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Narrative Techniques in *The Four Zoas*

The acceptance of Blake's major prophecies took a long time in coming. While the later ones, *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, have by now become accepted as part of the canon, *The Four Zoas* is still struggling to be admitted on equal merit. The main reason, it seems, is that the epic is considered a fragment.

Having finished his minor prophecies and the watercolour drawings and engravings for an edition of Young's *Night Thoughts*, Blake started to write *Vala* – later to be revised as *The Four Zoas* – in 1797 only to abandon it in 1804 for *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. Unlike the latter two, the first one was left in manuscript form and was never etched, a fact that urges Northrop Frye to conclude that it was not intended to be the part of an exclusive and definitive canon.

The Four Zoas remains the greatest abortive masterpiece in English literature. It is not Blake's greatest poem, and by Blake's standards it is not a poem at all; but it contains some of his finest writing . . . Anyone who cares about either poetry or painting must see in its unfinished state a major cultural disaster.¹

A recent critic, Andrew M. Cooper, writes in a similar vein: "Blake's evident abandonment of *The Four Zoas* . . . no doubt rescued the poem from the

¹Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, p. 269. Unlike the majority of critics who claim that the poem is fragmentary because the Apocalypse of the final night is so abrupt that it cannot be accounted for, John Beer suggests that it is the middle sections of *The Four Zoas* that call for completion. (Personal interview with Professor John Beer, Cambridge.)

process of calcification depicted in the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. But of course a rescue so desperate is failure by any other name.”²

Yet, even though Blake did abandon the poem, he did not dismiss it (as the successive revisions prove) and G.E. Bentley claims that there is reason to assume that certain passages in *The Four Zoas* were borrowed from *Jerusalem*, and not the other way round.³

Even those who acknowledge the greatness of the poem, attempt to retrieve the outlines of a poem—or an imagined poem—that lies behind the pages, unable to accept the *The Four Zoas* as it has been left to us⁴. They ignore Blake’s notes *On Homers Poetry*: “Every Poem must necessarily be a perfect Unity . . . when a Work has Unity it is as much in a Part as in the Whole. the Torso is as much a Unity as the Laocoon.”

Rajan’s distinction between incomplete and unfinished poems is especially illuminating:

Incomplete poems are poems which ought to be completed. Unfinished poems are poems which ask not to be finished, which carry within themselves the reason for arresting or effacing themselves as they do. If an unfinished poem were to be finished it would ideally erase its own significance.⁵

Unfinished as distinguished from incomplete is what the Romantics call a fragment – an authentic representation of their sense of reality, spiritual or material.⁶ Peter Otto – in line with what has been said about the Romantic fragment—convincingly suggests that there are cogent thematic and contextual reasons to surmise that when Blake finally stopped working on the manuscript of *The Four Zoas* he believed that the form it had taken was the only one that the subject matter could assume, as its form embodies the poem’s insights about the nature of the

²Cooper, *Doubt and Identity in Romantic Poetry*, p. 56. As a change, Paul Mann notes that Blake’s abandonment of *The Four Zoas*, usually rationalized on poetic grounds, might easily have been the result of complications in his material plan for the work, “continuing debt and the successive commercial failures of the *Night Thoughts*, and both editions of the *Ballads* could have . . . pushed him on toward *Milton* and *Jerusalem* and back to the techniques of illuminated printing.” Mann, “The Final State of *The Four Zoas*”, p. 208

³Bentley, *Vala or The Four Zoas*, p. 165

⁴One notable example is G. E. Bentley.

⁵Rajan, *The Form of the Unfinished: English Poetics from Spenser to Pound*, p. 14

⁶For more about the Romantics’ inclination towards fragments see Péter, *Roppant szivárvány*, p. 39

fallen world and of fallen perception.⁷ To consider the poem unfinished rather than incomplete would help do away with at least part of the prejudice that has been accumulated ever since the birth of the poem.⁸ We may conclude that the poem is unfinished in the same sense as *Kubla Khan* is—they are both organic and fully appreciable in the form they were left to us.

