

ABSTRACT

Blake's Aesthetic Messianism: Multimodal Art as the Rhetoric of Transformation

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Through the creation of multimodal texts featuring coexisting visual and written art, William Blake embeds his principle of contrariety that dominates his Illuminated prophecies. Contrary forces held in opposition for Blake produce an energy generated from the tension that exists between the two opposing forces. By promoting the visual arts to equal status with verbal and written forms Blake displays his concern for marginalized groups and shifts authority for a text's meaning to the reader. Additionally, Blake capitalizes upon prophetic and millennial narratives and roles in order to agitate for a multifaceted redemption, one that enjoins the populace to participate in the revolutionary movement while simultaneously calling for a messianic catalyst. Unlike his contemporaries, however, Blake envisions such a redemptive transformation taking place

through individuals' active and creative engagement with multimodal texts, bridging the gap between visual and verbal forms and generating new works of art.

I propose a framework of aesthetic messianism to explicate the transformation modeled in Blake's multimodal art and the desired redemptive revolution. Blake's vision for revolution begins with individuals overcoming their narrow perceptions to connect with others, all by means of creation and aesthetic expression. Blake models this process, acting as a messianic figure, a progressive painter, prophet, priest, and performer. Ultimately, the creative tension encourages the reader first to participate in creative interpretation of existing texts; second, to creatively produce new works of art, and third to creatively revise their own texts instead of other texts. This creative process works to perpetuate the process, avoiding the stasis Blake views as erroneous. The production of art becomes a means of transforming the individual in both their relationships with others and their perception of themselves, making them more externally sympathetic and internally reflective.

Blake's Aesthetic Messianism: Multimodal Art as the Rhetoric of Transformation

by

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One of my favorite sports clichés occurs when a player flushed with victory is interviewed immediately following the contest, especially if that player participates in a team sport. Inevitably the interviewer poses the question as to how exactly s/he emerged triumphant, to which the player invariably replies “It’s a team effort, you know, my guys/gals/teammates gotta get all the credit, I’m just thankful they put me in a position to be successful.”

This humility has always struck me as somewhat disingenuous; professional athletes have a healthy ego to accompany the levels of greatness they achieve. I propose that a healthy self-confidence is indispensable to their success, that without a belief in their own abilities they would be unlikely to impose their will upon the contest, raise their performance to heights that achieve victory, and so forth. This being the case, I cannot in good conscience acknowledge anyone else’s contributions for the completion of this dissertation.

Just kidding.

Actually, the issue of self-confidence as it pertains to scholarly writing at levels required for a dissertation has been the predominant obstacle that stood in my path. The dissertation always lurked in the back of my mind as the crucible

wherein my fatal flaw would be revealed, my inability to conjure and express valid and meaningful criticism. In this area my faculty mentors and professors have played incalculable roles in giving me the confidence that I have legitimate and worthy contributions to make to critical conversations. Throughout the process of coursework, my professors challenged and encouraged me to excel and regard myself as a worthy scholar.

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including a doctor. All praise and blessing and honor and glory and power be unto you.

DEDICATION

To my mother
who preached the gospel of hard work to me
until I finally listened

CHAPTER ONE

Aesthetic Revolution and Multimodal Democracy

Late eighteenth-century England was highly influenced by the revolutionary movements and moods permeating Europe. Spurred by the American Revolution, radicals began to challenge the foundations of British imperial power and traditional religious institutions. In response, the ruling institutions of Church and State felt compelled to tighten the reins, which only increased the resentment and anti-authoritarianism simmering in many sectors of society.¹ During the years in which William Blake grew as a man, an artist, and a thinker, challenges to dominant institutions by marginalized and oppressed people were gaining support. Though Blake inhaled the fumes of social rebellion against ministerial and ecumenical authority, he came to realize that such reforms merely addressed the symptoms of the disease without attacking the root cause. Blake's religious and philosophical background coupled with his artistic training and apprenticeship shaped his response to the revolutionary energy of the eighteenth century's fin-de-siècle. In order to cure

¹ David Erdman, in one of the definitive studies on William Blake in the twentieth century, asserts that "arbitrary monarchy, shaken by the American Revolution, was being drained of all power by the French one, and even the personifications of tyranny were dying." *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*, 151.

humanity of the systems of violence and oppression, Blake believed that an inward transformation was necessary, a transformation only accomplished through aesthetic redemption. And this aesthetic redemption takes the form of a dynamic tension generated by the contrary forces of image and word, visual and verbal mediums, which Blake combines in his multimodal texts.

Blake has often been regarded as one of the most politically active of literary and visual artists, as evidenced by his deep concern for marginalized people and critiques of powerful institutions. This perception informs much of the scholarship attending his works. Saree Makdisi emphasizes Blake's stance on this issue that "through the rhetoric of equal rights and choices, shared the key conceptual and philosophical assumptions of the radical discourse of liberty" (3). And such concern for diverse groups suffering under systems of oppression informs his compositions. In his works from 1788 to 1794, Blake raged against the oppressive and exploitative political and social forces of his day as ardently as any of the Romantics; in *The Songs of Innocence and Experience* he heaps venom upon the indifferent power mongers who ignore their fellow man. David Erdman explains, "In subsequent illuminated prophecies, *A Song of Liberty*, *America*, and *Europe*, he continued to write of revolution sympathetically, but not plainly. The final text of *America*, for example, eliminates all direct naming of George III and his Parliament" (*Blake, Prophet Against Empire* 152). Erdman hints

obliquely at the fundamental shift that distinguished Blake from many of his radical contemporaries; though he could continue to advocate for civil reformation, Blake's central concern moved to an aesthetic paradigm focused on individual redemption.

Blake's relocation of priorities has roots in his religious background. Religious themes pervade his works, and his biography provides fertile ground for explaining the origins of his rebelliousness. Many scholars have examined the religious expressions of antinomianism that infuse Blake's works and theories, derived from a "levelling" tradition dating back to seventeenth-century England. Blake's parents both hailed from Dissenting religious traditions, as G. E. Bentley mentions in his biography of Blake.² Dissenting beliefs, in Bentley's words, practiced "private devotion and private Bible reading rather than public catechism and public worship...Like most Dissenters, they believed that all truth lies in the Bible and that the proper interpreter of that truth is the individual conscience, not the priest or the church" (7). What emerges from an examination of Blake's heritage are sympathies toward an antinomian denial of any rigid moral codes or any authoritarian hermeneutics and spiritual practices.³ Robert

² Bentley, *The Stranger from Paradise*, 3.

³ Blake's even more subversive reimagining of the divine will be discussed in chapter four.

Rix observes Blake's emphasis on religious themes in his political prophecies, claiming that "They deal principally with the freeing of the people from religious falsehood, something which Blake sees as the root of all civil tyranny. The antidote for despotism is the opening up of a radical (in the multiple senses of the word) vision of everlasting truth" (4). True freedom demands a reformation of human institutions through individual redemption born of an inward transformation.

Blake's antipathy towards hegemonic institutions, whether political or religious, is well-established, but recent studies also allow for the extension of his revolutionary energies beyond Church and State. Makdisi asserts that

whereas much of the radical struggle for liberty in the 1790s was aimed exclusively at the apparatuses of the state, Blake's challenge to tyranny requires a social, economic, and cultural dimension as well, and recognizes that a struggle for freedom must go beyond the strictly political-representational issues raised in the writings of activists like Paine, to challenge not only the forms of identity taken for granted by Paine, but also the radical faith in the law and competition. (8)

In essence, Makdisi argues that Blake's subversive theories attacked the base assumptions that still privileged political and religious systems as instruments of reform. Northrop Frye expands on Blake's inherent mistrust of purely political reform, claiming that "he felt that revolutionary action would only go from one kind of slavery to another unless it were directed toward the goal of a free and equal working society" (35). Blake followed the dictates of his Dissenter

upbringing⁴ in seeking to illustrate the need for a fundamental renovation of human hearts and minds, a creative revolution that will liberate people to freely express themselves aesthetically.⁵

Blake extended his revolutionary reformations to spheres beyond the egalitarian movement in political and religious arenas, reaching out to the marginalized. Like Wordsworth and Coleridge's stated intentions in their *Lyrical Ballads*, many of Blake's works are explicitly concerned with representing those people groups not normally featured in respectable literature. *The Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789, 1794) center on Blake's interest in children, both as idealized exemplars of innocence and perhaps naiveté, as well as the subjects of exploitation and suffering, as seen in works like "The Chimney Sweeper" or "Holy Thursday". However, it is noteworthy that Blake's attempts to bring marginalized peoples to the forefront of readers' attention extends beyond conventional contexts. *Songs of Innocence's* "The Little Black Boy" highlights racial disparity and acknowledges the essential equality that transcends race: "When I from black and he from white cloud free, / And round the tent of God

⁴ Critics such as Peter Otto, Rix, and Kerri Davies differ as to Blake's debt to sects like the Moravians, Swedenborgians, or other Dissenting groups.

⁵ Christopher Rowland addresses this shift, saying "His purpose was not an aesthetic act, narrowly conceived. For him the text was a means to an end: to bring about the conversion of minds, hearts and lives to a life of 'forgiveness of sins' and the abjuration of 'Religion hid in war, a Dragon red, and hidden Harlot'" (1).

like lambs we joy; / Ill shade him from the heat till he can bear, / To lean in joy
upon our fathers knee" (E 9).⁶ This celebration of the marginalized continues in
Experience, where the focus shifts to religious equality and a move away from the
hierarchal structures of the Church. "The Little Vagabond" argues for holding
services in alehouses and public houses: "But if at the Church they would give us
some Ale, / And a pleasant fire, our souls to regale; / We'd sing and we'd pray,
all the live-long day; / Nor ever once wish from the Church to stray" (E 26).

Blake envisioned a moment in history when all races, creeds, and peoples would
be united. Such a millennium harkens back to Judeo-Christian notions of the
redeemed world described in the Biblical books Daniel and Revelations; for the
present study, Mike Sanders provides a helpful explanation of the establishment
of millennial peace through the intervention of a messianic figure. Sanders
breaks his system of messianism into two strands, which he labels
'millenarianism' and true 'messianism'. Millenarian strategies for revolution
emphasize the need for collective action to challenge and overthrow institutions
of oppression, while messianism calls for a role model to lead revolutionary
movements. Messianism exhorts the populace to jump into action and become

⁶ All primary source references refer to David Erdman's edition of Blake's collected works, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, and will be cited similarly. A further discussion of Blake's critique and subversive performance of antislavery children's literature comprises chapter 5 of this study.

part of the movement, while also requiring a catalyst, an intervention from a prophetic figure. As I establish, Blake participates in both strands in his system for redemption, though he moves the context away from political or religious spheres into aesthetic ones.

To effect such a millennial peace, Blake's writing in the later stages of the 1780s begins to shift away from strictly political and religious rhetoric, defining his radicalism in aesthetic terms. In his 1798 annotations to Sir Joshua Reynolds Blake's aesthetic shift seems complete as he diagnoses the foundations of society and pronounces the formula for toppling tyrannies:

The Arts & Sciences are the Destruction of Tyrannies or Bad Government...The Foundation of Empire is Art & Science Remove them or Degrade them & the Empire is No More - Empire follows Art & not Vice Versa as Englishmen suppose. (E 636)

For Blake, the current regimes and institutions stand and fall in conjunction with the practices of describing and exploring the world of experience, artistically or scientifically; therefore, it is at that level that the revolution will succeed or fail, explaining why Blake views an aesthetic transformation as indispensable.

The critical importance of identifying the aesthetic revolutionary energy in Blake's works lies in the specific form of Blake's aesthetics, the multimodal texts consisting of visual and verbal elements. Using visual-verbal interaction as indicative of creative tension, Blake depicts both his rejection of hierarchies and his program for aesthetic redemption. He takes visual art, often regarded as

secondary in aesthetic theories of his day, and elevates it to equal status with the more respectable literary and verbal mode, forcing the two mediums to interact in an ongoing process of contrariety. Such contrary forms of expression and the competing meanings they produce from audiences, as Blake explains in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), generates a creative energy from the tension that produces transformative works of art. Furthermore, visual forms of art affect the audience differently than verbal forms; Blake's intentions are, as Jean Hagstrum phrases it, to "attack the whole man—all at once" and the best way to accomplish this radical reform lay in not merely mounting intellectual arguments or emotional appeals, but rather "to invade man's soul by the avenues of more than one sense" (139). The deployment of visual along with verbal mediums allows for such an approach. The importance of this multilayered approach lies in the contrariety previously mentioned, a contrariety that produces creative energy by opening interpretive gaps into which reader/viewers must enter to interpret a work. Such interpretive gaps demand the lack of a singular textual meaning, the "right" interpretation. Avoiding a hierarchical hermeneutics entails eradicating a fixed and authoritative meaning; as Rowland explains, "It is not so much finding the true meaning behind the text as seeing the text as a gateway to perception, a stimulus to the imagination" (10).

An example of the interpretive gap between visual and verbal text appears in one of Blake's most famous works, "The Tyger." Blake opens interpretive gaps between the poetic description of "The Tyger" in *Songs of Experience* and the visual depiction on the plate, compelling readers to attempt to reconcile the two. The ferocity of the verbal description of the animal is in stark contrast with Blake's picture (Figure 1.1). Readers who envision the "fearful symmetry" of the opening stanza and ponder the narrator's trembling penultimate query ("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?" (E 25)) brace themselves to see a monstrous or titanic beast.



Figure 1.1. "The Tyger" from *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794, Copy C)

Instead, Blake gives them what Erdman have called “one of Blake’s contrived enigmas” (*The Illuminated Blake* 84). Less a fearsome beast, the visual portrayal has elicited responses like Eliza Borowska, who observes, “Somewhere along the way the act of describing got detached from the object of the description” (par. 13). Readers must reconcile the poetic text with the imagistic text as equal components of the multimodal work. The interpretive gap occurs with such a disparity as seen in “The Tyger.”

To understand how the reader’s response to his books is intended to work, a brief sketch of his contrariety and its role in his aesthetic-political-religious paradigm is helpful. In *The Marriage* Blake outlines his main objections to the political, social, and religious institutions he regarded as oppressive. Blake’s thesis contends, “Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence” (E 34). The purpose of this text is to demonstrate the “marriage” of two contraries, to bind them into a relationship and harness the energy that their tension produces. Blake does not desire to merge and coningle them, to synthesize them into an amalgam, for that would contravene the first “law” of these commandments, the necessity of contrariety for progression. This contrariety is most vividly expressed in the actual construction of his works, namely the interrelationship between the image and the word, verbal and visual

elements contained within a single page. Such elements are not acting merely as verbal titles or captions to the dominant image, or, as was more commonly the case, as illustrative visuals depicting the authoritative medium of written expression,⁷ for such a privileging of one medium over the other contradicts the necessary contrariety between these mediums.

Despite or because of Blake's lavishly and uniquely illuminated texts, a common reaction to his works has been to separate the visual from verbal components and consider them independently. Frye, who wrote the definitive treatment of Blake's philosophy and aesthetic paradigm in the twentieth century, elsewhere claims that "More surprising than the independence of the words from the design is the independence of the design from the words" ("Poetry and Design" 36), the implication being that the two mediums can and should be independent. W. J. T. Mitchell, whose work *Blake's Composite Art* remains perhaps the seminal contribution to the study of Blake's multimodality, determines that his discussion of the two mediums will treat them separately.⁸

⁷ W. J. T. Mitchell notes that "The belief in the translatability of literature into painting is everywhere evident in the eighteenth century's liking not only for individual designs illustrating literary texts but for entire galleries devoted to the pictorial translation of poets. Macklin's 'Poet's Gallery' and Boydell's 'Shakespeare Gallery' were symptomatic of the belief that painting would be enhanced by an alliance with literature, and that, despite some technical problems, translation from one medium to the other was possible and even inevitable" (17-18).

⁸ Mitchell confesses, "In spite of my argument that Blake's illuminated books must be read as unified formal entities, I have divided the essays into sections which deal primarily with

This tradition of sundering the two discourses into their respective disciplinary corners traces its roots back to an early Blake biographer, Alexander Gilchrist, who composed the first formal study/biography on Blake, a project completed by Dante Gabriel Rossetti after Gilchrist's death. The rationales behind such a division cover the spectrum from aesthetic to practical,⁹ but the major reason behind segregating mediums might be the simple difficulty of interpreting them simultaneously, seemingly requiring expertise in both visual and literary disciplines. This difficulty elicits tension in the reader similar to that between verbal and visual elements, and this tension provides grounds for the potential for a person's transformation via art.

Within Blake's texts the tension arises from verbal and visual elements sparring for supremacy, but Blake's deeper design is to engender a similar creative contrariety between the multimodal text and the reader/viewer who encounters it. This contrariety precipitates a process of interpretation and creation in which the reader/viewer becomes actively involved, required to draw upon their aesthetic resources to generate meaning and in doing so to create new

text or design respectively, rather than writing a 'contrapuntal' commentary in imitation of Blake's own form" (xvii).

⁹ Morris Eaves has noted the pragmatic obstacles that prevented the inclusion of the multimodal texts Blake produced, explaining that "severe technological limits left picture-makers lagging far behind word-makers in their ability to multiply the optical excitements they concocted" (100).

works of art. This process, labelled here as “aesthetic messianism”, provides the major framework for this study; the active role of Blake as an intervening exemplar, a prophetic artist who demonstrates and articulates redemption, borrows from Sanders’ theories of messianism.¹⁰ The process of aesthetic messianism builds upon the notion of contrariety between text and reader and transfers the theme of elevating the disenfranchised to artistic contexts. The visual arts, previously relegated as inferior to literary and verbal mediums by influential eighteenth-century theorists like G. E. Lessing and Joshua Reynolds, become essential to an aesthetic experience of the text. Similarly, the reader who traditionally occupied a lower position on the hierarchy of aesthetic interpretation than the author or the text, takes a prominent place in determining meaning. The marginalized form of visual art acts as a metaphor for the marginalized readers of Blake’s work. This elimination of hierarchical structures correlates to Blake’s revolutionary sympathies that advocated for political and social equality by dismantling oppressive institutions of Church and State.

The process of aesthetic messianism capitalizes on the contrariety in Blake’s design, recognizing the interpretive gaps that open opportunities for audiences to engage more actively in the reading/viewing experience. Aesthetic

¹⁰ Chapter three will explore more closely the features of messianism and its relation to Blake’s radical aesthetics.

messianism consists of three stages that Blake models in his works: creative interpretation, creative production, and creative revision. Creative interpretation occurs when an individual encounters a text like Blake's, one that prevents a simple and mindless reception of meaning. Instead, the reader/viewer must engage their imaginative energies to make sense of the text's oppositional structure of visual and verbal meanings, of confusing allusions or revised referents, of invented and obscure features. These interpretive gaps characterize Blake's works, providing ample opportunities for a creative response. Drawing upon creative energy facilitates the second stage of aesthetic messianism, creative production, in which the reader/viewer begins to formulate new expressions of imaginative activity, ideally by generating works of art. Whether the art flows from trying to reconcile or reinterpret the original work that produced creative energy, or merely takes the original work as inspiration for generating new art, Blake demonstrates how interpreting existing works translates into producing new works. Lastly, Blake's printmaking method provides the key to the third stage of aesthetic messianism, creative revision. In this stage reader/viewers-turned artists return to the work of art they produced and apply their creative interpretation to their own work. In essence, one's own artistic expression can inaugurate a new process in which one is responding to and revising oneself. This third stage provides opportunity for continual progression, avoiding a static

achievement of a perfected state that Blake rejects. Stasis for Blake is a consummate error; as he writes in *The Marriage*, “The man who never alters his opinion is like standing water, & breeds reptiles of the mind” (E 41-42). To truly transform society, people must never rest in their pursuit of equality and connection to the creative forces that for Blake constitute the divine. Blake’s unique ability to take an existing plate engraved in metal and reproduce it while reimagining it illustrates the third stage of aesthetic messianism.

This study applies the framework of aesthetic messianism to Blake’s early works generated during the tumultuous time of revolution from 1788 to 1794. *The Songs of Innocence and Experience*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and *Europe: A Prophecy* demonstrate instances in which aesthetic messianism can transform individuals who will then unite to revolutionize and reform the oppressive institutions and systems that perpetuate misery and bondage. Blake’s own life and aesthetic approach become examples for others to follow and emulate, comprising the messianic aspects of the study. By cleansing the doors of perception from the indoctrination of political and religious dogma, people transform and ascend to the level of true artists, able to see past their own limited perceptions and elevate the marginalized and disenfranchised. Stage one of aesthetic messianism involves the overcoming of such limited perception, while stage two represents a full participation in communal aesthetics. Stage three

directs these energies inward to continue to eradicate any tendencies of solipsistic self-involvement, ceasing to challenge one's own assumptions and to renew one's perceptions. Artistic interpretation and creation become avenues of redemption that will change the world.

The chapters in this study expand an understanding of this complex procedure and will discover potential pitfalls and oversights within Blake's own participation in it. Though Blake's works and writings form the basis for this system of aesthetic messianism, part of the study involves an analysis of whether he fully embodies it and if his expectations and proclamations coincide with his practices. The second chapter will examine more closely Blake's theories on the type of reader/viewer he values as vital to this redemptive process. Drawing upon reader-response theory, the chapter defines the ideal reader who can participate in the first and second stages of aesthetic messianism. Furthermore, Blake's elevation of the marginalized form of visual art will be explored, both the reasons for this elevation and the implications for aesthetic messianism.

Michelangelo's influence upon Blake provides an entry point into a consideration of his Illuminated prophecy *Europe*, in particular the frontispiece commonly labeled *The Ancient of Days*. Tracing elements of Michelangelo's visual works and Milton's literary works on the frontispiece displays the first stage of aesthetic messianism, Blake's creative interpretation of the texts. The second stage flows

from his interpretation, as Blake creates his own original work from his two models. Finally, *Europe's* Preludium provides an example of this elevated visual art in a multimodal context. Both in the composition of the text and in the allusions embedded in the text Blake demonstrates the dynamic and creative tension that multimodal texts can produce.

Having established the necessity of marginalized readers and marginalized art forms, in the third chapter I turn to the nature of Blake's own messianism and the traditions he appropriates in developing *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Sanders proposes definitions of messianism and millenarianism that correspond to Blake's own mixture of individual and collective modes. Messianism occurs when people collectively initiate and execute the apocalypse, but it also can involve an external and catalyzing intervention from a prophetic figure. In Blakean terms, the participation in aesthetic transformation requires the spectator's active involvement in interpreting the text, engaging their imagination in the first stage of aesthetic messianism. This requires a model to be interpreted, the artist-prophet who demonstrates this process. Blake assumes the mantle of aesthetic messiah in the printmaking innovation that removes the meddling of editors and printers from artists' visions, thus allowing a direct connection between artist and audience. The eighteenth-century mystic Emanuel Swedenborg provides both the template and the obstacle to which Blake must

apply his corrosive imagination, interpreting and creating new texts in response to Swedenborg. The anti-Swedenborg pamphlet Blake composes forms the genesis of *The Marriage*. By examining Blake's interpretation of Swedenborg, the first two stages of aesthetic messianism appear in the demonstration of artistic creation. Lastly, the third stage is foreshadowed by the discussion of eternity vs. temporality in a millennial and messianic context; Blake argues for a rejection of static accomplishments as the ideal state, instead proposing the progressive nature of human redemption.

Religious and liturgical functions come under examination in the fourth chapter, which argues for a liturgical understanding of Blake's printmaking process. Despite Blake's vociferous condemnations of religious rituals as hollow and moribund acts, liturgies' concerns with matters of ultimate importance and worship inform his conceptions of the creative act. The chapter explicates Blake's radical revision of the divine; Blake reimagines the divine as a creative force that was incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ, a force Blake titles the Poetic Genius. Furthermore, Blake's theories on limitations in the form of "bounding lines" helps illustrate the need for limiting forces that act as contraries to the energy of the imagination, which the liturgy provides through its set and measured procedure. James K. A. Smith's theories on secular liturgies and rituals provide a basis for understanding everyday acts as indicators of ultimacy, things

that matter most to people. With such an understanding, the chapter explores the printmaking process and the allusions to it in *The Marriage*, arguing that Blake imbues this process with ultimate importance as a symbol of the aesthetic act. The first two stages of aesthetic messianism are explored in *The Marriage's* episode involving a tour of the Printing House of Hell. Additionally, the liturgical rhythm of moving from the mundane to the profound and back in a cyclical pattern provides the basis for the repetitive nature of the third stage of aesthetic messianism. Liturgies encourage both the transcendent activity of creativity and the humbleness of the quotidian, marrying Blake's artistic exuberance with his emphasis on everyday concerns and common people.

The fifth and final chapter shifts the focus to the third stage of aesthetic messianism in its emphasis on Blake's reproducible multimodal texts as exemplars of the inwardly turned imagination. This chapter conceptualizes multimodal texts in a performative context, extending the liturgy as a performance of ultimate significance. An excursion into performance theory provides a basis for conceiving the visual and verbal elements as external and internal performances designed to create interpretive gaps within audience's minds. The audience is drawn into the action as they take an active role through their interpretation and creation of the text. Next, the chapter examines Blake's theories on theatre and performance, which are explicitly negative. However,

building on studies by Susanne Sklar and Diane Piccitto, Blake's notions of multimodal creation assume performative aspects in which marginalized audiences are better able to participate and become active performers. This dynamic facilitates the stages of aesthetic messianism, as the audience conceives the verbal text in one way, only to have an external performance visually depicted in another way. An interpretive gap is created, allowing for the audience's own involvement. Furthermore, an examination of "The Little Black Boy" illustrates how the multiple copies of *The Songs of Innocence and Experience* show Blake's revision of his own texts in order to confound indoctrinating narratives. Blake takes the genre of antislavery narratives in children's literature and reimagines such performances within a multimodal context, both illustrating the innocence of childish purity, and the need for adults tainted by indoctrination to be reformed and reeducated.

The chapter ends with a discussion of the reality and practicality of Blake's envisioned performance, his participation in the third stage of aesthetic messianism. Although he expresses a preference for the marginalized audience who can approach his texts without any preconceived notions, fully in touch with the Poetic Genius, a problem arises that relates to the entire study. Blake assumes that audiences can understand and appreciate his texts as he conceives them, a theory born out of his belief in the universal availability of the Poetic

Genius to all who truly surrender to it. The fact remains, however, that if his texts are too opaque and scandalizing, the reader might cease reading out of confusion and discomfort. Indeed, Blake's own experiences would eventually confirm that his audience either failed or refused (or refused because they failed) to appreciate and therefore engage with his radical works.¹¹ Since Blake experienced this public disapproval or rejection further into his career, it is safe to say that during the early years, still caught up in revolutionary fervor, Blake still believed that he could find a sympathetic audience who would participate in his progressive contrariety. However, he remained obstinately devoted to his ideals, aesthetically and philosophically, refusing to compromise in order to attract a larger audience. His legacy of his original works, especially the later epics *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, has become that of an eccentric genius, a source of inspiration to a minority of scholars and artists, but largely inaccessible to the mainstream culture. The reasons for this lead to the final point of this introduction, the development of interpretive systems.

¹¹ Eaves connects Blake's inability to attract an audience during his lifetime as a consequence of "a weak institutional base for knowing illuminated printing; Blake's continuous medium, which in our time has often been celebrated, highlights institutional discontinuities and challenges institutional memory. By cultivating a single medium that joins two arts, Blake put tremendous stress on the ability of ordinary legitimizing processes to function, and that stress had an unfortunate effect on the course of his reputation" (105).

Blake is notorious for his hatred of systematizing structures that impose limits and confine creative possibilities; he decries totalizing systems as the source of oppressive institutions and religious organizations in *The Marriage*.¹² However, in a supreme irony that only he could reconcile, Blake in his epic *Jerusalem* gives the following pronouncement to his heroic artist Los: "I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans / I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create" (E 153). Blake admits for the need to create a counter-system to the systems of oppression already in operation. This need to systematize explains the kind of Priesthood (that Blake deplored in *The Marriage*) that has sprung up around Blake's own works. In order to comprehend fully the panoply of allusions, the enormous list of dramatis personae and their changing characteristics, the wide array of locations and situations invented entirely *ex nihilo*, scholars devote years of study. Eventually, an impulse to create a systematic approach that renders the works coherent emerges. Steven Shaviri provides a defense of the inevitability of such systemization:

Blake's elaborate constructions are themselves only means toward the end of liberating the poet and his readers from any such limitations of system or of perspective. Systematization must remain subordinated to the process of creation of which it is nevertheless the result and the symptom. In the long run, any

¹² "And particularly they studied the genius of each city & country. placing it under its mental deity. Till a system was formed, which some took advantage of & enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realize or abstract the mental deities from their objects: thus began Priesthood" (E 38).

completed system, including even Blake's own, must be destroyed in order to be freshly recreated. (229)

Though systems must never become ossified and static, they are also extremely helpful in making sense of Blake. Therefore, though perhaps violating the letter of Blake's edicts, this study has devised a system for understanding the multimodality of Blake's works in terms of the redemption of humanity and the elevation of marginalized people. By no means is this system comprehensive, limited as it is to three works from a six-year span. Nor indeed is it meant to be, but merely poses a new direction for the conversation that will translate into the current climate of multimodal texts in the digital age. However, the necessity to create systems bespeaks the dichotomy between Blake's idealized state of aesthetic creation and consumption, and the reality that his works produce. Blake invites the very problem he despises: a Priesthood of systematizers to interpret his works.

The epilogue reflects on the broader application and future direction of this study. The wealth of materials now available through online resources has changed dramatically the potential for literary studies in general and Blake studies in particular. Comparative studies of Blake's multimodal texts, previously requiring travel to various libraries around the world, can now be accomplished through online resources like the Blake Archive. Furthermore, the ability to generate multimodal texts involving visual and verbal elements and

even incorporating video components, allows for exciting new horizons opening in areas like digital humanities and comparative or multimodal literature. From this explosion of digital texts and reading approaches, a conundrum emerges relating to how traditional literary criticism can handle the new environments and new definitions of texts. Blake's multimodal texts and their situation within the confines of traditional literary studies offers a potential space to develop vocabulary and strategies for engaging with the exploding literature and media environment. This study's largest goal is to begin proposing new directions for the development of such vocabulary and strategies by unpacking the multimodal texts created by Blake.

CHAPTER TWO

Elevating the Sister Art: Visual-Verbal Dialogues in Blake's *Europe*

Blake's concern for marginalized groups of individuals translates into an appreciation for a diversity among the arts, both in expression and in reception. All men should be artistically minded, interpreting other works of art and producing it themselves. In Blake's mind, many of the cruelties and oppressive organizations that plagued humanity in his day existed because of the failure to appreciate and value one's fellow man (or woman) as equal with oneself. The stratification and hierarchical structures that artificially elevated one group of people over another promoted the oppression of marginalized groups, and therefore constituted the first and most important point of reformation and revolution if any progress was to be made. The subjugation of visual art beneath verbal and written forms likewise exposed flaws and errors in the realm of aesthetics, and it is such a situation that Blake, as a trained engraver skilled in both literary and visual composition, felt himself uniquely qualified to address.

