SUSAN FOX

Poetic Form in Blake's Milton

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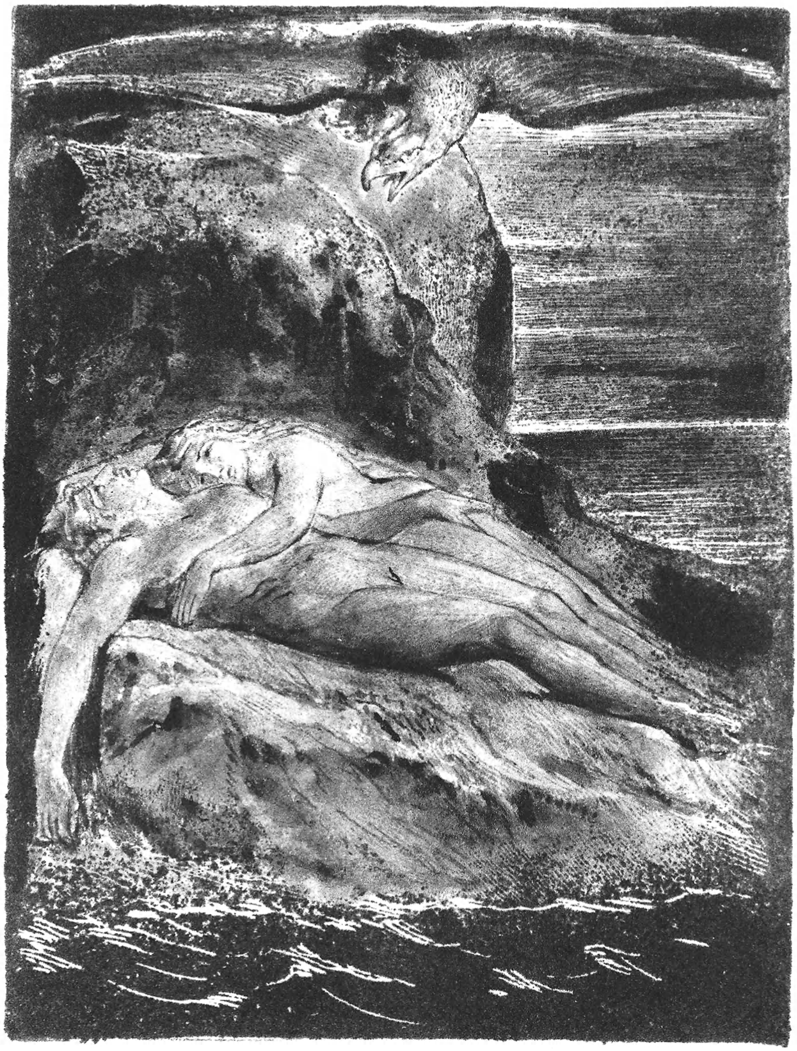
Poetic Form in Blake's *Milton*



1. Plate 42 (Albion, Jerusalem, and the eagle of inspiration)

Poetic Form in Blake's *Milton*

Susan Fox

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to Larry

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Preface

William Blake's exegetes have abundantly demonstrated the coherence of his late prophetic poems, but they have conceived that coherence primarily as a visionary one, a philosophical system into which the poetry initiates one through a series of splendid but erratic passages of great imaginative intensity. The narrative coherence of these works has had little attention; their verbal structures have been considered too esoteric or too confused to yield to any systematic rhetorical criticism. Yet Blake himself placed great emphasis on artistic form:

> I have heard many People say Give me the Ideas. It is no matter what Words you put them into & others say Give me the Design it is no matter for the Execution. These People know ⟨Enough of Artifice but⟩ Nothing of Art. Ideas cannot be Given but in their minutely Appropriate Words nor Can a Design be made without its minutely Appropriate Execution [.][1]

Furthermore, his sense of artistic form at about the time he first engraved *Milton* depended on outline, on delineating structure:

> The great and golden rule of art, as well as of life, is this: That the more distinct, sharp, and wirey the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art; and the less keen and sharp, the greater is the evidence of

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[1] Public Address, *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, commentary by Harold Bloom (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), p. 565. All quotations of Blake will be from this edition.

