

2004

Milton's Satan and Burns's Auld Nick

J. Walter McGinty

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McGinty, J. Walter (2004) "Milton's Satan and Burns's Auld Nick," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 33: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol33/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

J. Walter McGinty

Milton's Satan and Burns's Auld Nick

On the 18th of June 1787, newly returned from Edinburgh, Robert Burns wrote to his friend William Nicol, Master of the High School, Edinburgh:

I never, My friend, thought mankind very capable of any thing generous; but the stateliness of the Patricians in Edin, and the damn'd servility of my plebeian brethren, who perhaps formerly eyed me askance, since I returned home, have nearly put me out of conceit altogether with my species—I have bought a pocket Milton which I carry perpetually about with me, in order to study the sentiments—the dauntless magnanimity; the intrepid, unyielding independence; the desperate daring, and the hobble defiance of hardship, in that great Personage, Satan.¹

Before going on to analyze this letter, it is worth noting that Burns, writing to Mrs. Agnes McLehose on 8th January 1788, uses the same phrase in describing his respect for Jesus Christ. Burns writes:

The Supreme Being has put the immediate administration of all this, for wise and good ends known to himself, into the hands of Jesus Christ, a great Personage, whose relation to Him we cannot comprehend, but whose relation to us is a Guide and Saviour; and who, except for our own obstinacy and misconduct, will bring us all, through various ways and by various means, to bliss at last (*Letters*, I, 201).

¹*The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), I, 123. Henceforth *Letters*.

2 J. Walter McGinty

Here is Jesus Christ being referred to in terms just as complimentary as any that were applied to Satan in the letter to William Nicol of even months previously. Neither letter provides the basis for calling Burns either a Satanist or a Christian, but taken together they signal Burns's respect for the qualities to be found in the fictional character of Milton's Satan and the historical figure of Jesus Christ, in that they both are given the accolade of being a "great Personage." A personage is an important or distinguished person, a rare figure in literature or history, the Latin equivalent of *homo nobilis*. Burns in referring to Satan and Jesus Christ as personages is merely indicating that they are distinguished by the nobility and distinctiveness of their bearing as human beings.

Before looking in detail at the references to Satan in *Paradise Lost*, I want to return to Burns's letter to William Nicol, for it is in grasping the import of that, that we will be led to a better understanding of the nature of Burns's interest in Satan as portrayed by John Milton.

The immediate context of Burns's letter to Nicol is that he is writing soon after his return from Edinburgh where he had been feted by the Patricians, i.e., the literati, the great and the good, but he suspected, and I think rightly, that he was being treated in a condescending manner, and that a large element of curiosity lay at the root of their reception of the ploughman poet into their society. He knew that for most of them he would be a nine-day wonder and that someone else would soon be given the attention that they had briefly paid to him in their salons. Combined with this condescension experienced from the Patricians, there was the changed attitude towards him of his plebeian brethren, who now adopted a demeanor bordering upon the servile. Burns was neither fitting in to the patrician society of Edinburgh nor the plebeian society of Mauchline. He suspected, I think, that both sets of people were being hypocritical and that neither was to be trusted in their judgments of him or his work.

A further contextual element to his interest in and admiration for Milton's Satan expressed in Nicol's letter is that Burns had fairly recently received a couple of letters from Mrs. Frances Dunlop in which she had offered criticism of some of his work. On the 22nd March 1787 Burns replies to Mrs. Dunlop,

Your friendly advices, I will not give them the cold name of criticisms, I receive with reverence.—I have made some small alterations in what I before had printed.—I have the advice of some very judicious friends among the Literati here, but with them I sometimes find it necessary to claim the privilege of thinking for myself (*Letters*, I, 100).

