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The Spectrous Embrace, the Moment of Regeneration, and Those Two Seventh Nights

by PETER OTTO

Freud's suggestion in "The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming" that much of the pleasure that we gain from works of art is a result of the writer "putting us into a position in which we can enjoy our own daydreams without reproach or shame"1 is only in a very qualified sense true for a prophetic artist such as Blake. Perhaps the most striking feature of Blake's poems is their ability to act back on the reader, to question the necessity of conventions or world-views that had seemed to be "natural." The poems demand not that (in the words of Norman Holland) we use the work of art "to symbolize and finally to replicate ourselves"2 but that we remake or renovate our selves. This leads to an at times intense dialectic between the desire to discover our own beliefs or phantasies within the work of art and the experience of Blake's poems as a disruptive force. The strength of this dialectic makes it necessary to look again and again at the Minute Particulars of Blake's texts. As the Santa Cruz Blake Study Group points out with regard to the graphic and phonological dimensions of Blake's work:

What we can see and hear in Blake is influenced by what we expect to see and want to see; our desires for a purely phonological information and a "pure" lexical codification of that information make it difficult both to see and to accept the unexpected.3

One of the most unexpected moments in The Four Zoas occurs when the narrative doubles itself and the reader is presented with two seventh Nights.

The presence of two seventh Nights in a poem which announces itself as a Dream of Nine Nights has, not unexpectedly, provoked considerable discussion amongst Blake scholars. The traditional point of view on this anomaly has been that VII[b] is the earliest of the two versions and that VII[a] was written to replace it. The two Nights therefore represent either alternative accounts, or a definitive and a discarded version. Harold Bloom writes:


135
There are some remarkable moments in the original Night VII, but the reader ought to neglect it for the definitive later version. . . .

Erdman believes that VII[a] was written after the peace of Amiens (or "when peace actually came") and therefore represents a more positive alternative to VII[b]. Morton Paley tells us that

The present Night VIII, however, links closely with the new end of VIIa, indicating that when VIII was written, Blake was no longer trying to retain VIIb at all.

The problem that these critics are attempting to address is not simply that there are two Seventh Nights in The Four Zoas but that the two Nights seem to express quite different visions of Los and of the possibility of redemption. The imaginative leaps of Night the Seventh[a] are lacking from Night the Seventh[b] and it is only in the former that we hear "of the necessity of 'Self-Annihilation'—henceforth one of Blake's two or three most important themes." Perhaps the most difficult point to explain is that in Night VII[b] Los seems to have forgotten the lessons that he had learnt in VII[a]. The Los who draws "Urizen[s] Shadow away / From out the ranks of war" re-enters the conflicts of the fallen world in VII[b] with renewed vigour:

Los reard his mighty stature on Earth stood his feet. Above
The moon his furious forehead circled with black bursting thunders
His naked limbs glittering upon the dark blue sky his knees
Bathed in bloody clouds. his loins in fires of war where spears
And swords rage where the Eagles cry & the Vultures laugh saying
Now comes the night of Carnage now the flesh of Kings & Princes
Pampered in palaces for our food the blood of Captains nurturd
With lust & murder for our drink the drunken Raven shall wander
All night among the slain & mock the wounded that groan in the field. . . .

(96:19-27, E393/E361)'

Wilkie and Johnson in fact go so far as to write that

Night VIIIB differs so obviously from VIIIA that to describe them as different versions is inaccurate. The most important question is not how the two Nights differ but what, if anything, they have in common. In events, tone, texture, and above all in their ways of resolving the human crisis, A and B seem both to portray and to prescribe totally different worlds. 9

8. All references to Blake's poetry and prose are taken from the newly revised edition of The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. David V. Erdman, commentary by Harold Bloom (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1982), and will be inserted parenthetically in the text. However, in the course of my argument I refer to the two Seventh Nights as they stand in The Poetry and Prose of William Blake (rev. ed.: Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970). For ease of reference, when referring to the Seventh Nights, I give the page number to this edition immediately following on from my citation of The Complete Poetry and Prose. I designate the former, E, and the latter, E2.
With such an obvious and striking difference in character and mood it is doubtless convenient if one can be shown to be an earlier version of the second. The traditional resolution of this problem was, however, made problematic by Margoliouth and Bentley. The former observed that before late additions and arrangements there was a high degree of narrative continuity between the early versions of VII[a] and VII[b]. This point alone suggested that [b] was at least initially not an alternative or a discarded version of [a]. The latter argued on the basis of stitch marks on the manuscript that Night the Seventh[b] was later than [a].

These developments leave the critic in an uncomfortable position. As John Kilgore writes:

In sum, we have to regard VII[b] as part of the poem, but there is no really satisfactory place to fit it in. Blake left the Night as a unit, but as a unit it resists placement anywhere in the present text.

