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## Of Avatars and Apotheoses David Fallon's Blake

“Fable is Allegory but what Critics call  
The Fable is Vision itself”  
— William Blake

Somehow an artistic singularity as stellar as William Blake tends to take on the scattered spuriousities of his diverse readers. From S. T. Coleridge to Kenneth Clark, all sorts of critics regularly rediscover themselves in Blake's enigmatic rantings. Whatever your poetical, philosophical or political proclivities, you will most likely be able to find them confirmed by this bad boy, who after an initial show of struggle, quickly caves to give up the confirming symbolic goods. To put this another way: as an indicative recent collection like *Blake 2.0* demonstrates, there haven't been too many selective conceptual reuptake inhibitors at work in the ongoing transmission of Blake's legacy, whether you're talking naïve art, sci-fi, or 90s pop-music.<sup>1</sup> It's open slather on diversifying inspiration out there.

As long, that is, as you never doubt the fact that Blake was a *VISIONARY* (all caps, itals.). The contemporaneous testimonies preponderantly tell the same story, from characters as different as Henry Fuseli and Charles Lamb. Blake's acquaintance Benjamin Heath Malkin waxes lyrical on the subject:

Enthusiastic and high flown notions on the subject of religion have hitherto, as they usually do, prevented his general reception, as a son of taste and of the muses. The sceptic and the rational believer, uniting their forces against the visionary, pursue and scare a warm and brilliant imagination, with the hue and cry of madness.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See S. Clark et al., *Blake 2.0: William Blake in twentieth-century art, music and culture* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> B. Heath Malkin, “Letter to Thomas Johnes” in: H. Bloom (ed.), *William Blake* (New York: Infobase, 2008), p. 9.

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There you have it. By 1806, it turns out that the Blake Jelly had already set. No further wobbling is going to collapse the mould-hugging form of *this* sweet desert. All the key trigger-words and their apologia are present: the visionary (that is: incomprehensible) imagery is to be defended against the charges of enthusiasm (that is: bordering on *Schwärmerei* or fanaticism) and madness (that is: explicable only as “outside” the bonds of rational society).

Yet “visionary” is a word whose signification and resonances rapidly fray into a chaotic coherence the moment you try to pin it all down. Blake had famously had “real visions” from the time he was a child, whether it was angels in a field or fairies in the garden; here, the visions are present and continuous with an agreed-upon social reality, even if they contravene its basic dictates. Blake also proffers literary or artistic visions of other times and places; here, the visions are out-of-joint with such a reality, flagrantly deranging and unreal, yet retain some claim to verisimilitude. As John Milton almost puts it in *Paradise Lost*: in heaven, a prophecy is simply a report of a fact that hasn’t yet happened. Finally, the visionary is a mode of discourse that remains irreducible to any reality insofar as it presents images that, unstable themselves, can not only find no stable referent, but may even have lost any sense of reference. It’s worth underlining that this triplet scrambles temporality, reality, and affect: each moment is internally rent by different kinds of continuity and discontinuity, yet each moment presumes its others.

This at-least triple aspect of *visionariness* (and cognates) operates throughout the dominant lines of Blake criticism. If you’re not satisfied by David Erdman and John Grant’s classic anthology *Blake’s Visionary Forms Dramatic* or John Beer’s *Blake’s Visionary Universe*, there’s always Harold Bloom or A. D. Nuttall on Blake’s radical gnosticism to tide you over, or Steven Vine on Blake’s *spectral visions* or...<sup>3</sup> The list could go on (and on), but the point is not merely that Blake’s supposed *visions* and *visionary* character prove the still point of the turning worlds of Blake studies, but that the relation to this triplicity remains irreducible and generative.

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<sup>3</sup> D. Erdman and J. Grant (eds.), *Blake’s Visionary Forms Dramatic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970); J. Beer, *Blake’s Visionary Universe* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1969); A. D. Nuttall, *The alternative trinity: Gnostic heresy in Marlowe, Milton, and Blake* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998); S. Vine, *Blake’s Poetry: Spectral Visions* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993).

