

“Word, work, & Wish”: Labor and Productivity in William Blake

by

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It is probably a truism that dissertations always have a powerfully autobiographical character. If this is the case, it is little wonder that I wrote one on labor and productivity, since throughout the process my own productivity, my own anxieties of production, were very much at play. This anxiety may be endemic to scholarship in general; in my case, it has pervaded, defined, and (I hope) ultimately enriched the process of reading, researching, and writing this document. It may have been inevitable that Blakean labor without production—the poet’s myriad descriptions of incessant, obscure, repetitive, solitary, and issueless labor—appealed to me and seemed perfectly suited to my own habits and dispositions. More to the point, I’m quite aware of how my own anxieties about scholarly production and productivity have affected my relationships with my committee members and, most importantly, my family and friends. My advisor, Marjorie Levinson, deserves a great deal of gratitude for being an intellectual mentor, as well as for her patience and consistent enthusiasm for the project. Tobin and Julia provided detailed and insightful comments on my chapter drafts, and Adela generously agreed to participate despite a daunting list of other commitments.

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Abstract

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This dissertation addresses the political valence of labor in William Blake. That scenes of labor occupy a pivotal position in Blake’s poetry is widely acknowledged by critics who examine the political or ideological significance of his work. The general scholarly tendency has been to fit labor in Blake into critical narratives that herald a broadly liberatory thrust of Blake’s art, aligning it with various discourses about freedom.

Blake was highly attuned to the historical, economic, and ideological shifts that were gradually taking place in the realm of material labor in his lifetime, and while he may indeed have attempted to re-imagine the determined and coercive forms of capitalist production in favor of liberatory practice, there is another strain in his work that is deeply ambivalent about this very project. Blake’s enduring concern with modes of production (in his poetry, images, and other writings)

represents a complex, multi-faceted, and ultimately thwarted attempt to envision alternative modes of liberatory praxis.

Employing Adorno's notion of aesthetic negativity and critiquing the recent work of scholars such as Saree Makdisi, Guinn Batten, and others, I examine the theoretical discourse on labor from Hegel, Marx, and their heirs as it relates to aesthetic theory and Blake's aesthetic practice. Extended readings of "The Chimney Sweeper" of *Songs of Innocence*, *America a Prophecy*, and *The [First] Book of Urizen* focus on the negativity of labor and its disruptive effects in order to understand Blake's presentation of the abnegation of labor; the laboring dead rising from the grave; the ghostly subject of labor; and the unmooring of the concept of labor from the themes of activity, energy, and creation in favor of stupor, sleep, and the dissolution or decay of the body and sensorium. I argue that Blake's approach to labor involves an interference without resolution between two opposing views: on the one hand, a liberatory narrative of how oppression might be redeemed via aestheticization; on the other hand, a view of labor that refuses to enter into any of the compensatory strategies of modern ideologies of productivity, economic, aesthetic, or otherwise.

Chapter One:
“Brilliant and Disintegrating”: Blake, Labor, and the Ruins of Albion

According to one biographer of William Blake, between the years of 1790 and 1800, whenever the poet and artist strolled into the City from his Lambeth residence in South London, his path took him past one of the great ruins of the early Industrial Revolution in England, a ruin that was also, I would add, a concrete symbol of the complexities of labor in the age of the increasing hegemony of capitalist modes of production (Ackroyd 130).¹ Blake’s London, while not at the vanguard of early industrial production, nevertheless was home to perhaps the greatest symbolic feature of the reorganization of labor and production that was occurring more prominently in the cities of the North. In March of 1791, the Albion Flour Mill, built in 1786 on the south bank of the Thames (roughly near the present location of the Tate Modern), caught fire and, in spectacular fashion, burned to a charred, massive hull. According to Gillian Darley’s concise survey of the Albion Mill, its construction in effect brought the Industrial Revolution to the heart of England’s capital, it featured the most advanced steam-driven technology of the day, and its goal was unprecedented productivity (16-19). The Albion Mill was the first of its kind to use steam as its primary source of power (mills had been powered by wind or water), and was built by Matthew Boulton and James Watt (with

¹ The recent and more authoritative biography by the Blake scholar G. E. Bentley Jr., *The Stranger from Paradise: A Biography of William Blake*, makes no mention of the Albion ruin. Cyril Smith comments on the presence of the Albion Mill in Blake’s London (215).

architecture by important early factory designer Samuel Wyatt). It employed “fifty pairs of millstones set in motion by two engines. The output was expected to reach sixteen thousand bushels of flour a week” (Mantoux 333).²

It is difficult to imagine today that the mill, aside from being “a definitive emblem of British industrial eminence,” also was a destination for London’s elite and a “fashionable location in which to hold events, masques and balls... frequently visited by the more enquiring representatives of the aristocracy and City grandees, such as the Directors of the East India Company and the Bank of England, as well as eminent figures from abroad such as Thomas Jefferson” (Darley 18-19). Despite its glamour, the Albion Mill’s advanced technology was insufficiently tested and was worked well past safe capacity—insurmountable mechanical difficulties marred its short existence. And, despite the attraction of the mill to London’s elite, ordinary working men and women of London looked upon it with great hostility as it threatened the smaller manufacturers and more traditional methods of milling flour.

² The advent of steam as a source of power in industry is an event of great importance. Karl Marx discusses the innovations of Watt and Boulton in the first volume of *Capital*, where he cites Watt’s “so-called double-acting steam-engine” as a “prime mover” that, in effect if not in fact, released machinery from human or natural direction, thus reversing the traditional hierarchy of the human over tool: “The worker has been appropriated by the process; but the process had previously to be adapted to the worker” (499, 501). Marx goes on to describe the result as “the most developed form of production by machinery. Here we have... a mechanical monster whose body fills whole factories, and whose demonic power... finally bursts forth in the fast and feverish whirl of its countless working organs” (503). In *Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present*, David Landes argues that “The development of mechanized industry concentrated in large units of production would have been impossible without a source of power greater than what human and animal strength could provide... The answer was found in a new converter of energy—the steam-engine” (95). Palmer and Neaverson claim that the Albion Mill featured twenty millstones (23). For more background on the Albion Mill, see A. W. Skempton’s “Samuel Wyatt and the Albion Mill.”

Indeed, economic history remains uncertain whether the fire resulted from machines catastrophically overheated from overwork, or from the sabotage of proto-Luddite machine-breakers.³ In any event, many accounts of the destruction of the mill share a sense that its glamour was in fact heightened by its destruction. Indeed, the Mill's destruction became not only an occasion for celebration, but also paradoxically enhanced its allure: E. P. Thompson quotes one observer of the conflagration that, "the people were 'willing spectators', and 'ballads of rejoicing were printed and sung on the spot'" (*The Making of the English Working Class* 67). Not merely a spectacle for the lower orders, for whom it represented a threat to their traditional ways of life and labor and its destruction poetic justice, the mill, festively illuminated by the flames that consumed it, offered Londoners a "thrilling" real-life instance of the "sublime" (Darley 20); in so doing, the spectacle formed a compelling nexus of political economy and aesthetics by providing an occasion for delight in destruction, an exhilarating spectacle in which an industrial disaster became a means for observers to revel in a particular sort of apocalyptic *jouissance* occasioned by the advent of heavy industry:

³ Darley notes that the rumor circulating London that the fire was the handiwork of machine-breakers was just that—a rumor—and that the true cause was "untested technology, pushed beyond its limits." Darley also cites an Albion employee's claim that the cause of the fire was Wyatt's "insistence on over-running the machines" (20). Paul Mantoux's *The Industrial Revolution in the Eighteenth Century* implies that the fire may not have been a "mere accident" (334; see also Rosen 187). E. P. Thompson suggests that arson may have been a cause due to the practice of "adulteration" in order to lower quality and raise prices (*The Making of the English Working Class* 67). Steven E. Jones agrees that arson, as an anticipatory form of Luddism, may have been responsible for the fire (83). Blake scholar Saree Makdisi seems more certain of the events of March 1791, asserting unequivocally that the fire was arson (*William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* 64) and that "rioters" were responsible (110; see also 115).

The Albion Mill, its palatial masonry walls and windows silhouetted against the harsh illumination of the wall of fire inside, could have been mistaken for one of the public buildings of the City of London in festive mood, customarily lit with thousands of lamps and transparencies for royal or national celebration. Brilliant and disintegrating, the mill was a kind of terrible counter-image to such festivities. (Darley 20)

If the working men and women of London saw in the mill their own increasing obsolescence represented to them—in short, the mill was their future, futurity itself—they may have also been seeing something akin to Walter Benjamin’s description of an effect of the nexus of aesthetics and industrial production in a much later historical era. Benjamin’s famous suggestion that humanity’s “self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order” captures the sense of revelry in the exhilarating spectacle of the destruction of the mill (242). The sublime properties of the “brilliant and disintegrating” mill unite in a striking image the hope for a utopia of managed, disciplined, and productive labor and the thrilling, even self-destructive, wish for its own obliteration. This new temple of efficient, modernized labor carried with it an essential apocalyptic moment quite distinct from the destructive intentions of soon-to-be displaced workers.⁴ While the vast discrepancies between Blake’s and Benjamin’s eras and concerns must be respected in such analogies, in the spectacle of the mill’s destruction (which occurred over several days) and its burned-out ruins (which stood until 1809) we have a concise emblem for the concerns of this dissertation, the topic of which is the role of labor in Blake’s poetry.

⁴ In his interesting discussion of Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg’s painting *Coalbrookdale by Night*, which was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1801, Stephen Daniels notes a link between images of heavy industry and both apocalypse and prophecy (228).

While Blake makes no explicit reference to the Albion Mill's destruction (and never in his poetry calls a mill "Albion" or "Albion's") the constellation of issues it gathers around it reflects Blake's ongoing engagement with the seismic shifts in material labor that England witnessed in the late eighteenth century: mechanized, repetitive work; adherence to clock-time; disciplining the laborer to new, divided forms of work; the unsustainability of increased productivity; the unity of mechanization and the human that the factory both depends and founders upon; the increasing marginalization of traditional manufacture and handicraft; the relation between heavy industry and an empire- and war-driven economy (e.g., the presence of Jefferson and the East India Company); credit and the institution of a national debt (e.g., the interest of members of the Bank of England); the spectre of class antagonism and agitation; and labor in capitalism as an apocalyptic category in that the new spectacles of capital present an image of our own destruction that nonetheless elicits our rapt enjoyment.

Today, we can only speculate about Blake's actual views regarding the Albion Mill.⁵ Certainly, its fate may have simply represented for Blake the horrors of industrial production as a blight upon England's "green & pleasant land" as in the well-known Jerusalem hymn of *Milton* (plate 1; E 95). Mills in general are one of Blake's enduring symbols of servility and captivity, whether in the form of compelled and dehumanized labor or a fallen intellect. In *America a Prophecy* the

⁵ It is possible that Eric Hobsbawm is referring to the Albion Mill or its imitators when he implies that the mill's fate may have been a part of Blake's consciousness of industrial labor: "Few men saw the social earthquake caused by the machine and factory earlier than William Blake in the 1790s, who had yet little except a few London steam-mills and brick-kilns to go by" (*The Age of Revolution: 1789-1848* 263).

mill is the site of slave labor and thereby must be negated in order that the slave may be freed from his labors (6: 6; E 53).⁶ Elsewhere, mills are connected to labor only obliquely, as in Blake's opposition in the "Public Address" (1809-1810) between an aesthetics of "Soul & Life" and one of "a Mill or Machine" that he faults Rubens, Rembrandt, and Titian for pursuing (E 575). In *There is No Natural Religion* (1788), Blake associates the mill with private property, dead repetition, and limiting boundaries in a more abstract sense: "The bounded is loathed by its possessor. The same dull round even of a univer[s]e would soon become a mill with complicated wheels" (E 2).

Recently, Saree Makdisi has offered the most sophisticated theory available of what mills and labor might have meant to Blake, noting their protean and shifting nature and emphasizing their peculiar resistance to verbal or visual description in Blake's work. Mills abound in Blake, but they do so marked as a lack or gap in

⁶ The relevant lines from *America* are as follows:

The morning comes, the night decays, the watchmen leave their
stations;
The grave is burst, the spices shed, the linen wrapped up;
The bones of death, the cov'ring clay, the sinews shrunk & dry'd.
Reviving shake, inspiring move, breathing! awakening!
Spring like redeemed captives when their bonds & bars are burst;
Let the slave grinding at the mill, run out into the field:
Let him look up into the heavens & laugh in the bright air;
Let the inchained soul shut up in darkness and in sighing,
Whose face has never seen a smile in thirty weary years;
Rise and look out, his chains are loose, his dungeon doors are open.
And let his wife and children return from the oppressors scourge;
They look behind at every step & believe it is a dream.
Singing. The Sun has left his blackness, & has found a fresher morning
And the fair Moon rejoices in the clear & cloudless night;
For Empire is no more, and now the Lion & Wolf shall cease.
(A 6:1-15; E 53)

Interestingly, the lines from *America* are repeated in a slightly altered form in *Night the Ninth of The Four Zoas* (134: 18-24; E 402).

representation, and this fact suggests to Makdisi that the mill is both a real “site of compelled labor in general” *and* a more abstract process: “Thus, one labors at the mill to the extent that one labors in the process identified as the mill, and the mill is a conceptual space... in which imagination and even life itself have been harnessed to the material requirements of a certain kind of productive process” (*Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* 91-92).⁷ Makdisi’s dematerialization of the mill as a “conceptual space” simultaneously enriches and impoverishes the image, at once adding a compelling level of complexity that accounts for the manifold forms that mills assume in Blake, just as it empties the concept of its basis in labor as a recalcitrant material fact. This sort of move, I will argue later, is typical of Blake scholarship on labor, but it also maps onto analogous tendencies in aesthetic theory to elide the materiality (or servility) of labor just as it correlates with attempts to locate and activate the liberatory kernel of work in an aesthetic or creative moment that labor internalizes. Makdisi’s sense that there is something peculiar about Blake’s representations of mills is a valuable insight, but he misses the more crucial fact that it is labor that poses a representational problem that the mill as symbol takes on by association. The dematerialization of the mill in Makdisi’s analysis leads him to an explicit desire to negate labor, to articulate a sense of freedom that is a

⁷ I discuss Makdisi’s reliance on “life itself” as a liberatory ideal or transcendental ground in my discussion of *America* in chapter 3. Here, I merely wish to indicate Marx’s genealogy of the machine in *Capital*, where he describes how in feudal modes of production the machine mirrors or mimics the organic human body and remains the latter’s servant. In more advanced capitalist forms of industry, the relation is dialectically reversed, and the machine assumes priority and the organic human body is shaped or fitted to the machine’s movements and purposes (see 548-549). Makdisi’s static opposition between an organic or spiritualized sense of “life itself” and labor ignores the historical dialectic between the two, but it also leads him to a simplified view of the function and effects of labor in Blake.

freedom from labor and from any form of determination whatsoever. Ultimately, Makdisi's views on labor in Blake founder upon an unacknowledged ambiguity between a sense of labor's necessity for the representation of freedom and a desire to negate it altogether, as if to do so would render legible Blake's liberatory project. However, one premise of this dissertation is that labor's resistance to representation, the fact that it—whether symbolized in a mill or not—is a constant preoccupation of Blake's but one that eludes discursive fixity and conceptual stasis, suggests that there is something insistent about labor, something resolutely problematic that cannot be denied through negating it through a liberating access to the aesthetic or the "imagination." My quarrel with Makdisi is that the realm of freedom he sees in Blake is an articulation of Blake's own desire, a desire that the work—and the negativity of labor in the work—exceeds, a desire, moreover, that is representative of a general trend in Blake studies of reading in the poetry critics' desire for Blake to represent or prefigure forms of human liberation that, again, the work exceeds and at key junctures, obstructs outright.

Returning, then, to the ruin of the Albion Mill, it is possible that Blake saw in its massive charred hull something simultaneously utopian and dystopian, a temple of enhanced productivity and a locus of its thrilling destruction, a negative emblem for an irresolvable contradiction between totality and disintegration, and an indication of what was rapidly being lost while denying the possibility of a conservative return to the idyll of a political economy based on "Englands pleasant pastures" (*Milton* plate 1; E 95). And, as mentioned earlier, if the Albion Mill represented to the mill workers, small producers, and even artisans of London their

own future, or the concept of the future itself, the Albion mill might have suggested to Blake a particularly ominous relation to the future, captured well in the following lines from Night the Third of *The Four Zoas*: “Prophetic dreads urge me to speak. futurity is before me / Like a dark lamp. Eternal death haunts all my expectation” (41: 7-8; E 327-8).

In the following chapters I will claim that labor serves as the site for Blake’s intervention in what has come to be termed praxis philosophy;⁸ but I will also claim that this intervention is resolutely negative: labor’s indirect and at times obscured effects in Blake’s poetry involve the simultaneous invocation and refusal of the desire for utopia or totality, the construction of an abject and ghostly laboring subject, the repetitive inertia of historical time, and an economics that, while refusing the notion of an escape from or an “outside” of the economy of exchange, deconstructs this economy by applying pressure to (or, returning to the metaphor of the Albion Mill, overworking to the point of breakdown) its fundamental categories and commitments. The energy of Blake’s vivid depictions of labor seems channeled

⁸ Jackie DiSalvo has linked Marx and Blake together as “philosophers of praxis” (*War of Titans* 60ff). My understanding of praxis philosophy is informed by Jürgen Habermas’ discussion of it in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* where he claims that the capitalist “unfettering of productive forces must therefore be traced back to a principle of modernity that is grounded in the practice of a producing subject rather than in the reflection of a knowing subject” (63). Habermas goes on to describe the implications of this “unfettering” for the subject: “Praxis philosophy, which accords privileged status to the relationship between the acting subject and manipulatable worldly objects, conceives the self-formative process of the species... as a process of self-creation. For it, not self-consciousness but labor counts as the principle of modernity” (64). Habermas’s tone implies a progressive, emancipatory, almost triumphalist construction of an active, self-consciously creative subject. Part of my argument is that the negativity of labor in Blake both invokes and ultimately refuses the affirmative, positive production of the self, and instead marks the very concept of productivity itself as having ghastly, violent, and onieric effects.

toward producing a realm of utopian freedom out of physical and psychic oppression, yet whether they ever succeed in doing so is questionable. Blake's scenes of labor are simultaneously productive *and* destructive, at times nearly beatific in tenor, and at other times extraordinarily violent.⁹ Labor in Blake simultaneously gestures towards utopian liberation and a sort of hellish re-entrenchment in forms of political, economic, and intellectual oppression. Disentangling this contradiction has occupied the efforts of generations of critics (to be discussed in the next chapter) interested in Blake's political economy, and the sophistication with which this exercise has been pursued is to a large degree responsible for my initial interest in this topic. The sense, however, that this contradiction does not admit of solution, and indeed that this "stubborn structure"¹⁰ in fact is precisely the point of labor in Blake are the animating insights of this study. Insofar as the utopian wish is simultaneously asserted and denied in the form of

⁹ *The [First] Book of Urizen*, according to Andrew Lincoln, is notable since "Few works in English can express a more powerful sense of the body's capacity for pain. The book is filled with visual images of torment, of bodies cramped, buried alive, flayed, threatened with drowning, fire, or horrific metamorphosis" ("From *America* to *The Four Zoas*" (217). Robert Essick has claimed that "Much of *Jerusalem* is an excursion into the horrific sublime; it may be the most violent, blood- and entrails-splattered poem in English" ("*Jerusalem* and Blake's Final Works" 261).

¹⁰ I borrow this phrase from *Jerusalem*, where Blake uses it in a parenthetical comment about the English language: "English, the rough basement. / Los built the stubborn structure of the Language, acting against / Albions melancholy" (36[40]: 58-60; E 183). Though a full analysis of this passage is far outside the scope of the present context, the emphasis on linguistic experience as something constructed—figuratively an act of labor—is noteworthy, as is the fact that the language's structure, its rigidity and resistance to those who employ it, acts as a force opposed to lassitude and despair.

labor, the latter is resolutely negative—restlessly critical, protean, and disruptive to democratizing political progress or the representation of utopian solutions.¹¹

As the foregoing claims preclude or at the very least problematize positive representation in the language of assertions, they are most clearly instantiated in the ways the poetry performs them.¹² In other words, as the negative in Blake's

¹¹ John Barrell has usefully—if a bit hastily—summarized critics' views of Blake's politics that position him as a "founding father of the liberal individualism which has been the prevailing ideology of 'Blake Studies'" (*The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: "The Body of the Public"* 224). Barrell cites Moris Eaves as representative of the liberal ideology that Blake's supposedly "expressivist" aesthetics implies a heralding of the individual opposed to mass society, standardization, and forms of mass and divided production. Against this, Barrell constructs a more conservative Blake who is less a champion of the individual than he is concerned with classes and the extent to which "civic humanist" art can serve as an ideological buttress to modernizing society (see 225). Eaves's response to Barrell, largely pursued in *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy: Art and Industry in the Age of Blake*, aligns Barrell with the political right and himself with the left; nonetheless, this orientation places Blake squarely (if implicitly) within an art historical debate that sought to define a British character—and hence a nationalism appropriate to that character—that could compete with other European national characters (particularly the French). In essence, this nationalistic debate underpins and depends upon the construction of a free, capitalist market for art objects. Eaves ultimately fails to adequately explain why Blake, as champion of the liberal individualist ideology, *seems* well-suited for this free market that nonetheless excluded him. Julia Wright's *Blake, Nationalism, and the Politics of Alienation* argues that in the trajectory of Blake's career, he found himself both subverting but ultimately defending the dynamics of homogenization and hermeticism that the rise of nationalist ideologies required.

¹² Indeed, language itself participates in the positive language of assertion, as it struggles to avoid the rigidity and affirmation of concepts, invoked in the previous sentence. In other words, it becomes very difficult to avoid both a fetishization and/or domestication of negativity, which in either case reverses its effects. In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno suggests that the procedures of immanent critique entails a ruthless criticism of identity thinking and "damaged life" from within the strictures and with the tools presented by the latter. Negative dialectics "is obliged to make a final move: being at once the impression and critique of the universal delusive context, it must now turn even against itself. The critique of every self-absolutizing particular... is a critique of the fact that critique itself, contrary to its own tendency, must remain within the medium of the concept" (406). This occupational hazard is not, in my view, a sufficient argument against the approach I

political economy, labor eludes positive definition, and instead can be discerned principally in its disruptive, unruly, iterative effects. My claim that labor is determining in Blake entails that labor does not collect or produce a set of positive characteristics that admit of direct description; instead, any treatment of labor in Blake must locate nodes of crisis, difficulty, and contradiction that can only be exacerbated in order to bear witness to their effects. The following chapters do not so much supply arguments traditionally understood as they put certain problems of labor in Blake (one of them is the very representability of labor, reflecting or repeating the problem of how to represent negativity) “on stage,” in order to allow them to play out their internal contradictions more fully than much current criticism has hitherto allowed.

I am aware of the dangers of an argument of this sort: citing labor as a negative necessarily leads (or restricts) me to articulate a string of pessimistic, neither/nor claims; a lack of firm conclusions; and a perhaps reckless (or at least frustrating) willingness to allow ambiguities to stand. Indeed, the charge of nihilism may, with some justice, be levied against this dissertation. Indeed, the reader will note that these qualities, like symptoms, infect the very discourse of this dissertation itself: its interruptive mode of proceeding reflects (ideally, at any rate) my view of a political Blake divided against himself, riven by irresolvable yet incommensurable political commitments; footnotes both supply critical and bibliographic support (as is their traditional role) and offer a sort of dialogic space

have adopted here; it merely entangles this dissertation in another contradiction that will not be solved or sublated, but merely intensified (if I am successful) in the forthcoming chapters.

in which unruly elements of the argument (and mode of argumentation) can unspool and, at times, unravel.

Stating what labor *is* or what positive role it performs in fact contradicts the negativity thesis, in that it entangles my examination in the language of affirmation. Nevertheless, labor's negativity incorporates the positive claims that labor is both that which oppresses and hinders the full activation of the subject's powers and capabilities in capitalism, and, as the subject's creative activity is that which prefigures and is the causal force behind the articulation of utopia. However, as I will argue in more detail in the second chapter, the negative function of labor is a persistent fact throughout the narrative of labor that dominates praxis philosophy from Hegel and Marx through certain figures associated with the Frankfurt School, the Italian Autonomism movement, and others like André Gorz, early Bataille, and Baudrillard of the *Mirror of Production*. That Blake's work participates in this narrative, mirroring and expanding upon many of its themes, is a unique and unexplored phenomenon of his work. Many of these themes and thinkers will be discussed in the second chapter, but here I merely want to note that a feature of this dissertation is a running dialogue between Blake and a later, largely Marxist, or Marx-inflected, tradition that may seem alien to the poet's context and milieu, but that in fact contribute to the construction of a Blakean critique of the ideology of productivity that the criticism has, in the main, missed.¹³ Labor for this tradition is

¹³ Blake critics who have set Blake and Marx in conversation with each other, principally Makdisi, Stewart Crehan, Jackie DiSalvo, and (of lesser importance) Cyril Smith, have nearly universally both aligned Blake with a productivist ideology and, along with this, have sought a transcendental site at which the materiality of labor is overcome. I will discuss this in more detail in the following chapter along with an

nothing less than the process of the creation of the human, which implies the promise of the revolutionary re-creation of the subject after the overthrow of capitalism. As Marx claims in *The German Ideology*, “Only at this stage does self-activity coincide with material life, which corresponds to the development of individuals into complete individuals and the casting-off of all natural limitations” (192; this and all subsequent citations of *The German Ideology* are from *The Marx-Engels Reader*).

Labor’s re-creative power is merely one facet of the philosophical engagement with labor over the past two centuries, an engagement that both indicates the centrality of the experience of labor in modernity (a centrality that Blake’s work reflects and anticipates) and complicates the powerfully utopian vision of Marx; the significance of adding Blake into this narrative (and in reading the philosophy of labor through an optics provided by Blake) is that in Blake’s poetry the manifold effects of labor’s role in the (de)formation of the subject, the experience of historical trauma, and the (im)possibilities of representing historical change are glimpsed. Blake criticism has hitherto avoided exploring the negativity of labor, as it has busied itself with reading labor as a millennial, liberatory category in Blake. In doing so, this body of criticism has missed the rich—albeit deeply pessimistic—critique of humanism and human-centered notions of historical, political, and economic progress that the poetry may have on one level intended, but which is only the conscious, waking version of Blake’s political economy.

exception to this rule, Guinn Batten, who, enlists more of a psychoanalytic model to pry Blake from this trend, with limited success.

The criticism requires labor in Blake to perform the function of that which must be sublated, overcome, or abjected so that a realm of political and economic freedom can be imagined and represented. Scholarly views on labor and political economy in Blake in the main attempt to, in Marx's terms, forge a realm of freedom from one of necessity.¹⁴ This transubstantiation in the Blakean discourse precisely repeats or mirrors the dynamics of the intersection of praxis philosophy with aesthetic theory (*poesis*) as labor is posited in its fallen, divided character as the other of fine art, or as that which must be excluded or abjected in the articulation and construction of the category of "fine art" as a symbol of freedom from necessity and base materiality. These two forms of human making, two interpretations of productivity, persist in mutual tension with each other, resisting and refusing each other, and perhaps nowhere else in literary scholarship is the effort to unite them or to re-imagine *praxis* as *poesis* as strong as in Blake studies. This movement in eighteenth-century aesthetic theory doesn't just incidentally coincide temporally with Blake's life; it powerfully shapes Blake's aesthetic theory through his profession as an engraver and commercial artisan. In the voluminous criticism on Blake's aesthetic practice, the traces of material labor must shed their "servile," repetitive, and interested (as opposed to disinterested) character, thus providing a

¹⁴ The classic statement by Marx on this issue is from *Capital*, vol. 3:

In fact, the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production.... Beyond it [i.e., the realm of necessity] begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working-day is its basic prerequisite. (*The Marx-Engels Reader* 441)

model in Blake's artisanal workshop for the wished-for aestheticization of labor (and of politics) that critics desire. Modern aesthetic theory's concern (particularly in the figures of Burke, Kant, and Schiller) to advance a notion of "fine art" articulates itself as the positive, affirmative term to which the abject, servile nature of labor (particularly wage labor) is the other, or that which must be excluded and subsumed. In Blake criticism, labor's potential for millennial regeneration depends upon reintegrating it with art, reestablishing it as a holistic, spontaneous, and creative activity, a potential for utopian totality that capital has obscured, distorted, and fractured.

While a full discussion of Blake's aesthetic theory and practice is regrettably outside the scope of this dissertation, in the following chapter I dwell on the puzzling career of one key facet of it—the relation between aesthetic conceptualization and execution—in order to argue that Blake deploys what he rejects in order to excavate the deadening characteristics of production under the aegis of capital. In other words, division (of labor) is not what must be overcome to aestheticize political and economic experience in order to redeem it; instead, dwelling in division, exacerbating it, will lay the foundation for a deeper critique of the ways that labor constructs the human subject, provides the traumatic condition of historical experience, and, in its repetitive properties interferes with the very work ethic that governs it.

This foreshadows the readings of Blake's poetry I offer in chapters three through five. In my third chapter I argue that "The Chimney Sweeper" of *Songs of Innocence* (1789) presents the production of the subjectivity of the laborer. I argue

that the speaking voice has a special effectivity in the poem, as it both articulates and displaces the speaker's trauma, by means of repeating it in the constructed figure of Tom. Through this, the laboring subject is revealed to be an object—and not subject—of capitalist exchange, an exchange that produces the laborer as an effect of an exchange that establishes the permanent and constitutive debt and lack of this subject. The fourth chapter looks at the ways that *America a Prophecy* (1793) employs motifs such as the dead rising from the grave, the abnegation of labor, and traumatic pre-history (which I link with the Marxist theory of primitive accumulation) in order to contest Makdisi's recent reading of the poem as a celebration of what he calls "life itself." Chapter five, on *The [First] Book of Urizen* (1794), focuses on distinctions between types of labor represented by Los and Urizen. The poem is important in a genealogy of Blake's approach to labor for it is saturated with images of stupor, sleep, numbness, and other forms of passivity and the deadening of the sensorium—all intimately associated with acts of labor. This peculiar array of images suggests a critique or subversion of the notion of labor as an active, purposive engagement with the world, and hence of the work ethic itself.

This dissertation has a polemical thrust: in the following chapters I take aim against a view, which I find predominant in Blake criticism, that Blake's political economy must issue or produce a representation of freedom. I believe that this view is one-dimensional; more pertinently, however, it disciplines Blake's poetry into ideologies of productivity that his work may indeed invoke and participate in, but to which it cannot be reduced without error, and to which it poses a potentially disabling immanent critique. Threading throughout this dissertation is the

hypothesis that when critics write about Blake, they tend to be articulating their own desire, a claim from which I do not necessarily exempt myself. Standing ambiguously on the cusp of economic modernity, Blake induces critics to take their subject as gesturing toward a “road not(-yet) taken” politically. This dimly prophetic role may sit well with our image of Blake as a voice in the wilderness against power, whether in the form of the crown, the parliament, the pulpit, profit, or an overweaning reason.¹⁵ The ontology of this sort of claim implies that “Blake” is a unified, discrete, self-sufficient source of clear-cut political claims given to transparent linguistic expression, even if that expression requires the critical supplement. Yet, I will claim that looking more carefully at labor in Blake shows that Blake in fact struggled mightily with the problem of the representability of political change, that Blake was quite skeptical about the purported unified subject of bourgeois liberal political projects, and that “Blake” as an object of study was in fact produced by the scholarly desire for a representative of a political change that his poetry nevertheless foundered—however thrillingly—upon. Invoking Žižek’s invocation of Hegel, by “tarrying with the negative” of labor in Blake’s poetry we begin to see, behind the thwarting of utopian, revolutionary, or democratic projects, a challenge (which is itself utopian) that more accurately measures the distance between the current (either for Blake or the time of this writing) state of affairs and the desire for a fulfillment that perhaps permanently remains beyond our grasp.

¹⁵ In the early tract *All Religions are One*, Blake (or the speaker) refers to himself as “The Voice of one crying in the Wilderness” (E 1). Of course, this echoes the description of John the Baptist in the Book of Matthew (itself echoing Isaiah 40: 1-3).

History and Labor

Just as the ruined shell of the Albion Mill forced itself upon the consciousness of Londoners as a fallen shrine of modernization and industrialized forms of mass production, labor itself asserts an insistent, haunting presence in William Blake's work. To enter Blake's work is to enter a multivalent world of material production, at times absolutely claustrophobic with repetitive scenes of labor. This textual and visual universe of production attains concrete form in the dominating images of forges, hammers, chains, anvils, harrows, presses, furnaces, looms, mills, and those who work with them and who are consequently worked (formed / deformed, constructed / destructed) by them.¹⁶ Intricate machinic systems of "wheels within wheels" (much like the Albion Mill's system of steam-powered millstones) form the thematic and conceptual fulcrum of many of Blake's poems, and are powerfully evocative both of the growth of machine-driven power sources in late eighteenth-century Britain that propelled more machines (and the human implements of those machines) in factories, as well as the new disciplinary force of temporal and spatial management that sought to construct—often violently, if necessary—the ideal, sober, and efficient modern worker and subject.¹⁷

¹⁶ Michael Ferber has claimed that in the age of industrialism and its emergence, "[m]achines run all night and all year; those who labor at them—and the young were often thought most malleable to their demands—must become parts of the machine themselves, laboring 'day & night,' 'hour after hour'" (135). In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx succinctly encapsulates the difference between factory and earlier forms of labor vis-à-vis technology: "In handicrafts and manufacture, the worker makes use of a tool; in the factory, the machine makes use of him.... In the factory we have a lifeless mechanism which is independent of the workers, who are incorporated into it as its living appendages" (548).

¹⁷ Landes claims that workers "entered the mills in spite of a strong fear of the unknown, an aversion to supervision and discipline, and resentment of the

The note these images and systems strike is impossible to mistake; it conforms to E. P. Thompson's conviction that "it is neither poverty nor disease but work itself that casts the blackest shadow over the years of the Industrial Revolution" (*The Making of the English Working Class* 446).¹⁸ Thompson is referring to dehumanizing and violent shifts in the labor process that were emergent in the late eighteenth century and to which scholars generally agree that Blake's work responds. Blake's social class standing as an independent artisan uniquely positioned him vis-à-vis these shifts, as increasing political marginalization, immanent proletarianization, and the general threat to artisanal trades through the growth of large workshops and factories that relied upon wage labor, the division of labor, and "de-skilling" contributed to Blake's political aesthetics of immanent

unremitting demands of the machine" (114). In Blake studies, Makdisi offers the best description of this process of disciplining workers (see *Blake and the Impossible History of the 1970s*, especially chapter three).

¹⁸ The reader will note a slippage of terms between "labor" (my preferred term) and "work." Throughout this dissertation, I will tend to use the term "labor," because of its association with modernization, industrial modes of production, and the wage. Hannah Arendt offers a useful distinction between the two terms in *The Human Condition*, where she distinguishes between humanity as *homo laborans* and *homo faber* and claims that in the latter, "work" transforms and shapes nature according to human needs and is dictated by free human thought in accord with communal ends. Labor, performed by *homo laborans*, is opposed to work and is characterized by being determined by human needs, is bound to the necessities of nature and biology, and is aligned with the labor of slaves in its unfreedom and external determination. There is an impermanence to labor, as it produces for the mere sake of consumption, and therefore cannot produce the means for a public sphere of participatory politics, which work can and does, in Arendt's view, modernity, marked by the growth of industrialism and the regimenting of human activity, entails a sacrifice of use value (work) for exchange value (labor, understood as consumption): "we live in a labourers' society... and we have changed work into labouring... Whatever we do, we are supposed to do for the sake of 'making a living'" (126-7).

defeat.¹⁹ While these events—which accelerate in earnest in the last third of the eighteenth century and tend to fall under the rubric of the early Industrial Revolution—are too far-reaching and complex to address in detail here,²⁰ this study accepts as axiomatic a few precepts regarding the epochal re-organization of labor in the late eighteenth century: 1) Artisan labor, which characterizes Blake’s professional life and social class, was becoming increasingly marginalized and

¹⁹ Though it covers a much later historical period than the one Blake knew, the authoritative work on de-skilling is Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital*.

²⁰ While debates persist about the nature of the “revolution” (and even if such a term is viable), when it began and intensified, the relative evenness or unevenness of its development, its overlap with residual modes and relations of production, and so on, this study assumes, with Hobsbawm and others, that “if the sudden, qualitative and fundamental transformation, which happened in or about the 1780s, was not a revolution than the word has no commonsense meaning” (*The Age of Revolution 1789-1848* 29). Joel Mokyr states that the industrialization of labor and related British institutions “chang[ed] human life on this planet more than anything since the emergence of Christianity (27). The sources that have contributed to my understanding of the economic history of this period include Hobsbawm’s *The Age of Revolution: 1789-1848*, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour, Industry and Empire: The Birth of the Industrial Revolution*; Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* and “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism”; Landes’ *The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present*; Colley’s *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*; Rule’s *The Experience of Labour in Eighteenth-Century Industry*; Mantoux’s *The Industrial Revolution in the Eighteenth Century: An Outline of the Modern Factory System in Great Britain*; Porter’s *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*; Price’s “The Imperial Economy, 1700-1776”; Morgan’s *The Birth of Industrial Britain: Economic Change 1750-1850*; Calhoun’s *The Question of Class Struggle: Social Foundations of Popular Radicalism during the Industrial Revolution*; Mokyr’s *The British Industrial Revolution: An Economic Perspective*; Stevenson’s entry on “Industrialization” in *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832*; Jones’ *The Rise of the Factory System in England: Efficiency or Exploitation?*; O’Brien’s “Introduction: Modern Conceptions of the Industrial Revolution”; Hawke’s “Reinterpretations of the Industrial Revolution”; von Tunzelmann’s “Technological and Organizational Change in Industry during the Early Industrial Revolution”; and Pollard’s “The Industrial Revolution—An Overview” and “Factory Discipline in the Industrial Revolution.”

“proletarianized”;²¹ 2) The general experience of labor and the working day became increasingly disciplined, regimented, and rationalized;²² 3) The disciplining of labor was accompanied by a parallel shift in subjectivity, namely the attempt or

²¹ E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* claims that the skilled artisans “were casualties of history, [and] they remain, condemned in their own lives, as casualties” (12-13). Implying that artisans and their culture were the “victims” of the Industrial Revolution, Craig Calhoun claims that “[b]efore the 1820s, artisans had dominated the popular radicalism of England. They felt the industrial revolution largely negatively, as a disruption of or threat to their ways of life and their livelihoods. By the 1830s the predominance of the artisans had passed. Factory workers and others who were the products of the industrial revolution, not its victims, were the mainstay of Chartism” (12). Hobsbawm claims that artisans’ stubbornness to the new reorganization of labor was conceived as an act of resistance to a force that finally “turned independent artisans into impoverished and increasingly specialized sweated labor in urban cellars and garret workshops” (*Industry and Empire* 49). Michael Ferber discusses Blake’s relationship to this ongoing process of marginalization: “By 1790, artisans could feel a new pressure besides the immemorial struggles with middlemen and merchants—the increasing proletarianization of unskilled rural labor in the factory towns” (34). Bronowski usefully isolates Blake as a poet and an engraver to add focus to these shifts:

[T]here is nothing odd in what happened to Blake; for it was happening to many thousands others. The fine London watchmakers were becoming hands in sweatshops. The learned societies of the Spitalfields silk-weavers were rioting for bread. The small owners were losing their place, and the skilled workers were losing their livelihood.... This is a murderous story and it is Blake’s story. (22)

²² These shifts involved both a reorganization of space (in the form of moving large segments of the population to urban centers and gathering workers together on the factory floor) and time (mainly in the imposition of clock time and the imperative that temporal discipline improved productivity). Jackie DiSalvo argues that in the feudal economy, “Life was brutal and impoverished but not disciplined. Peasants enjoyed an erratic work rhythm regulated by the sun and the seasons and interrupted by numerous holy days” (*War of Titans: Blake’s Critique of Milton and the Politics of Religion* 261-262). Hobsbawm claims that, “Industry brings the tyranny of the clock... [and] the measurement of life not in seasons... or even in weeks and days, but in minutes, and above all a mechanized *regularity* of work which conflicts not only with tradition, but with all the inclinations of a humanity as yet unconditioned into it” (*Industry and Empire* 64). E. P. Thompson claims that, “Without time-discipline we could not have the insistent energies of industrial man; and whether this discipline comes in the forms of Methodism, or of Stalinism, or of nationalism, it will come to the developing world” (“Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism” 93).

imperative to construct a certain type of subject fit for rationalized labor;²³ 4) The experience of labor created new forms of misery and depravation for a large segment of the population.²⁴

Although this study accepts these precepts as broadly constituting the general economic and historical background of labor informing Blake's career, part of what I claim here is that any understanding of labor in Blake remains partial to the extent that it merely seeks to contextualize it vis-à-vis historical events (or the

²³ Makdisi argues that the "modern industrial labor process is seen to generate not only a stream of reified commodities, but also a stream of crippled and stunted organs that serve it, as well as a stream of essentially homogenous consumers (self-fashioning subjects) that enjoy its products" (153).

²⁴ The following passage from the first volume of Marx's *Capital* captures this in vivid detail:

[W]ithin the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productivity of labour are put into effect at the cost of the individual worker; that all means for the development of production undergo a dialectical inversion so that they become means of domination and exploitation of the producers; they distort the worker into a fragment of a man, they degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, they destroy the actual content of his labour by turning it into a torment; they alienate from him the intellectual potentialities of the labour process in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as an independent power; they deform the conditions under which he works, subject him during the labour process to a despotism the more hateful for its meanness; they transform his life-time into working-time, and drag his wife and child beneath the wheels of the juggernaut of capital.... [I]n proportion as capital accumulates, the situation of the worker, be his payment high or low, must grow worse. Finally, the law which always holds the relative surplus population or industrial reserve army in equilibrium with the extent and energy of accumulation rivets the worker to capital more firmly than the wedges of Hephaestus held Prometheus to the rock. It makes an accumulation of misery a necessary condition, corresponding to the accumulation of wealth. Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, the torment of labour, slavery, ignorance, brutalization and moral degradation at the opposite pole, i.e. on the side of the class that produces its own product as capital. (799)

discursive, political, and religious atmosphere of antinomianism and radical dissent). The scholarship that has already performed this task has usefully situated labor and Blake's political economy according to shifts in monetary policy, famine in the mid-1790s, the emerging rationalization of production, the exigencies of the war economy and colonial expansion, and the labor of engraving, among other issues.²⁵ Part of the uniqueness of this study is that, while far from disregarding historical context, it argues that there is something unsettlingly excessive about Blake's representations of labor, and that the Blakean political economy unsettles to the extent that labor resists conceptualization and representation. Labor in Blake may be embedded in historical facts, just as it is often closely aligned with the end of history (or its true origin) in the apocalypse and millennium.

²⁵ Kurt Heinzelman's *Labors of the Imagination* situates Blake's "poetic economics" according to the Bank of England's shifts in monetary policy, which Heinzelman suggests provides the context for Blake's attempt to conceive of an economics outside of a model of exchange mediated by money, and a mode of production not determined by the market. Dennis Welch discusses the famine of 1795 and claims that it provides the context for understanding Blake's critique of the classical British political economists who base their systems on conditions of scarcity; instead, Blake's economics are articulated in "spiritual and visionary terms, suggesting very different foundations and perspectives of political economy—especially those that grant currency and credit to the unwanted or unappreciated and (on that account) to the apparently wasted or lost labors of the heart and soul, the labors that truly count in the making of any man or woman" (618-9). Katey Castellano follows Welch in claiming that Blake railed against the emphases on scarcity, the work ethic, and rational self-interest; invoking Bataille, she claims that Blake posed an "economy of excess.... [E]xcess—both prolific and devouring—creates the basis for an alternative, non-utilitarian model of economy based on excessive generosity, which counters the puritan, middle-class morality of liberals such as Adam Smith and Mary Wollstonecraft" (Castellano 5, 9-10). Drawing on Bataille's notion of expenditure, Castellano claims that in this model, social revolution is an excessive and unrestricted expenditure or sacrifice that restores a repressed fund of religious and social meaning to a rationalized and administered world (see 9).

Although I claim that Blake's treatment of labor exceeds the historical, to the extent that this dissertation *is* historical, it finds labor as the locus of necessity in Blake's engagement with history, a necessity that eludes direct representation and therefore must be approached obliquely. Fredric Jameson has famously remarked that, "History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to the individual as well as collective praxis... But this history can be apprehended only through its effects, and never directly as some reified force" (*Political Unconscious* 102). Jameson's key themes in these lines—pain, the refusal of desire, "inexorable limits to the individual and collective praxis"—figure prominently (if not always directly) in the following chapters as horizons of the political, moments—resistant, even disruptive, to representation—that nevertheless condition and set the parameters for the possible in the social realm. If labor stalks these margins of the experience of political economy in Blake, it does so paradoxically in the foreground, as Blake's primary means through which to confront and work through a series of issues related to production and productivity, concepts that were both points of personal anxiety for Blake and that were undergoing rapid shifts in late-eighteenth-century England. What one recent and important study boldly concludes about Blake's books of the mid-1790s ought to be extended back to the *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and forward to *Jerusalem* (1808-1820) as well: these works are "concerned with one thing and one thing only: production—the production of time; the production of space; the production of worlds, of earth, of animals, of humans, of organs, of organisms, of language, of religion, of images, of meaning, of books; the

production of production; the production of life itself" (Makdisi, *Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* 263).

This dissertation has had (and will continue to have) recourse to an argumentative structure that claims that Blake may have intended one thing (to use labor to envision how a realm of freedom might be created from one of necessity), but that the poetry seems to "intend" or articulate another claim, perhaps one hostile to Blake's own. This uncanny experience of labor in Blake I will sometimes refer to as Blake's "economic unconscious," a term for which I am obviously indebted to Jameson's notion of the "political unconscious." However, my intent is more explicitly in accord with Pierre Macherey's views (a powerful influence on Jameson) on the unconscious of a literary work:

we can only describe, only remain within the work, if we also decide to go beyond it: to bring out, for example, what the work is *compelled* to say in order to say what it *wants* to say... Thus, it is not a question of introducing a historical explanation which is stuck on to the work from the outside. On the contrary, we must show a sort of splitting within the work: this division is its unconscious, in so far as it possesses one—the unconscious which is history, the play of history beyond its edges, encroaching on those edges: this is why it is possible to trace the path which leads from the haunted work to that which haunts it. (94)

As I have asserted already, this dissertation asserts that in Blake's approach to labor, we find his oeuvre internally divided against itself, and the primary aim of this study is to bring to light the "splitting within the work" that is the traumatic discursive wound that remains as labor's effect. While for Macherey this "internal distantiation" may be the condition of all literary work, I argue that in Blake labor marks the site at which Blake's utopian yearnings, including the desire to represent these yearnings, are simultaneously most clearly asserted and most definitively

denied. The more emphatically that Blake mobilizes scenes and images of labor precisely to articulate the utopian wish, the more obstinately do these scenes and images violate and disturb this selfsame wish. While Blake very well might have intended to use labor as a sort of conceptual or metaphorical lever through which conditions of unfreedom, oppression, and dehumanization (whether in the political-economic realm or psychological, religious, or intellectual) are transubstantiated or sublated into their redeemed opposite, the stubborn materiality of labor in Blake excavates and tarries at another, submerged, “unconscious” level that severely problematizes and in some cases disturbingly distorts this desire.

Satanic Labor in *Milton*

In only one of the more principal examples of the ways that material labor sustains a contradiction between positive productivity and destruction and thus explicitly establishes labor as negative, *Milton: A Poem* (1804-18), Blake’s “extended crisis lyric,”²⁶ constructs a fundamental opposition between the active, productive labor of Los and his antagonist Urizen’s hibernation, passivity, and inwardness: “Urizen lay in darkness & solitude, in chains of the mind lock’d up / Los seized his Hammer & Tongs; he labourd at his resolute Anvil” (*Milton* 3: 6-7; E 96). What follows in the first book of that poem (and in particular the section from 2: 25-12[13]: 44 (E 96-107) conventionally known as the Bard’s song) has to my knowledge never been explicitly considered an intervention in political economy, but it is impossible to ignore Blake’s concern with the economics of exchange,

²⁶ The phrase is Bloom’s, from *Ruin the Sacred Truths: Poetry and Belief from the Bible to the Present*, 124. John H. Sutherland also claims that “*Milton* may be summarized as a series of crises” (143).

redemption, debt, production, consumption, and labor in its pages. Indeed, when as a response to and defense against the fall—figured as the sleep of Albion—the character of Los and his emanation Enitharmon use their hammer and loom (respectively) to construct the three classes of Redeemed, Reprobate, and Elect, which will eventually contain and convey humanity into the apocalyptic “Last Vintage,” what is happening is not necessarily a theological argument with Milton’s purported Calvinism,²⁷ nor is it a parable of aesthetic production,²⁸ but a genealogy of the abstraction and exchangeability of labor that both establishes the negativity of labor in Blake and, consequently, offers a glimpse into the difficulties inherent in reading labor according to a liberatory trajectory. Los’s sons Rintrah, Palamabron, and Satan are representatives of the Reprobate, the Redeemed, and the Elect, respectively. Significantly, each son of Los, and hence each class represented by them, is also associated with a type (or division) of agricultural labor and a tool characteristic of that labor: Rintrah with a plow, Palamabron with a harrow, and Satan with his mill. As discussed earlier, Satan’s mill should resonate with readers familiar with Blake’s prevalent image of the mill as a multivalent image that variously encompasses industrialism; increasing rationalization; forces of social,

²⁷ John Guillory has traced the notion of “vocation” in the Calvinist doctrine of the classes and the blurring of the boundaries between the term’s valence in theological and economic contexts through a reading of Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*; more importantly, Guillory discerns a basic opposition in that poem between the imposition of reason, the law, and God on the one hand, and an impulse of destruction and transgression that find their formal and narratological correlative in a compulsion to repeat, or the Freudian notion of the drives. For Guillory, Samson’s “vocation is a desublimation of aggression, a crucial difference marking the discrepancy between the divine and earthly father’s demands as the recto and verso of destruction and production” (216).

²⁸ See Wittreich 236, and Welch “Blake’s Critique of Election: *Milton* and the *Comus* Illustrations” 523-524.

epistemological, and ontological homogeneity; and the mechanistic views of nature and the human represented for Blake mainly by the theories of Newton and Locke. However, in this context the Satanic mill is implicitly set apart from the plow and harrow both because it represents a form of work that employs complex machinery and, increasingly in Blake's time, steam (rather than water, wind, or animals) to provide a source of power, and because it bears the characteristic as an empty set such that laborers, each interchangeable from each other, may enter into and perform the "dull round" of tasks. While the distinction between the types of work represented by the mill on the one hand and the plow and harrow on the other does not fully imply a distinction between agriculture as a human- and animal-powered mode of production and one in which the methods of modern industry have gained ascendancy, the mill nevertheless implies a sense of abstraction—even alienation—from naturalized, organically determined work. In the *Grundrisse* (and elsewhere) Marx notes the industrializing tendency of agriculture in capitalism: "Agriculture more and more becomes merely a branch of industry, and is entirely dominated by capital" in bourgeois society (107). As such, the nature of agricultural labor in capitalism is being reorganized according to the dictates of modern industry during Blake's life, and the lines of *Milton* under discussion here are probing the implications of these changes.

Work initially proceeds under the firm discipline of Los, but the precipitating action of the Bard's song occurs when Satan implicitly refuses his naturally assigned task at the mill and instead manipulates himself into Palamabron's position with the harrow, thereby disrupting all productive work:

Of the first class was Satan: with incomparable mildness;
 His primitive tyrannical attempts on Los: with most endearing love
 He soft intreated Los to give to him Palamabrons station;
 For Palamabron returnd with labour wearied every evening
 Palamabron oft refus'd; and as often Satan offer'd
 His service till by repeated offers and repeated intreaties
 Los gave to him the Harrow of the Almighty; alas blamable
 Palamabron. fear'd to be angry lest Satan should accuse him of
 Ingratitude, & Los believe the accusation thro Satans extreme
 Mildness. Satan labour'd all day. it was a thousand years
 In the evening returning terrified overlabour'd & astonish'd
 Embrac'd soft with a brothers tears Palamabron, who also wept
 (7: 4-15; E 100)

Satan's deceitful "extreme" mildness threatens to overshadow his deeper motives in this passage, which are better framed by Palamabron in an address to his gnomes (i.e., his workers): "You know Satans mildness and his self-imposition, / Seeming a brother, being a tyrant" (7: 21-22; E 100). Satan's central characteristic here is his duality, the split between what he appears to be and what he is. If the three brothers are, in a fundamental sense, representational categories, functions of their characteristic labor, Satan's duplicity adds a complicating and disruptive layer to his representational role. His identity is not aligned with the work he does, but by his duplicity and ability to insinuate himself into various roles.²⁹ He—along with his millworkers—become free-floating signifiers, able to attach themselves at will to varying forms of work and representational roles, regardless of consequences. When Palamabron surveys the damage after Satan's day with the harrow, he notes that his "horses of the Harrow / Were maddend with tormenting fury, & the

²⁹ Here Blake seems to be drawing upon the depiction of Satan in *Paradise Lost* as a deceiver and shape shifter; for example, in Book 3 Satan takes on the form of a cherub to deceive Uriel to allow him to enter Eden (3: 634ff.).

servants of the Harrow / The Gnomes, accus'd Satan, with indignation fury and fire.”
(7:17-19; E 100). Realizing Satan's duplicity, Palamabron asserts that Satan

hath assum'd my place
For one whole day, under pretence of pity and love to me:
My horses hath he maddend! and my fellow servants injur'd:
How should he[,] he[,] know the duties of another? O foolish
forbearance

(7: 25-28; E 101)

Palamabron accuses Satan of overworking the horses and servants, and displays the damage to Los and Satan, who weeps at the sight but also reverses the accusation upon Palamabron. Los, forced to adjudicate this situation, suggests that exchanging forms of labor should not occur: “Henceforth Palamabron, let each his own station / Keep” (7: 41-2; E 124). However, the perplexity that Los exhibits here belies the authoritative tone he adopts toward Palamabron, who wasn't responsible for the problem in the first place. And the sense is very powerful that the damage has already been done, and exchangeability has been generalized. After all, Satan immediately sets himself up as a unitary law-establishing god, much as Urizen does elsewhere in Blake:

He created Seven deadly Sins drawing out his infernal scroll,
Of Moral laws and cruel punishments upon the clouds of Jehovah
To pervert the Divine voice in its entrance to the earth
With thunder of war & trumpets sound, with armies of disease
Punishments & deaths muster'd & number'd; Saying I am God alone
There is no other! let all obey my principles of moral individuality
I have brought them from the uppermost innermost recesses
Of my Eternal Mind, transgressors I will rend off for ever,
As now I rend this accursed Family from my covering.

(9: 21-29; E 103)³⁰

³⁰ As I will touch on in chapter five, *The [First] Book of Urizen* includes a lengthy passage at the beginning of the poem in which Urizen attempts to establish himself as a unitary god, his law as a singular authority, and sin as a guardian of human conscience.

The opposition between the slumbering “darkness & solitude” of Urizen and the laboring, productive activity of Los touched upon earlier might be mistaken for discreetly valued categories, such that active and productive labor is privileged over against sloth, slumber, and passivity. However, the discord that ensues in *Milton* when labor is inserted into a system of universal exchange is only the most prominent indication of labor’s negative function, a function that Blake repeatedly and explicitly notes. The leveling, repetitive, and circulatory nature of universal exchangeability makes of it an apocalyptic category for Blake, and the apocalypse takes on a uniquely economic form in *Milton*. The agricultural work of the Bard’s song becomes an extended presentation of the apocalypse in the form of the “Last Vintage” in which “Seed / Shall no more be sown upon Earth, till all the Vintage is over / And all gatherd in, till the plow has passd over the Nations” (25[27]: 8-10; E 121). Los thus instructs the laborers of the vintage:

Therefore you must bind the Sheaves not by Nations or Families
 You shall bind them in Three Classes; according to their Classes
 So shall you bind them.

...

The Elect is one Class: You
 Shall bind them separate: they cannot Believe in Eternal Life
 Except by Miracle & a New Birth. The other two Classes;
 The Reprobate who never cease to Believe, and the Redeemd,
 Who live in doubts & fears perpetually tormented by the Elect
 These you shall bind in a twin-bundle for the Consummation—
 But the Elect must be saved [from] fires of Eternal Death,
 To be formed into the Churches of Beulah that they destroy not the
 Earth

(25[27]: 26-28, 32-39; E 122)

The Redeemed and Reprobate will be consumed in the apocalypse in order to be redeemed in “Eternal Life”—as such, they function according an economy of

sacrifice, in which what is destroyed will ultimately be redeemed at a higher value.³¹ In this sense, their relationship to the vintage will represent an investment that will accrue a profit at “the Supper of the Lamb & his Bride; and the / Awakening of Albion our friend and ancient companion” (25[27]: 60-62; E 122). By stark contrast, however, the Elect class persists unchanged and unchangeable through the “Consummation” and escapes the logic of spiritual/economic redemption, in hopes of a future “Miracle & New Birth.” This hope for a miracle for the Elect nevertheless remains unredeemed and escapes the poem as a negative and non-economizable value, a pure loss that is never incorporated into or put to work for the production of new value. As such, the utopian kernel of the poem is not the “Last Vintage” and its (questionably) redemptive properties, but the wish for a non-economizable moment that the poem asserts but then cannot access—indeed, the poem may assert this wish in order to disable its realization.³² That the bearer of this “miracle”

³¹ In her recent book, *Blake, Nationalism, and the Politics of Alienation*, Julia Wright has provided a useful if flawed discussion of the function of sacrifice in *Milton*. In one of the very few critical treatments of the economics of *Milton*, Wright suggests that Blake critiques exchangeability under the aegis of the logic sacrifice as an ideological support for emerging forms of nationalism. Wright claims that against the homogenizing effects of modernity and modernization, Blake’s preferred form of social organization is a retreat to a vague, pre-modern pastoral idyll, severed from the logic of exchange and what she calls the “public economy” (118). Wright’s emphasis on reunification through retreat to a quasi-mythical past is contrasted in these pages by my treatment in chapter four of Marx’s notion of primitive accumulation and Blake’s *America a Prophecy* to show that capitalism’s initial growth is in fact a traumatic space that encodes historical time in a repetitive, iterative form.

³² In several passages in Blake’s later work, the hope for an undefiled and unique moment that may serve as a point of access to millennial or utopian vision:

There is a Moment in each Day that Satan cannot find
Nor can his Watch Fiends find it, but the Industrious find
This Moment & it multiply. & when it once is found /
It renovates every Moment of the Day if rightly placed[.]

is Satan's Elect class indicates that labor is both inside and outside the poem's political economy: inside insofar as it governs and protects the remainder of the fall, and moreover produces the classes that constitute a bridge between lapsed existence and its redemption; outside insofar as its property as exchangeable makes of it a negative that cannot be redeemed, but only repeated, endlessly re-circulated without hope of profit. The Elect's structure of atonement engages in a creative destruction that takes on an iterative, repetitive structure in which difference (in this instance another term for profit), or redeemed value, never accrues: "Satan is fall'n from his station & never can be redeem'd / But must be new Created continually moment by moment" (11[12]: 19-20; E 105):

For the Elect cannot be Redeemd, but Created continually
By Offering & Atonement in the crue[li]ties of Moral Law
Hence the three Classes of Men take their fix'd destinations
They are the Two Contraries & the Reasoning Negative.
(5: 10-14; E 98)

The contraries of the Redeemed and Reprobate are, in the final instance, eminently productive categories—they can only be redeemed and raised to a higher value in the impending vintage. Their characteristic labors, prior to Satan's interventions, have an essentialist quality in that what they do is yoked to their naturalized identity, and as long as this situation is maintained, productive labor proceeds unobstructed.³³ Satan's Elect, on the other hand, is the "Negative" of the

(*Milton* 35 [39]: 42-45)

³³ I want to be clear that in severing the labor of the Redeemed and Reprobate from that of the Elect, I am not claiming that Blake attributes a simplistic positive or negative valuation to one or the other. In my view this is more of a genealogical break in Blake's thinking of labor, a necessary division with historical and ontological consequences that his approach to labor throughout his poetry is a complex and non-uniform attempt to explore and understand, if not to resolve.

system according to Blake; introducing universal interchangeability into the system, which ostensibly ought to be a boon to productivity, in the context of Blake's *Milton* the negativity of the Elect brings about a catastrophic breakdown of productivity, causes the exhaustion and enervation of the laborers, and causally anticipates the stupefied violence of the apocalyptic Last Vintage.³⁴ If the Redeemed and Reprobate obey a logic of identity of self and labor (one is what one does) the Elect dissolve this identity and instead obey a logic of identity among the subjects of labor. From an economic system in which one is born into a complexly ordered schema of production, we move into one in which identity is determined by and mirrors the qualities of fluid, circulatory, changeable labor, which may alternate with the vacillation or whims of the market or the forces (human and otherwise) that operate it.

