

Postgraduate English

www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english

ISSN 1756-9761

Issue 15

March 2007

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Revolution & Revelation: William Blake and the Moral Law

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Postgraduate English, Issue 15, March 2007

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, despite its parodic form and function, is Blake's personal and politico-theological manifesto outlining his fervent opposition to institutionalised religion and the oppressive moral laws it prescribes. It ultimately concerns the opposition between the Spirit of Prophecy and religious Law. For Blake, true Christianity resides in the cultivation of human energies and in the fulfilment of human potential and desire – the cultivation for which the prophets of the past are archetypal representatives – yet the energies of which the Mosaic Decalogue inhibits. Blake believes that all religion has its provenance in the Poetic Genius which “is necessary from the confined nature of bodily sensation” (Erdman 1) to the fulfilment of human potential. Blake's “Proverbs of Hell” demonstrate how the energies underlying the true religious and potentially revolutionary consciousness are to be cultivated. He is especially concerned with repressed sexual energies of bodily sensation, stating in *The Marriage* that “the whole creation will be consumed and appear infinite and holy ... This will come to pass by an improvement of sexual enjoyment” (39). He subsequently exposes the relativity of moral codes and hence “the vanity of angels” who “speak of themselves as the only wise” (42) – that is, the fallacy of institutionalised Christianity and its repressive moral law or “sacred codes” which are established upon “systematic reasoning”.

For Blake liberation from oppression – from the moral law based on natural religion – comes from within; from the Imagination and not from without; from Reason and the observable, calculable, material world. Reason is effectively a preoccupation with morality so that, when separated from Imagination, “thence frames Laws & Moralities To destroy Imagination” (229). The clergy are the

agents of repression through reason; the cursers of innocent joys through a rigid moral code in that it preaches a passive obedience to its deontic “stony law”.

Blake believed that institutionalised religion is intrinsically repressive and corrupt; that it “makes up a heaven of our misery” (23) in impressing upon the mind the fear of death and the hope of a heavenly existence *post mortem* or “an allegorical abode where existence hath never come” (62).

Moreover, Blake perceived that institutionalised religion is hypocritical in that the virtues it exhorts are seldom practiced. For example, in the poem *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Blake criticises the “virgin That pines for man” who “shall awaken her womb to enormous joys In the secret shadows of her chamber”; and also the “youth shut up from lustful joy” who creates “an enormous image In the shadows of his curtains and in the folds of his silent pillow” (50). He perceived that an outward adherence to the moral law of religion – “A Religion of Chastity” (223) – did not necessarily imply an inward purity of spirit. For the poet, the “secret shadows” of the private chamber where repressed sexual energies are released through onanism are “the places of religion”, the places of moral hypocrisy. Blake associates religious hypocrisy, chastity, and auto-eroticism with a constrictive selfhood epitomised in *The Book of Urizen* by the self-closed, self-contemplating titular character. In the poem, Urizen, an anthropomorphic symbol for fallen Reason, gradually obscures the “prolific delight” of the Imagination and sexual fulfilment, “hiding in surging Sulphurous fluid his fantasies” (75). Urizen’s implicit auto-eroticism associates reason with the suppression of creative or sexual energies and so with religious hypocrisy.

Blake was vehemently against the political alliance of the Church and State or “The Beast and the Whore” (611) in the name of Reason. Writing in the late eighteenth century Samuel Johnson commented that “no man can now be made a bishop for his learning and piety; his only chance of promotion is being connected with someone who has parliamentary interest” (qtd. in Davies 10). Blake saw that the piety of the period was a piety that had vitiated the fires of revelation into cold, abstract reason in that it shared little interest in Christian doctrine except to

validate its ethical dogmatism. Blake perceived that this over-emphasis on reason, allied with the revolutionary cause, divorced the heart from the spirit and the mind, thus ideologically incarcerating man in “mind forg’d manacles” (Erdman 27). Subsequently the individual’s capacity for revelation was inhibited, for “Man by his reasoning power can only compare & judge of what he has already perceived” (2). Revelation or freedom from natural philosophy and its natural law requires the energies of the creative and liberating Imagination.

