

Joint Master's Degree in European, American and Postcolonial Language and Literature  
Ca' Foscari University of Venice  
Final Thesis

## **The Book of Copper and the Anvil of Death:** Gothic Elements of William Blake's Creation Myth



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**Academic Year**

2018/2019

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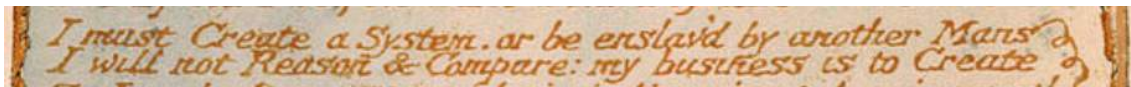
In the twelfth century, Abbot Suger undertook the lofty and radical task of refurbishing the Church of Saint-Denis, and in so doing, became the man chiefly responsible for defining Gothic architectural style. Arguably his most enduring change to the architecture of the period was his development of the concept of what he called *lux continua*, or “continuous light.”<sup>1</sup> This term applies, in the simplest terms, to the dappled, colored light that pours through the windows of a Gothic cathedral. Its function is not only to beautify and instruct the congregation in the stories of the Bible, but also to help to dissolve the bulk of the heavy stone masonry of the cathedral. However, the term takes on a metaphysical aspect when placed in context: this light is the splendid presence of God, and it is with this light that one may see the uninterrupted magnificence of the divine presence in the fallen, material world. This is nothing less than the goal of William Blake, particularly in his later, sometimes more convoluted works. With the world he creates, the figures he manifests, and the states he describes in technicolor realness, Blake sheds a light upon the structures of the world in order to break them down into a spectral and otherworldly feeling, one that one can only sense if one uses the tools of perception that he outlines. To read Blake’s prophecies is an exercise in destruction and enlightenment. In this dissertation, I hope to identify the forms within the light, and to demystify the poems to a certain degree by drawing parallels between some of the motifs and figures in these poems with tropes within the major literary tradition of the Gothic. To do so, the following pages will delve into William Blake’s cosmology, especially the three works that make up the bulk of his

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<sup>1</sup> Alloa, Emanuel. “Architectures of Transparency.” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 53/54, 2008, cit. 322.

creation myth: *The (First) Book of Urizen* (1794), *The Book of Los* (1795), and *The Four Zoas* (1797).

Blake has created a pattern in his poetry that is both a rubric for perception and a multifaceted, ever-changing mythological system. Characteristically for a man as radically unique as William Blake, this system, while absolutely reminiscent in basic archetypal ways to Biblical mythology and Classical (i.e. Greek and Roman) myths, is also very much not just vertical changes made to traditions that came before it. As the character Los states in *Jerusalem*:



*Jerusalem*, Erdman 10. The William Blake Archive, <http://www.blakearchive.org>.<sup>2</sup>

“I must Create a System, or be enslav’d by another Mans  
I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create.”

That said, Blake’s cosmology does follow the same rules as a mythology that comes about more naturally and pluralistically within a culture. Like the mythologies that came before, Blake’s system is not primarily an attempt to explain reality, nor is it a pseudo-primitive form of science or philosophy. It is rather a form of imaginative thinking that, rather paradoxically, uses literal versions of imaginative forms in order to demonstrate essential human truths. While Blake is ultimately a Biblical poet mired in the architecture of Christian texts, despite all his anti-religious feelings, he wanted to uncover the mythological universe of the human imagination, rather than projecting it on an objective God or similar analogy of external order.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all images and text samples in this thesis will include plate numbers corresponding to those found in David V. Erdman’s *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* for easy reference, as plate arrangement and numbering can vary edition by edition. However, the images themselves have been sampled from The William Blake Archive.

<sup>3</sup> Frye, Northrop. *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth, and Society*. Indiana University Press, 1976, cit. 109.

Mythological reinterpretations are not really unusual during this period — particularly in the works of later Romantic poets — but no one fleshed out a personal universe with as much passion and intimacy as Blake (except, perhaps, J.R.R. Tolkien years later). This was no silly pastime, nor was it an accomplished series of Pygmalion retellings or reconfigurations of Olympian psyches; as Northrop Frye said, Blake understood the underlying archetypal structures of myth and narrative better than anyone in literature, and possibly just as well as some of the greats in the field like James George Frazer and Robert Graves.<sup>4</sup> It is with this knowledge that he was able to combine what he truly believed to be the secrets of the universe, which are unlocked by opening the doors of perception with Blake as a guide to the process. The result is essentially the literary equivalent of the statement made by Joseph Campbell:

“Mythology is not a lie, mythology is poetry, it is metaphorical. It has been well said that mythology is the penultimate truth — penultimate because the ultimate cannot be put into words. It is beyond words. Beyond images [...] Mythology pitches the mind beyond the rim, to what can be known but not told.”<sup>5</sup>

This is done with a thoroughness that is oftentimes baffling, because, as one might imagine, in order to demonstrate the essential truths of the universe and of the evolved creatures within it, quite a lot of ground needs to be covered. This is why Blake found the need to retell and flesh out his creation myth a handful of times in different poems. It is chiefly for this reason that just one element of this cosmology will be delved into in this dissertation: the creation myth, along with its central figures. Below is a brief explanation of this creation myth, and an introduction to the major players that this

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<sup>4</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, cit. 112.

<sup>5</sup> Campbell, Joseph. “Perspectives on Myths & Sacred Texts.” *Bill Moyers on Faith & Reason*. PBS: Public Broadcasting Service. <https://www.pbs.org/moyers/faithandreason/perspectives1.html>.

dissertation will be examining in the following pages — for before this dissertation goes into certain aspects of the myths in depth, it is worth first going through it completely, simply in order to get a good impression of the surface before tracing our fingers along the bones beneath.

Blake's creation myth takes a number of structural cues from Jacob Boehme, a German mystic who was very influential for the poet. Boehme, in his scandalous work *Aurora*, analysed the makeup of the human psyche, placing Imagination at the center of man's potentially infinite powers, and attacking "reason" as its opposite and its enemy. He likewise believed that the Bible was symbolically of great value, and that it expressed some of the deepest truths of the human soul, though the Church was blind and despicable.<sup>6</sup> It is no wonder, then, that he was very influential William Blake, as well as for many other writers such as Milton and those of Romantic ilk.<sup>7</sup> In Boehme's version of the story of creation, three elements are of note: 1) creation and the fall occur simultaneously, 2) this takes place due to an eternal being's high degree of introspection, and 3) the Fall occurs in two stages, the second being the creation of Eve as a division from the side of Adam. Blake follows those three characteristics closely, but changes a few things: 1) Eternity consists of an entire society of eternal beings with infinite power (this is reformulated in *Four Zoas*, as I will cover in a moment) 2) the act of creation is actually sparked by the physical formation of Urizen himself, who was expelled from Eternity by the other immortals for his tyrannical aspirations, and 3) Blake has two major creators at work, including Los.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Damon, S. Foster. *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake*. Dartmouth College Press, 2013, cit. 39-41.

<sup>7</sup> Stevenson, W.H., editor. *Blake: The Complete Poems*. Routledge, 2007, cit. 253.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 234

Blake refers to his creation story, as well as the characters of Urizen and Los, countless times throughout his poetry, as he continued to shift or cultivate his points of view on creation, existence, unity, and monstrosity over the course of his life (incidentally, this is the reason why this dissertation will end up taking samples of text from all across Blake's career, rather than from a tidy handful of poems). However, the complete narrative of the creation myth proper takes place in just three poems. The first is *The (First) Book of Urizen*, which is the first of three books in what Blake called his Bible of Hell. *Urizen* tells the story of creation as outlined above. Urizen, angered at his failure to take tyrannical control of the immortals, isolates himself in exile from his peers, where he hardens into the fixed form of man in seven stages (these stages, of course, recalling the number of days that God took to create Earth in the Bible). Los, the blacksmith with his anvils of death,<sup>9</sup> is sent to observe this process, which leads him to become equally forgetful of Eternity and equally obsessively introspective. In the end, he aids Urizen in his transformation by lending permanence to the forms Urizen morphs into. Los then splinters in two — he becomes both Los and a female Emanation named Enitharmon, with whom he makes a child named Orc. The Fall is completed with the chaining of Orc with links formed from jealousy. The remainder of the narrative tells of Urizen's explorations of the dark world he has created, where he witnesses the creation of the four elements, which are called his children, a parade of creatures, and then finally humanity. All of the things in this world are restricted under his Net of Religion, and the poem ends with humanity fleeing him in an Exodus from Egypt. The motive behind the creation of this story seems to be Blake's desire to understand the nature of tyranny, and Urizen would develop even more into an allegorical figure inhabiting the concept of

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<sup>9</sup> Blake, William. "Jerusalem." *Blake: The Complete Poems*, edited by W.H. Stevenson, Routledge, 2007, cit. 675.

harsh and unfair law as time went by. Eventually, the themes behind the creation story that are more related to the unity or division of the soul come to the fore, but in *Urizen*, a much more bleak image of the selfish drive of the creator figure is prominent.

The second and third books of this infernal Bible of Hell were *The Book of Ahania* (1795) and *The Book of Los*. *Ahania*, though originally conceived to be the second of Urizen's books, was retitled, and occupies itself with a reinterpretation of the events of *Exodus*. *Los* is a retelling of *Urizen* from Los's point of view, and the narrative is cast in such a way that it shows a much greater level of similarity with the book of Genesis, which may have been the reason for the retelling. The only change here is that the six-day endeavor to give form to Urizen is omitted, and readers are simply privy to the tale of Los binding the sun to Urizen's spine. However, much more attention is given to Los aiding in creating the rest of the disorganized universe that he finds himself trapped in, and it is here that the seven-day structure appears once more. He makes fire, water, earth (at which point, he himself gains physical form), the cosmos, and then, finally, Adam. Blake was ultimately dissatisfied with the way that the Bible of Hell turned out, which is why he scrapped it and either retold the stories once more or took segments of it to insert into *Four Zoas*, which is the final poem that ought to be summarized before this dissertation moves on.

*Four Zoas*, though unfinished, is still a much longer poem than either *Urizen* or *Los*, as it ambitiously attempts to place all of Blake's myths within one larger work. Therefore, within the first section of the work is found a reformulation of the creation myth with a few significant changes. The first change is the introduction of The Universal Man, a giant, who has now replaced the society of Eternals that was in the original version of the myth (he is later called "Albion" in *Jerusalem*). The elements of the



Man's psyche are seen in human form in four figures called "Zoas": Urizen, Urthona, Luvah, and Tharmas. In this version of the myth, Los is actually a form of Urthona. The Man falls sick when the Zoas begin to war against each other, which can be seen as an allegory of the conflict of the various parts of the soul, such as passion and reason. The conflict begins because Urizen, as well as his fellow Zoa, Luvah, want control over the sick and sleeping Universal Man. Urizen is characterized slightly differently here, and his motivations for seeking order and control now come from a fear of an abyss that opens before him during the course of the action. This creation of the rest of the material world is not outlined with any specificity or linearity at all. This is partially because in *Four Zoas*, Blake invents the "dream technique", which is supposed to reflect humanity's deepest mental processes, thereby abandoning a logical or progressive narrative structure entirely, and intentionally leaving out segments of narrative.<sup>10</sup> However, the more likely explanation for this omission is simply that the poem was unfinished — or to be more precise, abandoned. The poem as it was no longer expressed what Blake wanted to say about Albion or Los, and individual concepts were better expressed in a handful of separate new poems than they were in any attempt at an omnibus.<sup>11</sup> As mentioned previously, Albion, Urizen, Los, and the rest of the beings in this poem, will make appearances in almost all of Blake's poetry after this date, and smaller sections of the creation story will be revisited.

When trying to make sense of Blake, and to apply a simple answer to the question "What does any of this really mean?" in his mythology, it is hard not to feel disoriented. Beyond the challenge of understanding the poetry, there is the difficult matter of neatly labelling Blake as anything in particular in order to try to gain some

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<sup>10</sup> Damon, *Blake Dictionary*, cit. 143.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, cit. 144.

sense of context in the work. For many years he was dismissed as a mad mystic, set apart from and beneath the standard canon of British poets, but even now that he is more easily identified as being very much a man of his time with contemporary concerns, it is nearly impossible to label him as belonging to any particular movement or style. To Morse Peckham, Blake was “a failed Romantic ... the Enlightenment dissolved around him, but he retreated in fear to an early sixteenth-century position” and to a “closed system” made up of “neo-platonic and Hermetic” doctrines of redemption.<sup>12</sup> So there certainly seems to be doubt among some that he is truly Romantic or even Proto-Romantic, and when you combine this with the fact that he traditionally occupies space in three different disciplines — visual arts, poetry, and illustration — this difficulty is compounded almost to the point of insanity. Scholars and poets have long tried to lie patterns of thinking atop his structures in order to figure him out, and this dissertation is no exception. For while Blake very much understood what Campbell said about mythology, and while many of his poems betray a slightly muddled, ever-evolving execution of ideas, there is something in them that the reader seems to understand innately. As one Blake scholar put it, among all of the categories scholars try to place Blake in, “there was also that category of what was not known, but understood.”<sup>13</sup> It is exactly that hard-to-define but readily-felt sensation that we as readers and viewers feel deep in our bones that, as this dissertation is about to argue in depth, puts these later poems in the same category as *The Castle of Otronto*, *Dracula*, or *Frankenstein*. While Blake is certainly not a Gothic writer strictly speaking, this particular feeling characteristic of his poetry is a Gothic one.

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<sup>12</sup> Simpson, David. “Blake and Romanticism.” *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, edited by Morris Eaves, Cambridge University Press, 2003, cit. 174.

<sup>13</sup> Warner, Janet A. *Blake and the Language of Art*. McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1984, cit. xvii.

This is due to a number of factors, some of which are more topical than others. To start with, there are numerous examples of Gothic motifs throughout Blake's works; verses that were clearly influenced by this movement are scattered liberally throughout his poetry from early on in his career. Take, for instance, this passage from *The Song of Los* (1795):



*The Song of Los*, Erdman 7.

“Forth from the dead dust rattling bones to bones  
Join; shaking convuls'd, the shiv'ring clay breathes,  
And all flesh naked stands: Fathers and Friends,  
Mothers & Infants, Kings & Warriors.

The Grave shrieks with delight, & shakes  
Her hollow womb, & clasps the solid stem.  
Her bosom swells with wild desire,  
And milk & blood & glandous wine  
In rivers rush & shout & dance  
On mountain, dale and plain.

The Song of Los is Ended.  
Urizen Wept.”

These verses are almost supersaturated with cloying adoration of the grisley, so it is obvious that he was unafraid of taking part in the Gothic tradition. Indeed, one could characterize this poem and perhaps “Gwin, King of Norway,” along with a few of his other, shorter poems, like ‘Fair Elenor’ as nothing more than Gothic imitations of varying

degrees of quality.<sup>14</sup> The pervasive influence of the graveyard poets laced throughout his works, no doubt inspired by his commissioned illustrations to Young and Blair, is definitely well-documented, and will not go unexplored in this dissertation, either. His visual parallels to medieval style and his gleeful preoccupation with morbid vocabulary are also readily apparent in all of his longer poems. The character Thel, from Blake's first prophetic work entitled *The Book of Thel* (1789), is incredibly similar to a typical Gothic heroine in the opening sections of the poem, in that she keeps the evil of the dark, labyrinthine forest at bay by invoking her purity and chastity. There are also several instances in Blake's poetry of less-tangible Gothic tropes, such as the heady mixture of decay and eroticism in the below image of a naked woman lying with the worm, a common symbol of mortality.<sup>15</sup>



Fig. 1: *Jerusalem*, Erdman 63.

Nelson Hilton writes off Blake's dabbling into the overtly Gothic as simply part of the poet's great ambition to explore all realms of art,<sup>16</sup> but that seems to this writer to be a bit of a hasty dismissal, as Blake's love for the Gothic was not merely relegated to imagery of bleeding castle walls in his poetic works. It had its heart in medieval art and

<sup>14</sup> Punter, David. *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the present day. Volume 1: The Gothic Tradition*. Pearson Education Limited, 1996, cit. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Warner, *Language of Art*, cit. 20.

<sup>16</sup> Hilton, Nelson. "Blake's early works." *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, edited by Morris Eaves, Cambridge University Press, 2003, cit. 193.

architecture, which very likely stemmed from his first paid commission: a series of plates depicting Westminster Abbey.<sup>17</sup> Much of Blake's use of iconography and pictorial space are obviously medieval gothic in style, though he is prone to blending it with mannerist elongation and Renaissance conceptions of the human figure. Even Blake's trademark blurring of boundaries between symbol and reality are typical of medieval and Renaissance art, where abstract ideas are painted as real and visible objects and figures all the time.<sup>18</sup> These visual tendencies of Blake's should be given the same weight as his sometimes cavalier usage of graveyard imagery, and as these tendencies saturate the entirety of Blake's visual oeuvre, it seems obvious that the Gothic has a special place in the core of Blake's works.

However, this dissertation will not dwell for long on these more surface aspects of Blake's Gothicism. The scholar David Punter has in recent years expanded what the definition of the Gothic is, and it was to his writings that I owe a great debt, for it is with this new exploration in mind that Blake's mythical-literary patterns became evident. Punter writes that the Gothic has been defined in innumerable ways over the course of history, because like the poetry of Blake himself, Gothic literature can be seen as amorphous — a loose collection of writings that are still uncharitably labelled by some as “sensationalist.”<sup>19</sup> However, the origins of the style lie in the belief, shared by Blake, that “the fruits of primitivism possessed a fire and a sense of grandeur” that was lacking in British culture and writing at the time, and that re-establishing connections with the rude, wild Gothic past of Spenser and Milton was a way to breathe life back into British culture.<sup>20</sup> Readers can see the resonance of that throughout Blake, both in his poetry

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<sup>17</sup> Ackroyd, Peter. *Blake*. Vintage Books, 1995, cit 43.

<sup>18</sup> Warner, *Language of Art*, cit. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Punter, *Literature of Terror*, cit. 5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

imitating Spenser and centering around Milton, as well as in his letters bemoaning the contemporary art scene and colorism.

