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How does Blake's use of space affect self-annihilation in *'Milton'*?

Sangeeta Jheinga

The concept of space has been long associated with William Blake's prophetic epic *Milton*, and it manifests in a number of ways: the realms of Blake's universe, the conceptual space of Jerusalem, and the spaces which Blake's figures can physically occupy. But one can look more directly at how space is used to bring about the ultimate goal of self-annihilation in the text. After close analysis of Jerusalem as a space, and analysing Milton's movement between spatial layers in order to reach enlightenment, questions such as 'what is the relevance of 'Jerusalem' as a space?' and 'why must Milton leave Eternity in order to achieve self-annihilation?' arise. I will discuss how Christ is the ultimate self-sacrificial example whom readers ought to follow, and suggest that space always dictates how self-sacrifice may occur, through the connection of spaces and ideas.

Before addressing the relationship between space and self-annihilation, it is best to begin with a definition of self-annihilation. In the simplest sense, it is an attempt to improve the individual through the mind, a shedding of the self-righteous aspect of the self, which is why Blake advocates 'Mental' war rather than 'Corporeal War'.[1] The daughters of Beulah sing 'The Memory is a State always, & the Reason is a State / Created to be Annihilated & a new Ratio Created' (ll.34-5, *Plate*35, *Milton*, Copy D), illustrating that reason and memory, or history, should be cast off in order to create something new. Just before Milton begins his journey, he complains that 'The nations still / Follow after the detestable Gods of Priam; in pomp / Of warlike selfhood, contradicting and blaspheming' (*Milton*, ll.14-16, *E*12). Milton's issue here is that men still believe in Greek notions of heroism: that physical combat is the only way to solve problems and to show your strength of character. This ideal is actively dismissed by promoting *mental* war. As Mary Lynn Johnson notes, Blake is looking for a 'remedy for humankind's separation from "Eternal Great Humanity Divine,"' and that, 'In Milton, atonement occurs through Christlike self-giving to others'. This demonstrates a desire for every being to live on a higher level, the divine humanity, and a forgiveness which, is achievable through self-annihilation.[2]

Jerusalem as a space is entwined with the achievement of self-annihilation in *Milton* since it exists as a conceptual space of harmony which one ought to strive for. It represents what Blake phrases as the 'Daughters of Inspiration' (*Milton*, l.8, *E*2) which advocates a constant rebuilding, a change from the past, in that, rather than simply redoing what has already been done, one ought to be inventive and new. Wittreich notes that Blake admired writers such as Milton and Spencer because they followed a similar doctrine: they used historical writers 'imaginatively, not imitatively' to create new styles such as the prophetic

[1] William Blake, *Milton: A Poem, Copy B, Electronic Edition,* on *The Blake Archive*, eds. Morris Eaves, Robert Essick, and Joseph Viscomi (Chapel Hill: Carolina Digital Library and Archives, 2005), pl. 2 (p. 34). http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/copy.xq?copyid=milton.b&java=no [Future references will be in parentheses. *Unless stated otherwise, all quotations will be from the B-text*.]

[2] Mary Lynn Johnson, 'Milton and its contexts', in *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake,* 1st edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 233.

epic.[3] In another respect, 'I will not cease from Mental Fight […] Till we have buildt Jerusalem' (*Milton,* l.37, *E*2) highlights the need for an on-going struggle to reach this divine, harmonious space, and Jerome McGann offers a translation: '"I" (Blake) struggle that "we" (Man) may together, in vision, recover our emanation Jerusalem, who is the image of every man's infinite desire'. This demonstrates how Blake wanted to 'recover the Divine Vision for, in, and through the world', advocating a collective effort to build a harmonious place such as Jerusalem.[4] It also highlights both how self-annihilation is a personal transformation, but that it benefits the whole of mankind. McGann qualifies this by saying 'the original state of blessedness is recovered only when every man lives in vision, that is, when every man beholds the universe in his own active imagination,' which recognises the plurality and singularity of humankind since all individually must be 'blessed' in order to become a single unit of blessedness.[5]

Beyond the spiritual connotations of what the achievement of Jerusalem represents, the location's associations with Christ and self-sacrifice are paramount to the text. *Milton* is book-ended by images of Christ in his self-sacrifice, signifying that Blake has paralleled the plot of Milton with Christ's journey to self-annihilation.

> …even till Jesus, the image of the Invisible God
> Became its prey; a curse, an offering, and an atonement,
> For Death Eternal in the heavens of Albion, & before the Gates
> Of Jerusalem his Emanation, in the heavens beneath Beulah.
> *Milton,* ll.12-15, *E*3.

In this early passage of the poem, the main speaker — the 1st person Blake character — is invoking the Muses and Daughters of Beulah to tell the story of Jesus' self-sacrifice in Jerusalem. The 'False Tongue' previously mentioned is associated with Satan and his sinful words, and it appears that the narrator Blake is accusing Satan of making Christ his 'prey'. Christ is seen very much as a martyr here: the physical 'image' of God who comes down to earth and is humankind's 'atonement' for sin. It becomes evident that Jesus is invoked as a figure of renown and honour, a figure to admire and *follow*, and Jerusalem is a symbol of Christ's ultimate self-sacrifice into 'Death Eternal' on behalf of mankind. By calling his readers to arms in the Preface, Blake is rousing them up to fight for another, to forgive, just as Jesus did, rather than allowing Christ to be humankind's 'atonement' for sins that he did not even commit. Blake even goes as far as to locate Calvary in London, bringing this religious space into the immediate world — 'Between South Molton Street & Stratford Place: Calvarys foot' (*Milton* Copy C, l.21, plate 3). South Molton Street is where Blake himself lived after 1803, and Stratford Place denotes where the Tyburn gallows are situated in London. Aligning a place of such historic religious significance with streets in London does not diminish Calvary's power; instead, it is Blake's attempt to humanise somewhere of religious significance. Whilst one thinks of their god as outside the self, one can fear it and the spectre feeds on that fear; but Blake in fact 'believed that God was a man, incarnated in Jesus but imprisoned as well in every individual psyche,' which truly personalises God, and Blake works to eradicate fear of and distinction from God.[6] Furthermore, the fact that Calvary is situated at the Tyburn Gallows in London again attaches a sense of sacrifice and a foreshadowing towards death. And so, aligning Calvary with earthly locations makes

[3] Joseph Wittreich, 'Opening the Seals', in *Blake's Sublime Allegory,* eds. Curran, S. and Wittreich, J. (Wisconsin: Wisconsin University Press, 1973), p. 26.
[4] Jerome J. McGann, 'The Aim of Blake's Prophecies', in *Blake's Sublime Allegory* (Wisconsin: Wisconsin University Press, 1973), p. 6.
[5] McGann, p. 6.
[6] Ibid., p. 4.

Calvary, and by extension Jerusalem, into a concrete space for humankind, ultimately showing how self-sacrifice can happen for humans as much as for divine figures such as Christ. In this way, space is carefully used to prophetically give readers the support to gain self-annihilation.

Space also dictates the way in which self-annihilation can be achieved, through the three realms of Eternity, Beulah and Ulro. Eternity is obviously the picturesque ideal space, and Beulah is depicted as a place of beauty: a place where 'where no dispute can come' (*Milton,* l.3, *E*30), 'Beulah is evermore Created around Eternity' (*Milton,* l.8, *E*30). Connolly notes that 'Beulah is contiguous with Eternity and its very form reveals its status as offspring,' since it is described as 'the beloved infant' of Eden.[7] Ulro, by contrast, is this rather more hellish realm associated with the 'Hells' and 'Furnaces' of Satan (l.32, *E*12). The characters' fluid movement between these three spaces during the poem illustrates the vivid way in which Blake created this universe, and also how the three layers are interconnected. It seems that, due to this fluid motion of possible movement between the realms, Milton can go on his journey to annihilating his self-righteousness in the first place, although that is not without injury. It physically pains him to descend into his hermaphroditic shadow's form: 'he enterd into it / In direful pain for the dread shadow, twenty-seven-fold / Reachd to the depths of direst Hell…' (*Milton,* ll.38-40, *E*12). This is curiously balanced by the full-page illumination of Plate 15 since Milton looks upwards to an Urizenic figure of submission, ascending up towards the hilltop with a divine halo and what are presumably angels at the top of the hill. Whilst Milton descends to Ulro, he seems to metaphorically be ascending, perhaps in a more spiritual sense since his descent will bring him enlightenment. And yet, the fact that the halo already exists around Milton indicates that he has already gained this spiritual ascendency. Thus, if Milton already has spiritual hierarchy, and if he already knows what he will gain from his journey, then the descent to Ulro seems somewhat redundant. If Eternity — or Beulah, for that matter — is as picturesque as it seems, it is unclear why must Milton leave Eternity in order to sacrifice himself in Mental War.

Perhaps *Milton* adheres to a more classical ideal that heroes must undergo some journey or task of strength in order for an epic poem to have that resonance, much like Odysseus and Aeneas. Perhaps it's because Ulro is associated with being Satan's space, and so, Milton must descend to Ulro to face Satan, to deal with his demon. The terms Satan and spectre become somewhat interchangeable in Milton's speeches, evidenced by Milton exclaiming 'Satan! my Spectre!' (*Milton,* l.29, *E*43) in adjacent addresses and Milton says '[Satan] is my Spectre!' (l.31, *E*12). By extension it is conclusive that descending to Ulro is the only way to eradicate Milton's spectre from the self.

On the other hand, perhaps Eternity as a space is perhaps not as perfect as one might assume, if Milton cannot undergo a spiritual awakening from within its realm. Perhaps this is associated with ideas that the pre-Fall Eden no longer exists, and thus the post-Fall Eden leads to Milton being as 'unhappy tho in heav'n' (*Milton,* l.18, *E*3). McGann's work here can help to decipher this — for Blake, 'Creation is generative and changing, whereas eternity is permanent and infinite,' indicating that eternity, as an infinite space, cannot allow for such changes as inherent personal enlightenment.[8] It appears that Blake sees self-annihilation as a fundamentally human trait; the ability to change and create oneself differently can only be done in the human realm. This links back with Christ's self-sacrifice: Christ also had to descend to earth before he could undertake the burden of human sin, and his crucifixion became a symbol of his self-sacrifice for the human race, and perhaps what is being demonstrated here is that self-annihilation can only be achieved on earth. Again, this also supports the earlier claim that all mankind can self-annihilate, thus Blake brings the action of

[7] Tristanne Connolly, *William Blake and the Body* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 157.
[8] McGann, p. 9.

the poem to the realm closest to earth. Thus the movement between spaces in *Milton* becomes essential for the capability for self-annihilation.

To complicate matters further, Milton's body never actually leaves Eternity: his body remains guarded by the Seven Angels of the Presence, who 'wept over Miltons Shadow!' (*Milton,* l.42, *E*12), whilst only the shadow of Milton descends to Ulro, making him a curious cross between spirit and human. What occurs is a peculiar temporary splitting of the soul from the body. Connolly explains that 'Blake apparently considers the soul itself to be either divisible or multiple,' which illustrates Blake's belief in the self as fluid and changeable, with regards to shape and form.[9] Blake's ideas of the self and its transformative abilities have an effect on the space of the text: Milton occupies two spaces at once, in which parallel narratives occur. This idea is also seen in the modern popular film, *Inception* (2010), with regards to parallel narratives across layers of dreams, instead of realms. In turn, this double use of space illustrates how self-annihilation does not require the physical body. Instead, it is a purely mental and spiritual battle, which is, as we've already seen in the preface and 'I will not cease from Mental Fight', this is exactly what Blake advocates throughout this epic poem.

In a different line of thought, the necessity to journey to Ulro is associated with the map of Plate 36, complete with compass points, which depicts Milton's journey to self-annihilation since Blake portrays his characters as spaces through which Milton can pass and have interactions with. The use of circles for each space shows how each figure occupies their own realm, but the fact that they overlap illustrates the intermingling aspect of these figures and their roles. As Thomas Dilworth discusses, the diagram also denotes 'narrative action, […] that of self-annihilation and artistic creation — which, conceptually at least, involve all the poem's artist-figures acting in unison'.[10] Arising here is the issue of connection: all of these figures, whilst being independent of one another, are all fundamentally linked and coexist simultaneously in one dynamic, multiple universe. Spaces are all interconnected in Blake's myth; they can coexist, and characters can transcend between realms and character worlds. Thus, to truly understand the coexistence of spaces, we must do as Blake wishes and see multiple things with the senses and connect. This, I believe, is what Blake means in the epigram of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, 'The eye sees more than the heart knows,' the idea being that the senses are alert to more than we can perhaps rationally interpret, but ultimately, multiple ideas and interpretations can always exist.[11] This is what self-annihilation advocates: to escape from the unitary, limited way of looking at things which Urizen represents, and to escape from narrow-minded dictatorship ideals like Satan when he demands that Milton 'Fall therefore down & worship [him]' (*Milton,* l.52, *E*39).

In this way, the Christ-like self-annihilation of Jerusalem is achieved, marked by Ololon's flight into the 'depths / Of Miltons shadow' (ll.5-6, *E*44), and *Milton* ends with another image of Christ's self-annihilation. Milton's 'false Body' or 'Incrustation' (l.35, *E*42), which inhibited Milton previously from fulfilling his full talents, are finally shed and Milton can become the 'Inspired Man' (l.29, *E*42) who has 'cast off Rational Demonstration' (l.3, *E*43). This means that Milton has shed the Urizenic, limiting and rational aspect of himself and can finally be a 'Daughter of Inspiration'. However, the key ideal to uphold is that one can never dispense of reason for long — it is inherent in us all — thus, Milton says the Spectre is 'a selfhood, which must be put off & annihilated *alway*' (l.36, *E*42). This act of self-sacrificing must happen continually because enlightenment is not a singular experience,

[9] Connolly, *Blake and the Body,* p.159
[10] Thomas Dilworth, 'The Hands of "Milton": Blake's Multistable Image of Self-Annihilation', *Mosaic*, 16:3 (1983), p. 12 [Accessed 6/11/13] http://search.proquest.com/docview/1300041952/fulltextPDF/141AD02BD3B3238714E/2?accountid=8018
[11] Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion,* Plate 1 http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=vda.a.illbk.01&java=no

for Blake. Whether Milton must continually self-sacrifice is not answered, but his words at this point seem more prophetic to the reader than himself: those who are living now on the earth must follow his footsteps, and then 'alway' annihilate the self-righteous self.

Thus, Blake's use of space very much dictates how and where self-annihilation can occur for Milton in the text; Milton's descent into earthly realms in Blake's imagined universe is mirrored with the physical earthly space of Jerusalem. It is only in certain spaces — Ulro — that Milton is capable of self-annihilation, thus connection between spaces is fundamental for it to occur; and self-annihilation must occur for Blake so that people can cast off their negative, reasoning shadows in order to ultimately find Truth.

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