

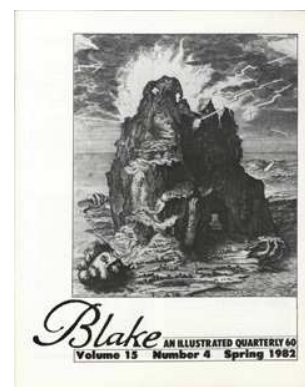
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Leopold Damrosch, Jr., Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth

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Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 15, Issue 4, Spring 1982, pp. 192-196



proverbs, neatly and in order, to scenes from the wars; under such circumstances, the "Proverbs of Hell" seem all the more challenging. But, of course, myth is not genuinely susceptible to opposition, nor even can it be destroyed or modified by the construction of counter-myths; since its realm is contradiction, it is capable of remaining unaffected by intellectual weapons, modifying its contours only in a complex and variable relation with changes in the underlying reality. A poem of 1813 entitled "National Discord" is interesting in this context; the poet regrets the contemporary lack of a "Thracian Lyrical . . . gifted with skill / To humble the Tiger to crouch at his will," and bemoans the collapse of the world into discord rather than the harmony which, of course, once prevailed:

the Genius of bright intuition is fled;
And harmony passed from the heart to the head;
No rapt inspiration now succours the brave!
No sounds of the lyre are effectual to save!

The reign is establish'd of Discord; delight

Exults in narration of siege and of flight;
Where losses confuse in the flames spreading-
far,
And distresses in pageants and tumults of war.

This, I believe, well illustrates ambivalence in contemporary attitudes to the war; the assumed preoccupation of poets with the martial is criticized, while at the same time the key terms "delight" and "exults" are attached precisely to this condemned narration. For "condemned narration," we could substitute "Bible of Hell," and we would thus be enriching our sense of the relations between Blakean narrative and history, while at the same time starting to think in quite a Blakean way first about the specific shapes, the particular inclusions and exclusions, which psychic energy can be made to assume by the pressure of historical circumstance and then about the ideological collusions which seek to protect people both from the threat of change and, at the same time and inextricably, from the risk of taking on their own power.

Leopold Damrosch, Jr. **Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth.** Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980. xiv + 395 pp. \$25.00 cloth, \$9.50 paper.

Reviewed by Nelson Hilton

Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth



Leopold Damrosch, Jr.

After two books on Samuel Johnson, Leopold Damrosch, Jr. has now burst forward unheralded to present *Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth*.¹ It is a weighty tome which will be read by every serious student of Blake over the next few years; the observations on "sex," "fatherhood," and the "spectre" if thought before have never been so well expressed. Having stated my belief that the book should be widely read, I hope I may be for-

given for taking the remaining space to wrestle in true friendship with a gloriously Urizenic text. Let me begin with this misreading: "As human beings if not as literary critics, we surely owe [Damrosch] Blake the obligation of testing his [criticism] myth against our experience of [Blake] truth, which is no more than doing what he constantly begs us to do [unsure]. . . . But as critics we must go further and try to understand why [Damrosch's criticism]

Blake's myth takes the unsatisfying form that it does. To do so will reveal his final ambivalence. . . ." (239-40).

Return to the title, the awkward indefiniteness of which is immediately apparent as one pauses to run through its equally compelling permutations. The rationale for the second term, "truth," is that "As a prophet Blake claims to announce the truth, and I have entitled this study *Symbol and Truth* because I think it important to consider how his poems might be perceived as true by modern readers" (9). The language is curious only until we realize that it is standard Academese: distancing and subject/self-effacing (how *perhaps* "perceived" not by Damrosch but nameless "modern readers"; reporting, non-judgmentally, Blake's "claims") in the midst of its very self-assertion ("because I think it important"). As it will turn out in the final consideration, "If Blake deliberately cuts himself off from the phenomenology of lived experience, and if the modern reader cannot join him in that exclusion, why should one read him?" (368). Disregarding the two "particularly compelling" academic reasons, I would suggest that the true modern reader does join in that exclusion--the young Blake readers of the new age, who believe as well in imaginary numbers, the genetic code, black holes, and floating keeps in computer programs, are indeed moving ever further from the phenomenology of Damrosch's nostalgic, Wordsworthian "lived experience" (we are told, regretfully, that "There can be no Wordsworthian solitary reaper in Blake . . . and no Michael . . ."; that, "In the end . . . Blake cannot come to terms with [Wordsworth's image of] ' . . . the very world which is the world / Of all of us' [366-67, 368]).

The first word of this book's title, "symbol," is its most important and problematic one; significantly (or symbolically?) enough, it never appears in Blake's text in any form. Damrosch, however, is concerned with "the issues" raised by Blake, and central to this focus is Blake's "exposure of the problem of symbolism," "his exploration of the possibilities and limits of the symbol" (7, 368). One is left with the impression that this also is Damrosch's vision of his own achievement. The obvious question, "What is a symbol?", would quickly propel us beyond Damrosch and into the deep space of contemporary poetics; but since the concept of "symbol" appears on nearly every page, it is essential to try to understand what Damrosch means by it. "Symbols are not simple signs"--they are "dense with meaning" and so "any simple translation of symbol into 'meaning' reduces it once more to a sign" (67, 68, 65).

Damrosch argues that "The symbol for Blake is more than a magnetic field of emotional charges or a cognitive system within which experience can be organized. It is our best and subtlest means of insight into reality. The sun looks like a disk but is human" (69). "But in Blake's theory," says Damrosch, "owing to his suspicion of the fallen world, symbols are vitiated by their fallen status, for example in the various versions of the sun." "Therefore," this argument continues, the symbols "point to, or participate in a reality which is more

vivid and immediate than they are, so long as we can achieve an apocalyptic breakthrough and ascend into vision on the fiery chariot of the imagination" (362). Heady stuff.

By "vision," Blake "means a mode of perception that sees through symbols rather than with them" (302).² "All thinking," by way of evident contrast to vision, is of a "symbolic character" (256). "We therefore have slippery and ambiguous symbols pointing to a more vivid and organized reality 'within'" (362). This "reality," Damrosch has to argue implicitly, is itself symbolic or hypothetical, since "Blake openly defies the reality principle" by means of his "wish fulfillment on a cosmic scale that . . . chooses to deny essential facts of human experience" (163, 70). This ostensibly meta-symbolic and transcendent Blakean reality depends finally on "an act of faith--which the reader must postulate even if he does not share"--since "Invariably we are brought back to the necessity of the divine" (69, 314). We read Blake, then (now), "to know what it would be like to believe in man's spiritual power" (368). These opinions resonate movingly with the author's most telling statement in the book: "I myself (to speak frankly) have no religious belief" (246). Reading in Damrosch's concluding paragraph that the entire exercise "would have a merely antiquarian function if Blake did not possess the power of a religious vision" (371), one cannot resist wondering, "Did he put on his knowledge with his power?"

Let us return to "the issue" of "unsatisfying form" and "final ambivalence": "The purpose of [Damrosch's criticism] Blake's myth is far from being merely descriptive. It is prescriptive . . ." (150). Hence such dicta as "the invention of states represents a decisive change in Blake's myth, and I think an unfortunate one"; "I propose to establish an intellectual context that will show not only what Blake seems to mean, but also why he finds it so hard to mean what he wants"; "his representations of Female Will would have been less tendentious if he had made more of the symbolism of Lilith"; "Blake's real mistake, if I may bluntly call it that, was to give in to the dualist impulse and to dismiss sexuality to Beulah" (154, 176, 219, 234).

Let me make clear what I think is going on. To talk about "symbols" is to posit the existence of "another" text, of latent meanings, and thus the concomitant necessity (since "A symbolic language has to be interpreted" [116]) of an interpreter, a wise guardian of the text and context. *Cui bono?* Recognizing that "To say what a given symbol means in Blake's work is impossible except in an extended essay on its various specific meanings" (107), Damrosch has projected instead a royal road of interpreting the nature of Blakean symbolization. His book is "a study in philosophical interpretation" which is, anyway, "logically prior to commentary"; it is, indeed, a "metacommentary" (4, 5). Like its title, the book's chapters offer abstract categories such as "The Truth of Symbols," "God and Man." Early on, Damrosch cites Blake's reported remark, "I can look at a knot in a piece of wood till I am frightened at it," and finds the implication that "a fixity of gaze would compel the object to yield up its hidden

meaning" (42). Perhaps we hear an abstracted echo of this when we read, later, that our author "will explore some philosophical reasons for the knottiest problems in Blake's myth," the meanings that "baffle interpretation," that "give trouble because they cannot be coherently reconciled" (113-14). Appropriately enough, he fixes his gaze longest--for over a fifth of the book--on "The Problem of Dualism" (every Blakean symbol "has a dual significance" [290]) and there, most "compellingly," on "Sex." One hopes that these fine discussions were as therapeutic for Damrosch as he holds Blake's myth to have been for its creator (152, 311).

Damrosch's concern "with contexts rather than sources" (6) is at times misguided. Context, again, is something the (meta-)commentator decides³--but it is time that we start discovering "intertext" rather than projecting context, which is to say, it is time we started producing the text rather than abstracting its "meaning." For example, Damrosch quotes Blake's description that "the Plowman of Chaucer is Hercules in his supreme eternal state, divested of his spectrous shadow, which is the Miller . . .," and observes that "In mythological terms, [the two] combine to make up Hercules, whom the ancient mythographers failed to recognize as a divided being." They "did not understand that their Hercules was a composite being. Blake's myth exists not to confirm traditional intuitions but to make new sense of them" (82). Well and good--but a little more concern for source/intertext would not be amiss. In the underworld of the *Odyssey* we see Hercules, in the translation of Pope that Blake was possibly reading with Hayley at the time, "A tow'ring spectre of gigantic mold, / A shadowy form" (11.742-43). One fascinating aspect of Hercules is that "high in heav'n's abodes / Himself resides, a God among the Gods," whereas "here" ghosts surround "his shade" (743-44, 747). Pope observes in a note to the passage that it offers "full evidence of the partition of the human composition into three parts: The body is buried in the earth; the image or εἶδολον descends into the regions of the departed; and the soul, or the divine part of man, is receiv'd into heaven." Needless to say this conception of a divided or composite being suggests *Milton* as well.

Again, Damrosch's emphasis on analogous context can distract us from a more interesting textuality. He relates that, according to Hans Jonas, in the "Gnostic philosophy of Valentinus, 'matter would appear to be a function rather than a substance on its own, a state of the 'affection' of the absolute being, and the solidified external expression of that state. . . . This substance, then, psychical as well as material, is nothing else than a self-estranged and sunken form of the Spirit solidified . . .'" (168). Damrosch adds, "Every word of this description can be applied to Blake, not because he 'was' a Gnostic but because the Gnostic form of Neoplatonism arrived at similar answers by an analogous route." But perhaps Blake's is not an arbitrary dualism severing the spiritual and the material, "defining one half of the duality out of existence." Perhaps it represents, in part, an attempt to incorporate contemporary "scientific reality." As Blake would have read in the *Principia*, "The vapors which arise

from the sun . . . may meet at last with, and fall into, the atmospheres of the planets by their gravity, and there be condensed and turned into water and humid spirits; and from thence, by a slow heat, pass gradually into the form of salts, and sulphurs, and tinctures, and mud, and clay, and sand, and stones, and coral, and other terrestrial substances."⁴

The importance of science or "scientific myth" as a context/intertext persists throughout Blake's work. "The final vision of the Zoas," notes Damrosch, "conversing in visionary forms dramatic, represents them as 'going forward irresistible from Eternity to Eternity' [J 98.27], a phrase which we have seen in Boehme and which probably derives from biblical locutions like 'from everlasting to everlasting'" (341). But again, this is in part Blake's revision of Newton's "living, intelligent, and powerful Being" whose duration reaches "from eternity to eternity."⁵

"In his positive vein," writes Damrosch, "Blake describes art as organized vision that transforms appearances." He cites the beautiful passage in *Milton*, "'Thou seest the gorgeous clothd flies that dance & sport in summer,'" and finds that "their random swarming [becomes] an intricate dance." But, he would remind us, "the vision of the dancing flies is Los's conceit, a work of imagination which is only a temporary transformation of the fallen world." The dance-message of bees is a world of delight closed to this critic.⁶ So too, for him, "The lark [in *Milton*] is not significant in itself, as an actual bird, but as a symbol of prophetic inspiration, which is made clear a little later in the image of a relay of larks as heavenly messengers. 'To Immortals, the Lark is a mighty Angel'" (86). Are we not Immortals, for a lark? Remarkable symbol, to lead "the Choir of Day! trill, trill, trill, trill" (*M* 31.31).

For me, the most difficult aspect of this book concerns the author's conception of Blake's language. A practitioner of "philosophical interpretation," Damrosch approvingly cites Wittgenstein: "'Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.'" So is Blake's poetry," he adds (358). To which I answer, forgetting who said it, "Poetry is too important to be left to philosophers!" The crucial term here, even more difficult than Damrosch's "symbol," is *word*. While recognizing that "Blake exhibits an almost Joycean awareness of the manipulability of words," Damrosch knows that "behind the words he sees a divine vision to which they point, and has little interest in words for their own sake" (73). Words are opaque bricks in "'the stubborn structure' of the Language"--a quotation to which Damrosch continually returns. Language is one more of those "barriers to vision" (like images, phenomena, symbols [42, 69, 302]), that we must learn to see through (73, 328): "how could the structure not be stubborn? Syntax is tyrannical, forcing us to think along its lines, and every individual word is haunted by associations that the user cannot escape" (326). Blake's liberties with syntax and normal association are for Damrosch only further indications of Blake's "determination to make us break through language" (326).

Discussing *Adam Naming the Beasts*, Damrosch proposes that "in the very act of naming, in choosing human symbols with which to represent experience, man has committed himself to the Fall" (90). But is the word, in its practical and conceptual reality, a human symbol? Damrosch neglects to acknowledge that both *Milton* and *Jerusalem* end with *onomastic* "visions" ("I heard it namd," "I heard the Name," *M* 42.15, *J* 99.5). Perceiving that there is something particular about Blake's relation to the word, Damrosch admits that "in Eternity . . . words become truly creative as in the symbolism of the first chapter of John's gospel . . . rather than a stubborn structure" (327). So, "When Albion awakens he is heard 'speaking the Words of Eternity in Human Forms,'" and these "Words are not signs but living beings. . . . And conversation must therefore be more than language as we know it, the stubborn structure of Los" (346). Curiously enough, these living words which Damrosch would confine to Blake's Eternity have escaped to his own text twelve pages on: "Blake's words will not stay on the page as objects of aesthetic contemplation; they invade the reader's mind and attempt to transform his world" (358).⁷ These are indeed the agents of a *stubborn* structure (let us consult the OED): "refusing obedience, unyielding, untameable, difficult to subdue."⁸ Blake's genius is that he recognizes this divine, transcendental, Orcian energy in the word. Where Damrosch sees his "slippery and ambiguous symbols pointing to a more vivid and organized reality 'within,'" one might instead see definite and polysemous words pointing to the vivid and organized reality within their structure: a vision of telos we could call imagination/the word/Jesus. Why, after all, does language exist? Why do we yield up the question of its origins? And here also I must dissent from the author's view that "Blake's dream of visionary truth is fundamentally incompatible with modern theories of intertextuality, indeterminacy, and deconstructive license" (355). The Book of Revelation is indeed "a very different model from the speculations of Jacques Derrida," but such contemporary explorations show us in words and texts the vortex long foretold.⁹ Barthes' "galaxy of signifiers" adjoins Blake's Eternity.

Consider another example of "Blakean symbolism, which continually disturbs our imaginations with its aggressive strangeness. After Satan seizes the harrow of Palamabron and reduces his servants to drunken confusion, 'Los took off his left sandal placing it on his head, / Signal of solemn mourning.' This is a symbolic action that demands a gloss, not a 'natural representation'" (94). Damrosch does not offer that gloss (this being a metacommentary, one supposes), but goes on to ask, typically, "Would an exemplar of the poet in Wordsworth put a sandal on his head?" I suggest that this is not so much a symbolic act as a linguistic one--an act whose "symbolism" is its praxis, which is "more than language as we know it, the stubborn structure of Los."

We need first to remember the surrounding text: the servants of the mill riot

With echoing confusion, tho' the Sun was
risen on high.

Then Los took off his left sandal placing it on
his head,

Signal of solemn mourning

(*M* 8.10-12)

"Echoing confusion" here indicates the manner in which the words that follow are to be understood. Thus "Sun" becomes the "sandal" which is in turn the "signal of solemn mourning." This is another version of what appears in *Jerusalem* as "that Signal of the Morning which was told us in the Beginning" (*J* 93.26),¹⁰ the beginning in which was the living word, the *logon zooōs* (λογον ζωης) of Golgonooza. As the Sun was risen "on high," so Los places the sandal "on his head." The sandal is the signal which the servants behold, and its rising initiates the mourning, the awareness of loss. What will later be the sandal of the vegetable world, the vehicle, the signifier, is here seen as the intellectual sun-head, the sign itself. The passage discloses a mode of productivity distinct from the odd picture ("symbol") offered by the narrative; indeed, the description seems to be intentionally "unfortunate" (Stevenson's annotation) in order to draw attention to the process of literal transformation at work. Thus in this passage *sun* becomes *risen*, becomes *Los* or *sol* anagrammatically, and then becomes *sandal* becomes *signal* becomes *sol/emv*--and all ending with mourning. The underlying theme, in word and letter (*o*'s occur here at twice Blake's average rate, as randomly sampled), is the sun; this should not surprise Damrosch, who offers a section on "Symbolic Knowing: The Example of the Sun." This theme may be called the "hypogram," the term introduced by Saussure in his strange investigation of Latin verse to characterize "the inducing word": the word or small group of words which he supposed "led, by way of phonetic paraphrase, to the elaboration of the poem" (Starobinski). Saussure hoped to discover a law of poetic composition, and while such a conception is incredible, it does seem that in the passage at hand the Poetic Genius (not to be identified with the conscious poet) writes from a pre-text concerning the sun. The effect of such literal play parallels that which Maureen Quilligan posits for wordplay in allegory: it makes the reader "self-conscious of reading by indicating the primary importance of the verbal surface rather than the imagined action." Such expanded considerations make the reader more conscious of the various paths to the production of meaning: the simple but serious realization that there is more at work than meets the everyday sleepy eye (or ear) is enough: the glimmering indication that there are worlds of delight closed by our common sense, our expectation, our symbolic projections,¹¹ awakens another sense for that delight, the sense that "Reason or the ratio of all we have already known is not the same that it shall be when we know more" (*NNrb*): a sense of process, of our passing presence in the exfoliation of the word. *S-u-n* perhaps serves in such a generating position in the passage since--to use a Swedenborgian intertext--the Lord is the Word, which is the spiritual sun, which is the only real existence and the conjunction between man and itself: the Poetic Genius centers on the word "sun" as another name for the word and for itself.

Damrosch "must reject Frye's suggestion that the key to Blake's thought is the synonymity of

'form' and 'image.'" Projecting unbindable duality everywhere, he explains, "On the contrary, form belongs to the eternal realm and image to the sensory"; and from this "We see how profoundly Blake needed a religious assurance of union with the one central Form" (44). But Frye's "synonymity" is precisely the energy or space embodied in the word, which joins form and image and is discontinuous with the world. At the beginning of *The Four Zoas* Blake directs us to John 1:14, quoting the last part in Greek: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." And the reason, according to the other reference to John, is "That they all may be one. . . ." Albion, if one will. It is language, the medium of communication and communion, in which we are one; it is the word which is the true subject. As Los "built" the stubborn structure, so "the words of man to man. . . . build the Universe stupendous: Mental forms Creating" (*M* 30.18-20, my italics). Where Damrosch sees us "confined to a world in which the word is woven into the garment of the Shadowy Female" (328), we can change the metaphysics and see the word weaving textuality, hear "the voice of the shuttle."¹² The rich ambiguity Damrosch is wont to find in Blake appears revealingly in his own comment on a quotation from Eliade: "'The myth is supposed to happen . . . in a non-temporal time, in an instant without duration, as certain mystics and philosophers conceived of eternity.'" In a word, as Blake conceived of it" (353).

This book, like all of its sort but more than some, is an exercise in academic power. It does not wear its learning lightly--a footnote to Pascal detains us with the information that "Pascal's term *jetée* is strikingly anticipatory of Heidegger's *geworfen*" (233); a note on *The Recluse* tells that "Both the thought and the meditative music--filled with anticipatory echoes of Stevens' *Sunday Morning*--are radically un-Blakean" (87). We are told with astonishment that "the Blakean phrase 'prolific energy' appears--of all places!--in Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*" (148), when there is no such phrase in Blake; the *Merkabah* is introduced without any explanation for the unlearned (240); "an electrical circuit plugged in to itself" appears as the impossible image of "an internal economy of perpetual stability" (239); we learn that "the problem of the divine is ubiquitous," but also that "Cruelty is ubiquitous" (244, 252). We hear too often that "It has been said . . .," "In other words . . .," "It is easy to see . . .," "No doubt . . ." (e.g. 96, 97, 103, 252), and also, usually with a negative tone, what "Blakeans" think. "A true acceptance of opposites demands a skeptical temperament and a commitment to things as they are" (242), says the same author who warns against dangers in "The zeal to domesticate [Blake] for English Literature" (308). We see Damrosch's zeal for things as they are in his "denial" of opposing flights of fancy (see 105, 239).

Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth is, then, a forceful and at times seductive attempt to inscribe Blake with the traditional issues of subject-oriented philosophy. I would rather wish, "loving

the greatest men best," our continual effort to subject ourselves to Blake. For myself, I deny that "In learning Blake's grammar we learn how to use his vocabulary; when we fail, it is either because we have not understood imaginatively enough or because he has not shown us what he means" (81). We fail because we do not pay due attention to the "Litteral Expression": "Mark well my words . . ."

¹ In the most recent of the preceding books, *The Uses of Johnson's Criticism* (1976), Damrosch still held to the vision of "Blake, the champion of minute particulars."

² To assert the reality of vision, Damrosch cites several mesalline experiences (none his own) and concludes, "I have thought this documentation important--and it could be multiplied many times over--because it should compel [!] a recognition that Blake's visions were actual experiences, not merely poetic metaphors" (49).

³ Or decides can't be decided: "the visionary episodes . . . are the ultimate context of his myth" (44).

⁴ Florian Cajori, ed. *Sir Isaac Newton's Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy and His System of the World*, trans. Andrew Motte [1729] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1934), p. 542; see also *Blake* 12.2, p. 84.

⁵ Cajori, p. 545; this is from the "General Scholium," essential reading for any student of Blake; note that Newton's God "constitutes duration and space," while the Zoas are "Creating Space, Creating Time" (*J* 98.13).

⁶ Cf. "With what sense does the bee form cells?" (*VDA* 3.4); on "bee" as one usual signified of "fly," see OED. This example is generated retrospectively, but then, "What is now proved was once, only imagin'd."

⁷ Perhaps he didn't mean this, or perhaps it's just one of those Blakean incoherences, for we read a few pages later that "It is crucially significant that the words are engraved . . . so that instead of allowing them to pass into our minds as if they spoke themselves inside our heads, we are forced--or would be if we used Blake's original texts--to see them as objects put there by a human artist" (363).

⁸ Damrosch seemingly prefers the judgment of Johnson's *Dictionary* that "In all its uses it commonly implies something of bad quality." Considering the description in the preceding verse, "English, the rough basement," "stubborn" may be pointing toward a stylistic description of the mother tongue as "Harsh; rough; rugged" (Johnson). Yet the terms "basement" and "structure"--appearing only here in Blake's poetry--certainly suggest something like Heidegger's vision that "Language is the house of Being. Man dwells in this house. Those who think [*die Denkenden*] and those who create poetry [*die Dichtenden*] are the custodians of the dwelling."

⁹ Cf. the description of *Beatrice Addressing Dante from the Car*: "a deadening book of memory or law . . . emerges in smoke from the vortex" (186).

¹⁰ This points to the important Blakean homonym morning/mourning which I will not discuss except to observe that it helps to explain the contradiction in seeing that "every morning is a completed desire" even though "the recurrence of spring, even in the gladness of its songs, is a symptom of the cyclical prison of the fallen world" (53, 86).

¹¹ "'The Eye altering alters all' occurs in a poem that describes the imprisoning cycle of the fallen world," says Damrosch (27)--but it doesn't so much describe as *inscribe*: do we naively believe that "all is done as I have told"?

¹² "Los answerd swift as the shuttle of gold" (*J* 92.13).