

A STUDY OF IMAGES IN WILLIAM BLAKE'S THE BOOK OF
LOS AND THE BOOK OF AHANIA

A THESIS

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Chapter I

Seeing Through the Eye: Blake's Visionary Images

Understanding Blake's aesthetics and his conception of the poet as prophet is an essential part of understanding his poetry. Blake's theories of art and the imagination present the first problem in interpreting his works: whether to deal with Blake's poetry from traditional critical approaches or whether, at the very least, to acknowledge the limitations of traditional criticism when applied to Blake and perhaps even to adopt new methods of reading him altogether. Should we treat Blake as a typical poet or not? Since criticism must rest on reason, do we violate Blake's poetry through analysis of it? What attitudes toward Blake have yielded the most fruitful criticism thus far? The analysis of imagery in Blake's The Book of Los and The Book of Ahania contained in this paper will indicate how I answer these questions, but other readers of Blake may answer the questions differently, for the built-in problem of poet-critic relationship in Blake's poetry must be resolved individually by each reader in the process of winding Blake's golden string into a ball. That Blake expected hard work from his readers, however, is everywhere

apparent in his art, poetry, letters, and annotations; it is further supported by his own life of intensive private scholarship and criticism. "Blessed are those who are found studious of Literature,"¹ he once wrote to a friend, and this comment by Blake in itself should lay to rest the fears of those critics who begin their work on Blake with an apology for it.

Northrop Frye's important contribution to Blake criticism, Fearful Symmetry, was written to help overthrow the impression of Blake as "an oracular revealer of mysteries" and to present him as "a typical poet" with "typically poetic thinking."² Elsewhere, in a collection of essays which he edited, Frye points out with satisfaction that "the contributors to this book read Blake as they would read any other poet."³ Frye asserts that Blake's prophecies "can hardly be code messages" and that "They may need

¹ William Blake, The Complete Writings of William Blake with All the Variant Readings, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (New York: Random House, Inc., 1957), Letter to John Flaxman 19 October 1801, p. 810. This edition by Keynes is used throughout the thesis for specific quotations from or references to Blake's works.

² Northrop Frye, Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1947), p. 426.

³ Northrop Frye, ed., Blake: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 5.

interpretation, but not deciphering."⁴ He considers Blake to be a "reliable teacher of a poetic language" who asks his readers, ordinary people, to learn the "lost art of reading poetry."⁵ There can be no doubt that this approach to Blake was immensely successful in Frye's work and in the work of those who contributed to his book of essays, men like Hazard Adams, David Erdman, and Harold Bloom. Certainly these are critics to whom every present student of Blake is deeply indebted.

It seems to me, however, that Frye may have overstated his case in referring to Blake as "a typical poet" because elsewhere his commentary conflicts with his description of Blake: "If Blake can be consistently interpreted in terms of his own theory of poetry, . . . the interpretation of Blake is only the beginning of a complete revolution in one's reading of all poetry."⁶ Typical poets, though, do not revolutionize the way we read poetry. They do not require books showing that they are typical, and they do not usually identify with Isaiah and Ezekiel. Blake felt more kinship with Milton and Dante than he felt with other poets, and he held some reservations about even these two.

⁴ Fearful Symmetry, p. 7.

⁵ Fearful Symmetry, p. 11.

⁶ Fearful Symmetry, p. 11.

Other poets have wished to aid revolution of one kind or another, but it is doubtful that any other poet has been as committed to perceptual and spiritual change through art as was Blake. It is the nature and extent of Blake's commitment to art which, in my view, set him apart from typical poets.

The complexity of problems encountered in Blake studies and the cosmic scope of his conceptions have led to a broad range of interpretations, a situation which may be in keeping with Blake's intentions, but excesses are common, and they create an added difficulty in the study of an already difficult poet. A well-known handbook summarizes the student's dilemma and places the blame on Blake:

How far to follow the journeyings of the commentators as they get more and more distant from the poem Blake wrote is a central problem for literary criticism. . . . Yet the need for all this exegesis, its own obscurity, and the divergent views of different commentators point to the disturbing feature of Blake's writing: his failure to achieve sufficient control of his readers' response, even the response of those particularly well equipped for reading him.⁷

Exactly the opposite view is expressed by another critic:

⁷ Boris Ford, ed., The Pelican Guide to English Literature: From Blake to Byron, vol. 5 (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1957, reprint ed., 1977), p. 67.

. . . the extreme diversity of opinion among critics of Blake about the meaning of particular poems and passages of poems is perhaps the most eloquent testimony we have to the success of his work.⁸

Frye's approach seems to represent a middle position between these opposite views. Introducing his collection of essays by Blake scholars (who read Blake as they would read any other poet), he comments as follows:

There are disagreements over how a given poem is to be read, as there are with all poets, but there is a general . . . feeling that some readings of him are obviously right and others obviously wrong. This simple fact represents a considerable critical achievement.⁹

Frye's combination of brilliant scholarship and common sense provides equilibrium, and it is, I think, an example worthy of emulation by students who wish to avoid the extremes so common in Blake studies.

The student of Blake should take into account two distinctive features of his thought and art; each of these features bears important consequences for Blake's imagery.

⁸ Stuart Curran and Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr., eds., Blake's Sublime Allegory: Essays on The Four Zoas, Milton, and Jerusalem (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), p. 13.

⁹ Blake: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 5.

First, Blake's view that reality in the fallen world is relative to perception, a view imbedded in both the form and the content of his poetry, brings a tentative quality to the meaning in his poems. Ordinarily we assume that the efficacy of poetic images arises from the poet's skill in calling forth necessary associations in a willing but passive reader. Blake's use of imagery, however, is calculated to force active reader involvement; the reader's willingness to alter his perceptions or to raise them to the level demanded by Blake helps determine what reality will be evoked by an image. Wordsworth's "rocks, and stones, and trees" are approximately those of any other poet who assumes the existence of an absolute external reality. Poets and their readers who begin with this assumption begin on common ground. But Blake's rocks, stones, and trees are only Blake's, symbols for mental events, and Blake's readers learn not to bring assumptions with them when they read his poetry. Furthermore, Blake considered nature itself to be part of the problem needing a solution, not part of the solution:

Thou, Mother of my Mortal part
With cruelty didst mould my Heart,
And with false self-decieving [sic] tears
Didst bind my Nostrils, Eyes, and Ears:

Didst close my Tongue in senseless clay,
And me to Mortal Life betray.¹⁰

Hazard Adams explains the perceptual dilemma inherent in Blake's poetry this way:

Struggling discursively in time and space,
like Blake's Urizen, I know that the symbolic
patterns with which I must cope exist in a
different kind of time and space--or perhaps
ultimately in no time and space at all.¹¹

Few men, if any, have tried as hard as Blake tried to unravel the mysteries of human life. Blake concluded that religious dogma, ritual, and sacrifice, political legislation, moral codes, and much of what passed for art--all of these self-important endeavors--actually evaded the real issue in this life: the errors that result from reason's distortion of our limited sensory perceptions and the possibility of a vision beyond these errors to which we are born. The problem is described concisely in There Is No Natural Religion and in All Religions Are One, but perhaps its most condensed expression is found in Blake's famous letter to Dr. Trusler: "As a man is, So he Sees."¹² When

¹⁰ "To Tirzah," p. 220.

¹¹ Blake and Yeats: The Contrary Vision, Vol. XL of Cornell Studies in English, eds. M. H. Abrams, Francis E. Mineka, and William M. Sale, Jr. (New York: Cornell University Press, 1955), p. 2.

¹² Letter to Dr. Trusler, 23 August 1799, p. 793.

man observes the world around him, distortion is inevitable, but "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite."¹³ Blake's imagery operates differently from that of other poets because he aimed his art at nothing less than a revolution in human perception; the ability, in his words, to see "through" rather than "with" the eye. To understand Blake's poetry, one must try with Blake "To see a World in a Grain of Sand," and no amount of research and analysis can substitute for the reader's dedicated effort to comply with this unique requirement of Blake's art.

Another distinctive feature of Blake's art bearing on the analysis of his imagery is the organic nature of the entire corpus of his artistic works. Blake's early lyrics contain the seeds of thought that he gradually developed into a complete mythology. His poetry, pictures, and criticism record the evolution of a complex system that grew, with adjustments, as Blake himself grew and experienced life. This autobiographical and organic quality is present to some degree in the works of any artist, even in the work of those realists who strive to be wholly objective. But it is inescapable in Blake's art, for it supplies an important portion of the subject matter. His prophecies,

¹³ The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, p. 154.

especially, should never be considered in isolation but should be studied as parts of his evolving, larger system. Although according to Blake each poem must itself be "a perfect unity," all of his poems taken together form a larger perfect unity. Frye notes that "all of Blake's poetry, from the shortest lyric to the longest prophecy, must be taken as a unit."¹⁴

Of the three minor prophecies produced at Lambeth constituting a Genesis and Exodus of Blake's promised "Bible of Hell," the longest of these, The Book of Urizen, has received the largest share of critical study. The Book of Ahania, a shorter sequel to the story, has received scattered critical attention. Neither of these two poems has been as neglected as has been The Book of Los, shortest of the three and limited in scope and viewpoint to the struggle of its central character, Los. Many broad surveys of all of Blake's works are available, of course, but mainly these are attempts to piece together the narrative sequence of Blake's mythology and are not intended to provide a close scrutiny of individual poems. I know of only one study devoted exclusively to imagery that includes The

¹⁴ Fearful Symmetry, p. 5.

Book of Los and The Book of Ahania.¹⁵ Another work includes The Book of Ahania in a study of satanic images.¹⁶ An early, massive study of occultism in Blake with at least one full chapter on each of the minor prophecies is also available,¹⁷ but the usefulness of this book is limited, unfortunately, by its extremely narrow focus.

Selecting and adhering to any definition of imagery from the broad range of meanings presented by theorists is difficult in itself, but selecting a definition that is compatible with an analysis of Blake's prophetic poetry is even more difficult, for Blake "tries to lead us to truths knowable not by sense experience but by the Poetic Genius or Imagination."¹⁸ Blake's prophecies "refuse to seek the visually remembered world."¹⁹ This problem of imagery

¹⁵ Robert Charles Chillag, "Image and Meaning in William Blake's Poetry," Diss. Northwestern University 1954.

¹⁶ Charlotte Frances Townsend Domke, "Progeny of Fire: A Study of Blake's Satanic Images," Diss. University of Texas 1972.

¹⁷ Emily S. Hamblen, On the Minor Prophecies of William Blake (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1930).

¹⁸ Victor N. Paananen, William Blake (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1977), p. 33.

¹⁹ Harold Bloom, "The Visionary Cinema of Romantic Poetry," in William Blake: Essays for S. Foster Damon, ed. Alvin H. Rosenfeld (Providence: Brown University Press, 1969), p. 22.

removed from conventional sense experience arises even in Blake's lyrics, but it looms very large in the prophecies, and it intimidates some of the best of critics, as some of them honestly admit. But it is not an insurmountable problem, and it does not justify a retreat from analysis.

Alicia Ostriker, who sees Blake as an "outlaw" artist, remarks: "One makes one's peace with the Prophetic Books, if at all, as the algebra student makes his peace with Imaginary Numbers. There is nothing in the real world to correspond to the square root of minus one," but as the student continues working, he comes to feel comfortable with this mathematical concept, and "in the end, he is likely to feel that imaginary numbers are as true as anything else, and perhaps truer than most things."²⁰

In spite of modern criticism's attention to imagery as a crucial element in poetry, the term imagery has firmly resisted precise definition. Student handbooks, which usually attempt to reflect the entire range of meanings encountered in criticism, present a bewildering array of definitions that range from the simple and restricted to the complex and nebulous. For instance, one handbook begins its discussion of imagery by defining the term as

²⁰ Alicia Ostriker, Vision and Verse in William Blake (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), p. 201.

"words denoting . . . sensory experiences" and ends with the comment that "In its furthest extension, the term image becomes synonymous with idea or vision."²¹ One of the broadest definitions of imagery was formulated by Ezra Pound: "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time."²²

The best clues to a suitable working definition of imagery for this study are to be found, I believe, in Blake's own definition of the "Most Sublime Poetry":

Allegory address'd to the Intellectual powers,
while it is altogether hidden from the
Corporeal Understanding, is My Definition of
the Most Sublime Poetry; it is also somewhat
in the same manner defin'd by Plato.²³

Blake differentiated between the "Sublime Poetry" of his prophecies and the poetry of "Fable"; the difference between the two was the difference between vision (seeing "through" the eye) and physical entrapment (seeing "with" the eye). Speaking of vision as the source of all his artistic material, Blake boldly announced:

²¹ Karl Beckson and Arthur Ganz, A Reader's Guide to Literary Terms (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1960), pp. 85-86.

²² Quoted without reference to source in René Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1956), p. 187.

²³ Letter to Thomas Butts, 6 July 1803, p. 825.

