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# Wordsworth and Milton: *The Prelude and Paradise Lost*

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Dr. Graver

John Milton had an undeniable influence on the Romantic era writers, specifically Wordsworth. Wordsworth's various works most notably *The Prelude* and the introduction to the grand work of *The Recluse*, known as *The Prospectus*. Both works contains details and images that show a strong connection between the writers, not only on the level of allusion, but clear rivalry between the two as Wordsworth presents. Through investigation it appears that there is an almost personal relationship between the two, characterized by Wordsworth's life experiences. On one level the connection is based on Wordsworth turning towards Milton as another failed revolutionary, hoping to find solace in his writings. Yet on another, the connection is fundamentally based on Wordsworth looking back into the tradition of English writers and trying to find his place amongst them. Apart from these general connections based on their experiences, there are clear textual connections between the two authors. The three most apparent large scale allusions are Wordsworth's description of London in *Book Seven* of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's return to Paris in *Book Eleven* of the 1850 edition and continuation of *Book Ten* in the 1805, and The Dawn Dedication within *Book Four*. These three instances remark not only on the political connections between the two authors, but appear to characterize Wordsworth's own personal stance on the characters within Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Through an analysis of these allusions one can look back to the similarities between the two authors lives as a means to explain why Wordsworth was so intent on included numerous references to Milton throughout his works.

The most proficient means to begins the investigation between the two authors is setting the foundation of the relation between the authors on a personal level, albeit their separation of nearly one hundred years. The relationship begins with Wordsworth's life long experience with Milton's texts and Milton's literary shadow. Some of this is due to Wordsworth's education in English canonical texts, but also "the Poet's father [who] set him early to learn portions of the

words of the best English poets by heart…at an early age he [Wordsworth] could repeat large portions of Shakespeare, Milton, and Spenser".[1] Therefore Wordsworth was exposed to the English tradition even prior to his Hawkshead and Cambridge education. Yet, it is not to say the latter did not continue his knowledge on the subject, but it does provide a primary reason for why Milton is the most alluded to writer in all of Wordsworth's texts.[2] Moreover Stein notes that Wordsworth's study and interest in Milton was unyielding, unlike his study of other preceding authors.[3] Yet outside Wordsworth's extensive education the reasoning behind his interest in Milton is inevitably due to the fact that "the very availability of *Paradise Lost* as a vernacular poetic resource…changed the way in which poetic allusion was practiced".[4] Clearly Wordsworth understood this fact and it reflected his own personal interest in Milton, therefore in his writings it would seem evident that Milton would be the most prevalent author alluded to. Furthermore considering Wordsworth's objective of becoming a great poet, it would follow that he would at the least understand the English literary tradition and acknowledge the tradition in his work. Moreover Wordsworth's life time of influence from Milton and his prevalence within the nineteenth century altered Wordsworth perspective of him into the most powerful poetic voice. It would follow that Wordsworth's means of working himself into the English canon would inevitably be through Milton.

Wordsworth's relationship with tradition and the English canon was a tenuous one, where Wordsworth desired to become part of it, but become his own voice and poet within that

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[1] Joseph Wittreich, JR., *The Romantics on Milton* (The Press of Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, 1970), 102.
[2] Edwin Stein, *Wordsworth's Art of Allusion* (The Pennsylvania State University Press University Park and London, 1988), 10.
[3] Ibid., 13.
[4] Anthony Harding, *Milton, the Metaphysicals, and Romanticism* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 2-3.

tradition. This conflict is made most evident in *The Prospectus*, where Wordsworth sets forth his goal of *The Recluse*, but also establishes what it is not. Stein remarks upon this intention:

> He [Wordsworth] was one of the first major writers in England to think of English poetry as constituting a long and worthy tradition, more important to assimilate than the classic tradition, and to make a lifelong practice of drawing, by way of quotation, echo, or allusion, on generous range of its stories.[5]

