

The Philosophy of Imagination and William Blake's Jesus

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Abstract

The artist-poet William Blake claims that “Jesus & his Apostles & Disciples were all Artists.”¹ Blake committed his artistic career to religious writing, and gave rise to a new Christianity, which better encapsulated the realities of the existential human condition. In what follows, I will explore Blake's philosophy of religion and of imagination. Through an explication of Blake's meta-poetry, I aim to illuminate Blake's depictions of the connection between the imagination and religion. In devising a Blakean philosophy of imagination, I consider the connection between metaphor and Blake's imaginative poetics, as well as the poetry of Wallace Stevens, which further corroborates that the Blakean notion of the imagination are indispensable and eternally necessary.

On his Engraving of the Laocoon, the artist-poet William Blake makes the claim that “Jesus & his Apostles & Disciples were all Artists.” In Blake's art and poetry, a propensity towards the revolutionary—and even towards the apocalyptic—can be observed. Sacrilegious and controversial, Blake, in many ways, committed the entirety of his artistic career to religious (and spiritual) writing. It can be said that Blake's writing gave rise to a new Christianity, a revolutionary twist, if you will, on the “new religion” brought to life by Jesus (and Saint Paul), which better encapsulated the realities of the existential human condition: (1) the universal existence of the creative, visionary human imagination, and (2) the duality of the world and its metaphysical qualities (namely, Good and Evil).

Jesus, Blake's ‘artist’, manifests the harmonization of good and evil. Blake, influenced primarily by his contemporary Neoplatonist, Thomas Taylor, would have equated the body with *evil*, and the human mind with *good*. The tension-bearing dialectic

¹ Blake, William. *The Poetical Works of William Blake*, ed. by John Sampson. London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1908; Bartleby.com, 2011.

of body and mind is “solved” through the advent of the revolutionary Christ-figure: a harmonization possible only in and through the human imagination is *realized* through the ‘artwork’² of Jesus Christ: the revolutionary marriage (of flesh and spirit) that he represents. Such paradigm—the deconstruction and amalgamation of the world’s “binary opposites”—is illustrated in Blake’s “Marriage of Heaven and Hell.” In the “Marriage”, Blake attempts to depict a world in which good and evil *coexist*, and are *interdependent*. Evil does not exist as an entity in and of itself. Rather, it exists upon a spectrum of *Good*, and in the end, *emanates* from the Good. Here we see Blake’s Neoplatonism come to light. The example is oft cited with respect to the Neoplatonic conception of good and evil: let us suppose that we have a fire, and that fire represents *The Good*. As we distance ourselves from the fire—from *The Good*—we call that distance *evil*. Evil, as we see, therefore, does not exist on its own, but rather emanates from The Good—it is viewed in relativity to The Good. Nonetheless, Blake believed that the imagination—the mind, representing *The Good*—provides us with the ability to reconcile the merely apparent dichotomy that we face in our lived experience. Through art, and through the creative imagination, we are able to envision a *perfect world*, where the body—and by extension, all of the material world—is seen as divine, as truly emanating from *The Good*, rather than as *evil*, diametrically opposed to *Goodness*.

This artistic power, Blake believed, realized through the figure of Jesus Christ, was *democratic*; transcending all limiting, hierarchical boundaries of culture, language, and historical time. Man’s responsibility, as a bearer of the creative, artistic imagination, Blake believed, was not to internalize the laws and creations of others, but rather to create a conception of *goodness*, on his own and for himself. We are all artists, Blake would claim, who can *realize* the impossible, and who *should*, as Christianity preaches, be like Jesus, the artist.³ He writes in his *Engraving of the Laocoon*: “The Whole Business of Man Is the Arts, & All Things Common. No Secrecy in Art.” The arts, for Blake, are universal. The creative imagination is held by all conscious beings—it is “Common.” The power of the imagination—to marry the otherwise dichotomous world—is the purpose, or ‘Business’ of Man. Here, there seems to be a double-entendre found in Blake’s usage of

² My use of the word “artwork” is here intentionally ambiguous. That is, I am to articulate that Christ, as God Himself, Christ *creates* artwork, and as God’s *creation* (as man), He is Himself as *work of art*.

