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JOSEPH CRAWFORD

Milton's Heirs: Epic Poetry in the 1790s

IN HIS 1782 *ESSAY ON EPIC POETRY*, HAYLEY ADDRESSES HOMER THUS:

And haply Greece, the Wonder of the Earth
For feats of martial fire and civic worth,
That glorious Land, of noblest minds the nurse,
Owes her unrivall'd race to thy inspiring Verse;
For O, what Greek, who in his youthful vein
Had felt thy soul-invigorating strain,
Who that had caught, amid the festive throng,
The public lesson of thy patriot Song,
Could ever cease to feel his bosom swell
With zeal to dare, and passion to excel.¹

In other words, it was not Greece that made Homer; it was Homer who made Greece. It was by hearing Homer that the Greeks were inspired to achieve all that would make them famous in later years; if Homer had not sung, then Pericles would not have spoken, Plato would not have written, Leonidas would not have stood and fought. Alexander, the legend goes, slept with a dagger and an *Iliad* under his pillow. It hardly matters whether there was any truth in this. What counted was the idea: good epics make good nations.

The old Renaissance commonplace had been that good epics made good *men*, and if Homer and Virgil had been able to form the minds of the ancients, then they could form the minds of the moderns, too. But in the intervening years, with all their highly visible modernization and change, a strong sense had grown up of the cultural *otherness* of antiquity. Renaissance-era printers had happily depicted Aeneas, Achilles, and the other epic heroes as sixteenth-century knights, but to an eighteenth-century artist it would have seemed absurd to draw them as contemporary

1. William Hayley, *An Essay on Epic Poetry*, ed. M. Celeste Williamson (Gainesville: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1968) 31. Subsequent citations will be cited in the text by page.

soldiers, red coats and all. In his 1735 *Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer*, Thomas Blackwell had concluded that the modern world was simply too civilized to give rise to Homeric poetry:

Neither indeed does it seem to be given to one and the same Kingdom, to be thoroughly civilised, and afford proper subjects for [epic] Poetry. The *Marvellous* and the *Wonderful* is the nerve of the Epic Strain: But what marvellous Things happen in a well ordered State?²

Thus, with the rise of historicist criticism in the writings of scholars such as Blackwell and Lowth, an uneasy sense arose that Homer and Virgil's works might no longer be applicable to their modern British readers. Hayley writes:

What! Can the British heart, humanely brave,
 Feel for the Greek who lost his female slave?
 Can it, devoted to a savage Chief,
 Swell with his rage, and soften with his grief?

(110)

This is not meant as a criticism of Homer, although it is a criticism of Homeric Greece; rather, it is a recognition that Homer's world and Hayley's are not the same, that indeed the cultural gap between them might now be so large as to make it difficult for modern readers to sympathize with Homer's heroes at all. Hayley was not alone in feeling this: as far back as 1715, Terrasson had complained about how little sympathy he had for "so very vicious a man as Achilles," and Addison had expounded on the unsuitability of ancient Greek or Roman models as behavioral or political guides for modern Britons.³ But the need for epic inspiration remained as pressing as ever, and if the old ones were no longer suitable, then new epics were needed to do for Britain what Homer had done for Greece.

It was not just cultural difference that made a national epic such a pressing necessity: it was also national pride. As the eighteenth century progressed, and Britain rose to become a world imperial power, the achievements of Greece and Rome came to seem less like inimitable wonders to be marveled at and more like templates to be followed, or even rivals to be outdone (see Weinbrot 127–31). A British national epic would simultaneously prove that the British were the equals of the Ancients in poetry, and inspire the British to equal and exceed them in other ways. Hayley's *Essay* continues:

2. Thomas Blackwell, *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (London, 1735) 26.

3. Jean Terrasson, *A Critical Dissertation upon Homer's Iliad* (London, 1722) 1: 84; Howard Weinbrot, *Britannia's Issue* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) 146.

And shall it [i.e. 'the British heart'] not with keener zeal embrace
 Their brighter cause, who, born of British race,
 With the strong cement of the blood they spilt,
 The splendid fane of British freedom built?
 Blest Spirits, who, with kindred fire endued,
 Thro' different ages this bright work pursued,
 May Art and Genius crown your sainted band
 With that poetic wreath your Deeds demand!

(110–11)

The need for such a British epic, written by a British poet about British heroes, had long been felt. Every classically educated critic knew that a national literature was supposed to consist of one epic, a few dozen plays, and a few hundred poems; that was the form in which both Greek and Latin literature had come down to them, so why should English literature be any different? By Dryden's day, let alone Hayley's, there were English poems and plays in abundance—but where was the heart, the keystone, the great English national epic that would be for Britain what Homer and Virgil had been for Greece and Rome?

