



MILTON AND THE ROMANTICS: THEY WALK IN BEAUTY

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Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:

England hath need of thee

—William Wordsworth, “London, 1802”

Abstract This study poses a hypothesis that the works of John Milton inspired and influenced the poets of the 18th century Romantic Movement and asks, if that is true, then to what extent and in what manner may such inspiration and influence be found in the works of those later writers. The traditional method of literary research, i.e., the review of published literature, is augmented by close readings of selected texts and extended by a poststructuralist perspective that denies any one specific meaning of a text. With a focus on the concept of “beauty” as it appears in literature throughout the ages and articulated by Milton and the Romantic poets, the hypothesis is confirmed and the extent and the manner of Milton’s inspiration and influence are revealed. The study finds convincing evidence of the connection between Milton and the Romantics in the portrayal of Eve as beautiful, a portrayal wholly of Milton’s imagination, one not found in the Bible. Both the method and the findings offer a fertile field for further research into Milton’s influence on later writers.

Keywords: Beauty, Blake, Byron, Coleridge, Keats, Milton, Romantics, Shelley, Wordsworth

Introduction

The Romantic Movement was a brief affair in English literary history. Allegretti (2022) makes it around 1798 to 1837 (p. 1), from Nelson’s defeat of the French fleet at the Battle of the Nile, and publication of *Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems* by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, to the beginning of the Victorian Period, the year of Victoria’s coronation. Some of the most noted of the British Romantic poets would include, besides Wordsworth and Coleridge, Blake, Byron, Shelley, and Keats. While teachers often take pains to tell their students that Romantic

is not about love but about nature, such dismissal is misguided. Love abounds in the works of these poets, as well as does nature. But there is one impulse in Romantic poetry that cannot be denied: Beauty.

It is from Blake’s drawings of *Paradise Lost* that we gain vivid visual perceptions of Milton’s lines. “Exuberance is beauty” was a mantra. Blake “believed in spiritual and political freedom” (Allegretti, 2021, p.1). It is this belief that ties Blake to *Areopagitica*, Milton’s passionate argument for freedom.

From Wordsworth (1858, p. 96), we get, “Of all that is most beauteous, imaged there/In happier beauty; more pellucid streams/An ampler ether, a diviner air/And fields invested with purple gleams.” Byron in rapture wrote, “She walks in beauty, like the night/Of cloudless climes and starry skies” (Appelbaum, 1996, p. 114).

Shelley sees “A lovely lady, garmented in light/From her own beauty” (Wood, 1980, p. 70), and, finally, from Keats reflecting on a Grecian Urn, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty/That is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” (Appelbaum, 1996, p. 219).

Perhaps less well-known but equally representative is the commentary of Coleridge, the intellectual framer of the Romantic Movement. “The sense of beauty is intuitive, and beauty itself is all that inspires pleasure without, and aloof from, and even contrarily to interest” (Guyer, 2005, p. 248). In this, the author of the highly imaginative “Xanadu” and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” cautions the reader against assuming rationality where there is little or none, only emotion. Or there is the admonition attributed to Charles Lamb, “Let us live for the beauty of our own reality” (Lamb, n.d., p. 1). And Walter Savage Landor wrote, “Something of the severe hath always been appertaining to order and to grace; and the beauty that is not too liberal is sought the most ardently, and loved the longest” (Landor, 2006, p. 91).

So the Romantic poets wrote about beauty. No surprise. The Romantic Period was all about a return to nature. Milton was not of that period. Nevertheless, Milton saw much beauty before he lost his sight, and he could see beauty in his mind afterward: “Beauty is God’s handwriting” (Singh, 2004, p. 243).

Whether in post-Soviet space or in places where English is a native language, pupils in schools and students in universities are exposed to Shakespeare. They can recite the plots of *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and other works of Shakespeare (1996), but what do they know of John Milton, one of the three most important writers of the English

language, along with Chaucer and Shakespeare? Not much. This study, then, is an effort to remedy that situation, at least, to make a start.

