

Blake And Gnosis

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"Thou art a man; God is no more,
Thy own humanity learn to adore".

Blake : The Everlasting Gospel

"You saw the spirit, you became the spirit. You saw the Father, you shall become the Father. You see yourself, and what you see you shall become....." Whoever achieves gnosis becomes "no longer a Christian, but a Christ."

The Gospel of Philip

Gnosis is an unusual word. Gnosticism and the gnostics are more common terms. All three relate to knowledge; somehow secret or esoteric. The origins of this paper go back many years and involve a personal engagement with a range of literatures, philosophies and psychologies.

However, its present form was precipitated by a talk given to The Blake Society by the renowned author on Glastonbury and all things Arthurian, Geoffrey Ashe. In this lecture, Ashe passed on an amusing episode from a novel by Waugh. In it, when asked the nature of knowledge, the gnostic replies that it would take a lifetime to explain; when asked how to acquire such knowledge, the answer is that it takes a lifetime to do. This is an amusing anecdote, and Ashe used it to disclaim any connection between Blake and Gnosis. However, I believe this to be wrong; and that a Gnostic view is 'the' key to understanding Blake's dense mythologies. I understand that Blake intended his work to be transformatory; that is, it

should work on individual psychologies, often in a corrosive way, and that the end result should somehow be a heightened state of (divine) humanity.

"I give you the end of a golden string
Only wind it into a ball
It will lead you in at Heaven's gate
Built in Jerusalem's wall "

But winding that ball is no easy task and being led to Heaven's gate seems to involve a lot of culs de sac along the way. Many of these are created by academics themselves. I have followed them. Read Erdman and Blake is intent on constructing a series of historical, political analogies, as some sort of hidden comment on the events of the day. Read Raine and he has absorbed and is recreating structural parallels of platonic myths. Both authors make for interesting reading as we indulge in 'spot the source' exercises. This is clever scholarship but tells us nothing of the power of such stories to transform. In other words, to speak personally, I was wondering what Blake had to tell me - about me ! I was sure there was a message, it was not clear, but, intuitively I felt it was there. It turns out that this transforming knowledge is gnosis and it forms part of an ancient tradition. Over the past few years I have placed the pieces together; followed its tracks across the centuries and drawn the common link between various works and writers. It has been a fascinating investigation but not a scholarly occupation. What follows is not an original piece of academic research but a sketchpad of ideas. It draws heavily on

secondary rather than primary sources and does not quote Blake very much at all. My intention, rather, is to give an indication of the importance of gnosis and what I see as related themes. It is ongoing, and I must say that many of my views have moved on from how they were originally stated in this paper. I offer them now in their original form because I believe they have a coherence and direction that are worth preserving. They are, though, working notes rather than definitive conclusions. I offer them in the spirit of common exploration of the work of Blake.

I cannot, in such a short paper, give an adequate account of the historic details and content of gnostic Christianity. Anyway, the job has already been more than adequately done, by Hans Jonas, Kurt Rudolph and Elaine Pagels. As I understand it, almost immediately after Christ's death, an

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enormous struggle took place to interpret 'events'. There were very many religious groupings but they roughly divide themselves according to two broad categories - the god without and the god within. Gnosticism is very definitely of the latter type, although the former, and for mainly political reasons, gained the upper hand. It could have gone either way but an external god made an external power easier to focus and exert. Gnosticism, once buried (and many gnostic writings were quite literally buried, as the Nag Hammadi scripts prove) went underground, became obscure, occult and secretive. But over the centuries it has reappeared: sometimes in heretical, religious sects, the members of which have been put to the stake by the Church of Rome; sometimes in the writings of alchemists and individuals generally working in the western mystic tradition. Very often, and here Ashe is quite correct, gnosticism has been used by groups looking for secret societies; in other words, elites and elitism - all the better if based on hocus pocus.

Gnosticism, however, is not about hidden, excluded knowledge. Quite on the contrary, it is revelatory! Moreover, the spirit of gnosis is not confined to the Christian tradition. In fact it is prominent in many historic myths and legends. In many of these, the fall of man is invoked; a golden figure or giant who has fallen into ruin or psychological trauma, often associated with his own behaviour or psychic imbalance. This figure appears as Adam-Kadmon in the Cabalah, as Albion

in Blake, indeed as Arthur in that legend. Each of their fates seem to strike chords and echoes of structural similarities to me, and some sort of systematic comparison may well prove useful. In each case, the character is a microcosm, a figure including or representing the psychological reality or state of man. But he is more than that. In addition, he is, or has been, a golden figure, a giant, a god even.

