ANCIENT YET NEW:
WILLIAM BLAKE’S MILTON A POEM
AND THE POLITICS OF ANTIQUARIANISM

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For Laura

Poi le vidi in un carro triumfale,
Laurèa mia con suoi santi atti schifi
sedersi in parte, et cantar dolcemente.

— Petrarch, Canzoniere, CCXXV
I would like to acknowledge the continuous support I’ve received from the faculty and graduate students of the English Department at the University of Missouri. In particular, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Noah Heringman, with whom I’ve had the pleasure of working for three out of my four semesters at the university. Without his always enlightening and encouraging feedback, this project could not have been a success. I would also like to thank Dr. Anne Myers and Dr. Stefani Engelstein for their thoughtful and thought-provoking responses to my project.
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ANCIENT YET NEW: WILLIAM BLAKE’S *MILTON A POEM* AND THE POLITICS OF ANTIQUARIANISM

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ABSTRACT

This study explores William Blake’s engagement with eighteenth-century antiquarian discourse as a means of critiquing the political and religious institutions of his era. In his shorter epic, *Milton a Poem*, Blake suggests a model for national regeneration rooted in a view of British antiquity that is marked by an original liberty based on brotherhood and forgiveness. The first chapter demonstrates that Blake presents the Druids as Satanic missionaries spreading his message of submission to his moral law, which also disguises itself as natural law. Blake depicts Satan and the Druids in this manner in order to critique eighteenth-century notions of natural and state religion. The second chapter examines Blake’s particular engagement with the work of the antiquary William Stukeley. Stukeley’s dual role as antiquary and Anglican clergyman reveals that antiquarianism was an important force in the contemporary political landscape. His vision of the Druids as proto-Anglicans and national religionists provides Blake with an avenue for the critique of natural and state religion he presents in *Milton*. The third chapter demonstrates how Blake uses the poetic and prophetic figure of the bard in opposition to the priestly Druids in order to provide an alternative locus for concerns of national identity and a model for social change through poetry. Communicative acts between individuals inspire the broader spread of the call to self-annihilation and the combination of individuals in brotherhood and forgiveness to join the body of Jesus.
Introduction
The Contemplation of Past, Present, and Future

Scholars have continually noted the presence of characters and images drawn from British antiquity in William Blake’s *Milton a Poem*. It may strike one as odd that a poem concerned with the primacy of the imagination over the memory and of the mental over the corporeal would reveal an interest in the study of antiquity, which is fundamentally invested in the recovery of cultural memory through material objects. As archaeological theorist and historian Alain Schnapp reminds us:

> Memory needs the earth in order to survive. Whether inscribed in stone, brick, or parchment, or flowing in the human memory by the agency of bard or poet, a foundation narrative must root itself in the land, invest itself with that reality which is sealed within the soil. It matters little if that seal is never broken, as long as there is some corner of the land which bears witness to its existence. (Schnapp 24)

The four quatrains that appear in the *Milton* Preface take the form of persistent questioning, a desire to know whether Christ once walked in England “in ancient time” (2:27)\(^1\). The speaker looks throughout “Englands green & pleasant land” for an answer, turning his attention variously to England’s “mountains green,” “pleasant pastures,” and “clouded hills” (2:28, 30, 32, 42). The speaker’s search for the site of the former Jerusalem gives way to his resolve to build Jerusalem anew. The monument in question has remained the same, yet the speaker has shifted his role from that of discoverer to that of creator. As Schnapp explains, “We have to engage with the idea that other human beings, maybe tomorrow, maybe in a few hours’ time, maybe a few years or centuries

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\(^1\) Unless otherwise noted, I refer throughout to the Princeton University Press edition of *Milton*, which uses copy C as its source text. Plate 2, which bears the Preface, appears only in copies A and B. It was initially part of copy C, but Blake later removed it. Essick and Viscomi include the plate from copy B as a supplementary illustration.
from now, will look upon our traces. Understood in this way, the archaeological consciousness is born more of confrontation with the future than with the past” (18). In *Milton*, Blake’s engagement with antiquity bears at all times a concern with past, present, and future.

Jon Mee has described William Blake in terms of Claude Levi-Strauss’ notion of the “bricoleur,” due to his inclination to build brilliantly reorganized structures from a repertoire of disparate discourses. Given this comparison, it is no surprise that Blake engages with antiquarianism, a discipline defined by its interdisciplinarity, such that it was “part of an intellectual world in which modern disciplines such as geology, archaeology, anthropology and comparative religion were pursued interchangeably, with little sense of disciplinary boundaries” (Sweet 119). Antiquarianism can most readily be understood as the precursor to the modern discipline of archaeology, albeit much less empirically rigorous. Though sometimes derided by modern scholars as eccentric or amateurish, antiquaries played an integral role in the cultural and intellectual climate of eighteenth-century Britain.

In particular, antiquarian investigations into the early inhabitants of the British Isles had a significant impact on the burgeoning concept of national identity that increasingly solidified over the course of the century. Rosemary Sweet argues:

Antiquaries were also convinced of the importance of their studies to their contemporary world, not least because of the patriotic importance of establishing the earliest history of national origins. For the historian of eighteenth-century Britain these attempts to trace back the lineage of the nation illuminate the process by which national histories and a national identity were constructed and highlight the differences between the self-perceptions of the constituent parts of the kingdom. (Sweet 119)
By populating his poetic landscape with Druids and bards, Blake also explores this issue of national identity and the possibility of national transformation. This study will examine ways in which antiquarian discourse was used in the eighteenth century to help define the emergent British national identity. After touching on this more general concern, I will examine in greater detail the cases of Blake and the antiquary William Stukeley. Though Stukeley is no stranger to Blake criticism, I will examine the relationship between the two men’s work in more detail than is typically the case with either Blake scholars or those who study Stukeley or eighteenth-century antiquaries. Stukeley constructed an image of antiquity to bolster the power structures of the present. Blake’s work, in turn, constitutes a reaction against this use of antiquity. Blake turns the antiquarian discourse represented by Stukeley on its head and targets the Druids as part of an attack on those very institutions that men like Stukeley sought to defend. To complete the reversal, Blake turns to another figure from British antiquity, the bard, to show how poetry constitutes a prophetic call for individual change that spreads into broader social change.

An epic poet typically takes up as his subject matter ancient characters and events that contribute to a shared sense of identity and ideals for his people. For example, Homer tells of the long vanished heroes of the Bronze Age, and Virgil recounts the story of Rome’s distant Trojan ancestors. When desiring to craft his own epic for the English people, Milton initially contemplated continuing this tradition of praising ancient heroes by writing an epic about King Arthur. In his Latin poem “Mansus,” Milton reflects on the prospect of “summon[ing] back our native kings into our songs, and Arthur, waging his wars beneath the earth, or…proclaim[ing] the magnanimous heroes of the table which
their mutual fidelity made invincible” (Hughes 130). Later, in The Reason of Church Government, Milton again admits to pondering “what king or knight before the conquest might be chosen in whom to lay the pattern of a Christian hero” (Hughes 669). Milton ultimately abandons this plan in favor of an epic on the fall of man, claiming within Paradise Lost that this more avowedly Christian subject constitutes a “higher Argument” (IX:41) than he could have made if he were “to dissect / with long and tedious havoc fabl’d Knights / In Battles feign’d” (IX:29-31).

Blake also elects not to use a warrior like Arthur as his epic hero, turning instead to Milton himself. Blake may have had Arthur on the brain during the composition of Milton, as Arthur is referred to several times in the Descriptive Catalogue and plays a part in Jerusalem. In Blake’s description of his painting The Ancient Britons, he claims that the “stories of Arthur are the acts of Albion” (Erdman 543) and that “Arthur shall awake from sleep, and resume his dominion over earth and ocean” (Erdman 542). If Arthur as Albion remains a symbol of national identity, in Milton the warrior-king’s waging of war is rejected as the path to glory in favor of Milton’s self-annihilation. In the Preface, Blake rails against those who “depress Ment / -al & prolong Corporeal War” (2:15-16). The battlefield of Mental War belongs to the poet, rather than the warrior. Julia Wright notes that as “a figure of rebellion for some and the hero of a more imperial nationalism for others, Milton was exploited by various competing definitions of nationalism” (114). Over the course of the poem, Blake reappropriates Milton’s role as national savior to serve his own narrative of national purification.

2 Unless otherwise noted, all references to any of Blake’s works aside from Milton are to David Erdman’s The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake.
This is by no means the first study to examine Blake’s abiding interest in British antiquity, as prior work has been done by David Worrall, Susan Matthews, and, more recently, Jason Whittaker. These works on Blake and antiquity have tended to devote more of their focus to the lengthier *Jerusalem* rather than to *Milton*. However, I contend that we cannot lose sight of the important social implications of Blake’s treatment of antiquity in *Milton*. As such, this study draws on prior historicist studies of Blake, such as Jon Mee’s *Dangerous Enthusiasm*, which places Blake’s earlier work in the context of political and religious radical movements of the 1790s. Given that Mee’s work focuses on a time period before the composition of *Milton*, it does not provide direct commentary on the poem as such. To an extent, my study continues to examine this same vein of political resistance as it appears in *Milton*; however, I contend that by the early nineteenth century Blake’s thinking has become more avowedly Christian than it had been in the 1790s.

More recently, Wright has examined Blake’s work in the context of nationalism, and she interprets *Milton* in particular in terms of national purification from classical influences. My study also shares Wright’s emphasis on nationalism, but I focus instead on Blake’s engagement with British as opposed to classical antiquity.

My discussion of antiquarianism and of Stukeley’s work in particular necessarily builds on the work of scholars in other disciplines. Of general value here are broader studies of the cultural conception of British antiquity in the eighteenth century, such as those by Sweet and Sam Smiles. In the last half-century, there have been two monograph studies of Stukeley, one by archaeologist Stuart Piggott and the other by historian David Boyd Haycock. I share Piggott’s view that Stukeley’s interest in Druids at Stonehenge and Avebury directly results from his ordination in the Church of England. My discussion
of Stukeley’s work focuses on the extent to which his public role as clergyman influences his antiquarian output.

In my first chapter, I demonstrate that Blake presents the Druids as Satanic missionaries spreading his message of submission to his moral law, which also disguises itself as natural law. My argument evolves from Wright’s claim that Blake figures Satan as a national blight that needs to be cured. However, in her emphasis on the classical sources for this cultural infection, Wright necessarily excludes the importance of the fact that Satan’s minions are often depicted as Druidic priests rather than as classical soldiers. My reading of the way Satan and his Druid sons are presented in the poem firmly establishes their connection with the oppressive forces of natural and state religion. I then consider Blake’s depiction within the broader context of eighteenth-century writing about Druids. Blake rejects Stukeley’s influential characterization of the Druids as patriarchal Christians whose beliefs foreshadow those of eighteenth-century Anglicans. However, in his rejection Blake does not abandon all claims to Britain’s primacy, but he grounds that claim in his understanding of myth rather than in a literal chronology.

In my second chapter, I examine more closely the antiquarian work of William Stukeley in the wider context of his public role as a clergyman in the Established Church. Prior studies of Stukeley’s work by Blake scholars have tended to emphasize only the texts of Stonehenge and Abury as repositories of textual and visual motifs for Blake’s designs. However, Stukeley’s antiquarian works are part of a larger program to combat skepticism in favor of an orthodox Anglicanism that emphasizes obedience and duty to the state. In particular, Stukeley asserts in these texts the same call for the importance of the Sabbath as a means of public sacrifice and atonement that he preaches in a
Martyrdom Day sermon before the House of Commons. Blake seizes on this idea of atonement and exploits the Druidical practice of human sacrifice as a means of atoning in order to suggest that the sacrificial economy of his own day repeats these errors.

In my third and final chapter, I discuss Blake’s use of the ancient figure of the bard as a model for social change through poetry. The bard is primarily a poetic and prophetic figure, as opposed to the priestly Druids, and provides an alternative locus for concerns of national identity. While the bard in part represents an original liberty to which Blake seeks to return, this notion of national renovation is complicated by the fact that Blake places so much emphasis on the importance of originality and artistic creativity. The return to original liberty is carried out through the poetic works of the imagination. Though the movement starts within the individual, communicative acts between individuals inspire the broader spread of the call to self-annihilation and the combination of individuals in brotherhood and forgiveness to join the body of Jesus.
Chapter 1

“Satan’s Druid Sons” as a Critique of Natural and State Religion

The narrative of Blake’s epic poem Milton features a panoply of characters drawn from the ranks of historical persons, such as Milton, from the Judeo-Christian tradition, such as Jesus and Satan, and from Blake’s own mythic system. Given the potential for estrangement of a reader awash in an unfamiliar mythic system of Blake’s devising, one might be tempted to view the poem as divorced from any recognizable political context, or perhaps divorced from any space that exists outside of Blake’s own mind. However, as the overlapping valences of these characters suggest, Blake in fact draws on a number of sources, such as the Bible, Paradise Lost, and various antiquarian texts, to support his own mythic system. Drawing on Julia Wright’s claim that Milton can be read as a poem that grapples with the construction of national identity, we can see that these sources from which Blake constructs his critique also reflect the numerous historical, religious, and mythic ideas that inform a nation’s self-conception. One such point of intersection is Blake’s Satan, who represents natural and state religion, forces that need to be expunged from the emergent nation. Moreover, Satan’s association at various points throughout the poem with Druids underscores the way that the antiquarian discourse that ran throughout the eighteenth century served to legitimize natural and state religion. Blake ultimately turns this antiquarian discourse against itself by presenting the Druids as Satan’s priests, enforcing his material and moral law.

In Blake, Nationalism, and the Politics of Alienation, Wright contends that the poem should not be read solely as an autobiography of poetic influence, for such readings
necessarily overlook the political aspects of Milton’s quest (111). In the central plot of
the poem, Milton descends to earth from the heavens to cast off his own selfhood, which
has become infected with various forces associated with Satan. Milton’s emanation,
Ololon, also arrives on earth to unite with Milton in anticipation of the awakening of
Albion and the ensuing apocalypse. Wright frames the conflict between Milton and Satan
within the context of a burgeoning sense of nationalism. She argues that by “the end of
the eighteenth century, Milton was appropriated to serve an English, Protestant
iconography that was disseminated and promoted to support a nationalist agenda that
included militarist expansion and commercial exploitation. This agenda was validated by
the belief, supported through reference to Milton’s writings, that England had a divinely
sanctioned mission” (Wright 114-5). Satan then, becomes emblematic of this militarism,
which Wright claims Blake particularly associates with “imperial classical roots,
particularly those of Rome, Greece, and Troy” (126). The conflict between these two
characters is rendered culturally in the Preface to *Milton* that appears at the beginning of
copies A and B:

The Stolen and Perverted Writings of Homer &
Ovid; of Plato & Cicero. which all Men ought to
contemn: are set up by artifice against the Sublime
of the Bible. but when the New Age is at leisure
to Pronounce; all will be set right (2:1-5)

According to the Preface, Milton too has been “curbd by the general malady & infection
from / the silly Greek & Latin slaves of the Sword” that threatens the nation as a whole
(2:10-11). Therefore, “Milton’s purification at the climax of the poem is…the cultural
purification of England anticipated by the preface” (Wright 112). Wright’s interpretation
is indeed enlightening; however, its narrow focus on Blake’s antipathy toward classical
tradition necessarily excludes other oppressive forces associated in the poem with Satan. I will demonstrate that Satan embodies the dual religious threat posed to the nation by the oppressive forces of natural religion and state religion. Furthermore, Blake’s decision to depict Satan’s minions as Druids rather than classical soldiers serves to undermine the antiquarian discourse that valorized British antiquity as a means of supporting the oppressive institutions of church and state.

Given that Satan is one of the more polyglot presences in *Milton*, the wide range of options available when interpreting his role in the poem seems like a microcosm of the broad spectrum of interpretive modes available for the poem as a whole. At the personal, autobiographical end of this spectrum is an interpretation first put forth by E. J. Ellis and W. B. Yeats in 1893, which posits that Blake’s own experiences with William Hayley at Felpham from 1800-1803 provide a means of understanding the conflict between Palamabron and Satan in the section of the poem often referred to as the “Bard’s Song” (Essick and Viscomi 15). However, Satan need not be understood only in this capacity, for within the Bard’s Song he becomes associated with forces of oppression that extend beyond the personal to encompass the religious and political. In a reading such as Wright’s, Satan becomes figured as an adversarial force plaguing the nation. This trope of rendering one’s enemies as either embodying or allied with Satan was not new in the eighteenth century. As Linda Colley writes, an “apocalyptic interpretation of history, in which Britain stood in for Israel and its opponents were represented as Satan’s accomplices, did not fade away in the face of rationalism in the late seventeenth century, but remained part of the thinking of many devout Protestants for years to come” (31).
Though this kind of political rhetoric was often reserved for rival nations overseas, Blake uses the Satan trope to represent the destructive work of natural and state religion within his own nation. Natural religion relies on a notion of a mechanistic, materialist universe, for in order for God to be rationally intelligible from nature, God’s universe must be empirically observable and interpretable. This materialist worldview is questioned in the song found on Plate f of Milton. The song tells of the fallen man, who must rely on the perception of his physical senses and is reduced to the level of a serpent, “[c]reeping in reptile flesh upon the bosom of the ground,” and seeing only with a “little narrow orb closd up & dark” (f:20-21). This image of the serpentine man evokes Satan’s appearance in serpent form as the “brute human” in Paradise Lost (IX:712). As Satan tempts Eve, he praises the Tree of Knowledge, which he calls the “Mother of Science,” for its gift of his heightened empirical powers, namely “not onely to discerne / Things in thir Causes, but to trace the wayes / Of highest Agents, deemd however wise” (IX:680, 681-683). Satan implores Eve in an argument based on experimentation with the material senses to “look on mee, / Mee who have touch'd and tasted, yet both live, / And life more perfet have attaind” (IX:687-689). Satan’s argument is illogical—God never tells the serpent it will die if it eats the fruit—but its persuasive effect on Eve asserts how readily empirical knowledge trumps divine revelation in human eyes. Satan sweetens his argument through the empty promise of enhanced perception through the material senses: “your Eyes that seem so cleere, / Yet are but dim, shall perfetly be then / Op'nd and cleerd, and ye shall be as Gods” (IX:706-708).