The situation could have been very different. In his 1642 pamphlet *The Reason of Church Government*, Milton had declared that although “time serves [sic] not now,” once he had sufficient leisure he intended to write a poem “for the honour and instruction of [his] country”: a work “of highest hope and hardest attempting,” in “that Epick form whereof the two poems of *Homer*, and those other two of *Virgil* and *Tasso* are a diffuse, and the book of *Job* a brief model.” It was to be a patriotic epic about a “K[ing] or Knight before the [Norman] conquest,” whom he would use as “the pattern of a Christian *Heroe*”: in other words, it would be exactly the sort of poem Hayley would long for in 1782.⁴ But *Paradise Lost*, the epic Milton actually published twenty-five years later, was written on a Biblical rather than a historical subject; and this meant that Britain entered the eighteenth century in the strange situation of both having and not having a national epic. It had an epic poem in English, certainly, and from Addison onwards eighteenth-century critics fell over one another to heap it with praise. But it was not an epic about Britain, in the way that the *Aeneid* was an epic about Rome: its themes were not national, but cosmic. Hayley worshipped Milton, but he could not find material in his epic with which to stir up the young men of Britain as he imagined that Homer had stirred up the young men of Greece.

So, from the late seventeenth century onwards, one poet after another

4. John Milton, *Complete Prose Works*, ed. Don M. Wolfe (New Haven: Yale UP, 1953–1982) I: 810–14.

attempted to write Milton's missing epic, the poem he had promised but never delivered. Dryden planned an Arthurian epic, but never wrote it, turning instead to an English translation of Virgil. Pope left his *Alcaender* unfinished, and his *Brutus* unbegun; instead he translated Homer, and wrote mock-epics like *The Rape of the Lock* to demonstrate the unheroic temper of the times. Blackmore wrote four national epics, *Prince Arthur* (1695), *King Arthur* (1697), *Eliza* (1705), and *Alfred* (1723); but they were little read and less respected, and are now remembered chiefly from Pope's lampoons on them in *The Dunciad*. The only epic sub-genre that flourished in eighteenth-century England was the religious epic, in which a single section of the Bible was expanded out to epic length, in more or less obvious imitation of Milton.⁵ Meanwhile, Voltaire wrote a *Henriade* for the French, and Macpherson "discovered" a Scottish national epic in the form of *Fingal*. If great national epics made great nations, then England was in serious danger of falling behind.

Hayley wrote his *Essay* at a historical moment when the danger seemed particularly acute. Britain's fortunes in 1782 were at low ebb; the previous year had seen the surrender of the British army at Yorktown, while parliament had just seen the collapse of one ministry and would witness the collapse of another within a year. Neither "martial fire" nor "civic worth" seemed much in evidence in Hayley's Britain, and it is understandable that he should have longed for a national, patriotic epic around which the nation could rally; an epic that could show them who and what they were, and teach them what they should do. He addressed his *Essay* to William Mason, then famous for his tragedy on the ancient British hero Caractacus, and ended it with a plea that the venerable poet might pen such a work. But Mason died without an epic to his name.

One problem was that Hayley's Britain was not sure what it was: as Paul Langford puts it, "There was much less certainty [amongst Englishmen] by the 1780s about who precisely they were."⁶ The war with America had shaken many of its assumptions about itself: that it was a land of liberty, an enemy of tyranny, an invincible nation of free men. For decades, Britain had been fighting and winning wars against what it saw as the tyrannical absolutist monarchy of Bourbon France, allowing the British to pride themselves on both the "martial fire" of their victories and the "civic worth" of their opposition to foreign despotism. But now they had been

5. Amongst these scriptural epics were Samuel Wesley's *History of the New Testament* (1701) and *History of the Old Testament* (1704), Abel Evans's *Prae-Existence* (1714), the anonymous *The Last Day* (1720), Thomas Newcomb's *Last Judgment* (1723), William Roberts' *Judah Restored* (1774), Elizabeth Smith's *Brethren* (1787) and *Israel* (1789), Mary Scott's *Messiah* (1788), Elizabeth Hands's *Death of Amnon* (1789), and Ann Holmes's *Adam and Eve* (1800).

6. Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People* (London: Oxford UP, 1989) 7.

defeated, losing their first major war in more than a century; and their primary vanquishers were not the French but their own rebellious colonists, who accused the British of being exactly the kind of tyrants they believed themselves to have been fighting all along. The 1780s thus saw Britain deeply uncertain of itself, and painfully aware of the need to reform its creaking political institutions; when Pitt the Younger was appointed Prime Minister in 1783, he won wide popularity with his campaigns to reform parliament and reduce corruption. A nation just emerging from a disastrous and unpopular war proved a poor breeding ground for poetic celebrations of national heroics, and it is entirely appropriate that the only national epics written during those years were *The Conquest of Canaan* (1785)—ostensibly about ancient Israel but with heavy (and explicit) echoes of contemporary America—and *The Vision of Columbus* (1787), by the American Timothy Dwight and Joel Barlow, respectively.⁷