In making connections between the works of Milton and those perhaps better-known writers, the poets of the Romantic period, we ask, “What was the impact of John Milton on the 18th century Romantic poets?” Implicit in the question is the hypothesis that there was such an impact. We have reason to believe that the hypothesis is well-founded because those later writers tell us so. Moreover, even a cursory reading of Milton, especially but not exclusively *Paradise Lost*, will reveal several connections, including, most notably, the concept of beauty, both that of humans (mostly female, from Eve forward) and nature. Finally, we have in visual form the illustrations of Milton’s epics in the drawings of William Blake, considered to be the earliest of the English Romantic poets. There is, then, a *prima facie* case in support of the hypothesis.

Methods

Our methods are based on the premise that literary research differs from research in other fields, such as the physical or social sciences (Altick & Fenstermaker, 1993; Correa & Owens, 1998; Jeyaraj, 2015). The “tools of the trade,” to which Correa and Owens refer, are different. Certainly, the volume of freely available material and its instant availability have changed the nature of literary research. Countless hours spent in the stacks of a major research university have been for the most part replaced by a sedentary positioning in front of a computer screen. We begin, aided by the Internet as well as a small library of relevant books, with a broad review of the published material, both by the writers under investigation and by those who have written about those writers. We then select passages that appear to be rich in detail and do a close reading of those texts (Continental, 2016; Burke, 2020).

This study is unusual, perhaps even unique, in that it takes a poststructuralist perspective on the works of Milton and the poets

of the Romantic Movement. The meaning of a text varies reader-by-reader. Each reader is different. Each has a different set of life experiences. Each will take his or her own meaning from a text. Not only that, but each person will understand the same text differently as he or she ages. We are not the same person today as we were yesterday, and tomorrow we will be different from the person we are today.

Meaning changes over time. Taking a poststructuralist perspective on both Milton and the Romantics is a challenge to the pedant who insists that a text has one meaning and that there is one truth to be found in the text if only we search for it with greater diligence.

Results

“The consensus within European cultural history has been impressive. Beauty is objective, related to goodness and to God, and moral and physical beauty are related” (Synnott, 1989, p. 625). Certainly, one reason for the consensus is the reception of the writings of the English poets, especially John Donne (Coffin, 2001), John Milton (Flannagan, 1998), and the 18th century Romantics.

As one who was extraordinarily well-educated in 17th century England, from the years of his childhood through school and tutoring at home, with a generous and supportive father, to his university years at Cambridge (which he disparaged as a waste of time), John Milton knew the works of antiquity, as did the poets of the Romantic Movement. They all knew Greek and Hebrew mythology. They knew the epic poems of Homer (1997), (whose *Iliad* set the 12-book pattern of Milton’s own epic poem *Paradise Lost*), of Sophocles and Euripides and their tragic plays, and they knew the philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. They knew something of the history of the Greeks, as well.

Both Milton and the poets of the Romantic Movement knew what the ancient Greeks had to say about beauty, whether that of Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty, or Helen, “the face that launched a thousand ships,” and of the

philosophical understandings of the concept of beauty.

Heraclitus (535-475 BCE) wrote, “To God, all things are beautiful, good, right” (Clohesy, 1987, p. 177). With a measure of consistency, Socrates (535-475 BCE) said, as recorded by Plato (428-347 BCE), “The most beautiful ape is ugly when compared to a human,” to which Plato added, “Forms are beautiful, the perfect being is beautiful, and among these forms, the form of good is the most beautiful” (Maxwell, 2022, p. 2). To Plato, beauty has to do neither with art nor with nature (Grube, 1927). For Plato, beauty is the object of love. In our study, we found in Plato’s *Republic*, some 114 mentions of beauty. Aristotle (384-322), Plato’s pupil, would write, “The beautiful is that which is desirable in itself,” and “Beauty is a gift of God” (Slife, 2022, p. 8). “The chief forms of beauty,” Aristotle wrote, “are order and symmetry and definiteness, which the mathematical sciences demonstrate in a special degree” (Sartwell, 2022, p. 9).

