AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

Donald Ault, Narrative Unbound: Re-Visioning William Blake's The Four Zoas

Paul Mann

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 23, Issue 2, Fall 1989, pp. 80-87

The poem's very last line offers another fine instance of precision and care combined with vividness and force. For "The dark Religions are departed and sweet Science reigns" Blondel gives us "Les sombres Religions ne sont plus, et du Savoir délectable c'est maintenant le règne" (483). Here he tries to reproduce the cadence, the rhythm, and he does it so well that we do not feel the syntactic inversion as at all forced. "C'est maintenant le règne du Savoir délectable" would be quite inappropriate, for we wish to end with a sense of innocence re-*organized*, of organic form, of a *rule* which is not Urizen's dividing rule. The translator, incidentally, as word-connoisseur has done as much careful thinking about the word "sweet" in Blakean usage as he has devoted to the imagery of sparks and blighting. In the Introduction he contrasts Blake's "sweet Science" with the Shelleyan "sweet eclipse / When soul meets soul on lovers' lips" (45) to help illustrate the difference between the more earthly apocalypse of the *Zoas* and the ethereal one of *Prometheus Unbound* Act IV. "Sweet," in Blake, also proves quite variable in meaning according to context. "Redd'ning, the demon strong prepar'd the poison of sweet Love" becomes "Rougissant, le puissant démon prépara le poison de l'amour souriant" (285). This is translation as interpretation, and it deserves high praise.

One can always cavil about a few details. I don't know why "all the black mould sings" should be weakened to "toute la terre noire chante" (457). "Mould" here refers to the rich, friable, black topsoil; why not "l'humus noir" instead of "la terre noire"? And surely it is more than a cavil to suggest that the Erdman text should have been used, not the Keynes.

But overall, the version is excellent. I cannot resist citing still another instance of taste and discernment. "Fearing thy frown, loving thy smile, O Urizen, Prince of Light" becomes "Redoutant le courroux de ton front et aimant ton sourire, O Urizen, Prince de Lumière" (411). "Le courroux de ton front" was by no means the inevitable choice for "frown"; there are many possibilities—"renfrognement," or "froncement de sourcil," or "regard courroucé." But the mention of Urizen's "forehead" is perfect in a picture of this Zoa of the head, or Schoolmaster of the Sky—and "front" even sounds like "frown." The whole *Quatre Vivants* abounds in exquisite touches of this kind. The notes to Watson, Bacon, and Boyd included in the same volume are also finely done into French. And the sample sketches reproduced from the *Zoas* manuscript increase our pleasure.

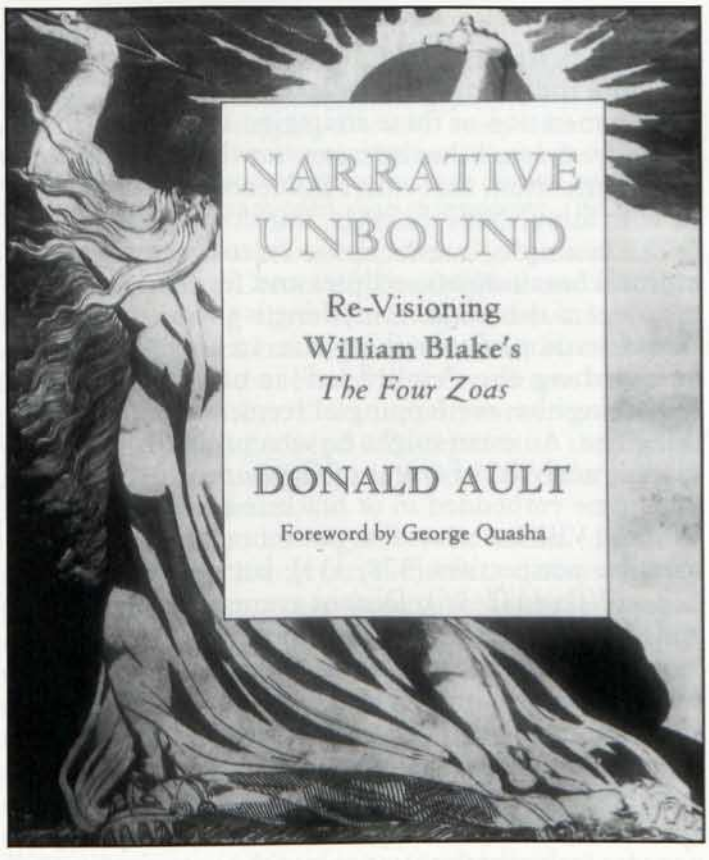
A total of six volumes is envisioned for this bilingual Blake series, which is under the direction of Pierre Leyris.

Donald Ault, *Narrative Unbound: Re-Visioning William Blake's* The Four Zoas. Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1987. xxvi + 518 pp. $37.50 cloth/$14.95 paper.