But Burns's reply, on 20th April 1787, to another letter from Mrs. Dunlop reveals both her further criticism of his work and his attitude to his critics. Burns writes,

Your criticisms, Madam, I understand very well, and could have wished to have pleased you better.—You are right in your guesses that I am not very amenable to counsel.—Poets, much my superiors, have so flattered those who

possessed the adventitious qualities of wealth and power that I am determined to flatter no created being, either in prose or verse, so help me God.—I set as little by kings, lords, clergy, critics, &c, as all these respectable Gentry do by my Bardship.—I know what I may expect from the world, by and by; illiberal abuse and perhaps contemptuous neglect... (*Letters*, I, 108).

and then follows Burns's first reference to Milton's Satan, in almost identical terms to those of his later letter to William Nicol, "But I am resolved to study the sentiments of a very respectable Personage, Milton's Satan," and quoting directly from *Paradise Lost*, Burns concludes, "Hail horrors! Hail, infernal world!"² If, however, we complete the passage from which Burns is quoting, we gain a further insight into both his attitude to Milton's Satan and to those who criticize his work. For Milton continues:

...and thou profoundest Hell
Receive thy new Possessor : One who brings
A mind not to be chang'd by Place or Time³

Here then is Burns determined not to be swayed by the opinions of those whom the world deems great, turning his back on them and embracing the same independent-minded stance as the character of Milton's Satan.

Let us look now in some detail at what Burns thought he could learn from Milton's Satan. According to his letter to William Nicol, Burns wanted to study, "The sentiments—the dauntless magnanimity; the intrepid unyielding independance; the desperate daring, and the noble defiance of hardship" (*Letters*, I, 123) of Milton's portrait of Satan. It should be noted that all that area listed as aspects of Satan's character are human attributes and qualities, entirely attainable and tenable by human beings. Everything that is being admired in Milton's Satan is described in human terms. There is not the slightest hint of any attraction being based on any supernatural or occult powers. The basis of Burns's summary of the attractiveness and admirable qualities to be found in Milton will emerge as we now begin a study of *Paradise Lost*, not with a view to achieving a detailed textual criticism, but to try to discern from the text itself the reasons for Burns's admiration for and sometimes identification with Milton's characterization of Satan.

In Book I of *Paradise Lost* Satan is just beginning to recover from having been cast out from the presence of God into the utter darkness of Chaos, yet even in that dismal place he is unrepentant of his rebellion and addresses his

²*Letters*, I, 108. The quotation is from *Paradise Lost*, Book I, lines 250-51.

³John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London, 1968), Book I, lines 251-3. Henceforth references will be entered in the text by book and line number.

4 J. Walter McGinty

legions, telling them that all is not lost and giving them hope that they may yet regain Heaven. Satan, defiantly remembering the conflict with God, declares,

Till then who knew
The force of those dire Arms? Yet not for those
Nor what the Potent Victor in his rage
Can else inflict do I repent or change,
Though chang'd in outward luster, that fixt mind
And high disdain, from sense of injur'd merit,
That with the mightiest rais'd me to contend,
And to the fierce contention brought along
Innumerable force of Spirits arm'd
That durst dislike his reign, and me preferring,
His utmost power with adverse power oppos'd
In dubious battle on the Plains of Heav'n
And shook his throne. What though the field be lost?
All is not lost; the unconquerable Will,
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield:
And what is else not to be overcome?
That Glory never shall his wrath or might
Extort from me (I, 93-111).

Such words would have brought about a sympathetic reaction in Burns's mind, a mind that did not sit easily in acknowledgment of authority; whether it be on what constituted appropriate language for poetry, or the acceptance of ecclesiastical doctrine or biblical interpretation, or the submission to the hierarchical society in which lairds or Lords or Kings were expected to be obeyed by virtue of their position. He knew the feeling of "injur'd merit," the unrecognized value of ordinary working people, and the injustice of a social system that sanctioned one level of life for the poor and another for the rich. Burns too had known the feeling implied by the words "What though the field be lost? / All is not lost." His early working experience in Irvine when the flax venture ended in disaster, brought about a dreadful despondency, yet within a short time he had become optimistic again about making his way in farming. Milton's words had been proven to be true in his own experience of life. Satan's attitude was an encouragement to battle on even though all seemed lost—for all is never lost.