With this in mind and considering that Wordsworth saw Milton as the most dominant figure within the tradition, it becomes clear why Milton's *Paradise Lost* is directly referenced and challenged within *The Prospectus*. The challenging of Milton within the introductory work becomes a norm within Wordsworth, although Wordsworth sees Milton as a seminal figure within the tradition, one which requires respect, he also has explicit anxieties regarding the shadow of Milton upon what he does. Therefore when Wordsworth states that "I pass them unalarmed," the "them" referring to Milton's creations within *Paradise Lost*, it should not come as a surprise that the nature of the passing is in fact characterized as surpassing. This moment of connection between the authors marks the rivalry that Wordsworth feels exists. The rivalry of course has the support of concrete evidence, exhibited in the marginalia of Wordsworth's personal copy of *Paradise Lost*. Of course the annotation of another author's text does not immediately reflect rivalry, the diction of the annotation does. For instance Wordsworth has a tendency within his annotation to state what Milton "should" have done, "This part of the picture might have been improved/ Milton here is guilty of an oversight/ This seems like an oversight/ This language seems inconsistent," and so on.[6] Wordsworth appears convinced that he had the capability to improve upon Milton's text, supported by the statement made in *The Prospectus*,

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[5] Stein, *Wordsworth Art of Allusion*, 1.
[6] Wordsworth, Wittreich, *The Romantics on Milton*, 104-105.

Trott recognizes this feature of the introductory text he states rather succinctly that "With a superb arrogance, the 'Prospectus' summons the anthropomorphic machinery of *Paradise Lost*, then dismisses it in laying the claim to the new epic 'region' of 'the soul of man'".[7] Trott recognizes the arrogance of the statement, but that characteristic of *The Prospectus* illuminates the anxiety Wordsworth has in his rivalry with Milton. Stein also notes the evidence of a rivalry, citing the ghostly encounter that Wordsworth has with the memory of Milton in *The Prelude, Book Three*, during a stay at Christ's College.[8] Stein notes that the encounter is evident of the anxiety that Wordsworth has regarding living in the shadow of Milton's literary figure.[9] Therefore one can come to the conclusion that, although Wordsworth desires to work within the English literary tradition, he also desires to become his own poet. This paradox is realized by Stein and he claims that because Milton was the "strongest voice he [Wordsworth] knew…this required his taking on Milton as a vital inheritance while distancing himself from him".[10] He continues this thought by noting that the means to perform this task is through allusion, thereby Wordsworth "authoritatively differentiates oneself from the master…so as to claim self-origination".[11] Thus the allusions within the various texts to Milton are to show what Milton has done in respect to what Wordsworth is accomplishing with his own texts. Wordsworth's separating himself from Milton, yet alluding to him is evident throughout Wordsworth's works, but there are three large scale instances where Wordsworth looks towards Milton for support in his voice in describing the situation or scene within *The Prelude*.

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[7] Nicola Trott, *Wordsworth, Milton, and the Inward Light, Milton, the Metaphysicals, and Romanticism* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 115.
[8] Stein, *Wordsworth Art of Allusion*, 97.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid, 108.
[11] Ibid., 108-109.

The first of these large scale allusions occurs within *Book Seven* of *The Prelude* where Wordsworth describes his time within London. The allusion is primarily based around the similarities between Milton's description of Satan's Pandaemonium and the state of London when Wordsworth sees it. The various allusions within the excerpt of *The Prelude* consist of physical similarities between the cities and also the tone in which Wordsworth describes it. Wordsworth echoes Milton's characteristic of building up a grandiose image, only to undercut it immediately following. One example of this within this section of *The Prelude* occurs when Wordsworth commands London to "Rise up, thou monstrous ant hill on the plain".[12] Immediately following and preceding this verse, Wordsworth is describing the numerous people and structures of the city, but then notes that the entire city is simply an "ant hill". Another allusion that exists between the texts is Wordsworth's explanation of his expectations for London being like "Rome, / Alcairo, Babylon, or Persepolis; …Of golden cities ten month's journey deep/ Among Tartarian wilds".[13] The use of these various locations is identical to the description that Milton uses in *Paradise Lost*, "Not Babylon, / Nor great Alcairo…".[14] Moreover in the previous description of Pandaemonium, it is noted that the city is made of gold, or at least the ramparts are, as directed by Mammon.[15] These details and images regarding London elucidate it as being a satanic city, if not at least a hellish place remarkably different from the rural and agricultural world that Wordsworth is used to living in. Nevertheless, the conflation of London with Pandaemonium is evidence of Wordsworth looking back towards Milton and the tradition of describing London as a city of discontent. Yet, in following with his desire to surpass Milton,

