

Lubomir TERZIEV**American University in Bulgaria**

Representation and Repetition in William Blake's *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*

Abstract

Taking its cue from Goldsmith's opposition between representation and apocalypse, in what follows I want to suggest that part of the mythical narrative that unfolds in *Jerusalem* occupies a borderline space between representation and repetition, and it is in this space that the Benjaminian now-time (*Jetztzeit*) of the poem constitutes itself. Out of the myriad motifs and storylines in the poem, I will focus on the relationship between Los – arguably the central character of Blake's mythos in this poem – and his spectre. I believe that an analysis of this nexus will illustrate my point about the constitutive borderline space between representation and repetition.

Keywords: Blake, Benjamin, representation, repetition, spectre, apocalypse

William Blake's *Jerusalem the Emanation of the Giant Albion* (1804) features most of the key elements of his prophetic mythopoeia. In the very beginning, the speaker, in the manner of an epic poet, announces his agenda: "Of the Sleep of Ulro! and of the passage through/ Eternal Death! and of the awaking to Eternal Life" (E 146).¹ The narrative opens with man's loss of awareness of eternity and his immersion in the illusory reality/sleep of Ulro – "this material world" of error (Damon 2013: 449) in Blake's symbolic geography. Here, primordial man Albion, who has fallen after his being self-divided, defies the Lamb and suppresses his emanation Jerusalem, who "was wont to play before thy face, /Beaming forth with her daughters into the Divine bosom" (E 147). Thus, Albion distances himself from the liberating presence of divine vision, which, in the symbolic logic of Blake's myth, is equivalent to losing his humanity. In Chapter 2, Albion's humanity is clouded by his newly acquired false consciousness of "the punisher & judge" for whom "every Act [is] a Crime" (E 174). Radical transformation is announced by "the Divine voice [that] came ... as Multitudes without Number! / the voices of the innumerable multitudes of Eternity" (E 177). It is this voice that asserts the inevitability and redemptive nature of Albion's "eternal death", which will be followed by an awakening: "Albion goes to Eternal Death: In Me all Eternity / Must pass thro' condemnation, and awake beyond the

¹ Reference to *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* edited by David Erdman (<https://erdman.blakearchive.org/>).

Grave!” Apart from the idiosyncratic punctuation (quite typical of Blake’s work), what is noteworthy here is the abrupt transition from the third-person reference (“Albion goes...”) to the first-person pronoun (“In Me all Eternity”). The personal pronoun refers to the divine speaker (Jesus), but the ambiguous syntax merges the human with the divine (Albion and Jesus), which is one of the versions of the *telos* that Blake’s mythopoeia pursues.

What obstructs the union of the human essence with the divine essence is the antagonistic activity of the “rational power”. In Chapter 3, the spectre of reason, who has separated himself from the essence of Albion’s humanity, reigns supreme and proclaims himself God:

But the Spectre like a hoar frost & a Mildew rose over Albion
Saying, I am God O Sons of Men! I am your Rational Power!
Am I not Bacon & Newton & Locke who teach Humility to Man!
Who teach Doubt & Experiment & my two Wings Voltaire: Rousseau.
Where is that Friend of Sinners! that Rebel against my Laws! (E 203)

The triumphant spectre induces Albion’s fall: “... Albion fell down a Rocky fragment from Eternity hurl’d / By his own Spectre, who is the Reasoning Power in every Man” (E 203). The motif of the absolute dominion of Newtonian/ Lockean reason restates metonymically Albion’s death. The poem follows the scenario of loss and redemption/restoration, so “awaking to Eternal Life” (E146) comes as the climactic moment at the end of Chapter 4. The messianic climax is preceded by a number of aggravations. There is first an epic battle between “Albions Twelve Sons” who “revolve mightily/ Over the Tomb & over the Body: ravning to devour/ The Sleeping Humanity” and Los – Blake’s name for the figure of the visionary poet – who “with his mace of iron/ Walks round” and “dash[es] in pieces self-righteousness” (E 233). Then Vala, a composite figure of many roles and transfigurations, in her hypostasis as Luvah’s daughter and lover, devises a scheme whereby Albion “should die a death never to be reviv’d”; to achieve this, she “keep[s] his body embalmd in moral laws” (E 237). The apocalypse – “the wrath of God breaking bright” (E 255) – is preceded by Los’ thunderous appeal to the “Fiends of Righteousness” to “obey their Humanities, & not pretend Holiness” (E 251). What follows is the moment of Albion’s and Jerusalem’s awakening, and eventually, the visionary restoration of the fourfold unity of the human: the “Four Faces of Humanity ... going forward irresistible from Eternity to Eternity” (E 258).

How does this tortuous, idiosyncratic, quasi-Biblical *mythos* of loss and redemption resound in an age to which Mark Fisher has attached the label “capitalist realism”, by which he denotes capitalism’s success in the naturalization of the ideological assumption that there is no alternative to the already established “business ontology” (Fisher 2009: 17)? Can Blake’s version of historical/mythical temporality

serve an emancipatory politics today and redeem our hope for a future that holds some kind of novelty? Does anything in the scenario that unfolds in *Jerusalem*, and in the prophetic books at large, provide a clue to how such a future beyond mechanical repetition can be conceived and/or materialized? Or, alternatively, does this narrative, like More's *Utopia*, "become a closure, ... autonomous and self-referential: at some outside limit, purely formal and without content, or rather, whose content has been sublimated by itself becoming self-referential" (Jameson 2005: 40)?

In the critical literature on Blake, one can identify both positions. Thus, Jon Mee, for instance, in his influential study on eighteenth-century enthusiasm, sees Blake as a Benjaminian historical materialist:

History in Blake's prophecies is blown apart by his apocalyptic enthusiasm. Against 'the homogeneous empty time' of the same dull round, Blake offers, like Walter Benjamin's work, the continuing possibility of an unworlding wherein both the individual and the nation are 'blasted out of the continuum of history'. (Mee 2003: 293)

In this reading, Blake's prophetic visions feature or constitute a declaration of rupture with the past whereby "the continuities of identity ... have to be abandoned entirely in the interests of regeneration" (Mee 2003: 293). Saree Makdisi's *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* offers the opportunity for a univocally emancipatory hermeneutic of the poet's enthusiasm:

... antinomianism comes to name not a particular religious belief as such but rather a plebeian cultural and political refusal of subordination, just as enthusiasm itself would by the end of the eighteenth century cease to be a strictly or properly religious discourse and would come to name a general condition, the potentiality of the multitude to be swept by supposedly irrational crazes. "Enthusiasm" would ultimately be identified with the creative potential of the multitude, its ability to generate other modes of social, economic, cultural, aesthetic, religious, and political organization than the ones recognized by both the established authorities and the hegemonic liberal-radical reformers. (Makdisi 2003: 74–75)

Commenting on Makdisi's rhetoric, Steven Goldsmith notes that "Makdisi mobilizes readerly exhilaration to the point where it promises, by its own affective momentum, to break free from social and ideological constraints that otherwise seem insurmountable" (Goldsmith 2013: 11–12). In an earlier book, and in a much more sedate tone than Makdisi's, Goldsmith suggests that Blake is "more the poet of representation than of apocalypse" (Goldsmith 1993: 139), by which he means that politically Blake's "interests coincide with those of the late eighteenth-century

democratic revolutions” (137) and aesthetically his rhetoric makes it “impossible to determine whether ‘Eternal Consummation’ indicates the pleasures of infinite apocalyptic energy or the permanent incapacities of an inescapably sexual history” (147).

Taking my cue from Goldsmith’s opposition between representation and apocalypse, in what follows, I want to suggest that part of the mythical narrative that unfolds in *Jerusalem* occupies a borderline space between representation and repetition, and it is in this space that the Benjaminian *now-time* (*Jetztzeit*) of the poem constitutes itself. Out of the myriad motifs and storylines in the poem, I will focus on the relationship between Los – arguably the central character of Blake’s *mythos* in this poem – and his spectre. I believe that an analysis of this nexus will illustrate my point about the constitutive borderline space between representation and repetition.

The meaning I attach to these words in this paper is Deleuzean. In the introduction to his book *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze defines the latter in opposition to generality: “Generality presents two major orders: the qualitative order of resemblances and the quantitative order of equivalences” whereas “to repeat is to behave ... in relation to something unique or singular which has no equal or equivalent” (Deleuze 1994: 1). Further down, in a rhetorically powerful passage which, interestingly, relies on parallel repetitions Deleuze goes on to argue that:

If repetition can be found, even in nature, it is in the name of a power which affirms itself against the law, which works underneath laws, perhaps superior to laws. If repetition exists, it expresses at once a singularity opposed to the general, a universality opposed to the particular, a distinctive opposed to the ordinary, an instantaneity opposed to variation and an eternity opposed to permanence. (Deleuze 1994: 2–3)

In other words, repetition works in the space before or beyond concepts and thus precludes the comforting possibility for easily identifiable sameness or similarity. It is a destabilizing mode which shakes one out of the predictability of the habitual order of the world and challenges the logic of permanent change/variation by confronting it with the option of eternity. In terms of signs, repetition makes synonymy difficult or impossible, since whereas representation – the vehicle of generality – “maintains a unique centre which gathers and represents all the others”, repetition “implies a plurality of centres, a superposition of perspectives, a tangle of points of view, a coexistence of moments which essentially distort representation...” (56).

