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Blake’s Critique of Enlightenment Reason in The Four Zoas

by MICHAEL ACKLAND

URIZEN is at once one of Blake’s most easily recognizable characters and one of his most elusive. Pictured often as a grey, stern, hovering eminence, his wide-outspread arms suggest oppression, stultification, and limitation. He is the cruel, jealous patriarch of this world, the Nobodaddy—boogey man—god evoked to quieten the child, to still the rabble, to repress the questing intellect. At other times in Blake’s evolving mythology he is an inferior demiurge, responsible for this botched and fallen creation. In political terms, he can project the repressive, warmongering spirit of Pitt’s England, or the collective forces of social tyranny. More fundamentally, he is a personal attribute: nobody’s daddy because everyone creates him. As one possible derivation of his name suggests, he is “your horizon,” or those impulses in each of us which, through their falsely assumed authority, limit all man’s other capabilities. Yet Urizen can, at times, earn our grudging admiration. At his fallen noblest he is akin to Milton’s Satan, battling against insuperable odds, and plumbing the abyss of his own internal hell. On the frontispiece of Europe a Prophecy he is, despite the symmetry and con­striction of his posture, a powerful, awesome figure; while in The Four Zoas he sloughs off the husk of fallen selfhood to become a gorgeous youth and a prime mover in the vintage of the nations. These various attributes have been separately discussed and codified in commentaries with almost Urizenic precision. But the underlying insights into the nature of reason which both explain and unite this multiplicity have escaped critical notice.1

While this omission is in part a result of the tendency to identify Uri­zen with specific attributes, it also arises from our often limited under­standing of the forces by which we seek to explain him. This is particu­larly true of the standard association of Urizen, in some of his roles, with Enlightenment reason.2 According to most commentary, Blake saw

the movement which elevated reason to its eighteenth century pre-eminence as unmitigatedly bad. Its great English proponents, whom Voltaire singled out for his countrymen's emulation, form in Blake's works the satanic triumvirate of Bacon, Locke and Newton. Moreover, the poet is nowhere more consistent than in his scathing attacks on the mere reasoner, and he persistently derides the dominant empirical, experimental approach as "Single Vision & Newton's Sleep." Yet our received, monolithic view of the age has been challenged in recent years by a growing awareness of tensions, even of conflicts, amongst the ideas and results achieved by the main proponents of reason. Blake, as we shall see, was aware of these antithetical tendencies, and attempted to portray their full complexity through the figure of fallen reason in The Four Zoas. For although deism, natural religion, and the effects of empiricism are alluded to explicitly only in the closing Nights of the poem, Urizen throughout is presented as a single, ongoing process, and his characterisation is based on dialectical impulses latent in Enlightenment thinking.

One of the most influential reappraisals of the Enlightenment, and one which in many respects most resembles Blake's critique of his age, is the Adorno and Horkheimer classic Dialectic of Enlightenment. This 1944-work is a direct response to manifestations of totalitarianism in Nazi-Germany and in industrial, democratic America. While both nations presented themselves as active proponents of "enlightened" thinking, their contemporary achievements seemed primarily to be war, domination, and the reification of human life. Blake had responded to a similarly ambivalent and conflict-torn political situation. He had seen the concept of Enlightenment used to justify the slave trade, rapacious mercantilism, domestic repression, and finally wars of empire. For him, as for Adorno and Horkheimer, a system of thought is to be judged as much by its end-products as by its avowed aims. If Enlightenment espouses human emancipation and results in repression, if it exhorts man to progress and yet ends in regression, then there must be contradictory and unresolved tendencies inherent in its very nature. To


5. Obviously the program of the German National Socialists was, in most respects, opposed to Enlightenment precepts; but according to Adorno and Horkheimer their practical manifestations often overlap. For instance, they claim in Dialectic of Enlightenment (London: Lane, 1973) that Enlightenment sympathy "with the social impulse" provides an analogy to "the triumph of repressive equality" in the Hitler Youth (p. 13).
explore the myth of Enlightenment and to rescue its truly worthwhile human objectives was the common aim of Blake and of Adorno/Horkheimer; and so it is to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that I shall turn first for a clear theoretical exposition of dilemmas that Blake projected imaginatively in the Prophetic Books.

