

The Chamber of Maiden Thought/ pages 70-81

CHAPTER 3

BLAKE: THE MIND'S EYE

by Meg Harris Williams

'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.
(*'Auguries of Innocence'*)

In Blake, the concept of God alone, transcendent, and unattainable, is replaced by a Divine Family as guiding deities of the creative mind, responsible for the 'expansion' of inner vision to infinity and eternity, with 'no limits'.¹ He expressed the prototypical fall and redemption of developmental experience with: 'First God Almighty comes with a Thump on the Head. Then Jesus Christ comes with a balm to heal it.'² In Blake's image of the creative inner world, which he called Jerusalem, the internal deities are: Jesus (or God-as Jesus), the female muses or daughters of Beulah (the dream-world) who are agents of Jesus and tend the suffering soul; and the 'little children of Jerusalem', or (as he synonymously terms them) the 'minute particulars' of mental existence - embryonic figments of imagination or intellectual vision, with an innocent potential for experience. Together they comprise the 'Divine Humanity' or the 'Humanity', for 'all deities reside in the Human Breast',³ yet are quite distinct from the 'selfhood'. The process of coming to knowledge of these internal relationships is the 'building of Jerusalem' - the function of 'every Christian, as much as in him lies',⁴ and in particular of the artist. Blake defines his 'task' at the beginning of *Jerusalem*:

I rest not from my great Task,
To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes
Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought, into Eternity
Ever expanding in the Bosom of God, the Human Imagination. (pl. 5, 17-20)

To *see* 'infinity' is to *be* 'human', in the Blakean sense:

If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would
appear to man as it is, infinite.

For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro'
narrow chinks of his cavern.⁵

This cleansing of perception is effected by the emotional tensions of a 'marriage of contraries', a phrase in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, derived from Satan's 'hateful siege of contraries' in *Paradise Lost*. Milton's poetic struggle becomes Blake's doctrine; these contraries are necessary to make vision expansive and translucent, imaginative - the paradise within. Conversely, if perception is not redeemed through this inner tension, man enters a state of spiritual 'non-entity' or 'error', which Blake in his prophetic books names Ulro, his own version of hell: a condition of self imprisonment, bounded by meaningless sense impressions - the walls of the cavern.

Blake's view supersedes both the Christian doctrine of sin and repentance, and rationalist empiricism. Error or non-entity rather than sin comprises the evil to which man is prone, and is only reversible through the spiritual dynamism of contrary passions, which endow him with a complex vision. (In his insistence on rejecting both Christian and classical mythologies, Blake invents a hierarchy of two-, three- and four-fold vision). The complex vision of imagination contrasts with the mechanical conjunctions of memory or the spectrous divisions of reason, like the compasses with which Newton divided the universe. By 'reason' Blake means 'rationalization', a tool of the specious omnipotent selfhood which needs to be abandoned. States in which the selfhood is dominant have a delusory substantiality, though man may in fact be drowning in the waters of materialism, or suffocated by sentimentality - the cancerous 'polypus of soft affections'. Ulro or Chaos appears well-ordered because it is tyrannically regimented, but is in fact 'not organized', since its creative energies are unemployed and useless - those giants which were born free

and are everywhere in chains.⁶ In their place are the false gods Urizen (tyrannical reason) and Satan, who represents smooth hypocrisy, pseudity, and imitative modes of learning. They are projections of the selfhood, and ‘in Selfhood we are nothing, but fade away in morning’s breath’.⁷ Blake knew that in the realms of imagination, the poet is but a ‘Secretary’ to his visions; the ‘Authors are in Eternity’;⁸ for ‘we who dwell on Earth can do nothing of ourselves; everything is conducted by Spirits, no less than Digestion or Sleep’.⁹ These are the conditions for the creation of both true humanity and true art. False art, like humanity, has a delusory coherence. Since Blake’s imagination lived and breathed through the visual arts, he extended his descriptions of this false or unreal organisation into terms of an ‘opaque’ or ‘excrementitious’ covering which is smeared over the true image or symbol, the hypocritical ‘covering Cherub’ which disguises the living ‘line of the Almighty’:

The want of this determinate and bounding form evidences the want of idea in the artist’s mind . . . Leave out this line, and you leave out life itself; all is chaos again, and the line of the almighty must be drawn out upon it before man or beast can exist.¹⁰