Jung, at the end of *The Psychology of the Transference* (a most gnostic book which I highly recommend) quotes Nicholas of Cusa:-

"Man is an analogy of God : Man is God but not in an absolute sense since he is man. Man is also a world, but he is not all things at once in contradicted form since he is a man. He is therefore a microcosm."

This seems to be the gnostic argument in a

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nutshell. It is also very close to Blake's own Albion. Indeed, it echoes Blake's reply to whether he believed in Jesus Christ - "He is the only living God! and so am I, and so are you." But this was the elder Blake, the post-Jerusalem Blake. Before this he was more preoccupied with the fall: from grace, from a golden age, from innocence to experience, from gnosis to deception. This is common to all the 'giant' legends. The quest is then to refind what has been lost. But, and in this I find Ashe's Arthur misleading, the lost condition is not a historical fact. The whole question of past, present and future is existentially problematic. Pastness encourages nostalgia and lostness encourages searching - out there!!! That which is lost, that which is yet unfound is not historical; is not rediscovered as some kind of spatial, temporal event! But, before refinding this state of 'paradise', what is the nature of the sickness, the state of lostness?

The words are common enough - alienation, anomie, isolation, depression. But these are the symptoms, what is the disease? For Blake, as in his Albion figure, the cause is division: between the sexes, between object and subject, between mental and material, innocence and experience, etc. The problem for me is that they all seem to overlap and to be separate manifestations of the same thing. But the result of the division is clear enough - man becomes one-dimensional (Marcuse) and/or a stranger to himself (Jung). The spectrous figure is inflated, urizenic, reason-bound, ego-centric.

However, even though this condition has the upper hand, all the other mental traits - feelings, sense, imagination - have a related part; and even conspire to promote it. It is not enough, therefore, to boot out Urizen and become Los; the two must counter balance. A more stark modern version is the tension between the conscious and the unconscious; and in particular, the shadow(s) the latter include(s). Lightness and darkness, good and evil - their co-existence is an essential element in gnosticism. Blake hinted at this early on in the Marriage of Heaven and Hell, but did not develop the idea until much later where it appears in his longer prophecies.

In the Gospel of Philip from the Nag Hammadi Library we find:

"If you bring forth what is in you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is in you, what you do

not bring forth will destroy you."

The Jewish gnosis of the Cabalah also recognised this:

"I form the light and create the darkness: I make peace and create evil: I the Lord do all these things."

Another aspect of the sickness is therefore that we may strive for the good and beautiful but by doing so we also invoke the evil and ugly.

Faced with the psychological misery of this condition, man seems to be trying to continually escape from himself, from what he is. Unable to be himself, the emptiness that remains is filled by a huge, inflated ego; one intent on self gratification and brutal aggression. More and more man looks outside of himself for help; to materialism, convention, to rule and practice. Often a god is constructed and worshipped as an escape into spiritual authority. But it will not do. Much of Blake can be read as a warning of following such false images:

"Why look at God for help and not ourselves "

Jerusalem 4

The only answer is for man to throw himself upon the God within himself; to surrender to himself, his true self, and thus remove all the props and images that he clings on to. For Blake this was the divine humanity. And humanity in this case also includes community :

Everyone is now a stranger amongst strangers. Kinship libido has long been deprived of its object. But being an

instinct, it is not to be satisfied by any mere substitute such as creed, party, nation, or state. It wants the human connection. That is the core of the whole transference phenomenon..... relationship to the self is at once relationship to our fellow man, and no-one can be related to the latter until he is related to himself "

Jung op. cit.

To return to this notion of the God within, however, it is a complex dialectic - light and dark, Yin and Yang, good and evil, destroyer and creator. And each of these is a psychological state. I find the gnostic god Abraxas the best representation of the dialectic. Firstly, he represents the notion of the fusion of opposites. Secondly, he includes a psychic energy akin to the Freudian libido - both creator and destroyer. Finally, is the whole idea of the conscious and the

unconscious, and the way the latter supports and invades the former. The unconscious, like the pleroma, represents a fullness, and an abyss, from which all things emerge without exhaustion. It is the source of human mental activity.

The power of such a figure is extremely disconcerting. Here is Hermann Hesse on the subject :

"Contemplate the fire, contemplate the clouds, and when omens appear and begin to sound in your soul, abandon yourself to them without wondering beforehand whether it seems convenient or good to do so. If you hesitate, you will spoil your own being, and will become little more than a bourgeois facade which encloses you and you will become a fossil. Our God is named Abraxas and he is both our God and the devil at the same time. You will find him both in the world of delight and of shadows. Abraxas is not opposed to any of your thoughts, or any of your dreams, but he will abandon you if you become normal and unapproachable. He will abandon you to look for another pot in which to cook his thoughts."

