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# Milton, A Poem (The Illuminated Books Of William Blake, Volume 5)



## Synopsis

The core of William Blake's vision, his greatness as one of the British Romantics, is most fully expressed in his Illuminated Books, masterworks of art and text intertwined and mutually enriching. Made possible by recent advances in printing and reproduction technology, the publication of new editions of Jerusalem and Songs of Innocence and of Experience in 1991 was a major publishing event. Now these two volumes are followed by The Early Illuminated Books and Milton, A Poem. The books in both volumes are reproduced from the best available copies of Blake's originals and in faithfulness and accuracy match the acclaimed standards set by Jerusalem and Songs. These two volumes are uniform in format and binding with the first two volumes. The Early Illuminated Books comprises All Religions Are One and There Is No Natural Religion; Thel; Marriage of Heaven and Hell; and Visions of the Daughters of Albion. Milton, A Poem, second only to Jerusalem in extent and ambition, is accompanied by Laocon, The Ghost of Abel, and On Homer's Poetry.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

David Bindman is Durning-Lawrence Professor of the History of Art at University College, London.

Robert N. Essick and Joseph Viscomi are Professors of English at, respectively, University of

California at Riverside and University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

This is a beautiful book. Blake's illuminated works are spectacular, and Milton is one of the most

impressive. The production values are every high, and the supplementary materials--the introduction, the commentary, the letter press text and the scholarly apparatus that goes with it--are invaluable. I will use this edition when I teach this poem in the future.

corresponds to the description even though it is fairly expensive

The editors of this great work recognize its difficulties and that it is usually only the domain of specialists. They have filled to volume it commentary, notes, and helps to try and help the general reader to penetrate aspects of this extended poem / lyric / myth. The style is so personal to Blake and so unlike any other writer's style that it is hard for most of us to make sense of what each character means in any instance. A further difficulty is that there really isn't a narrative path or plot or much to help the reader move from one moment to the next. Blake had a view of reality has so multi-layered with each being having simultaneous multiple identities and manifestations that our normal way of viewing reality is quite useless. The plates are beautifully reproduced with wonderful coloring and great images. It is a poem you can tackle as you wish, but plan on spending a lot of time thinking about it before it yields much to you. For those readers who love Blake this is a great volume to add to your collection.

Try as I might, I haven't come up with the blend of radical individualism thwarted by universal awareness which would make this kind of book an intellectual treat for most people. I have read the poems by William Blake (just a few thousand lines, really) that are in this book before, and I even compared the abridged copy of his poems which I've had for years with a complete text from the library to discover what I could about the process of selection. Most of this is still a big mystery to a lot of people, and buying this book was my first attempt to get the whole picture of what a lot of professors might think about a single work, which is printed on plates numbered 1, then 1 to 8, 8\*, 9 to 32, 32\*, 33 to 46, then a Preface, copy B, plate 2, and even a plate f, followed by variations of the pictures which were on plate 13 and other Supplementary Illustrations. I had some trouble making out words on the colored plates, so the most educational part of the book for me is the printed text with notes from pages 111 to 217. Milton is a great figure in English literature, and the great poems which place Satan and God in a struggle that makes Adam and Eve seem like minor characters are the intellectual context for Blake's effort to write a poem using Milton to write about things that minor characters wouldn't even want to talk about. Things don't really start happening for me until plate 12, "According to the inspiration of the Poetic Genius/Who is the eternal all-protecting Divine

