

## “Minute particulars” and the visionary labor of words

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Blake’s *Jerusalem the Emanation of the Giant Albion* presses the idea of “minute particulars,” discrete, significant units of sound and meaning. Los works with such materials to build a system of signification and reading that answers the Blakean imperative: “Labour well the Minute Particulars, attend to the Little-ones” (49: 58, 55: 51). This paper considers how “minute particulars” expose the “dumb,” embedded structures that produce Albion’s melancholy, and it explores how *Jerusalem* resists “Dumb despair” by creating a counter-melancholic poetics that figures “Minute Particulars” as both the symptoms of and cure for Albion’s melancholy. As the smallest units of sound and meaning, “minute particulars” are essential to Blake’s production of a liberated poetics, for “he who wishes to see a Vision; a perfect Whole / Must see it in its Minute Particulars” (91: 20–21).

In the second chapter of *Jerusalem the Emanation of the Giant Albion*, as Los and Albion’s friends – the cities of England – attempt to call Albion back from his melancholy, the self-conscious voice of the poet comments on the language Los uses to describe the friends:

(I call them by their English names: English, the rough basement, Los built the stubborn structure of the Language, acting against Albions melancholy, who must else have been a Dumb despair.) (40: 57–59)

Los focuses on building the structured or formal conditions of language as a response to Albion’s melancholy; he produces a syntax and grammar whose “stubborn structure” resists the “dumb” restraints of Albion’s despair. English emerges both as cure and challenge to Albion’s melancholy; it is the intransigent foundation for the restructuring of dumbness into signification. The passage performs this restructuring as it articulates it. “[W]ho must else have been a Dumb despair” may syntactically refer to Language (English), Albion, melancholy, or Los. The threat of “Dumb despair,” therefore, extends to each of these figures, but the four become aligned in their shared salvation and the personification that “who” establishes. Los’s language thus emerges to offer an alternative organizing principle to the melancholic symptomatology that diminishes Albion. Los resists “dumb” opacity to form a language whose multiple referents, equivalencies, and personifications perform Los’s rebuilding by disrupting and countering the expected linguistic forms and offering diverse readings of the passage that collectively rebel against the threat of Albion’s “dumbness.”

This passage is a “minute particular,” a discrete, significant unit of sound and meaning. Los works with such materials to build “Divine Analogy,” a system of signification and reading that answers the Blakean imperative: “Labour well the Minute Particulars, attend to the Little-ones” (49: 58, 55: 51). Blake’s syntax demands that the “Minute Particulars” themselves “labour well” and that readers “labour” them “well,” encountering them with conscientious mindfulness. Read in this way, the passage becomes a concentrated, luminous moment

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of narrative birthing and building. This paper takes up Blake's advice. It looks at how, on the one hand, Blake's "minute particulars" expose and articulate the conventionally "dumb," embedded, systemic structures that produce Albion's melancholy; that is, how Blake's poetics "builds" – and reveals – the systems of Albion's fallen body and state. At the same time, it explores how *Jerusalem* acts against "Dumb despair" by creating a counter-melancholic poetics that imagines "Minute Particulars" as the symptoms of and cure for Albion's melancholy. As the smallest units of sound and meaning – letters and words – "minute particulars" are essential to the production of a liberated poetics: "he who wishes to see a Vision; a perfect Whole / Must see it in its Minute Particulars" (91: 20–21). *Jerusalem*, therefore, establishes "Minute Particulars" as the central forces "building" the redemption of language and the world: through them words live and walk and ride in chariots.

"Minute particular" itself embodies the concentrated, multivalent nature of "Minute Particulars." "Minute" is an adjective modifying "particular," but it exceeds its role as adjective by performing the diversity of the idea it designates; "minute" rises up and takes on its other grammatical forms. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, by 1820, the year of *Jerusalem's* completion, "minute" as adjective could mean: "exacting, discriminating," "chopped," and "small." As a noun it resonates as: "a short space of time"; "a sixtieth of an hour"; "a point of time"; "the fitted moment"; "a brief summary of events"; "an official memorandum authorizing ... a certain course"; "an agreement or precise understanding"; and in music, "A (usually improvised) ornamentation whereby a long note is replaced by a series of shorter ones." As a verb "minute" can mean: "to draft, record, or enumerate point by point." Each of these definitions introduces a compelling reading of "minute," and an account begins to emerge that reveals the minute particularity of "minute." "Minute" becomes of a small, chopped (discrete) moment that replaces larger or longer moments in time, a moment appointed to offer a precise, prophetic understanding, recorded in its inscription.

