

Blake, Lucretius, and Prophecy: *The Book of Los*

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1 IN recent years historians of the Renaissance and Enlightenment have paid increasing attention to the influence of Epicureanism upon European thought.¹ As a result, Lucretius, the Roman who expounded Epicurean philosophy in his epic poem *De rerum natura*, has come to assume a foundational role in accounts of the development of modern science and philosophy. This change has been reflected within the world of Blake criticism, where, as scholars have become more interested in Blake's complex response to materialism, so the presence of Lucretius, as both a focus for Blake's hostility and as a shaping influence on his mythology, has become a subject of detailed scholarly investigation. We now have two studies specifically devoted to Blake and Lucretius. Stephanie Codsi has considered how Blake's hostility to Epicurean Deism could help to explain his depiction of absent fathers in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Joshua Schouten de Jel, in a book-length study, develops a comprehensive account of the sources from which Blake could have learned about Lucretius and a detailed view of particular areas of his response (focused upon figures that he associated with Epicurean atheism, Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton, and on specific areas of thought, including epistemology and cosmology). Since these studies have shed much light on this area, I need to explain why we need another discussion of Blake and Lucretius. In focusing upon the grounds of Blake's hostility it is easy to overlook or underestimate the ambivalence that haunts his understanding of error and of prophecy. In this essay I shall argue that Blake saw in Lucretius not only a materialistic cosmology that he felt compelled to attack, but

also a form of prophecy that represented an alluring alternative to his own prophetic mission, one whose malign influence could embroil those who tried to contain or oppose it—including John Milton. The work that deals with this issue most directly is Blake's creation myth, *The Book of Los*—a work that seems to be nobody's favorite, and that can appear frustratingly obscure.

2 As Codsi and Schouten de Jel note, references to Epicureanism are scattered through Blake's works: the portrait of Suction the Epicurean in *An Island in the Moon*; annotations scornfully associating Bacon, Newton, and Sir Joshua Reynolds with Epicureanism; lines in *Jerusalem* denouncing the "Atheistical Epicurean Philosophy" and the theory of the "Atomic Origins of Existence."² These references confirm that Blake saw Epicureanism not as a curious relict of the classical past but as a powerful influence within the thought of his own age. He undoubtedly saw this influence as dangerous, but his recurring condemnations suggest a kind of fascination. As Northrop Frye observes, Blake never mentioned Hobbes, with whom he would have profoundly disagreed, but angrily attacked writers with whom he found some grounds for agreement, because "truth in a false context is worse than outspoken falsehood."³ In the Epicurean philosophy expounded by Lucretius, Blake would have found libertarian aims with which he had some sympathy, but represented in a context of profound error. Lucretius presented Epicurus as a revolutionary figure who attempted to liberate humanity from the blight of superstition, priestcraft, warfare, and political tyranny and to promote pleasure and well-being. In his account (as represented in the translation first published by Thomas Creech in 1682), the active mind of Epicurus "was hurl'd / Beyond the flaming limits of *this* World" into the liberating experience of "mighty Space"—hurled not by a punishing deity but by his own force of will, by his own refusal to accept the constraints of "Religion's Tyranny," and by his own love of "natural liberty" (1.96–98, 85, 89).⁴ In the 1790s, in the context of the French Revolution, such a conception would have resonated with the ambitions of contemporary radicals, including Blake himself.

3 In *De rerum natura* Epicurus, aspiring to liberate desire from error and religious tyranny, assumes the role that Blake attributes to the prophet who rages against disabling constraints. But these aspirations appear in a context that Blake would have seen as utterly false. In Epicurean philosophy sensuous enjoyment does not lead to a perception of

1. See Leddy and Lifschitz; Greenblatt; Linker; Johnson; Kors; Vicario; and Mitsis.

2. Blake's writings are quoted from Erdman, hereafter abbreviated as E. See E 450–54, 620, 626, 645, 659, 660, 220.

3. Frye 188.

4. Creech 4, 3.

the infinite, nor to any participation in the divine vision. When Epicurus casts himself beyond the flaming limits of the world, he not only separates human life completely from divine interference but finds a world that emerges from the chance interactions of atoms falling through a void—the atomism that Blake consistently attacked and associated with atheism. Where Blake creates dramatic myths, Lucretius develops a reasoning, philosophical discourse. Where Blake humanizes plants and animals to suggest their spiritual form, Lucretius makes the human body begin to lose its distinctive form and to merge with the deep structure of other organisms as “blood, humour, nerves, and vein, and bone” (2.627), to which the mind, another material entity, is “knit” (3.659).⁵ Epicurus is a figure of the prophet trapped within a false vision, whose urge for freedom remains bound by what Blake sees as deep forms of error. Lucretius, that is, presents a key example of an archetypal problem—the tendency of prophets to reinforce Urizenic error even when they struggle to escape it. He illustrates a central insight in Blake’s work: that prophets can become instruments of tyranny “without knowing it,” as Milton did, according to Blake’s Devil in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (E 35). And, as we shall see, Lucretius contributes to, and helps to explain, some of the errors that Blake finds in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

- 4 It was easy to see *De rerum natura* as a work of mixed potential, since the moral and scientific aspects of Lucretius’s vision were received quite differently within different reading communities in Britain. By the second half of the seventeenth century, in the wake of the publication of a translation of Pierre Gassendi’s work on Epicurus (in Thomas Stanley’s *History of Philosophy*, vol. 3, 1660), those parts of Epicurean thought concerned with pleasure became fashionable within aristocratic circles associated with the Restoration court, circles that had little interest in Epicurean cosmology, which they sometimes linked with the supposedly futile activities of experimenters associated with the Royal Society.⁶ Christian moralists, on the other hand, tended to reject the Epicurean endorsement of sensuous enjoyment as unchristian. In Milton’s *Paradise Regain’d*, for example, when Satan tries to tempt the Saviour to embrace Epicureanism, the dismissive reply is that Epicurus promotes only “corporal pleasure ... and careless ease” (4.299).⁷ But not all Christians took such a disapproving view. Corporeal pleasure assumed a significant place in the theory and practice of the “heart religion” that developed in the eighteenth century, and was celebrated, for example, in the Moravian Church, to which Blake’s mother had be-

longed, and in the writings of liberal theologians such as Johann Caspar Lavater.⁸ When Lavater declares in his *Aphorisms on Man* that “the purest religion is the most refined Epicurism,” and then aligns it with “the most religious and the most voluptuous of men,” Blake writes in response, “True Christian philosophy” (E 591). Epicurus, who, as Schouten de Jel shows so clearly, fed into Blake’s negative accounts of the selfhood, could also be associated with what Blake resoundingly approves, as Codsi points out.

- 5 Lucretius’s approach to pleasure is certainly more complex than the libertine image of Epicureanism might suggest. His poem begins with a vision of a transcendent, transformative pleasure associated with the goddess Venus, whose arrival, in the words of the Creech translation, stimulates “Luxury” and “Amorous fire” so that “Each Beast forgets his rage” (1.15, 21, 25-27).⁹ This invocation to the inspiring goddess is, of course, a device formally at odds with the poem’s account of a world beyond divine influence, and suggests an alternative to it. Elsewhere the poem examines severe constraints upon desire, showing them as arising not from some original transgression of divine law but from a social development that leads from primitive life to the inequalities and repressions of civilization (book 5). This male-dominated social history is set against a natural history featuring a female earth that declines from an original state of abundant fertility into degenerate old age, a process that creates further constraints for humanity (2.1165-74). The common association of Epicureanism with the promotion of “corporal pleasure” developed in spite of Lucretius’s visions of historical limitation. But the conflict between transformative pleasure and entrenched constraint becomes a central issue in Blake’s work and, as we shall see, it assumes a striking form in the introduction to a work that seems particularly concerned with Lucretius and his influence, *The Book of Los*.
- 6 Those parts of Lucretius that deal with the nature of the universe and the origins of life eventually had a wider influence than the parts concerned with pleasure. By the second half of the seventeenth century many scientists were assimilating forms of atomism into their thinking in ways that helped to authorize it more widely.¹⁰ The evolutionary approach of Lucretius could seem relevant to the study of the earth, its organisms, and the heavenly bodies. But it was not only the cosmography that proved influential: Lucretius’s attempt to explain the basis of the universe in a poetic epic proved liberating to many poets, whether or not they

5. Creech 53, 88.

6. Hopkins 255.

7. Carey 1151.

8. For a discussion of sexual practices in the Moravian Church attended by Blake’s mother, see Schuchard.

9. Creech 1-2.

10. Niblett 154-55.

shared his philosophy, since it encouraged a movement away from the epic tradition of noble martial heroism (more completely than Milton had moved in *Paradise Lost*), and it helped to authorize the inclusion in poetry of those interests that aristocratic Epicurean libertines disdained: the findings of naturalists, geologists, and astronomers. A key example of this tendency is Richard Blackmore's epic *Creation*, a work praised by Joseph Addison and Samuel Johnson that was reprinted many times in the eighteenth century. The poem was intended specifically to oppose the claims of Epicureans and Fatalists, an aim that moves Blackmore away from the mythical mode he had adopted in political epics such as *Prince Arthur* (1695) and away from his deep personal commitment to the Bible, toward a reasoning, philosophical, and moral discourse, a counterpart to *De rerum natura*. In adopting this kind of reasoning mode, Blackmore set a trend for the long philosophical poem that would be followed in the eighteenth century by James Thomson, Alexander Pope, Edward Young, and William Cowper, among many others.¹¹ In opposing Lucretius, Blackmore is paradoxically drawn to the kind of evidence cited by the Latin poet. He views the human body, for example, with a physician's interest, surveying its internal structures, its "mazy Intricacies" and "complicated Parts," itemizing organs, sinews, veins, and bones—elements that, since they function beyond the human will or seem completely inert, are remote from issues of moral responsibility or spiritual experience, and (since other animals have comparable features) lose their distinctively human significance.¹²

- 7 The study of organic forms flourished through the eighteenth century with the aid of the microscope, Linnean classification, voyages of discovery, and increasing attention to habitat, and while naturalists, poets, and divines eagerly related the findings of such work to the idea of divine creation, some findings appeared to resist assimilation to this idea. Abraham Trembley's observations of the polypus were a controversial and well-publicized example of this problem.¹³ The polypus looked like a water plant but had arm-like limbs with which it could seize prey; it seemed to blur the distinction between animal and vegetable life. When it was cut up, each fragment grew a new whole organism, a phenomenon that challenged traditional ideas about the indivisibility of the soul and that appeared to support materialist arguments that matter had the capacity to organize itself without the need of a divine creator or a divine plan. As Aram Vartanian observes, it could imply that "the animal-soul is merely a function of matter" and "could

easily suggest a dangerous analogy applicable to the *human* soul."¹⁴ As others have noted, Blake's repeated references to the polypus suggest his awareness of Trembley's observations.¹⁵ Schouten de Jel points out the similarities between the eighteenth-century dissections of the polypus and Lucretius's conception of the relationship between body and soul (72).

- 8 In contrast to such perplexing observations, Isaac Newton appeared to have reconciled atomism triumphantly with divine creation, since the complex mechanical universe he described in *Principia Mathematica*, in which material bodies were composed of particles, was seen as the work of God. For example, in the light of Newton's work, a lecture by Richard Bentley in the Boyle Lecture Series conceded the atomistic nature of matter, but reconciled it with Christian teaching about divine creation.¹⁶ But this reconciliation was secured most clearly not in the terrestrial world of organic life, but in the heavens. From the outset Newton's achievement was celebrated as a kind of answer to Epicurean philosophy.¹⁷ Edmund Halley's Latin ode to Newton, which introduced the first edition of *Principia*, presented Newton as the new Epicurus, a figure greater than Epicurus, one who by demonstrating the truths of science had allowed humanity to enter the realm of the gods.¹⁸ Throughout the eighteenth century, in sermons, books, encyclopædias, and poems, Newton was routinely coupled with Lucretius and Epicurus, sometimes to suggest the classical precedents for Newtonian ideas of matter and gravity, or to claim that Newton had brought clarity and certainty to what was once mere speculation, or to emphasize that, in contrast to Epicurean thought, Newton's theories had demonstrated the creative power of the deity.¹⁹ If Newton was sometimes seen as a new Epicurus, he was often clearly distinguished from him as "anti-atheistic."²⁰ Where Lucretius describes Epicurus as hurling himself into the vacuum of space in defiance of religion, Newton was typically celebrated by poets as "mounting" or "soaring" into the heavens to reveal divine order.²¹ Like his classical predecessor, he was seen as a revolutionary, but a revolutionary who secured rather than challenged divine authority.

11. See Bergstrom.

12. Blackmore 6.689, 307, 283, 218.

13. Hilton 86.

14. Vartanian 264.

15. See Effinger 175-76.

16. Bentley, *Confutation* 4.

17. See Fabian.

18. Albury 36.

19. Edwards 75; Chambers, entry on "Hardness"; Hall, entry on "Newton"; Bentley, *Eight Sermons* 221; Martin 59; Dunkin 2: 474; Wesley 5: 97; Arno 257; Sullivan 1: 113.

20. Fabian 536.

21. Bentley, "A Reply"; Ramsay.

- 9 In this way, Epicurean philosophy contributed to a dichotomy in Enlightenment thought between views that implicitly or explicitly challenged ideas of intelligent design in creation and views that reinforced such ideas. What is at issue here is somewhat obscured in Schouten de Jel's study because he claims that Lucretius conceives the universe as "a giant mechanism" or a "world machine" (207). This argument is based partly on the single occurrence of the term "*machina mundi*" in *De rerum natura* (5.96) and partly on selective quotations from Cyril Bailey's prose translation (1948 ed.), which are used to argue that Lucretius "utilises a quasi-industrial context" and "the semiotics of mechanisation" when describing the combination of the elements (211). The argument allows Schouten de Jel to link *De rerum natura* directly with "the conception of the mechanised man common in enlightenment discourses" (226). But, as Sylvia Berryman has pointed out, there is little to support the assumption that the atomism of the ancients "is motivated by a machine analogy."²² Lucretius may evoke principles of matter, force, and motion, phenomena that we have come to associate with the realm of mechanics, but these can be evoked, as Popa points out, "when no explicit technological models come into play."²³ In fact the phrase "*machina mundi*" does not appear at all in the Creech translation of Lucretius, nor in the translation by John Mason Good of 1805, which Schouten de Jel also cites. This is important because the conflation of Epicurean atomism with later ideas of the world machine obscures a distinction that Blake is sometimes concerned to make, between a materialistic world in which all forms and motions develop without a controlling design, and one that is shaped by an intelligent creator. As we shall see, the distinction has an important place in *The Book of Los*.
- 10 William Powell Jones observes that "the growing conflict between the scientist and the man of genuine religious convictions did not affect the orthodox views of Newton or of many scientists of his day, and certainly not those of the theologians and poets who followed him and made of his demonstrations of an orderly universe a sort of new religion."²⁴ By 1795, the date on the title page of *The Book of Los*, Blake would have been aware of both the cosmological theories drawing on Herschel's observations and the theories of Buffon that challenged Newton's orderly view of the universe. As David Worrall has noted, in *The Botanic Garden* Blake would have found Darwin's description of a process in which heavenly bodies are ejected from each other through violent explosions, a process that seems to influence some of Blake's own descriptions of creation in

The Book of Urizen and elsewhere.²⁵ But as Marilyn Gaull observes, in spite of the circulation of these new scientific ideas, the Newtonian universe still dominated the public imagination at the end of the eighteenth century, and was reinforced in demonstrations of the orrery, poetic celebrations of Newton, and other ways.²⁶ The situation would begin to change in the nineteenth century, but in the 1790s the order of the heavenly bodies still provided an antidote to prospects opened up by materialist theories of a world without design or premeditated order. Donald Ault has argued that Blake "visualizes Newton's system as providing a usurpation of and substitution for the very vision he himself is trying to communicate."²⁷ This is true in that all systems that seek totalizing explanations of the world are seen by Blake as competing. But Blake is a kind of historian who tries to visualize the fundamental or spiritual causes that motivate the production of such systems, and to show why the Newtonian kind proves so powerful.

The Book of Los

- 11 *The Book of Los*, like all of Blake's illuminated works, draws on a wide range of writings—mythical, theological, philosophical, and others. It appears to engage with Lucretius and his influence in several different ways. Even the gendered division of the work between an introduction centered upon Eno, an "aged Mother," and the violent, masculine creation myth of the main narrative parallels the division within the British reception of Lucretius between two kinds of interest, pleasure and cosmography. In what follows I shall consider each of these parts in turn.
- 12 In Lucretius, there is a necessary disconnect between female generative nature in its old age and the transformative desire figured as a goddess Venus: they belong to two kinds of vision that cannot be reconciled.²⁸ Blake reimagines this kind of disconnect as itself an effect of history. His poem begins with Eno, an "aged Mother" who sits beneath an "eternal Oak" and shakes the "stedfast Earth" speaking of "Times remote" (3.1-7, E 90). Her association with motherhood, earth, and tree identifies her with (among other things) generative nature—now, as in Lucretius, in old age. Like Ahania in *The Book of Ahania* (also issued in 1795, and in the same format—intaglio etched, color printed, near-identical plate sizes) Eno appeals to memory rather than to visions of futurity, but in contrast to the Epicurean precedent, Eno's vision of "Times remote" brings transformative desire directly into the realm of social history. The con-

22. Berryman 38-39.

23. Popa 15.

24. Jones 9-10.

25. Worrall, "Botanic Garden" 410.

26. Gaull 35.

27. Ault 2.

28. See Betensky.

straints of civilization in the past were, we are assured, overcome by a turn to excess; if all were allowed to fulfill their desires instead of repressing them, there would be no vices. If Eno represents a feminine alternative to the dominant patriarchal ideology, her vision still bears the imprint of that ideology in its positioning of the female as passive object of male desire. But in the context of the 1790s, it would certainly have been seen as revolutionary.²⁹

- 13 The rest of the poem reflects upon the absorption of revolutionary desire within an illusory vision of creation, in a way that seems designed to reveal the spiritual basis of the errors afflicting Blake's contemporaries. As we have seen, within the realm of cosmography in eighteenth-century Britain two rather different figures of Epicurean transformation had appeared. There was Epicurus himself, impatient of constraint, hurling himself into mighty space where he confronted the chaotic atomic basis of reality; and there was Newton, the new Epicurus, who constructed a stable vision of creation upon the unstable realms of matter. In *The Book of Los* Blake derives from these figures two cycles in the history of prophecy, which together constitute a single development showing how the chaotic vision of atheistic materialism makes the idea of divine creation necessary.
- 14 Blake's account of this history is based in part upon an infernal reading of *Paradise Lost*, like that referred to in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* where, according to Blake's Devil, "[Milton's] Messiah fell. & formed a heaven of what he stole from the Abyss" (plates 5-6, E 34-35). Blake reinterprets the parallels and contrasts that Milton creates between Satan and the Son of God as they descend from Heaven, enter the realm of Chaos, and contemplate creation. Milton's Satan falls from Heaven and makes a difficult journey through Chaos to the world newly created for humanity. The Son voluntarily descends from Heaven and, having calmed the disorder of Chaos, rides into it to begin the task of creation. Satan's experience of Chaos is immersive, and he is at times passively at the mercy of its unstable conditions. The Son's relationship with Chaos is commanding and controlling, as he fixes set limits within it and draws the materials of creation from it. In Milton's chronology the Son's entry into Chaos precedes Satan's, but in the narrative sequence Satan's appears first. Blake's compressed allusions to these narratives in *The Book of Los* indicate that for him, the Satan-Son sequence is the work of the "true Poet" (E 35): Satan's challenging experience of Chaos prepares for the mastery of Chaos attributed to the Son. Where Milton thinks that the two narratives illustrate a contrast between evil and good, Blake suggests that they illustrate the progress of the same error, the false dichotomy between

Chaos and fixed order. Taken together, they suggest a learning process that culminates in an act of creation. In Blake's version, the narrative describes two cycles because Los encounters, and appears to escape from, two complementary forms of stifling constraint. The first arises from religious tyranny (symbolized by black marble); the second arises from the materialistic reaction to such tyranny (symbolized by water). Los's emergence from the waters of materialism leads him into a new form of error, involving the forging of the sun and the binding of Urizen: a hybrid vision of creation founded upon a materialistic basis.