3 Plate f appears only in Copy D of Milton. Essick and Viscomi include the plate as a supplemental illustration.
The song found on Plate f of *Milton* depicts the consequences of Satan’s empty promise, as it reveals the inadequacies of the material senses, for Satan’s world “shrinks the Organs / Of Life” (8*[c]:6-7). Instead of being like Gods, humans become reduced to the level of the serpent:

Can such an Eye judge of the stars? & looking thro its tubes
Measure the sunny rays that point their spears on Udanadan
Can such an Ear filld with the vapours of the yawning pit.
Judge of the pure melodious harp struck by a hand divine?
Can such closed Nostrils feel a joy? or tell of autumn fruits
When grapes & figs burst their covering to the joyful air
Can such a Tongue boast of the living waters? or take in
Ought but the Vegetable Ratio & loathe the faint delight
Can such gross Lips percieve? alas! folded within themselves
They touch not ought but pallid turn & tremble at every wind (f:28-37)

The “Eye” is that of an empirical observer who looks “thro its tubes,” namely telescopes, in order to “measure the sunny rays.” However, despite its powerful tools, the eye seems incapable of judging the stars as they appear to the man of vision, as this ear cannot judge of the “pure melodious harp struck by a hand divine.” With reference to the tongue, the passage takes on an explicitly biblical character, since the tongue cannot speak of the Day of the Lord, when “living waters shall go out from Jerusalem” (Zechariah 14:8). Bereft of these divine sensations, the man looking through his tube experiences only “the Vegetable Ratio.” Blake uses the term ratio to identify any inherently limiting system. A ratio is the expression of the way something else reflects back on oneself, either by containing the other or being oneself contained. This idea appears later in the poem in direct relation to the telescope and microscope of the empiricist observer: “The Microscope knows not of this nor the Telescope: they alter / The ratio of the Spectator's Organs but leave Objects untouch'd” (28:17-18). Without access to the prophecy that derives from the “living waters,” this fallen man cannot see beyond the bounds of his
physical sense, no matter how far his telescopic tube may allow him to see. As we will see, Satan takes this concept of the ratio from the material to the moral realm when he begins legislating morality from his own mind, forcing others to conform to the oppressive ratio of “Satans Mathematic Holiness, Length: Bredth & Highth” (32*[e]:18).

Blake quite often associates materialism and empiricism with Sir Isaac Newton. When Satan seeks to usurp Palamabron’s position driving the Harrow, Los rebukes him in terms that identify him with the mechanistic universe of Newtonian physics:

O Satan my youngest born, art thou not Prince of the Starry Hosts  
And of the Wheels of Heaven, to turn the Mills day & night?  
Art thou not Newtons Pantocrator weaving the Woof of Locke  
To Mortals thy Mills seem every thing & the Harrow of Shaddai  
A scheme of Human conduct invisible & incomprehensible  
Get to thy Labours at the Mills & leave me to my wrath (3[a]:9-14)

On one level, Satan’s Mills, as a symbol of industry, contrast sharply with the agricultural tools of Los’ other sons, namely “the Plow of Rintrah & the Harrow of the Almighty / In the hands of Palamabron” (3[a]:1-2). This contrast hearkens back to the Preface, where the “dark Satanic Mills” are the only blot marring the otherwise pastoral landscape of “Englands green & pleasant Land” (2:34, 42). Moreover, it foreshadows the fact that Satan will have no regenerative or redemptive role in the coming apocalypse. A miller may only transform material into a new shape; he never truly creates anything. A farmer, however, by planting an initial seed, nurtures a plant that produces its own seeds for an ever-increasing abundance of life. These mechanistic and sterile associations of the Mill take on a new meaning with the reference to Newton. Given that Satan is referred to as “Prince of the Starry hosts / And the Wheels of Heaven,” the Mills also appear to be functioning as a metaphor for Newtonian planetary mechanics, with every star and planet fixed in its perpetual orbit. Blake views the Newtonian universe as inherently limiting
and sterile; for if everything is material, there can be no imagination, and if every action has an equal and opposite reaction, there can be no creativity. This limiting nature of Newtonianism is reinforced by the fact that its model of the universe overruns mortal vision to the extent that “To Mortals [the] Mills seem every thing,” which excludes Shaddai, the Hebrew term for “Almighty” (Essick and Viscomi 119), as “[a] scheme of Human conduct invisible & incomprehensible.” Satan’s opposition with Shaddai takes on a religious character with the reference to Satan as “Newtons Pantocrator.” A Greek term from the New Testament, “Pantocrator” is also typically translated as “Lord Almighty” (Essick and Viscomi 119). Given the vast network of overlapping symbols in Blake, it should perhaps come as no surprise that my own study here intersects on the linguistic level with Wright’s focus on classicism, as the Greek Almighty overwhelms the Hebrew Almighty. Moreover, Satan’s identification as “Newtons Pantocrator” foreshadows his eventual declaration of himself as God later in the poem.

This reaction against the notion of a Newtonian usurpation of the heavens may be rooted in the fact that at various points throughout the eighteenth century, English Christianity tacitly accepted the Newtonian worldview and used it to undergird the institutions of church and state. Margaret Jacob argues:

To complacent Churchmen of the eighteenth century, and if the Methodist critique has any validity there must have been a fair number of them, the Newtonian vision of the natural world provided irrefutable justification for the public order and controlled self-interest sanctioned and maintained by church and state. The harmony of the worlds natural and political provided an intellectual and social context for the growth of empire and commercial capitalism. (269)

The drive behind this vision of harmony came from the latitudinarian churchmen, many of whom were Cambridge men heavily influenced by Newton’s conception of the natural
order of things. In the wake of the Glorious Revolution, the latitudinarians conceived of a Christianity so broadly defined that it would eliminate dissent. By conflating the natural order with the divine order, the latitudinarians argued that the “natural” status quo of political affairs must, according to reason, be divinely sanctioned otherwise God would have overturned it himself. Though the explicit latitudinarianism that Jacob writes about began to fade late into the first half of the eighteenth century, the twin engines of the church and the market continued to propel the nation throughout the eighteenth century.

On that note, Colley writes that “Protestantism, broadly understood, provided the majority of Britons with a framework for their lives….But if religion underpinned national identity [in Great Britain] as in so many other states…it was also the case that an active commitment to nation was often intimately bound up with an element of self-interest” (55). Those churchmen in the latitudinarian spirit were no exception, as they “proposed what can best be called a Christianized capitalism, an ethic for self-interest resting upon the providential order in the world political and natural” (Jacob 54). Thus, the mills of industry turn in unison with the mills of Newtonian space, with the priest’s hand at the crank.

Long after the latitudinarians enjoyed their zenith, practitioners of natural religion within the Church of England could still continue to enjoy prominence in Blake’s day. One such natural religionist was William Paley, now perhaps best known for the “watchmaker analogy” from his *Natural Theology*. In his *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, Paley decries “the absurdity of separating natural and revealed religion from each other. The object is the same—to discover the will of God—and, provided we do but discover it, it matters nothing by what means” (I:63). Robert Hole
associates Paley with the liberal latitudinarian spirit and describes Paley’s moral understanding as the belief that “the will of God was to be determined by the operation of the calculus” of human reason (79). Though theologically rather liberal, Paley’s moral calculus typically arrives at conclusions that support the status quo politically. For example, he argues that “obedience to the State, is to be numbered amongst the relative duties of human life, for the transgression of which we shall be accountable at the tribunal of divine justice, whether the magistrates be able to punish it or not” (W. Paley, II:154). Like the earlier latitudinarians, Paley seems to subscribe to the belief that relative stability betokens a sign of God’s will, given that his description of “not only the most just and liberal, but the wisest and safest [religious] system, which a state can adopt” directly mirrors England’s system of a dominant established church with limited, tolerated dissent (II:344). Thus, in the absence of revelation or inspiration, natural religionists essentially derive their moral law from their own reasoning sense, which allows churchmen to promulgate doctrine in their own self-interest or in the interest of maintaining the Church’s power in the status quo.

Satan epitomizes this notion of the self-deriving ratio of the moral law throughout Milton, for we are told that “Satan making to himself Laws from his own identity. / Compell’d others to serve him in moral gratitude & submission” (9:10-11). Satan first takes up the role of lawgiver in the Assembly, which Palamabron calls down after the disastrous consequences that result when Satan replaces him at his station. Satan launches a counter-accusation against Palamabron:

He created Seven deadly Sins drawing out his infernal scroll,  
Of Moral laws and cruel punishments upon the clouds of Jehovah  
To pervert the Divine voice in its entrance to the earth  
With thunder of war & trumpets sound, with armies of disease
Punishments & deaths musterd & number'd; Saying I am God alone
There is no other! let all obey my principles of moral individuality (7:21-26)

Satan here fulfills the literal meaning of his Hebrew name, the Accuser, and becomes the embodiment of error as he accuses Palamabron of offenses he has himself committed. As his wrath threatens to boil over beneath his “mildness,” Satan takes on the role of moral lawgiver to substantiate his position against Palamabron. To protest his innocence, he “created Seven deadly Sins drawing out his infernal scroll;” thus, moral virtue is in Satan’s conception a negative concept. Rather than relying on brotherhood or forgiveness, Satan’s notion of morality is framed in opposition to sin, but the sins themselves are also of his own creation. When projected outward from Satan’s personal conflict with Palamabron, his errors are inflicted upon the earth in the form of “the thunder of war & trumpets sound, with armies of disease.” The voice of God becomes perverted and subsumed in the voice of the law, as Satan cries out “I am God alone There is no other! let all obey my principles of moral individuality.” Satan, in creating the moral law, has succeeded only in creating a ratio of his own self-interest.

The moral and material worldview of Satan remains so oppressive because Blake’s Satan maintains power over the earth in a way that traditional conceptions of Satan do not. Even so, as in Paradise Lost, Satan as he rages in the Assembly internalizes his hellish state:

His bosom inwards shone with fires, but the stones becoming opake!
Hid him from sight, in an extreme blackness and darkness,
And there a World of deeper Ulro was open'd, in the midst
Of the Assembly. In Satans bosom a vast unfathomable Abyss. (7:32-35)

As purveyor of the “principles of moral individuality,” Satan further isolates himself from others in his opacity, shielding himself from the Divine Vision and “[h]id…from
sight, in an extreme blackness and darkness.” Satan takes the Ulro, which is “the lowest state of consciousness and utterly material being” (Essick and Viscomi 129), and internalizes it in his bosom. The notion of the opening of a “deeper Ulro” appears to echo Satan’s lament in *Paradise Lost* when he realizes that hell itself has become a part of him:

> Which way I flie is Hell; my self am Hell;  
> And in the lowest deep a lower deep  
> Still threatening to devour me opens wide,  
> To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heav'n. (IV:75-78)

Both Milton’s and Blake’s Satans seek to inflict their torment on others. Milton’s Satan emerges as a lone rebel, who braves the journey across chaos to engineer his plan to have Adam and Eve cast into hell with him so they cannot usurp his place as God’s favorite. Blake’s Satan takes the utter materialism of Ulro and inflicts it on the earth by setting himself up to rule as God over it. Thus Blake’s Satan has internalized Ulro only to make it external again as he forces others to conform to his material and moral ratio. Once Satan leaves the Assembly, Enitharmon sets aside a new earthly space for him, named Canaan. The seeming omnipotence from which Satan derives his godlike stature is revealed to be an illusion of the physical perception that operates within this space, for “it shrinks the Organs / Of Life till they become Finite & Itself seems Infinite” so that Satan appears “Limited / To those without but Infinite to those within” (8*[c]:6-7, 8-9). Soon afterward, “a Time [is given] to the Space / Even Six Thousand Years,” which reflects the traditional reckoning of the age of the earth (11:16-17). Within this time and space Satan becomes a “mighty Fiend against the Divine Humanity mustring to War” (8*[c]:11). Los’s response to this event reveals that in this new time and space Satan, who sets himself up as the god of this space, becomes associated with the way in which
church and state mutually buttress one another: “Satan! Ah me! Is gone to his own place, said Los! their God / I will not worship in their Churches. nor King in their Theatres” (8*[c]:130).

Given Wright’s persuasive argument about Satan’s classical associations, one might expect to find Satan “mustering to War” with various classical, pagan armies; however, it is in fact “Satans Druid sons” who “[o]ffer the Human Victims throughout all the earth” (9:7-8). The Druids, like Satan, are guilty of perpetuating a limiting and oppressive ratio to which others must conform, as their “Druidical Mathematical Proportion of Length Bredth Highth” (3[a]:27) anticipates “Satans Mathematic Holiness, Length: Bredth & Highth” (32*[e]:18). Though often seeming to simply lurk in the background of the events of *Milton*, the Druids constitute an important part of Blake’s mythic system. Multiple critics have stated that although Blake’s references to Druids in his later work appear largely negative, moments of ambivalence persist (Mee 90, Whittaker 138). For example, in the *Descriptive Catalogue*, Blake writes that “Adam was a Druid, and Noah; also Abraham was called to succeed the Druidical age, which began to turn allegoric and mental signification into corporeal command, whereby human sacrifice would have depopulated the whole earth” (Erdman 452-543). This passage would seem to indicate that the Druids had degenerated from some earlier state that did not indulge in the error of human sacrifice. This notion of the Druids’ degeneration from loftier origins also appears in the speech of “Hillel who is Lucifer” in *Milton*:

We were Angels of the Divine Presence: & were Druids in Annandale Compelled to combine into Form by Satan, the Spectre of Albion, Who made himself a God &, destroyed the Human Form Divine. But the Divine Humanity & Mercy gave us a Human Form Because we were combine in Freedom & holy Brotherhood While those combine by Satans Tyranny first in the blood of War
And Sacrifice &, next, in Chains of imprisonment: are Shapeless Rocks
Retaining only Satans Mathematic Holiness, Length: Bredth & Highth
(32*[e]:11-18)

Though these former “Druids in Annandale” now serve as idolaters of Satan, the
implication is that there was a time when they were “combind in Freedom & holy
Brotherhood.” Conversely, those “combind by Satans Tyranny” become “Shapeless
Rocks / Retaining only Satans Mathematic Holiness, Length: Bredth & Highth.” This
fleeting glimpse of an idyllic past provides a brief moment of hope for a Britain redolent
with primitive liberty. Perhaps this moment could be seized upon as an example of the
“Moment in each Day that Satan cannot find” that can pervade and renovate “every
Moment of the Day if rightly placed” (35:42).

Granting this single hint of a time when the Druids were bound by brotherhood,
Blake otherwise associates them strongly with Satan’s war-mongering drive to
overwhelm the nations of the earth and place himself enthroned as deity and dictator.
Throughout Milton, Blake ties the druids in with the Satanic connections to both natural
and state religion. For example, Jason Whittaker argues that Blake’s jibe on Plate 3(a)
that the sacrificial victims’ act of “Mocking Druidical Mathematical Proportion of Length
Bredth Highth” (3[a]:27) is aimed specifically at the work of antiquarian William
Stukeley (157). Stukeley, whose work I will discuss at greater length in Chapter 2, was
one of the foremost antiquaries who studied British antiquities in the eighteenth century.
He concentrated his work on the major stone circles on Salisbury Plain, which he claimed
displayed “plain, natural, easy geometry,…the first rudiments of art, deduced from
common reason” (Stonehenge 16-17). Both of his major antiquarian works, Stonehenge
(1740) and Abury (1743), feature the prominent use of a Druid’s cubit, a unit measure
that Stukeley claims forms the ratio between all of the stones at Stonehenge and Avebury and was in fact identical with the Hebraic cubit found in the Bible. For Blake, the problem lies not merely in Stukeley’s claim that the Druids’ art is deduced from reason; rather, Stukeley goes so far as to claim that these temples revealed that the Druids had also deduced their knowledge of the Christian Trinity from reason rather than from prophecy or direct revelation. Such an argument allows Blake to class Stukeley among the natural religionists and to use Stukeley’s obsession with mathematical calculations as a metaphor for the limiting ratio of the natural and moral laws and the ratio, or “reason,” of the “snows of doubt & reasoning” that fall “[a]mong indefinite Druid rocks” (2[b]:8).

For example, Stukeley writes that these temples recommended themselves as ideal places of worship because the Druids “considered that the beauty in [the stones’] appearance must be owing to their conformity, as near as may be, and to the proportion between the solid and the void interval” (Abury 21). For Stukeley, the temple mirrors the grand design of the universe, which, according to the Newtonian model, consists of a void space populated by solid bodies. The Druid temples have no essential beauty in themselves and reveal no beauty in the deity; they are beautiful only beauty in their conformity and ratio. “Drudical Mathematical Proportion” in its perpetuation of these ratios becomes one with Satan’s “Mathematic Proportion” that must be “subdued by Living Proportion” (f:44).