Adorno and Horkheimer view Enlightenment not as a specific historical period but as a distinctive feature of human culture. Essentially, it is born of man’s endeavour to escape the thralldom of nature, and to assert his own dominance over a potentially hostile environment. Its roots lie in prehistoric attempts to give shaping, rational significance to natural forces either through the creation of mythological explanations or through the production of primitive implements. Both actions seek to produce order in apparent chaos, to single out enduring principles which can be placated or controlled through sacrifice, as in the case of gods, or through skilled labour. Systematic modes of thought and behaviour arise, life is increasingly viewed in terms of repeatable, manipulable procedures, and what does not conform to these approaches is excluded as unknowable and even non-existent. Hence knowledge is identified with operation: man knows himself and his environment only in so far as he can manage it; and truth is defined and understood in empirical rather than metaphysical terms. Rules of computation, utility, and equivalence prevail; all else is suspect. The result is, as Adorno and Horkheimer recognize, totalitarian: absolute and crushing conformity is the only possible outcome of a process dictated from the outset. “Enlightenment behaves toward things as a dictator toward men. He knows them in so far as he can manipulate them. The man of science knows things in so far as he can make them.” What are normally held to be humanity’s great advances may then, in fact, constitute parts of a continuing process of rigidification, which reduces all aspects of existence to a single, reduplicable and unchanging model, to death-in-life. Enlightenment, and its main tenets of reason and order, form thus an ambiguous presence in all periods of civilization, although their effective reign is not always as openly acknowledged as in the eighteenth century.

The program of Enlightenment, as it is pursued in Western societies, is seen by Adorno and Horkheimer as being ultimately self-defeating, because it generates a series of negative dialectics. In setting out to free man from superstitions and myths, reason enters unavoidably on the path to deeper immersion in mythological thinking. It merely replaces the earlier myths, which themselves incorporate elements of enlightened thought, with rational procedures. These in turn partake of the very essence of myth, through their explanation of events as parts of a repeated pattern and through their claims of universal validity, so that

empirical science becomes a new mystery and the agent of profounder enslavement. As Adorno and Horkheimer note, the experimentalist assumption of repeatability "imprisons man in the cycle—that cycle whose objectification in the form of natural law he imagines will ensure his action as a free subject" (p. 12). Similarly, "what appears to be the triumph of subjective rationality, the subjection of all reality to logical formalism, is paid for by the obedient subjection of reason to what is directly given" (p. 26). In obsessively trying to subordinate nature, man confirms his mental subjugation; just as in trying to circumscribe its scope he creates narrow conceptual bounds beyond which he is unable to pass: "world domination over nature turns against the thinking subject himself; nothing is left him but that eternally same I think" (p. 26).

In effect, myth and its primeval natural roots are more powerful in an ostensibly enlightened world, because they have "entered into the profane . . . under the title of brute facts" (p. 28), and so constitute the basis of all officially sanctioned, empirical methodologies. A similar awareness of these complex issues also informs the varied presentations of Urizen, first in The Book of Urizen and then in The Four Zoas, although in the latter Blake attempts both to explore the battle of reason with nature, and to envisage this faculty abandoning dominion to work in creative unity with the forces of vision and inspiration.

Blake's first major attack on the Enlightenment myth appears in The Book of Urizen, where Urizen is identified with the workings of empirical reason. Although Urizen is presented here primarily in religious terms, as "the primeval priest" and as a demonic recasting of the god of Genesis and Paradise Lost, the work's satiric thrust arises from Blake's comprehension of the dialectics of Enlightenment. As commentary has demonstrated, Urizen and his universe are modelled on the most influential theories of the Enlightenment's English proponents. Prelapsarian eternity is described specifically in anti-Newtonian terms as "Earth was not: nor globes of attraction" (U 3:36, E70/K223); and the fallen demiurge Urizen can be seen both as a symbol of Locke's conception of substance and as an acting out of the empiricist's model of cognitive perception—reflecting, dividing, abstracting. As both the object and instigator of the creative process depicted, Urizen is the substratum from which Locke's simple ideas emerge; and the Lockeian mind which


“turns its view inward upon itself and contemplates its own actions.”

The supposedly objective, empirical realm is thereby shown to exist only as a function of mind; while theories of science and deism are revealed to be hopelessly circular: man projects the natural world and then discovers confirmation there of his notions of fact and divinity. By attributing the dominant empirical methodologies to Urizen, Blake forces the reader to recognize that what passes for truth or proven knowledge in this life is virtually indistinguishable from priestcraft and superstition. Furthermore, this early embodiment of enlightened thought is shown to be unmistakably totalitarian. Urizen’s idea of unity is not a multiplicity in harmony, but the autocratic, self-projecting state of a Louis XIV:

Let each choose one habitation:
His ancient infinite mansion:
One command, one joy, one desire,
One curse, one weight, one measure
One King, one God, one Law. (U 4:36-40, E71/K224)

His hierarchy of compulsion is opposed to change and contrast: “I have sought for a joy without pain / For a solid without fluctuation” (U 4:10-11, E70/K224). Yet in keeping with the dialectical nature of Enlightenment, each attempt to enforce this code produces an antithetical effect. Reason’s drive for cosmic dominion ends in solipsistic isolation; its creative acts produce only destructive confusion, rigidity, and contraction; its essays to develop civilization engender constant human regression. The work concludes with mankind in Egypt, the biblical land of spiritual bondage; and the ensuing Lambeth books add little to this initial portrait of negative Enlightenment.