It is therefore not surprising that in the time that has elapsed since the publication of Bentley's edition of the poem a number of critics have attempted a different solution of the problem. A brief overview of the strategy that has been adopted can be gained by comparing the conclusions of John Kilgore, Andrew Lincoln and Mark Lefebvre, who address this problem in the edition of Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly published in the Fall of 1978 (volume 12, number 46).

What dominates these latest critical positions is an extraordinary stress on narrative development and continuity (conceived of as the unfolding of a single line) and, in turn, this stress is predicated upon the assumption that the Los of embrace and reunion cannot precede or be contemporaneous with the Los of disunion. Kilgore talks of a "linear commentary" and arranges the poem so that the Los of VII[b] precedes the "illuminated" Los that we find at the end of VII[a]. Similarly Lincoln alters the poem to allow "a relatively coherent narrative sequence to develop" which will describe "a steady progress in the relationship of Los and Enitharmon, from disharmony to unity." Lefebvre follows the same path when he arranges the poem to allow for a "crucial upswing toward salvation" and even Erdman, in the course of attempting to summarize and draw a conclusion from the articles by Kilgore, Lincoln and Lefebvre, agrees that the two Nights can be rearranged to give expression to a "coherent narrative" which is somewhere beneath their pages. The fruit of this latest round of discussion can be seen in the most recently revised edition of David Erdman's The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake where the two seventh Nights are conflated into one.
It seems to me that the problem with all of these "solutions" to the presence of an apparently gratuitous Night in The Four Zoas is that they misunderstand the nature of Los's illumination in Night the Seventh[a]. The controversy of course begins with the observation of a clear disjunction between the tone and apparent intent of the two Nights. The existence of such a gap (with the attendant apprehension of an hiatus between the narratives of the two Nights) is incontrovertible. However, the conclusions that are drawn from this observation depend upon a perception of Los as somehow *cleansed of error* in the moment of embrace. Middleton Murry, for example, writes that by being reconciled to the Spectre within himself, by recognizing and receiving Urizen as a part of his own Self, Los-Blake attains a new understanding, a new synthesis (as we might call it to-day). Not, of course, an intellectual synthesis; but a real and decisive act of new spiritual understanding, involving a revolution of the total man—an act of the Self-annihilation which is Imagination.  

Similarly, Wilkie and Johnson write of "recovery" and "grace":

Blake takes us further than either Wordsworth or Spenser into the psychology of recovery, regeneration, renewal, but like them he presents only the *experience* of grace, not a formula for obtaining it. . . . Blake does not anatomize the moment of relief and reconciliation itself; he concentrates in the remainder of Night VII—and on through the rest of the poem—on the renewal of life as it flows out from that moment.  

The embrace by Los of his Spectre is certainly an extraordinary moment in the poem. However, it is important to see that because it is an *embrace* it leaves the fallen world intact and is not itself "an act of the Self-annihilation which is Imagination." In Night the Seventh[a] Los embraces the Spectre as another self. It would certainly be comfortable if this embrace somehow erased sin from the world and if from this point Los need only discover "fury and cruelty and the soul of dark revenge" "in his *former self*" (my emphasis). In fact, the entire force of this embrace would be lost if the recognition that the Spectre is Los's *real self* (and the embrace of this Spectre and the fallen world which he retains) were to destroy the Spectre and his world. An embrace is a relationship in which the other is *not* assimilated and in which the other can remain intact. For Los to attempt the "new synthesis" that Murry discusses would be for him to remain a "ravenous lust." Los's embrace is the acceptance of his own fallibility and of his complicity in the Fall. It does not erase; it recognizes and embraces the world created by the Spectre as his own body. It is therefore not the moment of "recovery," "regeneration," "renewal" and "grace" but the embodiment which is the ground or necessary condition for this event. The true climax of the poem is not in Night the Seventh[a] but at the beginning of Night the Ninth.

15. Wilkie and Johnson, *Blake's "Four Zoas,"* pp. 159-60.
In Night the Seventh[a], Los has done no more than embrace the reality of the fallen world. So long as this is all that he does, he remains a slave to the law, and the good that he does ushers in an evil that he does not intend. In other words, Los's embrace of the Spectre accepts but does not erase the antagonism within the world and within Los's own being between spirit and flesh, imagination and memory. This is quite clearly why we have not one but two Seventh Nights. The first (VII[a]) is a narrative of the spirit and of the inward man. In this Night we observe Los's recognition and embrace of his own ontology. This is a narrative of "redemption" because it tells of activities which save the world from annihilation and are the basis or necessary condition for a future new birth. However, these activities still occur in the fallen world and they are therefore mirrored by the narrative which we find in Night the Seventh[b]. This second narrative is contemporaneous with the first. It tells us of the flesh; the outward man; the self-centered body which, whatever one's spiritual decisions, continues the warfare of the fallen world. Critics make much of the simple word "but" which separates the negative "moment of the Shadowy Female's birth" from "the moment of the astonishing fraternal embrace of Los and the Spectre of Urthona."\(^{17}\) It is, however, equally important to recognize that Night the Seventh[b] begins with the same slender word. We are still in the fallen world, each advance by the spirit is matched by an advance on the part of the flesh, the outward man wars against the inner, Night the Seventh[a] is mirrored by Night the Seventh[b]. In short, we are still within the labyrinth and have not reached the moment of regeneration.