Decades later, in his Choir Gaur (1771), John Smith revises Stukeley’s mathematics in order to claim that the positioning of the stones at Stonehenge reflects a sophisticated understanding of astronomy on the part of the Druids. Smith believes that Stonehenge, initially called “Choir Gaur,” was “erected by the ancient Druids, for
observing the motions of the heavenly bodies: and from whence probably the choirs of all churches derived their name” (68). Smith is not entirely clear about why the Druids would need to track the motions of the heavenly spheres, and he mainly appears to ascribe it to some sort of astrological knowledge useful for planting, cultivation, and harvest. He speculates that Stonehenge likely served some religious purpose, but he does not arrive at a clear conclusion, for “[w]hatever the Druids did, was mysterious, and religiously kept from the knowledge of the vulgar” (66). Such an association of the Druids with some mysterious religious practice tied to astronomy plays readily into Blake’s association of the Druids with Satan, as it casts the Druids as natural philosophers following the progress of the celestial spheres. In this context, the Druids’ stone circles also evoke the “Starry Wheels” (2[b]:43) of Satan that are associated with the progress of the heavenly spheres in the Newtonian system.

Furthermore, the Druids, like Satan, come to be associated with the spreading oppression of state religion. The Druidic temples have sprung up as a malignant growth atop what should be the foundations of the New Jerusalem. Jerusalem is called upon to return to “Lambeths Vale / Where Jerusalems foundations began; where they were laid in ruins / Where they were laid in ruins from every Nation & Oak Groves rooted” (4:14-16). Arguing for a largely biographical reading of Milton, Essick and Viscomi point out that “[t]he Blakes lived across the Thames from Chelsea at 13 Hercules Buildings, Lambeth, from 1790 until their removal to Felpham in 1800” (121). Presumably, under this reading, Blake would be asserting his own central prophetic role by creating the New Jerusalem within his own house. However, I contend that it would be as profitable for us to view this passage as a reference to nearby Lambeth Palace, the London residence of the
Archbishop of Canterbury. Oak groves were held to be the site of Druidic ritual sacrifice. Thus, this religious edifice represented by the oak groves points to the Archbiishop’s Palace, the major religious edifice of Blake’s day rooted in Lambeth. In the same passage, Blake further identifies Lambeth as the place from which “stony Druid temples overspread the Island white” (4:20). The Druid temples with their “Druidical Mathematical Proportion of Length Bredth Hight” (3[a]:27) are a perversion of the New Jerusalem, of which it is written that the “length and the breadth and the height of it are equal” (Rev. 21:16). Blake associates this overspreading of the Druid temples with the oppressive influence of the Established Church, implying that the Church of England is a remnant of the mysterious Druidic cult. With its claim that “All things begin & end in Albions ancient Druid rocky shore” (4:24), the passage still affords England primacy of place in the regeneration that will accompany the coming apocalypse, but that redemption will not take place through the state church. Indeed, it is “Among the rocks of Albion’s temples” (9:7) that Satan launches his oppressive religious program, “Where Satan making to himself Laws from his own identity / Compell'd others to serve him in moral gratitude & submission / Being call'd God: setting himself above all that is called God” (9:10-12).

Mee has previously remarked upon Blake’s use of druid temples to signify the Church of England in *Europe*. Mee identifies the “ancient temple serpent-form’d” (10:2, Erdman 63) as a reference to the theories of Stukeley pertaining to the Neolithic monument at Avebury (Mee 92-93). Stukeley believed that the Druids were primitive Christians, who had erected this serpentine temple as a means of representing the Christian Trinity. Stukeley’s antiquarian work attempted “to prove that the druids had
inherited their religion from the Old Testament patriarchs and that this had been passed directly on to the Anglican Church” (Mee 94). Mee associates Blake’s use of the Druids as a negative representation of state religion with prominent Deist John Toland’s negative depiction of Druids in his *A Critical History of the Druids*, published in 1723. Toland represented the Druids as the origin of priestcraft in Britain as part of his own “covert attack on the Church of England, which played on parallels between druidism and institutionalized Christianity” (Mee 94). Toland’s account is marked by invective throughout: “Yet if the correspondence of any Priests with heaven be as slenderly grounded as those of the Druids, if their miracles be as fictitious and fraudulent, if their love of riches be as immoderate, if their thirst for power be as insatiable, and their exercise of it be as partial and tyrannical over the Laity…they should be blasted too, without a possibility of ever sprouting up again” (Toland 16). Mee argues that by adopting ideas similar to Toland’s with regard to the Druids’ tyranny, Blake is “echoing the deist tradition which informed the publications of Paine and Eaton when he subverts the notion that the Druids were the venerable founders of the British state put forward by Stukeley” (Mee 96).

However, by the time Blake writes his later prophecies, his position on Druids seems to have grown more complicated so that the Druids now represent not only these “venerable founders of the British state” but also the Deists themselves. Sam Smiles argues that in *Milton* and *Jerusalem* Druidism “symbolises in particular contemporary Deism, whose advocates had admitted the mechanistic Newtonian universe as a true picture of the creation and so radically restricted God’s role in daily life” (92). In contrast to Mee’s reading of *Europe*, wherein Blake’s treatment of the Druids stems from a line of
Deistic thought initiated by Toland, Smiles claims that in these later prophecies Blake presents “an almost exact reversal of Toland’s position, where the Druid’s decline into sophistry stands for the corruption of Deism into organised Christianity” (92). Critics have noted that in the early nineteenth century Blake moves away from the affinities his work may have had with 1790s rationalism. Morton Paley, for example, goes so far to claim that “at Felpham and immediately afterwards, Blake had a series of visionary experiences that resulted in what can only be called a religious conversion” (70). E. P. Thompson acknowledges that “Blake in these prophetic books moved away from deism, and ultimately into sharp antagonism to rationalism” (216). However, Thompson is quick to add that “it is not very helpful to argue that he was moving towards (or back to) anything recognizable as Christianity, orthodox or heterodox. For if he had been doing so he would have no need to labour at the creation of his own mythic system” (216).

Thompson’s point is valid; however, the unacknowledged flipside of his assertion might prompt one to wonder why an artist who worked so hard to create his own original mythic system would partially populate that system with characters preexisting Christian, Miltonic, or historical connections, such as Jesus, Satan, and the Druids.

With regard to Blake’s treatment of British antiquity in particular, the complicated task of identifying Blake’s own ends highlights the broader problem that arises from the fact that antiquarian discourse appears to lend itself well to appropriation by opposite ends of the political spectrum. Rosemary Sweet notes that antiquarian research “helped to shape, and was in turn shaped by, religious debate and political conflict; it was invoked by the ruling elite to legitimate their position but was also appropriated by those who looked to the past to undermine the very foundations of that rule” (349). Once again,
Julia Wright provides a useful jumping-off point by means of her discussion of two different modes of understanding antiquity that subsequently contributed to two divergent constructions of national identity. On the one hand, the Augustan concern with the classical past posits a conception of history in which “the national narrative is continuous and plots the evolution of the nation from its inception onward to its imperial development” (Wright 32). In opposition, a concept of history favored by the Romantic revival appears like an “antiquarian document” unto itself: “lost and existing only in a few tattered fragments, corrupted and destroyed by intervening history, it survives only as a trace through which the recovery of the original may be possible, but not readily so” (Wright 32). While the traditional, classical notion of antiquity emphasizes imperial continuity and progress, the latter form of nationalism may be called “revolutionary” inasmuch as “it is founded on a radical return to the distant past” (Wright 32).

Wright’s traditional versus revolutionary binary can be readily mapped onto those who celebrated a kind of regional nationalism through tales of opposition to invaders, who are at times figured as Romans. In the Ossian poems, for example, Fingal “relieves his Irish cousins from the encroachments of the Norsemen and also defends the Celtic world from the Roman Empire” (Mee 83). The Druids often surface in these tales of the fight against the classical invaders. Macpherson’s discussion of the Druids in his “A Dissertation concerning the Aera of Ossian” seems decidedly ambivalent. His description of their level of influence at times seems allied with the sort of critique of priestcraft favored by Toland: “The esteem of the populace soon increased into a veneration for the order; which a cunning and ambitious tribe of men took care to improve, to such a degree, that they, in a manner, ingrossed the management of civil, as well as religious,
matters” (II:217). Macpherson then tempers this portrait of the Druids as the apparent practitioners of a deceitful state religion by adding that “they did not abuse this extraordinary power” and “that they never broke out into violence or oppression” (II:217). Macpherson appears willing to forgive them their civil and religious control due to their pivotal role in rallying the Celts against the Romans, for “[i]t was by their authority that the tribes were united, in times of greatest danger, under one head” (II:217)

Blake seems to adopt a similar theme in his description of his painting The Ancient Britons in the Descriptive Catalogue of 1809. The painting depicts a battle set in front of “Druid temples, similar to Stone Henge” (Erdman 543). Blake’s painting reveals the carnage wrought by the Roman invaders but also asserts the defiant resistance of the Britons. Toward this end, he contrasts the vulnerable nudity of the Britons with the armor of the Romans: “The dead and the dying, Britons naked, mingled with armed Romans strew the field beneath. Among these, the last of the Bards who were capable of attending warlike deeds, is seen falling, outstretched among the dead and the dying; singing to his harp in the pains of death” (Erdman 543). Of course, Blake’s vision here may in part be colored by the fact that the painting was commissioned by Welsh antiquary William Owen Pughe, who was himself interested in the foundations of Welsh national identity among the Druids and Bards (Mee 110).

Indeed, at other points in his description of The Ancient Britons, Blake seems more concerned with a sort of Hebraism than with any particular regional identity. Wright elides the Gothic and Hebraic together in opposition to the classical, arguing that throughout his work Blake engages in “valorizing the Gothic culture indigenous to northern Europe, as well as the Hebraic tradition, while deprecating the rationalist and
classical culture as one of laws, constraints, and militarist imperialism foreign to the ‘true’ British identity is corrupts” (31). I wish to interrogate this elision of the British with the Hebraic further, as it will help us understand Blake’s seemingly counterintuitive move of locating British national identity within the identity of another nation and presenting Britain as the site of the New Jerusalem. On the one hand, this identification of Blake with the Hebrew tradition aligned against the classical accords well with Blake’s claim in the Milton preface that “The Stolen and Perverted Writings of Homer & / Ovid; of Plato & Cicero. which all Men ought to / contemn: are set up by artifice against the Sublime / of the Bible” (2:1-4). However, the distinction becomes more muddled in other writings that share Milton’s probable composition period. In the Descriptive Catalogue, Blake asserts the value of the Hebraic while at the same time undermining its primacy by including it within a larger, syncretic antiquarian framework:

> The antiquities of every Nation under Heaven are no less sacred than those of the Jews. They are the same thing; as Jacob Bryant and all antiquaries have proved. How other antiquities came to be neglected and disbelieved, while those of the Jews are collected and arranged, is an inquiry worthy of both the Antiquarian and the Divine. (Erdman 543)

At first blush, the idea expressed here seems little different from the notion expressed in the early illuminated work All Religions are One (1788) that “The Religions of all Nations are derived from each Nations different reception of the Poetic Genius which is every where call'd the Spirit of Prophecy” (Erdman 1). However, Blake follows up this syncretic look at the world’s antiquities with the claim that “All had originally one language, and one religion; this was the religion of Jesus, the everlasting Gospel. Antiquity preaches the Gospel of Jesus” (Erdman 543). Blake’s initial belief in the universality of the “Poetic Genius” has shifted to the more specific advocacy of the
universality of the “religion of Jesus,” a position that mirrors Stukeley’s belief in the presence of patriarchal Christianity in Britain though not his advocacy of institutional orthodoxy. Blake makes a similar move in *Milton* with his declaration that “All things begin & end in Albions ancient Druid rocky shore” (4:25). Once again the universal reach of this claim is simultaneously grounded in a specifically British mythic past.

This elision of the Hebraic and the British somewhat complicates Wright’s binary opposition of a traditional versus revolutionary notion of antiquity because this strategy has been used in different parts of the eighteenth century to either support or challenge the status quo maintained by the state. Writing before long the crisis of confidence brought about by the American and French Revolutions, William Stukeley’s identification of the British with the Hebrews served to further assert the claims of the Church of England on the souls of its people. Stukeley believed the connection between the Druids and the Hebrews to be quite literal as “the Britons were under the ecclesiastic regimen of the Druids, who were of the patriarchal religion, the religion indeed of Abraham, for they came from him” (*Itinerarium Curiosum* II:13-14). Mee argues that Stukeley’s view of this patriarchal religion is “essentially patriotic, an attempt to find biblical origins for the earliest British religion” (Mee 93). Stukeley states in the preface to *Stonehenge* that his purpose is to “shew that Religion is one system as old as the world, and that it is the Christian religion” (*Stonehenge* Preface). Blake’s claim about the universal religion in the *Descriptive Catalogue* seems to echo Stukeley’s position, though I would contend that Blake’s notion of “the religion of Jesus” (Erdman 543) is dramatically different from what Stukeley conceives of as Christianity. An apparent endorsement of Stukeley’s theory appears in the preface “To the Jews” before Chapter 2
of Jerusalem: “Was Britain the Primitive Seat of the Patriarchal Religion? If it is true: my title-page is also True, that Jerusalem was & is the Emanation of the Giant Albion. It is True, and cannot be controverted. Ye are united O ye Inhabitants of Earth in One Religion. The Religion of Jesus: the most Ancient, the Eternal: & the Everlasting Gospel” (Erdman 171). As a gloss on this idea, Blake repeats the line from Milton that “All things Begin & End in Albions Ancient Druid Rocky Shore” (4:25), which suggests that this syncretic view also undergirds the references to antiquity in Milton.

In contrast, a much more radical use of the connection between the British and the Hebrews can be found in the work of Richard Brothers. Brothers published two volumes of prophecies as Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times in 1794 and 1795. Brothers believed that the apocalypse would imminently occur in 1798 after he himself, as “Prince of the Hebrews” would lead the Jews of the Diaspora to build a New Jerusalem. Morton Paley notes that “[h]ad Brothers been merely a would-be Messiah, he might have had no difficulties with the government” (29). However, Brothers’ apocalyptic writings ultimately got him arrested as a political prisoner, for the “line…between political agitation and millenarian anticipation was by no means clear cut and, indeed, the language of prophecy was scrutinized obsessively by government authorities searching for revolutionary infection” (Madden 271). His prophecies frequently railed against the degeneracy of the English church and state; moreover, he promised the destruction of these institutions at the hands of God: “For the English Government, both what is called civil and ecclesiastical, in its present form will, by the fierce anger and determined judgment of the Lord God, be removed, annihilated, and utterly destroyed, before the expiration of ten months from this day” (Brothers II:124,
emphasis in original). Decrying both the civil and ecclesiastical order of things, Brothers adds that “No man, who has any knowledge of God, can justly say, that London is without guilt, and her people are without sin; when her streets are full of vice. And her prisons full of oppression” (II:66). By locating responsibility for these problems with the government of church and state, he appears to echo the idea of one of Blake’s “Proverbs of Hell” from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: “Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion” (8:21, Erdman 36).

Mee proposes that we should view Brothers’ millenarianism as politically radical, particularly since his notion of God’s judgment was inextricably connected with the political events of his time (37). For example, the war against France was a favorite topic of Brothers, as he wondered aloud, “Will England continue this war any longer against a people that has the judgment of God in their favour?” (II:28). His conception of the New Jerusalem is also fundamentally more literal than poetic, for “[i]t would not descend from the clouds but be built by human hands in the Palestine of his own time” (Mee 37). To add to Mee’s discussion, I would point out that this political vision of a literal New Jerusalem is fundamentally rooted in Brothers’ understanding of antiquity, namely his belief that he and a number of his fellow Englishmen were, unbeknownst to most of them, descendants of Jews of the Diaspora. For example, Brothers declares “that the visible Jews are but few in number, compared to the great multitude professing Christianity, but all descended from their [sic] former Jews in the land of Israel, the forefathers of the present visible ones…to whom, and your children forever, belongs the possession and government of [God’s] kingdom” (II:108). Whereas Stukeley’s notion of British Hebraism can be regarded as ethnocentric, Brothers’ view often turns more
egocentric, as he also used these antique genealogies to proclaim himself the true
descendant of David, Prince of the Hebrews, and rightful King of England. Even so,
Brothers provides an example of how a radical Christianity undergirded by a belief in the
primacy of Hebrew antiquity can form a call for political change at all levels of state and
church: “How is it then that the people of Europe, the most numerous professing
Christianity, and certainly the most enlightened with knowledge of any in the world, can
seriously say to God, Thy Will be done on earth, when they are instructed in their Public
Laws and forms of Worship to oppose it?” (Brothers I.20). I am inclined to agree with
Susan Matthews, however, when she suggests that Blake “constructs a very different
form of Hebraism from that of Richard Brothers” by rooting his understanding of
antiquity in myth rather than in a linearly constructed history (91).

Blake’s treatment of Satan and the Druids in *Milton* and other works of the early
nineteenth century reveals that it can be difficult to place him into a binary based on the
traditional or revolutionary understanding of antiquity. Blake selectively adopts certain
elements of a more traditional antiquarian discourse and ultimately molds those elements
to serve his more revolutionary ends. He shares, for example, Stukeley’s initial antipathy
toward Deism and his notion of a syncretic patriarchal religion, yet Blake uses Stukeley’s
Druids to reflect the rootedness of the limiting forces of natural and revealed religion in
his own time. He shares Brothers’ beliefs in the importance of prophecy, but Blake’s own
designs go beyond a concept of the New Jerusalem as a few stone structures in Palestine.

