

ILLUSTRATING WITHIN THE POET-PROPHET LINEAGE:
BLAKE'S RE-VISIONS OF MILTON'S NATIVITY ODE,
L'ALLEGRO, AND *IL PENSEROSO*

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Council of
Texas State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Master of Arts
with a Major in Literature
December 2014

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my committee: Dr. Paul Cohen, Dr. Elizabeth Skerpan-Wheeler, and Dr. Nancy Grayson. Without their guidance, expertise, and support, I surely could not have written this document. I wholeheartedly thank my committee chair Dr. Cohen, whose faith in my abilities continually spurred me on, even as I occasionally became mired in self-doubt. My graduate classes with Dr. Cohen and Dr. Skerpan-Wheeler were instrumental in guiding me to deepen my interest in Blake and Milton, and my undergraduate classes with Dr. Andrew Cooper and Dr. John Rumrich at the University of Texas sparked such interest, for which I am grateful. I would also like to thank the Texas State University Graduate College, whose Thesis Research Support Fellowship allowed me to travel to London and Cambridge to conduct an invaluable study of the originals of many paintings central to the concerns of this thesis. For their accommodations in my scholarly research, I thank the British Museum, the Fitzwilliam Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Tate Britain. For their emotional support, I also thank my mother and my sister, as well as many friends, especially David Longoria, Shannon Murphy, Anaya Angelica, Jessica Stiles, Aaron Parker, Hunter Harris, Michelle Escuder, and Divya Srinivasan.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

For the poet-prophet, the task of self-representation hinges on a paradox. The prophet is an empty vessel; still, whether by presentation of prophet status or by obsessive control over the means of production, poet-prophets assert their authorial presence aggressively. Both John Milton and William Blake fashioned themselves as prophets, and though each appears prominently in his own works, Milton and Blake also open up a space through which the reader undergoes an experience. In various ways, Milton and Blake subvert linearity, inviting their readers to experience the prophet's sense of time. In his paired *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* poems, Milton constructs two opposing perceptions of time. In his Nativity Ode, through use of the prophetic voice, Milton offers readers an opportunity to witness Christ's nativity in real time; likewise, Blake's *Milton* conveys a sense of indeterminacy that highlights the reader's function in constructing meaning. The temporal disorientation brought on by the switching of verb tenses in the Nativity Ode prompts the Christian audience to reenact Christ's birth within, and the unclear sequence of events in *Milton* forces the reader to collaborate with the author in ordering the narrative. In his use of visual art to accompany the textual narrative, Blake calls on readers to engage in a complex merging of spatial and temporal experiences. As he translates Milton's time experimentations from the temporal form of poetry to the spatial form of watercolor paintings, Blake relies on the repetition of prophetic iconography to convey the eternal perspective of the prophet.

In handling Milton's material to offer an atemporal experience to the reader, Blake depicts the lineage of the prophetic poet. Just as Milton reimagines Biblical stories

from Genesis, Blake's paintings for Milton's works go beyond mere illustration; rather, they present the spirit of the text as if the material has been prophesied anew. Pamela Dunbar explains the nature of Blake's relationship with his literary predecessor:

Blake's relationship with Milton never became a slavish, one-sided affair, and neither was it a purely "literary" connection. It was a lively, stimulating, intimate, intense, and provocative kinship of mind and spirit that on the part of Blake, the "active" partner, combined deep affection and admiration with elements of profound disapprobation, and which had at its core the later poet's capacity readily to evoke the spirit of Milton and to engage in 'discourse' with it. With this spirit Blake must have attained as nearly reciprocal a relationship as it can be possible to attain with the dead. (1)

Blake, for whom the imagination was not only the supreme faculty of man but also the divine part, believed himself capable of conducting a dynamic relationship with a man who died eighty-three years before Blake was born. When, in his epic poem *Milton*, Blake pictures Milton descending from heaven in the form of a star and entering into Blake's left foot (see fig. 1), the lineage of the poet-prophet is being dramatized. So though Blake does subtly indicate his points of ideological departure from Milton in the illustration of his poetry—particularly in the *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* paintings—he does so from a position of full embodiment of the spirit of the earlier poet.

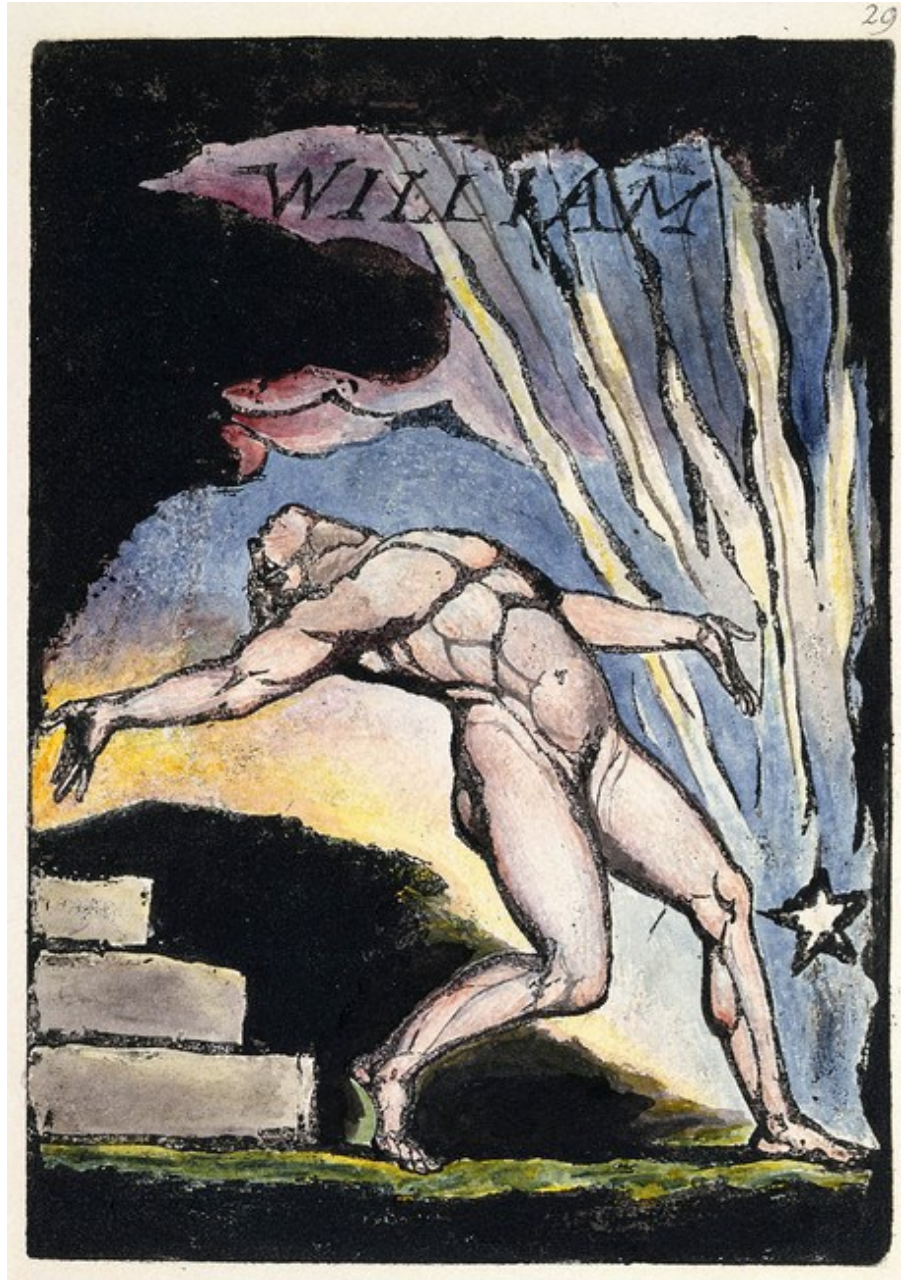


Fig. 1. William Blake, Plate 29 of *Milton a Poem Copy A*, British Museum, London.
Blake Archive.

In *Milton*, Blake explicitly speaks from the dual perspective of himself and Milton, but even in his later illustrations for Milton's Nativity Ode, and *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, Blake achieves a unity with the material that goes beyond mere affinity.

Viewers of Blake's Milton illustrations "experience the same combination of harmonious integration and creative tension that [they] derive from Blake's own 'illuminated' works" (Dunbar 8). Termed "illuminated" books in reference to medieval manuscripts, Blake's poems nearly always have pictorial accompaniment. Such images, however, are far from simple decoration; W.J.T. Mitchell explains that "Blake's text unites poem and picture in a more radical sense than simply placing them in proximity to one another. . . . Blake's images are riddled with ideas, making them a visible language—that is, a kind of writing" (147). Indeed, Blake's use of iconography to import conceptual significance to his images allows him to engage in pictorial storytelling, whether it be in his illuminated poems or in his illustrations for Milton's works. Viewing "image and text [as] equal modes of imaginative communication" (Hodnett 85), Blake uses image to tell part of the story, rather than just to represent the textual content.

What is remarkable is Blake's ability to translate Milton's texts pictorially with the fidelity and confidence of one who had written the text himself. For his own works, "every page is designed and executed on a single plate by a single mind, [so] the work can be more 'uniform' than the usual book in which author, illustrator, engraver, and typographic designer work at best in uneasy harmony and compromise" (Essick 119). Blake controlled every stage of the production process; he even developed his own print-making method:

Blake's illuminated books are done in relief etching, his own invention inspired by a vision of his deceased brother. The lines in intaglio, the veins to be filled with blood/ink, are nestled in the skin-like plate. In relief engraving the lines/veins are cross-sections, exposed and open, right on

the surface. Relief engraving requires more corrosion, more surface to be excised because not the thin lines but the surrounding negative space is eaten away. Intaglio covers the plate with ground to protect its surface, while relief protects only the lines. Relief printing is thus, even more than intaglio, like skinning an anatomical subject to reveal the systems that lie beneath. (Connolly 33)

Blake's self-assurance that he actually embodied Milton's spirit affords him the authority to undertake a process with Milton's texts that is much like his own printing process. Working from Milton's texts, Blake selectively crafts "designs [to] impress a whole complex of images upon the mind so as to reveal the higher conceptions and deeper meanings of the texts they illuminate" (Wittreich, *Angel* 77). According to this understanding, the watercolor paintings of Milton's poetry constitute a purification of the original text. Northrop Frye explains that Blake's embodiment of Milton's spirit yields similar results: "When Blake imagines himself to be a reincarnation of Milton, then, the imaginative power that is reborn is not a different form, as in ordinary life, but the *same* form which in the process of transforming itself has purged and clarified its vision" (322). While Blake remains contentious with many of Milton's ideological underpinnings, because he imagines himself as heir to Milton's prophetic lineage, he is able to depict Milton's text with a striking intimacy.

Milton's self-representation as prophet gives rise to a tension between created and creator, an issue as applicable to Blake as it is to Milton. As Gordon Teskey explains in his *Delirious Milton*, in order to depict himself as a divine vessel, Milton must create his creator. Blake, of course, creates an entire pantheon. When authors imagine themselves

prophets, they take on the seemingly audacious task of representing not only themselves but also a divine force; presuming to embody God could be the ultimate expression of narcissism, but both Blake and Milton avoid such a condemnation by opening space for the reader in their narratives. Milton and Blake extend the experience of prophetic time to their readers, and in that way they leave an opening to the entire poet-prophet lineage. Rather than passively witness the poet invoke the muse and so channel the divine, the reader of Milton's Nativity Ode and Blake's *Milton* experiences temporal disorientation as the authors shift verb tenses or perspectives.

Perhaps influenced by Milton's time shifts in his poetry, Blake creates a more extreme experimentation with non-linearity in *Milton*. Told from several different perspectives in overlapping narratives, *Milton* is essentially about the moment of poetic creation, an idea that becomes clear only as the poem nears its end. Though it is about a moment in time, *Milton* experiments with different temporal and spatial realms, and "one of the chief hallmarks of the poem is its discontinuity, complete with bewildering alterations of substance and style, as well as dizzying shifts in perspective" (Balfour 150). Among the narrators are different poet-prophet figures, including the Bard, Milton, and Blake; these alternating perspectives in *Milton* depict the lineage of the poet-prophet. *Milton* overtly addresses prophetic time, and it is the "artist's individual pulse [that is] a measure of prophetic time" (Goslee 64). A true artist experiences time in an unconventional way; Blake links time and poetry in his created god Los, who governs both. Los and Enitharmon, who represents space, "reside in Golgonooza, the city and nation of art," which serves "to show an individual how to transform the spaces of Ulro," Blake's term for the chaos of the perceptible world (Easson 144). In a seemingly

contradictory way, the poet-prophet both creates and accesses the pre-existing realm of Golgonooza, “the only space that Blake considered to be both a created space and an eternal archetypal form” (Easson 145). In other words, the poet-prophet participates in a lineage.

In opening up Golgonooza, the poet-prophet models for his audience how to transform mundane time and space. *Milton* explores the space of a moment, and within the poem, time “is no longer measured as a simple linearity but also as a spatial expansion” (Pierce 470). Noting that in the four existing copies of *Milton*, Blake features “alternative orderings of the engraved plates,” Harold Bloom explains that such changes reflect the fact that “the sequence of these poems is frequently not temporal, certain crucial events being both simultaneous with one another and also existent in the continual present of Eternity” (*Blake* 309-10). Reordering the narrative emphasizes the extent to which the poem does not rely on a linear sequence; furthermore, it allows Blake to “free Milton from the analogous temporal sequence of history. In the process of reading we must transform time as a rigid sequence of past, determined moments—a definition Milton would claim was caused by the irreversible fall he describes in *Paradise Lost*—into prophetic moments” (Goslee 37). Blake’s *Milton* uses shifting perspectives to communicate timelessness; similarly, Milton’s profusion of coordinating conjunctions in *L’Allegro* to link descriptions of the pastoral scene conveys simultaneity. However, Milton’s speaker’s participation in the time and space of Christ’s birth in the Nativity Ode more closely resembles Blake’s conviction that “the core of reality is mental and present, not physical and past. Past events do not necessarily dissolve in time, but their existence in the eternal present depends on imaginative recreation” (Frye 343). It is up to

the artist to use “the wonders divine of human imagination” to create time and space (Connolly 209). The imaginative efforts of the poet-prophet guide the reader to perceive time and space differently, experientially introducing the idea that time and space are constructs.

Significant images in *Milton* help Blake to reinforce the status and role of the poet-prophet speaker, whether it be Blake himself, Milton, or the Bard. Iconography representing writing, including the book and the tablet, possess negative associations from the very beginning of *Milton*, as John B. Pierce explains:

Blake’s title plate and his entire poem stand as a challenge to the linearity of the book even as they use the form of the book to convey this challenge. The naked human form of Milton on the title page forces its way through the textual components of the title page just as the title begins its linear unfolding of the protagonist’s name. A human form disrupts the linearity of writing in such a way that the written word must conform to the organizing principles of the human form rather than the other way around.
(468)

Stepping through his own name, Milton interrupts a singular portrayal of his identity (see fig. 2). The poet-prophet must disrupt his own identity, becoming empty to receive an eternal voice. But the resulting speaker has dramatized the process of becoming a channel, so the reader senses a dual voice; “Blake’s works—like Milton’s poems, like the prophet’s words—are his and not his, with the emphasis on their author being more possessed than possessing” (Balfour 172). Tying the image of the book to the idea of

singular authorship, Blake depicts the prophet, who speaks from a dual voice in defiance of linearity.



Fig. 2. William Blake, Plate 1 of *Milton a Poem*, Copy A, British Museum, London. *Blake Archive*.

Blake uses prophetic iconography to reinforce another image of textual disruption later in *Milton*. Picturing a band along the horizon line of plate fifteen of *Milton*, Blake

gives his revelers trumpets and tambourines, instruments he consistently associates with prophecy (see fig. 3). In the painting's foreground, the naked figure of Milton steps onto the middle of a large book in order to remold Urizen, who sits upon the book holding a stone tablet on either side. Though Milton steps forward with his left foot onto the book, with his right foot he interrupts the word "Self-hood" in the text along the bottom of the page, signifying the poet-prophet's emptying of his singular ego to ready himself to receive his prophecy. Plate fifteen marks the climax of one of the storylines in *Milton*; it is the moment of "[epiphany] in which social and political forms of tyranny are overcome only by internalizing them, then reducing them to mental error or unregenerate selfishness that is driven out or redeemed" (Schock 76). To simply destroy the external form of tyranny would be to deny that the process of internalization has taken place.

Blake's character Milton instead

takes on the correction of his errors, striving with Urizen, who is his worst legacy. But Urizen also represents a tenacious internal obstacle, the 'inner Urizen,' or Milton's attraction to absolute masculine authority. This is Milton's patriarchal overidentification, which accounts for the streak of authoritarianism in his personality and hence his misogyny, pride, and self-righteousness. (Quinney 129)

Blake's imagined embodiment of Milton's spirit at the end of *Milton* inspires him to craft the storyline which reaches its climax in plate fifteen. Here Milton truly realizes his role as prophet-poet.



Fig. 3. William Blake, Plate 15 of *Milton a Poem*, Copy A, British Museum, London.

Blake Archive.

Plate fifteen of *Milton* also contains many potent icons that Blake later uses as he reworks Milton's texts through illustrations. Trumpets and tambourines serve as symbols for the prophet, and Blake uses them in his watercolor paintings for the *Nativity Ode* and

for *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* to communicate moments of prophetic experience in Milton's poems but also to subtly identify ways in which Blake considers Milton to have fallen short of his true potential in embodying the prophetic lineage. Blake reinforces such corrective illustrations when he uses images he negatively associates with Urizen, his god of reason. The most obvious one is Urizen's face, which Blake uses to communicate error; likewise, Blake associates the book with Urizen, chronicling Milton's points of departure from what Blake considers to be the path of a true prophet. The extent to which Blake is motivated by criticism to reshape Milton's works through illustration is a topic of lively literary debate among scholars. Joseph Wittreich notes that a "spirit of contention is evident both in Blake's illustrations for Milton and in his portrayals of him, but it is not the hinge on which either turns" ("Divine Countenance" 158). In other words, Blake's tone toward Milton is predominately one of admiration, not critique.

Indeed, Blake's willingness to embody Milton in itself reveals his reverence for his predecessor. Even though Blake's character Milton does endeavor to set right his erroneous personal and political tyrannies, "*Milton* does not exist to convert John Milton into being a Blakean; Blake's part in the poem rises out of *his* desperate need for Milton's strength" (Bloom, *Blake* 322). Tapping into a poet-prophet lineage, Blake uses his illustrations to "remove the veiling errors and then to affirm the essential verities that he finds" (Werner 19). As heir to Milton's prophetic voice, Blake is in a position to treat Milton's text much as he treats his own, to illustrate in such a way as to illuminate the text. Blake produced watercolor paintings for *Paradise Lost*, for *Paradise Regained*, for *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, and for the Nativity Ode. All of these paintings "are inextricably involved with Milton's text; they have an *interpretive* function, apart from a

corrective one, following a series of important and original perceptions into the poems they accompany” (Wittreich, *Angel* 76-7). One key interpretation Blake makes is to give priority to the poet-prophet speaker. This thesis project focuses on the watercolor paintings for the Nativity Ode and for *L’Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* because these illustrations particularly highlight the role of the poet-prophet and convey his visionary process to the reader. Milton’s Nativity Ode and *L’Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* communicate the prophet’s unique handling of time; Blake’s repeated prophetic iconography serves to translate the poet-prophet’s sense of time in the text. Using visual art’s spatial form to depict prophetic time, Blake invites his reader to experience the lineage, even to become the nation of prophets he calls for in the preface of *Milton*.

