

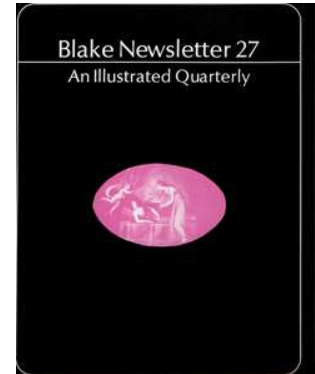
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Nature and Art in Milton: Afterthoughts on the  
1973 MLA Seminar

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## Nature and Art in Milton: Afterthoughts on the 1973 MLA Seminar

The 1973 MLA seminar "Perspectives on Blake's *Milton*" (based on five papers published in advance in *Blake Studies*, 6 [Fall 1973]) produced some stimulating discussion, but like most such sessions it opened up more avenues for thought than it fully explored. In the following comments I seek the rare gratification of saying at leisure some things that I lacked the wit or opportunity to say during the seminar.

In his opening remarks Karl Kroeber, the discussion leader, challenged the group to consider, among other problems, the ways in which *Milton* is an expression of Blake's critical or aesthetic ideas. Though none of the five papers deals with this question directly, it seems to me probably the most important one to ask about this particular poem. *Milton* has often been compared with *The Prelude*, and for good reason. Here Blake not only comes to grips with his personal role as poet-prophet, but, like Wordsworth in his autobiographical poem, he explores the nature of imagination in general, and in particular the relation of the poet's mind to nature. Only the first two of the five papers touch on this topic at all, and neither deals with it in a satisfying way. Mary Lynn Johnson's quite penetrating essay emphasizes the importance of the Christology that underlies *Milton*, but does not go on to relate this valuable idea to the poem's central theme, the relation of the artist to salvation. Thomas W. Herzing cogently analyzes "Natures cruel holiness" as it is portrayed in Book I, but by failing to point out the equally true contrary of sensuous Nature's necessary place in Los's task of regeneration, leaves a misleading impression about the direction of the poem as a whole.

The discussion of the papers was similarly more tantalizing than satisfying. Alicia Ostriker asked Mary Lynn Johnson about the other eternalists who were not, like Milton, moved by the Bard's song--does this imply that only the artist can respond properly to visionary inspiration? Johnson replied first by citing Blake's wish that all the Lord's people were prophets, and then went on to say that Milton's response is not to write a poem but to begin to act in a way that leads to self-annihilation. Stuart Curran also asked Johnson a pertinent question about the relation of theology to art. But these lines of discussion were cut off before they were much developed.

What needed to be said at the seminar was, first, that Milton's descent, union with Ololon, and triumph over his selfhood are events simultaneously theological and aesthetic in their

implications--indeed, the two are hardly separable in Blake; and, second, that the great problem that is solved in the poem is precisely the paradox that physical Nature, while a delusion of fallen humanity and the source of man's continuing error, is nevertheless the only means by which the poet-prophet, or the divine humanity in every man, is able to regain Eternity.

Herzing is misleading when he says in his essay that "All of being . . . possesses two forms: the external form is perceived by the easily enticed and easily deluded sensate eye; poetic vision perceives the inward form, the infinite and eternal character" (p. 30). But Blake is a monist; for him the very existence of those external forms is only an illusion we fall into when our mental powers become dormant, and we allow our selfhood to impose its limitations on our perception of the infinite. Our souls return to wholeness, to renewed participation in Eternity, by casting away the limiting selfhood (i.e., by self-annihilation) and sharing more fully in true reality through imaginative activity. The external forms are not cruel and delusive *per se*, but only when we see them as detached from Eternity, from the infinite within, as Natural Religion does. The energies of Eternity seem terrible when reversed in "the Printing-Press of Los," but that is because we are viewing them with dulled and fragmented vision. In *Milton* Blake believes as he did in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, that "Body is a portion of Soul discerned by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age" (Plate 4, E 34). When we see "the Constellations in the deep & wondrous Night . . . the gorgeous clothed Flies . . . the Trees on mountains," we are seeing true "Visions of Eternity" (Plates 25-26, E 121-22), visions which are valid to the extent that our limited minds can handle them. We see only "the hem of their garments": the phrase implies limitation but not derogation. As participants in the MLA seminar pointed out, the phrase alludes both to the angels' limited view of God in *Paradise Lost* (III, 380) and to the curative powers of Jesus' hem (cf. Matthew 9:20-21). Hence it is through *acceptance* and assimilation of the sense world rather than rejection of it that man--and preeminently the prophetic artist--returns to Eternity. That is what Los is doing when he builds Golgonooza, and

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what Blake is doing when "All this Vegetable World appeared on my left Foot," and he binds it on as a bright sandal "to walk forward thro' Eternity" (Plate 21, E 114). We must remember that Beulah--where, to put it crudely, Eternal forms take on garments of limiting materiality--is not only the exit leading to Ulro, but also the entranceway back to Eternity, via "holy Generation [Image] of regeneration" (*Jerusalem* I, 7; E 149). So in *The Four Zoas* Enitharmon, the selfish gates of her heart permanently broken, works toward salvation by weaving "Bodies of Vegetation" for the poor wandering spectres (Night VIII, p. 100, E 358). Very similar versions of this paradox of using the senses as a stairsteps to transcend the sense world are prominent in Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats; it is in fact a form of the familiar Platonic ladder of love.