It was only with the upheaval of the French Revolution that Hayley's call began to be answered. By 1793, when the French executed their king and declared war on Britain, there was a widespread sense that the new French republic was more dangerous and tyrannical a foe than the old Bourbon monarchy had ever been, and the great ideological backlash against the Revolution—the same backlash that transformed sometime reformers like Burke and Pitt into arch-conservative counter-revolutionaries—produced a great flood of epic poetry, aiming to rouse the “martial fire” and “civic worth” of the nation to face the terrors of the times. In the twelve years following the outbreak of the Revolution, Britain witnessed the publication of no less than *eight* national epics: James Ogden's *Revolution* (1790), William Hildreth's *Niliad* (1799), the anonymous *Britain Delivered* (1800), Joseph Cottle's *Alfred* (1800), Hannah Cowley's *Siege of Acre* (1801), Henry James Pye's *Alfred* (1801), John Ogilvie's *Britannia* (1801) and Sir James Bland Burges' *Richard the First* (1801), as well as Sarah Leigh Pyke's nationalistic scriptural epic *Israel* (1795), Samuel Hull Wilcocke's unfinished *Britannia* (1797) and John Thelwall's fragmentary *Edwin of Northumbria* (1801). They also saw the publication of Robert Southey's anti-war epic *Joan of Arc* (1796), two attempts to extend Milton's *Paradise Regained* in the form of Richard Cumberland's *Calvary* (1792) and James Ogden's *Emmanuel* (1797), George Skene's short epic *Donald Bane* (1796), and three oriental epics: Lady Sophia Burrell's *Thymbriad* (1794), Walter Savage Landor's *Gebir* (1798), and Robert Southey's *Thalaba* (1801). Such an unprece-

7. To this list should perhaps be added Helen Maria Williams' 1784 epic, *Peru*. Although less overtly concerned with the American Revolutionary War than the poems of Dwight or Barlow, Williams' celebration of peace-loving Americans resisting invasion by warlike Europeans had obvious resonances with recent events, especially given Williams' own opposition to the American war.

dented outpouring of epic poetry—an outpouring that continued into the 1820s—demonstrated that it was a form whose time had come.

In *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, Stuart Curran writes:

The romance revival, by its intensity and by the popularity of the new poetry that accompanied it, has marked the period from 1790 to 1825 indelibly with its name. Yet, the truly amazing phenomenon during this time is the proliferation of epics in England, which is unique in the history of Western literature.⁸

It is worth reflecting on what produced this extraordinary flood of epics. It was not just that Britain found itself engaged in a major war with France. The Seven Years War had generated plenty of patriotic bluster in print, but did not produce a single epic, even though in other fields it inspired works of art which rapidly became nationalistic icons, such as Benjamin West's painting of the death of Wolfe. Partly it must have been due to the number of British poets at the time who combined high productivity with low standards: so long as the blank verse was regular, or the couplets rhymed, why, that was poetry. For such poets, the writing of epics no longer seemed the overwhelmingly difficult task that it had once appeared. Milton had required nine or ten years to write the 10,565 lines of *Paradise Lost*, and Coleridge considered even that quick work: "I should not think of devoting less than 20 years to an Epic Poem" he wrote to Joseph Cottle in 1797.⁹ Yet, heedless of Coleridge's words, Cottle—like Southey—proceeded to write 10,000-line epics every five years or so for decades.¹⁰ But this, too, is not enough of an explanation, for mediocre poets were hardly unique to the 1790s. What was unique was their seemingly unanimous decision to turn their hands to epic poetry.

Why should this have happened? The obvious answer lies in the scale of the challenge confronting Britain in the years immediately following the French Revolution. After a century of limited wars fought for the expansion of commerce, or the protection of trade, or the defense of the "balance of power" on the continent, the British state—like most of the other states of Europe—found itself suddenly fighting for its life, for its very right to continued existence in its present form. The French, first under Robespierre and then under Napoleon, tore up the rulebook of what was and

8. Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986) 158.

9. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966) 1: 183.

10. The first reviewers of Southey's *Joan of Arc* criticized it for having been written too quickly, suggesting that such haste implied "so slight an opinion of (perhaps) the most arduous effort of human invention." See Christopher Smith, *A Quest For Home* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1997) 115.

wasn't politically possible in Europe, reordering their society from top to bottom and wiping nations off the map with the stroke of a pen. They were not interested in merely weighting the existing system a little further in their favor; they aimed for permanent and total change. They were not just a military threat: they were an *ideological* threat, a challenge of unprecedented magnitude to the entire established European social order, and as an ideological challenge they demanded ideological responses. As Trumpener has demonstrated, many novelists of the period turned to writing national (and nationalistic) works, which juxtaposed good and bad social systems in order to articulate visions of what Britishness (or Englishness, Irishness or Scottishness) was, or should be, or could become.¹¹ What was true of these novels was also, *a fortiori*, true of the period's epics, which presented the clash between good and bad societies, the righteous and the wicked, in much more overt terms. Many of these epics were clearly intended to be the contributions of their various authors to the national cause, written in the hope of stirring up some "martial fire and civic worth" amongst the British before it was too late.