³ (“Make real”)

the word “*Whole*”: The first interpretation is that the *whole* business of Man’s life, as Blake sees it, is indeed, “the Arts”. Additionally, the arts, and the creative imagination, serve to make man *whole*, for they consummate his two parts: mind and body, spirit and flesh.

Blake’s belief in the necessity of the reconciliatory in redemption is illustrated in the penultimate plate (99) of his *Jerusalem* series. The plate depicts a bearded elder embracing a younger woman (*Jehovah* and *Jerusalem*, respectively), below which appear the following lyrics:

All Human Forms identified, even Tree Metal Earth & Stone.
 All Human Forms identified, living going forth & returning wearied
 Into the Planetary lives of Years Months Days & Hours reposing
 And then Awaking into his Bosom in the Life of Immortality.
 And I heard the Name of their Emanations they are named Jerusalem.⁴

In the depiction, the younger girl, *Jerusalem*, acts as a symbol of the physical world, which *looks up to* (as she does in the depiction) the elder *Jehovah*, the *God*, not of Jerusalem alone, but of “all the earth” (Psalm 47:2). The apocalyptic faith is outlined by Blake (“...Into the Planetary lives of Years Months Days & Hours reposing...”), as Jerusalem, confined initially by space and time, “awakes in the Life of Immortality.” In Blake’s depiction, the act of theosis occurs not with the neglect of the body, but rather with the enactment of bodily intercourse, as Jehovah is shown penetrating the body of Jerusalem. For Blake, whose spiritual notion of sexuality is best explained in Marsha Keith Schuchard’s study, *William Blake’s Sexual Path to Spiritual Vision*, the eidos of the reconciliatory act is intercourse—the orgasm—which brings together the body and the imagination. In the depiction, Jerusalem—the young girl—realizes the faith through her sexual encounter with Jehovah. Often regarded as exclusively evil, sexuality is a means of connecting with *The Good*, or *Jehovah*. The Good, as we now see, is not entirely distinct from its counterpart, *evil*; rather, with the advent of Jesus, and the penetration of Jehovah, *evil*, itself, or the *bodily*, it becomes clear, emanates from *The Good*, and is therefore a means of *re-connecting* with the creator. When the world became polluted with sin, and deviated from the creative vision of its creator, we were redeemed, according

⁴ Blake, William. *The Poetical Works of William Blake*, ed. by John Sampson. London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1908; Bartleby.com, 2011.

to the Tradition, by *the person*, or *body*, of Jesus. Christians are asked to be like Jesus—a manifestation of the harmony of flesh and body. Since, as the Neoplatonist Blake would affirm, *all being* emanates from *Good*, then even the bodily, and what we call *Evil*, emanates from the *Good*, and can be used as an effective means of connecting with the Good.

Orgasm, moreover, for Blake, represents the perfect, Christ-like consummation of the bodily and the mental. Orgasm, a bodily manifestation brought on by the faculty of imagination, is a Christ-like example of the harmony of the flesh and the spirit. The *rising action* to the climax of sexuality occurs subsequent to an imagining, a fantasy. The non-empirical, “*unreal*” imagination penetrates the membrane of the bodily, ‘real’ (*tangible*) realm, and gives rise to orgasm. Blake refers to the orgasm, in the context of (the apocalyptic) religion, again, in his Plate 99 of the *Jerusalem* series. In Plate 99, Jehovah penetrates Jerusalem, and we are redeemed when the flesh and spirit become one, in the figure of Jesus Christ. Redemption occurs through reconciliation: “Deity, nature, politics, religion, art, body, and interiority are conjoined, but only conjoined in their ultimate reversal, as each becomes the very opposite of its given or manifest expression, thus making possible a truly comprehensive apocalyptic vision.”⁵ This reconciliation, as Blake portrays, occurs through self-annihilation: the self and the other—Jerusalem and Jehovah; the body and the imagination—became one. As John writes, “God is love.”⁶ Jesus is the *eidos*, or *model*, of love—an apocalyptic love that is made possible through self-annihilation, and the *becoming* of the *other*. Jesus *becomes* man: this self-annihilation and reversal *is* love. Jehovah loved His people—*Jerusalem*—so he became one with her. In orgasm, the imagination no longer envisions a dichotomous world; instead, we experience a unitary world. We become holy—like God—through the orgasm, because we take part in *enosis*. The imagination, which is the First Cause of the orgasm (which could not occur sans the imagination), allows us to reach *enosis*, or *theosis*. The imagination is a necessity, thus, in the living out of religious life: for only with the faculty of imagination can we actually erect the process of *becoming God-like*.