Blake’s use of the word ‘idea’ suggests it is a substantial presence in the mind not merely a didactic purpose. When the omnipotent selfhood is stripped away, its false ‘excrementitious/Husk & Covering into Vacuum evaporat[es], revealing the lineaments of Man’.¹¹ Blake preferred the translucent properties of watercolour to the building-up nature of oilpainting, possibly owing to this association of the line of truth with an entity which could only be recovered through being uncovered, discarding the smooth husk of fashionable taste, the selfhood’s lack of originality. The mind’s negative, uncreative condition is a type of superfluous garment of sense-impressions, not a real organized form in itself; as Blake wrote in one of his last verses, to ‘the God of This World’: ‘Truly, my Satan, thou art but a Dunce,/And dost not know the Garment from the Man.’¹²

In the poem ‘London’, from *Songs of Experience*, we see Blake’s aesthetic preoccupation with the bloody and sooty opacities integral to a state of error. The living line of the mind’s potential ideas are covered with indefiniteness:

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
Every black'ning Church appalls;
And the hapless Soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlot's curse
Blasts the new born Infant's tear,
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

The chimney-sweeper's cry, the soldier's sigh, the infant's tear, are voices of the little children of Jerusalem which go unheard because they are immediately converted into opaque coverings: the cry becomes the soot covering the church, the sigh becomes blood on the walls, tears and flowers become syphilitic boils and transform the sensuous vehicle of marriage into a hearse. This state of false art corresponds with the 'charter'd' streets and river of London - where 'charter'd' is the antithesis of 'organized'. The city of anti Jerusalem is imprisoned by 'mind-forg'd manacles'. It is an image of the cavern of man's selfhood, and its sensuous boundaries are those of vegetable reason, the excrementitious, the opaque, the indefinite. They include sanctimony and moral virtue, which are among the 'self righteousneses conglomerating against the divine vision'.¹³ All these 'conglomerations' represent the caked-up mind stifled by its own rubbish, like Macbeth's faecal hallucinations. The work-song of those 'at the plow' in *Jerusalem* is to 'labour well the Minute Particulars: attend to the Little-ones', which involves 'pounding to dust' all such 'Indefinites', or melting them in the 'Furnaces of Affliction':

For Art & Science cannot exist but in minutely organized Particulars,

And not in generalizing Demonstrations of the Rational Power.
The Infinite alone resides in Definite & Determinate Identity. (pl. 55, 51-64)

For Blake, the 'indefinite' is common sense deified: a species of perversity in which the unthinking basic assumptions of the mind are rigidified into moral laws. This rigidity is in antithetical contrast to the definiteness of the 'organized Particulars' or 'little children' of the inner world, which make up the Divine Humanity and contain the infinite in definite and determinate form.

Blake's insistence that the perversity and negativity underlying humanity's false face have to be reversed, not modified, before mental life can begin, prompts the deliberate reversal of labels in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. What the spectrous mind worships by the name of 'Jesus' is in fact Antichrist; the common view of wisdom (i.e. prudence) is really spiritual folly, and vice versa, since 'if the fool would but persist in his folly he would become wise'; corporeal war is really a state of inaction not a state of unbridled passion, and only spiritual war is active. Spiritual war is necessary to mental health, for 'Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human Existence.'¹⁴ Founded on Milton's 'siege of contraries', this key feature of the literary model of the mind permanently divorces poetry's sophisticated, exploratory idea of a 'progressive' ethics from the static application of moral or religious codes. In poetry, there are not right or wrong feelings, but real or unreal ones (pseudity), as likewise in psychoanalysis; and the real feelings must be discovered and brought into view if the truth about an experience is to be symbolized and digested into thought. 'Negations are not Contraries; Contraries mutually Exist;/But Negations Exist Not';¹⁵ the positive emotional tension between contraries is the way to lead the mind out of the impasse of the negative state. It appeared to Blake, when translating the lessons of the French revolution and of social injustice into terms of everyman's mental condition, that a species of spiritual murder or obliteration of the truth can be taking place at any time or continuously. 'Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires', he wrote provocatively;¹⁶ meaning that desires or passions which achieve no aesthetic organization or fulfilment are, in effect, murdered infants in the world

of the mind. Each one is an aspect of truth which has been aborted from fruition, and lies enchained, potentially vengeful. Likewise, tyrannical reasoning means that 'every Minute Particular of Albion [is] degraded and murder'd.'¹⁷ These minute particulars or little children are potential ideas within the individual mind, or ideas presented by poets and artists within the collective or historical mind of mankind - the body of Jerusalem. They emerge with emotional complexity, like Macbeth's 'pity like a new-born babe' or the songs of Lear's Fool, as in Blake's 'Infant Sorrow':

My mother groan'd! my father wept.
Into the dangerous world I leapt:
Helpless, naked, piping loud:
Like a fiend hid in a cloud.