The crucial issue here is that Satan's duplicity and "mildness" institutes exchangeability into a system of labor that hitherto had naturally assigned tasks to individuals who *were* the labor they performed. Satan's exchangeability "frees" the

³⁴ Blake's thoughts on contraries and negatives are well-known from the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, where he declares that, "Without Contraries is no progression" (plate 3; E 34). In *Milton*, however, Blake suggests that the act of negation (distinct from the negative) opposes the productive work of contraries:

All that can be annihilated must be annihilated
That the Children of Jerusalem may be saved from slavery
There is a Negation, & there is a Contrary
The Negation must be destroyd to redeem the Contraries
The Negation is the Spectre; the Reasoning Power in Man
This is a false Body: an Incrustation over my Immortal
Spirit; a Selfhood, which must be put off & annihilated away
To cleanse the Face of my Spirit by Self-examination.

(40[46]: 30-37)

brothers from this rigid form of identity-as-labor, “frees” them into circulation.³⁵

However, the liberatory element here has a more sinister component: it forms a sort of complex allegory for the institution of universal exchangeability into the labor process, a situation that historically was occurring in England around the time the Blake was writing.

In his unique hybrid of Marxism and psychoanalysis, Jean-Joseph Goux discusses the process of abstraction that defines labor in capitalism. He states that labor is doubly repressed in capitalism: “The force invested in labor power is repressed by the system of the exchange-value, which in turn is repressed by the price system.... In the course of this process there occurs a progressive *withdrawal of investment doubly inscribed*” (*Symbolic Economies* 61). The general equivalency of the commodity thus “acts as relative form to an infinite number of equivalents.... It is a situation of rivalry, of crisis, of conflict” (15). Material labor, according to Goux, must be repressed in order for abstract labor to establish the law of equivalence,

³⁵ This cynical if incisive view of freedom maps onto Marx’s own discussion in *Capital* of a double notion freedom that necessarily follows from the process of the abstraction. The capitalist “must find the free worker available on the commodity-market; and this worker must be free in the double sense that as a free individual he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and... he has no other commodity for sale.” Therefore, “he is free of all of the objects needed for the realization of his labour-power” (272-3). This process of abstraction and exchangeability and its implications for subjectivity is discussed in its historical context in James Thompson’s *Models of Value*: “This subject changes across the long eighteenth century, from one defined by social relations and their obligations (status) to a free and equal subject defined by exchange (contract), a depersonalized, abstract subject defined by the free and equal exchange of commodities.” (44-5). Tracing the theoretical implications of this moment in the work of early political economists such as Locke, Harris, Steuert, and others, Thompson finds that the subject produced by the consolidation of capital is marked by “free exchange, depersonalized, declassed, desocialized, and ultimately dehumanized” (85).

mediated by the further abstraction of paper money (or other financial instruments most prominently represented in the credit system) that facilitates and governs circulation. When labor in its exchangeability becomes a commodity, it too takes on the characteristics Goux cites as those of the commodity: rivalry, crisis, and conflict. When Satan surreptitiously introduces exchange and abstraction into the labor process he is also establishing labor as a negative force in the ways that Goux suggests, as an element that in its protean, disruptive, and viral nature both models the circulation of commodities and also interferes with the very productivity it more obviously promotes. The scene of the Last Vintage at the end of Book One of *Milton* offers a vivid glimpse into the ways that labor plays this type of negative role. Satan's exchanges result in terrible consequences for the horses and gnomes of Palamabron's harrow, and a similar chaotic situation ensues in Satan's mills, overseen by Palamabron in Satan's absence:

But Satan returning to his Mills (for Palamabron had serv'd
The Mills of Satan as the easier task) found all confusion

...

Los beheld

The servants of the Mills drunken with wine and dancing wild
With shouts and Palamabrons songs, rending the forests green
With ecchoing confusion, tho' the Sun was risen on high.

(8: 4-10; E 101)

On the one hand, the image of drunken workers evokes a commonplace problem in Blake's England that I have already mentioned: namely, how to subdue a newly organized workforce unaccustomed to the regularity and discipline of new forms of labor. On the other hand, intoxication in *Milton* exceeds this potential historical context to suggest a sort of general stupefaction that accompanies apocalyptic labor. Blake describes the Last Vintage primarily as a product of the labor of Los and his

laborers in a wine-press: “How red the sons & daughters of Luvah! here they tread the grapes. / Laughing & shouting drunk with odours many fall oerwearied / Drownd in the wine is many a youth & maiden” (27[29]: 3-5; E 124). The challenge of passages such as this one in Blake’s later work can be located in how they blur categories generally kept discrete. In this instance, the labor of treading the grapes is aligned both with suffering and laughing—as an apocalyptic image, there is a unique sense of joy in destruction, whether it is of others or of oneself. Drowning here implies death, but more broadly involves a sense of being overwhelmed or overcome by an intoxication that undoes the self. Labor’s role in the apocalyptic scene is not to form a productive causal agent for millennial regeneration, as some critics have believed; instead labor here contributes to a general stupefaction or intoxication in both performing and suffering violence.

Violating the classic division between myth and politics in Blake studies, here and elsewhere in Blake politics becomes mythic by way of a celebration of a destructive stupefaction of the individual from within the productive processes themselves: “naked & drunk with wine” those within the wine-presses blur the distinction between pain and “delights”:

But in the Wine-presses the Human grapes sing not, nor dance
They bowl & writhe in shoals of torment; in fierce flames consuming,
In chains of iron & in dungeons circled with ceaseless fires.
In pits & dens & shades of death: in shapes of torment & woe.
The plates & screws & wracks & saws & cords & fires & cisterns
The cruel joys of Luvahs Daughters lacerating with knives
And whips their Victims & the deadly sport of Luvahs Sons.

They dance around the dying, & they drink the howl & groan
They catch the shrieks in cups of gold, they hand them to one another:
These are the sports of love, & these the sweet delights of amorous
play

Tears of the grape, the death sweat of the cluster the last sigh
Of the mild youth who listens to the lureing songs of Luvah
(27[29]: 24, 30-41; E 124-5)

The progression in the Bard's song that I have been describing involves an undoing of labor's productivity not through an appeal to a utopian economy, but through an exacerbation of the tension between labor's purported ability to access or produce a realm of freedom from necessity, and the peculiarities of the notion of freedom within capitalist political economy. Using a key principle of labor within capitalism, Satan's establishment of exchangeability as a crucial aspect of labor both breaks down the production process in the poem, and it establishes itself as a non-regenerative, non-redeemable, non-profit-building category that can only obey a logic of repetition without the possibility of accruing difference. This repetitive, iterative aspect involves labor's negativity as it evokes an unsettling *jouissance*, if the latter is understood as an intoxication or stupefaction through which the productivity of labor runs aground, often in a self-consuming scene, whether of violence, of the abjection of the subject, or mere destruction.³⁶

"Word, work, & wish"

Before proceeding to the consideration of labor theory, aesthetics, and Blake criticism on labor in the next chapter, a brief note regarding the quote that makes up

³⁶ A well-worn Blake motto is that his work "rouses the faculties to act." The original context of this notion is a letter of 1799 in which Blake rails against a prospective patron's frustration with the poet and painter's obscurity. Defending himself, Blake appeals to the "Ancients," who held that "what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction because it rouzes the faculties to act" (E 702). The overuse of this phrase as a supposedly self-evident Blakean motto leads to an assumption that Blake's work merely has an energizing, expansive function. As I have been arguing, part of my claim about the "unconscious" of Blake's poetry is that other, opposed forces are at work as well.

the prefix of this dissertation's title—"Word, work, & Wish"—is in order. This phrase is taken from Blake's late poem, *Jerusalem the Emanation of the Giant Albion* (1808-1820). Describing the labor of Los, the broader context is as follows:

He views the City of Golgonooza, & its smaller Cities:
The Looms & Mills & Prisons & Work-houses of Og & Anak:
The Amalekite: the Canaanite: the Moabite: the Egyptian:
And all that has existed in the space of six thousand years:
Permanent, & not lost not lost nor vanishd, & every little act,
Word, work, & Wish, that has existed, all remaining still
(13: 56-61; E 157-158)

In this passage Blake seems to be offering a promise that all the smallest and least significant elements of fallen existence will be redeemed, incorporated into and transformed by inclusion in the utopian city of art that Blake calls Golgonooza. I foreground it in my title, however, because the *word*, in particular the materiality of speech, performs its own sort of labor in Blake, particularly in poems such as "The Chimney Sweeper" and *America a Prophecy* in which the efficacy of the voice both invokes and undercuts the utopian gesture.³⁷ These chapters will show,

³⁷ The theory of performativity has unique home in Blake studies, where the uniqueness and radical incommensurability of each Blake title (as he himself produced them) have led scholars to assent to what W. J. T. Mitchell argued about the "composite art of *The [First] Book of Urizen*: "Any single copy of *Urizen* may best be understood as a performance among several available possibilities" ("Poetic and Pictorial Imagination" 97). In a similar vein, Gavin Edwards has discussed how Blake's "London" exposes representatives of the Church and State using performative speech to bolster or cement power over a subjugated people ("Mind-Forged Manacles': A Contribution to the Discussion of Blake's 'London'"). In "Repeating the Same Dull Round" Edwards claims that repetition in Blake involves a performativity that refuses the security of original, univocal meaning (). Angela Esterhammer's work has relied on Austin's speech-act theory to discuss the political ramifications of performatives and the ways that many characters in Blake form or have a discernable effect on reality through the power of utterance (see *Creating States: Studies in the Performative Language of John Milton and William Blake*). Esterhammer has claimed that in *The [First] Book of Urizen*, "utterance... has

accordingly, that the “word” tends to also involve a moment in which the poems address and “recruits” the reader into their workings, requiring for their meaning this participation.

If this sense of recruitment might define an alternative labor or reading Blake, *work* itself—in particular the manifold sites of coerced labor—is given privileged position among the elements that remain to persist into futurity. As I discussed regarding *Milton*, the economics of this passage suggest a logic of redemption, a painful investment in fallen experience that will bring a return in the form of profit in the future, even if that future is repetitively deferred. These lines describe a hope for a value—and a mode of valorization—that circumvents exchange and commerce, and a labor that ultimately escapes capitalization in the disciplinary sites of “The Looms & Mills & Prisons & Work-houses.”³⁸ However, what is exhilarating about these lines is not the beauty of this wish; instead, it is what shadows or threatens, as if from within, the very wish it expresses. The final two lines—“Permanent, & not lost not lost nor vanishd, & every little act, / Word,

performative force, but this power carries negative connotations of imposition and even violence” (“Calling into Existence” 118).

³⁸ The sites of work as fundamentally disciplinary in nature obviously invokes the work of Foucault, for whom “the body is invested with relations of power and domination... its constitution as labour power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection.... The body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body” (*Discipline and Punish*, 26). In *Madness and Civilization*, labor is discussed as a punish for disobedience, when the body ceased to be productive or subjected: “Labor in the houses of confinement thus assumed its ethical meaning: since sloth had become the absolute form of rebellion, the idle would be forced to work, in the endless leisure of a labor without utility or profit” (57). The meaning of confinement for Foucault implies that the construction of madness and the mad as a pathologized segment of society was intimately connected with the inability to or refusal of work (see also *History of Madness* 69-73).

work, & Wish, that has existed, all remaining still”—evoke a desperation or anticipation of abjection (“not lost not lost”) for what Los “views” but what is not yet available for those who populate the “smaller Cities” and for those who work in them.³⁹ And the latter very well might wish for the passage of each “Word, work, & Wish,” as their permanence may enslave them to their fallen state. Yet, the possibility of them “remaining” also implies that they remain as “remains” in a more morbid sense: in fact, they may remain “*still*,” as in their mortal rest. The affirmative reading⁴⁰ of this passage therefore carries with it its negative, performing the division discussed earlier upon which the “economic unconscious” thrives.

But the issue of whether this futurity will redeem the utopian *wish* is an ultimately held in abeyance. As such, the notion of utopia assumed by this study bears some resemblance to the work of Ernst Bloch, who combines a critique of

³⁹ Scenes of building Golgonooza employ precisely the same imagery and tone as do the more straightforward scenes of oppression:

the thundering Bellows
Heaves in the hand of Palamabron who in Londons darkness
Before the Anvil, watches the bellowing flames: thundering
The Hammer loud rages in Rintrahs strong grasp swinging loud

Round from heaven to earth down falling with heavy blow
Dead on the Anvil, where the red hot wedge groans in pain
He quenches it in the black trough of his Forge; Londons River
Feeds the dread Forge (16: 8-15; E 159-160)

⁴⁰ In Blake studies, the most comprehensive discussion of utopia is Nicholas Williams’ *Ideology and Utopia in the Poetry of William Blake*. Williams understands the passages regarding Golgonooza in *Jerusalem* (such as in the passage cited in the previous note) as indicating the “redemption of labor as a constructive practice.” Blake is “reaffirming the integrity and efficaciousness of collective labor and the consciousness of a working class which remains true to itself despite the deceptions of industrial capitalism” (23). Williams far too rigidly opposes utopia (figured as liberstion) to ideology (coercion), noting that “the strength of Blake’s utopia and its relevance to a revolutionary program for change lie in Blake’s careful balancing of the ideological and utopian, the fallen and redeemed” (29).

dehumanized forms of industrial production with the “Not-Yet-Conscious,” which is “the preconscious of what is to come, the psychological birthplace of the New” (*The Principle of Hope* 116).⁴¹ Yet the utopian hope or wish does not obey a simple dichotomy between discrete affirmative or negative moments; in fact, the former contains the latter within it, as an essential element. Jameson comments that, for Bloch,

[H]ope is *always* thwarted, the future is always something *other* than what we sought to find there, something ontologically excessive and necessarily unexpected. Thus the negative is reabsorbed back into the positive, not as facile consolation, but as a kind of *via crucis* of hope itself, an enlargement of our anticipations to include and find satisfaction in their own negations as well. (*Marxism and Form* 137)

As I discuss in the next chapter, where I treat the notion of negativity that I ascribe to labor, Adorno’s notion of aesthetic negativity is an important concept for my general approach in this dissertation. As one expression of this viewpoint, which *Aesthetic Theory* is at pains to encircle though not necessarily define, Adorno notes that “By their very existence artworks postulate the existence of what does not exist and thereby come into conflict with the latter’s nonexistence” (59). This redemption-as-critique implies that a future that has not happened yet can only be glimpsed in the relentless critique of what is, and that the form of the work of art—elements such as beauty, spontaneity, totality, and so on, we have a prefiguring of a utopia that the work’s involvement and imbrication in damaged society refuses:

⁴¹ This critique is perhaps most powerfully expressed in *The Spirit of Utopia*, where Bloch states that, “For progress and capitalism have till now constructed technology, at least in its industrial application, solely for the purposes of fast turnover and high profits, and certainly not, as is so often claimed, in order to alleviate our labor, let alone improve the results” (11). In this work Bloch discusses art as prefiguring or offering a glimpse of a new model of creative production in the workplace: “pleasure in one’s ability will replace the profit motive” (245).

The tenebrous has become the plenipotentiary of... utopia. But because for art, utopia—the yet-to-exist—is draped in black, it remains in all its mediations recollection; recollection of the possible in opposition to the actual that suppresses it; it is the imaginary reparation of the catastrophe of world history; it is freedom, which under the spell of necessity did not—and may not ever—come to pass. Art's methexis in the tenebrous, its negativity, is implicit in its tense relationship to permanent catastrophe.... Art is the ever broken promise of happiness. (135-6)

Chapter Two:
“Thousands & thousands labour”: Labor Theory, Aesthetics, and Blake Criticism

Labor and Blake Criticism

As noted in the first chapter, this dissertation aims to locate an “economic unconscious” in Blake’s work in his treatment of labor; the *conscious* political economy of liberation to which it is opposed has been exhaustively discussed by generations of Blake critics. This criticism seeks in Blake’s work an imaginative regeneration of labor and, based on this, a re-conceptualization of the political economy of the poetry as a discourse of freedom. This critical discourse is indebted, even if only tacitly, to the discourse of labor found in what is broadly construed as praxis philosophy. According to Habermas, “[p]raxis philosophy, which accords privileged status to the relationship between the acting subject and manipulatable worldly objects, conceives the self-formative process of the species... as a process of self-creation. For it, not self-consciousness but labor counts as the principle of modernity” (64).¹ While Habermas locates praxis philosophy firmly within modernity, its roots extend back to Aristotle’s distinction between *poesis* and *praxis*

¹ Habermas also indicates the revolutionary element of praxis thought: “[T]he concept of praxis is also supposed to include ‘critical-revolutionary activity’ If, then, the ruptured ethical totality is thought of as alienated labor, and if the latter is supposed to overcome its alienation *from itself*, then emancipatory praxis can proceed from labor itself” (65).

as forms of human making.² For the purposes of this study, however, the key thinkers in this tradition are Hegel, Marx, Marcuse, Baudrillard, the recent work of Bruno Gulli, and Bataille; the first two articulate the terms through which the liberatory moment of labor itself is counterposed both to its alienated form and its negative potential, while Marcuse attempts to activate the liberatory moment of labor by opening the concept to *poesis* or aestheticized productivity, while Bataille's thought offers a perspective on rejecting the productivist bias inherent in Marcuse's views, at the same time outlining the possibilities of a negative theory of labor. The general tendency of the discourse on labor has been to attempt to articulate a realm of freedom from one of necessity, and examining the central thinkers in this tradition will reveal that labor's negativity haunts their endeavors, as the concept of labor resists its recruitment into narratives of freedom.

This chapter begins with an outline of the criticism on labor in Blake, moves on to discuss the philosophical discourse of labor that informs the construction of "Blake," and then discusses aesthetic theory and Blake's aesthetic practice. The argument of this chapter is that these three overlapping discourses follow a common pattern. First, each starts (conceptually, if not chronologically) with an implicitly dual conception of labor, one that I have already previewed: labor is both an essential, creative, self-creative activity and the main site of oppression, alienation, coercion, division, and limitation in modern (capitalist) modes of production. In fact, labor becomes something of a signature of modernity; not

² For a discussion of Aristotle's views on labor and his relevance for modern political economy, see James Bernard Murphy's *The Moral Economy of Labor: Aristotelian Themes in Economic Theory*.

merely an economic fact, labor is a powerfully formative element of the nature of modern subjectivity, as my later discussion of Hegel and Marx will show. From this premise, a unique phenomenon occurs: divided, alienated, and exploited labor not only must be transformed or reorganized to realize a realm of freedom and utopia; instead, labor must be overcome, sublated, or in some cases, abnegated altogether for the realization of the full powers of the human subject and the blossoming of true human community. Thus, the discourse of labor must paradoxically overcome labor itself for its own realization; the completion of the philosophical, aesthetic, and critical (in Blake studies) discourse of labor necessitates a sort of laborious self-negation of labor. In the case of aesthetic theory, labor must be abjected in order for aesthetic theory as a key site for the articulation of bourgeois values to constitute itself. In the case of Blake, the relationship between aesthetic conception and aesthetic execution in his material aesthetic practice—a relationship that critics believe Blake's illuminated printing method unites, thus offering a model for the overcoming of the division of labor in political economy—tactically deploys one of capitalism's key divisive strategies (the division of labor) in order to critique the use of the abnegation or sublation of labor as a utopian strategy.

While the aforementioned goals of this chapter might be viewed as a mere metacommentary—an analysis of critical work on Blake and the theoretical material that informs it rather than focusing on Blake's work itself—such a perspective assumes an invalid and rigid division between “Blake” and the discourse on Blake. My hypothesis is that the former cannot be considered apart from the latter, which in fact produces or constructs “Blake” as an object of critical attention and interest.

Blake's "work," as the object of interpretation, is not merely the text and physical artifact, but necessarily includes "the interpretive categories and codes through which we read and receive the text in question" (Jameson, *Political Unconscious* 9-10). In other words, the "economic unconscious" does not indicate a reservoir of repressed, untapped content of Blake's imagination that his work somehow contains and that then awaits positive representation through the archeological or reconstructive efforts of critics; rather, the economic unconscious of Blake's work necessarily includes and is produced by the "sedimented layers" (*Political Unconscious* 9) of reading conventions, criticism, and theory regarding labor that may appear secondary or discreet from it.

Jameson's perhaps obvious claim that we never encounter a text immediately, that our engagements with a text take the form of the always-already-read, is in fact radicalized in Blake studies, where the notion of an immediate and thoroughly absorbing encounter with the text is an animating fantasy the impossibility of which is indicated in the fierceness with which it is nonetheless pursued.³ What Adorno has called the "constitutive insufficiency" (*Aesthetic Theory*

³ The myriad forms this fantasy takes in the criticism bespeaks a peculiarly excessive mode that pervades Blake scholarship. For example, Northrop Frye describes his own fantasy of being surrounded by the plates of *Jerusalem*, a sort of total envelopment, absorption, or more drastically a state of drowning in the text: "If I ever get a big enough office, I shall have the hundred plates of my *Jerusalem* reproduction framed and hung around the walls, so that the frontispiece will have the second plate on one side and the last plate on the other" ("The Road of Excess" 122). This situation, interestingly enough, can be seen as a material instance of the significance of Blake for Frye, as a poet whose work is also a demonstration of how poetry (and literature) works. Complete absorption and the absence of any mediating force between reader and work is taken to be Blake's own ideal state of encountering it, and the ostensible goal of all literature and art: "This will be *Jerusalem* presented as Blake thought of it, symbolizing the state of mind in which

128) of art—the fact that the aesthetic object and the experience of it requires a critical labor external to each to draw out its “truth content,” a labor that art wishes to reject in the name of its “autonomy” but cannot—takes on a vital role in Blake criticism, which is embarrassed by this requirement that it nonetheless enthusiastically aims to fulfill. Critics ignore this “insufficiency” of the Blakean text at their own peril; when we ignore the ways that critical and theoretical discourse has constructed “Blake” as an object of study, we risk missing the internal fissures and gaps in our object of study that constitute the economic unconscious of the work and that terminally trouble the status of the political therein. The appearance of plenitude is a defining characteristic of the incommensurable Blakean artifact that seems wholly self-sufficient, able to provide immediate evidence of its meaning—indeed, for some, the bare fact of its incommensurability and non-exchangeability *may in fact be* its meaning—though there is a tell-tale gap between immediate apprehension and explication such that in performing the activity of the latter, scholars cannot help but notice that they are providing the sort of mediation the artifact denied requiring in the first place.⁴

the poet himself could say: ‘I see the Past, Present & Future existing all at once Before me’ (122). Perhaps the most striking and explicit expressions of this fantasy of immediacy and absorption can be found in the example of Harold Bloom, whom was taught the English language through memorizing Blake’s entire corpus:

Born into a Yiddish-speaking family, Bloom began reading Blake before he had ever heard English spoken; by the age of five, he had taught himself the language through an incessant reading and re-reading of Blake’s works; at ten, he had much of Blake’s poetry committed to memory. One can hardly imagine—one *cannot* imagine—a less mediated or more intensive initial encounter. (Singer xxxvii).

⁴ For Paul Mann, Blake’s mode of aesthetic production and the material fact of the product *is* the work’s ultimate meaning: “The ‘meaning’ of any Blake book is thus,

This tension between the appearance of self-sufficiency or immediacy and the critical labor this appearance paradoxically depends upon is obliquely anticipated in Blake's work, in particular when he suggests that children (among others) have apprehended and enjoyed his work to their full satisfaction: "I am happy to find a Great Majority of Fellow Mortals who can Elucidate My Visions & Particularly they have been Elucidated by Children who have taken a greater delight in contemplating my Pictures than I even hoped" (E 703). The tension in this passage between aesthetic pleasure ("delight") and thought ("contemplation"), between the implication of ease and immediacy of apprehension and the need for the labor of conceptualization and an external critical "elucidation" haunts the enterprise of Blake criticism, which offers a fascinating perspective on the peculiar anxieties of a critical labor that forgets that it constructs its own object of study, rather than finding it always already awaiting illumination. Crucially, the children Blake imagines perfectly grasping his work are in fact (it can be assumed) in the ideal, longed-for, yet ultimately impossible critical posture, elucidating the poetry and images through a repetition in the pure and transparent, child-like language of the everyday, of common sense. Staging the object of desire for his unanticipated future critics, Blake implies that the discursive performance of elucidation (whether oral, for the children, or in writing, for the critics) is a moment the work cannot do without, whether the aim is contemplation, delight, or otherwise.

first and foremost, that Blake made it, and made it this way, not just textually... but fully, materially, as 'Itself & Not Intermeasurable with or by any Thing Else'" ("Apocalypse and Recuperation: Blake and the Maw of Commerce" 2).

For the other “mortals” left out of Blake’s imaginary circle of delight and contemplation, however, the work—which includes the critical/theoretical apparatus that only appears as a prosthetic, as secondary—ultimately requires what the scene leaves out and what Michael Ferber has recommended as an “external elaboration” (*Social Vision* ix).⁵ Rather than taking Blake on his own terms, rather than using elucidation as the goal, critics ought to work to make Blake strange, to read him against the grain of the terms he himself has established. Essential to this is the task of estranging Blake from himself, of articulating a reading that might disrupt the deceptive lucidity of common sense and might violate Blake’s own intent or understanding of his own work. Like Ferber, W. J. T. Mitchell has called for the “defamiliarization and the rediscovery of Blake’s exotic, archaic, alien, and eccentric character,” implying that the critic goes a long way to producing the Blake we ultimately read. Blake’s “madness, obscenity, and incoherence” are incompatible with the discourses of criticism that seek to make him legible, relevant, and domesticated (“Dangerous Blake” 410-416).⁶ The vast majority of criticism on

⁵ The necessity of external elaboration was addressed, and crankily refuted, in his 1799 letter to Reverend Dr. Trusler: “You say that I want somebody to Elucidate my Ideas. But you ought to know that What is Grand is necessarily obscure to weak men. That which can be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care” (E 702).

⁶ According to Julia Wright, a “state of mind that impedes an individual’s productivity is ‘madness’” and thereby obstructs the “roughly capitalist, puritan, and rationalist” paradigms that were being consolidated in Blake’s time (172). The implication is that the critical status quo in Blake studies reads Blake according to the structure of a productivist ethic that works to produce a Blake that affirms these efforts, that forgets Blake’s “madness,” if the latter corresponds to an unruly unconscious that resists representation in the language of criticism. In a different context, Eleanor Kaufman has written on Foucault and Deleuze and their articulation of a madness that is the absence of (the) work. Looking at Foucault’s relationship with the (unproductive) philosopher Jacques Martin, Kaufman writes, “Here the contours of the work, because they are not filled in, will always be there.

Blake (and Mitchell seems to imply this) is a “re-phrasing” of Blake, a re-stating of Blake’s work motivated by the desire to relieve the poetry of its vaunted “difficulty.”⁷ However, critics who invoke Blake’s difficulty neglect to mention that it is fundamentally (if tacitly) a category of political economy, a category that implies a range of positions in a “labor theory of value” of reading Blake. Blake’s difficulty validates the work ethic of producing meaning; justifies the division of labor of academic sub-specialization; restricts and governs the circulation of the commodity of criticism in the marketplace of ideas; and provides an index of the alienation of a society that requires a poet like Blake to be elucidated. Immediacy and ease of understanding *should* describe our relationship to the Blakean text; that it *doesn’t* and never can is precisely why the work requires the laborious and divided task of criticism—as an encrypted form of desire for that which the text holds out as an ideal but that can never be attained. In the critical labor of reading Blake we thus find a repetition of a signal dynamic of the negative role of labor in Blake’s work:

When the work’s emphatically missing, it is strangely all the more there” (82). Blake’s nagging anxieties about his own productivity conflict with his own prolific assiduity (see E). Nevertheless, it is possible that Blake’s anxieties about the absence of (the) work indicate an absence at the core of his work ethic, a negativity that haunts his productivity and the finality of the concrete, positive *work* or the fullness of an oeuvre. This dissertation is attempting to mark out the effects of a negativity that these positive and existant works embody; a further step may entail leaving the work behind to trace a negativity of production that eschews the work altogether.

⁷ Duly noting Blake’s difficulty has become something of a mantra in Blake studies. For just one example, Morris Eaves, in “On Blakes We Want and Blakes We Don’t,” claims that “Blake was then and continues even now to be the sign of something new about to happen, partly because of his brand of obscurity, situated right between portentous sense and arrant nonsense... A persistent problem... has been how to motivate readers to climb walls of such difficulty” (414). W. J. T. Mitchell, who seems to refer to Blake’s difficulty as a call to arms to read him antagonistically (as Blake himself seemed to have read others), notes “Blake’s radiant obscurity” (“Blake’s Radical Comedy” 287).

Invoking yet denying the possibility of political freedom, labor gives the lie to forms of immediacy and spontaneity that appear as prefigurations of utopia but in fact are cryptographs of domination, generalized assent, and affirmation.

Around the mid-twentieth century, David Erdman, (and, to a lesser degree, Jacob Bronowski and Mark Schorer) pioneered the study of how Blake's work was powerfully shaped by and attempted to intervene in the political and economic world of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain.⁸ In *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*, David Erdman writes, "The economic side of Blake's myth is often expressed in images of fertility and sterility, fire and frost and seasonal growth" (227). Erdman suggests that the Blakean economy offers a stark criticism of the capitalist regime of exchange and profit-seeking, a realm in which the "Hirelings in the Camp, the Court, & the University... would if they could, for ever depress Mental & prolong Corporeal War" in the interest of capital and imperial expansion (*Milton* plate 1; E 95). Subjects in Blake are enslaved to alienated forms of labor for purposes of imperial war, conquest and base profiteering; they are thereby "transformed by the slavish labor of war production into beasts and automatons," where the dehumanizing effects of modernity are overturned or exchanged for a form of freedom, however the latter may be defined (373; see also 329).⁹ And

⁸ Schorer's *William Blake, The Politics of Vision* was published in 1946; Bronowski's *William Blake: A Man without a Mask* was published in 1943 (republished in 1965 as *William Blake and the Age of Revolution*); Erdman's *Blake: Prophet Against Empire: A Poet's Interpretation of the History of His Own Times* was first published in 1954.

⁹ The language of slavery in the quote from Erdman resonates with Blake's own interest in the topic, perhaps developed by engraving illustrations for his friend John Stedman's work *Narrative of a Five Year Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796). Erdman's analysis of slavery in *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion* has usefully provided historical context for Bromion's sexual,

though a poem like *The Four Zoas* relentlessly presents violent and oppressive labor practices, by its conclusion Blake has succeeded, in Erdman's view, in repurposing these practices and images to eradicate inequality and divisions among "men and families and nations" (358). Blake scholars who follow Erdman's concern with the significance of labor nearly uniformly concur with Erdman that the "visionary" qualities of Blake's work gesture obliquely to a point of rupture in the form of liberation, integration, and totality.

This negative, critical position clears the ground for the emergence of a positive one the contours of which can be adumbrated in Erdman's aforementioned emphasis on organic images and biological or elemental processes. Counterposed to the mechanical, deadening, and repetitive production processes that produce identical commodities, divide the labor process, and construct an alienated subject appropriate to the fragmented process into which it is inserted, Blake (as the argument goes) posits an alternative economy, whose systems of exchange and cycles of production and consumption mirror those found in organic life, archaic forms of generosity, neo-feudal modes of organization, gift economies, and so on. Recently, scholars have sharpened focus on the specific role of labor in Blake's work

economic, and psychological attitude of conquest in the poem (see "Blake's Vision of Slavery"). Additional work on slavery and *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion* include Goslee's "Slavery and the Sexual Character" and Robert Essick's "Introduction" to the recent Huntington Library's edition of the *Visions*. David Bindman's "Blake's Vision of Slavery Revisited" as well as his recent essay in his edited catalogue, *Mind-Forg'd Manacles: William Blake and Slavery*, provides useful context for Blake's relation to debates on the slave trade and the many forms that slavery takes, literal and metaphorical, in Blake's poetry and visual art. Rubenstein and Townsend contextualize Blake's view of slavery with the slave revolt in Surinam, images of which Blake engraved for his friend Captain John Stedman ("Revolted Negroes and the Devilish Principle").

and thereby have begun to articulate the shadowy notion of a “Blakean economy” that may form the core of Blake’s purported “radical” political project.¹⁰

In the first truly focused attempt to account for labor in Blake, David Punter’s “Blake: Creative and Uncreative Labour” argues that industrial labor “shapes

¹⁰ Aside from the work of Saree Makdisi, which I have already discussed and to which I will have occasion to return throughout this dissertation, some notable examples of this line of inquiry include Katey Castellano’s attempt to locate an “economy of excess” that leads Blake’s liberatory imagination to a past-oriented or return-to-origins version of social organization. Dennis Welch has discussed the relevance of the famine of 1795 and how it influenced Blake’s articulation of “a different dispensation... in which loss, sacrifice, and brotherhood yield the greatest spiritual and personal gains” (“Blake, the Famine of 1795, and the Economics of Vision” 598; see also Welch’s “Blake’s *Book of Los* and Visionary Economics”). Julia Wright explores the opposed economies of sacrifice and annihilation of the selfhood in *Milton*, as well as the economies of pestilence and circulation in *Jerusalem* in *Blake, Nationalism, and the Politics of Alienation*. Kurt Heinzelman notes that before the Bank of England revised its monetary policy from basing value in specie to paper money in 1810, Blake opposed political economy with an emphasis on gift exchange rather than the exchange of equivalences: “True spiritual health comes from the giving of one’s gifts and from the active receiving of those gifts” (119). Michael Ferber suggests that Blake’s radicalism can be located in what is essentially a conservative, past-oriented perspective: “Blake appeals both to an ideal community and to what remains of real precapitalist social bonds.... The virtues of frugality, calculation, and self-command may have been shared by skilled craftsmen, but these must have been modified by the traditions of fraternal generosity and the occasional profligate binge” (36). Ferber also discusses Blake’s “Left antiquarianism” and argues that his utopian economy is distinctively conservative: “Blake reminds us that an anticapitalist revolution should not try to march more efficiently into the future only to complete capitalism’s task, but should restore, in part, what capitalism has obliterated” (52; on antiquarianism, see Wright and Mee,). In this regard, the critical consensus on Blake’s political economy follows the programme for European Romanticism presented in Löwy and Sayre’s recent study, *Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity*, which, incidentally barely mentions Blake: “Romanticism represents a critique of modernity, that is, of capitalist civilization, in the name of values and ideals drawn from the past (the precapitalist, premodern past)” (17). Blake’s professional and class status, together with his aspirations for visionary work, entails for Kurt Heinzelman that Blake was able to “create his own system, a poetic economics” (110). Heinzelman looks at the “figurative portrayal of economic issues in Blake’s poetry itself, which represents Blake’s attempt to work out an economics of the imagination, an economics for the imagination in its labors” (112).

[Blake's] image-language in particular and complex ways" (538). Distancing himself from Erdman's tendency to imply that labor functions as a symbol, pointing to something more replete with significance beyond it, Punter describes a process unique to Blake's poetry in which oppressive labor is not a means for Blake to allegorize a type of social fragmentation and alienated consciousness, but ought to be taken on its own terms as the material cause of these social and psychological ills. Labor produces products for the marketplace, but it also produces the proper subject for those products and the proper social world for their reception and consumption. The figure of Los, so central to the epic poetry from the mid-1790s forward, is for Punter Blake's figure for an alternative to any real, existing forms of labor; "self-creation," "self-realisation," and "work as a guarantee of freedom" is what Los models in his building of Golgonooza, "eternal London," the city of art. For Punter, the difference between alienated labor and "productive and non-exploitative" labor lies in the "organicism" of Los's work, its proximity to the model of "life" as opposed to versions of labor that sever, alienate, and compartmentalize it (551). Los is, after all, not only a blacksmith operating a forge, he is also figuratively a poet, heroically fighting modernity's logic of equivalences, reification, and Newtonian measurement of experience through his "reliance on the potency of the living moment and his refusal to accept the reduction of life to mathematical equations" (556). Drawing on Blake's recurring image of the wheel, which appears frequently in his poetry, Punter offers that, "poetry can turn the 'adverse wheel' by placing existing objects and systems in a broader, imaginative context which will in turn imply the destruction of the existing order" (558). Despite his criticism of

earlier scholars for treating labor as a symbol or image, Punter nevertheless relies upon a relatively static opposition between labor and art, one that undialectically ascribes to them, respectively, the values of oppression and liberation.

Jackie DiSalvo's *War of Titans: Blake's Critique of Milton and the Politics of Religion*, a Marxist study of mainly *The Four Zoas*, explores "the psychic structure of bourgeois civilization" (14). DiSalvo clearly aligns Blake's work with a critique of capitalism and modernity, yet she also ascribes to Blake a valorization of the humanizing force or potential of labor: "Blake... anticipated Engels, for whom human beings create themselves through labor and skill, their very bodies, hands, brains, senses emerging over the millennia as the products of increasingly conscious labor" (164). She goes on to say that "the creative powers of imagination and labor appear on a continuum and are spoken of interchangeably" (165). DiSalvo views Blake's "concept of the imagination... as an economic one"; simultaneously, however, she also claims that this economic imagination is "a celebration of the potential of human productivity" (305). Blake's "mystical materialism" (166, see 16) leads him to hold, according to DiSalvo, that consciousness is embodied in the forms of human labor (166). "Paradise," or that to which the tendential logic of Blake's later poems compels us, configures humanity as the "product of the ecstatic common labor dramatized throughout Blake's revolutionary climax in which "The noise of rural work resounded thro the heavens" (166; FZ 124:14). Further, she claims that the conclusion of *The Four Zoas* brings with it the "end of exploitation, repression, and the mystery which disguised them... What remains of divinity is a creativity which is democratized and incorporated in all human activity" (309).

David Aers' "Representations of Revolution: From *The French Revolution* to *The Four Zoas*" weighs in on the question of labor from a historical point of view, and argues that Blake's depictions of labor damningly misconstrue the reality of contemporary radicalism and the political situation of changing economic and social formations, and as such the poems fail to articulate a viable program for social change. Focusing—like Bronowski and Punter—on the myriad sites of oppression and spectacular violence related to labor in the poetry, he says that Blake's fascination with the ways that forms of oppressive power tend to foster or even spawn modes of opposition that merely recapitulate those forms of power, turns would-be revolutionary subjects into figures as bad as or worse than those they oppose.¹¹ The poetry fails insofar as it does not reflect the capacities for revolution that Aers claims really existed historically, though these never manifested themselves completely or successfully. That critics can read the extreme violence of the conclusions to poems like *The Four Zoas* and *Jerusalem* as celebrations of a renewal or revolution only serves to underscore the alienation (or wishful thinking) of those "thriving in such a fundamentally violent culture as ours" (265). Opposed implicitly to Punter's position, Aers is frustrated that Blake does not even try to

¹¹ This forms the political version of a type of mythical circulation that Frye called the "Orc cycle," in which forces and energies of liberation necessarily culminate in oppression and enslavement to system. For Frye, Orc "is the power of the human desire to achieve a better world which produces revolution and foreshadows the apocalypse." But Orc is also "not only Blake's Prometheus but his Adonis, the dying and reviving god of his mythology" (*Fearful Symmetry* 206, 207). Therefore, Orc is defined by a cyclical form of life in which he never fully represents the advent of utopia, but "only the power of renewing an exhausted form in the old one" (218). Christopher Hobson, in *The Chained Boy: Orc and Blake's Idea of Revolution*, has offered a sustained and convincing critique of Frye's Orc cycle, ostensibly rescuing Orc for radical and liberatory purposes.

“present the sphere of work as prefiguring human liberation” (254). On the one hand, a certain type of labor is associated with “possessive individualism” and the forms of domination endemic to it (254). On the other hand a central concern is the “passivity” of workers, who seem to submit and not resist; this “deletes the decisive, apparently liberating agent and with this the vital processes of emancipation” (260).¹² Ultimately, Aers expresses disappointment in Blake’s failure to have found true sites of freedom in his engagement with the history of his times, when late twentieth-century liberal or Marxist historians have been able to locate nodes of resistance and rebellion against the homogenizing forces of capital.

Kurt Heinzelman’s *The Economics of the Imagination* and Michael Ferber’s *The Social Vision of William Blake* offer exemplary versions of how labor becomes aestheticized in Blake criticism in order to liberate it and transform it from determination, commerce, exchange, division, and coercion. For Heinzelman, Blake’s work intervenes precisely in the division and tension between art and labor set up not only in the field of aesthetics, but the related field of early political economy: “To define art in terms of labor is actually a belated attempt to win back art from the definitions of labor offered by economists” (Heinzelman 157). Blake’s profession as a printmaker and engraver, Heinzelman claims, granted him unique

¹² Aers’ desire for Blake to accurately depict workers’ struggles is a part of an expectation held more broadly in the criticism that Blake’s depictions of labor should have a social-activist orientation. Eileen Sanzo argues that the character of Los in the later prophecies is Blake’s “hero and personal representative,... a laborer in the new age of work” and that through Los “Blake dignifies the work of the common person in an age of industrial oppression and revolutionary struggle” (1). Sanzo goes on to say that, “political oppression... will be superseded by the work efforts toward social justice by Los and his sons symbolically laboring at the furnace and forge” (4).

access to the economics and commercial realities of artistic production, but his aspirations to visionary art pitted him against these very realities he nonetheless depended on. Heinzelman terms Blake's response as a "poetic economics" (110) and argues that commerce, exchange, and the necessities of making a living together form the base materiality against which the free ideals of aestheticized exchange may be articulated. In Heinzelman's view, for Blake "the goals of proper art could be liberated from the artist's economic means of subsistence" (112). Blake's poetic economics, as exemplified in works like *Jerusalem*, involves a sort of exchange not mediated by an abstract third term such as money, is not determined by coercion or materiality, and could be characterized by an exchange that is restorative and utopian, in that its production *and* consumption involves and employs undivided labor (see 121).

Heinzelman holds that aesthetic production enjoys a privileged temporality, as opposed to the temporality of divided labor bought and sold in the marketplace: "Whereas the imagination values the *moment* of desire, the economic sensibility, embodied in the secular forms of 'mart' and 'treasury,' either stores up desire or exchanges it for something else" (121-122, my italics). The staggered, divided, and multi-staged temporality of capitalist production involves, at the minimum, a discrete moment of conception and a discrete moment of execution—a primary division of labor that Marx discusses in multiple instances in *Capital* and elsewhere. "[A]rt might 'prove' its resistance to commerce by affirming the instantaneousness of its happening, by aggrandizing its ability to perish, by turning the temporal fate of Shelley's Ozymandias into an aesthetic manifesto" (Heinzelman 154). This absolute

instantaneousness and immediacy is the ultimate guarantor of totality, as the latter condensed into the most minute temporal unit cannot fall prey to division, fragmentation, and alienation in the terms that thinkers like Schiller were prescient in describing. This absolute spontaneous moment finds its consumption-circulation dimension in a “human economy without economic valorization... an exchange between poet-seer and see-er-reader which, quite simply, requires no commercial representation beyond which the artistic product, in its finally identified achievement, embodies” (133).

Michael Ferber’s *The Social Vision of William Blake* finds Blake “everywhere indignant” at the alienation of labor and the infection of art by exchange mediated by money (36). Ferber discusses the “Romantic valorization of art” as an implicit or tacit critique of industrialization and its divided and alienated labors: “Something like an ideology of art emerged to counter the ideology, and the fact, of the commodification of labor and its products. Around ‘art’ gathered nearly everything that faced extinction: organicism[,]... intuition, harmony of human faculties, joy and creativity in labor, and so on” (54). Following Heinzelman, Ferber claims that in Blake’s critique and attempt to redeem oppressed labor, the poet defends “spontaneous expression of feeling, magnanimity and openness to friends, and well-rounded development of the personality” (37). The temporality of production is radically condensed, such that the temporal divisions inherent in the division of tasks (as in an assembly line) are obliterated in the spontaneous apprehension of the truth of a higher mode of aestheticized production that Ferber calls “The

Romantic privileging of the 'moment,' *das Augenblick*, the aurorial glimpse or grasp of higher truth" (53).

In a recent article about the Burkean sublime and labor in *Jerusalem*, Daniel Schierenbeck discusses Blake's concept of the Divine Body as the figure for the final unity of the fallen realm of the social, calling it "an attempt to suture an impossible cleft within the social field. Though [Blake] strives to create an aesthetic that reconciles the division inherent in a capitalist society his discourse is structured by the very social antagonisms that are constitutive of other discourses such as political economy" (23-24). According to Schierenbeck, visionary, apocalyptic political vision is always already imbricated in the fallen language and modes of expression that block such vision. The epic task is less to find an emergent, resplendently meaningful, and immediate language with which to express a vision that precedes, determines and awaits representation from it, but instead entails following through on the doomed mission to exacerbate the social and aesthetic contradiction that our attempts to envision and instantiate utopia necessarily encounter, blocked as they are by the lapsed terms and iconographic means we have to express this utopian vision. Blake's drive toward forms of unity, totality, reconciliation, redemption, and renewal is an attempt to cover over deeper and more structural social antagonisms, which can never fully be ameliorated or even represented. Ultimately, Schierenbeck claims that by trying to mask the trauma and division inherent in the social field, Blake ends up promoting the antagonism of social relations in different terms.

The problematic of labor in Blake scholarship also participates in broader concerns in Romantic and eighteenth-century criticism regarding its putative opposites: leisure, luxury, indolence, and idleness.¹³ As Sarah Jordan has

¹³ Willard Spiegelman's *Majestic Indolence: English Romantic Poetry and the Work of Art* argues that in the work of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelly, and Keats "Indolence and torpor... became paradoxically a symptom of the disease of modern life at the same time that leisure, recreation, and rural retreat were viewed as having curative powers to assuage the emotional, psychological, and physical strains of that life" (15). More provocatively, Geoffrey Hartmann, in his reading of Wordsworth, has implicitly disabled the opposition between rest or indolence and labor, arguing that, Rest is not only an idling but also a heightened attention.... For the negative labor presupposed and in part accomplished by [Wordsworth's "Yew-Trees"] is extreme—even if... it may not be perceived as labor. We are already in an era of industrialization where the work ethic prevails. The image of labor is changing, and the idea of the poetical character is in doubt. What 'character' does one show by 'resting,' by entering the castle or garden of poetic indolence. (110-111).

The important relation between labor and leisure in Blake studies has been discussed in three essays in a special issue of *Romanticism on the Net* entitled *Romantic Labor/Romantic Leisure*. Robert Anderson's introductory essay uses William Godwin's *Political Justice* and its advocacy for a balance between labor and leisure within an utopian world of plenitude: "The situation which the wise man would desire... would be a situation of alternate labour and relaxation, labour that should not exhaust the frame, and relaxation that was in no danger of denigrating into indolence" (484, cited in Anderson, para. 5). Yet, as Anderson notes, in Blake these categories are rarely kept discrete. In the same special issue, Mark Lussier discusses the epigram of Blake's *The Four Zoas*—"Rest before Labour"—and the poem's status as a "dream poem," concluding that the work of "visionary transformation of the public sphere" requires as "pre-text" the "rest" of the poem-as-dream. While the dream-work may prepare the mind for political revolution through its ability to transgress linguistic codes, upon waking, the memory of this transgression can only occur from within fallen language and alienation. In "Byron, Blake, and Heaven," Brian Goldberg argues that paradise offers redemption from Adam's punishment for original sin by "reliev[ing] us of the distinction between labor and leisure" and it will also "erase the boundary between physical and mental work" (para. 1). Citing Swedenborg's claim that work is a principle of human "self-realization," Goldberg explains that labor does not cease in the afterlife, but is altered into pleasure in the service of "humanity's spiritual improvement" (para. 6). Goldberg offers brief analyses of "The Little Black Boy" and "The Chimney Sweeper" from *Songs of Innocence* and claims that after death, paradise offers ongoing education and improvement. For the chimney sweeper, this entails that his non-

documented in *The Anxieties of Idleness: Idleness in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Culture*, the emergent dominance of an ideology of work and in particular the work ethic as buttresses for capital position idleness and refusal (or inability) to work as signs of moral degeneracy or mental illness. In Blake criticism, the challenging work of Guinn Batten is the best and only example of an attempt to circumvent the implicit productivist bias in Blake criticism, and Batten treats indolence as an aesthetic category suited to disrupt this bias. *The Orphaned Imagination: Melancholy and Commodity Culture in English Romanticism* is noteworthy for its attempt to think past the division of labor and pleasure instituted by the work ethic and commodity culture, and for its critique of the “compensatory strategies” of sublimation and prohibition that critics demand of art, specifically poetry (3). What Batten calls the “twin injunctions of sublimation and work” (3) force the relinquishment of regressive or unhealthy attachments in exchange for productive labor and consumerism. Batten argues that Romantic poets like Blake contrarily inquired into what escapes the logic of modernization, and how is this escape might be represented or figured in art. Manual labor for Batten is the original human power to create value and hence to create oneself that capital took and bent to its own aims, but aesthetic work for the Romantics (according to Batten) is different: it reveals what slipped through capitalism’s energies of sublimation

skilled, abject labor might be redeemed for skilled, artisan labor—conveniently of the kind that Blake as a trained commercial engraver practiced—in which the poem’s emphasis on “duty” suggests a “common interest and a set of mutually implicating responsibilities” between the seller and purchaser of labor (para. 18). Strangely, Goldberg does not seem perturbed by the implication in his argument of an extension of the work ethic and the dictates of the market into paradise, implying an analogy between the latter and the free market.

through work, and what the logic of exchange can't account for. In this way, Romantic poetry and the work of Blake in particular, evince a ludic, and hence deeply disruptive, character.¹⁴

Discussing *The Four Zoas*, a poem written in periods that found the author afflicted with bouts of melancholy and acute concerns with his flagging productivity and indolence, Batten argues that Blake produces a work that explores “the necropolis of the unconscious [which] teems with those who have been sacrificed to the dreams of bellicose Work masters. They clamor for rebirth in the forms that emerge from the productive interiors of the creative self” (76). The political edge of such a poem is not to be located in the ways it recognizes and supplements “progressive” struggles that still maintain allegiances to productivity and the protestant work ethic, but in its conjuring or recruitment of the spectral dead as representatives of the repressive, exclusionary, and violent maneuvers of capital. Batten’s discussion calls to mind (but does not make explicit) Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” as a model for conceiving the ways that attention to the dead—specifically referring to the perpetually defeated of history—becomes the

¹⁴ But Batten insists that critics miss this negative potential. Whether cultural materialist (she cites Jerome McGann and Marjorie Levinson) or “liberal-humanist” (M. H. Abrams) they believe that “poetry works (*if it works at all*) in complicity with the ‘total form’ of cultural authority” (13). Even though most critics (according to Batten) adhere to a view that the value of Romantic poetry is to be found in how it transcends “material” and “ordinary labor” (9-10), they nevertheless subscribe to a view whereby the poet’s well-wrought work ethic compensates for an abiding sense of originary loss that causes melancholy—modernity’s particular structure of feeling—by placing a poem in the gap, thus establishing the conditions of possibility for the productive citizen: “The work of poetry should be an advancement of culture that meliorates a society’s problems,” or so this line of thinking goes, “and the work of poetry must include the ‘working through’ of loss that concludes in the poet’s psychic health, that is to say, in the mental independence we call maturity” (9).

material for a more hopeful, “alternative art of insurrection” (75). The refusal to surrender what has been lost issues in an aesthetic that originates in death, “regressive” sexual desire, and maternal reproduction (a salutary corrective to masculinist political economy).¹⁵ Nevertheless, this aesthetic is ultimately celebratory (83) or joyful (116) and is associated with pleasure, as opposed to melancholic labor (95). A highly unstable relationship emerges here, in that poetry is the excessive remainder of modernity because the pleasure it produces suggests a pleasure in unhealthy (because they disrupt productivity) attachments, eroding the productivist system from within. If modernity continually must compensate for its repression of origins through the establishment of the work ethic, Romantic poetry teases the wound, resurrecting the ghosts of these origins, using them for its poetry of resistance.

Batten’s resistance to the work ethic and productivist bias of Romantic poetry *and* Romantic criticism represents a potential revolution in how we read Blake in particular. Her rejection of a poetic (and critical) work ethic has been important in my development of this dissertation, yet ultimately she does not escape the trap of aestheticizing labor in Blake’s epic work. While she may not, in the final

¹⁵ The question of maternal labor is an as-yet underexplored topic in Blake studies. Recently, Julia Wright has offered perhaps the most complete exploration of the topic as it relates to scenes of birth in *America* and *Europe*. Wright describes what she calls the “childbirth metaphor” and claims that females that give birth resist becoming the passive vessels that masculine characters and masculinist ideology would have them become and remain. Instead, they “articulate their resistance through an alternative mode of creativity: the females speak, supplementing their uterine identities by appropriating a nonbiological mode of production from which they are excluded by the paradigm that genders creative labor” (91). Wright goes on to connect the form of feminine passivity that the females resist (with marginal success) to the passive reading that Blake’s textuality and difficulty purportedly contest.

analysis, replace labor with art (or transform the former into the latter), labor is nonetheless eschewed for a sort of ludic melancholy in which one “commemorates the dead who are buried in the unconscious through daily acts of imitation (or identification)” (215). If Blake’s poetry, according to Batten, denies the “Urizenic” workmaster, criticism co-opts—indeed, has an ethical imperative to co-opt—aesthetic pleasure in its own productive dictates.

Saree Makdisi’s recent and powerful discussion of labor in *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* is based on the (broadly Marxist) idea that labor not only produces products and commodities, but also the subjects of that labor. It “is a process that unifies and *produces* subjectivity and temporality as much as it produces simple material commodities—[it is] a process that in effect creates both its producers and their products” (88). The human subject is a product, produced “according to the requirements of a political and economic network that generates—fabricates, assembles—the inhabitants appropriate to it” (83). For Makdisi, labor is simultaneously a historical, political, economic, and aesthetic category, one that in Blake is reflected in formal and material qualities of his work.

Part of Makdisi’s argument here is that Blake’s work is mobilized by his opposition to the “authoritarianism of sober work and productive labor” (45). The capacity for work is reduced to Marx’s concept of abstract labor, or what Makdisi tends to call “average ability” (114); successfully disciplined workers, who are themselves (in their labor-power) commodities, can be inserted at any spot in the production process, plugged in to fulfill any needed function in production. The division of labor demanded by this system produces what for Blake represented one

of the “most destructive processes instituted in the modern industrial forms of production... its absolute reliance on a smooth flow of average labor” (116).

For Makdisi, labor in modernity is the categorical opposite of freedom, and consequently he cannot imagine a reading of Blake that calls into question the liberatory thrust of his poetry: Blake, we are reminded, “*of course*, was interested in the possibility of wresting a realm of freedom away from the realm of necessity” (101, my italics), but this freedom is figured as an escape from conditions of limitation and oppression. “[The] ‘joys and desires’ repeatedly celebrated in Blake’s work... involve both a freedom from a restriction to reproductive labor... and a freedom from confinement into a singular selfhood” (98). The position of labor in this process is ambiguous. Makdisi suggests at times that labor ought to be reorganized and transformed—into a “joyous and unrestricted form of being”—though at times he suggests that it ought to be abandoned altogether. *America*, for example, suggests that freedom can be found in a release “from the necessity of labor... freedom from the entrapment of labor under the rule of necessity” (152-3), yet Makdisi also suggests, in the same breath, that Blake’s so-called *Glad Day* print “can be read as an icon of freedom from labor” (154).

My contention is that Makdisi’s argument founders in part on his conception of freedom in Blake, which he tries to sever from the prevailing notions of freedom in the liberal thought of people like Paine. Makdisi, who notes that Marx was “working in very much the same conceptual continuum... [as] Blake” (129), nevertheless ignores Marx’s skepticism (mainly found in *Capital*) of freedom as a negative category in conditions of capitalism, where freedom is predominantly a

freedom from control of the means of production and freedom to sell one's labor power on the market. Indeed, as some of the more purple passages in Makdisi attest, the freedom from determination paradoxically sounds quite in accord with the ways that abstract labor can take on multitudinous forms, and circulate without condition or obstruction:

the joyous life of "the prolific," indefinite, open, reaching out toward an infinitely prolific number of re-makings, re-connections, re-imaginings—life as pure potential, life as constituent... power.... [R]ecognizing no externality, this is a creative, affirmative, positive freedom, the freedom of a life of creative *power*. Freedom here is the power to constitute "the eternal body of man";... it is the power to affirm life as being in common, life as the making of that "divine body" of which "we are his members." (266)

As Makdisi, following a habit endemic to Blake critics, tautologically quotes Blake to explain Blake, thus using Blake to preempt disagreement and enforce assent, a couple issues arise: "life" is a power arrayed against the deformations of a form of labor divorced from its creative and auto-creative potential. Yet, the effusive language of affirmation and joy mask the ways that, if properly decontextualized, passages such as this one, echo the transformative and revolutionary properties of capital itself.¹⁶ Yet, and perhaps more pertinently, I prefer to read problems like this in Makdisi's work regarding freedom and the fate of labor as a sort of culmination of one way of telling the story of labor as it threads its way through political and economic criticism of Blake's work. The tendency in Makdisi is an argument that

¹⁶ Makdisi claims that for Blake, "art does not simply refer to... aesthetic objects: it is, rather, an expression of the ontological power of the imagination." He goes on to say that "art... is making, [and] freedom must be understood as the freedom to make, and to keep making, and for people to make as they choose, rather than the freedom simply to buy and sell what has been already made, or to be told to make in particular ways under particular circumstances... [by] some extrinsic patriarchal power" (278).

Blake solved the problems of alienated and divided labor in Blake in his aesthetic practice, which was integrated, spontaneous, free, and disruptive of narrative determination. In other words, the aestheticization of labor cures labor of its infection with determination of any sort.¹⁷ The affirmative desire (recall Makdisi's claim that Blake "of course" wished to create or represent a realm of freedom) to see in labor the potential kernel of utopian regeneration of society and subjectivity ultimately leads to the negation of labor itself. Makdisi's uncertainty of the fate of labor in Blake's quasi-Deleuzian realm of affirmation of life suggests that labor is that which must be overcome in order for its creative potential to be realized, just as it, as a problem of capitalist representation, slips from notice in Makdisi's text, as the critique of aesthetic and economic production culminates in an airy "escape into the infinite" (83).

The Philosophical Discourse of Labor

Criticism on labor in Blake is significantly aligned with key strains of praxis philosophy, which, for my purposes here initiates with Hegel and Marx's encounter with Hegel. In these thinkers, labor is both an essential element of what it means to be human *and* a form of alienation from that very humanness. Labor is both an eternal aspect of human life just as it takes on specific characteristics in economic modernity that qualitatively alters it from previous iterations. Its affirmative character is found in its capacity to negate the naturalness of the natural world, thereby re-making it in the subject's own image, affirming that image; its negative

¹⁷ Makdisi's rather naïve antagonism to determination of any sort leads him to ignore that nothing could exist without some form of determination, including his treasured concept of "life itself."

character is found in its capacity to fatally interrupt that circuit, freezing the subject in an repetition *ad nauseum* in that moment in which its activity is alienated from it. Labor as the subject's creative, formative capacity prefigures a realm of freedom, just as labor becomes legible as a category of modernity only when it becomes universalized as a form of coercion and estrangement—indeed, its liberatory aspect only arises as a potential to the degree to which it is alienated as the form and image of servility. The dehumanization and exploitation of labor under the aegis of capital not only must be transformed or reorganized to realize a realm of freedom and utopia; instead, in later iterations of this philosophical narrative (though glimpses of it can be seen in Marx) labor's full realization entails its own negation or abnegation.