> weak imitation, plagiarism, and bungling. . . . The want of this determinate and bounding form evidences the want of idea in the artist's mind. . . .[2]

This study, in defining the elaborate rhetorical structure of *Milton* and in demonstrating the congruency of that structure with the poem's system of ideas, is an attempt to suggest that the late prophecies are as profound in their poetic structures as they are in their thematic ones.

The formal principles of the poem, its symmetry and alternating perspectives and disruption of conventional time sequence, are familiar enough in Romantic poetry. "Frost at Midnight" and "Ode to a Nightingale" are symmetrical, *Prometheus Unbound* is built of the various perspectives of its characters, and *The Prelude* for all its apparently chronological development skips back and forth in time via flashbacks and parallel experiences and late explanations of early phenomena. But Blake uses these familiar principles with such radical concentration in *Milton* that they are hardly familiar any longer. Symmetry becomes the exhaustive parallelism of the poem's two contrary books; all the perspectives of the poem are focused on a single event; that event takes place in a single instant which takes Blake fifty pages to describe but has no measurable duration.

As the structure of *Milton* is a distillation of many of the formal techniques of early nineteenth-century poetry, so it is a distillation of certain techniques of an older tradition, that of the biblical prophecies. The poem's refracted narration, its manifold repetitions of key incidents and images, its defiance of purely rational order in the name of suprarational order link it with the visionary forms of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and especially Revelation. But *Milton* employs these techniques even more insistently than the prophecies do. It abolishes conventional sequential narrative altogether, and establishes a system of congruencies so precise as to make repetition into identity.

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[2] A Descriptive Catalogue, p. 540.

I shall not argue that Blake consciously devised the structure of *Milton* according to the principles delineated in this study. The only evidence I can detect of deliberate organization is in a single revision Blake made of the poem (see Appendix B for discussion of that revision), and that evidence is too slight to bear such an argument. Blake himself described the composition of a long poem, probably an early version of *Milton,* in a letter to Thomas Butts in 1803:

> I have written this Poem from immediate Dictation twelve or sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time without Premeditation & even against my Will. the Time it has taken in writing was thus rendered Non Existent. & an immense Poem Exists which seems to be the Labour of a long Life all produced without Labour or Study.[3]

Whether the "eternals" who allegedly dictated that poem bothered themselves with such things as rhetorical structure we have no way of knowing; Blake had certainly trained himself in such concerns, as we can tell from his earliest lyrics. Furthermore, at least five years (probably six or seven) passed between this letter and the engraving of *Milton* in nearly its final form, and we also have no way of knowing what revisions Blake made during that period, or why he made them.

The question of conscious artistic control is particularly tantalizing when the work in point is as intricately and suggestively formed as *Milton.* It may be a question of greater psychological than literary pertinence, but that does not diminish its fascination. We do not know whether Blake consciously chose to create a poem of two exhaustively parallel books; we do not know whether he consciously arranged their matching progressions of style, or their paired stanzas, or their patterns of reflecting images. We do not know what processes of mental association are responsible for such patterns, conscious or unconscious. We can, however, recognize that in *Milton* those patterns observe perfect decorum with the meaning of the poem.

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[3] p. 697. The art to which Blake is specifically referring here is pictorial art, but his own expansion of the reference permits us to apply this comment to literary art at least by analogy.

Anne Kostelanetz Mellor's study, *Blake's Human Form Divine* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), traces the development of Blake's attitudes toward outline throughout his pictorial and poetic career.