Political and religious marginalization of people groups finds a corollary in the consideration of works of art. The role of the reader or audience member in encountering a text has been historically devalued, with focus levied on the author or the text itself as the locus of meaning. Who exactly a reader is and what

expectations can be made about him/her remains a contested area of study. Since, as the introduction established, the contrariety principle outlined in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (MHH) not only applies to the multimodal text that Blake produced but to the interaction between that text and the reader who encounters it, the role and function of readers becomes of preeminent importance. Blake's concern for marginalized audiences will receive more attention later in this chapter, but an understanding of Blake's ideal audience provides much insight into the spiritual and aesthetic paradigm in which this contrariety of creativity would function. In a letter to the editor of the *Monthly Magazine* in 1806, Blake defends his friend and mentor the artist Henry Fuseli against critiques that are "too formed upon pictures imported from Flanders and Holland", exclaiming, "consequently our countrymen are easily brow-beat on the subject of painting" (E 768).¹ He implores for a democratizing of aesthetic judgment: "O Englishmen! know that every man ought to be a judge of pictures, and every man is so who has not been connoisseured out of his senses" (768). Blake's use of the term "connoisseur" (which he transforms into a verb) is instructive in determining the kind of approach to visual arts that Blake finds erroneous, one that applies archaic artistic conventions learned from privileged experts at institutions like

¹ All primary source references refer to David Erdman's edition of Blake's collected works, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, and will be cited similarly.

the Royal Academy of the Arts (an institute Blake was briefly accepted into before a mutual disgust between himself and the instructors led to his exodus). “Connoisseur” for Blake seems to suggest an educated art critic who views art merely for the sake of demonstrating his own expertise and erudition, instead of engaging with the medium at a deep and visceral level.

This excerpt encapsulates the main thrust of the discussion at hand; Blake agitates against the general populace’s deference to a group of elites who hold sway over a downtrodden majority. Blake perceives a similar obsequious attitude towards political and religious authorities in eighteenth-century England, and believes that correcting the aesthetic error should begin to correct the other errors as well by unleashing individuals’ imaginative powers. This decimating of authority in the minds and hearts of his readers becomes his agenda in the early illustrated prophecies, and the first order of business in overturning this monopoly is to promote a cleansing of readers’ perceptions, to encourage the average person to critically examine their surroundings and the messages with which they are bombarded. To achieve such a desired skill requires practice, and Blake applies his creative energies in reinterpreting existing works of art for his own purposes. As the above passage stated, allowing a lofty elite to dictate aesthetic interpretation equals participating in one’s own oppression, abdicating an active and imaginative control over one’s life. The first

stage of aesthetic messianism that appears in Blake's thought and work involves this impulse: readers must apply a creative interpretation to external stimuli, starting with art and eventually leading to a renewed perception of ministerial and religious systems. As Blake demonstrates in his reinterpretation of two of his artistic heroes, Michelangelo and Milton, the redeemed imagination is able to level a cleansed perception even to such masterpieces as the Sistine Chapel and *Paradise Lost*, creatively interpreting them in order to produce a new work of art using them as inspiration. The frontispiece to the illuminated prophecy *Europe* serves as exemplar for this process. However, Blake also illustrates his concern for diversity and the marginalized by the medium of his new production, as well as the constitution of the two plate Preludium in *Europe*.

Promoting the importance of readers' engagement with a text, both verbally and visually, challenges the hierarchical authority of authors or texts. Reader response theory provides a framework for discussing Blake's elevation of the reader as a critical component to his scheme for aesthetic revolution. By centralizing the reader within the conceptualization of a text, creative interpretation and production of the text take on elevated significance, pushing back against attitudes that privileged the author or text.

Reader Response as Elevating the Marginalized Reader

Though isolated critics and artists like Blake expressed an interest in a reader's response to a work as a central factor in art criticism, not until the twentieth century were systematic theories developed that prioritized the reception of a text and sought to contemplate its implications. Reader-response theories became critical approaches in response to early twentieth-century literary theories, particularly New Criticism and formalism that focused solely on the text. In some sense, the text and the reader had become polarized in a system that saw the text as an independent object whose meaning exists in an almost abstract idealized state, waiting for the discerning reader to access it, but eternally available and inherent. This mindset set the reader at odds with the text; in a way, the reader became a passive receiver of the text's sublimity, marginalized in terms of the hermeneutic process. Reader-response theory shifted priority towards the reader, an intrinsic part of textual interpretation. In reorienting art and textual theories to include the importance of readers and their reception of texts, reader-response undermined the premise of authorial or textual authority.

Reader-response theory raises questions concerning the precise location of a text's meaning, as well as issues involving performance and the effect of reading upon the reader, all of which pertain to Blake's conception of what

readers do with texts and the desired results from the interaction. Interpretive gaps constitute a major element of the contrariety principle elucidated by Blake in *MHH*, as binary oppositions create a space in which the competing forces generate creative energy. The first and foremost gap that occurs in textual interpretation creates the space between the text itself and the reader. Wolfgang Iser, a pioneer in reader-response theory, articulates this binary opposition. Iser explains the polarization of text and reader and provides a redefinition of the textual object being created:

the artistic pole is the author's text, and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader. In view of this polarity, it is clear that the work itself cannot be identical with the text or with its actualization but must be situated somewhere between the two. It must inevitably be virtual in character, as it cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or to the subjectivity of the reader, and it is from this virtuality that it derives its dynamism. (21)

In this view, meaning is created as a collaborative effort located neither with the creator nor the reader but in the nebulous space between, where the author's expressed imaginative creation encounters readers' own imaginative interpretations. As Iser points out, the very lack of concrete definition of the virtual text allows for a dynamism, an activity and flexibility that opens potentially limitless horizons of meaning and breathes new life into old, dusty texts with each successive generation of readers or audience member who encounter it. Immediately apparent from Iser's definition here is a subversion of

the hierarchical notion of a text's independent existence from the reader. For Blake, this element provides a crucial component of his aesthetic paradigm, promoting readers into vital and prominent roles in textual analysis and creation.

A corollary to this concept of a virtual text created by the interaction between the physical artifact and the reader lies in the notion of performance, a performance that leads to transformation. Iser asserts that the interpretive gap between text and reader "arising from juxtaposed themes and backgrounds is occupied by the reader's standpoint, from which the various reciprocal transformations lead to the emergence of the aesthetic object" (29). These "reciprocal transformations" comprise the process of creating a virtual text existing between the reader and the physical artifact, the text redounding upon the reader in response to the reader's initial reaction in a kind of dance or dialogue. Stanley Fish, a well-known early proponent of reader-response, characterizes reading in a performative sense, the text imposing upon the reader in vital and transformative ways. He argues for the need to "substitu[e] for one question—what does this sentence mean—another, more operational question—what does this sentence do?...[The text] is no longer an object, a thing-in-itself, but an event, something that happens to, and with the participation of, the reader" (125). Fish argues that rather than communicating information or endeavoring to persuade his audience, texts envelop readers into the very

process they describe, to become a part of, or at least a participant in, the text rather than being a remote and objective spectator or scientist measuring and analyzing for facts (137-138). Fish outlined this theory in his book-length study of Milton's *Paradise Lost*,² and argued that Milton's poem worked to precipitate a kind of fall in his readers themselves.³ The participation of readers in the texts they encounter to the point of changing the reader provides a basis for understanding how Blake's multimodal texts might transform readers.

Fish is not alone in recognizing the potential for reader transformation through performing a text. Shoshana Felman emphasizes the performative practice of reception theory: "A reading lesson is, precisely, not a statement; it is a performance. It is not theory, it is practice, a practice... that can be exemplary only in so far as it is understood to be a model or a paradigm, not for imitations but for (self) transformation" (182). Felman's contention prioritizes transformation of the reader herself rather than simply the reader's transformation of the text, a feat accomplished by 'practicing' a text.⁴ Paul

² *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*.

³ Leitch explains, "As Fish conceived it, Milton's procedure was to render in the reader's mind the action of the Fall of Man, thereby causing the reader himself to fall just as Adam did" (36).

⁴ Chapter five of this study investigates performativity in Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*.

Ricoeur identifies a tension of identity stemming from a reader's responsive performance: "When a reader applies a text to himself, as is the case in literature, he recognizes himself in certain possibilities of existence – according to the model offered by a hero, or a character – but, at the same time, he is transformed; the becoming other in the act of reading is as important as is the recognition of self" (qtd. in Bennett 15). Ricoeur implies that readers identify with the characters in a text while remaining conscious of the fictionality of the characters, but that they also become alienated from themselves in a strange sense, "becoming other" through their identification. Thus, a reader can identify with a fictional character while recognizing their identification with such a construct as artificial and actual simultaneously; since they desire to be like a hero, yet they recognize the unreality of the object of their desire, their desire in a sense is to be unreal. This performing of a text, identifying with characters and situations that are fictional constructs, creates an interpretive gap that will be further explored in a later chapter. Felman and Ricoeur relocate the performative nature of textual hermeneutics with the reader, active and creative yet tension-generating, as befits Blake's theories.

Having established the role of the reader in the performative and hermeneutic movements within a text, reader-response theory also addresses the question regarding who or what is meant by the reader. Fish and Maurice

Blanchot provide several helpful insights into the role and characteristics of readers, the first of which entails the reader's responsiveness. Fish asserts that an ideal reader actively and immediately responds to a text, absorbed in the text in a quasi-literal sense. Breaking down a sentence, paragraph, description, chapter, novel, poem, or so on in a methodical sequence, Fish bases his system on "a consideration of the temporal flow of the reading experience, and it is assumed that the reader responds in terms of that flow and not to the whole utterance" (127). The temporality of the process of reading also creates a unique experience with each unique reader and each unique reading by the same reader.⁵ This question of temporality will recur in later discussions, but the experiential, almost existential, quality of the reader's responsiveness to a text coincides with Blake's own appreciation for the childlike enjoyment of his works. Reacting with an immediacy of response creates tension within the reader's own sense of narrative temporality and holistic awareness of the text while emphasizing the precognitive reactivity and receptivity that Blake prizes in his own ideal reader.

Building on the notion of reader receptivity, Maurice Blanchot identifies readers' inherent ignorance and therefore willingness to be acted upon by a text

⁵ Vincent Leitch observes: "Because reading occurred through time, the experience of literature involved a continuous readjustment of perceptions, ideas, and evaluations. The meaning of a work, therefore, was to be encountered in the experience of it, not in the detritus left after the experience" (36).

as critical to reader-response. While Fish maintains that an educated reader can practice instinctive receptivity,⁶ Blanchot argues that “reading, seeing, and hearing works of art demands more ignorance than knowledge, it demands a knowledge filled with immense ignorance, and a gift that is not given beforehand, a gift that is received, secured and lost each time in self-forgetfulness” (189). Appropriately, Blanchot dabbles in Blakean paradoxes of ignorant knowledge, but the notion coincides with Blake’s marginalized readers, which are those who come to the text from a posture of ignorance rather than expertise, from submission rather than authority, willing to accept a mutual dynamic of imposition instead of solely imposing their own will on a text.⁷ Blanchot does not advocate utter ignorance on the part of the reader, but a knowledge “filled with immense ignorance,” a level of base understanding that Blake would equate to the Poetic Genius inherent in each individual at birth.⁸ This ignorance also touches upon a contradiction within Blake’s framework for

⁶ Among the idealized reader’s attributes Fish explains that he is “a competent speaker of the language out of which the text is built up...[and] has literary competence. That is, he is sufficiently experienced as a reader to have internalized the properties of literary discourses, including everything from the most local of devices...to whole genres” (145).

⁷ Blake provides a picture of his ideal reader in a letter to the Reverend Truseler: “But I am happy to find a Great Majority of Fellow Mortals who can Elucidate My Visions & Particularly they have been Elucidated by Children who have taken a greater delight in contemplating my Pictures than I even hoped. Neither Youth nor Childhood is Folly or Incapacity Some Children are Fools & so are some Old Men” (E 703).

⁸ Blake’s theories on the Poetic Genius will be discussed in chapters three and four.

the dynamic interaction between text and reader, which this chapter's conclusion will explain.

Reader-response theory also addresses questions of marginalized readers in terms of gender or class that echo Blake's similar concerns. Patrocinio Schweickart applies a gendered lens to the discussion of reader-response. By reading male-authored texts, she discovered a process of "immasculation" imbedded in the substrate of the text, directing a reader's response in an androcentric direction and predicated on the reader's active engagement with the text. "The process of immasculation," she explains, "is latent in the text, but it finds its actualization only through the reader's activity" (81). Instead of emasculation, or the effacement of masculine characteristics, immasculation imposes a male perspective upon reader of both genders, leading to a kind of dualistic or even schizophrenic effect in female readers who find themselves compelled to submit to this paradigm. Choice becomes paramount in her system as the text and reader engage in a more combative interaction, each imposing upon the other, which illuminates the required consciousness of rhetorical paradigms embedded in each text. As Blake proposes in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence" (E 34); polarities of opposition perfectly fit within his aesthetic and philosophical

framework. This gendered appraisal of texts reintroduces political overtones to the aesthetic exchange between text and reader.

Other considerations of marginalized readers and reception theory's critique of such hierarchical systems focuses on a wider scope of people groups, though still among the categories visible in Blake's own intentions. Michel de Certeau addresses disenfranchisement considerations in economic and social spheres, explaining the classist nature of literary criticism as it was expressed during the eighteenth century: "the autonomy of the text was the reproduction of sociocultural relationships within the institution whose officials determined what parts of it should be read" (157). By limiting hermeneutical practices as well as the availability of texts, religious and political institutions maintained considerable power over a largely illiterate populace to suppress deviant readings of the Bible, and deviant texts like Paine's *The Age of Reason*, the suppression of which Blake would decry in his annotations to the Bishop Watson (E 612-620). The privileging of the text "independent of its readers" widened the gap between an uneducated and illiterate populace, maintaining the systems of power and control that the revolutionaries of the 1790s found so objectionable.

The issue of marginalized readers including the illiterate and uneducated particularly pertains to the final aspect of reader-response theory under survey here, and transitions to the following discussion of visual theory. In advocating

for a reader-centered lens that deconstructs hierarchization of texts, Certeau still maintains a linguistic and verbal hegemony that requires literacy and education, and with such education comes the potential for conditioned responses and approved interpretative strategies. However, Certeau tacitly acknowledges a graphical interpretative approach. In explaining the process of semiotic education, he claims that “the schoolchild learns to read by a process that *parallels* his learning to decipher; learning to read is not a result of learning to decipher: *reading* meaning and *deciphering* letters correspond to two different activities, even if they intersect” (emphasis in original, 154). By distinguishing the recognition of imagistic signs from linguistic signs, Certeau allows for multiple avenues of semiotic interpretation to operate simultaneously.⁹ Both the recognition of meaningful arrangement of letters that form words and the recognition of discernable images are acts independent of the mental and even creative act of discerning meaning. To recognize the shape of a tiger or the word “tiger” constitutes a different intellectual process than drawing conclusions about the meaning of the word/image or understanding the word’s/image’s allusions and connections within networks of meaning. Therefore, a reader must

⁹ Proposed grammars for visual studies and the decoding of images exist that are similar to linguistic systems. In the reader *Introduction to Multimodal Analysis*, David Machin explain, “[Kress & Van Leeuwen] argued that images are made up of elements, like words, that can be used to create meaning through the way that they are combined through a visual grammar” (159).

perform multiple processes almost instantaneously, recognizing the sign and its signified meaning, and accessing any deeper meanings, analogies, etc. that add significance to the sign, including its relative position to other signs, be they words or images.

Reader-response theory provides definite conceptions of the active or performative role the reader inhabits in a textual setting. Rather than passively accepting author- or text-centered authority in interpreting a text, readers actively cooperate with an extant artefact in order to “create” a text. By acknowledging the interpretive gap between the text and reader that requires creative responses, theorists can elevate readers into a role at least equal to the original text or author while questioning the capacity of the text in determining meaning and allowing for a visual rhetoric to supplement or supplant linguistic mediums in providing meaning. Defining the reader elucidates the role readers play in this interpretive dance, both in terms of immediacy of response and an element of ignorance and naturalness that facilitates receptivity to a text, a receptivity that leads to the transformation readers undergo who are actively engaged with the text. This transformative property of reader-response theory spills over into the political, social, and religious realms, creating opportunities for disenfranchised and marginalized readers to both engage with and be featured by texts. Such an egalitarian force translates into the inclusion of

imagistic and visual components as potentially more accessible than the verbal skills of language.

Visual Study Theories: Blake's and Others

Reader-response (reception) theory and visual studies may seem strange bedfellows at first glance, but the correlations between the two have received critical attention. Irene Chayes observes that reception theory's "greatest impact has been on art history, especially in and through the writings of Michael Fried on eighteenth- and nineteenth century French painting" (440-441). Reception theory's impact upon several major theoretical works on visual studies indicates how multimodal texts can be evaluated productively and creatively. Reception theory elevates the role of the reader in determining the meaning and aesthetic impact of a text, corresponding with Blake's desire to appeal to groups previously dismissed or ignored by the elite intelligentsia. In a similar way, Blake sought to elevate the visual arts from a subordinate position beneath literary and verbal aesthetics, a position to which it had been relegated during the eighteenth century. A brief overview of visual theory will segue into Blake's own notions of the image and its relationship with marginalized audiences, setting the scene for a full consideration of his Illuminated prophecy *Europe*. What comes into focus from examining visual studies theories involves a precognitive or instinctive apprehension that Blake strongly values, and that provides a means of appeal to

audiences unskilled in historical works of art or theory, cultural European traditions, or even those 'readers' who read poorly or not at all.

One of the leading theorists of the twentieth century in visual studies (perhaps not coincidentally) also produced one of the major critical works on Blake's images and their interactions with verbal content. W. J. T. Mitchell's *Iconology* represents a seminal visual studies text that helped define the direction of the field for the latter part of the twentieth century. *Iconology* deals primarily with both the theory and history of visual studies criticism, outlining the varied and contradictory approaches to understanding and deciphering images. Mitchell traces the standard practice of mimetic interpretation back to a Blakean nemesis, John Locke, drawing upon notions of Locke's premise of tabula rasa, Locke's definition of an image as "a reproduction in the mind of a sensation produced by a physical perception" (fn 12). Poetic and mental images are mental reproductions of physical stimuli, leading to the argument that the best visual art would be that which practices the highest mimesis, achieving the closest approximation of reality. Such Lockean rationalism infuriated Blake, who believed that a precognitive connection to an imaginative force called the Poetic Genius formed the basis for inspired interpretation.

Mitchell endorses some of Blake's principles in his own theories on visual interpretation. Rather than attempt to reconcile and merge visual and verbal

forms, Mitchell proposes that critics “treat it, not as a matter for peaceful settlement under the terms of some all-embracing theory of signs, but as a struggle that carries the fundamental contradictions of our culture into the heart of theoretical discourse itself. The point, then, is not to heal the split between words and images, but to see what interests and powers it serves” (*Iconology* 44). Mitchell echoes Blake’s desire to maintain a healthy tension between the two disciplines. In explaining the characteristics of a system of signs, Mitchell identifies the crucial nature of interpretive spaces: “A differentiated symbolic system, by contrast, is not dense and continuous, but works by gaps and discontinuities” (*Iconology* 67). The establishment of a monolithic system of visual hermeneutics contradicts Blake’s ideal of decimating hierarchies.

Mitchell also constructs a thesis parallel to conventions of reader-response when determining imagistic meaning. Dismissing any metaphysical authority or foundation, he contends that “we need to ask of a medium, not what ‘message’ it dictates by virtue of its essential character, but what sort of functional features it employs in a particular context” (69). Mitchell echoes Fish’s and Felman’s discussions about the effectual properties of a text, what it produces and how, though he is not necessarily thinking of the reader (or viewer as is the case) as the recipient of the text’s movement. The means by which a picture can be interpreted are not innate or transcendent, but socially, linguistically,

pedagogically, or political constructed, as critics like Schweickart and Certeau have argued. Visual studies theory as Mitchell conceives it relies upon the reader's context, assumptions, and imaginative function, part of which is provoked by the tension created between verbal or literary forms. In multimodal texts, the tension is evident and immediate; however, in works that feature little to no verbal components the tension must be subtler, produced either by a referenced verbal text (in the case of a depiction of a scene from a literary work), or by the verbalized (if only mentally) interpretation of the text the viewer generates. In either case, a heavy emphasis is placed on the viewer's activity as well as a healthy tension between mediums.

Part of Mitchell's thesis involves establishing and deconstructing the hierarchization of verbal over visual studies. Mitchell discusses G.E. Lessing, an influential aesthetic theorist of the eighteenth century and a proponent of the inferiority of visual art to literary works. Lessing is particularly relevant to any discussion of Blake's notions of aesthetic theory since Blake annotated his copy of Lessing. Mitchell explains Lessing's contribution to aesthetic theory: "Lessing's originality was his systematic treatment of the space-time question, his reduction of the generic boundaries of the arts to this fundamental difference" (96). However, reducing the evaluation of art to this criterion promoted a hierarchy in which written works emerge as superior to their sister forms:

Poetry had the 'wider sphere' because of 'the infinite range of our imagination and the intangibility of its images.' The 'encroachments' of one art upon another are always committed by painting, which tries to break out of its proper sphere and become 'an arbitrary method of writing,' or, even more sinister, tries to lure poetry into the narrow boundaries of the pictorialist aesthetic. (qtd. Lessing 107).

Additionally, Mitchell observes a gendered slant on this hierarchical structure of Lessing's: "Paintings, like women, are ideally silent, beautiful creatures designed for the gratification of the eye, in contrast to the sublime eloquence proper to the manly art of poetry" (110). Where poetry is active and exerts meaning upon the reader, pictures remain quiescent and passive, dependent upon readers' interpretation and objectification.

Ascribing a subservient and marginalized role to visual art continues to influence modern critics and theorists. James Heffernan in his book *Cultivating Picturacy* acknowledges the gendered readings mentioned above, noting the historical analogy drawn between femininity and the visual arts.¹⁰ His concern, however, involves the role of the art critic in mediating between the art and the audience, explaining that "Art criticism speaks for pictures because pictures cannot interpret themselves" (42). While Heffernan's focus involves audience

¹⁰ "To recognize here the terms in which men have traditionally defined the role of women is to see more clearly how visual art has been subordinated to language. It is no accident that the female face and figure, clothed and unclothed, has for centuries occupied such a central place in painting and sculpture, in beautiful works of art presented for the gaze and voyeuristic delectation of men" (16).

response, the audience in question is just that kind of audience that Blake demeans as “connoisseured”, obtuse to the instinctual reactions characteristic of such marginalized audiences like children, the illiterate, and uneducated.

Heffernan does contribute to another issue intrinsically connected to visual studies theory. Since imagistic form apparently carries no established meaning in the way linguistic expression does, much of the debate centers on the cultural context in which images are produced. Heffernan weighs in on religious-themed art, allowing that definite interpretations exist “for art in which religious or intellectual meanings are demonstrably embedded, or—to put this another way—for art to demand decoding” (26-27). However, he cautions against a universalizing application of such decoding systems, saying “it can too easily become formulaic and reductive, translating images into words with the aid of an iconographic dictionary that makes no allowance for ambiguity or indeterminacy” (27). In this qualification Heffernan affirms set meanings for certain subsets of imagistic expression, but disavows any universal system of interpretation. Christopher Heppner applies such a qualifier specifically to Blake’s visual mode: “there is a danger that readers will assume that there is indeed a coherent, univocal visual language, agreed upon by all artists, that Blake used, and which can in turn be used to decipher his images” (9). To impose a set imagistic vocabulary of meaning would be to impose constraints and

limitations on the creative response of viewers to a visual text, which would be diametrically opposed to the liberating and antiauthoritarian motivations Blake constantly supports.

If no set standard vocabulary for interpreting images exists, does this abolish any sensible interpretation of a visual text? Recent studies have proposed solutions to such a conundrum. John Bateman, author of *Text and Image: A Critical Introduction to the Visual/Verbal Divide*, admits that applying linguistic standards to images misses the mark, but later attempts to smuggle in this approach through a socio-cultural lens:

Researchers in this tradition [systemic-functional linguistics] accept as a basic tenet that *language is critically shaped by the demands made of it by the social contexts in which it operates*. This means that *even the internal organisation of language is seen as a functional response to the socio-cultural 'work' that language performs in constructing and maintaining social configurations*. Then, since all communicative behavior takes place in social contexts and for social purposes, *it is a relatively small step to consider other forms of expression to be equally subject to constraints of this kind and similarly to have their internal organisation shaped by those demands*. This predicts that *language and images will share general organisational features since they are both socially constructed meaning-making resources*. (45, emphasis mine)

Bateman's correlation between the social construction of image and word meanings provides a starting point for analyzing multimodal texts. What exactly that starting point entails for Blake, however, is another matter.

Blake's theories on aesthetic creation illuminate the priorities and the inspirations for his visuals, as well as the particular kind of reader who will be

able to interpret them productively. The crux of Blake's aesthetic lies in his distinction between what he deems Nature and his conception of the Imagination. In his "Public Address" Blake meditates on the artistic notion of copying, invoking nature and human imagination as potential sources of inspiration:

Men think they can Copy Nature as Correctly as I copy Imagination
this they will find Impossible. & all the Copies or Pretended
Copiers of Nature from Rembrat to Reynolds Prove that Nature
becomes [tame] to its Victim nothing but Blots & Blurs. Why are
Copiers of Nature Incorrect while Copiers of Imagination are
Correct this is manifest to all. (E 574-575)

Instead of relying upon Lessing's and Locke's mimetic form of art, Blake regards the mere copying of nature as "tame" and uninspired; as he exclaims later in the "Public Address", "No Man of Sense ever supposes that Copying from Nature is the Art of Painting" (E 578). While some critics read a Neoplatonic facet to the imagined forms that Blake reproduces in his art,¹¹ for Blake the source of inspiration does not exist in an idealized state, a universal language of visual and verbal semiotics that Heffernan and Heppner dismiss. Blake's notion of the Poetic Genius, a kind of spiritual force of creative energy, is essentially dynamic and transforming; its expression in art is a product of its interaction with individuals. True inspiration involves seeing the world or other works of art

¹¹ Janet Warner asserts, "Though critics are divided about the extent and form of Platonic and Neoplatonic influence in Blake's poetry, its effect on his aesthetic is clear" (11).

through the lens of the Poetic Genius so that even if one emulates another artist one inescapably begins to impose their unique artistic vision onto the work. To copy any source of inspiration without an imaginative imposition is to perpetuate the errors of Emmanuel Swedenborg, which Blake details in *MHH*.¹²

Blake elaborates on this distinction between inspired copying and imaginative creation by invoking several of his artistic models and masters, in particular Michelangelo. Commenting on his illustrations of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, Blake cites Michelangelo in the discussion of imitation versus invention: "To Imitate I abhor I obstinately adhere to the true Style of Art such as Michael Angelo Rafael Jul Rom Alb Durer left it [the Art of Invention not of Imitation. Imagination is My World this world of Dross is beneath my Notice & beneath the Notice of the Public]" (E 580). In Blake's mind, to merely copy existing texts, visual or verbal, with slavish devotion betrays an ignorance of true art. The "true Style of Art" of Renaissance painters like Michelangelo, Raphael and his pupil Giulio Romano ("Jul Rom"), and Albrecht Dürer transcends the pale imitation of the art of "this world of Dross" through imagination. Blake's theories and appreciation of Michelangelo were influenced by a contemporary and fellow artist, Henry Fuseli, whom Blake deeply admired. As Heppner

¹² C.f. Plates 22-23 of *MHH*, E 42-43. Chapters three and four explore Blake's response to Swedenborg further.

explains, Fuseli seized upon a distinction between Nature and “tradition”, positing that Michelangelo “learned most of what he knew by copying the ancients and by working with actual human bodies”, which allowed him to create “bodies that express feeling with an unquestionable, inevitable naturalness” (6). Despite Michelangelo’s use of corporeal models, the emphasis for Fuseli lay on his education from predecessors, from which he then created images that transcended a base mimicry of nature. Rather than copy and imitate nature, Michelangelo learned from his own masters and then utilized his imagination to produce a transcendent art. In this discussion of artistic inspiration, the first stage of aesthetic messianism begins to coalesce. To use existing models as templates or sources of inspiration does not violate Blake’s aesthetics. However, to do so without filtering the existing source material through the lens of imaginative energy is to fail to connect with the divine Poetic Genius, merely to copy without inventing and miss the lessons of masters like Michelangelo.

The receptivity to the source of inspiration should recall reader-response theories like Blanchot’s privileging of the ignorant reader who can engage with a text without the elitism or “connoisseured” prejudice that incensed Blake. Blake, in a letter to Dr. Trusler, provides further insight into the kinds of people he values reacting to his works: “I am happy to find a Great Majority of Fellow

Mortals who can Elucidate My Visions & Particularly they have been Elucidated by Children, who have taken a greater delight in contemplating my Pictures than I even hoped" (E 703). Children, those underrepresented and marginalized people that Blake advocates for in *The Songs*, are able to "elucidate" his works better than the "connoisseured" elites. In particular, Blake highlights children's receptivity to his "Pictures" or visual imagery. Blake draws a through line from the receptivity of reader-viewers responding to his text, to the particular effectiveness of visual mediums in accomplishing this end, to finally the marginalized audience that he values highest. When such sensitive readers encounter his texts, Blake believes that they will be transformed by interacting with the text, moving from creative interpretation into creative production, generating new works of art. This process appears in a consideration of Blake's *Europe* as Blake demonstrates such creative interpretation through his interaction with two of his artistic heroes, the aforementioned Michelangelo and Milton.

Golden Compasses and Chapel Ceilings: Blake's Interpretations of Michelangelo and Milton

In evaluating and interpreting art, Blake radically diverges from traditional aesthetic hierarchies. An excerpt from his commentary on Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* provides a clear insight into the deeply subversive approach Blake takes in art criticism. After pronouncing that "Original Invention" cannot

“Exist without Execution Organized & minutely Delineated & Articulated”, he points to a quartet of master artists who exemplify the principle: their art is “Drawn with a firm and decided hand at once with all its Spots & Blemishes which are beauties & not faults like Fuseli & Michael Angelo Shakespeare & Milton” (E 576). Expounding on the specific objections to lesser artists’ craftsmanship Blake compares their shoddy “Niggled & Poco Piud...and all the beauties pickd out...& blurrd & blotted” handiwork with the “firm and decided hand at once with all its Spots & Blemishes which are beauties & not faults” of the geniuses he lists.¹³ Yet he praises both Michelangelo and Milton using visual criteria, referring to drawing firmly while allowing “Spots & Blemishes” characteristic of painting. This conflation of criteria suggests that Blake evaluates *all art*, even literary and verbal art, through a visual standard, transposing literary concerns into an imagistic paradigm. Blake not only promoted images to equal footing with literary and written art, but has even insinuated that his perceptual framework defaults to a visual aesthetic rather than a linguistic one. In exploring the creative interpretations of Michelangelo and Milton, then,

¹³ E 576. Erdman provides a gloss of the “Pico Piud” in the collected works: “The phrase ‘the poco piu, o poco meno, the little more or little less’ was a commonplace of art criticism in Blake’s day, Morris Eaves tells me, quoting James Barry and Henry Fuseli—who used sometimes the Italian, sometimes the English. Jean H. Hagstrum first proposed this correct reading of what had always been transcribed ‘Poco pend’ and (in N 20) ‘Poco Pen’” (E 882).

readers should reorient their priorities an equal consideration of visual criteria rather than solely written or literary criteria.

This chapter will consider Blake's works within such a framework, as a fully multimodal text whose visual elements exert equal impact on the artistic expression. The associations and allusions embedded in the visual elements must take on the same relevance as those in verbal text, and likewise visual sources, as well as verbal sources, provides inspiration for both visual and verbal art. In examining this dynamic Blake's prophetic book *Europe: A Prophecy* provides a clear example. *Europe* was composed in 1794, following closely on the heels of *America: A Prophecy*, published a year prior in 1793. Blake conceived and created these plates while inhaling the intoxicating fumes of revolution that brooded over western Europe and the newly christened America at the time. Blake transposes such revolution into the realm of aesthetics, challenging the dogma of verbal-visual hierarchy. *Europe* serves as a prime example of this principle; although several plates consist solely of images, and one excised plate featured only words, most are multimodal plates demonstrating the creative opposition of visual and verbal elements vying for the same space. Two specific plates exemplify the creative interpretation and the elevation of marginalized visual components in Blake's works, the famous frontispiece often titled *The Ancient of Days* and the first of the two plates comprising the Preludium to the work.

This frontispiece serves as the book jacket for Northrop Frye's seminal commentary on Blake, *Fearful Symmetry*, positioning it as a hallmark of Blake's imagery. *Europe* begins with the frontispiece, which consists of the classic image of a figure bending down and forming/holding with his hand a compass. A close reading of this initial image reveals Blake's epistemic opposition to Enlightenment philosophy and aesthetics. When first confronted with the frontispiece, one's vision is drawn immediately to the center of the image. Urizen, Blake's revision of a tyrannical Old Testament Jehovah and personification of the rationalism he found so abhorrent in the philosophies of Locke and Newton,¹⁴ reaches down from his lofty and rarefied position (Figure 2.1). David Erdman in his collection *The Illuminated Blake* compiled a complete collection of reproductions of Blake's plates, each with his own annotations.¹⁵ For the frontispiece to *Europe*, he notes the direct allusion to Milton's *Paradise Lost* by glossing the image with the scene in Book 7 where the angel Raphael recounts

¹⁴ The various implications of "Urizen" include the previously mentioned "horizon", indicative of the encompassing and circumscribing impulse of fallen morality, but a further homophonic pun lies in the similar pronunciation between "Urizen" and "your reason" (or even "you're Reason", a damning accusation in Blake's lexicon), an embedded indictment of the rationalist epistemology promulgated by the Enlightenment and built upon Locke's and Newton's theories.

¹⁵ In a pre-internet era, this was one of the few resources that collected all of Blake's illuminated manuscripts together in one volume. The online Blake Archive, whence the Blakean images come, contains multiple copies of Blake's illuminated works and his illustrations of other works.



Figure 2.1: *Europe (frontispiece)* - *"The Ancient of Days"* (Copy G 1794)

the Genesis record of Creation: Erdman quotes the original passage from Milton, describing how God takes “‘the golden compasses’ in his hand to circumscribe the universe and creatures, ‘One foot he centered, and the other turn’d’” (*PL* 7.224-228)” (*The Illuminated Blake* 155). Immediately upon opening the book, then, educated readers are confronted with a literary homage, engaging in intertextual references to a literary masterpiece. Echoing the poetic lines, one foot of the figure of Urizen is planted before him while the other foot is positioned at an acute angle away from the body. Milton plays upon the image of a geometric compass that operated by a set prong or foot that remained stationary while the other prong moved to “circumscribe” the measurements. Blake literalizes and depicts this with the actual compass Urizen holds, creating a verbal and literary connection to *Paradise Lost* without resorting to verbal expression.

Simultaneous to his literary reference Blake employs a similar allusion to another masterpiece; this medium, however, is a visual one, Michelangelo’s fresco *The Creation of Adam*, the centerpiece of the Sistine Chapel. Like his devotion to Milton, Blake’s fascination with and emulation of Michelangelo has been well-documented over the years. Heppner devotes an entire chapter to this artistic dialogue, recording Blake’s copying of an image of Joseph of Arimathea while honing his skills as an apprentice (28-31). Furthermore, the images from *Europe* and Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel in this study have frequently been

used in tracing Michelangelo's influence or Blake's revision.¹⁶ Irene Chayes explores probable inspirations for Blake's *The Ancient of Days*, drawing a connection between Blake's kneeling Urizen and a kneeling figure from Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment*.¹⁷ Blake's indebtedness to the Renaissance master comprises much of the art criticism applied to Blake. Although the two images are not often compared, Blake's *The Ancient of Days* refers to Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* and provides a different network of influence and revision that consists equally of visual and verbal sources.

While Blake's appropriation of Michelangelo is evident, more pronounced is his revision of the source, the "Invention" he applies in order to reimagine and interpret the source for his own aesthetic and political ends. This revision begins with the overall background of both pieces. In every copy of Blake's image, the outer reaches of the plate are shrouded in darkness, whereas Urizen is englobed and illuminated by light. The clouds have parted to reveal the seemingly beneficent divinity condescending towards the earthly realm. The viewer's gaze

¹⁶ Heppner notes the correlation between *The Creation of Adam* and Blake's *Elohim Creating Adam*, which are certainly linked thematically (49-54). Jenijoy La Belle, who also noted the connection between *The Creation of Adam*—*Elohim Creating Adam*, comments that "It is certainly safe to assume that Blake knew the Sistine designs so well that their structure had become part of his own artistic habits of mind, and that when he came in 1795 to execute his own group of frescoes, Michelangelo's influence would inevitably make itself felt" (82).

¹⁷ "Blake's Ways with Art Sources: Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment*", 86-88

is immediately drawn to Urizen's gesture, reaching down from his elevated position. In *The Creation of Adam*, Jehovah and Adam face one another horizontally, both in recumbent positions (Figure 2.2). Blake adapts the source material of Michelangelo's Jehovah and reimagines him as a deity bent on imposing a harsh rationalism on the world. This critical revision is reflected in the tableau of the plate. In the frontispiece, the spatial arrangement has changed

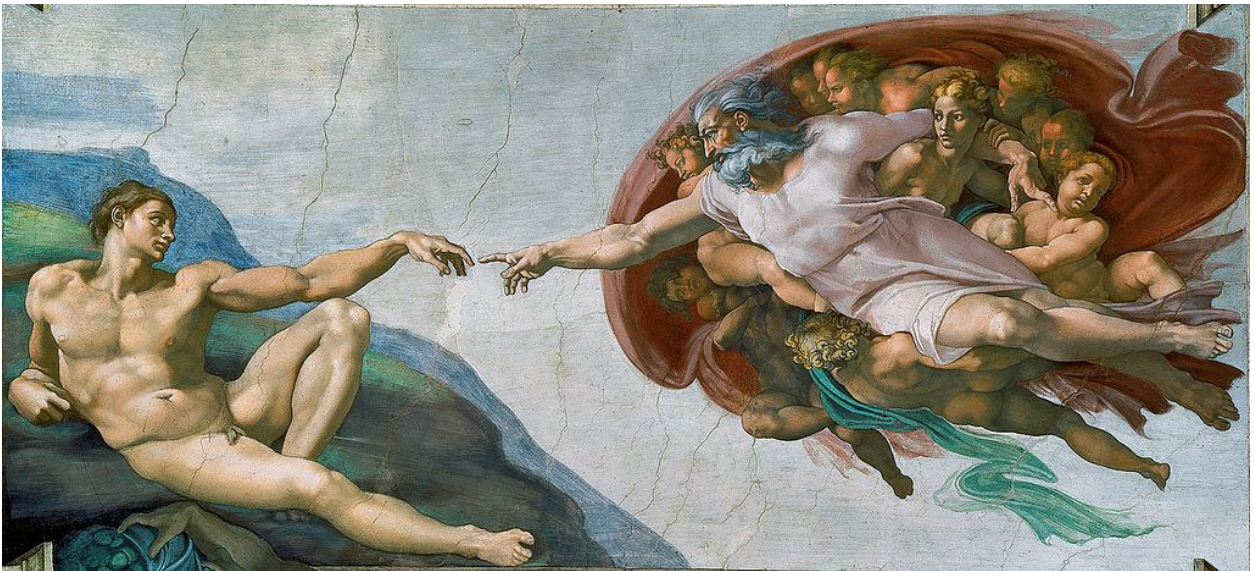


Figure 2.2: Michelangelo - "The Creation of Adam" from the Sistine Chapel.

from a horizontal axis, as in *The Creation of Adam*, to a vertical axis in *The Ancient of Days*. Urizen no longer reaches toward humanity that lies just below Him, now rather bending over toward the void establishing a vertical and visual hierarchy. Though the similarities in the postures and arrangement of the fingers calls to

mind the Sistine scene, the absence of humanity disrupts a direct parallel. Instead of reaching out to instill life into Adam, Blake's monotheistic deity reaches down into darkness with a mechanical implement, preparing to mechanistically inscribe limits to life and existence. Blake synthesizes Milton's passage with Michelangelo's image in his visual commentary upon the legalistic morality and religious authoritarianism against which much of the revolutionary spirit in the 1790s rebelled.

The physical staging of the figure in the plate was previously mentioned in conjunction with Milton's description of the creation, but the specific posture of Urizen can be interpreted to further understand Blake's depiction of cold rationality and suppression in religious garments. Urizen crouches down to extend his limitations onto existence, his left knee bent up in a similar manner to Adam's reclining figure in Michelangelo's fresco. Unlike the relaxed posture of Jehovah, suggesting openness and flexibility, Urizen contorts and confines himself, displaying an unnatural and uncomfortable physical position of his body. His right leg is bent beneath him, and indeed usually the toes disappear behind the bent leg in all but one of the copies of the plate.¹⁸ His body is drawn in on itself, contracted and tense, indicating that Urizen's posture of limitation and

¹⁸ Copy K is the sole existing exception.

suppression may originate within a fractured or twisted self, a theme Blake expands upon in his later epic prophecies. Adding to the claustrophobic sensation is the circumscribing disc of light that surrounds Urizen himself, a confinement that he will not reject but rather duplicate in his en-compassing of the world. In the physical positioning of the body, Blake combines elements from both figures in Michelangelo's work, Adam's bent extremities and Jehovah's extended arm, while simultaneously depicting the moment of creation in *Paradise Lost*. By alluding to both sources yet creating distances between his work and theirs, Blake establishes both his reverence and admiration for his mentors, and his desire to revise their works symbolically and thematically.

The central feature of Blake's *The Ancient of Days* continues this subtle and profound reimagining of Michelangelo's fresco. From Urizen's fingers extend shafts of the compass that at first glance almost appear to be light, flowing from his fingers down almost to the edge of the plate. Here Blake begins to unpack his own epistemological stance, again doing so by thwarting the viewer's expectations. In the tradition of Genesis and the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus, the introduction of light into darkness signifies a benevolent and redemptive impulse that facilitates creation and life to burst forth, leading to the advent of civilization and poetry. Milton, in Book 7 of *Paradise Lost*, follows the crucial passage involving the compass with the description of Genesis 1:3: "Let

ther be Light, said God, and forthwith Light / Ethereal, first of things,
quintessence pure / Sprung from the Deep, and from her Native East / To Journie
through the airie gloom began, / Sphear'd in a radiant Cloud" (PL 7.243-247).

Initially Blake's design seems to align with Milton's account, particularly in the depiction of the light as "Sphear'd in a radiant Cloud." Visually the viewer's initial gaze takes in both the figure of Urizen bending down and the perfect circle surrounding him in a halo of light, a tableau consistent through the various copies Blake produced.¹⁹ However, the sphere itself takes on ruddy shades in various copies, as in Figure 2.1, and the clouds surrounding this introduction of light are dark and ominous, frequently tinged with crimson hues evoking the blood-dimmed tide of revolution lurking over England and Europe at the time. Despite the similarity to Milton's source text, the reproduction diverges into a reading that suggests conflict instead of harmony.

Furthermore, Urizen's extended hand acts as an inverted reference to Michelangelo's Jehovah depicted in *Creation*. While Urizen appears to be imposing light and order on the chaotic darkness, the details of the clenching

¹⁹ In Copy E this effect is clearest as the circle framing Urizen is a golden yellow and the cloud that overlaps the sphere is rendered translucent, allowing a completed circle to appear. In most of the other copies, though, the halo is either red or tinged with red, as are the surrounding clouds (see Figure 2.1); in copy D, the solar symbol appears to be transforming before the viewer's eyes, a reddish hue creeping across the circle from left to right and only a small sliver of the right edge is yellow.

hand subverts the benevolence of the act. Urizen's fingers form the pivot of the compass whence the constricting mathematical implement appears to be emanating from Urizen's body. Like *Creation*, Urizen's fingers are divided between the forefinger and the remaining digits, the space between the forefinger and middle finger measuring the span of the earth or the heavens. But unlike Michelangelo's Jehovah whose fingers are casually and naturally divided, Urizen's fingers attempt to form a right angle of a compass. This contortion of the fingers is extremely unnatural and uncomfortable, immediately conveying a sense of unease and even pain to any viewer who attempts to duplicate the movement. The thumb is not visible and the three remaining fingers are united. Unlike Michelangelo's Jehovah whose fingers stretch and separate naturally, Urizen's fingers are tightly locked and contorted, not graciously and easily bestowing a divine spirit but forced to encompass and set unnatural limits around existence and its inhabitants. The stark contrast between these pivotal details in each image challenges the viewer's conception of the conventional Christian God of the Sistine Chapel, casting doubt upon the benevolence of the creator of existence and by association his followers and defenders.

The image of the compass wielded tightly in an unnatural grip creates a sense of oppression in the viewer, a Urizenic horizon of restrictions. As

mentioned above, Blake associated the empiricism and rationalism of Newton and Locke with such oppression (Figure 2.3),²⁰ which was diametrically opposed



Figure 2.3: "Newton". Tate Collection, 1795.

to the boundless and definition-defying imagination of poetic exuberance. This aesthetic liberty represents the "sensual enjoyment" Blake champions in *MHH*,

²⁰ Blake later composed this image of Newton in which the famous scientist is bending over and holding a compass, echoing the Urizenic tyrant based upon his theories. A sculpture based on this image stands outside the British Library that represents the learning and knowledge held within, ironic given the critique of Newton behind this image.

which transforms dead religious rituals into divine encounters through art. It is no accident that in the succeeding plates and verses of *Europe Orc*, the spirit of revolution, appears wreathed in flames, and fiery energy constantly combats with icy dogma and institutions. This icy demeanor appears in *The Ancient of Days* in Urizen's expression on the plate, another Blakean revision of Michelangelo's fresco.

Given that much of Urizen's face is obscured by his beard, the main features visible are his eyes as they study his handiwork. In contrast to Blake's famous injunction to see through the eye instead of with it,²¹ in every copy of the frontispiece Urizen's eyes are narrowed, the lids limiting his vision and obscuring other perspectives. Similarly, his eyebrows suggest an intensity or even anger as they contract toward the furrowed brow. The distinction from Michelangelo's painting is less overt since in *Creation* Jehovah looks upon Adam with a settled resolve, neither stern nor joyful. If Blake intended to give Urizen a fiercer visage than in Michelangelo's work, this minute difference is an important contrast between the two images and certainly agrees with the reinterpretation of the Old Testament Jehovah as an oppressive tyrant that Blake seemed to favor.

²¹ In "The Everlasting Gospel," Blake pronounces his famous dictum: "This Lifes dim Windows of the Soul / Distorts the Heavens from Pole to Pole / And leads you to Believe a Lie / When you see with not thro the Eye" (E 520).

Blake revises his source material to heighten his portrayal of an authoritarian figure intent upon mathematically circumscribing and demystifying the world.

A final note of dissonance emerges by considering the peripheral visual features. In the Sistine fresco, Jehovah is supported or surrounded by a crowd of figures, male and female, adult and childlike. Whether they represent seraphim or cherubim, orders of archangels, or characters drawn from the Biblical text, they are still present for this auspicious moment when life comes to humanity. Similarly, Milton sets the scene for creation by listing the heavenly host that accompanies the Son in His creation: "About his Chariot numberless were pour'd / Cherub and Seraph, Potentates and Thrones, / And Vertues, winged Spirits, and Chariots wing'd" (7.197-199). For Blake's predecessors, the act of creation entails an audience, a not-unexpected position for an artist and poet to take. Creation of painting, sculpture, poetry, or political tracts all intend to reach and ideally transform audiences, which is why artists have long associated their craft with divine creativity. Blake is by no means an exception to this attitude towards creativity; his desire to incorporate and compel his reader/viewer to take an active role in creating the experience of his texts is fueled by the desire to edify and elevate humanity through their participation in the divine, a process facilitated by the creative act. One must wonder, then, why this particular moment of creation, *the Creation*, is bereft of an audience, in direct

contradistinction from Milton and Michelangelo. Blake's interpretation of the Old Testament Jehovah as Urizen supplies an answer. S. Foster Damon explains that Urizen is "the God of This World, the 'jealous god' of the Old Testament" (420). While Milton interpolates Jesus into the creation narrative and Michelangelo incorporates flights of angels in keeping with Church tradition, Blake envisions the capricious, jealous, vengeful Jehovah of the Old Testament as highly individualistic and selfish. Viewing the world through the lens of scientific empiricism, Urizen thinks only about performing his functions, measuring and encompassing existence in order to isolate and rule it. This cold, calculating mentality runs directly opposite any humble and receptive attitude that Blake elsewhere espouses. Thus, this final distinction between the two source materials and Blake's own vision marks his final break from the original texts in favor of his own interpretation.

Blake, a fervent devotee of both Milton and Michelangelo, chooses both to base his image on this strange union of multiple texts in multiple mediums, and to reimagine it to serve his own revolutionary visions. By drawing on both visual and literary sources, Blake demonstrates the first stage of aesthetic messianism, to take an existing source and interpret it by applying the imaginative energy of the Poetic Genius. Moreover, Blake crucially creates only an image to demonstrate this multifaceted provenance, which indicates his desire to elevate

the previously marginalized image to an equal status with verbal sources. Marginalized forms take center stage in Blake's reimagining of two sources, a creative production consistent with the second stage of aesthetic messianism. However, a closer look at a subsequent plate in the work reveals the second stage in specifically multimodal forms. In examining the Preludium, Blake's prioritization of images continues in his generation of images that coexist with written text, and the visual components' interaction with verbal components indicates the continued influence of Blake's awareness for the marginalized.

The multimodal Preludium demonstrates the progressive infringement of the images upon words as the mediums' struggle for supremacy provokes the reader to reevaluate preconceived notions of image-word dynamics.

Schweickart's gendered reading and the connection to visual texts becomes crucial. Blake begins his challenge in the very first words in the text, raising the question of gender and its associations with artistic mediums derived from eighteenth-century theorists like Lessing. *Europe's* Preludium continues a theme from the prior prophetic Illuminated book Blake created, *America*, in which a shadowy feminine figure is forcefully united with the quintessential rebel Orc, prompting her to speak. But Blake is not merely recapitulating his earlier work; whereas the shadowy female in *America* must be ravished by revolution before her tongue is loosened, in *Europe* she begins the book with her mournful

incantation: "The nameless shadowy female rose from out the breast of Orc: Her snaky hair brandishing in the winds of Enitharmon, And thus her voice arose" (E 60). Not only does she speak unprompted, but also by separating herself from the male figure and creating her own identity. By foregrounding a female character Blake reimagines the role of women in poetic and revolutionary politics as well as evokes the gendered association of word and image.

The Shadowy Female's role as mouthpiece for Orc recalls the gendered roles of the visual and verbal discussed in the reader-response section. As Mitchell notes, the visual arts have been more associated with a feminine mentality, coinciding with a chauvinist deprecation of female mental abilities and an emotion-based epistemology. Mitchell details Lessing's association of feminine traits with spatial and visual concepts: "Space, Natural signs, Narrow sphere, Imitation, Body, External, Silent, Beauty, Eye" (110). Masculine traits, on the contrary, include "Time, Arbitrary (man-made) signs, Infinite range, Expression, Mind, Internal, Eloquent, Sublimity, Ear" (110). In eighteenth century thought, masculine qualities were more important, focusing on internal workings of the mind, appreciation of the infinitude of time, sublimity and so forth, all characteristics associated with poetry and the verbal arts. The feminine traits were considered shallow and transitory, easily seduced by natural signs, imitation, and beauty, external appearances that were ascribed to paintings and

other visual arts. The key features of this list correspond to their capacity for expression; as Mitchell explains, “Paintings, like women, are ideally silent, beautiful creatures designed for the gratification of the eye, in contrast to the sublime eloquence proper to the manly art of poetry” (110). Women and the feminine medium of visual arts should remain silently subservient to their masculine masters, in arts as well as gender roles.

This polarization of image and text in gendered terms would be present in Blake’s mind as he crafted *Europe*, which makes his choice in the Preludium that much more strikingly subversive. In a bizarre Bechdel test, the female, an emanation from Orc’s breast, is the first to speak, and addresses another female figure. Orc himself is silent throughout the entirety of the Preludium, and indeed for the majority of the work. This inversion of gender roles can be transposed to the corresponding roles of the verbal and the visual as well, where the marginalized image gains equal footing with the patriarchal word. For a revolutionary manifesto, Blake’s *Europe* is surprisingly dominated by the visual, beginning with the title on the Preludium’s first plate. The plate bears the title “Preludium” at the center-top of the page, set above the top half of the plate that features the image, with the lower half divided between images and words (Figure 2.4). That face is certainly suggestive of the priority apportioned to each



Figure 2.4: Preludium (1), Europe, Copy D, 1794.

aspect of Blake's imagination: half of the plate is solely visual, with only the title inserting any linguistic elements; conversely, the verbal portion is encroached upon by images as well. The title itself provides additional indications of the prioritization in this work; despite the privileged space accorded to the writing, the foliage invades upon the word's space at the final 'm's base, almost as if the natural elements are growing over and subsuming the manmade construction. Blake's restoration of marginalized groups is mirrored in his promotion of visual art into a prominent role.

Blake's privileging the visual becomes increasingly apparent in the visual's direct interaction with the writing. The primary image itself easily dominates over half of the page, calling into question which medium carries the central message of the text. What also stands out once the gaze shifts to the writing is the ornate and vegetative calligraphy Blake employs that blurs the boundaries between written and imagistic elements on the page. On the left side of the textual margins snaky tendrils writhe and twist, and the initial looping thread grows from the first letter in Blake's passage, "T" in "The nameless shadowy female". Flourishing vines corkscrew away from the letter before spilling down the left margin in vegetative exuberance, and this first tendril is joined by another that emanates from the third line's opening letter, 'A' from

“And thus her voice arose”. These stylized letters transform into visual elements on the plate. In this instance, the two tendrils that proceed from letters are joined by a third vine that reaches across the entire textual space as a sort of line break, separating the first three lines, in which the female appears and prepares to speak, from the subsequent stanzas that recite her speech. This invasion of the textual space by the visual images reinforces the primacy of the visual on this particular plate; the images encroach upon the text’s space, a standard practice for many Illuminated plates. Additionally, the boundary line on the page connects the larger image that dominates the plate with the smaller images that accompany and intrude upon the text.²² A snaky segment begins in the vegetation below the assassin’s foot and wriggles its way down and across the plate, introducing natural elements to the text. This visual element also encompasses both sides of the plate, with an offshoot of the vine continuing down the right margin to the smaller individualized images below the text, thus uniting the entire visual form of the plate in every direction, joining upper and lower images with right and left.

In addition to its relevance to the imagistic composition of the plate, the vegetative growth also begins the process of violating the distinction between the

²² Blake makes extensive use of this design in previous works, such as “The Divine Image” in *The Songs of Innocence* and in *America*.

writing and the image. As previously mentioned, the initial ornamentation of the first and third lines (repeated in the final line of the text), adds a pictorial aspect to the writing; yet these are relatively minor adornments on the overall textual space. The writhing line that snakes across the space, however, acts as a textual divider between poetic stanzas, operating rhetorically for the verbal content of the plate. This prefatory plate opens the proceedings of the book, distinct from the body of the work; likewise, the first three lines on the plate preface the dramatic monologue that comprises the Preludium. The vine highlights the reversal of gender roles, emphasizing that the female is speaking by denoting her quoted speech with a line break. This line clearly segments the two sections of text on the plate. Though the subsequent lines are divided into three four-line stanzas, Blake does not rely upon the reader's attention to recognize instantly the rhetorical maneuver within these lines: the first three-line stanza as narration and the following quatrains as dramatic monologue. Instead, he interjects a dividing line that doubles its function as an interconnecting image, both uniting and dividing the visual and verbal elements simultaneously.

The final aspect of the Preludium leads back to a consideration of Blake's audience and the various allusions, visual and otherwise, embedded in his text. Blake creates a potential network of meaning by including visual allusions to major political figures of that time. Blake's use of popular political cartoons could

be far more recognizable to uneducated and illiterate audiences than references to classical painting and literature. On the first plate of the Preludium the featured image depicts a man striding across a natural scene, peering off to the left margin of the page with a backdrop of vegetation. Clad in blue in most of the colored copies, he carries a knapsack or bundle on his back. Meanwhile, nestled in a rocky alcove and concealed from the traveler crouches a sinister figure holding a dagger and looking towards the traveler with oblivious malicious intent. Erdman claims that the traveler evokes John Bunyan's Christian from *Pilgrim's Progress*, but also identifies his blue clothing with George Washington, symbolic of the rebellion against the tyranny of the Crown and Parliament. Erdman traces Blake's source to the satirist and cartoonist James Gillray who frequently lampooned the Prime Minister William Pitt, as well as other figures like Edmund Burke (Figure 2.5).²³ In *Prophet Against Empire*, Erdman identifies the assassin's face as inspired by Gillray's caricature of Burke.²⁴ A close comparison of the two faces reveals the similarities Blake includes (Figure 2.6).

²³ Erdman sees the distraught figure encircled with scrolls and batwings as Charles Fox, a rival of Pitt (Erdman, *The Illuminated Blake* 159).

²⁴ "Gillray's man with a dagger is Burke, whom he often pictures as a spy or vigilant watchman defending Crown and Cross against 'atheistical revolutionist.' Blake's dagger-wielding assassin has the same face, and Blake's whole picture is a prophetic transformation of the Gillray satire" (*Prophet Against Empire* 219). Erdman continues to recount a scene on the floor of Parliament where Burke flourishes a dagger, throwing it down dramatically and pointing with his finger as he denounces a political treaty with France; the dagger indicated the treachery and threat that foreign agents posed to the British.





Figure 2.6: Comparison of Blake and Gillray's depiction of Burke

The pronounced nose and sculpted eyebrows create a parallel visual, and the curly hair of the assassin echoes the powdered curls of Burke's wig in Gillray's parody. Blake creates an imagistic network of references that connects his prophetic work with a more accessible and comprehensible source that assists reader/viewers in deciphering the text. In the brandishing of the dagger in the right hand and the left hand's index finger pointing skyward, Erdman reads this image as Blake's appropriating a political cartoon into a prophetic warning and

indictment of the British foreign policy.²⁵ Blake again uses an image as inspiration to produce his images, reaffirming the validity of visual sources for his visual components.

Blake continues such commentary in the second plate of the Preludium. Three male figures wrestle with each other beneath the text in a bizarre and grotesque tableau, while a fourth flees on the right side of the stanzas of text that are essentially justified along the left margin (Figure 2.7). Erdman reads these figures as depictions of William Pitt strangling his opponents²⁶ or Pitt's henchman Dundas²⁷ that Blake patterned after Gillray's caricatures, while the fourth figure who flees clutching his head is associated with Lord Chancellor Thurlow, Pitt's chief political rival whom Pitt eventually ousted through chicanery and manipulation of George III.²⁸ What is noteworthy, though, is the continued motif of interpreting visual sources and creating visual productions—the jingoistic Burke threatening the revolutionary figurehead of Washington, and

²⁵ Blake inverts the caricature of Burke in the positioning of his fingers, pointing down to the dagger on the ground in Gillray's cartoon; Blake's assassin's left hand is similarly posed as Gillray's Burke, but the left hand is pointed skyward.

²⁶ *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* 219-221.

²⁷ *Illuminated Blake* 160-161.

²⁸ *Prophet* 216-217.

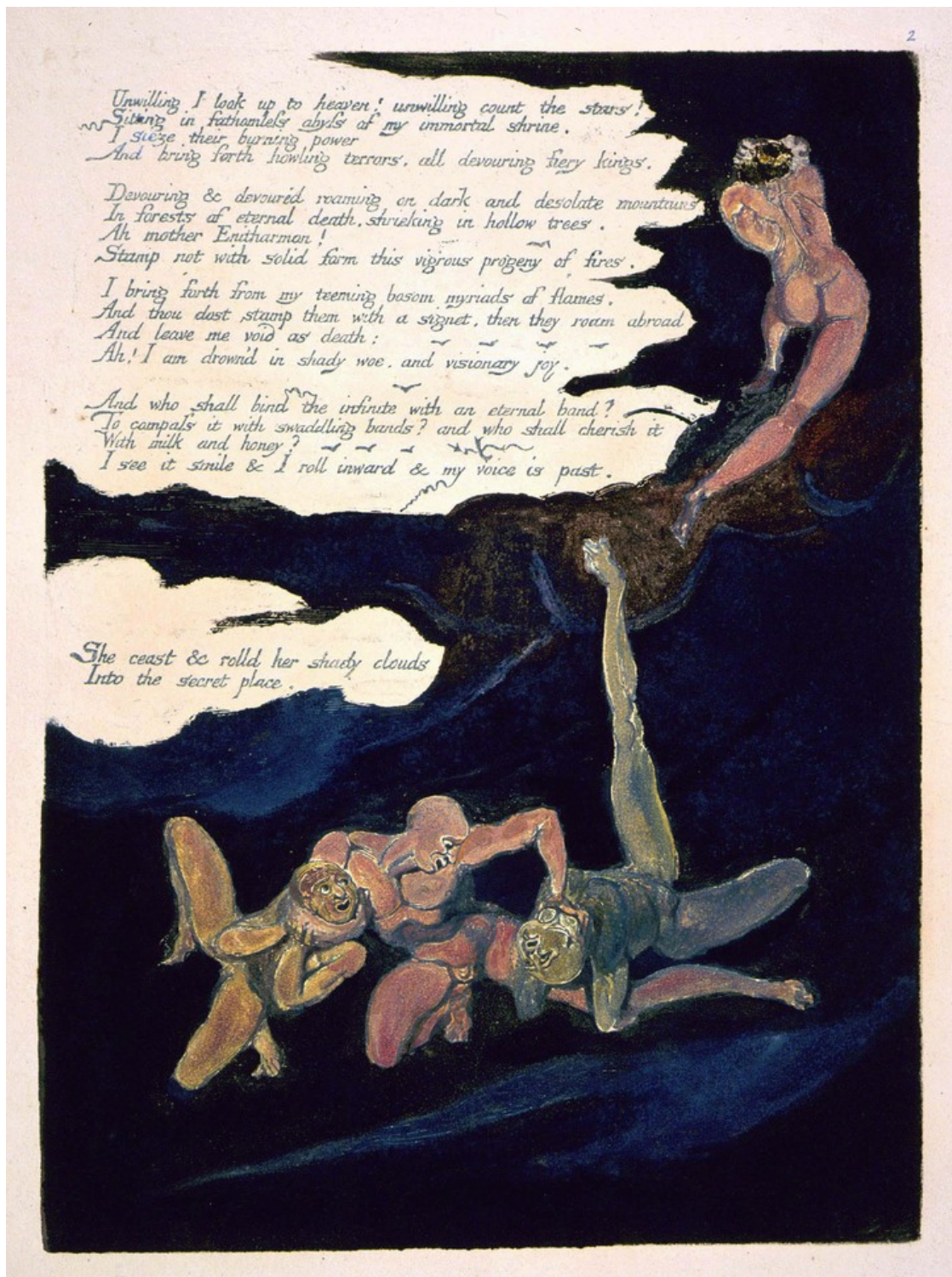


Figure 2.7: Europe - Preludium (2), Europe (Copy B, 1794).

the Machiavellian Pitt oppressing or banishing his opponents. In order to decipher the political commentary in the text (Burke as assassin) the viewer must first decode the image itself in order to make the allegorical connection. However, the visual references to sources like Gillray does not limit a reader/viewer's ability to interpret a work; it merely layers another facet of meaning and creative artistry for an astute consumer of satire.

The implications of layers of allusion in Blake's text raises questions regarding the viability of the sort of audience he claims to desire. On the one hand, he desires an innocent, untainted "ignorant" audience who can respond instinctively and receive the text uncritically, in touch with the Poetic Genius and able to apply creative energy to their engagement with the text. Maintaining a connection with this creative energy will promote and facilitate the interpretation required for the first stage of aesthetic messianism, which leads to the second stage of creative production, taking the inspiration from the sources filtered through the Poetic Genius in order to generate and invent a new work of art. This new production, avoiding the slavish copying of imitation, then contains the potential to be a similar catalyst for other audiences to undergo the same process, thus perpetuating this transformative participation with aesthetic creativity. On the other hand, the layered and complex network of allusions and referents implies a level of aesthetic education and sophistication that can be realistically

expected only from the very connoisseurs that elicited Blake's ire. Recognizing the visual allusion to Milton's golden compasses, Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, and Gillray's political caricatures involves an array of exposure to both classical and contemporary works covering a remarkable breadth. Blake's envisioned marginalized audiences comprised of children, the poor and illiterate, and culturally or racially diverse groups would be unlikely to apprehend and comprehend the kaleidoscopic references.

A solution to this disparity lies in changing one's perception of Blake's intentions behind the intertextual connections he makes. Though he incorporates various sources from literary and visual materials, from sublime and mundane works, from classical and contemporary artists, it is not necessary for even a discerning reader to recognize every possible source and allusion encoded in the literary and visual components. The aesthetic messianism this study introduces to Blake's works requires creative interpretation from audiences, but their interpretation need not require a recognition of any of Blake's models and inspirations. In expressing Blake's own participation in this process, a familiarity and identification of sources enriches the understanding of his brilliance and erudition as well as his creativity and dedication to invention. At the most basic level, however, all that the process requires is a text that provokes

readers/viewers to respond creatively, precipitating the aesthetic transformation Blake believed would redeem individuals.

Blake's participation in the first two stages of aesthetic messianism finds a full expression in *Europe*. By interpreting sources like Milton, Michelangelo, and Gillray through a lens of creative energy, Blake then invents original works that progress beyond a pale imitation. Furthermore, his elevation of the previously marginalized medium of visual art to equal status as verbal and literary art emerges in the synthesis of both visual and literary sources for *The Ancient of Days*. He extends this promotion of visuals into a multimodal context through the construction of the first plate of the Preludium. In this way Blake indicates his desire to appeal to marginalized audiences who have been dismissed to the peripheries of aesthetic consideration by eighteenth century theorists. As the discussion of reader-response and visual theory showed, Blake's ideal audience is willing to engage in the interpretive gaps created by the contrary forces of image and word in his multimodal text. Visual art must be given equal weight to act in contrariety with verbal art, and this principle of contraries is what informs and propels aesthetic messianism.

CHAPTER THREE

Aesthetic Messianism: Modeling Creative Participation in Eternity

A condensed version of this chapter will be published in the journal *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net* under the title: “[P]eriods of Space & Time Reveal the secrets of Eternity”: Aesthetic Millennium through Messianic Millenarianism in Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

Blake’s elevation of the marginalized arts reflects his desire to appeal to marginalized peoples through his work. He does so by promoting visual elements into a dynamic exchange with verbal elements and demonstrating the equal viability of visual sources for creative inspiration. Blake inaugurates what in his mind constitutes a new age of aesthetic production and interpretation that can overthrow oppressive institutions and promote a new kind of idyllic civilization, one founded on aesthetic principles rather than political or strictly religious systems, one in which people creatively engage with both themselves and their surroundings to the benefit of society. Creating pieces of art, in other words, is not the same thing as building streets, distributing resources, and engaging in political dialogue in ways that respect each person as an equal and remain open to mutually beneficial innovation; but inspiring each person to see him or herself as an active interpreter and creator might encourage such a result. This result requires the eradication of oppressive institutions and systems of

behavior that dominated the English landscape in Blake's eyes. The concern to emancipate the oppressed and eradicate hierarchical social structures mirrors the more traditional revolutionary movement of this age.

Blake initially expressed interest in the national upheaval and challenge to imperial systems represented in the American and French Revolutions, but his perception of revolution changed during the period from the late 1780s to the early 1790s, even before the atrocities and abuses of the new regimes became apparent.¹ His own unique mixture of religious, political, and aesthetic influences combined to produce a template for revolution born of artistic principles derived from religious notions of transformation and transcendence, though he redefines transformation and transcendence for his own purposes. Mike Sanders' theories on the messianic role in bringing about the millennium provides a framework through which to comprehend the prophetic function of Blake, and particularly the aesthetic mode he employs. The stages of aesthetic messianism demonstrate how the transformation of individuals might transpire, beginning with Blake's creative interpretation of an eighteenth-century mystic, his creative production in response to the mystic, and the capacity to continue

¹ Morton Paley notes this change, claiming that "despairing of the Revolutionary Millennium he had once expected, Blake turned to an apocalypticist who also saw history as outside human control" (*Energy and the Imagination* 164).

the process of interpretation and production thanks to the printmaking process he develops.

Religious influences on political radicalism factor heavily in studies of the 1790s revolutionary movements and consequently in Blakean criticism; the prophetic figure becomes a messianic exemplar in Blake's paradigm. The concept of millennium dominated the era of Blake's early career, influencing his desire to see the world transformed into a better society. Many late eighteenth-century conceptualizations of millennium were rooted in Biblical and religious themes and iconology, but remained instruments for social and political change. Morton Paley in *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry* claims that "A major topos in English Romantic poetry is the imminence of an apocalypse that will be succeeded by a millennium" (1). Tim Fulford explains the immediacy of a millennial utopia for Blake's contemporaries: "By the 1790s, things had changed: after the unprecedented upheaval of the French Revolution many abandoned the conventional view and expected the millennium to arrive in their own lifetime" (1-2). Robert Rix emphasizes the inextricable relationship between the religious and political: "To gain insight into the radical dimension of Blake's thinking, we need to understand how religion was at the very centre of public and political life at this time. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, the Anglican pulpit came to function as an important censor of public thought" (3). Translating

political revolutions into religious terminology allowed for moral and spiritual justifications of insurrection, and paved the way for the role of prophet to dominate the rhetoric of religious and political landscapes in the last two decades of the eighteenth century.

Prophetic figures abounded in the eighteenth century, and their particular relevance to Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (MHH) correlates to his own religious influences. Figures like Joseph Priestly, Richard Brothers and Joanna Southcott shouldered their way onto the English political landscape through their subversive assertions of an imminent apocalypse described in Biblical eschatological works such as Revelations.² In his book *Blake and the Bible* Christopher Rowland explores Blake's connection with biblical exemplars and observes Blake's own prophetic self-obligation: "Blake the modern prophet saw himself not only in continuity with the prophets but also as someone whose own peculiar mythology was already anticipated by John on Patmos" (1). As becomes evident in the text of MHH, Blake saw himself as an inheritor of the role of truth-teller and visionary from Biblical texts, albeit one who sees more clearly than many of his predecessors and contemporaries. Rowland expands on this thesis,

² Paley claims that, "At first Priestly, like his predecessor, stressed the millennial aspect. In his reply to Burke's *Reflections*, Priestly calls the American and French revolutions the beginning of a 'reign of peace' that has been 'distinctly and repeatedly foretold in many prophecies delivered more than two thousand years ago'" (*Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry* 20).

saying “Blake’s view of himself seemed to be of one who had a peculiar ability to open the doors of perception and understanding” (128-129). Blake sought to model in himself the clarified perspective he wished to promote in others.

Blake, however, applies his own imaginative paradigm to the prophetic role of revolutionary figurehead, reimagining both the role and the revolution in aesthetic terms. The artist takes on a seminal role as prophetic visionary, producing works of art designed to inspire and edify people’s imagination and incite them against the corruption of existing systems of power. For while the general populace must be incited and transformed in order to bring about fundamental and widespread change, messianism, as described below, also requires an intervention from a leader or model, creating space in which both the prophet and the people are active and passive. This fundamental tension between energetic activity and quiescent passivity precisely maps onto Blake’s famous dictum from *MHH*:

Without Contraries is no progression. 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. (E 34)³

³ All primary source references refer to David Erdman’s edition of Blake’s collected works, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, and will be cited similarly.

This chapter discusses the multimodal text *MHH* written during the radical tumult surrounding the French Revolution. Blake understands his purpose in terms that resemble Sanders's definition of messianism: while exhorting the populace to instantiate the millennium, Blake asserts the need for a catalyst, a messianic intervention from a prophetic figure. In Blakean terms, the participation in aesthetic transformation requires the spectator's active involvement in interpreting the text. The first stage in the process, active and imaginative response, leads to the second, creative production. This interpretation however requires an existing text as exemplar, as well as an existing performer of the process, the poet-artist-prophet who provides the catalyst. However, as more and more people begin to participate in this process, the diversity of creation will compound for everyone and the millennium will be inaugurated through a collective effort. This imagined millennium is not a final destination nor an idyllic state of rest, but rather requires a repetition and progression of the creative act. From this cycle flows the tension between the temporal and eternal frames of mind. The temporal life of humans allows for the constant participation in Blake's system, an indispensable requirement for redemption. But the creation of art transcends the temporal, becoming eternal in the sense that it exists beyond the lifespan of the artist, continuing to act as a model and catalyst for others to creatively interpret and respond to artistically.

This dynamic of temporal production and eternal endurance or aesthetic illumination foreshadows the third stage of aesthetic messianism, creative revision, that requires revisiting the previous two stages using one's personal works as catalyst for the process. In essence, the individual becomes their own messianic prophet-artist whose work propels a self-reflective process continually, world without end.

"Eternity is in love with the productions of time": Messianism and the Millennium

Before examining how Sanders' definition of the millennium as well as the means of achieving it can be used to explicate Blake's prophetic messianism, the traditional views of both facets of millennial thought in Blake's day deserve elaboration. Morton Paley defines the millennium in relation to the upheaval required to accomplish it: "Apocalypse, a revelation of the meaning of history typically accompanied by vast destruction, is succeeded by millennium, a period of social perfection upon an earth often pictured as regenerate in all its life" (*Apocalypse and Millennium* 9). Millennium, in traditional religious perceptions, meant a return to Eden, without any violence, sin, or inequality; though secular theorists then and now remove any spiritual and moral implications, the essential result desired mostly reflects a paradisaical existence. Paley also includes a messianic intervention to begin the transformative process, or perhaps a provocateur to prognosticate and prepare the world for revolution and to

generate a picture of the ideal millennium. In traditional religious narratives, this is the role of the prophet, though Paley extends this to secular narratives as well: “The apocalyptic mode, both in the Bible and in secular literature, involves a seer who communicates his visions, and these apocalyptic truths are conveyed not as a pure spiritual transmission, but through images and words” (2-3). The traditional notion of prophets holds that they operate primarily in verbal and rhetorical terms, but often those effective seers capitalized upon the power of visual imagery to propagate their own visions. The employment of prophets and seers is a popular device for writers to develop the rhetoric of revolutions and uprisings, excoriating the corruption of the status quo while predicting a reckoning and restoration, usually from a divine source. There are, then, two separate concerns inherent in any discussion of millennial thought: the definition of millennium and the process of actualizing it. Sanders’ theories are engaging with such notions and traditions as he outlines his messianic framework.

The question of millennial catalysts provoked different trains of thought and belief within the eschatological approach of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: would this require the intervention of a divine force, Christ coming on the clouds and imposing his kingdom on earth? Or would social and religious reform occur gradually over time, a result of human activity and self-improvement generated from advancements in either education or religious

devotion? Mike Sanders explores a subsection of this eschatological debate in his discussion of the later Chartist movement of the mid-nineteenth century.

Messianism, as Sanders defines it, participates in the same vein as the revolutionary thrust of the 1790s:

Messianism, which generally emerges at moments of historical crisis, is a complex, sometimes contradictory, intellectual and emotional structure. It expresses a critical attitude towards the existing social order (the profane world which stands in need of redemption) and affirms a belief that a truly just society will, ultimately, be established. Yet despite its commitment to both social critique and social justice, messianism can engender and sustain political quietism as well as militancy. (206)

Sanders conceives messianism as oppositional to the current systems and promoting the “truly just society” yet to be established. Though he injects seemingly religious dichotomies (sacred vs. profane), the true distinction involves a transcendent movement beyond the corruption of religious and political institutions through passive and active means. Sanders expands upon this distinction between the two different facets of messianism, outlining two options: “Within the messianic tradition, one strand insists that it is the Messiah alone who brings redemption, whilst the other argues that it is human activity that will initiate the messianic era with ‘the arrival of the Messiah [serving as] the a posteriori signal that the redemption has come’” (qtd. Jacobson 206).

Messianism involves a tension between active participation on the part of a

collective propelled by desire, and a messianic figure igniting a revolutionary movement to usher in the millennium.

Sanders also raises the competing notions of time and eternity as they relate to the two strands of messianism, claiming that the practitioners of messianism placed an emphasis on collective action. Sanders explains that the proponents of messianism

are searching for ways of expressing an alternative temporality which is capable of redeeming both past and present. Similarly, both agree that this alternative temporality can only be achieved through the negation of 'homogenous, empty time' by *Jetztzeit*....Both insist on the necessity for collective human agency and envisage messianic change in terms of an absolute rupture, which is nonetheless produced within, and as a result (by no means inevitable) of the historical process. (221)

Jetztzeit, as Sanders previously defines, entails a sense of momentousness, a culmination of events that allow for changes to be effected. The crux of temporality versus eternality pivots on the notion that events have been managed in order to initiate a millennial transformation, or whether human beings by their actions can accomplish this task, the messiah only signaling this reality. Saree Makdisi describes Blake's view of prophecy in ways that resemble Sanders's point about messianic intervention constituting a "rupture" in progressive time:

But if this disruption is produced by the prophecy's attempt to blast a hole in what the radicals (and generations of scholars since them) understood to be a continuous and progressive history, it

also had the effect of bringing that narrative, and whatever might be understood as the continuum of history, to a sudden and grinding halt. In other words, a moment of clarity is achieved in this prophetic vision by bringing the flow of empty, homogeneous historical time to a momentary pause. (156)

Makdisi's contention of apocalypse as the interruption of historical progression is accomplished by the prophetic figure, Sanders' messianic figure, who invades and disrupts the repetitive and repressive cycles of history. As Sanders explains later, redemption not as a "future state" but instead "the radical suspension of temporality" (208). In both strands of messianic intervention (messiah as catalyst, messiah as *post facto* indicator), the millennium establishes an atemporal disruption in the methodical progression of temporal events. Both Makdisi and Sanders argue for the atemporal penetrating the temporal in a rupturing cataclysm, the potentiality of new directions and paradigms of human behavior to be established.

In his prophetic multimodal texts Blake appropriates both strands of Sanders' messianism, and addresses the question of revolution rupturing of the slow march of time. He instinctively recognized the power that such millennial and messianic narratives held over the audience of his day. John Harrison contends that the sociological value of millennium lay in its connective power: "The millennium provided a common language and set of images and concepts in which people could express both individual and collective needs...but it

remained a mode of expression, a means of communication, rather than an end with an agreed meaning and programme" (6). Given Blake's intentions to appeal to and incite those audiences not normally exposed to "high" art and literature, the marginalized readers and viewers who populated his England, his appropriation of millennial rhetoric would weigh heavily on the cultural appeal he sought. This language infuses much of *MHH*'s conclusory section "A Song of Liberty":

Shadows of Prophecy shiver along by the lakes and the rivers and mutter across the ocean! France rend down thy dungeon; Golden Spain burst the barriers of old Rome; Cast thy keys O Rome into the deep down falling, even to eternity down falling...Down rush'd beating his wings in vain the jealous king: his grey brow'd councillors, thunderous warriors, curl'd veterans, among helms, and shields, and chariots horses, elephants: banners, castles, slings and rocks, Falling, rushing, ruining! buried in the ruins. ...Empire is no more! and now the lion & wolf shall cease. (E 44-45)

A flurry of imagery and allusion clearly draws upon such events as the storming of the Bastille, France's infamous dungeon. After the description of the fall of the "hoary" and "jealous king" representative of any oppressive tyrant, the passage ends with the famous dictum "Empire is no more! and now the lion & wolf shall cease", drawing upon Edenic imagery of lions lying down with lambs and children frolicking with serpents. Such references to apocalyptic destruction and millennial utopia would appeal to his readers (though also, perhaps, confusing them), resonating with popular narratives of prophetic revolution. This

apocalyptic passage illustrates Blake's use of cataclysmic intervention, significantly beginning with the French Revolution that was driven by the active participation of the general populace, an internal revolution. This Edenic millennium seems to depict a rupture that disrupts the flow of time and promulgates an eternal state of harmony.

However, Blake's view of the eternal appears diametrically opposed to this peaceful paradise, a rejection of the static nature of religious imagery that dominated the conceptions of his day. To loll on white clouds in halos fingering harps seemed the epitome of the error of inactivity and passivity he indicts in *MHH*: "Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained; and the restrainer or reason usurps its place & governs the unwilling. And being restrained it by degrees becomes passive till it is only the shadow of desire" (E 34).⁴ The desire for revolution, so crucial for Sanders' notion of messianism, demands an active involvement in the process, either politically or artistically; stasis is the enemy. In this sense Blake would approve of the rupturing of stale and oppressive institutions that persisted with temporal inertia like the Church and State, provided that a cessation of oppressive time did not translate into a suspension of activity and progress. As one of the *MHH*'s

⁴ Elsewhere he analogizes this principle; in "The Proverbs of Hell" he writes, "Expect poison from the standing water" (E 37).

“Proverbs of Hell” pronounces, “Eternity is in love with the productions of time” (E 36); desire must be maintained. However, Blake’s texts contain elements of both contradictory strands: direct intervention versus collective action, and temporal progression versus atemporal transcendence. In keeping with the notion of holding contrary positions or tenets in productive tension, readers may observe the tendency of Blake to insert himself as a kind of messianic model instrumental to the particular brand of revolution and reformation he imagines. Also, the dismissal of eternal states as static and passive find curious exceptions in the form of the Poetic Genius and the transcendent experience of artistic creation.

Blake’s vision of redemption emanates from the culmination of events that he perceived both in the world around him and in his own life. This culminating rupture, or what Sanders calls *Jetztzeit*, included for Blake the political events that indicated to him a crisis in human history was immanent; the revolutions portended possible seismic shifts that might provide opportunities for transformations on global scales. Furthermore, the culmination of his artistic development of multimodal forms found a means of expression in the invention of a revolutionary new printmaking process he discovered in the last year or so of the 1780s. Coupled with the flirtation with Swedenborgianism, Blake in composing *MHH* imagined that the time was ripe to see a millennium

established on earth, and one in which the office of poet and artist held a preeminent position of influence. In this paradigm, reformation and millennium transpired by the conversion of all humanity into artists and prophets of the divine creative force Blake titled the Poetic Genius.⁵ However, Blake viewed himself as the template for the development of the artist-artisan who could both conceive of a work of art and execute it using the printmaking method. Baptizing his readers' imaginations in the multimodal texts, Blake imagined himself as the progenitor of a new era of artist-philosophers that would change the world. In this sense, both the collective actions of the people and the messianic model of the prophet prove vital, holding both contraries in productive tension. Similarly, despite the rejection of stasis and transcendence of eternity in favor of the progressive and continuous activity of imagination, in the notion of the Poetic Genius Blake smuggles in a sense of disrupting and transcending temporality through the engagement with and production of works of art. This echoes the rupturing of stale progressive time, the *Jetztzeit* Sanders explains that provides new opportunities from what has come before while still acknowledging the past's importance. The great masters endure through the ages, as the previous

⁵ Terrance Dawson comments upon the Poetic Genius as a substitution for traditional Judeo-Christian monotheism: "The creative imagination, therefore, is not just God given: it is a portion of the divine. Its products are a manifestation of God. Blake is not referring only to his kind of art, but to all art that derives its inspiration from the creative unconscious" (64).

chapter explored, exerting influence upon successive generations of artists and providing impetus for the process of aesthetic messianism. Blake's own theories and the expression of them in his works constitute the remainder of the discussion, allowing for the system of redemption through aesthetic messianism to map upon Sanders' theories and Blake's practices.

"Every honest man is a Prophet": Blake's Role as Prophet-Artist

In his annotations to the Bishop Watson's *Apology for the Bible*, Blake lambasts Watson's disparaging of Thomas Paine, and the orthodox positions in Christian doctrine Watson asserts in response to Paine's criticism of the Bible and Christianity. Speaking of prophets, Blake shares his vision of the true nature of such figures: "Every honest man is a Prophet he utters his opinion both of private & public matters" (E 617). For Blake, the prophetic role involves the firm assurance that produces true statements on what the prophet perceives. Blake elaborates on particular facets of prophets in another series of annotations, this time to Lavater's *Aphorisms on Man*; he underlined the following passage: "As the presentiment of the possible, deemed impossible, so genius, so heroism-- *every genius, every hero, is a prophet*" (E 592). Blake endorsed many of Lavater's entries, and this excerpt aligns with his interest in the person and office of prophet. In addition to the prophetic injunction to speak truth to the powerful (or powerless), the prophet takes on that quality of genius normally associated with

artists and poets in the Romantic vein. This conflation of the prophet with the artist recurs in Blake's illuminated works; his heroic artist Los receives this appellation throughout the corpus of Blake's works, beginning in *The Song of Los* whose opening line is, "I will sing you a song of Los. the Eternal Prophet" (E 67). Though often maligned, imprisoned, and sometimes deceived, Los the artist-prophet represents the most consistent representative of the imaginative force that ultimately provides escape from the oppressive rule of Urizen, the dictatorial characterization of Jehovah.⁶ Prophets serve as liberators through their role as truth-telling artists willing to defy and decry systems of persecution and injustice.

Not only does Blake valorize prophets in his illuminated works and marginalia, he also perceives himself as fulfilling such prophetic functions. Christopher Rowland suggests that Blake "is no mere interpreter or exegete of the prophets and apocalyptic seers, but their successor, embodying their vocation and recasting their words for a new situation" ("The Common People and the Bible" 154). Blake in his own experience views the prophet as one who perceives the culmination of time, the immanence of apocalypse and millennium, and then proclaims this truth to the times in which he lives. Given the rise of

⁶ See chapter two for a more complete discussion of Urizen and Jehovah.

people claiming the mantle of prophet in the late-eighteenth century, Blake's own assumption of such a role seems less surprising; furthermore, his involvement with Swedenborg and the influence upon the genesis of *MHH* firmly situates his mindset within the prophetic paradigm, at least in the early stages of his career. However, Blake's conception of prophet as artist is uniquely shaped by his training and biography, as well as the innovation in printmaking that immediately preceded his works in illuminated, multimodal texts. A brief discussion of his background and the printmaking method reveals how these factors exercised such an influence on his imagination.

Since prophets are those who discern the culmination of events, Blake's qualifications for such a culmination in his mind explain his assumption of such an auspicious mantle. Furthermore, his unique contribution to aesthetics lies in the multimodality of his Illuminated works, which means that part of the culmination centers around both the artistic expression and practical execution of such art. The importance of multimodality in Blake's prophetic visions finds an individualized method of execution in the innovative printmaking procedure he develops in the years and months leading up to 1790. Blake's Romantic sensibility in literature has been well-documented in his rejection of Enlightened classicism and abstraction that privileged an educated and erudite reader.

Similarly, visual art was undergoing a sea change during the last two decades of the eighteenth century; William Vaughan explains that stylistically

the term “romantic” can assume a role that still has a meaning for us today: as the opposite of the term “classical”. While “romantic” can be seen as describing the work of art that emphasizes the associative side of picture-making, “classical” can be taken to describe the work that dwells on formal values. (11)

Romanticism, Vaughn continues, harkened back to “the chivalric romances of the Middle Ages. Since the Renaissance the word had come to mean...all that was wild and fantastic” (13). With fellow artists like Henry Fuseli and Francisco de Goya, Blake saw visual art recapturing a natural aesthetic and focus, much more in accord with his own Romantic sensibilities. Furthermore, visual arts factored into the prophetic vein of rhetoric in the eighteenth century. Robert Rix reports that “Eighteenth-century Bible studies conventionally accepted that prophecy was a mode highly visual in nature. The Book of Revelations was especially seen as a verbal translation of ‘scenic pictures’” (154). Visual art, with its ability to appeal to audiences at visceral levels and to spark imaginative engagement, seemed tailor-made to convey prophetic rhetoric and accomplish transformative and revolutionary goals.

Blake was unusually skilled in both visual and verbal art. His childhood and early adulthood included appreciating with an engraver, entering the Royal Academy of the Arts, and eventually working as an artisan engraver to support

himself and his wife, a vocation that he would continue throughout his life. As documented in G. E Bentley's biography, his apprenticeship with the engraver James Basire furnished him with the requisite skills to express both visual and verbal elements on a page, though the printmaking methods of his early years hampered his efforts. At first, Blake followed his contemporaries in using intaglio engraving, a laborious and limited method that required gravers to gouge out the text and image in the metal surface, after which the press would force paper into the depressions filled with ink. Fine details were lost or had to be added later; the actual engraved plate was imprecise to a perfectionist like Blake. Relief engraving, in which a surface was carved away leaving the desired images exposed, was relegated to wood block printing. As Bentley explains in his biography:

[T]he techniques of engraving, pushing a sharp instrument through copper, are so different from ordinary artistic composition, so much more cumbersome and time-consuming, that even a trained artist-engraver like Blake would feel inhibited when he took a graver in his hand. The ideal was to be able to draw on copper as freely as on paper or canvas, and this was not possible in England in the eighteenth century. (*Stranger* 102)

The conventional engraving techniques were thus insufficient for an imagination as prolific and multimodal as Blake's. Alternatively, sending a written work to editors for other illustrators to graphically interpret allowed for interference and a dilution of the creative product that Blake surely found unacceptable; Mark

Greenberg has discussed the general Romantic sentiment that viewed the mechanization of printing and commercialization of publishing with repugnance.⁷ Greenberg notes, the printmaking process presented artists with a conundrum of participating in a mechanized system to which they were ideologically opposed. Blake's ability to circumvent this thorny issue by engraving his own artistic visions, controlling the product until its dissemination, surely enhanced his sense of culminating importance in a prophetic-artistic vein as he imagined a world of artists who could realize their artistic vision from beginning to end. However, the limiting intaglio method frustrated his uncompromising sense of aesthetics since no reproducible method for executing his vision existed that would preserve his artistic and prophetic integrity and maintain his liberty from outside interference.

The answer to this conundrum came in an unfortunate yet appropriately momentous event that only reinforced his sense of a portentous mandate. Robert Blake, William's younger and best-loved brother, passed away in 1787; Blake claimed to have seen Robert's spirit ascend from his body while clapping rapturously. In his biography of Blake, Bentley relates the rest of the story:

⁷ Mark Greenberg explains that "Certain fundamental features of the typographical systems created the profession of author and also gave authors the freedom to question the implications and limitations of writing and commercial book manufacture. Put most simply, but accurately, the young romantics attacked the Industrial Revolution from a medium created and supported by the very system they abhorred" (156).

Then one night, probably not long after Robert's death, his brother appeared to [William] and showed him the simple solution to the problem of composing directly on copper The secret was a fast-drying liquid impervious to acid, probably a variant of the ordinary engraver's stopping-out varnish ... with which the artist could write and draw directly upon the copper. The spaces round the finished words and design could then be bitten away with aquafortis in the usual way, leaving the picture and words standing in relief. (*Stranger* 102-103)

Blake's solution allowed him to control with exquisite precision the transcribing of his artistic vision onto the plate, ensuring that the resulting images and text would more closely reflect his imagination. The "glutinous liquid" resistant to acid that Bentley cites from a letter provided the key element to his discovery, for now he could draw and write on the copperplate with an artist's precision. Once the acid was applied, the painted portions of the metal plate remained raised and ready to be inked, as Bentley describes (*Stranger* 103). With the need to gouge the surface with a crude graver eliminated, the artist could draw his designs directly onto the surface, confident that they would be preserved as precisely as his artistic skill allowed. Lastly, coming as it did through a spiritual visitation from his beloved brother reinforced the prophetic import that this innovation had on Blake's imagination and aesthetic theology.

Armed with this new ability to translate his fertile imagination into physical form, Blake began to design and create illuminated works that could fully incorporate the multimodal forms that demonstrated artistically his

principle of contrariety in *MHH*. However, a final occurrence around the same time impelled him to assume a prophetic role and precipitated his creation of *MHH*: Blake's flirtation with the teachings and followers of Emmanuel Swedenborg. Coming from a Dissenting background thanks to his parents, Blake was predisposed to entertain sympathetically radical sects and offshoots from mainline Protestant orthodoxy. Furthermore, biographers recorded the early instances of a visionary sensibility; from a tender age, he claimed to see visions of Biblical figures and spiritual beings.⁸ His deceased brother's appearance with the metal-relief printing method was another instance of Blake's spiritual visions. It is thus unsurprising that another earlier visionary played such a seminal role in Blake's aesthetic and religious development.

Swedenborg's impact on Blake in general and *MHH* in particular has been thoroughly documented elsewhere, requiring only a brief overview here.⁹ A Swedish scientist-turned-theologian and self-styled prophet, Swedenborg advocated the personal nature of Christianity and sought to reinterpret moral behavior distinct from legalistic Church doctrine. He claimed to experience

⁸ In his biography of Blake Bentley relates several stories of the child Blake seeing God poke his head in the window, or being thrashed by his mother for claiming that he saw the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel lolling under a tree (*Stranger* 19).

⁹ Joseph Viscomi has written extensively on Swedenborg's impact upon Blake and *MHH*. C.f. "In The Caves of Heaven and Hell: Swedenborg and Printmaking in Blake's *Marriage*" and "The Lessons of Swedenborg: Or, The Origin of William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*."

visions and to ascend to spiritual planes of existence in order to converse with angelic messengers, acting as a prophet through whom God would provide a revised and expanded Gospel that expelled legalistic and ritualistic corrupting influences from Christianity. These divinely inspired writings comprised Swedenborg's prophetic works; the manuscripts' format consisted of a theological discussion and Biblical exegesis in the first section of a chapter, followed by "Memorable Relations", passages in which Swedenborg narrates the angelic visitations and spiritual visions that inspired his teachings.¹⁰ Perhaps the most audacious of his claims stated that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ occurred in 1757, instigating the new heaven and new earth on a spiritual plane. He had witnessed this event after being granted a spiritual transcendence, and returned to testify of the new millennium. After his death in 1772, his followers established the New Jerusalem Church in London, and among those who expressed interest in his teaching were William and Catherine Blake. Blake, born the same year Swedenborg claimed that the Second Coming occurred, saw in Swedenborg a prophetic figure who challenged restrictive morality and produced supposedly inspired rebuttals to the Church's hegemony;

¹⁰ Edward Ahearn points out the parody of Swedenborg in Blake's "Memorable Fancies": "And, although Swedenborg is criticized, Dante, Shakespeare, Boehme, and Paracelsus being preferred, a form derived from Swedenborg, that of the 'Memorable Fancy,' is used to narrate supernatural encounters" (15).

though Blake rejected the Church's view of God, he reimagined the divine into a creative force he called the Poetic Genius.¹¹ The notion of an artist receiving inspiration from forces greater than himself, along with the proclamation of truth to an obstinate populace, coincided with the prophetic impulse mentioned earlier. Swedenborg fit the bill, at least, at first. Blake's interest in Swedenborg's theories peaked during the last years of the 1780s. Swedenborg's teachings initially attracted him and his wife, and they attended meetings of the New Jerusalem Church for a time, even signing a document affirming their veracity and the tenets of Swedenborgian teachings in 1789. However, Blake became disillusioned quickly with what he perceived to be the New Jerusalem Church's establishment of a systematized religion full of restrictive moral codes and rituals, the very things Swedenborg purported to eliminate. Ultimately Blake began to write a pamphlet criticizing Swedenborg's hypocrisy that formed the earliest draft of *MHH*. Additionally, Blake continued to engage with Swedenborg's theories as he composed *MHH*, referencing that auspicious date of 1757 that saw the Second Coming of Christ (according to Swedenborg) and his (Blake's) birth on Plate 3: "As a new heaven is begun, and it is now thirty-three years since its advent: the Eternal Hell revives" (E 34). As Erdman notes in his

¹¹ Chapter four addresses this reimagining more thoroughly.

edition of Blake's works, the year 1790 is written on this plate in Copy F (E 801). Figure 3.1 shows the year inserted between the image and the writing. This confluence of dates seems to have validated his own life with a special spiritual significance, encouraging him to regard himself as an exemplar of the Spirit of Prophecy.

As the penultimate decade of the eighteenth century concluded, events seemed to be coming to a climax. The revolution in France portended global uprisings that would depose the archaic and despotic rules that oppressed the people. Blake's maturation as an artist and engraver arrived with the groundbreaking development of the printmaking method that would allow artists autonomy over their works and precision in executing multimodal texts. Lastly, Blake's interest in and rejection of Swedenborg prompted work on a pamphlet in which Blake identified and corrected both the Church and State's errors, and the errors of supposed reformers like Swedenborg who remained trapped in the cycle of moral restriction and limited imagination that produced the sort of inhibited thinking the Church and State's power was founded upon. All these factors seemed to portend an opportunity for a rupture (*Jetztzeit*) that would correct the interpretations of nature and the divine, a revolution begun by



Figure 3.1: *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plate 3 (Copy F, 1794)

the prophetic artist Blake and ultimately propagated by the rest of humanity. In what follows, Blake's interpretation of Swedenborg illustrates the first stage of aesthetic messianism, revealing the errors inherent in both Swedenborg and

general ministerial and ecumenical thinking. This interpretation then precipitates the second stage of aesthetic messianism, the multimodal plates that provide the radical reinterpretation of Swedenborg as well as the conceptions of time and eternity Blake sees as reductive and passive. Blake demonstrates the two strands of Sanders' messianism, both acting as a prophet who identifies the culmination of events and relays it to the people, and as the messianic figure who catalyzes the populace by providing an example for them to emulate.

The Swedenborgian Pamphlet: Diabolic Interpretation and Creation

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell is a puzzling text, a hodgepodge of prophecies seemingly derived from biblical and other prophetic texts, proverbs and aphorisms mimicking sources like Lavater, poetic passages that echo his earlier *Songs of Innocence*, and discursive passages describing various fantastic situations and conversations. The narrator's conversations with Old Testament prophets bring to mind the child Blake's claims to see such figures as well as spiritual beings like God or angels, but they also satirize the prophetic progenitor Swedenborg's forms of spiritual inspirations. A strong parodic trope permeates the text, leading critics like Stephen Shaviro to explain the need to read at multiple levels of discourse simultaneously:

The discourse of *The Marriage* is consistently dramatic and ironic, limited to the perspectives of specific speakers (so that it is inaccurate simply to identify Blake's own voice with that of Hell

and the Devil); but to the extent that that discourse refers back to and founds the very perspectivism or doctrine of Contraries, within which and by means of which it is itself situated, it validates itself as a transcendent principle of authority. (233)

Shaviro presents a common caution against mapping too literally the diabolic or “Evil” perspective onto Blake; part of his intention is to tweak religious authorities and participate in the tradition of social commentary via satire that stretches from Aristophanes to Jonathan Swift. The audience of Blake’s day would have found many of the claims and arguments shocking or subversive, an intentional rhetorical move on Blake’s part to provoke readers from passive acceptance into active engagement. As Shaviro notes, contrary impulses to read the arguments as true of Blake or merely of his characters will require active involvement. As future discussions explore, Blake locates his printing house in Hell, and one of the sections of *MHH* involves a tour of that diabolic workshop.¹² However, without taking any subversive claims as demonic doctrine, the anti-Swedenborg pamphlet represents Blake’s system of creative engagement, as well as his exhortation to challenge hegemonic systems of belief and behavior. This idea constitutes a genuine principle Blake espouses, to cleanse peoples’ limited perceptions so as to connect them with creative forces that will change their lives. Though his parodic intentions may have taken form after beginning the

¹² See chapter four.

pamphlet, the principle of interpretation and production through creatively cleansing the perception clearly informs the genesis of *MHH*.¹³

In plates 21-24 of *MHH*, which grew out of the original pamphlet, Blake's argument begins with the critique of Swedenborg's lack of originality, a sin in the ethos of any innovative artist or think but even worse for Blake in one claiming spiritual insight and divine inspiration. Blake explicitly attacks the Swedenborgian doctrine as hypocritical and derivative:

Thus Swedenborg boasts that what he writes is new; tho' it is only the Contents or Index of already publish'd books...he shews the folly of churches & exposes hypocrites, till he imagines that all are religious. & himself the single One on earth that ever broke a net. (E 42-43).

Swedenborg claimed to receive visitations from angels and to experience transcendent visions, leading to his revisions of Biblical and eschatological orthodoxy. While Blake acknowledges that Swedenborg "exposes hypocrites," the Swedish mystic falls into the judgmental elitism that he derides, considering himself to be the sole prophet who eludes the limitations and confines of traditional thinking. In both these original plates and on the plate toward the beginning of the volume, Swedenborg is identified with angels, first as the angel on the tomb whose writings formed the grave clothes of Jesus, now discarded

¹³ Joseph Viscomi has established that the anti-Swedenborg pamphlet occurred prior to the rest of the creation of *MHH*, suggesting that Blake may not have had the end result in mind when he began to create. C.f. Viscomi, "The Evolution of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*," 282.

and obsolete,¹⁴ and then as the angel possessing “the vanity to speak of themselves as the only wise; this they do with a confident insolence sprouting from systematic reasoning” (E 42). Systematic reasoning for Blake represents that oppressive and constricting paradigm that invites legalistic moralism and mechanisms of inequality to develop in civilization. Blake’s disillusionment with Swedenborg’s followers compels him to compose a diatribe challenging another authority responsible for imposing limitations upon human vitality.¹⁵

This incensed response constitutes the first stage of aesthetic messianism that Blake illustrates in *MHH*. Swedenborg’s texts and his followers provoke him to apply his own theological and aesthetic paradigm, inciting his imaginative indignation. His reimagining of Christian and spiritual tenets began with the first two examples of illuminated printing, *All Religions are One* and *There is No Natural Religion*, both of which recast God as the Poetic Genius. This reimagining of orthodox theology occurs in the section derived from the original pamphlet refuting Swedenborg, as the Devil and Angel argue over morality versus spiritual liberation. The Devil opens with a telling definition: “The worship of

¹⁴ “And lo! Swedenborg is The Angel sitting at the tomb; his writings are the linen clothes folded up.” Plate 3, E 35. See Figure 3.1.

¹⁵ As Viscomi wryly observes, “Blake’s conflict, dramatized by angels and devils, is between Religion and Art, and the satiric inversion of the *dramatis personae* is in part suggested by Swedenborg himself. If he talks to angels, then Blake talks to devils” (“Lessons of Swedenborg”, 181).

God is. Honouring his gifts in other men each according to his genius. and loving the greatest men best, those who envy or calumniate great men hate God, for there is no other God" (E 43). Any one system contains only part of the truth, only echoes of the genius that comprises prophetic gifts, implying that "honoring" one another's participation in the prophetic genius is the only true path to spiritual enlightenment.

Blake transcribes the baptism of imagination that coincides with interpreting existing sources in the rest of the Debate. Responding to the Angel's dogmatic reply, the Devil cites Jesus as an example of antinomian disobedience. He recites all the ways in which "no virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments: Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse: not from rules" (E 43). In articulating his antinomian principles, Blake models the need for imagination in interpreting texts, a process resulting in transformation of dull and unimaginative Angels into active and creative Devils. The remainder of the episode reaffirms this "system" that combats the other systems: "When he had so spoken: I beheld the Angel who stretched out his arms embracing the flame of fire & he was consumed and arose as Elijah" (E 43). Transformation through the fires of corrosive antiauthoritarianism produces the prophetic genius at the pinnacle of human potential. By embracing the diabolic doctrines, the Angel rejects his dogmatic and rationalist beliefs and precipitates his metamorphosis

into one of the quintessential prophetic figures of the Old Testament, Elijah, known for his constant defiance of the corrupt king and idolatrous priests. The prophet identifies the flaws in the cultural paradigm of his day and conveys this to he (or she) who has an ear. Radical interpretation then produces transformation; ordinary people become prophets.

A potential objection must be acknowledged that impacts the prophetic role and the interpretative nature of aesthetic messianism. In typical Blakean fashion, this episode when considered in a messianic paradigm contains an apparent contradiction: the system is predicated upon a poet-prophet whom others can emulate and study in the process of poetic transformation, and the first principle is to reject those prophetic figures who would impose systems or structures. Is Blake contradicting himself by advocating antiauthoritarianism and by proposing his approach of antiauthoritarianism as the one to follow? Blake's actual "system" encourages the questioning of systems rather than mandating a system of beliefs and practices. By promoting the individual application of the cleansing fires of imagination and antinomian-antiauthoritarianism Blake believes that his disciples will discover the Poetic Genius that is at the heart of all

faith traditions and artistic endeavors.¹⁶ In terms of the process of aesthetic messianism, the exhortation to overthrow systems that limit imagination is qualified by Blake's hero Los' admission that "I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans" (E 153). In this case, the system of aesthetic messianism requires the participant to challenge the existing text, to creatively interpret it through their connection to the Poetic Genius and so precipitate the transformative process.

The first stage of aesthetic messianism sees the Angel consumed by the corrosive fires of creative interpretation. After the Angel's transformation is complete, the narrator adds a postscript that introduces the second stage of aesthetic messianism, the creation of new works after reinterpreting existing ones. The addendum reads: "Note. This Angel, who is now become a Devil, is my particular friend: we often read the Bible together in its infernal or diabolical sense which the world shall have if they behave well. I have also: The Bible of Hell: which the world shall have whether they will or no" (E 44). The references to texts here reiterate the first two stages of aesthetic messianism as the two friends now read the Bible in "its infernal or diabolical sense," applying their

¹⁶ In all fairness, Blake seems to imply that anyone who truly accesses the Poetic Genius will mostly agree with him, both in ideology and aesthetics, which presents another contradiction that is addressed in the conclusion of this study.

own creative interpretation to the text in accord with the prophetic genius. Blake identifies what the reader has been reading throughout *MHH*: Biblical exegesis through devilish eyes. However, the second text or "Bible of Hell" represents the second stage of creative production, a new text that seems to directly counter the traditional Christian Scriptures. Artistic creation represents for Blake the essence of the divine; Viscomi explains,

In manifesting God, great works of art manifest the origin of creativity and prophecy; or, put another way, the most original works originate or sprout from or are closest to the origin of creation, which, as Blake will dramatize on *Marriage* plates 6, 14, and 15, is hell. ("Lessons from Swedenborg" 186)

Prophetic rhetoric inherently involves aesthetic production. The Bible of Hell may refer to "The Proverbs of Hell," a section of aphorisms and proverbs within *MHH* that subverts orthodox morality and behavior, another example of Blake's energetic imagination at work. Viscomi theorizes that the reference encompasses all of *MHH*.¹⁷ Though Blake may have been undecided whether and to what extent he would reveal his own imaginative readings of Scripture when he wrote this, he seems hell-bent on producing a new text that readers will be forced to interpret. By the end of his production of *MHH* the diabolic interpretation of

¹⁷ "It also seems reasonable to suppose that 'The Bible of Hell,' which is announced before the Marriage was composed, might be referring to the Marriage itself, as it was anticipated at the time of Blake's anti-Swedenborgian text" ("The Evolution of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" 321).

conventional morality and epistemology has been revealed¹⁸ along with the Bible of Hell, both of which demonstrate his aesthetic imagination. This developing aesthetic, along with the innovative printmaking technique recently developed, constitutes the second stage that confirms his role of prophet-artist, modeling as well as explaining transformation through the arts.

The depiction of the Angel's conversion to energetic imagination provides a template for others to follow, though the characterization of this process in terms of devilish doctrine and a conversion to Evil reveals his mischievousness in the parodic text. Sanders' messianism provides an understanding of Blake's prophetic duty: to demonstrate that the time is ripe for people to throw off the constraining beliefs and fears promulgated by the Church and exploited by the State, while also providing an example and intervening to precipitate this process. Blake does this through the creation of the verbal text. However, when the focus turns to the visual elements, the truly subversive and radical nature of the millennium Blake envisions becomes clear, as well as a wider array of references and templates for transformation. The visual forms in the pamphlet reveal a cyclical pattern of temporal progression and eternal "transcendence" or

¹⁸ C.f. the aforementioned verbal content on plates 3 through 7, where Blake rehearses the conventional doctrines "That God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies" and counters with his views that "Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is The bound or outward circumference of Energy. Energy is Eternal Delight" (E 34).

exaltation that Blake embeds within his aesthetic paradigm, a pattern that calls for the exhilaration of creative production held in beneficial opposition with a grounding in daily life.

The visual elements in the pamphlet confront readers with a radical reimagining of classic concepts of time and eternity. Blake does not envision a static cessation of active imagination and creation. Rather, through the multimodal framework of the pamphlet, he demonstrates his vision of the millennium: eternity within temporality. Far from embracing the orthodoxy of eternal rest and everlasting torment, Blake seeks to marry both passivity and activity, reason and imagination, temporal progression and eternal illumination, within the human experience on earth. As Blake pronounces in the well-known Proverbs of Hell, "Eternity is in love with the productions of time" (E 36). Similarly, in a letter to William Hayley, Blake explains that "The Ruins of Time builds Mansions in Eternity" (E 705). The eternal for Blake is not a transcendent state of affairs completely divorced from time; on the contrary, Blake implies that temporal activity is absolutely vital to the experience and reality of the eternal, that eternality and the redeemed self that experiences it takes place within the linear progression of time. In fact, eternity exists only through the appreciation of temporal progression, as moments of experience resulting from union with the Poetic Genius. This union occurs as people participate in artistic interpretation

and imaginative creation, the first two stages of aesthetic messianism. This suggests that a cycle of participation must persist to actualize and maintain the millennium, a transformed society. This repetitious cycle forms the third stage of aesthetic messianism, creative revision, a process that will continue to be explored throughout the rest of this study.

Though both time and eternity are necessary in Blake's scheme, they still exist in productive tension, two contraries constantly vying with each other. Similarly, the visual elements in the pamphlet generate tension with each other as well as the verbal text, following the principle of contrariety that Blake develops in *MHH*. The two images that bookend the pamphlet generate the first source of tension, and comment upon the temporal-eternal opposition. The first image on Plate 22 depicts a nude man, strong and clean-limbed, resting in a relaxed posture, his face lifted to the sky (Figure 3.2). His legs are spread in a relaxed and open manner, suggesting a liberated and unencumbered mindset, free from the confinements of religious and moral legalism in terms of sexual and sensual codes of conduct. This pose, which reappears in similar situations and almost identical postures throughout Blake's later prophecies, represents the



Figure 3.2: *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*; Plate 21 (Copy C, 1790)

man who experiences eternity, a sentiment supported by the surrounding background. In copy C, the light sky is clear of any darkness or gloom, suggesting an idyllic situation. Given the verbal narrative of the Angel's liberation, this youth appears to be a visual depiction of the redeemed state of being espoused by the Devil.

The pamphlet thus begins auspiciously, portraying a redeemed humanity in joyous liberation. The image on Plate 24 that concludes the Swedenborg pamphlet creates a different tone and produces a tension-filled contrariety with the first image, particularly in light of the written portion. In a strange and disturbing tableau, a man, also naked, is positioned on his hands and knees like an animal (Figure 3.3). Lank locks of hair trail haphazardly from his hairy head, which also appears to sport a crown. The figure's face is turned not toward the sky but gazing at the reader, and the expression is one of horror and madness. Scholars like Erdman have noted the connection to the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar,¹⁹ who defied God and was cursed to roam like a mindless animal for seven years. Peter Otto connects the image of Nebuchadnezzar with tyrannical figures and systems, including Newtonian scientism, Lockean

¹⁹ Erdman, *Prophet Against Empire*, 193.



Figure 3.3: *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plate 24 (Copy C, 1790)

rationalism, Swedenborgian error, and the increasingly despotic and unbalanced George III, the English sovereign during Blake's early years.²⁰ The pamphlet ends with a howl of madness and oppression, a depiction of the reduction of humanity to that of unthinking brutes consumed with satiating the most basic of instincts. Nothing could be further removed from the artistic figure on plate 21, aesthetically and philosophically.

In the context of the written anecdote in plates 22-24, the two images erect a distinctly contrasting tableau. Whereas the narrative moves from a point of mortifying doctrinal orthodoxy to a state of energetic liberation and aesthetic attunement to the imagination, the images proceed in the exact opposite direction. Blake erects a contrast of liberation and bondage at both ends of the pamphlet. The first plate 21 displays the image of liberated man that contrasts with the verbal rejection of Swedenborg's complicity in the errors of orthodox religion, a dynamic that is inverted in the final plate. Plate 24 concludes the narrative of the Angel's transformation into a demonic artist and reader with the promise of more transforming texts to come. In contrast, the visual medium depicts the bondage humanity still endures at the hands of its obeisance to monolithic hierarchies of power, both religiously and politically. On this plate,

²⁰ Otto, "Blake's Composite Art", 50-51.

visual bondage clashes with the verbal narrative of liberation to continue the conflict established on plate 21. In this network of contrariety, the temporal and eternal are set in opposition that confronts readers' traditional beliefs. Instead of visually depicting the verbal progression, which could be interpreted as reducing the images to subordinate and illustrative roles, the inversion engenders confusion, opening interpretive gaps for readers to engage with the text. Furthermore, positioning a visualization of Blake's view of oppression under the tyranny of ministerial and ecumenical systems as the concluding image of the pamphlet introduces a cyclical dynamic in the text. The end of the text verbally shows redemption and an aesthetic transcendence above the systems of error, which for Blake constitutes the eternal. However, it visually depicts the wretched state of affairs as they exist, suggesting that any transcendence is balanced by a return to the everyday world. The end is the beginning and the beginning is the end as Blake demonstrates multimodally the necessity to continually remain aware of the bondage that temporal progression can impose while striving for the moments of transformation through aesthetic redemption.

Similarly, Sanders' two strands of messianism gives insight into how in *MHH* the actualization of the millennium takes place and who will provide a catalyst for the revolution, as well as the issue of temporal ruptured by the atemporal. Though Blake sees the culmination of various strands of his life and

world events converging in the form of multimodal art and printmaking, he realizes that artists must also work in time and influence the progression of events. For revolution is not solely the province and responsibility of the prophetic artist. The envisioned millennium will come, as Peter Otto explains, when

the human imagination becomes a power of opening the future, not as an expression of what we already are, but of what we cannot yet conceive (in part because it will be forged in relations with others). The elements of Blake's composite art attempt tirelessly to provoke this visionary conversation in which the future is forged and the 'lineaments of Man' are revealed. (61)

Multimodal contrariety symbolizes the need to maintain an attitude to humility and openness, the outreach to marginalized audiences mentioned in earlier discussions, as well as the recognition of the importance of everyday life. Through these mindsets and modalities, Blake imagines the true millennium will emerge.

By embedding the depiction of transformation in the Angel-Devil narrative within the rise and fall of humanity, Blake graphically and verbally illustrates the relationship and the trajectory of this process. The temporal experience of life involves the law of undulation, of rises and falls, glorification and degradation. This is the cycle of life, death and rebirth. Within this temporal progression there exists the potential for humans to accomplish a connection with the divine Poetic Imagination, to tap into the eternal by the processes

elucidated in the Angel's transformation.²¹ This cyclical process also takes on an increasingly religious overtone when considered in the light of liturgical practices designed to connect the participants with higher orders of being and mindset, an issue considered in the next chapter. Blake, through his appropriation of the prophetic role, demonstrates the three stages of aesthetic messianism through his multimodal art. By operating both as model and as participant, he establishes himself with the twin strands of messianism articulated by Mike Sanders in which millennial societies form through the collective will and through a messianic figure's intervention. In relocating the revolution to aesthetic grounds, Blake radically departs from his contemporaries and prophesies an inward transformation born in time and realized in eternity, again and again.

²¹ Ronald Grimes, discussing the passage from Blake's *Milton* that posits "A Moment equals a pulsation of the artery, And between every two Moments stands a Daughter of Beulah" (E 127), explains that "The moment of imaginative dawning, the moment of creativity, can be any moment. More accurately, such time is 'between' the tick and the tock of a clock's moment" (64).

CHAPTER FOUR

Printmaking as Liturgy: Resisting Ritual, Promoting Participation

Blake as prophet helps to define more clearly the process by which he anticipated and imagined a global revolution that would redeem humanity from its warmongering and avaricious state. Such a process begins with the demonstration of an aesthetic redemption of the imagination, cleansing the doors of perception in order to view all forms of humanity as equally capable of participating in the process of creating and sharing art. This vision for human redemption must take place at the individual level, prompting people to cleanse their perceptions of themselves and others through the redemptive lens of aesthetics. But it requires a model, an intervening figure to facilitate using creative contrariety to effect this perceptual cleansing; this messianic role Blake assumes for himself. His role as prophet proclaiming the gospel of aesthetic messianism transitions to the new role that concerns this discussion. Blake will become the exemplar of an aesthetic transcendence, a “religion of art” as William Butler Yeats observed a century later.¹ As practitioner of this “religion of art” Blake through his printmaking and his multimodal art performs a liturgy

¹ “William Blake and the Imagination”, *Essays and Introductions*, 111.

designed to incarnate the imagination and to encourage others into the first and second stages of aesthetic messianism, to engage other art with creative interpretation and then to become artists themselves.

Blake's antipathy towards religious organizations permeates his works. Throughout his entire career few institutions received more consistent vitriol than organized religion and its practitioners. Blake's earliest illuminated works attack the clergy and the deity they promulgate as restrictive, passive, joyless, and complicit in the despicable spiritual and political situation that Blake and so many others deplored in the closing years of the eighteenth century. In the *Songs of Experience*, Blake conflates the church with the state in their indifference to wretched members of society such as "The Chimney Sweeper": And because I am happy, & dance & sing, / They think they have done me no injury: / And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King / Who make up a heaven of our misery" (E 23).² The damning indictment here begins with the cruel and indifferent God preached by religious figures like the Bishop Richard Watson, whose response to Thomas Paine incurred wrathful marginalia from Blake.³ A more complete detailing of Blake's antipathy toward the clergy serves to illustrate the somewhat

²² All primary source references refer to David Erdman's edition of Blake's collected works, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, and will be cited similarly.

³ Among his scribbled remarks Blake exclaims, "Read the XXIII Chap of Matthew & then condemn Paines hatred of Priests if you dare" (E 612).

contradictory nature of his aesthetic liturgy while also highlighting his reliance upon religious themes and tropes even in a secular form.

Blake directed much of his ire to the arid and lifeless nature of religious practices that entail religious ceremonies and liturgies, which Blake viewed as embodiments of the failure of traditional religion. This failure involves a division endemic in contemporary organized religion that Blake laments in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (MHH), a fracture between the spiritual and corporeal realm. An overemphasis upon the physical realm, such as correcting human behavior and suppressing sensual transgressions, contributed to a dearth of physical enjoyment, but more to the point it also marginalized such exuberant expressions of rapturous spirituality more characteristic of the Dissenting heritage of Blake's parents. Reconciling this divide became a central impetus of Blake's meditations on art and the imagination, and one that Blake inherited from other luminaries and religious predecessors like Jacob Boehme.⁴ In defining this reconciliation Edward Rose connects Boehme to one of the holiest of Biblical figures:

The story is told of the patriarch Enoch, who is taken up by the Lord and changed into an angel. He is said to have been, like Jacob Boehme, a cobbler. When at work he performed his labor in such a way that as he stitched the leather sole to the leather body of the boot, he married the lower world and the upper world. Because he

⁴ Robert Rix observes the widespread influence of divines like Boehme and Emmanuel Swedenborg: "The mystical tradition, in which Boehme and Swedenborg belonged, was a vibrant cultural mode" (1).

so dedicated himself to these profane rituals, every stitch became sacred and he was in the process transformed from the earthly Enoch into an angel of the Lord. (584)

This emblem of the connection between the upper world and the lower world occurring in the lowest extremities appears vividly in Blake's epic poem *Milton*, in which he visually and verbally depicts Milton's spirit entering his left foot as a source of divine inspiration. Heaven meets earth in the form of the divine Imagination residing in human beings treading the corporeal realm. However, Rose's example raises the question of how such a rupture might be healed: through "profane rituals." Enoch, who walked with the Lord so completely that he was taken up into heaven, performs the humble and secular work of cobbling shoes. His devotion and his perceptual appreciation of the spiritual transforms mundane activities into acts of worship. Repetitive, ritualistic performances done in the correct mind frame incarnate a higher reality, and in doing so bring tangible and ephemeral experiences together as part of religious expression, which Blake conflates with art.

Blake understood this principle instinctively despite his expressed repugnance toward "outward Ceremonies" that bound human desire and creative expression. Inspired by the swell of upheaval generated by revolutionary activity and by his own innovation of a new printmaking technique, Blake developed an aesthetic revolution centered on imagination in

the works leading up to his manifesto *MHH* in 1790. In one section of *MHH*, he makes the very process by which he created the work a subject of the work. He thereby portrays his printmaking process as a kind of liturgy, a repetitive ritual necessary to the aesthetic messianism. Aesthetic messianism in Blake's works appears in his enactment of the liturgy of the imagination through the printmaking process. The power of liturgy to capture and channel imagination, to impose limits in order to create the contrariety of creative tension, can be seen in the multimodal forces of word and image in *MHH* that confound easy interpretation and illustration as well as traditional narrative progression. Multimodality fosters the gaps into which readers/spectators may enter Blake's and their own imaginations. Blake's liturgy demonstrates the stages of redemption in aesthetic terms by forcing creative interpretation of texts, promoting the creation of new texts, and gesturing towards the repetition of this cyclical process. The cyclical nature of the liturgy anticipates the ongoing potential for human error in individual and collective terms, and thus encourages the continual need for creating and recreating interpretations of art, as well as creating works of art.

Behavior as Worship: James K. A. Smith's Secular Liturgies

It might seem a stretch to claim that Blake, despite abhorring rituals, practices one of his own through his repetitive print-making method. Yet Blake's

print-making method could constitute a liturgy as defined by James K.A. Smith: a repeated action that shapes one's desire for and vision of ultimate importance. Smith's discussions of liturgies in secular contexts and sacred imagination will provide the framework that confirms Blake's participation in and creation of ritualistic cycles that form liturgies of ultimate importance.

The first premise to Smith's discussion of secular liturgies and rituals poses difficulties for those who view themselves as areligious and therefore entirely rational, a product of Enlightenment-descended scientific rationalism that has paved the way for the secularization of modern society. In his book-length study *Desiring the Kingdom* (DK) Smith begins by asserting that "cultural practices actually constitute pedagogies of desire" (DK 46). Smith's argument rests on this foundational concept that sociological and anthropological conclusions can be derived from observing the cultural practices of individuals and societies *en masse*. This is how we know what matters to people, by looking at what dominates their attention, where they invest their time and money and effort. From such observation one can deduce what desires motivate them.

A corollary of this assertion that is no less crucial to understanding the impact and potency of rituals and liturgies involves the construal of knowledge and epistemological mechanisms. Smith argues that a society's or individual's desires occur at a precognitive level, at the level of desire instead of intellect. In a

separate article Smith invokes Heidegger's theories of epistemology, explaining that

For Heidegger, we are never simply spectators of what's "given"; indeed, he found in Husserl an implicit picture of the human person as a kind of swiveling brain on a stick, an unengaged mind that surveyed the world like a lighthouse, simply "perceiving" things as "objects." In contrast, Heidegger emphasized (1) that our relation to the world is always already a construal, a take on the world; and, more importantly for us here, (2) that such construal happened at a precognitive level. The first point emphasizes that to be in the world is to always already interpret the world; indeed, there is no world without interpretation. ("Secular Liturgies" 169)

There is no such thing as the objective reason posited by Enlightenment-era thinkers like Locke and Newton. People consider and experience their existence through a "construal, a take on the world," filtering the experience through a particular emotional perception. As Smith further elaborates, this perceptual lens precedes the cognitive functions and intellectual approaches favored by the rationalist secularist who imagines his opinions and beliefs are founded solidly and solely upon objective empirical scientism. Smith contends that there is no unmediated experience, that the precognitive paradigms fashioned out of experience or innate characteristics direct and define human perception and cognition. At best, we can identify and seek to understand these paradigms, but to circumvent or alter them would require a more radical intervention than humanly possible.

The first premise of Smith's liturgical definitions, then, contends that cultural practices and behaviors reveal the epistemology of desire and that this epistemology exists at a precognitive level that colors human perception. Building off the importance of desire in affecting and shaping cultural behaviors, the second fundamental premise to Smith's argument is that humans are fundamentally shaped by what they desire above all, their sense of ultimate importance, which Smith calls "ultimacy". Smith elaborates: "humans are liturgical animals whose orientation to the world is shaped by rituals of ultimacy: our fundamental commitments are inscribed in us by ritual forces and elicit from us orienting commitments that have the epistemic status of belief" ("Secular Liturgies" 165). What humans privilege denotes the orientation of their intellectual and emotional compass, what is traditionally labeled "worship" in religious contexts. Smith expands the scope of worship beyond strictly religious situations: "Our ultimate love is what defines us, what makes us the kind of people we are. In short, it is what we worship" ("Secular Liturgies" 167).

What may come as an even greater surprise is the way in which behavior reflects desire, or even inculcates desire. Smith explain that "habits are inscribed in our heart through bodily practices and rituals that train the heart, as it were, to desire certain ends. This is a noncognitive sort of training, a kind of education that is shaping us often without our realization" (*DK* 58). Building on the

precognitive principle, the pursuit of desires that may not be consciously acknowledged or articulated nevertheless molds and educates the innermost heart in a worshipful orientation towards the object of desire. That which we pursue repeatedly becomes that which we worship,⁵ leading to liturgies, actions consciously undertaken in pursuit of ultimacy.

In delineating the difference between a ritual, a practice, and a liturgy, Smith creates an ascending order of intentionality and ultimacy. Rituals he defines as “routines (as in the rituals of a batter before he steps into the batter’s box); in this sense, not all rituals would be practices because not all rituals are directed toward an end” (*DK* 86). Rituals are repeated actions or thought patterns that occur at specific times and in specific circumstances. They usually have no desired result other than that they are part of the situational context and are therefore automatic in nature. Practices, by extension, are rituals with a specific end, making them a subset or “a species of the genus ritual” (*DK* 86). Therefore, the ritual and practice of this process progresses towards the highest order of meaning and desire, the liturgy.

⁵ Crucially, the repetition can even continue after the desired objective is removed or accomplished, or indeed has lost meaning or value, leading to the “dull rounds” of uninspired and non-jubilant rites Blake objective to so ferociously. Such a circumstance, though, is not an inevitable conclusion of the habitual repetition of the pursuit of desires, or worship, merely a possible perversion of it.

Smith defines liturgies as “rituals of ultimate concern: rituals that are formative for identity, that inculcate particular visions of the good life” (*DK* 86). While practices have a desired end, liturgies’ desired end are those matters of ultimacy, that which we worship and adore, “that aim to do nothing less than shape our identity by shaping our desire for what we envision as the kingdom—the ideal of human flourishing. Liturgies are the most loaded forms of ritual practice because they are after nothing less than our hearts” (86). Liturgies outwardly express the inward worship of our hearts, giving them a position of extreme importance and revelation in the assessment of individual and cultural desires.

A final aspect of Smith’s discussion of ritual and liturgy is relevant to Blake’s own aversion and appropriation of these practices in his art, which relates to the spheres of epistemological and phenomenological thought in terms of liturgies. Smith’s central argument in “Secular Liturgies” appears in the title itself, that liturgies are not limited to stereotypical conceptions and depictions of religious ceremonies and rites.⁶ Smith argues that any cultural practice that involves repetitive patterns of behavior designed to connect the practitioner with that ultimate desired end, that source of meaning and identity embedded at the

⁶ As Smith explains, “we associate liturgy specifically with religious rituals (and we might actually have a negative view of both liturgy and ritual in this respect)” (*DK* 86).

core of their being, constitutes worship and is in fact a liturgy. From this Smith draws two points:

First, we need to appreciate that religion “takes practice,” so to speak—that religion is an embodied, material, liturgical phenomenon that shapes our desire and imagination before it yields doctrines and beliefs. Second, and precisely because of that, we also need to recalibrate our theoretical radar in order to pick up secular religion, in order to appreciate the force of secular liturgies. (“Secular Liturgies” 161-162).

Smith’s emphasis upon religion as “embodied” will weigh heavily upon Blake’s own use of liturgy despite his best intentions, particularly in the shaping of “imagination” that antecedes “doctrines and beliefs.” Just as vital is the second assertion of appreciating “secular liturgies” as equally extant and influential not only among atheists or agnostics, but even among those claiming religious affiliation.

In a sequel to *Desiring the Kingdom*, Smith expands upon the role of imagination in liturgies, which will lead this discussion back to Blake and the role of liturgies in his own imaginative framework. Smith, in *Imagining the Kingdom (IK)*, claims that

there is a fundamental aesthetics of human understanding. This is because our fundamental “feel for the world” makes sense of our experience in a way that is more like poetry than propositional analysis...and the reason to describe this as fundamentally aesthetic is because the modes of inference and meaning-making that characterizes our embodied being-in-the-world operate according to a “logic” that is more akin to understanding a story than solving an algebra problem. (*IK* 116).

Smith reaffirms the distinction between cognition and desire as the underlying impulse for human behavior. The noncognitive core of human pursuit of the ultimate, however, stretches further than mere desire and actually incites the imaginative capacity; in Smith's words, "at the heart of a liturgical anthropology is a recognition of not just the centrality of desire but also the centrality of the imagination" (*IK* 124). This recognition of the imagination as central to liturgical systems of worship and ultimacy is precisely the impulse that Blake discerned within his own evolving antinomian approach to religious institutions coupled with an increasing awareness of both the transformative potency of art and his own abilities therein.

The valences of Smith's secular liturgical structures resonate with Blake's own discussion of the imagination. Just as Smith's desires for ultimacy function as a precognitive basis for humanity's epistemological perception of the world, so too Blake recognizes the critical role of desire in preceding and shaping rational cognition in defining knowledge and comprehending experience. Blake's equation of the imagination with the divine in the form of Jesus introduces the ultimacy Smith includes in his system. Similarly, the repetitive habits that coalesce into ritual practices resemble Blake's privileging of practice and repetition as foundational in the development of art, even including praxis as a defining characteristic of the creative act. The liturgical system of cyclical rituals

designed to incarnate and therefore encounter the ultimate assumes the transcendent quality Blake ascribes to the imagination as expressed in artistic endeavors. Finally, Smith allows for a desacralizing movement in theories of liturgy, arguing that the development and practice of rituals constitutes a universal trait of humanity, one that finds its fullest expression in religious rites but that is not limited to the religious sphere. Blake's antipathy for organized religion and the associated ceremonies does not prohibit him from capitalizing upon these liturgical systems and "secularizing" them in order to enact his own "religion of art."

Blake's Ritualistic Rejections and Liturgical Inclinations

An examination of Blake's explication of the imagination and its connection with divine matters of ultimate importance reveals similar characteristics as Smith's, providing a clearer picture of Blake's often obscure declarations on the subject. As the following discussion shows, Blake lays the groundwork for his innovative method of printmaking to serve as not only a means but a symbol of the pursuit of this imaginative ultimacy. In doing so, Blake portrays the printmaking process as containing a demonstration of the first and second stages of aesthetic messianism, creative interpretation that leads to artistic creation.

Any discussion of Blake's concepts of the imagination must begin where he began, with the Poetic Genius described and defined in his first illuminated works. In order to shuffle off the coils of religious bondage upon humanity, Blake reimagined the conventional Judeo-Christian God and Jesus as what he labelled the Poetic Genius. This revision of Christian theology appears in his very first multimodal text, *All Religions are One* (ARaO); as the title suggests, Blake proposes a radical view of religion: "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" (E 1). Though Blake reconstitutes the Divine as inextricably tied to aesthetic creation, the recast spirit fulfills much of the same function as the orthodox God. Blake's notions of transcendence remain hotly contested among scholars, some arguing that he denies a spiritual plane of existence in traditional religious terms (i.e., Heaven, angels, the Holy Spirit, etc.). Like many of his theories Blake eludes a clearly defined position on the imagination; however, it does appear that his understanding of life involved some sort of existence indiscernible through sensory empiricism. The divine might be conceptualized as an ineffable creative force that existed eternally, was responsible for the creation of the universe and humanity, and prior to Jesus' incarnation existed beyond the perception of the five senses. The divine does not necessarily have to exist on a spiritual plane utterly inaccessible to humans, but it

did require a mediator, a bridge to bring the physical realm into contact with this mysterious, quasi-mystical force. Jesus for Blake is the continuous embodiment of this bridge, the Word made flesh to dwell among mankind. As Blake says in *The Laocoön*, “The Eternal Body of Man is The IMAGINATION. God himself that is [Yeshua] JESUS We are his Members The Divine Body” (E 273). For Blake, then, humanity is now a participator in the divine because Christ has redeemed humanity by connecting transcendent creative energies with the human imagination.

Another early development in Blake’s aesthetic was the conclusion that imagination must function at a precognitive level in order to access the Poetic Genius. Several places in his marginalia and miscellany Blake comments on the issue of precognitive perception, such as in the sequel to *ARaO*, *There Is No Natural Religion* (NNR). This precognitive perception is connected to the role of aesthetic invention by a following principle from *NNR*: “Mans perceptions are not bounded by organs of perception. he percieves more than sense (tho’ ever so acute) can discover” (E 2). For Blake, perception produces desire and desiring an imperceptible abstraction is impossible. Thus, in order for humanity to desire the spiritual and aesthetic reunion with the Poetic Genius, the organs of perception transcend empirical and external phenomena. Blake argues that the precognitive framework that forms knowledge and desire, that binds and defines humanity, is

the imagination, the Infinite that acts as both the origin and the acme of human reason and desire: "The desire of Man being Infinite the possession is Infinite & himself Infinite...He who sees the Infinite in all things sees God" (E 4). Desire, as Smith showed, is the foundation for pursuing ultimacy, and Blake identifies the precognitive desire as a purer and truer perception of the Poetic Genius than rational thought and scientific empiricism can discern.

Several implications for the precognitive Poetic Genius emerge, the first of which is the necessity for an ordering impulse. This precognitive input, much like unvarnished desire, is chaotic and formless, an ineffable force that must have some imposition of control to be comprehensible and meaningful to humanity. Northrop Frye explains the role of perceptual control as a result of the imaginative function:

Sense experience in itself is a chaos, and must be employed either actively by the imagination or passively by the memory. The former is a deliberate and the latter a haphazard method of creating a mental form out of sense experience. The wise man will choose what he wants to do with his perceptions just as he will chose the books he wants to read, and his perceptions will thus be charged with an intelligible and coherent meaning. Meaning for him, that is, pointing to his own mind and not to, for instance, nature. It thus becomes obvious that the product of the imaginative life is most clearly seen in the work of art, which is a unified, mental vision of experience. (*Fearful Symmetry* 24)

Frye's distinction between self-reflexive meaning that a wise man directs vs. the natural order suggests that the aesthetic imagination must channel and refine the

precognitive experience of life, transforming raw data into meaningful forms of art and interpretation. The imagination works as an organizing force against the chaotic maelstrom of sensory perception, able to discern what empirical data matters and how it applies to human existence. In seeking “intelligible and coherent meaning,” perceptual control or the application of the imagination to the senses allows “a unified, mental vision of experience.” As Frye explains later, “imagination creates reality, and as desire is part of imagination, the world we desire is more real than the world we passively accept” (27). Imagination directs our perceptual framework, and to the degree that our desires affect our imagination, our desires define our view of reality, much the same way Smith traced the origins of rituals to desires that drive behavior. Simultaneously, our desires are shaped by the imagination, what Blake would consider the Poetic Genius, so that the act of aesthetic creation flows from imaginative forces even as it also calls them forth.

The second main implication from the Poetic Genius correlates to Smith’s discussion of desires fueling rituals as well, which is the importance of Blake’s celebration of and inspiration by the quotidian and the marginalized. Just as Smith contends that rituals originate from everyday desires, Blake draws inspiration from humble and disenfranchised people and places diametrically opposed to the classical and refined art of the Enlightenment. In comparing Blake

with the modern poet Mary Oliver, Jennifer Davis Michael invokes the eternal imagination: "Eternity is manifest in this dirty world, 'in love with the productions of time'. In other words, Blake's imagination is fed by the city even if, and as, he turns from it. Imagination does not so much rise above the earth but from it, as the butterflies from the rainwater" (46). Michael cites the final line of *MHH*, "For every thing that lives is holy," contending that Blake is deeply concerned and inspired by "the luminous world of the everyday" (50). Rather than elevating the imagination and its productions "above the earth," remote and transcendent, Blake purposefully celebrated and found inspiration from subjects normally dismissed from high aesthetic consideration. The physical and ethereal meet in creative tension as Jesus incarnates the Poetic Genius, rendering it immediate and accessible to any human imagination regardless of education or innate capability.

Imagination and its artistic expression, therefore, function as the deepest essence of human existence, the Poetic Genius from which all religious systems and all spiritual and transcendental experiences originate. Blake's central critique of organized religion lies in its refusal to acknowledge and encourage the imagination, which leads to the perversion of the imagination that produces meaningless and lifeless rituals. Blake's *MHH* provides an exposition of the origins of the Poetic Genius and the proper and improper ways that others have

used it. In one “Memorable Fancy”, Blake outlines the entire history of imaginative erosion and religious corruption of the Poetic Genius:

The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their enlarged & numerous senses could perceive. And particularly they studied the genius of each city & country. placing it under its mental deity. Till a system was formed, which some took advantage of & enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realize or abstract the mental deities from their objects: thus began Priesthood. Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales. And at length they pronounced that the Gods had orderd such things. Thus men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast. (38)

This striking passage summarizes Blake’s entire conception of the Poetic Genius’ relation to religious pursuits, and provides a template for the system of aesthetic messianism proposed by this study. First, Blake clearly establishes that the Poetic Genius is a naturally discerned force that exists at precognitive levels; the “ancient Poets” perceived this force and imbued the natural world with meaning and significance, reading elements of the world through their aesthetic lens. Here the first stage of aesthetic messianism emerges, the creative interpretation of stimuli through the filter of the Poetic Genius; though such interpretation can take place in conjunction with preexisting art, the truly gifted and attuned (‘redeemed’) individual can apply a similar interpretation to their surroundings and from that generate works of art. Second, the ancient artists Blake discusses share the impulse to define and limit this perceived creative force, seen in this

passage as the ascribing of deities to “each city & country” until “a system was formed.” Systems have no more fundamental purpose than to limit and define something that appears overwhelming or inscrutable, and though Blake connects the system described here with the abuses and oppressions of religious rituals, he acknowledges the naturalness of this ordering impulse. As the above quote demonstrates, Blake conceives of systems as limiting factors that can productively act in contrariety to the boundless energy of imagination. The error creeps in when “priests” take a system and rigidify it into a hierarchical series of rituals that oppresses portions of society for the benefit of the clergy, Christian or otherwise.

However, here Blake distinguishes between incorrectly interpreting and using the Poetic Genius and properly doing so. The improper interpretation of the Poetic Genius and the consequent limiting impulse leads to the enslavement of “the vulgar” and “abstract[ing] the mental deities from their objects: thus began Priesthood”. The final stage in this diabolical process is consequently the first stage that Blake must redress in his counter-system; because “men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast,” it is the prophetic poet’s duty to restore such knowledge, to remind them that the divine creativity is available only through a precognitive appreciation of the Poetic Genius, which can then be expressed by cleansing the doors of perception. The doors of perception are

cleansed through understanding the error of applying rationalism and empiricism to the Poetic Genius rather than allowing the imagination control over perception. Blake's beliefs proposed that such revelation would reverse this pernicious process in order to liberate humanity by reconnecting them with the Poetic Genius.

Blake's insistence that the impulses of Poetic Genius must be limited to become comprehensible finds expression in his print-making technique. This is what allows us to see his print-making technique as a liturgy. It therefore bears repeating just how firmly Blake insisted upon a limiting factor operating in conjunction with the imagination; as *MHH*'s section "The Voice of the Devil" proclaims, "Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is The bound or outward circumference of Energy. Energy is Eternal Delight" (E 34). Both Energy (imagination) and Reason (limitation, order) are required, and Reason serves as the limit or "outward circumference" of Energy. It is in the interaction between these contraries of expanding Energy and limiting Reason that the creative force comes into play, which Blake defines in the image of the bounding line.

Blake seizes upon a metaphor to capture his thoughts in the form of the bounding line. In the "Descriptive Catalogue" to his public art show in 1809, Blake expounds upon this seminal characteristic of high and worthy art, saying

“the more distinct, sharp, and wirey the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art; and the less keen and sharp, the greater is the evidence of weak imitation, plagiarism, and bungling” (E 550). The use of the bounding lines lies in ordering the chaos of experience: “How do we distinguish one face or countenance from another, but by the bounding line and its infinite inflexions and movements?...What is it that distinguishes honesty from knavery, but the hard and wirey line of rectitude and certainty in the actions and intentions” (E 550). Blake asserts that such division and distinction constitutes “life itself”, that without it “all is chaos again, and the line of the almighty must be drawn out upon it before man or beast can exist” (E 550). The corporeal and phenomenological experiences of life require separations that are imposed by divine imagination drawing lines and limits.

However, several features of this principle of limitation fully explicate both how the process works and why multimodal art constitutes an indispensable facet of this liturgy: minute particulars and practice. Attention to minute particulars allows for a precise understanding and expression of the creative chaos of precognitive sensory experience. Blake distinguishes between general and particular knowledge, saying that “General Knowledge is Remote Knowledge it is in Particulars that Wisdom consists & Happiness too. Both in Art & in Life General Masses are as Much Art as a Pasteboard Man is Human” (E

560). Further, Blake defines the wise practitioner as “he who enters into& discriminates most minutely the Manners & Intentions the [Expression] Characters in all their branches is the alone Wise or Sensible Man & on this discrimination All Art is founded” (E 560). The “Wise or Sensible Man” is one who can discriminate and particularize instead of dealing in “General” or “Remote Knowledge. To remain remote, removed from the earthy existence of sensual enjoyment, to wrap oneself in icy logic and abstemious piety making general commandments, these are the hallmarks of fallen humanity’s complicity with its own oppressors. Emancipation and illumination are to be found, conversely, in the attention paid to detail, to “minute particulars” as Blake refers to multiple times in his later prophecy *Jerusalem* and in unpublished poems and annotations. In an annotation responding to Joshua Reynolds, Blake describes the need for specificity and precision, which he characterizes as “minute particulars”: “the genuine painter . . . instead of endeavouring to amuse mankind with the minute neatness of his imitations, must endeavour to improve them by the grandeur of his ideas; . . .Without Minute Neatness of Execution. The. Sublime cannot Exist! Grandeur of Ideas is founded on Precision of Ideas” (E 646). While Blake’s endorsement of the “grandeur of [the artist’s] ideas” seems at odds with the assertion that “Minute Neatness of Execution” is the only grounds for sublimity to flourish, that “Grandeur of Ideas is founded on Precision of

Ideas", the two stances affirm Blake's appreciation for precision and concise expression of the grand ideas that inspired him. He recognized that both the expanding imagination and its limiting expression were required to constitute the caliber of art that touched the ultimate truths and pursuits he perceived.

Art then demands both the unbridled and precognitive inspiration of the Poetic Genius and the limiting forms of art that control and interpret aesthetic expression. Such a process only occurs through experiments, through trial and error, a temporal, progressive journey of cyclical ascent. In *The Laocoön*, created around 1815, Blake provides a series of pronouncements that constitute a schema for this process: "Prayer is the Study of Art / Praise is the Practise of Art / Fasting &c. all relate to Art / The outward Ceremony is Antichrist / Without Unceasing Pracise nothing can be done / Practise is Art If you leave off you are Lost" (E 273). Once again Blake reiterates his abhorrence for "outward Ceremony," but what seems curious is the juxtaposition of his rejection of ritual with the validation of prayer, praise, and fasting, all of which could be considered outward forms of worship. Furthermore, a cursory scan of the proclamations brings one repeated word to the fore: practice. "Praise" for Blake constitutes the development and repetition of art, which he labels "Practise," a concept he returns to twice in the following three lines. Practice takes on even more crucial roles throughout this brief passage, first as the basis for any action whatsoever,

for without it “nothing can be done.” Without practice, the visions that precede and produce art will remain hazy and indistinct, the artist unable to express them using clearly defined artistic practices, the “bounding lines” which are the golden rule of art. The final reference here escalates the stakes even further:

“Practise is Art If you leave off you are Lost.” Not only does practice produce art, but art must remain open to reinterpretation and recreation, not frozen in stasis. Every drawing and draft, no matter how preliminary, take on the awful weight and import of the expression of imagination that Blake assigns to art.

This radical claim that practice not only makes perfect but is perfect, as counterintuitive as it appears, brings into focus how Blake’s viewpoint was shaped by his profession. He was an engraver, tasked with producing plates that were used to produce and reproduce similar designs repeatedly. As such, his skills included the etching and scoring of designs into sheets, producing mirrored lettering that would be printed correctly and capitalizing upon all the popular techniques of his predecessors. As noted earlier, Blake developed his own technique of printmaking that in his mind revolutionized the precision of designs possible and the control the artist could exert over his own imaginative expressions through the relief method of engraving. Each time Blake produced a copy of *MHH*, he could rely upon the original plate to provide the foundation, but he could practice different combinations of colors, lines, and shading to allow

the full expression of his imagination. In practicing his printed imagination, he was producing unique works of art every time.

Ironically, this method of printmaking, which he did not exclusively use for the rest of his career but was certainly a favored technique when developing *MHH*, became a kind of system for him. As he explains in an 1815 letter to Josiah Wedgwood, "It will be more convenient to me to make all the drawings first. before I begin Engraving them as it will enable me also to regulate a System of working that will be uniform from beginning to end" (E 770). Despite his loathing for systems that confine and restrict the creative process, Blake develops his own system by which he can repeat and practice his art most efficiently while still adhering to aesthetic integrity. Los, Blake's personification of the artist, in the later epic prophecy *Jerusalem* summarizes the reality that "I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans" (E 153). Blake's ultimate realization condones and participates in a systematic approach to the pursuit of ultimacy. It is therefore fair to assume that despite his protests and attitudes, Blake subconsciously recognized the legitimacy and import of repetitious liturgies in providing both an avenue and experience of the ultimate, not of the traditional Judeo-Christian God, but rather in the potential transformative imagination that he felt lay within each individual human being. Blake's printmaking becomes

emblematic of the bounding line principle and reverberates through Blake's aesthetic in the early Illuminated works.

Liturgies of Imagination in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell

In *MHH*, both the first and second stages of aesthetic messianism emerge as Blake demonstrates through his multimodal contrariety the need to interpret and create; using the printmaking method as an example, Blake enacts a liturgical process of aesthetic creation. The discussion that follows addresses two primary concerns of Blake's liturgy of imagination: first, the methods and motives behind Blake's explicit references to his own practice of printmaking; and second, his multimodal text's demonstration of the liturgical cycle in the form of visual and verbal art. In both instances of liturgy in *MHH*, Blake demonstrates the cycle of art that redeems and propels the imagination of humanity into participation with the Poetic Genius. This is his program at the outset of the 1790s that could liberate humanity not through political revolution or religious transcendence but through individual transformation and artistic expression.

In the years leading up to 1790 in which *MHH* was primarily composed, among the events that exercised enormous influence upon Blake was the development of his printmaking technique. Covered more thoroughly in chapter three, several of Blake's imaginative theories are reflected in this technological

innovation. This study argues that the actual etching of the plate itself provides a metaphor for Blake's revolutionary perception. In a sense, the truth of his theological, aesthetic, and political agendas remained hidden and confined in the metal plates, unable to find expression. He regarded humanity in a similar state, hemmed in by forces of solid and inflexible systems bent upon restraining imagination and sensual enjoyment. Additionally, the specific grounds for Blake's frustration with conventional etching lay in his inability to draw precise lines that clearly defined his illustrations, echoing the previous discussion of boundary lines providing precision and definition. Scoring surfaces with a graver implied the force and violence of a penetrating act, which Blake probably found symbolically distasteful, but it also inhibits the desired precision.

Printmaking technology and methodology restricted Blake's artistic expression logistically and symbolically, lending immense importance to his innovation in corrosive etching. Logistically his multimodal plates gained even further detail in the base images and written text, while symbolically the interaction of two contraries resonated through his imagination. This corrosive interaction also represented the creative interpretation that constitutes the first stage of aesthetic messianism, to take an extant text and apply the creative faculties to it, revealing truths and meaning hidden below the surface. Blake demonstrates this reimagining of existing texts through his dialogue with

various theological and artistic influences such as the Old Testament prophets, Milton, Michelangelo, or Swedenborg.⁷ Furthermore, the symbolism of burning away the existing surfaces in order to reveal inner truths was informed by his beliefs on the internal divinity within every human; one of his famous pronouncements in *MHH* explicitly addresses this aspect of printmaking: “But first the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul, is to be expunged; this I shall do, by printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid” (39).⁸ Blake habitually takes existing works of art or philosophical and theological premises and ‘corrode’ away what he considers erroneous to reveal the inner truth he perceives, a principle that is inseparable from his printmaking process. This is a crucial piece of the puzzle for Blake, generating his marriage of contraries that defines his literary and visual palate. Two contrasting forces work together in order to forward the process of creativity that reveals the infinite within: the static surface of empirical existence

⁷ Though his admiration for Swedenborg would wane, as discussed in chapter three, the Swedish visionary and prophet remained an important figure for Blake.

⁸ Essick reads this “startling declaration” as “relevant to book production when we consider the traditional equation of picture with body, word with soul, in emblem book commentaries. In these terms, the illuminated books will overcome the body-soul dichotomy by uniting poetry and design” (*William Blake, Printmaker* 208).

and the redemptive energy of corrosive imagination. Printmaking is the process of incarnating Blake's liturgy of the imagination.

Blake verbally alludes to the printmaking process of corrosion three times throughout the text of *MHH*. The above passage is perhaps the most concise summation of creative corrosion as a metaphor for the imagination's interaction with tangible experience. The first such reference comes prior to this passage, in a brief description of the narrator's return from hell:

When I came home; on the abyss of the five senses, where a flat sided steep frowns over the present world. I saw a mighty Devil folded in black clouds, hovering on the sides of the rock, with corroding fires he wrote the following sentence now perceived by the minds of men, & read by them on earth.

How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way,
Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?
(E 35)

In the first two printmaking allusions to fiery interpretation, Blake comments upon the symbolism of corrosive imagination, of bursting the bounds of limited vision. The conclusion of this plate explains the necessity of such corrosion: "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" (39). The first passage contains a similar concern; the Devil's message (which is Blake's) written "with corroding fires" rebukes the limiting vision of empirical and rational observation "clos'd by your senses five."

Perceptual redemption involves, in Essick's words, "forcing the reader-viewer to

respond with all his sensibilities, restoring to his organs of perception their primal unity and simultaneity" (208).⁹ Corrosion becomes a means of communication as well as interpretation, one that will expand the caverns that confine readers' perceptions.

Corrosive interpretation produces fundamental alterations in traditional binaries and oppositions that Blake viewed as constricting and oppressive. Earlier in *MHH* Blake defines Evil as "the active springing from Energy.... Evil is Hell," followed by Blake's moral explanation that "Energy is Eternal Delight" (E 34). After famously redefining Evil-Hell as Energy and Imagination, Blake takes a tour through the recesses of such creative forces. In "A Memorable Fancy" he explains: "I was in a Printing house in Hell & saw the method in which knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation" (E 40). This introductory sentence establishes both the context and the purpose of the following tour through Hell's Printing House, to articulate both verbally and visually the construction and perpetuation of human knowledge. By situating the communication and preservation of learning among the fires of Hell and in the context of a Printing House, Blake connects human flourishing to the

⁹ I agree with critics like Peter Otto who question Essick's contention that Blake desired a *unity* of opposing forces, word-image, body-soul, reason-imagination. I would argue instead that he called for the maintenance of a healthy tension between these oppositions, generating the creative forces necessary for redeeming human imaginations.

corrosive interpretation that cleanses the doors of perception and leads to new creation. Past knowledge and expression exist to be received and interpreted by future generations according to the creative imagination that corrodes away surface distractions to reveal the hidden truth.

The purpose defined in Blake's introduction to this liturgy resonates with the previous discussions involving epistemological formulations of knowledge and the precognitive role of desire. The tour's purpose is to comprehend "the method in which knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation," which for Blake connotes several meanings, the first of which is a commentary on the traditional printing practices and the transmission of human knowledge over the years. As an avid devotee of Milton's and undoubtedly familiar with *Areopagitica*, Blake would be aware of the loaded politics surrounding printing and censorship in the past, in which the printing press becomes a potential tool of religious and governmental control. Conversely, it also carries the potential for the propagation of liberating texts like the Bible or *Paradise Lost*, or even recent prophets' works like Swedenborg. However, as the previous passages have made clear, Blake also announces a new era in printing technology and philosophy, one in which old institutions and systems of knowledge are subject to the imagination of the artist-artisan who will henceforth control his vision throughout the entire printing process, free from limits and interference of

publishers or editors. Symbolically, the creative process becomes governed by precognitive inspiration rather than rational oversight and interference. Finally, the new innovation in printmaking facilitates a truly multimodal text production, transcending the monopoly of a single form of artistic expression and allowing for the contrariety fundamental to Blake's aesthetic theology.

After the prefatory statement, Blake proceeds to describe the six chambers or stages of Hellish printing. The tour begins "In the first chamber" which is occupied by "a Dragon-Man, clearing away the rubbish from a caves mouth; within, a number of Dragons were hollowing the cave" (40). This initial stage is perhaps the most crucial and reflective of Blake's own corrosive printmaking, with fiery imagination once again play a primary role. As Robert Essick explains, "Dragons 'hollowing the cave' and 'Eagle like men, who built palaces in the immense cliffs' (E 39) are doing the work of Blake's mordant as it bites into the copper and constructs the cliff-like sides of relief plateaus" (209). The detritus is cleared away from a "caves mouth" and dragons are apparently enlarging the cave by their own incendiary breath. The immediate connotation certainly coincides with aesthetic messianism's first stage involving corrosive interpretation; hollowing out spatial gaps into which interpretive movement becomes possible engages the instinctive Poetic Genius to (re)interpret art and reality. The oral imagery also suggest a rhetorical undertone, the energetic art

able to transform humanity comes from the mouth. This reading resonates with the verbal imagery of the literal creation of “cliffs” of words rendered in relief: verbal creation both orally and physically. Spoken words and verbal art thus assumes a prominent role immediately in the process, a crucial distinction for the later comparison with visual inspiration. The incendiary rhetoric of both artist and prophet serves as the corrosive agent that can liberate the imagination from its bondage. The first stage of the liturgy of imagination translates the rhetoric of liberation into a redemptive corrosion.

The second chamber in Blake’s Printing house of Hell presents a different image but one that emphasizes the multimodal inclusion of previously marginalized imagery with another of Blake’s fundamental precepts related to the imagination. The text reads: “In the second chamber was a Viper folding round the rock & the cave, and others adorning it with gold silver and precious stones” (40). The Viper in question is actually represented pictorially on the plate (Figure 4.1), along with a reference to the next chamber’s primary occupant, an Eagle. In the image the bird grasps a writhing serpent in its talons; the serpent is coiled several times, with its mouth open and forked tongue protruding; Erdman reads the two figures as “not fighting with each other...but collaborating to produce linear text and infinite illustration” (*Illuminated Blake* 112). The gaping mouth and tongue visually allude to the first chamber and the verbal

A Memorable Fancie

I was in a Printing house in Hell & saw the method in which knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation.

In the first chamber was a Dragon-Man, clearing away the rubbish from a caves mouth; within, a number of Dragons were hollowing the cave,

In the second chamber was a Viper folding round the rock & the cave, and others adorning it with gold silver and precious stones.

In the third chamber was an Eagle with wings and feathers of air, he caused the inside of the cave to be infinite, around were numbers of Eagle like men, who built palaces in the immense cliffs.

In the fourth chamber were Lions of flaming fire raging around & melting the metals into living fluids.

In the fifth chamber were Unnam'd forms, which cast the metals into the expanse.

There they were recieved by Men who occupied the sixth chamber, and took the forms of books & were arranged in libraries.



Figure 4.1: The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Plate 15 (Copy C, 1790)

corrosion that expunges the occluding rubbish. Erdman notes that “the eagle, like the bird on the title page, looks upward, drunk with vision” (112). Blake creates an interwoven web of multimodal references here, beginning with the visual allusion to the verbal section about rhetoric, followed by the content of the second chamber. The Viper is described in terms reminiscent of manuscripts, folded like the pages of the folio; the implication suggests that the serpent becomes a physical artifact containing the multimodal expression of imagination. Furthermore, the Viper fashions a boundary or border containing the “rock and cave” of human imagination alluded to in the first chamber, reiterating the “bounding line” as a necessary contrary to the unbounded creativity of visual and verbal aesthetics. Blake also invokes the importance of the marginal both in elevating visual imagery to equal footing and in the peripheral readers he valued. By creating a visual border that contains the pages of the imagination, Blake conveys the importance of both multimodal margins and the limitations that define imagination.

The third chamber continues Blake’s multimodal agenda, turning away from the external boundaries of the physical to the internal imagination. The narrator explains that “In the third chamber was an Eagle with wings and feathers of air, he caused the inside of the cave to be infinite, around were numbers of Eagle like men, who built palaces in the immense cliffs” (E 40). As

Figure 4.1 shows, the Eagle is also visually depicted on the plate, suggesting that these two components of the printing process liturgy deserve special attention. The Eagle clutches the Viper in its claws, its wings fully unfurled and its head raised toward the writing that hangs above it. The lifted head with its beak open in seeming jubilation comprises a recurring motif in Blake's visual palette, most notably in *MHH* on plates 20, the Leviathan in Hell, and 21, the young man in the fully redeemed form.¹⁰ Here as elsewhere in Blake's works the uplifted face usually denotes the illuminated and transcending gaze of redeemed imagination. Continuing this theme, the passage itself refers to the bird's fulfillment of the Dragons' hollowing fires in the first chamber, since the inside of the cave is now "infinite." Infinity connotes the imagination and the divine for Blake, so this chamber represents the unlimited capacity for creation to form in the interpretive gaps of the cave. In these two chambers then Blake's contrariety of the imagination finds its full expression, with the boundaries of the Viper both submitting to and still constraining the transcending vision of the Eagle. Within the boundaries of the page, Blake's and the reader's imaginations can take flight.

If the printing liturgy demonstrates the system of aesthetic messianism implied in Blake's works, then the first stage of aesthetic messianism involving

¹⁰ For an in-depth discussion of these two images, see chapter three, as well as the final discussion of this chapter.

creative interpretation of both the world and other works of art roughly aligns with the first three chambers of Hell's Press. The corrosion of interpretation cleanses and redeems the doors of perception in people, facilitated by the hollowing out of interpretive gaps within the surface of texts. At this point in the tour the activities take a different turn; Essick observes the change in focus: "Blake makes a sudden shift in imagery that heralds his later use of printmaking as material for poetry" (209). The emphasis moves from deconstructive forces of corrosion and edification to constructive impulses of crafting and collecting. The fourth and fifth chambers comprise the second stage of aesthetic messianism, in which the redeemed imagination begins to generate new works of art, reaching out to other people by disseminating the artistic vision and its reception among the people.

Both the fourth and fifth chambers involve the agenda of creating and transmitting knowledge mentioned at the beginning of the plate. The text reads: "In the fourth chamber were Lions of flaming fire raging around & melting the metals into living fluids. In the fifth chamber were Unnam'd forms, which cast the metals into the expanse" (E 40). The fourth chamber reemphasizes the fiery imagery that dominated the earlier discussion and connects it with the rest of *MHH*, but now the flames serve a more constructive purpose. Here the energy of desire catalyzes a resurrection, transforming moribund substances "into living

fluids.” Essential to this chamber is the transmutation of intractable and unyielding substances into “living” forms, malleable and active. Their essence remains constant as the precognitive desire reanimates the divine imagination in the static metal, but now the metal submits to being formed into new shapes and forged for redeemed purposes. The fifth chamber of Hell’s printing shop continues this trajectory by invoking images of blacksmithing through the double meaning of *cast* in terms of fashioning a form in metal. Essick elaborates: “The technological reference here is to forge and foundry, not the etcher’s mordants and resists” (209). The printmaking pun reemphasizes the creation or casting of images using metal as the material shaped; the expanse is the blank, empty metal surface that receives the casting forces of redeemed desire. These two chambers illustrate the shift to creating new forms and works of art that defines the second stage of aesthetic messianism.

Blake’s liturgy of printmaking concludes by returning to the original mandate of the printing liturgy: to transmit knowledge to future generations thereby creating opportunities for readers to perform similar acts of interpretation and creation. Humans appear for the first time in the sixth chamber: “There they were reciev’d by Men who occupied the sixth chamber, and took the forms of books & were arranged in libraries” (E 40). With this final chamber the tone shifts beyond the denizens of Hell, leaving the regions of

internal imagination and moving to social and public spheres. The Men play no active part in the production of the text, seemingly; they merely receive the product in “the forms of books” and file it in libraries. A negative reading of this chamber might suggest that the cataloguing and filing of the energetic illustrated texts renders them inert instead of continuing the process of recreating the liturgy. Such a reading fits *MHH*’s criticism of expressions of the Poetic Genius that devolve into moribund rituals. However, interpreting this chamber in conjunction with the system of aesthetic messianism, Blake’s liturgy begins and ends at the point of provoking people to become artists themselves with the coalescing of the book to inspire future artists. Such books provide readers an opportunity to embark on the first and second stages of aesthetic messianism. Blake recognizes that the end of the liturgy of imagination, lies the demonstration of the Poetic Genius to subsequent readers and generations. His aim, after all, is to convert others to his “religion of art,” a purpose that must entail the creation of art that will illuminate the aesthetic imagination and redemption. The sixth chamber disseminates this new creation to a wider audience, risking its misinterpretation into a rigid and mortifying system, but providing a template for others to imitate and participate in the liturgy themselves. Blake concludes his printing cycle on the cusp of inspiration, though this time the inspiration comes from that which the ritual has produced. This

culminating incarnation of the imagination into a physical artifact actually leads to the third phase of Blake's liturgical practice, cyclical repetition.

The End is the Beginning: Liturgy as Cyclical Progression

Stasis for Blake personifies the errors of human experience, both in terms of culture and art, so any system that attempts to characterize his multimodal art as symbolic of his ideal for revolution and redemption cannot end in such a state. Repeatability and continual progression comprise a major element of liturgical practice, the reiterated demonstration acting as a continual reminder of theological or moral principles. Repetition also provides an essential component of printmaking; indeed, the entire justification for the development of printing presses and moveable type lies in the ability to quickly and easily duplicate a text. This replicability then introduces the third stage of aesthetic messianism in terms of the liturgy. Stage three will be explored more thoroughly in subsequent chapters, but repetition of the printmaking process and the liturgy reminds readers of the tangible nature of liturgy, and the importance of the quotidian and the limiting function in liturgical structures.

Edward Larrissy addresses all three of the stages of aesthetic messianism in conjunction with repetition in Blake. He draws upon Morris Eaves' theories in his discussion of repetition in printmaking:

Since printing is permitted by the possibility of repetition, what we have is two types of repetition, a positive and a negative, each the reversal of the other. The point about repetition has been put rather well by Morris Eaves: "Printing is a translation of one set of visual signs into another, made possible by the division of words into uniform letters, for the sake of repetition." For Blake, printing as repetition is explicitly linked to questions about influence, originality and the redemption of time. (69)

Influence, originality and the redemption of time align with the three stages of aesthetic messianism, as creative interpretation deals with questions of influence, the creation of new art emphasizes originality, and the redemption of time anticipates the perpetuation of the process. The creative product remains to be printed again and again, and each new copy provides with it the opportunity to continue the creative process even evinced by Blake's liturgy. Blake's multiple unique copies of *MHH* confirms that the final stage of the liturgical printing process takes place as the beginning of a new creative act. While the reader's imagination is provoked and expanded by encountering the printed version of the text, the artist too can return to the base plate and exercise their imagination repeatedly.

But as previously discussed, the precognitive impulse that defines human knowledge, including aesthetic and theological knowledge, lies in the desire for the ultimate. Thus, the imagination for Blake constitutes both the original impetus for the initiation of liturgies and its final desired consummation. In this sense, Larrissy's "reversal" rings true, for the end is the beginning and the

beginning is the end. What this means in practical terms for Blake and his illuminated prophecies is that the imagination or visualization that precipitates the creative act echoes the final product or expression of the imagination. This discussion proposes that visual media and imagistic art approaches more closely to the divine imagination than verbal expression, which is why the visual both precedes and succeeds the verbal in the original pamphlet that began *MHH*, the anti-Swedenborg tract of plates 21-24.

The full discussion of Blake's original diatribe against Emmanuel Swedenborg has been discussed in chapter three. The episode "A Memorable Fancy" contains a microcosm of Blake's entire program for the redemption of man via his imagination. This section of the work contains the debate between an Angel and Devil, ending with the fiery redemption of the Angel's legalistic stagnation. The two images that bookend this episode feature a young man rising from the earth, his gaze mirroring his ascent, next to a horrified figure crawling on the ground, the mad king Nebuchadnezzar (or George III). The juxtaposition of the two modes of art is striking, given the positive nature of the Angel's redemption in the written text and the negative trajectory of images from a seemingly redeemed man to one tormented by political and religious authority. The reader attempting to chart the trajectory of Blake's revolutionary redemption

in *MHH* would undoubtedly find herself struggling to interpret the multimodal forces clashing here.

What actually happens in this muddle of modes demonstrates the third stage of aesthetic messianism, the repetition of liturgical structures that emphasizes the limiting and limited nature of such cycles as well as the importance of the everyday experience of life. In order to see this, the spatial arrangement of the two mediums must be noted; at both ends of this episode, the image contains the written narrative. The redeemed youth precedes the outset of the narrative, and the deranged king adds a punctuation following the narrative's conclusion. In a very literal and (just as important) spatial sense, the imagery forms bounding lines around the verbal art. Visual art behaves as a limiting force to the previously elevated writing, reinforcing Blake's challenge to such hierarchy, as well as providing a defined space in which the temporally progressive nature of the narrative occurs. Just as liturgies feature a defined time and space, so the image serves to define the narrative. Finally, the images introduce a counteracting force to the more traditional and expected art of language, another function boundary lines. Boundaries and limits distinguish and define so as to order the chaos of experience and render it sensible, and in liturgical practices indicate the distinct stages of the liturgy, allowing for multiple meanings and messages to be conveyed. Limiting lines allow for

different variants of art to exist, both within modes and across modes. In the plates the images limit the text, but the text also clearly indicates where the visual content of the image gives way to verbal content. By creating a contrast of art that serves as limits and definitions for one another, Blake demonstrates the bounding principle that informed his aesthetic precepts.

Replicability as an indispensable part of the multimodal liturgy also allows Blake to reemphasize his appreciation for the quotidian parts of life, in keeping with the previous discussion of marginalizes groups and readers. Rather than prioritizing the elite intelligentsia who determined cultural and artistic norms, Blake purposefully rejected mainstream acceptance and concepts of “high” art that might have led to commercial and critical success. He injects this attitude into his works, which spills over into the liturgical framework discussed here. In addition, such themes in liturgies reminds the participants and practitioners of the immanence of the forces they are incarnating through the ritual. As Blake concludes *There Is No Natural Religion*, “Therefore God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is” (E 3). As important as accessing and experiencing the Poetic Genius that approximates the divine for Blake, reaffirming the importance of the physical world and daily life constitutes a key element of his liturgy of the imagination.

This validation of the quotidian appears in the episode through the arrangement of contraries. The verbal narrative depicts the process by which humans may ascend to the initial image, both by explaining the reality of and reasons for its current fallen status, and by providing a verbal description of the process of redemption. This redemption coincides with the initial image of the redeemed human that inaugurates the plate. However, though the verbal content ends with the redemption of the Angel's imagination, the visual image contradicts it by demonstrating a mind suffering under the oppression of systems of control at the hands of the State and Church. This visual and visceral reminder of the current state of affairs serves several purposes, the first of which reinforces the need to participate in this liturgical redemption. Though the promise of freedom is available through Blake's aesthetic messianism, it requires a frank understanding of the status quo. However, the second purpose contains greater importance, for it participates in the contrariety principle that pervades Blake's work, and contributes to the celebration of the marginal. Instead of concluding this multimodal meditation on aesthetic redemption with visual redemption, the episode returns to the fallen state of humanity in order to reinforce where the liturgy begins and why it must be repeated. The limiting nature of liturgy reminds its participants that they live and behave in the daily affairs of life. As Smith located the origin of liturgies in everyday desires, so too

Blake appreciates the role of the quotidian as a contrary to the illumination and exhilaration of artistic creation. The mountain top experience, in Christian parlance, is not sustainable on earth, and Blake recognizes that artistic production comes in cycles. Much of the inspiration that impels the stages derives from the ordinary activities and interactions in everyday life. Even in progress towards the ideal state of humanity, Blake realizes that undulating cycles are inevitable and must both be anticipated and overcome.

In order to complete his liturgy of the imagination, Blake must conclude the cycle in such a way as to facilitate its repetition. Liturgical structures and systems depend upon the cadence of life and peaks and valleys of experience to bring the participant back to the point of desire, and Blake's liturgy is no different. He purposefully returns to the starting place of the liturgy's impetus, the need to connect with ultimacy, as the means to propel a repetition of the cycle, albeit one that builds upon and is edified by the previous experiences. By leaving the audience with a sense of uncertainty, Blake encourages both a repetition of creative interpretation, stage one of aesthetic messianism, and an exhortation to the audience to undertake their own artistic liturgy, which is his ultimate goal. Using Smith's paradigm of secular liturgical practices and systems, Blake's own liturgy of the imagination reveals itself. Despite his objections and antipathy toward the limiting ceremonies and rituals of organized religion, Blake

recognized the inherent power of incarnating an ethereal or abstract notion in corporeal terms. In his case he substituted his own concept of the Divine Imagination for the Judeo-Christian Jehovah. Through the limitations imposed by the “bounding lines” of liturgies, Blake demonstrated the critical contrariety between the encompassing forces of reason and the limitless energy of imagination, a dichotomy that infuses *MHH*. Blake’s printmaking method becomes symbolic of this procedural incarnation of the imagination, compelling Blake to incorporate explicit references and a guided tour through the printing house of Hell. Finally, Blake capitalizes upon the multimodal potential of his printmaking innovation to both illustrate and to disorient his reader, prefiguring the cycles of aesthetic liturgy that both transfigures humanity and restores it to the point of desire. For only desire, that precognitive motivation of mankind, forces a lost and mentally contorted humanity to strike out in search of ultimacy, an ultimacy for Blake found in the process and liturgy of imagination.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dramatic Revisions: Ongoing Revision in *The Songs*

Aesthetic liturgy, for Blake, becomes the pursuit for ultimacy, as demonstrated in the printmaking process. Blake's printmaking method offers a cyclical opportunity to return to one's own creations and to recreate them continually, applying the same creative interpretation to one's own mindset and therefore continually challenging one's own perceptions. Blake demonstrates this principle with particular clarity in his *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, where the individual plates' multimodal elements provide opportunities to generate new interpretations and revisions. The third stage of aesthetic messianism, creative revision, involves this precise cycle of inward revision and reproduction, exemplified in the repetitions of dramatic performances for audiences.

Drama carries a powerful ability to connect daily activities with ultimate concerns, extending the deeper meaning of external actions to internal reflections. In liturgies, the performer's actions communicate spiritual truths and historical traditions that encourage audiences to participate inwardly. In essence, the viewer vicariously performs the liturgy as the priest performs it outwardly. Performance thus involves the act of both seeing and hearing, of visual and verbal stimuli, a multisensory experience that correlates to multimodal texts. By

examining the multimodal performance in Blake's texts, readers are swept into the performance of the aesthetic redemption he envisions; vision becomes behavior. Specifically, Blake's plates perform interpretive gaps between verbal and visual modes on individual plates, between individual plates within volumes and between volumes, and finally between the myriad copies and editions of *The Songs* Blake produced over his lifetime. These gaps allow readers to enter imaginatively the performance themselves, creatively interpreting and producing the text. Blake's myriad copies demonstrating variability and innovation enact the injunction on audiences to return continually to the text and repeat the process of aesthetic messianism.

Among the inspirations for this imaginative revision as displayed in *The Songs*, Blake draws upon a specific genre of literature popular during the eighteenth century in crafting poems like "The Little Black Boy" that indicates his subversive intentions. In order to jolt his adult readers out of the oppressive mindsets inculcated in them by powerful institutions, he appropriates the genre of children's literature to reveal the damaging nature of the dominant narratives that suppress and marginalize groups like children, the poor, and non-white ethnicities. This strategy is particularly inventive and subversive since children's literature operated as a primary delivery system of political and religious narratives that supported the status quo. Furthermore, he incorporates a radical

vein of writing, the abolitionist narratives prominent in the revolutionary circles of the late eighteenth century; despite the surface-level progressivism such abolitionist writings represented, Blake discerned a condescending, perhaps even racist undertone in the works. Through the performance of ironic reimagining of these two genres, he demonstrates the creative interpretation and creative production of aesthetic messianism, but also includes revisionary examples in order to deconstruct and critique fully these mainstream genres. After establishing a basis for perceiving Blake's multimodal texts as vicariously imagined performances, the two-plate work from *Innocence* will demonstrate the third stage of Blake's aesthetic messianism.

Performance Texts: Theatrical Diversity and Meaning

From an interesting cross-section of critical scholarship, including drama theory, Byzantine religious iconology and architecture, and literary theory, a picture emerges of performance's ability to create the necessary gaps into which spectators turn inward to participate in the aesthetic process of redemption that Blake envisioned.

Guy Spielmann provides a definition of performance that proves helpful in both what it affirms and excludes as performance: "The term [performance] can refer, in general, to a phenomenon—the accomplishment of an action or a series of actions, according to a predetermined formula by someone (the

‘performer’) who is consciously addressing them to a receiver (the ‘audience’), both parties being in direct or indirect physical contact—or to a specific instance of this phenomenon” (296). In this general definition he provides several essentials to understanding Blake’s multimodal texts as performances, the first of which is that the performance is not limited to strictly theatrical productions but rather encompasses anyone performing an action. The performer can be a poet, painter, priest, or politician. The second takeaway from Spielmann’s definition posits that the context of the action must entail an audience or spectator of some kind. A consciousness of audience is inseparable from a performance, even if the audience also includes the performer(s). Therefore, Blake’s texts become performances not only when they are disseminated to other audiences, but also when the original creator returns to them as a new viewer, his perception renewed and cleansed and ready to engage in the tripartite process of aesthetic messianism.

The final aspect of Spielmann’s definition is more problematic. Spielmann includes the proviso that the “action or a series of actions” takes place “per a predetermined formula.” In the case of theatrical productions, this predetermined formula ordinarily constitutes the original text composed by the playwright. Spielmann’s assumption seems to be that all performances must adhere to or emanate from an authoritative source. While providing a basis for a

performance via a set script facilitates a coherent and consistent performance, a logical result of this predetermined text is the establishment of a hierarchy in which the production or interpretation is subservient to an Ur-text that is the authoritative text. The written script dictates what actions the performers can undertake, what words they speak, and constrains how they interpret and reproduce the text. This limiting pressure upon creative interpretation and creative production constitutes a major objection Blake raised both to the religious rituals he witnessed and to the subordination of visual modes of aesthetic expression to verbal forms.

Such a hierarchical structure traces its roots back to religious sources of contention that would resonate strongly with Blake. Manfred Pfister, in his discussion of Shakespearean performance and national memory, explains that “the Reformation in its orientation towards the word and the book tried to marginalise or suppress the old Catholic rites of memory – liturgy or rites commemorating the dead” (219). Protestantism emphasized the decentralization of scriptural and spiritual authority away from Rome by encouraging individual engagement with the biblical text. This ethos helped spawn Dissenting sects and offshoots of Protestant believers like those in which Blake’s parents participated. Therefore, the antiauthoritarian impulse in Blake corresponds strongly to questions of modal hierarchies. However, a side effect of this movement away

from centralized institutional authority also privileged the Book above tradition; strict Biblical exegesis trumps religious observance and ritual. Thus, the written text takes on an almost (and in some cases actual) sanctified authority, inviolate from meddling or revision. This privileging of the text coincides with eighteenth-century aesthetic theorists like G. E. Lessing. Recognizing this potential, Spielmann qualifies his original definition, explaining that “the fact that most drama involves actors delivering lines should not delude us into believing that, even for ‘literary’ theatre, performance proceeds from text” (296). Much more flexibility exists for performers and productions to deviate from and recreate the Ur-texts that inspired them; this flexibility is inherent in the performative aspect of Blake’s multimodal texts.

Spielmann also discusses another important feature of performance that pertains to the multimodal texts Blake produces and his aesthetic system, a reader’s imagined performance of a dramatic text, similar to the virtual text discussed in chapter two. Spielmann explores the analogy between performances and multimodal texts by observing that frontispiece illustrations to a hardcopy of a play clash with readers’ conception of the play (308). Such interpretive gaps exist between mental and actual performances, but, as Spielmann acknowledges, also exist between written works and visual depictions of them, which also relates back to the question of authoritative mediums. Keir Elam, in discussing

women's paintings of Shakespeare's play in the eighteenth century, echoes this sentiment by invoking a familiar theorist:

These works become what W. J. T. Mitchell in his seminal volume *Picture Theory* terms image-texts, or what we might more properly term text-images, namely images whose reception and interpretation depends on an intimate dialectic with the text in question, rather than a generic relationship with a given play or character, translating the speech-act dynamic of the drama into a mode of visual and especially corporeal performativity. (124)

Taking active, dynamic portions of a dramatic text and translating them into visual and 'static' depictions constitutes a performance of the written text in a visual medium. Blake problematizes such an easy dialectic by denying any preexisting medium that can be authoritative; since the verbal does not precede the visual, nor vice versa, readers cannot easily assign one form as depicting or describing the other preceding form. In a sense, both mediums are simultaneously performing their counterpart, opening up limitless opportunities for interpretive interjections by the viewer and further undermining any set hierarchy.

Spielmann's example of image and text discrepancies creating a similar tension as between private and public performances demonstrates the ability to incite audience participation. Rozzita Schroeder explores a similar performativity between image and text within the context of Byzantine architectural ornamentation. Schroeder argues that the multimodal aspect of drama

transforms spectators into active participants, claiming that “by looking at, or as Robert Nelson has suggested ‘looking with,’ the images and texts on the walls of the church, the Peribleptos monks became active participants in a cosmic drama that bridged past and present, secular and sacred” (117-118). The capacity for religious imagery juxtaposed with writing to envelop and involve spectators into a “cosmic drama” would have appealed to Blake. Given his formal training of practicing illustrations by sketching architecture at churches, he would have been exposed to religious imagery and inscriptions in Gothic cathedrals. The explicit rhetorical purpose of provoking changes within the spectator, of enjoining them to participate in a cosmic drama that leads to their edification and transformation, informs the rhetoric of the multimodal texts he would later develop.

This religious demonstration suggests that not only are viewers transformed into participants, but that this participatory movement takes on ultimate significance, thus reintroducing the liturgical element. Pfister defines the repetition of Shakespeare’s plays as “ritual[s] of commemoration” that engender national identity, claiming “Shakespeare’s play not only anticipates these future rituals, but stages them right in front of our eyes and ears and turns us into participants to the ritualistic re-enactment” (230). Performances of such significance transcend the immediate purpose of a stage production of a written

text, becoming mechanisms to foster identity and community¹ and effect changes within the audience members who participate in “the ritualistic re-enactment.” Like Schroeder’s monks in Byzantine chapels, performative liturgies assume an aura of ultimacy by repetitive rituals performed inwardly whose purpose is to transform and illuminate its participants.

One final point to be made about the relation of performance to multimodality addresses how Blake’s performance of multimodal texts allows for repeated opportunities for creative engagement with texts or contexts. Spielmann identifies a problem with translating one type of performance between mediums. An artist attempting to depict a scene from a play must decide whether they are depicting a specific performance or their imagined version of the performance, characters, setting, and so on. Spielmann discusses the problem of visual representations of theatrical productions, of specific performances vs. idealized or imagined performances:

This quandary is peculiar to theatre, where the perspective of performance is the necessary condition for a text to be construed as ‘dramatic’ (drama meaning ‘action’), as opposed to other literary genres, where no actualisation is required: the fiction to which a novel refers, for instance, exists entirely in each reader’s mind, and

¹ Pfister asserts elsewhere that “[i]t was through the periodically repetitive reenactment of ‘cultural performances’ above all – through religious rites, the ceremonies of guilds or other social groups, through festivities, sports, games, pageants, commemorative observances, courtly masques and rituals and the performances of the public theatres – that a national collective memory and together with that a sense of cultural identity was fashioned, re-affirmed, developed or transformed” (221).

illustrations that may give it material form remain strictly optional (unless text and images are consubstantial, such as in comics, or in *Le Petit Prince*). (296-297)

What Spielmann identifies here is the uncertainty embedded in any visual depiction of a theatrical scene; of particular note is his distinction between theatre and novels, in which the narrative's world "exists entirely in each reader's mind, and illustrations that may give it material form remain strictly optional." The authority of the text comes into focus, and with it the limited nature of internal imagination; any adaptation of a novel into another form of art, be it painting, film, or theatrical performance, must always struggle with the question of the Ur-text, the authoritative written work from which other art derives. The reader's 'performance' of a novel's content will always differ from another interpretation by another artist. Spielmann's point emphasizes the inescapability of creating this disconnect in theatrical performances since the written text has not been actualized until it is performed; its true form as a work of art is found on the stage, not the page.

However, Spielmann's final parenthetical comment notes that those works that include both image and word avoid such a conundrum. Here the true advantage of Blake's multimodal works as both art and performance becomes clear; since no medium is privileged over another in terms of chronology or arrangement, questions of authority and hierarchy in multimodal texts such as

Blake's *Songs* become spheres of contention that open interpretive gaps. Even as the spectator of Blake's works are confronted with alternate mediums of verbal and visual, which prompt a mental image of the words or a mental explanation of the image, the coexisting medium quickly contradicts and confounds the spectator's mental constructs, forcing them to create and recreate their own interpretations of the dual (and dueling) mediums. Multimodality as a performative experience represents a less hierarchical and more flexible medium, in some ways, even than drama and theatrical works.

The importance of performance lies in challenging verbal and literary authority by elevating the visual enactment of a verbal text. Further, performance easily lends itself to the inclusion and participation of the spectator into the artistic process. Performance can be thought of in liturgical terms, enacting theologically and historically significant content. Lastly, the multimodality of performances involving verbal and visual stimuli translates easily into discussion of multimodal texts that the reader performs; Blake's *Illuminated* works demonstrate performative motifs that encourage readers to engage their imaginations in an internal direction, reconsidering mental conceptions of a verbal text when confronted with a visual depiction. Blake employs such tactics in *The Songs of Innocence and Experience*.

Blake and Performativity

Though Blake's own views on performance mostly involve the theatrical arts of his day, one can treat Blake's multimodal art as a kind of performance and apply theories of performativity to it. While he views theatre as compromised vehicles of indoctrination by the dominant structures of religious and political institutions, he senses performance's capacity to challenge hierarchies of art forms, primarily the verbal and literary modes' elevation over visual mediums. The application of performance and theatricality to Blake's works is a burgeoning field of late; Susanne Sklar focuses primarily on the theatricality of *Jerusalem*,² while Diane Piccitto takes a broader view of the corpus of Blake's works with particular attention to multimodality.³ These volumes focus directly on performance in Blake and specifically the multimodal Illuminated books. Like the previous section, they reestablish Blake's use of theatrical performance to endorse and facilitate an overthrow of verbal dominance and an elevation of marginalized and diverse forms. Additionally, they expound upon the tension created by the simultaneous public and private aspects of theatre in Blake, the private act of reading and imagining a scene or image or performance juxtaposed against the actual depiction of the written text in image or theatrical production.

² *Blake's Jerusalem as Visionary Theatre: Entering the Divine Body*.

³ *Blake's Drama: Theatre, Performance and Identity in the Illuminated Books*.

Blake's multimodal texts act as performances that encourage audience participation as a means of redemption. Blake, this study argues, seeks to use performative texts to reach marginalized audiences, and provoke them to creatively interpret and creative produce in response to his multimodal performance.

