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## MYSTIC ELEMENTS IN THE POEMS OF WILLIAM BLAKE



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### ABSTRACT :

*William Blake, was a poet, painter, engraver and mystic in the tradition of Plato, Jesus, Rumi and St.Fancis. In other words, he is a pre-romantic poet. He was an omnivorous reader of the classics and was for a time a close friend of Thomas Taylor, The first translated into English of Plato and Plotinus. Taylor also published many translations of and commentaries on the major works of the Neo platonic, orphic and Bacchic mysteries.*

**KEYWORDS :** *pre-romantic poet , major works , Neo platonic, orphic and Bacchic mysteries.*

### INTRODUCTION :

Blake worked steadily at his profession to support himself and his wife, and died peacefully in old age. His art is made from whatever came to hand, not only contemporary social and political events, but domestic matters including his acquaintances, his home life, his own engraving procedures, and so on. From the dark fusion of his mind, these phenomena re-emerge at terrible gods, visions of the dead, spirits of joy, the suffering and dispossessed calling forth judgement on the powers. His art cannot be explained by these contexts, but knowledge of them can make his work more accessible.

"When Blake was only ten years old he had already seen visions, had dreamed dreams, had known (and reported in terror) the face of God at his attic window, By his fourteenth year he had written that perfect little poem entitled "Song: whose first stanza begins :

*How sweet I roam'd from field to field, And tasted all the Summer's pride, Till I the Prince of Love beheld, Who in the sunny beam did glide!*

These are simple authenticated facts of the childhood of one of the most remarkable of mystics"<sup>1</sup>

The only marked peculiarity was that from an early age Blake saw visions. G.E. Bentley Jr, Writes,

From his earliest childhood Blake saw visions. When he was four years old, God put his head to the window and set the child screaming, and once 'his mother beat him for running in and saying that he saw the Prophet Ezekiel under a Tree in the Fields.' Later, when he was eight or ten, one day as *he* was walking on Peckham Rye [...] *he* saw 'a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars.' When he told this story at home, it was 'only through his mother's intercession...a thrashing from his honest father for telling a lie.' Another time, on a summer morning he saw 'the haymakers at work, and amid them angelic figures walking'.<sup>2</sup>

This is Blake's vision, but not psychosis. First, Blake deploys such visions in a self-consciously literary way in his writing, as, for example, when he reports in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that 'The Prophets Isaiah and

Ezekiel dined with me.' Here Blake is giving a tongue-in-cheek account of the two untameable Hebrew prophets sitting down to an eighteenth-century dinner party. Blake often states that the act of perception involves an act of interpretation: what we see is influenced by who we are or, as Blake puts it, 'as a man is, so he sees.' Blake may have used his visions playfully in the company of gullible friends such as John Varley, the astrologer for whom Blake drew visionary portraits such as 'The Ghost of a Flea,' It is possible that Blake believed he had seen such things, but they may equally express a wicked sense of delight.

William Blake, G.E. Bentley observes, is an English poet artist, engraver, myth-maker, and visionary, who was the earliest and most independent of the romantics. Blake proclaimed the supremacy of the imagination over the rationalism, artificiality, moral law and materialism of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He believed that "only imagination is real" and that his task was to open the mortal Eyes of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought. Blake's vision-shines through his early lyric poetry, in his later, more profound works it is clothed in a cosmological and psychological myth. As important as his words in conveying his insight are his engravings and watercolors".<sup>3</sup>

Blake was a non-conformist. 'Non-conformism' refers historically to religious groups that had separated from the Church of England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These events foregrounded the principle of self-determination in religious worship and belief, and this characteristic would remain central to religious debate in England even after the Church of England was established in 1559 under Elizabeth I. Such people had groups like Puritans, Quakers, Baptists, Methodists and Unitarians. These nonconformists were people who did not want the government telling them how to worship or what to believe or, by extension, how to live or what to think. There was, of course, a great range here: some of these groups, such as the Methodists, did not at first seek official separation from the Church of England, whereas other groups found the situation in Europe so intolerable that they emigrated to America in order to be able to practise their religious beliefs in the way that they

felt necessary. The inseparability of politics and religion in Blake's England makes the seemingly forthright attacks on the Church in his work more complex than they first seem. There is an ongoing debate about the religious position of Blake's parents and their status as non-conformists, but it now seems very likely that his mother came from Nottinghamshire and was a member of the Moravian Church, a protestant denomination with its origins in the Czech Republic. Blake's parents' beliefs meant that he did not attend church as a child. Moreover, he may have inherited a symbolic religious language which fused sexual and religious imagery.

Throughout his long life Blake talked of his visions as part of the natural order and not to be questioned. Though questioned they were, and shrewdly, by the kindly but keen-minded Crabb Robinson. At times, too, he propounded theories that invited ridicule, and suspicion as to his sanity, even in the mind of those who admired the artist and loved the man..... Blake used one phrase, "The spirit told me"/ with the same sort of persistence that Joan of Arc maintained with regard to her voices. "The spirit told me," the little man with the great head would repeat:-

"You use the same word as Socrates used. What resemblance do you suppose is there between your spirit and the spirit of Socrates?". "The same as between our countenance". He paused and added - " I was Socrates". And then, as if correcting himself, "A sort of brother, I must have had conversation with him. So I had with Jesus Christ. I have an obscure recollection of having been with both of them". Later he added, of the divinity of Jesus Christ: "He is the only God -and so am I and so are you"<sup>4</sup>.

"Blake had no formal education, and often said of education that it was a curse. What is meant was that the pouring of men's minds into moulds is their destruction, making them into vessels echoing the thoughts and ideas of others. He read without either guidance or method and his reading included Druidical writers, the Gnostics, Swedenborg (whose works he annotated), and Jacob Boehme, somewhat later adding the Aphorisms of the Swiss clerical mystic, Johan Lavater, Of Blake's intellectual capacity it is enough to know that Latin and Greek he learned, when past middle life, from the minor poet Hayley"<sup>5</sup>

The following notebook poem 'I saw a chapel all of gold' speaks of Blake's early religious beliefs: only the first stanza is illustrated:

*I saw a chapel all of gold That none did dare to enter in I And many weeping stood without / Weeping mourning worshipping.*<sup>6</sup>

By the time Blake was beginning to write, well over two centuries had passed since the establishment of the Church of England, and more than a century since the English Civil War (1642-51). Nevertheless, tensions between religious denominations in England and their connection to politics and social unrest were still strongly evident, not least because dissent was legislated against through the Test and Corporation Acts which were not repealed until after Blake's death.

Blake's poetry seems to be just as quotable as his images: the opening lines of 'Auguries of Innocence' (in a slightly misquoted form) 'to see the world in a grain of sand' mark the entrance point to the mystery that constitutes the plot of the 2001 action movie *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*.

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