

# The Gnostic 3

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## Blake and Gnosticism

William Blake was born in 1757 and died in 1827. He is considered to be amongst a group of poets who are generally known as the "romantics"; this would include writers such as Lord Byron, William Wordsworth, Samuel Coleridge, and Percy Shelley. Such individuals often seemed to write in the face of the industrial and scientific advances of the age, and sought a more emotional, sensational relationship with the world. They also often looked backwards in history to ancient traditions, myths and religions rather than to modern secular ideas. Blake's own biography is marked by sensation, vision and expression. As a child, he saw angels in the trees when out walking with his mother on Peckham Rye. He had no formal education – he could stand none. However, he was eventually apprenticed to an engraver and learnt this trade. Even here, his was a visionary experience: whilst engraving to in Westminster Abbey, he "saw" the ghosts of past Kings and Queens of England processing in the aisles. Clearly, an individual of remarkable imagination, he seemed to actually "see" the image he produced.

He did earn a living as an engraver. However, increasingly, he became involved in his own work. He invented a new form of engraving that entailed him writing in reverse onto copper plates, which he then used to print text and images together, finally colouring each copy by hand. Early books were quite popular and focussed: *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and *the Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. However, increasingly, he prepared long "prophecies," which included a large cast of mythological characters. In 1800, he moved for three years to Felpham, West Sussex, to a cottage which is still

there, to work with the poet William Hayley. However, relations with him soon became tense as he was required to work on his patron's own verse. He was also tried for sedition after an altercation with a soldier.

Blake lived in revolutionary times and was outspoken in the name of freedom. However, he became increasingly poor and ignored, and really only lived as a result of support from a small band of patrons. His longer prophecies make for demanding reading. His final magnum opus included 100 illustrated plates, but he only ever completed one copy. Living simply in London in one room with his wife, he was later "rediscovered" by a younger generation of romantically inclined artists and writers who called themselves the "Ancients." This group included the pastoral artist Samuel Palmer.

The philosophy underlying Blake's vision has been the subject of continued debate. Once he died, he faded into obscurity for many years, and was not really rediscovered until the twentieth century. However, there is now a veritable "Blake industry" and every type of interpretation of him: Marxist, Freudian, Jungian, Post-modern, and many more. Any engaging with his images and texts is itself a transformative process. This article addresses the nature of this transformation.

Gnosticism, gnosis, Gnostic are difficult words to define. The first (Gnosticism) is the term often used to denote early Christian heretics of the second, third and fourth centuries. We have long known that many early followers of Christ were condemned by other Christians as heretics but, until this century, nearly



everything we knew about them came from their opponents: most notably Irenaeus the second century Bishop of Lyons who wrote five volumes entitled *The Destruction and Overthrow of Falsely So-called Knowledge*; and, fifty years later, Hippolytus, a teacher in Rome, who wrote the enormous *Refutation of All Heresies* in order to "expose and refute the wicked blasphemy of the heretics". For Irenaeus, the heresies were "an abyss of madness and a blasphemy against Christ". It is clear that the persecution of those who held such views was successful: books were burnt; those possessing them were imprisoned. By the fifth century, such philosophies, became literary dangerous knowledge. Retreating from dominant orthodoxies, a Gnostic monk took thirteen papyrus books bound in leather and buried them in a red earthenware jar at the foot of a cliff honeycombed with caves near the town of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt; which is where they remained for some 1400 years. Then, in 1945, an Egyptian peasant, out searching for soft soil with which to fertilize his crops, dug up the jar and took it home. At first, he did not know what to do with what he found inside. His mother admits to using some of the papyrus to light fires. Eventually, however, and by an enormously circuitous route, the texts from the find filtered into the public domain. The story they told was astonishing. Along with other established writings from Plato, were texts, alternative gospels, myths, poems and philosophies. Many of these had mysterious, quasi-magical sounding titles, such as *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*, *The Exegesis of the Soul*, *The Hypostasis of the Archons*. Some told of an alternative creation story, others included sayings of Jesus not to be found in the orthodox bible, still others spoke in the voice of feminine divine power.

But what has all of this to do with William Blake?