As Linda Colley has shown, the French Revolution prompted a period of ideological reorganization and retrenchment in Britain. Threatened with revolutionary danger, the British governing classes reinvented themselves, changing themselves profoundly even as they claimed to be protecting the nation from change; they became more militaristic, more ostentatiously patriotic, and more aggressively British, self-consciously constructing a national mythology potent enough to resist the one being belligerently exported across the Channel.¹² Furthermore, the effort of fighting the French required the military and ideological mobilization of Britain on an unprecedented scale; when the French threatened to invade Britain men were recruited into the militia by hundreds of thousands, an immense effort which both required and contributed to the spread of this newly militaristic nationalism through lower and wider social strata (Colley, ch. 7). Many of these epics can be understood as part of this project to construct and disseminate a new, warlike national mythology, and there is some indication that they were understood as such at the time. In Scott's novel *The Antiquary*, written in 1816 but set in the 1790s, Jonathan Oldbuck gives some advice to a man he believes to be an aspiring poet:

Let me see—What think you of a real epic? The grand old-fashioned historical poem which moved through twelve or twenty-four books—we'll have it so—I'll supply you with a subject—The battle between the Caledonians and Romans—The Caledoniad; or, Invasion

11. Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997) 137–39, 164–65.

12. Linda Colley, *Britons* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992) 167–93.

Repelled—Let that be the title—It will suit the present taste, and you may throw in a touch of the times.¹³

Given that the whole action of *The Antiquary* takes place under the shadow of a possible French invasion, and culminates with an invasion scare, it is easy to see why Oldbuck believes that an epic poem like his projected “Invasion Repelled” should find a market. It will “suit the present taste” precisely because it includes “a touch of the times”; for, as Oldbuck implies, it was the anxieties of the age that created its taste for encouragingly nationalistic epic poetry in the first place.

The French Revolution looms large in these poems, no matter what their ostensible subject matter may be; faced with a fearsome enemy, and the very real possibility of a French invasion of England, many of these poets constructed epic formulations of anti-revolutionary Britishness or Christianity around which their compatriots could rally. They seldom mentioned the Revolution openly, but the significance it held for them is usually not hard to detect. It lurks behind Ogden’s comparison of Satan with a “fierce OTTOMAN . . . or DEMOCRAT,” and his decision to break off in mid-epic to pray: “Shield, Lord, our CHURCH and KING from this foul fiend, / In his worst form by DEMOCRATS now loos’d, / To spoil thy heritage . . .”¹⁴ It explains why Burges depicted Richard I contending with an infernal spirit of “False Philosophy” who “Monarchs from their mould’ring states impell’d / And law and faith o’erthrown, her impious triumph swelled.”¹⁵ It accounts for the desire, not just of Ogden’s William III, but also of Pye’s Alfred the Great, to establish a constitution that avoids both despotic and democratic extremes; and it explains why Cumberland feels it necessary to stop halfway through *Calvary* to harangue those who dare to seek external evidence for the events described in the Bible.¹⁶ It lurches into view in Pyke’s *Israel*, which begins and ends with prayers for Britain to be protected from invasion and civil war, and draws an explicit parallel between Pharaoh’s massacre of the Israelite children and the massacre at Nantes carried out during the reign of Robespierre, whom Pyke calls “a modern Pharaoh”; and it looms up suddenly in *Joan of Arc*, where Southey draws obvious parallels between events in Paris in 1418 and 1793, and laments that the city is “one day doomed to know the damning guilt” of executing those “martyr’d patriots,” Brissot and Madame Roland.¹⁷ It is im-

13. Walter Scott, *The Antiquary*, ed. David Hewitt (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1995) 107.

14. James Ogden, *Emmanuel* (London, 1797) 130, 110.

15. James Burges, *Richard I* (London, 1801) 2: 70.

16. James Ogden, *Revolution* (London, 1790) 42; James Pye, *Alfred* (London, 1815) 60–61; Richard Cumberland, *Calvary* (London, 1792) 68–69.

17. Sarah Pyke, *Israel* (London, 1795) 1: v, 2: 8, 2: 147–48; Robert Southey, *Joan of Arc* (Bristol, 1796) 94.

plicit in Wilcocke's insistence that the Druids, though superstitious pagans, at least never led the ancient Britons into "Parisian massacres"; and even Skene's short epic *Donald Bane*, despite being little more than an extended Ossianic battle scene, culminates with its rebellious hero submitting to the principle of royal legitimacy.¹⁸ Above all, it is present in all those visions of the future in which various prophetic figures disclose Britain's future greatness to the heroes, in imitation of Book 6 of the *Aeneid* and Books 11 and 12 of *Paradise Lost*. Such visions are usually highly nationalistic, depicting Britain's history as a rising arc of military greatness abroad and prosperity and liberty at home, and ending with fulminations on the horrors of the French Revolution and the glories of Britain's resistance to it. In Ogilvie's *Britannia*, for example, a druid shows Locrinus a vision of Britain's future in which the last two scenes revealed to him are the September Massacres and the Battle of the Nile, which are presented as the ultimate culminations of foreign evil and British courage, respectively.¹⁹