The crucial development in Blake’s characterization of Urizen comes in The Four Zoas, where the Enlightenment problematic is explored within the context of a radically humanized Christianity. In The Book of Urizen there is no indication that the demiurge is capable of positive action either in time or in his unfallen state; and the poem opens with the eternal faculties already slipping into a state of chaos. In the later

10. Kittel cites this passage from Locke’s An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (II, 19, i) on p. 136.


epic, however, these negative events are seen against the backdrop of infinite, atemporal existence. Each scene of fallen history is envisaged as part of an ineluctable passage towards regeneration, while the pre- and translapsarian potential of reason for good is also acknowledged. Moreover light, and by implication reason itself, are seen as attributes of deity or, in Blake’s terms from *The Laocoon*, as parts of “The Eternal Body of Man . . . The Imagination that is God himself . . . Jesus we are his Members” (E271/K776). Hence Urizen, even at the height of his power, laments the paradise lost that resides in spiritual wisdom, and his fallen peers also compare the two states: “Urizen who was Faith & Certainty is changd to Doubt” (FZ 27:15, E311/K282). These contrasts inevitably associate temporal enlightenment with that process of rational questioning which sought “the disenchantment of the world, the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy” (p. 3), and with totalitarian despoliation:

Till the Divine Vision & Fruition is quite obliterated
They call thy lions to the fields of blood, they rowze thy tygers
Out of the halls of justice, till these dens thy wisdom framd
Golden & beautiful but O how unlike those sweet fields of bliss
Where liberty was justice & eternal science was mercy
(FZ 39:7-11, E320/K292)

Here, as in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the most splendid constructs of civilisation are suspect, subverting natural energy into war, and an eternity modelled on the revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity into a restricted, reified state. But far from being negative, this new, dual perspective on Urizen leads beyond the earlier satire to dialectical progression. The recognition of true and false creative impulses within his realm provides a means for eventually enrolling the rational faculty amongst the forces working for humanity’s salvation.

The impact of this Christian teleology on Blake’s portrayal of Enlightenment is evident as early as Urizen’s first creation in Night the Second. Now even the actions presided over by fallen reason reveal a positive dimension to the visionary eye:

While far into the vast unknown, the strong wing’d Eagles bend
Their venturous flight, in Human forms distinct; thro darkness deep
They bear the woven draperies; on golden hooks they hang abroad
The universal curtains & spread out from Sun to Sun
The vehicles of light, they separate the furious particles
Into mild currents as the water mingles with the wine.

14. Although strictly speaking rational and empirical procedures are quite distinct from one another, in that the findings of the former depend exclusively on self-referential mental processes whereas the latter rely on conclusions drawn from natural observation, Blake saw them as interchangeable manifestations of distorted reason. As Donald Ault explains in *Visionary Physics: Blake’s Response to Newton* (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1974), for the poet “Descartes and Newton symbolize polar aspects of one mode of error, the purely logical” (p. 23).
While thus the Spirits of strongest wing enlighten the dark deep
The threads are spun & the cords twisted & drawn out; then the weak
Begin their work; & many a net is netted; many a net
Spread & many a Spirit caught, innumerable the nets
Innumerable the gins & traps; & many a soothing flute
Is form'd & many a cored lyre, outspread over the immense
In cruel delight they trap the listeners, & in cruel delight
Bind them, condensing the strong energies into little compass
Some became seed of every plant that shall be planted; some
The bulbous roots, thrown up together into barns & garners

Then rose the Builders; First the Architect divine his plan
Unfolds, The Wondrous scaffold reard all round the infinite

Familiar Blakean notions of corporeal entrapment and of usurpation by
cunning, weak intellects are countered by the subsuming perception of
this realm both as a temporary stay against non-entity, and as a necessary step towards eventual salvation. Consequently, what was merely
the restricting Tent of Science in The Book of Urizen assumes here the attributes of a daring, glorious creation, performed by soaring, human-
oid forms. 15 These “Eagles” of intellect demonstrate that the life of
imagination is still possible in the upper or inmost reaches of Urizen’s empire. 16 Beneath these hardwon levels, forms of energy succumb to
those of “compassing” reason; and natural existence remains cruelly
locked into a cycle of death. Seeds generate stones; and the first fruits of
this cycle are deluded cosmic builders who would have “the heavens
squared by a line” (FZ, 30:10, E313/K284). But although visionary
powers have been transformed in the course of the passage to the most
basic form of vegetative existence, “bulbous roots,” imagery of seeds
and harvest hints that the devolution may be reversible, that individual
roots may grow towards spiritual redemption as “Human forms dis-

15. Cf. They began to weave curtains of darkness
They erected large pillars round the Void
With golden hooks fastend in the pillars
With infinite labour the Eternals
A woof wove, and called it Science (U 19:5-9, E77/K231)

In Blake’s cosmology, of course, the Tent of Science is synonymous with the Mundane Shell, as the
later encompasses and constitutes the sphere open to scientific enquiry.

