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Blake's Vortex

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Like an imaginative whirlpool, Blake's use of the term "vortex" in *The Four Zoas* and in *Milton* has drawn appreciators to it without their satisfying its demand for explication or filling its void with meaning.1 Much of this image's alluring complexity stems from Blake's graphic representation of vortices, spirals, and circular forms throughout his work.2 While less frequent than its visual counterpart, the term "vortex" in his poetry is nevertheless polysemous. It signifies the selfishhood, jealous and consuming. And it represents an individual's existence within mental states, as well as passage through thresholds of consciousness. Any attempt to establish the limits of this image only serves to reduce its meaning, to blunt the rich suggestiveness which invites imaginative participation in it as a symbol, and ultimately to destroy the subtlety that, Blake tells us, "rouzes the faculties to act,"3 and is essential to his art. Reconsidering the possible sources of the vortex, its connection with the


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uroboros as a cultural archetype, and the several ways in which this im-
portant concept is transmuted, however, reveals in part that art’s genesis
and its intended relation to the perceiving mind.

Blake’s transformation of a natural and traditional image into a com-
plex symbol describing a mode of existence that reflects ironically back
upon its source indicates one significant aspect of his creative method.
Like Shelley, Blake transvalued myth by displacing traditional religious
terms onto individual and interior conditions. The Marriage of Heaven
and Hell is perhaps the clearest (although not the most complete) exam-
pie of this, where angels prevent the expression of divinity, and the road
of excess leads to the palace of wisdom. Yet in the dialectic of the Mar-
riage the coherent myth Blake would later develop in the prophetic books
is not fully realized. The mythic germ is there, but full flowering of it is
undercut by the satire. The transvaluation of the vortex in both The Four
Zoas and especially in Milton, however, provides evidence of Blake’s
process of integrating conventional images, and of transforming them in-
to symbols in “Allegory address’d to the Intellectual powers, while it is
altogether hidden from the Corporeal Understanding. . . .” (Letters, p. 69).
These symbols are charged with multiple meanings, and their diverse
significance must be realized by—indeed, exists only within—the perceiving
mind.

It is generally agreed that Descartes may well have been the source for
Blake’s vortex. The term, employed in the Cartesian sense of a phenom-
enal manifestation of the origin and continuance of the cosmos, was cur-
rent from the middle of the seventeenth century. Johnson’s Dictionary
cites several prominent appearances of the word in the writings of New-
ton, Bentley, and Pope. The OED lists Descartes’s use of the word in his
theory of the cosmos as one of its definitions. It provides examples from
Henry More’s Conjectura Caballistica (1653), Glanvill’s Lux Orientalis
(1662), as well as from Swift and Prior. In his Principles of Philosophy,
Descartes presents a mechanistic model for the operation of matter, the
creation and phenomena of the universe. Like the Deists, Descartes gave
ontological status to a finite cosmology; without the possibility for the
infinite, it was necessarily devoid of humanity for Blake.

Kathleen Raine has suggested that rather than having read about vor-
tices in Descartes, it seems likely that Blake made their acquaintance in a


5. I quote from vol. II of the second ed. (London: 1756), and modernize the typography where appropriate. Newton’s frightening hypothesis evokes visions of the later, but related, atomic chain reaction: Johnson quotes: “If many contiguous Vortices of molton pitch were . . . as large as those which some suppose to revolt about the sun and fixed stars; yet these, and all their parts would, by their tenacity and stiffness, communicate their motion to one another.”

6. The outline of Descartes’s system is provided by the proposition titles in Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, eds., The Philosophical Works of Descartes (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1931), II, 274-75. And in New Studies in the Philosophy of Descartes (London, 1952), Norman Kemp Smith explains the relationship between vortices and Descartes’s cosmology, see p. 118.
work of popular science, originally written in French, but translated into English in 1692 under the title, *A Voyage to the World of Cartesius.* Even if Raine's educated guess is incorrect and Blake never saw this work, *Cartesius* provides a good source for current notions of Descartes's system of vortices and gives a surprisingly clear account of the model Blake may have had in mind.

