MADE FUTURE: THE POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF WILLIAM BLAKE’S MILTON

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By

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This study investigates William Blake’s *Milton* (1811), both as a poem and as an illuminated book, to understand what, drawing on contemporary environmental thought, I have come to call Blake’s “ecology”: his portrayal of complex political and economic systems, their relation to the natural world, and his opposition to empiricist philosophy and scientificity, especially to Bacon, Newton, and Locke. But ecology, for Blake, is intimately tied to an Edenic vision of the future, one he casts in pastoral terms by noting the “green” and “pleasant” aspects of that vision. He does so in “Jerusalem,” the lyric preface to *Milton*, as well as in the accompanying images—and, I argue, in the material aspects of his illuminated printing. Blake’s pastoral futurism offers an alternative to the pessimistic view presented by many contemporary environmental thinkers, who at best urge a mourning of “Nature,” and at worst, advocate the embrace of our own perversion and toxicity, as Timothy Morton exhorts. Contrastingly (and usefully, for ecologists), Blake offers a theory of artistic creation that in his view instantiates a greener and more righteous future, and—despite its practical inadequacies—models a subjective connectivity that transcends the Cartesian dualism restraining networked thought in the Anthropocene.
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Introduction:

Blake's Ecology

In the famous “Jerusalem” lyric that prefaces Milton, Blake establishes what today seems a familiar dichotomy between London’s “dark Satanic Mills” (8) and the “green & pleasant Land” of an imagined future England (16). The poem hinges on a temporal divide between Britain’s mythic past—the “ancient time” of line one—and a pastoral vision of futurity that seems woefully out of tune with the capitalistic trajectory of industrial growth. Each of the lyric’s chronological poles is deeply, if quixotically utopian, though their respective visions of “Jerusalem”—what we might think of as Blake’s Arcadia—differ dramatically. Framed in the interrogative, lines one through six are characterized by conditionality, indicating the possibility of their own implausibility. The final stanza, wherein the speaker fixes his gaze on the future, follows a series of bellicose commands—“Bring me my Bow of burning gold; / Bring me my Arrows of desire,” etc. (9-10)—which metonymically presage Blake’s insistence on “Mental Fight” as an effective resistance to tyranny. The poem concludes with an emphasis on creation, the literal building of Jerusalem as a form of spiritual but also of environmental restoration: “green” and “pleasant” in line 16 patently echo the “mountains green” and “pleasant pastures” of stanza one. The poem reads in its entirety:

And did those feet in ancient time,
Walk upon Englands mountains green:
And was the holy Lamb of God,
On Englands pleasant pastures seen!

And did the Countenance Divine,
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here,
Among these dark Satanic Mills?

Bring me my Bow of burning gold;
Bring me my Arrows of desire:
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!

I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In Englands green & pleasant Land.

Structurally, the poem offers a curious portrayal of temporality, one that, for all of its
diachronic emphasis on futurity (it unfolds through time), is simultaneously cyclical, perhaps
even synchronic. Reading Blake’s temporality more generally, Saree Makdisi cites his many
“different modes of time,” arguing that his work is particularly concerned with “the
interactions or contradictions between” those modes and in “what happens when they
collide with each other” (Reading 96). Such tension is palpable in the “Jerusalem” lyric,
rupturing our perceptions of time and space. The repeated imperative “Bring,” offered in the
present with the expectation that the command will eventually be satisfied by an interlocutor,
cuts against the temporal poles established by the conditional past in stanza one and by the
futural grammar of stanza four. In one sense, the poem is diachronic, for the first pole (the
past) leads directly—chronologically, but also textually, visually, and sonically—into the
second (the future). But the echo in line sixteen (“Englands green & pleasant Land”) casts
readers back into the poem’s beginning, introducing a cycle that evolves throughout the
poem’s temporal rotation, a recursivity that not only opposes the linear model established in
lines one through fifteen but that also finds itself in keeping with the pastoralism of Blake’s
futurity. The past resides in, perhaps is the present, in which the future itself is also seeded.

1 Blake opens “Auguries of Innocence,” from his 1803 “Pickering Manuscript,” by adjusting and
conflating temporal scales: “To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower /
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand / And Eternity in an hour” (E 490, 1-4). The shift is not
merely temporal but spatial and visual as well, estranging the reader from measured experience. Time
in fact becomes space (“Infinity in the palm”), even as it is condensed (“Eternity in an hour”). In
Jerusalem he writes, “I see the Past, Present & Future, existing all at once / Before me” (15.8-9, E
159).
Critics have long noted Blake’s observations of nature and environmental degradation. Northrop Frye highlights Blake’s “didactic nature,” figuring it alongside what Blake perceives to be the “social impact of art” (70). Speaking of *The Four Zoas*, David V. Erdman observes that a single “description of the steel industry, from mining the ore to tempering the wrought pigs, stretches over seventy-eight lines, in which the process itself symbolizes the relation of man and nature when war is work master” (333). More recently, Kevin Hutchings has drawn on “scientific ecology” to underscore Blake’s “Nature” as a “historical mode of governmentality,” pointing to the “crucial similarity between the ecological and governmental models” present within Blake’s work (7).² The “constitution of the individual” becomes ensconced within “the context of a communal totality” (7)—what readers might see as nodes within a system or network. In some respects, this valence might seem so obvious as to preclude further analysis, although, as I argue below, new theories of ecology and materialism once again call Blake’s thought into question. Even more significantly, our own socio-historical crisis—the impending onset of environmental disaster as the result of anthropogenic climate change—necessitates a reexamination of those texts not only foundational to our thinking on this subject, but that, precisely because their stories did not prevail as the dominant narrative of modernity, might offer a reconsideration of that state. Blake’s rejection of liberal politics, his radical vision of an interconnected selfhood,³

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² New Historicism and the so-called Green Romanticism also considered Blake in this light, although Jonathan Bate, the leading proponent of that movement, tended to displace him from the “Big Six” of Romantic poetry, instead championing John Clare as the canonical representative of Romantic ecology.

³ It’s worth noting my use of the terms “selfhood” and “subjectivity.” The former is Blake’s term, and an old one. It dates to Old English, observable (as “sylfum”) in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* (c. 731). It takes on particular meaning in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, as discussed in chapter two. As Blake uses it—and as I adopt it here—it means, most closely, “Detached, of material different from its surroundings”; “Own, peculiar”; or, in its seventeenth-century usage, “That which in a person is really and intrinsically he (in contradistinction to what is adventitious); the ego (often identified with the soul or mind as opposed to the body); a permanent
and the entrenchment of his own poetic practice in the historically-located materiality of his art all contribute to a vision of futurity that enables us to imagine our own future in terms that push beyond the philosophical dualism central to our so-called modernity. Through his various models of connectivity, in both thought and literary form, Blake illustrates a complex systematicity akin to Bruno Latour’s idea of network: an uncompromising visualization of the intersections and connections that comprise subjectivity in an era global collapse (Modern 3).

Blake’s attitudes toward science and the environment were undoubtedly shaped by his historical circumstances, and while this study strives to avoid a strict historicism—to push beyond what Caroline Levine calls the “dense alterity of the past”—a brief glance at Blake’s environmental moment may be warranted. “Blake himself proposes,” as Nicholas M. Williams suggests, “that thought and culture are historically conditioned” (2). Although the impacts of industrialization had yet to emerge in the way that they would by the mid-nineteenth century, Blake fastidiously observed the deleterious effects arising from the combination of a condensed population and a significant uptick in fossil fuel consumption. As Robert C. Allen notes, the production of coal in Britain from 1560 to about 1800 “increased sixty-six fold,” the bulk of which “was shipped to London, which was growing rapidly” (81). Though London was not an industrial center like Birmingham or Manchester, coal use, propagated by its dense population, covered the city in soot. Blake notes the young chimney sweeper’s cry in The Songs of Innocence and of Experience, but the effects of pollution were various and widespread. While fog had always been common in London, by the time

subject of successive and varying states of consciousness” (OED). Even this definition is slightly problematic, since it refuses to detangle “self” from “subject.” “Subjectivity,” on the other hand, is a nineteenth-century invention, one I’ve retrospectively foisted onto Blake’s work, referring to the “quality or condition of being based on subjective consciousness, experience, etc.; the fact of existing in the mind only” (OED).
Dickens pens *Bleak House* in 1852, the air is tinged with “flakes of soot” (13). Structures of absorbent limestone turned black, as photographs from the period evidence. The first melanic peppered moths—*biston carbonaria*, or the “soot moth”—emerged near industrial centers around 1800. The moths were most notably present in the woods around Manchester, though they were frequently observed (Judith Hooper states) throughout Southern England from Oxford to Cornwall (123).

But soot was merely a symptom of the larger condition that, in Blake’s mind, plagued England at the turn of the nineteenth century. The period witnessed the exponential expansion of steam-powered technologies. According to Allen, the steam engine developed in “two phases,” the first of which was a “macro-invention” by Thomas Newcomen, an “atmospheric or fire engine” in Dudley, outside Birmingham, used in 1712 to drain water from coal mines (156). Such engines had so little horse-power and burned so much coal, they were only “cost-effective” near mines, “where fuel was effectively free and where the engine’s uneven, reciprocating motion was suited to raising and lowering pumps” (156). Newcomen’s engine rendered coal more available, but did not increase the possibilities of its application. In the 1760s, James Watt’s separate condenser, which injected cold water into the cylinder, increased efficiency. It required only “8.8 pounds of coal per horse-power hour,” making the earlier model of the Newcomen engine practical for manufacturing purposes (167). The emergence of the steam engine we recognize today, E.A. Wrigley explains, “meant that coal could be exploited to supply mechanical energy as readily as [traditional] heart energy, thus overcoming the last remaining barrier to the application of fossil fuel energy to all the main productive processes” (100). Less than a century later, “steam technology accounted for two-fifths of the growth in British labor productivity… freeing the economy from dependence on wind, water and muscle,” technologies we are
relearning to harness today (Allen 156). This pollution significantly reduced life quality for Londoners, such that in 1821, six years before Blake’s death, the medical doctor Tobias Smollett writes: “Human excrement is the least offensive part of the concrete, which is composed of all the drugs, minerals, and poisons, used in mechanics, and manufactures, enriched with the putrifying carcasses of beasts and men, and mixed with the scourings of all the wash-tubs, kennels, and common sewers, within the bills of mortality” (582, italics mine). “Human excrement” and “putrifying carcasses” were common enough in the cities of eighteenth-century Europe. The pollutants “used in mechanics, and manufactures” were new.

Such was the milieu into which Blake came of age. It is unsurprising, then, that ecological concerns would have fueled his theory of artistic creation, which envisions poetic making as an instantiation of environmental change. This theory is of interest to ecotheorists, who offer myriad perspectives but no entirely adequate response to the climate crisis we now face. One might argue, as Timothy Morton has, that the world is wrecked, that it is too late to reverse environmental catastrophe and that, in a “manifestation of grief” (2), we should embrace our own toxicity. Such an embrace is hardly a political act other than in the basic sense by which all action is inherently political. It is an existential position, but not an efficacious one. Lee Edelman has advocated a queering of futurism, imagining meaning in a world no longer dependent on the teleological outcome of heteronormative reproduction, a useful theory in terms of displacing a flawed political logic but not a helpful one toward formulating a material or even cognitive intervention. He observes, “The ups and downs of political fortune may measure the social order’s pulse, but queerness, by contrast, figures, outside and beyond its political symptoms, the place of the social order’s death drive” (3). If we think past the “Child as the emblem of futurity’s unquestioned value,” perhaps we can value our actions not simply as resistant to the inevitability of climate collapse but as
opposing “the logic of opposition” itself: a model of value intrinsically distinct from the now unbearable burden of futurehood. Still others have urged us to reconsider agency along the lines of an alternative historical narrative, one that asks us, as Latour does, to reject the “divide that separates exact knowledge and the exercise of power,” that severs “nature” from “culture” (3). This divide rests at the heart of what we consider our own modernity, supplanting it with a networked subjectivity that allows us to think as “Hybrids”: “half engineers and half philosophers” (3). Latour’s theory seems the most effectual, though even here one wonders how such thought translates into a solution in real terms.

All of these are valuable approaches for addressing the impossible question of climate disaster, and Blake, writing near the beginning of our historically unfolding ecological catastrophe, touches on all of them. But his theory of artistic making—of creativity as a form of instantiating a cyclical futurity that resembles the past—might allow us to go further. On the one hand, Blake offers a model of networked subjectivity envisioned by political theorists, among them Latour, Jane Bennett, Teresa de Lauretis, and Stacy Alaimo. I address this point in more detail in chapter two, but Blake’s mythological system establishes a network of psychic agents agonistically at play with one another. In resisting their own material formation, these agents offer a model for disentangling the self from bodily identity: from the intersections of gender, race, and ability (perhaps even of sexual orientation) that ground subjectivity in the body. The sheer vibrancy Blake attributes to the material world, which Hutchings assiduously illustrates, anticipates Bennett’s theories of thing-power and assembled agency. It’s a strange way of thinking about the world, since it finds itself at odds not just with the ways we typically think about ostensibly inanimate objects but because it opposes the logic on which many of our institutions and cultural assumptions are based. As Bennett writes, “Assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials
of all sorts… not governed by any central head” (23-4), a “federation of actants” on whom “moral responsibility fits quite loosely and to which the charge of blame will not quite stick” (28). Similarly, Blake’s vision of selfhood, which views the individual as a composite of opposing psychic forces, stands against the Lockean theories of property and individual rights nearly ubiquitous in the eighteenth century. That vision will seem strange to contemporary readers, for like Bennett’s “federation,” the concept of Blakean selfhood sometimes finds itself at odds with the conceptual basis of modern government and with much of Western philosophy.

This modality enables a reconsideration of those suppositions, which Blake in his time thought restricted freedom and that today we find increasingly oppressive. By taking on the “gendered dualisms” that Alaimo claims “have been cultivated to denigrate and silence certain groups of human as well as nonhuman life”—the Manichean opposition inherent in the binaries of “nature/culture, body/mind, object/subject, resource/agency,” etc. (5)—Blake interrogates and ultimately collapses those divisions in a process that resembles (though remains distinct from) Derridean deconstruction. Not only does Blake “analyze and critique how ‘nature’ and the ‘environment’ circulate as potent discursive formulations,” but in resisting the dominant model of subjectivity fueling the popular notion of political agency, he “complement[s] and complicate[s] that sort of analysis with investigations that account for the ways in which nature, the environment, and the material world itself signify, act upon, or otherwise affect human bodies, knowledges, and practices” (7-8). His thought methodizes a resistance to the constructions of identity and self, from gender, race, and sexual orientation to environment and mind. In this sense, Blake imagines the “post of posthumanity” de Lauretis identifies in contemporary humanistic inquiry, an installation of “uncertainty” within the very “primacy of the cultural and its many ‘turns’” (368).
Chapter one investigates what I call Blake’s pastoral futurism, the notion that, by employing tools available in the present, one can “build” a future that closely resembles the past. Blake metaphorizes that process of building in various ways, most prominently by depicting weapons, tools, and musical instruments to emphasize the artisanality of the labor Blake himself performed. I first trace several theories of pastoral by William Empson, Paul Alpers, and most significantly, Raymond Williams, all of which allow me to figure Blake’s pastoral as a technology that allows the artist to envisage the spiritual care of society by comparing it—even attempting to return it—to an idealized natural past. I then look to Blake’s watercolor illustrations of Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (Gray 1751, Blake 1798) to consider how Blake uses the material form of the illustrations to criticize the hermeneutic strictures of the clergy. I then tie that critique to Blake’s depictions of hand-based creation in the opening passages of Milton, the process by which Blake seeks to insatiate the cyclical futurity he imagines in the “Jerusalem” lyric.

