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THE VALLEY OF VISION:
A STUDY OF LOS IN BLAKE'S PROPHECIES

by
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The Valley of Vision: a Study of Los

in Blake's Prophecies

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PREVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

Where man is not, nature is barren.
Proverbs of Hell

There are some poets who satisfy their readers, there are some who anger their readers, and there are a few who haunt their readers. Like some form of primitive magic, the images of a few poets are never totally laid to rest; their symbols always need reconsideration, and their language always strikes fire. Blake, for many, is this last kind of poet. Troubled readers never can quite get rid of him; the lines, the images, the symbols, and the ideas of his poetry come back to haunt them. And one has to ask himself why this is so. What is there about Blake that allows this kind of thing? What is there about Blake that keeps him continually in mind? What is there about his poetry that haunts the mind?

Unfortunately, words come all too easily, and one is likely to find himself glibly chattering about Blake's language structures or his theory of imagination while never "really" answering the questions. So perhaps it is still necessary that one asks, what does it mean to say "a poet's language haunts me" or "his power of imagination haunts me?" Are not these kinds of questions little more than worry questions--distress signals of a lack of understanding? I suspect that this is not the case; this kind of

searching rather suggests that one is asking questions which lead him to consider the conception and function of imagination in that poet's works. And this is exactly what I wish to examine in Blake's poetry. When one reads Blake, he's drawn down into the Valley of Vision to dwell among the gods and men of Blake's myth, and something happens to him. He is intrigued, he is transformed by the very myth he perceives. The primitive magic of myth haunts the reader; the structures of the imagination alter the reader's perceptions. Thus, when one speaks of a haunting poet, he is speaking of the effect of that poet's imagination and how the tools of images, patterns, and symbols are used to make the poetry haunting. So it can prove profitable (pun intended) to examine just how and why Blake's theory of imagination operates in the poetry. It can prove profitable to articulate how Blake's poetry is haunting. And finally it can prove profitable to explore how Blake's images, patterns, and symbols produce the kind of Vision that they do, for at the base of this kind of search are answers to how imagination works in and through Blake's poetry.

Harold Bloom, in Shelley's Mythmaking, suggests what can be taken as an answer to this problem, for Bloom is trying to answer the same sort of questions about Shelley. Using Martin Buber's concept of the I-Thou relationship, Bloom characterizes "The Mythopoeic Mode" as

"a mode of imaginative perception,"¹ which sees reality in terms of relations rather than experiences--in essence, a mode of perception which quickens objects of perception into vital beings of a "thou" nature--not an "it" nature. By becoming involved with the objects of his perception, the mythologizing man personalizes distant objects into more humanized things.² The mythopoeic poet is one who is more concerned with the act of perceiving than with the object of his perception; he is one who is seized by the Vision of himself and his relationship to the natural world. Or to put it in Blake's terminology, the poet must annihilate his Selfhood and use his Selfness to regenerate the fallen world. That is, the poet must shun the rationalistic isolation of his sensations and turn to the imaginative perception of the world of Vision. He must not accept the ration of the five senses, but rather he must use the nature of his own imagination to humanize the world.

1

H. Bloom, Shelley's Mythmaking (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1959), p. 2.

2

Although I do not intend to follow Buber's distinction closely, I use Bloom's account here for the purpose of illustration. For a fuller account of the concept of vitality in mythic structures, see Cassirer's Language and Myth (New York: Dover Publications, 1946)--particularly pages 32-35. For I will be using the word "mythic" in the same sense of Cassirer--essentially as a generic term which relates to a process of epistemology analogous to Buber's concept of Thou-ness or to Coleridge's concept of the secondary imagination. I will use "mythic" to refer to those language structures which tend to quicken perception and which emphasize the necessity of the perceiver's relating himself to what he is perceiving.

Perhaps it would help here to recall what Coleridge says about the secondary imagination, for he too stresses the vitality of imaginative perception. He argues that imagination

dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to re-create; or where this is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects ³ (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

Thus, objects as objects--that is to say, simply as observed phenomena without relation to the observer--are not products of the imagination. But objects which have been shaped by the imagination are "vital." One is almost tempted to say "sentient," and here perhaps lies the answer to the questions concerning a haunting poet. That is, Blake's images, symbols, and mythic patterns suggest the "thou" relationship that stresses the act of perception rather than the object of perception. Thus, when a poet creates a mythic vision, he must so structure his images, patterns, and symbols that they precipitate in the reader the same mythic vision. So when I say that to talk of a poet's being haunting is to talk of his poetry's effect, I am partially implying that one has to examine that poet's theory of imagination. This is particularly true of Blake because the prime operating symbol in his poetry is a figure of creative imagination, and this brings me to the doorway of my problem.

