MICHAEL FERBER

The Social Vision of William Blake

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MICHAEL FERBER

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PREFACE

> Are not Religion & Politics the Same Thing? Brotherhood is Religion.

The present book had its origin in my attempt to understand this line from Blake's *Jerusalem* (57.10). It is not a particularly remarkable line, I admit, nor does it offer readier access to the mysteries of Blake than fifty or a hundred others from the same poem, but it struck me with unusual force when I first read it twelve years ago. I no longer remember what I made of it then, but I know I brought to it some intense feeling about religion, politics, and brotherhood. It was not long before reading *Jerusalem* that I had gone to the Arlington Street Church in Boston and turned in my draft card in a "ceremony of resistance" to the Vietnam War along with two hundred other young men who I felt were my brothers. We were part of what seemed a whole generation that took upon itself an original rethinking of what it meant to be political and religious in America, and how it might be possible to revive a failing democracy through organizations based on brotherhood—and, later, on sisterhood. In various ways and on various registers Blake had been a presence in our culture, or more often our counterculture, and I had always admired his lyrics and designs, but it was only after I had experienced moments of fraternity like the one in the church that Blake spoke peculiarly to my condition. I began to read him with new questions and expectations.

I am hardly the first to have taken Blake seriously as a social and political thinker or visionary, but those who have done so have always been a minority among his students and disciples. As George Orwell said of Dickens, Blake is well worth stealing, and occultists, Neoplatonists, Cabalists, Jungians, and even orthodox Christians have all tried to make off with him. Perhaps they are each entitled to keep a portion of him, but I think his "staminal virtue," as he would say, belongs to none

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of them. No doubt I will press my own claim too far in the pages that follow, but I do so partly as a corrective to these reductions and sanitizations, partly, as well, to see what certain unlikely features of his work will yield when pushed. I cannot deny a motive to steal him back and enlist him in the present phase of the cause he joined in his own day, the politics of spiritual fraternity.

Perhaps uniquely among western nations, America preserves the close conjuncture of religion and politics that was normal in Blake's England. One need think only of the revival of rightist fundamentalism in the 1970s and the more recent rise of "left evangelicalism" and Catholic peace activism. Many of the ideas and programs of the secular left in Europe have found a wide following in America only in a religious framework, and America's strong resistance to Marxism and socialism, even at their most moderate, has much to do with their supposed "atheism." In trying to account for this rejection of secular socialism, Robert N. Bellah writes, "one may wonder whether, if Karl Marx had studied a little less at the feet of David Ricardo and a little more at the feet of William Blake, he might not have had a far more powerful impact on English-speaking intellectuals."[1] Marx would not have been Marx if he had, of course, but Bellah's point about Americans, if not about all English-speaking intellectuals, seems right. Taken seriously as a visionary socialist, Blake offers something crucial to the heart of a movement for liberation and social justice—to its mind, too, but especially to its imagination, verve, and courage. No theory of history and society, no strategy of political change, can provide it, and without it no theory or strategy will usher in a society much better than the one we now have.

A similar claim might be made for Shelley or William Morris, for Thoreau, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, or Robert Merton (Merton's great spiritual pilgrimage began with a dissertation on Blake), but Blake's very difference from ordinary modes of thought, his difficulty, his combination of poetry and visual design, his archaic biblical diction, all confer a certain distinction on him. There is no need to plead for him in any case, for he draws ever larger numbers of readers. There

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is also no need, of course, to choose Blake to the exclusion of anyone else; too much has gone wrong with every kind of society on earth for us to be dogmatic as to where we garner wisdom or courage.

It is thus no help to the cause when Marxists, or those who think they are Marxists, make Blake over into another Marx, or a proto-Marx. That, too, is theft, and no less a flattening of his prickly particularity than the opposite claim, which would have Blake wandering only through the streets of his mind, thinking only about eternity or his anxieties as a poet. There is nothing very Marxist in the attempt to make Blake into another Marx, and in any case we do not need another Marx. We need Blake. Although Blake often sounds like the young Marx, who was himself a Romantic poet before he turned to philosophy and economics, it is their complementarity, even their conflict, which is valuable, not their resemblance. So I agree with E. P. Thompson when he says, "If I had to devise my own pantheon I would without hesitation place within it the Christian antinomian, William Blake, and I would place him beside Marx."[2] Side by side, they can argue it out in what Blake called "the severe contentions of Friendship," and so can we.

