You know from the title that this paper will focus on the drawing of a line and then lines by Blake’s Los at a crucial moment in Blake’s epic poem, *The Four Zoas*. I’m going to assume you don’t know the poem, and, to make this talk a little more interesting, I’m going to start out with a few observations about the poem. I’ll also spend some time describing the build-up to the moment when Los draws a line so that the all-important context for this moment is clear in your minds.

Let’s start out with the fact that *The Four Zoas* represents Blake’s first attempt at producing an epic structure, and that it was ultimately an unsuccessful endeavour. It was revised time and time again over the course of a number of years. In the end Blake gave up, and ultimately harvested materials from it for his two later epic structures.

Proceeding to content, in the poem, Blake speaks in terms of four giant forms, whose names are Luvah, Urthona, Urizen and Tharmas. Blake’s poetry is mythopoeic, and there’s no harm in this stage in thinking of these figures as gods.

Central to Blake’s poetic thinking is the notion of the Fall, and in *The Four Zoas* all four zoas fall. This process involves the generation of new god-like figures, some of which have familiar names. Figure 2 in the Appendix provides us with a picture of the names of the *fallen* zoas.

Blake’s poetry is a sort of spiritual history, and the other thing to mention at the outset is that, as such, it covers the whole history of humankind, from Creation/Fall to apocalypse. Figure 1 details how 2 formalist commentators describe the progress of events.

In order to consider *lines*, we must turn to Night the Seventh of the poem, as well as night the eighth. Two versions of Night the Seventh exist. In today’s standard edition, the Erdman one, the two are combined in line with the vision of the poem advanced by the Blake scholar Mark Lefebvre in his “A Note on the Structural Necessity of Night VIIb”, and it’s this edition I’ll be working with.

Turning to night the seventh, a tree stands at the centre of the action, a tree referred to as “the tree of mystery”. Revelation is a central idea in Blake. Mystery is the condition of the pre-apocalyptic; mystery is *solved*, as it were, by apocalypse. Nature is central to what Blake has in mind when speaking of mystery: fallen nature is an *unfathomable* environment. The religion which Blake views inimically is natural religion, which, if the tree represents fallen nature, amounts to worship of this tree.

In nights five and six, Blake’s Orc and Urizen are the most important figures associated with the tree. Of course we should associate revolution and stability, Romanticism and Classicism, with Orc and Urizen respectively, and remember that Blake would always have thought of Milton’s Satan as an Orc figure, and the Father in *Paradise Lost* as a Urizenic figure. By the time we come to night the seventh, we have reached the end of the cycle which keeps repeating itself throughout history. At this point in time, Urizen has a strong interest in the triumph of the natural religion the tree symbolizes. Under such conditions, people would accept that the only pattern for life is the one provided by a nature whose life is utterly governed by laws. His ultimate dream is of a society in which obedience is automatic, there being no need for conscious conformity. (This is symbolized by Orc’s taking on a serpent form and climbing the tree of mystery.)

This night also presents us with the familiar spectacle of a couple eating the fruit of the foreboding tree. We have two such scenes in this poem: the first involving both a figure called the Spectre of Urthona and another named the Shadow of Enitharmon, the second involving the Spectre of Urthona (again) and Blake’s Los. In both cases, however, the eating of the fruit seems to be secondary to a related act. What is crucial about the tableau in which the Spectre of Urthona and the Shadow of Enitharmon are associated with the tree is the Shadow of Enitharmon’s giving birth to a figure referred to as the Shadowy Female, who turns out to be Vala, another character from Blake’s pantheon. What is most relevant about Enitharmon’s and Los’s also eating of the fruit is that it segues into the most important episode in the second narrative strand: the process whereby Los unites with the Spectre.

Now, war is absolutely central to night the seventh. Erdman ties it in with the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, and more specifically the Anglo-Russian campaign in the Netherlands in 1799, when the Second Coalition forces were defeated the French. In the poem, the outbreak of war is bound up with the birth of the Shadowy Female. Blake describes her appearance and the effect she has:

…a Cloud she grew & grew   
Till many of the dead burst forth from the bottoms of their tombs   
In male forms without female counterparts, or Emanations,  
Cruel and ravening with Enmity & Hatred & War, (FZ7a-85.18-20; E360)

The figures referred to here simply as “the dead” are soldiers or warriors in the poem, and they are also alluded to throughout as “spectres”. Of enormous importance is that fact that these warring figures are spoken of as having no counterparts, which are specifically female. We might add at this stage that, in line with Blake’s view that war is the opposite of civilization rather than part of it, the nakedness of these figures is bound up with the fact that they have no civilization around them.

The countermovement is precipitated by the union of the Spectre of Urthona with Los, as I suggested. If we jump ahead to the ultimate significance of that union in night the seventh, the counterpoint is clear enough. The mythological figures of the poem start to abandon the war they have been engaged in. As we’re pushed for time, perhaps I might simply invite you to have a look at the passage in question at a later time.

It’s what happens immediately prior to this moment which is of prime importance for the purposes of this short talk. Having eaten the fruit of the tree of mystery, Los is dejected. But “Urthona’s spectre in part mingling with him comforted him”, and that moment of unity with the Spectre (actually the second such moment) leads into a scene in which Los and Enitharmon start planning. Los says

…Stern desire   
I feel to fabricate embodied semblances in which the dead   
May live before us in our palaces & in our gardens of labour,

(FZ7a-98[90].8-10; E370)

And Enitharmon replying, speaks of Los’s creating

…forms sublime,  
Such as the piteous spectres may assimilate themselves into, (FZ7a-98[90].22-23; E370)

Immediately after this productive exchange, Los starts manipulating metaphorical flames and producing lines. The very idea of the spectre suggests perhaps a somewhat vague outline, no doubt even vaguer than what Ingold speaks of as a “ghostly outline”, but in connection with the drawing of lines and the tincturing of the design, the spectres now they receive counterparts. The warring souls apparently routinely take refuge in Enitharmon’s “bosom translucent”. Ejecting them from that place of repose, Enitharmon breathes them forth, and they take on the forms provided for them by the pair:

… Los, his hands divine inspired, began   
To modulate his fires; studious the loud roaring flames   
He vanquishd with the strength of Art, bending their iron points   
And drawing them forth delighted upon the winds of Golgonooza  
From out the ranks of Urizens war & from the fiery lake   
Of Orc, bending down as the binder of the Sheaves follows   
The reaper, in both arms embracing the furious raging flames.

Los drew them forth out of the deeps, planting his right foot firm   
Upon the Iron crag of Urizen, thence springing up aloft   
Into the heavens of Enitharmon in a mighty circle.

And first he drew a line upon the walls of shining heaven,   
And Enitharmon tincturd it with beams of blushing love.    
It remaind permanent, a lovely form, inspird, divinely human.   
Dividing into just proportions, Los unwearied labourd   
The immortal lines upon the heavens, till with sighs of love,   
Sweet Enitharmon mild, Entrancd, breathd forth upon the wind   
The spectrous dead. Weeping, the Spectres viewd the immortal works   
Of Los, Assimilating to those forms, Embodied & Lovely   
In youth & beauty, in the arms of Enitharmon mild reposing.

(FZ7a-98[90].25-43; E370-371)

Perhaps the first thing to say about this imagery is that it quickly modulates into a variant in which Los is the smith in his forge, while Enitharmon is a weaver working with a loom. This is made clear in a number of instances in night the eighth. The work they do for the spectres is now presented in terms of forging and weaving. In one passage, we learn how

… Enitharmon erected Looms in Lubans Gate   
And calld the Looms Cathedron; in these Looms She wove the Spectres   
Bodies of Vegetation

(FZ8-100[1st].2-4;   E372)

If we look back at the line drawing moment, we can see that the imagery of drawing is *actually* combined with the imagery of flames, suggestive of a furnace environment.

As Frye clarifies for us, Los is “the builder of the eternal form of human civilization, and […] therefore a smith, a worker in metal and fire, the two great instruments of civilized life”. Why does he draw a line if he is a smith? is an obvious question. One possible answer is partly provided by the text which is associated with this seminar. Perhaps Blake possessed an Ingoldian, clairvoyant understanding of how lines permeate human civilization, so that the figure of the smith, the builder of the eternal form of human civilization, may justifiably be modulated into that of a figure simply drawing a line. Presently, we’ll turn to a passage from Blake’s *A Descriptive Catalogue* which will clarify this point.

But of course another possibility suggest itself. Poets and painters undoubtedly have a say in the building of the eternal form of human civilization, too. As we know, “poetry in its social aspect has the function of expressing, as a verbal hypothesis, a vision of the goal of work and the forms of desire”. And painters and their works have parallel social functions. The figure of the smith is flexible enough to refer to the poet or artist or poet-painter, but Blake also has the option of modulating the figure of the smith into the visual artist when thinking of *this* kind of artistic contribution to the construction of civilization. Los draws a line because he represents artists, like Blake, as well as the worker, more generally.

If we are to pursue the significance of the line in the poem a little further, we must continue with night the eighth, where a moral dialectic emerges. The line is germane here, even if it is the imagery of forging and weaving in particular which is central. If the activity of providing form, tied in with lines, has been introduced in night the seventh, a contrary logic is introduced in night the eighth. The work of Los and Enitharmon, which provides form, is contrasted with that of other figures, whose work first undoes their work and then provides *other* clothing. An ominous-sounding triad referred to as “Satan Og and Sihon” first *undo* the work of Los and Enitharmon. Together, they

Build Mills of resistless wheels to unwind the soft threads & reveal   
Naked of their clothing the poor spectres before the accusing heavens,

(FZ8-113[1st].17-18; E376)

But the real opponents of Los and Enitharmon are figures called Rahab and Tirzah, who, subsequently actually produce something like a demonic parody of the work of Los and Enitharmon:

... Rahab & Tirzah far different mantles prepare: webs of torture,    
Mantles of despair, girdles of bitter compunction, shoes of indolence,   
Veils of ignorance covering from head to feet with a cold web.

(FZ8-113[1st].19-21; E376)

We have clearly swung to the opposite pole of a moral dialectic. In the time remaining, I’ll simply make a small number of observations about this pole, tying it in with our overarching consideration, lines, before finishing. The first point to clarify is that the items associated with Rahab and Tirzah, though we might think of them as *connected to* lines, actually suggest *opposition* to the line, even if they consist of “forms” of a sort. In *A Descriptive Catalogue*, when speaking of his own work “Ruth – a Drawing”, Blake says

The great and golden rule of art, as well as of life, is this: That the more distinct, sharp and wirey the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art, and the less keen and sharp, the greater is the evidence of weak imitation, plagiarism and bungling …. The want of this determinate and bounding form evidences the want of idea in the artist’s mind, and the pretence of the plagiary in all its branches…. What is it that builds a house and plants a garden, but the definite and determinate? … Leave out the line, and you leave out life itself; all is chaos again, and the line of the almighty must be drawn out upon it before man or beast can exist.

If we take on board the dialectic Blake is speaking of here, the only possible inference is that the items associated with Rahab and Tirzah are really part of this chaos and not the “creation” brought into existence by the artist, even if they consist of “forms”. But how can that be? one might enquire. Those items, after all, have their lines.

The difference between the work of Los and Enitharmon and that of Rahab and Tirzah becomes clearer when we consider what they do. Los and Enitharmon’s work gives form to the spectres *without covering them or rendering them mysterious*. Rahab and Tirzah’s are items that conceal, shroud in mystery etc. These items presumably *cover* lines. In Blake’s painting, we remember, figures are either naked or clothed in virtually transparent garments which reveal the lineaments of their bodies. Items which cover lines are anathema to Blake.

But to fully comprehend this central point we must consider how Blake would have poetically thought of the natural world. In the longish quotation I read earlier, Blake connects line drawing with a *Genesis* type situation. The line creates things against a background of “chaos”. In relation to this “chaos”, one thinks of the natural world before the powers of human creativity go to work on it. Perhaps the last point and most important point to make about the work of Rahab and Tirzah is that, for Blake, everything that conceals and covers has an *affinity* with that unformed, not yet humanized natural world. For in Blake’s outlook, as already stated, that world is itself characterized by mystery. Everything that covers and conceals generates in mystery and converts human life into an analogy of the chaos Blake speaks of, where the line is ultimately absent. We do well to remember that Blake would have thought of the whole of the natural world as a covering or veil which is removed by apocalypse, an apocalypse, in his thinking, which would reveal a fully humanized, and presumably line-abundant world.