- 15 Blake may have been prompted to use *Paradise Lost* as a model for this reflection upon materialism because while Milton dismisses Epicurean ideas of pleasure in *Paradise Regain'd*, he finds a place for elements of Epicurean cosmology in *Paradise Lost*. Milton's inclusion of Chaos, a concept derived from classical tradition rather than the Bible, facilitates this attempt. Milton's God assures his angelic listeners that space is not "vacuous" (*Paradise Lost* 7.169), but nevertheless the poet tells us that the created world was "Won from the void and formless infinite" (3.12), and when Satan journeys through Chaos he falls into a seemingly infinite "vacuity" from which he only escapes by chance (2.932-38). Satan's passage through Chaos involves taking an "oblique" course (3.564, 9.510), an apparent allusion to Lucretius, who describes matter becoming organized merely because atoms "decline" (*De rerum natura* 2.280) from the vertical as they fall through the void.³⁰ Milton's Chaos is said to harbor "embryon atoms" (*Paradise Lost* 2.891-92, 900), so that creation can be seen as the triumph of divine order over a materialistic confusion. His account of the process of divine creation itself is also influenced by Lucretius. He elaborates the references in Genesis to the division of waters and land (Genesis 1:6-7, 10), showing how the elements separate according to their weight; and he uses precedents in Lucretius to expand the Genesis account of the generation of plants and animal life from the earth and waters (Genesis 1:12, 20-24). What appear in Lucretius as self-generating processes are, in *Paradise Lost*, shown to be initiated by the Spirit of God, who infuses his vital virtue and vital warmth into the elements. In *Paradise Lost*, they stand in contrast to the activities of the Son of God, who "made" the stars, sun, and moon, and who formed Adam from "dust" (corresponding to the actions of God in Genesis 1:16 and 2:7).

Black Marble

- 16 The narrative of *The Book of Los* intersects with that of *The Book of Urizen*, beginning at a point after Urizen, the

29. Worrall, *Urizen Books* 196-97.

30. Creech 41.

“primeval Priest,” has withdrawn from the fluid life of Eternity, craving the stability of a “solid without fluctuation” and attempting to impose his laws on the other Eternals. Urizen, having been expelled from Eternity, is rent from Los’s side and is “laid in a stony sleep” while Los watches over him (*The Book of Urizen* 2.1, 4.11, 6.7, E 70-74). The first cycle of the narrative of *The Book of Los* begins at this point. The effect of Urizen’s fall is to alienate Los from his own desires, leaving him stifled in a stony bondage (the title page includes an illustration of a body trapped within massive solid forms). At this point he is in the position of a rebel struggling against the deadly constraints of imposed orthodoxy. The “vast rock of eternity” (*The Book of Los* 4.12, E 92) that freezes around him seems akin to the “Stone of Night” used by the tyrannical Albion’s Angel to ground his repressive authority in *America* (7.2, E 53) and *Europe* (11.1, E 64); Los, “stamping furious to dust” (4.20, E 92) the bondage that oppresses him, resembles the rebellious Orc in *America*, who threatens to “stamp to dust” (8.5, E 54) the stony law of Urizen. The “black marble” (4.22, E 92) that Los smashes is specifically associated with Egypt, which at the conclusion of *Urizen* symbolizes the bondage of tyrannical state religion (and alludes to Exodus, in which Moses strives to deliver his people from their Egyptian captivity: *Urizen* 28.21-22, E 83). The design on plate 3 shows Urizen with his tablets of stone, presiding over a net of religion like the one mentioned in *Urizen* 25.22, a net in which two naked figures are helplessly trapped.

- 17 Los’s rebellion at this point follows the path of the Epicurean revolutionary, whose revolt against religious tyranny leads to a materialist conception of the infinite as an indefinite, void space—through which Los falls. In this void, humanity does not emerge fully formed from the hand of a creator as the biblical Adam does, but must go through the stages of a natural development, in a sequence that, like that in Lucretius 5.894-1539³¹ and in some eighteenth-century accounts of human progress, initially involves an age of helpless ignorance before humanity begins to acquire, through increasing knowledge, a measure of control over the external world. Out of this state of helpless ignorance a kind of progress emerges as Los passes through a state of infancy into “contemplative thoughts” (4.40, E 92), at which point the narrative becomes increasingly focused on how the fallen mind tries to explain its own condition.

Waters

- 18 Milton’s account of creation begins with a classical and atomistic conception of Chaos, whereas the Genesis story begins with “waters” (Genesis 1:2). Milton imagines a tran-

sition from one to the other in terms of the Son’s calming influence upon chaotic disorder (*Paradise Lost* 7.216ff.). Blake presents the transition as a learning process. As Los habituates to his condition and develops contemplative thought, “the Vacuum / Became element” (2.50-51, E 92). The element, which at first seems “pliant,” a medium that assists exploration, soon becomes exhausting, a “stifling black fluid” (4.62, E 93). This is the counterpart of the stifling black solid of religious tyranny that Los escaped earlier. The new constraints are not external, like the tyrannical black marble that once restricted Los’s movements. The watery medium is pliant and apparently limitless, but constraints now appear in the “finite” (4.45, E 92) physical and temporal condition of bodily existence itself, bound to the activity of the lungs, the pattern of sleeping and waking, recurrent weariness, and the random, uncontrollable limits of growth. In taking away the limits of tyrannical religion, Epicurean materialism submerges humanity in an indefinite realm of matter where complex “Branchy forms” (4.44) are simply random adaptations and variations passively “Driv’n by waves” (4.58, E 93)—by the meaningless, accidental motions of matter. No longer imprisoned by religious tyranny, Los is constrained instead by merely physical and temporal limits, which are “finite” but random, since atoms are always in motion and have no preordained limit to contain them. Blake’s references to “Branchy forms. organizing the Human / Into finite inflexible organs” in this watery element, and to the laboring mind “Organizing itself” (4.44-45, 50, E 92), keep in mind the idea of autonomous organization, an idea reinforced by the reference to the Polypus (4.57, E 93).

- 19 In *The Book of Los*, then, in order to escape his wearying submergence in the waters of materialism, Los once again becomes like Moses, whose smiting of the waters at Exodus 7:20 and whose parting of the Red Sea at Exodus 14:21 are preludes to the Israelites’ escape from Egypt. As Los smites the “wild deep” (5.4, E 93) he also becomes like Milton’s God the Son, triumphing over the waters of the abyss (*Paradise Lost* 7.262ff.), and like Newton as an “anti-atheistic” Lucretius (the “particles” that condense into an Orb at 5.30, E 94, allude to Newton’s theories of light in the *Opticks*). Los creates, as Newton does, a hybrid order, binding together a materialist vision of the natural world with an astronomical vision of created order, figured in the chaining of Urizen’s randomly whirling spine to the “self-balanc’d” Orb that Los has framed on his anvil (5.45). Here, creation does indeed come out of chaos, because the confrontation with materialism makes the idea of purposeful creation a psychological necessity. In Lucretius the bounding form of human beings seems arbitrary and porous, given the perpetual motion of atoms and the absence of preordained limits. In biblical tradition the bounding form of human beings is determined from above, and is linked directly to

31. Creech 165-85.

the creation of the heavenly bodies as part of the same system—made by and subject to the same creator.

