

William Blake: Gnosticism and Gnosis

Michael Grenfell

A Blake Manifesto

Rise up! People of the New Age. Set your minds against ignorance. For there is ignorance at home, in the courts and University. The killing of Spirit is the result of ignorance, as is the continuation of material and psychic warring.

Artists! Performers, Writers, Dancers, Architects, Musicians, Creators of all Art that is life! Do not suffer the fashionable fools who lead art astray; who depress your Creative powers and render Art valueless by the price they put upon it.

Politicians! Activists of all persuasions! Members of Alternative parties and groups – of all shades of opinion! Do not imagine a future world to which you can compromise the present. The New Age is Born today amongst us all in minute particulars.

Men and Women! Do not believe that your Sexuality divides you. Tear down the gates of fear that keep you apart. Men! Be ready to abandon your pride and prejudice of masculinity, to acknowledge your feminine aspect and to open yourself to your Sensibilities. Women! Stand by your connectedness and value the male and female in us all. Desire is eternal delight! Home is built on mutual Loving and Forgiveness. Where there is Love, there is Freedom. There is no other responsibility than lovingness, openness and honesty.

Men of Spirit! Christians! Theosophists! Gnostics! The Divine Humanity is the only Living God! And so I am! And so you are! And so is everyone! The tree of mystery is a poison tree. For God dwells within you – and not in codes, books, rituals, and beliefs. There is no other reality to keep faith with.

Philosophers! Intellectuals and thinkers of all sorts! Do not let your ideas become the tools of imposition and imposture. Intellect and Science have no power without Imagination. For Creativity is the true man.

People of the New Age! The Creative Spirit moves us in our task. Our struggle is not with Flesh and Blood but against powers, rulers of the darkness of this world, and spiritual wickedness in high places. The Spirit of William Blake calls on us to mount a resistance; to surrender to ourselves in order to be ourselves; to Annihilate Deceit and false forgiveness and, in mutual forgiveness to each other, to build Jerusalem.

Jerusalem! Freedom! City of Albion! City of Art and Poetry! It unites us! Yet it has to be re-found and rebuilt everyday. Each day – each moment - we die in order to recreate ourselves; to live again in the Eternity that is the present Heaven. Each day-each moment: a death. A

Resurrection! Jerusalem (the city of creativity and creation) is attacked on all sides and is ever changing. There are those who would raze it to the ground. City that will never be completed – within, without and around us – let us build Jerusalem!

Preludium

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 wrote in the face of the industrial and scientific advances of the age, and sought a more emotional, spiritual, 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 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 images he produced.

He did earn a living as an engraver. However, increasingly, he became involved in his own work. He invented (although he said it was suggested to him by the spirit of his dead brother Robert) 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 coloring 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: *The First Book of Urizen*, *Milton*, *Jerusalem*, etc.

In 1800, he moved for three years to the small village of Felpham, West Sussex, and a cottage, which is still there, to work with the poet William Hayley (who was famous in his day). 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 - Hayley bailed him out.

Blake lived in revolutionary times and was outspoken in the name of personal freedom. However, he became increasingly poor and was 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 – *Jerusalem* - 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 engagement with his images and texts is itself a transformative process. My writing here addresses the nature of this transformation.

Gnosticism and Gnosis

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, Gnostic monks 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 poetic texts, alternative gospels, myths, 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 synoptic gospels of the orthodox bible, still others spoke in the voice of feminine divine power.

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

Blake, Gnosticism and Gnosis

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 to the

above question 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 an inner rather than outer God. As the second century Arab Gnostic monk Monoimus put it:

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)

Or, as Nicholas de Cusa expresses it:

Man is an analogy of God: Man is God but not in an absolute sense since he is a 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.

As Kurt Rudolf (1977), a leading writer on Gnosis, makes clear, therefore, 'Gnosis' is not simply the history of 'Gnosticism' (p.56). The former subsumes the latter. My text seeks to explore this 'Gnostic' strand in Blake's work. I compare core aspects of Blake's philosophy with those to be found in various esoteric texts as well as those from the Nag Hammadi codices.

