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Urizen's Quaking Word

by KATHLEEN LUNDEEN

Though there is no consensus on how to read the illustrations in The Book of Urizen, they have generally been regarded as a cooperative partner in Blake’s poem. If we examine the self-referentiality of Urizen, however, a disjuncture between text and design becomes apparent, not unlike that which we find in “The Tyger.” Visually, we confront images of confinement, the futile attempts of cramped figures to escape a claustrophobic environment and, in several instances, to break out of the frame of the plate. The figure in Plate 23, for example, tries to extend the surface area of the plate (front cover), while the figure in Plate 27 challenges the two-dimensional space in which he is trapped (back cover). The language of the poem, by contrast, describes and enacts the burst of pent-up energy. We could resolve the apparent disparity between word and picture by assigning each a chronological function in the poem, the illustrations presenting some “before” condition, the text an “after.” But the tension between the two media suggests a less congenial relationship. Taken together, they constitute a contrapuntal discourse through which Blake depicts the paradoxical nature of image making.

As the illustrations reveal, the line which defines (be it verbal or visual) also confines. In Plate 5 Urizen exhibits the open book of the title page, showing a text of forms or figures rather than letters (fig. 1). The plates subsequent to Plate 5 present close-ups of the figures of Urizen’s open book; the figures are the words of his text, and their fate, I shall argue, is the fate of the pure tongue: for this is a poem about the fall of language. As Urizen peruses his book in Plate 5, his dark shadow broods over these figures, as if foreshadowing their doom. If we take the figures on the plates as linguistic rather than human or mythological, then we can regard the plates which follow #5 as describing the hell to which oppressive reason has subjected language, the violent themes of the plates—sinking into blackness, gravitational-boundedness, agonizing contortion, stillborn existence (suggested by the fetal position of the skeleton in Plate 8), imprisonment by chains, a crushing avalanche, a consuming fire, en-

1. I have followed Geoffrey Keynes’s numbering of the plates, based on Copy D of the poem.
2. Urizen’s book, with its indecipherable script, resembles the sphere in the frontispiece of The Song of Los, which is also covered with writing. Urizen’s world is literally a text, just as his text constitutes a world.
Fig. 1. William Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, Plate 5.
trapment by rocks, binding by heavy ropes—all suggesting the tortured fate of language bound by reason and, in turn, of life bound by a fallen linguistic model.

The text subverts the argument of the illustrations by exhibiting the impossibility of writer or reader (artist or viewer) holding an image in check. The poetry both describes and performs the bursting of creative bonds, which I shall explore in detail. These competing forces do not resolve dialectically into a third force, nor does one prevail over the other, as Paul Mann suggests. Mann argues that Blake shows the case of language, at least in its written form, to be a closed book. I shall contend that the central issue in the poem is not the inescapability of textually-enforced closure, the impetus behind language being, after all, to enclose an idea or an image. The dilemma in the poem is rather that the insistence of closure is countered by successful resistance to such closure. In Urizen, Blake challenges the reader to negotiate the abyss which lies between these conflicting dynamics in language.

At one time Blake’s apologists attributed what appears to be linguistic “overgrowth” in the prophecies to hasty editing or careless composition. More recently, commentators have sought to justify his seeming untidiness with the argument that he has freed his poetry from conventional grammatical and semantic rigidities. Thus, one critic contends that Blake rebels against the formal constriction of the imagination imposed by the fallen tongue and in this way creates a more flexible verbal system. I shall argue that Blake’s prophecies appear to be written in an unfamiliar mode because he supplies an x-ray view of ordinary language, an incisive look that makes the elusive—indeed, undisciplined—nature of the fallen tongue transparent. By shunning the naively secure verbal practices in the manicured poetry of his contemporaries, Blake unearths the semantic chaos which invades every linguistic utterance and virtually crowds out singleness of meaning. “Blake’s purpose,” notes Leopold Damrosch, is “to expose the slipperiness of ordinary language in its most ordinary manifestations.” Nelson Hilton identifies the source of this slipperiness: “The word is polysemous in its very constitution. . . . The very idea of language is the metaphor.”