It is interesting, furthermore, to consider this concept as we see it in Blake’s

⁵Altizer, Thomas. “The Revolutionary Vision of William Blake,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 37.1 (2009), 36-37.

⁶ 1 John. 4:8.

Jerusalem, in the context of the Gospel of John, specifically in the Johannine double-entendre on *logos*. In becoming the *spoken* image—the *Word*—God reveals himself to humanity. When God becomes *man*, he not only enters the language of man, as the Word, but also enters into the *logic* of man. God is no longer a nebulous being, neither containable nor comprehensible to the human or in this world, but rather, He becomes evident to, and enters into direct dialogue with, his creation. In the Hebraic (Old-Testament) conception, the human imagination is limited: it is to reflect the otherworldly God that exists in a separate (Formal) realm. With the advent of a more transcendental, “lamp-like” concept of the imagination, as Blake exhibits in his artwork, writing, and philosophical thought, it is seen that the human is able to *logically* comprehend God (through the revolutionary Christ), who embodies and communicates through the Word, the language of His beloved people. This comprehension, nonetheless—a harmonization of the dichotomies of the world (flesh and spirit), as seen through Jesus Christ—is facilitated by the creative imagination, a necessary gateway, I argue, to faith in the revolutionary Jesus Christ.

If Blake, nonetheless, believes that Jesus and his disciples were artists, then would it not hold that Blake, the poet and painter, is himself, Jesus-like? Much like the *Logos*, Blake contains, through his art, the offspring of the creative imagination. His art is an *incarnation* of the imagination—the divine imagination, which, much like God, the father, creates *ex nihilo* (pursuant, of course, to the Romantic, Modern paradigm of the lamp-like imagination). Through the imagination—the source of his art—Blake claims, in his “Auguries of Innocence,” that the imagination can assist us “To see a world in a grain of sand / And a heaven in a wild flower, / Hold infinity in the palm of your hand / And eternity in an hour.”⁷ Through the poetic imagination, we are able to connect with the divine. We, temporal beings, can understand “eternity” within our “hour”. The ancient mimetic conception of imagination would hold that our *imagining* of eternity within the hour—our *copy* of eternity into our spatiotemporal, fallen realm—would be illusory. The modern paradigm of the human imagination, however, holds that we are given all the parts in the here and the now to understand divinity—to create our own conception of God, as creative beings ourselves. Sexuality, as Blake holds, is a means of spirituality. Out

⁷ Blake, William. “Auguries of Innocence”. Poetryfoundation.org.

of ourselves, and our own powers, we realize the divine. The way that we make meaning—make worlds out of grains of sand, as Blake says—is the way that we understand and order our world. The divine is orderly, and through art, and through the Word (through *logos*), we order—or make *logical*—our world. God is order and logic. God is the implication of causation that we derive from correlation. This godly order and logic enters our world through the imagination, and through the way that we *envision* and *imagine* the purpose of various things in our world. The creative artist, thus, as Jesus, reconciles and harmonizes through his imagination: this, after all, is the “The Whole Business of Man.”⁸