Gnostic or Gnosis also involves the idea of the presence in man of a divine 'spark', which has 'fallen' into the world, which has been lost to mankind's physical and mental systems, but can ultimately be rekindled. As Hans Jonas, an author 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, these sorts of ideas sound 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 similarly 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 Crabb Robison asked Blake if he believes in Jesus, he confidently stated that he is 'the only living God...and so am I and so are you' (Crabb Robinson, 1898, p. 7). When challenged on this Crabb Robinson reports that Blake retorted with the 'doctrines of the Gnostics repeated with sufficient consistency' to silence him (ibid.). This identification of Man with God as an inner process of Gnostic redemption is also everywhere apparent in the Nag Hammadi codices. It is also present in various ways in the Hermetic tradition, thirteenth century Cathars, and the writings of such European mystics as Jacob Boehme, Paracelsus and Emmanuel Swedenbourg (See the article by Valerie Parslow in the Blake Journal No 3 for a more in-depth discussion of this tradition in relation to Blake).

We know that Blake was acquainted with some of these writers, either by direct or indirect reference. However, I concur with Stuart Curran (1986) when he points out (p.17) that the knowledge of the Gnostic tradition 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 other lengthy expositions of Gnostic thought in Pierre Bayle's *Dictionary*, Issac 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 or other of these did or did not act as a source for Blake's Gnostic epistemology. Nevertheless, 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 *Vala - 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 wither'd field where the farmer plows for bread in vain.
Plate 35

Job did gain wisdom of a sort, but first he had to lose everything and confront the external God he had created for himself: and I would not be the first to notice the match of physical facial features between Job and God in Blake's illustrative graphics of the story. There is a similar pairing between Albion and Elohim in an earlier picture - somehow denouncing any God that man creates as a projection of himself.

Elsewhere, Blake's work is mostly less derivative and the Gnostic connection more obtuse. The one tantalising reference to Gnosticism referred to above by Crabb Robinson arose when he was discussing Wordsworth with Blake. This brings us to another Gnostic issue - nature or the material world:

(Blake said)...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.
(Crabb Robinson, 1898, p. 25)

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, my sense is 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 of Blake 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 esoteric-isms.

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

The Gnostic Myth

Hans Jonas (1958/ 63) begins his book on Gnostic religion by recounting the essential creation story from a Gnostic perspective. 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: male and female. 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 (not unlike partaking of the apple in the Garden of Eden). The consequence is separation from the male aspect, which in effect creates the demiurge or chief architect of the material world. This ruler-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, therefore 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 re-find 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.

There are essential similarities between these aspects of Gnostic myth and those found in Blake's work.

Blake's Gnosis and Gnosticism

My first point concerns the nature of God and gods. As noted above Crabb Robinson, who met and corresponded with many leading writers of the day including Blake, writes of the distinction the latter made between the Elohim and Jehovah: one is the worldly architect, the other is the 'eternal father'.

This position returns us again to the issue of nature; as a product of the 'fallen' world created by the fallen God – Elohim. This is the god of the fallen world, who is the architect of separation or, as the Jewish Kabbalah expresses it:

I am the light and create the darkness: I make peace and create evil: I am the Lord of all these things.

The connection between Elohim and Jehovah is everywhere to be seen in Blake's work: in the material creation of Adam, in the illustrations and annotations to the *Book of Job*, and in *The First Book of Urizen*. The latter prophecy is an early account (Blake's Genesis for the never completed *Bible of Hell*) to show the process and consequences of the fall, division and the rule-bound nature of the material world. Mankind ignores their innate divinity in order to adopt a single vision of life. *The First Book of Urizen* also refers to the 'eternals'. The deities of Gnosticism are similarly and variously called gods, archons, rulers, many of whom have archangels and cherubim under them. It is out of the first fall that there is division on division, from which a universe is created that is ruled by multiple 'gods' (selves), 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 both Blake and Gnosticism with each character occupying domains of spiritual and material phenomena. However, they are still to be understood as 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.

