

Title: Abjection and the Melancholic Imagination: Towards a Poststructuralist  
Psychoanalytic Reading of Blake's *The Book of Urizen*

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Abstract of Essay: Julia Kristeva's work on the *semiotic* and the *symbolic* seems particularly relevant to Blake's poem *The Book of Urizen* insofar as she is concerned with how we develop as speaking beings and how language both disguises and reveals evidence of a previous state of union with what she calls the maternal *chora*. These ideas allow for an interesting reading of Blake's concern with the splitting off of Urizen from the Eternals and how this splitting off enables him to emerge as a signifying subject who bears traces of traumatic loss and upheaval, or of what Kristeva would term "the object." Abjection is a key concept for Kristeva and plays an essential role in what she describes as the "melancholic imagination." Abjection in Urizen manifests as a sort of paranoid repression and repudiation of the drives, of mutability, multiplicity, the body, and the Other. Urizen, throughout the poem, becomes overtly identified with the Symbolic Father and becomes himself the bearer of symbolic codes, legislator of rational discourse and semantic meaning.

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Contemporary critics and theorists have radically revised modern and pre-modern theories of the imagination which describe it as a power of creating images that reflect things in the world. Indeed, the term "imagination" itself has become suspect in

postmodern literary studies, akin to a term like “genius,” with its suggestion of a humanist belief in the transcendent individual who rises above the contingent social nexus of his or her time to create works of permanent and universal value. Many contemporary poststructuralist critics, trained to be suspicious of such terms as “imagination,” “creative mind,” and “autonomous individual” (as though such terms were without meaning, or worst, ideologically tainted), seem to have simply erased the term from their critical discourse. As Richard Kearney writes, “Several contemporary critics dismiss the very notion of creative imagination as an ideological ruse of Western bourgeois humanism—little more than an ‘effect’ of language play, a ludic mirage of signs” (172).

In addition, philosophers and literary critics have shifted from a concern with images as standing in for, resembling, or representing things to images as actual acts of consciousness, or, to put it another way, imagination is no longer described as a type of “seeing” but more as a dimension of language. Objects of the imagination are not static things with certain identifiable contents, but a type of function or a way of meaning. This ties in with the “linguistic turn” prevalent in much postmodern discourse and criticism. Furthermore, with the undermining of the notion of a stable self and the autonomous author, how can we even speak of a self or a text that is capable of participating in any radically recuperative cognitive act as imagination? And yet, how can we, in such foundering (and indeed desperately unimaginative) times, do without it? If the imagination is to be seen as a possibly redemptive, therapeutic form of cognition, it must be tied to and complicated by the postmodern turn towards the study of language and linguistics as the source of human subjectivity.

Julia Kristeva's work on the *semiotic* and the *symbolic* opens up a space in poststructuralist thought in which it is possible to think about the imagination from a new hermeneutic perspective, and her ideas can, I believe, add further insights to our reading of Blake's *The Book of Urizen* in terms of images that recur in the poem and that relate to the origins of human consciousness and the development of the imagination. Kristeva's ideas seem particularly relevant to Blake's poem insofar as she is concerned with how we develop as speaking beings and how language both disguises and reveals evidence of a previous state of union with what she calls the maternal *chora*. These ideas seem in many ways to allow for an interesting reading of Blake's concern with the splitting off of Urizen from the Eternals (representatives of a state of undifferentiated harmony) and how this splitting off enables him to emerge as a signifying subject who bears traces of traumatic loss and upheaval, or of what Kristeva would term "the abject."

Abjection is a key concept for Kristeva and plays an essential role in what she describes as the "melancholic imagination" and indeed in any use of language or meaningful cultural expression. In her essay "On Melancholic Imagination," Kristeva states that "there is no meaning aside from despair" (13). In *Black Sun*, she claims that "loss, bereavement, and absence trigger the work of the imagination and nourish it permanently as much as they threaten it and spoil it" (9). Abjection in *Urizen* manifests as a sort of paranoid repression and repudiation of the drives, of mutability, multiplicity, the body, and the Other. Urizen, throughout the poem, becomes overtly identified with the Symbolic Father and becomes himself the bearer of symbolic codes, legislator of rational discourse and semantic meaning.

