

The Norman Levan Center for the Humanities and St. John's College Present

# *William Blake*

## *and the Metaphysics of Poetic Genius*



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What is truth? Philosophy criticizes poetry for being removed from truth, and for offering us images and illusions in place of reality. How does poetry respond to this critique? Through an examination of the metaphysical foundations of the poetry of William Blake Mr. Carl will attempt to defend the poet's claim that without the imagination there would be no reality, and that truth is more a poetic construct than it is a philosophic construct.

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David Carl

What is Truth?  
William Blake & the Metaphysics of Poetic Genius

According to some accounts, William Blake was fond of taking tea with his wife in their garden, naked. One day some guests arrived unannounced. "Come in," cried Blake. "It's only Adam and Eve, you know!"

If this story is true, it's worth mentioning that Blake, not ashamed of his nakedness, sees himself as a prelapsarian Adam. Blake is Adam before knowledge has corrupted experience. This detail will have important implications for the relation between knowledge and experience in the discussion to follow.

On another occasion (recounted in his poem *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*) Blake was dining with the Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel. In response to Blake's question about how they dared assert that God had spoken to them, Isaiah admitted that he neither saw nor heard God in a "**finite organical perception.**" Instead, the senses of the prophet "**discover'd the infinite in every thing.**" Ezekiel too admitted his "**desire of raising men into a perception of the infinite**" and compared his work as a prophet to the practices of North American Indians.

Blake is interested in poetry's ability, which he elsewhere calls prophecy, to reveal the Infinite and Eternal. He writes, "**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**" (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell*). How does Blake's poetry constitute an attempt to cleanse these doors of perception and reveal to us the infinite? How will he help us see beyond the chinks of our cavern?

In the opening lines of his great epic poem *Jerusalem* Blake writes, "**I see the Savior over me / Spreading his beams of love, & dictating the words of this mild song.**" This "mild song" is the text of *Jerusalem* and it is important to note, in these first lines, how Blake combines the faculties of vision: "I see the Savior" and sound: "dictating the words", to introduce a work of art that is both word and image. It is also worth noting that Blake places himself in the tradition of the epic poets Homer, Virgil and Milton by claiming that his poem has been dictated to him by a divine muse. Only in Blake's case this muse is the Savior himself.

Tonight's lecture is not really a lecture about poetry, as I had originally intended it to be. Instead it is an introduction to the metaphysical underpinnings of Blake's poetry. A detailed analysis of the wonderful language, imagery, characters, and narrative structure of Blake's

poems will have to wait for a separate occasion. Tonight I am chiefly interested in exploring how Blake's understanding of Christianity relates to his theory of the Imagination and to the faculty he calls "Poetic Genius." If I have lured you here under the impression that I'm going to answer the question, "What is truth?" as my title suggests, then perhaps I've somewhat overstated my case. But then again, maybe not. Blake certainly thinks he knows the Truth; believes that this Truth has been revealed to him, in the form of a Divine Vision, and that it is the task of his poetry to share this Truth with the world.

Near the opening of *Jerusalem* he writes:

Trembling I sit day and night, my friends are astonish'd at me.  
Yet they forgive my wanderings, 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 (Plate 5)

Blake describes his "great task" as one of opening: he must "open the Eternal Worlds" and "open the Immortal Eyes of Man inwards." But what are these Eternal Worlds and what do we see when we look inwards with our Immortal Eyes? How does Blake's poetry seek to accomplish these twin openings? What is the vision that has been revealed to Blake, and how does his poetry share that vision with us, his readers?

Explicating the details of Blake's Divine Vision, particularly in terms of what he calls the "Human Imagination", is the task of tonight's lecture. Before we explore some of these details, here's a brief overview of what I consider six of the most outrageous things Blake believes have been revealed to him about the nature of Truth and Reality:

1. Truth is not something we have knowledge of. Truth is not an object of our rational faculty. Rather Truth is the object of prophetic experience. Blake writes in the 5<sup>th</sup> Principle of his short tract "All Religions Are One": "**The Religions of all Nations are derived from each Nations different reception of the Poetic Genius which is every where call'd the Spirit of Prophecy.**" Because prophecy is a form of poetry, it depends on the faculty of the Imagination rather than on our reason. Knowledge of the material world is always relative, subjective, and subject to the constraints of space and time. Newton's "truth" is subject to revision by the discoveries of Einstein. Euclid's truth, that pillar of certainty for our freshmen, is subject to revision by the discoveries of Gauss, Riemann and Lobachevsky. Our most fundamental notions of physical reality are called into question by Quantum Mechanics. But Blake's Truth is absolute and concerns those things not limited by Time and Space. Therefore Truth is not an object of knowledge, but rather one of the forms in which we experience the Divine.

2. Reality is not revealed to us by means of our physical senses. We do not discover what is real by observing, measuring and analyzing, because the only things that submit to observation, measurement and analysis are bodies, and bodies themselves are not real. Things are real by virtue of the Imagination alone. I will have much more to say about this point below.

