

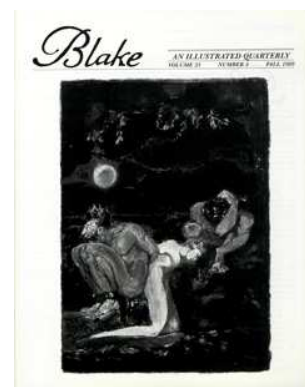
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Blake and Burke in Astonishment!

V. A. De Luca

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dimension of ideology here) determines the "nature of critical knowledge itself."

A similarly powerful argument for Blake's ideological blind spots is made by David Aers in his Marxist essay, "Representations of Revolution: From *The French Revolution* to *The Four Zoas*," in which he analyzes the way in which Blake's failure to envision particular differences and a meaningful plurality among the classes of the oppressed enables Blake to posit a polarized, two-class society, and then to celebrate a "salvific violence" whereby the sons of Los trample down the sons of Urizen in Night IX of *The Four Zoas*, a violence that modern readers ought to find extremely troubling. Aers's essay, which invokes both Bakhtin and Carol Gilligan's concept of a female ethic of care to good effect, is flawed only by its failure to incorporate into its argument an analysis of what should be Aers' primary text, *Jerusalem*.

Nelson Hilton and Hazard Adams both pay close attention to Blake's use of particular words and rhetorical methods to generate convincing readings of specific texts. In "Literal/*Tiriell*/Material," Hilton offers another demonstration of what he has called Blake's literal imagination, the way allusion and wordplay function in Blake's texts. In this case, he turns to the Concordance to show how *Tiriell* becomes a calculated meditation on the death of old myths, the curse of inherited language and metrics, and the ways Blake attempts to lift off the burden of the rubbish heap of the past. In "Synecdoche and Method," Hazard Adams describes the peculiarly radical and progressive nature of Blake's use of synecdoche, which he illustrates with a brilliant analysis of the way both intrinsic and historical clues enable us to understand the way Blake's mind worked in composing plate 10 of *Europe*.

These essays provide a compelling illustration of how contemporary critical theory both impedes and enables our understanding and appreciation of literary texts. When theory becomes the focus of critical attention, as it does in the essays by the editors, Stephen Cox and David Wagenknecht, it can lead to little more than a self-indulgent hermeneutic exercise, resulting in reductive, predictable (or unconvincing) readings. Typically, for all that these exercises claim to take into account the necessary self-reflexivity of both language and ideology, they are usually carried out with no recognition, as is the case here, of the individual critic's personal psychological profile, gender, ethnicity, religion, or other ideological commitments and interests. But when theory enables the critic to uncover the blind spots or fault lines of both the author's and previous critics' ideological limitations and thus opens the way to more en-

compassing and genuinely critical understandings, as the essays by Langland and Aers do most effectively in this volume, it must be welcome. Perhaps, in the context of the deconstructive and self-critical methods advocated so pervasively in this volume, I should add, "to me." And end with a personal credo that grows out of my experience of gender oppression and teaching of feminist theory: I believe that the time has come for contemporary literary criticism to move beyond deconstructive theory (whose intellectual insights have by now been absorbed, even exhausted) in an effort to recuperate more politically engaged, less elitist, practices of reading and teaching.

MINUTE PARTICULARS

Blake and Burke in Astonishment!

V. A. De Luca

On those occasions when Blake discloses his most important views on art and poetry—say, in the *Descriptive Catalogue*, or in the Annotations to Reynolds's *Discourses*, or in the letter to Butts of 6 July 1803—the sublime never seems far from his mind. We do not know the extent of his acquaintance with formal eighteenth-century theories of the sublime but we can be certain that he read the most famous treatise on the subject—Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into . . . the Sublime and the Beautiful*: "Burke's Treatise on the Sublime & Beautiful," he tells us in the annotations to Reynolds, "is founded on the Opinions of Newton & Locke on this Treatise Reynolds has grounded many of his assertions."¹ Blake tells us that he read it when "very young," and what he read when "very young" usually stuck, held in a strong clasp of love or hate. The avowed hatred in this case has tended to mask a rich overlay of tastes and assumptions. A few critics have recognized the link between the two men,² but our sense of the complexity of the relation may still need some refining—such as how much even Blake's departures from Burke issue from a Burkean ground.

