

HEAVEN IN A WILD FLOWER:

WILLIAM BLAKE'S SPIRITUALITY OF IMAGINATION, MYSTICISM, AND APOCALYPSE

Sara Spain, '20

Washington and Lee University

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Abstract: The following paper is interested in the spirituality and religious beliefs of the 18th-19th c. poet and artist William Blake. It is composed of three chapters: an introduction to Blake and the historical and thematic context he worked in, an overview of three relevant themes in Blake's work, and finally, an overview of Blake's spirituality, followed by the paper's conclusions. Through a study of primary texts as well as important criticism, this paper arrives at an understanding of Blake's spirituality as a form of mysticism grounded in the imagination as a mode of perception, and a belief in the apocalyptic union of contraries that occurred through the life and death of Christ. Seeing the world through the lens of the imagination, Blake believes, allows us to experience unity with God, which is made possible through Jesus's life and death on Earth.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	3
I. Historical and Thematic Context for Blake’s Work.....	4
<i>Who is William Blake?</i>	5
<i>The Enlightenment</i>	8
<i>The Romantic Period and Imagination</i>	11
II. Central Focuses of Blake’s Work.....	18
<i>Blake and the Union of Contraries</i>	19
<i>Blake’s Theory of the Imagination</i>	23
<i>Blake’s Conception of Reality</i>	30
III. Blake’s Spirituality.....	35
<i>Blake’s Mysticism</i>	36
<i>Blake’s “Human Form Divine”</i>	40
<i>The Life and Death of Christ as Apocalyptic Union</i>	47
CONCLUSIONS.....	55

Introduction

William Blake's distinctly imaginative, mystical, and apocalyptic work sets him apart from his contemporaries. While his technical skill in verse, paint, and print are alone significant, the visionary force seen throughout his work is what truly marks Blake as a genius. His unique spirituality has been understood as everything from Gnosticism to orthodox Christianity, depending on the work and quotations one looks at. As my study of Blake has progressed, I have come to understand his spirituality as an individual practice of mysticism through the vehicle of the imagination that rests on a belief in the life and death of Jesus Christ as an apocalyptic union of contraries. Blake's poem *Auguries of Innocence* begins with the lines:

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.¹

My reading of this excerpt has changed countless times since I first encountered Blake. I view it now as a poetic expression of Blake's spirituality. Blake inhabits a post-apocalyptic world: a world that has been rid of all dualities and made new through the life and death of Christ. The heavens and the earth, the divine and the human, all have been unified. In order to see this new reality-- one of God's total immanence in materiality- we must train our eye to see with imaginative, divine vision. While passively we see the illusion of the world's former duality and separation from the divine, when we seek unity with God through Blake's particular, imaginative mysticism, we see "Heaven" where once we saw only a "Wild Flower." We see the world anew, "as it is, infinite."²

¹ William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence by William Blake", Poetry Foundation, Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43650/auguries-of-innocence>.

² William Blake, "A Memorable Fancy", *The Selected Poems of William Blake*, ed. Bruce Woodcock, (Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions, 1994), 201.

-I-

Temporal and Thematic Context for Blake's Work



Blake's illuminated print, "Laocoön"³

³ William Blake, "Laocoön, Copy B: Electronic Edition", The William Blake Archive, (Charlottesville, Eaves, Essick, Viscomi; IATH, October 1998), www.blakearchive.org/copy/laocoon.b?descId=laocoon.b.illbk.01.

Who is William Blake?

This section aims to partially answer the question “Who is William Blake?” A uniquely imaginative and even eccentric figure, Blake created in several mediums: illuminated prints, paintings, sketches, poems, prose, and more. Blake was a technically gifted artist, but is more known for the visionary, transcendent force embedded in his work. In order to understand the key themes throughout Blake’s work, we first must examine important influences on his art, the role he saw for his art, and his basic outlooks on art and religion. With this foundation, we can better grasp the layered meanings in Blake’s writing and art.

Bruce Woodcock describes William Blake as “a revolutionary visionary and a visionary revolutionary.”⁴ While Blake’s work was often dismissed as lunacy during his life, today he is widely regarded as a gifted poet, painter, and engraver. He was a prolific creator who stayed true to his own perceptions and ideas. Blake frequently cites divine revelation as the source of these. As a child Blake voraciously read the Bible and viewed its poetry, prophecies, and parables as a worthy goal for his own art, ultimately producing his own “holy works.”⁵ Aware of their son’s eccentricity and artistic promise, Blake’s parents encouraged his artistic pursuits, eventually sending him to receive a formal education in the arts of engraving and painting, rather than a more traditional schooling. Inspired by his apprenticeship with a master engraver, Blake took an interest in the work of Renaissance artists such as Raphael, Michelangelo, and Dürer, whom he revered for their “timeless, 'Gothic' art, infused with Christian spirituality and created with poetic genius.”⁶ This influence contributed to his sense of the “interconnectedness of art and

⁴ Bruce Woodcock, *The Selected Poems*, v.

⁵ Eric Wilson, *My Business Is to Create: Blake's Infinite Writing*, (Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 2011), 3.

⁶ “William Blake Paintings, Bio, Ideas”, The Art Story, <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/blake-william/>.

spirituality” which is prevalent throughout his work.⁷ Additionally, these influences help to explain the significance and transcendence Blake saw in his own work. Blake once wrote to a friend "that his 'Genius or Angel' was guiding his inspiration to the fulfillment of the 'purpose for which alone I live,'" exemplifying Blake's view of his art as a divine calling and a product of divine inspiration.⁸

Blake also professed to practice what M.H. Abrams, a prominent scholar of the Romantic movement, calls “poetic automatism.”⁹ Rather than claiming automatism drawing from his mind's inner workings, Blake cites a supernatural source for his work, claiming that someone or something else was writing and acting through him. Regarding his *Milton*, Blake claims “I have written this Poem from immediate Dictation twelve or sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time, without Premeditation and even against my Will.”¹⁰ Writings like these and his rejection of other religious and artistic norms gave Blake a reputation for being an eccentric or even a madman. While Blake accrued a small following who recognized his genius, he was not widely recognized for his work during his life. This did not concern him, however. Blake's artistic goals intentionally transcend worldly aesthetics and expectations. He strives in his work to “converse with my friends in Eternity, See Visions, Dream Dreams & Prophecy & Speak Parables unobserv'd & at liberty from the Doubts of other Mortals.”¹¹ Blake maintains, however, that these lofty goals did not stem from his own thoughts, but from a divine voice commissioning his work. In his poem “Now Art has lost its mental charms,” Blake claims that at his birth, an angel commissioned him: “Descend thou upon earth, / Renew the Arts on Britain's shore,” drawing his inspiration from

⁷ “William Blake Paintings, Bio, Ideas.”

⁸ Blake, cited by Woodcock, *The Selected Poems of William Blake*.

⁹ M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1953), 215.

¹⁰ Blake, cited by Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 215.

¹¹ “William Blake”, Poetry Foundation, Poetry

Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-blake>.

“the immortal Muse.”¹² This demonstrates Blake’s conviction that his art originated from a divine source, and was destined by this source to benefit society at large.

Like many of his Romantic contemporaries, Blake advocated for the importance of each individual’s unique thoughts- extending even to interpretations of Christianity. Blake was a radical critic of organized religion: a role he played passionately, but that never had a real impact on wider thought, as the religious thought of Byron and Wordsworth, for example, would have.¹³ Blake asserted that imaginative freedom was essential for individuals’ discernment of true Christianity, and that religion must be subjective in order to be authentic.¹⁴ Viewing attachment to a belief system as a hinderance to religious truth, Blake’s religious thought existed in a complicated, and sometimes contradictory dialectic between faith and imagination. An important aspect of Blake’s push for religious subjectivity was freedom in interpreting the Bible: a practice Blake demonstrated in his own poetry and art, much of which contains heterodox Christian content.¹⁵

In addition to affirming imaginative freedom as foundational to religious truth, Blake’s personal theology relies heavily on the imagination. For example, Blake identifies Jesus Christ, whom he calls the “divine human,” with the human imagination or “Poetic Genius.”¹⁶ Imagination, for Blake, is a function that transcends the material world and puts us in touch with eternity. As we will explore later in this essay, Blake’s “World of Imagination” is itself the “World of Eternity.”¹⁷ The imagination plays the important role in Blake’s work of unifying the world’s many contraries, such as good and evil and the material and divine. Blake’s “World of Eternity,”

¹² Blake, “Now Art has lost its mental charms”, *The Selected Poems of William Blake*, 114.

¹³ Morris Eaves, *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), 166.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹⁷ Blake, cited by Eaves, *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, 163.

therefore, is a world in which all contraries are unified through the imagination, or Jesus Christ, who brings this unifying capacity into the world. On a concrete level, Blake and his Romantic contemporaries view the imagination as an important means of acquiring knowledge and truth. This is a significant departure from beliefs prominent during the Enlightenment, an age wherein logic and objective knowledge were the beginning and end of truth.

The Enlightenment

Commonly recognized among scholars as the first of the Romantics, William Blake is chronologically positioned as a transitional figure between the Enlightenment and the Romantic period. Because he is influenced by both movements, it is important to contextualize our study of Blake by assessing key characteristics of both the Enlightenment and the Romantic period. The Enlightenment is characterized by an emphasis on objective, empirical knowledge and the rejection of revelation and other supernatural knowledge sources. Blake outright rejects the latter, valuing his “Visions” and the imagination as sources of truth. He criticizes the Enlightenment’s limiting objective worldview, being one of the first of the Romantics to resurrect revelation and the imagination as sources of truth. In light of this, the following section provides an overview of the Enlightenment, with a particular eye to its religious attitudes, which differ noticeably from Blake’s.

A theme sparked by the Enlightenment and extended to the Romantic movement is the importance of empirical reason, or the “examination of the facts of experience” in order to generate legitimate knowledge.¹⁸ We will later see how this impacts Romantic theories of imagination, including Blake’s. This belief in truth and reality being grounded in empirical study

¹⁸ James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Vatican II*, (New York, Macmillan, 1971), 4.

is central not only to these movements, but also to Blake's worldview. In order to understand Blake's theory of imagination and its underlying theology, we first must grasp the ideological context he is working in. While the Enlightenment views empirical knowledge as strictly objective, the Romantics reintroduce the subject's role in transforming empirical observations into subjective truths. This transition towards promoting greater subjectivity while remaining rooted in the world is critical to the Romantic movement in general and to Blake in particular.