In Blake's model, there is only one form of real knowing, and that is, imagining what exists in the mind. Imagination is true vision, and is 'surrounded by the daughters of Inspiration', while invention in the form of fable or allegory is associated with the 'daughters of memory' and dominated by the selfhood (a distinction prefiguring Coleridge's between imagination and fancy):

Allegory & Vision ought to be known as Two Distinct Things, & so called for the Sake of Eternal Life. Plato has made Socrates say that Poets & Prophets do not know or Understand what they write or Utter; this is a most Pernicious Falshood. If they do not, pray is an inferior kind to be call'd Knowing? Plato confutes himself.¹⁸

The poets 'know' by means of imagination and inspiration; and this foremost means of knowing is to be sharply differentiated from 'inferior kinds' such as backwards-looking memory or tame allegory, which embody the limited or possibly false understanding of the selfhood. The knowledge gained by imagination is made by 'authors in eternity', and on it depends the mind's 'eternal life'. Yet Blake does allow a limited place for allegory in so far as this is 'seldom without some vision', though it is liable to be taken over by the purely mechanical memory or by moral virtues, things which 'do not Exist'. What man does 'of himself is at best derivative and at worst destructive; only inspiration puts him in contact with the eternal, internal

deities who can expand his vision for him. In his 'Vision of the Last Judgment', Blake presents his divine-essentially patriarchal-family of the imagination, with the 'Eternal Births of Intellect' emanating like 'Infants' from the central Sun of Jesus.¹⁹ Intellect and passion are part of the same mental complex: 'The Treasures of Heaven are not Negations of Passion, but Realities of Intellect, from which all the Passions emanate Uncurbed in their Eternal Glory', and men are 'cast out' from heaven only if they have 'no Passions of their own because no Intellect'. Blake's philosophy makes passion not the enemy but the key to the spiritual vision which is the only real knowledge:

Mental Things are alone Real; what is call'd Corporeal, Nobody knows of its Dwelling Place: it is in Fallacy, and its Existence an Imposture. Where is the Existence out of Mind or Thought? . . . 'What,' it will be Question'd, 'When the Sun rises, do you not see a round disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea?' O no, no, I see an innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.' I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more that I would Question a Window concerning a Sight. I look thro' it & not with it.²⁰

The eye of the beholder can either reflect the selfhood of its viewer's limitations (to see a guinea, signifying worldly dross), or it can strip away their opacity like a husk, to reveal the rays of organized passion which emanate from the source of mental reality - the heavenly host crying 'Holy, holy, holy'.

Blake's idea of perception makes it inevitable that the story of the mind's recreation or redemption of false vision cannot be a neoPlatonic ascent from the sensuous up towards a higher reality. It has to be one of intense looking at and through the sensuous until the veils are stripped away. As Isaiah says in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: 'I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover'd the infinite in every thing.'²¹ For Blake it is literally a question of discovery, a series of deaths of the selfhood; as he wrote in an autograph album in his later life, he was 'born in London in 1757 and has died several times since'.²² His repeated condemnation of the 'natural', as perceived by the false 'evidence of the five senses', is not an ascetic doctrine but an attempt to transform the meaning of the sensuous, which would indeed result in an 'improvement of sensual enjoyment'.²³ Looking outwards with a vegetative eye,

man's perception is blocked by the impressions which bombard him from the walls of his 'cavern', and he rationalizes them. Looking inwards, sense impressions become irradiated with meaningfulness, and constitute the complex vision which reverses negative 'single vision'. In the prophetic books, Blake experiments with various systems and hierarchies of experience, such as 'threefold' dream-vision and 'fourfold' Edenic revelation; though frequently the mythologies invented (then superseded) in these books have the flavour of what he himself would call allegory rather than vision, contrived by Blake the patriarchal mystic in the spirit of impenetrable didacticism. There is a certain defensiveness in their epic style which is perhaps accounted for by Los's comment: 'I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Man's.'²⁴ In wanting to be a system-creator yet rejecting the mythological language of existing culture, Blake tended to construct cryptic codes inviting interpretation by other systems, rather than symbols from which meanings could be drawn infinitely as with the plays of Shakespeare.