One would expect that, like any ghostly presence, Los’ spectre in Blake’s *Jerusalem* is a figure that puts representation into question. According to Derrida’s famous definition in *Specters of Marx*, the spectre is a “non-present present”, “an unnameable or almost unnameable thing” that “comes to defy semantics as much

as ontology, psychoanalysis as much as philosophy". Importantly, "the thing is still invisible, it is nothing visible at the moment one speaks of it". What also makes the thing difficult to represent is its fuzzy provenance and affiliation: "something, between something and someone, anyone or anything, some thing" (Derrida 1994: 5). The example on which these reflections rest is the ghost of Hamlet's father in Shakespeare's eponymous tragedy.

There are at least three characteristics that make Los' spectre different from Hamlet's father's ghost. First of all, it is not a *revenant*, i.e. it does not come back from somewhere, it does not reappear. Instead, it seems hauntingly and irritatingly available to Los at all times. Actually, the correlation between Los and his spectre (this applies to all such relationships in Blake's *mythos*) is synecdochical: in a past charged with trauma, the spectre has been divided from the essential body, so to speak, and the part has remained permanently and painfully visible to the whole (actually, later, Los will have to forcefully make the spectre invisible to his daughters). Secondly, Blake's version of the spectre is not exactly unnameable. As I will show, Los makes some unequivocally clear statements about the spectre's identity. Thirdly, Los and the spectre form a clearly identified nexus, and there is no uncertainty as to the spectre's origin or belonging: it is Los' private spectre. Fourthly, this ghost, unlike the one conceived by Shakespeare, ends up being pliable and obedient, albeit against his own will.

In *Jerusalem*, Los' spectre first appears in Plate 6. As soon as it comes on the scene, we learn about its traumatic aetiology: "His spectre driv'n by the Starry Wheels of Albions sons, black and Opaque/ divided from his back ... divided/ In terror of those starry wheels: and the Spectre stood over Los/ Howling in pain..." (E 149). The motif of painful division is no surprise to anyone aware of the basics of Blake's mythopoeia. "The Starry Wheels of Albions Sons" add an element of obscure symbolism, but the obscurity is dissipated by the repetitive use of this image in Blake's prophetic books as a pointer to "materialistic thought and ... [the] Newtonian universe", as S. Foster Damon informs us (Damon 2013: 478). What reinforces our sense of the representability of this spectral presence is its fixed position: "the Spectre **stood** over Los". One might want to compare this to Horatio's desperate appeal at the end of the ghost's first appearance in *Hamlet*: "Stay! speak, speak! I charge thee, speak! *Exit Ghost*" (Act I Scene I). Unlike the ghost in *Hamlet*, Los' spectre is here to stay. Once settled, he grabs the first cue in an extensive conversation in which his goal is "to lure Los: by tears, by arguments & by terrors":

Wilt thou still go on to destruction?
Till thy life is all taken away by this deceitful Friendship?
He drinks thee up like water! like wine he pours thee
Into his tuns: thy Daughters are trodden in his vintage
He makes thy Sons the trampling of his bulls, they are plow'd

And harrowd for his profit, lo! thy stolen Emanation
 Is his garden of pleasure! all the Spectres of his Sons mock thee
 Look how they scorn thy once admired palaces! now in ruins
 Because of Albion! because of deceit and friendship! (E 149)

In this soliloquy, the spectre's seductive strategy of persuasion is reminiscent of the role *hassatan* plays in *The Book of Job*. The satanic spectre seeks to immerse Los in the logic of a tit-for-tat history premised on duplicitous friendship and deceitful material gains: Los' "fields are plowed and harrowed for [Albion/England's] profit", i.e. the poet's visions have been appropriated to serve the agenda of a materialistically minded society. Beyond the Biblical overtones, these lines sound homologous to Mark Fisher's description of the poet's impasse in the conditions of capitalist realism: "Cobain knew that he was just another piece of spectacle, that nothing runs better on MTV than a protest against MTV; knew that his every move was a cliché scripted in advance, knew that even realizing it is a cliché" (Fisher 2009: 9).

