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WILLIAM BLAKE'S *MILTON* A POEM AS A CONVERSION NARRATIVE IN THE BEHMENIST TRADITION

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Abstract

The term 'conversion narrative' lacks proper definition and can be understood more broadly than is often the case, underlining its fictive nature. I show this by reading William Blake's *Milton a Poem* as a conversion narrative, exploring how Blake weaves a wider discourse of conversion around the conversion of his protagonist Milton that forms the narrative backbone of the book. This wider discourse shows us glimpses of Paul's conversion and conversion in Jakob Boehme's writings. The result is a work that challenges the idea of a conversion narrative as focussing on the author's past experience, showing how its ultimate focus is, instead, on the reader.

A fundamental problem for those who work on conversion narratives is that there is no clear definition of what a 'conversion narrative' is. In fact, all we can be certain about is that a conversion narrative is a text that somehow relates to the concept of conversion. Apart from this, almost everything is up for discussion: a conversion narrative is not necessarily autobiographical, it may or may not refer to a historical reality, and 'conversion' can either mean conversion to another religion or denomination, or a spiritual awakening within one religion or denomination. As Karl F. Morrison argued, a conversion narrative also usually—if not always—contains an element of fiction.¹ As a consequence, it is difficult to distinguish between 'conversion narratives' in the conventional (historical and autobiographical) sense and 'conversion narratives' in a broad (fictional and not necessarily autobiographical) sense.² More often than not, furthermore, these two senses overlap.

In this article, I address this theoretical confusion by reading William Blake's fictional work *Milton a Poem* (1804–11) as a conversion narrative. *Milton* has, after all, played a crucial role in scholarly reconstructions of Blake's

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own 'conversion'.³ But, as I wish to show here, *Milton* does more than simply refer to a conversion experience that Blake may or may not have had himself. The text's autobiographical material is, as we will see, only one way of several through which it evokes the subject of conversion. *Milton* is not primarily a text that looks back in time to an experience that Blake may have had. Instead, I argue, it points forward towards the potential conversion of another figure altogether: that of the reader. This is a fundamental literary dynamic that it shares with many other conversion narratives, notably Augustine's *Confessions*.⁴

The fundamental problem that *Milton* seeks to resolve is the fact that Milton, according to Blake, never managed to become a fully integrated prophet-poet. Thus the narrative begins with the protagonist's descent from heaven back to earth to search for internal unity and to discover the inseparability between the divine and the human. Blake thought that one of the historical Milton's gravest misunderstandings was his insistence on the separation between these two spheres: 'Seek not thy heavenly father then beyond the skies,' Milton is instructed (20.32, E114)⁵—a point which Blake makes clear by depicting his protagonist's journey as a descent from heaven to earth rather than as an ascent: what Milton seeks is not 'out there' but 'in here'.⁶ At the end, Milton is restored through an act of self-annihilation, identified as the destruction of his Spectre, or Satan.

Around Milton's steady progress, the narrative is unstable, fragmented, changing, and often appears to have no grounding in time and space. Milton's increasing orientation is mirrored by our increasing disorientation as readers; everything becomes more clear to him and less clear to us, until at the end of *Milton* we realise that Milton's journey was really only the prelude to *another* story. It ends, that is, with a strong sense of new beginning rather than closure. (This other story is probably *Jerusalem The Emanation of The Giant Albion*, 'J', 1804–20.)

One of *Milton*'s main themes is the *word*. Blake is preoccupied with the transformative power of writing, the imagination, and the Johannine connection between the word and the divine: the 'Poetic Genius' is 'the eternal all-protecting Divine Humanity/ To whom be Glory & Power & Dominion Evermore Amen' (14.1–3, E108). So one poet—Blake—attempts to transform another poet—Milton—through writing; as *The Bard's Song*, the long oral poem within the written poem, constantly repeats, 'Mark well my words. they are of your eternal salvation' (2.25, E96). When this 'salvation' is finally within reach towards the end of *Milton*, it takes the shape of Jesus incarnated not in flesh, but in writing, as he appears in 'a Garment dipped in blood/ Written within & without in woven letters' (42.12–13, E143). The theme of writing also extends to include Blake as an authorial presence who gradually becomes involved in his own work, so that as the narrative progresses, the dividing

lines between text, author, and characters within the narrative slowly disintegrate.

The most striking feature of *Milton*, however, is the sense that everything happens within one single moment: Milton is called back from the dead, Blake composes *Milton*, and the reader reads it.

For in this Period the Poets Work is Done: and all the Great
Events of Time start forth & are conceived . . .
Within a Moment: a Pulsation of the Artery.

(29.1–3, E127)

This collapsing moment, where everything happens in a flash of divine inspiration is, as we will see, constructed in a way so that no one—except perhaps for ‘Satan’—is left out. Jakob Boehme (1575–1624) calls this present moment a ‘flash’ (*Plitz*): ‘When the celestial flash rises up in the centre, the divine birth operates at full effect’ (*Aurora* 11.5).⁷ It is the moment when the poem is composed by the author, read by the reader, and conversion becomes a possibility.