A distinction must be made, however. Fallen language is intrinsically metaphoric. But as the longer prophecies indicate, Blake envisions an unmediated tongue, one which restores ontological unity between signifier and signified. Susan Fox sees in Blake’s vocabulary, which primarily consists of redefinitions of familiar terms, “a curious

literalness." It is true that Blake's language is not arbitrary and that he chooses his words with more care than readers are normally willing to admit. But, as we will see in Urizen, his vocabulary is not discrete: words overlap and subsume one another in the manner in which the zoas mingle and share identity. Blake challenged the prevailing eighteenth-century view which made a sharp distinction between literal and figural language by demonstrating that an ordinary word is as much a servant of metaphor as is a self-conscious symbol. In our time such a view has become commonplace; metaphor has advanced in status from rhetorical embellishment to linguistic principle. Paul Ricoeur observes in *The Rule of Metaphor*, "There is no non-metaphorical standpoint from which one could look upon metaphor, and all the other figures for that matter, as if they were a game played before one's eyes." And even more directly, "far from being a divergence from the ordinary operation of language, metaphor is [in the words of I. A. Richards] 'the omnipresent principle of all its free action'" (80). Ricoeur further says that "metaphor does not produce a new order except by creating rifts in an old order" (22). Rhetorical "riifting" is in fact at the heart of the drama in *Urizen*.

W. J. T. Mitchell, in a discussion of *Milton*, speaks of "a current in Blake's language . . . [which is an] 'apocalyptic pressure,' a sense that the system of words before the reader is continuously straining to explode into a new order." This quaking phenomenon appears in many of Blake's poems, but it finds its most explicit manifestation in *The Book of Urizen*. Though quaking is not always destructive in Blake, in this early prophecy geological rupturing has no constructive function, and it comes as no surprise to learn that Urizen is the force behind the damaging upheaval.

In the pre-Urizenic world, "eternal life sprung" (3:49), and the divine breathing decreed existence: "The will of the Immortal expanded / Or contracted his all flexible senses" (3:47-48). But this pulsating action is fatally interrupted when Urizen asserts himself. *The Book of Urizen*

11. Stuart Curran discovers a similar phenomenon in *Jerusalem*, and, as his discussion indicates, in Blake, quaking is sometimes a constructive force: "The intertranscious structures of *Jerusalem* continually repeat the rhythms of a fundamental dramatic event, demanding that we hold in perfect equilibrium within our minds the archetypal act, the potentials of its variation, and an expanding consciousness of its symbolic meaning. Where the mind contracts, it perceives a microcosmic dialectic; where it expands, it describes the cosmos of all human history. If it strains that expansion to the breaking point, it transfigures the myth and creates an infinity of realized human potential" (*The Structures of Jerusalem* in Blake's Sublime Allegory, 345).
opens at the site of an earthquake fault, and it is implied that Urizen is the “Demon / [who has] form'd this abdominable void” (3:3-4). The poet reports how “Times on times he divided,” and how “changes appeard / In his desolate mountains rifted furious / By the black winds of perturbation” (3:8, 10-12). Urizen himself is victimized by his own disruptive activity, a moral irony which prevails in all of the prophecies. The oppressor is also the oppressed: “Urizen was rent from [Los's] side; / . . . / Unorganiz'd, rent from Eternity” (6:4, 8); “the wrenching of Urizen heal'd not / . . . / [He was] Rifted with direful changes” (7:4, 6); “Like a dark waste stretching chang'able / By earthquakes riv'n” (10:3-4). Urizen's quaking initiates a chain reaction: even Los, who attempts to heal the now-embodied schism that is Urizen, is subject to convulsions: “His bosom earthquak'd with sighs” (13:49). The Eternal Prophet “was divided . . . / The Abyss of Los stretch'd immense” (15:1, 5). In turn, Los’s offspring, Orc, “Delv[ed] earth in his resistless way” (19:44) at the time of his birth. The quaking force is highly concentrated in Orc, as shown by violent burstings of the girdle with which he is repeatedly bound.