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[12] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850* (W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 1979),1850, 7:149.
[13] Ibid., 7:82-85.
[14]John Milton, *Paradise Lost. The Complete Prose and Essential Poetry of John Milton* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2007), 1:717-718.
[15] Ibid., 678-690.

Wordsworth goes into far more detail in describing the population of his city. Wordsworth does this extensively in his account of St. Bartholomew's fair, yet instead of separating himself from Milton, here by describing the denizens of his demonic city Wordsworth is further establishing a link by noting the grotesqueries of the people and the attractions within the fair.[16] It is possible that this description of the people is an example of what Stein had stated, that the echo of Milton though similar in tone, is not the same as Wordsworth's in his presentation of his imagery for the fair. Wordsworth is suggesting that Milton described his city in one manner, and that he Wordsworth is describing the population of his city through his own means. This book of *The Prelude* is direct evidence of Wordsworth's incorporation of the English canon into his own work as a means of placing himself within it, but simultaneously using his own voice and techniques to identify himself as being separate from Milton.

Another allusion within Wordsworth's *The Prelude* that is consistent with this scale and which characterizes Wordsworth's relationship with Milton appears within *Book Ten.* In the opening of *Book Ten* Wordsworth describes the events of the French Revolution and the choice of the people to follow Robespierre.[17] The details here explicate two distinct points of connection between Milton and Wordsworth; that the two were failed revolutionaries and that they saw themselves as figures of guidance for the people. The summary of events in the opening of *Book Ten* has clear parallels to Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The scene within *Paradise Lost* that corresponds to the description within *The Prelude* consists of Satan's return to Pandaemonium, where he relates the tale of how he corrupted God's creation, humans.[18] The first of these parallels within Wordsworth's text is the description of his travel to Paris, "Bound to that fierce Metropolis," being similar to the descriptions of London in *Book Seven* it seems that

[16] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 7:679-721.
[17] Ibid., 10:1-30
[18] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 10:424-546.

Wordsworth is setting a satanic tone for the city.[19] Additionally within *Paradise Lost* Milton refers to the devils within Hell, moving "Round their metropolis," the similarity, not only in the term "metropolis," but the sound of the phrase seems to point towards Wordsworth intentionally echoing Milton as a means to satanically characterize the failed events of the revolution and Robespierre.[20] Furthermore Wordsworth describes the new leadership in terms of a foreign king, "eastern hunters/ Banded beneath the Great Mogul, when he/ Erewhile went forth from Agra or Lahore, / Rajahs and Omrahs in his train".[21] Evidently the "Great Mogul" is Robespierre and therefore by characterizing him in terms of a foreign king, Wordsworth is echoing Milton's description of Satan, being an eastern king, like a Russian or Persian, with "the horns/ Of Turkish crescent".[22] Through this process of allusion Wordsworth appears to be conflating Milton's Satan with Robespierre, yet as will be examined later, this is not the case. Rather Wordsworth is using his echoes of Milton to characterize the rise of Robespierre to be evil and corrupt, a violent demagogue like Milton's Satan.