To claim, however, that what makes *The Four Zoas* “probably the least read of all the major English Romantic poems”⁹ is its – reputed – fragmentariness, would be a gross oversimplification, when so many incomplete/unfinished literary works have become famous and widely read (Kafka’s *Das Schloß* or Camus’ *Le premier homme*, to mention just a few). What, then, is the reason for the interpretative cruxes in the poem; what made the editors of the Norton Critical Edition of *Blake’s Poetry and Designs* reduce Blake’s longest poem, originally 4025 lines, to 408 lines deeming only these worthy of publication?

Before we answer the question we shall have a look at the original title of the poem: VALA / OR / The Death and Judgement of the Ancient Man / a DREAM / of Nine Nights / by William Blake 1797 (later to be retitled as *The Four Zoas: The Torments of Love & Jealousy in the Death and Judgement of Albion the Ancient Man*, in approximately 1805). Organized into nine “Nights” on the model of Young’s *Night Thoughts*, the poem is Blake’s first attempt to synthesize all his previous myths in a single dream; to depict the nightmare of the fall and the subsequent regeneration of Albion, the cosmic man. Paradoxically, Albion is withdrawn from the story, he is lying unconscious in a deadly sleep; the actual subject is the warfare between his four primary attitudes and their emanations. They all present the story of their fall from their own point of view, the one voice disintegrates into a plurality of voices and the result is a constantly shifting perspective.

The major challenge of reception then, we can conclude, is to be found in Blake’s invention of the dream technique, which S. Foster Damon considers the poet’s greatest contribution to literary methods.

⁷Otto, “Final States, Finished Forms, and *The Four Zoas*”, p. 144

⁸Nancy M. Ide, approaching the problem from an entirely different angle, also presents an appealing as well as compelling argument in spite of those who claim that the poem is a fragment. Her computer analysis of the images of *The Four Zoas* proves that there is a conscious scheme discernible behind the narrative. Ide, “Image Patterns and the Structure of William Blake’s *The Four Zoas*”

⁹Fuller, *Blake’s Heroic Argument*, p. 88

This technique destroys the effect of a continuous and logical narrative. It permits the tangling of many threads, abrupt changes of the subject, recurrent repetitions, obscure cross references, sudden intrusions, even out-and-out contradictions. Crucial scenes are omitted; others are expanded out of all seeming proportion.¹⁰

Since connective devices are muted – if provided at all – active participation and a “willing suspension of disbelief” are required of the reader to fill in the blanks in the disrupted narrative.

Besides the suppression or exclusion of elements from the narrative field, the multiplicity of voices presents additional difficulties. Since the four members of Albion – the four Zoas – and their emanations, coeternal and coexistent, are mutually interconnected in the one body of Albion, the fall of one inevitably means the fall of the others, so we would expect their individually related stories to be substantially similar and congruent. Yet, due to the different perspectives – “a series of incommensurable universes which intersect precisely at their lacunae”¹¹ – and the different starting points from which the respective accounts of the fall commence,¹² these juxtaposed stories and interpolated visions not only complement one another, but also render each thematic fragment even more difficult to reconcile and syncretize. This may have caused Paul Cantor to remark that “certainly no creation myth has ever done a better job of conveying a sense of the initial chaos out of which the world began.”¹³

To avoid total chaos, however, three basic methods are employed with the help of which the multiple styles and genres that contain multiple perspectives can hold these perspectives in dynamic tension.

1. At those points where the juxtaposed perspectives are difficult to understand, Blake uses overlapping imagery, diction and syntax.¹⁴ The repetition of

¹⁰Damon, *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake*, p. 143

¹¹Ault, “Incommensurability and Interconnection in Blake’s Anti-Newtonian Text”, p. 299

¹²Compare, for example, Luvah’s (II, 26-27:80-110) and Ahania’s (III, 39-42:31-105) point of view. (E. 317-18, 326-28.) or the account given by Enitharmon (I, 10-11:260-280) and the Spectre of Urthona (IV, 50:84-110).

¹³Cited in Pierce, “The Shifting Characterization of Tharmas and Enion in Pages 3-7 of Blake’s *Vala or The Four Zoas*”, p. 93

¹⁴Several critics have noted the reflections of Night I in Night IX, regarding it as an indication that Night I represents the inversion of the apocalypse in Night IX (Wilkie-Johnson, *Blake’s Four Zoas: The Design of a Dream*, p. 11)

certain key elements in different contexts is used to communicate to the reader the significance of the given contextual variation in the overall structure.

