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New Formalism in the Classroom: Re-Forming Epic Poetry in Wordsworth and Blake

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Abstract: Recent years have seen a resurgence of interest in “New Formalism,” a close attention to textual language and structure that departs from the outdated and regressive stances of old formalisms (especially “New Criticism”) by interrogating the connections between form, history, and culture. This article surveys the contributions of New Formalism to Romanticism studies and applies its techniques to two canonical texts, suggesting that New Formalism is useful both for literary criticism and teaching literature. Opening with a survey of New Formalist theory and practices, and an overview of the theoretical innovations within New Formalism that have been made by Romantic scholars, the article applies New Formalist techniques to William Wordsworth’s *Prelude* and William Blake’s *Milton: a Poem*. Often read as poems seeking to escape the dispiriting failure of the French Revolution, these texts, I argue, engage the formal strategies of epic poetry to enter the discourse of the period, offering competing ways to conceive of the self in relation to history. Written during the Romantic epic revival, when more epics were composed than at any other time in history, these poems’ allusive dialogue with *Paradise Lost* and with the epic tradition more broadly allows them to think through the self’s relationship to the past, a question energized by the Revolution Controversy. I explore how Wordsworth uses allusion to link himself to Milton and ultimately Virgil, both privileging the past and thereby asserting the value of the present as a means of reiterating and restoring it; Blake, in contrast, alludes to Milton to query the very idea of dependence on the past. These readings are intertwined with my experiences of teaching, as I have employed New Formalism to encourage students to develop as writers in response to texts. An emphasis on form provides students with concrete modes of entry into discussing literature and allows instructors to help students identify and revise the forms and structures of their own writing in response to literature.

Keywords: Romanticism; epic poetry; formalism; new formalism

The field of literary studies has become so historicized over the last several decades that an interest in formalism might seem quaint, if not suspicious. Long associated with the New Critics of the mid-twentieth century, the word “formalism” sometimes conjures the most regressive and limiting of their assumptions, especially the notion that the study of literature should be largely sundered from a concern for the historical and cultural context surrounding a work. Yet formalism has recently made a resurgence in literary studies as “New Formalism,” a critical approach that distinguishes itself from its precursors primarily by interrogating the relationship between form and sociohistorical context. In contrast to many New Historicist critics, who tend to see literary form as a pretense to unity that obscures context and conceals the ideologies at work in a text, New Formalists stress how the formal elements of a work carry historical and cultural implications, and how closely examining these elements can disclose a text’s engagement with its context. Indeed, history and culture are themselves organized by forms and structures, making an examination of literary form vital to understanding a work’s relationship to the world around it.

The study of British Romanticism has served as a fertile ground for these critical disagreements, largely beginning with Jerome McGann's well-known critique of the "Romantic Ideology," yet the supposed antagonism between formalism and historicism is in many ways an oversimplification that might well be predicated on strawmen: formalists never forgot about context entirely, and historicists have never abandoned the text.¹ There are various ways to narrate the development of literary theory, including some that see more nuance and continuity between New Historicism and formalisms both old and new. The forerunners of New Formalism—including Russian Formalism, the Chicago School, and New Criticism—were interested in, though not focused on, certain historical and cultural considerations.² Even Cleanth Brooks, often taken to be the foremost representative of New Criticism, did not attempt to "sequester poetry from its historical situations," as Susan Wolfson observes, "but he did contend that its formations required attention as something other than, something more than, information in rhyme and meter."³ To that end, Brooks's seminars spent half of their time on historical context and biography, implicitly affirming their importance for a study of literature.⁴ And far from imagining the text to be a neat unity, Brooks emphasized how literature often operates by a language of paradox, irony, and contradiction.⁵ Meanwhile, New Historicists have continued to give attention to the text. Even Terry Eagleton affirms that "form and content are intimately interwoven," especially in poetry, where formal elements "are actually generators of meaning, not just containers of it."⁶ And as Alan Liu argued as far back as 1989, it may be possible to conceive of New Historicism as another kind of formalism.⁷

Although we might conceptualize the relationship between formalism and historicism as less contentious than it sometimes seems, it is difficult to deny that the emphasis of literary studies, especially in the field of Romanticism, has to some degree moved away from detailed and sustained close readings of the text itself. Yet attention to the text is foundational not merely to formalist criticism but to the reading and teaching of literature, the activities out of which scholarship emerges and which are enriched by it. Indeed, attention to form in literary criticism (the formation of new knowledge) can productively inform close readings in the classroom (forms of pedagogy), and *vice versa*. In introductory literature and writing classes, students are typically taught first to approach texts as formalists, identifying and building arguments from literary elements. At the same time, students benefit from turning a critical eye to the formal structures of their own writing as they develop and refine their ideas about texts. My experiences as Writing Specialist at the College of Mount Saint Vincent and, earlier, as a Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow at Fordham University in New York City, have impressed upon me the value of New Formalism both in and beyond the classroom: insights into literary texts and their connection to context can arise from examinations of form in the classroom, and students can develop these ideas as they learn to scrutinize their own writing.

In what follows, I survey the techniques of New Formalism and its contributions to the study of British Romanticism. I then use these techniques to examine extracts from two canonical epics of the Romantic era, William Wordsworth's *Prelude* and William Blake's *Milton*. Often read as poems seeking to escape the dispiriting failure of the French Revolution, these texts, I argue, engage the formal strategies of epic poetry to enter the discourse of the period, offering competing ways to conceive of the self in relation to history. As I discuss these poems, I offer examples of how insights emerge out of classroom discussions and present opportunities to train students to sharpen their thinking and writing about literature.

¹ See (McGann 1983).

² For an overview of three schools and their relationship to New Formalism, see (Wolfson 2016).

³ "Romantic Poetry".

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ See (Brooks 1947, pp. 3–21).

⁶ See (Eagleton 2007, p. 67).

⁷ See (Liu 1989).

1. The Formal (Re)Turn in Romantic Literary Studies

The label “New Formalism” encapsulates a variety of critical approaches that resist the tendency to treat literature primarily in terms of its paraphrasable content. Instead, New Formalists place emphasis on the complex ways that formal elements of texts express, confront, and critique historical pressures. Instead of seeing literary form as passively shaped by, and obscuring, historical context and ideology, New Formalists tend to see it as an active force—reflecting, performing, and enabling forms of action. New Formalist critical practices thus include a renewed focus on close reading in relation to the historical context, an attention to the experience (and pleasures) of reading literature (particularly as the acts of reading and writing are constituted historically), and a focus on the way literature uses cultural items, as opposed to an exploration of the items it mentions. This final method relies on terms borrowed from W.V. Quince: “use” items are those that are framed in a particular way by the text, given status or emphasis by virtue of their position in the form; “mention” items are not—they are those items that are merely mentioned in passing.⁸ Where a historicist might seize upon a “mention” and pursue that item’s place in other discourse of the age, a formalist critic would be more interested in how a text recruits and deploys cultural items. Since such items only become part of a literary text through formal choices that incorporate them into the text’s structure, New Formalists are often interested first in how “use” items function within the internal logic of a text and, second, in how this use interacts with broader issues of social and historical context. The methods of New Formalism further resist the tendency to look for “deeper meanings” lurking symbolically behind the text, as approaches informed by Critical Theory sometimes do. Here, New Formalists have been influenced by Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best’s idea of “surface reading,” which shifts the focus of literary criticism away from a decoding of hidden meanings to “what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts.”⁹ While critics can employ any of these approaches without conceiving of themselves as “New Formalists,” and while many studies that have recently paid close attention to formal structures do not explicitly adopt the label, the phrase “New Formalism” remains useful in identifying those trends in literary criticism that depart from the prevailing methodologies of the past several decades to center more fully on the text, literary form, and close readings.

Calls for a renewed attention to form were sounded as early as the 1990s. Susan Wolfson’s *Formal Charges* (1997) not only argues for a historically informed formalism but examines how Romantic-era writers examine the poetic forming of language. Many critics like Wolfson in fact never turned away from the text: for instance, her book *The Questioning Presence* (1986), released during the ascendancy of New Historicism, pays careful attention to form and syntax. Similarly, Stuart Curran published *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* that same year, studying forms and genres as historically constituted categories that Romantic-era writers engaged.

Several notable overviews of New Formalism and collections of New Formalist essays have appeared. A special issue of *Modern Language Quarterly* in 2000 dedicated to New Formalism (“Reading for Form”) opened with an essay by Wolfson surveying the critical field. Among the essays in this issue, Robert Kaufman examines William Blake’s work in relation to both Kantian aesthetics and twentieth-century poetry. Drawing on McGann’s reading of Blake, in which he reconceives his poetry as a “form of action” rather than a “form of representation,” Kaufman illustrates how formal choices are vital to this action, both in Blake’s works and in those that draw on him in different historical moments.¹⁰ The year 2002 saw the founding of the Historical Poetics Working Group, a movement of critics who pay careful attention to poetic genre and historicize the “terms through which we recognize, describe, and evaluate poems,” thus “encourag[ing] skepticism about the normative concepts that

⁸ For a discussion of “use” versus “mention” in New Formalism, see (Levinson 2007, pp. 558–69, 565–66).

⁹ See (Best and Marcus 2009).

¹⁰ See (Kaufman 2000).

have been used to study and teach poetry.”¹¹ These critics continue today to work in this manner, gathering their contributions on their website.¹² After *MLQ*’s “Reading for Form” (Wolfson 2000) was republished as a book in 2006, Marjorie Levinson investigated New Formalism in a 2007 *PMLA* article, where she expresses surprise that New Formalists generally do not offer new theories of form. She identifies what she sees as a division between “activist” New Formalists, who take a dialectical materialist approach and seek to interrogate the relays between literary form and sociohistorical context, and “normative” New Formalists, who tend to treat literature almost as distinct from other kinds of discourse. The year 2007 also saw the publication of the collection *Romanticism and Form* (2007). Editor Alan Rawes contributes a chapter that explores “Tintern Abbey” by contextualizing it in relationship to the eighteenth-century ode. Responding to Levinson’s historicist reading, Rawes considers tensions in “Tintern Abbey” as a critique of the ode form and of its often-recommended idea of retirement from society.¹³ Other useful contributions to the volume include Jacqueline Labbe’s reading of Charlotte Smith and Ann Batten Cristall in terms of the sonnet form’s ability to construct female subjectivity.¹⁴ She explores how the formal elements of both poets enable them to construct various personae who transgress normative restrictions. A special issue of *ELH*, entitled “Form” (2015), continued to develop investigations of literary form. Among the contributions of this issue, Michael Nicholson examines John Clare’s use of form in his “intense struggles against the historical, poetic, and personal pressures of enclosure,” while Melissa Bailes studies how Mary Shelley shifts the concept of geological catastrophe into the psyche of an individual in *The Last Man*.¹⁵ The collection *New Formalism and Literary Theory* (2013) contains many essays that seek to theorize about form more robustly, as if to answer Levinson’s charge that New Formalism insufficiently considers form itself. Among the insights of this volume, Group Phi’s chapter on genre suggests that we might think of writing and reading as acts of distributed agency that are given direction by patterns of form.¹⁶ As writers and readers participate in genre, they both shape and are shaped by form. Further developing a theory of form, Caroline Levine’s *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Levine 2015) borrows from design theory to argue that forms operate by means of “affordances.” This term signifies the possibilities for interaction between objects and people: for instance, doorknobs possess the capacity for turning. The comparison suggests that form does not merely hold or produce meaning but provides the potential for action.

