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WILLIAM BLAKE'S *MILTON*: GIN A BODY MEET A BODY COMIN THROUGH THE SKY

Abstract: *The paper focuses on one of the crucial stages in the formation of the subject of the apocalyptic event in William Blake's mythopoeia. The central claim is that in his epic poem Milton, the poet performs a peculiar act of kenosis epitomized by Milton's coming down from heaven to enter mortal Blake's foot. This prepares the merger between Blake's "real" persona and Los – the imaginary figure of the visionary poet.*

Keywords: *Blake; Milton; mythopoeia; kenosis; subject*

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ПОЕМАТА НА УИЛЯМ БЛЕЙК „МИЛТЪН": АКО ТЯЛО СРЕЩНЕ ТЯЛО, КАТО ПАДА ОТ НЕБЕТО

Резюме: *Текстът разглежда един от ключовите етапи във формирането на субекта на апокалиптичното събитие в поетическото митотворчество на Уилям Блейк. Авторът твърди, че в това епическо произведение поетът извършва особен акт на кеносис, олицетворен от Милтъновото спускане от рая, за да влезе в крака на смъртния Блейк. Това подготвя сливането между „действителната" персона на Блейк и Лос – въображаемата фигура на поета визионер.*

Ключови думи: *Блейк; Милтън; мит; кеносис; субект*

John Milton's enormous aesthetic and ideological influence on the British Romantics is undeniable. It is no accident that S. T. Coleridge chose to devote one of his lecture courses to the poetry of Shakespeare and Milton. The very conjunction of the two names attests to Coleridge's high esteem for the author of *Paradise Lost.* In his Preface to the 1856 edition of the lectures, John Payne Collier, who was in the audience in 1811, reports that when asked to comment on a critic's assertion about Milton's tragedy *Samson*

Agonistes, an incensed Coleridge responded "with unusual vehemence": "… that he [the commentator] was no more competent to appreciate Shakespeare and Milton, than to form an idea of the grandeur and glory of the seventh heavens" (*Seven Lectures* XXVII). In the second lecture, Coleridge associates Milton's aesthetic "grandeur and glory" with his ability to ignore the poetic quality of the separate line ("In reading Milton … scarcely a line can be pointed out which, critically examined, could be called good"), since "he sought to produce glorious paragraphs and systems of harmony…" (19-20).

It is this exceptional gift for holistic vision, one could assume, that made Milton fit, in the eyes of eighteenth-century commentators, for the mission to write a national epic of the stature of Homer's *Iliad* or Virgil's *Aeneid*. Joseph Crawford reminds us that in his 1642 pamphlet *The Reason of Church Government*, Milton had declared that although "time servs [sic] not now," once he had sufficient leisure he intended to write a poem "for the honour and instruction of [his] country": a work "of highest hope and hardest attempting," in "that Epick form whereof the two poems of Homer, and those other two of *Virgil* and *Tasso* are a diffuse, and the book of Job a brief model." It was to be a patriotic epic about a "K[ing] or Knight before the [Norman] conquest," whom he would use as "the pattern of a Christian Heroe" (429)

Crawford goes on to suggest that for eighteenth-century litterateurs, *Paradise Lost* did not fulfil the promise of a national epic proper because its focus on the Bible alienated it from British history. Thus, Britain's literary scene in the eighteenth century found itself "in the strange situation of both having and not having a national epic" (429). Did William Blake seek to fill this gap when embarking in 1804 on the endeavor of writing a quasi-epic in which Milton **himself** was both the titular character and the one at the center of the mythical narrative?

The answer to this question could be affirmative, since *Milton: A Poem in Two Books* was part of the grand design of Blake's mythopoeia in which the name Albion refers both to the British Isles and to the figure of primordial man who epitomizes a prelapsarian unity of the four essential human faculties: reason, emotion, imagination, and instinct. A focus on the author of *Paradise Lost* would perfectly fit the design because his work was/is the luminous example of a contemporary **British** epic while at the same time meeting Blake's (or any epic poet's) requirement for a universally valid mythical dimension. To me, the negative response is more intriguing. What motivates it is that Blake emphatically and arrogantly dismisses the possibility of following in the footsteps of a predecessor: "I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans/ I will not Reason & Compare: my

business is to Create" (*Jerusalem* E 153).[1] In other words, Blake had bigger fish to fry. He could hardly have contented himself with the task of imitating and modifying Milton[2] in an attempt to write that missing national epic. As Joseph Crawford makes clear, others proved much better at this.[3]

So why did Blake write *Milton*? I want to suggest that biography and myth are interwoven in this tangle of motivations. In an attempt to partly disentangle it, let me first focus on one of Blake's most generous patrons – William Hayley. A poet and writer himself, this "learned man, fluent in French, Spanish, and Italian, Hebrew, Latin, and Greek, well-connected, and independent" (Bentley 203), was extremely benevolent to Blake on many occasions, most notable of which is perhaps his active defense of the poet when a ludicrous incident led to Blake's facing charges of high treason.[4] In 1800, Hayley, who "was a vigorous author with many projects in hand which required illustrations, … invited Blake to move to Felpham so that they could work side by side"(Bentley 209). Moving from London, Blake was at first enchanted by the pastoral atmosphere in Felpham, "a village on the south coast of West Sussex" (Damon 165). His felicitous co-habitation with Nature in the rural environment of Felpham did not last beyond the third year of the family's stay in the village. Part of the disenchantment was due to the sicknesses both Catherine (Blake's wife) and William were afflicted with. In his letter to Thomas Butts, his other patron, of Jan. 30th,

[1] All references to William Blake's work will follow this pattern. "E" refers to Erdman, David, the editor of the archive of Blake's *Complete Poetry and Prose*, available on https://erdman.blakearchive.org.