It is generally acknowledged that Boehme influenced Blake, but the extent of the influence remains disputed. Blake himself, in an autobiographical note to his friend John Flaxman from 1800, listed Boehme as one of his main sources of inspiration.⁸ *Milton*’s emphasis on the present moment or ‘Eternal Now’ (*Annotations to Lavater* 407, E592) and insistence on unity (not separation) between divine and human are significant themes in Boehme’s works. But most significantly, two of the concepts most central to Milton’s conversion—‘selfhood’ and ‘self-annihilation’—were both probably inspired by Blake’s familiarity with the writings of Boehme.⁹

The term ‘selfhood’ was probably used for the first time in English in a translation of Boehme from 1649.¹⁰ ‘Selfhood’ does not, however, represent a positive core in each individual subject, but instead—in Boehme as well as in Blake—a negative concept to be destroyed in self-annihilation: ‘He [Christ] died to my Self-hood in his Death, and I also die to my Self-hood in his Death,’ writes Boehme (*Signatura Rerum* (SR) 12.14).¹¹ The selfhood is thus the distorted image of God in the soul, or the part of the subject that has turned away from God: ‘Selfhood lives in the Land of Death, viz. in the continual Dying, in the continual Enmity against God’ (SR 15.12).¹² This image must be erased for the *imago dei* to be restored.¹³ In Blake’s works, ‘selfhood’ (together with the ‘forgiveness of sins’) becomes a central concept around 1804, when Blake started working on *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. In these works, ‘selfhood’ represents the main obstacle to the re-creation of the human subject, and is thus closely connected to the sphere of Satan. As Milton says: ‘I in my Selfhood am that Satan’ (14.30, E108). However, the term is never

used again after *Jerusalem*, and only used once outside *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, in the roughly contemporary *A Vision of The Last Judgment* (VLJ) (1810).

As for ‘self-annihilation’, Blake does not use the term before his revisions of *The Four Zoas* around or just after 1800, and not consistently so until *Milton*.¹⁴ In Blake criticism, the term is, as John H. Jones has noted, often overlooked, perhaps because it is understood as a purely theological concept.¹⁵ Selfhood understood as a psychological concept, on the other hand, is generally considered a fundamental part of Blake’s thought, neither religious in its base nor dependent on a religious solution. This separation of selfhood and self-annihilation, however, artificially sets apart a religious register from a non-religious register in Blake’s works. For in Blake’s works the concepts of selfhood and self-annihilation are integral to one other: self-annihilation, and the subsequent rebirth of the restored self, is the answer to the problem which the selfhood poses. And selfhood must be continually ‘put off & annihilated away’ (40.36, E142) in order to let the *imago dei* shine through and grow in the subject. However, as the final climax of *Milton* shows, this self-annihilation is not an isolated, individualistic project, but has wider social and ethical implications: ‘each shall mutually/ Annihilate himself for others good’ (38.35, E139).

The way from selfhood through self-annihilation to the beginning of new life is represented within *Milton* as a pilgrimage through time and space. This is illustrated in a map showing the spheres of Blake’s ‘four zoas’, the ‘mundane egg’ (the world of time and space), and two opposite locations within the egg called ‘Adam’ and ‘Satan’ (pl. 32).¹⁶ Cutting through the Zoas is a black line indicated as ‘Miltons Track’, showing the reader how Milton narrowly misses ‘Satan’ and instead heads towards Adam. It is thus back to Adam and past Satan that Milton is travelling, and once he is at ‘Adam’ (and at the end of the narrative), new restored life can begin, leaving the end of *Milton* open to the new beginning.

This visual representation of Milton’s journey shows a striking resemblance with Dionysius Andreas Freher’s thirteen planetary diagrams in vol. II of William Law’s edition of Boehme—in particular with diagram 2 (showing similar overlapping spheres as in Blake’s image) and diagram 11 (showing Jesus’s track as he enters creation as ‘the Breaker’).¹⁷ These are not the only visual echoes of Boehme in *Milton*: for example, the multilayered male–female images from Law’s vol. III may resound in the line ‘A Male within a Female hid’ (37.40, E138), and the shooting stars beside ‘William’ (pl. 29) and ‘Robert’ (pl. 33), which I discuss below, strongly resemble the stars in diagrams 8, 9, and 10 in Law II.¹⁸ Boehme, in the visual shape that Freher had given him and the literary shape that Law had given him, was—it seems—on Blake’s mind when working on *Milton*.