In his observations on the condition of religious life in the eighteenth century, William Law wrote that “we live starving in the coldness and deadness of a formal, historical, hearsay religion” (qtd. in Davies 9). For Blake, State religion is the source of all cruelty in its lack of sympathy for the physical and spiritual needs of the people (see Ryan 43-80). It was felt that the clergy stood aloof from the people so that those suffering “keep all things quiet within” (qtd. in Davies 9). This notion of an aloof clergy, epitomised by the worldly-mindedness and self-interestedness of the then Bishop of Llandaff, is correlative to the Deist belief in a *deus abscondia* – a rational God existing outside of the world – a belief which Blake vociferously opposed.

Blake agreed with St. Paul that a rigid moral law potentially engenders sin and, to some degree, with William Godwin in his view that “the laws which are made to restrain our vices irritate and multiply them” (qtd. in Wu 50). In the *Book of Urizen*, the “seven deadly sins of the soul” (Erdman 72) are engendered through the faculty of Reason: the moral codes of natural reason are static and furthermore infix selfish virtues of the natural heart; a Deistic belief in a self-sufficient human nature requiring no redemption from sin leads to self-righteousness, the vice of selfhood. Indeed the Deist’s insistence on the punishment of sin as opposed to the forgiveness of sin is the radix of civil conflict: “All the Destruction ... in Christian Europe has arisen from ... Natural Religion” (201).

The remedy for selfhood is Vision; an acknowledgement that the vegetable world is fallen. In essence the destruction of this cosmetic world must precede the vision

of the same world purified; selfhood must therefore be annihilated before the true visionary or Divine self can prevail. Blake advocated Father Augustine Baker's notion that selfhood must necessarily be destroyed before the spirit may enter into union with the Divine Humanity: the individual who would ascend to God must do so by self annihilation. Christ's Incarnation is paradigmatic of this concept of self-annihilation and, as Thomas Altizer has observed, the biblical source for Blake's concept of the Incarnation is in the Greek word *kenosis* meaning 'emptying' (Altizer 60): while this noun is not to be found in the New Testament, its correlative verb occurs in St. Paul's letter to the Philippians in which Christ, though manifest as God, "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (*The Holy Bible: King James Version*, Phil. 2: 7). Essentially, Christ's Incarnation is an act of the emptying out of self; of self-abnegation, and Christ is therefore the archetypal figure of self-annihilation.

Blake interpreted the Law not as fulfilled by Christ, as in Matthew 5:17 ("Do not think that I have come to do away with the Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets") but as abolished by him, as in 2 Corinthians 3 ("the new covenant ... consists not of a written law but of the Spirit"). For him, "no virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments: Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse – not from rules" (Erdman 43). Christ represents the revolutionary energies that are prerequisite in order to liberate the Imagination from oppressive Reason, as Leslie Tannenbaum states: "Blake sees in the American Revolution the possibility of ... a world redeemed from the bondage of the Law" (Tannenbaum 135). In *America*, Blake envisions the potential for salvation and revelation that is embodied in the revolutionary energies of Orc, he who transgresses the Law of Urizen, or Reason. He is the "Lover of wild rebellion, and transgressor of God's Law" – that is, the Mosaic Decalogue; "the fiery joy that Urizen perverted to ten commands" (Erdman 54). Altizer notes that "Orc is America, for the true America is a resurrected passion that awakes to ... annihilate the iron laws of repression" (Altizer 145). As an embodiment of the vital energies necessary for social and

political revolution, Orc may be identified with the impulsive, law-breaking and revolutionary Christ of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (see Miller 491-509). Indeed, Christ is seen a revolutionary figure in his opposition to Pharisaism and its espousal of an oppressive, stony law and so may be associated with the potential revolutionary and revelatory Energy represented by Orc. However, it must be acknowledged that Orc is representative of only a stage within the revolutionary process. He is an embodiment of the potential for revolution in the material or “feminine” world – his sexual energies are diverted towards the “shadowy female” who symbolises material existence – and therefore heralds its failure, since revolution must occur beyond the maternal/material world in the realms of Imagination: revolution must occur through revelation.

Blake’s concept of Christ as a revolutionary figure has parallels in twentieth century Liberation Theology. Liberation Theology is essentially an “immanentist” and opposed to a Deistic, transcendentalist theology. Liberation theologians envision a God who works in and through the indigent and oppressed communities in the Third World – that is, in their struggle for liberation from the oppressive forces of Western political and theological hegemony. Liberation Theology is a grass-roots theology. It promulgates the notion that the Kingdom of Heaven, and thus salvation, is at once immanent and imminent; that it will come to pass in the hearts of the oppressed people; and that it will be effectuated through political revolution in the foreseeable future. This notion of the Kingdom of Heaven occurring internally in the self – a “Jerusalem in every Man” (Erdman 203) – may be related to Blake’s idea of the Last Judgement as an instantaneous and immanent event which occurs internally whenever the spirit rejects Error and unveils Truth. Moreover, the concept of the Kingdom of God as an imminent phenomenon relates directly to Blake’s apocalyptic vision of the establishment of the New Jerusalem heralded by the American Revolution. Both Blake and the Liberation theologians utilise the Bible as a means to establish an analogue between the historical events documented in the scriptures and contemporary social and political injustices. The liberating message of the New Testament –

Christ as a revolutionary figure, the primacy of inner revelation and so forth – is a means of empowering the oppressed towards social revolution and personal revelation.

2 Corinthians 3 is instructive in analysing Blake's conception of the revolutionary Christ. The oppressive Law of the Old Testament is essentially abolished by Christ and the new Law which he establishes "consists not of a written law but of the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3: 6). The Law of Elohim – the comminatory God of Judgement – is supplanted by the Law of the Spirit – the merciful Law of Jehovah – which operates not in an external and abstract system of moral codes but internally in and through the Spirit. The old covenant is effectively a veil separating the individual from the Spirit: "The veil is moved only when the person is joined to Christ" (2 Cor. 3: 14). For Blake the epiphany of the Christ at the apocalypse is the ultimate revelation or unveiling of Error: the word "revelation", etymologically, derives from the Old French *reveler* or Latin *revelare*, from *re*, meaning "again", in the sense of a reversal, and *velum*, meaning "veil". The word revelation has etymological links with the word "apocalypse", which, deriving from the Greek *apokaluptein*, also means to unveil or reveal. Thus in Blake's secular apocalypse the individual must necessarily undergo a Last Judgement in casting off Error, or the old Law, and embracing Truth, the covenant or law of the Spirit.

In the poem *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Oothoon is opposed to an epistemology based on the dictates of natural reason – she is "open to joy and to delight wherever beauty appears" (Erdman 51), indulging in "happy copulation" and unbridled free-born joy. She effectively demonstrates that unfulfilled desire renders the self "A solitary shadow waiting on the margins of non-entity" (75); a self-enclosed, auto-erotic shadow governed by the constrictive dictates of natural reason that results in an onanistic and tyrannical "self-love that envies all" (51). *Visions* is a poem about sexual freedom in relation to a rationalist epistemology: its openness to love is set against the desire for power epitomised by rationalism, the slave trade, and the late eighteenth century marital arrangements – "the evil of

marriage” (Godwin qtd. in Wu 50) – in the sense that “she who burns with youth ... is bound In spells of law to one she loaths” and thus “turns the wheel of false desire” (Erdman 49). Here Blake is suggesting that the sexual ethics promulgated by the church give rise to cycles of oppression; the repression of true desire and the enslavement of the female under patriarchal dominion. The rape of Oothoon by Bromion may be paralleled with the myth of the rape of Persephone by Dis. In the sense that Dis’s imprisonment in the underworld may be interpreted as the souls descent into the world of experience or Generation, Oothoon contrastingly brings to Generation and the material world the memory of the values of the Eternal – that is, spiritual, selfless love. The poem ostensibly celebrates sexual desire as at once a revolutionary impulse against tyranny in the material world, against the rational dictates of a reductive epistemology based on natural reason or natural law, and as a potential vision or revelation of Eternity.

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft presents herself as a rationalist who sets reason in opposition to the impulse of the heart. She insists on the virtue of female chastity, associating reason with the elimination of sexual desire. Blake wholly opposed this notion of self-denial (see Williams 71-97). Comparatively, he presents sexual codes of the demand for physical purity and the hierarchy of male over female as continuous with the violence and injustice of slavery. For him, sex is a liberating experience and the erotic energies embodied by Oothoon are assimilated with the revolutionary desire for freedom from patriarchal control. Oothoon is therefore a mouthpiece for self-revelation and liberation through sexual experience. She represents the triumph of self-fulfilment over the rationalist doctrine of self-denial (see Kramer Linkin 184-194).