Punter also puts forward the premise that three principal symbolic figures run through Gothic works. He calls these figures “the wanderer”, “the vampire”, and “the seeker after forbidden knowledge.”<sup>21</sup> This statement is the bedrock upon which this dissertation rests. While there are indeed examples of the first two of these figures in Blake’s poetry, “the seeker after forbidden knowledge” is the one that best identifies the figures found in Blake’s creation myths, and it is on these figures that this dissertation will focus. The characters of Urizen and Los are both such figures — as is Blake himself. All three men seek and find arcane knowledge in a doomed attempt to create life, and the resulting monstrous universe and human form is their terrible reward. This dissertation will establish that, with his Gothic creation myth, the narrative web Blake spins, like those of Goethe and Shelley, relies upon a hubristic seeker of arcane and profane knowledge creating something monstrous. To show this, the sections that follow will trace Blake’s use of the arts as he demonstrates himself to be in possession of supernatural powers of of creation in three areas of artistic production: language, visual art, and song. There is a reason for the focus on these three arts, namely that these are the arts normally shut off to those within the fallen world; they are the arts that require special intervention in order to be properly perceived:



*Jerusalem*, Erdman 10.

“But in Eternity the Four Arts: Poetry, Painting, Music,  
And Architecture which is Science: are the Four Faces of Man.  
Not so in Time and Space: there Three are shut out...”

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 87.

Each section of this dissertation will also include samples from Blake's works, whether it be the poetry or the drawings, that prove that he bestowed this wisdom and these powers upon his two major players in the creation myth: Urizen and Los. This dissertation will also, through several bits of in-depth analysis of the characters themselves and their actions in the poetry, show that the source of this knowledge within the narrative is, in true Gothic fashion, the grave. Finally, the dissertation will turn to the abominable result of Urizen and Los's machinations: fallen man and its home in the Mundane Shell, who are both monstrous in their very nature.

This thesis will take samples of poetry and images largely from William Blake's major poems and visual art between *America, A Prophecy* (1793) and *Jerusalem* (1820) in order to explore the Gothic elements of Blake's oeuvre, especially as they exist within his creation myth. With the aforementioned scholarship by David Punter as its base, the thesis will demonstrate that the substance of William Blake's creation myth (concerning two demiurges, Urizen and Los, and their part in the simultaneous creation and fall of both mankind and the material world) lies upon Gothic bones.



### The Seeker After Forbidden Knowledge

David Punter has identified three principal symbolic characters that run through Gothic works of fiction: the vampire, the wanderer, and the seeker after forbidden knowledge.<sup>22</sup> In fact, all three of these characters make appearances within the work of William Blake: Los's Spectre, which could be interpreted in autobiographical terms as a personage personifying self-doubt within the creative process, is described often in vampiric terms, and a similar paper could be proposed focusing on how the character

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<sup>22</sup> Punter, *Literature of Terror*, cit. 87.

Tiriël, the main character in Blake's first prophetic poem, is the perfect embodiment of the wanderer. However, the figure that shapes the narrative of Blake's creation myth is the third one: the seeker after forbidden knowledge. This figure is most characteristically found in Romantic-era characters like Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's Faust, or Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Both of these men — and, as I am about to argue, Blake's Urizen and Los — isolate themselves from the world and from regular society in order to access a form of knowledge that is normally, and perhaps correctly, hidden from the eyes of humanity. This weighty knowledge comes in three forms, the intermingling of which is critical to imagination, creation, and perception: the written word, visual arts, and song. In this dissertation, I will demonstrate that not only did Blake believe himself to be in possession of this arcane trio of knowledge, but that he also bestowed this knowledge upon his demiurges, thereby allowing both Urizen and Los to fit into the category of the "seeker after forbidden knowledge" as defined by Punter. In the process, I will also show that the source of this knowledge for Urizen and Los was in fact the location of the grave, and that the result of their exploration of this place is monstrous and terrible.

William Blake does not restrict the characteristics described above by Punter to his creator gods; there exist other characters within Blake's later poetry that fit the description, though only obliquely. Los's Emanation Enitharmon, the Aphrodite to his Hephaistos, certainly takes part in the creation process, and does share some of the characteristics of her male counterpart. Satan and Milton, as characterized within *Milton*, also take part in the tradition, as does Orc, the embodiment of rebellion and the foil to the tyrannical order of Urizen. The Orc cycle is one inherently entangled with destruction and with recreation (if not creation proper), and one could argue that he



also fits into this narrative, especially given his tendency toward egoistic, single-minded obsession. However, out of the entirety of the poet's pantheon, only Urizen and Los really fit the bill perfectly. Blake clearly wanted to restrict the form of this persona to his two creator gods, who in a way, are facets of his own personality. This makes sense, because, as it may perhaps be already obvious, the seeker after forbidden knowledge is something of a natural offshoot of the stereotype of the Romantic artist. Ultimately, when speaking about the supernaturally-gifted and creatively-minded seeker after forbidden knowledge, one is speaking of a trio of enmeshed figures both within and without the poetry: Urizen, Los, and Blake himself.

Just as Urizen and Los share the act of the creation of the universe, these figures all have morphing identities in a way that is fairly characteristic of Blake's poetry, as he is prone to blend physical traits, especially in his visual art — though it is always to serve a particular purpose. In his illustrations of the Book of Job, for instance, Blake gives Job, Jehova, and the redeemer similar aspects for a particular narrative purpose: to emphasize that the God Job worships is manifested and changed by Job's own idea of him.<sup>23</sup> In *America: A Prophecy*, the bearded Urizen is placed in an illustration to the text that, in fact, describes a scene with the much more youthful Orc, and a few plates later, he confuses Orc again, only this time with the omniscient narrator;<sup>24</sup> this is to emphasize that characteristics of the radical, revolutionary Orc can be found in other personages. Blake also, in true medieval fashion, liked to rely upon cookie-cutter positioning for his characters, thereby imbuing them with more symbolic potency. Janet Warner identifies one such iconic position as being derived from God's hands on the Sistine Chapel: what

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<sup>23</sup> Bindman, David. "Blake as a painter." *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, edited by Morris Eaves, Cambridge University Press, 2003, cit. 105.

<sup>24</sup> Mitchell, W.J.T. *Blake's Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry*. Princeton University Press, 1978, cit. 9.

she calls “creative fingers.”<sup>25</sup> Warner argues that figures with outstretched arms and loosely pointing fingers stand for creativity, and when characters adopt that position they are in the midst of a creative act.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, characters in despair are always visually represented with their knees raised and their hands covering their face.<sup>27</sup> Blake would have been very familiar with the concept of despair, as it is a common thread throughout the Bible, as well as something commonly dealt with in medieval poetry. Significantly, this form of despair is often found in characters who have sinned against God and have no personal hope for repentance, which is a characteristic of the seeker after forbidden knowledge. Figure 2 is a representation of the as-yet unfinished form of Urizen in such a pose, which this dissertation will return to briefly in the next section. It is as if, in this image, the skeleton Urizen already realizes what a terrible mistake he has made in beginning the process of the creation of the physical world; his curled fetal pose both signifies his status as half formed, as well as his despair and the heavy burden of gravity that he feels pressing him down into the earth. Since the template applied here to Urizen can be applied to any character in the right circumstances, one also finds many visual similarities between figures given that, because of this positional symbolism, many diverse characters can appear in almost exactly the same compositions.

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<sup>25</sup> Warner, *Language of Art*, cit. 57.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.



Fig. 2: *The (First) Book of Urizen*, Erdman 8.

That the blending of identities is such a common factor in Blake's later poetry is not wholly surprising. Firstly, Blake does create poetic worlds in which figures represent states of the soul or the mind more than literal characters with fixed identities. Urizen, for example, cannot have his own interior life quite like a protagonist in a novel might, as he is meant to be the living aspect of the rational part of the mind. Urizen and Los are, in many ways, simply personifications of the Apollonian and the Dionysian aspects of the human mind, and of the creative impulse itself. Both of them, working together and feeding off of each other, form the matter that makes up the human spirit. One figure taking on personality traits of the other is the source of much of the conflict in the poems, and is, in fact, also the impetus for creation and change. Los's most critical lines concerning the urgency of the creative impulses, already cited once in this dissertation, is an example of this:

*I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans  
I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create*

*Jerusalem*, Erdman 10.

"I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans  
I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create."

While the second line would seem to dismiss the tactics of Urizen and his rationalism, the first line complicates that. Systems such as the one Los wants to create are, in fact, rational and regulated; while they can be perverted and dissolve into chaos, they are organized by nature. An additional complication to this quote is that Los is not the only being involved in the act of creation, of course; Urizen is, as well. Creation is not solely the act of the untamed imagination. This is the shade of grey that softens the portrait of Urizen as a tyrannical worldmaker: while he is indeed the creator of boundaries, which can reasonably be viewed as oppressive when soured in a fallen world, it's impossible to ignore that systems and boundaries are necessary to create at all. Blake certainly knew this, as one can see by tracing the evolution of his own system, and as the quote above shows, Los implicitly recognizes this, as well. Urizen and Los, acting together to create the physical universe, may be examples of sublime error, but they are simultaneously acting as catalysts for the progress of vision.<sup>28</sup> While Blake would certainly argue that one of them is more prone to corruption than the other, Los's imagination and Urizen's reason are both in play when it comes to the making of worlds. This is why it is difficult to speak of just one figure or the other in the creation myth, as gifts expressly given by Blake to one figure within his works can be understood to exist in both in the creation of the material world. To reduce the concept down perhaps too simplistically: the two figures together form one creator — one seeker after forbidden knowledge.



### The Divine Gift of Language

This dissertation will now turn to the first art that William Blake believed himself to possess and would then bestow upon Urizen and Los for their own creative act: the

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<sup>28</sup> Mitchell, *Composite Art*, cit. 56.

power of divinely-granted language. Blake was a firm believer in the idea that language and writing were gifts from the beyond, or perhaps from the mythic past, which makes writing itself a kind of arcane knowledge. He thought this for a number of reasons, not least because the deftness of his own manipulations of language was the proverbial proof in the pudding, as this dissertation will get to later. Firstly, Blake knew himself to be the recipient of literal divine visions.<sup>29</sup> In fact, he claimed that some of his writings were merely reports of whisperings that came to him from otherworldly beings, such as the one that is found before the prelude of *Europe: A Prophecy*, where Blake claims that “a fairy sat upon the table, and dictated EUROPE.”<sup>30</sup> Although the disclaimer at the start of a narrative that the writer is but a humble conveyer of a perhaps unbelievable story does smack of Gothicism to a certain degree, the sheer fabulousness of these reports was simply too much for people to take seriously for a very long time. However, this claim would not be considered unusual in the least to a medieval, or even a Renaissance, reader — hearing voices from above and seeing visions of angels would only seem to hint at madness to a modern person. If readers were to view these statements through the same lens that a person living during the Middle Ages would, it might even make sense. Indeed, it would help explain some of the layers beneath the feeling of potency to Blake’s creation myth, and would demonstrate how and why this poet and visionary blurred the line between metaphor and reality when it came to his creations.

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<sup>29</sup> Damon, *Blake Dictionary*, cit. 437. The visions began early on in his childhood; his first memory of one coming upon him occurred when he was still in his nursery, when he saw God peering at him through his window. These visions continued throughout his life, including angels perched in trees and wandering in fields of hay, a monstrous ghost he would later paint in his work entitled “The Flea”, and regular visitations from his deceased brother.

<sup>30</sup> Blake, William. “Europe: A Prophecy.” *Blake: The Complete Poems*, edited by W.H. Stevenson, Routledge, 2007, cit. 235.

During the medieval period, and even earlier, holy books explaining the creation of the universe become representative of the divine presence, and the divine presence itself becomes located within the book; the book's textuality, within this divine context, no longer merely conveyed the word of God, and it was no longer mere metaphor.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, according to medieval writers, if the holy book is the literal God as well as the literal word of God, it is easy for that metaphor to shift laterally and expand to encompass the entirety of the world that is created by God. Hugh of St. Victor, a twelfth century writer, said:

“For this whole visible world is a book written by the finger of God, that is, created by divine power; and individual creatures are as figures therein not devised by human will but instituted by divine authority to show forth the wisdom of the invisible things of God.”<sup>32</sup>

In his work ‘The World and the Book,’ Gabriel Josipovici explains that to Christianity, this equivalence between the physical world and the holy book was literal and pressing: “never has there been such faith in the phenomenal. What guarantees this faith is the incarnation, for it is the eruption into time of the eternal, into space of the infinite.”<sup>33</sup> The idea that the earthly realm is itself the word of God in the form of a holy book was groundbreaking, and fundamental to understanding the full parameters of Blake’s overarching metaphor, along with its slippery relationship with literal reality to the medieval point of view. When Blake wrote a book, he was creating a world.

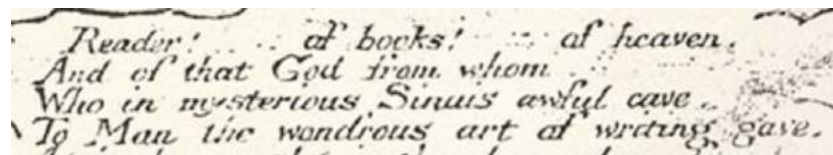
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<sup>31</sup> Bloom, Clive. *The ‘Occult’ Experience and the New Criticism: Daemonism, Sexuality and the Hidden in Literature*. Harvester Press, 1987, cit. 90-91.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Bloom, cit. 91.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Bloom, cit. 92.

While the above paragraph may seem initially to be a misguided attempt to ascribe a good amount of religious sentiment to the notoriously antireligious Blake, it is important to remember that he was fully saturated in Biblical imagery and context, and that while he believed truly that there is no Natural Religion, he also mined wisdom from within the pages of holy books. He does locate the divine reception of this gift in the Biblical place of Sinai in the passage below, in which he also — through the deletion of two words in the first line — implies that heaven is something that can be read, just as a book:



Jerusalem, Erdman 3.

“Reader! Of books! Of heaven.  
And of that God from whom  
Who in mysterious Sinais awful cave  
To Man the wondrous art of writing gave.”

In addition, Blake was not alone in claiming a divine origin of writing even among his contemporaries — it was so common an assertion as to compel Benjamin Disraeli to take note of it and to label the practice as “maniacal vanity.”<sup>34</sup> Famously, Frankenstein’s monster describes language as a “godlike science.”<sup>35</sup> However, as one might expect, Blake does radicalize the statement to an unforeseen degree by not only claiming a divine origin of writing in the distant past, but also in his personal visual art, located very much in the present day.<sup>36</sup> As this dissertation will delve into in depth later, writing for Blake was as much an act of ephemeral imagination as it was a physical movement with

<sup>34</sup> Mitchell, W.J.T. “Visible Language: Blake’s Wond’rous Art of Writing.” *William Blake*, edited by David Punter, Macmillan Press, 1996, cit. 133-134.

<sup>35</sup> Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. *Frankenstein, Or, The Modern Prometheus*. Penguin Books, 2003, cit. 115.

<sup>36</sup> Mitchell, W.J.T., *Visible Language*, cit. 134.

permanence— that of inscribing the word into metal to create his copper plates. Writing therefore takes on a dimension that, out of all other Romantic poets, exclusively Blake can truly feel; and this act was a tantalizing enigma as well as a concrete action.



### The World as Holy Book

Adding nuance to this discussion is the fact that, in keeping with the theme of blending metaphor and reality, writing is not just a mere vehicle for meaning for Blake: words were not only meaningful, but rather they were meaning itself. For him, as for Heidegger, “language is the house of Being” in which we live,<sup>37</sup> and Blake is its caretaker. Indeed, words are beyond humankind or the physical realm, and this demonstrates itself in Blake’s poetry in almost uncountable ways. To hark back to the Biblical vein in this line of thinking, one should remind oneself of the famous first verse of the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”<sup>38</sup> The popular Romantic conception of language as divine is, in fact, Biblical in nature, and demonstrates that to Blake and to others, ability to wield words and mold them to one’s will is nothing less than actual omnipotence. Words have a very real power over life and death in Blake’s poetry:

*“What have I said? What have I done? O all-powerful Human Words!”*

*Jerusalem, Erdman 24.*

“What have I said? What have I done? O all-powerful Human Words!”

Words are the magical building blocks of Blake’s “Universe stupendous”, and the multiplicity of potency here is that when this gift is applied to the characters within this

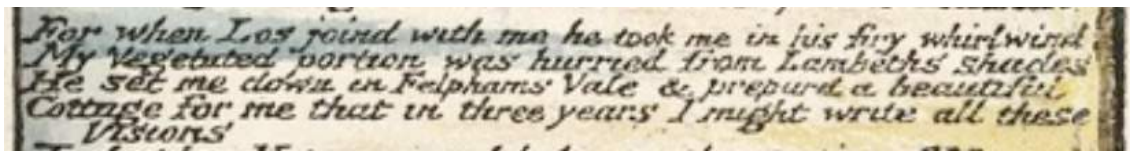
<sup>37</sup> Hilton, *Literal Imagination*, cit. 10.

<sup>38</sup> *The English Bible, King James Version*, John 1:1.



universe, such as Urizen and Los, Blake is using words to create a semi-divine creature within a literary universe that in turn uses words to create the physical realm within a universe. It is almost dizzying to contemplate.

The written word is emphasized just as emphatically within both Los and in Urizen. Los, the embodiment of imagination and creativity, is almost literally the fictional twin of Blake within the poems, and is actually stated to inhabit Blake as he wrote one of his epic poems:



Milton, Erdman 36.

“For when Los joind with me he took me in his firu whirlwind  
My vegetated portion was hurried from Lambeths shades  
He set me down in Felpham’s Vale & prepared a beautiful  
Cottage for me that in three years I might write all these Visions.”

However, more time is spent fleshing out the importance of the written word with Urizen, as he is the maker and keeper of the books of laws governing the four departments of life, each made of a metal: science in gold, love in silver, war in iron, and sociology in brass. He describes the making of these books in the plate in figure 3; it is a terrible process of sin and solitude. One particularly remarkable part of this passage is located in the first line of the sixth stanza, where the word “metals” is broken up into “me” and “tels”, which is intentional, as the entire word could have fit upon the page if he had wanted it to do so.<sup>39</sup> Clearly, Blake intended for Urizen to be saying that he made the books of himself. One can see again that the creator of the book and the book itself are considered to be one and the same.

<sup>39</sup> Wolfson, Susan J. “Blake’s language in poetic form.” *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, edited by Morris Eaves, Cambridge University Press, 2003, cit. 67.