None of these Romantic poets, including Blake, draws a line between poetic and religious inspiration. Coleridge's phrase in "Dejection: an Ode" for the happy consequence of his "shaping spirit of imagination" operating with the intense energy of Joy is the apocalyptic "New Heaven and a New Earth" (Revelation 21:1) also echoed in the millennial promise that follows Christ's decision to descend to man in *Paradise Lost* III (line 335). Both religious and aesthetic vision involve the ability to see the Divine--the One Mind--that is always immanent in experience for those who can see through the corporeal eye and not with it. Coleridge's famous definition of the primary imagination as "the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a representation in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" is a good gloss for Blake's four levels of vision: the greater the intensity at which the imagination operates in all perception, the more fully we share in the infinite creativity of the Divine mind, and approach fourfold vision. The fool sees not the same tree that the wise man sees, because the wise man perceives with a well developed primary imagination, whereas the fool, victim of his selfhood, cuts himself off from divine vision by depending on what Coleridge would call the fixities and definites of understanding and memory.

Blake consistently identifies Christ as the imagination in every man (e.g., in the *Laocoon* inscriptions, transcribed E 271). A Blakean Christology must therefore in some sense be an "Imaginationology." Milton, one of the supreme embodiments of imagination, in Blake's poem closely parallels Christ's career: his incarnation--that is, his decision to go to Eternal Death--resembles Christ's decision as described in *Paradise Lost* III; Milton has a temptation in the wilderness, well described by Thomas Herzing's article; his crucifixion and atonement is his choice of self-annihilation rather than opposition to Satan, his spectre--a parallel to Jesus' self-sacrifice in *Jerusalem*, 96, and, incidentally, to the refusal by Shelley's Prometheus to curse Jupiter; his resurrection is, as Mary Lynn Johnson says, "the emergence of the Real Human from the dead selfhood"; and his ascension is his final merging with Jesus in Plate 42.

All of these events have significance in terms of Blake's aesthetics, i.e., of his beliefs about imagination. When he decides to descend to Eternal Death, Milton takes off the "robe of the promise"--that is to say, he rejects a legalistic Puritan theology for one of Christlike self-annihilation; the aesthetic equivalent is rejection of a rational, Lockean use of the senses and the daughters of memory, in favor of living imagination and the daughters of inspiration. Christ's incarnation is the necessary clothing of the Word in a form assimilable by fallen humanity: "God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is." Even the Eternals converse in "Visionary Forms Dramatic," and "Man cannot unite with Man but by their Emanations" (J 88, E 244). Milton must be perfected through a fuller and more imaginative acceptance of the natural world, of the body and the senses, than his poetry originally achieved; it culminates in his proper union with his purified emanation Ololon. In Blake's plot, Milton's temptation and agon are the sorting out of the right and wrong uses of sensation. When Milton's shadow, or spectre, finally separates from him, and he refuses to fight it, this is itself victory over selfhood and the Not Human: it is inevitably followed by--in fact, it constitutes--an apocalypse for Milton (though not quite yet for Blake and the rest of the world) and by his union with the similarly purified Ololon in Jesus, the Divine Humanity. The Revelation to Milton of a new Heaven and Earth includes an explicitly literary aspect: he is able "To cast off the rotten rags of Memory by Inspiration" and to reject "the tame high finisher of paltry blots," and those "Who pretend to Poetry that they may destroy Imagination; / By imitation of Natures Images drawn from Remembrance" (Plate 41, E 141). In other words, sensation is wrongly used whenever it ceases to be a living part of the Divine mind shared in the act of Imagination, and the error is worst when embodied in Poetry, which ought to be the highest expression of Vision. Such abstraction in Poetry is spiritual death corresponding to Mystery in religion. The Bard's song in the first third of the poem, it should be noted, is a kind of Preludium presenting, in different terms, a misuse of imaginative powers similar to that which Milton eventually overcomes.

Thus in his poem Blake winnows out the eternal, Reprobate Milton from his Elect portion in a literary as well as a theological sense. As a personal document *Milton* records the impact on Blake of his predecessor. We recall that the Bard in Book I says he is himself inspired by the Divine Humanity; the Bard enters Milton's bosom, Milton enters Blake's heel, and Blake simultaneously merges with Los. In other words Milton's writings--in spite of some reservations Blake has about them--allow Blake to participate more fully in Eternal reality, and to contribute to Jerusalem's return to England's green and pleasant land. Significantly, Milton and Los appear to Blake as he is binding on the material world as a sandal in which to walk through Eternity. From the placement of this circumstance at such a climactic moment in Book I, it would seem that one of the things Blake learned from Milton was the proper use of the sense world.