If there's anything different about Blake studies in the twenty-first century, it's not because it tampers with this fundamental compact regarding the visionary *per se*, but because it descends to micrological scales. Which is where the most impressive scholarship pursues its demonstrations. Many recent studies drill down with unprecedented detail into the singularities of Blake's elucubrations, their editing, their editions, their emendations. For instance, in his examination of the *Four Zoas*, Peter Otto concentrates with extreme attentiveness on the problematic of transcendence in Blake, following his own earlier work on "constructive vision and visionary deconstruction" (there's that word again).<sup>4</sup> Then there's Hazard Adams's dedicated study of Blake's annotations of some of his reading: Johann Caspar Lavater, Emanuel Swedenborg, Francis Bacon, Joshua Reynolds, William Wordsworth, and others.<sup>5</sup> Or take Susanne Sklar on the "visionary theatre" of *Jerusalem*. Sklar declares:

Embarking on this Edenic journey may seem 'perfectly mad' until we enter the world of the poem on its own terms. We have to understand its fluid characters, shifting settings, and strange words and images. We have to attend to what Blake calls the Minute Particulars (or the unique and specific details) of the poem. This requires analysis and critical thought; we need to *know* what, where, how, and why things are in order to *experience* how they interrelate. Entering imaginatively into *Jerusalem* involves close textual reading and analysis — and close reading and analysis depends upon imaginative engagement with the text. *Jerusalem* asks its readers to be both critical and creative.<sup>6</sup>

So, alongside the ongoing grand thematic investigations of gender, race, nation, class, empire and religion in Blake, we also have this concerted contemporary scholarly micrology regarding the specifics and development, the "Minute Particulars" of Blake's own "visionary" character. Part of the problem for contemporary Blake scholars, then, is tracing a route between this accelerated hyper-

<sup>4</sup> P. Otto, *Blake's Critique of Transcendence: Love, Jealousy and the Sublime in The Four Zoas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); *Constructive Vision and Visionary Deconstruction: Los, Eternity, and the Productions of Time in the Later Poetry of William Blake* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> H. Adams, *Blake's Margins: An Interpretive Study of the Annotations* (Jefferson and London: McFarland, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> S. M. Sklar, *Blake's Jerusalem as Visionary Theatre: Entering the Divine Body* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 1–2.

trophy of miniscule details and the external demands of great themes, between the necessity to find a new seed in the near-exhausted ground without tampering with the incontrovertible conviction of Blake's visionary character.

David Fallon's solution in *Blake, Myth, and Enlightenment*<sup>7</sup> to such a difficult situation is, as his subtitle proclaims, to focus on a seriously specific, if highly significant term: *apotheosis*. This strategy is at once ingenious and tendentious, for reasons that will hopefully become clear shortly. The word itself is clearly of extreme interest. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the following etymology and definitions:

Post-classical Latin apotheosis deification (late 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. in Tertullian), ascent to heaven of a saint (a1508) < Hellenistic Greek ἀποθέωσις deification < ἀποθεοῦν to deify (< ancient Greek ἀπο- APO – prefix + θεοῦν to make a god of < θεός god: see Theo- comb. form) + σις – SIS suffix.

1. An apotheosized person or being.
2. Ascension into heaven; spiritual departure from earthly life; resurrection (lit. and fig.); an instance of this. Also used in the titles of paintings, sculptures, or other works of art depicting this; (hence) a work of art of this kind.
3. The action, process, or fact of ranking, or of being ranked, among the gods; transformation into a god, deification; elevation to divine status. Also: an instance of this.
4. a. Glorification or exaltation of a principle, practice, etc. Also: an instance of this; a glorified ideal. b. Attribution of more or less divine power or virtue to a person; glorification or exaltation of a person. Also: an instance of this.
5. The best or most highly developed example of something; the highest point or culmination, the acme.