Milton is simultaneously the description of Milton's conversion, as Blake recasts him in his imagination to realign him with the Poetic Genius, and an exemplary conversion narrative, suggesting to the reader a spiritual transformation similar to Milton's.¹⁹ These 'conversions' are not one-off experiences, but rather experiences to be repeated whenever the 'convert' falls back. Thus Milton, as quoted above, says that his 'Selfhood . . . must be put off & annihilated alway' (40.36, E142), a statement that reappears in *Jerusalem*: 'Man . . . requires a New Selfhood continually & must continually be changed into his direct Contrary' (52, E200). Blake does not represent these conversions as gradual developments, but as sudden movements from the sphere of redemption to the sphere of salvation. This is connected with the fact that in Blake, as in Boehme, both Paradise and the Last Judgment are always present and available. So in *Milton's* 'now', 'a wide road was open to Eternity' (35.35, E135). Boehme writes: 'if . . . thy Eyes were opened, then in that very Place where thou standest, sittest or liest, thou shouldst see the glorious Countenance or Face of God' (*Aurora* 10.98).²⁰ And Blake notes that: 'when-ever any Individual Rejects Error & Embraces Truth a Last Judgment passes upon that Individual' (VLJ84, E562). The 'conversions' in *Milton* are then connected with the subject's use of her or his divine imagination, by which the subject partakes in the divine existence. In the beginning of *Milton*, when the narrator calls upon the muses, he locates this imagination in 'the Portals of my brain, where by your ministry/ The Eternal Great Humanity Divine. planted his Paradise' (2.7–8, E96). Thus 'Imagination is not a State: it is the Human Existence itself' (32.32, E132). And towards the end of his life, Blake famously identifies the imagination with 'God himself The Divine Body JESUS we are his members' (*Laocöon*, E273). Likewise in Boehme, as Andrew Weeks and Kevin Fischer have shown, the imagination plays a central role as a common space shared by human and divine.²¹ In *The Three Principles*, for example, the soul 'holds the Saviour fast . . . and sets its Imagination . . . (through the Thread of Faith and Confidence) further into the Heart of God' (19.42), thus using the imagination to find a passage to God.²² It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that Blake's most Boehme-inspired work is an illuminated poem directed towards the reader's imagination, in which a historical poet is called back to life and imaginatively brought to walk with the narrator and the reader. The imagination in *Milton*, if nothing else, is a shared space: shared between the divine and the human, and between author, narrator, protagonist, and reader.

It soon becomes clear to *Milton's* reader, therefore, that it is not the past that interests Blake here so much as the present—and the way that past errors can be overcome by the use of the imagination. Blake illustrates this on the title page, where a naked man smashes *Milton's* title into the two syllables 'MIL' and 'TON'. Being positioned with his back to the reader, the man seems to

ask us to follow him into the narrative. By smashing Milton's name into syllables like this, he reveals the purpose of *Milton* to the reader: it is a breaking up of Milton into atoms and syllables, a close inspection, and a reassembly of his being into a new united existence.²³ The figure may be Milton, the protagonist, or Blake himself, showing how he intends to smash a 'name' (quite literally) and overwrite an old story (that of the historical Milton) with a new one. And again, we may here find echoes of Boehme, for the splintering of Milton's name into syllables closely resembles Boehme's practice of considering a word syllable by syllable in order to discover its true meaning. So, in Boehme's exegesis of the word 'sulphur', for example, 'SUL is the Soul or the Spirit that is risen up, or in a Similitude God,' and 'PHUR is the *Prima Materia*' (*Three Principles* 1.7).²⁴

The united existence Blake imagines in *Milton* depends on Milton overcoming his Spectre. The necessity of doing this comes in a flash to Milton already in his immediate response to The Bard's Song early on in the text. Here Milton plans his journey:

I will go down to the sepulcher to see if morning breaks!
 I will go down to self annihilation and eternal death,
 Lest the Last Judgment come & find me unannihilate
 And I be siez'd & giv'n into the hands of my own Selfhood
 ...
 I in my Selfhood am that Satan: I am that Evil One!
 He is my Spectre!

(14.21–31, E108)

Is Milton successful in following his envisaged route? Although it is not always clear to the reader, we realise by the end of the text, when Milton's conversion is about to be completed, that his inner compass is to be trusted. Now, he comes 'in Self-annihilation & the grandeur of Inspiration' to 'cast off Rational Demonstration by Faith in the Saviour' and 'cast aside from Poetry, all that is not Inspiration' (41.2–7, E142). Milton takes Satan by surprise when, in their final confrontation, he refuses to enter Satan's spiral of violence and annihilate him, even though he has the power to do so. Instead, Milton pacifies Satan by entering into himself, 'in fearless majesty annihilating Self' (38.41, E139).

A dramatic *locus classicus* of conversion lurks in the background of *Milton* as a complementary movement to the prolonged conversion of its protagonist, for Paul's conversion in Acts is a recurrent reference point.²⁵ As the narrative describes Milton's continued struggle towards salvation, the repeated references to Paul's sudden experience pull the narrative in another direction: towards immediacy, revelation, and a focus on the present moment (as do related experiences such as the raising of Lazarus invoked in 24.26–32). Paul's experience thus becomes another example of the importance of the present

moment, which complements the gradual movement of Milton through the poem. Together, the moment and the movement create a composite vision of conversion that can be contained neither in one moment, nor in one gradual movement.

Where do we see these traces of Paul's conversion in *Milton*? The present moment is, as noted above, the flash of inspiration under which the illuminated poem was composed: 'In this Period the Poets Work is Done . . . Within a Moment: a Pulsation of the Artery' (29.1–3, E127). This 'Period' is illustrated on the plate immediately following (confusingly also known as pl. 29), showing a naked man who throws himself backwards in ecstasy or surrender, a shooting star falling towards his left foot.²⁶ Above, his name is written: 'William'. This is, we understand, the inspiration of the author ('William Blake') in 'a Pulsation of the Artery'. But the image also echoes Albion 'converting' before the crucified Christ in *Jerusalem* 76 as well as the moment in *Milton* where Milton enters the narrator's foot: 'on my left foot falling on the tarsus, enterd there' (15.49, E110). Immediately above the reference to the 'tarsus', a miniature version of pl. 29 makes the connection between the two plates impossible to miss for the reader. And in pl. 33, the 'flash' is repeated in the depiction of Blake's younger brother 'Robert', which exactly mirrors the depiction of 'William'—Blake saw Robert, who died in 1786, as a fellow artist, which explains why he is also depicted in a moment of divine inspiration. Finally, Paul's conversion is alluded to towards the climax of *Milton* in 38.16–31, where it adds to the intensification of the conversion theme towards the end. Here, as David Riede has observed, Blake alludes to the words 'trembling and astonishment' from Acts 9:6 twice within fifteen lines. Here, however, it is Satan, not Milton, who plays the part of the possible (but probably unsuccessful) convert.²⁷

All of these moments in *Milton* invoke Paul's conversion as a traditional marker of sudden religious vision and transformation. This point is particularly obvious in the above reference to Blake's 'tarsus', which refers to bones in the human ankle as well as to the birthplace of the biblical Paul. Christ taking possession of Paul on the road to Damascus is thus used as a type for Milton taking possession of Blake, and belongs to the positive image of the visionary Paul within *Milton* (perhaps with a nod to another Saul in 1 Sam. 10:6, who was taken over by the spirit of God, made able to prophesy, and was then converted into 'a different person', NIV).

It becomes more complicated, however, when we realise that Blake also uses a negative set of references to Paul in *Milton*, as David Riede has discussed.²⁸ These negative references represent what Blake calls 'the Church Paul' (J56.42, E206), which functions as a negation of the visionary Paul: the visionary Paul was a positive prophet-poet, who challenged tradition, whereas the 'Church Paul' represents the negative state in which the spiritual energy of

Paul has been reduced to a system or, indeed, a church (compare the stagnated Swedenborgian church in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*). We find this 'Church Paul' in the two direct uses of Paul's name in *Milton's* text. First, 'Four Churches' are identified as 'Paul, Constantine, Charlemaine, Luther' (24.30–33, E120), accompanied by a margin illustration showing naked tormented bodies as an indication of what Blake saw as these churches' shared suppression of the body. And second, towards the end of the poem, we find a similar reference to 'Abraham, Moses, Solomon, Paul, Constantine, Charlemaine/ Luther', churches characterised as 'the Dragon Forms/ Religion hid in War' (37.41–43, E138).

So, 'Paul' has a double meaning in *Milton*. On the one hand, references to Paul qualify Milton's prolonged transformation throughout *Milton* as the making of a true prophet-poet (which he only becomes with the help of Blake's imagination and re-vision). And on the other hand, Blake uses the figure of Paul to show how a distorted institution (the 'Church Paul') can return to its original visionary state ('Paul'). In doing this Blake shows that Milton's transformation comes from within and is only a restoration of an already present potential: Milton's conversion is a complete re-formation. And overall, as mentioned, Paul works as a repeated reminder to the reader of the importance of the 'Eternal Now', in which the divine imagination strikes, and change happens in a flash.

The present moment in *Milton* is, however, not solely a temporal point but also a spatial location: 'every Moment has a Couch of gold for soft repose' (28.46, E126). It is a passage point or a gate that indicates both the moment *in which* the subject is transformed and the place *where* the subject manages to break through. It is at once the temporal 'Moment in each Day that Satan cannot find' (35.42, E136) and, to quote *Jerusalem* (which, in turn, quotes *Milton*), the spatial 'Grain of Sand in Lambeth that Satan cannot find' (37.15, E183). It is the moment of transformation or conversion, which simultaneously happens in an instant *and* must continually or repeatedly be performed—and at the same time the locale in which the opening happens. As Ololon asks Milton towards the end: 'Is this the Void Outside of Existence, which if enterd into/ Becomes a Womb' (41.37–42.1, E143).

This combined moment-locale has a parallel in Boehme's 'fourth property', which denotes the crucial spatial-temporal point, where darkness becomes light, and death becomes life. The fourth property is the active point of 'sharp Regeneration' (*The Threefold Life of Man* 14.76), which all Boehme's other six properties relate to: an 'astringent chamber', which can be 'opened' and acts as 'a turning wheel' (SR 2.40).²⁹ It is also the opening centre, or the centre of rotation, through which God moves—and truly meets—the human subject.³⁰ And it is the place where self-annihilation takes place, resulting in a

release of powers (or, as Blake calls it in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 'Energy').

In *Milton*, the annihilation of the selfhood in the present moment has two characteristics that are particularly worth noting when reading Blake and Boehme alongside each other. First, it is less explicitly connected to an experience of Christ than in Boehme's works. Unlike in *Jerusalem*, where Albion has to see the crucified Jesus before he enters into the 'fourth property', Jesus in *Milton* reveals himself to the protagonist as the incarnation of the Poetic Genius—the human form of divine *writing*, through which there is salvation for Milton (the poet). Here, in the final revelation we see Jesus dressed in 'woven letters', so that 'the Writing/ Is the Divine Revelation in the Litteral expression' (42.13–14, E143). The second noteworthy thing is that we are not to understand *Milton's* self-annihilation as a complete destruction of the self after which there is no form of individual being left. Instead, as Bryan Aubrey has pointed out, Blake takes Boehme's distinction between the positive selfhood, *Meinheit*, and the negative selfhood, *Eigenheit*, and creates a dialectic movement in which the subject continually puts off selfhood and puts it on again.³¹ In Blake's works, this dynamic takes the shape of the productive opposition of 'contraries', which is distinct from the frozen opposition of 'negations'. Thus the act of self-annihilation, by which Milton puts off 'all that is not of God alone' (38.48, E139), is only one example of what must continually happen in the life of a subject:

There is a Negation, & there is a Contrary
 The Negation must be destroyd to redeem the Contraries
 The Negation is the Spectre; the Reasoning Power in Man
 This is a false Body: an Incrustation over my Immortal
 Spirit; a Selfhood, which must be put off & annihilated away
 To cleanse the Face of my Spirit by Self-examination.
 (40.32–37, E142)

Alongside the conversion of Milton, another attempted conversion surfaces in *Milton*: that of the narrator, 'Blake'. 'Blake's' presence in the poem is, unlike Milton's, locally and temporally grounded: he is usually situated in an identifiable location, for example in his garden in Felpham (pl. 36), whereas Milton is constantly moving through time and space. 'Blake' occupies a number of different positions within the poem. First, he is positioned as its author, a *poet*, and thereby automatically and intimately connected with the text's discourse on the Poetic Genius. Second, he is positioned in a complicated revisionary relationship with his poetic predecessor Milton, whom he both criticises and calls back from the dead to give him new form. And third, 'Blake' is positioned as someone who is sometimes *also* possessed by someone else (as when Milton enters him or when he becomes one with Los in

22.4–14) and who has ecstatic visionary experiences resembling Paul's on the road to Damascus (the 'William' plate, 29). However, he is ultimately returned to the path outside his own house as everyone else heads off for the 'Great Harvest & Vintage' (43.1, E144).

It is particularly the connection between 'Blake' and Paul that evokes the theme of Blake's conversion in *Milton*. This connection is evident in the 'William' plate's similarities with Blake's roughly contemporary watercolour 'The Conversion of Saul' (ca. 1800).³² These similarities suggest that we should understand 'Blake' (or 'William') as a converting figure like Paul. In both images, the 'converting subject' ('Saul' and 'William') moves downwards, suggesting submission of the old self. And both stretch out their arms and fall backwards, just as Saul's horse and the star next to 'William' also move downwards. Simultaneously, there is an upward movement in both images, suggesting infusion of divine spirit and the creation of a new self: Saul sees a vision of Christ above him, who points upwards and forwards with his right arm; and behind William, three steps indicate a possible passage upwards. Thus both images represent the acceptance of the converting subject to enter into the long line of prophet-poets:³³ as Christ inhabits Saul and throws him into a revisionary relationship with his past (Jewish tradition), so Milton inhabits 'William' and authorises the poet to put forward a new, revised understanding of Milton. The product of this is *Milton*.

There is, however, a fundamental difference between the two images: Jesus is present in 'The Conversion of Saul' and he is absent in the 'William' plate. This is crucial as to how we should understand conversion in *Milton*. When Milton inhabits the narrator in pl. 15, it suggests to the reader that this is necessary to facilitate Milton's conversion within the text: Blake must become an instrument of Milton's spiritual pilgrimage. However, as we get to pl. 29's visual representation of the same scene—with its parallels to 'The Conversion of Saul'—*Milton's* implicit question of 'where to find the divine' is answered: here there is no vision of Christ above, because the divine spirit is *already* within the human figure. As Jesus says to Albion at the beginning of *Jerusalem*: 'I am in you and you in me, mutual in love divine' (4.7, E146). This becomes Blake's reply to the historical Milton and his disproportionate preoccupation with a distant God in heaven compared to his engagement with human existence below: what Milton needs in order to become whole is not a vision of 'Jesus above' as in 'The Conversion of Saul'. Instead, he needs a re-visioning of himself where eventually, also, he will find the divine spirit. In Boehme's words: 'Where will you seek God? In the Deep above the Stars? You will not be able to find him there. Seek him in your Heart, in the Center of the Birth of your Life, and there you shall find him' (*Three Principles* 4.8).³⁴

However, 'Blake's' own conversion is never accomplished. He may play the role of Milton's poetic sidekick, but when Milton ultimately succeeds in his conversion, 'Blake' is left behind like the narrator in John Bunyan's classic conversion tale *Pilgrim's Progress*, who longingly sees the protagonist Christian enter into heaven: 'And after that, they shut up the Gates: which when I had seen, I wished my self among them'.³⁵ Similarly in *Milton*:

I fell outstretched upon the path
A moment, & my Soul returnd into its mortal state
To Resurrection & Judgment in the Vegetable Body
(42.25–27, E143)

As the poet finishes his work, 'Blake' is left behind in his mortal body as after an act of *kenosis* ('self-emptying'), given over to the everyday continual struggle between resurrection and judgment and exhausted after imaginatively bringing Milton to internal unity through writing.³⁶ But 'Blake' himself remains ultimately unconverted—at least until the narrative of *Jerusalem* begins, the central conversion of which he will become deeply engaged in through his externalised form, Los (who notably also does not take part in the final conversion of *Milton* in pl. 43).

One last presence becomes visible towards the end of *Milton*, namely that of the reader. The emergence of the reader as *Milton* draws to an end echoes many other conversion narratives—an example again being *Pilgrim's Progress*, the last pages of which show a progressive inclusion of the narrator, who suddenly demands the attention of the reader by speaking in the first person and entering into a discussion with characters within the text. Both in *Pilgrim's Progress* and in *Milton*, the narrator seems intimately connected with, or even identical with, the author. As Gerda Norvig and Arlette M. Zinck have shown, the inclusion of the narrator in *Pilgrim's Progress* helps to build up towards the final vision of Heaven and Hell, which poses a question that is a common characteristic of allegorical texts to the reader: which way do *you* choose?³⁸ Thus the growing presence of the narrator towards the end seems to elicit the corresponding presence of the reader, who is called into being when directly addressed by the narrator and positioned in an I–thou relationship with him.

In *Milton*, the emergence of the reader in the text is more suggestive and indirect than in *Pilgrim's Progress*. This is most clearly realised via the narrator 'Blake's' appearance at the very end of the text, when he returns to the path outside his cottage and the narrative goes on to a new beginning without him. When 'Blake' suddenly takes a very clear form within the text, it reminds the reader of her or his own position *vis-à-vis* the text and poses a question similar to the one in *Pilgrim's Progress*: which way do *you* choose—that of 'Blake's'

abortive conversion or that of those who are now ready for the ‘Great Harvest & Vintage’? As both *Pilgrim’s Progress* and *Milton* draw towards their respective endings, the reader realises that the figure of the narrator has been present within the poem throughout and is now coming to the surface. This in turn suggests two things. First, that transformation is possible not only for the protagonist, but also for those liminal figures in the text that are able to cross the boundaries between ‘fiction’ and ‘reality’: narrator and author. Second, that this group of liminal figures might also include the readers. In retrospect, *Milton’s* imperative ‘Mark well my words! they are of your eternal salvation’ suddenly appears to have been directed not only at Milton, but also at *Milton’s* reader. And thereby Milton’s struggle, transformation, and conversion—and ‘Blake’s’ attempted conversion—become suggestive, if not programmatic, for the reader.³⁹ Like in Dante’s *Vita Nuova* (ca. 1292–94), which describes the making of its autobiographical narrator as a poet and a pilgrim, the reader ends up retrospectively realising that she or he did, in fact, also move through the pages of the text like a pilgrim, joining in the gradual conversion of the protagonist alongside him: as readers we retrospectively realise that we were included in the ‘I’ of *Vita Nuova*, and that we could also be the ‘Milton’ of *Milton*.

Finally, the sense of the reader’s conversion is emphasised by how Milton himself becomes an instrument of conversion in *Milton*. This development becomes particularly visible in two places. The first place is the scene in pl. 19, where Milton takes ‘the red clay of Succoth’ and gives Urizen new form, ‘creating new flesh on the Demon cold, and building him’ (19.8–13, E112). This passage positions Milton as ‘God’ to Urizen as ‘Adam’, whose name literally means ‘red clay’. The second place is Milton’s two final speeches, addressed to Satan (38.29–49) and Ololon (40.29–41.28) respectively. Here Milton represents himself not so much as an object of conversion as a potential converter himself. He now sees it as his responsibility to ‘discover before Heavn & Hell the Self righteousness/ In all its Hypocritic turpitude’ (38.43–44, E139), to publicly expose the errors of Satan’s ways, and to ‘take off’ Albion’s ‘filthy garments’ and instead ‘clothe him with Imagination’ (41.6–7, E142). In the final movements of *Milton*, then, Milton becomes both converted and converter. In his own conversion, or rebirth, he fully becomes ‘Milton the Awakener’ (21.33, E116). And the object of his awakening may not only be found within *Milton*, but also outside it, in the present moment when the reader engages with the illuminated poem.

To conclude: *Milton* is the spiritual portrait of a figure who goes through a Blakean conversion. It shows how the subject must move through annihilation of selfhood in order to gain unity. It insists that the subject’s awakening can take place through the use of art (poetry) and the imagination, for

Milton's conversion is only possible by way of the imaginative powers of another poet, Blake, within a challenging illuminated work to be read, or 'activated', by a reader. *Milton* shows that in order to find the divine, one must travel inwards, not outwards. And, it creates a poetic possibility of transformation, in which everyone is included: protagonist, narrator, author, and reader.

Reading *Milton* in this way not only underlines the intimate connection or inseparability in Blake's works between personal (or psychological) transformation and spiritual (or religious) transformation. It also helps us identify a deeper dynamic in the text between author, protagonist, and reader that can be applied to other conversion narratives as well. And, thereby, we are led to reconsider what conversion narratives are, what they can be, and what role the reader plays in them.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Karl F. Morrison, *Understanding Conversion* (Charlottesville, VA, London: University Press of Virginia, 1992), and, *Conversion and Text: the Cases of Augustine of Hippo, Herman-Judah, and Constantine Tsatsos* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1992). For conversion texts as narrative, see B. Diane Lipsett, *Desiring Conversion: Hermas, Thecla, Aseneth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- ² The three—slightly different—descriptions of Paul's conversion in Acts (9:1–19; 22:1–21; and 26:12–23) and Augustine's *Confessions* are usually understood as the origins of the Christian conversion narrative. Whilst we do have some early conversion narratives such as *The Shepherd of Hermas* (see B. Diane Lipsett, *Desiring Conversion*), it was not until the hagiographies and *vitae* of the Middle Ages that conversion became more widespread as a defining literary trope, and that authors, in various ways, began to imitate *Confessions*. From the Early Modern period we have an abundance of conversion narratives: interreligious conversion narratives (describing a turn from one religion to another), interdenominational conversion narratives (describing a turn from one denomination to another), and intradenominational conversion narratives (describing a spiritual awakening within one denomination). The tradition of spiritual autobiographies carried on into the evangelical movement, so that Methodists, for example, were encouraged to put into writing an account of their conversion, complete with exact time and place (John Wesley famously converted on 24 May 1738 at 'about a quarter before nine') (Henry D. Rack, 'Wesley, John (1703–1791)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2012) <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/29069>, accessed 11 August 2014). These various forms of conversion narratives, despite their differences, share some characteristics: namely one protagonist (often but not necessarily an autobiographical narrator), that the reader can easily identify with; a plot that is driven forward by one or several conversions; a tension in the text between instant conversion and gradual conversion; and, as Littberger has pointed out, a focus on the ending (Inger Littberger, *Omwändelser:*

- Nedslag i svenska romaner under hundra år* (Stockholm: Brutus Östlings Bokförlag Symposion, 2004), p. 27).
- ³ See for example D.J. Sloss and J.P.R. Wallis, *The Prophetic Writings of William Blake* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926, reprinted 1957), p. 7; Bernard Blackstone, *English Blake* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1966), pp. 119–21, 374; Morton D. Paley, *Energy and the Imagination: A Study of the Development of Blake's Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 142–3; Jean H. Hagstrum, "'The Wrath of the Lamb': A Study of William Blake's Conversions", in Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom, *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 311–30; and Mark Crosby, *Sparks of Fire: William Blake in Felpham, 1800–1803* (D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 2007), Introduction.
- ⁴ One example of how *Confessions* has the reader's turning to God in mind is found in the 'cascade of references to "conversion"' in the final book that represents the reader's formative exit from the text (Morrison, *Conversion and Text*, p. x and chapter 1). Augustine's very last remark to the reader leaves the clear impression that the narrator's gradual turning to God could be, and should be, replicated: 'Yes, indeed, that is how it is received, how it is found, how the door is opened' (13.38.53) (Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, reissued 2008), p. 305).
- ⁵ All references to Blake are to *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake, Newly Revised Edition*, David V. Erdman (ed.) (New York: Anchor Books, 1988) (E).
- ⁶ David Riede, 'Blake's Milton: On Membership in the Church Paul', in Mary Nyquist and Margaret W. Ferguson, *Re-membering Milton: Essays on the Texts and Traditions* (New York, London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 257–77; and Gerda Norvig, *Dark Figures in the Desired Country: Blake's Illustrations to The Pilgrim's Progress* (Berkeley, CA, Oxford: University of California Press, 1993), p. 98. Blake only ever uses the term 'descent' in *Milton* (Thomas A. Vogler, 'Re: Naming MIL/TON', in Nelson Hilton and T.A. Vogler, *Unnam'd Forms: Blake and Textuality* (Berkeley, CA, London: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 141–76). Compare Augustine in *Confessions*: 'Descend, so that you may ascend' (quoted in John Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion* (Cambridge, Mass, London: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 74).
- ⁷ Boehme, *Aurora (Morgen Röte im aufgang)*, ed. and trans. Andrew Weeks (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2013). Bryan Aubrey, with reference to both Boehme and Blake, calls it the 'lightning-flash' (*Watchmen of Eternity: Blake's Debt to Jakob Boehme* (Lanham, New York, London: University Press of America, 1986), pp. 120–6).
- ⁸ 'Paracelsus & Behmen appear'd to me' (E707). See Kevin Fischer, *Converse in the Spirit: William Blake, Jacob Boehme, and the Creative Spirit* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004) and Aubrey, *Watchmen*.
- ⁹ Some suggest that Blake got the term 'self-annihilation' from David Hartley instead (who in turn was also a Boehme reader) (John Howard, *Blake's 'Milton': A Study in the Selfhood* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1976), pp. 177–8).
- ¹⁰ OED, second edition, 1989; online version September 2011, s.v. 'selfhood', <http://oed.com/view/Entry/175277> (accessed 12 August 2014).
- ¹¹ William Law (ed.), *The Works of Jacob Behmen, the Teutonic Theosopher* (London: Printed for G. Robinson, 1763), IV, p. 99. Blake may have owned this edition. He was definitely familiar with it, as Henry Crabb Robinson noted that Blake

- 'praised . . . the designs to *Laws* Translation of Bohmen—"Michael Angelo could not have surpassed them" (quoted in G.E. Bentley, Jr, *Blake Records*, second edition (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 697.
- ¹² Quoted in Aubrey, *Watchmen*, p. 127.
- ¹³ 'Awaken my disappeared Image in me' (Boehme, 'Of True Repentance', Law IV, 19).
- ¹⁴ Andrew Lincoln, *Spiritual History: A Reading of William Blake's Vala or The Four Zoas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). The dates of the revisions are disputed. For 'self-annihilation' as a visual motif from ca. 1799 onwards, see Crosby, *Sparks of Fire*.
- ¹⁵ John H. Jones, *Blake on Language, Power, and Self-Annihilation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 8. Mark Crosby, for example, understands self-annihilation as belonging to the sphere of theology (*Sparks of Fire*, p. 11).
- ¹⁶ Blake's four Zoas are mythical representations of the four aspects of the human subject: Tharmas (body), Urizen (reason), Luvah (emotions), and Urthona (imagination) (Samuel Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), pp. 458–60).
- ¹⁷ Robert N. Essick and Joseph Viscomi, 'Introduction and Notes', in R.N. Essick and J. Viscomi (eds), *Milton a Poem and the Final Illuminated Works: The Ghost of Abel, On Homers Poetry [and] On Virgil, Laocoön* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press/The William Blake Trust, 1993), p. 29, and Marsha Newman, "'Milton's Track" Revisited: Visual Analogues to Blake's Vortex in the "Law Edition" of Boehme', *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 5 (2004) 73–93. The term 'the Breaker' refers to Micah 2:13. Cf. also 'the track/ of Satan' in *Paradise Lost* 10.314–15 (Essick and Viscomi, 'Introduction and Notes', p. 29).
- ¹⁸ For the male–female figure, see in particular Law III's 'The First Table' and 'The Second Table' (which contains a flap in the male–female chest called 'Selfhood'). See also Newman, 'Milton's Track'.
- ¹⁹ I use the terms 'conversion' and 'transformation', or 'spiritual transformation', interchangeably in this article. Whilst 'conversion' is a more loaded term than the less specifically religious 'transformation', it also immediately connects this article with the literary traditions of Christian conversion narratives. By using 'conversion' I thus wish to conjure up not so much an idea of a dogmatic turn, but of a connection with a long tradition of representing conversion in language and narrative, style and form. As shown by William James, definitions of conversion are inherently metaphorical and carry a number of meanings: 'To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities' (William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London, Glasgow: Collins, 1960), p. 194).
- ²⁰ Quoted in Fischer, *Converse in the Spirit*, p. 64.
- ²¹ Andrew Weeks, *Boehme: An Intellectual Biography of the Seventeenth-Century Philosopher and Mystic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 149–53, and Fischer, *Converse in the Spirit*.
- ²² Law I, 192.
- ²³ An alternative interpretation is that the title is *already* broken in two, and that the figure stretches out his arm in order to assemble the pieces again. Below, we see Milton's motto from *Paradise Lost* 'To Justify the Ways of God to Men', emphasising that *Milton* is composed in Milton's true spirit (cf. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 6).
- ²⁴ Law I, 10.

- ²⁵ Aubrey, *Watchmen*; Riede, 'Blake's Milton'; and Mary Lynn Johnson, 'Milton and its Contexts', in Morris Eaves (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 231–50. See also Jonathan Roberts, 'St Paul's Gifts to Blake's Aesthetic: "O Human Imagination, O Divine Body"', *The Glass* 15 (2003) 8–18. Other significant references to Paul's conversion in Blake's works outside *Milton* are found in the watercolour 'The Conversion of Saul', which I discuss below, and the direct reference in *Jerusalem* pl. 77 (immediately following the image showing Albion's conversion before the crucified Jesus). Saul, of course, was Paul's name before his conversion. In *Jerusalem* pl. 77, the words 'Saul Saul/ Why persecutest thou me' are inscribed just before Blake's prose introduction to chapter four, which calls upon all Christians to abandon the moralistic suppression of the stagnated 'Church Paul' (see below): 'I know of no other Christianity and of no other Gospel than the liberty both a body & mind to exercise the Divine Arts of Imagination... England! awake! awake! awake!' (E231–33).
- ²⁶ Blake often changed the order and number of plates between the copies of his works. When discussing *Milton's* illustrations, I refer to Essick and Viscomi's *William Blake Trust* edition (1993), which sometimes varies from the numbering in E.
- ²⁷ Riede, 'Blake's Milton', p. 272.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 258.
- ²⁹ Quoted in Fischer, *Converse in the Spirit*, p. 112.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ Aubrey, *Watchmen*, pp. 130–1.
- ³² Janet A. Warner, *Blake and the Language of Art* (Kingston, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1984), pp. 39–42; Essick and Viscomi, 'Introduction and Notes', p. 27; and Johnson, 'Milton and its Contexts', p. 244.
- ³³ Cf. Christopher Rowland, *Blake and the Bible* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 147, and Luke 1:17.
- ³⁴ Law I, 22.
- ³⁵ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, James Blanton Wharey (ed.), second edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), p. 162. I am grateful to one of my anonymous reviewers who drew my attention to Bob Dylan's use of this trope: 'Now I'm trying to get to heaven before they close the door' ('Trying to Get to Heaven', *Time Out of Mind*, 1997).
- ³⁶ The concept of *kenosis* in Christian thought is based on Phil 2:7, where the term is used about Christ: 'he made himself nothing (*ekenosen*) by taking the very nature of a servant' (NIV).
- ³⁷ Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, p. 156.
- ³⁸ Norvig, *Dark Figures*, p. 210, and Arlette M. Zinck, "'Doctrine by Ensample": Sanctification through Literature in Milton and Bunyan', *Bunyan Studies* 6 (1995–96) 44–55.
- ³⁹ The possibility of the reader's conversion is also discussed in Norvig, *Dark Figures*, and Howard, *Blake's 'Milton'*, p. 159.