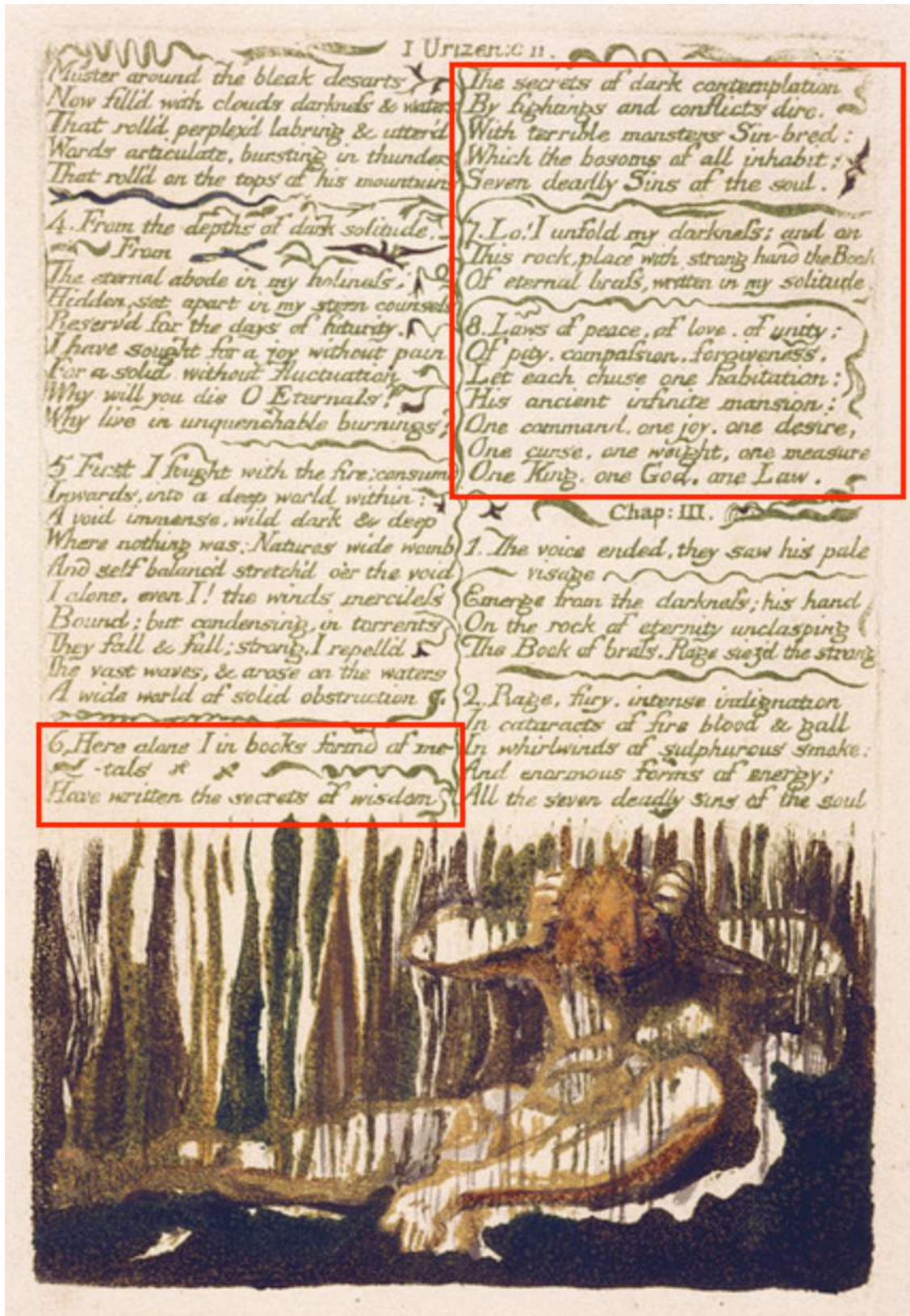


Fig. 3: The (First) Book of Urizen, Erdman 4.

“6. Here alone I in books formd of me-tals  
 Have written the secrets of wisdom  
 The secrets of dark contemplation  
 By fightings and conflicts dire,  
 With terrible monsters Sin-bred:  
 Which the bosoms of all inhabit;  
 Seven deadly Sins of the soul.

7. Lo! I unfold my darkness: and on  
 This rock, place with strong hand the Book  
 Of eternal brass, written in my solitude.

8. Laws of peace, of love, of unity:  
 Of pity, compassion, forgiveness.  
 Let each chuse one habitation:  
 His ancient infinite mansion:  
 One command, one joy one desire,  
 One curse, one weight, one measure  
 One King, one God, one Law.”

Urizen literally is the embodiment of the written word in the form of the book. Since the written word in the form of Urizen is expressly law, he can be described as a creator god that personifies a concept outlined by Michel Foucault:

“Consequently the father separates, that is, he is the one who protects when, in his proclamation of the Law, he links space, rules, and language within a single and major experience. At a stroke, he creates the distance along which will develop the scansion of presences and absences, the speech whose initial form is based on constraints and finally, gives rise to the structure of language but also to the exclusion and symbolic transformation of repressed material.”<sup>40</sup>

With this in mind, one is reminded that not only is Urizen the written word, he also is the creator of the restraints that govern the written word. He is grammar, rhyme

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<sup>40</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*. Edited by Donald F. Bouchard. Translated by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. Oxford University Press, 1977, cit. 81.

scheme, stanza, and verse, and as such he is the embodiment of all of the rules of writing that Blake so enjoyed breaking — readers can even see an example of the way in which he gleefully played with the constraints of line in the plate in figure 3. Urizen as word and Urizen as law is necessary to the poetic universe here, just as it is necessary to any Gothic narrative. Without law, there can exist no transgression, desire, or excess in the way that defines Gothic fiction,<sup>41</sup> along with the monstrous and fallen universe that Urizen creates. Drawing attention to the limits of language and existence only emphasizes when those limits are shattered. Laws aided in the creation of the universe, and they also created a confinement against which the created beings could strain.



#### Polysemous Language

Of course, given Blake's predilection toward the extreme, it should not surprise anyone to find the emphasis on the importance of the written word is compounded even further with the utilization of polysemous language. This concept was derived from two theologians that had an immense impact on Blake: Jacob Boehm, who has been mentioned once already in the introduction, and Emanuel Swedenborg. Swedenborg, who was interested in clearing away the traditional trappings of religion from the simple truth of God and Christ (including that God, Heaven, and man were all one and the same), had perhaps more influence on Blake than any other single thinker; Blake was, in fact, an active member of his church.<sup>42</sup> Both Boehm and Swedenborg placed an inordinate amount of importance on language: Boehm stated that "language is the agent of man's likeness to God," and for Swedenborg, every word constitutes a literal meaning

<sup>41</sup> Botting, Fred. "The Gothic production of the unconscious." *Spectral Readings: Towards a Gothic Geography*, edited by Glennis Byron and David Punter, Macmillan Press, 1999, cit. 26.

<sup>42</sup> Davies, J.G. *The Theology of William Blake*. Archon Books, 1966, cit. 31-35.

and an “internal” one which consists of a spiritual meaning that is inaccessible to human intelligence.<sup>43</sup> Blake took that to heart in multitudinous ways, as this dissertation will show in a moment, and given the reasoning that Swedenborg gives for this statement, it is not hard to see why the idea would speak to the poet:

“If any Person who is under the Influence of Falses, looketh at the Word, as it lieth in its holy Repository, there ariseth a thick Darkness before his Eyes, in Consequence whereof the Word appears to him of a black Colour, and sometimes as if it was covered with Soot; but if the same Person toucheth the Word, it occasioneth an Explosion, attended with a loud noise, and he is thrown to a Corner of the Room where he lieth, for about the Space of an Hour as if he was dead.”<sup>44</sup>

This Swedenborgian belief must have been particularly intriguing Blake, who is in many ways very akin to Punter’s seeker after forbidden knowledge himself. Blake’s ambition to tap into that inaccessible knowledge — to wipe the soot away from the surface — is expressed in his use of words, down to the very last possible meaning of each, in some cases. As Nelson Hilton explains in his *Literal Imagination*, Blake makes a great effort to incorporate a plurality of meanings of a word, either by way of what have been called “puns”, or visually by way of strategic placement on the copper plate and subsequent print itself. He makes a point to describe the polysemy as “multidimensional” for this very reason; the way in which it suggests varied spatial fields implies that each meaning of a single word can unlock a dimension of experience and meaning.<sup>45</sup> This embracing of polysemy would, on the surface, seem to suggest a kind of ambiguity that is rather

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<sup>43</sup> Hilton, Nelson. *Literal Imagination: Blake’s Vision of Words*. University of California Press, 1983, cit. 14.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Hilton, *Literal Imagination*, cit. 14.

<sup>45</sup> Hilton, *Literal Imagination*, cit. 11.

against the Classical or Renaissance idea of a rhetorical ideal with total verbal clarity; however, it is exactly this kind of binary logical thought that Blake wanted to revolutionize, so it would be fair to say that Blake is actually sidestepping that dialectic entirely.<sup>46</sup> For Blake, the infinite is present in finite words, and he aims to entirely dissolve linguistic and artistic boundaries.

An example of this polysemy can be found in the word “grave,” which, in Blake’s poetry, can function as the adjectival “serious,” the nominal “burial place,” or the action word for “to carve” either separately or all at once.<sup>47</sup> This is an incredibly critical word for Blake, as the comprehension of humanity’s own mortality lies at the core of his creation myth, and is the source of all of the arcane truths that this dissertation outlines here. The understanding of death and the confrontation of the grave entails a transformation of the mind’s understanding of itself and its relation to the physical universe. Blake, Urizen, and Los are all men who have come to grips with the nature of the grave, as this dissertation will explore further shortly, and it is from this somber contemplation of both burial places and of engraving that these creators of universes discover the secrets necessary for the making of worlds. There are innumerable mentions of graves bursting, shrieking, and frightening the characters, but there is one activity that stems from the grave in Blake’s narratives that is particularly evocative and critical in understanding just how death and creativity are linked: resurrection. In figure 4, from *America*, a recurring visual motif can be seen that will come up once more later in this dissertation: a nude, idealized male figure perched upon a sepulchre as though he has just sprouted from it. He gazes upwards, as though his eyes strain to perceive the infinite heavens. The highlighted text describes the scene, in a rare instance of straight

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 10-13.

<sup>47</sup> Hilton, *Literal Imagination*, cit. 19.

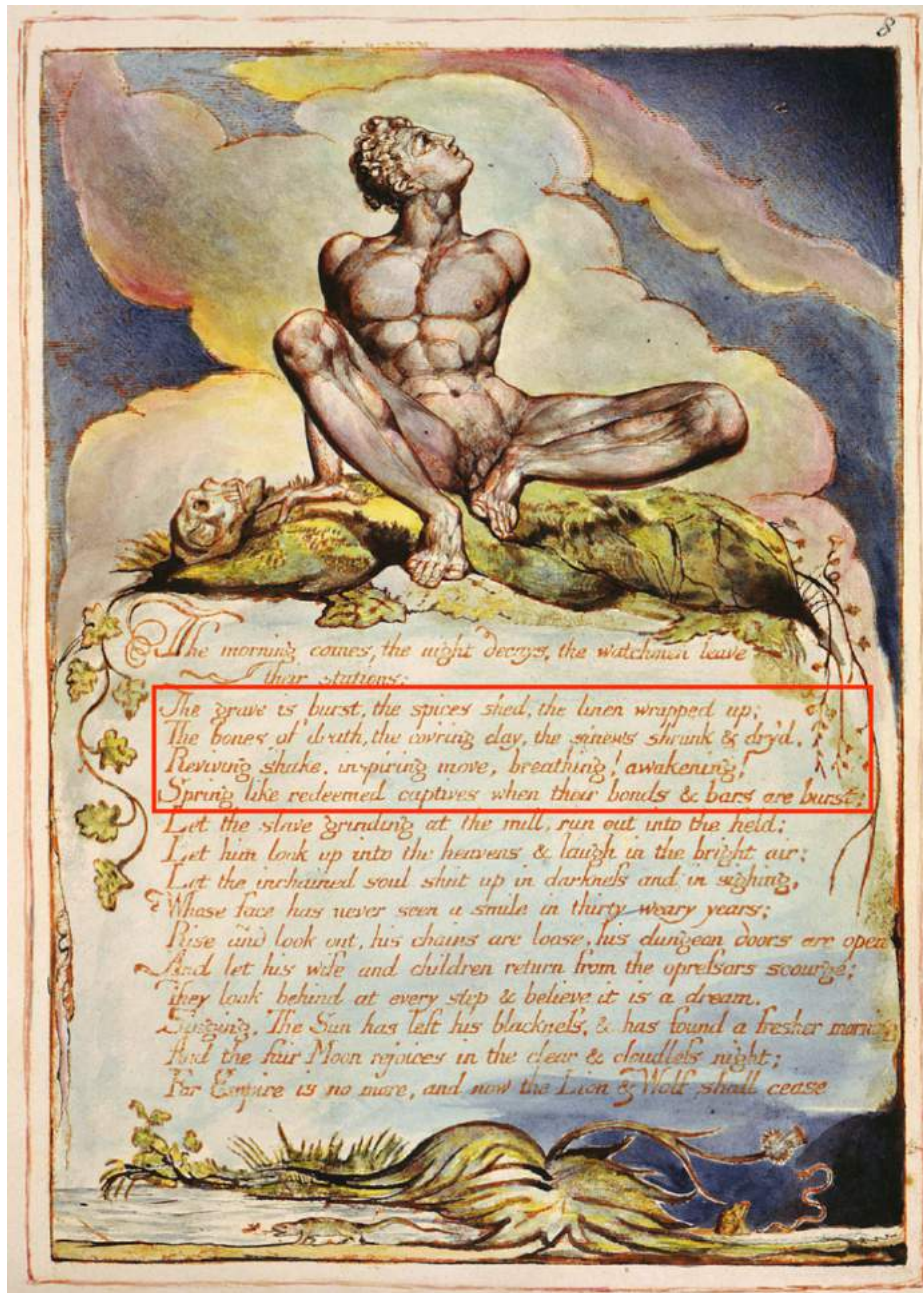


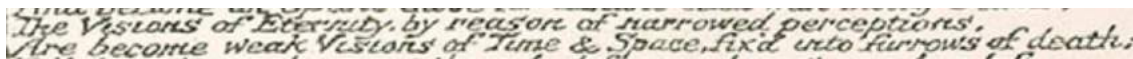
Fig. 4: America: A Prophecy, Erdman 6.

“The grave is burst, the spices shed, the linen wrapped up;  
The bones of death, the cov'ring clay, the sinews shrunk and dry'd  
Reviving shake, inspiring move, breathing, awakening,  
Spring like redeemed captives, when their bonds and bars are burst.”

ekphrasis: this figure is indeed arising from a burst grave, his embalming accoutrements having been shed, his flesh returning to his withered bones. Life and death are so

intertwined as to be confused in terms of timeline. Life not only leads to death, but they are one and the same; life cannot take place without death both preceding it and following it. Graves, like sleep, are things to be risen from. The action word “spring” in the final line of the highlighted section is both a verb and a symbol: spring the season, too, is the very concept of rebirth distilled.

The second meaning of the word “grave”, as mentioned above, is one that obviously carries much weight when considering these illuminated works: the act of digging into a hard surface to leave a pattern behind. These graves left behind by Blake’s acids or engraving tools are also to be risen from; the ideas embodied by the words one reads or the images one considers are brought to life in the reader’s own mind.<sup>48</sup> Words, then, function something like seeds, which is a commonly referenced Biblical metaphor: the seed is the word of God. The word-seeds bear much fruit in the reader’s imagination, especially in the hands of literal creator gods such as Urizen and Los. It is with these seeds that the entirety of creation can grow into being. The grave is both the word used to describe the act of making a work of art such as *America*, and it is the source of the knowledge that enables their actual creation within Blake’s mind. The acquisition of the knowledge and the creation of the forms are one and the same, just as is the reporting of this activity to the reader. This is seen in the brief quotation from *Jerusalem* here that this is the case:



The Visions of Eternity, by reason of narrowed perceptions,  
Are become weak Visions of Time & Space, fix'd into furrows of death;

*Jerusalem*, Erdman 49.

“The Visions of Eternity, by reason of narrowed perceptions,  
Are become weak Visions of Time & Space, fix’d into furrows of death...”

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<sup>48</sup> Hilton, *Literal Imagination*, cit. 21.



The “furrows of death” here, of course, refer to both meanings of the word “grave.” In context, this quotation is simply referring to the doomed nature of creation, which is blinded and crippled in this fallen world, trapped by mortality and physicality. However, it also refers to the impaired nature of the creative act itself, which is undertaken by Blake, Urizen, and Los. The inky divots burned into the copper plates upon which their stories are told are but shadows of the eternal truths they are meant to represent, just as humanity’s created bodies are lacking in perception. The etched and engraved poem is the setting for transformation and rebirth, however flawed.



#### The Grave as the Source of Knowledge

It would be wise to dwell on the importance of the grave a while longer before moving on to the next arcane art that the trio of creators utilize; as mentioned above, it is from the contemplation of the grave that truth can be found. The path to great and eternal truths was an important concern for Enlightenment thinkers, and something that Blake was very much reacting to (and against). Enlightenment belief stated that man was potentially all-powerful, and that there were no secrets of the universe that would be hidden to the man who used human reason to find them out.<sup>49</sup> One might think that Blake would find this concept intriguing; however, the overemphasis of human reason in the pursuit of such truths was clearly something he found fault with. For Enlightenment thinkers, the truth was something to be extracted with empirical evidence, and the imagination had no place at all.<sup>50</sup> Blake placed imagination higher than empiricism, and also claimed that God and imagination were one and the same. He

<sup>49</sup> Punter, *Literature of Terror*, cit. 23.

<sup>50</sup> Abrams, M.H. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Edition*. Oxford University Press, 1953, cit. 263.

believed that we can sense with our imagination that we are all one organism, even if we do not immediately recognize it as divine, and it is partially for this reason that Blake can be considered a radical concerning his religious views; successfully perceiving that imagination is what unites humanity exposes the falseness of organised religion.<sup>51</sup>

Blake found the Enlightenment point of view circular and sterile, and especially did not appreciate the way that it was clearly rooted in a paralysing fear of passion and emotion, nor did he appreciate the way Enlightenment thinking considered those qualities as things to be dominated and suppressed.<sup>52</sup> Blake recognized that attempting to repress all things unruly within the human psyche would render them even more incomprehensible, when they were actually a great source of inspiration and wonder. Furthermore, it placed no value on the deepest, darkest recesses of the human soul and imagination. In this way, Blake was much more aligned with the thinking of Gothic revivalists, who wanted to shape their craft into something that could imagine the unimaginable, and turn their works into a distorted magnifying glass that would show people a truth otherwise inaccessible.<sup>53</sup> It is in using the creative act to make non-realistic inventions that, he believed, brought his works closer to ones that could be characterised as divine.<sup>54</sup> Blake, *Urizen*, and *Los* all look to create form from maddening terror and critical error, and to create flesh and bones out of darkness.