Drawing from various antiquarian contexts, Blake twists the more traditionalist
view of the benign, patriarchal Druids so that it buttresses his own radical understanding
of the Satanic forces of natural and state religion that can only be cleansed in self-
annihilation. The story of Satan is presented as a history, as the Bard’s song explains how the world has come to be as it is. The poem highlights the provocative power of this history, for it is Milton’s confrontation with and reflection upon this history that prompts his journey of self-annihilation. Blake chooses to have his narrator begin his account of his poetic visions with the Bard’s song about Satan’s fall, rather than begin with the narrator’s physical entry into the narrative, which occurs when Milton strike’s the narrator’s foot in the form of a falling star. The readers of Milton then become part of the audience for the Bard’s song and are thereby invited to undergo the same reflection Milton does, albeit projected onto a national scale. Milton begins his journey to self-annihilation after recognizing the Satan that resides in his selfhood. Blake associates Satan’s Druids with the forces of natural and state religion in his own time to suggest the longstanding rootedness of those forces and to prompt retaliation against them.
Chapter 2

“Verdant Cathedrals of Antiquity”: Stukeley’s Druids and Public Religion

In the last chapter, I suggested that antiquarian discourse was, to an extent, malleable and could be adapted to opposing political purposes. In this chapter, I will delve into the work of the eighteenth-century antiquary William Stukeley in order to examine how Blake can adapt an antiquarian source toward his own ends. At times, Blake and Stukeley seem to share an affinity, if only because they share a common enemy in the Deists. Stukeley’s work is of particular importance to my discussion because Stukeley more than any other eighteenth-century antiquary firmly roots the Druids in the milieu of natural and state religion that I described in the previous chapter. By adopting Stukeley’s conception of the Druids as an amalgamation of natural philosophers and Anglican priests, Blake creates a launch pad for his critique against the errors of natural and state religion. Blake especially exploits the Druids’ recourse to sacrifice as a means of atoning with God and nature and goes on to suggest that the religion of his time repeats these errors in its notion of the sacrificial economy. This chapter situates Stukeley’s antiquarian view of religion in the context of his public role as an Anglican clergyman in order to understand how pragmatic and scholarly motives combine to open avenues for Blake’s critique.

Both Blake and Stukeley share a connection with the Society of Antiquaries of London, albeit in vastly different capacities. Stukeley, a physician by trade before his ordination in the Church of England in 1729, was one of the principal founders of the eighteenth-century version of the Society, which held its first meeting in 1717. Described
in the introduction to the first volume of *Archaeologia* as an “indefatigable searcher after British antiquities in the earliest periods,” Stukeley was elected the Society’s first secretary (xxxiii). Though he died in 1765, five years before the publication of the first volume of *Archaeologia*, this first volume contains two papers written by Stukeley. Moreover, Stukeley’s writings continued to be cited in other articles in *Archaeologia* throughout the 1770s and 1780s, especially those that dealt with the Druids. Sweet notes that in “most volumes of *Archaeologia* there was at least one paper which dealt with druidical remains in some form or another, but the number of such papers rose steadily during the 1780s, with a peak in 1785 of no fewer than seven” (135).

Blake’s connection with the Society was much more peripheral. From 1772-1779, William Blake served as an apprentice to the engraver James Basire whose studio was responsible for engraving the plates for *Archaeologia* and other publications of the Society. Basire’s studio also engraved other antiquarian texts not published by the Society itself. Morton Paley points out that “[a]nother Basire project that Blake almost certainly had a hand in during his apprenticeship is the plates for Jacob Bryant’s *A New System, or an Analysis of Ancient Mythology*” (“Fourth Face” 185). Blake later invokes Bryant in the *Descriptive Catalogue*, claiming that “Jacob Bryant and all antiquaries have proved” that the antiquities of all lands are equal to those of the Jews (Erdman 543). Bryant’s syncretic mythography is partially indebted to the syncretic history presented in Stukeley’s *Stonehenge* and *Abury*. For example, Bryant footnotes Stukeley during his own discussion of Stonehenge, wherein he grants Stonehenge chronological primacy among the monuments of the world: “I question, whether there be in the world a monument, which is much prior to the celebrated Stone-Henge. There is reason to think
that it was erected by a foreign colony; one of the first, which came into the island” (Bryant 533). Bryant’s claim echoes Stukeley’s own argument that Stonehenge was built by Hebrew colonists that sailed from Phoenicia. Thus, it seems probable that Blake’s apprenticeship to Bashire jumpstarted what E. P. Thompson has called his “quirky interest in Druidism” (198).

Furthermore, evidence in Blake’s own designs suggests that it is at least plausible, if not likely, that Blake could have seen Stukeley’s work in its original form rather than filtered through works like Bryant’s or in digest form, as in Archaeologia. The most oft-cited example from Blake’s work is the megalithic design found on plate 100 of Jerusalem, which bears a striking resemblance to Stukeley’s own reconstruction of the “serpentine temple” at Avebury. Trilithons like those found at Stonehenge also appear in Milton on plates 3(a) and 4. Plate 4 features an enormous trilithon with a man on horseback below. Essick and Viscomi seek to fit this image in with their biographical interpretation of the poem by noting that “the horseman might be Hayley, fond of riding” (21). I contend that the design might just as easily be a convention carried over from the engravings in Stukeley’s Stonehenge. Paley notes that “[i]t is worth remarking that like Fischer von Erlach, Stukeley shows a view of a horse and rider before a great dolmen, and so may have influenced the design on plate 4 of Milton” (“Fourth Face” 193). The rider shows up in Stonehenge more often even than Paley would suggest; no fewer than a dozen of the engravings feature men on horseback. The engraving on Table V of Stonehenge, with its horseman riding in the very midst of the monument, most evokes Milton plate 4. Stukeley’s strategy behind depicting such horsemen appears twofold. Firstly, these horsemen, like all the human figures in these engravings, provide a sense of
scale for the monuments. Second, the juxtaposition of the plates depicting these horsemen among the ruins in eighteenth-century dress with other plates depicting ancient Druids among the same ruins builds a sense of continuity between the ancient Britons and eighteenth-century Englishmen. Stukeley uses this continuity in design to buttress his claims in the text for the politico-religious continuity of Britain from the patriarchal religion of the Druids to the Anglicanism of his own day. For Blake, the design on Milton plate 4 alternately suggests that the errors and oppressiveness of the Druids persist into the present, thereby undermining Stukeley’s own end.

Stukeley’s fascination with the religion of the Druids pervades even his works that do not have the Neolithic British monuments as their central subject. In volume one of *Archaeologia*, Stukeley briefly digresses on the Druids when describing how the Gothic arches of the Sanctuary at Westminster resemble architecture from the Near East:

> The original of all arts is deduced from nature and assuredly the idea of this Arabian arch and slender pillars, is taken from the groves sacred to religion, of which the great patriarch Abraham was the inventor. The present Westminster abbey, and generally our cathedrals, the Temple church, and the like, present us with a true notion of those verdant cathedrals of antiquity; and which our Druids brought from the east into our own island, and practised before the Romans came hither. (40)

This brief passage encapsulates many of the themes that run throughout Stukeley’s antiquarian writings. Stukeley subscribes to a notion of Hebrew originalism in both art and religion, claiming that the arches of the Sanctuary mirror “the groves sacred to religion, of which the great patriarch Abraham was the inventor.” It soon becomes apparent that these sacred groves of Abraham are akin to the oak groves of the Druids, which themselves form the “verdant cathedrals of antiquity” that predate the Roman influence. Thus, monuments like Stonehenge become directly figured as precursors to
Westminster Abby, the church where monarchs are crowned and often buried. However, it is not the Hebrews’—and by extension the Druids’—place as God’s chosen people that grants them this artistic genius; rather, these principles of art can be “deduced from nature.” In *Abury*, Stukeley applies this principle of natural deduction to encompass religion as well in his belief that “the patriarchs had a knowledge of the nature of the deity to be ador’d, subsisting in distinct personalities: which is even deducible from human reason. The Druids had the same knowledge, as appears by their works” (1). Stukeley’s conflation of natural and state religion in works like his description of the Sanctuary feeds directly into Blake’s conflation of the two in his characterization of the Satanic and Druidic threat in *Milton*.

Stukeley zealously⁴ guarded his vision of antiquity and the orthodox faith that informed that image against the attacks of the Deists. Stukeley’s writings during the decade preceding the publication of *Stonehenge* and *Abury* reveal that he positioned himself as a defender of Christian doctrine against its enemies. For example, in an unpublished manuscript dedication from 1732 that Haycock identifies as a dedication to God himself, Stukeley affirms: “To You, My Lord, I desire to dedicate these my labors, who have deserv’d so well of Brittain, who have shown your eminent care and skill in preserving its antiquities; but more, so prudently & zealously protect our most excellent Church against the insolent attacks of atheists, Deists, skeptics, infidels, & all its open and secret enemys” (qtd. in Haycock 10). Two years earlier, in a letter to Roger Gale, 

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⁴ Stukeley’s rhetoric in defense of his idyllic vision of the Druids could occasionally be quite severe. For example, Stukeley’s main rival interpreter of Stonehenge during his lifetime was the architect John Wood, whose *Choir Gaure* was published in 1747. After reading Wood’s book, Stukeley composed a diary entry in which he compares Wood to Satan: “His entrance into this sacred enclosure, seems to me like Satan breaking over the hallowed mound of Paradise with no other than a murderous intent” (*Family Memoirs* III:276).
Stukeley discusses evidence for the Druids’ belief in the Christian Trinity: “My main motive in pursuing this subject is to combat the deists from an unexpected quarter, and to preserve so noble a monument of our ancestors’ piety, I may add, orthodoxy” (Family Memoirs III:266). Both statements place him in opposition to Deism and reveal his belief that the Church of England embodied orthodoxy. They exemplify what Piggott, later joined by Burl and Mortimer, has termed Stukeley’s “religious phase” in opposition to his earlier “scientific phase” prior to his ordination in 1729 (108-109). The surviving manuscripts and letters seem to confirm this thesis. The recently uncovered manuscript of Stonehenge, written soon after Stukeley’s work at Stonehenge from 1721-1724, is virtually devoid of reference to the Druids as proto-Christians when compared with the published version of 1740 (Unpublished Manuscript 1). In the three volume collection of Stukeley’s diaries and letters that was published in the late nineteenth century, the first discussion of Christianity with regard to the Druids appears in a 1730 letter from Roger Gale, who states that he is “extremely rejoiced at your reassuming your design about Abury, & as much pleased with the plan of your theologicall engagements on it” (Family Memoirs, I:235). The first instance of such a discussion from Stukeley himself is the aforementioned desire to “combat the deists,” which appears in his reply to Gale a week later. It is worth noting that, writing much later in 1753, Stukeley claims of himself that “having always a religious turn of mind, & especially loving to go up to the fountain head of things, his chief attention was the work of the Druids, whom he perceived to be of the aboriginal religion,” though his self-assessment is not borne out by the available evidence (Family Memoirs, I:52). Thus, his interest in proving the “orthodoxy” of the Druids as proto-Christians seems inextricably wrapped up in his ordination in 1729. Indeed, Piggott
suggested that at this stage in his career, Stukeley considered himself “the antiquarian champion of orthodoxy” (86).

Stukeley’s view of himself as the champion of orthodoxy implicitly involves a role for himself as champion of the nation as well. One cannot overstate the importance of Protestantism to the notion of British identity in the eighteenth century. As Linda Colley has claimed, “Protestantism was the foundation that made the invention of Great Britain possible” (54). In a nation with an Established Church, the issue of religion, even in an antiquarian context, inevitably becomes an issue of politics. Rosemary Sweet argues that the antiquaries “used their knowledge thus acquired in the law, in politics, and in the church; it informed their sense of identity at both a local and a national level; and it gave them a sense of purpose, a sense of patriotism and a sense of pride” (xv). Moreover, the “most numerous occupational grouping amongst the antiquaries…consisted of the clergymen” (Sweet 49). The antiquarian-pastor provides the historical narrative that legitimizes the state and also acts as “a mediating figure between centre and locality” that is “essential in the network of communication that supported the construction of the eighteenth century state” (Sweet 51). Through these clergymen, “ideologies of political obedience and social deference were inculcated through the pulpit” (Sweet 51). The state is not the sole beneficiary of this relationship, as the “study of antiquities was also a means by which an aspirant clergyman might hop to make a name for himself by venturing into print” (Sweet 54). For example, after the publication of Stonehenge Stukeley received an invitation to deliver a sermon before the House of Commons in 1742 and an invitation to Court to discuss the Druids and their ties to the modern Church of England with Princess Augusta in 1754 (Family Memoirs III:211). Thus, Stukeley, like
many clerical antiquaries, may have been motivated by factors outside of his commitment to orthodoxy when pursuing his antiquarian work.

In his preface to *Stonehenge*, Stukeley issues a statement of purpose for the whole work that exemplifies the ambivalence of his antiquarian work in the context of the debate between natural and revealed religion:

> And seeing a spirit of Scepticism has of late become so fashionable and audacious as to strike at the fundamentals of all revelation, I have endeavoured to trace it back to the fountain of Divinity, whence it flows; and shew that Religion is one system as old as the world, and that it is the Christian religion; that God did not leave the rational part of his creation, like the colony of an ant-hill, with no other guide than instinct, but proportion’d his discoveries to the age of the world, to the learning, wisdom, and experience of it; as a wise parent does now to his children (*Stonehenge* Preface)

On the one hand, he seems to advocate a revealed religion when he identifies the stakes of his project as “the fundamentals of all revelation.” However, the claim that the human race is not merely left with “no other guide than instinct” but rather sees the world by means of “learning, wisdom, and experience” suggests an affinity with an idea of natural religion more akin to a Deistic philosophy. Nevertheless, the image of a God who has “portion’d his discoveries to the age of the world…as a wise parent does now to his children” clearly implies a belief in a God who still actively intervenes in the affairs of the human race and may further imply that Stukeley’s own discoveries are divinely revealed. Even so, within the body of *Stonehenge*, he quickly backs himself into a corner with natural religion marking the only escape route. He seeks to identify the Druids as Christians of fundamentally the same sort as members of the Church of England in the eighteenth century (*Stonehenge* Preface). However, to do so he must confront the fact that the revelation of the Christian New Testament, manifest in the Incarnation of Christ,
occurs at a fixed chronological point in human history that occurs centuries after what he believes to be the dates for the construction of Stonehenge. Ultimately, he reaches further into the past, identifying the Druids as Hebraic migrants from the time of Abraham who “brought along with them the patriarchal religion, which was so extremely like Christianity, that in effect it differ’d only in this; they believed in a Messiah who was to come into the world, as we believe in him that is come” (Stonehenge 2). Though he attempts to reassert his orthodox intent by focusing on the Messiah, he finds himself trying to defend the rather ludicrous position that Druidical patriarchal Christianity is effectively the same as eighteenth century Anglican Christianity save for the minor formality that he proposes, in essence, a Christianity devoid of Christ. Thus, in the span of two pages, Stukeley seems already to have plunged into the very same Deistic trap he sought to avoid.

When not attempting to form his views to historical necessity, Stukeley reveals in some of his other published writings a turn of mind more closely related to the “orthodoxy” and “the fundamentals of all revelation” he claims to profess, especially in his two published sermons. In the first, published in 1742, he discusses first the necessity for weekly Church attendance for the betterment of the individual and the community. In the second, published in 1750, he argues for the supernatural nature of Christ’s miracles. To be fair, this sermon is not devoid of the influence of natural religion. In fact, Stukeley at one point presents the conflict between the power of the devil and the miracles of Christ in explicitly Newtonian terms: “It is agreeable to the philosophy of the natural world, where attraction and repulsion, action and reaction, are the great springs that conserve the mighty frame of the universe” (14). However, in the context of the sermon
as a whole, this comment seems simply out of place since the rest of it is spent not on the
natural but on the explicitly supernatural: “‘Tis degrading the dignity of Christ’s divine
mission, in a high degree, to spirit away the real, historical fact; in thinking it was only a
disease…Those that deny our Savior’s cures to be supernatural, are pronounced
incurable” (Healing of Diseases 8). This attitude is striking, not only because it presents
the type of Christocentric affirmation of supernatural divine intervention largely absent
from Stukeley’s major antiquarian works but also because it displays a close affinity with
the opinion of William Blake on the subject. In his marginalia to Watson’s Apology for
the Bible, Blake writes in 1798:

   Jesus could not do miracles where unbelief hindered hence we must
   conclude that the man who holds miracles to be ceased puts it out of his
   own power to ever witness one. The manner of a miracle being performed
   is in modern times considered as an arbitrary command of the agent upon
   the patient but this is an impossibility not a miracle neither did Jesus ever
   do such a miracle (Erdman 616-617).

Both men affirm a belief that faith in Christ necessarily precedes the appearance of these
miracles. Stukeley goes on to argue that even the absence of exorcisms today stems from
God’s active work in the world. In the time of Christ, God allowed people to be
possessed so that Christ could reveal his glory in the exorcism. Now that Christ is no
longer incarnate on earth, God intervenes actively to keep the demons at bay (Healing of
Diseases 13).