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As this definition already makes clear, the word simultaneously compresses mythical, religious, political, and generic actions, hinging on the transformation of a human figure into a divinity, and of a concomitant transumption of place, from an earthly to a non-mundane realm, from a potential or hypothetical state to a categorical one. Its pertinence to Blake's work should immediately be evident: from early to late, Blake is clearly obsessed (the word is not too strong)

<sup>7</sup> David Fallon, *Blake, Myth, and Enlightenment: The Politics of Apotheosis* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

with the operations of apotheosis, of the relation of the human to the divine, of how the human can become, or has already become, divine. Insofar, then, as apotheosis is integrally linked with questions of myth, religion, politics, and art, it may not only be a pertinent but a *privileged* trope to reopen questions regarding the visionary nature of Blake's work. Its sharp, regulated definition gives it a kind of chisel-like quality; inserted into the right fault-lines, it promises to crack apart what had previously been taken for a seamless face.

And this is precisely Fallon's strategy. According to the simplified received images of the phenomena in question, the myth-intoxicated Romantic visionary is stringently distinguished from — indeed, opposed to — the sceptical neo-classicizing figures and forces of Enlightenment. The work of Northrop Frye, especially his *Fearful Symmetry*, is perhaps the scholarly *locus classicus* for this position.<sup>8</sup> There seems abundant evidence for such a position in some of Blake's best-known works. Take the famous anathemas of *Mock On*:

Mock on Mock on Voltaire Rousseau  
 Mock on Mock on! tis all in vain!  
 You throw the sand against the wind  
 And the wind blows it back again

And every sand becomes a Gem  
 Reflected in the beams divine  
 Blown back they blind the mocking Eye  
 But still in Israels paths they shine

The Atoms of Democritus  
 And Newtons Particles of light  
 Are sands upon the Red sea shore  
 Where Israels tents do shine so bright<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> N. Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947).

<sup>9</sup> W. Blake, *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake, Newly Revised Edition*, ed. D. V. Erdman with commentary by H. Bloom (New York: Anchor Books, 1982), pp. 477–8.

The sands of quantitative rationality, of scepticism, mechanism, and atheism, blind their own adherents, as they provide the prophetic gemstones upon which Israel will stake its tents on its messianic path. Voltaire, Rousseau, Newton become the synecdoches of vain and impotent scientism, subject to a form of deflationary anti-apotheotizing (if that's a word) on Blake's part.

What Fallon seeks to do in this book, however, is to displace and revise these old, familiar and—it should be admitted—still widely-accepted judgements. For Fallon, Blake is not simply anti-Enlightenment, but critical of a reactionary trend that inhered in Enlightenment itself, which Enlightenment attempted to criticise but was unable to fully purge; moreover, in his own critique of this failure, Blake takes up certain features of Enlightenment itself, not least its own creative and critical relationship to myth. This means that the popular images of Enlightenment as mechanistic scepticism and Romanticism as visionary correction must be revised.

Certainly, many eminent accounts—including the now-classic work of John Beer—had already noted the difficulties in any simple attempt to circumvent Enlightenment, even if one sticks to the usual equipment. For if one is to criticize Enlightenment as a dark and dreary divagation, such a critique has to squarely face the real challenges Enlightenment presents. In an Enlightened world—certainly, a post-Newtonian one—the heavens were hardly really either high or immutable. On the contrary, *up there* was now governed by just the same laws as *down here*, just as *up* and *down* had lost any real signification in an infinite universe.

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What literary or artistic imagery could cope with the revelations being transmitted to the public regarding the heavenly visions of the new grand telescopes and scientific theories? On the one side, deflationary Enlightenment produces new kinds of knowledge that trope sublimity as *quantitative* immensity or infinity — for instance, through calculus or the stellar distances — before which any attempted sublimity through imagery-inflation alone tends to collapse into reactionary or superstitious fancies. On the other side, attempts to squeeze some vital human pathos out of the mechanistic reduction betray their irrelevance with every pitiful gasp.

So Fallon's argument needs to engage in an intricate triple movement. First, he has to demonstrate that myth is continuous with religion is continuous with poetry in Blake's poetry. This is perhaps the easiest part of the job, because it doesn't contravene any of the fundamental principles of Blakeans's Visionary Inc. As Fallon asserts: "Apocalypse is the most mythical mode and genre in the Bible, and Blake's fusion of apocalyptic figures and motifs, especially from Isaiah and Revelation, with mythological material, drawn from sources as varied as Hesiod, Ovid, *Northern Antiquities*, Ossian, and Milton, suggests he perceived continuities between myth and religion".<sup>10</sup> So far, so good.