But in many ways this is dangerous talk and represents the process rather than the product. Hesse seems to be encouraging us to let Abraxas grow in balance with its various facets, because in the combination a kind of integration takes place which liberates total man. Total man is the lost man returned of Adam, Arthur and Albion. In Jungian terms, this forms a process of

individuation. And for this to occur, in Blake's terms,

'error must be put off', to tear down 'the self-hood of deceit and false forgiveness.' But this must be an exceedingly difficult thing to do! In particular, the false ego, once attacked, is very likely to fight back. Similarly, to discover the true self is like the birth of a child - hopelessly vulnerable in its early days! A human soul with no protection is likely to perish.

Another opposition in Blake is that between the sexes. It has been stated, and with this I have some sympathy, that we should not regard Blake's male and female as men and women but principles or elements. Even understood as principles, however, the tensions between the two still seem very pertinent to relationships between real men and women. It is perhaps not that Blake started with these

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psychic-spiritual archetypes and then applied them to human relations but the other way around; faced with the contradictions of these, Blake extended them into the realm of his psychic cosmology, tracing spiritual and psychological sources. This aspect of Blake's work can hardly be overestimated. Albion divides into his male spectre and female emanation. The four zoas do likewise, and throughout the whole of his work there are daughters, sons, fairies - all engaged in taunting, teasing and generally causing havoc. 'The Pickering Manuscript' is full of poems with the underlying theme of sexual tension. Milton too is haunted by his sixfold emanation:

"Although our human power can sustain
the severe contentions of friendship,
our sexual cannot, but flies into the Ulro
(chaos)."

This division is not only expressed anthropologically but in individual psychological terms. The whole distinction between anima and animus is well developed in Jung's writings. Suffice it to say that the feminine aspect of man is another good example of him being a stranger to himself; especially in the way that the anima, once projected, becomes idealised, worshipped, feared, whatever. This is at the heart of the 'romantic myth', with all its misplaced pantheism. Yet, it is a relationship that can end in tears. So many romantic poets simply burnt out, or became, as in Wordsworth's case, disillusioned and depressed. This misleading aspect can also be observed in the whole evolution of romanticism into the

macabre sensualism of Poe, etc., with all its unhealthy connotations. Blake too was affected. When, in 'The Crystal Cabinet', he is seduced by the material world, he is at first intoxicated. This heightened sense of reality at first gives him a new view of the world - another England, London and Thames - and he is thrilled at what he sees, that burns like a flame. However, as is often the case, he forces the matter, projects beyond, and, by overstretching the external view, collapses the whole vision. The lesson is that externally projected states lead men astray. Nature, in Blake's view, is highly ambiguous; at once a source of seeing through the eye, and at the same time diverting this process. This partially explains why Blake wrote some of the most beautiful pastoral passages existing in the English language and yet also asserts that nature deadens him. Hence Vala! - the sexual

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division here expressed between the male, spiritual subject and the female, material object. The reconciliation does not seem to occur until plate 99 of Jerusalem where Albion and Jerusalem embrace - this time not in possession but surrender. For me it is significant that this was just about the last major work that Blake wrote.

The issue at stake here seems to be crucial to an understanding of man's relationship to the world, himself and others. Similarly, in the artist's perception and the source of his/her creativity, in as much that an overwhelming desire to copy what appears in the world is likely to lead to a loss of 'self' unless this latter is used to infuse the artistic object with its own unique character. Creativity then not as self conscious (which is bound to be limited), which seeks an object on which to impose itself, but creativity as self-surrender; springing from the source of fullness of 'being'. This cannot happen when objects are idealised, worshipped, etc. The artist, therefore, cannot 'take' his or her art but acts as a medium through which the art can define itself. For this to happen some sort of psychic union must take place in the brain; to allow for the spark of creativity springing from opposites, but in a way that does not overwhelm either. Such an activity becomes more like a prayer or a meditation. In Hoeller's words :-

"The purest form is the human soul's delight in its experience of a full communion with deity itself. Rather than asking anything of God, such activity is the souls joyous giving of itself wholly

and unreservedly to God. It is the breaking down of the last barriers between its separate existence and the allness of the Godhead - the finding of its total unity with the inmost self of all."

In this case, God is expressed gnostically; the divine humanity or fullness of being.