I subsequently turn in chapter two to trace the philosophical history and theoretical implications of Blake’s psychic system: the historical milieu in which his unique vision of selfhood emerged and the extent to which Blake’s system differed from the prevailing models in the period. I briefly examine selfhood in Blake’s major poetic predecessor, Alexander Pope, understanding Pope’s model as monadic and self-enclosed. As is evident from The Marriage of Heaven & Hell, as well as from Milton, Blake’s vision of the self—from the level of political agency to that of cognition—differs radically from Pope’s: he rejects the mind-body division established by Descartes and understands perception as the product of oppositional psychic selves imaginatively interacting. He furthermore views property and individual rights, on which the notion of the modern subject is based, as restrictive, rejecting Lockean sovereignty in favor of a radically free—because congregated—individual that
exists outside the institutional systems that comprise liberal modernity. I illustrate Blakean selfhood by turning to the body text of Milton to understand not only how Blake conceives of subjectivity but how subjectivity itself is intricately tied to his theory of artistic creation.

Chapter three examines Milton as a system of interconnected material texts whose variations and changes reflect Blake’s shifting attitude toward technology and artisanal practice. After briefly historicizing Blake’s artistic process, looking specifically the print history of Milton, I examine two cancelled plates from America a Prophecy before examining the four material copies of Milton. Most significant, I conclude, is Milton copy D, which, through Blake’s use of luminous metals to irradiate the text, reflects his strengthened investment in artisanal creation even the mechanical printing press emerges. While Blake demonstrates a strong resistance to mechanized printing and to the scientific episteme that enabled such technologies, his relationship to technology and industry is a complex one, engaged with the multifarious economic and industrial networks of empire. He demonstrates that complexity from the broadest conceptual level to the minutest material scale.

Ultimately, though, Blake’s theory of poiesis is wholly inadequate as a mode of instantiating real political change—of initiating the cyclical futurity depicted in “Jerusalem.” Even he must have known this. From the late 1780s until his death in 1827, he watched the British Empire not decline but expand, aristocratic power accrue, and his own training as an artisanal printer and bookmaker grow increasingly obsolete. Certainly in terms of environmental degradation, the world was a worse place near the end of Blake’s life than when he entered it in 1757. What Blake offers us, however, is what Makdisi calls an “anti-history of modernization” (Imperialism 157), a vision of futurity that works against the historical narrative of modernity we read in textbooks and teach to our students—one that, in the competitive sphere of codified intellectual histories, simply didn’t win out. But the
myriad injustices Blake recognized in liberalism’s emerging “world-system” (Imperialism 157) speaks to the system of exploitation we might recognize, if look closely enough, in our own (neo)liberal modernity. We don’t have ‘slavery anymore,’ but we do; the world was ‘decolonized,’ but it wasn’t. The fact that the most powerful governments today work arduously to maintain what Makdisi, referring to Blake’s era, refers to as a “global network of production and exploitation” bolstered by a robust “political and military system” illustrates just how little our society has truly evolved (Imperialism 157). If we as critics are to have any chance at addressing that system and the cataclysm of environmental degradation it has produced, the first step is to rethink what we consider our own modernity. To do so, we must reach into the past, if not to make an environmental future that resembles the untouched nature of a previous era, at least to see clearly our own errors and to do what we can to amend them now.
Pastoral Futurism:

Blake’s Millenarian Making

The first book of *Milton* opens with an invocation of the “Muses,” the “Daughters of Beulah… who inspire the Poets Song,” an invitation to “Come into” the poet’s “hand” and rouse his creative powers (2.1-5, E 96). In a downward motion quite opposite Milton’s in the opening verses of *Paradise Lost*, a gesture of embodiment rather than apotheosis, Blake describes the process by which the Muses’ inspiration enters the mind and manifests in an act of physical creation given form by the hand. Thought “descend[s] down the Nerves of [his] right arm / From out the Portals of [his] Brain, where by [the Muse’s] ministry / The Eternal Great Humanity Divine. planted his Paradise” (2.6-8, E 96). The passage emphasizes a division between the body and the mind, one Blake elsewhere rejects, underscoring the significance of physicality to Blake’s process of making. Diction is important here. Blake uses the word “Brain” rather than mind, highlighting its materiality. Its “Portals” function as literal gateways through which sense experience enters and imaginative creation departs before being granted form by the hands. It is not enough to imagine a “green & pleasant” future. That future must be *made*. Blake models that process here.

As with much of Blake’s art, the passage is self-reflexive, speaking at once of the “Bards Song” that comprises the first third of *Milton* and of the writing and engraving Blake performs in creating his illuminated book—of giving form to the amorphous matter of the manuscript page, of the untouched copper plate, or of the paper onto which that plate will eventually be stamped. Blake goes on to explore other modes of creation throughout the prophecy. *Los*, for instance, emerges into physical form in a passage blatantly echoing
biblical creation—and, perhaps more significantly, resembling Raphael's description of God creating the universe in book VII of Paradise Lost. While all such processes are related—they all investigate one mode or aspect of creation—none is more important for Blake than that of artistic making, since it comprises the method by which spiritual, political, and environmental change emerges in the material world. Blake privileges this form of poiesis—the doing or making by which futurity is built—by placing it front and center in the “Preface” and focalizing it in the opening to book one.

This process of making is essential to Blake’s millenarian theory of political action, which imagines cycles of disruption and renewal that depend on creativity to instigate such change. By bringing art objects into the world, the creator induces a temporal rotation back to the “Jerusalem” lyric’s “ancient time.” This backward movement, and the pristine natural imagery that accompanies it, symbolically cloaks Blake’s futurism in the mode of pastoral, a peculiar valence for a poetic work so concerned with the labor of creation. As Raymond Williams so trenchantly observes, one of pastoral’s prime functions is to obscure labor even while depicting its products. This mode of representation is significantly at odds with Blake’s theory of making, which emphasizes the materiality both of labor and its products in order to manifest revolution. Milton demonstrates an awareness of this tension, grounding Blake’s vision of a made futurity in an implicit interrogation of the technology of pastoral itself, for even while employing the mode’s myriad devices he critiques them, at points centralizing labor to do so and at others curiously obscuring it to highlight its necessity. The oscillation between labor’s overt presence and its absence (which is really a decentralized presence, rendering labor itself even more salient, if not apparent) establishes a system of contrariety in which Blake forges opposition in order to facilitate that system’s collapse.
This chapter investigates the metaphoricity of Blake’s labor, how he imagines the tension between its necessity for the creation of his own illuminated prints and its absence in depictions of pristine natural futurity. As will become clear, Blake views manual labor, represented by the shovel, the scythe, and the plow, as an analog to poiesis. Paradoxically, the cyclicalty of his pastoral futurism prevents that future from being imagined without first expunging labor from that image. Opposition thus becomes a way for Blake to mitigate this paradox by legitimizing a kink in his futural logic, for how does one labor toward a made future if labor is absent from that future itself, or from one’s imagination of it? By interrogating the modality of pastoral even while employing it—by rendering labor both absent and present—he illustrates a theory for creating an environmental future that, though it looks pastorally pristine, is essentially artificial. But in a world of fallen forms—ones, as we will see from chapter two, imprisoned in their own materiality—poiesis renders environmental degradation a felix culpa of sorts, one that allows humanity to redeem itself, through the suffering of work, by inducing a turn on the temporal wheel. By employing the material aspects of his illustrations to perform this interrogation, Blake models that making, giving physical form to a previously imagined future, one greener and more pleasant than the one he himself inhabits.

**Pastoral Technology**

According to Paul Alpers, the term “pastoral” designates a wide range of genres, including but not limited to “pastoral elegies, love complaints” and “singing contests,” which might take the form of “romances,” “lyrics,” “comedies” and even “novels” (46). But pastoral is not a mere umbrella term for these diverse genres, and while some crossover may be inevitable, pastoral as technology—Alpers calls it a “mode”—performs a specific
rhetorical work on its own. As a quick glance at the OED reveals, the term is nebulous. In some instances, it may refer to a person or thing “associated with the tending of livestock,” an image nearly ubiquitous throughout Blake’s corpus, especially in the Songs. Shepherds, sheep, and the act of shepherding are central to the long tradition of pastoral. Farming and farmland typify its more colloquial usage, especially as employed in opposition to cityscapes or urban spaces, though that distinction traces back at least to Virgil’s Eclogues. In English, pastoral poetry has frequently been written by urban poets for urban audiences, exemplified early on by direct emulations of the Eclogues but spanning out to encompass everything from short lyrics to early modern dramas and pastoral elegies. In nearly all cases, the authors of such works arose either from wealthy families—who, if not based in London, maintained access to travel and education—or from urban centers, where a basic education in the classics might have been available. Though they do not all stem from the same financial or geographic backgrounds, what remains common among Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and Marvell—and a whole host of English writers whose works, at one point or another, participate in the pastoral mode—is that they were literate, spent large portions of their lives in manors or in urban centers, and they wrote for primarily urban audiences. Blake himself falls neatly into these categories. Though his work is populated by Shepherds and farmhands, he lived nearly his entire life in London, leaving for only a three-year period, which he spent in Felpam, Sussex, under what he found to be the restrictive financial auspices of his patron William Hayley.

4 Blake draws on many strands from the genres listed by Alpers, most notably the pastoral elegy, but it would be difficult to class his illuminated books within any single one of them. The “Piping songs” (2) and the “pluck[ing]” of a “hollow reed” (16) in the “Introduction” to The Songs of Innocence might recall what Peter Sacks in The English Elegy refers to as the “most elegiac of instruments”—the “pipe or flute” used by Pan, the “patron of pastoral and of elegy” (2)—a symbol that might tempt readers to class these poems as pastoral elegies.
Because pastoral literature was not written by members of the laboring class, the term denotes the portrayal of “rural life or characters” in an “idealized or romantic manner,” one not only unfaithful to rural life but that displaces its most essential components: the mud, sweat, and blisters that typify work in the field. Raymond Williams describes this effect as an “image of culture” without labor, a “natural growth” that requires no tending, shaping, indeed, no culturing (27). The representation of such absence—abundance without the labor necessary to sow seeds, tend crops, and, ultimately, to harvest them—is an “abuse of language,” not the “country life” such representations are meant to depict. It’s worth lingering over Williams’ language, which seeks to belabor absent work: to make present in the scholarly archive that which in the poetic and imagistic ones remains absent, and whose absence has inarguably contributed to the damaging conception of Nature as a provident entity that requires no maintenance or care, and from which humanity can unendingly mine resources. As Williams writes:

The actual men and women who rear the animals and drive them to the house and kill them and prepare them for meat; who trap the pheasants and partridges and catch the fish; who plant and manure and prune and harvest the fruit trees: these are not present; their work is all done for them by a natural order. (32)

Considered on these terms, pastoral is indeed an abuse of language, a denial of lived experience in favor of its glossy idealization. Empson calls it a “curious trick” that pastoral depicts the “poorest people” to invoke “courtly flattery” (98), an ironic effect, since the mode has generally been evoked by artists, trained in their craft, for classes educated and literate enough to be able to appreciate the work, even if they do not register that irony. The result is one of imaginative remove. Pastoral places the reader in a scene far distant—much
more “green” and “pleasant”—than the one he or she experiences, but it does so at the cost of reality, for in obscuring the labor necessary to shape its idealized depictions, it masks the artisanal physicality of making—the work that lends aesthetic form to the raw material of nature.

On the one hand, it makes sense that Blake, having grown up in London, would turn to pastoral to imagine a greener reality. As noted, English cities of the eighteenth century were characterized by rapidly increasing populations, widespread sanitation issues, and, most pertinent to this study, a massive uptick in fossil fuel consumption. Though London was not a major manufacturing center, Londoners burned coal at such rates that “respiratory illness caused by coal smoke” had become “one of London’s leading causes of death” (Hiltner 316). Coal’s impact on children in the period has been well documented, not least of all by Blake, but while his “Chimney Sweeper” poems provide much insight on this matter, they hardly depict what Leo Damrosch notes are the “twisted joints and spines” experienced by actual chimney sweepers, some them “as young as four” (64). Moreover, “there were no facilities for washing off soot,” and as a result, “cancer of the scrotum was common” (64). Coal also prompted the mechanization of printmaking as steam power gave way to the automated printing press, rendering the slow and physically arduous wooden printing press, on which Blake printed all of his illuminated books, increasingly obsolete. By the time Blake completed his apprenticeship, the world into which he set out as an artist was on the cusp of a mechanical revolution, one that would eventually put artisans like Blake out of work. Given the social-environmental milieu into which he was born and in which he spent the vast majority of his life, it only makes sense that Blake would look to pastoral, with its idealization of the “green” and “pleasant” aspects of life outside of the city, in order to imagine a better life. But Blake was highly aware of the way pastoral masks labor in depicting
abundance, and while Blake himself was not exactly a farmhand, Blake the artisan worked extensively with his hands, often for long hours on end. He did not undervalue the work it takes to shape formless matter into art, nor did he overlook the labor necessary to culture unplowed dirt into a field of harvest-ready crops. Such shaping was essential to illuminated printing and central to Blake’s theory of *poiesis* as a mode of political action.

There is also a temporal aspect to pastoral, one emblematic of the mode more generally, but that remains pertinent to Blake’s employment of it as a technology for thought: a intellectual tool whose implementation might materially instantiate the green futurity Blake imagines. Pastoral is characterized by a preoccupation with the past, a looking back from the present, often longingly, with the notion that things were better—spiritually, morally, socially, even technologically—in a previous age. Williams describes this effect as a sort of “escalator,” always bringing us “Just back” over the crest of the “last” temporal “hill” (9). He traces the effect from his own present through the nineteenth century, and then, via John Clare, to “what seems, on internal evidence, to be the 1790s,” Blake’s most active period and the time in which he began to plot *Milton* (10). Williams quotes Clare’s “Helpstone,” which loosely echoes Blake’s “Jerusalem” with its “happy Eden” and “golden years” (163). But Williams doesn’t stop there, mapping his “escalator” as an indication of “historical perspective,” first “over the next hill,” and then over the next, back to “Eden” where he suggests “we must get off the escalator and consider its general movement” (10-12). The retrospective effect Williams identifies in the historical literatures of various periods—the “successive Old Englands to which we are confidently referred” (12)—underscores the nostalgia central to the technology of pastoral. It sets representation of the past in front of us and asks us to pine for it—to recognize its moral virtues and their absence from our own time. It is this dimension of pastoral that Blake wholeheartedly embraces,
sometimes to a fault, and on which he bases his penchant for a “green” and “pleasant” future that closely resembles an England of the past—and what, in chapter three, we will come to see as a critique of mechanized industry.