The heroes of the national-historical epics—Ogilvie's Brutus the Trojan, Burges' Richard 1, Cowley's Sidney Smith, Ogden's William of Orange, Pye's Alfred the Great—serve as embodiments of royal British virtue, champions one and all of orthodox Christianity and a rather aristocratic interpretation of the British constitution. All of them are the chosen servants of heaven, and in both Ogden's *Revolution* and Burges' *Richard 1* they find themselves fighting against French kings who are not just despotically-minded but actually demonically inspired, while in Cowley's *Siege of Acre* demons rise from hell to march alongside Napoleon's troops and angels protect the British from French gunfire.²⁰ The parallels with contemporary events are not quite as obvious in the religious epics, but both Ogden and Cumberland leave their readers in little doubt which side of the current war their amazingly conservative Christs would support: Ogden's Christ even numbers amongst his miraculous powers the ability to discern between 'idle vagabonds' and 'the industrious poor', and only dispenses charity to the latter (*Emmanuel* 63). In all these cases, the poets aimed to create heroes who could act as exemplars of anti-revolutionary orthodoxy, around whom the embattled nation could rally in its defense of property and Protestant Christianity. The sudden outpouring of patriotic epics at this period suggests that the need for such exemplars was keenly felt.

Conservative poets, however, did not have a monopoly on the epic form. Southey's anti-national *Joan of Arc* reversed their formula: Burges and Ogden wrote of divinely inspired English kings fighting (literally) demonic

18. Samuel Wilcocke, *Britannia* (London, 1797) 12.

19. John Ogilvie, *Britannia* (London, 1801) 527–34.

20. Hannah Cowley, *The Siege of Acre* (London, 1801) 88, 124.

Frenchmen in defense of the glorious British establishment, so Southey wrote of a divinely inspired French peasant girl fighting an evil English king in defense of French liberty. In both cases, the relevance of the epic to current affairs was bluntly obvious—just as it was not hard to guess Barlow's political sympathies when he depicted George Washington being cheered on by angels in *The Vision of Columbus*. Landor's *Gebir* was somewhat more oblique, but between his denunciation of war-mongering kings and his offhand mention that Corsica will one day produce "a mortal man above all mortal praise," his Bonapartist politics are not hard to discern.²¹ The one epic poet who tried to keep his work relatively clear of contemporary politics was Cottle, whose *Alfred* pushed historical and cosmic drama into the background in favor of religious moralizing and sentimental romance. But even in this case, the basic scenario—England invaded by foreign infidels, who are defeated by a virtuous, patriotic and above all Christian English king—has such obvious resonance with the national situation in 1800 that it becomes a political statement almost by default, even if that statement is nothing more than "we should forgive our enemies—once we have defeated and converted them."

The French Revolution and the wars that followed it formed one obvious landmark in the background of these poems; John Milton was another. All of these poets knew that, by the mere act of writing epics on the history of Britain or the later life of Christ, they were picking up where Milton left off, and thereby inviting comparison with a man whom the critical consensus of their day considered the greatest epic poet since Virgil. Unsurprisingly, many of them felt that the safest thing to do in such circumstances was to imitate Milton as closely as they possibly could. Witness the opening lines of Book VI in Ogden's *Emmanuel*:

Hail, CONTEMPLATION, placid, friendly pow'r,
 To mortals, undisturb'd with anxious cares,
 Whether thy magic mirror things presents,
 Fittest for recollection; or new scenes
 Opens into the Intellectual world—
 Or the mind's eye, if thou should's't inward turn,
 To know itself—Of knowledge far the best—
 Thee frequent wooing, at the early hour
 Of day-spring, while the lark his matin-song
 Attunes; or when umbrageous shades at noon,

21. Walter Savage Landor, *Gebir* (London, 1798) 60. It was once commonly asserted that the plot of *Gebir* was inspired by Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, but Simon Bainbridge has shown this to be improbable, as Landor began writing it as early as 1796. See Simon Bainbridge, *Napoleon and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995) 32.

Offer a shelter from the solar heat;
 Or when the time of ev'ning cool excites
 Musing—Be thou propitious to my song.