3. We do not rely on our physical senses to discover the truth about reality because our bodies are not part of this reality. We are embodied beings only in the most contingent of senses. Humans are essentially spiritual beings. Our bodies are an extension of our spiritual reality, but are not themselves real. Blake writes in “All Religions Are One”: **“the Poetic Genius is the true Man. and . . . the body or outward form of Man is derived from the Poetic Genius . . .”** In “There Is No Natural Religion” he asserts that so long as **“the desires & perceptions of man”** are **“untaught by anything but organs of sense”** they will remain **“limited to objects of sense.”** Recall that Blake’s “great task” is to **“open the immortal Eyes Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought”**; i.e. to reveal to us those truths not limited to objects of sense. This is possible because Blake believes that **“Man’s perceptions are not bound by organs of perception; he perceives more than sense (tho’ ever so acute) can discover”** (“There Is No Natural Religion”).

4. Among the principles articulated in “All Religions Are One” we find: **“The Jewish & Christian Testaments are an original derivation from the Poetic Genius.”** The reality of our spiritual nature is revealed to us through prophecy, a form of Poetic Genius, and it is the poet’s task to express this reality in the form of poetic truths we experience through the faculty of the Imagination.

5. True Christianity is one such system of poetry, and Christ is a true poet. The single essential aspect of Christianity is the quality of Forgiveness embodied by Christ. Forgiveness is so important that Blake thinks the Virgin Birth is one of the grossest errors perpetrated by false Christian belief. For Blake it is essential that Mary was a harlot who conceived Christ out of wedlock. Otherwise there would have been no occasion for Joseph to exercise the cardinal virtue of Forgiveness. The true miracle of Christ’s birth, according to Blake, is Joseph’s forgiveness, in which he imitates and becomes like Christ, and not Mary’s sinlessness, which would obviate man’s opportunity to approach the Divine by acting like God. To fully appreciate just how radical Blake’s understanding of Christianity is, we should keep in mind that the Spanish Inquisition was not finally abolished until 30 years after he began composing *Jerusalem*.

6. As we deepen our understanding of the Divine we recognize the essential identity between man and God. Man *is* God. God *is* man. We are Divine. Essential to recognizing our true Divinity is what Blake calls “the annihilation of Selfhood.” It is only through annihilating our limited, material, deterministic, narrowly rationalistic notion of self, an annihilation made possible by means of the Christian virtue of forgiveness, that we arrive at a vision of our true Divine nature. Forgiveness, it will turn out, is possible by means of poetry, and poetry depends on the Imagination. Thus poetic imagination is the lynchpin of Blake’s entire soteriological metaphysics. As he concludes in “There Is No Natural Religion”: **“He who sees the Infinite in all things sees God. He who sees the Ratio only sees himself only. / Therefore God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is.”**

Before we examine the poetic foundations that support these six claims, I’d like to say a bit more about Blake’s notion of the Poetic Genius. Given the enormous power it has to shape and determine our experience of reality, I’d like to provide a specific example. Here’s what

I've come up with: *Calvin and Hobbes*. I know we have to be cautious, at a great books college, about how we throw around the adjective "great." But *Calvin and Hobbes* is a pretty great comic strip. Calvin, who must surely strike some of us as a 20<sup>th</sup> century version of a six-year-old Don Quixote, or perhaps an Avatar of Blake himself, is also a delightful, and I would argue profound example of Blake's Poetic Genius. Shrunken down to child size. The poet and the child have much in common. Calvin, through the power of his imagination, has brought his stuffed Tiger, Hobbes, to life. He has given vivid, compelling expression to the details of his internal life. In fact he has allowed the contours of his internal world to dictate the shape of the external world. He is a creator; a childlike version of the Divine. He has given Hobbes thoughts and feelings, a personality and character traits. The two of them interact. Hobbes' behavior influences Calvin. For Calvin, Hobbes is *real*. There's no point telling a six-year old boy that his tiger *isn't* real, that it's *just* his imagination. The six-year old knows better. When locked in a struggle over reality the six-year old will win out over a narrow-minded literalist adult constrained by the limits of materialism every time. If you doubt that, just look at the fate of Calvin's parents frame after frame throughout the ten years the strip ran.

Is Calvin a childhood version of Blake's Poetic Genius? Or is it really *Calvin and Hobbes* creator Bill Watterson who is the example of Poetic Genius? Watterson brought Calvin to life for millions of readers. In turn, Calvin brings Hobbes to life. The Poetic Genius is an animating force. It makes things *real*. It gives them value. (If you doubt the real value of Hobbes for Calvin I refer you again to the details of the comic strip.) What is the nature of this value engendered by the Poetic Genius? What is this power that brings things to life and makes them real?

As we shall see throughout this lecture, for Blake it is the power of the Imagination. Without the imagination, there would be no reality. Think about that for a moment. What could it possibly mean? Blake thinks that all values come from the Imagination, and all meaning comes from values, and reality depends on meaning. So, if  $A=B$  and  $B=C$  and  $C=D$  then  $A=D$  (Blake will submit to logic so far at least), where  $A$ =imagination;  $B$ =value;  $C$ =meaning; and  $D$ =reality. Or at least, the only form of reality that matters to us as human beings. What if there were a reality completely independent of value and meaning, a reality of facts and measurements and statistics. But what could we possibly care about that? Its very definition: a reality without value or meaning; precludes the possibility of our caring about it, since as soon as we start caring we've injected value into it, and thus exercised our Imaginations. That's what we are: value-creating machines that impose values on facts in order to create a meaningful world. That's what poetry does. That's what the work of the poet is: to create value so that the world of facts becomes meaningful to us. That's what Blake calls "reality" and that's why he claims that only the power of the Imagination makes things real. I will return to a further consideration of this theory of value later in tonight's lecture, and consider it from the perspective of a famous 20<sup>th</sup> century physicist when I do so.