Surrounding these publications, many articles and books on Romanticism have been influenced by New Formalist practices. Several delve into the connection between specific formal choices and historical context. For instance, Mark Canuel has revisited historicist and formalist readings of “Tintern Abbey” to explore how Wordsworth examines the “interconnection between poetic and institutional forms.”¹⁷ Yasmin Solomonescu has studied the use of punctuation in Percy Shelley’s *Queen Mab* and *Laon and Cythna*, linking specific structures in these texts to Shelley’s broader understanding of incremental change in the Romantic period.¹⁸ Caroline Levine has explored the role of repetition in John Clare’s poetry, arguing that his work illustrates how repetition is “crucial to the exercise of political and economic power.”¹⁹ A recent special issue of *Essays in Romanticism* (25.1, 2018) was devoted to Historical Poetics and Romanticism, and its contributors attend to specific formal choices in their examinations of lyricization. Other studies trace themes through their discussion of form. For instance, Mark Sandy’s *Romanticism, Memory, and Mourning* ranges across literary forms of the

¹¹ See (About).

¹² See <https://www.historicalpoetics.com/>. On Historical Poetics, see (Adams et al. 2016).

¹³ See (Rawes 2007).

¹⁴ See (Labbe 2007, pp. 154–70).

¹⁵ See (Nicholson 2015; Bailes 2015).

¹⁶ See (Phi 2013).

¹⁷ See (Canuel 2012).

¹⁸ See (Solomonescu 2016).

¹⁹ See (Levine 2016).

Romantic era, suggesting that consolation can be obtained from “submitting heartfelt personal grief to those public conventions of ritual, code, and poetic language and form.”²⁰ D.B. Ruderman’s *The Idea of Infancy in Nineteenth-Century British Poetry: Romanticism, Subjectivity, Form* (Ruderman 2016) explores images of babies in Romantic-era poetry, arguing that this trope influences poetic form and thereby transforms the reader’s subjectivity. Other works study form’s relationship to broader discourses, such as T. Duggett’s *Gothic Romanticism: Architecture, Politics, and Literary Form* (Duggett 2010), which examines the mutually informing discourses of its subtitle, and Denise Gigante’s *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism* (Gigante 2009), which argues that scientific conceptions of life influenced aesthetic form during the period. Still others examine form’s role in intertextual dialogue, such as Ewan James Jones’s *Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form* (Jones 2014), which traces how Coleridge’s most important engagements with philosophy occur through formal elements of his poetry.

What these contributions to Romanticism studies share is an interrogation of literary form that remains aware of questions of historical context. While not all the above critics explicitly embrace the label “New Formalism,” their focus on the text, its formal structures, and the relays between these elements and the historical context comprises a significant trend in contemporary literary criticism that deserves to be discussed. This focus on the text, by whatever name we choose to call it, is valuable in the classroom, where students are generally introduced to literature through close reading and careful examination of form. The work that begins both in personal reading (for pleasure) and in the classroom lays the foundation for deeper investigations of how texts and history intersect.

2. Forming and Reforming Epic Subjectivity: Wordsworth’s *Prelude* and Blake’s *Milton*

Wordsworth’s *Prelude* and Blake’s *Milton* make useful subjects for New Formalist approaches because both are heavily invested in poetic form. New Formalist readings of these works might seek to explore not that which they occlude but that which they engage. Each is concerned with epic poetry as a genre, England as a nation, and John Milton as national epic poet. Each is the product of substantial revision, arguably appearing as a kind of fragment poem. Though Wordsworth completed a version of *The Prelude* in 1805, he would revise it for the rest of his life, and his wife, Mary, would title and publish it in 1850, after his death.²¹ The heavy revisions have resulted in distinct yet related texts: Thomas McFarland goes so far as to claim that *The Prelude* is the “only great poem that does not have a text, for its *substantia* hovers in *Aufhebung* somewhere between the facing page editions of the 1805 and 1850 versions.”²² Blake’s *Milton* is also the product of a lengthy labor, and it arguably also “lacks a text” in McFarland’s terms. Though the title page reads 1804, Blake produced forty-five plates between c. 1804 and c. 1811, and he created six additional plates between c. 1811 and c. 1818. As with most of Blake’s poems, there is no definitive version of *Milton*. Discrepancies exist between extant copies, including the order of some plates, and no extant version of the poem contains all fifty-one plates.²³

The fragmentary state of Wordsworth and Blake’s poems challenges the notion of epic poetry as unified. The category of “epic poetry” is itself historically constituted, and it had acquired in the nineteenth century associations not only with order, stability, and unity, but with nationalism and imperialism—concepts that would have been useful for writers responding to the tumultuous upheavals of the Romantic period and the expansion of the British empire. It is perhaps not surprising that more epics were written in Britain between 1790 and 1820 than at any other time in history.²⁴ Writers were eagerly affixing the label “epic” to their long poems and reiterating the tropes of epic literature to place their works in a prestigious literary lineage, engaging with the poetic form that Keats

²⁰ See (Sandy 2016, p. 4).

²¹ On the poem’s composition history, see (Wordsworth 1979, pp. 510–26).

²² See (McFarland 2014, p. 237).

²³ On the textual history, see (Blake 1982, pp. 806–8).

²⁴ See (Curran 1986, p. 158).

called the “king” of genres.²⁵ As this metaphorical invocation of the *ancien regime* suggests, epic poetry often carries a conservative connotation, implying deference to tradition. It is little surprise, then, that conservative writers took up the genre to support their political positions. However, progressive writers also wrote epics of their own, bending the genre to more democratic ends. In doing so, they joined a long tradition of challenging epic tradition from within: epic writers commonly assert the superiority of the values of their own age to those of previous epists.²⁶ As Phi argues, genres are more than collections of literary conventions: they might be conceived as patterns that both provide direction in composition and offer possibilities for innovation. For the epic genre specifically, these patterns entail both the reiteration of tradition and the partial rejection of it. As a result, an epic is arguably “authored” by a process of collaboration/competition with epic tradition itself. Tension and conflict are thus built into the epic form, making it useful to capture and examine the tensions of the Romantic age. Writers could use epic poetry to construct, promote, examine, and critique ideological views, even as they crafted and positioned their public image.