Second, Fallon needs to show that these continuities are also at play in the very Enlightenment modes that perhaps seem to reject them. Here, he draws upon diverse critical studies not only of Blake, but on accounts of myth and Enlightenment more generally. A rapid invocation of Ernst Cassirer, Peter Gay, and Jonathan Israel is at hand: yes, the Enlightenment did indeed seem to reject myths in the name of an "exit from a self-imposed immaturity" (to quote Immanuel Kant), but it delighted in demystificatory conjectural histories of religion. Furthermore, if we turn to recent authorities on the structure of myth — Claude Lévi-Strauss is a notable absence, presumably being too "structuralist" (a.k.a. rationalist) for Fallon's purposes — we find that Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Ricoeur offer several proposals that render myth not only a mystifying, but a *critical* discourse. Myth at once provides a hermeneutic of suspicion *and* a hermeneutic of restoration. It is also the case that, as process and praxis — not as an achieved or completed project — Enlightenment relied on certain forms of mythico-poetic expression for its new thoughts, perhaps most obviously upon *allegory*. In sum, on the basis of these positions, Fallon proposes that myth was indeed deployed in the service of the Enlightenment, that the relation to myth is uncircumventable; that myth is divided and divisive; that its dynamism is linked to this divisiveness; and that this dynamism is simultaneously critical and creative.

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Third, it is not only through a reexamination of the *gestes et opinions* of the Enlightenment and Blake on myth that their solidarity can be revealed; it is through a very specific operation, that of "apotheosis." I have already listed the definitions of this term above, but Fallon's ambition is to establish a much stricter historical context and connections than any dictionary can make avail-

<sup>10</sup> Fallon, *Blake, Myth, and Enlightenment*, p. 6.

able. In this regard, there are a number of significant contextual inflections to be marked.

First, and second: as a student at the Royal Academy, Blake had access to an extraordinary range of prints, from Raphael to Rubens. These no doubt included many Renaissance ascensions of Christ, Mary and the Saints, who sometimes look like they're being shot into the empyrean like accelerationist god-rockets. Rubens, the very emblem of Counter-Reformation ambassadorial servility, was of course a dab hand at deifying diverse masters, above all by apostrophizing and apotheosizing them, Medicis and Stuarts alike. When Rubens is holding a brush or pen, no lord or lady will go without halo or chorus of plump putti to sing them to their eternal life in the glistening cerulean. Catholic, servile, self-interested: Rubens was, as Fallon quotes Blake's patron William Hayley, the very anti-type of the great unimpeachable revolutionary artist John Milton. So, apotheosis was not only an ancient genre, but one which had acquired — at least from Blake's perspective — deleterious political and religious connotations.

Third, the ancient tradition of apotheotic art (to which Rubens was of course self-consciously contributing) was contemporaneously undergoing a commercial boom. A John Flaxman redesign of an apotheosis of Homer from a vase sold by William Hamilton to the British Museum was adapted for "a celebrated relief in white jasperware which Wedgwood reproduced on mantelpieces and vases".<sup>11</sup> No self-respecting bourgeois personage would surely be without one of these highly-sought after luxury items, etc.

48 In addition to these artistic, political, and commercial aspects, we also find, fourth, a contemporary satirical tradition of Gillray cartoons and Augustan raillery. If these drew on classical, predominantly Ovidian models of glorifying Imperium, they did so to flagrantly critical and caricatural ends. In this regard, apotheosis is also an exemplarily *comic* genre, aimed against precisely the attempted self-glorification of degraded political actors. In the hands of the satirists, sanctification was shown up as sanctimony.

But there is yet another, absolutely crucial aspect of apotheosis in the context, which returns us directly to the deflationary polemics beloved by Enlighten-

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 34.



ment. As Fallon puts it: "Apotheosis was widely understood as a major source of pagan deities, with founders of states, political and military leaders, inventors, and benefactors all regarded as divinities. The critical correlative to this practice was Euhemerism, which [...] has received less attention from Blake critics than it merits".<sup>12</sup> Apotheosis's links to Euhemerism are indeed fascinating.