   Ironically, out of all Stukeley’s attempts to assert an orthodoxy for the Druids, the
one argument that he believed would most directly allow him to combat the Deists ends
up becoming arguably his most Deistic argument of all. Indeed, upon the publication of
Abury in 1743, Roger Gale writes to him:
I have read over your Abury very carefully, & with great pleasure, having mett with the greatest satisfaction, I may almost say demonstration, in it, that a subject of that nature is capable of receiving, either as to the architectonical or theological part. I little thought that Dr. Tindall would have a second to prove Christianity as old as the creation, though upon a different bottome & principles. (Family Memoirs III:359)

If his goal was to combat the Deists, Stukeley could not have been encouraged by the comparison, qualified though it may be, to Matthew Tindal, the eminent Deist author whose Christianity as Old as the Creation; or, the Gospel a Republication of the Religion of Nature had been published in 1730 (Haycock 185). To correct his depiction of the patriarchal religion as a Christless Christianity in Stonehenge, Stukeley attempts to insert Christ into prehistory in Abury. First, he argues that the “Jehovah” referred to in the Bible was “not the invisible supreme;” rather, “this Jehovah is no other than the Messiah” (Abury 3). Thus, the earliest migrants to settle in Britain may have carried with them the cultural memory of interaction with Christ in his pre-incarnate form. Moreover, he believed that the megalithic monuments at Avebury constituted proof that the Druids had possessed an understanding of the Trinity, which they had deduced from natural reason (Abury 86-87). Stukeley identifies three orders of Druid temples that correspond to the three persons of the Trinity: circular temples that represent the Father, serpentine temples which represent the Son, and winged temples which represent the Holy Spirit (Abury 9). Because the Druids are capable of deducing the Trinity by reason alone, other civilizations must necessarily be capable of the same. So Stukeley catalogues numerous examples of serpent reverence from other cultures to fortify his argument, a methodological choice that will influence later syncretic mythographers like Jacob Bryant. Of course, he essentially has no choice except to resort to the antiquity of other cultures since the Judeo-Christian tradition, to which he believed the Druids belonged,
does not think highly of serpents. He recognizes that “it looks a little strange, after our
first mother was seduc’d from her innocence, by the devil under this form, that so high a
regard should be paid to it” (Abury 55). Despite this strangeness, Stukeley insists that the
serpent, in relation to Christ, is “A fit emblem of his divinity, thro’ that remarkable
quality of their throwing off old age with their skin, and returning to youth again….A fit
emblem of his resurrection from the dead, and of returning to an immortal life” (Abury
61). Stukeley has managed to work Christ into his vision of ancient Britain, but in order
to do so, he transforms Christ with the imagery typically associated with Satan.

Equally damning is the way Stukeley’s notion of Stonehenge as representative of
the “Mundane Egg” so easily elides into a sort of nature worship. Stukeley saw
Stonehenge itself as the Druids’ attempt to iconographically represent the entirety of
nature as an egg:

> The ancients thought the world of an egg-like shape, and as the world is
> the temple of the Deity, they judged it proper to form their temples, so as
to have a resemblance thereto….So our Druids, as well as he, may mean
> the infinity of nature in the Deity, who made the world, by this scheme of
> Stonehenge; at least they understood by the circle, the seat and residence
> of the Deity, which includes all things. (Stonehenge 25)

Echoes of this image appear in Milton in the form of the “Mundane Egg,” which
represents the material world of time and space, and the “Mundane Shell” of that Egg.
This equation of Stonehenge with the ancient image of the world also appears in Smith’s
Choir Gaur, this time explicitly under the name “Mundane Egg.” Smith reports that
“Pliny, in his natural History, says, this Egg, speaking of the Gaulish Druids, which was
unknown to the rest of the World, was conformed by the scum of a vast multitude of
Serpents twisted and conjured up together” (72). Since, in Blake’s cosmology, the
Mundane Egg represents the world of the physical senses, it would seem only appropriate
that such a world would be the product of a knot of Satanic serpents. While Stukeley’s Druids imagine the egg surrounded by the heavens, Blake’s egg extends “from Zenith to Nadir in midst of Chaos” (34:34) because, in Blake’s mind, the materialistic worldview of empiricists like Newton had given “that false appearance which appears to the reasoner / As of a Globe rolling thro' Voidness” (28:15-16). This false appearance results from the distortions of the microscope and telescope, which “alter / The ratio of the Spectators Organs but leave the Objects untouched” (28:17-18).

Stukeley’s perception of the world as the temple of God similarly proves problematic. Christ uses the destruction of the temple as a metaphor for the resurrection of his body (John 2:19), and in Milton the Bard speaks of “the Human Imagination, / Which is the Divine Body of the Lord Jesus blessed for ever” (2[b]:3-4). Thus, by claiming that the material world is God’s temple, Stukeley and his Druids subvert the power of both Jesus and the human imagination and elevate the material world as a place of and an object of worship. Furthermore, the biblical New Jerusalem will render all physical temples moot because God and the Lamb themselves will act as its temples. John writes in Revelation: “And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it. And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof (Revelation 21:22-23). In Milton, this light becomes internalized, like the body of Christ in the human imagination, such that “Every thing in Eternity shines by its own Internal light” (8*[c]:16). In contrast, Satan and the Druids represent that which is “Opake without Internal light” (8*[c]:20). Satan rages “Opake against the Divine Vision” (7:31), and “the stones, becoming opake, / Hid him from sight in an extreme blackness and
darkness” (7:32-33). The opacity of the stones fits in with the other descriptions of them as shapeless and indefinite, all of which stands in contrast to the necessity of delineation inherent in self-annihilation: “Judge then of thy Own Self: thy Eternal Lineaments explore. / What is Eternal & what Changeable? & what Annihilable? (32*[e]:30-31).

While we have seen that though Stukeley eventually falls into a Deistic mode of thought in his antiquarian writings, he persists in seeing himself as first and foremost an orthodox Anglican. This self-identification as an Anglican profoundly shapes his conception of the Druids, whose affinity with modern Anglicanism he points out whenever such an opportunity should arise. For example, he describes a Druidical “staff, which was commonly carry’d in their hands, one of the insignia of their office, as a pastoral staff of bishops” (Abury 27). He views Abury as “the great cathedral, the chief metropolitical or patriarchal temple of the island” (Abury 40). In turn, he conceives of Stonehenge as a structure embodying both church and state: “Stonehenge was the metropolitical church of the chief Druid of Britain. This was the locus consecratus where they met at some great festivals of the year, as well as to perform some extraordinary sacrifices and religious rites, as to determine causes and civil matters” (Stonehenge 10). The association did not go unnoticed, as evidenced by the 1795 poem “The Old Serpentine Temple of the Druids of Avebury,” written by Charles Lucas, who was then curate of Avebury. Lucas, who begins by literally invoking Stukeley as his muse, contrasts “the venerable Arch-druid” with “[t]he lowly Pastor” in order to lament the decline of British Christianity since the days of the Druids (Lucas 24). Stukeley’s association of the Druids with present day Anglicanism as part of the “same regular and golden chain of Religion to this day” (Stonehenge Preface), and his need to resort to
natural religion to prove that association, allowed Blake to link natural and state religion in *Milton*. Most Deists were concerned with proving that humans were naturally religious creatures rather than with proving the validity of revealed Christianity (Whittaker 146). The Church of England, too, wishing to avoid dissent, began to focus more on ethics, pragmatism, and civic virtue, and, as Whittaker states, “Quietly, the Church of England absorbed the arguments of its Deist opponents and, in so doing, virtually reduced Christianity to morality” (146). It is this reduction of Christianity to morality that Blake locates in both natural and state religion, as divine revelation gets subsumed into an all-encompassing latitudinarianism.

The political implications of Stukeley’s commitment to the Church of England are most fully revealed in the sermon he preached in 1742 before the members of the House of Commons at St. Margaret’s, Westminster, on the subject that “National judgments [are] the consequence of a national profanation of the Sabbath.” The sermon was part of the celebration of the politico-religious feast\(^5\) known as “Martyrdom Day,” which commemorated the regicide of Charles I. Hole explains that Martyrdom Day “had been instituted by Act of Parliament during the reign of Charles II, and the rubric directed that, after the creed, parts of the homily against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion should be read, or the minister should preach a sermon of his own on the same theme” (14). Stukeley chose to deliver a sermon of his own composition, but since the law in essence requires a conservative screed against political dissent, it might not be entirely fair to

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\(^5\) The *Book of Common Prayer* called for four such political feasts in the eighteenth century: Martyrdom Day on January 30 commemorated the regicide of Charles I, Restoration Day on May 29 commemorated the return of Charles II, Gunpowder Day on November 5 commemorated the foiling of the “Gunpowder Plot” to blow up Parliament, and Accession Day commemorated whenever the current monarch acceded to the throne—June 11 (o.s.) for much of Stukeley’s life and October 25 for most of Blake’s life. See Hole pp. 13-14.
extrapolate Stukeley’s personal political beliefs from this one sermon. However, as I will demonstrate shortly, the insistence on both the political and religious importance of the Sabbath that marks Stukeley’s sermon is also characteristic of his assessment of the religion of the Druids. This consistency suggests either that Stukeley held a genuine abiding belief in the importance of the Sabbath, or that early on Stukeley seized upon support for the Sabbath as a means of currying political favor, or perhaps some combination of the two. In any event, it hardly seems a coincidence that Stukeley was invited to preach before the House of Commons in the years between the publication of Stonehenge and Abury, when he was beginning to enjoy particular prominence as an antiquary.

Like his antiquarian writings, Stukeley’s sermon constructs a privileged British identity based on a belief in Hebrew originalism. At the start, Stukeley reads much like Blake in the Milton Preface with his assertion of the greatness of biblical language over classical poetry: “The Hebrew meter (which is the origin of all poetic composition) is not like that of the Greek and Latin, which consists of feet, nor of the Gothic sort, in riming, but is an artificial form of speech, sublime, magnificent, emphatical, and figurative, such as is peculiar and necessary to that kind of writing, and chiefly adapted to religious subjects” (National Judgments 1). Britain has inherited the mantle of Israel as the land of God’s chosen people, for it is “a most powerful nation, which God had been pleased to redeem from the captivity of popery; which he had fenced in, as his own peculiar, with the ocean; which he had blessed with the free exercise of pure religion, governed by the gentle sway of a limited monarchy, abounding with all the comforts of indulgent heaven” (4). However, as heir to Israel’s glories, Britain must be careful to avoid Israel’s
catastrophes. The opening of the sermon focuses on the Book of Lamentations, which tells of “the destruction of their city and temple, the captivity of the people, the murder of their king and princes, and an utter subversion of their whole polity, in church and state” (2). Stukeley directly compares this disaster to the strife and turmoil caused by the English Civil War. Stukeley interprets the war as a punishment from God for failure to adhere as a nation to the Sabbath practice: “National judgments are the necessary consequents of national sins, consequents in a moral and even philosophical sense: as sure as natural causes produce their effects…. [T]he sum of all temporal calamities which can befall a nation, is owing to the neglect of the public profession of religion or national duty of the Sabbath” (6). The rest of the sermon is devoted to demonstrating “the utility and expediency of the Sabbath duty, to peace and good government, to the temporal prosperity of the state; as to the moral obligation thereof, as it may be styled a law of nature” (7).

Stukeley renders the Sabbath as an occasion for sacrifice and atonement, and in the context of Martyrdom Day this notion of atonement takes on both a theological and a political character. In a theological sense, the doctrine of “atonement” understands Christ’s death as a ransom by which Christ in his crucifixion pays off, or redeems, all of the debts of humankind that have been inherited through original sin. Stukeley applies this notion to the political event commemorated on Martyrdom Day: “Let us then in this day of humiliation, with great contrition of heart, with the utmost prostration of mind and body, deprecate that vengeance due to the crimes of our ancestors, and that barbarous murder of the royal martyr, as on this day perpetrated; which our church calls upon us now to make an atonement for” (National Judgments 21). The Sabbath becomes a means
of buying off God’s “vengeance” aimed at Britain for the regicide of Charles I, which is here presented as a political and religious crime, given Charles’ dual role as head of church and state. We can see in Stukeley’s call for the “utmost prostration of mind and body” to placate the Established Church the reflection of Blake’s claim that Satan “Compell'd others to serve him in moral gratitude & submission” (9:11). Moreover, in this context Satan’s “setting himself above all that is called God” (9:12) reflects Stukeley’s claim that “church calls upon us now to make an atonement,” thereby placing itself on high as the arbiter of God’s vengeance.

Blake is able to transfer this Satanic call for moral submission over to his conception of the Druids because Stukeley has, in essence, made the connection for him by discussing the importance of the Druids’ observance of the Sabbath. Stukeley believed that the Sabbath has been a part of the patriarchal religion since its beginning and that it is amenable to natural reason, and in his antiquarian works, he claims that the observance of the Sabbath is inextricably tied to the fate of the nation as a whole. Profanations of the Sabbath are “the sure root of national corruption, the sure presage of national ruin” (*Stonehenge* Preface). While discussion of the Sabbath is relegated to the front matter in *Stonehenge*, Stukeley devotes much more attention to it *Abury*, which was published the year after his sermon to the Commons. Even in the days of the Druids, neglecting the Sabbath is rendered as a political crime, for any “person who secludes himself from his share in this duty, is a rebel and a traitor to the public, and is virtually separated from the blessings of heaven” (*Abury* 6). This conclusion directly echoes his political sermon, in which he argues that any “person who neglects the Sabbath withdraws himself from his share of the blessings, which God continues weekly to dispense toward the nation”
(National Judgments 9). In both Abury and National Judgments, Stukeley decries neglecting the Sabbath as an act of sedition and argues that the person who commits this act “has no real right to [national blessings], as he has not contributed toward them. And tho’ he enjoys these blessings, in common with the other good subjects, yet he is no true subject, but ought to be looked on as an excrescence only of the government” (National Judgments 9). Hole notes that while clergymen generally became more moderate in the beliefs they put forth in such sermons at mid century, by Blake’s day “the sermons became noticeably more conservative and authoritarian. Generally, at least from 1782, they stressed much more than before the rights of government, its divine authority, and the duty of obligation” (51). This more conservative trend carried over to antiquarianism as well, so that by “the end of the century events in Europe conspired to present the preservation of ecclesiastical antiquities as a matter of national importance, and the conservative rhetoric of Church and King fuelled the production of both sermons and antiquarian literature by the clergy” (Sweet 52). Stukeley’s inclusion of the same political thoughts in his antiquarian works legitimizes the Established Church’s and the government’s claim for moral and political submission by presenting such submission as an integral part of British public life since ancient times.

According to Stukeley, the Druid Sabbath took two forms, the ordinary form of invocation and the extraordinary form of sacrifice. On most Sabbaths, the Druids were content with “invoking in the name of Jehovah” which “is a form of speech importing publick worship on Sabbath days: equivalent to our saying, to go to church on Sundays” (Abury 4). When it comes to sacrifice, especially human sacrifice, Stukeley is much more circumspect. Sacrifices are important, for they serve as a means of atoning for ones sins
to God and, as such, were instituted only “at the fall” (*Stonehenge* 34). Though he is quick to downplay the practice, Stukeley does acknowledge the Druids’ association with human sacrifice:

> Indeed, the Druids are accused of human sacrifices. They crucified a man and burnt him on the altar; which seems to be a most extravagant kind of superstition, derived from some extraordinary notices they had of mankind’s redemption: and perhaps from Abraham’s example misunderstood. But as to human sacrifices simply considered, the Romans themselves and all other nations upon earth at times practis’d them. (*Stonehenge* 54)

As Morton Paley points out, “Stukeley provides a view of Stonehenge consistent with Blake’s: that it was the product of a Druid civilization that had links to the patriarchs of the Bible, and that in it human sacrifice was carried out because of the corporeal misinterpretation of allegorical command” (193). Paley refers here to Blake’s claim in the *Descriptive Catalogue* that the Druidical age “began to turn allegoric and mental signification into corporeal command, whereby human sacrifice would have depopulated the whole earth” (Erdman 543). Human sacrifice, then, is a gross misapplication of the belief in atonement by literally paying off one’s debt to God by offering up another person’s life. In *Milton*, Blake seizes on human sacrifice as the ultimate example of Satanic and Druidic oppression, as “Satans Druid sons / Offer the Human Victims throughout all the Earth” (9:7-8).