As briefly mentioned in the introduction, Blake was no stranger to the Gothic genre; his career was very much punctuated and informed by interactions with Gothic poets, both professionally and personally. Early on in his career, he was influenced by

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<sup>51</sup> Frye, Northrop. *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake*, vol. 14. University of Toronto Press, 2004, cit. 37-45.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-98.

<sup>54</sup> Abrams, M.H. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Edition*. Oxford University Press, 1953, cit. 275.

Thomas Parnell, who wrote the influential “Night-Piece on Death” in 1722.<sup>55</sup> Parnell was considered to be the first and primary example of a school of writers who would be called “graveyard poets”, who wrote poetry that was characterised by gloomy meditations on mortality, and saturated with images of skulls, decay, and all of the surface motifs that are broadly associated with the Gothic genre as a whole.<sup>56</sup> Parnell claimed in his poem that nothing can be learned from books or logic, and that intense feeling and contemplation of life’s absolute extreme, death, was the only way to come to divine truths of the universe: “Death’s but a path which must be trod, / If man would ever pass to God.”<sup>57</sup> This quotation, naturally, can be considered literally: one can only truly come close to God by passing on to heaven. However, this quote also repurposes the grave to be a pathway leading towards enlightenment — as a way to understand the darkest, most divine secrets of creation.

This more cosmic, less personal and introspective, concept which also more explicitly linked death and the material composition of the universe is reflected in another work that had a significant influence on Blake: Edward Young’s *The Complaint: or, Night-Thoughts on Life, Death, & Immortality* (1742-1745). This poem, another example of graveyard poetry, was illustrated by Blake in the year 1794 or 1795,<sup>58</sup> which is a number of years after Blake was an active poet, and a few years after he penned *The Bible of Hell*. Therefore, it is impossible to say with any certainty whether Blake actually read this poem before penning the first versions of his creation story. However, it indubitably influenced *The Four Zoas*, as they have mirroring structures that break the

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<sup>55</sup> Punter, *Literature of Terror*, cit. 30.

<sup>56</sup> Cox, Michael, editor. *The Concise Oxford Chronology of English Literature*, Oxford University Press, 2004, cit. 607.

<sup>57</sup> Parnell’s “Night-Piece” as quoted in: Punter, *Literature of Terror*, cit. 33.

<sup>58</sup> Eaves, Morris, et al. *The William Blake Archive*, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the University of Rochester, 1996, <http://www.blakearchive.org/work/but330>.

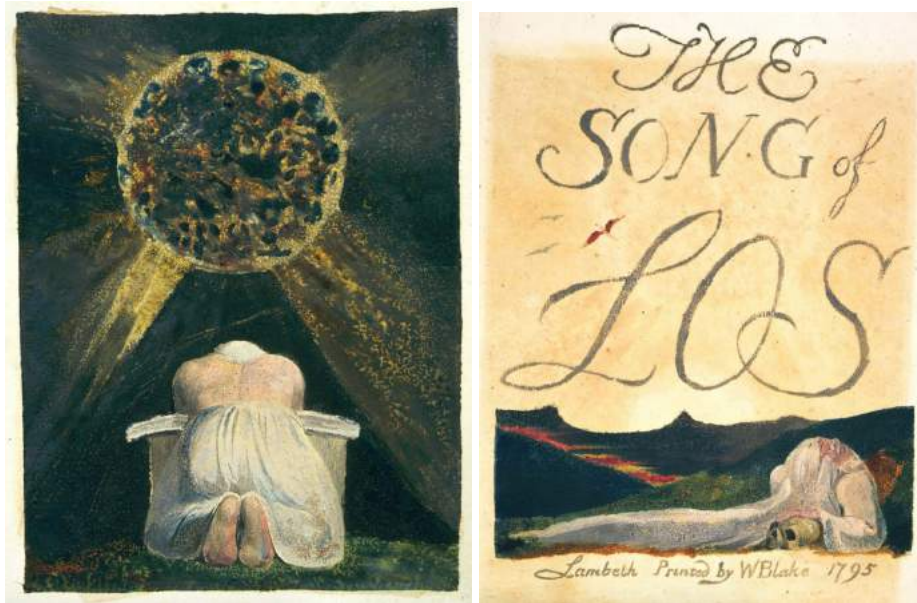
narrative up into nine sections, each called “nights,” and there are enough similarities between *Night Thoughts* and the rest of Blake’s creation story concerning the personification of Urizen and Los that it is clear that Blake is at least participating in the same tradition as Young was, even in his earliest explorations into his cosmology. *Night Thoughts* is a tale of the soul of the poet who releases himself from material matters and invokes the powers of darkness to assist his visionary voyage in exploration of the entire universe.<sup>59</sup> Within the poem, Young advises that focusing on death is the way to attain exquisite anguish, and it is in terror that he locates a hubristic aspiration towards divinity; the claim of self-divinity is central here — pain, anguish, death, and horror can bring a person towards ultimate comprehension and divine power.<sup>60</sup> Wisdom of the highest and most inaccessible kind, according to Young, is only found in darkness, despair, and in death.

This line of thinking is seen more literally played out in figures 5 and 6, which make up the first two pages of the *Song of Los*. Here is represented an old, silver-haired man in two significant positions, both of which link him to the preternatural. In the first, he kneels as though before an altar, but before him is not a crucifix, but an amorphous miasma of darkly luminescent colors. In the second, Urizen is pressed firmly to the ground, left hand resting on a skull, peering almost woefully up towards the heavens. Given the subject matter of *The Song of Los*, which concerns itself with the events following Urizen’s tyrannical imposition of laws and false religion upon the world, the interpretation that the image on the left evokes “the early existence of man and his primitive submission to false religion in the form of the murky ‘indefinite’ sun

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<sup>59</sup> Punter, *Literature of Terror*, cit. 34-35.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-39.



Figs. 5 and 6: *The Song of Los*, Erdman 1 and 2.

worshipped by a submissive priest” has merit,<sup>61</sup> but it perhaps does not paint a complete picture of the narrative being presented. Firstly, the white head of the praying figure should not be considered an accident in the printing process. Blake reserved silver hair for only a few members of his pantheon — the Ancient Bard, Albion, and Urizen — and only Urizen really makes sense in the context of this poem, especially with the complementary page following. This is no mere submissive priest; this is Urizen. He, eyes turned towards the roiling, half-formed heavens, is contemplating the secrets of creation, the roots of which are in the mortality he grasps in his left hand in the second image. The splotchy treatment of color in the orb before him occurs again in one of his own books, where he has trapped these secrets (Fig. 7).<sup>62</sup> As the explanation for Urizen’s lamentations in chapter eight of *The Book of Urizen* states, his despair in creation, which

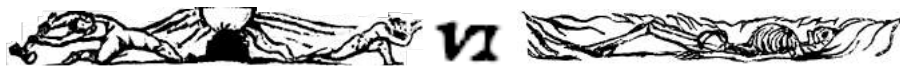
<sup>61</sup> Bindman, David, editor. *William Blake: The Complete Illuminated Books*. Thames & Hudson, 2000, cit. 193.

<sup>62</sup> It should be acknowledged that talking this specifically about color treatment within Blake’s illustrations is a messy business, as no two illuminated books are colored in precisely the same way. However, while I did select panels from the copy of the book that best demonstrates this point, every extant copy features similar dusky, undefined color.

one can see clearly in his expression here, stemmed from the fact that “he saw that life lived upon death.”<sup>63</sup>



Fig. 7: *The (First) Book of Urizen*, Erdman 5.

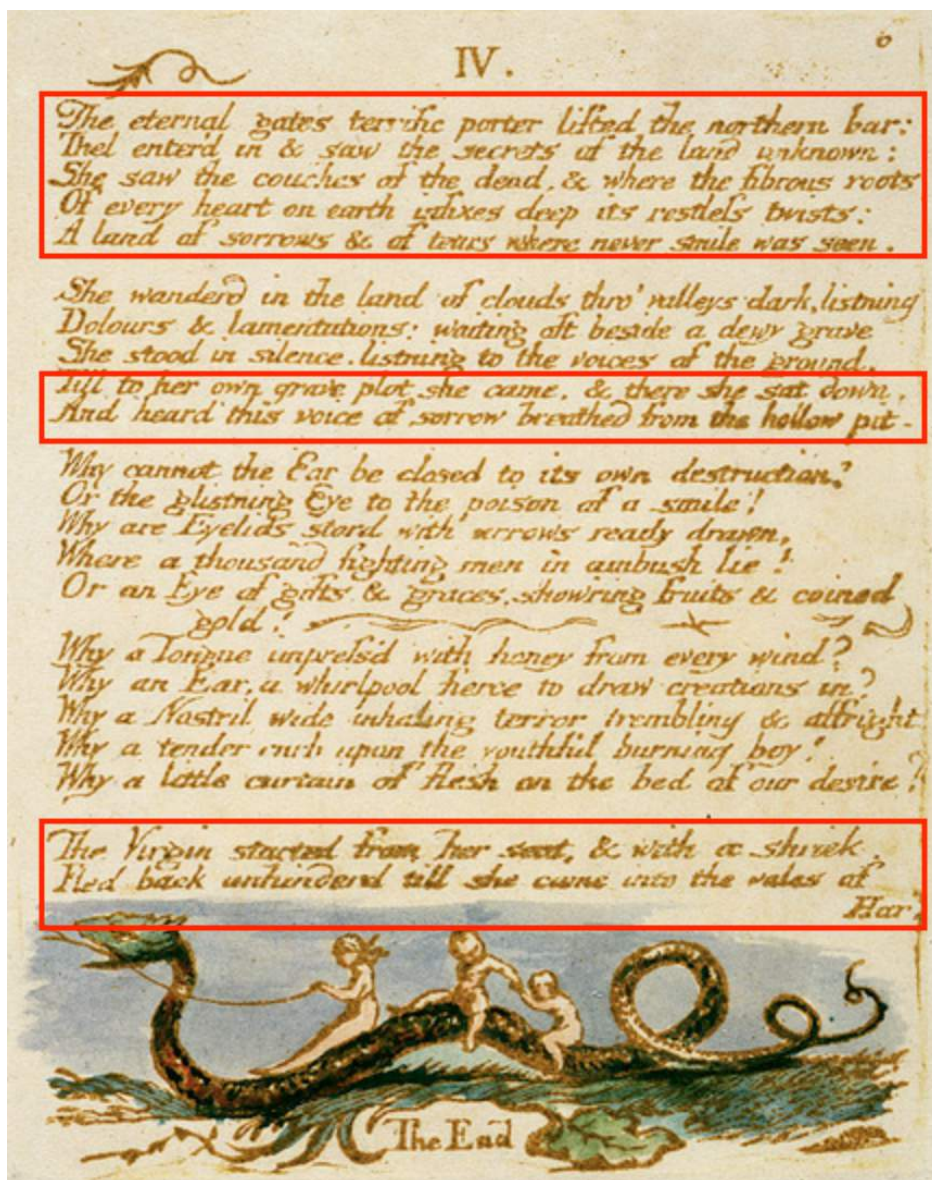


#### The Grave as Realm of Disorientation

Death, in Blake’s mythology, is more than just something one contemplates in the pursuit of arcane truths; it is a physical place, and a fertile realm that is nevertheless to be viewed with horror. This is explored most explicitly in *The Book of Thel*, which tells the tale of a young, nymph-like woman named Thel in the Vales of Har (a realm separate from this fallen world), who ponders life’s great questions with the help of the Lily-of-the-Valley, the Cloud, the Worm, and The Clod of Clay. As one might suspect based on the symbolic meaning behind the names of her last two companions, these great questions have to do with the nature of life and death, which are two concepts that are linked exclusively within the material world from which she is cut off. In a Platonic reading of this poem, the Vales of Har are similar to the realms of pre-existence, and the world below ground is symbolic of the temporal plane; thus, Thel is an unborn soul confronting mortality.<sup>64</sup> Figure 8 shows what happens when Thel is brought to the

<sup>63</sup> Blake, William. “The First Book of Urizen.” *Blake: The Complete Poems*, edited by W.H. Stevenson, Routledge, 2007, cit. 271.

<sup>64</sup> Mitchell, *Composite Art*, cit. 81.

Fig. 8: *The Book of Thel*, Erdman 6.

“The eternal gates' terrific porter lifted the northern bar:  
Thel enter'd in & saw the secrets of the land unknown.  
She saw the couches of the dead, & where the fibrous roots  
Of every heart on earth infixes deep its restless twists:  
A land of sorrows & of tears where never smile was seen...  
Till to her own grave plot she came, & there she sat down,  
And heard this voice of sorrow breathed from the hollow pit...  
The Virgin started from her seat, & with a shriek  
Fled back unhinderd till she came into the vales of Har.”

gateway between her realm and ours, which takes the form of her own moaning grave.

Thel is given the opportunity to satisfy her curiosity and enter into the realm of

Experience, otherwise known as the fallen world that we, the readers, inhabit. However, she is confronted with the horrendous reality of transience and decay, and she flees in terror. The small design at the bottom, however, which shows three innocent and childlike figures (not unlike the youthful Thel herself) riding upon what is considered to be a symbol of regeneration and renewal, clues the reader in to what Thel is missing out on by rejecting entering the physical world. While certainly horrible, the grave is also a wondrous source of creation and transformation. This particular aspect of the grave was not, one gleans, unknown by Blake or his two creator figures, judging by their utilization of their knowledge of the grave in their creative works.

This can be understood chiefly by visual analysis of figure 9, which incorporates visual motifs that are actually dispersed throughout Blake's poetry.<sup>65</sup> Figure 9 is the final iteration of the composition, as it was created in 1805. The two figures here are taken from this composition as isolated elements and placed in compositions in other poems. This dissertation has in fact already reproduced the star-gazing young man at the top in figure 4 from *America*, and readers also see the hunched and bearded man entering Death's Door many times and in many different illustrated manuscripts. Clearly, these two figures hold great importance for Blake, as readers can see them copied and replicated more often than most other figures throughout the illuminated manuscripts. However, an unpublished sketch that implies that the original version of both of these figures actually appeared together, as it appears here.<sup>66</sup> If one takes what one knows about the potency of the grave as a function of Blake's craft of engraving and apply it to this image, one comes to an interesting observation. The bearded man is being literally

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<sup>65</sup> Makdisi, Saree. "The political aesthetic of Blake's images." *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, edited by Morris Eaves, Cambridge University Press, 2003, cit. 110-132.

<sup>66</sup> Makdisi, *Political Aesthetic*, cit. 121.





Fig. 9: *Death's Door*.

engraved in two senses: Blake is etching him into a copper plate, and the old man is intering himself into a sepulchre. A cause and effect on two levels is seen, then: within the framing of the image proper, the seed of the engraved image is leading to a new creation springing from the earth above him, and we as viewers, in turn, bring the entire process as Blake imagined it to life in the viewer's mind as he or she looks at the image. When one adds to this the fact that Urizen himself is only ever represented like this — with long, trailing white beard and pale robes — one could make an argument for an even further dimension. Perhaps what is represented here is Urizen again at the threshold of death, being swept forward by either a gust of air or by a brash compulsion to reach the extremes of the universe in order to create and control. Above him is man, in all his fallen but heaven-bent glory — the flesh-bound and holy result of Urizen's machinations as abetted by Los. This is not an outlandish theory, especially given that the end result of the saga of this motif is that it served as an illustration of Robert Blair's

*The Grave*,<sup>67</sup> yet another example of graveyard poetry. Blake's illustrations of the poem concerned themselves chiefly with the parting of the soul and body, which is a chief concern of Blake's, and the ultimate fate of the universe in the creation myth in his own cosmology.<sup>68</sup> With all of this evidence before us, I would argue that the dark expanse of despair into which Urizen and Los enter before they begin to create the Mundane Shell is this very realm of death as described by graveyard poets. It is there in the grave — both in terms of the etching into the copper plate and the resting place — that they seek and find the arcane truths from which spring the cosmos and humanity.

This realm of the grave, in keeping with the Gothic revivalist reaction to Enlightenment tenets, is more than just a place; it is a vast and shadowy country of disorientation and fear. There are a couple of lines in *Four Zoas*, spoken by Urizen, that would seem to indicate where the realm of death is, and how a personage may move through and within it: "Reflecting all my indolence, my weakness & my death, / To weigh me down beneath the grave into non-entity."<sup>69</sup> From this, one can gather that the realm of the eternal, Urizen's original home, is at the bottom of a multi-layered universe. Therefore, rising upwards from the bottom, there is: the realm of non-entity, then the grave above it, and finally the Fallen World above that.<sup>70</sup> Urizen and Los, then, ascend to the grave to acquire the knowledge necessary to form the world above them. This is

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<sup>67</sup> The final illustrations were actually completed by another artist, Louis Schiavonetti, in a more fashionable style in 1805, though the compositional backbone of the illustrations remained rooted in Blake's original concept sketches (<http://www.blakearchive.org/work/butwba10>).

<sup>68</sup> Eaves, *The William Blake Archive*, <http://www.blakearchive.org/work/bb435>.

<sup>69</sup> Blake, *Four Zoas*, cit. 344. Unlike all other text quotations in this dissertation, quotes from *Four Zoas* will be transcribed. This is due to the fact that this poem was never printed, therefore reproducing them in their original form not extremely useful, nor would it be very legible.

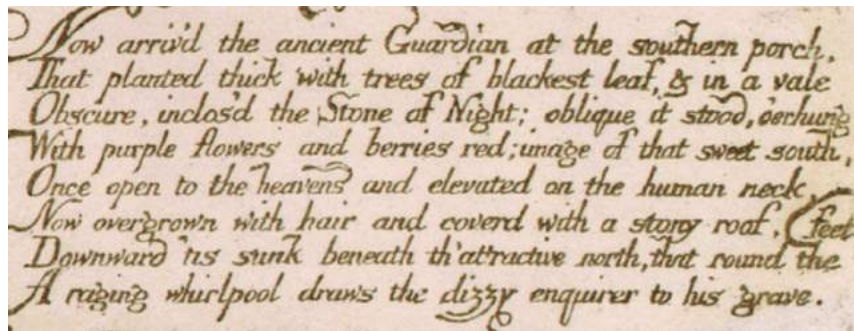
<sup>70</sup> This schema gets much more complicated, and less strictly observed, once Blake begins rounding out these ideas in *Milton* and *Jerusalem* (Stevenson, *Complete Poems*, cit. 506). There, other realms of allegorical import, such as Beulah, Ulro, Golgonooza, and Satan's Seat are tangentially inserted into the broader realm of the world we are in.

supported by the repeated imagery of beings entering this life by crawling up from the earth, such as Figure 10 below.