CHAPTER II

Prophetic Presence in *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*

Through *Milton*, Blake exposes what he finds to be Milton's major errors: his political and personal tyranny. Both can be traced to what Blake considers an inordinate reverence for reason. Milton's embodiment of Urizen, Blake's mythological figure, "symbolizing the faculty of reason" (Richey 83), impedes his full realization of his role as a prophet. *Milton* provides a model for spiritual reformation, and though Blake's "respect never faltered for his prophetic precursor" (DiSalvo 241), Blake does expose what he identifies as Milton's errors, both textually and pictorially. After finishing *Milton*, Blake went on to paint watercolor accompaniments to several of Milton's poems. Employing the pictorial iconography that he uses to express error in *Milton*, Blake visually suggests in his paintings for *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* that as Milton passed from innocence into experience, he developed flawed spiritual beliefs: a connection to Platonic dualism and a commitment to a tyrannical God. By visually linking Milton to Urizen, Blake's "monstrous caricature of Milton's God" (DiSalvo 240), Blake references his own exploration of Milton's Urizenic error in *Milton*, and he also hints at Milton's potential for awakening, which occurs in *Milton*. By inserting Milton into the poems, Blake points to both his own spiritual departure from the historical Milton and to his visionary redemptive correction of the Milton whom he has incorporated into his own mythology.

If Milton's authorship of *De Doctrina Christiana*, not discovered until 1823, is accepted¹, then Milton, like Blake, likely espoused a theological belief in monism

¹ William B. Hunter articulates doubt over Milton's authorship of the tract. Hunter finds it unlikely that Milton wrote *De Doctrina Christiana* (*Of Christian Doctrine*) because at the time of its composition,

(Teskey 105). But Blake's depiction of Milton in the *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* paintings suggests that Blake connected Milton to dualism. Linda M. Lewis argues that "Milton's politics and theology (like Dante's) are guided by the notion of a dualistic universe . . . [and] Blake's revisionism must integrate what Milton has separated" (112). Likewise, J.M.Q. Davies perceives a "deep-seated dualism" in Milton, which he identifies as a critical target for Blake, who, Davies claims, uses *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* to show that "both Mirth and Melancholy are inadequate [as contraries] because they are one-sided muses" (115). The paired poems present two distinct attitudes toward life and two differing experiences of time. Each is addressed to a muse, and at the beginning of each poem, the "banishment" of the other's invoked muse, "followed by an invitation that includes the appropriate Goddess and her entourage" implies a rejection or negation of the opposing state rather than the coexistence necessary for contraries to bring forth progression (Grossman 84). *L'Allegro*'s speaker calls Melancholy "loathed," clearly connoting a disdainful tone; further, he claims she is the child of the hellhound "Cerberus and blackest Midnight" (1-2). Returning the insult about parentage, *Il Penseroso*'s speaker claims that Mirth is the bastard child of "Folly without father bred" (2). Milton's harsh tone from each respective speaker suggests that he viewed the states as mutually exclusive polarities.

Blake's illustrations, while they do not focus on the genealogies of the goddesses, synthesize the two speakers' perspectives to depict many of Milton's textual details, even

Milton was blind, he was writing other works at the same time, and the ideas in it differ from those in other works. Milton scholars who accept *Of Christian Doctrine* as Milton's identify heretical theological beliefs explicitly espoused by Milton in the text. Stephen Dobranski and John Rumrich counter Hunter's suggestion that Milton did not author the tract by citing Hunter's own admission of Milton's retention of the document and by noting the tract's stylistic and ideological signatures (7-10).

those to which Blake is likely ideologically opposed. In response to perceived failings in Milton's ideology, critics such as Jackie DiSalvo assert, Blake cannot engage in "repudiating . . . [or] developing Milton's vision. In Hegel's terms, Milton must be *aufgehoben*—negated and absorbed" (13). While Blake does take Milton into the mythological system he creates and even, albeit imaginatively, incorporates him when Milton enters as a falling star into Blake's left foot in *Milton* (see fig. 1), Blake can hardly be said to absorb and negate Milton when, up until the very end of his life, Blake seems "readily to evoke the spirit of Milton and to engage in 'discourse' with it" (Dunbar 1). A spirit of engagement, not negation, presents itself in Blake's Milton designs. Considering the fidelity of Blake's illustrations to Milton's poetry, Wittreich's critical perspective most persuasively outlines Blake's intentions in representing Milton: "Blake delivered that poet's vision in designs that faithfully delineate it even as they suggest its failings" (*Angel* 79). Visual symbols in *Milton* such as dark clothing, the book, and clouds call forth Urizen, whereas the trumpet, the scroll, and the plowman are prophetic symbols; the application of such a symbolic vocabulary to Blake's Milton illustrations clarifies Blake's interpretive implications.

Table 1

Text and Illustration Correspondences for *L'Allegro* Paintings

Lines Illustrated	Blake's Watercolor Painting
<i>L'Allegro</i> lines 24-36	"Mirth"
<i>L'Allegro</i> lines 41-4	"Night Startled by the Lark"
<i>L'Allegro</i> lines 57-68	"The Sun at His Eastern Gate"
<i>L'Allegro</i> lines 70-82 <i>L'Allegro</i> lines 91-8 <i>Il Penseroso</i> line 154	"A Sunshine Holiday"
<i>L'Allegro</i> lines 99-114	"The Goblin"
<i>L'Allegro</i> lines 116-135 <i>L'Allegro</i> lines 145-50	"The Youthful Poet's Dream"

"Mirth," Blake's first watercolor illustration of *L'Allegro*, faithfully represents Milton's detailed descriptions of his main character and her entourage while very subtly using tone to suggest a critical perspective. The "heart-easing Mirth" (13) who Milton's *L'Allegro* speaker describes as "buxom, blithe, and debonair" (24), takes the central position in Blake's painting (see fig. 4). The painting's focus, she is also larger and closer to the viewer than any other figure represented. Buxom and blithe, Blake's Mirth wears a sheer dress that reveals a curvy figure, and her face radiates a smile. She appears to move in a jaunty step, and her arms are raised overhead in a carefree motion; thus, she is the debonair companion Milton's speaker seeks. After the poem's initial rejection of *Il Penseroso*'s muse Melancholy and the subsequent speculation on Mirth's genealogy, the speaker sets the scene through a detailed invitation to Mirth to bring her entourage:

Haste thee nymph and bring with thee

Jest and youthful Jollity,
Quips and Cranks and wanton Wiles,
Nods and Backs and wreathèd Smiles,
Such as hang on Hebe's cheek,
And love to live in dimple sleek;
Sport that wrinkled Care derides,
And Laughter holding both his sides. (25-32)

Blake bases his first painting on Milton's description, pictorially representing the characters mentioned. The overall tone of the painting shows fidelity to Milton's text, using light colors to communicate a lighthearted scene. Blake's later engravings of the same scene, however, begin to highlight the more subtle undercurrent of criticism.

Blake's first illustration in the series is unique in that it is the only watercolor painting of the set that Blake later engraved. Blake engraved the "Mirth" illustration twice, but only one uncolored print remains of each of the engravings. Only available in small reproductions that obscure many details, these two prints are both holdings of the British Museum in London. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to personally visit the British Museum for the purpose of studying the prints. This study convinced me that while the illustrations of specific characters show significant shifts from the watercolor painting to the prints, the figures in the first and second state engravings of "Mirth" remain fairly consistent, with the notable exception of Mirth herself, whose entire face is transformed in the second state (see figs. 4, 5, 6). The second engraving is, however, markedly different from both the first engraving and the watercolor painting in its tone.

The first engraving is “delicately executed in line and stipple” to largely replicate the watercolor (see figs. 4, 5), but the second engraving, “vigorously drawn but in line only,” conveys a much more critical tone through the only use of text in all the series (Dunbar 122). Two phrases from Milton’s *L’Allegro* neighbor the pictorial representation of them in the second engraving (see fig. 6). Near the top left corner of the print, several figures grouped together seem to fly downward as they turn their heads back and smile. One figure is pointing at a man who faces her with a gloomy expression. The fragment from *L’Allegro* is inscribed: “Sport that wrinkled care derides.” These figures, notes Bette Charlene Werner, “introduce an unpleasant note” into even the watercolor painting (147). The added textual content, however, emphasizes the picture’s more obviously negative images. The other textual inscription, “Laughter holding both his sides,” surrounds the head of a stout figure with wide-set eyes and a devilish grin. Although Dunbar dismisses the text as “somewhat superfluously inscribed” (123), here, too, the text draws attention to the figure, who has negative overtones and “seems to be taking a good thing a little too far” (Werner 147). Blake’s three figures, Sport, wrinkled Care, and Laughter, are listed in a series in Milton’s *L’Allegro*, and the quality of youth unites all of the figures, except for wrinkled Care who appears in a relative clause modifying Sport. Milton’s speaker encourages Mirth to bring along with her a group whose exclusivity links them to cruelty. Blake adopts the critical perspective of *Il Penseroso*’s speaker when he uses textual content on the engraving to emphasize the dark underside of Mirth.

Milton’s own preference, which he indicates formally by giving *Il Penseroso* twenty-four more lines than *L’Allegro*, is for the contemplative life celebrated in *Il Penseroso*. Blake’s preference is not so clear, perhaps because for Blake, to choose a life

of contemplation at the expense of sensual delights is to commit the error of repression; the body is an entry point to the spirit. Although he uses text to depict the attitude of *Il Penseroso*'s speaker, which is likely also Milton's attitude, Blake ridicules it as well, when along the bottom of the second engraving of "Mirth" Blake has written "Solomon says Vanity of Vanities all is Vanity & what can be Foolisher than this" (see fig. 6). The speaker of *Il Penseroso* describes Mirth and her followers as "vain" and "deluding" (1). For Blake, to reject earthly pleasure as vain is foolish, whether Milton or Solomon does it. In addition to such textual criticism, Blake uses visual symbolism, particularly in the second engraving of "Mirth," to express an ambivalent critical perspective.

Blake does not limit his illustration to literal translation of the poems' textual content but makes use of the iconographic conventions of his time. Wittreich lists eighteenth-century iconography associated with Milton as including "the harp, the apple, the serpent, the laurel crown, the palm tree, Pan's pipe, and the trumpet" ("Divine Countenance" 128). He argues that it benefits readers to have a historical context for Blake's visual depictions of Milton and Milton's works. The trumpet is the most often repeated of the eighteenth-century icons in the *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* series. In the "Mirth" watercolor, the goddess's outstretched left hand almost touches one of the "trumpeters blowing bubbles [who is] surely 'vain deluding joys,'" Mirth's follower whom Milton's *Il Penseroso* speaker dismissively describes (Werner 147). Milton's diction implies a critical tone toward those who follow Mirth; vanity and delusion sully the joy. Though Blake's choice to depict this misguided joy with a trumpet may at first seem puzzling, considering the trumpet's commonplace iconographic symbolism for prophecy, Blake's image could indicate a deeper critique of Milton's status as a prophet.

Milton's text targets a false joy that is based on illusion; thus, Blake's trumpeter blows bubbles, floating mirages that can burst, leaving the viewer with nothing (see fig. 4). The image of the bubbles issuing out of the trumpet visually suggests false prophecy.



Fig. 4. William Blake, "Mirth" *L'Allegro*, Morgan Library, New York City. *Blake Archive*.



Fig. 5. William Blake, "Mirth" First State *L'Allegro*, British Museum, London.



Fig. 6. William Blake, “Mirth” Second State *L’Allegro*, British Museum, London.

In the engravings, even more trumpets become clear (see figs. 5, 6). While in the watercolor, the goddess Mirth’s hair blends into a vague halo created by barely

discernible human figures, “[i]n the engravings the halo consists only of four figures; the upper pair are blowing trumpets and the lower pair shaking tambourines” (Dunbar 122). Such a group recalls the image in plate fifteen of *Milton* in which Milton remolds Urizen out of clay while five celebratory figures play music along the horizon line—a harpist, a pair of trumpeters, and a pair shaking tambourines (see fig. 3). Such a visual allusion connotes a positive tone because the remaking of Urizen represents Milton’s heroic moment of inner transformation, the reckoning with the part of himself that made his prophecy false.

However, Blake complicates the positive visual tone that the trumpets create when he alters a human figure in his design to make it animalistic in the engravings (see figs. 5, 6). Three figures at the bottom right corner of the picture are almost vertically stacked. In the watercolor, the figure touching the earth is clearly human, whereas the two figures above her appear to be fanciful hybrids with the dragon and the donkey. Still, the grounded figure retains her human form in the watercolor, but in the engravings she has gained whiskers. Dunbar identifies them as “feline” and notes that the “animal attributes of this trio suggests [sic] that the delights it offers may not be unqualified” (123). Blake shows that the “bounties of Mirth do not represent the ultimate ecstasies of the spirit” (Dunbar 124). The whiskers, along with Blake’s addition of text, convey a critical tone. That critique only sharpens with each successive revision of the illustration because the “Mirth” engraving in its second state has such a darker use of lines that it gives the overall impression of Mirth as a beacon in the darkness. Blake thus both textually and visually strikes out against Milton’s dismissal of Mirth.

As indicated by his treatment of the trumpet, as Blake's critique intensifies, so too does his suggestion of redemptive possibility. In the second engraving of "Mirth," Blake visually depicts another important symbol for prophecy, the scroll (see fig. 6). W.J.T. Mitchell explains the contrasting symbolism of the scroll and the book in Blake's visual art:

The hinge in the textual universe is represented emblematically in Blake's art by a formal differentiation between what I call, for simplicity's sake, the 'book' and the 'scroll.' In the context of romantic textual ideology, the book is the symbol of modern rationalist writing and the cultural economy of mechanical reproduction, while the scroll is the emblem of ancient, revealed wisdom, imagination, and the cultural economy of handcrafted, individually expressive artifacts. We might summarize this contrast as the difference between print culture and manuscript culture. Alongside these quasi-historical differentiations, however, Blake treats book and scroll as synchronic emblems of an abiding division within the world of sacred or 'revealed' writing. The book represents writing as *law*: it is usually associated with patriarchal figures like Urizen and Jehovah, and Blake regularly uses the rectangular shape of the closed book and the double-vaulted arch-shape of the open book to suggest formal rhymes with textual objects like gravestones, altars, gateways, and tablets, 'books,' as it were, of stone and metal. The scroll represents writing as *prophecy*: it is associated with youthful figures of energy, imagination, and rebellion, and

its spiraling shape associates it formally with the vortex, the Blakean form of transformation and dialectic. (132)

Mitchell points out that Blake's work occupies the world of the scroll and the world of the book because Blake does use mechanistic production, even if his painting of each print and his unique and laborious printing methods create handcrafted books.

While Blake's works themselves may balance the contraries of the book and the scroll, he employs the symbol of the book to indicate the imbalance of his time and of Milton's ideology. The book visually cues rationalism while the scroll, like the trumpet, recalls the prophet. In the "Mirth" watercolor, neither the book nor the scroll occurs, but Blake adds the scroll to his engraved versions (see figs. 4, 5, 6). A figure in the watercolor "is depicted carrying a wand in his left hand and seems to be controlling four small balls, but in the engraved versions he trails a scroll" (Grant 425). If, as Werner argues, "the series suggest[s] a passage from innocence to experience" (145), the presence of the scroll on the first engraving indicates that Blake imagined the young Milton as possessing prophetic potential.

Blake considers Milton's prophetic potential to be quite delayed in its realization; not until after his death does Milton become a true prophet. In *Milton*, the spirit of Milton is able to correct his errors after he enters into Blake's left foot (see fig. 1). Although the foot is the point of contact with the earth, Blake also uses the foot in *Milton* as the point of contact with the heavens. Cato Marks observes that "[in] *Milton*, Blake's endeavor to combine the quasi-spiritual world of poetry with that of the very earthly world of radical politics is also symbolized by the feet" (58). Marks argues that Blake subverts traditional left-right associations whereby leading with the right foot would suggest spiritual pursuits

and leading with the left foot implies worldly pursuits; Blake “corrects this hierarchical division of right and left that Milton had made into one of poetry and politics” (57). Attention to the positioning of feet in Blake’s designs for Milton’s poetry reveals interesting possibilities. In the “Mirth” watercolor, the goddess leads with the right foot, so her posture suggests a spiritual rather than worldly interest (see fig. 4). Such a reading, however, seems contrary to Mirth’s celebration of earthly pleasures. Perhaps Blake wishes to confound such easy delineations of left and right symbolism here, too, in his illustrations, as Marks argues he does in *Milton*.

The second painting in the *L’Allegro* series is visually suggestive of Blake’s mythological characters Los and Urizen (see fig. 7). In his description of clouds in *Milton*, Harold Bloom associates them with Urizen (*Blake* 306). Clouds divide the second *L’Allegro* watercolor, “The Lark,” horizontally in half, and a white-haired, bearded figure visually reminiscent of Urizen is positioned just behind a fortress, “his watch-tower in the skies” (43), that sits atop the clouds. The figure is Night, “pictured as the oppressive Father God of institutionalized religions, his association with the twenty-seven churches cemented by Blake’s drawing him next to a papal prison” (Werner 148). The goddess of dawn sweeps in just below astride a chariot; Milton’s alliterative “dappled dawn” (44) has become Dawn’s “Dappled Horses” in Blake’s manuscript of the poem. Blake adds to the picture a personified earth, who “beneath awakes” at the painting’s base (Blake *L’Allegro*). All gazes turn upwards to the painting’s most prominent figure, the lark, who Blake calls an “angel” in his manuscript (see fig. 8).



Fig. 7. William Blake, "Night Started by the Lark" *L'Allegro*, Morgan Library, New York City. *Blake Archive*.

2 To hear the Lark begin his flight
And singing startle the dull Night
From his Watch Tower in the Skies
Till the dappled Dawn does rise

The Lark is an Angel on the Wing
Dull Night starts from his Watch Tower
on a Cloud. The Dawn with her
dappled Horses arises above the Earth
The Earth beneath awakes at the
Lark's Voice

Fig. 8. William Blake, "Night Startled by the Lark" Manuscript *L'Allegro*, Morgan Library, New York City. *Blake Archive*.

Blake uses pre-existing associations between the lark and time to visually suggest Los. The lark's role, like the rooster's, as a timepiece to signal dawn roots back at least to Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, but unlike the rooster, the lark appears specifically in love poetry to remind lovers of their obligations to mundane labors (Bawcutt 9). The lark's association with time is fitting, for Los is Blake's figure for time. If Night calls forth the twenty-seven churches, the lark reminds readers of the lark in *Milton*, who "is the messenger of Los, the spirit of prophetic imagination" (Werner 148) and "is explicitly associated with poetic inspiration" (Dunbar 126). Considering its associations with poetry, prophecy, and time, the lark is a potent visual symbol that allows Blake to communicate one of Milton's major concerns, his self-representation as a poet-prophet. The lark's size in the painting suggests the optimistic triumph of prophetic poetry.

Including images of prophecy—the trumpet and the plowman—the third watercolor in the *L'Allegro* series centers on Los in order to convey the importance of time in this part of the poem (see fig. 9). The lark in Milton's *L'Allegro* sets into motion a series of events that seems to occur perpetually and simultaneously. At the very bottom of Blake's third *L'Allegro* watercolor, "The Sun at His Eastern Gate," Blake faithfully depicts the following passage from Milton's text:

While the Plowman near at hand,
Whistles o'er the Furrow'd Land,
And the Milkmaid singeth blithe,
And the Mower whets his scythe,
And every Shepherd tells his tale
Under the Hawthorn in the dale. (63-68)

That the plowman, the milkmaid, the mower, and the shepherd perform their actions at the same time is mundane enough, but somehow Milton's speaker perceives all of these actions simultaneously, as the syntax, with its use of the conjunctions "and" and "while" suggests.

