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N O T E

A Note on Blake and Fuseli

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NOTES

1. A NOTE ON BLAKE AND FUSELI

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That Henry Fuseli was profoundly influenced by Blake is generally acknowledged, but the suggestion that Fuseli exerted any significant influence upon Blake is usually resisted.¹ Several pieces of evidence, which seem to have escaped Blake's commentators, may suggest otherwise, however. Blake knew the paintings that composed the Fuseli Milton Gallery, and he knew them well, as his letters and some marginalia indicate. Of these paintings, the one depicting Satan, Sin, and Death at the Gates of Hell achieved considerable notoriety and may, in fact, have inspired Blake to choose that episode for two separate illustrations, both of which are now in the Huntington Art Gallery.²

Moreover, both Blake and Fuseli were led to speculate on the nature of epic poetry, and their speculations are based largely upon Milton's achievement in *Paradise Lost*. In "Lecture III," delivered before the Royal Academy in May, 1801, Fuseli had insisted that the epic poet concern himself with impressing "one general idea . . . one irresistible idea upon the mind and fancy" (Knowles, II, 157).³ Two years later, Blake comments similarly in a letter to Thomas Butts (April 25, 1803), which mentions the immense number of verses he has written on "One Grand Theme, Similar to Homer's Iliad and Milton's Paradise Lost (Keynes, p. 823). Distanced from one another by two years, these comments may, of course, suggest intellectual kinship rather than an actual debt. However, a final piece of evidence may indicate that Blake's whole conception of epic poetry was colored by his knowledge of Fuseli's views on the subject. In the Spring of 1803, Fuseli delivered a fourth lecture wherein he once again takes up the question of epic poetry, points to Milton's allegory of Satan, Sin, and Death as an instance of the sublime that "amalgamates the mythic and superhuman,"⁴ and then defines epic poetry as "sublime allegory" (II, 196). Fuseli's definition corresponds strikingly with Blake's, which comes in a celebrated letter addressed to Thomas Butts and dated July 6, 1803. In this letter, Blake expresses the hope that he may speak "to future generations by a Sublime Allegory" and then defines sublime poetry as "Allegory address'd to the Intellectual powers, while it is altogether hidden from the Corporeal Understanding" (Keynes, p. 825).

It is in this same letter that Blake imagines himself to be none other than a "Secretary" of those "Authors" who dwell in "Eternity." It would seem likely that, having found Fuseli an appropriate model for painters, Blake would find him an equally authoritative source for his thinking on poetry. Such is the impression he gives, in any case, when in *Public Address* he places Fuseli alongside Michael Angelo, Shakespeare, and Milton (Keynes, p. 595).

¹ For exceptions to this generalization, see Anthony Blunt--*The Art of William Blake* (Columbia, 1959)--who reminds us that Blake borrowed many themes from Fuseli (p. 39) and Raymond Lister--*William Blake* (London, 1968)--who recalls that Blake often professed that he was a student of Fuseli (p. 138). More importantly, David Erdman, in *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (Princeton, 1954), maintains that Blake "appropriated many of his [Fuseli's] ideas on the theory and history of art" (p. 41)--a premise repeated by Jean H. Hagstrum who, in *William Blake, Poet and Painter: An Introduction to the Illuminated Verse* (Chicago, 1964), while acknowledging that on large matters "their differences were profound," recognizes that "Blake owed much" to Fuseli and "shared many of the same artistic ideas" (pp. 67-68, 64). But in every case the "minute particulars" of Blake's debt to Fuseli go unacknowledged.

² The illustrations of Fuseli and Blake are reproduced in Blunt as Plates 10c and 11a respectively. Blake's illustration surpasses Fuseli's, as well as those by Stothard and Barry (see Plates 10a and 10b), in its fidelity to Milton's text (i.e. the others depict Death as a monster, whereas Blake alone depicts him as a shadowy figure). It is noteworthy that Blake, in his second set of illustrations to *Paradise Lost* (1808), dropped all designs for the first two books of *Paradise Lost* and thus began his new series with the Son's offering of himself as Redeemer. The differences between these two sets of illustrations are of immense significance, usually showing Blake bringing the illustrations into closer alignment with Milton's text, and deserve a full-length study as a form of non-verbal criticism.

³ All citations from Fuseli and Blake are taken from the following editions: *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, ed. John Knowles (3 vols.; London, 1831) and *The Complete Writings of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London, 1966).

⁴ The quality of sublimity, denied to this episode by Milton's eighteenth-century critics from Addison to Johnson, is attributed to it, first by Burke, then by Fuseli and Blake (see Blunt, p. 15), and finally by Coleridge, Hunt, and De Quincey. See, esp., John Payne Collier, *Seven Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton by the Late Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London, 1856), pp. 64-66; Leigh Hunt's *Dramatic Criticism 1808-1831*, ed. Lawrence Huston Houtchens and Carolyn Washburn Houtchens (New York, 1949), pp. 149-150; and *A Diary of Thomas De Quincey* (London, 1927), p. 169.

2. SOME ADDITIONS TO A BLAKE BIBLIOGRAPHY

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"Dinner by the Amateurs of Vegetable Diet (Extracted from an Old Paper)," *The London Magazine and Theatrical Inquisitor*, IV (1821), 31-35. Reprinted in *The Unextinguished Hearth: Shelley and His Contemporary Critics*, ed. Newman Ivey White (Durham, N.C., 1938; New York, 1966), pp. 263-269.

This witty sketch contains the following reference which may or may not be to Blake (Professor White suggests that it is): "Mr. P[ercy] B[lysshe] S[helley] then gave, 'the memory of Nebuchadnezzar, and may all