One handy and efficient way of approaching a complicated relation between two writers is to focus on key terms that are shared in their vocabularies. Blake and Burke share "astonishment," one of the central terms in

the idiom of the eighteenth-century sublime, and an examination of their use of the term sheds light on the parallels and divergencies of their aesthetics. In the discourse of sublimity "astonishment" comes laden with ambiguity: it names a human psychological state, yet resonates with the powers of external nature, from the airy might of thunder (from which it derives etymologically) to the solidity of stone (which it resembles in sound). Burke begins the second part of his *Philosophical Enquiry*, an analysis of the sublime proper, with a definition of "astonishment":

The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force.³

Writers throughout the century refer to astonishment in similar terms.⁴ But however much these formulas are repeated, perplexities abound. The psychological state itself seems curiously resistant to straightforward discursive explanation, as Burke's own highly figurative language demonstrates. There is a marked ambiguity in the play of these figures. At the moment of astonishment, when the power of the sublime manifests itself, the mind becomes utterly open to the influx of what it beholds ("filled with its object"), and yet this flood of power into the mind produces no kinetic transfer of energy to the mind's faculties but rather the reverse, a suspension of internal motion, a total arrest. At first appearing entirely permeable, the mind in an instant becomes impenetrable, like a container packed to the bursting point ("so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other"). The mind is quite stopped ("suspended"), only to be "hurried"; its internal density becomes crushing and yet finally it is easily carried along. "Astonishment," then, cannot be so much described as circumscribed by a ring of mutually canceling figures such as action/arrest, penetration/resistance, inertial mass/momentum. The figures are drawn from physical mechanics, but they compose no mechanics that Newton would recognize. Here the continuum of cause and effect breaks down; outward forces have unpredictable inward consequences. As Burke presents it, "astonishment" marks the intervention of sharp discontinuities in the spheres of both nature and mind: nature suddenly manifests itself in so overwhelming a fashion that normal relations of subject and object are abolished; at the same time the mind loses its consistency of operation and becomes a thing of paradox, of self-contradictory extremes.

It is easy to comprehend the part that astonishment plays in the dynamics of a Burkean "terrific" sublime. Terror and astonishment are kindred states, as Burke makes clear in an etymological aside:

The Romans used the verb *stupeo*, a term which strongly marks the state of an astonished mind, to express the effect either of simple fear, or of astonishment; the word *attonitus*, (thunderstruck) is equally expressive of the alliance of these ideas; and do not the french *étonnement* and the english *astonishment* and *amazement*, point out as clearly the kindred emotions which attend fear and wonder?⁵

To be struck by lightning is literally a form of astonishment, for etymologically the word means "thunderstruck." Perhaps the prestige of the term "astonishment" in eighteenth-century aesthetics derives ultimately from Longinus, who tells us that "the Sublime, when seasonably addressed, with the rapid force of Lightning has born down all before it, and shewn at one stroke the compacted Might of Genius."⁶ The two metaphors that Longinus employs here for the onset of the sublime, the stroke of natural lightning and the blow of intellectual power, imply a hidden and prior third, one that connects the forces of nature to the forces of mind. This mediating figure is of course that of a divine being, like the Jove and Jehovah of myth and scripture, at once the author of natural thunder and of human inspiration. Hence the word *astonishment* incorporates within itself two contradictory aspects of the sublime; it immobilizes or releases, destroys or raises up. One is either struck by the divine power and "hurried" on to participate in its glories, or one is struck dead as a stone.