In "A General View of the Whole Work" of *Cartesius,* we are given its author's estimation of the power and reach of Descartes's vortices: "Scarce any yet have given him disturbance upon the Hypothesis of his Vortices, which is notwithstanding the Foundation of all he says touching the motion of the Planets, the ebbing and flowing of the Sea, the gravity and levity of Bodies; and of his whole System concerning Light, of which he himself has been so very fond." The narrative of *Cartesius* involves a journey by a group of philosophers led by "the Old Gentleman" to M. Descartes who is occupied in space with building worlds. The group questions him about his "vortices," and he replies: "For the comprehending what I mean by this word 'Vortex'; imagine to yourself a round or oval space of matter, which I divide in a thousand little Parts. Suppose these little parts, so many little Giggis, each made to turn about their Axle or their Centre; and bowl'd at the same time about the Centre of that round or oval Space; and that is what I call a 'Vortex' " (pp. 212-13). Each vortex is a firmament at whose center is a fixed star. But for Blake the model is not as innocent as it first appears to be. It comprehends within it the mechanistic and chaotic world Blake associated with Newton and Locke: the natural world of limiting time and crushing space; a material world of body opposed to soul; a world doomed and determined by the action of whirling masses hurtling heedlessly, uncaringly, through space: "For we must consider all these Vortices, as so many Antagonists that dispute it to an Inch, and so long as their Forces are equally matched, gain no Advantage over each other; but as soon as one of them is any ways weakened or disabled, it becomes a Prey to all the rest, each taking in a part of its space, and at last usurping it all" (*Cartesius*, p. 223). It is a cosmology that engenders a vision of

> When Nature underneath a heap  
> Of jarring Atomes lay,  
> And cou'd not heave her head."

Blake saw Descartes's mental constructs creating a world that destroys the possibility for imaginative life in all save those (like Blake) who continue to wage mental war. Blake's response is contained in the several ways in which the vortex manifests its consuming waters in his myth.

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Descartes—if Blake read him or his exegetes—was still not the only source for the icon Blake shapes to suit his artistic needs. Blake owned and annotated John Casper Lavater’s *Aphorisms on Man* (trans. J. H. Fuseli and published in 1789), in which Lavater uses the word “vortex” in a passage Blake showed he loved:

*What is a man’s interest? what constitutes his God, the ultimate of his wishes, his end of existence? Either that which on every occasion he communicates with the most unrestrained cordiality, or hides from every profane eye and ear with mysterious awe; to which he makes every other thing a mere appendix;—the vortex, the centre, the comparative point from which he sets out, on which he fixes, to which he irresistibly returns;—that, at the loss of which you may safely think him inconsolable;—that which he rescues from the gripe of danger with equal anxiety and boldness.*

Blake annotates: “Pure gold” (Blake’s underlining; E., p. 573). As Lavater immediately adds, in words Blake underlines: “The object of your love is your God” (E., p. 573). Lavater secularizes and internalizes God: the mind’s communicant or the person or object it clandestinely reveres and protectively reserves becomes its deity. Fully assenting, Blake later writes that “All deities reside in the human breast” (E., p. 37).

The vortex here represents the loved, the object of one’s imaginative, emotional investment that also constitutes one’s reason for existence. The vortex of our desire is our point of initiation, our constant reference, and our point of return and completion. Lavater specifically selects the vortex to image that center of greatest desire from which the lover begins and to which he constantly refers and ultimately returns. The vortex symbol exists only in motion: it moves in our imaginations. Its constant attraction drawing surrounding matter to its periphery and its periphery to its focus describes the constant interaction between lover and loved. The loved becomes force-field by dint of the lover.

But in Blake’s later prophecies written years after heartily approving Lavater, Blake, like Shelley and Keats, explores the dynamics of obsessive love which ultimately blasts the imagination and consumes the lover. Lavater astutely delineates the compulsions attending this pure love, this ultimate desire: anxiety and boldness in pursuit; inconsolable grief at its loss. As the prophecies show, Blake senses here the potential for union between the love object and the self. The congruence of lover and loved results in solipsism. When the imagination fails to invest itself in other but becomes exclusively self-directed, its vortex describes for Blake only its inward passage toward self-destruction. Blake’s vortex as image and act of such a self-created mental wasteland exploits Lavater’s potential in a mock-Cartesian setting.
I

To God

If you have formed a Circle to go into
Go into it yourself & see how you would do (E., p. 508)