Surely, Milton and the Romantics must have read these ancient Greek commentaries on beauty. They also knew the Bible, and they knew its references to beauty (of which there are more than 75 in the King James Version). They knew the story of David’s lust for the beautiful Bathsheba and how that lust drove the King of Israel to arrange for the death of Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah, so he could marry her. The son of David and Bathsheba would come to write in the Song of Solomon (4:1), “Behold, you are beautiful, my love, behold, you are beautiful! Your eyes are doves behind your veil.”

If Milton and the Romantics were familiar with the references to beauty in both the Greek and the Hebrew mythologies, they were equally familiar with what the Romans had to say about beauty, especially Virgil (70-19 BCE) (2000) in *The Eclogues* and Ovid (43 BCE-18 CE) in *The Metamorphoses* and *Ars Amatoria*.

In *The Metamorphoses*, Ovid tells of how beauty can cause devastating changes in the lives

of the beautiful, such as how the beauty of Daphne caused Apollo to pursue her until she changed herself into a tree of laurel to escape his attentions. From that event comes the origin of Apollo's adoption of the laurel as his treasured symbol. "At the beginning of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid announces that he feels impelled to speak of changed forms" (Anderson, 1963, p. 1), and that is precisely what he does.

Greek and Roman mythologies contain mixed messages regarding beauty, whether it is a benefit or a curse. Apollo lusts after the beautiful Daphne. Hades pursues the beautiful Persephone. The beautiful Helen is the Trojan War's cause célèbre. When Juno, Jove's wife, finds that her husband is distracted by the beautiful Io, she punishes not Jove but Io, who is then turned into a cow. Atalanta is treated as a trophy because of her beauty. Ovid demonstrates the "shallowness of society" using these along with the myth of Jove, Callisto, and Arcas, "where Callisto's beauty leads to the ruin of her entire life" (Agrawal, 2019, p. 1). Ovid (2022) writes, in *Art of Beauty*,

Once more, ye fair, attend your master's song,

And learn what method will your charms prolong;

What happy heart best recommends a face;

What heightens beauty; what preserves a grace.

Horace, at the end of the Roman Republic, expresses concerns in his *Odes*, Book 1, Ode 5, about beauty and those who are affected by beauty:

Now he delights in thinking how lovely you are,

Vacant of storm as the fragrant air in the garden—

Not knowing at all how quickly the wind can change.

Hapless are they enamored of that beauty
(Horace, 1997, 1.5, p. 17)

Having written his caution, Horace then demonstrates in the same Book 1, Ode 19, the power of beauty to attract the admirer:

I thought I had forgotten all about,

For I have fallen in love with Glycera's body,

Smoother than shining marble is shining and smooth,

And with her way of behaving, so wanton and pleasing,

And with the bold lubricious look on her face,

That makes you lose your footing to look at her. (Horace, 1997, 1.19, p. 55)

As the Renaissance was beginning to replace the Middle Ages in England, it was Geoffrey Chaucer (1342/3-1400) who would provide the transition of the English language from its mainly Germanic roots to what has come to be called Middle English. It was also Chaucer who first dared to speak out against the church, albeit with the utmost subtlety. While most scholars, if they know Chaucer at all, know something of *The Canterbury Tales*, they are, in general, unaware of his other, shorter, poetry. Among these, with special interest to this study is his rondel, "Merciless Beauty," the refrain of which is this,

Your two great eyes will slay me suddenly;

Their beauty shakes me who was once serene;

Straight through my heart the wound is quick and keen. (Benson, 1987, p. 659)

In the next century, the Middle English of Chaucer is transformed into the modern English of William Shakespeare (1564-1616), who had his own reflections on beauty. In his narrative poem, "The Rape of Lucrece," Shakespeare writes, "Beauty itself doth of itself persuade/The eyes of men without an orator." And in Sonnet 18, he writes (with the monosyllabic "fair" substituting for the bisyllabic "beauty"):