[2] It is difficult to overstate, of course, Blake's dependence on Milton's poetic and ideological legacy. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, for example, Blake builds his rebellious satanism on the claim that "… Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, … because he was a true Poet and of the Devils party without knowing it" (E 35). In an illuminating paper, tellingly titled, *Tyger as Miltonic Beast*, Paul Miner explores Blake's indebtedness to Milton for the imagery in one of his emblematic poems.

[3] At the end of his paper, Crawford refers to two eighteenth-century epic poems devoted to King Alfred: Joseph Cottle's *Alfred* (1800) and James Pye's *Alfred* (1801). He attributes these poems' popularity to "the fact that these writers made such heavy use of familiar ably made them that much more acceptable to readers who looked to be comforted and reassured. Blake's *Milton* and Wordsworth's *Prelude*, which were being written at the same time as these epics, may have been incomparably greater works of art; but they could hardly provide the same encouragement as a work like Pye's *Alfred*, with its comforting times of darkness the forces of Goodness, Christianity, and Englishness will prevail in the end" (442-3).

[4] For details on Blake's getting embroiled in a conflict with royal dragoon John Schofield in August 1803 and the trial that ensued, see Bentley's biography *The Stranger from Paradise* (251-7).

1803, Blake writes: "When I came down here I was more sanguine than I am at present but it was because I was ignorant of many things which have since occurred & chiefly the unhealthiness of the place" (E 723). This resentment was reinforced by his changed attitude toward his benefactor Hayley. By 1803, Blake had come to believe that Hayley was envious of his genius, and was trying to impose on him aesthetic values that were absolutely alien to him. This new spin to the relationship becomes clear in Blake's letter to his brother James of Jan. 30th, 1803: "… a determination which we have lately made namely To [sic!] leave This Place – because I am now certain of what I have long doubted Viz [that H] is jealous… The truth is As [sic!] a Poet he is frigtend at me & as a Painter his views & mine are opposite he thinks to turn me into a Portrait Painter …, but this he … nor all the devils in hell will never do" (E 725).

What does all of this have to do with Blake's motivation to write *Milton*? In a typical Blakean manner, (auto)biographical elements are interwoven in the fabric of the mythical/fictional quasi-epic that *Milton* is. To understand what glue keeps this edifice together, we need to look at a significant triangle formed by John Milton, Samuel Johnson, and William Hayley. One of Hayley's notable works is his *Life of Milton*, which, as Anthony Apesos has pointed out, "was more than a biography; it was a defense against the slurs[5] that fill Samuel Johnson's biography of Milton" (390)[6]. Although Milton, "a true Poet," was one of Blake's shaping influences, he did not completely align with Hayley on this issue because he "accept[ed] as true many of Johnson's statements about Milton" such as the claim concerning the cruel "treatment of his wife and daughters" (Apesos 391). More importantly, Apesos contends, "both Johnson and Hayley" overlooked "two of Milton's greatest errors. First, Blake could not reconcile the concept of an almighty and loving God, as he is portrayed in *Paradise Lost*, and the need for Jesus' death at the cross. Secondly, he could not agree with the concept of a blissfully uneventful Eden, where "Adam and Eve are

[5] Johnson's attacks concern both Milton's republican politics, his behavior as a husband and father, and his supposedly inept versification. For an online version of this biography, go to https://jacklynch.net/Texts/milton.html.

[6] In his book *Blake's Agitation*, Steven Goldsmith provides a pithy account of Hayley's dominant attitude to Milton's temperament and politics in *Life of Milton*. According to Goldsmith, Hayley's ideal of Milton rests on the image of a man who tended "sometimes to act incautiously" but who was also capable of suppressing his rebellious urges, as shown, Hayley believes, in *Paradise Regained* (160). Goldsmith sums up his summary of Hayley's book by drawing a fitting parallel: "… Hayley was constructing a figure who might answer a question not unlike the one Kan answered by proposing his theory of the revolutionary spectator: How can the passion for liberty be upheld and deferred simultaneously?" (161).

required to perform … some light gardening and restraint from consuming the fruit of one forbidden tree" (Apesos 392). Leo Damrosch reminds us of another objection Blake had to Milton's ethos: "Milton rebelled against the earthly tyrant Charles I, but in Blake's view, he tried in vain in *Paradise Lost* to justify the tyranny of a patriarchal God" (83).

How does Blake use these agonistically related biographies to create the composite subject of the rebellious poet in *Milton*? I believe that despite the title of the epic, the central character in it is Blake's persona whose substance lies in the (auto)-biographical. I agree with Anthony Apesos that one of the unique features of *Milton* is "[Blake's] presence as a character in its unfolding narrative" (379). What makes for the dramatic momentum of the narrative is a series of unions and conflicts, all of which culminate in overcoming identitarian limitations and transforming Blake's persona into the subject of a visionary apocalyptic event.

My reading of *Milton* is based on the assumption that Blake did not write the poem primarily to rectify what he perceived as the ideological and/or aesthetic errors of his great forebear. Nor did he write the poem to achieve some kind of reconciliation with Hayley after their quarrel. Blake does not seek and does not achieve anything like that in *Milton.* On the contrary, he represents his former friend Hayley (selfishly and pettily perhaps) as a version of Satan exhibiting mild hypocrisy.[7] Milton, in turn, undergoes phantasmic transformations that, to a great extent, meet Blake's expectations of a poet who overcomes his limitations and gives full rein to his rebellious imagination.