16. The most detailed commentary on this passage to date, Nelson Hilton’s “The Sweet Science of
the Atmospheres in The Four Zoas,” Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly, XII (1978), 80-86, asserts that
“These eagles suggest the great scientists of the century, like Halley and Newton, who even in life, were
very commonly presented as pursuing extra-mundane, cosmic voyages of intellect” (p. 82). But this
negative association is hardly persuasive in view of Blake’s consistent recourse to the eagle, both ver-
bally and visually, as a symbol of divine inspiration, as in the allegory of the Printing house of Hell
(MHH15, E39/K154-55), or in the full-plate illustration of an eagle hovering over the recumbent forms
of Albion and Jerusalem in Milton, Book the Second, discussed exhaustively in J. A. Wittebrechts. Jr.,
Moreover, not all commentary is in agreement with Hilton’s reading. Bloom remarks of the same scene
that Urizen retains “still genuinely divine power as a creator” (“Commentary,” E870), W. H. Steven-
fallen realm described in Night the Third (p. 64).
tinct." These possibilities are strongly reinforced by imagery of regeneration in the preceding lines. There the "universal curtains" are formed which Christ's crucifixion will rend; and the mystery of atonement is again evoked through the Eucharistic mingling of water and wine to render "furious particles" mild, much as Christ's suffering will mark a first step towards redeeming the Urizenic ranks of war in Night the Seventh (b). The passage reads like an exercise in positive dialectical thinking. Like the epic as a whole, this depiction serves as a "vehicle of light" which carries us beyond the imaginatively bounded world of The Book of Urizen to a new chiliastic envisioning of reason.

Despite this recognition of positive attributes, much of The Four Zoas is devoted to analyzing the consequences of false Enlightenment in the fallen world. For Blake must first expose the delusive impositions of reason if he will bring the reader to realization of humanity's true potential. In The Four Zoas, as in the Adorno and Horkheimer treatise, Enlightenment is seen to be a feature common to all periods of human history. Blake's depiction of the initial creation thus links Urizen's proud lust for dominion with acts of perverted enlightenment. "Strong scales," subduing "compasses," "Cubes . . . fix[ed] in their awful stations" convey the monarchical, dictatorial nature of his enterprise, as do commands "with care & power & severity" to enslaved brethren labouring "in darkning woe lamenting." In this autocratic state regenerating light and its concomitant of vision exist only as a felt absence in such lines as "no Visions in the darksom air," and "that sulphur orb that lights the darksom day" (E312/K283). Instead, "furnaces of affliction" produce molten metals, sparkling pyramids "heated red hot" cleave dark chaos, and Urizen's great palace "glowed bright / With ever streaming fires beaming from his awful limbs" (E313/K284). The illumination afforded by this "infinitely beautiful" work, like its movements, is restricted to the same dull, wearisome round of unaided reason as the stars themselves:

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Travelling in silent majesty along their orderd ways
In right lined paths outmeasurd by proportions of number weight
And measure. mathematic motion wondrous. along the deep
In fiery pyramid. or Cube. or unornamented pillar
Of fire far shining. travelling along even to its destind end
Then falling down. a terrible space recovring in winter dire
Its wasted strength. it back returns upon a nether course
Till fired with ardour fresh recruited in its humble season
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17. This regenerative notion, far from being an isolated concept in Blake's works, plays a vital role in the later prophecies, as Edward J. Rose demonstrates in "'Forms Eternal Exist For-ever': The Covenant of the Harvest in Blake's Prophetic Poems," in Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic, pp. 443-62; and "Blake's Human Root: Symbol, Myth and Design," Studies in English Literature, XX (1980), 575-90.

18. The link is driven home by Urizen's first designation here as "King of Light" (FZ 31:1, E314/K285).
It rises up on high all summer till its wearied course
Turns into autumn. such the period of many worlds
(FZ 33:22-31, E315/K287)

The geometrical heavens reflect Urizen's terrestrial creation with that
terrible solipsistic symmetry engendered by self-contemplating reason.
All is necessity, totalitarian, imaginative entropy; an alternating quick­slow
movement of abstractions, performing with mathematical regular­
ity the continual dance-of-death which constitutes vegetative existence.