Hegel's dialectic of the lord and bondsman (better known as master and slave) in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* establishes labor as purposive, sensuous activity both as a defining characteristic of the human, as it also characterizes labor as alienation and negativity. In its basic outline, Hegel's theory of the master and slave is positioned to offer a way to expand the consciousness of the subject beyond a solipsistic for-itself self-consciousness. In encountering the external world as an alien object, the subject negates this objectivity through the exercise of its desire. The gap between subject and world is bridged through the former's desire to negate the latter, to consume it and thus affirm itself. However, this satisfaction is fleeting and imperfect, and the subject must endlessly repeat the exercise of desire on the object, thus repeatedly destroying or consuming it: "Desire and the self-certainty obtained in its gratification, are conditioned by the object, for self-certainty comes from superseding this other... Thus self-consciousness, by its negative relation to

the object, is unable to supersede it; it is really because of that relation that it produces the object again, and the desire as well" (*Phenomenology of Spirit* 109). Desire thus takes on a repetitive character, as it negates and re-produces the object to be negated.

In moving past the encounter with the object to the encounter with other self-consciousnesses, the relation achieves another level in which the object of desire does not need to be destroyed in order for it to be subdued. This level means, first, that negation moves beyond signifying mere destruction and, secondly, that the subject must take each other self-consciousness "as something that has an independent existence of its own, which, therefore, it cannot utilize for its own purposes, if that object does not of its own accord do what the first does to it" (112). While mutual recognition and a sort of perfect mirroring of interests is the ideal, in fact "*at first* it will exhibit the side of inequality of the two, or the splitting-up of the middle term into the extremes which, as extremes, are opposed to each other, one being only *recognized*, the other only *recognizing* (112-113). Characterized by a contradiction between universality and individuality, the subject seeks to mediate this through what Hegel terms a "life and death struggle" for the "satisfaction" of mutual recognition with the alien self-consciousness (see 110). The way this occurs is through violent struggle, as both parties attempt to gain recognition through imposing one's will on the other. The fact that subjects are willing to sacrifice their lives in this struggle is not a mere byproduct or effect of the struggle for recognition; rather, risking one's life is the reason for the struggle itself. In order to prove to the other that the subject not a mere object to be negated through being bent to his or

her will, the subject must prove its status as a self-consciousness by displaying a willingness to be negated in death. Only a self-consciousness can provide recognition, and only a self-consciousness can secure recognition through the giving up of his or her life (see 113-114).¹⁸ The limitations to the life and death struggle are obvious, as a dead person can't provide recognition: "This trial by death, however, does away with the truth which was supposed to issue from it, and so, too, with the certainty of self generally. Just as life is the *natural* setting of consciousness, negation without independence, which thus remains without the required significance of recognition" (114). When one subject in the struggle realizes this and gives up, he becomes enslaved to the other, who is now the master and can impose his or her will on the slave. The objects of labor that once presented themselves as forms to be repetitively negated and re-constituted are in effect replaced by the slave, whose labors are dictated by the master who through the slave's labor attempts to transcend his sense of alienation from the external world.

However transitory this masterly satisfaction might be, the key development belongs to the slave, who, in the experience of fear in the life and death struggle and the experience of laboring according to the master's will, no longer finds him or herself dictated by mere desire and attains a more sophisticated level of self-consciousness than the master can: "through work... the bondsman becomes conscious of what he truly is.... Work... is desire held in check, fleetingness staved off; in other words, work forms and shapes the thing. The negative relation to the object becomes its *form* and something *permanent*, because it is precisely for the

¹⁸ In this particular understanding of Hegel, I am relying on the influential work of Alexandre Kojève's *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (see 40-42).

worker that the object has independence” (118). More than just imposing his desire on the world, the slave finds objects and imposes his negativity upon them, transforming them according to a prior idea.¹⁹ No longer does the external world need to be destroyed in order for the security of the self to be established; instead, “in fashioning the thing, he becomes aware that being-for-self belongs to *him*, that he himself exists essentially and actually in his own right.... Through this rediscovery of himself by himself, the bondsman realizes that it is precisely in his work wherein he seemed to have only an alienated existence that he acquires a mind of his own” (118-119). While the master might passively “enjoy” the fruits of the slave’s labor, the slave, according to Judith Butler’s reading, “embodies the principle of negation as an active and creative principle” (*Subjects of Desire* 53). Hegel claims that the “formative activity” is a “*negative* middle term” that is actually instantiated in or incorporated into the transformed object; thereby, in its objectification, it “acquires an element of permanence” (118). In negating the object presented to him and transforming it, the slave’s negativity is put on display, creating, in effect, an image of him or herself in the finished product, thereby achieving a sort of ironic freedom through the expressivity of active labor. Material labor is the necessary reflection of desire in the world, and in its products the self-consciousness of the laborer is represented and recognized. Thus, labor in the

¹⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy argues for a slightly different emphasis, describing an intertwining of desire and work: “Work... elaborates the form of desire. The work, in its exterior form... forms the manifestation of desire itself—and it is an infinite formation” (64). Judith Butler writes that “Desire is *aufhebung* in ‘Lordship and Bondage’; it is canceled yet preserved, which is to say that it is transformed into a more internally complicated mode of human striving” (*Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* 43).

Hegelian world is an essential moment in the expression and emergence of freedom.²⁰

As a necessary moment in the emergence of freedom, however, the master and slave relation must encounter intransigent difficulties and be both overcome and incorporated as a negative moment in a further development of consciousness. Subsequent to this stage in the story Hegel tells are Stoicism, Skepticism, and the Unhappy Consciousness. In each, as Bruce Baugh has summarized, “These stages of self-consciousness represent consciousness’ increasing awareness of itself as *negativity*” (3). And the Unhappy Consciousness merits attention in this context for at least a couple related reasons. First, there is a powerful sense in Hegel that the Unhappy Consciousness generalizes the idea that progressively, if unevenly,

²⁰ Kojève repeatedly stresses this link between labor and freedom in his *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*: “Work is an auto-creative act: it realizes and manifests Freedom.... [S]ince *he* [i.e., the slave] is he who transformed the given World by working in it, the change which he seems to *undergo* in consequence is in fact an *auto-creation*: it is he who changes himself, who *creates* himself as other than he was *given* to himself. And that is why Work can raise him up from Slavery to Freedom” (228). For Adorno, Hegelian spirit does not merely incidentally involve work in the master and slave scenario, it is an activity of labor, a fact that opens a tension internal to spirit between the abstract and the concrete, the universal and particular, mind and matter. Reading Hegel through the lens of Marx’s theory of abstract labor, Adorno suggests that labor for Hegel must be understood as a general form of shared human activity; Hegel’s depiction of one-on-one agon in the master and slave relation might mislead one to believe that Hegel only conceives labor as an activity of an individual confronting the stark materiality of the world and transforming it—in short, as work. Instead, as a moment of spirit, labor must be abstract, universal, and exchangeable, and as such both provides and obstructs the ideality of pure spirit: “the experience... of abstract labor takes on magical form. For that subject, labor becomes its own reflected form, a pure deed of spirit, spirit’s productive unity” (*Hegel: Three Studies* 20). The “magical form” Adorno refers to involves a paradoxical sense that spirit both requires what it must reject—namely the materiality of labor as praxis—for its own development, just as this development is modeled after labor and indeed “has always been part of the work ethic” (20-21).

emerges throughout the *Phenomenology* that the self-conscious subject is caught in an intransigent contradiction between a self-creative, liberatory praxis and a form of self-alienating oppression: "This new form is... one which *knows* that it is the dual consciousness of itself, as self-liberating [e.g. in labor], unchangeable, and self-identical, and as self-bewildering and self-perverting, and it is the awareness of this self-contradictory nature of itself." Hegel concludes that, "the *Unhappy Consciousness* is the consciousness of self as a dual-natured, merely contradictory being" (126). The subject *as* finitude and limitation confronts the infinity of Reason itself, and is conscious of this insurmountable chasm. While these passages are often viewed as a critique of religious reason, for my purposes here it is also notable that labor is a primary means by which the self-consciously limited subject attempts to bridge the gap between him or herself and Reason in the form of a transcendent God. In work, "consciousness finds confirmation of that inner certainty of itself... by overcoming and enjoying the existence alien to it" (132). However, the subject cannot overcome the sense that if this labor is supposed to bridge the gap between mere individuality and the universal, whatever work is performed has been sanctioned and enabled by the latter, thus effacing whatever sense of unity has been attempted and entangling the subject in a form of alienation just as it felt its freedom emerge. Just as the Unhappy Consciousness fails to accept that its constitutive impasse is in fact its truth, labor as praxis encapsulates and expresses the potentiality of liberation through the transcendence of base materiality through tarrying with and transforming it, *while it also is* the point of breakdown or exhaustion of this potentiality.

I dwell at some length on Hegel's thoughts on work in the Lordship and Bondage and Unhappy Consciousness sections in order to isolate key themes in the genealogy of labor in modern thought that informs my approach in this dissertation. Just as in my earlier discussion of Blake's *Milton*, where Satan's exchanges are both a metaphorical instance of the consolidation of modern labor and its intensification of various tensions leading to its undoing, in Hegel we find a distinct yet roughly analogous movement, in which labor serves as a dialectical moment in which the master and slave hierarchy is both established and overcome in the guise of emergent freedom; yet labor, at a subsequent moment, can be read as more deeply internalizing—if not generalizing—a sense of internal contradiction and impasse.²¹

More than once in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* Marx credits Hegel for grasping the fact that labor is *both* the means by which the subject creates a world, thereby creating him or herself, *and* a self-divisive, alienating force:

The outstanding thing in Hegel's *Phenomenology* and its final outcome—that is, the dialectic of negativity as the moving and generating principle—is thus first that Hegel conceives the self-genesis of man as a process, conceives objectification as loss of the object, as alienation and as transcendence of this alienation; that he thus grasps the essence of *labour* and comprehends objective man—true, because real man—as the outcome of man's *own labour*. (112;

²¹ Art historian T. J. Clark has provocatively suggested in a very different context that while the logic that unfolds in the *Phenomenology* attempts to reconcile the impasse between self-sameness and radical difference that characterizes the Unhappy Consciousness, the “essence of modernity... is the failure to grasp that.... Things would be more bearable if at least the Unhappy Consciousness could pursue its self-laceration to the point of extinction. But it never can. It can never lay hold of mere difference and embrace its Truth” (329). As the “essence of modernity” the Unhappy Consciousness institutes a radical impasse between self-sameness and contingency, identity and difference; however, while this problematic may indeed offer, as Clark asserts, leverage on the claim that art replaces religion in modernity, more pertinently it implies that the fact of material labor becomes the mediating figure of this impasse, marking modernity in its repetitive, negative character.

this and all subsequent citations of the *Manuscripts* are from *The Marx-Engels Reader*)²²

It is noteworthy that in Hegel's treatment of labor Marx finds a dialectical movement through which the subject creates him or herself through the activity of self-alienation and the "transcendence" of this alienation. Objective, practical life can only occur through the alienation of the object of labor. Thus, labor is an essential element not only of the maintenance (and production) of human life,²³ but of subjectification itself. Without it, the human is inconceivable: the subject

²² Elsewhere in the *Manuscripts* Marx echoes this thought: "Hegel conceives labour as man's act of *self-genesis*—conceives man's relation to himself as an alien being and the manifesting of himself as an alien being and the manifesting of himself as an alien being to be the coming-to-be of *species-consciousness* and *species-life*" (121). In his later work, the *Philosophy of Right* (1820), Hegel foregrounds labor more explicitly in the realm of political economy, as he looks at the exchangeability of labor as a cornerstone of civil society, or the socio-political form of ethical life (or *Sittlichkeit*). The status of the subject as a rights-bearing individual for Hegel depends upon an analogous situation as the one found in the master and slave dialectic. The ability of a subject to work, to impose his or her will upon inert matter, to use things found in the natural world and appropriate them for prescribed purposes confirms the subject as universal and thus is the basis of the right of property (see 75-76).

²³ Humans "distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence... By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life" (150). For Marx, labor "is a condition of human existence which is independent of all forms of society; it is an eternal human necessity which mediates the metabolism between man and nature, and therefore human life itself" (*Capital* 133). The notion that humans are differentiated from animals because of the former's capacity for mindful work is found also in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in which

God hath set
Labour and rest, as day and night to men
Successive
...
other Creatures all day long
Rove idle unimploid, and less need rest
Man hath his daily work of boy or mind
Appointed, which declares his Dignitie,
And the regard of Heav'n on all his waies;

confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature. He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature. (*Capital* 283)

In Hegel, Marx also finds the implication that we are what we do, or that identity is determined—and is therefore alterable—through material activity and production. As Marx claims in *The German Ideology*, “As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both *what* they produce and *how* they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production” (150). Essentially, this is a very divided claim: On the one hand, the story Marx is telling is one of extreme limitation and external determination. In effect, we become what we are through our material activity, an activity that is rarely (and in Marx’s time and ours, increasingly rarely) determined, given, or directed by ourselves. In fact, increasingly this activity is characterized by coercion and conditions of exploitation. On the other hand, Marx suggests that if material conditions change, if what we produce and how we produce it can change—even if the definition of what constitutes production and productivity itself might change—the potential for the liberated subject could be unlimited. “The object of labor is... the objectification of man’s species life: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he contemplates himself in a world which he has created” (76). When the proletariat becomes the universal class

While other Animals unactive range,
And of their doings God takes no account.” (4: 612-622)

through the overthrow of existing relations of production and the state that buttresses them, labor's truly creative potential is realized: "only at this stage does self-activity coincide with material life, which corresponds to the development of individuals into complete individuals and the casting-off of all natural limitations" and then it becomes "possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic" (*The German Ideology* 192, 160).

Here, a quite unique feature of Marx's theory of labor emerges, a feature that broadly characterizes what I take to be the three defining facets of Marx's theory: alienation, labor power, and abstract labor. This feature is best characterized by a certain elusiveness or instability inherent in the concept of labor in capitalism for Marx. Labor, above all else, is for Marx a category of representation, a problem of representation. *Capital's* general aim to represent the inner workings of capital and also capitalist political economy leads Marx to obsess over the ways that capitalism plays with the relations of surface and depth, appearance and reality. How one thing or relation might take the form of another, the ways that meaning and value get produced through the mediation of another element, and the general sense that social processes and products of labor never directly and transparently convey or express their own value or meaning but require something else to "bear" or represent it are problems that define the work that *Capital* attempts to perform. The very first pages of *Capital* introduce the reader not merely to the analysis of capitalism and the commodity form, but also Marx's anxieties about and fascination

with the dynamics (or economics) of representation and how meaning is conveyed, obscured, and expressed by something else. The first sentence of the book is instructive: “The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails *appears* as an ‘immense collection of commodities’” (125, my emphasis). Quoting his own earlier work here, Marx implies that his own discourse is entangled in the question of how economic phenomena (such as labor power or the commodity form) are to be represented, and that another party, term, concept, or text may be required for the job.²⁴ Marx’s obsession with the gothic—vampires, phantoms, ghosts, the dead rising from their graves, and so on—is rarely attributed to this problem of representation, yet there is something striking about the structure of economic phenomena and processes for Marx that makes them essentially not as they appear, or makes them turn into something else before our eyes. As one thing takes the form of another, meaning in capitalism can only be specular, a hall of mirrors in which one thing reflects another, and direct, unmediated presentation of meaning or value is impossible.²⁵

²⁴ David Harvey’s recent book on Marx’s *Capital* notes that when Marx uses a term like “appears” in this context (or other, similar terms), this “signals that something else is going on beneath the surface appearance. We are invited to think about what this might be” (*A Companion to Marx’s Capital* 15). Harvey doesn’t acknowledge, however, that when Marx hesitates when it comes to questions of representation and the representability of economic phenomena, it is not merely an appearance/reality question, but that Marx’s theory (if not “Marx” himself) is problematizing representation just as he is attempting himself to represent capital and its inner workings.

²⁵ The commodity, to take the basic unit of capitalist experience, “*reflects* the social characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves... Hence it also *reflects* the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects” (*Capital* 164-5). In this multiply reflective, specular process, Marx claims, objects created through labor not only acquire value, they, in fact, *become* commodities, internally divided through a

Repeatedly, Marx takes exception with the classical political economists for, among other issues, how labor is understood in a straightforward way, as if it as a bare, material fact could offer access to capital's secrets. While it may indeed be the case that “[p]olitical economy conceals the estrangement inherent in the nature of labour by not considering the direct relationship between the worker (labour) and production” (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* 73), it is also true that to fully grasp the relationship of expropriation and exploitation Marx refers to here as “direct,” labor itself (or the “nature of labour”) must be paradoxically abstracted from itself as a material fact and process. Accepting the empirical fact of labor as self-sufficient and manifestly true, Adam Smith and others failed to understand the deeper mechanisms driving the accumulation of surplus value, according to Marx.²⁶ As the factor that adjudicates equivalences, labor (or socially necessary labor time) must assign and measure the value of commodities; yet, throughout texts like the first volume of *Capital*, labor itself refuses to submit to representation. Concepts like alienation, labor power, and abstract labor—again, facets of the theory that are crucial to Marx’s description and critique of capitalism—are about how labor is

constitutive tension between being physical, “sensuous things” and social phenomena that cannot be reduced to materiality or use.

²⁶ As Althusser mentions in *Reading Capital*, Marx was not concerned with a “balance sheet” of what Smith and the other political economists got right and wrong; for Althusser, Marx’s reading of Smith presupposes another sort of reading altogether, one in which what seems correct in Smith is in fact the effect of an “oversight... that concerns *vision*” (21). The lack that Althusser claims that Marx reads in Smith occurs precisely at the discursive site of labor, for Smith’s notion that value is constituted by labor is a “concept *manqué*” and one that conceals the absence of the true question left unposed until Marx provided it: the question of labor power. What I take from this is that in Marx’s confrontation and reading of Smith, the very representability of labor—or labor as a problem of representation—is staged.

divided and dividing, more illustrative as potential rather than as fact, and more conceptual and generalized rather than a concrete and actual experience.

Labor's lack of categorical fixity in Marx belies its centrality and threatens Marx's theory from within. Before discussing alienation, labor power, and abstract labor in more detail, it is instructive to recall that in the previous chapter, I noted how the key recent critic on labor in Blake, Saree Makdisi, also notes (though he elides the challenges it raises) labor's protean, shifting, and fluid character in Blake's poetry. In fact, Makdisi's discussion foundered on the issue of the representability of labor, subsuming labor within the metaphor of the mill, thereby dematerializing it and arguing for its elimination in the wake of a negative conception of freedom. Unperturbed by this feature of the poetry, Makdisi's solution is to gesture toward a realm of freedom from labor that he sees emergent in Blake. It is possible also to see an analogous movement in Marx, particularly where his materialist theory of labor requires abstraction from the concrete experience and process of labor to be intelligible, and also in the scattered instances where Marx suggests, quite in contradiction with his more dominant view that labor is the human condition, that labor, ultimately, will be abolished: for example, in *The German Ideology* Marx concludes that the proletarians "will have to abolish the very condition of their existence hitherto (which has, moreover, been that of all society up to the present), namely, labour" (200).²⁷ At any rate, in Marx's ideal of hunting, fishing, rearing, and

²⁷ Several pages earlier, Marx claims that, "the communist revolution... *does away with labour*" (193, my italics). In the early 1970s a debate broke out in the pages of the *Canadian Journal of Political Science* about the status of labor in Marxian communism. Of significance here is Morton Schoolman's argument that Marx, like Marcuse much later, advocated the abolition of work altogether (see 295)

criticizing all in the same day, it is the supposed fixity of labor that he objects to, the ways that it is tied inexorably to one's identity, defining and in effect representing or "expressing" who we are. But as I will touch on when discussing abstract labor, part of capital's hegemony involves the universal exchangeability or commodification of labor, a feature that does away with the supposed fixity of labor and the ways that labor has been (or at least has been seen to be) tied to identity in earlier forms of economic life. In effect, then, Marx's communist utopia, as notoriously difficult as it may be to define, is determined by a deeply structural feature of capitalism itself. In the freedom to do what one wants without being determined by that activity, the free-floating exchange of tasks inadvertently implies precisely what Satan's exchanges in *Milton* metaphorically suggest: that in capitalism workers are indeed free to dispose of their labor power as they like, but in doing so they are simultaneously also freed from the means of production and may be shuffled among tasks at the whim of the owner of capital.²⁸

Alienation for Hegel, as I discussed earlier, involves the repetitive process of the subject engaging with nature, working on it, altering it, expressing oneself in this purposive activity, and seeing oneself and one's powers reflected back. In this process the hitherto solipsistic subject experiences a part of him or herself outside in the world, alienated, as it were. But in work, the subject returns to oneself, finds oneself suitably expressed and recognized in the finished products that are created

²⁸ Marx's notion of "double freedom" threads its way throughout the first volume of *Capital*. The capitalist "must find the free worker available on the commodity-market; and this worker must be free in the double sense that as a free individual he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and... he has no other commodity for sale,... he is free of all of the objects needed for the realization of his labour-power." (272-3)

and recognized by others as a self-conscious subject. In Hegel's master and slave dialectic, as I have discussed, this process takes the form of coercion in which one's labor is for another, even if in the final instance this grants the slave a sense of freedom and expansion of powers denied to the master.²⁹ In a highly advanced state of productivity, Marx claims, alienation loses the moment of de-alienation, and takes on a range of alienated forms:

labour is *external* to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work... he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. (74)

For those performing it, work, in such conditions, is loss of self, forced, coerced— labor is both one's ownmost activity, the activity in which one knows and recognizes oneself, *and* an activity that is hostile and alien to the subject performing it. As a consequence the product, far from affirming the powers of the worker who created it, reflects back and communicates only the fact that it has become an "alien object exercising over" the worker (74). The world itself and nature as a whole face the worker as an antagonistic, hostile force. Not only is the product of labor alienated from the worker, the very activity of work itself, which in Hegel is a self-confirming activity the master cannot take away even as he compels that labor, is alienated:

²⁹ In the Jena lectures of 1803-4 and 1805-6 that preceded and led to the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel anticipates Marx as he discusses how modern industry has developed new needs and thus has abstracted (alienated) the laborer from his or her activity and raw materials, thus making the laborer "more and more machine-like, dull, spiritless" (*Philosophy of Right* 444); thus, the "mind of his own" that the laborer acquired in the master and slave confrontation is lost: "The spiritual element, the self-conscious plenitude of life, becomes empty activity" (*Philosophy of Right* 444).

the relation of the worker to his own activity as an alien activity not belonging to him; it is an activity as suffering, strength as weakness, begetting as emasculating, the worker's *own* physical and mental energy, his personal life... as an activity which is turned against him, nether depends on nor belongs to him. Here we have *self-estrangement*, as we had previously the estrangement of the *thing*. (75)

Alienation also isolates workers from each other, as a consequence of the wage relation between worker and capitalist (see 77). As Marx accepts from Hegel the notion that working, or purposive and productive activity in the world is a fundamental and transhistorical element of what it means to be human, the final element of the theory of alienation involves the divestment of even this aspect, leading to the full dehumanization of the laborer. This collectively binding essence of the human subject is termed by Marx "species being": "Man's species being, both nature and his spiritual species property, [is converted] into a being *alien* to him, into a *means* to his *individual existence*. It estranges man's own body from him, as it does external nature and his spiritual essence, his *human being*" (77).

In the *Manuscripts*, Marx makes a critical link between alienated labor and the origin of private property. Alienated labor becomes generalized in the capitalist mode of production, in which labor itself is a commodity to be bought and sold on the market. One's own labor power, or the potential to do work, is brought to the market by workers who must do so since the means of production have been cut off from them and are placed in the hands of a small group of capitalists. In capitalism, the worker is indeed "free" to sell his or her labor power on the market, and this notion of labor as the worker's private property that then becomes, in exchange for a wage, the capitalist's, defines the worker's relationship to labor as a thing that, in

its very essence, must be alienated from the worker, put into the service of another's purposes and designs: "The relationship of the worker to labour engenders the relation to it of the capitalist, or whatever one chooses to call the master of labour. *Private property* is thus the product, the result, the necessary consequence, of *alienated labour*, of the external relation of the worker to nature and to himself" (79).³⁰

Marx's elaboration of the Hegelian theme of alienation in the sphere of political economy is important not merely for the ways it has powerfully defined the terms of the discourse of the experience of labor in modernity for many, and not merely for how it could provide insight into scenes of dehumanized labor in Blake. The theory of alienation reveals something essential about labor in capitalism: namely, that its dominant form of appearance is as something that is internally divided, and that in turn divides the subject performing the work, divides that subject from others, and divides that subject from his or her humanness. Labor, the theory of alienation implies, takes on its full, modern significance only when it eschews its "in-itself" character, only when the enterprise to grasp labor "itself" or labor "in itself" can only be undertaken under erasure, or with the sense that such an enterprise will paradoxically (and perhaps damningly) reveal labor refuses such

³⁰ Communism, on the other hand, is the "*genuine* resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man" (84). It reunites all the capitalism tore asunder, including the divided, internally alienated subject *qua* worker: communism is the "re-integration or return of man to himself, the transcendence of human self-estrangement.... Communism... [is] the complete return of man to himself as social (i.e., human) being—a return become conscious, and accomplished within the entire wealth of previous development" (84). Of note here is the language of return, of reunification, of the recovery of a lost origin. In contrast to this conservatism, Marx tends to describe capitalism as a future-oriented, revolutionary movement.

self-reflexive moments. It is as if the “resolution,” “re-integration,” “return of man to himself,” and so on of the representation of communism is the utopian expression or redemption of a condition endemic to the concept of labor: the wish-fulfillment of a lack inherent in the concept of labor itself, communism envisages itself as a return to a totality that certainly never existed historically, but that conceptually haunts the concept of labor as that which it will never achieve in reality.

Labor, as it turns out, is a very unique kind of commodity, the only kind that can actually create new, or surplus, value:

In order to extract value out of the consumption of a commodity, or friend the money-owner must be luck enough to find within the sphere of circulation, on the market, a commodity whose use-value possesses the peculiar property of being a source of value, whose actual consumption is therefore itself an objectification... of labour, hence a creation of value. The possessor of money does find such a special commodity on the market: the capacity for labour... in other words, labour power. (270)

Here Marx introduces the notion of “labor power,” or the potential to perform work, and distinguishes it from labor itself, or the actual activity of producing. Labor power, understood as the capacity to do work, becomes conceptually important because of capital’s need to extract surplus value. Labor power is the *potential* or *ability* of workers to work, given their muscles, brains, skills, and capacities. It is the *promise* of creating value possessed by human labor that has not yet been expended. Labor power has a distinct not-yet characteristic opposed to the ways that “labor” is the actual *activity* of producing value. While actual labor is unhelpful to Marx’s theory, the *capacity* to perform work belongs only to the worker, and is bought and sold on the market for a given time-period (freely, Marx hastens to add, not without irony). In this way, the worker “alienate[s] his labour-power” and “avoid[s]

renouncing his rights of ownership over it" (271). Being able to both sell yet retain the rights to re-sell the labor power later on is a situation of world-historical importance for Marx: "The historical conditions of its [i.e., capital's] existence... arise... only when the owner of the means of production and subsistence finds the free worker available, on the market, as the seller of his own labour-power... Capital, therefore, announces from the outset a new epoch in the process of social production" (274). When the ability to sell the products of labor is taken from the worker, the capacity to perform labor must be sold on the market in exchange for a wage. Labor adds value to other commodities, and is the only commodity that does this. The capitalist extracts labor from the laborer, and thus, since labor is the source of value, also extracts value from the laborer, adding it to the commodity produced. The wage paid to the laborer is far less than the value the laborer produces or endows the finished commodity with. Significantly, it is also far less than what it costs to maintain and reproduce the life of the laborer:

by incorporating living labour into... lifeless objectivity, the capitalist simultaneously transforms value, i.e. past labour in its objectified and lifeless form, into capital, value which can perform its own valorization process, an animated monster which begins to "work", "as if its body were by love possessed." (302)

Also, this sale of labor power is an "alienation" of the worker's capacity from the worker. Thus, the worker is alienated from his or her creative powers and from the product produced. When the laborer sells his or her labor power to the "money owner," the laborer alienates a part of himself and divests him or herself from any relation to the produce of the labor performed: "From the instant he steps into the

workhouse, the use value of his labour power and therefore also its use, which is labour, belongs to the capitalist” (292).

In the previous chapter, I argued that the key aspect of Satan’s activity in *Milton* involved his instantiation of the exchangeability of labor and laborers. Though the text does not touch on wage labor and private property, the political economy of the Bard’s song implies a movement away from work as an essential element of one’s identity, and towards a sense of labor (and laborers) as exchangeable, as a commodifiable, as abstract. While this is a conceptual or logical movement in the development of the concept of labor, it has definite historical implications as it is specific to capitalism and its consolidation. “Abstract labor” for Marx introduces the notion of general exchangeability to the concept of labor, which Smith, for example, had neglected. This is one of the bases of Marx’s difference from Smith and the classical political economists, and it is crucial to Marx’s concept of value.³¹ Whereas each act of productive labor is an act of particular, concrete labor, or what in *Capital* Marx referred to as “productive activity of a definite kind, carried on with a definite aim,” abstract labor is “human labour pure and simple, the expenditure of human labour in general” (133, 135). Both concrete and abstract aspects are present in any act of laboring under capitalism, but in capitalism, labor has a particular *abstract* character that comes to be through the fact that those who

³¹ Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* is notable in part for its elaboration of a “labor theory of value,” a radical shift from earlier economic theories that attributed the source of value to the natural world. For Smith, economic wealth is derived from labor, and the rate at which goods are exchanged is determined by the quantity of labor embodied in them: “Labour, it must always be remembered, and not any particular commodity or set of commodities, is the real measure of the value both of silver and of all other commodities” (291).

perform labor are separated from the means of production and have sold their labor power as a commodity. Marx claims in the first chapter of the first volume of *Capital* that, “Indifference towards specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer to one labour to another, and where the specific kind of is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference” (104). Later, Marx claims that “since capital as such is indifferent to every particularity of its substance, and exists not only as the totality of the same but also as the abstraction from all its particulars, the labour which confronts it likewise subjectively has the same totality and abstraction in itself.” (296). Marx suggests that the distinction between craft production—which roughly corresponds to Blake’s own class position as a skilled artisan³²—and production in advanced capitalism (or more properly, what is lost in the uneven and discontinuous transformation from the former to the latter) can be mapped onto the advent of the universalization of abstract labor as that which produces wealth, or surplus value. Abstract labor, then, changes the social relations of production and the subjects that perform that labor, just as it

³² The historical category of the “artisan” is, according to economic historian John Rule, “fraught with difficulty and ambiguity”:

In some usages it suggests independent master craftsmen trading in a product made up from materials which they themselves owned: perhaps being themselves the employers of one or two journeymen.... In England especially, such independent masters were by the middle years of the eighteenth century a small part of those designated artisans. Skilled workers in general were so considered. The term generally described those who through apprenticeship or its equivalent had come to possess a skill in a particular craft and the right to exercise it. (“Property of Skill” 102)

Elsewhere Rule argues that, “‘Artisan’ conveys some notions of independence from employers, but it was still much used to describe those groups of skilled craftsmen who through serving an apprenticeship possessed the right to view their skill as a kind of ‘property’” (Rule *Experience* 22).

alters the nature of work itself, robbing it of its potential creative powers, severing it from the model of the aesthetic mode of production, and aligning it with abstract, repetitive, formalized tasks, or “activity pure and simple” that encounters stubborn materiality as something indifferent and accidental to the specific task, rather than as essential and immanent to it:

This is not the character of the craftsman and guild-members etc., whose economic character lies precisely in the *specificity* of their labour and in their relation to a *specific master*, etc. This economic relation—the character which capitalist and worker have as the extremes of a single relation of production—therefore develops more purely and adequately in proportion as labour loses all the characteristics of art; as its particular skill becomes something more and more abstract and irrelevant, and as it becomes more and more a *purely abstract activity*, a purely mechanical activity, hence indifferent to its particular form; a merely *formal* activity. Or, what is the same, a merely *material* activity, activity pure and simple, regardless of its form. (*Grundrisse* 297)

Concrete labor, which can also be thought of as the particular quantity of time an individual laborer takes to make a particular product, can account for the use value of a commodity, but not its value: “all labour is an expenditure of human labour-power in a particular form and with a definite aim, and it is in this quality of being concrete useful labour that it produces use-values” (137). Marx therefore calls for a measure of “identical labour power” that itself requires a far broader perspective than merely looking at one watchmaker in one shop compared to another: “the total labour-power of society, which is manifested in the values of the world of commodities” (129). This “power of society” is crucial for Marx’s views on value as a measure of labor, and it represents an advance on thinkers like Ricardo, who did not take the social or abstract perspective in his views of the labor theory of value. “Socially necessary labor time” is Marx’s term for these homogenous, equal,

abstract units of labor time that are in fact averages across a productive sphere of a society of amounts of time needed to produce a given commodity: “What conclusively determines the magnitude of the value of any article is therefore the amount of labour socially necessary, or the labour-time socially necessary for its production” (129).

When Adam Smith talks about the division of labor across tasks—the fact, essential to capitalism and an advanced state of productivity, that humans depend on the labor of many, many others to produce what they need to survive, a condition that privileges and requires general exchange—Marx notes that this advanced state of development has led to a condition in which particular or concrete labor cannot account for the value of any given commodity anymore. But when the vast multiplicity of units of concrete labor across all productive sectors of society are taken together—a conceptual act made possible only by the general exchangeability and commodification of labor—we arrive at the general or abstract unit of labor that can account for value: “On the one hand all labour is an expenditure of human labour-power... and it is in this quality of being equal, or abstract, human labour that it forms the value of commodities” (137). Marx duly notes that the division between abstract and concrete labor is a conceptual, though necessary, one. Exchangeability depends on abstraction, while concrete labor is required to produce the exchangeable commodity: “The body of the commodity, which serves as the equivalent, always figures as the embodiment of abstract human labour, and is always the product of some specific useful and concrete labour” (150).

For Marx, the concept of abstract labor depends upon conditions of alienation. As laborers are severed from the productive processes and means of production and are thereby required to sell their labor power in the marketplace, labor becomes exchangeable and is wholly determined by forces alien to any factual laborer or any given productive process. In effect and in reality, the laborer's labor power becomes a commodity. Commodities, those basic elements of capitalist experience, are all embodiments of human labor power. Since the usefulness of a commodity will tell us nothing about its value, exchange value becomes the "necessary mode of appearance, or form of appearance, of value" (128). Exchange value represents the labor it took to produce it. Labor again becomes a representational issue. It calls for what it creates—the commodity form—to represent its value, and the value of labor can only be approached by working backwards, as it were, from the appearance of value embodied in the commodity. Value is "abstract human labour... objectified... or materialized in the commodities" (129). Yet, even as value takes material form in commodities, abstract labor as that which produced the value in the first place takes the form of a "phantom-like objectivity... congealed" in the commodities (129). The value of a commodity in its exchange is a representation of value, which is in turn socially necessary labor time. Exchange value is the outward form or representation of value itself, which is nothing more than congealed or crystallized quantities of homogenous, abstract labor time. However, while socially necessary labor time expresses or determines value, and thereby establishes the conditions of exchangeability, it cannot directly mediate an exchange, say, between a quantity of watches and a quantity of apples.

Money, on the other hand, is the universal equivalent that mediates exchange, and labor requires money, as a “third party,” to provide an objective, if arbitrary, measure of socially necessary labor time. As labor now requires a symbolic representation of itself in the market, we have arrived at the form of fetishism, a paradigmatic form for the specularity that *Capital* notes in capitalism: “It is precisely this finished form of the world of commodities—the money form—which conceals the social character of private labour and the social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations between material objects, instead of revealing them plainly” (168-9).

Marx’s concept of alienated labor along with his reflections on how labor is an essential element of the human subject and of subject-formation itself would, especially in the early work of Herbert Marcuse, become key in the formulation of a Marxist theory of human liberation, a theory that begins in the realm of political economy but that extends further in an attempt to incorporate the full flourishing of human potential.³³ One of the earliest commentators on Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marcuse claims that alienated labor is the negation of the humanity of the laborer, but that truly free labor is “the real expression and realization of the human essence” (12). Perhaps part of Marcuse’s attachment to the thought of Heidegger, Marx’s theory of labor in the *Manuscripts* is given a distinctly ontological cast and Marcuse stresses labor’s importance to the species being of the human subject and consequently its role in redeeming alienation an oppression:

³³ Martin Jay claims that Marcuse’s stance on the centrality of labor in Marxism set him apart from mainstream Frankfurt School members like Horkheimer and Adorno (see *Dialectical Imagination* 79).

through labor, the laboring subject “is not limited to the particular actual state of the (given) being and his immediate relationship to it... he can recognize and grasp the possibilities contained in every being. He can exploit, alter, mould, treat and take further (‘pro-duce’) any being according to its ‘inherent standard’” (*Studies in Critical Philosophy* 15-16). To become oneself most fully, to most completely realize the potential of the species being, the human must become “objectified” in nature, must externalize oneself in actual, physical work in and on the world. Labor, for Marcuse, forms the ontological link between the human and the world (or nature); it is through labor that the intentions and designs of humanity can be reflected in nature, thus altering it to our best purposes.

The Hegelian influence in these ideas ought to be clear; Marcuse’s ontology of the activation of human creative potential bears a great degree of similarity with Hegel’s notion that it is through a dialectical process of externalizing or alienating oneself that the subject “makes” a world, and, in making it in his or her own image and according to his or her own purposes and designs, he or she consequently “makes” or “remakes” him or herself. Marcuse’s extended analysis of Hegel, *Reason and Revolution*, claims that “labour in its true form is the medium for man’s self-fulfillment, for the full development of his potentialities; the conscious utilization of the forces of nature should thus take place for his satisfaction and enjoyment” (277).

Jean Baudrillard’s *The Mirror of Production* is unique for the ways that it claims that both Marx and capitalist political economy commit the same error of upholding and deepening the hegemony of the work ethic and a generalized productivist bias. According to Baudrillard, Marxist theory strives toward the

articulation of a form of labor not infected by alienation, and a perspective on productivity that, instead of dividing and limiting and determining the subject, opens the latter up through the free and creative exercise of his or her productive powers. Both capitalism and Marxism views human beings as “production machines” and privileges productivity and labor above all else. Aping Marx and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto*, Baudrillard claims that, “A spectre haunts the revolutionary imagination: the phantom of production. Everywhere it sustains an unbridled romanticism of productivity” (17). Though Marx may have intended a “ruthless critique of everything existing,” labor and productivity somehow escape this thoroughgoing analysis. Baudrillard claims that Marx only aims to liberate the subject from a type of labor, but does not realize that it is labor (or labor-power) that it must be liberated from. The only praxis worth the name is labor for the sake of production, and between Marx and classical political economy the only real difference is who profits, who owns the means of production. Even the aesthetic as free play does not escape this critique: “in the ideal types of play and the free play of human faculties, we are still in a process of repressive desublimation. In effect, the sphere of play is defined as the fulfillment of human rationality, the dialectical culmination of man’s activity of incessant objectification of nature and control of his exchanges with it” (40). It is the same with non-work or the absence of labor: merely the continuation of “repressive desublimation,” non-work in effect purifies the internalized work ethic as the “sign, and only the sign, of [political economy’s]

abolition (41).³⁴ The general exchangeability of the commodity is not merely an economic category; it is a semiotic one as well.

The recent work of Bruno Gullì, like Marcuse's reading of Marx, attempts to raise the concept of labor to a metaphysical category, and thinks that behind the manifold ways that labor appears or is experienced lies labor as a concept, and essence. Labor for capitalists and capitalist political economy denies or obscures this essence, as it is in its best interest to do so: "the category of labor as constructed by political economy under the capitalist mode of production does not correspond to what labor is in itself, to its concept" (1). Gullì introduces the "neither/nor of labor," meaning a neutral concept of labor, much like the neutral (or univocal) concept of being introduced by John Duns Scotus. The concept of labor is found in all concrete forms of labor, as it must; however, the former cannot be reduced to or limited by the latter. This allows him to say that labor—in whatever form it takes—partakes of moments of creative, living labor that labor under capitalism denies. The productivist logic of capital denies a conception of labor of what it is in its essence, "the univocal and common concept of the social" (3). When capitalism expires and labor's concept is released from the divided and limited forms it now is forced to persist within, the productivist injunction and demand will wither away: "To disappear will be productivity, which is proper to the concept of wage labor and

³⁴ Baudrillard claims that Marx's discovery of the category of abstract labor and its severance from concrete labor has led to the autonomy of the signifier from referent and signified. The commodity, which Marx took to be the fundamental, ubiquitous unit of capitalist experience, is in fact, for Baudrillard, merely one example among many of the free floating nature of signification in capitalism.

'job,' not labor or production. It is on the question of productivity that any analysis of labor will show where it stands: in the capitalist or in the anticapitalist camp" (4).

Gulli argues for a society based on "production without productivism, labor without capital—a production that spans the range of human activity from economy to culture: a poetic praxis, a practical poiesis" (10-11). In the ontology of labor, what will emerge in what Gulli calls genuine communism, is that "in its nonestranged form labor is the essence of man in its totality": Sensuous, practical activity is liberated from its one-sided categorization as "economic" and its consequent expectations of productivity and more broadly understood as an ontological fact, or what Gulli calls "organic, creative labor" (25). For Gulli, redeemed or realized labor as a common concept is indistinguishable from art: Gulli's anti-productivist position involves the creation of a "new understanding of production... one that does not limit production to the sphere of political economy and the market; one that does not, at the same time, distinguish between economic production and social life, and, in particular, between economic production and artistic production" (10-11). Once productive labor as subsumed under the logic of capital is abolished and the concept of labor returns to itself, it in effect becomes artistic production, which for Gulli can be distorted under capital, but it seems that art nevertheless retains something of its revolutionary, liberatory character and stands as a model for the concept of labor. Drawing on Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, Gulli claims that this identity of art and labor is the "new and better praxis" (175, see Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* 16, 368).

Bataille's own views of the intersection of negativity and labor emerge in his confrontation with the legacy of Hegel's master and slave dialectic and the unhappy consciousness. Similar in some ways to Baudrillard, Bataille differs from Marx in his rejection of work or labor as a paradigm of productivity. Bataille's general economy would aim to free us from Marx's (and Hegel's) notion of work as self-producing and self-productive. *Inner Experience* claims that "Hegel's construction . . . is a philosophy of work, of the 'project'" (80; see also *Accursed Share 1*, 127). In his work of the 1930s and 1940s, Bataille laments the privileging of work or works, in Marxism and surrealism, respectively. Bataille's concept of sovereignty rejects the servility and coercion inherent in the master and slave relation, as it also rejects the ways that work is subordinated to production or is merely a means to an end (*Accursed Share vol. 3*). Homogeneous society is based on production and productivity, and is enslaved to the work ethic, whereas heterogeneity is characterized by sovereignty, waste, violence, and expenditure. Capitalist homogeneity and its forms of alienation requires that the slave should refuse work, the condition of his or her enslavement, and as a consequence, the proletariat should reject its status as the class that works (*Accursed Share 36*).

"Expenditure," similarly, occurs in an economy of consumption rather than production, an economy of excess rather than scarcity. As such, labor as productive activity is rejected in favor of destruction, "expenditure, sacrifice, celebration" in the interests of "rupturing and disequilibrium" (*Guilty* 136-8). The sobriety of the work ethic is very obviously counter to the principle economic movement of general economy, in which, "as much energy as possible is squandered in order to produce a

feeling of stupefaction—in any case with an intensity greater than in productive enterprises. The danger of death is not avoided; on the contrary, it is the object of a strong unconscious attraction” (*Visions of Excess* 118, 119). Additionally, this new economics would be an “asocial organization having as its goal orgiastic participation in different forms of destruction” (*Visions of Excess* 101).³⁵

It is likely that Bataille’s interest in surrealism may have been due to the hope that art could be “a minor ‘free zone’ outside action” (*Nietzsche* xxxii). The autonomy of art suggests that the artwork does nothing, produces nothing, cannot

³⁵ Antonio Negri, Mario Tronti, and others associated with the radical Italian worker’s group *autonomia* have argued that the dominance of abstract labor in the service of producing surplus value calls for a sort of sabotage or insubordination of the mechanisms of capital in a “refusal to work.” The theories, advanced by several thinkers loosely associated with this movement and its various and protean underground organizations and parties, of “autonomous labor,” non-work,” or the “refusal of work” argue that refusing work is a critique and obstacle of capitalism’s injunction to work and to do so in ways that distort the subject’s creative potential (see Tronti’s “The Strategy of Refusal”). The philosophy of André Gorz in books like *Critique of Economic Reason*, *Farewell to the Working Class*, and *Reclaiming Work* (among others) echoes the themes of the refusal to work, though in far less radical terms. Drawing on Karl Polanyi’s argument that capitalism’s historical uniqueness is derived from the fact that in it the sphere of the economic becomes autonomous from society and therefore assumes dominance. In the quest for infinite growth, economic reason trumps other forms of rationality and other spheres of life. Without subordination to other goals, the economic sphere has forced the dominance of the work ethic, even when technological advances could be used to reduce the time spent working (see, for example, *Critique of Economic Reason* 113-114). Gorz advocates for using technological advances to reduce work and to create universal and fulfilling employment at sustainable wages (192). Gorz calls for a “liberation of time,” which entails reappropriating time as a human end rather than an economic means, and a liberation from work, which entails an “extension of the sphere of autonomy... predicated upon a sphere of heteronomous production which, though industrialized, is restricted to specially necessary goods and services that cannot be supplied in an autonomous manner” (*Farewell to the Working Class* 102). The refusal to link work with one’s identity leads to a dissolution of classes and class consciousness and the aim, “not to seize power in order to build a new world, but to regain power over their own [i.e., the “non-class of non-workers” (73)] lives by disengaging from the market rationality of productivism” (75).

be corralled in service of praxis. Yet, as Bruce Baugh has argued, Bataille ultimately broke with the surrealist project precisely because it could only embody negativity, not deploy it as an end in itself (75-76). The aesthetic is ultimately rejected as an alternative to the ethic of productivity and labor, as long as it is embodied in concrete works. In the narrative of the philosophy of labor I have described, divided, alienated, and exploited labor not only must be transformed or reorganized to realize a realm of freedom and utopia. Through this effort, labor becomes that which must be overcome, sublated, or in the case of Baudrillard and Bataille, abnegated, for the realization of the full powers of the human subject, even if the notion that creative action must produce utopia or human community is abandoned in these thinkers.

Aesthetics and Labor

A guiding principle in Blake studies is that the major prophecies transform the determination of manual labor into the liberation of activities that, in their integrated, organic, and idealist character, resemble a certain view of art that was being consolidated before and during Blake's lifetime. In a concomitant movement, it is no coincidence that as the character of labor is undergoing massive structural changes, modern aesthetic theory is being constructed in its various iterations as, in part, an opposition between labor and play, between compulsion and freedom, between a rigidly determining materiality and a release of the spirit. In the aesthetics of Burke, Kant, Schiller, and Reynolds, art and labor are deeply entwined concepts. Just as "play" in some aesthetic theories is opposed, in varying degrees of explicitness, to "servile" labor, which in its repetitiveness, deadening qualities, and

absence of freedom cannot avoid association with modern capitalist labor, Blake criticism devotes a great degree of energy to rescuing Blake's poetry and its own mode of production from its traces and implications of the spectre of material labor.

The development of the concept of the "fine arts" around the middle of the eighteenth century depended on distinguishing itself from that taint of labor inherent in the term "mechanic" or "mercenary" arts.³⁶ Central to the establishment of the notion of the "fine arts" that aesthetic theory busied itself in articulating was the antagonism, internal to aesthetics, between labor and art. As Paul Mattick has described, "Art developed along with the commercialized mode of production that became capitalism, and it is only by understanding art as an aspect of this mode of production that the supposed antagonism between them (central to aesthetics)—and so the idea of art's autonomy—can be understood" (3). Most importantly, according to Mattick, art became a protected conceptual space where the fragmentation, alienation, and divisions of modernity were reversed or defeated in

³⁶ Jacques Derrida's "Economimesis" offers a fascinating reading of how Kant's attempt to differentiate "liberal art" from manual labor, and more generally to liberate fine art from the economic, instead ultimately more firmly reinscribes the idea of fine art within an iterative economy of repetition and imitation, ultimately showing that the effort to separate and purify the former from the latter is not as successful as aestheticians hope: "[M]ercenary productivity... resembles that of bees: lack of freedom, a determined purpose or finality, utility, finitude of the code, fixity of the program without reason and without the play of the imagination. The craftsman, the worker, like the bee, does not play. And indeed, the hierarchical opposition of liberal art and mercenary art is that of play and work" (5). Derrida claims that though in Kant the liberal arts are contrasted with the mechanical arts, "which above all require manual labor" (6-7), in the free liberal art there is nevertheless an intervention of "a certain constraint" (7). Something compulsory and mechanical is at work in liberal art, or else the spirit would have or take on no form: "Liberal art relates to mercenary art as the mind does to the body, and it cannot produce itself, in its freedom, without the very thing that it subordinates to itself, without the force of mechanical structure which in every sense of the word it *supposes*—the mechanical agency, mercenary, laborious, deprived of pleasure" (7).

the name of unity and integration: “By the early nineteenth century, art has begun to be seen as an ideal sphere in which the reintegration of the individual personality and of the social totality, unachieved in concrete reality, can be attained” (12). Art performed the ideological role of securing or imagining a sphere of freedom—as yet unachieved in damaged social, political, and economic life—as the object of desire for the new bourgeoisie, and labor, as the spectre of determinism, coercion, the physical body and its limits, and activity performed not out of pleasure or as an end in itself but for a wage and under duress, was the spectre that the sphere of freedom had to exorcise.

Terry Eagleton has offered perhaps the finest exposition of this theme, in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. In this book Eagleton is concerned, among other things, with showing how the establishment of the bourgeois public sphere in the eighteenth century entailed the internalization of authority such that this internalization would be taken as the guarantor and proof of the autonomy of the bourgeois subject: “What is at stake here [i.e., in the discourse of the aesthetic] is nothing less than the production of an entirely new kind of human subject—one which, like the work of art itself, discovers the law in the depths of its own free identity, rather than in some oppressive external power” (19). The autonomy, self-determination, and freedom through which the bourgeois, middle-class subject identifies itself is modeled precisely on the same principles that the modern discourse of aesthetics has used to define art and the aesthetic experience (23). The threat of external determination, the interference of materiality, the spectre of servility or instrumentality is precisely that which must be occluded for the

production of this subject, the “truly universal subject” (19). Yet, whereas arbitrary sovereign power or religion may have been the figure for this determination in an earlier era of social life, as the eighteenth century wore on in England, and as the growth of moderization and capitalist modes of production were aided by the establishment of bourgeois democratic politics in England, I suggest that the earlier forms of determination were redistributed and transubstantiated into labor. Labor becomes, in aesthetic theory, the other that must be disciplined or, better yet, isolated into certain socio-economic class or habitus, so that Eagleton’s “truly universal subject” might be free to become the ideal consumer of culture.

As Eagleton notes, the aesthetics of Edmund Burke is one of the first sites in which labor as determination appears in aesthetic theory. In his conception of the sublime as advanced in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Burke presents labor as a “poor person’s version” (Eagleton’s phrase) of the sublime: “Like the sublime, labour is a masochistic affair, since we find work at once painful in its exertion and pleasurable in its arousal of energy” (Eagleton 56). Eagleton goes on to suggest that there is a “gratifying coerciveness” in labor for Burke that can stave off the “melancholy and despair” of idleness found in the feminizing effects of beauty (57). Eagleton’s class differentiation of Burke’s aesthetics between the “poor man” and “rich man” might not ultimately prove accurate, as Tom Furniss has pointed out.³⁷ Nevertheless, for Burke, the torpor, enervation, lassitude, and, above all, the feminizing effects of the

³⁷ Furniss claims that the proper class struggle within which to locate Burke’s aesthetics is that between “England’s traditional ruling class and the upwardly mobile commercial class” (33).

beautiful are countered and corrected by the sublime, and in particular the latter's association with physical labor's properties of strengthening through exertion: "The best remedy for all these evils [of the beautiful] is exercise or *labour*, and labour is a surmounting of *difficulties*, an exertion or the contracting power of the muscles; and as such resembles pain" (Burke 164). Ultimately, the experience of the sublime for Burke provides a gratifyingly unifying property, as the sublime employs pain, division, and "difficulties" in order to ameliorate the more problematic divisions of the lazy, non-productive experience of the beautiful.³⁸

In Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, the freedom of the fine arts implies the absence of rules and consequent spontaneous production. The figure of the genius for Kant involves the free play of one's creative, form-giving powers: "genius is the exemplary originality of a subject's natural endowment in the free use of his cognitive powers" (186). Kant distinguishes the freedom and spontaneity of the fine arts from craft, which includes the reproductive arts such as engraving—Blake's profession: "*Art* is likewise to be distinguished from *craft*. The first is also called *free art*, the second could be called *mercenary art*. We regard free art [as an art] that could only turn out purposive (i.e. succeed) if it is play... mercenary art we regard as labor" (171). Kant associates labor with coercion and pain or disagreeableness (echoing Biblical and Miltonic renderings of the effects of the Fall), whereas the fine arts are associated, explicitly, with freedom, spontaneity, contemplation, and unity. Kant's central precepts of the fine arts—disinterestedness, purposiveness without a

³⁸ Burke discusses the physiological difference between the experience of labor and the sublime: "As common labour, which is a mode of pain, is the exercise of the grosser, a mode of terror is the exercise of the finer parts of the system" (165).

purpose, universality without a determining concept—set it apart from the divisions, disagreeableness, and physicality of labor. Art’s freedom entails and is determined in large part by its character of “not being a mercenary occupation and hence a kind of labor, whose magnitude can be judged, exacted, or paid for according to a determinate standard” (190).³⁹

In Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, written in 1794 and heavily influenced by Kant, the play instinct as the essence of the aesthetic impulse is opposed to the determination of wage labor in the form of “mercenary art.” Schiller defines his modern age as inherently fragmented—perhaps most notably through the division of labor—in contrast to the Greeks’ unified personality.⁴⁰ Modern society and the “increasingly complex machinery of state [that] necessitated a more rigorous separation of ranks and occupations” have divided the human faculties against one another, so that “the intuitive and the speculative understanding now withdrew in hostility to take up positions in their respective fields” (99). Schiller’s description of modernity strikingly resonates with both Marxist views of the division of labor and the fragmentation of society, as well as

³⁹ Kant’s views on the sublime and their relevance to Blake’s work have been explored by David Baulch in “Reflective Aesthetics and the Last Judgment: Blake’s Sublime and Kant’s Third *Critique*” and in Vincent De Luca’s *Words of Eternity: Blake and the Poetics of the Sublime*.

⁴⁰ In *Marxism and Form* Fredric Jameson notes that Schiller “transferred the notion of the division of labor, of economic specialization, from the social classes to the inner functioning of the mind, where it assumes the appearance of a hypostasis of one mental function over against the others, a spiritual deformation which is the exact equivalent of... economic alienation” (87). The dynamics that Jameson notes in Schiller have a clear resonance with Blake’s preoccupation—generally associated with Urizen—with a form of rationality that severs itself from a primeval unity with the other human faculties and attempts to set itself up as superior and dominant.

Blake critics' descriptions of the new forms of labor and the subjects appropriate to it that Blake's work confronted.⁴¹ For Schiller, modernity is

an ingenious clockwork, in which, out of the piecing together of innumerable but lifeless parts, a mechanical kind of collective life ensued. State and church, laws and customs, were now torn asunder; enjoyment was divorced from labor, the means from the end, the effort from the reward. Everlastingly chained to a single little fragment of the whole, man develops himself into nothing but a fragment; everlastingly in his ear the monotonous sound of the wheel that he turns, he never develops the harmony of his being, and instead of putting the stamp of humanity upon his own nature, he becomes nothing more than the imprint of his occupation or of his specialized knowledge. (99-100)

The play drive is able, according to Schiller, to re-integrate the fragmented personality and thereby "to restore by means of a higher art the totality of our nature" (104). Schiller's emphasis is not on material labor per se, but more broadly on the forms of bourgeois labor that figuratively enslave its practitioners to a wage, interest, and exchange. Labor, broadly conceived, is subsumed within commerce or a capitalist economy of exchange mediated by money, and is the divisive and fragmenting element of culture. The "disinterested" attitude essential to the appreciation and apprehension of fine art is characterized by its purity from the realm of exchange, profit-seeking, and economic "interest." While labor (and laborers) might be divided and alienated, art for Schiller (pre-)figures a totality yet to be achieved in reality (though imagined to have been the case for the idealized Greeks). In this, Schiller's aesthetics evokes a notion of totality in the social realm

⁴¹ Habermas notes the connection between Schiller's aesthetics and Marx's ideas on non-alienated labor: "Schiller... grounded this expressivist idea of self-formation in an aesthetics of production. Inasmuch as Marx now transfers aesthetic productivity to the 'species-life actuated in work,' he can conceive social labor as the collective self-realization of the producers" (64).

that Kant's aesthetics ignores. Larry Shiner (citing Peter Hohendahl) claims that "Schiller was convinced that only a class freed from labor would have sound 'aesthetic powers of judgment' and 'maintain the beautiful entirety of human nature, which is... thoroughly destroyed by a life of work'" (150).⁴²

One of Blake's great antagonists (though it is likely he had never heard of Blake), Sir Joshua Reynolds, the first President of the Royal Academy of Arts, held that trade and commerce were inimical to the arts. Reynolds demeans the supposed reliance on "craft skills" in the Venetians and Dutch painting rather than "intellectual dignity... that enobles the painter's art' and 'lays the line between him and the mere mechanick'" (35; cited in Reynolds *Discourses* 43, 57).⁴³ D. W.

Dörrbecker notes the irony that while Reynolds strongly advocated an institutional and ideological division between fine art (Reynolds emphasizes history and portrait

⁴² Elaborating on the theme of alienation and the opposition between fine art and the world of divided work and commerce, Eagleton locates a class allegory in Schiller's *Letters*: Schiller's sense-drive "directly evokes appetitive individualism" and thus is aligned with "the average German middle-class philistine." Yet, paradoxically, "the sense-drive is also the proletariat, with its 'crude, lawless instincts...'" (105). Later, Eagleton argues that "the troubled relations between sense drive and formal drive, or Nature and reason, are never far from a reflection on the ideal relations between populace and ruling class, or civil society and absolutist state" (113).

⁴³ Morris Eaves' *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy* argues that the economic and popular success of "original" artists such as Reynolds depended on the proliferation of highly accurate and relatively inexpensive print copies of original paintings, garnering profitable revenues and subscriptions, and also heightening the prestige and cost of the original work itself (68-69). Eaves goes on to note that "engraving, as the art of reproduction, is a 'foundation' for 'cultivation' of 'fine arts'—painting and sculpture" (64). Joseph Viscomi has noted that even "original" engravings, due to the particular mode of their production, did not escape the charge of "servility": "[Prints] were secondary and subservient by definition: they represented the reproduction and not the invention of images" (*Blake and the Idea of the Book* 8). This eighteenth-century hierarchy has persisted in a "zombie existence" in contemporary art history, and I would add, in Blake studies as well (Dörrbecker 139).

painting) and reproductive art (Reynolds repeatedly associates this with labor, “servility,” and “mechanicks”) the practice of fine art painting was increasingly dependent on an assembly line, divided labor process, just as it also relied on reproductive printmaking for its profitability. The subordination of engraving, or reproductive arts more broadly, is based on a value-laden division of mental and manual labor, the former involving contemplative freedom and spontaneous production while the latter involved the body and is inherently repetitive (126). Dörrbecker suggests that the subordination of reproductive arts was a way of enforcing, by concealing or disguising, the economic dependence of painters on engravers.