Human sense, male/ female relations and materiality/ spirit are for Blake therefore archetypically the driving forces of the universe, but played out in terms of a set of impulses – the Zoas – which determines what does and does not happen in the cosmic worlds. Many of these Zoas are grouped in gendered dyads (to match the first division between Adam and Eve) which pairs Spectre (male) with Emanation (female) each representing psychic/ psychological aspects of the 'human' universe: Urizen (reason) – Ahaniah (pleasure); Tharmas (sensation) – Enion (sex); Luvah (passion) – Vala (body/ nature); Urthona (imagination) – Enitharmon (care). Most of Blake's longer 'prophecies' are played out in terms of this dramatis personae as they are set one against the other. They are also positioned according to a spiritual geography. Most of the problems of Albion (England) occur when Urizen (reason) moves to the ruling position of the north (the place of imagination) so that he separates from his female emanation Jerusalem (creativity) and rules through reason. Redemption is then when he re-assumes his correct position - in the south - as Urthona

(imagination) returns to his own rightful position in the North; in the course of which, Albion (England, who contains these warring psychic elements) becomes once again united with his emanation Jerusalem (see Jerusalem plate 99).

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

First, e're 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,
(*Milton*, Plate 31)

Yet, elsewhere, we have seen how 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*)

Since nature is created by a separated god, Blake comments as above, that nature – the material world – did indeed 'deaden' him because it lacks spiritual unity. Yet, and subsequently, it is an odd sort of 'deadening'; in fact, more a sort of alluring, attractive relationship which tempts (separates) him from himself – or at least his feminine aspect; which is why his nature poetry can be so seductive. Nature is then similarly personified by Blake as a woman - Vala - in his cosmology of *the Four Zoas*.

Vala is also the female emanation of the male Zoa Luvah – Passion! In other words, the material world restrains passionate energy and appears as a torturer who betrays him in what she promises and delivers. This is also apparent in *The Crystal Cabinet* poem. At first, the protagonist is seduced by the material world when he looks into it and is intoxicated by it: he sees another England and Thames, which 'burn like flames'. However, in an effort to possess what he sees, he ends up collapsing the whole vision; the message being that materiality is a mirage - and romantic attachment to it breeds trouble. This illusion is also apparent in the *Garden of Love* poem. 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 a Garden of Paradise; a nostalgia which subverts the eternity in the now - a longing to escape the present, in other words. In the Gnostic *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 itself (Sophia, Knowledge, Wisdom, Gnosis) as it is trapped in nature. This is everywhere 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'. In Blake's *Book of Thel*, she does not descend to earth, which is seen as a refusal to incarnate. Oothoon in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* does descend but her fate is horrifying:

And they inclos'd 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 - creativity.

Everywhere in his prophecies she is lost. Here is Tharmas in the *Vala/ Four Zoas prophecy*:

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 thee a Labyrinth... also: O Pity me, O Enion
Why hast thou taken sweet Jerusalem from my inmost Soul.
(Plate 4 my italics)

But she can be re-found. 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 overspread 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) and those who inhabit them. However, this reconciliation also needs to be understood as a very personal event for Blake. At the end of *Milton* he (Blake) awakes to find his 'sweet Shadow of Delight', that is his wife, Catherine, 'trembling at his side'.

For Blake, this spiritual world governed the material world; the former he referred to as 'the mundane shell' (or egg): one which literally holds us in. This vision offers an entirely more complex cosmology.

This image returns us to the sexualized – or at least gender-ised – nature of this man-nature relationship. For Blake, the division of the sexes was clearly a source of distress for him; no less than their separation from the material/ nature. This is why he sought some 'liberation' or 'reconciliation' with the feminine spirit it contained. It is an ambition with deeply sexual undertones: 'Althou' our Human Power can sustain the severe contentions of Friendship', he consequently writes 'our Sexual cannot but flies into the Ulro'. (his name for chaos) (*Milton*, plate 41).