Fig. 10: America: A Prophecy, Erdman 2.

However, the experience of this climb is not so straightforward, as is found in *Europe*:



Europe: A Prophecy, Erdman 10.

“Now arriv’d the ancient Guardian at the southern porch,  
That planted thick with trees of blackest leaf, and in a vale  
Obscure enclos’d the Stone of Night; oblique it stood, o’erhung  
With purple flowers and berries red, image of that sweet South,  
Once open to the heavens, and elevated on the human neck,  
Now overgrown with hair, and cover’d with a stony roof.  
Downward ’tis sunk beneath th’ attractive North, that round the feet,  
A raging whirlpool, draws the dizzy enquirer to his grave.”

The experience of passing through to the grave is a bewildering one, and one in which north and south and up and down are utterly confused. When Urizen himself enters this scenario in *Four Zoas* as he attempts to escape back into to death from the material world, he describes being battered about by different vortexes:

“Whence I might travel round the outside of this dark confusion?  
When I bend downward, bending my head downward into the deep,  
’Tis upward all, which way soever I my course begin.  
But when a vortex formed on high

... then 'tis downward all, which way  
Soever my spirits turn. No end I find of all.

.....  
I fall or rise at will or to remain  
A labourer of ages, a dire discontent, a living woe,  
Wandr'ing in vain..."<sup>71</sup>

This sensation of dizzying chaos in and around the threshold of the grave is familiar, as similar descriptions can be found in any number of Gothic works where a character becomes hopelessly lost in a shadowy maze of narrow stone hallways and hidden doorways. Urizen here is lost in a labyrinthine miasma of gloom, where any innate sense of the cardinal directions are thrown to the wind. Blake's shifting of the motivations of Urizen in the creation of the universe between the publication of the books in *The Bible of Hell* and that of *Four Zoas* reflects a development of his thinking about the action of creation. In *Four Zoas*, Urizen's express motivation for beginning the process is that he was utterly terrified of the void he had found himself in. This is precisely what Parnell and Young were emphasizing: it is in extreme fear that one can find arcane truths. Urizen and Los, in this darkness, did find the secrets of creation as William Blake believed them to be. These secrets are those tied to the creative act of the poet, and the engraver, and the bard, as this dissertation will continue exploring now.



#### Marrying the Sister Arts in Illuminated Printing

The melding of facets of meaning, which this dissertation explored first with the polysemous nature of the word, was not at all a foreign one during the eighteenth century, as artists and thinkers were at that time quite preoccupied with the idea of marrying the "sister arts" of the sensual, bodily art of painting and the temporal,

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<sup>71</sup> Blake, *Four Zoas*, cit. 377.

cerebral art of poetry.<sup>72</sup> Simply characterizing the two arts in this way — as though they do not naturally overlap in the realm of the imagination at all — serves to separate them even more, of course, especially when coming from a Blakean point of view, and it is therefore not difficult to imagine Blake’s potential reaction to the exercise. There is no written participation to the conversation by Blake recorded, but it is impossible that he was unaware of his age’s obsession with the goal of uniting poetry and painting together as an academic exercise.<sup>73</sup> While Blake could not be considered a Neoplatonist exactly, he was interested in and influenced by Neoplatonic ideas, such as the impulse to understand everything on the basis of one source that they considered divine,<sup>74</sup> and his thoughts concerning this matter speak to that influence. Blake found that the dualistic world of body and soul or of time and space was an illusion to be dispelled with art, not propagated by it. The independence of design and text was, for Blake, mimetic in that it reflected the split nature of the material world itself.<sup>75</sup> He is, above all, interested in exposing the fiction of the bifurcated reality that is a symptom of the fallen man, or man’s “fall into Division.” The highlighted section of the figure 11 describes this. The “infernal method by corrosives” there refers, of course, to the printmaker’s method of image creation by way of acids on copper plates, confirming that Blake believed that his artistic gifts could and would be responsible for creating unity in the various arts by way of exposing the false nature their division. Truth, or at least the Platonic ideal of it, is not split between text and image, so he unites them both. As a hint of the prolific creative possibilities behind this that may be bestowed upon Urizen or Los, we can turn to the

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<sup>72</sup> Mitchell, *Composite Art*, cit. 14.

<sup>73</sup> Mitchell, *Composite Art*, cit. 15.

<sup>74</sup> Wildberg, Christian, “Neoplatonism.” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/neoplatonism>. Accessed Jan. 2019.

<sup>75</sup> Mitchell, *Composite Art*, cit. 33.

image at the top of figure 11, in which a floating being presides over flames rising from an unconsumed human form. Could it be said that humanity itself can be forged and refined in the fires of a puissant creator's imagination? In any case, both the image and the lines certainly demonstrate that the act of uniting seemingly divided areas of reality was viewed by Blake as a violent and revolutionary project.

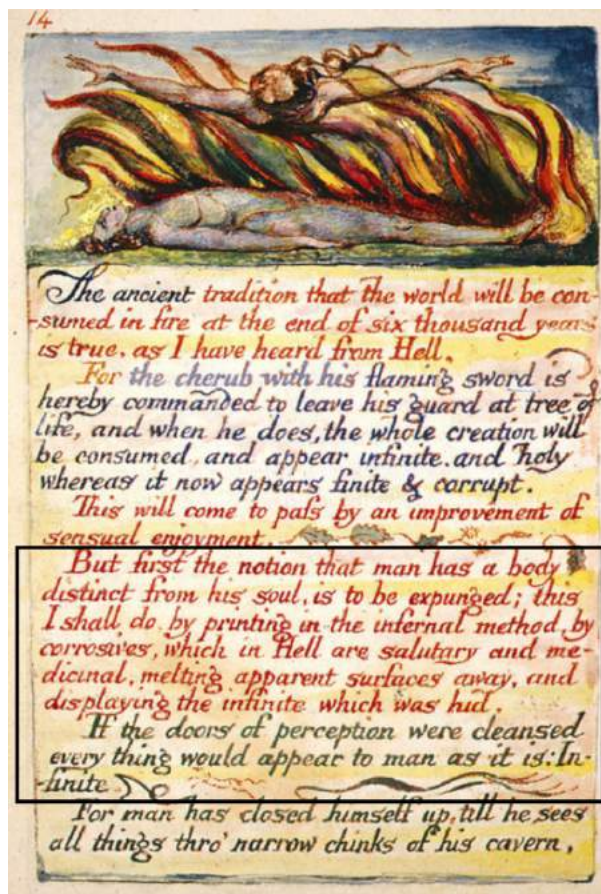


Fig. 11: *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Erdman 14.

“But first the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul is to be expunged; this I shall do by printing in the infernal method by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid. If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.”

While his contemporaries attempted to merge the two arts by way of “painterly poetry” which aimed to conjure a fully fleshed-out image in the minds of the readers, Blake did not. He sets his poems in utterly nonvisual settings that serve other functions,

like dramatizing states of mind, instead of illustrating a literal place or time (which, the parts of the narrative before the creation of the universe, do not exist in any case). Instead, Blake turned to the sacred pictorialism of illuminated printing to conceptually merge these arts, a method of printing defunct since the Middle Ages. For Blake, language, while extremely powerful, is nonetheless limited as a “gross tongue that cleaveth to the dust.”<sup>76</sup> Uniting typographic and pictorial form into one process, which is what relief etching does,<sup>77</sup> was one unique way of overcoming that, and a way to more dynamically allow the text and the design to interact as separate, but related, elements of a whole work. This would describe the arts of illustration or ekphrasis, as well, but to use either of these terms to describe the broad field of artistic accompaniments to these poems would be a mistake. Many of these artworks can in fact exist on their own, even if they are placed next to words, and the interaction between text and image can even be described as contradictory or challenging in some parts, with neither art form taking dominance over the other.<sup>78</sup> While Roland Barthes, as well as Blake’s contemporaries, would argue that all symbolic forms aspire to the condition of language,<sup>79</sup> Blake would seem to contend that if such a tendency does exist, it is to be eliminated through the lively interactions of the arts on the page.

The importance of this composite art in the act of creation is best expressed and developed within the person of Urizen. This can be gleaned initially from the simple profusion of images in *The Book of Urizen*, in which Blake actually does seem to almost wish to subjugate the text in favor of the images, which slightly overwhelm the

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<sup>76</sup> Blake, William. “Milton.” *Blake: The Complete Poems*, edited by W.H. Stevenson, Routledge, 2007, pp. 503-602.

<sup>77</sup> Mitchell, *Composite Art*, cit. 40-42.

<sup>78</sup> Mitchell, *Composite Art*, cit. 3-4.

<sup>79</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Elements of Semiology*. Translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, Hill and Wang, 1964.

occasionally awkward poetry. Furthermore, the link between Urizen and the creation of visual art is concisely and perfectly represented in the frontispiece of his book, figure 12, which shows Urizen creating two of his sacred law books at once. With his right hand, he writes with a quill, and with his left, he engraves. This is the infernal act of creation as Blake imagined it — the burning or carving away of material to reveal an image in metal. It is interesting that Urizen does so with his left hand; in images of Christ during the Last Judgement, it is his left hand that damns people down into eternal torment, while his right calls the elect upwards. If this is the first book of Blake's never-realized Bible of Hell, the import of engraving taking place on the sinister side is certainly significant. It is as though the visual arts even take precedence over poetry in the sins and fall of man.

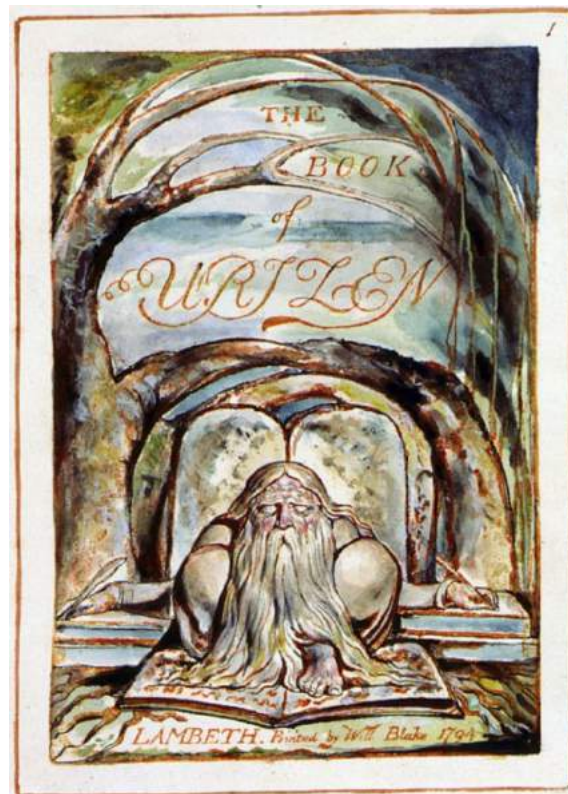


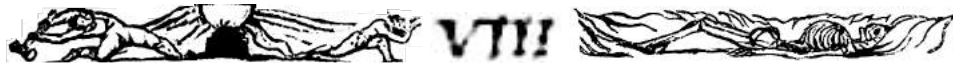
Fig. 12: *The (First) Book of Urizen*, Erdman 1.



The importance of engraving and of these composite arts is also reflected in a scene from the sixth night in *Four Zoas*, in the lines describing Urizen's trials of death and rebirth:

“...the books remained still unconsumed  
 Still to be written & interleaved with brass & iron & gold  
 Time after time — for such a journey none but iron pens  
 Can write, and adamantine leaves receive; nor can the man who goes  
 The journey, obstinate refuse to write time after time...”<sup>80</sup>

The knowledge of death must be incorporated into the fabric of the universe, and the story of creation must be told. It cannot be refused, and ink on paper will not suffice. Words and images both, in the form of Blake and Urizen's composite books, are critical to the process.



#### The Word as Graven Image

Text can also function as image itself, which is the final nail in the coffin for the manufactured line between the arts of the tongue and the eye. This goes beyond simply the examples of Blake running a stylized ivy train off the tail of a vowel, or the clever way in which he uses implied lines to turn the title of *The Book of Thel* beneath a drooping tree branch into writing upon an implied gravestone (figure 13). Blake creates an image out of typeset by framing it this way, which means that formal visual descriptions can be applied to the way the text appears on a page. Because, of course, the way the type is set is not an accident, nor is it random. Again, as Nelson Hilton demonstrates at length in his book, the positioning of a word near another word physically on the page can connect the two concepts like a constellation forming a

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<sup>80</sup> Blake, *Four Zoas*, cit. 376.



Fig. 13: *The Book of Thel*, Erdman ii.

picture across the printed-page-cum-canvas, and each word on the page carries meaning beyond the meaning of the word itself. Each word is so saturated with meaning that it carries across lines and verses; it becomes significant in the same way that an object in a portrait is significant. The linguistic structure of cascading meanings discussed earlier in this dissertation circles back to us here now as it joins in with the physical layout of the text itself. The expansion of meaning is infinite.

Figure 14, an image of a hunched figure sitting next to a scroll with text upon it, speaks to this very concept. The scroll is, in the context of Romantic textual ideology, a symbol of ancient revealed wisdom,<sup>81</sup> which Blake sets in opposition to the book, which is often associated with the strict and false regulations enforced by Urizen.<sup>82</sup> The text on it is, significantly, written backwards, and reads:

“Each man is in his Spectre’s power  
 Until the arrival of that hour  
 When his Humanity awake

<sup>81</sup> Mitchell, *Visible Language*, cit. 137.

<sup>82</sup> The vortex formed by the curling parchment, furthermore, is associated with the ear in Blake’s iconography, and the rhyme scheme of the text upon it further emphasizes this text’s aural quality. The significance of this will become evident beginning in the next section of this dissertation.

And cast his Spectre into the Lake.”

Despite the fact that the image would suggest that the hunched figure is the white-haired Urizen, in *Jerusalem*, it is actually Los who is plagued by the Spectre, whom he attempts to control by compelling him to work in his forge because he fears that it will destroy his powers of imagination. It follows then that the message was written for Los. However, the fact that the text is backwards, and functionally illegible, indicates that this is not simply an accompaniment to the narrative within the poem meant to be imbibed by Los as a reader. It is meant exclusively for the engraver of the text to be able to read, as the text would be able to be read in the normal fashion upon the copper plate. This is significant for two reasons: Firstly, since it appears written upon a scroll, this message is a form of arcane, divinely-bestowed prophecy. Secondly, the fact that a message meant for Los is written so that only the engraver can truly understand it implies that Los is the engraver, or at least that Blake so identifies with Los as a creator that he can pen a message both to the demiurge and to himself at once. The inverse positioning of this brief message upon the page gives the words a secondary meaning, and helps the reader to interpret them fully.



Fig. 14: *Jerusalem*, Erdman 37.

In a way, the stress on the placement of a word on a page, along with the symbolic import of the scroll, harks back to the archaic origins of writing, when language was hieroglyph. However, while this is a pleasing parallel to draw when speaking of the search for arcane knowledge, this was probably not Blake's main goal. W. J. T. Mitchell identifies this patterning on the page as a major part of the poet's "composite art," in that it shows that writing and printmaking are media capable of full-bodied presences that are not mere supplements to speech; it challenges the predominant "conviction that the deep truth is imageless and that language is the best available medium for evoking that unseeable, unpicturable essence."<sup>83</sup> For Blake, the word is object, other, and divine, and gives mankind the capability of stretching its imagination to its very limits in its very multiplicity of form and function.



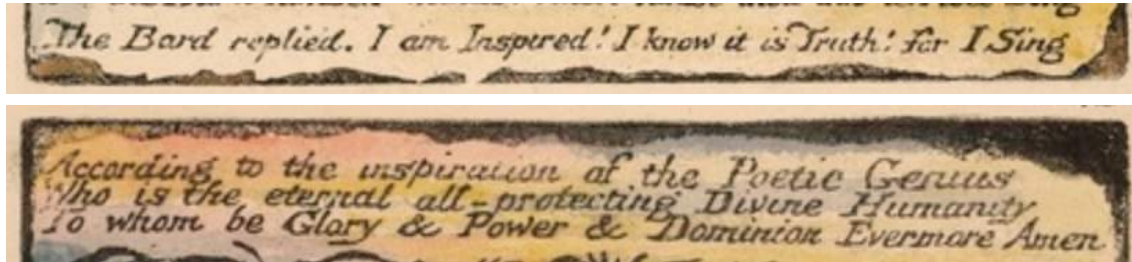
#### Prose & Song

The final element to the supernaturally infinite powers of language as it appears in the poetry of William Blake is one that circles back to the age-old and mysterious role of the word as it manifested itself in humanity's most ancient of days: the aural component of the lyrics. Song is the manner in which great stories are told, and important truths imparted. The relative neglect of this part of Blake's oeuvre in traditional summaries of his works is a lapse; the ear is the body part attributed to Los, the embodiment of Poetry and Creative Imagination itself, which certainly implies that sound is critical to the act of creation. Additionally, his most popular poems, along with a significant later poem about the creation of the universe, are called "songs", which has an obvious implicit aural quality. *Milton*, one of Blake's longest poems, has two significant

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<sup>83</sup> Mitchell, *Composite Art*, cit. 125-126.

songs within it: The Bard's Song and The Song of Beulah. The Bard's Song demonstrates the persuasive power of song, in that it is the instigating effect of the action: through his song, the Bard convinces Milton to descend from eternity to the material world in order to redeem his Emanation. When asked whence the song came, familiar refrain of Blake's is found:



Milton, Erdman 13-14.