Yet this Satan was not just a hard man immured to suffering. There was another aspect to his character that would have appealed to Burns who had sometimes looked upon suffering humanity and longed for the power "to wipe away all tears from all eyes." Milton's Satan was also a man of feeling, who, when he looked upon his fallen angels who were suffering because they had joined him in his cause, was moved to tears. Milton shows this other side of Satan:

He now prepar'd
To speak; whereat their doubl'd Ranks they bend
From Wing to Wing and half enclose him round
With all his Peers; attention held them mute.
Thrice he assay'd, and thrice in spite of scorn
Tears such as Angels weep, burst forth; at last
Words interwove with sighs found out their way (I, 615-21).

Burns's admiration was not for a demagogue, but for a man of feeling with whom he could identify.

Burns had also experienced the swing of feelings, the sudden turnaround that could be triggered by the slightest glimpse of hope or by the faintest threat of disaster. His correspondence often reveals this sudden change of mood, as in that very letter to William Nicol, when, having just stated his resolve to study the admirable qualities that he sees in Satan, his exuberance suddenly evaporates as he reflects upon his life:

'Tis true, I have just now a little cash; but I am afraid the damn'd star that hitherto has shed its malignant, purpose-blasting rays full in my zenith; that noxious Planet so baneful in its influences to the rhyming tribe, I much dread it is not yet beneath my horizon. Misfortune dodges [*sic*] the path of human life; the poetic mind finds itself miserably deranged in, and unfit for the walks of business; add to all, that, thoughtless follies and hare-brained whims, like so many *Ignes fatui*, eternally diverging from the right line of sober discretion, sparkle with step-bewitching blaze in the idly-gazing eyes of the poor heedless Bard, till, pop, "he falls like Lucifer, never to hope again."

Albeit, Burns appends the comment to this outburst, "God grant that this may be an unreal picture with respect to me!" (*Letters*, I, 123). But even allowing for this letter having been written to a close friend with whom he exchanged much banter, there is an uneasy truth in the poet's description of himself, or at least of that self in its worst moments. There is much evidence that Burns was subject to severe swings of mood and could quickly shift from hope to despair and back again by means of the slightest occurrence or even thought. Burns would have empathized with Satan when the latter said:

What reinforcement we may gain from Hope
If not what resolution from despair (I, 190-1).

Burns knew the driving force of both hope and despair. He knew the reinforcement of his hope as he set about organizing his new farm at Ellisland. He pursued the task with vigor, thoughtfulness and enthusiasm. But a very short time later he realized that he had got a bad bargain in Ellisland and that it could never provide him with what he had sought from it—a comfortable living and sufficient leisure in which to pursue the Muse. He was prompted by that de-

6 J. Walter McGinty

spair to resolve to try to make his way in the Excise. Having been galvanized by hope and driven to new resolve by despair, Burns had experienced the truth of Satan's words.

Milton's Satan was given to hope even at the bleakest of moments. When he was in the immediate aftermath of his crossing the great gulf between Heaven and Hell, he yet could say:

For since no deep within her gulf can hold
Immortal vigour, though opprest and fall'n
I give not Heav'n for lost (II, 12-14).

Here was Satan, still utterly defiant, still convinced of his having the capability of regaining his place in Heaven because of the inextinguishable life force within him. Burns would have appreciated and admired that spirit for he seemed to have within himself that same kind of unwillingness to accept defeat. He had described himself to Dr. Moore as having, when a child, "a stubborn sturdy something" in his disposition (*Letters*, I, 135). He did not easily give up on anything he tackled whether it was the pursuit of a lady or the study of a book.

Milton's Satan was Burns's kind of man. He could relate to him because although Satan was flawed, one who had even defied God and was now a fallen angel, yet there remained in him some of the qualities that had once earned him a place in Heaven, among those who kept the company of God. Milton himself had made the observation early in *Paradise Lost*, "that neither do the spirits damn'd / Lose all their virtue" (II, 482-3). Burns recognized in Satan the remaining vestiges of the qualities that had once made him great and respected by God. Burns had picked up on a remark by Abdiel, one of the angels of God who when he looked at the splendid armored figure of Satan as he prepared to do battle with God, said:

O Heav'n! that such resemblance of the Highest
Should yet remain, where faith and reality
Remain not (VI, 113-15).