This relationship between the two Nights can be seen in the uncanny echoes of the one in the other. Just as the body is the ground or condition for the activities of the spirit, and spirit is the condition for the movement of the body, so too within Night the Seventh[a] the events of Night the Seventh[b] form the dimly seen ground to the history of the spirit (and vice versa). In Night the Seventh[a] the situation immediately prior to Los's embrace of the Spectre (85:13-21, E360/E2353), for example, details the war of VII[b]. Even after the embrace, as Los describes to Enitharmon his desire to "fabricate embodied semblances," it is important to note that Los speaks from a position

\begin{quote}
in Golgonooza in the Gate of Luban where
He had erected many porches where branchd the Mysterious Tree
Where the Spectrous dead wail . . . , (90:2-4, E370/E2355)
\end{quote}

and, of course, although Los is able to divide "the powers of Every Warrior" (90:63, E371/E2357) and so avoid a complete collapse of the world, he is unable to stop the warfare itself and he is powerless to draw Urizen's "Spectrous form" out of "the ranks of war" (90:59-60, E371/E2357). This hidden narrative of the flesh is, therefore, an ever present companion to

\(^{17}\) Wilkie and Johnson, *Blake's "Four Zoas,"* p. 156.
the advances of the spirit; it is the dimly seen ground to the configuration of spirit in the fallen world.

In Night the Seventh[b], however, the relationship between figure and ground is reversed and the narrative focuses on the flesh. For Satan, Christ's descent to Hell and embrace of the sins of the world appeared (according to Milton) at first to signify the success of his own plans. Similarly, while Los embraces the reality of the fallen world (in Night the Seventh[a]), Urizen (in Night the Seventh[b]) proclaims his victory:

The time of Prophecy is now revolv'd & all
This Universal Ornament is mine & in my hands
The ends of heaven like a Garment will I fold them round me
Consuming what must be consumd then in power & majesty
I will walk forth thro those wide fields of endless Eternity
A God & not a Man a Conqueror in triumphant glory
And all the Sons of Everlasting shall bow down at my feet . . .

(95:18–24, E360/E2392)

From Urizen's point of view the world is now a Garment which he can fold around himself. He has drawn the Spectre and Shadow, the form or body of the world, to worship at his tree. In addition, Los's embrace of the Spectre (from Urizen's perspective again) seems to diminish the power of Los. Urizen is no longer confronted with a Los who attempts to bend the world to his will; instead he sees that Los, like Christ, has embraced the very bowels of hell. In Night the Seventh[a] the success of Urizen's designs can be seen in the irruption of the tree of mystery within Los's constituted world. In Night VII[b] this same event is expressed from Urizen's point of view. The "Sun that glow'd oer Los" is now compelled to enter Urizen's world:

& they took the Sun that glow'd oer Los
And with immense machines down rolling, the terrific orb
Compell'd, The Sun reddning like a fierce lion in his chains
Descended to the sound of instruments that drownd the noise
Of the hoarse wheels & the terrific howlings of wild beasts
That drag'd the wheels of the Suns chariot & they put the Sun
Into the temple of Urizen to give light to the Abyss
To light the War by day to hide his secret beams by night . . .

(96:9–16, E361/E2393)

Los is unfortunately still in a world where, to paraphrase St. Paul in Romans chapter 7, he performs that which he does not will and each advance in "spiritual understanding" is accompanied by an extension of the empire of the flesh. Los's embrace of his own reality is an extraordinary achievement, but in this embrace the world is no longer held in a struggle between Los and Urizen; in fact, in relinquishing his own claims on the body of the world Los allows it to be completely appropriated by Urizen. It is now quite literally Urizen's garment.

From the point of view of the flesh, Los's embrace of the Spectre gives the fallen world a new vitality. This is why Los and Tharmas now appear
as ruthless and cruel warriors. In embracing the Spectre and the world that he retains, Los (and Tharmas in Los) embraces the form of withdrawal, which is of course the form of war:

Outstretched upon the hills lay Enitharmon clouds & tempests
Beat round her head all night all day she riots in Excess
But night or day Los follows War & the dismal moon rolls over her. . . .