Blake shows a surprisingly persistent allegiance to Burkean settings and diction, giving us imagery and narrative scenarios that are full of sensory deprivations—darkness, cloudiness, and the host of disquieting sensations that gather under the general term "terror."⁷ He also uses the term "astonishment" more frequently than any other major poet in the period 1660–1830,⁸ and always with careful discrimination. Extraordinarily sensitive to the possibilities of word play,⁹ he is quick to hear the thunder and to see the "stone" in *astonishment*.¹⁰ The word thus could easily encompass the whole program of Urizen, armed with "his ten thousands of thunders" (BU 3.28), to bring about a "solid without fluctuation," "a wide world of solid obstruction" (BU 4.11,23). Hence to experience astonishment means in one sense to turn to stone, to be "filled," as Burke would say, with the inducing power and filled solid. Thus in *Urizen*, "Wonder, awe, fear, astonishment, / Petrify the eternal myriads" (BU 18.13–14). As it is the fate of overweening deities in Blake to be struck by their own thunder, as soon as Urizen manifests himself in all his pride, he is struck down and stunned (from *étonnement*) into "a

stony sleep" (*BU* 6.7) or, elsewhere, into "a stoned stupor" (*FZ* 52.20). The moment of astonishment, then, is *par excellence*, the moment when, in Blake's famous formula, one becomes what one beholds. Beholding Urizen's stony sleep, mentioned above, Los is "smitten with astonishment" (*BU* 8.1). But whose astonishment is meant here? Los's own or that of Urizen whom he beholds lying stunned? There is no meaningful way of sorting out distinctions of this nature. Astonishment astonishes, the petrified petrifies. Thus in *Jerusalem*, seeking for the Minute Particulars, Los is again "astonished he beheld only the petrified surfaces" (*J* 46.5); two lines earlier we read "Los was all astonishment & terror: he trembled sitting on the Stone." Los is now filled with his stony object and is *all* astonishment; we see *all as stone* in these regions. From becoming all astonishment it is easy to become a thing that causes astonishment, as in Los's statement, "I now am what I am: a horror and an astonishment" (*J* 8.18). The abstract noun becomes a stony particular, substituting itself for an individuality now petrified and soon to petrify others.

But as there is a thunder that immobilizes and petrifies, there is also a thunder that cracks open the stones, releasing our buried powers to freedom, a "crack of doom" for a sullen old dispensation. In contrast to the "inarticulate thunder" that Urizen booms at his misshapen children in *Vala* (*FZ* 70:39), we have the articulate thunder of that true God who "To Man the wond'rous art of writing gave" and who "speaks in thunder and in fire! / Thunder of Thought, & flames of fierce desire" (*J* 3.4,5-6). There is also the awakened Albion, "Loud thundring, with broad flashes of flaming lightning & pillars / Of fire, speaking the Words of Eternity in Human Forms" (*J* 95.8-9). And there are the at last fraternal Zoas who "conversed together in Visionary forms dramatic which bright / Redounded from their Tongues in thunderous majesty" (*J* 98.28-29). In contrast to the obliterating power of the Urizenic thunder, the power of this thunder resides in its incisive capacity to clarify and reveal. It does not stun with an avalanche of sound but cleaves through darkness and obstruction, employing as its cutting tools those instruments that inscribe the definite lines of Blake's "writing," "Words," and "Forms."

It follows that the "astonishment" produced by this clarifying thunder encompasses the moment when surfaces and opacities are burst to reveal an infinite potential within. Thus when Eno in the *Four Zoas* "took an atom of space & opend its center / Into Infinitude & ornamented it with wondrous art / Astonishd sat her Sisters of Beulah to see her soft affections" (*FZ* 9.12-14) A similar response to visionary revelation appears in Blake's ecstatic report of his first days at Felpham:

In particles bright
The jewels of Light
Distinct shone & clear—
Amazd & in fear
I each particle gazed
Astonishd Amazed
For each was a Man
Human formd.