Burns had similarly agonized over the idea of man as made in the image of God. The Calvinist theology upon which he was brought up insisted that the image of God had been totally defaced by man's sin. But Burns was not convinced of that doctrine, and believed that a vestige of that image remained, however damaged or distorted it had become. In fact Burns went further than that; far from believing in Original Sin, he asserted the view that man was by nature good. In a letter to Peter Hill on 2nd March 1790, he writes:

Mankind are by nature benevolent creatures; except in a few scoundrelly instances, I do not think that avarice of the good things we chance to have is born with us; but we are placed here amid so much Nakedness, & Hunger, & Poverty, & want, that

we are under a damning necessity of studying Selfishness in order that we may Exist! (*Letters*, II, 21).

The angel Abdiel's observation that Satan still bore a resemblance to his creator chimed in with Burns's view of humanity as having been created good and ever retaining the hallmark of natural goodness. It was the world that brought about the evil in mankind, not something that they inherited from Adam's fall.

One last comment on the attractiveness of Milton's Satan to Burns relates to the vulnerability of Satan and the parallels to our humanity. In Book VI, the Archangel Michael fights and wounds Satan, Milton describing the fight:

...but the sword
Of Michael from the Armoury of God,
Was giv'n him temper'd so that neither keen
Nor solid might resist that edge; it met
The sword of Satan with steep force to smite
Descending, and in half cut sheer, nor stay'd
But with swift wheel reverse, deep ent'ring shar'd
All his right side; then Satan first knew pain,
And writh'd him to and fro convolv'd (VI, 320-28).

But despite his grievous wound Satan quickly begins to heal,

Yet soon he heal'd; for Spirits that live throughout
Vital in every part, not as frail man'
In Entrails, Heart or Head, Liver or Reins,
Cannot but by annihilating die;
Nor in their liquid texture mortal wound
Receive, no more than can the fluid Air,
All Heart they live, all Head, all Eye, all Ear,
All Intellect, all Sense (VI, 344-51).

At the end of that horrendous battle Satan realizes that although he and his forces have suffered defeat, they have not been utterly vanquished. He discovers too, from his personal experience of having been wounded, that he is capable of recovering from his wounds. Undaunted, he looks positively on the day's events, concluding that if he and his forces have managed to sustain one day in their fight against the forces of God then they have every reason to hope, "if one day, why not Eternal days?" (VI, 424). Here is the spirit that Burns found admirable. Here is the attitude from which he took comfort and inspiration. Here is the spirit which if adopted by a human will result in the kind of life that is ever renewed, ever able to recover from the blows inflicted upon it by the world.

From the heavenly to the earthly, from the noble to the common, from the sublime to the ridiculous, these are the phrases that come to mind in turning

8 J. Walter McGinty

from a consideration of John Milton's Satan to the "Auld Nick" of Robert Burns.

Burns prefaces his "Address to the Deil," with these lines from *Paradise Lost*:

O Prince, O chief of many Throned Pow'rs,
That led th' embattl'd Seraphim to war (I, 128-9).

but far from continuing in the same high-flown language Burns introduces a totally new and irreverently reductionist tone as he addresses the Devil:

O Thou, whatever title suit thee!
Auld Hornie, Satan, Nick, or Clootie,⁴

thereby setting the scene for a quite different treatment of the character of Satan.

Burns launches into the reduction of Satan's character first by adopting the Standart Habby stanza which had a tradition of use as a form for carrying a mock elegy. Robert Semphill of Beltrees in the seventeenth century had revived and modified a medieval verse form in his "Life and Death of Habbie Simpson, the Piper of Kilbarchan." William Hamilton of Gilbertfield used it for his "Last Words of Bonny Heck, a Famous Greyhound." Allan Ramsay, who coined the name for the stanza, used it for his elegy for a dying cow "Lucky Spence's Last Advice," and Robert Fergusson used it for his "Elegy on the Death of Mr David Gregory, late Professor of Mathematics in the University of St Andrews." Lastly, Burns himself used it in a mock elegy for a favorite sheep "Poor Mailie's Elegy."

Now although Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns also used Standart Habby for poems of a more serious nature, the form was best remembered and most associated with the mock elegy. Burns is therefore inviting us to regard his "Address to the Deil" as a piece in which we can expect great use of whimsy and irony. "The Deil" is not to be taken seriously.