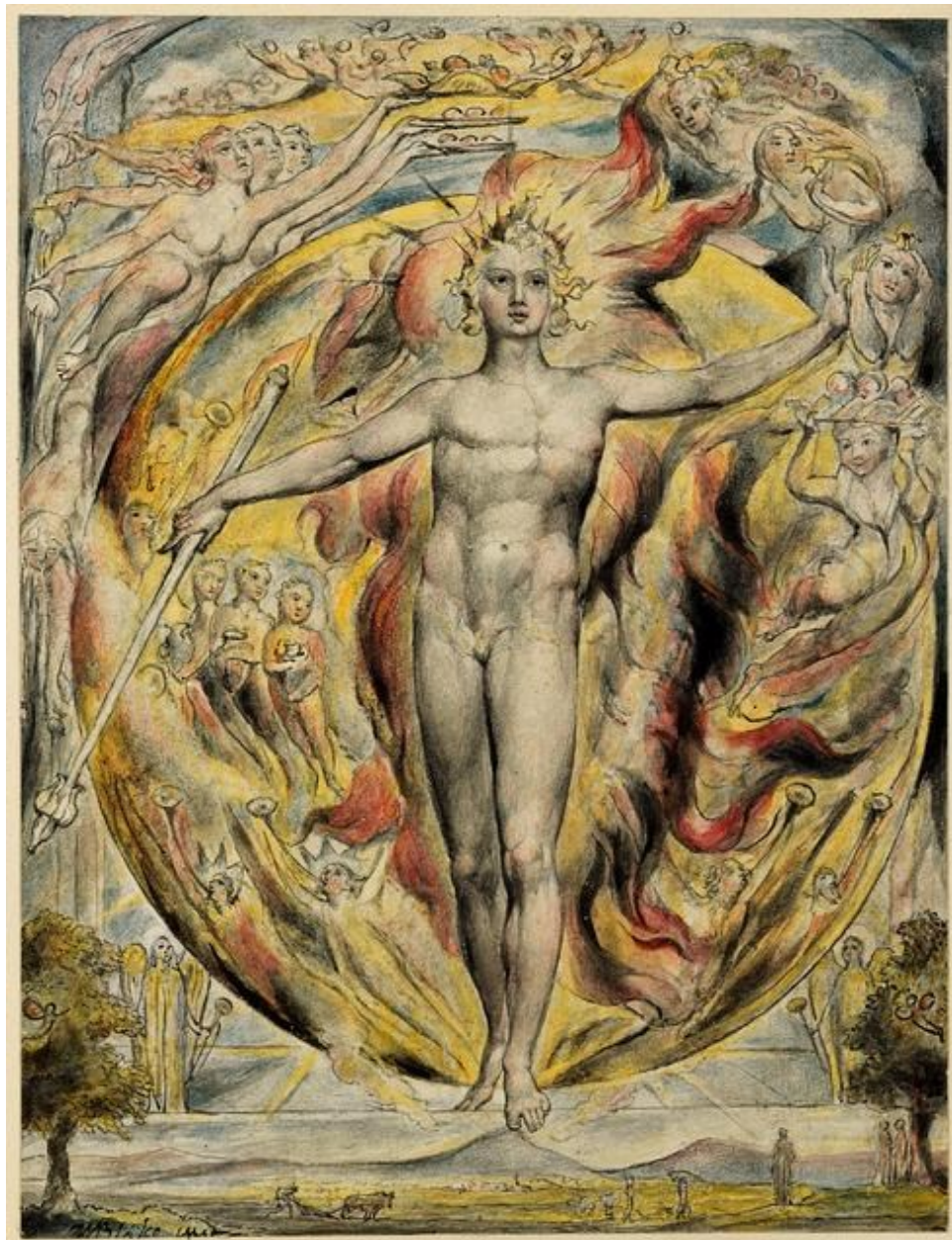


Fig. 9. William Blake, "The Sun at His Eastern Gate" *L'Allegro*, Morgan Library, New York City. *Blake Archive*.

Blake acknowledges Milton's apparent suspension of time and engages it by dominating the painting with his mythological representative of time, Los, "the redeemer [who] represent[s] time—in particular time present, that perpetually renewed moment in which all thoughts are thought and all actions acted out" (Dunbar 130). Los steps out of the frame of the sun, signifying that the poetic imagination cannot be contained within the material world. The trumpets of prophecy surrounding Los reinforce his symbolic significance: "four distinct trumpeters are accompanied by two less distinct ones within the sun, while two more trumpeters stand in readiness on the threshold" (Grant 429). Even the "the literal transcriptions of Milton's pastoral characters," the plowman, the mower, and the shepherd, possess an added prophetic significance; they "suggest the coming harvest of nations" (Werner 150). Northrop Frye explains that the "plowman is traditional in the English epic as a symbol of the visionary" (335). Blake uses this tradition when he crafts farming imagery in *Milton* to express the conflict between his mythic figures Palamabron and Satan, as well as the prophecy of the rise of Albion.

The next painting, "A Sunshine Holiday," uses contrasting symbols of prophetic trumpets and Urizenic clouds to show how divine vision becomes blocked (see fig. 10). Like "The Lark," "A Sunshine Holiday" is horizontally divided by a line of clouds and the presence of the Urizen figure for Night (see figs. 7, 10). A personified Nature joins Night, "who appears here as her spouse" (Werner 151). She wears a crown that recalls the watch-tower associated with Night in "The Lark." Nature and Night join together to dominate the middle section of the painting, and above the horizontal division made by the clouds is a "resurrection procession," including two trumpets (Grant 430). The figures, "bearing musical instruments, chalices, and wicker baskets—the emblems and

vessels of divinity” (Dunbar 136), ascend in a zig-zag formation but are interrupted by the imposing ethereal couple, Night and Nature, who sit upon the mountaintops that appear to correspond to the “Mountains on whose barren breast / The laboring clouds do often rest” in Milton’s text (73-4). Infused heavily with his own imaginative vision rather than based solely on Milton’s text, Blake’s “A Sunshine Holiday” communicates a narrative of thwarted prophetic potential.

The trumpet continues to communicate such potential, though Urizenic reason blocks its realization. Hovering above the tree on the right side of the painting are two more trumpeters who seem to be ready to ascend to join the procession (see fig. 10). Two more figures, whom Blake’s manuscript identifies as angels (see fig. 11), in the top right and left corners of the watercolor hold trumpets near their mouths, as if ready to sound the song of the apocalypse. The procession’s ascent creates the line in the painting, though the positioning of Nature and Night, associated here with Urizen, interrupts the painting’s line for the viewer, resulting in a horizontal division between the earthly and heavenly images. Clouds, also associated with Urizen, issue out on both sides of Nature and Night.

In the entire painting, only one figure appears to be conscious of both the earthly and heavenly realms. Dunbar writes that Blake’s illustration of Milton’s “unseen Genius of the wood” from *Il Penseroso* (154), “is gazing at the dancers and pointing upwards with the index finger of his right hand—apparently an attempt to recall them from the transient summertime of their delight to the trials and values of eternity” (134). While this “figure of Christ” does clearly point upward (Werner 151), his eyes focus on the group standing near his tree, not on the maypole dancers in the painting’s left side (see

fig. 10). Whether he directs their attention to the trumpets of prophecy or to the clouded vision of fallen Nature and Urizenic Night is ambiguous.



Fig. 10. William Blake, "A Sunshine Holiday" *L'Allegro*, Morgan Library, New York City. *Blake Archive*.

4 Sometimes with secure delight
The upland Hamlets will invade
When the merry Bells ring round
And the fount Rebekahs sound
To marry a Youth & many a Maid
Dancing in the Choquer Shade
And Young & Old come forth to play
On a Sunshine Holiday
In this Design is Introduced
Mountains on whose barren breast
The labring Clouds do often rest
Mountains, Clouds, Rivers, Trees, appear
Humanized on the Sunshine Holiday. The
Church Steeple with its merry Bells, The
Clouds arise from the bosom of Mountains,
While Two Angels sound their Trumpets
in the Heavens to announce the Sunshine
Holiday

Fig. 11. William Blake, "A Sunshine Holiday" Manuscript *L'Allegro*, Morgan Library, New York City. *Blake Archive*.

Though the two groups of people in "A Sunshine Holiday" are unified in their focus on earthly matters, the groups are made distinct by their contrasting clothing and

gestures (see fig. 10). Blake has faithfully painted Milton's "young and old come forth to play" (97), but these two groups remain divided within the scene. On the painting's left side a group of dancers around a maypole wear the sheer, light-colored clothing reminiscent of Mirth's in the first *L'Allegro* painting. Like Mirth's entourage, this group comprises only young people. With raised arms, they gesture happily as they dance around the maypole. To the painting's bottom right, however, the group of people has a more diverse age range, including a hunched-over elderly man, two middle-aged women, and four children of various ages. The open gestures of the dancing group find their opposition in the crossed arms of three figures in this group. Furthermore, the group's clothing is notably darker than that of the dancers. Wittreich connects the dark clothing in *Milton* to Urizen ("Divine Countenance" 141), and this group's elderly man does wear the long, white hair and beard typical of Urizen. In *Milton*, "clothing renders the modern man dead because it cuts him off from his environment, and from others" (Connolly 207). Blake visually signals a rebirth of the Milton of his poem by picturing him naked (see fig. 2). The dark clothing of the people in "A Sunshine Holiday" reinforce their closed gestures to reveal that they are cut off from each other, from the surrounding landscape, from the apocalyptic vision in the heavens.

Dark clothing continues to be prominent in the next painting, "The Goblin," as it visually reinforces Blake's critique of institutionalized religion (see fig. 12). In his illustration of the first scene from the poem set after nightfall, Blake shows the storytellers of Milton's *L'Allegro* in a reenactment scene of the fairy tales they tell while enjoying "spicy nut-brown ale" in the poem (100). The female storyteller is pictured in her bed being "pinched and pulled" (103) while the "fairy Mab" she describes takes her

position in the sky (102). The man's story of being led by the "friar's lantern" and of the "drudging goblin" becomes the focal point of the episode in Blake's painting (104-5). Dunbar persuasively argues that in Blake's illustration, "the innocent folk superstitions and cozy story-telling of the text have been transformed into a grim drama of sexual discord and mental 'error'" (138). Blake presents his critique of Milton's religious beliefs by picturing the man as a "Blakean pilgrim" (Grant 433) who steps forward with his right foot to follow "the Friars Lantern towards the Convent" (Blake). The friar's lantern is meant to lead the traveler off the path, so Blake's addition of the word *convent* to his manuscript and to his illustration indicates his disapproval of institutionalized religion (see fig. 13). Further, the position of the pilgrim's feet suggests that the pilgrim's steps have a religious meaning, even if that spiritual path is a false one.

The pilgrim wears all black, so his error in following the path of institutionalized religion links to Milton's Urizenic error. In Milton's text, the pilgrim is merely a "youth" (95), but Blake adds religious overtones through his representation of the man's clothing (see fig. 12). Likewise, Milton's youth tells of "the drudging goblin" (105), the relatively benign figure Robin Goodfellow from folklore; Blake's representation of this figure, however, is the stuff of nightmares. The Goblin, the most imposing figure in the painting, "represents the restrictive selfhood, the elect state of Satan" and is the pilgrim's spectre (Werner 151). Considering that in *Milton*, Milton identifies himself with Satan, the pilgrim could be Milton, as Davies argues when he asserts that in *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, Blake includes visual representation of Milton himself "five times as *Il Penseroso* dressed in somber Puritan garb, as against twice as *L'Allegro*" in order both to

show Milton's preference for Melancholy over Mirth and to use clothing and the postures of Milton's body to suggest his failings (3).



Fig. 12. William Blake, "The Goblin" *L'Allegro*, Morgan Library, New York City. *Blake Archive*.

5 Then to the spicy Nut brown Ale
With stories told of many a Treat
How Faery Mab the junkets eat
She was punch'd & pulled she said
And he by Friary Lantern led
Tells how the drudging Goblin sweat
To earn his Cream Bowl duly set
When in one Night e'er glimpse of Morn
His shadowy Flail had thresh'd the Corn
That ten day labourers could not end
Then crop-full out of door he flings
E'er the first Cock his Matin rings
The Goblin crop full flings out of doors
from his laborious task dropping his Flail
& Cream bowl yawning & stretching vanishes
into the Sky. in which is seen Lucan Mab
Eating the Junkets. The sports of the Fairies
are seen thro the Cottage where "She" lays
in Bed punch'd & pulled "by Faery as they Dance
on the Bed the Ceiling & the Floor & a Ghost
pulls the Bed clothes at her Feet. "He" is seen
following the Friary Lantern towards the Convent

Fig. 13. William Blake, "The Goblin" Manuscript *L'Allegro*, Morgan Library, New York City. Blake Archive.

The prevalence of Milton's image in the *Il Penseroso* paintings in itself shows an understanding of Milton's identification with the contemplative life over the life driven by the senses. Blake unambiguously represents Milton in his last painting of the Mirth-inspired poem, "The Youthful Poet's Dream," and his depiction honors Milton's pensive spirit (see fig. 14). The central focal point of the design is a sleeping Milton, who appears to be transcribing the vision of the orb floating above him. The orb apparently represents what Milton in *L'Allegro* notes as "Such sights as youthful poets dream / On summer eves by haunted stream" (129-30). While some of the details of the scene are pictorial details from Milton's poem, such as Blake's river running under the sleeping poet, much of the picture has no clear textual basis but is instead Blake's addition. The poet's eyes are closed, which could indicate "that his inspiration is not derived from the external world" (Dunbar 139). Like *Il Penseroso*'s Melancholy, Milton seems to be "commercing with the skies" (39) as he experiences a spiritual vision.

However, the nature of the vision calls into question Dunbar's statement that Blake's "purpose is to glorify the splendour of the poet's vision" (139). Milton's description of the poet's dream focuses on marriage imagery typical to comic writing:

There let Hymen oft appear
In saffron robe, with taper clear,
And pomp and feast and revelry,
With masque and antique pageantry (125-8)

Although within the vision, Blake does represent Hymen in his saffron robe presiding over a matrimonial union, the rest of the vision is Blake's addition (see fig. 14).

Furthermore, the globe that the sleeping young Milton envisions in the painting "remains

dualistically divided,” a consequence of the dawning of an “Age of Reason” (Davies 116). Arms extended with the right hand ready to transcribe a vision, the youthful poet appears open to receive the prophetic inspiration traditionally associated with the right; unfortunately, the inspiration available to him is not a true vision because it is caught in the dualistic worldview.

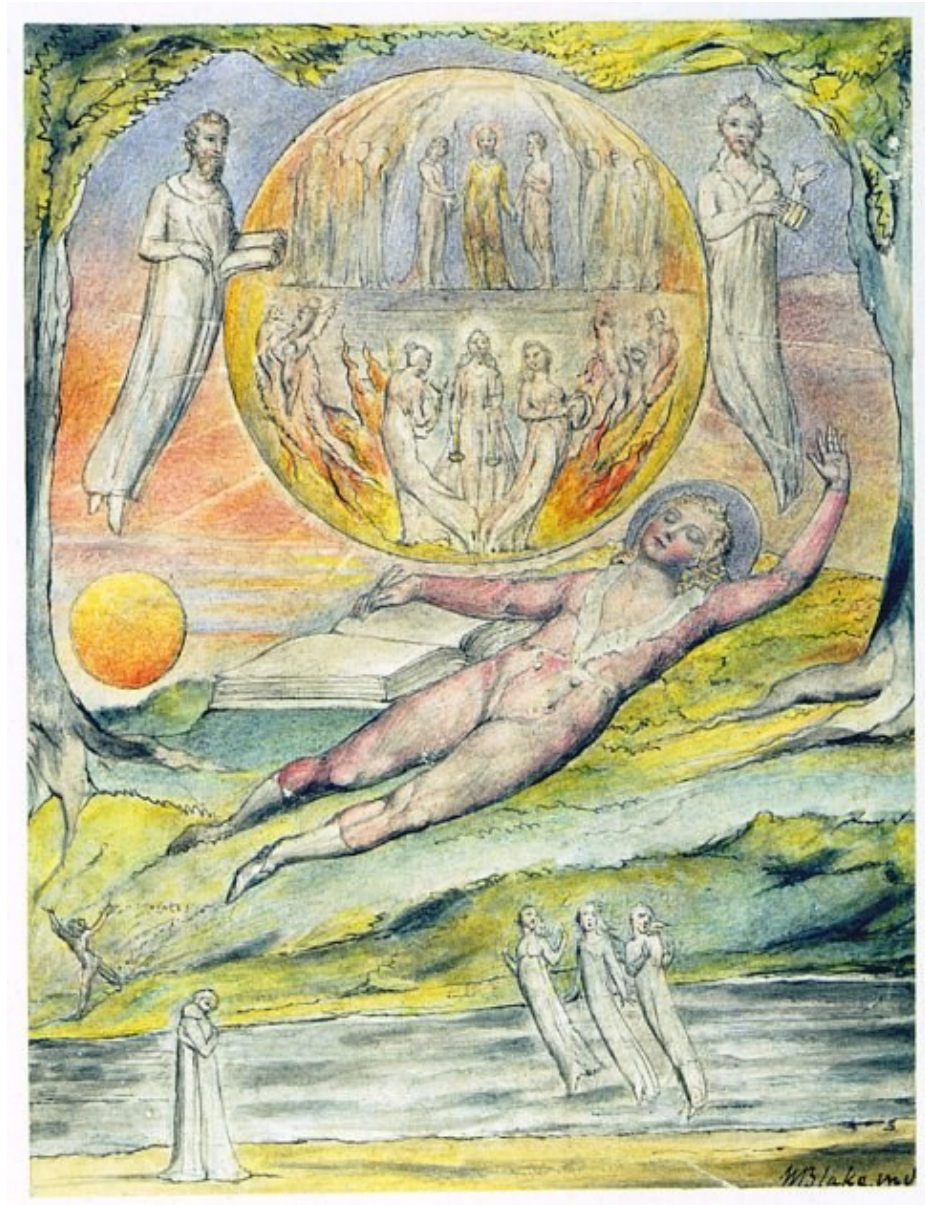


Fig. 14. William Blake, “The Youthful Poet’s Dream” *L’Allegro*, Morgan Library, New York City. *Blake Archive*.

Key visual symbols present in “The Youthful Poet’s Dream” connect Milton with a line of tradition that is associated with his Urizenic error. The Pan’s pipe may be among the positive iconography associated with Milton in the eighteenth century, but Blake in “The Goblin” has already used innocuous folklore to highlight religious error and its resulting spectral horrors. Pan’s pipe, with its association with shepherds, fits the pastoral genre of *L’Allegro*, but the object also links Shakespeare, who in the painting holds it, to the “Greek or Roman Models” that Blake asserts in the preface of *Milton*, “all Men ought to condemn” (95). The last painting for *L’Allegro* visually presents the “notion of mediation [that] is fundamental to Blake’s theory of poetic creation” (Dunbar 140). Blake imagines Shakespeare not simply performing as he does in Milton’s poem to “[w]arble his native wood-notes wild” (134), but as an angel of poetic vision, complete with halo, hovering beside the globe of the young poet Milton’s dream.

Blake implicates Shakespeare in Milton’s error, here in the *L’Allegro* painting (see fig. 14), but more obviously in *Milton*’s preface when he observes that “Shakespeare & Milton were both curbd by the general malady & infection from the silly Greek & Latin slaves of the Sword” (95). While in *Milton*, Blake groups Shakespeare and Milton together in suffering the same attachment to classical literature, in “The Youthful Poet’s Dream,” Blake seems to implicate Shakespeare and Jonson as partially responsible for transmitting to Milton the “classical moralism [that] . . . prevented him from achieving his imaginative potential” (Richey 114). The dualistic vision prefigures the later painting “The Spirit of Plato” in the *Il Penseroso* series (see fig. 21), and the Pan’s pipe is a visual reminder of the mythology of the classical period from which Plato’s philosophy also comes.