The revival of epic poetry in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century was spurred on by a renewed interest in John Milton and *Paradise Lost*. William Hayley’s 1796 biography contributed to this interest, along with the age’s turbulent current events that made Milton’s life and work seem more relevant than ever. As both national poet and apologist for regicide, Milton was invoked by writers across the political spectrum to support their positions.²⁷ Both Wordsworth’s long poem in Miltonic blank verse and Blake’s psychedelic invocation of Milton’s spirit thus participate in this politically charged fascination with England’s greatest epist.

In a literary landscape where engagement with the revived epic genre allowed writers to construct and position their public image within ideologies of nation and empire, Wordsworth and Blake’s deployment of Miltonic allusion in their epic poetry, I argue, reflects their approaches to selfhood in relation to history, a question that had been energized in the wake of the French Revolution. Conservatives like Edmund Burke famously condemned the Revolution for violating the social contract, a “partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.”²⁸ They understood individuals as deriving rights from, as well as owing a duty to, their forebears (in addition to owing an obligation to posterity). Such conservative views appealed to tradition and emphasized the necessity of maintaining institutions and reforming them slowly. Meanwhile, progressive voices rejected the notion that the rights of the present day should be bound to tradition. In an equally well-known passage from *The Rights of Man*, Thomas Paine succinctly summarized the difference: “I am contending for the *rights of the living*, and against their being willed away, and controuled and contracted for, by the manuscript, assumed authority of the dead; and Mr. Burke is contending for the authority of the *dead* over the rights and freedom of the *living*.”²⁹ Between these poles, writers across the political spectrum conceived of the relationship between the present and the past in various ways. *The Prelude* and *Milton* stake out positions that broadly align with conservative and progressive stances, respectively. But these poems refuse to be pinned down: even as Wordsworth’s *Prelude* arguably grows more conservative over the course of its revisions, elements of the poem continue to query and resist this outlook; and while Blake’s poetry generally finds affinity with radical voices of his day, his unorthodox style and incorporation of multiple discourses make it difficult to locate him in any conventional political position. Attending to the formal choices of Wordsworth and Blake’s epics allows us to explore the complex ways their

²⁵ See (Keats 1970, lines 35–38).

²⁶ On epic competition with epic history, see (Wilkie 1965, p. 10).

²⁷ For an examination of how Milton’s image and poetry was put to use by writers of various political persuasions, see (Crawford 2010).

²⁸ See (Burke 1790, p. 144).

²⁹ See (Paine 1791, p. 5) (emphasis in original).

poems enter dialogue with discourse of the period, and also suggests how we, today, including our students, might relate to history and our own historical moment through literature.

It is not merely the presence of allusion, by itself, in Wordsworth and Blake's poems that assists them in engaging broader questions of self and history: it is the use of this device in works that self-consciously respond to the form of epic literature. By its nature, epic poetry depends upon allusion: writers identify their work as epic largely through a reiteration of traditional devices from, and references to, previous epics. And as the work of New Formalists reminds us, literary elements like allusions are not mere containers or producers of content that can be fully grasped by paraphrase alone. Form shapes writers as writers shape form: to author an epic is to enter a web of allusive structures that provide possibilities for composition. In the specifics of citing and recasting these references—in lineation, diction, revision, spatial arrangements on the page—texts not only insist on their epic status but dialogue with tradition and their own period. I explore below how Wordsworth uses allusion to link himself to Milton and ultimately Virgil, both privileging the past and thereby asserting the value of the present as a means of reiterating and restoring it; Blake, in contrast, alludes to Milton to query the very idea of dependence on the past.

Wordsworth conceives of himself at the end of the Revolutionary Books in *The Prelude* as part of a historical continuity, a Burkean “great society” of the “noble Living and the noble Dead.”³⁰ But Wordsworth extends Burke by constructing a concept of self that also overcomes history's failures and disappointments, ultimately seeking “domination” over the “face of outward things” (14.81-82). Yet the teleological narrative of *The Prelude*, and its construction of a transcendent subjectivity, is plagued by doubts and uncertainties, anxieties that are reflected on the textual level by questioning syntax, as Wolfson has argued, and by its manner of engaging with epic (and especially Miltonic) allusion.³¹

Many passages in *The Prelude* encapsulate and explore this attitude in microcosm. The example with which I will illustrate Wordsworth's use of Miltonic allusion comes from Book VIII, a section of the poem I have taught in many literature classes. Dealing with Wordsworth's residence in London, this Book tends to interest students, especially those who live in an urban environment. Wordsworth documents the sights and sounds of suffering, along with the disconnect he felt from others. Yet he also locates the city as a source of inspiration. By the end of the Book, Wordsworth recalls his experience in London with an epic simile. Wordsworth originally penned this passage as part of the “Simplon Pass” section of Book VI, just before the imagination redeems his sense of anti-climax at crossing the Alps without realizing it.³² Placed in Book VIII, the simile suggests that Wordsworth is finally able to “read” his experience in the city, producing from it both art and a sense of his position within the world and history. The first part of the simile, on which I will focus, corresponds to Wordsworth's overwhelming initial impression of the city. He likens himself to

The curious traveller, who, from open day,
Hath passed with torches into some huge cave,
The Grotto of Antiparos, or the Den
In old time haunted by that Danish Witch,
Yordas; he looks around and sees the vault
Widening on all sides; sees, or thinks he sees,
Erelong, the massy roof above his head,
That instantly unsettles and recedes,—
Substance and shadow, light and darkness, all

³⁰ *The Prelude*, 11.393-94 (1850 version; unless otherwise noted, quotations come from this version).