Secondly, Burns reduces the figure of Satan in the opening lines by using the titles for the Devil that were common in Scottish folklore: Auld Hornie, Nick, Clootie and, in the second stanza, he continues the process of reduction by saying:

Hear me, *auld Hangie*, for a wee,
An' let poor, *darned bodies* bee (*Poems*, I, 168).

⁴*The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), I, 168. Henceforth *Poems*.

It is quite clear from his opening stanzas that Burns does not expect his readers to take this Devil seriously. The formal name "Satan" only appears as the second title, all the others are names that were commonly used when people were joking about the Devil.

"Auld Hornie" refers to the horned figure much loved by medieval artists and engravers. But by the eighteenth century this figure was being called into question by ordinary people who perhaps used humorous titles for the Devil to mask their disbelief in his reality. The writings of John Goldie, the Kilmarnock lay theologian who was Burns's contemporary, are typical of the growing unwillingness of thinking people to accept some of the traditional beliefs either about God or the Devil.⁵ "Nick," as a title, was used of the Devil in "Tam o' Shanter," where in Alloway Kirk we find:

A winnock-bunker in the east,
There sat auld Nick, in shape o' beast;
A towzie tyke, black, grim, and large,
To gie them music was his charge:
He screw'd the pipes and gart them skirl,
Till roof and rafters a' did dirl (*Poems*, II, 561).

But even here the Devil takes a minor role; he is just the accompanist to the dance, and in what follows it is the witches, principally the one with the "cutty sark" who take the leading role. He is also depicted as standing, as Tam was, bewitched by the dance,

Even Satan glowr'd, and fidg'd fu' fain,
And hotch'd and blew wi' might and main (*Poems*, II, 563).

This interchangeability of the terms "auld Nick" and "Satan" has a further effect in the reduction of Milton's noble figure. He becomes a common beast-like hulk whose only role is to play the pipes for "wither'd beldams, auld and droll" in between gawping at the shapely young witch, Nannie with the "cutty sark" (*Poems*, II, 562).

When Burns calls Satan "Cloutie," he is referring to the image of the devil as cloven hoofed. In Burns's "Answer" to "An Epistle from a Tailor" he writes:

And maybe, Tam, for a' my cants,
My wicked rhymes, an' drucken rants,
I'll gie auld cloven Clooty's haunts
An unco slip yet,

⁵ See John Goldie, *Essays on Various Important Subjects Moral and Divine Being an Attempt to Distinguish True from False Religion* (Glasgow, 1779).

An' snugly sit amang the saunts
At Davie's hip yet (*Poems*, I, 279).

In "Address to the Deil" Burns calls him "auld Hangie," meaning the hangman—the one who will bring us to a violent death. But instead of elaborating on the power of the Devil to bring our lives suddenly and nastily to an end, Burns takes the Devil aside and, adopting a very familiar tone, proceeds to give him a lecture, as we have seen. Making allowances for the devil not really being as bad as to sadistically enjoy torturing people, Burns continues his harangue

I'm sure sma' pleasure it can gie,
Ev'n to a *deil*,
To skelp an' scaud poor dogs like me,
An' hear us squee! (*Poems*, I, 168).

I shall return later to this familiarity, and the understanding attitude adopted by Burns towards the devil, but for the moment, let's take a concluding look at the poem. After acknowledging that the Devil's fame and power are well known, and that he is very busy in his biblical role: ranging like a roaring lion—riding the tempest—lurking in the human bosom, as well as haunting lonely glens and ancient ruins, Burns cannot resist a further reductionist remark, saying that he does all of this despite living in a heugh—a low-lying hollow or pit. Then adding insult to injury Burns confesses that one dark winter's night he himself was frightened thinking that the Devil was about, but it turned out that it was only a duck. Burns then castigates the Devil for spoiling Eden:

Then you, ye auld, snick-drawing dog!
Ye cam to Paradise incog,
An' play'd on man a cursed brogue,
(Black be your fa'!)
An' gied the infant warld a shog,
'Maist ruin'd a' (*Poems*, I, 171).