This conception of the Enlightenment problematic as a recurrent
phenomenon is projected in Night the Sixth through Urizen’s journey in
the Abyss. There the Prince of Light repeatedly sinks overwearied into
a death-like, vegetative slumber, then rises to renew his apparently end­
less journey. Commentary has identified these “resurrection[s] to sor­
row & weary travel” (FZ 71:34, E342/K316) with successive ages of his­
tory; and Blake describes them in terms of the dominant empirical
methodology as “all his wandering Experiments in the horrible Abyss”
(FZ 81:1, E349/K324). At each stage Urizen produces the hallmarks of
rational thought, “many a Vortex fixing many a Science in the deep”
(FZ 72:13, E342/K316), for he is seeking enlightenment, which is syn­
onymous in his mind with dominion. Consequently each of his actions is
essentially dictatorial: a fixing, an ordering, a denying of diversity,
which transposes the lessons learnt in the struggle with nature to the
subjugation of one’s fellow man.

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
(FZ 73:21-24, E343/K317)

But with each increasingly triumphant historical avatar, the King of
Light, the truly enlightened monarch ruling in “Godlike State” beyond
“the bounds of Science” (FZ 80:41-42, E349/K324), becomes more
deeply ensnared in a self-destructive dialectic of his own making:

He [Urizen] sufferd him [Orc] to Climb that he might draw all
human forms
Into submission to his will nor knew the dread result
(FZ 81:5-6, E349/K324)

Like Adorno and Horkheimer, Blake views all historical manifesta­
tions of Enlightenment primarily as fear-inspired, foredoomed attempts
to subjugate nature. Throughout *The Four Zoas*, Urizen is motivated by terror of those unchecked natural forces, represented initially by the chaotic realm of Tharmas.

Mighty was the draught of Voidness to draw Existence in
Terrific Urizen strode above, in fear & pale dismay
He saw the indefinite space beneath & his soul shrunk with horror
His feet upon the verge of Non Existence. . . .

(FZ 24:1-4, E309/K280)

Yet the methodological reliance of empirical, scientific thought on sensory experience means that it is never able to escape dependence on the natural world. Hence the King of Light’s first creation, instead of transcending, only succeeds in incorporating Vala, or the quintessence of nature, in all its wondrous structures: “the hewn stone / Is placed in beds of mortar mingled with the ashes of Vala / Severe the labour” (FZ 30:12-14, E313/K284). This inescapable dialectical dilemma and its consequences are presented imaginatively through the climactic encounter of Urizen with his consort Ahania in Night the Third.23 There Ahania is banished for those very features which characterize Urizen and his enslaved realm:

Thou little diminutive portion that darst be a counterpart
Thy passivity thy laws of obedience & insincerity
Are my abhorrence. Wherefore hast thou taken that fair form
Whence is this power given to thee! once thou wast in my breast
A sluggish current of dim waters. on whose verdant margin
A cavern shagg'd with herid shades. dark cool & deadly. where
I laid my head in the hot noon after the broken clods
Had weared me. there I laid my plow & there my horses fed
And thou hast risen with thy moist locks into a watery image
Reflecting all my indolence my weakness & my death
To weigh me down beneath the grave into non Entity

(FZ 43:9-19, E322/K295)

The speech moves from direct criticism of the object through acknowledged attraction to condemnatory self-recognition in her “watry mirror.”24 The irreconcilable nature of Enlightenment goals and methods stands revealed;25 and reason, acting according to its highest dictates,


25. A parallel act occurs at the end of Night the Eighth, when the satanic forces of Enlightenment condemn Mystery, and then restate as Deism those natural phenomena upon which they rely. As Frye
precipitates its own realm back into the grip of that primeval nature from which it has never fully escaped.

Similarly, Blake suggests that the repressive political and moral codes sponsored by enlightened reason are a direct response to feared outbreaks of unpredictable, and therefore ungovernable, natural energies. These are projected through Orc, the nightmare embodiment of a future which could render the rationalized face of nature a “Cavern'd Universe of flaming fire.” Confronted with a vision of uncontrollable horses of instruction and of an accelerated vegetative cycle in which destructive flames “Dance on the rivers & on the rocks” (FZ 77:13, E346/K320), reason can only fall back upon its ordered, repeatable systems, hoping fearfully to accommodate those forces of which its codes of war and behaviour are only pale reflections. To fierce Orc

Urizen answerd Read my books explore my Constellations  
Enquire of my Sons & they shall teach thee how to War  
Enquire of my Daughters who accursd in the dark depths  
Knead bread of Sorrow by my stern command for I am God  

(FZ 79:20, E348/K322)

Dominion, not human betterment, is Urizen’s goal. It is the ruling passion behind his Newtonian-based heavens, and it is revealed “in his books of brass,” whose savage moral logic seeks to enforce abject submission. As in Dialectic of Enlightenment, so here the constructs of reason bear witness to a heightened form of natural thralldom, for they arise, not from a desire for humanity’s progress, but from a static, besieged mentality, which “Traces the wonders of Futurity in horrible fear of the future” (FZ 79:16, E347/K322), while also dreading regression to a primitive past, in which all is a chaotic “Struggling to utter the voice of Man struggling to take the features of man. Struggling” (FZ 44:18, E323/K296).