(94–95)

In Ogden's case, as in Cumberland's, the imitation of Milton is so slavish as to border on parody. The torturous syntax, the almost endlessly delayed main verb, and the eccentric diction ("attunes," "umbrageous") are all obviously employed simply because Milton employed them, rather than because they serve any real poetic purpose, and the entire passage does not so much allude to *Il Penseroso* and the third book of *Paradise Lost* as borrow from them wholesale. The historical poets fared a little better, as they were not obliged to follow so closely in Milton's footsteps; several of them rejected his blank verse style in favor of the heroic couplets of Dryden and Pope, and Burges even wrote in Spenserian stanzas. But many of the epic poets still insisted on adopting Milton's machinery of angels and demons; some of them even borrowed his specific *cast* of angels and demons, so one finds such figures as Moloch, Belial, Gabriel, Ithuriel, Death, and Mammon strutting around Ogden's *Emmanuel*, Cumberland's *Calvary*, Ogilvie's *Britannia*, and Burges' *Richard I*. Miltonic scenes and images proliferate: cubic phalanxes of angels fly around Ogden's *Revolution*, Satan presides over a council of devils in Cumberland's *Calvary*, God explains his plans in Miltonic terms to an audience of applauding angels in Pyke's *Israel*, Sidney Smith's confrontation of Napoleon is compared to Abdiel's confrontation of Satan in Cowley's *Siege of Acre*, and the whole of Barlow's *Vision of Columbus* is essentially an extended adaptation of Adam's vision of the future in *Paradise Lost* combined with Christ's vision of the kingdoms of the earth in *Paradise Regained*. This self-conscious Miltonism reaches its bizarre, self-reflexive height in Pye's *Alfred*, when a prophetic bard actually tells the Saxon king what a pity it is that Milton will never get around to writing his promised historical epic about him. If Milton would:

Fill with the magic of his mighty hand
 That outline his creative fancy plann'd,
 Then should a monument eternal rise,
 Worthy of Alfred's glory, to the skies.

(156)

But, the bard continues, he never will, so the job will be left to Pye instead. The couplets cited here, which are pretty representative of Pye's verse, demonstrate just how unfortunate for Alfred this really was.

These poets faced multiple problems in adapting Milton to their purposes. Most, if pressed, would probably have said that they believed God

organized human history along a providential plan; but the sense of the active intervention of supernatural beings and forces in human affairs, so prevalent in Milton's day, had disappeared, and as a result their use of Miltonic machinery falls flat. Ogden's *Revolution* uses the Homeric trope of gods imitating men to infiltrate angels and demons into the events of 1688: thus we learn that James II's advisors were really demons in disguise, as was the gunner who fired at William of Orange before the Battle of the Boyne—and would have killed him, had the guardian angel of England not deflected the shot. Barlow's *Vision of Columbus* was minimal in its use of supernatural machinery, but the expanded version he published in 1807 as *The Columbiad* added a great deal more, such as the god of the River Delaware rising up to thwart the revolutionary armies only to be subdued by Hesper, guardian angel of America. *The Niliad* attributed Nelson's Egyptian victory to the intervention of Classical deities.²² These scenes verge on the ludicrous because they are so clearly tacked on to poems that do not need them, simply because their authors felt that some kind of supernatural machinery was necessary to an epic. They do not appear because the plot requires them; after all, contemporary historians had no difficulty narrating the events of the Glorious Revolution or the American War without recourse to the supernatural. Still less do they appear because their authors believed that angelic or demonic hands actually turned the wheels of human history. Their angels and demons are mere literary devices, jumped-up metaphors tricked out in borrowed Miltonic finery, and as a result resembling nothing so much as the sylphs and gnomes of Pope's mock-epic *The Rape of the Lock*. When Milton wrote of Satan unleashing Sin and Death upon the world after the Fall, he was being deadly serious: for him Satan was real, the Fall was real, and Sin and Death really were its consequences. Burges was probably trying to be equally serious when he wrote of Belial unleashing False Philosophy upon England. But he almost certainly did not believe that Belial was real, still less that he (or some equivalent evil spirit) was directly responsible for the success of False Philosophy: his Belial is too obviously a mere paper demon, a fashionable literary trope rather than a fallen angel, and as a result the scene, like so many others in these epics, is not sublime but absurd. In them we see, in Curran's memorable phrase, "a demythologized age fearlessly threatening itself with satanic legions made of cardboard" (174).

22. Of all these epics, *The Niliad* is the only one of which I have been unable to locate any surviving copies. My information on it comes only from a mention of it in the *Critical Review* xxv, new arr. (1799), which mocks Hildreth's use of Classical machinery: "In an epic poem upon a victory so peculiarly attributed to providence, it was injudicious to derive its success from the heathen gods, as, according to the most ancient and orthodox opinions, those deities were the fallen angels. Mr Hildreth has therefore given the glory to the devil" (354–55).