Burns goes on to remind the Devil of the spiteful joke that he had played on Job, the man of Uz, and then again displaying his knowledge of *Paradise Lost*, he says that he could not begin to list all that the Devil had been up to "sin' that day MICHAEL did you pierce."⁶ But the conclusion of the poem displays Burns's affection for, and sympathy with this Devil. In addressing him, Burns uses the diminutives "Auld Cloots" and "auld Nickie-ben":

⁶*Poems*, I, 172. The poem first appeared in 1786, where Burns added the following note to Michael's name: Vide Milton, Book 6th.

An' now, auld *Cloots*, I ken ye're thinkan,
A certain *Bardie*'s rantin, drinkin,
Some luckless hour will send him linkan,
 To your black pit;
But faith! He'll turn a corner jinkan,
 An' cheat you yet.

But fare you weel, auld *Nickie-ben*!
O wad ye tak a thought an' men's!
Ye aiblins might—I dinna ken—
 Still hae a *stake*—
I'm wae to think upo' yon den,
Ev'n for your sake (*Poems*, I, 172).

Kinsley points out that this hope that even the devil might be saved stems from "Dryden's hope with Origen that the Devil himself, may at last be saved" (*Poems*, III, 1132). Burns's familiarity with Dryden is well established, but I am less sure of his awareness of the classical theology of *diabolum esse salvandum*. However, Burns was very much aware of Laurence Sterne's gentle and kindly character Uncle Toby in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, who said, "My heart would not let me curse the devil himself"—to which Dr. Slop replies—"But he is cursed already, to all eternity"—to which the ever gracious Uncle Toby rejoins—"I am sorry for it."⁷ Burns concludes his "Address to the Deil" by being sorry for Satan.

In the early months of the year of his death Burns wrote a "Poem on Life" addressed to Colonel Arentz Schuler De Peyster, major-commandant of the Dumfries Volunteers. Incidentally, this is an example of Burns's use of Standard Habby in a poem of a serious nature, one in which he turns to one of the great and recurring themes of his writing. Burns writes:

O what a canty warld were it,
Would pain and care, and sickness spare it;
And fortune favor worth and merit,
 As they deserve:
(And aye a rowth, roast beef and claret;
 Syne wha would starve?)

Burns goes on to paint a picture of life as a hard enough struggle between good and evil made even more difficult with the entry of the Devil.

Then that curst carnagnole, auld Satan,
Watches, like bawd'rons by a rattan,

⁷Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (Harmondsworth, 1986), p. 191.

12 J. Walter McGinty

Our sinfu' saul to get a claute on
Wi' felon ire;
Syne, whip! his tail ye'll ne'er cast saut on,
He's off like fire (*Poems*, II, 809).

The carmagnole was a cape worn by the French revolutionary soldiers, and became in time used as a term for the soldiers themselves. As the revolution went on many people including Burns grew critical of it so that the word carmagnole came to be used pejoratively and had come to mean rascal. So with Satan. Once he had been a revolutionary, revolting against what he deemed the injustice of God, but now he had become a rascal, playing sadistically with men as a cat plays with a rat. And yet, Burns had sympathy for this rascally Devil. For in the next stanza there is affection in his address:

Ah! Nick, ah Nick it is na fair,
First shewing us the tempting ware,
Bright wines and bonnie lasses rare,
To put us daft;
Syne weave, unseen, thy spider snare
O' hell's damned waft (*Poems*, II, 810).

In his "Poem on Life" Burns is making a plea for understanding to the Devil, implying that man has quite enough to contend with in his own nature without some external power setting traps for him. "It is na fair" says Burns. But he is, I think, saying more than this as he concludes his lines to Colonel Peyster with a benediction that perhaps is praying that men and women should be able to live their lives free from any thought of interference from any devil, whether real or imaginary: "The Lord preserve us frae the devil! / Amen! Amen!" (*Poems*, II, 810).

In *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs*, Thomas Crawford draws attention to no fewer than six passages in Burns's writings for which he can find parallel thoughts in the writings of William Blake. Crawford does not conclude from this that Burns knew of Blake's work and, as far as I know, there is no firm evidence to suggest this, but the shared concerns of the two poets might reveal a closer connection that is at first evident.⁸

In 1793 Blake had written in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell":

The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it.