The entire universe of Urizen quakes destructively, undergoing both abnormal expansion—“his heavens immense cracks / Like the ground parch'd with heat” (23:16-17); “throughout all / The tormented element stretch'd” (25:15-16)—and permanent contraction (the roof of Urizen's cavern contracts to become the roof of the brain, the womb-like cavern becoming Enitharmon's womb, and the globe-like cavern the globule of blood; even future generations shrink up from existence, vividly described in the last chapter of the poem). The principle of contraction, manifested in this imperfect repetition of images, makes the entire poem resound like a distorted echo. For Urizen's agitated universe is a perverse mimicry of the divine breathing, its destructive rhythm alternating between expansion to the point of rupture and shrinkage to the point of collapse.

Mitchell attributes the quaking in Milton to “Blake's radiant obscurity, . . . his frequent use of the rhetoric of violence and noise, . . . [and] his frequent and calculated use of apocalyptic imagery.”13 These are all features not just of Milton, but of all the prophecies. The upheaval in the poetry has deeper philosophical roots than Mitchell's analysis suggests. Blake's rumbling language is not only a metaphor for the apocalypse. It is also self-descriptive. Urizen's quaking, we discover, is primarily a verbal phenomenon: “his ten thousands of thunders / . . . stretch out across / The dread world” (3:28-30), and he “utter[s] / Words articulate, bursting in thunders / That roll'd on the tops of his mountains” (4:3-5). Early in the prophecy Urizen declares the impetus behind this violent rumbling: “I have sought for a joy without pain, / For a solid without fluctuation” (4:10-11). That is to say, reason yearns for concrete abstraction, indeed for spiritual matter, since in itself it is in a perpetual state of

alienation, always divorced from what it seeks to know. Paradoxically, Urizen's object of study is nothing more than the child of his own brooding. Blake describes this condition in the Preludium: “Eternals spurn’d back [Urizen’s] religion; / And gave him a place in the north, / Obscure, shadowy, void, solitary” (2:2-4). Whether the foreboding adjectives describe Urizen, or the north, or both, is left ambiguous by Blake, inviting one to consider Urizen as constituting the place he occupies, and thus underscoring the exile of one who lacks even the company of an environment distinct from himself.

Urizen’s response to the complementary problems of remote abstraction and fickle concreteness only accentuates his solitude: “Here alone I in books formd of metals / Have written the secrets of wisdom / The secrets of dark contemplation” (4:24-26). Urizen, an anti-muse who “unfold[s] . . . darkness” (4:31) instead of light, reiterates that his book has been “written in [his] solitude” (4:33), reconfirming the isolated perspective inherent in analogical language: whether written or spoken, the fallen word is always declared in a “soul-shudd’ring vacuum” (3:5). In other words, one names an idea or an object either by inventing his own private language or by redefining existing terms from within the precincts of his own consciousness. Blake clearly shows that the action which triggers the ensuing confusion in Urizen’s universe is not merely contemplation but the formulation of that contemplation, specifically the act of writing. Donald Ault rightly observes, “Urizen’s attempt to use logical language is the linguistic analogue for his attempt to reduce flexibility to solidity. In either case the result is chaotic . . . logical language is the language of chaos.”14 Furthering this line of thought, I shall argue that to Blake logical language is, more precisely, analogical. The primary victim of Urizen’s initiative is not life but language: life falls from a state of grace because language falls from a state of pure literalness.