Blake believes that pre-lapsarian Man was originally androgynous: “In Eternity Woman is the Emanation of Man; she has No will of her own. There is no such thing in Eternity as a Female will” (see Erdman 554-571). For Blake, sexual love is a means to transgress the inhibitive moral law and so access to the Imaginative and eternal world of Eden. He envisaged the material world of nature as fundamentally corrupt, constrictive and “feminine” to the perceiver; a “body

which receives the seed of the imagination” (Frye 74). In Eden, there is only pure energy manifesting itself in form: the material form of nature is absent so that, in the realm of the Imagination, there is no pre-Oedipal m/other figure: the Fall of man effectively constitutes a dependence on the objective material and “maternal” world of nature and natural law. This nourishing force in the natural world is the “Female Will” and is only possible to natural religion. In transgressing the rational moral law and therefore the natural world, it may be said that Oothoon represents the transgression of the Female Will; the potential return to a pre-lapsarian state of perception principally through the revelation of the Imagination and in the freedom of desire, not the revelation of Reason, in which male and female, *anima* and *animus* become one. This sexual union may therefore be said to be a form of self-revelation and self-emancipation from the natural world – that is, a partial perception of the epicene self and hence of the Eternal, of Truth.

Northrop Frye has noted that within Blake’s symbolism the two great symbols of the Female Will are the Madonna and the child; the infant imagination embraced and, it may be said smothered in the arms of the m/other (see 75-76). Blake repudiated the concept of the Virgin’s parthenogenesis: the Virgin is a paradigm of the religion of chastity and hence of repression. It is significant, however, to note that perhaps Blake overlooked the revolutionary implications of The Virgin’s proclamation in “The Magnificat” (Luke 1: 46-47): “My heart praises the Lord ... He has stretched out his mighty arm and scattered the proud with all their plans. He has brought down mighty kings from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away with empty hands” (see Balasuriya *passim*).

Blake relished the energy and the boundlessness of the world of nature and of the mind and criticised all reductions of this sense of infinity to a concept of oneness. This relates to his opposition to the Deist belief in an abstract, invisible and unknowable God: the eternal or Divine Intelligence consists of distinct bounded Forms or Ideas which are perceptible through the Imagination. This notion is elemental to Blake’s radical aesthetic. In *A Descriptive Catalogue* (1809) Blake

writes: “The great and golden rule of art, as well as life is this: That the more distinct, sharp and wirey the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art” (Erdman 550). For him the bounding line is expressive of and not constrictive to the Imagination. He goes on to ask: “How do we distinguish one face or countenance from another, but by the bounding line and its infinite inflexions and movements?” The infinite and the bounded are compatible; the infinite, or the Eternal, contains bounded forms or bounding lines which are perceived by the visionary mind through the Imagination as they are reflected in the vegetable glass of Nature: a dynamic and imaginative form is given or is bounded to things by the creative mind or Poetic Genius. *The Book of Urizen* as a text is bound *per se*. Its columns of verse are divided into chapters and numbered sections, “divided, and measured Space by Space” (70), in imitation of sacred scripture. Moreover, the poet’s use of unrhymed anapaestic trimeter conveys a sense of rhythmic limitation, as Edward Larrissy observes “the verse is infected with the limitations of the Fall it describes” (Larrissy 129). The poem self-consciously lacks a certain richness and variety of metaphor and diction; the form of the text suggests the very moment at which poetry congeals into scripture in its unmediated/unrefined state – the very moment at which the Poetic Genius or vision is made incarnate and “moulded into existence” (79). The poet appears to hesitate between Vision and the limitation of Vision; the creation of poetry through Vision and its subsequent fall or bounding within the body of the text.

Blake’s aesthetic practice was heavily influenced by the Bible and it is significant that Blake envisioned the Bible as at once embodying the oppressive, Mosaic Law of the Old Testament, and yet as being composed in a radical or lawless aesthetic mode unbound by fixed literary conventions. The Bible does not comprise a seamless, coherent narrative; rather, it is replete with textual ruptures, gashes and inconsistencies, semantic lacunae, reiterated passages; it is fissiparous, fragmented, and inaccessible to Reason; it is *per se* a Bible of Hell. Indeed, the Bible is “the product of a complex, continuous, and often arbitrary set of historical interactions” (McGann 320); it is “a heterogeneous collection of various materials

gathered together at different times by different editors and redactors” (321) and derives from a number of cultures, traditions, literary and historical contexts. It is therefore pertinent to examine Blake’s radical aesthetic practice in the light of his political theology and in the light of his opposition to a rational moral law.

Tannenbaum observes that Blake’s radical aesthetic derives primarily from the prophetic writings of Isaiah who, like Blake in *America*, similarly utilises the symbol of the Divine or apocalyptic marriage as a means to convey the culmination of history (see Tannenbaum 124). In *America*, Blake infuses his vision of the apocalyptic marriage with erotic imagery derived from the Canticles of the Song of Solomon as a means to depict the revivification of latent reformatory, creative and sexual energies that have been repressed by the moral law of State religion (see Tannenbaum 146).

Blake’s aesthetic may be said to be radical in the sense that he wholly opposed aesthetic paradigm of neo-classicism which privileges form over content (see Roston 15-42). In Blake’s poetic the formal unity as well as the semantic coherence of the text inheres in its synthesis of the particular with the general; in the internal unity of the parts as opposed to an externally and imposed order: “when a Work has Unity it is as much in a Part as in the Whole” (Erdman 269-270). As Tannenbaum notes, this aesthetic principle is identifiable in the Bible. He states that “In biblical poetry ... form is subordinated to significance” (Tannenbaum 26). The fundamental unit of Hebrew verse is the self-contained distich of parallel lines which embodies a concrete, vivid and precise image. Hebrew verse verges on the prosaic in its foregrounding of sense as opposed to structure. It employs “a flexible, undulatory rhythm produced neither by syllabic quantity nor accentuation, but by the antiphonal sense-pattern of the passage” (Roston 23). The meaning and the unity of Hebrew verse resides in the semantic juxtaposition of parallel lines; in its self-contained internal semantic units as opposed to an overriding externally imposed formal structure. Blake’s poetry is similarly asymmetrical and anti-linear, relying upon an internal unity of semantic elements for its structure and coherence.

For instance, in *America*, Blake commingles tenses and thus disrupts the chronological flow of the narrative; he employs anthropomorphic synaesthesia (“the hungry wind”, “loud winds”, “angry shores”) in order to engender a notion of semantic multi-dimensionality; and dynamically deploys various symbols (such as fire, clouds, fetters) in different semantic contexts (“fiery joy”, “lustful fire”), thereby achieving a sense of textual unity and coherence through sense and symbol as opposed to structure. The principle of parallelism is exemplified in plate 8 lines 5-6 (“That stony law I stamp to dust; and scatter religion abroad To the four winds as a torn book, & none shall gather the leaves”). The stony law of ecclesiastical theology is initially associated with the Decalogue – the stone tablets of the law – and are subsequently assimilated with writing – with scripture (from the Latin *scribere*, to write) – and the tyranny of the written word. The change in association is implicit in the verb “stamp”, which connotes the stamping or printing of words. Moreover the verb “scatter” initially refers to religion (here used as a metonym for the Law) and precedes the qualifying simile: “as a torn book”. The metaphorical association between religion and the law is proleptically signified in the verb “scatter”, which precedes the actual metaphor, a metaphor that is at once figurative – in that the dissipation of religion is associated with the scattering of leaves from a book – and literal – in that the religious Law is a written law, the books of Urizen. This dynamic use of metaphor is carried across the distich: the second line expands upon and qualifies the meaning of the first line, thus achieving a unity and expansion of sense as opposed to a unity of structure. Indeed, the relationship between law and literature is etymological: the word for law, *lex* (originally meaning a crop of acorns), and its correlative verb, *legere* (to gather acorns), came to refer to the gathering of peoples into an assembly and thence to the gathering of letters into a word – that is, writing (Beckett 11).

Bishop Robert Lowth examined the principle of parallelism in his *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*. He believed that form is artificial, restrictive and oppressive to the prophet-poet who, “guided by the nature of the subject only, and

the impulse of divine inspiration” (Lowth 221), seeks primarily to emphasise the semantic import of his verse as a means to inspire the reader towards both vision and action. Blake utilises the principle of parallelism as a means not only to invoke inner vision in the reader but also to arouse the faculties into action (see Erdman 702-703), as Tannenbaum suggests: “He found in the Bible a concept of art ... that acts upon the reader and enjoins the reader to act in response to it” (Tannenbaum 53-54). In this respect the concepts of revelation and revolution are interrelated in Blake’s aesthetic in that he synthesises vision (*visio*) and action (*praxis*); the means to revelation through vision and to political revolution through action. Blake, then, discovered in the Hebrew Scriptures a radical aesthetic “that was based not on external rules, but on a principle of inner coherence that served the poet-prophet’s need to protest against the moral, religious, and political abuses of his time”(35) – that is, the moral law of natural religion.

Blake’s aesthetic may also be considered to be radical in the respect that it wholly differs from and consciously subverts the conventions of neo-classicism in its disruptions of linearity, its constant divagations and transitions (the *genera mista* of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, for instance), its representation of multiple perspectives (such as the constant interchanges or *agon* between Orc and Albion’s Prince in *America*), its effusive diction, and its resilience to a restrictive formal structure such as the “modern bondage of Rhyming” (Erdman 145). As previously argued, Blake’s aesthetic, like the Bible, operates on the principle of thematic or semantic as opposed to formal coherence. His works achieve a sense of unity via the interrelation and recapitulation of subject matter; in the recurrence of various tropes and leitmotifs, and in the poet’s overriding prophetic-poetic vision. Blake’s poetry, then, signifies via a process of association or metaphor as opposed to the principle of contiguity or metonymy. Roman Jakobson differentiates between the principle of metaphor and metonymy as characteristic of the modes of literary or poetic and non-literary or prosaic discourse respectively (see Jakobson 73-108). Metaphor operates on the principle of association and substitution – it is *paradigmatic*. Contrastingly metonymy operates on the principle of contiguity and

combination – it is *syntagmatic*. This notion of metaphor – of signification through association – is characteristic of Blake’s aesthetic. His prophetic verse does not signify in terms of contiguity – that is, chronologically – but rather meaning is generated via the interplay of images, tropes and symbols, therefore foregrounding the meaning or content of the text as opposed to its form.

Blake offsets the chronology of the text, and indeed of history itself, by initially offering a proleptic vision of events and subsequently expanding on their theme and significance. This is a mode of typology which Blake derived from the Bible. In *America*, for example, the Preludium foreshadows the themes and events in the subsequent poem proper. *America* additionally disrupts the chronological sequence of the text via multiple divagations which serve to focalise the narrative events on different characters. Given the multiple spatial and temporal transitions in *America*, Blake employs an episodic mode of narrative which typically relies upon a unity of theme for its coherence and which, furthermore, enables him to establish a theme or event and then elaborate upon its significance, thus resulting in a sense of simultaneity and multiple time schemes or *polychronotopicity* (Pearce 74). Tannenbaum notes that within this tradition of nonlinear, multiform Hebrew verse the poet is able to convey multiple perspectives on a single theme or event primarily by the principle of simultaneity.

In contrast with the aesthetics of neo-classical verse, the nature of Hebrew poetry promotes the subjective effusion of creative and visionary energies unbridled by a restrictive and decorous formal system of poetic diction or verse structure. Hebrew verse utilises the language of the passions in order to inspire the reader which, for Lowth, is the true language of poetry (see Lowth 150). He identified that the use of metaphor in prophetic poetry and its efficacy to convey the seemingly ineffable is a device to express an inward and wholly subjective state of being. He states that “a man in a passion will frequently reject the words which simply express his thoughts; and for the sake of giving them more force, will make use of images stronger...and more congenial to the tone of his mind” (53). Metaphor is more efficacious than simile in engendering a notion of psychic

verisimilitude in that it “transports the mind” of both the author and the reader closer to the reality of his prophetic experience.

Hebrew poetry is composed principally with the authentic and aesthetic energies of experience, of Divine inspiration. However, in the late eighteenth century the State, under the aegis of William Pitt – following from the social upheavals of the French Revolution together with the American Declaration of Independence, the 1787 Constitution, and Bill of Rights (1791), as well as the founding of the London Corresponding Society in 1792 – imposed a law on all publications, especially religious writings, which were deemed to be oppositional to the State or potentially subversive to the established order (see Phillips 263-279): in 1792 a Royal Proclamation against seditious writings was published and signalled the inauguration of Pitt’s “Reign of Terror”, which Michael Phillips describes as “a systematic effort on the part of the government to seek out, demoralize and effectively destroy any organization or individual that it deemed to be questioning the tenets of the constitution or the monarchy and therefore to pose a threat to its authority” (266). The penalty for publishing seditious writings, for slander against the authorities and, indeed, any overt opposition to the order of things was imprisonment. As part of the repressive government’s censorship programme and due to the lack of an established police force, an initiative was implemented whereby citizens were offered a financial reward for acting as informants to the government of any actual or potential acts of sedition within society. Writers and publishers were under constant surveillance not only by the government but by members of their own community. This quasi-Panoptic concept of social regulation led Blake to claim that “To defend the Bible in this year 1798 would cost a man his life” (Erdman 611) and ensured that the repressive social institutions of power operative in society are unknowable and elusive. Furthermore, this notion of regulation and obedience via surveillance results in psychological discipline whereby the individual, through fear, is incarcerated in “a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 201). In this way, the law of censorship inhibited potentially

subversive energies. The religious energies of inspiration or “enthusiasm” posed a threat to the hegemony of the Church and State if cultivated amongst the masses (see Mee 194-211). The word “enthusiasm” is linked etymologically to Blake’s notion of revelation: the word derives from the French *enthousiasme* and via the Latin from the Greek *enthousiasmos* meaning ‘possessed by God’ (based on *theos*, God). It is the inspiration of the Divine Spirit that drives the poet-prophet’s creative energies, and it is essentially this energy or enthusiasm, embodied by Orc, which Blake envisioned as necessary for the transgression of the stony law and so for social and political revolution.

Saree Makdisi observes a direct correlation between Blake’s politico-ideological radicalism and his aesthetic radicalism, suggesting that Blake’s concept of liberty and liberation from oppression was wholly different to the hegemonic-liberal political vision of Paine (Blake opposed the ideology of Paine that promoted the “transhistorical” sovereignty and autonomy of the self in the light of reason which, for Blake, had the potential to be corrupted into self-hood) and, furthermore, that Blake’s opposition to the hegemonic-liberal position is identifiable in the subversive nature of his poetry (see Essick 189-213). Makdisi argues that Blake’s aesthetic operates in counterpoint to his subject matter. Considered in conventional terms, form and content do not coalesce, in that, historical narratives are traditionally represented in a unilinear temporal sequence, whereas Blake’s *America* develops via thematic associations, textual ruptures, temporal and spatial transitions and verbal ambiguities (see Makdisi 158). As a result the poem’s “disruption of straightforward narrative” presents a “challenge to 1790s discourse of liberty” (32) that was essentially governed by the dictates of reason.

Blake’s radical theology is implicit in his unconventional poetry in that it challenges the dominant aesthetic paradigm of his time, notably that employed by the rational liberalists. Therefore, Blake’s radical aesthetic has an expressly political dimension and utility (see James 235-252). In addition, this notion of aesthetic radicalism promotes textual and semantic instability. Blake’s prophecies

are polysemic in that they defy a uniform mode of reading, subsequently challenging the very reading processes and “laws” or conventions of his contemporary audience. In this sense, Blake’s texts function to rouse the reader and therefore necessitate an active reading and interpretation. In Makdisi’s words: “Far more than most literary and artistic work, Blake’s reminds us of the extent to which all texts are open and virtual; and hence far more than most, it frees us from the determinism of those texts that pretend to be closed and definite” (Makdisi 169); that is, those texts employed in State trickery. Blake’s radical aesthetic, then, opposes textual hegemony in so far as his concept of art derives primarily from his theological outlook; and in this respect Blake integrates aspects of both theological and political radicalism within his aesthetic.