³
S. T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, Ed. by G. Sampson, (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1920), p. 178.

Most of the scholars who have written on Blake have concluded that Blake's major concern is for the operation of the human imagination in the processes of perception, but strangely enough, there has been very little comment on Los other than as the figure of imagination in Blake's myth. There has been no extensive study of Los or his function in the mythology. Most scholars have concluded briefly that he is some sort of configuration of the characteristics of imagination and creativity, but few have gone further. The best--and most concise--declaration of the meaning of his role may be found in Foster Damon's A Blake Dictionary. There Los is said to be "Poetry, the expression in this world of the Creative Imagination."⁴ But what does this say about Los and his role in Blake's myth? It does, of course, suggest a great deal, but it imparts very little in the way of concrete information. So this disseration will be an examination of that sort of description of Los. It will examine the introduction and development of Los in Blake's poetry and try to determine his significance along the lines of Damon's specification. I will look at Los as he progresses from a mere creation figure to the full-blown instrument of imaginative regeneration, and then I will

4

S. F. Damon (Providence: Brown Univ. Press, 1965) p. 246. Here one needs to be judicious in accepting Damon's descriptions, for since he relies mostly on Milton and Jerusalem for his sources; his descriptions overlook the developing quality of Blake's myth.

attempt to explain his significance in terms of his humanizing and vitalizing role in the regeneration of mankind.

There is, however, one scholar, Robert F. Gleckner, who has suggested a way of looking at Blake's imagination that is analogous to the one in this dissertation. Gleckner argues that imaginative perception is the prime tenet of Blake's aesthetic creed and that it is necessary to cleanse the doors of perception in order to prepare for salvation. He stresses that Blake thought it necessary to particularize phenomenal reality in order to see the Eternal, or imaginative, aspects of it. And once man has seen the Eternal reality, he will strive to annihilate his Selfhood--that state characteristic of the solipsist--and seek to reunite himself with Humanity and Eternity. Furthermore, Gleckner argues that this process of salvation must be in terms of the imaginativeness of poetry and that it must be a symbolic process. That is,

To present the reintegration of the divided Imagination the poet or bard must be imbued with the very wisdom which his characters or symbols yet seek . . . His problem, then, is the presentation of the symbolic experience in such a way that it adumbrates the cosmic reunion.⁵

⁵
R. F. Gleckner, "Blake's Religion of Imagination," The Journal of Aesthetics, XIV (March, 1956), p. 368.

Unfortunately, Gleckner makes two errors--one of commission and one of omission. He seeks to imply that Blake's myth only sketches the process of redemption, and he neglects to deal with Los at all. I shall try to correct both of these oversights in this dissertation. I will prove that Blake's process of regeneration is not sketchy--either symbolically or cognatively, and I will demonstrate how this process must be conceived of in terms of the function of Los.

When Gleckner fails to discuss Los, he robs his comments of immediate critical value, for Los is the substance of Blake's myth. It is the early prototypes of Los who are the Energetic Devourers and Devils of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell who oppose the perversities of orthodoxy and rationalism. The configurations of imagination that express themselves in the Bard of The Songs of Experience are the starting point of Blake's progression through the Contraries. By juxtaposing imagination against reason and energy against restraint, Blake formulates the basic structure of his myth. And too many scholars have spent their time delineating the negative aspects of Blake's myth; not nearly enough attention has been given to the operations of Los and the imagination. Not nearly enough discussion has been given to Blake's process of Regeneration through the function of the creative imagination.