“The Bard replied, I am Inspired! I know it is Truth! For I Sing  
According to the inspiration of the Poetic Genius  
Who is the eternal all-protecting Divine Humanity  
To whom be Glory & Power & Dominion Evermore Amen”

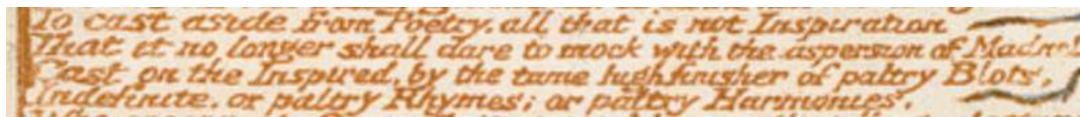
The Bard, who is truly Blake inserting himself into the narrative, insists once more that it is in his song that the Poetic Genius expresses itself best.

Admittedly, the auralty of Blake's songs is difficult to pin down at times<sup>84</sup> and detecting a rhythm, especially in his later works, is sometimes difficult (and not only because of the distractions caused by things like design and style). The Bard's Song quoted above is not, in fact, rhyming, and his metrical philosophy there is decidedly not one that Alexander Pope would recognize as appropriate. Blake was notoriously

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<sup>84</sup> Glossed over in this section, merely because it felt tangential to the import of the auralty of Blake's poems, is the fact that the definition of song, or even of music more generally, is complicated (Kania, Andrew, "The Philosophy of Music." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/music>). This dissertation will both identify when words are simply spoken aloud, not necessarily with the implication that there is any kind of intonation, and it will also accept the broad definition by Scruton, Hamilton, Kania, and others that song is an appeal to tonality, pitch, rhythm, and rhyme.

dismissive of some of the trappings of poetry prized by students of the medium. Again in *Milton*, Blake says:



*Milton*, Erdman 41.

“To cast aside from Poetry, all that is not Inspiration  
That it no longer shall dare to mock with the aspersion of Madness  
Cast on the Inspired by the tame high finisher of paltry Blots,  
Indefinite, or paltry Rhymes; or paltry Harmonies.”

The poetry and songs of William Blake do not always follow traditional rhyme schemes, as he viewed them to be “paltry” and an obstacle in the way of truth of Inspiration. When Blake does use more traditional forms, it was for a specific effect. Some of Blake’s rhythms recall the liturgical poetry of the King James Bible or of The Book of Common Prayer,<sup>85</sup> which is of course symbolically weighty in some of his poetry meant to evoke Biblical narratives or themes. However, it is widely acknowledged that Blake was chiefly an experimentalist, utilizing free verse, the free septenary, and the unrhymed trimeter.<sup>86</sup> While many contemporaries and early students of Blake were disapproving of such experimentation, Samuel Say, an eighteenth-century prosodist, claimed that Blake’s mixing of rhythms in *Milton* was something preternaturally inspired:

“... a proper Mixture, Exchange, Agreement, or Opposition of Such a Variety of Parts, Sounds and Numbers; and sometimes a Sudden and Seasonable Start from all Rules to awaken Attention, or imitate the Passion, seems to be that HIDDEN SOUL OF HARMONY, as MILTON calls it, which secretly informs the whole

<sup>85</sup> Kumbier, William. “Blake’s Epic Meter.” *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1978, pp. 163–192. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25600128, cit. 164.

<sup>86</sup> Damon, *Blake Dictionary*, 332.

Composure and animates Every Word, and Every Syllable in the Writings of the Ancients.”<sup>87</sup>

Perhaps this is why the Bard’s Song, though not in traditional verse, is so compelling for both Milton and for the reader.

The importance of aurality is further highlighted in *London*, which hinges on our ability to not only hear the words as they are sung, but also merge the senses of sight and sound, like in the way that sighs run as blood down palace walls. This is stated baldly in the first letter of each line in the 3rd stanza, which form the word “HEAR”, which can be understood to be a command as well as an acrostic. Then again, in the final word of the poem, “hearse” with the concept “hear-see,”<sup>88</sup> as is seen in figure 15. Blake, again, in his command for us to listen, also commands us to dissolve the boundaries between the senses.



Fig. 15: *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, Erdman 46.

<sup>87</sup> Say, Samuel. *An Essay on the Harmony, Variety and Power of Numbers*. Edited by Paul Fusell, Jr., The Augustan Reprint Society, no. 55, 1956.

<sup>88</sup> Hilton, *Early Works*, cit. 207.

The locus of the majority of the import of song is found within the character of Los, as he is the figure within Blake's pantheon that is tied to the door of perception attached to aurality: the ear. He sings his *Song of Los* in the guise of a bard singing at a table; finding his voice within *Jerusalem* is a major plot point, and his articulations help to fill the void surrounding a group of hurt women, changing their mourning into hope.<sup>89</sup> It is in this aspect of Los, particularly as it is expressed in this latter poem, that there is again an excellent example of the weight of a single word or concept, as explained by Nelson Hilton. As mentioned briefly in the previous section, weaving, storytelling, and the creation of the physical realm are closely linked within this poem; so much so that the metaphor can be found in the style of the images in the form of an overabundance of cross-hatching, which is a visual reminder of warp and weave.<sup>90</sup> The loom, as well, takes on a related importance in the poem, and a significant section is devoted to relating the story of the daughters of Enitharmon weaving the flesh of the as-yet spectral humanity. Los, as well, is something of a singer in this scene, not unlike the Ancient Bard: he is "the voice of the shuttle,"<sup>91</sup> and the manpower telling the spinning women what to do. Worth noting is the fact that in the plates depicting the creation of Urizen, and by extension, the rest of the physical universe, it is Los who is the active party. It is not much of a leap to say that it is Los who is imagined to be the original reciter, the one who relies on the oral refrain.

While Los is certainly the dwelling in which song rests, Urizen is also identified as the progenitor of sound that begets creation:

"[Urizen] formed also harsh instruments of sound  
To grate the soul into destruction, or to inflame

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<sup>89</sup> Hilton, *Literal Imagination*, cit. 45.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>91</sup> Blake, *Jerusalem*, cit. 739.



The spirits of life, to pervert all the faculties of sense  
 Into their own destruction — if perhaps he might avert  
 His own despair, even at the cost of everything that breathes.  
 Thus in the temple of the sun his books of iron & brass  
 And silver & gold he consecrated, reading incessantly  
 To myriads of perturbed spirits through the universe.  
 They propagated the deadly words...<sup>92</sup>

Urizen, looking to escape his fear of the realm of non-existence, creates aurality in order to incant the words from his books that create life and pervert the soul, which is precisely what occurs when he and Los make the physical universe. These spoken words are, in turn, proliferated by the spirits that populate said universe; song begets song.

However, it would actually be a mistake to think of music as existing only in the fallen world, or as something wholly invented by Urizen and Los rather than simply utilized by them. Music is, like language, something that comes to them from a divine source. At the end of the first night of *Four Zoas*, Urizen descends the universe and proclaims, “Behold these sickening spheres!”<sup>93</sup> The use of the word “sphere” to refer to the Mundane Shell, which does not occur here in isolation, calls to mind another medieval conception involving the makeup of the universe: the *musica universalis*, or the music of the spheres. This notion refers to the idea that the pathways along which celestial bodies move create a form of music.<sup>94</sup> This music was partially a kind of metaphor for the metaphysical principle that God created the universe to exist in perfect harmony.<sup>95</sup> However, it was also, literally, conceived to be divine music:

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<sup>92</sup> Blake, *Four Zoas*, cit. 422.

<sup>93</sup> Blake, *Four Zoas*, cit. 122.

<sup>94</sup> This idea could have come to Blake in any number of ways. Milton refers to it in *Paradise Lost*, and in Dante’s *Paradiso*, heaven is depicted as a number of concentric spheres surrounding Earth.

<sup>95</sup> Weiss, Piero and Richard Taruskin. *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents*. Cengage Learning, 2008, cit. 3.

“...[A]s that vast (though finite) space is not dark, so neither is it silent. If our ears are opened we should perceive, as Henryson puts it, ‘every planet in his proper sphere / In moving makand harmony and sound’ (*Fables*, 1659)... The ‘silence’ which frightened Pascal was according to the Model, wholly illusory; and the sky looks black only because we are seeing it through the dark glass of our own shadow. You must conceive yourself looking up at a world lighted, warmed, and resonant with music.”<sup>96</sup>

If one accepts, as is not difficult, that Urizen and Los are essentially hubristic error incarnate, one can read the above quote from C.S. Lewis almost as an admonishment spoken directly to them. The Eternity from which Urizen and Los come is full of light and music from God, and the fearful darkness they perceive themselves surrounded by, even once they enter the realm of death, is an illusion caused by their own warped perception. In figure 16 from *Europe*, Urizen is seen with a compass in hand, englobed in a shining sun. While the compass certainly speaks to Urizen’s position as architect of the world, it is interesting that what he holds is specifically the tool used to create circles, or spheres, on a page. Urizen is here cocooned in the divine sphere created by God, while simultaneously drafting his own in the form of the fallen world. His error is that this creation was begun in order to control and oppress, which perverts the divine form. This dissertation will explore how this perversion manifests itself in the final section of this dissertation.

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<sup>96</sup> Lewis, C.S. *The Discarded Image: And Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 1964, cit. 112.



Fig. 16: *Europe: A Prophecy*, Erdman i.



### Oral Storytelling

The most significant example of the importance of the oral tradition probably comes again from *Jerusalem*, the patterns of rhythm and sound of which are based less on poetic requirements and more on oratorical arrangements. The action of weaving is incredibly important in this poem, especially as an extended metaphor for oral storytelling. Robert N. Essick argues that the abundance of individual words having to do with fabric and weaving turns the entirety of the epic into a fabric of its own — one of interwoven metonymies that are akin to the linguistic functions of the brain.<sup>97</sup> This system or pattern, Essick states, functions like the sound patterns shaping the oral formulas of ancient epics like the *Odyssey* or *Beowulf*. The images involving weaving tend to cluster in line clumps of a couple dozen lines rather than being evenly distributed, which suggests that one image might have served as a mnemonic cue for its

<sup>97</sup> Essick, Robert N. "Jerusalem and Blake's final works." *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, edited by Morris Eaves, Cambridge University Press, 2003, cit. 255-256.

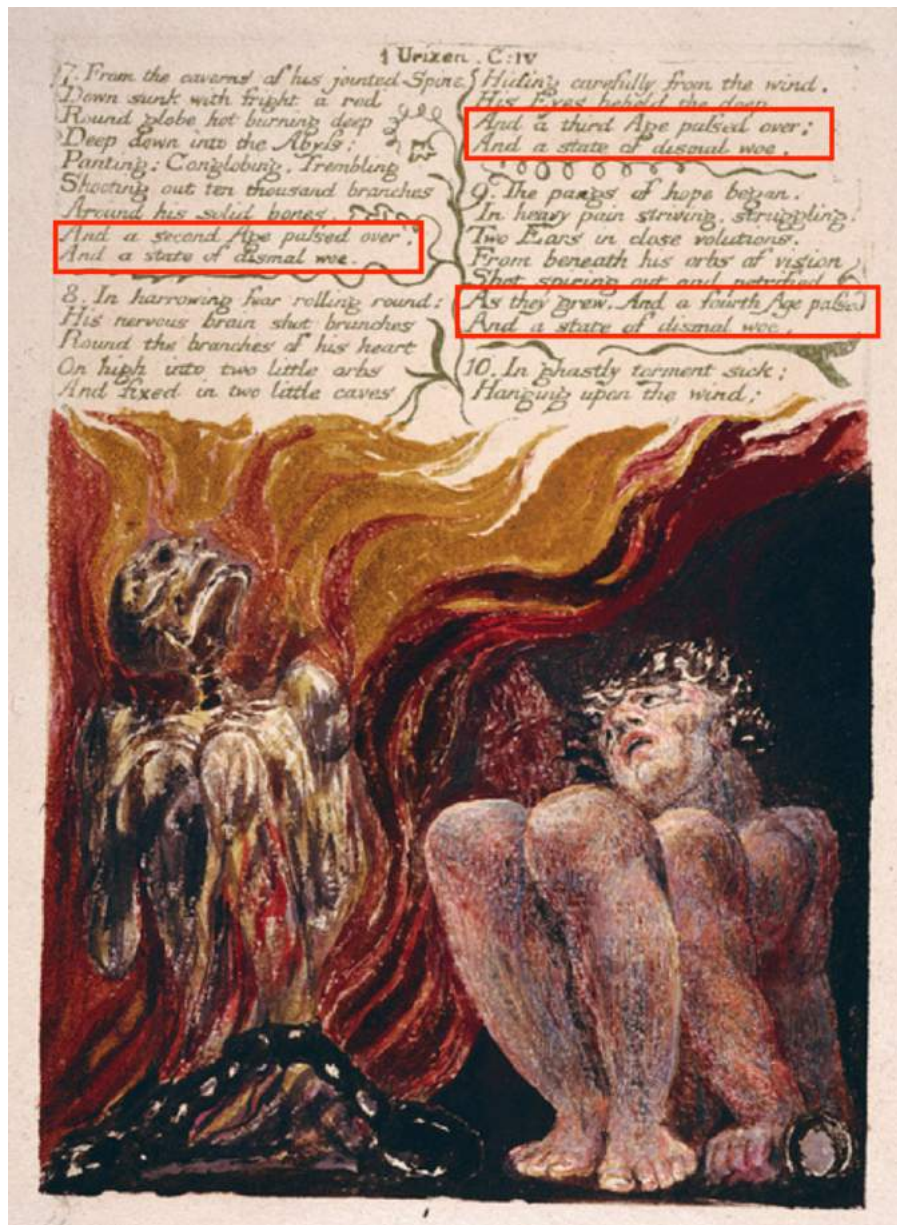


Fig. 17: *The (First) Book of Urizen*, Erdman 11.

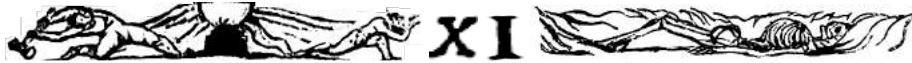
associates.<sup>98</sup> This theory is given credence by the fact that, just as there is a chorus in songs both ancient and modern, there is a kind of refrain that is noticeably repeated in different variants plates: “They became what they beheld.”<sup>99</sup>

Oral epic formulae are interwoven with the material of the blood and bones of Urizen, and, it follows, into the very fabric of the physical world, as is evidenced in the

<sup>98</sup> Essick, Robert N., *William Blake and the Language of Adam*, Clarendon Press, 1989, cit. 174-178

<sup>99</sup> Blake, *Jerusalem*, cit. 723.

highlighted lines in figure 17. Los enacts this creation, which takes seven ages, during the fourth chapter of the book. The final two lines of each of these ages are two repeated phrases — “And the second Age passed over, And a state of dismal woe” — serving as a fabricated verbal recall for the singer of the words. And the process, as is explicitly illustrated at the bottom of the page, is a gruesome one. Urizen and Los are deep in the innards of what appears to be the second age. Here is Los, holding the hammer with which he forms the chains that bind Urizen, rolling his eyes back in abject horror in reaction to what is manifesting before him: a blood-bound skeleton, wreathed in the flames of Los’s hot furnace. This is an image of “dismal woe,” indeed.



#### The Narrative Contract

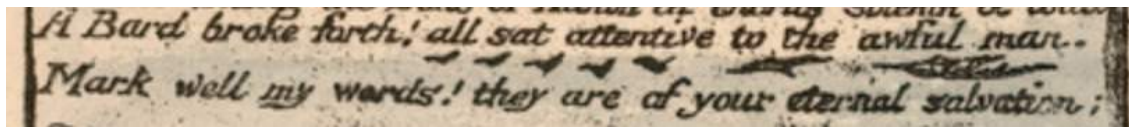
Significantly, however, these kinds of refrains also recall what Gavin Edwards calls “performative utterances,” which ties the poems to ritual, whether religious, legal, or magical.<sup>100</sup> Edwards draws attention in particular to a handful of words whose secondary or tertiary meanings actually imply a form of what Roland Barthes calls a “narrative contract” for the interlocutors,<sup>101</sup> which is not a concept foreign to Gothic writers. The nested narrative structure of *Frankenstein*, for example, calls attention to the presence of a listener beyond Frankenstein, and when the monster persuades his maker to listen to him, this narrative contract is sealed for both Frankenstein and for the reader.<sup>102</sup> The exact same situation comes about when the Bard calls upon Milton to

<sup>100</sup> Edwards, Gavin. “Repeating the Same Dull Round.” *William Blake*, edited by David Punter, Macmillan Press, 1996, cit. 109.

<sup>101</sup> Barthes, Roland, and Lionel Duisit. “An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative.” *New Literary History*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1975, pp. 237–272. JSTOR, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/468419](http://www.jstor.org/stable/468419).

<sup>102</sup> Brooks, Peter. *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*. Harvard University Press, 1993, cit. 202.

listen to his song in *Milton*:



*Milton*, Erdman 2.

“A Bard broke forth! All sat attentive to the awful man.  
Mark well my words! They are of your eternal salvation...”

While this line is directed toward Milton, one cannot mistake the voice of Blake in the Bard. Here, Blake is calling upon us to listen to his tale, and in so doing, we as readers are entering this narrative contract. This command is also a refrain, and rings out on four more occasions over the course of the first book;<sup>103</sup> readers enter this contract on the very first plate, and are recalled to it over and over again.

It is important to note as well that there is an auralty given to the books of Urizen. In the short passage below, there is Urizen, his daughters, and the audience entering the narrative contract mentioned in the previous section of this dissertation. Urizen reads from the book of brass to his daughters, beginning a long list of the ways in which a tyrannical ruler such as Urizen might impose order on the universe through cruelty:

“Listen, O daughters, to my voice! Listen to the words of wisdom!  
So shall ye govern over all.; let Moral Duty tune your tongue,  
but be your hearts harder than the nether millstone...”<sup>104</sup>

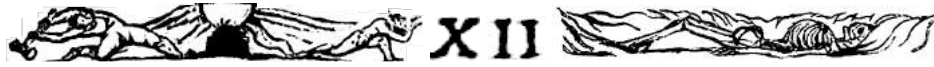
Later on in the poem, the reader is told that the book is placed upon clouds of death and sung aloud by his daughters<sup>105</sup> — therefore, one is meant to interpret that Urizen’s books of law were in fact songs of law, and that we are implicit in their enactment simply

<sup>103</sup> Which, incidentally, means that this could also be considered an instance of the usage of oral formulae.

<sup>104</sup> Blake, *Four Zoas*, 387.

<sup>105</sup> Damon, *Blake Dictionary*, 424.

by listening. Within Urizen's books already are two of the three sister arts that Blake believed held immense power.



### Riddles, Charms, & Magic

Sound, narrative contract, and visual ties between words can all interact, as well, in the form of the riddle or charm. Northrop Frye outlines this potentiality in an essay that largely concerns a poet that Blake was an admirer of: Edmund Spenser.<sup>106</sup> Frye states that charm and riddle both illustrate that literature, which sometimes makes use of the two, is a natural intermediate between the musical and pictorial arts. He reminds us that the words “read” and “riddle” have the same root, and that riddles often have pictorial relations to things like siphers, palindromes, and acrostics. As was seen already in *London*, Blake is no stranger to these particular visual tricks within poetry, and it is also safe to say that he was probably as familiar as Spenser was with the affinities between music, lyricism, and charm. Charm has a rhetoric of its own that is similar in style to an incantation; Frye speculates that before Spenser utilized charm as a literary device, there may have been an imagined apotropaic magical purpose.<sup>107</sup> Its repetition is dissociative, and ordinary processes are momentarily put on hold. If effective, readers or listeners are compelled into some sort of action that will only be half-conscious. Geoffrey Hartman obliquely acknowledges that Blake understood the facets of riddle and charm when he states that the wonder of Blake’s poetry is its ability to “envision

<sup>106</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, cit. 123-147.

<sup>107</sup> Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, cit. 126.

what it calls for.”<sup>108</sup> A simple little example of this can be found in *To Spring* (italics mine):

“O thou with dewy locks, who lookest down  
Through the clear windows of the morning, *turn*  
*Thine angel eyes* upon our western isle,  
Which in full choir hails thy approach, O Spring!”<sup>109</sup>

This is not the most inspired poem of Blake’s, perhaps, but the italicized segment does show poetry’s capability to force one to enact what it prescribes. The reader’s eyes do indeed turn down as the reader moves them from one line to the next in the course of reading. Blake’s words, both individually and as constellations across the page, have tangible aural, graphic, and poetic power, and while it might just be a stretch to suggest that Blake believed that his words were literal incantations, he fully realized just how impactful words could be in the truest, most primordial and preternatural way.

Songs are often sung by the characters within the text that are capable of compelling other personages to do what they wish. The song that is sung during the second night of *Four Zoas* during the feast of Los and his Emanation, Enitharmon, spurs its listeners to war,<sup>110</sup> and earlier in that poem, Enitharmon attempts to convince Los of the superiority of the female with a persuasive song of death, but fails — perhaps because the prosody of the song fell short. However, the most famous example of a riddle proper within all of Blake’s opus is Thel’s Motto, found before the frontispiece of *The Book of Thel*:

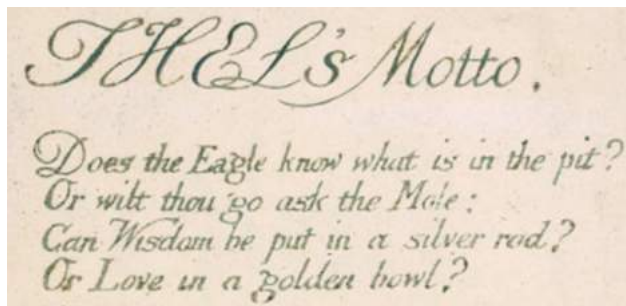
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<sup>108</sup> Hartman, Geoffrey. “Blake and the Progress of Poesy.” *Beyond Formation*, Yale University Press, 1970, cit. 194.

<sup>109</sup> Blake, William. “To Spring.” *Blake: The Complete Poems*, edited by W.H. Stevenson, Routledge, 2007, cit. 3-4.

<sup>110</sup> Blake, *Four Zoas*, 818.

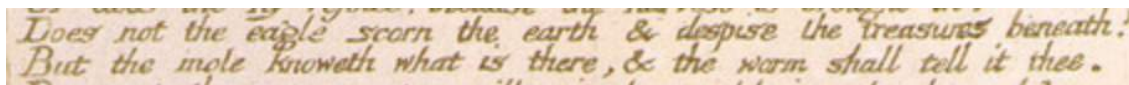




*The Book of Thel*, Erdman i.

“Does the Eagle know what is in the pit?  
Or wilt thou go ask the Mole:  
Can Wisdom be put in a silver rod?  
Or Love in a golden bowl?”

This motto is enigmatic, and its purpose is to compel us to understand the import of *The Book of Thel*. The answer to the first two questions included in the motto is actually found later in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*:<sup>111</sup>



*Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Erdman 2.

“Does not the eagle scorn the earth & despise the treasures beneath?  
But the mole knoweth what is there, & the worm shall tell it thee.”

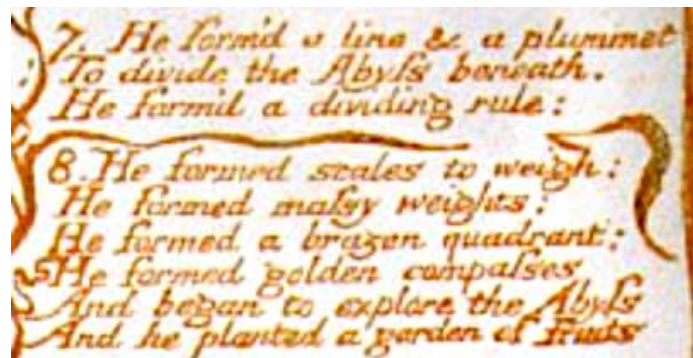
No, the eagle, a noble creature of the air, cannot know what is below ground; only the mole or the symbol of death and decay, the worm, can tell us. Likewise, Thel cannot truly know what lies in the grave without being bestowed with mortality herself. She is a creature of Innocence, not of Experience. The second two lines are often explained as representing Blake’s preoccupation with and disapproval of the Church of England, as the silver rod could refer to the scepter of a high-ranking church official, and the golden bowl to a cup used during communion.<sup>112</sup> However, I think there is another aspect to the

<sup>111</sup> Stevenson, *Complete Works*, cit. 100.

<sup>112</sup> Sorensen, Peter. *William Blake’s Recreation of Gnostic Myth: Resolving the Apparent Incongruities*. Edwin Mellen Press, 1995, cit. 41.

second-to-last line in Thel's Motto that ties the entire poem into the overall theme of creation as we've discussed it thus far: the silver rod may refer secondarily to the engraving tool that was seen in Urizen's hand in figure 12. Perhaps wisdom can, in fact, be found in a silver rod, and perhaps that silver rod can be used to create the fallen realm that so fascinates this poem's protagonist.

The dissociative repetition characteristic of charm can be found in *Urizen* as well, in a section just before his exploration of the "dark den" of the realm of death. The narrator recounts the actions of Urizen as he creates the tools with which he will eventually use to create the limits and rules of the universe, particularly those that measure existence. The regular, drumlike pacing of the lines when read aloud is influenced by this repetition, meaning that the form of the prosody and the story it recounts mirror each other. This stanza tells of the measures of this world, and it also inches forward with a regular pacing that is something similar to the aural equivalent of notches on a ruler:



*The (First) Book of Urizen*, Erdman 20.

7. He form'd a line & a plummet  
To divide the Abyss beneath.  
He form'd a dividing rule:

8. He formed scales to weigh;  
He formed massy weights;  
He formed a brazen quadrant;

He formed golden compasses

And began to explore the Abyss  
And he planted a garden of fruits..."



### The Three Fates

What, then, is the significance of these three arts being used? The first potential, and slightly unsatisfying, the answer lies in the suggestion that these three arts correspond to as many of the five senses as can be impacted, practically speaking, in a two-dimensional medium. Blake speaks unendingly about the importance of opening up all the senses, as his ultimate aim with his works is to open the doors of perception to the infinite, and to show that "Man's perceptions are not bounded by organs of perception he perceives more than sense (tho' ever so acute) can discover."<sup>113</sup> However, there are obvious holes in this theory, namely that there are senses left out with these three arts, and that Blake has other, much more successful, ways of representing the senses and their dissolution or expansion within his works. The second possible reason could be that the number three simply held symbolic significance for Blake, as it does for much of the western world. Much has been written — of varying quality — about Blake and his tentative relationship to numerology,<sup>114</sup> and while this is absolutely not an example of Blake attempting literal magic in the form of the number three, he was definitely aware of the symbolic potency of the number in different traditions.

<sup>113</sup> Warner, *Language of Art*, cit. 31.

<sup>114</sup> A thorough history of this can be found in: Spector, Sheila. "Kabbalistic Sources: Blake's and His Critics." *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly* 17.3 (1983): 1983-84. Essentially, because Blake knew Hebrew, some scholars have attempted to interpret Blake through the lens of Kabbalah. However, this has often clouded the matter more than clarified it. If Blake was aware of Kabbalah, it was a distorted version of it that was more linked to the Theosophical movement of the nineteenth century, which held that there was a universal secret knowledge that only consisted of Jewish mysticism in part.

This brings me to what I would like to propose as a possible answer to this question, which also aligns wordsmithing with the divine and inscrutable nature of creation. The fact that three arts are harnessed in Blake's use of language alone is reminiscent of the most illustrious trio in myth and literature: the three fates. These figures appear in a number of artworks and illustrations by William Blake, both pictorially and verbally, including a fairly recently-discovered painting called "The Sea of Time and Space (Vision of the Circle of the Life of Man)":



Fig. 18: The Sea of Time and Space (Vision of the Circle of the Life of Man). National Trust Collections, <http://www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/985730>

F. Foster Damon identifies Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos — representing birth, life, and death, respectively — in the figures crushing down upon the shell-crowned person of Tharmas at the very bottom of the composition.<sup>115</sup> Draped over and between them is the thread of life. This painting represents the descent of the soul into the material world, and it is significant that this world, represented by the allegorical sea of the divided space and time, is bounded by these three mythological women. The fallen and material

<sup>115</sup> Damon, *Blake Dictionary*, cit. 87.

world, this artwork tells us, is a realm dominated by the Moirai, who dictate experience there beyond the pale, Neo-Platonic world represented on the right of the composition.

Blake made use of the, to borrow a term, “weird sisters” a few times times by way of suggestion, as well, through the person of Enitharmon. Enitharmon is the “vegetated mortal Wife of Los”, and the two are paired in the act of creation during Night Seven of *Four Zoas*.<sup>116</sup> She is the weaver of flesh that carries out the commands of Los, and is often depicted as part of a trio of women, as is seen in figure 19:



Fig. 19: *Jerusalem*, Erdman 25.

*Europe: A Prophecy*, however, is really the single poem out of Blake’s oeuvre that explores the character most. Figure 20 is a work by Blake entitled “The Night of Enitharmon’s Joy,” the title of which was taken from the fifth plate of the poem (although the artwork did not accompany the illuminated manuscript of the prophecy). This work depicts Enitharmon on the right, flanked by half-hidden Michelangelesque figures, in a dark, otherworldly realm populated by symbolic animals and monsters. This work is particularly worth bringing up for two reasons. The first is that the female figure on the

<sup>116</sup> Damon, *Blake Dictionary*, cit. 24-125. Enitharmon does work on her loom alone, as well, but only when she is working with Los is the work good; otherwise, it brings only ill (Stevenson, *Complete Works*, cit. 556).



Fig. 20: "The Night of Enitharmon's Joy".

right here, nominally Enitharmon, was very much informed by the character of Hecate from William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, which enjoyed an upswing in popularity at the time of the artwork's creation.<sup>117</sup> The connection to and confusion between these two dangerous, powerful, and larger-than-life women locates Enitharmon firmly within the realm of spells and charms. The second reason to include this work of art in this discussion is the object beneath the left hand of Enitharmon-cum-Hecate: a book. This tome also happens to be touching the woman's left foot, a location associated with direct, divine inspiration for Blake, as is seen in *Milton*. Enitharmon, occasional partner in crime in Los's creative machinations, is herself clued in to the source of universe-expanding power: language. The tripled figure is here associated with the very source of power that Blake would bestow more actively upon his male demiurges Urizen and Los. This image, along with the one preceding, both demonstrate that the three arts Blake harnessed within his words were in turn associated with the powers of creation.

Something provocative to take note of in this discussion of powerful word-wielding is that there are two thematically related pairings commonly made with faux cognates that Blake, a scholar of Latin and other ancient tongues, may have been

<sup>117</sup> "William Blake. Hecate, c. 1795." Emory College of Arts and Sciences: English Department. [http://www.english.emory.edu/classes/Shakespeare\\_Illustrated/Blake.Hecate.html](http://www.english.emory.edu/classes/Shakespeare_Illustrated/Blake.Hecate.html).

familiar with. The first is between “grammar” and “glamour” (as in a spell or charm), and the second is between “word” and “wyrd” (as in fate). The weaving of words is a charm, and the word itself is divinely-ascribed destiny. Language can cast a spell, and words are divine, especially if wielded properly. When the three fates of song, visual art, and poetry are combined within the written word itself, the result can be, in a word, magic.



#### Monstrous Man

Thus the world and its inhabitants are created, in much the same way that it occurs in the Bible: “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.”<sup>118</sup> Blake, Urizen, and Los — with the three artistic fates in hand — all take part in the creation of this flesh-bound poetic universe, and in terms of both the poems themselves and the universe they describe, the results are not precisely what the creators had imagined. Blake’s poetic universe undoubtedly got out of his control at a few points during his career, and he was forced to reshape it and its characters several times in order to either reign in or expand concepts that got rather out of hand. Urizen is likewise frustrated that his attempts to rule with an iron fist were thwarted time and time again by chaotic humanity, and Los struggled with this as well, especially with his own progeny, Orc. These three men’s joint attempt to rationalize experience into a homogenous system results in its precise opposite — a world of terror and chaos that will not obey the laws set forth, and one that is divided into metaphorical bloody, living amputations.

The creatures dwelling within the Mundane Shell in the poetry are monsters in multiple senses of the word. The first relates to the way one views humanity visually,

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<sup>118</sup> *The English Bible, King James Version*, John 1:14

and this does not refer simply to creatures that are ugly — though there is definitely plenty of that within the poetry and illustrations, as well. It is more complicated than that, and more compelling when viewed within the framework of harnessing the power of multiple arts, especially the verbal, as outlined in this dissertation. Peter Brooks defines monstrosity as something born both from nature and from something beyond it; it is something that calls into question what vision itself means, the language we use to classify what we see, and the means by which we can even judge or control the phenomenal world at all:

“What, then, in unprincipled nature, is a monster? A monster is that outcome or product of curiosity or epistemophilia pushed to an extreme that results — as in the story of Oedipus — in confusion, blindness, and exile. A monster is that which cannot be placed in any of the taxonomic schemes devised by the human mind to understand and to order nature. It exceeds the very basis of classification, language itself: it is an excess of signification, a strange byproduct or leftover of the process of making meaning. It is an imaginary being who comes to life in language, and once having done so, cannot be eliminated from language. Even if we want to claim that “monster,” like some of the words used by Felix and Agatha [in *Frankenstein*] — “dearest”, “unhappy” — has no referent, it has a signified, a conceptual meaning, a place in our knowledge of ourselves. The novel insistently thematizes issues of language and rhetoric because the symbolic order of the visual, specular, and imaginary relations, in which he is demonstrably a monster.



The symbolic order compensates for a deficient nature: it promises escape from a condition of 'to-be-looked-at-ness.'"<sup>119</sup>

A monster is a body created by the imagination that exists in order to be regarded and wordlessly shuddered at; one that transgresses all conceived barriers and that cannot be wrapped up tidily or conceptualized with language alone. Monstrosity is the Gothic encapsulated: easily felt but difficult to describe. It is almost as though the paragraph above were written in reference to Blake's philosophies concerning boundaries, so perfectly does it encapsulate his belief in the harnessing of multiple arts to demonstrate something beyond humanity's fallen and limited comprehension; truly, language alone is not enough to encapsulate the monstrous. Blake is the seminal poet of the fallen, shattered body that is both human and dehumanized, and the blindness characteristic of the conceptual core of monstrosity as described above, is part and parcel of the very idea Blake has of the closed doors of perception. The fallen nature of humankind and physical impurity are enough to call into question language and how we use it to describe the world and ourselves. We are monstrous spectacles in our very nature. This earth-bound, natural boundary-transgressing conception of humanity is demonstrated neatly in one oft-repeated motif within both the poetry and the artworks: scaly and reptilian hybrids. Figure 21 is an image of two fallen humans in *Jerusalem* paired with a comparable image from antiquity. Figure 22 depicts a *gigantomachy*, or a battle between the Greek gods and the race of giants. This type of scene was incredibly common in antiquity, both in poetry and visual arts, so there is no doubt that Blake would have encountered it in his studies of the ancient world. These scenes were meant to highlight

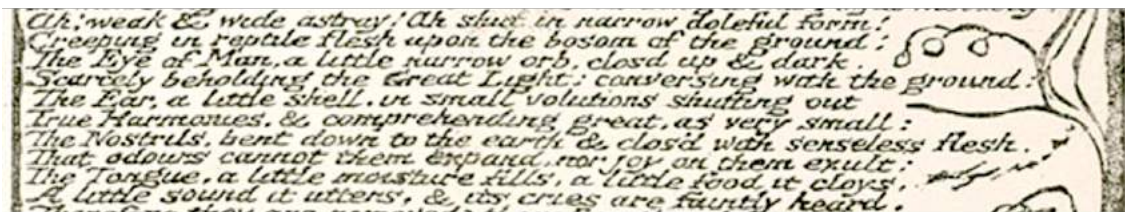
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<sup>119</sup> Brooks, Peter. *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*. Harvard University Press, 1993, cit. 218.



Fig. 21: *Jerusalem*, Erdman 75. Fig. 22: from *The Pergamon Altar*, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.<sup>120</sup>

the distinction between the all-powerful beings from Mount Olympus and crude, earthbound monsters. Giants were very commonly depicted with serpentine legs both to distinguish them visually from normal humans and to emphasise that their monstrosity arises from their pressed-in closeness to the earth, along with their inability to transcend these confines. Below is a section from *Jerusalem* that speaks to this within humanity itself:



*Jerusalem*, Erdman 49.

(Ah! Weak & wide astray! Oh shut in narrow doleful form!  
 Creeping in reptile flesh upon the bosom of the ground:  
 The Eye of Man, a little narrow orb, closed up & dark.  
 Scarcely beholding the Great Light; conversing with the ground.  
 The Ear, a little shell, in small volutions shutting out  
 True Harmonies, & comprehending great, as very small:  
 The Nostrils, bent down to the earth & clos'd with senseless flesh.  
 That odours cannot them expand, nor joy in them exult:  
 The Tongue, a little moisture fills, a little food it cloys.  
 A little sound it utters, & its cries are faintly heard.)