⁸See Thomas Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs* (Edinburgh, 1994), pp. 217-20.

Some six years earlier, in February 1787, Burns wrote to James Dalrymple of Orangefield from whom he had received a rhyming epistle:

I suppose that the Devil is so elated at his success with you that he is determined by a coup de main to effect his purposes on you all at once in making you a Poet (*Letters*, I, 93).

In that same letter Burns quotes Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Perhaps the connection is that both Blake and Burns knew of an older tradition of an association of Poets with the Devil. However, the inclusion of a reference to Milton is maybe indicative that Burns considered Milton to be a person who had sacrificed convention to truth in representing Satan in such a sympathetic way and thereby unwittingly joined the Devil's party as one who, like the Devil himself, had defied authority because of what he believed to be true. Burns would have gladly considered himself to be of the "Devil's party," if that meant that he was recognized as being in opposition to a tyrant God, as Milton's Satan believed himself to be.

Writing twenty-five years after Burns's death, Shelley, in his essay, *A Defence of Poetry*, comes to a somewhat similar assessment of Milton's Satan and God as they are portrayed in *Paradise Lost*:

Nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan as expressed in "Paradise Lost". It is a mistake to suppose that he could ever have been intended for the popular personification of evil.... Milton's Devil as a moral being is as far superior to his God, as one who perseveres in some purpose which he has conceived to be excellent in spite of adversity and torture, is to one who in the cold security of undoubted triumph inflicts the most horrible revenge upon his enemy, not from any mistaken notion of inducing him to repent of perseverance in enmity, but with the alleged design of exasperating him to deserve new torments.⁹

Burns in his admiration for Milton's Satan was also expressing a judgment on the God who was being proclaimed by a large element of the presbyterian Church of Scotland of his day, and in that judgment God was found wanting. Hence the highly critical "Holy Willie's Prayer," "The Kirk o' Scotland's Garland," "The Holy Fair," "The Holy Tulzie" and others, poems in which the caricature of God as presented in much of the preaching of the day is castigated.

Milton had tried, as he states in Book 1 of *Paradise Lost*, "to justify the ways of God to men" (I, 26). Paradoxically, many today would judge, Milton ended up by revealing a God who was the moral inferior of Satan, the character commonly accepted as the very embodiment of evil. As William Empson re-

⁹Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry* (1821) in *English Critical Essays (Nineteenth Century)*, ed. Edmund D. Jones (London, 1956), p. 125.

marks: "Milton was right to feel that in undertaking to defend the Christian God, he had accepted a peculiarly difficult client."¹⁰ The discerning judgment of Burns in expressing an admiration for Milton's Satan puts him in the distinguished company of Blake and Shelley. It was inevitable that Burns should find Milton's Satan attractive in that the character was so in keeping with Burns's own nature. How could he fail to be attracted to one who had turned his back on Heaven, "preferring / Hard liberty before the easy yoke / Of servile Pomp" (II, 255-6)? But having expressed his admiration for the qualities found in the fictional figure of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, when it came to writing about the Devil he knew from all that he had been brought up to believe, and all that he had gleaned from the folklore of people around him, the figure that emerged was vastly different. Nothing of nobility here, nothing of magnanimity, nothing of daring and defiance but a rather pathetic figure of fun, given to sleeketness and tricks and traps, whose one redeeming quality was the likeness that he showed to humanity. Burns almost becomes fond of the Devil, certainly he becomes understanding of him because there is so much in his nature that is like the poet himself. So the final portrait of the Devil painted in the year of Burns's own death finds the poet hoping that the Devil, like Burns himself, might make sufficient changes to their lifestyles to be able at the last to avoid the Hell that they seem destined to land in. Burns did not believe in a God who could create a place of eternal punishment and consequently could find no place in his theology for the Devil. In his work the Devil was just a concept to play with, but would never be spoken of as if he were part of reality. Hence the nicknames and all the reduction of the character best known as "auld Nick."

Glasgow

¹⁰William Empson, *Milton's God*, 2nd edn. (London, 1965), p. 242.