Blake’s aesthetic additionally subverts contemporary philosophical and epistemological discourses on space and time as absolute phenomena subject to the laws of physical nature – a notion expounded by Isaac Newton. Like Berkeley, Blake believed that space and time are relative, subjective and wholly contingent upon the perceiving individual: notions of time and space cannot exist externally or independently of our ideas of them (Doscow 53-73). Concepts of time and space do not exist *a priori* as given, natural, phenomenological laws, but rather they are human, imaginative creations (see Erdman 125-126): “For Blake ... time is defined by each individual act of imaginative creation, and space is defined by human sight and is relative to the individual” (Doscow 65): as the eye is, so it sees. Blake’s epistemology is therefore correlative to his concept of the Imagination: the mind shapes the world as it perceives it through the Imagination which is a shaping, creating, transforming faculty.

In the sense that space and time are relative concepts, Blake’s art furthermore embodies this notion in its resistance to a linear chronology and in its constant transitions in spatial terms, so that Blake’s aesthetic emblematises his epistemology and simultaneously challenges the philosophical and scientific

discourses prevalent in his time. Makdisi notes that the concept of time *per se* became quantifiable and heterogeneous following from the Industrial Revolution. The workers in the manufactories were subject to an oppressive economy of time that regulated and dominated the working day and, according to this discipline of time, manufacturing methods were revised according to time wastage in an attempt to increase human productivity – the principal method became the division of labour and subsequently gave birth to modern capitalist modes of production (see Makdisi *passim*). Makdisi states that “The manual labour required for the production of any manufactured commodity involves a series of steps akin to the stages of unilinear narrative” (120). In *America*, then, the temporal dislocations of narrative and emphasis on thematic association or metaphor, as opposed to narrative continuity or metonymy, disrupt and subvert this notion of disciplinary clock time associated with manufacture. Moreover, as Mollyanne Marks argues, for the prophet-poet “the true meaning of time lies in its identity with the spirit of prophecy, for by speaking out, the prophet can reverse the cycles of history and make time an agent of mercy rather than destruction” (Marks 59). In his vision of the American Revolution as an imminent apocalypse, Blake’s temporal aesthetic synthesises the present/synchronic and the past/diachronic aspects of time and history into a single narrative, thereby suggesting that the past, present, and future are inseparable to the Imagination. In this way, Blake transcends the cultural and material constraints of history by utilising the present typologically as a means to envision to future. This aesthetic is elemental to his politico-theological and prophetic mission and it may therefore be said that in *America* social and political revolution is coincident with spiritual and aesthetic revolution.

In his synthesis of politics and theology, that is, in his vision of revolution as a prelude to apocalyptic revelation, Blake challenged the moral laws based on reason upheld by the established Church, as well as the rationalist epistemology based on a concept of natural law, and expressed this challenge via a radical aesthetic derived predominantly from the Bible, which is at once law-bound in its

espousal of the Mosaic Law, and yet aesthetically lawless. Utilising the principle of parallelism in his verse, Blake subverted the conventions of classical poetry by prioritising sense over structure, subsequently engaging his readers on an imaginative level and, furthermore, deployed this aesthetic as a means to challenge received notions of linear chronology. In Blake, revolution and revelation go hand in hand: revolution is the yearning for revelation, and the revolutionary impulses, both political and religious represented by Orc and Oothoon – the former as an emblem of self-renewal and potentially subversive Energy, the latter as an emblem of sexual manumission – ultimately represent the potential to unveil social and political Error – the tyranny of Reason, selfhood, and the moral codes of Church government – so that the individual may reject Error, embrace truth, and be free from oppressive, law-bound systems. Revelation is a revolution in the self, from within; and revolution from without begins with self-revelation.

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First Response

The essay exhibits a certain lightness of touch in its intelligent, well-informed, and illuminating exploration of Blake's poetic and aesthetic adaptation of the Mosaic Law and Hebraic tradition. This reading of Blake's strikes a delicate balance between an awareness of historical context and the formal aspects of the poetry discussed. Where appropriate, the author also draws on contemporary theories (such as Althusser and Liberal Theology) to elucidate their interpretation of Blake. This particular take on Blake's aesthetic revolution against institutionalised forms of morality also situates its own argument in the wider field of recent Blake studies and makes effective use of critics, including Leslie Tannenbaum, Saree Makidisi, and Jon Mee.