And every fair from fair sometime declines,

By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;

But thy eternal summer shall not fade,

Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;

Shakespeare's contemporary in the English Renaissance, John Donne (1572-1631), was fairly obsessed with beauty. He writes, "No spring nor summer beauty hath such grace as I have seen in one autumnal face." And in his aubade [a morning love poem] "The Good-Morrow," Donne writes,

"If ever any beauty I did see,

Which I desired, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee." (Coffin, 2001, p. 8)

This brings us, finally, to Milton and the Romantics. Can anyone deny that Milton was influenced by the ancient Sumerians, the ancient Hebrews, or the ancient Greeks? Or by the Romans? Or by Chaucer? We examine these early works to establish those relationships and to set the stage for the next step, to find the influences of Milton on the Romantic poets.

Milton on Beauty

Milton refers to beauty twice in his 1634 *A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle, or Comus*:
Beauty is Nature's coin, must not be hoarded,

But must be current, and the good thereof

Consists of mutual and partaken bliss.

(Comus speaking in *Comus I*, lines 739-741).

In Beauty is natures brag, and must be shown

In courts, at feasts, and high solemnities

Where most may wonder at the workmanship. (Comus speaking in *Comus I*, lines 745-747).

In his shorter poems, Milton goes to the classics. For example,

"To set her beauty's praise above The Sea-Nymphs..." Il Penseroso, lines 20-21.

Beauty is a recurring theme in *Paradise Lost*. Lucifer is beautiful, and as the fallen Satan he is able to assume any shape he chooses, he can appear to Eve as a beautiful animal. Milton takes many opportunities to describe the beauty of Eve:

In naked beauty more adorn'd,

More lovely, than Pandora (PL, I, 713).

Yet beauty, though injurious, hath strange power,

After offense returning, to regain

Love once possess'd. (PL, I, 1003).

Both Adam and Satan lust after the beautiful Eve but for entirely different reasons. Satan has promised his host of fallen angels that he would continue to do battle against God, not in Heaven but in the paradise that God created. Not by a frontal assault on the Almighty but by sabotage, by the seduction and corruption of God's beloved new creatures, the humans, beginning with the first of these creatures, Adam and Eve. Adam has an entirely different motivation. He loves Eve to the extent that he will forego eternal life to be with his beautiful wife, the "Mother of Mankind."

The study continues with a very brief commentary on the life and times of John Milton and his major works: The epic poems, *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*.

We look at his sonnets, especially Sonnet 19, "When I consider how my light is spent," and a bit of his prose works.

Arguably, the greatest work ever written in the English language is Milton's epic poem of the Fall of Man, *Paradise Lost*. So we should not be surprised to find the presence of beauty in that work. In our study, we found some 16 mentions of beauty in *Paradise Lost*. Of Eve, the narrator speaks "Both of her Beauty and submissive Charms" (Book IV, line 498) and "Eve with perfect beauty adorned" (line 633).

In support of our hypothesis, Jonathan Bate (2011) writes, "It has long been known that the major Romantic writers were all obsessed with John Milton and his great English epic poem *Paradise Lost*. William Blake imagined the spirit of Milton entering him via the left foot and inspiring him to write his own epic poetry" (p. v). Bate adds,

Wordsworth's epic endeavor, "The Recluse" (which was never finished, but which resulted in his two vast poems "The Prelude" and "The Excursion") was conceived as a conscious over-going of Paradise Lost. Keats gave up his Hyperion because he thought that he could not match up to Milton's high example. Percy Shelley dreamed of the rising of Milton's ghost and Mary Shelley included Paradise Lost among the most significant reading matter of her Creature in Frankenstein. (Bate, 2011, p. v.)