I assert for My Self that I do not behold the outward Creation & that to me it is hindrance & not Action; it is as the Dirt upon my feet, No part of Me. "What," it will be Question'd, "When the Sun rises, do you not see a round disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea?" O no, no, I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty." I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question a Window concerning a Sight. I look thro' it & not with it.²⁴

Hazard Adams' extensive explanation of Blake's aesthetics²⁵ clarifies Blake's definition of poetry and relates it to Blake's larger system of thought. I summarize his discussion: According to Blake, allegory addressed to the "Corporeal Understanding" is fable; allegory addressed to the "Intellectual Powers" is vision. Fable is abstraction drawn from "finite organical perception"; vision is the apprehension of timeless unity in spite of "finite organical perception." Fable assumes that an objective external reality can be fitted to mental experience; vision acknowledges mental experience itself as the only reality. For Blake, a single mental image as it occurs is a single reality. All of mankind's mental experience, the total reality, belongs collectively to mankind and reflects his collective level of vision. Apocalypse occurs when man achieves communal vision of unity.

²⁴ A Vision of the Last Judgment, p. 617.

²⁵ Blake and Yeats: The Contrary Vision, Ch. II.

Since Blake refused to seek eternal realities in the fallen world of sense experience, and since in his "Sublime Poetry" he purposely hid meaning from the "corporeal understanding," it would be fruitless to apply to the analysis of his prophetic poems any definition of imagery merely as sensory content. That is not to say, however, that in his prophecies Blake never drew imagery directly from the physical world, for obviously he does; however, he never employs independent sense associations merely for effect, since that would be directing the poetry toward corporeal understanding as in fable. Imagery in the prophetic books derives its significance from the visionary context of the poem in which it is found and from meanings established elsewhere in Blake's poetry or sources.²⁶ Sense objects provide Blake a verbal common denominator with his reader; they are points of reference: ". . . all of us on earth are united in thought, for it is impossible to think without images of somewhat on earth."²⁷ These "images . . . of earth," then, are the vehicles for imaginative thought,²⁸

²⁶ Morton D. Paley, Energy and the Imagination: A Study of the Development of Blake's Thought (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 50.

²⁷ Annotations to Lavater, p. 88.

²⁸ In their discussion of imagery Beckson and Ganz conclude, p. 86: "In short, imagery serves as the vehicle for the imaginative thought, the aesthetic experience, which the writer attempts to communicate."

and in their transformation into symbols, they lose their familiar sensory appeal: "All Forms are Perfect in the Poet's Mind, but these are not Abstracted nor Compounded from Nature, but are from Imagination."²⁹

Frye notes that, for Blake, the two words form and image are interchangeable; they refer to a "unit of . . . mental existence" derived from perception.³⁰ Frye also illustrates the way imagery drawn from the physical world can get turned inside-out in Blake's poetry:

"The man was like a lion" is a Lockian simile, an attempt to express a human character in natural terms. "The man was a lion" is a much more dramatic and effective figure, and more suggestive of their real relationship; but still it is essentially a simile with the word "like" omitted. But if we say "the lion is like a man" we are getting somewhere, and beginning to achieve the concentrated focus of the artist's vision of the lion which reveals his form to the human eye. As we proceed in our vision, everything positive and real about the lion becomes an aspect of our perception of him, and we can take the next step and say that the lion is entirely a human form, a human creature. . . . The famous "Ghost of the Flea" similarly shows the human form of that insect.³¹

In defining imagery for this study of images in The Book of Los and The Book of Ahania, I am taking into account

²⁹ Annotations to Reynolds, p. 459.

³⁰ Fearful Symmetry, p. 15.

³¹ Fearful Symmetry, p. 123.

the highly individualistic art of Blake's prophetic books and the personal vision from which it is derived. I consider as imagery those words and phrases that denote and describe visionary detail. The term visionary as used here is not synonymous with visual; it does not refer to the "finite organical perception" of physical eyesight. It refers instead to prophetic revelation such as Blake experienced and described.³² The story of the fall in The Book of Los is visionary, narrated from a viewpoint that belongs to an imagined world of unfallen perspective. Within this visionary framework are literal or figurative references to sense objects that belong only to the world of fallen perspective. My use of the term visionary encompasses the total imaginative experience that may include, but is never limited to, the purely sensory impressions of sight, sound, touch, motion, taste, and smell as represented by Blake from his imaginary viewpoint outside of time and space.

I am concerned, then, not with the effects of sense impressions but with the conceptual content of verbal units within each poem, the interrelationships of these units, and the cumulative effects of these units on each poem as a whole, its meaning and its success as poetry.

³² The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, p. 153.

I attempt to find the significance of Blake's imagery in his own work and in his known sources.³³ I explore the collective imagery within the poems as thematic, structural, and sometimes satiric devices. Finally, I examine the two poems as they relate to each other and to the larger body of Blake's work.

³³ Frye comments as follows in Fearful Symmetry, p. 12: "In the study of Blake it is the analogue that is important, not the source; and even essential sources such as the Bible and Milton are of value only as sources of analogues."

Chapter II

The Book of Los: Secrets of the Land Unknown

Current Blake criticism indicates that the Lambeth minor prophecies were Blake's initial attempt to write a mythology, after which he started over in Vala, or The Four Zoas, reworking material drawn from the Lambeth books. This view is based on evidence of Blake's suppression of the minor prophecies and on his obvious efforts in Vala to consolidate and expand his material on a massive scale. The developmental relationship between the major and minor prophecies is not yet well understood; clarification of this important relationship depends on improved understanding of all the prophecies, including further insight into Blake's personal life as it influenced his artistic work.

Blake's heroic efforts to give mythic form to his beliefs arose from his intense interest in world religions and myths, all of which he believed to be manifestations of man's "Poetic Genius." He appreciated the evolutionary quality of these religions and myths, believing that the spiritual revelations contained therein were the product of time and human community. In Blake's view, every religious impulse pointed ultimately toward one central

truth, and this idea became a major theme of his prophecies. His early prose tracts There is no Natural Religion and All Religions are One developed this idea, and he returned to the theme in later prose writings such as his annotations to Watson's "Apology for The Bible" and his A Descriptive Catalogue. Dominating all of Blake's interest in this subject was his belief that the Bible contained a complete record of man's changing perceptions of God. Blake believed that the Bible contained all truth; it was to him "an original derivation from the Poetic Genius."

Blake's work was primarily an attempt to identify the common elements in different world myths and to embody in his own personal system the central truth in all of them. Thus, Blake's myth was intended to express his unique, personal understanding of already existing religion and myth and was not intended as a revelation of new truth or as a supplement to the Bible. It is doubtful that Blake considered himself to be in possession of a completed central myth when he began writing his Lambeth "Bible of Hell." Instead, he trusted his visionary insight enough to begin the search for it, feeling confident that prophetic vision would lead him eventually to the total revelation he sought. His work began as most religions and most myths begin, with an assumption of the soul's immortality and the consequent

explanation of man's transitions between his eternal state and his mortal existence.

Since an accounting of the fall of man is pivotal to the entire system, Blake undoubtedly struggled long and hard with this task. The Book of Urizen, written in 1794, and The Book of Los, written a year later, are Blake's earliest versions of the fall. That he wrote within a year or two these separate, though similar, accounts is evidence that he viewed the work as experimental. Further evidence that he viewed the work as experimental is the continuing adaptation and revision of these early stories of the fall in The Four Zoas, Milton, and Jerusalem. But the central idea of Blake's narratives, the fall as creation itself, remained unchanged throughout the successive adaptations and revisions. The changes which Blake did make seem to have been directed primarily toward increasing scope, complexity, and subtlety as the emphasis in all of his work shifted from the Genesis of beginnings to the Apocalypse of final revelation. And Blake's firm purpose in all his work never changed: "To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes / Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought, into Eternity / Ever expanding in the Bosom of God, the Human imagination."¹

¹ William Blake, The Complete Writings of William Blake with All the Variant Readings, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (New York: Random House, Inc., 1957), Jerusalem, Ch. I:5, p. 623.

It seems to me, therefore, that the most fitting way to read The Book of Los is to read it as the experiment of a great poet in search of a central myth. In other words, The Book of Los represents an important early stage in Blake's struggle to communicate his personal visions of man's relation to God, the universe, and eternity. Aside from the obvious religious and philosophical complexities of narrating man's transition from an eternal state into a finite body, Blake faced also the practical consideration of "attempting to represent an uncreated . . . world in language and imagery which are, by their very nature, post-creation entities."²

The limited criticism of The Book of Los now available accords in its essentials with the interpretations given by pioneer Blake scholar S. Foster Damon in his two indispensable Blake guidebooks, William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols and A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake. According to Damon, The Book of Los "retells the story of The Book of Urizen from the point of view of Los" and paraphrases Genesis I.³ This approach to

² W. J. T. Mitchell, "Poetic and Pictorial Imagination in Blake's The Book of Urizen," Eighteenth Century Studies, 3 (Fall 1969), p. 85.

³ S. Foster Damon, A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake (Providence: Brown University Press, 1965), p. 51.

the poem is echoed in numerous other important critical commentaries on Blake as they give their usual passing glance at the poem. But many discrepancies between Los and Urizen cloud the exact narrative and thematic connections between these two poems. Apparently the major critics view these discrepancies merely as signifying the experimental nature of the poems; after all, no two versions of the fall in any of Blake's prophecies are exactly alike. It seems to me, however, that Blake's revisions in his story of the fall might provide important clues to the trend of his thought and, therefore, warrant close attention in future criticism.

The Book of Los contains a tripartite structure. Part one, which also may be viewed as a prologue, is the lament of Eno describing a lost paradise in eternity. Part two, from the end of Eno's lament through the third verse of Chapter II, briefly describes the chaos immediately preceding the creation of Adam. The last section of the poem, verse four of Chapter II to the end of the poem, narrates the fetal development of Adamic man, the process of the fallen mind literally organ-izing itself. As in The Book of Urizen, the creation narrative, patterned loosely on the stages of human embryological development, suggests that a recapitulation of the original fall occurs within the life of every individual.

The Book of Los is Blake's most condensed narrative of a central myth.⁴ It sketches his concept of the eternal mind as pure energy (or "absolute wisdom"⁵) and the creation (fall) as energy become matter, it outlines the roles of Urizen and Los in the fallen mind, and it implies a promise of regeneration, for the imprisonment of the "Immortals" in a material body providentially limits their fall and permits a partial retention of their divine powers. The concepts of the poem, then, are extremely complex, but the plot of the narrative is simple: it tells how a "Human Illusion" was created. For Blake, a "Human Illusion" is the physical human body with its fallen mind. The eternal "Real Man" is "All Imagination": "Jesus considered Imagination to be the Real Man."⁶ A "Human Illusion" and its "egg-formed world" are created out of the chaos of the fallen mind at its nadir which Blake later called Ulro: "Such is the nature of the Ulro, that whatever enters / Becomes Sexual & is Created and Vegetated and Born."⁷

⁴ For this observation I am indebted to Dr. Lavon B. Fulwiler, who has pointed out to me how The Book of Los summarizes Blake's total myth.

⁵ Northrop Frye, Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), p. 350.

⁶ Blake, Annotations to Berkeley's Siris, p. 774.

⁷ Blake, Jerusalem, Ch. 2:44, p. 674.

Ulro, the purely material world, is "Hell, the abode of Satan, . . . the world of abstractions which in aggregate are matter, nature, reason, and memory."⁸ The organization of this physical world in the midst of Ulro is an accomplishment of Los, the integrating, imaginative faculty of the mind, and the world that he creates out of the primal chaos is a generative world with a future: "Los's 'vegetated' world stands between man and chaos. It is the earth by which he escapes from the abstract hell of his own devising."⁹

The Book of Los begins with the lament of "Eno, aged Mother / Who the chariot of Leutha guides." Eno's first appearance in Blake's total myth is made in this first line of Los. She appears soon afterward in The Four Zoas as a "Daughter of Beulah," Blake's muse, and thereafter, she reappears unnamed in Jerusalem.¹⁰ Only in Los is she said to guide the "chariot of Leutha." If we interpret chariot to represent the human body (Blake often thought of human bodies as "Mortal Vehicles"¹¹) and if we understand Leutha

⁸ Frye, p. 135.

⁹ Milton O. Percival, William Blake's Circle of Destiny (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938, reprint ed., New York: Octagon Books, 1970), p. 88.

¹⁰ Damon, p. 125.

¹¹ Blake, Letter to John Flaxman, 21 September 1800, p. 802; see also Frye, pp. 272-73.

to represent the fallen ethic in which human sexuality is viewed negatively as lust¹² and, therefore, is made morally unacceptable, then "the chariot of Leutha" is the human body with its repressed desires in the physical world of experience. Thus Eno, here identified as "aged Mother," is an embodiment of the mother principle in human life, and the chariot she guides is the human, "vegetated" body. Although she functions as a muse in The Four Zoas, her purpose here is to establish the tone of the poem and to provide background information necessary for coherence. In a broad sense, though, she is here simultaneously mother and muse: she makes creation possible.

Lines 3 and 4 tell us that she has performed this mother role since "the day of thunders in old time" and that she is "Sitting beneath the eternal Oak." In the imagery of these two lines Blake gives us important clues to the setting of the narrative. Damon, in his Dictionary, comments that "the eternal Oak" is probably the Oak of Weeping which stands with the Palm of Suffering on the edge of Beulah¹³ overlooking Ulro. But in The Book of Ahania, Blake had already connected the oak, his favorite symbol

¹² Damon, pp. 237-38.

