

Introduction

For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against the powers, against the rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.

Ephesians 6: 12

Blake worked on *The Four Zoas* for more than ten years: most of the poem was written between 1797 and 1803, but he continued to revise it until at least 1807. Although the poem was left unfinished, arguably it represents the culmination of Blake's early poetry, while at the same time anticipating the radical narrative strategies of the later poems, *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. In recent Blake criticism it has become the most important locus of debate over the nature of Blake's verbal and visual art. Yet when readers peruse this poem, many feel frustrated and disoriented.

The poem opens with Tharmas in darkness. He has been precipitated from a 'prelapsarian' heaven, but the fallen world has not yet been elaborated. In this liminal state, he experiences an extreme reduction of the self, a suspension of the motions of his soul: 'I am', he complains, 'like an atom | A Nothing left in darkness' (4: 43-4). This moment of blockage and reduction at the threshold between two disparate states closely resembles the inaugurating moment of the sublime. Indeed, every item on Burke's list of qualities that arouse a sense of the sublime—'terror', 'obscurity', 'power', 'privation', and so on—can be found here. Tharmas's plight resembles the reader's predicament.

Who is 'Tharmas Parent power'? Why is he 'darkning in the West'? (4: 6). Where is this void between darkness and light? The manuscript heightens this sense of disorientation. Tharmas's lamentation, for example, is written over an erasure. Readers can still catch sight of a few words or phrases belonging to this 'first' level of

the poem: 'the light of day', 'Till', 'slavery' (E819). The lines that replaced this 'first' layer were themselves partly erased and new lines inserted to produce a third. This multiplication of layers produces a tension between the 'final' state of this page, different stages of revision, and an unreachable 'first' version. Even the prologue offers the reader only equivocal assistance. The narrator's direction that his muse sing of Los's 'fall into the Generation of Decay & Death & his Regeneration by the Resurrection from the dead' (4: 5) is complicated by the prior admission that 'no Individual' can know the 'Natures' of the 'Four Mighty Ones . . . in every Man' (3: 4, 8). As Los is the fourth Mighty One, the narrator is proposing a project that cannot reach completion.

Urthona, the prologue tells us, is Los's name in Eden. This name ('earth-owner') and his prelapsarian locale ('the Earth of Eden' (4: 2)) suggest that Urthona provides a ground for the life of Eden, while Los (loss) represents the loss of that ground.¹ In Blake's later poetry Los(s)—the fallen imagination/prophet—is the (non) ground of the entire visible universe. The story of Los's fall and resurrection would therefore be a history of the fallen world from genesis to the Last Judgement. Yet it is difficult to see how this could be accomplished, because the narrator is himself an effect of the story he wants to relate. This ambivalence becomes more pronounced as one proceeds further into the poem. Far from providing a frame within which history can be ordered, *The Four Zoas* sometimes seems little more than a container within which narratives and voices multiply. Recollections of the prelapsarian world, 'explanations' of the Fall, and descriptions of the fallen world proliferate. The physical appearance of the manuscript, hesitations at the most fundamental level of the poem's structure, and the interpolation of drawings originally intended to illustrate Young's *Night Thoughts* add to the impression of a poem unable to draw its warring fragments into a 'Perfect Unity' (3: 4). It is as if the poem is haunted by

¹ For an account of the roles played by Urthona/Los in Blake's *oeuvre* see Leonard W. Deen, *Conversing in Paradise: Poetic Genius and Identity-as-Community in Blake's Los* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1983); Peter Otto, *Constructive Vision and Visionary Deconstruction: Los, Eternity, and the Productions of Time in the Later Poetry of William Blake* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Morton D. Paley, *The Continuing City: William Blake's 'Jerusalem'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 234–77; Edward J. Rose, 'Los, Pilgrim of Eternity', in Stuart Curran and Joseph Anthony Wittreich Jr. (eds.), *Blake's Sublime Allegory: Essays on 'The Four Zoas', 'Milton', and 'Jerusalem'* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), 83–99.

voices, traces of other poems, and allusions to other projects and times, all of which it can embrace but not assimilate to a single point of view.²

Yet the frame within which these warring fragments raise their voices is not overwhelmed. As Frye remarks, 'The plan of *The Four Zoas* is not difficult to follow'.³ As early as 1978, Wilkie and Johnson claimed to find in *The Four Zoas* a coherent narrative.⁴ De Luca describes the last seven Nights of the poem as 'a conceptually and narratively coherent tale of great power'.⁵ Ault refers to the 'single plot thread' of Nights II–VI.⁶ To note only the most obvious points: the poem *is* ordered (with two major hesitations) as a dream of nine Nights. Its narrative progresses from Fall to Apocalypse. And in both early and late versions of the title-page, the entire poem is placed in a relation of identity with one of Blake's giant forms. The poem was first called *Vala*, suggesting that the poem is congruent with this emanation of Luvah (the Zoa of sexual love). Later emendations align it with 'The Death and Judgement of Albion the Ancient Man'.

Bentley suggests the degree of tension between the poem's frame and its manifold voices when he reports that the 'tatters' left after Blake's haphazard revisions 'are gorgeous, but they will not bear the strain of the giant frame'.⁷ An analogous tension conditions Frye's judgement that '*The Four Zoas* remains the greatest abortive masterpiece in English literature'.⁸

The ruin of a giant form is the subject of Milton's 'portrait of Satan' in *Paradise Lost*, lines judged by Burke to be more sublime than any others:

He above the rest
In shape and gesture proudly eminent
Stood like a tower; his form had yet not lost

² Donald Ault, *Narrative Unbound: Re-Visioning William Blake's 'The Four Zoas'* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1987), p. xviii, summarizes the conventional view: '*The Four Zoas* is the most uncanonical, unmanageable, and recalcitrant text Blake ever wrote'.

³ Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (1947; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 278.

⁴ Brian Wilkie and Mary Lynn Johnson, *Blake's 'Four Zoas': The Design of a Dream* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978).

⁵ V. A. De Luca, *Words of Eternity: Blake and the Poetics of the Sublime* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 123.

⁶ Ault, *Narrative Unbound*, 241.

⁷ G. E. Bentley Jr. (ed.), '*Vala*' or '*The Four Zoas*': *A Facsimile of the Manuscript, A Transcript of the Poem, and a Study of Its Growth and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 166.

⁸ Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 269.

All her original brightness, nor appeared
 Less than archangel ruin'd, and th' excess
 Of glory obscured: as when the sun new ris'n
 Looks through the horizontal misty air
 Shorn of his beams; or from behind the moon
 In dim eclipse disastrous twilight sheds
 On half the nations; and with fear of change
 Perplexes monarchs.⁹

Although Milton's 'crowd of great and confused images' (a tower, an archangel, the sun rising through mists or in an eclipse, the ruin of monarchs) cannot be resolved into a unified whole, we gain an inkling of the ruined Satan's still gigantic form and colossal power. Similarly, one can argue that the manifold voices and narratives of *The Four Zoas* evoke the vast ruin (human history) that is the fallen body of Albion (humanity).¹⁰

Like the fallen world it sets out to analyse, *The Four Zoas* closely resembles the ruined world described by catastrophists such as Thomas Burnet: it presents 'the image or picture of a great Ruine, and [has] the true aspect of a World lying in its rubbish'.¹¹ Burnet locates in the distant past the catastrophe that ruined the earth. For Blake, the catastrophe that produced the fallen world continues to unfold in the present. This brings us once again, now in relation to the poem as a whole, to the blockage characteristic of the first stage of the sublime. It raises questions such as: 'how should we respond to sublime ruin, whether of the poem or of human history?'

A sublime allegory

Until recently, the sublime ruin of *The Four Zoas* was thought to be the product of Blake's haphazard revisions of an earlier poem or of his inability to find a satisfactory form for his subject-matter.

⁹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 1, lines 589–99, *The Works of John Milton*, ed. Frank Allen Patterson, 18 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), ii. 1, p. 29. Quoted in Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 57.

¹⁰ The poem is often described as a 'Ruin'. See, for example, Stephen Cox, *Love and Logic: The Evolution of Blake's Thought* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 167–81; De Luca, *Words of Eternity*, 116–17.

¹¹ Thomas Burnet, *The Sacred Theory of the Earth*, introd. Basil Wiley (1691; rpt. London: Centaur Press, 1965), 91. See also Gordon L. Davies, *The Earth in Decay: A History of British Geomorphology 1578–1878* (London: Macdonald Technical and Scientific, 1968).

According to Frye, Blake was not able to achieve 'a definitive vision'.¹² Bentley wrote that 'It is possible but unlikely that, at the time of his first draft, *Vala* was a great poem, but the present manuscript is a tantalizing and tragic failure'.¹³ Erdman was even less complimentary: the result of Blake's labours 'is as mad as the effort to play croquet in Wonderland with living mallets and balls'.¹⁴

Influenced by the postmodern-romantic valorization of disorder as incitement to creation, more recent accounts of the poem celebrate the features that for earlier critics were signs of failure. The Santa Cruz Blake Study Group are fascinated by the manuscript's 'surface chaos' and they lament the loss of these features in the edited poem.¹⁵ For De Luca, the 'more palpably the revisions interrupt or intrude, the more they endorse the possibility of fresh vision'.¹⁶ Ault calls the poem 'an inert nest of paradoxes, mistakes, and non sequiturs';¹⁷ but this 'nest', if it does not drive readers away, rouses their faculties to act.

The differences between these two 'schools' are so obvious that it is surprising to find how much they have in common. Both sides agree on the poem's disorder: for Frye, Bentley, and Erdman disorder suggests an authorial crisis or failing. For Ault, the Santa Cruz Blake Study Group, and (to some extent) De Luca, to be disedified by this disorder implies a failing on the part of the reader. There is agreement that the poem's disorder is the result of revisions that turned a reasonably well-formed poem into the unruly work we encounter today. For Frye, Bentley, and Erdman revision was haphazard or ill conceived; for De Luca, Ault, and the Santa Cruz Blake Study Group, the revisions are designed to make docile readers active. Finally, both sides put forward the world-forming imagination as the antidote to chaos. The former turns to the author and wonders

¹² Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 309.

¹³ Bentley, 'Vala', 165.

¹⁴ David V. Erdman, *Blake, Prophet Against Empire: A Poet's Interpretation of the History of his own Times* (1954; rev. edn. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 294. These judgements of the 'final state' of the poem are commonplace. See, for example, Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 269; H. M. Margoliouth, *William Blake's 'Vala': Blake's Numbered Text* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), p. xxvi; David V. Erdman, 'The Binding (et cetera) of *Vala*', *The Library: A Quarterly Journal of Bibliography*, 19 (1964), 112–29; Anne Mellor, *Blake's Human Form Divine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 213; John B. Pierce, *Flexible Design: Revisionary Poetics in Blake's 'Vala' or 'The Four Zoas'* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), p. xxvi.

¹⁵ Nelson Hilton (ed.), 'What Type of Blake?', *Essential Articles for the Study of William Blake, 1970–1984* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon-Shoe String, 1986), 301–33; 328.

¹⁶ De Luca, *Words of Eternity*, 117, 115.

¹⁷ Ault, *Narrative Unbound*, 10.

why his imagination was not equal to the task. The latter turns to the reader's imagination to complete what, according to earlier critics, Blake was unable to achieve. For both schools, chaos marks the absence of, and can only be healed by, a return to the imagination.

This romantic response to disorder stands in stark contrast to both the religious and natural sublimes, which trope sublime chaos as the indirect presentation of a transcendent rather than immanent power. In the passage quoted above, for example, Satan is described after his defeat by God. His sublime ruin is, therefore, a sign of the divine power that, exerted on our behalf, lifts us beyond Satan's reach. Sublime landscape reassures the heroine of Radcliffe's *Italian* that the overwhelming human and material forces that oppress her are an indirect presentation of the much greater power of God, who elevates her above them:

gazing upon the stupendous imagery around her, looking, as it were, beyond the awful veil which obscures the features of the Deity, and conceals Him from the eyes of his creatures, dwelling as with a present God in the midst of his sublime works; with a mind thus elevated, how insignificant would appear to her the transactions, and the sufferings of this world!¹⁸

For the proponents of the natural and religious sublimes, chaos marks the absence of, and can be healed only by a return to, the transcendent.

Transcendent powers and immanent faculties are often thought to bear the same relation to each other as poison to a cure. The former is aligned with death and hierarchical social systems; the latter with life and the individual. Chaos marks the disputed land between these realms: reason and imagination/desire struggle against each other (the priest/scientist against the poet/revolutionary) for the right to shape its fragments into a whole. Although this schema illuminates aspects of Blake's early poetry, it proves less helpful with the Lambeth prophecies, produced in the period immediately preceding *The Four Zoas*.

In *America*, the first of the Lambeth prophecies, Orc (energy or desire) arises to overturn the order imposed by priests and kings. At the end of *Europe*, Los (the imagination) emerges to help destroy the *ancien régime*. Although the portraits of these figures are not unequivocal, it is possible to see them as elements of the psyche not corrupted or co-opted by Urizen, that can serve as a foundation for

¹⁸ Anne Radcliffe, *The Italian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 90–1.

the new world. *The Song of Los* problematizes this optimistic scenario.

The *Song* is divided into two parts. The plot of the first, 'Africa', takes readers from the beginning of time to the beginning of the American Revolution: its last line repeats the first line of *America*. 'Asia', the second half of *The Song of Los*, takes us from the close of *Europe* to the end of time: it begins with the response of the kings of Asia to the 'howl' that rises 'up from Europe', and concludes with apocalypse. As Erdman notes, the three poems together describe a circle which takes us from Africa in the south to America in the west, to Europe in the north and then to Asia in the east. The entire extent of fallen history, and the four quarters of the globe, are contained by *The Song of Los*. This brings Los to the centre of Blake's *œuvre*, but it also implies that the poet/prophet is deeply involved in the production of the fallen world. Indeed, Blake writes that Urizen gave his 'Laws to the Nations | By the hands of the children of Los' (3: 8–9), who bound 'the sons of Har . . . to the Earth: closing and restraining: | Till a Philosophy of Five Senses was complete' (4: 13–17). Even if Orc were able to destroy Los/Urizen's world, what would prevent Los from rebuilding it? Orc may be no more than an agent of cyclical renewal (as the Preludiums to *Europe* and *America* imply).

In *The Book of Urizen*, *The Book of Ahania*, and *The Book of Los*, Los and Orc are still more closely entwined with Urizen's world. Los shapes Urizen's body and the fallen world; and when Orc is born, he binds him 'With the Chain of Jealousy' (20: 24). Orc's imprisonment wakes Urizen from sleep, thus initiating Reason's attempt to order life by imposing laws that further repress desire.¹⁹ In *The Book of Ahania*, Orc is displaced by Fuzon, who struggles against Urizen in order to take his place. And in *The Book of Los*, the work of the fallen imagination produces only 'a Human Illusion' (5: 56). At this point in Blake's *œuvre*, 'fallen' humanity is imprisoned not only by transcendental powers and their temporal representatives (reason, kings, priests), but by reason and the imagination as well. In the world described by these poems, a too hasty appeal to a redemptive faculty or power is likely to produce the disease it hopes to cure.

In *The Four Zoas* any simple opposition between transcendent powers (or their representatives) and redemptive faculties leads to

¹⁹ See Peter Otto, 'Time, Eternity and the Fall in *The Book of Urizen*', *Philological Quarterly*, 69 (1990), 359–76.

readings that underplay Los's involvement in Urizen's realm and obscure the most important focus of the poem: the fate of the body in a culture of transcendence.²⁰ If the fallen world can be redeemed by a simple turn to the imagination, there is no need to analyse its causes, mechanisms, or structures. Indeed, one could argue that the violence of the fallen world is redemptive, the product of a fortunate fall, which prompts the reader to return to the fuller life of the imagination.