The Romantic Period begins in 1798 with the publishing of *Lyrical Ballads* by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. It ends in 1837 when Queen Victoria comes to the throne, a period of just 36 years.

We find two generations of Romantic poets. The first includes William Blake, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The second includes Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats.

The first generation is of special relevance to our study, as it is from the illustrations of Blake that we have our first images of Satan, Adam and Eve, and the other characters of *Paradise Lost*.

Wordsworth and Coleridge give us the intellectual foundation of the Romantic Movement.

Blake asserts that "Exuberance is beauty." And in his "Cradle Song," he writes,

*Sleep! sleep! beauty bright,
Dreaming o'er the joys of night;
Sleep! sleep! in thy sleep
Little sorrows sit and weep*

Antippas (1972), in his review of Wittreich's comprehensive treatment of our subject, notes that Blake did some ninety-odd illustrations of Milton's poems and concludes, "All in all, Wittreich has demonstrated that the Romantics were Milton's fittest audience and that Blake was front row center" (p. 55).

When we consider Blake to be the first of the poets of the Romantic Movement, we see the first signs of the influence of Milton. This study finds such signs in Blake's drawings and in his own poetry. Illustrating scenes from *Paradise Lost*, Blake tells the story in visual form of the serpent tempting the beautiful Eve in the Garden of Eden. His terrifying illustrations of Satan, Sin, and Death from the same Milton epic poem, on the other hand, stand in opposition to the beauty of the pre-fall Eve and her paradisiacal garden of Eden. Just as Milton contrasts the good of the prelapsarian Adam and Eve, along with the angels who teach them, with the fallen angels and their spawn, Blake juxtaposes "innocence" and "experience."

In his *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, Blake ponders the dilemma of an omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God who, having made the innocent lamb of the pleasant green pasture also made the terrifying beast of the dark forest. Following Milton's lead, Blake knows who made the lamb. In addressing the Lamb, he asks the question and answers it. He knows that the "Little Lamb" was, in the Trinitarian tradition, God made manifest, born a human child, meek and mild.

Here from *Songs of Innocence* is "The Lamb":

*Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee*

*Gave thee life & bid thee feed.
By the stream & o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing wooly bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice!*

*Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee
Little Lamb I'll tell thee,*

*Little Lamb I'll tell thee!
He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb:
He is meek & he is mild,
He became a little child:
I a child & thou a lamb,
We are called by his name.*

*Little Lamb God bless thee.
Little Lamb God bless thee.*

As for the beast, Blake seems ambivalent. Like Milton, Blake accepts the doctrine that God made all things and that everything God made was good (Wittreich, 1970. p. 36). So how is it possible that God also made the beast? Milton, of course, answers this theodicean question by putting the blame for Sin and Death squarely on the fallen angel, Lucifer cum Satan, who infiltrated the Garden and corrupted the innocent Eve. God created Lucifer, of course, as he created the universe and everything in it. Even the angels had free choice, and the jealousy of Lucifer manifested itself in his decision to rebel against God.

What of Adam, then? Man has free will, as did Lucifer. That is the gift of God in the Creation. Lucifer succumbed to the twin temptations of pride and jealousy and challenged God to a war in heaven, with his followers engaging in a war they could not win, with the result of their being cast

into darkness. Adam's decision was qualitatively different. Blake understands the distinction. Given the choice between staying in Paradise without the beautiful Eve and knowingly and intentionally disobeying God's commandment to be with Eve outside of the Garden, Adam chooses the latter not out of hate caused by pride and jealousy, but by passionate love for Eve.

Blake's Tyger, then, is the trochaic Yin of the Lamb's Yang. He replaces the rejoicing vales with a dark forest, evoking the condition of Satan and his band of fallen angels in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, chained to a lake of fire that burns and tortures but gives no light. Blake knows, of course, that it was God who created both the Lamb and the Tyger. The question is rhetorical.

