

Artist and Spectre: Divine Vision in the Earthly Work of William Blake

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My first encounter with William Blake, though perhaps not as magnificent as a fiery star descending to my foot (as Blake depicted both his brother Robert's and his own encounter with the poet Milton above), came during my freshman year in college when my professor admitted he had not studied Blake extensively and did not fully understand him. From that moment I was intrigued, and have come to find that not understanding Blake has been and remains a common theme even among English literature studies. Though he was considered mad and neglected artistically for much of his life, modern scholars have begun to change his fortunes. Blake still has something, even if only a fleeting confusing vision, to offer in his art and idea of art. Northrop Frye, one of the most influential scholars in Blake's modern resurgence, writes in his preface to the Italian translation of *Fearful Symmetry* of Blake's impact on his own critical work, of "the expanded view of literature which Blake imparted to me [Frye]" (422). In the Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, Morris Eaves writes, "Blake is an education—one of the

best reading teachers available, a radical challenge to the reasoning mind, a training ground for knowledge in as many areas as you are willing to open for yourself" (14). Blake did, however, hope for understanding within his own lifetime. In an advertisement for his last artistic exhibition, Blake implores the public: "those who have been told that my Works are but an unscientific and irregular Eccentricity, a Madman's Scrawls, I demand of them to do me the justice to examine before they decide" (*Complete Poetry* 527-528). Blake hoped to cultivate a new understanding of the human potential in Imagination. He hoped to change perceptions of reality, and believed in the power of art to cultivate the minds of his audience. In Blake's work, the artist possesses visionary power through Divine Imagination. Blake sought to fulfill this role of the artist with his own work and influence. Blake depicts the artist as possessing unified divine vision, and his own production of art, the manifestation of vision within the physical world, illustrates his belief in this visionary unity.

In his general mythology, Blake refers to the natural world of limited senses, the perceived reality of humanity, as the fallen generative world. This physical world splits, or generates, out of the original unity of existence, which Blake terms Eden, and continues to further generate into greater and greater physical existence, which makes it further fallen. Northrop Frye describes this development of Blake's thought simply, as "the conclusion for Blake, and the key to much of his symbolism, is that the fall of man and the creation of the physical world were the same event" (47). All existence once possessed unity: a scientific understanding might view such an idea of unity as the moment before the big bang, though Blake would not use scientific time scales or theories. The fall of man into separation comes from a perceived reality of separate existence, from viewing distinct selves and bodies in the physical world as ultimate existence. Eternal unified existence from which mankind fell, and from which the world generated, originally remained whole in Blake's form, or image, of Albion, the sleeping giant. The opening of Blake's *The Four Zoas* sees four aspects of man in unity, in "The Universal Brotherhood of Eden/The Universal Man" (3:5-6). The nature of Mankind remains unified, but has separated existence in the fallen world. People suffer because they perceive the physical world as truth.

Blake often uses Biblical imagery while deviating greatly from orthodox interpretation, so that he uses poetic images like Eden in his work although it no longer means the biblical garden. Comparing Genesis to Blake's myth, the very first verse already marks the fall. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth", which already establishes a generative world split and opposed from heavenly existence (Genesis 1.1.1). Applying Blake's myth further, the split of unity would come from

the sleeping giant, the biblical creator God. Separated humanity naturally comes from the process of creation and marks the actual fall of mankind into generative existence, which continues to generate and split further. Of the split and fall from the original giant, Frye writes, "The Particular 'Giant form' or 'Eternal' to which we belong has fallen, the aggregate of spirits we call mankind or humanity and Blake calls Albion...When Albion or mankind fell, the unity of man fell too...we are locked up in separated opaque scattered bodies" (50). The disruption of human unity into the generated world develops into separation, separate bodies and selves.

Blake then creates and illustrates the idea of the Spectre to mean individual existence in a world of separation and selfhood. The Spectre rationalizes time and physical space as mediating existence, and so comes to reside in and understand the natural world as abstraction and through abstraction. In his use of the term abstraction, Blake is referring to a generalization of existence, but not one based on the true understanding of existence as spiritual unity. The rational senses become a cage to the higher potential of imagination. The Spectre as Selfhood grows concerned with worldly needs, and possesses an insatiable hunger: "In pain the Spectre divided: in pain of hunger and thirst" (*Jerusalem* 6:13). The Spectre suffers constantly from worldly needs that it can never satisfy. Divided humanity in the world remains always concerned with physical needs, with feeding the body and caring for the individualized selfhood. Frye writes of the Selfhood as "an individual ego reflecting on his sensations of an outer space-world while existing in time, [and therefore] the natural man is a dying man" (64). Furthermore, the Spectre representing human Selfhood comes to dwell fully in and define existence by this divided nature. The Spectre exists with the concerns of a physical world,

feels its dying nature, and takes on the concerns of trying to live longer in the physical realm. From this reference point, the Spectre must dwell on its divided nature, scared of death: “And thus the Spectre spoke: Wilt thou still go on to destruction?” (*Jerusalem* 7:9). Humans come to accept their position in the generative world, take it as reality and live with the selfish mindset to take advantage of the perceived short period of life in this reality. The Spectre, human Selfhood, turns away from unified existence, loses the faculty of imagination that can believe instead in unified existence, and fully dwells in what Blake considers the abstract perception of physical spaces.

Blake believes that the artist, in contrast to the Spectre, has the faculty of Divine Imagination, can reconnect with the unity of Edenic existence, and is able to envision the unified Giant of Albion. Whenever Blake writes of art he speaks to the faculty of imagination and Divine Vision. In *Milton* he writes of “the Human Imagination: which is the Divine Vision & Fruition/In which Man liveth eternally” (32: 19-20). Concerned instead with divine nature, the artist does not fall into the same trap of selfish concerns like the Spectre’s selfhood. The true artist can even cast off the idea of the self. In Blake’s vision of Milton, the poet says “I come to Self Annihilation/ Such are the Laws of Eternity that each shall mutually/Annihilate himself for others good” (*Milton* 38:34-36). The artist—Blake considers John Milton an inspired artist—does not fear a death of the self. The Spectre, in contrast from a thoroughly selfish point-of-view, believes that self-annihilation only destroys. The Spectre believes casting off the Self can only become an evil and devastating action, while the artist recognizes the good that comes from casting off the self-centered ego. Divine humanity annihilates the self for the good of others; it does not hide in abstractions of the natural world as an end in itself and therefore

selfishly attempts to live in the physical world as ultimate. Frye describes how “the Selfhood must be annihilated before the true self can appear” (65). Frye understands true self not in the terms of one self in a body in the natural world—that would remain only a Spectre and Selfhood. The true self appears more like an artist with a vision of unity, with the understanding that selfhood in general is existence in abstraction. Frye then describes how “the only possible cure for the original sin of this selfhood of the natural man is vision, the revelation that this world is fallen and therefore not ultimate” (64). The artist looks to unified existence, and *must* look to unified existence. The artist must see the eternity that brings all people back together once the self is eliminated.

Blake truly believes that artists have prophetic power, and that the artist speaks for the divinity of imagination through their work. The artist’s visionary potential becomes prophecy so that the artist in Blake’s work also means “prophet”. Imagination, humanity’s faculty of higher spiritual vision comes directly from divinity. The artist sees and speaks the word of God as a prophet because all true vision comes from Godly nature. Frye describes Blake’s connection between art and prophecy: “the fully imaginative man is therefore a visionary whose imaginative activity is prophecy...It is the superior clarity and accuracy of the prophet’s vision that makes him an artist, and that makes the great artist prophet” (65). Blake himself explicitly called two of his poems prophecies, “American a Prophecy” and “Europe a Prophecy.” In the initial prose section of his Preface to *Milton*, Blake invokes a connection to the divine in his art. In prophetic undertones, he directs the reader toward a re-establishment with the Divine and eternal world: “if we are but just & true to our own Imaginations, those Worlds of Eternity [worlds created by Imagination] in which we shall live for ever; in Jesus our Lord” (1).

Early in and extensively throughout *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake constructs the imaginative vision of his own spiritual self as a prophet. In one section, he resides amidst the good company of other biblical prophets: “Isaiah and Ezekiel dined with me, and I asked them how they dared so roundly to assert that God spake to them” (*MHH* 12). The character of Blake here asks where the prophetic message comes from. Isaiah voices the visionary poet Blake’s own answer to the question, “I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover’d the infinite in every thing” (*MHH* 12). In this passage Blake asserts the divinity of imagination and its ability to see beyond physical limitations. Blake terms these physical limitations abstractions, but the true imagination transcends them. God becomes the “Poetic Genius” (*MHH* 12). This association of the Divine with Imagination sets up the idea of the prophetic artist that remains a central vision throughout Blake’s works.

Prophetic vision, the gift of the artist, manifests in the active pursuit of creating art. Blake does not define a medium for art, he considers all forms of visionary expression artistic, but does refer to its final production. Frye writes of this aspect of Blake’s vision of the artist “whose perception produces art. These two are the same thing, perception being an act” (65). Blake stood against a total separation between artistic conception and artistic creation. In addressing a possible split between the two, Morris Eaves writes, “the division of idea from execution and of intent from accomplishment may become one of the signs that our art is as fallen as we are” (162). Though Blake’s idea of artistic creation always begins with vision, he believes that its manifestation should allow transcendence upward in unity. In his *Descriptive Catalogue*, Blake writes, “the distinction that is made in modern times between a Painting and a Drawing proceeds from ignorance of

art. The merit of a Picture is the same as the merit of a Drawing” (*Complete Poetry* 549). Both produce art, and any distinction between mediums Blake attributes to ignorance. Blake further writes “Painting is Drawing on Canvas & Engraving is Drawing on Copper & Nothing Else & he who pretends to be either Painter or Engraver without being a Master of Drawing is an Impostor” (574). Execution of work remains most important, whether onto copper, canvas, or paper. Bindman writes that Blake’s denunciation of Sir Joshua Reynolds, “who had been President of the Royal Academy during the whole of Blake’s early career...was not so much directed at the principles or models he advocated as against his hypocrisy in not putting his ideals into practice” (86). Reynolds painted portraits of wealthy patrons and gained wealth and the respect of those in power, but against what Blake believes is the true nature of the artist—engaging with work of imagination and divine vision (86). While Reynolds painted wealthy patrons, while Blake painted divine visions, such as *Ezekiel’s Wheels*, Blake’s interpretation of the divine vision of the biblical prophet Ezekiel—who lies at the bottom frame of the picture.



Within his central myth, Blake develops the character Los, whom he presents as the worldly manifestation of the true artist. Instead of engaging with a clearly determined

artistic medium, Los works as a blacksmith, so that Blake turns artistic practice into the physical labor that re-produces divine vision. Rather than describing at all times a physical individual in Los, Blake particularizes the creative artist. Los connects to the artistic archetype, thus to past artists like the poet Milton, Blake himself, and even Jesus as unifying visionary of apocalypse. In writing of Blake's mythical characters in *Jerusalem*, Robert Essick discusses their lack of "consistency or self-sameness over time" and the semi-permeable nature of their interconnection (260). Since Los also falls from the unity of primordial man, he becomes at times an individual, but also represents the faculty of creative imagination across mankind. Lack of definitive characterization actually grants Los further power to display the capability of embracing creative divine imagination. As a mythic figure, Los works within the generative world as the ultimate artist and his task is to reclaim unifying vision, and ultimately to bring back the unity of Edenic existence. His vision of a prior unity always manifests in work—his work at the forge as a blacksmith. He builds the great city of art, Golgonooza, a potential spiritual re-imagining of worldly space.

Los functions as one of the main characters of Blake's epic *Jerusalem*. This illuminated epic, Blake's longest work, deals with his central myth, the fall and apocalyptic reunification of the giant man, and casts Los's struggle with his Spectre into this central structure. At the beginning of the poem, Blake gives an opening address and declares the nature of his new epic: "I Again display my Giant forms to the Public...I cannot doubt that this more consolidated & extended Work, will be as kindly received" (3). The opening of the poem addresses Blake's sleeping giant Albion: "Of the Sleep of Ulro! And of the passage through/Eternal Death! And of the awaking to Eternal Life" (4:1-2). Robert Essick writes of *Jerusalem* as "a psychodrama

of being in which the principal forces take the form of prolific fragmentation countered by an anxious desire for everything to come to a grand unity" (257). The faculties of man, represented by various characters as Los represents imagination, divide and fall into passivity and near deathly sleep. Among this fragmentation of the world, Los never loses his artistic strength or his artistic drive to unify. Los in *Jerusalem* takes on Blake's own goals. Los proclaims, what becomes in essence Blake's own proclamation, "I rest not from my great task!/To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes" (5:17-18). Los, unlike many of the other characters, never suffers long stretches of passivity fatal to the artistic visionary.

In *Jerusalem*, Blake writes of Los's split from his Spectre and need for re-integration to fulfill his creative capabilities. Blake does address the divide of the Spectre from Los, but Los never gives up fighting or gives in to his Spectre's view of the natural world. Blake writes of the divide, "His spectre driv'n by the Starry Wheels of Albion's sons, black and/Opake divided from his back; he labours and he mourns" (6:1-2)! The Spectre takes a position over Los; it tries to lord over him and take control of his perception. "The Spectre stood over Los/Howling in pain: a blackning Shadow blackning dark & opake/Cursing the terrible Los" (6:4-6). The Spectre's concerns are with physical needs, he remains "in pain of hunger and thirst," and tries to convert Los to the natural world, "to devour Los's Human Perfection" (6:13-14). Los, however, fights against this takeover with artistic work: "chaunted his song, labouring with the tongs and hammer" (6:11). The Spectre realizes his failure to control Los: "when he saw that Los/Was living: panting like a frightened wolf, and howling/he stood over the Immortal, in the solitude and darkness" (6:14-7:1-2). In the image accompanying the text, the engraving on plate 6, the Spectre flies over

Los's head, a bat-like shadow, and holds his hands to his head as if shrieking.



Los stares up at him undaunted, still holding his hammer, and the creative fires of the forge swirl around him and the Spectre. Still, both suffer the pains of division, but Los does not give in to passivity. He has a vision of potential unity and tells his Spectre “I know that Albion hath divided me, and that thou O my Spectre,/Has just cause to be irritated: but look steadfastly upon me:/Comfort thyself in my strength the time will arrive/When all Albions injuries shall cease...They have divided themselves by wrath. They must be united by/Pity” (7:52-58). Los never loses sight of potential unity; he never gives up artistic vision.

The internal struggle of the artist with his Spectre becomes the most important development of *Jerusalem*; the Spectre continually attempts to make him doubt and give in to the natural world, but Los instead forces the Spectre to work towards his art. Los tells the Spectre, “thou art my Pride & Self-righteousness: I have found thee out... For I am one of the living: dare not to mock my inspired fury...Take thou this Hammer & in patience heave the thundering Bellows/Take thou these Tongues: strike thou alternate with me: labour obedient” (8:30-40). The Spectre of Urthona, Los's spectre,

becomes a necessary part of creation as the artist's engagement with the natural world. Frye writes, “The Spectre of Urthona, properly controlled, is the obedient demon who brings his master Los the fire and metals and other physical needs of culture, brings the artist his technical skill” (289). In Jerusalem, Los uses the Spectre to work toward his art and vision: “I will compel thee to assist me in my terrible labours. To beat/These hypocritic Selfhoods on the Anvils of bitter Death/I am inspired” (8:15-17). Essick writes of the Spectre as “that portion of each male character necessary to the accomplishment of his task in the material world and yet resisting that goal” (259). Los needs the Spectre, but must turn its physical and limited perception of the world toward a higher vision of art.

Blake's own work represents a view of the artist conquering the Spectre to use it for artistic production. Blake's own creations, his engraved illuminated manuscripts, represent a demanding physical task and labour of passion. Blake's poetry shows the unity of all his artistic abilities, connecting his poetic inclinations with his artistic vision and his work as professional engraver. The image above of Jerusalem shows Blake's illustration of Los's division from his Spectre. The image represents many aspects of Blake's work. The poetry fully integrates with the accompanying image depicting its contents. Los stands at the forge, looking up at his shrieking Spectre, and the flames of creative energy surround the pair. Blake engraved both image and text onto large copper plates, which required a great physical effort. Blake actually used some of the same tools as Los the blacksmith to prepare the copper plates so that even in Blake's own, work creating the art of vision becomes an intensely physical labour.

Blake never achieved his artistic revolution, but his work reveals man who never gave up his own vision even if he gave up his hopes for the public's potential to

change. After his failed 1809 exhibition at the Royal Academy, which he had hoped would show the viability of large-scale public art through a new form of fresco painting, Blake largely withdrew from the public art world. Later in life, as Blake continued to work on his own, he came into contact with a young artist name John Linnell who provided money for Blake and commissioned further production. Linnell admired a series of watercolors depicting the story of Job that Blake had earlier produced for his friend and patron Thomas Butts and had him engrave the entire series (Bindman 105). Bindman notes Blake's "singularly rich interpretation of the biblical story," which shows how Blake never turned from his belief in Divine Imagination and its mythic representation (105).

The plates depict the Orthodox religious God as a false god who does not care for Job or Satan's temptations of him. Job instead finds relief in a vision of Jesus Christ, whom Blake always considered the figure of Divine Imagination manifest in man. The final plate of the series shows Job and his family rejoicing with song and playing musical instruments. Bindman writes how in this ending, "art and prayer thus become one and the same" (105). Blake's belief in art as the

means of reaching true unity and divinity remained with him throughout life.

Blake died poor and obscure in 1827, still believing in his vision of art even if the artistic revolution he promoted failed in his lifetime (Bentley 436). Though his artistic endeavors were deemed a failure during his lifetime, and his dream of turning London into a new artistic Jerusalem never transpired, Blake left behind a vision of artistic unity as opposed to the selfish desires of human Selfhood in his own work that still holds a potent message.

Ignored during his life and for the next century, in part because of his own idiosyncratic and difficult symbolism, Blake's work has gained new readers who have further rejuvenated his vision and led to his literary revival. His view of the incredible power of human imagination can still speak to a modern audience, if the audience feels willing to engage with his difficult work. Art and imagination still have the potential and the power to inspire our highest faculty if we allow them positions in our lives.



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Ceremonial Sacrifice

Orazco Mural (Dartmouth College) – Jim T