It is my contention that rather than urging sublime transcendence (whether through the invocation of a transcendent or immanent power), *The Four Zoas* hopes to thwart it. The poem aims to delay the movement of the sublime from blockage to transport and elevation, long enough for the reader to see the warring visual and verbal elements of the fallen world as the fragmented and dismembered *body* of humanity (Albion).²¹ In Blake's words, the poem is a 'Sublime Allegory' (E730).²² Unlike more conventional forms of sublimity, it reads the sublime 'surface' of the poem as an indirect presentation of the body of suffering humanity rather than of a divine power or redemptive faculty. Rather than recoiling from the chaos of the fallen world, it treats chaos as a human creation, a product of the sublime turn from the suffering body.

Seen in this light, *The Four Zoas* is a product of the *prophetic* rather than redemptive or innocent imagination. In Blake's *œuvre*, prophecy is not a matter of arbitrary prediction. Instead, the prophet attempts to delineate the 'underlying pattern to which historical events are likely to conform': 'If you go on So | the result is

²⁰ Christopher Z. Hobson writes in *The Chained Boy: Orc and the Idea of Revolution* (Lewisburg, Va.: Bucknell University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1999), 206–7, that in *The Four Zoas* 'the fragmentation of Orc and the dispersal of his energies record the lack of a clear *agency* for human transformation'. He adds, however, that some portion of the original Orc remains "in the depths", howling defiance'.

²¹ Kathryn Freeman's *Blake's Nostos: Fragmentation and Nondualism in 'The Four Zoas'*, SUNY Series in Western Esoteric Traditions (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), offers a useful critique of dualism and the role played by the divine in *The Four Zoas*. However, her reliance on mysticism (eastern and western) to provide a model for non-dualism and her privileging of consciousness over the body, produces an argument very different from the one advanced here. Where Freeman argues that the 'poem's teleology mirrors its central paradox that history moves toward nondual vision, a state outside of time' (19), I argue that the desire to attain this state conditions the violence of the fallen world.

²² De Luca, *Words of Eternity*, 31, argues that 'it is the *sublime* of "Sublime Allegory" that bears the heaviest stress in [Blake's] conception [of the sublime]'. In the argument that follows, I give equal weight to both terms.

So' (E617).²³ In *The Four Zoas*, Blake patiently analyses the pattern of relations that constitutes the chaotic, fallen body, so that it can be recognized and embraced as our own. Only then can the desire for transcendence and the struggle between the Zoas be replaced by the collective, embodied actions required for exodus.

The chapters that follow therefore focus on the poem as it now stands.²⁴ For ease of reference, I take the text of *The Four Zoas* printed in the newly revised edition of Erdman's *The Complete Poetry and Prose* (1988) as the best approximation to the 'final state' of the poem; and for the arrangement of the poem's illuminations, I follow the order set out in Magno and Erdman's '*The Four Zoas*' by *William Blake*. Some of the cruxes and perspectives obscured by these editions will be discussed at appropriate points in the pages that follow. My account of *The Four Zoas*, I should add, relies on repeated study of the poem's manuscript (housed in the British Library), supplemented by the two facsimiles of the poem—Bentley's '*Vala*' or '*The Four Zoas*' and Magno and Erdman's '*The Four Zoas*'.²⁵

²³ Andrew Lincoln, *Spiritual History: A Reading of William Blake's 'Vala' or 'The Four Zoas'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 11.

²⁴ For discussion of Blake's publishing plans for *The Four Zoas* and its 'final state' see Robert N. Essick, '*The Four Zoas*: Intention and Production', *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*, 18 (1986), 219; Paul Mann, 'The Final State of *The Four Zoas*', *Blake*, 18 (1986), 204–9; Paul Mann, 'Finishing Blake', *Blake*, 22 (1989), 139–42; Peter Otto, 'Final States, Finished Forms, and *The Four Zoas*', *Blake*, 20 (1987), 144–6; Peter Otto, 'Is there a Poem in this Manuscript?' *Blake*, 22 (1989), 142–4; Joseph Viscomi, *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 316–19.

²⁵ Bentley printed his facsimile from conventional photographic prints of the manuscript. This photographic technology was unable to reproduce many of the faint lines, partial erasures, and other details visible to the naked eye. When Magno and Erdman prepared their facsimile of the poem, they arranged for infra-red photographs to be taken. As a result, they were able to reproduce many, although not all, of the details lost to Bentley.

The most significant shortcomings of Magno and Erdman's facsimile arise from their decision to print, without enlargement, from 'the 8 × 10 inch prints . . . obtained for this work' (ME17). Most of the pages of Blake's manuscript are approximately 12¾ × 16½ inches. Where Bentley's facsimile reproduces these pages in full, the reproductions found in Magno and Erdman's facsimile are approximately one-quarter the size of the originals (the reproduced pages are roughly 6–6½ inches by 7½–8½ inches).

Magno and Erdman were advised that printing from the photographs, without enlargement, would 'retain their sharpness of detail' (ME17). Unfortunately, this same strategy makes it more likely that those details will be overlooked or seem insignificant. Moreover, diminishing the size of a visual field tends to resolve its elements into a unity (much like seeing an engraving close up and then at a distance). Consequently, it becomes more likely that viewers will overlook the elements constitutive of that unity, and the ways in which they might open other 'layers' of meaning. For example, on page 90[98] of the *manuscript*, the head of the Prester Serpent can be seen as a unified whole. Equally, it can be seen as an assemblage of

Of particular interest to this study are the proof engravings and drawings included in the poem, for it is here that Blake maps in remarkable and sometimes shocking detail the fate of the body in a culture of transcendence. It is perhaps a consequence of Blake criticism's romantic and now postmodern-romantic desire for an ideal textual body that they are marginal to, or excluded from, every book-length discussion of the poem.²⁶

More particularly, *Blake's Critique of Transcendence* argues, first, that *The Four Zoas* is structured as a coherent, albeit complex and multi-voiced narrative, which details the history and outlines the relations that constitute the body of the fallen Albion. Second, far from being opaque, the illuminations (drawings and proof engravings) are arranged in a multifaceted 'visual' narrative, that stretches across the entire length of the poem. Third, text and illumination sustain an intimate, mutually clarifying relation to each other. The latter offers a perspective, often from the point of view of the body, of events described in the former. When the poem's text and illuminations are embraced (seen as elements that constitute the body of the fallen Albion), many of the textual cruxes, thought by previous critics to be evidence that the poem is incoherent, incomplete, or a failure—the presence of two seventh Nights in a poem of nine Nights; Los's embrace of the Spectre in Night VII[b]; his reply to Rahab in Night VIII; passages which extend Jesus's role in the poem; and so on—are discovered to play an integral role in the unfolding, polyvocal narrative.

incongruous parts (there is a human *and* a serpentine head, a heart-shaped mask, and a nose that 'stands out' from the rest of the composition). In Magno and Erdman's facsimile, the reduced size of the Prester Serpent's head emphasizes the former and makes the latter much harder to see.

²⁶ Critics often consign discussion of the illuminations to a brief appendix. See, for example, Ault, *Narrative Unbound*, 469–72; John Beer, *Blake's Visionary Universe* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press; New York: Barnes and Noble, 1969), 343–52; Lincoln, *Spiritual History*, 291–2; George Anthony Rosso Jr., *Blake's Prophetic Workshop: A Study of 'The Four Zoas'* (Lewisburg, Va.: Bucknell University Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1993), 164–79. When they are discussed in the body of the text, it is usually only in passing: Freeman, *Blake's Nostos*, Pierce, *Flexible Design*, De Luca, *Words of Eternity*. The most important discussions of the poem's illuminations are: John E. Grant, 'Visions in Vala: A Consideration of Some Pictures in the Manuscript', in Curran and Wittreich (eds.), *Blake's Sublime Allegory*, 141–202; *Cettina Tramontano* Magno and David V. Erdman, 'Commentary on the Illuminations', *'The Four Zoas' by William Blake* (Lewisburg, Va.: Bucknell University Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1987), 25–102; Bentley, 'Vala'; Martin Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*, Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 274–94.

Erasure and revision

There are a number of stumbling-blocks routinely placed before attempts to read the poem as it now stands. The first can be summarized by Erdman's warning that 'The complexities of the ms . . . continue to defy analysis and all assertions about meaningful physical groupings or chronologically definable layers of composition or inscription . . . rest on partial and ambiguous evidence' (E818). Recent monographs by Lincoln and Pierce suggest that these complexities, although formidable, may have been overstated.

Lincoln's *Spiritual History* develops a 'staged' reading, which moves from the 'earliest' to the 'latest' layers of the poem. Where Bentley believed that Blake's revisions marred an earlier poem, Lincoln argues that it is only in the fourth phase of revisions that Blake introduces material that does not evolve naturally out of the poem's earliest concerns. In his *Flexible Design*, Pierce argues that the poem's 'meaning' 'exists in the stages of [its] development'. He finds in *The Four Zoas* a poetics of revision which sidesteps both the traditional charge of incoherence and poststructuralist aporia: 'incorporation of . . . conflicting variants . . . leads to a degree of suspension of critical judgement that opens out multiple vectors of meaning'.²⁷

As a result of these studies, it is now much more difficult to claim that Blake revised the poem in a haphazard manner, that the revisions were designed to open multiple conflicting layers of text, or that the later additions introduce a providential framework intrinsically at odds with earlier layers of the poem. My own work draws on the insights of both these critics, although it assumes that the final state of the poem cannot be reduced to the story of its production and, moreover, that the story of the poem's composition depends in part on what we imagine its final state to be. In a staged reading, the earliest text of the poem becomes the primary point of reference in relation to which early stages and late revisions are located. Yet in the manuscript, copperplate text, proof text, and early and late revisions (along with the poem's illuminations) form part of a single work where they interact with each other in ways which a staged reading disguises.

Most of Erdman's 'complexities' are, of course, not relevant for a study of the poem as it now stands. Others—such as the question of

²⁷ Pierce, *Flexible Design*, 145.

the poem's two seventh Nights or whether the poem should begin with the first or second Night—are a stumbling-block only for readings that attempt to 'complete' the poem by establishing a univocal narrative. In contrast, a reading of the poem as it now stands can explore the poem's ambiguities and branching narratives as antagonistic, complementary, or mutually illuminating 'vectors of meaning'.