The confluence for Blake of sex and nature, man and woman, material and spirit - and the psychic distress it caused him - is everywhere apparent in Blake's work. For example, *The Mental Traveller*, where the male baby is rendered old as the old lady becomes young – as if the life-energy is sucked out of him; or the *Long John Brown and Little Mary Bell* poem on the fatal consequences of sexual intercourse. On plate 25 of *Jerusalem* also there is the image of Albion, literally having his guts torn from him as he is trapped by three female characters – the three fates. Vala (nature) holds up a tent as he becomes mesmerised by another (Rahab the harlot). Meanwhile, Tirzah (sex) draws out the umbilical cords, which links him to nature as his genitals are tied down tightly. These depict the kind of crucifixion that the Luvah-Christ character suffered.

My fourth point, therefore, concerns the process of this process of redemption. Hans Jonas again gives an outline of it. 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 possess Gnosis. On gaining this Gnosis, the previously fallen man must reunite with the divine, and ascend to former glory. Metaphorically, as noted, this reunion is often characterised in sexual terms, as a (re-)union. Elaine Pagels is one writer who emphasises this 'sexual symbolism to describe God'. Such symbolism, and the practice it sets in motion, led many Gnostics to assume opposite positions with regard to sexual practice: some seeing abstention as a way to Gnosis, others acting with considerable indulgence for the same ends. In this respect spiritual and sexual sensations were regarded from a similar perspective.

When the union does take place, texts in the Gnostic Gospels describe the sexual act between a man and a woman as analogous to the union with the eternal god/spirit. It is hence described as a 'marriage' (Note: Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*) or similarly an act of the 'bridal chamber':

The Holy of Holies is the bridal chamber. Baptism includes the resurrection (and) 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*: see Strathearn 2009 for further discussion)

For Blake, a similar place is described as Beulah, which is his source of poetry and dreams, and thus 'where contraries are equally true' (*Milton*, plate 30), and where 'Sexes wander in dreams of bliss' (*Jerusalem* plate 79), and relations are ideal and unrestricted (*Jerusalem*, plate 30). The allegory is again sexual:

'In Beulah the Female lets down her beautiful Tabernacle,
Which the Male enters magnificent between her Cherubim,
And becomes One with her, mingling, condensing in Self- love'.

The consequence is that there exists once again a 'unity of love' – oneness: the sense of 'eternity' is always a spiritual reality underlying temporal phenomena and is the consequence of this re-unification. For Blake, this process – this psychic reconciliation - is conceived as essentially being within 'one man' - Albion (England). Moreover, to note is the way that the Luvah archetype – passion – arrives 'enfolded' in 'robes of blood' and 'crown of thorns'; a clear reference to Christ but now as the 'imagination' and the suffering he must undergo for the transformation to occur. In this way, Luvah (passion) is then reconciled with Vala (nature/ materiality) and separation/ division is overcome through the union of gendered opposites; also involving something of an ex-static surrender of ego to the linearity of time (see below).

There is no internal reference to the past and future at this point of union – indeed, Blake denounces 'the Gates of Memory' - just a submission to the present moment for those who would 'kiss a joy as it rises' - that is, ex-static, not substantiated. This is a 'sexual' union of sorts in the broader terms of uniting opposite and opposing forces within the cosmic spiritual war of the fallen world. Such is also a precursor to redemption: where spectres/ emanations, spirit/ matter, mind/ body have the possibility of returning to harmony. This is depicted in the *Jerusalem* prophecy, and is always the conclusive point of Blake's longer texts.

However, such a point is not simply one of mutual forbearance; it is an actual ontological state of union. In this respect, the sexual becomes a-sexual even: that is, androgynous - but not hermaphroditic. For Blake, the latter, a creature possessing organs of both sexes, is sterile. In Blake's *Annotations to Thornton*, Satan is also declared 'Nature, Hermaphrodite, Priest & King', unreconciled, still warring. On a more personal level, hermaphroditic is used to express 'doubt', 'self-contradiction'. This is the exact opposite of 'androgyny' where 'male' and 'female' are permanently at-one as the natural state of the soul. The archetypal psychologist Jung also declared on the 'androgynous state of the soul'.