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6 John Smith takes Stukeley’s antipathy toward the idea of Druidical human sacrifice a step further by attempting to prove empirically that Druids could not have burned anyone on the altar at Stonehenge: “On this altar the Druids offered up the blood only of their sacrifices. Notwithstanding they have been charged by all authors, with offering up human victims, I must beg leave to dissent from them, for the following reason; which is, that this altar will not bear the fire. I tried a fragment of it in a crucible; it soon changed its blueish to an ash color, and, in a stronger fire, was reduced to powder. Very unfit surely for burnt offerings!” (68). Smith seems to have conflated the two modes of sacrifice described in classical sources: disemboweling at the altar and burning in the wicker man. Perhaps he draws from the claim that Stukeley presents here.
From the start of *Milton*, Blake inverts atonement into a curse rather than a blessing. In the invocation, the narrator calls on the Daughters of Beulah to tell of the False Tongue and “of its sacrifices. and / Its offerings; even till Jesus, the image of the Invisible God / Became its prey; a curse, an offering, and an atonement” (1[3]:11-13). Michael Ferber explains how the sacrificial economy of atonement functions: “Rather than sacrifice our Selfhood, which is really only a crust of defensive reactions and myopic perceptions but which seems essential to our life and identity, we usually prefer to sacrifice someone else. Such sacrifice is what Blake calls ‘atonement’” (76). As Blake inverts atonement, he similarly inverts the predestined classes of Calvinism. He associates atonement with the Elect and claims that their calls for atonement prevent them from achieving redemption: “For the Elect cannot be Redeemed, but Created continually / By Offering & Atonement in the cruelties of Moral Law” (f:11-12). The Elect are classed with Satan:

And one must die for another throughout all Eternity.  
Satan is fall’n from his station & never can be redeem’d  
But must be new Created continually moment by moment  
And therefore the Class of Satan shall be calld the Elect (9:18-21)

The redemption promised by atonement is an illusion, since in the absence of forgiveness the sacrifice of another merely perpetuates the cycle of vengeance. When, for example, “Charles calls on Milton for Atonement” (f:39), Milton will not bridge the gulf between them. The fact that “Cromwell is ready” (f:39) suggests that Cromwell may not represent a truly viable alternative but instead will simply answer violence with violence. The Elect grow complacent in their Satanic selfhood, believing that Christ has already ransomed their sins as a scapegoat.
Wright argues for a political understanding of sacrifice because it “is intimately linked, through the neoclassical ideology in which it is an important mechanism, to a violent economy in which, in the most general terms, destruction empowers the destroyer’s clique, not least by establishing a network of sacrificial debt that traps all of the nation’s subjects” (117). We need not limit ourselves to the neoclassical, for as we have seen, the Church is intimately involved in promoting the same ideals outside of the classical context. Moreover, Blake associates this sacrificial economy with the Druids. In Milton’s climactic confrontation with his Spectre, who is “the Covering Cherub & within him Satan,” the narrator reports that “he appeard the Wicker Man of Scandanavia in whom / Jerusalems children consume in flames among the Stars” (37:7, 11). The Wicker Man is a gigantic wooden effigy of a man that was used as a container for mass human sacrifice. The Wicker Man has been associated with the Druids since classical times and has been described by such writers as Strabo and Julius Caesar. Wright’s claim that “Self-sacrifice…binds individuals into an aggregate, linking them…through bonds of duty and obligation rather than affection” (120) takes on corporeal form as men are literally bound together as a human sacrifice in Strabo’s description of the Wicker Man (Aldhouse-Green 67).

Like Stukeley’s call for sacrifice and atonement to ward off God’s vengeance on the nation, the Druids in Caesar’s account use sacrifice in the face of “threatening Distempers, and the imminent Dangers of War” (Caesar 146) The proceedings are overseen by the Druids, whom we might think of as a privileged Elect in ancient British society, to punish the criminal Transgressors on the society. However, in the absence of criminals, the innocent are compelled to take their places. These publically sanctioned
sacrifices are prompted by the belief that “nothing but the Life of Man can atone for the
Life of Man” (Caesar 146) and the innocent must take on the sins of the entire
community. Blake’s association of the Wicker Man with Satan and the Druids, and by
extension with the religious institutions of his own day, sets up those institutions as
perversions of the Body of Christ. Paul writes that “as the body is one, and hath many
members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is
Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:12). In seeming parody of the many parts of Christ’s body, the
victims are bundled into the limbs of the Wicker Man. While in the Body of Christ
“whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26), in the
case of the Wicker Man the Druids inflict suffering on the few to protect the community.
Finally, Paul writes that “Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular” (1
Corinthians 12:27). The victims are all contained within the Wicker Man, but in the Body
of Christ, one is contained within it and contains that body within oneself, as both
member and body, for as Blake reminds us “All deities reside in the human breast”
(Erdman 38).

The image of Milton’s Satanic Specter as the Wicker Man also reflects the
tyrranny and compulsion inherent in the model of Satanic social exchange identified by
“Hillel who is Lucifer.” He and the other Angels of the Divine Presence report having
once been “Druids in Annandale” who were “Compelld to combine into Form by Satan”
(32*[e]:11-12). Though the Angels were able to combine “in Freedom & holy
Brotherhood” and consequently keep a human form, there were others “combind by
Satan’s Tyranny first in the blood of War / And Sacrifice” who take the form of
“Shapeless Rocks / Retaining only Satans Mathematic Holiness Length: Bredth &
Hight” (32*[e]:15-18). This is yet another perverse combination, as Satan’s followers become the very rocks of Satan’s Druid temples. For Stukeley, the shapelessness of Druid rocks proves their affinity with the temple of Solomon. He notes that at Stonehenge, “like the fabric of Solomon’s temple, every stone tally’d; and neither axes nor hammers were heard upon the whole structure” (Stonehenge 5). The claim that Stonehenge and Avebury consist of stones untouched by human tools allows Stukeley to connect them with the patriarchal religion, since atop Mount Sinai, God says “if thou wilt make mee an Altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift vp thy toile vpon it, thou hast polluted it” (Exodus 20:25). For Blake, the shapelessness of the Druid rocks only confirms only the Druids’ oppressive lack of imagination.

This difference in the symbolic value assigned to the Druid rocks is reflected in the two men’s different artistic designs that I discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Stukeley’s drawings always reflect Stonehenge in the brightness of the light of day. One of Stukeley’s plates, depicting ancient Britons among the ruins, is entitled “A Peep into the Sanctum Sanctorum,” which firmly establishes the role of Stonehenge as an important temple. Blake’s plate depicting the lone rider is much more ominous. The landscape is overcast, and the rider is left alone under Satan’s “moony Space / Among the Rocks of Albion’s Temples” (9:6-7). Blake appropriates Stukeley’s notion of the Druids as proto-Anglicans and natural religionists in order to point out the way in which those ideologies continue to enjoy power in his own time. Stukeley’s work lends itself well to such an appropriation, given the way in which he attempts to balance natural religion with his more orthodox theology that remains grounded in a more traditional notion of revealed religion. Ultimately, Blake’s focus on human sacrifice allows him a powerful entry point
for a criticism of the constrictive limits of these religious institutions. It is their influence that one must cast off if one wants to break free of the eternal sacrificial economy to reach out in forgiveness and brotherhood to others.
Chapter 3

“Poems of the Highest Antiquity”: Ancient Truths and a New Age

In response to the oppressive forces of natural and state religion, Blake conceives of a program for change in Milton, which takes the form of Milton’s act of self-annihilation. What starts as an individual action has the potential to spread throughout a society more broadly through inspiration. Self-annihilation is a communicative act, an example for others to follow. Blake hastens the spread of this action through the creation of poetry, another communicative act. Blake draws his model for this spread of action from British antiquity in the form of the prophetic songs of the ancient bards. The ancient truths carried by the bards’ songs engender new creative production that conveys those truths. Thus, liberatory art reveals itself as simultaneously rooted in the past yet striving toward the future, ancient yet new. Blake projects this artistic model onto Los’ construction of the New Jerusalem, such that the presence of Jerusalem constitutes both a return to original liberty and the creation of a new age. Once the apocalypse arrives, the distinctions between past, present, and future will dissolve in favor of the eternal truths that subsist in Jesus, who for Blake constitutes the human imagination.

Blake begins his mental fight against the oppressive forces of Satan and his Druid sons with another figure adapted from British antiquity—the bard. Blake often presents the bards and Druids as opposing forces in his poetry. Eighteenth-century antiquaries also presented the Druids and bards as representative of the priest and poet respectively, though not necessarily in opposition to one another. Generally, the ideological position of the author dictates the manner in which the binary is presented. For example, in a
published letter to James Macpherson, in which he vouches for the authenticity of the poems of Ossian, William Stukeley claims that because of their office as poets rather than priests of the patriarchal religion, “the Bards, the Poets, were an inferior Order to” the Druids (14). Conversely, the radical Deist John Toland elevates the bard as a natural, prophetic figure over the Druid, whom Toland associates with priestcraft and human sacrifice. Given that it is “a common mistake…that the Bards belong’d to the body of Druids,” Toland meticulously distances the bards from the practice of Druid sacrifice, claiming that the bards “made Hymns for the use of the Temples, ‘tis true, and managed the Music there” while the Druids “officiated as Priests, and no sacrifices were offer’d but by their ministry” (29). Emphasizing the bard’s prophetic role, Toland writes that they “were also Poets and cou’d prognosticate certain things, and gave them out in meter….for Bardd was an appellation of all learned men, and professors of Learning, and Prophets” (191). In Milton, Blake seizes upon the prophetic potential of a bard’s song to inspire Milton to undergo his journey of self-annihilation by which he casts off his Satanic and Druidic self.

By invoking the figure of the bard, Blake participates in the larger project of a revolutionary antiquarianism that seeks to return Britain to a more fundamental conception of national identity free from the excesses of church and state. Jon Mee argues that “Blake’s writing and designs pick up and develop the notion of an original liberty, much of it staged around an antagonism between the inspired bard and repressive druid of northern antiquity which maps on to a parallel biblical opposition between prophet and priest” (76). Blake’s association of the bard with an earlier state of original liberty is rooted in eighteenth century poetic conceptions of the Bard, such as the warrior-
poet Ossian and the central figure of Thomas Gray’s “The Bard.” Mee writes that the “conception of the bard shared by Macpherson and Gray drew on the belief that the ancient poets had been intimately involved in the public affairs of their societies” (85). This figure of the political poet—or poetic politico—lent itself well to adoption by anyone seeking poetic expression for an understanding of British national identity. Whittaker notes, for example, that the Ossian poems “fulfilled many of the hopes in the eighteenth century for a nationalist epic” (87). The national identity at issue in these poems, concerned as they were with Scottish and Welsh antiquity respectively, mapped more readily onto an ethnic and regional notion of nationalism that potentially threatened to undermine the emergent construction of a larger British identity.

In any event, the bardic poetry of the eighteenth-century Celtic revival provided an alternative means for the recovery of national identity apart from the work of the antiquarians. Smiles argues that “William Blake’s attitude to the ancient British past may be taken as an extreme example of this imaginative recuperation. His approach to archaic British history is reliant on the bardic tradition, as opposed to antiquarian or historical research. The truth of Celtic literature was, for Blake, a surer guide to the past than the measured historiography of his age” (48). While I agree with the general tenor of this statement, Smiles draws too sharp a distinction between the bardic tradition and antiquarian research. While I have granted that bardic poetry offers an alternative avenue for rehabilitation of the lost past, it is not necessarily opposed to antiquarian research on a fundamental level, either for Blake or for poets and antiquaries more generally. In the previous two chapters of this study, I have shown that Blake sustained an abiding interest in antiquarian research that informed much of his later poetry. Blake did, however, feel
free to manipulate this antiquarian work for his own ends, rather than accept it as simple truth. By the same token, a project like Macpherson’s relies to an extent on antiquarian as well as poetic work. Mee notes that “Macpherson, for instance, went to the Highlands to find the remnants of the canon of Ossian extant in ballads and old manuscripts preserved by popular culture” (112). As we have seen, even more avowedly antiquarian work like that of William Stukeley is not exempt from almost poetic flights of fancy. Stukeley’s idyllic visions of primitive Christian Druids have prompted Stuart Piggott to christen him the “most irresponsibly romantic writer on antiquities” (116).

Both Macpherson’s fabrications and Stukeley’s fanciful religious interpolations highlight the complexity of truth claims in any vision of antiquity. Though bardic poetry and antiquarian research need not be fundamentally opposed, Smiles rightly points out that the two disciplines rested on ostensibly opposite conceptions of truth. While antiquarianism deals in the truth borne out by the discovery and collection of material objects, Blake’s understanding of authenticity is rooted in his poetic understanding of national truths. Thus, in his 1815 annotations to Wordsworth, decades after the initial charges of forgery, Blake maintains, “I Believe both Macpherson & Chatterton, that what they say is Ancient, Is so” (Erdman 665). The Descriptive Catalogue sheds further light on Blake’s counterintuitive conception of the ancient. In his description of The Ancient Britons, Blake casts himself as what we might term a visionary antiquarian, as he conflates his “visionary contemplations” with the material possession of antiquities: “The British Antiquities are now in the Artist’s hands; all his visionary contemplations, relating to his own country and its ancient glory, when it was as it shall be again, the
source of learning and inspiration” (Erdman 542). Blake goes on to identify these antiquities as a set of poems:

Mr. B has in his hands poems of the highest antiquity. Adam was a Druid, and Noah; also Abraham was called to succeed the Druidical age, which had begun to turn allegoric and mental signification into corporeal command, whereby human sacrifice would have depopulated the earth. All these things are written in Eden. The artist is a resident of that happy country; and if every thing goes on as it has begun, the world of vegetation and generation may expect to be opened again to Heaven, through Eden, as it was in the beginning. (Erdman 543)

Under the assumption that these latter three sentences are a description of the poems referred to in the first sentence, it becomes evident that these “poems of the highest antiquity” are in fact Blake’s own poems—namely, Milton and Jerusalem, both of which were in the stages of composition and production in 1809. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Blake’s understanding of the Druidical penchant for human sacrifice here matches the presentation of the Druids in Milton. The association of this renovation of the world with poems written in Eden evokes the invocation of Milton, in which the narrator asks the Daughters of Beulah to enable him to write out all the visions that spring “From out the Portals of [his] Brain where by [their] ministry / The Eternal Great Humanity Divine, planted his Paradise” (1:7-8). Moreover, Milton’s central plot details the way in which the material world is “opened again to Heaven, through Eden, as it was in the beginning” by means of Milton’s reunion with his emanation and the apocalypse that ensues. If we accept that Blake does indeed refer to his own poetry here, we must confront the paradox that these “poems of the highest antiquity” had likely not even been completed yet. Blake’s assertion reveals that his conception of “ancient” is not bound up in the traditional notion of the ancient as an object that survives from the distant past of linear time. Rather, Blake’s poems are ancient inasmuch as they reveal the truths of the
gospel of Jesus that exist from the beginning of time and without time, for, after all, “Antiquity preaches the Gospel of Jesus” (Erdman 543).

However, these ancient truths risk remaining meaningless if they are not effectively communicated to others, for poetry is the process by which vision becomes prophecy. Smiles is right to point out that Blake condemns eighteenth-century historiography because of his belief that bardic literature represents “a surer guide to the past than the measured historiography of his age” (Smiles 48). Nevertheless, we should also keep in mind that Blake conceived these poems, in part, as a history of his own. Once again, in the *Descriptive Catalogue*, Blake refers to one of these poems as the story of the fall of the fourfold man, presumably the giant Albion: “The Artist has written it under inspiration, and will, if God please, publish it; it is voluminous, and contains the ancient history of Britain, and the world of Satan and Adam” (Erdman 543). The particular “voluminous” poem in question here is likely *Jerusalem*, but *Milton* is based on the same thematic principles. As I have argued, Blake’s presentation of the “world of Satan and Adam” in *Milton* derives from his own understanding of the “history of Britain.” Blake conceives of history as a series of actions and the reading of history as an interpretation of those actions by the reader, rather than the historian:

Tell me the Acts, O historian, and leave me to reason upon them as I please; away with your reasoning and your rubbish. All that is not action is not worth reading. Tell me the What; I do not want you to tell me the Why, and the How; I can find that out myself, as well as you can, and I will not be fooled by you into opinions, that you please to impose, to disbelieve what you think improbable or impossible. (Erdman 544).

Blake’s statement here reveals not only his conception of historical narrative but also his expectations for his readership. Blake himself comes off as both an antagonistic reader and an active one. The fact that Blake expects such an intense level of engagement from
readers may suggest a partial rationale for his continued implementation of a deliberately obscure mythic system of his own devising. The juxtaposition of familiar figures from ancient British history and Judeo-Christian salvation history with Blake’s own mythic figures confronts readers with a challenge to read, interpret, and understand these familiar figures in new, often disorienting ways.

Moreover, Milton is marked by many actions, including the creation of the poem itself. For the poem’s narrator, the poem is more than a visionary experience—it is a call to action. The production of the poem constitutes the narrator’s response to this call, as he invokes his muses, the Daughters of Beulah: “Come into my hand / By your mild power; descending down the Nerves of my right arm / From out the Portals of my Brain” (1:5-7). The narrator’s focus on the nerves of his arm foregrounds the particular emphasis he places on the physical action of creating the poem. He then tells the Daughters to “Say first! what mov’d Milton” (1:16). Here the physical and the emotional unite, as Milton is first emotionally “moved,” or inspired to undertake the physical movement required of his journey back into the material world. This invocation deliberately mirrors the opening of Paradise Lost, only to ultimately invert its narrative. In Book I of Paradise Lost, Milton tells his muse, the Holy Spirit:

…say first what cause
Mov’d our Grand Parents in that happy State,
Favor’d of Heav’n so highly, to fall off
From thir Creator […]? (I:29-32)

The answer, of course, is “Th’infernal serpent” (I:34). Milton focuses on the cause and eventual ramifications of Adam and Eve’s fall from Paradise. He stresses the separation this creates between the couple and their creator, a separation that for a time will be
mirrored in the rift that develops between Adam and Eve themselves. Blake deliberately toys with a number of these motifs at the start of Milton:

Say first! what mov'd Milton, who walk'd about in Eternity
One hundred years, pondring the intricate mazes of Providence
Unhappy tho in heav'n, he obey'd, he murmur'd not. he was silent
Viewing his Sixfold Emanation scatter'd thro' the deep
In torment! To go into the deep her to redeem & himself perish?
What cause at length mov'd Milton to this unexampled deed?
A Bards prophetic Song! (1:16-22)

While *Paradise Lost* centers on Adam and Eve’s fall from the “happy State,” Blake portrays Milton as “Unhappy tho in heav’n.” Adam and Eve’s fall from innocence to experience is mirrored by Milton’s literal descent from heaven to earth. However, Blake inverts the values assigned to these downward journeys. Adam and Eve’s fall sows discord and disunion both between the couple themselves and between the couple and God. Conversely, Milton’s journey is marked by a culminating union, as he goes “into the deep” in order to reunite with his female Emanation. Adam and Eve’s original sin, itself a perverse “unexampled deed,” binds humankind with the shackles of sin; whereas, Milton’s “unexampled deed” of self-annihilation initiates the redemption of humankind that eradicates such errors. Blake’s answer to the poem’s initial question sets up the influence of the Bard as a counter to the influence of Satan: the effects of Satan’s words of temptation are undone by the Bard’s song of inspiration. Given Blake’s persistent association of Satan with the Druids, it is all too appropriate that Blake marshals the ancient British poet to combat the ancient British priests.