(Letter to Butts, 2 Oct. 1800, lines 15-22, E 712)

If visions of nature humanized bring astonishment, so too do the recognition and recovery of unfallen portions of humanity within the self: "Los embracd the Spectre first as a brother / Then as another Self; astonishd humanizing & in tears" (*FZ* 85.29-30). Images of barriers broken, of visions glimpsed through sudden openings, of obdurate forms melting down and flowing together, attend this form of astonishment:

Then Los said I behold the Divine Vision thro the
broken Gates
Of thy poor broken heart astonishd melted into
Compassion & Love

(*FZ* 99.15-16)

Finally, in the single instance in Blake's poetry where astonishment is modified by the adjective *sublime*, *Jerusalem* recalls ancient days before Albion's dreadful separation: "I taught the ships of the sea to sing the songs of Zion. / Italy saw me, in sublime astonishment: France was wholly mine" (*J* 79.38-39). The response of the nations embraces the full paradox of the sublime moment; arrest is freedom here, for to be filled with the object in this case is to be filled with a being who is "called Liberty among the Children of Albion" (*J* 54.5).

Blake's wide-ranging use of the term *astonishment* provides a good index of his understanding of the problematic dynamics of the eighteenth-century sublime. Not only does astonishment occupy a gap between polarized states of experience but it also unfolds within itself alternate destinies of the sublime moment. Two possible sublimities quiver in the indeterminacy of the moment of astonishment: one, the sublime of terror and deprivation most closely associated with Burke, and the other, a sublime of desire and plenitude. Blake's imagination is repeatedly drawn to the Burkean sublime, as our examination of his vocabulary and imagery indicates, but nowhere does this evidence suggest that he finds in Burkean "astonishment" any genuine access for the mind to an expansive and liberating power. Burke would have us believe that psychic disequilibrium, suspension of faculties, and immobilization of will are sure indications of the presence of an overwhelming external power or magnitude. Blake reads such scenes otherwise: encountering "terrific" objects his protagonists reel not at a magnitude of power made present but at the magnitude of power lost, at the degree of petrification re-

vealed in so-called powers by the time they present themselves as natural "terrors."

Blake seeks a less melancholy sublime, and if as a poet he is to gratify desire and recover plenitude, he must attempt some sort of redemption of astonishment. When Reynolds repeats the Burkean saw that "obscurity . . . is one source of the sublime," Blake retorts that it is "Neither the Source of the Sublime nor of any Thing Else" (E 658). Yet in a famous letter to Thomas Butts where he proclaims the sublimity of his own poetry (he calls it a "Sublime Allegory"), Blake ventures an important clarification: "Allegory addressed to the Intellectual powers *while it is altogether hidden* from the Corporeal Understanding is *My Definition* of the Most Sublime Poetry" (E 730; *emphases mine*). To obscure originally meant to veil, cover, or conceal, and nothing can be more thoroughly obscured than that which is altogether hidden. Thus a sublime object (in this case the poetical text) becomes "most sublime" when it is altogether obscure to our mundane faculties. There is no apparent conflict with Burke here. Indeed, it is not immediately easy to see how this bafflement of the "Corporeal Understanding" differs much from Burke's own opinion in the *Philosophical Enquiry*: "It is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions."¹¹ Blake apparently has no intention of abandoning the drama, the clash of oppositions, and the suspense inherent in Burke's account of the sublime. He is willing to exploit Burke's evocations of giddiness and irresistible rush since they so easily consort with Blake's own imagery of centers opening up, gates broken down, and forms melting. There is a need, however, to relocate the scene of this drama, away from a point of humiliating encounter between the experiencing mind and some thunderous externality. As Blake's own notions of the sublime become fully articulated, the encounter is seen to take place between a lesser and a greater faculty of the mind, made manifest through the mediation of the poetic text. Blake not only represents scenes of astonishment in his work but also seeks to create fresh moments of astonishment in the encounter of poem and reader, offering a petrific text to stony understandings and a field of openings for the receptive.