¹³ Damon, p. 305.

for Druidism, with Ulro itself.¹⁴ Since the Oak of Weeping on the edge of Beulah is probably an alternate image for conditions in Ulro anyway, I think that Eno's Oak should be interpreted as a symbol of Druidism, with Eno's lament arising from her position in its shadow with Ulro in view.

The "day of thunders" is the beginning of time, for in Blake's mythology Los created time as a stay against chaos after Urizen withdrew from the Eternals and in doing so became a thunder god:

His cold horrors silent, dark Urizen
 Prepar'd; his ten thousands of thunders,
 Rang'd in gloom'd array, stretch out across
 The dread world; & the rolling of wheels,
 As of swelling seas, sound in his clouds,
 In his hills of stor'd snows, in his mountains
 Of hail & ice; voices of terror
 Are heard, like thunders of autumn
 When the cloud blazes over the harvests.¹⁵

This interpretation of the "day of thunders" fits Blake's later division of human history into seven "Eyes of God." Frye explains that the first three of these periods belong to Lucifer, Moloch, and the Elohim, thunder gods who represent the death impulse as manifested in worship through human sacrifice.¹⁶ According to Blake, therefore, the

¹⁴ Blake, The Book of Ahania, Ch. II, p. 250

¹⁵ Blake, The Book of Urizen, Ch. I, p. 223.

¹⁶ Frye, pp. 128-30.

original human culture was Druidism. He believed that this culture began in Britain and spread from there throughout the world, extending from the beginning of history into the Elohim period up to the time of Abraham,¹⁷ in whose lifetime the practice of human sacrifice was dropped. Thus, the "day of thunders" is the dawn of human history, and the "eternal Oak" represents the conditions under which man lived after the fall. Since "Adam was a Druid,"¹⁸ we may safely assume at this point that in The Book of Los Blake is interpreting the Genesis account of Adam's creation in its "infernal or diabolical sense." That is, according to Blake, Adam awakens to his mortal existence not in a pleasant garden but in a satanic world where humanity is sacrificed to the tyranny of brutal, unforgiving gods and their repressive "moral" laws. Reduced to such an existence, the eternal mind which is the "Real Man" becomes a "Human Illusion."

But Eno's lament recalls a former human existence in eternity when "none impure were deemed." Human energies were undivided, unfettered, or--in a word--unfallen. The allied sins which we call Covet, Envy, Wrath, and Wantonness symbolize the divided object world of fallen sense perception in which human energy becomes misdirected toward

¹⁷ Blake, Jerusalem, "To the Jews," Pl. 27, p. 649.

¹⁸ Blake, A Descriptive Catalogue, p. 578.

the possession of inert matter.¹⁹ But the human energies operating in these cardinal sins never die, and in eternity, where existence is not limited and objectified, these energies cannot possess the qualities attached to them as sinful in the fallen world. If Covet is "poured full" and "Envy fed with fat of lambs," their nature as sin is cancelled out; they cease to be covetousness and envy, for they cease to crave the unattainable. That is why forgiveness, also a cancellation of sins, represents a return to Eden in Blake's myth. Eno's description of life in eternity echoes the description of eternity in "Night" from Songs of Innocence:

And there the lion's ruddy eyes
 Shall flow with tears of gold,
 And pitying the tender cries,
 And walking round the fold,
 Saying "Wrath, by his meekness,
 "And by his health, sickness
 "Is driven away
 "From our immortal day."²⁰

This verse and Eno's lament expand the biblical image of predator and prey resting peacefully together in a world where natural laws are obviated by divine wisdom and love:

¹⁹ I intend inert matter to include the material human body as opposed to the human spirit. Thus, Wantonness would belong in the same group as Covet and Envy. I assume that Wrath belongs in the group because it is the logical outcome of the other three sins.

²⁰ Blake, p. 119.

"The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid. . . . They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord." (Isaiah 11:6-9)

The imagery in the lament is purposely unrelated to central images in the poem proper, for the lament is intended to evoke a far different world from the world in which Adam was created. The lament refers to a world in which human desire is fully satisfied: "poured full," "fed with fat of lambs," "lull'd to sleep," "sated with her love." Of course, Blake is not referring here to the physical appetites that are part of fallen man's affliction, for purely physical appetites belong to the object world of predator and prey. Blake is speaking instead of everlasting mental energies, and to say that in eternity "Envy sung at the rich man's feast" is to say that envy as we know it in the natural world is a fallen form of human desire which, in eternity, is uncorrupted by the Darwinian system at work in nature.

Eno's memory of these "Times Remote" in eternity, a memory which her children inherit, is a kind of intimation of immortality, as Wordsworth would call it. In fact, many years after writing The Book of Los Blake read and admired Wordsworth's great ode on immortality, and he especially

liked the fourth verse²¹ ending with the question, "Where is it now, the glory and the dream?" Like Wordsworth's ode, Eno's lament articulates grief for a lost paradise.

What purpose is served by these introductory verses and how does the imagery in them help to accomplish this purpose? Primarily, I think, they introduce Blake's view that the fall and the creation of the material body are the same event and that they occur simultaneously. The mother who guides the chariot of Leutha evokes the image of a womb, and this circular image is immediately associated, though indirectly, with the circular image of a Druid temple, the scene of human sacrifice, and with other related circular images of Druidic nature worship: the sun, its planets, and their orbits. The fusion of these images speaks of womb as tomb, a place where the eternal mind must learn to submit to a kind of death-sleep in time and space, and a place where the nightmarish "vegetation" of fetal life occurs. It is this nightmare of vegetation, the successive and unalterable stages of the soul's entrapment in a material body, that the rest of the poem narrates. The point Blake makes throughout the poem is that the human body represents an imprisonment of the eternal

²¹ Mona Wilson, The Life of William Blake (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1969), p. 277.

mind in an alien existence of "Cumbersome wheels, circle o'er circle." But Blake also makes this point pictorially in the design he etched for the poem's heading: "Flourishes form an oval round 'LOS' at the top of the plate. In the 'O' sits a tiny bearded man with an open book."²² As if to make sure that the reader gets the point, Blake drew a net (the Net of Religion?) that appears to surround the figure in the "O" and to fall in folds beneath the letter. Throughout the poem, images of circular entrapment (chains, binding, fiery sphere, Immortal revolving) overlap with circular embryological or anatomical images (womb, embryo, polypus, lungs) forming a core of circular images that unify the other image clusters in the poem: images of pure energy as represented by fire and motion and images of matter such as rock and water.

The second part of Los, from the end of Eno's lament through the third verse of Chapter II, briefly describes the chaos which immediately preceded the creation of Adam. These verses are perhaps the most difficult in the entire poem to comprehend because they describe the ancient concept of a transmogrification of spirit into matter, a process which Blake imagines as a freezing of fire. Another

²² William Blake, William Blake's Writings, ed. G. E. Bentley, Jr. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1978), I, 307.

difficulty in comprehending these and the remaining verses, as well as other works by Blake, arises from Blake's apparent ambivalence toward the human body.²³ Blake's device of embodying mental faculties in human characters, giving them bodies figuratively, weakens the impression of catastrophe that needs to be made by the mind's enforced assumption of a material body in Blake's version of the fall, creating a suspicion of ambivalence just when a sense of conviction is most needed if we are to accept Blake's equating of creation and fall. Complicating the matter further, Blake also employs the reverse procedure of referring to "finite inflexible organs" in highly figurative language. Such difficulties are best overcome if a reader can remember that the main character in all of Blake's prophecies is "The Immortal," by which term Blake refers to the total mind of man, and other characters in the poems are sub-headings of this broader term.

The major image in the second section of Los is fire, Blake's ubiquitous symbol for mental energy. Since fire is used frequently throughout Blake's works to represent

²³ Morton Paley, Energy and the Imagination: A Study of the Development of Blake's Thought (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 90. See also Anne Kostelanetz Mellor, Blake's Human Form Divine (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974). Mellor argues throughout her book that this ambivalence was a central issue in Blake's work.

states of the soul, noting how this symbolic fire changes helps us to understand Blake's meaning. At the outset we can rule out any use of the fire symbol in Blake's work to represent a fire-and-brimstone hell of eternal punishment for sinners since Blake abhorred this doctrine. The hell of Blake's myth is mental, reminding us of Satan's words in Paradise Lost: "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n." Errors, not individuals, get cast into a lake of fire in Blake's version of the Last Judgment; his hell is constructive rather than retributive, reflecting his doctrine that all human energy is ultimately self-redeeming.

In The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Blake says that human energy in itself cannot be evil; it is "Eternal Delight." "In this age," however, human energy is enclosed within a physical body. If the pure, infinite energy of the soul is symbolized by everlasting fire, then contained mental energy, or the soul imprisoned in a human body, in a logical extension of the fire symbol would become a furnace. Thus, in "A Divine Image" from Songs of Experience, Blake speaks of the human form as a furnace:

The Human Dress is forged Iron,
The Human Form a fiery Forge,
The Human Face a Furnace seal'd,
The Human Heart its hungry gorge.

Fire has fascinated mankind since its discovery, and fire symbolism probably dates from that discovery. Blake's uses of fire symbolism harmonize with this ancient literary tradition and are influenced specifically by alchemy. But Blake's fire symbolism is also highly original, for it synthesizes material selectively drawn from an eclectic array of sources and belongs, as a result, only to Blake. For this reason, Blake's fire symbolism cannot be tied exclusively to any one single source, and identifying Blake's multiple sources is only of limited usefulness in interpreting his poetry. The following paragraph summarizes my views about which sources most influenced Blake's fire symbolism in The Book of Los.

Most of Blake's sources are indicated in his own prose writings. His most important sources or influences, as many critics have shown, are those named in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell: the Bible, Swedenborg, Milton, Dante, Shakespeare, Paracelsus, and Jacob Behman. In addition to these important influences, Blake indicates a familiarity with "All Bibles or sacred codes," "The ancient Poets," and "The philosophy of the east." Of all these sources or influences, the Bible was undoubtedly the most pervasive and decisive influence throughout Blake's career. In The Book of Los, Blake apparently adapted and synthesized

elements of fire imagery from four of the sources named above: the Bible, Swedenborg, Paracelsus, and Boehme. In the Bible fire is used as an emblem of God's total presence or as an emblem of one aspect of His nature (wrath, judgment, light, testing). In Swedenborg's Wisdom of Angels Concerning Divine Love and Divine Wisdom annotated by Blake, two principles of God's nature are represented by heat and light: God's love and God's wisdom. Enthusiastic about many of the ideas in this tract by Swedenborg, Blake evidently assimilated into his thinking the following passage, a passage which I think seems to lie at the very heart of The Book of Los:

[Swedenborg] Forasmuch as there is such a Progression of the Fibres and Vessels in a Man from first Principles to Ultimates, therefore there is a similar Progression of their States; their States are the Sensations, Thoughts and Affections; these also from their first Principles where they are in the Light [Blake's underlining], pervade to their Ultimates, where they are in Obscurity; or from their first Principles, where they are in Heat, to their Ultimates where they are not in Heat [Blake's underlining].

[Blake] We see here that the cause of an ultimate is the absence from heat & light.²⁴

The point of Swedenborg's tract is that divine wisdom and love are interdependent, just as heat and light are

²⁴ Blake, p. 94.

interdependent: one cannot exist without the other. Swedenborg associates thought (wisdom) with light and affection (love) with heat, traditional associations which I believe are strongly reflected in Los, as I shall discuss later.

Although Blake's opinion of Paracelsus and Boehme is somewhat disputed,²⁵ most critics see both of these men and the alchemical traditions which they represent as important influences on Blake's work. Probably through the influence of Paracelsus and Boehme Blake utilized in The Book of Los the ancient alchemical concepts of primal unity as First Matter followed by a transmutation of elements in progression toward reversal, with fire as both element and agent of change.²⁶ According to Frye, Blake's myth of the fall was also influenced by Boehme's idea of the contrary principles of God's wrath and God's love, in which wrath is associated with fire and love with light,²⁷ but I find this concept less compatible with the context of The Book of Los than are the concepts of Swedenborg and Paracelsus outlined above.

²⁵ Harold Bloom, Blake's Apocalypse (New York: Cornell University Press, 1963, Cornell Paperbacks, 1970), pp. 77, 93-94, 429.

²⁶ Percival, pp. 197-215.

²⁷ Frye, p. 153.

The fire in Los, symbol for the mind of man, is eternal; it cannot be extinguished. The nearest to extinction that an eternal fire could come would be to lose its essential properties of heat and light; that is, if this fire froze into a "Solid without fluctuation, hard as adamant, / Black as marble of Egypt, impenetrable," then it would have reached the limit of change or reversal possible to it without becoming totally extinguished. It would have reached a limit of "opacity" and "contraction." Between the two extremes of a divine, life-sustaining fire that gives heat and light and a divided fire that has frozen into a black solid there is the anarchic fire of chaos described in verse 6:

Raging furious, the flames of desire
Ran thro' heaven & earth, living flames
Intelligent, organiz'd, arm'd
With destruction & plagues.