"Particular" takes up and complicates the concepts of "minute." By 1820 the *OED* notes definitions of "particular" that include accounts of belonging: "of or belonging to some one thing and not to any other"; "special; not general"; "proper, peculiar, restricted"; "apart from the rest"; "distinguished in some way among others of the kind." It implies forms of distinction with its definitions: "more than ordinary"; "peculiar so as to excite surprise or wonder"; "strange, odd." And, in practical terms, "particular" means "describing or setting forth something in detail"; "of a narrative, account, etc"; "attentive to details of action"; "specially careful." Furthermore, Particular Baptists are "members of a Baptist denomination" holding the Calvinistic doctrines of particular election and particular redemption: the Divine election and redemption of some, but not all, people. In *Jerusalem*, therefore, "particular" embodies the idea of privileged singularity, of a precise account, an exact and wondrous moment of narrative and myth. But it serves a deictic function as well; because of its isolation and singularity, "particular" is pregnant with the meaning of its individual, investing context, not with the general, surrounding one. The "minute particular" is a deictic abstraction that becomes a "Minute Particular" when it is invested with a local context. Both "minute" and "particular" veer toward empirical science's impulses to measure and observe that are characteristic of Blake's historical moment, but "particular" especially also moves toward the odd, the wonderful, and the strange that resist classification. And so "minute particulars" give articulation to "Dumb despair" through their weird incalculabilities.

Blake offers two forms of production for the minute particular and attempts to discriminate between them – between the hardened particularity that condenses meaning and the wildly exact particularity of a poetic language that holds various meanings simultaneously. Los identifies the former minute particularity in Albion's fallen body:

Fearing that Albion should turn his back against the Divine Vision  
 Los took his globe of fire to search the interiors of Albions  
 Bosom. in all the terrors of friendship. entering the caves  
 Of despair & death, to search the tempters out, walking among  
 Albions rocks and precipices! caves of solitude & dark despair,  
 And saw every Minute Particular of Albion degraded & murdered  
 But saw not by whom; they were hidden within the minute particulars  
 Of which they had possessed themselves and there they take up  
 The articulations of a mans soul, and laughing throw it down  
 Into the frame. then knock it out upon the plank, & souls are bak'd  
 In bricks to build the pyramids of Heber & Terah. But Los  
 Searched in vain: clost from the minutia he walkd, difficult.  
 He came down from Highgate thro Hackney & Holloway towards London  
 Till he came to old Stratford & thence to Stepney & the Isle  
 Of Leutha's Dogs, thence thro the narrows of the Rivers side  
 And saw every minute particular, the jewels of Albion, running down  
 The kennels of the streets & lanes as if they were abhorrd.  
 Every Universal Form. was become barren mountains of Moral  
 Virtue: and every Minute Particular hardend into grains of sand:  
 And all the tendernesses of the soul cast forth as filth and mire,  
 Among the winding places of deep contemplation intricate  
 To where the Tower of London frownd dreadful over Jerusalem (31: 2–23)

This moment is the nadir of the poem. Los finds nothing to redeem. He cannot identify the villains who have produced this world because Albion's melancholy is systemic; it is the product of a complex structure of interlocking interests. In Albion's internal world, minute particulars are "possessed" by a melancholic, nullifying context. Walking among "the caves of solitude & dark despair," Los sees that the calcified particulars have been "degraded and murdered"; they have "hardend into grains of sand." In Albion's body, the particulars are petrified into a constricted and despairing meaning: "Every Universal Form. was become barren mountains of Moral / Virtue ..." In these terms, the text itself can be identified with Albion's body, which is the page, and with his hardened minute particulars, which are the words that mark it. The Minute Particular "Universal Form." and the white space that follows it perform the doomed opacity of Albion's body. Because Blake's punctuation splits two phrases that together form a conventional, subject-predicate sentence, the lexical unit is isolated from the rest of the sentence that completes it; "Universal Form." is stranded in detachment. The "tempters" in the text mimic this nullifying structuring as they reduce the minute particulars and their incalculable oddities into standardized bricks that produce despairing singularity – the pyramids and Albion's barren body. At the same time, however, Blake's idiosyncratic orthography reveals the otherwise invisible structures of language and the imaginative possibilities inherent to "Universal Form" that those structures nullify.

Obliquely unpacking the possibilities inherent in "Universal Form," the poem describes "a Grain of Sand in Lambeth [that] ... is translucent and has many angles" and in which Jerusalem hides (41: 15–16). The poem's language takes up the project of negotiating the possibilities of minute particulars, which are forever, inherently poised between hardening into nullifying opacity or opening into expansive translucence. The "Grain of Sand in Lambeth" is a minute particular that rises out of a myopic, opaque physicality and into a multifaceted, translucent vision, a Minute Particular. What rhetorical strategy, what method of minute particulars, opens out the text's allegory of "hardend" sand into a version of poetic production?

Like most of Blake's materials of production, his minute particulars complicate and press the existing, predominant material of production, the Newtonian atom. While the

minute particulars counter the paradigm of Blake's historical moment, they never entirely exceed its threat of reduction or condensation. Instead, minute particulars depend on the restructuring of thought so that the reader encounters them in the right state of mind. In this state, the reader recognizes that each Minute Particular contains every moment in time – past, present, and future – and all periods of narrative, like the poet, who asserts:

I see the Past, Present & Future, existing all at once  
 Before me; O Divine Spirit sustain me on thy wings!  
 That I may awake Albion from His long & cold repose.  
 For Bacon & Newton sheathd in dismal steel, their terrors hang  
 Like iron scourges over Albion, Reasonings like vast Serpents  
 Infold around my limbs, bruising my minute articulations

I turn my eyes to the Schools & Universities of Europe  
 And there behold the Loom of Locke whose Woof rages dire  
 Washd by the Water-wheels of Newton. black the cloth  
 In heavy wreathes folds over every Nation; cruel Works  
 Of many Wheels I View, wheel without wheel, with cogs tyrannic  
 Moving by compulsion each other: not as those in Eden: which  
 Wheel within Wheel in freedom revolve in harmony & peace. (15: 8–20)

In the poem's terms, the atom that Locke and Newton imagine structures the universe is a "wheel without wheel," a local, isolated atom, that builds on other atoms, literally "bruising ... minute articulations" through the forces of their "compulsions" that form the physical world. For Blake, Newton's atom is the threat of reduction realized; it is the component part that contains only a small, hard meaning, a limited compulsion. "Minute articulation" offers an alternate version of production to the Newtonian atom. It is "Wheels within Wheel," a revolving, harmonious structure reminiscent of the Medieval cosmology of crystal spheres: each wheel is contingent on the next – "all are necessary to each other" – and the harmony of their revolutions produces celestial music (3). If the threat of minute particulars is that they might harden into Newtonian atoms, then their ambition is to recover or produce a "Vision" of an Edenic world order that is apocalyptic in consequence: "Past, Present, & Future, exist all at once" in the wheels of its "minute articulation."

But the reader encounters *Jerusalem* sequentially, plate by plate, and the trajectory of the prophecy can be traced temporally with specific moments land-marking the narrative's progression. The methods of marking time are Albion's progressive fall(s). Each of *Jerusalem's* chapters contains a fatal moment when Albion falls or continues falling, and the poem is at once pre-occupied with establishing a sense of an unfolding narrative – tracing Albion's fall(s) – and with resisting the trajectory of linear time by offering moments – Albion's repeated fall(s) and falling – that cannot be contained within a linear framework. The repetition of Albion's fall(s) is a disruption that exposes an alternative temporal, narrative impulse that constantly attempts to refigure the systems that produce Albion's fall into "Visions of Eternity."

This new conception of time allows the poem to open out unexpectedly. Apparently the Apocalypse occurs in the text and is sounded by the minute particular, "Time was finished!" (94: 18). Yet the poem continues. *Jerusalem* literally cannot be contained within the traditional organization of narrative and syntax; it exceeds those structures. But how can a narrative exist outside of its rhetorical structures? How can the text continue its narrative trajectory when that movement is not grounded in temporality?

That the poem is not only concerned with time in terms of a linear progression, but also with it as an aspect of rhythm, reveals the work's structural interest in time as a disrupting force of time: in a moment of self-reflexivity, time apprehends itself and interrupts the

temporal unfolding of narrative. The seams of the work become visible. At the poem's outset the narrator says:

When this Verse was first dictated to me I consider'd a Monotonous Cadence like that used by Milton or Shakespeare, & all writers of English Blank Verse. derived from the modern bondage of Rhyming: to be a necessary and indispensable part of Verse. But I soon found that in the mouth of a true Orator such monotony was not only awkward, but as much as a bondage as rhyme itself. I therefore have produced a variety in every line. both of cadences & number of syllables. (3)

The language of the poem, with its syllables and stresses, constantly breaks traditional, "bound" time: normative blank verse. Fetters are chains for feet, and Blake's poem breaks those chains by breaking with the expected feet: "For his Words roll in thunders & lightnings among the Temples" (90: 60). The opening trochee seemingly revises a conventional iambic opening, but it undergoes a further revision by the spondaic "Words roll" that makes the relative stress on "For" minor and that breaks the reader's iambic expectations. The line then seems to fall into two iambs, but that pattern is brief, and the final seven beats divide into a trochee, a dactyl, and a closing trochee. In this line, then, "Words" "roll" away from and escape "monotony." Time, therefore, disrupts itself by dramatically and tonally enacting moments of dissonance that simultaneously recall the ghosts of expected iambs. Prosody's concept of "particular meter" – "modifications of ordinary iambic meters used for hymns" – emerges and enacts the work's holy unorthodoxies that save the poem from "fetters" (*OED*).

But in the final chapter, the minute particulars themselves are in bondage: "Minute Particulars in slavery I behold among the brick-kilns Disorganizd, & there is Pharaoh in his iron Court" (89: 17–19). The Minute Particulars are at work creating bricks, fashioning concrete versions of themselves as building materials, and they do this, themselves narrative building blocks, to construct the "rough basement" of the narrative they advance. Thus the enslaved Minute Particulars are in a double bind: they build the narrative that enslaves them. They are subordinated to the end of a coherent text that they form. Yet the end of time prophecies the end of the work's narrative – what then happens to the minute particulars and their relation to the text?

The Minute Particulars become Christ figures, their deaths in normative time allowing the reader access into the infinite:

Jesus said. Wouldest thou love one who never died  
For thee or ever die for one who had not died for thee  
And if God dieth not for Man & giveth not himself  
Eternally for Man Man could not exist. for Man is Love:  
As God is Love: every kindness to another is a little Death  
In the Divine Image nor can Man exist but by Brotherhood (96: 23–28)

Minute Particulars, as Blake's orthography reveals, are minute gods, and in the economy of the text, they die to be reborn for man's sake, so that he can exist beyond time. "Particular" also describes a friend or friendship, and Blake suggests a "Brotherhood" that the Minute Particulars make possible in the poem. The method of reading employed by Satan and his Watch Fiends that "degraded & murdered" "every Minute Particular of Albion" is converted into the self-sacrifice and brotherhood of the Minute Particulars (31: 7). They redeem the role of death in reading so that death no longer means suppression into human order but expansion and return to divine order. Human time is over, as though the end of narrative is reached, as though it is no longer necessary or possible for the work to continue. But the end of time is not the end of narrative; it is the end of a murderous method of reading. The transformation of minute particulars into Minute Particulars

through Incarnation is literalized: Minute Particulars become men. Blake's poetic language takes on human form:

& in the midst

Jesus will appear; so he who wishes to see a Vision; a perfect Whole  
 Must see it in its Minute Particulars; Organized & not as thou  
 O Fiend of Righteousness pretendest; thine is a Disorganized  
 And snowy cloud: brooder of tempests & destructive  
 War You smile with pomp & rigor: you talk of benevolence & virtue!  
 I act with benevolence & virtue & get murderd time after time:  
 You accumulate Particulars, & murder by analyzing, that you  
 May take the aggregate; & you call the aggregate Moral Law:  
 And you call that Swelld & bloated Form; a Minute Particular.  
 But General Forms have their vitality in Particulars: & every  
 Particular is a Man; a Divine Member of the Divine Jesus. (91: 19–30)

Minute Particulars reveal the whole as they maintain their minuteness, their particularity. Thus to organize them, to see their aggregate, is devastatingly to disorganize them. *Jerusalem* must marshal its series of discrete, particularized moments to realize an overarching and compelling prophetic impulse. Blake's prophetic vision is a prophecy of work, of reorganization and production. Los builds the "rough basement" of language, and Minute Particulars work as slaves to open out that basement and to convert murder into self-sacrifice. *Jerusalem* builds a structure of redemption. Prophecy, therefore, is not merely articulation; it is labor-intensive construction, and it answers the Blakean imperative: "Labor well the teeming earth" (55: 53).

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