If Milton's machinery presented these poets with one set of problems, his politics presented them with another; John Milton, stalwart republican and polemical defender of regicide, was always going to be a rather uncomfortable ally for epic poets attempting to bolster the British establishment against the ideological inroads of the revolutionaries. Faced with Milton's problematic politics, the epic poets did what English critics had already been doing for a century: they ignored them. In his "vision of Britain's future" scene, Pye deplors the evils of Cromwell's government while, elsewhere in his epic, praising Milton to the heavens; Ogilvie, in his equivalent "vision" scene, praises Milton whilst skipping over the Civil War altogether, the narrative of his prophetic druid leaping straight from Elizabethan England to the mid-eighteenth century. Neither Pye nor Ogilvie gives any hint that Milton ever did anything other than write religious poetry (Pye 156, 66; Ogilvie 536). Drawing upon the depoliticized "sublime Milton" of the eighteenth century rather than the revolutionary Milton invoked by some of their contemporaries, one epic poet after another happily borrowed everything from Milton except his politics.

Why were these poets so willing, even eager, to invite comparison with Milton? Curran notes that "unlike the eighteenth century, which had generally dodged possible comparison, no anxiety of influence bars the dozens who, starting in the 1790s, set their eyes on the high slopes of Parnassus" (160). Why? Curran points to the influence of Hayley's *Essay*, which had explicitly recommended that would-be epic poets should seek inspiration in Milton. But what Hayley actually wrote was that future poets should draw inspiration from Milton's refusal to let adverse personal circumstances prevent the composition of his epic. On the subject of using Miltonic *material* he was less encouraging:

Apart, and on a sacred hill retir'd,
 Beyond all mortal inspiration fir'd,
 The mighty MILTON sits—an host around
 Of list'ning Angels guard the holy ground;
 Amaz'd they see a human form aspire
 To grasp with daring hand a Seraph's lyre,
 Inly irradiate with celestial beams,
 Attempt those high, those soul-subduing themes,
 (Which humbler Denizens of Heaven decline)
 And celebrate, with sanctity divine,
 The starry field from warring Angels won,
 And GOD triumphant in his Victor Son.

(64–65)

These are hardly lines to encourage poets to follow closely in Milton's footsteps. Milton, we are told, is a poet "apart," "beyond all mortal inspira-

tion," who attempts things that even other "Denizens of Heaven" consider to be beyond their abilities. He is "holy" and "sacred," and his poetry is marked by "sanctity divine"—carrying the strong implication that tampering with it might well be blasphemy. In any case, Hayley had counseled against mere imitation, suggested turning towards the then-novel mythologies of Asia as a new source of epic material, and advised against the use of supernatural machinery in modern epics. No one could have risen from the *Essay* thinking that what Hayley really recommended was a national epic in a Miltonic style, complete with Miltonic machinery and as much recycled Miltonic material as possible—and yet that is what these poets repeatedly delivered. Hayley may well have played a powerful role in inspiring them to write their epics in the first place, but an explanation of their often painfully sub-Miltonic character must be sought elsewhere.

The problem faced by these poets—the radicals Barlow, Landor, and Southey, and the liberal Cottle excepted—might be stated thus. The British, they felt, needed a national, anti-revolutionary epic around which they could rally in defiance of the French. Milton had written an epic in English, but it was neither national nor anti-revolutionary. If anything, it was quite the reverse: Milton and his epic were increasingly coming to be identified with the unfolding Revolution, and the French revolutionaries and their British radical allies were keen to claim him as one of their own. If only he had written the poem he had promised, an uncomplicated celebration of the royal British values of an Arthur or an Alfred, such appropriations would have been nigh-impossible. But instead he had written the disturbingly ambiguous and multivalent *Paradise Lost*; and while for the best part of a century his epic had been successfully assimilated to elite literary culture, under the stresses of the 1790s that process of assimilation was increasingly coming unstuck. For the most part, these poets had probably grown up certain that they knew exactly what Milton and his epic stood for; educated in the mainstream eighteenth-century literary tradition, they would have learned to see him as a champion of Protestant orthodoxy and British liberty. But now a chorus of disturbing voices were claiming that he had meant something else entirely.

These poets, I would suggest, responded to the contemporary struggle over Milton's meanings by attempting to write the epic that Milton *should* have written. The reason they followed Milton so closely in machinery and style was that each of them was trying to *become* Milton: not Milton as he had been, but Milton as they felt he should have been, pious, nationalistic, and anti-revolutionary. Dedicating his 1751 edition of *Paradise Lost* to King George II, John Marchant had excused Milton's political activities on the grounds that "The Times he lived in, were Times of Violence," and that "had it been *Milton's* good Fortune to have liv'd a Subject of Your Majesty,

he would have been . . . far from desiring to see this Monarchal changed into a Republican Form of Government."²³ That, more or less, is what these poets seem to have wanted to believe: that Milton's radicalism had been a historical accident, and that had he lived in other times—their own, for example—he would have been as conservative as they could have wished. Thus their imitation of Milton in everything other than his politics: the whole point was to produce something that, in all other ways, was as Miltonic as possible, something that they hoped Milton himself might have written, had he been living at that hour. Such a work would not only be useful in and of itself; it would also help them to claim Milton for themselves and their ideological allies, and cut away the ground from those, such as Coleridge and Godwin, who were trying to claim him for the opposition. By borrowing Milton's epic machinery and appropriating his epic voice they could claim to speak for him, like shamans donning the regalia of a tribal hero in the hope of acquiring his power and wisdom, or a line of priests taking turns to conceal themselves within a statue of their deity and shout to their congregation through his brazen mouth. In so doing, they pre-empted the need for a re-examination of Milton himself. There was no need for Milton to stir in his grave: they already knew what his unquiet spirit would have wanted to say. He could go safely back to sleep.

