

IN THE NAME OF GOD

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**Milton's *Paradise Lost* and its Pictorial
Representation in 18th, 19th and the 20th Centuries**

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REPRESENTATIONS IN THE 18TH, 19TH AND THE 20TH
CENTURIES

BY:
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Abstract

Milton's *Paradise Lost* and its Pictorial Representation in 18th, 19th and the 20th Centuries

By:

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This project goes to the domain of Comparative Literature based on Henry Remak's definition and its objective is to show the relationship between poetry and painting and the way they can influence each other. Poetry and painting, since a long time ago—since the time of Aristotle and Horace—have been juxtaposed so that the different qualities of each would be clarified and comprehensible in comparison with the other. Lessing, the art critic, is the first to theorize the relationship between poetry and painting in the 18th century. He believes that the difference between poetry and painting has to do with the different potentials of the two fields. Poetry, has at its disposal, the element of time and painting, the element of space; therefore, poetry is capable of chronological narration of events, but painting, if it is to be effective, should choose to depict the most telling moment, the moment in which action reaches its acme.

Paradise Lost written by Milton, the 17th century poet, is one of the masterpieces of epic poetry that has haunted the imagination of many painters in different centuries. This poem has been on the one hand, inspired by Bible's story and on the other hand, has been the source of inspiration for poets and artists who came after it. To put it another way, the story of the loss of paradise has been the source of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the poem has been the source of William Blake, John Martin's and Carlotta Petrina's illustrations that are going to be discussed in this research. These painters, influenced by the time and place and the social, political and economic milieu, present a time specific version of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The choice of specific scenes to illustrate, the magnification of one character and the minimizing of another or the total deletion of one or more aspects of the story, are all justifiable if put in the proper context in which the text has been created.

Table of Contents

Content	Page
Chapter one:Introduction	1
1-1-Reception of Milton's <i>Paradise Lost</i> through Paintings....	5
1-2-The Objectives of Study.....	8
1-3-The Significance of Study.....	9
1-4-The Scope of Study.....	14
1-5-The Literature Review.....	14
1-6-The Organization.....	21
Chapter Two: Conceptual Framework and	
Methodology	19
2-1-Origins of New Historicism.....	23
2-2-Key Terms.....	30
2-2-1-Context	30
2-2-2-Text.....	31
2-2-3-Power.....	31
2-2-4-Ideology	31
2-2-5-Subversion/ Containment.....	31
2-2-6-History	32
2-2-7-Discourse.....	35
2-2-8-Audience Reception Theory.....	36
2-3-Drawbacks of New Historicism.....	37

Chapter Three: The Image of God in Milton's

<i>Paradise Lost</i>	39
3-1-Milton's Absolutist God.....	39
3-2-Discourse of Determinism.....	42
3-2-1-Puritan Providentialism.....	43
3-2-2-Mechanism.....	44
3-2-The Discourse of Individual Autonomous Agency.....	45
3-2-1-Vitalism.....	45
3-2-2-Popular Sovereignty.....	46
3-2-3-Free Trade.....	47
3-2-4-Blood Circulation.....	48
3-3-Opposing Discourses in Milton's <i>Paradise Lost</i>	49
3-4-Conclusion.....	55

Chapter Four: William Blake's, John Martin's and

Carlotta Petrina's <i>Paradise Lost</i>	57
4-1-Blake's Christ Centric <i>Paradise Lost</i>	57
4-1-1-The Discourse of Apocalypse.....	57
4-1-2-The Discourse of Revolutionary Debates.....	60
4-1-3-The Discourse of Patriotism.....	62
4-1-4-Blake's Son, a Conservative Messiah.....	65
4-1-5-Conclusion.....	77
4-2-John Martin's <i>Paradise Lost</i> , Starring Science.....	77
4-2-1-The Discourse of Utilitarianism.....	78
4-2-2-The Discourse of Civilizing Mission.....	80
4-2-3-The Discourse of Scientific Progress	82
4-2-4-The Discourse of Struggle for Existence.....	85

4-2-5-John Martin's <i>Paradise Lost</i> , a Consolidating Text.....	86
4-2-6-Conclusion.....	95
4-3-Carlotta Petrina's <i>Paradise Lost</i> , Gender Roles Reconsidered.....	95
4-3-1-The Discourse of Art.....	97
4-3-2-The Discourse of Body Aesthetics.....	100
4-3-3-The Discourse of Anti-Bourgeoisie.....	101
4-3-4-The Discourse of Misogyny.....	103
4-3-5-The Discourse of Gender Roles.....	103
4-3-6-The Discourse of Ruralization.....	105
4-3-7-Petrina's <i>Paradise Lost</i> , a Subversive Text.....	106
4-3-8-conclusion.....	115
Chapter five:Conclusion	117
Works Cited	133
Appendix	148
Title Page and Abstraction in Persian	