A second set of obstacles are summarized by Pierce, who writes that 'the unfinished state of all but the drawings on the first few pages leaves the viewer lost in a field of conjecture with no firm basis for argument' and that 'the drawings do not readily lend themselves to the developmental discussion usually possible with a written text'.²⁸ As Grant explains:

the fact that a picture in *Vala* has been altered tells us nothing about when the alternation was done . . . Often it is possible to speak meaningfully about 'early' and 'late' alterations of the text, but no principle is in sight for comparable assertion about the pictures.²⁹

Of course, an unfinished work need not leave viewers 'lost in a field of conjecture'. Romantic aesthetics valorizes the fragment and the sketch because they are thought to offer a privileged glimpse of the artist at work, while leaving room for an active audience. More importantly, without denying that the drawings are 'unfinished', many of the features which seem to warrant this judgement are the result of Blake's radical artistic practice in *The Four Zoas*, which depicts space as composed of multiple, interacting elements. Pierce's second point is a stumbling-block only for developmental accounts of the drawings.

For the present study, more substantial obstacles emerge from the attempt, by an unknown hand, to erase elements of some of the designs. Once again, however, these difficulties should not be exaggerated. *The Four Zoas* is written and drawn on seventy large sheets. Four pages contain no drawings (34, 95[87], 98[90], and 105[113]) and two have only sketchy lines or curves (19[21] and 80). The designs on the remaining pages range from full page compositions to small sketches. Of these, forty-seven are proof engravings of designs originally intended to illustrate Young's *Night Thoughts*; two pages were formed by cutting a print of Blake's 'Edward and Elenor' in half; and eighty-five pages contain new drawings composed by Blake for *The Four Zoas*.

²⁸ Pierce, *Flexible Design*, pp. xv–xvi.

²⁹ Grant, 'Visions', 143.

The problem of erasure does not affect the proof engravings. The single exception is page 79, which was trimmed, excluding 'the grave and briars and flowers in the full engraving' (ME69).³⁰ This may also have removed a drawing at the bottom of the verso of this page (in the lower, left-hand corner, there are a few curved lines). The divided halves of 'Edward and Elenor' were not tampered with. On the remaining pages, one can distinguish between those which show no significant sign of erasure, pages where Blake experimented with his design (often varying the posture of one or more figures), and cases where elements of the design appear to have been censored.

The largest group is the first: fifty-five of the drawings show no evidence of substantial erasure. In a further sixteen drawings, Blake changed his mind about elements of the design. On page 82, for example, he changed the position of the woman's left leg, so that it was no longer immersed in the stream. On page 46, Blake sketched Tharmas's head several times. In this second category, Blake has clearly rejected an earlier version, the erasures are trivial, or the revisions suggest different perspectives on a single event or character.

The third category (pages 21[19], 24, 26, 28, 31-2, 35, 38-42, 76, 110[106]) can be distinguished by the material that has been erased and the vigour of the attempt to remove it. On page 35, for example, the 'censor' attempted to hide a crop of 'ripe' phalluses carried by the woman on the left, the activity of three kneeling women (they are using vegetable phalluses as dildos), and a figure to the right of the drawing who may be emptying his bowels. On other pages, scenes of copulation, fellatio and anal intercourse, and representations of male and female genitals, have been erased, often leaving heavy black smudges. The most obvious difficulty posed by these pages was removed by Erdman and Magno who, using infra-red photography, recovered most of the erased drawings. Their facsimile helpfully includes 'tracings' of difficult aspects of the drawings 'and sometimes partly conjectural redrawings of lines, to bring out particulars almost lost to the camera' (ME17).

There is no consensus on the censor's identity. It is possible that Blake erased some of the drawings himself, before passing the manuscript on to 'his younger artist friend and patron John Linnell' (ME13). Magno and Erdman suggest that we should attribute at

³⁰ Magno and Erdman note that the clipped design 'serves well the spirit of the text' (ME69).

least some of the 'erasures and scribblings . . . to the exigencies of the manuscript's survival in a Victorian house-hold' (14). Most of the erasures affect drawings that critique Swedenborg's 'sexual religion'. This raises a third possibility: perhaps Blake censored aspects of the manuscript to prepare it for a Swedenborgian audience. The identity of the censor and the rationale of his/her work are, however, beyond the purview of the argument that follows.

Visionary conversation

Rather than being primarily a psychological epic or marking a retreat to religious healing,³¹ *Blake's Critique of Transcendence* argues that *The Four Zoas* is deeply engaged with politics and history. As such, it draws on the insights and shares some of the preconceptions of critics such as DiSalvo, Rosso, and Lincoln, who identify important historical contexts for Blake's poem. Most helpful for my project are Rosso's location of *The Four Zoas* in relation to 'the long poem of eighteenth-century Anglican apologetics',³² and Lincoln's claim that the poem 'aligns itself with a Christian tradition that places all human experience within a providential framework; [yet] is also influenced by an Enlightenment tradition that seeks to liberate history from this framework'.³³

The former argues that Blake uses 'obscurity' to challenge 'readers to participate in [the] cultural battle [between prophetic and

³¹ See, for example, Paul A. Cantor, *Creature and Creator: Myth-Making and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Leopold Damrosch Jr., *Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); P. M. S. Dawson, 'Blake and Providence: The Theodicy of *The Four Zoas*', *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*, 20 (1987), 134-43; 142; E. D. Hirsch, *Innocence and Experience: An Introduction to Blake* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964); Morton Paley, *Energy and the Imagination: A Study of the Development of Blake's Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 164-5; Charles J. Sugnet, 'The Role of Christ in Blake's *The Four Zoas*', *Essays in Literature*, 3 (1976), 167-80; Paul Youngquist, *Madness and Blake's Myth* (University Park, Pa., and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 132-3. Even Lincoln, *Spiritual History*, 227, who is critical of these views, writes of revisions that begin 'to transform the poem from a cosmogonic myth into a theodicy'.

³² Rosso, *Prophetic Workshop*, 63. Rosso argues that Young's 'visionary humanism' is supported by his belief in a 'great chain of being' (56). Blake, he continues, rejects the second and extends the first by arguing that 'the (t)errors of creation come about through externalizing . . . human needs' (93). This view understates the extent of Blake's argument with Young. Young's 'visionary humanism' is forged in the tension between the 'thought' of death and the desire for transcendence. As such, his work is a characteristic product of the culture of transcendence that Blake critiques in *The Four Zoas*.

³³ Lincoln, *Spiritual History*, 1.

rational versions of the Creation] . . . so that a new, more human creation can emerge'.³⁴ For the latter, although *The Four Zoas* is visionary, always suggesting that the deep structures of history can be changed, it is also engaged in a work of demythologization: it uses materialist and empirical procedures to unmask the real structures of history hidden by myths propagated by the powerful.

Blake's Critique of Transcendence takes up insights such as these by exploring the poem's 'conversation' with the philosopher John Locke, the poet Edward Young, and the visionary Emmanuel Swedenborg. My choice of the first two of these writers should occasion little surprise. As one of the most important philosophers of the Enlightenment, Locke exerted a strong influence on the culture of eighteenth-century England. Although there is no extended study of the role he plays in *The Four Zoas*, his (negative) influence on Blake's *œuvre* is well documented. He was for Blake one of the demonic triumvirate of Bacon, Newton, and Locke, architects of Urizen's eighteenth-century kingdom.

Young is the author of *Night Thoughts*, one of the most popular poems of the eighteenth century. Between 1795 and 1797, Blake produced 537 watercolour drawings to Young's poem. A selection of these designs was 'to be engraved by Blake for a projected four-volume *de luxe* large paper edition of Young's poem'. The first volume was published in the summer of 1797, but 'no further volumes were ever issued'.³⁵ Towards the end of this period, Blake began work on *The Four Zoas*. This temporal proximity, along with the profound formal and thematic influence of *Night Thoughts* on *The Four Zoas*, explains in part why the watercolours that illustrate the former frequently seem to allude to events detailed in the latter.

Some of the *Night Thoughts* designs assume an even closer relation to *The Four Zoas*. From page 43 onwards, Blake wrote his poem on proof sheets of the engraved designs. On the recto, the text of *The Four Zoas* appears alongside the *Night Thoughts* designs, inscribed in the blank space intended for Young's text. On the verso, Blake drew

³⁴ Rosso, *Prophetic Workshop*, 63.

³⁵ David V. Erdman, John E. Grant, Edward J. Rose, and Michael J. Tolley (eds.), *William Blake's Designs for Edward Young's 'Night Thoughts': A Complete Edition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 3. For background to this publishing venture see G. E. Bentley Jr., 'Richard Edwards, Publisher of Church-and-King Pamphlets and of William Blake', *Studies in Bibliography: Papers of the Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia*, 41 (1988), 283–315; William Blissett (ed.), 'The Great Illustrated-Book Publishers of the 1790's and William Blake', *Editing Illustrated Books* (New York and London: Garland, 1980), 57–96.

new designs to accompany his poem. This creates the impression, as one pages through the poem, that *Night Thoughts* designs have been woven into its verbal and visual fabric.³⁶ At the same time, the designs are not entirely assimilated to their new location: while playing an important role in the poem, they continue to evoke their original context. This means that, although Young's poem often provides a crucial interpretative context for *The Four Zoas*, the reverse can also occur: *The Four Zoas* sometimes provides an interpretative frame for aspects of the *Night Thoughts* designs and, through them, the earlier poem.³⁷ This insistent intertextuality has implications for any reading of *The Four Zoas*, yet it is usually mentioned only in passing.

For many critics, the most surprising member of my triumvirate is probably the third. Swedenborg's influence on Blake's early work is well known.³⁸ Of the thirteen books extant that were annotated by Blake, three are by Swedenborg. Moreover, the Swedenborgian 'New Church' is the only religious group with which Blake was closely associated. William and Catherine Blake both signed their names in the Minute Book of the Swedenborgian General Conference of 13–17 April 1789, implying 'assent to the forty-two theological propositions which were unanimously approved by the

³⁶ Grant, 'Visions', 160–1, writes that Blake might have seen 'significant relationships among the *Night Thoughts* engravings and many of the *Vala* drawings that face them and also some of the drawings on the versos of the engravings or elsewhere in the manuscript'. See also: De Luca, *Words of Eternity*, 121–2; Freeman, *Blake's Nostos*, 29; Mary Hall, *Materialism and the Myths of Blake* (New York and London: Garland, 1988), 122–6; Lincoln, *Spiritual History*, 34–5, 94–6; Pierce, *Flexible Design*, 37; Rosso, *Prophetic Workshop*, 48–50, 56–8.

³⁷ There is no consensus on whether Blake's designs for *Night Thoughts* illustrate, extend, or are critical of Young. For this debate see: John E. Grant, 'A Re-View of Some Problems in Understanding Blake's *Night Thoughts*', *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*, 18 (1984–5), 155–81; John E. Grant, 'Jesus and the Powers That Be in Blake's Designs for Young's *Night Thoughts*', in David V. Erdman (ed.), *Blake and His Bibles* (West Cornwall, Conn.: Locust Hill Press, 1990), 71–115; John E. Grant, 'Envisioning the First *Night Thoughts*', in David V. Erdman and John E. Grant (eds.), *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 304–35; Thomas H. Helmstadter, 'Blake's *Night Thoughts*: Interpretations of Edward Young', in Robert N. Essick (ed.), *The Visionary Hand* (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, 1973), 381–418; Thomas H. Helmstadter, 'Blake and Religion: Iconographical Themes in the *Night Thoughts*', *Studies in Romanticism*, 10 (1971), 199–212; Christopher Heppner, *Reading Blake's Designs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Morton Paley, 'Blake's *Night Thoughts*: An Exploration of the Fallen World', in Alvin H. Rosenfeld (ed.), *William Blake: Essays for S. Foster Damon* (Providence, QI: Brown University Press, 1969). In the pages that follow I argue that Blake's use of proof engravings for *Night Thoughts* in *The Four Zoas* dramatically extends a critical dialogue with Young.

³⁸ Lincoln, *Spiritual History*, makes three brief references to Swedenborg. In *Flexible Design*, Pierce refers to him only once. He is not mentioned by Freeman in *Blake's Nostos* or by Rosso in *Prophetic Workshop*.

participants'.³⁹ It is often assumed, however, that Swedenborg's influence on Blake came to an end with the latter's scathing rejection of the former in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790).⁴⁰ Consequently, the influence of Swedenborg on the architecture and thematics of *The Four Zoas* understated. In particular, the relation between Swedenborg's spiritual/rational metaphysics and the sexually explicit illuminations in this poem is ignored. In contradistinction to these views, *Blake's Critique of Transcendence* argues that in the 1790s Swedenborg provided Blake with a rudimentary theory (and rhetoric) of sublimation, and a spiritual/rational theology that exemplified the forms taken in modernity by the desire for transcendence.

The reading of the poem unfolded on the following pages is, of course, unable completely to escape this desire for transcendence. By narrowing the poem's conversation to that between Swedenborg, Young, and Locke—ignoring, for the most part, its engagement with the Bible, the Christian tradition (in particular Milton), Blake's earlier and later works, various iconographical and mythological traditions,⁴¹ the relation between its 'layers', and so on—*Blake's Critique of Transcendence* produces its own version of an 'absolute body'. One could defend this reduction by arguing that it makes room for detailed discussion of the interaction between text and design.⁴² It is important to add, however, that reduction is (in one form or another) inevitable. One of the most obvious of the lessons 'taught' by *The Four Zoas* that our emotions, imaginations, and sense-making procedures are deeply implicated in the production of the fallen world.

³⁹ Morton D. Paley, ' "A New Heaven is Begun": Blake and Swedenborgianism', in Harvey F. Bellin and Darrell Ruhl (eds.), *Blake and Swedenborg: Opposition is True Friendship: An Anthology*, introd. George F. Dole (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1985), 16.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Joseph Viscomi, 'The Lessons of Swedenborg; or, The Origin of William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*', in Thomas Pfau and Robert F. Gleckner (eds.), *Lessons of Romanticism: A Critical Companion* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1998). Morton Paley writes that 'From 1793, when *The Marriage* was completed, to about 1800 there is little to indicate interest in Swedenborg on Blake's part'. Paley notes that from 'about the turn of the eighteenth century' Blake displays 'a renewed interest in Swedenborg', and that 'comments in Blake's *Descriptive Catalogue* reveal a strong renewal of interest in Swedenborg by 1809'. See Paley, ' "A New Heaven is Begun" ', 27.

⁴¹ As Lincoln notes, Blake suggests 'fundamental similarities between different myths and traditions (Orc as Prometheus, Dionysus, Isaac, Christ)' (Lincoln, *Spiritual History*, 285). This implies that the same primary patterns are repeated in a wide variety of historical periods and cultural contexts.

⁴² No previous study examines in any detail or consistency the relations between Blake's text and the visual designs in the manuscript.

This realization conditions the prophetic procedures of Blake's later poems. Without recourse to an innocent, redemptive faculty or power, Blake develops a prophetic art that attempts to pierce 'Apollyon with his own bow!' (*J12*: 14), to use the procedures of the fallen world to demonstrate the evils of that world. This prophetic endeavour turns, for example, the 'Wine-press . . . call'd War on Earth' into the 'Printing-Press of Los' (*M27*[29]: 8); it invokes our desire for sublime transcendence in order to reveal the suffering body that is its ground. Readers therefore inevitably take part in, even as they come to understand, the 'Deadly Dreams' of *The Four Zoas*.

In the argument that follows, the sublime provides the model for a wide variety of cultural practices designed to achieve transcendence. Although the structure of the sublime remains broadly the same through the eighteenth century—and, arguably, the nineteenth and twentieth—it functions in radically different ways. This is nowhere more evident than in the changing locus of the power that gives rise to the experience of sublimity: the orator in the rhetorical sublime; God in the religious sublime; Reason in the Kantian sublime; the self or the imagination in the romantic sublime; and language in the postmodern sublime. The proximate target of Blake's critique of sublimity in *The Four Zoas* is the religious sublime of *Night Thoughts*. In order to understand Blake's critique of sublime transcendence, we must briefly describe Young's religious sublime, placing it within the context of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century thought on the sublime.