Two major issues raised by recent Blake criticism, the relation between Blake and his epic predecessor Milton and the relation between the illuminations and the texts of Blake's poetry, have direct and powerful bearing on any understanding of *Milton.* Because the purpose of this study is to elucidate the verbal structure of the work, and because so much excellent scholarship has appeared on these subjects in the last few years, I shall limit my discussion of Blake's argument with Milton to commentary on those passages in which it is instrumental in the poem's structure, and my discussion of the illuminations largely to an appendix in which I shall describe their relation to the verbal structure. Readers who wish to pursue these issues further might consult the work of Northrop Frye, S. Foster Damon, Peter F. Fisher, Florence Sandler, Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr., and others on Blake's response to Milton,[4] and of

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[4] Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (1947; rpt. Boston: Beacon, 1962), pp. 351–352; S. Foster Damon, "Blake and Milton," *The Divine Vision: Studies in the Poetry and Art of William Blake*, ed. Vivian de Sola Pinto (1957; rpt. New York: Haskell House, 1968; hereafter cited as *Divine Vision*), pp. 89–96; Harold Bloom, *Blake's Apocalypse: A Study in Poetic Argument* (1963; rpt. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1965), pp. 78–82; Peter F. Fisher, *The Valley of Vision* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961), p. 70; Florence Sandler, "The Iconoclastic Enterprise: Blake's Critique of 'Milton's Religion,'" *Blake Studies*, 5, 1 (1972), pp. 13–57; Irene Taylor, "Say First! What Mov'd Blake?: Blake's *Comus* Designs and *Milton*," *Blake's Sublime Allegory: Essays on The Four Zoas, Milton, Jerusalem*, ed. Stuart Curran and Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr. (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1973; hereafter cited as *Sublime Allegory*), pp. 233–258; Harold Fisch, "Blake's Miltonic Moment," *William Blake:*

David V. Erdman, W.J.T. Mitchell, Jean H. Hagstrum, and others on the illuminations.[5]

Essays for S. Foster Damon, ed. Alvin H. Rosenfeld (Providence: Brown University Press, 1969; hereafter cited as Rosenfeld), pp. 36–56; Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr., "William Blake: Illustrator-Interpreter of *Paradise Regained*," *Calm of Mind: Tercentenary Essays on Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes in Honor of John S. Diekhof*, ed. Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr. (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1971), pp. 93–132; Wittreich, "Opening the Seals: Blake's Epics and the Milton Tradition," *Sublime Allegory*, pp. 23–58.

Of these the Sandler essay and "Opening the Seals" are the most comprehensive. The latter is the only work on the list that deals principally with the poetic rather than the conceptual relation of the two poets.

[5] David V. Erdman, *The Illuminated Blake* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1974), pp. 216–267; W.J.T. Mitchell, "Style and Iconography in the Illustrations of Blake's *Milton*," *Blake Studies*, 6, 1 (1973), pp. 47–71; Mitchell, "Blake's Composite Art," Rosenfeld, pp. 82–91; Jean H. Hagstrum, "Blake and the Sister-Arts Tradition," Rosenfeld, pp. 82–91; Robert N. Essick, "Blake and the Traditions of Reproductive Engraving," *Blake Studies*, 5, 1 (1972), pp. 59–103. The first two of these essays deal directly with the illuminations of *Milton*, and the others argue the general relation of Blake's illuminations to his poetry.

Acknowledgments

My debts to previous Blake scholarship are too great to be adequately acknowledged in footnotes, and I am eager to record my gratitude here, especially to the works of S. Foster Damon and Northrop Frye. For their scholarship, and even more for their advice and encouragement, I am grateful to Harold Bloom, who first guided me through Blake's complexities, and David Erdman, whose generosity in sharing his knowledge is Blakean in proportion. Anthony Heilbut, Thomas R. Frosch, and Florence Sandler read my manuscript and offered invaluable suggestions.

For permission to reproduce six of Blake's illuminations of the final, D copy of *Milton* I am grateful to the Library of Congress, Rosenwald Collection.

The Queens College Word Processing Center prepared the manuscript. I appreciate the skill of Wendy DeFortuna, who typed patiently through Blake's vagaries and my own.