This artistic and poetic act, nonetheless, comes through the use of metaphor, which becomes indispensable as a result of the aforementioned act of self-annihilation, much in the way that metaphor becomes necessary as a result of the annihilation of (or realization of the arbitrariness of) the linguistic sign. If we posit, as a result of the realization of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, that predication comes about through negation, then it must be the case that in his “whole business,” man perpetually creates metaphor. That is, if we accept that the nature of the linguistic sign is arbitrary and the signifier and signified are bound merely by a superficial social contract, then it must be the case that our own being—existence—is always realized through negation, and not predication. In the statement “I am me”, ‘me’ is an empty sign. It gives us no information about the ‘I’, and the ‘I’, therefore, also remains empty. However, if I were to say that “I am not a tree”, then the ‘I’—the ego—would begin to take on meaning. In fact, the ‘I’ can be defined merely through an infinite list of negations. Language, thus, seems always to be poetic and metaphorical. Even in stating what something *is*, we compare that *something*, in a metaphorical manner, to what it is not. In Jehovah’s ecstatic emptying of the self, a metaphorical act comprised of the relationship of non-identical objects must occur. For Blake, the artistic and poetic act—marked by its metaphorical nature—gives way to theosis and the possibility of Christ, marked, like poetry and art, by a metaphorical nature, a comparison, or harmonization, of contraries.

This understanding of the imagination prevails throughout the Romantic Movement, into modernism (indeed, my aforementioned consideration of language, and the linguistic sign, is, in many ways, a modernist consideration). In demonstration, I cite

⁸ Ibid.

the poetry of Wallace Stevens. But first, I believe that an excerpt from Matthew Maguire's *The Conversion of Imagination* situates Stevens in the context of Blake:

... a poet like Wallace Stevens would seem to have a speculative aesthetic radically distinct from Blake—or for that matter from Deleuze, or from the global culture of spectacle—but he too finds in imagination a power that expands infinitely beyond its assistance to his art ... elsewhere Stevens can say for others, 'we say God and the imagination are one.'⁹

Notwithstanding, in Stevens' "The Plain Sense of Things," we see the importance of the imagination. Stevens begins his poem with a death—the death of nature, and of the imagination: "After the leaves have fallen, we return / To a plain sense of things. It is as if / We had come to an end of the imagination [...]"¹⁰. Though, by the penultimate stanza, the poet ejects himself from his dark surroundings and sees his words—his morose words—as products of the imagination. The paradox is thus highlighted: "Yet the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined." By the conclusion of the poem, Stevens comes to terms with the *requirement* of imagination in human existence: "... all this / Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge, / Required, as a necessity requires."¹¹ The imagination thus appears as curse and charm. Its desires and expectations, unfulfilled, precipitate melancholia, though the imagination itself, through which we devise meaning, leads also to the understanding of (existential) purpose. Through the imagination, we transcend the "plain sense of things." We relinquish a sense of purposelessness, especially in the face of a changing, evolving nature and append a sense of artistic beauty to the natural, physical world. As Blake consistently articulates, through the imagination and through art, we transcend the "evil", fallen world of matter, and are enabled to become Jesus-like. The human imagination dominates nature. Everything becomes conquerable with the imagination—including evil, and including "the plain sense of things." Through art, Stevens the poet transcends this 'plain sense.' The imagination is therefore legitimately compared to God by Stevens: the imagination, like God, *creates* the world (the sense of the world that we experience), and conquers nature. Thus, we can interpose Blake's words regarding Jesus the artist with those of Saint Paul in his letter to the

⁹ Maguire, *The Conversion of Imagination: From Pascal through Rousseau to Tocqueville*.

¹⁰ Stevens, "The Plain Sense of Things".

¹¹ Ibid.

Philippians: “I can do all things through Christ [the artist], who strengthens me.”¹²

Blake’s art makes us aware of the power of the imagination: its Christ-like power, to be precise. Blake’s Jesus exemplifies the manner in which we are to imagine the essence of our world. Through Jesus, we see not a pied, dichotomous world, in which our *enmeshment in matter* is in tension with our possibility of realizing divinity. Through art—and through the *artwork* of the figure of Jesus—we are able to imagine a harmonious world in which *all* is Good. Through the imagination, we transcend our “plain sense of things,” and become like God. Blake’s Jesus, who correctly, I claim, reflects that of the Bible, is apocalyptic and revolutionary. We are all artists, says Blake, and we therefore are Christ-like—able to transcend the dichotomous world of flesh and spirit—and become closer with the divine, through our power of imagination. There seems to be no difference among Blake the artist, the conscious, imagination-bearing human being, and Jesus.

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¹² Phil. 4:13.