It becomes increasingly clear that we should attach the term "astonishment" to that moment when the reader's mind divides into a stunned Corporeal Understanding and privileged intellectual powers. Astonishment is thus a liminal or threshold state, dividing the complacent mind from the stunned understanding and the latter from exalted powers of intuitive reception. The function of liminal states is to mark boundaries and hence to provide bounding outlines for what lies beyond

them. Blake's sublime allegory serves to isolate the intellectual powers from the other components of the mind, for the essence of Blake's sublime resides in intellect becoming present to itself as a wholly determinate form (see the *Descriptive Catalogue*: "The Beauty proper for sublime art, is lineaments, or forms and features that are capable of being the receptacles of intellect" [E 544]). The analogy to this process in Burke's system would be the recoil of delight that floods the consciousness when it realizes its safe distance from the contingent pain or deprivation that provoked the sublime experience in the first place.¹² Blake and Burke do not differ in their understanding of the structure or the dynamics of the sublime experience. Blake's quarrel is with Burke's choice of sublime objects (ratios of the five senses rather than glimpses of Eternal Death or of Divine Vision) and Burke's apparatus of transformation (nerves and muscles rather than passion and imagination). But both writers place discontinuity of consciousness at the center of their ideas of the sublime.

If anything, in stressing the determinate, the particular, and the distinct as necessary qualities of sublime objects, as he does in the Reynolds annotations and elsewhere, Blake provides for a more radical discontinuity and deprivation of the ordinary senses than anything that Burke can supply from his storehouse of the corporeally vast and terrific. The Blakean visionary symbol, the reflexive emblem of the Intellectual Powers—determinate, particular, and distinct in itself—must be radically discontinuous with everything that is beyond its bounding outline. Here Blake occupies a sphere of conception that would be "altogether hidden" to Edmund Burke, but we would be wrong to ignore the elements of a Burkean sensibility that lick about the borders of this sphere like a darkness to its radiance, enhancing its outline. Blake always assimilates his enemies' strength before he discards their excrementitious husk.

¹¹David V. Erdman, ed. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, newly rev. ed. (Garden City: Anchor P/Doubleday, 1982) 660; hereafter referred to as E.

¹²See, for example, Josephine Miles, *Eras and Modes in English Poetry* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1957) 78–99; Morton D. Paley, *Energy and the Imagination: A Study of the Development of Blake's Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1970) 18–24; and especially Paley, *The Continuing City: William Blake's Jerusalem* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1983) 57ff.

¹³Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. J. T. Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958) 57.

¹⁴Addison, for example, tells us that "our imagination loves to be filled with an object, or to grasp at anything that is too big for its capacity. We are flung into a pleasing astonishment at such unbounded views. . . ." According to Johnson, "[The sublime is] that

comprehension and expanse of thought which at once fills the whole mind, and of which the first effect is sudden astonishment, and the second rational admiration." Here is a sampling of similar contemporary opinions: "The sublime . . . takes possession of our attention, and of all our faculties, and absorbs them in astonishment"; "[the sublime] imports such ideas presented to the mind, as raise it to an uncommon degree of elevation, and fill it with admiration and astonishment"; "objects exciting terror are . . . in general sublime; for terror always implies astonishment, occupies the whole soul, and suspends all its motions." See, respectively, *Works of Joseph Addison*, 6 vols. (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1811) 4: 340; Samuel Johnson, "The Life of Cowley," *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 3 vols. (1905; Oxford: Clarendon P; New York: Octagon Books, 1967) 1: 20–21; James Usher, *Clio: Or, a Discourse on Taste*, 2nd ed. (London: T. Davies, 1769) 102; Hugh Blair, "A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian," in *The Poems of Ossian*, trans. James Macpherson, 2 vols. (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1773) 2: 422; Alexander Girard, *An Essay on Taste* (London: A Millar, 1759) 19.

⁵*Philosophical Enquiry* 58.

⁶Dionysius Longinus, *Essay on the Sublime*, trans. William Smith (London, 1756) 3.