List of Figures

Figures	Page
Figure 1. Blake's <i>Satan Calling his Legions</i>	149
Figure 2. Blake's <i>The Son Offers to Redeem Mankind</i>	150
Figure 3. Blake's <i>Satan Watching Adam and Eve</i>	151
Figure 4. Blake's <i>Temptation and Fall of Eve</i>	152
Figure 5. Blake's <i>Raphael Warns Adam and Eve</i>	153
Figure 6. Blake's <i>The Casting of the Rebel Angels</i>	154
Figure 7. Blake's <i>The Creation of Eve</i>	155
Figure 8. Martin's <i>Through Eden thir Solitary Way they took..</i>	156
Figure 9. Martin's <i>Expulsion Scene</i>	157
Figure 10. Martin's <i>The Country of Iguanodon</i>	158
Figure 11. Martin's <i>Raphael's Visit</i>	159
Figure 12. Martin's <i>Satan Exalted</i>	160
Figure 13. Martin's <i>Fall of Nineveh</i>	161
Figure 14. Petrina's <i>Raphael's Visit to Adam and Eve in Eden</i> ...	162
Figure 15. Petrina's <i>The Son Riding the Chariot of Paternal Deity</i>	163
Figure 16. Petrina's <i>Expulsion</i>	164
Figure 17. Blake's <i>Expulsion from Eden</i>	165
Figure 18. Petrina's <i>Fall</i>	166
Figure 19. Fuseli's <i>Nightmare</i>	167

1-Introduction

1-1- Reception of Milton's *Paradise Lost* through Paintings

Milton's reputation was low during the Restoration period: he was briefly imprisoned for being a Cromwellian notable. On his release, he dictated his epic, *Paradise Lost* which is a coded account of the defeat of the English Commonwealth, and prophesies the fall of the Stuarts and the reintroduction of a republican state. Keith Staveland (1987) believes that Milton's epic is the "analogue to the history" of the English "Puritan commonwealth *par excellence*" because it brilliantly evokes English Puritanism's failure to resolve the very issues of authority and power which it had itself raised. Puritanism's destructive "antinomian and Arminian contradictions" are thus embodied by Milton's portrayal of the relationship between Adam and Eve and his characterization of Satan (52).

Milton who wants to "justify the ways of god to man" (*PL* 1:26) views Satan as an evil figure who combines Charles I, and his eldest son, with some of the worst features of Oliver Cromwell in his last phase as Protector. The slender hopes of national rebirth that Milton cherished were erased forever by the Restoration in May 1660; and the depth of Milton's despair may be gauged by *Paradise Lost*, a poem originally planned to honor a restored Paradise in England. Milton's *Paradise Lost* has been interpreted differently by different critics. The

dynamic interpretation of the text of Milton's poem can be traced in the illustrations of the poem.

At the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century there appears a great vogue to align poetry with visual representations. The signs of painting and visual representation in fact contribute heavily to the narrative and participate fully in the production of meaning. Book illustrations interpret what is already a representation in language in the form of printed words. Painters are involved in an ongoing negotiation with the poem they are illustrating, grasping its message and at the same time adding the flavor of their own reading to the verbal text. Therefore, book illustrations are not mere decorations added to a literary work to find a good market for the published book. Visual images, one can say, are themselves windows instead of window dressing particularly in an illustrated book. Book illustrations are an editorial and interpretive apparatus, opening new horizons to the readers of the book. Maria Nikolajeva(2000), Professor of Comparative Literature at Stockholm University finds the examination of the word/image interaction, "so rich and so promising in its ability to penetrate and unlock the intricacies" of the message intended to be conveyed to the reader (238).

Paradise Lost was actually rediscovered in the 18th century by the Romantic poets and has continued to inspire poets, painters and writers up to the present time. *Paradise Lost* was greatly alluded to and rewritten in an innovative way by many poets and pictured by many artists of the time. The poem has undergone different interpretations through the passage of time. To critics of different ages, *Paradise Lost* has offered fresh raw materials, with which they can tackle to reach new

depths; that is, every period has looked at *Paradise Lost* through different lenses fashionable at that time.

Commentary on the poem is not limited to verbal criticism. Painters and engravers have produced ample criticism on the poem through their art. Having haunted the imagination of artists of different times and places, the myth of *Paradise Lost* has assumed different appearances in the works of different artists. The poem, one can say, has been the scenario, the painters are the directors and the social and political milieu in which the painters live, provide the setting in which the scenario has been directed. Accordingly, particular aspects of the poem are highlighted to emphasize the milieu-bound requirements. The protagonists and antagonists change places, the human figures are subjugated to the paradisaical setting in one version and domineering in another; e.g. Eve has a proud erect posture in one scene and tragically broken in another. The artist sometimes emphasizes the power of Satan, sometimes that of the deities and sometimes that of Adam and Eve. All these different versions are made under the influence of the discursive practices of the time during which the artist, as an interpreter, has lived.