Reviewed by Paul Mann

An enormous, astonishing, monumental book; a quantum leap in the reading of *The Four Zoas*; etc. (It is difficult, at one level, to avoid the rhetoric of dust-jacket superlatives in appraising the scale and importance of Ault's accomplishment; but so too the puny scale of a review will inevitably belittle his book even in singing its praises.) For more than fifteen years, patiently, obsessively, Ault has labored over *FZ*, his "master text," reading and rereading, revising and revising and revising ("revisioning"). The phrase "master text" (xviii) is in fact exemplary. But Blake sought no disciples and Ault is no false-humble acolyte. What we are given are the results not only of scholarly study but of a sustained attempt to rise to *FZ*'s occasion, to answer to its demands. In fact, *Narrative Unbound* is nearly as demanding as *FZ* itself. One imagines readers so severely tested by the demands *NU* transfers to them—outrageous demands, for a patience and obsessiveness approaching Ault's own—that they resort to the stock charge of self-indulgence. Here, they will say, is still one more critic who thinks he deserves as much attention as the poet he interprets, who doesn't read and explicate but usurps, who overwhelms us with an excess that some Blake slogan or other calls for but no one really wants to witness. Just who is the master of this master text, Blake or Ault? But in reading Ault's vast book one might also come to the conclusion that the only way really to appreciate *FZ*, to be faithful to it, is to exceed it, or rather to *keep it* excessive, to refuse reduction at all costs.

What sort of mastery does this master text require? For Ault, reading must see itself in the light of Blake's radical insistence on the primacy of perception. It is no longer a matter of choosing between a hypostatic Poem Itself that pretends to bracket off every "extrinsic" relation and one immersed in some "concrete" historical context, nor between authorial intention and readerly affect. Ault's proper reader is neither usurper nor servant, neither before nor after meaning: in *FZ*, Ault discovers, "text and reader come into existence simultaneously to constitute and alter one another at each point



in the poem" (6). It is a revolutionary notion, if taken seriously, and announces what might be the most Blakean project that Blake criticism could take upon itself, one in which ontology recapitulates phenomenology: being as an act of perception, an act of minds in relation, with no actuality outside of relation. Becoming and beholding and being beheld are simultaneous, interconstitutive, a single nexus: "perspective ontology," in Ault's phrase. We have seen this sort of claim before—Frye, of course, begins his own study with an analysis of Blake's radical epistemology—but in Ault it is not just a claim, it is a *modus operandi*. Ault's *FZ* is an attempt to generate in its reader an *actual* awareness of the primacy of perception, and *NU* is an attempt to respond to that awareness in kind. But to respond in this manner is necessarily to produce something excessive, outrageous, monstrous, no longer simply a book on a poem: indeed, it will be difficult henceforth to separate study-title from poem-title. Perhaps they should be rewritten thus: *NU/FZ*.

So the massive bound object that Ault names *Narrative Unbound* is a monument to the inter-exorbitance of text and reading. It is a monument constructed by the relentless disclosure and intercalation of what became, in practice, endlessly resonant, mutually interfering *details*. So much detail that Ault can provide no index: "categories that would make sense for an index . . . would generate [one] competitive in length with the book itself" (xxii). The very detailedness of Ault's study is its first gift and one of its foremost theses about *FZ*. "The physical bulk of this book is integral to its program: the accumulation of details does not *exemplify* but actually *constitutes* its argument" (xxiv; Ault's emphases). Ault's project is Blakean not only in its epic scale but in its microscopic attentiveness. Not a single verbal blur or mark is permitted to admit of insignificance. Minute particularity is not just a "theme" here, it is an operational principle, a way of enacting or embodying a specificity that remains, for others, only a general idea. We must imagine a reading that has so thoroughly appropriated the poem that it knows immediately if some instance of food or circles or the sun or sitting or mildness or armour recurs similarly or differently at some distant elsewhere in the poem, and if that *kind* of recurrence or difference resonates with narrative strategies at yet other junctures; for Ault the poem is a complex web (an image that may already mark a reservation about *NU*) whose slightest vibration is transmitted throughout the entire network. We must imagine him coming to know the poem virtually by heart and still, daily, uncovering new details, new relations between cruxes he had once thought settled, with each discovery having to alter his sense of the whole until the constant flux of this alteration finally unsettles every hope for a wholeness dependent upon closure—until alteration becomes the poem. That is the sort of monument we encounter here: *NU/FZ* is an altar to alteration. The key is once again in epistemology. "The Eye altering alters all": to mark well some hitherto unmarked detail is fundamentally, substantively, to transform the whole. Nor can such revision ever end. The potential and perhaps virtual endlessness of Ault's reading is epitomized in *NU*'s extraordinary marginalia, where he not only frames, summarizes, annotates and glosses but also interrupts, extends, departs from his own text, reaches toward still other "possible" readings. For Ault, the perpetual perceptual motion of this reading *is* the meaning of *FZ*.