Shakespeare's Pan's pipe recalls classicism, but it is Jonson's book that connects such classicism to Urizenic error. In *L'Allegro*, Milton's speaker celebrates the comic form with a mention of "Jonson's learned sock" (132). Blake pictures Jonson as the sleeping Milton's poetic mediator who holds an open book (see fig. 14). As Mitchell argues, the book represents Urizen, reason, and law (132). Plate fifteen of *Milton* pictures Urizen seated on an open book (see fig. 3), as does the title plate of *The First Book of Urizen*; in plate four of *Urizen* (see fig. 15), he consults an open book, and in plate sixty-four of *Jerusalem*, he points to an open book (see fig. 16). Dunbar poses two possible readings of "The Youthful Poet's Dream": that the "poet's sleep may be the repose of Divine Vision or the oblivion of Urizenic materialism" (118); considering the visual symbol of the book, the latter proposal seems far more likely, especially considering that the Milton of the painting, too, holds an open book with "pages . . . open but as yet unmarked" (Werner 153). According to this reading, the globe of vision, then, could represent Milton's spectre, which Bloom argues is "every impulse towards dualism, which must include the impulse that shaped the God and Satan of *Paradise Lost* as antithetical beings, and then assigned so much of human energy and desire to Satan" (*Blake* 309). Closer attention to the content within the dualistic globe, however, defies such a simplistic dismissal of the vision as one of pure error.



Fig. 15. William Blake, Plate 4 of *The First Book of Urizen* Copy D, British Museum, London. *Blake Archive*.



Fig. 16. William Blake, Plate 64 of *Jerusalem* Copy E, Yale, New Haven. *Blake Archive*.

Rather, Blake communicates his ambivalence as he depicts Milton's globe of vision; Blake illustrates the complexity of his artistic relationship with Milton's works when he presents Milton's dream as both flawed and visionary. Dunbar points out that

“[t]he globe, the most striking detail of the picture, is entirely of Blake’s invention” (139) and that “[t]he sun of this world, a tiny, orange-red sphere that hovers just above the horizon, is dwarfed by the globe of vision” (141). In addition to the prominence of the vision in the design, the possible presence of a trumpet in the globe suggests that the dream is not entirely cut off from prophetic wisdom (see fig. 14). Although Werner argues that in the bottom half of the globe, the middle figure is “the presiding goddess of the underworld here as Justice with her balance scales severed” (153), drawn in response to Milton’s mention in *L’Allegro* of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, the image is really too small to make out with any certainty, and other critics have interpreted the image as a pair of trumpets (Dunbar 142) and as “an unblown trumpet in the right hand and a censer in the left” (Grant 436). The trumpet of prophecy that lies idle could represent Blake’s recognition of Milton’s potential as a prophet, potential that Blake enables Milton to realize through his own epic poem *Milton*.

In contrast to his nudity in *Milton*, however, Milton’s dark clothing and gestures of repression signal an increasing association with Urizen in the first painting of the *Il Penseroso* series (see figs. 2, 18). With fidelity to Milton’s text, Blake illustrates Melancholy as a “pensive nun, devout and pure” (31), but her black habit, in addition to fitting Milton’s textual description of “a robe of darkest grain” (33), recalls the dark robe that Milton discards in *Milton*, symbolizing his liberation from his attachment to the religious tyranny that covered his spirit (see figs. 17, 18). The negative associations with Melancholy’s dark clothing are reinforced by “the snaky fold of her gown as it hangs from her left forearm” (Grant 436). The snake shape of her gown belies the piety of her

“looks commercing with the skies” (39). Blake indicates that religious devotion in the picture is not to be fully trusted.

Table 2

Text and Illustration Correspondences for *Il Penseroso* Paintings

Lines Illustrated	Blake’s Watercolor Painting
<i>L’Allegro</i> lines 6-9 <i>Il Penseroso</i> lines 11-17 <i>Il Penseroso</i> lines 33-60	“Melancholy”
<i>Il Penseroso</i> lines 67-72	“The Wandering Moon”
<i>Il Penseroso</i> lines 85-108	“The Spirit of Plato”
<i>Il Penseroso</i> lines 131-8	“The Sun and His Wrath”
<i>Il Penseroso</i> lines 139-50	“Milton’s Mysterious Dream”
<i>L’Allegro</i> line 5 <i>Il Penseroso</i> lines 165-74	“Milton in His Old Age”

As well as her clothing’s associations with Urizen, Melancholy’s isolation in Blake’s painting conveys the rigidity of error (see fig. 18). Unlike Mirth, her companions stand at a distance from her, and in its lack of dynamic life, “the picture details a state of restricted vision in which the characters are placed in a Urizenic setting and isolated from each other in their own self-communing and essentially unilluminating private worlds” (Dunbar 146). Melancholy appears prim; her “hands gesturing abnegation and her gaze too sweetly cast heavenward associate her with repressive notions of moral virtue” (Werner 155). While she shares with Mirth the quality of being disproportionately large in the painting, which suggests that each goddess is physically closer to her viewer than any other figure represented, Melancholy’s lack of movement means that she simply

stands apart (see figs. 4, 18). Though Mirth clearly leads her companions, Melancholy appears to be antisocial.



Fig. 17. William Blake, Plate 13 of *Milton a Poem* Copy A, British Museum, London.
Blake Archive.



Fig. 18. William Blake, "Melancholy" *L'Allegro*, Morgan Library, New York City. *Blake Archive*.

Her companions, too, though they do not share her dark clothing, gesture in ways that identify them as “spectrous negations” (Werner 155). Milton catalogues Melancholy’s entourage in an imperative call from the poem’s speaker to Melancholy:

And join with thee calm Peace and Quiet,
Spare Fast, that oft with gods doth diet,
And hears the Muses in a ring
Ay round about Jove’s altar sing.
And add to these retired Leisure,
That in trim gardens takes his pleasure;
But first, and chiefest, with thee bring
Him that yon soars with golden wing,
Guiding the fiery-wheelèd throne,
The cherub Contemplation;
And the mute Silence hist along (45-55)

Milton associates Spare Fast positively with gods, but Blake’s image bears a negative connotation: “Spare Fast, with the cross-arm pose of a coffin effigy, is a grim figure. Retired Leisure repeats the same closed gesture” (Werner 155). As with the group in “A Sunshine Holiday,” *Il Penseroso*’s first plate shows characters closed off to each other but likely also closed to the spiritual realm with which they claim to be in communion.

While “Mirth” is a painting that bounds with movement toward the viewer, “Melancholy” is stationary, which communicates Blake’s effective translation into spatial form the different temporal modes in the two poems. While the speaker of *L’Allegro* disregards time, his counterpart in *Il Penseroso* is all too aware of it. “Less” introduces

the song of the nightingale “Philomel,” indicating a choice between its song and silence (56). Blake depicts the nightingale as a small, naked, humanized figure which “contrasts markedly with the Lark of *L’Allegro* [’s second painting], his counterpart in the companion poem” (Dunbar 145). Blake’s lark, in its connection to Los, is a spiritually oriented bird (see fig. 7); the nightingale, however, prompts illicit love and is “a symbol of . . . earthly pleasure which is *more* tempting because [it is] fleeting and perilous” (Shippey 57). While the nightingale signals sensual delight, which makes it an odd choice considering the subject matter of *Il Penseroso*, the idea that the nightingale communicates a sense of “fleeting” time does fit with the poem’s attitude towards time (see fig. 18). After the nightingale image, the poem’s only instance of “while” occurs, which, at first reading, suggests that “Cynthia checks her Dragon yoke” at the same moment that the nightingale sings (59). However, Milton soon reveals that his speaker does not hear the bird’s song because he was focusing his attention elsewhere; a sense of loss pervades this scene as the speaker perceives one action at another’s expense. Although Blake, as an illustrator, makes no such choice, depicting both Cynthia and the nightingale, the arrested motion of his painting does convey the sacrifice that accompanies choice because it contrasts with the frenzied movement of choicelessness in the first Mirth painting (see figs. 4, 18).

Blake transforms Milton’s moon in his portrayal of her in the next painting, and he depicts Milton, dressed in dark, Urizenic clothing, gazing up at her (see fig. 19). In his manuscript of the poem (see fig. 20), Blake adds the adjective “terrified” to Milton’s comparison of the moon traveling through the heavens “[l]ike one that had been led astray” (69). Blake uses the moon in this painting not to criticize classical mythology or

the chastity associated with the moon in it, but possibly to depict “one of his own muses. The bare-breasted girl who steps out of the milky way is one of daughters of Beulah, who create moony spaces for sleepers outside Eden” (Werner 156). Another possibility for the moon’s identity, Werner argues, is Ololon, Blake’s representation of Milton’s emanation, which includes his daughters but also his writings, in *Milton*: “imagery of the milky river, the young virgin, the streaming clouds, and the moon comes together in this picture in a way that suggests a quite possible identification of the figure of the Wandering Moon with Milton’s emanation” (Werner 156). Such an identification would explain Blake’s addition of the adjective “terrified” to his description of the moon because in *Milton*, Milton abandons his emanation, and Ololon must both sustain in isolation from him and then later bravely follow him to “Eternal Death” (Blake, *Milton* 12.14).

Milton’s dark clothing presents the possibility that Blake is using his illustration “The Wandering Moon” to show Milton’s moment of separation from his emanation, resulting from his errors. Milton’s presence in the painting at all, of course, is completely Blake’s addition (see fig. 19). Like Melancholy, Milton wears black; his clothing reflects “the description in *Milton* of . . . his Spectre” (Dunbar 148). Rightly connecting Milton’s error to Melancholy, whose dress calls to mind institutionalized religion, Dunbar also notes that Milton “is wearing a gown and trencher” (146), which associates him with the university. Viewed biographically, the painting connects Milton’s time at the university, an institution which Blake viewed “along with the Church, as repressive” (Werner 156), to the error clouding his prophetic vision.



Fig. 19. William Blake, "The Wandering Moon" *Il Penseroso*, Morgan Library, New York City. *Blake Archive*.

8 To behold the wandering Moon
Riding near her highest Noon
Like one that has been led astray
Thro the heavenly wide pathless way
And oft as if her head she bowed
Stooping thro a fleecy Cloud
Oft on a plot of rising ground
I hear the far off Curfew sound
Over some withered water thorn
Swinging slow with sullen ear
Milton in his Character of a Student
at Cambridge sees the Moon terrified
as one led astray in the midst of her
path thro heaven. The distant Beech
seen across a wide water indicates
the sound of the Curfew Bell

Fig. 20. William Blake, "The Wandering Moon" Manuscript *Il Penseroso*, Morgan Library, New York City. *Blake Archive*.

Milton's early poems show heavy references to classical mythology and philosophy, which Blake denounces in *Milton*. Extensively including mythological characters, Milton's "At a Vacation Exercise in the College," also alludes to Plato's *Timaeus*. Milton engages Plato even more explicitly in *Il Penseroso*. The dualism that Blake detects in the Milton poems is rooted in Milton's invocation of the "spirit of Plato to unfold / What worlds, or vast regions hold / The immortal mind" in *Il Penseroso* (89-91). Indeed, the dualistically separated orb from "The Youthful Poet's Dream" has split into two globes (see figs. 14, 21), demonstrating an even more prominent espousal of dualism in "The Spirit of Plato," the third painting for *Il Penseroso*.

Plato and Milton are both pictured in this painting which is largely Blake's imaginative addition rather than illustration, and Plato appears to be filling Milton's head with his dualistic visions (see fig. 21). According to Dunbar, Blake considered Plato to be "a false prophet obsessed with the harsher aspects of the generative material world and with an afterlife that promises only re-entry into the generative cycle" (154). In his rejection of sensory experience as illusion, Plato's teaching calls for the "[repression of man's] elemental spirits, the sources of his creativity, [and] bind[s] him, paradoxically, all the more firmly to the fallen material world" (Davies 142). Milton's posture in the painting suggests that he has some resistance to Plato's message. With his hand on his head, Milton forms a physical barrier between himself and Plato, as well as sending a signal that the information distresses or confuses him. Furthermore, unlike the Milton of "The Youthful Poet's Dream," this Milton's eyes are open, suggesting an active engagement and even filtering of the ideas. Blake signals that although the young Milton

who wrote *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* may have pondered Platonic dualism, its hold on him is eventually overcome.



Fig. 21. William Blake, "The Spirit of Plato" *Il Penseroso*, Morgan Library, New York City. *Blake Archive*.

Visual symbols evoke Urizen to augment Blake's critique of Plato. Urizen's image itself appears twice in the painting—once as Plato himself and once as “Plato's God of Gods, who governs by law—a tyrannical supreme being who, like the classical Zeus, Blake's own Urizen, and the Jehovah of the Old Testament, is preoccupied with the abstract modes of creation and systems of law” (Dunbar 151). In the right-hand globe of vision directly above Milton's head, the “Demiurge is here Urizen” (Blunt 82), a representation of a heavenly king that aligns with Milton's vision of the creator, which Blake considers to be in error. Plato himself also bears Urizen's characteristic white hair and beard, but he “wears a sad but benevolent expression of experience rather than the stern countenance of a repressive lawgiver” (Werner 157). Perhaps Blake wishes to communicate his own mixed feelings for Plato; rather than reproach him as roundly as he does Urizen, Blake softens Plato's visage to moderate his critique. Like Milton, Blake himself in his youth was “impressed by the works of Plato” (Dunbar 153). From their youthful studies of Plato, Blake and Milton retain a “general Platonic agreement on the superiority of the spiritual over the material” (Werner 159). However, unlike Milton and Plato, Blake does not reject the world of the senses but considers sensory experience, when imbued with imagination, to provide an entry point to spirituality; for example, sexual love for Blake, while possessing the potential “of being dragged down into simple preoccupation with the material, it more rightly opens a way upward into Eden” (Werner 162). Blake's image of Urizen most obviously suggest criticism of Plato, but his depiction of Milton with a book further builds his critical commentary on the poem.

At the same time that Blake's painting critiques Milton's association with Plato, it subtly suggests the redemptive possibility of *Milton*. In “The Spirit of Plato” “the negative

suggestions . . . are considerable. It is clear that the artist is not drawing the expansive vision of one who is truly awake” (Werner 160). Milton’s open book in the painting functions as a symbol for reason and the Urizenic consciousness that Milton must transform in *Milton* to become “the Awakener, an awakener is in the process both of himself awakening and of awakening others” (Wittreich, *Why Milton* 77). Plato points to “the heavens above with an index finger of his right hand while with his left hand he is pointing to a volume” (Dunbar 149). Plato unites the flawed vision above to the book below (see fig. 21). Milton in the picture “is again dressed in black” (Dunbar 149), indicating a covering of his spirit. Through many visual Urizenic symbols, “Blake implies that Milton was strongly influenced by Plato, and that this influence was a harmful one” (Dunbar 152). Visual symbols for Urizen continue throughout the rest of the *Il Penseroso* paintings.

In the next painting, “The Sun in His Wrath,” Milton’s dark clothing, his possession of a book, and his attachment to Melancholy reveal his continued pursuit of spiritual error (see fig. 22). Blake’s juxtaposition of black and yellow colors creates a dark tone. Both Melancholy and Milton are dressed in black, and in his union with Melancholy, Milton “has taken a wrong turn, repudiating the sources of his own strength, to walk instead in the cloister of twilight groves of repression” (Werner 162). Melancholy takes Milton’s right hand, signifying a spiritual pursuit, but the dark clothing suggests Urizenic error, this time Milton’s personal tyranny, a “repression that poses as holiness and purity” (Dunbar 157). In Milton’s “left hand he is clutching a large tome” (Dunbar 156), and the book, now associated with both Urizen and Plato, shows that Milton “has succumbed to an erroneous notion of duality” (Werner 161). “The Sun in His

Wrath” is the most unambiguously negative image in the *Il Penseroso* series, but while Milton’s *Il Penseroso* speaker targets his criticism on the sun, who “begins to fling / His flaring beams” (131-32), Blake’s sun recalls the majestic Los of “The Sun at His Eastern Gate.” The vibrant and open gesture of the Sun contrasts Blake’s objects of criticism, Melancholy and Milton.

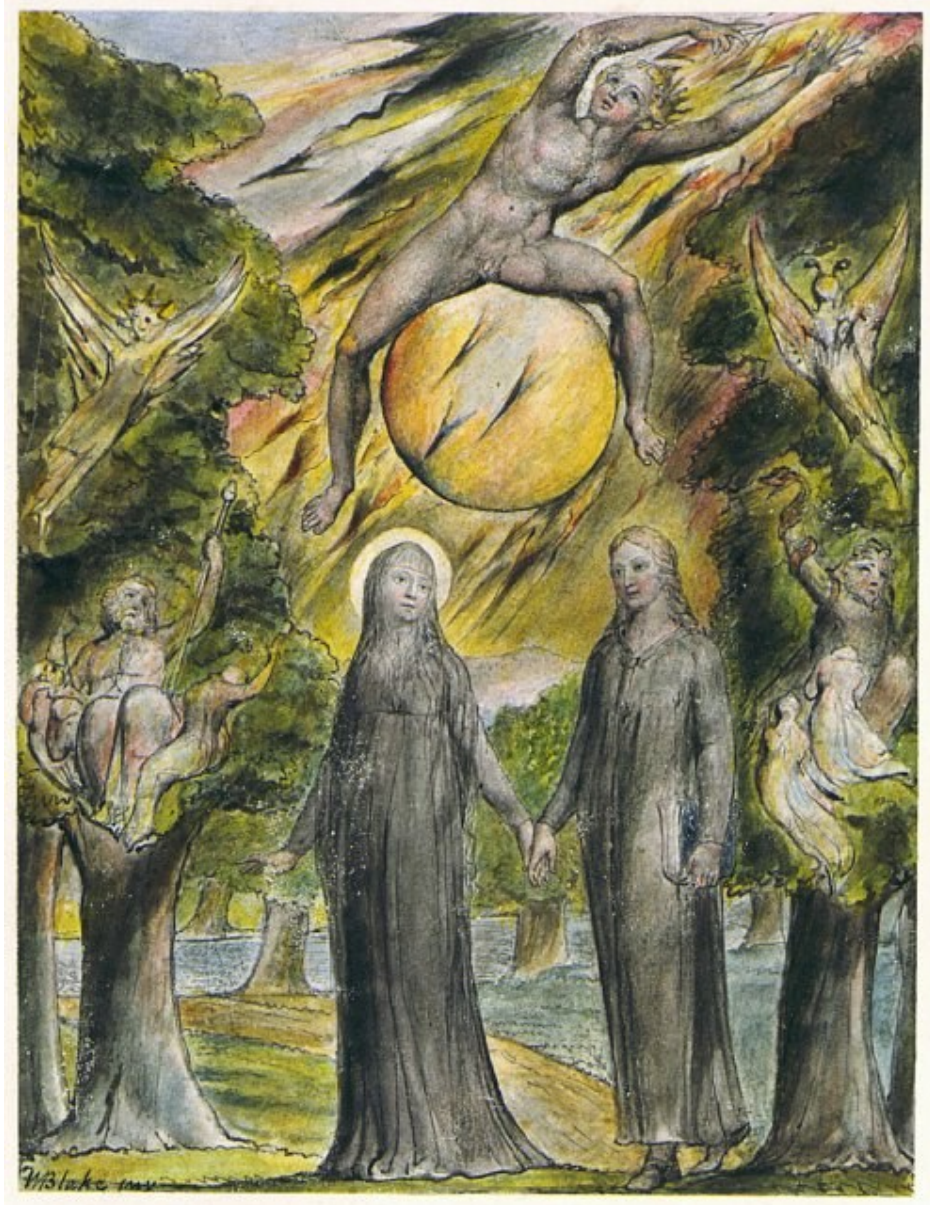


Fig. 22. William Blake, “The Sun in His Wrath” *Il Penseroso*, Morgan Library, New York City. *Blake Archive*.