<sup>120</sup>This is a screenshot from the 3D model of the altar taken from the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin website (<https://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/antikensammlung/collection-research/3d-model-of-the-pergamon-altar.html>).

As is evident in this passage, the “reptile flesh” of humanity not only ties us symbolically to the earth, but is also responsible literally for the shutting up of the doors of perception. Part of humanity’s monstrousness is its physical deformities, most assuredly, but it is also its wormlike blindness. In other words, humanity is indeed monstrous because it is something before which one can do nothing but wordlessly gawk, as Brooks defines it, but included in that monstrousness is also our inability to comprehend it. This is exactly what Blake is attempting to rectify by using the three arts in conjunction in the creation of his illuminated works, and that Urizen and Los were unaware that they were inflicting upon humanity. Monstrousness in Blake’s poetry is an unending, horrific vortex that is reminiscent, in fact, of the realm of death from which it was created.

However, the particular brand of monstrousness that we witness within the poetry is not as simple as serpentine figures with sightless human faces. The fallen form is horrific and disfigured indeed, and a human form with serpentine legs absolutely fits the bill for a monstrous body that defies phenomenological boundaries, but the crux of the issue is rather that while the human form idealized is holy, the results walking among us are accursed specifically because of their suspension between divinity and the atrocity of physical form generally. The horror of fallen humanity comes from the fact that humans are hybridized as both coming from the bowels of the earth and from the supernatural beyond. Below, figures 23 and 24, are two instances of parallel forms that are either repeated or slightly adapted a handful of times throughout Blake’s illuminated books. These two paired with each other demonstrate that mankind is formed of these two substances. The text below the illustration in figure 23 describes the beginnings of the creation of the physical form of Urizen aided by Los, which, as we

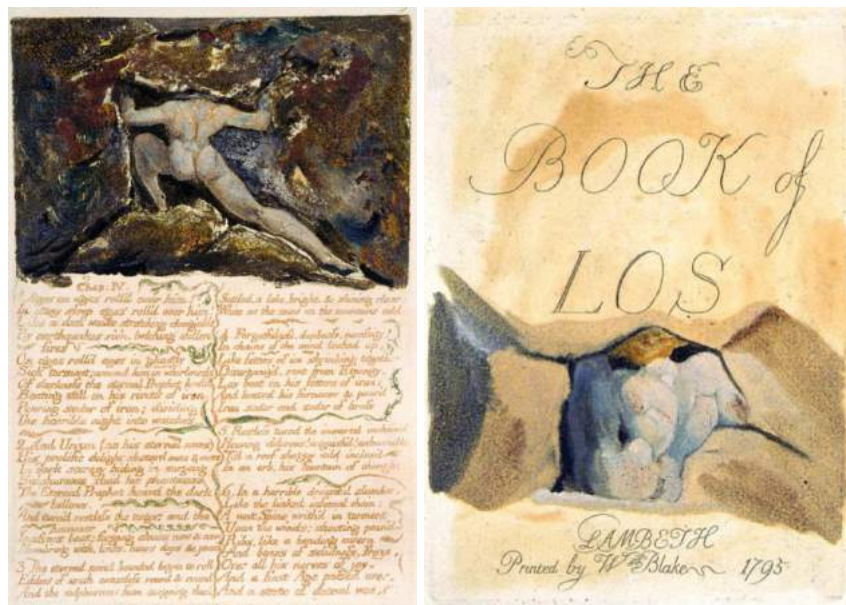


Fig. 23: *The (First) Book of Urizen*, Erdman 10. Fig. 24: *The Book of Los*, Erdman 2.

know, implies as well the creation of mankind from the imaginations of the two deities. One can see in this image that mankind is mined from the murky, splotchy blackness of the realm of death that is also identified and analysed with figure 5. Here, man is depicted as such stuff as nightmares are made of. In this case, we see an instance of illustration as pure and simple as Blake ever gives his readers. This is not quite the case with figure 24, in which is found a more hunched and claustrophobic version of the faceless, muscle-bound back. Here, the man is emerging from a different substance entirely: a ochre-tinted one that is entirely earthen. This is moving from the realm of illustration proper and into the area of allegory; never has a figure been so literally chthonic.

Another aspect of the monstrous nature of humanity that has been touched upon in this dissertation already is its divided quality. When the universe was created, its fall was simultaneous. This fall is characterised by arbitrary divisions between things like time and space, past and future, and male and female, and it is in this latter separation that Blake locates quite a bit of his exploration of the fall into physicality — much more

so than any other singular division. Below, figure 26, is one of several images that encapsulates this, taken from *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, along with two images from The Sistine Chapel that Blake would have known well, and would certainly have informed the composition of the image from *Visions*:

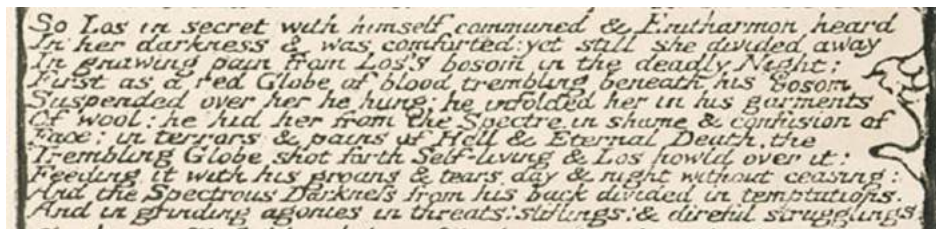


Fig 25: from *The Creation of Adam*, Wikimedia Commons. Fig. 26: *Visions of the Daughter of Albion*, Erdman 6. Fig. 27: from *The Expulsion from Paradise*, Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 26 can be understood to be a depiction of the simultaneous creation and fall of man because of its visual parallels within Michelangelo's works. Michelangelo was a major influence on William Blake in terms of subject matter, of course, but also in terms of style. It was partially for this reason that Blake was never a particularly popular artist during his lifetime: the style then in vogue aligned itself with color and indefinite line, but Blake and Michelangelo were both firmly in the *disegno* camp, and never sublimated form to concerns of color or light.<sup>121</sup> We can see this in the clear, if sketchy, draftsmanship of figure 26. The male figure on the left of the image reclines upon an amorphous black shape in much the same way that Adam is in figure 25, and the female figure to his left is in a pose that is effectively a combination of both Adam's and Eve's in figure 27. There is an important difference in the figure of Eve, however, which speaks to the theme of this section of the dissertation: Eve is covering her face. This is not unusual in images of the Expulsion, and is often interpreted as an expression of shame over the

<sup>121</sup> Mitchell, *Composite Art*, cit. 45-47.

sin Eve has committed in the Garden of Eden. However, this shame cannot be an applicable emotion in this scene; firstly, the female cannot yet have sinned, as this is the very moment of her creation, and secondly, a story like the Expulsion is not to be found within Blake's cosmology. In addition, Blake had some rather unorthodox ideas about what sin is exactly; it was either a transgression against entirely arbitrary and false rules of morality, or it was a spiritual disease unrelated to one's actions.<sup>122</sup> One can understand this pose, then, to be a result of the horror of the situation this woman has found herself in; she covers her eyes because what she is witnessing is too monstrous to bear. This horrific circumstance is also found in the text below, which centers in on the split between Los and his Emanation, Enitharmon:



Jerusalem, Erdman 17.

(So Los in secret with himself communed & Enitharmon heard  
 In her darkness & was comforted: yet still she divided away  
 In gnawing pain from Los's bosom in the deadly Night;  
 First as a red Globe of blood trembling beneath his bosom  
 Suspended over her he hung; he enfolded her in his garments  
 Of woll: he hid her from the Spectre in shame & confusion of  
 Ease: in terrors & pains of Hell & Eternal Death, the  
 Trembling Globe shot forth Self-living & Los howld over it:  
 Feeding it with his groans & tears day & night without ceasing:  
 And the Spectrous Darkness from his back divided in temptations.  
 And in grinding agonies in threats: stiflings: & direful strugglings.)

As one might expect, figure 26 is not an example of illustration of the split between male and female in the strictest terms, nor is the text above an instance of ekphrasis. Both samples of the illustrated manuscripts together, however, can give readers an accurate

<sup>122</sup> Damon, *Blake Dictionary*, 375-376.

depiction of what experiencing the split between the two sexes is like. It is “direful”, it is bloody, and it is impossible for mere mortals to behold.

The monstrosity of division as found in the human form is expanded to encompass the makeup of the universe itself, which is also described in bodily terms. The form, imagination, and dwelling of man are one and the same, as all things in existence are extensions of man; for Blake, all forms exist in the imagination that both creates and perceives them.<sup>123</sup> This dissertation has touched upon this already, when it dealt with the creation myth as told in *The Book of Urizen*, where it is evident that the creation of the physical universe is inexorably tied up in the creation of the body of Urizen. This concept is also literally manifested in the geography of the universe, lands within which are actually parts of both the human body and the human psyche. Lands dreamed up by Blake as literal place and metaphorical state of mind, both contain and consist of human body parts.<sup>124</sup> For example, Babylon and Beulah, two lands within Blake’s cosmological universe, can be understood as expressions of human sexuality that are very similar and yet foils of each other. Beulah, the married state, is a place of soft, female forms: the womb, the vulva, or a mother’s embrace, and Babylon, prostitution teetering on the edge of hell, is a land where sexuality is thwarted, suppressed, or perverted.<sup>125</sup> Both places are linked to genitalia, though of course one is the expression of healthy and fruitful sexuality, and one is not. Both of these lands are as much representative of real (imagined) places as they are almost allegorical representations of different aspects of the human mind. These places within the

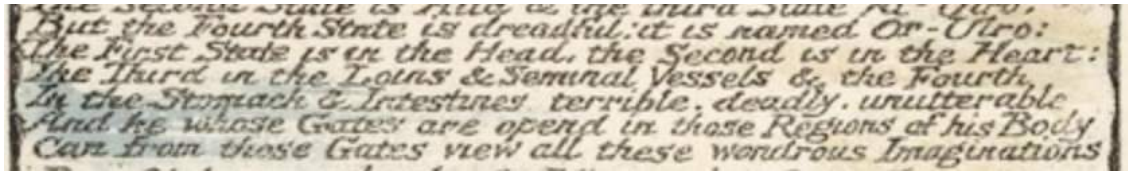
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<sup>123</sup> Warner, *Language of Art*. cit. 23. It is here that Blake proves that he is not a Neoplatonist in the most narrow sense of the term, as he considers form and substance to be inseparable.

<sup>124</sup> Damon, *Blake Dictionary*. cit. 162

<sup>125</sup> Hagstrum, Jean H. “Babylon Revisited, or the Story of Luvah and Vala.” *William Blake*, edited by David Punter, Macmillan Press, 1996, cit. 40

hellscape, just like parts of the human mind or the human body, can become either diseased or optimized, as we see below with Or-Ulro, the region associated with the bowels:



*Milton*, Erdman 34.

But the Fourth State is dreadful; it is named Or-Ulro:  
 ...In the Stomach & Intestines terrible, deadly, inutterable  
 And he whose Fates are open in those Regions of his Body  
 Can from those Gates view all these wondrous Imaginations.

The fallen universe created by Urizen and Los is a place of dreadful distortion and disease, and not only for those dwelling within it. Just as Blake struggled to make a created universe meld perfectly with his philosophies, these two creator figures lose control of something that they meant to have dominion over. What follows are countless tales of monstrous humanity that call into question both mankind's limits of perception and our ability to verbalise what we take in.



It is interesting that Blake's works were so monstrous and unruly themselves. The Bible of Hell and *Four Zoas* felt unsatisfactory and were abandoned, *Jerusalem*, the culminating work of his prophetic oeuvre, is often forgotten or mistaken for the short poem now called "Jerusalem" found at the beginning of *Milton*, and his mythological characters are forced to change aspect so often throughout his poems that it is rather hard for anyone to define them in any one way. Even the narrative or the structure for



the poetry can be deformed and disordered, whether it be on accident due to lack of time, resources, or inspiration, or on purpose for specific effects. The “dream technique”<sup>126</sup> found in *Four Zoas*, mentioned briefly earlier in this dissertation, is an example of this purposeful structural distortion, though it could also be considered an example of an accidental behemoth in its unruliness that even Blake was forced to recognize and then abandon. The fact that *The Book of Urizen* mirrors the confusion of creation is a certain success, however; not only does it describe human bodies being created and chaotically metamorphosing, it also goes through strange changes itself in its shifts between tenses, spaces, and perspectives.<sup>127</sup> While it would be a foolhardy reach to claim that Blake — by failing to organize the lofty (or infernal, as the case may be) thoughts within his works as thoroughly as he may have hoped to — intended to paint himself in so literal a manner as someone like Los or Urizen in order to create a parallel monstrosity of his own, it is indicative of the fact that in characterizing these two figures, he himself manifested the same quality that lies at the core of their motivations. It is a fatal flaw of Classical bent, and one that will come as no surprise, as it also features in many Gothic narratives as it is typical of the seeker after forbidden knowledge: hubris. Both Urizen and Los claim to be God at various points in the poetry. In the second night of *Four Zoas*, Los states “Lo, I am God the terrible destroyer, & not the saviour!”<sup>128</sup> In the third night, Urizen follows suit: “‘Am I not God?’ said Urizen, ‘Who is equal to me?’”<sup>129</sup> While Blake never, as far as records tell us, claimed to be God, he certainly believed himself to be in possession of divine powers, as well as susceptible to divine visions. The divinity is

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<sup>126</sup> Damon, *Blake Dictionary*, cit. 143.

<sup>127</sup> Lincoln, Andrew. “From America to The Four Zoas.” *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, edited by Morris Eaves, Cambridge University Press, 2003, cit. 217

<sup>128</sup> Blake, *Four Zoas*, cit. 317

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 344

firmly placed in the arts, and accessed by opening the doors of perception that are naturally closed within us. In this way, Blake both embodies himself and characterizes Urizen and Los much in the same way as Punter described the wanderer,<sup>130</sup> an archetype that can and often does overlap with the seeker after forbidden knowledge, as with Frankenstein. The wanderer, as well as the seeker in some cases, has committed a crime against nature and against God, and if satiated, his ambition would involve social disaster and the aforementioned transgression of boundaries between the natural, the human, and the divine.<sup>131</sup> What is fascinating about this narrative in the hands of William Blake is that it is given a radically humanist twist: Urizen and Los claiming to be God was not a crime against God, but against man.<sup>132</sup> It is because of their hubris and obsessive need to create and control that humanity, not to mention the universe itself, falls into monstrous separation. God does not enter the creation myth here, jealous and fuming — it is mankind who is harmed by their ambition, and mankind that rebels against the two figures. On the topic of human nature within mythological structures generally, Northrop Frye states,

“the root of evil is the fallen nature of man; the fallen nature is a part of physical nature; hence the basis of superstition and tyranny is the deification of physical nature; this deification has polluted Western culture from the sky gods of Greece and Rome to the gravitational universe of Newton.”<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> In a longer project, the idea of Blake and Urizen as the wanderer could be fleshed out almost as successfully; especially with epistolary evidence from Blake’s time living in the cottage in Felpham.

<sup>131</sup> Punter, *Literature of Terror*, cit. 101-105

<sup>132</sup> Hagstrum, *Babylon Revisited*, cit. 39

<sup>133</sup> Frye, Northrop. “Poetry and Design in William Blake.” *Blake: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Northrop Frye, Prentice-Hall International, 1987, cit. 121.

The root of evil is seen quite clearly in both Urizen and Los: in true form as seekers after forbidden knowledge, Urizen and Los are so obsessed with their own imagined status as God, so enamored of physical nature, and so afraid of nonentity, that they make a monumental hubristic error: they create a monster. A parallel statement could be made about William Blake and his creation myth, as well. Blake is, in a way, a metaphorical terrible creator god made flesh, and the poems he burns into creation are heterocosms reflective of our own cosmos;<sup>134</sup> it is this recognition of the creative act as a metaphor for its own process is characteristic of the most ancient of mythopoeic thinkers,<sup>135</sup> though the concept of the poet's creative process as parallel to God's creation of the universe was rediscovered and explored again during the Renaissance,<sup>136</sup> and it is for this reason that Blake's mythology still resonates with readers today.

The Abbot Suger was not the only great thinker to aim to expose the truth of the universe by dissolving the structures around us in this life. Clive Bloom writes:

“Gothic horror [...] is about that which should not be, whose comprehension is the end of sanity and the opening of the abyss, in which cursed state of knowledge of the forbidden becomes manifest, the veil is withdrawn and the fabric of the material universe falls to dust.”<sup>137</sup>

If there is one thing that defines Blake as an artist (and, as the introduction to this dissertation elaborated upon, pinning William Blake down in any way is no mean feat), it is this characteristic that he has in common with the entirety of the Gothic genre. It is,

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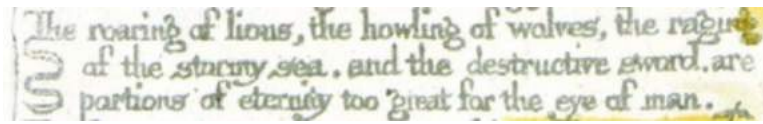
<sup>134</sup> This complicates traditional critical reactions to Enlightenment thinking, which states that the poem is an utterly separate world of its own that is subject to its own laws. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, cit. 278.

<sup>135</sup> Quasha, George. “Orc as a Fiery Paradigm of Poetic Torsion.” *Spectral Readings: Towards a Gothic Geography*, edited by Glennis Byron and David Punter, Macmillan Press, 1999, pp. 16-35.

<sup>136</sup> Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, cit. 272.

<sup>137</sup> Bloom, *The Occult*, cit. 34.

in short, the attempt to portray in art the absolute darkest and most horrible side of the sublime to convey:



*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Erdman 8.*

“The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword... portions of eternity too great for the eye of man.”

This is best understood, as this paper argues, by exploring the creation myth, and the wondrous powers the poet has in common with his two creator gods: Urizen and Los. This dissertation’s examination has walked the long and tortuous path through Blake’s creation myth from skull to spine to bowels in order to show that by harnessing and compounding the multitudinous powers of three arts — divine language, infernal visual arts, and magical song — Blake, Urizen, and Los all attempted to extend the reach of man, whether mortal or eternal, to create something that transgressed and shattered all boundaries as previously conceived. These seekers after forbidden knowledge were driven by abominable hubris to push against and define every limit they encountered in order to create something that was ultimately a karmic punishment for their ambition: a monster, whether poetic, human, or universal.

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