When this androgynous state, as the pre-fallen unity, is re-experienced, *The Gospel of Truth* describes it thus: '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 can again equally be applied to Blake's philosophical position, with one crucial difference which is aptly summed up by William Horn: while Blake retains the mythic 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 name he gives to the Imagination; in particular, his own imagination. Not only this, Blake asserts that

such a vision - Jesus as the Imagination - such a relationship between object and subject, creator and the created, God and Man - is available to anyone who will follow the 'golden string' he is offering. Imagination, as exemplified in and through Blake's work, is this golden string. The creative output of which Blake was the victim is the City of Jerusalem - creativity itself. Building Jerusalem then represents this psychic union of opposites experienced at a deep psychological level – the genome of creativity.

Blake Gnosis and Creativity - Beyond Gnosticism

I have already raised Blake's ambiguous relationship to nature; at once, seemingly being both beauty and illusion, the product of the fallen world but also holding the spark of eternity. But, of course, this was not the only reality Blake experienced. 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 writings are testament enough to the vivid imagery he experienced: images that were almost more real than the material world for him. We need only consider his 'ghost of a flea', his 'visionary heads', and his picture of 'the man who 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 birdsong, 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-letter 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,
Astonish'd, Amazed;
For each was a Man
Human form'd. 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 - and both human and divine. Yet,, 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.

This relationship within and in front of 'the image' is similarly central to the Gnostic tradition. Meister Eckhart, for example, stated:

When the soul wishes to experience something, she throws out an image of the experience before her and enters into her own image.

Here, there is a collapse of the manifest and the un-manifest. In the Gnostic *Gospel of Philip*, we also read:

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*. 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. (my italics)

The message consequently is that you become what you see:

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'.
(*Gospel of Philip*)

Blake writes similarly:

They became what they beheld.
(*Jerusalem*, plate 32)

So, such a rebirth is depicted in an image which offers an expression of its holistic process of becoming: the formation of rebirth is thus incarnate in the image. That image can also give rise to a name in words to describe it. It is truly necessary then that the human being should be born again *through the image* – its name. If one does not acquire the image for oneself, both it and its 'name' will also be taken away from one, and another external one imposed. It is, therefore, in the receipt of images, that the divine union again occurs. For Blake, this needs to happen in an instant: the moment where 'error', separation, Satanic evil is 'put off':

There is a Moment in each Day that Satan cannot find

Nor can his Watch-Fiends find it; but the Industrious find,
This Moment & 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 & 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*)

The consequence of such experience is that there exists once again this sense of a 'unity of love' – a 'oneness'. Of course, everyone has a hunger for this sort of Direct experience, but how do you get it? In the *Auguries of Innocence*, 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.
The Auguries of Innocence

This sense of 'eternity' – 'to see the world in a grain of sand...' 'to kiss a joy as it flies..' – is always a spiritual reality underlying temporal phenomena for Blake and is, for him, the consequence of re-unification of the subject and object. To emphasise, this process – this psychic reconciliation - is conceived as being within 'one man' (Albion in his prophecies - England) , but ultimately implies the whole universe and *vice versa*.

However, there is also a word of caution to add here: the very wantonness of such vision can itself become a projection which acts independently, and may even alight on inappropriate materia -, ideological or physical objects - which are not suitable and take on a sometimes less than benevolent life of their own. This would be what occurs in the Gnostic version of the orthodox God – Elohim in Blake's terms (Job's God): a projection of subjective self in the opposition it holds between man and nature, the material and the spirit. Indeed, belief in an 'external God' turns him (*sic.*) into a commodity which is subject to loss, which results in outward searches for him/ her 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 underfeet 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' (ego); 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 murderers
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 swallow'd up in Regeneration.
(*Milton*, Plate 41)

This 'putting off' of error is described as a '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, the deeper we go, the more we leave behind personal idiosyncrasies of the individual and the more we touch the essential elements common to the 'divine humanity' – the spiritual fellowship available to men and women. The act of personal individuation is hence 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 above in the Gnostic *Gospel of Philip*: you become what you see. In this respect, it is enough to recognise the divine spark, Jerusalem, to awaken from material sleep, and to begin to become it. For Blake, this recognition and becoming is indeed available through the process of his art.