These out-of-control, "living," "intelligent" flames are flames of desire, the same energies that operate in Covet, Envy, Wrath, and Wantonness. They are "Raging furious" through heaven and earth, "arm'd / With destruction & plagues." Thus, we are given only the effect, not the cause, of Urizen's revolt in heaven. That story is briefly told in Chapters I and II of The Book of Urizen. It is the story of light separating from its fire source, or reason

assuming an impossible self-sufficiency, whereupon it becomes a "dark power," "hidden, set apart," "deadly black," dwelling in shadows, clouds, and secret dens. The implication in this story is that reason's withdrawal from the other "Eternals" perverted life for all of them, for only in perfect union could they function as divine entities. That is why Los in chaos "curses" his lot as he is chained to the role of monitoring Urizen.

In the passage by Swedenborg quoted above, "thoughts and affections" are described as progressing from "first Principles" to "Ultimates" where they are respectively "in obscurity" and "not in heat," an implicit use of fire imagery derived from alchemy. According to other passages in Swedenborg's tract, the first principle of thought (intellect) is wisdom and the first principle of affection (emotion) is love. Throughout the tract Swedenborg associates love with heat and wisdom with light as in the following passages:

Doth it not happen that in Proportion as the Affection which is of Love groweth cold, the Thought, Speech and Action grow cold also? And that in Proportion as it is heated, they also are heated?²⁸

²⁸ Blake, p. 89.

But he who knows how to elevate his Mind above the Ideas of Thought which are derived from Space and Time, such a Man passes from Darkness to Light, and becomes wise in Things spiritual and Divine . . . and then by Virtue of that Light he shakes off the Darkness of natural Light.²⁹

Swedenborg emphasizes the essential unity of divine wisdom and love, and Blake adds an observation:

[Swedenborg] When Love is in Wisdom, then it existeth. These two are such a ONE, that they may be distinguished indeed in Thought, but not in Act.

[Blake] Thought without affection makes a distinction between Love & Wisdom, as it does between body & Spirit.³⁰

For Blake, "Thought without affection" is a condition of the fallen mind in which its own disunity is reflected in its differentiation between love and wisdom, body and spirit. Swedenborg continues his argument with some contradictory assertions about the interdependence of wisdom and love: "Thought indeed exists first," he says, but love is the force that empowers thought to function at its highest level, wisdom.³¹ Blake follows Swedenborg's hair-splitting argument with close attention and good humor,

²⁹ Blake, p. 91.

³⁰ Blake, p. 90.

³¹ Blake, pp. 95-96.

pointing out contradictions and clarifying his own position. His independent conclusion, expressed with typical gnostic finality, is that "Heaven and Hell are born together."³²

It seems to me that in the early stage of Blake's developing myth, especially in Urizen, Los, and Ahania, Blake was focusing on the theme of Swedenborg's tract: divine love and divine wisdom. Apparently at this point Blake was thinking of intellect and emotion as the two primary principles of the human soul, although shortly thereafter he expanded his concept of the human soul from two principles to four, the four "Zoas."

In Urizen, Los, and Ahania, Blake, like Swedenborg, associates degrees of light with intellect (Urizen) and degrees of heat with emotion (Los). In The Book of Ahania, for instance, Ahania describes the unfallen intellect, Urizen, with images of light: "bright Urizen," "Flower of the Morning," a "bright presence" who sowed seeds of eternal science on the human soul. In The Book of Urizen the fallen Urizen is described as a "dark demon" whose emerging world appeared "like a black globe" to the unfallen Eternals. Thus, the fallen Urizen had progressed from a first principle "in the light" to an ultimate "in obscurity." Los, on the other hand, is presented as a near-personification

³² Blake, p. 96.

of highly charged emotions. In Urizen he "wept, howling," he was "smitten with astonishment," "His bosom earthquak'd with sighs," and his jealous frenzy materialized into a "Chain of Jealousy." He enters The Book of Los in a fit of fury, hurling his chains and stamping his feet in "hot indignation," an image that directly relates heat and emotion. Throughout most of the poem he is "astonished and terrified," but at the end he "smil'd with joy" upon completing the form of a human illusion. Although Los's artistic powers are emphasized in Blake's later works, it is his emotional energy that is important in this poem. This emotional energy is the heat of Los's fires at this stage of Blake's myth, and the progression of this heat toward its "ultimate" is described thus:

But no light from the fires! all was
Darkness round Los: heat was not; for bound up
Into fiery spheres from his fury,
The gigantic flames trembled and hid.

Coldness, darkness, obstruction, a Solid
Without fluctuation, hard as adamant,
Black as marble of Egypt, impenetrable,
Bound in the fierce raging Immortal;
And the seperated fires froze in:
A vast solid without fluctuation
Bound in his expanding clear senses.

With the fall from perfect union of the Eternals Los became "Prophetic Wrath," shattering the "vast solid without

fluctuation" into "innumerable fragments" which became the material used in forming Adam's body. Adam's body, referred to later in Blake's works as "the limit of contraction," is the "ultimate" in "a Progression of the Fibres and Vessels in a Man from first Principles to Ultimates."

Blake had used the fire imagery of heat and light in a similar but simpler way in "The Little Black Boy":

"Look on the rising sun: there God does live,
 "And gives his light, and gives his heat away;
 "And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive
 "Comfort in morning, joy in the noonday.

"And we are put on earth a little space,
 "That we may learn to bear the beams of love;
 "And these black bodies and this sunburnt face
 "Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.

The imagery of divine heat and light is also used in A Descriptive Catalogue in Blake's comments on his illustration of the Canterbury pilgrims:

The principal figure in the next groupe is the Good Parson; an Apostle, a real Messenger of Heaven, sent in every age for its light and its warmth. . . . Read Chaucer's description of the Good Parson, and bow the head and the knee to him, who, in every age, sends us such a burning and a shining light.

The Tyger who is "burning bright" seems to me to be a highly complex use of this same fire symbolism; the poem asks what "thoughts and affections" characterize the omnipotent force behind our universe.

The central image in the last verse of Chapter I and in the first four verses of Chapter II is the "black marble" of frozen fire that imprisons the Immortal and restricts his formerly "expanding clear senses." Blake illustrated this scene on the poem's title page, showing "a back view of a naked man apparently squeezed within the earth."³³ This illustration is perhaps as near as any drawing could come to depicting spirit entrapped in matter. But it is in the poetry itself that Blake has created the strongest sense of claustrophobia and oppression. A dull repetition of key nouns and adjectives creates an impression of intolerable restriction within the poetry itself, as if even the poetic process had become subject to the "hard bondage": within just sixteen lines solid is repeated three times, hard three times, and bound three times, and all three words are further reinforced in the same sixteen lines with the imagery of "adamant," "marble," and "rock." Blake's usually highly condensed, complex poetry suddenly grinds into slow motion, and the narrative comes to a standstill as Blake employs biblical parallelism to focus on the entrapped divinity:

³³ William Blake's Writings, ed. G. E. Bentley, Jr., I, 307.

Coldness, darkness, obstruction, a Solid

 Bound in the fierce raging Immortal;
 And the seperated fires froze in:
 A vast solid without fluctuation
 Bound in his expanding clear senses.

The energy which provides the escape from this imprisoning rock is the emotional energy of Los, whose "impatience no longer could bear / The hard bondage." Although fire imagery is absent from Chapter II and most of Chapter III, it should be remembered that the organic matter referred to in these chapters was originally imaged as fire, and we can expect a return of fire imagery as the spirit-matter, now at the "solid bottom of the Fall,"³⁴ begins preparation for its eventual return to Edenic purity.

The final stage of the fall as narrated in this version is an explosion of fury in Los that shatters the "vast solid" into "numberless fragments" which fall "ages on ages" into an abyss. This startling sequence of images is a Blake original, and it is used only in The Book of Los. It is an ingenious way to account for humanity as separated fragments of an original unity, with each individual human fragment containing identical elements and all belonging together to the original unity. It is also a striking illustration of the prophet's task. Los's "Prophetic wrath"

³⁴ Frye, p. 257.

acts as the agent of change necessary to lead man back to unity: he first shatters the rock-bound prison of the mind, and this act, even though it divides individuals in their time and space societies, helps to free all humanity for reunion in eternity. This "Prophetic wrath" was a favorite theme of Blake, who saw emotional detachment and art as mutually exclusive concepts. In The Marriage of Heaven and Hell Blake has Isaiah comment that "the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God," and two of the aphorisms in Marriage echo similar thoughts: "The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God" and "The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction." In The Everlasting Gospel Blake portrays Jesus as a man of intense emotion whose "furious ire / Became a Chariot of fire" and whose wrath "did subdue / The Serpent Bulk of Nature's dross." Blake makes very clear his scorn of the pale, passive "Creeping Jesus" worshipped by shallow minds.

The passage in Chapter II narrating Los's spiraling fall contains a confusion in its metaphors that seems to reflect the disorientation experienced by Los in the fall. Within the elaborate metaphor of the myth itself, Blake employs the traditional metaphor of man's incipient mortality as a fall and apparently gives it a literal meaning within the myth. He creates a vivid image of a downward

spiral through time and space, an image of a body "revolving" in "incessant whirls / In the horrid vacuity bottomless." But the direction of the downward motion is changed by an alteration in the perceptions of the falling mind:

The Immortal revolving, indignant,
First in wrath threw his limbs like the babe
New born into our world: wrath subsided,
And contemplative thoughts first arose;
Then aloft his head rear'd in the Abyss
And his downward-borne fall chang'd oblique.

Since the falling mind checks its "fall" through its own powers of thought, the literal description of a downward fall that seemed to fit the narrative sequence no longer seems to fit. An adjustment has to be made in the reader's interpretation so that "fall" is again understood as metaphor. A similar confusion arises with the anatomical images: the Immortal "threw his limbs" and "aloft his head rear'd in the Abyss" just at the point in the narrative when spirit is beginning to take on the material form of a human body. It gradually becomes clear to the reader that all of this confusion may be part of Blake's design, for it is the confusion of moving from one dimension into another dimension, and that is what Blake saw as occurring in the falling mind: a movement from infinite to finite perception. The Immortal's formerly "expanding clear senses" have shrunk into a few weak, fragmented remnants, and the

result is a kind of blindness: loss of vision, confusion, and error.

Elsewhere in his work Blake sometimes imagines the fall not as a downward spiral but as a shutting off of conscious awareness as in "falling" asleep. For instance, he speaks of "Newton's sleep" and "the sleep of Ulro," and in A Vision of the Last Judgment he refers to "States of Sleep which the Soul may fall into in its deadly dreams of Good and Evil when it leaves Paradise." This image and the image of a fall through space both convey a sense of drastic change; the fall through space, however, carries with it implications of trauma that contribute to the tone of horror in Los.

The image of Los's swirling fall dominates other imagery of circular motion found throughout the poem: the flames of desire that "roll round / And round on all sides" and that become bound into "fiery spheres"; the thin matter, separated from the heavy, that rose up, "flowing round the fierce fires"; the light that "Flow'd around the Immense"; Los's creation of an "immense Orb of fire." All of these movements take place within the larger circular pattern of Los's spiral downward that "chang'd oblique" and then moved "sidelong." Blake's kinesthetic imagery of unceasing circular motion creates a strong sense of the trapped energy which is the condition of the fallen mind.

Since Los begins with memories of eternity and ends with the creation of a material body, the middle verses narrating Los's spiraling fall appear to describe the trauma of a human mind at the moment of its attachment to a physical body in conception. Such a framework of thought in the poem would help to explain Blake's choice of numerous images relating to gestation and childbirth: Eno as a mother guiding the chariot of Leutha, the "indignant" Immortal who "threw his limbs like the babe / New born into our world," the waters in which the branchy forms materialize, the "Nine ages" required for completion of the form, the "infinite wombs" of Los's furnace, and the overall pattern of embryological development on which the last half of the narrative is based. Blake's mind ranged far and wide, and certainly it would not have been out of character for him to try to envision the state of the soul in this moment of its passage into mortality.

That Blake was interested in and well-informed about contemporary medical knowledge of embryological development has been pointed out in separate articles by two critics, F. B. Curtis and Carmen S. Kreiter.³⁵ Both of these

³⁵ F. B. Curtis, "Blake and the Booksellers," Blake Studies, 6 (1975), pp. 167-70. "William Blake and Eighteenth-Century Medicine," Blake Studies, 8 (1979), pp. 187-99. Carmen S. Kreiter, "Evolution and William Blake," Studies in Romanticism, IV (1965), 110-18.

critics argue that Blake's pervasive use of terminology which is derived from contemporary medical studies (globule, lymph, polypus, fibers, effluvia, etc.) indicates that Blake regularly read the many medical publications that he had easy access to in the bookshops he frequented as an engraver employed by writers and booksellers. Much medical writing was being published in London during the 1780's and 1790's;³⁶ reading these new publications as they first appeared in the shops would have enabled Blake to keep abreast of all the important advances in medicine and biology. For instance, he probably read with great interest the widespread scientific speculations during that period about animal origins, speculations that were rapidly leading to the theories of Haeckel and Darwin. Kreiter goes further than Curtis and suggests that as an apprentice engraver Blake probably knew the famous surgeon John Hunter well enough to have been invited to Hunter's museum where Blake could have seen "hundreds of species of mammals, birds, reptiles, and fish dissected and arranged to portray the series of changes in the development of the embryo."³⁷ Kreiter then explains how the embryological development described in The Book of Urizen follows the sequence of

³⁶ Curtis, "William Blake and Eighteenth-century Medicine," p. 196.