Humanity" that Milton actually rose up and said, "I go to Eternal Death!" Don't expect to meet anyone saying such things on our streets. This attempt to be instructive in the art of self-annihilation produces one of the great intellectual puzzles of eternal questions, which attempt not to apply to a particular place and time. My appreciation of John Milton and William Blake is more concerned with their ideas than with artistic techniques. The importance of Blake was suggested, more than it was demonstrated, by Theodore Roszak in *THE MAKING OF A COUNTER CULTURE*, Chapter VIII, "Eyes of Flesh, Eyes of Fire," which observes that a "perfectly sensible interpretation . . . would tell us, for example, that the poet Blake, under the influence of Swedenborgian mysticism, developed a style based on esoteric visionary correspondences . . . Etc. Etc. Footnote." (Roszak, p. 239). What really impressed me was the intellectual context established in the Bibliographical Notes, at the end of *THE MAKING OF A COUNTER CULTURE*, which states, "Anything Blake ever wrote seems supremely relevant to the search for alternative realities." (p. 302). The radical element of that thought needs to be understood in a way that affirms the religious significance of what Blake was trying to accomplish, and other scholars might overlook how this search in Blake's work might oppose their own assumptions about our cultural inheritance. Harold Bloom, in *BLAKE'S APOCALYPSE*, (1963, shortly before the radical part of the sixties) said "The dark Satanic Mills have nothing to do with industrialism, but" poetically pick the most common example for why those who are bored might want to complain of "The same dull round, even of a universe, would soon become a mill with complicated wheels." (Bloom, p. 305). There are a lot of names to explain, as Bloom does in his book, and the scholars employed by Tate Gallery Publications for the production of this book display an extraordinary amount of work on this project for that purpose, and the intellectual puzzles are what remains mysterious even after learning what knowledge is available. At the heart of the poem, "Milton," is the question of what such a character might mean to William Blake, and how, long after Milton's death, he might be of some use. A lot of works have been written to give an author the opportunity to say something that he wouldn't have otherwise had a chance to say, and this book seems to be one of the unique cases of a work which tries to say something that no one else is saying. Instead of treating Milton like anyone who had been dead for more than a hundred years, the treatment of Milton's thought also supposes that it exists through an "Emanation, Sixfold presumably because he had three wives and three daughters." (Bloom, p. 308). Bloom thinks this book is a result of "a complex relation of responsibility to what he has made, though his creation is in torment because scattered through the creation." (p. 308). After John Milton had become blind, his wives and daughters represented a tremendous portion of his remaining contact with the world. Walter Kaufmann, in *LIFE AT THE LIMITS*, considered a sonnet by the blind Milton

about a dream in which one of his wives, who had died, was seen by him "Brought back to me like Alcestis from the grave." The reality expressed in the final line of that poem, "I wak'd, she fled, and day brought back my night," seemed to Kaufmann to be "the most powerful last line of any English short poem." (LIFE AT THE LIMITS, p. 75). Blake approached this situation, in which picturing another person might be considered the strongest link with any reality, with what modern readers might consider an unctuously religious picture on plate 15, with the caption (explained on p. 139 with, "The giving up of selfhood to achieve a more inclusive sense of self is essential for the artist to create" which isn't so scary if it is only applied to artists and monks): "To annihilate the Self-[there is a foot here in the picture]-hood of Deceit & False Forgiveness." Then plate 16 starts with "In those three females whom his Wives, & those three whom his Daughters/Had represented and containd. that they might be resume'd / By giving up of Selfhood:" This poetic division of a single poet into six male-female relationships is the most surprising thing in the poem, for me. Trying to apply it to religion states a much more radical understanding of what religion has to offer than most people expect if they merely go to church, which seems to be one of Roszak's points about how our culture accepts religion by making it strictly mainstream, totally "God Bless America" as the most popular current phrase goes. Much of the scholarship on the creation of Blake's large works notes how uncommercial it was in Blake's day, as "Hayley discouraged him from anything other than 'the meer drudgery of business' (p. 14)" and this book tries to make that picture perfectly clear. In one of the few small works at the end of this book, Blake complained: The Classics, it is the Classics! / & not Goths nor Monks, that / Desolate Europe with Wars. (p. 264) I feel the same way, complaining about some books, but Blake assumed a society in which people were actually being taught things like a Platonic belief in forms, and the Classics were a large element of what seemed bad to him. He might have felt differently if he ever had a chance to observe our formless void, where any claim to wisdom is highly suspect. We can only look the other way.

I hate Blake. He and his Zoas and Los can go suck the ample breasts of Albion's emanation Jerusalem. At least Joyce (the only other person I know with this personal mythology splattered out for everyone) had a sense of humor. This guy, though. Nevertheless, the illustrations are something, and there is something in the poem, I don't know exactly what it is (nor does anyone else, regardless of how convoluted and esoteric their arguments), but I'm convinced that in order to understand the least bit of these poems, you must read them all. Study them, in fact. The notes in this version are very good, and the extra illustrations are great, particularly the painting of Adam and Eve discovering Abel with Cain running off covering his newly marked forehead. Also, there is a

large Lagoon, undoubtedly Blake's best thing. (I don't want to call it a poem, painting, or even "work" for some reason).

Princeton University Press has thoroughly impressed me with this series. Using higher quality paper than I've ever seen in publishing, along with an unheard-of \*six\* color printing process, they have reproduced the colors like never before. In addition to the color plates, a full reprint of the text is included in typescript, as well as informed and thoughtful commentary. Well done! Too bad the hardback is out of print (or was at the time of this review).

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