The connection between Wordsworth's descriptions of certain political figures and Milton's Satan is a parallel that has been realized by several critics, nevertheless the various critics do not agree to what extent and how Wordsworth truly understands Milton's Satan. Wordsworth's perspective of Satan appears somewhat consistent with the Romantic era reading of the rebellion within *Paradise Lost*, as noted in *The Romantics on Milton*. Wordsworth remarks upon his frustration that Milton degraded Satan in his final punishment after the corruption of man, moreover that it is a loss of dignity for his character, "And it is not a little to be lamented that, he [Milton] leaves us in a situation so degraded in comparison with the grandeur of his

[19] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 10:11.
[20] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 10:439.
[21] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 10:17-19.
[22] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 10:431-434.

introduction".[23] Therefore it becomes evident that Wordsworth sees some kind of majesty in Milton's Satan, but as Wittreich makes known in his notes "Like many of the Romantics, Wordsworth found Milton's Satan enormously impressive…thus objected to Milton's degradation of the devil," moreover Wittreich mentions that this appreciation ought not to be understood as sympathy.[24] Harding states in his introduction to *Milton, the Metaphysicals, and Romanticism* that Wittreich saw:

> That the Romantics' vision of Milton had been "much neglected often misrepresented and generally misunderstood," pointing out that the New Miltonists' exclusive focus on Satan had distorted the complexity of the Romantic response to Milton.[25]

It appears that Harding is explaining Wittreich's understanding of the Romantic response to Satan as in fact a red herring. This seems doubtful considering that Wittreich fully understands that for Wordsworth, Satan was a magnificent poetic figure, worthy of allusion. Yet, perhaps, it is a red herring, if one were to understand the Romantic response to *Paradise Lost* as a satanic epic. Although the Romantic reader may have desired this interpretation, the moral implications it constitutes eliminate that possibility. This viewpoint is supported by Newlyn who sees the references to Satan within *The Prelude* as means to accentuate "the problematic relation between morality and politics, or more specifically, means and ends".[26] Of course this understanding of satanic allusions corresponds quiet well to the appearance of the Miltonic echoes within the introduction to *Book Ten* of *The Prelude* addressed previously. Although later in her text Newlyn reads the figures of Satan and Robespierre "as successful Satanic tempters" at which point she notes that there is a distinct separation of the two characters no matter how appealing it maybe to

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[23] William Wordsworth, Wittreich, *The Romantics on Milton*, 106.
[24] Wittreich, *The Romantics on Milton*, 150.
[25] Harding, *Milton, the Metaphysicals, and Romanticism*, 6.
[26] Lucy Newlyn, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993), 109.

read the events of *The Prelude* as conflating Robespierre with Satan, she notes that "Such a reading underestimates the moral and political ambivalence which makes Satan so potent a symbol to and for the Romantic imagination".[27] Yet Newlyn also mentions the idea that the Miltonic Satan is a being championing the quest for human liberty and freedom in the eyes of the Romantic reader.[28] The issue with this view is that it does not necessarily appear within the writings of Wordsworth, nor was it likely ever the intention of Milton for his character to appear in such a fashion. Wordsworth seems content to use the figure of Satan as a means to highlight the hubris and corruption of political figures like Robespierre, not as a means to argue for human liberty.

Yet, the non-satanic beings within *Paradise Lost* are characterized as being intellectually or physically elevated in their relative placement in the Chain of Being by their obedience. In contrast the faculty that Wordsworth is primarily interested in, in his epic is human creativity and the free exhibition of that ability. Stein notes this in his analysis of the variation among the higher beings in the respective author's texts: "Wordsworth's higher minds are habitually conscious whose progeny they are, but they express themselves through their power of creativity, not through obedience. Furthermore they recognize in nature a permanent, not a temporary or optional, mediator of a higher life".[29] The higher beings within *Paradise Lost* find themselves as barely being antonymous, yet from the human standpoint of Adam, beings like Raphael are nevertheless seen as more enlightened through their faithfulness and obedience to the commands of God. It would then be reasonable to understand that from Wordsworth's perspective why he was frustrated by the inglorious state Satan falls to after his seduction of Eve in the Garden. Satan represents the only character within the epic to be an enlightened being who acts through