The fifth design, “Milton’s Mysterious Dream,” marks a turning point in the tone of the *Il Penseroso* series. While Blake continues to expose Milton’s errors, the light colors of this painting suggest redemptive potential largely absent from the series so far; this “design shows the possibility of a progressive awakening into vision” (Werner 162). Spiral shapes suggesting scrolls appear three times in the painting, representing prophetic potential (see fig. 23). Similar to “The Young Poet’s Dream” in *L’Allegro*, in this painting Milton is sleeping (see fig. 14), but there are notable contrasts in his body language and in his vision. A single, unified globe hovers above Milton, and in the disc appear figures who are either contorted into positions of anguish or who resemble Blake’s Urizen or could be images of “the tyrant-god Jehovah” (Dunbar 159). Blake signals that he finds Milton to be in “a state not of divine inspiration but of mortal error” by folding Milton’s arms to suggest a closing of his spirit (Dunbar 157).

Even this false vision, however, is not dualistically split, suggesting that Plato had no lasting effect on Milton, who, as Harold Bloom points out “is not a dualist” (*Blake* 38). Like Blake, Milton can be described as “someone who rejects the division of what is into two radicals—into spirit and matter, mind and body, divinity and humanity, idea and substance,” but while Milton was a materialist monist who believed the “spirit is not the dualistic opposite of matter but matter’s most sublime realization,” Blake is a “metaphysical monist” who “encloses the physical world within spirit, or, as he calls it, imagination” (Teskey 90). While Blake may find error in Milton’s material vision of the soul, it is Milton’s attachment to rationalist thinking that garners Blake’s full reproach.



Fig. 23. William Blake, “Milton’s Mysterious Dream” *Il Penseroso*, Morgan Library, New York City. *Blake Archive*.

Blake’s final painting for *Il Penseroso*, “Milton in His Old Age,” issues both a potent criticism of Milton’s elevation of reason and a suggestive visual allusion to the

Milton of Blake's work *Milton*. Dressed in dark Urizenic clothing and seated beside an open book (see fig. 24), a symbol for reason, Milton occupies the "peaceful hermitage" of *Il Penseroso* with his "hairy gown and mossy spell" (168-9). His eyes are cast upward to the heavens and are fully open. Dunbar describes his body language in positive terms, noting that "his arms are outstretched in a gesture of universal blessing" (160). To Dunbar, the painting suggests that Milton has attained the "prophetic strain" from the poem (174). But with his arms extended outward, he also bears resemblance to the Urizen of plate four of *Urizen* (see fig. 15), and even to the Urizen who Milton must remold in plate fifteen of *Milton* (Blake 206, 262) (see fig. 3). The visual association of Milton with Urizen is a reminder of Milton's Urizenic error, resulting in his "attraction to absolute masculine authority . . . [and his] patriarchal overidentification, which accounts for the streak of authoritarianism in his personality and hence his misogyny, pride, and self-righteousness" (Quinney 129). It is the correction of these errors that form the basis of Blake's *Milton*, a work that, through Blake's imaginative vision, redeems Milton from an eternity of "dwelling in error" (Quinney 128). Blake uses the Milton of the last *Il Penseroso* painting to give a prophetic nod to his own work, *Milton*.

Two elements of "Milton in His Old Age" are particularly suggestive of Blake's reworking of Milton's story: the constellations and the motif of vision. Dunbar writes about the pattern of the constellations featured in the painting:

The zodiacal signs represented in *Il Penseroso* . . . are those that were associated by the Neoplatonists with the descending soul. As we have already seen, the Milton of *Milton* returns to earth to correct the "errors" of his first existence. Here we see the "original" form of the poet nearing

the end of his life and overcome by a vision of his own redemptive return.

(161)

Whether the image suggests that Blake felt that the historical Milton really had a vision of how he would appear later in Blake's *Milton* is beside the point. Blake, though presenting Milton in a pose that shows him in error, uses the constellation to remind the reader familiar with Blake's earlier work *Milton* that Milton will eventually acknowledge his faults and journey to redress them (see fig. 24).

First, Blake's Milton suddenly has an awakening to his misconceptions. Throughout *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, Milton's eyes have played an important role in Blake's paintings in revealing Milton's states of mental passivity or activity. The youthful Milton of *L'Allegro* has closed eyes while only one representation of Milton in *Il Penseroso* shows Milton's eyes closed. In "Milton in His Old Age," Milton's eyes are open (see fig. 24), and it is suggests that Blake may have felt that Milton's thinking began to change near the end of his life. After writing *Paradise Lost*, the source of many of what Blake perceives to be Milton's errors, Milton, in writing *Paradise Regained* "breaks away from the terrifying theology that clouded the vision of his earlier epic; he returns to the Christocentric theology of his earlier poems" (Wittreich, *Angel* 40). A shift from God the Father to the Son is analogous to a shift from reason to imagination. Blake, for whom "the divine gift of imagination . . . replaces the divine gift of reason in Milton's system" (Davies 18), shows the Milton in the last *Il Penseroso* painting as still bound in his error but "in the process of waking up" (Wittreich, *Angel* 32), an act that finds its completion in Blake's *Milton*.



Fig. 24. William Blake, "Milton in His Old Age" *Il Penseroso*, Morgan Library, New York City. *Blake Archive*.

Blake's paintings do provide a commentary to Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, but not at the expense of fidelity to Milton's work. His use of many textual

details to show the imagery of the poems reveals Blake to be a close reader of Milton. Blake also goes beyond the text of the poems to illuminate Milton's spiritual beliefs, which are imbedded in the text as well. When Blake criticizes Milton's ideas, he does so in a way that, rather than distort the meaning of the poems, sharpens understanding of Milton. For *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, the "picture and poem collaborate to yield meaning" (Wittreich, *Angel* 21). Blake's paintings use visual symbolism to engage in a type of discourse with Milton's poems that illuminates the spiritual underpinnings in the art of both Milton and Blake.

CHAPTER III

Prophetic Time and Space in the Nativity Ode

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake writes that a “man who never alters his opinion is like standing water, & breeds reptiles of the mind” (125). The stagnant water image is telling: Blake insists on movement, on energy, on progression. Religious institutions err because they reject the energy of the body as evil (Blake 110), a misconception, but also because the very process of institutionalizing requires stagnation as opinion becomes codified into dogma, their figurative reptile. Milton’s image in *L’Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* suggests that Blake perceived institutions, particularly those of religion and education, to have exerted a corrupting influence on Milton. However, Blake clearly did not find Milton to be irreparably damaged, for in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake “presents [Milton] as a poet of principle who, changing his mind and altering his opinions, avoids breeding reptiles of the mind” (Wittreich, *Why Milton* 96). Further, Blake shows in *Milton* that he finds him to be capable of transformation; Milton changes his mind in Heaven and initiates a journey to correct his errors. The nineteenth-century French Romantic Lamartine also notes flexibility in Milton; a quotation from Lamartine appears as the epigraph in Gordon Teskey’s *Delirious Milton*, and the English translation of it reads, “Milton floated among a thousand systems.” Though both Lamartine and Blake clearly grasped the complexity of Milton’s ideology, the impulse of many present scholars appears to be to simplify and categorize Milton. Prominent critics such as Barbara Lewalski have doggedly defended the view of Milton

as a political radical throughout his literary career², but recent scholarship on Milton's "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," the Nativity Ode, challenges the critical assumption that all of Milton's works reflect a radical agenda. Placed in its historical context, the Nativity Ode could have served a politically conservative agenda: to promote Christmas at a time when the radical Parliament had banned it. Blake's repetition of Christmas iconography, the manger scene, is compatible with a pro-Christmas reading, but the appearance of the manger scene in four of the six watercolor illustrations Blake made for Milton's Nativity Ode primarily functions to replicate Milton's sense of prophetic time (see figs. 27, 28, 30, 31, 33, 34, 40, 41). In illustrating Milton's Nativity Ode, Blake also draws on iconography that he associates with prophetic experience in *Milton*, such as the trumpet, the bow and arrows, and the stars. As in *Milton*, Blake's Nativity Ode paintings feature images of error: reptilian creatures and the bearded visage of Urizen. As with *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, echoes of the visual iconography from Blake's *Milton* in the Nativity Ode paintings open up a deeper understanding of the interpretive nature of Blake's illustrations.

Blake produced two sets of the Nativity Ode watercolor paintings, and though their basic designs remain constant, the two copies vary significantly in their use of color and iconography, resulting in differences in tone. The two sets of paintings—one currently at the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester, England, and the other currently at the Huntington Library and Art Gallery in San Marino, California—each comprise six paintings to illustrate the Nativity Ode's four proem stanzas and its seventeen hymn

² As she expresses in "How Radical Was the Young Milton," Lewalski considers the Nativity Ode to evidence reformist Puritan ideology in its expulsion of the pagan gods, who she connects to conservative religious practice under Archbishop Laud.

stanzas. The Blake Archive assigns the Whitworth set 1809 for its date of composition, and considers the Huntington set to be later, estimating 1815 for its completion (Eaves). The issue of dating the two sets, as well as determining which preceded the other, is one under active debate. Werner notes that though some have proposed that Blake may have completed the Huntington set earlier than the Whitworth set, “it seems probable that the Whitworth set is the first version and that the Huntington set was executed after a period of intervening years, for the Huntington series’ more markedly apocalyptic imagery suggests that it is the later version” (Werner 117). Dunbar disagrees, noting the Whitworth set “is the more detailed of the two, and it includes more points drawn from Blake’s ‘system’ and more traditional pictorial motifs than the Huntington set. It is therefore likely to have been the later of the two” (91). Though the details are certainly in sharper focus in the Whitworth set, which is “pen-and-ink drawings to which washes of colour have been applied” versus the Huntington set, which is “highly coloured” with the softer lines typical of watercolor paintings (Dunbar 91), Davies points out Martin Butlin’s argument that the “pale, misty, luminous tones” of the Huntington set suggest that it “should on stylistic grounds be grouped with the *L’Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* and *Paradise Regained* designs, both watermarked 1816, which are on the same intimate scale” (Davies 89). The question of dating the paintings becomes especially important if one accepts Wittreich’s argument that “as Blake’s understanding of the poet—both his life and works—advanced, Blake became less and less intent upon rebuking Milton and, simultaneously, much more cognizant of the visionary dimensions of Milton’s art” (*Angel* 43). Following this line of reasoning, a viewer should detect a more critical tone in the Whitworth set than in the Huntington set; indeed, the use of the trumpet as a prophetic

symbol is one way in which the iconography bears out this understanding of Blake's illustrations.

In both sets, the image of the Nativity scene where Christ is born in a stable is prominent. When he repeats the manger scene in over half of the paintings in each set, "Blake reveals the celebrative rather than descriptive character of Milton's poem" (Wittreich, *Angel* 90). Like Milton, Blake avoids sequential and representative storytelling of the event. Though Milton's poem is abstract in its handling of the Nativity, avoiding the descriptive imagery of the scene typical to poems with the subject of Christ's birth, Blake uses the iconography of the manger repeatedly. One result is that Blake's paintings emphasize the image of Christmas; if Milton's poem did indeed function as a conservative political statement by reminding his audience of Christmas though Parliament had banned the celebration of it, Blake's illustrations reinforce such a political comment. Recently, a Milton scholar has made the argument that Milton's headnote for the Nativity Ode should be understood in a political context. James Dougal Fleming argues that the headnote "Compos'd 1629," which appears underneath the title of the Nativity Ode, was a politically conservative response to the Puritan Parliament's ban of the public worship of Christmas in January 1645 (20). Starting a poem about Christmas with a reminder of a year that no Puritan could forget as the beginning of Charles I's personal rule, Milton suggests the Parliament's tyranny through juxtaposition. The Nativity Ode first appeared in *Poems of Mr John Milton* in 1645; until Fleming's scholarship, the headnote was thought to be apolitical (see fig. 25). The date marker of the headnote provides the first temporal frame for the reader, and it was taken as the literal date of composition, which "Milton does not want the reader to miss because he is

about to invent the fable that the real time is the last hour of the pre-Christian era” (Allen 26). But if the headnote serves as such a time marker, one must question why Milton would have allowed its removal in the 1673 edition of the poem (see fig. 26). Though the Nativity Ode possesses the prominent position of the first poem in the first and second editions of the book, the headnote “Compos’d 1629” does not appear in the 1673 edition. Fleming believes that the differences in the political landscape of 1645 and 1673 account for the editorial changes. The 1673 edition lacks the headnote because it had ceased to be politically relevant in the post-Reformation context. Fleming’s article suggests that for Milton, in the same year as the ban on Christmas, to publish a book that begins with a poem written in a “politically reactionary genre [that] is conservative . . . Laudian . . . and anti-Puritan” destabilizes the view that Milton held consistently radical beliefs from a young age (24). Few Christian images are as suggestive of the birth of Christ as a manger, and though Milton mentions the word “manger” only once in his poem, Blake depicts it four times. Blake’s repetition of the iconography of Christmas sends a potent reminder of the holiday itself.

*serve of the age, by bringing into
the Light as true a Birth, as the
Muses have brought forth since
our famous Spencer wrote ;
whose Poems in these English ones
are as rarely imitated, as sweetly
excell'd. Reader if thou art
Eagle-eyed to censure their worth,
I am not fearful to expose them
to thy exactest perusal.*

Thine to command

HUMPH. MOSELEY.

On

(1)



On the morning of CHRIST'S
Nativity. Compos'd 1629.

I.

THis is the Month, and this the happy morn
Wherin the Son of Heav'n's eternal King,
Of wedded Maid, and Virgin Mother born,
Our great redemption from above did bring ;
For so the holy sages once did sing,
That he our deadly forfeit should release,
And with his Father work us a perpetual peace.

II.

That glorious Form, that Light unsufferable,
And that far-beaming blaze of Majesty,
Wherewith he wont at Heav'n's high Council-Table,
To sit the midst of Trinal Unity,
He laid aside ; and here with us to be ;
Forsook the Courts of everlasting Day,
And chose with us a darksome House of mortal Clay.

A

III. Say

Fig. 25. The first page from John Milton, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," *Poems of Mr John Milton* (London, 1645). Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C.
EEBO.

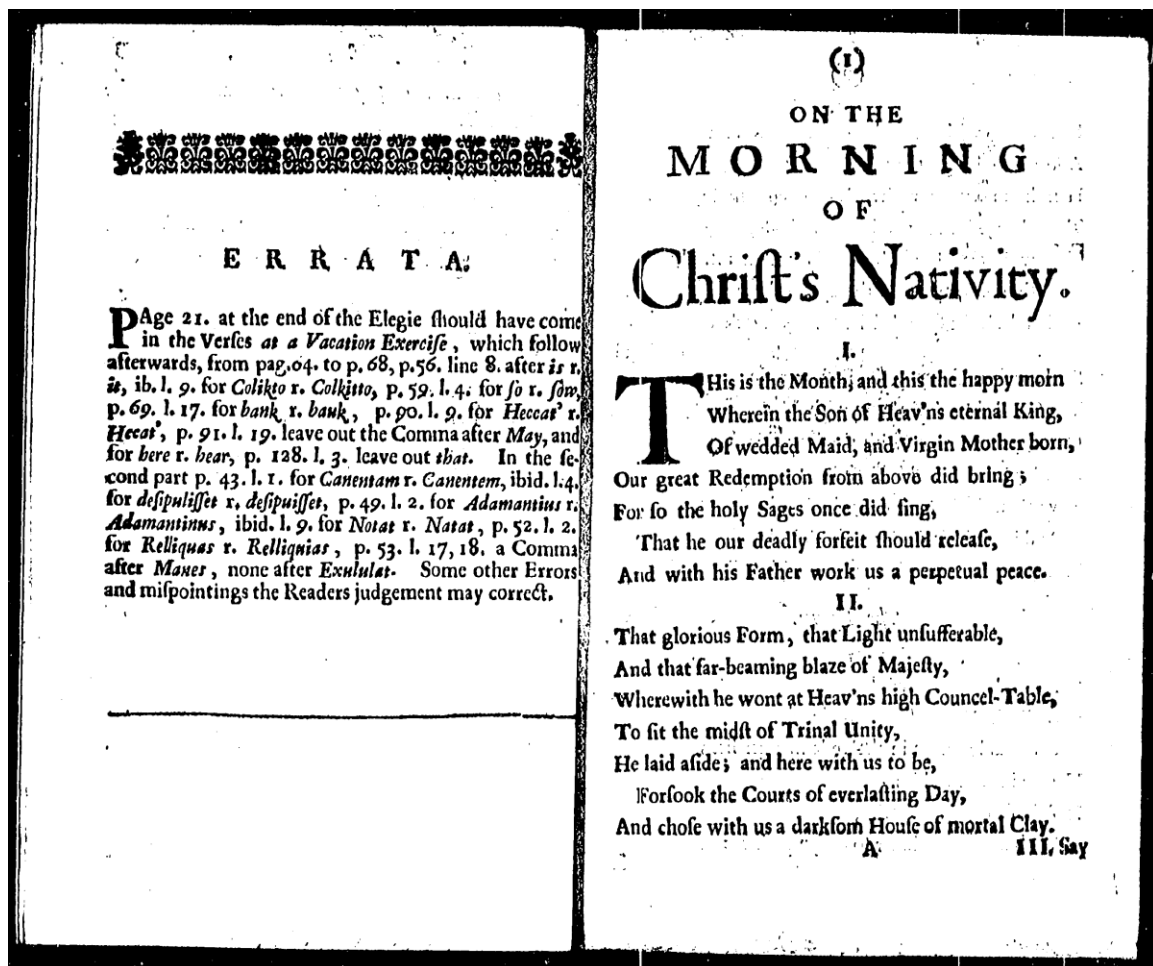


Fig. 26. The first page from John Milton, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," *Poems of Mr John Milton* (London, 1673). Huntington Library, San Marino. EEBO.

Milton's poem begins with a consideration of time, contemplating the anniversary of Christ's birth in the poem's first stanza. Milton's first line, "This is the month, and this the happy morn" uses the pronoun "this," which does not have a clear referent (1). Still, the proximity to the headnote and "the present tense [denotes] Christmas Day 1629" (Kerrigan 193), if, of course, the headnote is to be believed as the date of composition, rather than as a reference to political tyranny. Milton describes Christmas, the Nativity Ode's presumed date of composition, as a "happy morn" because on it, "the Son of

Heav'n's eternal King / Of wedded maid, and virgin mother born / Our great redemption from above did bring" (2-4). What is important about the occasion is the action of the "Son," of God, "Heav'n's eternal King." Milton's representation of God as a monarch carries into later works such as *Paradise Lost*, revealing that even though Milton advocated for a republican system of government in England, he conceived of God as a perfect monarch. Such a conception also calls into question whether the young Milton believed in the trinity because the word "king" denotes reign over others, including those in his family, such as his son. Blake considered Milton's vision of a monarchical God to be tyrannical and flawed, and Blake's only representation of a king in the Nativity Ode illustrations is of the crowned Moloch, who, in the fifth painting of the series, presides over a scene of infant sacrifice (see figs. 38, 39). Milton uses oxymoron to describe Mary's virginity, but again Blake reveals his differing view as he illustrates the line (see figs. 27, 28). Milton's contradictions in terms emphasize the mystery of Christ's incarnation; the paradoxical "language admits in contradiction its impotence in face of the miracle" (Moseley 102). Milton's Mary is a "wedded maid, and virgin mother," but she "was to Blake neither blessed nor virginal but merely the bodily vehicle of Christ's divine birth, [and consequently] is clothed not in the blue robes of chastity but in white" (Dunbar 96). Blake uses color as a visual suggestion to link Mary to personified Nature, who, partially covered in white, rests at the bottom of the first painting; such a connection conveys that Mary is mundane, tempering Milton's emphasis on Mary's participation in a miracle (see fig. 27).