- 20 The account of Los's creation in *The Book of Los*, like the creations described in Genesis and Milton, proceeds from the making of order in the heavens to the creation of human form. It combines the top-down vision of creation, as an expression of a designing will, with a bottom-up materialist view, in which the basis of the human being is not the spirit or genius but physical components such as atoms and the skeleton (the latter prefigured in the so-called Jahwist account of Genesis 2:4b-23, where human beings emerge from dust and bone—a rib). We may note that in each of Blake's Urizen books there is a reference to "hurtling" bones, the epithet denoting noise as well as movement, as Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* indicates.³² Blake would have encountered a skeleton at the Royal Academy, where students were taught anatomy using a suspended skeleton—which no doubt rattled when it was moved about.
- 21 In this myth Blake begins to distinguish between degrees of error—a process that will assume more systematic form in later works. Los finds the constraints with which he binds Urizen preferable to the stony constraint he once suffered when trying to escape his own desires. At the end of the narrative the flames of desire are no longer something to be escaped, but something to harness purposefully. There is even some pleasure in the act of creation: Los smiles in contemplating his work (5.45, E 94). Los's act of creation is at least a step up from the stifling chaos of materialism, since it introduces a creative agency that can be imagined in human form. Blake would later describe creation as an "act of Mercy" (E 563).
- 22 The act of creation is assigned to Los, the prophet and blacksmith, rather than to Urizen, the reasoner, who in *Urizen* comes to make and wield mathematical instruments. For Blake, what is ultimately at issue in the realm of Lucretius and in Newton's vision of an orderly universe is not scientific measurement nor mathematical calculation nor the abstract principles that typically concern Urizen. The basis of the Epicurean vision, the world of atomic matter and void space, did not arise directly from empirical observation; it was imagined. And Blake understands—as many of his contemporaries apparently did not—that scientific instruments, observations, and calculations cannot prove that the world is a divine creation. The idea that the sun is the work of a creator is a poetic idea. Los creates an "illusion" (5.47, E 94), part of an imagined order that Urizen will

32. See, for example, *Urizen* 8.1-2 (E 74), *Ahania* 4.24 (E 87); Johnson illustrates the term with a reference to the "noise of battle" in Shakespeare.

inherit and explore with his measuring instruments in *The Book of Urizen*. The prophet provides the paradigm within which the reasoning scientist must work. The Urizenic figure who turns the pair of compasses in the famous frontispiece to *Europe* is standing on a disc or globe that has already been made, and whose form he echoes with his instrument. Blake needs to show the prophet as both deeply mired in error and as able to do the truly liberating work that he, Blake himself, is doing, of seeing through history from an eternal perspective. In *The Song of Los*—the work designed to frame Blake's "prophecies" *America* and *Europe*—Los the Eternal Prophet appears both inside and outside the realm of fallen history, as agent of error and (having assumed a place in eternity) as expositor of it. He is depicted with his hammer and globe on plate 8, while his children are described as instrumental in handing down Urizen's laws (3.9, E 67); he sings his prophetic song of liberation in Eternity (3.1-2).

- 23 The assigning of the work of both error and redemption to Los is central to Blake's mythology, because he sees that the imagination usually works within the illusory constraints created by Urizen's fall from eternity, although it can assume an "eternal" perspective. Since, within the fallen world, it provides the paradigm for Urizen's errors, its creations may be more difficult to escape than the works of the reasoning scientist. This is why Lucretius is such a challenging figure for Blake, since the vision he presents has such a powerful and enduring influence. In a fascinating discussion of Blake's assault on the eighteenth-century philosophy of science, Harry White has suggested that Blake "might very well have loved much that [Charles] Darwin achieved after he returned from his momentous voyage [on the *Beagle*]. Darwin destroyed not only the Creator God, but also 'conceptions that had reigned in the philosophy of nature and knowledge for two thousand years [which] ... rested on the assumption of the fixed and final'"³³ Yet the assumption of the fixed and final had been challenged since at least the time of the ancient Greeks, and Blake would probably have recognized Darwin as a revolutionary of the Epicurean kind, one who appears to stamp to dust the stifling religious orthodoxy that seeks to constrain human liberty, only to fall into the materialistic element in which the polypus dwells, where all life is subject to random environmental adaptations. And while Darwin may have imagined a narrative of evolution more compatible with his own observations, he did not and could not finally destroy the poetic idea of a created universe. There is abundant evidence that this idea is still current, not only sustaining the belief of creationists, who, in reacting to the vision of a world

33. White 121, quoting John Dewey, *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1997) 1-2.

without design, wish to endow it with “scientific” status, but also celebrated by hymn singers, who may accept Darwinian principles but find the poetic idea of creation more compatible with worship, or with their aesthetic response to the world around them.³⁴

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34. See Stewart.

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