[27] Ibid., 113.
[28] Ibid., 39.
[29] Stein, *Wordsworth Art of Allusion*, 100.

individuality and not through obedience; of course his acts are created via imagination and internal discovery. Therefore it seems that the understanding of Satan as a poetic figure in the eyes of Milton and the mind of Wordsworth is in fact a point of divergence for the two authors. It appears in this fashion possibly as a microcosm of how Wordsworth attempts to separate himself from Milton in *The Prospectus* with the design of a new epic. It would appear then that Wittreich is incorrect in his understanding that the Romantic response to Satan is a red herring, rather the Romantic understanding of Milton's Satan, specifically Wordsworth's, is crucial in understanding what Wordsworth is conveying in his recounting of the French Revolution.

The final large scale allusion between Milton and Wordsworth is the section of *Book Four* in *The Prelude* referred to as the Dawn Dedication.[30] The passage directly corresponds to Milton's description of Raphael descending to speak with Adam in *Book Five* of *Paradise Lost.*[31] The parallel images once again demonstrate what Stein refers to as the use of allusion as a means to differentiate Wordsworth from the master Milton.[32] Furthermore the contrasting element of the Dawn Dedication as a natural event, compared to the supernatural aspect of Raphael seeks to exhibit what Wordsworth notes in *The Prospectus*, it is yet another instance of Wordsworth echoing Milton, as a means to distinguish himself as a unique voice. Moreover this allusion appears to be the enacting of what Wordsworth saw as a possible improvement on the images within *Paradise Lost*. In *The Romantics on Milton* Wordsworth's marginalia describes:

> This part of the picture might have been improved by the delineation a simple introduction of some of the most interesting rural images of an extensive prospect viewed

[30] Wordsworth, *The Prelude 1805*, 4:329-360
[31] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 5:266-307.
[32] Stein, *Wordsworth Art of Allusion*, 108-109.

> at daybreak such as Hamlets cottages and woods with reaches of a river, all piercing lifting themselves here and there thro[ugh] the morning vapour.[33]

During the imagery of the Dawn Dedication, Wordsworth includes these details. He makes mention of the sounds of the ocean, the "Dews, vapours,… And labourers going forth into the fields".[34] In contrast the aspects of Milton's landscape are albeit romantic in detail, but considering that the area itself is supernatural, it contains none of the pastoral images that Wordsworth appears to me looking for to supplement the imagery of the dawn.[35] Therefore as noted previously, this echoing of Milton appears to exemplify what Stein understands as Wordsworth's intention of allusion. That there are clear and intentional similarities, between the two dawn images, but the underlying variation amongst the two is the core difference between Milton's epic and Wordsworth's, that there is a higher virtue in the exploration of the natural world through the mind of man, than the creation of a fictional supernatural world through man's intellect.

The relationship that exists between Milton and Wordsworth exists on several levels despite the temporal separation of the authors. Wordsworth looks towards Milton as a means to understand the English literary canon as well as port of entry for himself. Moreover Wordsworth uses his echoes of Milton's poetic figures to characterize his own. Through the tone and details Milton laid out in his own work, this is evidently seen in the satanic allusions surrounding Wordsworth's description of Robespierre and London. Additionally as Edwin Stein has understood, the intention of many of Wordsworth's allusions to Milton are also a way of Wordsworth comparing his text to Milton's, showing the difference between the two, but simultaneously adhering to the tradition of allusion. Although the Romantic response to Milton

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[33] Wordsworth, Wittreich, *The Romantics on Milton*, 104.
[34] Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 4:333, 339-338.
[35] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 5:290-300.

has been misunderstood, as many critics have noted, it appears that Wordsworth understood the intentions of his predecessor Milton and sought to incorporate them in his own works as well as incorporating himself within the English cannon, thereby creating a tangible connection between the two authors, understandable to his readers.

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