Fig. 27. William Blake, “The Descent of Peace” *On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity*, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester. *Blake Archive*.



Fig. 28. William Blake, "The Descent of Peace" *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, Huntington Library, San Marino. *Blake Archive*.

Milton begins to play with the reader's sense of time, conflating Christ's birth with its consequences; likewise, Blake's repetition of the stable in the first and last paintings of the series thwarts any attempts by the reader to chronologically order events (see figs. 27, 28, 40, 41). When Milton writes that Christ's birth, "Our great redemption from above did bring" (4), he creates that impression that it was Christ's birth that

brought redemption rather than his death. Though Christ atones for mankind's sins with his sacrifice, Milton's poem implies that redemption took place on "the happy morn" of the nativity. However, Milton is clearly not confused about the chronology of Christ's life; rather, the Nativity Ode "inaugurates a poetic technique characteristic of Milton, in which a particular event is made to encompass all time and space and history" (Lewalski, "Poetic Tradition" 82). Indeed, Milton's view of time is typically Christian, according to Lowry Nelson, who explains that for the Christian, "time was thought of as bounded at either end" (50). Nelson elaborates on the implications of such a view:

With the boundaries thus firmly set, it was possible to see time, under the aspect of eternity, as static and all the moments as equally present. Time, therefore, could be considered contingent and to some extent manipulatable within the closed Christian system. We need not think that time was in any way held to be unreal. It is possible to go further and say that the Christian conception of time implied circularity. The second coming of Christ was expected at the future end of time; it would be the re-establishment of Paradise much as it had existed in the beginning.

(Nelson 51)

Rather than confusing the nativity and the crucifixion, then, Milton presents the events as simultaneous when viewed from an eternal perspective. Blake, whose illustrations are also "bounded at either end" (Nelson 50) by an iconographic repetition, successfully translates the eternal perspective of Milton's text into visual form.

Both Blake and Milton regard themselves as prophets who are capable of accessing eternity. Later indicating his own prophet status, Milton first refers to Hebrew

prophets who told of the coming messiah: “For so the holy sages once did sing, / That he our deadly forfeit should release, / And with his Father work us a perpetual peace” (5-7). Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah foretold of the coming savior: “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed” (KJV, Isa. 53.5). Interestingly, the prophet uses past-tense verbs to tell of future events. According to Isaiah, “we are healed,” after the savior suffers on our behalf; Milton’s speaker clarifies that the prophets saw that Christ would release us from our “deadly forfeit,” the sin and death that arose from Adam and Eve’s fall. Furthermore, Christ’s birth brings the promise of the restoration of paradise in the end times. Werner aptly notes that both Blake and Milton create a “window in time that opens into eternal vision” and that “Blake honors Milton’s visionary perspective into the meaning of the Incarnation” by depicting the stable “in the form of a wayside shrine, which creates the impression of a first station of the cross” (117). Blake’s illustrations also use the personification of Nature and Peace to visually suggest the prophetic promise of redemption. In both the Whitworth and the Huntington sets, Peace frames the top of the stable with outstretched arms and wings as she descends from the heavens (see figs. 27, 28). Davies associates Peace with the Lark of Blake’s *L’Allegro* illustrations, but also with Milton himself: “like Milton in the poem she is introducing, indeed revealing, the Divine Vision opened to the spectator and to nature beneath her” (91). Nature, reclining across the painting’s lower border, functions with Peace as a frame for the divine vision of the stable, but the locked eyes of the two characters implies the eventuality of their union that Christ’s Incarnation signals.

The first painting in both the Whitworth and Huntington sets depicts the same scene, although with key differences. Most notably, where the Whitworth set pairs only the oxen (see fig. 27), the Huntington set creates two visual pairs between human and personified characters: Mary with Nature and Christ with Peace (see fig. 28). Blake shows Nature in profile and Mary in partial profile, but each figure has an upward gaze that creates a visual symmetry in the painting. Although Nature intently focuses on the figure of Peace while Mary's unfocused eyes direct upwards as she swoons, the two figures' postures link them in the Huntington series, with Mary falling backward from a seated position and Nature in the process of raising herself from her supine repose.

Nature in the Whitworth series, by contrast, lies completely flat, with only her eyes raised upward, and "her recumbent position resembles that of Eve in the eleventh *Paradise Lost* illustration" (Davies 93). Highlighting Nature's fallen state by associating her with Eve, Blake faithfully illustrates Milton's description of Nature. Milton's Nature uses snow "To hide her guilty front" (39); she experiences shame and feels unworthy to be in the presence of Christ. Blake's Whitworth set shows Nature "hidden by a veil of drifting snow" even though "Blake would have deplored [Milton's] conviction of sin and his aspersions on nature" (Werner 121). To show his disapproval of Milton's vision of Nature, in the Whitworth version, Nature's "ankles are crossed," an indication of "error to Blake" (Dunbar 97). Considering that in the Huntington series, "Nature's legs are no longer crossed and her snowy covering is less pronounced" (Davies 93), a tempting conclusion might be that Blake's approach in the Huntington set is more corrective than illustrative. However, though Milton's Nature is "Confounded that her Maker's eyes / Should look so near upon her foul deformities" (43-4), Milton's Christ in response, "Sent

down the meek-eyed Peace” for Nature’s “fears to cease” (46, 45). Blake remains faithful to Milton’s poem even as he pictures Nature in a “partially raised pose [that] suggests that the process of regeneration has already begun” (Werner 122) because Milton’s Nativity Ode is about the redemptive consequences of Christ’s incarnation. The Whitworth and Huntington sets, then, represent two differing views of Nature: one associates Nature with the Old Testament Eve to emphasize damnation, the other with Mary in acknowledgement of Nature’s salvation through Christ. Nature in Blake’s Whitworth set may be truer to the letter of Milton’s text, but the Huntington’s version more accurately captures the spirit of the poem by showing its “visionary dimensions” (Wittreich, *Angel* 43).

The visual connection between Peace and the infant Christ in the Huntington painting appropriately associates Christ with the solace his incarnation affords Nature. Blake’s Peace, like Milton’s, is pictured “waving wide her myrtle wand” (51), and in both sets, her figure interrupts “the amorous clouds” (50), which Blake typically associates with Urizen (see fig. 28). The Peace of Christ breaks through the old order, just as the Lark of *L’Allegro* radiates out from the clouds (see fig. 7). Further, Peace features the same peaked hair as the Lark. In the Huntington version of the painting, the infant Christ shares this peaked hair. Werner details the ways in which the image of Christ in the Huntington set recalls the Lark of *L’Allegro*:

The radiant infant resembles also the Lark of *L’Allegro-Il Penseroso* . . . who strikes the identical pose and is likewise surrounded, at least faintly, with luminescence. In a manner similar to his depiction of the Lark, who startles away the dull night, Blake represents here the eternal Light, whose

appearance in time ends the ages of human darkness. Just as the Lark is the youthful and triumphant successor to a bearded and ancient figure associated with the imprisonment of the law, the blazing, energetic infant Christ here comes to supplant the old law with a new covenant of inspired life. Blake's Lark is the messenger of Los, the personification of creative imagination, representative of the power that makes man divine. The Child similarly pictured here is the creative Word of God, manifest among men.

(119)

Visually associating Christ to the Lark also forges a connection to Los, Blake's mythological figure tied to prophetic poetry. Such an association between the prophet-poet and the linked figures of Christ and Peace gains further reinforcement through the painting's composition, which mirrors that of Milton's poem.

Blake's first Nativity Ode illustration can be viewed as two frames, one picture inside the nativity stable and one larger frame outside of the manger, where the figures of Peace and Nature reside (see figs. 27, 28). Likewise, Milton's proem provides a larger frame in which the hymn rests. The beginning stanza of the proem sets a meter and rhyme that remain consistent throughout the next three stanzas, though they differ from the rest of the poem "since they form no part of the hymn but act as a sort of frame for it" (Moseley 101). With the "old rhyme royal" rhyme scheme of "a b a b b c c" and in a pattern of six lines of iambic pentameter followed by "a heavier and grander alexandrine" for the seventh line, the first four stanzas differ from the more musical pattern in the hymn (Moseley 102). The cadence of iambic pentameter, with its ten syllables alternating in an unstressed then stressed pattern, resembles speech rather than song. The final line of

each stanza, with twelve beats but also following an iambic pattern, adds weight to the stanzas' final statements or images. The proem's formal frame reinforces a narrative frame, in which the narrator is "simultaneously outside of one frame and inside the larger frame of the entire fiction" (Kerrigan 188). The proem is the larger frame, and here the narrator "explores the nature of his inspiration and defines the limit of his knowledge, the agent of his prompting, and the extent to which he is a composer or merely an instrument" (Kerrigan 188). Instead of visually representing Milton as he does in the *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* series, Blake shows the dual frames of Milton's poetic structure through the figures of Peace and Nature. Blake reveals his celebratory tone toward Milton by casting the angelic figure Peace, intimately connected to Christ, as his surrogate; more importantly, Blake implies the value of the poet-prophet.

In the proem section of the Nativity Ode, Milton's speaker engages in a self-conscious dramatization of the role of the poet-prophet. An obvious shift occurs from the proem's second to third stanza, both in form and content. Though the rhyme scheme and meter stay consistent, "the first two [stanzas] begin with the same consonantal sound, with a demonstrative pronoun and a demonstrative adjective, while the next two begin with imperative verbs, again beginning with the same consonantal sound" (Moseley 103). Whereas the first two stanzas describe Christ's incarnation, the object of the speaker's meditation on the occasion of its anniversary, the second two stanzas depict a direct address of the heavenly muse, which takes place not on the anniversary but during the actual time of Christ's birth. The first stanza begins in the present tense: "This is the month" (1). But the second stanza describes Christ's actions in the past tense: "He laid aside" (12). The third stanza, however, uses the future and present tenses for the

speaker's interrogation of the heavenly muse. The third stanza starts with the question "Say Heav'nly Muse, shall not thy sacred vein / Afford a present to the infant God?" (15-16). Such direct communication with heaven suggests the speaker's prophetic role. Like Blake in his Felpham garden in *Milton*, the Nativity Ode's speaker receives a vision (see fig. 29). In the proem, Milton's speaker asks why the heavenly muse hasn't presented Christ with a poem or hymn, implying that the major section of the poem to follow, the hymn, is inspired by heaven.

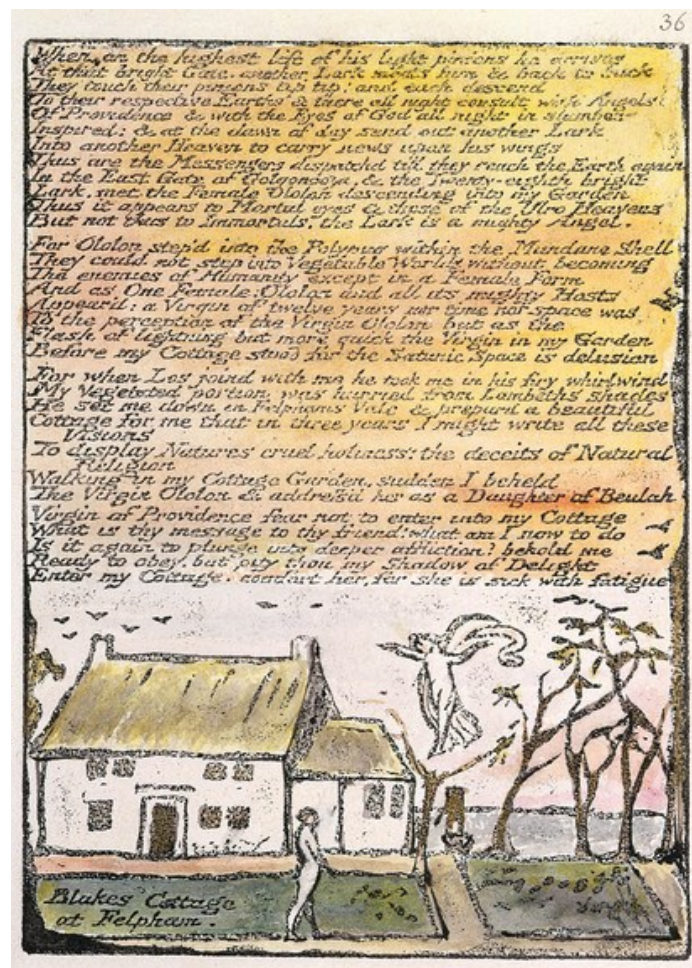


Fig. 29. William Blake, Plate 36 of *Milton a Poem* Copy A, British Museum, London.

Blake Archive.

Defying the conventional modern idea of the artist as creator, Milton and Blake both represent themselves as recipients of their creative works. In *Milton*, Blake details his vision of “Eternity, which at first seemed a vast self-enclosed universe, [but] is found to concentrate within the author’s mind” (Cooper 92). Blake twice shows himself receiving the vision of Milton’s story and the Bard’s story in heaven: in Plate 29, Blake receives a shooting star into his foot (see fig. 1), and in Plate 36, Blake stands in his Felpham garden as Ololon (see fig. 29), Milton’s emanation, descends from the heavens. Andrew Cooper understands Plate 36 as Blake “repossessing his mythology as personal vision, [so] we can only conclude that for the whole preceding course of the poem he must have been lost *within* the mythology. . . . *Milton* was his means of getting back inside his visionary self” (93). Blake pictures himself as a recipient of the visions of his own imagination.

Though for Blake the divine imagination is ultimately sourced in the human mind, Milton seemed to believe the inverse proposition. Milton possessed the “serious belief that his poetry, in some inexplicable way, was inspired by the Holy Spirit. The *Nativity Ode* was a poem Milton believed to have been ‘given’ to him” (Moseley 101). The poem offers a view into the process of receiving as Milton uses his speaker to dramatize his call to heaven before composing a divinely inspired poem. Because Milton depicts the call to inspiration and, presumably, its answer, his represented “poet-prophet acts in a divine theatre as both seer and seen, transcriber and voice transcribed” (Kerrigan 199). Milton the author must create the heavenly muse as a character in order to dramatize how a poet could invoke her. While such a creation seems risky for a believer, lest he get it wrong, Milton’s humble seriousness about his work staves off any potential criticism that his

self-conception appears inflated or audacious. After noting that Milton must create Biblical characters in his own works, Teskey summarizes Milton's view of the extent of his artistic creation:

He says that his poems are mediated through him by the Spirit, the creative power of God, and are fashioned by an art that is the poet's own—his own talent, his own labor—only in a secondary way. For the things that are the poet's own were given him by his Creator, and the very poems he writes are extensions of the original Creation. This is the basis of Milton's poetic ideology, the conscious recognition that everything, including his poem, must be referred back to an original Creator. (11)

The poet himself, like Christ when he incarnates, must be empty to receive. Milton's self-conception poses such difficulty, however, because his style possesses such authorial presence. From his syntax inversions to his periodic structures, his form itself bears unmistakable distinction. Yet Milton himself would refer these trademarks back to God as well. His "Miltonic voice, like other issues of the self, operates always within the radical Christian principle of losing oneself in order to find oneself" (Swaim 68). Blake's portrayal of himself getting lost within his own mythology in *Milton*, then, is similar to Milton's dramatization of emptying the self to receive divine inspiration.

Getting lost not only operates for the poet-prophets in the poems, but for the reader as well, who experiences disorientation in *Milton* because the "entire poem stands as a challenge to the linearity of the book" (Pierce 468), and as a result of the merging of distinct times in the Nativity Ode. If the speaker offers the reader the opportunity to lose himself, the Nativity Ode also opens up the path to Christian self-discovery through a

confrontation with Christ. J. Martin Evans discusses the absence of the typical characters present in a nativity scene, marking that in Milton's depiction, the nativity scene "has been completely dehumanized" (16), which Blake reflects in the Whitworth set but not in the Huntington set. Evans argues that in "purging the scene of all the traditional witnesses of the Nativity, Milton forces the reader to respond to the scene not vicariously, through the experience of the wise men and the shepherds, but directly" (16). This open confrontation with Christ results because Milton "casts the reader rather than the poet in the role of the convert" (Evans 12). Rather than simply represent the nativity scene, Milton does something different in the Nativity Ode. His speaker "undergoes an experience on our behalf and does not so much represent it as mediate that experience to us, so that we seem to participate in it" (Teskey 3). Staging the process of receiving divine inspiration is one way the speaker mediates his experience to the reader. Conflating different temporal frames so that the reader has access to the speaker's prophetic eternal perspective is another.

Through their uses of the prophetic voice, Blake and Milton offer the reader an opportunity to engage in an experience. The Nativity Ode "is not just a poem about the nativity, written from a huge distance: it is a poem that claims to participate in the event it represents" (Hobson 36). Furthermore, the poem extends the participation to readers as well in a way that is natural for its subject matter, the nativity, which "is about a moment in time and a moment outside of time and a moment reenacted through time—that is, at each Christmastide—and reenacted within the hearts of all Christians" (Swaim 71). The temporal disorientation brought on by the switching of verb tenses in the Nativity Ode prompts the Christian audience to reenact Christ's birth within, as does the contemplation

of the mystery of Christ's incarnation. Blake invites the readers and viewers of *Milton* to experience the flash of poetic inspiration, untethered to conventional notions of time; in doing so, he "throws the written body [of Milton's works] into a field of discourse of non-linearity, plurivocity and imagination" (Pierce 469). Because Milton uses these same approaches in the Nativity Ode (albeit to a much lesser extent—the Nativity Ode uses a doubled speaker whereas *Milton* uses a quadrupled one; the time structure in *Milton* has a pronounced disorientation that by contrast makes the verb shifts in the Nativity Ode appear to be quite subtle), Blake's illustrations for the Nativity Ode, like his images in *Milton*, "[deny] ordinary narrative time in which one event can be said to precede another in a definitive and exclusive temporal line" (Brisman 199). The repetition of the manger replicates Milton's sense of the simultaneous nature of events when viewed from the prophetic perspective.

Another feature that both *Milton* and the Nativity Ode share is the abundance of light versus dark imagery; interestingly, Blake's Nativity Ode paintings depart from Milton's poem by showing Christ's birth primarily through images of light. Stanza two of Milton's proem uses contrasting imagery of light and darkness to communicate the speaker's awe at Christ's choice to come into the human world. The speaker depicts divine substance as thoroughly alien to the human; this contrast is "the dynamic of the stanza, which is wholly built on the idea of relinquishing light and fullness of being for darkness and time and limitedness" (Moseley 102). The stanza's first two lines show images of light: "That glorious form, that light unsufferable, / And that far-beaming blaze of majesty" (8-9). Christ's form in heaven is light that shines so brightly that humans could not suffer to bear it, and far is the reach of such light. The next two lines emphasize

Christ's high station in heaven and his intimacy with God the Father: "Wherewith he wont at Heav'n's high council table, / To sit the midst of trinal unity" (10-11). While possessing his heavenly form of light, Christ occupies a position of authority in heaven and is completely at one with God. The image of "trinal unity" carries with it a sense of equality that contradicts stanza one's reference to God the Father as a king. In stanza two Christ's form of light functions as the direct object of the first verb. A syntax inversion begins the stanza with the direct object, prioritizing it appropriately, considering that the direct object is divine substance. The simplicity of the other main sentence parts, subject and the first of three compound verbs, is strikingly abrupt. The stanza's last three lines read, "He laid aside; and here with us to be / Forsook the courts of everlasting day, / And chose with us a darksome house of mortal clay" (12-14). The stanza's lone subject is "He," which refers to Christ, and the bluntness of "He laid aside" implies Christ's decisiveness in taking the action, which to the reader, after reading such elaboration of the object, the heavenly form of light, seems unthinkable.