The majority of the Nag Hammadi texts could not have been available in Blake's day. And Blake hardly proclaims himself a Gnostic, or indeed uses the word at all. The answer lies in the second of my key words: gnosis. Gnosis

might be defined as "knowledge": not simply the knowing of facts, but deep, intuitive, experiential knowledge, which is based on personal insight and knowing of oneself. However, this knowledge of oneself goes beyond simply self-conscious understanding; rather, the more this knowing develops, the more it becomes simultaneously a personification of God:

Abandon the search for God and the creation and other matters of a similar sort. Look for him by taking yourself as the starting point. Learn who it is within you who makes everything his own and say, "My God, my mind, my thought, my soul, my body." Learn the sources of sorrow, joy, love, hate...If you carefully investigate these matters, you will find him in yourself.

#### Monoimus

As Kurt Ruldolph, a leading writer on Gnosis, makes clear, therefore, "gnosis" is not simply the history of "Gnosticism" (p.56). The former subsumes the latter. This article seeks to explore this "Gnostic" strand in Blake's work. An earlier treatment of this theme was included in the *Blake Journal* No.2, where I approached it very much from a mythic-poetic angle. The reception of this piece was sufficiently positive to encourage me to develop the argument. In the present article I compare core aspects of Blake's philosophy with those to be found in various Gnostic texts; in particular, from the Nag Hammadi codices.

Gnosticism or gnosis involves the idea of the presence in man of a divine "spark", which has fallen into the world, which has been put out by mankind's physical and mental systems, but can ultimately be rekindled. As Hans Jonas, a writer on Gnosticism religion, writes: "The ultimate object of gnosis is God: its event in the soul transforms the knower himself by making him a partaker in the divine existence (which



means more than assimilating him to the divine essence).

Now, this sort of language sounds remarkably close to Blake's own. "I give you the end of a golden string", he writes in one of his most didactic tones "only wind it into a ball (and) it will lead you to Heaven's gate, Built in Jerusalem's wall" (Jerusalem Pl.77). In "The Everlasting Gospel" he writes, "Thou art a man, God is no More, Thy own humanity learn to adore". And again in Jerusalem: "Why look at God for help and not ourselves". Similarly, when asked if he believes in Jesus, Blake confidently states that he is "the only living God... and so am I and so are you". This identification of Man with God as an inner process of Gnostic redemption is everywhere apparent in the Nag Hammadi codices. It is also present in various ways in Hermetic tradition, thirteenth century Cathars, and the writings of such European mystics as Jacob Boehme, Paracelus and Emmanuel Swedenborg (See the article by Valerie Parslow on the *Blake Journal* No 3 for a more in-depth discussion of this tradition in relation to Blake).

With some of these, by direct or indirect reference, we know that Blake was acquainted. However, I concur with Stuart Curran when he points out (p.17) that the knowledge of the gnostics in Blake's time was "derived from highly biased anathemas against the Gnostics delivered by men fighting an ideological war". In theory at least, Blake had access to lengthy expositions of Gnostic thought in Pierre Bayle's Dictionary, Isaac de Beausobre's *Histoire Critique de Manichée et Manichéisme*, Nathaniel Lardner's *History of Heretics and Credibility of the Gospel History*, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and any number of works of the Unitarian theologian Joseph Priestly. Of primary documents, three deserve mention. "Poimandres", considered by Kurt Rudolph to be a Gnostic treatise within the *Corpus Hermeticum*, was translated into English as "The Pymander" by Everard in 1664. *Pistis Sophia*, a late Gnostic treatise was not translated until later, but was at least described by C.G. Woide in 1778. And Richard Laurence's 1821 translation

of the (Ethiopian) *Book of Enoch*, which was discovered in 1773, contains a lengthy discussion of fallen angels similar to the Gnostic hypostasis (that is the multiplicity of gods) of some Nag Hammadi materials. To these we need to add the three recognised inspirations on Blake: namely, the Gnostic homologies found in Milton, Shakespeare and the Bible, particularly the Old Testament and the Book of Revelation.

Yet, we can only surmise the extent to which each one of these did or did not act as a source for Blake's Gnostic epistemology. In some cases, it is fairly easy to identify the Gnostic inspiration behind Blake's work; for example, in his story of Job. Here, Job confronting life's experience, reminds us of a passage from the Four Zoas:

What is the price of experience?  
Do men buy it for a song,  
Or wisdom for a dance in the street?  
No: it is bought with the price  
Of all that a man hath, his house,  
his wife, his children.

