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Poetic Quaternaries:  
William Blake’s Unsystematic System

Catalin Ghita

1. Introduction

The purpose of my study is to sketch a critical approach evincing the existence of four levels of significance within Blake’s poetry. Obviously, this goal cannot be achieved without starting from the assumption that there exists essentially a unity of significance within what I call Blake’s unsystematic system. The title syntagm (poetic quaternaries) epitomizes my approach to the subject. As all Blake students know, the poet states that there exist four specific types of vision: single, twofold, threefold, and fourfold. I intend to demonstrate that these classes of vision correspond to four distinct yet convergent levels of meaning, i.e. social, metaphysical, aesthetic, and religious, which underline Blake’s artistic structure from a conceptual point of view.¹ This hermeneutic scheme, which should be viewed as text-oriented and flexible, can be extended, so that it may comprise the whole Blakean production. It must be remembered that the components of this Literaturwissenschaft² pattern are interrelated, even symbiotic, and, even if they represent something in themselves, their general function is to be discovered only within the integrity of the system.

2. Blake’s Unsystematic System

From a methodological perspective, my general approach to Blake’s work draws concurrently on theory of literature, hermeneutics, metaphysics, the history of ideas, and visionarism. My first task is to demonstrate that, although Blake makes no attempt at explicitly creating a system, he does implicitly attempt to create one. In point of fact, in Jerusalem, Los, Blake’s metonymy of the creative self, states boldly: ‘I
must Create a System, or be enslav’d by another MansI will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create (E 153).³ Herein lies the crux of the argument, for Blake’s attitude towards composition in general and poetry in particular is rather transparent. The statement seems to be concerned neither with synthetic presentation nor with analytical parallelism, being merely a plea for the absolute exercise of imagination, which hinges on nothing except itself. Therefore, the question which arises as soon as a critic has started his hermeneutic endeavor concerns the logicality of Blake’s poetry: can the latter be analyzed as a unitary construction, a pattern endowed with both purpose and meaning? I strongly believe that it can. Whilst a sagacious scholar like Damrosch, Jr.⁴ gives a rather strange verdict, which acknowledges Blake’s incomprehensibility, three brilliant Blake exegetes, Damon,⁵ Frye,⁶ and Erdman,⁷ prove conclusively the existence of a variety of Blakean systems.⁸ Although a number of postmodern currents frown upon any systematic attempts at explaining Blake, and subvert unitary paradigms, I do not rally to these efforts, and, rather, believe that the exegetic basis is to be sought not only in the dissemination of details, but also in the overall textual organization.

The whole controversy concerning Blake’s readability beyond Songs of Innocence and of Experience commenced as early as 1924, with the publication of William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols by Damon, who found it necessary to underline the purpose of his exegesis in the Introduction: ‘This book is an attempt to give a rational explanation of Blake’s obvious obscurities, and to provide a firm basis for the understanding of his philosophy’ (IX). Further on, the critic stated, rather metaphorically, that Blake ‘gives us the Keys of Paradise. But he conveys them in symbols whose meaning he stipulates we must first learn. We must find the meaning’ (X). This last assertion constitutes a case in point, for, insofar as I am concerned, the ultimate goal of a critical approach to Blake’s work is the demonstration of an articulate structure of thought within his apparently self-contradictory poetry. Subsequently, Frye, in Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake, and Erdman, in Blake: Prophet against Empire: A Poet’s Interpretation of the History of His Own Times, forged two different, albeit systematic, interpretations of Blake’s work as a whole. Whilst the former’s discourse concerned itself with myths and archetypes, discussing Blakean poetry in terms of a ‘cosmology in movement,’ the latter’s settled for a an account of Blake’s historical and political intellectual development (although, in the great epics, the historical and political perspectives are diminished by
the anguished outbursts of the poet’s elementals). The latest critic to have offered a systematic approach to Blake’s philosophy was Damrosch, Jr., who, in Symbol and Truth in Blake’s Myth, after trying to prove the presence of a coherent structure in the poet’s work, decided that the aforesaid structure is under a permanent threat of break-up: ‘But it would be idle to pretend that Blake’s prophetic poems are not, in the end, very strange as well as very difficult’ (349). Aside from these critics, Kathleen Raine deserves an honourable mention. Her Blake and Tradition fell just short of its exegetic target, the critic having failed to unify the otherwise well-defined pieces of the hermeneutic puzzle.9

In an attempt to offer a definite response to Blake’s putative system creation, Mark Trevor Smith resorts to paradox as an ultimate explanatory formula: ‘it is impossible to decide either to build systems or to destroy them. We must, as Los learns in Jerusalem, simply decide to do both’ (158). A similar dictum is pasted at the end of his demonstration: ‘Blake is constructing systems most coherently when he is smashing systems; Blake is smashing systems most vigorously when he is constructing systems’ (175).

In my interpretation, Blake’s general attitude towards poetry, what one may call his rhetoric of poetry, parallels a practice of poetic discourse. In a letter to Thomas Butts, dated July 6 1803, the poet offers his definition of poetry: ‘Allegory addressed to the Intellectual powers while it is altogether hidden from the Corporeal Understanding is My Definition of the Most Sublime Poetry’ (E 730). Elsewhere (in Jerusalem), he wishes ‘To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes / Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought . . . (E 147).10 As Blake himself claims in an indisputable manner that poetry must be invested with significance, a scholarly approach to his work cannot disregard so important a statement, or overlook the relevance of a systematic unity of significance within Blake’s frame of thought. The various pieces of poetry, albeit characterized by semantic cross currents, parallel plots, ideological idiosyncrasies, and rhetorical repetitions, are essentially logical, even unitary, constructions.