Though Milton's poem shifts to imagery of the darkness of the human form, Blake's illustration shows a halo of light around all the human figures in the nativity stable (see figs. 27, 28). In doing so, Blake makes a key alteration to Milton's narrative, no longer expressing the degradation that Christ must undertake to become human. Incarnating, Milton reminds his readers, was an incredible sacrifice, but one that Christ chose with utter resolve: "He laid aside" (12). Following the semicolon with an adverbial clause, "here with us to be," Milton again uses inverted order, this time to communicate the reason that Christ gave up his station in heaven. The "everlasting day" that Christ surrenders stands in direct contrast with the "darksome house of mortal clay" that he

chooses. To become human, Christ must degrade himself. Blake, who would have found this dissociation of the human and the divine objectionable, does not represent the human as lowly and dark. Dunbar notes the Platonic underpinnings of Milton's imagery of the mortal body: "The metaphor of the flesh and the world as prisons for the earth-bound soul is common in Neoplatonist and Platonically influenced writings. Milton himself employs it in *Il Penseroso*" (94). Blake's depiction of Plato in *Il Penseroso* suggests a deep ambivalence if not outright suspicion.

Table 3

Text and Illustration Correspondences for "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity"
Paintings

Lines Illustrated	Blake's Watercolor Painting
Nativity Ode lines 3, 8-10, 23, 31-46, 50-1	"The Descent of Peace"
Nativity Ode lines 21, 85-100, 109-32	"The Annunciation of the Shepherds"
Nativity Ode lines 69-70, 168-72	"The Old Dragon"
Nativity Ode lines 173-80	"The Overthrow of Apollo and the Pagan Gods"
Nativity Ode lines 205-12	"The Flight of Moloch"
Nativity Ode lines 237-44	"The Night of Peace"

Blake does illustrate the Incarnation, however, simply with more neutral imagery. Werner observes that Blake uses "the presence of surrounding vegetation in the Nativity Ode illustrations [to signify] the enclosing of the divine spirit in flesh in the Incarnation" (120). The hay in the stable communicates the humble earthy existence that Christ has

chosen, but because Christ still emits his divine light, Blake's illustration does not communicate the poem's insistence that Christ must have let go of his divine qualities to become human. Mary Oates O'Reilly argues that a "recurrent figure of thought" in the Nativity Ode is *kenōsis*, a gesture of emptying (98). O'Reilly observes the poem's "drastic *kenōsis*, dramatized by the double metaphor of descent and evacuation" and writes that "Christ must simultaneously vacate the 'courts of everlasting day' in order to inhabit the 'darksome house of mortal clay' and 'empty himself' of divine attributes" (99). Christ cannot remain in his fully divine form, but must shed it to become human. Milton's description of the human body harkens back to the "deadly forfeit" of the first stanza. The human body is a "darksome house," the opposite of the light of God because of its proclivity to sin. Furthermore, it is made of "mortal clay," so it decays and dies—a consequence of original sin. Yet in spite of its obvious flaws, Christ chooses to inhabit it; hence, Milton's carefully crafted imagery emphasizes the mystery of the Incarnation. Blake, whose understanding of Genesis was clearly more Gnostic than Milton's, illustrates the splendor of the Incarnation without Milton's sense of awe, which relies on a degraded view of humans.

The topic of the poem shifts in the next stanza to a subject about which Blake's and Milton's beliefs appear more harmonious: the prophetic status of the poet and his access to atemporal experience. Milton's speaker calls into question the ownership of the poem as he continues to ask the muse if she has a gift for Christ. He inquires of the muse, "Hast thou no verse, no hymn, or solemn strain, / To welcome him to this his new abode" (17-18). Using a conversational tone to challenge the heavenly muse, the speaker opens himself as a vessel for the art of the heavenly muse, which would serve the purpose of

welcoming Christ to “his new abode.” Considering that Milton describes the human body as a house in stanza two, the word “abode” could refer to Christ’s human body, in addition to its more obvious meaning of earthly shelter. The next three lines indicate when this gift would be given: “Now while the heav’n by the sun’s team untrod, / Hath took no print of the approaching light, / And all the spangled host keep watch in squadrons bright” (19-21). The word “now” brings attention to time in the poem. Though the third stanza starts in the future tense, it has shifted to the present tense—a shift that is reinforced by the word “now.” But the “now” in which the heavenly muse would deliver a poem to the infant Jesus is likely not the 1629 date of composition stated in the headnote, even though it “at first appears to indicate the point just before dawn on Christmas of 1629” (Tayler 35). Rather, Milton’s speaker “moves into an imaginary present tense denoting the first Christmas Day” (Kerrigan 193). David Quint views this imaginative experience as “an escape, a backward retreat from time” from which Milton learns lessons of maturation by the poem’s end (216). However, the time setting is vague, and it is possible to read the “two time planes [as] merged” and, according to Nelson, “in the ‘Hymn’ itself the actual morning of Christ’s birth and the morning of the speaker become one and the same” (32). The “now” in the third stanza, then, works to “establish the a-temporal patterns that are later elaborated in the Hymn proper” (Tayler 35). Milton’s experimentations with time confound the reader who expects a linear narrative poem just as the ambiguity over the poem’s ownership by the muse or the speaker challenges the assumption of a single narrator. Using the repeated manger image to similarly subvert linearity, Blake captures Milton’s experimental spirit.

A sense of urgency pervades Milton's speaker's statements to the muse, some of which could more accurately be termed commands. In stanza three, there's a sense that the poem needs to be composed before the sun rises, while the stars are still out. Such an imperative fits with Blake's use of stars, considering that his stars function as the iconography of prophecy, particularly in *Milton*, in which both Blake and his brother Robert are struck with falling stars from heaven (see fig. 1). Milton's mention of the sun alludes to the mythological Phoebus Apollo who "stand[s] in that fiery chariot" as he rides across the sky to raise the sun each day (Ovid 51). Considering that Apollo was also the god of prophecy, it is significant that Milton's speaker rushes to receive from the Christian muse his own prophetic poem before the sun, associated with Apollo, can appear on the horizon.

No less important than the absence of the sun for the speaker is the presence of the stars. Milton's stars are angels who serve as protectors for the infant God; they are a "spangled host [who] keep watch in squadrons bright" (21). In Blake's second Nativity Ode painting, a globe of congregated angels dominates the composition (see figs. 30, 31). Rather than present the stars in their mundane form, Blake shows them as angels who produce a "globe of circular light" (110). Dunbar rightly notes that in Milton's poem, "the globe of light seems merely to surround the angels, but in [Blake's] illustration they themselves form its very substance—an acknowledgement of one of the secondary meanings of the Latin 'globus', 'a compact body of persons'. It thus becomes the 'humanized sphere', one of Blake's most common images for the Divine Vision" (98). Blake significantly gives primacy to the humanized representation when he reverses Milton's ordering, illustrating the angel choir before the stars. Because the stars represent

angels, the speaker's push to the heavenly muse to deliver her hymn while they are still out fits with the imperative in the fourth stanza to "join thy voice unto the angel choir" (27). The following hymn reflects that effort as "the sun literally stands still, and the poem unfolds in a kind of extratemporal interim" (Evans 5). Written from a perspective beyond time, the Nativity Ode conveys the experience of temporal confusion to readers.



Fig. 30. William Blake, "The Annunciation of the Shepherds" *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester. *Blake Archive*.

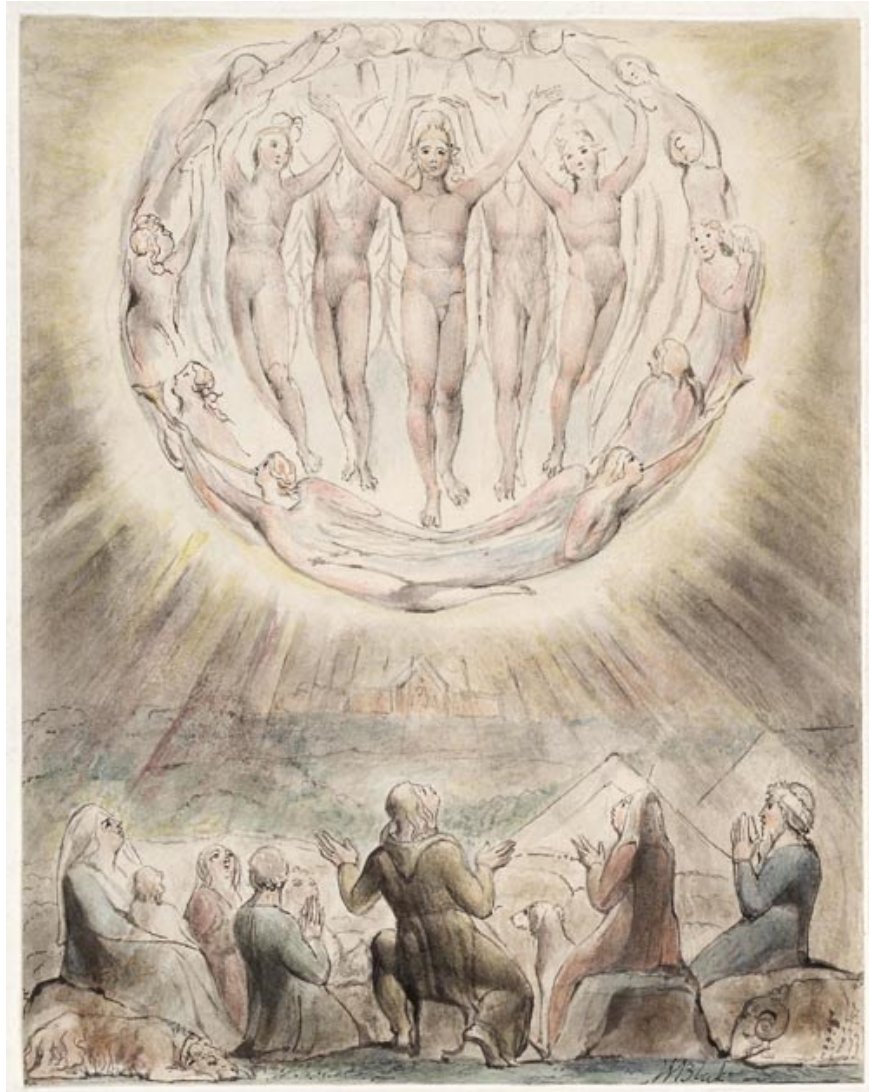


Fig. 31. William Blake, “The Annunciation of the Shepherds” *On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity*, Huntington Library, San Marino. *Blake Archive*.

The proem’s fourth stanza calls into question the identity of the dramatic persona narrating the poem, and a few possibilities emerge: the speaker could be using his own voice only, the heavenly muse could be expressing her voice through the speaker, or the speaker and the heavenly muse could both function as narrative voices in the ode. When the speaker says “thy humble ode,” “he hopes to be filled with the voice of prophetic

song” (O’Reilly 100). The muse then acquiesces to the speaker’s call for inspiration; Noam Reisner calls this the standard reading and offers a counter-interpretation. Reisner notices in the use of “thy” “an ambiguity here that is as deliberate as it is destabilizing” because “stanza four shows the poet surrendering to the silence of Muse in deference to her divine authority” (377). In other words, Reisner believes that the poetic speaker narrates without the heavenly muse’s assistance, citing the “exhortations” of imperative verbs as evidence for his reading (377). The last three lines of the stanza direct commands to the heavenly muse: “Have thou the honor first, thy Lord to greet, / And join thy voice unto the angel choir, / From out his secret altar touched with hallowed fire.” (26-8). The use of “thy” in these three lines becomes particularly ambiguous because of the allusion to the prophet Isaiah in the last line. Isaiah’s own gift of prophecy was granted by an angel, who, “having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from off the altar . . . laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin is purged” (KJV, Isa. 6:6-7). Though the speaker persists in using “thy,” an ambiguity arises out of the idea of being purified for prophecy because the heavenly muse would have no need for such purification.

Rather, it is the speaker who hopes to undergo such a purification process so his voice may be touched with the fire of prophecy. The speaker, like all people after the fall, possesses a “deadly forfeit,” but by alluding to Isaiah’s purification, the speaker suggests that he too can access prophetic knowledge after being purified. Still, the speaker uses “thy” instead of “my,” so the ambiguity of the referent of “thy” communicates a conflation between the speaker and the divine energy he channels. It is the speaker who is “touched with a sacred coal like Isaiah,” even though he suggests that the heavenly muse

receive such an experience (Kerrigan 201). The speaker pushes the heavenly muse to “join thy voice unto the angel choir,” and in the hymn that follows, the voice is “public rather than private, communal rather than personal, celestial rather than human” (Evans 12). Perhaps it is a choral voice that sings the hymn. Blake’s illustration of the angel choir is the most luminous and climactic of the six paintings (see figs. 30, 31), and for Blake to give such prominence to that particular scene suggests that, just as Milton’s poem is about both the Incarnation and the role of the poet-prophet, Blake’s second painting celebrates the choir to which Milton’s voice has merged. Kerrigan argues that the poem has a “double voice” of both the speaker and the heavenly muse, which could cause issues for the modern reader who expects a single speaker (195). The speaker’s “gift is not given by him but through him,” which indicates that the prophetic speaker functions as a divine channel (Tuve 43). Just as two speakers emerge in the poem, two time planes are “established so strongly” that the poem “prepares the reader for what is going to happen insofar as tense and structure are concerned” (Nelson 42). Such narration and time disorientation invite the reader into an experience that the speaker undergoes through the course of the poem.

The Nativity Ode’s reader receives the vision, the hymn from the merged voices of Milton’s speaker, his muse the Holy Spirit, and the angel choir. Within the poem, the shepherds function similarly to the Nativity Ode’s readers in that they receive the divine song. The shepherd has Biblical associations with Christ, for whom the hymn is intended to be “a present” (16). Before hearing the music of the angel choir, the shepherds are “chatting in a rustic row” (87) about their work or about “their loves” (91). The music of the angel choir “all their souls in blissful rapture took” (98). Blake’s artistic medium

guides a key conceptual change in illustrating the poem; he shows the sight rather than the sound of the angel choir sending the shepherds into rapture. Such a shift enables him to engage a longstanding homophonic comparison between the sun and the Son. Just before he describes the shepherds in his poem, Milton explains that the sun has delayed itself in rising to hide “his head for shame” (80) when he sees that in comparison to the light of Christ, “his inferior flame / The new-enlightened world no more should need” (81-2). Picturing the angel choir in a luminous globe “that bursts upon the night [Blake’s image] is a sign of Christ the Son as the greater Sun, who is the world’s true spiritual light” (Werner 123). Davies argues that the Whitworth painting shows “this heavenly light, which now illuminates the shepherds and floods out into the world, originated in the stable [which] is suggested by the fact that Mary and Joseph are now alone” in the stable that is pictured in the painting’s background (Davies 94). The infant Christ *is* the light of the angel choir.

Blake’s militant angels reflect the contrary nature of Christ (see figs. 30, 31). Werner notes that Blake’s illustration of the angels is faithful to Milton’s text: “Blake illuminates Milton’s imagery of peace and war associated with the Christ Child. In the details of the design one may see the implications of the artist’s fidelity to Milton’s paradoxical vision of Christ, who appears in the poem in the roles of both shepherd and warrior” (122). Milton calls Christ “the mighty Pan” (89), the mythical shepherd who would appeal especially to the shepherd audience; yet he also alludes to Hercules when he describes the infant Christ “in his swaddling bands [able to] control the damnèd crew” of pagan gods (228). The angels, “helmed Cherubim / And sworded Seraphim” (112-3), form “squadrons” (21) to protect the infant Christ. Both Blake’s Whitworth and

Huntington illustrations include angels in helmets; however, the Huntington painting shows angels who are both armored and vulnerable in their nakedness (see fig. 31), better reflecting Christ, who “is not just the Lamb, but a figure of dread, like the tiger” (Werner 124). Furthermore, their lack of clothing strengthens the visual connection to Los made by the “squared circle” (Davies 94), which Blake uses in both his “Sun at His Eastern Gate” illustration for *L’Allegro* and, as Davies points out, in Plate 47 of *Milton* (see fig. 32).



Fig. 32. William Blake, Plate 47 of *Milton a Poem* Copy D, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. *Blake Archive*.

Blake uses an icon of prophecy and visual associations to Los to communicate his reframing of the poem's climax. In both sets of illustrations for the poem, Blake appropriately includes musicians in the angel choir; however, his Huntington set includes "tambourinists and two trumpeters" (Werner 123), recalling their appearance in Plate 15 of *Milton* (see figs. 31, 3). Dunbar interprets the change as a shift toward more apocalyptic imagery (99). As in the *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* paintings, the trumpet is associated with the prophet. Milton's poet-prophet appeals to his muse to "join thy voice unto the angel choir" (27), and because he means to be a conduit for such a voice, it is his own voice that sings the hymn of the Nativity Ode, presumably with the angel choir. The shepherds who witness the angel choir make gestures of reverence, but the central shepherd is set apart by his open posture (see figs. 30, 31), which is that of a prophet ready to receive revelations; he "is shown in a less dramatic modulation of the position adopted by other inspired figures in Blake's canon, such as William and Robert in *Milton*" (Davies 95) (see fig. 1). The second Nativity Ode painting, then, dramatizes the process of the poet-prophet at two different stages: that of the poem's speaker, whose song has merged with that of the choir, and that of the shepherd, who receives divine inspiration.

Of all the paintings in the set, the second is the dramatic climax. Davies considers Blake's handling of this painting to be a revision of Milton's poem:

Blake has effected a bold reversal of Milton's priorities in the first two designs. Whether or not Milton intended the angelic choir as the aesthetic center of his poem, there can be no question that doctrinally its importance is hierarchically subordinate to that of the infant Christ whose praises it

sings. But in Blake we appear to move from a Beulaic vision in which Christ as the spirit of truth and love is born and cherished in the stable, to a fourfold Edenic vision of the choir as an emblem of harmony among men who in the aggregate form the Divine Body of Jesus. (94)

Though Davies rightly identifies the prominence of the choir in Blake's illustrations, he overlooks the choir's importance to Milton's poem. The Nativity Ode, while certainly focused primarily on the Incarnation of Christ, explores the secondary theme of the artistic process of the poet-prophet. Much of the Nativity Ode's proem section is the poet-prophet's call to his muse to inspire him so he may join the angel choir; the hymn section is the fulfillment of his desires. Davies may be correct in his assessment of Blake's interest in the human, but such concerns do not render Blake any less faithful in his illustrations. When Blake repeats the Nativity scene in the first and last paintings, he celebrates the Incarnation; although the angel choir may serve as a climax for the set, Blake strikes a balance with the repeated images of Christ in the stable, giving primacy to Milton's main topic, Christ's Incarnation.

In the next painting, Blake represents the angels emblematically and the Nativity scene in a position of triumph over the bound demons below, drawing from his familiar reptilian and Urizenic images to condemn tyranny (see figs. 34, 35). Although two angels stand on either side of the manger, the majority of the protective squadron hovers above the stable in a line of stars. Ambiguously, the stars form a continuous line either leading into or emerging out of the dragon's tail. Though he acknowledges the "obvious allusion to Revelation 12.4, where the Dragon's 'tail drew a third part of the stars of heaven' down, immediately before the War in Heaven," Davies argues that "the way the Dragon

and his crew gaze generally heavenward and not just at the stable, seems to imply that they have been routed in an encounter with the Cherubim in the previous design” (Davies 96). True to the form of prophetic writing, chapter twelve of Revelation depicts events as viewed from an eternal perspective. Satan’s rebellion in heaven seemingly occurs simultaneously to Christ’s birth, obfuscating a chronological ordering of events, which would place Satan’s rebellion as preceding the fall of Adam and Eve, which would in turn prefigure Christ’s Incarnation. Blake’s inclusion of the stars visually strengthens Milton’s allusion to “Th’ old Dragon” of Revelation (168), but it also recreates Milton’s sense of prophetic time in the Nativity Ode. Rather than just suggest that Christ’s protective squadron are the same angels who defeated Satan during his rebellion in Heaven, Blake subtly signals that Satan’s rebellion and Christ’s birth—both acts of eternal significance—co-exist in a realm devoid of time, a realm as accessible to Blake and to Milton as it was to the prophet John of Revelation.

