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Historical Dissonance and William Blake’s The Song of Los

by JAMES McCORD

Critical interpreters of William Blake’s The Song of Los as a composite work have been fit but few, and this small number is a surprise because the verse is so powerful, the illustrations so stunning, and their relationship so rich and varied. Although confined to only eight plates, the narrative sweeps from eternal past to revolutionary present over two continental battlefields. These repressive psychological, intellectual, and military struggles are described by means of capsulated history and mythic detail, cryptic reference and familiar allusion in tones and rhythms of an all-seeing prophet, historian, humanitarian, and revolutionary. The accompanying illustrations are also remarkable for their dynamism and variety: the frontispiece serves as introduction, exposition, and conclusion; illustrations appear above, between, beside, and below printed texts; tiny marginal and interlinear natural details weave busily around and through some texts while others are encased in dense vegetation; human forms are many and often fantastic; and the settings range from desolate valley to pastoral haven, from dense forest to fiery cloud.

But Blake’s intention is not simply to baffle the reader-observer with diversity; it is to guide him through the cacophonous nightmare of world history so that, no matter how few or forced the notes, he will take up Los’s song and, like the initial “I” we hear, sing of what has been, what is, and, especially, what might be. Prophetic composition and recitation are courageous acts comparable to the heroics of Thomas Percy’s ancient bard “who united the arts of Poetry and Music,” and whose “skill was considered as something divine.” They are also subversive, the prophet singing his many-strained song against monarchy in order to provide his listeners with “thought-creating” directions on how to humanize civilization. Throughout this poem the antagonists to Los’s song are past history and the colorprinted illustrations, each of which

strikes a different dissonant note, all of which weep or howl for relief from our dark night of universal oppression.

A brief annotation by Blake to Swedenborg’s *Divine Love and Divine Wisdom*, “the dead Sun is only a phantasy of evil Man,” provides an appropriate gloss for the frontispiece portrait of a misguided worshipper humbled before a globe (see fig. 1) opposed to the “living sun” that created “all Things.” If this shadowy orb has a textual reference, it would be Urizen’s “woven darkness above” (7:25) or the “forms of dark delusion” beheld by Moses on Sinai (3:17). As an obfuscated sphere netted with hieroglyphs and surrounded by night, it is also the pictorial equivalent of the Abstract Philosophies and Laws given and received in the first section of the poem, “Africa.” The radiant disc of *Europe’s* frontispiece with its sharp, white rays has here degenerated into a hazy, mottled globe with four heavily-textured ray bands to mark, it seems, the change from natural sun as influence to natural sun as dictator.

As orb without a trace of human form, this “phantasy” may also be analogous to the lawmaker called Urizen in the text, himself an abstraction used by tyrannical kings, priests, and counsellors to enslave their citizens. For his early illuminated books, Blake altered his portrait of Urizen four times in seven years, and with each alteration the “jealous king” became less human and more cryptic. There is first the old man embedded in a cloud of *All Religions are One*, plate 4, and *America*, plate 8, next the divine geometer of *Europe’s* frontispiece, then the heavy-winged patriarch in “Elohim Creating Adam,” and, finally, Urizen as “dead Sun” here. This last image is *ne plus nadir* because for Blake holiness must always reside in man:

Think of a white cloud. as being holy you cannot love it but think of a holy man within the cloud love springs up in your thought. for to think of holiness distinct from man is impossible to the affections. Thought alone can make monsters, but the affections cannot

The unidentified man kneeling before the sphere hunches over a stone slab or altar with open book on it. According to a contemporary history of the Bible “sincerely designed to root out Deism and Infidelity, and advance the Cause of True Religion,” the presence of an altar betrays the figure’s ignorance and defines him as a sacrificial victim. Using the text of Los’s song as a guide, this worshipper of “forms of dark delusion” might well be Moses, who in *Exodus* decided against his better judgment to abide by the laws of an inflexible deity that pro-

3. The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. David V. Erdman, with commentary by Harold Bloom (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1982), p. 605. All references to Blake’s writings are to this edition, and are preceded by the letter “E.”