Moreover, it should be noted that the so-called obscurity of Blake’s works is a common critical fallacy, strongly refuted by the poet himself. In his Annotations to the ‘Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds,’ Blake writes: ‘Obscurity is Neither the Source of the Sublime nor of any Thing Else’ (E 658). Once the poetic paradigms have been identified, the critic’s doubts regarding Blake’s logicality are dispelled, and the subsequent exegesis becomes an ordinary hermeneutic act.
To sum up, I believe that Blake’s system of thought is indeed unsystematic, since it is diffused throughout a variety of textual productions, of unequal length and poetic value (main works and *paralipomena*). Nevertheless, as I shall make an attempt at proving, all these may be unified in a convergent hermeneutic enterprise, which should be viewed neither as reductive nor as absolute.

3. Rhetorical Encoding and Scholarly Decoding

In the foregoing phase of interpretation, I stated that Blake’s intellectual challenge lies not only in the details of poems, in their careful rhetorical dismemberment, but also in their overall tone, in their general architecture. If one’s perspective on Blake’s thought is solely microscopic, irregularities and illogical plot developments are striking. But if one is mainly concerned with Blake’s ideas as they shift their tone from one poem to another, then a coherence and even a convergence of interpretative layers is at hand.

At this point, I find that one particular problem looms large: Blake’s rhetorical encoding, which implies a series of complex literary ciphers, some intentional, some haphazard. It pays to give a succinct account of the most important of them, since such a systematization has not been the concern of any Blakean exegesis so far.

Concretely, a first series of difficulties rises from textual organization. Blake’s *chresmology* (oracular prophetic mode), combined with a shrewd use of *significatio* (implying more than he says), in his two continental prophecies, *America* and *Europe*, is sybillinic enough to baffle even the most stubborn critic. The absence of *metabasis* (a technique whereby the writer at once recapitulates the plot and points out directions of its development) on some particular occasions in *The Four Zoas* and *Milton* has a double effect: on the one hand, it accelerates the turn of events, on the other, it obscures the function of the characters and their intellectual liaisons. Various deleted, as well as insititious (inserted), passages complicate the textual organization of certain epics to the point of total obscurity. At other times, Blake’s *acryology* (incorrect language) is evident, but this fact, neutral in itself, becomes malignant in some passages where exactness and lack of verbosity are requirements for an apposite hermeneutic act on the part of the reader. Blake’s *open punctuation and seemingly random capitalization* constitute yet another formal difficulty, along with the constant employing of *hypotaxis*, espe-
cially in the larger poems, a fact resulting in multi-layered constructions, with numerous subplots and rhetorical ramifications. The presence of *effiguration* (minute descriptions) in Blake’s epics, especially in *The Four Zoas* and in *Jerusalem*, also diverts the reader’s attention from the broad spectrum of plot development. Simultaneously, the poet makes use of *commoratio* (dwelling upon a point by means of repetition), especially in the early prophecies: e.g. the whole plot of *The Book of Los* is a retelling of *The Book of Urizen* from Los’s viewpoint. Last but not least I should mention Blake’s *asphalia* (emphatic underlining of one’s words) in the Bard’s Song (*Milton*), wherein the Bard assures the Eternals that his voice is inspired and therefore demands attention and obedience.

Having clarified the initial hurdles to interpretation, i.e. those concerning Blake’s relevance as a creator of systems as well as those regarding Blake’s rhetorical obscurities, I may now move on to demonstrate the existence of his poetic quaternaries.

4. Four Types of Vision

Blake states that there exist four main types of vision, which, in my interpretation, correspond to a similar number of hermeneutic levels, affording the reader a quadripartite interpretation of the poetic discourse.

Strange as it may seem, critics’ theoretical stances are rather inconsistent with regard to a clear and conclusive definition of the four visionary classes. Starting from what I believe is a correct assumption, i.e. that, in its broad sense, vision ‘is the perception of the human in all things’ (*Blake Dictionary* 436), Damon asserts almost the same thing in relation to twofold vision, i.e. that the latter is ‘the perception of the human values in all things’ (*Blake Dictionary* 437), thereby creating, rather than dispelling, confusion.13 John Beer speaks of four ‘states’ (corresponding to the four types of vision): the first is that of ‘darkness,’ ‘in which Reason alone holds sway’ (27), the second is that of ‘Fire’ or ‘Wrath,’ wherein ‘energy is freely exercised’ (27), the third is that of ‘Light’ or ‘Paradise,’ reserved for ‘the state of sexual pleasure’ (27), and the fourth ‘reconciles all the others’ (28), being recoverable only *post mortem*. In my view, the third ‘state’ is mistaken for the fourth, the Edenic experience being the attribute of the mystic, whilst the fourth is actually a very present reality *ante mortem*, constituting an ecstatic oasis for the deeply religious. Nevertheless, as I shall show further on, I also believe that the
fourth class brings about the reconciliation of the preceding three.