In this process the male and female principle work together, just as in alchemy where the Sonor Mystic works with the alchemist mixing his substances. At the end of their labours there is a kind of mystic wedding involving the creation of the androgynous. Incidentally, Jung expounds on the androgynous nature of the soul! There is a similar parallel in the processes of individuation worked out in the Jungian laboratory between the patient and analyst. Images and dreams are produced by the two and become common to both of

them, so that neither remembers who it was who produced the dream or image. The psychic union is different from ordinary love in that even though lovers wish to fuse themselves completely, they are never capable of dreaming the same dream. Only the magic wedding can close the gap.

Jung said: "this psychic union can only take place in a spirit of love since only then will one be ready to risk everything". Nevertheless, the love of the psychic union is tricky and dangerous, it is a love without love, contrary to the laws of physical creation and history. The child (dream or image) produced of such love is a child of spirit, or of the imagination. It is a fusion of opposing factors within the psyche of each; it is again a process of individuation.

Gnosticism (although not necessarily gnostics and gnostic sects) is not about mystery and the occult but is revealing in a psychological sense. The gnostic, religious analogies that Blake creates seem to be part of a psychological process. Even the 'resurrection' becomes a daily experience, 'once error is put off'. I believe that the modern Christian experience is also often gnostic in resulting in the altered mental states for warring opposites to be reconciled. The source of this is within not without; akin to the type of new age spirituality found in the work of such artists as Cecil Collins and Francis Bacon. Indeed, the motto used by Collins for his Chichester Cathedral altar cloth - 'all things come from you' - must surely be turned back on the observer.

To conclude on a personal note. For many years, a poem of Blake's was particularly problematic for me. It is the well known opening of *The Auguries of Innocence* :

"To see a world in a
grain of sand
And a heaven in a
wild flower
Hold infinity in the
palm of your hand
And eternity in an
hour"

I recognised it as beautiful poetry and felt instinctively that it had something to say to me, but, try as I might, I could not 'experience' what it was to feel like this. The clue to grasping it was given to me by the artist David Barton - the key to this phrase is not to search 'its inmost form' but to surrender to it as instinctively right. Coincidentally with our conversation I was reading a book on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. In more detail now, the latter seems to come closest to describing what is

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going on at this level of experience. A key concept of Heidegger's is Dasein - quite literally 'being there'. Existentially, this signifies being committed, open, given to the moment. In this case, not only is man (or woman) existing 'there', that unique moment in time, she/he is the 'there' - the being through which the light of being shines. 'To Be', therefore, is to be open, unhidden; and dasein is to be the place of this openness and unconcealment. But this cannot occur passively, rather it requires open-eyed alertness and readiness to 'experience' it. Hence, 'to see the world.....'. It also requires a surrender of self in order to let 'being' come forward; except that what comes forward is a more authentic expression of self. To see like this, to be active like this, does seem to be to return man to some sort of golden age or lost state of innocence. But it is not a return in a literal sense. Common origins do not exist, rather, in Hillman's words, "the ultimate source is..... in the enigma (never fully revealed).... of the imaginal....in the mundus imaginalis". For Heidegger, "the past lies not behind but in front of man, structuring man's present and future. We can move towards the future only by moving towards the past. Our past is our future". In this sense, to live authentically is, in Pindar's words, "to come forth as what thou art".

Man is not static, therefore, but his essence is in his 'possibilising' thrust towards the future - towards possibilities which must be maintained as possibilities without ever becoming completely actualized. Man is most himself when he is

ecstatic; exceeding himself, standing in the openness of Being - indeed he is the place where Being opens up and reveals itself - to itself!! No wonder that Heidegger stated that the natural attitude of the philosopher was astonishment!

Essentially, such an attitude of mind is gnosis itself. It is the heaven's gate towards which Blake's work leads us, and the gnostic God who is none other than man's own expression of being, of divine humanity. But this is a road and not a terminus. It is a path to be travelled, a path with no clear ending. As God is expressed in man, the opposites - conflicts, sorrows, joys, feelings of love and anguish of life - are finally nothing other than expressions of the growth of God and man. Such a journey is revelatory and transformative. It is in this that Blake calls us to join.

Bibliography

As previously stated, I have, in much of this paper, shamelessly plagiarised various works without quoting my sources. The mosaic, however, is my own, as are the links drawn with Blake's work.

For anyone interested in the various themes I recommend:

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Hans Jonas : The Gnostic Religion (Beacon Press)

Kurt Rudolph : Gnosis (Harper and Row)

C. J. Jung : The Psychology of the Transference (Ark)

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M. Serrano : A Record of Two Friendships (RKP)

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A. Ehrenzweig : The Hidden Order of Art (Weidenfeld and Nicolson)

T. Churton : The Gnostics (Weidenfeld and Nicolson)

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