Few accusations in Blake’s illuminated works have the force and density of Orc’s accusation that Urizen “perverted to ten commands” “the fiery joy” (*America* 8:3 E 54). Orc, Blake’s symbol of revolutionary and sexual energy, here charges Urizen, Blake’s caricature of reason, with perverting sexual pleasure into commands. Blake often depicts Orc with his genitals at the center of his body, a depiction that cements the connection between sex and revolution (Mitchell *BCA*). Yet, in order for readers to be able to unpack Orc’s charge, they have to understand that behind Urizen’s perversion of joy into hierarchy is Blake’s perversion of Mosaic law. That is, Blake seeks to turn the Ten Commandments, the basis of so much Western moral virtue, on its head, and he does so by truncating commandments to “commands,” linking them, in the democratic rhetoric of his day, with the illegitimate hierarchy of kings. In masking his perversion underneath Urizen’s perversion, Blake shows how judgments of perversion not only assume wrong and right to be unarguable, but also assume that a stable ground exists from which to measure perversion. If the Ten Commandments are not the ground but the perversion of the ground, where is the ground? To complicate further the use of perversion, Blake inverts
ordinary syntax, placing the direct object of the verb before the verb. The line begins with “the fiery joy, that Urizen perverted to ten commands,” thus putting joy at least syntactically back in the driver’s seat, where it belongs. The poet’s perversion of ordinary syntax not only further undermines the solidity of ground, but also exploits epistemological uncertainty to the end of undermining all forms of authority, including his own.

Perversion came to occupy a central position as a concept and technique for Blake. Although perversion literally means the “turning aside from truth or right,” Blake demands that his readers discover the truth or right for themselves, especially when “nature” is invoked as the standard against which to measure perversion. If Foucault got it right when he claimed that the weaker perversion “is epistemologically, the better it functions” (Foucault *Abnormal* 32), then, for Blake, all perversion is strong perversion that doesn’t function and this disruption of function is precisely his point because the suspension of function allows mental fight to occur. Because Blake took issue with so many of his culture’s notions of “truth,” “right,” or what “truth” and “right” dissolve into—namely, nature—the turning of perversion allowed the poet to force readers to question the very ground upon which a charge of perversion can be made. He thus turns perversion away from ontology and toward epistemology. This turning, moreover, enacts the kind of revolution Blake wants to perpetuate and reminds us that both revolution, etymologically connected to revolve, and perversion involve turning. Much like his use of the vortex, Blake exploits the power of perversion to uproot his readers from secure ground.

At the outset of *The Four Zoas*, for instance, Enion weaves a Garment, “not / As Garments woven subservient to her hands but having a will / Of its own perverse & wayward” (*FZ* 1:85–87 E 302). Although Enion judges this garment to be “pervasive,” the fact that the specter of Tharmas refuses to be subservient to Enion suggests that “pervasive” is at least partly a commendable sign of individuality. Later describing the wheels of Urizen and Luvah as rolling “pervasive” and “back reverse,” Blake writes,

\[
\text{T errific ragd the Eternal Wheels of intellect terrific ragd} \\
\text{The living creatures of the wheels in the Wars of Eternal life} \\
\text{But perverse rolld the wheels of Urizen & Luvah back reversd} \\
\text{Downwards & outwards consuming in the wars of Eternal Death (*FZ* 1:556–59)}
\]

This pun on “pervasive” and “reverse” indicates perversion is relational rather than absolute: it depends on the vantage point of the perceiver and upon the
perceiver’s values. The fact that “perverse” and “reverse” bookend the line both highlights their spatiality and their dependence upon vantage point. The line literally turns on “perverse” and “reverse.” Moreover, because “Terrific ragd” begins and ends the first line, Blake reminds us that revolution returns to its origin. The net effect of all this turning makes readers always question whether the ground isn’t really a perversion of the ground. Is the rolling of these wheels good or bad? On the one hand, since “perverse” is antithetical to “Eternal life,” and since Urizen and Luvah are aligned with the “wars of Eternal Death,” perversion would seem bad. On the other hand, their reverse wheels recall Blake’s own need to write backward on the copper plate and thus suggest some allegiance to them. To the extent that Luvah represents desire and his wheels counter Urizen’s (reason’s) wheels, Luvah’s reversal further moves in the right direction. Although Blake’s ampersand seems to unite the wheels of Urizen and Luvah, the fact that Urizen stands for reason against desire (Luvah) hints that Luvah’s wheels might be admirably “perverse.” And although Urizen’s and Luvah’s wheels are associated with “Eternal Death” (1:574), such death precipitates Albion’s “rising”—the first word of Night 2. If death is necessary for resurrection to occur, once again readerly judgment about the wheels must be suspended. Therefore, in making perversion raise so many questions, Blake disrupts its ability to function as a clear marker of morality and thus perverts the performative power of perversion—its seeming ability to deliver immediate judgment—into that which immediately provokes epistemological uncertainty. That these wheels symbolize both death and life only highlights this uncertainty.

Likewise, since the charge of perversion so often works by claiming to evade historical specificity—perversions are against nature, which is allegedly immune to history—Blake’s perversion perversely insists on that history and in the process redefines that history as trauma because history has the power to show the arbitrariness of any one version of nature as well as the psychic costs of history. Hence, Blake gives the Ten Commandments not the grounded authority of the Logos, the word of God, but the merely ascribed authority of Urizen (“Your Reason”). That Urizen embodies the Romantic interpretation of the Enlightenment means that he cannot be dismissed so easily as a villain.

But Orc’s accusation does much more than have Urizen playing politics. To the extent that Orc is right, it suggests that liberation will be achieved when the fiery joys return, when sexual pleasure has no longer been perverted into commandments. It invites readers to consider whether they want a God devoted to joy or one insistent upon hierarchy, an illegitimate one to boot. It in-
vites readers to consider whether commandments should be the basis of a religion as well as to consider why joy and reason became understood antithetically in the first place.

The aesthetic embodiment of perversion raised further issues for Blake: if his own words acquired the ontological solidity of the commandments, then they, too, could repress rather than liberate. Blake insists that poet/prophets are “seers not arbitrary dictators” (E 617). To make his own charges of perversion more than finger wagging, Blake made them debatable. Thus, he embodies perversion in insistently contradictory ways, often continuing to turn opposing concepts until one can see the connections between the two rather than seeing them as polar opposites. The above charge comes from Orc, not Blake, and thus Blake’s distancing of himself from Orc needs to be factored into the equation, as does his ironic attitude toward Urizen and, by extension, the Enlightenment itself. Orc’s charge that Urizen had perverted “fiery joys” means that Orc himself is perverted since Orc stands for fiery joy: what about perversion enables it to acquire the glue of identity? Orc’s dual existence as the embodiment of joy and the perversion of it further unsettles the very ground by which one determines whether perversion exists. This duality further tempers any readerly identification with Orc and hints at the painful consequences of revolutionary instability. As Blake knew only too well, merely to substitute Orc’s authority for Urizen’s relocates tyranny, not does away with it.

Moreover, if reason is a perversion of joy, what role does either play in one’s aesthetic? Previously I suggested that the Romantics aligned themselves with an eroticized if purposive aesthetics precisely to engage audiences otherwise abstracted and distanced by reason. Here I show what Blake’s aesthetic embodiment of perversion accomplishes. And, building upon Andrew Elfenbein’s insight that Romantic genius centered on the artist’s ability to experiment with sex/gender roles, I ask whether perversion is the logical outcome of an aesthetics of originality and individualism. How better to set oneself apart from one’s culture than to undermine the very naturalness of sex?

In short, Blake was perverse to his very core, and it is high time that we dealt with that fact along with its manifold implications. My method here will be first to unpack the significance of perversion to Blake by looking closely at how the poet uses this term to open up epistemological questions rather than to close them down, then to think about the implications of perversion to Blake’s understanding of body and text, and, finally, to see how he embodies perversion. I situate Blake in the medical literature of his day to show that he could not have
understood the body as a fixed sign, in terms of the intransigence of material-
ity; nor could he have associated textuality with automatic liberation. Thus, our
understanding of the body and language in Blake runs the considerable risk of
saying more about our own postmodern fascination with textualism as a form
of liberation and materiality as that which resists change than it does about
Blake.

Textualism is here defined as the exploitation of language’s “intrinsic poten-
tial for detachment from the material circumstances in which it is utilized”
(Terdiman 76). Blake understood the sexual body as both spirit and body and
thus could make the body the ground for liberty, not its enemy. And although
textualism in Blake helps to disconnect words from authority, the poet certainly
recognized that the free play of language does not necessarily give anyone the
traction needed to muster counter arguments (Terdiman 105). The illuminated
books, thus, encode a conversionary/perversionary/transformative dimension
within them yet require the readerly deconstruction of this textualism as part of
their attempt to shift power from the location of the author to the reader, a ma-
nuever which is allegorized in Blake’s grounding of his mythology in the body.

At once incarnation and allegory, Blake’s sexed bodies embody a flexible ma-
teriality that can ground utopia within the human body. Having defined the
imagination as “spiritual sensation” (Letter 5 E 703), Blake holds onto bodies
even in his concept of spirituality. These questions of the relation of material-
ity to text get condensed into Blake’s concept of perversion. By linking the ma-
teriality of the body with epistemological questions, by giving those questions
the seeming incarnation of perversion, and by reminding us that the body bears
the legible signs of psychic trauma, Blake harnesses both materiality and textu-
ality in service of the idea liberation. He thereby avoids the limitations of both:
intransigence and endless vertigo, not to mention Urizenic law and impotence.
Because the sexed body in Blake must always be viewed from an aesthetic stance
that resists purpose, the poet is equipped to measure the forms liberation takes
against any achievements.

Perversion in Blake

Blake uses various forms of the word “perversion” nineteen times in his writ-
ings (Concordance), and the term offers important clues about how we are to
understand Blakean sexuality and why the poet insists that “gratified desire” is
key to political liberation. His preference for verbal and adjectival over noun
forms of the word reminds us that he understands perversion to be relational and contextual. Only three of his uses of perversion are the abstract noun forms. Although medicine and psychology were hardening perversion into deviant forms of psychological identity, Blake deploys perversion to undermine both identity and the idea of psychological diagnosis. For Blake, the problem is hardly the deviance of any individual psyche, but rather a generalized repression of imaginative vision.

I'll begin with Blake's accusation in his letter to Trusler that Trusler's eye “is perverted by Caricature Prints” (Letter 5, E 702) one of the poet's more straightforward uses of “perverted.” Yet, given Blake's own indebtedness to caricature, so carefully documented throughout the Princeton facsimiles, how could the poet be sure his own eye had not been likewise perverted? Blake offers three answers. First, Trusler cannot recognize the difference between the beauty of “Michael Angelo Rafael & the Antique & best living Models” (E 702) and that of caricature. Second, Blake adds that “Fun I love but too much Fun is of all things the most loathsome” (E 702). This raises the question of how do we know when we love fun too much? Provisionally, I'll suggest here that excess fun indicates Blake's own impatience with equating a kind of aesthetic free play with liberty. Third, by linking perversion of Trusler's eye with the mass marketing of Caricature, “which ought not to abound as they do,” Blake shows the dangers of commodity culture that profits by getting purchasers to pervert quantity into quality.

Where Blake distances Trusler's perverted eye from his own, a distancing which paradoxically mandates an identification with Trusler in order to understand the grounds for Trusler's perversion, he deepens his idea of perversion in his annotations to Bishop Watson’s *An Apology for the Bible*. Of course, if the distancing of perversion leads us back to identity, perversion is by no means simple. In the margins to Watson, Blake harrumphs, “The Perversions of Christs words & acts are attacked by Paine & also the perversions of the Bible; who dare defend [them] either the Acts of Christ or the Bible Unperverted?” (E 611). From Blake's standpoint, Watson mistakenly claimed Paine perverted the Bible when in truth Paine's argument was that the Bible was perverted to begin with, a text designed to further priestly hierarchy. So what is it about perversion that enables this kind of mistake? This is a crucial epistemological problem in Blake. How do we know perversion when we see it, and then what to do about it?

To distinguish between a perversion of something and the thing itself, one needs at very least to be able to stand outside of the thing itself. An ironic stance
toward objects enables the consideration of whether one’s perception of the object is distorting it; more critically, such a stance allows one to consider if the object is being manipulated in the service of specific interests. To get to the “Bible unperverted,” one must acknowledge the possibility that it can be, and may have been, perverted. This means that, at least from the perspective of the fallen world, interpretations that assume meaning is fully present in the sign cannot work because they do not offer any place to stand outside the text insofar as word and meaning are welded together. Instead, one needs to see the Bible as a palimpsest of texts, one whose previous interpretations mask the pure text underneath. Although my use of “pure text” would seem to reinstall the very naive logocentrism Blake denies, I want to insist upon the reader’s necessarily skeptical view of all texts, even ones that claim to be pure. Here I point out that Blake uses “unperverted” rather than pure, a word choice that suggests we should initially assume all texts to be perverted. As many have noted, Blake’s own texts resist logocentric readings, and this is even the case when the details of the poet’s printing process have been so admirably set forth, but in ways that locate Blake’s meaning in materiality. I am suggesting that obsessive critical fascination with the materiality of the poet’s printing process is symptomatic of, rather than counter to, the larger instabilities within Blake.

Blake’s resistance to logocentrism raises another and more serious problem. If the signifier only has to manage to signify the signified, how does one overcome the gap between the signifier and signified and know when a perversion has occurred? Blake offers more clues when he trumpets, “I cannot conceive of the Divinity of the books in the Bible to consist either in who they were written by or at what time or in the historical evidence which may be all false in the eyes of one man & true in the eyes of another but in the Sentiments & Examples which whether true or Parabolic are Equally useful as Examples given to us of the perverseness of some & its consequent evil & its consequent good” (E 618). Blake informs us here that divinity is grounded in neither the author nor historical evidence. He also distances perverseness from moral judgment—perverseness can have either consequent evil or good. That Blake refuses to attach perverseness to evil or good undermines the neat opposition that supposedly exists between Romantic moral perversity and Victorian perverted identities. Where Paine had dismissed the authenticity of the Bible because the actual actors had not written their own accounts, Watson argues that one must distinguish between genuineness and authenticity: although the work may not have been genuinely “written by the person whose name it bears” (Watson 11), this fact does
not prevent the work form being historically true or “related matters of fact as they really happened” (Watson 11). For Watson, Paine may have shown the books of the Bible not to be genuine, but that was not the same thing as showing them to be inauthentic. 11

Long before Foucault and Barthes would declare the author dead, Blake refutes Watson by insisting that both authorship and historical fact are insufficient grounds for truth. In other words, Blake eliminates both the bishop’s genuineness and his authenticity as grounds for biblical truth, a maneuver which again insists that texts are best apprehended when they are assumed to be perverted. Such an assumption makes even sacred texts approach jeux de vérités, games of truth. Furthermore, what may seem historical evidence to some may not count as evidence to others; therefore, one is to understand that evidence not in terms of its referentiality, but in terms of the “sentiments and examples” that lead readers to act or embody those same sentiments. Note that Blake presumes neither the truth nor the perverseness of biblical examples: rather than presuming the exemplarity of biblical characters for good or ill, the poet again demands that we not prejudge and attempt first to gauge how the actions and sentiments of these individuals might serve as examples for others. Blake’s emphasis upon “consequent” underscores that readers look to what actions and sentiments provoke. This insistence on consequence allows us to go back to Blake on Trusler’s perverted eye, and to see that “too much fun” for Blake is fun without consequences. That perversion facilitates the separation of the self and other when in fact the other may define the self further calls for the deliberation that irony makes possible. Because Blake values fun but not the excess of fun, differences of kind between the poet’s eye and Trusler’s perverted eye begin to look like the mere difference of degree.

Perversion, then, in spite of its seeming immediacy, demands an ironic or allegorical reading of all texts. Blake enhances the ironic powers of perversion by actively distancing perversion from moral judgment and by highlighting perversion’s vexed relationship to identity. Since every act or text potentially embodies its perversion, each must be actively apprehended by the reader, grounded in neither the acts nor sentiments themselves but in what those acts or sentiments lead up to. Moreover, by substituting consequences for function, Blake makes perversion into a kind of purposiveness against purpose insofar as consequences demand effects without assuming the form of them in advance. It is because Watson cannot imagine the possibility that the Bible is itself perverted that he mistakes Paine’s acts for a perversion of the Bible rather than an unper-
verting of the biblical text. If the reader must posit the possibility of perversion, and it does not exist necessarily in the text itself, then the emphasis is not so much on the text, but in the apprehender, and in what the apprehension would achieve. Suspending judgment, Blake posits Paine to be “either a Devil or an Inspired man,” and by looking at Paine through both vantages, he concludes that “Tom Paine is a better Christian than the Bishop” (E 620).12

Yet this final assessment of Paine is especially perverse for Blake since Paine was a professed deist, who turned to reason and science to try to explain religion. Paine read the book of nature as the only true Logos of God (Age of Reason 68), and Blake’s beloved Book of Revelation was for Paine a mere fable (55). Blake abhorred natural religion because of its insistent materiality. Even worse, Paine denied the imagination’s role in religion, and sought to debunk revealed religion because it was no more than hearsay. So why then does Blake not align himself with Watson who defends revealed religion and against Paine the deist?

The answer goes back to Blake’s emphasis on consequences. While Paine was promoting equality and liberty, the bishop was merely a “State trickster” (E 612) defending the deeds of a wicked God, one who would sanction the murder of another. Blake denounces any “defence of the Wickedness of the Israelites in murdering so many thousands under pretence of a command from God” (E 614). He could also align himself with Paine because of Paine’s skepticism about the Bible and its meanings, a skepticism that would allow one to choose a New Testament Christ of forgiveness over a punishing Old Testament God and see institutional religion as oppression.13 At one point, Paine makes doubting Thomas his ideal reader (Age of Reason 54), and “Thomas” had the virtue of being ideal as well as real, Paine’s own first name. Blake similarly takes comfort in the fact that Christ died as “an Unbeliever” in the Old Testament God (E 614). Blake also would find solace in Paine’s declaration that “my own mind is my own church” (50).

In the end, because of his inability to suspend judgment and to think through the substance of Paine’s arguments, Blake cannot identify with the bishop. Watson has very limited capacity for irony. He neither has a considered response to Paine’s claim that the “Bible is all a State Trick” nor does he refute Paine’s argument that the commentators of the Bible are all “dishonest Designing knaves” (E 616). Here the ironic distance that Blake has from Paine—Paine argues that the Bible is a state trick, not necessarily Blake—which allows the poet meaningful reflection about Paine.14 Blake’s use of “designing” above alludes to the argument from design: the very argument that Paine had used to make na-
ture the word of God was for Blake a perverse debasement of spirituality into vegetative materialism. Hence, “designing” in this particular context is “the work of knaves.” Lurking within Blake’s defense of Paine is the possibility of Paine’s perverseness.

Blake as reader hopes to instill in his readers this very ironic distance so that they don’t mistake his words for commands. His strategy of offering disembodied quotations—Blake often does not tell us who is speaking until well after he or she has spoken—further demands readerly irony. The poet again brackets his use of perversion with irony when he states in response to Watson that “the Bible says that God formed Nature perfect but that Man perverted the order of Nature since which time the Elements are filled with the Prince of Evil who has the power of the air. Natural Religion is the voice of God & not the result of reasoning on the powers of Satan” (E 614). By emphasizing “the Bible says,” and given Blake’s general distaste for sacred codes, we don’t know whether Blake agrees with what the Bible says. Nonetheless, the poet’s attribution suspends judgment. Watson scores rhetorical points against Paine by pointing out that Paine’s privileging of natural religion over revealed religion merely projects the wickedness of God onto nature. For this reason, Watson relishes the fact that by Paine’s own logic, which undermined the legitimacy of the Old Testament God on the basis of his cruelty, the recent earthquake in Lisbon makes Paine’s God of natural theology equally cruel. Blake retorts to Watson that one must distinguish between “an accident brought on by a man’s own carelessness & a destruction from the designs of another” (E 614). Read in this light, the poet’s comment that “the Bible says God formed Nature perfect but that Man perverted the order of Nature” must be ironic in that nature’s perfection consists of mere accident and not design. I therefore draw attention to Blake’s love of puns and the written similarity of “pervert” and “perfect” because so much hangs on two letters. Furthermore, for Blake, nature’s perfection is a perversion of the divinity within mankind, the emphasis upon the vegetative at the expense of the spiritual. The key here is to remember that nature and man have different standards for perfection in Blake, and that even perfection can yield perversion. The claim of divine perfection intensifies the perversion.

Blake’s willingness to think about Paine as both “devil” and “inspired man,” along with the poet’s positive and negative senses of devils, enables Blake to gauge if Paine’s unpervverting of the Bible amounts to liberation and, if so, to liberty. Moreover, by insistently deferring the adjudication of perversion onto a previous text, and by trying to understand the role of perversion in each text,
Blake makes perversion a slippery but useful critical tool against authority. Paine’s unperverting of the Bible may be liberating, but that does not mean it achieves liberty. If it doesn’t achieve the ultimate goal of liberty, then liberation can be a perversion. Here, lest I seem to be merely reinstalling the very terms (repression and liberation) that Foucault sought to make bankrupt, I aim to show the Romantics thinking through the limitations of liberation. By recognizing those limits, the Romantics and I can help restore credit to the concept. Often skeptics of sexual liberation miss the skepticism within the sexual liberators. The Romantics recognized that liberation from something was not the same thing as liberty, yet they held onto the concept of liberation because that gave them targets to aim their revolutionary energies against, as well as a belief in a more hopeful future. Finally, Blake’s emphasis on consequences offers a sobering warning to queer theorists at once intent on celebrating the disruptiveness of desire without allowing their own identities to be disrupted by that desire.

To return to Orc’s charge that Urizen had perverted fiery joys into ten commands, I argue that Orc’s charge of perversion enables liberation from Urizen, but to be liberated from Urizen is not to be in the condition of liberty. For one, there are Urizen’s many emanations to combat. For another, the free fall of liberty, the endless turning in Blake, may liberate one from certain constraints, but it does not necessarily achieve liberty. Few would mistake vertigo or a fall into an abyss for freedom. Likewise, as Blake’s Whore of Babylon and Beulah make clear, one may be liberated from the oppressive distrust of the flesh, but that is far from liberty. Whereas the whore transforms an enslavement to denial of the flesh into an enslavement to the flesh, Beulah looks like Eden only to be a vegetated Eden.

Acknowledging the liberty of the flesh to be at considerable distance from liberty itself, Blake reminds us that “the Sexual is Threefold: the Human is Fourfold” (Milton 4:5 E 97). If identity cannot be reduced to the sexual, nor can sexual liberation be liberty. Likewise, in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Blake distances his “Song of Liberty” from his deconstruction of sacred codes: to have profaned the Bible is not yet liberty. And while Jerusalem is “named liberty,” we cannot know what this means until the end of Blake’s epic, and only after we measure “liberty” against how the various audiences Blake addresses construe liberty. Addressing the public, the poet, for example, explicitly distinguishes between the democratic rhetoric that amounts to the “stern demands of Right & Duty instead of Liberty” and “Love” as the bedrock of liberty (Jerusalem 22:11 Paley 164). The gap between liberation from something and liberty enables
Blake a standpoint outside of liberation from which to evaluate the consequences of liberation, and whether those consequences lead to love and liberty. Here since liberation takes the form of “rights and duty,” the poet must ask if this form in fact achieves liberty. Furthermore, this gap enables Blake to measure the costs of sexual liberation and to think about who is really being liberated.

Now that Blake lays the responsibility for identifying perversion at the reader’s doorstep, he warns that the charge of perversion can be merely a projection or transference. Blake annotates Swedenborg thusly, “Many perversely understand him as if man while in the body was only conversant with natural Substances because themselves are mercenary & worldly & have no idea of any but worldly gain” (E 606). A perverse or incorrect understanding of Swedenborg stems from the fact that one’s own materialism leads one to charge others with it. A more careful reader would acknowledge that Swedenborg is never so absolute and that he insists that the mind is a composite of spiritual and natural substances, although Swedenborg does also maintain that thought derives from spiritual substances only. The very phrase “spiritual substance,” however, collapses metaphysics with physics, and it is this collapse that helps make Swedenborg compelling to Blake. But perversion’s ability to transfer its charge from the accuser to the accused and then to cover its tracks makes it so powerful. The accusation of perversion seems to foist perversion onto others when in fact the need to accuse others connects perversion back to the accuser’s identity.

Blake will often turn to the word “perversion” when his ideal sexuality is being threatened. Perverse sexuality thus is an especially dense transfer point of power: Satan accuses Palamabron in *Milton* of perverting the Divine voice into the seven deadly sins and the “infernal scroll/Of Moral laws” (9:21, 23 E 103), when the fault is really his. Rintrah and Tizrah “perverted Swedenborg’s Visions in Beulah & in Ulro,” with Beulah and Ulro being the state of vegetative sexuality (*Milton* 22:46 E 117), while “Rahab and Tizrah pervert” the “mild influences of Enithahmon and her daughters” (*Milton* 29:53 E 128). Where the former hopes that Swedenborg takes the blame, the latter leaves Enithahmon holding the bag. In addition, sex under moral law (generation) seems to Blake a perversion of ideal sex, a destruction of the faculties of sense rather than their redemption. Blake therefore later equates the “Vegetated Mortal Eye” with “perverted & single vision” (*Jerusalem* 53:11 E 202).

But to understand more fully Blake’s concept of perversion, we need to examine the complex role that generation plays in his work. Thomas Frosch is certainly right that “generation is the world of ordinary fallen experience” (187).
Indeed, the word “generation” in Blake frequently takes on distinctly negative overtones, signifying the merely material or the vegetated body so bereft of the spirit that Urizen hammers out. Blake’s commentary on his “A Vision of the Last Judgment” at once links generation with the finite, temporal, vegetative, and deadly (E 555). Perhaps because “generation” evoked biblical hierarchical kin relations (Cody 21), Blake remains suspicious of it.

In Jerusalem, Blake condemns generation, dismissing that “false and Generating Love: a pretence of love to destroy love” (17:25–26 E 161). Moreover, “the Religion of Generation,” Blake declares, “… was meant for the destruction/Of Jerusalem” (7:63 E150). As his symbol of liberty, then, Jerusalem must actively combat the forces of generation. Los’s city of art and manufacture, Golgonooza, which literally contains the Zoas, must continually reach toward and reorient generation if such liberty is to be achieved (12:49, 61 E156). Los directs his fury against the sons of Albion, because he is afraid of the daughters, and of being “vegetated beneath/Their Looms, in a Generation of death & resurrection to forgetfulness” (17: 8–9 E 161). As Thomas Frosch ably put it, “reproduction [in Blake] carries with it the aura of meaningless, self-enclosed, and compulsive repetition that characterizes nature as a whole. The fallen world is a ‘sexual machine’” (E 185); and Los says, “I hear the screech of childbirth loud pealing, & the groans Of Death” (E 175) (Frosch 161). In fact, sexual reproduction for Blake runs dangerously close to the mere reproduction of an ordinary engraver: a form of mere copying rather than imaginative recreation.

In keeping with the poet’s wariness of mere sexual generation, Blake generally dismisses function and organs, which go back to the Greek word for instruments. Given his interest in perversion, Blake unsurprisingly uses the word “function” only twice in his entire work: once in his unengraved The French Revolution and again in his The Four Zoas. In The French Revolution, Orleans, one of Blake’s ostensible heroes, rises to ask, “Can the man be bound in sorrow/Whose ev’ry function is fill’d with its fiery desire?” (182–83 E 294). By imagining desire and function as commensurate, yet opening up desire to include every function, Blake renders it pointedly not teleological, especially since the function of fiery desire in Blake is energy or eternal delight. Orleans’s sense that every function is filled with its fiery desire makes localization conceptual nonsense. Desire is thus paradoxically detached from its instrumental function (reproduction) and turned into functions in themselves. Orleans addresses the National Assembly whose flames are “for growth, not consuming” (179 E 294), a detail which hints at the poet’s democratic sympathies and his alliance with Orleans.
Blake often reminds us that the “organ” appears in organization. Los implores Vala to recognize that “Humanity is far above sexual organization” (*Jerusalem* 79:73–74), and the poet warns us against “sexual organization,” which captures both the sexing of the body into the sexes as well as the genitalizing of sexuality. Such localization moves insistently away from the integrated spiritual body that Blake hopes to achieve. Los admonishes us, for example, to “consider sexual organization & hide thee in the dust” (*Jerusalem* 34:58; Paley 184). That Luvah and Vala are relegated to servants and hierarchy implies that a reorganization of the functions will not promote liberty. Generation entails the separation of and growing friction between the two sexes, a separation that moved mankind away from fourfold vision and made sexuality necessarily a site of strife.

Perverse or functionless sexuality in Blake is potentially a form of liberation: where reproductive sex traps mankind into the material world of nature, perverse sex allows the sexual act to take on imaginative and spiritual reunification of the senses. \(^{17}\) Perverse sex also resists the power of moral law. Thus, generation is on one level a perversion of joy. It is only the fall that has made generation material, painful, and sorrowful. \(^{18}\) Yet, because we only know sexual nature through the fall, it is difficult to return to that original moment.

We need to keep in mind, however, that, although sex without generation is potentially liberating for Blake, it will neither restore human beings to their prelapsarian condition nor necessarily achieve or even lead to liberty. For example, in *Jerusalem*, as Los prays for the resurrection of the savior, he describes how in Beulah “the Female lets down her beautiful tabernacle;/Which the Male enters magnificent between her Cherubim:/And becomes One with her mingling condensing in Self-love/The Rocky Law of Condemnation & double Generation, & Death” (30:34–37; Paley 177). While on the one hand, intercourse represents a unification of the sexes, the fact that this takes place in vegetative Beulah, and the fact that such intercourse only leads to self-love, not self-annihilation, means that such generation, despite its double status, is deadening. Blake thought that selfhood obscured the spiritual and thus demanded nothing less than the sacrifice of the self. \(^{19}\) Los fittingly concludes this prayer by asking the savior to “rend the Veil,” a rending that will strip away whatever positive force double generation has.

Moreover, although the poet’s negative depictions of generation imply that generation perverts fiery joy, generation cannot be subsumed under perversion because Blake paradoxically demands not only a turning away from generation but also an embrace of it. Frosch therefore tells us only half the story when he
equates generation in Blake with fallen perception. Because Blake believes that one must embrace one’s fallen condition in order to begin the process of self-annihilation, to imply that one must turn away from generation—that generation is a perversion—does not get us to self-annihilation. To enter into self-annihilation, one must recognize one’s own sins, embrace them, and then incorporate them. When Blake foists Eve’s fall onto Mary Magdalen, therefore, he makes the fall fortunate in that Mary is able to recognize her own pollution as helping to glorify Jesus’s holiness. Mary says to Jesus, “If I were unpolluted I should never have/Glorified thy holiness” (Jerusalem 61:45–46; Paley 229). To redefine her own pollution as an amplification of Jesus’s holiness is, on the one hand, positive in that Mary is recognizing her own sins. Of course, for Blake, Mary’s sin is not her sexuality; it is her reduction of sexuality to moral law. On the other hand, her use of the term “pollution” still betrays the influence of moral law. The problem comes to a head when we realize that if Mary’s pollution has amplified Jesus’s holiness, her “pollution” is not properly pollution at all, but is instead a form of divinity. That is, she still insists that her fallen sexuality is a perversion. Blake turns to Mary to exemplify the necessity for and difficulty of self-annihilation. While Mary has taken the first step in embracing her sins by turning away from and identifying with them, she still must do more to achieve redemption. Blake thus positions generation within the realm of ordinary fallen experience, but we must both turn away from that experience and turn toward it if we are to achieve redemption.

This is why the poet praises regeneration at the expense of generation, only then to remind us that “generation” appears in both terms.20 The fact that generation appears in both terms implies that sex under moral law can be reconcepted and reimagined and that generation is a part of regeneration, not so much its opposite. Los continues, apostrophizing, “O Holy Generation! [image] of regeneration!/O point of mutual forgiveness between enemies” (7:65–66), once again connecting regeneration with holiness and forgiveness, the first step on the way to self-annihilation.

Inasmuch as self-annihilation requires the ability to reperceive selfhood as a version of generation, it demands an active negation of generation. Active negation must be more than a form of the denial of the generated self; it must also be a reperception and a sacrifice. One must have a self to annihilate it. Blake cannot ultimately choose regeneration over generation, because each makes the other possible. Hence, immediately following Lavater’s statement that “the unison of various powers for one is only WILL, born under the agonies of self-
denial and renounced desires,” Blake writes, “Regeneration” (E 584). Regeneration is the product of human and divine will, a will that must struggle against generation, self-denial, and the suppression of desires. In this struggle generation becomes regeneration. More critically, rather than being simply enemies, self-denial and renounced desires are what give birth to the will or regeneration.

Blake’s unravels this paradox more fully in his annotations to Lavater’s Aphorisms on Man. He redefines generation as a perversion of regeneration, a conceptual redefinition that makes it difficult to divorce one from the other since a reversal in direction is not a negation. Blake asks, “But if man is considered as only evil & god only good [sic]. How then is regeneration effected which turns the evil to good. By casting out the evil. By the good” (E 594).21 Regeneration turns evil into good, a reversal of Milton’s Satan’s perversion of God’s good into evil. To the extent that perversion insists on one wrong direction, it bears the traces of previous turns in direction.22 By acknowledging those multiple previous turns, perversion must persuade rather than insist. Refuting Lavater’s praise for honesty as the absence of self-contradiction, Blake argues that this monistic way of perceiving man fails to explain how the regeneration of generated man is possible. Good can only cast out evil if man is a “two-fold being, one part capable of evil & the other capable of good” (E 594). Blake continues, “Both evil & good cannot exist in a simple being. For thus 2 contraries would. Spring from one essence which is impossible” (E 594). Blake’s sense of mankind’s inherent dualism means not only that the possibility of perversion is always there, but it is there twice. Because both man’s capacity for good and his capacity for evil can be perverted, there is no such thing as simple perversion in Blake. Blake implies that just as the capacities for good and evil are part of man’s complex essences, so must be generation and regeneration. His insistence on the potentiality within both good and evil, rather than on good and evil as essences, further ironizes the idea of either good or evil as essences.

To underscore the fact that regeneration ultimately cannot be separated from generation, Blake writes in “To Tirzah” that “Whate’er is Born of Mortal Birth,/Must be consumed with the Earth/To rise from generation free” (1–3 E 30), thus making generation, at first blush, antithetical to resurrection and liberation. Tirzah is in fact the mother of the mortal body in Blake, and thus the spiritual body who is the “I” of the poem wants nothing to do with Tirzah, having been set free by Jesus’s death. Yet, rather than divorcing itself from mortality, the voice of experience must recognize that only Christ’s self-annihilation of the body enables the spiritual body to rise up. Read with biblical typology in
mind, as Blake’s quotation of I Corinthians 15:44 demands that we do, the first Adam (generation) must pave the way for the second, Jesus (regeneration) (Lincoln 201). Blake, of course, conflated the two in time and space, at times giving Adam the halo of Christ (Genesis Manuscript, First Title Page). Blake’s illustration for “To Tirzah” foregrounds a pitcher of water being held over the pieta of Christ’s body, and this reminds readers that only self-sacrifice of the generated body can lead to baptismal rebirth. Thus, Blake suggests that the speaker’s need to separate generation from regeneration is really a perversion of regeneration. Blake takes the mortal body down off the cross and highlights that body to undercut the speaker’s need to divorce himself from it.

In a stroke of brilliance, Blake culminates Jerusalem with an image of “the all tremendous unfathomable Non-Ens/of Death . . . seen in regenerations terrific” (98:33–34) precisely to insist upon the connection of generation or death (sex under moral law) with regeneration. Line number 33 makes death occur precisely at the age of Christ’s self-annihilation, and turns the unfathomable Non-Ens of death into a meaningful sacrifice of selfhood, a combination that forcefully reminds us that self-negation of the generated self is necessary for resurrection to occur. Blake hated the idea that Christ had been a passive victim of his crucifixion, and so he stresses the activeness of self-sacrifice. Thus, to transform generation, one must initially turn away from it and then value it. That Jesus “must create Luvah” (lust) so that “banished [desire] can return before the resurrection (62:20; 22 Paley 230), brings self-annihilation perversely close to orgasm. The turn of line 33 into 34 also occurs when the Non-Ens/of Death is no longer seen as nothingness but is miraculously transubstantiated into regeneration. With regeneration, death becomes cognizable instead of unfathomable. As the very last word of line 33, Non-Ens, juts out to the very edge of the plate and signifies the nothingness that can be changed into regeneration. Blake tellingly surrounds “Non-Ens” with leafy decorations. The significance of this visual representation is threefold: first, the absence of Non-Ens is countered by the emphatic presence of the word which pushes itself into the margin, thus calling attention to itself. Death is only absence from a fallen perspective. For Blake it is an active negation. Second, “Non-Ens” is surrounded by the vegetative death represented by the leaves and thus begs for regeneration. And, third, the proximity of the Non-Ens to the edge of the plate reaches out to the reader who must activate it into regeneration. Death can be positive as long as resurrection is in sight. Yet, if resurrection is in sight, the Non-Ens of death is the fecklessness of death: death has been reduced to nothingness as opposed to
William Blake, Jerusalem, plate 98 (Rosenwald 1811). Courtesy of the Lessing Rosenwald Collection, the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
being the condition of nothingness. Blake’s perverse turn here suspends the reader between these two meanings of death with the end goal of bringing him or her to the state of self-annihilation. He counters that suspension with his incarnation of Christ, an incarnation that closes much of the gap between generation and regeneration.

This transformation also incarnates the awakening of Jerusalem into his (Jesus’s/Jehovah’s) “Bosom in the life of Immortality” (99:4–5). Of course, Blake emphasizes the simultaneity of the Non-Ens of generation with regeneration in his insistence that the one “is seen in” the other. What appears to the fallen senses as necessarily unfolding through time, Blake reminds us is actually revealed instantaneously. That we are finally told that Jerusalem’s emanations are named Jerusalem enables us to close this temporal gap even as it unifies the emanations of liberty. Elsewhere, Blake’s insistent pun between consume and consummation, linking the physical act of eating with the spiritual act of attaining divinity, also transforms physical orgasm—consummation—into simultaneous religious experience. Indeed, the illustration to plate 99 depicts Jehovah sensuously embracing another: their approaching lips look as if they might kiss, one groin is pulled near Jehovah’s groin, and Jehovah’s hands caress the male—Is that the idealized face of Blake on the nude figure?—or female figure’s left buttock. All of this physicality reminds us of the divinity even within generation.

In Blake’s hands, perversion is an exceptionally flexible instrument, one that announces a turning away but that also demands that readers themselves reevaluate the standards by which perversion is measured. To the extent that perversion can turn and yet suspend moral judgment, the turn of perversion must be initially unpredictable. Because Blake’s ground shifts, the turning of perversion has the possibility of developing into a full-blown vortex. Whereas perversion often works by grounding itself in nature, in Blake, nature is not a stable construct. Los and Urizen constantly hammer nature into form. Not only is nature always shifting because it is continually generated, but also Blake replaces the already shaky ground of nature with the imagination. By making the creative imagination a type of Christ (Tannenbaum 74), and by making the imagination the bridge between Christ and man, Blake argues that nature perverts spirituality. Moving the ground of perversion from nature to the imagination, of course, enables Blake to pervert perversion.

Moreover, the minute that the reader understands generation to be negative, Blake insists that regeneration is positive, leaving the reader grasping at what might possibly distinguish the two. This leads to a necessary reevaluation of
generation and the body. Note the multiple movements here. Generation initially looks perverse in Blake because it is material, divisive, and merely reproductive. Although most would understand sexuality with reproduction as normal, Blake’s sense of generation as being a mechanical and vegetative process turns the normal provisionally into its perversion or sex under moral law. If regeneration forces the reappraisal of generation, since generation is contained within regeneration, generation can no longer be intrinsically perverse. Rather, generation only becomes perverse when it is the ultimate end of sex and does not lead to self-annihilation. As long as generation leads to regeneration, generation is not perverse. This means that although one must initially turn away from generation by recognizing it as a perversion of fiery joy, to turn away from generation blocks regeneration in that one must embrace generation in order to be resurrected. Thus, an initial turning away must lead to an embrace of one’s errors, sins, sex as moral law because that is the only way to regenerate. In sum, by defining moral law as a perversion of joy, Blake has us turn away from moral law and toward joy. But this turning away does not enable regeneration, because regeneration can only be achieved through embracing one’s sins. As he puts it in Jerusalem, “Forgiveness of Sins . . . is Self Annihilation” (98:23 E 257). Thus, Blake has us turn back to the moral law we had rejected so as to incorporate our generated selves back into ourselves so that we can annihilate the self.

If generation is not necessarily a perversion of the imagination, the narrative arc of liberation in Blake is nothing so simple as a liberation from generation to regeneration. Instead, self-annihilation demands that liberation go through the body, not above it. This journey through the body must entail both a rejection of generation as well as an embrace of it. In this way, one can be truly liberated from generation and that liberation can lead to self-annihilating liberty.

We can now perhaps understand why Blake so insistently stages and restages the battle between sexual pleasure and sex under moral law: there are many levels to his argument, self-annihilation occurs in stages, no one character can capture the numerous ways in which generation is maintained and regeneration is facilitated, and self-annihilation demands that we both reject and accept generation, along with the self that is part of generation. Consider the range of characters who represent sexual energy of one kind or another. A preliminary list would include Orc, Luvah, Leutha, Jesus, Antamon, Ahania, Enitharmon, Oothoon, Ololon, Tharmas, Rahab, Reuben, Vala, Tirzah, and the Whore of Babylon. In Blake, furthermore, sexuality and the division of power extend to the particularity of individuality. This divisive individuality cloaks power under
identity. Therefore, Blake’s concept of self-annihilation dissolves both sexual division and identity. If self-annihilation is literalized in orgasm, desire disrupts the power that comes with sexual individuation, the power that is cloaked under identity so that it does not seem like power. In Milton, self-annihilation takes the form of fellatio, an act that Blake undercuts with the words a “fallacy (phal- lusy) of Satan’s churches” (plate 44 E 141) in the plate immediately before. This reminds us of how easily orgasm can enhance selfhood rather than undermine it.

Thus, sexual liberation in Blake offers a number of key cautions to queer theory. For one, as Jonathan Dollimore argues, queer theorists regularly celebrate the inherent disruptiveness of desire only then to recontain that disruptiveness within identity (homosexuality, queerness, bottoms, or tops) (Dollimore Sex 26–29). Blake, by contrast, uses sexual desire to dissolve identity because he recognizes that identity is a powerful cloak for power. As Elfenbein argues, following traditional male gender roles often reduces male characters to “ineffective heaps of egomania” (Romantic Genius 153). The overwhelming thrust of Jerusalem is the dissolution of individuality. Blake’s insistence that we must consider the consequences of any act of liberating or perverting resists an identity politics that equates one’s own outing from the closet as intrinsically liberating. He knows too well that declaring one’s identity in terms of one’s desires tends to tame the disruptiveness of desire. Finally, if liberation is held up to higher standards of liberty, self-annihilation, and love, the mere approval of perverse sexuality cannot in itself be necessarily liberating because approval does not dismantle the logic of perversion; it merely reverses the direction of perversion.

For Blake, perverse sex by itself had no necessary connection to liberty. Even though perverse forms of sexuality fly in the face of moral law, the rejection of moral law in itself does not lead to the poet’s ultimate goal of the rejection of selfhood. For self-annihilation to occur, one must reject and embrace moral law. Blake therefore can both celebrate homosexuality in Milton and conceive of Satan’s homosexuality as Leutha’s “stupefying [of his] masculine perceptions, and keep[ing] only the feminine awake” (12:5–6). As a symbol of Blake’s weak patron Hayley, Satan allows himself to be made effeminate by no less than Leutha, representing sexual guilt and sin. Blake renders homosexuality as a form of stupefying of Satan’s masculine perceptions so that the feminine perceptions can take over, a representation that offers a universalizing narrative of homosexuality insofar as we all have masculine and feminine perceptions.

True, this characterization is Leutha’s, and because Leutha represents sin, critics have dismissed the possibility that Blake is thinking about homosexual-
ity in terms of effeminacy. But any clear distance between Leutha and Blake is undercut by the fact that Blake considered the male allowing the female to be on top as a form of foppery and that he wrote of Hayley, “Of H’s birth this was the happy lot/His Mother on his Father him begot” (E 506). Blake does at times think like Leutha. Elfenbein demonstrates how effeminacy/foppery got “pushed closer” to sodomy in the Romantic period (21), and such rapprochement meant that same-sex acts were in part forms of gender deviance.25 Blake writes, “Unappropriate Execution is the Most nauseous of all affectation & foppery” (E 178). While foppery here stands for civic decay, the sodomite was the very embodiment of the ultimate civic decay, and thus Blake draws upon a chain of signifiers that show ambivalence to some forms of “perverse” sexuality. Yet this ambivalence is not hypocritical because Blake never argues that perverse sex is intrinsically liberating: the suspension of function/reproduction must have consequences in order to be liberating. Once again Blake’s emphasis on consequences rather than function transforms perversion into a kind of purposiveness. The couplet seeks to understand something about Hayley’s nature in light of Hayley’s mother’s sexual assertiveness. In taking the top position, she did something to Hayley. Blake demands that we think of the consequences of perverse sex rather than embrace it as a good in and of itself. That Leutha annihilates herself for her father’s (Satan’s) sins in Milton further indicates that Blake embraces rather than rejects Leutha, an embrace that symbolizes his own self-annihilation as well as his own embrace of his own sin. To the extent that Leutha models self-annihilation—sin embraces sin so that she may redefine it—Blake recognizes the costs of his gender attitudes. Self-annihilation, moreover, has the potential to counter the poet’s phallocentrism even as the poet unsexes strength and “punctures constricting gender roles” when characters keep up with “exhausted conventions” (Elfenbein RG 153).26

Because he mistakes approval of perverse sexuality in Blake for liberation, Christopher Hobson is thus forced to argue that Blake eventually approves of masturbation. To equate perverse sex with liberation in Blake is to ignore the poet’s insistence on consequences. Where function welds sex to reproduction, consequences allow for results that are not always known in advance and re-define function as being too narrowly construed. Hobson writes, validation of masturbation in turn leads to “validation of other types of perverse sexuality, and then to an incomplete revision of his idealization of the male” (36). Although Blake would have had little truck with the demonizing of masturbation, the problem is that it tends to lead to self-love, which is antithetical to self-
annihilation. To wit, Blake’s descriptions of masturbation in the *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* emphasize not the liberation of desire but rather the religious constraints that pervert “the moment of desire” into the “creation of an amorous image/In the shadows of his curtains and in the folds of his silent pillow” (7:3–7 E 50). These are precisely the “places of religion,” Blake wryly comments (7:8). Blake thus sees masturbation as the inherently paradoxical “self-enjoyings of self-denial” (7:9), a formulation that enables religion to perpetuate its power as pleasure. Hence, he objects to masturbation because it can use orgasm to consolidate the self: it may look like self-annihilation but often achieves its opposite.

Blake further harnesses the disruptive turning of perversion by emphasizing that moral categories are really false names for things rather than essential descriptions of truth or right. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake insists that conventional morality is merely language, words that have lost any connection to the thing itself. John Mee reminds us of the antinomian resonances of *The Marriage*, where Blake so celebrates the spirit over the letter of the law that he “represents grace as the reward of transgression” (58). Hence Blake insists that from reason and energy, attraction and repulsion, “spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy. Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell” (3). By making good and evil mere words used by the religious, Blake demands that readers reassess why they value one at the expense of the other. In the process, “religious” has become a mere word, too. Blake then perverts Evil into a Good by making evil active rebellion as opposed to passive obedience. But he does not stop turning there. Blake then equates good with Heaven and evil with Hell, an equation that merely substitutes one empty signified for another. Now that Heaven is twice removed from good, insofar as it now stands for passive obedience and that passive obedience is what the religious label good, Blake can further destabilize perversion by making it merely a word used for good or ill. As my use of the *Marriage* suggests, Blake valued perversion when it prompted mental revolution.

**Body, Medicine, and Text**

Beyond Blake’s concept of perversion, his very idea of the term demands our rethinking of how body and text work. For Blake, perversion is about epistemological uncertainty, and thus he transforms the function of perversion—the delivery of immediate and unarguable moral judgments that are often grounded
in the body—from performative immediacy to performative vortex. The twists and turns in Blake’s treatment of generation and its relation to regeneration imply that the body is an especially flexible form of materiality, as does his sense of orgasm as bodily sensation that can lead to self-annihilation. Performative vortex then leads to incarnation into the holy lust of Christ. Blake’s paradoxically uniting self-annihilation with incarnation indicates his skepticism about perfect embodiment. Again, rather than being pure, Blake regards texts as being “unperverted.” And, because Christ is for Blake the very embodiment of perversion—Blake takes especial pride in the fact that Christ broke every one of the Ten Commandments and that “no virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments” (MHH 21 E 43)—incarnation into Christ is simultaneously incarnation into perversion. Perverse incarnation, thus, enables Blake to move beyond Urizen’s naive incarnation; where Urizen not only believes his brass books to be perfect incarnations (fully embodied meanings that would deny the transformative powers of perception), but also that his children incarnate his will (thereby denying them free will), Blake yokes together incarnation and self-annihilation, generation and regeneration, along with Christ’s sins and mercy to preserve a gap between incarnation and meaning. Such a gap demands an aesthetic apprehension of embodiment, one that gauges the extent to which the form of liberation yields liberation. His concept of perverse incarnation thus harnesses the disruptive powers of deferral and the incarnational powers of reference because the self under moral law must be embraced so that it can be annihilated.

I have already hinted that our postmodern faith in textualism—“that language has an intrinsic capacity to detach itself from material circumstances” (Terdiman 76)—has led us to overestimate the intransigence of materiality and to underestimate its capacity for change. Textualism has also led us to misunderstand how body and text function in Blake, a misunderstanding that has, in turn, led to the belief that sexual liberation in Blake can only be achieved by transcending the body (see Porter and Hall 32), or to the idea that Blake thought that the deferral of language was inherently liberating. Rather than seeing liberation as working from the body into speech, from materiality into malleable text, Blake recognized that the body was a crucial agent and object of change, and that speech was not the same thing as liberty. And rather than emploting liberation along a predictable narrative arc from body into text—one that testifies to our postmodern faith in textualism—Blake, by contrast, sought to harness the liberating possibilities within both bodies and texts, along with
both the incarnational and deferring capacities of language itself, a dual capacity writ large in the idea of Christ as the incarnation of perversion. Blake reminds us of Christ’s perversions when he praises him for refusing to convict Mary of adultery, and when he delights in Christ’s “lay[ing] his hand on Moses Law [sic]” (“Everlasting Gospel” f E 521). Christ’s defiance of Moses results in “The Ancient Heavens in Silent Awe/Writ with Curses from Pole to Pole/All away began to roll” (ibid.). In the process, the Ten Commandments can now be seen for what they are: curses. Finally, if orgasm leads to self-annihilation, the body can be a site of both incarnation and deferral, the recognition of the difference (generation) within the self even as the self is reincarnated into the perverse body of Christ.

Textualism has also blinded us to the differing possible outcomes of linguistic embodiment. While the Romantics generally sought a kind of natural sign that would contain the arbitrariness of Lockean signs, they could also turn to language as Logos to counter our fallen condition even as they dismantled it to get rid of tyranny. If the arbitrariness of the letter helped to disconnect language from authority, then incarnation could bring the ideal within human reach. While our faith in textualism has engendered blindness to the fact that both language as deferral and language as embodiment can be put to liberating or tyrannical ends, our amazement that Blake united conception and execution in his printing process, making his direct composition onto copper plates into autographic sketches, has blinded us to Blake’s perverse incarnations, bodies that resist perfect embodiment even as they attempt to transform word into flesh. Joseph Viscomi’s magisterial Blake and the Idea of the Book is in part driven by a polemic against différance, the theory that language defers meaning. On the one hand, Viscomi emphasizes Blake’s autographic hand uniting conception and execution; on the other, he tames the gaps between word and thing by reminding us that Blake’s works were produced in editions, and this meant that the illuminated books could not have had the individual intentional instabilities that critics have celebrated. By contrast, Morris Eaves’s caution that Blake actively orients his aesthetic “toward conception and away from execution” (179) is much more forgiving of différance. Blake’s antinomian background, moreover, meant that he recognized that the letter could obfuscate the spirit, especially when the letter became law, and explains why he attempts to quicken the spirit at the expense of the letter (Mee 58). That “fiery joy” can so easily be translated into the fires of Blake’s acid baths further blinds us to how Blakean incarnation resists logocentrism. After all, acid annihilates and thus allows meaning to occur. Lin-
guistic deferral, fueled by antinomianism, can help undermine authority from within, just as the differing editions of the illuminated books reinscribe that deferral onto Blake’s rhetoric of unifying composition and execution.

Our distrust of materiality, furthermore, has meant that we underestimate the capacity of Blake’s bodies to deliver change, even as we substitute the body of Blake’s printed texts for the physical body. Thus, in a suggestive study of the body in Blake, Tristanne Connolly underestimates what the fallen body in Blake can do (71), and embodiment, whether Urizenically fixed or Reuben-like in its flexibility, only leads to fallen generation. In his Genesis manuscript, Blake titles chapter 3 “Of the Sexual Nature and Its Fall into Generation and Death,” a title that insists “sexual nature” predates the fall of man, and thus there is nothing intrinsically wrong with sexual nature, and by extension the human body. The fact that Blake thinks regeneration stems from generation means that bodies have as much potential for liberating pleasures, which may or may not lead to liberty, as they do Urizenic oppression. Jerusalem, after all, ends with a celebration of the “Human Form” and imagines the awakening of those forms into Christ’s bosom. If Blake’s “Life of Immortality” goes through Christ’s bosom, and the illustration reminds us that Christ has a real bosom, the body is the ground for utopia, not its enemy. To the extent that the generated body grounds Blake’s utopia, he is neither a strictly utopian thinker (Williams) nor an ideological escapist turning toward idealism when the French Revolution gets too bloody. If transcendence in Blake goes through as opposed to above the body, we will also have to learn to see Blake’s idealism as nothing less than a thorough social engagement with the body. And, although Blake is acutely aware of what can go wrong with the body in that the senses can constrict him into a caverned man, situating him within the medicine of his time can remind us that he knew what could go right.

This distrust of materiality has also led Blake critics to underestimate the force of language as incarnation, the word as Christ’s flesh, while trust in incarnation has led to overestimation of what embodiment can do. That textualism and incarnation both want language to foster liberation—one sees liberation from authority within linguistic difference, the other sees liberation from our fallen condition in incarnation or in words as Christ’s perverted body—suggests that neither texts nor bodies have any monopoly on liberation. Leslie Tannenbaum has argued that Blake’s sense of incarnation was “broadly conceived” in that he equated Christ with the poetic imagination, thus allowing the prophet to both communicate the word and be the word (74–76). Incarnation, however,
raises a problem, one that Tannenbaum sleights, in that how do we reconcile language as incarnation with language as deferral with the fact that Blake distrusted the notion of language as Logos because it inevitably led to tyranny?

I suggest that whenever language threatens to become law, Blake seeks to remind us of the spirit that perverts the law. Urizen’s tablets of brass indicate Urizen’s naively incarnational view of language because he does not acknowledge the possibility that the tablets themselves might be perversions of God. By contrast, Blake relies on a paradoxical view of Christian incarnation, one that recognizes the capacity of deferral to ironize what is being incarnated. Because Christ perverts each of the Ten Commandments, incarnation into Christ mandates the supplementing of the Ten Commandments into art of writing. As the very incarnation of perversion, Christ embodies both sin and the forgiveness of sin, generation, and regeneration. Nonetheless, whenever language seeks to reunite and expand the senses into Christ’s body, language results in a liberating incarnation as long as Christ perverts Urizen. By allowing forgiveness to triumph over law, as when Blake rereads the mark of Cain not in terms of God’s curse but rather in terms of God’s forgiveness, Blake enables Urizen’s naive incarnationalism to become incarnation into Christ. Blake demands that we too filter our Old Testament God through a God of love and forgiveness, so that we can see the true significance behind the Old Testament. Hence, the pencil sketch shows that Blake’s mark of Cain is really God’s kiss (Genesis Manuscript 11). By emphasizing New Testament spirit over Old Testament letter, Blake enables naive incarnationalism to become incarnation; now the son can regenerate the father. Thus, even generation (sex under moral law) can become regeneration by an imaginative act, one that reminds us of the spirit that has always been within the letter but, since the fall, obscured by the letter.

Blake’s insistence upon consequences, furthermore, helps us further to distinguish between naive incarnation and perverse incarnation. Because one must stand outside the immediacy of even sexual experience in order to evaluate the consequences for that experience, Blake demands an ironic stance to even incarnation. To the extent that words lead to law and punishment, and therefore deny the need for interpretation, that is naive incarnation. To the extent that words lead to forgiveness and self-annihilation, that is perverse incarnation, an embrace of one’s sins so that they can be forgiven and a simultaneous disembodiment of the generated body and regeneration. Readers are obligated, moreover, to recognize naive incarnation as a perversion of incarnation, to then convert that naiveté into Christ-like incarnation, by turning away from it and then em-
bracing it. We can do so by suffusing ourselves with the spirit and not the law and by rereading the Old Testament as a type of Christian forgiveness.

Consequences, moreover, provide the poet with an aesthetic stance from which to gauge perversion and to see if perversion amounts to sexual liberation or even liberty. Just because Blake valued a flexible body does not mean that he could not see the limitations of the body: sexual pleasure leads to re-enslavement in Beulah, and selfish sexual pleasure moves away from self-annihilation and love, not toward them. By reminding us that the ground may be the perversion of the ground, Blake warns us that what looks like liberation and the free expression of desire may not be terribly liberating. Earth answers the Father of Ancient Men that his “free love [is] with bondage bound” (E 19), and Blake here insists that the forms that free love must take must be scrutinized. For whom is free love free? Moreover, if perverse sex (sex without reproduction) does defy moral law, the defiance of moral law is not in and of itself liberty. Getting rid of moral law only produces liberty if there are no other forms of repression. To wit, Blake describes masturbation as the “self-enjoyings of self-denial,” a definition that insists not only that pleasure has failed to escape moral law but also that moral law intensifies pleasure. Getting rid of moral law, of course, will not achieve self-annihilation.

Now that I have laid out many of the unfortunate consequences of our inability to come to terms with Blakean materiality or textuality, let me unsettle once more Blake’s concept of perversion, by putting Blake’s bodies in a contemporary medical context. Medicine grounds Blakean optimism that the fallen body can be regenerated and that the body under moral law can become the incarnation of Christ, liberty, and divine imagination. More crucially, contemporary medical and botanical understandings of the body would allow Blake to collapse body/utopia, body/text, body/allegory, real/ideal, materiality/transcendence, and feminine/masculine, thereby making the ideal attainable within the body and regeneration possible.

Blake’s optimism that the generated body could be regenerated in the same way as naive could become perverse incarnation was intensified by the fact that regeneration was a hot topic in the burgeoning biological sciences. Building on Bonnet’s work on regenerating polyps and Reamur’s work on earthworms’ ability to regenerate lost parts, Abbe Spallanzani demonstrated in 1769 that lower forms of life like salamanders, slugs, tadpoles, and earthworms could literally and repeatedly “regenerate” lost or missing limbs or tails. Spallanzani marveled at how the salamander could regenerate its tail, legs, and jaws: “this regen-
eration is so much more surprising than that which takes place in the craw-fish and small lizard, as the structure of these parts in the salamander is infinitely more complicated and refined” (58). Spallanzani ends this treatise by asking if “the flattering expectation of obtaining this advantage for ourselves be considered entirely as chimerical?” (86).

Spallanzani was not the only scientist of the period interested in the body’s ability to regenerate itself. Monsieur Le Cat published an article in the Royal Society’s 1766 Philosophical Transactions on the regeneration of human bones in a three-year-old French child and in a forty-one-year-old soldier. Blake was apprenticed to James Basire, the official engraver to the Royal Society from 1772 to 1779, and perhaps had access to the Philosophical Transactions. Le Cat urged surgeons not to amputate limbs “when there is a possibility of bringing about this sort of regeneration” (277). Here, regeneration is both divine and human, brought about by the surgeon’s knowledge and nature’s help. In 1785, Charles White published a pamphlet “On the Regeneration of Animal Substances,” based on a paper he read at the Royal Society on December 1782. Citing the work of Le Cat, Monro, and William and John Hunter, White concluded that “in the human species, not only flesh, skin, bones, may be regenerated, but membranes, ligaments, cartilages, glands, blood vessels, and even nerves” (16). Moreover, he posited that this might be explained by the ability of “coagulable lymph, which is poured out, and becomes vascular, and forms organized parts” (17). He concluded, “In some animals, we see this regenerating, and living principle, carried still to a much greater length, where not only whole limbs, but even the more noble organs are reproduced” (17). Blake uses “lymph” only once in his entire works, and like White understands it to be a basic building unit of the body. In The Book of Urizen, “the void shrunk the lymph into Nerves” (13:56). For Blake, it would seem that “lymph” is not only ontologically prior to the void, but it is also a unit of the body that has not yet been localized or specialized into organs. “Shrunk” depicts this biological specialization in terms of loss.

Seen in light of Spallanzani’s, Le Cat’s, and White’s scientific studies of regeneration, Blakean regeneration becomes less ideal and more immediate: less theory, and more actuality. Although the poet certainly associates generation with the material world of pain and death and regeneration with the spiritual, he often reminds us that generation is literally within regeneration. That is, the physical and spiritual bodies are one. Hence, in Milton, Blake envisions the moment when “Generation is swallowed up in Regeneration” (41:28 E 143). Of course, the word “generation” is already literally swallowed up by “regenera-
tion.” Indeed, “swallowing up” reminds us of the body even as it depicts resurrection. Notwithstanding the fact that Blake insists that the “Religion of Generation . . . was meant for the destruction/Of Jerusalem,” he later suggests that “O holy Generation! [Image] of regeneration” (Jerusalem 7: 63–64 E 150). The parallelism of the phrases recalls the sublime of the Bible and suggests that the one is contained within the other. Very close to the end of Jerusalem, Blake describes “the all tremendous unfathomable Non-Ens/of death was seen in regeneration terrific” (98:33–34 E 258). Because the nonentity of death can now be seen within regeneration, Blake reminds us that body and spirit are not at odds as long as perception does not obfuscate one within the other. Shot through with regenerative powers, then, the mortal body is holy.

Furthermore, since biological sex was a much more mobile set of categories than it is now, the poet could justifiably hope for the end of sex under moral law. Sexual division could be overcome if sexual difference was still in the state of flux. That the Romantic period worked through competing models of sex—from one sex to two—meant that sexual difference had not yet hardened into stone. Indeed, Blake can image the vanishing of the sexes (E 252) because they were a construction very much in formation.

Orc, we recall, gets to work at the age of fourteen, and since puberty was in the Romantic period a state of dynamic change from two feminized sexes into masculine strength and female weakness, not to mention a window of up to twenty years, the body was literally in transition. Orc is revolution in puberty, perhaps recalling the French medical descriptions of puberty as revolution, making him an embodiment of revolution not yet fully sexed. Just as puberty shows the body to be capable of enormous change, so does revolution foster bodily change. As the flexible if material embodiment of revolution, puberty helps explain why Blake celebrates the androgynous, why he is obsessed with hermaphrodites and equates them with being a two-fold form (Milton 19:32), why a part of Jerusalem takes place in Middlesex, and why the fall of man begins in puberty in The Four Zoas. The medical discourse about hermaphrodites sought to make sex not a problem of ontology, but rather a problem of epistemology: how do we know that we have a real hermaphrodite, especially since the culture thought of the penis and clitoris as relatively interchangeable organs? Understanding the human body to be in transition between sexes not only enhances epistemological uncertainty about sex itself, but it also enables Blake to see sexing of the body as part of a fallen condition rather than a given, just as it offers hope that the sexes can be reunited into one. It is not as far from
Middlesex in England (plate 90) to the Jerusalem of the everlasting imagination: indeed, we have only to turn ten plates to get from one to the other. Without being able to see the generated bodies within Blake’s regenerated bodies, we misread idealism as escapism, when in fact nothing could be further from the truth.

The poet’s critique of sexual organization and genital sexuality could well have been informed by Albrecht von Haller’s relocation of the sensations of the erections of the penis and breast nipple from the organs of generation to the soul/mind/brain. In his *Memoirs of Albrecht von Haller*, for which Blake engraved a frontispiece portrait, Thomas Henry rehearsed Haller’s distinction between mechanical muscular irritation, not under control of the will, and the sensible activity of the brain/nerves, the organs of pleasure (72–75). Therefore, when Blake has Urizen command Luvah and Vala to be “servants” and “return O Love in peace/Into your place the place of seed not in the brain or heart” in Night Nine of *The Four Zoas* (9:363–65 E 395), Urizen turns back to a physiology before Haller, one that sought to limit sexuality only to the genitals, and only to mechanical processes. By equating such a return with servitude, and by connecting such servitude with being “thrown down from their high station/In the eternal heavens of Human Imagination” (*FZ* 9:367–68 E 395), Blake suggests that the furnaces Urizen repeatedly uses to lock up Luvah allegorizes the return of the seed to the genitals even as it allows Blake’s acid baths to restore lust to its rightful place: throughout the body and particularly to the brain, the place where the soul resides. Indeed, whereas Urizen thinks furnaces are forms of containment, the poet connects their fires with “Mental flames” (E 39), thus ironizing Urizen’s repressive desires. Haller thus allows Blake to connect sexuality with the immaterial mind/soul, enhancing its potential divinity, and to refuse the sexual organization that comes with reorganizing Luvah into the organs of generation and the body as machine. Henry referred to Haller’s *Dissertation on the Sensitive and Irritable Parts of Animals* as having achieved a “revolution in anatomy” (75), one that Urizen seeks to overturn. Should Urizen get his way, the body will revert back to a mechanistic materialism and away from one that understood the body as suffused with a vital principle both within and above matter.36

From the standpoint of Romantic medical terminology, Blake’s negative treatment of generation actively seeks to pervert what were known as the “organs of generation”—the genitals—into fiery joy. Organs of generation that do not generate are ontological oxymorons. To the extent that scientists in the Romantic period actively showed how sexual pleasure had no necessary connec-
tion to reproduction, Blake’s hostility to limiting the genitals to generation was part of a larger cultural hostility of limiting pleasure to function. Indeed, Blake never uses the term “organs of generation,” preferring instead to invoke the genitals or the loins. The closest he comes is to refer to “some organs for craving and lust” in *The Book of Ahania*, but that is to empty out the genitals of generation. Blake makes these organs part of Urizen’s “army of horrors” (4:6): having cast out Ahania or pleasure, Urizen now seeks to repress mankind through the body. Thomas Frosh has argued that genital sexuality in Blake is a form of tyrannical centralization, and this suggests another reason why Blake eschews the term “organs of generation” (162–63).

The fact that Blake describes Orc at his birth as a worm (Urizen 19) and then as a serpent connects Orc physiologically to the sperm. Spallanzani had proven that generation could not take place without physical contact between the female organs of generation and the semen, and Erasmus Darwin had referred to the sperm as “spermatic worms.” Orc thus acquires a powerful, if phallocentric, but continuously shifting form of embodiment, one that could provide a material ground for Blakean idealistic revolution. Because worms are etymologically related to snakes, Orc’s transformation from worm to serpent allegorizes the body’s embryological development, albeit in a masculine one, and gives Orc’s revolutionary fires transformative embodiment.

Blake’s emphasis on the consequences of unperverting the Bible in his annotations to Watson might have come from his reading in physiognomy and phrenology, and the general wariness many scientific writers had have toward materiality lest they be accused of ascribing to French atheism. Thus, Lavater insists that facial features only indicate potentiality, while Spurzheim and Gall relentlessly generate organs of the mind but then have to insist that the mere existence of those organs will not determine one’s actions, and the organs are really more ideas than organs. Rather, the presence of organs only amounts to a predisposition toward the particular behavior, not the material embodiment of the behavior. Might not Blake’s awareness of the capacity of evil and the consequences of actions done in the name of liberty owe something to the physiognomical and phrenological idea of a predisposition or propensity? Likewise, Blake’s ability to see generation as having the capacity for regeneration suggests that generation can have a predisposition to regeneration, especially if one recognizes that Christ dwells within the human body. By so insisting upon gaps between the material body and human behavior, Gall and Spurzheim attempted to deflect charges of materialism. Gall and Spurzheim’s ideas were widely dif-
fused in the Romantic period, appearing, for example, in Henry Crabb Robinson’s article for *Rees’s Cyclopedia* (Richardson 2001 36), and Blake prepared multiple illustrations for this work. Robinson sought out Blake in the spring of 1810 for his German article on Blake (Bentley 296). We know that Blake read Spurzheim’s 1817 *Observations on Insanity*, and Spurzheim insisted that both “external impression[s] and internal predispositions of the mind” combine to reduce the mind to insanity (154).

Blake filled the margins of Lavater’s 1788 *Aphorisms on Man* with much praise, and engraved four plates for Lavater’s 1788 *Essays on Physiognomy*. In his “Public Address,” we can hear Blake’s bravado when he claims, “It only remains to be Certified whether Physiognomic Strength & Power is to give place to Imbecillity” (E 571). Lavater writes in his *Essays* that “certain situations of mind frequently repeated, produce propensities, propensities become habits, and passions are their offspring” (1:135). On the one hand, propensities insist on a gap between the material shape of the head and the immaterial mind. Materiality is thus distinguished from immateriality in much the same way that Blake initially separates generation from regeneration. On the other hand, propensities are the link between materiality and immateriality and thus Lavater explains how the material interacts with the immaterial, how generation can lead to regeneration. That the body was so malleable as to “assume the habits, gestures, and looks of persons with whom we live in close harmony” (3:195), made it at least partly capable of realizing Blake’s ideal of the unification of the sexes. While Blake would certainly have objected violently to Lavater’s attempts to make perversity (sexual immorality, criminality) visible on a person’s face, Lavater does say that “I have seen men the most perverse . . . all their malignity, all their blasphemies, all their efforts to oppress innocence, could not extinguish on the faces the beams of divine light” (2:41). Blake would have found especially provocative the fact that perversity could not extinguish divinity; by analogy, no amount of generation could extinguish the capacity for regeneration.

The poet’s connections to the radical Joseph Johnson circle meant that he potentially had access to much of the key medical literature of his day. Johnson was one of the three major medical publishers in London. While I do not have the space to survey this vast literature, I want to suggest at least one current. The poet’s imagery of childbirth resonates differently in light of the 1790s dispute between men-midwives Thomas Denham and William Osborn, both published by Johnson. What made their dispute so vitriolic was the fact that they had once practiced midwifery together. Where Osborn insisted that women’s
generation was necessarily painful, and so mandated by God, Denham, by contrast, insisted that parturition was a “natural” process, “not... generally requiring assistance” (Introduction 2:1). At issue are two competing understandings of nature: Osborne’s, which distrusted nature, and especially female nature, arguing for example that the intricate passage of the pelvis made it impossible for childbirth not to be difficult and painful (14), and Denham’s, which urged that men-midwives restrain themselves from intervention because nature “should be suffered to have its own course” (2:1). Osborn therefore emphasized the need for active male control over female childbirth. Read in light of this controversy, Blake’s depictions of childbirth remind us of the falleness of generation and childbirth in that they are generally accompanied by pain. But they also remind us of the reasons why he could think of generation as not being too far from regeneration. Denham’s view would have helped him to see that generation did not have to imply either the curse of God, or male dominance over the female body, or the necessary falleness of nature.

The degenerating and rheumatic body, moreover, could be regenerated by electricity, once again grounding utopia within the living body. Blake was in fact a witness to just such a transformation. Blake’s own and his wife’s physician, John Birch, was a leading practitioner of medical electricity. Blake refers to Birch’s “Electrical Magic” in his letter to Hayley of December 1804 and to the fact that his wife had discontinued these treatments in these three months, indicating that Catherine had been under his care earlier in that year. In October 1804, Blake had indeed rejoiced in his wife’s recovery: “Electricity is the wonderful cause; the swelling of her legs and knees is entirely reduced” (E 756). This was, of course, also the year in which Blake inscribed on the title page of Milton, and in that work, Blake describes, “Albions sleeping Humanity began to turn upon his Couch;/Feeling the electric flame of Milton’s awful precipitate descent” (20:25–26). Viscomi informs us that “Milton was not in draft or in production before 1804” (315). Electrical shock is precisely what the sleeping Albion needs to regenerate his body; one might even imagine Blake watching Catherine on the couch while undergoing Birch’s therapy. That Blake compares Milton’s descent to an electrical flame links the onset of self-annihilation to electricity. In 1802, Joseph Johnson reprinted Birch’s 1792 Essay on the Medical Application of Electricity, and in it Birch marveled at the fact that “so mighty a power, capable of extinguishing life at a stroke, may with discretion, be passed through the tender fabric of the brain!” (iv). Birch himself described his application of electricity: “When I wish to apply the fluid, I connect by a smooth
wire the glass-mounted director to the conductor with a point at it’s [sic] extremity, and the radii are projected from it to the part affected. When desirous of propelling the sparks, I change the point for the ball. When the shock is intended, the circuit of the Leyden jar must be made” (Adams 522). Electricity was helpful because it acted as a “sedative, stimulant, and deobstruent” (Adams 521).

Blake’s symbolic use of medical electricity thus occurs just at the moment when the narrator reminds us that “thou art cloth’d with human beauty O thou mortal man./Seek not thy heavenly father then beyond the skies” (20:31–32). Blake urges us to look within our own bodies for God, and electricity reinforces the divinity within man. Birch thus framed electricity between annihilation and miracle cure. Because electricity was thought to be either a subtle ether that could permeate porous matter or an electrical fluid that revealed the Promethean spark to be real (Fulford 16–17), electricity thus helped to restore belief in regeneration of man’s otherwise dead flesh. As the prototype for Albion, Catherine Blake hints that women are not beyond divinity and redemption.

John Hunter’s 1794 Treatise on the Blood, Inflammation and Gun-Shot Wounds, published by Joseph Johnson in the very same year that Blake produced the First Book of Urizen, informs Blake’s depiction of the “red globules of life blood” of Urizen. Hunter challenged Hewson, who claimed the globules of blood were not really globules at all (40). Blake may have known Hunter and he satirizes him in An Island in the Moon. Not only did Hunter think the blood held the principle of life (it was the vital fluid), but also Hunter made it clear that globules of blood were a particularly flexible form of matter. Blake alludes to a “red globule of blood” twice in Milton; indeed, Blake’s point that the microscope and telescope “alter/the ratio of the Spectators Organs but leave Objects untouched” (Milton 29:16–18 E 127) specifically recalls Hunter’s warning about how magnifying glass in particular distorts the perception of objects. Comparing how the eye sees to how objects are seen through a magnifying glass, Hunter notes: “In such a situation, respecting our eye, all the relative objects by which the eye, from habit, judges with more nicety of the object itself, are cut off; the eye has likewise a power of varying its forms, adapting it to the different distances of the parts of an object within its compass, making the object always a whole; but a magnifying glass must be made to vary its position, and bring in succession the different parts of the hemisphere into so many focal points” (Treatise 42).

Hunter claimed that “to conceive that blood is endowed with life, while circulating, is perhaps carrying the imagination as far as it well can go; but the difficulty arises merely from its being fluid, the mind not accustomed to the idea
of a living fluid” (77). Hunter explicitly invokes the “imagination” here, and calls upon it to help make a connection between life and fluid; matter does not preclude imagination. Blake also equates blood and life, insisting upon the “trembling” “globe of life blood” twice in *Urizen* (15:13 E 78 and 18:1 E 78). The immortals behold this trembling, and the fact that this trembling enjams over three plates, and that such trembling culminates in the branching out of the blood into roots and fleshly fibers, further indicates Blake’s physiological debts to Hunter. Indeed, Hunter suggested that although “the coagulation of the blood, would seem to be unconnected with life, yet life could not go on without it; for as all the solid parts of the body are formed from the blood, this could not take place, if there did not exist in it the powers of coagulating” (17). For Hunter, blood provides the basic building materials for the body. “Trembling” further signifies a complete and living body because for Hunter, bodies must contain “body, blood, and motion (circulation)” (86). “The three make up a complete body,” he concludes (86). Urizen’s failure to recognize the life within blood thus is an imaginative failure, and it is one that even medicine tried to forestall in its insistence upon the gaps between dead anatomy and living physiology, body parts and body. It is no surprise that the bodies Urizen creates are by Hunter’s standards incomplete, more dead than alive.

Hence, in *Urizen*, blood mediates between the abstract and brooding Urizen and the creation of material bodies. The outset of Urizen emphasizes abstraction and shadows and void, but when the heavens awaken, “vast clouds of blood roll’d/Round the dim rocks of Urizen” (4:40 E 71). The presence of blood as an especially flexible form of materiality even within the void means that there is nothing about materiality itself that makes it fallen. To the extent that one can imagine a materiality that is not bereft of spirit or life, even bodily materiality need not equate to fallenness. More to the point, blood offers a kind of corporeal materiality that can counter abstraction yet not ossify into fixity and, as such, clues us in to how the body can provide a via media between shadows and substance. Urizen’s creation of a dead womblike structure “vast, petrific around” (*Urizen* 5: 28–29 E 73) shows his failure to grasp the difference between living bodies and the dead. His womb therefore entombs and petrifies rather than generates life.

When Urizen takes the “globe of fire” to light his journey—an image that recalls globules of blood and anticipates Los’s globe of light—he is annoyed by the “forms of life on his forsaken mountains” and by the “fawning portions of life;
similitudes of a foot, or a hand, or a head/Or a heart, or an eye” (21:1–5). These are further described as swimming “mischievous Dread terrors! Delighting in blood” (21:6–7). Here again blood symbolizes a living material potentiality, a potentiality that is fundamentally disturbing to Urizen because it cannot be pinned down and measured. Unsurprisingly, Urizen immediately sickens “to see/His eternal creations appear” (21:8–9). In connecting the red blood globule to the globe, Blake reminds readers once again of what Urizen cannot see: the universe within the grain of sand, and the metonymic connections between globe and globule, globule being the diminutive form of globe. The ability to perceive this connection—one theorized by medicine—is what enables a blood globule to become a globe of enlightenment. Quite literally so: the globule as a symbol for life embodies that life and points to its possible physical manifestation in the world even as it does not mistake the physical manifestation with life. The gap between the fallen and unfallen body thus can be traversed in Blake by material bodies, but only ones that see that the structure of a body is not the same as life.

Blake’s debt to Hunter, however, is more subtle and specific. Hunter argued that “matter continually passes between solid and fluid” and that “no species of matter can assume solid form, without first been in a fluid state; nor can any change take place in a solid till it be first formed into, or suspended in a fluid” (12). In Hunter’s view, bodily matter fluctuates between liquid and solid and back again, and his interest in the coagulating powers of blood as a means of healing the body’s wounds meant that both solidity and fluidity were necessary for corporeal health. Read in this context, Blake’s having Urizen and Los hammer bodies into form shows that they do not grasp the need for the body’s fluidity. At the same time, if “coagulation is an operation of life” (Hunter 26), flesh is not so much the enemy to imagination but rather its enabling vehicle. Precisely for this reason, Blake takes an epigraph from the Bible, “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rules of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places,” and makes this a gateway into The Four Zoas. The fact that Christ’s blood was yoked to his incarnation further reminded Blake that even flesh could be divine. Although the development of the body in Urizen seems equated with fallenness, the problem is that all Urizen and Los seem to care about is the hardening, delimiting, measuring, imprisoning, and chaining of the body, and thus it is no surprise that the senses harden into dumbness. Blake reminds us that
they “forgot their eternal life” (23:42). With this forgetting, the chords and meshes of the human brain devolve into “the Net of Religion” (23:20–23). Hunter insisted that the principle of life was not indebted to organization, that “life can never rise out of, or depend on organization” (78), and his separation of the living principle from materiality and organization helped to reinforce Blake’s sense of a possible gap between corporeal organization and life. Hunter likewise reminds us that without the living principle of blood, all we have been examining “is like dissecting a dead body without having any reference to the living, or even knowing it had ever been alive” (76).

The globular form of the red part of the blood had “something like the nature of a solid body, yet the particles seem not to have the properties of a solid,” Hunter declared (40). He concludes that these globules are fluid. How then to account for the shape of the blood globule? Hunter surmises that the shape was due to “a fixed principle in the globule itself” (40). Hunter’s theory of the blood supports Blake’s sense of the dynamic materiality of the body by making the body and life essentially fluid, by connecting idealized principles like the life force to the body of the red blood cell, and by bridging the fixity of shape with the fluidity of the globule. Orc’s red fires are the fires within our blood, only waiting to be reactivated. Also, as the agent of growth and repair in the blood as well as the agent of coagulation, Hunter’s red globules imply that generation has within it regeneration. Los, by contrast, does not appreciate the flexible materiality of these globules: he wants to hasten their progress to fibers (Urizen 18:1–3 E 78). Moreover, Los’s fixing “englobing” is antithetical to the flexible globes that are within the human body. Hunter also argues that these red blood cells are the source of strength, and this perhaps explains why Urizen arose at the beginning and end of night six of The Four Zoas, “gorgd with blood” (6:322 E 352). Orc’s fires recall the strength that is within our very blood.

Recently, we have discovered that Blake owned a copy of John Quincy’s Pharmacopoeia Officinalis & Extemporanea; Or, a Complete English Dispensatory (1733). I have been unable to consult the ninth edition of this work, but I have read the tenth edition, which has the same number of pages. From this, Blake would have understood the body as an amalgam of processes, and Quincy lists “fermentation, calcinations, digestion, incorporation, filtration” as processes common to both pharmacy and the body (n.p.). Quincy theorizes that “there is an attractive force in all bodies whatsoever; or, that all the parts of matter are mutually drawn towards one another” (1), thus emphasizing the mobility of matter.
Quincy not only helped reinforce Blake’s faith in the regeneration of matter, but also detailed how to make and dilute *aqua fortis*, the substance Blake used as the acid in his relief etching process. Robert Essick argues that Blake was innovative in using a much weaker acid than normal (Printmaker 99), and thus Blake would have found Quincy’s directions for manipulating the strength of this acid especially helpful.\(^{41}\) Quincy, moreover, stresses that *aqua fortis* had its place “as a Menstruum for other pharmacological preparations” (288), thus making its corrosive powers curative. Insofar as his acid baths could both corrode and heal, Blake could harness this dualism in service of the regeneration of matter.

Through Erasmus Darwin, Blake learned of the perverse sexuality of plants,\(^{42}\) how so few plants were monogamous. For Darwin, plant sexuality allegorized human sexuality, one that did not have to confine itself to monogamy or marriage. While Darwin helped to expand the range of natural forms of human sexuality, he also depicted a world rife with fecundity and desire. These medical and botanical contexts also help explain the relentlessly allegorical nature of Blake’s bodies. Body fits with allegory in that both can be flexible. Bodies in Blake can be fallen and unfallen, and this means that his depictions of sexuality are necessarily allegorical. Because natural history, comparative anatomy, and botany of the period so relentlessly allegorized animal and plant bodies in terms of human ones, bodies were profoundly like texts. This simultaneous incarnation and allegorization of bodies meant that Blake could at once harness the immediacy of incarnation (performative vortex), and the reflexiveness of allegory, giving him the space from which he could evaluate who is being liberated and from what and to what.

Blake’s textualized bodies, therefore, demand careful scrutiny. For example, before we can assent to Brenda Webster’s claim that Blake is misogynistic, we must be sure to have factored in the poet’s insistent perversities. Webster’s comment that Blake comes to “see women as responsible for the Fall” (209) ignores the multiple significances of the fall to Blake, along with the possibility that Blake’s fallen women are only seen from the vantage of the fall. Although the flexibility of his bodies further undercuts any stable vantage point from which to level a critique, I am also mindful of Tristanne Connolly’s point that “the fallen/eternal distinction in Blake can be a convenient trapdoor to save him from many sins: anything unpalatable can be explained away as fallen” (ix). I therefore side with Helen Bruder’s more nuanced claim that Blake recognized the costs of his gender attitudes, because that position, at very least, recognizes the value of Blake’s perverse turns.
Blake’s Perverse Aesthetics of Incarnation

I have thus far laid out the many ways in which Blake uses perversion to intensify epistemological uncertainty to the end of undermining all forms of authority including his own. I have also considered how medicine made it possible for Blake to see regeneration even within the mortal body. I now examine ways in which he embodies perversion in his aesthetics. Here my focus is less on how perversion leads to skepticism, but more on how he goes about delivering his perverse ideas. Blake embodies perversion in such a way as to undermine its ability to deliver immediate moral judgments, thus perverting the function of perversion from condemnation to questioning while harnessing the immediacy of perverse judgments in the service of epistemological uncertainty. Embodiment of this uncertainty in the reader makes the reader’s self-annihilation possible. To the extent that the moment of self-annihilation is, for Blake, the moment of perverse incarnation—the moment when readers recall that they are already the embodiment of Christ who in turn embodies perversion—then Blakean incarnation recognizes the pitfalls of naive incarnation, and it does so by remaining skeptical about incarnation as perfect embodiment. That is, Blake recognized that without deferral, language must take part in an authoritarian metaphysics of presence, Urizen’s tablets of brass and sex under moral law. Through perverse incarnation either via Christ, because Christ negates the Commandments and died as an “unbeliever” in the Old Testament God (“Annotations to Watson” E 614), or through bodily orgasm as a kind of unknowing or forgetting or jouissance, Blake maintains skepticism about perfect embodiment. Indeed, because perfect embodiment would obviate the need for interpretation, not to mention cleansing the doors of perception and epistemological uncertainty, the poet must hold on to that skepticism. If I have until this moment described what perversion in Blake does, I now consider how he gets the job done.

Perversion is also essential to understanding Blake’s aesthetics. The turning of perversion is manifested in texts that resist stabilization: a resistance that is simultaneously articulated and performed. Performance helps to give perverse turning the ontology of direct experience. Turning the page in Blake literally becomes a potential act of perversion. For example, copies of the Book of Thel that end with Thel’s motto, which might refer to the motto for The Book of Thel or that of Thel, redefine the opening of the poem as its conclusion. Copies A–M and P–R (P and Q have been untraced) open with the motto, while the “final”
copies N and O end with it. Given that the journey of Thel is one of sexual awakening, one especially called for by Thel’s virginity, the placement of the motto is either previous to that awakening or after it. If previous to that awakening, then Thel cannot be aware of the sexual innuendos in the golden bowl or phallic rod. And if she cannot see sexual innuendo, it stands to reason that she must be equally incapable of skepticism about such forms of sexual embodiment or restriction. Moreover, the motto’s placement at the end suggests that Thel’s awakening into sexuality is much more than an awakening into Thanatos and that, rather than being soundly denounced by her critics, Thel should be praised for her ability to see beyond mere generation and death. By plate 8, Thel only sees sexuality in terms of vegetative and mortal generation, and thus she flees back into the Vales of Har, or self-love. The ending motto gives Thel the final words and suggests she is more than a failed heroine who has fallen into silence or self-pity. 46

Finally, where the motto at the outset frames the text with the language and message of the preacher in Ecclesiastes—that all is vanity and that human desire must give way to duty and to the commandments (12:13)—the one at the end undermines the voice of the preacher with his very own words, suggesting that love cannot be put into a golden bowl in much the same way as the preacher wants to confine desire to the commandments and duty. Again we can only credit a critical skepticism to Thel’s motto if she has been awakened to sexuality and if she can maintain an aesthetic stance vis à vis the forms that sexuality and love take. Should love take the forms of duty or should love transcend those forms? I am suggesting then that Blake’s decision to end with the motto perverts not only his previous reading, but also the underlying message of Ecclesiastes itself. 47 Marjorie Levinson’s reminder that Thel is etymologically rooted in desire, coupled with her sense that “for desire to know itself as desire, hence to be felt, it must, in some tenuous, incomplete, or unconscious way, have assimilated its object” (292), means that this desire suspends reproductive purpose, and is akin to purposiveness.

In placing so much emphasis on the placement of the motto, I am guided by Blake’s critique of sexuality as mere generation and his sense that sexuality needs to awaken spirituality or it will be perverted from its true essence. Thus, Thel’s sexual awakening is only partial; while she “saw the secrets of the land unknown” (8:2 Eaves, Essick, and Viscomi 100), she sees only the generative aspects of sexuality since the underworld can only show death. Hence, Blake initially concludes that she “fled back unhindered till she came into the vales of
Har” (8:22), leaving her still hindered. In the final copies N–O, however, we turn the page to find Thel’s motto, giving Thel the last word. Here, the motto occurs after Thel’s admittedly partial awakening, but it now holds the promise of a fuller awakening, a recognition that sexuality must lead to something more than mere generation, regeneration. Her motto reads,

   Does the Eagle know what is in the pit?
   Or wilt thou go ask the Mole:
   Can Wisdom be put in a silver rod?
   Or love in a golden bowl?

When the motto follows Thel’s journey into the underworld, it offers the possibility of the higher knowledge gleaned from the descent. All epics demand that we descend before we can ascend, and the motto offers a possible ascent from the depths of death. Although Thel does insistently question, her questions throughout Thel are prompted by a lack of knowledge rather than a skeptical questioning of the answers that she is being given as truth. The cloud, for example, reminds her that she “know’st thou not. [sic] our steeds drink of the golden springs” (5:7). The experiences chronicled in her book enable her to move from innocent to informed questioning as she does in the motto’s final questions.

   By thinking about the vantage point of the eagle in her motto, Thel recognizes the possibility that sexuality means more than reproduction and generation. Instead of simply taking in the information without considering her source, Thel now wonders what wisdom would look like if it came from the eagle’s perspective. Would the eagle even be able to hear the voice of sorrow that is in the pit of plate 8? Only after the lily and the cloud introduce her to sexual pleasure can Thel read the innuendos within the phallic rod and the vaginal bowl and see that these containers are limited. Sexuality cannot be reduced to genitality; desire refuses to remain localized anatomically. Thel’s rhyme between “bowl” and “mole” introduces what Blake would later call the “bondage of rhyme”: rhyme highlights her awareness of these limits.

   Blake’s tail-piece depiction of a naked Thel riding a phallic Orc-like serpent further supports a general movement from descent in plate 8 to ascent in the motto. Blake often symbolizes a rejection of materiality and fallen sexuality by a stripping off of garments: both Milton and Jerusalem show us his correlation of spiritual and sexual enlightenment with nakedness. Blake’s rendering of bodies with transparent skin suggests that nakedness is the start of a journey within.
Whereas many have taken the snake as an emblem of “infantile regression,” the fact that Blake elsewhere links Orc to the serpent connects Thel with the liberating energies of Orc. And although Thel does seem to be holding a rein over the snake, the rein connects Thel to Orc’s tongue, limiting the potential restraint. That the rein is slack and does not bind the serpent’s neck further implies that it is a relatively ineffective form of restraint if indeed it represents restraint. If the serpent represents Orc-like rebellion, the final words of the plate, “the end,” indicate not a termination, but the purposiveness of an enlightened and liberating sexuality. My sense of the significance of the motto’s [re]placement at the end of Thel further supports this dual meaning of end as goal, but one that remains to be achieved.

To the extent that the motto stands for the knowledge of epic ascent, Thel’s criticism of Ecclesiastes now becomes clear. Her motto replaces that of the preacher. Although the preacher’s sense that all is vanity helps undermine worldly materiality, his desire to break the golden bowl and loosen the silver cord amounts to a denial of the flesh rather than the recognition that one must attain regeneration through the flesh. He concludes his book of the Bible with a clear motto: “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: ‘Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment’” (12:13–14). Not only do Thel’s first two questions in her motto demand that readers consider their source, but they also strongly indicate her recognition that material embodiments for love, desire, and wisdom are themselves inadequate. Her questions further show that she knows sexuality must partake of both love and wisdom. Here Thel recognizes she has only been given the generative understanding of human sexuality, one that is subsumed by death. To ask whether wisdom can be put in a silver rod is to ask whether metaphor is an adequate container. It is also to see the absurdity of fixating on the “little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire” (E 6) as if the hymen is really the embodiment of the moral virtue of chastity. The preacher of Ecclesiastes, by contrast, is only too happy to contain desire in duty and the commandments and ends his book in the certainty of God’s judgment. Thel, by contrast, resists judgmental closure, offering questions in the place of conclusion, summation, and judgment.

Thus, when we turn to Thel’s motto as the final plate of the book of Thel, we overturn readings of The Book of Thel that emphasize the weakness of Thel and see her as an anti-heroine, that see sexuality as Thanatos and spiritual death, and that remain blind to how this illuminated text so thoroughly undermines...
the Book of Ecclesiastes. Without the motto at the end, we miss Blake literally perverting Ecclesiastes by ending the final plate with an image of a serpent instead of a judgmental God. At very least, Blake found ironic the fact that the preacher of Ecclesiastes stipulates all to be vanity yet concludes the book by demanding that we “Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man” (12:13). We also miss a glimmer of Thel’s sexual and spiritual awakening to a sexuality beyond Thanatos, to the regenerative possibilities of sex construed without purpose. And we miss the perverse heroism of Thel herself, her transformation from a passive and silent listener into an active and skeptical questioner. If plate 8 ends where Thel began in the vales of Har, a place no different than Thel’s own grave, the motto, by contrast, signals an awareness of the limited perspective provided by the Clod, Cloud, Lilly, Worm, and the Voice of Sorrow. In turning the page to the initial beginning of the book, a beginning that is now properly its end, less in the sense of a terminus but more in the sense of a goal, Blake has transformed the act of turning the page into an act of perversion. We turn the page to the end that was once the beginning, an ending which ironizes the very idea of endings. Sexual awakening is a process rather than a product. That the motto is written in the relative freedom of Blake’s calligraphic hand as opposed to the alienating block letters of the title page further marks transition from alienation to awakening and supports the significance of the motto’s placement at the end of the book.

Before leaving behind the Book of Thel, I want to highlight the role that orgasm plays in Blake’s aesthetics because minute descriptions of sexual acts are often taken to be aesthetically perverse. Saree Makdisi has lamented the lack of attention to joy in Blake (xiii–xv), and I would simply add that much of the poet’s joy is sexual. But orgasm has an even more important resonance in Blake in that it is the closest thing our bodies experience to self-annihilation. Blakean orgasm has the potential to destroy selfhood. That this destruction of selfhood is a form of forgiveness, whereby one both forgives errors of the self and no longer blames others, adds a key ethical dimension to perversion. Hence, the cloud in the Book of Thel, Blake’s Vade Mecum of pleasure, anatomizes orgasm as the loss of self:

O virgin thou know’st not. Our steeds drink of the golden springs
Where Luvah doth renew his horses: look’st thou on my youth,
And fearest thou because I vanish and am seen no more.
Nothing remains; O maid I tell thee, when I pass away,
It is to tenfold life, to love, to peace, and raptures holy: (3:7–11)
The cloud’s steeds drink in the golden springs. Gold often in Blake has sexual resonance. Not only does Luvah symbolize lust, but also the horses are a long-standing image of the passions. Upon drinking from the stream, the cloud is “seen no more,” “nothing remains,” and the cloud “passes away” into the petit mort that is orgasm or “holy raptures.” Even as Blake here equates orgasm and self-annihilation, he calls attention to the benefits of that annihilation: “tenfold life . . . love, . . . peace . . . and raptures holy” (5:11). Orgasm is precisely the knowledge that the virgin know’st not; Blake’s twist on sexual knowledge is that it leads to unknowing, the process of self-annihilation. For Thel, such knowledge comes at too dear a price, at least until her motto. Her immediate response to the cloud is to declare that she is “not like thee” (5:17). She reimagines herself at her death as the “food of worms,” solely in the terms of generation rather than in the terms of the absence that the cloud uses, and this implies that she has not yet grasped how self-annihilation demands a regeneration of generation.

In giving self-annihilation the physiological experience of orgasm, Blake again grounds the real in the ideal, the erection within resurrection and the resurrection in bodily experience. But this is an especially powerful if paradoxical bodily experience. If orgasm is a form of self-annihilation, it is experienced as a dissociation of the body. Thus, when the nameless shadowy female experiences orgasm in America, Blake describes that sensation as the womb’s sensation: “it joy’d” (2:4 E 52). The “it” insists on the gap between the womb and the self and ruptures any metonymy, any connection between the part and the whole. As Blake defines it, orgasm is the sensation that leads to the breakdown of the self. So if the poet turns to physiology to ground his concept of self-annihilation in the body, self-annihilation in turn grounds the regeneration of the self. Where Robert Essick argues that linguistic performance in Blake is not about the deconstruction of the transcendental, but about the “celebrat[ion of] the engendering powers of language” (Adam 239), I want to consider the power of orgasm in Blake to perform both engendering and division. The traffic in Blake’s performative language goes two ways: it is a highway to transcendence and to the generated body. Such duality allows Blake to harness the liberating capacity of incarnation (recall that Lavater helped Blake to see that generation gives birth to the will or regeneration) as well as the liberating capacity of deferral.

Perversion further operates at the level of the poetic line in Blake. Milton taught Blake to think of the line as a means to liberation. On occasion, Blake will use the word “pervert” as either the final foot in the line as when “Rahab and Tirzah pervert” the “mild influences” of Enitharmon and her daughters (Milton
29:53 E 128), or in the first two feet, as in “to pervert the Divine voice in its entrance to the earth” (Milton 9:23 E 103). The turn of the verse (“verse” comes from versare, to turn the plow) is also the turn of perversion. In this second example, the infinitive form reminds us that although Satan tries to fob his perversion onto Palamabron, the perversion is his. Blake will at other times put perversion smack in the middle of other turns. In The Four Zoas, for example, Urizen invents “harsh instruments of sound/To grate the soul into destruction or to inflame with fury/The spirits of life to pervert all the faculties of sense/Into their own destruction” (8:18–21 E 374–75). Note how Blake puts “spirits of life” into an ambiguous position just after the turn of the end of the line, hovering between the objects that are being inflamed and the active perverters of sense. This epistemological uncertainty—enhanced by the parallelism of “to grate” and “to pervert,” which not only suggests that grating and perverting are synonymous, but also figuratively moves pervert to just after the line break in the position of grate—demands that readers actively apprehend who is doing what to whom. Insofar as the “spirits of life” have been perverted into death, the truth is that they are both the victims and agents of their own perversion. Where the charge of perversion is usually an attempt to absolve the self from blame, Blake makes clear that perversion simultaneously moves toward and away from the self. That Blake uses the physical layout of the page to break lines into subunits amounts to what Susan Wolfson has called a perverse “performative antiformalism” in Blake (2003 64–65).

John Hollander has noted “the conscious formal perversity to [his early] Spenserian imitation, . . . in which every stanza is ‘defective’ if taken from one point of view, or ‘adapted’ if from another” (205). From the standpoint of Blake’s early neoclassicism, which understood originality in terms of the conscious choosing of which models to imitate rather than the Romantic transcendence of imitation, Blake has been perverse in the sense that he demands that the reader recalibrate the very standard by which one measures metrical perversity.53 If judged from a Romantic perspective that values innovation, Blake’s departures look innovative and demand to be seen as positive adaptations. But such departures imply the limitations of the source and beg the question of why imitate Spenser anyway. If judged from a kind of neoclassical originality, Blake has chosen a potentially good model but then needs to explain what licenses his departures, else his departures look like perversions. Blake, thus, raises multiple standards for assessing the differences between his and Spenser’s lines precisely to undermine the single and stable uniform standard that perversion demands.
In terms of the metrical fourteeners of Blake’s longer works, the poet turns to structural parallelism to pervert the balance and smug witty antithesis of Augustan verse (Hollander 208). Few of his lines are end stopped, and thus the termination of the line rarely equates with a semantic unit of meaning. Where other poets exploit the tension between the line’s ending and the unit of meaning, Blake typically layers line upon line so that the lines themselves threaten to become the poetic equivalent of a vortex. This layering is all the more overwhelming in light of the fact that meaning in Blake so depends upon a “network of interactions within [and between] texts” (Makdisi 7). Where John Hollander stresses Blake’s metrical contract of the fourteener, albeit one tempered by his free accentualism, I want to emphasize the impotence of this contract to assist us in unraveling Blake’s meanings. This impotence is especially acute when dealing with Blake’s long catalogs of “nouns, phrases, or whole clauses [that] tend to form a succession of brief, more or less equally weighted elements distributed isochronously along an indefinitely extended line,” which reduce particulars to “virtually atomic units of significance” (De Luca 68).

Even in his depictions of the figures, Blake exploits the turning of perversion. He often depicts figures in contrapposto, in the act of turning from one stance to another. Moreover, sequential plates can sometimes rotate a particular figure, a rotation that allegorizes how readers are to engage with the figure or to reflect upon the limitations of perspective. For example, in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Blake depicts a resurrection through fire (plate 3) only to give us the obverse of that image eleven plates later (plate 14 Eaves, Essick, and Viscomi 167). Why would he invite the reader to recall the former image eleven plates later, and why does he turn that image 180 degrees? While the earlier plate 3 announces that the “new heaven is begun,” an assertion that implies the apocalypse has already taken place, plate 14 insists that the apocalypse is still in the offing, as the world, we are told, “will be consumed in fire at the end of six thousand years” (14). Moreover, the cherub with his flaming sword “will come to pass by an improvement of sensual enjoyment” (14). Important clues appear at the bottom of the earlier plate. Although the poet here emphasizes the now of the apocalypse, he shows at the bottom of the plate a woman giving birth to a child (bottom left) along with a couple in sexual embrace (bottom right). Combined, these images suggest that the real improvement of sensual enjoyment has not yet taken place in the earlier plate, given that sexuality is still subsumed under generation, the reduction of sexuality to reproduction.

In the later image (plate 14), by contrast, Blake shows us that behind the
image of resurrection of the flesh is precisely the generated dead body, a death that was obscured in the earlier plate by the flames. What the earlier image neglected to mention was the price of apocalypse, the death of the generated self. The improvement of sensual enjoyment thus cannot truly come to pass until one recognizes the price of regeneration, self-annihilation, as well as how reproduction confines sensual pleasure unnecessarily to the physical body. What looked like the apocalypse in plate 3, then, was merely the first stage of it, the recognition of the pleasures of the flesh. But Blake warns us not to mistake generation for regeneration. Hence, in the earlier plate he ironically alludes to the resurrection of Swedenborg, when his audience would have known immediately that, when Swedenborg’s tomb was opened, the only thing discovered was his dead flesh. When we reperceive the earlier plate in light of the later one, we must come to terms with the fact that the dead body was there all along. Taken together, these plates insist that regeneration must entail generation and that regeneration is not without its costs.

Furthermore, the poet’s valorizing of nudity over clothing equates nudity with holiness and thus attempts to reverse Christian distrust of the flesh. As Blake put it in his accompanying aphorisms to “The Laocoön,” “Art can never exist without Naked Beauty displayed” (E 275). His rendering of characters such as Los, Thel, and Milton in various states of undress as they go through experience reminds us that maturation is at the same time a process of self-annihilation in Blake, a willing surrender of selfhood. In Milton, that surrender is achieved via fellatio when it had previously been accomplished by intercourse, suggesting that self-annihilation takes multiple forms and that these forms declare a gap between form and meaning. Once Blake connects maturity with the surrender of selfhood, the adolescent search for identity becomes a perversion. Furthermore, the difficulty of being able to see nudity as holiness—the difficulty of stripping off one’s garments, especially to an eighteenth-century audience—is nothing compared to the difficulty of taking off of one’s selfhood.

Armed with these ways of thinking about perversion in Blake, let us now return one final time to America and to Orc’s claim that Urizen has perverted man’s fiery joys into ten commands. Again, rather than merely taking Orc’s word for it, because authorship or speaking are not in and of themselves guarantees of truth, we need to think about why we should believe Orc. We should note the ways in which Blake makes it hard for us to take anyone’s word as the unequivocal truth. That he so often identifies the speaker only after he or she
has spoken, and even then not always, means that statements have to be inter-
preted at least initially without speakers behind them. Moreover, his speakers
so insistently change states from the elect, redeemed, or reprobate, or specters
or emanations, or even identities as when Luvah becomes Christ; Blake insis-
tently disembodies words. Finally, the poet’s illustrations fail to embody the
words on the page insofar as they often have little correlation to what the words
say. Even when we can finally identify a visual rendition of a character and thus
begin to attribute speech to a depicted speaker, that identification often comes
after or sometimes well before the speech itself. The nude male perched atop
Blake’s words on plate 6 of America is only identified as “his” in the plate, and
we can only later begin to identify this male as Orc.

Certainly from the perspective of Albion’s angel, whom Orc addresses at this
moment, the claim that “fiery joys” have been “perverted into ten commands”
seems absurd and furthermore supports the angel’s feeling that Orc must be
stopped at all costs. “Angel,” of course, seems to load the deck against Orc; the
angel’s accusations that Orc is “serpent-formed” and is “standing at the gates of
Enitharmon, ready to devour her children” doesn’t predispose readers to accept
Orc. Nor does the angel’s charge that Orc is the Antichrist. But readers can be-
come more sympathetic to Orc once they see that Albion’s angel is no angel: he
is motivated by wrath, and the fact that he is “wrathful burnt” (7.1 E 53) sug-
gests that he is unbeknownst to himself already tainted with the Orcan fire of
rebellion. Blake’s illustration of children lying peacefully down with a sheep un-
dercuts the angel’s view of things, allowing Orc to then score some rhetorical
points by converting the angel’s wrath into a wreath: Orc describes himself as
being “wreath’d round the accursed tree” (8:1 E 54). Portraying himself as a vic-
tim, Orc has been both wreathed and accursed, and we have only to conclude
that the angel’s wrath has led him to do these things to Orc while maintaining
the illusion of angelic innocence. If Orc is now serpent-formed as the angel de-
clares, the angel has made him so, for the angel has converted pleasure into a
kind of satanic evil.

Blake’s play on wrath and wreath hearkens back to Milton who in Book 6 of
Paradise Lost wrote,

So spake the Sovran voice, and Clouds began
To darken all the Hill, and smoke to roll
In dusky wreaths, reluctant flames, the sign
Of Wrath awak’t: (6:56–59)
In *Paradise Lost*, as God mobilizes his troops to defeat Satan, the wreaths materialize God’s voice into the smoke of fire and awaken the Old Testament God’s wrath. In Blake’s *America*, the wreath emphasizes Orc’s status as victim—he is, after all entwined around a tree—even as it suggests that Urizen’s torture will awaken the wrath of Orc. We should note, however, that Blake values the mercy, forgiveness, and love of God, not the punishing angry Old Testament Urizen. So while Orc’s “wreath’d” status brings him closer to God, it brings him to the Urizenic God of the Old Testament, not the divine mercy of Christ. The Miltonic allusion further complicates our identifications with Orc: we turn toward him when he seems God-like, only to turn against him when he looks like Urizen. Hence, when Orc speaks, cursing Urizen, Blake gives us an illustration of Urizen (Blake’s plate 10). In linking our identification with Orc with our potential perversion, and in linking Orc with his nemesis/father Urizen through pêr(e)/version, Blake demands that we wean ourselves from his revolutionary energy and manifest our own.

The charge of the angel’s hypocrisy accrues more weight when Orc denounces “that pale religious letchery, seeking Virginity,/May find it in a harlot, and in coarse-clad honesty/The undefil’d tho’ravishd in her cradle night and morn” (8:9–11). Where Christian asceticism tries to pawn virginity as one of its highest virtues, Blake has Orc call attention to the seeking of that virtue as a form of lechery. The denial of the flesh does not remove the influence of the flesh; rather, it forces the cloaking of desire in the name of virtue. Such cloaking only intensifies eroticism rather than does away with it. Hence, religious lechery can find virginity in a harlot who remains undefiled although she is repeatedly ravished in her cradle. That the angel’s words fall on deaf ears doesn’t invite readerly sympathy either; even though the angel thrice demands the sounding of trumpets of war, he is greeted only by silence: “No trumpets answer; no reply of clarions or fifes,/Silent the Colonies remain and refuse the loud alarm” (10:3–4). As Blake’s annotations to Watson insist, we must be attentive to consequences as part of evaluating who is perverting what. Where Orc achieves nothing less than revolution, the angel’s words and trumpets are mere sound and fury, signifying nothing.

We are now in a position to believe Orc when he says, “The fiery joy, that Urizen perverted to ten commands” (8:3). Having earned this right, readers now can admire the crispness of this accusation, how it in a single stroke threatens to undermine the very foundation of Western morality. Although the commandments seem to be a set of rules that provide a social contract between God
William Blake, America, plate 10 (Rosenwald 1804). Courtesy of the Lessing Rosenwald Collection, the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
and his worshippers, Blake underscores the tyrannical authority of it; he also comments on how the denial of the pleasure of others actually consolidates power. Shortening commandments to commands allows him to insinuate illegitimate kingly authority: didn’t American democracy show precisely the futility of such commands? Later, of course, Blake will inform us that the writing of the Ten Commandments was really the means by which God gave humans the art of writing; such an interpretation makes the actual referentiality of the commandments beside the point (Jerusalem 3:4).

Nonetheless Orc’s charge of perversion only holds up if the Ten Commandments can be seen as an authoritarian document of illegitimate authority. The obstacles to such a reading are enormous, but this is precisely where Blake performs perversion in addition to writing about it. Blake critics frequently remark how the poet must get rid of his audience’s mental furniture in order to raise its levels of perception. How then does Blake propose to make it possible to think of Mosaic law as a perversion of pleasure? Here John Mee, Vincent De Luca, and Steven Goldsmith can help, insofar as each shows how Blake took advantage of prophetic, democratic, and sublime language to help deliver his point.\textsuperscript{56} But Blake’s syntactical ruptures further model the kind of epistemological rupture he wants to achieve. Tannenbaum stresses that Blake turned to Isaiah and the apocryphal Second Book of Esdras to depict Orc as demonic Christ coming down with his sword (124–33), a yoking together of opposites that hints at the syntactical perversions to come. The object of the sentence, “fiery joy,” appears at the outset of the line, whereas the subject, Urizen, has through a distortion of syntax almost become the unwitting object of the joy. The syntax in other words prompts a reversal of Urizenic perversion by putting joy back in the driver’s seat where it belongs.

Let’s now examine the complicated phrasings that surround Orc’s accusation of Urizen’s perversion:

- The terror answered: I am Orc, wreath’d round the accursed tree:
- The times are ended: shadows pass the morning gins to break:
- The fiery joy, that Urizen perverted to ten commands,
- What night he led the starry hosts thro’ the wide wilderness.
- The stony law I stamp to dust: (10:1–5 Paley edition)

Note Blake’s insistent colons here, and how those colons shape the reading of these lines. Because of those colons, this passage is difficult to understand insofar as the relationship of one phrase to its previous phrase is unclear, and colon
piles on top of colon before the reader can process the syntactical relationship of each phrase. This piling fosters the reader’s self-annihilation insofar as it takes the reader outside him or herself in order to process this. Yet if the colon signifies the elaboration of “I am Orc,” a declaration of identity that appears in the very center of the first line indicating its importance, the statement “the fiery joy, that Urizen perverted to ten commands” must likewise amount to a declaration of identity. While “perverted” is shunted into a restrictive clause, Urizen’s perversion runs the danger of subsuming Orc’s identity, and to the extent that both are simultaneously possible, Orc and Urizen begin to fold into one another. Indeed, Orc’s actions are merely a père/version, a version of—and structured by—his father’s.

Orc is not without limitations, as his raping of the shadowy daughter of Urthona further shows. Orc perhaps reasons that rape is the best way to show Urthona (earth owner) that he does not own America. Likewise, Orc’s regenerating powers are not outside of Urizen, but they burn within, a fact that explains why America opens with “Albion’s fiery Prince,” Urizen’s agent, “burning in his nightly tent,” who is its mistaken “Guardian” (3:1, 5) and “Angel.”57 The question is how can Urizen be forgiven and redeemed if he lacks the capacity for regeneration from within? That Orc’s claim of identity leads to a breakdown of identity furthers the reader’s process of self-annihilation, a process intensified by the fact that although perversion foists commands onto Urizen, Orc is not free of commands either. Blake thus renders the Orc cycle itself as a perversion simply because the son’s activities are merely reactions rather than essential displays of fiery joys unconditioned by Urizen.

At the risk of breaking the camel’s back, I might add that Urizen/Orc embodies a perversion of reason on at least two levels. Urizen perverts reason into taxonomy, systematicity, and a body based on organs. And as the embodiment of the Romantic understanding of the Enlightenment, Urizen cannot accurately capture the Enlightenment, because he must offer an interpretation of the period that enables Romanticism (fiery joy) to differentiate itself from its predecessor (reason). Such an interpretation of Romanticism was under considerable pressure, given the fact that “revolution” then straddled an Enlightenment sense of turning back to an origin and the sense we now have of revolution as a turning away (M. Brown 46). Blakean perversion thus acquires an additional epistemological certainty at the moment when one must define the kind of turning that revolution demands, a definition whose stakes are raised when the Romantic must differentiate himself or herself from an Enlightenment past.
Where Orc stamps “the stony law . . . to dust,” are we likewise to smash the past into bits, or are we to gather up the past toward revolution? By showing ultimately that fiery joy (Orc) was within (Urizen), however, Blake acknowledges that the Enlightenment sets into motion the revolution that is Romanticism and suggests that Romanticism is a regenerated form of Enlightenment. Reason thus has the capacity for liberation, just as fiery joy has the capacity for repression.

Blake’s decision to print the bulk of America in recto/verso format literally makes Orc the obverse of Urizen and further underscores their connectedness. Through perversion, manifest in Orc’s charge of Urizen and in turning the page, Blake reminds us of these dual capacities. In Blake’s plate 9, Albion’s angel accuses Orc of being the Antichrist, while the on the obverse (plate 10), Orc accuses Urizen of perverting fiery joys. Critics have been at a virtually complete loss to explain Blake’s illustrations. Not only do Orc’s and Urizen’s mutual accusations make one not unlike the other, but if the cuddly image of the children lying down with the sheep (plate 9) is Blake’s ways of refuting the angel’s accusation, this Edenic image stands for Orc even by way of negation. Blake demands that we pay attention to who delivers each perspective. Meanwhile, Blake illustrates Orc’s charge with a Urizen-like figure, whose outstretched arms prefigure his arisen status, his Christ-like crucifixion and resurrection (his body is in the shape of a cross). Urizen too will be arisen; such a prophetic hint implies that plate 9 foretells the regeneration of Orc from destroyer to forgiver. Within plate 10, Orc’s speech appears below an image of Urizen, juxtaposing these contrary figures. As we turn plate 9 into plate 10, the pastoral image (refuting the angel’s description of Orc) gives way to Urizen (the master of the angel appears while Orc speaks). When we factor in that Orc’s accusation of Urizen leads to Orc’s recognition that the perversion of fiery joys has perverted him into the Ten Commandments, we have a sense of what Blake may be up to. Urizen is the generated self that must be regenerated into Orc. Given that Urizen also represents Blake’s Old Testament God, the son, Orc, who is surrounded by Christ imagery (Tannenbaum 141–42), will rise from the dead to replace Urizen’s sexuality under moral law/reason with Christ’s holy lust.

At the same time, since Urizen has Orc within himself, generation can partake of regeneration as God generates the son. Urizen’s Christ-like arms hint at the regeneration to come even as the generated body must be actively crucified/annihilated in order for regeneration to take place. To the extent that plate 9 represents the regeneration of Orc, his demonic anger has been transformed...
In thunders ends the voice. Then Albions Angel, wrathful, burnt
Beside the Stone of Night; and like the Eternal Lions howl
In famine & war, replied. Art thou not Orc, who serpent-formed
Stands at the gate of Enitharmon to devour her children;
Blasphemous Demon, Antichrist, fater of Disguises;
Lover of wild rebellion and transgresser of God's Law;
Why dost thou come to Angel's eyes in this terrible form?
into peace and love once he has gotten rid of sex under moral law. Furthermore, the poet’s acknowledgement that, while the charge of perversion promises to foist perversion onto the other, the accusation itself must on some level bespeak identity, and we come to the conclusion that Urizen and Orc are but names for the dual capacities within each of us—what Blake elsewhere calls “the self-enjoyings of self-denial” (E 50)—that we must break through to get to true liberty. Blake equates Christ with liberty in Jerusalem. Urizen represents the law over the spirit and thus generates through the Immaculate Conception, while Orc represents the spirit over the law. Hence, Blake makes one the obverse of the other, and the act of turning the page is potentially our regeneration of generation, our choice of spirit rather than law. But he reminds us simultaneously that each has the capacity for law and holy spirit.

What, we should ask, is the consequence of all of this perversion? On one level, words have bodily consequences in Blake insofar as Blake can get us to re-think the role and value of sexual pleasure. If sexual pleasure and orgasm lead to both division and regeneration, they cannot be intrinsically liberating. On another level, Blake’s sensuous embodiment of perversion enacts a turning within the reader, a violent shifting vortex of concepts and their relation to value that is both articulated and performed. Nelson Hilton has argued that Blake’s vortex “signals either a passage into transcendence or, in its vaginal form, a return to generation” (165–66). I would adjust Hilton to say that the vortex signals both a regeneration that looks like a transcendence of the body and a return to generation that does not preclude a later return to regeneration. If Orc is within Urizen, their external struggle allegorizes a battle within the human psyche and that they are part of the dual capacities of mankind for generation and regeneration. Similarly, the capacity for liberty and the capacity for repression are simultaneously within. Blake’s insistence upon consequences mandates that perverse sexuality be neither intrinsically liberating nor necessarily meaningfully pleasurable.

Blake was not merely being idealistic when he imagined the transformation of the generated body to the regenerated one. He was taking part in a cultural understanding of the body that saw the body, even the sexed body, as open to change. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick asks social constructionists what makes them think culture can be more easily changed than biology (1990 41). Biology in the Romantic period insisted upon the interrelations of nature and culture, and this meant that since Blake did not need textualism and free speech to liberate bodies from materiality, the body could ground change. Of course, because sexual
liberation too was not yet liberty, the body could not guarantee liberty either, but a medical understanding of the body along with a recognition of the poet’s perversity could certainly rewrite the narrative of Blakean liberation: instead of bodies becoming speech or speech incarnating into bodies, the false naive incarnation of the judgmental Old Testament (Urizen), where language is law, could become the true yet perverse incarnation into a merciful yet sinning Christ (Orc), where language is forgiveness. Whether through Erasmus Darwin’s botany, physiognomical propensities, healing acid, fluid blood, or medical electricity, Blake’s bodies could continually regenerate themselves until they attained liberty. Blake did not need Judith Butler to remind him that bodies matter. But Blake can remind us that bodies are flexible, and that bodies, not performance, are the grounds for change. To the extent that perversion in Blake would allow him to harness the liberating capacities of text and of bodies, not to mention the text’s multiple bodies, the many twists and turns of perversion could help the reader reclaim and incarnate the divine imagination within the body.