⁷Just as Burke's sublime rides on an aesthetics of darkness, deprivation, pain, and "whatever is in any sort terrible" (*Philosophical Enquiry* 39) so in Blake's vocabulary *dark* prevails numerically over *light*, night over *day*, *death* over *life*. More notably, the word *terror(s)* and its co-derivatives *terrible*, *terrific*, *terrified*, taken as a collectivity, would rank in the dozen most frequently used words in his concorded vocabulary (David V. Erdman's *Blake Concordance* [Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1967] reveals a total of 393 uses of these terms). Despite his stated aversion to Burke, Blake so closely associates the sublime with the terrific that the terminology of the latter often acquires an honorific lustre in his work. Thus we have such phrases as "Terrified at the Sublime Wonder" (a reference to the beneficent Spaces of Erin—see *J* 11.8–15), "terrible Blake in his pride" (When Klopstock England defied," line 2), an uncharacteristically affectionate Enitharmon's "Lovely terrible Los wonder of Eternity" (*FZ* 90.160), the "terrors of friendship" (*J* 45.5), and the "terrific Lions & Tygers" that "sport and play" before the Great Harvest at the end of *Milton* (*M* 42.38). In these instances *terror* loses most of its terrors, and one gets the sense that in such cases Blake is not paying tribute so much to the signified *feeling* of terror but rather to the signifier, a vocabulary of the sublime fondly preserved from the fashions of his youth.

⁸There are 51 uses of the terms from the collectivity (*astonish(ed)(es)(ing)(ment)*) in Blake's poetry. Among poets of comparable stature, range, and sublime interests, Milton's poetry yields only 6 instances, Wordsworth's, 17, and Shelley's, 11. Pope draws upon this cluster of terms 16 times, almost entirely for his translations of Homer, and Dryden, 11 times, mostly for the *Aeneid*.

⁹See Nelson Hilton, *Literal Imagination: Blake's Vision of Words* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983) 16–17, and especially 239–57.

¹⁰This connection is reinforced by the older sense of *astonished* (or its variant *astounded*) to connote death-like paralysis and insensibility; thus the *OED* on *astounded*: "Stunned; made insensible, benumbed, paralyzed (1611)"; cf. also Milton on Satan's legions, who "lie thus astonisht on th'oblivious Pool" (*Paradise Lost* 1.266).

¹¹*Philosophical Enquiry* 61.

¹²See *Philosophical Enquiry* 37, 40.

A Twist in the Tale of "The Tyger"

Desmond King-Hele

Most readers of "The Tyger" have their own ideas of its meaning: I shall not be adding my own interpretation, but merely offering a factual record of minute particulars, by pointing to a number of verbal parallels with Erasmus Darwin's *The Botanic Garden*. A few of these were given in my book *Erasmus Darwin and the Romantic Poets*; the others I have come across more recently.

Darwin's poem *The Botanic Garden* was published in two parts, with Part 2, *The Loves of the Plants*, appearing first in 1789, and Part 1, *The Economy of Vegetation*, nominally in 1791, though it did not actually appear until about June 1792, probably because of delay in printing Blake's superb engravings of the Portland Vase.¹ After my quotations I give the canto and line numbers from the third edition of *The Loves of the Plants* (1791) and the first edition of *The Economy of Vegetation*.

One of the best-known passages in Darwin's poem was his vivid description of a nightmare, based on Fuseli's painting (illus. 1), which features the half-visible head of a large animal with unnaturally bright eyes, enveloped in black night. Obviously the head is intended as that of a horse, but the word "nightmare" has no etymological connection with horses, male or female.² (The nightmare is produced by the incubus, or "squab fiend" as Darwin calls him.) Could Fuseli's monstrous animal, with eyes burning bright in the blackness of the night, have given Blake the cue for his Tyger? Such a speculation is encouraged by a verbal parallel between "The Tyger" and Darwin's verses about the sleeping girl. The nightmare induces in her an "interrupted heart-pulse" and "suffocative breath", as frightful thoughts

In dread succession agonize her mind.
O'er her fair limbs convulsive tremors fleet,
Start in her hands, and struggle in her feet.

(*Lov. Pl.* 3: 68–70)

This is not quite "What dread hand? and what dread feet?" but dread is powerfully present, "in her hands, and . . . in her feet"; and "dread" was a favorite adjective with Darwin, used twenty times in *The Botanic Garden*.

The burning brightness of the first two stanzas of "The Tyger" has some resemblances to Darwin's picture of Nebuchadnezzar ordering "a vast pyre . . . of sulphurous coal and pitch-exuding pine" with "huge bel-lows" to fan the roaring flames: