

Falling III: *The [First] Book of Urizen* and Romantic Medical Theory

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This essay comes out of a fourth-year seminar on the circulation of ideas between literature and medicine in the Romantic period. As Caira Clark shows in her essay, Blake (a visual artist trained in anatomy) draws on medical theories of the day as well as long-dominant Galenic medicine to pursue a complex examination of spiritual, political, and bodily health. The Book of Urizen is also the body of Urizen, and Urizen is also a mythical principle, as Blake links text, divinity, and corporeality to explore repression and oppression. In particular, Caira shows the importance of the Romantic-medical conviction that balance is critical to health, and Blake's interest in connecting that medical framework to Christian notions of embodiment as Fall.

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Fascination with bodies is not a recent phenomenon. Thomas Pfau describes a concern in the Romantic period with "the individual body's capacity to reproduce and undermine the nation's economic and cultural health" (631). Alan Richardson notes that Romantic writers, such as William Blake, had "exposure to contemporary medical science" that "had significant effects" upon them (5). Bearing in mind medicine's

influence, this paper will compare Blake's poem, *The [First] Book of Urizen*, with the medical theories of Galen, John

Brown, and Thomas Trotter, which connect balance and health. While there are commonalities between the poem and each theory, Blake follows Brown and Trotter most closely, for their theories support Blake's conceptualization of "the fallen form" (Mann 51). Blake aligns himself with his medical contemporaries and uses Brown and Trotter's theories to reinforce his creation narrative.

The first model with which to compare the poem is Galen's theory of "humours" (Jouanna 335). Galen suggested that "[g]ood health is defined as the balance and mixture of the humours, whilst their imbalance and separation is the cause of disease" (Jouanna 335). James Robert Allard notes that Galen's "impact on the history of medicine is immense" and that his ideas remained popular in the Romantic period (28); thus, they could have influenced Blake. Urizen's sons align with Galen's humours. Galen "creat[ed] a relationship between the elements (fire, air, water and earth) and the humours" (Jouanna 339); Urizen's sons represent the elements, so they are also associated with the humours: Thiriell is air, "from a cloud born" (Blake 8.3.6); "Utha/[f]rom the waters emerg[es]" (8.3.6–7); "Grodna rent[s] the deep earth" (8.3.8); and "Fuzon [f]lam[es] out" (8.3.10–11). Urizen separates "self from other, subject from object, mind from matter, and finite from infinite" (Johnson and Grant 113); however, like Galen, he eventually recognizes that humours

must “balance and mix[]” (Jouanna 335): “he curs’d/Both sons & daughters for he saw/That no flesh nor spirit could keep/His iron laws one moment” (Blake 8.4.2–5). Urizen’s children cannot function in isolation, just like his “iron laws” cannot irreversibly divide the universe (Blake 8.4.5). Urizen’s sons thus demonstrate Galen’s theory.

Another aspect of the poem that is comparable to Galenic medicine is its physical construction. Garry Leonard argues that Blake’s “images are inextricable from the text” and that “this strategy is comparable to the cinematic technique of montage because images in montage create... a third image” (919–920). John H. Jones argues that “[b]y piecing together the variations [in] Blake’s bookmaking practice... readers have the ability to create the story as they interpret it” (74). Neither critic applies medical theories, but their discussions are similar to Galenic medicine if one sees the text and images as “humours” that “balance and mix[]” (Jouanna 335). In Leonard’s argument, their “mixture” (Jouanna 335) is “a third image” (920), and in Jones’s view, it is the reader’s “interpret[ation]” (74). The poem’s physicality is therefore consistent with Galen.

Consistencies with Galen are minor in light of Paul Mann’s argument that Urizen and his book are “fallen form[s]” (51). Critics align the book and the body: Erin Goss argues, “the nominally corporeal and the ontologically corporeal are indistinguishable” (413), while Mann allies the body, the book, and the Bible in “biobibliography” (50). He argues, “[a]s Urizen falls outside Eternity – indeed, causes ‘outside’ by enclosing and creating his interior space

- so Eternity is excluded, thrown outside the horizon of the book" (Mann 52). As a result, Urizen "comes into focus as a fallen form" and is "increasingly clear to the reader, who is thereby also defined as fallen" (Mann 51). Tristanne Connolly argues similarly that this "obscuring of the eternal body... reflect[s]... the experience of embodiment" (78). Connections between the poem and Galen contribute sparingly to "the fallen form" (Mann 51). Perhaps the "third image" (Leonard 920) and reader's "interpret[ation]" (Jones 74) obscure the original text and images, just as Urizen "obscur[es] the eternal body" (Connolly 78), but this comparison is not concrete. Blake alludes to Galen, and so does not reject him, but Galenic medicine does not reinforce absolutely the idea of "the fallen form" (Mann 51).

Contrary to Blake's scarce references to Galen, Brunonian medicine is referenced throughout the poem. Brown's theory centres on the ideas of "excitement" (5) and "debility" (23); Blake uses the rhetorical figure *energia* - "the 'energy' or vigor of an expression" ("*Energia*") - to communicate Brunonian ideas. According to Brown, "excitability" that is "either excessive... or deficient... produces [] diseases" (Brown 9). Corrections that balance one's "excitement" (Brown 5) can remedy an excess or absence:

the nature of [a] loss of excitement [is] that it rushes to instant death, unless proper measures be taken to preserve life by a great stimulus, but less than that which occasioned it, and then by still less, till by means of the moderate stimulus,

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that is suitable to nature, or a somewhat greater,
life may at last be preserved. (Brown 22)

To correct his “debility,” Urizen experiences progressively smaller variations in “stimulus” (Brown 23). First, he is faced with “Eternal fury” (Blake 3.5.2):

He dug mountains & hills in vast strength
He piled them in incessant labour,
In howlings & pangs & fierce madness
Long periods in burning fires labouring
Till hoary, and age – broke, and aged
In despair and the shadows of death. (Blake
3.6.4 – 9).

Blake’s vocabulary shows that Urizen’s actions require energy: “vast strength,” “incessant labour,” and “fierce madness” exhibit *energia* (3.6.4 – 9). When Urizen recovers from his “stony sleep” (Blake 3.10.1) he re – exerts himself:

Enraged & stifled with torment
He threw his right Arm to the north
His left Arm to the south
Shooting out in anguish deep
And his Feet stamped the nether Abyss
In trembling & howling & dismay. (Blake
4b.12.1 – 6)

In this stanza, *energia* is less pronounced. Urizen is “[e]nraged” but his actions are “stifled” (Blake 4b.12.1). “Anguish” and “dismay” (Blake 4b.12.4 – 6) are less severe than “the shadow of death” (3.6.9). Urizen’s later exertion is still meeker:

Urizen explor'd his dens
 Mountain, moor, & wilderness,
 With a globe of fire, lighting his journey
 A fearful journey, annoy'd
 By cruel enormities; forms
 Of life on his forsaken mountains. (Blake 8.1)

This stanza exhibits even less *energia* than the previous ones. Urizen “explor[es]” (Blake 8.1.1) but is nowhere near his “incessant labour” (3.6.5). Thus, as the poem progresses, *energia* decreases according to Brown’s medical theory.

The poem’s decreasing *energia* reinforces Blake’s depiction of the “fallen form” (Mann 51) because Urizen retreats from the Eternals’ energetic stance. Eternity is a site of Brunonian “excitement” (Brown 5): when Urizen creates “[t]he Book of brass” (Blake 3.44), the Eternals experience “[r]age, fury, intense indignation,” “whirlwinds of sulphurous smoke” and “enormous forms of energy” (3.2.1–4). Urizen’s original state is similar to that of the Eternals, but his energy diminishes over the course of the poem as he distances himself from Eternity and suppresses the Eternals’ energetic influence. Fire also reinforces the “obscuring of the eternal body” (Connolly 78), particularly when it is seen as thermal energy that is similar to “excitement” (Brown 5): originally, Urizen works “long periods in burning fires” (Blake 3.6.7), but when he experiences lower levels of “excitement” (Brown 5), he controls fire and use it to “light[] his journey” (Blake 8.1.3). Urizen’s falling “excitement” (Brown 5) and his control over

fire emphasize his separation from Eternity and reinforce Mann's idea of Urizen as a "fallen form" (51).

Blake uses two further medical concepts: Brown's "debility" (23) and Trotter's "predisposition" of "literary men" (34–37). According to Brown, there are two states of illness: "excitability... exhausted by stimulus is debility" that is "denominated indirect" (23) and "[t]he effect of withdrawing any stimulus is... direct debility" (28). In addition, Brown defines "[p]redisposition" as "that state of the body, that recedes from health, and approaches to disease" (2). Trotter takes up Brown's "debility" (23) and "[p]redisposition" (2); he says that "literary men" (Trotter 34) are "predispose[ed] [to] disease" (37) because "they "think[] and reflect[] much [and] must retire... To be shut up in a close room, little exposed to a free and pure air out of doors, soon induces... general debility" (35). Urizen is a "literary m[a]n" (Trotter 34) who closes himself in "a roof vast petrific" (Blake 3.5.28) so experiences imbalanced cycles of "indirect" and "direct debility" (Brown 23–28). When Urizen is finished writing, he declares his accomplishment and then

[t]he voice ended, the[] [Eternals] saw his pale
visage
Emerge from the darkness; his hand
On the rock of eternity unclasping
The Book of brass. (Blake 3.1.1–4)

Urizen's "pale visage" (Blake 3.1.1) signals that he is ill. The stanza's vocabulary, devoid of energia, reinforces his

“debility” (Brown 23): sound energy is absent in the phrase “[t]he voice ended” (Blake 3.1.1) while light energy is absent in “the darkness” (3.1.2). Later, when he is faced with “Eternal fury” (Blake 3.5.2) and “d[i]g[s] mountains & hills in vast strength” (3.6.4), the language changes due to his “excitement” (Brown 5). The vocabulary exhibits *energia*: Urizen’s actions require kinetic energy while “burning fires” (Blake 3.25) require thermal energy. Furthermore, Urizen’s “debility” (Brown 23) is consistent with the symptoms Brown lists: he is likely “sweat[y]” and “h[o]t” (Brown 19) from working “long periods in burning fires” (Blake 3.6.7) and later he experiences “stony sleep” (Blake 3.10.1). Blake thus uses Brown and Trotter’s ideas in his poem.

Urizen’s experience with “debility” (Brown 23) is a medical explanation for his illness at the end of the poem. Blake’s use of “excitement” (Brown 5) reinforces “the obscuring of the eternal body” (Connolly 78), but Urizen’s declining levels of “excitement” (Brown 5) do not result in balance. Perhaps Urizen’s illness is Brunonian, for as the poem progresses, he experiences less and less “excitement” (Brown 5) and thus ongoing “direct debility” (Brown 28). However, Urizen does not die even though “the nature of [a] loss of excitement [is] that it rushes to instant death” (Brown 22). Instead, his illness and its spread to humans as “the dark net infection” (Blake 9.1.8) is consistent with Trotter: Urizen becomes ill because he is a “literary m[a]n” (34) and is “little exposed to a free and pure air out of doors” (34). As Urizen creates his book and his world, he comes

“predispose[ed] to disease” (Trotter 37). His “debility” (Brown 23) and “predisposition” (Brown 2; Trotter 37) explain his illness.

“Debility” (Brown 23) and “predisposition” (Brown 2; Trotter 37) also reinforce Mann’s idea of “the fallen form” (51). Mann asserts, “the genesis of books [is] an investigation of origin itself as a ground of loss” (50). Urizen loses “excitement” (Brown 5) and creates “debility” (Brown 5; 23) in an attempt to “obscur[e] the eternal body” (Connolly 78). Consequently, Urizen loses his health when he creates “The Net of Religion” (Blake 8.9.1), and humans lose theirs to “The Net of Urizen” (9.7.3). The conditions that Urizen creates promote disease and remove the possibility of balanced “excitement” (Brown 5). He solidifies the creation of books and of bodies “as a ground of loss” (Mann 50) in Brown and Trotter’s medical terms.

In conclusion, *The [First] Book of Urizen* is a complex poem that integrates multiple medical theories that were popular during the Romantic period. Blake draws most closely on Brown’s “excitability” (Brown 9) and “debility” (Brown 23), and Trotter’s “predisposition” of “literary men” (Trotter 34–37), though he also incorporates elements of Galen’s “humours” (Jouanna 335). His use of these theories, each predicated on the connection between balance and health, confirms their influence on his literary works and strengthens the creation story at the centre of his “biobibliography” (Mann 50) because they reinforce Mann’s idea of “the fallen form” (51). Blake’s integration of medical theories illustrates the devastating spiritual and

intellectual effects of imbalance and disease. Ultimately, he shows that health is a multidisciplinary concept that is not only important for our functionality but that also contributes to literature and our understanding of creation.

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