Blake’s insistence on “Mental Fight” as an integral component of poiesis combines these aspects of pastoral, translating thought into political action through the process of artistic making. Such is evident in the catalogue of imperatives put forth in stanza four of the “Jerusalem” lyric and stated even more explicitly in the prose “Preface” that precedes it:

Rouse up O Young Men of the New Age! set your foreheads against the ignorant Hirelings! For we have Hirelings in the Camp, the Court, & the University: who would if they could, for ever depress Mental & prolong Corporeal War. Painters! on you I call! Sculptors! Architects! Suffer not the fash[j]onable Fools to depress your powers by the prices they pretend to give for contemptible works… We do not want either Greek or Roman Models if we are but just & true to our own Imaginations, those Worlds of Eternity in which we shall live for ever; in Jesus our Lord. (2, E 95)

Blake sees his age as one of deep institutional corruption, a regime of structured power whose effects range from the restrictive interpretation of texts to degradation of the environment itself. But his criticisms extend beyond his material surroundings, extending into the spheres of religion and spirituality. As Robert Rix observes, “Blake shows only skepticism towards political agitators who think in material terms and therefore fail to see the necessity of a spiritual rebirth through the renewal of the nation’s religious narrative” (155).5 Naturally, he turns to the past—and specifically to the biblical past—as a model for

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5 See also Christopher Rowland, Blake and the Bible (Yale UP, 2011). Rowland emphasizes the importance within radical Christianity of “human participation in bringing about the New Age
what the future might look like, a place where “the Daughters of Memory shall become the Daughters of Inspiration” and “Inspired men”—those imbued with the creative power of the imagination—“will hold their proper rank.” Imagination pours from the wellspring of divinity, itself “Sublime” in the same manner as the Bible.

Like the “Jerusalem” lyric, the prose Preface hinges on millenarian revolution—“revolution,” that is, in the sense that it advocates a new spiritual-political order, but also that things must “revolve” (circular, cyclical) in order to reach that point. While Jerusalem functions as a site of pastoral utopia, it also represents the Jerusalem of biblical apocalypse. As John writes in Revelation, “new Jerusalem” descends “from God out of heaven,” at which point he hears a “great voice”: “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them” (21:2-3). The notion of a God “dwelling” within the corporeal world is an attractive one to Blake. He seems to have detected—at points, literally to have seen and interacted with—a spiritual world embedded within sensible, material reality, one in whose “midst,” Damrosch notes, we live “here and now”; we might ourselves detect that presence “if we could open our consciousness” by employing the imagination “to the fullness of being” (3). “Human Imagination,” Blake writes in Milton, “is the Divine Body of the Lord Jesus” (3.3-4, E 96). Engaging the imagination by producing works of art provides access to this reality, though it also functions inversely: “To make and to be made,” Makdisi argues, “is to participate in this common form of being which Blake called God; and to participate in this common form of being is also to make, to create, to produce” (Reading 113). But

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Kingdom of God on earth,” noting that, as Blake saw it, such revolution cannot be “left to some kind of miraculous intervention” (158).

6 Peter Ackroyd describes one of Blake’s visions, stating that “Blake had been reading an edition of Edward Young’s Night Thoughts, which he had agreed to illustrate, and had come to a passage in which the poet asks “who can paint an angel?” (202). Blake broke into full-on conversation with an entity, which revealed itself to be “the arch-angel Gabriel,” replete with “a shining shape” and “bright wings, who diffused much light” (Blake qtd. in Ackroyd 202). Ackroyd summarizes: “So in the study of his house in Lambeth, Blake saw an angel stand in the sun and move the universe” (202).
“making” is a difficult task, one that requires a great deal of work on the part of the perceiver. Readers should not pass over the “Sword” in line 14 of “Jerusalem,” which is decidedly conscious, awake in the speaker’s “hand.” For Blake, the spiritual future does not come about passively, as it does in Revelation, but actively, through poiesis. The work of the hand in combination with the mind or “brain,” analogous to artistic creation, remains as fundamental to the “Jerusalem” lyric’s temporal rotation as it does to Blake’s millenarian revolution.

Weapons, Tools, Hands

Blake’s pastoral is intimately tied to hands—to the labor, sometimes violent, of the shovel, the scythe, the hammer, and the spear. This manual work is analogous to the labor of creativity, performed through the hands as well as through the imagination. Blake’s symbols for creative making are myriad, but they include the book, the harp, and of course, the flute or the pipe. It is no coincidence that the “Young Men of the New Age” whom Blake implores to be “just & true to [their] own Imaginations” are all visual artists of one sort or another, who would have relied on their hands not only for their livelihood but as the medium of expression for their artistic vision. Blake’s books are littered with images of characters employing manual devices, instruments of “building” for the farmer, shepherd, and piper alike. The introduction to The Songs of Innocence and of Experience unsurprisingly contains an image of a youth holding a pipe, gazing up at what appears to be a wingless cherub. The poem concludes with the speaker “plucking a hollow reed” to fashion “a rural pen,” with which he writes the “happy songs” that comprise Innocence (16-20). “The Voice of the Ancient Bard” features the titular bard plucking the strings of a golden harp larger than himself. Right shoulder held sharply back and arms poised supply above the strings, his
posture is strikingly militant: he wields the harp like a weapon. More importantly, the poem concludes with a warning to the reader (line one’s “Youth of delight”) to avoid the mazes of “Folly” where many “stumble all night over bones of the dead” (1-9), a criticism, as Aileen Ward asserts, of the French Revolution and of political institutions more generally. The concentration of power in just a few hands leads, as Ward suggests, to violence; the “opening morn” in line two “is a bold salute” to the sack of the Bastille, which occurred in July 1789, the same year *The Songs of Innocence* were first printed.

Fig. 1 “The Voice of the Ancient Bard,” *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, copy C, plate 24. 1789. Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
The political nature of Blake’s pastoral becomes especially prevalent in his watercolor illustrations to Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” which examine labor against the hermeneutic strictures of social structures, particularly the church. A protestant Dissenter along the lines of Milton, Blake values self-interpretation of the Bible—and, for that matter, of the Book of Nature. Unlike his illuminated prints, the Gray illustrations, commissioned by the sculptor John Flaxman as a gift for his wife Ann (Blake Archive), employ pencil and light-colored paint, lending a diffuse quality to the images. Colors run and sometimes mix, causing subjects to blend with their environments. By contrast, the engraved images are much starker, featuring fixed borders between subject and object, but also between subject and text, despite their occasional intermingling. Borders in the engravings are not only visually striking, the manner in which the rolling press physically pushes the copper plate into the page leaves a material indention, detectable by running one’s fingers over the front of page. In later copies, when Blake began printing solely on one side of the paper, those borders are distinctly visible on the verso. This blending of self and environment extends beyond the watercolor medium and into the composition, pitting manual laborers against the natural background they penetrate with their tools. Page five (Fig. 2), for instance, features a farmhand bending low to the ground, holding back a clump of wheat with one hand and preparing to scythe it with another. Blake’s pencil lines are visible through the watercolor pigment of the scyther’s left arm, depicting (through a small material detail) the physicality of wild “Nature” penetrating a human subject.
Fig. 2  “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” Page 5. Pen and ink, watercolor over pencil. c. 1797-98. Yale Center for British Art.

Fig. 3  First Detail of “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” Page 5. Pen and ink, watercolor over pencil. c. 1797-98. Yale Center for British Art.
Similarly, the dark watercolor pigment along his spine and buttocks (which seems to imitate motion, though one suspects Blake’s paint simply ran) illustrates the scyther’s impact of his presence on the natural environment, even when he doesn’t actively touch it.

![Fig. 4 Second Detail of “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” Page 5. Pen and ink, watercolor over pencil. c. 1797-98. Yale Center for British Art.](image)

Compositionally, Blake depicts the complex relationship between the laborer, his work, and the environment from which he extracts what Williams would call “abundance.” The bend of his spine, the circumference of which continues along his left arm, fashions an arch nearly symmetrical with that of the scythe, such that, when his right arm swings forward to cut the wheat, it might form a circle. His entire body leans into the effort—as does his mind, if we are to judge by his apparent concentration. The scythe becomes the conduit through which his mental objective is accomplished, a tool for the embodiment of action as the body itself might be thought of, in Cartesian terms, as the mind’s instrument.

Ironically, Gray’s poem highlights labor by drawing the reader’s attention to its absence or end. We barely glimpse the “ploughman,” already heading home in stanza one, as the “curfew tolls the knell of parting day,” leaving the speaker in isolation (1-3). Later, when
Gray addresses work directly (in the lines Blake illustrates here), he does so in the past tense, such that—in keeping with Williams’ critique—the workers themselves remain absent. “The rude forefathers of the hamlet” are “[a]sleep” in their “narrow cell[s]” even as the poem begins, and while Gray describes the “busy housewife ply[ing] her evening care” and the harvester “yield[ing]” his crop, those people and their work exist only in the past tense (16-26). If we think of Blake’s scyther on page five as an illustration of Gray’s laborers, he is always already dead, a ghost persisting in perpetual anonymity via artistic representation. Gray praises such workers, if from the privileged position of an educated penman. He highlights the jocundity with which their work is performed, despite the “destiny obscure” (30) by which their memory is all but eclipsed. Nevertheless, he views their work as “useful,” contrasting it against the “boast of heraldry” and the “pomp of power” that characterize the moneyed class. In so doing, he recognizes the myriad advantages wealth conveys to those who possess it: opportunity for education, ability to travel, and the leisure to fashion enduring works of art. In effect, privilege begets cultural memory, allowing those born well to memorialize themselves. Futurity might be literally “built” by the lower class but the aristocracy will shape our understanding of it.

Blake’s centralization of labor might seem an attempt to upend the modal tendency in pastoral to emphasize abundance while eliminating work. This is true of page five, where the laborer is clearly focalized. Elsewhere, Blake obscures laborers from the scene, rendering them simultaneously present and absent, a technique that, though it putatively resembles the more problematic aspects of pastoral, actually works to critique them. Three illustrations depict digging. On page four (Fig. 6), the laborer clears a deep crevasse in the earth as mourners dressed in black hang their heads toward the ground. In contrast, a white priest in a white gown, holding a white book with no words visible to the reader looks up to the sky,
mouth agape. He mediates the book’s words for the mourners, who, we assume, take his words as truth. Compositionally, the laborer should be the focus. He inhabits the very center of the image and performs the scene’s primary action. But in adding the letterpressed stanzas of Gray’s poem, Blake cuts into his own design, removing a rectangular portion of the original illustration in order to mount the text, here severing the laborer’s head, shoulders, and abdomen. By eliminating the laborer’s identifiable features, Blake renders him anonymous, abstracting work from the person who performs it. Viewers register an unnerving sense that, while the priest and mourners are the only identifiable subjects in view, their presence is somewhat peripheral. Since the laborer, whose hands and shovel persist, remains at the physical center of the image, his work itself becomes the illustration’s central focus. Rather than underscore work by depicting the laborer (as he does on page five), Blake highlights work’s significance by focalizing labor in the abstract, making uncomfortably apparent what viewers cannot see: labor is necessary, inexpugnable, even in instances where we do not want to recognize its presence.

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7 The contrast between the absent-present laborer and the people that surround him is enhanced by the material form of the art-object. The paper of the watercolor designs is the same thick, high-quality stock he uses for his illuminated prints. By contrast, the gray stanzas are (somewhat crudely) cut from the thin and flimsy pages of a printing of Gray’s poems. As one turns the unbound prints to examine the verso, the quality of the paper becomes clear, further enhancing this material difference.
Fig. 5 “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” Page 4. Pen and ink, watercolor over pencil. c. 1797-98. Yale Center for British Art.

Fig. 6 Detail of “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” Page 4. Pen and ink, watercolor over pencil. c. 1797-98. Yale Center for British Art.
Labor’s absence-presence—that it is always there even when obscured from the viewer—functions in contrarian opposition to the absolute centralization of labor in illustrations such as page five. The series oscillates between the two modes, maintaining tension between them, in both cases pitting manual laborers against figures of the moneyed class, the gatekeepers of interpretation within modern institutions. The figure in page seven (Fig. 4), for instance, is shown in physical defiance to a solemn clergymen, his right hand resting gently on his shovel while his left lifts toward the heavens, index finger raised, a solid gesture of rebellion against the power of institutionalized religion. His upright posture contrasts starkly with that of the priest, who slouches as he slinks away. The priest’s torso is turned toward the laborer, but his feet face the opposite direction. In his hand, he holds a piece of paper, the writing on which is indiscernible. Judging from the red tassel hanging from the bottom, it seems to be of some importance: an institutional tool of law, whether spiritual or governmental, which empowers the priest-as-interpreter at the expense of working class laborers. The illustrations contain about as many books as shovels—one more, in fact—and the two technologies, one of making and the other of interpreting, oppose one another throughout the illustrations.

This opposition is linked to Blake’s role as a religious dissenter, one who subscribed to no particular branch of theological thought but who believed ardently in the necessity of self-reliance and individual interpretation. Christopher Rowland stresses the “hermeneutical characteristics of the radical mind-set,” emphasizing the significance, in Blake’s view, of reading and interpreting the Bible for oneself (159). Hermeneutic autonomy renders the book a weapon—a “Bow of burning gold”—but the strictures of institutional instruction (of the priests, government officials, university professors, etc.) render that autonomy moot. The illustrations highlight manual labor not merely in contrast but in opposition to clerical
labor, underscoring the liberatory power of Blake’s metaphorical “building.” Such tension is present even from page three, where a priest looking up at a cloud-like figure overlooks the laborer directly in front of him. Blake uses a light, yellow-brown pigment to distinguish the laborer from his environment. The horse behind him, the same color as the bucket, matches the color of the dirt at the laborer’s feet. But for his placement at the center of the page and his lighter pigmentation, the laborer would likely blend into the landscape, as his fellow worker at the page’s right margin—the color of the horses and of the dirt—virtually does. A light-colored plow, large and near the foreground of the image, sits unused while the priest with empty hands looks elsewhere. Viewers see the plow as the priest sees it: lightly sketched, pushed to the side, in plain sight but almost entirely invisible. The suggestion seems to be that, while Blake praises interaction with the spiritual world, to do so without simultaneously laboring with one’s hands is ineffective and hypocritical.
Fig. 7  “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” Page 7. Pen and ink, watercolor over pencil. c. 1797-98. Yale Center for British Art.
Labor is essential to Blake’s pastoral, which reflects his skepticism toward social institutions but, more significantly, adumbrates his theory of artistic making as a means to political action. For readers familiar with Blake’s process as a printmaker, the shovels in his illustrations immediately recall an engraver’s burin. A small, chisel-like tool, the burin featured a lengthy steel neck topped by a pointed oval tip, which, as printmakers knew well, resembled a shovel. The “engraver,” Robert Essick describes, “had to hold his wrist fairly rigid” to keep the tool “cutting at the proper depth,” pressing into the copper plate with “considerable strength,” often “for hours on end” (20). It was hard manual labor, not
terribly dissimilar from the difficult and time-consuming process of grave digging, a correspondence Blake did not fail to notice. The term “burin” itself derives from the French, though many in Blake’s time preferred its older, English synonym, “graver.” Moreover, as Essick notes, the tool had to be pushed “through the metal like a plow,” thrusting the copper “out of” the newly dug “lines” and into “thin curl[s] of metal” (20, my emphasis). The plow further suggests “verse,” from the Latin versus, a “line or a row,” such as those turned over in the soil, as in Virgil’s Georgics (OED). The image thus becomes a tripartite, self-reflexive metaphor, analogizing the various media of Blake’s illuminated books: image, engravings, and words, all of which require one type of labor or another. In so doing, he pits the art of printmaking (like the artisanal practices mentioned in the “Preface”) against the agents of structural oppression, the “Hirelings” who “depress Mental & prolong Corporeal War.” Revolution in the Blakean sense, a “turning” back to the past in order to eke out a future, necessitates a combination of spiritual and material building, through which utopian “Jerusalem” is made.