³⁷ Kreiter, p. 114.

events in embryogenesis that Hunter's writing described, adding that Blake's demarcation of embryogenesis into seven stages echoes "with considerable accuracy" William Harvey's account of a chick's development in De Generatione.³⁸

Had Blake visited Hunter's museum as Kreiter suggests, he would have observed how in their early stages of development all embryos appear "pliant to rise / Or to fall or to swim or to fly." Furthermore, he would have noticed that among the vertebrates the early stages of embryonic development are basically the same, so that even if he had not seen a human embryo, he could have inferred enough information from the museum displays to construct mentally the pattern of fetal development. Awareness such as Blake may have obtained at Hunter's museum may lie behind images like these in The Book of Los: "his organs like roots / Shooting out from the seed," "branchy forms," "around his spent Lungs / Began intricate pipes," and the unformed parts that were "Dim and glutinous as the white Polypus."

In my reading of the poem, verse 7 of Chapter II and the final two and one-half lines of the poem together form a complete summary of the narrative that follows the description of Los's fall:

³⁸ Kreiter, p. 116.

Many ages of groans, till there grew
 Branchy forms organizing the Human
 Into finite inflexible organs;

 till a Form
 Was completed, a Human Illusion
 In darkness and deep clouds involv'd.

In other words, I believe that all of Chapters III and IV narrate the process of "organizing the Human" into a "Form": the process of fetal development. In this interpretation I am disagreeing with a host of distinguished Blake scholars who have seen in Chapter IV a description of Los's forging of the material sun. But I find several problems with their view of Chapter IV, the major one being that the creation of a material sun does not fit what seems to me to be the narrative structure of the poem: a progression toward completion of a human body. It seems to me that Los's urgent challenge as presented in Chapters II and III was to reintegrate within one functional system the remnants of divided human energies spoken of earlier in the poem, and that meant creating a material human body in which the chaotic energies could be organized, contained, and preserved. Within this context the creation of the material sun in Chapter IV would appear to be only loosely related to Los's immediate problem. Furthermore, in the similar creation narrative of The Four Zoas the material environment of man was completed before the creation of

man's physical body.³⁹ In addition, the light that Los would use in creating what Blake considered to be a dead sun would not be derived from "those infinite fires" of eternity "That glow'd furious in the expanse," as would be the case if Chapter IV dealt with creation of the sun. Damon's William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols identifies the "immense Orb of Fire" as the "Sun of Poetry,"⁴⁰ but this interpretation does not seem to me to fit the context of the poem either, and Damon's Dictionary indicates that Damon later changed his interpretation of the "Orb," seeing it instead as the material sun.⁴¹ I believe that in Chapter IV Blake was referring not to a dead sun or to the sun of poetry but to the vital organ of the human body that functions as its sun, supplying heat and energy throughout the system and, therefore, sustaining its life. I believe that Los's "chain'd Orb" is the human heart, no less a symbol of circularity than that other sun since the heart governs the circulatory blood system.

In Chapter III Blake traces the development of lungs, around which "Began intricate pipes that drew in / The

³⁹ "Night the Second," pp. 286-87.

⁴⁰ S. Foster Damon, William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1924; reprint ed., New York: Peter Smith, 1947), p. 359.

⁴¹ A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake, p. 247.

spawn of waters, Outbranching / An immense Fibrous Form." That is, the organs of the thorax were being formed: the lungs and major blood vessels of the cardiovascular system. Since the growing organism of man's body is still incomplete, these organs cannot yet function together in harmony, and the lungs that "heave on the wave" trying to breathe keep "sinking beneath / In a stifling black fluid." The heaving lungs represent the life force or the living human mind,⁴² and their struggle against the "stifling black fluid" of amniotic water is a dramatic image of drowning. When we recall that Blake, like the ancients, used water as a symbol of matter,⁴³ the message in these lines is abundantly clear. In Blake's embryology, the major arteries, which are the "intricate pipes . . . Outbranching," instinctively draw in these surrounding waters since these waters are meant to circulate through the "Fibrous Form." A sense of inevitability pervades these lines: Los seems to create involuntarily, in the manner of an artist who does not know what the finished creation will be like until he has completed it.

⁴² Damon, William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols, p. 359. Damon notes that in Swedenborgian symbolism the lungs correspond to understanding.

⁴³ Kathleen Raine, Blake and Antiquity (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 7.

In verses 5 and 6 of Chapter III the image of the gasping, drowning Immortal flailing about in the waters "separating the heavy and thin" seems to lead to a curious piece of eighteenth-century biology:

The living body had two primary components, the fluid and the solid. The fluids taken collectively formed the humors of many different types. The solids, apparently so diverse, were all composed ultimately of fibers. The problems of disease received final explanation from these elements.⁴⁴

Just exactly how the fluids interacted with the vessels (the solids) was not entirely clear, but all physiological processes depended on this interaction. The basic mechanism was along the following lines: The heart was the motive power which impelled the fluids through the entire series of vessels. The cardiac impulse, acting on the fluids, dilated the arteries.⁴⁵

If this concept of two body components or one similar to it lies behind the lines in which Los "with his terrible wrath" separates "the heavy and thin," then in these verses of The Book of Los we have Blake's mythic version of how blood is formed and why it is red:

. . . up rose
The thin, flowing round the fierce fires
That glow'd furious in the expanse.

⁴⁴ Lester S. King, M. D., The Medical World of the Eighteenth Century (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 65-66.

⁴⁵ King, p. 74.

Then Light first began: from the fires,
 Beams, conducted by fluid so pure,
 Flow'd around the Immense.

The fierce fires "glow'd furious in the expanse," indicating that light and heat are being restored, evidently as a result of man's progress toward reintegration of his divided energies. Then "Light first began," and the imagery seems to be that of glowing embers that burst into bright flames. "Beams" from the light of these bright living flames are infused into the "fluid so pure," imparting life and a red glow to the water that otherwise would be inanimate matter.

There was evidently a great deal of speculation among doctors and scientists of Blake's time about the composition and power of blood as microscopy forced them to give up the concept of humors. For instance, John Hunter argued that blood is "alive,"⁴⁶ but an article entitled "The living power of the blood" in the Analytical Review (published between 1788 and 1798 by Blake's friend Joseph Johnson) reported that the research of a Mr. Blumenbach had led to the opposite conclusion:

By living power, Mr. Blumenbach understands a quality capable of producing effects not to be

⁴⁶ King, p. 285.

explained by the mere physical properties of matter; and the existence of such a quality in the blood he denies: it is not necessary to any effect produced by the blood and the solids are not otherwise stimulated by the blood than by inanimate matter.⁴⁷

Blake, of course, would have agreed with Hunter, as F. B.

Curtis observes:

Unlike Blumenbach, Blake strongly asserts "the existence of such a quality in the blood": it is from a "globe of life blood" that Enitharmon is formed after the division of Los. Blake may have used the physiological observation to point out that a "living power" does exist in human blood, that blood is not inanimate matter; on the contrary, it is animated by emotional qualities. His "globe of life blood trembled," palpitating with the living powers of grief and sorrow.⁴⁸

In line 3 verse 1 of Chapter IV there is a sudden shift in focus from lungs, arteries, and blood to the spine, but in verse 4 the focus returns to the developing cardiovascular system.⁴⁹ Line 1 of verse 4 indicates that the action being described is out of sequence: "And first from those infinite fires / The light . . . / He siez'd, beating incessant, condensing / The subtil particles in an Orb."

⁴⁷ Curtis, "Blake and the Booksellers," p. 177.

⁴⁸ Curtis, "Blake and the Booksellers," p. 177.

⁴⁹ This working back and forth from one event to another is a common feature in Blake's prophecies.

I believe that "first" means "before the action in the preceding five lines." In other words, the narrative of forging the "sun" intersects line 5 verse 2 of Chapter IV, after Los "formed an Anvil, / A Hammer of adamant." The remainder of verse 2 is parallel in sequence with lines 6 and 7 of verse 7 in Chapter IV: "He the vast Spine of Urizen siez'd, / And bound down to the glowing illusion."

The images of Urizen's backbone "Hurtling upon the wind / Like a serpent! like an iron chain" partake of three major Blake symbols: serpent, stone, and circle. In Blake's poetry the serpent represents, among other things, the worship of nature or nature itself,⁵⁰ and this symbol overlaps with the biblical symbol of serpent as evil. "Iron" belongs with bones and rocks to the category of Blake symbols that represent matter in its most contracted form. Circles in Blake represent entrapment in the cyclical world of time and space. Urizen's spine in fetal position, then, like Druid temples and iron chains, combines in one symbol both circularity and contraction; it is, therefore, an ultimate Blake symbol for all the evils that beset man in the natural world.

Blake habitually links pain with bones as he does in the image of Urizen's spine "writhing upon the dark void,"

⁵⁰ Damon, A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake, pp. 365-66.

an image that is repeated in The Book of Urizen and in The Four Zoas. Physicians of the eighteenth century believed that all of the solid parts of the body had ideal degrees of rigidity: a hardening in soft organs or a softening in hard parts indicated disease.

Opposite the weak fiber was the rigid or stiff fiber whose particles cohered so tightly that they did not yield to the distending action of fluids. The vessels which these fibers constituted became narrower, shorter, more resistant to the passage of fluids. To some extent this was a normal aging phenomenon, but excessive exercise or labor accelerated it. To counteract such stiffening, the remedies were a thin diet and mealy substances with aqueous, smooth, soft, or oily medicines, all of which tended to soften the fibers.

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Bloodletting might eliminate the symptoms of excessive rigidity. Vessels that were too firm exerted excessively forceful action on the contained liquids, which rendered the blood dense and compact and predisposed to clotting. Bloodletting would relieve this, since it emptied the vessels and drained off the denser parts of the blood.⁵¹

There was thought to be a continuous process of hardening throughout the body as it aged, as explained in J. Aitken's Essays on several important subjects in surgery (London, 1771):

From the first moment of conception, to the utmost verge of life, by the gradual

⁵¹ King, pp. 76-77.

accumulation of earthy matter,--the process to rigidity is constantly advancing, not only in the bony, but also in the softer parts of all animal bodies. To this change is chiefly and perhaps solely, to be attributed the very remarkable diminution of irritability and vascular texture, which is observed to take place in all aged animals: All the parts of their bodies thus approaching, as it were, to Solidity.⁵²

From the medical viewpoint of Blake's time, then, increasing solidity in the body was associated with disease and death, and Blake's image of a "writhing" spine undoubtedly arose at least in part from this medical attitude.

The word fiber is another borrowing from medical science. Curtis has given examples of how Blake's use of the term echoes its use in eighteenth-century medical texts, and he cites lines 1 and 2 of verse 2 in Chapter IV as a suggestion of the muscular strength of the uterus:⁵³ "Up-folding his Fibres together / To a form of impregnable strength. . . . Curtis observes that fibers is again associated with birth in The Four Zoas (FZ iii, 20-21):⁵⁴ "Vala shall become a Worm in Enitharmon's Womb, / Laying her seed upon the fibres, soon to issue forth."

⁵² Curtis, "William Blake and Eighteenth-Century Medicine," p. 191.

⁵³ Curtis, "William Blake and Eighteenth-Century Medicine," p. 192.

⁵⁴ Curtis, "William Blake and Eighteenth-Century Medicine," p. 192.

The narrative of Chapter IV makes quick mention of Los's furnaces, anvil, and hammer and then summarily moves the story forward:

. . . then began
The binding of Urizen day and night.

Circling round the dark Demon with howlings,
Dismay & sharp blightings, the Prophet
Of Eternity beat on his iron links.

Of course, the iron links are the solid matter that Los shapes into flesh, and human flesh is thus equated with chains of iron. The binding in chains is carried out in circular motion, further establishing circularity as the principle of life in nature. Los's "howling, / Dismay & sharp blightings" indicate his horror and fear of the nightmare creation that is emerging, still cold and apparently dead. But in the last verses of Chapter IV, verses that describe Los's creation of the human heart, Los appears to work with new hope and enthusiasm as he seizes his materials and works "unwearied."

It was directly from "those infinite fires" that Los gathered material for creating the human heart. He "siez'd" the "light that flow'd down on the winds," the same "beams" used in creating blood. Then he formed these "bright sparks" into the "immense Orb of Fire" that is the heart, perfecting its shape with his hammer and anvil.

Satisfied with its "glorious" shape, he "siez'd" more fire and "heated the round Globe." This "chain'd Orb" was Los's crowning achievement, for it was the means by which Los reintegrated the properties of heat and light with their solidified fire source, thus securing chaos and preventing a fall into non-entity. Blake's flaming metaphor for the human heart celebrates the heart as seat of the emotions: love, joy, fear, pity, wrath--including prophetic wrath. Reason, residing in the brain, is doomed to darkness, a "stoned stupor," without the fire of these emotions, for light and heat, wisdom and love, are interdependent. In creating this "sun" Los had found the means by which "heaven and hell" could be reunited and born together in Adam.