Fig. 1. Blake, *The Song of Los*, frontispiece. The Huntington Library.
hibited him from seeing Him or understanding His ways: "[I] will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy. . . . Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me and live. . . . thou shalt see my back-parts; but my face shall not be seen" (Exodus xxxiii.19–20, 23). His back to us, Moses here is portrayed as neither mediator of the covenant, lawgiver, nor unifier of Israel, but as deferential lackey who is mimicking, from our point of view, the posterior identity of the "phantasy" his monstrous thought has created. But whether identified as Moses, Urizen, an Urizenic priest, a child of Los, one of the race of Los and Enitharmon, or any of the numerous exponents of Urizen's laws listed in "Africa," this obedient disciple is distinctive because of his uncritical acceptance of "Abstract" codes, an acquiescence that has extinguished any "thought-creating fires" he may have possessed.

In contrast, the supine figure on the facing title page, though more obviously bound to the "closing and restraining" earth, eyes directly the object above him: The Song of Los. This ancient is almost entirely covered by gown and hair, and his form melts into the landscape to become one of five terrestrial masses differentiated from each other by color, texture, and shape only. Yet he seems to hear Los's revelatory song which offers a way out of this desolate vale of earth, matter, natural philosophy, and death by pointing toward the more humane and ennobling strata of sky, spirit, imagination, birds, and printed words.

This figure also recalls Adam, the prototype of flesh, and Noah, the savior of flesh:

Adam stood in the garden of Eden:
And Noah on the mountains of Ararat (3:6-7)

For Adam, a mouldering skeleton
Lay bleach'd on the garden of Eden;
And Noah as white as snow
On the mountains of Ararat. (7:20–23)

Adam and Noah are used as framing characters in The Song of Los because it traces the degeneration of the physical body from its standing form in Eden and on Ararat to "bleach'd," "mouldering skeleton." Only a stone's throw from Ezekiel's ossuary, the title page elder, along with the reader-observer, will learn how prophetic song can save him...
from ignorance and error by exposing Urizen's deadening methods. After receiving such knowledge, Blake believes, we will reject the "Abstract" doctrines that imprison us, collect our human energies, and awaken into eternal life.

Giving and receiving doctrine is also a central theme in "Africa." The poem opens with an anonymous "I" singing Los's song to the dismay of receivers Urizen and Ariston. Then, in order, Adam and Noah shudder and fade when Urizen gives his "laws to the Nations"; Rintrah gives "Abstract Philosophy to Brahma"; and the singer-historian documents further gifts from Theotormon, Antamon, and Sotha. These bestowals have appalling effects on the human race which becomes either enslaved or degenerative because of them: when humankind follows codes that provide brick and mortar for "Churches: Hospitals: Castles: Palaces," it is trapped; when it attempts to flee from the accepted lifestyle of "War & Lust," it shrinks like Har and Heva. The final result of this perversion of human energy is a "Philosophy of Five Senses" which finds its visual equivalent as heavy rolling clouds that attempt to muffle all sound and obscure all sight of rebellious life on the four continents:

Clouds roll heavy upon the Alps round Rousseau & Voltaire:
And on the mountains of Lebanon round the deceased Gods
Of Asia; & on the deserts of Africa round the Fallen Angels
The Guardian Prince of Albion burns in his nightly tent (4:18-21)

It is significant that Los traces the fall of the human race in "heart-formed" Africa, Africa née Egypt being the continent in which the human heart was first controlled. Plates 3 and 4 trace how psycho-sexual enslavement led to human acceptance of the abstract codes "given" by Urizen and his followers, and to acceptance of the dreamy "heart-formed" delusion that if they were good and obedient, humans would be "given" the opportunity to bask in Elysian fields. "Los the Eternal Prophet" originally sung his song "at the tables of Eternity" when there existed a harmonious correlation between heart and action, a time before the "sunny African" grew black and before Africa came to represent the continent of slavery. Since that time, Blake writes in The Book of Urizen, "heart-formed" has come to imply division, isolation, and loss of will:

And their thirty cities divided
In form of a human heart

9. Noted by Erdman, "The Symmetries of The Song of Los," p. 182. In his favorable pairing of "Rousseau & Voltaire," Blake may have had in mind the following passage from Mary Wollstonecraft's An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution (London: J. Johnson, 1794), pp. 9-10: "[in France] against superstition then did the writers contending for civil liberty principally direct their force . . . though the tyranny of the court increased with its viciousness . . . Voltaire leading the way, and ridiculing with that happy mixture of satire and gaiety . . . the inconsistent puerilities of a puppet-show religion . . . Rousseau also ranged himself on the same side; and, praising his fanciful state of nature, with that interesting eloquence, which embellishes reasoning with the charms of sentiment, forcibly depicted the evils of a priest-ridden society, and the sources of oppressive inequality. . . ."
After this continental rift, the human heart lost its pride and vitality, and became like a burdensome weight sinking in the African desert which is, appropriately, also the landing site for the vanquished "Fallen Angels" (4:20). Blake here seems to be emphasizing—as he had earlier in *Thel*, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, *America*, and several poems in *The Notebook*—that while the heart is the primal center of emotion, love, and compassion, in its fallen state it is easily manipulated by tyrannizing church, state, family, or lover. The references in "Africa" to three love affairs are not accidental. The "Gospel" Jesus, "(a man of sorrows)," received from Oothoon's lover, "wretched Theotormon," was based on self-pity and false penitence. The Koran, the "loose Bible" that Antamon gave to "Mahomet," represents tyranny of the kind reviled by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*:

... in the true style of Mahometanism, [women] are treated as a kind of subordinate beings, and not as part of the human species. ... Thus Milton describes our first frail mother; though when he tells us that women are formed for softness and sweet attractive grace, I cannot comprehend his meaning, unless, in the true Mahometan strain, he meant to deprive us of souls, and insinuate that we were beings only designed by sweet attractive grace, and docile blind obedience, to gratify the senses of man when he can no longer soar on the wing of contemplation. 11

And Sotha distributes a "Code of War" to Odin's north country because he seeks to "reclaim [the] joy" he experienced with Diralada before they came to fear "the joys of Love" (3:26). Sexual repression, then, leads naturally to the formulation of abstract theological, philosophical, legal, and military codes with men threatening and controlling their victims as confidently as the mottled serpent that weaves its way through the lightly-printed letters of "Africa" at the head of plate 3.

This serpent also darts its head in defiance at the shepherd sleeping below the prelude, who represents another version of African soft-heartedness. Child and sheep are in the chrysalid stage of development, the colorful caterpillar and bat-winged butterfly to the right in the larval and adult stages. This idyll of innocence and immaturity symbolizes no fulfillment of our dreams of a golden world. "Eternity" is not a dream;
it is. It was "obliterated & erased" because it was regarded "like" (as if it were) a dream (4:4). Such sweet scenes are incomplete and should be regarded as temporary; at worst they thrive on sentimentality and fill us with false hopes of achieving what never can be or should be. They also direct our attention toward deceptive "allegoric riches" (6:18) invented to keep us hankering after an "allegorical abode where existence hath never come."12 By denying our human responsibility to participate in eternal life we not only encourage inhumane social and political systems to continue, we strengthen their positions: metaphorically, we feed their rapacious, serpentine activities.

Like shepherd and sheep, the diminutive king and his sleeping (perhaps dreaming) queen of plate 5 (see fig. 2) also appear oblivious to the turbulent action of Los's song and so are responsible in part for the demise of human life because they turn their backs on it. Lounging inside two lily cups near a secluded bank, this royal couple—Oberon and Titania or Ariston and his "stolen bride" perhaps13—willfully isolate themselves from the very world in which they should aspire to recreate eternity, a selfish decision that does not escape Los's notice:

The human race began to wither, for the healthy built
Secluded places, fearing the joys of Love
And the disease'd only propagated: (3:25-27)