While Blake’s labor is harsh, dirty, un-“pleasant” in nearly every aspect, there is a recuperative quality to it. Indeed, as I have mentioned, it is through such “building” that a green environmental futurity is made. What is distinct about these images is that they are not in the least bit industrial. Blake centralizes labor but the labor he highlights is a form of work that, even in the 1790s, was becoming obsolete and would only continue to do so over the course of the nineteenth century. Blake’s cyclical vision of futurity requires work, which we might otherwise imagine as entirely absent from a pastoral, pristine nature, but the work that it requires, at least in Blake’s mind, is the work of the past—what is becoming outdated and outmoded, even as Blake imagines it. Such will be the case, as I examine in chapter three, of Blake’s illuminated books. As a response, Blake’s methods grows increasingly intricate over
the course of his career, emphasizing the material ornamentation of his books by investing greater amounts of time in them and upping their cost. By 1818, when he prints copy D of *Milton*, he is entirely invested in a mode of artisanal making diametrically opposed to the standards of bookmaking in his day. What I want to suggest in this final essayist turn, however, is that Blake views artistic creation—and therefore labor—in *fortunate* terms.

Though it might seem like a burden, one we may want to expunge from artistic representation, labor itself is what allows the artist to instantiate an Edenic future. Like Milton, Blake sees humanity in a postlapsarian state, of which environmental degradation is simply a symptom. But unlike Milton, who understands human beings as redeemed only through Christ’s sacrifice, thus removing the onus of redemption from mankind itself, Blake views humanity as responsible for its own spiritual, political, and environmental redemption. *Poiesis* becomes the mode through which that redemption manifests, a form of poetic salvation that harnesses the power of the imagination to materially instantiate pastoral futurity not in the next life but in the one at hand.
CHAPTER 2

Made Future and the Congregational Self:
Political Agency in *Milton*

*Milton* begins in earnest by depicting Milton, the now-fictionalized historical poet, dead “One hundred years, pondring the intricate mazes of Providence” and “Viewing his Sixfold Emanation scatter’d thro’ the deep / In torment” (2.17-20, E 96). In Blake’s telling, Milton soon descends from Heaven, entering the body of Blake the poet, a scene depicted in plate 17, copy D, as a star descending onto, or perhaps into, the poet’s foot—a spiritual body being blasted into material one. But even before he does, the “cause” that “mov’d Milton to this unexampled deed” is “A Bards prophetic Song,” a “chorus solemn & loud” to which “all sat attentive” (2.21-5, E 96). Even in these lines, readers will note the fractured nature of the Blakean self. The bard, whom readers might take to be Blake, is both choral and singular (“a Bard,” “the awful man” [2.22-4, E 96, my emphasis]). The same is true of Milton’s “Sixfold Emanation,” a collection of his female selves severed from the singular, and essentially hermaphroditic, Milton. This fusion of selves, of many into one and one into many, parallels the fragmentation of time necessitated by Milton’s descent from Heaven. He breaks from “Death Eternal,” which somehow lasts a mere “One hundred years,” to again become flesh and inhabit the world of measurable time and space.

Fig. 9  Detail of *Milton*, plate 17, copy D. Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
Blake’s notion of a fundamentally fractured self is central to his theory of art as political action: this is the idea that, by giving form to thought, the artist materially intervenes in the political arena. While such acts of politically motivated *poiesis* introduce tension outwardly into the social sphere, as artistic acts, they begin in the mind, where the dialectical tension that shapes the political sphere and introduces historical progress necessarily originates. For Blake, this inward tension is fostered by the various actants agonistically at play within the self. This inverts the “subjected” or shared agency described by ecotheorists. Latour, for instance, advocates a collective understanding of agency, one wherein to “be a subject” at all “is not to act autonomously in front of an objective background, but to share agency with other subjects that have also lost their autonomy” (5 “Agency,” italics original). What Western thinkers have traditionally seen as mere objects—as latent, unmoving, non-autonomous beings—Latour considers players within a wider network of intersecting subjects. Bennett similarly describes an “agency of assemblages,” wherein “thing-power” dominates both the subjective will and the political sphere (20). As she writes, “Any specific thing”—“a rat, a cap, and the human narrator of their vitality”—“is neither subject nor object but a ‘mode’ of what Spinoza calls ‘Deus siva Natura’ (God or Nature)” (21-2). To be a “mode” in the Spinozan sense “is to form alliances and enter assemblages,” to “mod(e)ify and be modified by others” (22).

Blake is not primarily interested in understanding material objects as agents, or in representing inert objects as subjects, although as I noted in my introduction, Kevin Hutchings’ *Imagining Nature* has underscored the vitality Blake sometimes locates in the “Vegetable World” (*Milton* 21.12, E 115). “For Blake,” Hutchings writes, “our encounters with non-human entities are always in some sense anthropomorphic encounters with ourselves” (117). Gesturing to copy C, plate 16, Hutchings observes the human-legged tree
near the page’s bottom, which exerts agency by extending its anthropomorphized branches like arms toward a human figure, what seems to be Milton. A stone beneath it features a human face, perhaps Urizen’s, staring up at him from the ground. Yet, as Hutchings observes, “the fact that the tree and rock are not entirely human in form but maintain a degree of their non-human alterity indicates something of their resistance to anthropomorphic inscription,” rendering them simultaneously “human and inhuman” (117).

More significant for Blake is the interaction not of objective but of interior agents, the interplay between which—and the networks of contrariety they forge—comprises a revised form of subjectivity itself. Blake’s subject is, like Latour’s, “subjected,” but to inward rather than outward forces. In this way, the self constitutes a network, ecological in the etymological sense of a “house” or a “dwelling”—from the Greek οἰκος—within which interdependent agents cooperate and adhere. As I will demonstrate, the tension between these interacting interior agents translates into the political sphere through the physical acts of poiesis described in chapter one, which artistically materialize the mind’s dialectical interchange in the physical world and institute a temporal rotation back to the “Jerusalem” lyric’s “ancient time.” While the topos of Blake’s “green” and “pleasant” future alternates
continuously between ideality and impossibility (between the *eu-* and *ou-* of Thomas More’s *Utopia*), the action it provokes—the form it gives to thought—renders it a useful, perhaps indispensable trope for environmental thinkers, both in Blake’s time and today. Ultimately, Blake’s vision of ecological selfhood, whose systemic tension implicitly advocates “Mental Fight,” serves as an apt model for the future of ecocriticism, which seeks to think beyond binary oppositions and into the complex patterns of interaction and exchange that characterize networks in the Anthropocene.

**Against Atomism**

Blake’s vision of selfhood opposes the dominant model of individualism that emerged in the eighteenth century, especially for figures who lived a generation or so before him, among them Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe, and Alexander Pope. Pope in particular viewed the self as essentially atomistic, isolated through the apparatus of perception from the other beings that surround it. Those beings interact within a wider ecological network, dependent on each other even as they exist in opposition, but in his mind they are, in and of themselves, whole. Although the Popian “Universe” is comprised of one great “chain” that “Connects each being,” individual selves remain isolated, “bubbles on the sea of matter borne” (III.1-27). Pope’s vision of selfhood is expressed mimetically in the couplet form, which condenses his thought into atomized units. The effect is a legalistic structure—a verse governed by metrical laws that resemble those of nature—which shapes the poem in both form and thought. While the *Essay* ultimately settles on a religious materialism that eschews scientific investigation, Pope’s idea of an ecologically connected, cognitively distinct self stems contradictorily from the science of the period.
The notion of an atomized self finds its historical locus in the discourses of empiricism and natural philosophy that unfolded throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Particularly in the *Essay on Man*, Pope champions Isaac Newton, whose *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687) described the universe in material terms, rendering matter quantifiable and measurable, a revelation that, a few short decades later, had seeped into nearly every discipline of study, “fields as diverse,” Hutchings argues, “as chemistry, botany, zoology, psychology, and theology” (121). Even poetry, as Pope both wittingly and unwittingly demonstrates, was impacted by Newtonian principles. His verse is critical of Newton’s “proud science” (I.101) while advocating for empirical observation and exhibiting an insistence on meter and rhyme:

Go, wondrous creature! mount where science guides;
Go, measure earth, weigh air, and state the tides;
Instruct the planets in what orbs to run,
Correct old Time, and regulate the sun

(II.19-22)

*Look round our world; behold* the chain of love
Combining all below and all above.
*See* plastic Nature working to its end,
The single atoms each to other tend,
Attract, attracted to, the next in place
Formed and impelled its neighbor to embrace.

(III.7-12, italics mine)

The legalistic structure of Pope’s verse, which governs the apparent chaos of language according to strict mathematical principles, betrays an acute anxiety over the disarray of “unnumber’d” (I.21) Nature. That the universe itself could be quantified, perhaps controlled,
must have been a comforting thought, especially for an eighteenth-century Catholic who saw himself as a “deformed dwarf” (486).  

Whatever his anxieties, Pope, like many of his contemporaries, was fascinated by the idea of a measurable, quantifiable universe, one that, if understood, could potentially be manipulated and employed to suit the aims of mankind. Such logic would eventually give way to a mechanical episteme that enabled the invention of the steam engine, the Leyden jar, and the mechanical printing press. “Measurement,” Foucault argues, “enables us to analyse like things according to the calculable form of identity and difference,” through which “Western culture found its fundamental arrangements modified” (53-4). This was already happening to an extent in Pope’s youth, though such technologies would expand exponentially throughout his lifetime and in Blake’s. But Newtonian science did not develop in a vacuum; it built upon the principles of observation and rational thought introduced in England by Francis Bacon, and perfected by John Locke, over the course of the seventeenth century. While the Baconian Method would eventually be supplanted by the Scientific Method still in use today, Bacon’s Novum Organum (1620) argued, as Garrett Thompson observes, for “the gradual and systematic ascent to general truths from the observation of particulars,” locating the basis of knowledge in the senses (122). Bacon’s theory insisted on the “mechanical infallibility” of the sensorium and of the Baconian Method itself, which emphasized “eliminative induction” over the “simple enumerative induction” of Aristotelian science, which he thought “rashly generaliz[ed] from finite observations” (Thompson 122-3). A friend and contemporary to Newton, Locke sought to quantify the nature of knowledge,

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8 Pope wrote, in a letter to his close friend Martha Blount (a possible, though somewhat unlikely, lover), “I have indeed heard of women that have had a kindness for men of my make, but it has been after enjoyment, never before; and I know to my cost you have had no taste of that talent in me” (327). As Leo Damrosch notes, “Pope had heard of a queen who had a fondness for a deformed dwarf in her court” (486). The implication seems to be sexual.
to “inquire into” its “justification and limits” (Thompson 148). Though Locke, in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, believed “certain innate principles” to be “naturally imprinted on the mind,” he casts the process of imprinting as the “making” of “certain truths to be perceived,” since “to imprint any thing on the mind, without the mind’s perceiving it, seems to [him] hardly intelligible.” The limits to knowledge, in the Lockean sense, are the limits of sensation and intellection.

As is well known, Blake fundamentally disagreed with the Popian model of selfhood and the modalities of empiricism and natural science on which it is based. He detested the idea that knowledge is acquired exclusively through the senses and that mere intellection comprises its ultimate bounds. Together, Newton, Bacon, and Locke make up the triumvirate of materialist philosophers Blake rails against in his later works, a triad that sometimes expands to include René Descartes, Voltaire, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In Blake’s view, natural philosophy sought to expunge God from the physical world and divide cognition from material reality. For him, spiritual and material realities coexist, and the mind—which perceives divine presence through the active power of the imagination—is inseparable from the instruments of perception that make such divinity known, a theological position that undoubtedly stems in part from his own experiences. Blake famously observed spirits in mundane places, once exclaiming to his mother that he had seen “the Prophet Ezekiel under a Tree in the Fields” (Tatham, qtd. in Bentley 19). Years later, he is said to have observed “a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars” (Gilchrist qtd. in Bentley 19). The very tenets of empiricism thus appear as heresy to

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9 Conversely, in *Milton*, he will locate mundane places within spiritual or imagined ones, such as his descriptions of Golgonooza—the built city resembling a New Jerusalem—which features streets and landmarks specific to the city of London. He writes, on plate four of *Milton*, “Between South Molton Street”—Blake’s early residence—“& Stratford Place: Calvarys foot / Where the Victims were preparing for Sacrifice their Cherubim” (E 98, 4.21-2). Later, he asks, “When shall Jerusalem return
Blake, who pithily evinces such sentiments in his annotations to Bacon’s *Essays Moral, Economical and Political* (1798). He writes on the title page, “Good Advice for Satans Kingdom” (E 620), and elsewhere scribbles, “Bacon put an End to Faith” (E 621). In a section titled “Of Unity in Religion,” he exclaims, “False O Satan” (E 622).