Blake’s illustrations of the demons in the painting reflect his own agenda: their Urizen-like faces and their possession of monarchical symbols communicate a condemnation of tyranny. In both the Whitworth and Huntington sets, the demons make up the central focal point of the painting (see figs. 34, 35). At least two figures in each painting have partially scaled skin, and the central figure possesses a large dragon’s tail, which, Dunbar marks, though “potentially a tremendous engine of destruction” actually keeps “the beast from moving at all, as it has wound itself about his legs” (101). This central demon is the old dragon of Revelation, Satan. His visage in both the Huntington and Whitworth sets is recognizable as the same face of Satan in Blake’s *Paradise Regained* illustrations (see figs. 33, 34, 35). His is the face of Urizen, “the false god

whom Blake holds responsible for the wretchedness of the material world” (Dunbar 102). Blake indicts reason, for which Urizen stands; in doing so, he makes a pointed critique of Milton, who prized reason as the pinnacle of man’s capabilities. Also targeting religion and monarchy, Blake pictures Satan with a scepter in both sets, and he shows in “the Huntington plate one devil clothed in what appear to be a nun’s veil and habit” (Dunbar 102). Milton would have shared Blake’s condemnation of Catholicism and monarchy, so though Blake does suggest in the painting his ideological departure from Milton, he also depicts their common enemies.



Fig. 33. William Blake, Plate 8 of *Paradise Regained*, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. *Blake Archive*.



Fig. 34. William Blake, "The Old Dragon" *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester. *Blake Archive*.



Fig. 35. William Blake, "The Old Dragon" *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*,
Huntington Library, San Marino. *Blake Archive*.

In the next two paintings Blake employs the iconography of prophecy, but he subtly communicates error through the absence of the Nativity stable. Prophetic symbols from *Milton*, the tambourine, the trumpet, and the bow and arrow, function in plates four

and five of Blake's Nativity Ode illustrations as signals of false prophecy (see figs. 36, 37, 38, 39). The fourth and fifth paintings of the Nativity Ode depict two of Milton's catalogue of the many gods in flight at the Incarnation of Christ. Blake's fourth Nativity Ode painting shows Apollo, who "from his shrine / Can no more divine" (176-7), and the fifth shows Moloch, who "Hath left in shadows dread / His burning idol all of blackest hue" (206-7). In illustrating these two particular gods, Blake not only depicts Milton's description of the power of Christ to dispel false gods; Blake also uses the illustrations to target Milton's adherence to classical models and his conception of the divine as a king.

Blake uses his own system of prophetic symbols to paint a scene of horror in which a god king is at the center and to suggest visually what he states explicitly in the prologue plate of *Milton*, that "Milton [was] both curb'd by the general malady & infection from the silly Greek & Latin slaves of the sword." As Stella Revard notes, Milton's treatment of classicism in the Nativity Ode is ambivalent, for though he shows Apollo eclipsed by the birth of Christ, he also alludes to Hercules when he describes Christ "in his swaddling bands [able to] control the damnèd crew" (128). Revard also concludes that Milton "has his cake and eats it too, letting Christ swagger like Heracles in banishing the pagan presences from the bright new world of Christianity" (24). Dunbar argues that of the expelled gods "in the Blake series only Apollo is attractive" (103), and Werner finds both Milton and Blake to treat Apollo as a type for Christ, to "prefigure the Messiah, who comes to crush the serpent's head and to break finally the binding power of evil" (126). Blake highlights Milton's attention to Apollo, reminding his audience of his disapproval of Milton's use of classical models (see figs. 36, 37). When Blake shows Apollo with the bow and arrow of the prophet, he also pictures such iconography

rendered ineffectual; in doing so, Blake illustrates Milton's "dumb" oracle faithfully (173).

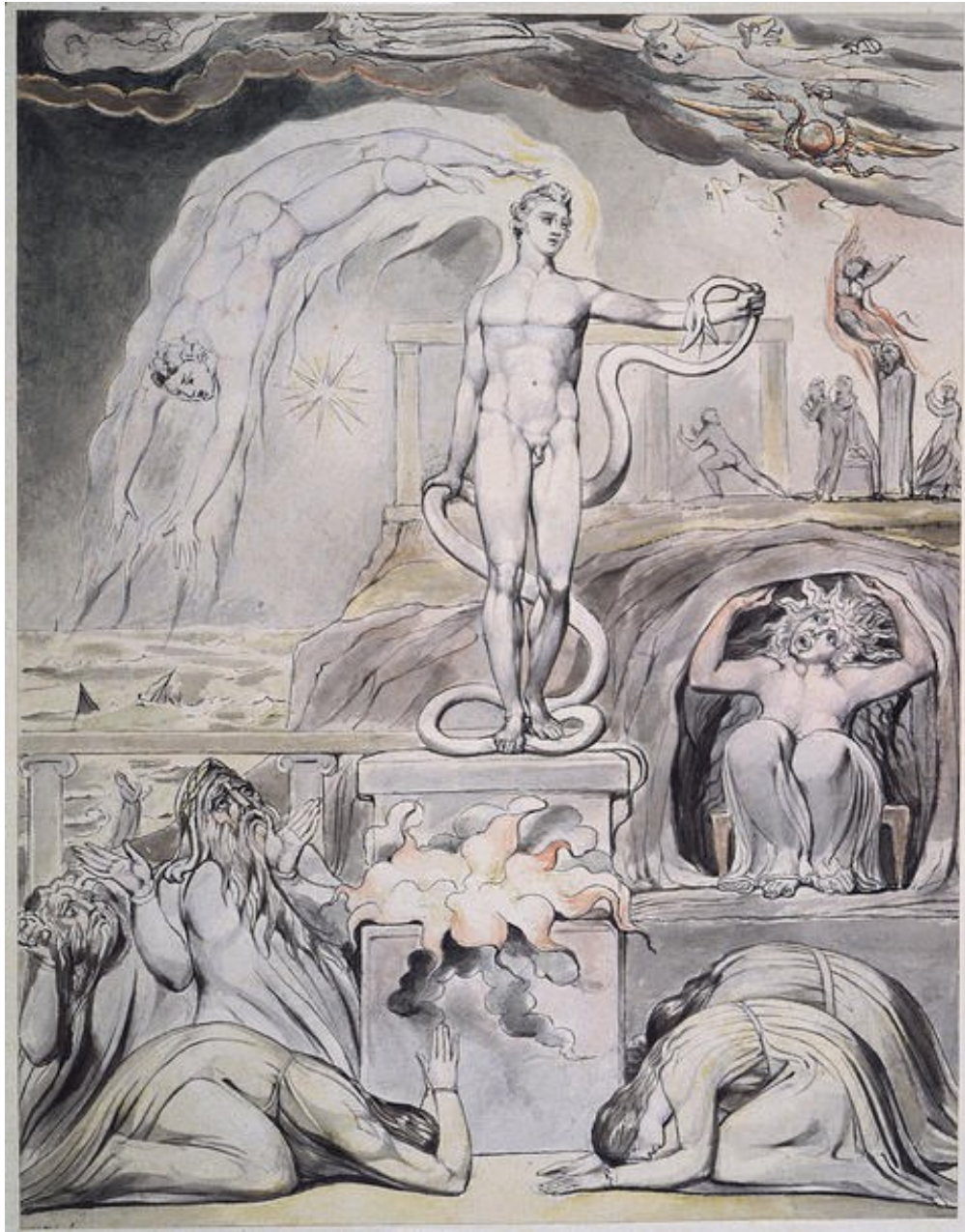


Fig. 36. William Blake, "The Overthrow of Apollo and the Pagan Gods" *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester. *Blake Archive*.



Fig. 37. William Blake, “The Overthrow of Apollo and the Pagan Gods” *On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity*, Huntington Library, San Marino. *Blake Archive*.

Although Apollo wields the prophetic weapon the bow and arrow, and Moloch is surrounded by musicians who play instruments typically associated with prophecy, Blake visually suggests falsehood in depicting such iconography. The bow in *Milton* is “of burning gold [and] is a deliberate contrast to the black bow of Urizen in *The Book of*

Ahania, which will reappear as the black bow of Satan in *Jerusalem*” (Bloom, *Blake* 306). Apollo’s bow in the Nativity Ode illustrations, though lacking the gold hue from *Milton*, is clearly not black either; rather, Blake’s “bow and arrows in the Huntington design are emblems for the ardor of inspiration, shown to be lost within the petrified confines of classical form. The bow is unstrung” (Werner 126). Leaving the bow unstrung suggests the weapon’s impotence, reflecting Apollo’s prophetic capabilities since the advent of Christ (see figs. 36, 37). Considering that Blake found Milton to be hindered by the influence of the classics, this illustration could also be understood as Blake’s identification of Milton’s own prophetic limitations.

Likewise, the trumpets and tambourines present in the next painting of Moloch, though associated with prophecy, signal a misconception of God. In the painting, Moloch “is partially encircled by worshippers, who are dancing and playing percussion and brass instruments—timbrels, trumpets, castanets, and cymbals—in order to drown the children’s screams” (Dunbar 107). Moloch, whom Milton terms “the grisly king” (209), wears a crown in Blake’s paintings (see figs. 38, 39). Although Milton describes Christ as sitting in “trinal Unity” (11) with “Heav’n’s eternal King” (2), never does Blake depict Christ as a monarch. Monarchical symbols appear only in the illustration of Satan in plate three and of Moloch in plate five. Blake deliberately associates the king with the tyrant, who, in Moloch’s case, kills babies. To give the image spiritual weight, Blake includes prophetic iconography in the form of the “timbrels and cymbals and trumpets, which are instruments of joy in the psalms of praise, [and] are grotesquely adapted here to the service of a god who appears the very abomination of desolation” (Werner 129-30). The Moloch painting tells the cautionary tale of how conceiving of the divine as a monarch

leads to the perversion of prophecy; in this Nativity Ode illustration, Blake implicitly critiques Milton's representation of God as a king in *Paradise Lost*.



Fig. 38. William Blake, "The Flight of Moloch" *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester. *Blake Archive*.



Fig. 39. William Blake, "The Flight of Moloch" *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*,
Huntington Library, San Marino. *Blake Archive*.

The reappearance of the stable in last Nativity Ode painting serves to remind the viewer of its absence in the previous two paintings; reasserting the manger's presence

also suggests the triumph of Christ that Milton describes in his poem and the sense of circular time so central to prophetic writing (see figs. 40, 41). As in the first painting of the series, the stable is the focal point of the last painting; Blake's "final scene also repeats the general outlines of the first" (Werner 135). Though the paintings make an overall impression of repetition, key differences are prominent upon further inspection of the details, as Dunbar explains:

The difference between the two plates, like those between the first and last verses of the poem, are slight but significant. Those which are taken from the poem—the laying to rest of Christ, the guarding of the stable by angels, and the settling of the Star of Bethlehem above the stable—mark the slow but inexorable passing of 'time present' on Christmas day. Other alterations, which were contributed by Blake, suggest the tightening grip of the fallen or generative world upon the child-soul as well as the passing of simple chronological time. (112)

Interestingly, the first Nativity Ode painting shows consequences of Christ's Incarnation that are chronologically further progressed than those suggested in the last Nativity Ode painting. In Blake's first painting, Peace and Nature lock eyes in a gaze that cuts through Christ's stable; the picture suggests the outcome of the apocalypse (see figs. 27, 28). The last Nativity Ode painting, however, uses martial angels to remind viewers of the apocalypse, not its outcome (see figs. 40, 41). Blake shows "all about the courtly stable / Bright-harnessed angels" (243-4). Again, Blake subverts linearity in a faithful illustration of Milton's poem.



Fig. 40. William Blake, "The Night of Peace" *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester. *Blake Archive*.



Fig. 41. William Blake, "The Night of Peace" *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*,
Huntington Library, San Marino. *Blake Archive*.

Even Blake's points of departure from Milton's text ultimately capture the spirit of the writing. Dunbar and Werner both observe that the pile of hay in the last painting—completely Blake's addition to the scene—reminds the viewer of Blake's idea of generation (see fig. 40). But even where Blake "depart[s] conspicuously from the poem

Milton has written and from the usual iconography of Nativity paintings,” Wittreich explains, Blake captures the spirit of Milton’s work because “Milton’s poem, of course, departs radically from both poetic and pictorial treatments of this subject; and Blake uses Milton’s departures from traditions as precedent for his own, thereby calling attention to the innovative character of Milton’s poem” (*Angel* 89). Blake’s recreation of Milton’s most striking innovation is the offer of prophetic experience to the audience. Eliade explains how prophetic, or as he terms, mythical, time is established:

Just as the profane space is abolished by the symbolism of the Center, which projects any temple, palace, or building into the same central point of mythical space, so any meaningful act performed by archaic man, any real act, i.e., any repetition of an archetypal gesture, suspends duration, abolishes profane time, and participates in mythical time. (36)

Using the temporal medium of text, Milton uses merged speakers and shifting verb tenses to guide his reader to the imaginative space of the prophet. As an illustrator working with a visual medium, Blake creates a symbolic center with the stable, replicating Milton’s sense of prophetic experience and establishing himself as heir to the prophetic poet’s status.

CHAPTER IV

Conclusion

Scholarly concerns over Blake's paintings for Milton's poems center largely on Blake's fidelity to Milton's texts and his implicit critiques or celebrations of them. While the complexity of Blake's relationship to Milton is certainly intriguing, to focus exclusively on Blake's conflicted handling of Milton and draw conclusions about his artistic intentions in illustrating Milton's works is to understate a primary feature of Blake's situation. Painting *L'Allegro, Il Penseroso*, and the Nativity Ode illustrations *after* having received Milton's spirit in *Milton*, Blake can freely revise textual content from a position of authorial entitlement. Blake imaginatively embodies Milton's spirit and then uses illustration to transform Milton's narratives, paralleling Milton's own embodiment of his Muse in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. Milton uses these epic poems to recast Biblical stories, and Blake uses illustration to highlight what he finds to be essential in Milton's texts.

In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom provides a compelling and inventive framework for the process of poetic influence; though I cannot accept the theory as applied to Blake's relationship to Milton, I hope to engage Bloom's ideas in order to clarify and conclude my study of the relationship between the two authors. Bloom's premise is that, in a quite Freudian kind of way, poets experience oppression of their own creative expression by the greatness of their poetic precursors, and it is only through the "misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation" that a strong poet is able to recover his own creativity (*Anxiety* 30). Bloom concludes that a "strong imagination comes to its painful birth

through savagery and misrepresentation” (*Anxiety* 86). Blake undoubtedly possesses the strong imagination that Bloom describes, yet his treatment of Milton can hardly be described as savage. Through my own preceding study of Blake’s illustrations for *L’Allegro*, *Il Penseroso*, and the Nativity Ode, it should be clear that even as Blake interprets and alters Milton’s texts, he treats them not with violence, but with fidelity to their spirit.

Bloom rests his theory on the distinction between the poet and the critic as a reader, a binary opposition that ignores the possibility and existence of poets who are also critics. Bloom writes that “[p]oets, by the time they have grown strong, do not read the poetry of X, for really strong poets can read only themselves” (*Anxiety* 19). Because they read with their own creative works in mind, argues Bloom, when poet readers encounter in another poet’s work something that “gives pleasure to the critic,” this very same thing “may give anxiety” to them (*Anxiety* 25). Such anxiety, claims Bloom, prompts a great poet such as Blake to create his own system rather than be enslaved by that of another. Blake himself, however, exemplifies the problem with Bloom’s binary opposition. Through his illustrations for Milton’s works, through his epic poem *Milton*, and through his writings on Milton in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake sets into motion a tradition of literary criticism that Stanley Fish identifies as one of two critical camps for reading Milton. Blake’s reading of Milton’s Satan initiates the view that Milton shows the “disobedience of God is a positive act that rescues mankind from an unvarying routine of mindless genuflection and makes possible the glorious and distinctively human search for self-knowledge and knowledge of the Truth” (Fish x). Blake, though not a critic in the modern sense, plays an instrumental role in critical understandings of Milton.

Still, some of Bloom's terms for explaining his theory of the anxiety of influence are clearly applicable to Blake's handling of Milton. Of Bloom's six terms to explain poetic influence, two of the concepts have obvious application to Blake's *Milton*. First, the clinamen, Bloom explains, is a swerve, "a corrective movement in [an influenced poet's] own poem, which implies that the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves" (*Anxiety* 14). Blake's poem *Milton* certainly has a corrective agenda; its premise rests on Milton's spirit entering into Blake for the express purpose of correcting his errors. Furthermore, Blake's *Milton* exemplifies another of Bloom's concepts, the tessera, or "completion and antithesis" (*Anxiety* 14). Blake shows Milton to have "failed to go far enough" in becoming a true poet-prophet (Bloom, *Anxiety* 14), and it is only through Blake's imaginative completion that Milton fully realizes his prophetic potential for Blake.

Bloom's third concept in his theory of poetic influence, however, applies to both Blake and Milton as participants in the poet-prophet lineage, though not exactly in the way that Bloom suggests. Bloom and O'Reilly both take the term *kenōsis* from St. Paul's gospel in the New Testament. O'Reilly uses *kenōsis* to describe both Christ's emptying of his divine self to take human form and the prophet's emptying of his individual voice to channel the voice of God. In Bloom's use, *kenōsis* describes "a movement towards discontinuity with the precursor" (*Anxiety* 14), or an emptying out in the writer of his artistic predecessor's influence. The emptying that Blake does, rather than separate him from Milton, however, brings him more in line with his precursor because Blake's emptying is accompanied by a merging of his own identity with Milton's. Blake's *kenōsis*

and the *kenōsis* he imagines for Milton in *Milton* is an “annihilation of the self-hood” (Blake 262). Just as the Nativity Ode’s speaker aspires to join his voice to the angel choir, absorbing the individual voice into a celestial song, Blake dramatizes his embodiment of Milton. Although Bloom notes that Milton “absorbed precursors with a gusto evidently precluding anxiety” (*Anxiety* 50), he does not address Blake’s dramatized embodiment of Milton.

Paradoxically, the poet-prophet both writes from a dual perspective and from the emptiness of no perspective. The prophet seeks to empty his own identity to speak with the voice of God, but as Milton and Blake both clearly demonstrate, the poet’s identity necessarily remains, creating a dual voice of the poet and the received vision. Biblical narratives were spoken by prophets, so if Milton is also a prophet, he is in a position to take up the narratives and speak them anew. Likewise, because Blake believes Milton to be a prophet, he can take up Milton’s narratives and use his own vision to refresh the stories. Because each poet-prophet gives the Spirit greater authority than text, Milton and Blake can use divine guidance to reinterpret prophetic stories. In doing so, each artist models the pursuit of spiritual truth for the reader. As Milton suggests in *Areopagitica*, truth is dynamic, and we must use the divine wisdom of our hearts to pursue it. Allowing the reader to experience the space and time of the prophet, Blake’s paintings for Milton’s Nativity Ode, *L’Allegro*, and *Il Penseroso* invite the reader to touch beyond the mundane and access their own imaginations.

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