(97:19-21, E362/E394)

In Night the Seventh[b] we therefore are given the reason why the "Union" between Los and Enitharmon

Was not to be Effected without Cares & Sorrows & Troubles
Of six thousand Years of self denial and of bitter Contrition. . . .

(87:27-28, E369/E355)

Los has embraced the form of the fallen world, but this form is the form of withdrawal and dissension.

The difficulty in reading and writing about The Four Zoas at this point is to keep the perspectives of the spirit and of the flesh, the inner and the outer man, Night the Seventh[a] and [b], in clear focus at the same time. This is extraordinarily difficult because the knowledge of good and evil bequeathed to us at the Fall presupposes a separation and distinction between what Los and the poem have brought together. The reader is called to make an embrace every bit as difficult as Los’s embrace of the Spectre.

In Night the Seventh[b] we therefore see an attenuation of the reality of evil which exactly matches the advances in the realm of the spirit that were observed in Night the Seventh[a]. It is now, for example, Luvah (the immortal form of Orc) who is nailed to the tree. This suggests an increase in the sufferings of the victim, and therefore an extension of Urizen’s religion and of his reign of terror:

They sound the clarions strong they chain the howling captives
They give the Oath of blood They cast the lots into the helmet,
They vote the death of Luvah & they nailed him to the tree
They pierced him with a spear & laid him in a sepulcher
To die a death of Six thousand years bound round with desolation . . .

(92:11-15, E364/E396)

Orc is now completely assimilated to the world of Urizen:

No more remaind of Orc but the Serpent round the tree of Mystery
The form of Orc was gone he reard his serpent bulk among
The stars of Urizen in Power rending the form of life . . .

(93:24-26, E365/E397)

and at the very close of the Night Satan appears. Los indeed stands “in the Gate of Luban where / He had erected many porches where branched the Mysterious Tree / Where the Spectrous dead wail.” In Night the Seventh[b] it is only in the penultimate lines that the reader glimpses the possibility of rebirth and recovery which is, thanks to Los’s redemptive
embrace, implied in the fallen world (it is interesting that these lines are again introduced with the word but):

But the Eternal Promise

They wrote on all their tombs & pillars & on every Urn
These words If ye will believe your Brother shall rise again
In golden letters ornamented with sweet labours of Love
Waiting with Patience for the fulfilment of the Promise Divine. . . .

(95:4-8, E367/E2399)

The promise is written on “tombs,” “pillars” (which memorialize the dead) and “on every Urn” (full of the ashes of the dead). In other words, it is in the very shape of the fallen world that we will find the promise of salvation. Los cannot escape the fallen world by retreating from it; he cannot make an easy division between good and evil, spirit and flesh. He is in fact only able to see “the Lamb of God / Clothed in Luvahs robes of blood descending to redeem” (87:43-44, E369/E2355) by embracing the reality which he constitutes, and then by turning his eyes inward to see the course of action that has been made possible by this act.

Night the Seventh[a] and Night the Seventh[b] are therefore in a relationship which can only be called an embrace. At the same point in narrative place and time the reader has two Nights which persist in standing alongside one another. It is in fact odd that the embrace between Los and his Spectre which is applauded throughout the canon of Blake criticism should be denied these two Nights. More importantly, as soon as the Nights are seen to be parallel and contemporaneous and themselves enacting, within the form of the text, “the spectrous embrace,” we are able to see that much of the debate that has raged around these Nights is spurious and misleading. It would be out of place to go into this at length at this point; however, at the risk of being too brief, I conclude that if the Nights are read as parallel narratives of the flesh and the spirit then the apparent discontinuity between the accounts is no longer a problem which must be solved or explained. The narrative discontinuity is as great as that between the inner and the outer man, good and evil. In addition we can explain why Blake reversed the order of VII[a], added the closing lines to VII[b], and by so doing obscured the narrative development which once existed from VII[a] to VII[b]. That a person who has had an illumination as to his own nature should in the next step revert to his old self is a truth that we have perhaps come to expect. That illumination (and the late additions to VII[a] magnify the extent of that illumination) should itself exist alongside of and even depend upon and facilitate the “law of the flesh” is nothing less than shocking. We do not have two alternative Nights, two sequential seventh Nights, or even a single composite Night the Seventh, but two contemporaneous, parallel accounts which cannot be separated. The narrative, like life, doubles itself and we must place together two Nights, the good and the bad, Los’s embrace and his fiery revenge, the inner and the outer man. In The Four Zoas the recognition that good and
evil, spirit and flesh, Night the Seventh[a] and [b], are entangled with one another, and the experience of the tension that this duality introduces into the world, will push Los and provoke the reader until there remains no option but the embrace of the whole Man.