Title: Illustration 1 to Milton's "Paradise Lost": Satan Calling Up His Legions
Date: 1807
Basic Detail Report

Primary Maker: William Blake
Medium: pen and watercolor

Description: Satan is pictured "on the Beach/Of inflamed Sea" as he attempts to rouse his rebel angels (1:299-334). Blake had previously painted two temperas of this scene, one ca. 1799-1800, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the other ca. 1800-1805, now at Petworth House, Sussex (Butlin 1981, Nos. 661 and 662). In both, Satan stands in the upper center of the composition with arms raised, but the action is pictured from a more distant point of view with many more figures less symmetrically arranged than in the Huntington watercolor. A slight pencil drawing (ca. 1805-10?) may be a sketch for Satan with alternative positions for his arms (Robert N. Essick collection; Butlin 1981, No. 591). Satan's troubled visage with "baleful eyes" (1:56) and the slight suggestion of scales over his genitals, like those given to Satan in Blake's sixth Job watercolor of ca. 1805-1806 (Pierpoint Morgan Library; Butlin 1981, No. 550.6), indicate his fallen condition; but his heroic physique suggests residual potency. His dramatic stance and arm gesture recall illustrations of this scene by Thomas Lawrence (exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1799) and Henry Fuseli (painted and engraved in 1802), as well as Blake's own personification of "Fire" in For Children: The Gates of Paradise, plate 5 (1793). [1] Satan's "ponderous shield" and "Spear" (1:284, 292) rest on the rock behind and to the right of him. The clouds and streaks in the sky in the background suggest one half of Milton's interwoven water and flame imagery descriptive of the "fiery Deluge" of hell (1:68). Some of Satan's minions are beginning to "rouse and bestir themselves" (1:334) and rise from their "Dungeon horrible" and "Adamatine Chains and penal Fire" (1:48, 61). Their bodies, like many similar figures throughout Blake's art, testify to his great indebtedness to Michaelangelo. The chained figure immediately below Satan's feet is a familiar Blakean type, with notable versions on the frontispiece and plate 3 of America (1793), plate 22 of the Book of Urizen (1794), and in the lower left corner of both tempera versions of "Satan Calling Up His Legions." The upside-down figure just to the right has numerous parallels, including the victim in "The Poison Tree" in Songs of Experience (1794), two personifications of Death in Blake's Night Thoughts watercolors of ca. 1795-97 (British Museum; Butlin 1981, Nos. 330.434 and 330.435), one of the dead sons in the third Job design (Pierpoint Morgan Library; Butlin 1981, No. 550.3), and one of the fallen figures in the lower right corner of "The Fall of Man," a watercolor of 1807 (Victoria and Albert Museum; Butlin 1981, No. 641). A generally similar upside-down male with cascading hair, but no beard, appears in Edward Burney's illustration of the same scene in an edition of Paradise Lost published in 1799. The crouching devil in the lower left corner is reminiscent of the imprisoned figure on plate 9 of The Book of Urizen; he is repeated in a small niche in the lower right quarter of "The Last Judgment" pencil drawing of ca. 1809 (National Gallery of Art, Washington; Butlin 1981, No. 645). The seated figure behind Satan is pictured below his leader in both tempura versions. His melancholic posture suggests classical sculptures of fallen
soldiers or a traditional river god. [2] The latter association is particularly apt because of the infernal river of "liquid fire" (1:229, and see 2: 575-76) cascading from behind his left hip. The rising figure on the left is a slightly modified version of one of the saved just below the left corner of Christ's throne in Blake's "The Day of Judgment" illustration to Robert Blair's The Grave, drawn in 1805 but now known only through Louis Schiavonetti's engraving of 1808. The format of the whole design, with rising and crouching bodies symmetrically arranged about a vertical central axis defined by a single dominant figure, also reminds us of a Resurrection or Last Judgment scene. [3] Blake's use of this compositional formula suggests that he found a typological relationship between Satan's rousing of the fallen angels and Christ's resurrection of fallen man, the former event a satanic parody of the latter, both predicting and necessitating it. There are only eight figures pictured in the Butts version, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Satan, the recumbent figure behind him, and the crouching figure lower left are positioned much as in the Huntington design, but the upside-down and bearded man has been moved to the lower center of the composition. His manacled arms and hands are pictured in a cruciform position; the head of another tortured follower of Satan emerges above his right arm. The bound figure with prominent knees drawn up to his chest, placed immediately below Satan in the Huntington design, has been moved to the right corner. Two heads appear above his left shoulder. There is no fiery river; flames appear only around Satan's feet and the two figures below him, and above the group lower right. There is only one spear. The streaks in the sky behind Satan are more prominent. Notes 1. In the sketch of "Fire" in his Notebook, Blake quoted lines from Paradise Lost describing Satan: "Forthwith upright he rears from off the pool/ His mighty stature" (1:221-22). 2. Suggested in Dunbar 1980, 45. 3. Pointed out in Andrew Wilton, "Blake and the Antique," The British Museum Yearbook 1: The Classic Tradition (London: British Museum, 1976), 208. Dimensions: 9 13/16 x 8 5/16 in. (25 x 21.1 cm.) mount: 9 13/16 x 8 5/16 in. (25 x 21.1 cm.)