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D I S C U S S I O N

## Final States, Finished Forms, and The Four Zoas

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## DISCUSSION

with intellectual spears & long winged arrows of thought

### Final States, Finished Forms, and *The Four Zoas*

Peter Otto

In last spring's issue of *Blake*, Paul Mann and Robert N. Essick raised once again the question of the form in which Blake intended to produce *The Four Zoas*. The former suggests that at some stage in the development of *The Four Zoas* Blake intended to print the text in letterpress.<sup>1</sup> The latter, enlarging on Mann's hypothesis, argues that we should adopt a three part schedule for the development of the manuscript: from "a manuscript and production mockup for a poem (*Vala*?) intended for publication of text and designs as intaglio etchings/engravings" to "a manuscript and production mockup for a poem (*The Four Zoas*?) intended for publication as a letterpress text accompanied by intaglio etched and/or engraved designs," and then to "a working manuscript unrelated to any specific publication intentions."<sup>2</sup> I have no quarrel with the major part of these suggestions; they seem genuinely to illuminate at least part of Blake's intentions for the poem. It is with the status that we ascribe to *The Four Zoas* in the third and final stage of its development that I am concerned.

Discussion of *The Four Zoas* has been dominated by a strong desire to retrieve the outlines of a poem (*Vala*), or potential poem, that lies somewhere behind its pages. This approach assumes that the present poem represents a "major cultural disaster," "a tantalizing and tragic failure," and that it would be irresponsible to suggest "a reversion to 'the poem itself.'"<sup>3</sup> This position is supported by the belief that poems should be unified, coherent, and formally complete. It also draws on the trope that couples incompleteness in the present with completion in some other realm. As a result, the wealth of hypotheses about the possible form of *The Four Zoas* in the "first" and "second" stages of the poem's development is coupled with a relative unanimity of response to the third.

It seems to me that there are cogent thematic and contextual reasons to entertain the possibility at least that when Blake finally stopped working on the manuscript he believed that the form taken by the work was the only one that the subject matter could assume. Or, to phrase this in a less intentionalist idiom: the (unfinished) form of the work embodies the poem's insights

about the nature of the fallen world and of fallen perception. Simply to call the poem incomplete, chaotic, and a "failure" is therefore to be quite misleading. *The Four Zoas* resists and criticizes the attempt to arrive at a closure. The manuscript could not have been completed in any traditional sense without altering what the poem has to say about fallen perception. To adopt the terminology used by Rajan in *The Form of the Unfinished*, *The Four Zoas* is an "unfinished" rather than an "incomplete" poem:

Incomplete poems are poems which ought to be completed. Unfinished poems are poems which ask not to be finished, which carry within themselves the reasons for arresting or effacing themselves as they do. If an unfinished poem were to be finished it would ideally erase its own significance.<sup>4</sup>

*The Four Zoas* does differ in certain respects from the poems discussed by Rajan. *The Faerie Queene* or *Don Juan*, for example, are "unfinished" because they lack an ending. By contrast, *The Four Zoas* has a remarkable ending (even though, as I shall argue, the closure effected by this ending is rather ambiguous). Moreover, a large portion of *The Faerie Queene* and *Don Juan* were "completed" and published by their respective authors, whereas Blake left *The Four Zoas* in manuscript form. Blake seems unwilling to impose a final form on any part of this particular poem. Nevertheless, *The Four Zoas* is "unfinished" rather than "incomplete" because the poem is arrested by forces which are intrinsic to its subject matter. Now is not the occasion to put forward my argument in detail; however, I will briefly outline some of the points that could be mustered in its defense.

*The Four Zoas* begins by announcing that it will provide an account of the "fall into Division" and "Resurrection to Unity" (4:4, E 301) of Los; yet this program is announced in a context which suggests that this is a task which must remain unfinished. Blake warns that "a Perfect Unity / Cannot Exist. but from the Universal Brotherhood of Eden / The Universal Man" and, in a late addition, that the "Natures" of "The Four Mighty Ones," one of whom is of course the hero of the poem, "no Individual Knoweth nor Can know in all Eternity." Here, in the opening page of the poem, the narrator suggests both a drive towards clarity and completion (telling the whole story) and a residue or excess which must leave this drive short of its goal.