To understand how Blake's poetry develops and supports this radical vision of reality, let's consider a set of traditional contraries he thinks it is essential that we see beyond, in order to arrive at true understanding. A great deal of Blake's poetry is aimed at bringing about a *marriage* of these contraries: not a reconciliation between them, or a triumph of one over the

other, but a balanced union which recognizes their essential tension and respects it. The only thing that must be fully overcome for Blake is that sense of materialistic Selfhood dominated and limited by the narrow rationalism that brings about moral systems and the notion of the opposition of these contraries in the first place.

In *Jerusalem* Blake writes of “a place where Contraries are equally true” (Plate 48). These contraries include: Heaven and Hell, good and evil; body and soul; reason and passion; rationality and imagination. There are others, but these should keep us busy for a while.

Blake first explored the union of these contraries in his visionary prose-poem manifesto *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Written in 1790, only 3 years after the second edition of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, *The Marriage* is one of the most unusual works of English literature, ever. In it Blake combines verse and prose, word and image, parable and painting to create an absolutely unique moral, poetic, spiritual, and mythical vision of truth and reality. Twenty years later, when he came to write his last great epic poem *Jerusalem*, he would borrow characters, words, phrases, images and ideas from this early work. *The Marriage* remains the source of Blake’s metaphysics, aesthetics, critique of religion and theory of poetry.

In *The Marriage*, assuming the “voice of the Devil”, Blake writes:

Without contraries is no heaven. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.  
From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy.  
Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell.

Here Blake initiates his critique of the false dichotomies between reason and energy, good and evil, heaven and hell. We see these essential contraries as opposed to one another because of three “Errors” which Blake believes have been taught by a distortion and misunderstanding of true religion. These errors are:

1. That Man has two real existing principles Viz: a Body & a Soul.
2. That Energy, call’d Evil, is alone from the Body, & that Reason, call’d Good, is alone from the Soul.
3. That God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies.

Against these errors Blake asserts, “the following Contraries to these are True”:

1. 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
2. Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.
- 3 Energy is Eternal Delight

The first error and its contrary truth is the essential element of all of Blake's further metaphysics: Blake is not a materialist. He does not believe that bodies in themselves are real. Our senses are "inlets of Soul **in this age**"—useful for providing us with information about things that exist in time and space (the dominant forms of false reality *in this age*; but of little help in guiding us to an awareness of those realities which exist beyond time and space: the realities of Infinity and Eternity. As he writes in Plate 52 of *Jerusalem*:

The Spiritual States of  
the Soul are all Eternal  
Distinguish between the  
Man, & his present State

Blake's idealism depends on the scientific principle that everything that is a part of the material world is subject to rigorous laws of natural determination and causality. But it is clear that man is not subject to these laws. It's not a question of whether or not we *know* that we are free—we experience ourselves as free. (Recall that for Blake truth is not something we know but something we experience.) Therefore man is not a part of nature. Or rather, his nature is not material. Those parts of us that are a part of nature are not parts of our essential selves. In our "present State" we are fallen versions of our true selves.

If Blake is not a materialist, neither is he a dualist: he does not believe that human beings are a combination of Body and Soul, mind and matter, spirit and substance. Blake is an idealist. Only Soul—something like what some contemporary philosophers call "mind"—is real. In fact, Blake is one of the most radical Idealists of the Western tradition. His sense of the reality of the Soul goes beyond the Idealism we encounter in Plato, Berkeley, or Hegel. The conclusions that Blake's idealism lead him to about Infinity and Eternity, about the nature of reality, about what is True, and about the status and importance of creativity, poetry, and the Imagination constitute one of the most radical epistemological and ontological metaphysics ever articulated in the West.

Blake makes no sustained distinction between the errors of Materialism and Dualism. Both insist on the reality of the Body, and it is this mistake that opens the door to the notion of Selfhood that Blake's poetry is intent on showing us the way towards an annihilation of. Blake prays in the opening passages of *Jerusalem*: "**O Saviour pour upon me the Spirit of meekness and love: / Annihilate the Selfhood in me, be thou all my life!**" (Plate 5). So long as we hold onto an idea of individuality that leads to Selfhood we remain divided, cut off from the Holy Savior, and separate from our true Divine nature. In *Jerusalem* this division is represented by the character of Albion, the Universal Man who has fallen into the "sleep of Ulro": the slumber of materialistic ignorance and rational narrow-mindedness. The action of *Jerusalem* revolves around the attempts of various characters, particularly Albion's Emanation Jerusalem and his friend Los, to rouse him from this slumber and restore him to the true unity of his Divinity.

Against the soteriological efforts of these friends, Albion is lulled to sleep and complacency by the exhortations and temptations of his materialist rationality, characterized by the figure of his divided Spectre:

But Albion fell down a Rocky fragment from Eternity hurld  
By his own Spectre. who is the Reasoning Power in every Man  
Into his own Chaos . . .

But the Spectre like a hoar frost & a Mildew rose over Albion  
Saying, I am God O Sons of Men! I am your Rational Power!  
Am I not Bacon & Newton & Locke who teach Humility to Man!  
Who teach Doubt & Experiment & my two Wings Voltaire: Rousseau.  
Where is that Friend of Sinners! that Rebel against my Laws!  
Who teaches Belief to the Nations, & an unknown Eternal Life  
come hither into the Desart & turn these stones to bread.  
Vain foolish Man! wilt thou believe without Experiment?  
And build a World of Phantasy upon my Great Abyss! (Plate 54)

The characters in *Jerusalem* are caught up in struggles that result from the various forms of division created by rationalism, materialism, jealousy, and a failure to understand the spirit of Forgiveness embodied by Christ. A single character in Blake's poetry is simultaneously several characters. Each character possesses different aspects, called "Sons", "Daughters", "Spectres" and "Emanations" which represent their—and our—divided nature. For example, in Blake's poetry a character's Spectre represents cold rationality divorced from Divine Vision and the Imagination. In *Jerusalem* Albion is torn apart, divided into a Spectre who opposes him and an Emanation whom he drives away. His sons and daughters are also fragments of his own shattered unity.

Because we are essentially one, and only experience ourselves as multiple selves because of the illusions of materialism, Blake knows that all forms of struggle are really self-struggle. Whatever it is we are fighting in life, we are really always fighting ourselves. We are tormented and fragmented beings. In our fallen state we are cut off from our essential unity and we engage in the struggle with ourselves that Blake calls Selfhood. Selfhood is a war caused by our dividedness, represented in Blake's poetry by the figures of Spectre and Emanation. The Spectre is the divisive power within each of us, as well as between the male and female aspects of each human being, represented by the characters of Los and Enitharmon in *Jerusalem* (cf. Plate 88). The very distinction between male and female is a sign of this division: true Human Being, for Blake, is neither male nor female, but an androgynous unity, similar to the Angels in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Only in our fallen state do we divide into these sexed contraries.

Here's a description of this fallen state:

And this is the manner of the Sons of Albion in their strength  
They take the Two Contraries which are calld Qualities, with which  
Every Substance is clothed, they name them Good & Evil  
From them they make an Absract. which is a Negation  
Not only of the Substance from which it is derived  
A murderer of its own Body but also a murderer

Of every Divine Member: it is the Reasoning Power  
An Abstract objecting power, that Negatives every thing  
This is the Spectre of Man; the Holy Reasoning Power  
And in its Holiness is closed the Abomination of Desolation (Plate 10)

Poetry cannot redeem us from this fallen state. Redemption is not something we will achieve in this life. But poetry is the promise of a Reality that underlies the illusions of this world. For Blake, Paradise is not some promised bliss we achieve after a lifetime of moral obedience here on earth. Paradise is what we have lost; what we gave up in order to toil away our days as mortal coils upon this Mundane Sphere. All that transpires here on earth occurs from the perspective of our Fallen state. Poetry, and art in general, which in the form of the Imaginative Genius is the prophetic force of True Religion, affords us only a glimpse of what Paradise must have been like. Poetry will not allow us to achieve Paradise here on earth, but it will provide greater insight into the true nature of our Fallen State. It will expose the falsehoods upon which this world, the Mundane Sphere, is built on: the materialism, the determinism, the insistence on cold rationality divorced from the Imagination, the dependence on demonstration and proof which undermines the power of faith awakened by poetry.

The task of art is to stimulate the Intellect and reveal to us the workings of the Poetic Genius that express the truth of Reality behind the illusions of materialism and Selfhood. Blake's poetry is not irrational or even anti-rational. He insists on the cultivation of understanding and the development of intellect. Rationality is essential to our understanding of the shadow of reality that unfolds in time and space. But to understand that this "reality" is merely a shadow, rationality must be governed by the Imagination, which is capable of perceiving things beyond the limits of our five vegetable senses.

For Blake, this is true poetic seeing, the perception of the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel; it is the perception made possible by means of the Poetic Genius. Thus Blake, possessed of this prophetic power to see the Divine Vision, looks at the sun, and proclaims:

"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. (*A Visions of the Last Judgment*)

That's what Blake sees when he looks at the rising sun. This is how the poet sees. Why? Because, as he continues to remark in the same catalogue notes and as he will insist on with great adamancy throughout his work:

Mental Things alone are Real; what is call'd Corporeal, Nobody knows of its Dwelling Place: it is in Fallacy, & its Existence an Imposture. Where is the Existence Out of Mind or Thought? Where is it but in the Mind of a Fool?

In Blake's poetic cosmology what he calls "single vision" and the organs of sense are replaced by the fourfold organ of the Imagination. Blake calls the Imagination "fourfold"

because of its ability to unite male and female, human and divine into a single image of Man before the Fall; the Fall, for Blake, being nothing other than this world and our lives as they unfold in it. But even in the Fallen World, this Mundane Shell, there is such a thing as poetic seeing—a revelation of Divine Vision. This is the perception of the Poetic Genius—what we see by virtue of the Imagination, and such seeing is not limited by those vegetable senses that observe and measure the objects of time and space but cannot perceive the Infinite and Eternal. Those most famous lines from Blake’s “Auguries of Innocence” suggest such a form of seeing:

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

More explicit still are a few lines Blake scrawled in the margins of his copy of Reynolds’s *Discourses*:

Every Eye sees differently. As the Eye, such the Object.  
Every thing possible to be believed is an image of truth.  
The Sun’s Light when he unfolds it  
Depends of the Organ that beholds it. (*Marginalia to Reynolds’ Discourses*)

“As the Eye, such the Object”: the eye of the prophet sees a truth that the eye of time and space—the single vision of Newton and Locke— cannot see. While the later sees “a round disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea” the former sees “an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host” with every sunrise. Some of Blake’s contemporaries, including Wordsworth, suspected Blake was mad.<sup>1</sup> But if you had a choice about how you wanted to perceive and experience the world, which would you choose: the Guinea, or the Heavenly Host?

