Hélène Ibata: *William Blake's Visual Sublime: the "Eternal Labours"*.

William Blake was one of the leading actors of a revolution in aesthetics which, by releasing the imagination and the subconscious from rational control, and by emphasizing the intensity of perception and the freedom of creative genius, fostered a new yearning for an absolute within human reach. The concept of the sublime provided a theoretical framework for this opening of boundaries, as the pervasive contemporary debate on the subject attests, and became a working paradigm for the changes which took place in the arts and thought of the time. Blake, who was born the same year as Edmund Burke published his landmark *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), was necessarily familiar with the terms of the debate, and his frequent use of the word “sublime” in his poetry, letters and artistic pamphlets shows that he gave it a central place in his aesthetics, reflecting, as can be expected from his composite approach to art, both about its poetic and its visual dimension. He called his poetic universe a “sublime allegory,”¹ a phrase which aptly encompasses the prolific and complex creations of his “prophecies” in their defiance of univocal meanings and their challenge to readers’ ordinary perceptions. In *Jerusalem*, his very self-reflexive last epic prophecy, the central object of artistic striving and production is “the sublime Universe of Los & Enitharmon” (59: 21; E 209);² in *The Four Zoas*, the purpose of Los’s “fires” is to “fabricate forms sublime” (98: 22; E 370). The sublime is also a recurrent term in Blake’s writings on art, where it designates the highest form of artistic expression: it figures prominently in his annotations to Sir Joshua Reynolds’ *Discourses on Art*, partly in answer to its use by Reynolds, but also with a clear personal intentionality.

Blake’s position, however seems to have been an isolated and puzzling one in its context, largely due to his definite rejection of the then prevailing theory of Edmund Burke, with its foundation of the sublime on an empirical basis. In his *Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke, who did not think much of painting as a means to convey the sublime (being too figurative and explicit), had nevertheless provided a number of principles and guidelines for which visual artists had found immediate practical applications. He had notably argued that some objects’ material qualities, like vastness, confusion, and obscurity, were necessary conditions for experiencing the sublime, thus leading many artists to increase pictorial formats and scale, and to favour

chiaroscuro and striking tonal contrasts to stir the viewer's imagination in a fearful but delightful manner.

Blake's explicit refusal of such an idiom, his neoclassical distaste for indistinctness and his direct attack against Burke's theory in the annotations to Reynolds, has often disqualified him as an artist of the sublime. Those who have taken his claims to visual sublimity seriously have generally emphasized his predilection for sublime *subjects*, and pointed out the *thematic* influence of Burke. Anthony Blunt was the first to stress that Blake's choice of Biblical, Shakespearian and Miltonic subjects for his paintings and illustrations was wholly in keeping with the examples of the sublime provided by Burke and with the contemporary practice of fellow artists (13-21). Morton D. Paley, who has repeatedly stressed the centrality of the concept of the sublime in Blake's thought (*Energy and the Imagination* 1-60; *Continuing City* 57-66), has also demonstrated that Blake's recurrent choice of apocalyptic subject matter makes him a major contributor to this specifically British development, the "apocalyptic sublime," in spite of stylistic divergences mostly based on Blake's refusal of naturalistic representation (*The Apocalyptic Sublime* 71-100).

By examining these stylistic and philosophical divergences, however, other approaches to the Blakean visual sublime have been made possible. David Baulch has thus argued that Blake's aesthetics of the sublime have to be revalued as working outside of the empirical framework of Burke's theory, within his own personal conception of perspectival states. Baulch shows how Blake integrates the Burkean sublime, as an empirical aesthetic, within his fallen states (Ulro and Generation) and looks for real sublimity in the state of Eden, where imaginative activity is highest (whereas in Burke's conception the mind is passive). Finally, through close analyses of "To Tirzah" and plates 25 and 95 of *Jerusalem*, he shows that the Blakean sublime is the product of a visual/ verbal composite. Going further, in the light of postmodern interpretations, Steve Vine has shown the Blakean sublime to be closer to Jean-François Lyotard's view of the sublime as a historical/ temporal process, or event, engaged with materiality, than to either Burke's empirical interpretation or even to Kant's own transcendental approach.³ This new approach allows Vine to take seriously Blake's stylistic claims that accuracy of line and "minute particulars" are vehicles of the sublime: the bounding line operates as a "sublimation of materiality" (243), is "*a sublime event itself*, for the line draws definition upon chaos" (247), and the minute particulars "anticipate Lyotard's postmodernism" by "instituting a sublime of

particularity and differentiation rather than of any universalizing ‘grand narrative’” (248). Vine, however, does not examine Blake’s actual graphic and pictorial practice, applying the stylistic comments mostly to textual considerations.

As a matter of fact, the recent reappraisal of the Blakean sublime, based on the underlying assumption that the sublime is more a temporal experience than a transcendental one, has mostly taken place from a textual point of view, Vine being one of the few to venture into the visual dimension. Blake’s poetry has proven to be a particularly apt illustration of some of the latest interpretations of the sublime, which point to the fear of closure, the provisionality, immediacy and urgency of artistic production, as well as the excess of thought in the making, as the driving dynamics of the sublime. In his famous essay on « Le sublime et l’avant-garde, » Lyotard locates the sublime in the here and now of pictorial creation, as an « event » driven by the need for novelty and the intimation of something beyond presentation. The transience of the event and its immediacy is central to our experience of the sublime, which Lyotard identifies as a desperate tension for things to happen (for there to be language, or for the void of the canvas to be filled) in order to perpetuate the process of artistic production. This tension, in his view, is particularly at work in the Burkean sublime, which revolves upon the fear of absolute privation, and the constant anguish for things to continue happening (110-111). Elsewhere, Lyotard has reinterpreted Kant’s “Analytic of the sublime” in the *Critique of the Power Judgment* as an illustration of Kant’s focus on aesthetic judgment as self-reflexive and self-perpetuating pleasure, rather than as a method for knowledge – which was how it had traditionally been viewed – (*Leçons sur l’analytique du sublime* 19). In such an interpretation, the “sentiment of the sublime” is seen as a means for thought to break open boundaries and enjoy its own “démessure” (75), that is to say its excessiveness and boundlessness; it is the expression of thought “in the raw”, before it is captured by limitations, forms, schemata, or conceptual rules (152). Other recent interpretations draw our attention to the experience of the sublime as an immanent and open process. Peter De Bolla, for instance, scrutinizes the eighteenth-century discourse *of* the sublime (as opposed to the discourse *on* the sublime), seeing it as a self-transforming discourse, without boundary, characterized by its “propensity to produce excess” (12). Jean-Luc Nancy’s reading of Kant, to which I will return, locates the sublime in the imaginative or creative process rather than its product, in “the play of presentation itself, without any represented *object*,” or “form forming itself, for itself, without object” (28-29).

Blake's constant fear of the cessation of imaginative energy and activity (which he expresses as a fall into Beulah or Ulro), as well as his textual and graphic exuberance, open-endedness and medium-reflexivity bring him close to such a conception of the sublime as an immanent experience, taking place in the very moment of artistic production, and in the strife to sustain it. In the last two decades, this emphasis on open-ended process has been made by several commentators of his poetry. In various ways, Tilottama Rajan (*The Supplement of Reading*), Donald Ault (*Narrative Unbound*) and Fred Dortort (*The Dialectic of Vision*), among others, have explored the indeterminate and transformational nature of the Blakean text. They have highlighted its self-reflexivity and lack of closure, which bring forward the labour of writing itself, and its continuation in the reading process. Although the features they have highlighted need not be linked to the theories of the sublime, and have also been linked to the comic and to Blake's ample use of irony and satire,⁴ the anguish of indeterminacy as well as the exhilaration of open-endedness bring to mind the new interpretations of sublimity. Other critics have made this point more clearly, and explicitly identified a sublime experience derived from the textual complexity of the later prophecies. V.A. de Luca has thus defined Blake's program as "displacing the natural sublime object with a text" (*Words of Eternity* 30) and identified the "sublime event" as taking place "in the actual difficulties of the reading experience" (*Words of Eternity* 31). De Luca's research enhances the anti-narrative physicality of Blake's text, with its profuseness and semantic opacity being comparable to a "wall of words" inducing in the reader a sentiment very much like the vertiginous exhilaration characteristic of the sublime ("Wall of Words" 231). Peter Otto, in his reading of *The Four Zoas*, argues that such a conception of the text as a barrier is another form of transcendental sublimity. Instead, he writes, the discursive complexities of *The Four Zoas* call for an active readerly experience in which, as in the sublime of Wordsworth and Keats, "the humiliation of the understanding (or an analogous entity), unable to move beyond the objective world... throws into relief the constructive power of the imagination" (26).

What brings together these analyses is their emphasis on the provisional and transformational nature of textual production and reception, and the heightened awareness of the text itself as it unfolds, in all its complexity – opacity or richness. Such an emphasis on the "textuality" or "materiality" of the text points to a sublimity immanent to the process of production or discovery, in its conflation of intoxication and urgency.

The main purpose of the following analysis is to show that a similar conception of the sublime as *process* can be discerned in the *visual* dimension of Blake's art. In this more "physical" side of his work, the artist's expression of the temporal processes of his production is actually heightened by his awareness of material constraints specific to graphic and pictorial media. Seeing Blake as an artist dedicated to the energetic labour of printing, engraving and painting allows one to see his engagement with materiality in a more positive light than his attacks against empiricism suggest. Vine sees Blake's sublime as "tied anxiously and dangerously to a threatening corporeality" (240). A closer look at his artistic practice might show that corporeality is a necessary rather than a threatening part of the sublime as temporal rather than transcendental experience.

I will begin by assessing Blake's views on the sublime in their context, in order to reappraise his rejection of the empirical interpretations of his contemporaries. Because of the representational and technical constraints of his artistic approach, I will then show, this rejection did not lead him to seek the sublime in a transcendental realm of vision, but rather to seek visionary expansion in the production process itself. Such an interpretation, we will see, is confirmed by the more recent studies of Blake's graphic techniques, which highlight the significance of medium reflexivity in his practice. An analysis of the verbal and visual *mise en abîme* of "form making" in the later prophecies will then show how this awareness leads Blake to articulate, in his own creative work, a new conception of sublimity as process. Finally, I will reexamine the significance of the Blakean line as the immediate expression of this sublime.

Against Burke

In the context of British pre-Romantic and Romantic visual arts, William Blake's conception of the sublime appears to be an oddity, going against most pictorial and graphic experiments of the day in their attempt to answer the challenge raised by Burke's essay. The thematics of the natural sublime, the vast expanses of wilderness, the oceanic or mountainous scenes which so fascinated most painters of the day only made it into his repertoire as evidence of the mind's subjection to Nature. The vastness of scale or format which artists like de Loutherbourg, John Martin or James Ward attempted was incompatible with his graphic or pictorial media (illuminated printing, colour printing and watercolour). The dramatic use of chiaroscuro (as in the work of Wright of

Derby, de Louthembourg or, for that matter, his own friend Johann Heinrich Füssli) was according to him a narrowing of perception, comparable to putting “Points of Light” into “a dark hole” or “a dark cavern” (*Public Address*; E 579). Most importantly, his dismissal of expressive colourism and suggestive indistinctness as “Blots & Blurs” (*PA*; E 575, 576) or “Broken Colours & Broken Lines & Broken Masses [which] are Equally Subversive of the Sublime” (“Annotations to Reynolds” E 652) isolated him from those like Turner who had made this stylistic choice to answer Burke’s contention that words were more suggestive than images, and therefore better vehicles of the sublime.

Through his choice of small formats, his strong stand against the contemporary taste for sharp tonal contrasts, or his absolute refusal of expressive colourism without visible drawing, Blake’s conception of the sublime seemed to be going against the tide. The conflict of ideas found its most explicit expression in Blake’s annotations to Reynolds, who had adapted Burke’s theory to pictorial needs. Reynolds, in particular, had seen chiaroscuro as the pictorial translation of Burke’s “obscurity,” a powerful cause of the delightful terror and frightful suggestiveness around which the sublime experience was articulated in the *Philosophical Inquiry*. Blake took particular offense to such a notion: “Obscurity,” he wrote in answer to Reynolds, “is Neither the Source of the Sublime nor of any Thing Else” (E 658). By “obscurity,” he meant indistinctness and weakness of conception, and was evidently challenging Burke, whom he rightly saw as the theoretical inspiration of Reynolds on such points:

Burke's Treatise on the Sublime & Beautiful is founded on the Opinions of Newton & Locke on this Treatise Reynolds has grounded many of his assertions. In all his Discourses I read Burkes Treatise when very Young at the same time I read Locke on Human Understanding & Bacons Advancement of Learning (...) They mock Inspiration & Vision Inspiration & Vision was then & now is & I hope will always Remain my Element my Eternal Dwelling place. (E 660-61)

As Blake was well aware, his dislike of Burke was based on a sharp disagreement with the theoretical premises on which the *Philosophical Inquiry* was grounded: the philosophy of empiricism and its emphasis on the mind as a receptor, which he saw as a cause of intellectual torpor, and led him to blame the fall of Albion on “Bacon, Locke & Newton” (*Milton* 41:5; E 142) in the prophecies. The crucial point against Burke, which is implicit in Blake’s renewed

defense of Vision and Inspiration, was that he too emphasized the passivity of the mind in his conception of the sublime. Whereas Blake saw vision and inspiration as active workings of the imagination, Burke based the sublime experience on what could appear as a form of mental surrender:

THE PASSION caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is *so entirely filled with its object*, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. (Part II, Section 2, 53; my emphasis)

The idea that the mind could be overwhelmed by its object and thus submitted to external forces it could not quite control was quite alien to Blake's own philosophy and aesthetics. For this reason, he could not agree with Burke's method of tracing the sublime back to its many external causes and sources, most of which are listed in Part II of the *Philosophical Enquiry*: obscurity (sections III and IV), power (section V), privation, "Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude and Silence" (section VI, 65), vastness (section VII), infinity (section VIII), "Succession and Uniformity" (section IX), "Magnitude in Building" (section X), etc. Whereas these sources provided new themes and a working idiom for many fellow artists, for Blake they were only evidence of the hold of the external world on weak minds. Significantly, they made their way into Blake's production, but mostly by providing a powerful imagery of the fallen world, and of the mind's passive immersion in externality.

Where Burke saw vastness and darkness as productive of sublimity, Blake considered them as evidence of mental dissolution and loss. In *The Book of Urizen*, where Reason (Urizen) is shown to prevail over imagination and energy, the imagery of Cosmic powers, darkness and open waters (plates 11 and 22), far from being the source of a transcendental experience, contributes to the overall sense of material oppression created by the more explicit representations of imprisonment in matter (as in plates 8 and 9). This is enhanced by the oppressive use of opaque and dark colours, the "sad and fuscous colours, as black, or brown, or deep purple, and the like" which Burke had presented as productive of the sublime (75). Blake saw nothing uplifting, no "delightful horror" (Burke 67) in man's sense of powerlessness or awe, but only evidence of

imaginative failure. His use of Burkean thematics was the visualization of a post-lapsarian world subjected to reason and materialism.

Another example of Blake's visual critique of Burke is plate 70 of *Jerusalem*, which shows a gigantic trilithon, a hyperbolic example of "Magnitude in Building," towering over three diminutive human forms. The vastness of scale implied by the presence of human referents, the sense of power and awe derived from the massive construction, make this design one of Blake's closest visualizations of the Burkean sublime. It is, however, fraught with criticism. Druidism being for Blake the epitome of religious cruelty, the hyperbolic sacrificial altar can be read as an ironic allusion to Burke's "delightful horror," and a critique of religious awe as a source of the sublime; not surprisingly, this imagery of terror goes along with a critique of "Abstract Philosophy" (*J* 70: 19; E 224) and the three human forms, who are to be seen as overpowered by such an emblem of cruelty and superstition, are probably "Bacon & Newton & Locke" (*J* 70: 15; E 224) whose names appear just above the structure.

As such examples show, Blake's use of Burkean thematics or stylistics of the sublime is highly critical. Even though, as Blunt or Paley have argued, he does seem to favour subjects that his Burke-inspired contemporaries would have called sublime, he also repeatedly appears to undermine the idiom. In many such cases, Blake is exposing the contradictions of an experience that is based on the visual perception of material objects and claims transcendence at the same time. The infinite, as he reminds us repeatedly, is not to be found in magnitude observable in the physical universe, but in visionary activity: "The Microscope knows not of this nor the Telescope. they alter/ The ratio of the Spectators Organs but leave Objects untouched /For every Space larger than a red Globule of Mans blood./ Is visionary: and is created by the Hammer of Los" (*Milton*, I, 29: 17-20; E 127). Blake's belief that the path to infinity was visionary activity made it impossible for him to validate a sublime experience derived from the simple visual perception of "vastness," "magnitude," or "obscurity". It entailed another definition of the sublime, and a new visual idiom and practice, where creative form-making (as the above reference to Los suggests) plays a prominent part.

Corporeality, visionary expansion and the visual media

Blake needed to articulate his own conception in an aesthetic context dominated by the discourse of empiricism. As his annotations to Reynolds show, his interpretation of the sublime was partly determined by his antagonistic reaction to such a discourse. Consequently, some of his statements strongly deny any material anchoring to the experience of the sublime. Thus, in his letter to Butts of July 6, 1803, Blake described his new poem *Milton* as a “Sublime Allegory,” adding: “Allegory addressed to the Intellectual powers while it is altogether hidden from the Corporeal understanding is My Definition of the Most Sublime Poetry” (E 730). The apparent dualism of such a definition, however, should be examined in the light of Blake’s complex conception of the corporeal and the material. The “corporeal” here means what belongs to the natural body, and “Corporeal understanding” is understanding derived from the closed “vegetable” senses (a recurrent image in the prophecies), as in the empirical method; but this natural body is only the fallen and divided fragment of the fully integrated body, in which the open senses fuse with the creative imagination. Working in isolation, this “Selfhood” is unable to experience sublimity. On the other hand, reunited with the imagination and expanded by Man’s creative energies, the body itself becomes the locus of visionary activity. Thomas Frosch makes a convincing case against the idea that Blake’s thought may be dualist, by showing that sensory perception is actually integrated in a vast conception of “perceptual improvement” (32); instead of being negated or transcended, the natural body and the five senses are filled with the imagination and expanded (41). A powerful expression of this renovation can be found in this famous passage from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*:

But first the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul, is to be expunged: this I shall do, by printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid.

If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is: infinite.

For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.
(E.41)

As there are various states of the body and the senses (which can be “narrow chinks” or “doors of perception”), so the corporeal can be part of man’s perceptual opening to the infinite. Significantly in this passage, it is Blake’s own printing and relief etching activity which is

presented as the catalyst for such a liberating experience, as the reference to “corrosives . . . melting apparent surfaces away” makes clear. The corporeal is therefore reintegrated as perceptual expansion fused with creative activity, ultimately leading to visionary revelation.

These changing perspectives may explain why graphic concreteness and representational explicitness are actually central to Blake’s conception of the *visual* sublime, in which they may be seen as positive features of a complete experience. In his annotations to Reynolds, Blake notably states: “Without Minute Neatness of Execution. The Sublime cannot Exist” (E. 646), and shortly afterwards: “Singular & Particular Detail is the Foundation of the Sublime” (E. 647). Even though he is protesting against Reynolds’s empirical method of abstraction from particular to general form, and defending the preciseness of vision against the weak copies of nature, these assertions go together with a resolutely representational visual bias. Blake only conceives “neatness of execution” and “particular detail” in relation to his prime visual subject, the human form. He objects against a sublimity of suggestiveness and obscurity, in which contours and bodily substance are dissolved in painterly features like tone and colour; and he makes the corporeal central to his own representation of the visionary. As he claims in the “Descriptive Catalogue”: “A Spirit and a Vision are not, as the modern philosophy supposes, a cloudy vapour or a nothing: they are organised and minutely articulated beyond all that the mortal and perishing nature can produce... Spirits are organised men” (E 541-542). The firm delineation of the human body, for an artist opposed to formal abstraction and who had developed a bold linear idiom, was the natural visual receptacle of the spiritual.

Unlike Blake’s definition of “the most Sublime Poetry,” this literal and anthropomorphic approach made it clear that the “corporeal” had a part to play in his visual sublime. The discrepancy highlighted the major tension between physicality and intellectuality at the heart of Blake’s graphic and pictorial work. It also reflected verbal/ visual tensions. Blake’s poetry, especially in the prophetic books, does indeed challenge the reader’s “corporeal understanding.” As W.J.T. Mitchell has convincingly shown, it goes against the pictorialist tradition of its time with its unvisualizable mental spaces and dramatic voices (*Composite Art*, 20-24), and its undescribed personae with shifting narrative and thematic functions. The visual concreteness of the accompanying designs, on the other hand, boldly reintroduces the corporeal. Even though the emblematic or allegorical value of the designs addresses the intellect and prevents any easy

identification, the overwhelming presence of the naked human body makes “corporeal understanding” a central component of our appreciation.

The contrast is especially striking in *Jerusalem*, where the thematics of bodily distortion and fragmentation in the text is at variance with the solidity, firm contours and muscular relief of the human figures in the designs. In the coloured version of the poem (copy E), the completion of many years of masterful and industrious graphic work, the physical presence of the body is enhanced by the brilliant combination of pictorial and etching techniques, and the almost sensual use of colour. Dark blue, brown and red washes provide tone and give bodies a sculptural aspect, especially as they are well contained within the thick russet contours of relief etching. On a number of plates, the effect is heightened by the combination of dark watercolour with white-line etching (or woodcut-on-copper as Blake called it), in which the design is cut out of the etching ground in a succession of thin white lines.⁵ On plate 26, for instance, the two forms of Hand and Jerusalem, emerging from the dark background, acquire an astonishing physicality: the rich watercolour washes, blended with the sinuous patterns of white-line etching, display Hand’s muscular anatomy in a manner reminiscent of an *écorché*, while they liken Jerusalem to a living statue with intermingled bodily fibers and thin folds of drapery. This perfected representation of the human body gives the corporeal a more positive value than the thematics of fragmentation and shrinking in the text. Hand’s *écorché* appearance, it cannot be denied, is a visual accomplishment, “a figure of terrible beauty” as Mitchell writes (*Composite Art*, 203).

The design highlights the centrality of the “corporeal” in Blake’s visual sublime. By conflating corporeal beauty with Burke’s aesthetics of terror, it demonstrates how the human body itself could be a vehicle of the sublime. More importantly, it reveals the active role played by the artist’s body itself. Hand, whose printed name makes explicit the self-reflexive dimension of the design, cannot but be seen as a visualization of the artist’s “hand,” drawing our attention to the very process of his representation. And as so often in Blake’s visual work, the human figure is primarily the vehicle of the artist’s craft, displaying his range of visual techniques, and his “Minute Neatness of Execution” without which “The Sublime cannot Exist”. If Blake’s visual practice requires us to conceive of the sublime as anchored in physicality, it is by directing our attention to the material world of the creative process itself, and by making the artistic medium and the artist’s hand so clearly visible.

In particular, it allows us to discern the parts played out by the artist and his materials, by not concealing the latter's resistance and intentionality. The vibrancy of the design we have been examining results from the almost experimental fusing of pictorial and graphic techniques, the unexpectedly successful encounter of watercolour and white-line engraving. Here as throughout his production, the artist incorporates the visible specificities of his media into the significance of the design. The "Minute Neatness of Execution" may then be sublime because it is the artist's successful channeling of energies that resist his control. In this dialectical exchange, the materials are not destroyed to become transparent vehicles of meaning, but enhance meaning through their visible presence. This awareness of the artistic medium, of its physical presence and intentionality, gives added significance to Blake's emphasis on execution in his statements on the visual sublime. It once again draws our attention to the immanent process of artistic production as the place where we may locate this sublime.

The artistic medium: physicality and reflexivity

Blake's active engagement with the artistic medium has been demonstrated by persuasive experimental work on his techniques, conducted since the 1980s notably by Robert N. Essick (*William Blake Printmaker*) and Joseph Viscomi (*Blake and the Idea of the Book*), as well as Michael Phillips (*The Creation of the Songs*, 15-31; 95-108). Contrary to previous emphases on the visionary and intellectual dimension of his visual work, such research highlights the physicality of Blake's graphic and pictorial production, his exceptional involvement in the *process* of it, and what is more, a high degree of medium reflexivity. At a time when Sir Joshua Reynolds had made a point of defending the status of the visual artist by highlighting the intellectual dimension of his art and playing down the "mechanical" side of it, seeing the stages of execution as secondary to "invention" and ranking pictorial styles from the most "mental" to the most "ornamental,"⁴ Blake made a deliberate choice to be involved at all stages of his production, including the more "mechanical" ones, such as making his own colours or the laborious process of etching, inking and printing. His experience as an accomplished craftsman, combined with the invention of visual designs and poetic text, meant the reunion of a vast range of intellectual and technical skills, which would have been impossible for almost anyone else. It was the perfect illustration, and perhaps the leading cause, of his poetic and philosophical striving

for wholeness, for the ultimate fusion of man's faculties: execution could not be divided from invention; technical skills had to be fused with intellectual ones, rather than separated or worse, delegated. It also meant that Blake was acutely aware of the processes of artistic production, and more specifically of the resistance of the artistic medium or, as Essick puts it, its "intentionality or telos" ("Blake's Body" 206).

Blake's necessary awareness could be linked to the method of illuminated printing which he had perfected for the production of his illuminated books. A detailed account of this method is provided by Robert N. Essick and Joseph Viscomi. Both convincingly show why it is most likely that Blake composed directly on the bare copper plate, contrary to what had been asserted by previous arguments in favour of transfers from preliminary design to copper plate (Ruthven Todd being the leading proponent of the latter explanation). To achieve this, he developed a technique of "relief etching" in which, instead of cutting out the text and design and then inking them, as in the more common practice of intaglio engraving, he drew and wrote directly on the plate with a stop out varnish, and then etched out the exposed background with acid, prior to inking. This essentially meant that he abolished the traditional distinction between invention and execution. As Viscomi writes:

In illuminated printmaking, the labor of artist (*delineavit*) and engraver (*sculpsit*) is the same labor, occurring in the same place at the same time. This relation between conceiving and making, between invention and execution, is encouraged by the very act of drawing as opposed to tracing and/ or translating designs already drawn and thus composed. (32)

A direct consequence of such immediacy was the characteristic roughness of design that one finds in most of his illuminated books. As immediacy of expression prevailed over accuracy of reproduction, and as the lines drawn with the varnish were thicker and more prone to visible imperfections than thinner, engraved or etched out lines, this effect was a result both of the artist's intention, and of the medium's specificity. It was Blake's decision to preserve the visibility of the artistic medium, as part of his original project. As Essick puts it, "Blake used relief etching exclusively for original composition and never attempted to disguise it as another medium" (*Printmaker*, 120). The same primacy of the artistic medium can be found in Blake's use of colour printing, alternately with watercolour, for the colouring of his illuminated books. The technique Blake used consisted in applying colours directly onto the printing plate, using

water-miscible paints mixed with glue (size) in order to prevent the colours from spreading and overlapping, and completing the ensuing unfinished areas with watercolours (Viscomi, 121). The physical presence of the artistic medium was undeniable in the resulting mottled texture (due mostly to the use of size and to the interaction of the colour with oil-based inks) and the contrasts of mat and shiny surfaces (due to the co-presence of colour printing and watercolour finishing). As with relief etching, immediacy of composition went together with the visibility of the artistic medium. The fact that Blake used the method not only in the production of illuminated books, which required rapidity of conception and execution, but also in the series of separate large colour prints composed from 1795 to probably at least 1804, suggests that he considered the unusual textural effects worthy of artistic consideration. In some cases, as in the famous *Newton* print, the mottled and reticulated effect is left to create meanings of its own, suggesting an underwater background aptly representing the ocean of materiality within which the scientist is immersed.

Such freedom left to colour and texture, together with the richness of effect, contradicting as it does Blake's statements against Venetian colouring and the "unorganized Blots & Blurs" of Rubens & Titian" (*PA*; E 576), also suggests that the resistance of the artistic medium is well accepted and integrated into his artistic project. The technical choices of relief etching and colour printing not only contributed to making invention and execution simultaneous, but they also enhanced the physicality of execution, the very process of etching or printing showing itself for what it was rather than making itself the invisible vehicle of an original design.

While such methods allowed Blake to compose directly on the printing plate, and therefore removed mediations between vision and representation, they also meant that vision could be altered by the independent play of the artistic medium. Blake's awareness of the artistic medium as an actor to contend with, actually physically to wrestle with, is perhaps best illustrated by the struggle between Los, the dominant figure of the artist in the late prophecies, and his Spectre. According to Essick, the latter can be interpreted as "the powers of execution," like etching skills, or "the materials (e.g., copperplates) and social relations (e.g. patronage) necessary for the embodiment of the imagination – but also the resistance of matter to mind and personal entanglements that thwart creative acts." (*"Jerusalem"* 259) Similarly, in *the Book of Urizen*, Urizen's book-making activities and submersion within materiality are an obvious mise en abyme of Blake's own on-going experiments with the recalcitrant colour printing medium, as the large

number of color-printed illustrations without text attest. Among those, plate 11, which shows Urizen floating, or rather drowning in watery matter, caught within the opacity of colour without referent, may be seen as an ironic projection of Blake's own struggle with colour printing and of his difficulty to extract himself from it and to return to the textual referent.

The dynamics of the sublime: Blake and Kant

The artist's engagement and struggle with his media makes the artistic process, even more than its product, central to the Blakean sublime. This concern with process is an essential feature of the Romantic sublime, whose dynamics can often be ascribed to the incommensurability of artistic conceptions and their realization, following a pattern outlined by Kant in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Kant described the sublime as derived from the inadequacy of the imagination to the ideas of reason (§ 26-27, 137-143), with the imagination, as a "sensible faculty" (141), being able to apprehend the absolutely great or the infinite progressively but not to comprehend it "in one whole of intuition" (139), whereas reason has the ability to do so. The result is a tension between the inadequacy and frustration of the imagination in its attempts to apprehend and present the "absolutely great" (131), and the pleasure derived from the resolution provided by reason: "The feeling of the sublime is thus a feeling of displeasure from the inadequacy of the imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude for the estimation by means of reason, and a pleasure that is thereby aroused at the same time from the correspondence of this very judgment of the inadequacy of the greatest sensible faculty in comparison with ideas of reason" (141). Imagination, which is the "faculty of presentation" (128), struggles to give a sensible presentation of magnitude, to give form to what it apprehends, but cannot, "for what is properly sublime cannot be contained in any sensible form, but concerns only ideas of reason" (129). It is the very possibility of representation which is questioned, and the very process of representation as a struggle to give form which emerges as the focus of artistic interest.

Blake's conflicting statements about the sublime may be seen to revolve around a comparable pattern of inadequacy and representational effort, a similarity of structure which Vincent de Luca has convincingly demonstrated, showing that although the roles of reason and imagination are reversed, "Blake's and Kant's defining conditions for the sublime have, *mutatis mutandis*, an identical structure. What is a barrier to the faculty allied with sense is an avenue to its more

privileged counterpart” (*Words of Eternity* 25). There are some strongly Kantian echoes in Blake’s statement that “Allegory addressed to the Intellectual powers while it is altogether hidden from the Corporeal understanding is My Definition of the Most Sublime Poetry” (E 730).

Blake’s dealings with “sensible form” as a visual artist and his belief in the visionary powers of the imagination, however, reinstate representation as central to the experience of the sublime, not as an impossible goal, but as a necessary process. The sense of incommensurability is still the driving dynamics of such sublimity, but it is intensified by the necessity to give forms, and by the actual engagement with the world of sense that necessarily occurs with artistic production. Whereas Kant asserted that “what is properly sublime cannot be contained in any sensible form” (129), Blake bestows on his representative Los the task to “fabricate forms sublime” (FZ 98: 22; E 370). The artist’s activity itself becomes the locus of the sublime disjunction that Kant saw as a conflict of faculties. The predicament now has to do with the representational activity. Blake’s *vision* requests *visualization*, yet cannot be satisfied by it. “Sensible forms,” as Kant puts it, cannot convey the sublime, yet sensible forms must be produced, and the Blakean sublime resides in the repeatedly frustrated striving to make those forms adequate to their visionary originals. Blake’s art would be a denial of vision, the production of the “mortal eye” addressed to the “mortal eye” (DC, E. 541-542), if one considered it merely as a finished product. If one sees it as a process, an endeavour to convey vision in sensible form, to match execution with invention, then it becomes clear that the sublime is not to be found in vision itself, but in the artist’s struggle to capture vision; not in a transcendental realm but in the reality of artistic production. This fits with a conception of art which emphasizes the artist’s hand and the intractability of the visual medium, because it is the energetic striving to produce forms, rather than the finished form, which reveals the imaginative power of the artist.

Medium reflexivity in the later prophecies: the “Sublime Labours” of form making.

This conception seems to motivate many uses of the term “sublime” in the later prophecies, where it is often linked to the never-ending process of form-making, the “eternal labours” of Los at his furnaces (J 53: 20, E. 203). The *mise en abyme* of Blake’s artistic labour is a prominent feature of the Albion cycle, where the plunge into formal reflexion is literally abysmal, with a succession of formal states each embedded in the other and reflecting on the other. Medium

reflexivity focuses on the endless production of visual forms at least as much as on the production of discourse – with both activities being eventually conflated at the end of *Jerusalem*, when Albion speaks “Words of Eternity in Human Form” (95: 9; E 255). Of particular interest is the fact that the making of the concrete physical forms of Generation is explicitly presented as a sublime activity. In *The Four Zoas*, for example, Enitharmon asks Los to “fabricate forms sublime/ Such as the piteous spectres may assimilate themselves into” (FZ 98 [90]: 22-23; E 370). Such an appeal establishes a clear link between the sublime and the central redemptive activity of the three poems, the purpose of Los and Enitharmon’s “terrible eternal labour” (J 12: 24; E 155), that is to say the production of generated bodies and of the city of Golgonooza. The sublime is immanent to the compelling process which requires Los’s unrelenting effort to extract form out of formlessness and to reclaim humanity from the world of shadows into which it has fallen with Albion.

At the other end of the cycle, form-making is also necessary to the perpetuation of imaginative activity. The dynamics of the Blakean sublime is indeed also the agonizing urgency to translate pure Vision, “Mental Forms,” into spatial terms, and therefore sensible representation. The central moment of the Eternal Man’s projection into an Emanation can be seen as Blake’s poetic transposition of this predicament:

Lo the Eternal Great Humanity

To whom be Glory & Dominion Evermore Amen
Walks among all his awful Family seen in every face
As the breath of the Almighty. such are the words of man to man
In the great Wars of Eternity, in fury of Poetic Inspiration,
To build the Universe stupendous : Mental forms Creating

But the Emanations trembled exceedingly, nor could they
Live, because the life of Man was too exceedingly unbounded
His joy became terrible to them they trembled & wept
Crying with one voice. Give us a habitation & a place
In which we may be hidden under the shadow of wings
For if we who are but for a time, & who pass away in winter

Behold these wonders of Eternity we shall consume
(*Milton* 30: 15-27, E. 129)

The “wonders of Eternity,” the “Mental Forms” of poetic inspiration, if they are not to burn and consume, require “a habitation & a place”. What is “too exceedingly unbounded” calls for boundaries. This picture of the necessary interaction of Eden and Beulah, which is so central to Blake’s conception of the imagination, could also be read as a powerful symbolic rendering of the sublime. It vividly dramatizes the incommensurability of Vision and sensible, bounded form, as well as the desperate longing for representation which this entails. It also stages the tormenting dilemma of representation, which is both a compelling necessity and a first step towards the realm of shadows: a contraction of vision and a division from pure mental life. The urgency and continued sense of inadequacy this entails are properly sublime.

Since the above narrative can also be read as Blake’s *mise en abyme* of the verbal/visual tensions he encountered in the production of his illuminated books (“Mental forms” being presented as verbal creations, of the “words of man to man”), one could see this sublime process immediately occurring in the visual projection of text in the prophecies. Blake’s ceaseless effort to prevent his designs from becoming a visual shrinking of the text could itself be said to be sublime. The visual forms we encounter through Blake’s illuminated world, in their diminutive format and thick lines, threaten to anchor the artist’s vision in the reduced material reality that he so much decries, yet Blake explores every possible way to prevent this rigidification. The renewal of the visual dimension with each new copy of an illuminated work is perhaps the most obvious aspect of the open-endedness of the designs: these well-known colour and graphic variations reflect the artist’s continuous involvement in the visual aspect of his work, while they question the stability of the text itself in their shifting interaction with it. Even within a single copy, the illuminations are not static translations of the poetry. W.J.T Mitchell has amply demonstrated how Blake dynamizes his designs by using them as polysemic independent actors, moving alongside the text as a “counterpoint” rather than as a literal transcription (*Composite Art* 9-12). In our current perspective, this use of design could be interpreted as a sublime struggle for the perpetuation of visual movement, against the threat of formal petrification.

In *Jerusalem* especially, the liberation of design from text contributes to a remarkable sense of creative energy. The semantic openness of illustrations placed at unexpected distances from their possible textual referents, is one aspect of this dynamism. Another one is the sheer variety of visual expressive means displayed in the prophecy. As Mitchell points out, Blake's style in *Jerusalem* ranges from his most sophisticated use of fine lines to the roughest sketches (*Composite Art* 194). The resulting visual exuberance is particularly enhanced by his outstanding use of margins, in a manner unprecedented since the *Songs*. These very ornamented and stylistically varied designs stage their own drama of flux and mutability, with hybrid vegetable, human and fiery forms, free from any textual referent, defying the very notion of formal boundaries. Some have thematic links to the text: the right margin designs in plate 34, which show human forms fusing into vegetal surroundings, or the ones in plate 42, an indistinct chain of humans pressing on one another, are powerful visualizations of man's fallen state. Others contradict the text, as with the open and leaping human figures of plate 36, which present a striking contrast with the description of Albion's sickness. Yet what most strongly emerges is a powerful visual expression of exuberance and motion, working against the graphic rigidity of the text, almost fighting for space against it in its profuseness. These designs could be said to present their own self-reflexive visualization of the endless process of form-making which the text so much revolves around. They also show that the artist's drawing of visual boundaries is not a shrinking of mental forms, but a process carried forward by its own dynamic need for novelty, and its excessiveness. Blake's illuminations thus bring together the urgent striving for novelty as well as the pleasure in excessiveness that recent definitions of the sublime have identified.

These sublime dynamics of form-making must have been strongly felt by Blake, as the echoing *mise en abyme* in the poem suggests. It is significant that the labours of Los are called "sublime" at the same time as they are presented as unceasing "contendings":

Yet ceas'd he not from labouring at the roaring of his Forge
With iron & brass Building Golgonooza in great contendings
Till his Sons & Daughters came forth from the Furnaces
At the sublime Labours for Los. Compelled the invisible Spectre
To labours mighty... (*J* 10: 62-65; *J* 11: 1; *E*. 154)

More generally, the unceasing energy and Titanic activity of Los's "sublime Labours" may be read as an original conception of the sublime as a mode of production, anchored in Blake's artistic practice, which went much beyond the thematic and stylistic interpretations of his time. Through his intense involvement in graphic and printing production, Blake was led to conceive an experience of sublimity which was not a transcendental elevation, away from the physical world, but which was an integral part of his own artistic activity. Daniel Schierenbeck has demonstrated the link of such a view to theories of political economy, seeing in Blake's conception of the sublime as labour an attempt to provide an imaginative alternative to the increasing division of labour in printing and engraving methods (21-42). While such an interpretation highlights the ideological implications of Blake's aesthetics, it also confirms the temporal and material anchoring of the visual sublime. The latter is endlessly driven forward by the provisional nature of artistic production, and by the necessity to resist formlessness, division or petrification for imaginative activity to continue. The sublimity of Los's "sublime Labours" resides precisely in this dynamic process, in the fact that his greatest creation, the city of Golgonooza, is "continually in the act of being formed" (Paley, *Continuing City* 136), and that in the midst of chaos "Is Built *eternally* the sublime Universe of Los & Enitharmon" (*J* 59: 21; E 209; my emphasis).

This conception of sublimity as sustained creative labour should account for what seems to isolate Blake's conception in the artistic context of his time. It shows in particular that his refutation of Burke's empirical approach was not meant to substitute a transcendental experience to one derived from the senses, but instead should be understood as an assertion of creative energy (intellectual *and* corporeal) against the passivity of affect. In this respect, it is important to note that in the later prophecies, Blake often uses the term "sublime" in relation to Los's most inspired, energetic and conquering labour. Thus, following Enitharmon's request to "fabricate forms sublime," "his hands divine inspired began/ To modulate his fires studious the loud roaring flames/ He vanquished with the strength of Art..." (*FZ* 98 [90]: 25-27; E 370). It is also quite significant that this unceasing labour itself becomes a cause of "delight" and intoxication, thus conferring on creative activity the sublime delight that Burke derived from terror and a sense

of helplessness. Blake possibly projected some of his own productive delight in this description of the Daughters of Los at work:

Endless their labour, with bitter food. void of sleep,
Tho hungry they labour: they rouse themselves anxious
Hour after hour labouring at the whirling Wheel
Many Wheels & as many lovely Daughters sit weeping

Yet the intoxicating delight that they take in their work
Obliterates every other evil; (E. 209 [*J* 59: 30-35])

The necessity to sustain creative work accounts for another major point of contention with Burke: indistinctness, “obscurity” as Burke and Blake call it, far from being a pre-requisite of sublimity, is only the manifestation of the mind’s inability to cope with the energetic workings of the imagination. Consequently, seeing the sublime as a process is what allows Blake to restore distinctness of form and to proclaim its sublimity, as he does in his annotations to Reynolds. In the later prophecies, the continuing process of form-making is primarily a protection against indistinctness, a means to rescue being from “Non Entity” or “the Indefinite.” For this reason, Burke’s bias against the visual arts (which he considered too explicit to convey the sublime)⁶ is irrelevant in Blake’s conception of the sublime, which is based on the necessity to give visible forms, and more particularly on the vital moment of the artist’s drawing of the ‘bounding line’ (*DC*, E 550) that will extract form from formlessness: “Leave out this line and you leave out life itself; all is chaos again...” (*DC*, E. 550)

Outlining, the sublime gesture.

Following Enitharmon’s request to “fabricate forms sublime,” Los first “drew a line upon the walls of shining heaven/ And Enitharmon tintured it with beams of blushing love” (*FZ*, 98 [90], 35-36, E 370). The graphic process of drawing and outlining is presented, in the prophecies as well as the theoretical writings, as the initial moment of form-making, that which retrieves form from nothingness. Its centrality in Blake’s conception of the sublime has to do with the fact that it articulates many of the tensions that contribute to the self-perpetuating dynamism of artistic production. Indeed, while the act of drawing gives life to shapes, at the same time it contains the

possibility of their closure and petrification, and the continuing labour of form-making can be seen as drawing that cannot cease, for fear of falling into either the world of shadows or that of selfhood.

Blake's original conception of line and drawing is articulated by a dialectic between the desire for finished forms and the necessity to keep visionary activity alive. As Eaves and Viscomi have argued, in his quest for immediate linear firmness as the expression of determined original thought, Blake sought to reconcile romantic spontaneity with neoclassical perfection of form (Eaves 11-15; Viscomi 39), which was a most challenging task, if not an impossible one: "Blake advocated the aesthetic of the sketch but not its form – which, of course, raises theoretical and technical problems for an artist committed to line, a stylistic feature associated with last thoughts and reasons" (Viscomi 39). One could add that the ultimate object of Blake's emphasis on line might not have been the reconciliation of spontaneity and reason (or formal perfection), but the very tension entailed by the conflation of such apparently contradictory aesthetics. The act of drawing or outlining may thus be seen as the visualization of Blake's dialectic thought, of his early conviction that "Without Contraries is no progression," (*MHH*; E. 34) and of his realisation that the excess, energy and delight of the imagination must be contained, and actually *need* the boundaries of reason: "Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy... Energy is Eternal Delight" (E 34). There is something of the Kantian sublime in the fascination for the inexhaustibility of spontaneous and energetic expression and in the idea that it can only be checked by the "circumference" provided by Reason: as with Kant, the very possibility of representation is questioned if the imagination (the faculty of representation according to Kant) can only provide an energetic surge and needs Reason to give it containment.

At the same time, the Blakean line should not be seen as simply the "circumference" or boundary drawn by reason, but as the *gesture* of tracing itself, as a marker of the artist's identity. Blake's emphasis on line as the dominant feature of his graphic style can indeed be understood as the expression, or rather projection, of the artist's imagination, where the expressive motion of outlining matters more than the finished form. In his recurrent statements about line, Blake is not advocating academic perfection, but the expression of the artist's identity and of his individual energy and desire. In his *Public Address* (a defense of his engraving style against the practice of

more conventional, and successful, contemporary engravers) he praises the originality of lines “Drawn with a firm and decided hand at once [with all its Spots & Blemishes which are beauties & not faults] (E 576; the second part of the sentence was deleted), while in *A Descriptive Catalogue* he asserts: “neither character nor expression can exist without firm and determinate outline” (E 549). Morris Eaves sees such statements as illustrations of the fact that for Blake “making a line expresses identity” (44) and drawing has to be seen primarily as an *act*, “the fundamental artistic act” (19), rather than the objectified result of such an act. The imperfections of line, contrary to what Blake calls the “Blots & Blurs” (E 576) of colourists, are “beauties” inasmuch as they make that act, and the decisive energy that drives it, visible. The beauty is that of the purposeful gesture which draws the line: “Every Line is the Line of Beauty it is only fumble & Bungle which cannot draw a Line this only is Ugliness [...] That is not a Line which Doubts & Hesitates in the Midst of its Course” (*PA*; E 575). With this conception of drawing as stemming directly from the artist’s mind, Blake’s art is an apt illustration of the romantic turn from mimesis to expression, which M.H Abrams describes as a shift from a conception of the artist as a receptor and recorder of the external world, to an emphasis on the process whereby he/ she projects, ex-presses his/ her own mental activity (21-24; 48).

The outline, therefore, is seen primarily as a gesture rather than a closure, which once again goes together with a conception of art as process: Blake’s “Bounding Line” may perhaps be best understood as an attempt to give form without actually binding, an expressive play rather than an authoritative delimitation, in which the dynamic and expressive gesture of the artist overrides the concern of adequacy between imagined form and represented outline. This conception of line is also properly sublime rather than beautiful, if one is to follow Jean-Luc Nancy’s distinction between the beautiful as formal adequacy and the sublime as properly *sublimitas* – literally below the limit – being the process of coming into touch with the absolute limit, which cannot be given formal representation and eventually defeats the imagination:

The beautiful is the figure that figures itself in accord with itself, the strict accord of its contour with its design.

Form or contour is limitation, which is the concern of the beautiful: the *unlimited*, to the contrary, is the concern of the sublime. (35)

The sublime, as Nancy shows, has less to do with any form or design than with the very gesture of tracing, which can only point to its own process:

One would have to say that the unlimited is not the *number* but the *gesture* of the infinite (*CJ*, § 27, 98; 98). That is, the gesture by which all (finite) form gets carried away into the absence of form. It is the gesture of formation, of figuration itself (of *Ein-bildung*), but only insofar as the formless itself stands out – without itself taking on any form – along the form that traces itself, and presents itself. (36)

For the thought of the sublime, the contour, the frame, and the trace point to nothing but themselves – and even that is saying too much: they do not point at all, but present (themselves), and their presentation presents its own interruption, the contour, frame, or trace. (42)

Nancy's emphasis on the *gesture* of delineation in the experience of the sublime gives a good idea of what is at stake in Blake's own adamant defense of line against the prevailing pictorial idiom of his own time: line, as it is being drawn, could be understood as the locus for the sublime conflation of the finite and the infinite, form and formlessness, sensible representation and what exceeds sensible representation. The process of drawing the line could be said to contain in itself the sense of incommensurability that is at the heart of the sublime, and as this sublime dynamics can only be sustained if the gesture of tracing itself continues, without ever reaching closure, Blake's own visual prolificacy finds its justification here. Form, with him, is "carried away" by its yearning for infinity, which requires both the perpetuation of outline, and its expansion:

. . . for every-thing in Eternity is translucent:

The Circumference is Within: Without, is formed the Selfish Center

And the Circumference still expands going forward to Eternity (*J* 71: 6-8; E 225)

The reversibility, translucence and continuing expansion of the circumference is Blake's image for form in Eternity. It is also an apt transcription of a sublimity which, as Nancy puts it, takes place at the edge of any limit, which strives for form and at the same time exceeds any limitation.

Blake's immersion in the realities of graphic and pictorial form-making, however, adds a more concrete meaning to the sublimity of delineation. While it actualizes the image of the gesture, it also shows how much such a gesture is anchored in materiality, being first and foremost the extraction of form from formlessness, and the assertion of the artist's imaginative energy in the process of transforming the plastic medium into meaningful form. The thick granulated lines of relief etching, with their earthy hues, in many of the illuminated books, are a constant reminder of the resistance of matter, and the unfinished quality of this linearism suggests that the struggle for the absolute takes place not in a metaphoric delineation that defies representation, but in the actual process of drawing or etching, in the encounter between the imagined form and the materials for its representation. The coarse russet outlines of *Jerusalem*, so barely distinguishable from the pervasive bodily fibers that illustrate the theme of corporeal unravelling and weaving, are a powerful expression of this sublime contention.

According to Derrida, "the ideal *topos* for the experience of the sublime, for the inadequation of presentation to the unrepresentable, will be a median place, an average place of the body which would provide an aesthetic maximum without losing itself in the mathematical infinite" (140-141). In Blake's production, as the small format of his illuminations and paintings attests, the median place, the "aesthetic maximum," has little to do with the colossal of which Derrida writes, but it is a sensible maximum nevertheless: it is the visible incarnation of the most intense imaginative activity. It is the artistic process made visible, as an energetic engagement with plastic media in general, and more specifically in the assertion of line. The Blakean visual sublime takes place in the artist's full involvement in the production processes, in the laborious extraction of form from formlessness, and in the emergence of line out of the recalcitrant engraving and printing medium. Blake's conviction that his linear style was sublime makes sense if one sees the *gesture* of drawing the line as the exemplary locus of this sublime in process. Drawing a line is being at the edge between representation and what exceeds representation, and therefore making visible a sense of incommensurability that is central to the sublime. It is also the adequate expression of a sublime that is immanent to the artistic activity itself: it is a line drawn from the struggle with the artistic medium, perpetuated by the drive for novelty and by the need

to inscribe imaginative activity against the resistance of matter, a gesture that must be endlessly continued for fear of closure. Blake's sublime "terror," if there is any, might very well reside in the threat of interrupted visual production – and consequently imaginative activity – which would happen with the discovery of closed and "perfect" outline.

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¹ The phrase is used in a letter to Thomas Butts, written on July 6, 1803, which suggests that the "Sublime Allegory" is the poem *Milton*. However, it can be inferred to apply equally to the other two major prophecies, *Jerusalem* and *The Four Zoas*, whose production overlapped with that of *Milton* and which share many thematic and "narrative" developments with it.

² All quotations of Blake's work come from David Erdman's *Complete Poetry and Prose*, hereafter indicated by "E".

³ I was pleased to discover, as I came across Vine's article shortly before completing my study, that we shared this essential assumption, although my slightly more "graphic" bias makes me come to different conclusions.

⁴ Mitchell's recognition of these features in *Milton* leads him to call it a "radical comedy," by which he means that the poem should be seen as "a kind of living theater, open-ended, inconclusive, and reaching out to involve its audience in the action." ("Blake's Radical Comedy" 282)

⁵ For a description of this method, see Viscomi 68-72.

⁴ Many examples of this classical hierarchy come to mind. The fourth discourse is Reynolds's most complete illustration of the idea that "[t]he value and rank of every art is in proportion to the mental labour employed in it, or the mental pleasure produced by it" (57).

⁶ On that point, see Part II, section IV, and most of Part V of the *Philosophical Enquiry*.