One cannot discuss Blake’s use of the Bardic figure without examining it in the context of Thomas Gray’s “The Bard,” a poem which Blake illustrated in watercolors and which served as the inspiration for one of the paintings in his Exhibition of 1809. Smiles
notes that “however extensive antiquarian interest in Celtic society and culture may have been before the mid eighteenth century, it is nonetheless true that the publication in 1757 of Thomas Gray’s ode *The Bard* was one of the most important stimuli to a more widespread public understanding of archaic Britain, and a begetter of that interest in all things Celtic now known as the Celtic revival” (47-48). Much of the poem consists of the impassioned speech of the last remaining Welsh bard, as he curses the destructive wars of Edward I. The bard takes on powerful prophetic and political connotations. From the very first line, the bard spews vitriol against the invading monarch: “Ruin seize thee, ruthless king” (1). He “with a master’s hand, and prophet’s fire / struck the deep sorrows of his lyre” (21-22). The bard’s last song, fueled by this prophetic fire, conveys a political prophecy, namely the eventual end of Edward’s line. The poem takes on a nationalist tone, as the bard calls on his fellow Welshmen to defend their land. The deaths of the Welsh warriors are simultaneously figured as the death of the nation itself, as “[y]e died amidst your dying country’s cries” (42). However, the political vindication called for in the prophecy only comes about when the Welsh Tudors ascend to the throne, hailed as “genuine kings, Britannia’s issue,” to the British throne (110). Thus, the oppressive institution remains in place, but with the consolation of a Welshman on the throne. The poem ends with the bard, relishing in the prophecy of the king’s future demise, jumping to his death before the kings eyes:

[“] Be thine Despair, and scept’red Care,
To triumph, and to die, are mine.”
He spoke, and headlong from the mountain’s height
Deep in the roaring tide he plung’d to endless night. (141-144)

This conclusion of triumph in suicide drew the ire of some critics in Gray’s time. Samuel Johnson, for example, claims that he did “not see that *The Bard* promotes any truth,
moral or political” (767). Johnson notes that “the ode might have concluded with an action of better example: but suicide is always to be had without expense of thought” (768). Blake, however, seems to have appreciated the poem and selected it as the subject for one of his paintings in the Exhibition of 1809. His commentary on it in the Descriptive Catalogue reveals his endorsement of the poem’s triumphant tone, as both “King Edward and his Queen Elanor are prostrated, with their horses, at the foot of a rock on which the Bard stands; prostrated by the terrors of his harp” (Erdman 542). With regard to the final lines of “The Bard,” Whittaker notes that “Blake seems to have overlooked the sinister implications in such exhortations to die for one’s country, perhaps because he identified so strongly with the poet’s self-destructive act” (82).

Because of the potential for the type of “sinister implications” Whittaker describes as inherent in the poetic act of self-destruction, Wright points out that Blake is particularly careful to distinguish the liberatory act of self-annihilation from the act of self-sacrifice for the benefit of the state. According to Wright, self-annihilation “is entirely personal; it is the individual’s destruction of selfhood for the good of that individual” (120). What she terms “self-sacrifice,” on the other hand, “posits a social system of exchange in which ‘one must die for another,’ demanding the destruction of the self for a good that the sacrificed individual cannot realize but [that] someone who has not abnegated selfhood can realize through a national economy” (Wright 120). I agree with Wright’s claim that Blake eschews this latter notion of self-sacrifice, which he associates with the theological doctrine of atonement and renders perverse in the form of Druidic human sacrifice. However, I contend that Wright draws too fine a distinction between the individual and the social in the case of self-annihilation. A more extreme
version of this distinction can be found in the work of Morton Paley, who seems to assume that self and society are to an extent mutually exclusive. Speculating upon the reason for Blake’s decision to scale *Milton* down to two books rather than twelve, Paley posits that “[t]hese difficulties suggest Blake’s realization in *Milton* that he had promised apocalypse and millennium in history but had delivered them only within the self” (*Apocalypse* 90). I contend that such a distinction between the social sphere and the sphere of selfhood is necessarily false, as Saree Makdisi nicely points out: “the work of salvation in Blake’s prophecies is at once abstract and metaphorical and awfully and crudely material” (164). Blake’s caption to the full-plate design on plate 15 announces the goal “To Annihilate the Self-hood of Deceit & False Forgiveness” (15). Thus, the self is here defined by the way in which one relates to others, and self-annihilation is thereby rendered as a transformation in one’s behavior such that one embraces truth and true forgiveness. Though self-annihilation may seem “entirely personal,” it has the potential to be a communicative act that inspires others to the same end. A chain reaction of such a self-apocalypse within a group of people will bring about a societal apocalypse.

Indeed, the Bard’s association with prophecy brings these political ramifications to the fore. A prophet is inherently a political as well as a religious figure. The prophet represents his people before God and, in turn, represents God before his people. Moreover, the prophet cannot enact change single-handedly; rather, he must call out for the masses to change as well. Even if he cries out alone in the wilderness; he does not cry out for himself, but in service of others. This political role lent the figure of the bard tremendous power as a nationalist symbol for both poet and antiquary alike. Katie Trumpener argues that nationalist antiquaries saw themselves “carrying on this bardic
protest, albeit in a less dramatic register” through their antiquarian work: “if the bards of old hung up their harps, refusing to play for their captors, present-day nationalist antiquaries are determined to deliver over no piece of their cultural legacy without fully cataloging where it came from and making clear what it meant for it to be wrenched from its original circumstances” (8). Even this type of regional and ethnic nationalism, which presents itself as staunchly anti-imperial, is subject to the potential for “sinister implications.” Trumpener explains that these nationalists in their foregrounding ethnic and regional ties willfully ignored inequality brought about by class discrimination within their own groups. Thus, these “cultural nationalisms of late-eighteenth century Scotland, Ireland, and Wales served as an important prototype for nineteenth-century nationalist movements throughout Europe, not least in their populist attempts to invoke a united people without giving unsettling attention to the differences of status and privilege within the nation” (30). The important question for Milton, then, is not the issue of whether or not the chain of bardic inspiration at work in the poem is political, for the bardic figure inherently invites a political interpretation. Rather, we must concern ourselves with whose politics are being served in the poem.

Trumpener characterizes these nationalist antiquaries, such as and Welshman Edward Jones, as primarily concerned with recapturing a lost vision of the national past, a concern she views as opposed to the Enlightenment obsession with progress. She explains that “if the Enlightenment impulse is scientific—an attempt to expand, by experiment and catalog, the scope of the knowable world—the nationalist project is recuperative” (Trumpener 30). These “nationalist improvers wanted a future in which a relationship to the past, damaged or severed by colonial rule, could be repaired, a future
in which a history of cultural achievements was at once honored, preserved, and rejoined” (Trumpener 30). Though Makdisi also views Blake’s work as a response to empire, his explanation of Blake’s project dissociates Blake from this antiquarian desire to recuperate the past. For Makdisi, “Blake’s critique of the Universal Empire comes partly as a reflection on—though not an appeal to return to—the bygone days of a lost ‘innocence,’ days before the onset of industrialization and the reorganization and reproduction of space into the modernity we now ‘experience’” (161). Makdisi particularly distances Blake from an antiquarian project by pointing out that “Blake’s project—and Los’s—was not to excavate the fallen Jerusalem in order to return to it, but rather to construct the redemptive space of a new Jerusalem out of the nightmare of the present day ‘mind-forg’d manacles’ in the space of London” (169). Though I will argue later in this chapter that Makdisi underestimates Blake’s engagement with the past, his distinction here between excavation and construction is apt, for Blake is far too invested in the importance of artistic creation to pursue a future that is a mere carbon copy of the past.

However, the Jerusalem of Milton is not constructed of brick and mortar; rather, it is a “building of human souls” (4:19). This conception of Jerusalem constitutes an inversion of the symbolism associated with Satan, who is “A ruind Man: a ruind building of God not made with hands” (39:15). Satan, ruined and artless, opposes the construction of a new city made from the souls of the very people he has relished in oppressing. This notion of a city constructed of many souls underscores the insufficiency of the annihilation of oneself alone, for many must annihilate themselves in order to build the New Jerusalem. Thus, the artistic creation involved in the construction of the city is
figured as the process of bringing people together, a theme that persists throughout the poem. Though much of the poem’s action centers on its eponymous hero, the fact remains that no one in Milton succeeds alone; the main narrative is carried through when numerous characters combine and mutually benefit one another as they bring about the apocalypse together.

The Bard’s prophetic song is the initial spark that triggers this chain reaction. I have already shown how the invocation identifies this Bard’s song as the impetus for Milton’s journey to earth; I add that the Bard claims divine inspiration for his song. Those seated around the tables of Eternity, aside from Milton himself, doubt the veracity of the Bard’s song, to which the Bard offers a rebuke:

The Bard replied. I am Inspired! I know it is Truth! for I Sing
According to the inspiration of the Poetic Genius
Who is the eternal all-protecting Divine Humanity
To whom be Glory & Power & Dominion Evermore Amen (11:52-12:3)

The Bard paraphrases the doxology that closes the Lord’s Prayer in a manner that deemphasizes God the Father in favor of the “Divine Humanity” as the source of the Bard’s inspiration. Milton’s internalization of the Bard’s divine message takes literal form as he opens his bosom to shelter the Bard himself, as “[t]he loud voic’d Bard terrify’d took refuge in Miltons bosom” (12:9). This exchange between the two figures is cast as mutually beneficial. On the one hand, the Bard seeks and finds shelter from those who would oppose his inspired message. Milton, who up until this point had been wandering aimlessly and unhappily through eternity, receives a new sense of purpose, which he underscores by announcing his intention in a triple “I will” statement: “I will arise and look forth for the morning of the grave. / I will go down to the sepulcher to see if morning breaks! / I will go down to self annihilation and eternal death” (12:20-22).
Milton’s decision to enter into generation at the behest of this Bard’s divine message will have ramifications in our natural world. Thus, the chain reaction initiated by the Bard’s song bears out Blake’s belief that “every Natural Effect has a Spiritual Cause, and Not / A Natural: for a Natural Cause only seems, it is a Delusion / Of Ulro: & a ratio of the perishing Vegetable Memory” (25[26]:44-46). The action of Milton offers a direct challenge to the Newtonians and the natural religionists, who believe that all causes can be empirically observed within the natural world. Blake asserts the power of prophetic religion over natural religion, as inspiration trumps observation.

Moreover, this incident with Milton and the Bard underscores the fact that any successful communicative act necessarily requires two individuals to have their hearts open, one to perform the act and another to comprehend it. Only because Milton opens himself, in this case both literally and figuratively, to the Bard’s song does he avoid falling into the same doubt that plagues the other Eternals. Throughout the poem, there appear several misunderstandings of the Bard’s Song, which reinforce the notion that the prophet’s song cannot accomplish its work alone. It is only after Los’ family, fearing that he will set Orc free from his chain, drives Milton into the Ulro that they “[know] too late / That it was Milton the Awakener! they had not heard the Bard. / Whose song calld Milton to the attempt” (20[19]:32-34). Due to this insufficiency of the song alone, the poem places an emphasis on the importance of written text for conveying meaning. Blake presents writing dialectically, as a potential force for both liberation and enslavement. For example, the Shadowy Female explains that she has woven a garment of “dire sufferings poverty pain & woe / Along the rocky Island & thence throughout the whole earth” (17[d]:8-9). She details the importance of writing for inflicting this woe on others:
I will have Writings written all over it in Human Words
That every Infant that is born upon the Earth shall read
And get by rote as a task of a life of sixty years
I will have Kings inwoven upon it. & Councellors & Mighty Men (17[d]:12-15)

She characterizes these writings as “Human Words,” which in this case emphasizes the limited nature of their message in contrast to the “Divine Revelation in the Litteral expression” that characterizes the garment of Jesus (45[44]:14). These “Human Words” are the laws perpetuated by the “Kings…Councellors & Mighty Men” who oppress their citizens as soon as they leave the womb. The fact that these state laws oppress from cradle to grave may give them the appearance of a “natural law” to those citizens who can only view them from within the system.

To combat this oppressive writing with inspired and liberatory writing, both Milton and the narrator are presented not only as prophets but also more particularly as writers. While on his journey through the material realm, Milton “saw the Cruelties of Ulro, and he wrote them down / In iron tablets” (16:9-10). Along the same line, Milton’s daughters “wrote in thunder and smoke and fire / His dictate” (16:13-14). These lines appear to describe the composition of Paradise Lost, and Essick and Viscomi are inclined to see that Blake here associates writing in “thunder and smoke and fire” with “Blake’s own etching methods, both in actual practice and as imaged as a devilish process in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” (Essick and Viscomi 145). In particular, Milton’s inscribing of the tale of hellish Ulro in iron tablets echoes Blake’s own engravings about Ulro in the form of the metal plates of Milton itself. As was the case with the Bard and Milton, the relationship between Milton and the narrator is cast as mutually beneficial. As Milton sheltered the Bard, the narrator carries Milton within him after Milton descends
upon the narrator in the form of a falling star, “And on [the narrator’s] left foot falling on
the tarsus, entered there” (14:49). As numerous critics have noted, “tarsus” here evokes
Saul of Tarsus, later known as St. Paul, who converted to Christianity after being struck
by a blinding vision of Christ while on the road to Damascus (Essick and Viscomi 143).
Paul then travelled the Roman world, spreading the call to action in Christ and writing the
Epistles that make up much of the latter part of the New Testament. By the same token,
the narrator’s union with Milton initiates a journey that culminates in his authorship of
Milton, which serves as an epistle that calls its audience to spread the gospel of
brotherhood and forgiveness.

Another union follows, which results in the fourfold figure of the Bard contained
within Milton, who is contained within the narrator, who now unites with Los. Los, a
mythic figure of Blake’s own creation, is identified as “the Spirit of Prophecy the ever
apparent Elias” (23:71). Elias, the Greek name given to the Hebrew prophet “Elijah,” is
perhaps the most important of the Old Testament prophets. Moreover, the Old Testament
foretells that Elijah will return to earth before the coming of the apocalypse (Malachi
4:5). Blake cultivates the association with Elijah in the famous lyric that appears in the
Preface, as that lyric’s speaker calls out, “Bring me my Chariot of fire!” (2:38). This line
alludes to the ascension of Elijah, when “there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of
fire… and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven” (2 Kings 2:11). The lyric speaker
envisions this chariot—and its attendant prophetic associations—as the vehicle by which
he will wage the “Mental Fight” that will bring about the promised “New Age” for
society at large (2:4, 39). Los fulfills this vehicular function when he whisks the narrator,
carrying Milton and the Bard within him, from Lambeth to Felpham:
For when Los joined with me he took me in his fiery whirlwind
My Vegetated portion was hurried from Lambeths shades
He set me down in Felphams Vale & prepar'd a beautiful
Cottage for me that in three years I might write all these Visions
To display Natures cruel holiness: the deceits of Natural Religion
(36:21-25)

The narrator conceives of his poem as his own means of “Mental Fight” insofar as it will reveal to others the lies of Natural Religion, a religious system associated throughout *Milton* with Satan and his Druid sons. Since the Bard’s tale of Satan’s fall prompted Milton to recognize Satan in his selfhood, the narrator here similarly emphasizes nature’s cruelty and deceit in the hopes that his readers will recognize the delusions of the material senses. The narrator’s resolve to record his visions mirrors Blake’s own understanding of his poetic work while at Felpham, where he conceived his grand plan for *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. In a letter to Thomas Butts, dated April 25, 1803, Blake writes: “But none can know the acts of my three years Slumber on the banks of the Ocean unless he has seen them in the Spirit or unless he should read My long Poem descriptive of those Acts” (Erdman 728). Again, we can see that Blake conceives of his poem as a catalogue not only of visions but of acts. Significantly, he reveals here that he believes his poetry can stand in for firsthand spiritual visions. Blake’s poetry takes up the mantle of bardic prophecy by engendering in others those inspiring visions that lead to self-annihilation and apocalypse.

