

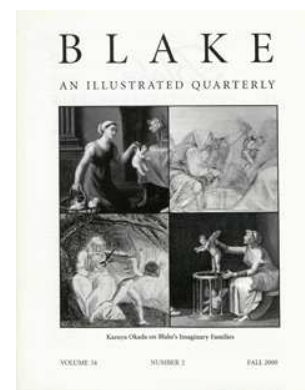
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

A R T I C L E

The Book of Ahania: A Metatext

Hatsuko Niimi

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 34, Issue 2, Fall 2000, pp. 46-54



The Book of Ahania: A Metatext

By HATSUKO NIIMI

The three books etched by Blake in 1794-95, namely *The Book of Urizen*, *The Book of Ahania* and *The Book of Los* have been considered by many critics to be a sequence of parodies or satires on the Pentateuch; David W. Lindsay, Leslie Tannenbaum and Stephen C. Behrendt maintain that they constitute Blake's Bible of Hell, intended to revise and challenge the received Bible of Heaven, while Harold Bloom believes they belong in the framework of the Orc myths. Tannenbaum, examining them in the context of the Bible and its traditions, regards *Urizen* and *Los* as dealing with the events in the book of Genesis and *Ahania* as related to the book of Exodus. Finally, David Worrall, in his edition of the three books, which appeared in 1995 and is the most recent, groups them together and refers to them as the Urizen Books; he considers the trilogy to be "an expression of Blake's scepticism about his age's politicization of scriptural authority" (153). This corresponds to Jon Mee's claim that "Blake is constantly seeking to break down the notion of scripture as monolithic authority" (14); his primary assumption is that Blake's "rhetorical practices" (2) in the 1790s can be construed better and differently, if put in the context of the controversy over the French Revolution. Worrall examines the extent to which Blake was affected by the political and religious debates in progress in London during this decade: disputes which intensified and grew more dangerous for those suspected of sedition, when England declared war against France in 1793, and Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* was published in 1794-95. Worrall defines the Urizen Books, written in the years of "Pitt's Terror" (12), as Blake's "most politically interventionist works" (19) and gives particular attention to his Muggle-tonian sympathies and his connection with one of his contemporaries, the radical anticlericalist, Thomas Spence.¹ It may, then, be an invitation to disagreement to single out one of these books as a work with its own peculiar merit and significance. But to read *The Book of Ahania* closely encourages us, I believe, to see it as unique in its ability to shed light on Blake's ideas concerning writing or literacy, as opposed to speaking or orality, and consequently on his view of the text, or the book, in general.

One of the distinctive features of this work, in contrast with *Urizen* and *Los*, is the role allotted to the female character. In *Urizen*, Enitharmon is presented by means of descrip-

tion as a figure giving birth to Orc, and weeping over her son chained to a rock, but at no point does she speak for herself. Similarly, *Los* consists entirely of the recollections of its narrator, Eno, apart from the six lines which introduce her, but Eno does not tell her own story. Yet *Ahania*, whose plight is described in the opening chapter of the book named after her, begins to speak for herself in the fifth and last chapter: her lamentation for the prelapsarian state of her union with Urizen occupies almost the whole of this chapter, and is therefore given great prominence. This fact, together with the content of her speech, suggests that the events connected with Urizen and Fuzon, which are related in the first four chapters, are, like her own situation, capable of being interpreted in a new way: in the context of linguistic activity, with its various moral, historical and ideological connotations.

Jon Mee, who considers the three books to be "Blake's critique of the Bible" (162), refers, in his discussion of *Urizen*, to Blake's making use of "an antithesis between written and oral forms" (103), and characterizes the former as oppressive and the latter as liberated. His argument includes a consideration of the status of Blake's own writing in his chosen medium of illuminated printing. Although Mee is only concerned with the opposition between the druid-priest Urizen and bard-prophets like Orc and Los, I think this sort of opposition exists also in *Ahania*, in the contrast between Urizen who "wrote / In silence his book of iron" (pl. 4:63-64)² and Ahania, "his parted soul" (pl. 3:32), and in the relationship between Urizen and Fuzon, whose corpse "Urizen nail'd" on the topmost stem of "the accursed Tree of Mystery" (pl. 5:6-8). Urizen is depicted as the murderer of his rebellious son and a producer of written books, but he remains silent throughout the book, except for four lines addressed to his bow, Fuzon, a character who resembles Orc, denounces Urizen in four lines which occur early in chapter 1, just before he attempts to assassinate him: in chapter 2 he utters one line of exultation when he thinks he has succeeded: otherwise he also remains silent. In striking contrast, Ahania shows herself capable of prolonged eloquence in the concluding chapter, as she speaks of her love for Urizen and her vision of the past, her fervor unaffected by her sense of the futility of her appeal.

The purpose of this paper is to interpret *Ahania* as a metatext, concerned with conflicting and antagonistic linguistic realities, represented by the activities of these three characters. First, Ahania's speech will be discussed, with reference to Saussure's distinction between parole and langue and Walter J. Ong's analysis of orality and literacy. My argument is that Ahania is an instance of parole, which is "active

¹ Worrall's assertion that the Books were written "against a background of an authoritative and repressive culture" (15) is cogently illustrated in his discussion of *Ahania*, which he situates in the contemporary print culture of political caricature (157-59), and in his analysis of its endpiece design (162-63).

² All quotations from *The Book of Ahania* are from *The Urizen Books* edited by David Worrall (London: The William Blake Trust/The Tate Gallery, 1995). Subsequent references to the text will be designated by the plate number, followed by the lines in parentheses, as in (Pl. 3: 1-5).

and individual" (Saussure 70a), or a "winged word," a Homeric phrase, familiar to many of Blake's contemporaries through Horne Tooke's book,³ and signifying "evanescence, power, and freedom" (Ong 77). In addition, I hope by discussing her speech, to connect it with her markedly feminine "ethics of care" (Mellor 3).

Conversely, Urizen, it seems to me, represents an aspect of language, which is "passive and resident in the collectivity" (Saussure 70a), and he also possesses, I believe, the characteristics of writing, which is "a particularly pre-emptive and imperialistic activity" (Ong 12). I shall attempt to show that Urizen's casting out of Ahania, who represents his "pathos," that is, his ability to feel pity or sadness, and his murder of Fuzon, who is his eros, demonstrate his conception of justice, which consists of enforcing repressive and self-righteous laws and of the writing of books, which in their inflexibility are incapable of response to the dynamic procedures of language formation.

Finally, I would like to discuss the unmistakable affinities between Ahania's lucid eloquence and Blake's creation of illuminated hand-printed texts, and the close resemblance between Urizen's writing of "his book of iron" and the standardized printing of texts which have been established with finality. Blake's production of his etched texts, analogous to the production of manuscripts, is much more akin to spoken language than the reproduction by a printing press of written language. Moreover, in *The Book of Ahania* there are two designs which depict Ahania; they help to justify my belief that Blake's conception of the text/book can be deduced from an analysis of the various contrasts between Urizen and Ahania. Blake's books will never be definitive and the same to all readers; they will remain flexible and fluid, seeking a dialogue with readers every time they are produced, with successive copies always differing in some respect.

³ The phrase, in Greek, constituted the first two words of the title Horne Tooke gave to his two-volume study of language and grammar, *Epea Pteroyta: Or, the Diversions of Purley* (1786-1805). Tooke (1736-1812) was known primarily as a radical politician, but achieved temporary fame as an etymologist as a result of this book until genuine philological knowledge began to reach England from the continent in the nineteenth century.

Robert N. Essick, in *William Blake and the Language of Adam* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1989), discusses Tooke's work on language in relation to Blake as well as to Locke in the linguistic context of the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century (57-66). He also gives an explication of *The Book of Urizen* as Blake's criticism of contemporary linguistic theories (140-59). Although Tooke's book was published by Joseph Johnson, there is no surviving evidence that Blake met him or knew his book.

The phrase is used by Blake in the Preludium to *The Book of Urizen*, where he asks the "Eternals" to "Dictate swift winged words" (Pl. 2:6). Angela Esterhammer, in her *Creating States*, discusses the poem in terms of naming and speech acts and argues that the Preludium "must already make us suspicious about the extent to which (inspired) words will be instruments of imposition on a passive audience" (155).

In chapter 1 of *Ahania*, the heroine represents the soul, or emanation of Urizen, divided from him after Fuzon's attack on his "cold loins" has caused him to discard her as sin: she is said to move as "the moon anguishd circles the earth," for she is under the control of Urizen; as "a faint shadow" and the "mother of Pestilence," she is bound to revolve round him, "Unseen, unbodied, unknown." She becomes a voiceless figure, associated with disease and death, the victim of Urizen's suppression and hatred, as well as an invisible and amorphous being. Except for the first six lines, which describe her formless presence, chapter 5 consists first of her lamentation over her miserable separation and alienation from Urizen; secondly, of her unwearied questionings of his rejection, aloofness and rigidity, and finally, of her frank and impassioned recollections of her glorious past, sharing sexual and mental joy, beauty and freedom with Urizen.

Although at the beginning of the work, Ahania is said to be his "parted soul," in the final chapter, she can be said to be a representation of either wisdom (Bloom 176, Tannenbaum 242), or pleasure (Paley 30), or desire (Worrall 185), according to the aspect of her supplication which is seen as predominant. She is also relational and interpersonal, with "the mutualism of selflessness" (Behrendt 147): she has care and compassion for others, as well as resistance to the dualism and universalization which characterise abstract thinking (Cox 160). As regards style, she uses pictorial and concrete images and introduces into the poem "a new speed and flexibility" (Lindsay 146). Ahania is described as wandering and floating, as well as weeping and chanting "on the verge / Of Non-entity," which indicates the extent to which her exiled condition can vary.

It is obvious that her role is primarily that of a speaker: a protagonist whose medium is language. More specifically, she is endowed with the functions of parole and orality, or oral culture. I would like to demonstrate this by referring first to Saussure's conception of parole, as expounded in his third course of lectures on general linguistics (1910-11). He distinguishes two kinds of parole: "The use of faculties in general for linguistic purposes (phonation, etc.)" and "individual use of the language code to express individual thought" (70a); this last function of parole, which is the source of all change in a language, is of crucial importance in linguistic activity. He further indicates the interdependency between parole and langue:

There is nothing in the language which has not entered (directly or indirectly) through speech, that is through the sum total of words perceived, and conversely no speech is possible before the development of this product called the language, which supplies the individual with the elements for the composition of his speech. (71a)

In contrast to langue, which is constructed structure, parole is constructing structure; parole is regulated by the collective knowledge of langue, which in turn is to be reformed through the individual activity of parole. David Holdcroft lists six comparable characteristics shared by the two, according to Saussure's account: parole is individual, contingent, has an active role, is designed, is not conventional, and provides a heterogeneous subject matter which is studied by different disciplines, whereas langue is social, essential, has no active individual role, is not designed, but conventional, and provides a homogeneous subject matter to be studied as a branch of social psychology (21). By quoting Saussure's statement that "Each change is launched by a certain number of individuals before it is accepted for general use," Holdcroft emphasizes that "parole is needed to explain not only how langue is constituted as a stable system in a community, but also how changes occur in it" (33).

Ong, who recognizes the primacy of parole (oral speech) in Saussure's classifications, has given further consideration to the respective spheres of the oral and the literate. It is relevant to draw on his argument in order to clarify certain aspects of the function of language in a community. He states:

...oral cultures must conceptualize and verbalize all their knowledge with more or less close reference to the human lifeworld, assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings. (42)

Orality "situates knowledge within a context of struggle," engaging "others in verbal and intellectual combat" (44); "Primary orality fosters personality structures that in certain ways are more communal and externalized, less introspective than those common among literates. Oral communication unites people in groups" (69). He also points out that "Oral man is not so likely to think of words as 'signs,' quiescent visual phenomena," but as "constantly moving, but by flight, which is a powerful form of movement, and one lifting the flier free of the ordinary, gross, heavy, 'objective' world" (77). It is necessary to see these characteristics of oral cultures in contrast with those of writing cultures, and I would like to discuss this topic later in part 2, in connection with Urizen's role as a writer. But the immediate relevance of Ong's account of the distinctive features of oral cultures to my argument concerning Ahania, consists in his claim that they spring from direct contacts with the living world, from a strong interest in differences between the self and others, and from a consequent wish to become involved with others, by setting up personal relationships. Finally, his suggestion that language is seen as flexible and mobile by speakers in an oral culture, is particularly relevant to my interpretation of this character.

In chapter 5 of *Ahania*, we can detect in the descriptions of her state and in her own utterances various elements

which remind us of the aspects of parole and orality to which I have drawn attention:

Her voice was heard, but no form
Had she: but her tears from clouds
Eternal fell round the Tree

(pl. 5:49-51)

It is noticeable that her existence is verbal, yet has no fixed form. It has therefore one quality essential to orality: so has her unrestricted power to feel sorrow and compassion for the pain and suffering of others. In addition, her passionate yearning for Urizen and her continuing sense of his merit and superiority, are repeatedly suggested by her actions and words:

And the voice cried: Ah Urizen! Love!
Flower of morning! I weep on the verge
On Non-entity; how wide the Abyss
Between Ahania and thee!

(pl. 5:52-55)

The significance of her invisibility as well as the danger that she will become extinct, separated from Urizen, will be discussed later, but the point to notice here is that, in spite of his hardness and cruel rejection of her, she never fails to show care and love for him, unable to see his initial brightness and magnificence as lost, and seeking to reestablish their unity. Memory is also an important element in orality (Ong 19). Worrall states that Ahania's solitary lament "is presented as the most dubious authentication of Urizen" (153) and thinks her "irrevocable loss of Urizen's presence might itself be a misremembered recollection of a paradisaical joy which never happened" (155). It is, however, hard to discover any grounds in her speech for this interpretation. Her plea is earnest and pressing, vividly recalling his "bright presence" (pl. 5:63). Her intense and continuous plea for change is vain, which makes her appeal pathetic, but no less authentic.

Ahania's most individual and unconventional characteristics are very evident in her vision of her former blissful intercourse with Urizen, and in her vindication of the passion and fulfilment of their love as her recollections proceed. She is eager to "awake my king in the morn! / To embrace Ahania's joy / On the breadth of his open bosom" (pl. 6:10-12) and looks back to the time:

When he gave my happy soul
To the sons of eternal joy:
When he took the daughters of life
Into my chambers of love:
When I found babes of bliss on my beds.
And bosoms of milk in my chambers
Fill'd with eternal seed
O! eternal births sung round Ahania
In interchange sweet of their joys.

(pl. 6:15-23)

She dwells with passionate affirmation on the unique world of unrestrained desire, sexual joy and consequent fertility, which she shared with Urizen: she is referring to "the eternal exchange of the joys of love freely given and received in a sexual embrace" (Tannenbaum 246). Lindsay, emphasizing the fact that "the human integrity and creativity of an unfallen mind" are portrayed in this section, indicates that the "golden age here is remembered as one of free and confident energy, of delight unrestricted by possessiveness, of abundance and unfettered generosity" (147). Ahania recalls the sense of belonging to a unified whole, which she experienced when she and Urizen were together and in harmony. She expresses herself in fluid and prolific images, which contrast strongly with Urizenic categorization and demarcation.⁴ She is not uttering a prophetic vision, but recreating an experienced world of life and love. She is a daring believer in her own vision of the past, though she does not know how to reclaim it, and it is the fervor of her belief that gives her speech its individuality.

The generosity of maternal love, the willingness to forgive nature to a liberal mind, and the urge to recover the unstinted reciprocity of a sexual and personal relationship are all demonstrated in Ahania's speech, and all correspond to the characteristics of parole and orality. It will deepen our understanding of this speech, from a linguistic viewpoint, if we consider the feminine ethics it implies, which also share some of the qualities of parole and orality. In her study of Michel Foucault and feminism, Lois McNay examines the feminine critique of rationality, stating that in contrast to an abstract, masculine ethics of justice, "a feminist ethics is based on a responsiveness to others and a respect for the particular which leads to moral concerns connected to providing care, preventing harm and maintaining relationships" (92). In her discussion of Carole Gilligan's "particular ethics," which is "based more on caring and interpersonal relations" (93), she explicates Gilligan's view of women's moral judgments, which are "more contextual and more immersed in the details of relationships and narrative (the 'particular other')" (93). This ethics of care is certainly to be found in Ahania's attitude to Urizen and in the pity for Fuzon which the opening lines of chapter 5 attribute to her. Her longing for the restoration of broken relationships is central to her character. As Anne K. Mellor points out, Blake's "feminine ethics" is developed fully in later prophetic books, especially in *Jerusalem*, in his creation of "Emanations" which "are clearly maternal and valued for their feminine capacities for sympathy and empathy" (21). But in *Ahania*, the heroine's speech and her implied characteristics do not only arise from a moral outlook which anticipates postmodern

⁴ Cox discusses Ahania's attempt to "try to picture the state of undivided yet related wholeness that existed before Urizen began his revolutionary career" and suggests that her "pictorializations are vaguely bordered, expandable things that resist both sharp division and dogmatic universalization" (160).

feminine ethics. They also reveal her commitment to a far more amorphous and generous love relationship. She places a strong emphasis on the primacy of physicality, sexually based difference, and the capacity for reform. Being unseen, unbodied and unknown to fallen Urizen, and asking insistently for change and for a close personal bond, as she gives full vent to her innermost sorrow and joy, she embodies speech, or Saussurean parole, though this parole is received or approved by no one, as it reaches out towards a reciprocal relationship which has been lost.

II

If it is appropriate to regard Ahania as representing parole and orality, what are the roles of Urizen and Fuzon in terms of linguistic activity? And especially what is the meaning of Ahania's solitary and rejected situation in the context of language? It is again relevant to examine Saussure's concept of parole in contrast to langue, and Ong's differentiation of orality and literacy as opposing principles; it will enable us to see that Urizen is possessed of some attributes of langue and the function of writing. In *The Book of Ahania*, he is depicted chiefly as the crucifier of Fuzon and as a writer of books, seated on the rock enclosed by the Tree of Mystery.

As we have seen, Ong stresses the primacy of orality and suggests that writing "was a very late development in human history" (83). Moreover, writing "separates the knower from the known and thus sets up conditions for 'objectivity,' in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing" (46). He offers a four-point summary of Plato's view of writing: it is inhuman and thing-like; it destroys memory; it creates an unresponsive text; it is passive (79). Ong also points out "the deadness of the text, its removal from the living human lifeworld, its rigid visual fixity," though this "assures its endurance and its potential for being resurrected into limitless living contexts by a potentially infinite number of living readers" (81). In comparison with spoken words, writing entails "the reduction of dynamic sound to quiescent space, the separation of the word from living present" (82). Moreover, the writer of a text is alone and writing is "a solipsistic operation" (101), but it "makes possible the great introspective religious traditions such as Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam" and all of which have "sacred texts" (105). These characteristics of writing illuminate various aspects of Urizen as a writer and his writings.

Before he is attacked by Fuzon's "sounding beam" (pl. 3:27), Urizen had been "shrunk away / From Eternals":

... he sat on a rock
Barren; a rock which himself
From redounding fancies had petrified
...
Soon shot the pained root

Of Mystery under his heel:
It grew a thick tree; he wrote
In silence his book of iron:

(pl. 4:56-64)

What is suggestive here is the simultaneity of the growing of the mystery tree with Urizen's writing of the book of iron, as well as his association with the rock. Almost all the critics of this work identify Urizen with Jehovah, and Fuzon with Moses, or Christ; other suggestions have been Satan, St. Sebastian and Robespierre. His role in *Ahania* certainly has apparent allusions to the last four books of the Pentateuch, and to the Atonement. But Urizen is absorbed in the production of religious texts which are essentially concerned with mystery. Moreover, the rapid enlargement of the Tree of Mystery clearly means that its leaves are multiplying, and there is a possible punning allusion to the multiplying leaves of Urizen's book, which suggests that his role as a writer will lead to his becoming a despot, increasing in power and isolation as the tree increases.

The tree developing into a forest is seen as symbolizing several things: "the network of Church-and-State religion" (Paley 32); "the restrictions he placed on intellectual freedom" (Lindsay 145); "the establishment of the priesthood of the Levites" (Tannenbaum 233); "the psychic origin of Urizen's repressive institutions" (Webster 171); "Urizenic state religion" (Mee 102). These interpretations of the Tree of Mystery enable us to see in it one of the attributes of writing which has been distinguished by Ong: its tendency to encourage the establishment and perpetuation of rigid and fixed "sacred texts," through the medium of priestcraft or of institutions like churches of state religion, even though the original code might have taken shape in the immediacy of care and love.

In this sense, the book of iron is the Bible of Heaven, and as he writes it, Urizen is "compassed round / And high roofed over with trees" (pl. 4:69-70); he is incapable of seeing through the world of appearances, though possessing the power to demand sacrifice and subjection. The rock, the thick tree and the book of iron, which are associated with the earth and resistant to change, are his instruments for the enforcement of his written law and for the infliction of cruel punishment, creating "An endless labyrinth of woe" (pl. 5:4). He represents the established power, the guardian and promoter of "the deadness of the text". He can also be said to be an embodiment, after his own fashion, of Saussure's *langue*, the constructed structure of the social code, which is developed and made durable by "the collective intelligence" (Saussure 71a), so widely different from the individual wills which are responsible for parole; in Urizen's case, of course, the difference has become extreme, and the code a tyranny.

As stated in my introduction, Jon Mee draws our attention to "an antithesis between written and oral forms" when

referring to Urizen, who is "associated with the process of transcription and the written law"; he also suggests that "One obvious implication of these metal books is the inflexibility of the political and psychological order Urizen sponsors," while the "struggle against the iron authority of Urizen's written laws is often figured in terms of orality" (103). Mee cites as examples *Orc in America* and *The Book of Urizen* and *Los in The Song of Los*. My argument is that in *The Book of Ahania*, orality is represented by the heroine, though her voice occasions no hint of change on the part of Urizen, who embodies the system of *langue*; her speech fails to receive its "collective approval."

Another common factor shared by interpretations of *Ahania* is the assumption that Fuzon is the hero of the poem, as a rebellious spirit. His revolt against his father, and consequent crucifixion, presented in the first two chapters, have obvious biblical associations, recognized, as noted above, by most critics.⁵ Paley, however, sees Fuzon rather differently: "Fuzon as the Energy principle, the element of fire, is the force within man that will redeem him from the bondage of Urizen's repressing law" (28). Webster and Cox construe Fuzon as representing impulse or passion. His "beautiful visage, his tresses, / That gave light to the morning of heaven" (pl. 4:41-42) are just what *Ahania* once enjoyed admiring in Urizen.

When Fuzon attacks Urizen in chapter 1, he already sees his father as "this Demon of smoke," spreading the deceiving vapor of a joyless religion, and demanding worship. Fuzon calls him:

... this abstract non-entity
This cloudy God seated on waters
Now seen, now obscur'd; King of sorrow (?)

(pl. 3:11-13)

Fuzon refuses to worship him, and "in a fiery flame" of wrath throws "The howling Globe" which lengthens into "a hungry beam" (pl. 3:18-19). His beam of desire is encountered by Urizen's disk of abstract geometry, which constitutes the shield of reason. Fuzon's attempt at parricide undeniably entails a sexual assault, "The cold loins of Urizen dividing" (pl. 3:29) and this is clear also from Urizen's reaction: "Dire shriekd his invisible Lust" (30). The result is that *Ahania* is divided from Urizen, who casts her away; as Bloom says, "Urizen rejects his sexuality, and dismisses his female counterpart as Sin" (177). Webster suggests that "Urizen's opposing shield, forged in 'mills' of logic, functions, like the curtains in *Urizen*, to distance dangerous impulses by denying both hungry sexuality and aggression" (169).

⁵ Tannenbaum, for example, suggests that "Fuzon-Moses represents the passion for justice, the spirit of righteousness that quickly extends its vitality as it takes the form of doctrines, laws, and codes of living" (226-27).

It is clear, I think, that Fuzon is the projection of Urizen's sexual and rebellious impulses. In chapter 2, the parent's retaliation starts, which is the beginning of the process by which Urizen endeavors to repress his eros. The detailed procedures by which he prepares his weapon are significant: his bow is the "Bow of the clouds of secresy" (pl. 4:26) and his arrow is a "poisoned rock" (24); the son is struck down and killed by the rock. The development of Urizen's character in chapter 3 reveals that it is "the rock of the Law," which serves "as a negation of an arrow of desire" (Bloom 179). Lindsay also offers an interpretation of this assault, suggesting that "the spirit of rebellion is struck down by the moral law" (145). It is not difficult to see why Urizen's nailing of his son's corpse to the Tree of Mystery is seen by many critics as an unmistakable parody of the Atonement, but it is more difficult to be sure, even approximately, of the significance of Fuzon's declaration in chapter 2 "I am God. said he, the eldest of things!" (pl. 4:38). To one critic, it suggests that "the rebel has become the tyrant" (Tannenbaum 226); to another that "By proclaiming his omnipotence, Fuzon breathes new life into the Urizenic system" (Mee 194).

It is possible to suggest an explanation, in terms of the linguistic analogy, of Fuzon's boastful claim, and I will attempt this after a further brief discussion of the part he plays in *Ahania*. It would be reasonable to expect to find some illumination of his second speech in chapter 4, but it is the most enigmatic of the five chapters. It could conceivably be a continuation of the atonement of Fuzon, or a stage in Urizen's own gradual degradation, or in his ossification of the fluid lava of life and energy. Lindsay is, as far as I know, the only critic who makes any extensive comment on this chapter: he says of the "white Lake" (pl. 5:14), "By his withdrawal from eternal liberty into the futilities of abstract thought, Urizen transmuted his active powers into inertia and chill frustration" (146); with regard to Fuzon's body, he comments that it is displayed as "an advertisement for suffering," and believes it is meant to suggest that "the first inventing of religion confined humanity within the physical body, so this consolidation of clerical privilege reduces man to a still more earth-bound existence and further hardens the bony prison of his brain" (146). The second consequence of Urizenic rule, which Lindsay mentions here, is of course an allusion to chapter 4, verse 8.

Lindsay's explication, though a little schematic, offers an interesting summary of the power struggle with which the poem is concerned: "the rational intellect is by the destructive violence of its own offspring wrenched apart from intellectual joy" (144). His exegesis suggests that as Urizen represents repressive reason and law, Ahania represents intellectual pleasure and Fuzon passion and lust; reason is destined to negate every emotional, sexual or mental joy and fulfillment. More might be said about Ahania, but it seems clear that Fuzon does indeed represent a vehement assertion of the claims of unashamed sexual impulse: his castra-

tion of his father is an instinctive attack on passionless and repressed sexual activity: the "cold loins" of Urizen and his "invisible Lust." It seems reasonable to conclude that Urizen's elimination of his son and his female counterpart and his attempt to perpetuate his logocentric rule signify a victory of reason over eros and pathos.

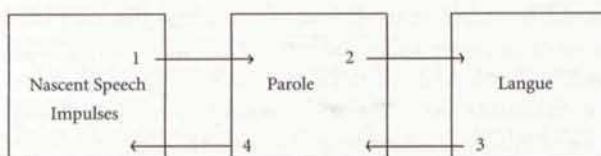
It is clear that a situation of this kind can arise with respect to the need to find an appropriate language, which may exist in any single human being, or in any community. Writing, speech, and the nascent language impulses which arise from the need to claim fulfilment for sexual impulse, can become involved in a three-sided struggle, each urge to self-expression trying to assert its own primacy over the others, but not in the hope of winning interactive responses. Hostility or rejection may continue, in so far as difference and the existence of other functions are denied. The lava of meanings, or the signified, latent in the internal world of sexuality and emotion, and in contacts with the external world, is struggling to achieve entrance into the solid universe of language, and could bring about an alteration in its system if it could do so. But a writing culture, too reliant on unchangeable texts, cannot accommodate this direct assertion of eros, and orality or parole cries in vain for the moments of interaction with the literacy or langue, and for assimilation into it.

Fuzon's ominous second speech is explicable, if he represents both impatient sexual passion, demanding its right to reject repression and hypocritical control, and nascent language impulse, determined to challenge tyrannical control by the langue. When he makes his attempt at assassination, he is renouncing his legitimate means of promotion through the parole, in which he was already beginning to be at home, as his first speech shows. In attempting to obtain forced entrance to the langue, by violent assault, he deprives himself of the support of parole, and of the vestigial chance that he might change the langue by right of kinship and by traditional non-destructive modifications. So it is understandable that as to his attack, his confidence should contract into hollow swagger, and his command of speech should be equal only to a crude adolescent assertion of supremacy, which reveals that his rebellion was self-defeating: this was not the way to deal with Urizen.

Thus the three characters, Urizen, Ahania and Fuzon could be said to have become isolated in their separate spheres, unable to influence each other constructively because all normal interaction has been halted. Emotion welling up to become language has to encounter negation by the accumulated knowledge of the written. This has repressed the challenge and entreaty of speech, which would ordinarily be the means of shaping nascent language impulses, and providing their means of gaining access in the language. The following diagram shows what each of the characters represents.

representative attributes		linguistic activities
Urizen	abstract reasoning	writing, literacy, langue
Ahania	pathos: compassionate understanding	speech, orality, parole
Fuzon	eros: violent passion and lust	emotion/the lava of meaning

If there is no normal interaction, the three forms of language activity remain closed off from each other, as in the diagram. My second diagram shows a normal interaction operating without rejection and hostility.



- 1 Nascent speech impulses welling up to become language
- 2 Innovations seeking collective approval
- 3 Acceptance for general use
Materials to create speech
- 4 Encouragement to become articulate

The last seven lines of Ahania's speech effectively convey the stagnant state of language which ensues, when the reciprocal interchange is arrested:

Cruel jealousy! selfish fear!
Self-destroying: how can delight,
Renew in these chains of darkness
Where bones of beasts are strown
On the bleak and snowy mountains
Where bones from the birth are buried
Before they see the light.

(pl. 6:41-47)

The "bones of beasts" suggest the refuse or carcasses of words which have failed to become langue, and the last four lines indicate that language is at an impasse, where sexual energy and love are denied their right to be born either as langue or parole: this is the work of Urizen, the writer of the iron books, who is trying to create a universe of death, and to abstract everything from "the all-creative Imagination" (Tannenbaum 248). Bloom states that in *Ahania* "Few images, even in Blake, are grimmer than that final vision of infanticide" (180). It is also true to say with Lindsay that "this is the most negative of Blake's major poems since *Tiriel*" (144),

for if its linguistic implications are accepted, there is little sign of a positive intercourse. But it must be remembered that this is Ahania's comment on the situations not necessarily Blake's last word.

III

Blake's designs for *Ahania* do much to clarify the meaning of the text, especially as regards the linguistic function of Ahania and Urizen, and will next be examined. Then with reference to Jerome J. McGann's idea of an indeterminate text, I would like to consider the significance of Los in this work, and finally to deduce Blake's view of written texts and printing in relation to oral culture. My investigation of these questions will be concerned with reading *The Book of Ahania* as a metatext, relevant to Blake's method of book production.

It is a distinctive visual feature of the three Urizen books that they "mostly mimic the layout of the Authorized Version, double columns divided into chapter and verse" (Mee 162). But the two memorable images of Ahania on the frontispiece and on the titlepage respectively reinforce the theme of language and text. The first shows her in an attitude of protest and supplication, as she is "about to be 'siez'd on his [Urizen's] mountains of Jealousy' after the castration of Urizen's 'cold loins' by his son Fuzon" (Worrall 160). This Ahania strongly contrasts with the figure on the titlepage, who is depicted as "still flying but (the direction of her hair tells us) descending obliquely" (Worrall 161), with a worried expression on her face. These two contrary states of Ahania, one earthbound and the other free from the ground, correspond well with those conveyed in the text. The figure on the titlepage illustrates the role of oral speech or "winged words," and her pathetic facial expression emphasizes her suffering under "the iron authority of Urizen's written laws" (Mee 104), which means either that parole is denied entry into langue, forced to keep circling around aimlessly, or that liberated speech is repulsed by oppressive writing (Mee 104). The Ahania of the frontispiece, who is the character in chapter 5 before her final expulsion, suggests that orality is being deprived of the opportunity to express love and care. It also illustrates the rigid control exercised by Urizen or the written language, shut up in its own sphere. As for the design on the last plate, it has been generally agreed that it "depicts severed heads and mangled limbs, leavings of the guillotine" (Paley 33), but in terms of the linguistic interpretation I am suggesting, it may depict the body of Fuzon finally murdered, the wreckage of the pre-literal state of eros or energy demanding to be a component of language, but savagely broken into pieces by the drive towards fixed written texts which result from exclusive and empirical thinking.

The coordination between text and designs vindicates my belief that Blake is describing in *Ahania* a language situation in which pre-language chaos and oral speech are forc-

ibly suppressed by the written; if nothing is done, this situation is going to bring about the prohibition of freedom of expression at a political level, as well as in artistic creation, and the negation of free love and sex. But Blake seems to imply, while symbolizing this state of linguistic turmoil, that his own composite art offers a solution, and in order to discuss this possibility it is necessary to consider the concept of an indeterminate text proposed by McGann and Mee.

McGann regards *The Book of Urizen* as Blake's indeterminate text, claiming that Dr. Alexander Geddes's work showed Blake "not only that many texts of the Bible of Heaven existed, but also that those texts exhibited lacunae and redundancies within and between themselves" (323). He believes that Blake's reading of Geddes encouraged him to rewrite the Bible by interpolating material into his version which seems incongruous with the surrounding text. But although there are two passages in *Ahania* which unexpectedly introduce Los and could be said to resemble interpolations, there is no evidence that they are insertions. Los first appears in chapter 1, verse 9, retrieving "the fiery beam of Fuzon"; he "siez'd it and beat it in a mass / With the body of the sun." In chapter 4, verse 5 he appears again, in lines which refer to his exertions in *Urizen* chapter 4, when this demon was beginning the process of acquiring a semblance of the human form, and Los was laboring to fetter him into this shape. We are told, this time, that having "forg'd nets of iron around," Los "threw them around the bones." These fragmentary descriptions of Los's characteristic task of beating and forging, which represents Blake's idea of imaginative creation, are a reminder of what he was trying to do himself. The passages in question are not really out of place: the first shows Los conserving the passion of anger and sexual aggression and amalgamating it with the sun, and the second shows him laboring to ensure that *Urizen* is confined within an identifiable body: both are imaginative and resourceful actions. If his readers were reminded of interpolations in the biblical text (as they might have been, in view of the fact, noted above, that all three of the *Urizen* books mimic the lay-out of the Authorized Version), they could only have noted the contrast between the pointless mystification caused by such a practice, in this text venerated by a writing culture, and the effect of Blake's own apparent digressions. Blake was repudiating the repetition of identical words on printed pages and attempting to avoid producing texts which looked determinate and final: his aim was to create new perspectives by an activity similar to parole.

To believe that this is the case is to wish to consider Blake's own illuminated printing. In his comparative view of writing, manuscript, and print, Ong states "typographic control typically impresses more by its tidiness and inevitability: the lines perfectly regular, all justified on the right side, everything coming out even visually," and that the print is "an insistent world of cold, non-human, facts" (122); on the other hand, manuscript culture, he argues, preserves "a

feeling for a book as a kind of utterance, an occurrence in the course of conversation, rather than as an object" (125). Moreover print "encourages a sense of closure, a sense that what is found in a text has been finalized, has reached a state of completion," and "encloses thought in thousands of copies of a work of exactly the same visual and physical consistency" (132). The most important point of difference is that the "printed text is supposed to represent the words of an author in definitive or 'final' form," while manuscripts "were in dialogue with the world outside their own borders. They remained closer to the give-and-take of oral expression" (132).

The closeness of Blake's manuscripts to oral expression is pointed out by Mee in a similar vein:

Blake operates with a notion of writing as containing both positive and negative potentialities. He seeks a writing that retains the fluidity of the voice; that seeks the status of "poetic tales" rather than "forms of worship"....Blake sought to achieve a means of literary production that was fluid and operated against the notion of the single authoritative Word (105-06)

In other words, Blake is trying to avert the fixation or standardization of his books, and to keep the fiery vitality, passion and freedom of the living voice, which has its source in the individual will. Metaphorically speaking, Blake aims to maintain *Ahania's* orality as far as possible and to assimilate Fuzon's violent impulses. In a sense, Blake's artistic creation has a recurring nature, which does not proceed from repeating the same dull round, but from eternally recreating the prime eros and pathos. The fact that the germ of all change is first found in speaking has already been discussed in this essay, but speech, through the activity of various individuals, seeks to constitute literate culture, by continually modifying the established system. The production of his etched plates means that Blake was trying to open up a new perspective on the world by situating the plates at the point of intersection of orality and literacy, so that they maintain the fluid reciprocity between parole and langue, which is to lead to a change and renewal of language.

Blake's other attempt to avoid the inflexibility of a written text is his "double printing method" (Mee 106): his books were etched on copper plates and then printed on paper, which "allowed him to insert differences at each stage of production. Changes were always available to Blake in transcribing copy-text to plate and in the process of transferring plate to paper.... His books always went beyond the state of *Urizen's* books of metals, that is, the copper-plate, and each of the final states varied one from the other so none could claim the status of scriptural authority" (Mee 106). This constant flight from establishing one single final version of his text helps to establish, as far as possible, an impression of indeterminacy, as I have said. His creative principle is to

attain a mutual infiltration of parole and langue and consequent linguistic activation, thus resisting political, religious and intellectual oppression, or sterility and obscurantism.

The Book of Ahania provides an example of the state of linguistic activity under the autocratic reign of the written; the voice of change is suppressed. As I suggested at the beginning of this article, Blake was drawing attention to his own view of printing and the printed text; he was, in addition, criticizing the contribution made to a dangerous situation by automatic deference to the biblical text. He believed that the danger could be counteracted: to read Blake's illuminated books is to be well aware not only of his unique "printing" method but of his metatextual concept of writing. Behrendt states that the "reading activity Blake advocates is one of dismantling, of uncovering, of removing the semantic and intellectual garments and displaying the pristine, naked eternal truth that is everywhere the primary objective of his art" and the reading "must be a subversive activity whose processes are corrosive to the authority both of text and of the acts and principles embodied in that text" (127). As Blake's corrosive acid removes surfaces and allows the truth to stand out, his texts, with the convergence of the oral and the written, make us question the validity of the language situation of our own time and our methods of linguistic expression and communication, so much controlled by institutional customs, rules and prejudices. They demonstrate a way of achieving freedom from coercion, discrimination and suppression in almost every human activity and society, by their endless effort to flee from finalization.

Works Cited

- Behrendt, Stephen C. *Reading William Blake*. London: Macmillan, 1992.
- Bloom, Harold. *Blake's Apocalypse: A Study in Poetic Argument*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1963.
- Cox, Stephen. *Love and Logic: The Evolution of Blake's Thought*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992.
- Esterhammer, Angela. *Creating States: Studies in the Performative Language of John Milton and William Blake*. Toronto, Buffalo and London: U of Toronto P, 1994.
- Holdcroft, David. *Saussure: Signs, System, and Arbitrariness*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991.
- Komatsu, Eisuke and Roy Harris, ed. and transl. *Saussure's Third Course of Lectures on General Linguistics (1910-1911)*. Oxford, New York, Seoul and Tokyo: Pergamon P, 1993.
- Lindsay, David W. "The Book of Ahania: An Interpretation of the Text." *Durham University Journal* 68 (1976): 144-47.
- McGann, Jerome J. "The Idea of an Indeterminate Text: Blake's Bible of Hell and Dr. Alexander Geddes." *Studies in Romanticism* 25 (1988): 303-24.
- McNay, Lois. *Foucault and Feminism*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992. Rep. 1994.
- Mee, Jon. *Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism in the 1790s*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1992.
- Mellor, Anne K. *Romanticism and Gender*. New York and London: Routledge, 1993.
- Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. New York and London: Routledge, 1988.
- Paley, Morton D. "Method and Meaning in Blake's *Book of Ahania*." *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* lxx (1966): 27-33.
- Tannenbaum, Leslie. *Biblical Tradition in Blake's Early Prophecies: The Great Code of Art*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982.
- Webster, Brenda S. *Blake's Prophetic Psychology*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1969.
- Worrall, David, ed. *William Blake: The Urizen Books*. London: The William Blake Trust/The Tate Gallery, 1995.

R E V I E W S

Clifford Siskin. *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain, 1700-1830*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. x + 285 pp. \$39.95, paper \$16.95.

Reviewed by MARY LYNN JOHNSON

Why is this journal reviewing Clifford Siskin's *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain, 1700-1830*, when "Blake" is not even in the index? It must be because the title links one of the arts Blake practiced to one of his highest aspirations as an artist, the transformation of society. But composing prophecies by night under the inspiration of the Poetic Genius after doing commercial engravings by day to put food on the table is not what Siskin means by "writing": here the operative word is "work," as in "produce observable social results." For Siskin, following Raymond Williams in *Writing in Society* (1983), writing is "shorthand for the entire configuration of writing, print, and silent reading" (2) that rapidly expanded in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as "more people had more occasions to write more," and as readers themselves became writers (contributors of letters to periodicals, for example). Siskin seeks to recover a history of writing that reveals "what changed and who paid the price" (3) in this critical period. He holds that gender inequities, in particular, were exacerbated by the "work of writing," which organized knowledge into deeper and narrower channels (from which emerged new university disciplines), instituted sharper divisions and rankings among occupations by means