³¹ See (Wolfson 1986).

³² On the composition history of this passage, see *The Prelude*, 304 n. 7.

Commingled, making up a canopy
 Of shapes and forms and tendencies to shape
 That shift and vanish, change and interchange
 Like spectres (8.560-72)

The Grotto of Antiparos and the Cave of Yordas were both sites popular with travelers in the Aegean and Yorkshire, respectively. The latter was a show cave that Wordsworth had visited in May of 1800 with his brother John.³³ A New Historicist reading of this passage might explore the significance of these “mentions,” focusing on their place in the discourse of the age (and how this passage in *The Prelude* fits into that discourse). A New Formalist reading, by contrast, would be more interested in how Wordsworth deploys these cultural items, how the simile is constructed, and how his formal choices on the level of the line and the structure of the poem contribute to *The Prelude* and its place in the historical context.

When I assign students to read parts of Book VIII, I bring this section into class and invite them as we read it aloud to underline specific words and formal choices that seem important for Wordsworth’s construction of himself. As I do before we read any literature aloud, I tell students to attend to peculiar word choice, figurative language, line breaks, punctuation, and repetition. What they notice and highlight during the reading process becomes the foundation for discussion. Such concrete modes of entry into conversation are especially important in undergraduate classrooms: conclusions about texts begin from the specifics of the experience of reading.

Students are quick to pick up on the ominous mood created by invoking the cave of a witch, and they typically cite the words “haunted” and “spectres” as appropriate descriptors. Those students who recall our earlier discussions of Wordsworth’s questioning syntax throughout *The Prelude* can sometimes identify “sees, or thinks he sees” as a qualification that signals Wordsworth’s uncertainty. Classroom discussions of this passage can move to specific word choices, such as the use of “unsettles” to underscore the tone, or it can consider punctuation and lineation, such as the comma after “Erelong,” which suspends the motion of the passage hesitantly at the beginning of line 566. The ominous feeling of these lines will soon be juxtaposed by the triumph of the second half of the simile, yet its presence inscribes and foregrounds both Wordsworth’s misgivings about the city and, more broadly in the context of the entire poem, his doubts about selfhood and about the politics of his youth. Though the Revolutionary Books appear later, the ghost of the Revolution arguably haunts the entire epic, manifesting in its many doubts and hesitations.

The phrase “sees or thinks he sees” carries more significance than students first consider, for it is an allusion to both Milton and Virgil. The line recalls a simile from *Aeneid* 6, where Aeneas beholds in the underworld the shade of Dido. He sees her dimly, like one who “sees or thinks he sees, through the clouds, the moon” (“Aut videt, aut vidisse putat per nubila lunam”).³⁴ Milton borrows this phrasing to describe how Satan and his angels, in their own underworld, shrink to fit in the Pandemonium: they are like “fairy elves, /Whose midnight revels, by a forest side/Or fountain some belated peasant sees, /Or dreams he sees.”³⁵

When I bring this epic lineage into the classroom, students are quick to note how Wordsworth is constructing London as the underworld of his own epic. I usually prompt them to consider how Wordsworth might be connecting himself, not merely the city, to these older epics. With some encouragement, students tentatively conclude that just as Aeneas confronts the consequences of his actions, Wordsworth in this Book confronts the results of urbanization and British imperialism, with which he and other British citizens are to a degree complicit (and which furnish both his challenges

³³ On this visit, see (de Selincourt 1967, p. 298).

³⁴ See (Virgil 1900, 6.454, translation mine).

³⁵ See (Milton 1993, 1.781-84).

and his art). And like Milton's "belated Peasant," Wordsworth here feels secondary before the great epists who came before him, even as he places himself in their lineage.

I often bring into class the 1805 version of this passage and invite students to contrast it with its 1850 counterpart. They quickly observe the different lineation: in 1805, the traveler "sees, or thinks/He sees, erelong, the roof above his head" (8.716-17). Students can now trace the progression: Virgil expresses the simile in the space of a single line, and Milton breaks it over two lines. In 1805, Wordsworth further breaks the allusion across a steeper enjambment, intensifying a sense of fragmentation. By revising the allusion in 1850 so that it appears on a single line, Wordsworth asserts a more confident connection to literary history.

Wordsworth thus links himself to great authors of the past. Out of this connection will emerge his idea of a transcendent self that attempts to "dominate" the external world. As Book VIII continues, Wordsworth celebrates London as the "Fount of my country's destiny and the world's", whose grand history—finally able in his mind to compete with that of classical Greece and Rome—precipitates for him a sense of the "human nature unto which I felt/That I belonged . . . a spirit/Diffused through time and space" (593, 608, 610–11). This sense of self anticipates his feeling of belonging to a "great society" of the "noble Living and the noble Dead," participating in an intellectual community that stretches back into a privileged past. If the project of *The Prelude* involves "enshrining . . . the spirit of the Past/For future restoration" on the level of Wordsworth's biography, many passages in the poem suggest that Wordsworth also seeks to enshrine an idealized sense of historical and literary greatness out of which his self emerges (12.285-86). Wordsworth's allusion in this section of Book VIII reflects this broader conception of the self within history, but it also preserves the doubts and anxieties that accompany it, even as the revised lineation of the 1850 version strives to diminish them.

Wordsworth's epic thus aligns him with more conservative conceptions of self and history, but in the details of its formal elements, it offers more than a simplistic yearning for the past: Wordsworth crafts a selfhood sensitive to its debt to the past, anxious about the vexations of the present, and eager to seek "domination" over the "face of outward things," even as it registers doubt toward the possibility of such transcendence. Overall, *The Prelude* can be read not as simply adopting a more conservative ideology in a blind response to the pressures of history: Wordsworth actively confronts these pressures, tentatively asserting a conception of selfhood and crystalizing its tensions through formal choices. These conclusions that emerge from close reading and classroom discussion suggest broader avenues for critics to explore. Further investigations of *The Prelude* might consider how Wordsworth's allusions operate throughout the text and how his conflicted notion of selfhood aligns with and differs from ideas about self and history endorsed by other writers of the era. Critics might consider how the very form of the poem enables Wordsworth to dialogue with contemporary ideas of the social contract, as Zoe Beenstock has examined.³⁶ It would be particularly interesting to consider how Wordsworth enters conversation with other Romantic-era epics, especially underread texts, through the form of his work.

