

## The Rhetoric of Sublime Astonishment in the Burkean and Blakean Readings of Milton

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*HJEAS*

“Mark well my words! they are of your eternal salvation.”  
(Blake 482)

Paul de Man presents the task of reading as the sublime failure—and he is not the first one to do so. In *The Critique of Judgement*, Immanuel Kant already claims that estimating the magnitude of monstrous objects in nature involves two operations: in the phase of apprehension, the imagination tries to understand or grasp their greatness—that is, partly its own greatness—while during comprehension, it tries to unite and totalize the apprehended sight. The perplexity aroused in the spectator is caused by a “failure” of imagination, since the spectator’s imagination reaches its maximum and, as it cannot expand that maximum, it sinks back into itself (Kant 105). In his *Aesthetic Ideology*, de Man compares the mental process of apprehension and comprehension to the process of reading, “in which . . . the eye moves horizontally in succession whereas the mind has to combine vertically the cumulative understanding of what has been apprehended” (77). Therefore, the continuous unfolding of the text inevitably challenges one’s ability to synthesize the covered passages, images, and rhetorical figures. The experience of such an effort and the resulting blockage have also been termed “the reader’s or hermeneutical sublime” (Weiskel qtd. in Hertz 50).<sup>1</sup>

The difficulty of interpretation and the sublime astonishment that follows are particularly characteristic of the reading of William Blake’s prophecies. My paper has two aims. First, I intend to elaborate on the conceptual background of the Blakean sublime in order to identify points of connection to the Burkean understanding of the concept; and second, I also aim to show that, despite the striking antagonism between the philosopher and the artist, their interpretations of the sublime become intertwined in their readings of John Milton’s works. Although Edmund Burke’s seminal work on the sublime, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), is deeply affected by John Locke’s highly influential sensualist-empiricist philosophy, in some cases, Burke proves to be strikingly anti-Lockean. Albeit Locke’s clear and distinct ideas provide a framework for the philosophical treatise, in the elaboration of the notion of the sublime, Burke relies much more on his own reading of literary works. I contend that Milton’s impact is emphatically displayed in the “dark and obscure” rhetoric

of Burke's work. In spite of the abundance of classical quotations, it is Milton's "strong expressions" (Burke 198) that dominate the argument, thus, the concept of the Burkean sublime owes a lot to Milton's obscurity. I would go as far as claim that the Burkean sublime derives primarily from Burke's reading of Milton, the poet, who has been commonly referred to as a "sublime genius" from the beginning of the eighteenth century (Moore 5).<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, Blake borrows a lot from Milton, but he radically rejects Burke's ideas. Through the revelatory power of his visionary sublime, Blake overtly criticizes Locke's shallow empiricism and Burke's obscure rhetoric, and argues against the simple disparity of light/clarity versus darkness/obscurity. Therefore, I explore the Burkean and the Blakean readings of the Miltonic sublime side by side, analyzing the Miltonic quotations in Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry* parallel with the verbal and visual references to the "sublime genius" in Blake's *Milton* to show the differences in their understandings.

### **"Dark with excessive light": the Burkean reading of the Miltonic Sublime<sup>3</sup>**

In the framework of the *Enquiry*, Burke relies on Locke's "simple ideas, which convey themselves into the mind, by all the ways of sensations and reflection," namely, by pleasure and pain (Locke 129). Locke calls all the elements of our thinking—sensations, external objects, and operations of the mind—ideas, and claims their source to be experience (109). Burke's treatise refers to Locke repeatedly not only in the introductory parts on pleasure and pain, and their connections with the beautiful and the sublime, but also in the last section on words (pt. V). Burke presents a simplified dichotomous pattern when comparing the beautiful and the sublime in the different sensations, objects, and living beings that are capable of producing either the pleasantness of beauty, or the astonishment of the sublime. His system of sensory and bodily effects of external objects, however, extends the confines of a binary opposition and displays a five-part system of inner sensations: (positive) pleasure versus (positive) pain, in-between indifference, while the removal of pain gives relief (relative or negative pleasure, that is, delight), and the diminution of pleasure gives grief (as relative or negative pain) (Burke 80-86). While he considers the contemplation of beautiful objects to be pleasurable, he introduces the sublime as something painful, also emphasizing the intensity of the feelings thus incited: the sublime "operates in a manner analogous to terror [. . .] that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (86). In the passage entitled "Of the passion caused by the sublime," he mentions "astonishment" first:

[t]he passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings and hurries us on by an irresistible force. Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence, and respect. (Burke 101)

The most intense effect of the sublime is that, due to the greatness of the accompanying emotions, it occupies and blocks the rational functioning of the mind. Similarly to Burke, Joseph Addison and Samuel Johnson also highlight the pleasing and terrifying astonishment incited by the sublime, that is, the admiration and terror associated with the perception of sublimity (qtd. in de Luca 16). As Vincent Arthur de Luca explains, for Burke, astonishment means that “nature suddenly manifests itself in so overwhelming a fashion that normal relations of subject and object are abolished; at the same time, the mind loses its consistency of operation and becomes a thing of paradox, of self-contradictory extremes” (17).

In the same section, Burke refers to the common etymological root of “terror” and “astonishment,” namely, that the Latin *stupeo* was associated with the numbness of the stunned mind—not without the effect of fear. The English *astonishment* and the French *étonnement* also assign the feelings of amazement, threat, and wonder, while the Latin *attonitus*, meaning “thunderstruck,” highlights the intensity of the emotional surplus with which the sublime provides the viewer (Burke 102). The passionate quality of the sublime is discussed in *Peri Hupsous* (“On the Sublime”), the classical treatise of Longinus, which was translated by Boileau only in 1674—although its original was available in a printed format from 1636—and William Smith’s English translation came out in 1743 (Monk 20). Burke was clearly familiar with Longinus’s work and most probably borrowed the metaphorical meaning of the astonishing quality of the sublime (being “thunderstruck”) from Longinus, who speaks about the sudden “lightning-flash” of the poetic genius that at once illuminates in admiration and strikes one benumbed (freezes one) with its power (Longinus).<sup>4</sup>

In his *Enquiry*, Burke commends the passionate intensity of Milton’s rhetoric: “No person seems better to have understood the secret of heightening, or of setting terrible things, if I may use the expression, in their strongest light, by the force of a judicious obscurity than Milton” (103). He,

then, provides striking examples of Milton's obscurity, analyzing the terrible images of his descriptions of Death, Satan, and Hell in *Paradise Lost*. Due to the "expressive uncertainty of strokes and coloring," these depictions are terrifying, gloomy, and confusing (Burke 103). The dark crowned shape of the "king of terrors," for instance, is indistinguishable "if shape it might be called," as a "substance might be called that shadow seemed" (Milton 2.666-73 qtd. in Burke 103). Satan's figure is even more pompous and vague in its sublime vastness, having a great impact on the reader's imagination:

He above the rest  
In shape and gesture proudly eminent  
Stood like a tower; his form had yet not lost  
All her original brightness, nor appeared  
Less than archangel ruined, and th' excess  
Of glory obscured: as when the sun new risen  
Looks through the horizontal misty air  
Shorn of his beams [ . . . ]. (Milton 1.589-96 qtd. in Burke 105)

In his final selected quotation functioning as his summary on the rhetoric of the sublime, Burke provides a verbal example of the absolute negative sublime by quoting Milton's description of Hell:

O'er many a dark and dreary vale  
They passed, and many a region dolorous;  
O'er many a frozen, many a fiery Alp;  
Rocks, caves, lakes, fens, bogs, dens, and shades of death,  
A universe of death [ . . . ]. (Milton 2. 618-22 qtd. in Burke 197)<sup>5</sup>

Burke is struck by the terrible power of these words and keeps reciting them in fragments. He highlights the expression, "a universe of death," as a strong combination "of two ideas not presentable but by language," resulting in a stunning metaphor. Burke differentiates between clear and strong expressions, where "the former regards the understanding, the latter belongs to the passions. The one describes a thing as it is, the latter describes it as it is felt" (Burke 198). The phrase, "a universe of death," is far too astonishing to exemplify a Lockean "clear and distinct" idea of the mind; as Burke states, "it will be difficult to conceive how words can move the passions which belong to real objects, without representing these objects clearly" (198). The energy of this phrase derives from the effective power of words, the passions the words *cited* can *incite* in us, which is partly due to our ability to share emotions, and partly to the unusual word-combinations that produce images of unreal

and supernatural entities. As a result, the sublime rhetoric of the phrase petrifies readers, making them astonished, that is, making them experience “the state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror [. . .] the effect of the sublime in its highest degree” (Burke 101).

In the *Enquiry*, Burke opposes the treatment of light to the preceding praise on the obscurity of the sublime and relates it rather to the fine, pleasant, and relaxing beautiful: the realm of clarity. Burke disagrees with Locke’s claim that “darkness is not naturally an idea of terror; and that, though an excessive light is painful to the sense, the greatest excess of darkness is no ways troublesome” (171-72; cf. Locke 131). In contrast, Burke claims that darkness has an associative terror for man and, though an excess amount of light can be the source of the sublime, “darkness is more productive of sublime ideas than light” (121). The most puzzling figure of Miltonic rhetoric, however, is brought to light in the depiction of the overwhelming darkness around God’s throne, which Burke quotes from *Paradise Lost*, although this time with a slight alteration: “With the majesty of *darkness* round / Circles his throne” (cf. “Covers his throne” in the original) and “*Dark* with excessive *light* thy skirts appear (cf. “bright thy skirts” in the original) (Milton 2. 266-67; 3.380 qtd. in Burke 121).

As these quotations aptly demonstrate, Burke argues that an extreme amount of light blinds one, and “a light which by its very excess is converted into a species of darkness” (121) can draw one into the realm of darkness—the realm of obscure images. His misquotation is not an instance of falsification or misreading; the slight changes are rather due to false recall, some lapse of memory, and “excessive familiarity with the text” (Ferguson 44). It is striking that the image “skirts,” in the second quote, is closely associated with “circles” in the first one, as if these images had already been connected in Burke’s imagination. The reader can wonder whether Burke knew these lines by heart, otherwise his hearing the words within articulates another sort of reading. In any event, Burke exhibits an essential feature of the Miltonic rhetoric, since commentators of *Paradise Lost* already stressed in the eighteenth century that Milton favored the use of contradictions in his diction: the epic is “a field of opposing stresses and signals,” displaying the struggles of poetic creation *ex nihilo* (Herman 13-15).

### **“The Imagination is not a State: it is the Human Existence itself”: Blake on Sublimity**

Due to the ambiguity of his works, Blake can be labeled the master of contradictions and transformations. Regarding his philosophical views, his rejection of the intellectual “unholy trinity” of Francis Bacon, Locke, and

Isaac Newton is well-known. He rejects Locke's idea of "tabula rasa" and his claim that we are born without innate ideas. As he states in his *Annotations to Sir Joshua Reynolds's Discourses* (1808), "Knowledge of Ideal Beauty is Not to be Acquired. It is Born with us. Innate Ideas are in Every Man, Born with him; they are truly Himself. The Man who says that we have No Innate Ideas must be a Fool & Knave" (Blake 459). In the same work, he expresses his aversion to Burke's empiricism:

Burke's Treatise on the Sublime & Beautiful is founded on the Opinions of Newton & Locke; on this Treatise Reynolds has grounded many of his assertions in all his Discourses. I read Burke's Treatise when very Young; at the same time I read Locke on Human Understanding & Bacon's Advancement of Learning; on Every one of these Books I wrote my Opinions, & on looking them over find that my Notes on Reynolds in this Book are exactly Similar. I felt the Same Contempt & Abhorrence then that I do now. They mock Inspiration & Vision. Inspiration & Vision was then, & now is, & I hope will always Remain, my Element, my Eternal Dwelling place; how can I then hear it Contemned without returning Scorn for Scorn? (Blake 476-77)

Blake rejected Burke's association of the sublime with the obscure, thinking that "Grandeur of Ideas is founded on Precision of Ideas," while "Obscurity is Neither the Source of the Sublime nor of any Thing Else" (457, 473).<sup>6</sup> In his "unpresentable" visions, he insisted on clarity; he wanted to paint and describe sharply defined images with the highest possible degree of precision. He did not think that such a demand on great accuracy in his sublime visions was self-contradictory, as "all his imaginations appear[ed] to him infinitely more perfect and more minutely organized than any thing seen by his mortal eye" (Blake 576-77).<sup>7</sup>

In his remarkable book, *Words of Eternity: Blake and the Poetics of the Sublime*, de Luca compares and contrasts the Blakean, the Burkean, and the Kantian—later Wordsworthian—interpretations of the sublime, concluding that Blake shares with his contemporaries the view that "the sublime resides in an identification of a desired infinite with the quester's own intellectual being" (26). I would rather suggest that for Blake, the imagination is the overwhelming faculty that enables man to attain the infinite, while in Kant's view, the imagination is subdued by our mental capacity (reason) in the process of grasping sublime infinity. Blake harshly criticizes our reasoning faculty, the so-called "Corporeal Understanding"—borrowing the term "corporeal" most probably from Burke (de Luca 135)—as it limits and closes our apprehension. According to Blake, the intellectual power of our creative

imagination enables us to open up our mind towards the comprehension of sublimity (the greatness) of *the world and the word*; as he wrote in a letter to Thomas Butts in 1803: “Allegory address’d to the Intellectual powers, while it is altogether hidden from the Corporeal Understanding is My Definition of the Most Sublime Poetry” (823).<sup>8</sup> In the same letter, he promises the completion of a sublime, “Grand Poem” that will be either his *Milton* or *Jerusalem*.

Before reading “the Grandest Poem” of *Milton*, I will briefly look at another Blakean prophecy that is pertinent to a discussion of the Blakean versus Burkean concepts of the sublime. It is not only in his *Annotations* that Blake criticizes Burke; he also parodies some of Burke’s insights on the sublime in his *The First Book of Urizen*. This early prophecy, as Hélène Ibata has noted, addresses such features of the Burkean sublime as power, awe, and terror, but Blake challenges the Burkean conception in his (anxiety of the) form-making process and his self-reflection on artistic creation (9).<sup>9</sup> For both Burke and Blake, the fear of nothingness and formlessness is associated with the sublime, but while Burke identifies it as the source of “delightful horror” (67), Blake sees it as the horror of artistic creation *ex nihilo*. In his prophecies, for instance, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *The Book of Urizen*, and *Milton*, Blake describes how man is imprisoned in his own understanding—in his body and skull, being connected to the world through his senses—whereas, originally, the human mind was open to the sublime vastness of the world that now is only accessible to and through his imagination. As Ibata sums up: “[being] overwhelmed by anything which exceeds this single and limited vision, the mind in such a world experiences the feeling of terror which Burke describes as central to the experience of the sublime, but which Blake shows to be a reflection of perceptual limitation” (15). Consequently, his *Urizen*, in a self-reflexive way, abounds in verbal and visual images of imprisonment and astonishment, since sublime vacuity and monstrosity are produced by the limited sensations of a closed mind.<sup>10</sup>

Blake’s satirical *Urizen* prophecy can be described in terms of a sublime failure because the text closes upon itself only with a hint in its illustrations at the essence of the Blakean sublime: the “discontinuity between imaginative form and visual form” as the experience immanent to artistic activity (Ibata 50). While *Urizen* presents a passive contemplation of an artisan, *Milton* presents a true artist, the Artist as “a sublime energizer” (Blake 580), who shows the way out, moving beyond the frames and limitations of our rational thinking. As W. J. T. Mitchell suggests, “*Milton* is an exploration of the limits of poetry as a force for inciting people to imagine action, and a prophecy of

the breaking-down of those limits [. . .] call[ing] the reader, not to contemplation, but to action” (“Blake’s Radical Comedy” 282-83).

### **Blake’s Miltonic “Sublime Poetry”**

“Milton lov’d me in childhood & shew’d me his face,” wrote the visionary Blake in a letter to John Flaxman in 1800 (799). The poet Milton became a life-long inspiration to Blake, and several of his works—thematically and spiritually—owe a lot to Milton’s influence. S. Foster Damon sees strong similarities between the two poets’ life events, and he also draws parallels between their writings (274-75). Although several episodes of *Paradise Lost* are recalled in Blake’s *The Four Zoas*, it is the text of *Milton* that is characterized by Milton’s obscure rhetoric and offers the sublime astonishment of writing (and reading). Their literary kinship, their textual friendship, culminated when Blake, spending three troublesome though inspiring years in Felpham from 1800 to 1803, composed an epic, simply titled *Milton* (1804), in which Blake, in his rapture, was being united with the spirit of the dead master. In his “Most Sublime” poem, Blake develops the depressing notion of repeated historical cycles into the image of the spiritual vortex, also shifting the focus from his previous mythological agent, the historical-revolutionary Orc, to Los, the spiritual revolutionary, “the spirit of biblical poetry” (Fisch 44). I agree with Harold Fisch that it is truly “Blake’s Miltonic moment,” a turning point, rather than an elaboration of a new theodicy, as Harold Bloom has suggested (Fisch 52; Bloom 304). Writing about Milton’s spiritual journey, Blake himself finds a way out of his own dejection and gains back his creative spirit so that he could compose his final work, *Jerusalem*.

The text of *Milton* makes the reader experience the struggles of the intellect in the apprehension and comprehension of the waving lines, the plethora of mythological characters, and the cataracts of rhetorical figures. The reader is also to experience the narrative’s cascading flow and a constant flux of sudden changes in the cosmic happenings. The reader is to experience a sense of loss and vertigo, becoming entrapped “in the meanderings of time . . . the paratactic sentence structure, . . . and parallelism in syntax” (de Luca 68)—just like in this passage of mine. “Sublime poetry,” as de Luca remarks, “terrifies the reasoning mind because it denies the centrality and dominance of the reasoning faculty” (31). The sublimity of the text is markedly anti-Lockean, as it transgresses the limits of empirical logic and the Burkean delight of enchantment, with the text—together with the apt reader—verging on madness. Blake’s main aim is to emphasize intellectual and imaginative development, thus, his



“walls of words” can mean barriers to “Corporeal Understanding,” while they can become—and transform into—“walls of glass” to the more creative (de Luca 32).

Milton’s descent from (his own) Heaven is announced—*in medias res*—in Plate 2, together with the other compulsory epic devices, such as proposition and invocation, conventionally placed at the beginning of an epic work:

Daughters of Beulah! Muses who inspire the Poet’s Song  
Record the journey of immortal Milton thro’ your Realms  
Of terror & mild moony lustre, in soft sexual delusions  
Of varied beauty, to delight the wanderer and repose  
His burning thirst & freezing hunger! Come into my band  
By your mild power descending down the Nerves of my right arm  
From out the Portals of my Brain, where by your ministry  
The Eternal Great Humanity Divine planted his Paradise,  
And in it caus’d the Spectres of the Dead to take sweet forms  
In likeness of himself. (Blake 481)

To write his prophetic work, Blake asks for the inspiring help of the “Daughters of Beulah,” angelic spirits living under Eden, in *Beulah* (meaning “married”),<sup>11</sup> the region of “threefold vision,” where “contraries” cease to exist as the harmonious unity of opposite qualities is achieved in imagination and in sexuality. The lower regions of Ulro (single vision) and Generation (twofold vision) represent levels of “Corporeal Understanding” in our world. Blake, through his writing (spiritual) right hand and his creative intellect, can get connected to the highest level of the fourfold vision that can only be attained from Beulah, where man, in mystical ecstasy, can experience/sense a union with God, which is Eden, the world of infinite imagination and divine inspiration. The sublime opening does not only recall Milton’s energetic endeavor in his composition of the “advent’rous song,” but it also alludes to Satan’s journey through chaos in *Paradise Lost* (Milton 5).

The question—“Say first! what mov’d Milton”—is answered: “A Bard’s prophetic Song!” (Blake 481-82). Although Milton’s journey is proposed right in the beginning, the narrative returns to the central theme only on Plate 14; in between, the Blakean Bard is reciting the generations of gods, the “Three Classes,” and the repeated cycles of creation. Listening to the song, Milton becomes ready to descend and correct his mortal errors; here Blake hints at the great predecessor’s dogmatism (Puritanism), his political activity (republicanism), and his relationship with women.

Interestingly enough, regarding the three errors, the last one is decisive in the narrative as the image of Milton's ill-treated six women—his three wives and three daughters—is already mentioned in the epic proposition. Milton is introduced as being “unhappy” in heaven, “pond’ring the intricate mazes of Providence,” and being divided, as his “Sixfold Emanation,” his female counterpart, is in torment: he undertakes the journey “to redeem [her] & himself perish” (Blake 481).

Milton's self-annihilation is vividly portrayed in the Blakean text: he descends to reintegrate himself, to become one with his “other,” his (female) Emanation, but, first, he has to awake his (divine) Humanity and get back his Shadow of desire (Bloom 309):

Then Milton rose up from the heavens of Albion ardent.  
The whole Assembly wept prophetic, seeing in Milton's face  
And in his lineaments divine the shades of Death & Ulro:  
He took off the robe of the promise & ungirded himself from  
the oath of God.

And Milton said: “I go to Eternal Death!

...

When will the Resurrection come; to deliver the sleeping body  
From corruptibility? O when, Lord Jesus, wilt thou come?  
Tarry no longer, for my soul lies at the gates of death.  
I will arise and look forth for the morning of the grave:  
I will go down to the sepulcher to see if morning breaks:  
I will go down to self annihilation and eternal death,  
Lest the Last Judgment come & find me unannihilate  
And I be seiz'd & giv'n into the hands of my own Selfhood.”

(Blake 495)

In the prophecy, there are two illustrations that show Milton naked. On the cover, Milton's reasoning dualistic Spectre is entering the flames of Hell—his own Hell—representing the Satanic and Urizenic state of his mind (see Fig. 1).<sup>12</sup>

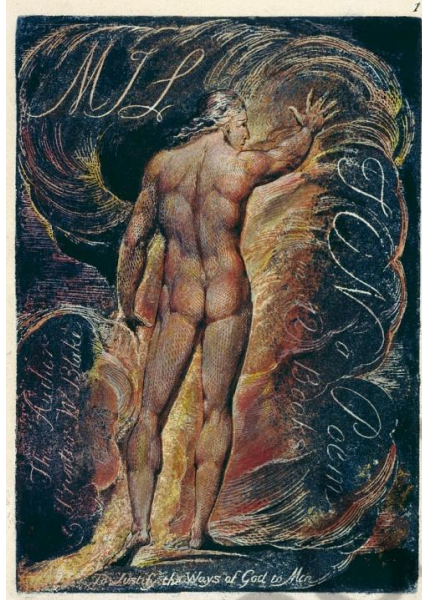


Fig.1. Blake, *Milton* Plate 1.

The nude Milton, with his back turned to the reader, is just about to start his journey: he is standing on the imagined threshold, in the framework of the front page/plate, lifting his right, spiritual arm to the envisioned headsill (cf. sub-limes, “up to the line”). Then, in Heaven, he repeats this gesture when he is, again, in a liminal state, but, this time, taking off his robe, he surrenders his selfish Spectre to “overcome Satanic one-dimensionality” (de Luca 112). Morton D. Paley points out the importance of material and mental garments in *Milton* and *Paradise Lost*: the true poet, if he wants to see face to face, if he wants to transcend the dichotomies of black versus white, dark versus light—or even female versus male—has to get rid of his superficial robe—as it is shown in the full-page illustration of Plate 16 (see Fig. 2). For Blake, nudity in the illustrations of the masculine sublime displays the natural essence, the divine truth of Man.<sup>13</sup>

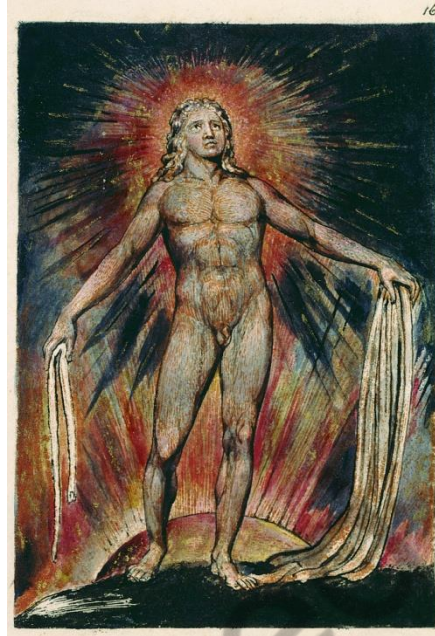


Fig. 2. Blake, *Milton* Plate 16.

Still longing for his Emanation, Milton encounters his Shadow of desire and, in his poetic Satanic voice, reflects on his past errors, parodying his creature, Satan's speech in *Paradise Lost*:

I in my Selfhood am that Satan: I am that Evil One!  
He is my Spectre! in my obedience to loose him from my Hells,  
To claim the Hells, my Furnaces, I go to Eternal Death.  
And Milton said, "I go to Eternal Death!" Eternity shudder'd,  
For he took the outside course, among the graves of the dead,  
A mournful shade. Eternity shudder'd at the image of eternal death.  
Then on the verge of Beulah he beheld his own Shadow,  
A mournful form double, hermaphroditic, male & female  
In one wonderful body; and he enter'd into it  
In direful pain . . . (Blake 496)

We have here the astonishing Blakean phrase of "Eternal Death," suggesting that the immortalized Milton, without his female Emanation, suffers eternally. The metaphor resonates with Milton's rhetoric, particularly with his strong expression of "a universe of death"; the one Burke worshipped. The Blakean sublime phrase petrifies even eternity; in *its* reading, even eternity "shudder'd

at the image.” That is the awful power of passionate poetic words, being uttered by Milton and *envisioned* by Blake.

Blake’s prophecy culminates in Milton becoming united with his Sixfold Emanation, Ololon. Her name has been associated with the Greek “lamentation” (*ὄλολογών*), women’s crying and ululation (Bloom 332); in my reading, however, it can also recall the phrase “all alone.” Before their fusion, Milton abandons all of his limitations, dogmas, notions, and ideas, that is, the characteristics (his “garments”) of his own self, in order to be filled only with poetic inspiration:

To bathe in the Waters of Life, to wash off the Not Human,  
I come in Self-annihilation & the grandeur of Inspiration,  
To cast off Rational Demonstration by Faith in the Saviour,  
To cast off the rotten rags of Memory by Inspiration,  
To cast off Bacon, Locke & Newton from Albion’s covering,  
To take off his filthy garments & clothe him with Imagination,  
To cast aside from Poetry all that is not Inspiration,  
That it no longer shall dare to mock with the aspersion of Madness

....

(Blake 533)

Milton’s speech rhetorically sounds like a catalogue, the repeated parallel construction of the clauses has immense energy, but it also casts a spell over the mind. Then, in the concluding Plate (Plate 42), the male and female are not only paired, but, as Milton has already “cast off” his self, they compose the complete man, the One Man, Jesus. In his own garden, in Felpham, Blake witnesses how, after the union of Milton and his Female Counterpart, the hero—in “incarnational and textual” manifestation (de Luca 216)—becomes one with Jesus:

Then as a Moony Ark Ololon descended to Felpham’s Vale  
In clouds of blood, in streams of gore, with dreadful thunderings  
Into the Fires of Intellect that rejoic’d in Felphams Vale  
Around the Starry Eight; with one accord the Starry Eight became  
One Man, Jesus the Saviour, wonderful! round his limbs  
The Clouds of Ololon folded as a Garment dipped in blood,  
Written within & without in woven letters, & the Writing  
Is the Divine Revelation in the Litteral expression,  
A Garment of War. I heard it nam’d the Woof of Six Thousand  
Years.

(Blake 534)

In the astonishingly terrifying scene, being described in a few words, the bloody clouds of the Female merge with the fiery intellectual Male. By this time, the reader is optimally drawn into the events, and the intellect has been trained to imagine and accept the conclusion. By the end of the work, the writer, the protagonist, and the reader are all supposed to mount to a higher level of imaginative understanding. In Blake's vision, Ololon's garment, written in blood, tells the events of traumatic (male) human history of six thousand years. De Luca highlights the biblical resonances of the sublime scene by noting that it is an instance not of the "Word made Flesh" but, rather, of "Flesh, the living continuum of history, made Word" (217)—with the assistance and the sorrow of the Female, the com-passionate. The last illustration of Plate 50 depicts the first redeemed female in the posture of rejoicing with two male figures "to go forth to the Great Harvest & Vintage of the Nations" (Blake 535), heralding apocalypse (see Fig. 3.). The newly born Christ's prophetic power resides in the letters, in writing: "the Writing *is* the Divine Revelation in the Litteral expression" (Blake 534); or, as it is announced by Blake/Milton, the main aim of the true poet-prophet is "to Justify the Ways of God to Men"—to seek redemption.

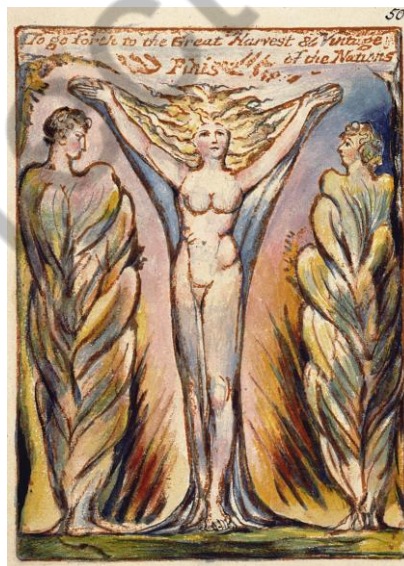


Fig. 3. Blake, *Milton* Plate 50.

In the conclusion of *Milton*, having witnessed the fusion and being inspired by the energy of this *unio mystica*, Blake experiences a sublime vision about the return of Albion and the realization of England-Jerusalem.<sup>14</sup> The resurrected Jesus is an artist, the Poetic Genius for Blake, and, in this sense, imagination/Christ is the Redeemer of mankind because He leads men to the accomplishment of the divine in everybody: “The Eternal Body of Man is The Imagination, that is, God himself ‘The Divine Body . . . Jesus’” (776). In the vision, Blake is mentally overwhelmed first, being “struck” (astonished) by the terror of the scene, physically “[falling] outstrech’d upon the path” (Blake 534). Another illustration of the prophecy shows Blake, the exalted poet, swooning in the aftermath of a trance, which is mirrored in the illustration of Blake’s (dead) brother, Robert, similarly leaning his body back with his hands spread in an ecstatic rejoicing (see Fig. 4, 5).



Fig. 4. Blake, *Milton* Plate 32.



Fig. 5. Blake, *Milton* Plate 37.

My last selected quotation, due to its sublime rhetoric, is about the vortex—the vortex that “the traveller thro’ Eternity,” on his way, can experience as a spiral, while the one who has completed the journey, looking back, can see as a circle:

The nature of infinity is this: That every thing has its  
Own Vortex, and when once a traveller thro’ Eternity  
Has pass’d that Vortex, he percieves 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 (with) whom he liv’d  
benevolent.

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,  
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. (Blake 497)

Blake associates the circle with imprisonment and closure, while the spiral of interconnected—not fully drawn but open—circles shows the possibility of movement and development. Joseph Anthony Wittreich, in his *Angel of Apocalypse*, has pointed out that in *Milton*, “the true revolutionary releases man from the cycles of history,” and, in his redemption, Milton is to assume “the role of the Awakener” (239) with the help of the Com-passionate. Wittreich has also rightly argued that the “Mental Fight” and the building of “Jerusalem / In England’s green & pleasant Land” (Blake 481) is already prophesied in the preface of the work. For the visionary, “vision does not travel in a straight line, but oscillates between contradictory forces, converging on a moment of illumination,” as Mitchell has observed (*Blake’s Composite Art* 72). The idea of travelling, moving back and forth in time and space, is central in the work. The reader is passing through the words, phrases, sentences, and passages of a text, but not in a straight line—the (Kantian) sublime process of apprehension and comprehension is visualized and envisaged as a spiral. As de Luca, who exemplifies the creative reader required by Blake’s text, has noted, “we have passed the verbal vortex and have experienced, with Milton, what it is like to negotiate the difficult passage between Eternity and the corporeal world” (83). *Milton* is not only a text about a vortex: “the text *is* the



vortex” itself—it is a *vortex*. The spiral “proceeds forward through the succession of verse lines, to circle continually back on itself” (de Luca 84); or, rather, it seemingly turns backwards while circle by circle it slowly progresses. Similarly, Stephen D. Cox differentiates between vertical and horizontal movements in the Blakean narrative, which become intertwined within a vortex and can be read along a spiral line (211, 218).

Blake offers “a petrific text to stony understanding and a field of openings for the receptive” (de Luca 21), where “the receptive” need passionate efforts to understand the written words. As we have seen, in his sublime vision, Blake emphatically renounces Burke, a follower of Locke, imprisoned in his self-forming. Blake, by contrast, invites the reader to participate in a “process of educative reading” (de Luca 51), since all “mental travellers” floundering while reading have the chance to develop. In *Milton*, the words open up the possibility of the re-creation of the senses, challenging our limited understanding of the wor(l)d. Although Burke was also mesmerized by Milton’s phrases and paradoxes, for Blake, the astonishment described by Burke presents only the lower levels of “Intellectual powers.” The empirical aesthetics of the sublime remains in the state of Ulro or Generation, in the realm where vision and reading are bound to corporeal sight and the acceptance of contraries. In Blake’s view, however, the sublime challenges the reasoning faculty and stimulates the mind. Blake looks for true and imaginative sublimity on a higher level of understanding, in the state/world of Beulah and Eden, where contraries are united, and divine harmony can be achieved by the blessed and chosen ones—by the creative writers and readers. The repeated sublime imperative astonishes the reader from time to time in the whirlwind of the exhausting narrative: “Mark well my words! they are of your eternal salvation.” In the spiral line of understanding, which has also shaped my interpretation, seemingly drawing a full circle, I return to Longinus’s sublime rhetoric. Longinus’s classic quotation becomes endowed by the Blakean endeavor with a deeper, more imaginative sense of the sublime: “For I would confidently pronounce that nothing is so conducive to sublimity as an appropriate display of genuine passion, which bursts out with a kind of ‘fine madness’ and divine inspiration, and falls on our ears like the voice of a god.”

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In *The End of the Line*, Hertz also writes about the abundance of critical writings and the scholars' anxiety of reading "everything" before starting their own analyses. While in the sublime blockage Kant reads the different movements of the thinking and the knowing mind, Hertz shows the conflict between two operating components, that of the "man thinking" and of the "man reading" (43-44). This distinction also informs my discussion of the Burkean and the Blakean conceptualizations of the sublime.

<sup>2</sup> Milton's *Paradise Lost* was frequently quoted as an example of the sublime already in Burke's time: John Dennis labelled it "Paradisiacal," Addison highlighted its "passionate" quality, while Johnson valued the power of the "dreadful" Miltonic verse (Knapp 52; Ashfield and de Bolla 63, 67).

<sup>3</sup> This section of is elaborated in a longer essay, "Transgressing the Boundaries of Reason: Burke's Poetic (Miltonic) Reading of the Sublime," in a collection of essays, *Writing and Constructing the Self in Great Britain in the Long Eighteenth Century*, to be published by Manchester University Press.

<sup>4</sup> The contemporary critic, John Dennis also highlighted the terrifying and overwhelming feature of the sublime that makes the "the Soul utterly incapable of reflecting," as a result of which "there is no difference between the Images and the Things themselves" (qtd. in Cora 23). Dennis did not have an overt influence on Burke, although he unquestionably had some impact on Blake, while it is also worth mentioning that Dennis referred to Milton's *Paradise Lost* as an example of "Enthusiastick Terror" (qtd. in Cora 21).

<sup>5</sup> Reading Milton, Burke tends to pick up the strongest expression in the lines, omitting the explanatory phrases. In the case of "a universe of death," the passage continues as follows:

A Universe of death, which God by curse  
Created evil, for evil only good,  
Where all life dies, death lives, and Nature breeds,  
Perverse, all monstrous, all prodigious things,  
Abominable, inutterable, and worse  
Then Fables yet have feign'd, or fear conceiv'd,  
Gorgons and Hydras and Chimeras dire. (Milton 2.622-28)

<sup>6</sup> Due to his studies in line-engraving, and his earlier experience with Gothic and Greek art, Blake despised obscurity and worshipped clarity in art. As he says: "Without Minute Neatness of Execution The Sublime cannot Exist!" (457). In addition to clarity, the key terms in Blake's aesthetics are the line and the outline opposed to color; body and form opposed to space; and nudity opposed to garment. With his line-engraving technique, Blake is a linear artist, and, for him, line cannot be something else but truth. The line, "firm and determinate outline," is the essence of art (Blake 585). In his *Annotations*, he similarly claims that "Broken Colours & Broken Lines & Broken Masses are Equally Subversive of the Sublime" (Blake 464).

<sup>7</sup> See more about the relations between Burke's treatise and Blake's art in Ibata's *The Challenge of the Sublime: From Burke's Philosophical Enquiry to British Romantic Art* (2018). In my paper, I draw on one of Ibata's earlier studies on Blake, since I focus on the textual not the artistic representation of the sublime.

<sup>8</sup> As de Luca has noted, Blake probably recalls some Dennisian phrases here (27-28).

<sup>9</sup> Ibata also refers to postmodern commentators on the struggles of form-making and representation in the sublime introduced by Kant; for instance, she quotes from Derrida, Lyotard, and Jean-Luc Nancy.

<sup>10</sup> Urizen is portrayed, for instance, as being caught in his own net of reason, sinking in the ocean, or squatting chained down on the ground with his eyes closed.

<sup>11</sup> "Married" refers to the restored happy relationship, the reconciliation, between God and Palestine (Damon 436-37). In one of his letters to Butts, Blake elaborates on the four levels of sight, of his vision (818), while references to Beulah are scattered through his works. For instance, in *Milton*: "There is a place where Contrarities are equally True: / This place is called Beulah" (Blake 518).

<sup>12</sup> The source of all illustrations is Copy D of William Blake, *Milton* (1818), available at <http://www.blakearchive.org/copy/milton.d>.

<sup>13</sup> For Blake, the complexity of the undivided divine man in Eden has the emotional (Humanity), reasoning (Spectre), and desiring (Shadow) parts in harmonious unity; in the original prelapsarian state, man is also hermaphrodite: male and female (Emanation) in One. See the appropriate entries in Damon, even on the Platonic references to the three agents of the soul.

<sup>14</sup> Cox, among others, sees in the Blakean revelation biblical references to Paul's vision in the twelfth chapter of 2 Corinthians about a man who "was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words" (208).

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