And then,

Wisdom is sold in the desolate market  
where none come to buy,  
And in the withered field where the  
farmer ploughs for bread in vain.

Job did gain wisdom of a sort, but first he had to lose everything and confront the God he had created for himself: and I would not be the first to notice the match in features between the two, or indeed a similar pairing to that of Albion and Elohim in an earlier picture.

Elsewhere, Blake's work is mostly less derivative and the Gnostic connection more obtuse. We have that one tantalising reference from Crabb Robinson when discussing Wordsworth with Blake. Crabb Robinson writes:

The eloquent descriptions of Nature in Wordsworth's poems were conclusive proof of Atheism, for whoever believes in nature said Blake: disbelieves in God—for



Nature is the work of the devil. On my obtaining from him the declaration that the Bible was the work of God, I referred to the commencement of Genesis—In the beginning God created the Heaven and the Earth—But I gained nothing by this for I was triumphantly told that this God was not Jehovah, but the Elohim, and the doctrine of the Gnostics repeated with sufficient consistency to silence one so unlearned as myself.

Even here, however, it is not altogether clear if Blake explicitly referred to the Gnostics himself, or this was Crabb Robinson giving an interpretation of what Blake said; in other words, Blake may not have consciously known that he was talking “gnostically”. Or did Blake declare himself to be a Gnostic believer based on readings? Or did Blake simply make use of fragments of Gnostic myth and symbol, picked up mostly intuitively as part of an iconographic “bricolage”, in order to express himself artistically through his paintings, drawings and poetry?

I cannot answer these questions directly? However, I do feel that much of Blake's work can best be understood when viewed from a Gnostic standpoint. I am not the first to associate Blake with gnosis and Gnosticism. A reference is made in Helen White's *The Mysticism of William Blake*, as early as 1927 and developed in 1938 in Milton Percival's *William Blake's Circle of Destiny*. More recently, Leopold Damarosch (1980) *Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth*, Leslie Tannenbaum (1982) *Biblical Tradition in Blake's Early Prophecies*, Stuart Curran (1986) *Blake and Gnostic Hyle: A Double Negative*, William Horn (1987) *Blake's Revisionism: Gnostic Interpretation and Critical Methodology*, and Peter Sorensen (1995) *William Blake's Recreation of Gnostic Myth* have all discussed the connection between Blake's work and Gnosticism in some detail. And yet, a Gnostic reading of Blake has yet to acquire the orthodoxy of political, Freudian and Neo-platonic interpretations to be found elsewhere. I would personally concur with Stuart

Curran that the Neo-platonism that Kathleen Raine finds so prevalent in Blake's writing is more correctly Christian Gnosticism. I would also agree with Horn that the same might be said of attempts to link Blake with kabbalism, traditional Christianity, renaissance alchemy, druidism and any number of other -isms.

It is my conviction that Blake was first and foremost a Gnostic. The rest of this article suggests how this is so. Firstly, however, I want to give an account of the basic Gnostic myth. There are many variations, the following is a distillation of these into their essential elements.

Hans Jonas begins his book on Gnostic religion by recounting the essential creation story. In the beginning is a god of gods, a “first cause”, an unknowable Monad if you like, who/ which exists as a unitary being or oneness. It is the fount of existence, the fullness of being often referred to as the “pleroma” in Gnostic scripts. This unity exists as a perfect marriage of contraries and opposites. Here, it is necessary to notice the gender bias of the language used. Even in this primeval oneness, the unity is expressed in terms of the fusing of sexual opposites. Nevertheless, the feminine aspect of the unity has a name—Sophia—originating from the Greek word for wisdom. She is a goddess in her own right, but she and her male consort “act as one”. At some point in cosmic history, Sophia wishes to act alone and creates the demiurge or chief architect of the material world. This Jehovah-like character creates Adam and Eve, Nature, and all forms within it. Sometimes, these creations are splendid, but at base they are all forms of the fallen world; they all obey strict laws of boundary and definition. Sophia, recognising her error enters into the world, into mortality, in order to give mankind a spark of eternity. She becomes Eve, the archetypal heavenly woman, who now contains the eternal goddess Sophia. Adam and Eve fall from the Garden of Eden and pass into the material world; if they did not no one would know of the demiurge's flawed creation. However, by passing into the material world, and hence relying on a messenger of truth (the Gnostic redeemer who



brings the Gnosis, or secret revelation), Adam and Eve, and all their mortal descendants, have the possibility of escaping the division and darkness of materiality and regaining their eternal positions as gods. This story is summed up in one Gnostic script:

In the beginning the father intended to  
bring forth the angels and the archangels.  
His thought leaped ahead from him.  
This thought, who knew her  
father's intention.  
Thus she descended to the lower realms  
She bore angels and powers, who  
then created the world  
But after she bore them she was  
held captive by them  
She suffered every indignity from them  
And she could not return to the father  
In a human body she came to be confined  
And thus from age to age she  
passed from body to body.

There are various elements to this and other Gnostic stories which seem to be common to all of them:

Firstly, the imperfect nature of the Old Testament God: Yahweh, the egotistical: "I am what I am" is self-sufficient and is producer and product of the divided nature of the world: nature/spirit, man/woman, object/subject, mental/material, innocence/experience, light/darkness, good/evil, God and the Devil.

Secondly, therefore, the divided nature of the material world, which is essentially a feminine product.

Thirdly, the feminine spark of eternity trapped within nature but regainable.

Fourthly, the notion of a personal, internal quest to refine the eternal state which is Gnosis by shaking off the limitations of god-given systems, and social and material structural forms.

Once the primeval perfection is regained, all these worldly products drop away.

I now want to draw out some of the essential similarities between these aspects of Gnostic myth and Blake's work.

My first point concerns the nature of God and gods. I have already quoted Crabb Robinson on Blake's distinction between the Elohim and Jehovah: one is the eternal father, one is the worldly architect. Of course, the connection between the latter and Blake is everywhere to be seen: in the material creation of Adam, in the illustrations and annotations to the Book of Job, and in Urizen. The latter is an early account to show the process and consequences of the fall, division and the rule-bound nature of the material world. Mankind ignores its innate divinity in order to adopt a single vision of life. Urizen also refers to the "eternals". The deities of Gnosticism are variously called gods, archons, rulers, many of whom have archangels and cherubim under them. Out of the first fall, there is division on division, from which a universe is created that is ruled by multiple gods, but they are all products of the independent will of Sophia and the actions of the demiurge. Similarly, in Blake there is a fragmentation of divine characters: Zoas, Emanations, Spectres, Shadows, Fairies. There seems then to be a hierarchy of gods in Blake and Gnosticism with each character occupying domains of spiritual and material phenomena. However, they are all linked by the division within the first cause. In this respect, the multiple mythological characterisation of Blake's prophecies is less difficult to interpret if it is seen as the offspring of the essential aspects of the original unity.

My second point concerns the status of nature. Clearly, Blake wrote some of the most beautiful nature poetry in the English language:

First, ere the morning breaks, joy  
opens in the flowery bosoms,  
Joy, even to tears, which the sun  
rising dries; first the wild thyme  
And meadow-sweet, downy & soft  
waving among the reeds,  
Light springing on the air, lead  
the sweet dance. They wake

The Honeysuckle sleeping on the  
 oak (the flaunting beauty  
 Revels along upon the wind); the  
 white-thorn, lovely may,  
 Opens her many lovely eyes.  
 Listening the rose still sleeps-  
 None dare to wake her; soon she  
 bursts her crimson-curtained bed  
 And comes forth in the majesty  
 of beauty. Every flower-  
 The pink, the jessamine, the wall-  
 flower, the carnation,  
 The jonquil, the mild lily—opens  
 her heavens. Every tree  
 And flower & herb soon fill the air  
 with innumerable dance,  
 Yet in order sweet and lovely.  
 (Milton Plate 32)

Yet, elsewhere, Blake speaks of nature as it  
 “deadens” him:

Natural Objects always did and do  
 now weaken, deaden and obliterate  
 Imagination in Me. Wordsworth must  
 know that what he Writes valuable is Not  
 to be Found in Nature.

#### Annotations to Wordsworth Poems

Vala, too, the material veil of nature, appears  
 as a torturer who betrays him in what she  
 promises and delivers. This is apparent in “The  
 Crystal Cabinet”. At first he is seduced by the  
 material world, and, intoxicated by it, sees  
 another England and Thames, which burn like  
 flames. However, in an effort to possess what he  
 sees, he end up collapsing the whole vision; the  
 message being that materiality is a mirage. This  
 illusion is also apparent in the “Garden of Love”.  
 At first, it is seen as being “sweet” and “playful”.  
 However, on closer inspection, it is “filled with  
 graves”. In the Gnostic story of Adam and Eve,  
 there is a similar nostalgic longing to return  
 to the Garden of Paradise. A nostalgia which  
 subverts the eternity in the now; a longing to  
 escape the present. In the *Apocryphon of John*,

Adam is placed in paradise by the archons, the  
 gods and angels of the fallen world, but it is  
 illusion for the food and leisure of the garden  
 “is bitter and beauty is depraved...their luxury  
 is deception...their trees are godlessness...their  
 fruit is deadly poison and their promise is death”.

My third point concerns the feminine spark  
 (Sophia, Knowledge, Wisdom, Gnosis) trapped  
 in nature. This is every where apparent in  
 Gnostic script. For example, in *The Apocryphon  
 of John*, she is referred to as “our sister Sophia...  
 who came down in innocence in order to  
 rectify her deficiency”. Thel, of course, for Blake  
 does not descend. Oothoon in “Visions of the  
 daughters of Albion” does: her fate is horrifying:

And they enclosed my infinite  
 brain into a narrow circle  
 And sunk my heart into the Abyss,  
 a red round globe burning  
 Till all from life I was obliterated and erased.  
 (Plate 2)

Of course, the major Sophia figure for Blake  
 was Jerusalem. Every where in his prophecies  
 she is lost. Here is Tharmas in “Vala”:

Lost! Lost! Lost! are my  
 emanations Enion O Enion  
 We are become a Victim to the  
 Living We hide in secret  
 I have hidden Jerusalem in Silent  
 Contrition O Pity Me  
 I will build a Labyrinth also  
 O Pity me O Enion  
 Why hast thou taken sweet Jerusalem  
 from my inmost Soul  
 (Plate 4)

But she can be refound. In *The Apocryphon of  
 John*, we read:

This (Adam) is the first one who came  
 down and the first separation. But the  
 Epinoia (The Sophia) of the light which  
 was in him, she is the one who will awaken  
 his thinking..



This reawakening is the occurrence which redeems Milton in Blake's poem. Here, Ololon reunites with Milton, an event which reconnects them both as a divine family and as eternal individuals. The same event occurs between Albion and Jerusalem at the end of the prophecy named after her:

Awake! Awake Jerusalem! O  
lovely Emanation of Albion  
Awake! and over spread all  
Nations as in Ancient Time  
For lo! the Night of Death is  
past and the Eternal Day  
Appears upon our Hills

(Plate 97)

Such an event clearly redeems not only Albion (England) but all materiality (the Nations). However, it is also clearly a personal event for Blake. At the end of Milton he awakes to find his "sweet Shadow of Delight", that is his wife, "trembling at his side".

My fourth point concerns the process of this redemption. Hans Jonas again gives an outline of redemption. First comes the "call", that is, a voice from beyond the earthly veil beckons to the fallen man, teaching him his divine origins. This call comes from the Gnostic redeemer or messenger, and it is a voice which is alien to all but those who can receive it: that is gnosis. On gaining this gnosis, the previously fallen man must reunite with the divine, or ascend to former glory. Metaphorically, this reunion is often described in sexual terms, as a union, and Elaine Pagels for one emphasises the "sexual symbolism to describe God". However, this symbolism also led many gnostics to assume opposite positions with regard to sex; some seeing abstention as a way to gnosis, others acting with considerable indulgence for the same ends. It is also clear that these spiritual and sexual sensations were experienced very similarly. In particular, the union with the eternal god/spirit is described as a "marriage" or an act of the "bridal chamber":

The Holy of Holies is the bridal chamber.  
Baptism includes the resurrection (and

the) redemption; the redemption (takes place) in the bridal chamber...Christ came to repair the separation which was from the beginning and again unite the two, and to give life to those who died as a result of the separation and unite them. But the woman is united to her husband in the bridal chamber. Indeed, those who have united in the bridal chamber will no longer be separated.

#### *The Gospel of Philip*

Of course, in such language various other metaphors concerning virginal states, procreation and surrender are implied. Similarly, in the union, an androgynous state, as prefallen unity is experienced. Once this occurs, as the *Gospel of Truth* states it: "They themselves are the truth; and the Father is within them and they are in the Father, being perfect, being undivided in the truly good one, being in no way deficient in anything". Such language could equally be applied to Blake's philosophical position, with one crucial difference which is aptly summed up by William Horn:

While Blake retains the myth syncretism of ancient Gnosticism, he substitutes, in a typically Romantic move, the activities of the artist for Gnostic ritual.

In other words, for Blake, the Gnostic redeemer, is personified in his Jesus, the imagination; in particular, his own imagination. Not only this, he makes it available to everyone. Imagination, as exemplified in and through Blake's work is the golden string he offers us, and the creative output of which he was the victim is the city of Jerusalem to which he leads us; the building of which represents a psychic union of opposites experienced at a deep psychological level. How should this be so?

I have already raised Blake's ambiguous relationship to nature; at once, seemingly being both beauty and allusion, the product of the fallen world but also holding the spark of



eternity. But, of course, this was not the only reality Blake experienced. I have always believed that we should treat with profound suspicion many of the romantic accounts of Blake's behaviour as passed on in Victorian biographies, overlaid as they were with Gothic fancies. However, we know from Blake's own words, and bona fide statements from his closest associates, that Imaginary vision was a way of life for him. Whether he did really see God at his window as a child, or angels in the trees on Peckham Rye, or the Queens and Kings of England passing in the aisles of Westminster Abbey we shall never know. Even so, his own art and writing is testament enough to the vivid imagery he experienced: images that were almost more real than the material world which surrounded him. We need only consider the ghost of a flee, his visionary heads, and his picture of the man who supposedly taught him how to paint. We also have accounts of him rising in the night, seemingly haunted by the words and images going around his mind. Clearly, in such reports, there is the question of who was controlling who: the art or the man? And we can only wonder at his own literally ecstatic experience of leaving industrial London for Felpham to be greeted by the sea and country, with bird song, the perfume of the wide thyme, and the open vistas of the sky. I refer to plate 32 from Milton quoted above and the poem written "To my friend Butts", written within a few days of arriving to his seaside retreat:

My Eyes did Expand  
 Into regions of air  
 Away from all care  
 Into regions of fire  
 Remote from Desire ...  
 I each particle gazed  
 Astonished Amazed  
 For each was a Man  
 Human formd. Swift I ran  
 For they beckoned to me  
 Remote by the sea  
 Saying, Each grain of Sand  
 Every Stone on the Land  
 Each rock & each hill

Each fountain and rill  
 Each herb and each tree  
 Mountain hill Earth & Sea  
 Cloud Meteor & Star  
 Are Men Seen Afar...  
 The living universe!

For Blake, his art was literally more real than reality. Similarly, his own communication of his vision was often treated, both by family, friends and the world that surrounded him as obscure, confusing and eccentric. We find it difficult to imagine the psychic stress of having such artistic outpourings largely ignored or misunderstood. Interestingly, the Gnostic Gospels, about which Blake could not have known, contains passages pertinent to art and the way it is produced. Here is the *Gospel of Philip*:

Truth did not enter this world unclad,  
 but it came in types and images. The world will not receive truth in any other manner. There is rebirth and there is an image of rebirth. It is truly necessary that the human being should be born again through the image. If one does not acquire the images for oneself the name will also be taken away from one. But if one receives them in the anointing of the Pleroma (of the might of the cross), which the apostles call the right and the left, then such a person is no longer a Christian but a Christ.

In the receipt of such images, the divine union again occurs. For Blake, this happens in an instant:

There is a moment in each day  
 that Satan cannot find  
 Nor can his watch-fiends find it;  
 but the industrious find  
 This moment and it multiply.  
 And when it once is found  
 It renovates every moment of  
 the day if rightly placed.  
 (Milton Plate 35)



It is in this moment that art is done:

Every time less than a pulsation of the  
artery  
Is equal in its period & value  
to six thousand years.  
For in this period the poet's work  
is done & and all the great  
Events of time start forth & are  
conceived in such a period,  
Within a moment, a pulsation of the artery.  
(Milton Plate 29)

Of course, everyone has a hunger for this  
sort of direct experience, but how do you get it?  
Blake describes or explains:

To see the 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.  
*Auguries of Innocence*

However, the wantonness of such vision itself  
becomes a projection which acts independently,  
may alight on unsuitable material, ideological  
or physical objects which may not be suitable  
and take on a, sometimes less than benevolent,  
life of their own. This would be the Gnostic  
version of orthodox God. Belief in God turns  
him into a commodity which is subject to loss,  
which results in outward searches for him in the  
world of nature and ideas. The Gnostic God,  
on the other hand, comes through personal  
inner experience. But this is only available  
when all other illusory experiences and ideas  
are put aside, as a kind of divestment of worldly  
clothing. The *Gospel of Thomas*:

His disciples asked when wilt thou  
appear to us and when will we behold  
thee? Jesus said: When you divest yourself  
of your clothing without being ashamed,  
and take your clothes and trample them  
underfoot as the small children do, and  
step on them, then you shall behold the

son of life and you shall not be frightened.

For Blake, this happens when you "annihilate  
the selfhood of Deceit and false forgiveness"; not  
only personified in external constraints, such as  
moral codes and laws, but in inner illusions, the  
spectre, that is largely a product of the social  
world.

I come in self-annihilation &  
grandeur of inspiration,  
To cast off rational demonstration  
by faith in the Saviour;  
To cast off the rotten rags of  
memory by inspiration;  
To cast off Bacon, Locke & Newton  
from Albion's covering;  
To take off his filthy garments, &  
clothe him with imagination;  
To cast aside from poetry all  
that is not inspiration

.....

These are the destroyers of Jerusalem,  
these are the murders  
Of Jesus, who deny the faith  
& mock eternal life;  
Who pretend to poetry, that they  
may destroy imagination  
By imitation of nature's images  
drawn from remembrance,  
These are the sexual garments, the  
abomination of desolation  
Hiding the human lineaments  
as with an ark & curtains  
Which Jesus rent & now shall  
wholly purge away with fire,  
Till generation is swallowed  
up in regeneration  
Milton Plate 41

This is "putting off" of error is described  
as momentary resurrection, as the essential  
man communes with the divine unity, the  
spiritual product of which appears in his art and  
writings. As this putting off continues, deeper  
we go and the more we leave behind personal



idiosyncrasies of the individual and the more we touch the essential elements common to the divine humanity. This act of individuation is also an act on behalf of the whole of humanity. Naked, the more you see of this, the more you become it. Becoming more oneself, one's true undivided self, means becoming more like God in its essential oneness. As the Gnostic gospel of Philip puts it:

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.

In this respect, it is enough to recognise the divine spark, Jerusalem, to awaken from material sleep, and to start to become it. However, for Blake this recognition and becoming is the process of his art.

It is not possible in such a brief article to give further detailed references to Blake's work and to link these with Gnostic events. There is also, clearly, much more to be said about Blake in connection with various esoteric traditions: for example, the mystic marriage in alchemy is especially pertinent here. Jung recognised this in his own work and the extent to which he expressed the disfiguration of the human soul as the "shadow". In particular, he understood that the images that come forth in the Gnostic union are not just pretty pictures. They include the horrors of Francis Bacon as well as the benign spirituality of Cecil Collins. Blake's own art and poetry are full of images of the existential void, chaos and the abyss. But none of these are as horrific as the images of reason gone mad, of error played out in the world in the minute killings of spirit which go on in the name of education and progress. The redemption from such error starts when psychic images are expressed. As the Gnostic *Gospel of Philip* has it:

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".

These images themselves are emanations: the product of individual mind with which one forms a relation. Indeed, it is through them that psychic contact is made:

When in eternity Man converses  
with man they enter  
Into each others Bosom (which  
are Universes of delight)  
In mutual interchange, and first  
their Emanations meet...  
For Man cannot unite with man  
but by their Emanations.  
(Jerusalem Plate 88)

Pertinent here also is Anton Ehrenzweig's account of creativity of art as a series of ex-static projections, objectification and re-integrations. Gnosis can also be connected with the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke (in particular, I am thinking of the *Duino Elegies*) and the philosophy of Heidegger (See Avens on this). In much of this there is a fine line to be drawn between an unattainable transcendent beyond, the searching for which leads to loss of self, and, a surrender to the moment which brings an experience of a special sense of reality, or passive communion with the lifeworld.