Fallen language, the product of Urizen’s “Dark revolving” (3:18) is, like its creator, a closed system, a “self-contemplating shadow” (3:21) which neither reflects nor transmits light. It does not convey a world apart from itself but exists in a state of what might be called semantic claustrophobia. Anya Taylor notes, “When words create they cruelly bind; when they call imaginary things into being, they doom them to fixity.”15 Damrosch is even more explicit in identifying the controlling mechanisms which manipulate thought: “Syntax is tyrannical, forcing us to think along its lines, and every individual word is haunted by associations that the user cannot escape.”16 The illustrations of Urizen confirm such a view, but the poetry demonstrates that the enforced fixity is only momentary. The unnatural pressure of reason’s confinement causes the word to explode into scattered indefiniteness. To appropriate Saussure’s terms, each instance of

15. “Blake’s Moving Words,” 76.
parole contracts the semantic potential of langue, only to burst from that constraint in superfluous significations. Urizen’s world, a linguistic phenomenon, undergoes precisely this violent upheaval:

Sund’ring, dark’ning, thund’ring!
Rent away with a terrible crash
Eternity roll’d wide apart
Wide asunder rolling
Mountainous all around
Departing; departing; departing;
Leaving ruinous fragments of life
Hanging frowning cliffs & all between
An ocean of voidness unfathomable. (5:3-11)

With each repetition of a word, the word’s meaning “departs.” Immediate repetition reduces language to metronomic, nonverbal sound; even remote repetition diminishes the sense of a word, decreasing its particularity and increasing its generality. Ironically, of course, without repetition a word would be meaningless, for meaning is born in the associative echo produced by the word. The self-destructive nature of language is once again apparent: the action which produces meaning also destroys (former) meaning. The departure of meaning, which occurs every time a word is used, explains the futility of any attempt to discover absolute meanings in words, which are but “ruinous fragments of life,” disconnected from the objects and ideas they are supposed to signify. These verbal fragments drift in “An ocean of voidness unfathomable,” whether that ocean be blank page or unarticulated silence.

Urizen’s linguistic activity, which reduces Babel to babble, initially imprisons the unfallen Logos, signified by the inflexible, metal binding of his book; hence, too, the words are said to be “In chains of the mind locked up” (10:25). The subsequent changes of Urizen are likewise bound “with rivets of iron & brass” (8:11). Hilton notes, “By his chains, Blake gives us to understand that man serves as his own jailer, imprisoned by his vocabulary, culture, and perception.”17 What Blake is clearly saying in all this is that the fate of language is the fate of man. Martin Heidegger describes the reciprocal relationship of words and wordsmiths in somewhat less threatening terms, though he points to the same inescapable condition:

In order to be who we are, we human beings remain committed to and within the being of language, and can never step out of it and look at it from somewhere else. Thus we always see the nature of language only to the extent to which language itself has us in view, has appropriated us to itself.18

The reader of Blake who struggles against semantic promiscuity, grammatical perversion, character displacement, narrative discontinuity rarely

17. Literal Imagination, 78.
Fig. 2. William Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, Title Plate.
remembers that he is, in Blake's words, "Like as a Monkey peeping in a Mirror," viewing the topography of his own mind. In the title-plate, Urizen appears to be transcribing what he is reading, his left foot directing his eye across the page in front of him, while both hands are inscribing books on either side of him (fig. 2). Reading is writing, reconstituting another's symbols into a self-styled sign system.

Contending with the egotistical reason of Urizen, there is a principle of spontaneity which seeks to emancipate the victims of mechanical rationality. Los, who is Urizen's contrary, perpetually challenges Urizen's decrees, though he, too, falls victim to the tyranny of alienated reason; at the sight of Urizen and his chaotic creation, Los's eloquent voice is reduced in the end to a primitive howl. Under the pressure of Urizen's violent quaking, the poetic tongue itself becomes inarticulate.

Ironically, Urizen's rigid linguistic deeds unleash the dark energies of the word, its capacities for semantic multiplicity: "unclasping / The Book of brass" (4:43-44) causes a violent eruption:

Rage, fury, intense indignation
In cataracts of fire blood & gall
In whirlwinds of sulphurous smoke:
And enormous forms of energy;
All the seven deadly sins of the soul

In living creations appear'd
In the flames of eternal fury. (4:45-5:2)

There is a paradox here of determinacy (Urizenic naming) giving rise to indeterminacy. One can resolve it, however, by extrapolating from Stephen Carr's discussion of Blake's design. Carr argues that Blake is able to maintain a nontyrannical visual syntax in spite of definite outlines, as the pun in Blake's "bounding line" demonstrates: "Lines and outlines set boundaries and establish limits; but they also bound or leap, moving over the page in exuberant bursts of energy."20 Blake's lines of verse, written in the language of Urizen, also "bound"—delineate specific meanings and leap beyond those meanings into other semantic possibilities.

The furious reaction to Urizen's acts of definition is all the more curious because Urizen himself is introduced, unnamed, in the Prelude: "Eternals spurn'd back his religion; / And gave him a place in the north" (2:2-3, emphasis added). Besides creating suspense, the referenced pronouns allow Urizen to be seen from a non-egotistical perspective. In Chapter One, the perspective contracts as Urizen is named: "Some said / 'It is Urizen', But unknown, abstracted / Brooding secret, the dark power hid" (3:5-7). Once again, Urizen bears a resemblance to his progeny, the fallen word, whose being is a "brooding secret" rather than manifest revelation. Language has the unsolvable mystery of a Chinese

box: we uncover one meaning only to discover the potential of another meaning which "broods" beneath the other surface. Though named, Urizen remains unidentified, as is demonstrated by the qualification that immediately follows his naming. Blake alludes here to the essential superficiality of naming, which delimits but fails to individualize its subject. This superficiality is even more apparent in the catalog of life forms in Urizen's wilderness: "he strove . . . / In unseen conflicts with shapes / . . . / Of beast, bird, fish, serpent & element / Combustion, blast, vapour and cloud" (3:13-17). Blake's point is clear: naming categorizes life, though claiming to particularize it. Appropriately, Urizen, "a shadow" (3:1), strives only with "shapes" of life, with generalities rather than with particular forms. Deprived of distinct identity, his name-designated creation eludes its own creator.

Early in the poem reference is made to Urizen's name: the poet remarks how "vast clouds of blood roll'd / Round the dim rocks of Urizen, so nam'd / That solitary one in Immensity" (3:51-53). By linking the naming of Urizen to images of solitude and solidity, Blake makes the point that naming separates, isolates, solidifies. Later, describing Urizen's self-imposed bondage, Blake again calls attention to Urizen's name—"Urizen (so his eternal name)" (10:11)—stressing, this time ironically, the inescapable limits a name imposes on life. Urizen's self-victimization by the naming process is clearly ironic: he is the principal offender in that cosmic crime, as indicated by his legalistic attempt to control life by determining its name and nature. The ritual of naming continues in a parody of Genesis when the Eternals christen Urizen's self-destroying creation: "They call'd [the first female form] Pity" (19:1), "called [the woven woof] Science" (19:9), and "call'd [the Web] The Net of Religion" (25:22). The self-perpetuation of this defining process is confirmed by the children of futurity who in the tradition of the Eternals "form'd laws of prudence, and call'd them / The eternal laws of God" (28:6-7). This fusion of law and language exposes the seemingly innocuous naming as severe legislation which would dictate the limits of identity both of life and of language.

The abnormal stretching and contracting which result from naming, and which regulate Urizen's universe, produce not only rubble (fragments of language) but also aberrant manifestations of life, such as "light frozen / Into horrible forms of deformity" (13:42-43). These are shown verbally in Blake's text in two ways, by the incongruous series of metaphors (abnormal semantic stretchings) and by the many distortions of words produced by the dental suffix "d" (abnormal contractions). The hard "d" ending—simultaneously the perverse heartbeat of tyrannical analysis and the unrelenting beat of time—is the dominant sound throughout the poem. The past tense ending produces a deadening effect, not only upon the verbs which it entraps ("consum'd," "writh'd," "stiff'd") but also upon adjectives ("gloom'd," "anguish'd") and even nouns ("earthquak'd"). The
eighteenth-century convention of contracting the "ed" ending to "d" here visually reinforces the sense of language shrinking with the rest of life.

The grammatical and orthographic shift from the noun "earthquake" to the verb "earthquak'd" epitomizes the semantic convulsion which causes a rift in language. Each time a word (or a book) is read, it rumbles, shifts semantically to accommodate the perspective of the reader, a perspective which is never stable. Critical thinking has traditionally handled language as if it were intractable. But the "rumbling" of a single linguistic unit, whether that unit be an entire book or only a single syllable, causes the linguistic ground to quake and results in a displacement of meaning, a phenomenon which has been exploited by deconstructionists.²¹

Blake exposes the semantic instability of fallen language in several ways. Throughout the poem the narrative is held up by the most slender of linguistic supports. Each cataclysmic event is reported, not as an occurrence but only as an appearance. When Urizen explores his dens, for example, he "sicken[s] to see / His eternal creations appear" (23:8-9). The self-contracting ambiguity of "appear" leaves one wondering whether the event actually happened or whether it only seemed to have happened. Similarly, the term "vision" contains an inherent semantic conflict. Is a vision that which is actually viewed or that which is only imagined? The poet introduces this ontological uncertainty in his invocation in the Preludium to the poem: "Eternals . . . / . . . fear not / To unfold your dark visions of torment" (2:5-7). Though the words "appear" and "vision" occur infrequently in the poem, their function is critical: they tell the reader how to evaluate the events to which they refer by showing that although words seem to be solids without fluctuation, in fact they are substantial illusions. The impotence of fallen language is paradoxically coupled with its excessive power. Urizen describes his habitat as "A void immense, wild dark & deep, / Where nothing was" (4:16-17). The predicative "was" elevates "nothing" to the status of something, reversing the metaphysical order of existence and imputing delusion as well as illusion to language.

Not only do words rebel internally against semantic fixity, they also shift unpredictably from one meaning to another in their interplay with other words. A major cause of difficulty in reading the poem has, in fact, to do with the inconstancy of its metaphors. Marc Rosenberg wrestles with what he terms the "free-floating similes and metaphors" in Urizen in an attempt to uncover the nature of the incorporeal world of this seemingly incoherent and scientifically improbable narrative.²² He qualifies his perceptive stylistic analysis, however, by admitting the limited gains of such a pursuit. In spite of Urizen's efforts to legalize and delimit, his rigid

²¹. See, for example, Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context" in Margins of Philosophy, trans. Alan Bars (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982).
language is not bound by one meaning ("one law"); frequent and un-predictable fluctuations in meaning evoke a stream of seemingly unrelated associations that present either an order of life which eludes empirical reasoning (as Rosenberg argues) or a life devoid of any kind of order whatsoever.

Untangling the strands in this network of shifting metaphors will not completely decode a poem which deliberately evades specificity; but an examination of its semantic progressions will reveal something of the anarchical state of reason-based language. The ever-shifting narrative, as Rosenberg shows, is unified by several metaphors which undergo transformation in the course of the poem. One of them is Blake’s comparison of the universe to the human body. Underlying this metaphor are two pairs of recurring images which are intrinsically antagonistic to each other: the generative images of “womb” and “globe” and the fallow and lifeless images of “void” and “rock.”

Womb, globe, and heart are presented as similes for Urizen’s universe: “like a womb; / . . . / . . . like a black globe / . . . / Like a human heart . . . / The vast world of Urizen appear’d” (5:29-37). This early clue to their interchangeable natures prepares us for the blurring of each throughout the poem and justifies Blake’s unannounced and effortless evolution of one metaphor into and out of another.