Euhemerism is a program that rereads myths as fictionalised accounts of real figures. If instances can be found in many ancient sources, including Herodotus and Plato, it now takes the name of the mythographer Euhemerus. Christianity has always had serious issues regarding the status of non-Christian myths, which it has generally to read as demonic lies. In order to assimilate these myths, then, two strong programs proved their doctrinal worth. Euhemerism enables the genetic deconstruction of the origins of all myths into a forgotten and covered-over reality; its figurative relative typology enables the rereading of non-Christian myths and the Hebrew Bible as presenting un-knowing temporal anticipations of Christ.<sup>13</sup>

Yet what is absolutely determining for Christianity — as distinguished from almost any other religion, and certainly the other major monotheisms — is that the New Testament is basically a tradie's account of a bloke-who-was-*already*-the-one-and-only-God, a Man-God who, at least one crux (so to speak), doubted his own divinity. Jews are still waiting for the Messiah, the Prophet is not a deity for Muslims, and there is no necessary or absolute prohibition in many non-monotheistic religions regarding the traversal of this threshold between human and divine. In a very particular sense, then, the doctrines of almost all orthodox forms of Christianity are at once very close to Euhemerism — a real historical figure became its Godhead — yet also very, very far. Jesus was not a man who became God; he was the Word become flesh.

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By Blake's time, Euhemerism had itself undergone some radical transformations. If it had supported early Christian polemics against the pagans, then been adapted by Protestants raging against the Catholic beatification of saints and papal infallibility, the Enlightenment had finally turned Euhemerism into an

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> See the still-incomparable essay of Erich Auerbach, "Figura," in: *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (New York: Meridian, 1959).

atheistic strategy against Christianity *tout court*. If “[t]he predominant eighteenth-century approach to apotheosis was as a form of error, either a deformation of an originally pure theism or a stage in the evolution from primitive polytheism to monotheism”,<sup>14</sup> Voltaire and Hume and Baron d’Holbach had shown how so much of what passed for true religion turned out to be the illicit, superstitious, and often simply flagrantly outrageous glorification of hypocrites. For these Enlightenment chaps, nature corrupts nature to gods for humans. What began as human, all-too-human, becomes, over the course of generations of transmission, distorted into pretentious fictions. Of course, this could make modern Enlightenment atheism itself seem a form of dejected or degenerate Christianity — if, that is, you are somebody like William Blake. Atheism, in such a view, could even be a distressed hyper-critical Christian child. As Fallon points out, in *Milton* Blake names Gibbon, Hume, Newton, Voltaire, Rousseau, et al. not only as “unconscious agents of religion,” but as “complicit with the orthodox religion they attack”.<sup>15</sup>

Together, then, these five heterogenous local inflections of apotheosis — artistic, political, commercial, satirical and historical — come to constitute an indispensable resource for Blake, enabling him to play off the Euhemeristic as affirmation of critical history against the typological resonances of imaginative redemption. Or so Fallon’s argument goes, at least to some extent. Apotheosis becomes primarily *an act of fantastic interpretation*, generating apocalyptic cosmic figures who embody political events as natural phenomena, thus undoing the opposition between man and nature in a kind of post-Bultmannian extraction and recrudescence of the kerygma, while providing a set of dramatized power-figures for potential affective interiorization that resist the horrors of philosophical abstraction.

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Fallon tracks Blake’s alleged deployment of *apotheosis* through a sequence of studies of the latter’s key writings — *The French Revolution*, *America a Prophecy*, *Europe*, *Urizen*, *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and others—in Blake’s development from the 1780s to 1820s. So it is thus that the forging of new myths of apotheosis enables Blake to literally engrave imagistic and poetic links between “real” revolutionary events and “visionary” inhuman forces, and, particularly, to draw

<sup>14</sup> Fallon, *Blake, Myth, and Enlightenment*, p. 32.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 247–8.

upon revolutionary *figures* of his own present in this peculiar way. Hence the shock or surprise that readers often confess to experiencing when they find Tom Paine and George Washington rubbing portentous shoulders with Albion's Angel and Urizen.

Moreover, the ambiguities of the "real" actions, events, and persons cannot be reduced. Regarding Blake's unfinished *The French Revolution* (1791), Fallon notes that "Voltaire and Rousseau hover above the army, driving out spectral monks who insubstantially 'dash like foam' against the army. Whilst they lead the enlightened dissolution of superstitious religious orders, the philosophes loom over the soldiers like sky-gods... Blake's imagery paradoxically mythologises Voltaire and Rousseau's demystificatory power".<sup>16</sup> As for Lafayette — "America's favourite fighting Frenchman," as Lin-Manuel Miranda's Broadway musical *Hamilton* has it—it's possible that he, first envisaged as the republican hero of Blake's contemporary epic, was rapidly revealed as a reactionary re-establisher of representation-in-Revolution. The trope fails to take.

But if you're dealing with anyone other than Christ or, perhaps, Mr. Milton, one presumes that part of the volatility of apotheosis, which is also part of its force, and one of the conditions that make it available for poetic use in the first place, is due to the fact that turning local heroes into stars can too often reveal their clay feet (and your own). Fallon quotes from a notoriously servile apotheosis, known to Blake, Edmund Burke's ludicrous invocation of Marie Antoinette in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*:

It is now sixteen or seventeen years since I saw the queen of France, then the dauphiness, at Versailles; and surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision. I saw her just above the horizon, decorating and cheering the elevated sphere she just began to move in,—glittering like the morning-star, full of life, and splendor, and joy. Oh! what a revolution! and what a heart must I have, to contemplate without emotion that elevation and that fall! [...] I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult.—But the age of chivalry is gone.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Fallon, *Blake, Myth, and Enlightenment*, p. 71.

This passage, much mocked by Burke's contemporaries (Fallon charmingly names it "an adulatory peroration"), at the very least demonstrates how easily apotheoses can undermine their own use. What separates Blake's use of apotheosis from Burke's is not simply that the latter's are paroxysms of reaction, but that they are so because, in their defence of the indefensible, they try to close up the gap between political and artistic representation. Here, the problem of the representation of the people becomes paramount. As Peter Hallward notes regarding a fundamental division in uses of "the people" in political discourse:

When we slide from one conception of the people to the other, we don't just shift from a singular to a plural definition of the people as a grammatical subject. We also move between two profoundly antithetical conceptions of political power, and of what is involved in the taking and exercising of such power. The first conception of the people, the people as realm, is one that most oligarchies can happily embrace, since it incorporates the differences that secure their status; the second poses an existential threat to *any* form of elite and has been consistently decried as such across the whole of recorded history. More precisely, to privilege realm over masses is to ensure that appeals to the people must proceed through mechanisms of representation that are adequate to the diversity and complexity of all the disparate groups, regions and concerns that compose it, such that legitimate power then rests in the hands of those who can best claim to represent the interest of this elaborate whole, and in particular of its 'prevailing part'. The alternative recognises, by contrast, that for obvious reasons the poor majority can only overpower an ordinarily powerful or dominant elite if they are able to mass together and concentrate their power, in both time and space—at particular moments, in particular places.<sup>18</sup>

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As we know, Blake was "enthused by the agency of the popular will in the original act of resistance",<sup>19</sup> not by "the people as realm." Yet, to present the people in their revolutionary aspect — that is, at moments unable to be recuperated by any form of political representation — and not merely as a subordinate realm of the masters, requires a concomitant derangement of the powers of aesthetic

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<sup>18</sup> P. Hallward, "Concentration or representation: the struggle for popular sovereignty," in: *Cogent Arts and Humanities*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2017. Available at: <[www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311983.2017.1390916?scroll=top&needAccess=true](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311983.2017.1390916?scroll=top&needAccess=true)>.