Spanning the majority of the 18th century, the Enlightenment was a cultural and philosophical movement characterized by the desire for human progress, the rise of science as a source of knowledge, and increased rationalism and objectivity. Enlightenment figures such as Immanuel Kant urged individuals to "Have courage to use your own reason," rather than relying only on revelation, inherited scriptures, the church, and other orthodox knowledge as authorities on truth.¹⁹ This move away from ecclesiastical authority and theological dogma created "a culture emancipating itself from theological domination...largely secular in character."²⁰ This new culture encouraged individual autonomy, and acted as a "revolt against authoritarianism," encouraging "the emergence of individual reason and conscience as the primary arbiter of truth."²¹ Individuals were urged to find knowledge through their own observation and experience, in part with the goal of returning to an idealized "state of nature" without the unnatural influences of monarch, church, and societal conventions.²² In order for an individual's autonomy to be valid by Enlightenment standards, however, it must have been in accord with universal laws of reason. In this sense, the Enlightenment promoted individual inquiry only in so far as the thoughts could be confirmed objectively. To Enlightenment thinkers,

¹⁹ Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

²² *Ibid.*, 4.

subjective truth was not legitimate or consequential- a problem with the age that is taken up with urgency by Romantic figures like William Blake.

A catalyst for the shift in worldview seen during the Enlightenment was the rise of science as a source of knowledge and a mechanism for human progress. Scientists such as Isaac Newton and Francis Bacon promoted the belief that the natural world can be understood through mechanistic models ordered by rules and reason. During this time of discovery, Aristotelian philosophy gave way to a novel understanding of nature as modeled on the characteristics of a machine. What came to be called the “mechanical philosophy” exemplified the era’s view of reality as an objective phenomenon.²³ Likewise, the “modern empiricism” of the Enlightenment is rooted in the Scientific Revolution, which asserted that “proper knowledge is and ought to be derived from direct sense experience.”²⁴

Nature’s structures and rules came to be “reverenced, even divinized” during this time.²⁵ Alexander Pope captures this phenomenon in poetry, writing “All are but parts of one stupendous Whole / Whose body Nature is, and God the soul.”²⁶ The mechanical philosophy and empiricism as generators of knowledge may appear to be at odds with a religious worldview. However, Stephen Shapin suggests that the mechanical conception of nature produced powerful arguments aligning Enlightenment and religious perspectives. The patterns and rules observed in nature were taken as “apparent evidence...of intelligence and purpose” on the part of a deity.²⁷ This idea, known as the “argument by design,” is “the cornerstone of natural theology...the practice of establishing the existence and attributes of God from the evidence of nature.”²⁸ Such

²³ Steven Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution*, (London, University of Chicago Press, 1996), 30.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁵ Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁷ Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution*, 142.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 142.

ideas are fundamental to the Enlightenment's emphasis on empiricism and objectivity in generating knowledge, and ultimately inform the Romantic movement's basis in the material world.

Alongside the Enlightenment's empirical foundation came a new recognition of and hope in human capacities. An improved future constructed by humanity became an "eschatological substitute for the...Kingdom of God."²⁹ As another example of the era's relatively secular spirit, Enlightenment figures asserted that "Theological truth was arrived at not through religious experience but, rather, by logical deduction from certain 'first principles.'"³⁰ This tendency is known as "the religion of reason." Also referred to as Deists, its proponents "rejected the necessity of revelation and insisted on the sufficiency of the unaided natural reason in religion."³¹ This movement sought to simplify Christianity to minimal doctrines and even fewer practices, rejecting outright sacraments and rituals. Christian practice was thus reduced to the recognition of moral duties or divine commands. The religion of reason quickly broke down, however, in part because it was "dismantled by its own analytical tools," becoming "too abstract, too intellectual," and lacking unity.³² Blake openly rejects the religion of reason, particularly for its rejection of revelation as a source of truth. Blake's susceptibility to "Visions" and reverence for the imagination are the antithesis of Enlightenment thought and religion.

The Romantic Movement and Imagination

Working in the movement's early years, Blake is known as one of the first Romantics. This section seeks to outline Romanticism's themes and religious ideas, the most important for

²⁹ Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 7.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

³² *Ibid.*, 40.

our purposes being the return to subjectivity, imagination, and revelation as sources of knowledge and truth. The movement does not necessarily reject the Enlightenment's objective, empirical worldview, but seeks to expand this worldview to also include other knowledge sources. The imagination is an essential faculty of Romanticism, and while Blake shares in this emphasis, his imagination has a unique connection to his spirituality. Not only is the imagination a transcendent way of viewing the world; it is also equated with Jesus Christ, and is the unifying force acting on the world's contraries. Using the imagination, according to Blake's mystical spirituality, we are able to experience union with God. In this sense, while Blake shares in the Romantics' central concerns, he also goes beyond these in terms of his religious beliefs.

In the early 19th century, the Enlightenment gradually gave way to the Romantic age, a period characterized largely by a renewal of subjectivity and individuality. While the Romantics diverge from Enlightenment thought in important ways, they also retain many of the same ideas. It is important to recognize that, as Jacques Barzun explains, "Romanticism did not merely oppose or overthrow the neoclassic 'Reason' of the Age of Enlightenment but sought to enlarge its vision and fill out its lack by a return to a wider tradition."³³ In both movements, we see a new form of hope that is grounded in a future state of human history, rather than in a future new world. With the Romantics, more confidence is placed in humanity than ever before. While the Enlightenment primarily affirms individuals' reason and autonomy, the Romantics supplement this with the revival of subjectivity and imagination. The Romantics hold to the Enlightenment's goal of human progress but acknowledge human creativity as also vital to pursuing this end, rather than relying only on observation and reason.

³³ Jacques Barzun, cited by Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 81.

Recognizing the limits of human intellect and reason, the Romantic movement expands the Enlightenment's conceptions of truth and knowledge to include personal experience, creative diversity, and subjectivity. This expansion creates in the Romantic period an "emphasis on the workings of the unconscious mind, on dreams and reveries, on the supernatural, and on the childlike or primitive view of the world."³⁴ "Truth" for the Romantics takes on different meanings in science versus in poetry. According to Abrams, the norm was to "allow truth to science, but to bespeak a different, and usually an even more weighty and important kind of truth, for poetry."³⁵ While Enlightenment thinkers viewed human beings as law-bound and machine-like, the Romantics appealed to the creative power of humanity that extends beyond the pre-existing systems central to Enlightenment thought. In this sense, the transition from the Enlightenment to the Romantic age is characterized by a shift in worldview from objective to subjective.

Perhaps no words better capture the Romantic movement than Blake's, "I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Man's / I will not Reason and Compare: my business is to Create."³⁶ In addition to an expanded notion of human capabilities, the Romantic movement was characterized by a renewed belief that "behind Nature some Spirit or Vital Force was at work."³⁷ This was not the Deists' transcendent watchmaker God, but a God who was poignantly immanent in all things. The Romantics rejected the Deists' God, instead "overcoming the sharp bifurcation between the natural and supernatural" that had been present in the years prior.³⁸

³⁴ Nicholas Shrimpton and Michael Cordner, "The Romantic Period", Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., February 4, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/art/English-literature/The-Romantic-period>.

³⁵ Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 313.

³⁶ Blake, cited by James Chandler, *The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature*, (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2009), 103.

³⁷ Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 82.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

The Romantics achieved a “rediscovery of the immanence of God in the world of nature and history that made possible once again a more deeply felt personal experience of God.”³⁹

Romantic poets viewed the “imagination as the supreme poetic quality, a quasi-divine creative force that made the poet a godlike being.”⁴⁰ The Romantic imagination functions as a perceptual apparatus, or a lens through which an individual understands or envisions material reality. William Wordsworth, a Romantic poet, states in his *Prelude* that the imagination

Is but another name for absolute power
And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,
And Reason in her most exalted mood.⁴¹

Here we see the lingering influence of the Enlightenment in Wordsworth’s emphasis on empiricism and reason as fundamental components of the imagination. Elsewhere in Wordsworth’s prose, however, he defines imagination as “a subjective term,” claiming that “it deals with objects not as they are, but as they appear to the mind of the poet.”⁴² For most Romantics, both statements are true of the imagination, despite their apparent dissonance. The Romantic movement emphasizes subjectivity in the way we understand the world. In Blake’s words, “As a man is, So he Sees.”⁴³ Not the perceived object, but the meaning and transformation the individual brings to the object is the higher truth.

The Romantic imagination is rooted in empirical observation and physical experience, the sensations of which are subsequently transformed into perceptions unique to each individual. The imagination, for Romantics, is the perceptual tool that enacts this transformation of sensation into perception. This understanding of the imagination parallels a theory of Immanuel

³⁹ Ibid., 111-112.

⁴⁰ Nicholas Shrimpton and Michael Cordner, “The Romantic Period.”

⁴¹ William Wordsworth, cited by Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 314.

⁴² Ibid., 314.

⁴³ M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, (New York, W.W. Norton, 1971), 375.

Kant, a philosopher generally associated with the Enlightenment. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant explains that “the senses do not merely afford us impressions but also put them together, and produce *images* of objects.”⁴⁴ Rather than attributing sensation and synthesis both to a common faculty, Kant argues that “something more than the receptivity of impressions is required, namely a function of the synthesis of them” that follows the function of sensation.⁴⁵ Kant credits this function to the imagination, which for the Romantics constitutes the rise of subjectivity over the Enlightenment’s objectivity. For the Romantics, sensation is the faculty that gathers material or data, while perception- specifically, that of the imagination- arises from the mind’s activity in organizing sensations. The first step is observation of the material world, or sensation. This data is then transformed into perception by the subjective imagination. This view of imagination reflects a key issue taken up by the Romantic movement in response to the Enlightenment’s objectivity. During the age of reason, subjective perspectives were barred from classification as truth. William Hazlitt, however, defends the legitimacy of poetic truth by asserting that “This language is not the less true to nature, because it is false in point of fact; but so much the more true and natural, if it conveys the impression which the object under the influence of passion makes on the mind.”⁴⁶

According to Jon Klancher, another way of understanding the Romantic imagination is as a “meta-faculty,” or “the mind observing sensations and impressions- and above all the mind observing itself while it observes its sensations, impressions, the world, and beliefs.”⁴⁷ Similar to Kant’s theory of the imagination as a function that transforms sensual data, Klancher views the

⁴⁴ Samantha Matherne, “Images and Kant’s Theory of Perception”, *Ergo*, vol. 2 no. 29, Michigan, 2015. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ergo/12405314.0002.029?view=text;rgn=main>.

⁴⁵ Matherne, “Images and Kant’s Theory of Perception.”

⁴⁶ William Hazlitt, cited by Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 315.

⁴⁷ Jon Klancher, *A Concise Companion to the Romantic Age*, (Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 23.

Romantic imagination as the way our minds make sense of various sensations and impressions. However, Klancher asserts that for the Romantics, merely possessing the function of the imagination was not enough, but that one's unique imagination "must also leave its mark in time and space...[and] shape human memory."⁴⁸ As shown in the previous discussion of the Romantic movement as a whole, the Romantic imagination was seen as an active, productive force in the world. The most important human faculty, the Romantic imagination held a redemptive power to reconnect "one's self to the outer world of nature, things, and humanity," which during such a dynamic, tumultuous time, was "a matter of mental survival."⁴⁹ The Romantics viewed the imagination as a transformational, impactful function for both the individual and the world.

Just as it was for Blake, imagination for the Romantics was also connected to ideas of God and religion. The imagination was viewed as necessary to experiencing God, who was "sensually and ideally recovered" by the Romantics' view of imagination as being rooted in materiality and as an active force in the world.⁵⁰ Rather than highlighting God's transcendence, distance, and power, Romantics viewed God as present in materiality, and accessible through the imagination. Blake for example came to see "God's grace" as being "nearly synonymous with the simple joy of being alive."⁵¹ A fundamental part of this being alive for Blake and other Romantics was the ability to create: an ability newly associated with the divine. Thomas Macaulay describes the influence of religious thought on creative work by claiming that the new test for "good" poetry was the presence of "creative power" and "the vision and the faculty divine."⁵² This transcendent

⁴⁸ Klancher, *A Concise Companion to the Romantic Age*, 24.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵² Thomas Macaulay, cited by Klancher, *A Concise Companion to the Romantic Age*, 30.

ideal of poetic giftedness produces a language of the “romantically religious,” containing “consecrated words in the secular Romantic discourse of imagination.”⁵³ Like Blake, the Romantic movement at large elevates the imagination to a transcendent function and ushers the divine into the material realm through art.

While Blake shares many of the Romantics’ concerns, beliefs, and characteristics, he stands apart from them when it comes to his spirituality. The Enlightenment’s worldview is incomplete, according to Blake and the Romantics, who argue that in addition to information gathered from rational observation, reality also includes subjective, imaginative truths. Blake’s theory of the imagination is of foremost concern to him, as is true of most Romantic poets. However, Blake’s imagination is inherently divine, and complexly related to his spirituality. Blake’s imagination is a unifying force, deriving from the incarnation of Christ as the event that unified materiality and divinity. Imaginative vision is necessary in order to perceive the fullness and truth of reality. The strictly rational thought of the Enlightenment is inadequate; Blake calls us to “cast off Bacon, Locke, and Newton” and to “cast off Rational Demonstration by Faith in the Saviour.”⁵⁴ Not only is rational thought a hinderance to perceiving reality, it is “a false Body, an Incrustation over [the] Immortal / Spirit.”⁵⁵ Rationalism divides the world into discrete, contrary parts, as opposed to Blake’s imaginative vision, which calls for the apocalyptic union of contraries, and most importantly, the union of the material world with God. Blake’s imagination rejects Enlightenment thought at one fell swoop and is more than a faculty for perceiving truth, as it is for the Romantics: it is the redeeming, unifying force acting on individuals and the entire cosmos.

⁵³ Ibid., 30.

⁵⁴ Blake, “Reason and Imagination”, *The Selected Poems*, 329.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 329.

II.

Central Focuses of Blake's Work



Plate 99 of Blake's illuminated book, *Jerusalem*⁵⁶

⁵⁶ William Blake, "Jerusalem The Emanation of The Giant Albion, Copy E: Electronic Edition", The William Blake Archive, Charlottesville: Eaves, Essick, Viscomi; IATH, March 2003, www.blakearchive.org/copy/jerusalem.e?descId=jerusalem.e.illbk.99.

Blake and the Union of Contraries

This section aims to introduce one of the most important motifs in Blake's work, the union of contraries. Blake incorporates this idea into most facets of his work, including his political views, his conception of the individual, and his spirituality. Contraries create the injustice Blake sees in the church and state, the fragmentation of the individual psyche, and our apparent separation from God. However, Blake affirms the necessity of contraries, if only for the purpose of their unification. Without them, there would be no need for redemption or unification. For Blake, unification occurs through the imagination and Jesus Christ. In fact, Blake equates these two seemingly different things. The imagination is the unifying faculty working in the human mind, and on a larger scale, Jesus is the imagination of the cosmos, as he acts to unify and thus redeem its myriad contraries. We will see later in this essay that Blake views Jesus's life and death on earth as an apocalyptic union of contraries; the human and divine, the good and evil, all are made one. By overviewing the general theme of unification in this section, we set the stage for the major role unification will play in Blake's spirituality.

As is characteristic of the Romantic movement, Blake draws inspiration from political strife, such as the American and French Revolutions of the late 18th century. Like his fellow Romantic poets Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey, Blake expresses a millennial interpretation of the Revolutions. Desiring a new, redeemed world, Blake calls for a time when "the happy earth" will "sing in its course, / The mild peaceable nations be opened to heav'n, and men walk with their fathers in bliss."⁵⁷ In addition to imagining other, future worlds, Blake often describes a future wherein the oppressive structures of this world are overturned. In his poem "The Last Judgement," for example, Blake imagines that "The thrones of Kings are shaken, they have lost

⁵⁷ Blake, cited by Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 339.

their robes & crowns / The poor smite their oppressors, they awake up to the harvest.”⁵⁸ Blake oscillates between expecting a worldly apocalypse and an other-worldly one. However, even barring apocalyptic expectation, social critique is a common theme throughout Blake’s and other Romantics’ poetry, especially regarding oppressive structures like the church and the state. For instance, throughout *Songs of Experience* Blake highlights forms of oppression and suffering created by human pursuits. In “Holy Thursday,” Blake criticizes a society fraught with “Babes reduc’d to misery” and diminished to “a land of poverty.”⁵⁹ Blake is critical of both the church and the state as oppressive authorities, as is evidenced by his poem “Proverbs of Hell,” which contains the line “Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion.”⁶⁰

As a self-proclaimed prophet and visionary, Blake rejected many social, ideological, and artistic norms, even within the free-thinking Romantic movement. For example, Blake criticizes the restrictive effect of ecclesiastical and political structures on society and the human spirit. In “A Memorable Fancy,” Blake asserts that through such structures, “man has closed himself up till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.”⁶¹ Likewise, Blake rejects the Enlightenment’s desire to categorize and systematize the world into rational, understandable parts and in response endeavors to “Create a System” in order to avoid the restraints of the Enlightenment’s rational, scientific worldview.⁶² In Woodcock’s words, Blake “seeks to renew, radicalize, and release human potential, energy, and imagination from the limits of laws, inequalities, and the ‘single vision’ of the rational mind.”⁶³ As an advocate for the freedom of the human spirit, Blake exemplifies Romanticism’s revolutionary tendencies. He claims that religious and political

⁵⁸ Blake, “The Last Judgement”, *The Selected Poems*, 311.

⁵⁹ Blake, “Holy Thursday”, *The Selected Poems*, 81-82.

⁶⁰ “William Blake.”

⁶¹ Blake, “A Memorable Fancy”, *The Selected Poems*, 201.

⁶² Chandler, *The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature*, 103.

⁶³ Woodcock, *The Selected Poems*, v.

authorities “preach law and order but create chaos.”⁶⁴ This reflects Blake’s disdain for traditional morality as espoused by the Church and mainstream society. He asserts that “Moral Virtues all begin / In the Accusations of Sin.”⁶⁵ At the root of Blake’s critical outlook on the Church is his belief in Christ not as an enforcer of morality, but as a rebel and revolutionary. In “The Everlasting Gospel,” Blake describes Jesus as one who “mock’d the one and the other’s rod; / His seventy Disciples sent / Against Religion and Government.”⁶⁶ For Blake, true Christianity is revolutionary.

In Blake’s worldview, repressive forces are at work not only in society as a whole, but also in the individual. Blake views the human mind as constantly divided between contraries such as restrictive reason and liberating creativity. The fragmentation of the human psyche, for Blake, is the root of evil. In a cyclical nature, these internal divisions are created by social divisions, which in turn are propagated by individuals’ inner divisions. According to Blake, this inner conflict clouds our vision. In “A Memorable Fancy,” he asserts that “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.”⁶⁷ A champion of the human spirit, Blake desires that individuals balance the counter-acting forces inside them, such as reason and imagination, rather than letting one take complete control. Blake is not necessarily an enemy of reason, as a caricature of the Romantics may make him out to be. Rather, his worldview affirms the necessity of what he calls “Contraries” in human existence, if only for the purpose of their unification.⁶⁸ He demonstrates this through the content and titles of works such as *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. The unification of such contraries is a

⁶⁴ Ibid., v.

⁶⁵ Blake, *The Selected Poems*, 93.

⁶⁶ Blake, “The Everlasting Gospel”, *The Selected Poems*, 122.

⁶⁷ Blake, “A Memorable Fancy”, *The Selected Poems*, 201.

⁶⁸ Blake, “The Argument”, *The Selected Poems*, 196.

goal throughout Blake's work: for example, *Songs of Innocence and Experience* contains several pairs of poems with contrary messages or tones. "A Divine Image," which attributes "Cruelty...[and] Jealousy" to humanity, and "The Divine Image," which attributes "Peace, and Love" to humanity, are unified within the same collection, despite their opposing messages.⁶⁹

Without these mutually opposed forces, there would be no space for the unifying, redemptive power of the human imagination. Blake views individuals and society as having fallen into inner fragmentation; from Blake's perspective, they must unify their inner contraries in order to inhabit a full, imaginative, and redeemed existence. In order to attain redemption, that is, one must unify the psyche's contraries. In Abrams' words, Blake's theory of contraries ultimately posits "an organically inter-related universe, where any part involves the whole and we can 'see a World in a grain of sand.'" ⁷⁰ For Blake and several of his contemporaries, art and the imagination play crucial roles as "the reconciling and unifying agencies in a disintegrating mental and social world of alien and warring fragments."⁷¹ The crucial aspect of art in this unifying role is beauty, which serves to unite opposed conditions and thus destroy the opposition between them. As I will discuss later in this essay, Blake establishes the unifying force as the imagination, which within Blake's theology is identified directly with Jesus Christ. This, for Blake, is the cardinal purpose of humanity: to perceive the truth and fullness of a unified reality through the inner harmony of contraries.

⁶⁹ Blake, "A Divine Image" and "The Divine Image", *The Selected Poems*, 91 and 69.

⁷⁰ Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 216.

⁷¹ Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 212.

Blake's Theory of the Imagination

Blake's imagination is complex and layered with meanings. By exploring this important part of Blake's work, we ultimately aim to situate it within his spirituality. Blake describes the imagination in many ways and as many things, including as a perceptual apparatus or type of vision, a unifying force, and Jesus Christ. While these definitions may initially appear at odds with each other, we will see that they interact and converge in important ways within Blake's worldview and spirituality. The imagination is the vehicle for Blake's subjective mystical experience—through it, we see the world for its true, eternal reality, and experience union with God. This divine vision is only possible because of Jesus's life and death on earth, the apocalyptic union of contraries. We will discuss Blake's various definitions and uses of the imagination with an eye to its role in the bigger picture of Blake's spirituality, and thus build a foundation on which we will piece together Blake's beliefs.

While Blake often refers to the imagination as a faculty that, like the Romantic imagination, perceives and transforms the sensual world, he also repeatedly refers to a "Vision" that does not appear to be rooted in the sensual. Blake deliberately cultivated his visions, viewing them as his true reality, despite such a belief's unpopularity. Blake claimed from a young age to see otherworldly visions, including such things as "a tree filled with angels."⁷² These first appeared at the age of four, sending the young Blake "a-screaming."⁷³ Later in his career, however, he sketched and wrote out his visions, resulting in some of his most complex, even baffling work. J.G. Davies, author of the comprehensive work *The Theology of William Blake*, notes, importantly, that the visions' "validity does not depend upon their objectivity, but upon their practical effects upon [Blake's] life and thought; and the vigour of his life and the genius of his painting give

⁷² "William Blake."

⁷³ Blake, cited by J.G. Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, (London, Clarendon Pr., 1948), 77.

ample proof of their fruition.”⁷⁴ Blake’s visions were not only a product of his mind’s inner workings, but were, more importantly, a source of supernal knowledge. Blake asks in *Ghost of Abel*, “Can a Poet doubt the Visions of Jehovah?...were it not better to believe Vision With all our might & strength, tho’ we are fallen & lost?”⁷⁵ While the imagination of most Romantics relied on images and material from sensually observable reality, Blake’s imagination relied also on radically, even divinely subjective visions accessible only through the artist’s unique mind. Vision was for Blake “my Element, my Eternal Dwelling place,” transcending the imaginative limits of the physical senses and accessing a reality beyond the empirical, natural, and finite.⁷⁶ Blake aims in his art to “converse with my friends in Eternity, See Visions, Dream Dreams & Prophecy & Speak Parables unobserv’d & at liberty from the Doubts of other Mortals.”⁷⁷ The imagination is a sublime faculty, but simultaneously an inherently human faculty, hinting at its important place in Blake’s theology.

One example of Blake’s visions is found in one of several poems in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* titled “A Memorable Fancy.” Blake begins by claiming, casually, that “[t]he Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel dined with me.”⁷⁸ Regardless of whether Blake actually experienced a vision or dream of such events’ occurring, they often present Blake’s ideas in powerful ways. Regarding his experience communing with God, Isaiah says in a distinctly Blakean fashion, “my senses discover’d the infinite in everything.”⁷⁹ Ezekiel, similarly, describes the motivation for his asceticism as “[t]he desire of raising other men into a perception of the infinite.”⁸⁰ The ability to perceive the infinite, for Blake, is the ability to utilize imaginative vision. This vision may take the

⁷⁴ Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, 77.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁷⁷ “William Blake.”

⁷⁸ Blake, “A Memorable Fancy”, *The Selected Poems*, 200.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 201.

form of the preceding example- a direct, non-sensual experience- or it may be rooted in materiality. Indeed, Blake asserts that “he who wishes to see a Vision, a perfect / Whole, / Must see it in its Minute Particulars.”⁸¹ Whether a vision in question is rooted in materiality or subjectivity, Blake views it as his foremost artistic and spiritual task, “to open the eternal worlds, to open the immortal eyes, / Of man inward into the worlds of thought, into Eternity / Ever expanding in the bosom of God, the human imagination.”⁸²

The Romantic imagination is a fundamental human faculty, one that for Blake is “the Human Existence itself.”⁸³ This is a strong statement, but not a surprising one coming from such a prolific creator. As Northrop Frye notes in his important Blakean study *Fearful Symmetry*, Blake’s experience as a painter provided him with “practical knowledge of how the creative imagination works,” and thus a connection between the senses and the imagination.⁸⁴ Blake asserts that “Mental Things are alone Real.”⁸⁵ For Blake, mental experience is “a union of a perceiving subject and a perceived object,” and “something in which the barrier between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ dissolves.”⁸⁶ Frye expands on this, explaining that all knowledge comes from mental experience, of which in Blake’s sense of the phrase, the senses are an e

xample. This unifying power comes from the subject, who brings their creative perception to the sensual experience, ultimately producing a work of art. This brings Frye to the conclusion that for Blake, art “is not an escape from reality but a systematic training in comprehending it.”⁸⁷ The imagination captures sensual moments and immortalizes them through art. Blake asserts

⁸¹ Blake, “The Worship of God”, *The Selected Poems*, 356.

⁸² Blake, cited by Woodcock, *The Selected Poems*, 331.

⁸³ Wilson, *My Business Is to Create*, 5.

⁸⁴ Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1947), 85.

⁸⁵ Blake, “From a Vision of the Last Judgment”, Scribd, Scribd, August 12, 2009, www.scribd.com/document/18495105/Blake-From-a-Vision-of-the-Last-Judgment#from_embed.

⁸⁶ Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 85.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 85.

that the world viewed “from Generated Organs [are] gone as soon as come,” but that it is made “Permanent in The Imagination.”⁸⁸ In order to see the world for its permanent reality, the subject must intentionally employ imaginative perception. While the inherent subjectivity of imagination often disqualifies it as a part of reality, this subjectivity is what makes the imagination viable for Blake; it is, for him, the “immediate perception of reality.”⁸⁹

For Blake, true perception is concerned with “particulars” rather than generalities, as only “extreme closeness exposes the unbounded.”⁹⁰ By focusing our vision, we are able to see “a World in a grain of sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower.”⁹¹ Rather than the generalities produced by sensual apprehension, the particulars experienced through imagination’s subjectivity form the “foundation of the sublime,” allowing us to see the fullness of Blake’s reality, possible only through imaginative and radically subjective perception.⁹² In fact, Blake claims that “Art and Science cannot exist but in minutely organized Particulars...The Infinite...resides in Definite and Determinate Identity.”⁹³ The infinite cannot be found in generalities, but must be found in minute particulars. As Blake describes, “Nature and Art in this together suit: / What is most grand is always most minute.”⁹⁴ Through the minute particulars found in nature and art, we may adopt the imaginative vision necessary to perceive reality. In a larger, more spiritual sense, Blake explains, “every Particular is a Man, a Divine Member of the Divine Jesus.”⁹⁵ Just as each wild flower or grain of sand is a lens for viewing the infinite, every human being is a lens for viewing God.

⁸⁸ Blake, cited by Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 85.

⁸⁹ Wilson, *My Business Is to Create*, 14.

⁹⁰ Blake, cited by Wilson, *My Business Is to Create*, 13.

⁹¹ Blake, “Auguries of Innocence by William Blake.”

⁹² Blake, cited by Wilson, *My Business Is to Create*, 14.

⁹³ Blake, “The Holiness of Minute Particulars”, *The Selected Poems*, 348.

⁹⁴ Blake, “On Art and Artists”, *The Selected Poems*, 161.

⁹⁵ Blake, “The Worship of God”, *The Selected Poems*, 356.

We do not, however, need nature or art in order to access the imagination. Blake explains, “We do not want either Greek or Roman models if we are but just and true to our own Imaginations, those Worlds of Eternity in which we shall live for ever, in Jesus our Lord.”⁹⁶ The imagination is accessible to every human being, allowing everyone to perceive, through an intentional shift in perception, Blake’s “Worlds of Eternity” that constitute reality. For Blake and other Romantics, the implementation of our unique imaginative vision is how we fully come into being. While anyone can access an imaginative view of reality, imagination in this sense is not a passive daydreaming, but instead an intentional mode of perception. Blake’s contention, in Eric Wilson’s words, is that “Every experience is a decision, a context we create that shapes the world one way or another.”⁹⁷

The Romantic ideal of imaginative reality was not universal. For many, and especially those with views characteristic of the Enlightenment, reality was limited by what could be observed by the senses. According to Blake, “the Nature of Visionary Fancy, or Imagination, is very little known, & the Eternal nature & permanence of its ever Existent Image & Individuality never dies, but renews by its seed.”⁹⁸ Most people never experience the reality of imaginative vision, but regardless, Blake maintains that the material world is merely a shadow, and that “its Reality is its Imaginative Form.”⁹⁹ According to Davies, the primary enemy of imaginative vision is “nature wrongly perceived.”¹⁰⁰ This does not negate material, sensual experience, but rather problematizes our understanding of it. Blake implores us not to rely on the senses, but to perceive the world using the visionary faculty of the imagination. This allows us to see not the illusion of

⁹⁶ Blake, Preface to *Milton, The Selected Poems of William Blake*, 319.

⁹⁷ Blake, cited by Wilson, *My Business Is to Create*, 21.

⁹⁸ Blake, cited by Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, 75.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁰⁰ Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, 75.

the material world as distinct from the divine, but to see the unified reality attainable only through imaginative vision.

This for Blake is a task of eternal, existential importance; in order to live and see fully and truly, we must perceive the true, sublime nature of reality using the imagination. In his poem “The Caverns of the Grave I’ve seen,” Blake recounts seeing visions of “The Caverns of the Grave,” and “the Caves of Hell.” He claims that after showing these visions to the Queen and a Countess- likely through his art- they were not understood or respected. Blake defends his unique vision, claiming that ultimately,

My designs unchang’d remain.
Time may rage, but rage in vain.
For above Time’s troubled fountains,
On the great Atlantic Mountains,
In my Golden House on high,
There they shine eternally.¹⁰¹

This demonstrates Blake’s contention that imaginative perception constitutes reality. As Blake describes in the notes for his print “A Vision of the Last Judgment,” “Vision, or Imagination, is a Representation of what Eternally Exists, Really & Unchangeably.” Concerning the material world, Blake claims that “There Exist in that Eternal World the Permanent Realities of Every Thing which we see reflected in this Vegetable Glass of Nature.”¹⁰² According to Blake, the material world that we appear to be existing in is no more than an illusion, or a reflection of the true reality. Blake’s reality- the “Eternal World”- is what he urges us to perceive through “Vision,” or imagination.

For Blake, an imaginative existence is a prerequisite for a Christian existence. He asserts that “Prayer is the Study of Art. / Praise is the Practise of Art,” equating art and the imagination with

¹⁰¹ Blake, “The Caverns of the Grave I’ve seen”, *The Selected Poems*, 115.

¹⁰² Blake, “From a Vision of the Last Judgment.”

religious practice.¹⁰³ In *Jerusalem*, Blake claims that Christianity and its Gospel specifically are “the liberty both of body and mind to exercise the Divine Arts of Imagination.”¹⁰⁴ Blake’s theory of imagination is intricately connected to his spirituality: one that views imagination as the unifying force, and also as Jesus Christ himself. Imagination, the divine vision, is made possible through the incarnation of Christ: the event that unified the material and the divine realms. Jesus, through his incarnation, is “the giver of every mental gift,”¹⁰⁵ and God “the intellectual fountain of Humanity.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, for Blake, “the labours of Art and Science” are alone “the labours of the Gospel.”¹⁰⁷ To labor in this way is “to build up Jerusalem”¹⁰⁸; Blake’s “New Jerusalem,”¹⁰⁹ the eternal, unified world of imagination.

Blake expands on his ideas of the imagination and perception in the notes for his painting “A Vision of the Last Judgment.” Imaginative perception is a subjective, intentional experience, rendering a different “Vision” or appearance for each individual, and requiring an active choice on the part of the individual. Blake insists that “I see everything I paint in this world, but everybody does not see alike.”¹¹⁰ We may choose to view the wildflower as merely a wildflower, or we may look closely at its particularities in order to see its inherent sublimity and mystery. Blake’s imagination is radically subjective, rendering a different vision for every individual. In both “Auguries of Innocence” and “The Everlasting Gospel,” Blake describes imaginative vision as seeing “thro[ugh]” rather than “with” the eye, complicating traditional understandings of

¹⁰³ Blake, “Laocoön, by William Blake”, Thehumandivine.org, July 30, 2017, <https://thehumandivine.org/2017/07/30/laocoon-by-william-blake/>.

¹⁰⁴ Blake, “To the Christians”, *The Selected Poems*, 352.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 353.

¹⁰⁶ Blake, “A Vision of Jerusalem”, *The Selected Poems*, 355.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 353.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 353.

¹⁰⁹ Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 364.

¹¹⁰ Blake, cited by Wilson, *My Business Is to Create*, 19.

vision.¹¹¹ Understanding “the eye” as our default perception of reality, Blake urges us not to continue perceiving in this way, but rather to see “through” or beyond this mode of perception. If we do not, we are led to “believe a lie”; our perception “Distorts the Heavens from pole to pole.”¹¹² The artist’s genius, for Blake, lies in their choice of seeing the world “thro’ the eye” in its true, eternal reality.¹¹³

Blake’s Conception of Reality

Blake’s imagination requires a shift from seeing with the eye to seeing through the eye, or past the illusory world we are accustomed to. In this way, the imagination is deeply intertwined with the way Blake perceives reality. This section will dive deeper into Blake’s reality, specifically the difference between seeing with and through the eye. This understanding is foundational to Blake’s spirituality- one that relies mainly on mystical communion with God through a shift in the way we perceive the world. What we passively see is not the true world; we must shift our vision to see somehow beyond or behind this illusion. This section aims to define what these two modes of perception are, and the types of worlds they open up for us. By doing this, we may grasp the full meaning of Blake’s mysticism as a new mode of being in the world. Ultimately, Blake’s true reality relies on concepts explored in the previous two sections- the union of contraries and the imagination. Through the union of contraries, the true world is created and made accessible to us. Through the imagination, we are able to perceive and exist in this new creation.

¹¹¹ Blake, “From a Vision of the Last Judgment.”

¹¹² Blake, “The Everlasting Gospel”, *The Selected Poems*, 121.

¹¹³ Blake, “Auguries of Innocence”, *The Selected Poems*, 138.

The meanings of seeing “with” versus “through” the eye are contentious amongst scholars and have significant ontological implications, as they inform questions of how we experience reality and what reality really is. One perspective understands the distinction of seeing “with” versus “through” the eye as seeing past the material realm in order to see the divine realm. This presupposes a dualistic reality: one with a clear distinction between the material and the divine. We can understand the experience of such a reality as seeing either the material or divine, but not both at once, or as seeing both the material or divine simultaneously. Another perspective, expressed by Thomas Altizer, understands reality as a status existing after an apocalyptic union of life’s dualities; e.g. the material and the divine. Reality is no longer dualistic, but consists of a fusion of the material and the divine, creating something completely new. Seeing “with” the eye relies on an old, dualistic conception of reality; the world around us is merely material, and if there is a divinity, it is separate from this realm. Seeing “through” the eye, however, allows the individual to perceive the new, unified reality that is free of duality. Whichever form Blake’s seeing “through” the eye takes, this constitutes his imaginative perception, and thus the true, eternal reality.

To understand Blake’s imagination, we first must understand how he views the nature and composition of reality. We have seen previously the Romantic understanding of the imagination as the experience of reality. This view differs from prior Enlightenment thought, which viewed the imagination as a departure from reality. While Enlightenment figures considered reality to be objective, concrete, and limited to what we can gather through our senses, the Romantics also included subjective and supernatural knowledge in their definition of reality. In fact, many viewed imaginative perception as more real than sensual experience. With the imagination established as a part of reality, we now consider the difference, if any, between the material and the divine worlds. While other conceptions of reality exist, we will consider two divergent

understandings of reality: the material and divine as separate realms (either existing together or altogether separated), and the material and divine synthesized, forming something altogether new.

One interpretation of Blake's "Heaven in a Wild Flower," preserves the duality of the material and divine, but allows us to see both realms simultaneously. A new substance is not produced through this interpretation of imaginative vision, but rather we are granted a new way of experiencing reality. Rather than seeing only the mundane or only the transcendent, we see both at once. Blake contends that when we are able to "cast off the veil thrown over reality by rational thought...everything would appear to man as it is, infinite."¹¹⁴ Within this interpretation, the ability to apprehend materiality and simultaneously see beyond "the veil" is what truly constitutes reality. Anything less is an illusion. Imaginative vision in this case resembles what J. Lewis Martyn, writing about the Apostle Paul and Flannery O'Connor, describes as using "near vision" and "far vision" simultaneously.¹¹⁵ According to Martyn, this mode of perception embodies the apocalyptic trope of "bi-focal vision."¹¹⁶ Seeing bi-focally, or simultaneously before and behind the veil, allows us to experience Blake's two-fold reality. With bi-focal vision, Blake reveals an enchanted, complex, divine reality lying just behind the veil. Not necessarily a "far" reality in the sense of transcendence and separateness, but a reality that was hidden all along in the corporeal world. Both bi-focal vision and imaginative vision can function as lenses utilized intentionally by the subject, transforming mere sensual experience into the simultaneous perception of mundanity and divinity.

¹¹⁴ "William Blake Paintings, Bio, Ideas."

¹¹⁵ J. Louis Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul*, (Edinburgh, T&T Clark/Continuum, 2005), 284.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 284.

Taking a different perspective on Blake's "Heaven in a Wild Flower," Thomas Altizer understands Blake's role as an artist as that of an apocalyptic visionary and "prophetic seer" who aims to open our perception to the universal "*coincidentia oppositorum*," or union of opposites, that has taken place.¹¹⁷ Altizer's reality is the result of "an apocalyptic union of the seemingly separate worlds of vision," those being the material and divine worlds.¹¹⁸ The result of this synthesis of materiality and divinity yields something entirely new, in contrast to a bi-focal perception of two distinct realms. Altizer's apocalyptic union of contraries eliminates the duality of material and divine, as "God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is."¹¹⁹ This dual change- a change in both the material and the divine- occurs as a result of Jesus's incarnation on Earth, as we shall discuss further in a later section. The life and death of Jesus are together the apocalyptic event which transforms the cosmos and the heavens, resulting in God's being "totally incarnate in experience," rather than abiding in a separate realm.¹²⁰ According to Altizer, this is Blake's post-incarnation reality: a post-apocalyptic reality in which dualities are eliminated and the divine and human are wholly unified.

Furthermore, Altizer views the union of contraries as an ongoing process, of which we are at the end. In his words, Jesus's death "initiates the Apocalypse" that will continue to expand beyond Jesus, the catalyst, and ultimately unify the entirety of existence.¹²¹ Altizer attributes this belief also to Blake. However, I argue that Blake does not view the apocalypse as an ongoing process. Blake understands Christ's life and death not as merely the beginning, but as the entirety of the apocalypse: a single event which served to unify all contraries. While Altizer views the total

¹¹⁷ Thomas Altizer, *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake*, (East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 1967), xi and 215.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, xvii.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹²⁰ Altizer, *The New Apocalypse*, 147.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

unification of existence as the culmination of space and time, Blake views this as the beginning of a new era, during which all of humanity is newly able to perceive with the imagination, or the divine vision, enacted through the unification of humanity and divinity. This newfound ability- the divine, human imagination- constitutes a mystical experience for Blake. Through the imagination, one is able to commune with God, who is now immanent in materiality as a result of the apocalypse. This apocalypse is different from Altizer's, which is not yet completed, and thus does not allow for the complete union with God that Blake strives for. Blake's understanding of the union of contraries allows for a distinct individual spirituality- one of mystic union with God through imaginative vision. Reality for Blake is fraught with the lingering illusion of duality, which was eliminated through Christ's life and death. However, through the imagination, a "new and unified mode of vision," we are able to achieve complete union with God, and finally "embrace all reality whatsoever."¹²²

¹²² Ibid., xviii.

III.

Blake's Spirituality



Blake's painting, "A Vision of the Last Judgment"¹²³

¹²³ William Blake, "A Vision of the Last Judgement", Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, December 20, 2019, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Vision_of_the_Last_Judgement.

Blake's Mysticism

Blake's spirituality is complex and has been interpreted many ways by many scholars. The preceding chapter sought to create a foundation for understanding key elements of Blake's spirituality, those being the union of contraries, the imagination, and his conception of reality. This chapter will build on these concepts and attempt to piece together a coherent belief system. The first element of Blake's spirituality is his mysticism. While he does not specifically use this word, Blake frequently writes about achieving union with God through the imagination. Blake's mysticism, in this sense, is a subjective experience of union with God that is accessed through the imagination. This mysticism relies on imagination as a transformed mode of perception, which allows the subject to perceive the eternal, true reality that is created through the union of contraries. Mysticism encompasses the subjective aspect of Blake's spirituality, which is a component of his broader apocalyptic worldview. The apocalypse for Blake is the life and death of Christ, or the union of the world's contraries, and the mystical experience of imagination is the experience of this apocalyptic reality. This section discusses the particulars of Blake's mysticism with the goal of situating it as a key element of his spirituality.

As J.G. Davies details in his comprehensive *The Theology of William Blake*, Blake's complex worldview is not infrequently associated with mysticism: a spirituality aiming primarily to achieve union with God. Mystics rely not on theory or doctrine for spiritual knowledge, but on personal, esoteric experience. Their practice, often referred to as "contemplation," consists of an "interplay between an adoring communion with God and an objective reading of the experience."¹²⁴ Christian, specifically Catholic mysticism commonly involves ascetic practices; Blake however rejects this form of spirituality. Blake's stubborn independence contributed to his conclusion that

¹²⁴ Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, 54.

“Christianity is Art,” or in other words, that the way of salvation is not asceticism, but creativity.¹²⁵ Blake’s mysticism is therefore not traditional Catholic mysticism, due to his system’s being closely connected with his art and in Davies’ words, “founded upon a creative response to the divine call and not upon an ascetic one.” Seeking unity with God, Blake approaches his mysticism “in self-annihilation,” but not that of asceticism, “and the grandeur of Inspiration,” his imaginative, true, and eternal world.¹²⁶

Mystics’ quest for union with God is typically divided into stages, the number and symbolism of these varying between individuals. Blake’s quest involves what Davies describes as a “gradual cleansing of vision,” which connects clearly with Blake’s emphasis on imagination and vision as vehicles to unity, redemption, and reality.¹²⁷ The lowest form of Vision, used by most of humanity, is concerned only with the material and sensual. Blake refers to this as “Single vision”; he associates this with Enlightenment themes of rationalism and objectivity.¹²⁸ In *Jerusalem*’s “Fourfold and Twofold Vision,” Blake laments that “The Visions of Eternity, by reason of narrowed perceptions, / Are become weak Visions of Time and Space.”¹²⁹ Davies provides several quotations revealing Blake’s attitude toward nature: that it is “the work of the Devil,” and “an outside shadowy Surface superadded to the real Surface,” having the effect of “deaden[ing]...Imagination” and being no more than “a Phantasy.”¹³⁰ Such an attitude toward nature leads to a desire for escape, potentially through detachment from materiality and the self. In terms of Blake’s mystic quest for unity with God, such actions are forms of asceticism; for Blake, however, they are achieved “not through purgation, but by the affirmation of his genius

¹²⁵ Blake, cited by Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, 59.

¹²⁶ Blake, “Reason and Imagination”, *The Selected Poems*, 329.

¹²⁷ Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, 59.

¹²⁸ Blake, cited by Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, 61.

¹²⁹ Blake, “Fourfold and Twofold Vision”, *The Selected Poems*, 345.

¹³⁰ Blake, cited by Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, 61.

under the direction...of the Holy Spirit.”¹³¹ Such a life leads to Blake’s “twofold vision,” wherein “everything appears to man as it is, infinite.”¹³²

Blake writes to a friend that “double the vision my Eyes do see, / And a double vision is always with me.”¹³³ Seeing now with double vision, Blake appears to go back on his prior condemnation of nature, stating that “This World is a World of Imagination & Vision...to the Eyes of the Man of Imagination, Nature is Imagination itself.”¹³⁴ Perception of natural objects is an important distinction between those who possess only single vision and those who have attained twofold vision. As Blake explains, “The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the Eyes of others only a Green thing which stands in the way.”¹³⁵ Blake’s double vision does not allow one to see beyond the material, implying a duality and separateness between the material and divine, but instead allows the individual to see the new thing created by the union of divinity and materiality. As Altizer may say, Blake emphasizes the immanence of God, writing from Jesus’ perspective that “I am not a God afar off, I am a brother & friend: / Within your bosoms I reside, and you reside in me.”¹³⁶ For Blake, God is immanent both throughout the natural world and in each individual: beliefs that rest on the apocalyptic union of contraries.

Bearing in mind Blake’s association of the imagination with divinity, we may understand Blake’s threefold vision, the next step towards union with God, as a state of “refuge...for those who are incapable of attaining to the highest vision,” wherein one has “passed beyond reasoning and inquiry into a condition of repose and peaceful communion with God.”¹³⁷ This is not the highest form of vision, however. The state to which all mystics aspire, Blake’s fourfold vision is a

¹³¹ Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, 61.

¹³² Blake, cited by Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, 63.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹³⁶ Blake, cited by Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, 68.

¹³⁷ Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, 71.

condition of “complete union with God, or in Blake’s own words: ‘With holy raptures of adoration, rap’d sublime in the Visions of God.’”¹³⁸ In this state, the individual is lost within the full experience of God. Blake describes the climax of fourfold visionary experience: “Terror-struck in the Vale I stood at that immortal sound. / My bones trembled, I fell outstretch’d upon the path / A moment, & my Soul return’d into its mortal State.”¹³⁹ This description contains clear apocalyptic notes, as “Immediate Communion with God” is experienced with fear, trembling, and a departure from the default “mortal State.”¹⁴⁰ Blake understands fourfold vision- the experience of divine union- as the imagination: “the Divine Vision not of the World, or of Man, nor from Man as he is a Natural Man, but only as he is a Spiritual Man.”¹⁴¹ Blake’s imaginative vision is the ultimate experience of union with the divine, and not of a divine that was previously separate from us, but a divine that had been unified with the material and the human all along, hidden behind an opaque veil and the illusion of duality.

Blake’s mystical tendencies are an important component of his unique spirituality, but not the only component. The quest for union with God through the adoption of imaginative, fourfold vision is the mystic’s individual spiritual task, but this task is only one part of Blake’s complex spirituality. On a cosmic scale, as we shall examine further, Blake’s spirituality is centered around the apocalyptic union of contraries that occurred through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Through God’s incarnation on earth as a man, the material and divine were unified. Blake’s mystical quest seeks to awaken the individual through clear, complete vision to the reality of their connaturality with God. This connaturality had been present all along, but when we see with single vision, we are unable to perceive it. Instead, we see the illusion of a

¹³⁸ Ibid., 71.

¹³⁹ Blake, cited by Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, 71.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 72.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 74.

dualistic world, wherein God and humanity are separate. By utilizing Blake's imaginative, mystical, fourfold vision, we are able to fully perceive the world and humanity: permanently unified and made new through the apocalyptic event of the incarnation of Christ.

Blake's "Human Form Divine"

This section aims to situate Blake's idea of what it means to be human within his spirituality. Human nature connects both to Blake's mysticism and his apocalypticism, and is important in understanding what Blake's individual spiritual life was like, as well as that which he saw for others. To be human, according to Blake, was to be divine and to share in the nature of God. This reality is a result of the apocalyptic union of contraries which occurred through Jesus's life and death on earth. The human and divine are unified, making the divine imminent in materiality. Nature calls this new humanity the "Human Form Divine," a humanity that can achieve mystic union with God, and indeed has already achieved this through Christ, but does not realize. Now that humanity is divine, they are able to utilize Blake's mystical imagination, the "Divine Vision" which enables them to see the fullness of reality and their own divinity. This subjective experience is a crucial component of Blake's spirituality. For these reasons, it is important for understanding Blake's spirituality to understand his unique conception of human nature.

The Greek word *apokálypsis* translates literally to "an uncovering" or "an unveiling," that allows us to see something we had not seen previously: a Heaven in what before had only been a Wild Flower. Throughout his art, Blake strives to open our eyes to imaginative vision- the divine vision- and show us the true nature of reality. Kaethe Wolf-Gumpold notes this tendency in Blake, saying that "the greatest artists and writers [strive] to make the invisible visible, to reveal

the spiritual world lying behind the material.”¹⁴² It is not clear, however, that Blake exists in a dualistic world: one in which the material and the spiritual exist on separate planes. Blake seeks to reveal a hidden reality in his art, but it is not a reality that negates the senses entirely. Rather than viewing the material world as the veil behind which the truth is located, Blake removes the opaque veil covering reality, revealing a world in which the material and divine are unified, creating a new reality entirely. In this way, Blake claims, “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.”¹⁴³ The illusion we have been seeing is not the material world; the illusion is that a material world exists separately from the divine, or that this distinction exists at all. Blake unveils reality through his art, showing us that there is no divine behind the material, and that the idea of this duality was eliminated through an apocalyptic union of contraries: enacted by the incarnation of Christ.

As noted previously, subjectivity is for the Romantics an invaluable component of the imagination, which in turn is a fundamental human faculty. In a sense, this is also true of Blake; however, Blake’s theology informs a totally different idea of what it means to be human. For most Romantics, the imagination is a “quasi divine...god-like” quality and entails the ability to transform physical sensations into images unique to the subject.¹⁴⁴ Building on this, Blake views imagination as the “Divine Vision” that is possible only through humanity’s connaturality with God.¹⁴⁵ Imagination, or “Genius,” is for Blake “the Holy Ghost in Man.”¹⁴⁶ In “The Everlasting Gospel,” Blake critiques society’s tendency to view the human body as “shame and sin,” instead describing the body as “Love’s temple that God dwelleth in.”¹⁴⁷ Blake’s conception of the divinity

¹⁴² Kaethe Wolf-Gumpold, *William Blake*, translated by Ernest Rathgeber and Peter Button, (London, Rudolf Steiner, 1969), 7.

¹⁴³ Blake, “A Memorable Fancy”, *The Selected Poems*, 201.

¹⁴⁴ Shrimpton and Cordner, “The Romantic Period.”

¹⁴⁵ Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 364.

¹⁴⁶ Blake, “The Worship of God”, *The Selected Poems*, 356.

¹⁴⁷ Blake, “The Everlasting Gospel”, *The Selected Poems*, 124.

of humankind is informed by his unusual theology: one conceiving of Christ's incarnation as the event which establishes our own divinity. In his poem "The Divine Image," Blake demonstrates shared qualities between God and man:

For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
Is God, our Father dear,
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
Is man, his child and care.¹⁴⁸

While these verses certainly show our similarity to the divine, Blake goes further than this in saying that humanity is divine, not just divine-like. In this poem and others, Blake portrays his belief in "the human form divine."¹⁴⁹ God is not merely reflected in humanity, but necessarily manifests in a human form.

The theological term for humanity's becoming divine is *theosis*: an idea dating back several centuries to various ancient Greek theologians. While Blake did not explicitly refer to his beliefs as theosis, we see a clear similitude when reading Blake's ideas. This and others of Blake's theological ideas are inspired by Emanuel Swedenborg, of whose "New Church" Blake was an early member.¹⁵⁰ According to Swedenborg's Neo-Platonic worldview, the nature of God "accounts for the form of heaven and of man, and the form of every living thing."¹⁵¹ Following Swedenborg's line of thought, Blake asserts that "to think of holiness distinct from man is impossible to the affections."¹⁵² God is not transcendent and unknowable for Blake, but instead takes on a human, natural form. In Blake's words, "God is Man & exists in us & we in him."¹⁵³ This theology is consistent with Blake's grounding in materiality and subsequent transformation of this experience into a subjective, yet transcendent one. While Blake adopted many of

¹⁴⁸ Blake, "The Divine Image", *The Selected Poems*, 69.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁵⁰ Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, 31.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁵³ Blake, cited by Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, 36.

Swedenborg's philosophies, he in time began to diverge. A major issue Blake took with Swedenborg was his attempts at using reason to explain spiritual matters. Blake accuses Swedenborg of distilling spiritual concepts in order to make them suitable to the rational faculty. Blake reacts with distaste, asserting that the spiritual is definitively outside the scope of reason, making Swedenborg yet another child of the Age of Reason. Despite their ultimate differences, however, many of Swedenborg's ideas, including the divinity of man, had a lasting impact on Blake.

When we view Blake's imagination in the context not only of *theosis*, but also of *apokalypsis*, we understand the otherworldly implications of human creativity as a way of perceiving the fullness of a reality in which the material and divine are unified. Blake's unique theology is an important foundation for understanding his ontological beliefs. According to Blake, the material and divine were not always unified; rather, this occurred through the event of the incarnation of Christ. The event of the incarnation holds exceptional ramifications for Blake's views on the nature of reality, humanity, and divinity. Had God not entered the material world through Christ's birth, the divine and the mundane would have remained separated, rather than intricately unified, as they are now. As Davies explains using language similar to Altizer's, Blake maintained that "knowledge of the Godhead [was] possible because God is immanent in humanity," as well as throughout the natural world.¹⁵⁴ While he maintains God's transcendence in much of his work, Blake also often identifies the divine as connatural with all of the material world, resulting in many scholars' classification of him as a pantheist. In "The Everlasting Gospel," Blake implores us that "Thou also dwell'st in Eternity. / Thou art a Man: God is no more."¹⁵⁵ In "A Memorable

¹⁵⁴ Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, 87.

¹⁵⁵ Blake, "The Everlasting Gospel", *The Selected Poems*, 120.

Fancy,” Blake asserts that “God only Acts and Is, in existing beings or Men,”¹⁵⁶ Davies takes issue with Blake’s classification as a pantheist, explaining that the relationship between God and humanity is “a union so close that its analogy is found in the union of subject and object in human knowledge and love, a union which comes of connaturality, which means the possession of the same nature, for indeed by grace we are made precisely ‘partakers of the divine nature’.”¹⁵⁷ Such a relationship is consistent with orthodox Christian belief. Because of our connaturality with God, we are “capable not only of learning about, but of suffering, experiencing, divine things.”¹⁵⁸ I also argue that Blake is not a pantheist; to classify him as such would be to understand the world as always having been divine. This is not the case for Blake, who believes that the material world became one with the divine through the life and death of Christ.

Blake’s theology is indispensable for understanding not only his religious sentiments, but also his conception of the natural world: for Blake, nature is no longer inherently different from the divine. The two realms, through the apocalyptic event of the incarnation of Christ, have been unified, and now share a common substance. The problem, according to Blake, is that we do not recognize or perceive God’s immanence throughout the natural world and humanity. In order to perceive Blake’s unified reality, we must, using Blake’s terminology, turn our focus to “particulars,” rather than “abstractions.” The connaturality of God and humanity exemplifies Blake’s emphasis on particulars in the sense that “God apart from man is Blake’s idea of abstraction.”¹⁵⁹ As noted previously, Blake views religious and political structures as oppressors of the human spirit. These structures in turn created a theology that placed divinity outside of the

¹⁵⁶ Blake, “A Memorable Fancy”, *The Selected Poems*, 202.

¹⁵⁷ Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, 89.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁵⁹ Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, 89.

human realm; according to Blake, this form of religion resulted in our forgetting that “All Deities reside in the Human breast.”¹⁶⁰ These harmful structures create a vision of humanity contrary to that which Blake describes in “The Divine Image.” In “A Divine Vision,” Blake describes a contrary vision of humanity:

Cruelty has a human heart,
And Jealousy a human face;
Terror the human form divine,
And Secrecy the human dress.¹⁶¹

Because we have created structures that shroud our vision, the divinity of humanity is not clear to the passive observer.

Here Blake’s theory of imagination and theology converge; Blake identifies the imaginative vision with divine vision: both of which allow the subject to see “Thro the Eye” into reality.¹⁶² In fact, Blake directly identifies the imagination with Christ, saying that “Imagination...is the Divine Body of the Lord Jesus, blessed for ever.”¹⁶³ Blake equates the two in order to highlight the imagination’s redemptive, unifying capacities. As Blake illustrates in his imaginative mythology, after the Universal Man falls into a state of internal division, he requires a “Resurrection to Unity.”¹⁶⁴ By allowing us to perceive reality and unite the contrary forces acting in our minds, the imagination is the actor that allows an individual to come into full being. The unifying principle is Jesus, who is synonymous with the human imagination; here is the path to the redemption of full, unified humanity. Here, too, we see that the divinity we are searching for is inside us and all around us. In Blake’s *Jerusalem*, God proclaims:

I am not a God afar off, I am a brother and friend:
Within your bosoms I reside, and you reside in me.

¹⁶⁰ Blake, “Proverbs of Hell”, *The Selected Poems*, 200.

¹⁶¹ Blake, “A Divine Image”, *The Selected Poems*, 91.

¹⁶² Blake, “Auguries of Innocence by William Blake.”

¹⁶³ Blake, cited by Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 121.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 258.

Why stand we here trembling around
 Calling on God for help, and not ourselves, in whom God dwells?¹⁶⁵

When imaginative vision is liberated and contraries are unified, we are emboldened to see the divinity within each individual and throughout the cosmos.

In his art, Blake strives to clear our vision and allow us to perceive reality. In this way, Blake's theology and creative work serve as a means of revelation, or apocalypse. Abrams describes the unifying, redemptive, and even divine power of the human imagination as a "jubilant apocalypse."¹⁶⁶ Rightly so, as Blake reflects on the individual's inner unification as follows in his mythology:

I shall cast off my death clothes & Embrace Tharmas again
 For Lo the winter melted away upon the distant hills
 And all the black mould sings...
 Joy thrilld thro all the Furious form of Tharmas humanizing
 Mild he Embracd her whom he sought.¹⁶⁷

Blake views an individual's redemption as the unification of inner contraries, and also emphasizes the individual's "recovery of his flexible, imaginative, and creative power of unifying vision," further integrating the imagination's role in determining humanity's ultimate fate.¹⁶⁸ The individual is able to see the reality that "Man has no Body distinct from his Soul; for that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age."¹⁶⁹ On a cosmic scale, Blake's redemption also occurred through a unification of contraries: through the incarnation of Christ, the God-man, the divine and human were unified, thus redeeming the once-material world. Blake calls the post-union world "the New Jerusalem," a promised land "in every Man" accessed through "the Divine Vision."¹⁷⁰ The world remains unified whether or not

¹⁶⁵ Blake, cited by Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, 87.

¹⁶⁶ Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 259.

¹⁶⁷ Blake, cited by Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 259.

¹⁶⁸ Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 342.

¹⁶⁹ Blake, "The Voice of the Devil", *The Selected Poems*, 196.

¹⁷⁰ Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 364.

we recognize it, but in order to reap the benefits of redemption, we must utilize divine, imaginative vision. Divine subjectivity is required to grasp Blake's revelatory message, but once the imagination is utilized, we see the reality of our subjectivity: that each one of us embodies the "human form divine."¹⁷¹

The Life and Death of Christ as Apocalyptic Union

We have explored the subjective experience of Blake's spirituality through studying his mystic tendencies and his conception of human nature. However, this side of Blake's spirituality is only possible through a cosmic union of contrary forces. This happens in Jesus Christ's life and death, the apocalypse that reveals a transformed human and material nature, one in which the divine is totally immanent. The event of Christ's life and death is the foundation of Blake's spirituality. Without it, mysticism and divine subjectivity would not be possible. This event and its results color every part of Blake's worldview, from his imagination to his conception of reality. Bearing this all in mind, this section endeavors to describe Blake's beliefs surrounding Jesus and the cosmic repercussions these beliefs have. In this way, we will situate the mystical, subjective experience of Blake's spirituality within a broader spiritual framework of apocalypticism.

In his study of Blake, Altizer rightly describes Blake as "the most Christocentric of Christian visionaries."¹⁷² Likewise, Davies captures Blake's reverence for Christ in saying that "always the centre of Blake's religion was Christ, the Divine Humanity."¹⁷³ Blake's spirituality- encompassing a range of mystical, apocalyptic, and more orthodox Christian beliefs- looks to Jesus as the unifying principle, the apocalyptic event, and the divine human: the only figure

¹⁷¹ Blake, "The Divine Image", *The Selected Poems*, 69.

¹⁷² Altizer, *The New Apocalypse*, 140.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 93.

capable of redeeming humanity and the cosmos. Through Jesus's life and death, in Davies' words, "the transcendent becomes immanent," and thus "establishes an absolute kinship between man and God."¹⁷⁴ This influences Blake's spirituality on two levels. First, on a personal level, Jesus' incarnation provides a model for life and allows for the individual's complete union with God through imaginative vision. Second, on a cosmic level, Jesus' incarnation serves as the apocalyptic event which unifies and eliminates the duality of the material and divine. This universal event is necessary in order for the mystic to achieve union with God, as it was the event which brought into the world the imaginative, or divine vision. Blake's mysticism does not encompass his entire spirituality; rather, it is the individual level and experience of an apocalypticism that redeems the entire cosmos. An event fulfilled through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the apocalyptic unification of the material and divine is a central truth for Blake, both regarding his cosmic, ontological beliefs, and also regarding his personal spirituality.

As a result of the apocalyptic, universal transfiguration that occurs through Jesus's life and death, Jesus, or the human imagination, newly becomes "the source and the substance of all life."¹⁷⁵ Altizer understands the life and death of Christ as an instance of *kenōsis*, or an emptying, of God's divine substance into the material world. This is one part of the process of unification that occurs through God's incarnation in the material world. Altizer elaborates, "the full meaning of the Incarnation is that the Incarnation is a dual and dialectical process whereby God empties Himself of Himself and becomes man and man empties himself of his historical particularity and his individual selfhood and becomes God."¹⁷⁶ This dual movement- of both divinity and materiality- is an "apocalyptic transfiguration of the cosmos" that occurs through the

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 90.

¹⁷⁵ Altizer, *The New Apocalypse*, 67.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 74.

life and death of God on Earth.¹⁷⁷ In Altizer's words, the apocalypse "draws all the separated contraries into a new unity; no longer do the contraries exist in dualistic opposition, for now man's infinite senses expand and behold the All as one."¹⁷⁸ The contrary states of materiality and divinity undergo cataclysmic, substantial changes, ultimately converging to a new state of connaturality. In this way, "a true humanity is born" through the life and death of Christ.¹⁷⁹

Altizer's sense of apocalyptic union is also found in Blake's spirituality. In "The Universal Family," Blake reflects on the connaturality of Christ and humanity,

We live as One Man: for, contracting our Infinite Senses,
We behold multitude; or, expanding, we behold as One,
As One Man all the Universal Family; and that One Man
We call Jesus the Christ. And He in us, and we in Him,
Live in perfect harmony in Eden, the Land of Life.¹⁸⁰

After the incarnation of Christ, all of humanity and creation is made to be of one new, sublime nature shared with God. Through the imagination, or our "Infinite Senses," we perceive the post-apocalyptic, post-incarnation world for its fullness and truth. Blake places "reason" in opposition to the unifying force of the imagination- "the Satan whose destructive negativity isolates the contraries from one another."¹⁸¹ Blake's post-apocalyptic world is one of total unity between God and humanity, and when we see it for what it is, we inhabit the new "Eden, the Land of Life." Altizer describes Blake's belief shown in the above passage, that "Jesus is the body of humanity, and is present in every human face and hand."¹⁸² For Blake, this new state of being has been true since the life and death of Christ: we merely need to shift our perception to one of imagination in order to embody it.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 142.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 178.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 143.

¹⁸⁰ Blake, "The Universal Family", *The Selected Poems*, 342.