Despite the radical nature of this poetic vision, Blake is not an irrationalist. He does not deny the power and the importance of the intellect. It is not that the Imagination must overcome or replace rationality. Rather we must recognize the true relationship of these faculties, in order not to be misled by the consequences of the errors associated with experiencing them as irreconcilable opposites.

Therefore we should not see the opposite of the Imagination as either reason or reality, but rather as an absence of possibility. The Soul, for example, is not real in any simple sense. It is not real in space and time. It cannot be measured or weighed (and what cannot be measured cannot be the object of science, and how can that which is not the object of science be *real*?). It cannot be located in space or visually represented, nor can it be grasped or understood by means of reason. But remember the claim articulated above: “Things are real by virtue of the Imagination alone.” The soul is an object of the Imagination—its possibility is brought forth by means of the Imagination. Reason and material reality, the constraints of time and space, are inadequate to the Soul. So, if we wish to be exposed to those possibilities that the Soul

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<sup>1</sup> Wordsworth once wrote, of Blake, “There was no doubt that this poor man was mad, but there is something in the madness of this man which interests me more than the sanity of Lord Byron and Walter Scott.”

makes available to us, we must resort to the Imagination. If we deny the Imagination we must also deny the Soul, and if we deny the Soul then we must conduct our lives within the confines of the material world and the limited possibilities of such a world (a world, for example, in which friendship and love are explained by evolution, biology, and chemistry). With this in mind we might offer as a working definition of Imagination the following: the Imagination is the power by virtue of which the impossible is made possible and the possible is made real.

The Imagination is another aspect of Blake's unique understanding of Christianity, for along with the forgiveness embodied by Christ, Imagination allows us to pursue the annihilation of the Selfhood that separates us from our Divine Nature. As he says in Plate 77 of *Jerusalem*:

I know of no other Christianity and of no other Gospel than the liberty both of body & mind to exercise the Divine Arts of Imagination Imagination the real & eternal World of which this Vegetable Universe is but a faint shadow & in which we shall live in our eternal or Imaginative bodies, when these Vegetable Mortal Bodies are no more.

Compared with the transient and illusory qualities of our "Vegetable Mortal Bodies" our Imagination is "real & eternal." For Blake the essence of Christianity is the exercise of "the Divine Arts of Imagination", and these Arts are the work of the poet. As he says elsewhere, the man or woman who is not a poet is not a Christian. It is impossible to overemphasize the importance Blake places on the role of poetry in the life of Man. As he writes in his "Letter to the Public" at the beginning of *Jerusalem*:

Poetry Fetter'd, Fetters the Human Race! Nations are Destroy'd, or Flourish,  
in proportion as Their Poetry Painting and Music, are Destroy'd or Flourish!  
The Primeval State of Man, was Wisdom, Art, and Science.

Why does Blake think poetry is so important that the fate of Nations hangs in the balance? For one thing, without poetry, there is no reality. Poetry is responsible for the existence of the very world we see around us. How is such a thing possible? We all know that the world is made up of atoms and electrons, waves and particles, forces and relationships. Whether we actually understand these particles, forces, and relationships or not is another matter. But we know they're real, don't we? We can measure them. They're not figments of our imagination. So how can Blake be so audacious as to insist that reality depends on the Imagination?

To answer this question we need to go back to the beginning. The very beginning of *everything*. Before there were atoms or electrons or electromagnetic waves or gravity. Back to the moment of creation itself.

According to *Genesis*, when God created the world he simultaneously created something even more important. What could be more important than the world? What stands outside the world, and is that by virtue of which the world's coming into being matters at all? When God created the world, he also created the concept of value. *And God saw that it was good*; this

phrase is repeated six times in the opening chapter of *Genesis*. What does it mean to create value alongside and as a part of the world? For Blake, this is the original act of Poetic Genius. It means to create a system by which reality can be measured and understood, not in terms of “true and false” or time and space, but in terms of the value things have: what they mean, not objectively, but to us, for that’s what value is: something’s meaning for us. Without value, no meaning; and Blake will go one step farther: without meaning, no Reality. Therefore, in terms of Poetic Genius, Reality depends on value, value is something divinely created, and man has access to the Divine by means of the Imagination. Therefore reality depends on the Imagination.

Imagination allows us to recognize our unity with God; it is the key to discovering our divine nature. Scrawled in the margins of his copy of Berkeley, in whose writing he no doubt found confirmation of his own idealist tendencies, Blake wrote, “**Man is All Imagination. God is Man & exists in us & we in him.**” (*Marginalia to Berkeley*)

Elsewhere he wrote, “**The Eternal body of Man is The Imagination, that is, God himself. It manifests itself in his Works of Art (In Eternity All is Vision)**” (*Laocoön Aphorisms*).