*The Book of Urizen* is Blake's first major attempt at mythopoetic cosmogony, and it stands as one of the most visionary attempts to explain the origins of the universe and of human consciousness. Formally, the poem consists of three- or four-beat lines, a form that creates a brusque, dense, almost obsessively constricted rhythm that reflects the compacted violence of the subject-matter, the process of reduction from eternity to limitation that occurs in the poem. Within the signifying economy of the poem, many of the figurations collapse in on themselves and the syntax is twisted, cut off, smashed together, or left truncated, as if violated in some way by the content. The images are hermetic and difficult to unpack. It is not an easy poem to read or understand, and it certainly constitutes a challenge to orthodox ways of explaining the origins of consciousness and the universe. Clark Emery's brief analysis of the poem's rhythmic qualities seems to suggest that Blake is consciously playing with our expectations of what a poem with this subject matter should be. Emery notes that Blake uses a metrical form that enables image and content to be foregrounded, making a reader "rarely aware of the basic rhythm" (22). It seems counterintuitive that Blake should have chosen such a short choppy line and what could have been a sing-song rhythm for such a profound subject matter as the origin of the universe. Emery also notes that:

Blake's [metrical] variations throughout the poem are emphatic: trochees ("Groaning! gnashing! groaning!"), dactyls ("Ages on ages roll'd over him!"), iambs ("He watch'd in shuddring fear"), spondees ("Of beast, bird, fish, serpent & element") work havoc with any sense of expectancy that has been built up. Run-ons are sometimes violent...And yet, underneath it

all, is to be sensed that childish lilt...recalling the divine harmony that has been lost but which, since it exists eternally, can be regained. (22-23)

I would argue here that this “divine harmony that has been lost” suggests the semiotic *chora* and that it cannot be regained other than in language, in the semiotic traces that are left behind as linguistic inscriptions in the rhythm and cadences of the poem. This is where we find our only access to the maternal *chora*: the underlying textures of the verse that correspond in subtle ways to the archaic bodily sensations, primal unconscious drives, and libidinal energies that are hidden beneath layers of semantic meaning.

Satirically modeled after Yahweh, Milton’s Satan, and other classical gods and patriarchal figureheads, Urizen is Blake’s figure for the ultimate logocentric demiurge and anti-muse. It is important to keep in mind that for Blake, Urizen’s development is something that each individual goes through repeatedly. *The Book of Urizen* is not only a cosmological myth but a psychological drama, a study of the movement from unity to individuation which each of us experiences. “[I]t is Urizen’s fall that we participate in daily with our unimaginative looking...[H]is diseased mental condition...is that faculty in us that repeats this same false creative process every time we see a fixed physical world around us” (Paananen 35-7). Blake represents Urizen as attempting to violently suppress all affective (potentially creative) drives that spring from and energize what we might think of as the semiotic realm. His creative agency is thus governed by the negation and denial of drives and energies but, of course, does not entirely succeed in erasing them. Urizen, the rational authoritarian in all of us, wants to expel (or *ab-ject*, “throw off or away”) all mutability from his universe; in the monolithic, seamless ur-space of his mind, all signs of heterogeneous plurality are suppressed:

Hidden set apart in my stern counsels  
 Reserv'd for the days of futurity,  
 I have sought for a joy without pain,

For a solid without fluctuation (2:10-13)

Urizen's is indeed a uni-verse ("One King, one God, one Law," as he says later). And one would expect its model of language to be strictly univocal. However, as Kathleen Lundeen notes, though Urizen attempts to exert absolute control over words and their meanings and treats language as though he were Yahweh in Genesis, Urizen's logocentric approach to language is thwarted by the inherently unstable nature of words and particularly in the way that Blake exploits this instability. As Lundeen puts it, "what Urizen joins together, Blake will put asunder" (63). For example, the very strange, chaotic way Blake describes the body and the drives in this poem and the way the syntax twists around itself so that the reader has a hard time parsing sentences and untangling subject from object, Los from Urizen, as in this passage:

Los, smitten with astonishment,  
 Frightened at the hurtling bones

And at the surging sulphureous  
 Perturbed Immortal, mad raging

In whirlwinds & pitch & nitre  
 Round the furious limbs of Los (4:1-6)

It is difficult to ascertain upon a first reading of this passage who or what is performing the main action here—whose bones are “hurtling”? And if they are Urizen’s, then why are Los’s limbs described as “furious”? In particular, the predicates, subject, and verbs of the two lines “the surging sulphureous/Perturbed Immortal mad raging” blatantly violate the normative rules of English grammar. Such a sentence would “normally” read something more like: “the sulphureous perturbed Immortal was raging madly” or “immortal Urizen was sulphureous, perturbed, and mad as he raged and surged”—but then, of course, those lines would lose much of their disturbing power and would not have the same semiotic effect as Blake’s original lines in which the “whirlwind” of “pitch and nitre” are enacted by the syntax itself. Again, as Lundeen points out, “In spite of Urizen’s efforts to legalize and delimit words, his rigid language is not bound by one meaning (one law); its frequent and unpredictable semantic fluctuations evoke a stream of apparently unrelated associations” (Lundeen 67). Quickly after having witnessed these infantile rages, Los, like an alarmed father, immediately tamps down the fire by setting rigid boundaries around Urizen’s urges to annihilate semantic logic:

And Los formed nets & gins

And threw the nets round about

...[he] bound every change

With rivets of iron & brass (4:7-11)

And here we are restored to a syntax that is more regular, more in accordance with the symbolic mode of the “clean and proper” body.

Urizen is defined in terms that are reiterated over and over again (almost obsessively, as if to suppress the consciousness of some opposing force) in the poem— words such as “unknown,” “self-closed,” “secret,” “dark,” “cold,” “silent,” etc. He is also described as a “shadow of horror,” “unprolific,” sterile, and enclosed. These figurations of enclosure suggest the melancholy of the subject (as described by Kristeva) who has unsuccessfully mourned the loss of the mother and so has introjected the lost figure into himself and whose capacity for symbolic language and meaning-making (and thus entry into culture and society) has been drastically compromised. Urizen, this rather unsympathetic figure of melancholic imagination, is “all-repelling”; in other words, he seeks to isolate himself from other subjectivities and thus creates a solipsistic, sealed-off state of being. He is completely self-sufficient, alone, as if carefully warding off the pain of acknowledging the difficulties inherent in dealing with other minds, other bodies, the traces of Otherness even within himself. He is actually revolted at the sight of his own creations: “Most Urizen sicken’d to see/His eternal creations appear” (8:8-9). And he is “annoy’d/...[by the] forms//Of life on his forsaken mountains” (8:4-6).

Much of *The Book of Urizen* focuses on Urizen’s separation and self-containment, his solitude, aloneness, apartness. He is also described as a “self-contemplating shadow,” “unseen,” “shut in the deep,” brooding secretly in an “abominable void,” a “soul-shudd’ring vacuum,” a “forsaken wilderness.” As he draws himself away from his brothers in Eternity, he separates himself from the process of contraries held in homeostatic tension and balance—he shuns this state of contraries, saying to the Eternals, “I have sought for a joy without pain,//For a solid without fluctuation” (2:10-11). Urizen reveals here his intolerance of ambiguity and change and his desire to split everything



into a binary dualism: either one thing or the other, but not both. This seeking for a pure something rather than a mixed something is the source of his error and his fallenness.

It is also interesting to note how many times Urizen uses the word “I” in Chapter Two (the only time he speaks in the poem). In the space of these several stanzas, Urizen uses some form of the first-person singular ten times. He seems self-obsessed. And at the end of this monologue he presents his final theory: let each individual lock himself up in his own mental cage, choosing “One command, one joy one desire,/One curse, one weight, one measure/One King, one God, one Law” (2:38-40). Having repelled the waves of matter and materiality (the abject, in Kristeva’s terms), Urizen here resembles a totalitarian dictator ruling over everything with his rigid book of brass, the Mosaic Law, the Symbolic Order or Law of the Father. Like a bell intoning a death-knell, or a priest casting a spell on someone, the word “one” is repeated over and over again, revealing Urizen’s jealous monomaniacal heart: he wants everything unified around him, all the infinite variety of the universe to congeal around his one self-enclosed being. He cannot abide the thought of anything not emanating from nor identical to his own consciousness. The Other is totally and violently excluded from his universe.

In order to employ Kristeva’s notions of psychic abjection (which will help explain why Urizen reacts this way towards other forms of life), we need to understand what is meant by the “semiotic *chora*.” First, Kristeva uses the word “semiotic” with its original Greek etymology in mind. As she puts it, the semiotic denotes a “ ‘distinctive mark, trace, index, precursory sign, proof, engraved or written sign, imprint, trace, figuration’ ” (McAfee 18). What is this semiotic a sign or trace of? It is, briefly, a hint of what remains behind or beneath the surface of our conscious mind, a remnant of the

“*chora*,” a term Kristeva borrows from Plato’s *Timaeus*, where it is meant to suggest the womb or receptacle out of which everything in the universe emerges. In the *chora*, as Kristeva appropriates and redefines it:

Discrete quantities of energy move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such and, in the course of his development, they are arranged according to the various constraints imposed on this body...by family and social structures. In this way the drives...articulate what we call a *chora*: a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated. (qtd. in McAfee 18)

For Kristeva, in other words, before there is language, naming, speech, and identity, there exists a decentered, borderline state of flux and plenitude, the maternal continent, a primitive and intimate landscape in which there is no “inside” nor “outside,” no “self” nor “other.” *The Book of Urizen* actually enacts this state of decentralization and lack of differentiation in the beginning chapters, as Andrew Lincoln points out. We enter the poem and are immediately unmoored from time and place, not knowing exactly where the events are taking place, when, or why. “At the beginning readers are denied intelligible spatial and temporal referents, or a clear sense of cause and effect—we are exposed to a linguistic chaos which may induce an anxious search for stable order” (Lincoln 217).

In this boundary-less realm, *Urizen*, like the prelinguistic infant in Kristeva’s model of development, is not limited to privileging one sense over another (vision, for example, over touch or smell):

Earth was not: nor globes of attraction

The will of the Immortal expanded

Or contracted his all flexible senses.

Death was not, but eternal life sprung. (2:36-9)

In other words, he is able to enjoy the fluid play of sensory perception as the infant in the womb (before the schism of birth and separation from the body of the mother) exists in a state of polymorphous sensory perception in which all of the senses are stimulated in a constantly fluctuating openness. Urizen, at this point, is able to perceive sensory phenomena without trying to control or categorize them—in other words, his senses and mental constructs have not yet become rigid and reified.

In this state of ego-less-ness, there are no “globes of attraction,” no need for the atomistic forces of attraction to draw different things together because everything is already intimately bound together in a state of blissful unity. There is not yet a separation of subject and object, infant and mother, self and other. The eternity from which Urizen is initially expelled or exiled suggests the prelinguistic choric state described by Kristeva, a life of undifferentiated plenitude where needs are satisfied before they can even be recognized as needs. In this state, Urizen is immortal, deathless, because he has not yet entered the order ruled by the laws of time and space, or, in other words, he has not yet fallen into the realm of human consciousness, limitation, and mortality. Death also has not come “into being” yet because Urizen is not yet aware of time, an awareness that is only acquired with the entrance into the symbolic order. With the acquisition of language comes the awareness of time, other subjectivities, and one’s own mortality. As Anna Smith explains:

[B]efore we have yet been formed as speaking beings and before our world has acquired the coherence of objects for us, there exists an abject borderline state we inhabit. Our identity runs all over the place, and in this phase of psychic development, whenever it meets up with boundaries and barriers, we experience a traumatic sense of upheaval. (149)

If we take the Eternals as figures for sublime fusion with the maternal continent (*mater*, matter, materiality), blissful, undifferentiated, unconscious wholeness, then Los and Urizen's splitting off from the Eternals can be thought of as the infant's splitting off from the mother into a split subject: Reason (Superego, repression of drives, the symbolic) and Imagination (Id, the drives, the semiotic). After this initial split, of course, many other splits occur, and indeed we never truly stop branching off into different modes of consciousness; we are, as Kristeva claims, "subjects-in-process."

Urizen creates bifurcations in reality and induces his own fallen-ness (reflecting back to us as readers our own process of falling) by "enclosing and creating his interior space—so Eternity is excluded, thrown outside the horizon of the book...creation involves a series of divisions" (Mann 52). Creation does essentially involve a series of violent rendings, splittings and separations, as Urizen splits off from the Eternals, and then from Los, and as Enitharmon splits off from Los and then Orc divides from Los and Enitharmon. Even body parts are described consistently as branching off into more and more refined and fragmented parts which in turn branch off from those parts in a vertiginous process of ramifications. Pity, a feeling usually thought of as bringing two people together, is figured by Blake as again a force of separation and rending: "In anguish dividing & dividing/(For pity divides the soul)" (5:52-3). Los sees what he has

done in separating Urizen from himself and suppressing his drives, and the deadly necessity of this process makes him mourn.

Urizen is not yet constituted as a subject before he separates from the Eternals and before Los hammers him into embodiment. Before he becomes a priest who assumes his own power and ushers other beings into the symbolic order, Urizen himself is undivided, fluid, existing in a state of infinite freedom. Another way of understanding the semiotic chora is as follows:

In this early psychic space, the infant experiences a wealth of drives (feelings, instincts, etc.) that could be extremely disorienting and destructive were it not for the infant's relation with his or her mother's body. An infant's tactile relation with its mother's body provides an orientation for the infant's drives...the *chora* is the space in which the meaning that is produced is semiotic. (McAfee 19)

Strangely enough, Los enacts what can be thought of as the maternal boundary to the choric drives of the infantile Urizen. Urizen does seem early in the poem to be a raging infant experiencing wave upon wave of uncontrollable drives. Los, though, provides the orientation spoken of above in the relationship between infant and mother. Los, contrary to some critics' reading of him as being guilty of enslavement here in his fallen state, is rather providing a much-needed organizing force for Urizen's rages as he throws nets and grids around Urizen and binds him "[w]ith rivets of iron & brass" (4:11). This is akin to the mother providing some sort of boundary or wall against which the infant can direct its energies. Without this boundary, the infant would not be able to develop a separate sense of selfhood nor be able to successfully split from the mother

when the time came to leave the archaic state that is forever lost to us once we fall into a state of identity and embodiment. In our state of fallen-ness, or entry into the Symbolic Order, we no longer have access to what Blake calls our “eternal life,” or a sense of timelessness and lack of bounded-ness. This state is lost by Chapter 5, after Los has hammered Urizen into an embodied form. At this point, Blake writes, all sensory perception has been reduced to what can enter in through the narrowness of the eyes:

All the myriads of Eternity:

All the wisdom & joy of life:

Roll like a sea around him,

Except what his little orbs

Of sight by degrees unfold.

And now his eternal life

Like a dream was obliterated. (5:28-35)

This “eternal life” lingers in our unconscious like a dream, however, something we seem to remember in moments of uncanniness but only in a faded, obscure way. We cannot recall it into our rational waking minds or articulate it to others. All the “myriads of Eternity” or in other words, all of the manifold sensory phenomena of the semiotic *chora* are there, yet firmly placed in a distant realm, as far away from our conscious minds as possible: “Eternity stood wide apart,/As the stars are apart from the earth” (3:41-2). This semiotic mode of consciousness must be at least partially obliterated and forgotten lest we, as speaking subjects, remain unable to enter into communion with others in the social corpus. It is indeed a kind of necessity, as Blake suggests: “Forgetfulness, dumbness,

necessity!” (4:24). As we can see in the lines prior to this, what was once a figure of repulsive abjection (Urizen’s dark secret “surgeing/ Sulphureous fluid”) has been tamed and aesthetically sublimated into “a lake, bright, & shining clear:/White as the snow on the mountains cold” (4:21-3).

For Urizen, the body and embodiment are intolerable because mutable and the source of suffering, pain, and a reminder of his dependence on others, or on Los, in the case of this poem. Urizen’s wound never heals (“the wrenching of Urizen heal’d not”(3:4)) because he sets about suppressing his knowledge and memory of this pain by establishing fixed and rigid laws that no one, not even his own offspring, can obey. For a poem so taken up with the bodily formation of this demiurge, after his embodiment occurs, no mention is made of Urizen’s body again. If we look at the process of embodiment in the poem, it is filled with anguish, and the refrain “[and an]...Age passed over,/And a state of dismal woe” after every body part is created enforces this sense of inescapable suffering.

Urizen’s spinal chord, the axis in the human body of the central nervous system and the route through which all bodily sensations travel, is described as “writ[ing] in torment” and “like [a] linked infernal chain” (4:36). His ribs are bent into the shape of a cavern and “shoot” outwards in pain. His bones, instead of providing structure and support to his flesh, are said to “[freeze]/Over all his nerves of joy” (4:41-2), again emphasizing the incredible loss Urizen is going through in taking on this fragmented body split from his former state of union with the eternal. His heart sinks down in fright and is “hot” and “burning” (4:3). It is as though he is dying before he has even begun to be born as a separate being. The phrase “[i]n ghastly torment sick” is repeated twice by

Blake, and Urizen's stomach, throat and tongue are described not as sources of potential pleasure but of future pain, thirst, hunger, and insatiable desires.

For Kristeva, the body is a source of the abject, or rather it is the abject when it evades our control or exhibits signs that it is not "clean and proper"; for instance, bodily wastes, blood, tears, and, finally, the corpse break down and threaten the supposedly secure boundaries between self and other, between one person and the outside world. They test our limits. They remind us of our weakness and vulnerability. This is related to Kristeva's distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic in that "language is the outgrowth of certain drives and desires that are somehow 'presymbolic,' or we might say, prerepresentational" (Covino 18). Language is only possible when I am no longer identified with my mother's body. Naming and being aware of the split between self and other, and after the "mirror stage" in which the child knows it is a distinct self and can use language to represent things that are not immediately present, to gratify desires, is a significant break with the semiotic phase, a break Kristeva refers to as the "thetic break." The semiotic, however, never entirely goes away but erupts in the rhythms and metaphors seen most often in poetic language, that which resists a one-to-one correspondence with the empirical world, that which is non-representational. It is the role of the Symbolic Order, on the other hand, to limit outbreaks of semiotic material, which it sees as meaningless or corrupt in its signifying economy. What is defiled, recalcitrant to established codes or outside the bounds of social propriety is thus relegated to the "abject," exiled to some other realm ("And now his eternal life/Like a dream was obliterated" 5:33-4).



Perhaps one of the clearest examples of maternal abjection in the poem is in Chapter 6 where the birth of Orc is described. The words “worms” and “womb” are repeated so often and in such close proximity that they begin to blur together, suggesting the repellent aspect for male phallic subjectivity of female generative power. Enitharmon is described in pathological terms as “sick,” feeling “a Worm within her womb” and her womb is said to be “trembling” with the poisonous and toxic “worm” (Orc) inside of it (6:20-2). Inscribed already on his infant body in the womb are the bestial forms of “fish, bird & beast.” (This anarchic power, potentially revolutionary, inspires another round of Oedipal triangulation between the three characters, and Urizen seems to momentarily fade into the background.) At the birth of Orc, the internal rhyme of “Infant form” and “worm” in the lines “Brought forth an Infant form/Where was a worm before” (6:35-6) indicate a suggestive linking of the human body with the abject, or what is utterly rejected as other by the unitary ego. This also reminds us of earlier in the poem when Urizen is trying to hide from the rage of the eternal and constructs a roof that is “petrific” (rotten or turned to stone) and “like a womb,” suggesting that Urizen is literally trying to return to the womb, where he can be safe and unharmed.

“The abject is what one spits out, rejects, almost violently excludes from oneself: sour milk, excrement, even a mother’s engulfing embrace. What is abjected is radically excluded but never banished altogether. It hovers at the periphery of one’s existence, constantly challenging one’s own tenuous borders of selfhood...It remains as both an unconscious and a conscious threat to one’s own clean and proper self. The abject is what does not respect boundaries. It beseeches and pulverizes the subject...[Kristeva shows] the violence by which one jettisons phenomena that both threaten and create the self’s

borders” (McAfee 46). The abject differs from the Freudian repressed in that it is always present on the borders and peripheries of the conscious mind, always poised on the verge of breaking into and breaking up the subject’s boundaries. What Freud calls the “return of the repressed” (the uncanny, *unheimlichkeit* feeling of “I’ve been here before, I remember this place somehow” which Freud interprets as being a repressed memory of having been in the mother’s womb) Kristeva calls “maternal abjection” (McAfee 49). This desire to reintegrate oneself with the maternal body is a threat continually (but peripherally) present to the mind. It threatens our sense of individuality and the boundaries of the social order. Thus, religions have traditionally set up rituals to enact a kind of catharsis and purification of the “abject” thing (i.e., certain types of food, etc.). Art too, in secular societies, can perform this function to a degree (McAfee 49).

“All imaginative practice, such as art, poetry, love and psychoanalysis, represents the individual subject’s encounter with the law of the father, of the symbolic and of society, with imposed form and structure, as well as representing the imaginative attempts to battle with this frame of reference in the name of desire, subjectivity and the energy and drives they bring into play” (A-M Smith 17-18). As Kristeva puts it in her study of depression and melancholia, *Black Sun*, “Imagination is that strange place where the subject ventures its identity, loses itself down to the threshold of evil, crime, or asymbolia in order to work through them and to bear witness...from elsewhere. A divided space, it is maintained only if solidly fastened to the ideal, which authorizes destructive violence to be *spoken* instead of being *done*” (200). We need the Urizen in ourselves (and the Los as well) to have split off from their Eternals, to bear the trauma of that essential loss, no matter how excruciating, if we are to bear witness to the suffering from which creative

imagination arises. Having left behind the oceanic void of the chora, unspeakable drives still permeate our language whenever certain non-semantic musical or poetic modulations or cadences disrupt rational discourse and lend it affective meaning. Without this element, our expressions would be devoid of human feeling. “The drives, as represented in the instinctual energy of the developing child, are checked by biological and social constraints. They nevertheless permeate what Kristeva calls semiotisable material, such as voice and gesture, and faced with real constraints, enter into a subjective economy which can be perceived as processes of condensation and displacement” (A-M Smith 20-21).

So what, we may ask, does all this suffering, defilement, and abjection have to do with the imagination, melancholy or otherwise? Part of the answer lies at the heart of *The Book of Urizen*—in the figure of Los. Though Los usually represents the creative and liberating imagination or force in Blake, in this poem, he seems much more to represent the law of the father and the symbolic order. And as Kristeva realizes, creative activity results when the subject comes up against received forms “in the name of desire, subjectivity and the energy and drives they bring into play” (A-M Smith 18). Kristeva would include in creative acts that involve the imagination the following: psychoanalysis, which involves transference, erotic love, which involves idealization of the other, and, of course, art and literature, which involve the creation of new modes of being. In order to access the realm of consciousness that Urizen ends up so effectively displacing, one needs to give oneself over to or open oneself up to the “strange places” of the abject in order to expose the gaps in the dominant discourses and modes of being, to show that, indeed, other worlds are possible, that sublimity is immanent in worlds that are right in

front of our eyes but that we fail see because with our impoverished imaginations and blunted senses, our privileging of the symbolic over the semiotic, we can't imagine that they are there.

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