2. The other technique typically used by Blake is what we may call, adopting Brian Wilkie's coinage, a *prequel* meaning a unit composed later but relating an earlier part of the story.¹⁵ These prequels form "an increasingly comprehensive and progressively detailed texture of imaginatively interrelated and mutually reflecting events"¹⁶, allowing the scattered portions to add up to a coherent (or at least "recoverable") – though certainly taxing – narrative.

3. Blake's use of *typology* also facilitates our apprehension of the interconnected threads of actions. The significance of the use of typology is two-fold. Types provided Blake with an "intellectual shorthand"¹⁷ that would permit an

The recurrent images (such as agricultural labour-harvest, plowing, sowing, wine, youth, blood, marriage feast) help us recognize the substantial interrelatedness of characters and events. Nancy M. Ide has identified 196 such image groups (Ide, op. cit. p. 126) She points out—based on her computer analysis of *The Four Zoas*, its imagery, their density and frequency distribution—that the imagistic allusions remind the reader of the earlier scene in which they were used, but the fact that these images appear in a new context, surrounded by new images, fundamentally alters the meaning of the whole.

Thus the reader is forced to reconsider his earlier perception, and by recognizing a second perspective, moves beyond the viewpoint defined by one or the other of these perspectives and subsumes the two. . . . The appearance of images from earlier portions of the text invokes alternative connotations, and in comparing them the reader moves to a higher level of abstraction, and recognizes not only that alternative meanings exist, but also that meaning is substantially defined by context. (ibid. p. 130). For related matters see also: "Identifying Semantic Patterns: Time Series and Fourier Analysis", and Ide, "A Statistical Measure of Theme and Structure"

¹⁵Wilkie, "The Romantic Ideal of Unity", p. 16

A typical example for a prequel is the account of the disintegration related by the Messengers from Beulah (I, 21-22:476-550) and the Spectre of Urthona's description of the fall (VII, 84:278-95) (E. 310-312 and 359.)

What Wilkie calls a prequel, Donald Ault terms as "perspective analysis".

A simple perspective analysis of a prior event re-enacts the same event within the same fictional framework—as when the initial conversation in the poem between Tharmas and Enion is twice re-enacted, once in the metaphorical action of weaving and once again in the metaphor of sexual union. (...) The most complex mode of perspective analysis "embeds" subsequent events in prior plots. (...) An embedded plot means that previous actions are being re-enacted within a new perspective, thereby revealing information suppressed within the previous fictional framework. (Ault, *Incommensurability and Interconnection in Blake's Anti-Newtonian Text*, p. 300)

¹⁶Kittel, "The Book of Urizen and An Essay Concerning Human Understanding," p. 128

¹⁷Tannenbaum, *Biblical Tradition in Blake's Early Prophecies: The Great Code of Art*, p. 118

easier understanding of highly complex ideas. Secondly, typology significantly contributes to a fuller appreciation of the extratemporal aspect of Blake's myth. Because of its vertical view of history in which events are not related to each other chronologically but thematically, typology divorces these events

from any chronological matrix... Time remains fixed and all events are perceived to be contemporaneous; past, present and future are fused through the perception of those events as repetitions of a single paradigmatic event.¹⁸

As opposed to critics who regarded Blake's new narrative technique as a stumbling block and a proof of the lost poetic control,¹⁹ the majority of recent Blake scholars today attribute special significance to this unrewarding method and try to find the poet's motivations for employing such a taxing narrative. Although their point of departure is substantially similar – they suppose that the verbal texture of *The Four Zoas* is functional rather than ornate – their conclusions are very different. Northrop Frye – with his customary elegance – simply states that it is difficult “because it was impossible to make [it] simpler.”²⁰ Morton gives a historical explanation. He contends that the poem – and indeed the other prophecies – are both grotesque and obscure because Blake was unable to relate his reality to that of everyday life. But more importantly it was a characteristic of the strange sects (whose ideas Blake seems to have found appealing) that regarded themselves as the possessors and guardians of a secret doctrine, not to be easily revealed to the uninitiated. Besides being intentionally secretive and obscure, Morton asserts, Blake must have felt it a historical necessity to conceal these ideas since these sects were often persecuted for their dangerous tenets.²¹ G. J. Finch cannot accept Morton's claim that Blake was *incapable of* reconciling his reality with the world. On the contrary, he finds that the fundamental challenge of Blake's poetry is