This floral wonderland includes several images of sexuality—stamens arching over the sleeping queen,14 sceptre, corolla—yet the illustration is curiously cool and distant because free from any strong image of "the joys of Eternity" (4:2). Moreover, the scene is discomforting because it is static, quiet, and dark, the figures separate, silent, uncommunicating, and the few landscape details—bank, stream, and hills—reduced to dark colorprinted bands. The softly-textured cream lilies offer the only

13. Ariston appears briefly beside Urizen in The Song of Los (3:4) and with his bride in America: A Prophecy 10:5-10: E 55. Martin Butlin, The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1981), II, 61, 86, 125-26, calls attention to the three earlier versions of this design, two by William and one by Robert Blake. As calm watchman, the king in The Song of Los and in the reverse watercolor version of c. 1790-93 (Cat. 245) is aloof and isolated in a more dramatic way than Oberon in the earliest version of c. 1785, "Oberon, Titania, and Puck with Faeries" (Cat. 161), where he is set apart from the frolicking faeries, his wife and Puck providing a link between his casual, nonfestive attitude and the circle of dancers. Nor is there any trace in The Song of Los design of the faery dance that appears in the earliest version and in Robert's wash drawing on p. 13 of The Notebook c. 1785-87 (Cat. 201 5). By comparison, Shakespeare's Oberon directs and participates in communal song and dance; as Titania puts it, "Hand in hand, with faery grace, / Will we sing, and bless this place." "Faery time" is, of course, nighttime, and faery blessings cease at "break of day." Puck's epilogue/apology allows us to excuse the play's "visions" and "theme" as "No more yielding but a dream." More sinister, because of Blake's attitude toward Hecate, darkness, night, and dream as illusion, is Puck's description a few lines earlier:

And we faeries, that do run
By the triple Hecate's team,
From the presence of the sun,
Following darkness like a dream. . . . (V.I. 382-85)

Compare David V. Erdman, The Illuminated Blake, p. 178, for a positive reading of this plate, in which the setting is identified as "Eternity" and the "perfect lilies foretell a paradisal regeneration." 14. In copies C, D, and E, and in the watercolor version of c. 1790-93 (Cat. 245).

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Fig. 2. Blake, *The Song of Los*, plate 5. The Huntington Library.
contrast to this nightscape of starry floor and watery shore, but they too complement the sterile scene because of their familiar association with purity, chastity, virginity. Moonless, this is not a mystical moonlit night of the kind so popular in the late eighteenth century. Nor is it a haven of innocence symbolizing “the basic purity and freedom of love.” 15 For Blake, I think, would agree with Mary Wollstonecraft when she writes: “Children, I grant, should be innocent; but when the epithet is applied to men or women, it is but a civil term for weakness.” 16 If “heart-formed” Africa had been vision-formed, it never could have provided the setting for the contraction of the human race or been responsible for perpetuating delusive dreams of paradise.

We approach closer to vision in the second half of Los’s song, “Asia,” which, according to a contemporary geography text, was the continent of fresh beginnings:

It was in Asia that the All-wise Creator is generally supposed to have planted the garden of Paradise, in which he formed the first of the human race. It was there that arts first were known, that edifices were first erected, and cities built. It was Asia that became the nursery of the rising world, after it had been destroyed by general deluge; and from thence the descendent of Noah founded colonies in all parts of the spacious earth. 17

But the new earth cannot begin until after the two plates of “Asia” emphasize the horror that ensues when “Human form’d spirits in smiling hipocrisy. War / Against one another” (3:13–14). The text describes the “kings of Asia” rushing out of their webs and “ancient woven” dens to view the “thick-flaming, thought-creating fires of Orc.” Stricken with terror and crying in “bitterness of soul,” they unwittingly confess to the insidious workings of their civilized slave states and reveal in detail how they enweb their citizens and shape them into creatures only part human. Throughout Los’s song, in fact, human beings are described in the process of becoming something other than human:

Noah faded (3:10)
Noah shrunk, beneath the waters (3:15)
Oothoon hoverd over Judah & Jerusalem (3:22)
The human race began to wither . . .
And the disease’d only propagated (3:25,27)

And as they fled they shrunk
Into two narrow doleful forms:
Creeping in reptile flesh upon
The bosom of the ground (4:7–10)