Assuming a substantial cross-over between the audience for these epics and the audience for *Paradise Lost*—assuming, that is, that many of the people who bought copies of Cumberland's *Calvary* were also in the market for new editions of Milton—it does not seem improbable that the messages of these epics should have been read back into Milton by their readers. Just as someone who reads the Old Testament as part of a Christian Bible, bracketed by a Christian introduction on one side and a New Testament on the other, will be inclined to interpret it differently to someone who reads it as a complete and independent Jewish religious text in its own right, so someone who reads and sympathizes with Cumberland's *Calvary* and then turns to Milton's *Paradise Regained* will be predisposed to read Milton in the light of Cumberland; to assume that their two Christs are one and the same, and that Milton, like Cumberland, was as religiously and politically orthodox a writer as one could wish. The fact that they employ the same language, the same characters, and so on, should only heighten the effect. Similarly, if one reads about Ithuriel and friends defending Britain against villainous foreigners in *Britannia* or *The Revolution*, and then turns to *Paradise Lost*, the fact that one has already got used to thinking of the Miltonic angels as friendly, patriotic figures will make it that much harder to see them as anything very different in their original context.

23. John Marchant, "Dedication," in John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (London, 1751) v–vi.

Coupled with a suitably bland introduction to one's edition of Milton's *Poetical Works*, assuring its readers that Milton had been a saintly man with few real interests except writing religious poetry, defending "liberty," and loving God, the net effect must have been to powerfully distance Milton from the revolutionary turmoil of the present. Instead, it could be taken for granted that his authority underwrote the conservative, patriotic epics that were now being written; indeed, it could even be insinuated (as in Pye's *Alfred*) that he himself would have written them, if only he had been able to find the time.

The authors of the pro-revolutionary epics, although fewer in numbers, presumably hoped to accomplish much the same thing in reverse. Convinced that Milton had, in fact, been on *their* side, they set out to write the sort of unambiguously revolutionary epics that *they* felt Milton should have produced; poems that, unlike the frustratingly ambiguous *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, could not possibly be harmlessly assimilated by the anti-revolutionary establishment. After reading the sub-Miltonic language of *Joan of Arc*, or seeing the pro-revolutionary angels of the *Columbiad*, one would be that much more disposed to read Milton himself in a radical light, especially if one had also been reading Hayley's *Life of Milton* or some of Milton's recently reprinted political pamphlets. Both sets of epics aimed to direct the interpretation of Milton, to encourage their readers to see him as entirely committed to either the pro- or anti-revolutionary cause; and in each case they formed part of broader ideological projects attempting to associate or disassociate Milton with contemporary events. Whatever their political sympathies, however, the net effect of the epics was always to distance Milton himself, interposing themselves between him and history, speaking in his voice so that he would not have to speak at all.

However unreadable these epics seem today, several of them enjoyed considerable contemporary success. In America, Dwight was hailed as a worthy successor to Milton.²⁴ Cottle and Pye's *Alfreds* found enough readers to go through three editions each. Most successful of all was Cumberland's *Calvary*, which proved popular with the large market of readers of religious poetry; described by one contemporary reviewer as being "imbued with the genuine spirit of Milton," it went through seven editions by 1811; and in 1814 this inveterate imitator of Milton was himself imitated by Charlotte Eliza Dixon, whose *Mount of Olives* continued his *Calvary* just as it, in turn, had continued *Paradise Regained*.²⁵ Clearly there was a market for this kind of epic, and to a large extent it was probably the same market that, over the same period, absorbed dozens of editions of *Paradise Lost*. In

24. George Sensabaugh, *Milton in Early America* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1964) 16.

25. *DNB* 14: 618; Curran 164.

the mood of heightened national anxiety created by the French Wars, people wanted to hear stories about the triumph of good over evil, and the fact that these writers made such heavy use of familiar Miltonic trappings probably made them that much more acceptable to readers looking to be comforted and reassured. Blake's *Milton* and Wordsworth's *Prelude*, which were being written at the same time as these epics, may have been incomparably greater works of art; but they could hardly provide the same encouragement as a work like Pye's *Alfred*, with its comforting message that even in times of darkness the forces of Goodness, Christianity, and Englishness will prevail in the end. Such epics may not quite have led directly to a British golden age, as Hayley imagined Homer's epics had in Greece; but amidst all the chaos and uncertainty of the era, they may well have invigorated a few souls, taught the odd "public lesson," and perhaps even swelled the occasional British bosom "with zeal to dare, and passion to excel" (Hayley 31).

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