Let me try to summarize *NU*'s argument without displacing either the primacy of its detail or its radical phenomenological embeddedness.

Assume that, faced with a text of *FZ*'s density, the Common Reader would try to organize the experience of the poem into some unitary and coherent sense, some interpretation that would, in effect, be simpler than the poem itself. The task would be to resolve difficulties into

singular meanings—however complex, however admittedly partial. For Ault, such resolutions, such closures, are profoundly anti-Blakean; perhaps the very concern with establishing the poem's meaning is anti-Blakean. Every attempt to define some "character" as an autonomous allegorical identity; every attempt to read through the poem's incredible flux to the presumed core of some more or less coherent plot; every attempt to locate in the poem a single narrative agent finally capable of resurrecting its fall into division into a unity that has anything in common with classical aesthetic categories: every normative critical project toward *FZ* is classed as single vision, as *Newtonian*. (We might remark here that Ault has a particularly single vision of the common reader's commitment to single vision; Ault's invocation of this normative reading as a basic plot in any actual encounter with the text might very well overdetermine it, rendering it at times little more than a strawman against which to measure his super-anti-methodology.) The poem's chief task is to resist and supercede both Newtonian narrative structures and their counterparts in the reader's mental operations. Instances of such Newtonian projects are not difficult to locate, even prior to what Ault apparently takes as "reading." The persistent editorial attempt to normalize the text of *FZ* and of Blake's work in general is one instance of the sort of attitude against which Ault militates; the ongoing debate about whether Blake—as primary creative agent—has succeeded or failed, finished or abandoned this poem is another. In what is one of its most radical gestures, *NU* simply hypostatizes the manuscript text, takes it as is, sets aside all questions of whether "Blake" finished the poem as irrelevant to its true purposes. What once seemed editorial "discrepancies"—accidents of the poem's incompletion—are neither resolved nor dismissed but "taken to be significant *as such*" (xvii; Ault's emphasis). Along lines like these, *FZ* is constituted as a *process* by which the propensity toward Newtonian single vision that dominates normative reading, that dominates most normative mental activity, is continuously and at times brutally "subverted." The poem becomes a School for Epistemologists in which we are retrained for Fourfold, or at least Non-Newtonian, Vision.

This subversive education is carried out not only through the poem's corrosive flood of detail but, at the same time, in *NU/FZ*'s deployment of these details in a range of extremely complex and "incommensurable" narrative strategies. *NU/FZ* gives us an unprecedented look into the poem's flux. Indeed, one suspects, it is in the enumeration of these strategies, as much as in the quantity of detail that he raises, for the first time, into critical attention, that Ault's influence is most likely to be felt. Tumultuous shiftings, transformations, disruptions, multiple intersections, fractured mirrorings, mutual containments, eclipses and feedback loops are the order of this world. Everything is a version, an inversion, a revision of something else, an aspect or analysis of something else, "embedded" in or a suppression of something else, overlapping or reemerging from something else. An event might be seen primarily as a "perspective analysis" of one or more prior events and at the same time embedded in or bracketed by them. Nights VIIa and VIIb are treated, at one moment, as alternative narrative perspectives (328, 333); later, VIIb is embedded in VIIa (475–76). Distant events are coterminous and consecutive events are simultaneous; an established sequence of events might turn out to be simultaneous from another perspective and in reverse order from yet another. "Event-clusters overlap but are by no means unequivocally identical" (268). An outcome can create "preconditions" for a prior event that seems to be its origin: "The Lamb [of God] and Satan are . . . preconditions for each other's entrance into the narrative proper" (275; also 327, 336, etc.). What is at one juncture seen as a cause will later appear as an effect of what it appeared to have caused. Transformations can as easily be "retroactive" (300) as successive: new information might substantially change not only our understanding of what has preceded but *therefore*—and this is precisely the causal link these transformations underscore—the character of the event-complex itself, and of the chains of events that depend from it. "[R]e-enactments *alter* those earlier relationships through a complex process of feedback" (329; Ault's emphasis). Competing versions of events (e.g., the two versions of the "war plot" concluding Night I) cause the reader either to suppress differences, to invent overviews that circumvent incommensurability—both Newtonian responses—or to embrace narrative undecidability and a radically perspectual sense of the real. As Ault remarks, in one of his provisional summaries of the onto-epistemo-narrative strategies of *NU/FZ*:

> Among the comprehensive textual models or patterns for perspective transformation which Blake invokes throughout the poem, the following are most prevalent: 1) perspective analysis and linearly embedded structures; 2) hierarchical displacement; 3) fictions of causal sequence; 4) overlapping of "events" by repetition; 5) involution of events by causal circularity and information loops; 6) disjunctive jumps (within a nexus of events) between discrete information bits; and 7) continuous re-orientation of perspective. (16)

The strategies, in other words, of the dreamwork itself. This is, after all, a Dream of Nine Nights, and for Ault the engine driving these narrative condensations and displacements is essentially psychosexual. Nonetheless he insists that it is the least of Blake's concerns to *represent* dreaming. Rather, Blake uses dreamwork strategies to disorient the reader's habitual relation to the nightmare of single-vision reality itself. So that readers might read themselves awake.

The same flux that organizes the narrative defines its characterology. It is in fact difficult to discuss characters and narrative structures in separate terms: events are displacements of characters and characters are condensations—"crystallizations," in Ault's recurrent phrase—of events that are perspectives on them. Ault's radical treatment of Tharmas, Enion, Urizen and so on surely constitutes another way in which this book should mark future studies. None of these names any longer represents an entry in some Blake Dictionary. Now characters overlap each other, are projections or returned repressions of each other, arise into the "narrative proper" only through event-contexts. Everything here is context-dependent, but contexts are no more fixed or absolute than what they contain: a context out of which some character arises might later be shown to be a projection by the character it seemed to create. Urizen is not an identity who steps from *The Book of Urizen* into this poem, nearly if perhaps not fully realized: he is sung into it by Enitharmon in a response to Los. Urizen "begins" not as a character but as a name attached by Enitharmon to an aspect of her own reactive vision. But he does not rest within the fictive frame of her song: Enitharmon "calls Urizen into the narrative proper out of his function as a dialogical operator in her interpolated vision" (69). She invents him as a fiction of her needs, *ergo* he exists. But when he is "wrenched out of his interpolated status," forced into "the narrative proper," it is *as* an agent, equipped with a history and identity that influence events not only after he appears but retroactively, as if he had always been there. And Enitharmon is "herself," "originally," a projection of Enion, without prior existence but with retrospective force.

Everything in *NU/FZ* is generated out of the repression or absence that demands it; everything is desired, imagined, projected, sung before it can exist, and then exists as if it had always been there, until in some other context it disappears into the never-was. Just as characters arise, so they dissolve back into event-clusters, or are repressed in the "psyches" of other figures, or end up exerting force only as absent or displaced, or function subliminally as "primary aspect[s] of all the characters" (175). Their names are like linguistic shifters, words without inherent referents that attach themselves to various entities and forces, and that can be determined only relationally within a given utterance. As Ault describes it, characters are "substitutions for, or analyses of, previously narrated relationships" (120), "aspects of one another syntactically and semantically" (234). The flux of characters—an "interchangeability of roles in a field of difference" (175), a "crisis of relational versus individual identity" (241)—and the flux of events are linked versions of each other. In other words, the Zoas and their various Emanations, Spectres, children and so on interconstitute one another in the same "perspective ontology" by which, Ault's Blake proposes, we are ourselves interconstituted with the text, and with the world we might regenerate out of it.

Let me cite as evidence at least one passage in which these various concerns emphatically converge:

> Blake forces us to experience the Lamb of God and Satan totally from the outside: they appear and disappear enigmatically throughout Night VIII. Though they are in some ways the most important "characters" in Night VIII, we have no sense of their motives: they seem, even more than other characters, to be complexes of relationships, with no real interiors. Although Blake relentlessly forces the reader to experience characters as interlocking sets of transforming relationships rather than static identities, Blake can lure the reader into accepting the alternate fiction that his characters have desires and feel that they are acting causally. The Lamb and Satan, however, in Night VIII act exactly as if they are characters totally *constituted by situations* in a way that, for example, Los is not. It is impossible to imagine an interior, in this sense, of the Lamb and Satan: they remain as completely enigmatic to the characters in the poem as they do to the reader. They perform functions, create situations, make conditions possible, and act as consolidations of conditions and relationships. But they remain fundamentally indeterminate, successfully evading all attempts at scrutiny because, if Blake's perspective ontology holds, there is nothing there to scrutinize. . . . This enigma is central to Blake's establishing the reader's expectations for entrance into Night IX. The reader's need to seek out motivation, *internal* cause, within and behind these images, is a corollary of the reader's urgent need for an *external* redemption in the text. (280–81; Ault's emphases)