Perhaps the most famous articulation of Blake’s resistance to natural philosophy is his “Mock On” lyric (c. 1803), which criticizes both the vanity and futility of inductive reasoning, figuring natural science within the context of prophetic thought:

Mock on Mock on Voltaire Rousseau
Mock on Mock on! tis all in vain!
You throw the sand against the wind
And the wind blows it back again
And every sand becomes a Gem
Reflected in the beams divine
Blown back they blind the mocking Eye
But still in Israels paths they shine

The Atoms of Democritus
And Newtons Particles of light
Are sands upon the Red sea shore
Where Israels tents do shine so bright (E 477)

Adopting the four-beat meter characteristic of *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, “Mock On” not only trivializes the writings of Voltaire and Rousseau, framing its critique in a poetic form common to nursery rhymes, it casts their works as fruitless efforts that “blind” their authors to actual truth, which for Blake is the truth of God. Their names stand in as metonyms for the entire system of Enlightenment thought, as well as for the history of natural philosophy from Democritus to Newton, on which that system is founded. Blake minimizes their contributions to a collective historical knowledge, comparing the theses of Democritus and Newton to individual grains of sand—themselves nearly invisible—within & overspread all the Nations / Return: return to Lambeths Vale,” Lambeth being a borough in London where Blake lived as he developed his first illuminated books (E 100, 6.18-9).
the holistic contribution of ideas that accumulates into collective knowledge. Much as the
disciplines of science or philosophy might be considered in teleological terms, ultimately
moving toward a predetermined end, Blake sees knowledge itself this way, although its telos is
religious, stemming from revelation rather than observation. Thus the atomic sands of
Newtonian or Democritean philosophy accumulate not into a vast strand beneath the cliffs
of Dover, which would perhaps be emblematic of the various empiricist knowledges
cohering in Blake’s England (Pope might have written such a poem), but on “the Red sea
shore / Where Israels tents do shine,” an homage to the millenarianism discussed in chapter
one. Knowledge—and with it, human progress—is inextricably tied to Christ’s coming, at
least in Blake’s mind.

Blake’s prophetic works are even more vehement in their rejection of empiricist
knowledge. Late in Milton he bemoans natural philosophy, which he calls the “Natural
Religion” (40.11, E 141), viewing its emphasis on sensation as the ultimate means of
apprehending materiality in direct conflict with the millenarian notion that God or the
spiritual world exists within the embodied one perceived through the senses. Empiricism,
in his view, stifles imagination. He also castigates the “Newtonian Phantasm” (40.11, E 141),
seeing Newton’s urge to enumerate nature via mathematical principles as antithetical to the
“opening of consciousness” requisite for imaginative creation. He mentions Voltaire,
Rousseau, and David Hume by name, rebuking them for their “annihilation” of religion
(40.9, E 141). Indeed, Blake viewed England’s growing obsession with scientific
understanding as yet another sign of its political, spiritual, and institutional corruption,
leading him to pine for a time in England before such intellectual fashions took hold. “O

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10 Blake writes, in plate nine of There Is Not Natural Religion, “The desires & perceptions of man
untaught by any thing but organs of sense must be limited to objects of sense” (E 2), and on plate 10,
“Mans desires are limited by his perceptions. none can desire what he has not perceiv’d” (E 2). Copy
B concludes, “Therefore / God becomes as we are, / that we may be as he / is” (E 3).
Divine Spirit,” he writes in *Jerusalem*, “That I may awake Albion from his long & cold repose. 

/ For Bacon & Newton sheathed in dismal steel, their terrors hang / Like iron scourges over Albion… bruising my minute articulations” (15.10-3, E 159). Blake would happily step onto Williams’ escalator and ride it back a generation or two, if it weren’t for the responsibility he feels for England’s spiritual care. Instead, he employs the imagination to induce a rotation on the millenarian wheel, using his illuminated books—the products of his own *poësis*—to instigate political, spiritual, and environmental restoration.

Of course, as Hutchings observes, Blake’s “polemical alignment of Newton with mechanistic philosophy” is in part “misdirected,” for it is not Newton so much as the “models and methodologies” of Newtonian materialism that Blake so adamantly opposed (123). He especially objected to the zeal with which “Enlightenment thinkers enthusiastically transposed” Newton’s ideas onto disparate epistemic spheres. Blake’s perturbation with such a legalistic understanding of nature—that it is governed by strict and predictable laws—stems in large part from his dissenting Protestantism. As outlined above, he resisted the strictures of institutional interpretation, and similarly detested what he saw as the dictatorial mandates of natural science—especially as applied to institutions—handed down from the hermeneutic authority of Voltaire, Rousseau, etc. Statements such as Pope’s “Whatever is, is right” (I.294)—especially as Pope widens the scope of the Essay to encompass sociability and the state—enraged Blake to the core.11 He abhorred the demystification of religion, which he saw as central to the modernizing project of natural philosophy. But Blake’s distaste for fixed and regimental legal structures goes far beyond Newton. Law, for Blake, is grounded binarity; and while Blake’s work often establishes dynamics of dualistic interplay, the

11 Pope praised Newton effusively, both in *An Essay on Man* and in his epitaph to the great thinker, which reads in its entirely: “Nature and Nature’s Laws lay hid in Night: / God said, ‘Let Newton be!’ and all was light” (95).
objective is always to play out the contrariety in the text until it eventually collapses, revealing the systemic complexity of his subject matter. Natural science, as Blake understood it, restricted selfhood, imagination, and creativity, stifling not only the materiality of making but the broader project of cyclical futurity in which that making is invested.

Cognition and Individual Sovereignty

Because Blake locates spiritual entities within the material world and *vice versa*, his theories of cognition and perception remain difficult to pin down. He rejects the outright separation of the body from the mind, though at points he depicts the body as a sort of prison for thought, through which the senses—*instruments of “finite organical perception”* (*MHH* 12, E 38)—serve as portals to the outside world, stimulating the imagination. He asks, in *The Marriage of Heaven & Hell*, “How do you know but ev’ry Bird that cuts the airy way, / Is an immense world of delight, clos’d by your senses five?” (5, E 35, italics mine). He insists within the same text that the mind and material reality are not at all separate entities, but that the body is “a portion” of soul:

> All Bibles or sacred codes. have been the causes of the following Errors.  
> 1. That Man has two real existing principles Viz: a Body & a Soul.  
> 2. That Energy. calld Evil. is alone from the Body. & that Reason. calld Good. is alone from the Soul.  
> 3. That God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies.  
> But the following Contraries to these are True  
> 1. Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that calld Body is a portion of the Soul discerned by the five Senses. the chief inlets of Soul in this age  
> 2. Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.  
> 3. Energy is Eternal Delight

(4, E 34)
According to Blake, the individual perceives the spiritual world within materiality and employs the imagination, which Blake views as divine, in order to extract it. Not only does the mind exist in constant communication with the outside world, as even the empiricists would agree, it is itself material and therefore an inextricable part of that world. It “Delights” in it both physically and intellectually.

Blake’s understanding of cognition is an unusual one for his age, which under the influence of rationalist and empiricist thought not only emphasized the division of the body from the mind, but privileged the mind as sovereign over the body it governs. As Descartes writes in the second Meditation (1641), the subject’s ability to “judge only of things that are known” to him limits his sphere of knowledge strictly to the self (35). He argues, solely, “I am, I exist” (35, italics original). “I” here means “mind.” Descartes’ “thinking thing” holds in alterity not only its surrounding objects but the very body it inhabits, reasoning that the body and everything it senses “may possibly be dreams merely or deceptions” (36). For Descartes, subjectivity coheres entirely in the mind, not in the holistic combination of mind and body that Blake thought of, simply, as human. Thus when Descartes writes, “I am not that assemblage of limbs we call the human body” (35), Blake would probably respond, “I am indeed that assemblage of limbs, of which my mind is a mere part.” Together, all of these “parts” constitute being, rendered physically in the material world but which is primarily spiritual. Not only will that spirit-being manifest qua spirit after death, such a spirit, enclosed in the sensorium, applies the imagination to the senses to perceive and interact with the spirit world within the life at hand.

Blakean cognition, which figures the mind as soul, would have been anathema to the inheritors of rationalism, who worked under the more secular Cartesian model described
above. Of course, this was not the only philosophy on this point within European thought. Figures such as the theologian Emmanuel Swedenborg, whom Blake read with interest (and to whom he consciously responds in *The Marriage of Heaven & Hell*), provide alternate models—ones that simply were not useful to an emerging global liberalism and that, as a consequence, have largely fallen away from the historical narrative of modernity. Indeed, the notion of the Cartesian subject, referred to more broadly today as the “modern subject,” came to dominate European philosophy in the eighteenth century. Coupled with empowered parliamentary governments and a rising middle class, especially in England, France, and the British colonies, the subject, previously an epistemological entity, becomes a political one as well. The logic, again perpetuated by Locke, reads as follows: if the human mind governs the movements of the body it inhabits, it can just as well govern the movements of the constituent self within the body politic, navigating the cultural and economic complexities of bourgeois society. That body is, thus, sovereign, and needs no body to govern it besides its self. He—and at this historical moment, only he—is an individual sovereign. As Locke states, “every man has a property in his own person: this no body has any right to but himself” (v.27).

The individual therefore maintains the right to own property, to govern that property as he sees fit, and the right to representation within the collective political body that will seek to exert power over such property, most frequently through the apparatus of taxation, though sometimes through seizure and blunt force. The individual sovereign is entitled to the profit produced through the actions of his own self, be it through labor or investment. He is not a serf or a slave. Not only will this idea go on to influence the French and American

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12 Descartes himself did not render his thought in rigidly secular terms. Both in the *Meditations* and in the earlier *Discourse on Method* (1637), he outlines the theological implications of his theory in ways amenable to church doctrine. The other philosophical and scientific figures mentioned here, from Newton to Locke, held some religious beliefs, most of them somewhat unconventional but nevertheless devout. Blake refers to them unilaterally as “deists.”
Revolutions, because it advocates self-rule over one’s property, Lockean individualism becomes a foundational cornerstone for free market economics. As scholars such as J.G.A. Pocock have shown, Locke’s subject, via Descartes, initiates modernity, enabling the complex web of governments, trade, industries, and empires that comprise it even today.\(^\text{13}\)

Since Blake fundamentally disagrees with the Cartesian logic on which Locke’s individual sovereign is based, his vision of political agency differs somewhat from Locke’s. This is important because, in order to understand Blake’s theory of artistic production and its role in the political sphere, we must understand not just how he conceives of cognitive agency but of agency within the polity itself. As Makdisi notes, “Blake’s work articulates such an antinomian stance… that we can see in it a joyous form of freedom… utterly incompatible with the doctrine of individual rights” (Impossible History 9). Blake found such a “conception of rights,” fundamentally grounded in the notion of aggregate selfhood, to be “far too limited and restrictive,” representing at its core “the worst form of confinement” (Impossible History 5). The characters in his illuminated books who seek out such rights, or who ground their views in the disciplinary legalism of democratic subjecthood find themselves thwarted time and again by “new forms of oppression, both of the other and of the self supposed to be rendered free” (Impossible History 6). Makdisi traces the patterns of liberation and entrapment—of emergence into Lockean selfhood and the subsequent usurpation of liberty by religious, cultural, governmental, or technological sources—throughout Blake’s books of the 1790s, most notably in America (1793), Europe (1794), and Visions of the Daughters of Albion (1793). But Blake’s idea of a de-centered individualism, of a psychically networked cogito holistically linked by internal agentic forces, truly crystallized

\(^{13}\) For further reading on this point, see Pocock’s Virtue, Commerce and History: Essays on Political Thought and History Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century (1985) as well as Barbarism and Religion, vol 2: Narratives of Civil Government (1999).
after 1800, as Blake’s work grew increasingly complex. *Milton*, for instance, sets out to address the spiritual well being of a society drifting into the “general malady and infection” (2, E 95) of religious, environmental, and economic subjugation, but does so by physically splitting its protagonist into his various psychic selves. *Jerusalem* features a similar rupture, here of the giant Albion, a symbolic stand-in for England itself, who in a Jungian psychic drama is fractured into the four Zoas, each of whom maintains an Emanation. Albion, the primeval man, is divided upon a fall into “Selfhood” (5.22, E 147), which paradoxically entraps him even as the various factions of his self resist coherence.

As much as his work resists the logic of individual sovereignty, Blake sympathized with the politics of Enlightenment individualism, espoused in England by figures such as Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, with whom Blake had some limited interaction. He admired the “struggling afflictions / Endur’d” (2.10, E 52) by the “Brothers & sons of America” (*America* 3.4, E 52). More importantly, he was unrelentingly critical of what Makdisi calls “hereditary aristocratic government” (*Impossible History* 5), feeling, as Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and the Americans did, that it allowed the moneyed class, monarchs in particular, to unduly exert power over the rights and property of the people it was meant to govern. Unlike his contemporaries, Blake recognized the potential for tyranny not merely in the divine right of kings but in all forms of institutions, which consolidate power by hierarchizing it and disseminating a hermeneutical agenda—a way both of reading

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14 By the time he was engraving *Milton*, Blake’s view of the French and American Revolutions had shifted, criticizing the violence necessary to mount each one and bemoaning the counterrevolution that had arisen in France. He “held the intellectual begetters of those revolutions responsible for their failure,” leading him once again to single out—as Erdman notes—the “Deisits” Voltaire, Rousseau, Gibbon, and Hume as “false prophets” (416-7). Erdman continues: “The essence of the charge is that Voltaire and Rousseau—and Paine, who is included in a more gently worded passage—were diverted by their own barren theological battles from sufficiently directing their fire against monarchs and militarism… The Enlightenment had not sufficiently weeded out king-worship and planted a hardier concept of brotherhood and human self-reliance” (417).
texts and of reading the world—from the top down. Much of Blake’s “Mental Fight” is directed at resisting the myriad ways consolidated power shapes one’s worldview. Rather than invest in a system of Republican government, which to Blake maintained the same potential for the hierarchical domination of thought-power, Blake advocated the power of original, individual thought as a resistance to the tyranny of institutional collectivity. Ironically, Blake’s insistence on “Mental Fight” inherently relies on the Lockean individualism it elsewhere critiques, for the individual cannot resist collective tyranny without first staking claim to the property of his own thought. Blakean sovereignty is thus invested in a paradoxical relationship with Locke’s rights, one that recognizes the individual’s right to govern itself against the collective but resists the modernizing schemes—republicanism, empire, trade—that subjugate that self to the tyranny of systems. Because Blake sees the individual as a psychically composite entity, the right to one’s own thoughts, in the Blakean mode, is fundamentally a right to the network of contraries constantly at battle within the mind, an interesting complication to Locke’s vision of individual selfhood. Blake’s self is as much many as it is one, and in that way, not only maintains “a property in his own person” but “properties” within “persons,” collectively fracturing the logic of selfhood and the vision of modernity that accompanies it.

**Self as Network: Making**

In plate 18 of *Milton*, copy D, Blake depicts Milton “Annihilat[ing]” the bearded Urizen, whose abnormally long hands stretch over the tops of two grave-like stones. He hinges himself to these “icons of moral law” (Hutchings 125), which distinctly resemble the Ten Commandments. Milton’s foot divides the phrase “To Annihilate the Self-hood of Deceit & False Forgiveness” almost symmetrically—seven syllables on one side and eight on
the other—splintering “Selfhood” into two distinct, syllabically equal parts. While Milton’s severing of “Selfhood” symbolically depicts Blake’s view of a fractured self, that severance establishes an agonistic binary that—like Milton from his Emanation—will remain in tension, resolving conflict through contrariety and manifesting the self in that process. It is an essentially creative act, though it seems destructive, an instance of Blake’s making that channels the imagination into material form.15 Above him, his Six-fold Emanation dances and plays a series of instruments, many of which are distinctly “globe-shaped,” resembling, as Hutchings notes, the cyclical rotation of “satellites compelled to orbit a parent star” (125). The instruments recall the tools of making we’ve observed in “The Voice of the Ancient Bard” and in the illustrations to Gray. It is difficult to tell from the reproduction here, but the rising sun is colored with heavy red, orange, and purplish pigment, accented with flares of yellow and touched with gold leaf. As the page bends in the light, the gold flakes shine, mimicking the brilliance of the rising sun. In this way, the page’s literal illumination enhances the “model of cyclical recurrence” (Hutchings 125) central to Blake’s philosophy of making, the revolutionary turn that brings about spiritual and environmental restoration. By applying the tools of the hand to material substance, the maker gives form to amorphous matter, translating the fancies of imagination into the sphere of the real.