By functioning as inspirational prophecy, such poetry aids in Los’ arduous task of building a New Jerusalem out of a union of human souls, for there is a direct connection between the Poetic Moment and the moment in which Ololon descends to unite with Milton upon his self-annihilation. In *Milton*, Blake reconceptualizes time such that all six-thousand years are contained within the span of a moment, which is defined in terms
of the pulsation of an artery. Thus, the line between the creation of poetry and the
creation of the world becomes blurred, “For in this Period the Poets Work is Done: and
all the Great / Events of Time start forth & are conceived in such a Period / Within a
Moment: a Pulsation of the Artery” (28:1-3). Indeed, the poetic creation of the
imagination can inspire the creation of the New Age within the larger world, the natural
effect of the spiritual cause. Blake’s model underscores the importance of creative and
communicative acts, for time is not presented merely as a period of waiting for Jesus to
return and put an end to history. Rather, every day contains a moment that allows for
potential change:

There is a Moment in each Day that Satan cannot find
Nor can his Watch Fiends find it, but the Industrious find
This Moment & it multiply, & when it once is found
It renovates every Moment of the Day if rightly placed
In this Moment Ololon descended to Los & Enitharmon (35:42-46)

Those “Industrious” souls labor poetically in order to multiply the single moment by
spreading the inspired message of their poetry to others. Thus, this moment of Milton’s
self-annihilation in constituted as the purification both of poetry and of the larger society
of Albion from its politico-religious evils. When he finally casts off his Satanic spectre in
the poem’s climactic moment, Milton announces:

I come in Self-annihilation & the grandeur of Inspiration
To cast off Rational Demonstration by Faith in the Saviour
To cast off the rotten rags of Memory by Inspiration
To cast off Bacon. Locke & Newton from Albion’s covering
To take off his filthy garments & clothe him with Imagination
To cast aside from Poetry, all that is not Inspiration (44[43]:2-7)

This passage is part of a long speech by Milton that reveals that the forces that Milton
casts out from his selfhood are those same forces that Blake believes plague the nation, as
I have argued in the preceding chapters of this study. The state is implicated, as these
menaces are figured as one “[w]ho creeps into State Government like a caterpillar to destroy” (44[43]:11). Much more of the passage is devoted to the oppressive system of natural religion, which is rooted in “Rational Demonstration” and the materialist philosophies that derive from the works of “Bacon. Locke & Netwen” as opposed to “Faith in the Saviour,” which is rooted in direct inspiration. Poetry, as the conduit that spreads inspiration from one person to another, must therefore be purified of “all that is not Inspiration.”

Milton’s “unexampled deed” of self-annihilation initiates the final set of combinations in the poem. Milton and Ololeon join with the Angels of the Divine Presence to become “One Man Jesus the Saviour” (45[44]:11), after which Jesus enters into Albion’s bosom so that Albion may awaken. In my previous chapter, I discussed Satan’s appearance as the Wicker Man, a wooden body whose members are made up of sacrificial victims. By contrast, Milton’s act of self-annihilation transforms him into a part of the body of Jesus, thereby reversing the perverse Satanic and Druidic practice of sacrifice as a means for atonement. Around the limbs of Jesus’ now manifest body appear “The Clouds of Ololeon folded as a Garment dipped in blood / Written within & without in woven letters: & the Writing / Is the Divine Revelation in the Litteral expression (45[44]:12-14). Jesus’ garment, which Essick and Viscomi argue represents the flesh and blood body that Jesus assumes on earth, directly contrasts the earlier garment woven by the Shadowy Female (Essick and Viscomi 210). Whereas the Shadowy Female’s garment betokens the imprisonment and slavery inherent in submitting oneself to laws made up of merely “Human Words,” Jesus’ garment reveals “the Divine Revelation in the Litteral expression.” Presenting Jesus as covered with the written text of the divine revelation
associates him with the “Sublime / of the Bible” (2:3-4) that Blake so zealously defends in the Preface and casts Jesus himself as the ultimate source of liberatory writing—pure inspiration, pure imagination, pure poetry. The Bard’s Song tells us of “the Human Imagination / Which is the Divine Body of the Lord Jesus, blessed forever” (2[b]:4). The Imagination subsists in everyone; therefore, Jesus subsists in everyone. True poetry, a product of the Imagination, calls out to everyone to cast off the encrusted selfhood of the material world in order to become one in Jesus, so that we are “just & true to our own Imaginations, those Worlds / of Eternity in which we shall live for ever; in / Jesus our Lord” (2:24-26). Blake’s notion of the “Divine Humanity” overturns the orthodox understanding of the union between God and human, which imagines the incarnation of Jesus as a single, historical event. However, for Blake, there exists a poetic moment in each day that can renovate all others, ensuring that this union with Jesus is always possible.

However, given Jesus’ final union with Albion, which is of course another name for the island of Britain, one might reasonably wonder whether the eternal salvation promised in Milton is for all people or whether the New Jerusalem built “In Englands green & pleasant Land” (2:42) will be for the chosen nation of England alone. Makdisi notes that Blake’s later prophecies contain “a considerable degree (to say the very least) of anglocentrism” (171). Indeed, Julia Wright understands the poem primarily in terms of a “national renovation” (128). In this reading, the purification that Milton himself undergoes through self-annihilation reflects the purification of the nationalist ideology being used to hold the nation together. Her transference of the poem’s ramifications for individuals to the national level necessarily relies on the speech of Hillel who is Lucifer:
We are not Individuals but States: Combinations of Individuals

But the Divine Humanity & Mercy gave us a Human Form Divine
Because we were combind in Freedom & Holy Brotherhood
While those combined by Satan’s Tyranny first in the blood of War
And Sacrifice & next. in Chains of imprisonment: are Shapeless Rocks
(32*[e]:10, 14-17)

Though the word “state” here is typically taken to refer to some sort of “state of mind” or
“state of being,” Wright contends that “state” can and should be understood on multiple
levels, including the political. Even if Blake is not using “state” in the precise
Westphalian sense, there remains a social dimension of the states in Milton, given that
they are “Combinations of Individuals.” We can consider, then, nationalism as at least
one potential means of combining individuals socially. In this context, we may see the
two forms of combination presented by Hillel (Lucifer) as contrasting forms of national
cohesion. On the one hand, there is the cohesion that results from brotherhood and
forgiveness, exemplified here by the Angels of the Divine Presence, who eventually
come to form the Body of Jesus. On the other hand, there is the compulsive cohesion
enforced by the oppressive forces of Satan, which I have argued are representative of
natural and state religion.

These two conflicting senses of nationalism undergird Makdisi’s notion that
Blake’s vision constitutes an “anti-imperial imperialism” (172). Makdisi persuasively
shows how Blake, throughout his later poems, uses the geography of London to represent
the entire world, such that “London is the spatial representation of the experience of the
Universal Empire of modernizing capitalism; a process that was, in Blake’s vision,
gradually reterritorializing and transforming the globe” (157). By subsuming the entire
world into the space of London, Blake skirts the line of participating in “an imperial and
almost missionary-like conflation of the destiny of various colonial peoples with those of England itself” (171). Even so, Makdisi ultimately argues that Blake focuses on the extent of this oppressive Universal Empire, centered in London, in order to illustrate how the Empire ultimately becomes turned back upon itself. Thus “[b]y chaining the ‘nations’ and peoples of humankind together, according to [Blake’s] vision, the Universal Empire has united them. They can now turn that Empire’s most powerful and oppressive features against it in order to free themselves and each other” (Makdisi 171). In light of the speech of Hillel (Lucifer), the vision presented in *Milton* shows that those combined by Satan’s tyranny have the potential to use their combined social strength to cast off the Satanic selfhood and combine anew in forgiveness and brotherhood. In *Milton*, this conflict is figured politically and religiously. Satan oppresses with missionary zeal, sending out his minions whose “stony Druid Temples overspread the Island white” (4:20). Like Makdisi’s Universal Empire, Satan binds the material world together “Till All Things become One Great Satan” (40:1). Satan oppresses with his natural and moral law, represented in terms of orthodox morality as “the four iron pillars of Satans Throne / (Temperance, Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, the four pillars of tyranny)” (28:48-49). Milton casts off Satan’s “Rational Demonstration by Faith in the Saviour” (44[43]:3), whose body is the Imagination. Thus, if any prominence of place is to be won for Britain in this poem, it is as an exemplar of self-annihilation for other peoples throughout the earth.

However, I part ways with Makdisi when it comes to understanding the way in which Blake presents the process of building the New Jerusalem. Recall Makdisi’s claim that “Blake’s project—and Los’s—was not to excavate the fallen Jerusalem in order to
return to it, but rather to construct the redemptive space of a new Jerusalem out of the nightmare of the present day ‘mind-forg’d manacles’ in the space of London” (169). Makdisi’s focus on the “nightmare of the present” causes him to underestimate the presence of the past. While it is true that Los’ project is not a straightforward excavation, his New Jerusalem rather significantly rests on the ruins of the old for its foundation. Despite Makdisi’s claim that Blake does not desire a return to a prior lost innocence, the rise of the New Jerusalem is specifically conceived as a return in the Bard’s Song. The Bard sings of “Lambeths Vale / Where Jerusalems foundations began; where they were laid in ruins” and implores Jerusalem to “Return: return to Lambeths Vale O building of human souls” (4:15, 19).

In this vision of a Jerusalem that is simultaneously ancient and new, we can finally come to understand how Blake could present his own new poems as “poems of the highest antiquity.” From the very start of Milton, Blake’s social vision includes both a sense of newness and a recognition of the importance of the ancient. In the “New Age” foretold in the Preface, “those Grand / Works of the more ancient & consciously & profesi- / sedly Inspired Men, will hold their proper rank” (2:5-7). Of particular importance here is the association of antiquity with inspiration. Blake’s own poetry becomes ancient as it is professedly inspired. It is impregnated with the eternal truths of brotherhood and forgiveness, the gospel of Jesus, which endure from antiquity through to the present day and on into the future. Moreover, this paradoxical ancient newness ultimately reveals the way in which past, present, and future are mere functions of the material sense that fade in the face of Eternity, a fact that is revealed through prophecy, as Los says: “But all remain: every fabric of Six Thousand Years / Remains permanent:
tho’ on the Earth where Satan / Fell and was cut off all things vanish & are seen no more
/ They vanish not from me and mine” (21[20]:20-24). Thus, while the antiquary seeks to recover things once thought vanished, the prophet calls others to recognize the eternal truths that endure in Jesus, which one care share with others through the work of the Imagination.

For Blake, the bards and prophets are the conveyors of these eternal truths. In the various unions of Milton’s characters, Blake traces the union of the British and Hebraic traditions through the importance of prophecy to the respective traditions. The poem’s main chain of combinations begins with the Bard, a figure of British antiquity, and ends with Los, whose fiery whirlwind associates him with the biblical prophet Elijah. The bard, as figured both in the works of nationalist antiquaries and in the works of poets like Gray, provides an appropriate exemplar for Blake’s notion of self-annihilation. First, bards sing the praises of a community’s ancestors’ exemplary deeds. Second, bards traditionally seek self-destruction rather than face the prospect of conforming to an oppressive regime. Blake’s rendering of self-annihilation encompasses both of these bardic aspects. The destruction of the self frees one from enslavement to Satan. Furthermore, the act of self-annihilation sings out, as a bard upon a harp, proclaiming the glories of what had hitherto been an “unexampled deed.”
Conclusion

“The Great Harvest & Vintage of the Nations”

This study has aimed to show that Blake’s reflections on the ancient past in *Milton* also constitute a critique of the present and contain a hope for the future. Though Blake reaches toward the infinite, the vision he presents of the hope for the future remains limited. The poem anticipates the apocalypse, but the narrator’s vision—and consequently, the poem—ends before this final horizon can be reached. I have argued throughout that *Milton* presents a political as well as a religious vision. Because the poem ends with the culmination of the preparation for the Messiah’s return, thereby stopping short of a vision of the final harvest and vintage, we cannot see what sort of more perfect society, if any, will succeed our present world. Blake does, however, maintain the political aspect of his critique by foregrounding the importance of human agency in bringing about this apocalypse.

Jon Mee helpfully explains the distinction between “pre-millennialism” and “post-millennialism,” which to an extent “revolves around Christ’s role” (36). On the one hand, pre-millennialism involves “a desire for a sudden and apocalyptic transformation of the temporal world by divine intervention” (Mee 36). Thus, anyone “who foresaw a radical discontinuity believed Christ would precede the Millennium and act as the primary agent of transformation” (Mee 36-37). By contrast, post-millennialism “stresses the continuity between the world as it is and shall be” by “representing the Millennium as a progressive improvement” (Mee 36). For these believers, “the Second Coming followed the Millennium; it marked the final dissolution of the human achievement rather than its
commencement” (Mee 37). *Milton* muddies the distinction between the two, in part because Blake does not draw as fine a distinction between the divine and the human. Jesus arrives at the end of the poem before the initiation of the final harvest and vintage, but his appearance and embodiment appear contingent on the actions of the human characters’ working in concert, as Milton is roused to action by the Bard’s song and is carried to his reunion with Ololon by the narrator. Moreover, Jesus’ appearance on earth occurs only after the combination of Milton with Ololon and the Angels of the Divine Presence; thus, his body is made up of these other characters. However, Jesus subsists within these characters, working within them, but not compelling them, toward their combination through self-annihilation. That which a person would recognize as his or her self is a false form encrusted on the spirit by the work of Satan. Once one has willfully annihilated this self, all that remains is that piece which forms part of the larger body of Christ.

Though this emphasis on the willful actions of humans in bringing about the return of the Messiah would seem to tend toward a post-millennial view, Blake’s conceptualization of time in *Milton* once again complicates the distinction. His conception of the poetic moment militates against any notion of “the Millennium as a progressive improvement.” Blake’s vision of apocalypse entails the regeneration of an ancient past that is still in touch with eternal truths. This model rejects the Enlightenment emphasis on progress that attends this notion of gradual social improvement. Moreover, the poetic moment does not allow for the renovation of the world only at a single moment that is the peak of a progressive historical climb; rather, the poetic moment can be seized at any time by those capable of finding and building upon it. Blake claims that “There is a
Blake’s messianism and his reconceptualization of time can be usefully viewed through the work of twentieth-century theorist Walter Benjamin. Benjamin’s bases his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” on his understanding of the dialectical relationship between theology and historical materialism, reflecting the dual influence of Jewish mysticism and Marxism upon his thought. In this text and in the brief “Theologico-Political Fragment,” Benjamin explores the implications of the Messianic for the contemporary world. During the wait for the approaching Messiah, the “order of the profane should be erected on the idea of happiness” (Benjamin Reflections 312). This happiness is brought about by the liberation of oppressed peoples. Benjamin augments the call for present political change with an insistence on the importance of the past. These past images of oppression provide an essential impetus for change in the present because both the working class’s “hatred” and its “spirit of sacrifice” are “nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren” (Illuminations 260). For Benjamin, these images of enslaved ancestors inspire a weak messianism, in which there “is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim” (Illuminations 254). The generation of the present uses its weak messianic power to fight against the passive continuation of the tradition that risks “becoming a tool of the ruling classes” and has contributed through its silence to the destruction of the oppressed
because only “the historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins” (Illuminations 255).

By the same token, the series of liberatory communicative acts that make up the central narrative of Milton involves figures from different points throughout history. Aside from the eternal Los, each character in the chain offers shelter and aid to the character that came before him. The narrator, who writes in the poet’s present day, houses and carries Milton, who has spent the last one-hundred years in heaven. Milton, in turn, provides refuge for the ancient Bard in his bosom. Both Milton and the narrator use their poetry to reveal the nature of oppression. Milton, for example, “saw the Cruelties of Ulro, and he wrote them down” (16:9). The narrator announces his intention “[t]o display Nature’s cruel holiness: the deceits of Natural Religion” (36:25). The Bard’s focus on the story of Satan’s past transgressions in eternity provides the impetus for Milton’s journey to self-annihilation. Los’ anticipation of the apocalypse is fueled by anger at the treatment of the oppressed: “Los listens to the Cry of the Poor Man: his Cloud / Over London in volume terrific, low bended in anger” (46[45]:34-35). By crafting the poem as political critique, Blake ultimately makes a claim on our own weak messianic power as well. Since oppression and cruelty still exist in our own time, Milton makes a claim upon us to annihilate our own selfhoods as part of the larger project of spiritual regeneration.

Benjamin’s messianism also relies on an alternative understanding of time. Time as we typically conceive of it is nothing more than “homogenous, empty time” that moves forward continually and without meaning (Illuminations 261). In contrast, Messianic time “comprises the entire history of mankind in an enormous abridgment,”
fulfilling this eternal present and investing it with meaning (Illuminations 263). Only after redemption does the past become fully intelligible: “To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments” (Illuminations 254). This emphasis on the past does not deprive the future of value. Benjamin cites the example of the Jews, who he argues were instructed in remembrance. The future maintains value for them because “every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter. (Illuminations 264). Engagement with the past is still possible prior to redemption, and a sincere engagement with the past is necessary to avoid the forgetfulness that characterizes a notion of progress oriented only toward the future: “For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irrevocably” (Benjamin 255).

However, Blake understands how this engagement with the past remains open to manipulation and can be used to solidify the forces of oppression rather than combat them. The work of someone like Stukeley, for example, treats the past as the concern of the present in order to buttress those institutions that, in Blake’s opinion, contribute to political and religious oppression. Blake responds by presenting his poems as documents of antiquity, holding on to the image of primitive liberty embodied by the Bard in order to stake a claim for its importance to the present. The Bard is both a prophet and a poet, and it is in poetry that Blake sees the opportunity for Messianic fulfillment. Benjamin’s claim that the Messiah may enter through any moment is matched by Blake’s claim that there is a moment in every day that can be seized and used to renovate all other moments. The distinction is that while Benjamin’s Messiah chooses the moment of his arrival
independent of human work, for Blake self-annihilation and poetic creation are acts of the human will.

The final question I would like to entertain is whether the final harvest and vintage renders issues of national identity or even human history moot. After all, this final image would seem to suggest that the borders between the nations are going to be broken like the skins of grapes so that everyone and everything within will meld into one. Even if all do meld into one in Jesus at the end of time, Blake suggests that human history endures. Los reminds us: “But all remain: every fabric of Six Thousand Years / Remains permanent: tho’ on the Earth where Satan / Fell and was cut off all things vanish & are seen no more / They vanish not from me and mine” (21[20]:20-24). The passage of history and the passage of time are an illusion of the material senses, and nothing ever completely disappears. The ultimate affirmation of human history occurs at the poem’s close when Christ invests every moment of human history with meaning by taking history itself—“the Woof of Six Thousand Years”—as his garment (45[44]:15).
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