

Nighttime and Speculative Realism in William Blake's *Milton*

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Abstract

William Blake's *Milton*, written between 1804 and 1811, has always been considered a challenging work. This research article provides two possible interpretations of the epic. First, it argues for a reading of Blake within the Enlightenment movement, which sheds new light on both the poet and the era. Second, the study suggests that Blake's cosmos in the poem bears a resemblance to Quentin Meillassoux' notion of hyper-chaos. This concept has its root in the field of speculative realism, a branch of philosophy that defends the autonomy of the world from human access with imaginative boldness. Focusing on nighttime as a potent object in the Blakean cosmos, the article ends with an analysis of how Blake constructs nighttime in *Milton* as a hyper-chaotic space filled with infinite potentiality and contingency.

Keywords: speculative realism, William Blake, *Milton*, the infinite, hyper-chaos

Introduction: Blake in the Enlightenment

When it comes to discussions of the Enlightenment, William Blake (1757-1827) and nighttime share one important quality: both are traditionally viewed as peculiar and antagonistic to the "light" belonging to the Age of Reason. This is not surprising, for the very name of the Enlightenment typifies a period when light triumphs over darkness, and nighttime's most distinctive property is darkness owing to an absence of sunlight. Likewise, since the nineteenth century, William Blake has been conceptualized as a prominent figure for our understanding of the Romantic reaction to the Enlightenment. Again, this is quite evident, as Blake never hesitated to express his animosity towards Enlightenment rationalism and atheism. His antipathy was so explicit that Northrop Frye (1947) stated in the 1940s that Blake "hated [the Age of Reason's] enlightened philosophers Locke and Voltaire" as well as its "elegantly skeptical historians Hume and Gibbon" (p. 161). Frye explained that Blake's strong reaction against Enlightenment philosophy relied heavily on his belief in

the “archetypal myth; that is, with the man in the religious perspective, surrounded by the huge conception of fall, redemption, judgment, and immortality” (Frye, 1947, pp. 161-162). This explanation is a valid one, as Blake commented in his annotations to Joshua Reynolds’s *Discourses* and elsewhere that the Enlightenment philosophers “mock inspiration & Vision,” both of which he regarded as “my Element my Eternal Dwelling place. How can I then hear it Contemnd without returning Scorn for Scorn.” (Blake as cited in Tsai, 2018, p. 161) In the Preface to his epic poem *Milton*, Blake also vehemently chastised “The Stolen and Perverted Writings” of classical authors such as Homer and Ovid who had been highly regarded since the Renaissance until Blake’s day and beyond.¹ It seems he was so committed to the principles of imagination, magic and mysticism cherished in the Romantic movement that to discuss him in the context of the Enlightenment would be preposterous.

Yet the Enlightenment had many faces and variations. Dorinda Outram (1995) characterizes this period, using an example from the writings of Immanuel Kant, another ambiguous figure in the liminal space between the Enlightenment and Romanticism, as “a series of interlocking, and sometimes warring problems and debates” (p. 3). The Enlightenment took *many* forms instead of the received view of it told in a linear and simple narrative about how the struggle for rationalism and freedom overcame religiosity and oppression, culminating in such iconoclastic events as the American Revolution (1765-1783) and the French Revolution (1789-1799). Accordingly, rationalism in the eighteenth century was manifested in various forms and there were also multiple ways of struggling against the oppression of the Old Regime. Blake might not be acknowledged as a bringer of light to the benighted populace in the same way that Thomas Paine, Voltaire, John Locke or Isaac Newton have been perceived. Neither did he dwell in a philosophical hinterland, nor was he completely against the movement. David Fallon (2017) asserts that Blake was, in fact, “sympathetically engaged with Enlightenment thought” (p. 7). Even though he might not have agreed with certain strains of opinion, such as the Newtonian view of the mechanical universe and the *philosophes*’ intolerance of mythology, Blake perceived himself as a prophetic poet who was committed to liberating humans from the restrictive laws of oppressive monarchy and religion. He was also an ardent supporter of the French Revolution and might have been involved in helping Thomas Paine’s escape from prosecution for treason (Mee, 1992, p. 1)

¹Unless otherwise noted, references to Blake’s text are from David Erdman’s edition of *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (Blake, 1982). I use the conventional abbreviation of “E” followed by the page number. In this case E, p. 95. In case of the poem *Milton*, I use the plate number indicated in Erdman’s version, followed by line number.

He aligned himself closely with the Swiss poet and physiognomist Johann Caspar Lavater's hope to create "a universal study of human nature that could become a science" (Fallon, 2017, p. 7)

What is the purpose, if at all, in trying to take William Blake away from the usual "Romantic circle" and place him amongst the authors of the Enlightenment? Most importantly, doing so is imperative to building an understanding of the Enlightenment as a diverse and more convoluted *process* than the simplified version found in popular narratives. It was more of a *process* than a unitary movement, as it involved a richness of interactions among various regions of ideas that constantly engaged and played off against one another. J. G. A. Pocock (2004) even proposes that there were "a number of 'Enlightenments'" instead of *the* [emphasis added] single Enlightenment (p. 105). Even though Blake's prophetic poetry sounds stylistically and conceptually different from the philosophes' tracts, his works shared with them an aspiration to liberate humankind from the bondage of the ancient establishments. Placing him amongst the Enlightenment authors also illuminates many aspects in Blake's poetry that have otherwise been difficult to interpret. This includes his fervent participation throughout his life in the process of criticizing and dismantling the domination of states and religion in pursuit of collective freedom. He also shared with many intellectuals their enthusiasm for the "brilliant 'new sciences' of astronomy, cosmology and physics, pioneered by Kepler, Galileo, Descartes and their successors" (Porter, 2001, p. 13). Michael Ferber (as cited in Fallon, 2017) notes that Blake expressed several of his main themes "in terms of stars, moons, meteors, clouds, and nearly everything else that inhabits the sky 'above' us." (p. 3). Indeed, this interest could be read as a display of his animosity towards the Newtonian mechanical universe. Yet Fallon (2017) suggests, following critics such as Worrall, Miner and Squibbs, that Blake paid careful attention to astronomical details, which he used to criticize contemporary politics and religion. Blake employed celestial features to show the diminishing power of "the elevated authority of kings, aristocrats, and state priests by revolutionary forces" (Fallon, 2017, p. 3).

In addition to astronomy, Blake shared with his enlightened contemporaries an admiration for light. Jeremy Tambling (2005) notes that Blake's illuminations tend to commemorate "dawn," as evident in "the theme of the picture 'Albion Rose or 'Glad Day'" (p. 5). Throughout the entire corpus of his poetry, many instances glorify light and morning. Both are inescapable metaphors, saturating his poetic expressions, symbolizing beauty, hope and freedom. In *Songs of Experience*, the narrator of "The School Boy" states as early as the first line that "I love to rise in a summer morn, / When the birds sing on every tree." (E, p. 31) In a more vivid fashion, after the series of apocalyptic events that conclude *The Four Zoas*, the "Sun" finally "arises from his dewy bed," heralding the "fresher morning" in a revived world where the "intellectual

War The War of swords departed now / The dark Religions are departed & sweet Science reigns.” (E, p. IX 647-655, p. 407) This postapocalyptic vision of the renewed and ideal world reveals that morning light eventually triumphs over darkness, and “sweet Science” comes to reign in place of “dark Religion.” As stated above, Blake’s metaphorical use of the readily available notion of nocturnal darkness defeated by morning light bears a striking resemblance to the works of other Enlightenment thinkers. One of the most iconic is W.A. Mozart’s 1791 opera *The Magic Flute* (German: *Die Zauberflöte*), which features a sequence of variations on the victory of “pagan” priests and laymen over the Queen of the Night, the triumphs of light over darkness.

Despite the thematic similarity between the two texts, with the power of morning light over nocturnal darkness, the Blakean cosmos is more ambiguous and less dichotomous than *The Magic Flute*. In the latter, the Queen of the Night (“Königin der Nacht”) embodies the night. She first appears among the stars in the sky, accompanied by loud claps of thunder, to lament to the male protagonist Tamino about how her daughter has been kidnapped by a figure that one of her ladies describes as “a strong and angry demon” (Mozart, 2001, p. 51). This “demon” is the Egyptian priest Sarastro, whose aspiration to save humankind from the Queen’s “delusion and superstition” motivates him to kidnap her daughter Pamina to raise her as his daughter and marry her off to Tamino, her designated soulmate. (Mozart, 2001, p. 74) As the physical embodiment of night, the Queen possesses a powerful female body. She exerts control over other human beings through artful manipulations, such as spreading the news that Sarastro is an evil demon and threatening to disown Pamina for refusing to kill Sarastro, as well as inflicting cruel punishments on her daughter and others. Sarastro describes her as a “haughty” woman who “considers herself great and hopes to beguile the populace through delusion and superstition.” (Mozart, 2001, p. 74) Her heart harbors “Hell’s revenge” as she is “roaming between the walls of the temple,” seeking vengeance on Sarastro and humankind (Mozart, 2001, pp. 85-87). She is also capable of controlling natural elements. Such frightening qualities can be seen in the way in which her presence is always escorted by a thunderous atmosphere to scare off people. Nighttime, which is her preferred setting, is no less pleasant in this story. When the night falls in Act II, Tamino exclaims straightaway “What a horrible night!” (Mozart, 2001, p. 75). What makes nighttime hideous for Tamino and other human characters is what they perceive to be the night’s properties. These include darkness, loud thunderclaps and “ice-cold shivers”. (Mozart, 2001, p. 76). Taken together, these elements work with nighttime’s assumed obscurity to obstruct the human ability to demarcate between the real and the illusory. Manipulations, lies and temptations tend to occur at night. Only daylight and the exercises of “sound judgment” may dispel such evils and bring back happiness to the world (Mozart, 2001, p. 81). The same dichotomous opposition of day and night is best

illustrated when the Three Youths describe in their song that “the night” and “all the superstition” that comes with it will soon be banished by the brilliance of the sun (Mozart, 2001, p. 101).

In the Blakean cosmos, however, things are not as easy to delineate. Nighttime occurs throughout his entire poetical oeuvre but is never once personified. This is quite unanticipated considering Blake’s inclination to assign corporeal identity to each natural element he uses as his characters. The absence of bodily form for night nevertheless does not render it less fascinating. On the contrary, this lack of a preconceived association makes night less rigid and more fluid to accommodate various things and actions. Night in the Blakean cosmos becomes a *being* without having *to be* anything. Unlike Mozart’s Queen of the Night, it is not a powerful female body, waiting to unleash her vengeful hatred upon humankind, only to be annihilated by light and men’s reason. Nor is it annexed to notions of deception and malevolence. Indeed, Blake’s nighttime has recognizable properties, darkness and stars included. Yet these properties do not come with fixed implications. Darkness registers neither malice, nor does it function to erode the senses. Many deeds are done in the dark, but not all of them are dubious. This is not to say that nighttime is more desirable for Blake, though some Romantic poets did prefer nocturnal sublimity over daytime clarity. Unlike that which Mozart accomplished in *The Magic Flute*, Blake avoided setting up a diametrical opposition between day and night. This is quite unusual, even for Blake himself, considering that he did not hesitate to formulate various symbolic objects and characters, many of which are set in opposition to one another. The most noticeable cases are his characterizations of Urizen (conventional law) and Los (poetry). Moreover, most of his creations are quite strange and unintuitive for readers unfamiliar with his works. The Mundane Shell, for instance, stands for the visible sky enclosing the earth. Human desire is personified as a male character named Theotormon, the third of the first four sons of Los. Night, however, does not find such a convoluted personification in the Blakean cosmos. Such absence does not register that night is forgotten, as nocturnal scenes are constantly featured. Many beings, good or vile, thrive in or prefer the night. Certain actions are achieved during the night as well. It seems improbable – impossible even – to formulate a coherent interpretation of what night actually means or functions as in Blake’s poetry.

Blake the Realist: Vital Universe

This study does not offer an alternative interpretation of what night means. What it aims to focus on is the *being* of night in Blake’s epic poem *Milton*. It attests that even though Blake agreed on many points with contemporary idealist philosophers such as George Berkeley (1685-1753) who favored human imagination over materialistic empiricism, Blake was very much a *realist* in the sense that he did not wholly conceive that “matter has no

independent existence apart from the mind” (Raine, 1968, vol. 2, pp. 104-106). Neither was he convinced by Berkeley’s claim that God has infinite power, while man is a finite being. His disagreement with that doctrine is evident in his early tract *There Is No Natural Religion*, which states that man’s “perceptions are not bounded by organs of perception” (E, p. 2) and “the desire of Man being infinite the possession is infinite & himself Infinite” (E, p. 3). Hence a human who “sees the Infinite in all things sees God” as “God becomes as we are, that we may be that he is.” (E, p. 3) In this sense, Joseph Fletcher (2017) is correct in suggesting that Blake’s conceptualizations of the human and the surrounding world bear strong resemblances to that of Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) (pp. 129-130). Leibniz disagreed with Lockean and Newtonian formulations that the universe must be mechanical, composed of compact, solid and inactive particles, and functioned only in motions following what God had originated at the Creation. He proposed instead that not only does the universe *exist* but it is also *vital* and *infinite*. According to Leibniz (2014), the universe is made of the *monad*, which is “a simple substance which enters into compounds” (p. 14). Monads are “true atoms of nature, and in a word, the elements of things,” each of which is unique and contains within itself a “plurality within the unity,” as each is “divisible to infinity ... each part into further parts, each of which one has some motion of its own” (Leibniz, 2014, pp. 14, pp. 16-17, p. 21). All of these qualities are possible and perfected due to divine creation. There is no separation between the divine and material universe for Leibniz, since matters are divinely created, immanently vital and indefinitely divisible. Blake’s principles as set out in *There is No Natural Religion* clearly echo this perspective of the universe existing independently of the human mind and its perceptions. The existing universe is also infinite and such infinitude applies likewise to the divine, human and the material world.

Leibniz’s and Blake’s vital, infinite universe have been overpassed by several decades of criticism, partly because the reigning trends in philosophy and literary studies have been governed by phenomenological, postmodernist and deconstructive tendencies to negate realism in favour of correlationism, whether linguistic or phenomenal. Quentin Meillassoux (as cited in Gratton, 2014) explains that such correlationism posits that “there are no objects, no events, no laws, no beings which are not always-already correlated with a point of view, with a subjective access” (p. 14). Put simply, correlationism vouches that human beings are incapable of accessing reality without our languages and perspectives. Whether reality exists or not is not as crucial as how we perceive it, since it is more probable that reality (or what Kant glosses as things-in-themselves) lies beyond all possibility of human access. Hence, correlationists are more interested in how reality is represented to them and what such representation might signify. With the emergence of “speculative realism,” which is a new philosophical movement emphasizing the material world and

objects as existing independently outside of human perception, mind-independent reality has been invoked again in scholarly conversations. Past readers of Blake have misapprehended him along the same trajectory by which they have dismissed reality in favor of correlationism. Critics tend to pay more attention to what night (and other things) *means* than to the state of its being. This study, therefore, seeks to fill such a lacuna. In so doing, it turns in the following section to the discussion of speculative realism in relation to the Enlightenment. Then it will seek to attest that night in Blake's works, specifically his "diffuse epic" *Milton*, is indeed a thing that exists, not simply a metaphor. What this "thing" does throughout the poem is provide a *speculative* space for many other things to happen. Since night is the core object of *Milton*, something that exists as one large compound in which many other things and events occur, this study chooses to focus primarily on that poem instead of others of his texts that feature nighttime in a less prominent role.

Literature Review: Speculative Enlightenment

"Speculative Realism" is a relatively new branch of philosophy that officially began in 2007, with a conference at Goldsmiths College, University of London (Harman, 2012, p. 184). It has since gained influence both in and outside the field of academic philosophy – ranging from architecture, ecology and neuroscience to medieval studies. Amongst its notable theorists are Ray Brassier (who has since detached himself from the movement), Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman, Peter Gratton, Quentin Meillassoux, Levi R. Bryant and Timothy Morton, to name but a few. Speculative realists agree with Meillassoux's claim that since the time of Kant, and typified by its continual theorizations of notions such as discourses, dialectics and deconstruction, continental philosophy has been more inclined to focus on *how* we know reality than reality-in-itself (Gratton, 2014, p. 4) As a result, followers of continental philosophers tend to emphasize text, words, social and cultural practices and "human finitude" (Bryant et al., 2011, p. 3) even as they have identified themselves as anti-humanists. Yet such emphasis on *how we know* reality, that is epistemology, functions to place the human subject who experiences the world or the human society that constructs such a world at the center of the universe. Reality "appears in philosophy only as the correlate of human thought." (Bryant et al., 2011, p. 3) Speculative realism was inaugurated as a movement to question and revolt against this trend in continental philosophy. As self-proclaimed *realists*, they postulated that reality indeed exists independently of our minds and sensory perceptions. However, Graham Harman (2012) points out, "they are also *speculative*, in the sense that they do not wish to establish a commonsense middle-aged realism of objective atoms and billiard balls located outside the human mind" (p. 184). Put simply, they are not returning to unmediated realism since doing that has been impossible since the turn to

discourses and deconstruction. They seek to replace such “naïve realism” with a “model of reality as something far weirder than realists had ever guessed” (Harman, 2012, p. 184).

Naturally, the search for weird models of reality has produced many options. Of specific interest for this study are those speculated by Quentin Meillassoux and other models involved in the lives of objects as found in the works of Jane Bennett and Timothy Morton, which can include, but are not limited to, the approaches of object-oriented ontology. While Bennett understands the universe to be imbued with infinite possibility, Morton instead places his emphasis on the vibrant force of objects. Meillassoux’s commitment to the idea of an infinite universe begins with his application of the term “correlationism” to refer to the trend in post-Kantian philosophy, postulating that there can be no reality in itself existing independently of a conscious, that is to say the human subject that perceives it. Meillassoux takes issue with the implication of the correlationist viewpoint for understanding the weirdness offered by new scientific awareness of phenomena and events so distant in time and space that they indicate the existence of a reality before and beyond humanity and existing independently from empirical access to them. He understands phenomena such as black holes as “ancestral,” a term he uses to refer to “any reality anterior to the human species.” Ancestral objects, or what he calls “arche-fossils” (that is, “materials indicating the existence of an ancestral reality or event”), exist regardless of what he regards as correlationist attempts to interpret them as “something given” for humans to make sense out of. Even though correlationism proclaims in the name of existentialism or any number of philosophical traditions that things fall apart and this cosmos contains no meaning, Meillassoux would argue that it still vouches for humanity as the absolute, necessary being. The universe is only meaningless because it correlates to the absurdity of *our* lives. Therefore, it is unthinkable for any forms of correlationism to imagine the universe without humans or humans without the universe. What remains is only the sense of an intrinsic correlation between the two. To refute this, Meillassoux (2006) encourages philosophers to look beyond human finitude into “the *great outdoors*, the *absolute* outside of pre-critical thinkers: that outside which was not relative to us, and which was given as indifferent to its own givenness to be what it is, existing in itself” (p. 7). By “the great outdoors” he means the vast terrain that correlationism dismisses from its anthropocentric perspective. This territory contains nothing-in-itself but contingency and pure chaos because it is unthinkable and beyond our conceptualization. Meillassoux implies that there is no absolute being such as God in this great outdoors, as God’s perfection implies stability. Yet its contingency suggests that everything is possible from moment to moment, so there is no guarantee “that God won’t come to be and raise the dead” at any moment (Gratton, 2014, p. 7). The universe is thus always capable of novelty,

stasis and utter destruction. Things do not have to occur in accordance with the so-called natural laws of a stable, mechanical universe. Meillassoux (2006) designates this condition of permanent contingency as “Hyper-Chaos” (p. 105).

Is it possible for humans to imagine any reality that exists independently of our consciousness and subjectivity? Probably not entirely, but Meillassoux suggests that modern scientific discoveries in fields such as quantum physics suggest that what we take as “given” natural laws – such as those of motion and gravity – are anything but stable and eternal. Beyond the scopes of the sciences and mathematics, literature also offers glimpses into contingent reality, in which the logic of probability and the continuation of natural laws might not function as expected. In his study of speculative realism and Romantic literature, Evan Gottlieb (2019) praises the genre of “speculative fiction” for its ability to imagine realities drastically and intrinsically different from our known cosmos (p. 26). This genre involves all types of narratives featuring alternative realities, such as horror, sci-fi, weird fiction and fantasy. However, what prevents such fictions from “embracing the full implications of advent *ex nihilo*” is how they adhere to the “principles of continuity and constancy” (Gottlieb, 2019, p. 26-27). That said, a sci-fi text might represent a new universe with different laws of physics that radically challenges our conception, but once such laws are introduced, they remain constant and stable throughout the story, so that it is possible to continue a series of consequential actions. Meillassoux then proposes that, in place of continuation, the principle of unreason might be applied, starting from “what normally has to be excluded from narrative: not only pure arbitrariness but an arbitrariness that can be reproduced at any moment” (Gottlieb, 2019, p. 26-27).

What is mostly at odds with Meillassoux’s commitment to sci-fi and quantum entanglement is the way in which his articulation of arbitrariness involves in considerable amount the deific and eschatological dimensions. This has to do with his interest in the ultimate destiny of the hyper-chaotic universe, which has no perfect and stable God as theists know it but in which there also exists the possibility that a being like God might come to be at any given time to raise up the dead and give them the final peace. Meillassoux’s conceptualization of “God to come” is necessary for him to envision the ethical possibilities of justice, as he elaborates in an essay called “Spectral Dilemma.” This work speculates that our present world is haunted by figures Meillassoux gives the name “essential specters,” whose odious deaths escape the human capacity for mourning, due to either the unfathomable violence or pure randomness of their deaths. Their spectral existences disturb us, although they are “not necessarily shadows who declare their revenge but shadows who cry out beyond all vengeance. Whoever commits the imprudence of lending an ear to their call risks passing the rest of his life hearing their complaint.” (Meillassoux as cited in Harman, 2015, p. 86) Making peace with essential specters requires what he

calls “essential mourning,” which can be achieved only if the dead are resurrected. As strange as it sounds “amidst the obligatory atheism of the cutting-edge European thought,” (Harman, 2015, pp. 86-87) Meillassoux’s proposal provokes us to ponder questions regarding a form of mourning that “extracts itself from the twofold distress of the atheist and the religious believer,” (Meillassoux, 2008, p. 262) along with how to process grief since survivors are forced to confront nature’s indifference to death as well as the atrocity of modern institutions in their operations to control biopower. The solution, therefore, is to revise our assumptions, scientific or otherwise, about “causation and the stability of natural laws and [to look] toward the opposite of finitude – immortality.” (Dushane, 2019, p. 98) Such immortality is thinkable only with the advent *ex nihilo* of a “virtual God” who does not exist before the injustice of deaths happened in the past and has nothing to do with previous human history, but may come out of pure contingency in the future to establish a new world where the dead are revived and past injustices absolved. Such an advent would defy every law of causation known to humans in the present but would, in turn, bring about a world where our “rational ends” and “universal aspirations” of final truth and justice are eventually materialized (Harman, 2011, p. 218).

Taking Meillassoux’s hyper-chaotic universe, it becomes easier to get a glimpse of the strange reality of a cosmos in which laws of physics might or might not function in accordance with our expectations. Within this cosmos, things, organic and inorganic alike, are not simply objects to be experienced by humans, since they contain within themselves the power of self-organizing, becoming and transforming things other than themselves. As fascinating as it sounds, such a strange, infinite and non-totalizing universe has been speculated many times before, most spectacularly during the Enlightenment, when a brave new world of thoughts was enthusiastically imagined, despite the absence of quantum physics. The speculative universes of Enlightenment thinkers were drastically different from those of the speculative realists but they were “speculative” and somehow went against the grain or defied the “common sense” of their period nonetheless. As previously stated in the introduction, Leibniz, for instance, believed in the infinity inherent in monads of each thing. Baruch Spinoza (as cited in Israel, 2001), in his opposition to the Cartesian emphasis on thought, asserted that “every substance is necessarily infinite” and absolutely independent in itself (p. 230). Unlike Meillassoux, Spinoza (as cited in Israel, 2001) denied contingency, as he postulated that nature is self-moving and creates itself, for what had previously been understood as God’s providence is “nothing but the striving we find both in Nature as a whole and in particular things, tending to maintain and preserve their being” (p. 162). There are no miracles in the Spinozian universe. What humans have previously classified as miracles are actually the striving of things that can be known partially through

science, not because human reason is incapable of understanding them but because it is impossible for science to make an empirical account of the whole system. Nevertheless, he still held that it is possible for humans to attain knowledge as “grounded in sensation and built from our perceiving what is true and what is false through mathematical proportions ... so that while we make mistakes and frequently believe things which are not true, we cannot believe erroneously such that [reality] cannot be demonstrated to us.” (Israel, 2001, p. 162). Both Leibniz’s and Spinoza’s speculative universes offer their audiences not only a purview into the possible infinity integral to every being, but also the aspiration that mathematical rationality might enable us to see reality, especially in the formulation of Spinoza. However, their speculations were very much based on the premise of a rational universe in which things must happen in accordance with the laws of physics. In the absence of these laws, following Meillassoux, it is helpful (or necessary) to look beyond science and philosophy to speculative literature to find the most radical speculations imaginable.

Reading Blake’s *Milton* as Speculative Text

The existence of Meillassoux’s “speculative” genres such as sci-fi and fantasy and the genre he speculatively names “extro-science-fiction” during the Enlightenment remains debatable. Yet literary works involving speculative universes or alternative realities were by no means absent. William Blake’s *Milton* (written between 1804-1810) is one of such notable cases. It anticipates many of the themes and arguments of speculative realism. This epic poem features a reincarnation of the seventeenth-century radical poet, John Milton, whose political and poetical works significantly contributed to the foundation of the English Commonwealth and Whig tradition. The poem itself resists simple summarization, as the poetic structure is not linear in terms of time and space. It does not present events in a straightforward manner but unfolds like a dream sequence. This is seen from the beginning that features a narration of Milton’s unhappiness “tho’ in heaven,” due to the separation from his Sixfold Emanation (his three wives and three daughters) (E, *Milton*, 2: 16-24, p. 96). The unhappy Milton listens to “a Bards prophetic Song” that recounts at length the quarrel between Satan (signifying error, even though what his character stands for is highly debatable) and Palamabron (representing pity). The Song’s role in the poem is equivocal and the meaning is multilayered. It nevertheless moves Milton to renounce his Puritan doctrine and descend into the deep to save his Sixfold Emanation, even if doing so results in his own demise. Assuming the form of a comet, the poet travels to Lambeth, a London district on the southern side of the Thames where the Blakes lived from 1791 to 1800. He enters Blake’s left foot through the tarsus, enabling the living and the dead poets to merge with each other. Then Blake finds himself waking up at dawn in the garden of his Felpham cottage. A skylark appears before transforming into a twelve-year-old

girl named Ololon, whom Blake mistakes for one of his muses. Upon the revelation that she is in fact Milton's Sixfold Emanation, Milton comes to meet Ololon. The poem ends with an apocalyptical note, through the ultimate unity between the living and the dead, the internal and external worlds, and the masculine and feminine aspects, resulting in a state of oneness that transcends boundaries and unites seemingly disparate elements.

Milton in Blake's "diffuse epic" represented Blake's aspiration to be a civic and visionary poet who tirelessly served to lead the nation on a path to liberation and freedom. However, Milton, for Blake, bore a strong resemblance to what Meillassoux calls the "essential specter," as Blake still found Milton's death to be disturbing, to the point that he kept seeing the deceased poet and was even "commanded" to write about Milton against his will (Robinson, 1907, p. 265). Like Meillassoux's essential specter, Blake's renditions of being haunted by Milton, both in relation to the poem and in other contexts, show that, as Meillassoux defines his essential specter, the time that had passed after Milton's death was "inadequate for a tranquil bond between [the dead] and the living to be envisaged," as his death disturbed not only those who knew him "but upon all those who cross the path of their history." (Meillassoux, 2008, p. 262). Blake perceived that Milton's mission on earth was unfinished. While he was an accomplished poet for the Commonwealth, many of his works and his personal life, according to Blake, were plagued by selfishness, classicism, self-righteousness, rationalism, rigidity and sexism that refused to perish with his death. In the light of Enlightenment rationality, Blake's claim of being haunted by Milton's specter provoked people to question his sanity. The diarist Henry Crabb Robinson recorded a series of conversations he had with Blake, never committing fully to seeing him as either an Artist or a madman. One of the stories Blake told him of being visited by Milton's spirit involved specific pleas and instructions. Blake told Robinson that Milton "came lately as an old man ... to ask a favour of me. He said he had committed an error ..., which he wanted me to correct ... He wished me to expose the falsehood of his doctrine" (Robinson, 1907, pp. 295-296).

Blake neither rewrote Milton's works as requested, nor wrote any treatises analyzing fallacies and misconceptions in Milton's works. Instead, he tried to do in his poem *Milton* what was impossible in the perspectives of his contemporary philosophy and scientific knowledge. His attempt frustrated both the theological and scientific categories available at that time: he went against the laws of causation to "resurrect" Milton from his death. The resultant poem condensing the epic form, is full of chaos, and is notoriously difficult to grasp. The poem takes the audience into a world where time and space are not bound by natural laws, where things happen from moment to moment. Harold Bloom (1982) explains Blake's perspective on such alternative modes of temporality: "The poet's work conquers the eternity that teases us out of thought, for

imaginative time triumphs over clock time by denying its categories” (p. 922). Blake thus creates a speculative cosmos of “eternity” where life extends beyond years lived on earth and where the passages of time and spatial dimensions do not adhere to a clock, calendar, compass or map. Past, present and future coexist in the sense that what we perceive as the past presents itself again now as well as in the future. Under such spatio-temporal conditions, what Saree Makdisi (2015) classifies as diurnal time – the time of cyclical repetition, focusing on the sun’s rotation and the monotonous recurrence of natural and ecological cycles every twenty-four hours – is twisted, extended and overturned (pp. 95-97). Things that have happened for six thousand years are made to happen and created *ex nihilo* from moment to moment, in an infinite, unimaginable space. Each moment “equals a pulsation of artery” and pulsation “is Equal in its period & value to Six Thousand Years.” (E, p. 126 line 47). Night as a state of being or what might be called night-in-itself does however exist in the imaginary universe of Milton and is even extended despite the seeming irrelevance of diurnal time in its most literal sense to the condition of Blake’s eternity. Night in *Milton* does not adhere to the cyclical repetition of the sun’s rotation. It becomes a thing interwoven into the fabric of Blake’s eternal cosmos to allow many other things to happen. It is this unusual rendition of night to which this study now turns.

Discussion: Blake’s Hyper-Chaotic Night in *Milton*

Milton begins with an invocation of the Muses but they are not identical with the Muses traditionally found in epic poems. They are the “Daughters of Beulah!” and Beulah, for Blake, represents a mysterious realm newly created *ex nihilo* in his eternal, speculative cosmos. In this realm, the laws of nature do not function as expected; anything can happen, without reason, without law and without purpose. “Contrarities,” wrote Blake, “are equally true” here (E, *Milton*, 4: 10, p. 98). Mildness and terror can coexist without affecting each other, along with tenderness and cruelty, and love and hate. Beulah is introduced early in the poem because Milton traverses this space to find his redemption after descending from heaven:

Daughters of Beulah! Muses who inspired the Poets Song
Record of the journey of immortal Milton thro’ *your realms* [emphasis added]
Of terror & mild moony lustre [emphasis added], in soft sexual delusions
Of varied beauty, to delight the wanderer and repose
His burning thirst & freezing hunger! (E, *Milton*, 2: 1-5, p. 96)

Despite the absence of any outright remark, it is not difficult for readers to envision that such mysterious realm(s) that Milton journeys through must be nocturnal, as registered by the presence of “mild moony lustre.” As one of the most recognizable objects of the night, the moon here gleams only mildly upon the “realms of terror,” evoking in mind a phantasmal image of an obscure,

murky landscape where the moon is the sole source of illumination. Indeed, it might be instinctive to assume that such obscurity usually harbors unforeseeable dangers, as the word “terror” also indicates. Yet the juxtaposition of “terror” with the “mild” gleam of the moon puzzles. There is no clear demarcation whether this is a grim place to be avoided or a pleasant, nocturnal world of a luminous moon, full of “varied beauty.” What readers can grasp about night in Beulah is that it contains both terror and mild moonlight, and that it is the place through which Milton travels after walking “about in Eternity / One hundred years, pondring the intricate mazes of Providence / Unhappy tho in heav’n...” (E, *Milton*, 2: 16-18, p. 96).

This is the first instance in which night is interwoven into the intricate fabric of Blake’s *Milton* cosmos. Night is the constant condition in Beulah, which, according to S. Foster Damon’s *A Blake Dictionary* (2013), signifies “the realm of the Subconscious.” (p. 42). Night in Beulah, with its mild moonlight, obscures not only the landscape but also itself. Contradiction rules here. The moonlight is mildly luminous but the landscapes of Beulah are portrayed as “realms of terror” simultaneously. Is it possible to confidently interpret that such terror comes from insufficient light? Maybe, but it is difficult to determine so. Such “contrarities” and obscurity introduced here become what *defines* night or what night *is* throughout the poem. This presents a stark contrast with the horrible night of superstition and vengeance personified by the ruling queen in Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*. The Blakean night never has constant characteristics. It keeps changing as the narrative proceeds. The moonlight is mild, but the terrain it shines upon is terrifying. Night appears to be a time for repose for most beings, yet Satan, symbolizing error or “what seems to be but is not” (Damon, 2013, p. 355), is assigned to work ceaselessly on his Starry Mill, “day & night.” For Blake, the Mill was inferior to the creative Plow, as it represented Reason working on ideas embellished by imagination (E, *Milton*, 4: 10, p. 98). While this instance of night might seem like a random insertion by the poet, night is significant enough to be chosen as the time when Milton “rose up from the heavens of Albion arduous,” to enter into his shadowy body in order to descend and find redemption (E, *Milton*, 14: 10, 108).

Most importantly, it is the time when Blake, as the living poet who is struggling with his creative power, sees Milton’s spectral presence “in the Zenith as a falling star, / Descending perpendicular. Swift as the swallow or swift.” During the night, Milton falls on and into Blake’s left foot “on the tarsus; enter[ing] there; / But from my left foot a black cloud redounding spread over Europe” (E, *Milton*, 15: 47-50, p. 110). This event enables “All this Vegetable World” to appear on Blake’s foot in a form of “bright sandal form’d immortal of Eternity” (E, *Milton*, 21: 12, p. 115). The meaning of this incident remains elusive and in dispute. What is notable, nonetheless, is that this is the moment

when Milton is motivated by his own will to reject the holiness of heaven and embrace human embodiment. Milton's descent to find redemption highlights Blake's sympathy with Enlightenment values that cherish humanity and freedom, as Milton is not restricted by any supernatural intervention or traditional beliefs. However, what distinguishes the Blakean cosmos is its hyper-chaotic nature. The nighttime properties, primarily stars, cloud, and dark sky, facilitate his descent in such an unexpected manner, operating outside the natural laws known to humans. He does not have to wait until Judgment Day to grasp the meaning of eternity, as the poet sees through the dark, starry and cloudy sky "That every thing has its / Own Vortex; and once a traveller thro Eternity. / Has passed that Vortex, he perceives it roll backward behind" (E, *Milton*, 15: 21-22, p. 109). Once out of the Vortex, Milton "bent down / To the bosom of death, what was underneath soon seemd above. / A cloudy heaven mingled with stormy seas in loudest ruin;" (E, *Milton*, 15: 41-43, p. 110). Shortly afterwards, in such a hyper-chaotic fashion, Milton falls from the heavens in the form of a comet, merging the living body and the divine spirit by landing on Blake's foot. Charged with energy from Milton's star, Blake feels a powerful surge of inspiration as Los, a symbol of creative force and imagination, appears behind him. Los binds Blake's sandals and fuses with his soul. Blake then becomes the poet who witnesses the dreamlike transformation and self-annihilation of Milton. The language used to describe the process is highly convoluted and mystical, perhaps to convey the unfathomable complexity of the cosmos. Milton must travel through the "rocky masses of the Mundane Shell" or the surface of the "Vegetated Earth" that has been "Enlarg'd into dimension & deform'd into indefinite space, / in Twenty-seven Heavens and all their Hells; with Chaos / And Ancient Night; & Purgatory." (E, *Milton*, 17: 20-25, p. 110). He also has to face Urizen (symbolizing conventional reason and law) who tries to "took up water from the river Jordan: pouring on / To Miltons brain the icy fluid from his broad cold palm" (E, *Milton*, 19: 7-8, p. 112). Yet Milton overcomes the cold reason and control of Urizen as he embraces the sensory vitality of the "red clay" that he uses to sculpt "new flesh on the Demon cold" (E, *Milton*, 19: 13, p. 112). As the poem unfolds, it is shown that this nocturnal world of Beulah also harbors elements such as "the nightingale's song" (E, *Milton*, 31: 28, p. 130), blooming flowers (E, *Milton*, 31: 46, p. 131), and the aromatic "Wild Thyme" (E, *Milton*, 35: 54, p. 136). All of these natural attributes possess sensory qualities beyond their material existences. The Nightingale, for instance, is capable of singing "thro the day, / and thro the night" (E, *Milton*, 31: 42-43, p. 131). When it sings, "every Bird of Song / Attending his loud harmony with admiration & love." (E, *Milton*, 31: 43-44, p. 131).

What, then, is the Blakean night in *Milton*? Damon (2013) in his authoritative Blakean dictionary deems that for the entirety of Blake's oeuvre night "needs no explanation" (p. 299). It is probably too common to merit

special attention. But it is also possible that night escapes categorization because there is no simple way to delineate it. Night exists in this strange mythological cosmos. It infiltrates the many worlds created within the labyrinths of Blakean eternity as well as the material world. Night can be found in both the Subconscious slumber of Beulah, “where Contrarities are equally true,” and in the apocalyptic universe of the epic dispute between Satan and Palamabron, which is Blake’s radical revision of the Myth of the Fall and symbolizes the poet’s sympathy for the oppressed (E, *Milton*, 30:1, p. 129). Beyond these abstractions in Blake’s visionary world, however, it also has a presence in Felpham, an actual village in West Sussex where Blake the poet and narrator sees Milton as a falling star that then enters the poet’s left foot. Felpham was also the place where Blake was first inspired to compose his earliest epic on Milton, as he was commissioned by the Reverend Joseph Thomas of Epsom to create a series of illustrations to Milton’s *Comus* (1634). In a way, Felpham bears a certain resemblance to nighttime, as it is both an actual place and an imagined space. With regards to nighttime, its constant presence in Blake’s strange worlds seems to provide readers with some sense of normalcy, as it registers that the mundane, familiar diurnal time still functions. On the other hand, its persistence further puzzles the reader. Indeed, night exists, so diurnal time does work here. But nighttime in the epic exceeds the notion of progressive linear time and its variations (clock time, world time, national time, and so on) with which Blake’s contemporaries were becoming familiar. Saree Makdisi (2015) notes that the late eighteenth century was when the various patterns of life previously dictated by natural cycles (the seasons, the diurnal and so on) were changed into the steady “monotonous tick-tock of industrial time determined by the ‘tyranny of the clock’” (p. 98). However, Blake’s nighttime in *Milton* does not adhere to the imposition of modern clock time. Even such a simple task as understanding night’s duration becomes quite bewildering. Take Beulah, for instance, where the seemingly perpetual night is the ruling condition:

Beulah is evermore Created around Eternity; appearing
To the Inhabitants of Eden, around them on all sides.
.....
..... the moony Habitations of Beulah,
Are from Great Eternity a mild & pleasant Rest (E, *Milton*, 30: 8-9, 13-14, p. 129)

Night is probably eternal in moony Beulah because, if we adhere to Damon’s interpretation, it is the place of the Subconscious. Various traditions since at least the medieval period have associated visions and dreams with the night, that is, the time when they are most likely to occur. Darkness was also instrumental to constructions of the sacred especially after the Reformation (Koslofsky, 2011, p. 46). However, there is more to the night in Beulah than a simple nod to the traditions or contemporary culture. As stated above, Beulah is

a place where such hyper-chaotic incidents happen repeatedly, ranging from the descent of Milton to the Nightingale that sings throughout day and night. After Milton has descended from heaven,, his three wives and three daughters (or the Sixfold Emanation), given the name Ololon, who comes from Eden to mourn for him among the moony inhabitants of Beulah. In this speculative cosmos, Beulah is a middle-space between Eternity and the material world, known as Ulro. (Blake's rendition of the material world or world of matter) (E, *Milton*, 21: 7, p. 115). Beulah's midway position allows beings from many realms – the Eternal, the earthly and the Edenic – to look at and tread on its moony surface. To some extent, the strangeness of Blakean nighttime evokes what Graham Harman (2007) describes when he says that "Objects hide from one another endlessly, and inflict their mutual blows ['physical relations'] only through some vicar or intermediary" (pp. 189-190). Many mythical realms in Blake's cosmos also "hide from one another endlessly" in the sense that the inhabitants from each realm do not recognize each other's existences. Neither can they transgress the boundaries to visit one another. For instance, when Ololon is in Eden and Milton is in heaven, neither can reach out to the other. Or when Milton enters into Blake's left foot, the poet "knew not that it was Milton, for man cannot know / What passes in his members till periods of Space & Time / Reveal the secrets of Eternity..." (E, *Milton*, 21: 8-10, p. 115). Beings from different realms can only reach out to one another under the nocturnal condition of Beulah, and then only temporarily. Beulah is the space of possibility where beings converge and things considered impossible elsewhere happen. Night is instrumental to the condition of Beulah. It functions as a tool that renders the landscape "mild and moony" as well as terrifying. Without the everlasting presence of night, each realm and being in the Blakean cosmos would still stay apart, barely touching or recognizing the existence of one another. This clarifies why night is interwoven early into the fabric of Blake's cosmos: to obscure the logic of probability so that the impossible can become possible.

Given the speculative framework, the nocturnal sphere of Beulah might be indeed enthralling. Nevertheless, as stated in the previous section, Meillassoux (2015) warns us that most writings in the speculative genre stop short of adopting the full implications of the hyper-chaotic world. They might introduce the audience to another world where the laws of physics are totally different from ours. Yet they usually adhere to the logic of continuity and constancy, so that their narratives can be "told because we are still dealing with worlds, with ordered totalities" (p. 23). Following Meillassoux's caution, it is worth noting that the nocturnal condition in Beulah does not abide by such principles. Of course, nighttime is permanent there, but as the narrative unfolds, it is noticeable that morning happens in Beulah as well. This occurs when the protean Ololon comes from Eden in the form of "multitudes" and mourns for Milton. When her lamentation is heard, "all Nations wept in affliction" as "one

awakend in the night” and “all the Living Creatures of the Four Elements, wail’d / With bitter wailing...” (E, *Milton*, 30: 17-18, p. 130). Amongst such creatures is “The Lark sitting upon his earthy bed: just as the morn / Appears.” (E, *Milton*, 30: 29-30, p. 130). The bird then begins to sing “with inspiration; every feather / On throat & breast & wings vibrates with the effluence Divine” that “All Nature listens silent to him & the awful *Sun* / Stands still upon the Mountain looking on this little Bird / With eyes of soft humility, & wonder love & awe.” (E, *Milton*, 30: 34-38, p. 130-131). The Wild Thyme also “appears only a small Root creeping in grass / covering over the Rock of Odours his bright purple mantle” (E, *Milton*, 35: 55-56, p. 136) as if to celebrate the dawn. Then, the poem harbors more contingency, as the advent of morning does not immediately offer a happy ending. Upon Blake the narrator’s encounter with Ololon in his garden, now in Felpham instead of Lambeth where he first sees Milton as a comet, Blake invites Ololon to meet his wife in the cottage. Milton hears Ololon’s voice and, after “condensing all his Fibres” (E, *Milton*, 37: 6, p. 137) to get out Blake’s body, he appears as “the Wicker Man of Scandinavia in whom / Jerusalems children consume in flames among the Stars” (E, *Milton*, 37: 11-12, p. 137).

After fusing with Blake’s body for an entirety of the first book and half of the second, now Milton takes on his own bodily form. Nevertheless, he appears neither as the radical poet of the seventeenth century nor as a celestial being. What Milton looks like at this point is “the Wicker Man of Scandinavia,” which means that he appears similar to a gigantic wicker statue used in ancient Celtic religion as a method of sacrificing humans and animals. This sheer size and appearance of such a statue is already intimidating. Yet the poem features additional enigmas as it catalogues the names of “the Gods of Ulro dark / Twelve monstrous dishumanized terrors Synagogues of Satan. / A Double Twelve & Thrive Nine: such their divisions” (E, *Milton*, 37: 16-18, p. 137). At this point, it is no longer certain whether the narrative is still set in the morning. The constant references to stars (E, *Milton*, 37: 12, 47-48, 52; E, *Milton*, 38: 61; E, *Milton*, 39: 3, 6) inside and outside the “Mundane Shell” (visible sky) serves to further disrupt the stable perception of time. Does the event still take place at dawn in Blake’s Felpham cottage? Or does it become another cosmic event occurring in “the Chaotic Voids outside of the Stars” (E, *Milton*, 37: 47, p. 138) beyond diurnal time? The poem does not provide a straightforward solution, as the narrative shifts to center on Milton, who undergoes a transformation from a towering wicker man to a figure resembling the poet’s customary portrait: ‘clothed in black, severe & silent’ (E, *Milton*, 38: 8, p. 138).

Such discrepancies keep emerging throughout the narrative, indicating that there is no underlying rule in this place, only limitless possibilities. Indeed, it is worth pointing out that *Milton* does end in the morning time, with Milton’s final redemption achieved through an act of self-annihilation by merging with

Ololon, who divides into Sixfold Emanation and enters into the depth of Milton's soul. In a manner true to Blake's style, this event, though wondrous, takes place in a landscape that is neither beautiful nor predictable. Ololon descends to Felpham "in clouds of blood, in streams of gore, with dreadful thunderings" (E, *Milton*, 42: 8, p. 143). These attributes make her more akin to *The Magic Flute's* Queen of Night who always appears with thunder and darkness than the soulful feminine emanation that Milton has been seeking. However, the gory imagery may not be as shocking if the audience envisions the event in a more literal yet speculative way. Simply put, the complete merging of two entities requires the total destruction of their physical presences, resulting in blood and gore. This final union enables Blake's bones to tremble (E, *Milton*, 42: 25, p. 143). The hyper-chaotic night finally ends with the lark's morning song, serving as a reminder to Blake that this apocalyptic vision is not the end of the world. Such a hopeful note brings Los (creative force) and his wife Enitharmon (spiritual beauty and poetic inspiration) to renew their commitment to civic duty. History also continues, as "All Animals upon the Earth, are prepar'd in all their strength / To go forth to the Great Harvest & Vintage of the Nations[.] (E, *Milton*, 42: 42-43, p. 144). This continuation aligns with the way in which the Blakean speculative universe does not come to an end solely with the conclusion of *Milton*. In all of Blake's visionary works, night persists, expanding, distorting, merging and colliding. The immense potential contained within the moonlit shades and hills of the Blakean night serves as a reminder that the Enlightenment holds more than what is readily visible. Often, the darkness and moonlight of the night offer infinite potential to humans - a richness and diversity that cannot be fully overcome by sunlight.

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