The Concordance to the Writings of William Blake lists twenty-two occurrences of the terms "vortex" and "vortexes." The earliest appearance in the poetry is in The Four Zoas; the latest in Jerusalem, pl. 74. The great majority of times that the term appears, Blake employs it in the first sense suggested: as a metaphor for mental processes. Strongly suggesting the congruence between the mind's organizing itself—revolving itself—about thoughts, hence defining its universe, and the revolution of the vortex, is a passage from one of Keats's letters. Keats, like Lavater, never pursued this "old maxim" to its potentially solipsistic conclusion as does Blake; Keats's great project, of course, was to integrate the imagination with the earth. Yet his image here is appropriate to Blake's vortical interpretation of mental aspects and reveals the figure's poetic appeal as a metaphor for the mind's action: "it is an old maxim of mine and of course must be well known that evey [sic] point of thought is the centre of an intellectual world—the two uppermost thoughts in a Man's mind are the two poles of his World he revolves on them and every thing is southward or northward to him through their means."\(^1\)

The vortex provides a satisfyingly complete image of the operation of the selfhood in Blake's poetry: consuming, destructive, solipsistic. We are reminded that hell is a product of one's metaphysics.

The similarities between Urizen creating his ruined world in The Four Zoas: Night the Sixth, and the work of Descartes as envisioned in Cartesius, are striking. The following passage is at once the anatomy of the scientific mind of the eighteenth century, of the proponents of organized religion, a parody of mechanistic cosmology, and an ironic and frightening analysis of the creation of, and existence in, an ambiance subject to the caprice of the vortex. This existence is also terrifyingly familiar: the "Tearful & sorrowful state" is our own:

Endless had been his travel but the Divine hand him led
For infinite the distance & obscurd by Cumbustions dire
By rocky masses frowning in the abysses revolving erratic
Round Lakes of fire in the dark deep the ruins of Urizens world
Oft would he sit in a dark rift & regulate his books
Or sleep such sleep as spirits eternal wearied in his dark
Tearful & sorrowful state. then rise look out & ponder
His dismal voyage eyeing the next sphere tho far remote

Then darting into the Abyss of night his venturous limbs
Thro lightnings thunders earthquakes & concussions fires & floods
Stemming his downward fall labouring up against futurity
Creating many a Vortex fixing many a Science in the deep
And thence throwing his venturous limbs into the Vast unknown
Swift Swift from Chaos to chaos from void to void a road immense.12

Urizen’s “Creating many a Vortex fixing many a Science in the deep” is
the response of those who deny imagination to the seeming chaos of their
self-created hell. The passage stands as fit dramatization of Blake’s epi­
gram, “To God” (see epigraph). Blake’s image of this metaphysical
answer which is no answer at all, “darting into the Abyss of night his
venturous limbs” to stem “his downward fall,” is represented visually in
Plate 6 of The Book of Urizen (Census copy G): Urizen struggling in
the waters of materialism. Those waters are the material here whirling in the
vortex.

Blake’s irony reveals Urizen trapped within the vortex: his creation
Further, spun off by the vortex from center to periphery, Urizen loses
even the Newtonian fixities of direction and extension:

For when he came to where a Vortex ceased to operate
Nor down nor up remain’d then if he turned & look’d back
From whence he came twas upward all. & if he turned and view’d
The unpass’d void upward was still his mighty wandering
The midst between an Equilibrium grey of air serene
Where he might live in peace & where his life might meet repose.

Kathleen Raine posits the action of centrifugal force upon its victim as
the cause for Urizen’s seeing experience as “upward all”: “This giddy
nightmare is an accurate description of how the vortexes would operate,
driving any heavy body from center to periphery, so that when the travel­
er looked back, ’twas upward all’ to reach the center from which he was
repelled.”13 This is a good beginning with a difficult symbol. But a com­
plex irony is operating here: while Urizen is creating vortexes he remains
within one. Each attempt to create “many a vortex fixing many a Science
in the deep” is one of formalizing the void according to the mental con­
structs of the formalizer. Blake challenges us to project a scientific,
phenomenal process within, and then to differentiate object and creator,
the vortex and Urizen. But we cannot. For Urizen, in reaching the point
“where a vortex ceased to operate,” has reached the center of his own
vortex: he has sunk to the focus of the whirling mass and can only see
upwards. Urizen cannot stem “his downward fall.” His formalizing in

Bloom (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), 72: 2-15. All subsequent references to Blake’s written art are
from: this text which I abbreviate “E.” Numeration of the illuminated books is based on William Blake’s
Illuminated Books: A Census, compiled by Geoffrey Keynes and Edwin Wolf 2nd (New York: Grolier
Club, 1953).
terms of vortices has failed, his science cannot sustain him, and, iron­
ically, he has been sucked down by his own design, his own vortex.

