
‘Romantic literature affirms imaginative possibilities, even as
it confronts suffering and misery.’

Discuss with respect to the poetry of William Blake.

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He who binds to himself a joy
Does the winged life destroy,
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in Eternity's sunrise.

'Eternity'
William Blake

The importance of imaginative possibilities for William Blake's poetry is hard to overstate. In contrast to Hegelian patterns of resolution prevailing in conventional thought before the revolutionary ferment of the late 18th century, Blake favours a dialectic approach which resists closure in favour of affirming multiple possibilities. This commitment to plurality is part of a movement, in the more extreme forms of Romanticism, to pull power away from totalising, hence restrictive, institutional structures¹ such as the church and onto the figure of the individual; 'All deities reside in the human breast'.² Authority is seen as embedded in the controlling structures of Enlightenment culture, which Blake's poetry is at pains to subvert; as noted by Marilyn Butler, 'Blake's books are angrily pacifist, and explicitly opposed to government and to all symbols of authority.'³ It is also useful to note that the voice of the above quotation is the Devil's, not Blake's own. It is therefore not possible to establish a direct bijection between Blake's own opinions and those developed in the poem; its conclusions are presented in a dialogic context and hence fail to coalesce into a firm statement of intent. This is an example of Blake's commitment to multiplicity, examined in more detail below, and of the way his poetics avoid becoming a totalising metanarrative in the same vein as those it criticises. Blake's poetry, in presenting the suffering caused by the nefarious and totalising discourses of state institutions, simultaneously counteracts it by its self-validating commitment to the multiple creative possibilities of the imagination.

As mentioned above, since in Blake's poetry the centre of power is transferred from the church to the individual, the creative possibilities of the imagination take the place held by God in earlier literary discourse; as Yeats notes '[Blake] announced the religion of art'.⁴

¹ See *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (henceforth *The Marriage*), plate 4. Quoted at p.150 of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Volume D, The Romantic Period*, 9th Edition, ed. Julia Reidhead, (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2012). All further quotations from *The Marriage* will be taken from this edition.

² *The Marriage*, plate 11.

³ Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries : English literature and its background, 1760-1830* (Oxford : OUP, 1981), p.44.

⁴ W. B. Yeats, 'William Blake and the Imagination', *Ideas of Good and Evil*, 2nd edn. (London : A. H. Bullen, 1907), p.168.

The poet takes on the role of creator. Imagination etymologically means image making;⁵ thus creation through the imagination is especially important given the visionary nature of Blake's poetry.⁶ In *Jerusalem*, Blake makes explicit reference to the creative possibilities of vision and of the imagination:

And they conversed together in Visionary forms dramatic
[...]
Creating Space, Creating Time, according to the wonders Divine
Of Human Imagination
Jerusalem plate 98: 28-32

More specifically, in an earlier passage Blake uses the metaphor of sight to explain the purpose of poetic endeavor:

I rest not from my great task!
To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes
Of man inwards into the Worlds of Thought, into Eternity
Ever expanding in the Bosom of God, the Human Imagination
Jerusalem, plate 5, 16-20

The creative power of the poet, previously divine inspiration or 'God', is here redefined as 'the Human Imagination'. Importantly, this is not a simple substitution, Imagination supplanting the place of God as creator, but a redefinition. This hence provokes a dialectic reappraisal of the original meaning of, and the restrictive ideology underpinning, the term 'God', which, due to the former, the latter of which Blake is highly critical. Likewise elsewhere, in a critique of Enlightenment empiricism, 'reason' is redefined to become the prescriptive law that limits the 'Eternal Delight' of man's 'Energy'.⁷

Moreover, Blake expresses the menace of the singularity of ideology throughout *The Book of Urizen*. For example, in plate 4, the 'Book/ Of eternal brass' Urizen lays down with 'laws of peace, of love, of unity' are but the expressions of an inflexible, unyielding and overbearing power. Hidden in the seemingly benevolent language with which they are first presented, they contain

One command, one joy, one desire,
One curse, one weight, one measure
One King, one God, one Law.

⁵ "imagination, n.", *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/91643>, last accessed: 14th November 2018.

⁶ 'Scattered all through Blake's work are epigrams indicating this relativity of existence to perception: "Every Eye sees differently. As the Eye, Such the Object; Everything possible to be believed is an image of truth; The Sun's light when he unfolds it/ Depends on the Organ that beholds it."': Northrop Frye, *Fearful symmetry: a study of William Blake* (Princeton : Princeton Univ. P., 1969), p.19.

⁷ *The Marriage*, plate 4.

Urizen, plate 4

As Hannah Brown notes, ‘the singularity of this vision is a stark contrast to the creative multiplicity celebrated in Los. [...] Even the titles of their respective visions suggest their fundamental difference, for Urizen’s vision is recorded in a ‘Book’, and Los in a ‘Song,’ carrying with it all the Blakean visionary and thus progressive implications of musicality.’⁸ The conflict between the two shows up the dangers of a totalising ideology, which, with a ‘strong hand’, uses its power to oppress and control.⁹

This multiplicity of imaginative possibility is central for Blake’s poetic critique of oppressive discourses since it involves a rejection of earlier models of contraries, in particular Hegel’s — thesis countermanded by antithesis and resolving in synthesis. As Michael Mason has noted ‘[t]he fact is that Blake [...] actually embraced intellectual and emotional ambivalence. He is the great anti-simplifier, always probing for contradiction, especially self-contradiction.’¹⁰ Blake has a view of contraries which, in refusing closure, both asserts its own validity and expresses its criticism of suffering and misery. In fact the dangers of accepting Hegelian resolution could not be greater: ‘[t]hese two classes of men are always upon earth, & they should be enemies; whoever tries to reconcile them seeks to destroy existence.’¹¹ The comment following this statement — ‘Religion is an endeavour to reconcile the two.’ — is one of the most explicit statements against the church’s attempts at total, singular control in Blake’s poetry. The necessity of resisting contraries is present throughout Blake’s corpus, the most famous statement of which is probably ‘Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.’¹² It also runs through *The Songs of Innocence and Experience*. In fact the subtitle of the latter — ‘Shewing the two contrary states of the

⁸ Hannah Brown, unpublished dissertation on ‘Progression in William Blake’, last accessed 15th November 2018, p.24. The importance of music to Blake’s poetry is evident throughout *Innocence and Experience*, especially since all the poems are technically songs. However, singing is particularly important in the following: ‘Introduction’, ‘The Shepherd’, ‘Laughing Song’, ‘Holy Thursday’ (*Innocence and Experience*), ‘The Clod & The Pebble’, ‘The Chimney Sweeper’ (*Experience*) and ‘The School Boy’.

⁹ *The Book of Urizen*, plate 4. Quoted from *The Blake Archive*, last accessed 14th November 2018.

¹⁰ Michael Mason, Introduction to *Oxford Authors*, 1988, p.xv. Quoted in lecture by Michael O’Neill, 2nd November 2017.

¹¹ *The Marriage*, plate 16-7.

¹² *The Marriage*, plate 3.

human soul' — exemplifies both the ambivalence Mason mentions above, and also admits the presence of both good and evil, joy and suffering.

'The Little Black Boy', in *Innocence*, offers an example of how Blake adopts this ambivalent imaginative perspective to confront suffering, even as it destabilises the conventions which cause that suffering:

When I from black and he from white cloud free
[...] then I'll [...]
be like him and he will then love me.

From a Hegelian perspective, these concluding lines suggest that liberation occurs when physical differences have been expunged; only when black and white are no longer present as contraries can metaphysical connection and unity be attained. However, such a reading does not account for the discord of the power relations in the final stanza. The referent of the lines 'I'll shade him from the heat till he can bear,/ To lean in joy upon our father's knee' is ambiguous, being either, or both, the heat of the 'beams of love' itself, which 'the English child' can now withstand independently, or the dependent state of supplication the English child adopts to the father and his love.¹³ Similarly and perhaps oddly, while the little black boy is seen as the stronger, protecting 'the English child' 'like a shady grove', he yet aspires to be pure in soul, *like him*. This becomes paradoxical though since the purity of the English child's soul is itself questionable; the concluding 'and he will then love me' makes that love the white boy will show to the black conditional on the little black boy being white, if not physically then at least spiritually; the quality of mercy becomes strained and the basis for the binary distinction between black and white uncertain. The final stanza thus invokes a dialectical splitting of desires, questioning the fixity of the initial thesis and antithesis between black and white, physical and metaphysical, set up in the first, fourth and fifth stanzas and thus complicating a unitary synthesis in the Hegelian sense. The discrimination the little black boy is implied to have suffered is therefore in one sense negated since the poem refutes the mechanisms by which his misery was caused. Thus Blake, through his belief in the inherent multiplicity of imaginative possibilities, affirms their redemptive qualities even as he confronts the suffering caused in this case by racial discrimination.

¹³ In this case the punctuation does not especially aid interpretation since, as David Fuller notes, 'Blake was relatively indifferent about punctuation' William Blake, *William Blake: Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. by David Fuller (London: Pearson Longman, 2008), p. 21.

As noted in the introduction, a feature of the more extreme and subversive forms of Romanticism is to direct attention from religion, seen as derivative, external and oppressive, onto art, seen as original, internal and liberating.¹⁴ There are, however, dangers to this process. In the famous of image of ‘mind forged manacles’ in ‘London’ humanity is ‘both the agent of repression and the repressed itself.’¹⁵ In contemplating this repression, ‘London’ affirms the strength of the imagination, though in this case negatively.¹⁶ In the main though, the opposition between institution and individual, singularity and multiplicity, affirms the value of the latter. In ‘The Garden of Love’, a poem of *Experience*, ‘Blake implies that the totalising impositions of organised religion have impinged upon humanity’s fundamental rights to freedom of expression.’¹⁷ Possibly referencing the nostalgic idyll of ‘The Echoing Green’ in *Innocence*, the ‘chapel built in the midst,/ Where I used to play on the green’ shows how the institution of the church has made the innocent joys of the speaker impossible. The contrast between the stasis of ‘built’ in the simple past and the fluidity of the imperfect tense ‘used to play’ emphasises the restrictive nature of the church. Moreover, the chapel is expressed purely in negatives; ‘Thou shalt not, [is] writ over the door’, there are ‘tombstones where flowers should be’ and ‘Priests [are] [...] binding with briars my joys & desires’. The internal rhyme of the last example shows how the possibility of progression has been negated. The title of the poem thus becomes deeply ironic since the pastoral garden is now an unrealised chimera. Thus in ‘The Garden of Love’, and throughout *Innocence and Experience*, Blake hence shows the dangers of, like the deathly ‘priests in black gowns’, gaining experience and subscribing to a totalising institutional metanarrative; reduction of imaginative possibilities to a single point, causes despair.

¹⁴ I am indebted to Michael O’Neill’s lecture, 2nd November 2017, for this insight.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Galt Harpham, ‘Ethics.’, in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, 2nd ed., Lentricchia, Frank, McLaughlin, Thomas, eds., (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), p.394. This quotation does not refer to Blake himself but to the state of contemporary ethical theory, though its dual applicability to past and present shows the prescience of Blake’s poetic insight.

¹⁶ Elsewhere, such as in ‘And did those feet’ and the image from *The Marriage* discussed below, Blake states the converse view of imagination’s positive creative power. Importantly mental fight is an ongoing process — ‘I will not cease from Mental Fight,/ Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand:/ Till we have built Jerusalem.’ — across the realms both physical and metaphysical, and with the prospect of the new Jerusalem ever an imaginative possibility. ‘And did those feet’ quoted in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, p.161.

¹⁷ Brown, p.41.

By contrast, Blake's poetry also shows that confronting suffering from a perspective that admits of a multiplicity of imaginative possibilities can act as a salve for that suffering, and in this way affirms the value of imaginative creation. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, using Plato's famous image of the cave, Blake emphasises the multiple creative possibilities of the imagination. 'If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite./ For man has closed himself up till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.'¹⁸ Notably the creative power of the 'doors of perception', the eyes, is asserted, as elsewhere in Blake's poetry; 'the eye altering alters all'.¹⁹ The image implies that the infernal states of woe perceived in the Hellish 'cavern' are necessarily, like everything else in this metaphor of the cave, shadows, hence transitory and soon to disappear when the light which currently is only weakly present through 'chinks' shines fully on them.²⁰ This vision in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* admits to the possibility of suffering and strife and yet does not accede to its necessity. By espousing an amorphous view of contraries, Blake both confronts suffering and misery, and refutes it, offering instead a vision of creative progression in 'eternity's sunrise'.²¹

To conclude, Blake's poetry affirms the value of a plurality of imaginative possibilities both while, and by, confronting the ills caused by singular, and hence totalising and repressive, institutional ideologies. Brown writes that '[t]he act of problematising [conflicts, by refusing to accept a singularity of vision,] acts itself as an alternative promise of progression, for in its act of negation there remains a negative space in which the, albeit elusive, possibility of progression remains.'²² However I would modify her conclusion by saying that, as seen above, the negative space she defines is more akin to idea of the 'centre' that Derrida defines in 'Structure, Sign and Play' that, once its emptiness is realised, becomes opened up to freeplay;²³ it is not from an emptiness but from an overflowing

¹⁸ *The Marriage*, plate 14.

¹⁹ 'The Mental Traveller' l.62, quoted from the lecture given by Prof. Michael O'Neill, 2nd November 2017.

²⁰ Likewise, both suffering and contemplations of infinity are built into the prophetic structure of *Jerusalem*. Damrosch describes what Blake calls 'Beulah' in plate 98 as '[a] temporary resting place from suffering and strife, but one from which it is necessary to move either up or down. [...] Above it is Eden, a condition of dynamic activity that participates in the fullness of Eternity.' In Leo Damrosch, *Eternity's Sunrise: The Imaginative World of William Blake* (London: Yale University Press, 2015), p.48.

²¹ 'Eternity', William Blake.

²² H. Brown diss, p.20

²³ Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' (1970) <http://www5.csudh.edu/ccauthen/576f13/DrrdaSSP.pdf>, last accessed: 15th November 2018.

fullness of imaginative possibilities, an unending 'play' of contraries, that Blake derives his direct criticism of misery and suffering.

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