The "self-balanced" sun, then, is the self-regulating heart that measures time automatically, unlike the clock of Blake's time. The human heart measures the relative time of mental experience, not the mechanical clock time of orbiting planets:

Every Time less than a pulsation of the artery
Is equal in its period & value to Six Thousand
Years,

For in this Period the Poet's Work is Done, and
all the Great

Events of Time start forth & are conceiv'd in
 such a Period,
 Within a Moment, a Pulsation of the Artery.⁵⁵

This passage continues with an explanation of how space,
 like time, is experienced relatively in the human mind:

The Sky is an immortal Tent built by the Sons
 of Los:
 And every Space that a Man views around his
 dwelling-place
 Standing on his own roof or in his garden on a
 mount
 Of twenty-five cubits in height, such space is
 his Universe:
 And on its verge the Sun rises & sets, the Clouds
 bow
 To meet the flat Earth & the Sea in such an
 order'd Space:
 The Starry heavens reach no further, but here
 bend and set
 On all sides, & the two Poles turn on their
 valves of gold;
 And if he move his dwelling-place, his heavens
 also move
 Where'er he goes, & all his neighborhood bewail
 his loss.
 Such are the Spaces called Earth & such its
 dimension.
 As to that false appearance which appears to the
 reasoner
 As of a Globe rolling thro' Voidness, it is a
 delusion of Ulro.

Blake then says that "the red Globule is the unwearied Sun
 by Los created / To measure Time and Space to mortal Men
 every morning," but the words Time, Space, and morning must

⁵⁵ Blake, Milton I:29, p. 516.

be understood in context. The "red Globule . . . the unwearied Sun" that Blake is speaking of here is not the material sun, another "false appearance . . . / As of a Globe rolling thro' Voidness" which is a "delusion of Ulro." This "red Globule" is the human heart, that sun which measures the time of a poet's inspiration and the conception of "Great Events." To make his sun-heart metaphor clearer Blake adds that "Bowlahoola & Allamanda are placed on each side / Of that Pulsation & that Globule, terrible their power."

In The Book of Urizen the narrative of the heart's creation is told as an event experienced passively by Urizen:

From the caverns of his jointed Spine
Down sunk with fright a red
Round Globe, hot burning, deep,
Deep down into the Abyss;
Panting, Conglobing, Trembling
Shooting out ten thousand branches
Around his solid bones.

Absent from this version is Los's exultation over his achievement of the "self-balanced," life-sustaining energy system of fallen man. In The Book of Urizen the imagery of heat and light is given sinister connotations of pain: the red "hot-burning" globe sinks into the abyss "Panting, Conglobing, Trembling," Urizen had sought to escape the "unquenchable burnings" of eternity, but he could not.

Kreiter believes that the lines from Urizen quoted above prove Blake's close connections with the medical establishment of his time; specifically, she believes that only by viewing a vivisection could Blake have attained the perspective required for describing a beating heart as "Panting, Conglobing, Trembling."⁵⁶

In contrast with these lines from Urizen, The Book of Los describes Los actively creating the heart and then placing it triumphantly in the body:

. . . the Sun
 Stood self-balanced. And Los smil'd with joy.
 He the vast Spine of Urizen siez'd,
 And bound down to the glowing illusion.

The heart is here described ironically as an illusion because it is fundamentally matter, containing the "bright sparks" of life only for a few decades of clock time and then returning to its former lifeless state. The irony continues into lines 1, 2, and 3 of verse 8: "But no light! for the Deep fled away / On all sides and left an unform'd / Dark vacuity." That is, the radiance of eternity is lost to this fallen soul, and what appears to be substantial is actually an "unform'd Dark vacuity." The "glowing bed" is the blood system issuing from "the glowing illusion."

⁵⁶ Kreiter, pp. 114-115.

The entire process of creating this human form required "Nine ages," the nine-month period of human gestation. The number nine is associated traditionally with nightmare,⁵⁷ and this overlay of symbolism helps to underscore Blake's message that, from the viewpoint of eternity, womb means tomb.

Now functioning together, the brain and heart produce in the "fleshy slough" the four rivers that are the four senses of sight, smell, taste, and hearing.⁵⁸ The completed "Human Illusion" emerges in the final verse of Los as a kind of Frankenstein, for he is the pieced-together remnants of a once glorious life, a life-in-death caricature of the "Real Man." Life exists within this "Form" by virtue of the "immense Orb of fire," but even this vital sign of life is obscured by the matter encasing it. Thus, fallen man begins his sojourn on earth "In darkness and deep clouds involv'd." The "deep clouds" are to be understood as a form of water, a symbol of matter. The use of this symbol in these concluding lines of the poem is especially appropriate since the whole point made by the poem is that the material world obscures the light of the spiritual world as clouds obscure the sun.

⁵⁷ Bloom, p. 166.

⁵⁸ Blake, Annotations to Berkeley's Siris, p. 773. Jerusalem 98:12-18.

This somber poem, with its images of fire and ice, whirling descent, circular entrapment, amorphous body organs, and drowned lungs, describes what happens when an ungenerated soul reaches the "land of clouds" and "valleys dark" that Thel refused to enter:

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.

But in The Book of Los there could be no turning back, and the embryo of this poem is born in another poem by Blake:

My mother groan'd! my father wept.
 Into the dangerous world I leapt:
 Helpless, naked, piping loud:
 Like a fiend hid in a cloud.

Struggling in my father's hands,
 Striving against my swadling bands,
 Bound and weary I thought best
 To sulk upon my mother's breast.

Chapter III

A Circle of Darkness in The Book of Ahania

In its account of the fall of man, The Book of Los sketches an overall design that includes a description of an eternal state before the fall and an implication of regeneration to come after the fall. The Book of Ahania sketches a dominant pattern within this larger design. Ahania focuses on the consequences of the fall, illustrating the cyclical pattern of fallen humanity's history on earth. With its historical theme and its familiar biblical images, Ahania is a less difficult poem than Los, and perhaps for this reason it has fared better with the critics. But there is still enough substantive variation among critical interpretations of the poem to indicate confusion.¹ For instance, Ahania is variously interpreted

¹ Of the many commentaries on Ahania which I have read, I have found two the most instructive: Hazard Adams, Blake and Yeats: The Contrary Vision (New York: Cornell University Press, 1955), pp. 76-80, and E. D. Hirsch, Jr., Innocence and Experience: An Introduction to Blake (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964, pp. 82-87. My interpretation of the poem was built primarily on the insights provided by these two discussions. Also helpful was Morton Paley's Energy and the Imagination: A Study of the Development of Blake's Thought (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 78-86.

as wisdom, desire, pleasure, nature, and Mother Earth. Although most critics seem to view her as a sympathetic character, one prominent critic of Blake sees her as a fallen Sophia, a decidedly unsympathetic character: "For Blake, . . . the wraith-like Ahania, mysterious, formless and well-nigh indiscernible, expresses his dislike of abstraction as rational knowledge divorced from the active intelligence."² There is more agreement on the role of Fuzon; he is generally understood as an Orc figure representing youthful forces of change or renewal. Other major symbols in Ahania such as serpent and tree are easily understood by most readers.

Biblical images abound throughout the poem. From the Old Testament Blake has taken the images of slavery in Egypt, the pillar of cloud and fire, thunder and lightning, Mount Sinai, the serpent, and echoes of Psalms and Proverbs. Most of these images are woven into the circular plot that moves from slavery to deliverance and back to slavery again. From the New Testament Blake has taken the image of crucifixion, telescoping it into the plot derived from Exodus. The many mythic analogues of the story, as noted by numerous critics, are the stories of Moses, Satan, Absalom,

² Peter Fisher, The Valley of Vision: Blake as Prophet and Revolutionary, ed. Northrop Frye (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961), p. 195.

Adonis, Prometheus, Odin, Balder, St. Sebastian, Robespierre, and Jesus.

Like other prophecies by Blake, Ahania has a confusing narrative pattern. As a sequel to The Book of Urizen it continues the action of that poem, but the first chapter of Ahania overlaps with the last two verses of Urizen and includes a flashback to the fall. Two other flashbacks occur later in the poem: verses 3 and 4 of Chapter III and verses 2 through 6 of Chapter IV. Nevertheless, The Book of Ahania divides easily into three parts. The first part, composed of Chapters I and II, is Blake's version of the Exodus story highlighting the revolt against bondage to a "Demon of smoke" in Egypt and the subsequent return to that bondage in Sinai. The second part, Chapters III and IV, adds an elaborate postscript to the completed cycle narrated in the first two chapters. The last part of the poem is the lengthy lament of the outcast Ahania contrasting the rich intellectual life in eternity with present repression and darkness.

My reading of Ahania varies from the usual interpretation in which Fuzon's wounding of Urizen is represented as the primary cause of division between Urizen and Ahania. As I understand the story from Urizen, Ahania, and The Four Zoas, Urizen's repudiation of Ahania had already occurred

as a stage of the fall before the creation and the early history of man. I think that Blake intended his readers to see Urizen as a spiritually impotent and self-divided being long before Fuzon made his castrating attack that divided Urizen's "cold loins." The Book of Urizen implies that Fuzon is "self-begotten,"³ and Ahania describes Fuzon as a "Son of Urizen's silent burnings," each poem thus indicating that Ahania had no part in Fuzon's birth. As Urizen's emanation, she is bound to his world but had been cast from his "bright presence" as he was becoming "unprolific, / Self-clos'd, all-repelling."

Ahania has no direct involvement in the battle between Fuzon and Urizen except that Urizen jealously perceives her to be the winner's prize. In Ahania Urizen addresses her as Sin to excuse the sterility that his wound has made undeniable, but as her lament makes clear, she is actually the means by which intellect remains productive. Because she represents that love of truth which enables the intellect to escape the sterility of its own biases, her presence is a reproach to Urizen. To reject her is to reject understanding, and without her Urizen cannot be

³ William Blake, The Complete Writings of William Blake with All the Variant Readings, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (New York: Random House, Inc., 1957), p. 225. In The Book of Urizen III:4 Urizen's armies are described as "self-begotten."

light to the soul. Those critics who see her as a personification of wisdom seem to be closest to Blake's meaning. Ahania's lament implicitly removes her from taint of the fall; she seems uncorrupted by the fall as if she were a separated but essentially pure fragment of eternal human energy. In The Four Zoas, for instance, she struggles to set Urizen straight until he banishes her, and in the end, when he finally realizes his mistakes, she is so overcome with joy that she collapses. She becomes "The Mother of Pestilence" only insofar as she is the subjugated spouse of the father of pestilence, Urizen himself, who "desires, but acts not." In the story of Ahania's separation from Urizen Blake is stating a central theme in his work: repression of energy, here a suppression of truth, breeds pestilence.

Fuzon is introduced in The Book of Urizen as Urizen's fiery "first begotten, last born" son of sorrow who eventually led out of Egypt those "children of Urizen" who had managed to escape Urizen's net. Lest we allow his opening speech in Ahania to influence unduly our opinion of him, we should recall that Urizen, too, had led a revolt; Fuzon may not be the great deliverer he seems to be. Two questions present themselves after we first read the poem: is Fuzon merely an aspect of Urizen himself, and if not, at what point in the story does he fall victim to Urizen's power?

Recalling that Fuzon dwells in clouds, that his weapon is a globe, and that he attempts to gain power by castrating his opposition, we may be saved from an early assumption that he represents a substantial threat to Urizen's rule.

Although the despotism described in Ahania is clearly a moral and spiritual despotism, David Erdman explains in Blake: Prophet Against Empire how Blake was also commenting on the political struggles of his time as power shifted with dizzying speed. Specifically, Erdman sees Fuzon as a figure that Blake associated with Robespierre.⁴ Erdman is convincing on this point, for he notes several parallels in the stories of Fuzon and Robespierre and he points out how Fuzon is introduced in The Book of Ahania "with the same, fiery-chariot image that is used in Europe to refer to the beginning of the Terror."⁵ But Erdman takes the introductory speech of Fuzon at face value as an indication that Blake initially believed Robespierre's newly legislated religion to be "a thorough revolt against everything represented in his own demonology by Urizen."⁶ Erdman is less convincing on this point, for it leads him to the conclusion

⁴ David V. Erdman, Blake: Prophet Against Empire (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 289.

⁵ Erdman, p. 288.

⁶ Erdman, p. 289.

that Fuzon is meant to be "a sympathetic character . . . a guide and prophet" and that Blake did not change his mind about Robespierre until some time later.⁷ My own view is that Blake was too shrewd not to have understood the implications of Robespierre's activities as late as the writing of Ahania, even though "contemporary reports were confusing."⁸ Morton Paley takes a similar view:

The first poem in which Blake does take an entirely ironical and pessimistic view of the fate of Energy is The Book of Ahania (1795), written after the Terror and the rise and fall of Robespierre. Yet Blake was not willing to commit himself permanently to such a view even then: he left scope in his myth for the eventual redemption of Energy, should the authoritarian aspect of the Revolution have turned out a temporary aberration, by making the fatal hero of Ahania not Orc but a surrogate, Fuzon.⁹

Fuzon's first speech, which is usually read as the appeal of a great liberator, appears less heroic under close scrutiny. It contains no substance beyond its drive toward unseating the existing power. It offers no direction for a genuine spiritual change or political reform. In today's terms it could be described as "political

⁷ Erdman, p. 290; p. 389.

