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William Blake and the Bible: Reading and Writing the Law

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Blake's attitude towards the Bible was ambivalent. He believed it was at once revelatory in its prophetic mode and yet repressive in its espousal of the Moral Law – the Mosaic Law or Decalogue. His radical aesthetic challenges the notion that the Bible, as the embodiment of the Law, is a semantically stable and formally unified text which contains a single, infallible meaning. The Bible, despite being the Law, is not subject to the laws or conventions of reading and writing which promote a single, authoritative voice or textual presence. Blake's poems similarly challenge the notion of reading and writing as creative acts bound by formal and institutional laws and conventions.

Samuel Beckett notes an etymological connection between the origin of the word law and the act of reading in the evolution of the Latin word *lex* (Beckett 11). The word *lex* originally meant a crop of acorns and its correlative verb *legere* meant to gather (acorns). Gradually, *lex* came to mean a gathering of peoples into an assembly – a political or legal assembly – and hence law; and the verb *legere* came to mean a gathering of letters into a word, to read. In the light of the notion that the Bible promotes unbounded reading, it is necessary to consider to what extent the activity of reading and interpretation is bound by law and convention.

For Owen Fiss, reading is a circumscribed, law-bound act which can be measured against a set of norms made possible by “disciplining rules” (Fiss 744). Interpretation is not predetermined by a source external to the interpreter but is constrained “by a set of rules that specify the relevance and weight to be assigned to the material...as well as... the procedural circumstances under which the interpretation can occur” (Fiss 744). The disciplining rules, which constrain the reader, function to transform the act of reading from a subjective into an objective process and constitute the principle of right reading or the “standards by which the correctness of the interpretation is to be judged” (Fiss 744).

The idea that readers internalise certain codes, conventions and laws of reading relates to the notion of literary competence. For Jonathan Culler readers do not approach a text without an “implicit understanding of the operations of literary discourse which tells one what to look for” (Culler 113-114). Texts have meaning only in relation to the system of codes and conventions of reading that the reader has assimilated so that “To

read a text as literature is not to make one's mind a *tabula rasa* and approach it without preconceptions" (114). For example, in his analysis of Blake's poem entitled 'Ah! Sunflower', Culler observes that there are certain conventions operative in reading poetry which tell the reader what to look for, such as the "rule of significance...metaphorical coherence" and the "convention of thematic unity" (115). Readers acquire a literary competence through the assimilation of certain laws and modes of reading so that reading is "a rule-governed process of producing meanings...which both makes possible invention and imposes limits on it" (126). Reading, then, involves the reader in the production of meaning, though reading is principally a disciplined activity governed by normative principles and conventions that, in turn, form the "constraints of the institution of literature" (116).

Reading practices are controlled by the literary institution. The conventions of poetry are constituents of the institution of literature and so it is misleading to discuss individual poems as autonomous, organic unities complete in themselves existing outside the literary institution. S. H. Olsen defines an institution as "a set of constitutive rules" (Olsen 196). He suggests that the aesthetic properties of a text are determined by these rules or formal laws and have no relevance outside of the institution in which they function. The text is an "institutional transaction" (22); its meaning is defined by institutional conventions that enable the reader to identify its aesthetic properties so that to interpret a text is to understand its properties and how they conduce to its meaning within the field of literary criticism. This process is made possible by the literary institution that at once regulates, codifies, legitimises reading as a social and critical practice.

The idea of legislation involved in the act of reading inevitably raises the issue of authority and authorship. In the twentieth century, a number of theorists replaced the Wordsworthian concept of the author as an authoritative, omniscient presence with the notion that the author is an absence, a hypothetical and linguistic construct. For instance, in his seminal essay 'The Death of the Author', Roland Barthes asserts that the author as an origin, an anterior presence and authority, is undermined through the very act of writing. The author is, in effect, already written, a "ready-formed dictionary" (Barthes 147). The singular voice of the author is unheard amidst the babble of diverse discourses that comprise the "stereophonic plurality" (159) of the text.

Barthes believes that a text is composed of multiple writings focused ultimately upon the reader so that the text, its meaning and its unity, inheres “not in its origin but in its destination” (148). This notion undermines the autonomy of the Author-God. The reader is the textual space in which the multiple writings converge so that the writer is erased, written out of the text whereas the reader is inscribed, written into the text. In the “multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered” (147); meaning cannot be anchored to an ultimate signified. The stereographic text liberates reading so that to refuse to fix meaning is to “refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law”. The death of the Author-God as law-maker is an affirmation of textual *jouissance* – of the free play of the signifier – and, moreover, heralds the birth of the reader as law-breaker.

Valentine Cunningham states that the rejection of “real authors, as origins for utterances and texts is explicitly, in the case of Barthes...part of a strong ultimate rejection of the existence and authority of God as author and origin” (Cunningham 16). In relation to Blake, Jon Mee writes: “At the root of Blake’s attitude to the Bible lies a hostility to the very notion of the pure text...to the notion of a text which claims a transcendent authority” (Mee 11-12). According to Blake, the signifier ‘God’ or the Word had an origin or fixed signified until the rise of Priesthood which sought to abstract the mental concept of God from its object (see *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in Erdman 38-39). This conception of God as an abstract entity – a floating signifier without a signified – is oppressive. Narratives and ideations that abstract their form from their origin – the Poetic Genius – and so divorce the sign from the signified are those in the service of the oppressive Church and State which utilise abstract conceptions of God, morality and Law for their own ideologically hegemonic ends; an ideology which Blake associated with abstract reasoning, as well as the classical poets, and which he considered to be a form of allegorizing. For Blake, allegory is potentially an oppressive form of poetry in that it may be serviceable to those in power that maintain ideological hegemony through the foregrounding of the immutable signified.

Allegory presupposes a stable relationship between sign and signification. For Blake, it is “the poetry of moral virtues” (Mee 12) – that is, the Scripture of the Law and the Decalogue. In his *A Vision of the Last Judgement*, he asserts that “The Hebrew Bible and the Gospel of Jesus are not Allegory” (Erdman 554). For him, the meaning of the

Bible lies hidden beneath the surface of the text and is to be revealed via a process of critical, active reading; it is a Sublime Allegory in the sense that it is not composed of abstract ideations but rather contains narratives which allude to a specific historical reality; a reality which operates as a mythic paradigm and which repeats itself throughout history. Narratives based in the past “are used prophetically to bring the past...to bear upon a situation located in the present” (Tannenbaum 117). Indeed, this notion of Biblical narratives as *exempla*, proleptically or prophetically signifying the future, is referred to as typology and relates to Blake’s conception of Christ as a type, an *exemplum*, in his fulfilment of the Mosaic Law: “I cannot conceive the Divinity of the...Bible to consist either in who they were written by or at what time or on the historical evidence which may be all false...but in the Sentiments & Examples” (Erdman 618).

Tannenbaum observes that in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* “the disagreement between the Angel and the Devil centers (sic) around the issue of the sense in which Christ is a fulfilment of the Law” (Tannenbaum 115). The Angel perceives Christ to be the fulfilment of the Law in terms of being the culmination of a historical, typological process. The Devil, on the contrary, perceives Christ’s fulfilment of the Law to be perpetually renewed throughout history in different manifestations and in different historical contexts. Christ represents not the culmination but rather a specific stage within the redemption narrative of history. Christ is a type or paradigm of the regenerative process – of self-annihilation – which Man must emulate in order to enter the Divine Humanity or body of Christ. Blake utilizes types in his poetry. His characters are composite, multi-faceted, consisting of a number of types, such as Los in *The Book of Urizen* who, as Tannenbaum notes, signifies at once Jehovah, Adam, Abraham, Apollo, Jupiter and many more historical figures or types that inhabit a specific historical reality (see Tannenbaum 117). In this way, Blake’s types are multi-form, multivalent, and so ambivalent. Ambivalence in Blake’s poetry functions to engage the reader on an imaginative, typological and subjective level and to challenge the disciplining rules of right reading – that is, by rousing the reader’s faculty of interpretation to engage imaginatively with the characters on multiple levels as representatives of the past, present and future in the sense that “typology posits a vertical view of history in which events are not related to each other chronologically...but thematically” (118). Indeed, the visionary reader is roused into action becoming an active agent of the Word, not a passive hearer, in

the sense that Christ “acted from impulse: not from rules” (Erdman 43) and embodied the dictum “be ye doers of the word, and not hearers” (*The Holy Bible: King James Version*, James 1: 22).

As Cunningham observes, *I Peter* 2: 21, describes Christ as *exemplum*, a type; a text, a piece of writing (For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps). He argues that, in this context, Christ as a type or example is a *hupogrammos* – that is, “that line of writing written out by the Greek schoolboy at the top of the schoolboy’s wax writing tablet for him to keep copying out as handwriting practice” (18-19). The *hupogrammos* included all the letters of the Greek alphabet so that Christ is envisioned as an alphabetic, textual entity – “the whole of language’s potential” (19) – and the entire alphabet from *alpha* to *omega*. Cunningham notes that the *hupogrammos* was frequently a sentence comprising neologisms composed by the schoolmaster for practice in the formation of letters as opposed to the study of their sense. In this way Christ as a text – a *hupogrammos* – becomes a mishmash of letters, of nonce-formations, of non-sense words so that he is non-referential, multivalent, a set of graphic and semantic traces.

Derridean poststructuralism promotes the idea that any text is composite of verbal and semantic traces which elude a transcendental signified. It foregrounds what is expressly ‘literary’ about literature so that the term ‘literature’ is endowed with authority and so capable of destabilising the logocentric discourses and institutions from which it originates. For Derrida, the ‘law’ of literature, its literariness is, in fact, its inherent lawlessness: literature inherently defies, destabilises and deconstructs the institutional and logocentric Law of Literature and so, in a similar fashion, the figure of Christ as *hupogrammos* promotes textual pluralism in order to oppose the logocentric hegemony of the Word. For Cunningham, Christ-as-text signifies the concept of logocentrism as the foregrounding of multivalent textuality; of the interweaving of multiple voices in the text; of Christ as the ultimate polysemous sign, signifier or *semeion* (20). As *hupogrammos*, the body of Christ is a body of letters, a gathering of words (*legere*), and so replaces the singular, monologic and oppressive Word of God. Christ is a body, a text, and so represents an anthropomorphic conception of textuality which is germane to Blake’s conception of art in bodily terms: “The head Sublime, the heart Pathos, the genitals beauty, the hands and feet Proportion” (Erdman 37). For Blake, the Word of God as

incarnate in Christ represents not homology but plurality. It manifests itself typologically throughout history and therefore its meaning is not fixed and immutable but rather it is infinitely renewable – “Its Eternal Image & Individuality never dies but renews by its seed just as the Imaginative Image returns according to the seed of Contemplative Thought” (Erdman 555); it is an ever-present, ever-changing signifier within the synchronic present and not a fixed, static signified anchored to a specific historical or diachronic moment.

The opposition between signifier and signified and the hegemony implicit in the reification of the sign is dramatized in *The Book of Los*. In the poem “the rock of eternity” (Erdman 92) that incarcerates Los – and is symbolic of the Mosaic Law – is replaced by him with the sun that he fashions. The sun is, according to Tannenbaum, an icon of natural religion that signifies “the worship of the finite world that the sun inscribes and whose materialistic premises... establish the hegemony of the Law” (Tannenbaum 279). The sun is false icon, a false signifier divorced from its signified – that is, God – and so it is falsely reified, falsely worshipped. This notion of iconoclasm, of false worship, relates to Jean Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra – “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality” (Baudrillard 1) – which is an ersatz object, icon, or signified. For Blake, natural reason separates the signifier and the signified so that the object of worship is a mental deity abstracted from its referent. It is fashioned as an object of Mystery – that is, it is merely an empty, non-referential sign and so it has meaning merely as an object or icon. In the poem, then, the sun represents a deified simulacrum, a false idol and object of worship so that the Law, as an abstract system of moral codes derived from the object of worship, is itself a simulacrum, a hyper-real, a model without an origin or reality.