It is a dense passage and could be unraveled along several lines, but what we need most to mark here are the various implicit and explicit relations between writer, poem and reader. What Ault has produced, in the anti-Newtonian epistemological school of Blake's text, is a version of reader-response criticism—a fact underscored by one of Ault's few overt references to other critics, a late reference to the influence of Stanley Fish (511). In *Surprised By Sin*, we recall, Fish reconsidered the perennial problem of the attractiveness of Satan and decided that Milton's Satan is so designed in order to lure the reader as well as Adam and Eve into choosing badly, so that the reader can experience and hence better understand the Fall. Ault's version of Blake's reader also falls. The reader is tempted by the radically disjunctive experience of Blake's poem to choose not Satanic rhetoric but Newtonian order—a bad choice that, as the poem's characters and events themselves demonstrate, leads only to further chaos. Like Milton's, Blake's reader must be driven toward a paradise within, happier far, a difficult paradise of radical indeterminacy and perspective ontology. Hence it is hardly surprising to find, in Ault's text, the familiar Fishian melodrama of author as omnipotent manipulator, punishing the reader for his or her own good. In the passage cited above, Blake relentlessly forces the reader, lures the reader; again and again in Ault's critical narrative, Blake's reader is tempted, dazzled, seduced, overwhelmed, frustrated. Possibilities of establishing solid origins or closures, of grounding the experience of the text in some external order, some non-visionary truth, are continually held out to the reader only to be immediately withdrawn. Every discontinuity and discrepancy, every blur and mark is recruited into the service of this (dis)abusive project. What used to seem accidents of the manuscript's incompletion now become holes purposely left for the reader to fall through in a bizarre, almost sado-masochistic form of visionary therapy.

But the situation is even more complicated than this. For the traditional administrative order of reader-response criticism would be incoherent in the perspective ontology Ault's Blake seeks to reveal. Blake's perceiver cannot be merely manipulated by the perceived: reader-response must be recast within the terms of the profoundly relational ontological orders of *NU/FZ*. As we have seen, text and reader are "interconstituted," in effect operate as writers and readers of one another; or rather—for it is still more complicated—"narrative, text, and reader come into existence and alter one another at each point in the poem" (6). The reader is not merely a screen on which the text's operations are projected—their teleological alibi, as it were, and as they are in so much so-called reader-response criticism; here the reader is in some sense the text's proper agent, its producer. But its blurs and marks are no Rorschach either: the matter is more complicated yet:

> Though the actual individual reader is absolutely indispensable to the existence of the *Four Zoas* narrative and text, it is not the reader but the narrative itself that is the primary agent of transformation, while the text participates equally with the reader in their acts of mutual constitution and revision. . . . [T]he *Four Zoas* narrative is a purely relational process that has no existence (cannot be pointed to) in any form except through the act of reading. But instead of simply coming into existence as a dialectical product of the interaction between reader and text, the *Four Zoas* narrative actually brings the reader and text into mutual existence. This radical relational narrative process undermines Newtonian narrative ontology (through retroactive transformation, aspectual interconnection, and so on). . . . The *Four Zoas* narrative can come into existence only if reader and text are freed from existing independent of reading, but this liberation can be performed only by the narrative itself: reader, text, and narrative are thus mutually preconditions for one another's existence. (22)

The distinction between "narrative" and "text" in passages like this is especially, and perhaps purposefully, difficult to determine. Narrative is not simply the order of the poem's events but the non-Newtonian order that those events generate in the reading—which is here to say the text's production—itself; text is not simply manuscript or printed words on the page but some order of verbal/authorial agency that is finally indistinguishable from the indistinguishability of narrative and reader. There is no reader or text or narrative prior to the unfolding of reading, no identity or truth to fall back on; before reading animates it, the poem has no ontological priority. (This explains, at least in part, Ault's bracketing-out of all but a few references to prior literary theory, or Blake criticism, or influences on Blake; though this is not to say that such references are not everywhere implicit.) Like the Zoas themselves, in *NU/FZ*'s own elaborate characterology, nothing and no one has any being except

through context, through relation, through manifold interenactments.

Within the narrative of *NU* itself, however, this gordian knot of interconstitutions is laid out in more familiar and, I would argue, regressive terms. In the syntax of the typical Aultian sentence, the threefold ontology of text, narrative and reader becomes "Blake," "narrator" and "reader." "Blake" is the familiar omnipotent poet-god, in unerring command of his words, marshaling them for heroic battle with Newtonian demons; the "reader," as we have seen, is the standard victim of reader-response manipulations, lured, tempted, forced, frustrated, etc. The third figure, the "narrator," is a quasi-authorial personage distinct from the all-seeing, all-knowing "Blake"—something like the "dramatic speaker" or "poet" of New Critical analyses, that ineradicable, functional voice left over once the intentional author is eliminated. In the hands of Ault's Blake, this narrator is in effect an internalization of the same sorts of Newtonian attempts to resolve the poem's purposive indeterminacies that, Ault maintains, the Newtonian reader undertakes; hence "narrator" and "reader" are paired functions, mirror-dupes of the poem's subversive strategies. The narrator operates more or less as a character in the poem, not on the event-level of the Zoic drama but perceiving, responding, mistaking, retelling from his own skewed, partial and usually single-vision perspective. Witness this characteristic passage, dealing with the feast of Night IX:

> We learn, as we did with Luvah, that Luvah's sons populate the feast only as they arise to gather the vintage in golden baskets. At this point Blake shows how easily the narrator can lapse into language that instantly allows the reader to seize on a hope of redemption on the page and thus forget the chain of past unfulfilled expectations. (433)

Or this:

> The narrator's explicit demarcation of embedded structures at this point is the most obvious in the entire poem and calls attention to how extensively we ourselves have been lured into the dream. We too have suppressed the wracking confusion; our own senses have become orbed; and we too have been "entertaind" by these perverse visions, which Blake will now proceed to eradicate just as totally as Vala's world succeeded in repressing its immediate narrative context, the harvest. Blake accomplishes this feat by turning his narrative inside out. (411)

There appears to be some sort of contradiction between the radical interconstitution of narrative-text-reader and the more conventional reader-response hierarchy of Blake, narrator and reader. Perhaps this hierarchy is simply a critical convenience, as when Ault lays out events in a linear form while assuring us that they are not in fact linearly arranged. But reader-response conventions cannot adequately represent what Ault seems to mean by perspective ontology. According to those conventions, "Blake" knows all and exerts total control; "the narrator" knows a little, understands less and fails again and again as a visionary writer; and "the reader" is subjected to a thousand tricks to get him or her to identify falsely with the narrator in order someday to see how stupid the choice was in the first place. The narrator also serves, in effect, as an alibi for any "failures" one might perceive in the text—a bad writer, but certainly not Blake, the master of the master text, who planned all this in advance and whose reputation must still be protected at all costs. There is something quite Newtonian about this sort of Blake, and while one recognizes that the reader-response syntax might have helped Ault sort out various local relationships, it is a lot less interesting than his notion of a purely situational and relational ontology.

But where there is threefold one expects a fourth. Not just Blake, narrator and reader, then, but also Reader, *Ault*. If the "narrator" is a duped and fallen "Blake," so perhaps the "reader" is a duped and fallen "Ault." Blake and Ault pair off opposite narrator and reader as the properly interconstituted, implicitly resurrected writer-reader of *NU/FZ*. But none of this ever rises to the surface of Ault's text; he continues to observe the decorum of the self-effacing explicator even as everything in his book demonstrates how false this is. One cannot dismiss Ault's study as subjectivist or impressionistic or a mere reading-into; one cannot say that what he discovers in *FZ* is not "there," in the senses of thereness that *NU/FZ* allows; but there is something more than casually personal driving this reading. It is hardly accidental that this particular reader—with his background in mathematics and engineering, and long-standing interest in the history and philosophy of science—produced an anti-Newtonian reading. What is being mastered in this master text is not just a text. *NU/FZ* is the narrative of a struggle with Newton not only in but through Blake's work: the narrative of Ault's struggle with the Newton in himself. It is a struggle—an event-cluster, if you will—out of which Ault as Reader is born, and Newton is the Zoic name he sings out of this struggle into the narrative proper of *NU/FZ*. This Newton-Within partly explains the complex Urizenism