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15 In Paradise Lost, God creates the world by “circumscrib[ing] / This universe” (7.226-7), separating entities from one another and giving form to what had previously been “Matter unformed and void” (7.233): “God saw the light was good; / And light from darkness by the hemisphere / Divided” (7.249-51). Much the same language is employed in the King James Bible, which describes the world as “without form” and “void,” stating that God “divided” the dark from the light (1.1-2).
As much as Blake advocates such making as a mode of political intervention, artistic creation, even in Milton, does not exist without its drawbacks. Blake understands “Selfhood” as essentially delimiting and therefore imagines individual sovereignty as stifling to creativity (much in the way that physical form restricts possibility for amorphous matter).  

16 It might be helpful to think of Blake’s theory of ontological substance as akin to the ethereal substance of Milton’s angels in Paradise Lost. Such beings are not composed of matter but of angelic substance and, as Raphael not so coyly describes to Adam in Book VIII, their substances freely intermix: “Whatever pure thou in the body enjoyst… we enjoy / In eminence, and obstacle find none / Of membrane, joint, or limb, exclusive bars: / Easier than air with air, if spirits embrace, / Total they mix, union of pure with pure / Desiring; nor restrained conveyance need / As flesh to mix with flesh, or soul with soul” (622-9). For Blake, it is only when embodied, as humans are, that beings are refused such ontological exchange.
the self is tied to embodiment, just as the imagination is tied to making: both require a form. Thus, when Los on plate three “seiz[es] his Hammer & Tongs” (3.7, E 96), he does so “Refusing all Definite Form” (3.9, E 97), even though throughout the following passage he emerges into his own physicality. As Los smolders in the formless deep, “Among indefinite Druid rocks & snows of doubt & reasoning,” he slowly “conglob[es]”—a term borrowed from Milton—into his material self (3.8-12, E 97). He receives a heart (the “red round Globe hot burning”), eyes (“Orbs of Vision”), “Two Nostrils” and a “Tongue,” along with a “Right Arm,” “left Arm” and “Feet” (3.11-25, E 97). Unsurprisingly, Los finds embodiment oppressive. He reacts to the confinement of his formerly diffuse self by growing “Enraged & stifled without & within,” lashing out with his newly minted limbs and “Stamp[ing] the nether Abyss in trembling & howling & dismay” (3.24-6, E 97). Anger soon gives way to further creation.

Ironically, Los’s reaction to being “made” is to join his now separate female self, Enitharmon, in building the “Looms of Generation” and the great city of “Golgonooza” (3.37-43, E 97). Blake describes the process in terms reminiscent of Milton’s Satan rising in the “boundless deep” (Paradise Lost I.177) of what has not yet been created into hell. Blake writes:

Terrified Los stood in the Abyss and his immortal limbs
Grew deadly pale; he became what he beheld: for a red
Round Globe sunk down from his Bosom into the Deep in pangs
He hovered over it trembling & weeping, suspended it shook
The nether Abyss in tremblings, he wept over it, he cherish’d it
In deadly sickening pain: till separated into a Female pale
As the cloud that brings the snow: all the while from his Back
A blue fluid exuded in Sinews hardening in the Abyss
Till it separated into a Male Form howling in Jealousy

(3.28-36, E 97).

Much like the fallen angels in Paradise Lost, who “when they please / Can either sex assume” (I.423-4), Los in his abstract form is essentially sexless. Embodiment renders him male,
splitting him from Enitharmon. The two recombine, this time materially, in order to produce children, one of whom will adopt the moniker of Satan, “Prince of the Starry Wheels”:

Subduing his Spectre, they Builded the Looms of Generation
They Builded Great Golgonooza Times on Times Ages on Ages
First Ore was Born then the Shadowy Female: then All Los’s Family
At last Enitharmon brought forth Satan Refusing Form, in vain
The Miller of Eternity made subservient to the Great Harvest
That he may go to his own Place Prince of the Starry Wheels   (3.37-43, E 97)

The movement from “Particulars to Generals,” rather than vice versa, suggests once again a resistance to physical embodiment, just as Satan himself unsuccessfully “Refus[es] Form.”¹⁷

In this sense, procreation becomes a microcosm for Blakean contrariety: the two poles of the divided self, the male and the female, interact with and resist one another, producing something new for futurity.

Los’s resistance to form focuses not merely on embodiment but, more significantly, on the enclosure of the diffuse self by “lock[ing]” intellection into “little Caves” of sensation (3.6-14, E 96-7), a description that recalls the above-quoted passages from The Marriage of Heaven & Hell. The “close volutions” of his ears quickly become “petrified,” asserting their physicality with the realness of stone (3.17-8, E 97). The visual-semantic play between “volution” and “volume” illustrates the new restraint embodiment places on sound perception, rendering it focused and acute but “close[d]” off from imaginative possibility.

The physical limitations of sensation determine what the listener can hear. That Blake characterizes sense experience as one of confinement rather than of apprehension reiterates his distaste for empiricist scientificity and his rejection of the Cartesian cogito. Metaphorizing

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¹⁷ Blake’s Satan resembles Milton’s in myriad ways, not the least of which is a struggle against the tyranny of formation, paradoxically a struggle against creation itself. Blake’s Satan, like Milton’s, delights in liminality: his “Starry Mills” are “built,” for instance, “beneath the Earth & Waters of the Mundane Shell (E 97, 4.2-3). He is also—as should seem fitting within the Blakean scheme of perception and individual sovereignty—“Newtons Pantocrator,” who “weav[es] the Woof of Locke” (E 98, 4.11).
the body as a prison, he underscores the subject’s division from spiritual reality, in which it
might more fully participate as an amorphous spiritual entity. But even here, Blake is mired
in paradox, for the senses themselves render spirituality perceivable: the mind renders sense
data thinkable only after information has been received from the sense organs, at which
point the imagination is free to act on that data. Without embodiment, revelation of the sort
experienced by Blake—his “Ezekiel under a Tree”—simply could not enter the mind.

Readers must remember, of course, that Blake delights in such paradoxes, and that, in his
mind, the tension between creation and matter—between amorphous substance and the
process that gives it form—is an inherently productive one. Los, who goes on to become the
great maker within Blake’s mythology, resists his own making, an exemplary case of Blakean
contrariety. Such tension makes the self, regardless of how that self is represented externally.

Because making can seem destructive in Blake, the revolution necessary to manifest
the “green” and “pleasant” England of futurity may seem to recall the more violent aspects
of the French and American Revolutions he so ardently supported in the 1790s. But by
1803, when the Peace of Amiens came to a close, and as he was in the midst of developing
Milton, Blake had developed what Erdman refers to as an “ambivalent view” of those
revolutions, seeing them by turns “too warlike or not revolutionary enough” (416). Readers
must keep in mind, as Blake establishes in the Preface, that he condemns “Corporeal War,”
despite the bellicose rhetoric employed in the “Jerusalem” lyric to describe “Mental Fight.”
France’s revolution has been particularly violent. Not only had revolution ultimately failed, it
had led to an even stronger “counterrevolution,” and that state was now governed by a
“pope-crowned emperor” (416-7). Despite its resemblance to the tension Blake fosters in his
poem (and unlike the revolution in America), the political tension in France was not
productive in the least. To Blake, the French Revolution was an act of pure destruction, an
utter rebuke of the creative dialectic central to his theory of poiesis. As Erdman argues, those revolutions may have been “premature” (427), “Sow[ing] War” (23.48, E 119), in Blake’s view, before thinking through the full political impact of that enterprise. The “ultimate goal” remains “revolutionary,” but that goal won’t manifest until the “right moment,” at which point Christ himself will initiate “the complete revolution which makes any further rotation of human misery unnecessary” (Erdman 427-9).

This is a turn on the temporal wheel initiated within the poem by Milton’s descent and reincarnation within Blake, and in life, by Blake’s book itself. Milton thus provides not only what Makdisi calls “anti-history” of modernity, its cyclical temporality offers a resistance to the linear, unitized time central to industrial production. If production unfolds cyclically rather than diachronically, if it defies spatialization and measurement, how can one determine the “transformation[s]” Marx identifies as essential to exchange (181)? How, for instance, can one assess the efficacy of labor requisite to the quantification of work-value? How, if production time is not linear (nor unitizable), does one measure the exchange value of objects produced? What, in such a world, is the value of money? In fulfilling the millenarian prophecy described in the Preface and initiating a rotation back to the “pleasant pastures” and “mountains green” that typify New Jerusalem, not only does Blake lay out a theory of creation for a pristine natural futurity, his anti-history resists liberalism’s most basic assumptions, rendering those who subscribe to such a vision, however anachronistic, unabashedly and joyously free.
Chapter 3

Blake's Textual Ecology:

*Milton* as Material System

My introduction noted that Blake’s *Milton* begins with what is perhaps his best-known lyric, colloquially referred to as “Jerusalem,” but this statement was misleading. In fact, only two of the four extant copies of the book actually contain the plate, which also features the prose Preface. I have referred often to this plate in order to articulate Blake’s prophetic millenarianism and his theory of artistic making. The other two copies begin, after the title plate, by simply jumping into the poem’s first book. The lyric’s absence in copies C and D testifies to the difficulty in reading Blake, or “Blake,” at all: as regularized and anthologized as his work has become, the material variations on any one illuminated book render such standardization exceedingly difficult. There are fifty-one total plates to *Milton* and no one copy contains them all. These variations have presented great difficulty for certain readers, who understand Blake’s books as fixed objects whose standardization in editions such as Erdman’s *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake* (1982) renders them stationary and immutable. For others, the variability of a text like *Milton* opens a hermeneutic opportunity, since readers view this series of alternative copies not as contributing to a monadic understanding of *the work*—one that transcends the specific signification of each individual copy—but to a systemic one, wherein what we call “*Milton*”

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18 Erdman’s edition is of course an indispensible resource for students and scholars of Blake. I cite it frequently throughout this study, especially in chapter two. As much as Erdman attempts to account for the textual variations on each text, placing language from missing plates within his standard version, such a rendering, which imagines Blake’s books as static entities, ignores the near infinite variations introduced we consider them in their sheer, unmediated materiality.
functions as a network of interdependent text-objects whose sheer materiality renders each plate necessary and significant.

By emphasizing the specific materiality of individual plates, readers not only engage an interlinked network of texts, they enter into a transhistorical relationship between Blake as creator of the (plural) text-object and themselves as a recipient or consumer of that artifact. As Blakeists know too well, these texts exist in time: proof exists in the ravages of storage, transport, and the physical act of handling these books, which over the centuries have taken their tolls. But by viewing such objects in person, readers identify the material traces left on them by their maker: the shine of gold flakes, flecks of spilled ink, and uncolored indentations pushed into the paper’s surface by the blunt physical force of the printing press. None of this is typically visible in digital reproductions. Especially in the cancelled plates from *America a Prophecy*, which I discuss below, readers view Blake’s process of instantiation in its still incipient form, the plate coming into being even as it is. But more importantly, these details matter to us because they mattered to Blake. He took great pains to develop a combinatory mode that integrated the techniques of etching and engraving to produce his illuminated prints. No one before Blake used such a method, and anyone who later employed it was probably attempting to recreate a Blake plate.19 Blake himself described the technique in a 1793 prospectus to the public as one that “combine[d] the Painter and the Poet” into a “style more ornamental, uniform, and grand, than any before discovered” (E 692). As Joseph Viscomi notes, words were written and images sketched onto “copper plates in acid resistant ink,” after which Blake used nitric acid to “etch[] away the unprotected metal to bring the composite design into printable relief” (41). Not only did Blake invent a

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19 Michael Phillips has faithfully recreated this process, using an eighteenth-century printing press to forge some rather convincing imitations.
method, he frequently metaphorized that method in self-reflexive terms—as in the Gray illustrations from chapter one—evidence that technique occupied a great deal of his thought.

Blake’s close devotion to the material practice of his art is also a response to the substantial technological innovations of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a series of rapid industrial advancements that likely alienated Blake, especially later in life. By 1757, the year of Blake’s birth, a rudimentary steam engine was in use throughout England and Wales, employed to drain water from the rich coal reserves northeast of London. By 1781, as Blake was first striking out on his own, James Watt’s patented ten-horsepower engine enabled the use of steam-power in a manufacturing setting. One such factory was the Albion Mills, a steam-powered flourmill located in Southwark, just south of Blackfriars Bridge. Erected in 1783, its engine was designed by Watt himself. While the Mills only functioned for five short years, from its opening in 1786 until its destruction by fire in 1791, the structure was a major architectural fixture in London and most certainly figured into Blake’s poetic imagination. In a general sense, we might read Blake’s corpus as a resistance such changes: to the automatization of the modes of production and of the workers themselves. Not only did he remain suspicious of the lack of skill required for such work (Blake was a highly skilled laborer), he detested what he saw as the Newtonianism on which such technologies were based: the idea that the universe is quantifiable, governed by fixed laws. As much as Blake himself utilized and at points invented technologies—of the hand and of the mind, as I’ve shown in chapter one—he detested mechanization, associating it with the expurgation of spirituality he attributed to empirical science. He witnessed firsthand the environmental consequences of such machines, as their introduction into the city of London dramatically increased coal consumption.

20 Some critics credit it as the inspiration for Milton’s “dark Satanic mills,” though I am wary of hastily assigning such associations.
The introduction of the mechanical printing press solidified Blake’s apprehension toward mechanized industry, leading him to become further entrenched in the material aspects of his work. While his process was already maturing when the first copies of Milton appeared in 1811, his prints grew increasingly ornate, such that by 1818, when he printed Milton copy D, the books feature bolder, more carefully blended colors, touched with gold leaf.21 The work was laborsome and the prints more expensive, leading Blake to produce fewer of them (Bentley 362).22 This was after a hiatus from bookmaking, from 1811 to 1818, during which Blake focused exclusively on paintings and individual prints, a break that intriguingly parallels the emergence of mechanized printing in London. Though Blake could not have known about them, the earliest designs for such a press were drawn up in 1802 by the German printer Friedrich Koenig, culminating in a patented model in 1810, with a first trial production the following year. Koenig sold the first models of this new machine to The Times of London, which published the first mechanically printed newspaper, an edition of about 1,100, coincidentally on Blake’s birthday in 1814 (Meggs 126-34). It is difficult to know how aware Blake might have been of this development. As someone working in the print industry, who sometimes designed plates for larger print runs than those of his illuminated books, he might have heard rumors of this machine’s development, but by 1815, when mechanized printing emerged as the standard, Blake would have seen mechanized prints everywhere and, if he read the news, would have held them in his own hands.

Compared to mechanical printing, Blake’s production model was not merely outdated; it was archaic. The process of creating his books was scrupulous and laborious,

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21 See Michael Phillips’ Apprentice & Master for further discussion of the practical mechanics of Blake’s print and of the increasingly elaborate nature of Blake’s books, especially pp. 96-101.
22 As Bentley notes, the 1818 prices increased “eight to fourteen times” from those listed in his 1793 prospectus (362). Milton was listed at £10.10, a high price for the period—the highest listed in the 1818 prospectus—despite the book’s 50 plates; at 28 plates, Urizen went for £3.03 (360).
neither time- nor cost-effective. While Blake’s books were far from typical in the period, in terms both of product and production, the mechanical printing press was implicitly designed to put people like him out of business. Blake could have adapted to the times. Bookmakers throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century still needed skilled engravers, and more upscale productions of sometimes included hand-painted plates. Instead, Blake not only refused to evolve but doubled down on his process, privileging artistic products that exhibited a Benjaminian “aura” over mechanically reproducible ones (1169). Moreover, his choice to create increasingly ornate and expensive copies from 1818 onward suggests not an artist growing into maturity but one doing so against the backdrop of a techno-historical milieu he viewed as spiritually and environmentally degraded. Thus, when I advocate a systemic reading of Blake’s books, one that privileges the specific materiality of individual plates, I do so not for the sake of cataloging their physical minutia but with Blake’s complex relationship to this burgeoning technology in mind. For Blake, the physical act of making is a resistance to the “dark Satanic mills” of the “Jerusalem” lyric. This complex relationship with his own industrializing reality manifests in the physical books, evident in the material traces of Blake’s making, which persist today despite a vast temporal divide between the moment of their creation and our own. By reading these objects and interacting with them not in but as the material form in which they were produced, readers not only revive the past—boxed away in various archives around the world—but imagine Blake’s particular opposition to industry within the context of a liberal modernity not so essentially different from Blake’s own.
Cancelled Plates: Blake at Work

Besides the finished books, few remnants exist today that testify to Blake’s process. Some manuscripts remain, scattered throughout libraries in the U.S. and Britain, along with sketches, usually in pencil, which exhibit early renderings of images that would later crop up in the books. One such illustration features a woman with arms outstretched, surrounded by what appear to be trees and leaves but could also be flames. There is a long, vine-like figure to her left, what might be a snake or a caterpillar. Though the sketch is dated to 1793, it almost precisely resembles the female figure on the final plate of *Milton*, which Blake would not print for nearly twenty years. The pose and hair are nearly identical, as is the shroud that falls from her hands. While Blake frequently recycled images in his work, this one seems to be unique, its closest resemblance dating to *The First Book of Urizen* (1794), though even then the figure is male and appears upside down. The pose may be similar, but the images are not the same. The fact that Blake made designs in 1793, which only appear in illuminated print in 1811 (and later, in 1818), testifies not just to the depth but to the length of his thought, which seems to have developed—and is expressed aesthetically—in a continuously evolving strand from the late 1780s until his death in 1827. But the three cancelled plates from *America a Prophecy* are exceedingly rare. To my knowledge, no other such plates exist in the U.S. or the U.K. Blake’s copper plates, from which all of the books were printed, seem to have been destroyed, along with any unused paper prints, such as those discussed below. A single fragment from a cancelled copper plate remains—used to print one of the three

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23 In *Milton* she is flanked on either side a male and a female character, wrapped either in wings or in leaves; the sun is rising behind her and the words “To go forth to the Great Harvest & vintage of the Nations” appear above her, below which we read “Finis.”
cancelled plates—apparently housed in a cabinet for about 140 years. While we will never know with certainty why these plates were discarded, the cancelled plates show Blake’s art in the process of becoming, perhaps even more so than any of the illuminated books proper, which, though they maintain physical traces of their making, are ostensibly finished products.

Fig. 12 “A woman with snaky locks,” pencil and paper, c. 1793. Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Of the three cancelled prints, only two—cancelled plates six and seven—contain significant changes. Plate five, which doesn’t, features only a few visual revisions and minor textual addendums. For instance, in the brief catalogue of significant American political thinkers that comprises line four, Blake moves “Franklin” toward the front, just after “Washington,” moving “Hancock” to Franklin’s former place as penultimate in the list. Perhaps he does so for sonic reasons, perhaps to privilege Franklin’s role in the revolution.

24 As Damrosch notes, Blake gave the fragment—intended as the first stanzas following the Preludium to America—to the son of a friend, who stored it away until 1937, when it was rediscovered (26).
Maybe the change was arbitrary. What seems significant, especially in light of the other
cancelled plates, is a small change in line 14, where Blake exchanges the adjective “fiery” for
“wrathful” to describe Orc. (The major changes to plate three, as I explore in more detail
below, show Blake stamping out various synonyms for “fire.”) In other places, he toys with
syntax and punctuation, but the meaning remains unaltered. Blake must have had his
reasons, but we will never know them.

Blake maintains largely the same design between the cancelled plate six and its final
version, but changes the text almost entirely. The dragon-like figure and the snake-legged
seraph remain, as does the crouching figure holding his ears, though his companion,
collapsed by his side in the finished copies, is absent. Blake also changes “George the third”
(9) to “The King of England” (E 58, 4.12) in the final plate. Perhaps the overt reference to a
tyrant still in power—whose family would reign throughout Blake’s life—was simply too
subversive. This is, in any case, a considerable change for Blake, who did not readily shy
away from radical politics, especially in the 1790s, and who often inserted identifiable figures
and locations into his poems. He also condensed the narrative significantly, removing much
of the language. Maybe, given the tone and formality of the verse, he felt it too closely
resembled *Paradise Lost*. The “dismal visions,” “choirs of iron,” and “infernal forms art-
bound” recall Milton in both image and syntax (12-4). Blake’s attempt at epic simile in lines
19-24 is clearly inferior to the drawn out non-homologous ones employed throughout
*Paradise Lost*, especially in book I, which layer allusions to intertwine Christian and pagan
mythology. This may have been a source of anxiety. As Damrosch notes, “Blake’s aggressive
critique of Milton furnishes one of Harold Bloom’s examples of the ‘anxiety of influence,’ in
which a ‘strong poet’ achieves his own vision by wrestling with an intimidating predecessor”
(165). It might be that, this early in his career, Blake shied away from “wrestling” with an
idol. Whatever his reasons, a version of the plate did make it into the finished book, though seriously altered.

![Image](image.png)

**Fig. 13** *America a Prophecy*, cancelled plate 2, c. 1793. Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

This is not the case with the final cancelled plate, which scholars speculate could have been “intended for insertion between plates 10 and 11” (Bindman 172). Nothing quite resembling it appears in the final book, but what’s even more significant—particularly for

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25 Blake might not have viewed his relationship to Milton quite in Bloomian terms, seeing himself, again to quote Damrosch, as “uniting with Milton, not displacing or rejecting him… rescuing what was inspired by Milton’s vision by purging it of error” (165).
this study—is that Blake has made specific edits to the plate with his pencil, revealing insight into his artistic process. Readers note attempts to bracket certain clauses, rewritten at points in the margins. The handwriting can be difficult to read, but Blake seems to replace “silent stood the King breathing” (5) with “all in orbs look and wrath.” The line does not break but, as happens frequently in the illuminated books, Blake runs out of space for the nineteen-syllable line, long even for him. He extends the line visually—as editors often do with Whitman’s poems—until it end-stops with a colon. The prepositional phrase “with flames” becomes displaced in the process. Blake slashes through it with the pencil, revising first to something now lost (he has crossed that out as well) and choosing instead “damnation.” The lines reads in its entirety, “By the wise spirit of Londons river: all in orbs look and wrath damnation.” It is a uniquely Blakean phrase, especially in its syntax, but not completely out of place as a description of “Albions Angel,” who sounds an awful lot like Milton’s Satan with his “thirsty spear” and “shield that bound twelve demons & their cities in its orb” (1-4).

Most of the words and phrases Blake removes are related to conflagration: he cuts “gleam” (6), “glow the fires” (8), “ardors” (14), “glowing” (16) and “fires” (18). He also somewhat cryptically writes “clouds” next to “flames” in line 12. The words he replaces them with are myriad, varying in meaning and part of speech. What’s clear is that, at least in this plate, Blake sought to stifle the more infernal imagery in his verse.
Blake’s rationale for so amending the text remains obscured. No known manuscript speaks to the changes, nor has Blake provided any obvious clues. Perhaps as I have speculated about cancelled plate five, he viewed the passage as too nearly “envying” rather than “emulating” Milton—as Maggie Kilgour puts it (50)—hewing too closely to what she reads as the Satanic impulse of imitative rather than original creation. We might view it as a reflection of Blake’s evolving attitude toward revolution. As Makdisi observes, Blake sympathized with the French and American Revolutions early on, but throughout the 1790s
began to see them as unnecessarily violent, an ultimately unproductive mode of instantiating political change. Blake’s material alterations illustrate the tortuous relationship he maintained to political revolution in this decade, an extinguishing of the metaphorical fires of revolutionary change—or of the fires of burgeoning industry—even as he authors a poem sympathizing with such action.\textsuperscript{26} It is difficult to say with any certainty. Maybe there were just too many “fire” images and he wanted to shake things up. In either case, he marks horizontally through half of line 21, all of 22, and the first clause of line 23 (“Sleep like the dead”), and slashes vertically with his pencil up from the bottom of the plate to the top of line 10 and back down—a second slash—through line 19. The sheer violence with which the act is committed illustrates an utter disavowal of the text, a rejection of the art object and the ideas it represents. In the end, Blake discarded the plate entirely, reducing the copper to rectangular cuts and most likely melting it down for reuse (aside from the one remaining fragment). He apparently filed the print away, leaving it to the scrap heap of history, where it remains, a less than canonical fixture in the textual network that comprises \textit{America}.

\textbf{The Milton Network}

While the cancelled plates shed some insight into the materiality of Blake’s artistic process, we cannot properly read Blake without examining the illuminated books. They are the finished products of that process. In some ways, \textit{Milton} is easier to assess materially, since there are fewer copies of it than most of Blake’s books. There are only four of them, after all. As a result, readers can generate a fuller understanding of how the material differences between copies contrast and interact with one another, contributing to a wider comprehensive text, which we might think of in the abstract as \textit{Milton} proper. As Northrop

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Sympathize} is indeed the word here, for even within the finished text of \textit{America}—and later, in \textit{Europe}—Blake displays strong ambivalence toward those conflicts.
Frye has argued, “all of Blake’s poetry”—and here I would insist, all of Blake’s images and the materiality that composes them—“must be taken as a unit” (5). Because Milton is a particularly difficult text, one Christopher M. Bundock notes is “written over with so many glosses” (157), even the minute mutations between two versions can be significant, highlighting certain aspects of the work and downplaying others. A close reading of such variations is especially fruitful as a mode not merely of fixing a “transparent view of historical or poetic truth” but of investigating the “collage of compatible systems” that ultimately comprises the Blake canon (Bundock 157). The following pages expand on the “mutability and re-coding” (159) Bundock reads in Milton’s images (the “star of inspiration,” for instance, which “famously falls on Blake’s left foot” [159]) to assess the “mutability” of symbolic meaning in the books’ material substance. What results is a system of texts fundamentally concerned with dialectical opposition. Taken as a whole, that system manifests in the various iterations of the books’ physical composition, and in so doing, models Blake’s prophetic theory of artistic creation. Not only is this a way to instantiate spiritual-ecological change, as his bookmaking grows more ornate over time, it becomes a way for Blake to mitigate the techno-social changes that rendered his artisanal process increasingly obsolete.

Blake’s networked model of artistic creation is evident in the title plate, which illustrates a nude Milton from behind in a traditional contrapposto, his right foot placed sturdily in front of him with the left behind, heel slightly raised. His right arm lifts toward the heavens, fingers outspread: a gesture of opposition. The pose is significant for several reasons. The contrapposto was traditionally employed to represent figures in tension (hence the English “counter pose”), portraying Milton agonistically against his others, though the object of that opposition remains unclear. Perhaps it is his Sixfold Emanation; perhaps it is
Blake, who, by 1804, viewed himself as a poetic rival to Milton. It is also the stance adopted by God in *Paradise Lost* as he takes “the golden compasses” and prepares to “circumscribe / This universe, and all created things” (VII.225-7):

One foot he centred, and the other turned
Round through the vast profundity obscure,
And said, Thus far extend, thus far thy bounds,
This be they just circumference, O world.
Thus God the heaven created, thus the earth,
Matter unformed and void: darkness profound
Covered the abyss

(VII.228-34)

The plate visually articulates Blake’s theory of making by granting form to void matter. The “bounds” and “circumference” placed on “Matter unformed and void” closely resemble (and are likely the inspiration for) the embodiment of Los described on plate four. Milton assaults his own name, dividing his name into distinct monosyllables (“MIL-TON”). In so doing, he “annihilates” the “Selfhood” that encloses the poet’s interconnected and ultimately holistic being, destroying the “false Body” that is “an Incrustation over [the] Immortal / Spirit” (40.35-7, E 142). Because contrapposto places greater emphasis on the forward or “engaged” foot, leaving the left leg unburdened or “free,” the figure’s stance also models the prophecy’s uneven two-book structure.27 Interestingly, the book’s full title reads *Milton a Poem in 12 Books*, the same number as in *Paradise Lost*. As was significant for Milton, and thus for Blake, this is the same number of books as in Virgil’s *Aeneid* and half the number, 24, of the Homeric epics. That Blake settles on two remains curious. Blake may have initially set out to compose 12 books and simply didn’t follow through, but if so, it seems odd that he did not revise the plate, which as we know from *America* he was certainly capable of doing.