An early version of the argument of this study appeared in *Blake Studies*, II, 1 (1969).

Poetic Form in Blake's *Milton*

I. Contexts

Throughout his poems William Blake attempted to reform established traditions; *The Book of Thel* is a revision of pastoral idealism, *Europe* of Milton's theology, *Jerusalem* of everyone's theology. The nature of Blake's revision of conventional poetic techniques deserves particular attention, because exaggerations of his heterodoxy have encouraged even sympathetic readers to assume that his prophetic poems have no coherent structural frameworks. *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem* have been considered brilliant collections of set pieces in random or at best indecipherably subjective orders; their supposed randomness has even been elevated to the ranks of their principal virtues. A close study of the individual poetic units of *Milton* and their interrelationships, however, should at least mitigate any suggestion of structural randomness charged to or against the prophetic Blake. The structure of *Milton* is unique, and forbidding in its complexity, but it is a comprehensible poetic structure nonetheless.

However unique the frameworks of Blake's late prophecies may be, their basic elements are surprisingly conventional. Blake's diction, for example, may seem perverse to a reader who likes his angels exemplary, and yet the basis of that diction is anything but perverse: as Josephine Miles has demonstrated, the language of Blake's poetry throughout his career is the familiar poetic language of the eighteenth century.[1]

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[1] *Eras and Modes in English Poetry* (1957; rpt. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1964), Chapter Five. Robert F. Gleckner, in "Blake's Verbal Technique" (Rosenfeld, pp. 321–332), notes that Blake uses his inherited vocabulary "towards ends quite foreign to eighteenth-century thinking," and finds this new use "a

Traditional though Blake's vocabulary may be, of course, he does often employ it in a startingly innovative way. Not only does he introduce extravagant, invented names (Luvah, Golgonooza, Ololon) and radically reworked conceptions (Innocence, Spectre, Eternity), he makes even the most familiar places and things ominously unfamiliar. Yet, however Blake tampers with our automatic responses to words, he relies on those responses for his effect. It is no use calling Hitler an arch-angel unless we all know what an angel is: a revered spokesman for the public and private self-conceptions of a given society. For all their mythic and ironic dimensions, Blake's redefinitions have a curious literalness. They are never arbitrary; if they seem so, that is only because society has been arbitrary in assigning values to what they signify. They never reverse or otherwise deny the established conceptions of what they indicate; they merely criticize those conceptions by exposing the limitations, usually moral or perceptual, inherent in them. A "Spectre," for example, is no less an incorporeal ghost in Blake than it would be in any Gothic novel, but it is only an incorporeal ghost as defined from eternity, whence all true definitions are derived. What is, from the standpoint of eternity, dead and invisible, happens to be, from our standpoint in Generation, the only material life. Blake is not being perverse when he calls our hard live flesh a ghost, he is being literal to his vision, which must, as all genuine poetic vision must for him, derive its perspective from eternity.

Similarly, the concept of eternity itself has an unexpected literalness in Blake's poetry. We are so used to a vague, convenient use of the word that we may find it merely quaint to hear its denizens named familiarly and without awe "the eternals," as if they were the Nixons or the sanitation workers. But Blake had a very particular idea of eternity and its inhabitants: "Many suppose that before [*Adam*] ⟨the Crea-

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measure of his antipathy to and distance from the poetic technique he inherited" (p. 322).

tion⟩ All was solitude & Chaos This is the most pernicious Idea that can enter the Mind as it takes away all sublimity from the Bible & Limits All Existence to Creation & to Chaos To the Time & Space fixed by the Corporeal Vegetative Eye & leaves the Man who entertains such an Idea the habitation of Unbelieving Demons *Eternity Exists and All things in Eternity Independent of Creation which was an act of Mercy. . . .*"[2] Blake does not permit us our comfortable stock responses to words of major significance. He challenges those responses to reveal the greater meaning those words imply. In his poetry "eternally" never means "for ever and ever"; it always means "in that state of existence which is neither chaos nor creation." Recognizing this expansive liternalness, we may spare ourselves confusion when we read of a character's sleeping eternally or going to eternal death, only to find him wide awake or quite alive several pages or even paragraphs later; this is not the poet's absent-mindedness, but his conscious renovation of words. His characters do not die or sleep forever; they enter a state of what seems like death or sleep to those left awake in eternity. By this kind of redefinition Blake makes familiar expressions like "Surrey" or "eternity" as raw and vulnerable and resoundingly suggestive as "Oothoon" or "Los."