In Blake one thing leads to another in an endless network, and I soon felt far from my original subject. Often when I felt farthest from it, however, one more step brought me back into the midst of it. That led to the problems of presentation most Blake scholars seem to have wrestled with: where to start, where to stop, what to leave out. As the book grew, moreover, I found I was synthesizing, or at least making ample use of, the two preeminent works on Blake, Northrop Frye's *Fearful Symmetry* and David Erdman's *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*. In common with every other student in the last thirty years, I learned to read Blake through Frye's wonderful book, and it has partly inspired the integrating gestures, the use of analogues, and perhaps even the tone of my own. The trouble with Frye's book is that it is almost too wonderful: it is so thorough an internal elaboration of Blake that it dazzles and intimidates as much as Blake himself does. What is needed is an external elaboration, a study from one or several external

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standpoints that will not submit to the blandishments of Blake's seemingly unified vision, but will hold it at sufficient distance to "comprehend" it—as a cultural object of a certain sort, in a certain context, at a certain historical moment.

David Erdman's masterly study of Blake's historical context and allusions is indispensable to any attempt to do that. I have borrowed heavily from his erudition while paying only scant returns with a discovery or two of my own. Erdman's book is ordered chronologically, whereas I have tried for larger integrations of Blakean ideas than would have been possible had I bound myself to the order in which his works were produced. In exploring a series of themes like brotherhood, liberty, labor, and history, I have dwelled on Blake's two completed epics, *Milton* and *Jerusalem,* but have drawn freely from every phase of his career. I have also tried to be somewhat more introductory than Erdman and have presumed a little less on the part of the reader. This book remains demanding, however, and anyone who has been good enough to read this far should be sure to have gone at least once through all of Blake's poems before deciding whether to continue.

My attempt to "integrate" Blake, incorporate Frye and Erdman, and still appeal to the inexpert reader began at one point to swell the book unmanageably. I was drawn, too, to Jean-Paul Sartre's inspiring ambition to "totalize" his subject with "a supple, patient dialectic," an approach that would acknowledge the particularity or specificity of a poet-painter while accounting for him by inserting him in a series of mediations, "regressions," and cross-references.[3] A glance at Sartre's enormous yet unfinished study of Flaubert sobered me up, however, and I would now be content if what I have written could serve as materials toward a totalization of Blake, and if I have avoided the premature closures and reductions that come of forgetting that Blake lived when and where he did, knew certain people but not certain others, hated war during a war-crazed time, made little money, had a dear brother who died, spent a lot of time engraving copperplate, and the like.

In getting this book down to reasonable proportions I have left out several chapters of sustained "close readings" of whole

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works (texts and designs), which ought to be the proof of the pudding. These will probably go into a second book.[4] I have also had to be selective in singling out themes to explore, and I have compromised between those that are most central and those that have not been much discussed by others. More important as a focus, however, is the concept of ideology, which I introduce in the first chapter. Ideology has many theoretical difficulties, and in crude hands it has led to crude literary criticism, but in recent years in better hands it has shown its subtlety and fruitfulness. It is just about the only category adequate to the task of mediating between social history and literary or aesthetic meaning. It is not the master key to Blake, but without it certain doors of perception will not open.

The remaining seven chapters press the notions of totality and ideology less heavily than chapter one does, since I wanted the themes to be drawn out with a certain autonomy and thoroughness before being folded back into the Blakean whole or referred to the social context, but at many points they link up with each other and with the opening argument. I may at times have indulged a suggestible and digressive tendency on my part, but it seemed more honest to let things unfold as they seemed to demand and to trust the reader, as Blake did, to make the connections, rather than to tie things up and click them shut with my governing theoretical premises. Life is short, and Blake is bottomless. I have done my best, however, to bring out the social and political bearings of each topic, and that is a large part of ideological analysis. Ideological analysis, in turn, does not exhaust the meaning or value of Blake's social and political vision, which at several points, as I shall argue, pitches beyond ideology into something more critical, universal, and true.