It is not possible in this brief text 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 man expressed the disfiguration of the human soul as the 'shadow'. It is both a macro and micro event!:

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.

In Blake's term, this is a call for the constitution of the 'divine humanity' as both personal/particular and social.

The only answer to the modern dilemma – of 'one –dimensional man' (Herbert Marcuse) – is hence for him to throw himself upon the God within: the surrender to himself, his true self, and thus remove all the false props, images and beliefs that he clings to. To do such is indeed to partake of the 'divine family' for Blake. Yet, Jung also 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; indeed, dealing with the horrors was part of the process – the integration.

Blake's own art and poetry are also full of images of the existential void, chaos and the abyss as well of reconciliation and beauty (*NB. in particular, the First book of Urizen*). No images are as horrific as those 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.

Redemption from such errors begins *not* with embracing 'pretty pictures' (found in nature and thoughts), which can only act as a palliative, but when authentic psychic images are expressed from within. As the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* puts 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.
... seeing what we are as seeing what is.

Such a relationship is also perfectly consistent with the contemporary phenomenology of the subject-object relationship. For example, in *The Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty writes of the 'study of perceptions' with the intent of putting 'essences back into existence'. For him, there is a two-way process between what he terms *noesis* and *noema*. The *noematic* is all that is 'known' about an object of perception; whilst the *noetic* is an individual act of (cognitive) perception – not all that 'is known' is brought to mind at 'one time'.

It follows in a similar manner when Merleau-Ponty writes of 'a process of physiognomic perception'; of the 'drawing together the subject and object in dialogue'; of being 'diffused through the object, and by the object, of the subject's intentions' and 'arranging around the subject a world which speaks to him of himself'. In this way, for Merleau-Ponty, the subject-object becomes 'one flesh': a subject consciousness 'sees' the object but, in doing so, the object 'calls' on - *interpolates* - the subject to know what it already knows/ sees. Here, Merleau-Ponty obviously does not intend that the world is sentient, as human, of course. It is subjective consciousness that sees the world, but this world still 'calls' on the subject to know what it already knows, to be conscious of what it is already conscious of (at a deep unconscious level, of course). This is axiomatic of a kind of *metanoia* (see Grenfell, 2023).

But, the experience can be psychically, if not psychologically, disturbing for the individual undergoing and faced with its effects. Such a spiritual confrontation of counterpoised images – of good and evil, of heaven and hell – and doing so has fateful consequences. Hermann Hesse:

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 façade 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.

Disturbance - shock even - is part of the process of unlocking the process of transformation. These images themselves can therefore again be seen in terms of Blake's emanations: the product of individual mind with which one forms a relation. Indeed, as we have seen, it is through such images (emanations) that psychic contact is made - within a process of union. :

When in Eternity Man converses with Man they enter
Into each other's 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 is Anton Ehrenzweig's account of the psychology of artistic creativity as a series of ex-static projections, objectification and re-integrations (1993/ 67).

In addressing the 'hidden order of art', he describes artistic expression itself as a condition of neurosis and psychosis; where there is a 'externalisation of schizoid fragments' that can be unconsciously scanned - that is, objectified consciously - and subsequently reintegrated (re-introjection). In the course of this process, there is a collapse of the subject-object relationship from whence the ego is liberated - a process which he describes as the 'dying god': much as Albion and Jerusalem 'submit' to each other and the divine spark and materiality become one again. Within the Western alchemical tradition - which itself has close associations with Gnosticism and Gnosis - the stages of alchemical purification involve a similar process where the ego - the subject - is subverted and the 'lower' liberates the 'higher' through Exaltation, Multiplication, and Projection seen, in a very Gnostic way, as a 'fall' and a 'ascension'.

So, what is the relationship between an artist and the source of their creative output? Is it one of external copying or internal creativeness (implying the union discussed above)? When merely copying there is a loss of self rather than a realisation of self through an infusion with the creative object and its source. Creativity then is not 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 the fullness of Being. This cannot happen when objects are 'idealised' or 'worshipped'. The artist cannot *take* his/ her art but acts as the medium through which the art can *define* itself. For this to occur, some sort of psychic union (see discussion of the Bridal Chamber above) must take place in the mind and body: to allow for the spark of creativity springing from opposites, but in a way that does not overwhelm either. Such an activity is more akin to a prayer or meditation. Stephen Hoeller:

The purest form is the human soul's delight in its experience of its full Communion with deity itself. Rather than asking anything of God, such activity is the soul's joyous giving of itself wholly and unreservedly to God. It is the breaking down of the barriers between the separate existence and the allness of the Godhead – the finding of its total unity with the inmost self of all.

In this case, 'God' of course, needs to be understood Gnostically: as an expression of fullness of Being or, again, Blake's divine humanity. In this process, the male and female principles – archetypes – work together. Just as in alchemy with the *Sora Mystica* who works with the alchemist mixing their substances. At the end of their labours, there is again a kind of 'mystic wedding' involving the creation of the androgynous (note: not hermaphrodite – see above). Images and dreams produced by both become one.

Blake's Gnosis might also be connected with the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke: for example, in the *Duino Elegies*:

Nowhere, Beloved, will world be but within us. Our Life
Passes in transformation. And, the external
Shrinks into less and less...

....But because truly being here is so much, because everything here
apparently needs us, this fleeting world, which in some strange way
keeps calling to us. Us, the most fleeting of all
once for each thing. Just once, no more. And, we too,
just once. And never again. But to have been
this once, completely, even if only once:
to have been at one with the earth, seems beyond undoing.

Words that echo Blakean spiritual philosophy in many ways.

The philosophy of Heidegger is also pertinent here, whose key concept *Dasein* literally expresses the sense of 'being there' - presence. Existentially, this signifies being 'committed', 'open', 'given to the moment'. In this case, not only is a man – or woman – existing 'there', that unique moment in time, s/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* this place of openness and un-concealment. But, this does not occur passively, rather it requires open-eyed alertness and readiness to 'experience' it. It also requires this 'surrender to the self' to itself in order to let Being come forward; except that what comes forward is a more authentic expression of that Self. To see like this, to be active like this, appears to return men to some golden past age of lost state of innocence but it is not a *return* as such. Indeed, 'common origins' are not enough and do not even exist here. Rather, as in the archetypal psychologist James Hillman's words, 'the ultimate source is...in the enigma (never fully revealed) ...of the imaginal...in the *mundus imaginalis*': the common spirit consciousness of Blake's 'divine humanity'. For Heidegger, the past lies not behind but in front of man, structuring man's present and future. We can thus move towards the future only by moving towards the past. Our past is our future; or in Pindar's words, 'to come forth as 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 actualised. Man is thus most himself when he is ex-static; exceeding himself, standing in the openness of Being – indeed, he is the place where Being opens up and reveals itself. No wonder that Heidegger described the natural attitude of the philosopher as being one of ‘astonishment’. Essentially, such an attitude of mind is Gnosis itself: the ‘heaven’s gate’ towards which Blake’s work leads us., and the Gnostic god who is none other than man’s expressions of Being – again as Blake’s ‘divine humanity’.

Yet, in much of this, I have stressed how 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 life-world.

Concluding remarks....

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' (*The 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 on his part and transcendent assertion of its meaning - and inflation of its value perhaps. As above, 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 (reason) himself becomes redeemed, and offers redemption in being able to limit and shape psychic energy, which can fly out of energetic control if not so bounded. Blake himself clearly could not always control his imagination, nor did he want to, but it must not control him either. In the end, he did write and paint; and this activity in itself represents a routinisation - grounding - of the imagination. Maybe the greatest Gnosis, therefore, is that there is no Gnosis – just a transcendent non-transcendence: a pleroma that is at once full and void - now in the present moment. At this point, one is perhaps reaching the kind of spiritual consciousness expressed by the Hindu Saint Ramana Maharshi. 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 are 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 (1987) undertakes a similar task in his own history of the Gnostics, which also takes in Blake and John Lennon – and the Cathar terrain of South-West France. 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 the 'distance' from one or the other.