Works of Art are physical manifestations of the Poetic Genius as brought forth through the power of the Imagination, which Blake suggests is “God himself.” Imagination, for Blake, is that door of perception through which we can see the Infinite. Throughout history, from the Hebrew Prophets to the Greek philosophers and from the North American Indians to the Hindu sages, the Poetic Genius has shared its vision through unique acts of creation. For Blake it is not only the *Book of Job*, *King Lear*, the *Upanishads*, and *Paradise Lost* that count as works of art. Judaism and Christianity themselves are great works of art composed by the Poetic Genius. But we must remember that when Blake says that Christianity is a work of the Imagination, he does not intend thereby to cast doubt on its veracity or reality. Rather it is his way of attributing to it the highest form of reality of which he can conceive.

I’d like to take a brief detour and return to the question of the relationship between value and reality I mentioned earlier: it is not only poets who share Blake’s view of the relationship between meaning and value. In *Mind and Matter* Erwin Schrödinger, one of the founding fathers of quantum physics, writes:

the world of science lacks, or is deprived of, everything that has a meaning only in relation to the consciously contemplating, perceiving, and feeling subject. I mean in the first place the ethical and aesthetical values, any values of any kind, everything related to the meaning and scope of the whole display. All this is not only absent but it cannot, from the purely scientific point of view, be inserted organically.

Schrödinger is well aware that science is the study of nature, and he writes, “**Nature has no reverence towards life. Nature treats life as though it were the most valueless thing in the world . . . . The values are missing, and quite particularly meaning and end are missing.**” If we wish to find these qualities we must turn not to science, but to poetry. When Schrödinger observes, “**Most painful is the absolute silence of all our scientific**

**investigations towards our questions concerning the meaning and scope of the whole display,”** he speaks of a form of pain that man turns to poetry to find relief from. It is “our questions” that lead to this pain, but it is our attempts to find answers to these questions that succor and inspire us. End of detour.

Let’s return to the question of the spiritual and moral force of poetry. In 1820, at about the same time that Blake was completing the 15 years of work that culminated in *Jerusalem*, fellow British poet Percy Bysshe Shelley was writing his “Defense of Poetry”. Shelley’s essay is *the* manifesto of Romanticism, and his ideas about the moral power of poetry shed helpful light on the value-creating qualities of Blake’s Poetic Genius.

Shelley agrees with Blake that poetry is a spiritual force in the world. To understand this claim let’s return to Blake’s understanding of Forgiveness. If the essence of Christianity is Forgiveness, and forgiveness is made possible through an “annihilation of the Self”, and this annihilation is in turn made possible by means of the Imagination, then there is a clear link, for Blake, between the attainment of what for him constitutes the highest goal of Christianity in particular and religion in general, and the fundamental source of all art and poetry which is the Imagination.

Here’s how it works: it is by virtue of the Imagination that we are capable of putting ourselves in the place of another person. We have no direct access to their thoughts or feelings. In fact we have no direct access to their experiences at all. Without the power of the imagination we would all be solipsists. But by means of the Imagination sympathy and empathy are possible,<sup>2</sup> and through these we are able to transcend the limitations of our own selves, gradually increasing our sense of identity with others until true forgiveness is possible. Thus through the power of the Imagination, which is cultivated through art and poetry, the goal of Christianity, Forgiveness, comes within our reach.

As Shelley puts it:

The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must **imagine** intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and many others . . . . **The great instrument of the moral good is the imagination,** and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. **Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination . . . .** Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb.

According to Shelley, in the light of poetry, “**self appears as what it is, an atom to a universe.**” Like Blake, Shelley adopts a theological vocabulary when talking about poetry. He claims that poetry acts in a “divine manner” to “**awaken and enlarge the mind.**” And

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<sup>2</sup> A similar theory of the moral power of the imagination is developed by Adam Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiment*.

like Blake, Shelley insists that “**a poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one . . .**”

Because the poet’s task is to “**burst the circumference of the reader’s mind,**” poetry is not only aesthetic but also axiological, and if it has an aesthetic and perhaps even a social mission, it has a soteriological and spiritual one as well.

What is this soteriological mission Blake and Shelley attribute to works of art?

Let’s think back to Plato for a moment. Recall the way Callicles reproaches Socrates, in the *Gorgias*, for not giving up the “childish pursuits” of philosophy. Callicles urges Socrates to grow up and “get real,” and focus on the important, practical concerns of the day: making money, gaining power and influence, taking care of his friends and family, hurting his enemies. According to Callicles, Socrates’ adamant pursuit of philosophy is a distraction from the things of this world that “really matter.”

But this is not simply a debate between the practical and the pleasurable, or the useful and fanciful, any more than it is between the rational and the Imaginative. These are more of those false contraries that Blake urges us to see beyond. In fact, Blake is willing to accept Callicles premise that man should devote himself to the most useful, the most practical, the most valuable, and the most important activities available. They simply disagree—wildly—about what these useful, practical, valuable, and important activities are. Very well, they disagree, but who is right?

Like Socrates, Blake and Shelley believe that there are “higher pleasures” and greater goods than those Callicles extols. Among them, according to Shelley, are “**the delight of love and friendship, the ecstasy of the admiration of nature, the joy of the perception and still more of the creation of poetry.**” These are among the highest values of man, and what Shelley calls the “**unmitigated exercise of the calculating faculty**” not only inhibits their pursuit, but threatens to undermine our ability to experience and appreciate them altogether.