27 W.J.T. Mitchell refers to the pose as “graceful” (157) and, while I’ve emphasized the oppositional nature of the illustration, I do not want to overlook this valence. In all four copies, there is a majestic and potent quality to Milton, one that renders him godlike, England’s great prophetic creator divinely entering the world of men in order to initiate a spiritual revolution. One could hardly read the image as anything other than “graceful.”
In some copies, he attempts to. Copy C above clearly shows “12,” but in copy A, housed at the British Museum, the “1” is nearly invisible, deprived of the yellow pigment that colors the lettering in copy C and wrapped into the light blue watercolor with which Blake paints the swirling substance surrounding Milton—what in most copies appears to be a cloud of smoke but in copy A resembles water. The “1” is only slightly more visible in copy B, where Blake applies less paint to the smoke etchings, but the heavy black ink mostly blots out the number.
Blake took a different approach to the title plate of copy D. As mentioned above, it was printed in 1818 instead of 1811, at which point Blake employed a more elaborate illustrative style. Rather than utilize watercolor to enhance the etchings, he blots the copper plate heavily with dark ink, especially near the edges, such that only those engravings pressed deepest into the plate’s surface even appear. The ink is applied more lightly toward the center of the plate, especially around Milton’s left leg, torso, and beneath his left arm. Blake uses bright yellow, red, and orange pigment to create a stark chiaroscuro effect, touching the watercolor sections with gold leaf. As the page bends or turns in the light, the flames around Milton’s figure leap out. While in the prophecy Milton is said to descend from heaven, Blake’s illustration recalls hell’s “livid flames” (PL I.183), offering yet another layer of contrariety to a text already layered with opposition. “12 Books” in this version is visible, though not brightly colored. Blake seems to have privileged the image, subordinating the plate’s text. Unlike the previous iterations, wherein pigment highlights the writing, the words in copy D either exhibit the color of the paper or become engulfed in flame. In some places,
where the ink is more heavily applied, the text becomes difficult to decipher. Readers hardly make out “Printer W. Blake” to the left of the page, and the date, “1804,” is almost entirely obscured. The most visible portion of writing besides the book’s title is the inscription at the bottom, which adopts artistic impetus for *Paradise Lost*: “To Justify the Ways of God to Men.” Though he does so in copies A-C, the material presentation of copy D most aggressively asserts Blake’s confrontation with Milton, rendering *Milton* not only structurally parallel to *Paradise Lost* but a rival to its position in the annals of English letters.

![Fig. 17 Milton, copy D, plate 1. 1818. Library of Congress, Washington, DC.](image)

Fire adopts multiple valences throughout the text, especially in copy D, which uses the gold leaf technique to highlight such imagery throughout. Plate eight (plates nine and ten
in copies C and D, respectively) features three nude figures, one of whom stands on a pedestal, again contrapposto, in a brilliant gyre of flame. I take this figure to be Blake. His right, unburdened foot is raised, meeting at the toe—probably meant to be the “tarsus”—with a visibly angry Milton. The other figure remains puzzling. He is probably Blake’s younger brother Robert, who appears with a star falling onto his foot in plate 33, mirroring a figure, labeled “William,” on plate 29. The figure on plate eight does appear contrapposto with his right foot raised, the same onto which the star falls in the “Robert” plate. Placing himself rather than Milton in the flame, Blake establishes a parallel between the two poets. He thus displaces Milton, “cast[ing] off the rotten rags of Memory by Inspiration” from the elder poet (41.4, E 142, emphasis mine) to adopt the prophetic mantle of England’s spiritual restoration.

The visual representation of the plate changes minutely from copy to copy, especially in the color of the flames. They are blue and yellow in copies A-C, a pale flame that doesn’t quite capture the infernal heat one would associate with hell but perhaps depicts the Miltonic paradox of darkly burning fire. Copy A is especially pallid, the bodies appearing in a sickly, monochromatic pink surrounded by a sea of darkness. Milton and Robert watch impassively as the fictional Blake is fervidly consumed. The image hardly evokes the fires of spiritual revolution Blake describes in the Preface, which is included in this copy. By contrast, the flames of copy D are bright yellow, tinged brilliantly with red pigment, as in plate one. The page is brushed profusely with gold leaf, speckling the thighs, chest, and shoulders of the Blake figure, flecking the dark pedestal around his feet. Of course, Blake implemented bits of luminous metal into prints throughout his career. As Angus Whitehead observes, “gold appears in Blake’s work as early as c. 1775” when he was “still an apprentice to James

28 The “tarsus” is the point at which Milton’s spirit “Descend[s] perpendicular” “as a falling star” onto the “left foot” of the poet Blake, where it “entre[s]” into his body (15.47-9, E 110).
Basire.” His own work employs it sparingly throughout the 1790s, when circumstances afforded the Blakes some fiscal autonomy. From 1815 onward, however, he “began to use metal leaf, and especially gold,” with “unprecedented frequency.” Not only does he cover the Blake figure effusively in gold, the flakes thin out toward the top of the print, persisting up to and past the ink border, marking the otherwise uncolored paper. It is as if the Blake figure burns out of the page and out of representation itself. Because the flakes sparkle in the light, the technique creates the illusion of movement: the figure burns luminously, almost ethereally. The flames extend just to the edge of Milton’s foot, engulfing it, but noticeably depriving Milton and Robert of the poet’s cleansing fire, rendering them static and mundane, clothed in the blunt materiality of “Selfhood.”

Fig. 18 Milton, copy D, plate 10. 1818. Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
The brilliance of the flames in copy D carries over into subsequent plates, reflected in representations of the sun, the stars falling into William’s and Robert’s feet, and the burning fires surrounding the diagrammatic illustration of the Zoas on plate 36. They are especially evident in plate 18 as the sun rises behind Milton’s festive emanations as Blake annihilates the earthly and legalistic Urizen, stamping out “Self-hood” with his foot, as discussed in chapter two (See Fig. 8). That scene echoes the emergence of Milton on plate 16 (below; plate 13 in copies A and B, and 15 in C): the sun rises behind the poet who drops the “filthy garments” of the past as he is “clothe[d] … with Imagination” (41.6, E 142). His apparent lack of shame concerning his nudity frames him in an Adamic light but the pose is reminiscent of Christ: his arms are spread to the side and his head held toward the heavens, as if he has emerged from the grave. Bright sparks frame the head, distinct from the sun’s rays, resembling the golden aureoles of Christian iconography. He stands once again in contrapposto, this time his left foot squarely on the ground and the right unburdened, employing his gauche side—as the biographical Milton did when he wrote—to quash England’s “ignorant Hirelings.” The early copies of the plate are dim, Milton’s figure etched and lightly stippled into the print. Especially in copy A, the pigment is so faint that the figure struggles to emerge from the surrounding darkness. The finer details of his physique are largely eclipsed. The halo is hardly present. Copy D, on the other hand, is triumphant. A red and yellow aureole glows from Milton’s head, crowning him victorious in his annihilation of spiritual malaise. His face exudes confidence, as does his posture, which, daubed only lightly with ink, remains much clearer in this copy than in others. His lucidly rendered physical form—his limbs and muscles accented by the pen—resembles the trim body of Italian renaissance sculpture. His genitals are unabashedly displayed, the only such rendering in the Milton book-system. (Even in copies A-C, they are difficult to make out.) The image-object
exemplifies visually what Blake articulates poetically in “Jerusalem”: the building of a pristine natural future that recuperatively resembles an Arcadian—in this case Edenic—England of the past.

Fig. 19  *Milton*, copy D, plate 16. 1818. Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

While each copy of *Milton* functions as an artistic instantiation of Blake’s revolutionary millenarianism, copy D, with its flecks of golf leaf and fires of renewal, seems most ardently to reflect that ideal. This is in part because Blake, having spent the previous seven years concentrating on commercial prints, refined his technique. But we may also read this artistic shift as a response to the many social, technological, and political developments
of this brief period. The Napoleonic Wars raged until 1814, years after the first copies of *Milton* were printed. Although the tyrant “George the third” had been effectively deposed by his own madness, the prince regent, later George IV, ruled by proxy, further entrenching the divide between the aristocracy and the merchant class Blake criticized in the 1790s. Perhaps most tellingly, the first Luddite uprising occurred in November 1811, a sign that the conflict between skilled laborers and burgeoning technologies was coming to a point, especially in Northern England. That an artisanal laborer such as Blake might have read about such uprisings in one of Britain’s first mechanically printed newspapers seems particularly ironic. Such rebellions manifested periodically for the next several years until factory owners and government officials began to violently suppress them. Critics often read Blake as an honorary Luddite, citing the “dark Satanic Mills” of the “Jerusalem” lyric as evidence of his dialectical opposition to industrialization. There is undoubtedly some truth to this. One cannot avoid the fact that the exquisitely illustrated *Milton* D was printed at the tail end of this conflict, after which all of Blake’s books adopt a similar ornamentation. The book itself becomes the metaphorical target of Blake’s “Bow of burning gold,” an instance of the historico-political intervention Blake seeks to accomplish through the production of all of his art but which becomes the explicitly articulated goal of *Milton*.

Although the book pointedly advocates for environmental renewal, to call Blake a Luddite simplifies his complex relationship to labor and industry. Certain aspects of the industrial revolution clearly benefitted Blake. While Blake typically sought out fine, handmade paper for his prints, by the end of his career, it is not unlikely that he would have created prints on paper produced in steam-powered mills. As Duncan Wu observes, the first “paper-making machine” was put to use in 1803 (xxxiv). Moreover, Blake’s more ornamental books might not have been purchased without the wealth afforded to patrons due to
industrial innovations. His material books could not have been as well preserved from their moment of production to our moment of reception without simple advances such as temperature control, nor could his work have been disseminated so widely throughout the twentieth century without the aid of mechanical printing and, later, the internet. Computerization itself would not have been possible without steam-power, since the electricity that powers such machines is still produced primarily through the burning of coal. The project of digitization that enables the complex reading of a material book-system such as *Milton* would be all but impossible. Every step from the production of Blake’s raw materials to the technologies that enable my reading of his books today is dependent on a complex network of industrial innovations, one that, through its continued dependence on steam-power, paradoxically contributes to environmental degradation even as it allows us to consider a response to that conflict.
Coda:

Blake in/of Time

The field of Blake studies has long been characterized by a positivist historicism, one that, unlike the method I model in chapter three, seeks out historical detail primarily for its own sake. Many arguments could be made for this approach. A greater level of historical knowledge allows us to see the world as Blake saw it, to understand complex networks of connectivity as they would have appeared to him. To understand such networks on our own historically limited terms would be to misunderstand them, if not ignore them entirely. But as Caroline Levine suggests, this “version of historicism,” which “assumes that genuine knowledge” derives “only through observation,” is predicated on a “steadfast effort to separate [the] past from the interests and values of the present” (n.p.). It divides “subject from object, one culture from another, Victorians”—here, Blakeists—“from the twenty-first century.” This overarching trend in mainstream historicism—and in Blake studies, particularly—imagines the past as knowable only by its material trace, holding at a distance the very history it seeks to know via its radical emphasis on specificity.

If I’ve demonstrated anything throughout this study, it is that Blake rejected binaries of all kinds, establishing them in his own work in order to facilitate their disintegration and the social, economic, and environmental disruptions such disintegration can create. As he asserts in Milton, “Negation must be destroyed to redeem the Contraries” (40.33, E 142), and earlier, in The Marriage of Heaven & Hell, “Without contraries is no progression” (3, E 34). We can only speculate that Blake would have rejected such a temporal division. He certainly represented time in terms less amenable to liberal modernity than the linear, unitized structure we generally subscribe to today. In describing Blakean subjectivity—the congregation of psychic agents that comprises thought itself—I’ve sought to illustrate the
very type of thinking that might allow us to move beyond such binaries and toward a
networked understanding of our own global culture.

Methodology, like Blake’s pastoral, is in itself a tool for thought, and if we do not
apply the correct tools, we cannot properly think Blake. How, then, does one best examine
Blake—and not just Blake the poet but Blake the maker of temporally bound material
objects? How does one investigate his process and his theory of creativity in a manner that
both accounts for historical detail and addresses the complex sociopolitical challenges facing
criticism today? While the answer is one I’ve touched on throughout this study, I’d like to
briefly consider it in terms of what Anna Kornbluh and Benjamin Morgan identify as the
“robust interpretive mode” that epitomizes presentism. Methodologically, there are many
ways to recognize, as Kornbluh and Morgan suggest, that “To study the nineteenth century
is to be struck almost daily by the sense that it never really went away” (n.p.). For one, we
can read historical texts with the questions and theories of contemporaneity in mind—to see
them as participating in a transhistorical dialogue that collectively comprises our own
modernity. I laid out such questions in my introduction and have sought to facilitate such a
dialogue throughout this study. As Kornbluh and Morgan state, “Ours is also a gilded age of
income inequality, of financial speculation, of de facto debtor’s prisons, of capitalist
exploitation, of global inequity, of misplaced faith in evolutionary psychology, of widespread
reliance on coal-based energy.” Such a dialogue is therefore easy to foster. It almost writes
itself.

We might also look to Blake’s material process: to the physical composition of
Blake’s work and to the methods by which those works were produced. Somewhat
paradoxically, the hyper-specificity in which Blake studies is entrenched renders the field a
particularly rich site for presentist criticism, which seeks to combine historically
particularizing readings of archival work with theories of empire, economics, ecology, etc. Because Blake created his books meticulously, and archaically, in ways that materially reflect his thought, his works fashion a temporal collision that collapses the “separability” Levine recognizes between the nineteenth century and our own time. It is the task of the maker, as Northrop Frye observes, to see “images as permanent living forms outside time and space” even while giving them form through acts of historically-located poiesis (85). So it is the task of the critic to account for the temporal collision Blake himself manifests: to think diachrony ensconced within synchronicity, considering the ways by which the universality of thought becomes manifest in the ephemerality of matter.

Such a collision becomes its own creation, since like the two temporal poles of “Jerusalem,” it models not a collapse but a cycle. If we are to take Blake at his word that artistic creation has the power to manifest environmental restoration—and I do—we cannot read his illuminated books as anything other than an attempt to bring that restoration to fruition. Just as the process of making the illuminated books grasps for a pre-industrial past, in their sheer materiality, the books themselves hurl the moment of their making into futurity. Embedding thought in form, Blake generates a theory of presentism that permits his readers to transcend the othering effect of positivist historicism. In so doing, he initiates a recuperative cycle that, through the imagination’s “Mental Fight,” combines spiritual and material worlds to “build” a post-industrial ὠἶκος—a dwelling as green and pleasant as the pristine natural past.

If we understand Blake’s specificity not as mere particularity but as itself a tool for thought, scholars of Blake might do so as well. Especially in the face of anthropogenic climate change—of a future that is not certain, or whose certainty rests in its own destruction—Blake’s theory of creation through opposition may hold a key. While it is
difficult to imagine making an environmental future that does not involve robotics or cybernetics—mechanization to the extreme—Blake permits us to think beyond the solutions offered up by theory. Of course, Blake’s poiesis does not provide a practical solution: it will not remove cellophane from the bowels of gulls off the Midway Islands, nor will it re-freeze the polar icecaps. What it does provide is a mode of cognizing complex systems beyond the strictures of disciplinarity in order to forge the solutions we have yet to fashion for ourselves. If we can think a future, if we can harness the “hybridity” Latour argues is essential to networked thought, we can instantiate that future into physical form. And if we’ve done that, how have we not made a future? If we take nothing else from Blake’s books, it is that time is linked to material reality just as thought is tied to physical form. The two come hand in hand. To study any object at any level of specificity is to partake in a diachronic relationship between the present and the past, between when the object was made and when we hold it in our hands. To give form to abstract thought is to collapse the divide between those temporal poles, instantiating a future that looks like the past and that recuperates the ecological damage we’ve so carelessly inflicted on our present.
Works Cited