⁸ Erdman, p. 289.

⁹ Paley, p. 81.

rhetoric." When Fuzon suddenly announces himself as God, we realize that the whole story of his transformation from liberator to tyrant is missing from the poem. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that a "Son of Urizen's silent burnings" would be capable of the vision required to establish a new order. For these reasons I do not interpret Fuzon to be a failed prophet or an innocent whom power corrupted. I see him instead as representing a Urizenic rebellion or struggle for power that is inextricably tied with Urizenic repression. Fuzon is part of Urizen's system, and he helps it to operate. In Urizen's phase of the cycle, victims are provided through sacrificial religion; in Fuzon/Orc's phase, victims are provided through revolutionary war.

The distinction between Fuzon as a figure inside or outside of Urizen's system is an important one, I think, for it influences the interpretation placed on Chapters III and IV in which Urizen affixes Fuzon's dead body to a tree. This image of crucifixion leads critics to an almost routine association of Fuzon with Christ, but Fuzon is not a true Christ figure since Christ's rebellion was a spiritual one against the entire Urizenic system. Christ abrogated that system with his gospel of forgiveness. Fuzon crucified represents the corpse-on-a-tree worship in Christianity that emphasizes sacrificial atonement, worship that Blake

considered to be a perversion of Christ's message on earth since true forgiveness demands no price. For Blake, the icon of a dead body on a tree was the Antichrist, the ultimate triumph of Urizen. An Orc, alive or crucified, "cannot represent an entry into a new world, but only the power of renewing an exhausted form in the old one."¹⁰ Fuzon is merely the desire of the ever-aging Urizen to perpetuate himself; he is, in fact, a youthful version of Urizen himself. The prideful speeches of father and son in Ahania indicate how much alike they are. In The Book of Urizen Urizen "explor'd his dens" and realized as he viewed the hideous sights around him that "life liv'd upon death" in the monstrous world he had created. The "pale living Corse on the Tree" symbolizes the life-in-death world of Urizen.

Fuzon is described in the poem as a daring, handsome youth in the mold of Apollo, Prometheus, and Absalom. He had wide shoulders, a "beautiful visage," and "tresses / That gave light to the mornings of heaven." In addition he possessed great physical strength. Blake does not usually describe the outward appearance of his characters in this much detail. He had a special purpose in doing so here, for he wished to emphasize the deceptive external

¹⁰ Northrop Frye, Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), p. 218.

appeal of political promises such as those made by Robespierre, who promised democracy but delivered a revised version of the old tyranny.

Like other humanitarian artists and intellectuals of his time, Blake in the mid 1790's was being forced by the political turn of events to give up any hope that fundamental social changes could be wrought through government reform. For these men, dreams of brotherhood had to be modified if they were to be retained. The political pessimism that Blake must have felt when writing Ahania eventually became subordinated to the spiritual optimism that dominates his major prophecies.

Egypt as a symbol of the fallen world was an idea that occurred to Blake apparently very early during the Lambeth period. In 1791 Blake engraved five plates for Erasmus Darwin's The Botanic Garden, published by Joseph Johnson,¹¹ and among these engravings was an illustration entitled "The Fertilization of Egypt," inscribed "H. Fuseli, R. A. inv. W. Blake sc."¹² Albert S. Roe in "The Thunder of

¹¹ Mona Wilson, The Life of William Blake (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc.), p. 343.

¹² Albert S. Roe, "The Thunder of Egypt," in William Blake: Essays for S. Foster Damon, ed. Alvin H. Rosenfeld (Providence: Brown University Press, 1969), p. 160.

Egypt"¹³ argues that in spite of the ascription to Henry Fuseli, this illustration came from Blake's own imagination, for it unites Blake's major symbols of Urizen's Ulro: Jehovah-Urizen surrounded by clouds; a rocky desert shore that flanks the waters of materialism; and Urizen's mountains, the "pyramids of pride." The landscape depicted in this 1791 illustration, whoever may have conceived it,¹⁴ is precisely the spiritual landscape described in The Book of Ahania. In the center of the picture we see a "cloudy God seated on waters" as if "his dire Contemplations" had "Rush'd down like floods from his mountains." Rocks, stones, and mountains combine in two pyramids placed prominently in the foreground of the picture, and in the center at the top is a large six-pointed star (the shape of an inverted pyramid superimposed over an upright pyramid). Roe interprets this six-pointed star of Judaism as a representation of the "cruelties of Moral Law," the old dispensation.¹⁵ He makes

¹³ Roe, pp. 158-70.

¹⁴ Anthony Blunt observes: "Fundamentally, . . . it is futile to argue the question of priority. The essential point is that there were certain motives and certain images which were, one might almost say, the common property of the whole group to which Blake, Fuseli, Flaxman, Romney, and Stothard belonged, and that each member of the group produced his own particular interpretation of the motive." The Art of William Blake (New York: Harper and Row, Icon Editions, 1959), p. 41.

¹⁵ Roe, p. 162.

no mention of Ahania, but he might have added that the pyramid-formed star emblematic of Mosaic law embodies in one symbol the central theme of The Book of Ahania: human history is cyclical, apparently leading in the "same dull round" back to where it started. Dominating the illustration is the figure of Anubis--fallen man--with the head of a jackal standing in a worshipful pose before the "Angry God of this World." In Ahania Urizen's sons and daughters take on animal characteristics as they "reptilize upon the Earth." Perhaps the most striking similarity between the illustration and Ahania is the imagery of a thunderstorm. In the picture flashes of lightning are seen amid the heavy clouds surrounding Jehovah-Urizen, and in Ahania many images combine to suggest a tremendous electrical storm: "spiked flames," "sparkles," "clouds of smoke," "his right hand burns red in its cloud," "thunder-stone," "waters," "roaring," "the exulting flam'd beam," "sounding beam," "floods," and "torrents of mud."

Fuzon's fire appears to be an electrical energy forever joined with the elements of Urizen's world; it is the force by which that world moves in its cyclical pattern of decay and renewal, or literally, the force of revolution. Opposing this force is Urizen's broad disk, formed by the winter's cold winds: "forg'd in mills where the winter /

Beats incessant." The image Blake evokes in these lines is that of a thunderbolt (Fuzon's beam) piercing a rain cloud (Urizen's disk). Urizen's disk is the dark cloud of secrecy and materialism that may dissipate in storms of revolution only to return and befog man again as long as nature holds dominion over the earth.¹⁶ These Old Testament images of cloud, lightning, and thunder are part of a consistent symbolic pattern developed in the minor prophecies and continued throughout the major works.

In Chapter II we encounter another important Blakean symbol, the serpent. According to verses 2 and 3, an "enormous dread Serpent" hatched from the eggs that materialized in "torrents of mud" after the storm. Urizen killed the serpent and used its "ribs" and "sinews" to form a bow with which to make a counter-attack against Fuzon. Drawing the bow into a "circle of darkness" he shot an enormous rock at his enemy, who then lay "outstretch'd on the edge of the forest."

According to Damon, "Blake gives the serpent a number of overlapping meanings, all related:"¹⁷ the serpent

¹⁶ Adams' reference to Urizen's shield as a "solar disk" (Blake and Yeats: The Contrary Vision, p. 77) seems illogical since Blake says that the disk was made "where the winter beats incessant." Frye sees the shield as the pillar of cloud (Fearful Symmetry, p. 215).

¹⁷ S. Foster Damon, A Blake Dictionary (Providence: Brown University Press, 1965), p. 365.

represents the hypocrisy of moral law, materialism, and Nature herself. Damon adds that "Sometimes it is tempting to interpret the Serpent as a sexual symbol."¹⁸ Perhaps each of these meanings applies to the serpent in Ahania, but primarily the serpent here symbolizes Urizen's repressed desire as the source of poison and the natural consequence of his pursuit of a "joy without pain," "a solid without fluctuation." Blake's view that both war and sacrificial religion are direct results of repressed sexual energy is surely represented in the conflict between Urizen, Ahania, and Fuzon; however, Blake's meaning is much broader than that, for his sexual symbolism encompasses all forms of human desire. Urizen speaks of his serpent as a "lust-form'd monster," indicating very clearly that this monster is the product of desires which Urizen had denied in establishing himself as the "One King, one God." The desire of an uncorrupted intellect would be wisdom and understanding. The fallen Urizen's repression of this desire in order to maintain his rule of reason results in perversions of the mind: religious superstitions and ignorance. The sexual imagery of Ahania's lament also obviously refers to intellectual rather than sensual desires; Urizen with his "lap

¹⁸ Damon, p. 366.

full of seed" sowed "the seed of eternal science," or understanding, on the human soul in eternity.

Urizen's careful preparation of the serpent's dead body as raw material for his weapon, polishing the ribs and drying the sinews, recalls "A Poison Tree" with its description of a well-nurtured suppressed anger that eventually produced a poisonous apple and thereby the death of the foe. In Ahania the serpent's blood "poison'd the rocks" and one of these rocks became the projectile for Urizen's bow. Still "in torment of his wounds" Urizen shot the rock, which hit its target and then "fell upon the Earth / Mount Sinai in Arabia." Blake saw the code of Sinai as a variant of the theocracy in Egypt under which the Israelites had been held in bondage, and to him it meant a perpetuation of the same errors: repression, guilt, blood sacrifice, and the tyranny of priests. Blake's use of Mount Sinai as a symbol of spiritual bondage echoes Galatians 4:22-26, in which Paul identified the bondage of Jerusalem with "mount Sinai in Arabia."¹⁹

Ironically, by the time that Urizen had made his counterattack, Fuzon had set himself up as God, the fires

¹⁹ William Blake, The Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1965; rpt. Anchor Books, 1970). As noted in commentary by Harold Bloom, p. 822.

of revolution had died, and the old order had already returned. After Fuzon's crucifixion and the forty years of "Wailing and terror and woe" described in Chapters III and IV, a new cycle began in Canaan: "then Asia / Arose in the pendulous deep."

Chapters III and IV present several difficulties in interpretation. First, they add little forward movement to the narrative, each chapter containing a lengthy flashback to the fall. Second, since a full cycle of power had already been completed when Urizen re-established his control at the end of Chapter II, the crucifixion of the corpse in Chapter III seems like tacked-on material, literally a bit of overkill. In addition, this chapter introduces a new set of images. Chapters I and II contained images from Exodus and those familiar Blakean images of circularity (the "Globe of wrath," the "Disk of Urizen," Ahania "circling dark Urizen," moon, sun, eggs, and the serpent-bow stretched into a "circle of darkness"). But Chapter III is dominated by images of a forest where "A Tree hung over the Immensity," and Chapter IV contains images of chaos and creation from The Book of Urizen. Furthermore, since the symbolic elements introduced in Chapter III constitute an important part of Blake's larger myth, this chapter cannot be easily disposed of as an

experiment that Blake discarded. Apparently the material itself serves no purely poetic function. The purpose of these chapters seems to be that of relating the cycle described in Chapters I and II to modern history. Blake's telescoping of the New Testament story of the crucifixion into the Old Testament Exodus story, locating the image of crucifixion in the wilderness of Sinai, was Blake's way of making the point that blood sacrifice belongs spiritually to Urizen's Ulro. Forgiveness of sins, the gospel of Christ, is the only way out of this bondage:

Mutual Forgiveness of each Vice,
 Such are the Gates of Paradise.
 Against the Accuser's chief desire,
 Who walk'd among the Stones of Fire,
 Jehovah's Finger Wrote the Law:
 Then Wept! then rose in Zeal & Awe,
 And the Dead Corpse from Sinai's heat
 Buried beneath his Mercy Seat.
 O Christians, Christians! tell me Why
 You rear it on your Altars high.²⁰

Chapter III is devoted largely to a flashback narrative that tells the origin of the Tree of Mystery. This familiar Blakean symbol recalls both the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil from the Old Testament and the tree of crucifixion from the New Testament. For Blake these trees are identical. Both represent moral law and the

²⁰ For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise, p. 761.

authoritarian religious and political systems derived from it: "The Moral Virtues in Great fear / Formed the Cross & Nails & Spear." Blake explains his view more simply as follows: "Every Religion that Preaches Vengeance for Sin is the Religion of the Enemy & Avenger and not of the Forgiver of Sin, and their God is Satan, Named by the Divine Name. . . . This was the Religion of the Pharisees who murder'd Jesus."²¹ Blake refers to each of these trees as the Tree of Mystery because, as Hazard Adams explains, "good and evil, being really nonexistent abstracts, are the ultimate mystery, just as the god said to have created them must also be a mystery."²² The Tree of Mystery is the opposite of the Tree of Life spoken of in Genesis and Revelation, the leaves of which are meant "for the healing of the nations."

The Tree of Mystery first appears in Blake's works in "The Human Abstract" from Songs of Experience, a poem which locates this tree "in the Human Brain." It reappears with the story of its origin in Ahania, The Four Zoas, and Jerusalem. Although the details of its origin vary slightly in these three works, the tree is always clearly associated

²¹ Jerusalem, p. 682.