Therefore, against the would-be Callicles of this world, Blake and Shelley argue that the task of “poets [and] poetic philosophers” is to promote utility in the highest, “Divine” sense. For there is such a thing as “Divine utility” and this is the utility that serves our highest ends: our spiritual, our aesthetic, and our emotional needs. Divine utility addresses the areas of our lives that are built around values. For values are part of a realm that cold reason cannot touch. Shelley writes,

The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportionally circumscribed those of the internal world; and man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave.

Shelley’s “poetical faculty” sounds like the little brother to Blake’s Poetic Genius. In this assertion lies the very crux of Romanticism: the affirmation of the existence and superior worth of what the poets call man’s “internal world.” To the person who denies the existence,

or the importance, indeed the absolute primacy, of this “internal world” Blake and Shelley’s work must inevitably ring false, hollow and meaningless. To those who, like Callicles, circumscribe the boundaries of our existence to the parameters of an “external world” that can be sensed, tested, and measured, and who define power as the extent to which we are capable of influencing, controlling, or bending this external world to our will, the claims of poetry will remain empty bombast and idealistic phantasy. They will remain deaf to Wallace Stevens’ insistence that, “The world about us would be desolate except for the world within us.”

This notion of a “world within” is crucial to the Romantic Vision. According to Shelley, poetry “**purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being.**” Blake too speaks of his “great task” as one of opening “the immortal Eyes of Man inwards.” What is this poetic notion of “inward sight”? What do we see when we look inward through the eyes of poetry? According to Shelley, it is “the wonder of our being.” And what is this wonder? Blake says it is man’s essential relationship to, indeed identity with, the Divine. When Shelley concludes his essay with the outrageous claim that, “**Poets are hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration**” we must recall that a hierophant was a priest in Ancient Greece charged with the interpretation of sacred mysteries and esoteric principles. When Shelley continues, “**Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world**” he completes the axiological equation by suggesting that the proper legislators are a kind of priest whose task it is to create and interpret the poetry by which our lives possess value and become meaningful.

Blake and Shelley believe that people like Callicles who deny this inner world have chosen self-exile from the realms of “the beautiful and the good”; they pursue materialist certainty, physical comfort, and vegetable pleasure over poetic idealism. Having submitted to “**an excess of the selfish and calculating principle**” (Shelley), they have chosen the shadow over the substance and the body has “**become too unwieldy for that which animates it.**”<sup>3</sup>

Blake and Shelley are adamant that poetry is something divine. Shelley writes, “**Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man.**” But what is this notion of Divinity the poets extol? And if we attribute the importance of poetry to the Divine, have we not left the realms of literary criticism and aesthetics behind and exchanged them for those of religion? Are we now talking about art or religion? Or is there, for Blake, even a difference?

Perhaps not. In his *Laocoön Aphorisms*, Blake writes, “**A Poet, a Painter, a Musician, an Architect: the Man or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian.**”

But it is one thing to say that without art man would not have a sense of the Divine. Is it also the case that without the Divine man would not have art? If we deny the realm of the Divine, we deny the revelations of Poetic Genius, and poetry, as conceived by Blake, would be nothing at all. Empty fantasy. Nothing that matters beyond aesthetic pleasure, occasional distraction, and the pretensions of culture. But poetry would not be something absolutely

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<sup>3</sup> “Reason is the enumeration of qualities already known; imagination is the perception of the value of those qualities . . . Reason is to imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance.” “A Defense of Poetry”

essential to what it means to be a human being. Not something upon which our highest values, goals, and ambitions depend. The Imagination, on such a view, is relegated to the role of a supporting actor for reason at best, and a dangerous distraction from the practical work of utilitarian rationality at worst. But this, of course, is not the view of the poets we are considering tonight. Shelley asks:

What were virtue, love, patriotism, friendship—what were the scenery of this beautiful universe which we inhabit; what were our consolations on this side of the grave—and what were our aspirations beyond it, if poetry did not ascend to bring light and fire from those eternal regions where the owl-winged faculty of calculation dare not ever soar?

But let us pause for a moment and adopt the skeptic's point of view. Let us exercise our "owl-winged faculty" and ask a perfectly fair, honest question: why on earth should we believe these wild, albeit noble and romantic, claims of the poets? Why should we for a moment think they're *right*; that what they're saying is actually *true*? After all, they produce no evidence, and in fact condemn the very mind that asks for evidence, as Don Quixote condemned the merchants who asked to see a picture of Dulcinea before they would acknowledge her the most beautiful woman in the world (but of course they were merchants, tied to the practical realities of the material world; what business was it of theirs to pronounce on beauty or to take on the vaunted role of bestowers of worth and value?). But let us for a moment be practical as the merchants were and ask the poets: why should we *believe* you? After all, isn't there a great deal at stake here? Isn't our entire value system, our sense of right and wrong, of reality and illusion, in question?

How will the poets respond to such a reasonably placed question? Not, I can assure you, by being reasonable themselves and trying to gently coax us over to their point of view. Not by offering proofs and demonstrations. Blake is adamant. In *Jerusalem* he writes, "**I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to create.**" And that is how he responds: by means of his creations. He will offer us his poems and works of art.

During their dinner party Blake asked the prophet Isaiah, "**does a firm perswasion that a thing is so, make it so?**" And Isaiah replied: "**All poets believe that it does, & in ages of imagination this firm perswasion removed mountains; but many are not capable of a firm perswasion of any thing.**" Blake hopes, through the power of his poetry, to restore the "ages of imagination," much as Don Quixote hoped to restore the Golden Age through his faith in chivalry. If his works are true products of the Poetic Genius, they too will be persuasive, as the words of the prophets were. They will have moved us beyond the realm of rational knowledge into a realm of imaginative experience that cannot be denied. Truth is not something we know; it is something we experience.