All eight chapters, finally, are more or less independent of one another and may be read in any order with little loss. Their sequence is not entirely arbitrary, nevertheless: the argument is intended to accumulate toward Blake's own attempt at totalization, which I call *apocatastasis*, or the restoration of all things. If my first chapter seems a categorical net to catch a rare and eccentric species, my final chapter may be taken

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as a humble acknowledgment of the vastly braver and more ambitious striving of my subject to comprehend everything that has ever lived.

SEPTEMBER, 1984
WASHINGTON, D.C.

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The author of a book so "woven with his life" and so long in the weaving ought to thank every one of his friends and everyone who influenced his thinking, but he would get small thanks if he did. So I will limit myself to those who directly helped me, either with ideas about Blake or comments on the manuscript.

Warner Berthoff took on faith that I had something worth saying about Blake and cheerfully agreed to supervise my dissertation at Harvard; for that and many years of friendship and support I owe him my greatest debt. To Zachary Leader, my fellow graduate student and "Blakemate," I am grateful for a very careful reading of the whole book and many wise suggestions. David Erdman also read the book, at two stages, and helped me think my way out of several confusions. I owe more thanks than I can express for the deep encouragement of Nancy Schwartz, and for the doors she opened to ways of thinking I would have missed without her. Staughton Lynd and E. P. Thompson offered salutary criticisms of part of the manuscript and reoriented my thinking at crucial points. And Anne MacKinnon, with great editorial skill, made me look with disenchanted eyes at my often casual and clumsy sentences.

I am also indebted to Susan Arnold, Harry Bracken, Jeremy Brecher, Noam Chomsky, Jill Cutler, Margaret Ferguson, Brooke Hopkins, Will Kirkland, Edward Mendelson, Jeffrey Merrick, Harold Pagliaro, and Alan Trachtenberg. For the errors and follies that remain despite all this good advice I alone am to blame.

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ABBREVIATIONS

E	David V. Erdman, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, Commentary by Harold Bloom, 5th ed., rev. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). All Blake quotations are from this edition.
Bloom, "Commentary"	Commentary in E
A	*America: A Prophecy*
Eur	*Europe: A Prophecy*
FZ	*The Four Zoas*
J	*Jerusalem: The Emanation of The Giant Albion*
M	*Milton: A Poem in 2 Books*
MHH	*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*
NNR	*THERE is NO Natural Religion*
U	*The Book of Urizen*
VDA	*Visions of the Daughters of Albion*
VLJ	*A Vision of The Last Judgment*
PL	John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

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1

The Concept of Ideology

For the past fifteen years or so English and American scholars have been catching up with the Continent in their theoretical discussions of the concept of ideology and its application to literature. A good deal of their work has been to translate, interpret, and extend the major theories: those of Georg Lukács (especially during his brief phase around 1922 as an independent Marxist), Antonio Gramsci, the Frankfurt School (Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse), Jean-Paul Sartre, and French structuralist Marxists such as Louis Althusser. In England, almost alone, Raymond Williams has been patiently working out his own theory of "cultural materialism"; he has now incorporated it with the work of younger English thinkers and of Europeans like Lucien Goldmann.

In the hands of "vulgar" orthodox Marxists ideology could break butterflies on the wheels of history; thus Wordsworth was "objectively" a reactionary petit bourgeois whose poetry expresses only the nostalgia of a doomed and marginal class, and so on. But ideology has been rescued from reductionists and given greater conceptual reach and subtlety by heterodox thinkers who have, on the whole, taken their young Marx with their old, absorbed Weber and Freud, felt the pressure of anti-Marxist critiques, faced up to Stalinism, and retained their love of literature. That theoretical problems remain, and that effective use in any concrete case demands a great deal, are no excuses for ignoring ideology any longer.