My claim, however, seeks to go beyond the idea of appropriation of Milton's figure through forceful rapprochement. I want to suggest that in this

[7] There seems to be a broad critical consensus that the narrative featuring Satan, Los, and Palambron in Plates 7 and 8 of *Milton* should be read as an allegory of Blake's relationship with Hayley. In the myth, Satan, after meeting with Palambron's (Los' son) refusal to concede to him his harrow (like Los' hammer, the harrow is an instrument for visionary work), approaches the father and "with most endearing love / … soft intreats Los to give to him Palamabrons station." After "repeated intreaties" Los gives him "the Harrow of the Almighty." Palambron suppresses his anger "lest Satan should accuse him of / Ingratitude, & Los believe the accusation thro Satans extreme/Mildness." Once under Satan's control, "the horses of the Harrow / Were maddend with tormenting fury." The moral of the story comes from Palambron's mouth: "You know Satans mildness and his self-imposition, / Seeming a brother, being a tyrant, even thinking himself a brother / While he is murdering the just" (E 100). The image that Blake constructs of Hayley is similar to that of the villain from the Argument of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.* Like Satan, the villain "walks in mild humility" and pushes the just man into the wild.

poem Blake may be pursuing a peculiar form of *kenosis*.[8] This emptying starts with a real-cum-imaginary body (Milton) falling through the sky to meet and fill another imaginary-cum-real body (Blake), which then empties itself to meet a completely imaginary body (Los).

Let me now focus on what I consider the pivotal moment in the transformation of Blake's persona: Milton entering Blake's left metatarsus in the form of a star. It is important to bear in mind that speaking of "moments" in the quotidian sense of the word when we refer to Blake's convoluted narrative in *Milton* is, at best, precarious. Julia Wright has noted that "in *Milton*, Blake plays relentlessly with concepts of time and space that are at odds with the notions that inform historiography…" (53). Wright reminds us that the poet is represented as a figure that has the power to construct time (53): "the Sons of Los build Moments & Minutes & Hours And Days & Months & Years & Ages & Periods" (*Milton* E 126). More importantly, every moment in the poet's time contains the whole history of the world: "Every Time less than a pulsation of the artery / Is equal in its period & value to Six Thousand Years" (E 127). The next three lines give us a glimpse of Blake's perception of the mechanics and the impact of poetic genius: "For in this Period the Poets Work is Done: and all the Great/ Events of Time start forth & are concievd in such a Period / Within a Moment: a Pulsation of the Artery" (E 127).

Upon closer scrutiny, two intriguing oppositions emerge in these lines. First, the "Pulsation of the Artery" translates the somewhat vague "Within a Moment" into the concrete language of physiology. It also adds a quality of spontaneity to the moment of poetic conception. What is more, in a typically Romantic vein, the poet's creation assumes organic significance – it becomes a living organ as crucial to life as a pulsating artery. At the same time, there is a tension between this organic spontaneity and the

[8] I'm taking my cue here from Harold Bloom's seminal book *The Anxiety of Influence*. For Bloom, *kenosis* is one of six strategies the later (lesser?) poet employs to cope with the influence of his great predecessor. Here is the full quote: "*Kenosis*, which is a breaking-device similar to the defense mechanisms our psyches employ against repetition compulsions; *kenosis* then is a movement towards discontinuity with the precursor. I take the word from St Paul, where it means the humbling or emptying-out of Jesus by himself, when he accepts reduction from divine to human status. The later poet, apparently emptying himself of his own afflatus, his imaginative godhood, seems to humble himself as though he were ceasing to be a poet, but this ebbing is so performed … that the precursor is emptied out also…" (14). Blake's act of *kenosis*, as I will show, is somewhat different from the one described by Bloom. First, Blake never pretends to have "ceased to be a poet"; his self-emptying, unlike Paul's and Christ's, does not involve humbling, I think. Secondly, Blake's agenda is not only literary/aesthetic; more importantly, he seeks to establish his voice as the subject of the truth of the apocalyptic event.

representation of the creative process as work that is done. As we normally associate "work" with an extended temporality, this reference may look confusing. If we remember, however, the predicate of "labor," which Blake consistently attaches to his *alter ego* Los, the confusion will be partly dispelled. The mortal poet works, builds and unbuilds, but his involvement with mundane praxis, paradoxically perhaps, does not strip his visionary constructs of his organic "energy [which] is the only life" (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell* E 34).

The other opposition has to do with the apparent tension between "the Poets Work" and "all the Great Events of Time." The former refers to an individual's efforts whereas the latter evokes phenomena that lie beyond the scope and the grasp of an individual's will. Two readings of this conundrum come to mind: a) momentary conception characterizes both "the Poets Work" and "all the Great Events of Time." In this case, the relationship is based on homology; b) "the Poets Work" **is** one of "all the Great Events of Time." In this case, the relationship is based on ontology. The second reading seems more compatible with the ethos of Blake's mythopoeia in which the poet has a mission to restore the dynamic harmony of faculties (reason, senses, emotion, and imagination), which characterizes the four-fold man.

The stage is now set for Milton's entering Blake's foot. The two bodies will meet "Within a Moment" which will exceed the limitations of the measurable duration that we associate with history – it will last "less than a pulsation of the artery" and will be "equal in its period & value to Six Thousand Years." So, the encounter between the two bodies will take place beyond the confines of history. Neither the event itself nor its consequences will lend themselves to dating and recording. It will all happen off the record, so to speak.

The prelude to the first iteration of the entering comes in a cinematically rich segment where we see Milton falling down into Ulro.[9] This is a *sui generis* fall because after passing the vortex of heaven (he is still in eternity), Milton reaches the vortex of the earth, which has not yet been "pass'd by the traveller thro' Eternity" (E 109). The first sight that meets his eye upon this passage is the body of a prostrate Albion, who lies "Deadly pale outstretchd and snowy cold, storm coverd; / A Giant form of perfect beauty outstretchd on the rock / In solemn death" (E 109 -110). Seeing the perfectly beautiful, symbolically dead Albion (humanity), Milton does not engage with this figure but keeps falling "into the Sea of Time &

[9] In Damon's succinct definition, Ulro "is this material world …. It is the Grave … the world of Death, not merely because all things die here, but because they are spectres"dead" to Eternity" (688).