The opposition, central to aesthetic theory, between labor and art, ultimately breaks down; unlike the commodity-form (which depends on labor, or socially necessary labor time, to determine its value), the work of art, according to Adorno, “gives the lie to production for production’s sake and opts for a form of praxis beyond the spell of labor” (*Aesthetic Theory* 12). The play instinct, which, in its freedom from coercion, rules, and rationalization becomes the unstable antithesis of labor for aesthetic theory and thereby invokes and deepens art’s complicity with what it seeks to reject. Adorno claims that while art attempts to free itself from praxis and rationalization through play, the latter actually involves a regression to the unfreedom of childhood in that, “by its neutralization of praxis... [art] becomes bound up specifically with its spell, the compulsion toward the ever-same, and, in psychological dependence on the death instinct, interprets obedience as happiness” (*Aesthetic Theory* 317). Play in art, consequently, cannot disassociate itself from its

“disciplinary” character. An “afterimage of praxis,” aesthetic play is like the *fort-da* game in Freud in that what seems a childish game void of constraint or purpose is instead a performance of the repetition compulsion in which art’s “terror” is accessed (see 317-8). Aesthetic theory’s affirmative drive to eliminate the trace of base materiality and praxis comes to grief in play’s dependence upon and conjuring of a deeper negativity in the form of a grim yet child-like compulsion to repeat.⁴⁴

The Adventures of Conception and Execution

Adorno’s notion that a structuring feature of aesthetic free play is its hidden complicity with the mechanisms of repetition, ritual, habit, and so on, suggests not only that aesthetic theory’s attempt to define itself through expunging labor and its attendant characteristic belies the fact that labor and the aesthetic share more than the (romantic) ideology of art cares to admit. In Blake studies, perhaps the best conceptual site at which to witness how aesthetic ideas attempt, yet fail, to expunge the taint of labor is the relation between the moments of conceptualization and execution in Blake’s aesthetic practice. According to Makdisi, “the structuring distinction between conception and execution, that is, the distinction between (intellectually) planning and directing production and (materially) carrying it out”

⁴⁴ As the subject’s “own reflected form,” labor also provides that mirror reflection in which the subject’s alienation from itself is produced, manifested, and, as it were, put to work in the service of an ethic imposed from without. In Adorno’s understanding of Hegel, thought always involves a sort of “mirror stage” in a form of practical, material activity that thought wishes to reject but yet requires in order to comprehend its own activity and movement. Though totality is the formal goal of Hegel’s thought, according to Adorno this is a deeply paradoxical totality in that it is internally divided precisely to the extent that material labor is both necessary and external. Labor thus articulates Hegelian totality according to a constitutive contradiction: both the model for totality and that which infects it from within, labor serves as the negative element in Adorno’s version of the Hegelian dialectic.

(116) was one of the most salient developments in the realm of material production during Blake's era. As James Bernard Murphy has noted in his attempt to construct a "theory of justice in the production of goods" from the praxis philosophy of Aristotle, in both capitalist and communist systems of production, conception and execution is severed in the name of efficiency and greater productivity. However,

work is properly the unity of conception and execution, of noesis and poesis... What gives skilled work its dignity, according to Aristotle, is that a worker first constructs in thought what he then embodies in matter; conversely, what makes unskilled work sordid is that one man executes the thought of another....

Through this dialectic of conception and execution we become autonomous subjects, rather than mere instruments, of labor. (3, 8)⁴⁵

Morris Eaves, in perhaps the most systematic attempt to articulate an aesthetic theory of Blake's work, claims that, "the division of conception from execution in art is a central instance of the alienation of subject and object that many romantic intellectual remedies attempt to heal" (*William Blake's Theory of Art* 88-89). Critics nearly universally accept the belief that Blake's work theoretically and practically unifies conception and execution, eliminating the temporal distance between the moment of cognitive presentation of an aesthetic idea and the moment of that idea's material representation.⁴⁶ These critics believe that the rarity, uniqueness and

⁴⁵ Murphy cites the Industrial Revolution as the major cause of the generalized divorce between conception and execution, and discusses the management philosophy of Taylorism as its logical culmination—though not completion—in monopoly capitalism.

⁴⁶ Interestingly, the utopian wish for a union of conception and execution in the realms of aesthetics and political economy seems to not only be denied in Kantian epistemology, the temporal dissociation and lack of immediacy appears to be a condition of possibility of cognition in the first place, despite efforts to overcome it: For Kant... no representation, no *Vorstellung*, can ever be adequate for the presentation or *Darstellung* of the concept.... There will always be a gap, a chasm, separating the concept from its representation—but

fragility of the Blakean artifact—product of an “instantaneous” unity of idea and production—is a hieroglyph of a freedom not yet achieved elsewhere. By becoming a material signifier for this union, the Blakean artifact stands as evidence of a unification in aesthetics that has not yet taken place in political economy, and the former, it is assumed, stands as evidence or hope for the possibility of the latter.

Understanding of Blake’s aesthetic practice and its economic implications took a great leap forward when, in 1980, Robert Essick published *William Blake, Printmaker*, a comprehensive study of Blake’s training as a printmaker, the historical background of engraving in England as it informs Blake’s development and daily work, and, most notably, the ways that Blake brought his training as a reproductive artist to bear in order to create original, unique works (see, e.g., 38, 64). In Blake’s “invention” of relief etching—using a chemical corrosive to etch away the areas of a copper plate that would not be inked and printed—Blake was able to free himself from “false and tyrannical systems” (characterized by monotony, copying, tedium, and uniform production; see 26-8) in order to “free his creative energies... [in the] belief in transformation and redemption through the never-ending labors of the artist as he struggles to harness matter in the service of spirit” (255). More specifically, in the fluidity of relief etching techniques, Blake’s methods resemble that of a painter or illustrator, in that he was able to immediately execute his own original conceptions on the copper plate with little or no mediation (see 88-9). But perhaps even more significantly, this method, according to Essick, gave

the gap is better than nothing: the space of inadequacy separating the concept from its representation is nevertheless the only space of possibility available. No thought can occur without this sublime expanse of impossibility. (Hartley 85-86)

Blake a measure of autonomy from the strictures of the market for commercial engraving and book production, and gave him aesthetic independence from both. Against the reliable and commercially successful aim of employing repetitive methods in a workshop run more like an assembly line than an artist's studio in order to produce a large number of identical copies (whether of books or individual prints), Blake's innovations allowed him (or limited him) to printing small runs in which each moment of production, from conception to execution, was controlled solely by him,⁴⁷ and the products of this process were characterized by idiosyncratic variations in color, design, or quality. And against the dead (albeit profitable) repetition characteristic of commercial engraving and letter-press production, Blake employed repetitive means to produce difference, uniqueness, variation—a value that, Blake seemed to assume, would allow his work to participate in “the revolt of energy against the established order” (255). Insofar as the concept of repetition implied here both invokes the mass, serial production of commodities *and* might be employed otherwise, in order to establish a difference that might interfere with or stand outside the realm of exchange, it is clear that the “established order” is economic to a powerful degree.

Despite Joseph Viscomi's disagreements with Essick on the importance of the edition over the individual copy and the ideological significance of these differences, the importance of his work is in his radicalization of Essick's insistence on the unity of conception and execution. On this point Viscomi's antagonist is what he calls the “transfer theory” of Blake's production. Earlier scholars such as Ruthven Todd, the

⁴⁷ Blake's wife Catherine assisted him in his printmaking activities, though there is no evidence that Blake ever ceded control of aesthetic decision-making to her.

painter Joan Miró, and Wright argued that Blake's illuminated books had to have been produced by Blake composing and drawing or painting a page on paper, and then using that paper to transfer the image and words to the copper plate, upon which it would appear backwards. Viscomi's problem with this theory goes beyond its simple inaccuracy; if the transfer theory is right, Blake's aesthetic labor is divided. If this theory is correct, graphic execution is separate from initial invention and execution is itself divided into two techniques: one mechanical (a transferred text) and the other autographical (drawn illustration) (20). Drawing on the language of organicism, Viscomi argues forcefully for the notion that Blake composed directly on copper, "where the tools and materials of illuminated printing allowed the individual page design to evolve, which in turn allowed the book to evolve, organically" (25, see also 30-31).⁴⁸

Viscomi's claim that the unification of conception and execution is organically implicated in Blake's methods in effect radicalizes Essick's position that Blake's manipulation of the "servile," repetitive, laborious methods of printmaking produces liberation from mere matter. Viscomi argues that, drawing (or painting as a species of drawing) on copper is the practical and theoretical model for understanding Blake's mode of production: "Invention realized in and through

⁴⁸ The issue of organicism—and hence the aesthetic ideal of unifying conception and execution—for Viscomi is in accord with a certain view of Romanticism his work presupposes: "[B]y being written freely and autographically, the script remained sensual but unaffected; like the language of the great Romantic conversation poems, it visually creates the intimacy of a personal, expressive voice precisely because it does not overwhelm readers with its style" (59). Viscomi seems concerned to locate an organicism, a principle of life, within or among the reproductive technologies and methods of Blake's workshop.

drawing unites thought and act, making material execution a part, and not a consequence, of the act of discovery that is invention” (42-43). For Viscomi, it is not only the aesthetic idea that collapses the moment of conception and that of execution, the mind of the artist is simultaneously created and externalized in this moment. The mind is not the material cause or progenitor of the idea—even this distinction is collapsed and unified in Blake’s practice:

Creativity... is a sensitivity to the mind forming itself outside the body and inside the medium, a sensitivity predicated on the complete internalization of the medium. This union of invention and execution means that creative imagining and thinking occur simultaneously inside and outside the body.... The paradox of drawing, then, of making lines, distinctions, and boundaries, is that it dissolves distinctions between mind and medium, imagination and paper, and hand and tool, at least for the artist at the moment of creation. (43)⁴⁹

The insistence on the unity of conception and execution in Blake is an emblem of the broader view that art ought to carve out or stand for “an ideal sphere in which the reintegration of the individual personality and of the social totality, unachieved in concrete reality, can be attained” (Mattick 12). The Blakean ideology participates in this view that it is the role of art to “reconstitute the fragmented

⁴⁹ In *William Blake’s Theory of Art* Morris Eaves argues that, “Blake’s idea of originality is the deep originality of human personality expressed in works of art that perfectly unite conception and execution” (77). More specifically, Eaves provides an etiology of this aesthetic development noting that the division of labor in political economy “forces” the division of conception from execution, “because conception is one stage in the division of labor and execution is another” (“Blake and the Artistic Machine: An Essay in Decorum and Technology” 908). The separation of conception and execution has economic causes, and specifically economic effects: “All the arts, conceived in freedom, are executed under the laws of the artistic machine” (912). For Makdisi, “In seeking to reunify conception and execution, body and mind, creatures and creator, Blake is not merely opposing what was becoming consolidated... as the dominant way of thinking; he is also proposing a positive, affirmative, ontological alternative” (279) in order to wrest power... from above and convert it into a common creative power (279).

human person,” to, in Schiller’s words, “restore... the totality of our nature” (43, Mattick 43). The sheer tenacity with which Blake scholars have defended the notion that Blake’s books offer a figuration of the regenerated, unified, holistic, fully attuned new subject indicates the degree to which this expectation or wish is an ideologically loaded one, overdetermined by critical desire that has yet to be examined, and, to some degree, resists examination. My point here is not to submit this concept to full critique, a task that falls outside the scope of this dissertation, but rather to gesture towards its significance in the critical realm of Blake’s political economy and labor. The ideal of unity expresses and contains the utopian kernel of Blake work; as such, however, it simultaneously de-realizes it, isolates it in the realm of the impossible.

Dialectically, however, it is this impossibility that in the final instance becomes the true utopian moment in Blake’s work, but insofar as this is the case, the logic this utopia obeys and articulates is a profoundly negative one. To illustrate what I mean, Paul Mann’s study of the Blakean artifact is crucial. Mann takes as axiomatic the commitment to the unity of conception and execution in order to push the concept to its limits and to discover the contours of the specific contradiction such a commitment presents scholars of Blake.⁵⁰ Mann radicalizes the prevailing

⁵⁰ Unlike most critics, Mann suggests that the significance of this unity is not necessarily found in the ways it produces difference in the work or in how it offers a symbol for integration in the realm of political economy. Instead, the mode of production *is* meaning: “The ‘meaning’ of any Blake book is thus, first and foremost, that Blake made it, and made it this way, not just textually... but fully, materially, as ‘Itself & Not Intermeasurable with or by any Thing Else’” (2). Therefore, any given Blake book is “labor-intensive, intending the manifestation of its own labor and maximizing the evidence of that labor wherever possible.... It is peculiarly and incorrigibly autotelic” (3).

economic understanding of conception and execution by suggesting that Blake's identity of the two sets his work well outside not merely capitalist economics, but the realm of the economic per se:

An economy is a system of exchange, [that depends utterly on] the mediation of value, of *intermeasurability*; Blake's... aesthetic [and his collapse or idea of the immediacy of conception and execution] explicitly rejects the notions of mediation, exchange-value and intermeasurability. The ideology of identity is precisely anti-economic and undercuts any wish expressed in the text for its transmission to an audience. (11)

Because it excludes the possibility of reproduction (via the methods of modern capitalist production) the Blakean anti-economy sets his work outside the realm of the exchange and circulation—both as objects as texts. In the form that Blake intended for his books—unique individual, singular works—they are by and large unreadable and effectively undercut the possibility of an audience. The Blakean ideal of a radical unity and integration causes the work to fold in on itself, to seal itself from the readership that defines its and grants it meaning. The upshot of this for the political economy of Blake's practice is that, "Blake's early revolutionary enthusiasm and his wish to circumvent the dominant mode of production, if not to 'subvert' it, is undercut by his project's own inexorable aesthetic and economic *self-absorption*" (22 my italics).

Mechanical reproduction, on the other hand, delivers into circulation (both economic and discursive/critical circulation) the cipher of the sort of unity and integration the work had hoped to employ in denying assimilation into that system

in the first place.⁵¹ At stake here is the very legibility of “Blake” and his text: criticism, reading, and viewing Blake participates in a “non-Blakean ideology in a non-Blakean economy” (28). By submitting the non-assimilable and radically unique work to incorporation into modes of circulation the work stands as a critique of, reproduction both ensures the work an audience foreclosed upon by the work’s original mode of production, and guarantees that what we read and see when we study Blake is diametrically opposed to the mode of production Blake employed. “Reproduction... provides the work with... a disseminative capacity which the work rejects ideologically but without which it cannot survive.... The work [depends] on the reproducibility it rejects.... [While] Reproduction... betrays the work... this betrayal is the work’s only salvation” (26-27). The result is a bifurcation of “Blake,” a production of “a Blake who is extrinsic to himself” (28).

⁵¹ Long a vexing issue in Blake studies, reproduction or repetition and the traces of these processes in Blake’s material practice seem to threaten the status of Blake’s originality and spontaneity from within. Yet, Walter Benjamin’s theory of mechanical reproduction has been put to creative and counterintuitive purposes in Blake studies to rethink the status of reproduction and the aura in Blake’s work, despite the divergent historical and economic contexts of the two writers. Stephen Leo Carr discusses Benjamin’s view that mechanical reproduction dissolves the authority of the aura in Benjamin. Yet Carr claims that mechanical reproduction actually constitutes the very aura that it also disrupts: “only after an original has been reproduced, only after it has revealed its power to be disseminated indefinitely, does its historical authority become operative or even visible. Edward Larrissy has similarly claimed that Blake’s illuminated printing practice is a practice of “redeemed repetition,” and is “an attempt to recover aura in relation to a method which could literally decline into mechanical repetition” (“Spectral Impostion and Visionary Imposition: Printing and Repetition in Blake” 75). In Mann, the fact that each work is radically unique means that this uniqueness can only be ascertained and appreciated—fetishized—as such through the medium of reproduction that delivers it to an audience, but that is diametrically opposed to the production-aesthetic: “In Blake’s case... reproduction does not mark the demise of the aura; on the contrary, it produces an aura which marks the demise of the work as work. It transforms production itself into an icon” (25).

The consequence of the unity of conception and execution thesis, as Mann presents it, is that the desire for radical immediacy entails a thoroughgoing mediation; the desire for radical uniqueness depends upon mass production; the utopian wish for integrated and unified aesthetic production necessitates division; and the desire for access to Blake's "vision" can only be theoretically "fulfilled" by processes (like the mass reproduction of Erdman's *Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*) that negate this very vision, this very privileged access, and that are diametrically opposed to it. Moreover, the move toward a space free of exchange—indeed, an anti-economic space—is conditioned, circumscribed, and governed by nothing other than exchangeability itself. Mann teaches us that when the unity of conception and execution thesis is taken to its conclusions, Blake becomes legible only as a part of an economy he rejects in favor of an anti-economy that condemns the work to oblivion. This rejection is a sort of negation that gets dialectically incorporated back into the system that in fact demands and depends on the rejection. Here, unmediated vision is defined and given conceptual shape only by what opposes it. The legibility of Blake and his aesthetics of immediacy depends on and in fact presupposes divided vision in order to be recognized as such.

Mann's essay gestures to the grave difficulties inherent in aestheticizing labor in the service of the unity of conception and execution in order to carve out a zone in Blake's work purified of the servile, material repetitions of manual labor and to conjure away the traces of not only capitalist political economy, but the economic as such. The contradictions that inhere in these efforts, however, unwittingly unearth a signal contradiction in Blake's political economy: efforts to aestheticize

labor in order to purge it from the system encounter the stubborn residue of labor as in fact determining these efforts. Paradoxically, then, the truth of these efforts is found in the utopian moment of the positing yet refusal of unity or totality. This contradiction is in fact the truth of the conception and execution unity insofar as it is in accord with the damaged society that determines it. The desire for unity or totality in Blake's aesthetic theory is true insofar as it indicates the utopian wish for totality in the social world; it is false insofar as it posits, in the name of the unity of conception and execution in the illuminated book, this unity achieved through the purification and aesthetization of labor. In the effort to herald the Blakean artifact as an anti-economic object, immune to universal exchangeability, through the purification or spiritualization of the traces of material labor in its mode of production, the illuminated book, in its irreducible repetition-as-difference, cycles back into its purported opposite: the commodity. In the imperative to erase traces of the modes and relations of production that produced it, the commodity appears in its pure form as a *sui generis* entity. What Adorno has said about the question of totality in speculative philosophy pertains also to the question of unity of conception and execution in Blake studies:

The force of the whole... is not a mere fantasy.... It is the force of the real web of illusion in which all individual existence remains trapped... By specifying... the negativity of the whole, philosophy satisfies... the postulate of determinate negation, which is a positing. The ray of light that reveals the whole to be untrue in all its moments is none other than utopia, the utopia of the whole truth, which is still to be realized. (*Hegel: Three Studies* 87-8)

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno defines aesthetic form as "a posited unity... [that] constantly suspends itself as such; essential to it is that it interrupts itself through

its other just as the essence of its coherence is that it does not cohere" (*Aesthetic Theory* 143). Art impresses us with its semblance of totality and organic completeness, seducing us to believe that it indicates analogous future totality in the socio-economic realm; but this is given the lie by its need, at every moment, to be "completed" by a cognitive supplement that is always insufficient. The result is an irresolvable confrontation between the drive for such social totality and its refusal. Christoph Menke (*The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Derrida and Adorno*) argues that for Adorno, "Only in our efforts to reach understanding in our aesthetic experience do we discover a negativity that goes beyond these efforts, and goes beyond them unsublatably" (25). This impasse of a simultaneous promise *and refusal* of freedom in Blake's treatment of labor is constitutive of the Blakean artifact. It entails, both for art and for political economy, "a refusal of the compensatory strategies that reproduce the work ethic and the repression or reorientation of desire that drive the blinding energies of our fetishistic commodity culture" (Harrison 97). To refuse the compensatory strategies of capitalism is to question the work ethic that enforces modern regimes of productivity, whether in the factory, or the poet's study. To tarry in this garden of indolence is to question the basis of capital and its aesthetic buttress. Labor remains the resolutely non-assimilable in Blake's totalizing system, the recalcitrant core of ideology that resists transformation or representation within a viable, coherent political program. Blake's poetry registers—against Blake's waking, conscious wishes—a negativity that interferes with his own vision of regeneration and renewal.

What do such considerations entail for the labor of reading (labor in) Blake? Can an “ethics” of reading Blake’s poetry be derived from them—if our definition of “ethics” is carefully delimited to the sphere of our desire for Blake, for a certain type of Blake, for a Blake that performs a certain type of cultural, political, symbolic labor for us? While the following three chapters attempt, not so much to provide definitive and final answers to these questions, but to provide examples of how the intractable problems these questions might be addressed or staged, at the very least, they entail that the political edge of Blake’s poetry is not to be located in the ways it recognizes and supplements “progressive” struggles that still maintain allegiances to productivity and the protestant work ethic; instead, in their conjuring of the spectral dead as representatives of the repressive, exclusionary, and violent maneuvers of capital, Blake’s work converges with Walter Benjamin’s notion, from “Theses on the Philosophy of History” that the dead—specifically, the defeated of history—could become the material for a mournful, melancholic “alternative art of insurrection” (Batten 75). If it is true that, as Benjamin remarked, “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history” (254), for Blake this realization populates the poetry with a reserve army of labor as the walking dead, a failed and grotesque redemption that is at time presented as beatific, but which on closer examination takes on ghastly dimensions.⁵² As I will show in the following

⁵² The best-known theoretical work on the subject of ghosts and revenants and their relation to Marx is, of course, Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. In it, Derrida is at pains to describe the status of haunting, the ghostly nature of capital, and of ghosts that return insistently. He is trying to “ontologize remains, to make them present” and to find what remains of Marx, what remains relevant, useful, necessary for a radical project today (9). While I don’t explicitly draw on Derrida’s reading of Marx in this

chapter on “The Chimney Sweeper.” In tension with Guinn Batten’s view that “insurrection” may make way for the possibility to “give birth to a future, and more just, society” by incorporating the “dead whom we will, through art, in turn regenerate as ‘new growth’” (74), the following chapters will claim that the spectral dead stalking the margins of Blake’s poetry stubbornly refuse re-economization in the name of bourgeois ideals of justice and progress. That this less sanguine view of Blake’s political economy resists both Blake’s own intentions represented in the millennial logic of his work, as well as the conscious powerful strands of the criticism (which has been largely concerned with excavating and explicating these conscious, “waking” intentions) only raises the stakes of a negative approach to labor in Blake.

dissertation, the concern for ghostly returns and a haunting of history (or “hauntology” (10)) is a recurrent theme in these pages.

Chapter Three:
The Production of the Laborer in “The Chimney Sweeper”

The practice of discerning the contours of Blake’s political economy is inextricably tied to what can and cannot be said and heard. In ways that scholars of Blake have barely appreciated, and despite the overwhelming privileging of vision in scholarship on his oeuvre, understanding his political project demands attention to how the materiality of the voice in his poetry performs and participates in his ongoing interrogation of productivity.¹ The fragile effectivity of the voice in Blake—and its opposite, namely the places where the voice fails to produce substantial effects—subtends and provides a sort of off-scene foundation for production and productivity, including the more specific role of labor. To the extent that this may be true, it is also clear that reading labor in Blake requires a reading practice that is as vocal and auditory as it is visual, in the highly specific sense that it calls for us to simultaneously speak and hear that which the work cannot—to compensate for its silences, in other words. Despite this, scholars tend to portray Blake’s poetic

¹ One notable exception, which I discuss in the next chapter, is Julia Wright’s *Blake, Nationalism, and the Politics of Alienation*. Wright focuses on the Preludiums of *Europe* and *America*, which both feature female figures who transcend the inert and passive corporeality of the reproductive body through the assumption of a voice that grants them access to the intellectual and hence active form of production generally assigned to masculinity. Moreover, the feminine voice in *America* produces what Wright calls a “seepage” between nominally discrete ideological systems, showing that it is through this “flux within a boundary that is failing to bound that revolution is possible” (59). Galia Benziman has developed a concept of “coerced ventriloquism” to capture how the speaker in “The Chimney Sweeper” is forced to voice adult truths that would be alien to him.

presentation of labor as replete with the sound of tool- and machine-driven production, and thereby fail to register the role of vocal speech in his interrogation of the problematics of labor and productivity. Echoing claims made by Robert Essick, Saree Makdisi has noted the sheer noisiness of Blake's poetry: "Think of the 'enormous labours,' 'perplex'd labring,' 'incessant labour' ... Think of what a noisy environment it is.... Significantly, noise in Blake's work is invariably ontological, associated with making..." (*Impossible History* 263-265; see also Essick *Language of Adam* 173). While the noisiness of "making" in Blake, particularly in the poetry of the 1790s and later, is no doubt important, Makdisi's emphasis on machinic "amplification"² occludes a deeper appreciation of how vocal utterance and its absence also may provide lessons about Blake's ontology of labor.

To fully grasp the significance of labor in Blake, we must contend not merely with the noise of laborious making, but the acts of speaking and hearing (and their failures) that also are productively effective, if nebulously so. Vocal articulation not only is a productive act in Blake,³ it also is foundational in the production of Blake's political economy. Steven Goldsmith has recently suggested that Blake's political radicalism is oriented toward "a future that can only be inarticulately anticipated"

² A minor, and therefore untheorized, term in Makdisi, "amplification" is considered an effect of Blake's iterative textual and poetic tactics, and thus generates the sort of transformative experience that might dislodge the hegemony of modernity (see 169, 200). What Makdisi does not consider, however, are the manifold ways that the iterative act of labor in Blake's work and the privileged space of reading Blake (also necessarily iterative) might collude to invoke such liberatory options for the modern subject, while simultaneously interfering or blocking the productive engine of these sorts of transformations.

³ I am invoking Nicholas Williams' modification of Austin's speech act theory that he terms the "'prophetic tense,' a speech genre which attempts to make something so in the saying of it." But it only does so as a promise of performativity, "a promise for the future" (*Ideology and Utopia in the Poetry of William Blake* 119, 120).

("Agitation" 787). Gesturing cryptically toward a utopian anticipation of totality, Blake's work only does so through barely detectable traces, traces that may not be noticeable in the fallen present.⁴ But these traces, Goldsmith insists, are *inarticulately* anticipated, the implication of vocal speech opening up a animating ambiguity. While critics tend to locate the nexus of Blake's revolutionary political *vision* in the labor of visually confronting and reading/seeing Blake's protean and particularly *writerly* text,⁵ it also inheres in what cannot be *spoken* and *heard*. This

⁴ Of course, the classic work on totality is Martin Jay's *Marxism and Totality: The Adventurse of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*. There, Jay claims that for Marx, "history was to be understood descriptively as a totality and normatively as promising a new totalization in the future" (63). My own use of the term invokes Jay's sense of the term's duality in Marx, yet in my opinion this duality of description and norms (or action) entails or articulates a deeper contradiction inherent in the term. Invoking both an objective development of productive forces and relations in society *and* a discursive phenomenon, the history of the concept bespeaks the specific discursive efforts to describe a wished-for event or culmination in the socio-economic sphere.

⁵ I am cautiously invoking Roland Barthes here. I retain Barthes' sense of a politics of concealment that inheres in his duality of texts, particularly his notion of how writerly texts reveal elements that the readerly attempts to conceal. However, in this immediate context I am linking Barthes with a paradigm of reading Blake from which I am trying to distance my project. Therefore, I do not share his glorification of the role of the reader, who, confronted with a writerly text, asserts a sense of control by which he / she takes an active role in the construction of meaning. The notion of supposedly stable meanings of readerly texts is replaced by a proliferation of meanings that disturbances of narrative and / or formal expectations produce. Barthes' economic language is instructive in this case: "Why is the writerly our value? Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (*The Rustle of Language* 4). While Barthes seems to think that writerly texts defy the commercialization and commodification of literature, I believe that his reification of the heroism of the reader when faced with "difficult" texts relocates the commercial nexus to a marketplace of interpretations, which the reader who has mastered the exchanges endemic to academic scholarship may choose among. In this way, Barthes' theory, instead of eliding the leveling effects and relations of capital in reading practice, in fact deepens and intensifies the ways that the marketplace determines such practice. For one application of Barthes' notion of the writerly to Blake's work, see Rajan's comment that Blake's work articulates "a logic of absolute difference in

most fragile of liberatory projects repetitively defers not only its realization, but also its vocalization in the lapsed and fractured present: “for now, it escapes the range of what can be spoken” (Goldsmith 786). At the same time, Goldsmith implies that anticipation itself occurs through, or despite, the fraught activity of speaking; the anticipation of totality both founders and depends on the barely-articulate or inarticulate voice. But the utopian gesture does not rest upon a conception of the voice as semantically expressive; whether or not it *says anything whatsoever*, the materiality of the voice not only may or may not express the utopian wish, its fragility and contingency is itself this wish, and the possibility of speaking and hearing carry with them the “not-yet” quality of utopian longing.⁶

The potentially inutterable anticipation of totality necessarily implies a receptive ability that itself is always and by definition in doubt, an ability of the most refined sensitivity that perhaps Blake alone has mastered “for now”: Blake tunes “his critical judgment to such a fine pitch of agitation that he might just hear conflicts which cannot yet be spoken in the entrenched idioms of the present,” constituting a “public intervention so inaudible as to seem nonexistent” (Goldsmith

which the Blakean text exists only in its performances, as a transformational narrative surface, or in terms of a writerly rather than readerly textuality. As much as the system, absolute difference protects the economy of literature and the self-satisfaction it afford the critic” (“(Dis)figuring the System” 383). For a slightly antagonistic reading of Barthes’ notion of the writerly as it relates to Blake, see Eric Chandler’s “The Anxiety of Production: Blake’s Shift from Collective Hope to Writing Self.”

⁶ I am drawing upon the work of Ernst Bloch here, explained in a bit more detail in my first chapter. Here it is enough to merely note that Bloch’s concept of the “not-yet” invokes a sense of the utopian possibilities in barely detectable traces in the lapsed present. “The wish [that] builds up and creates the real” (*Principle of Hope*, vol. 3 1370) out of the *Vor-Schien* or pre-appearance of utopia bears many similarities to Blake’s project, though I also want to suggest Blake’s struggle with the very possibility of realizing the wish.

786, 789). The implications of this situation for the Blake critic are unclear, but nevertheless crucial. Putting our ears to the ground, as it were, listening for the faint rumblings of a future that may never arrive, we are, sadly, poor participants in Blake's political project,⁷ participants that Blake self-consciously wished for and attempted to recruit and produce.⁸ As a peculiar feature of his text, Blake continues to recruit these participants. Always implicated in the fallen condition that determines the limits of our bad hearing, we sense our inadequacies and fail to grasp how this implication, this guilt, is often the point of Blake's project.

The link between the voice (and its silence) and the guilt of the always already implicated reader is perhaps best described by Louis Althusser in his

⁷ To call the political character of Blake's work a "project" involves a certain level of question begging, as this nomination implies a unitary, willed, and goal-oriented engagement with power (or powers) that may be productively re-imagined, re-represented, re-configured, or annihilated. Part of my intent is, however, to suggest that Blake's political economy partakes of a powerful utopian dimension, one which Blake himself may not have been fully aware of, and therefore did not master. To the extent that this might be called a "project," it also eschews the productive and the willed. In many ways, I read Blake's political economy as an interrogation of the viability of thinking, reading, and writing otherwise, otherwise than in the project-oriented, productivist, sense. The problem, of course, becomes one of the stubbornness of a language of projects and products that resists such an interrogation, and persists even in the wake of its success.

⁸ Blake's quest for an audience took on a range of forms. For example, in a letter dated August 23, 1799, Blake writes, "I am happy to find a Great majority of Fellow Mortals who can Elucidate My Visions & Particularly they have been Elucidated by Children who have taken a greater delight in contemplating my Pictures than I even hoped" This sanguine attitude, no doubt fabricated for effect, is tempered elsewhere. For example, each of the four books of *Jerusalem* begins with an address to a specific group: "To the Public," "To the Jews," "To the Deists," and "To the Christians." The first in particular reveals a halting faith that a public might exist for his work: "I also hope the Reader will be with me..." (J 3; E 145). Significantly, this early hope for, and later despair of, an audience is graphically revealed in passages Blake deleted by scratching them out on the copper plate, represented in the following in bracketed italics: "Therefore [*Dear*] Reader, [*forgive*] what you do not approve, & [*love*] me for this energetic exertion of my talent" (J 3; E 145).

discussion of his method of reading (or listening to) Marx in *Reading Capital*. For Althusser, there are only guilty readings, readings that are determined and indeed produced by the reader's limited field of vision (or hearing). And the silences that inhere in a text bespeak its hidden and informing contradictions, gaps, and discontinuities, which in fact drive and determine the text's production of meaning. Interestingly, throughout his analysis, Althusser repeatedly slips from his dominant metaphor of reading as vision (and blindness) to one of the voice (and silence), implying an instructive uncertainty about, yet gravitational pull towards, the latter subordinated metaphor. Althusser begins by establishing the Hegelian errors of the young Marx who believed it was possible to perform an "immediate reading of essence in existence" (16). This epistemology is based on a "certain idea of *reading* which makes a written discourse the immediate transparency of the true, and the real the discourse of the voice" (16). Self-consciously employing ecclesiastical imagery, Althusser heaps scorn on this approach to knowledge, with its emphasis on "religious myths of the voice (the Logos)... [and the] religious complicity between Logos and Being" (17). In this model, the voice (or Logos) stands for Althusser as an immediate expression of truth, one that (as his religious language suggests) we kneel to and compels belief in its salvific properties.⁹

⁹ It is interesting to contrast Althusser's vexed relationship with the Catholic Church (the language of which permeates his writings) and Blake's antipathy to the Church of England, ecclesiastical authority, and organized religion in general. For a good summary of Blake's views on this subject, see Thompson's *Witness Against the Beast*. In the *Songs of Experience*, "The Little Vagabond" summarizes Blake's antinomian relation to the church, employing the site of the "Ale-house" as a common meeting place for dissenters: "Dear Mother, dear Mother, the Church is cold, / But the Ale-house is healthy & pleasant & warm;" (1-2, E 26). "The Chimney Sweeper" of *Experience* echoes the sentiment that the official church is not a welcoming and

Opposed to this early Hegelian view, the late Marx does not think that history can be “read in its manifest discourse, because the text of history is not a text in which a voice (the Logos) speaks, but the inaudible and illegible notation of the effects of a structure of structures” (17). To hear the “inaudible,” Althusser requires a symptomatic reading (or hearing), which “divulges the undivulged event in the text it reads, and in the same movement relates it to *a different text*, present as a necessary absence in the first” (28). Here as elsewhere in the chapter entitled “From *Capital* to Marx’s Philosophy,” it is impossible to miss the symptomatic slippage from the guiding metaphor—which Althusser insists ought to be taken literally (see 25)—of vision to hearing; additionally, there is a discernable shift from a conception of the voice as the bearer of expressive and immediate truth to one in which the voice is ridden with silences and gaps, and is threatened with an inarticulateness that nevertheless bears its truth. In “The Merits of Classical Economics” Althusser opposes the “innocent” reading of the immediate and fully expressive Logos, to a “symptomatic” one that reads the text’s silences:

A ‘*symptomatic*’ reading is necessary to make these lacunae perceptible, and to identify behind the spoken words the discourse of the silence, which, emerging in the verbal discourse, induces these blanks in it, blanks which are failures in its rigour, or the outer limits of its effort: its absence, once these limits are reached, but in a space which it has *opened*” (86).

In this reflection on his own practice of reading Marx, we witness another typical Althusserian slippage from vision to speech/hearing:

warm place: While the sweepers are “Crying weep, weep, in notes of Woe!” their parents “are gone to praise God & his Priest & King / Who make up a heaven of our misery” (2, 11-12, E 22-23).

I was merely re-establishing, i.e., *maintaining* his discourse, without yielding to the temptation of his silence. I heard this silence as the possible weakness *of a discourse under the pressure and repressive action of another discourse* [my italics], which takes the place of the first discourse in favour of this repression, and speaks in its silence: the empiricist discourse. All I did was to *make this silence in the first discourse speak, dissipating the second.* (90)

“Listening under pressure”: this gloss on Althusser describes the problematics of detecting the political ramifications—indeed, the political economy—of reading labor in early Blake poems. The bulk of this chapter will focus on a poem from *Songs of Innocence*, “The Chimney Sweeper,” in order to adumbrate the status of labor in the early Blake. Before doing so, it will be important to clarify the reasons I have chosen to dwell on Althusser’s less-appreciated theory of reading in this context. First, as I will clarify later, there is a striking parallel between Althusser’s concern with voices and silences in the reading of ideological texts and how the drama of the speaking voice in the poem, including the places and ways in which it is silenced (or spoken over), determines the production of the subjectivity of the laborer. More importantly, Althusser’s theory of reading offers a compelling alternative to the prevailing trend in Blake studies to “speak for” Blake, to articulate, clarify, and express the deeper essential meaning that his opaque and uniquely difficult texts refract or distort: in other words, to represent or translate, in the language of criticism, what Blake’s own, quite different language struggles to enunciate.¹⁰ In this sense, much of Blake criticism participates in the Hegelian mode

¹⁰ Two divergent examples could be cited. Donald Ault’s project in *Narrative Unbound: Re-Visioning William Blake’s The Four Zoas* is an exhaustive attempt to rephrase Blake’s unfinished epic, one that does not allow any assumptions not explicitly warranted by the content of the poem itself. On the other hand, Paul Mann has called for “a theory of Blakean production which does not restrict itself to...

of conjuring the immediate essence from the Blakean material and textual artifact. Alternatively, Althusser's approach to reading places stress on the places in apparently totalized discursive systems where countervailing, or unconscious, discourses may emerge.

Overall, one of my principle aims in this dissertation is to expose the false critical choices of liberation or oppression that punctuate the studies of Blake's political economy, and labor in particular. Labor occupies a unique and highly privileged space in this regard, due to the historical and theoretical ambivalence of the concept in conceptualizations of freedom and bondage, as I discussed in the previous chapter. I contend, however, that the ideological investment in this dichotomy of freedom and oppression can only be exposed by "hearing" what passes unnoticed in Blake's texts, and which does so as an "unconscious" effect of the historical sedimentation of Blake's artifact under the pressure of histories and discourses not available to the historical Blake.

In "The Chimney Sweeper" from the *Songs of Innocence* (1789), articulation, hearing, and guilt coalesce in a particularly impacted story of the production of the subjectivity of the laborer.¹¹ In a moment in which the discontinuities or gaps

representing Blake's own theory of production" (Mann 5). That these approaches are not mutually exclusive testifies to the sense that a Blakean "theory of reading" has yet to be fully articulated.

¹¹ It is important to note the obvious at the outset of this analysis: There is something odd about including this poem in the canon of Blake poems about labor, since labor per se does not appear in the poem. This may account to some extent for the relative silence about the poem in the scholarship about labor in Blake. This double absence—of labor in the poem, and of the poem in scholarship on labor in Blake—is significant, in that it partially prepares the ground for a misreading of the poem (which I will discuss later) that is nevertheless crucial for the more proper

appear in the apparently smooth and undisturbed surface of the poem, the speaker attempts to console Tom Dacre who cries because he is unable to speak as he is initiated into his labor as a chimney sweeper: “Hush Tom never mind it, for when your head’s bare, / You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair” (7-8). This compensatory speech act incorporates a series of overlapping exchanges—Tom’s trauma for the speaker’s earlier one; the speaker’s articulation for Tom’s silence *and* the speaker’s earlier inability to speak; a linguistic consolation for the castrating cutting of hair, experience for innocence; etc.—that ultimately result in loss. For the speaker’s peculiar lesson for Tom is that what one no longer has, what has been taken from you, can no longer be spoiled.¹²

Althusser’s theory of reading is uniquely suited to “The Chimney Sweeper” since acts of speaking (including acts of “speaking for”) and concomitant acts of silencing are crucial for the largely submerged (or unconscious) economic structure of the poem. After all, as I will discuss more fully in the following pages, compensation for the traumatic losses is an effect of a double act of silencing: Tom’s semantic inarticulateness in the first place, and his subsequent “hushing” at the exhortation of the speaker. Tom ought to be consoled, and as a consequence ought to be (and remain) silenced, for what is lost forever—even if it is the power of expressive speech and participation in the realm of the human—can’t be spoiled.

Consolation—or compensation—here takes the form of the sustained, pristine, and

understanding of labor in Blake that this chapter and dissertation is attempting to describe.

¹² Robert Gleckner suggests that, “to the imagination the hair is there, unspoiled and in a sense protected” (*The Piper and the Bard*, 109). Isolating the “imagination” in this way from concrete events seems an unhelpful way to solve the conundrum of this line.

yet permanently refused promise of subjectivity. The poem thus implies—and I will establish this in what follows—that capitalist labor, and in particular the subjectivity of the laborer proper to it, is not a precondition of exchange; rather, labor and the laboring subject are predicated on a prior or ur-exchange, which far from being governed by equivalence, originates in fact in traumatic lack. The poem stages a series of exchanges (e.g., the speaker’s trauma for Tom’s trauma). These exchanges are foundational for the creation of the worker’s subjectivity, but all these exchanges actually entail debt or loss rather than being exchanges of equivalence (capitalism). Traumatic exchange, in other words, is a precondition of subjectivity, not its product.

What about the reader of the poem, whose labor (necessarily flawed, partial, provisional) produces the object of knowledge that is the poem? In crucial and complex ways, the poem implicates the reader (most obviously in the indictable “your” in line 4), since it is the reader’s guilty reading that determines and produces the peculiar way the poem demands to be misread.

When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue,
Could scarcely cry weep weep weep weep.
So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep.

Theres little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head
That curl’d like a lambs back, was shav’d, so I said.
Hush Tom never mind it, for when your head’s bare,
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair.

And so he was quiet, & that very night,
As Tom was a sleeping he had such a sight,
That thousands of sweepers Dick, Joe, Ned & Jack
Were all of them lock’d up in coffins of black,

And by came an Angel who had a bright key,

And he open'd the coffins & set them all free.
Then down a green plain leaping laughing they run
And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.

Then naked & white, all their bags left behind,
They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind.
And the Angel told Tom if he'd be a good boy,
He'd have God for his father & never want joy.

And so Tom awoke and we rose in the dark
And got with our bags & our brushes to work.
Tho' the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm,
So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.

There is a paucity of critical commentary on the poem itself, but what is available tends to rely heavily on the actual historical context of the chimney sweepers, who were a common presence in Blake's London.¹³ The poem clearly represents the dismal and dehumanizing plight of chimney sweepers in eighteenth-century London.¹⁴ Scholars such as Saree Makdisi, Martin Nurmi, and David Erdman

¹³ Makdisi generalizes the condition of the sweepers in Blake's London:

For during the 1790s it was becoming increasingly clear that the disfiguration and agony of the such marginalized and indeed preindustrial figures [e.g., the whore and chimney sweeper] were no longer so exceptional, as all of society was gradually beginning to turn into a factory, with the utterly catastrophic results for working people already evident in London's streets. (106)

¹⁴ M. Dorothy George notes that as late as the 1760s, the sweepers were popularly "regarded as villains ripening for the gallows" (242). A couple decades later, anxiety about them became a humanitarian concern. It is important to note that there is nothing about the profession of chimney sweeping that marks it as specific to Blake's age of nascent industrialization and the consolidation of capitalism. In fact, the labor performed by the sweepers in Blake's time seems to have been largely unchanged for centuries. Despite this, contemporary legal and socioeconomic debates about chimney sweeping (and similar professions) strongly suggest that the plight of the sweepers in the late eighteenth century came to stand for larger debates about the role of child labor, slavery or coerced labor, and poverty that became particularly heated in the early phases of industrialization. If chimney sweeping as a social category defies discrete categorization as dominant, residual, or emergent (see Raymond Williams' use of these terms in *Marxism and Literature*, 121-127), the ways it simultaneously evokes disgust and sympathy and manages to

have aided our historical understanding of the poem by filling in a great deal of the contextual and legal background of this profession, and of the recurring presence of this type of labor in the early *Songs*. Makdisi offers a succinct description of the lives of the chimney sweepers: “[T]ypically beginning work at around the age of five, by the age of twelve or thirteen a chimney sweeper, now grown too large for this cramped work, would inevitably be a broken and stunted cripple, finished for life” (105). Martin Nurmi claims that it was common for impoverished parents (or whoever had control over the child) to sell boys and girls into the profession, and that “Chimney sweeping left children with kneecaps twisted and spines and ankles deformed, from crawling up chimneys as small as nine or even seven inches in diameter, with ‘chimney sweep’s cancer’ of the scrotum resulting from the constant irritation of the soot, with respiratory ailments, and eye inflammations” (16).¹⁵ Recalcitrant sweeps who refused to work were forced up the chimneys with poles or pinpricks on their feet, or, more disturbingly, by fire, which in many cases homeowners kept burning while the sweeps worked (Nurmi 17). They typically slept on bags of soot and went for months without washing.¹⁶

yoke historical particularity and transhistorical permanence suggest contradictions in the profession that are internalized in the poem itself.

¹⁵ See Mantoux for a bracing overview of child labor in the early years of the Industrial Revolution. For example, Mantoux claims that the children’s “weakness made them docile, and they were more easily reduced to a state of passive obedience than grown men. They were also very cheap.... Their working day was limited only by their complete exhaustion and lasted, fourteen, sixteen and even eighteen hours” (see 420-423). E. P. Thompson states notes a sharp rise in the “intensity of exploitation of child labour between 1780 and 1840” (331) and concludes by stating that “the exploitation of little children, on this scale and with this intensity, was one of the most shameful events in our history” (349).

¹⁶ Gardner also provides useful details (*Blake* 115-117). See also Erdman, (*Prophet* 132) for a brief summary of legislation to improve the plight of the “climbing boys.”

Scholarship on the poem tends to revolve around the question of how to read the Angel's compensatory moral at the end of the dream, followed by Tom Dacre's renewed attitude towards his work in the final lines. If a consensus exists here, it is in the unquestioned centrality of Tom and particularly the ambivalent payoff of Tom's dream, an ambivalence that extends into and is repeated in the criticism on the poem. Nurmi suggests that in the Angel's admonition Tom might find "a private meaning of more immediate hope than [the Angel's words] actually hold out" (21). Andrew Lincoln admits that the "final line *seems* disconcerting," but nevertheless reads the arrow-shaped imagery of the bordering vine (found in the King's College copy reproduced in the Blake Trust edition) as an emblem of "self-protection," that "*may illuminate the sweep's reconciliation of joy with duty*" (1991, 152, my italics). This ambivalence is easily translated into irony, a particularly Romantic strategy of deferring final determination of signification.¹⁷ In a recent article, Galia Benziman argues that the poem's central irony entails that "childish Innocence, though spiritually admirable, must be sacrificed... to make room for subversion and

¹⁷ I am here thinking of Paul de Man's view that irony involves a permanent discontinuity between sign and meaning, and that this linguistic fact has a self-perpetuating nature with implications for subjectivity: "The ironic language splits the subject into an empirical self that exists in a state of inauthenticity and a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity" (*Blindness and Insight* 214). This experience of the split subject entails a "dizziness to the point of madness" (215). Moreover, discussing Schlegel, de Man describes the repetitive nature of irony: "The act of irony... reveals the existence of a temporality that is definitely not organic, in that it relates to its source only in terms of distance and difference and allows for no end, for no totality.... It dissolves in the narrowing spiral of a linguistic sign that becomes more and more remote from its meaning, and it can find no escape from this spiral" (222). My point here is that the deployment of irony in the Blakean context I am describing misses the more pessimistic cast of de Man's genealogy of the concept in Romanticism. Instead, Blake's critics empty the concept of its theoretical weight, using it to herald the role of the critic in adjudicating Blake's meaning.

condemnation of the guilty” (175). Indeed, the last line “can hardly be read in any other way” than ironically (175). Leopold Damrosch refers, oxymoronicly, to “the clear ironies” of “The Chimney Sweeper” as a prime example of “the disparity between what children and adults understand” in the *Songs* (228 n.135). Zachary Leader has agreed with Bloom’s note that the final lines represent a “new fierceness for Blake” but nevertheless claims that the call to duty is ironic in that “our attention is almost wholly absorbed in the sweeps’ last few glimmers of imagination and fellow-feeling” (46; the Bloom quote is from *Blake’s Apocalypse* 43). Bloom, for his part, notes the “forceful ironies” in the child’s voice (*Visionary Company* 41). And, in the introductory essay of the *Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, Morris Eaves claims that the poem and others like it in the *Songs*, “seem to offer simple religious solace to children in dire situations, [but] *may be* highly ironic—or not, or *they may* toggle back and forth in a very typical Blakean way between contrary perspectives of harsh critique and Christian consolation” (5, my italics). Despite the circular logic of defining the signal characteristics of Blake’s poems as “Blakean,” these ironies and equivocations are often employed to celebrate Blake’s work’s polysemous nature, and by extension serve (cynically, in my view) as markers of the heroic role of the Blake critic as guardian and referee of the poet’s oft-cited, unique difficulty.

This ambivalence, I contend, is itself significant. A preliminary but incomplete understanding of it can be organized along the “two economies”

structure I have earlier outlined. In “The Chimney Sweeper,” the bucolic dream¹⁸ of liberation and unbridled joy stands in stark tension with the early lines that provide a glimpse into one of the most brutal professions in Blake’s London. Whether we see in Tom’s waking attitude an ideologically naïve capitulation to domination cynically orchestrated by a teasingly absent paternalistic god, or as a celebration of a deeper faith that mitigates material misery (see Lincoln, 1991 152), the terms of the debate are determined by the stalled or prematurely resolved dialectic of Blake criticism between oppression/liberation.

This critical hesitance or reticence that marks commentary *on* the poem (and on the two economies structure more generally) is a repetition or restaging of the drama of the speaking and non-speaking subject *in* the poem. Take, for instance the repetitive “cries”—and their exchanges for, alternatively, speech or silence—that mark both the speaker’s and Tom’s entry into the life of chimney sweeping. The cry that both is and is not produces a series of rich aural associations that map conveniently onto the way the poem’s significance has been understood. The first lines of the first five stanzas all feature an off-rhyme with “cry”: “died,” “cried,” “quiet,” “bright,” and “white,” which, read in progression, mark a movement from a sort of death-in-life, to calm acceptance, to a cleansing liberation. Death quiets the cry, positions it firmly in the past, leading proleptically to the figural and literal brightness of a newly purified state. That the final stanza does not participate in this

¹⁸ Christopher Hobson links “The Chimney Sweeper” to another poem in *Songs of Innocence*, “The Lamb”: “The lamb is truly a victim; so too is his human equivalent, Tom Dacre, even though Tom’s dream is anagogically a vision of the New Jerusalem” (*The Chained Boy* 112). Hobson’s reasons for linking the lamb and Tom are not fully explored in his text, but I hope to make clear in this chapter why I disagree with the association of Tom’s dream with millenarian fulfillment.

loose rhyming pattern only underscores the poem's undeterminable comment on labor and liberation—the last word, as it were, on the subject is literally silenced. Recalling my earlier understanding of Althusser's call for a "reading under pressure," we must acknowledge this moment in the poem—the silenced last word on labor and liberation, or the stalled dialectic of the two economies opposition—to serve as an indicator of the silence produced by the pressure a dominant discourse exerts on a submerged, unarticulated one that remains to be heard.

At the same time, the assonance in these initial lines also invokes the "I" of the poem, or the question of the status of the self-reflexive subject of language in general. Extending the aural reading a bit further, the "I" that aurally lurks or inheres within "died," "cried," "quiet," "night," "bright," and "white" (and that appears in line one and throughout the first two stanzas) is curiously absent in the final stanza, replaced with the "we" of the sweepers' workforce.¹⁹ Indeed, the question of point of view or the subject position of the speaker in the poem is vexing—and completely ignored in the criticism²⁰—since the "I" of stanzas one and two becomes the second person of stanzas three through five, which in turn becomes the "we" of the last. The subtle shifting of point of view implies, at the very least, that the ignored status of the speaker (and speech in general) is very much at stake in the poem, and moreover, the deindividuating form that this shift takes invokes the discourse—very much alive in Blake's time—of how to bend the

¹⁹ Just as the visual "eye" that dominates approaches to Blake is briefly nudged aside in favor of the voice and ear.

²⁰ One exception is Benziman's investigation into the "vague" (174) point of view of the speaker, whose voice is "appropriated in order to express the words of his oppressors," a structure the poem participates in, insofar as it uses the child to convey an "adult social protest" that is "alien to his own perspective" (175, 176).

individual will of the laborer to new, standardized, generalizable modes of productivity.²¹

At this point, it will be instructive to take a close look at one of the dominant theories of the production of the laborer in Blake. Saree Makdisi has offered the most comprehensive discussion of the connections between labor and subjectivity

²¹ Workers' reluctance to work, and in particular to adapt to new, standardized modes of production, was a major problem in the early stages of industrialization. The break that managers were requiring laborers to make entailed a range of cultural, social, and lifestyle revolutions, many of which would have been unheard-of a generation before, or even, due to the uneven development of industrialization, in a neighboring town.

The worker who left the background of his domestic workshop or peasant holding for the factory, entered a new culture as well as a new sense of direction. It was not only that 'the new economic order needed... part humans: soulless, depersonalised, disembodied, who could become members, or little wheels rather, of a complex mechanism'. It was also that men who were non-accumulative, non-acquisitive, accustomed to work for subsistence, not for maximization of income, had to be made obedient to the cash stimulus, and obedient in such a way as to react precisely to the stimuli provided. (Pollard 98)

Economic historians note the difficulty of recruiting men and women (and children) to this life—of subjectifying them according to a strange, new mode of production, a difficulty exacerbated by the resemblance of the sites and style of this new labor to prisons and workhouses (Pollard 98). E. P. Thompson has famously argued that this process required a new concept and relationship to temporality: "In all these ways—by the division of labour; the supervision of labour; fines; bells and clocks; the suppression of fairs and sports—new labour habits were formed, and a new time-discipline was formed" ("Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism" 90). The upshot of this was that the worker was compelled to acquiesce to the following:

the rise of a master-class without traditional authority or obligations: the growing distance between master and man: the transparency of the exploitation at the source of their new wealth and power: the loss of status and above all of independence for the worker, his reduction to total dependence on the master's instruments of production: the partiality of the law: the disruption of the tradition family economy: the discipline, monotony, hours and conditions of work: loss of leisure and amenities: the reduction of the man to the status of an "instrument." (*Making of the English Working Class* 202-203).

in Blake's work. For Makdisi, labor participates in and perpetuates this process; just as the conditions of labor in capitalism produce identical products as commodities, so too does labor produce the laborers who are suited to perform it. The human subject is itself a product, produced "according to the requirements of a political and economic network that generates—fabricates, assembles—the inhabitants appropriate to it" (83). The larger implication of this process for Makdisi is the denaturalization of the notion of identity in Blake, and the suggestion that who we are is a product, much like any other product, of the social and economic relations that have contributed to produce it (see 106). When Makdisi connects his inquiry to the figure of the chimney sweeper, he amplifies this social constructivist perspective, but with a subtle difference: "The chimney sweepers who populate Blake's works, *invariably crying and weeping*, are the ultimate evidence of the extent to which work could literally form the worker, at once mentally, emotionally, and physically" (105, my italics). While Makdisi duly notes the unique utterance of the sweepers, he fails to note how "The Chimney Sweeper" of *Innocence* demonstrates the primary and disruptive role of the voice—the labor proper to it—in how the subjectivity of the laborer is produced in the first place. Moreover, his commitment to a Deleuze-inflected notion of how the Blakean subject might be construed along non-identitarian and liberatory lines blocks an appreciation of how, in the poem, the voice mediates a series of traumatic exchanges that call into question such an open-ended and mutable sense of "freedom from..."

Althusser's theory of ideological interpellation is significant in this case not only because it provides a compelling model of the production of the capitalist and

laboring subject, but also because of the key role of language—and in particular the voice and hearing—in this model. As we have seen, Althusser’s theory of reading engages in repeated slippages from a (literal) metaphors of vision to the voice, and from the fullness and immediacy of the voice as Logos to a silence-ridden bearer of meaning. In his better-known theory of ideology, Althusser repeats this ambivalence, but this time in a theory of the production of the subject. According to Althusser, ideology is primarily concerned with the reproduction of the capitalist relations of production, or more precisely, “the capitalist relations of exploitation” (154). Silently informing Makdisi’s understanding of how “The Chimney Sweeper” functions within Blake’s conception of labor, Althusser emphasizes the importance of not only how skills and technique must be reproduced, but also the “reproduction of... submission to the rules of the established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers” (132-33). Significantly, ideology is a ritualized material practice or set of practices that govern and enforce a certain representation of our relation to production (see 163 and 166). Of particular importance here is that Althusser is not proposing a theory of false consciousness, but more particularly a theory of how subjects are produced, and produced in such a fashion that they are fit subjects for the relations of production in capitalism: ideology’s purpose is “‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects” (170, italics removed). To explain how this works, Althusser reverts to the special efficacy of the voice, offering the example of the sudden authoritative “hail” on a street from a police officer to which we inevitably respond: “Hey, you there!” (174). Through interpellation, individuals become subjects: “the rituals of ideological recognition...

guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects" (172-3). However, Althusser presents interpellation and the formation of subjectivity as a function not just of speech, but also of the necessity that the "hail" is heard, recognized, and physically responded to.²²

Clearly, the speaker's compensatory words to Tom in the second stanza ought to be read as a type of authoritative, interpellative "hail" of the sort Althusser discusses. In verbally addressing Tom as he does, the speaker articulates Tom according to a paradigm of production appropriate to capitalist exchangeability. As Morris Eaves has suggested, the speaker seems to function as a sort of "counselor figure" in relation to Tom ("On Blakes We Want and Blake's We Don't" 431); other commentators have suggested that the older speaker is a sort of overseer or "manager." Althusser's imaginary but ubiquitous police officer's "Hey, you there!" becomes the speaker's order to "Hush..."; the emblematic turn of the interpellated and guilty subject is implied in Tom's silence and obedience. Quite unlike Althusser's scene in which real purposive action is required of the obedient subject, in Blake's poem the interpellative scene requires and compels silence. However, the

²² Interestingly, articulation and hearing are not just incidental elements of Althusser's example of the police officer; they play a pivotal role in his discussion of Ideological State Apparatuses earlier in the same essay. Many of his examples emphasize aural experiences of ideological indoctrination: "The communications apparatus by cramming every 'citizen' with daily doses of nationalism, liberalism.... The religious apparatus by recalling in sermons and the other great ceremonies of Birth, Marriage and Death, that man is only ashes..." (*Lenin and Philosophy* 154). He goes on to describe this cacophony as a "concert [that] is dominated by a single score... of the Ideology of the corrupt ruling class" (154). And, finally, he mentions the "dominant" role of the schools, which is so subtle and barely noticeable that "hardly anyone lends an ear to its music: it is so silent!" (155).

fact of Tom's silence, which like most silences is easy to not hear, is a crucial element of this exchange, in that it both foregrounds Tom's pre-linguistic and pre-expressive stage of development, and, more importantly, demonstrates a fundamental inequality at the core of the system of exchanges that structures the poem. Not merely hushing Tom, the speaker "speaks for" him, and this exchange—"speaking for" or "speaking in place of"—articulates (or interpellates) Tom according to the demands of their work. Therefore, is it possible to say that the function of speech here has to do with the external articulation of the subject, being articulated from a position external to the subject. Along with this, speaking becomes a primary instance of exchange in the poem, in that the act of speaking in the poem produces a debt without profit.

Not merely requiring silence, sleep is also enacted by the speaker's act of "speaking for"; "so" implies a causative relation between sleep and not necessarily *what* the speaker says (which, as I have suggested, is less than comforting) but *the fact of his speaking*: "And so he was quiet, & that very night, / As Tom was a sleeping he had such a sight," (9-10). Thereafter, the dream (or "sight" (10)) of lines 11-20 repeats the interpellative scene, offering an alternative gloss on the speaker's injunction to Tom not to "mind" that what has been lost can no longer be spoiled. Here, "spoil" takes on a double signification: the intended meaning suggests sully or ruination—in this case of Tom's curly hair—but Tom's dream, in its ostensible role in guaranteeing Tom's obedience, settles the debt of his sale²³ into this

²³ It is safe to assume Tom's entry into the life of a chimney sweep mirrors or repeats the speaker's own transition into that life. This exchange, recalled by the

profession. In this case the ritualistic²⁴ cutting of Tom's hair—a sort of refracted castration scene—initiates Tom into his work and thus stands as a symbolic promise of his future profitability, a profit that the poem promises in the final stanza, but the representation of which is nevertheless permanently deferred. The inverse of the perverse lesson the speaker consoles Tom with—that what has been taken from him can't be ruined—is here cashed in (as it were): what is taken from him becomes the currency of another's future profit—or the “spoils” of Tom's initiation. In addition, the poem becomes a promissory note for this profit; however, the nature of this profit is in doubt, as it is merely a future profit that the poem defers on condition of future performance of labor. In this sense, the carefully governed borders of the poem, its debt and credit structure, qualify this potential profit as still a debt to be repaid through future work. At the end of the poem “we rose in the dark / And got with our bags & our brushes to work.” (21-22), but the poem ends with the debt still outstanding. Here it becomes crucially important that labor itself is never represented, and according to the logic of the poem, is perhaps unrepresentable here. By refusing the representation of the profitable labor gleaned from Tom's successful initiation, the poem assumes Tom's debt and strangely takes on the form or structure of credit: a debt is incurred on the basis of a promise of future gain that does not, strictly speaking, occur.

Exchangeability in general is predicated on originary loss or lack, and therefore in the poem's various exchanges all partake of the credit form, in which a

speaker in stanza one, is the most prominent traumatic exchange in the poem, and its characteristics will be explored later in the chapter.

²⁴ Both Nurmi (17) and Leader (45) note the ritualistic nature of this scene.

promise of future gain is exchanged for debt or lack. Rather than this suggesting that it would be better for one to assume the outward appearance of innocence in order to survive in the realm of experience (Nurmi 20), this compensation supplements a loss for a loss: Tom now has nothing, a nothing that nevertheless ought to be positively valued because it can't be spoiled, and a nothing that carries with it a forever deferred promise of spiritual gain. The exchanges of the poem result in an economics of loss, and that whatever we think of the poem's consolations—or more precisely compensations—they are calibrated according to a negative exchange matrix that ensures their relentlessly subtractive character.

Exchange and exchangeability have been important elements in understanding Blake's political economy, as well as his aesthetic. Blake's opposition to the notion of exchangeability, which he seems to understand as a particularly modern idea, is well-known.²⁵ In his influential work on the intersections of

²⁵ Blake's general opposition to equivalence and general exchangeability is well known. In a late letter (April 12, 1827) discussing his Job engravings with patron George Cumberland, Blake asserts a sort of aesthetic ontology of the subject, when he moves rather seamlessly from an argument about the incommensurability of the line to a critique of abstract equality: "For a Line or Lineament is not formed by Chance a Line is a Line in its Minutest Subdivision[s] Strait or Crooked It is Itself & Not Intermeasurable with or by any Thing Else Such is Job but since the French Revolution Englishmen are all Intermeasurable One by Another Certainly a happy state of Agreement to which I for One do not Agree" (E 783). This is not the context to discuss the political aesthetic of this passage, nor how nationalism and its discontents can be doubly linked back to aesthetic and historical causes. Nevertheless such concerns were important to Blake throughout his life, and were the focal point of one of Blake's few extended treatment of aesthetic issues, "The Public Address" (1809-1810). Here Blake contrasts "Individual Merit" and commercially successful art produced by "Ignorant Journeymen" (E 573; see also 576). Traces of Blake's hostility to the principle of interchangeability of different objects can be glimpsed much earlier, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-93), where he concludes "A Memorable Fancy" by declaring, "One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression" (E 44).

economics and literature, Marc Shell has argued that “Money... is the great trope—a comparative term for the value of things of different species” (121).²⁶ Shell’s description of how language, like money, has a “perversely equalizing” character in modern capitalism ought to be contrasted to the language of “The Chimney Sweeper.” For example, the Angel’s promise to Tom in the dream is a repetition of the speaker’s compensatory words to Tom that produce his sleep, and further underscores how the credit form imposes a traumatic experience of subjectivity: “And the Angel told Tom if he’d be a good boy, / He’d have God for his father & never want joy” (19-20). Harold Bloom reads this as a “promise” or a “direct projection, as dream-fulfillment, of the Church’s disciplinary promise to its exploited charges” (*Blake’s Apocalypse* 43). The particularly coercive theology in these lines works according to a logic of debt and the credit-form; the deal that the Angel proposes depends on a certain mode of exchange akin to credit: the angel barter for Tom’s good behavior and dutiful attention to his horrible labor in exchange for the promise of future psychological or spiritual profit—he will never fear harm. That what is “purchased” through this credit form is expressed negatively underscores the insubstantiality of Tom’s supposed gain. The motivating fear of harm entails permanent submission to the Angel’s law, which serves the capitalist goal to produce productive and profitable laborers. The relationship the Angel establishes

²⁶ In an important analysis of value in both the Marxist and psychoanalytic realms, Jean-Joseph Goux claims that material sources of value, namely gold, function in a parallel way with the phallus, a thing without intrinsic value or substance, but that nevertheless serves as the determinant of value in the economic and psycho-sexual realms, respectively: “The materiality of value is abandoned for the abstraction of value in a hypostasized sublimation—a trend that is perhaps consciousness itself, the institution of the arbitrary: history” (49).

with Tom mirrors that of the speaker with Tom. In both, figures of authority, in the plenitude of expressive speech, use language to establish Tom's debt.

In exchange for his moral and material debt, what does Tom receive? If the logic of these lines establishes a relationship of credit, what does Tom possess in the establishment of his debt? Significantly, the poem is bookended by the specter of absent fathers—the speaker's in the first stanza, and the deferred presence of a moralistic and paternalistic god in the second-to-last. The absent fathers in fact contribute powerfully to the economics of the poem. Drawing heavily on Freud and Lacan, Guinn Batten has discussed how for the major Romantic poets the loss of the father (or Father) produces a crucial moment in the production of the modern subject.²⁷ While the successful incorporation of this loss determines the production

²⁷ The importance of the absent fathers in the poem corresponds with my earlier claim that the cutting of Tom Dacre's hair is modeled on a ritualistic castration scene. In the classic Lacanian castration scene, which has many parallels with my argument here, the father will normally intervene to thwart the child's Oedipal aspirations. For Lacan, castration involves the child's renunciation of the aspiration to be the phallus for the mother, and his or her submission to the law. In doing so, the child gives up *jouissance* to the Other and, according to Bruce Fink, "The Other as language enjoys in our stead" (99). Crucially, there is a link between the psychoanalytic and the economic in castration. Lacan claims that, if castration occurs as it should, the child will go away with 'title deeds in its pocket' for a future *satisfying substitute* for its forbidden first love-object. Žižek modifies Lacan's promise of satisfaction and instead argues that in castration the subject gets nothing in exchange: "this renunciation is 'pure,' a pure negative gesture of withdrawal which constitutes the space of possible gains and losses, i.e, of the distribution of goods" (*Enjoy Your Symptom!* 75). In the renunciation that is castration, the subject only incurs further loss: "all that the second part of this strange act of exchange brings is an additional loss... *the subject himself is made into an object*, becomes an object of exchange" (171). In "The Chimney Sweeper," Blake sets up a complex layering of renunciations and promises (or "title deeds"): When Tom accedes to the law and submits to have his hair cut, his loss is substituted with the dream and its false promises of futurity. Likewise, waking—or the loss of the dreaming fantasy and the subsequent assumption of duty—is substituted for the promise of not fearing harm. In what follows I will also discuss a further consequence of castration,

of adult subjectivity, the failure to mourn and resolve this loss results in what Batten describes as a ludic and libidinal attachment to the dead and to other prohibited objects of desire. In "The Chimney Sweeper," which Batten does not discuss, absent fathers function as both cause and effect, thereby blurring the distinction; lack is simultaneously the past source of the speaker's trauma just as it organizes a future-oriented desire for its opposite. These absent fathers, far from producing unconventional libidinal cathexes, in fact stand for the absence of any authoritative source of equivalence. If in lines 19-20 "want" implies desire and lack, or desire structured as lack, "joy" denotes an excessive spiritual state of overflowing plenitude, something that in its impossibility to represent belies the bland verb of possession, "have." In fact, this sentence is striking in part because the series of generic verbs—"be," "have," and "want"—invoke the straightforwardness and absolute qualities of these states while the context suggests the opposite, that Tom's status as being, having, and wanting is very much at issue in the poem. Whether these sorts of attributes may be attributed at all to Tom is questioned even as the poem attaches these verbs to him. Ontological stability and completeness is contingent on an ethical submission; by making "being good" the condition of the fulfillment of desire and "having," the poem in fact severely questions the very possibility of having, possession being less a state proper to the economic subject of exchange but to the realm of future promises of spiritual profit. The father's traumatic rejection of the speaker by selling him into slavery in the first stanza is

in that Tom himself is a "substitute" for the speaker's recollected and imperfectly symbolized traumatic loss. Moreover, paralleling Žižek's notion of the castrated subject being an object of exchange, I will discuss the unique class dimensions of Blake's presentation of the subjectification of the laborer.

indefinitely repeated in this situation whereby the condition of having is figured in terms of the desire and impossibility of Tom re-achieving his father, or having “God for his father.” The speaker’s initial loss is thus transferred to Tom, who stands in for the desire and impossibility of capitalizing on the traumatic exchange.

Significantly, Blake uses the word “for” rather than “as” to establish that this relationship, even if it were achievable, would merely be one of substitution, as though god were merely playing the role of a father rather than being the father. In this poem, then, exchange and exchangeability are not critiqued in favor of a notion of the unique irreducibility of the subject who exceeds the leveling work of capital. Instead, exchangeability is exposed as performing the traumatic interpellation of the subject, in that subjectivity is constructed according to a credit structure, in which loss or debt is incurred for permanently deferred promises of spiritual bliss.

There is something particularly timely about the economic form of credit and the connected notion of insurmountable debt as Blake was writing the *Songs* in the late eighteenth century. As scholars like Peter de Bolla, Colin Nicholson, James Thompson, and Patrick Brantlinger have argued, the emergence and power of modern Britain was closely tied to the economics of credit based on accruing massive public debt. Building Britain’s assets abroad required a level of financing that exceeded the nation’s store of treasure and required drawing upon virtual or imaginary financial instruments that produced a national debt of staggering proportions. In this sense, in the eighteenth century a range of means to manage (or represent) the idea of sublime levels of debt and absence were developed as means to secure a sense of plentitude, power, and substantiality:

Nation-states are invented through a process of fetishistic misrecognition whereby debt, absence, and powerlessness are transubstantiated mainly through class exploitation at home and war abroad, into wealth, a plenitude of laws and institutions, and power, including power in the form of imperial aggrandizement. In economic terms, public credit underwrites this plenitude and power. (Brantlinger 20)

This misrecognition or faith in the notion that future prosperity would follow from the accumulation of debt, or what Brantlinger has called “capitalist religiosity” (29) was—and remains—crucial in the proper functioning of capital. This “transubstantiation” of loss into gain, of negative into positive, was felt in shifting forms of authority and new relationships between subjects and states. More importantly, the wealth and security of the nation became a question of a belief in the substantiality and value of something absent, as the nature of money itself underwent a gradual virtualization during the eighteenth century. Brantlinger notes that both Marx and Simmel discuss the “gradual *dematerialization of money*” throughout the eighteenth century (23). This “transition from real to nominal value in semiology and in economics” (Thompson, *Models of Value* 21) meant that, in effect, money becomes a fetish, in that it has no intrinsic value of its own, but stands for value: “money is a statement of the relationship between credit and debt, a statement of mere *belief* or of absence rather than of any substantial wealth or presence” (Brantlinger 35-36, my italics).²⁸

²⁸ It is outside the scope of this chapter to discuss the connections between Blake’s profession of engraving and money. Morris Eaves has exhaustively discussed the relationship, in both the art and political worlds, of engraving and commerce (see *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy: Art and Industry in the Age of Blake*). G. E. Bentley has offered a précis of the economics of Blake’s printing methods and practices in “What is the Price of Experience? William Blake and the Economics of Illuminated Printing.” A much fuller account of this can be found on Joseph Viscomi’s *Blake and*

Significantly, money forms a sort of figurative parentheses around “The Chimney Sweeper”; money is both prior to the poem (as that which is exchanged for the speaker and Tom) and posterior to it (as the material profit of the successful subjection / subjectification of the sweepers). However, like fathers and labor itself, money is absent in the poem and its import belies its absence: “The Chimney Sweeper” shows that modern capitalist exchange is backed by the strength of a quasi-religious belief in the possibility of a discursive representation of value, magically embodied in paper money (or other paper financial instruments). Thus, the poem cannily avoids the representation of money. In this way, Blake finds money and its role as fetishistic arbiter of value to be a unique representational problem, just as contemporaneous and subsequent political economists have. Like the fathers, whose absence is so important for how the poem presents exchange, money is an absent yet facilitating presence in the poem. Simultaneously cause and effect, money motivates both the sale that inaugurates the speaker’s voice, and the speaker’s hushing of Tom that will bring future spoils. Both an object of faith (in

the Idea of the Book. However, it is interesting to note that the engraving of plates for banknotes was considered the paradigm of the “servile copying” required of engravers. In an important historical recovery of Blake’s engraving training and methods, Robert Essick discusses Blake’s endorsement of a fellow engraver Alexander Tilloch’s process “for exactly duplicating banknote plates and thereby preventing forgeries” (*William Blake, Printmaker*, 116). He goes on to contrast Blake’s painterly and expressive methods of illuminated printing to the ideal of uniformity and precision—“a mechanical uniformity that found its ultimate and most artistically deadening expression in banknote engraving” (120). Essick’s investment here is in recovering Blake’s involvement and training in engraving from its reputation as “servile copying,” and not worthy of fine artistic status, an issue Blake wrestled with in the form of the Royal Academy and its structure of inclusion and exclusion. I am more interested here in the ways the representational offices of money are specifically meaningful in Blake’s work, a line of inquiry that would require a wholly different direction than the one Essick takes.

future profit) and lamentation (in the “weep weep weep weep” that both Tom and the speaker utter) money is the primary arbiter of value whose absence suggests its fictional and arbitrary status.

However, the relationship between the subject and the modern capitalist state is mediated by money, and the latter becomes the fetish par excellence and stands in for the lack, in the form of debt, that founds the state. Brantlinger draws heavily on Slavoj Žižek’s notion of how, in the quotidian act of exchanging money for commodities, subjects engage in a pathological act of fetishistic misrecognition. Žižek suggests that the subject is interpellated by his or her participation in the “money-fetish” in which money’s status as a contingent, merely symbolic commodity is forgotten and is treated as if it were intrinsically valuable. Both Brantlinger and Thompson—along with other representatives of the “new economic criticism”—argue that cultural production in this period can be understood as an exploration of and compensation for the transition from real to nominal value, and the requirement that in our economic activity we misrecognize this fact. Thus, the new, virtual experience of money, debt, and public credit in the eighteenth century produced or constructed the modern subject as a paradoxically material effect of this process of dematerialization and its misrecognition.²⁹

²⁹ Paper instruments of finance represented a virtualization of property, which produce the “autonomous subject as the ‘real’ presence beyond discourse—an accomplishment of commercialist ideology” (Moore 89). Peter de Bolla argues that the discourses of the sublime and immense debt, which both emerge between 1756-63, constituted “the autonomous subject, a conceptualization of human subjectivity based on the self-determination of the subject and perception of the uniqueness of every individual (de Bolla 6). The modern subject emerges as an effect of debt, as an “excess or overplus of discourse itself; as the remainder, that which cannot be appropriated or included within the present discursive network of control” (6).

“The Chimney Sweeper,” however, proposes a unique intervention in these critics’ discussion of the fetishistic effects of credit, debt, and absence as the source of the wealth of nations. By specifically focusing on the construction of the *lumpen* laborer and not that of the bourgeoisie who has access to and to some extent mastery over the acts of exchange—and hence misrecognition—constitutive of modern commercialist society, the poem suggests another type of economic subject, one that invokes but calls into question the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the canonical eighteenth-century economic bourgeois subject. Less a “real” or substantial effect of sublime debt and the misrecognition of money, the laboring subject is excluded from interpellative commercial agency (as an object and not subject of exchange) and symbolic but inherently empty sources of value (money and fathers). I have maintained that the effectivity of the voice in the poem performs and highlights a sort of ur-exchange that establishes permanent debt and thus articulates the laborer according to it; on another level, and in ways that scholars have not yet recognized, the voice in fact interpellates the reader into a crucial misrecognition or misreading of the poem, one that, among other things, insists on the appearance of the sweepers as subjects that open and pose the question of liberation and oppression. Blocked from an active role in exchange but repeatedly subjected to it, the sweepers surreptitiously pass along the role of misrecognition to the reader, whose investment in reading the poem according to the matrix of liberation or oppression requires a misreading of the agentive subject of the poem.

The principle misreading I'm referring to is the status of Tom Dacre. If he is understood to be the figure of debt and lack in the poem, if we view him as a figure who is speechless and who is symbolically castrated as part of his ritualistic initiation, it is important to question what it might mean that the critical consensus maintains that the poem is really "about" Tom, and in particular queries whether his waking situation at the poem's conclusion is one of enhanced oppression or spiritual liberation despite material enslavement. Wherever critics fall on the liberation / oppression problematic, Tom's centrality for critics is never questioned, nor is Tom's veritable "substantiality" as a meaning-bearing subject.³⁰ Even though he never speaks in the poem, he "expresses" the poem's political economy and its "moral."³¹ Criticism may be ambivalent about the meaning of Tom's dream, but that it is Tom's dream and, in a larger sense, Tom's poem, is taken to be an immediate truth; crucially, this is a view that the poem seeks to encourage and in fact depends on. After all, the speaker effectively disappears from the poem after the first two stanzas; in fact, one could argue that this disappearance or elision occurs even earlier, at the end of the first stanza. Beginning in stanza two, the deictic points away from the speaker's insistent "I" to Tom: "Theres little Tom Dacre..." (5). The statement, "I said," in line 6 signals the reduction of the speaker as a figure who bears individual meaning and history to one that is merely a disembodied voice—

³⁰ I would also argue that the lack of sustained critical commentary on the poem—far from weakening the claim that a consensus of any sort exists—in fact strengthens my contention that the relative silence on the poem in fact expresses and enforces this premature consensus.

³¹ In this way, it is possible to argue that the non-speaking subject Tom ironically stands in for Althusser's "immediate reading" or "expressive" Logos that suppresses or applies pressure upon another meaning that a symptomatic reading must excavate, or hear.

literally and merely a “speaker”—whose independent, speaking status is gradually and subtly elided into the plural and non-individuating “we” or “our” of the final stanza.

This ghosting of the unnamed speaker indeed implies a sort of apparent and symbolic exchange of the speaker for the more satisfying proper name and subject of Tom Dacre. It also seems to warrant the ways the speaker is ignored in the criticism. On the other hand, if the speaker’s “I” becomes “we” through the labor of producing the poem, the proper name of “Tom Dacre” suggests an analogous logic of dispersal and de-individuation. Indeed, just as surely as the poem suggests that it deals with Tom’s subject formation through the speaker’s vocal hail/act of hushing, it also, and far more subtly, performs an analogous labor of desubjectivation. Here it is instructive to note that scholars argue that “Tom Dacre” is a “foundling’s name”³²—a general category that marks this figure as a type or a member of a particularly abject classification (but not necessarily a social *class* per se). The strangeness of the proper name that both points to a discreet individual *and* an undifferentiated mass, a *lumpen* mob that both fascinated and deeply troubled Blake’s London,³³ is exacerbated by the dreamed-of list: “thousands of sweepers Dick, Joe, Ned & Jack” (11). Unlike the title of the poem, which presents a singular

³² Lincoln (*Songs of Innocence and of Experience* 152) and Benziman (174) follow Gardner (*Blake* 78-79) on this point, which is based mainly on the historical existence of Lady Ann Dacre’s Alms Houses.

³³ E. P. Thompson provides a useful summary of the varieties of mob violence in the period (*Making of the English Working Class* 62-76). Linda Colley claims that, “The last quarter of the eighteenth century and the first quarter of the nineteenth witnessed rapid and disruptive population growth in Britain’s industrial regions, a dramatic spread of radical ideas and political organisation among the artisanal classes [i.e., Blake’s class], and sharp and often violent expressions of discontent over food, labour conditions and taxation” (284).

type (“*The Chimney Sweeper*”) as a representative of a group wholly defined by their labor, and moreover presents this subsumption of the many into one and identification of the laborer with his or her labor as natural and inevitable, line 11 presents a generalized multitude (the “thousands”) as a collection of real individuals with proper names. However, the title and line 11 converge when we consider that the poem ultimately shrinks from or abnegates the office of naming, and performs instead the impossibility of individuating or subjectifying this multitude. Like Tom Dacre’s name, the list “Dick, Joe, Ned & Jack” simultaneously suggests and denies the conference of individuality, as we realize that not only is the list necessarily incomplete, but that these too are mere “foundlings’ names,” names that both enact the humanistic labor of naming those that history has deemed nameless, but also and in the same gesture generalize and obscure the bearers of these names.³⁴

The feint that Blake performs here is that while readers may think they are exchanging a disembodied and expendable speaking “I” for the full subjectivity of Tom Dacre as the meaning-bearing subject of the poem, in fact this exchange repeats the exchange of Tom’s hair for vocal consolation in the second stanza: Both exchanges suggest that what is taken away forever (the hair, the speaker’s “I”) can’t be spoiled, and that perhaps in the poem’s logic of loss, preservation or purity can

³⁴ Alicia Ostriker has noted the extra stress in lines 11-13, which she maintains gives an effect of “enthusiasm” and “wide-eyed eagerness.” More to my point, however, this rhythmic irregularity presents formally what I suggest the tension between the “thousands” and the four named individuals. Just as these lines present a particular problem of individuating a multitude, of counting and naming this historically situated mass, Blake’s metrics also imply an unruly and excessive arithmetic. Blake’s general interest in naming is revealed in poems such as “*The Lamb*” and “*Infant Joy*.”

only be guaranteed by this ruthless logic of subtraction.³⁵ But loss and preservation are not mutually exclusive in the traumatic economics of this poem; the speaker's trauma is in fact preserved and maintained by his construction of Tom. At first glance, the traumatic scene the speaker recalls in stanza one—in which he “Could *scarcely* cry weep weep weep weep.” (3, my italics)—is exchanged or replaced with the far more consolatory scene of stanza two, in which Tom functions as a foil for the speaker's mastery and symbolization of this prior trauma that, when it occurred,

³⁵ The dialectics of loss and preservation is a consistent concern in Blake. Blake's inquiry into production and productivity extends into a concern with cause and effect, which must reckon with very basic questions concerning what decays, what changes, what remains the same, and why. The Proverb of Hell, “Eternity is in love with the productions of time,” exhibits a keen and rhetorically compact sense of the complex nature of the problem (7: 10; E 36). *The Book of Thel* could be read as an extended analysis of the problem of permanence and regeneration in the face of decay: “But Thel is like a faint cloud kindled at the rising sun: / I vanish from my pearly throne, and who shall find my place.” (2: 11-12, E 4). *Milton* and *Jerusalem* transform these earlier formulations to an ontological concern to perceive and thus create a core of experience that resists loss or disintegration. One of the main actions of *Jerusalem* involves Los's project to build Golgonooza, Los's great project city of art, redeemed visionary London:

Los builded Golgonooza,
 Outside of the Gates of the Human Heart, beneath Beulah
 In the midst of the rocks of the Alters of Albion. In fears
 He builded it, in rage & in fury. It is the Spiritual Fourfold
 London: continually building & continually decaying desolate!
 (J 53: 15-19; E 203)

Earlier in *Jerusalem*, Los stalks around the walls of Golgonooza and its satellite cities: “And all that has existed in the space of six thousand years: / Permanent, & not lost not lost nor vanishd, & every little act, / Word, work, & Wish, that has existed, all remaining still” (13: 59-61; E 157-158).

In the earlier poem *Milton* Los proclaims,
 I in Six Thousand Years walk up and down: for not one Moment
 Of Time is lost, nor one Event of Space unpermanent
 But all remain: every fabric of Six Thousand Years
 Remains permanent...

...
 The generations of men run on in the tide of Time
 But leave their destined lineaments permanent for ever & ever.
 (M 22[24] 15-21, 24-25)

the speaker could not subject to the symbolic. Tom's ritual initiation of having his hair shorn is a symbolic castration scene, as I have already mentioned; but, if Tom is a construction of the speaker, the symbolic castration belongs to the latter, as a repetition of the castrating action of the speaker's father selling him into a form of slavery and a life worse than death. While the word "scarcely" emphasizes the pre-linguistic youth of the speaker, sold at a time when he could "scarcely weep," it also penetrates to the basic impetus of the early discourse of political economy in which scarcity was a mobilizing specter.³⁶ The overlapping scene of the speaker's *scarcity* in stanza one—the economic privation that occasions the speaker's sale, the death of the mother and betrayal of the father, and the inability to give voice to and thus symbolize this trauma—is exchanged for the speaker's role as counselor and the "speaker" of the poem.³⁷ The temporal lag between the time of the poem's utterance and the prior scene of trauma measures the gap between the speaker's own

³⁶ The discourse of classic economic thought was motivated by understanding the distribution of goods and wealth within conditions of scarcity, conditions that necessitated the speaker (and perhaps Tom as well) being sold in the first place. Dennis Welch has read Blake's poems of 1795 (*The Song of Los*, *The Book of Ahania*, and *The Book of Los*) in terms of the famine that gripped Britain in that year, claiming that Blake thought that the most important factors behind the problems of 1795 were the dominant laws of market economics, which had only recently been formed. These laws are based on the notion of finiteness—that finite resources, such as labor, are valued and circulated according to supply and demand ("Economics of Vision" 607). Kurt Heinzelman, discussing *Milton*, suggests that, "Where scarcity and economic calculation are the rule, assurances of abundance must be merely fictions" (121).

³⁷ Harold Pagliaro has read the poem in ways that anticipate some of my concerns. He claims that the speaker's trauma is "too potent emotionally for him to handle, either directly or in terms of rationalization, which would at least make it available to consciousness in a verbally disguised form" (19). Later, he suggests that, "It may be supposed that at the foundation of his unique Selfhood is this loss.... One may understand that important elements of his Selfhood were *abruptly wounded into being*" (19, my italics).

castrating initiation and his ability to symbolize it, the evidence of which is the poem itself. If Tom is less the meaning-bearing subject of the poem than he is the speaker's construction, a means by which to symbolize his own trauma by repeating and displacing it so as to subject it to the symbolic, then not only does the speaker "speak for" Tom, thus interpellating him into the life of the chimney sweeper, but this peculiar speech act is also a repetition in language of the speaker's own trauma. In this way, it partakes of the Freudian and Lacanian notion of deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*). According to art historian Hal Foster, "For Freud, especially as read through Lacan, subjectivity is not set once and for all; it is structured as a relay of anticipations and reconstructions of traumatic events... One event is only registered through another that recodes it; we come to be who we are only in deferred action" (Foster 29). Citing Jean Laplanche's claim that "It always takes two traumas to make a trauma," Foster suggests that the repetition of the trauma recodes the original one, which, until the repetition, strictly speaking has not yet taken place.

The second trauma, namely the speaker's repetition of his induction into life as a sweeper in the oneiric figure of Tom, must be misrecognized as the primary one. Just as subjects are "hailed" by their participation in an exchange the nature of which must be misrecognized, so too the speaker's indictment and involvement of the reader in line 4, an indictment that correctly positions the reader in a role of the subject of exchange, must be misrecognized, ignored. In this way, we fail to see Tom as a construction of the speaker; by reading him as a subject with psychological depth, as a subject who may or may not choose to accept the speaker's and the

Angel's dubious promises, we validate our role as arbiter of critical choice in the "free" marketplace of interpretive options.

At the end of the first stanza the speaker's voice invokes sleep: "in soot I sleep" (4). "I sleep" is less an amplification of the speaker's relationship with the ever-present element of soot; instead it is (quite uniquely) a performative soporific, instantiating what it states through its vocalization. The speaker states, "I sleep," he falls asleep, he dreams, and what results (i.e., Tom) is a product and not the subject of the poem's dreamwork. The dreamwork of the poem works by means of the appearance of accretion, and simultaneously unworks what it seems to accrue in a dispersal that is also an undoing or unmooring of the speaking subject of the poem.

Look again at some of the key lines of the dream:

And so he was quiet, & that very night,
As Tom was a sleeping he had such a sight,
That thousands of sweepers Dick, Joe, Ned & Jack
Were all of them lock'd up in coffins of black,

And by came an Angel who had a bright key,
And he open'd the coffins & set them all free.
Then down a green plain leaping laughing they run
And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.

Then naked & white, all their bags left behind,
They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind.
And the Angel told Tom if he'd be a good boy,
He'd have God for his father & never want joy. (9-20)

The dream offers the appearance of a coherent, cause and effect narrative that can be easily summarized. Nevertheless, the syntax of addition and accumulation is powerful here, with the word "and" (or an ampersand) appearing ten times, and "then" (15, 17) arguably functioning less as governing strict causality than as a noun that indicates something occurring after something else within an atemporal

sequence without firmly establishing cause. With its hypnotic and repetitive insistence of conjunctions that don't fully conjoin, the dream in "The Chimney Sweeper" resists the totalization or summation of what is added. And if the elements to be added are the beatific contents of the utopic wish or urge for release, which is surely beyond Tom's ability to linguistically represent and thus can only be condensed into the dream, this release, which is wholly unavailable to Tom in "real" life, can only be counterposed to the solidifying (or stultifying) effects of accumulation.³⁸ In other words, part of what Tom cannot symbolize, but that emerges in the syntactic seams of the dream, is a stalled dialectic between systematization (in both the socio-economic realm and the realm of narrative) and release or dispersal (again, in both realms). The utopian wish evinces an ambivalence or irresolvable tension between the desire for totality and the desire for a dispersal, an undoing so thorough that it threatens (or promises) to do away with the physical body and the earth's claims upon it: "They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind" (18).

³⁸ Zachary Leader's analysis of the illuminated print of the poem notes the "technical or formal limitations" of the relationship between text and design, which force the image of the rejoicing sweeps to a narrow strip at the bottom of the page. "As a result, sweep-heaven seems neither airy, light, nor particularly pleasant" (44). Suggesting that Blake could have split the poem onto two pages, which would have allowed him to represent the sweeps' dismal real-life plight on the first page and on the second page "a heaven every bit as joyous as lines 15 to 18 describe" (44), Leader misses the opportunity to read the compactness of the visual design as an indicator of how the condensations of the dreamwork work their way into the visual data of the plate. Moreover, Leader also misses how the claustrophobic relationship between text and design might inform the poem's anxiety about speaking and silence, in that the lack of negative space seems to crowd out intervening voices while also blocking the possibility of interruptive silences.

Tactics of accumulation and dispersal reveal a restrained paratactic structure in both form and content in the poem. The dream-language uses the fallen language of a unified subject expressing a meaning that exists prior to the words that carry it, but it also offers hints of another language that is not so encumbered, not so determined (or determined in quite the same manner). The figure of the speaker may take on a counselor role, in command of the language he speaks just as he is of the economic uses of the younger sweepers who are his charges. But when the poem presents Tom as a subject, a focal point, and a unified subject, when in fact he is an oneiric construction of the speaker whose misreading the poem dictates, the speaker loses this sense of psycho-economic mastery and self-sufficiency. Language in the dream thus makes use of and opposes subjective expression.

By means of comparison, for Adorno's understanding of Hölderlin, this sort of syntactic interference "represents the sacrifice of the legislating subject itself... The subject's intention, the primacy of meaning, is ceded to language along with the legislating subject" (136). This has two main consequences: it dissolves the illusion that truth would be consonant with the expressive subject, and it dislodges the subject from the position of that which would provide synthesis. In the final instance, it is "language that speaks for the subject, which... can no longer speak for itself" (137). Paratactic poetry—similar to what we see in the dream in "The Chimney Sweeper"—gestures towards a non-coercive unity, but its attainment is illusory, since in a coercive world the idea of a noncoercive sphere of language or

aesthetics is dangerous and risks masking or aestheticizing real oppression. But the illusion must be given form, saved, brought to light, retained, even as it is blocked.³⁹

Marxist aesthetic theory, of which Adorno's parataxis essay is an important instance, has long been engaged in a search for a language that escapes the logic of capital, that undoes the rigid character of alienated speech and the concept of the subject proper to capitalism. In *Labors of Imagination: Aesthetics and Political Economy from Kant to Althusser*, Mieszkowski recalibrates our understanding of the role of language in the discourse of labor in both classical and Marxist economics. For Marx, "the event of labor is not an unassailable, holy occurrence, but an eminently corruptible phenomenon" (131). Prior to the classic forms of alienation Marx describes in texts like the *Manuscripts*, productive activity splits and alienates the subject against itself (132). Labor, far from consolidating and affirming the bourgeois subject, in fact puts the acting subject under erasure, and calls into question whether the activity of labor can be equated with any subject that performs that labor:

[L]abor is never simply an activity of self-confirmation or self-realization. It is always a process of self-externalization and self-

³⁹ There are many varieties of this type of concern in Blake studies. For example, Guinn Batten calls *The Four Zoas* a "nocturnal, secretive labor" produced in "darkness, indolence, and passivity" that implicitly challenges the Protestant work ethic and the capitalism it buttresses (86, 87). Makdisi has claimed that Blakean project represents "a breakdown of the conceptual language through which the fundamental ideologemes of modernity were articulated" (9). Thomas Vogler claims that Blake's language accesses a realm of play that overcomes the fallen dichotomy of rest and labor, a realm akin to Barthes' notion of the pleasure of the text. This realm is to be found in "the *writing* of his text, as writing not yet inscribed in the book 'of' Urizen." This writing is a "mode of praxis, the writing of a full word rather than an univocal word" ("Re: Naming MIL/TON" 174, 175). Essick develops a theory of Blake's "post-apocalyptic" language that would release language from "Urizenic consciousness" (*Language of Adam* 195).

expropriation, to the point that the act of labor is no longer self-evidently the act of a self that performs it. As a result, one cannot simply appeal to labor as a naturally liberating power that can automatically be valorized as a privileged act over and against supposedly mediated or mystified behaviors. (132)

The productivity of labor calls into question the very basis of praxis philosophy; the ability of human beings, through their productive activity, to create themselves and, in a less alienated imaginary, to see themselves reflected in their labor and transform themselves through transforming the material world. The ideal of self-transformation through Marxist praxis clashes with this, more radical, view that severely tests the claim that the laboring self ever acts “by, in, or of itself” (133-4).

Ultimately, Mieszkowski’s understanding of Marx’s theory of labor returns to the peculiar function of language in (or *of*) capitalism. The dominance of the paradigm of production entails a prisonhouse of the language of commodities and equivalence; this language is structured according to a paradigm of propositional identity, “in which sentences are articulations of attributes (accidents) connected to a fixed object, the ‘subject’ of the sentence” (138). Mieszkowski (and, to a lesser extent, Adorno) holds out the possibility of a Marxian “language of real life” that counters the language of capital by somehow unhinging the speaking subject from being defined by its attributes, forging a more “‘human’ language... not defined by words that take their places in sentences” (140).⁴⁰ In this language, “thought is set

⁴⁰ On Adorno and the language of “life,” see Morgan, *Adorno’s Concept of Life*. Morgan argues that Adorno describes an aporetic situation in which life as *Erlebnis* or lived experience is caught between the claims of conceptual knowledge and those of immediate, phenomenal apprehension. This impasse in philosophy of life is an expression of an impasse in the life of society itself, a “lack of rationality within capitalist society itself” (6).

adrift" (139) from a subjective presence who "owns" his or her utterances as a means of confirming itself as a self and author of its activities.

The speaker's counsel that what is lost cannot be spoiled suggests that loss is simultaneously preservation, and the Angel's promise to have God as father figure in return for good behavior implies a sort of ethics of moral accounting. Both sentiments are parallel in the sense that both employ a fallen language of equivalences, a language that is inflected and determined by a parallel economic logic. But the formal structure of accumulation and dispersal offers a counter-claim: that the laboring subjectivity in the poem, articulated out of traumatic loss and promises that only produce debt, and dispersed in a paratactical language that eschews causality and narrative, is in fact under erasure. Marc Shell has noted that "Money... is like modern commercial language; both are perversely equalizing common denominators in a one-dimensional society, depending on a false sense of 'universal equality'" (Shell 122). The language of "The Chimney Sweeper" is deeply structured by the language of capitalism, even as it seeks (and perhaps fails to find) alternatives to this language. In a different context, David Wagenknecht has offered the concept of "pastoral ignorance" to capture how the state of innocence allows an occasional respite from the harshness of the state of experience even though the former can't be described in language that is not already contaminated by the latter (*Blake's Night* 76-77). In any case, "The Chimney Sweeper," a poem of innocence, shows how the question of respite or release is in fact an effect of contaminated language: The peculiar double bind of "pastoral ignorance" pertains not as much to the poet who must use "contaminated" language to speak of the possibility of purity;

it more properly describes the position of the reader, whose contamination is in fact required in the poem's production of meaning, a point I will return to presently.

Dreaming—a topic of great interest for Blake throughout his life⁴¹—is important in the poem because it secures and calls into question the coherence of narrative and of subjectivity. There is good reason to think that Blake was interested in dreaming in part for how in dreams the language of narrative coherence breaks down. As a poet who was also a visual artist, Blake was intrigued by the conflict between narration (temporality) and the image (spatiality) and the ways this distinction might be blurred, and the ways it remains stubbornly in place.⁴² Understanding how this works in “The Chimney Sweeper” requires a sort of act of faith on the part of the reader, a faith that counters and also incorporates our guilt as readers, a concept my earlier comments about Althusser have addressed.

By faith I do not mean a sense of religiosity, but a belief that a poem is and is not

⁴¹ The most notable example is *The Four Zoas*, which Blake provisionally subtitled “A Dream in Nine Nights.” Wilkie and Johnson dispute the notion that dreaming in the *Zoas* is “crucial in itself” 203; drawing on Wilkie and Johnson, Freeman claims that *The Four Zoas* itself is a dream “containing that of Albion, who has long since awoken” (35). Much of the manuscript of the *Zoas* was written on the back of page proofs for Blake's incomplete commission to engrave illustrations for a deluxe edition of Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*, a canonical example of the popular eighteenth-century sub-genre of “dream poetry.” Poems such as “The Angel” (*Experience*), “A Dream,” and “Cradle Song” (*Innocence*) also incorporate dreaming in significant ways.

⁴² There is a massive body of scholarship in Blake studies regarding the relationship between text and image. Principle among them is W. J. T. Mitchell's landmark text, *Blake's Composite Art*. In a later book, however, Mitchell notes that, “Blake... saw clearly the sexual and political foundations of the abstractions that define the battle lines between artistic genres [e.g., painting (space) and poetry (time)]” (*Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* 115). The cause and effect relation Mitchell describes might also be reversed, suggesting that the aesthetics of space and time are themselves in the service of politics, and thus an argument can be made for how the dreamwork in Blake violates these lines—Mitchell describes them as akin to geo-political borders (104-105)—for political purposes.

what the text “expresses.” It is also about what the text (and its imposing layers of re-readings) represses. The Hegelian error of reading a text’s immediate truth as it (apparently) unproblematically and in full voice expresses is not an error per se, at least not in the sense that it is a mistake that might be corrected. In my understanding, the Hegelian error is part of the poem’s truth, part of what it indicts, and without which the poem would teach us very little indeed. In this sense, when we shift the emphasis on “I sleep” to read it as performative rather than descriptive, the truth of the Hegelian reading emerges as that which has repressed or submerged another reading that implicitly indicts the dominant one. Blake’s concern with dreaming as an uncanny experience is, I think, due in large part to its parallels with a sort of reading which, had it been articulatable in his day, he would have been sympathetic with. As Ellen Rooney has asserted in an important article on Althusser, “guilt is the productive relation” (197). By this she means to describe how necessarily partial, tentative, and even “unnatural” reading is:

Althusser stresses the open structure of reading as a way of acknowledging the interplay among readers, readers past and readers to come, and with them histories and politics. Hence his view of reading as an endless strategy of doubling, a structure of repetition that marks both our historical situatedness... and our political interestedness. (Rooney 197)

These determinative matrices are productive in that without them, no reading can take place. They also produce gaps and silences in texts, silences that are also productive in that they encourage the reproduction of that situatedness and interestedness that structure the dominant problematic.

In other words, the poem counts on us to misread it, and misread it we do, as dutiful (re)producers of Blake. Sleep is uniquely productive in Blake in general and

more particularly in “The Chimney Sweeper.” It in fact cleaves the poem in two, and depending on one’s guilt, offers two readings. On the one hand, there are a great many reasons to misread “I sleep.” We feel the speaker drop off the edges of the poem, and we sense his desubjectivation as the first person blends into the second, and then slips into the third at the end. We are compelled by the figure of Tom Dacre, seduced by his proper name, by his oneiric coalition with the “thousands,” and by his conversation with the Angel. And we wonder whether his waking situation bespeaks liberation or deeper oppression, or some entwining of both. But we inevitably fail to question or even articulate the political economy of this reading.

Just as repression silences that which by virtue of its silencing ensures the healthy production and functioning of the agentive subject, “The Chimney Sweeper” draws us into a reading that supports and reassures the critic of his or her critical agency in a marketplace of ideas. The speaker, however, as he recalls his traumatic past, indicts the reader, an indictment that some critics register, but refuse to read: “So *your* chimneys I sweep” (4, my emphasis).⁴³ This phrase subtly implicates the reader into the speaker’s trauma, positioning us in the role of the careless patron who unthinkingly participates in his physical and psychological oppression.

The speaker’s first word (for us) is “When,” highlighting the tension between his fully articulate subjectivity in the present, which is determined and structured

⁴³ Heather Glen has argued that in this line, “the polite reader is unemphatically but inescapably implicated” (*Vision and Disenchantment* 96; also see Pagliaro 20.) Nelson Hilton goes a bit further, suggesting a possible “apocalyptic” reading of this implication, namely that the “thousands” might wreak vengeance on “the poem’s art-purchasing, house-possessing... readers” (“Blake’s Early Works” 200).

according to a past defined by trauma, loss, prior to language. The speaker's initial and primary function as speaking subject is to condemn us, to mark us as guilty. He is in this sense not just the speaker of the poem; he is in some nebulous larger sense "*the* speaker" in general. Just as the speaker is a synecdochal condensation of the drama of speaking and "speaking for," we as (guilty) readers synecdochally stand in for the system of oppression and are thus interpellated as subjects defined by our role as representing a larger social system of oppressive labor, class division, and scarcity. More than this, as the poem subjects and subjectifies us as guilty, it also requires a misrecognition or misreading that allows the submerged reading to emerge. In this sense, as readers of the poem, our misreading that heralds our mastery of hermeneutic choice in the marketplace of interpretations is analogous to the one required of economic subjects in the realm of capitalist exchange. While the latter must misrecognize the empty form of money as substantial and the real measure of value, the former must misrecognize the oneiric figure of Tom as real, substantial, and the measure of the value of interpretations in the critical marketplace. This helps naturalize the production of the laborer, and gives us the satisfaction of critical choices as the interpretive laborers who produce the object of knowledge called "The Chimney Sweeper."

At this point it is possible to return to history—in this instance, not the real historical conditions of the lowly sweepers, but the discursive framing these conditions take in criticism. The scholarly rhetoric about this background both hints at the spectral subject of labor and its production that I have been tracing in this poem, and it heuristically gestures toward a constitutive tension or impasse in

current thinking about Blake's political economy that the rest of this dissertation will continue to explore. An early essay by Martin Nurmi is symptomatic: the sweepers lived in conditions that were "worse than animals" (16); Tom's induction into this life "changes him into a different, somehow subhuman creature" and profession "'cuts [the sweepers] off from all society'" (Nurmi, citing Tooke 18 n.18). Going well beyond merely stating the truism that this life and form of labor was exploitative and horrific, scholars gravitate toward a deeper, more thoroughgoing sense of subjective destitution: "[T]heir humanity has been all but completely obscured. They live in a world of unrelieved blackness" (19). Harold Bloom has noted that, "The black coffins are at once confining chimneys and the black ragged forms of the sweeps, in the death of the body which has become their life" (*Blake's Apocalypse* 43). Andrew Lincoln similarly claims that Tom sees his mortal existence as "a form of death" (1991 152). Is it strange that critics sense that there is something not quite human about Tom, something ghostly, spectral, zombie-like? Nurmi goes on to suggest a metamorphic change in which they die into their revenant natures: They "become... what they seem to be: creatures so different as to have *no claims on humanity*" (20, my italics). In this discourse, Tom Dacre and others like him become a ghostly (or ghastly) presence of labor in the poem, a nightmare of the laboring subject. As a reserve army of dead labor, in attempts to describe them they take on an unsettling resemblance to the living dead, a remnant or a revenant and little more.

How are we to understand the critical insistence on the inhuman or ghost-like resemblance of the historical sweepers? Why do scholars routinely note that

these laborers evince a certain zombie-like, walking dead character? What is Blake's point by "ghosting" this non-class of worker, and why does Blake's most explicit treatment of the production of the subjectivity of the laborer involve this more subterranean undoing of the very same subject position? Does Blake's poem flesh them out or finish them off?

There is something oddly excessive about this critical insistence that goes well beyond the historical representation of oppression. In these unruly and excessive instances, we can glimpse criticism inching past its dualism between liberation and oppression, into territory that suggests a link, however tenuous, between the peculiar economies of the poem—its staging of exchange, accumulation, and debt—and the ghastly (non-)subject of capital in the figure of the chimney sweeper.

Chapter Four:
“[T]he times are return’d upon thee”: Primitive Accumulation, Repetition, and “life
itself” in *America a Prophecy*

The understanding of “The Chimney Sweeper” advanced in the previous chapter suggests that scholars have not yet confronted the abject character of the chimney sweeper (as well as the abjecting work of the poem itself), a character that they nevertheless insist upon historically.¹ Critics cannot account for the peculiarly excessive nature of the sweepers,² and by extension, the excessive debt the poem produces and passes along to the reader. To the extent that my reading of the poem may help account for the poem’s unique economies, I am also motivated by a

¹ The general logic of exclusion, return, and disgust that describes my use of the notion of the abject is informed by Julia Kristeva’s *The Powers of Horror*. Though her focus is on the maternal body, Kristeva’s notion that the abject is an experience of a border or boundary, and that, like a corpse, “is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part”; it “disturbs identity, system, order” (4). She goes on to claim that the abject is what is “jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side” (69). From this position outside the symbolic, the abject and the reactions it provokes—both intense horror and attraction—nevertheless threatens its boundaries. Ultimately, for Kristeva, the operations of the abject as the sign of the forbidden and defiled lead one to a place where meaning collapses and the possibilities for a “great demystification of Power (religious, moral, and verbal)” can take place (210).

² In his biography of Blake, Peter Ackroyd calls “The Chimney Sweeper” a “poem of death” and remarkably claims that, “It is clear enough that Tom Dacre will soon die during the course of his work” (125). Putting aside the problems with predicting what will happen to a character outside the lines of the work he appears in, Ackroyd’s point evinces a sense of the poem’s morbidity lost in many critics’ work on it. Moreover, speaking to (and to some extent ventriloquizing) the sense of the poem’s excessive nature, Ackroyd also notes that the historical sweepers represented “a potent mixture indeed, of sex and dirt and criminality and desire embodied in the very young” (125).

broader skepticism about commitments to productivity and productivism in scholarship about Blake, as I indicated in my introduction. “The Chimney Sweeper” serves as a stage in constructing an anti-productivist view of labor in Blake, a view that haunts or functions as an economic unconscious of Blake’s “waking” or conscious desire to produce utopia. Even though critics insist on the resemblance of the historical and poetic sweeper—both profoundly discursive constructions—to revenants, ghosts, zombies, or the walking dead, sophisticated readings of the poem may nevertheless repetitively encounter a stubbornly recalcitrant core that obstructs or unravels signification, much like the trauma that reduces expressive speech to weeping, or that dooms one to (s)weep forever. Resisting our desires for the closure of meaning and allegorical attribution, the sweepers become a profoundly negative figure for the refusal of access to meaning, the refusal of allegorization of trauma, and the refusal of the logic of growth and eventual fruition that the utopian gesture seems to require.

Hostile to our desires to fill the void of language that nevertheless subjectivizes, the sweepers enact what I describe as the difficulty of assigning to Blake a “politics” or “political project.” In other words, scholarly attempts to read the poem according to the matrix of freedom or bondage inevitably attribute to the poem a stable, “live” subject that subtends these ontological-political categories; this subject is the very sort of subject that the specter of a swarm of “thousands” of besooted/blackened zombie children roaming the streets of London resolutely is

not.³ The youth of the sweepers is not just historical verisimilitude on Blake's part: the promise and innocence of childhood in general functions in the poem as a false promise of growth and biological, economical, political, and even interpretive progress. This maps onto the poem's false promises of spiritual redemption for originary debt that belies the surface narrativity of the poem that persists, as if negatively anagogical, as a false figure for the possibility of the political in general.

If "The Chimney Sweeper" offers insight into the construction of the laboring subject for Blake, his later, more explicitly political and historical work, *America a Prophecy* (1793), continues and expands upon a range of themes set forth in the earlier lyric. Both poems have been read, fairly exclusively, as meditations on Blake's approach to the duality of freedom and oppression. If crushing economic necessity brings about the sweepers' sale into slavery, the colonists in *America* are also depicted as victims of Britain's economic oppression and exploitation.⁴ Both poems figure dreaming as a source of possible release from oppression, though in either case the dreams result in highly ambivalent states of apparent renewal and regeneration: Dreaming as an escape from the bleakness of damaged life functions in both works as an analogue to rising from the grave, itself an ambivalent figuring of utopian regeneration. Conjuring the dead becomes a dialectically ambiguous figure for both liberation and a horrific return of the dead—a sort of uniquely

³ Later in this chapter I will touch on *America's* invocation of the "multitude," a word that in the context of the poem refers to British soldiers (*A* 15:5; *E* 57); in Saree Makdisi's work on the poem in *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s*, "multitude" refers to the mass of laborers who have powerfully banded together in a dissolution or "detonation" of individual subjectivity.

⁴ On the father/child issue in *America* and the revolutionary context, see Behrendt, "This Accursed Family': Blake's *America* and the American Revolution."

Blakean crystallization and literalization of the Marxian notion of dead labor.⁵ Both poems partake of the common symbolism in which nakedness is an attribute of apparent liberation and renewal; more importantly, both poems exhibit a more general concern with coverings (or obscuration) and their absence (whether as exposure or revelation).⁶

Most scholars agree that *America* enjoys unique importance in discussions of Blake's political economy and his thought regarding the production of political and economic utopia. However, there is fundamental disagreement about the relative success or failure of the poem in doing so.⁷ The fact that readings of the politics of

⁵ Marx's well-known obsession with ghosts, vampires, werewolves, and so on as metaphors to describe the workings of capital, makes the connection of the sweepers, as one of the most exploited group of the laboring class, with the walking dead, seem less strange: "Capital is dead labor, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks" (*Capital* 257). Derrida.

⁶ Discussing plate 6 of *America*, Steven Behrendt has noted that, as if an ideal state of desire, "The nakedness toward which Blake's freedom fighters all advance held special significance in the antinomian tradition as an indicator of the new, regenerate humanity which had put off the old, fallen Adam in order to go forth in the absolute equality of unconcealed and undissembling innocence" ("History" 395). Behrendt's comments are relevant also for the scene of nakedness in the dream of "The Chimney Sweeper."

⁷ Erdman notes that plate 6 of *America* is a "paraphrase of the Declaration of Independence" and that the poem implies that "in 1780 the people of England rose up in a demonstration of independence, dancing the dance of insurrection (apocalyptic self-sacrifice) to save the Nations (Blake's term in *America* for the Colonies)" (*Prophet* 10). Later he describes the end of the poem as showing "The revolt of Energy against the restraining Reason of kings would open all the gates to Paradise and to the perception and creation of Eternal Delight" (209). D. W. Dörrbecker claims that in *America*, "the hopeful visions of resurrection, redemption, and liberation [e.g., plate 6] define a *telos* for the historical processes here interpreted in the terms of Blake's emerging mythology" (34). Michael Ferber calls Blake "one of the great poets of liberty in all its forms" in the context of discussing plate 6 of *America*, and claims that, "Blake's great usefulness today... is as a phenomenologist of liberation" (*Social Vision* 125, 112). In contrast, Robert Maniquis calls *America* an "ambivalent prophecy, a poem partially self-fragmented"

America and “The Chimney Sweeper” share a commitment to unpacking the dichotomy of freedom and oppression—what I am calling the “two economies” model of reading Blake—is perhaps the broadest and most powerful element shared by the poems. Moreover, just as the absence of labor paradoxically marks its semantic presence in “The Chimney Sweeper,” the role of labor in the oppression of the colonists and their imagined liberation in *America* are similarly marked by absence and lack. This chapter attempts to account for and understand this constitutive absence or lacuna in the political economy of *America*.⁸

not only poetically, but also in its political stance (Maniquis 388-9). John Howard seems to concur, claiming that until the Americans refuse to respond to Albion’s Angel’s war trumpets, “the prophecy has developed the opposition of freedom and tyranny by a series of dramatic oppositions in dialogue and perspective... The remaining portion, a narrative, shows the forces in conflict” (123). For James McCord, Blake’s goal in *America* was to “expose how dehumanizing all war is... Blake plays down America’s colonial destiny and ‘apocalyptic’ victory, personifies the continent in a strikingly unconventional way, minimizes American heroism and participation in the war, [and] shows how intellectual revolt is more revolutionary and effective than military revolt...” (386). Nicholas Williams suggests that the conclusion of the poem, which involves the Americans giving up their labor, coming together as a multitude, and the recoiling of the Angel of Albion’s plagues, “indicates... a humanizing of history, a grasping of the motive force of history in human hands” (125). This apparent victory is, however, almost immediately contravened by Urizen’s appearance, which marks a mythical re-intervention that quashes the revolutionary wish. Ultimately, in *America* and the other continental prophecies, “The mute blank space between Urizen’s ideological thunders and Orc’s utopian raging stands as the symbol of Blake’s inability to definitively narrativize the conversion from fall to redemption, his inability to maintain the narrative line of progress from ideology to utopia” (132). This sense of ambivalence can also be found in David Simpson’s brief comment on the poem in *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt Against Theory*. While *America* “maintains a relatively straightforward optimism about the birth of a new global political order,” he also notes the troubling role of the rape in the Preludium (160).

⁸ Here might be a good place to summarize the basic plot of *America*. In doing so, I consciously invoke the problem that the “plot” of *America* is itself in question in my chapter and in the criticism more generally. With this in mind, my discussion of the poem might be aided with a basic outline of the plot, however under erasure the notion of plot may be in this context.

America, broadly speaking, is about history, about the poem's own relationship to history, and more particularly to a politically utopian revision of history. *America* is a historical poem—perhaps Blake's most explicitly historical, after *The French Revolution*—referring to political and historical facts and personages of great importance in world history. The reference to utopia here ought to be taken in its discursive as well as political sense, gesturing towards the crucial yet complex role of writing and representational acts in producing qualitative historical change. What does it mean to imagine revolution? What are the forms of representation and representational activity proper to political and

The poem is divided into two sections, a "Preludium" and a "Prophecy." The Preludium opens with a scene of captivity: Orc is in chains, and the "shadowy daughter of Urthona," who remains unnamed and is identified as "the nameless female," presides over his captivity. Orc breaks his chains and it is strongly implied that he rapes the female. This act occasions a speech of recognition on the part of the female, who does not reappear in the Prophecy itself. In her ambiguous speech that concludes the Preludium in most copies, the female obliquely associates Orc with Jesus, and a few lines later describes her pain as "eternal death, and the torment long foretold" (2: 8, 9, 17). The Prophecy section abruptly shifts scenes from the mythical realm to the historical conflict between Britain and the American colonies. Washington notes the oppression of the colonies under British rule, which occasions the confrontation of "Albions wrathful Prince" (3:14) and Orc, who offers a stirring speech picturing the liberation of the dead, captives, slaves, and "the enchained soul" and the slave's wife and children (6: 1-12). Orc and the Angel engage in a dialogue that, among other things, involves a recognition and description of Orc's characteristics from both figures' perspectives, and the Angel sounds his "war-trumpets & alarm," an activity that attempts to provoke a response from the Americans, an aim it fails to accomplish. After the defection of "Bostons Angel," the "thirteen Angels," and the British soldiers in the colonies, Albion's Angel releases a plague upon the Americans and their crops. The American citizens give up their daily work and "rush together" (14: 19; E 56) and the plagues are reversed and smite the British. This causes a further defection of British troops and the retreat of the priests, which in turn causes a regeneration of female sexuality and a revision of marriage. As the poem draws to a close, Urizen, who contrasts Orc's fires with frost and ice, appears to obscure his revolutionary fires. The final lines imply that the affairs of America have aroused the fear on the part of foreign monarchies of similar popular actions.

economic revolution? What would it mean to “successfully” represent revolutionary change, and what is the relation between representation in the aesthetic and political realms? *America*, perhaps more so than any other of Blake’s texts, confronts these questions, just as it confronts and interrogates itself as a literary performance. Self-consciously both “about” envisioning political change and the representational acts that this change depends upon, the poem is insistently also a meditation on its own scene of production, on itself as aesthetic labor.

One way that this meditation on the poem’s representational practices and mode of aesthetic production is manifest is in its insistent attention to speech and the problem of speech’s effectivity. As scholars have noted, the action of the poem is largely subsumed into speech, and much of the “narrative” of the poem (the narrative status of the poem is not to be taken for granted) is constituted by various characters delivering oracular monologues.⁹ Yet the predominance of questions regarding *America*’s narrative (whether it has a narrative at all, and if it does, what kind is it, etc.) implies a larger consensus about how the poem, as an investigation of the possibilities of political revolution, is therefore also an inquiry into political and

⁹ William Richey has claimed that, “the poem focuses upon a mere war of words, the trans-Atlantic shouting match between Orc and Albion’s Angel with which Blake imaginatively recreates the Burke-Paine debate. (“The Lion & Wolf shall cease” 199). Tilottama Rajan describes *America* as “a world of pure surfaces in which actors on the world-historical stage put on and take off the apocalyptic discourse of cloud and fire like clothing. They appear, seize the microphone and cease.... [T]hese characters exist only as what they say...” (“(Dis)figuring the System” 395). Peter Middleton has argued that when the characters speak, “The speech is not a demonstration of character as in traditional poetic drama, but a further dimension or boundary or fragmentation that cannot be assimilated into a coherent, localisable narrative illusion. The characters are not, we might say, quite in the same play or on the same stage or even quite all there” (41).

historical time and, by extension, the nature of temporality itself. The issue of radical social, psychological, sexual, political, and economic change depends utterly (as the argument goes) on a certain understanding of time and how history as the lived and shared experience of time operates and moves. The motive force of historical change might be found, it is assumed, in the minutia of narrative time. Critical attention to speech, as language temporalized, materialized, and put into play in the public sphere, thus is a species of the general quest to excavate political signification from the poem's peculiar figurations of time.

However important expressive speech may be to the politics of revolt in *America* (and I will return to this point later), in key instances it is interrupted or confronted by the possibility of its distortion into non-sense. The refusal of significance, or at least the threat of its refusal, haunts *America*. The overriding critical concern with whether *America* "successfully" represents revolution or not therefore misses the point; overwhelmingly the poem is instead concerned with more fundamental—and hence more disturbing—questions: What does it mean to represent revolution in ways that exceed the liberal logic of improvement? What are the conditions of possibility of visualizing utopia? What historical or perceptual forces block such imaginings? Do lines of connection exist between aesthetic visualization and real, historical instantiation of revolutionary upheaval? If the politics, economics, aesthetics, and sexuality of labor are key to any utopian conceptualization, why does labor either appear as the unrepresentable per se or as peculiarly inert, unproductive, issueless?

Though my aim in this chapter will be to address these questions, part of my argument is that the peculiarities of *America* are such that the difficulties the poem has presented to generations of critics cannot be reduced to a productive ambiguity that admits of a plenitude of critical choice among interpretive options.¹⁰ Rather, this ambivalence indicates a sort of underanalyzed stalled dialectic that itself needs critical attention. The choice between liberation and oppression becomes an affirmative screen or veil for a moment of negativity in Blake's work that renders this freedom of choice inoperable. That the political in Blake is rendered broadly as a choice of liberation and oppression is merely an affirmative ideological displacement that ultimately celebrates and reinforces the plenitude of choice in the marketplace of ideas.¹¹

Rather than affirming the position of the critic, this chapter urges that attention be paid to the deposits of negativity in the poem, the articulation of which defy positivist cataloguing or even narrativization in the logic of critical presentation. Indeed, as I will suggest, these deposits are as much produced by a certain type of critical engagement with the poem as they are already manifestly

¹⁰ Behrendt's comment expresses a commonplace assumption of the activation of the imagination the Blake's work supposedly elicits, and the consequently triumphalist position of the critic:

Blake deliberately forces his reader into the process of imaginative creation in the attempt to discover 'meaning' or signification. When none can be established with any real certainty, the reader is cast upon her or his imaginative resources and must be content either to have no definitive meaning or to be courageous enough to posit a reading of her or his own. (*Reading Blake* 115)

¹¹ I discuss this contentious point in my first chapter. In the immediate context, Rajan claims that, "As much as the system [i.e., Blake's mythological system], absolute difference protects the economy of literature and the self-satisfaction it affords the critic" ("(Dis)figuring the System" 383).

there, awaiting critical notice, latent in the artifact that Blake actually produced. Instead, these moments of negativity, which call into question the possibility of the political itself in *America*, require *for their production* a sort of following through or exacerbation of a series of overlapping contradictions that follow from the inert binary that critics tend to prematurely stake their readings of the poem upon—liberation and oppression.

This chapter locates and traces the effects of a negative undercurrent in the poem that countervails, obstructs, and infects *America's* ostensible aim to represent revolutionary historical, political, and economic revolt and renewal. My argument is antagonistic to the notion of a productivist politics oriented to produce utopia—a value nearly universally supported in the criticism, regardless of what side one falls on in the oppression/liberation choice.¹² Even if—or precisely because—Blake's work offers as its goal to "rouse the faculties to act," and if "truth" is aligned "with the contingencies of movement and against the arresting lie of the law," and if Blake's "enthusiasm" entails a sort of "creative political potential of the multitude" and a "fearsome capacity to generate"—if all this activity, amplification, and, above all else, *productivity* articulates Blake's kinesthetic system, then haunting his efforts in *America*—and, I might add, critics' attempts to read *America*—is precisely the opposite: the threat of arrest, decay, stasis, and the breakdown of the sensorium and the subject's capacities for expression—a threat that ultimately may disable the

¹² Michael Ferber has argued that "Blake had no doubts... that the liberation of the world from tyranny had begun in America, was spreading to France, would soon come to England, and would ultimately reach Asia and the scene of man's original enslavement, Africa" (*Social Vision* 74). In this chapter, I'm claiming that it is precisely the effects of primitive violence in these same colonial lands that spreads in *America*.

political itself (see, respectively, Blake's letter of August 23, 1799 (E 702); Goldsmith's "Blake's Agitation" (756-757); and Makdisi's *Impossible History* 296).

In a recent polemic that informs (but remains in the background of) my understanding of *America*, Lee Edelman cites the ideology of "reproductive futurism" as that which preserves the fantasy of the social, of the future—the fantasy that the political itself requires (*No Future* 2). The political, for Edelman, is at bottom an attempt to suture over the lack, based primarily in the constitutive gap in signification, that subjectifies us. Much like the misrecognitions in the economic sphere I discussed in the prior chapter, the very possibility of the political screens the negativity of the signifier and demands the "misrecognition of the self as enjoying some originary access to presence" (8). This fantasy of the end of alienation is the driving force of the political as such, and for Edelman, the idealized figure of the Child stands for this identity, this Imaginary access to unmediated presence, that the political attempts to effect in the future. In this way politics is unthinkable for Edelman without the narrative structuring of experience. Without the Child as figuring past wholeness and the end of the deferral of signification as something that must be reproduced into the future, no politics can exist. Opposed to the narrative desire called the political stands the drives: "intractable, unassimilable to the logic of interpretation or the demands of meaning-production; the drives... carry the destabilizing force of what insists outside or beyond, because foreclosed by, signification" (9). Drives—and, following Lacan, Edelman really means the death drive as an effect of the surplus of signification that undoes the subject—are notably counterposed to the work ethic of producing meaning, the labor of signification, and

the constitution of identity. Against the *telos*-oriented tendency of the desire for meaning, the death drive is marked by a machinic, repetitive insistence without end or goal:

As the name for a force of mechanistic compulsion whose formal excess supersedes any end toward which it might seem to be aimed, the death drive refuses identity or the absolute privilege of any goal. Such a goal, such an end, could never be “it”; achieved, it could never satisfy. For the drive as such can only insist, and every end toward which we mistakenly interpret its insistence to pertain is a sort of grammatical placeholder, one that tempts us to read as transitive a pulsion that attains through insistence alone the satisfaction no end ever holds. (*No Future* 22)

The death drive is manifested in a spectral, haunting repetition that undoes the logic of signification. The spectral and haunting excess figured in the drive’s insistent and violent repetition destroys the “reproductive futurism” of the political and the injunction to “choose life,” and takes the form of *jouissance*, or a self-consuming, desubjectifying pleasure born from a “fantasmic escape from the alienation intrinsic to meaning” (25).

The figural Child, who in Edelman’s view persists as the proleptic, future-oriented ideal of utopian closure (both of the political and of signification, which for Edelman amounts to about the same thing), is rejected in *America* for an abject, violent, and destructive child who, similar to the figure of the chimney sweeper whose life seems more like death, thereby exposes the reproductive futurism and the laborious reproduction of the social that subtends and enables the political as such. Indeed, in *Orc* we are presented with a child that is far more accurately aligned with the drives than with “reproductive futurism.” Thus, as we move from the cynical compensations of “The Chimney Sweeper” to *America*’s revolutionary

imaginary, we witness Blake's political "project" shift from the production of the (abject) subject of politics to an inquiry into the possibility of the political itself. The future, conceived as the ideal temporal projection of what Saree Makdisi has called "life itself," must engage in strenuous acts of displacement of the drives and exorcise these revenants (that stubbornly keep returning) from the narrative of politics. Moreover, as I will discuss shortly, while labor has great importance in Makdisi's argument about how the poem's curtailment or abandonment offers the possibility for new forms of subjectivity and collectivity, the ways that labor is more intimately associated with this destructive force and in fact defies its appearance of abdication in the service of a new, liberated subject demands—insists on—attention.

My own attempt to write about labor in *America* only coalesced late in the process when I realized that the difficulty I was having was not just a simple issue of not knowing enough or not being able to forge certain positive connections; rather it was uniquely constitutive of the enterprise itself and spoke of a deeper failure lodged at the core of the problem. It wasn't that some benighted or politically retrograde critics failed to ask the question, or that I couldn't properly ask it once I committed to try; rather, the problem inhered in the ways the question enforced and participated in its own refusal. Labor is simultaneously central and absent; it obstinately refuses to submit to representability. The status of the political cannot be spoken of in *America* without focusing on it; nevertheless, it stubbornly remains that of which there is nothing that can be said. Labor is precisely that which cannot be represented in *America*. In the gap produced by *this* refusal, what opens up is a

repetitive, iterative structure that, I argue, impedes the pursuance of the nature of the political economy of *America*.

A range of effects issue from this structure. If Blake's poem is, as most critics insist, about what moves history, what causes historical and revolutionary change, how to represent this change, and the relation (causal or otherwise) between this act of representation and the change itself, labor's resistance to representation suggests that there is a level at which Blake's poem works against its ostensible political aims. If the antinomy of oppression and liberation is not only refused but also seen as an ideological suturing of a deeper negativity associated with labor, then labor becomes a source of trauma in the theory, a traumatic instance logically prior to the antimony it produces in order to sustain itself. This debilitating trauma then articulates insistently a series of repetitive symptoms.

This chapter, consequently, attempts to draw out and exacerbate these symptoms rather than "cure" or resolve them. After discussing some key criticism, I will focus on the ways that the scene of mythical violence and trauma in the poem's Preludium is a repetition that iterates throughout the rest of the poem's description of the American Revolution, a repetition that thwarts the poem's attempt to articulate a future for revolutionary change and politics (a repetition that is, incidentally, repeated in the debilitating trauma in the theory).¹³ As a poem

¹³ In his introduction to the Blake Trust edition of the Continental prophecies, Dörrbecker claims that Blake "intended to uncover and examine the deeper structural and systematic 'laws' that serve as the foundation of all oppressive power systems in human history" (21). Though he takes his claim in a very different direction than I intend to here, I agree with the basic view of John Beer regarding the Preludium: "Its function is to provide another form by which Blake can gear history to mythology" (*Blake's Humanism* 110). Williams (*Ideology and Utopia in the*

obsessed with representation, with how things are viewed and spoken of, *America* is also about the corrosion of representation in history in favor of a pestilential dead repetition. As I will explain further, the violent rape in the Preludium will be linked to Marx's concept of primitive accumulation in order to show that traumatic labor conditions and encodes a history that refuses the future-oriented teleology that the political depends on and instead initiates a repetitive, non-productive, destructive, nihilistic temporality.¹⁴

At this point, it is important to highlight the peculiarities inherent in the discourse of labor in *America*. Makdisi's *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* discusses how Blake's narrative disruptions in the poem contribute to a boundless affirmation of life, which primarily entails a life without labor. Labor has a broadly narratological character, Makdisi implies, in that for him both labor and chronological, cause-and-effect narrative are ontologically determinative, and therefore the abdication of labor in the poem mirrors the poem's formal disintegration of narrative structure.¹⁵ If the consolidation of capitalism's hegemony entails a restructuring, re-organization, and management of time, in the sphere of the literary this takes on the form, for Makdisi, of narrative

Poetry of William Blake) and Wright (*Blake, Nationalism, and the Politics of Alienation*) also provide useful views of the relation of myth to history in *America*.

¹⁴ Ian Balfour has noted the repetitive nature of history in *America*, though his broader aim is to secure a notion of the role of prophecy in Blake's political work. Balfour's view that Blake "rehearses the repetitive history of oppression in order that *that* history not be repeated: The recognition or remembering is posited as a key moment in the trajectory of liberation" (139) makes clear the liberatory gesture informing Balfour's, but not my own, account.

¹⁵ See Makdisi's *Impossible History* 161.

determination.¹⁶ Insisting that *America* denies linear or progressive temporality, he argues that it must be viewed instead as having no coherent teleological narrative whatsoever (see 31-2).

Makdisi's insistence on the lack of chronologically linear narrative determination is associated causally with Blake's purported desire to reveal a freedom of determination by labor. In turn, this freedom from determination by labor unlocks the slave in plate 6 from not only his literal chains, but also the figurative ones that bind together a self-sufficient, coherent, sober, industrious, productive subject of the kind enlightenment thinkers from Locke through Paine proffered as the basis of democratic liberty:

The slave rising from his labors at the mill in *America* can be seen on the one hand to be escaping the despotic confines of the site of organized production; but on the other hand, he can also be seen to be escaping the equally despotic confines of individual selfhood. Freedom in either case involves an escape from the confines of reified finitude and into a joyous and unrestricted form of being. (132)

The ability of the Americans to come together as a multitude or community is for Makdisi a direct *causal effect* of giving up their labor, as depicted in plate 14: "It is only when they cease... their individual occupations... that the fierce rushing collective is brought into being" (39). Makdisi concludes his discussion of *America* by noting that Blake's illuminated works "must now be read as celebrations of

¹⁶ See *Impossible History*, e.g., 110-112. For one of the most foundational accounts of time and new forms of industrial production instantiated by capitalism, see E. P. Thompson's "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism." See Chapter 9 of Marx's *Capital*, entitled "The Rate of Surplus Value," (and Marx's critique of Senior) for a fascinating example of the role of the management of labor time in the creation of surplus value (320-339).

freedom from the mill with all its deadening wheels, the mill of work, the mill of unitary subjectivity, the mill which threatens to consume *life itself*" (154, my italics).

"Finished for life" was Makdisi's succinct (and unwittingly apt) phrase for the deformed and abject figure of the chimney sweeper; I contrast it here with another that Makdisi repetitively stresses, and that stands as a sort of unacknowledged transcendental signifier for his reading of *America*: "life itself." In Makdisi's view, the mill of labor and ontological determination¹⁷ is diametrically opposed to "life itself," while the "production of life itself" is the central point of Blake's work throughout the 1790s; indeed, we find that "Life is production, both material and immaterial" (263). Finally, Makdisi claims that freedom for Blake involves "the power to *affirm life* as being in common, life as the making of the 'divine body' of which 'we are his members'" (266, my italics).

For Makdisi, "life itself" is an ontological category that casts into the utopian future the sort of Imaginary identifications that only exist in the figural, mythical past, in the Imaginary wholeness—the suturing of subject and object, signifier and signified, word and object, self and other, and so on—for which the ruined figure of the chimney sweeper in the earlier lyric stands as a grotesque parody. In projecting this fantasy of identity into the perpetually deferred future and imagining a sort of millennial closure of "life itself," Blake critics, Makdisi chief among them, construct

¹⁷ In the introduction I discuss Makdisi's views on Blake's mills, encapsulated in the claim that, "[T]he dark satanic mill... is a figure not just of the organization of production in early industrial society, but also of the social, political, and religious constitution of the individual psychobiological subject" (11).

the sort of narrativization that the “political” in Blake (and the “political Blake”) depends upon.¹⁸

It is useful to dwell a bit longer on the implications of Makdisi’s notion of the abdication of labor in the service of this utopian notion of “life itself.” Discussing *America*, Makdisi announces that, “Blake pushes to the foreground... the one question that, with very few exceptions, the radicals of his own time refused to ask—though, as I will show... it is one that obsessed Blake—namely, the question of labor” (33). Moreover, Makdisi simultaneously announces his own intent to reorient critical attention to this selfsame “question,” a question that somehow was marked by silence, invisibility, and suppression. It was, after all, the very question that Blake’s contemporaries and, by extension, most present-day critics, “refused to ask.” That the *other* question was never asked, namely the question about the *reasons* for this suppression (both among Blake’s and Makdisi’s contemporaries), troubles Makdisi very little.

However, Makdisi’s approach is characterized by an uncanny repetition. Just as this dynamic of suppression and re-emergence of the question of labor characterizes Blake’s position in the composition of *America*, this dynamic is also repeated in the criticism; Makdisi’s position uncannily mirrors and repeats Blake’s, in that both seek to “push to the foreground” that which has been largely ignored, in

¹⁸ “Narrative” for Makdisi seems to mean only one kind of linear, cause-and-effect narrative, thus denying that narrative might take other forms and obey different temporal structures. (see 32, where Makdisi implies that “straightforward” narrative is synonymous with narrative in general). However, I am less interested in Makdisi’s rather simplistic notion of narrative and narrative time and more concerned with his re-narrativization of the politics of *America* according to a notion of “life.”

the former instance in debates about political liberty in a revolutionary era, and the latter on critical debates about Blake's position vis-à-vis this era in a later era characterized by the hegemony of historical forces, economic formations, and political ideologies Blake (according to Makdisi) would have vehemently opposed. Makdisi suggests that the role of labor in liberal radical thought actually performs or repeats labor's absence in the poem itself. If the late eighteenth-century radicals refused to ask the question of labor, Makdisi's treatment of it in *America* similarly is marked by an unacknowledged refusal or abdication. When Makdisi seeks to "foreground" the question that others have "refused to ask," we see that this foregrounding is done in the name of labor's abdication and its lack of representation in the poem. The peculiar nature of this "refusal to ask" is that the refusal *insists* despite Makdisi's desire to ask. Beyond the description of this abdication, Makdisi actually has little more to add. As such, Makdisi's work (despite his own intent) implies that labor is simultaneously central and that which cannot be represented except as a determinate absence or lack. A problem of representability,¹⁹ labor functions—in the poem and again in the criticism—as a negative kernel that irrupts in the discourse of and on the poem to interfere with or decay the status of the poem's political economy as articulated according to the

¹⁹ That this is the case is unintentionally implied in the critical work. For just one example, the Makdisi passage quoted several pages earlier invokes the problematics of sighting (and citing) labor in Blake that is signaled though not acknowledged: "The slave rising from his labors at the mill in *America can be seen* on the one hand to be escaping the despotic confines of the site of organized production; but on the other hand, he *can also be seen* to be escaping the equally despotic confines of individual selfhood" (132, my italics). In such a passage, despite Makdisi's affirmative posture, there is a lurking sense that the dynamics of representation within criticism founder upon the question of labor.

oppression and liberation antimony. In fact, the dogged adherence to this antimony, I would suggest, is itself an effect of this corrosive and antagonistic presence in the poetry. An ideological suturing over of the constitutive negativity of Blakean politics, the mirage of critical choice along the oppression/liberation continuum persists because of and not despite the presence of this negativity of the concept of labor.

Largely an affirmative reading of *America*, Makdisi's text avoids an accounting of what Tilottama Rajan has called the "recalcitrant materiality of history" ("(Dis)figuring the System" 390). Labor's negativity performs this "recalcitrant materiality." Yet, despite their substantial differences, Makdisi and Rajan share with many other critics of *America* a sense that the poem is doing something unique regarding temporality. Rajan notes how the time of *America* becomes spatialized in an ontologically and conceptually prior mythical space, and consequently her reading emphasizes the Preludium and its mythical atmosphere.²⁰ Rajan's provocative (and enigmatic) comment that "history is the scene of the system's psychoanalysis, an unconscious or radical alterity inseparable from its prehistory in trauma" (387) can be read as an anticipatory critique of Makdisi's assumption that Blake's mastery of his textual and visual assemblage can

²⁰ In stark distinction to Makdisi and Rajan, Nicholas Williams holds that *America* "represents an attempt to historicize, to narrativize, the explosive revolutionary energies of the past, to channel them for use in the present"—and, one might add, for the re-visioning of the future (117). For Williams, the prophecy section of *America* "represents some of Blake's most narrative verse, the closest he comes... to a novel-in-verse" (121). Wright's recent, important reading of *America* concurs: for her, the poem is a "narrative of a successful revolution" (60). Wright's work draws upon her mentor Rajan's interest on irruptive temporality and the question of primary violence.

adequately explain the travails of historical and narrative time in *America* and other poems. Instead, *America* “reaches back to the prehistorical traumas that encode history, the unseen ‘rifts’ and ‘perturbations’ that produce its furious disorganizations.... [F]unctioning more like the semiotic that precedes the Symbolic order: a way of taking culture back to the overdetermined primal scenes that constitute its contradictions” (Rajan 394).²¹ This “prior” scene of trauma—and not a notion of Blake’s conscious or waking intention to articulate a political position is what “figures the ‘abjection’—the unusable negativity—that haunts his writing” (386). The text and its temporal acrobatics, then, are effects of a spatialized arrest of time in a violent event that prefigures and determines the temporal disjunctures that Makdisi chooses to read as liberatory. The text *he* reads—the text of and for criticism—has been conjured to “cure” this negativity, this trauma, but it is also and primarily a symptom of it.²² In my reading of Rajan, the text of *America* is in fact a repetition, a waking articulation of this space of violent trauma. That the text is in fact called upon (produced) to suture over or block access to this traumatic

²¹ Nicholas Williams arrives at a similar conclusion, in that for him the mythological time of the Preludium stands in distinction to historical time in the Prophecy; yet, in distinction to Rajan, he offers this as an indication of the poem’s failure to successfully represent revolution in historical time, and the failure for the mythical to be converted into the historical. The Preludium is best thought of as “a first draft, whose stationary, ahistorical approach to historical events... is rejected in favor of the temporal, historical approach of the Prophecy” (121). For Williams, the Preludium appears as a failed attempt, akin to the nameless female’s inability to speak until the sudden act of sexual violence that animates her, to represent in order to alter, “historical events.” As I will suggest shortly, however, the Preludium can be read as actually enacting—and not, as Williams’ suggests, foundering upon—this problem of representation, of the conditions of possibility of bringing into view.

²² See Paul Mann’s essay, “Apocalypse and Recuperation: Blake and the Maw of Commerce” for an excellent discussion of the consequences of the distinction between and incommensurability of the Blake text that enables and supports criticism and the text/artifact that Blake produced.

spatiality may or may not account for the overdetermined drive to truth and unity that has become the quest of critics. But it also provides the groundwork for the defining contradiction that a poem ostensibly about the production of liberty and freedom actually indulges mechanistically and repetitively in the undoing of the social. That this undoing of the social and political cannot be disentangled from its opposite, utopian gesture also may account for the fact that on key points critics inhabit diametrically opposed views on the poem, but it also accounts for the irrepressible jouissance the poem exhibits in instances of destruction. The peculiar “accounting” work left over for the critic of *America* interested in the economic unconscious of the poem suggests instead a negativity that can’t be “re-economized” (Rajan 386).

To investigate the effects of this “kernel of negativity” that resists “re-economization” and the ways this concept intersects with the status of labor and time in *America*, the Preludium of the poem crystallizes these concerns in a scene of primal violence—much as Rajan suggests—but one that is fundamentally economic in nature.²³ This scene crucially invokes Marx’s concept of primitive accumulation, but refines and extends the concept to offer a theory of history that impedes the future-oriented logic of liberation that critics like Makdisi embrace.

The Preludium of *America* is “prelude” in the sense of being both logically and temporally prior: the Preludium presents a mythical space in which events take place that condition and encode the history and historical time that follow it. Its

²³ As I hope to make clear, this economic facet does not obscure or ignore the importance of the sexual violence in the Preludium; instead, it exacerbates and complicates its significance.

sole characters Orc and the nameless female may be, in Rajan's terms, "primitive and chthonic beings" (398), but the primal scene of traumatic violence the Preludium presents has profound and causal effects on the temporality of the Prophecy itself. It deals in elemental experiences of vision and spatiality, articulating a dialectical relation between space as a product of vision and vision as a product of space. It does this both to figure forth Blake's concerns with the problematics of representation, but also to link the problems of representability to primal violence and plunder.

The Preludium has long remained a point of contention for scholars, many of whom note its stark difference from the Prophecy section in tone, atmosphere, and action. The first thing to note is that, as a species of mythical time, spatiality as the arrest of time is implied in the opening line, "The shadowy daughter of Urthona stood before red Orc" (1: 1). Using the word "before," which obviously can mean both prior in time and spatially in front, Blake emphasizes the collapse of time as duration into extension and organization in static space. By prioritizing the spatial organization of figures as archetypes over action or time-oriented plot, Blake signals immediately that temporal directionality may encounter spatial arrest in the Preludium.

Moreover, Blake also immediately introduces an attendant problem that has received little or no attention in the criticism of *America*: the uniquely spatial dynamics of visualization, which includes the role of obstruction of visualization as an essential part of visualization. The attempt to describe the female is fundamentally an exercise in describing her position as obscured from sight and the

dynamics of how she might be grasped visually and the specific spatial framing devises such an exercise requires. The daughter is “shadowy,” as though this is an ontological attribute. Her nature is, at this point, to be wrapped up in clouds and shadows; by definition, she is obscure and defies definition. No nomination fixes her (or humanizes her for that matter) and she is only a collection of actions and attributes: She is “shadowy,” dark,” a “virgin,” a “womb.” She delivers food to her prisoner, but her role is ambiguous: both warden and servant, she is simultaneously martial and submissive: “His food she brought in iron baskets, his drink in cups of iron; / Crown’d with a helmet & dark hair the nameless female stood” (3-4). The female is paradoxically a servile guardian, and her armor makes her “Invulnerable tho’ naked, save where clouds roll round her loins” (7). Exceeding a merely conflicted identity, her identity is “shadowy”—she is shadow enveloped by clouds. She indeed appears, standing resolutely “before” Orc, but only as partially obscured by clouds or “as night” (1: 8).

The sexuality of the female is stressed preceding the rape. As the “female” or the “daughter” “abhorr’d” by her father Urthona, her lack of nomination suggests that she is the product of a sexual act (“daughter”) and, as the Preludium bears out, potential for violent sexual appropriation (mere “female”).²⁴ The status of visibility gains additional purchase in the ways the female’s sexuality is caught up in a complex dynamic of visual presentation. Not just her identity but also her status as

²⁴ I want to be clear that I am *not* saying that by virtue of her gender she is apt fodder for Orc’s sexual violence. Instead, I am suggesting that by both avoiding naming her and by categorizing her in this way, within the context of the immanent rape, Blake is suggesting that her status as female here is perceived by Orc as a “dark virgin” (1: 11) body/territory ripe for exploitation.

a potential sexual object is bound, much as Orc's provisional imprisonment, in a spatiality of visual apprehension: "Invulnerable tho' naked, save where clouds roll round her loins, / Their awful folds in the dark air; silent she stood as night;" (1: 7-8). An object to be revealed, her "loins" seem to Orc to be obscured, yet somehow framed and emphasized through their obscuration; paradoxically, they are the element of her naked form that he sees, precisely by virtue of or through the fact that they are obscured by clouds: "Their awful folds" find their proper framing paradoxically through the property of the "dark air" that is their element.

When Orc,²⁵ in his first appearance in Blake's work, attempts to view his crepuscular female warden, he complains, "my red eyes seek to behold thy face / In

²⁵ The figure of Orc has a lengthy and ambiguous career in Blake's oeuvre, one that renders summation impossible in this limited context. For Northrup Frye, "Orc is the power of the human desire to achieve a better world which produces revolution and foreshadows the apocalypse" (206). For an extensive recent study of Orc, see Christopher Hobson's *The Chained Boy: Orc and Blake's Idea of Revolution*, where Northrup Frye's dominant notion of an "Orc cycle" in which revolutionary revolt always becomes subsumed into conservative, violent, and repressive regimes, is productively disputed. Hobson thus attempts to redeem a notion of Orc as "the emblem of an elemental resistance" without teleological guarantees (17). For Hobson's understanding of *America*, Orc functions as a direct correlative to events in France, notably the "terror" that Hobson notes was reaching an apex as *America* appeared on the market. In Hobson's view, Blake deploys Orc as a symbol of "social and sexual repressed energy, [and] the struggle against this repression," but, more importantly, he "signifies an apocalyptic potential in the oppressed" (107). Elsewhere, Hobson claims that, "Orc is... a multivalent symbol of oppression and opposition" ("The Myth of Blake's 'Orc Cycle'" 6). Early political criticism of Blake generally concurs with Erdman's viewpoint that Orc represents "the spirit of human freedom defiant of tyranny" ("Blake's Vision of Slavery" 244). Fuller calls Orc a "wholly positive figure" in *America* (68). However, in an important essay on Blake's politics, David Aers critiques the role of Orc as a hyper-masculinized agent of "domineering, predatory, violently coercive action... [that] exclude[s] all mutuality, care, and reciprocity, exhibiting a thoroughly macho version of revolutionary force" ("Representations of Revolution" 251). Conversely (and improbably) Christine Gallant claims that Orc's vision "is Blake's own, of course" and that Blake is "trying... to affect the reader's perception exactly as Orc affects that of the Daughter of

vain! these clouds roll to & fro, & hide thee from my sight." (1: 19-20). But here problems of visualization also involve physical and sexual appropriation, powerfully linking representation and violence. When Orc breaks his chains, gaining his freedom in order to rape her, his violence is both sexual and representational, as his ability to catch sight of her is closely linked with his act of sexual violence. Indeed, it is possible to argue that they are two parts of the same violation: "The hairy shoulders rend the links, free are the wrists of fire; / Round the terrific loins he seiz'd the panting struggling womb;" (2: 2-3). As in the sense of the word "before" discussed earlier, namely when Blake reduces the duality of the term to a univocal sense in order to emphasize the spatial over the temporal, here too Blake's use of the term "seiz'd" as a euphemism for the rape is a way to link the sexual violence with the arrest of time. The act of violence arrests the temporal rhythm of "panting" and the motion of "struggling" just as it, significantly, ambiguously affects the (potentially) productive "womb."

Notably, Blake links the female's obscured availability to visualization with her similarly obscured sexuality: "save where clouds roll round her loins, / Their awful folds in the dark air;" (1: 7-8). This tactic implies the nameless female's identity as obscuration simultaneously defines her sexuality, as it is her genitalia

Urthona in the poem's 'Preludium.'" That Orc's method of "affecting" the daughter involves sexual violence does not trouble Gallant. In fact, she argues that, "the Daughter experiences a revolutionary expansion of imagination through an aroused desire" (*Assimilation* 27). Recently, Julia Wright detects a sort of "nihilism" in Orc in *America*, where he advocates and attempts to bring about an obliteration of all systems, most notably the system of state-sanctioned religion, which would be like a "torn book" that could never be gathered together again. The result, Wright avers, will situate "the reader in a potentially liberating place," a "liberation from the perspective of others" (88).

that are obscured in the dark. Moreover, she does not speak. She stands as a figure of potentiality both sexually and vocally, a potentiality that is only revealed retroactively in the as-yet impending violent act. Inexpressive and virginal, sexual violence and appropriation will activate her capacity for speech, her visual acuity, and open her to visual apprehension. At this stage in plate 1, however, the fact that her genitalia are obscured paradoxically highlights her sexuality, or the potential of her “awful” sexuality, which, when attacked by Orc, takes on a causal force.

Orc is the first to speak in the poem. After complaining about his imprisonment and describing the contradiction between his boundless and protean “spirit” and his imprisoned physical status, he says to the female, “red eyes seek to behold thy face / In vain! these clouds roll to & fro, & hide thee from my sight.” (19-20). Sight is again emphasized, but there is nothing immediate or “given” about it.²⁶ Not a passive medium through which Orc perceives the world, vision is linked clearly with his acquisitive attempts. His “red eyes” may wish to “behold” the

²⁶ Like Orc’s contradictory state of being both bound and boundless, the possibility of sight or more broadly of extension past the corporeal self to sensually apprehend the world is always “bound” with its opposite, the notion that the “in vain” possibility of visual apprehension always confronts vision not necessarily as its opposite, but as a framing mechanism/structure. For one example of this complex dynamic in which that which obscures paradoxically reveals, in the “Introduction” to the *Songs of Innocence*, Blake writes, “And I made a rural pen, / And I stain’d the water clear” (17-18; E 7). As Ian Balfour has noted, this passage (and the poem as a whole) presents a democratizing process, one in which the private enjoyments of the song expand to include and produce a reading public. The water may be “paradoxically stained clear, that is, clarified by the act of writing” (144). Balfour does not, however, notice that Blake’s metaphor implies that clarity, by definition, cannot be visually grasped without a “stain” that demarcates it. Yet, the metaphor also carries with it the possibility that clarity per se is always an ideological effect, a discursive construct whose motivations are never “clear,” but always concealed.

female, but this is merely a refraction of his desire to “hold” or seize her body, figured later by the reductive synecdoche “womb.”

However, if Orc’s spirit “soars” and is boundless and ever-changeable, if it invokes the eagle, lion, whale, and (as a characteristic Orcian association) serpent, it is also “feeble” (17) and “folds.”: “On the Canadian wilds I fold, feeble my spirit folds.” (17). “Folds” echoes the use of the word in conjunction with the female’s body: “clouds roll round her loins, / Their awful folds in the dark air;” (1:7-8). Folding is opposed to expanding, and in the case of Orc, despite his spirit’s association with a range of predatory animals, invokes a sense of weakening, enfeebling. By contrast, the “awful folds” of the female imply awe or terror. In either case “fold” involves a dynamic of expansion and contraction, an increase of powers and proliferating forms and a countervailing enervating, weakening, diminishing aspect. The emphasis on spatiality is compelling: “in the sky,” “fathomless abyss,” “Around the pillars,” “On the Canadian wilds,” “chained beneath,” and this stanza closes with a return to the dynamics of vision for Orc: “and my red eyes seek to behold thy face / In vain! these clouds roll to & fro, & hide thee from my sight.” (2: 19-20). The first plate ends then with this connection of physical imprisonment, a spirit at once expansive and enfeebled, sexual desire, the threat of violence, and the fraught act of seeing.

The events of the Preludium are centered on a “fierce embrace,” a mythic, founding act of sexual violence committed by Orc on the female. Before the attack, we are told that the female is “dumb till that dread day when Orc assay’d his fierce embrace.” (1:10). Plate 2 opens with Orc breaking his chains and sexually attacking

the female: "Round the terrific loins he siez'd the panting struggling womb" (2: 3). The female's immediate response is enigmatic; however, her reaction establishes that the violence is logically and temporally inaugural, initiative. If the female is synecdochically reduced to an organ as a "womb," her womb is paradoxically reified as an "it" as she is affectively and vocally animated: "It joy'd: she put aside her clouds & smiled her first-born smile; / As when a black cloud shews its lightnings to the silent deep." (2: 3-5). The first thing the violence brings about is the female's voice, which confirms, as Rajan implies, the Preludium is a pre-temporal, pre-linguistic semiotic mythical space (398).²⁷ Rajan ignores that this mythical space also means that the Preludium is necessarily a marginal space; as pre-linguistic, it also defies representation; in nonetheless requiring representation, it depicts the violent forces that bring the representational voice into being. A specifically visual space, the Preludium *as a text* requires the verbal as its supplement. If Orc and the female are "chthonic," they also necessarily persist on the margins of history and myth, space and time, the semiotic and symbolic, vision and language. Even as a mythical space, Blake positions the Preludium as a transitional, marginal one.

²⁷ Though she reserves the full strength of this view for the slightly later works *The Book of Urizen*, *Book of Los*, and *Europe*, Rajan suggests that Blake moves from time to space, from history to myth, and "from events to the space that precedes them, a space indeterminately cosmic or psychic." In so doing, "Blake reaches back to the prehistorical traumas that encode history, the unseen 'rifts' or 'perturbations' that produce its furious disorganization" ("(Dis)figuring the System" 394). Invoking Kristeva's re-working of Lacan, Rajan continues to claim that Blake's myth (as opposed temporally and conceptually to history) functions "more like the semiotic that precedes the Symbolic order: a way of taking culture back to the overdetermined primal scenes that constitute its contradictions" (394). This mythical or semiotic space is "raw and violent" and America represents one of Blake's first reflections on it and its relation to temporal, human history.

The rape has a range of specifically *primary* effects, effects that form a constellation among the visual/representational, temporal, spatial, and economic realms. After it, the daughter gains both visibility and the power of vision: “she put aside her clouds... / As when a black cloud shews its lightnings to the silent deep” (2: 4,5) and seems to see Orc for the first time or sees him anew, and her muteness is replaced with speech: “Soon as she saw the terrible boy then burst the virgin cry.” (2: 6). Her “first-born smile” obviously emphasizes firsts and underscores the alterations Orc’s rape incurs for the female. When the female speaks, which, as the poem clarifies, cannot happen until her violation, her voice is an effect of the animating sexual violence; hers is a speech of recognition—both of self and other. Her first words—“I know thee, I have found thee, & I will not let thee go;” (2: 7)—emphasizes recognition as a function of possession and captivity. Perhaps more importantly, for the female sight, knowledge, and appropriation are linked, much like the ways that sight and violent appropriation are linked for Orc: “Soon as she saw...” and then “I know thee, I have found thee, & I will not let thee go;” (2:7). Entry into language and the realm of representation, the Preludium seems to suggest, is not merely a violent rupture, it necessarily entails and produces subsequent appropriation, violence, and captivity.

Orc’s violence not only brings the female into the realm of linguistic representation, it also positions him as a Christ-like figure, self-sacrificial, “fall’n” from myth into history in order to give the female life.²⁸ His fallenness and the

²⁸ For the association of Orc and Jesus, see Dörrbecker, *The Continental Prophecies* (18). David Fuller calls Orc a “new Messiah” (*Blake’s Heroic Argument* 67).

female's resultant assumption of "life" together suggest that the originary violence of the rape involves a collective fall into history, a trauma (for both victim and perpetrator) that has to be incorporated to serve as "prelude" to politics and history. This traumatic fall is not spiritual in nature or effect; I read the language of spiritual expansion and proliferation Orc uses (1: 12) as an attempt to mask the notion of territorial and imperial expansion the passage presents. Indeed, the powerful colonial language in the Preludium implies that the fall is profoundly historical, political, and economic in nature. Orc's speech on Plate 1 emphasizes territoriality: the "raging fathomless abyss" (1: 15) is medium for expansion, conduits for commerce, and ever-surpassable limits of empire; mountains (1: 14) become emblems of untamed, unclaimed territory ripe for expansion. Orc further associates himself with "Canadian wilds," a colonial possession and neighbor of the American colonies, with overlapping though distinct histories, chronologies of expansion, and tales of exploitation for material gain. The "wilds" are less an emblem of the oft-celebrated Orcian energy than they are tempting territories to forcibly acquire and exploit for resources.

Orc's violence against the female is a powerful figure for violent appropriation of colonial lands by more powerful invading forces. Orc's spiritual forms and locations are mirrored in the female's list of colonial lands (and the ocean) and their animal symbols. She claims an analogy between the American colonies and her physical body:

Thou art the image of God who dwells in darkness of Africa;
And thou art fall'n to give me life in regions of dark death.
On my American plains I feel the struggling afflictions
Endur'd by roots that writhe their arms into the nether deep:

I see a serpent in Canada, who courts me to his love;
In Mexico an Eagle, and a Lion in Peru;
I see a Whale in the South-sea, drinking my soul away.
O what limb rending pains I feel. thy fire & my frost
Mingle in howling pains, in furrows by thy lightnings rent;
This is eternal death; and this the torment long foretold. (2: 8-17)

The female's speech invokes the cliché of associating untamed, "virgin" colonial lands with the female body.²⁹ Having the female voice this shows her implication in this ideology of the female body and colonies as ripe for exploitation and for production/reproduction. Both are figured as potentialities, as sites of potential plunder and unchecked accumulation. Her intense pain as a result of Orc's violent appropriation of her body does not escape a connection with agriculture, as her "furrows" are prepared for agricultural productivity.³⁰ The nameless female, once her voice is activated by Orc's violent "seizure" of her womb, associates herself clearly with the "American plains" (2: 10) and other colonial territories in the Americas. The close aural association between "plains" and "pains" underscores this association. As raw materials for production, the colonial lands and the female's body undergo a sort of ritualized violence that ushers them into the realm of productivity. Even if this is a space of trauma prior to historical time, the ideology of

²⁹ For the association of the female with America see Dörrbecker, *The Continental Prophecies* (29). Michael Ferber claims that the female personifies the land, "not only the continent as a political entity but the farmland" seized by colonists ("Birth of Revolution" 96). James McCord thinks that this link between the female body and the colonial land is "unconventional" (386).

³⁰ The agricultural theme is repeated in the Prophecy section:

They cannot smite the wheat, nor quench the fatness of the earth.
They cannot smite with sorrows, nor, subdue the plow and spade.
They cannot wall the city, nor moat round the castle of princes.
They cannot bring the stubbed oak to overgrow the hills. (9: 5-8)

production—not itself hegemonic until a later stage—bleeds retroactively into it. The fact that her first words are thoroughly implicated in colonial and masculinist ideology shows that in this mythical space prior to history, ideologies of production retroactively persist.

Though the rape's causal and initiative properties must be acknowledged, there is also a strong sense that the act brings with it a "seizure" of time. The term "siez'd" in line 3 of the second plate as a euphemism for the rape suggests both violence but also arrest. The "panting struggling womb" is "siez'd," immobilized: if panting and struggling imply motion, Orc's act "seizes" it, arrests its rhythmic motion. The rape, located in the mythic space of the Preludium, is figured as one of the pre-temporal and "prehistorical traumas that encode history, the unseen 'rifts' and 'perturbations' that produce its furious disorganization" (Rajan, "(Dis)figuring" 394). But if this is the case, it is also true that history enters the Preludium as spatial or territorial appropriation, figured, to some extent, as a result of sexual violence.

The traumatic semiotic space has an analogue in Marxist theory in the form of the theory of primitive accumulation. If the Preludium is a space (both logically and temporally) prior to history, and as such functions as the location of the mythic founding violence of human history, Marx's revision of the classical economists' views of the economic transition into capital also locates both in and outside of historical time a founding and subsequently determining instance of violent trauma.³¹ Primitive accumulation (or "previous accumulation" in Adam Smith's

³¹ Historically, Blake writes at a time that might have afforded him a privileged perspective on the effects of primitive accumulation, both in England and abroad. According to James Thompson, the British eighteenth century

terminology) is the theory of how it occurred that a few individuals (capitalists in embryo) came to possess the financial resources to purchase labor power and the means of production which, taken together, can be mobilized to produce profits. According to Marx, “so-called primitive accumulation... is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production. It appears as ‘primitive’ because it forms the pre-history of capital, and of the mode of production corresponding to capital” (*Capital* 874-875). Primitive accumulation is the attempt to account for how masses of workers became divorced from the means of production, thereby dispossessing them of the means of self-provision and compelling them to sell their labor and enter the market system.³²

When Marx describes primitive accumulation he sets the tone and content of his theory far apart from Smith. The energy of Marx’s rhetoric reveals how the theory of primitive accumulation is a specifically traumatic experience in history. Against Smith’s view in which a minority just so happen to be more industrious and frugal than others, and thus are able to amass capital while others are lazy and

witnesses the end of primitive accumulation and enclosure and the transition to agrarian capitalism, the development of the first stage of market capitalism, and the extension of commodity relations into all areas of social life... It is the period that witnesses the beginnings of the transformation from the older form of money as accumulated treasure or wealth to money in exchange as capital. (33)

³² In Romanticism, the disruptive effects of enclosure laws have been amply exposed. In just one recent, significant account, Rachel Crawford’s *Poetry, Enclosure, and the Vernacular Landscape, 1700-1830* discusses enclosure and, more abstractly, enclosed space as associated with regimes of productivity. (See Prest, *Albion Ascendant: English History 1660-1815* 148-150 for a very concise summary of the history of enclosure.) Blake, as a city poet, has been excluded from this body of criticism; my point here is that primitive accumulation, as the political-economic theory proper to enclosure and accompanying strategies for establishing and disciplining a new class of wage laborers, is very relevant for Blake’s political ideas.

squander resources, Marx clearly describes primitive accumulation as a traumatic and violent event: “In actual history, it is a notorious fact that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short force, play the greatest part. In the tender annals of political economy, the idyllic reigns from time immemorial... As a matter of fact, the methods of primitive accumulation are anything but idyllic” (874). In his extended genealogy of primitive accumulation, Marx notes that “agricultural folk [were] first forcibly expropriated from the soil, driven from their homes, turned into vagabonds, and then whipped, branded and tortured by grotesquely terroristic laws into accepting the discipline necessary for the system of wage-labor” (899). Marx goes on to note the important role of colonialism and the establishment of the national debt to establish primitive accumulation:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of black-skins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation (915).³³

³³ As Marx states here, the American colonies played a central role in sustaining the British economy. While the historical background of *America* has been adequately examined, the connections between the economics of America the colony and the symbolic economics of *America* the poem have not been adequately explored in the criticism. This chapter’s focus on primitive accumulation represents a beginning attempt in this regard. My hypothesis is that the specific representational problems that inhere in the poem’s presentation of labor (and which critics have sensed though not adequately discussed) indicate the poem’s inability to produce a future, its inability to represent political and revolutionary change. Instead, labor irrupts, as a symptom of the dead repetition or haunting of the traumatic space of myth, located (spatially, if not temporally) in the Preludium. Obviously, I disagree with McCord’s view that America *attempts to* “expose how dehumanizing all war is.... Blake plays down America’s colonial destiny and ‘apocalyptic’ victory, personifies the continent in a strikingly unconventional way, minimizes American heroism and participation in the war, [and] shows how intellectual revolt is more revolutionary and effective than military revolt...” (386).

The Preludium of *America*, I suggest, offers a refracted vision of precisely the sort of developments Marx describes. Of course, it would be a mistake to think of the Preludium as a strict representation of the events of primitive accumulation, and I am not arguing that Blake's intent was to offer a fable of the transformation into capitalism, but certain analogues are clear. In the first instance, the theory of primitive accumulation exhibits a peculiar contradiction regarding the temporality of the concept. This contradiction pertains to whether it is a process that solely occurred at a single time period in the distant past, or if it is an ongoing, repetitive process. Though Marx seems to substantiate the latter view, at points he implies (and many tend to agree) that primitive accumulation is a relatively isolated historical instance, occurring during the phase of the transition from feudal to capitalist modes of production: "The different moments of primitive accumulation can be assigned in particular to Spain, Portugal, Holland, France and England, in more or less chronological order. These different moments are systematically combined together at the end of seventeenth century in England" (915). On the one hand, history appears conceived in this statement as linear, and obeys a common sense cause-and-effect structure: primitive accumulation occurred at a certain time and in certain spaces, and can be located accurately along a teleological continuum. On the other hand, one part of Marx's objection to Smith's version of the concept is the latter's historically naïve viewpoint. What Michael Perelman calls the "temporal cleavage" (29) in Marx's theory implies the overlap of linear history (with its assumption that primitive accumulation represents a causal rupture occurring at one point in the past) and a cyclical view in which the traumatic origins of

capitalism in open plunder of natural resources, murder, slavery, and violence is repeated—indeed must be repeated—in the modern market system.³⁴ But even the more nuanced vision of a dual or “cleaved” historical time simplifies Marx’s attempts to grasp the baroque temporality of primitive accumulation. The *Grundrisse* presents this description of the causality and temporal experience of the concept:

While e.g. the flight of serfs to the cities is one of the *historic* conditions and presuppositions of urbanism, it is not a *condition*, not a moment of the reality of developed cities, but belongs rather to their *past* presuppositions, to the presuppositions of their becoming which are suspended in their being. The conditions and presuppositions of the *becoming*, of the *arising*, of capital presuppose precisely that it is not yet in being but merely in *becoming*; they therefore disappear as real capital arises, capital which itself, on the basis of its own reality, posits the conditions for its realization. Thus e.g. while the process in which money or value for-itself originally becomes capital presupposes on the part of the capitalist an accumulation... [nevertheless,] as soon as capital has become capital as such, it creates its own presuppositions, i.e. the possession of the real conditions of the creation of new values *without exchange*—by means of its own production process. These presuppositions, which originally appeared as conditions of its becoming—and hence could not spring from its *action as capital*—now appear as results of its own realization, reality, *as posited by it—not as conditions of its arising, but as results of its presence*. It no longer proceeds from presuppositions in order to become, but rather it is itself presupposed, and proceeds from itself to create the conditions of its maintenance and growth. Therefore, the conditions which preceded the creation of surplus capital I, or which express the becoming of capital, do not fall into the sphere of that mode of production for which capital serves as the presupposition; as the historic preludes of its becoming, they lie behind it, just as the processes by means of which the earth made the transition from a

³⁴ David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, chapter 4, 137ff. Harvey argues that primitive accumulation is not an event that happened once on the eve of the consolidation of capitalism. Preferring the term “accumulation by dispossession” for its avoidance of this implication, Harvey claims that the violent and thieving practices of accumulation are an ongoing global process. For Harvey, “accumulation by dispossession” is used currently to stave off debilitating crises, most notably, of overaccumulation. See also Ernest Mandel’s *Late Capitalism* 46.

liquid sea of fire and vapour to its present form now lie beyond its life as finished earth. (*Grundrisse* 459-460)

I cite this passage at length because Marx's language registers his early attempt to grasp the notion of time required by a theory of primitive accumulation that supersedes that of the classical economists. To some extent, the Hegelian language of expressive causality muddles what appears to be a relatively simple main point: that which provides the causal lever for the flourishing and eventual hegemony of a political-economic form necessarily disappears once that form is achieved. Beyond a mere tension between the diachronic and synchronic, Marx describes a peculiar temporal experience in which what was once experienced as a historical condition of the emergence and solidification of the capitalist mode of production actually disappears in the fully formed version of the latter (e.g., "The conditions and presuppositions of the *becoming*, of the *arising*, of capital... disappear as real capital arises"). The example of the *process* of moving the peasantry from recently enclosed, previously communal land into urban centers of industry and the concomitant transition into wage labor is instructive both in the sense that it may be a vanishing condition of the emergence of capitalism, but it is vanishing only insofar as it also erases or obscures from view the violence and trauma inherent in the process. Marx's text subtly both describes and performs this vanishing. Marx's imagistic flourish at the end, invoking geological and pre-human processes, invokes a sense of the congealing of fluid processes that disappear in the hardened, final form that forgets its processes of formation and congealment.³⁵

³⁵ Though Marx does not draw the connection in this context, it is striking how the ideological work that the commodity performs of obscuring the relations and

Marx's language of vanishing and his geological metaphors are specifically spatial and visual ways of describing temporality.³⁶ Additionally, as a way of understanding historical-temporal causality, the images of a vanishing cause and hardening of geological fluid evoke a contradictory sense of simultaneous disappearance and substantialization, absence and presence. The ambivalence between mutually canceling metaphors to describe the time of primitive accumulation that suggest either a disappearance or a hardening/congealing of temporal causes marks the theory as a place in which the time of capital both initiates and also collapses. Not only does this confirm the link between primitive accumulation and what Rajan describes as the pre-historic and mythic *space* of the Preludium, it also suggests that the time of primitive accumulation may repetitively encounter a disruptive spatialization or arrest of temporal processes.

However, even if this notion of the threat of temporal/causal arrest is valid, Marx's distinction between "*historical conditions*" and "*conditions*" (or a "moment of the reality...") not only implies a distinction between temporal and logical causality but also (expanding upon the duality of the "temporal cleavage" theory) a dehiscence or rupture of temporal experience. Those vanishing logical conditions, in being ultimately sublated in the finished form's being, can only be grasped or viewed as retrospective theoretical positings. As if to compensate for the

conditions of its production in its final form directly parallels this process of vanishing from sight that primitive accumulation requires.

³⁶ Reinhart Koselleck suggests that time can only be conceived in terms of spatial metaphors (see Barndt, "Layers of Time: Industrial Ruins and Exhibitionary Temporalities," 134). Ronald Grimes has argued that for Blake's three late epics, "The virtual impossibility of discussing time apart from space accords with Blake's insistence that regeneration occurs only with the reunion of Los and Enitharmon, watchman of space and mistress of space" (75).

structuring absence of the vanishing cause, the final form must iteratively assert or inscribe its own birth with a causal or explanatory presence imposed retroactively. Marx describes a process in which the retrospective perspective of capital upon its own origins in large part constructs those very origins: “as soon as capital has become capital as such, it creates its own presuppositions... results [i.e., not causes] of its own realization” (*Grundrisse* 460). The violent emergence of capital, as the passages in Marx imply, necessarily involves a self-positing moment in which capital constructs, retroactively, the myth of its own origins. The latter highlights a uniquely *discursive* element in the theory of the temporality of primitive accumulation, an element that maps onto Rajan’s emphasis on the Preludium of *America* as a scene of writing, and the poem as a whole as primarily a meditation on its mode of discursive production.³⁷ This discursive moment is, among other things, a repetitive suturing over of the pre-linguistic trauma with a myth that explains and domesticates it.

Marx’s efforts to describe primitive accumulation cause him to have frequent recourse to it as a specifically discursive, literary phenomenon, thus providing a

³⁷ Rajan claims that the abrupt interruption of the writing of the Preludium—represented in only two copies as the Bard breaking his harp—implies a recognition that the Bard’s “(ab)use of the female (dis)figures the work that follows by inscribing it as part of a will-to-power, complicit with a historical world in which there is no substantive distinction between tyranny and energy” (398). She seems to mean that the political is subsumed into *America’s* textuality, such that the Preludium’s scene of violence is an initially enabling yet ultimately obstructing trope, exhibiting how the poem and others from the same period are essentially “about the difficulty of their writing” (385). While Rajan suggests that *America’s* ostensible goal to represent revolutionary change encounters a fundamental impediment in Orc’s rape of the nameless female in the Preludium, part of what I am claiming is that the primal violence of this scene is precisely what forms the condition of possibility for political history as such.

serendipitous and instructive parallel with recent criticism on *America*.³⁸ According to Marx, the history of primitive accumulation is “written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire” (875). Imagined as a mode of writing as well as a historical and economic process, primitive accumulation takes on the generic conventions of the fairy tale or religious fable—both of which are forms that obsessively posit and problematize origins and stories of origins: In fact, this is precisely the grounds upon which Marx attacks Smith’s “idyllic” conception of the concept: For Marx, Smith’s version of

primitive accumulation plays in political economy about the same part as original sin in theology. Adam bit the apple, and thereupon sin fell on the human race... *In times long gone-by* there were two sorts of people; one, the diligent, intelligent, and, above all, frugal elite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living.... Thus *it came to pass* that the former sort accumulated wealth, and the latter sort had at last nothing to sell except their own skins. And from this *original sin* dates the poverty of the great majority that, despite all its labour, has up to now nothing to sell but itself, and the wealth of the few that increases constantly although they have long ceased to work. (873, my italics).

While Marx’s writing in general often indulges in similar rhetorical and literary devices, its predominance in the context of the description of primitive accumulation implies that as a traumatic mythical space, primitive accumulation is also a discursive phenomenon. This isn’t meant to imply that the violence of primitive accumulation is imaginary; rather, its violence must take on an iterative

³⁸ There is therefore a sort of self-reflexivity in the theory of primitive accumulation, as a place where Marx seems to be compelled to conceptualize, in however amorphous a fashion, the discursiveness of his own practice. If the language of the classical economists mask their ideological aims in the guise of objectivity, common sense, and the immediacy of language and the phenomena it describes, Marx here seems to both parody this while also acknowledging the force of rhetoric in his own presentation.

structure, such that the violence both vanishes and is repetitively re-asserted, re-articulated within the capitalist mode of production. When Marx insists on the necessity of a theory of primitive accumulation—capitalism “*must* have had a beginning of some kind” (*Capital* 714, my italics)—he simultaneously implies that this repetitive structure of erasure and re-writing characterizes the approach to the historical time of capitalist myth of origins.

The traces of labor in its irruptive role must be followed, as a symptom of the dead repetition or haunting of the traumatic space of myth, located (spatially, if not temporally) in the Preludium.³⁹ In part, as the defining event of the Preludium, the

³⁹ My views on traumatic repetition borrow from similar discussions in the psychoanalytic tradition. While it is impossible here to give a thorough account of this theoretical terrain, a brief outline will suffice: Freud’s theory of the death drive emerges both out of limitations inherent in the early theory of the instincts (the pleasure principle) and out of Freud’s work with and research on severely traumatized WWI soldiers who seemed drawn to repeat self-destructive and painful actions that seemed to be repetitions of war experience (see *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 10-15). Freud suggests that the goal of the drive to repeat traumatic experience is to try to integrate it, to subject it to the powers of discursive significance and hence to gain mastery over it. The dual effects of repetition more broadly—to produce difference or sameness, to congeal or to disperse—are implied in Freud’s theory, where the compulsion to repeat is simultaneously an attempt to incorporate so as to unify the fractured, traumatized subject. On the other hand, this repetition is also pathological and ultimately involves the undoing of the subject’s integrity, wholeness, and health. The significance of the compulsion to repeat was, for Freud, that it gestured toward the existence of the death drive, an urge to return to an earlier, inorganic state of things.

Cathy Caruth has productively used the Freudian model as a means to understand traumatic history. She claims that, “history is precisely the ways that we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (24); but this history is ultimately “not fully perceived as it occurs;... a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (18). My own view here is that Blake imagines the relation between myth (origins) and history as one between trauma and repetition, a repetition that pathologically replays the trauma, but in doing so both endows it with meaning and subjects it to the vagaries and problematics of representation. Trauma encodes the history it determines, but this history (implying representation and / in language

rape, as I have mentioned, functions as an inaugural event, an initiation of history in trauma that encodes subsequent history. This primal mythical violence is iterated throughout the Prophecy section, and the negativity of labor is one of its primary effects or traces. The first overt mention of labor in *America* occurs at the start of the Prophecy section of the poem. The passage finds Washington provoked by the “Sullen fires” of the Prince of Albion “Piercing the souls” (3: 2, 3) of the American patriots:

Washington spoke; Friends of America look over the Atlantic sea;
A bended bow is lifted in heaven, & a heavy iron chain
Descends link by link from Albions cliffs across the sea to bind
Brothers & sons of America, till our faces pale and yellow;
Heads deprest, voices weak, eyes downcast, hands work-bruis'd,
Feet bleeding on the sultry sands, and the furrows of the whip
Descend to generations that in future times forget.—
(A 3: 6-12; E 52)

This passage is often read as an indictment of colonial oppression in the form of economic bondage. Nevertheless, it is significant that Washington’s oration figures the colonial oppression of England over the colonies as an effect of labor; it is not that monarchal oppression has forced and oppressed labor as one among many of its oppressive characteristics, it takes the form of enforced, alienated, and physically deforming labor specifically. The anchor of the speech is the litany of the effects of oppressive and enforced labor, labor that shares the imagery of slavery common in Blake’s time.⁴⁰

also retroactively re-asserts the traumatic scene, protecting and domesticating it, positioning it for alternative uses.

⁴⁰ See Erdman’s *Prophet* (22-23) and Makdisi: “enforced labor—the necessity of paid labor and the necessity of slave labor alike—is the form of slavery the dominates the social world and gives it meaning. Slavery...[refers] to a social

But just as the Preludium's traumatic violence involved a concern with the conditions of possibility of visualization and visuality, the Prophecy re-iterates this concern throughout. The effects of brutal labor, much like the rape in the Preludium, occasion a meditation on vision, visuality, and more broadly how these effects or traces become available to representation. Washington's first exhortation is to "look," directing his comrades to see the bended bow and the chains that emerge from Britain to bind the colonies. Considering what immediately precedes and follows the passage, it becomes clear that looking and the possibilities of visual apprehension is at stake here. The spatiality of the scene in general emphasizes the conditions of possibility of visual perception; as the Prophecy opens we assume we are in Britain, witnessing the Guardian Prince burning in his tent. The second line perhaps confuses this assumption: "Sullen fires across the Atlantic glow *to* America's shore:" (3: 2, my emphasis). Here we seem to be in America, if the Prince's fires are viewed from "across" the Atlantic. But if this is the case, that the fires glow "to" or toward America might imply that we are witnessing the transmission of the light from Britain *to* America, the directionality thus placing us in Britain. Even if this is disputed, as it certainly could be, line 5 apparently reverses directionality again: the American rebels are "glowing with blood *from* Albions fiery Prince." (3: 5, my emphasis). The spatiality of the passage takes us from "across" to "to" to "from." And if it is suggested that the reader/observer may be instead occupying an omniscient view from the heavens, it is not clear that the problem of shifting and ambiguous point of view is thereby settled, since these shifting

process in which the capacity to do work becomes a commodity to be sold out of dire necessity" (*Impossible History* 93, see also 33).

directionalities and perspectives elide the transcendental vantage point.⁴¹ Finally, this passage, coming at the beginning of the Prophecy section of *America*, in fact subtly questions the notion of beginnings. The fact that the American rebels “Meet on the coast” suggests spatial rather than temporal boundaries or limits. The littoral emphasis shifts attention from temporal beginnings to spatial margins and lines of division. The to and fro of light encounters its limit with the coastline. As the opposing camps gather at their spatial limits, the “Atlantic” becomes not a formidable expanse but a boundary that does not permit passage, save for light. Despite what might occur later, the Prophecy begins with an emphasis on lines of sight and lines of division. The glow from the Prince may penetrate “souls,” but it finds a hermetic border at “America’s shore.”

The passage describing the interruption of Washington’s speech exacerbates the spatial confusion:

The strong voice ceas’d; for a terrible blast swept over the heaving
sea;
The eastern cloud rent; on his cliffs stood Albions wrathful Prince
A dragon form clashing his scales at midnight he arose,
And flam’d red meteors round the land of Albion beneath[.]
His voice, his locks, his awful shoulders, and his glowing eyes,
Appear to the Americans upon the cloudy night. (A 3:13-4:1; E 52-53)

Washington’s speech arouses Albion’s Prince, whose appearance to the Americans is again emphasized. The blast that silences Washington mid-thought (much like the Bard’s frustration that interrupts and brings the Preludium to abrupt conclusion in

⁴¹ While I agree in general with the point that in the poem “both ‘geography’ and ‘history,’ as the markers of what we might recognize as specific discursive formations, have been transfigured” I disagree with the recuperative direction to which such a view invariably remains committed (Makdisi, “Blake, America, and the World” 83).

two copies) violates the boundaries just addressed, just as it splits an obscuring cloud revealing the Prince to the Americans. The passage, like the one before it, foregrounds the conditions of visibility of the scene. The intensely visual elements of the passage—"A dragon form clashing his scales at midnight he arose, / And flam'd red meteors round the land of Albion beneath[.] / His voice, his locks, his awful shoulders, and his glowing eyes,"—while they may stretch the reader's visualizing capacities, nevertheless are not presented as transparent to the witnessing Americans: they are only there for apprehension as a result of specific processes of revelation. And these processes, these strategies of obscuration and revelation, these framings and modes of production of the visible take on a strange primacy in this scene and the poem itself over and against whatever content is thereby revealed. In *America*, vision is never immediate—it is always a mode of production; it is always presented as a vexed, fraught process whose success must never be taken for granted. Moreover, there is a constitutive tension between the temporality and the spatiality of this process/mode of production. Washington's speech encapsulates this tension as it is presented as a temporal process of the transmittal of light, of figures rising, and of descending chains. But the scene also arrests time with figures such as the immediate "blast" that halts Washington's monologue, and the static figures on the coast. Finally, the passage concludes in an odd collision of vision and voice in the statement that "His voice, his locks, his awful shoulders, and his glowing eyes, / Appear to the Americans upon the cloudy night." (3:17-4:1). Significantly, the "voice" of the Prince, who has not yet spoken, is one of the elements that "appear" to the Americans. This peculiar mixing of the senses

does not imply a synesthetic increase or expansion of capacity; rather it suggests a primacy of the visual such that the voice is implicated in and apprehended visually, but also that the limit of expressive speech is vision.⁴² Washington's speech, after all, is interrupted with a "blast," a visual explosion associated with the parting clouds that reveal the Prince's appearance on the scene of America (and *America*).

The abdication of labor figures primarily in the famous monologue of Orc⁴³ on plate 6, where beneath the surface of an apparently highly celebratory passage can be found the lurking laboring dead preparing to rise:

The morning comes, the night decays, the watchmen leave their
stations;
The grave is burst, the spices shed, the linen wrapped up;
The bones of death, the cov'ring clay, the sinews shrunk & dry'd.
Reviving shake, inspiring move, breathing! awakening!
Spring like redeemed captives when their bonds & bars are burst;
Let the slave grinding at the mill, run out into the field:
Let him look up into the heavens & laugh in the bright air;
Let the inchained soul shut up in darkness and in sighing,
Whose face has never seen a smile in thirty weary years;
Rise and look out, his chains are loose, his dungeon doors are open.
And let his wife and children return from the oppressors scourge;

⁴² This phenomenon is itself a repetition from the Preludium, where after Orc's rape of the female, the latter's obscuring clouds are put aside and she smiles "As when a black cloud shews its lightnings to the silent deep." (2: 5). The dynamic of showing and revealing crosses sensory borders as the deep to which the light penetrates is characterized as "silent." If the female's expressive capacities are activated by the rape, the silences of the depths are penetrated by, paradoxically, the visual experience of the "lightnings." Sight and the spatiality of the passage are primary to sound or speech, as the next line confirms in which sight releases the cry: "Soon as she saw the terrible boy then burst the virgin cry" (2: 6).

⁴³ While most commentators agree that it is Orc who speaks here (see, for example, Dörrbecker, *The Continental Prophecies* 57), the text is in fact somewhat inconclusive, only offering, "a voice came forth," to explain its origins. I think Blake intends the voice to be Orc's, but the purposely disembodied nature of the voice suggests Orc's presence here as a non-subjective one. Orc is here less a speaking, acting presence in the text, as he is an idea, a iconographic force or promise of rebellion, opposition, violence; Erdman calls this the "demon of futurity" (*Prophet* 334).

They look behind at every step & believe it is a dream.
Singing. The Sun has left his blackness, & has found a fresher morning
And the fair Moon rejoices in the clear & cloudless night;
For Empire is no more, and now the Lion & Wolf shall cease.
(A 6:1-15; E 53)

The exhilarating language of liberation in this plate has made it one of the most widely recognized stanzas of Blake's post-*Songs* oeuvre, with the exception of the "Jerusalem" hymn from *Milton*.⁴⁴ For many scholars this plate can be isolated to encapsulate one's position on the politics of *America*. Noting how the plate repeatedly shifts tenses and temporal registers, Makdisi claims that it ends in a "moment of rupture and clarity" (158) and a breakdown both of the diurnal cycle and of narrative itself: "freedom is celebrated in the disruption of narrative and the implosion or explosion of historical time" (161). For Makdisi, the complete "annihilation" of time results in a euphoric liberation from all forms of necessity, particularly that of wage-labor (see 91).⁴⁵ His emphasis on "life" as the opposite to

⁴⁴ Part of the passage's popularity must also be due to its stylistic, formal, and tonal differences from the rest of the poem, which give it a more optimistic feeling than the murky and nocturnal atmosphere of the rest of the work (see Makdisi's "Blake, America, and History"). Noting Ostriker's point about how this song "reverts to ballad rhythm and end-stopped lines," Dörrbecker suggests that this plate's formal isolation and difference from the rest of the poem implies an interruption of, or internal distantiation from, the historical events that the poem will soon partly allegorize, and partly represent (34; see also Ostriker 158).

⁴⁵ Makdisi's book is significant in how it breaks from nearly all existing Blake criticism on the issue of labor by specifically not celebrating and attempting to recuperate labor as a source of liberation. For one prime example, Erdman, citing plate 11, claims that "*America* is a song of harvest reaped in the teeth of redcoats who would smite the wheat; it is also a song of praise to the industrious man" (*Prophet* 248-9). Additionally, comparing *America* with the final night of *The Four Zoas*, Erdman argues that in both poems "harvest symbolism suggests that revolution engenders and fructifies a word of plenty" (*Prophet* 355). Though in this statement he significantly ignores the association of the raped female with the furrows of agriculture, for Erdman work is lauded against indolence, and productivity is privileged over waste and scarcity.

the negativity of labor takes on an interesting association. After all, this is a scene—reminiscent of “The Chimney Sweeper”—in which the graves open and the remains of the dead return to life: “The bones of death, the cov’ring clay, the sinews shrunk & dry’d. / Reviving shake, inspiring move, breathing! awakening!” (6: 3-4). If we draw out the implications of Makdisi’s claim that “Freedom from the cyclical time of the working day is transfigured into freedom from the linear time of the working life” (161), the walking dead laborers of plate 6 indeed enjoy a “freedom from... time [and]... freedom from... life.”

The simile in line 5 emphasizes resemblance between the dead and the freed slaves: the reawakened dead—perhaps slaves akin to the one we meet on line 6—“Spring *like* redeemed captives.” Not only does this suggest a resemblance to the manumission of prisoners and not the actual deed, the language of captivity hearkens back to the Preludium, where Orc (who, again, is speaking in plate 6) was the captive who broke his chains in order to “seize” the female. Additionally, the repetitive construction of conditional verbs in lines 6-11 implies an aspiration that may have no connection to material reality: “Let the slave... / Let him look up... / Let the chained soul...”—again, the speech foregrounds the ways the aspirations it describes can’t be unmoored from its own discursivity, its own status as discourse.

In other words, plate 6 must not merely be put in context with the Preludium; it must be read as a repetition of it. I don’t mean that plate 6 is a literal repetition of the Preludium, or that Orc ought to be viewed as one of (or as even in solidarity with) the risen dead, or even that he is among the slaves the speech

attempts to imagine into freedom. Instead, because of the traumatic scene that occurred in the mythical space of the Preludium, an act that inaugurates and encodes historical time, the rape and its traces are insistently repeated in that history, even in spaces of liberatory imagination. “The inchained soul” who will “Rise and look out” in lines 8 and 10 is analogous to the soaring (but also “folding”) spirit of 1: 12, 17; the broken “bonds & bars” (6: 5), the opened “dungeon doors,” and the escape from the “opressors scourge” repeats the breaking of the links in 1: 2; the potential for plunder of the land from the Preludium finds a further iteration in the “bones of death” that might be the remains of the slave labor employed to such tasks, or even those who stood in its way. The intimation of the end of empire with which plate 6 concludes seems less like a conclusion and more like a *telos*; the promise that “the Lion & Wolf shall cease” (6: 15) might augur an end of predatory violence, but it seems more likely that it refers instead to the ceasing of Orc’s monologue itself, the end of which is, much like Washington’s speech just 3 plates earlier, announced: “In thunders ends the voice.” (7: 1). This suggests, much like Marx’s own self-consciousness of the discursive nature of the theory of primitive accumulation, a sense of the literariness of Orc’s vocal performance. As a rhetorical exercise, Orc’s speech is not a performative (thus instituting what he speaks in that act of speaking it); rather, its careful framing—the narrator’s announcement of its “end” mirrors the announcement of its beginning: “thus a voice came forth, and shook the temple” (5: 7)—lifts and isolates it from the realm of historical actuality and lodges it squarely in the realm of what Marx referred to in the passage from the *Grundrisse* as the iterative re-writing of (and over) the (repetitively disappearing)

traumatic ruptures that encode and determine history. If *Orc is the Lion*⁴⁶ (recall 2: 13 where Orc calls himself the “Lion in Peru”), what is ceased here is not the violence of expansion; rather, what is ceased is only this particular discursive iteration of the scene of mythical violence and appropriation that this particular liberatory attempt called the American Revolution attempts to compensate for.

Elsewhere in the poem the abdication of labor serves as an example of the consolidation of the multitude; more generally it is an example of how the absence of labor is an essential element of a communal subjectivity not defined by individual, determined selves:

Fury! rage! madness! in a wind swept through America
And the red flames of Orc that folded roaring fierce around
The angry shores, and the fierce rushing of th’inhabitants together:
The citizens of New-York close their books & lock their chests;
The mariners of Boston drop their anchors and unlade;
The scribe of Pennsylvania casts his pen upon the earth;
The builder of Virginia throws his hammer down in fear.
Then had America been lost, o’erwhelm’d by the Atlantic,
And Earth had lost another portion of the infinite,
But all rush together in the night in wrath and raging fire
The red fires rag’d! the plagues recoil’d! then rolld they back with fury
(14: 10-20)

As the “decisive scene” in *America* for Makdisi, this image conjures both the fear of mob violence and, more importantly, the “micropolitics of revolution, and in particular, the micropolitics of subjectivity” (38). In this moment of throwing down

⁴⁶ Incidentally, Albion’s Angel refers to himself as a Lion and reactivates the martial image of the lion and wolf just two plates later:

Sound! sound! my loud war-trumpets & alarm my Thirteen Angels!
Loud howls the eternal Wolf! the eternal Lion lashes his tail!
America is darkned; and my punishing Demons terrified
Crouch howling before their caverns deep like skins dry’d in the wind.
(9: 1-4)

the instruments of labor (as in the previous passage when the slave leaves behind his work of “grinding at the mill”) in order to “rush together” individuals are liberated their specificity and determination and become a multitude, “altogether detonating their prior individuality.... It is only when they *cease... their individual occupations...* that the fierce rushing collective is brought into being” (39, my italics). When Albion’s pestilence recoils against the British, the afflicted soldiers throw down their arms:

then the Pestilence began in streaks of red
Across the limbs of Albions Guardian, the spotted plague smote
Bristols
And the Leprosy Londons Spirit, sickening all their bands:
The millions sent up a howl of anguish and threw off their hammerd
mail,
And cast their swords & spears to earth, & stood a naked multitude.
(25: 1-5)

Here the possibility of a collective that undoes the limitations and determinative nature of the bourgeois individual is transformed. No longer the multitude of Makdisi’s conception, they are the diseased and grotesque “sickening... bands”; no longer the “fierce rushing collective,” they are here the “millions” in “anguish.” While it is true that this multitude is made up of the British oppressors, while the collective of Makdisi’s argument is the Americans, it is hard not to see a clear analogue: both are scenes of the giving up of labor, and in both cases this abdication is associated with a breakdown of the individual self in favor of a collective. Attending to the differences of what side one is on in the conflict risks missing the repetition this passage participates in. Moreover, after we witness the pain of the millions, we see that the reversal of the plagues is the result of the cooperation of the collective Americans and Orc, now oddly in league with each other:

Albions Guardian writhed in torment on the eastern sky
 Pale quivering toward the brain his glimmering eyes, teeth chattering
 Howling & shuddering his legs quivering; convuls'd each muscle &
 sinew
 Sick'ning lay Londons Guardian, and the ancient miter'd York
 Their heads on snowy hills, their ensigns sick'ning in the sky
 The plagues creep on the burning winds driven by flames of Orc,
 And by the fierce Americans rushing together in the night
 Driven o'er the Guardians of Ireland and Scotland and Wales
 They spotted with plagues forsook the frontiers & their banners seard
 With fires of hell, deform their ancient heavens with shame & woe.
 (15: 6-15)

Orc is the architect of this scene, much as he was the articulator of the earlier scene of plate 6, much as he was the initiator of traumatic history in the Preludium. The pestilence is foretold in the Preludium, associating it with the female's heavenly origins: "When pestilence is shot from heaven; no other arms she need:" (1: 6), and the pain of the millions is an echo of her own pain experienced immediately after the rape: "O what limb rending pains I feel. thy fire & my frost / Mingle in howling pains, in furrows by thy lightnings rent; / This is eternal death; and this the torment long foretold." (2: 15-17).

As the mythical element in the Prophecy section, Orc is tasked in the poem with carrying through the traumatic origins the poem reiterates. Like "The Chimney Sweeper," *America* is dominated by a monstrous child (whether real or as nightmare) and Orc can be viewed as a continuation or intensification of the sweeper as an abject figure. In the earlier lyric, an act of critical and historical parallax is needed to see the morbidity of the suffering speaker who is bound to return *en masse*; in *America* the "terrible boy" Orc, despite the fact that his first appearance in Blake's oeuvre occurs in *America*, manifestly *is* this "return"—he is defined at the outset as a figure that returns, the figure of returning. To those who

oppose Orc, he defies coherent form, and Orc's nature as defiance suggests that the perspective of those who oppose him is perhaps the most accurate one. Albion's Angel in fact questions his very identity, framing his address in the negative:

Art thou not Orc, who serpent-form'd
Stands at the gate of Enitharmon to devour her children;
Blasphemous Demon, Antichrist, hater of Dignities;
Lover of Wild rebellion, and transgressor of God's Law;
Why dost thou come to Angels eyes in this terrific form?
(A 7: 3-7; E 53-54)

Appropriately, "Art thou not" emphasizes the supreme negativity of this youth. For Orc is less an accumulation of positive attributes, attributes that the Angel nevertheless tries to affix to him, than he is a spirit of negativity and nihilistic energy.⁴⁷ Moreover, if the passage cited above begins with a question posed in the negative, it concludes by noting that Orc presents himself as a problem of knowledge, a blank core that resists representation. His form is "terrific," invoking the aesthetic category of the sublime, but the Angel's phrasing underscores Orc's protean nature and implies that the problem of defining or representing Orc is a product of his mutable form.⁴⁸ Orc introduces himself as resolutely not a single, unitary identity, but as an animalistic assemblage of attributes: "Sometimes an eagle screaming in the sky, sometimes a lion, / Stalking upon the mountains, & sometimes a whale I lash / The raging fathomless abyss, anon a serpent..." (1: 13-15). The

⁴⁷ "Orc's position is closer to that of a nihilist than a revolutionary.... "the 'fiery joy' is not a means to an end... but the end itself.... It is energy rather than structure" (Wright xiii-xiv).

⁴⁸ David Fuller claims that claims that the Angel's view of Orc, particularly his "serpent" form, is "a paradoxical indication of a positive value. It is a vision that emanates from the tyrannous spirit of English colonialism which sees Orc in this way because it identifies him with Milton's Satan. Orc attempts the identification for his own reasons: the reproach of the reactionary is a republican title" (*Blake's Heroic Argument* 67).

Angel's question encapsulates Orc's central paradox that he inhabits multiple forms and, at the same time, none at all. As the child-devouring child, Orc is described as profoundly antinomian, as a pure spirit of revolt, and one that may in fact be self-consuming in his delight of opposition.

Two plates later, the Angel returns to his attempt to understand the appearance of Orc, and implies that the quest to know him entails fundamental phenomenological and epistemological questions:

Ah vision from afar! Ah rebel form that rent the ancient
Heavens; Eternal viper self-renew'd, rolling in clouds
I see thee in thick clouds and darkness on America's shore.
Writhing in pangs of abhorred birth; red flames the crest rebellious
And eyes of death; the harlot womb oft opened in vain
Heaves in enormous circles, now the times are return'd upon thee,
Devourer of thy parent, now thy unutterable torment renews.
Sound! sound! my loud war trumpets & alarm my thirteen Angels!
Ah terrible birth! a young one bursting! where is the weeping mouth?
And where the mothers milk? instead those ever-hissing jaws
And parched lips drop with fresh gore; (9: 14-24)

The Angel stresses his position as knower, citing Orc's position vis-à-vis his own as "from afar." He further notes that "thick clouds and darkness" obscure but also paradoxically frame his perspective on Orc. Nearly directly referring to Orc's act of breaking free of his chains and raping the female in the Preludium, the Angel describes Orc's role in ancient, mythical events: "Ah rebel form that rent the ancient / Heavens."

Having established that Orc's appearance in history is a traumatic repetition of his activities in the mythic space of the Preludium, the Angel establishes a complex series of images that severely problematizes Orc as he relates to the issue of birth, reproduction, and progeny, a relation that is sorely unexamined in the

criticism. As in the Preludium when the rape is characterized as a seizure of the female's womb, here the "harlot womb oft opened in vain / Heaves in enormous circles." As the "abhorred birth" and the "terrible birth! a young one bursting," Orc is the "Devourer of thy parent." As the Angel struggles to see and represent Orc, he is figured as an awful product of another type of labor, specifically maternal; that he violently bursts and devours the body that produces this labor suggests that the problem of Orc in the poem is less whether he is a harbinger of liberation or the guarantor of endless oppression; instead, Orc stands before the Angel (and the reader) as the violent repetition and continuation of his mythic act in the Preludium. If his rape of the female initiates and encodes the history subsequent to it, the revolutionary and utopian wish that he becomes associated with in the criticism is inflected with the violence of reproduction, the problematics of the labor of birth mirroring that of the rape. The food and drink brought by the female that caused Orc to "howl my joy" (1: 19) are now perverted; maternal sustenance is greeted with the jaws of cannibalistic matricide: "where is the weeping mouth? / And where the mothers milk? instead those ever-hissing jaws / And parched lips drop with fresh gore" (9: 22-24). As if a literalization of the old cliché of the revolution that devours its own children, Orc becomes a violent obstruction of historical process, of the basic reproductive act that is an analogy of the reproduction of the relations of (re)production in society.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ In this context, it becomes difficult to comprehend apologists for Orc who see him as a servant of pacific and progressive social change. For one example, in "'The Lion & Wolf shall cease': Blake's *America* as a Critique of Counter-Revolutionary Violence," William Richey has claimed that Orc's "millennial vision" aligns him with Republican values: "To the Painite Orc—whom Blake fittingly associates with

Orc's role in *America* involves not only sexual violence but also matricide.

The violent and "limb rending pains" he causes the female in the Preludium are repeated in the heavily phallic language used to depict his defiant appearance to the King of England:

Solemn heave the Atlantic waves between the gloomy nations,
Swelling, belching from its deeps red clouds & raging Fires!
Albion is sick. America faints! Enrag'd the Zenith grew.
As human blood shooting its veins all round the orb'd heaven
Red rose the clouds from the Atlantic in vast wheels of blood
And in the red clouds rose a Wonder o'er the Atlantic sea;
Intense! naked! a Human fire fierce glowing, as the wedge
Of iron heated in the furnace; his terrible limbs were fire
With myriads of cloudy terrors banners dark & towers
Surrounded; heat but not light went thro' the murky atmosphere
(4: 2-11)

This passage underscores Orcian sexuality as it aligns it with his violence. As the nations suffer, Orc's sexual ferocity grows, just as his violence against the female in the Preludium seems to erupt immediately after he complains about how his spirit both surges (taking on a multitude of forms) and then "folds." It is important to note that the depiction of Orc's phallic threat exudes a sense of issueless violence. The Angel, who views Orc and "trembles at the vision" (4:12), nevertheless struggles to identify what it is he sees. Characteristic of the poem as a whole, the dynamics and difficulties of seeing and representing Orc are foregrounded. Not only is Orc characterized as a "vision," the Angel's position or point of view is clarified: "beside the Stone of night" (5: 1). At this vantage point, Orc appears "like a comet, or more

America—the revolution is entirely pacific: not a violent struggle for social and political power but the dawning of a new age of peace and harmony" (203, 199). For Richey, Orc is a pacifist who seeks an end of war and who "is apparently minding his own business and says nothing that is either threatening or violent, [while] Albion's Angel instantly interprets his intentions as hostile and begins heaping abuse upon him" (200).

like the planet red" (5: 2). Uncertain of what he sees and how to represent it, the Angel is compelled to recall a distant, mythical past: "That once inclos'd the terrible wandering comets in its sphere. / Then Mars thou wast our center, & the planets three flew round / Thy crimson disk; so e'er the Sun was rent from thy red sphere; (5: 4-6). According to Dörrbecker, in this primal time before the planets realign properly with the sun at the center, "war acts as the gravitational force dominating this idea of the original cosmic order" (33). If Mars was "our center," a primal union of the Angel's and Orc's motives can be discerned. But if this is the case, here Orc functions as threat and voice, a problem of representability whose impotence in this context belies the bellicose and sanguinary posture he strikes: "The Spectre glowd his horrid length staining the temple long / With beams of blood; & thus a voice came forth, and shook the temple" (5: 6-7). I read these lines to suggest onanism as the issue of the description of Orc's phallogocentrism.⁵⁰ This does not undercut the principle of Orcian violence; nor does it diminish its effects and pain. In the insistent repetition of the rape, there is a simultaneity of violence and impotence, threat, and waste. If the violence that encodes history must be discursively re-performed, *America* warns us that the second time it may appear as farce.

Nevertheless, the phallic scene in the Prophecy compels a return to the Preludium. After the rape, the female's pain evokes the pain of labor and childbirth,

⁵⁰ "Orc's creatures are phallic and political at the same time, referring simultaneously to the act of copulation and to slave revolts in America, abortive historical rebellions, and to the 'South Sea' scandal of British commerce" and "Orc's ascent over the Atlantic is distinctly sexual," according to Dörrbecker (28, 29). Helen Bruder also notes the "phallogocentrism" of Orc as well as the Americans (*William Blake and the Daughters of Albion* 123-128).

though no such event seems to actually occur: “O what limb rending pains I feel. thy fire & my frost / Mingle in howling pains, in furrows by thy lightnings rent; / This is eternal death; and this the torment long foretold.” (2: 15-17). According to Julia Wright, the female figures in the Preludiums of *Europe* and *America* (who bear many similarities) avoid being reduced to mere wombs as vessels of passive reproduction, by assuming a voice that allows them to escape assimilation into the hegemonic gender system, marked by a reductive, inert corporeality. In particular, noting a “homology” between the discourses of aesthetic or intellectual creativity and biological reproduction, Wright describes the pervasive stereotypes of feminine passivity and masculine activity within these modes of production (masculine) and reproduction (feminine), and claims that Blake disturbs, yet ultimately retains, these associations and “defamiliarizes” them by implicitly linking the voice to a non-determinative self-generating, auto-creative power (see 99).

Against Wright’s recuperative claims, I suggest that the complex sexuality of *America* functions as another layer of the argument that labor in *America* plays the role of the “non-economizable” negativity, that which refuses assimilation into productionist forms of political economy. Elsewhere in Blake’s work, Enitharmon is identified as the daughter of Los, who is a form of the Zoa Urthona. This suggests that the Enitharmon who appears here (and who plays a major role in Blake’s subsequent work) might be the previously nameless female from the Preludium, the one who, as Orc notes, “thy father stern abhorrd” (1: 11). Elsewhere in Blake’s oeuvre Orc is depicted as the offspring of Enitharmon and Los (e.g., *The [First] Book of Urizen* 19: 19-20: 7; *Europe* 4: 11; for a succinct summary of the “family tree” see

Damon, *A Blake Dictionary* 369). While these relationships are not yet formed in *America* and a fair amount of debate persists about the justification for importing pieces of Blake's myth from one work to the next in order to neatly complete Blake's notoriously fractured narrative tactics, the incestuous implications of these connections fit with and further complicate the sexuality in the poem. When the Angel identifies Orc as he who "Stands at the gate of Enitharmon to devour her children" (7: 4), Orc may be both the father (if the rape in the Preludium impregnates her and her pains are indeed those of labor) *and* brother of the offspring. That he devours her children suggests a consuming violence that refuses and destroys (re)productive issue. Labor, in this sense, remains that which refuses the logic of (re)production and defies clear representability. Moreover, attending to these troubling moments in the poem severely complicates Makdisi's notion of the poem as a celebration of "life itself" as an escape from the mills (conceptual, psychological, industrial) of production.

Near the end of the poem, a further element is added to the issue of production in and of history. In the final plate the figure of Urizen first emerges:⁵¹

Over the hills, the vales, the cities, rage the red flames fierce;
The Heavens melted from north to south; and Urizen who sat

⁵¹ Strangely, though this is the "first" appearance of Urizen, Orc's great antagonist, in Blake's work, it is not quite his first appearance in this poem. In plate 8 Orc cites, as if in anticipation of Urizen's appearance in the poem, a sort of "always already" priorness of Urizenic influence:

The terror answerd: I am Orc, wreath'd round the accursed tree:
The times are ended; shadows pass the morning gins to break;
The fiery joy, that Urizen perverted to ten commands,
What night he led the starry hosts thro' the wide wilderness:
That stony law I stamp to dust: and scatter religion abroad
To the four winds as a torn book, & none shall gather the leaves;
(8: 1-6)

Above all heavens in thunders wrap'd, emerg'd his leprous head
From out his holy shrine, his tears in deluge piteous
Falling into the deep sublime! flag'd with grey-brow'd snows
And thunderous visages, his jealous wings wav'd over the deep;
Weeping in dismal howling woe he dark descended howling
Around the smitten bands, clothed in tears & trembling shudd'ring
cold.

His stored snows he poured forth, and his icy magazines
He open'd on the deep, and on the Atlantic sea white shiv'ring.
Leprous his limbs, all over white, and hoary was his visage.
Weeping in dismal howlings before the stern Americans
Hiding the Demon red with clouds & cold mists from the earth;
(A 16: 1-13; E 57)

At this point in the poem, the pestilence released against the Americans by Albion's Angels has recoiled with devastating consequences against the British, whose priests, figured as repressive guardians of female sexuality, have become reptilian and hide from Orc. Urizen, who notably does not speak in *America*, appears in a vale/veil of tears,⁵² and "Weeping in dismal howling woe" seems to rob him of the power of expressive speech, an ability that otherwise determines the activities and characteristics of the other major figures in the poem. Moreover, the phrase just cited is repeated (with a slight variance) five lines later: "Weeping in dismal howlings." In this case this repetition of the scene of weeping (and howling) underscores the unexpressive nature of Urizen in *America*. The repetition suggests at one level a loss of difference that would otherwise guarantee linguistic sense and by extension access to knowledge about Urizen. In its power to conceptually undercut or arrest Urizen's potential for speech and the act of speaking in the poem (occurring as it does near the end, giving a sense of finality to the poem), weeping

⁵² In *Literal Imagination*, Nelson Hilton touches on the role of tears as coverings, mainly in *Jerusalem*. He also plays on the veil/vale of tears homonym in that later poem (see 143).

interferes with speech's narrative capacity, thus also arresting—or spatializing—the temporal nature of expressive speech.

As the temporality of speech is halted and its primacy in the poem subtly displaced, the spatiality of sight infects. Weeping as the interruption of speech also has specifically visual elements. Its insistent repetition in the narrative of the passage under discussion has a range of effects. It becomes a veil or covering agent that obscures Urizen's activities: "he dark descended howling/...clothed in tears & trembling shudd'ring cold").⁵³ The repetition of that act of weeping and its linguistic representation, which at once obscures the "sense" of Urizen to would-be observers within the poem (the "smitten bands" who later "shut the five gates..." (16: 19)) and readers of the poem, later veils his adversary, Orc: "Weeping in dismal howlings... / Hiding the Demon red with clouds..." (16: 12-13). This repetition has an accumulative nature, not one that necessarily produces difference or an escape from sameness, but, like the pestilence unleashed by Albion but that recoils against his troops in plates 15 and 16, infects and spreads obscurity from self to other, from Urizen to Orc as the supposed principle of revolution, and from there to the readers who are implicated in the final two lines and the final word of *America*: "But the five gates were consum'd, & their bolts and hinges melted / And the fierce flames burnt round the heavens, & round the abodes of men" (A 16:22-23; E58). If readers (real or imagined) might be the unaffiliated, undifferentiated "men" of the final line (and final word) of *America*, the absence of final punctuation and the presence of an extra

⁵³ Blake's syntax makes it unclear whether Urizen is clothed in tears or if it is the "smitten bands." In this context, however, the passage emphasizes more than once that it is Urizen who weeps, and the "shudd'ring cold" is routinely associated with Urizen, both in this passage and elsewhere in Blake's corpus.

metrical foot contribute to a sense of circularity or seriality to the flames that indeed consume, but more emphatically in this instance surround and encircle, as underscored in the repetition of “round.” And if the “five gates” represent the five senses, their fiery consummation suggests that perception or perceptibility itself is obscured in the final lines.⁵⁴

So, at the conclusion of *America* we have a confrontation of red Orc’s flames with the “mildews of despair” (16: 20) associated with white Urizen. *America*, then, ends in an odd collision of disease, flame, and mildew, or a rot produced through weeping. Weeping, not merely a principle of visual obscuration, thus becomes an agent of physical ruination and decay, more principally of signification itself. Not only do Urizen’s tears deny the signifiatory powers of verbal speech, they contribute to the poem’s broader refusal of sense at the conclusion.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, though they obscure visual apprehension,⁵⁶ these “tears” (products of weeping) paradoxically also reveal—as a rip (or “tear”) in a covering fabric—Urizen’s icy silence, a silence that is all the more deafening as the final,

⁵⁴ Furthermore, in the passage under discussion, the collided verbs, “wrap’d, emerg’d,” encapsulate this central concern of the poem with coverings and revealings, a concern that insistently perseverates throughout the poem. Indeed, what action there is in the poem can be organized according to a toggling back and forth between obscuration and emergence from it. Stephen Cox makes a connection between the imagery of the gates and the poem’s ostensible liberatory aims: “Blake... wants to introduce the concept of a final opening, an end to dialectical opening and shutting. The only gate that is definitely opened is a gate that no longer exists” (128-9).

⁵⁵ Frye’s understanding of the conclusion is quite different: “The poem ends with a vision of the imagination bursting through the senses until the chaos of earth and water that we see begins to dissolve in fire” (*Fearful Symmetry* 206).

⁵⁶ What is obscured is ambiguous, varied, and seemingly auto-proliferating: Do the tears obscure Urizen’s sight, the ability of the “smitten bands” to perceive Urizen, the sight of Orc as the red demon, or is Blake more broadly implying at the very end of the poem that the perceptual or sense-making ability of the reader is obscured?

defining sound of an otherwise loud poem. Tears or tears, weeping or ripping, this paradox of visually revealing an aural experience (or the lack thereof) does not imply synesthesia as an augury of a utopian reunification of the senses, just as the consummation of the five gates does not imply reorganization or unification of the senses.⁵⁷ Rather, in *America* the efficacy of the voice (and its silences) is routinely invoked and undercut by, among other things, its “contamination” with the contingencies of vision. Vision, the conditions of possibility of which have never been immediately given or taken for granted in the poem, here takes on an infecting, obstructing character.

In a cancelled plate, perhaps intended to replace plate 9, we see a rough reversal or foreshadowing of the Orc/Urizen impasse at the end:

In opposition dire, a warlike cloud the myriads stood
In the red air before the Demon; [*seen even by mortal men:
Who call it Fancy, & shut the gates of sense, & in their chambers,
Sleep like the dead.*] But like a constellation ris'n and blazing
Over the rugged ocean; so the Angels of Albion hung,
a frowning shadow, like an aged King in arms of gold,
Who wept over a den, in which his only son outstretch'd
By rebels hands was slain; his white beard wav'd in the wild wind.
(A C: 20-27; E 59)

In this passage the frowning Angels are figured, perhaps echoing Spenser and Arthurian legend, as a single weeping king, whose white beard, Urizen-like, waves in the wind. The anticipatory echoes of plate 16 are clear, including the weeping of an

⁵⁷ See Arguelles on synesthesia in Blake. W. J. T Mitchell (following Marshall McLuhan's discussion of synesthesia in Blake in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*) claims that the function of Blake's images is synesthesetic insofar as these images are not representative or symbolic, but employ formal motifs that are in accord with the “structural dynamics of our sensory openings”: “we look at reality *through* his pictures, as if they were stained-glass windows constructed to fit our sensory openings” (*Blake's Composite Art* 74).

aging monarch who presides over an abyss or depth from a position above it, and the presence of Orc as a red demon. But, recalling the dreamwork and rising dead of “The Chimney Sweeper,” the mortals in *America* “Sleep like the dead” because of their ability to visualize the confrontation of Orc the red demon and the armies of Albion, a perceptual ability they instead prefer to deny. Unlike in “The Chimney Sweeper,” in which sleep activates the dialectic of accretion and dispersal, here sleeping joins “weeping” and “sweeping” in an analogical chain of abjection and perceptual dimness. The willed obliviousness of the mortals comes as an effect and cost of visual perception. Sleeping “like the dead,” they cannot acknowledge and remain willfully ignorant of the dismal shadow of their political and economic oppression and thus “shut the gates of sense.”

Moreover, the “canceled” status of this plate underscores the themes of submerged consciousness and oblivion, as though the plate itself sleeps (sweeps?) within *America*. As *America*’s dream, the canceled plate anticipates the waking conclusion of the poem just discussed, like the experience of *déjà vu*, a repetition in anticipation of the opposition of Orc and Urizen, and their stalled dialectic of revelation and obscuration.⁵⁸ According to Erdman’s editorial gloss, the bracketed and italicized material in lines 21-23 was “deleted but not replaced” (E 803), which suggests an additional suppression that only further submerges the bracketed material’s relation to the waking, conscious poem. The deleted lines suggest the demon is visible to “men,” but its reality is denied by them. Instead, they “*call it*

⁵⁸ See Hobson regarding the identity of Orc and Urizen? Frye, Mitchell, Hobson (53-57, 94). David Bindman claims that in the designs at points it is unclear which figure is which, a difficulty compounded by the fact that Urizen and Albion’s Angel are presented as “identical in mien” (*Blake as an Artist* 75).

Fancy, & shut the gates of sense, & in their chambers, / Sleep like the dead." Preferring oblivion and a sleep from which they will not arise, these canceled and "deleted but not replaced" "men" proleptically anticipate the "men" (who as I suggested, function as analogues for *America's* readers) at the end of the waking poem, who, as we have seen, are bereft of sense in the paradoxically moldering flames of the conclusion already discussed: "They slow advance to shut the five gates of their law-built heaven / Filled with blasting fancies and with mildews of despair" (16: 19-20). The threat ("slow advance") of the decay of sense/sensorium is an odd conclusion for a poem that is ostensibly concerned with the possibilities of political revolution and liberation, with the aim to represent, as Jonathan Mee argues, "the ultimate fulfillment of biblical prophecy... found in the process of liberation which seemed to be renewing itself in the American and French Revolutions" (*Dangerous Enthusiasm* 22).⁵⁹

In this plate Blake describes the atmosphere of the Urizenic "law-built heaven" as filled with "mildews of despair" (A 16: 19, 20; E 58). Embedded within the word "mildew" is the compound, "dew."⁶⁰ But within "mildew" is also "mil," suggestive of Blake's well-known satanic mills, which encapsulate Blake's concerns

⁵⁹ Quite distinct from my own view, Mee argues that *America* "reaches a formal end on a note of suspense as the fires of liberty begin to corrode the ancien regime of Europe. The implication is that the American Revolution is part of a progressive continuum" (*Dangerous Enthusiasm* 211).

⁶⁰ As Nelson Hilton notes regarding plate 127 of *Jerusalem, Vala* (whose name joins the analogy of veil and vale) is associated with morning (or mourning) dew, and thus becomes "another form of the weeping of 'The Little Boy Lost'" and, we can add, the weeper/sweepers themselves. In *Jerusalem*, at any rate, "the dew... represents the mourning of the Divine Vision—that is, earthly morning and birth into limited natural referents" (*Literal Imagination* 49).

about industrial reproduction, commodified labor, the production of equivalent and exchangeable subjects, and repetition conceived of as the generalized production of sameness. “Mill/dew” involves a paradoxical collision of fluidity and hardness, flow and mechanism, mutability and sameness, transience and permanence, water and iron that escapes conceptualization. As Hilton notes, “dew” suggests morning as a time of birth or creation, a first emergence of a unique being, and thus a mode of production of the new (*Literal Imagination* 49). Temporally the stress is linear, with a clear point of origin and stretching toward implied death as *telos*. The “mill” suggests morning also, but in a quite different sense as a point of a diurnal repetitive cycle of the abrupt start of the working day. In terms of the products the mill produces, the subjects constructed by the labor in the mill, and the temporal structure determined by the mill, the emphasis here is not on production but reproduction. The temporality of the mill is deadeningly repetitive and cyclical, a punishing “dull round” that admits no escape or release, particularly given the replaceability and exchangeability of the laborer demanded and produced by this new organization.

“Mill/dew” in Blake’s usage here is a highly impacted portmanteau that collapses and combines a range of possibilities, including morning as the diurnal start of the working day, weeping or mourning, decay/rot, and industrial labor in order to crystallize another version of the Orc/Urizen confrontation between protean dynamism and rationalized, delimited experience. If, as Makdisi claims, the mill opposes and indeed may “consume *life itself*” (154), *America* introduces a third

term to this opposition, a principle of decay and rot that infects, much like *America's* plagues and pestilence, the principle of historical movement and historical time.

If it seems that I am placing undue emphasis on the apparently minor word-play of mill/dew and the imagery of rot in plate 16, there is an influential precedent for stressing such language in Marxist theory, and thus good reason for linking the issue of decay and rot in history to understanding the status of the political and the possibility of representing revolution in *America*. Jeffrey Mehlman's *Revolution and Repetition* examines Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* and finds that at the key juncture of class revolt that Marx discusses, we witness a "strange irruption of something lower than the low... at the top" (13). Against, or in direct parody of, the dialectic of class struggle, the Bonaparte instance is both a debased and farcical repetition of a original tragedy, but one that introduces difference not only in debasement but also because of how it retrospectively calls into question the meaning of the original. More importantly, for Mehlman the *lumpenproletariat* elicits a "certain proliferating energy" (13) in the Marxian text, and Marx's vehement distaste for this non-organized non-class, this rabble of history, is precisely due to the way that it interferes with the dialectic of historical becoming.⁶¹ It is "a form of rot within history, [and] it is no less so... within Marxist theory" (15-16). This, for Mehlman, indicates in Marx a decay of the logic of the dialectic, a sort of infection

⁶¹ Peter Stallybrass's "Marx and Heterogeneity: Thinking the Lumpenproletariat" shares a great deal with Mehlman's argument, yet Stallybrass usefully criticizes Mehlman's implicit binarism between the textual and the political that obscures the "disturbance of the *political*" in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. For Stallybrass, the spectre of the lumpenproletariat disrupts "any simple opposition between homogeneity and heterogeneity, openness and closure. Nor, as Marx suggests, does heterogeneity necessarily disrupt unity; on the contrary, it can ensure it" (81).

that debases the ideal structure: “the repetitive instance of a specific structure: the irruption of a *third* element which in its heterogeneity, asymmetry, and unexpectedness, breaks the unity of the two specular terms and rots away their *closure*” (19). Again: “Bonapartism’ in 1852 was shot through with a metaphoric of rot. The rotten or putrifying state, composed of the residues of class society, the *lumpen dejecta* of the class struggle, functioned as a source of rot within the theory as well” (38). Indifferent to the valences of the antimony of proletariat and bourgeois, of oppressed and oppressor, and of the historical trajectory or teleology of class struggle, radical heterogeneity irrupts, infecting or rotting the historical dynamic, but also the principle or theory of historical change that subtends it.

Mehlman offers a valuable model for conceptualizing instances in Marx’s text where internally disruptive elements threaten to irrupt; these elements appear to disrupt the dialectical functioning of history, but instead are either incorporated as essential contradictions into its dynamics. But the notion of a rot that infects historical change is also an assertion about the theory *of* this change—about the nature of historical representation itself. The irruption of Bonaparte is a crisis of representation, not only of how or what class this historical figure represents politically, but also of the writing of history, of narratives of historical dynamics. For Mehlman, Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire* must be read as “the systematic dispersion of the philosopheme of representation” and as affirming a “tertiary instance breaking with the registers of specularity and representation” (21, 22). Analogously, the opposition between vision and voice in *America* resolves (or culminates) in the threat of decay, and rot affects both the senses and the notion of historical change.

But this opposition is itself a symptom of the negativity of labor, a trace of this absent cause that produces the antimony of liberation and oppression to mask or suture over it.

For some readers of *America*, the scene of the workers giving up their occupations is a euphoric moment signaling the formation of a revolutionary collectivity, but it should also be seen as a repetition of the tentative ending of the Preludium:

*[The stern Bard ceas'd, asham'd of his own song; enrag'd he swung
His harp aloft sounding, then dash'd its shining frame against
A ruin'd pillar in glittering fragments; silent he turn'd away,
And wander'd down the vales of Kent in sick & drear lamentings.]*
(2: 18-21)

Though these lines only appear in two extant copies of *America*, they strike me as important. In particular, as a uniquely self-reflexive moment in the poem, they evoke the poet/artist's sense of his own work, of a futility attached to his work (and work in general), and a future time of non-work (or the absence of "works"), silence, lamentation (a sort of proleptic or anticipatory haunting). Rajan suggests that these lines imply a sense of the Bard's shame regarding the violent act that enables the writing of the poem. However, I have tried to argue that the stakes of that violence are much higher than Rajan acknowledges. As a political poem, and in particular as a political poem that attempts to conjure a sense of what type of historical change might issue in future utopia, labor stubbornly and uniquely remains that which is central, yet cannot be spoken of directly. The scene of the frustrated and ashamed Bard becomes a moment when the poem gains awareness of this debilitating yet enabling contradiction... and founders upon it. And as I have attempted to show,

there is an inexorable counter-current in the poem that works precisely against these aims. I have called this counter-current labor, and I have cited it as a non-assimilable, non-economizable moment that, in its resistance to representation, threatens to undo or obstruct the possibility of a time of the future that the utopian wish and more broadly, the political itself, requires.⁶² When the Angel of Albion cites Orc as a devourer of his mother, he simultaneously clarifies a different sense of historical time in *America*; against the notion of a future, the Angel notes a repetitive, deadening temporality, a temporality of arrest, of death (against “life itself”), and of the repetitive re-tracing and re-inscription of and over the scene of violent appropriation and trauma. Indeed, “now the times are return’d upon thee” (9: 19).

⁶² The possibility of a future as key to a politics figures prominently in criticism of *America*: Jon Mee notes that the ending of all the so-called continental prophecies—*America* included—must be understood as presenting a “continuous process of transformation, available in the present and continuing in the future” (*Dangerous Enthusiasm* 211). Dörrbecker echoes this issue: “in the context of *America*, the hopeful visions of resurrection, redemption, and liberation define a *telos* for the historical processes here interpreted in the terms of Blake’s emerging mythology” (34).

Chapter Five:
“Departing; departing; departing”: De-forming Labor and the Labor
of Reading *The [First] Book of Urizen*

Throughout this dissertation, I have distinguished the role of labor in Blake from what I have generalized as a dominant mode of thinking about labor. One of the principal aims of this dissertation has been to give voice to a submerged, subterranean, “unconscious” counterdiscourse to the dominant view that labor in Blake obeys an either/or logic in which labor is *either* “the creative application of human intelligence to the material world” *or* “the ultimate expression of ‘selfhood’” (Hobson *The Chained Boy* 134, 128). On the one hand, labor is a “primal curse,” performed under conditions of want and coercion, a source of pain, oppression, and division consequent of the punishment of Adam and Eve, as John Milton (following Genesis 3.17-19) describes in *Paradise Lost*:

Curs’d is the ground for thy sake, thou in sorrow
Shalt eat thereof all the days of thy Life;
Thorns also and Thistles it shall bring thee forth
Unbid, and thou shalt eat th’ Herb of th’ Field,
In the sweat of thy Face shalt thou eat Bread,
Till thou return unto the ground, for thou
Out of the ground wast taken, know thy Birth,
For dust thou art, and shalt to dust returne. (10: 201-208)¹

¹ Interestingly, the story of the fall in *Paradise Lost* involves a version of the division of labor, which Milton uses as a device to explain why Eve was left alone and vulnerable. Eve suggests to Adam that they separate to work alone in order to discipline themselves to greater efficiency and productivity:

Let us divide our labours thou where choice
...
For while so near each other thus all day

More than merely depicting a stoical “acceptance of... life in the world as a task,” the expulsion scene, as Max Weber implies, provides a blueprint for an ethic of work held dear by “sober, conscientious, and unusually industrious workmen, who clung to their work as to a life purpose willed by God” (88, 177). The protestant work ethic attempts to transubstantiate coercion and punishment into a “calling,” to exchange physical force and privation into the luring seductions of the godly voice, in which steeling oneself to productive labor regardless of how onerous or loathsome it may be assuages one’s anxiety about the afterlife and provides for others a sign of (or represents) one’s (hoped-for) salvation: “one’s duty in a calling is what is most characteristic of the social ethic of capitalistic culture, and is in a sense the fundamental basis of it” (54).

On the other hand, in the *Grundrisse* Marx calls labor the “form-giving fire” (361), and scholars who follow in the Marxist tradition endeavor to find the kernel of transformative, creative, and liberatory energy even in coerced and alienated forms of labor—indeed, one of the interesting things about reading Marx is that labor retains a creative and ennobling moment even in the darkest descriptions of life in the factory.² Labor not only creates a world in the image determined by

Our taske we choose, what wonder if so near
Looks intervene and smiles, or object new
Casual discourse draw on, which intermits
Our dayes work brought to little, though begun
Early, and the hour of Supper comes unearn’d (9: 214, 220-225)

Their work in the garden is “pleasant” until Eve’s suggestion (see 4: 625, 9: 207).

² I have covered this ground in chapter two. In this context I only wish to single out the recent work of Bruno Gullí, who follows Marx’s claim that labor is a “form-giving fire” by arguing that beyond a form of labor that is organized according to the duality of productive or non-productive, and beyond a labor that is dictated by the

human will, it also creates the embodied, intellectual, psychological human subject itself. The consequences of this are enormous, as it suggests that to the extent that we have created a world of alienation, oppression, and lack of fulfillment through our forms of labor—to precisely *that* extent we can also re-create the world and even ourselves more in accord with our utopian wishes. Labor thus simultaneously indicates the radical delimitations *and* limitless proliferation of human possibility.

Keith Thomas's recent book, *The Ends of Life: Roads to Fulfillment in Early Modern England*, argues that, "The two dominant intellectual traditions, Christian and classical,... both encouraged the notion that work was a tedious, even cruel necessity, and that, ideally, life would have been better if people did not have to work at all" (78). But this view is gradually supplanted in the eighteenth century with the idea that work could be "intrinsically satisfying in itself" and could embody the potential "for human happiness and fulfillment" (91). Citing David Hume, Thomas notes that work came to have a uniquely psychological significance in the eighteenth century, as the vigor of exertion was believed to have salutary effects on the mind and soul, leading to an intrinsic sense of satisfaction, even pleasure: "when 'men are kept in perpetual occupation', they 'enjoy as their reward *the occupation itself*, as well as those pleasures which are the fruit of their labor. The mind acquires new vigour; enlarges its powers and faculties; and, by an assiduity in honest

profit motive, labor *in itself* is exactly the image and material activity of libertaory praxis: "The end of productive and unproductive labor is the beginning of real creative labor, of real freedom; it is the lighting of a communal fire, not the self-conceited absorption into a solipsistic desire" (85).

industry... satisfies its natural appetites” (94, Thomas’s italics).³ While Hume’s picture of the worker thoroughly engaged, body and mind, in his or her labor and deriving intrinsic reward from it entails a depth psychology quite foreign to the figures populating Blake’s work,⁴ the expectation that rescuing alienated, divided, and coerced labor and converting it into creative, communal, and self-enlarging activity in which one’s limited and truncated “powers and faculties” may be fully engaged, expanded, and opened exerts an extremely powerful force on Blake criticism—indeed, in my opinion this can be said to be a defining expectation on the part of critics who take seriously the idea that Blake’s work is engaged in reimagining society, economics, and community along utopian lines. For just one example, Jackie DiSalvo has argued that Blake “anticipated Engels, for whom human beings create themselves through labor and skill, their very bodies, hands, brains, senses emerging over the millennia as the products of increasingly conscious labor” (*War of Titans* 164).⁵ DiSalvo goes on to argue that “practical material activity in the world” is the means by which “the continual re-creation of the universe... The

³ The material from Hume is from the essay, “Of Refinement in the Arts” (106-107). Guinn Batten discusses Robert Burton and his similar view that melancholy is an effect of the freedom from having to work and the cure is the work ethic (7-8).

⁴ The poem of concern in this chapter, *The [First] Book of Urizen*, is a good example of the unique ways that Blake refuses to humanize his cast of characters. W. J. T. Mitchell provides an apt description of the form this takes for Urizen: “Urizen is not a man ‘representing’ reason, or a man dominated by the faculty of reason: he *is* reason, a particular mode of consciousness. Blake’s peculiar genius was not in dramatizing the human behavior associated with mental and emotional states, but in exploring the contours of various modes of consciousness *as such*” (“Poetic and Pictorial Imagination” 90). Angela Esterhammer claims that characters in Blake take on “archetypal roles” rather than function according to recognizably human characteristics and motives (“Calling into Existence” 115).

⁵ DiSalvo seems to be drawing on Engels’s unfinished work known as “On the Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Apr to Man.”

creative powers of imagination and labor appear on a continuum and are spoken of interchangeably” (165).⁶

Throughout the preceding chapters, I have argued that while this aforementioned narrative has a sort of compelling (because affirmative and humanistic) appeal that should not be wholly discounted, there is a more far more complex, nebulous, and darker function of labor in Blake’s poetry that can be described as the “unconscious” of the version briefly sketched above. DiSalvo, for one example, offers the view that Blake’s “concept of the imagination... [is] a celebration of the potential of human productivity” (*War of Titans* 305). Saree Makdisi concurs, and argues that labor as coerced, alienated, divided, managed, and organized according to the profit motive, in Blake is transformed into labor as pure productivity, claiming that, for Blake, “life” is nothing other than “endless making” (265).⁷ Despite the celebratory intent of statements such as these, a more ominous undertone can be detected in which the generic verb, “making,” can refer to a broad range of activities and circumstances and motives that condition them, and potentially forms of labor that Makdisi seeks to distance himself (and Blake) from. The implication is that if “life” is not “endless making,” endless production, it ceases to be life; life is identified wholly with “making,” with productivity, just as it is severed from labor, if the latter is inserted into the hegemonic capitalist system of political economy. Thus, even while these critics believe that Blake counters the protestant work ethic and the often violently coercive managerial forms it took in

⁶ Minna Doskow’s “The Humanized Universe of Blake and Marx” also discusses the world- and self-creating and transforming potentials of labor.

⁷ Makdisi amplifies this notion throughout *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s*: “Life is production” (263).

his day, their efforts in effect reinstate the injunction to work, the ideology of limitless productivity, at a deeper and more fundamental level of Blake's work (and this holds true for a great deal of the critical work on labor in Blake). Material labor is the key form that material, psychological, and bodily oppression takes in Blake's work, and it is also central to Blake's utopian, liberatory imaginary. The opposition of labor and life that Makdisi relies upon and that other critics implicitly endorse might be overcome through finding an essence of production logically prior and fundamental to its distortions in labor under the dominion of capital, but Blake's work teaches us that representing this is notoriously difficult, so much so that even in its most utopian moments, Blake criticism tends to more firmly establish the work ethic and the productivity injunction at the core of an oeuvre that otherwise seems quite aware of its own internally ambivalent—even antagonistic—relationship to it.⁸ Indeed, it may be a truism that the dynamics of giving form, of

⁸ Blake's industriousness must be set alongside his own deep-rooted anxieties about personal productivity, anxieties exacerbated by the implicit if theoretically vexed opposition between the work ethic proper to the production of visionary art and that proper to "servile," reproductive work. The best example is his July 1800 William Blake emerged from "a Deep pit of Melancholy, Melancholy without any real reason for it" and threw himself into his labors (E 706). Relocating from London to Felpham in Sussex in September of that year Blake spent his days decorating the library of his new patron, William Hayley, with images of notable European authors, executing commercial engravings, and trying to learn the intricacies of miniature portraiture, one of Hayley's interests. Two days before this momentous move, the "indefatigable Blake," in Hayley's description (ctd. in Bentley 478 n.64), describes his renewed mood vividly: "My fingers Emit sparks of fire with Expectation of my future labours" (E 709). Soon enough, however, depression returns; in letters of late 1802 and early 1803 Blake reports feelings of profound unhappiness with the "mere drudgery of business" that has dominated his time with Hayley (E 724). Blake's self-diagnosis concludes that his afflictions are based on an overwhelming feeling of "dependence" and confinement associated with reproductive work—both literally reproducing original work of others, and more figuratively reproducing the conceptions of Hayley. The contradiction between his financial reliance on this

creation, of making, of production can be viewed as perhaps *the* quintessential Blakean activity. Yet, the distinction between creation and labor, often given the form of the policed severance of art from labor, is belied by the sense that labor is a key element of its other, more positive antithesis, and, is that which must be redeemed for this antithesis to emerge in the first place—labor in Blake persists in a nebulous zone in which it is both the abject of Blake’s aesthetic and political imaginary *and* its animating, essential force. It is possible to argue that the “unconscious” effects of labor in Blake, which this dissertation has sought to bring to light, are due to precisely this contradiction. A far riskier claim would be that these unconscious effects require and in fact produce false solutions of this contradiction, solutions that offer a false because simplified outcome for the utopian overcoming of (fallen) labor. At any rate, Blake’s work, as I have suggested in these pages, investigates what remains at this unconscious level, where labor is cleaved from the dictates of productivity and surrenders its creative, energetic, active function in order to instead tarry with death, dissolution, stupor, and sleep.

Another aim of this dissertation has been to show how the practice of reading labor in Blake (the labor of reading) is to be recruited—quite against our will and often without our knowledge—into a discourse that is at odds with itself, and thereby to be recruited into a role in the drama-without-closure this discourse describes.⁹ When I say that readers are recruited into this discourse, I mean that

situation and his aspirations to “visionary” work reduce Blake’s mood to a state of desperation.

⁹ Indeed, the present chapter on *The [First] Book of Urizen* could even be viewed as a prolegomena to the treatment of labor in the lengthy, labyrinthine poems *Milton*, *Jerusalem*, and especially *The Four Zoas*.

Blake's poetry is uniquely performative: at key junctures the poetry requires the reader as supplementary to a fundamental lack that the poem articulates and refuses to fill. In an earlier chapter, for example, I discussed how the speaking voice in "The Chimney Sweeper" has a special effectivity, in that it articulates the speaker's trauma by means of repeating it in the figure of Tom, who is nothing other than an oneiric construction on the part of the speaker. Through this device, which recruits the reader as a participant/dupe in its subterfuge, the laboring subject is revealed to be a production of an ur-exchange that establishes the permanent and constitutive debt of this subject. The labor of reading Blake is too often taken to be the dutiful (and affirmative) activity of supplying what Blake notoriously leaves out; and yet, as the case of "The Chimney Sweeper" shows, it is possible to discern an unsettling plenitude or excessiveness in Blake, in which our participation completes the error the poem relies upon for its own completion or fullness of significance. We perform this labor, this role, quite against our will, in conditions of coercion and deception, conditions that, as it turns out, eerily repeat or replicate those in the sphere of capitalist production: alienation, division, compulsion. The labor of reading Blake is often taken to be—or assumed to be—a highly laborious process by which the reader experiences a radical expansion of perceptual, sensory, intellectual capacity.¹⁰ In other words, through the highly-attuned, active work of reading

¹⁰ The rewards of this labor of reading Blake are widely believed to be transformative. For only one example, Julia Wright has analyzed the alienating effects of the Blakean text and experience of reading/viewing it:

The reader necessarily occupies the intersection of the different, isolated and isolating, systems represented in Blake's poems, at the margins of all and included in none. Alienated by a world that not only is constituted through words on a page and an unconventional book,

Blake, the reader, hitherto determined and delimited by the “damaged life” of modernity, becomes, paradoxically, a production of the text, images, and material artifact that he or she consumes. But the question is not what the reader can do to provide sense, to speak for the absences in the text (such as Blake’s notoriously absent grammatical subjects or causal connections), but what role the reader must (i.e., is forced to) play in the performances of an economic unconscious that fatally disrupts the productivity injunction and leads one away from the utopian promise of limitless energy, unity, community, and fullness of perception and instead into what Guinn Batten has described as the “necropolis of the unconscious” (76) that produces a poetry of disavowal, abandonment, stupor, haunting, and spectral repetition. Indeed, as Batten claims, Blake’s poetic discourse on labor “revives, repeatedly, the regrets and dreams of the dead in human places of germination”; and yet, counter to Batten’s argument, it does so not in the service of sowing the “seeds of hope” in these places (79). The laboring dead in Blake do indeed return, as Batten claims, but not in the form of renewal and redemption; they return instead as ghastly revenants or walking casualties of capitalist forms of labor under the aegis of the ideology of productivity.

As my oncluding case study in the hauntings of (reading) labor in Blake’s poetry, this chapter claims that *The [First] Book of Urizen* (1794) is important in a

but that also uses unusual names, stages generally recognizable events in unfamiliar ways, and denies the reader a surrogate through whom to be introduced to this new world, the reader is held back from the text. It retains its unfamiliarity, its strangeness, and its estranging effect. The reader is consequently placed in the space in which revolutionary transgressions of the homogeneous societies are possible. (xxix-xxx)

genealogy of Blake's approach to labor because it fully detaches labor from positive productivity, and instead indelibly associates it with images of stupor, sleep, numbness, decay, and other forms of the deadening of the sensorium and the evisceration of the body. Also, the confrontation of Los and Urizen in the poem—both of whom are depicted, in part, as laborers—anticipates the later roles of Urizen as the “great Work master” of *The Four Zoas*¹¹ and Los as the millennial prophet/blacksmith/poet of *Jerusalem* and *Milton*. In *Urizen* the thematics of the voice, visuality, trauma, and the walking dead, as I have discussed in the chapters on “The Chimney Sweeper” and *America a Prophecy*, are again revisited—in keeping with Blake's insistent, repetitive instincts—but whereas in the earlier poems labor is a problem of and for representation and appears chiefly in oblique traces, in *Urizen* Blake decisively turns his direct attention to the dynamics and travails of what Christopher Hobson has called “giving form” (*The Chained Boy* 125).¹² However, the argument this chapter will pursue is that the scholarly insistence on *Urizen's* presentation of form-giving activity—even when this is critiqued—is a defense against the ways that the titular character spends much of the poem in a process of now gradual, now fitful decay. Indeed, for Urizen, labor does not serve to stave off or arrest this decay, nor does it necessarily create the world of time and space as is often claimed; rather, it is an act that is paradoxically passive in its

¹¹ Urizen is described as a “Work master” in Night the Second of *The Four Zoas* (24: 5), although his function as a laborer or overseer is diminished in *Milton* and *Jerusalem*.

¹² Hobson argues that, “human labor, emblemized by Los's smithing, *gives form* to the social, political, and religious hierarchies that oppress it” (*The Chained Boy* 128, my italics). Los “stands for human labor, the creative application of human intelligence to the material world. The function that links these roles [imagination and labor] is the giving of form” (134).

activity, a product of and collaborator with processes of decay. The labor of Los is, similarly, a reaction, an imitation, an iteration of Urizen's labor and its effects and not primarily a salvific act.

Additionally, I will claim that the performative elements of reading are at work in *Urizen* as well, lending themselves to an opportunity to discern some of the stakes of (the labor of) reading Blake. In the end, *Urizen* is a poem about the labor of reading Blake. To a certain extent, this can be said about many of Blake's, especially later, works; yet, few link a concern with representation and labor in such a way as to, on the one hand, invoke the plenitude of interpretive options (and hence the freedom and agentive power of the reader/critic), and on the other, to simultaneously enforce a radical narrowing of sense. Just as labor in *Urizen* leads to/is associated with stupor, sleep, numbness, and other forms of the deadening of the sensorium, the critical labor of reading commences in a peculiar and unsettling quietus regarding the very freedom that the poem leads us to believe that we have achieved in our interpretive endeavors. After a brief summary of the plot of *Urizen*, this chapter will move on to discuss some key themes in the criticism of the poem, then it will trace the effects of labor in the poem, and finally suggest some implications for the ways that readers of *Urizen* are recruited into its discourse.

Urizen opens with a brief Preludium in which the speaking "I" accepts the role as scribe for "dark visions of torment" (2: 7), that the "Eternals" (functioning as muses) will recite, the poem proper begins with Urizen's retreat or withdrawal from

the life and world of the Eternals.¹³ He is characterized repeatedly as both obscure and discrete: He is a “shadow” and is “Unknown, unprolific! / Self-closed, all-repelling” (3: 1, 2-3). Upon the sounding of trumpets, he speaks and expresses his sense of solitude, his self-perceived holiness, his desire for an experience without contraries, and for fixity: “I have sought for a joy without pain, for a solid without fluctuation” (4: 9-10). He confesses to have written “secrets” in “books formed of metals” and establishes sin and a rigidly unitary law of “peace, of love, of unity: / Of pity, compassion, forgiveness” (4: 34-35). Upon this announcement a tumultuous and painful process of separation occurs, and Urizen attempts to establish his creation through an “incessant labor” (5: 25) characterized by “fierce anguish & quenchless flames” (5: 68). Urizen’s world is “like a womb,” “like a black globe, and “Like a human heart struggling & beating” (5: 29, 33, 37). Los appears as “rent” from Urizen’s side, but as this occurs, “Urizen laid in a stony sleep / Unorganiz’d” (6: 7-8). Los attempts, through intense yet measured labor, to bind his and the world’s fluctuation to impose some semblance of order upon it. As if in response to Urizen’s labor to forge his world, Los builds the human body: spine, nerves, bones, brain, and the organs of sense and their properties. When this work is completed, Los “shrunk

¹³ Urizen, as we have seen in *America*, often plays a role that is inimical to revolution. He is often taken to embody the principle of reason, oversees the division and limitation of the senses, is obsessed with establishing a single law, and is typically depicted pictorially as an aged man with a white beard. Politically, psychologically, and spiritually, Urizen is “clearly the model of a tyrant” (Williams, *Ideology and Utopia in the Poetry of William Blake* 192). A succinct summary of Urizen can be found in Mitchell’s “Chaosthetics: Blake’s Sense of Form”: Urizen is the “personification of sanity and proportionality in his time. Urizen’s rage for order, system, control, and law is constantly represented by Blake as producing the most pathological forms of madness... in both the subjective mental life of the reasoner and the political sphere of rational social management” (453).

from his task” and mourns what he sees (13:20). Then, a “globe of life blood trembling” appears (10: 13). This globe eventually transmogrifies and becomes Enitharmon, Los’s female counterpart. After a deeply ambiguous encounter with Los, she “Felt a Worm in her womb” (19: 20) and finally, “Brought forth an Infant form / Where was a worm before” (19: 35-36). This is the birth of Orc and his parents immediately chain Orc to a mountaintop with the “Chain of Jealousy” (20: 24). Urizen then forges a collection of tools and instruments and explores “his dens,” the “Abyss beneath” (20: 32, 34). This experience brings him into an encounter with, among other things, his own sons and daughters, “His eternal creations” that he “sicken’d to see” (23: 9, 8). Urizen’s explorations lead him through cities where his visitation, in effect, humanizes the inhabitants. There, bodies are formed, they succumb to mortality, and finally a law-based religion is established. Finally, Urizen’s “first begotten, last born” son, Fuzon, collects his siblings and leaves the earth behind.

It has been commonplace for scholars to comment that *Urizen* presents the first installment of “The Bible of Hell” promised by Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (plate 24; E 44), that it principally offers a parody of the book of Genesis, and that it uses Gnostic thought to re-think the relationship between the fall and the creation.¹⁴ The poem, in broad strokes, presents Urizen’s regression, which is a

¹⁴ The other books of the Bible of Hell are generally taken to be *The Book of Ahania* and *The Book of Los*. Genesis stuff. Harold Bloom has claimed that: “*Urizen* parodies Genesis and *Paradise Lost*, and attempts to correct what Blake considers the imaginative errors of those myths of creation” (*Visionary Company* 71; see also *Blake’s Apocalypse*, where Bloom suggests that *Urizen* is also a parody of Plato’s *Timeaus*). Beherendt: *Urizen* (along with *Ahania* and *The Book of Los*) is a “guide” to reading the Bible in its infernal sense (46-47). Robert Ryan has claimed that *Urizen*

regression back to origins, and yet, as Peter Otto argues, it also implies a temporal anticipation (see “Time, Eternity and the Fall in *The Book of Urizen*” 374). The poem, ending on a decisive note of failure and abandonment, nevertheless gestures beyond or past itself to, as Mitchell suggests, the time when we may wake up from the nightmare of history. It is significant that the poem plots Urizen’s regress and decline, just as *Urizen* itself plots a parallel double-movement of regress and anticipation. Critics claim that the poem itself represents not only a retreat, but also a sort of failed first attempt at a mythological account of our current fallen state—in other words, the poem is often positioned in Blake’s oeuvre as a transition to the *The Four Zoas*, looking ahead, paving the way for the larger “failure” of the *Zoas*.¹⁵

The poem is also conventionally understood to be a deepening of Blake’s interest in developing his so-called myth, as figures such as Urizen, Enitharmon, and Los are cast in far deeper relief than in, say, *America*. This concern has often been misinterpreted as Blake’s withdrawal from politics, even though many critics that hold that position also argue that this withdrawal is, perhaps paradoxically, in the service of an even deeper, more thorough engagement. W. J. T. Mitchell has been one of the most persistent critics of *Urizen*, and claims that the poem marks a departure for Blake from the realm of politics. Mitchell claims that with *Urizen*,

offers a critique of religion as a product of the fall: “In Blake’s myth of the origin of the universe, the most radical theological premise is that religion ought not to exist at all, that in its presence in the world is a disastrous consequence of humanity’s fallen condition” (155).

¹⁵ G. E. Bentley has termed the *Zoas* as a failure (see “The Failure of Blake’s *Four Zoas*”). Steve Clark has noted that *Urizen* observes and represents a “logic of decline” (146), yet the problem I have just outlined—which can be viewed as a uniquely Blakean version of the problem of totality—might be better termed a logic of failure.

Blake has left the explicitly political (of poems like *America* and *Europe*) behind, “moving completely into the realm of myth, pushing back to the very origins of time and space” (108). The thematics of retreat or regress are apparent: *Urizen*, according to Mitchell, represents a

turning away from obviously contemporary issues[,]... a movement from the timely to the timeless, from a descriptive cosmology which, in the political prophecies, had comprehended the four ‘continents’ of the world, to a mythic cosmogony which would delineate the beginnings and end of a cosmos in which Blake’s kind of topical prophecy would be coherent” (85).¹⁶

These views imply not only a return to origins, but they also imply that origins are also conclusions, and the poem has consistently been discussed as not only an inquiry into origins, but into anticipations as well. In this sense the notion that *Urizen* represents a retreat from politics is merely another way of saying that it inquires into root causes of politics; in other words, according to this line of thinking, Blake retreats from politics in the post-*America* work only in order to engage with it at a more fundamental, causal level. Tilottama Rajan, for example, has claimed that in *Urizen*, “Blake goes behind the mangled surface of history to the pre-history in which it is inscribed, thus confronting a recurrent problem: namely the origin of historical events in cultural traumas for which there may not be material causes or remedies” (405). And in a similar vein, Mitchell refines his notion that Blake turns away from politics for the more nuanced position that Blake is

¹⁶ Aileen Ward similarly has claimed that *Urizen* represents a shift for Blake from politics to “cosmogony” (215). Mitchell also notes a strong tonal shift that accompanies the turning away from politics: In the later Lambeth books like *Urizen*, “Blake seems to be moving into a new thematic and stylistic period, characterized superficially by increasing irony and pessimism and by poetic forms which end not with a promise of resolution but with a note of apparent despair” (107).

interested in excavating root causes of intractable problems in the political realm—indeed the root causes of the political per se: “There is a steady pressure in Blake’s art to seek an explanation for the nightmare of history, and to envision an awakening from it” (*Blake’s Composite Art* 107). The poetry of this period, Mitchell continues, seeks a figure—for Blake it is Urizen in *The Book of Urizen*, but Los elsewhere—to embody or trigger “a consummate episode to end all episodes—revolution, utopia, apocalypse” (136). Christopher Hobson, who disagrees with Mitchell’s thesis that *Urizen* leaves the world of politics behind, also claims that *Urizen* and the other works associated with Blake’s “Bible of Hell,” *The Book of Ahania* and *The Book of Los*, “present an account of how authoritarian and repressive psychic and social structures could come to exist in the beginning of human society without a superhuman creator” (*The Chained Boy* 125). Rajan, Mitchell, and Hobson, despite their different approaches to *Urizen*, implicitly concur that there is a double regression concerning *Urizen*: On the one hand a retreat from political, economic, and social events happening, as it were, “on the ground”; and on the other hand, a withdrawal to the mythic or cosmically causal realm that condition and give form to these events. It is a poem that looks into the past to attain a glimpse into the future—its prophetic role may be to ascertain the form of futurity itself. The larger implication of this idea is that if *Urizen* is successful, it could be read for a philosophy of history that, paradoxically, withdraws from that history, a theory of that which the theory disdains.

Urizen has been generally read as a poem about, as Hobson states, the dynamics of “giving form,” and the respective labors of Los and Urizen are central to

how this occurs (or fails to occur). Hobson, who attributes a social or political role to *Urizen*, claims that, "Overall, *Urizen* shows a *divided* creation; human labor, emblemized by Los's smithing, *gives form* [my italics] to the social, political, and religious hierarchies that oppress it" (*The Chained Boy* 128). Makdisi says that to keep the fall under control, to keep life from devolving or decaying "uncontrollably," it must be "formed, regulated, organized, disciplined by an external regulative power. That is, the limitless potential of eternal life must be organ-ized" into bodies as "productive machines": "such bodies are abstracted from life itself, life lived as limitless potential" (*Impossible History* 261). Aileen Ward attributes the source of this potential to the "figure of creative power," or Los, who "brings a substantial and meaningful world into being: he is a creative surrogate for his own creator, stamping his work with a designing hand" (215, 221). Susan Wolfson says that *Urizen* is "caught in his will to formation" (67), and Andrew Lincoln claims that in *Urizen*, "The urge to unify the human community through law is therefore seen as an archetypal error, based on a limited understanding of identity" ("From *America* to *The Four Zoas*" 215).

One of the bigger disagreements concerning *Urizen* is how to evaluate this emphasis on "giving form," and by extension how to describe what the poem is saying about totality. After all, while labor in the poem does indeed create a world, and one that bears some similarities with our own, it is clear that this creation is also a fall, whether fortunate or otherwise. While Peter Schock notes that *Urizen's* type of "giving form" is one that Blake sought to expose and alter, he nevertheless views the central activity of the poem to be a consolidation, a formation, even if it is

of error: “Blake critiques the materialist ideology that harmonized natural, rational, and political orders, an analysis extending to Urizen’s ‘creative’ labor, the process that eventually produces the human body... Blake’s demiurge becomes the progenitor of all the mechanist paradigms ascendant in the late eighteenth century” (62). Eric Chandler claims that “it is manifestly clear that the creation is *not* good: it horrifies Urizen, whose record of fallenness, temporality, and interminable division the poem is, and it horrifies everyone else as well—especially his antagonist Los, whose task it is to hammer all that has been created into determinate form” (48). Much like Blake criticism in general, ambivalence is the order of the day; however, here, critical ambivalence is a repetition of the ambivalence of giving form in the poem itself. Edward Larrissy has claimed that *The Book of Urizen* “betrays Blake’s anxiety about making form in a fallen world: his ambivalent feelings are inscribed in the ambiguous form of the text and illuminations themselves” (*William Blake* 133). Donald Ault has suggested, using Aristotelianism as a figure for the totalizing gesture in criticism, that *Urizen* may indeed be about nothing less than the problems inherent in the will to the formation of a whole:

the peculiar working or power of the plot of *Urizen* would ‘de-form’ the fundamental presupposition of Neo-Aristotelian method that unity of total form/affect is the primary end of aesthetic construction: this deformation would derive from the specific way the synthesizing/disintegrating reflexive principle operates both to undermine its own functioning and to expose the fatal limitations of the drives toward totalizing form which both the logistic and dialectical methods have as their end or purpose. (“Blake’s De-Formation of Neo-Aristotelianism” 122)

What is interesting—or at least useful—in Ault’s approach to *Urizen* is the unique vantage point it offers on the utopian function of Blake criticism. It is a

peculiar fact that while many critics read Blake for the ways his work offers an augury of paradise whether political or spiritual, or both, or neither—“to paradise the hard way,” according to one (Eaves “Introduction” 1)—the true utopian gesture can be found in the totalizing moment in Blake criticism, revealed in the stark contradiction between claims like Ault’s that Blake’s work is self-undermining in that the will to totality encounters, internally, the “fatal limitations” of that very gesture.¹⁷ While a full excavation of this point is far beyond the scope of this chapter and dissertation, it is important to note that in *Urizen*—as in all Blake’s work—a logic is at work that, as Ault implies, sustains the totalizing fiction at the same time as it fatally undermines it. For critics of *Urizen*, this can be discerned in the poem’s inherent disorder, a disorder that critics activate in the name of a happy—if self-sustaining—state of indeterminacy. The site of this disorder is the state of the physical artifact of *Urizen*, which exists in only eight copies, each of which has a different ordering of plates, and the challenges and opportunities this fact may present. And the activity that takes place at this site—reading—is both activated and disrupted by this same disorder. Jerome McGann has written eloquently about *Urizen* and has claimed that, “disorder both within and between the various copies of [*Urizen*] seems almost the rule which Blake followed when he put the work together. Or rather, disorder is a permanent presence with which the work’s conventional narrative seems always to be engaged” (“The Idea of an Indeterminate Text” 306). John H. Jones echoes McGann, claiming that reproductive print

¹⁷ In Ault’s essay, formulas and figures taken from the fields of mathematics and formal logic form an unintentionally Aristotelian mode through which to “de-form” Neo-Aristotelianism.

technology is an ideology that enforces singleness of vision and a rigidly determined mode of reading appropriate to it. On the other hand, *Urizen*, and Blake's mode of book production in general, is

a critique of the potential for authorial power that print technology can foster through its ability to mass-produce exact copies of a text.... Blake's mechanical method of book production, however, undoes the fixity of traditional printing by making each copy of each book a new version or retelling of the same basic story, a new performance that differs from all other versions. (74)

By eliminating exact duplication, Blake overcomes the stasis and fixity of the bound and mass-produced books, and thereby challenging and disrupting authorial power, figured (much like *Urizen* himself) as a unified voice self-assured in the singleness of its meaning. Instead, "Blake's bookmaking process reintroduces performance into the experience of reading mechanically reproduced printed matter by making each 'copy' of his book a separate telling of the *Urizen* story" (Jones 87-88). Julia Wright has recently claimed that *Urizen* defies the strictures of the authoritarian text, which "confines and silences the reader, forcing compliance to its dictums" (103).¹⁸ And Kathleen Lundeen, while not limiting herself to the physical form of Blake's work, still argues that, "Contending with the egotistical reason of *Urizen*, there is a principle of spontaneity which seeks to emancipate the victims of mechanical rationality" (20).¹⁹

¹⁸ Wright's discussion of *Urizen* is regrettably too brief to draw too many conclusions from it, but elsewhere she has argued that Blake's texts and books have the effect of "alienating" the reader or viewer from hegemonic positions. Wright's implication is that the ideal reader of Blake becomes an effect of the Blakean artifact, mirroring its openness, non-fixity, and fluidity.

¹⁹ In a significant, though isolated, departure from this celebratory theme, Paul Mann has provocatively claimed that the very of the bound, mass produced, and printed book is an "ontological horizon, the horror-zone of the fallen world" but that

We have returned to a by-now familiar set of terms, set up in stark opposition to one another: spontaneity and mechanical rationality are analogues of “mill” and “dew” (of *America*) and of liberation and oppression. This dissertation has largely been concerned with tracing the effects of this tension (or series of analogous tensions) that persists in Blake’s discussion of labor. In *Urizen*, this persistent dichotomy is set in motion through labor. One of the striking things about the beginning of the poem is that it is concerned not only with conventionally introducing the figure of Urizen and the situation he inhabits and effects; it is also manifestly concerned with its own act of presenting Urizen, which begins in the Preludium. Like the Preludium of *America*, *Urizen*’s Preludium has an ambiguous relationship with the rest of the text. In the case of *Urizen*, the Preludium apparently frames the central action and concern of the poem proper, much as a conventional prelude might. Yet, this relation between Preludium and subsequent poem—as well as the more abstract relation between past and present and between past and future—breaks down upon further examination.

Of the primeval Priests assum’d power,
When Eternals spurn’d back his religion;
And gave him a place in the north,
Obscure, shadowy, void, solitary.
Eternals I hear your call gladly,
Dictate swift winged words, & fear not
To unfold your dark visions of torment. (2: 1-7)

The Preludium crucially highlights the poem as discursive labor, just as its convoluted temporality disrupts the labor of discursive production that it presents.

despite being marked by an irreducible difference, Blake’s books are nevertheless “problematic”: “The unique book is quite possibly a version of Urizenic selfhood. It is as if Blake’s very reluctance to reproduce his book in industrial forms reproduces it in Urizenic forms, binds it into a Urizenic body” (“Horizon of the Book” 57-58).

In doing so, it problematizes the poem's representational capacities at the same time as it attempts to provide the provenance of the poem's content. Beginning with the preposition "Of," the Preludium feels like it starts not just *in media res*, but in the middle of a sentence, as if the poem is an interruption of the grammatical unit. Unlike in *America*, where the Preludium discusses a sort of primal or primitive scene of violence, in *Urizen* it appears at first to be a more straightforward glimpse of what the poem will present, a précis of sorts. As a "Preludium," its position is necessarily chronologically prior, yet logically it assumes a perspective only possible after the action has been recounted.

However, only in retrospect after finishing the poem do we realize that the Preludium presents a series of inaccuracies, including the fact that the Eternals do not "spurn" the Priest's religion (in fact they seem ultimately helpless against its spread) and they do not give "him a place in the north." While these inaccuracies in themselves might not be important, they indicate that the Preludium is doing something more than merely anticipating for the reader what will follow. Because we do not know that the Preludium is inaccurate until we finish reading, the poem foregrounds both that the reader is encountering a place of origin, a place of naivety, but also that one understands this only upon inserting the point of origin or first contact with the poem within a circular process of re-reading.

The scene of dictation similarly implies a complex relation between origin and iteration, as the writing "I" takes his direction from "Eternals" who are both present (as Eternals) but off-scene. And even if the scribe/poet hears them "gladly," he appears to be a passive vessel through which the poem passes. However, there is

some cause to think that the scribe is not being truthful or accurate, and that perhaps he is also its instigator. When he reassures the Eternals that they should “fear not / To unfold your dark visions of torment” it sounds more like he is attempting to convince the Eternals to dictate a story that they might wish to keep secret. Is the poem a call placed by the Eternals, or is it one they take part in despite their fear and against their better judgment?²⁰

Moreover, as will become clear in the poem itself, the Eternals are unlike conventional muses in that they are interested actors in the poem they dictate, with clearly partisan positions on the titular character of the poem and the actions he causes and participates in. Looking more carefully at the syntax of the sentence, the “I” of the scribe is the subject of the verb, “Dictate”: In other words, the sentence offers the impression that it is saying that the Eternals should dictate their words, but in fact there is justification in thinking that in fact the sentence is telling the Eternals (the direct address lacks the comma) that “I hear your call gladly, [and] dictate swift winged words, & fear / Not to unfold your dark visions.” The scribe, in this case, still writes another’s vision, but he is doing the dictating and writing. Of course, the scribe could also be an Eternal, in which case the “I” as the subject of the sentence is a part of the “your” that indicates who possesses the “dark visions.” While relieving some of the grammatical problems of the sentence, this possibility nevertheless introduces other difficulties. The grammar of lines 5-7, while

²⁰ Ian Balfour talks about the prophetic voice as a repetition, an echo, dictation: Blake ‘encapsulates the theme of the immediacy of the prophetic word as incorporated or internalized in God’s spokesman, but it des so *in* the mode of allusion and citation” (170).

misleading the reader concerning the scribe's role, also mislead concerning the reliability of the perspective from which the events of the poem are recounted.

The point is that just as the Preludium seems to establish the origin and provenance of the story the poem will recite—a story that is itself about origins to a large extent—it also obscures the fact that this provenance is deeply compromised, corrupted, and perhaps biased. In any case, the origin and stability of the poem we are trying to read is destabilized as its mode of production is represented and obscured, its moment of conception (in whose mind it exists) and its moment of execution (who is calling, whose voice dictates the poem, and who physically writes it down) are purposefully sundered and, as in the description of the priest, is rendered “Obscure, shadowy.”

Just as the scene of dictation alerts us to the potential of infinite regress from the notion of an originating voice, thereby foregrounding the problems of mythical-historical representation and the labor that goes into such representation, the figure of Urizen, from the start, is similarly a problem of representation and in *Urizen* he is never straightforwardly given; Urizen is in fact nothing more than the dynamics and work of presenting and perceiving him. At first he is referred to indirectly, as the “Primeval Priest,” “a shadow of horror,” and a “Demon” (2: 1; 3: 1, 3). He is only named properly after this series of descriptors, each of which emphasize vagueness, secrecy, and the supernatural. And when Urizen is finally named, Blake goes to lengths to draw focus on the act of naming itself:

what Demon
Hath form'd this abominable void
This soul-shudd'ring vacuum?—Some said

“It is Urizen” (3: 3-5)²¹

Blake’s use of quotation marks to indicate speech is very unusual. Generally, Blake uses no punctuation to set off speech, but here the punctuation emphasizes the act of naming Urizen, and links him to acts of definition in general. Yet, as an “It,” Urizen is somewhat less than human; the implication is that, even as he is given a proper name, the non-human attributes used to denote him in the preceding lines may yet be more appropriate. And, as Rajan notes, if Blake aims to emphasize the act of definition, it is less than clear whether Blake is fleshing Urizen out in these lines or if he is emptying him of content and significance. After all, the “It” refers to the “abominable void” and/or the “soul-shudd’ring vacuum”—both emphatic figures for absence and emptiness (see Rajan, “(Dis)figuring” 406). Moreover, it is unclear what we are to make of the speaker(s) of these words. The “Some” who offer this nomination may be the other Eternals (as the early lines of the poem seem otherwise unpopulated), but if they are dictating the poem to the speaker, it can be assumed that they are quoting what has been said by another party, yet the source of this voice is ultimately inconclusive; ultimately readers aren’t given any assurance who has named Urizen and who attributes these characteristics to him.

While Urizen’s (and also Los’s) act of “giving form” is crucial, the poem nevertheless stages its own drama of formation in its opening plates as it simultaneously introduces and obscures its titular character. Ultimately, the act of

²¹ Blake reemphasizes the act of naming Urizen later in the poem as well. Chapter two of *Urizen* describes the trumpet blast that precedes Urizen’s speech and says, “vast clouds of blood roll’d / Round the dim rocks of Urizen, so nam’d / That solitary one in Immensity” (3: 41-43). During the labor of Los to forge time and the body, we read: “And Urizen (so his eternal name) / His prolific delight obscurd more and more (10: 11-12).

defining or giving form to Urizen introduces more ambiguity to his already vague shape. The first chapter of the poem is thoroughly overburdened with a myriad of terms emphasizing Urizen's isolation, abstraction, obscurity, inwardness, and self-imposed limitation. Urizen is described as "unknown" five times in the first chapter alone (3: 2, 6, 10, 20, 14). He is "a shadow of horror" and "Self-closed, all-repelling" (3: 1, 2-3). He is "unknown, abstracted / Brooding secret" and a "dark power" in hiding (3: 6-7). Yet, it is impossible not to note that there is something excessive in Blake's description of Urizen in these early lines, and I would suggest that this excess ought to draw our attention to the contradiction that despite Urizen's obscurity, abstraction, and introversion, he is nevertheless both under intense and focused scrutiny by the speaker of the poem, who actually sees him (and the nature of his obscurity) quite clearly and conveys this to the reader.

As if to emphasize this fact, Blake devotes a full page to an image of Urizen that depicts him facing the reader (see figure 1). Though this image is a means to visualize Urizen or making him available to our sight, the interplay of obscuration and revelation is nevertheless at play, undercutting its representational aims. In the image, Urizen's eyes are closed, suggesting his inwardness and state of being closed off from the world, but in the form of an image this effect is reversed: the closed eyes function as a sort of veiling device, denying our access to and knowledge of him. His beard similarly covers about half of his body, and his crouching position makes of his visible body a series of abstract circles and ovals (right knee, right shoulder, left shoulder, left bicep, left forearm, left knee/thigh) that has the effect of breaking his body apart into abstract shapes, much like the shapes with which Urizen "strove in

battles dire / In unseen conflicts” (3: 13-14). In the image, the environment in which we find Urizen suggests the stormy, elemental conditions the poem describes—i.e., “Combustion, blast, vapour and cloud” (3: 16)—yet there is a clear sense that Urizen is being forced down into his crouching position. The thin dark line outlining his shoulders and head contribute to the impression that whatever might be above Urizen, whether cloud, blast, or rock, might be bearing heavily down upon him, crushing him. Even though Urizen’s crouch might suggest that he is readying himself for laborious exertion and action—much like a sprinter’s stance—the feeling is stronger that the crouch is a product of weariness and an unbearable weight.

Later in *Urizen*, in an image that parallels the aforementioned image of the crouching Urizen, we see the titular character again with eyes closed, yet demonstrably crying (see figure 2). His posture has changed to a sitting position, and his arms and legs are in shackles. In comparison to the first image, in this one Urizen is facing up, with a corona or halo of celestial light framing and emanating from his head, and thus in an optimal position to see and be viewed, a similar sense of withdrawal and absence is conveyed. Here the shackles are not necessarily an indication of slavery, but of the binding or bounding (as in setting the limits) of Urizen’s depictability. Moreover, in this companion image, the sense that Urizen may be on the verge of action is lost; though his head is upturned, as if in expectation, his posture does not convey even the potential for movement.

Urizen is engaged in intensive labor that belies yet also accompanies his silence and withdrawal. In fact, as the poem begins, his work has in part already

taken place. This temporal displacement of his work provides the occasion for the poem itself, as implied in the Preludium where the work is prefigured as “assum’d power,” or his establishment of dynamic potency in the static world of the Eternals where “Earth was not” and “Death was not” (3: 36, 39). In the midst of his description as hidden and withdrawn, he nevertheless busily subdivides the monotonous temporality and spatiality of eternity:

2. Times on times he divided, & measur’d
Space by space in his ninefold darkness
Unseen, unknown! changes appeard
In his desolate mountains (3: 8-11)

Though the opening takes place “In Eternity,” the first line of the poem proper notes that “a shadow of horror is risen / In Eternity!” (3: 1-2), suggesting that despite being in eternity, events and actions that take place over an expanse of time can and do take place. In *Urizen*, duration exists in Eternity, which in turn implies that labor will always already have been accomplished and in process. More importantly, the notion that Eternity might imply stasis or fixity is undermined in such statements; *Urizen* is described as “unprolific!” and withdrawn into himself. The poem implies that *Urizen* “Hath form’d this abominable void” (3: 3-4), even though it marks him as “unprolific,” incapable of production. Dividing time and measuring space, *Urizen* prepares it for experience. He imposes a logic upon it, a logic that organizes it for future activity. *Urizen*’s uniqueness is that prior to this establishment of phenomenal time and space, he already has productive capacity. *Urizen*’s activity persists within and despite his status as “Unseen, unknown!”; despite being the subject of these activities, the oddly passive construction Blake employs here detaches *Urizen* from the active authorship of them: “changes appeard.” Implicitly

unmooring Urizen from his agentive role, Blake implies here that Urizen's labor is both his and not his; the labor is directed and initiated by him, but the implication is that Urizen passively suffers it to be done through him.

Later, Urizen's labor takes on a pace that is both frenetic and obscure:

4. Dark revolving in silent activity:
Unseen in tormenting passions;
An activity unknown and horrible;
A self-contemplating shadow,
In enormous labours occupied

5. But Eternals beheld his vast forests
Age on ages he lay, clos'd, unknown,
Brooding shut in the deep; all avoid
The petrific abominable chaos (3:18-26)

Urizen's labor is here characterized by acts of division and measurement, in line with his predominantly Newtonian worldview.²² As before, Urizen's labor is appropriately alienated; his work is not initially directly attributed to an acting subject; the work is merely "an activity" performed by a "shadow." As readers we are assured that "It is Urizen" who is acting, yet Blake's syntax gets about as close as possible to direct attribution without providing it. As in the passage discussed earlier, these lines are claustrophobic with the concepts of silence, visual obscurity, opaqueness to knowledge, and being cut off from the world. However, these characteristics are difficult to square with what we think we know about labor—

²² Blake's hostility to Newton's thought weaves throughout his work. Often associating him with figures like Locke, Blake links Newton with singleness of perspective, deism, and a constraining and overweening rationality. In an untitled poem included in an 1802 letter to his friend and patron Thomas Butts, Blake asks, "May God us keep / From Single vision & Newtons sleep" (E 722; lines 87-88). On Newtonism in Blake, see Ault's *Visionary Physics: Blake's Response to Newton* and the notion of a Newtonian narrative as Ault describes it in the Introduction to *Narrative Unbound: Re-Visioning William Blake's The Four Zoas*.

that it involves a self-affirmative, definite, productive act in the world performed by a subject who knows him or herself through the energetic exertion. Even alienated labor observes these characteristics; even if the laborer feels him or herself to be severed from and by his work, there is still that abiding sense that there is an “I” performing work that puts the identity and security of that “I” under pressure.

In the second chapter of *Urizen* labor and speech are linked, as Urizen addresses whomever will listen in order to articulate his position and the reason for his rebellion. Upon the sounding of trumpets, Urizen speaks, yet in keeping with themes already discussed, the agentive capacity of Urizen is undercut as it is asserted:

3. Shrill the trumpet: & myriads of Eternity,

Muster around the bleak desarts
Now fill'd with clouds, darkness & waters
That roll'd perplex'd labring & utter'd
Words articulate (3: 44–4: 41)

On the one hand, we *know* the speaker to be Urizen; yet, when scrutinized, it isn't clear what assures us of this. After Urizen finishes speaking, we encounter this brief statement: “The voice ended” (4: 40). However, the voice *must* belong to Urizen, because we somehow know that he speaks here; the voice, after all, expresses concerns and ideas that are conventionally attributed to him. Yet Blake surreptitiously avoids directly attributing “his” words to him. If the speaking voice is unmoored from any definitive speaking subject, so too does the “perplex'd labring” present its own set of difficulties. Is the labor performed in a state of being perplexed? If so, who labors, and who is perplexed? Does the labor perplex its performer? Is our view or understanding of the labor perplexed? In this often-

overlooked passage, labor and the problems of representation are staged. Namely, labor is represented, yet it is a labor without a clear agent.

As in the passages previously discussed, here Blake allows the reader to assume or provide the subject performing the action. Yet the action itself is a process without a subject, though the subject position is provided by the reader. In lieu of providing answers to crucial questions such as “Who is speaking?” and “Who is acting?” Blake’s work cajoles the reader into doing so. In what follows I will discuss some of the effects of this risky maneuver in *Urizen*.²³ For the moment, it is important to note that when critics overlook the fact that we are dutifully doing this, we risk missing an essential characteristic of labor in Blake’s work, particularly from *Urizen* forward: As labor takes on a central role in this poetry, it becomes increasingly abstract, it is often not directly or securely attributed to a agentive subject, it rarely issues in positive products or effects, it tends to be linked to abstracted and benumbed states such as stupor, sleep, passivity, and death. In passages such as the one just discussed, when critics provide a positive role to labor we are recruited into a misreading that buttresses what I have discussed elsewhere in this dissertation as the conscious workings of labor in Blake to articulate or imagine the transubstantiation of oppression into freedom. By claiming that there is an unconscious role that labor plays, I have been saying that this dynamic of misreading that repeats throughout Blake’s work may have been something that

²³ I claim that this maneuver is risky because for it to work, the reader has to supply sense that the text doesn’t warrant, signification that exceeds what the immediate evidence will bear—and the reader must not be aware he or she is doing this. What I am doing is not an act of heroically seeing what others have missed, but instead a sort of disabling of the textual machinery of *Urizen*.

Blake himself was unaware of, as I believe he took seriously the utopian wish and knew that redeemed labor would be crucial in its representation.

In thus perplexing the reader, Urizen (it is assumed) then articulates a sort of manifesto of his goals, he asserts his own holiness, and he tells a story of his activities. He starts in the void, with which he is repeatedly associated, but it is a void with potential for rebirth, for generation: "Natures wide womb" (4:17). The void is empty, yet as a womb it is potentially productive; indeed, from it a world emerges: "A wide world of solid obstruction" (4:23). Having created a world with more secure dimensions than that of the Eternals, Urizen has also written in "books form'd of metals" in which he has "written the secrets of wisdom" (4: 24, 25) and, in particular, laws geared toward the establishment of a unitary society: "Laws of peace, of love, of unity" (4: 34). Urizen's speech emphasizes a rigid unity, his attempt to reign in the multiplicity and mutability of experience. To this end, the speech revels in the singular and indivisible speaking "I": "I alone, even I," "I repell'd," "Here alone I," "Lo! I unfold." As befits such egoism, Urizen asserts that the world he would create would be organized according to singular and rigid laws: "One command, one joy, one desire, / One curse, one weight, one measure / One King, one God, one Law" (4: 38-40).

Yet, even as Urizen's speech seems to assert his consolidating power and authority, the world he creates begins to decay. His fellow Eternals react immediately, violently severing themselves from Urizen. Their reaction is in effect a retreat, a passive reaction despite the commotion it produces:

3. Sund'ring, dark'ning, thund'ring!
Rent away with a terrible crash

Eternity roll'd wide apart
Wide asunder rolling
...
Departing; departing; departing:
Leaving ruinous fragments of life
Hanging frowning cliffs & all between
An ocean of voidness unfathomable (5: 3-11)

As the Eternals turn away from Urizen, the “ruinous fragments” they leave behind might refer to Urizen himself. A few lines later, Urizen defends himself from the Eternals’ separation by his building labors:

6. In fierce anguish & quenchless flames
To the desarts and rocks He ran raging
To hide, but He could not: combining
He dug mountains & hills in vast strength,
He piled them in incessant labour,
In howlings & pangs & fierce madness
Long periods in burning fires labouring
Till hoary, and age-broke, and aged,
In despair and the shadows of death.

And a roof, vast petrific around,
On all sides he fram'd: like a womb;
(5: 19-29)

Ultimately, “The vast world of Urizen appear'd” (5: 37). As the world appears, it seems that Urizen himself is more and more isolated, “rent from Eternity” (6: 8). But the production of his world is laborious, “incessant,” carried out in “fierce madness.” The Blakean figure for reason here is implicated in activities that involve madness. The world he creates defies direct description and can only be described by a series of similes: it is “like a womb,” “like a black globe,” and “Like a human heart struggling & beating” (5: 33, 36). Ultimately, this globe will have a role to play, but at this point it is important to note that after his work, Urizen succumbs to a “stony sleep / Unorganiz'd, rent from Eternity” and is “Like a dark waste stretching

chang'able..." (6: 7-8; 10: 3). Urizen falls into a state of "ghastly / Sick torment" (10: 5-6) and is "obscurd more & more" (10:12). Later, "his eternal life / Like a dream was obliterated" and Los looks upon him with horror and sees "Urizen deadly black" (13: 33-34, 50). While Urizen begins the poem in a Satanic act of defiance, after his rousing speech he seems to be decaying throughout, until this point at which he is a ruined, blackened, obliterated form.

Urizen's decay and demise is starkly depicted in two images (figures 3 and 4). Plate 10, according to David Worrall, shows the body of Urizen, which is also the "body given to mortals by Urizen" (*The Urizen Books* 34). The image presents a skeletal body, hunched over in a circular shape that is punctuated by the curving spine, the series of ribs, the skull, and the pelvic bone.²⁴ The posture of the skeleton echoes that of Urizen crouching in figure 1. But here the profile view turns the figure away from the reader, and in place of an obscuring beard the skeleton's hand cups its skull, as if in dismay or shame, as a form of protection, or as an attempt to hide. Overall, the figure doesn't represent the blackened form that Los sees, but it does depict the evisceration of the body that Urizen's changes imply. If the figure's posture suggests dismay, it may also suggest that Urizen realizes the fatality of his plan.

Plate 13 (figure 4) is one of the most striking images in *Urizen*.

Conventionally it is understood that the two figures represent Urizen (on the left)

²⁴ Much later in the poem, Los creates the fallen human form, and the description of the skeleton bears some resemblance to the image on this plate:

A vast spine writhed in torment
Upon the winds; shooting pain'd
Ribs, like a bending cavern
And bones of solidness (10: 35-40)

and Los (on the right). Urizen's body appears engulfed in flames, and though his hands rest casually on his knees, the posture of his head suggests agony. Hobson argues that the two figures "suggest the relationship between free and slave labor, and it is notable that the free laborer sinks back in exhaustion while the slave figure's lips are drawn back over white teeth in a rictus of pain or a cry" (128).²⁵ In other versions of this image, Urizen's ankles are visibly chained, as they are in figure 2, which suggests the shackles of slavery. It is unclear why Los suggests free labor to Hobson, as his body, while unburned, healthy, and robust-looking is nevertheless locked in a distorted and perhaps painful position, his torso turning away from Urizen and the flames, but his head cranes back and sideways to witness Urizen's immolation, as if fascinated despite himself. With his right hand Los clenches his hammer, as if in preparation for his work.²⁶ Los appears in the poem after the Eternals separate from Urizen, and after Urizen creates his "vast world" (5: 37). He is deeply upset and terrified at what Urizen has accomplished and what has become of him—indeed, it can be said that he appears in the first place to embody the Uriizenic reaction. And as we read Los's actions in the poem, it is impossible to not get the sense that all he does is as a passive response to what he sees occurring to Urizen.²⁷ The tortured posture he adopts in this image conveys the sense that he is

²⁵ The image in copies A and C makes him look as though he is even further decayed than in copy G, the copy employed here.

²⁶ David Worrall claims that Los's posture means that he is dropping his hammer, but he also claims that this image is "one of the most definite and literal in the whole book in terms of relation to the verbal narrative" (*The Urizen Books* 37). If this is so, the text on the plate occurs much earlier than when Los actually drops his hammer, implying, perhaps, that Los continues to work.

²⁷ Los is often taken to be a heroic embodiment of Blake himself, a poet and ceaseless creator of beautiful forms. He is often described, in *Urizen* and elsewhere

simultaneously horrified and attracted to what he sees. While the two figures are not mirroring each other, the upturned heads (perhaps looking at the same point far outside the frame of the plate) and the position of the knees and shins suggest that Los may be a type of Urizen here. Indeed, when we are first introduced to Los, he is hoping that the Eternals, who have departed, will “confine” Urizen (5: 39). When they refuse further engagement, as if in grotesque parody of the forming of Eve from Adam’s rib, “Urizen was rent from his side” (6: 4), causing him great anguish: “Groaning! gnashing! groaning! / Till the wrenching part was healed / 13: But the wrenching of Urizen heal’d not” (7: 2-3).²⁸

Los is horrified by Urizen’s rapidly advancing decay and formlessness, and he works (or is put to work) to try to stem or counter this. His activity often takes the form of creating provisional structures—such as the human body—that can arrest the fall of Urizen and create the necessary framework for renovation and renewal. In an extended passage that toggles back and forth between Urizen’s ongoing suffering leading to his demise and Los’s labors as response to this, organizes time and builds the fallen, limited human body:

Beating on his rivits of iron
Pouring sodor of iron; dividing
The horrible night into watches.
....
The Eternal Prophet hevd the dark bellows,
And turn’d restless the tongs; and the hammer
Incessant beat; forging chains new & new
Numb’ring with links. Hours, days & years

as the “Eternal Prophet”; he is a version of Haephestus, working as a blacksmith and forging metals; in the later epics he builds Golgonooza, Blake’s “city of art”; and generally speaking he is taken to be an active, causal force in Blake. Here, however, I am claiming the opposite: he exists merely as a passive response to Urizen

²⁸ Easson and Easson have discussed the Adam and Eve connection (95).

....
Los beat on his fetters of iron;
And heated his furnaces & pour'd
Iron sodor and sodor of brass (10: 8-10, 15-18, 28-30)

The effect of this labor is the production of the human body and its faculties (10: 31-13: 25). However, Los's labors seem to be less effective at saving Urizen than they are in giving Los characteristics previously attributed to Urizen. When Urizen is rent from Los's side, he is formless, "Unorganiz'd / A clod of clay" (6: 8, 10). Similarly, Los's body is traumatized by Urizen's separation and he falls into a "dismal stupor" (7: 1). Like Urizen's fear of change and "fluctuation" (4: 11), Los is fearful of the lack of form and presence of chaos, so he forms "nets & gins" and "bound every change / With rivets of iron and brass" (7: 7, 10-11). Just as Urizen's work—though in the sphere of the Eternals—occurs "Times on times" and "Space by Space," suggesting the subdivision and measuring of time and space for the purposes of control and calculation, Los's work also forms linear time: "dividing / The horrible night into watches" (10: 9-10); "forging chains new & new / Numb'ring with links. hours, days & years" (10: 17-18). Finally, "in ghastly torment sick" (12: 26, 13:4), the body has been formed, with delimited and stunted senses, and Los, as a version or repetition of Urizenic error, reunites with Urizen just before the latter succumbs to "deadly black":

4. Shuddring the Eternal Prophet smote
With a stroke, from his north to south region
The bellows & hammer are silent now
A nerveless silence, his prophetic voice
Seiz'd; a cold solitude & dark void
The Eternal Prophet & Urizen clos'd (13: 35-40)

Los's silence and solitude, as well as the presence of the void, powerfully echo the descriptions of Urizen from earlier in the poem. And faced with Urizen's death, Los divides himself (or is divided despite himself). He beholds Urizen, and to some extent becomes him: "Thus the Eternal Prophet was divided / Before the death-image of Urizen" (15: 1-2).

The point of these echoes or resemblances is that Urizenic error—and this includes Urizen's labor—once initiated, can only be repeated. Los's work is often—and to some extent not incorrectly—taken to be an effort to set limits on the fall, to provide a boundary on the decay and dissolution that Urizen experiences. The limited human body and its impoverished senses is the result of this effort. Yet, if there is irony in the poem, it is in the fact that Los is compelled to participate in, realize, and make permanent Urizen's error, even though he seems to see it *as* an error and knows what is happening to Urizen is sick, distorted, limiting, and deathly. He is compelled to work, but not, I suggest, to arrest error, but to continue it, to set it in a cyclical and repetitive motion. His labor is compromised, occasioned by another's error. When Urizen is seen "Dark revolving in silent activity" (3: 18) near the beginning of the poem, the "revolution" (in the sense of a cycle) he begins is one that Los is compelled to repeat when Urizen is incapable of doing so.

However, this repetition involves transition and transgression. In a sense, after Urizen's death, another poem begins, as Urizen returns from the dead and Los's mode of production radically shifts. After the fallen body is created, "In terrors

Los shrunk from his task: / His great hammer fell from his hand" (13: 20-21).²⁹

According to Harold Bloom, "Horrified by his failure to arrest Urizen's fall, Los momentarily gives up, drops his hammer, and silently merges with Urizen" (*Blake's Apocalypse* 170). Los's hammer is abandoned, only to be replaced with another, far stranger instrument:

In pangs eternity on eternity
Life in cataracts poured down his cliffs
The void shrunk the lymph into Nerves
Wand'ring wide on the bosom of night

²⁹ There is a similar scene in *The Four Zoas*. Near the conclusion of "Night The Fourth" Blake offers an arresting image of the arrest of labor:

In terrors Los shrunk from his task. his great hammer
Fell from his hand his fires hid their strong limbs in smoke
For with noises ruinous hurtlings & clashings & groans
The immortal endured. Tho bound in deadly sleep
Pale terror seizd the Eyes of Los as he beat round
The hurtling demon. terrified at the shapes
Enslaved humanity put on he became what he beheld
He became what he was doing he was himself transformd
(4.55 [second portion]. 16-23 E 338)

It is worth drawing attention to the peculiar nature of Los's refusal or abdication of his labors, and the role of stasis or inertia. Los is here locked, "seizd." Not merely attentively gripped by the spectacle of what he witnesses, Los is also made into a mimetic copy or repetition of it. Sleep provides no respite but in fact further binds Los in systems of production that never cease, despite Los's individual and momentary abdication. The well-known epigraph of *The Four Zoas*, "Rest before Labor," read as an imperative or demand, implies that labor might submit in resignation to powers it cannot overcome (E 300). Sleep then is not in the service of the work ethic, subject to the division of abstract time in order to provide rest for the purpose of more labor. The use of the passive voice to describe the falling hammer suggests a deeper compulsion uniting both the demands to work and to rest. The deeper compulsion is based on a logic of identity between labor and laborers, a system in which ontology recapitulates phenomenology, in which one *is* what one beholds. Rather than indicating "sympathy," as Wilkie and Johnson understand this passage (98-99), or Marx's notion that labor (de)forms workers' subjectivities and bodies according to the repetitive tasks performed, I view this as suggesting a logic of inertia that inheres in the repetitive work process, seizing Los, objectifying him. Furthermore, the chronological sense of "before" in the epigraph, "Rest before Labour," is spatialized as Los's failure or refusal to labor is due to his strictly mimetic relationship to what he sees right "before" his eyes.

And left a round globe of blood
Trembling on the Void (13: 54-55)

The globe of blood starts trembling, branches out into roots, produces “fibres of blood, milk and tears” (18: 4). David Worrall claims that the globe of blood gives Blake “the basis of a conceptual geometry of materiality’s separation from Eternity” (*The Urizen Books* 138). The globe is also an exterior womb of sorts, as it soon begins metamorphosing:

In pangs, eternity on eternity.
At length in tears & cries imbodyed
A female form trembling and pale
Waves before his [Los’s?] deathly face

9. All Eternity shudder at sight
Of the first female now separate (18: 5-10)

This is another, transformed scene of labor, and the one that characterizes Los’s labor in the last chapters of the poem. Obviously drawing upon the story of Eve being formed from Adam’s body, this scene also employs eighteenth-century medical knowledge, as Robert Essick and others have shown.³⁰ In figure 5, we see a body that we take to be Los’s hunched over the globe, with his face obscured by hair. The hair seems to connect the globe and Los’s head, suggesting that it is emerging from him. Los’s back is lined with what might be a network of nerves or veins that may be supplying the blood to the globe, or at least circulating the blood between globe and figure.³¹ Los’s assumption of a feminine form of labor—however

³⁰ See Essick’s *William Blake’s Commercial Book Illustrations* and “William Blake, Thomas Paine, and Biblical Revolution.” See also Mary Lynn Johnson’s “Blake, Democritus, and the ‘Fluxions of the Atom,’” and George Gilpin’s “William Blake and the World’s Body of Science.”

³¹ Worrall also claims that Los’s position implies worship of the globe, which is itself evocative of the solar worship in *The Song of Los* (*The Urizen Books* 43). Alexander

unconventional its depiction may be—suggests that in *Urizen* Los’s compulsion to labor in or after the image of Urizen is a usurpation of a power that is not proper to him, much as Urizen had “assum’d power” recklessly and destructively.

In *The Orphaned Imagination* Guinn Batten discusses how maternal and feminine labor in *The Four Zoas* derives from the body’s sites of death, desire, and reproductivity, is judged to be regressive in its narcissism” (82). She goes on to suggest that “acts of ‘enwombing’” imply “transformations of the bellicose death drive into a creative renewal of life” (100). However, in *Urizen* Los’s act of giving birth leads to violent appropriation and oppression. Immediately after Enitharmon appears Los attempts to force himself sexually on her:

1. But Los saw the Female & pitied
He embrac’d her, she wept, she refus’d
In perverse and cruel delight
She fled from his arms, yet he followed

2. Eternity shudder’d when they saw,
Man begetting his likeness,
On his own divided image. (19: 10-16)

It is unclear if Enitharmon successfully escapes Los’s attempted rape; in any case, the reaction of the Eternals suggests that a violation of some nature has taken place.³² That they see it in representational terms, as a dynamic of likeness and an image, may evoke the begetting of like copies on a printing press, but it also bolsters the claim that *Urizen* is exploring the repetitive effects of Urizen’s labor. Though these effects have been transformed and have proliferated, their form or basic structure of violence and appropriation has persisted.

Roob has inconclusively yet provocatively connected the globe with a human placenta and claims that it is emerging from the “head of the demiurge” (174).

³² Ellis is confident that, “Los rapes Enitharmon, who gives birth to Orc” (106).

Whether Los's rape of Enitharmon is successful, she nevertheless is subsequently impregnated and gives birth in striking fashion:

When Enitharmon sick,
Felt a Worm within her womb.

4. Yet helpless it lay like a Worm
In the trembling womb
To be moulded into existence. (19: 19-23)

The worm in Enitharmon's womb changes into a serpent "With dolorous hissings and poisons / Round Enitharmon's loins folding" (19: 27-28). Finally, "When Enitharmon groaning / Produc'd a man Child to the light" (19: 39-40). This child is Orc, born in flames, the violent, destructive form of unbridled revolt that we have seen at work in the Preludium of *America*, where he rapes the nameless female who may be a version of Enitharmon, his mother in *Urizen*. Here, Los and Enitharmon nearly immediately chain Orc to a rock, where we have already found him in the opening lines of *America*, causing his own ur-historical traumatic transgression that encodes the history of Blake's (and our) own times.

If we read across these two texts, the cyclical and accumulating acts of violence and appropriation enter history retrospectively, as an act of representation gone horribly wrong. After all, what is *Urizen's* speech but a discourse about representation? Writing in *Urizen* has an always-already quality, as if the deforming effects of *Urizenic* labor have no secure beginning, but only continue to regress to still more fundamental sites of origin, lodging them deeper and deeper in our mythical-historical past. Returning now to the early plates of the poem where *Urizen's* rebellious speech is found, a couple issues now emerge. Most importantly, *Urizen's* act of rebellion is largely an act of writing and bookbinding: "Here alone I in

books formd of metals / Have written the secrets of wisdom / The secrets of dark contemplation" (4: 24-26). Urizen goes on to open the book, like the act of opening the seals in Revelation: Lo! I unfold my darkness: and on / This rock, place with strong hand the Book / Of eternal brass" (4: 31; see figure 6). As discussed earlier, critics have duly noted the importance of Urizen's reference to the book, and have distinguished his book from Blake's. However, his rebellion has already taken place. Much of this speech takes place in the past tense. Not only has his rebellion already taken place, he has already submitted it to writing, and then, at another level of representation, recounts it orally and refers back to the written form for its authoritative form. It is unclear whether his decay and death in the poem result from the act of rebellion itself, the book that recounts it, or if it is a result of the speech itself. The performativity of Urizen's speech is located in the fact that the performance instantiates a punishment for speaking the revolt.

As a final brief note about *Urizen* before moving on to some concluding remarks, the criticism has not sufficiently discussed the afterlife of Urizen in his poem. The assumption has universally been that after Los's work in creating the fallen body, that Urizen's demise is reversed or arrested. However, to my knowledge it has not been suggested that Urizen does not return as a human, or even a diminished version of his eternal form, but instead rises as a revenant, the walking dead. When the abject and rejected child Orc is chained to the rock, he speaks (his actual words are not given) and, hearing him, Urizen rises from the dead: "The dead hear the voice of the child / And began to awake from sleep" (20:

26-27). The first thing Urizen does is forge measuring, weighing, and navigational tools to engage in the morbid and unproductive task of exploring his “dens”:

7. He form'd a line & a plummet
To divide the Abyss beneath.
He form'd a dividing rule:

8. He formed scales to weigh;
He formed massy weights;
He formed a brazen quadrant;
He formed golden compasses
And began to explore the Abyss (20: 33-40)

The repetition of the word “form'd” or “formed” is striking here. Urizen performs highly skilled and precise work, much in line with his will to impose law on unruly and changeable experience. It is implied that he uses his tools to explore an “Abyss,” which as empty space might render tools such as the “dividing rule” or “massy weights” useless. Despite the will to form that this passage emphasizes, there is something pathetic or tragic-comic about Urizen’s efforts here as he doesn’t seem to understand his surroundings, the task he will do, and what he will need. In other words, he is acting less like a paragon of reason (as he is often depicted) and more like an automaton with no mindful guidance.

Later, Urizen encounters some of the objects and beings of his journey through his dens:

A fearful journey, annoy'd
By cruel enormities: forms

Of life...

2. And his world teemd vast enormities
Frightening; faithless; fawning
Portions of life; similitudes
Of a foot, or a hand, or a head
Or a heart, or an eye, they swam mischevous

Dread terrors! delighting in blood

3. Most Urizen sicken'd to see
His eternal creations appear
Sons & daughters of sorrow on mountains
Weeping! wailing! (20: 49–23: 11)

Ranging from the fantastical to the grotesque, the entities that Urizen encounters are his own creations, even his own children. We witness him pass over cities where the inhabitants, after Urizen passes, “shrunk up from existence” and “forgot their eternal life” (25:39, 42). In effect, Urizen brings death to the cities, like a rampaging plague, and the inhabitants, infected, become versions of him, much as Los had mirrored Urizen earlier in the poem. Bodies shrink, capacities shrivel, the general will to live is annulled:

5. And their children wept, & built
Tombs in the desolate places
And form'd laws of prudence, and call'd them
The eternal laws of God (28: 4-7)

My point in suggesting that Urizen is or functions like some sort of revenant or zombie (he is referred to as a “Demon”) is twofold: first, it is consistent with the post-apocalyptic atmosphere of the final plates of the book, in which the inhabitants believe that “life liv'd upon death” and “They lived a period of years / Then left a noisome body / To the jaws of devouring darkness”; second, it takes away from critics the affirmative thrust of readings that, while acknowledging the pessimism of *Urizen*, nevertheless read the poem as a celebration of the powers of the critic. Reading *Urizen/Urizen* as revenant, and the concluding plates as his laborious efforts to haunt his own text, the cyclically repetitive history in the poem (figured mainly by the Los/*Urizen* relation) is transferred to the reading process, where the

labor of reading Blake is not necessarily always a self-enlarging, self-assuring process, but can also be one that resists our attempts to provide sense, that gradually shuts down our attention rather than enlarges it, and that compels fellowship with the spectral dead rather than with a celebratory version of “life itself.”

If scenes of labor in *Urizen* and elsewhere in Blake’s poetry evoke and obstruct the desire for totality and utopia, they also are the sites of the articulation of desire in the poetry, as desire is always the desire to achieve a lost, illusive past unity, and a millennial future. This desire has long served as the ultimate orientation of both dominant strands of Blake criticism, the mythical and political. Sharing this orientation to desire, the distinctions between these traditionally opposed camps dissolve.

In the background of the dissertation is the hypothesis that Blake’s canonicity and the accompanying hermeticism of what has come to be called “the Blake industry” is due in part to the ways that Blake has been doggedly—and often ingeniously—read as the literary site for the accomplishment of totality in the realms of political economy, ontology, and epistemology. If, as Žižek has claimed, “desire is always the desire of a desire” (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 174), the need for Blake to fulfill the desire for political totality and utopia is also the desire not so much for the latter’s fulfillment or proper and full representation, but for the orientation to an unfulfillable lack to be repetitively perpetuated. Labor is the place in Blake’s poetry where the desire of utopia is cathected, where its impossibility is

encountered, and where this contradiction is obsessively repeated, insistently desired.

To some extent all politically-oriented criticism of Blake functions according to “the desire named Blake” insofar as it tends to gesture toward, articulate, or assume a promise of totality, utopia, and conceptual and political holism; specifically as “desire,” Blake criticism already entangles itself in a negative structure it seeks to remedy and tries to block. When I employ the phrase, “the desire named Blake” I am of course invoking Lyotard’s chapter in *Libidinal Economy*, “The Desire Named Marx.” What I am taking from Lyotard’s chapter is the peculiar dynamic of Marx’s attempt to grasp the totality, the organic unity, of capital, and consequently the deferral or “perpetual postponement” (96) of the completion of his total view of communism. Lyotard notes a peculiar deferral of Marx’s totalizing gesture, a “cancerization of theoretical discourse” (96), or a sense that this unruly deferral is a repetition in theoretical terms of capital’s flows, constant motion, and stubborn resistance to totalization. Nevertheless, Lyotard crucially notes a certain *jouissance* in the suffering this deferral occasions. Reversing the common sense view that the travails and suffering of theoretical work will ultimately give way to final unity and understanding, just as the bleakness, violence, and poverty of the proletariat will, in the final analysis, produce the liberation and reunification of damaged life in socialism, Lyotard’s text also resists the attribution of an ethical valence to either the moment of the loss of totality or the moment of its accomplishment, or in the world of Blake studies, the representation of utopia or its failure. Refusing to make either an ethical or interpretive choice between the satisfactions of unity or the

seductions of excess, Lyotard's reading of Marx shows how capitalism "exceeds the capacity of theoretical discourse" (98) to complete it, to envision it whole. As a pursuit to find the libidinal intensities in Marx's thought, Lyotard's text cautions against what I might call a "productivist" or positive approach, one which he charges Baudrillard with employing: "This trap consists quite simply in *responding to the demand of the vanquished theory*, and this demand is: put something in my place." (105). Eschewing positivity for the blankness or negativity of a space that cannot be occupied, Lyotard (in my view) locates a negativity that denies economization into Marx's system, even as it produces the effect of that system as a total whole.

If, as I have said, the desire named Blake for critics is the desire for political, economic, ontological, and epistemological unity and totality, the excesses in the discourse that attempts to capture this totality take on unique significance. Just as certain Marxists (such as Mehlman) look to the excessive, unassimilable moments in Marx's text to locate the fissures and gaps in his work, so too this dissertation has been devoted to a largely negative project: to excavate and reside in what one day might be called the "Lyotardian place" in Blake studies, to resist the temptation to positively fill the fissures in Blake's poetry or to redeem Blake's texts' negativity with a positivity that affirms the role of the critic in the marketplace of ideas. It has been my contention that labor is the site in Blake's work where these negative dynamics persist; my most basic goal has been to, as Žižek might say, "tarry with the negative" and refuse the false consolation of resolving the contradictions upon which it insists. If there is a utopian moment in such criticism, it is in its relentless criticism of the implicit though predominant view that resolution, holism, totality,

and the production of sense ought to be the ultimate goal of Blake criticism; these goals are refused for the notion that the most recalcitrant irritant in a system or structure (and I am saying that labor plays this role in Blake's political economy) is what is most true about it: or, as Adorno has said, "The splinter in your eye is the best magnifying-glass" (*Minima Moralia* 50).

Appendix



Figure 1: *The Book of Urizen*, copy G, plate 4



Figure 2: *The Book of Urizen*, copy G, plate 11

Chap: IV: -ment

1: Los smitten with astonish- Frightend at the hurling bones	4: And Los formed nets & gins And throw the nets round about
2: And at the surging sulphure -ous Perturbed Immortal mad raging	5: He watch'd in shuddring fear The dark changes & bound every change so With rivets of iron & brais:
3: In whirlwinds & pitch & nitre Round the furious limbs of Los	6: And these were the changes of Urizen.



Figure 3: *The Book of Urizen*, copy G, plate 10

Urizen. C:iv

7. From the cavern of his jointed Spine,
 Down sunk with fright a red
 Round globe hot burning deep
 Deep down into the Abyss;
 Parting, Conglobing, Trembling
 Shooting out ten thousand branches
 Around his solid bones,
 And a second Age puls'd over,
 And a state of dismal woe.

8. In hurrowing fear rolling round:
 His nervous brain shut branches
 Round the branches of his heart
 As high into two little orbs
 And fixed in two little caves

Hiding carefully from the wind,
 His Eyes beheld the deep,
 And a third Age puls'd over,
 And a state of dismal woe.

9. The parings of hope began,
 In heavy pain striving, struggling,
 Two Ears in close volutions,
 From beneath his orbs of vision,
 Shot spuring out and petrified
 As they grew, And a fourth Age pass'd
 And a state of dismal woe.

10. In phastly torment sick,
 Hanging upon the wall;

Figure 4: *The Book of Urizen*, copy G, plate 13



Figure 5: *The Book of Urizen*, copy G, plate 17



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In living creations appeared
 In the flames of eternal fury.

3. Sundering, darkening, thundering:
 Rent away with a terrible crash
 Eternity rolled wide apart
 Wide asunder rolling
 Mountainous all around
 Departing; departing; departing:
 Leaving ruinous fragments of life
 Hanging fromning cliffs & all between
 In ocean of waters undathomable

4. The roaring fires ran o'er the heavens
 In whirlwinds & currents of blood
 Had o'er the dark deserts of Urizen
 Fires pour thro' the void on all sides
 On Urizens self-begotten armies

5. But no light from the fires, all was
 darkness
 In the flames of Eternal fury

6. In fierce anguish & quenchless
 flames

To the deserts and rocks he ran
 To hide, but he could not; combining
 He dug mountains & hills in vast strength
 He piled them in incessant labour.
 In homings & punings & fierce madnals
 Long periods in burning fires labouring
 Till hoary, and eye-brake, and aged,
 In despair and the shadows of death.

7. And a roof vast petrific around,
 On all sides he fringed: like a womb;
 Where thousands of rivers in veins
 Of blood pour down the mountains to cool
 The eternal fires beating without
 From Eternals; & like a black globe
 View'd by sons of Eternity, standing
 On the shore of the infinite ocean
 Like a human heart struggling & beating
 The vast world of Urizen appeared.

8. And Loas round the dark globe of
 Urizen
 Kept watch for Eternals to confine,
 The obscure separation alone;
 For Eternity stood wide apart.

Figure 6: The First Bok of Urizen, copy G, plate 5

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