Therefore, Blake offers us not proofs, but poetry; not arguments, but allegories. And while philosophers are busy debating the relative powers of reason and experience, rationalism and empiricism, innate ideas and categories of the understanding, Blake cuts through these epistemological knots with the sword of the Imagination. Such philosophical quandaries are so many angels dancing on the head of a pin. They are the shadows on the wall of the cave

about which Plato's prisoners make such a fuss. But a poem is the light of the Sun (the Sun as heavenly host and not as golden guinea) whose rays illuminate the darkness of our misunderstanding and reveal the Eternal and Infinite truths of our Divine nature.

Blake's prophetic works are quite long. His poem *Milton* is over 100 pages in the volume of *Collected Poems*; *The Four Zoas* and *Jerusalem* are both over 200 pages. It is difficult to get a sense of the full power of these works from a short sample, but it would be impossible to end this lecture without reading an example of the poetry Blake offers in response to the practical doubters, the utilitarian skeptics, the rational materialists, and all those who share the single vision of Locke and Newton. In conclusion, here are some lines from *Jerusalem*:

And Enitharmon like a faint rainbow waved before him  
Filling with Fibres from his loins which reddend with desire  
Into a Globe of blood beneath his bosom trembling in darkness  
Of Albions clouds. he fed it, with his tears & bitter groans  
Hiding his Spectre in invisibility from the timorous Shade  
Till it became a separated cloud of beauty grace & love  
Among the darkness of his Furnaces dividing asunder till  
She separated stood before him a lovely Female weeping  
Even Enitharmon separated outside, & his Loins closed  
And heal'd after the separation: his pains he soon forgot:  
Lured by her beauty outside of himself in shadowy grief.  
Two Wills they had; Two intellects: & not as in times of old.  
Silent they wandered hand in hand like two Infants wandring  
From Enion in the desarts, terrified at each others beauty  
Envyng each other yet desiring, in all devouring love  
Repelling weeping Enion blind & age-bent into the fourfold  
Desarts. Los first broke silence & began to utter his love  
O lovely Enitharmon: I behold thy graceful forms  
Moving besides me till intoxicated with the woven labyrinth  
Of beauty and perfection my wild fibres shoot in veins  
Of blood thro all my nervous limbs. soon overgrown in root  
I shall be closed from thy sight. seized therefore in thy hand  
The small fibres as they shoot around me draw out in pity  
And let them run on the winds of thy bosom: I will fix them  
With pulsations. we will divide them into Sons & Daughters  
To live in thy Bosoms translucence as in an eternal morning

A longer lecture, or another lecture altogether, would have time to dwell on the details of these lines and examine what makes them powerful and compelling. We could attempt to answer the question about their relationship to the Poetic Genius through a careful reading of their vocabulary, syntax, imagery and grammar. But I have not left myself time for such work tonight. Instead we can conclude with a few final questions.

In *Jerusalem* Blake writes of poetry's task to "**Striv[e] with Systems to deliver Individuals from those Systems**" (Plate 11), and his character Los, a stand-in for Blake throughout the

poem, says, “**I must Create a System. or be enslav’d by another Mans**” (Plate 10). What is the success of Blake’s efforts by the end of *Jerusalem*, which is essentially the end of his work as a poet? If I have succeeded in sharing with you an accurate picture of Blake’s metaphysical worldview as expressed in the language, imagery, detail, rhetoric, and narrative structure of his poetry, than an obvious question remains: Has he succeeded in his ambition to “create a system”? Does Blake present us with a legitimate way of *being* in the world? Is all this just the fancy of poetry, or is it a system one could live with and by? Does Blake provide us not only with a body of beautiful poetry and vivid works of visual art, but also with a viable metaphysics and a coherent foundation by which we might live day to day, interact with others, engage in our own struggles, and strive to be the kind of beings we most fervently desire to be? Is Blake’s poetry merely an example of romantic fantasy and outrageous fancy, or is there a truth here that might shape the way we live our lives?

Of course these are the kinds of “grand questions” that every reader must answer for him or her self. Earlier I suggested that the opposite of the Imagination is not reason, but a lack of possibility. I hope I have succeeded, in tonight’s lecture, in raising the spectre of a possibility: the possibility that Blake is in fact right about the way he sees, judges, and describes the world. The possibility that he holds out to us a viable alternative to deterministic materialism and rationalism divorced from the imagination. The possibility that we might find, in the works of a poet, the means to answer our most fundamental questions about who we are and the kinds of lives we might choose to live.

Thank you.

#### Parable: Contemporary Theology

Is it possible, at the end of the 21st century, to still seek God? Those who have managed, against all odds, to still believe in God, cannot seek him, for they believe they have already found him. And those who do not believe in God do not seek him, for they do not believe he exists in order to be sought. Who then is left to seek, and what form could this searching take, in a world from which God seems determined to withdraw, since nowhere is his existence (his?) more impossible than among those who claim they still believe in him?

Only the person who sincerely, who desperately, doesn’t know, and yet yearns for knowledge, can search for God. Such a person must be very cynical about the solaces of hope, and yet cling to them nonetheless.