Space" (E 110). At the end of the fall, after a miraculous counter-apotheosis transformation, he ends up in Blake's foot as a star. The first-person account deserves to be quoted in full:

> Then first I saw him in the Zenith as a falling star,
> Descending perpendicular, swift as the swallow or swift;
> And on my left foot falling on the tarsus, enterd there;
> But from my left foot a black cloud redounding spread over Europe. (E 110)

Blake's illustration in Plate 32[10] has captured the moment of shock and awe before the star/Milton hits its/his target, but I find the cinematic textual representation of the penetration more impressive and suggestive. If I were a movie director, I would first zoom in on Blake's eyes as he catches sight of the star at its zenith (no shock, just surprise at the miraculous transfiguration: "Lo, Milton has become a falling star!"; next, I would focus on the fast perpendicular descent of the star (no clear target at this stage – the star could hit any object on planet Earth); only then would I train the camera's lens on the moment captured in the illustration (I would try to show that the shock is just theatrical pretense because Blake's persona knew that he is the star's elect telos); the final shot would switch to the portentous "black cloud" spreading over Europe.[11]

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[10] See *The Complete Illuminated Books of William Blake*, 423. In his annotations to *The Illuminated Blake*, David Erdman considers the complementarity between Plate 32 and Plate 37, which virtually represents a mirror image with the star reaching towards the human figure's right foot. The inscription on top of the image reads "Robert" (Blake's younger brother). Erdman argues that "the moment reveals the separation and union of the contraries of wrath and pity" (216).

[11] In her reading of *Milton*, Laura Quinney affirms categorically that the black cloud represents the negativity of political and religious strife, and she believes that instead of being energized by Milton, Blake perceives himself as "complicit in Milton's failings" (134). The black cloud does appear as a symbol of war in Blake's mythopoeia. David Erdman reminds us of Urizen's regretting "his imperial mistakes," one of which is "his choice of war instead of peace" in *The Four Zoas*; instead of rising to the occasion and courageously guiding humanity "[he] hid [himself] in black clouds of his wrath" (*Prophet Against Empire* 266). Saree Makdisi, however, draws attention to an evocative passage from one of the Memorable Fancies in *The Marriage*: "When I came home; on the abyss of the five senses, where a flat sided steep frowns over the present world. I saw a mighty Devil folded in black clouds, hovering on the sides of the rock, with corroding fires he wrote the following sentence now percieved by the minds of men, & read by them on earth.
How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way,
Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five? (E 35)"

Although in this merger Blake seems to be the submissive and passive recipient of Milton's genius, I have three reasons to believe that he has donned the arrogant mask of his own genius. First, there is the presumptuousness associated with the bridging of the gap between the metaphorical and the literal in this event. A figment of the imagination enters the "real" foot of the "real" Blake standing in the "real" village called Felpham. This comes to show that this poet's "pulsation of the artery" can conceive phenomena in which the visionary and the mundane coalesce. Secondly, as I suggested in the cinematic breakdown above, Blake's foot turns out to be the one and only object on earth that this star is headed for. There is more to this than a mere chance. The preordained course of the star elevates Blake to the status of singularity. Thirdly, the impact of the merger is cosmic. It is from Blake's left foot that the ominous cloud covering a whole continent emerges. Blake's body (let us not forget that for Blake energy comes from the body)[12], is the point where universal change will start.

What precedes the next iteration of the moment of penetration is Milton's encounter with Urizen, who "oppos'd his path" (E 113) in the fallen world. Milton first resists the appeal of the sons and daughters of Rahab and Tirzah[13], whom these two epitomes of anti-visionary materiality send to entice the poet into skepticism of the apocalyptic event – "Where is the Lamb of God? where is the promise of his coming?" – and make him believe that Albion (humanity) is living blissfully in the world as it is, since "Within [Tirzah's] bosom [he] lies embalmd, never to awake" (E 113). Intransigent,

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Makdisi comments on the Devil's question as suggesting that the five senses impose limitations on "other more expansive ways of seeing and imagining our being [which] involve delight, pleasure, and joy" (*Reading William Blake* 74). Let me highlight a significant detail – the Devil who preaches this gospel of joy is "folded in black clouds." The black clouds symbolize here the antinomian power which opposes the white, angelic law of virtue. For Blake, Milton was one of the key conduits of this vigor, so it may well be that "the black cloud redounding" represents the release of visionary energy.

[12] From this perspective, it makes sense that the star enters Blake's foot rather than his brain, which is the locus of the body's opposite – reason. In a recent article, Joel Faflak has suggested that the foot as an entry point for Milton and Blake's right arm as a conduit for the muses who inspire the poet's song in the opening lines of the poem confirm the assumption that "Blake's imaginative economy opens bodily reality onto the "Abyss of the five senses," a locus where bodies form, re-form, and transform as feeling entities" ("Blake's *Milton* and the Nonlife of Affect" https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/702582).

[13] In Blake's mythical/allegorical system, Rahab represents Natural Religion (see Damon 565), which for Blake was one of the key rationalist antipodes to true vision. Tirzah, based on a biblical character, is "the creator of the physical body … and thus the mother of death" (Damon 673).

Milton is now ready to face Urizen[14] with all the magnanimity of a true, albeit divided, maker-cum-creator:

> So spoke they as in one voice! Silent Milton stood before
> The darkend Urizen; as the sculptor silent stands before
> His forming image; he walks round it patient labouring.
> Thus Milton stood forming bright Urizen, while his Mortal part
> Sat frozen in the rock of Horeb: and his Redeemed portion,
> Thus form'd the Clay of Urizen; but within that portion
> His real Human walkd above in power and majesty
> Tho darkend; and the Seven Angels of the Presence attended him. (E 114)

Milton responds to the voices of seduction with the silence of a maker who has important work to do. "Laboring" is a characteristic action that Blake usually attaches to the blacksmith-cum-poet Los. What also brings Milton closer to Los is the sculptor metaphor. In *Jerusalem*, we are introduced to "the bright Sculptures of Los' Halls" which have carved in stone "All that can happen to Man in his pilgrimage of seventy years" (E 161). One representation of the business of the visionary creator rests on the predicate of sculpting into form the record of humanity. As Milton forms the image of Urizen, however, his identity is split into three. His "Mortal part" carves the image of his subject in the static form of the Mosaic law.[15] The "Redeemed portion," i.e. the aspect of his identity that has received atonement for its sins, is endowed with the quality of a demiurgic creator – in a Jehovah-like manner, he "form[s] the Clay of Urizen." Above these two rises "his real Human" hypostasis; this, I believe, is a metonymy for the visionary self, which for Blake was synonymous with the divine imagination, which, in turn, is a predicate of Jesus. Milton's imagination is still "darken'd" (an attribute Blake often attaches to Urizen), and yet he "walk[s] in power and majesty." In other words, we are confronted here with a Milton suspended between his past Urizenic philosophy (which Blake perceived as one of his errors), his present of a Los-like "laboring" maker, and his future (after re-visioning his Urizenic stance) of a divine creator. It is in this unsettled condition that he will end up in Blake's foot. The foot-

[14] Urizen "symbolizes Reason. But he is much more than what we commonly understand by "reason": he is the limiter of Energy, the lawmaker, and the avenging conscience…His name has been translated as "Your Reason…; but Kathleen Raine and others prefer to derive it from the Greek **ὁρίζων** (to limit), which is the root of the English"horizon" (Damon 691).

[15] Horeb is the name of the mountain where, according to the Book of Deuteronomy 4:10, God passed the Ten Commandments onto Moses.

entering climax is anteceded, however, by some more peripeteia. What comes first is Blake's persona's bursting into the scene with a quasi-ascetic recognition of the limitations of his mortal body. The segment is rich in allusions, so a longer quote is in order:

> O how can I with my gross tongue that cleaveth to the dust,
> Tell of the Four-fold Man, in starry numbers fitly orderd
> Or how can I with my cold hand of clay! But thou O Lord
> Do with me as thou wilt! for I am nothing, and vanity.
> If thou chuse to elect a worm, it shall remove the mountains.
> For that portion namd the Elect: the Spectrous body of Milton:
> Redounding from my left foot into Los's Mundane space,
> Brooded over his Body in Horeb against the Resurrection
> Preparing it for the Great Consummation … (E 114)

Joel Faflak makes a good point when he claims that "to read *Milton* is to position interpretation as a transferential, interactional, and transactional field where the text is at once the process and product of a conflict of interpretations" ("Blake's *Milton* and the Disaster of Psychoanalysis" 105-6). One of the conflicts of interpretation in the excerpt above has to do with the difficulty of identifying the speaker's I. In a typical vein, Blake only loosely attributes direct speech to a particular character in the narrative, and this can easily confuse the first-time reader. One interpretation here would be that Milton, attended by "the Seven Angels of the Presence" (the line immediately precedes the monologue), is daunted by his high mission and is thus overcome by a fit of irresolution. The reading that I lean toward, however, would have it that this is one of the many abrupt appearances of Blake's persona. One clue is the reference to "the Spectrous body of Milton," "redounding from **my** [emphasis mine] left foot." My concern here is with Blake's persona. Blake adopts a voice that is radically different from the Bard's voice of epic authority ("Mark well my words! they are of your eternal salvation").[16] We hear an inconfident self-conscious prophet who bows in humility and surrenders to God Almighty: "But thou O Lord Do with me as thou wilt!" This prophet/poet is well aware of his mission – he is called upon to "Tell of the Four-fold Man" (Blake's ideal of humanity where the unity of the four faculties is restored) – but his recognition of his nothingness in comparison with God blocks his visionary potential. This is also a voice that exhibits rhetorical weakness as the allusions to the Bible are

[16] *Milton* opens with the epic voice of the Bard, which remains beyond the scope of this paper.

virtually direct borrowings. In Psalm 119: 25, the speaker's "soul cleaveth unto the dust," and in Isaiah 41:14-15, God addresses Jacob as a worm and assures him of His full support in overcoming obstacles above man's station: "Fear not thou worm Jacob, ye men of Israel … Behold, I will make thee a new sharp threshing instrument: thou shalt thresh the mountains, and beat them small, and shalt make the cliffs as chaff." In terms of both thematic content and rhetoric, Blake adopts what I will dub the quasi-Job persona, i.e. the persona of a failed rebel.

How could we account for this moment of submissiveness? How do we reconcile this persona with the one asserting in *The Marriage* that "all deities reside in the human breast"? A more careful reading of the second part of the speech will suggest, I believe, that this is a different form of *kenosis*, which resembles more closely Jesus'. Blake first empties himself of his arrogant genius in order to prepare the union with his paragon. If through the Bard, Blake had to deal with his admiration for Milton, in these lines he is on his way to appropriating Milton's re-(en)visioned identity. The appropriation features a subtle dialectic of rapprochement and detachment. Here is a periphrasis of what seems to be happening in this part of the narrative. Leaving Blake's left foot, Milton's "Spectrous body" leaps into the fallen material world that Los inhabits and hovers over him, thus preparing him for the moment of the Apocalypse ("the Great Consummation"). Milton has become one with Blake's body, but he detaches himself from it and goes on to haunt the body of Los (Blake's *alter ego)*. Before the second iteration of the personal entering, we are given a glimpse of the universal impact of Milton's descent: "Now Albions sleeping Humanity began to turn upon his Couch; / Feeling the electric flame[17] of Miltons awful precipitate descent." Blake appeals to Albion's awakened humanity to perceive the totality that was inaccessible to him: "Seest thou the little winged fly, smaller than a grain of sand? / It has a heart like thee; a brain open to heaven & hell" (E 114). Milton's falling "thru Albions heart" and "travelling outside of Humanity" enrages the Eternals (members of the Council of God, or the Divine Family)[18] who are most probably piqued by Milton's prospective ascent to their demesne. Witnessing the Eternals' wrath, Los is at first horrified, but his despair subsides when he "recollect[s] an old Prophecy in Eden recorded, / … That Milton of the Land of Albion

[17] In the article quoted above, Joel Faflak reads this image through the prism of affect theory. According to him, the "electric flame" is "the drive of feeling itself, of sheer affectivity." Faflak compares it to the "Energy" or "Eternal Delight|" from Plate 4 of *The Marriage* in that it challenges, "with the pathogen of its own affective life" …."the body of science as Urizenic form" ("Blake's *Milton* and the Disaster of Psychoanalysis" 107).
[18] "Then those in Great Eternity met in the Council of God" (*The Four Zoas* E 310).

should up ascend / Forwards from Ulro from the Vale of Felpham" (E 115). Los then descends to Udan-Adan at night and joins Satan, who sits "sleeping on his Couch in Udan-Adan[19]" (E 115) All of this content featuring a series of bewildering ascents and descents from and to no less bewildering locations matters because it immediately precedes the climactic moment of Milton's entering Blake's foot. The presentation of the miraculous penetration starts with what seems to be an illogical conjunction of contrast:

> But Milton entering my Foot; I saw in the nether
> Regions of the Imagination; also all men on Earth,
> And all in Heaven, saw in the nether regions of the Imagination
> In Ulro beneath Beulah, the vast breach of Miltons descent.
> But I knew not that it was Milton, for man cannot know
> What passes in his members till periods of Space & Time
> Reveal the secrets of Eternity: for more extensive
> Than any other earthly things, are Mans earthly lineaments. (E 115)

What is the contrast that "but" denotes in the first line above? The syntax of the line itself, with the semi-colon marking a sort of caesura, makes it incomprehensible at first read. One would think of "But Milton entering my Foot" as a syntactic fragment before connecting it to the clause after the semi-colon. Even after making sense of the syntax, the question of what the entering is contrasted with remains unanswered. Are we to read it as highlighting the fact that it is Blake's foot, rather than Los', or more intriguingly, Satan's, that Milton has entered? This reading would suggest that Blake is adding bricks to the tower of his persona as an exceptional poet/prophet. An alternative interpretation, which I tend to support, sends us down another rabbit hole. What if we assume that the contrast refers to the difference in space? The two spaces in this contrast/comparison would be the imaginary lake of Udan-Adan and "the nether Regions of Blake's Imagination."

Udan-Adan is a sophisticated construct. On the one hand, this lake's waters are made of the tears and sweat of those who have submitted to the Urizenic law, but on the other hand, it lies right next to the gates of Golgonooza – the pre-apocalyptic city of poetry and vision (see note above).

[19] Udan-Adan is a lake that lies on the verge of Golgonooza (Los' city of poetry and vision). In *The Four Zoas*, Blake describes it as a lake "formd from the tears & sighs & death sweat of the Victims / Of Urizens laws. to irrigate the roots of the tree of Mystery" (E 377).

Let us take a look at the spatial disposition. Los, the poet and builder of Golgonooza, has descended to the Dantesque lake of despair (Satan is sleeping on its shores), and he is most likely despondent at the sight of the lake because it reminds him that the success of his building project – his visionary city – is adjacent to and dependent on the quagmire of souls that have lost the divine spark in their breasts. This seems to be putting the pieces of the puzzle together: the contrast is, then, between Los' low spirits and Blake's persona's elation at the merger with Milton. A closer look at the spaces involved in this configuration makes matters a bit less straightforward.

While Los is sitting at the shores of Udan-Adan, which is a place born in the niches of Blake's imagination, Milton enters his foot; awareness of the physical penetration becomes available to Blake not through the senses, but "in the nether Regions of the Imagination." The recipient has good reason to be elated because this time round the merger occurs in a profoundly personal psychological space. Seeing Milton in "the nether Regions of the Imagination" is far more substantive than seeing an extraneous star that ends its fall in one of the body's "members." This has to be the ultimate fit, the ultimate moment of appropriation. This, however, does not seem to be the case. One may fail to notice the definite article before "Imagination": "**the** Imagination" as opposed to the alternative "**my** Imagination." Yet this detail draws the reader's attention when the next lines make it clear that the event is far from personal – "all men on Earth, and all in Heaven" also see Milton's descent in the depths of **the** imagination. **The** imagination turns out to be a faculty that the poet shares with the rest of humanity. What exactly do they see, actually? What does the "vast breach" of the descent denote? If it points to the end of the cosmic fall, the phrase could be read as a hyperbolic image of Milton's body breaking into Blake's foot. The vastness of the breach may suggest an impact of tremendous consequence. The visual experience, which is both personal and collective, is conceivable in the universal space of the imagination. Blake's foot is, as it were, at the center of a panopticon and every single human gaze has access to it. Thus, the foot becomes the most mythically significant limb since Achilles' heel.

The parallel with Achilles' heel is intriguing. A contrast comes to mind first: Achilles' heel is the only vulnerable spot in the epic hero's body whereas Blake's foot receives the visionary power of a poet who belongs to the devil's party. In the next lines, however, it becomes clear that the singularly elect foot is an ordinary mortal's "member" which is disconnected from the mind ("I knew not that it was Milton, for man cannot know / What passes in his members"). An indefinitely long period of time has to pass for the gap between eternity (whose essence is entrapped in the foot) and mortal

existence to be bridged. The gap is unbridgeable because man's Lineaments" are "more extensive / Than any other earthly things." In other words, what prevents man in general, and this exclusively endowed poet in particular, from overcoming their/his earthliness is not the earthly environment that they/he inhabit(s) but their/his intrinsic earthliness.