The meter of Blake's later works also represents a reordering of convention. Blake's septenary is unusual in a tradition that has adopted pentameter as its standard, but it is a perfectly natural vehicle for a poet who loved the Bible's long-lined eloquence and the ballads with their seven-beat units. The fourteener does change, to be sure, during the course of Blake's career, and the regular, identifiable ballad rhythms of the early illuminated prophecies have been hammered into an entirely new and scarcely recognizable metrical invention by the time of the composition of the *Jerusalem.* But the hammering is a process, a traceable development not entirely unlike the development of

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[2] "A Vision of the Last Judgment," p. 552.

Milton's iambic pentameter from its simplicity in the sonnets through its ornate involutions in *Paradise Lost* to its spare and ringing quiet in *Paradise Regained.*[3]

Blake's reworkings of traditional diction and meter are dramatically innovative, but they cannot in themselves account for the confusion or the genius attributed to the artistry of his late prophecies. Either confusion or genius must be charged instead to the structural principles to which diction and meter are subservient. A study of those principles in *Milton* should suggest both the coherence and the originality of Blake's prophetic art.

Two particular structural principles seem to me to grow in influence throughout Blake's career until they culminate in *Milton*: the principle of simultaneity, by which the duration of the entire action of the poem is defined as a single unmeasurable instant, and the principle of multiple perspectives, by which every facet of that action is analyzed from the point of view (or points of view) of every major character. A brief sketch of the developments of these two principles in Blake's poetry may clarify both their increasing importance in the course of his thought and art, and their dominant influence on the composition of *Milton.* Because multiple perspective is the more widespread of the two principles in Blake's work, and the more nearly conventional, let us begin with it.

Even in the *Songs of Innocence*, published in 1789, Blake is clearly playing perspectives off each other. The chimney sweeps may take comfort in sweet dreams of death, but the reader cannot be less appalled at their plight for that dark relief. There has been extensive critical debate over the degree, even over the existence, of irony in the Songs; but there can be no debate that the perspective of Innocence, which can speak to the lamb and the emmet as equals and which fears no harm of wild beasts, is not the perspective of the adult reader. In the tension between the two perspectives lies the greatest significance of the poems. "The Lamb" is a great poem only when it is endowed with the nostalgia or the bitterness or the pain of loss or the wise re-creation of one who has long since ceased to converse with livestock; otherwise it is nursery patter.

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[3] Alicia Ostriker traces that process of Blake's developing prosody in *Vision and Verse in William Blake* (Madison and Milwaukee: University of Wisconsin, 1965). John Hollander considers the prosody further in "Blake and the Metrical Contract," *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (New York: Oxford, 1965). See also Kathleen Raine, "A Note on Blake's 'Unfettered Verse' " (Rosenfeld, pp. 383–392).

Blake's use of perspective in the *Songs of Innocence*, and in the *Songs of Experience* printed five years later, is perfectly conventional in everything except, perhaps, the emphasis he places on it. Tension between perspectives forms a major part of the substance of *The Book of Thel*, dated the same year as the *Songs of Innocence*,[4] and again there is nothing conspicuously original in Blake's conception of that tension. But in *Thel*, for the first time in Blake's poetry, multiple perspective is a governing principle of the structure of the poem. *Thel* has four numbered parts. The first three, pastoral in diction and biblical in rhythm, are set in the Vales of Har, a garden of Innocence in which flowers and clouds and the earth itself chat encouragingly with the heroine. Thel has begun to have inklings of mortality; she finds no comfort for her anxiety in the Vales, but fears to enter any other reality. By the fourth part she has been persuaded to set aside her fears. She passes to the grave, the edge of Experience, and hears from beyond it a dreadful lamentation of existence there. As the perspective of the poem shifts from Innocence to Experience, so does its language: pastoral diction gives way to apocalyptic, lilies and lambs and gentle breezes to "fibrous roots" and poisons and

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[4] Because of discrepancies in the script styles of the plates, it is possible that the poem was not completed until at least 1791, that plate 6 is a revision of an earlier plate (see David V. Erdman's textual notes to his edition of *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965], p. 713).

"a whirlpool fierce." This new perspective is too much for Thel; she flees shrieking back to the Vales of Har. The substance of her anxiety is the same regardless of perspective: it was mortality she feared in the Vales, and it is mortality that frightens her in the grim prophecy of Experience. From Innocence, though, mortality seems merely a matter of fading gently away. From Experience, it seems a matter of torment and betrayal. The structural pivot of the poem is the transition between the two perspectives, between the lamb and the whirlpool.

Oothoon, in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), is not frightened by new perspective; she embraces it. In the first two plates of the poem she passes from Innocence through Experience to a confident new vision of reality that subsumes both. The remaining six plates, however, see her enslaved by the limited perspectives of Theotormon, her lover, and Bromion, her defiler. The whole poem may be seen as a dialectic between her comprehensive perspective and their fragmented perspectives. Theotormon is a kind of parody of false Innocence; he rejects what reminds him of loss or evil, and spends his hours moping (much as Thel moped) that he cannot be strong and good. Bromion is a parody of the limitations of Experience, tyrannical and mystifying and committed to the existence of the evils Theotormon laments. Oothoon, having known both their states, transcends both. Innocence and Experience are always limited, and limiting, states in Blake's poetry: it is little more viable only to fear tigers than it is not to fear them at all. In Oothoon's comprehensive vision we see the beginnings of an alternative to these limitations.

In Blake's early poems one's perspective may be measured roughly by the criterion of childhood. The only true Innocent is a child who can know no other perspective. Experience is the next developmental state, beginning symbolically with puberty and entrance into social obligation. Those who can accurately recognize both these states may enter into Oothoon's comprehensive perspective, which critics call Organized Innocence. The three states may be conceived linearly, as a personal progression from early childhood to true maturity.

After *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Blake measures perspective not by this limited personal criterion of biographical development, but by the objective, comprehensive criterion of what he calls eternity. One's state of being, the magnitude of one's perspective, is defined in the later poems not by one's earliest and simplest perspective, but by the vastest and most sophisticated perspective possible. The linear progression from Innocence through Experience to Organized Innocence gives way to a series of concentric circles initiated at a center point without extent or duration, Eden. From Eden, which opens inward into eternity, perspective is charted outwards in three realms of diminishing vision, Beulah (described as Innocence had been described), Generation (which incorporates the earlier Experience), and Ulro (a kind of lethal extension of the limitations of Beulah and Generation). The mythic implications of this new cosmology have been vigorously analyzed by Damon, Frye, Bloom, and others, and we shall have cause to consider them again in a later chapter. What is pertinent to our present argument is the relationship of this series of perspectives to the composition of Blake's prophecies. Innocence / Experience, the linear, personal axis of vision, has ceased to be effective by *America*. In *Europe* (1794), the Eden / Ulro axis, identified as the line from a fairy's perception to a mortal tyrant's, has formed. The major significance of that shift to the development of Blake's prophetic art is that the emerging, more complex, less personal system allows the poet great new freedom in elaborating the range of perspectives that is the basis of his vision. The difference between Innocence and Experience is simple, dramatic, and absolute—a quantum distinction in individual understanding. The difference between Eden and Beulah, or between any two states on the Eden / Ulro axis, is a matter of gradation at points so subtle as to be indistinct—a universal prin-