¹⁸¹ Altizer, *The New Apocalypse*, 176.

¹⁸² Ibid., 140.

The term “apocalyptic” is often connected with ideas of the end of time, otherwise known as eschatology. While Blake was certainly entranced by eschatological themes and ideas, including imagery from the book of Revelation, this is not what we mean when we call his spirituality “apocalyptic.” Apocalypse in this sense is an unveiling of the true nature of things, or some hidden knowledge. For Blake, Christ’s incarnation was the apocalyptic event that unified the material and the divine realms, revealing humanity’s connaturality with God. Christ’s incarnation was not, however, the end of time. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake describes a vision of what the end times will hold. “As I have heard from hell,” Blake explains, “[t]he ancient tradition that the world will be consumed in fire at the end of six thousand years is true.”¹⁸³ Blake presents his vision as a supernatural revelation: a version of apocalypse, or unveiling, but not *the* apocalypse that occurred through the incarnation. Blake’s vision of the end times, however, is connected with his ideas of the apocalyptic union of the material and divine. He asserts that “the whole creation will be consumed and appear infinite and holy, whereas it now appears finite and corrupt.”¹⁸⁴ Before this happens, Blake says, “the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul is to be expunged,” this done by “melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid.” These excerpts suggest Blake’s view that the way humans currently perceive the world is obscured or limited. At the end of time, the illusions we see will be abolished, allowing everyone to see the divine reality initiated through the apocalypse of Jesus’s life and death.

Blake makes clear throughout his poetry that we do not intuitively recognize this new, unified reality. As we see above, Blake notes that the world currently “appears finite and corrupt,” which is merely a surface hiding “the infinite.” We may understand this reality as

¹⁸³ Blake, “A Memorable Fancy”, *The Selected Poems*, 201.

¹⁸⁴ Blake, “A Memorable Fancy”, *The Selected Poems*, 201.

consisting of two layers: the top mundane, and the bottom, the divine. We may also, however, understand this reality as being of one nature- the new, post-apocalyptic, unified reality- which we do not perceive, but rather see the anachronistic illusion of a dualistic world: one in which the material and divine have not been unified, but remain separate. When we understand Blake's reality as the latter interpretation, the end of time functions as the final elimination of the illusion shrouding our perception of everything "as it is, infinite."¹⁸⁵ Altizer describes the end of time as "a new and final paradise in which God will have become all in all."¹⁸⁶ At that time, all will see the reality of the world and the human race: that they are connatural with God, the material and divine made one, the body and soul made one, and most importantly, connatural with Jesus Christ, the God-man.

In addition to understanding the incarnation as an apocalyptic union of contraries, Blake also holds more orthodox Christological beliefs. In "The Everlasting Gospel," for example, Blake professes that Christ "took on sin in the Virgin's womb / And put it off on the cross and tomb / To be worshipp'd by the Church of Rome."¹⁸⁷ This demonstrates a belief consistent with the Church's doctrines: that Christ's death resulted in the forgiveness of sins and the salvation of humanity. Blake does not deny humanity's sinful nature, but rather affirms the necessity of "Forgiveness of Sins continually."¹⁸⁸ Jesus is the solution to the problem of sin for both the mainstream Church and Blake. Of God the Father, Blake says that "God out of Christ is a consuming fire."¹⁸⁹ Jesus was the central figure of Blake's theology, in and through whom, in

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 201.

¹⁸⁶ Altizer, *The New Apocalypse*, 193.

¹⁸⁷ Blake, "The Everlasting Gospel", *The Selected Poems*, 119.

¹⁸⁸ Blake, *The Selected Poems*, 346.

¹⁸⁹ Blake, cited by Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, 94.

Davies' words, "reconciliation is made, the wrath of God being transformed into forgiveness and mercy."¹⁹⁰

Serving as a model for Blake's mystical spirituality, the earthly life of Christ, according to Davies, "disclosed the true humanity."¹⁹¹ Blake's Christology venerates Christ primarily for his humanity, as Blake exclaims in *Jerusalem*, "A Human Vision! Human Divine, Jesus the Saviour."¹⁹² In *Jerusalem*, following the fall of humanity, Blake declares,

The Divine Vision still was seen,
Still was the Human Form Divine;
Weeping, in weak and mortal clay,
O Jesus! still the Form was Thine!
...
Entering thro' the Gates of Birth,
And passing thro' the Gates of Death.¹⁹³

As demonstrated by this excerpt, Blake's Jesus is in Altizer's words, "the epiphany of a universal divine Humanity."¹⁹⁴ Christ's humanity is the foremost component of Blake's spirituality and apocalypticism, as Christ's paradoxical, dual nature fulfills the union of the material and divine. Through his life and death, Jesus is "the total union of God and man," in whom "Humanity is deified."¹⁹⁵ Were it not for Jesus's humanity, the human and divine would not have been unified into one new substance, thereby allowing all of humanity to share in the nature of God. Jesus's incarnation brings about the Kingdom of God, which for Blake is a unified cosmos, rid of duality and filled with immanent divinity. God is not only present in man; man is also present in God. All are connatural with each other.

¹⁹⁰ Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, 94.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁹³ Blake, *Jerusalem, The Selected Poems*, 340.

¹⁹⁴ Altizer, *The New Apocalypse*, 73.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 145-146.

Rather than being only an historical occurrence, the life of Christ for mystics like Blake is, according to Davies, “the pattern or epitome of all spiritual life, which every soul striving for union with God must experience.”¹⁹⁶ Christ’s life and death were together the apocalyptic event that unified the material and divine realms, resulting in a new, common substance of the material world, the heavens, and all human beings. For mystics, the realization of our shared substance with Christ requires us to turn inward to what William Law calls the “spark of the divine nature” hidden in each individual; by doing this, Law claims, “thy heart will find its Saviour, its God within itself.”¹⁹⁷ As discussed in the section on Blake’s mysticism, Blake’s mystical vision is equated with the imagination, the divine vision: one that allows us to experience and recognize our unity with God. By seeing with the imagination, we achieve the mystical unity with God that Blake strives for, and that is possible for all as a result of Christ’s life and death.

Additionally, Blake understands the incarnation as “a personal process, as an influx of spiritual light, that is, of Imagination, ‘which is the Divine Body of the Lord Jesus.’”¹⁹⁸ In the previous section, we established that Blake’s mystical fourfold vision to which he aspires is a state of complete union with God. Blake equates this with the human imagination. The imagination, then, is a state of complete union with God, and is also, itself, the Body of Christ. In Altizer’s words, “the triumphant Body of the crucified Jesus is the freedom and universality of the Human Imagination.”¹⁹⁹ Altizer clarifies Blake’s equation of Christ with the imagination, explaining that “he is certainly not speaking of the imagination in a purely esthetic sense, nor is he limiting the epiphany of Christ to men who know themselves as artists.”²⁰⁰ Blake’s imagination is the divine

¹⁹⁶ Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, 70.

¹⁹⁷ William Law, cited by Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, 70-71.

¹⁹⁸ Blake, cited by Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, 71.

¹⁹⁹ Altizer, *The New Apocalypse*, 144.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

vision brought into the world through Christ's incarnation: the event which unified the human and divine, allowing every person to experience complete unity with God. The mystical experience of union with God is not limited to only artists, but is possible for all through the life and death of Christ.

Blake's mystical imagination is his faith. According to Altizer, for Blake, "Faith is Vision...But Vision can neither arise nor be consummated apart from a transformation of the totality of Experience."²⁰¹ This transformation rests on a God "who eternally dies for man...who is kenotically incarnate in every Other; His dying dissolves that Other; and His free acceptance of his death in Jesus initiates the Apocalypse."²⁰² The world after the apocalypse of Jesus has been made anew through the emptying of God into existence, and the simultaneous transfiguration of humanity into a "Universal Humanity" that is connatural with God.²⁰³ Through Jesus's life and death, the "universal mystical vision," the human imagination, comes into existence.²⁰⁴ All this is to say that the apocalyptic union of contraries is the foundation of Blake's spirituality. Without it, there would be no "Human Form Divine" or "Divine Vision," no mystical experience of divine union. Blake's mysticism exists within an apocalyptic framework; through the mystical faculty of the imagination, we are able to perceive the new, divine reality created through Jesus's life and death.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 3.

²⁰² Ibid., 147.

²⁰³ Altizer, *The New Apocalypse*, 147.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 179.

Conclusions

In his poem “The Tyger,” Blake meditates on the “fearful symmetry” of the natural world. He envisions an apocalyptic world, questioning:

When the stars threw down their spears
 And water'd heaven with their tears:
 Did he smile his work to see?
 Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

The natural world is included in the cataclysm and action of the apocalypse, transforming itself alongside heaven. The result is Blake’s “fearful symmetry,” a new symmetry between the cosmos and the heavens. As we have seen, this apocalypse occurs through the life and death of Jesus Christ, who embodies and enacts the union of the divine and human realms, resulting in a world wherein God is totally imminent, “burning bright, / In the forests of the night.” Every human being, Blake tells us throughout his work, has within them the capacity to see the world’s “fearful symmetry” with the divine.²⁰⁵ We are living in a world transformed through apocalypse, a world wherein, “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.”²⁰⁶

Our exploration of Blake’s work and spirituality has led to the conclusion that Blake lived a mystical and artistic life, modes of being that were one and the same for him. To be Christian was to be an artist, and vice versa. Blake urges us to live and see through the imagination, the “Divine Vision” which puts us into direct communion with God. In this way, his art is his mysticism. Such an imaginative and spiritual experience would not be possible, however, without the apocalyptic union of contraries that occurred through Christ’s earthly life and death. Through the incarnation, the divine became immanent throughout materiality, and newly

²⁰⁵ Blake, “The Tyger by William Blake”, Poetry Foundation, Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43687/the-tyger>.

²⁰⁶ Blake, “A Memorable Fancy”, *The Selected Poems*, 201.

accessible to human beings through the faculty of the imagination. Indeed, Blake equates the imagination with Christ, both being the unifying force within his spirituality. To see the world through the lens of the imagination was to intimately experience Christ, and even to see the world through His eyes.

Blake's spirituality was one we would all do well to imitate. For Blake, the imagination was not limited only to artists. Imaginative vision is inherent in all of us, and is what allows us to embody the "Human Form Divine." The imagination is a divine, mystical subjectivity that aligns our nature with that of God, the original Creator. Through it we encounter Christ, and through its unifying capacities we are redeemed. To see the world through this lens is to see it for all its "fearful symmetry." To be fully human, for Blake, is to strive for an imaginative life that places us in contact with the divine substance immanent in the cosmos. Through Christ, such a life is possible for every human being. Blake's spirituality is one of mysticism, imagination, apocalypse, and union. To live in such a way is to live in constant wonder of the world's mysteries, and to embody that divine creative force innate in us. Ultimately, Blake opens us to our inherently human, inherently divine ability:

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.

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