Raine rightly points to the parallel between this vision and the predatory nature of the vortex as described in *Cartesius.* 14 But again, the man­acles upon Urizen's vision are "mind forg'd." There is no uncreated ex­ternal cause for Blake as there was no void for Descartes. And Harold Bloom reminds us (E., p. 875) that in the notes on the *Illustrations to Dante* Blake comments upon a diagram of Hell's Circles: "In Equivocal worlds Up & Down are Equivocal" (E., p. 688).

Urizen equivocally decides to "leave this world of Cumbrous wheels" in order to form a more perfectly solipsistic (and, for him, workable) system elsewhere:

But Urizen said Can I not leave this world of Cumbrous wheels
Circle oer Circle nor on high attain a void
Where self sustaining I may view all things beneath my feet
Or sinking thro these Elemental wonders swift to fall
I thought perhaps to find an End a world beneath of voidness
Whence I might travel round the outside of this Dark confusion
When I bend downward bending my head downward into the deep
Tis upward all which way soever I my course begin
But when A Vortex formd on high by labour & sorrow & care
And weariness begins on all my limbs then sleep revives
My wearted spirits waking then tis downward all which way. (72: 22-32)

Lamenting and searching again for solidity, fixity, Blake describes the consciousness that seeks for a platform from which to extend itself:

Here will I fix my foot & here rebuild
Here mountains of Brass promise much riches in their dreadful bosoms.

(73: 14–15)

Bloom (E., p. 875) picks up the compass image in "fix my foot," as though "Blake were thinking of his own frontispiece to *Europe,* 'The Ancient of Days Striking the first Circle of the Earth.' " If we consider the Ancient describing that circle, his moving compass forms a vortex, now with Urizen outside, and above, the circumference, kneeling in one of the fixed stars formed, according to Descartes, by a vortex.

The results of the first circle are a general fall into vortical (that is, material) existence. Blake invites us to conflate some of his favorite images of materialism with that of the vortex: mills, wheels, gins, nets, woof, tent, web:

And the Sciences were fixd & the Vortexes began to operate
On all the sons of men & every human soul terrified
At the turning wheels of heaven shrunk away inward withring away
Gaining a New Dominion over all his sons & Daughters
& over the Sons & daughters of Luvah in the horrible Abyss
For Urizen lamented over them in a selfish lamentation

Till a white woof coverd his cold limbs from head to feet
Hair white as snow coverd him in flaky locks terrific
Overspreading his limbs. (73: 21–29)

Perhaps a transformed vision of the "Old Gentleman" in Cartesius (see p. 215) who must move deftly from one vortex to another, the grim picture of Urizen shows him

Travelling thro darkness & wherever he traveled a dire Web
Followd behind him as the Web of a Spider dusky & cold
Shivering across from Vortex to Vortex drawn out from his mantle of years. (73: 31–34)

The transformation is a product of prophetic and visionary art here upon the image of the vortex.

Blake had associated vortices so closely with the Urizenic consciousness and its manifestations that in another passage of The Four Zoas: Night the Eighth he particularizes their alteration with the alteration of the other elements of Urizen's world. The conflation of images we noticed earlier is maintained:

Urizen heard the Voice & saw the Shadow. underneath
His woven darkness & in laws & deceitful religions
Beginning at the tree of Mystery circling its root
She spread herself thro all the branches in the power of Orc
A shapeless & indefinite cloud in tears of sorrow incessant
Steeping the Direful Web of Religion swagging heavy it fell
From heaven to heavn thro all its meshes altering the Vortexes
Misplacing every Center. (103: 21–28)

In this remarkable passage hypocrisy is turned against itself; the insidious extension of organized religion ultimately displaces Urizen's cruel "Vortexes." Similarly, any consciousness that attempts to usurp another, like the antagonistic operation of vortices in Cartesius, may be represented as a vortex. The image bears further scrutiny: as the operation of any eddy attracts free bodies to it, consumes those bodies in itself, and draws them to its focus, so the selfhood establishes a force-field about itself that acts in much the same way. We meet the phenomenon in both saints and in dictators. Blake, in fact, invites us to make these associations since none of us "knows" or has "seen" a "vortex" in the way it is used in this poetry. In creating the significance of the symbol for ourselves, we connect abstraction and experience.