Blake's myth proves to be the account of the struggle between reason and imagination in the characters of Urizen and Los. Blake sets for himself the task of recounting the causes and the effects of that struggle. He provides the history of mankind's Creation, Fall, and Redemption and offers through the myth the process of man's regeneration. For Blake the imagination has to be the prime power of man's mentality and the guide to the faculty of reason. But his reading of history had shown him that reason had usurped the place of imagination and had corrupted it. So Blake shows imagination regenerating the fallen nature of man, and he seeks to show that this contrary relationship of reason and imagination is fundamental to the operations of human mentality. That is, it takes the struggle between Urizen and Los, between reason and imagination, to produce the humanizing effect on perception that will allow mankind to be whole. Therefore, it seems eminently important that someone articulate how Los figures in the process of regeneration and how his role as the creative imagination allows mankind to become humanized.

The basic approach of this study is two-fold. I will first trace the development of Los in the poems of the period from 1794-1804, and then I will examine the function and significance of Los in order to explain Blake's theory of imagination and how it relates to his concepts of regeneration. However, this two-fold approach is necessary,

for Los is not always as he appears in the last prophecies of Blake. It takes Blake an entire lifetime of experimentation and exploration to discover how Los could operate best as a figure of imaginative regeneration. So, by and large, the history of Los is one of errors and failures and mistaken paths. Nevertheless, there is a kind of constancy to his character. There is a kernel of function and process that always accompanies Los. There is no intention here to argue that Blake radically changes his concepts; in fact, the ideas that Blake develops are implicit in his earliest works. And I have tried to reflect this constancy by beginning each major section of this study with a Proverb of Hell from The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. The development of Los is not so much a process of new discovery as it is an exploration of the potentiality of several of Blake's basic concepts. And when Los is finally developed to his full extent, Blake has learned how to use his ideas about imagination to produce the regeneration of mankind. And my intent here is to trace that development of Los from his most simple origins to his most complex fulfillment. I will follow him through Blake's Bible of Hell and demonstrate how, as the representative of imagination, Los leads to the regeneration of mankind into Humanity.

About one half (the first four chapters) of this study will be limited to eight poems: Europe and The Book of Urizen in 1794; The Song of Los, The Book of Los, and

The Book of Ahania in 1795; and Milton and Jerusalem in 1804. I choose these poems because they all deal with the role of Los as imagination, and I arrange them in this chronological order⁶ because I wish to stress that Los is a developing character with whom Blake experiments in order to find the most effective characteristics for him. In addition to these poems, I will also discuss The Four Zoas (1797). Although it violates chronology, I place this poem last for two reasons: one, Blake abandons the poem and never engraves it; and two, although it is very inclusive of Blakean ideas and structures, the poem is a failure because of the ineffectiveness of the character of Los. I include it here because it gives a clear account of what Blake does not wish to do with Los and because, in a negative sense, it helps one to clarify how Los is a representation of the creative imagination.

In the latter half of this study, I will concern myself with the significance of Los in Blake's mythic structure, and I will be likely to use other poetry for additional information. But primarily I will work from the assumption that Los is, as Damon says, the representation of the creative imagination. Moreover, because of his connections with poetry both in Blake and in Blakean Scholasticism, I will explore

6

For a fuller account of the chronology of Blake's poetry, see G. E. Bentley's and M. K. Nurmi's A Blake Bibliography (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1964), pp. 31-38.

the significance of Los in terms of language's ability to create mythic structures and perceptions. I will look at how important language is to the nature and function of Los. However, this dissertation will not be a linguistic examination of Blake's poetry. Rather it will be an examination of the role Blake gives language as represented in Los as a mythic figure who must use poetry to regenerate mankind. I will not be counting syntactic structures, but I will be examining the semantic peculiarities that Blake uses to create understanding of the significance of Los.

It is important that one understand what is meant here by "language." Obviously I am not referring to the phonemic, morphemic, or syntactic structures of the descriptive linguist. Rather I am using the term in its metalinguistic sense; that is, I wish to stress that language is a system by which man deals with reality symbolically. I wish to stress that language, as a medium for poetry and myth, carries with it certain assumptions about man's needs and experiences in perception and that mythic language, at least, lies very close to the heart of man's imagination. Thus, if this dissertation is to examine Los and if Los is the representation of the creative imagination, I must necessarily concern myself with language in this rather general sense. Blake is a poet who concerned himself with the powers and effects of imagination on perception, and his concern took the form of poetic productions and symbolic

formulations in language. So I think one can easily see why I stress the significance of Los in terms of language which is capable of creating mythic structures and perceptions and which necessitates the regeneration of man's relationship to the natural world.

Finally, I have one word of caution. In treating the development and significance of Los in Blake's prophecies, I will certainly be committing myself to discussing the function of poetry. But any attempt at a poetic theory here is of a particular type for a particular poet. I have no desire to claim that all poetry must be mythic. But I do want to argue that mythic poetry views reality as an extension of man and his perceptions and that mythic poets, like Blake, would say, "Where man is not, nature is barren." Essentially I will be working toward a theory of Romantic poetry--a theory of poetry that makes poetic language a cornerstone of perception and poetic language the foundation of mythology and human knowledge.

CHAPTER I

THE SPAWN OF SOLIPSISM

Blake very early in his development as a poet turns to the structures of revolution and apocalypse to express his ideas about the nature and function of imagination. He originally uses "Poetic Genius" as a contrast to the powers of orthodoxy and rationalism, and imagination as a counterpoint to the perversions of rationalism, Deism, and Natural Religion. Thus, by 1794 one begins to see a pattern emerging-- Blake's ideas of apocalyptic vision and revolution become the main goal of imaginative perception, and they are forced to operate within the framework of the Contraries. The Book of Thel in 1789, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell in 1790, the Visions of the Daughters of Albion, and America: a Prophecy in 1793--not to mention The Songs of Innocence and Experience--all emphasize apocalyptic vision and revolution as contraries to reason and orthodoxy. And although Blake later qualifies both of these, they are, at first, the direction that he takes for the development of Los; the symbolic patterns of his poetry are informed into mythic and prophetic structures that allow Blake to show forth the triumph of imagination.

The major pattern that has operated in Blake's poetry up until 1793 is his use of the doctrine of the Contraries for the framework of his myth, and this is once more illustrated in the year of 1794. For Blake--following the growing apocalyptic vision of revolution--produces two contrary figures to explicate the relationships of prophecy and history and of imagination and reason. He seeks to set up a myth--at first called the Bible of Hell, and later called the Four-fold Vision--to correct the errors of orthodoxy and to destroy the perversions of reason. So in Europe he creates Los to show the effects of the opposition of Los to Urizen, and in The Book of Urizen, he develops Urizen¹ to explore the relationship between Los and Urizen in mythic history. The two characters stand apart from each other and fight the struggle that has made history what it is. Los as the representative of the imagination struggles with Urizen as the representative of rationalism, and the results of their battle is the fallen state of mankind. These two figures

¹
I realize that The Book of Urizen is not the first occurrence of Urizen, but I choose to start with him here for the purposes of argument. Blake's doctrine of the Contraries apparently starts as a purely negative reaction against the strictures of orthodox religion and simple-minded science; he was reacting against the deadweight of systematized thought, and he chooses to portray this negative reaction through the relationship of Urizen and Los.

form the basis of the Contraries, and the progression arising from their relationship becomes the Blakean device that produces the eventual regeneration of mankind and leads to the Four-fold Vision of the Eternal Humanity.

Therefore, both the Contraries and the Four-fold Vision are of the utmost importance for understanding Blake's myth. They can, in part, help one to understand the complexities of Blake's ideas and structures. For example, understanding the Contraries and the ironical relationships arising in the poetry from the Contraries allows one to follow the pattern Blake is developing. Without the Contraries Blake's Vision pales into a simplistic and one-sided view of reality, and the same is true of the Four-fold Vision because it adds different levels of interpretation to the poetry that automatically involve the reader in the mythic process.

The Contraries, as a Blakean doctrine, are first introduced in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. There Energy is opposed to restraint, and imagination is opposed to reason. The pattern of the Contraries is to juxtapose two opposing forces that must struggle for the redemption of mankind. At first, Blake does little more with this pattern than use it as a negating device to attack the powers of orthodoxy. But as he develops the myth, he begins to rely more and more on the Contraries and to develop them into an essential part of the regeneration of mankind. Not only do the Contraries function as a complicating device; they become a

regenerative device that allows man to see reality with his imagination and not with the ratio of his five senses. That is, because the Contraries have the structure of a paradox, and because they help to define mythically the roles of human faculties, they become the basis of the Eternal Vision in that they force the reader to rely on his imagination to articulate the mythic world. Because of Urizen's isolation and fragmentation and because of man's fall and his imprisonment in the flesh, it is necessary to have the Contraries as a complicating device to allow man to reconstruct the Eternal World. Without the Contraries and the imaginative vision arising from them, man would be left in the Vegetable world of the five senses, and he would never know the world of his Humanity.