The reader can take whatever position fits one's predisposition. In each case, the question is addressed to a representative character, the Lamb representing innocence and the love of God, and the Tyger representing something different, something mysterious—not evil, most certainly not evil, for if the maker of the Lamb also made the Tyger, then it would be heresy, if not blasphemy, to suggest that God created something evil.

As to the poesy of the Tyger, the trochaic tetrameter form and the “fearful” vocabulary invite a further contrast to the gentle Lamb, again evoking the image of Milton's innocent Eve corrupted by his irresistibly evil Satan, or rather the angst associated with free choice.

*Tyger, Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

*In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?*

*And what shoulder, & what art,
 Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
 And when thy heart began to beat,
 What dread hand? & what dread feet?*

*What the hammer? what the chain,
 In what furnace was thy brain?
 What the anvil? what dread grasp,
 Dare its deadly terrors clasp!*

*When the stars threw down their spears
 And water'd heaven with their tears:
 Did he smile his work to see?
 Did he who made the Lamb make thee?*

*Tyger Tyger burning bright,
 In the forests of the night:
 What immortal hand or eye,
 Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?*

For “true beauty” and for the beauty of Nature, we turn to William Wordsworth. Wordsworth is not obsessed with Nature; he simply revels in it. On the whole, he is concerned with “true beauty,” which, as we find elsewhere is more than “skin deep.” For Wordsworth, “True beauty dwells in deep retreats./Whose veil is unremoved,/Till heart with heart in concord beats,/And the lover is beloved” from his *Poems Founded on the Affections* (Wordsworth, 2015, p. 80).

For Singh (2022) true beauty is inextricably tied to love, as articulated by the Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser (1552/3-1599): “Spenser held the view that beauty and goodness are interrelated with the former being the indicator

of the latter” (p. 1). Outward beauty, or what Shakespeare in Sonnet 18 calls “fair,” will fade. True beauty is within, and it is that beauty that endures. Perhaps anticipating the later Milton’s description of Eve, Spenser says of his wife in “Epithalamion,”

*Tell me ye merchants daughters did ye see
 So fayre a creature in your towne before?
 So sweet, so lovely, and so mild as she,
 Adorn'd with beautyes grace and vertues
 store,
 Her goodly eyes lyke Saphyres shining
 bright,*

Her forehead yvory white.... (Poetry Foundation, 2022)

Spenser echoes the theme in “Amoretti III: The Sovereign Beauty”: “But looking still on her, I stand amazed.” Adam might have uttered such praise at the sight of the beautiful Eve. From a feminist perspective, the focus on the physical beauty of Eve is an objectification.

Feminist theologian Morris (1993) notes, “Milton repeatedly characterizes Eve in terms of her physical beauty and her inferiority to Adam. Adam is the image of God; Eve is the image of Adam” (p. 1). In Book 4 of *Paradise Lost*, Milton writes of Adam,

*He in delight
 Both of her beauty and submissive charms
 Smiled with superior love... (lines 497-
 498)*

The poets of the Romantic Movement did not learn of Eve’s beauty from the Bible, for there is no mention of it in the creation story of Genesis 2 or 3. They learned of Eve’s beauty from Milton, from *Paradise Lost*.

Using the model of Ferdinand de Saussure (2001), further articulated by Roland Barthes, we find the word “beauty” to be a “signifier,” one of many that may point to a “signified.” We agree

with Barthes (2012) that “the universe is infinitely fertile in suggestions” (p. 218) and “A signified can also have several signifiers” (p. 229). In this case, the signifier, “beauty,” is one of many that may point to Eve or to woman, in general. In the final chapter of his *Mythologies*, titled “Myth Today,” Barthes leads us to question whether the signified is Eve or woman but perhaps some deeper meaning. Both Milton and the Romantic poets would have asked the question. Barthes takes the model further, from signifier to signified to myth.