²² Hazard Adams, A Reading of the Shorter Poems (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1963), p. 243.

with deceit, hypocrisy, and the forced humility of subjugation. Like a banyan tree it has branches that lengthen until they touch the earth, then root and form new trees. The image of a single tree is thus extended to the image of a forest, in Blake always a symbol of the web of errors among which man becomes spiritually lost. In Ahania Urizen himself barely escaped from this labyrinth of leaves and branches, leaving behind his book of iron (war). The entanglement of the book of iron in the Tree of Mystery suggests a close relationship between religion and war.²³

Urizen nailed Fuzon's corpse to this tree presumably as an idol for his sons and daughters to worship. An emblem of Urizen's own repressed desires, it represented Urizen's sacrifice to himself. It glorified death and set an example for Urizen's heirs by which their internalized repression would cause their skulls to harden and their emotions to "reptilize" as sources of poison. This process of dehumanization is depicted as a forty-year rain of "arrows of pestilence" around the tree. The "arrows of pestilence" symbolize the varied forms of spiritual disease within individuals and societies; they recall the arrows of Psalm 38:1-3:²⁴

²³ As noted by Harold Bloom in commentary for The Poetry and Prose of William Blake, p. 877.

²⁴ As noted by Paley, p. 85.

O Lord, rebuke me not in thy wrath: neither
 chasten me in thy hot displeasure. For thine
 arrows stick fast in me, and thy hand presseth
 me sore. There is no soundness in my flesh
 because of thine anger: neither is there any
 rest in my bones because of my sin.

Chapter IV provides background information that helps to clarify the metaphor: the arrows of pestilence are the remnants of chaos to which Los was unable to give human form. As tormented, disorganized fragments of fallen energy, they belong to Urizen's Ulro; as his "army of horrors" they apparently do his bidding. They are the opposite of those fourfold arrows of intellect that signal apocalypse in Jerusalem.

By placing the crucifixion image in the wilderness of Sinai, Blake associates it with the bronze serpent made by Moses that for centuries afterwards was worshipped in Israel.²⁵ Urizen, rejuvenated in Fuzon, is like a serpent who has shed its skin to emerge renewed; thus the serpent is an apt symbol of Urizen and his cyclical world with its poison and its constant repetition of error. Blake's story contains an ironic twist, however. Moses had used the bronze serpent raised on a pole to cure the Israelites whom

²⁵ Harold Bloom, Blake's Apocalypse: A Study in Poetic Argument (New York: Cornell University Press, 1970; by arrangement with Doubleday & Co., Inc.), p. 179. See also Frye, pp. 136-37, and Paley, p. 80.

God had punished for disobedience with a plague of venomous snakes. But in Ahania the crucifixion idol represents the source of the disease, not the cure, as the arrows of pestilence fly freely among the people during their forty-year sojourn in the wilderness. Urizen's idol in the wilderness refers specifically to Christianity's preoccupation with the crucifixion, a preoccupation that in Blake's view turns the cure back into the disease.

Ahania's lament in Chapter V contrasts life in eternity with the desolate existence in Urizen's Ulro. Every image of darkness, disease, and death in the poem proper has its counter-image in this section of the poem. Instead of Urizen's desert wastes, dark forests, and stormy skies, Ahania's lament speaks of a world with sunlit fields and orchards where intellectual life flourishes in rich variety. Ahania, the mistress of this eternal world, is abandoned and homeless in the fallen world; her lament echoes Proverbs 8:1-2:²⁶ "Doth not wisdom cry? and understanding put forth her voice? She standeth in the top of high places, by the way in the places of the paths."

Imagery in Chapters I through IV indicates that there is little light in Urizen's world: "dark Urizen," "now

²⁶ As noted by Paley, p. 82f, and Bloom, p. 822, in commentary for The Poetry and Prose of William Blake.

seen, now obscur'd," Ahania hid "in darkness," "a dark rooted Oak," the black bow that shot through black clouds, Fuzon's tresses that "were smitten with / Darkness," and the "dismal shade" formed by the Tree of Mystery. But the paradise that Ahania recalls in her lament is a world flooded with light as in these images: "golden palace," "ivory bed," "morning hour," "bright Urizen," "generous fire," and "clouds of morning." Urizen is like the unfallen Lucifer, a light-bearer and Son of Morn, awakening his universe to life. This universe is filled with a harmony of joyful interaction that is the complete opposite of the rebellion and death described earlier in the poem. Jealousy and fear do not exist: Urizen gives Ahania to the "sons of eternal joy" and she opens her "chambers of love" to Urizen and the "daughters of life." "Eternal births" and an abundant harvest follow, for the unfallen Urizen is a tireless lover who happily begets and sustains the joyful life around him. Interwoven images of fertility, growth, and harvest mark the contrast between infinite life in eternity and death-in-life in Ulro:

"Swelled with ripeness & fat with fatness,
 "Bursting on winds, my odors,
 "My ripe figs and rich pomegranates
 "In infant joy at thy feet,
 "O Urizen, sported and sang.

"Then thou with thy lap full of seed,
 "With thy hand full of generous fire
 "Walked forth from the clouds of morning,
 "On the virgins of springing joy,
 "On the human soul to cast
 "The seed of eternal science.

Birth rather than death is the dominant image of the lament: "babes of bliss," "Eternal births," "infant joys," and "mothers-joys." The "clouds," "dew," "showers," and "moisture" constitute waters of life, the opposite of Urizen's waters of materialism.

Although recurrence in the fallen world means entrapment in error, recurrence in eternity means harmony and proportion. In the perfectly balanced universe of eternity where death is unknown and where contraries are joyfully wedded, recurrence is the pattern of infinite productivity in an ever-expanding universe of life. The imagery of Ahania's lament, verses 6 through 13, suggests such recurrence in dawn-to-dusk and seedtime-to-harvest cycles that operate to promote the fullest possible development of human life.

With its images of eternal life, Ahania's lament alone saves The Book of Ahania from total pessimism, that "mental cancer" which Frye speaks of as developing from the tragic view in which all history is seen as a hopeless series of

Orc cycles.²⁷ At the time Blake wrote Ahania he had become disillusioned with the revolutionary forces that he had once expected to change history. His prophetic vision did not include the means by which he could deal with an apocalypse that never happened. Although he possessed a well-developed concept of eternal life, he had not yet envisioned the relationship of cyclic human history to man's regeneration and to eternity. Apparently the search for an answer to this question was a central problem in the development of his mythology during the decade that followed Los and Ahania. A milestone in this quest was Blake's eventual conclusion that the Mosaic law represented an essential stage in the development of man: the primitive religion of the Jews corresponded to man's childhood.²⁸ A complete resolution of the problem of historical recurrence came to Blake as the concept of seven "Eyes of God." These Eyes of God are Blake's division of human history into seven major historical cycles. According to this view of history, each major cycle constitutes part of the process by which truth forces error to consolidate itself into Antichrist; thus, history advances toward an increasingly clear-cut

²⁷ Frye, p. 384.

²⁸ Damon, p. 90.

alternative between life and death.²⁹ That is, as history progresses, man matures spiritually, moving toward an adult state in which he can consciously choose between clearly identified alternatives. Error cannot always remain unidentified, forever free to produce the ignorant armies that clash by night. During man's apparently endless repetitions of hatred, war, materialism, and repression, God revealed himself in Christ, and Christ showed the way out of a history in which life lives upon death. Years after Blake wrote the darkly beautiful Book of Ahania, he wrote in the final plate of Jerusalem a bright and triumphant affirmation of renewed faith that history is leading toward apocalypse and toward that eternal world described in Ahania's lament.

²⁹ Frye, p. 260.

Chapter IV

Blake's Images of Wonder in The Book of Los and The Book of Ahania

The Book of Los and The Book of Ahania, each dated 1795 on its title page, did not receive the special attention in printing and illumination that Blake had lavished on many of his former works, nor were they listed for sale.¹ Consequently, some critics have concluded that Blake was dissatisfied with or disinterested in them. But dissatisfaction could hardly have been the case since Blake retained in his growing mythology material from Los and Ahania as well as from other minor prophecies. It also seems unlikely that Blake was disinterested in these works; it is difficult to imagine Blake half-hearted about anything he had produced. Furthermore, as Morton Paley notes, "Blake did not even temporarily abandon the mythology he had created."² Other explanations are possible for Blake's apparent neglect of these poems. An obvious one is that

¹ William Blake, William Blake's Writings, ed. G. E. Bentley, Jr. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1978), I, 718-20.

² Morton Paley, Energy and the Imagination: A Study of the Development of Blake's Thought (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 89.

purely practical matters may have consumed too much of his time since he was forced to earn a living in the very uncertain social, economic, and political conditions of turn-of-the-century England. Also, by 1795 Blake had entered a spiritual struggle that was to last for several years; the reasons for this struggle were possibly also the reasons Los and Ahania received less attention than he had given to his former works. He began work on the long and tortuously revised Vala some time between 1795 and 1797, but this poem remained in manuscript even after years of labor. If we say that Blake was dissatisfied with or disinterested in Los and Ahania, we would have to say the same of Vala. But each of these works satisfied him at least enough to sustain his obvious determination to write a masterpiece that would set forth his total vision in a definitive artistic statement.

The revisions in Blake's emerging mythology indicate his laborious efforts to clarify and to integrate into one system all the impressions of his far-reaching mind during that tumultuous period when the western world was re-defining its civilization. At the same time that he was trying to clarify concepts he was also facing difficult artistic decisions about the scope and form he would give to his myth.³

³ Alicia Ostriker, Vision and Verse in William Blake (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), pp. 145-70.

Los and Ahania were created in the midst of this mental ferment, and therefore, they may be considered transitional works in Blake's canon.

Taken together, these two works encompass a nearly complete vision of life. Los begins with a backward glance at eternity and Ahania ends with the same focus; the two poems narrate the creation/fall and outline the archetypal pattern of man's history. Missing from these poems are the stories that link the eternal world and the fallen world, stories that would explain both why man fell and how he is to be regenerated. That portion of the myth was developed in The Book of Urizen and in the major prophecies. But Los and Ahania possess the virtue of brevity; as highly condensed capsule accounts of his larger myth, they are devoid of the involution that swells the major prophecies to such awesome proportions. As a result, Los and Ahania provide an effective introduction to the major works.

Although Blake revised the content of his myth and experimented with its form, he remained fairly consistent in all his work in his uses of imagery. He possessed throughout his career "an original and individual conception of the nature and functions of imagery."⁴ Although

⁴ Mark Schorer, William Blake: The Politics of Vision (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1946), p. 414.

supremely intellectual--a Mental Prince as he called himself--Blake disliked and distrusted anything without definite form, including ideas. His own ideas came to him with form as visual images, so that thought to him meant "intellectual vision."⁵ He seems to have acquired very early in his life a rich store of visual images which he developed into symbols; they served him as a kind of mental shorthand and facilitated his astonishing intellectual productivity. His pictures, whether visual or verbal, present his ideas in the form in which he conceived them.

Blake's consistent uses of a fixed set of visual images and symbols provide his readers with their most direct line to his thinking. For instance, the symbolic tree in "The Human Abstract" helps in understanding all of the other trees in Blake's poetry, and the "direful monster" of his very early "To Winter" from Poetical Sketches is clearly recognizable in his later works as Urizen. Complicated abstractions in Blake's prophecies present themselves to the reader in the concrete visual images of circles, gyres, fire, clouds, rocks, and forests. His poetry and pictures, often described as complementary, are actually restatements of the same ideas, "sister arts

⁵ Schorer, p. 11.

joined at birth."⁶ The consistency and concreteness of Blake's imagery removes his difficult concepts as far as possible from the realm of mystery that he abhorred. They make tangible the ideas which are so abstract that they have been compared to imaginary numbers.⁷ I am not suggesting that the consistency of Blake's imagery simplifies his work, nor am I suggesting that Blake was allegorizing, for such suggestions would imply a forced linking of object with idea. In Blake's art, the ideas are embedded in the images; the two are inseparable. Thus, Blake's images are units in a symbolic language, and they provide an immediate access to his ideas. It is this immediate accessibility through his visual images that Blake probably had in mind when he wrote to Dr. Trusler that children easily understood his pictures.

As I have tried to show in this paper, Blake never exploits the purely sensory appeal of his images; they include little or no detailed description that would engender such appeal. Blake would probably equate highly descriptive and sensuous imagery with painting that copies nature, and to copy "so neat as to make it a deception" was not art to him. Regardless of sense derivation, his

⁶ Schorer, p. 11.

⁷ Ostriker, p. 201.

imagery in Los and Ahania as well as in his other prophecies addresses itself directly to the intellect with the purpose of raising the reader far above sense experience: "If the Spectator could Enter into these Images in his Imagination, . . . if he could Enter into Noah's Rainbow or into his bosom, or could make a companion of one of these Images of wonder, which always intreats him to leave mortal things . . . , then would he arise from his Grave, then would he meet the Lord in the Air."⁸

⁸ William Blake, The Complete Writings of William Blake with All the Variant Readings, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (New York: Random House Inc., 1957). A Vision of the Last Judgment, p. 611.

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