Elaine Pagels writes that Gnosticism represents a philosophical justification for radical non-conformity. She also notes that it is a system which can be understood in terms of the psychic therapy it offers to its adherents; particularly, depressives, or lonely, isolated souls, or people who seek to affirm their own worth. It is possible to see this in Blake's ranting against authorities. "I must create a system", he proclaims "or be enslaved by another man's" (Jerusalem). "Both read the Bible night and day, But thou reads black where I read white" (*Everlasting Gospel*) Is Gnosis simply a way of separating from the ego everything that one does not like? Other critics may want to give a Freudian interpretation of this, of Blake continuing to fight his own Father in the relations



he formed, and there are plenty of examples of the difficulties he had in establishing lasting friendships with men. We can also see how the lack of acceptance of Blake's work led to an anger and transcendent assertion of its meaning and inflation of its value. We do not know ultimately whether Blake wrote, drew and painted the way he did because of his uncontrollable imagination. Certainly, there is evidence in his work that between *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *The Four Zoas*, Urizen himself becomes redeemed, and offers redemption in the limiting and shaping of psychic energy. Blake could not always control his imagination, did not want to, but he did not want it to control him either. In the end, he did write and paint; and this activity in itself represents a reification of the imagination. Maybe the greatest gnosis is that there is no gnosis. The Pleroma is at once full and totality void. We start from nothing into which something is created: "By starting from the invisible world, the visible world was invented" (*The Hypostasis of the Archons*). Maybe Blake came to understand that in a deep sense. Certainly, his most creative output was undertaken in the first half of his adult years. After the age of forty five, there seems to be little change in his mythological stance and his characters are all but formed. He also became increasingly spiritually puritan as he aged.

Of course, there is also the social and political systems which surrounded Blake not to mention his problematic relations with his own wife. If it is difficult in a modern world which offers us a feminist aesthetic, or art as a product of the market, to believe in one man's artistic activity as describing human redemption. I have deliberately drawn on various types of discourse in this article: personal, academic, poetic, theological. In a sense, it is my own construction, my own recreation of Gnostic myth or gnosis. Tobias Churton undertakes a similar task in his own history of the gnostics, which also takes in Blake and John Lennon. It is clear that there are degrees of Gnosticism, not one orthodox version. At one extreme are straight derivative accounts based on historical, Gnostic texts. The

other extreme is more personal and intuitive. The question to be addressed is "distance" from one or the other.

Finally, the whole point of Blake and gnosis, especially in the sense of orthodox derivation, is that it is impossible to prove by empirical textual analysis. If it were, his work would not be truly Gnostic in the second, more personal, intuitive sense. Attempts to gain such incontrovertible proof, apart from some striking resonances, are likely to take away from the spirit of gnosis rather than get closer to it. Another way of looking at this argument is to see my account as being sufficiently post-modernist to deliberately avoid a mono-mythical narrative. There is no identity between Blake's work and any other political, sociological and psychological explanatory system. At the same time, it does not offer an account as a mere ruse, a "jouissance", or play on words and themes. Nothing could be further from Blake's intent. He believed in delineation and precision not polyfocal relativism. My conclusion is that gnosis is the product of deep psychic and psychological experiences that have been mediated by a multiple range of philosophies, some of which were heretical Christian. That Blake picked up on some of the elements of these and made use of them in a conscious and semi-conscious manner is beyond doubt. Most of what he did, however, was to combine these with others, and his own, to reconstruct his personal Gnostic texts. The fact that we can see and feel basic commonalities, on many levels, between Blake's and other Gnostic writings attests to their own inner coherence in terms of worldly experience and the challenges it offers to people as they pass through life. The fact that he decentres and subverts, all whilst provoking and creating means he has produced a living text which indeed continues to be transformatory by the way it engages with us and works on what we personally bring to it. In it, truly, is heaven and hell, as well as paths leading to and from both of them. Some of these involve acts of creation; all of them involve knowing, or gnosis.



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