In Night of the Sixth Blake traces the destructive passage of enlightened reason through the realm of nature and primitive myth to its triumphant self-assertion in human society. Adorno and Horkheimer illustrate a corresponding process with the journeyings of Odysseus (pp. 32–80). In his various encounters they see the struggle of rational thought, the self-reflective I, to free itself from the state of nature or, more generally, “the opposition of enlightenment to myth . . . expressed in the opposition of the surviving individual ego to multifarious fate” (p. 46). Whether the danger is posed by Circe, the sirens, Cyclops, Charybdis and Scylla or Hades, the basic pattern of response is always the same. Humanity, intensely aware of its comparative physical weakness, seeks to elude the primeval threat by stratagems which involve yielding the self to superior forces, and yet allow the I by cunning ulti-

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Acknowledgments: “The gospel of an objective nature is a gospel of mystery, and when it becomes plain that it is mystery, it is forced into that paradoxical dilemma of a revelation of mystery which is what Deism is” (Fearful Symmetry, p. 303).
mately to escape and overcome these powers. Odysseus, by rendering his oarsmen deaf and himself bound to the mast, can surrender himself to the siren’s allurement; much as he escapes the Cyclopes’ rage through self-abnegation: he reverts linguistically to the condition of primal non-entity by assuming the name of No one. During his own “terrific voyage,” Urizen also collapses repeatedly into the helpless, death-like sleep of nature, only to arise to renewed rational productions, which will culminate in the formation of “another world better suited to obey” (FZ 73:18, E343/K317):

But still his books he bore in his strong hands & his iron pen
For when he died they lay beside his grave & when he rose
He siezd them with a gloomy smile for wrapd in his death clothes
He hid them when he slept in death when he revivd the clothes
Were rotted by the winds the books remaind still unconsumd
Still to be written & interleavd with brass & iron & gold
(FZ 71:35-40, E342/K316)

Cunningly, each necessary submission to the overwhelming natural dictates is turned into, and preserved as, a form which will assure their eventual control. The Adorno-Horkheimer description of Odysseus applies equally to the voyaging monarch’s action in Night the Sixth: “the estrangement from nature that he brings about is realized in the process of abandonment to nature he contends with in each adventure” (p. 48).

From its outset, Urizen’s exploration of his natural dens is presented in terms of a traditional forcing of the gates of hell: itself a theme identified by Adorno and Horkheimer with “the very core of all antimythological [and hence enlightened] thinking” (p. 76). The hero, complete with spear and helmet, attempts to cross a river leading into hellish regions of “sulphur,” “racks & wheels,” “burning wastes,” and peopled with the hideous forms of “dishumanized men” (340). Adorno and Horkheimer remind us how Odysseus, in his journey to the nether world, meets “primarily the matriarchal images banished by the religion of light” (p. 75). Similarly, Urizen first meets the blocking presence of “three terrific women,” in an encounter which encapsulates again the Enlightenment problematic. As the scene reveals, the women are at once the daughters of Urizen and yet they are closely identified with the life-forces of nature, both by their colours of blue and green and by their control of the nourishing waters. These matriarchs have already been “banished” in Urizen’s preceding condemnation of his self-mirroring realm; and now, in the repetitive, self-enclosed manner characteristic of empirical thought, he unwittingly re-enacts his earlier judg-

26. Commentary has noted the domineering attitude of mind to matter in this Night, but has not grasped its wider relevance to the Enlightenment problematic. See Mary Lynn Johnson, and Brian Wilkie, “On Reading The Four Zoas: Inscape and Analogy,” in Blake's Sublime Allegory, pp. 227–32; and Blake's Four Zoas, pp. 118–39.
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... cursing his own "female" creation and thereby worsening the condition of that natural world upon which he relies. This negative interplay between reason and instinctual life is then driven home in an unequivocal form with the appearance of lamenting Tharmas. He suggests a pack of mutual destruction between himself and Urizen, which recognizes the interdependence of their respective attributes:

Withhold thy light from me for ever & I will withhold
From thee thy food so shall we cease to be & all our sorrows
End. . . .
Thou shalt pursue me but in vain till starvd upon the void
Thou hangst a dried skin shrunk up weak wailing in the wind

These despairing proposals carry through to their logical conclusion the forces set in motion by enlightened reason. Its dominion-seeking actions, described in Night the First, have reduced nature in Tharmas to the deathlike chaos of sensory experience, and locked thought into the self-destructive circle portrayed in Nights the Second and Third. There Enlightenment creates the image of nature it both fears and needs; and so is involved, like Urizen, in Night the Sixth, in an ongoing battle against its own misshapen "children." Stripped bare of its historical rhetoric, the advance of reason appears a "dismal voyage," which traverses the full dialectical spectrum from successful assault on the source of all mythologies, through to desperate fending off of overwhelming forces from the Abyss with the chilling, self-enveloping webs of rational thought.