From the Miltonic point of view, the signifier “beauty” may point to the signified “woman,” and the myth may be that woman is vulnerable and needs the more rational male to guide her. Satan, in the form of the serpent, might be a signifier, with the temptation as the signified, and the myth is the same characterization of woman as vulnerable and in need of a man to keep her out of trouble. This more nuanced interpretation may be seen in the poems of the Romantics, as well, particularly in the frequent objectification of the female.

From a poststructuralist perspective, this study identified three major themes associated with the term “beauty.” First is how Eve is characterized, the beauty of the face and figure. Second is the Platonic form of beauty as order and goodness. Then there is Nature and the joy that a bright sky and a pastoral scene can bring to the eye and mind.

As for the beauty of Nature among the Romantics, many readers will know Wordsworth from his “Daffodils,” perhaps one of the best-known poems of the Romantic Movement, and one that reveals the passion of the Romantic poets for the beauty of the earth, sky, and sea:

*I wandered lonely as a Cloud
That floats on high o'er Vales and Hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host of golden Daffodils;*

*Beside the Lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.*

*Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the Milky Way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:*

*Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.*

*The waves beside them danced, but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:—*

*A Poet could not but be gay
In such a jocund company:*

*I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the shew to me had brought:*

*For oft when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,*

*They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude,*

*And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the Daffodils.*

(Appelbaum, 1996, 43-44)

What is Wordsworth doing that engages our interest in finding connections with Milton? We find inspiration in Milton’s pastoral elegy, “Lycidas,” but we cannot attribute “Daffodils” entirely to “Lycidas,” as Wordsworth must have known the pastoral narratives in the *Eclogues* of Virgil (2000) as well as *The Metamorphoses* of Ovid (2016).

When we look for the theory of beauty among the Romantics, we find Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who may be considered the architect of the Romantic Movement. As the author of “Christabel,” he wrote that most memorable

exclamation: “Beautiful exceedingly!”

*There she sees a damsel bright,
Drest in a silken robe of white,
That shadowy in the moonlight shone:
The neck that made that white robe wan,
Her stately neck, and arms were bare;
Her blue-veined feet unsandl'd were,
And wildly glittered here and there
The gems entangled in her hair.
I guess, 'twas frightful there to see
A lady so richly clad as she—
Beautiful exceedingly!* (Appelbaum, 1996,

p. 83)

Moving to the second generation of the Romantics, we look closely at the similarities and differences compared to and contrasted with the first generation. Themes of pastoral contemplation and conscious distancing from conventional mores distinguish the Romantics from their Enlightenment predecessors. The second generation, especially Byron, Shelley, and Keats, try to put as much distance between themselves and the first generation as the first generation does from the writers of the Enlightenment.

Byron writes “She walks in beauty,” Shelley “Spirit of beauty,” and Keats, with finality, “Beauty is Truth.” We find in these phrases either clear or subtle connections to Milton’s Eve, specifically with the kind of feminine beauty that we have seen from antiquity (from the Greeks, the Hebrews, and the Romans), through the middle ages (Chaucer) and the Elizabethans (Shakespeare), right up to John Donne and John Milton.

In Byron, we have the epitome of beauty in the genre of Romantic poetry, and who cannot be moved by the words and the images they conjure in the following 18 lines?

*She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes;
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.
One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impaired the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
Or softly lightens o'er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express,
How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.
And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent!*
(Appelbaum, 1996, pp. 114-115)

The Romantic poets actively sought and captured beauty wherever and whenever they could find it. If they were antithetic to the traditions of English culture, perhaps it was because they felt that their creative energies were inhibited by those traditions. While most if not all of the poets of the Romantic Movement wrote about feminine beauty, Coleridge, like many others, was impressed by the beauty of Lord Byron: “so beautiful a countenance, I scarcely ever saw; his eyes the open portals of the sun—things of light and for light” (Synnott, 1989, p. 625). Coleridge was able to look past Byron’s character flaws and scandalous behavior to appreciate the beauty of the “countenance,” i.e., the face.