If universities—and in America, at least, it is mainly there that literary theory is produced—are to live up to their name, some such coordinating and cross-disciplinary notion as "ide-

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ology" will have to come into use. It is indispensable for connecting the conventions of literature, in form and content, with the experience and interests of groups in society. The connections may be very complex and densely "mediated," but without such a way of trying to connect literature to its place in the social totality, literary history will remain anecdotal and claustrophobic. And without a grasp of the power and persistence of ideology, even in literature departments—the "departmentality" of universities, in fact, being a major ideological force—we risk falling prey to ideology in our own literary theories. We find today, for example, the widely propagated idea, born in part of the very desire to break out of the confines of a department or discipline, that everything is a text and that reading is the basic mode of human comprehension. It begins by taking what used to be called "works," a word with its own presuppositions, and naming them "texts," founding thereby a certain kind of critical activity which, however rich and brilliant it sometimes is, forgets what it erased in its opening gesture. To take the object as text is to fail to take account of its nontextual features. This school's next move is to globalize "text" to include not only other forms of culture but all of history and even nature. One hardly needs to say that this is not the same as situating a text or work in a larger context (the normal use of "context" invites this text-model); it is to assimilate the context under terms set by texts. There are even "Marxist" versions of this textual imperialism, according to which a text "produces" meanings, or ideology, or even the reading subject itself. It is not to deny their power if one points out the kinship of such theories to the ideology of Melville's "sub-sub-librarian" and the division of whales into folios, octavos, and duodecimos. In Blake's words, they "view a small portion & think that all, / And call it Demonstration" (J 65.27-28).

The task—if this needs to be said—is to study everything and fit it all together. To put it practically, it is to learn something of the different planes of knowledge and how they intersect, to respect the integrity of an object or event in culture while trying at the same time to "explain" it, to trace its nearer ramifications and at least acknowledge the farther

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ones, indeed, to gain a standard of near and far in relevance, and to accept and enjoy the communality of scholarship. To put it negatively, the task is to avoid the twin temptations of premature synthesis and chronic analysis, the hypertrophy of a single method or set of terms and the noncommittal pluralism of insulated approaches. The concept of ideology, of course, is not immune to overgrown pretensions, but I will try to live up to my brave words and offer a definition and defense of it, if not as a sovereign conceptual key, then as a useful coordinating or regulating idea.

Blake presents some special problems. Faced with his heroic efforts to hammer his eccentric and multifarious thought into unity, those of us who take Blake seriously may become what we behold, and do the same with our own critical commentary. Northrop Frye's well-titled *Fearful Symmetry* is the greatest example of Blake's contagion, greatest in being most Blakean in its formal spirit and intuitive understanding, though for those reasons losing some of the distance proper for critical leverage. In other critics Blake seems to have magnified the general tendency to methodological exclusiveness; they have unified their commentaries by finding one or another outside standpoint from which to pry him up, and so we have the series of one-dimensional contractions of his work to Neoplatonic, Cabalistic, or Swedenborgian sources or to Jungian, Freudian, or Marxist analogues that have made the Blake shelves in the library so unbecoming to behold. A reaction against such books has set in, and many Blakeans are now content modestly to labor in their patch of the common field and leave to future generations the gathering in. Much of the ground for their work and my own has been cleared magisterially by David Erdman; his own caution before grand generalizations certainly warns me sufficiently. It is my impression nonetheless that some of the careful studies of this or that minute particular have come up against limits not surpassable by tying the particulars together link by link, as it were; rather, the particulars demand a multiplanar organizing interpretation to situate them properly. Blake's own example of persisting in folly also remains before us, and life is too short to await all the returns before trying to assess him. I am one,

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tamination. But ideology touches all experience, and the sense of having transcended ideological illusions is very often itself an illusion born of the clash of two or more of them. Yet such a clash may also genuinely remove illusions, I would argue; Blake's peculiar insight into ideology, which we will note throughout this book, may owe a good deal to the conflicts to which his social position exposed him.

Finally, I think it makes sense to say that all literature has an ideology, or components of an ideology. Some Marxists, as I mentioned earlier, would prefer to say that literature *produces* an ideology, a way of putting it that seems to bring out the active process of reading, but that also seems to assign that activity mainly to the text itself—as if by being so good as to read it a reader becomes putty in its hands—rather than distributing the determining activity between text and reader as co-producers of the "ideological effect." I suspect too that this parlance is itself a product of a new desire for rigor among Marxists who are restating aesthetic theory in terms of production, Marxism's founding concept. But we may leave aside this refinement; it will do for now to say that all literature "has" an ideology.

To put it simply, literature has designs on us, palpable or not, and those designs have social bearings, however remote. All literature teaches, even if it claims only to delight. In fact, the claim only to delight not merely is false but has a fairly evident ideological ring. Certain highly self-conscious works, deliberately critical of prevailing ideologies and alert to their social bases, might make an exception to this rule, though of such works it might be truer to say that they project an anti-ideological viewpoint that is itself partly ideological. So one might argue of James Joyce's *Ulysses* that, while its many narrative stances and styles seem to sweep away all Archimedean points from which to comprehend, or at least speak about, the world, the careful continuity of its "realistic" level beneath all the devices, and the final surfacing of that level in the seemingly artless soliloquy of Molly, endorse after all the standpoint of "life," of empathy, of realism, of something like Albert Camus's anti-ideological decency, whose ideological features are not hard to discern.

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ifestly a strategy of Blake's throughout his works, the poetic equivalent of *reductio ad absurdum* in an "immanent" critique of ideology. But "mathematic power" and "demonstrative science" may burn, or freeze, the hands that wield them, however inspired, and in Los indeed we can find many instances of despair, rage, momentary tyrannizings, and even an anguished collaboration in the original solidification of Urizen's world. More interesting in our context are the Urizenic traces in Blake's own work.

Here it is easy to be cavalier and dismiss the catalogs, say, or even worse the litany of Golgonooza's gates and directions in *Jerusalem* (12 and 13) as so much Urizenic intrusion upon a slumbering poetic genius. The bardic barking may sound too imperious to deserve the name of honest indignation. Of both sorts of passages a defense can be made; one might begin by noting how rarely Urizen speaks and how little he seems to care for details. A nice example, however, of how a Urizenic form may infect a Blakean content, how the language of reason may abstract or reify a minute particular, lies in the phrase "minute particular" itself. Occurring some dozen times in *Jerusalem* and only there, it has the air of a new discovery Blake is trying out, and it is quite a good one: it unites in a single phrase the realms of aesthetics (his annotations to Reynolds's *Discourses* praise minuteness, particular details, minute discrimination, and so on), epistemology (from particulars to generals), politics ("Minute Particulars in slavery"), and religion ("every Minute Particular is Holy"). It lends itself to several concretizations, such as the "little particle" or grain of sand which may grow opaque to the light or open like a jewel (in turn a metaphor of the human individual), or to the "little ones" of Jesus' flock (from Matthew 18), Jerusalem's children, members of the Divine Body, and even Jesus himself as an infant. The phrase also modulates to "minute articulations" and "small articles" and from there to "scarcely articulate" speech and back to the "arts" of life. It seems to entwine every significant thematic strand of *Jerusalem*, and one could do worse, after one's first intimidating reading of it, than trace through all the intersections of metonym and metaphor that "minute particular" implies. The problem, of course, is that

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such a master trope is only a step from becoming a trope of mastery, an imposition of a single idea onto many unique and disparate individuals, which almost confesses its tyranny in its very name, Latin polysyllables smothering honest English little ones (though of course even "little ones" remains a generalization).

What is one to do? The "stubborn structure of the Language" is only a floor, a "rough basement," beneath the collapsing Albion, but Los must build English to keep Albion talking (J 36.58-60).[63] And if Blake is going to talk to Albion at all he must use his language, however corrupted by Urizenic ideology. Faced with later corruptions of the language into a one-dimensional, operational, or instrumental system, modern critics of society have turned to deliberate difficulty, irony, obscenity, and poetry, not to say wordless art or total silence, for both weaponry and sanctuary. For Blake, obviously, the recourse was to art and not to direct statement, but direct statements are in the works, and they raise questions. Troubled by them, Blake may have overreacted on his catalogs of minute particulars, whose significance we can now see as proper names, ungeneralizable, untyrannizable, stubborn, and unique.

Under the influence of Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, and Jacques Derrida, some critics now use "ideology" in a wider sense than I have done. For them any system of thought that posits a privileged ground or center, whether in the world or the self, whether an origin, substrate, or final form, is an ideology. In a useful account of Derrida, Jonathan Culler writes that "to grant any principle this privileged status, to make it the prime mover unmoved, is a patently ideological step."[64] "Ideology" here would seem to embrace all systematic thought, whether or not it enters into social conflicts or domination. As Culler's discussion of the *Tel quel* group suggests, it may not be so much the privileging of a principle but the forgetting that one has done so (and Blake's critique of religion comes in here), the witting or unwitting concealment of the founding gesture, that gives a system its ideological character. One would certainly exempt a musical composition even though it "privileges" a certain key, or the system of Euclidean

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geometry even though one may not question the five postulates. Indeed, the critical practice of the *Tel quel* group resembles intellectual play, where paradigms are produced only to be deconstructed and replaced in a *jouissance* of creativity.

Whatever the difficulties with this view,[65] it brings to the fore features of thought systems or *Denkformen* which are preeminently, if not uniquely, ideological. Closure, system, totality: we are taught to suspect these as forms of repression or exclusion. One of the characteristic tactics of deconstruction is the surgical extraction of a myth of origins and a proof that it is circular or endlessly regressive; taken in a wide sense (from "antecedents" to "epistemological grounds"), "origins" and their mystifications are undoubtedly a prime ideological feature.

In Blake it hardly needs to be shown that two realms, ultimately the same one, are privileged; that is, by the terms of Blake's system, setting aside whatever distancing or subverting effects the form of his work may instill, one cannot think beyond either the plenitude of Eternity or the Poetic Genius (Imagination or Holy Spirit). Both are "fountains" or "springs," sources of everything else. We could stop right here and discuss what Derrida calls the "metaphysics of presence," which Blake shares with western thought, even though Blake consigns most of that thought to Urizen. He has not escaped the larger system, however little resemblance his energetic Eternity of Inner Light bears to Locke's blank slate or the Old Testament Lawgiver. I think, however, that it is more interesting, more appropriate to Blake, and certainly more specific historically to take up less abstract and global questions. How, given these two founts, does the Fall come about? The fact that there are half a dozen different versions of it in *The Four Zoas* alone is less an index of that poem's unfinished state than of the incompleteness of Blake's "system," or possibly a clue to Blake's real attitude toward the question.[66] Why, in the light of this, does he begin at the beginning in so many works, even where plot and genre would dictate entering *in medias res*? In two copies of *Milton*, for example, Blake expanded the Bard's Song, which opens the poem, to include part of the creation story from *Urizen*. Why? Is Blake putting it in the fore-

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ground to make us question it? Or is the point less the content of the origin story than its existence—that there is another place or time than this one, however solid and permanent it may seem? In other words, Blake may be making the move necessary to upend the current reigning worldview, and may care much more about doing that than about grounding his own in a consistent way.

To dwell on this point for a moment: at the opening of *Urizen,* Blake's fullest treatment of ultimate genesis, there is no account whatever of Urizen's decision to withdraw. It begins: "Lo, a shadow of horror is risen / In Eternity!" We come to learn a little more of what bothered Urizen about Eternity, but not why it bothered him or why it did so then, if "then" makes any sense in Eternity; it just happens. Blake probably knew enough about the exasperations of Christian theodicy, and of Milton's unsuccessful wrestlings with the origin of evil in *Paradise Lost,* not to spend too much time on it. For the main point, one could argue, is that *The Book of Urizen* is meant to precede and supplant the Book of Genesis, to show its belatedness or secondariness: Genesis is merely a derivative of some ancient source that flows more directly into Blake. *Urizen* takes the story back chronologically several phases earlier than Genesis, which begins with chaos but leaves chaos, and God, too, unexplained; Blake accounts for chaos in all but the initial separation, and leaves Eternity unexplained. The two cosmologies are formally equivalent, but Blake, intervening in a culture that posits chaos as primordial and honors the Creator of nature, wants for complex reasons, some of them political, to set up an alternative that merges the creation with chaos and sets them both against something higher. He wants to induce us, too, to ask a question difficult to entertain among a nation that kicks stones to refute ideas: Why is there nature? The seemingly so solid, primary "givenness" of nature Blake would pry up and deny to the epistemologies and moralities of Locke, Hobbes, and the British empiricist priesthood. And it is a priesthood. From his new Archimedean standpoint the earth of such down-to-earth thinkers shows itself weightless and delusory, an insubstantial pageant conjured up by the "primeval priest," as Blake calls

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