Having traced the workings of reason in humanity's mythic prehistory, Blake then portrays in Nights the Seventh and Eighth the consequences of Enlightenment's hidden contradictions in European civilization. In these Nights enlightened reason erects its universal empire and godlike temple, while its empirical drives to limit life to a series of repeatable, interchangeable procedures are depicted as "arts of death," ending in man's alienation from his work, his fellows and his spiritual heritage. But the harder Enlightenment flees its secret fears, the closer it brings their realization. The universal wars Urizen has dreaded are now unleashed in the delusive hope of augmenting his power, while his


28. And in their stead intricate wheels invented Wheel without wheel
To perplex youth in their outgoings & to bind to labours
Of day & night the myriads of Eternity, that they might file
And polish brass & iron hour after hour laborious workmanship
Kept ignorant of the use that they might spend the days of wisdom
In sorrowful drudgery to obtain a scanty pittance of bread
In ignorance to view a small portion & think that All
And call it Demonstration blind to all the simple rules of life (FZ 92:26-33, E396/K337)

increasing sway ensures the ubiquitous presence of threatening, dehumanized nature throughout his empirical realm, with "the Shadowy Female absorbing / The enormous Sciences of Urizen ages after ages exploring / The fell destruction" (FZ 102:26-28, E360/K344). What to the Prince of Enlightenment appears the constructive subjugation of his corporeal realm is, in fact, correctly grasped by the natural forces as "fell destruction" of visionary life, and in a parallel action ("exploring") exploited to increase humanity's thralldom. An unwitting victim of the dialectical tendencies he has generated, Urizen triumphantly regresses to that reptilian, death-like state he has so long feared, and yet unconsciously honoured in his role as expounder of scientific knowledge: "his human form a Stone / A form of Senseless Stone remaind" (FZ 106:31-32, E357/K332). Here "Senseless" stands as a definitive judgment on the King of Light's entire program. For his sensory realm not only owes its supposedly objective meaning to human perception and its very existence to the Eternal Man, but it is ultimately self-destructive. Enlightenment has no need of Tharmas's suicide pact, as through its own rational systematizations it has effectively reached the state of "a dried skin shrunk up" from eternal existence. In the words of Adorno and Horkheimer, "the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant" (p. 63); and, "with its last mythological covering removed," "the history of thought" is exposed as "an organ of domination" (p. 117).

But whereas Adorno and Horkheimer devote little space to the possibility of a redeemed role for reason, Blake makes its realization the triumphant climax of his epic. Dramatically opposed images of Urizen are offered in the last Nights which challenge us to perceive both difference and continuity in the Prince of Light's antithetical roles. In Night the Eighth, his petrific, reptilian form provides the occasion for a final denigration of the Enlightenment ideal, as understood in purely rational and empirical terms:

No longer now Erect the King of Light outstretched in fury
Lashes his tail in the wild deep his Eyelids like the Sun
Arising in his pride enlighten all the Grizly deeps
His scales transparent give forth light like windows of the morning

His Eyelids give their light around his folding tail aspire
Among the stars the Earth & all the Abysses feel his fury

Up bound the wild stag & the horse behold the King of Pride
Oft doth his Eye emerge from the Abyss into the realms
Of his Eternal day & memory strives to augment his ruthfulness

29. This final state of abasement is prefigured after the fall of the Prince of Light's first realm, when "Urizen slept in a stoned stupor in the nether Abyss" (FZ 52:20, E328/K302), while it is pointedly contrasted with Enion's apocalyptic hymn at the end of Night the Eighth, which envisages all creatures, stones included, as "scattered portions" of "The Eternal Man" (FZ 110:6,26, E370/K355-56).
Then weeping he descends in wrath drawing all things in his fury
Into obedience to his will. . . .


Pride and dominion are insistently equated with the very act of enlightening. By implication, the cult of reason is revealed to be the most recent manifestation of satanism and a humanity-degrading system, which achieves its totalitarian advances at the cost of imitating its own rigidifying, despiritualizing procedures. Moreover, although enlightened reason retains here imaginative potential, as did its first creation described in Night the Second; unaided it is insufficient to allow humanity’s permanent escape from the Abyss. Instead, the unfulfilled vision of “Eternal day” is displaced into perverted, vengeful forms, which reassert the negative dialectics of fallen existence. With Newtonian arrogance Urizen, at the height of debasing power, had sent “his folding tail aspiring / Among the stars.” But in Night the Ninth he learns, through the influx of “The Imagination . . . Jesus” (E271/K776), of the immanence of the infinite: “Thro Chaos seeking for delight & in spaces remote / Seeking the Eternal which is always present in the wise” (FZ 121:9-10, E375/K361). In Blake, self-recognition is simultaneously the acknowledgement of error and the re-emergence of the true eternal self:

. . . he [Urizen] shook his aged mantles off
Into the fires Then glorious bright Exulting in his joy
He sounding rose into the heavens in naked majesty
In radiant youth. . . . (FZ 121:29-32, E376/K362)

This renewed concept of enlightened reason is as transformed as its features. Scaled reptilian is replaced by naked human form, weeping and wrath give way to joy, and aspiration signifies glorious concord not lust-for-dominion. Throughout his fallen existence, Urizen has retained a kernel of true illumination like “a seed in the vast womb of darkness” (FZ 73:9, E343/K317), so that even in his most dehumanized form, the emphasis falls on outer restricting attributes like “Eyelids” and “scales,” which deflect or control the free-flow of light. In this state, the visionary eye “emerges” only as a synonym for possible imaginative ascension. Now at last, with limiting “mantles” removed, light is no longer restricted to the vegetative “Eyelid”; but becomes a force irradiating the whole form, as reason prepares to become one with the other members of divine humanity.

Ultimately, what separates Blake’s vision of Enlightenment from that of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is his fusion of Christian millenianism with his faith in the regenerating power of art. Although Adorno and

30. Even in this debased form Urizen is still capable of imposing on both his subject-creatures and his readers. Christine Gallant for instance, in *Blake and the Assimilation of Chaos*, sees his flames as energizing rather than as domineering manifestations; and so misses the passage’s emphasis on the rigidifying and consolidating of error, when she argues that “those parts of the natural world that had formed the Zoas’s deadening construct of Ulro here are animated and revitalized” (p. 89).
Horkheimer acknowledge the inherently dialectical nature of writing, its capacity to be itself and something else (pp. 15-24), they can never entirely transcend their overwhelmingly negative experiences, which included the apparent capitulation of art in the face of totalitarianism. But Blake came increasingly to redeem reason through his conception of all man's faculties as "Members" of Jesus, or the divine imagination; while proving, in his own person, that true art could be maintained in "time of trouble." In the Lambeth Books, the relationship of reason and imagination remains unclear. Blake's theoretical pronouncements place them in stern opposition; but The Book of Urizen suggests a prelapsarian symbiosis of the two, for Los is rent from Urizen's side, and in Europe a Prophecy the sons of Urizen attempt to link their music with that of Los. By the composition of The Four Zoas, Los's redeeming labours unequivocally depend on the support of reason:

From out the ranks of Urizens war & from the fiery lake
Of Orc bending down as the binder of the Sheaves follows
The reaper in both arms embracing the furious raging flames
Los drew them forth out of the deeps planting his right foot firm
Upon the Iron crag of Urizen thence springing up aloft
Into the heavens of Enitharmon in a mighty circle
(FZ 90:29-34, E356/K331-32)

The depiction recognizes the antithetical faces of reason, its destructive and constructive potential, and affirms the necessity for both. Vision operates "upon" the stubborn structures of reason, be they linguistic or phenomenal. It reveals within fallen existence divinity and infinity, implicit in the images of "heaven" and "a mighty circle." To the visionary eye, the world of Urizen is one with that of Los/Urthona, and these collectively constitute the Body of Christ. Thus a measure of reason's redemption in the last scenes of The Four Zoas becomes its gradual disappearance from the main action. Urizen, from being the prime mover in the apocalyptic harvest, is finally present only through the stored "Corn" ground by the eternal prophet, Urthona (FZ 138:1, E391/K378). Usurping reason, as history-bound mortals know it, ceases to exist. In its stead is "the golden armour of science / For intellectual War," forged by the newly risen, Christlike figure of Urthona to dispel the "war of swords," and to usher in the reign of "sweet science" (FZ 139:8-10, E392/K379).

In The Four Zoas, Blake is able to reconcile the roles of reason and imagination, and thereby to offer a redeemed conception of Enlightenment. The awesome constructive capacities of reason, captured in earlier works like "The Ancient of Days," are now acknowledged to contain regenerative potential, while Blake's thorough understanding of

the dialectics of Enlightenment enables him to highlight the antitheses and essential continuities inherent in reason's diverse manifestations:

They [the Sons of Urizen] Sing they seize the instruments of harmony they throw away
The spear the bow the gun the mortar they level the fortifications
They beat the iron engines of destruction into wedges
They give them to Urthonas Sons ringing the hammers sound
In dens of death to forge the spade the mattock & the ax
The heavy roller to break the clods to pass over the nations (378)

(FZ 124:17-22, E378/K365)

This prelude to apocalypse emphasizes the paths open to reason. It can pursue a course ending in totalitarian domination or, by aligning itself with the forces of art, can transform the hard data of empiricism and war into the means of genuine illumination. Art, understood as a synthesis of intellect and vision, becomes thus a "vehicle of light." It also becomes the true hero of the later Prophetic Books who, even more than Odysseus, is capable of fulfilling the ordinances of the fallen world and yet of transcending them.

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