Percy Bysshe Shelley composed “A Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” in which he echoes the oath of Socrates to beauty: “I vowed that I would

dedicate my powers/To thee and thine have I not kept the vow?" (Synnott, p. 625). Shelley writes, "Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world." In this, Shelley believes that beauty may be found in the most unlikely places. It is his obligation, and that of other poets to reveal the beauty hiding in the dark places. In his "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," Shelley appeals to the Spirit of Beauty:

Spirit of BEAUTY, that dost consecrate

With thine own hues all thou dost shine upon

Of human thought or form, where art thou gone?

Why dost thou pass away and leave our state,

This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate?

Ask why the sunlight not for ever

Weaves rainbows o'er yon mountain-river,

Why aught should fail and fade that once is shown,

Why fear and dream and death and birth

Cast on the daylight of this earth

Such gloom, why man has such a scope

For love and hate, despondency and hope?

(Appelbaum, 1996, p. 145)

Should there be left any doubt about the inspiration and influence of Milton on the poets of the Romantic Movement, one need only go to the words of those poets themselves. For example, they write admiringly of the Satan of *Paradise Lost*. Wittreich (1970) traces the Satanist position to those writers: "In their celebration of Satan, Blake, Byron, and Shelley seem to imply two judgments: Satan is at once a magnificent poetical creation and an object for moral admiration and

sympathy" (p. 5). Why should this be the case? After all pre-teens in catechetical classes learn that Satan is a liar and a seducer. How, then, can this be? "Milton was, for the Romantics, a daring individualist who took his place outside the circle of conformists" (p. 11). Wordsworth referred to "The divine Milton" (p. 103). In a letter to John Thelwall, Coleridge wrote, "Milton is harmonious to me" (p. 156). In his dedication to his "Don Juan," Byron equates "Miltonic" to "sublime" and in Canto I, "Thou shalt believe in Milton" (p. 517).

While Wordsworth wrote, "Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour: England hath need of thee," Byron and Shelley dreamed of the poet's spirit rising from the grave "to freeze once more/The blood of monarchs" (Adlington, 2013, pp. 39-40).

Finally, we come to the last of the Romantic poets, John Keats. In "Ode to a Nightingale," Keats discusses "the temporary status of life and beauty", but in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," he explores the artistic permanence of the images on the urn" (Allegretti, 2022, p. 2). It was Keats "who summarized the Romantics' views in 'Endymion.' "A thing of beauty is a joy forever: Its loveliness increases; it will never Pass into nothingness" (Synnott, p. 625). And it is the last two lines of his "Ode on a Grecian Urn" that has been the subject of as many masters' theses and doctoral dissertations as any in English philology:

*"Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."*

Discussion

Having concluded the study, we ask, Is it Relevant? Is it important? And what further research is needed?

The findings present convincing evidence to support the hypothesis that the works of John Milton inspired and influenced the poets of the 18th century Romantic Movement. The focus of the study was on the concept of "beauty," and we find many instances of the Romantic poets drawing on Milton's work, especially his epic poem *Paradise*

Lost, and within that work the beauty of Eve. It would be overreaching to suggest that Milton was the only inspiration for the later poets, as the study shows thousands of years of the concept of beauty. Nevertheless, there are sufficient similarities to conclude that there were influences. Indeed, the poets of the Romantic Movement tell us so in their own words.

The poststructuralist perspective offers new insights into the relationship. Specifically, the Romantic writers saw in Milton, and the other sources, a wide variety of meanings, of truths that contribute to the depth and richness of the texts, both to those writers and to readers and writers of the centuries that followed.

The study offers methods and analyses that add to the appreciation of both Milton and the poets of the Romantic Movement. While we have identified many sources on the writings by John Milton on beauty, materials about the writings of John Milton on beauty, the writings by the romantic poets on beauty, and materials about the Romantic Poets on beauty, the list of references below is far from exhaustive. Scholars with an interest in English language and literature are invited, and encouraged, to expand the body of knowledge concerning the inspiration and influence of Milton not only on the Romantic poets but on all who write poetry.

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