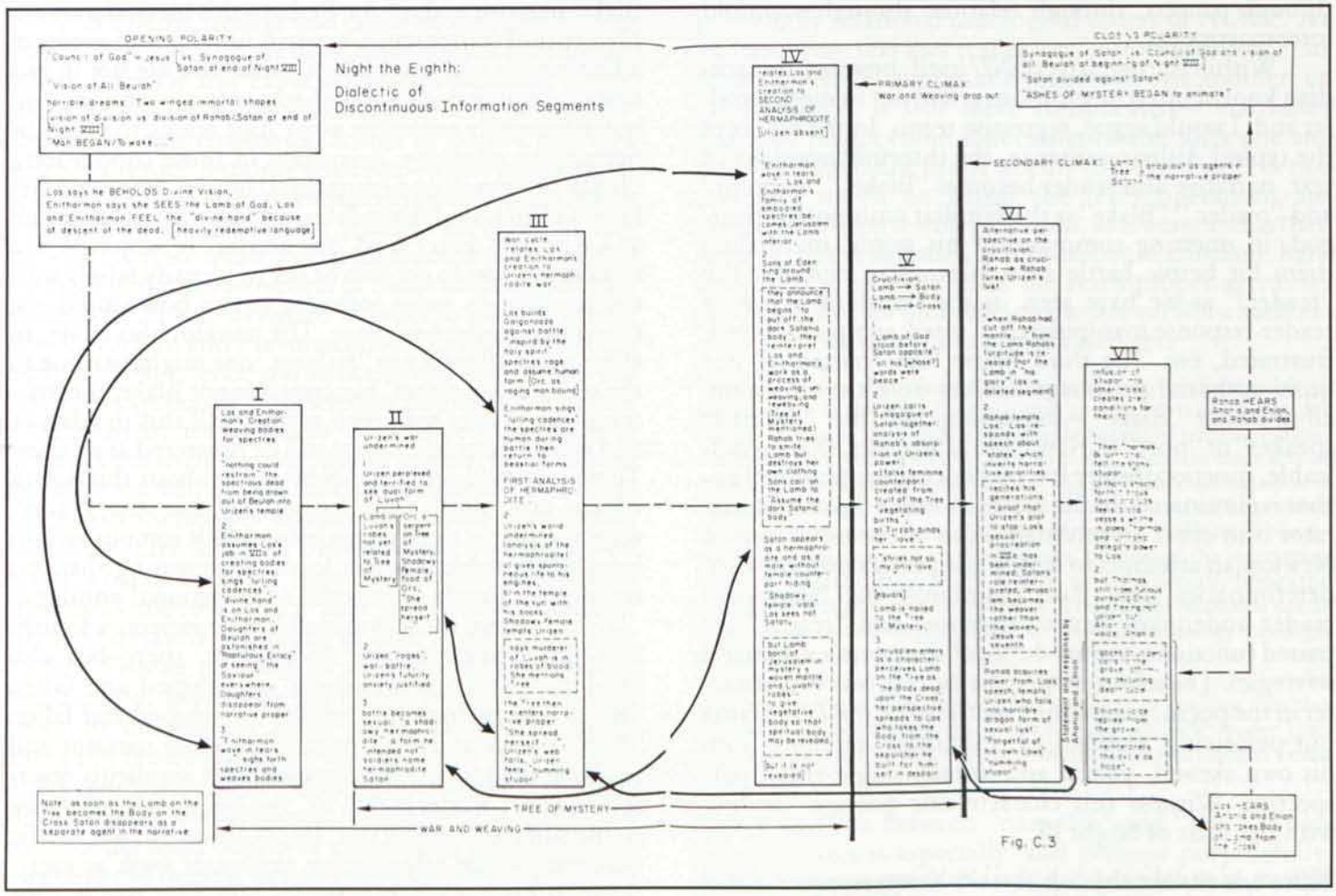


Fig. C.3

of Ault's obsession with structure, witnessed spectacularly in *NU*'s incredible charts. The elaboration of narrative structure is presented as a discursive convenience, but it is clearly a great deal more than that; it is evidence of a reader striving with systems in order to deliver himself from them. Perhaps then we might re-vise the Blakean motto Ault takes for his own: in *NU*, the manifold I of *FZ* aulters all.

The reader-response paradigm thus serves, ironically, as a cover for the agency of the "real" reader. We should also observe that the question of reader-response criticism in *NU* is linked to the question of what claims on the reader can be made by a text that remains essentially an unpublished manuscript. Ault's "reader" is a familiar fiction that extends the interrupted trajectory of the manuscript's journey through a publication it never had, just as his "Blake" extends the realities of the poet's relation to the manuscript into an ideal of authorial control. Perhaps the most serious problem with *NU/FZ* lies precisely in the manner in which work-in-progress is hypostatized into "finished" work—or rather, into a work that is neither finished nor unfinished but hyperfinished. Forms of completion and control proposed along one line of Ault's argument are belied both by the manuscript itself and by the forces in Ault's own reading that militate against Newtonian closure. In a sense, then, what is most conspicuously absent in this study is a more serious interest in the poem's manuscript status. At times Ault can be especially subtle about the vagaries of punctuation and orthography in the manuscript, and when it suits him he may make a marginal comment about layers of revision; but for the most part he treats the manuscript as a Poem, overtextualizes it, relegates any specific attention to it as a "visual text" to a few appendix pages. The powerful author and the mastered and masterful text of Ault's critical allegory usurp the possibility of fully exploring the manuscript-poem's openness. Such an exploration might have shown us the poem's "radical optionality" at the most material levels; and it might have allowed Ault to articulate even more clearly his own (and any reader's) actual and *proper* agency in the interconstituted universe of this work. It is,