The major force working against completion is, however, not the nature of the Zoas or the impossibility of creating a "Perfect Unity" within the fallen world, but the curious fact that the narrator is himself an "effect" of the story that he recounts. The narrator's Muse may be to some extent above the cycles of the fallen world, but the narrator himself exists within it. As a prophet/poet and therefore himself a manifestation of Los, his identity and activity can be located within the history that he recounts. Like Urizen in plate 23 of *The Book of Urizen*,

the narrator is therefore contained within his own poem. This suggests that *The Four Zoas* is a kind of Möbius strip that denies the possibility of reaching an End. As Urizen complains in a passage that suggests more than one reader's experience of the poem:

Can I not leave this world of Cumbrous  
wheels  
Circle oer Circle nor on high attain a void  
Where self sustaining I may view all things  
beneath my feet  
Or sinking thro these Elemental wonders  
swift to fall  
I thought perhaps to find an End a world  
beneath of voidness  
Whence I might travel round the outside of  
this Dark confusion . . .

(72:22-27, E 349)

If the poem were completed in any conventional sense this would suggest that the narrator had reached the "void" outside of the poem/world that eludes Urizen.

Blake's characterization of apocalypse introduces a similar conflict between the forces of completion and those of incompleteness. The Fall described by *The Four Zoas* is in essence a fragmentation or dis-membering. In order to "complete" the poem by bringing it successfully to apocalypse, the narrator must enumerate as many fragments of the Fall as possible so that, in the course of the Ninth Night, these can be re-membered. However, to the extent that this enumeration of the fragments and perspectives of the fallen world is accomplished, a tension is introduced between the poem's form and the disorganized, proliferating entities and perspectives of the fallen world. If the poet were able to order the disorder of the fallen world, this would suggest an order (similar in kind to the "false" or fallen unity propounded by Newton) which would vie with the Unity offered by "The Universal Man." Moreover, this order, because it is produced by a fallen self, could only be founded on the repression or masking of a more fundamental disorder.

One of the obvious manifestations of this tension can be seen in the existence of two seventh Nights. Formally there can, of course, be only one seventh Night in a Dream of Nine Nights. However, in the fallen world the conflict between flesh and spirit fragments what the ordering mind hopes to master.<sup>5</sup> It is perhaps not too fanciful to suggest that the presence in the poem of Blake's proofs for Young's *Night Thoughts* also suggests an influence, an other, that cannot be completely assimilated to the poet's design. Similarly, the possibly successive "layers" of the poem, written in copperplate, modified copperplate, and "usual" hand, imply a history which cannot be contained within the "timeless" artifact of a "complete" poem. *The Four Zoas* is haunted by its doubles; and these proliferating images could only be erased if the poet were to adopt the position out of time and space which he denies to his characters.

The narrator's struggle with his subject matter is mirrored by Urizen's attempt to order the fallen world. In Night the Third, Urizen constructs a "Golden World": "The seas & lakes, they reard the mountains & the rocks & hills / On broad pavilions, on pillard roofs & porches & high towers / In beauteous order . . ." (32:8, 33:1-3, E 321). But this ordered form *frames* a world of chaos: "For many a window ornamented with sweet ornaments / Lookd out into the World of Tharmas, where in ceaseless torrents / His billows roll where monsters wander in the foamy paths" (33:5-7, E 321). In *framing* the "World of Tharmas," this "beauteous order" excludes disorder (at least from the perspective of Urizen). However, this exclusion (because it frames the world of Tharmas) paradoxically provides a ground against which disorder can be drawn into existence. It is ironical that what appears to the inhabitants of the "Golden World" as chaos in fact contains Tharmas, the "Parent Power" (4:6, E 301) who, in the prelapsarian world, has an important role in the task of giving form to life. For the poet/narrator to complete *The Four Zoas* would be to create a structure which was isomorphic with Urizen's "beauteous order."<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the most remarkable instance of this conflict between the forces of completion and incompleteness can be seen in the vision of regenerate humanity with which the poem closes and begins again. The "Unity" achieved by the Zoas on pages 138 and 139, a "Unity" which promises to reintegrate the fragments of the fallen world and offers a ground for the individual Zoas in the "whole Man," provides an ending for the poem; yet it does not "complete" the poem. The rising Sun and "fresher morning" described on these pages place regenerate humanity both before and after the slumber of Nine Nights. "Unity" exists *outside* of the poem. In other words, the poem glimpses and yet fails to incorporate within itself its own completion. Unity is achieved by waking from sleep, by moving from night into day, and by transforming Los (loss) into the Sun. The end of the poem therefore lies outside its own boundaries; paradoxically, *The Four Zoas* can only be completed by affirming its necessary incompleteness.

It is of course true that the glimpse of regenerated humanity offered in these pages does exist within the boundaries of *The Four Zoas* and that in terms of narrative form it suggests a possible closure or completion of fallen history. But even in this sense the end of the poem is contested by the forces of incompleteness. Within the framework of a dream of Nine Nights, regeneration can occur only at the very end of history, at the end of the Book. But the reordering of fallen humanity that is described in Night the Ninth suggests that this kind of end may be quite misleading. The temporal and spatial order which is established by Los and Enitharmon in the course of the poem is, in fact, destroyed at the beginning of the Ninth Night. As a result, the "volume of Heaven

& Earth," with its linear organization (from beginning to middle to end) is folded into a scroll. End and beginning are now in the center of the text rather than at its perimeter. This is what Urizen discovers on page 121 when he says:

Then Go O dark futurity I will cast thee  
forth from these  
Heavens of my brain nor will I look upon  
futurity more  
I cast futurity away & turn my back upon  
that void  
Which I have made for lo futurity is in this  
moment . . .

(19-22, E 390)

It is perhaps to underline the change of orientation demanded by the Ninth Night that the vision of regenerated humanity is written on a proof of the first page of Young's *Night Thoughts*. To complete this poem (to look for an End which could give it a final shape) is to see the vision of awakening slip beyond our grasp and to be drawn back into another dream of nine Nights.

Rather than arguing that before Blake "abandoned" *The Four Zoas* he tried "to gather the new and old threads of his Prophecy, and to strengthen the whole with new patches"<sup>7</sup> in the hope of creating a formally complete and unified poem, it is possible to argue that Blake left his creation myth in an unfinished condition because this was the only form which is appropriate for the effort of a fallen self to recount the origins, history, and regeneration of the world. Moreover, in this poem it is the tension between completion and incompleteness, affirmation and irony, which ensures that the history of Los, which is the history of the fallen world, remains open to the possibility of regeneration. The path from *Vala* to *The Four Zoas* does not lead to a "major cultural disaster"; it leads to a remarkable instance of what Rajan calls an unfinished (rather than an incomplete) poem.

<sup>1</sup>Paul Mann, "The Final State of *The Four Zoas*," *Blake* 18 (1986): 204-09.

<sup>2</sup>Robert N. Essick, "The Four Zoas: Intention and Production," *Blake* 18 (1986): 219.

<sup>3</sup>Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1947), p. 269; G. E. Bentley, Jr., ed. "Vala": or "The Four Zoas" (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 165; Mann, p. 208.

<sup>4</sup>Balachandra Rajan, *The Form of the Unfinished: English Poetics from Spenser to Pound* (Princeton, NJ: Univ. Princeton Press, 1985), p. 14.

<sup>5</sup>I describe this conflict and view of the relationship between the two seventh nights in an article entitled "Those Two Seventh Nights Once Again" (forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup>Blake did of course, complete *Milton* and *Jerusalem* after he stopped working on *The Four Zoas*; but these poems are no longer attempts to give a history of the fallen world; they are "Visionary forms dramatic."

<sup>7</sup>Bentley, p. 165.

## REVIEWS

### BLAKE'S PRELUDE *Poetical Sketches*

ROBERT F. GLECKNER



Robert F. Gleckner. *Blake's Prelude: Poetical Sketches*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982. xii + 202 pp. \$15.00.

Reviewed by Michael J. Tolley

Still the wonder grows. What Hewlett in 1876 condemned as the plagiarism of an "Imperfect Genius," has become, with successive refinements and extensions of the pioneering work in 1940 of Margaret Lowery, a swelling tribute of praise to an original (not merely "untutored") genius. Gleckner's researches, the most