JOHN MARTIN'S
REVOLUTION AND GRANDEUR:
A NEW DIRECTION FOR MILTON'S
EARLY ILLUSTRATORS

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEXT AND ILLUSTRATION in English books has been problematic since the seventeenth century. Essentially, a text exists before an illustrator brings visual concept to it, so it has its own life limited only by the author's intent, insofar as an author can limit the imagination of readers. Milton, for example, never conceived of Paradise Lost as a text to be "illustrated" by another hand. In Renaissance England there were, of course, illustrated texts known as emblem books wherein the marriage of text and art was intentional. These books were immensely popular, but the art died out by the Restoration, enjoying a brief, creative revival under the hands of William Blake, the most consummate author-illustrator that England has produced. But the basic problem with an illustration, when the author and illustrator are not the same person, is that it brings to a text an outsider's vision and thus "guides" readers to "envision" a poem in much the same way as the outsider-illustrator. Today we accept literary visual aids because we live in a world of film, wherein our creative imagination is often undercut by extrapolating from words to image because the magic is done for us by cinematographers, but image in the Renaissance was generally separate from text, both being distinct arts. Some defenders of sacred words, in fact, went so far as to decry the "worshiping" of images that sprang from words transformed into stained glass windows and statues.

Illustrating a text is thus problematic for two reasons: illustration restricts the author's vision and it makes the reader lazy. What young reader of Paradise Lost would not rather look at a Gustave Doré picture than struggle with Milton's mighty lines? Virginia Tufte, however, defends the use of illustrations, noting that they can enhance a young reader's attention to imagery (112). Her argument suggests, in fact, that very young readers need pictures to jangle the imagination,
but I suspect there are few readers of *Paradise Lost* under the age of sixteen, and by that age the imagination has been enriched by thousands of visual stimuli, precluding the need for outside help. At some point a reader of Milton grows beyond illustration, the poem being visual enough in itself. Joseph Wittreich maintains that modern readers tend to dissociate an illustration from the text because they recognize in visual apparatus an attempt by painters to influence reading:

Milton’s illustrators postulated a different set of premises: they assumed an interdependence of text and design; their objective in illustrating a poem was to illuminate it; their designs, therefore, attempted a crystallization of the Miltonic vision, which the artist then criticized and might even try to correct. Milton illustration, with very few exceptions, is a form of nonverbal criticism. (56)

So, illustrators become critics and may do more to skew readers away from the text than to lure reluctant neophytes to the feet of the bard. The illustrations are, in fact, more often than not, a starting point for animated discussion on how poorly a given artist understands the real Milton. In that regard they are a valuable teaching tool, but only after the text has been allowed to speak for itself. What is it exactly that Milton attempted to express in his great poem? If one were to draw an answer to that question by looking at most *Paradise Lost* illustrations, one might very well conclude that Milton was concerned only with individuals, since the focus in each picture is on either a human or supernatural figure. The single exception can be found in the work of John Martin (1789–1854), who alone, to my mind, captures the epic grandeur of *Paradise Lost*.

Martin’s inspiration came not from the pictures of earlier illustrators but rather from the poem itself, read as grandiose, with a vision parallel to that of the English orator Edmund Burke. One reason that early illustrators of *Paradise Lost* do not succeed as well as John Martin is that they never understood or applied Burke’s distinction between what is sublime and what is beautiful. We do not know if John Martin had ever read Burke’s essay (written half a century before Martin’s public career), but there is no doubt that the effects Burke wanted are found magnificently in Martin’s illustrations. When *The Sublime and the Beautiful* essay appeared in 1756, Edmund Burke defined the sublime in a way that was to revolutionize English art: