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Infinite Perception: William Blake's *Marriage of Heaven
and Hell*

By

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Introduction

William Blake is often referred to as the first of the British Romantics. The Romantic period was relatively short (1785-1830) and was fueled in part by two of the most important movements for independence in history, the French and American revolutions. The self-assertion that provided the foundation for the Romantic period led to the questioning and eventual rejection of long-established social hierarchies, political institutions, and religious traditions and organizations. The Romantic artists, too, rejected the established literary forms and thematic concerns of their predecessors and sought new ways of expressing themselves. These artists emphasized the nobility and importance of common experiences and, to a certain extent, a common language accessible to all, not just the educated classes. By extension, they championed the imagination as the higher faculty and believed the natural world more moral, spiritual, and ordered than the world of men. William Blake was this movement's English pioneer. He was born in London, England in 1757 and was reared in a middle-class family. Blake did not receive a formal academic education although he did attend the royal Academy of Arts and made a fairly good living as an engraver. It is also important to note that from the age of four, Blake experienced visions, most of which were religious in nature. These visions inspired most, if not all, of Blake's literary and artistic pieces.

Not all critics consider Blake a pure Romantic. In order to do so, argues Northrop Frye, critics would have to ignore about two-thirds of his works – works such as the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* And *There is no Natural Religion* (3). Such critical sentiments stem, perhaps, from the fact that Blake openly rejected most of the philosophical ideas of the Romantic period, especially those that grew out of the works of

Francois Voltaire (1694-1778) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). However, much of his prose and poetry does champion the downtrodden and exploited and emphasizes the importance of individual experience and the imagination.¹ Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is, however, a departure from these more popular pieces because it is so purely religious and philosophical. Although dense and somewhat difficult to navigate, *Marriage*, written around 1793², is one of his more important works because it exemplifies his deepest desire to reject the stranglehold of man-made institutions (such as organized religion and philosophy) on the individual. "Speaking for all imaginative artists," Blake writes, "I must Create a System or be enslaved by another man's" (qtd. in Greenblatt 1407). *Marriage* is also more singularly invested in Blake's notion that moral dualism (good and evil), as defined by traditional religious and philosophical institutions, does not exist.³

This clear departure from traditional ideas of good and evil in *Marriage* has leant itself to a number of different critical opinions. Helen White argues that this dualism reveals Blake's Romantic belief that God may be found through intuition. David V. Erdman, however, sees political tensions in *Marriage*: "Blake's more immediate focus is upon the politics of moral restraint [of the French Revolution]" (180). Similarly, G. Sabri-Tabrizi argues for a "Marxist" reading, while Samuel Foster Damon examines

¹ See for instance, the *Songs of Innocence* and the *Songs of Experience*, which lash out at social, religious, and political hypocrisy.

² Blake did not date *Marriage*, so scholars are not certain of the exact date it was written. However, they have come to a consensus of 1793, which means it was written shortly after "Songs of Innocence" and Songs of Experience."

³ See, for example, the religious account in Genesis 2. Adam and Eve are instructed not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Religious scholars use the story to demonstrate how "evil" (our sins) has corrupted society. Blake, however, does not see "evil" and "good" as opposite or distinct moral categories, as I will address later in this essay.

Marriage from a Freudian perspective. “Blake’s ‘Energy,’” he writes, “is the libido, the Id, and his ‘Reason’ is the censor, the Superego” (262). Inevitably, however, these theories impose a system from outside Blake’s text. If Blake did have a “system” for *Marriage*, it evolved from the very personal experiences of his divine visions, not some outside source. The importance of Blake’s visions in the creation of his art, then, requires a method of interpretation that isolates Blake’s poetry, while still acknowledging its philosophical tension.

Blake’s text must be approached personally. This means each individual’s sense of the divine must, to some extent, inform his/her understanding of the piece. In fact, Blake insists upon an individual experience in some of the “Proverbs of Hell” when he says “No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own wings” (206). Therefore, because *Marriage* is oriented toward the personal, critics must be careful not to impose one specific interpretation onto it. Rather, they must acknowledge that Blake’s goal is to liberate the individual from his/her personal bondage. As Blake writes in “Earth’s Answer,” the people cry out, “Break this heavy chain, / That does freeze my bones around!” (26), and then pleads in “Introduction,” “O earth O earth return! [to paradise]” (6). He wants to help the individual find the divine, which cannot be confined to or defined by any set of rules or regulations.

In Blake’s famous words, “If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite” (201), he gives the reader a thematic compass for *Marriage*. The purpose of *Marriage* is to teach readers how to “cleanse” their “perception” and participate in the infinite, if the readers choose to do the hard work of embracing a divine vision. Although Blake calls his readers to find the “infinite,” a large

portion of *Marriage* utilizes metaphors that imprison the readers, thus creating a text that itself becomes a door of perception. However, unlike other systems that leave a person trapped in a methodology, Blake's structure presents two contrary visions that together cleanse the "doors of perception."

Visions, as a key metaphor of the text, give Blake a foundation to build upon and create a process to cleanse the doors of perception. Each vision embodies dark images that are in fact horrific and chaotic, but the text turns when it is confronted by them, thus developing and expanding the vision into a picture of the infinite. In the opening "Argument," Rintrah rages on in the desolate wild, yet he promises that he will return to paradise. In the fire of Hell, the Devil hovers over the side of the dark, closed-in cave.⁴ On the wall an inscription appears of a bird in an open, infinite sky. When Isaiah and Ezekiel dine with the narrator, they discuss how they once ate dung and went naked and barefoot for three years; however, they assure the narrator that they found the infinite. In the Printing House of Hell, the jewels and metals are cast into the expanse and destroyed by fire, yet the Metal becomes fused to the infinite. During the trip to Heaven and Hell, the characters forge through the emptiness of Heaven and chaos of Hell. They finally reach a peaceful riverside. In the last vision, the fire consumes the Angel, and he arises as a divine prophet. Blake asserts that when the individual recognizes his fallen condition and realizes he must not fight the contrary states of the human soul (innocence and experience), he begins to develop and expand his narrow vision. As a result, he not only fuses into the infinite life that is found beyond the walls of perception, but he also sees the potential to fuse material objects with the divine.

⁴ This essay follows Blake's capitalization in *Marriage*. He capitalizes his characters and philosophical ideas such as Spirit, Soul, Energy, and Body.

Chapter I. Enclosed Perception

According to Blake, mankind's quest for the divine begins with a need for the infinite. Everything is always infinite, but people do not know it until they gain a divine vision and embrace the life that will transform them into divine poets. However, Blake does not get this message across by providing its thesis but by focusing on its antithesis. Because "man has closed himself up till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern" (*Marriage* 201), Blake believes it is his poetic responsibility to present mankind's desperate condition and help his readers understand their own imprisonment. Blake successfully does this by presenting different perspectives of each vision. These various perspectives help weaken the finite walls, a process which in turn opens the doors to the infinite.

Each section of Blake's poetry contains a double vision, which thereby forms a process to destabilize the doors of perception. The opening "Argument" contains two visions of the path of life, one of innocence and one of experience. Innocence appears joyful: people contently walk a perilous path, roses grow in the trail of thorns, and honey bees sing.

Once meek, and in a perilous path,
 The just man kept his course along
 The vale of death.
 Roses are planted where thorns grow,
 And on the barren heath
 Sing the honey bees. (195)

Although the path appears stable, Blake recognizes that people see only the temporary, the step right in front of them, not realizing they walk down "the vale of death" (195).

Blake then systematically explains the contrary states of innocence and experience through mankind's fall from paradise. *Marriage* opens with a vision of a character named Rintrah⁵ who was "once meek" and tried to prolong innocence in a postlapsarian world. Roses are planted where thorns grow, and honey bees sing to drown out the barren heath (2). The "Argument" echoes the biblical rendering of the fall. Blake's message is immediate and clear: when people deny their fallen state (experience), they block themselves from experiencing a heavenly vision. Once Rintrah, whom Anne Mellor relates to the biblical Esau (the brother who lost his inheritance in Genesis 27), recognizes his rightful heavenly inheritance (his right to regain a heavenly vision), his prophetic wrath is ready to fight against the experience that threatens his holiness (41): "Rintrah roars, and shakes his fires in the burden'd air" (195). And, as Blake contends on Plate 3, noting Isaiah 34 and 35 where the once oppressed people of Edom are delivered and the barren land becomes plentiful, Rintrah will succeed: "Now is the dominion of Edom, & the return of Adam into Paradise" (195).⁶

In the second stanza of the introduction, therefore, Blake disturbs Rintrah's finite, innocent view of life by forcing him to gain a perspective of experience. For Blake, Rintrah's experience comes with the miserable reality of the fall from innocence and the realization of his desperate condition. Thus, the second stanza mimics Adam and Eve's fall from the Garden of Eden through the serpent Satan who uses temptation to drive man and woman from the garden of innocence.⁷ Satan, whom Blake calls the "villain" and

⁵ Rintrah is a wrathful character in Blake's later work *Milton* (1800). In *Marriage*, the reader knows him only as the character who roars.

⁶ Although Isaiah 34 and 35 specifically talks about the Jewish domain in Edom, Blake uses the passage to refer to domain of the descendants of Esau.

⁷ See Genesis 3, the story of the temptation by the serpent and the fall of man.

“sneaking serpent,” leaves the “paths of ease,” notably heaven, to walk on the sinful “paths, and drive / [Rintrah] into barren climes” (195). Throughout *Marriage*, Blake presents an unconventional view of Satan. In the fourth plate, Satan, who is also called the Devil, holds the key to truth, and it is through his voice, not God’s, that mankind receives the law. However, the Devil does not always give people truth in a straightforward manner. Truth comes through personal experience and revelation; thus, sometimes Satan has to be a villain to drive “[Rintrah] into the barren climes” (195) and threatens to destroy his life.

While Blake does not contend that people follow Satan, Blake does illustrate the unfolding of all the states of the human condition, a process which, in the end, turns the person from innocence to experience to what Robert Gleckner in *The Piper and the Bard* calls a “Higher Innocence” (46, *passim*). Satan drives the innocent Rintrah into the “forest of the night” and leaves him wandering alone; he has nothing to hang onto, not even joyful feelings. In turn, Blake leaves Rintrah oppressed, on the path of destruction, thus, bringing him into experience. His new state destabilizes his finite walls, making him ready to admit the failure of his own vision, which will eventually turn him towards a higher innocence.

Blake, therefore, starts with a human state (innocence) and austere follows the path of the dialectical method (experience counter-posing that which was posited) until it once again arrives at a synthesis of opposing assertions (the contradiction of innocence and experience, which is a “higher innocence”). Innocence and experience are contradictory but, ironically, mutually dependent on each other. Innocence is the state of divine peace. Experience is the state of turmoil. However, without experience, mankind would not need

the divine. Experience, therefore, causes Rintrah to realize his desperate condition. Embodying experience, Rintrah must now fight back the villain. “The villain” who left the “paths of ease” becomes “the sneaking serpent [who] walks in mild humility” (195). With both innocence and experience, Rintrah recognizes his fallen condition and suddenly “roars and shakes his fires in the burdened air” (195). Knowing his fallen condition, he no longer walks blindly on the path but desires to destroy the serpent who threatens his life.

What happens when Rintrah fights back? Again, experience does not come forth with the intention of regaining innocence, but provides the opportunity to gain a heavenly vision (“A new heaven is begun”), always more than innocence. “Now,” says Blake “is the return of Adam into Paradise” (195). In the last two paragraphs, Blake gives the thesis of the first vision of *Marriage*: “Without contraries is no progression” (196). According to Blake, heaven comes about because of evil, because of the opposition of innocence and experience, because the sneaking serpent is devoured by Rintrah’s active, assertive power. Evil, therefore, draws Rintrah into Paradise.

Not only does each section in *Marriage* demonstrate the oppression of a fallen state and seek to liberate people from their oppression, but the text within each vision also challenges that oppression. In the first “A Memorable Fancy” where the Devil walks along the dark abyss of the five senses, a literal text challenges the fallen condition. On the wall of the abyss, the following lines appear, asking, “How do you know but ev’ry Bird that cuts the airy way, / Is an immense world of delight, clos’d by your senses five?” (197). Each word describes man’s problem: his singular perception has caused him to see only material objects, such as a bird, instead of considering the infinite sky. Again, Blake

employs two different perspectives to destabilize man's finite imagination. He presents a vision of a dark, closed-in abyss with a text imprisoned in the stone. However, a second vision rises from the text itself, a description of a bird transcending the finite. Thus, the text exposes the limited human vision and challenges the reader to develop his/her imagination and see not just a dark cave, not just a bird, but an infinite sky.

Notably, Blake does not take his readers into the sky where "ev'ry Bird" cuts a way. Instead, he focuses on the text itself. In describing "the minds of men," the narrator realizes they do not see the bird. All they see is the back wall of a cave. "I saw a mighty Devil, folded in black clouds, hovering on the sides of the rock" (197). In this vision, the men mimic the prisoners in Plato's cave, who can see only shadows on a dark wall. In Plato's cave, people walk behind the prisoners "carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals" (205). However, the prisoners can only see the shadows of the articles carried behind them because they are chained facing the back wall of the cave:

Human beings living in an underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. (Plato)

The shadows are cast by a fire that burns on the ledge above and behind the prisoners. The prisoners can hear voices and can see the shadows, but the prisoners mistake the shadows for reality. In this, Plato demonstrates that man's senses fail him. The truth comes only by developing and expanding one's vision. However, this is not an easy task. One prisoner is unchained and forced to go outside. Yet, he cannot handle the light:

At first, when any of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows. (359)

He must first look at the shadows from the trees (because he is more familiar with an illusion), then the tree's reflection in the water, then the actual trees, then mountains, and finally he can see the sun itself.

Like Plato, the Devil wants to liberate people from the darkness and bring them into the light and warmth of the infinite. On Blake's wall, the image of the bird is etched by fire. Just as the fire of Plato's cave brought a shadow, so also Blake's fire demonstrates that what people see with their physical eyes is just a shadow. The only bird people know is a physical bird. Blake's physical bird is outside the cave, which represents the five senses, so people never experience it. In fact, people are so accustomed to darkness that if they were taken outside Blake's cavern, they would not see the infinite. They would not see that the bird's body transcends into the infinite. They would not see that "the contours of the bird's body lose their firmness" (Wardi 266).

Again, Blake emphasizes his antithesis so his readers will see the danger of their finite vision. Specifically, he implores people to recognize their need for a cleansing of perception. Hence, he appropriately traps the words "in the stony grip of what they signify" (De Luca 222). Blake wants to liberate the signifier (the text) from the signified (bird). In other words, since words point to finite images, Blake seeks to free mankind from their five senses, so they will see not just text, not just a finite bird form, but the infinite. As each part of the world participates in the sun in Plato's cave, so also does

everything in Blake's world participate in the infinite. The five senses block the mind from realizing that the Body actively participates in the "immense world of delight" inherent in every object (197). The result is that people focus on the contours of the Body (or even the shadow) rather than recognizing the bird engages in the infinite sky. Therefore, the Body of the Bird is actually part of an "airy way" and, potentially, a power that soars into the infinite (197). Blake, like Plato, is forcing his readers to come out of the cave and participate in the world of the infinite.

Chapter II: Embodied Perception

Blake's goal is certainly to liberate mankind from its bondage. However, as individuals begin to recognize their fallen condition, they cannot just sit still in the darkness of their cave. They must actively assume their place in the world of the infinite. If experience involves participating in a mere shadow or earthly manifestation of the infinite, then, once people realize there is a divine world about which they know nothing, they may use the shadow to teach them about, and even help them find, the infinite. Blake argues that people must turn experience into an assertive power called "Energy." Blake asserts that all of life, the physical Body and spiritual self, are earthly manifestations of this potentially active force, a force that expands to meet the divine. The key, then, is to embody experience, to actively rather than passively participate in it, thereby creating an expanding force.

The expanded perception that transcends the five senses is "a matter of going beyond the Body by means of the Body" (Wardi 254). For Blake, the Body is the center of the imaginative experience. Rather than being subject to categorical perceptions, the Body and Soul emerge as one unit:

1. Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discerned by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.
2. Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.
3. Energy is Eternal Delight. (*Marriage* 196)

Man's corporeal bodies, then, "are only momentary images of this unbounded spiritual power," images imposed upon it by the five senses (Mellor 43). In other words, people's

five senses keep them from seeing that their Body is only a manifestation of the universal power. Therefore, again, the Body, as an earthly manifestation of divinity, participates in the infinite. “If [they] could cleanse the doors of perception” and thus move beyond their five senses, they would see their Body as an active power in the universe (Mellor 43).

Blake contends that the Body must use its Energy to make room for itself in the world. “The Body,” Wardi writes, “is in the world because it situates itself there – because it takes its place there” (258). Wardi explains this in terms of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the lived body of experience:

‘I am my body, at least wholly to the extent that I possess experience, and yet at the same time my body is as it were a ‘natural’ subject, a provisional sketch of my total being. Thus experience of one’s own body runs counter to the reflection which detaches subject and object from each other, and which gives us only the thought about the body.’ (qtd in Wardi 255)

In other words, the body is the subject, rather than the object, of experience. The Body, then, must actively assume itself in the world. The Body makes the choice to create a place for itself.

The importance of the Body applies to the contrasting places in the journey to Heaven and Hell in the fourth “A Memorable Fancy” in *Marriage*. The Devil and Angel take the trip to test each one’s eternal “lot”:

An Angel came to me and said: ‘O pitiable, foolish young man! O horrible! O dreadful state! Consider the hot, burning dungeon thou art preparing for thyself to all Eternity, to which thou art going in such career.’

I said, ‘Perhaps you will be willing to show me my eternal lot, and we will

contemplate together upon it, and see whether your lot or mine is most desirable.' (203)

Their eternal lots provide a contrast between the Devil's poetic imagination and the Angel's fallen imagination. In both heaven and hell, the Devil and Angel face a dark space and through it discover a redeeming alternative, embodying the place.

In the trip to heaven following the trip to hell, the Angel testifies to the danger of an un-embodied space. As they enter heaven, which stands "void between Saturn and the fixed stars," the narrator acknowledges the emptiness of the Angel's life by saying, "Here [...] is your lot, in this space, if space it may be called" (204). Space is meant to be embodied, but the narrator sees nothing, only vacancy. When they leap into the space, they see a finite wall: a cold church (204). They are confronted with another void as they enter the church: "I [The Devil] took him [the Angel] to the altar and opened the Bible, and lo! It was a deep pit, into which I descended driving the Angel before me" (204). Every object has a distant feeling because it has not been embodied. Rather than vibrantly living in the divine, the bodies' themselves are destroyed from a lack of life. This church is not a lived-in place, and it certainly does not feel like home. "The orthodox heaven, where good has defeated evil and restraint has conquered desire, is to Blake a devouring place... Existence too is destroyed, just as the bodies are left helpless trunks" (Burriss).

According to some critics, the "strong" characters in Blake's text represent a certain type of people. Blake describes the strong as creatures who catch the weak and devour them "by plucking off first one limb and then another" (204). Erdman, for example, argues that they represent the government (181). Harold Bloom, on the other hand, argues they represent religious leaders (*Blake's Apocalypse* 95). However, Blake's focus, like

that of most Romantic writers, is not on one group of people but on the individual. As apparent in *Songs*, Blake is concerned with chimney sweepers and soldiers, black and white children, and the poor and needy. The “strong” is anyone who blocks the individual from his/her vision, whether it is a government official, a religious leader, or a person’s next-door neighbor.

The chains, likewise, represent the Ten Commandments or other laws that bind everything and everyone to a specific lifestyle. The Ten Commandments are rules. However, Blake would argue that Jesus, man’s example, “was all virtue, and acted from impulse, not from rules” (24).⁸ Therefore, people should be guided by the way Jesus acted, not by rules and regulations. Wardi notes that the book through which the Devil and Angel descend just sits on the altar, symbolizing the oppressive authority the Ten Commandments have over their life (258). While he is correct, the book’s location also mimics the distance motif that threads itself through Blake’s work. Some things are close together, like the brick wall to the creature which the Devil finds inside the Angel’s Bible, but everything related to spiritual growth, like the divine the Bible actually offers, appears far away. The Bible contains stories of the divine – of, as Blake writes, “God becoming as we are, that we might become as he is” (*Natural Religion* 3) – but the Angel has blocked himself from an experience of divinity because he will not embody the Bible. The Angel is so busy living out the rules of the Bible that he misses the individual’s relationship to the Bible – the divine vision of the Bible.

Conversely, when the Devil and the Angel take the trip to Hell, the Devil knows they must embody the dark space. “If you please, we will commit ourselves to this void, and

⁸ Blake does believe in the scriptures. He is not advocating abolishing the commands but arguing that people misunderstand them. Religious living, he argues, is not a method but a relationship.

see whether providence is here also,” the Devil proposes (203). In other words, the Devil understands that if he embodies the darkness, he will evidentially find providence. They come to an “infinite Abyss” “fiery as the smoke of a burning city” (203). Even the air is composed of black and white spiders, evoking the danger of black and white thinking (Wardi 259). The Angel feels threatened and leaves the scene. However, the Angel, notes Wardi, does not run from the spiders because he is comfortable with black and white rules (260). Instead, the Angel leaves the scene because he is terrified by the presence of the Leviathan. The Leviathan, an enormous, all-powerful sea monster from Job 41, has the power to destroy the laws of the spidery web. The Leviathan, whose “mouth and red gills hang just above the raging foam, tinging the black deep with beams of blood,” advances “towards [the Angel] with all the fury of a Spiritual existence” (204). The Leviathan symbolizes the difference between allowing the text to inform and growing spiritually from the text. Indeed, “The hyperbolic flow of bloody images configures the Angel’s loss of his spidery textual control” (Wardi 260). The Angel flees the scene because “he would rather remain outside, enclosed in his preconceptions” and “consume himself like that desperate monkey at the bottom of his Bible, who picks the flesh of his own tail” (Wardi 260).

Meanwhile, the Devil who embodies the experience finds himself on a calm bank. The Devil wants to release himself from the bondage of the text, so he does not run from the Leviathan. His imagination listens and waits for the divine, and for this reason, he has a vision wherein he finds himself “sitting on a pleasant bank beside a river, by moonlight, hearing a harper, who sung to the harp; and his theme was: ‘The man who never alters his opinion is like standing water, and breeds reptiles of the mind’” (204). He realizes that

the Energy of the Leviathan and his own Body are fused into something greater – they are fused to the divine world. The Angel, meanwhile, has escaped from the Leviathan, and although he stands on a mill, he is still far from the calm bank. The Devil says, “I arose and sought for the mill, and there I saw my Angel, who, surprised, asked how I escaped. / I answer’d: ‘...when you ran away, I found myself on a bank by moonlight hearing a harper” (204). The unimaginative Angel could not hear the harp’s music or see the light outside the cave because his fear of spiritual energy has blocked his spiritual senses from hearing and seeing beyond the physical senses. The Angel remains in this fallen state until the last vision of *Marriage* where he finally “[embraces] the flame of fire” and allows his fallen condition to be consumed, and, then, the Angel arises as a divine prophet (206).

Chapter III: Contradiction Perception

After the Leviathan in the trip to Heaven disappears and the Devil wakes up on the calm bank of a river, he realizes he is not merely making room for himself in the world, but he is also being fused with divinity. Blake's ultimate goal is to unite Body and Soul, or Matter and Spirit, so that Matter, which "seems finite and corrupt," "will be consumed in fire" and, then, appear "as it is, infinite and holy" (201). In other words, Blake seeks to take what seems like finite Matter, assimilate it with its Energy, and fuse it with divinity. Blake becomes the readers' disciple and helps guide them through the process of uniting Matter and Spirit. In order to do this, Blake says, "The notion that man has a body distinct from his soul is to be expunged" (201). The Body certainly seems "finite and corrupt"; however, because it is connected to the Soul, or Spirit part of the person, it is not only "infinite and holy," but can also be fused into divinity (201).

Before Matter and Soul can be united, people must understand the function of the Body and Soul. For Blake, the Body and Soul both contain contrary forces of Good and Evil and Reason and Energy. Together they help aid people in their search for divinity. Blake denies the belief "That Energy, call'd Evil, is alone from the Body, and that Reason, call'd Good, is alone from the Soul" (196). When religious institutions preach that Evil is born from the Body, it essentially says that the Body is bad, and, therefore, people will attempt to divide the Body from their Soul.⁹ This is a dangerous belief because the Body and Soul, good and evil, and Energy and Reason all exist to help people find divinity.

Blake's text begins with the idea of two contraries working together, which according

⁹ See, for example, Gnosticism, which contends that our bodies are the spirit's prison. This heavily influenced religious practices of denying the body, such as priesthood celibacy.

to Damon, “is a unity” (262). “Man has no Body distinct from the Soul,” Blake argues (196). The two contrary states are of one purpose: “As these contraries are essential to each other in the psychic structure, Blake reduced [them] to mere technical terms” (Damon 262). However, Blake also says the contrary states inherently oppose one other. In other words, contraries, such as Reason and Energy, must coexist for each to be what it is, yet that coexistence forms the ability for opposition.

The contraries may be compared to each other as “Attraction” counterbalancing “Repulsion.” Keely’s Law of Attraction and Repulsion states that if two objects expand or contract simultaneously, the objects attract. However, if one expands while the other contracts, the objects repulse. Attraction and Repulsion are clearly seen in Energy and Reason:

Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion,
Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.

From these contraries spring what the religious call Good and Evil.

Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from
Energy. (196)

Blake calls expanding force “Energy,” which is the “only life” (196), and he calls the contracting power “Reason.” Energy and Reason repulse one another because they are not unified in purpose. Energy seeks one end, and Reason seeks another. However, Blake suggests that Energy and Reason may also work for the same purpose, and thus form attraction. In other words, Energy and Reason can oppose one another, or they can work for the same purpose.

Reason and Energy often repulse because Reason operates through a deductive process to provide absolute laws, which creates a system that destroys the active Energy that searches for divinity. Jesus, for example, did not create laws. Rather, Blake argues, he bettered the world through virtue. In fact, says Blake, virtue necessitates breaking the commands. “No virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments. Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse, not from rules” (206). Reason seeks to strip people of virtue and, ultimately, divinity. In the busyness of living up to a set of rules, such as “You shall not commit adultery” (New American Standard Bible Exodus 20:14), Reason replaces rules for divine living, while impulse spontaneously sees potential divinity and runs to find it. Blake believes Jesus did not focus on the Ten Commandments, as the Devil says, “did [Jesus] not mock at the sabbath, and so mock the sabbath’s God? murder those who were murder’d because of him? turn away the law from the woman taken in adultery?” (206). For Blake, Reason never teaches the adulterous woman of her potential divinity because it is too busy living up to a set of social and religious rules. Reason opposes that which searches for divinity.

In this case, Energy and Reason oppose one another because they are not unified in purpose. Energy seeks to find divinity while Reason seeks to strip man of Energy. Since Energy expands divinity while Reason contracts to mere rules, then, naturally, there is repulsion. However, Blake suggests that Energy and Reason may also simultaneously expand and thus form attraction. In other words, individuals who recognize their need for Energy also use Reason to aid them in the quest for divinity. Blake demonstrates Reason and Energy’s dependence upon one another. “The history of this,” says Blake, is “written in *Paradise Lost* and the Governor or Reason is call’d Messiah” (196). Energy, called

Desire, is represented as the Devil or Satan. While the Messiah and the Devil would seem to oppose one another, Blake does not see it that way. He suggests that Jesus called upon Desire himself: “This is shewn in the Gospel, where he prays to the Father to send the comforter or Desire that Reason may have Ideas to build on, the Jehovah of the Bible being no other than he who dwells in flaming fire” (197). Reason (as represented as Jesus) recognized its ultimate need for active Energy before it went out on the ultimate mission for divinity.¹⁰ Because fallen man cannot (and should not) even try to keep the law that Reason demands, Reason fulfilled Christ’s own law through his death, thereby embracing Energy and offering divinity to the world.¹¹ In other words, Reason and Energy both bring divinity and form expansion; they attract.

Reason and Energy also can potentially expand in the life of the individual. Literary critics such as Ronald Grimes in *The Divine Imagination: William Blake’s Major Prophetic Visions* mistakenly assume that Romantics such as Blake believe Reason strips mankind of life. Grimes argues that “Reason, or ‘Ratio’ as Blake names it, is the function of the individualistic Selfhood in contrast to vision, a function of social Identity” (138). He adds that “Reason has a legitimate role in vision as long as it does not set itself up as the stand for vision” (141). Again, Blake defines Reason as the outward circumference of Energy and demonstrates that it is an essential part of every vision. Anne Mellor connects this idea to Blake’s artwork¹². “Reason,” she says, “is the force that draws a bounding line around Energy and thus makes possible the creation of an artistic image” (48).

¹⁰Blake refers to the Jesus’ last hour on earth before he goes forth to die on the cross.

¹¹ Jesus said in Matthew 5:17: “Do not think I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill” (New American Standard Bible).

¹² In addition to writing poetry, Blake was both a painter and an engraver. He engraved his poetry onto his paintings; thus, to fully experience his artwork, one should read the accompanying poetry.

Energy needs the Reason, the line, to form a shape. When Energy meets Reason, the line expands. The boundary line merely appears to be an enabling circumference. The boundary exists “only as a limit of expansive Energy,” and Blake simultaneously asserts the reverse “truth that, without circumscription, the Devil’s original, productive Energy would cease to be productive” (Miller). Hence, Energy and Reason must coexist for each to be what it is.

Harold Bloom explains the purpose of Blake’s contradictions by saying “heaven and hell are to be married but without becoming altogether one flesh or one family” (“Dialectic” 57). They cannot become one flesh because they so often repel. This is not dualistic or monistic. This is Blake’s mystery wherein contradictions are married, where Hell itself marries Heaven. Therefore, “Blake confirms the mutual necessity of contraries” (Miller).

The idea of “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” seems startling. Why would evil marry good? Blake asserts that good and evil, as religion defines them, do not exist (Nurmi 561). Good is simply “the passive that obeys Reason” while “Evil is the active springing from Energy” (196). This is why Nurmi says there is a difference between “negations” and “contraries” (561). Reason and Energy, while contrary, do not negate one another. Reason and Energy do not seek to destroy each other. Rather, they are – or should be – willing collaborators in the divine. As long as Reason fulfills its proper role, its boundary lines will reveal, rather than hinder, the divinity of man.

According to Blake, religious people have so mistaken the nature of good and evil that they fail to recognize that everything that lives is imbued with contrariety. Even the Body, says Blake, has contrary forces of Energy and Reason. Once people acknowledge

the role of Energy and Reason in their Body, they can begin to engage in an assertive power. As Blake suggests, “Energy is Eternal Delight” (196). Mellor explains, “Blake attempted rhetorically to persuade his readers that any force or energy directed toward the possession of greater sexual, political, or intellectual freedom is inherently good, even divine” (45).

Thus, according to Blake, people’s goal is to take their Body and use both its Energy and Reason to reveal their innate Spirit. Blake offers to do this “by printing in the infernal method, by corrosive [...] melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid” (201). Or, to put it more simply, Blake takes the “narrow chinks of [man’s]” cave and “cleanse[s]” it so that “everything [...] appear[s] to man as it is, infinite” (201). In the third “A Memorable Fancy,” the narrator takes the individuals through “a Printing-House in Hell,” which contains six chambers, presumably echoing the six days of creation (Wardi 262). In those six chambers, Blake creates new selves, wherein he takes people’s fallen state and transforms it into divinity.

A different creature indwells each chamber and represents a different aspect of the creative Energy between the Body and Soul. In the first chamber, the reader meets the fire-breathing Dragon who hollows “away the rubbish from a cave’s mouth” (202). The chamber mimics the reader “hollowing” out his fallen vision with his fiery Energy and rejecting his finite perception that is trapped in the Platonic cave. Once the cave is cleared, the Viper in the second chamber gathers up jewels and other forms of Matter, and, in the third chamber, the Eagle-like men take the jewels and build “palaces in the immense cliffs” (202). In other words, they are taking the Matter and building it into the infinite. A Viper, who crawls on his belly, is the opposite of an Eagle, who flies, showing

that a simple Body can gather up the Matter, but it takes an action, such as flying, to utilize it. The Eagle in the third chamber represents the stage of embodiment. As he makes room for himself with his wings, he “causes the inside of the cave to be infinite” (202): literally, the cave itself expands. As Wardi explains,

This zooming out reflects the assumption of a bird’s view, whose subject is represented by an image of an eagle that ‘causes [the cave] to be infinite’ [...]. Symbolizing the expansive poetic vision, the bird’s view displaces the narrow fallen perspective symbolized by the vipers in the second chamber, whose interior they both shape and decorate. (263)

Blake seeks to take Plato’s enclosed cave and expand it to the point where the individual can look through the material and see into the infinite.

However, in order for the jewels or Matter to be transparent and, thus, reveal rather than hinder the divinity of mankind, the “surfaces” must be melted away, so they will appear as they are, infinite. Thus, in the fourth chamber, “Lions of flaming fire, [rage] around and [melt] the metals into living fluids” (202). Again, the fire comes from within the Body and represents the Energy needed to “display[...] the infinite which was hid” (201). As Frye explains, “Fire is the greatest possible combination in this world of heat and light, and the risen body lives in the greatest possible combination of the spiritual forms of heat and light: energy or desire, and reason or vision” (196). The melted fluids are then cast into the expanse in the fifth chamber as the Matter becomes one with the infinite. The distinction between Matter and Spirit is at last blurred. Notably, the fluids are cast by “Unnam’d forms” (202). “The fusion of matter and spirit,” notes Wardi, “is beyond human conception” (264).

Whatever happens, though, individuals must recognize that they suddenly become divine. For Blake, everything is always infinite. People just do not recognize it. However, when the doors of perceptions are cleansed, they suddenly become aware of their innate holiness, and their Spirit begins to connect with God. For example, at the end of *Marriage*, “the Angel, who stretched out his arms, embracing the flame of fire,” was “consumed, and arose as Elijah” (206). The Angel uses his arms (Body) to embrace his Energy, and, thus, shakes off his fallen state, arising as a divine prophet.

Even if people cannot comprehend the merging of Matter and Spirit, they have the responsibility of sharing the experience with others. Thus, the “Men who occupied the sixth chamber” take the metals and gather them in “forms of books and [arrange them] in libraries” (202). Blake’s message is copied and distributed to his readers. Matter and Spirit now embody the books, thereby making room for themselves in the lives of other people. For Blake, it is not good enough for people to merely become fused with divinity. The child in the “Introduction” of *Songs*, for example, tells the Piper to share the songs about the Lamb: “Piper sit thee down and write / in a book that all my read” (*Songs of Innocence* 13-14). Notably, people learn about Spirit and Matter through literature. The individuals will utilize both Reason and the imagination to form to their understanding of the literature. Reason is clearly a tool that reveals the divinity of mankind. Energy melts Matter and casts it into the infinite, but it takes Reason to provide a framework (i.e. Mellor’s line that forms a shape¹³) for Matter. Suddenly, Matter is not merely floating in the infinite. It exists in chapters and lines and words on a page. Clearly, Matter and Spirit emerge through the power of Energy, but they merge through Reason.

¹³ Mellor notes that an artistic image is formed by lines; thus, the line is the framework of the image. Likewise, reason is the line (framework) of a divine experience (48).

Chapter IV: Concealed Perception

Uniting Body and Soul is one formal intention of *Marriage*, but Body and Soul's fusion into divinity does not overshadow the ultimate goal, which is to encourage the readers to break free of their fallen vision and gain a new and divine one. For Blake, being divine must coincide with having divine visions. Even in *Marriage's* most famous line, "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear as it is, infinite" (201), the emphasis is not so much on everything being infinite, as it is on looking through the Matter of this world and gaining an infinite vision. Indeed, every section of *Marriage* involves a contrast between a fallen vision and a heavenly one: in the opening "Argument," the serpent and Rintrah; in the fire of Hell, man and bird; in the dining scene, the prophets and man; in the Trip to Heaven and Hell, the Angel and Leviathan; in the last vision, the fallen Angel and the new, divine prophet.

However, if an infinite vision is Blake's ultimate goal, the question must be raised: Why do the majority of Blake's visions focus on a fallen perception? Certainly, Blake wants the perceiver to recognize his desperate condition. Yet, Blake's dark vision is more involved. Beyond the dark, fallen vision is a divine vision that can never actually be seen. Blake cannot unveil the divine vision, for it cannot be looked upon, and it certainly cannot be described. It is known only to the divine perceiver, and it is known only through the divine imagination.

Blake repeatedly places his reader in dark places, far from the object of his vision. In the second "A Memorable Fancy" where the narrator dines with Isaiah and Ezekiel, Isaiah admits that he has never seen God. The narrator asks Isaiah how he dares to "assert that God spoke to them" (200). The narrator expects Isaiah to say he saw a vision, but

instead Isaiah replies, “I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover’d the infinite in everything” (200). Clearly, Isaiah did not hear or see God. Instead, he knew God’s existence through everything around him. God remained forever concealed yet ever revealed in everything.

God must remain transcendent because the divine in its essence cannot be comprehended by the human mind. “I saw no God,” says Isaiah because God is too vast to look upon and comprehend. What can be comprehended, say Isaiah and Ezekiel, is Matter. “My senses,” says Isaiah, “discovered the infinite in everything” (200). Isaiah knows God, not because he tries to look upon God and comprehend his essence, but because he senses God through what he can comprehend, the tangible Matter of this world. The Bible confirms that although God is invisible, he is still “seen and known”: “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead” (New American Standard Bible Roman 1:19-20). The Bible declares that although God is not directly seen, he is known in the created order. For Blake the divine can be and is known through the phenomenal.

The divine as unintelligible is seen in the Printing House of Hell where the relationship between Spirit and Matter is not comprehended by men. “Unnamed forms” instead of people “cast the [Matter] into the expanse” (202) because people cannot grasp the infinite apart from a tangible object. Once the material is re-gathered, however, “The metals [...] were received by Men” (202) because God is known through the phenomenal. Thus, Matter is important not only because of its participation in the infinite, but also because it plays essential roles in helping men know the divine.

Although the senses potentially keep the fallen person from realizing there is a divine source that exists outside the five senses (a fear that Blake and Plato both share), Blake also argues that the senses may assist the fallen person in gaining a divine vision.

In *Critique of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant explains knowledge of objects in terms of the beautiful and the sublime. The beautiful object may be organized in terms of time, space, and categories. The beautiful object is, as Kant describes it, "preadaptable to our judgment, and thus constitutes in itself an object of satisfaction" (83). People enjoy flowers, for instance, because they can see the individual petals. However, the sublime object represents disorder. It seems "to violate purpose in respect of the judgment, to be unsuited to our presentative faculty" (83). In other words, people cannot organize or contain the sublime object. The sublime, therefore, is something frightening, and when people come in contact with it, they withdraw. Thus, for Kant people must withdraw from the sublime because they not only cannot comprehend it, but they also are terrified by its presence.

Similarly, in *Marriage*, the characters are not threatened by the Matter (the beautiful object) such as the metals in the printing house, but they withdraw from the divine (the sublime object) as represented by the infinite fifth chamber. This, of course, is appropriate because God is never meant to be organized or fully contained. The beautiful, material object assists people in "knowing" God's existence. Then, their imagination helps them transcend the phenomenal world and meet the sublime they cannot directly see. The divine is something one possesses; it is not something seen or fully understood. For Blake, a vision is not about looking into an explicit image. It is the work of the imagination. "The Nature of my Work is Visionary or Imaginary," writes Blake; "it is

an Endeavour to Restore what the Ancients call'd the Golden Age” (qtd in Rotenberg 87). The Golden Age is what the Bible calls the “unfallen world,” one where the imagination, removed from an explicit theology, has the power to create an “unfallen” vision.

This same formation of withdrawing from the object of the vision is found in biblical prophecy. The prophets are in constant communication with God (the vision), but as John 1:18 makes clear, they never actually look at the object of their vision. “No man has seen God at any time” (New American Standard Bible). Moses wants to see God, but he is told that “You cannot see [God’s] face: for no man can see [God] and live” (New American Standard Bible Exodus 33:20). When Moses is confronted with a heavenly vision, he hides in the cleft of the rock. Moses receives his vision, but he is unable to look upon God’s face. In other words, the individual experiences what Betty Rotenberg says of Moses, “that man must withdraw for God to appear” (85). People must release themselves from the object of the vision and withdraw from the sublime before the vision becomes accessible. As medieval mystic and theologian Meister Eckhart states, people must leave “God for God, leaving [the] notion of God for an experience of that which transcends all notions” (“Johannes Eckhart”). When people release themselves from a fixed ideology of God, they are able to move outward and find God through the imagination.

As people remove themselves from the object of the vision, they hide in what they can understand, once again showing that the divine is known and understood through the material world. Again, this is clear in the biblical story of Moses, which Rotenberg compares to *Marriage*. Moses indeed hides from the divine God, as Rotenberg says.

However, this is not the end of the story. At the moment Moses removes the object of the vision (God) from his eyes and hides behind the rock, he realizes he is actually hiding in God. The rock is a symbol of Christ as suggested when Moses later calls it the “[r]ock of [...] salvation” (New American Standard Bible Deuteronomy 32:15). Christ – the God man – becomes the lens through which mankind can meet the divine. This is what Blake understood when he said, “God becomes as we are, that we may become as he is” (*Natural Religion* 3). There in the cleft of Christ, Moses hides from the terror of the sublime object. As Moses looks away from God, the rock reveals itself as God.

Therefore, a material object, such as a rock, functions as a divine mediator between the poet and God. Blake describes perception as a door. People should look through the door in order for everything to appear infinite. Again, this echoes the Biblical allusion of Jesus being the door (New American Standard Bible John 10:9). People do not actually see the divine Father, but in hiding behind the cleansed door, they become aware of the divine world, and they gain a divine vision. Matter is not merely fused into divinity; it is the tangible essence of divinity. By knowing the Matter, one also knows the Spirit.

Yet, the divine manifests itself in different individuals in different ways. In Blake’s text, the prophet Ezekiel strongly criticizes Judeo Christians who think their laws get them to heaven:

The philosophy of the east taught the first principles of human perception: some nations held one principle for the origin & some another; we of Israel taught that the Poetic Genius (as you now call it) was the first principle and all the others merely derivative.... We so loved our God that we cursed in his name all the deities of surrounding nations, and asserted that they had rebelled; from these

opinions the vulgar came to think that all nations would at last be subject to the jews. [*sic*]

'This' said he, 'like all firm perswasions [*sic*], is come to pass; for all nations believe the jews' code and worship the jews' god, and what greater subjection can be? (201)

Blake clearly believes that people connect with the divine through their personal imagination. To enslave divinity by forcing it to adhere to certain rules and regulations, such as the Jewish code, destroys the individual's perception of the infinite. Blake lives in the hope of seeing the perceiver not only liberated from his/her fallen vision, but also freely and individually living in the new, heavenly one. Blake never explains the characteristics of the new vision nor does he paint its picture. It remains concealed and will only be revealed to the divine, Poetic Genius, who, like Isaiah and Ezekiel, creates his/her own vision with the imagination.

Conclusion

The Poetic Geniuses who have been liberated from their fallen condition will never live as they did in their fallen state. They know a spiritual realm that the physical eyes cannot see. The result is that they are constantly looking through the material world, constantly delighting in a spiritual realm, and constantly realizing they are fused to something greater than themselves. Their unchained Energy, like that of Isaiah, who went “barefoot and naked for three years” (201), becomes war-like and fierce. They are ready to live a life that is totally opposite from the rest of the world, yet filled with a passion to help others participate in this heavenly vision.

Therefore, Poetic Geniuses aggressively share their new vision with other people. Blake’s strongest characters – such Rintrah who “roars, and shakes his fires in the burden’d air” (195), the prophets who eat dung, or the Devil who takes the Angel into the chains of death – all rage with a passionate inferno that refuses to be satisfied until other people are raised up to a heavenly vision. In their intensity, the characters are not merely divine people; they are divine prophets. The Angel, for example, was already divine; however, he left his fallen state, “stretched out his arms, embracing the flame of fire, and he was consumed, and arose as Elijah” (206). Prophets must share their message, and ones on fire cannot be stopped until the fire has been spread to every part of the earth. This is how Rintrah is seen in the first vision of *Marriage*, roaming the earth, shaking “his fire in burden’d air” (206). Fire – the word itself – is charged with the imagery of an unbearable force and unquenchable intensity. The word carries the notion of being possessed by a desire that cannot be concealed and that cannot be restrained without great effort. Indeed, the prophets cannot restrain himself – they must share the message.

In addition to bringing other people into the realm of the infinite, Poetic Geniuses must carefully sustain their own divinity and protect themselves from psychological oppression. The new poets have a heavy responsibility to interact with their new heavenly vision. As Blake says in the “Proverbs of Hell,” the source of people’s temporal life is eternity. “Eternity is in love with the productions of time” (198). Poetic Geniuses live on earth, no doubt, but they live out of their heavenly vision, which is removed from the oppression of social evils. The new vision calls people to have an active, aggressive approach to life. At the closing of *Marriage* after the Angel arises as Elijah, the Devil narrator testifies to the Angel’s new, aggressive life:

This Angel, who is now become a Devil, is my particular friend. We often read the Bible together in its infernal or diabolical sense, which the world shall have if they behave well.

I also have The Bible of Hell, which the world shall have whether they will or no. (206)

The passive, black and white words of the Angel’s Bible have been replaced by the active, challenging reading of the Devil’s Bible. The new Devil does not suppress his Energy or his divinity, but, rather, he embraces the message of Body and Soul, Sex and Love, and Desire and Reason. Few people in the world will understand or participate in this assertive, aggressive lifestyle. However, says Blake’s Devil, everyone will at least hear the message of The Bible of Hell – the message of the power of Energy’s flames, the message on how to cleanse the doors of perception, the message of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

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