Furthermore, in frontispiece and title page, coloring and medium make it difficult to tell the garment from the man; in plate 3 the shepherd

15. Geoffrey Keynes, The Song of Los, quoting S. Foster Damon.
16. Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, p. 34.
sleeps huddled like the sheep beside him, his curly hair matching the sheep's wool; in plate 4 a flying figure sports bat-wings, and the shrinking "doleful forms" of Har and Heva begin sinking into the earth on their way to becoming reptilian creatures; in plate 6 a despairing giant hides his head "overgrown with hair and coverd with a stony roof," his back humped in an unnatural way to repeat the vegetation arching over the cave mouth above where a couple appear as victims of priestly "Pestilence from the fen"; and the single figure falling in the upper right of plate 7 is little more than torso, his limbs appearing severed, his head wrenched back to suggest, perhaps, decapitation. These last horrific distortions of the naked human form divine are the direct result of the devious, dehumanizing tactics exposed in the text.

Human suffering is also the theme of the diminutive scene surrounding the letters "Asia" atop plate 6. But the figures here are more likely victims of Orc's liberating fires which illuminate the cloud-streaked, webbed sky behind "Asia" (especially noticeable because watercolored in all copies) and threaten to disperse the dark surrounding "clouds of despair" that Urizen draws "thro' the heavens / Of Europe" (7:12-13). Falling, fleeing, pleading, or shielding themselves, these tortured kings, priests, counsellors, and consorts recall Isaiah's haughty recipients of God's wrath who "shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of his majesty, when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth" (Isaiah ii.19). The only human being not suffering in this miniature "Vision of the Last Judgment" is one whose attention, like that of the title page ancient, is focused beyond the "bosom of the ground." This "all flesh naked" man is positioned at the Lord's right hand just outside the scenes of suffering associated with "Asia"; and he is poised, as are his brethren in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, plate 21, and America, plate 6, the moment before he will rise, extend his limbs, and sing and dance like Albion, himself a human sun radiating light to beat back the "darkness of Asia."

If necessary, it would be a reassembled human form like this one who would be the next singer of Los's song to take us through the movements of history toward the symphonic climax that describes the violent but exhilarating conception and birth of apocalypse:

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

18. Europe: A Prophecy 10:29: E 64.
19. This last piece of man is the most reduced version of a figure Blake had used in earlier compositions: ref. The Notebook, p. 75, America, plate 5, Europe, plate 1, and The Book of Urizen, plate 6.
20. Noted and termed "the liberated man" by David V. Erdman, The Illuminated Blake, p. 179.
The Grave shrieks with delight, & shakes
Her hollow womb, & clasps the solid stem:
Her bosom swells with wild desire:
And milk & blood & glandous wine
In rivers rush & shout & dance,
On mountain, dale and plain. (7:31-40)

In prophetic images and bardic tones bone, clay, and breath combine in that genetic order until all flesh "stands," as Adam and Noah "stood" before Urizen handed out his laws. Inspired by Orc, our "sullen," shrieved earth in a surge of exultant, orgiastic energy and sound floods the title page vale of tears made sterile by the "Philosophy of Five Senses." Her shrieks of delight drown out Urizen's howls and thunderous bellowing (7:24); her erotic gyrations render impotent his "shudd'ring waving wings" (7:10); her rushing, humanized rivers of quintessential life fluid wash away his tears of self-pity.

"The SONG of LOS is Ended" on notes powerful and prophetic, human song and dance visually and aurally obliterating documented history. But these notes are apparently not strong enough to blast the heavily colorprinted forests of night that enclose them. Los's song has moved from prelude to fall to the beginnings of apocalypse; the designs, by comparison, have been somewhat repetitious and insistent on their depiction of misdirected, tormented humans entrapped by "closing and restraining" landscapes. It is as if nothing can silence the singing of Los's song, but once the liberating words are heard, it is up to the audience to fulfill them. Los, unfortunately, does not fulfill them, the poem's last plate and epilogue helping to explain why the "children of Los" aid Urizen in distributing his laws (3:8-9), and why the "terrible race of Los & Enitharmon gave / Laws & Religions to the sons of Har" (4:13-14).