Blake was wholly averse to the regulation of ideology via closed texts and so his radical aesthetic promotes polysemous textuality which requires an active and subjective mode of reading unconstrained by disciplining rules. He states that “that which can be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care” and that the best kind of writing is that which “rouzes the faculties to act” (Erdman 702). Indeed, Blake endeavoured to subvert and transcend repressive, conventional and disciplining paradigms of reading by positioning the reader centripetally to the text. Oppressive reading is associated with passivity, objectivity, and the disciplining rules of logocentric, institutionalised literature

disseminated by repressive and hegemonic forces. On the other hand, radical or lawless reading is associated with mental fight, subjectivity, and the death of the Author as a consequence of what Barthes calls the foregrounding of the anti-logocentric, stereographic plurality of the text.

Saree Makdisi argues that Blake's illuminated works, like the Bible, signify via thematic, conceptual and aesthetic interrelations not only within a single text but across multiple texts and moreover, not only in words but in images, and so require constant acts of rereading. He writes: "Much of the experience of reading one of the illuminated books... involves alternating between reading words and reading images, and turning back and forth through the plates, tracing and retracing different interpretive paths" (Makdisi 112). This sense of reading and re-reading disrupts the notion of a linear chronology and so necessitates a form of spatial reading and, in this sense, the meaning of the poems emerge from the multiple modes of reading they require. For Blake, radical reading involves Imagination or Vision – a renewed mode of perception – which challenges prescriptive modes of right reading and the assimilated literary competence of the reader. Blake's use of multi-media, that is, the interplay of words, sounds and images in his poetry, opens up a textual space in which diverse, often contradictory meanings are invoked, subsequently rousing the reader's faculties to actively engage dialogically with the text. For instance, Blake's illustration on plate 24 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* depicts a subterranean locus inhabited by an anguished, aged, Urizenic figure crawling beast-like on his hands and knees and is, furthermore, reminiscent of Blake's 1795 print, 'Nebuchadnezzar'. The illustration signifies contrapuntally to the written text on the plate, which concerns the conversion of the Angel to a Devil in reading the Bible in its "diabolical" or unconventional sense. Beneath the illustration are the words "One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression". The image, in the context of the written text, is multivalent – unanchored by the written text – and so invites a plurality of readings. The figure may signify the Natural Man who "receiveth not the things of the Spirit" (*The Holy Bible: King James Version*, 1 Cor. 2: 14), who reads the Bible in its literal and non-diabolical sense, and who is earth-bound by the five senses; or it may signify the tyrant oppressor who is bound by his own inflexible Moral Law. In this way, Blake challenges prescriptive modes of right reading.

Blake's poetic may be said to be radical in the sense that it challenges and subverts the ideologies and conventions of classical and neo-classical aesthetic paradigms which privilege the propriety of poetic form or, in Blake's terms, Mathematical Form, over matter or content (see Roston 15-42). Tannenbaum writes: "The subordination of the general to the particular, with a reliance upon internal coherence among the arts rather than upon an externally imposed order" (Tannenbaum 25) was the aesthetic principle that Blake saw to be operating within the Bible. Blake was opposed to formalism in the sense of an externally imposed unity in a work of art. For him, the formal unity as well as the semantic coherence of the text – its Living Form – inheres in its synthesis of the particular with the general; in the internal unity of the parts as opposed to an externally and imposed order: "when a Work has Unity it is as much in a Part as in the Whole" (Erdman 269-270). As Tannenbaum notes, this aesthetic principle is identifiable in the Scriptures. He states that "In biblical poetry... form is subordinated to significance" (Tannenbaum 26). The fundamental unit of Hebrew verse is the self-contained distich of parallel lines which embodies a concrete, vivid and precise image. Hebrew verse verges on the prosaic in its foregrounding of sense as opposed to structure. It employs "a flexible, undulatory rhythm produced neither by syllabic quantity nor accentuation, but by the antiphonal sense-pattern of the passage" (Roston 23). The meaning and the unity of Hebrew verse resides in the semantic juxtaposition of parallel lines; in the particular as opposed to the general; in its self-contained internal semantic units as opposed to an overriding externally imposed formal structure. Blake's poetry is similarly asymmetrical and anti-linear, relying upon an internal unity of semantic elements for its structure and coherence.

For instance, in *America* Blake commingles tenses and thus disrupts the chronological flow of the narrative. He employs anthropomorphic synaesthesia ("the hungry wind", "loud winds", "angry shores") in order to engender a notion of semantic multi-dimensionality and dynamically deploys various symbols (such as fire, clouds, fetters) in various semantic contexts ("fiery joy", "lustful fire"), thereby achieving a sense of textual unity and coherence through sense and symbol as opposed to structure. The principle of parallelism is exemplified in plate 8 lines 5-6 ("That stony law I stamp to dust; and scatter religion abroad/To the four winds as a torn book, & none shall gather the leaves"). The stony law of ecclesiastical theology is initially associated with the

Decalogue – the stone tablets of the Law – and these are subsequently assimilated with writing – with scripture (from the Latin *scribere*, to write) – and the tyranny of the written word. The change in association is implicit in the verb “stamp” which connotes the stamping or printing of words. Moreover the verb “scatter” initially refers to religion – here used as a metonym for the Law – and it precedes the qualifying simile “as a torn book”. The metaphorical association between religion and the Law is proleptically signified in the verb “scatter” which precedes the actual metaphor; a metaphor which is at once figurative in that the dissipation of religion is associated with the scattering of leaves from a book; and literal in that the religious law is a written Law. This dynamic use of metaphor is carried across the distich. The second line expands upon and qualifies the meaning of the first line, subsequently achieving a unity and expansion of sense as opposed to a unity of structure. As previously noted, the relationship between law and literature is etymological and, in this context, the word for law, *lex*, refers to the act of writing, that is, the gathering of letters in a word, into a sentence.

The concept of genre is related to the idea of legislation in that it implies an institutionalised system of classification, a standard or norm by which to judge literary works. Tzvetan Todorov observes that in the classical period literary critics sought to prescribe generic laws and manifested a “penalising tendency” (Todorov 138) to judge works according to those laws. The individual work was judged in relation to a general system, a general law of genre or, alternatively, in relation to a generic standard – a canon, from *kaneh*, meaning measuring rod – such as tragedy. Indeed, any text relies upon its participation within a general system for its readability. To be interpretable, a text must belong to a genre, a set of formal conventions, serving as “a norm or expectation to guide the reader in his encounter with the text” (Culler 136). Genres, then, provide a system of codes and conventions for reading a text. A genre at once enables and limits reading, constraining it to a specific function, type, or genre of reading already implicit in the laws it prescribes so that the law of genre legislates the reading act.

The Bible is generically hybrid. It is “a pattern of commandments, aphorisms, epigrams, proverbs, parables, riddles, pericopes, parallel couplets, formulaic phrases, folktales, oracles, epiphanies” and is composed of “snippets from historical documents, laws, letters, sermons, hymns” and so on (Frye *The Great Code* 206). In this sense it does not have a formal unity but rather a unity of content or a unifying vision – an

“imaginative unity” (218) – and it is in this sense that, for Blake, the Bible is Sublime. Given that the Bible has multiple authors and, given that it is an aggregate text formed over many years and, despite the fact that it contains a number of Laws or commandments, the claim to authority that it has is essentially one of Vision. Its meaning is polysemous, not in the sense that it contains multiple significations, which would imply that the meaning of the text is arbitrary; but rather in the sense that its significance may be apprehended on a number of levels – that is, literal, moral, allegorical, and anagogical (220-221). In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake refers to the composition of his illuminated books as the “infernal method” of printing which melts away the apparent surface of the text, exposing to the reader “the infinite which was hid” in the multiple layers or levels of meaning (Erdman 39). He promotes the notion of infernal writing and infernal reading; a mode of reading which sees beyond the mere superficialities of the text.

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell is a composite work, which may be apprehended on a number of levels, hybridizing a number of genres and literary modes, synthesizing argument, and narrative, and so challenging the reader’s literary competence or their assimilation of institutionally prescribed modes of reading. It is essentially structured on the concept of contrariety, of “opposed voices” (Miller 495). Blake presents arguments from contrasting points of view, often with an ironic tone, so that there is no stable, singular, authoritative voice in the text. In this way, the authorial voice of *The Marriage* is multiple or polyvocal; there is no overriding presence of the author in the text and so it may be said that the text is decentralised or depersonalized – not in the sense that there is no authorial personality or in the sense that the perspective of the text is essentially an objective one, but rather in the sense that there is no singular personality, no identifiable authorial voice but a conflict of voices which constitutes the stereographic plurality of the text. Blake, like the Hebrew poets, diverts his attention away from himself-as-poet towards himself-as-prophet – that is, towards his subject matter – and consequently achieves a condition of depersonalization, ultimately by “transmuting passions without obtruding his own personality upon them” (Roston 27). This dialogic mode is necessary to engage the reader with the text. Without dialogue or contraries there is no progression towards Vision.

In his poetry “Blake is constantly seeking to break down the notion of scripture as monolithic authority” (Mee 14). *The Book of Urizen*, for example, exists in multiple versions, each with varying configurations of the plates and none providing a sense of narrative cohesion or continuity, which, in the words of W. J. T. Mitchell, “suggests that this atemporal, antisequential quality is a deliberate formal device” (Mitchell 137). The poem is intentionally unstable, fragmentary, and so multivalent and engages in contemporary discourses surrounding the state of Biblical texts. Jerome McGann argues that the poem is a direct response to the new developments in contemporary Biblical and textual studies, most notably the theory of Biblical texts known as ‘the fragment hypothesis’ expounded by Alexander Geddes: in the poem “the textual anomalies are structural; they are part of a deliberate effort to critique the received Bible and its traditional exegetes from the point of view of the latest research findings of the new historical philology” (McGann 324). Geddes argued that the Bible, as a conglomerate text derived from multiple sources, is a heteroglot work or, in Bakhtin’s terms, a *polyglossia*, and subsequently does not convey any single, pure, original inspiration or historical, political, or theological viewpoint. If we follow this argument the Bible, then, does not have a single Author and so it cannot claim to be the voice of a single authority whereas Biblical scholars previously held that God was the single Author of Creation and of the Word. For Blake, the notion of textual monologism – of a singular voice or viewpoint and authority which denies that there exists outside of it another consciousness (see Bakhtin 79-85) – is a manifestation of the hegemony of the written word in precluding the possibility of diverse readings. Blake’s textual mode, as seen in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, is essentially dialogic or polysemic and subverts the hegemony of the authoritative, monologic text.

The Book of Urizen imitates the textuality of the Bible so that to read the poem “is to discover a Bible one had never known before; it is to learn to read the traditional Bible in an entirely new way” (Mc Gann 324). Blake’s conception of myth or narrative is similar to and may derive from the neoteric notions of textuality espoused by Robert Lowth and others in their Biblical hermeneutics in the mid to late eighteenth century. Blake perceived that all sacred texts are comprised of mythologues or poetic tales which have their provenance in the Poetic Genius and which encode and reflect certain culturally specific ideologies. The Bible does not comprise a seamless, coherent

narrative, or a single, all-embracing ideology; rather, it is replete with textual ruptures, gashes and inconsistencies, semantic lacunae, reiterated passages; it is fissiparous, fragmented, and inaccessible to Reason; it is a Bible of Hell *per se*. Indeed, the Bible is “the product of a complex, continuous, and often arbitrary set of historical interactions” (320); it is “a heterogeneous collection of various materials gathered together at different times by different editors and redactors” (321) and derives from a number of cultures, traditions, literary and historical contexts.

The canonisation of texts potentially results in the institutional control of interpretation. The word ‘canon’ etymologically derives from a Semitic word meaning reed that is in Hebrew *kaneh*, meaning a measuring rod – a rule, a standard or norm. The literary canon “controls the texts a culture takes seriously” and so disciplines “the methods of interpretation that establish the meaning of ‘serious’” (Altien 42). Bloom states that “A canonical reading...attempts to stop the mind by making a text redundantly identical with itself, so as to produce a total presence, an unalterable meaning” (Bloom *Poetry and Repression* 29). Canonical texts, then, are models of authority and represent a standard by which to judge all other texts and how they are to be read. The etymological connection between *kanon* – meaning a reed – and the literary canon (and the implications the word has for conventional reading) is perhaps implied in Blake’s use of homophony in the Introduction to *Songs of Innocence*:

Piper sit thee down and write
In a book that all may read –
So he vanish’d from my sight
And I pluck’d a hollow reed (Erdman 7)

As well as subverting canonic or regulated modes of reading, Blake opposed the notion of the established literary canon. In his Preface to *Milton*, he vociferously asserts that “We do not want either Greek or Roman Models if we are but just and true to our own Imagination” (Erdman 95). Eric Chandler notes that here Blake is opposing the conventions and laws of literary composition derived from the classics, subsequently ingrained in literary tradition, which Blake, Shakespeare and Milton were constrained by, and which comprise the literary canon (see Chandler 71). Blake demands that the revised

canon should consist of “those Grand Works of the more ancient & consciously & professedly Inspired Men” (Erdman 95) – that is, the “Sublime of the Bible” – which, unlike the typical objective detachment from life of the classical poets, places an emphasis on subjective emotion, on matter not metre, on function not form.

Blake associated Memory with traditional, canonical, classical aesthetics – “The Stolen and Perverted Writings of Homer and Ovid: of Plato and Cicero” – and set it in opposition to Inspiration which constitutes the Sublime of the Bible. He envisioned artistic freedom from the constraints of classical models based on reason and convention and so the triumph of Imagination – which unlike fallen Reason is the means by which the poet conveys Vision through Inspiration – over Memory, using the Bible as a literary model. The liberty of the Imagination entails a rejection of all aesthetic paradigms which constrain Vision. Chandler observes that the substitution of the Bible for classical aesthetic paradigms results in contradiction. He states that “Blake manoeuvres around this problem, however, by suggesting that there is a difference between the model that inhibits or contains the artist and the inspiration that stimulates and expands the imagination” (Chandler 71). The Bible as a literary model may be equally oppressive to the creative Imagination, depending on how it is read – that is, critically or uncritically, actively or passively, diabolically or conventionally. The Bible is an embodiment of the Moral Law, and it is also canonic. Blake challenges the canonicity of the Bible by reading it infernally; by reading Christ as a polyvalent sign: *hupogrammos*, that is, Christ, the Word, as an anti-logocentric, anti-hegemonic incarnation of textual stereography; a revolutionary figure who “acted from impulse: not from rules” (Erdman 43). Blake believed that the Bible is true Inspiration in cleansing the doors of perception and, subsequently, in its ability to rouse the artist and reader to realize the creative potential of his poetic/prophetic Imagination.

For Blake, then, the Bible, despite being the Moral Law, is “a Poem of probable impossibilities, fabricated...by Inspiration...Poetry & that poetry inspired” (Erdman 616-617). It is the great code or instructive paradigm of art which enables him to synthesise his political and theological outlook into a coherent, creative Vision. In his poetry he is preoccupied with “the opposition between scripture, represented as an oppressive mode of writing which is associated with the law, and poetry, a mode of writing which is open, multi-form, and seeks the imaginative participation of the reader” (Mee 12). In this light,

Blake's radical aesthetic, derived from the Scriptures, challenges textual logocentricity and the idea that the Author-God of the text is an infallible presence. Blake also challenged the idea that there are certain conventions or laws of reading and writing a text which prescribe the reader's literary competence. Blake, on the other hand, envisaged the Bible as a paradigm for lawless or diabolical reading and writing. In opposition to institutionalised forms of reading and writing, he promotes in his poetry the primacy of subjective reading and the active role of the reader in challenging prescriptive, law-bound and objective modes of reading and interpretation governed by institutionalised conventions or disciplining rules.

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