While Wordsworth connects himself to a "great society" that extends into the past and that he would "enshrine" for the future, Blake conceives of a self that can escape a sense of bondage to history, a self that need not restore the past for the sake of the future. Blake's conception here depends upon overcoming the notions of selfhood that writers and thinkers like Wordsworth promote. While Wordsworth privileges the past and lauds the self that emerges from it, Blake celebrates the timeless Moment of artistic inspiration, in which the imagination can query the temporal categories that facilitate a fetishization of the past.

Students generally struggle with Blake's long poems, but I introduce them to these texts from a perspective inspired by the New Formalist emphasis on the pleasures of reading: the goal, I tell them, is less complete mastery of the poem's meaning than a careful attention to the feelings that it provokes

³⁶ See (Beenstock 2016, chp. 4).

in us and the formal elements by which it does this. It is useful to place *Milton* side-by-side with *The Prelude*: students can easily detect even from brief extracts the radically different formal choices that structure their responses to their historical period.

The difficulty of Blake's epics is well known. These poems introduce a flurry of characters from Blake's idiosyncratic mythology, many of whom express aspects of other characters; their plots are dense and obscure; and they contain apparent contradictions. *Milton* is perhaps the most straightforward of these works, and its premise is easy enough for students to grasp: John Milton returns from the afterlife and enters the body of William Blake to inspire him to write the very poem that records this event.³⁷ In an age of renewed interest in Milton, this premise suggests that the poem comments on the epic revival itself and the (often reactionary) ends to which many would-be epists were putting Milton's image. Blake not only suggests he is "out-Miltoning" his contemporaries, absorbing the great English poet directly into his body: he challenges the conservative, past-looking model of selfhood implicit in many of the derivative Romantic-era epics.

The example I will use from *Milton* is one that captures the imagination of students: the scene in which John Milton descends to the world of Generation and enters Blake himself:

as a wintry globe descends precipitant thro' Beulah bursting,
With thunders loud and terrible: so Miltons shadow fell
Precipitant loud thundring into the Sea of Time & Space.
Then first I saw him in the Zenith as a falling star,
Descending perpendicular, swift as the swallow or swift;
And on my left foot falling on the tarsus, enterd there,
But from my left foot a black cloud redounding spread over Europe. (15[17].44-50, E110)

Between lines 46 and 47, a small illustration depicts a star falling into a man's foot and spreading outward in black lines (Figure 1). The language in this passage alludes to Luke 10:18 ("I saw Satan fall like lightning from Heaven") and Revelations 9:1 ("and I saw a star fall from heaven unto the earth"). It further echoes *Paradise Lost* 1.745, where the fallen angel Mulciber/Vulcan was "Dropt from the Zenith like a falling Star," and 10.184, in which Satan "fall[s] like lightning down from Heaven" before Christ triumphs over him.

A New Historicist reading might pursue how these Biblical and Miltonic passages were understood and used by Christians in Blake's time, or it might seize on a word like "pestilence" and investigate the state of disease or medical science during Blake's lifetime. In contrast, a New Formalist reading would be more interested in how Blake reframes Biblical and Miltonic references in his poem's form. Blake's peculiar allusions to multiple sources here allow him to cast his poem's John Milton as the Satan of *Paradise Lost*, a redemptive Christ figure, and a double for Blake himself.

After my classes discuss extracts from *The Prelude*, I often bring in fragments of *Milton* and encourage students to engage with Blake's visual art as well as his poetry. Blake illustrates versions of Milton's descent three times: full-plate illustrations on plate 29 and 33 (Figures 2 and 3), as well as the small illustration on plate 14. The full-plate illustrations are labeled "William" and "Robert" (Blake's brother), respectively, suggesting that the figures are independent people even as their depiction implies that they are one (as if the images represent the same moment seen from different angles).³⁸ I often invite students to respond to Blake's illustrations with short in-class writing assignments that require them to imagine "entering" his pictures and to write a creative piece about what they think they would see, hear, feel, or even smell. Though some students resist such an exercise, many

³⁷ For a helpful overview of the plot of *Milton*, see (Fox 2015).

³⁸ On these illustrations in the "parallelism" of the poem, see (Fox 2015, pp. 223–24). On Blake's relationship with Robert, see (Essick and Viscomi 1998, pp. 27–28).

are more creative than they first suspect. When I instruct them to write about the scenes of Milton's fall, students report in our discussion varying interpretations undergirded by a sense of uncertainty. Some students detect joy and rapture in the figures, whom they interpret as throwing their arms to the air in celebration. Others see an attitude of pain, imagining cries of agony or sorrow. Still others sense an attitude of acceptance, as each figure resigns to take upon himself the burden of inspiration. Though students are unable to decide on a definitive interpretation of these images, they typically agree that they are evocative and powerful.