<sup>19</sup> Fallon, *Blake, Myth, and Enlightenment*, p. 69.

representation. The trope of apotheosis here shows its bonds to sublimity, that is, “an aesthetic mode in which Blake could attempt to express uncontainable popular energies”.<sup>20</sup>

If all the evidence is there to support Fallon's contentions regarding the centrality of apotheosis in Blake's work, why did I call this attention *tendentious*? Because, as Fallon himself admits, Blake uses the word himself only once. I quote: “It may seem surprising to focus on the term ‘apotheosis,’ which Blake used just once. In advance of his 1809 exhibition, his advertisement foregrounded three works, including ‘Two pictures, representing grand Apotheoses of NELSON and PITT.’ Nevertheless, apotheosis is a recurrent image and idea throughout Blake's oeuvre”.<sup>21</sup> It is of course entirely in line with acceptable hermeneutical principles that the non-mention or apparent marginality of a term can, under certain circumstances, provide a magical key to the arcana of prophetic poetry.

Such keys can be of a variety of kinds, if, no matter the kind, there is always something necessarily projective about the claims made for them. After all, arguing from an absence is always a little risky. Today, the ungrounding volatility of conspiratorial interpretosis means that a simple non-mention can be parleyed by assertoric force into systemic exclusion: you didn't mention me, therefore you have deliberately oppressed me. But there are obviously more plausible forms of interpretation-by-absence. Otto, for example, definitively demonstrates the abiding influence of Swedenborg on Blake, well after the latter's explicit violent rejection of the former.

Here, precisely as Milton proclaims about his muse Urania in *Paradise Lost*, the point is in “the meaning, not the name I call” (7. 5). If the word was used only once by Blake, I don't think there's any doubt after reading Fallon's book, that apotheosis provides a very useful way to approach Blake's oeuvre. “Apotheosis” — at least in the self-reflexive and self-occluding form that (Fallon argues that) Blake gives it — enables precisely a particular person to be raised up, while simultaneously, by drawing attention to the peculiarities of any such troping, de-particularizing that person into the clash of forces traversing the people.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

By doing so, Fallon strongly implies that Blake in fact offers *an apotheosis of apotheosis*. This would suggest that, in Blake, apotheosis is deployed to undermine itself, its common uses and history, as it gathers together the diverse history of its manifold uses in order to revivify its properly messianic aspects for us. The celebrated “Human Form Divine” would be just one of the many pleonastic oxymorons which, bound by Blake to a form of apocalyptic apotheosis, convoke the powers of the people beyond any appropriate forms of representation, political or artistic. Hence Blake’s demystificatory mythopoesis resists any direct decodings.

Yet certain issues remain. Following Fallon, I have spoken of the trope of apotheosis as having a five-fold or pentagrammic character in the late eighteenth century: aesthetic, politico-religious, commercial, satirical, and historico-critical. It is also, as I have noted, deployed by Blake as a self-undoing trope. Indeed, it is paradoxically perhaps the *comic* aspects of apotheosis that made it available to Blake as particularly propitious for his own purposes in the first place. Yet part of the problem that arises here is the accompanying personification or prosopopeia: giving a face to something that does not have one cannot but run the risk of providing certain protrusions for phrenological speculation. In doing so, Blake himself veers towards an unconscious complicity with forms of representational binding he might prefer to avoid.

For as Blake mobilises apotheoses, he also proliferates physiognomies. As Fallon remarks: “While physiognomy may now seem like Romantic quackery, Johann Caspar Lavater’s aspiration to produce a universal study of human nature that could become a science places him within the tradition of the European Christian Enlightenment”.<sup>22</sup> Lavater was also a friend of Blake’s friend Henry Fuseli, about whom Blake once wrote:

The only Man that eer I knew  
Who did not make me almost spew  
Was Fuseli he was both Turk & Jew  
And so dear Christian Friends how do you do?<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> W. Blake, *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*, p. 507.

But the interest here concerns the status of the phrenological, which we can perhaps agree is back today in the contemporary totalitarian projects of face-recognition software, big data, and proprietary identity politics. For Blake, despite himself, cannot entirely avoid the ancient problems of representation — including the relations between inside and outside, micro- and macrocosm, of immanence and transcendence — not least because in this he comes close to another enemy, philosophy or, more particularly, Plato.

G. W. F. Hegel, another great contemporary enamoured of progressions-through-contraries, was, like Blake, very attentive to phrenology. In his extended commentary on the phenomenon in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel remarks of Plato's organology that: "Plato even assigns the liver something still higher, something which is even regarded by some as the highest function of all, viz., prophesying, or the gift of speaking of holy and eternal things in a non-rational manner."<sup>24</sup> That Blake himself died of liver failure at the age of 69 is not really my point, although one can still find little medical Platonists today drawing connections between Blake's productivity and his bodily ailments. The point is rather that Blake cannot altogether evade the "purely rational analysis" he cannot abide.