Not only are the metaphors metaphors of one another; each also defines diverse phenomena. Thus, the body functions initially as a simile for Urizen’s universe but later on is localized as a metaphor for Urizen’s response to his universe. At the same time, it is the product of Los’s welding (10:1-13:19). Toward the end of the poem, the human body is shown in a state of anarchy, an image of the lawlessness of Urizen’s creation:

\[
\text{And his world teemed vast enormities} \\
\text{Frightning; faithless; fawning} \\
\text{Portions of life; similitudes} \\
\text{Of a foot, or a hand, or a head} \\
\text{Or a heart, or an eye. (23:2-6)}
\]

Toward the end, the decay of the body prophesies the devolution of man:

\[
\text{Then the Inhabitants of those Cities:} \\
\text{Felt their Nerves change into Marrow} \\
\text{And hardening Bones began} \\
\text{In swift diseases and torments, . . .} \\
\text{Till the Shrunken eyes clouded over . . .} \\
\text{[and] Grew small like the eyes of a man. (25:23-36)}
\]

Blake then compares the thirty cities of future generations to a human heart, affirming the inherently cyclical character of Urizenic creation and reminding us that what appears to be a new, contemporary world is, in fact, only the ancient world of Urizen all over again.

The womb image also changes in the course of the poem. “Natures wide
"womb" (4:17) is first reduced to Urizen's cavern, then to Enitharmon's loins. During Enitharmon's gestation period, the activity in her womb repeats the activity in Urizen's rocky cavern-prison. This contraction in scale and perspective—from the womb of the universe to the womb of a single woman—defines the narrowing of Urizen's vision.

The least precise of the three metaphors for Urizen's cavern, the globe, is the most versatile. Before Urizen creates his universe, the not-yet-existent planets are described as "globes of attraction" (3:36). After the creation, the black globe (noted above) becomes a simile for Urizen's universe and acquires an additional meaning as "the dark globe of Urizen" (5:38): the genitive ambiguity here suggests that Urizen not only possesses the globe but also constitutes it, as though the globe had become a metaphor for reason and had assumed the shape of the human skull. Appropriately, the universe of the egocentric creator extends no farther than his limited perception: Urizen is his universe. The globe becomes more directly associated with Urizen when Los creates a body for him: "From the caverns of his jointed Spine, / Down sunk with fright a red / Round globe hot burning" (11:1-3). Subsequently transferred to Los, it is identified as a "globe of life blood" (15:13), which we later learn is Enitharmon—objective nature—in embryo. It is finally transformed into the "globe of fire" (20:48) that lights Urizen's path as he explores his dens. Functioning as a symbol of the planets, the universe, the ego, the animus of man, the fetus, and a lantern, the globe links those various manifestations by its treacherous promise of infinitude and its actual effect of constriction. As an image of life it is a cruel delusion.

Countering the apparent fertility of womb and globe are the lifeless images of void and rock. The void, a kind of unproductive womb, haunts Urizen throughout the poem. Wherever he journeys, he finds himself in a void: in the Preludium he is exiled to a void; his underworld, where he interacts with his macabre creation, is also "an abdominable void" (3:4); in the midst of his self-generated chaos, he inhabits "An ocean of voidness" (5:11); and in the aftermath of his self-imposed hell, he finds himself in a "dark void" (13:39). The effect, though kaleidoscopic, is a powerful trick of the imagination since the phantasmagoric universe in the poem is only a void. The intense and varied descriptions of Urizen, his breathtaking transformations, are also poetic magic since he is merely a shadow. Once again, Blake calls the trustworthiness of human language into question. Language can charm one into seeing a world which does not exist.

As the void is a womb in appearance but, being vacant, is antithetical to a womb in function, so the rock counters the globe. Hard, cold, lifeless, the rock incarnates the stoniness of reason. The void Urizen inhabits is Urizen himself, and the rocks which are the primary building blocks of his universe are the stoniness of his nature. Like Adam, Urizen is cast into "a stony sleep" (6:7) after he recreates the universe by naming
it. The stony sleep, a fusing of the images of void and rock which reinforces the negative quality of each, is very likely the rock to which Orc is chained. Orc’s name, an anagram for "rock," suggests that he too is the victim of self-imposed bondage.