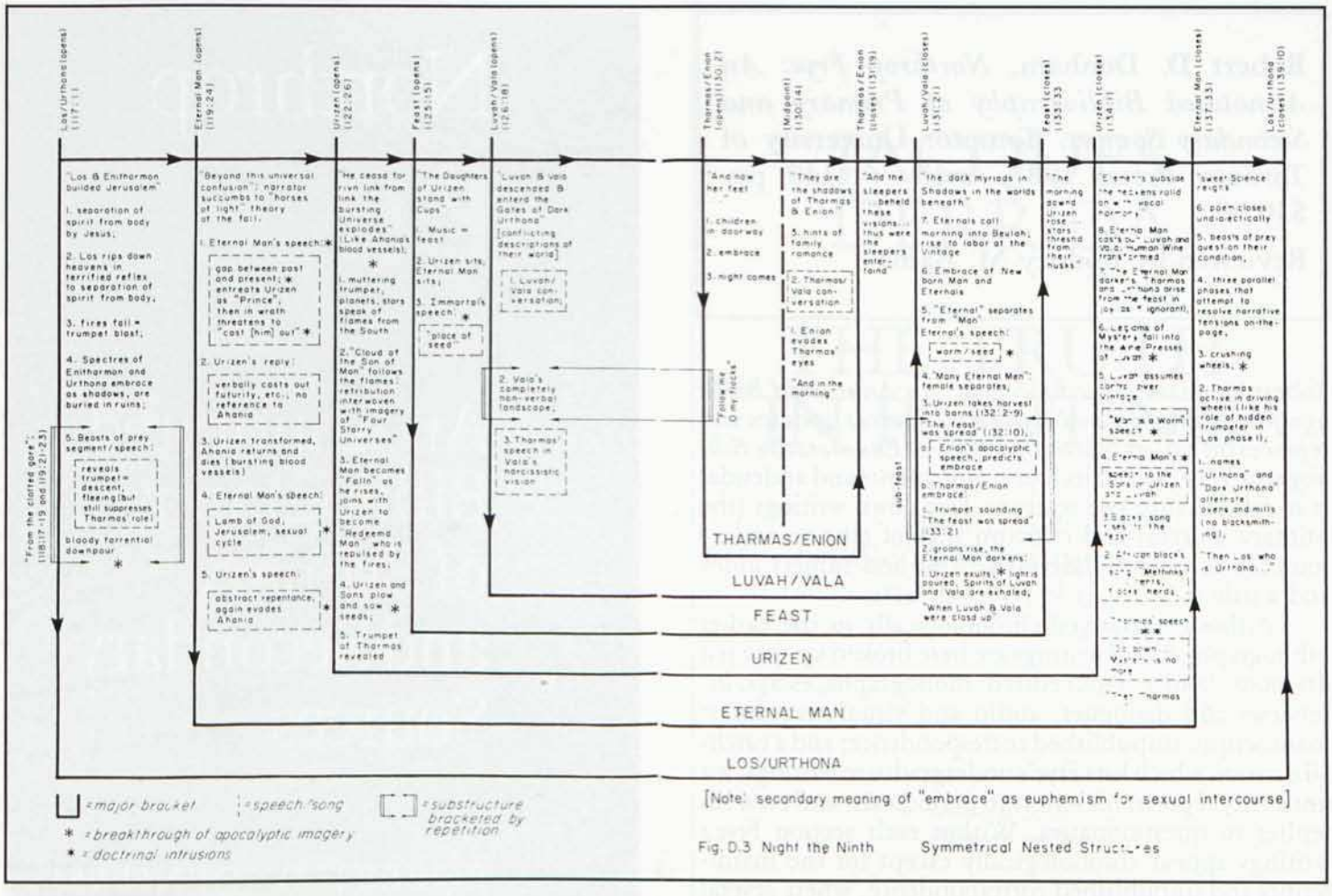


Fig. D.3 Night the Ninth Symmetrical Nested Structures

after all, "Ault" who finishes *FZ*; he is the reader liberated by reading from Newtonian bondage; but he binds that liberation into the fiction of dutiful critical service to master poet and master text. But I must also apologize to him for, in effect, demanding another five hundred pages of close study. I am being greedy, and foolish: this sort of exploration could have kept *NU* out of our hands for another decade.

There is, finally, the question of this study's place in Blake criticism. It is interesting to speculate on whether Ault has opened a door only to close it behind him, whether his monument is the end of a golden string or a wide world of solid obstruction. I have suggested a few ways in which Ault should someday be seen to have made a contribution to Blake scholarship: in unearthing a wealth of detail, in the elaboration of narrative and characterological strategies. But the very nature of his project—the mode in which these discoveries have been carried out, which *is NU*'s interpretation of *FZ*—is more likely to be passed over. In a Blakean economy, the book's excesses make perfect sense: the more that is done, the more there is to do; the more exhaustive the reading, the more inexhaustible the poem. But in the economy of Blake criticism, the book is an aberration, a transgression. In being so radically exemplary, it becomes eccentric. Perhaps it is for this reason that Ault self-consciously remarks that his analysis "is not intended to compete with the existing body of Blake scholarship but rather to be fundamentally incommensurable with it" (xi). *NU/FZ* is more than incommensurable with existing Blake scholarship, it is a condemnation of it. If it is "not a *necessary* reading" but "a *possible* reading" (xxiii; Ault's emphases), it also presents itself as precisely the sort of possibility the Blake industry has to marginalize. Nothing will permit the vast majority of Blake's readers to devote this much or this kind of attention to his work. *NU/FZ* is an indictment of a critical economy in which such a book cannot really be useful, perhaps cannot even be exemplary except as the sign of a project that most readers will find neither the time, the energy, the courage, nor the professional latitude to pursue.