This is why, when Fallon emphasises how Blake rejects Platonic myth as "abstract allegoresis",<sup>25</sup> he simultaneously has to note Blake's own elective affinities with Plato. In doing so, however, Fallon doesn't discuss Plato's *Symposium* at all, which, in a book dealing extensively with myth and apotheosis, seems like some kind of omission. After all, it is the famous myth of the genealogy of Eros and the mind's ascent through love that is assigned by Plato to Diotima in that dialogue — a form of apotheosis that is not convincingly reducible to "ab-

<sup>24</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, analysis J. N. Findlay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 196. The whole section is worthy of attention in this context, not least for Hegel's (perhaps surprisingly) excellent sense of humour: "It is of course undeniable that there remains the *possibility* that a bump at some place or other is connected with a particular property, passion, etc. ... One can imagine the man who is living under the same roof as the murderer, or even his neighbour, or, going further afield, imagine his fellow-citizens, etc. with high bumps on some part or other of the skull, just as well as one can imagine the flying cow, that first was caressed by the crab, that was riding on the donkey, etc. etc.," p. 203.

<sup>25</sup> Fallon, *Blake, Myth, and Enlightenment*, p. 292.

stract allegoresis” and which, moreover, offers mythico-conceptual resources to Enlightenment and Romanticism that are often overlooked.

And it isn’t just rival forms of ascent that go under-examined here; it’s the going-down too. The word “avatar” — deriving from the Sanskrit for the manifestation of a deity — is ubiquitous today due to the dominance of computer games, perhaps in place of “incarnation,” which, due to its close ties with institutional Christianity, has presumably become unavailable for quotidian use. Blake’s own term — “emanation” — designates, among other things, a literal *pendant* to apotheosis:

Like as a Polypus that vegetates beneath the deep!  
 They saw his Shadow vegetated underneath the Couch  
 Of death: for when he enterd into his Shadow: Himself:  
 His real and immortal Self: was as appeared to those  
 Who dwell in immortality, as One sleeping on a couch  
 Of gold; and those in immortality gave forth their Emanations  
 Like Females of sweet beauty, to guard round him & to feed  
 His lips with food of Eden in his cold and dim repose!  
 But to himself he seemd a wander lost in dreary night...<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps this would be the logical next study for Fallon: the integration of the counter-movement of emanation with apotheosis?

Finally, where are we with Blake’s revolutionary apotheoses today? On 18 August 2017, Nadja Spiegelman and Rosa Rankin-Gee proposed an emoji poetry contest for *The Paris Review*: be among the first ten people to decode three extracts from famous poems that had been translated into emojis to win a prize.<sup>27</sup> The very first ideogram was the following:

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<sup>26</sup> From “Milton,” in: Blake, *Complete Poetry & Prose*, p. 109.

<sup>27</sup> Available at: <[www.theparisreview.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/emojiipoem1.png](http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/emojiipoem1.png)>.





Following on the near-immediate shock of recognition — “Tiger Tiger burning bright/in the forests of the night”— one could perhaps be forgiven for feeling that the comedy of this ingenious image has less-than-utopian implications. My friend Bryan Cooke once remarked to me that emojis are the dialectical sublation of ideographic and alphabetic script, but which, contra the usual account of the operations of Hegelian negation, preserve only the worst aspects of both. Irony aside, part of the point is that emoji threaten both the literality of the literal and the meaning of meaning; that is, their conditions in global electronic media mean that they are part of a dissolution of the powers of linguistic expression. It’s not only unreconstructed logocentrists who might be legitimately mournful about such a development. To be sure, breath and voice are evacuated, but so too are any bonds to the French Revolution. And this is where the contemporary avatar and its emojis seem to catastrophize Blake’s own catasterisms: an enforced descent into the algorithmic transcendence of proprietary virtuality, not a mythopoetical expression of the revolutionary powers of the people.