How are we to read this admission of limited potential? Has Blake donned again the Job-like mask? Is this recognition of weakness analogous to his lamenting the fact he cannot "tell of the Four-fold Man"? Not really. The next three lines change the picture radically:

> And all this Vegetable World appeard on my left Foot,
> As a bright sandal formd immortal of precious stones & gold:
> I stooped down & bound it on to walk forward thro' Eternity. (E 115)

A peculiarity that strikes one in this text is that Milton's immortality is not transmitted directly to Blake's body but to a piece of expensive accoutrement. The contrast with the first iteration of the entering is evident. It is useful to remember that the impact of the star hitting the foot produces a direct cosmic effect – a black cloud "redounds" all across Europe. This time around, the image that lingers in the reader's mind is "the bright sandal of precious stones & gold" that only expects to be bound and used. For a moment, the kitschy glitter of the sandal blinds us, as it were, to the fact that this piece of footwear appears in the vehicle of the simile. The tenor – "all this Vegetable World" – conveys the universal scope of the poet's mission that one would expect from a poet like Blake. The material world, with all its multifarious views and scenes, compressed into an all-encompassing, singular image on Blake's foot, is reminiscent of one of the most famous topoi in the literature of classical Antiquity – the description in Book XVIII of the *Iliad* of Achilles' shield made by the blacksmith of the gods Hephaestus. On second read, then, this global picture seems to constitute the essence in the game of appearances whereas the piece of footwear has a secondary descriptive value. Or does it? The third read yields some associations which make the sandal image essential.

Significant classical allusions come to mind again. In some ancient myths, the sandal was a locus of magic powers of movement and prophecy. In Homer's *Odyssey*, two deities – Athena and Hermes – put on their sandals and rush to the rescue of their protégé Odysseus. What is more, one of the attributes of the sandal on Blake's foot – immortal – is attached to the sandals on the gods' feet: In Book I, Athena "[binds] on her feet / The beautiful sandals, golden, immortal" (4), and in Book V, Hermes "[laces] on his feet the beautiful sandals, / Golden, immortal" (30). In both cases, the

sandals have the magic quality of accelerating flight, which is depicted in exactly the same language: they "carry [Athena and Hermes] over landscape and seascape / On a puff of wind" (30). Like these deities, Blake binds his sandal, and it magically propels him "thro' Eternity."

Another key classical myth revolves around the sandal of Jason – the heroic leader of the Argonauts – and this time it is the vehicle of a fatal prophecy. As the story goes, Pelias usurped the throne of his half-brother Aison (Jason's father and king of Iolkos), and Alkimede (Jason's mother) hid her young son in the mountains fearing that Pelias could kill him. Years later, the grownup Jason came back to Iolkos, and as his presence posed a threat to the usurper, Pelias sent him on an impossible and perilous mission – to reclaim the golden fleece – hoping that he would thus get rid of him. According to Apollonius of Rhodes, "had received an oracle from Apollo, bidding him beware of a man who should come with only one sandal; for by him should he be slain." In fulfillment of this ominous prospect, Jason lost one of his sandals in the mud as he was crossing the river Anauros (Apollonius XV). Upon his triumphant return from his quest for the Golden Fleece, the one-sandaled man ended Pelias' rule and put his father back onto the throne.[20] What makes this story particularly relevant to the Blake narrative is the single sandal on the foot of the protagonist. In her meticulously researched article "One Shoe Off and One Shoe On," Sue Blundell refers to this motif in ancient mythology and art as "monosandalism." Wary of speculation on the basis of scarce evidence, she still believes there is sufficient ground to posit a connection "between *monosandalism* and religious ritual" (221). She trains her eye on the wall paintings found in a "room in the Villa of the Mysteries" in Pompeii, which, she assumes, may well illustrate a scene of initiation" (223)[21]. The focus is on the image of Dionysos. According to Blundell's description, "on his left foot [*sic*] he wears an elaborate sandal, but the right foot is bare, and the sandal which once adorned it lies on its side…" (223). Blundell suggests that the sophisticatedly designed composition makes us think of Dionysos as "one of the initiates into his own cult … at this moment poised on a boundary" (223) – the boundary between the human and the divine.

Whether Blake had these classical allusions in mind is of course uncertain, but the ritualistic quality of the sandal (significantly, not the

[20] For a detailed account, see Sue Blundell's article "One Shoe Off and One Shoe On" in *Shoes, Sloppers, and Sandals: Feet and Footwear in Classical Antiquity*, pp. 217-18.

[21] For an interpretation of monosandalism as pointing to initiation, see also Charlotte Chrétien's article "Achilles' Discovery on Skyros: Status and Representation of the *Monosandalos* in Roman Art" in *Shoes, Sloppers, and Sandals: Feet and Footwear in Classical Antiquity*, pp. 247-58.

sandals) in the lines above stands out. In this peculiar rite of passage, Blake's persona is initiated into the status of a human being endowed with superhuman powers. Besides, the close resemblance in motifs and predicates is noteworthy. Athena and Hermes bind/lace their sandals, and defying time, fly off on their respective epic missions; Blake's persona binds his sandal and walks off across the boundaries of time. The focus on one sandal is significant, too. It is true that in the segment focused on Blake's mythical union with Los in Plate 22, Los "stoop[s] down and b[inds] [Blake's sandal**s** [*sic*]" (E 117). The plural here makes the question of its absence in the lines under discussion even more pertinent. One could not dismiss it as an unconscious omission of the plural inflection because the text emphatically highlights the one and only sandal on the left foot. What about the other foot? Is it bare or is Blake's persona wearing an ordinary, non-magical sandal on it? If the latter is the case, the lack of any reference to binding the sandal on the right foot reinforces the perception of the second sandal's mundanity. In short, the significant absence of the right foot and the footwear on it adds to the ritualistic quality of the sandal on the left foot. It is also useful to remember that the sandal carries a global *eidos*. Like Borges' *aleph*, this tiny space accommodates all possible spaces in the world at large.

If we assume that the appropriation of Milton as a single magical sandal constitutes a rite of passage, what is the boundary that *monosandalos* William is poised on? As I suggested, when he binds the world-as-a-sandal on his foot, he transcends the temporal limitations of his earthly existence. He seems to have extended the "extensive earthly lineaments" that determined his mortal essence and can now walk "thro' Eternity." At the same time, the global *eidos* of "all this Vegetable World" keeps him anchored to the mortal human condition. The boundary that the single sandal represents, then, is the one between the temporal and the eternal, the mundane and the magical, the human and the superhuman/semi-divine.

It seems that a new persona – the *monosandalos* – has emerged in the second iteration of the foot-entering event. By adopting the *monosandalos* persona, Blake appropriates a version of Milton's identity that helps him construct his own subject without identity. What makes this persona distinct from the other personas? First, while preserving the bard's capability of delivering universally valid messages, the *monosandalos* has sloughed off the external, authoritative, injunction-bearing epic voice. With Milton internalized psychologically both for the poet and his universal audience, i.e. in "the nether regions of the Imagination," Blake can address humanity from the perspective of an equal who shares with them the same psychological content deposited in the same region. At the same time, he has the distinction of physically appropriating Milton as a sandal on his left foot. In contrast to

Blake's persona, which emerges after the first iteration of the penetration, the *monosandalos* does envisage cosmically significant action, and yet he does not see himself as causing "a black cloud redounding … over Europe." Instead, he keeps his feet on firm ground and walks (as opposed to fly, like Athena and Hermes). In other words, the arrogance of the artist who can change the world by miraculously "cleansing the doors of perception" is gone. The *monosandalos* knows that changing the world will take the effort of walking (or limping?) "thro' Eternity." Finally, the *monosandalos* supersedes the doubtful Job-like persona that emerges occasionally. While still aware of his human limitations, Blake will confidently pursue his mission. The stage is set for Blake's union with Los as the imaginary *alter ego* seems to be poised on the same boundary between the worldly and the unworldly – the blacksmith-cum-poet does his work in this world, but he prophetically aspires towards building the city of Golgonooza, which will open for humanity the gates to Jerusalem.

The meeting takes place after Los becomes aware of Blake's "b[inding] [his] sandals on." The text is so rich in instances that lend themselves to interpretation that it is worth quoting in full:

> … Los heard indistinct in fear, what time I bound my sandals
> On; to walk forward thro' Eternity, Los descended to me:
> And Los behind me stood; a terrible flaming Sun: just close
> Behind my back; I turned round in terror, and behold.
> Los stood in that fierce glowing fire; & he also stoop'd down
> And bound my sandals on in Udan-Adan; trembling I stood
> Exceedingly with fear & terror, standing in the Vale
> Of Lambeth: but he kissed me and wishd me health.
> And I became One Man with him arising in my strength:
> Twas too late now to recede. Los had enterd into my soul:
> His terrors now posses'd me whole! I arose in fury & strength. (E 117-18)

The thematic focus that immediately pops off the page here is both characters' perception of their encounter as a sublime event. Los catches an echo of Blake's binding his sandals (one magical, one mundane, I assume) and reacts to this sound "in fear." The source of Los' fear resists facile interpretation. The disturbing question is why he feels fear rather than hope at discovering a soulmate and an equal equipped and ready to join him on the journey "thro' Eternity." Could it be that Blake is projecting his own fear onto his imaginary construct? On this reading, Los' fear produces an emotional bond between the imagining self and the imagined self. Blake himself (or his persona, rather) is even more terrified by the meeting. The

language conveys the intensity of the emotion. In a scene reminiscent of Althusser's police officer interpellating an unsuspecting individual in the street, Los "hails", as it were, Blake from behind. The interpellated Blake "turn[s] around in terror" and sees Los standing in the "fierce glowing fire" of a "terrible flaming Sun." A few lines further down, we see Blake in the grip of a strong emotion that he describes with the tautologically emphatic "fear & terror": "trembling I stood / Exceedingly with fear & terror, standing in the Vale/ Of Lambeth." Part of the terror probably stems from the miraculous repetition of a crucial symbolic action: "he also stoop'd down/ And bound my sandals on in Udan-Adan."[22]

There are two significant instances of ambiguity here. The first one is spatial. Los descends to Blake, who is standing in the "real" space of Lambeth (London) from the imaginary space of Udan-Adan. So far so good. The question that lingers is where the meeting occurs. If Blake is in Lambeth and Los is binding his sandals in Udan-Adan, where does Blake first see his imaginary counterpart? Where is the moment of interpellation located? Does Los descend to Lambeth, where he kisses Blake after the binding of the sandals? The binding of the sandals itself is ambiguous because the referent of the possessive pronoun "my" is unclear. Is Los binding Blake's sandals on Blake's feet in Udan-Adan while Blake is standing in Lambeth? Or is Los binding his own sandals which happen to be the same sandals as Blake's? This is mind-boggling, I think. I have already discussed the erroneous expectations that Blake will construct a coherent linear narrative, but it seems to me that in these lines the ambiguity serves a specific rhetorical function. By blurring the distinctions between different referents, Blake represents rhetorically the merger that he explicitly states at the end of this excerpt.

A kiss and a wish do the job. No need for persuasive rhetoric. This is a conversion that transcends language. A comforting physical touch and a comforting ritualistic phrase suffice to persuade the insecure initiate that it is "too late to recede." The step forward (to eternity) is also a step inward as becoming "One Man with [Los]" involves letting him into the soul. The difference with Milton's entering is evident – the soul now substitutes for the foot. Milton, miraculously transformed into a magical sandal, provides, so to speak, the physical means of transportation whereas Los becomes the

[22] An analogy between Blake's fear at the doorstep of eternity and Dante's fear at the doorstep of hell comes to mind. In Canto II of *Inferno*, Dante addresses his guide and mentor Virgil to voice his doubts about his worth: "But **I,** why come there? or who grants it? I am not Aeneas, I am not Paul; neither I nor others believe me worthy of that." (43). Unlike Virgil, who responds to this moment of insecurity with a lengthy persuasive speech, Los just kisses Blake and wishes him health. This marks the difference between the two pairs: Dante is Virgil's follower whereas Blake merges with Los.

spiritual vehicle. The merger with him leaves no residue – it "posse[sses] [Blake whole" and instills in him the strength &fury" of the visionary rebel.

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