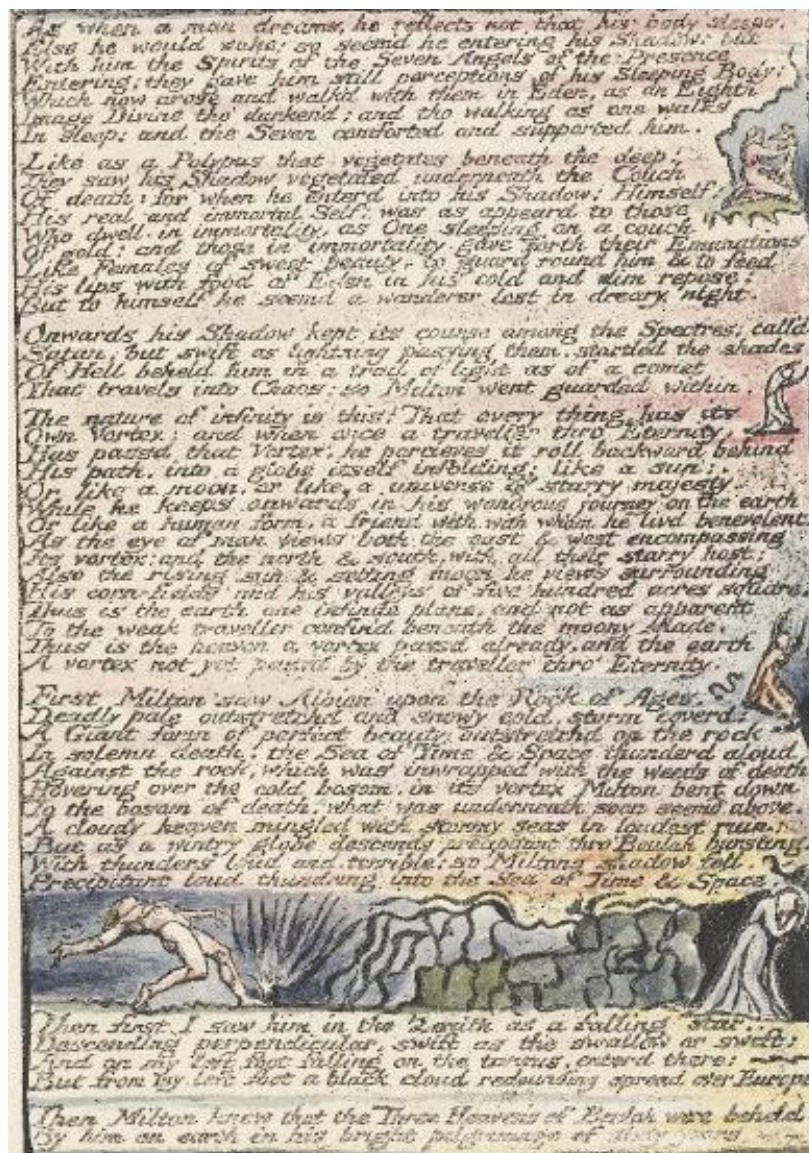


Figure 1. Milton: A Poem, Copy A, Plate 14 © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 2. *Milton: A Poem*, Copy A, Plate 29 © The Trustees of the British Museum.

In examining the poetry from plate 14, students generally first observe the long lines that Blake employs, as well as his use of multiple similes instead of a single, extended comparison. The longer lines help create a Biblical cadence. The steep enjambment of lines 45–46 above the illustration throws forward the momentum of the description of Milton’s fall, while the punctuation at the end of each line below the illustration suspends the action. Each line underneath the illustration provides a new impression of the fall or its consequence. Students have reported that reading these lines out loud enacts the vision they describe: a precipitous fall that radiates outward as a series of effects into the world. Grouped around the illustration, this cluster of lines is emphasized, both by being “interrupted” by an image and “emerging” from the image, almost as if “protecting” it (students rarely agree on which interpretation is correct). The many similes in the passage intensify and may almost overwhelm readers: Milton’s fall is not merely likened to a star but to a “wintry globe” and to a “swallow or swift.” The punning repetition of “swift” on line 48 calls attention to the figure of speech while blurring its tenor and vehicle. It is as if the speaker is struggling to find language to describe the ineffable experience of poetic inspiration, which has begun to eat away at the distinction between categories.