For plate 8 (see fig. 3) portrays Los the blacksmith, craftsman having replaced singing "Eternal Prophet," hammer having replaced harp, illustration having replaced word, perceiving eye replacing receiving ear. Of Blake's Lambeth books, only in Europe: A Prophecy is Los a political activist rising to the occasion of revolution and calling "all his sons to the strife of blood." Elsewhere, he is once singer "to four harps at the tables of Eternity" and often "Eternal Prophet" turned terrible smith. Here weary after having beaten into shape the orb beneath him, Los, cloudborne and surrounded by fiery splintered rays, leans for support on a glistening black hammer while gazing passively at his creation. Of all Los's children, Orc is the only one in this poem who is not implicated in the crime of perpetrating Urizen's "Laws" (3:8-9); this is be-
Fig. 3. Blake, *The Song of Los*, plate 8. The Huntington Library.
cause during the intercontinental infestation he remained "chain'd down with the Chain of Jealousy" (3:21), the result of a domestic dispute described in *The Book of Urizen* which was caused by Los's twisted heart-formed feelings toward Orc and his mother. When Orc bursts onto the Asian scene, he appears as he did in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, America*, and *Europe*: a composite of serpent and fire, revolutionary counterforce to Urizen, sexual energy embodied, the repressed human heart exploding. If the suspended globe is meant to suggest circumscribed Orcian energy, Los has harnessed his fiery son in a way that recalls his behavior when dealing with Fuzon, Orc’s blood brother from *The Book of Ahania*:

But the fiery beam of Fuzon  
Was a pillar of fire to Egypt  
Five hundred years wandring on earth  
Till Los siezd it and beat in a mass  
With the body of the sun. (2:44-48)

Such an action, of course, quenches "pride of the heart" (7:3). As Oothoon voices in a passage from *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* that is echoed in *The Song of Los* (4:4), it also leads to the obliteration and erasure of eternal life:

And sunk my heart into the Abyss, a red round globe hot burning  
Till all from life I was obliterated and erased. (2:33-34)

In Los’s song, Orc and Oothoon are paired as frustrated revolutionaries (3:21–22), Oothoon's crime of the heart (the opposite of heart-formed obedience in "Africa") equated with Orc’s. For her fiery "thought-creating" inquisitiveness in *Visions* she is defused and enclosed in "five senses," as Orc may be here. Or this final portrait of Los might illustrate the fallen Eternal forging our natural sun. In *The Book of Urizen*, after Eternity is torn asunder, Los becomes a dismayed prophet who in terror hammers Urizen into mortal form, which obliterates Los’s "eternal life / Like a dream" (13:33–34) along with the primeval priest’s. And in *The Book of Los*, Los’s achievement as blacksmith is again described and pictured as erroneous:

And first from those infinite fires  
The light that flow’d down on the winds  
He siez’d; beating incessant, condensing  
The subtil particles in an Orb.  
Roaring indignant the bright sparks  
Endur’d the vast Hammer; but unwearied  
Los beat on the Anvil; till glorious  
An immense Orb of fire he fram’d . . . .

Nine ages completed their circles  
When Los heated the glowing mass, casting  
It down into the Deeps: the Deeps fled
In the British Museum copy of the design at the bottom of this final plate of *The Book of Los*, Los’s open mouth expresses wonder or woe, not joy or contemplation. His cosmic labor may be sublime and well-intentioned, but it is not visionary or redemptive, this “Sun” being a re-shuffling of fractured eternal particles, flecks of the harmonious infinite having been condensed into a circumscribed container inferior to its parts. He who exchanged song for hammer has framed a fearfully symmetrical object. The product is a “glowing illusion,” the original version of the dead sun in the frontispiece of *The Song of Los*. We have come full circle, returning to the image from which we departed but knowing its origins and nature for the first time. We also know that though it gives light to our “sullen Earth,” this globe can never illuminate it like the song of prophecy we have heard and visualized with our human imaginations.

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