The Eternal world is in itself the Four-fold world of Humanity; it represents what man once was and can be again if he will use his powers of imaginative perception. For Blake, the attempt to reconstruct the Eternal World is the Four-fold Vision, for this sort of imaginative reconstruction reflects the complexities of the Eternal world. Thus, the Four-fold Vision becomes, in Blake, a mythic process of perception and imagination that is intent on rebuilding the fallen world into the world of Eternal Humanity. The Four-fold Vision seeks to complicate--by involving the imagination of the reader in the perception of the material world--man's own existence. It seeks to make man aware of his potentiality

as an imaginative intelligence. That is, by using the Contraries as a process of describing the relationship in the material world, and by trying to make those relationships correspond to as many areas of human activity as possible, the imaginative man may attain the Vision of his Humanity.

Apparently the Four-fold Vision works somewhat like Dante's four levels of allegory² except that they contain typically Blakean emendations, for Blake, like Dante, is interested in perceiving and articulating the eternal verities. Thus, there are four different levels of interpretation in Blake's myth. There is a historical level that deals with the history of man's civilization; and there is a mythic level that is the literal renditions of the poem in terms of men and gods. Both of these have been ably demonstrated by Erdman and Bloom,³ but this pattern can be extended further.

2

These are literal, allegorical, moral, and spiritual. See D. W. Robertson's A Preface to Chaucer (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1963), p. 349. Even though the point here is not that Blake was following Dante but that he was relying on the traditions of allegory, I suggest that one can see similarities as follows: the mythic level is literal; the historical level is allegorical; the apocalyptic level is spiritual; and the humanizing level is moral.

3

See D. Erdman's Prophet Against Empire (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1954) and H. Bloom's Blake's Apocalypse (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1963).

For example, I think no one would quarrel with talking about an apocalyptic level--one that is directed toward prophesying what will come from the struggle between reason and imagination. But moreover, I think it necessary to add a fourth level that I will call the "humanizing" level. That is, a level directed toward the reader and toward Blake himself and intent on cleansing the doors of perception through the operations of the poetry. I choose this term "humanizing" because it stresses the function of myth and also because it helps to explain the kind of things Blake is doing with the biographical references in his poetry. Not only is Blake instructing his reader in a new sense of perception, but he also has numerous biographical references to his own difficulties with the imaginative life.⁴ Essentially what Blake does is to use his mythic characters and himself as examples of the process of imaginative regeneration. That is, the configurations of the Imaginative Man and the Blakean Bard are both fairly obvious object lessons designed to explicate the role of the imagination in transforming this fallen world into a world of humanity and freedom. The intent of the myth is to point out that man need not accept the lesser concept of himself that reason demands. Thus, the Four-fold Vision is used to

⁴

See particularly the biographical references in Milton and Jerusalem.

deepen the experience of the poetry, and one is expected to identify the Four-fold Vision with the many four-fold correspondences that Blake builds into his poetry. The Northern Urthona (or Los) dwells in Eden of the mythic world, and the Southern Urizen dwells in Ulro, the fallen, historical world. The Eastern Luvah dwells in Beulah, the apocalyptic world transformed by imagination, and the Western Tharmas dwells in the "world of Generation"--the vegetable or human world that must be redeemed by the imagination. Nevertheless, the one relationship that stands out is the contrary one of Los and Urizen, for their relationship forms the basis of mankind's eventual transformation back to the Unity of Humanity.

This Contrary relationship of Urizen and Los is the major reason that I begin with Europe even though The Book of Urizen is an easier poem to grasp on the first reading, for Europe is a prime example of the complicating and involving effects of the Contraries and the Four-fold Vision. Also, I would argue that Europe is an earlier poem than Urizen because it has the same form and direction as the earlier America and the Visions of the Daughters of Albion. But more importantly for my topic, it presents Los in his most insignificant role, and it makes an ideal place for starting a study of the development of Los. In Europe, Los is no more than a sire of revolution--perhaps because Blake is totally consumed by his passion for revolution.