Finally, the whole point of connecting Blake and Gnosis, especially in the sense of orthodox derivation, is that it is impossible to prove otherwise by empirical textual analysis. If it were possible, his work would not be truly Gnostic in the second, more personal, intuitive, transformatory 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 strict identity between Blake's work and any other political, sociological and psychological explanatory system. At the same time, my account is not offered as a mere ruse, a 'jouissance', or play on words and themes. Nothing could be further from my own or Blake's intent. He believed in delineation and precision - not poly-vocal relativism. So do I!

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 further fact is that he continually decentres and subverts with his writings, all whilst provoking and creating the means he has to produce 'living texts'. They remain transformatory by the way they engage with us and work on what we personally bring to them. Truly, they contain both 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.

References and Further Reading

- Avens, R (1984) *The New Gnosis*. Dallas, Texas: Spring Publications.
- Blake, W (1971) *Blake: the Complete Poems* (eds.: W Stevenson and D Erdman). London: Longman.
- Blake, W (1966) *Blake: Complete Writings* (ed.: G Keynes). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Churton, T (1987) *The Gnostics*. London: Weidenfield and Nicolson.
- Crabb Robinson, Henry, *Extracts from the Diary Letters and Reminiscences of Henry Crabb Robinson* (1898). The Perfect Library, n.d.

- Curran, S (1986) 'Blake and Gnostic Hyle: A double negative'. In N Hilton (ed) *Essential Articles for the Study of William Blake*. Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Book.
- Damarosch, L (1980) *Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Ehrenzweig, A (1993/67) *The Hidden Order of Art*. London: Weidenfeld.
- Filoramo, G (1990) *The History of Gnosticism*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Grenfell, M (1996) 'Blake and Gnosis'. *The Journal of the Blake Society of St. James*, 2, 19 - 29.
- Grenfell, M 'Blake and Gnosis', *The Journal of the Blake Society*, 1996, 19-29.
- Grenfell, M 'John Cowper Powys and William Blake', *The Blake Journal*, 2002, 6-17.
- Grenfell, M 'Blake and Gnosticism'. *The Gnostic*, 2010, 3, 62-74.
- Grenfell, M *Bourdieu's Metanoia*. London: Routledge, 2023
- Horn, W (1987) 'Blake's revisionism: Gnostic interpretation and critical methodology'. In D Miller, M Bracher and D Ault (eds) *Critical Paths and the Argument of Method*. London: Duke University Press.
- Jonas, H (1958/63) *The Gnostic Religion*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Jung, C (1969) *The Psychology of the Transference*. London: Ark.
- Layton, B (1987) *The Gnostic Scriptures*. London: SCM Press
- Pagels, E (1982) *The Gnostic Gospels*. Harmondsworth: Pelican.
- Percival, M (1938) *William Blake's Circle of Destiny*. Columbia: Columbia University Press.
- Robinson, J (1990) *The Nag Hammadi Library*. San Francisco: Harper.
- Rudolph, K (1977) *Gnosis*. Edinburgh: T and T Clark.
- Stevenson, W. H. (ed.), *Blake – the Complete Poems*. London: Longman, 1971.
- Strathearn, G, *The Valentinian Bridal Chamber in the Gospel of Philip*, *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity*, 2009, vol 6, 83 -103.
- Solomon, A (1993) *Blake's Job: A message for our time*. London: Palambron Press.
- Sorensen, P (1995) *William Blake's Recreation of Gnostic Myth: Resolving the Apparent Incongruities*. Salzburg: Salzburg University Studies.
- Tannenbaum L (1982) *Biblical Tradition in Blake's Early Prophecies: The Great Code of Art*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Tuckett, C (1986) *Nag Hammadi and the Gospel Tradition*. Edinburgh: T and T Clark.
- Welburn, A (1994) *Gnosis: The Mysteries and Christianity*. Edinburgh: Floris.
- White, H (1964/27) *The Mysticism of William Blake*. New York: Russell and Russell.