Nevertheless, from the prophetic books we glean a general picture of those internal deities, energies or giants whom Blake calls 'fairy hands', engaged in a continual cycle of harrowing, weaving, hammering, and melting; manipulating Time and Space around the 'mundane shell' of the mind's body. The goal is to build the city of art (Golgonooza) in relation to the city of eternal imagination (Jerusalem), and to prevent the mind softening and weakening through materialism, rationalization, and sentimentality. The main agent in all this is Los (=Sol, sun) who ultimately, in *Jerusalem*, forms part of the identity of Jesus. In Blake's personal hell of spiritual non-existence, 'Souls incessant wail, being piteous Passions and Desires/With neither lineament nor form';²⁵ and the process of redemption consists therefore in building a house for the passions which is truly 'organized' in its 'inward form', to accommodate those outcast children of Jerusalem. In *Milton* (begun 1804) he describes this:

And every Generated body in its inward form
Is a garden of delight and a building of magnificence,
Built by the sons of Los in Bowlahoola and Allamanda, . . .
Some sons of Los surround the Passions with porches of iron and silver
Creating form and beauty around the dark regions of sorrow,

Giving to airy nothing a name and a habitation
Delightful: with bounds to the Infinite putting off the Indefinite
Into most holy forms of Thought (such is the power of Inspiration),
They labour incessant, with many tears and afflictions,
Creating the beautiful House for the piteous sufferer.

(plates 26, 28; *Writings*, pp. 512, 514-5)

Blake's house for the passions, built to replace the prison of the senses, has its dual genesis in Theseus' speech about the imagination and in *Paradise Lost* with its investigation of true and false building systems. Inspiration gives bounds to the infinite 'holy forms of thought', symbolic containers for the inward form of the passions. In Blake's myth, Milton returns to earth to revise his vision through the existence of Blake, and in the process shows Blake how to avoid becoming a mere 'covering for Satan to do his will' (plates 38, 31). It is a myth which illustrates both Blake's admiration and ambivalence towards Milton. In a 'moment' during the day which 'Satan cannot find' (plates 35, 42) the inspiring forces of the mind enter earthly existence:

And between every two Moments stands a Daughter of Beulah
To feed the Sleepers on their Couches with maternal care ...
Every Time Less than a pulsation of the artery
Is equal in its period & value to Six Thousand Years,
For in this Period the Poet's Work is Done, and all the Great
Events of Time start forth & are conceiv'd in such a Period,
Within a Moment, a Pulsation of the Artery. (plates 28, 29; *Writings*, p. 516)

Thus the process of redemption may be seen on the vast time scale of the six thousand years of creation, or on the microscopic time scale of a pulsation in an artery. Blake believed that a single 'error', not 'removed', could destroy a soul;²⁶ but at the same time he believed that a single moment of inspired 'feeding' by the daughters of Beulah (the dream-bringers) could redeem it; in this period the poet's work is done, and the building of Jerusalem.

The last word on Blake's literary contribution to the model of the mind should perhaps be left to one of his most haunting poems, 'The Tyger',

written at a time before the visual artistic side of Blake's creativity became paramount. After *Jerusalem* (begun 1804) he wrote little, and concentrated on painting. 'The Tyger' (*Songs of Experience*, 1794) demonstrates symbolically the creative tension between contraries essential to mental life:

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame they fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies,
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

The tiger-light is from from the outset one of those inward lights which in Blake illuminate aspects of eternity, like the uncut diamond image in *Milton* - disguised by duskiess, yet 'open all within' (pl. 28; *Writings*, p. 515). The question at the heart of the poem is whether the poet can tolerate the awesome conjunction between contrary emotions inspired by this light - the 'fearful symmetry' of terror and beauty. The light both summons and repels the poet who feels called upon to 'seize the fire', Prometheus-like, yet is aware such symmetry cannot be 'framed' in the sense of captured or tamed. Gradually, his own feelings become framed in the aesthetic sense - symbolically. In the second stanza, the light in the forest or night-sky becomes specifically a fire in the eyes, burning in 'deeps or skies', in a way which suggests not only the marriage of heaven and hell, but of blue eyes becoming 'deep' and burning.

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? and what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

The central stanzas focus on the body of the tiger, and the nature of its framing in the sense of building. These are the labours of Los at his furnaces, hammering at the doors of perception to forge inward vision - the making rather than the inspired receiving aspect of the artist-craftsman. In the process, there is a fusion of identities between creator and created, into which the poet is also drawn through projection and introjection. The 'shoulder' of God becomes that of the tiger; likewise the 'hand' and 'feet'. The beating of the heart (which is conveyed by the poem's quickened rhythm) is primarily the tiger's, but also God's by virtue of its enclosure within that 'shoulder' and 'feet'; and also brings into the identification the poet through his sense of terror. The beats of his heart direct the following series of questions, which culminate in the clinching of the 'grasp-clasp' rhyme in which tiger, God, and poet are united. Meanwhile the pattern of the rhetorical questions 'What dread hand? and what dread feet?', which echoes that of 'On what wings . . .?', has linked the wings of exploration to the grasp of the tiger, in the poet's journey towards knowledge. The sudden insertion of the abstract word 'terrors' in this section of concrete building references, illuminates how in clasping the image, framing the poem, the poet is himself clasped by terror in the hand of the tiger-god. He feels his own inner world come to life and start beating, as a result of seizing the fire of poetry; he finds his own identity framed by the symbol's fearful symmetry. Thus the doors of perception are cleansed, and start to weep:

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?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

The first stanza here focuses on the face of the tiger-god: on the eyes (stars) and 'smile'. The mythological reference of 'stars' is to the angelic armies whose rebellion prefigured the fall of man. In 'throwing down', rather than

relinquishing their arms, the vigour of piercing rays of light is retained; as these rays transmute into tears, their original spirit continues to shine in them, keeping the link with the 'fire' of the tiger's eyes yet modulating its ferocity. The relationship implicitly figured here between tiger and poet is that of lovers (with a hint of mother and baby in tiger and lamb). 'Did he who made the Lamb make thee?' is a cry of recognition, not a question demanding an answer or even posing an ambiguity. It follows the inevitable progression of the change in quality of the starlight during the recognition-crisis of the poem. Through the 'watering' which dissolves the barriers against vision, a line of intimacy is drawn between eyes and lamb: making the lamb an integral part of the tiger-visage, an emanation from the divine humanity. Finally, in the last stanza (which repeats the first apart from the single key substitution of 'Dare' for 'Could'), the poet recognizes that the fearful symmetry of the tiger is dependent more on emotional capacity than on physical artistry or craftsmanship. Now that the tiger-symbol is made, he discovers that what makes the tiger awesome is the union of contraries: the emotional tension or aesthetic conflict between tiger and lamb, both aspects of God, little children of Jerusalem. This relationship is revealed, rather than crafted by Los with his hammer. Both Tiger and Lamb are deities which reside within the human breast. In this poem, which is symbolic rather than didactic like the epics, Blake explores the implications of Milton's 'hateful siege of contraries' - the aesthetic conflict at the heart of the mind's relation to its internal deities. This is the 'golden string' which Blake offers 'to the Christians' in *Jerusalem*, in an image founded on Milton's 'pendent world':²⁷

I give you the end of a golden string:
Only wind it into a ball,
It will lead you in at Heaven's gate,
Built in Jerusalem's wall. (pl. 77)

Notes

Blake's poetry and prose are quoted from *Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes. London: Oxford University Press, 1971.

- 1 See *Jerusalem* (engraved 1804-20), pl. 42, 35.
- 2 'A Vision of the Last Judgement', in *A Descriptive Catalogue of Pictures* (1810 edn), pp. 92-5, *Writings*, p. 617.
- 3 *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-93), pl. 11, *Writings*, p. 153.
- 4 *Jerusalem*, pl. 77, *Writings*, p. 717.
- 5 *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, pl. 14, *Writings*, p. 154
- 6 See for example *Jerusalem*, pl. 17, 41-3 and pl. 54, 7-8; *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, pl. 16, *Writings*, p. 155.
- 7 *Jerusalem*, pl. 45, 13.
- 8 Letter to T. Butts, 6 July 1803, *Writings*, p. 825.
- 9 *Jerusalem*, pl. 3, *Writings*, p. 621.
- 10 Quoted by K. Raine, *William Blake*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1970, p. 109.
- 11 *Jersusalem*, pl. 98, 18-19.
- 12 Epilogue to 'The Gates of Paradise', 1793-1818.
- 13 *Jerusalem*, pl. 13, 52.
- 14 Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, pl. 3, *Writings*, p. 149.
- 15 *Ibid.*, pl. 17, 33-4.
- 16 *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, pl. 10, *Writings*, p. 152.
- 17 *Jerusalem*, pl. 31, 7.
- 18 'A Vision of the Last Judgement', p. 68, *Writings*, pp. 604-5.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 85, *Writings*, p. 613.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp. 87, 92-5, *Writings*, p. 153.
- 21 *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, pl. 12, *Writings*, p. 154.
- 22 'Inscription in the Autograph Album of William Upcott' (1826), *Writings*, p. 781.
- 23 *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, pl. 14, *Writings*, p. 154.
- 24 *Jerusalem*, pl. 10, 20.
- 25 *Milton*, pl. 26, 26-7.
- 26 *Jerusalem*, pl. 46, 11.
- 27 *Paradise Lost*, II.1052.