Connecting these two sets of images is the web/net construction. Blake explicitly defines the web as "a Female in embrio" (25:18), and so links it to the images of womb and globe; the web is gradually exposed as a strangling force, uncovering its conspiracy with the more blatant death images of void and rock. This fatal weave is first identified as "The Net of Religion" (25:22), then as "the dark net of infection" (25:30), and finally as "the Net of Urizen" (28:13). Hilton discovers the larger implications of this web in his examination of Blake's design: "The 'net of Religion' entangling Urizen on the final plate of his book may . . . be seen as another version of the linear web he was engraving on the first."23 The linear web he engraves is, in fact, language, and the "Net of Religion," an appropriate epithet since language is ritualistic naming—fixing in place—of the biblical "I AM" of life. As "woven hypocrisy" (25:32), it imprisons all of creation as exemplified by the culminating image of the poem. "Urizen’s entrapment," Mitchell observes, "is implicit . . . in the very act of making those creations."24 It is indeed fallen language which Urizen has created, a network of names, of parasitic metaphors, which encroach on one another's meaning to bind pure, unfallen expression, and along with it, the expresser as well. Heidegger's description of verbal entrapment could almost serve as an epigraph for Urizen: "Language and linguistics have been caught fast in [the] rigid forms [of grammar], as in a steel net."25

Urizen's desire for "spiritual matter" backfires and produces a less stable universe than the one which previously existed. In Mitchell's words, "Urizen's search for a 'solid without fluctuation' is like trying to cap a volcano; it merely serves to build up pressure so that the inevitable outburst of energy is more violent and destructive."26 Urizen discovers the impossibility of creating "spiritual matter" (an ontological contradiction) when he views his creation: "he saw / That no flesh nor spirit could keep / His iron laws one moment. / For he saw that life liv'd upon death" (23:24–27). "Life" here refers to mortal existence, by analogy, mortal (fallen) language; and "death" refers to change. Fallen language is in a perpetual state of flux since every time a word is used it changes from its former meaning, acquiring a new one according to the context in which it is used and the perspective of speaker, writer, listener, or reader. Urizen learns that if "the solid" of life ceased to fluctuate, it would cease to exist;

moreover, that because "the solid" of life is ephemeral, it is more shadow than substance. Paradoxically, Urizen is described both as shadow (3:1) and "clod of clay" (6:10); one infers that matter is only shadow, and alienated reason, as grossly material as unanalytical matter. Though rational thought appears to belong to the realm of spirit, Blake shows it to be just another form of matter.

The ontological contradiction which Urizen embodies is magnified in the illuminated poem itself. If we read text and design together, the opposing manifestations of rigid determinacy and random indeterminacy challenge each other, as I have suggested. The cramped figures, which sometimes seem too big for their frames, appear to rebel against the close quarters to which the artist has confined them. The overdetermined metaphors, on the other hand, seem to have escaped the parameters of the artist's intent. The reader has to contend with figures which have too little space and words which have too much. The spatial "problems" in Urizen signal that the artist is above all a framer. The fundamental decision facing poet or painter is where to draw the line between text and the nontexual, or art and that which lies outside of art. Though this line may "bound" with each new reading or viewing, without a horizon there would be no art, and without uninscribed space (actual or imagined) there would be no horizon.

In Urizen, Blake dramatizes the Urizenic mind's reconstruction of language as mediator between physical and metaphysical realms. Language does not merely articulate the interface between the two spheres; it is that interface. Philosophically, language (more generally, art) is the frame of perception, and the artist is the framer. Human consciousness dwells neither in matter nor in spirit nor in a region accommodating both but in the illusory interface of language. As Blake forcefully demonstrates, language fails to reconcile matter and spirit; they are unequivocally incompatible states of being. Reason's attempt to fuse them deforms the pure, unfallen Logos, binding the divinely literal with the limited perspective of the metaphoric, so that the Word no longer is; it merely represents.

Works Cited


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