In the late 18th century Romantic poets and painters considered Milton their revolutionary mentor and obsessively alluded to him and his poems through their works. William Blake illustrated Milton's *Paradise Lost* in 1807 and 1808. Living at a time when French revolution promised liberty and freedom from age-old political bondages and witnessing the Napoleonic wars intended to spread the message of revolution to all European countries by force, Blake had much in common with Milton, the disillusioned revolutionary.

Wittreich(1975) points out that Blake's "sympathies were with Milton's political ideology, not the theology of a poem like *Paradise Lost*" (151). Kimmelman(2001) counts "Milton's political radicalism, his advocacy of freedom of speech, and his endorsement of the right to divorce" as his appealing qualities to which Blake is attracted (E.2:31). Blake's lifelong concern with Milton involves both love and hate; Blake rejects the Puritan morality of Milton who claims that "the pleasure of sexes arose from the fall"(qtd. in Hagstrum, 124). Therefore, Blake's illustrations of *Paradise Lost* seem to critically revise, or furnish commentary on certain spiritual or moral aspects of the poem. They show the mentality of the British people and its changes at the time of and after the French Revolution.

1-2-The Objectives of the Study

The researcher aims to explore Milton's dialogue with his age and reveal the integration of scientific, religious, and political discourses of his time. Milton is concerned with the question of agency during his life and after the restoration chooses to favor an absolutist mode of government. Next, the researcher looks at three artists' illustrations of *Paradise Lost*. William Blake shows his occupation with the notion of Messianism that burgeoned with the fervor of the French Revolution. French revolution cherished the ideas of change, reform and rejection of old rules and rulers in favor of a more humanistic notion of society. Blake's reading of *Paradise Lost*, being a Christ centric one, depicts the Son as the hero of *Paradise Lost*. The second illustrator, John Martin

depicts the industrial society of the 19th century England. Living at a time when science was considered by people to be a vital phenomenon in every day life, Martin maneuvers on the triumphs of science. The last illustrator is Carlotta Pettrina, the American female illustrator of *Paradise Lost* who illustrated the poem in 1930s, in Italy during the reign of fascism. Fascism, as patriarchal system, tried to relegate women to their traditional role as fertile reproducers of human beings. Pettrina reacts to this system by her depiction of a feminine Adam and a melting Eve whose body cannot be mistaken for the ideals of feminine body advertised by fascist aesthetics.

To understand the differences between the mood of *Paradise Lost* the poem and its illustrations, and also the differing tone between the illustrations themselves one should put each of them in its historical context. Analyzing the poem, along with its illustrations, located in their historical context, shows that there is no single meaning for any work of art. Meaning is not fixed but discovered. Therefore, this study is going to historicize Milton's *Paradise Lost* and its illustrations, produced by William Blake, John Martin and Carlotta Petrina to show how the social and political milieu of each era creeps into the poet's mind and his treatment of the story of the fall, and into the artists' interpretation of the poem.

The objectives of this research are many folded. First, it tries to come up with a New Historical reading of Milton's "Paradise Lost; second, it discusses the reception of *Paradise Lost*" from the time of its inception to 20th century; third, it investigates its relation with painting as a kind of

interpretation. To the knowledge of the researcher, no such study has been done before.

1-3- The Significance of the Study

The ongoing comparison of the sister arts in the 18th century recommends an assessment of the works of the artists reading and interpreting literary texts. The comparison started from Aristotle and Horace. From Aristotle originates the most influential idea of the renaissance, the humanistic theory and *ut picturia poesis*: the imitation of idealized nature in art. Horace's correlation between poetry and drawing is relevant because it can be applied to painting by close association. He observes that successful poets know their objects by observing them as an artist would observe a live model, and/or experiencing them, as a poet experiences the spoken word. The main objective of Renaissance artists and art critics who promoted the theory of *ut pictoria poesis* was to raise painting to the status of liberal art by comparing it to the art of poetry.

The idea can be divided into two elements: the first being the importance of classic or conventional formal elements in poetry and painting and the second being the importance of scholarship in poetry and painting. Although there was a much stronger emphasis on scholarship, an attempt was made by some to compare their formal similarities. Some critics discuss Aristotle's parallel of plot and words in poetry to design and color in painting.

The importance of formal qualities and techniques to the artist, whether the same in painting and poetry or not, ties together poetry and

painting in a similar goal. The second and more important idea was the question of scholarship that encouraged painters to study past and contemporary poetry, history, theology and philosophy. This idea was especially important because it ensured that once painting had established itself as a liberal art, it would remain a liberal art.

The theorists of how a painter should be educated at the eighteenth century inform the practice of book illustration because they reveal a free interplay between the visual and verbal arts. John Dryden for example, in the preface to his translation of *Du Fresnoys' de arte graphica*, recommends several books and authors that painters should read for ideas, including "the Bible, Homer, Milton, Virgil, Spenser and Godwin's roman antiquities"(qtd. in Rosand 530). Jonathon Richardson likewise advises that painters should read the best books such as Homer, Milton, Virgil, Spenser, Thucydides, Livy, Plutarch, but chiefly the wholly scriptures. The education of painter, Richardson notes, should be no different from the poet:

to paint a history a man aught to have the main qualities of a good historian and something more; he must yet go higher, and have the talent requisite to a good poet; the rules for the conduct of a picture being much the same with those to be observed in writing a poem...he must be furnished with a vast stock of poetical, as well as historical learning (Qtd. in Rosand 535).

Importantly Richardson's insistence on common rules between poetry and painting implies that a history painting is a literary text, he does in fact later characterize painting as a "kind of writing" (ibid. 536). The reading curricula recommended by Dryden and Richardson for

history painters imply that book illustrators should be close readers of texts.

The humanistic theory of arts which started from the renaissance prevailed through 17th century but was challenged during the 18th century by the ever growing influence of the treatise of Longinus' *on the sublime* that emphasized the doctrine of original genius as necessary to attain sublimity and greatness, hence refusing to conform to the old traditions. Another danger to the doctrine *ut picturia poesis* was the growing interest in external nature meant to contrast the freshness and irresponsible freedom of outside nature with the limited, custom-bound life of the people.

At the root of the sister arts tradition, as was mentioned before, is a debate contending for the superiority of one art over the other. The debate originated in the Italian renaissance theorists to confer on painting the dignity and prestige of poetry by using the ideas from ancient rhetoric and poetics. The proponents of painting claimed it to possess an educative force and a power of moral persuasion equal to or surpassing that of poetry. The advocates of poetry on the other hand, continued to insist upon poetry's superior ability to engage the mind in a process of intellectual and spiritual growth. By the eighteenth century all the contending theorists reached an agreement on the dependency of each art upon the techniques intrinsic to the other. The poet could admire the moral force inherent in painting's visual immediacy; the painter could envy the narrative stretch and conceptual subtlety of verse. This affirmation of the interdependency of the sister arts assumed that one art form need not be ranked above the other.

Hence, in the 18th century, critics actually managed to appropriate the renaissance doctrine of *ut pictura poesis*. Ruskin, for example, holds that both painting and poetry are expressive arts: "Painting is properly to be opposed to *speaking* or *writing*, but not to *poetry*. Both painting and speaking are methods of expression" (qtd. in Landow 521). Reynolds, another 18th century art critic, equates painting and poetry as far as their commonalities are concerned: "There are ... intellectual qualities and dispositions which the painter can satisfy and effect as powerfully as the poet; among those we may reckon our love of novelty, variety, and contrast"(146). In the 18th century therefore, painting finally established itself as equal if not superior to poetry. Imagination, as an image making ability in the 18th century, makes the allegiance of the two arts a symbiotic relationship.

In the 20th century, the comparison of sister arts goes to the domain of Comparative Literature which is defined by Henry Remak as follows:

Comparative Literature is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of relationships between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts (e.g., painting, sculpture, architecture, music), philosophy, history, the social sciences (e.g., politics, economics, sociology), the sciences, religion, etc. on the other hand. In brief, it is the comparison of one literature with another or others, and the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression (qtd. in Stallknecht_Frenz 1).

Literature, like any other cultural production, does not and cannot exist in vacuum. One has to put it within its context and its relation to other arts. This is as rewarding a study as that of the relationship between

his time in his narration of a sequence of events (Stallknecht *and* Frenz 156).

The main significance of this research lies in its interdisciplinarity, a major trend in modern literary studies. It is a new reading of PL in the sense that it uses painting, as an art, to demonstrate not only the different readings of PL but its influence on the artists of the generations to come.

1-4-The Scope of Study

The scope of this study contains a literary work, *Paradise Lost* and paintings/illustrations by William Blake(1757-1827), John Martin(1789-1854), who are both British, and Carlotta Petrina (1901-1997), who was American but lived in Italy in 1930s, when she illustrated “Paradise Lost.” William Blake started illustrating the poem in 1790s and finished the illustrations in 1808. John Martin started illustrating the poem in 1824 and finished the project in 1827. This research includes the way the story of loss of paradise is interpreted in the 17th century by John Milton, and the dynamics of its interpretation during the last decade of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century.

1-5- Literature Review

Many have worked on the interrelation of text/context and word/image the review of which follows. Wendy Furman Adams and Virginia Tufte in an article under the title of ““Metaphysical Tears’: Carlotta Petrina’s Illustration of the Expulsion Scene”, comment on the fragility of Adam and Eve, who not being provided with sufficient