It is important to note that the spectre's account of events rests on an easily representable conceptual core of self-promotion through marginalization. The spectres of Albion's sons "mock" the "once admired palaces" of imagination and establish Baconian/Lockean/Newtonian reason at the centre of the narrative. It is around this centre that the homogeneity of history (in the Benjaminian sense) is constructed. In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Benjamin argues that to the historian who "contents [himself] with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history ... the sequence of events [is] like the beads of a rosary" (Benjamin 1969: 265). The continuity of events and the preclusion of rupture in Los' spectre's account is ensured by the subjugation and suppression of non-representational visionary scenarios: "He (Albion) makes thy Sons the trampling of his bulls". In his rebellious response to the spectre's admonition, Los states emphatically the power and the validity of his vision:

Be attentive! be obedient! Lo the Furnaces are ready to receive thee.
 I will break thee into shivers! & melt thee in the furnaces of death;
 I will cast thee into forms of abhorrence & torment if thou
 Desist not from thine own will, & obey not my stern command!
 ...I will compel thee to assist me in my terrible labours. To beat
 These hypocritic Selfhoods on the Anvils of bitter Death
 I am inspired... (E 151)

This is the first declaration of imminent rupture in *Jerusalem*. The continuity of history established by the "hypocritic Selfhoods" of Albion's sons and their spectres will be "blasted out", to use Benjamin's verb, on the "Anvils of bitter Death". The spectre is exposed here for the first time to a brutal and uncompromising rhet-

oric of intimidation, and a few lines further down he does yield to Los' threatening injunction:

Therefore Los stands in London building Golgonooza
 Compelling his Spectre to labours mighty; trembling in fear
 The Spectre weeps, but Los unmov'd by tears or threats remains
 I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans
 I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create
 So Los, in fury & strength: in indignation & burning wrath
 Shuddring the Spectre howls... (E 153)

In the first line of this excerpt from Plate 8, Blake proclaims the constitution of a Benjaminian now-time (*Jetztzeit*): the site where time is no longer “empty [and] homogeneous” but becomes “time filled by the presence of the now” (Thesis XIV 263). The juxtaposition of the semantically passive verb “stand” with the semantically active verb “build” parallels the juxtaposition of the two locations: London and Golgonooza. In this specific opposition, London stands for the actual corrupted past and present, whereas Golgonooza stands for the virtual “new now”. Golgonooza is a construct dangling on the margins of the conceptual. We learn in Blake's *Milton* that it is “namd Art & Manufacture by mortal men” (E120), which inscribes it within the economy of *techne*, or the makeable. In Plate 12 of *Jerusalem*, however, we are given a meticulous description of its four gates, one of which opens onto the degraded material world called Ulro, but another one looks towards Eden. In other words, Golgonooza is a space accommodated somewhere between the earthly and the heavenly; it is both makeable and unmakeable, both worldly and unworldly. Los himself has taken a firm stand in the reality of the representable past/present, and it is in/from this dimension that he is performing his singular poetic act of repetition – the act of building a makeable virtual “new now”. The poet's suspended posture makes for a borderline space between representation and repetition in which novelty emerges.

Importantly, the spectre of reason is forced to contribute to the birth of novelty. It is definitely a traumatic experience for him: “Shuddring the Spectre howls”. One could assume that what accounts for this outburst of rage on the part of a figure supposed to represent reason, is the perceived irrationality of the project in which he is forcefully involved. In an intriguing economy, this counter-emancipatory rage is mobilized to work for the cause of the visionary's wrath.

Let us now take a look at the whole disposition. Los, who himself is a spectre-like iteration of Urthona (the Eternal who stands for imagination in Blake's mythopoeia), assumes the role of an essence with regard to his own spectre, who assumes the role of the essential spectre's reason. The latter spectre, who, despite his spectrality, is essentially nameable and representable as Newtonian/Lockean

empiricist reason, participates in the construction of a makeable virtual visionary city called Golgonooza. Los, the spectre's past bodily host, copes with the pernicious presence of this supplementary part, which constitutes a lack and an excess at the same time, by transforming it/him into a labourer and imposing upon it/him a regime that could be referred to as a dictatorship of the imagination. At the same time, however, both the spectre and Los do not leave the space of the representable as long as their status and relationship are based on more or less clear ontological predicates: the spectre is reason, whereas Los is vision; the spectre is the divided part whereas Los is the divided spectral whole; the spectre is a slave whereas Los is a master. Los, simplistically and categorically, imposes another binary opposition: the one between "creat[ing] a system" or "being enslav'd by another Mans". To him, these are entities within what Deleuze defines as "the order of resemblances and the order of equivalences" (1994: 1).

I want to suggest, then, that the emancipatory potential of the Blakean mythopoeia in *Jerusalem* should be sought in the idea that repetition, conceived as a novelty, or "a singularity opposed to the general", can be actualized only through an excruciatingly painful subjugation of the ubiquitous spectres of the concept. This subjugation, however, does not involve a radical rupture with representation. Golgonooza – the makeable virtual city – is the true site of the "new now". Jerusalem, with its "Four Faces of Humanity ... going forward irresistible from Eternity to Eternity" is the site of an always receding virtual prospect.

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