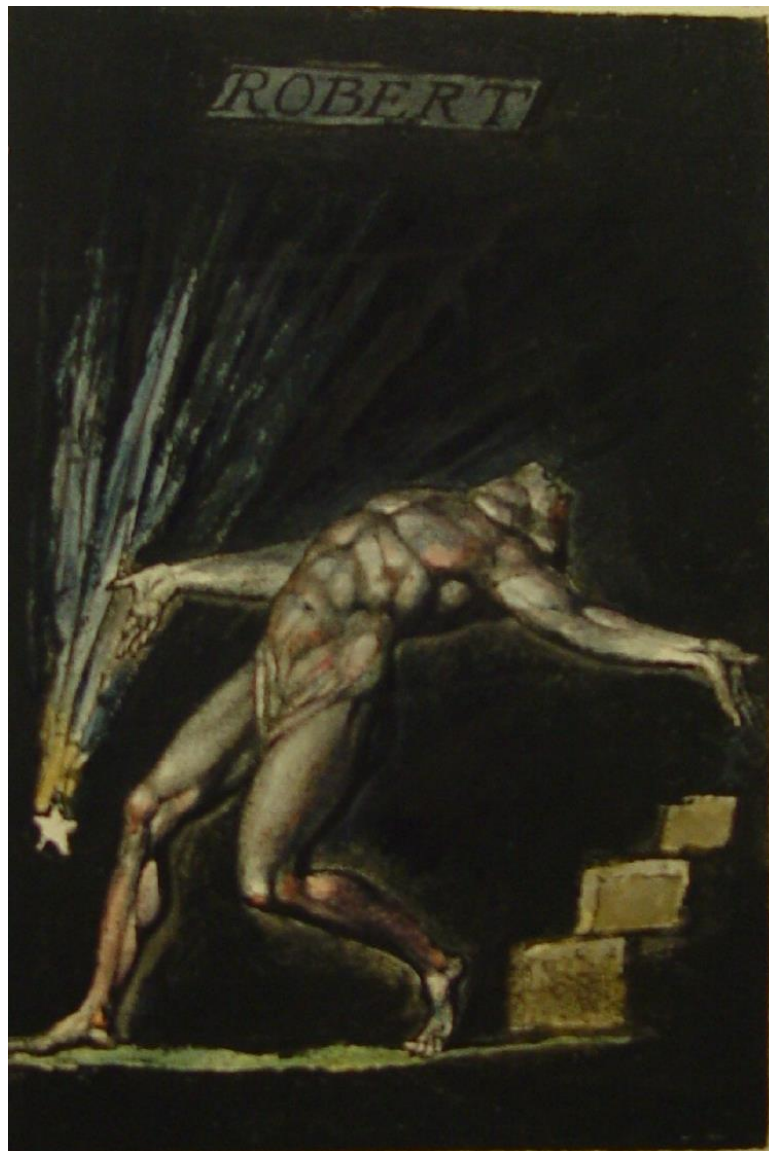


Figure 3. *Milton: A Poem*, Copy A, Plate 33 © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Though Blake takes Milton into his body, he is not obliquely reiterating his language with a sense of belated apprehension, as Wordsworth does in *The Prelude*. Blake, as character in his epic, becomes the vehicle by which Milton spreads reborn over Europe to correct his errors and repair his image—errors that Blake associated with tyrannical religion and imperialism, some of the very errors that writers of the Romantic epic revival were perpetuating in the act of invoking Milton.³⁹ Similarly, Milton's language becomes reborn through William Blake's acts of forming, reframed throughout *Milton* as a response to the Romantic epic revival. If Blake derives meaning from Milton, then Milton equally derives meaning from Blake. In the Moment of poetic inspiration, the boundaries between these writers blur. Yet there is no single, objective way to render this blurring, as suggested by the multiple illustrations with many possible interpretations (and an accordingly ambiguous relationship between the passage and its illustration in terms of their layout on the plate). As Blake's radical reframing of Milton's language and plot throughout the poem makes clear, he refuses to privilege his sources, and thus refuses to privilege the past: Blake conceives of himself as an equal creative partner with both

³⁹ On the errors Blake saw in Milton, see (Sandler 1972).

Milton and the Bible, and he implicitly rejects the idea that the self derives its meaning from its place in history, as well as the idea that the self's historical position can enable it to obtain "domination" over the external world. To use the language of *Milton*, Blake throughout the poem annihilates the "Selfhood," an understanding of the self as distinct from others and locked in oppositional relationships with them. Further investigations of *Milton* might trace the complex ways that it performs this notion of self, particularly in Blake's eccentric homage to and revision of the epic genre. Critics might further examine how Blake's use of allusion aligns with, extends, and even challenges more radical voices of the period as it strives against the work of much of the Romantic-era epic revival.

3. Forming Responses in the Classroom

A close attention to the text facilitates productive classroom conversations that not only develop students' abilities as interpreters and admirers of literature but also give them a taste of literary form's relationship with historical context. For writing-intensive literature classes, New Formalist approaches are particularly useful because writing pedagogy is enriched by making students aware of formal elements in their own work, and how their sentence-level choices intersect with the context of their historical moment.

When students write about these poems and others, they benefit from explicit discussions of templates. Many similar sentence structures recur across academic writing, and basic templates can serve as a jumping-off point for writing exercises. Sometimes, these templates are as straightforward as clear transitions between texts: "While Wordsworth _____, William Blake _____." At other times, templates allow students to articulate their argument with nuance: "By using allusions to _____, Wordsworth not only _____, but also _____." In other situations, templates are vital to help students ground their arguments in specifics of the text. After quoting from the literature, a student can write a sentence like this: "The word _____ here suggests that _____" or "The use of _____ in a simile allows Wordsworth to _____."

When discussing *The Prelude* and *Milton*, I often ask students to consider their own relationship to the past, both their personal histories and world history. Students generally struggle with simultaneously acknowledging their links to the past and locating their independence from it. To help them explore these questions that emerge from a discussion of this literature, I sometimes have students compose two paragraphs in class. The first asks them to quote from *The Prelude* and respond by considering how they themselves are shaped in various ways by the past. The second invites them to quote from *Milton* and respond by reflecting on how they are not constrained or defined completely by the past. As my students revise their writing in class (often in groups, where they can react to each other's paragraphs in real time), opportunities arise to connect their writing on the sentence level to broader intellectual issues. To give one minor example, a revision exercise that involves the grammatical structures of coordination and subordination opens a conversation about students' understanding of their place in history. Students commonly write a sentence along these lines in a first draft: "Wordsworth finds fulfillment in 'enshrin[ing]' the past, and I keep the traditions of my family in mind in my daily life." By coordinating its ideas, the sentence suggests an equal importance between them. But by revising the sentence to subordinate its claim about Wordsworth to its discussion of the writer's own life ("While Wordsworth finds fulfillment . . . "), the writer can foreground her lived experience and clarify that her reading of Wordsworth is secondary to it. Though Wordsworth is in a sense part of the company of "Noble Dead" that our students are joining by studying literature, the form of the revised sentence emphasizes that the needs and experiences of the present day take precedence. The formal structures of student writing thus suggest action in both thought and deed, to the extent that thought shapes our behavior. Sentence-level revisions are not merely pedantic polishing: in identifying and refining thought, they are forms of action. The classroom can become a space where students collaboratively learn to locate such formal structures of action in both literary works and their own writing.

The study of literature and history, as well as writing about these subjects and understanding their interconnection, always involves questions of form. New Formalist theory and practice, which place emphasis on the intersection of form and context, can help connect the pleasures of our own reading, the intellectual labor of the classroom, and the insights that critics can glean from extending these avenues. The “return to form” in literary studies is less a return than a recognition of the value of studying the ways that forms of various kinds shape literary texts, history, and even ourselves. Attending to what Blake would call the “Minute Particulars” of a text is not a way of ignoring complex historical forces: it is a path to locating the specifics not only of the mutually constituent roles of form and content, and text and context, but of possibilities of action afforded by forms.

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