The only tentative definition that is essentially in concordance with my own interpretation is that offered by Alexander Goulray in *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*: ‘Blake distinguishes ordinary, ‘single vision,’ mere optical reality, from higher forms of vision that perceive things metaphorically, imaginatively and eternally’ (286). Nonetheless, the presentation is too brief to clarify Blake’s position. In my definition, the types of vision are as follows: single (common sight, ordinary visual perception), twofold (perception ‘through’ the eye, not ‘with’ it, functioning on the premise of phenomenological substitution), threefold (artistic en- and decoding, premised on the powerful exercise of imagination and/or inspiration), and fourfold (religious rapture, ecstatic trance, which recaptures and surpasses the essence of all the three preceding stages).

Before proceeding with the quadripartite pattern exegesis, I must also present the context wherein the poet presents the four types of vision explicitly. In a letter to Thomas Butts, dated 22 November 1802, Blake includes a 12-month-old versification describing a rather complex vision, interspersed with seemingly trivial happenings. It is also apparent that it is fourfold vision that allows its recipient to acknowledge its own existence, as well as that of the other three categories:

Now a fourfold vision see
And a fourfold vision is given to me
Tis fourfold in my supreme delight
And three fold in soft Beulahs night
And twofold Always. May God us keep
From single vision & Newton’s sleep (E 722)

5. Four Levels of Interpretation

This subsection of my research is aimed at demonstrating how Blake’s patterns of thought are instanced in his works. I hold that there is a gradual development from his early prophecies, wherein, more often than not, the dominant ‘social’ level is constantly subverted by incipient elementals, to his fully-fledged epics, wherein atemporal phenomena dictate the course of action. So the whole process is chronological, ranging from *America a Prophecy* (1793) to *Jerusalem* (1804-20).

Thus, I start from the assumption that Blake has a quadripartite perspective upon phenomenal reality, a fact which generates four levels of significance. In the subsequent lines, my critical discourse will be cen-
tred on the four main intellectual levels, which correspond to the afore-
mentioned four types of vision, and on the textual realizations of the
four levels. Concurrently, I shall try to demonstrate that Blake deploys
certain paradigmatic figures, whose role is that of action-converging
icons. The simultaneity of the two processes (the creation of levels of
significance and of paradigmatic figures) is, paradoxically, a mode of
encoding, since there is an increase in text complexity, as well as of
decoding, a poem or an epic, since the plot, the characters, and the
underlining tone become all the more transparent in the process.

I shall introduce one more factor in my hermeneutic equation, i.e.
Blake’s plot pattern. Strangely enough, critics have failed to point out
that, throughout both the early prophecies and the epics, Blake uses a
three-step scenario development: an initial state of crisis, which esca-
lates up to a climax, followed by a gradual stage of regeneration, ending
in a retrieval of harmony. On the social level, crisis is represented by the
sleep of reason, regeneration by the unfolding of revolution (Orc’s
apotheosis), and harmony by the community utopia regained. On the
metaphysical level, war among man’s underlining metaphysical aspects
constitutes the crisis, the Apocalypse is regeneration, and true intuitive
knowledge represents the retrieval of harmony. On the aesthetic level,
the crisis is comprised of Milton’s errors in Paradise Lost, the war
against Satan, the corrupter of visionary art, is regeneration, and the
reunification with Ololon constitutes the retrieval of harmony. Finally,
on the religious level, the crisis is Albion’s jealousy of Jerusalem, who is
destined to be the Bride of the Lamb, regeneration is represented by the
rejection of his own selfhood, and the retrieval of harmony is the accom-
plishing of the Brotherhood of Man in the spiritual body of the Christ. In
point of fact, the systematic presence of the three-step scenario proves
once again the factuality of the poetic quaternaries.

5.1. The Social Level: America, Europe, The Song of Los

The first level is the social one. Since it focuses on concrete realities
(in an allegorical albeit clear form), it corresponds to single vision, and,
as such, records events which involve real history, and knowledge of the
human elements in their gross interactions. Its basic conceptual element
is revolution, since this is the ultimate ferment of social evolution. One
may find its textual application in some of Blake’s ‘minor prophecies,’
i.e. America a Prophecy (1793), Europe a Prophecy (1794), and The
Song of Los (1795).14 The French Revolution (1791) may also be treated
as a textual application of the social level, but I preferred to leave it aside for two main reasons: 1. It is incomplete (of the intended seven Books, only one is extant, the other six having been lost) and 2. *America a Prophecy, Europe a Prophecy*, and *The Song of Los* form an independent whole, narrating related and even consecutive events.

As I have already suggested, the aforecited ‘minor prophecies’ are premised on an explicit quadripartite pattern, and constitute an allegorical outline of social history, set on the stern and immutable principles of revolution. My idea is not unique in this context, Stephen Behrendt, among others, defending a related thesis: ‘In *America, Europe* and *The Song of Los*. Blake reconstitutes the history of the human world’ (105).15

The paradigmatic figure of the revolutionary cycle is Orc, whose role is that of an action catalyst. Damon writes that ‘Orc is Revolution in the material world’ (*Blake Dictionary* 309), but the formula is incomplete. Briefly, Orc truly embodies Blake’s idea of Revolution in the perishable universe, but he is uncontrollable. One can neither reason with nor tame Los’s son, for the latter is spontaneous, devastating, and rule-challenging, these being, in my opinion, the three seminal features of any social uprising. Orc is more than any other Blakean figure the expression of his creator’s Zeitgeist, an age obsessed with pseudo-religious formulae, as Jon Mee convincingly points out: ‘The prophetic platform, expressing social grievances and utopian visions in terms of biblical paradigms of Babylonian oppression and millenarian expectation, was in fact one long established in the rhetorical resources of the popular culture by the time Blake wrote’ (28).

*The Song of Los* contains two sections, the first (*Africa*) and the fourth (*Asia*). According to Erdman, they ‘seem to be preludes to unwritten prophecies’ (*Prophet against Empire* 258). Harold Bloom adds that the poem is the weakest of all Blakean revolutionary prophecies, ‘because of the merely pedestrian *Africa* section that begins it’ (E 905). Pedestrian though it may be, the section dedicated to the Black Continent points out that the latter stands for the supreme expression of conservatism, imperialism, and oppression, since it embodies slavery, as the ultimate form of domination. The African continent is carefully translated into a metonymy of seclusion. In fact, these are the first lines of what will prove to be an exquisite account of intellectual architecture in Europe, whose fallacy resides in that it focuses on man’s outer interactions (the social layer) whilst denying the spiritual communion which alone guarantees liberty: ‘These were the Churches: Hospitals: Castles: Palaces: / Like nets & gins & traps to catch the joys of Eternity’ (E 67).
I am of the opinion that the mere ‘pedestrian’ character of *Africa* is yet another rhetorical device employed by Blake with the sole purpose of demonstrating the intellectually castrating feature of single vision. As ‘Newton’s sleep’ is elsewhere defined as seeing with the eye, not through it, the poet intentionally describes the whole plot and its corresponding atmosphere in fading contours. There is a series of nouns, adjectives (usually used as epithets), and verbs which make up a picture of extreme uncertainty, of delusion generated by the singularity of perception: ‘Noah faded! Black grew the sunny African’ (E 67), ‘Noah shrunk’ (E 67), ‘forms of dark delusion’ (E 67), ‘The human race began to wither’ (E 67), ‘as they fled they shrunk’ (E 68), ‘two narrow doleful forms’ (E 68), ‘closing and restraining’ (E 68). Simultaneously, the elements in the fallen, material universe are gradually diminishing, suggesting their petty role in the course of forthcoming events. There is also a slightly derisive undertone, for the action unfolding on the material layer is doubled by an increasingly developed plot on a superior scale, involving supernatural agencies. In my opinion, this whole piece constitutes Blake’s response to physical-eye vision, and to its inevitable intellectual errors.

The second part, *America a Prophecy*, comprises a *Preludium* and *A Prophecy*, being constructed in a manner similar to *Europe a Prophecy*. The *Preludium* deserves a brief analysis, as Blake amalgamates here all his ingredients of an extreme social revolt. The lines are suffused with dark tones, and the characters’ movements are leaden, due to the influence of a heavy materiality, evoking at once a narrow perspective and spiritual fallacy: ‘dark abode’ (E 51), ‘iron baskets’ (E 51), ‘cups of iron’ (E 51), ‘dark air’ (E 51), ‘iron tongue’ (E 51), ‘dark virgin’ (E 51), ‘tenfold chains’ (E 51), ‘fathomless abyss’ (E 51), ‘dark limbs’ (E 51), ‘black cloud’ (E 52), ‘darkness of Africa’ (E 52), ‘dark death’ (E 52), ‘nether deep’ (E 52), ‘silent deep’ (E 52). At the same time, there can be encountered certain tropes (metaphors, metonymies, and epithets) which evoke blood: ‘red Orc’ (E 51), ‘red eyes’ (E 51), ‘wrists of fire’ (E 52), and conflict: ‘struggling womb’ (E 52), ‘struggling afflictions’ (E 52). All these textual elements are symbolic of primary perception, which renders reality incomprehensible if not absurd in its gratuitous violence. The end of the *Preludium* brings about one of Blake’s favourite contrasts of elementals: fire and frost mingling ‘in howling pains, in furrows by thy lightnings rent’ (E 52).

On the whole, *America* records Orc’s apotheosis. The Orcan energetic impulse is, primarily, sexual in nature, the writer being seduced by
a masculine form of violence (cf. Aers 172). Orc’s omnipotent revolutionary force grips Europe, destroying boundaries and upsetting obstacles. The prophecy is fulfilled: the American Revolution prevails. The visionary panorama displays a complex set of crude and brutal images, revolving around Orc’s menacing silhouette:

Stiff shudderings shook the heav’nly thrones! France Spain & Italy,
In terror view’d the bands of Albion, and the ancient Guardians,
Fainting upon the elements, smitten with their own plagues

(E 57)

The third piece, Europe a Prophecy, which, according to Bloom, is ‘the subtlest and most difficult of Blake’s poems, outside of the three epics’ (E 903), constitutes a social allegory, comprising a broad spectrum of phenomena, ranging from the historical sphere to the political one.

Just as in the case of America, the Preludium deserves a concise analysis. The lyrics are infused with numerous syntagms evoking consummation: ‘first born & first consum’d’ (E 60), ‘Consumed and consuming’ (E 60), ‘sieze the burning power’ (E 61), ‘Devouring & devoured’ (E 61). As a construct, the whole piece translates Blake’s idea that social arousal is contagious, and that this contagion consumes the backward reactionary forces. Blake’s scenario is rather simple: dogmatic sleep brings about rejection of imposed patterns of social behaviour, and the violent outcome of the surging masses is sheer rebellion. Single vision is again mocked in the compound metaphor of Enitharmon’s sleep and of the eighteen centuries of dogmatic fallacy: ‘Enitharmon slept, / Eighteen hundred years: Man was a Dream!’ (E 63). In my opinion, the key to this primary level of interpretation lies in an explicit figure of speech, an ironical metonymy of Newton (‘mighty Spirit’), whose pernicious mediation accounts for the subsequent emergence of spiritual barrenness and of extreme dejection:

A mighty Spirit leap’d from the land of Albion,
Nam’d Newton; he siez’d the Trump, & blow’d the enormous blast!
Yellow as leaves of Autumn the myriads of Angelic hosts,
Fell thro’ the wintry skies seeking their graves;
Rattling their hollow bones in howling and lamentation (E 65)

Europe gives a picture of Orc’s tempestuous arrival in France, where the background is set for a consuming uprising. The atmosphere is gory, its hues ranging from golden to crimson. It is interesting to note
that the accompanying characters are ferocious beasts, as in Hindu iconography (according to various artistic representations, each and every god of the Indian pantheon is ascribed a certain animal vehicle – vāhana):

The Lions lash their wrathful tails!
The Tigers couch upon the prey & suck the ruddy tide:
And Enitharmon groans & cries in anguish and dismay (E 66)

The second portion of The Song of Los, and the fourth of the general plot, Asia, describes the hectic assault of the counter-revolutionary forces. It is the intellectual, not the empirical, nature of Orc’s fire that poses the real threat: ‘For the darkness of Asia was startled / At the thick-flaming, thought-creating fires of Orc’ (E 68).

However, the dynamics of the Revolution cannot be subdued. The archetype of any form of rebellion, Orc, proves to be invincible, paving the way for spiritual freedom, and anticipating the conciliatory finale of Jerusalem. According to William Richey, Blake’s Revolution is ‘a rebirth of ancient vitality, a return to the glory of primitive times’ (75). It is essential to note that these ‘primitive times’ translate the concomitantly religious and ontological concept of illud tempus, which is the trans-temporal aspect of reality described in Jerusalem:

Orc, raging in European darkness,
Arose like a pillar of fire above the Alps,
Like a serpent of fiery flame! (E 69)

The chromatic pattern in Asia is the reverse of Africa, the hues ranging from yellow through red to crimson. This palette is suggestive of the gradual force of Revolution, a transparent metaphor expressing the poet’s intense criticism, levelled against scholastic narrow-mindedness and spiritual cecity. The series of nouns, adjectives, and verbs pertain to an imaginary of incipient if luminous rebellion, the spiritual permanently bordering the material: ‘The howl rise up’ (E 68), ‘the thick-flaming, thought-creating fires of Orc’ (E 68), ‘fires in the City’ (E 68), ‘red flames’ (E 69), ‘pillar of fire’ (E 69), ‘serpent of fiery flame’ (E 69).

5.2. The Metaphysical Level: The Four Zoas

The second level is the metaphysical one. Its counterpart is twofold vision, for its purpose is to reveal the concealed aspects of the universe,
the first principles of things. The underlying concept is that of ‘science,’ perceived not as *doxa*, but as *apokalypsis*, which is the supreme expression of *episteme*. One may find its textual application in the *The Four Zoas* (1795-1804).

The paradigmatic figure in Blake’s unfinished epic is the iconic ensemble of the four zoas: Tharmas, representing man’s corporeal dimension, Urizen, man’s intellect, Luvah, man’s feelings, and Urthona, man’s creativity. It is also worth noting that Urthona fails to acquire a temporal manifestation, being replaced by its poetry-embodying avatar, Los. The whole plot of *The Four Zoas* is concerned with the description of man’s metaphysical aspects, since, in Blake, knowledge, just like historical development, cannot be separated from the anthropic element.

Max Plowman, followed by Damon and Bloom, brilliantly epitomized the epic action. In the following lines, I shall try to synthesize my own global interpretation of *The Four Zoas*. Whereas the first four *Nights* focus on the gradual disruption and dispersion of the zoas: Tharmas, Luvah, Urizen, and Urthona respectively, *Night the Fifth* presents Orc’s tribulations. Whilst *Night the Sixth* and *Night the Seventh* centre on Urizen’s continuous decay, as he, the embodiment of reason, turns into a fallen god of the universe of error, *Night the Eighth* sums up the universal fallacies, suggested metaphorically by the hermaphrodite’s portrait. *Night the Ninth* brings about Judgment Day, and thereby the restoration of knowledge as metaphysics of harmonious truth.

As I have hitherto tried to show, *The Four Zoas* is, in its author’s teleology, a complete description of the world’s ontological components and of their relationships. Moreover, one should bear in mind the fact that, as twofold vision must be understood in its relationship with single vision (the former continually substituting the perceptive data furnished by the latter with essentially new, metaphorically-designed phenomena), the metaphysical level must be identified in its similar relationship with the social level. Thus, the social conflict unfolding in the material world (the fierce contagion of revolution) is transferred to a superior ontological scale, and is replaced by intellectual war, waged among man’s inner qualitative aspects. The pivotal element shared by both the social and the metaphysical levels is the anthropic one, for man is at the centre of the entire Blakean phenomenology.

That this is the case is evident from the very beginning of *The Four Zoas*. In *Night the First*, Los proclaims in a peremptory tone that the unfolding metaphysical drama, encompassing war among furious elementals, takes place in man’s brain: ‘I see the shower of blood: I see the
sword & spears of futurity / Tho in the Brain of Man we live, & in his circling Nerves’ (E 306). Since reason mistakes geometrical constructions for true ontological knowledge, it is destined to fall, along with all imaginable shapes and figures. Blake’s metaphors translate both the sterility of any organized rational compound and the latter’s incapacity to grasp spontaneous harmony as the ultimate meaning of phenomena:

. . . . Trapeziums Rhombs Rhomboids
Parallelograms. triple & quadruple. polygonic
In their amazing hard subdued course in the vast deep (E 322)

Blake’s symbol of inert reason is, of course, Urizen. Thus, I think that Blake’s extended metaphor depicting Urizen’s ruins in Night the Fourth actually evokes the sheer débâcle of the rational faculty refusing to shift its perspective. Only through transfiguration can the bounds of reason be surpassed: ‘Terrified Los beheld the ruins of Urizen beneath / A horrible Chaos to his eyes. a formless unmeasurable Death’ (E 335). Reason craves for knowledge, but, since the former’s conceptual unity is disrupted by dichotomous entities, it is denied access to the latter. The conflicting apparitions are metonymically translated into the feminine triangle in Night the Sixth: ‘Lo three teriffic women at the verge of the bright flood / Who would not suffer him to approach. But drove him back with storms’ (E 345).

The cosmic rage reaches its denouement in Night the Ninth. Due to the implacable nature of Urizen, Science is no longer illuminated, but autological, and, consequently, self-destructive: ‘Thy self-destroying beast formd Science shall be thy eternal lot’ (E 390). This compels Urizen to accept his intellectual errors, but, quite predictably in Blake’s metaphysical scheme, he is not instantly purged as a result of his cathartic act: ‘Urizen said. I have Erred & my Error remains with me’ (E 391). The gradual process of understanding on the part of one zoa involves a regaining of harmony on the part of another. Urthona, a personified hypostasis of the metaphysical faculty in man, is restored to its erstwhile glory: ‘. . . . Urthona rises from the ruinous walls / In all his ancient strength to form the golden armour of science’ (E 407). In the end, knowledge prevails, and bad science, that of Bacon, Newton, and Locke, abstract and experimental in its scope, is discarded. In the last line of Night the Ninth, the visionary self cannot conceal an optimistic tone in what I believe constitutes the rhetorical key to the entire epic: ‘The dark Religions are departed & sweet Science reigns’ (E 407).
5.3. The Aesthetic Level: *Milton*

The third level is the aesthetic one. Being designed with a view to exemplifying the principles of artistic creation, it is analogous to three-fold vision. Its underlining element is spontaneous creation, which may be aroused due to the exercise of two faculties, imagination and inspiration. One may find its textual application in *Milton* (1804-08). The paradigmatic figure at this level is Los, who, as the archetype of Poetry, becomes Blake himself, thereby helping Milton purge his artistic, as well as spiritual, sins: ‘And I became One Man with him arising in my strength: / Twas too late now to recede. Los Had enterd into my soul’ (E 117). Blake expounded the genesis of *Milton* in two epistles to Thomas Butts (25 April 1803, and 6 July 1803). In the first letter, the poet merely acknowledges his lack of involvement in the actual process of creation, attributing the completion of the latter to a superior agency: ‘I have written this Poem from immediate Dictation twelve or sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time without Premeditation & even against my Will. the Time it has taken in writing was thus renderd Non Existent. & an immense Poem Exists which seems to be the Labour of a long Life all producd without Labour or Study.’ (E 728-29). The encomium in the second letter is not farfetched, since Blake can assume no authorship: ‘I may praise it since I dare not pretend to be any other than the Secretary the Authors are in Eternity I consider it as the Grandest Poem that This World Contains’ (E 730). The divine assistance reaches even farther, in that it imposes its omnipotent will upon the very production of the finite artwork, i.e. its verbal-pictorial form, the illuminated manuscript: ‘This Poem shall by Divine Assistance be progressively Printed & Ornamented with Prints & given to the Public’ (E 730).

At once displaying the spiritual tribulations of two poetic personae, i.e. Milton and Blake, and offering reflections on the nature of art, *Milton* is an aesthetic manifesto, defending the autonomy of the creative process. It is a powerful plea for imagination unbound and unlimited, as well as for true inspiration, since these represent the foundations of all artistic manifestations. In *A Descriptive Catalogue* (1809), which was innocently devised as an introduction to a seemingly capital exhibition, heralding nothing less than ‘the birthday of the Renaissance of English art’ (Frye 410), Blake axiologically conceives of two essentially negative classes of men. The former class refers to ethics, the latter – to aesthetics: ‘As there is a class of men, whose whole delight is the destruction of men, so there is a class of artists, whose whole art and sci-
ence is fabricated for the purpose of destroying art’ (E 538). The Preface to Milton is directed against the aesthetically-disruptive individuals, and calls for a visionary awakening of all artists: ‘Painters! On you I call! Sculptors! Architects! Suffer not the fash[i]onable Fools to depress your powers . . . believe Christ & his Apostles that there is a Class of Men whose whole delight is in Destroying’ (E 95).

That Blake sees art as being able to perform a cathartic function is, to my view, a fact beyond any shadow of doubt. This can be proved by calling attention to a particular trope, i.e. a repetition found no less than six times (E 96, E 98, E 100, E 101, E 102, E 105) in the Bard’s Song in Book the First: ‘Mark well my words! they are of your eternal salvation’ (E 96). Not only does Blake believe art to lead one to catharsis, but he also employs the Bard’s discourse as a medium of personal communication. Blake’s Bard is turned into a metonymy of the creative self. Through the lens of this reading, the relationship between Blake and his leitmotifs appears formulaic within the artist’s system of reference. Conjoined images depicting a flaming state of afflatus portend the imminent exclusion of craft and artifice from visionary art:

The Bard replied. I am inspired! I know it is Truth! for I sing

According to the inspiration of Poetic Genius

(E 107-8)

In order to expiate his spiritual sins, Milton is forced to return to the material universe (‘eternal death’), which brings about distress and confusion. The state of ‘unannihilation’ is the fallen state of the artist who has not renounced his selfhood and, consequently, has not subjected himself to the potency of Poetic Genius. The whole scenario is set in Book the First: ‘I will go down to self annihilation and eternal death, / Lest the Last Judgment come & find me unannihilate’ (E 108).

The complex metaphor of Satan’s bosom, one of Blake’s favourite stylistic techniques, depicts the utter ruin of fallen art. Since man is at the centre of Blake’s poetic enterprise on all levels, art is personified, and the reader is opened to the perspective of a barren anthropomorphic construct: ‘I also stood in Satans bosom & beheld its desolations! / A ruind Man: a ruind building ofGod not made with hands’ (E 139). In Book the Second, sub finem, Milton renounces his ego, which symbolizes error and, implicitly, the figure of Satan, so as to embrace true art, i.e. the product of the omnipotent force of imagination and/or inspiration. His discourse is a pathetic aesthetic apologia, a flamboyant piece of rhetoric which differentiates between visionary and non-visionary arte-
facts, between afflatus and labor. The underlying idea is that the supreme artist, who is incapable of performing perfunctory tasks, should be completely devoid of egotism, for he merely follows a sacred generative instinct, and is under total divine control. This genuine state of enthouiasmos can be misinterpreted as lunacy by those whose only calling is elusive reasoning or dissemination of uncertainty:

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 (E 142).

5.4. The Religious Level: Jerusalem

Finally, the fourth level is the religious one. Its target is the totality of ontological contents, and, therefore, this niveau is similar to fourfold vision. Its defining element is spiritual redemption, perceived as cosmic unity. One may find its textual application in Jerusalem (1804-20), whose symbolism ‘is based on a combination of English and Biblical imagery’ (372), according to Frye.21 Quite predictably, the paradigmatic figure at this level is Jesus, whose redemptive presence is invoked more than once, and who marks the entire plot of the epic as the materialization of visionary harmony: ‘Come then O Lamb of God and take away the remembrance of Sin’ (E 200). Jerusalem, Blake’s intended magnus opus, is centred on the idea of spiritual liberty, its end being soteriological. In Blake, knowledge, art, and religion are part and parcel of the vast domain of visionary Imagination, which constitutes the Body of Christ. Thus, the three classes of vision, as well as the three levels of significance, are reconstructed within the fourth, and the circle is complete (social liberty too is reorganized, on a superior scale, as spiritual liberty). The whole epic brilliantly narrates Albion’s self-sacrifice (the sacred annihilation of the gross ego stands for the rejection of Satan) and the restoration of the pristine unity of all forms of being.

That the poem must be viewed as an actualization of a religious teleology becomes evident from the introductory passage in Chapter I, To the Public: ‘I also hope the Reader will be with me, wholly One in Jesus our Lord . . . (E 145). The propensity for integrating all levels of human manifestation into the ‘Saviours kingdom’ is again evident in the description of the gnoseological triad (‘Wisdom, Art, and Science’) which characterizes ‘[t]he Primeval State of Man’ (E 146). Whilst, in the introduction to Chapter II, To the Jews, the author urges the Hebrews to ‘[t]ake up the Cross . . . & follow Jesus’ (E 174), in the
prefatory lines to Chapter III, To the Deists, he advises against the heresy of Natural Morality or Natural Religion, whose followers are ‘the Enemies of Christianity’ (E 200). The preface to Chapter IV, To the Christians, proclaims Blake’s lifelong belief in the imaginative perception of absolute religion, as a free exercise of ultimate visionary power: ‘I know of no other Christianity and of no other Gospel than the liberty both of body & mind to exercise the Divine Arts of Imagination’ (E 231).

The opening lines of Chapter I evince Albion’s selfishness and his jealous rage against his own Emanation, Jerusalem, who is destined to become the Bride of the Lamb. Albion’s numerous sons and daughters incarnate his rage, and, concurrently, demonstrate that multiplicity brings about conflict and desolation: ‘They revolve into the Furnaces Southward & are driven forth Northward / Divided into Male and Female forms time after time’ (E 148). The series of divisions continues. Los himself divides into a masculine figure and its feminine counterpart, the resulting elements being two incomplete entities, i.e. a Spectre and an Emanation:

Los heard her lamentations in the deeps afar! his tears fall
Incessant before the Furnaces, and his Emanation divided in pain,
Eastward toward the Starry Wheels. But Westward, a black Horror,
His Spectre driv’n by the Starry Wheels of Albions sons, black and
Opake divided from his back; he labours and mourns! (E 148-49)

Chapter II records Albion’s endeavour to destroy Jerusalem, aided by his twelve sons, who spring from his bosom as soon as he has fallen asleep. The Giant is deluded by spiritual error, and fails to acknowledge the capital importance of Divine Vision, which is the textual translation of Blake’s fourfold vision:

But they fled to the mountains to seek ransom: building A Strong
Fortification against the Divine Humanity and Mercy,
In Shame & Jealousy to annihilate Jerusalem!

Turning his back to the Divine Vision . . . (E 174-75)

In Chapter III, due to the seemingly omnipotent character of error in its spiritual form, the Divine Vision itself undergoes a series of convoluted metamorphoses. My view is that the symbols are growing in intensity, from the innocuous flame (initial stage of grace) through the more elaborate pillar (Moses’s guidance) and wheel of fire (Ezekiel’s
prophecy) to the globe of blood, suggesting at once human sacrifice and Christ’s passions. The restoration of the supreme form of vision lies with Jesus:

The Divine Vision became First a burning flame, then a column
Of fire, then an awful fiery wheel surrounding earth & heaven:
And then a globe of blood . . .                                         (E 219)

Nonetheless, Chapter IV concludes both with Albion’s and Jerusalem’s religious awakenings through Christ’s spiritual mediation, and with the supreme merging of all beings into one total form, infinite in scope and divine in nature. Salvation is achieved by mystical reunification, and the saga of separation ceases. Creation, which constitutes a mere prolongation of an ontological error (primordial division), comes to an abrupt end, as perishable existence is transmuted into Eternity. Basically, everything continues to exist in illo tempore:

All Human Forms identified even Tree Metal Earth & Stone. all
Human Forms identified, living going forth & returning wearied
Into the Planetary lives of Years Months Days & Hours reposing
And then Awaking into his Bosom in the Life of Immortality.

And I heard the Name of their Emanations they are named
Jerusalem

6. Conclusion

Partly due to space constraints, partly due to a commitment to that principle of economy known as Occam’s razor, I conclude this critical approach, not before summing up my attempt. This analysis has started from a basic assumption concerning Blake’s unsystematic system, and has proceeded thence by a process of explication de texte to the demonstration of the hermeneutic thesis. As I have striven to explain throughout this study, Blake’s artistic conception is premised on an intricately devised unsystematic system, comprising four main levels (social, metaphysical, aesthetic, and religious), which are to be discerned and interpreted both ideologically and textually. I have also shown that this quadripartite ensemble and the distinct types of vision (single, twofold, threefold, and fourfold) in Blake’s thought are interconnected, and must be analyzed accordingly. Thus, my interpretation evinces Blake’s complex profile as a poet and thinker, and, at the same time, attempts to offer a fresh starting point for a systematic academic approach to his work in general.
Notes

1 Here, I have in mind Damrosch, Jr.’s dictum that ‘Blake’s art is fundamentally conceptual’ (118).
2 Literature as a scientific method, based on exegetic principles.
4 Cf. Damrosch, Jr. passim.
6 Cf. Frye passim.
7 Cf. Erdman, *Prophet against Empire* passim.
8 It is no accident that, in his *Foreword* to Damon’s *Blake Dictionary*, Morris Eaves points out that three emblematic scholarly figures are to be retained as foremost authorities on Blake studies: Damon, Frye, and Erdman (IX). In my opinion, the same three critics succeeded in offering a logically coherent and fundamentally unitary Blake.
9 Cf. Raine passim.
10 As a case in point, Damon too notes that ‘thought, animated by passion, is the substance of his verse’ (*Blake Dictionary* 351).
11 Cf., in this respect, the series of omissions, erasures, and deletions in *Milton*: plates 6 (l. 35), 7 (l. 4-5), 27 (l. 60) and in *Jerusalem*: plates 1 (*Frontispiece*), 4 (l. 15), 14 (end of the first chapter), 36 [32] (l. 34), 37 [34] (l. 10), 84 (l. 17-19), etc. Other contexts evince the fact that Blake re-used the material of *The Four Zoas* to shape *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. On the other hand, *The Four Zoas* contains repetitions from previous poems, such as *Tiriel, Visions of the Daughters of Albion, America a Prophecy, The First Book of Urizen, The Book of Ahania*. For more details, cf. Damon, *William Blake* 396-98.
12 Cf. E 107-08.
14 The third poem represents, simultaneously, a prequel and a sequel to the two versified prophecies.
15 Behrendt continues: ‘In these three works Blake marshals his verbal and visual forces to present for infernal reading a documentary history that aims to reveal that the events of the latter years of the eighteenth century are presages of the millenium that is imminent, that is in fact unfolding, and that it has been foreshadowed in the artifacts of both Christian and pre-Christian cultures’ (105).
16 For a comprehensive presentation of *Orc*’s paradigm, cf. Hobson passim. It is perhaps significant that Raine equates Orc with Isaac’s son, Edom or Esau, holding that Blake’s whole symbolism springs from Swedenborg (I 337-38). The same opinion is also held by Tannenbaum (cf. 131-33 et passim).
17 George Quasha equates Orc with political revolution (17).
18 For a perceptive analysis of the poem, cf. Ansari 46-54.
19 For more details in this respect, cf. Damon, *Blake Dictionary* 143, and E
948-67.

20 For a summary of the plot, cf. Frye 316.
22 William of Occam expressed his doubts in relation to the futile multiplication of interpretative patterns, and defended a thesis according to which the simplest explanation is the best.

Select Bibliography