In Enion's chant in Night the Eighth the vortex images the chance for renewal: its consuming operation is turned against the consumer:

More happy is the dark consumer hope downs all my torment
For I am now surrounded by a shadowy vortex drawing

15. The "sons of men" are called "the trembling millions" in Night the Ninth (119: 22), and at the point of their apocalyptic awakening we are reminded: "Beyond this universal confusion beyond the remotest Pole / Where their vortexes begin to operate there stands / A Horrible rock far in the south" (119: 24–26). Apocalypse is not yet at hand; "their vortexes" are a grim reminder of this.
The Spectre quite away from Enion that I die a death
Of bitter hope altho I consume in these raging waters. (109: 24-27)

In Jerusalem, Hyle, “the Affections rent / Asunder & opposed to Thought,” is the same principle, for Blake, of religion, mill, reductionist, denier of imagination, hence, of life. He

roofd Los in Albions cliffs . . .
to draw Jerusalem’s Sons
Into the Vortex of his wheels. (74: 28-30)

And in Night the Seventh: [B] of The Four Zoas the Shadowy Female is called “The nameless shadowy Vortex,” and she attempts to consume Orc:

Thus in the Caverns of the Grave & Places of human seed
The nameless shadowy Vortex stood before the face of Orc
The Shadow reard her dismal head over the flaming youth
With sighs & howling & deep sobs that he might lose his rage
And with it lose himself in meekness. (91: 1-4)

The connection between this challenge in “Places of human seed” and the uroboric nature of the vortex is significant, and will become clearer with further discussion.

For Blake, Act is the exuberance of life; it is the declaration I AM, in much the same way that it is for Coleridge. Usurpation is born of the dearth of exuberance, the poverty of forming power, the absence of imagination. Blake’s moral position is clearly stated in the “Annotations to Lavater”:

Accident is the omission of act in self & the hindering of act in another, This is Vice but all Act [from Individual propensity] is Virtue. To hinder another is not an act it is the contrary it is a restraint on action both in ourselves & in the person hinderd. for he who hinders another omits his own duty. at the time

Murder is Hindering Another
Theft is Hindering Another. (E., p. 590)

The operation of the “nameless shadowy vortex” ironically expresses this moral vision. The appropriateness, if not the limits, of the symbol is clear. The vortex here characterizes the electric reach of consciousness extending outward that draws other consciousnesses to it for the purpose of annihilating other and affirming self. The image is what it describes. Blake’s finest irony is that the selfhood thus represented is bounded by material and has, at its core, vacuum.

The symbol as we have so far traced its operation nicely affirms the unity of body and soul; it clearly implies an ironic thrust at Cartesian dualism. Regardless of the particular mental condition described, the vortex symbol effects a Coleridgean fusion of matter and manner: it operates—signifies—only as part of an aesthetic process that demands for its meaning our imaginative participation. The difficulty of imagining the vortex as Blake employs it, of grappling with its complex associa-
tions, "rouzes" our "faculties to act": Blake begins a process that we
must continue, that becomes, rather than formalizing a product that is.
The vortex is the unity of both center and circumference:

1 Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that called Body is a portion of the Soul
discerned by the five Senses, the chief inlets of the Soul in this age.

2 Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward cir-
cumference of Energy. (The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, pl. 4)

Indeed, Blake’s visionary art—art that transforms image to symbol—is,
in its process, expunging the “notion that man has a body distinct from
his soul” (The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, pl. 14). And as we create
the symbol, Blake’s poetics indicates, so we create our cosmology and
our physiology. Blake’s students have long known that form is the ex-
pression of vision. The symbolic operation of the vortex artistically
affirms that knowledge.

Appreciators of Blake’s visual art are familiar with the spirals, coiled
serpents, circles, and eddies, that constantly recur. Consider “Eve
Tempted by the Serpent” (no. 44), and “Every man also gave Him a
piece of money” (no. 79), in Blake’s Drawings. And in the Water-
Colours Illustrating the Poems of Thomas Gray, “The Serpent & the
Wolvish Dog—Two terrors in the Northern Mythology” represents a
huge coiled serpent—with its tail in its mouth—encircled in flames and
suspended above the “Wolvish Dog.” Blake’s serpent devouring itself—
the uroboros of ancient Egypt and “probably the oldest pictorial symbol
in alchemy”—opens new possibilities for the significance of the vortex,
without suggesting bounds to it. And we shall need all the help we can
obtain in attempting to deal with the symbol as it appears in Milton, pl.
15.

II

The Image of the uroboros is archetypal. Its formation in Blake’s
mind may well have been unconscious; Blake possessed the visionary
powers from which archetypes arise. He certainly could have encoun-
tered the mandala in Boehme or in Agrippa. The uroboros has attracted
comment from Blake scholars only as “a perfect emblem of the Self-

16. Drawings of Blake, Selected, Introduction and Commentary by Sir Geoffrey Keynes (New York:
Dover, 1970).
17. (Chicago and Paris: O’Hara and Trianon, 1972). Other manifestations of this shape that come
readily to mind include plates 11 and 13 in the Illustrations to Job, ed. S. Foster Damon (New York:
Dutton, 1969). And in the illuminated printing, observe almost all of Songs of Innocence and of Experi-
ence; Urizen, pl. 14; Thel, pl. 7; The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, plfs. 3, 20; and America, pl. 5. Of
course, this list is by no means exhaustive. See also the examples in De Groot, “The Ouroboros,” pp.
556-562; and Grant, “Visions in Vala,” pp. 178, 184 and 197, tentatively identifies several vortices.
vol. XII of the Collected Works of Jung.
Press, 1968), figs. 3, 4, 14-27, 37-39, and the accompanying commentary, p. 60 ff. (This is vol. IX, 1 of
the Collected Works.)
hood: an earth-bound, cold-blooded and often venomous form of life imprisoned in its own cycle of death and decay"; "an image of the dull mechanic round of unliberated existence and the repeated natural cycle"; a figure used "to represent the natural and the earth-bound." But visions of a tame tiger ("The Tyger") and children happily riding atop a serpent (a coiled serpent, in *Thel*, pl. 7) should warn us that few symbols in Blake can be fixed in singular meaning. And it is obvious from context that these interpretations do not account for the vortex in *Milton*.

The positive process of self-annihilation, reintegration, recreation—indeed, rebirth—that is the process of Milton's, Blake's, and (as I wish to demonstrate), our own transformation in *Milton*, is described as a passage through the vortex, through states of consciousness, through the body, as a child passes through the mother to birth. The uroboros-vortex compounds psychic, physical, cultural, and perceptual experience in a symbol that reaches towards the harmony of conscious and unconscious response in the perceiver, towards the limits of visionary art. Erich Neumann's *The Origins and History of Consciousness* perceptively reveals the fullness of the emblem's significance: "The symbol of the circular mandala stands at the beginning as at the end. In the beginning it takes the mythological form of paradise; in the end, of the Heavenly Jerusalem" (p. 37). And the fluid of the vortex—its waters, if you will—corresponds to the ring-snake of the uroboros: "The primal ocean, likewise an origination symbol—for as a ring-snake the uroboros is also the ocean—is the source not only of creation but of wisdom too" (p. 23). The reader who has followed thus far has probably anticipated the direction of my synthesis: the uroboros-vortex in *Milton*, pl. 15, compounds creation, procreation, and birth—mental apocalypse and concomitant bodily emergence. Neumann writes: "The uroboros appears as the round 'container,' . . . the maternal womb, but also as the union of masculine and feminine opposites, the World Parents joined in perpetual cohabitation" (*Origins*, 13).

In *Milton*, pl. 15, Blake provides an unusual amount of detailed description aimed at helping establish the reader's perspective, orienting the perceiver within the vision. He begins:

As when a man dreams, he reflects not that his body sleeps,
Else he would wake; so seem'd he entering his Shadow: but
With him the Spirits of the Seven Angels of the Presence
Entering; they gave him still perceptions of his Sleeping Body;
Which now arose and walk'd with them in Eden, as an Eighth
Image Divine tho' darken'd; and tho walking as one walks
In sleep. (1-7)

Northrop Frye's remarks on the vortex are most appropriate to Milton

here as subject-and-object, for what Blake describes is like “trying to see a book from the book’s point of view.” As Harold Bloom explains, “Since center and circumference are not separate in eternal vision, the perceiver is at once at the apex of his vision, and yet able to regard it from a distance” (E., p. 829). Yet Frye’s perception bears upon only one aspect of Milton’s existence as he passes through the vortex. Blake’s logical language: “As . . . Else . . . so” signals to us that a crucial concept is being presented. He wants us to be tuned in to the visionary particulars, to the “Sublime Allegory . . . Grand Poem” (Letters, p. 69). With Milton’s multifold division (itself symbolic of the form and operation of Blake’s “Allegory”) in mind, we approach the vortex.

The nature of infinity is this: That every thing has its Own Vortex; and when once a traveller thro’ Eternity Has passd that Vortex, he perceives it roll backward behind His path, into a globe itself infolding; like a sun: Or like a moon, or like a universe of starry majesty, While he keeps onwards in his wondrous journey on the earth Or like a human form, a friend with whom he liv’d benevolent. (21-27)

To pass through the vortex is to pass through a state of existence. Again Blake gives phenomenological reference for a psychic process: perceiving the vortex “roll backward behind / His path, into a globe itself infolding” is an experience akin to looking out the back of a speeding train as it breaks from a long tunnel. But the “globe” of the vortex passed is charged with significance for the “traveller thro’ Eternity” because the natural forms of the vortex, “a sun / Or . . . a moon . . . or . . . a universe of starry majesty,” have been transformed by the imagination. They are invested with human significance. And “a human form, a friend with whom he liv’d benevolent” does in one sense describe this humanization, and in another, closely related, describe the relationship of child to mother in both pre- and post-natal life.

Passing through the vortex is passing through the womb, through innocence, through thresholds of consciousness. These are stages, according to Blake, that must be passed in this fallen world, just as Neumann describes the uroboros being displaced by ego in the developing individual (Origins, pp. 275-86, 358-59). While Blake concentrates upon passing through vortices in Milton, upon transformation, he insists that the nature of infinity is itself defined by distinct vortices. And each vortex,

23. Hazard Adams has described and diagrammed this process as objectification and imaginative displacement of experience from the perceiver outward (Blake and Yeats, p. 107; Blake: A Reading of the Shorter Poems, pp. 31-32). To my mind, the entire process occurs within, as the vortices themselves are mental constructs: the mind itself moves across thresholds of consciousness which are delimited by the vortex image: “Thus is the heaven a vortex pass’d already, and the earth / A vortex not yet pass’d . . . .” Elsewhere, however, Adams (who adopts the term “vertex” to refer to imaginative vision in the books I have cited) comes closest to expressing the fullness of the image as Blake employs it in Milton, pl. 15: the vortex as emblem of eternity. See Blake and Yeats, p. 114.
as Ronald L. Grimes suggests, "symbolizes one's perspective from a particular space-time complex. . . . That a vortex can be passed through suggests that one can transcend any particular space-time situation, but to do so is not to escape being situated altogether." 24 Yet situation itself is, for Blake, self-created. Milton's multifold existence as subject-object capable of perceiving himself as object from the object's point of view exemplifies the imaginative perspective that Milton goes "to Eternal death" to achieve. We see that visionary capability in Blake's triumphant emergence as the Bard in the poem. It is unfortunate that Bloom repeats Frye's remarks with emphasis upon passing "from the outer ring of the whirlpool . . . to the vacuum at the center" (Blake's Apocalypse, p. 325). But in the preceding section of plate 15, like Urizen's movement in The Four Zoas, the passage is into the cone. Unlike Urizen, however, Milton travels through the eddy completely. Seeing the vortex from the inside as Bloom describes, it would appear not as a globe, but as a whirling wall of fluid. The process of transformation occurs not by remaining within, but by journeying through, the vortex.

In the next section of Milton, pl. 15, all earthly existence is described as vortical; Blake connects "The nature of infinity" with the nature of imaginative human perception. For him they are closely identified. Blake, who is often accused of absenting the imagination from the particulars of the world, here defines perception of those particulars in terms of the vortex. As the vortex open infinitely large in the imagination, man surveys his earth—"one infinite plane":

As the eye of man views both the east & west encompassing
Its vortex; and the north & south, with all their starry host;
Also the rising sun & setting moon he views surrounding
His corn-fields and his valleys of five hundred acres square. (ll. 28-31)

The image is one of man at the center of an animated zodiac of rising sun, setting moon. But the animation is self-created. And this is seeing "thro'" the eye, not with it. Yet even this visionary achievement is temporary—heaven and earth are themselves stages of consciousness that must be passed, limiting and limited modes that must yield to the

24. "Time and Space in Blake's Major Prophecies," in Blake's Sublime Allegory, ed. Curran and Wittreich, p. 79. See this brief but very fine analysis of the vortex as crucial perspective, pp. 79–81. Mary Lynn Johnson and Brian Wilkie, "On Reading The Four Zoas: Inscape and Analogy," in the aforementioned festschrift, also view the vortex as organizing perspective: "a way of looking at things, an orientation, a pathway through chaos" (p. 230). And Thomas R. Frosch, our most recent commentator upon the image, continues this analysis: in The Awakening of Albion he too sees the vortex as an emblem of perspective and sight—it "synthesizes the figures of externalization and contraction," providing an "account of the mechanics of perspectival observation"; "Blake is actually describing not imaginative but visual experience" (pp. 69–70, 71). I wish to emphasize that imaginative transformation becomes the passage through one vortex and into another (as Grimes has in part suggested)—or at least begun by such passage. The symbol can express the trap of solipsism, or it can stand, as it does here for Milton, as the threshold to renewed vision. Each situation, each perspective, each vortex, is self-created: the product of imagination or the denial of imagination. Milton and Urizen are principles of mind in Blake's prophecies, and as such they order their own situations. Hence the destructive vortices born ultimately of solipsism in The Four Zoas: Night the Sixth, 72:2-15, and 73:21–26—not pathways through chaos, but chaos itself; not perspectival situations one assumes, but projections of the selfish mind. Blake's vortex image embraces the range of mental acts and expresses them as phenomenal constructs.
infinite and the human. For vision through the vortex, infinite vision, recognizes not the stars or the planets or the earth as balls hurtling through a void:

Thus is the earth one infinite plane, and not as apparent
To the weak traveller confin'd beneath the moony shade.
Thus is the heaven a vortex pass'd already, and the earth
A vortex not yet pass'd by the traveller thro’ Eternity. (15: 32-35)

Passing that vortex is one way of envisioning the theme of Milton: for John Milton/Blake/Bard and for us, a transformation awaits.

Albion, the one and the many, is particularized as the earthly vortex that Milton must pass. The symbol of the vortex is first suggested by Albion “inwrapped with the weeds of death”:

Hovering over the cold bosom, in its vortex Milton bent down
To the bosom of death, what was underneath soon seem'd above.
(15: 41-42)

Milton has entered the vortex, Albion, a state of consciousness, an uroboros: “It is man and woman, begetting and conceiving, devouring and giving birth, active and passive, above and below, at once” (Neumann, Origins, p. 10). Milton is sucked into the fallen consciousness now instantly, much as Urizen was victim of his own vortex. The difference is that Milton, through his act of self-annihilation, is able to pass through Urizen’s “cloudy heaven mingled with stormy seas in loudest ruin” (15:43), through his vortex, and to enter Blake.

While a symbol in Blake tends to become dominant, and, like a vortex, absorb everything around it, I think the passage I have described is central in the poem, and forms the core of a work of art whose movement suggests that of a vortex. The title plate of Milton (Census copy D) shows John Milton facing into a whirling, fiery vortex that has apparently caused the lettering of the title to conform to its movement. It organizes the letters. Yet Milton, right foot forward, right arm raised (significantly, the godly limbs in Christian iconography), goes forthrightly forward towards the transforming eddy, advancing to “Eternal death” that is Eternal life. The final plate (50) can be seen as a before-and-after vision of the vortex stopped. That we are meant to relate it to plate 1 is indicated by the outward-looking human figure. While the two images on either side of this figure certainly appear to be vegetable forms (perhaps the corn of the “corn-fields” of plate 15?), they also strongly suggest vortices. The central figure suggests an androgyne, and corresponds with “the uroboric, i.e., male-female.”25 Its arms are raised like those of a dancer whose spin is instantly stopped; its shape generally suggests the tapering form of the vortex; its “cape” the material of the eddy. It is, perhaps, a vision of the transformed Milton—at least a signal that Mil-

ton has been imaginatively changed from John Milton of the first plate to Milton-Blake-Bard, ready, by plate 50, "To go forth to the Great Harvest & Vintage of the Nations." The transformation was accomplished by the process of Blake’s art; it is a passage through, and a final emergence from, the vortex. And it is Blake’s symbolizing process that allows us to justifiably interpret this human figure on plate 50 both as vortical—he has become what be beheld—and as the vortex stopped.

Blake’s particular use of the vortex is protean; the symbol is polysemous. But in tracing possible sources of the figure, and cultural parallels to it—in attempting to embrace the complex responses that the image engenders—we at least approach the truth of Blake’s artistic process. We participate in what Blake calls “Truth” or fourfold vision by realizing the levels of meaning, constructing the bridges between this symbol and associations on the periphery of its eddy of meaning. Blake also tells us that “whenever any Individual Rejects Error & Embraces Truth a Last Judgment passes upon that Individual” (E., p. 551). It is this apocalypse, finally, towards which the symbol of the vortex reaches.

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