¹⁸*Ibid.* 118-119

¹⁹A recent example for this prevailing opinion: The loose forked tongue of *The Four Zoas* is where Blake left off before beginning *Milton*; by now accepting this tongue as the only one he's got, Blake will perhaps be able to make it speak true, thus recovering poetic control. . . . The runaway tongue of *The Four Zoas* is a form of wandering erroneous and forlorn." (Cooper, *Doubt and Identity in Romantic Poetry*, pp. 64-65)

²⁰Cited in Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry*, p. 54

²¹Morton, *The Everlasting Gospel: A Study in the Sources of William Blake*, p. 33

to our hold on what we take to be real. The reconstruction of a new self and the discovery of new modes of being involves a radical assault on accepted ways of perceiving ourselves and the world around us. Poetry is not a re-creation of secondary emotions but the disclosure of an enduring inner possibility. To see it that way is to realize the possibility in ourselves. Blake's poetry is concerned to initiate us into a world where the normal rational boundaries of accustomed perception are dissolved by the indeterminacy of untrammelled experience. Such a vision inevitably involves an undermining of formal syntax and poetic structure.²²

Finch's argument that conventional aesthetic satisfactions might have dulled our reception and resulted in a disengagement of ideas is the most widely shared opinion.²³

Even though Jerome McGann's research deals with the textual disorderliness of *The Book of Urizen*, his observations seem indispensable to our full appreciation of *The Four Zoas*. His findings are all the more applicable to the poem under discussion since *The Four Zoas* was most probably intended to be the continuation of *The [First] Book of Urizen*, as the early - later erased - title, *The Book of Vala*, shows. Even more convincing is the fact that where the two poems intersect - where borrowings from *The Book of Urizen* can be found - in Nights IV and V, these Nights were originally called "Fourth Book" and "Book the Fifth," thus proving that both *The [First] Book of Urizen* and its continuation, *The Four Zoas*, were a deliberate parody of the Pentateuch. This obvious allusion to the Bible allows McGann to examine Blake in the light of Alexander Geddes' "Fragment Hypothesis," according to which the Bible is a disorderly text, comprising a heterogeneous collection of various materials assembled at different times by a number of editors and reductors.²⁴ Just like the biblical texts do not comprise a seamless narrative, the obscure pages of Blake's Bible of Hell²⁵ do not locate authorial errors or unresolved incoherences,

²²Finch, "Blake and Civilization", p. 200

²³See also Fuller, *Blake's Heroic Argument*.

²⁴The shifting perspectives of the characters could well correspond to this.

²⁵One of the first titles of *The Four Zoas* was "The Bible of Hell, in Nocturnal Visions collected. Vol. I. Lambeth" (on the back of a Young drawing). This is the Bible of Hell that Blake promised to give the world on Plate 24 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and whose Genesis is *The (First) Book of Urizen*.

the textual anomalies are structural, they are part of a deliberate effort to critique the received Bible and its traditional exegetes from the point of view of the latest research findings of the new historical philology."²⁶

Also in the Bible Blake could find a principle of form based not on external rules but on a principle of inner coherence.

Taking individual units of history, poetry, or oratory as his working blocks, he was not bound by chronological or historical order, nor was he obliged to provide transitions between individual units. Meaning and coherence were created through the thematic juxtaposition of individual parts.²⁷

Once we accept McGann's contentions, all the formal problems discussed so far seem to be resolved, the diagrammatic design of *The Four Zoas* becomes deliberate architecture.

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²⁶McGann, "The Idea of an Indeterminate Text: Blake's Bible of Hell and Dr. Alexander Geddes", p. 324. About Blake's conceivable familiarity with Geddes' hypotheses see Tannenbaum, op.cit. p. 13 and p. 292

²⁷Tannenbaum, op.cit. pp. 35-36

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