Any discussion of Blake's inclusion of performativity as part of aesthetic messianism should begin by examining his stated views on the theatre. It will probably come as no surprise that Blake held negative opinions about the theatrical institutions of his day. One of the few references he makes to theatres in his works occurs in *Milton*, where Blake's hero-artist Los exclaims, "their God I will not worship in their Churches, nor King in their Theatres" (E 104). While such an indictment against theatres seems rather categorical in rejecting this mode, the specific wording suggests that Blake's objection lies in the content rather than the form of productions. Piccitto explains that

Even though this appears to be a damning sentiment directed toward the theatre, I would argue that it is not the theatre itself as a site of dramatic performance that earns his ire...the indirect allusion is to the way the monarchy employs this space of popular entertainment, just as priests employ houses of worship. The theatre is a target of attack because of the way the head of England stages itself to the masses. (4)

Blake's objection to the theatre stems from its use as a method of control, of promulgating the Church and State's message of indoctrination. Yet despite its

corruption by the established institutions of Church and State, this highly influential art form still appeals to Blake's revolutionary tendencies. Piccitto affirms the effectiveness of drama in reaching a diverse population. This capability in performativity explains Blake's appropriation of such elements in his multimodal texts, since his goal is to impact people at the deepest levels possible and encourage them to participate in the production of art.

Blake's objection to theatrical productions then mirrors his opposition to perceived hierarchical structures in human institutions as well as art forms. Performative art has already been demonstrated to help overcome hierarchical inequalities among verbal and visual mediums, a sentiment Blake strongly endorsed. However, because many Blake scholars come from literary backgrounds, a subtle tendency persists that prioritizes verbal components of Blake's texts over visual ones, a dynamic Stephen Behrendt labels a "logocentric bias" (80). He elaborates, "Language of this sort implies that only a literary text can be a real 'text' and that the visual text is at best the weak and subservient sister art whose function is not textually significant and whose nature as art is only minimally and marginally important in the generation of meaning" (79). Rejecting a logocentric mindset is crucial to appreciating the performative aspects of the multimodal texts Blake creates. However, the visual-verbal conflict corresponds to an issue that finds particular resonance within performative

contexts, public versus private or external versus internal performance.⁴ Visual performance, as the previous section suggested, resides in an external or public context, usually in terms of theatrical or dramatic productions, while verbal forms are generally considered as private and internal performances, reading novels, poetry, and drama to oneself and ‘performing’ it silently. According to Piccitto, performance creates a similar tension between private imaginings of the written text:

This idea that the powers of the mind are superior to those of material pictorial space extends to the view that the powers of corporeal stagings are also inferior. However, performance opens up interpretation in many ways, most notably by showing us a reading that we may have never envisioned. With respect to Blake’s *Illuminated Books*, the images do not limit our numerous possible mental interpretations; rather, they offer a different dynamism than the text, and together the two forms create a theatrical energy. (28)

Hierarchical structures in art forms corresponds to a similar prioritizing of internal performance of a text, where the reader imagines or voices a prose or dramatic work. External forms that visually confront audiences acquired a diminished reputation regarding the audience’s active role; rather than performing (mentally) and engaging the imagination, viewers passively received other artists’ performances. This subtle hierarchization finds a rebuttal in

⁴ Piccitto exposit that “The dynamic of image–text in his work breaks down the opposition between reading/interiority and performance/exteriority by embedding his work in both spheres” (19).

multimodal texts. By elevating the sister art of visual media to equal footing with verbal media Blake also demolishes the clear separation between public, visible art (foremost of which is theatrical performance), and the private interior practice of reading and mental performance via the imagination. The visual components therefore act as public performances that offer the contrast to a reader's private imaginative performance of written work.

This premise of public vs. private performance deserves further attention especially as it pertains to Blake's performances in multimodal texts as both imminent and distanced, internal and external. As the spectator assumes an active role in the performance, the question of what kind of role they assume arises. Susanne Sklar explains her concept of "visionary theatre" that fosters a dualistic perception of audience participation:

Like a lens through which a text can be seen, visionary theatre helps us perceive a text both from within (as an actor would do) and also from without (as a director or spectator). We can imagine inhabiting two reference frames, seeing the work from behind the eyes of particular characters, while also seeing how characters, settings, action, and imagery interrelate. (19)

The public/private dialectic becomes another interpretive gap into which spectators are thrust, perceiving the action by projecting themselves into active roles. Blake's multimodal texts allows spectators to inhabit multiple parts of the performance: the director/creator, the actor/performer, and the audience/spectator. The interiority of interpretation and then creative

interpretation creates a gravitational pull from the externality of dramatic performance; however, since both elements remain in Blake's illuminated prophecies, neither prioritizing visual performance as precognitive, nor verbal texts as authoritative becomes viable. Since the responsibilities of actors and directors are necessarily different while still closely intertwined, the actively engaged spectator/participant must negotiate their imagined choices as an actor with those offered as a director. In a sense, the viewer is brought progressively into the action: from a passive spectator s/he advances to viewing the play to finally become part of the action on-stage as a performer. Similarly, a reader who imagines a poetic or dramatic image then confronts the visual depiction of the image performed by the original artist, and an interpretive and creative gap ensues.

Simultaneous to a reader's participation in the performance, there develops a sense of alienation within the reader. Blake attempts to elicit this response partly through the obscure and disjointed texts he devised and partly through the shifting and amorphous role of readers as both audience and performer. Piccitto notes the necessity of jolting readers out from a conventional view of reality: "For Blake, creating a sense of distance is necessary in order for the audience to consciously answer his call to enter into the works by altering their perception in a fundamental reconceptualization of the way we understand

reality, spectatorship, and his art form" (54). Piccitto builds off the twentieth-century dramatist and theoretician Bertolt Brecht, whose influential theory of alienation served to confront spectators with the reality of theatre's unreality, an attempt to exhort spectators to similarly examine other constructs of political and social institutions. Blake's political leanings and intentions sympathize with an artistic system that "rouzes the faculties to act."⁵ Cleansing the doors of perception requires confronting and reconsidering one's fundamental view of reality, God, humanity, homeland, and so on, but such an alienating effect is necessary to shake spectators out of their torpor and stupor. Alienation demands a creative response.

It is this contrariety that Blake reproduces and transforms through the use of multimodal texts in the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Through the dynamic interaction between multiple sources of expression, such as the verbal and visual components on individual plates, between individual works within *Innocence* and *Experience*, and between the two volumes in question, Blake generates

⁵ Letter in 1799 to Rev Trusler, E 702. This letter sheds light on Blake's attitude towards creating art that is easily accessible and comprehensible for readers: "You say that I want somebody to Elucidate my Ideas. But you ought to know that What is Grand is necessarily obscure to Weak men. That which can be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care. The wisest of the Ancients considerd what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction because it rouzes the faculties to act." As chapter 2 showed and the remainder of this study will illustrate, Blake perceived the untutored reader, children, poor, illiterate, and non-European, as more sensitive to the Poetic Genius, while the "Idiot" unquestioningly ingests indoctrination from oppressive institutions.

interpretive gaps, varying depictions, and alternating worldviews that confound the spectator. In keeping with the aesthetic messianism that will demonstrate and encourage his followers to emulate him, Blake illustrates the stages of creative interpretation, creative production, and finally creative revision that connects him and his audience to the Poetic Genius.

Subversive Childish Performances in "The Little Black Boy"

Blake's multimodal texts operate in performative ways throughout *The Songs* in order to challenge and deconstruct typical structures of institutional control and subjugation of the marginalized. Blake's texts seek to illustrate both the nefarious ways children are indoctrinated into the dominant paradigms that reinforce religious and political systems and the potential for childish innocence to connect with the Poetic Genius. Furthermore, Blake's consideration for other marginalized groups of racial and social classes appears in the critique of antislavery narratives that, though arguing for abolition, maintain a subtle form of white superiority by stereotyping Africans and Western slaves as primitives in need of Anglicizing in order to ascend to the white, Christian context that defines normativity. Blake incorporates a traditional literary form that functions as social control and indoctrination. "The Little Black Boy" offers a critique of antislavery narratives through catechistic functions in keeping with the pedagogical mode of children's literature. The work operates at multiple levels of meaning and

multimodal form to demonstrate childish connection with the Poetic Genius as a counter to institutions of oppression, performing creative interpretation and creative production while also inserting a progressive cycle of creative reinterpretation and reproduction.

Blake's *Songs of Innocence* (1789) was produced during the height of revolutionary fervor, with the second volume *Experience* (1794) added later after the tide turned. Although he would engage directly with the political and social movements that sparked the French and American revolutions in subsequent works, it is striking that Blake chose to create a work parodying children's literature at such a time rather than more 'adult' works. The particular implications of this decision are suggestive of Blake's intuition at such an early juncture that revolution and radical change must take place somewhere other than the corridors of political and religious power, the palace or the cathedral. Blake also signals his concern for the marginalized audience of children by consciously and purposefully crafting a work that resembled such texts. Furthermore, as Roderick McGillis has noted, "Childhood, like adulthood, is a performance. If the child is an actor, in costume, then, as far as we know, the being who acts is empty when off stage" (104). Children were expected to conform to a specific performance of childhood and participate according to

social and religious norms, and the primary means of inculcating such norms lay in children's literature.

Children's texts and in particular religious-themed texts had a popular and influential position in the rising literary marketplace of the late eighteenth century.⁶ John Bunyan's *A Book for Boys and Girls* (1686) contributed to the rise of a particular mode of literature catering to children, with an educational agenda intended to inculcate religious and moral rectitude. Bunyan's work was followed several decades later by the preacher and hymnist Isaac Watts; Donald Smith explains that "Bunyan's poems were second in popularity and influence only to Dr. Isaac Watt's class *Divine and Moral Songs* (1715)" (2). The eighteenth century's booming book trade produced many more examples,⁷ some of which Blake probably encountered. The intersection of children's literature and Blake's works has attracted scholarship from various critics,⁸ focusing on the didactic and moral

⁶ Donald Smith details the "rapid mid-century growth of the children's book trade" in his article "Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience and Eighteenth-Century Religious and Moral Verse for Children" (4).

⁷ Several major examples include John Wright's *Spiritual Songs for Children* (1727), Thomas Foxton's *Moral Songs Composed for the Use of Children* (1728), John Marchant's *Puerilla, or Amusements for the Young* (1751), Charles Wesley's *Hymns for Children* (1763), Anna Laetitia Barbuald's *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781), and Sarah Trimmer's *Sunday-School Catechist* (1788).

⁸ C.f. V. de Sola Pinto, "Isaac Watts and William Blake"; Smith, "Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience and Eighteenth-Century Religious and Moral Verse for Children"; Robert Rix, "William Blake's 'The Tyger': Divine and Beastly Bodies in Eighteenth-Century Children's Poetry"; Alan Richardson, "The Politics of Childhood: Wordsworth, Blake, and Catechistic Method"; Alan Blackstock, "Dickinson, Blake, and the Hymnbooks of Hell".

nature of the works and Blake's deconstruction of such exemplars. Smith explains that "The purpose of each volume was basically similar, to teach the child reader how to lead a Christian life and prepare for death and judgment" (2). De Sola Pinto argues that the trajectory from Bunyan to Watts to Blake represented a shift from pure religiously themed didacticism to a celebration of childish innocence.⁹ Children and the literature involved in their moral and literary formation become a complex of religious and political movements, influenced by Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke and proto-Romantics like Rousseau. As Nick Shrimpton posits, Blake's "decision to write children's hymns was not an eccentric one. It was a decision to participate in what was to be the most prolific and controversial literary form of the decade" (22). The impact his ideas could potentially carry may have influenced his decision to utilize such a genre.

The popularity of children's literature produced a specific form of the moral and social education embedded in this genre. Originally, writers like Bunyan saw such a telos as essential in children's literature; Donald Smith

⁹ Pinto explains: "In Bunyan we see the adult interested only in forcing the child into the mould of a traditional morality. Watts also holds this view, as it were officially, but he has a secret sympathy for the child as a child, and feels the charm and beauty of the small and the helpless. Blake no longer thinks of turning the child into a model of adult virtue, but tries to enter with imaginative sympathy into the child-world of smallness, helplessness and bewilderment" (220).

provides a summation of the purpose behind this pedagogical overlay on children's literature: "For a century the aim of the genre remained the same: to make the study of the most serious subject, religion and morality, attractive to children who, whether benighted by original sin or simply untrained and therefore frivolous, needed an inducement to that contemplation" (5). However, as Richardson argues, the catechistic form and function subtly altered the rhetorical thrust from merely attempting to create better citizens and Christians to reinforcing the institutional structures protecting establishments like the Church and State.¹⁰ Catechistic literature "played a much greater role in the disciplining of the middle and especially the lower classes for an increasingly industrialized society" (854), transforming the spiritually benevolent intentions of Bunyan and Watts into another instrument of social control.

Given this agenda of pedagogical strictures informing the performative nature of children's literature, Blake's decision to employ such a genre gains further significance. Critics mostly agree that *The Songs of Innocence and Experience* are not participating in the form of children's literature dominated by Bunyan or Watts. Sebastian Mitchell observes that the "short religious narrative" typified by

¹⁰ Richardson claims, "The Renaissance emphasis on dialectical argument, related to the rise of an entrepreneurial class requiring intellectual flexibility, yielded to the mechanical production of set answers, obedient behavior within the educational setting, and (for the lower classes) passive literacy. Catechism replaced dialectic as the exemplary mode of a process which Michel Foucault describes as the 'disciplining' of society" ("The Politics of Childhood" 853).

Watts resembles *The Songs*, but that Blake employed this form not “as a means of instructing innocence, but rather of demonstrating its corruption” (116). The choice to incorporate this literary genre then takes on significant implications, as Heather Glen explains:

In choosing to present his vision in the form of a book for children he was choosing to engage directly with the coercive strategies of its dominant culture – strategies which the child’s book, with its rationalistic simplification of ambiguous subject-matter, its assumption that its readers should passively accept ‘instruction’, very clearly embodied. In writing for those accustomed to such books, he was addressing himself to an audience who had internalized those strategies, as an unquestioned ‘mental set’ of assumptions and expectations, which was called into play in the very act of reading. (31-32)

Blake intentionally sought to engage readers using a mode of writing that would be quite familiar to them, that carries a specific rhetorical association (of instruction in moral formation and religious doctrine), and that readers may view favorably and to which be uncritically receptive. Blake’s use of children’s literature and the performance of childhood paves the way for his challenge of the internalized thought patterns and beliefs imposing social control, making his subversion and eventual inversion of them that much more resonant.

Children’s literature with its acquired rhetoric of indoctrination also corresponds to another form of rhetoric that intersects with the revolutionary fever rising in the last decades of the eighteenth century, antislavery narratives. Besides the American and French revolutions, the lesser-known uprising on

Haitian plantations in 1791 followed much abolitionist agitating and unrest that permeated European empires like Britain's.¹¹ This immediate example along with the American expulsion of imperial expansion pushed the treatment of indigenous peoples to a prominent position in antiauthoritarian and revolutionary thought. Though antislavery writings of the times argued for the abolition of the slave trade, much of the literature exploited this movement for ulterior motives that maintained a hierarchy relegating races, religions, and cultures beneath white European Anglican norms. The use of children's literature to buttress and defend an Anglo-centric perspective aligns with the previous discussion of catechisms.¹² To some critics *The Songs of Innocence* supports such imperialistic mindsets, as Christine Gallant explains in the context of "The Little Black Boy": "If one assumes that the little black boy says is what Blake thinks, then one misses the irony and, as readers going back to S. Foster Damon in 1924 have charged, Blake becomes yet another of the unintentionally racist abolitionists" (126). However, given the companion *Experience* that clearly excoriates such abuses as slavery, child labor, and religious suppression, Blake's

¹¹ Christine Gallant notes Blake's involvement in Caribbean narratives involving slave revolts: "Blake was creating his engravings for John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative of Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* when the Saint-Domingue revolt broke out, and the rebellion influenced his work as surely as the French Revolution did" (123).

¹² Alan Richardson notes the connection between children's literature and antislavery works in his article "Colonialism, Race, and Lyric Irony in Blake's 'The Little Black Boy'" (235).

true intentions of critiquing such imperialist attitudes accords with the larger corpus of his works. Blake employs the supposedly docile genre of children's literature to levy a biting critique against the dominant structures and narratives of indoctrination and political quietism. Alan Richardson connects the "The Lamb" with Blake's excursion into antislavery narratives, "The Little Black Boy": "Along with such related lyrics as 'The Chimney Sweeper' and 'The Little Black Boy,' which also feature a child resisting indoctrination through imitatively instructing a still more helpless figure ('little Tom Dacre,' the 'little English boy'), 'The Lamb' offers its child reader a model for evading adult coercion by means of parody" (865). Whereas "The Lamb" directly parodied and subverted the catechistic model of indoctrination disguised as education and moral formation, "The Little Black Boy" assumes the function of catechistic programming while focusing on antislavery narrative forms.

Coincident with the antislavery racism Blake critiques in "The Little Black Boy" is the unique properties of his reproduced works, a fact enabled by the printmaking method discussed in previous chapters. Repetition and reproduction have been a constant theme in the aesthetic messianism expounded in this study, comprising the third stage of the process of imaginative redemption. The ability to recreate the same base text while applying creative energy to produce a unique copy constitutes the creative reimagining of aesthetic

messianism, and Blake demonstrates this aspect of his creative paradigm vividly in the various copies of *The Songs*. Using various copies of the multimodal plates for “The Little Black Boy” Blake illustrates his subversion of antislavery narratives through the reimagining of the visual text, maintaining the implicit critique of artistic hierarchies as well as political and religious systems.

From the first printing of *Songs of Innocence* in 1789 to the end of his life, Blake reproduced thirty-one editions of *The Songs* that provided a unique bibliographical quandary for Blake scholars. As the online editors of The Blake Archive have noted,

After 1794, the printing history of *Innocence* becomes complex because Blake began printing it with *Experience* to form copies of the combined *Songs* while continuing also to issue *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* separately. Complicating matters further are the facts that some separately issued copies of *Innocence* were combined with *Experience* by collectors and dealers, and that copies of *Innocence* now separate were once part of copies of the combined *Songs*.¹³

The murky provenance of Blake’s works adds to the subversion of textual authority that Blake first endorsed through the elevation of images to the level of written text. Additionally, given the number of copies of *The Songs*, each unique in their execution and often in their arrangement, any claim of authoritative status of a single copy quickly becomes suspect. After all, Blake created the text

¹³ Blakearchive.org, <http://www.blakearchive.org/work/s-inn>.

not once but thirty-one times, and while the verbal elements changed less frequently,¹⁴ the visual elements certainly vary between copies, reaffirming the importance of visual art.

“The Little Black Boy” provides a clear example of the capacity for adding new constellations of meaning to a work repeated through revision. Critics have noted similarities between “The Little Black Boy” and antislavery works of the eighteenth century. Gallant observes Blake’s involvement in John Gabriel Stedman’s *Narrative of Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, tracing verbal and visual similarities in the Songs to contemporary sources.¹⁵ Lauren Henry draws parallels between “The Little Black Boy” and such writers as Phillis Wheatley.¹⁶ Richardson examines the imbrication of children’s literature with antislavery literature, listing numerous works aimed at childish audiences that include colonial rhetoric (235). Though most recent criticism

¹⁴ The verbal elements achieve variation mostly through the inclusion or exclusion of certain plates within copies of the *Songs*. For instance, Blake not only excised some of the individual works from *Innocence* and *Experience*, but printing *Innocence* singly several times even after completing *Experience*.

¹⁵ Gallant identifies Josiah Wedgwood’s seal of a black figure kneeling with the caption “Am I not a man and a Brother?” as a visual motif in several of the Songs, including “THE LITTLE BLACK BOY” (Gallant 124-125).

¹⁶ Henry, in her article “Sunshine and Shady Groves: What Blake’s ‘Little Black Boy’ Learned from African Writers”, refers to Wheatley’s “An Hymn to the Morning”, as well as works by Thomas Clarkson, James Albert Gronniosaw, and Olaudah Equiano, “probably the most famous of England’s black abolitionists” (10).

agrees on the fact of Blake's satiric subversion of antislavery, which precludes reading "The Little Black Boy" as guilty of the condescending or racist antislavery rhetoric, less attention has been paid to *The Songs'* visual narratives in multiple copies as indicative of Blake's multimodal performance of revising antislavery children's literature.

"The Little Black Boy" is a two-plate work from *The Songs of Innocence* detailing the meditations of an African-born child comparing himself with white children in the light of race and Christian virtues. The poem draws upon conventional didactic forms and catechistic functions; a child's voice provides the content that centers around the social and religious doctrine he receives from his mother. The boy testifies to his racial difference and its possible relation to God: "My mother bore me in the southern wild, / And I am black, but O! my soul is white; / White as an angel is the English child: / But I am black as if bereav'd of light" (E 9). This first stanza has prompted much of the criticism levied against Blake as propagating a racist antislavery style; Richardson provides a conventional interpretation of this rhetoric, saying "Angels and souls are white; blackness is a purely negative ('bereav'd') condition" ("Colonialism, Race, and Lyric Irony" 239). The child seems to have acceded fully to the indoctrination of colonial narratives that see his black skin as something from which he will eventually escape. Blake complicates any instinctive reaction from an abolitionist

or anti-abolitionist reader; for the abolitionist, he inserts a compliance with a racial hierarchy narrative into the boy's speech, forcing abolitionists to consider how racial stereotypes infect their victims to a point of championing their own oppression. For the opponent of abolition, the boy's subsequent discussion of heavenly departure from racial clouds throws into question the importance of skin color as moral indicators.

The literary convention of didacticism and moral formation that dominated children's literature in Blake's day is explicit in the boy's account of his interaction with his mother. The mother's lesson partially echoes a traditional Christian account of a benevolent deity bestowing blessings and gifts to the earth ("here God.../ gives his light, and gives his heat away. / And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive / Comfort in morning joy in the noon day", E 9). Given the boy's expression of racial hierarchies in the opening lines and his overt allusion to his mother's teaching, readers can reasonably interpret the initial section of the poem as affirming the religious and racial indoctrination endemic in eighteenth century antislavery and children's literature. The remainder of the boy's recitation of his mother's teaching conveys an implicit reinforcement of racial dynamics relegating people of color to serve the superior whites:

And we are put on earth a little space,
That we may learn to bear the beams of love,
And these black bodies and this sun-burnt face
Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.

For when our souls have learn'd the heat to bear
The cloud will vanish we shall hear his voice.
Saying: come out from the grove my love & care.
And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice. (E 9)

Henry sees echoes of Wheatley in the reference to a “shady grove”: “In both poems the ‘shady grove’ is associated with an African speaker’s struggle to construct an identity (either poetic or personal), and in both poems the image of the protective grove is set up in opposition to the sun and to Christianity” (7). Looking at this passage from an abolitionist perspective, the image of black bodies and black faces analogized with a cloud confirms the equating of the sun and light with holiness and purity, where the blackness of African skin acts as an impediment to assimilating into Christian ethics and cultural norms. The erasure of blackness translates into the banishment of clouds, leading to ascension into Paradise, from the darkness of the grove into the “golden tent” of God’s favor. Antislavery rhetoric, though well-meaning in intent, sometimes betrayed an unconscious tendency to relegate blackness to socially and spiritually inferior positions.

At this point, the visual designs of the plate are helpful in developing an idea of the racial overtones and undertones involved in the text. On the first page of the work, the boy’s mother instructing her son comprises the image, as seen in Figure 5.1. The child and his mother are clearly depicted with dark skin in a



Figure 5.1: "The Little Black Boy (1) - Songs of Innocence (Copy C, 1789)

naturalistic setting representing Blake's image of an African landscape. In this case the image accompanies and illustrates the poetic content, depicting the

second stanza's explanation of the speaker's upbringing: "My mother taught me underneath a tree / And sitting down before the heat of day" (E 9). Though some scholars see the boy's upraised pointing hand as the boy teaching his mother, the pointing hand can signify the boy's gesturing verification of the heavenly origins of blessings. A proposition of the child becoming the teacher will indeed resonate with the second section of the poem and may reflect Blake's own attitude of childish wisdom over adult error, making it useful to bear in mind.

However, the design on the first plate seemingly depicts the verbal content involving the boy learning at his mother's knee. Finally, it is noteworthy that in comparing all the existing and available copies of "The Little Black Boy" every iteration visually depicts the mother-son tableau similarly, with darkened skin. Figure 5.2 is from a different copy of *The Songs*, and confirms this fact. The first plate of the work remains consistent in this regard across editions and copies, visually illustrating the text much in the manner of "The Lamb" and therefore supposedly satisfying an orthodox view of hierarchies both of race and of artistic form.

The second plate features the black boy switching roles, from pupil to instructor, representing a fairly radical viewpoint even to the orthodox eye. Here



Figure 5.2: *"The Little Black Boy" (1) - Songs of Innocence (Copy Z, 1789)*

the black boy explains his own intentions of educating his white counterpart:

Thus did my mother say and kissed me,
And thus I say to little English boy;
When I from black and he from white cloud free,
And round the tent of God like lambs we joy:

I'll shade him from the heat till he can bear,
To lean in joy upon our fathers knee.
And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,
And be like him and he will then love me. (E 9)

Though the child's intentions appear mostly benevolent and optimistic, his proposal to "shade" the white boy "from the heat till he can bear" the intensity of God's heat can be read as continuing to assume a subservient role to his white better, as well as perpetuating stereotypes of darkened skin as reflective of the sun's rays, making Africans more elemental and naturalistic than the refined and cultured Europeans. Henry summarizes the boy's conflicting desires to both aid

and be submissive to whites: “he sees his blackness as a sign that he is ‘bereav’d of light’ and as a gift from God; and he believes that when he goes to Heaven, he and the white English boy will both shed their cloud-bodies, and thus achieve some kind of equality, and yet still envisions himself serving the white child, ‘shad[ing] him from the heat’ and ‘stand[ing] and strok[ing] his silver hair’” (8).

Seemingly consistent again with the verbal content, the visual elements portray a shepherd sitting and attending two small children at his feet (Figure 5.3). The shepherd figure aligns with traditional depictions of Christ, the Good Shepherd, and his acceptance of marginalized groups like the poor, sinners, children, and Gentiles is reflected in the attentiveness he shows toward one boy. The image seems to depict the antepenultimate line “To lean in joy upon our fathers knee” and the larger of the two boys standing back appears to be the speaker from the verbal context. The other child who actually leans in devotion upon Jesus’ knee sports the “silvery hair” mentioned in the penultimate line, and the other boy’s hand on the white child’s back betokens the caretaker nature of the black boy who benevolently “shades him from the heat” until the white child adapts.

For when our souls have learnt the heat to bear
 The cloud will vanish we shall hear his voice.
 Saying: come out from the grove my love & care.
 And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice.
 Thus did my mother say and kissed me,
 And thus I say to little English boy.
 When I from black and he from white cloud free,
 And round the tent of God like lambs we joy:
 I'll shade him from the heat till he can bear,
 To lean in joy upon our fathers knee.
 And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,
 And be like him and he will then love me.



Figure 5.3: "The Little Black Boy" (2) - Songs of Innocence (Copy C, 1789)

Jesus' gaze appears to be entirely occupied with the white boy, which could be construed as marginalizing the black boy in favor of the white; however, the white boy's attitude of clasped hands and uplifted face also creates a visual allusion to Josiah Wedgwood's popular design for seals for the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade (Figure 5.4). Though the seal could be read as another example of an unconscious bias even among abolitionists,¹⁷ the intent to liberate slaves remains laudable and affords Blake an opportunity to visually allude to and deconstruct a popular text relevant to his work.



Figure 5.4: Josiah Wedgwood - Seal for Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade

¹⁷ Cf. George Boulukos, *The Grateful Slave: The Emergence of Race in Eighteenth-Century British and American Culture*.

Gallant expands on this visual allusion: “consider the posture of the white boy, pictured in profile in the same position as the Wedgwood slave-seal....In other words, it is the white boy who is the slave, with the ‘mind-forg’d manacles’ that prevent him from loving the black boy so unlike him” (126). Jesus’ ministrations are thus more urgent for the white boy than the black boy, since the white boy still languishes as a slave to racial hierarchies while the black boy has transcended such oppressive attitudes and perceptions.

However, both boys in Blake’s image are depicted with light skin, only the taller boy’s darker hair distinguishing the two and providing clues to the respective identities in terms of the poem. Blake depicted the boy with dark skin in the previous plate, yet here he seems to take an earlier line literally, which says “When I from black and he from white cloud free” (E 9). The clouds refer to skin color as the speaker draws the metaphor for the reader: “And these black bodies and this sun burnt face/ Is but a cloud”. The reference to being free from divisive skin colors explains the two boys sharing a similar shade of skin in the last image; liberated from the bondage of fallen humanity, the two races are united at the feet of Jesus, a portrait of universal brotherhood and harmony. This rather innocent anticipation of heavenly harmony is not entirely free from racial hierarchy, as the black speaker seems to define his ultimate acceptance by whites in terms of shedding the morally inferior darkness of skin, and one could argue

that the boy still complies with racial hierarchies by depicting the redeemed state of existence as both boys (and Jesus, incidentally) having white skins.¹⁸ Blake's multimodal text "The Little Black Boy" apparently conforms to the regressive antislavery rhetoric of black inferiority, at least on the surface of the text.

If one copy of Blake's *Songs* represents a performance of his aesthetic imagination, then the question of repetition and revision takes on a different aspect of potential importance. Performances can alter perceptions of a text, as the first section of this study demonstrated, and the singularity of Blake lies in his ability to revise and reimagine his own performance of texts in unique expressions. The visual elements of the plates particularly allow for such revision, and though often Blake's alterations are more ambiguous for interpretive purposes, "The Little Black Boy" provides an example of the revision stage in aesthetic messianism that offers a potentially profound change in readers' understanding of the text.

A reader who encounters only this version of "The Little Black Boy" might arrive at such a reading as the following: Blake is well-intentioned in advocating for partial racial equality, but limited by his era and embedded racial bias in

¹⁸ Such a sentiment is echoed by David Marriott, who concludes that "Giving voice to a plaint about racism, Blake the author falls back into racist biblical allegory". "'The Heat To Bear'", 208.

imagining the truly holy state as Caucasian. However, the multiple copies of the same text create an interpretive opening. In Copy Z (Figure 5.5), produced in



Figure 5.5: *"The Little Black Boy" (2) - Songs of Innocence (Copy Z, 1789)*

1789 and thus among the first editions Blake published, the image is noticeably altered. The figures of Jesus and the white child (though somewhat darker in this version) remain Caucasian but the other child, the black boy, is clearly distinguished in his skin tone.¹⁹ As both children are in the presence of Jesus, they are both seemingly redeemed and liberated from fallen states, yet in this

¹⁹ This visual revision occurs in copies L, Z, E, R, T, V, and Y.

case the black boy retains his differentiating pigmentation. If the previous line of being released from “clouds” of skin tone are still relevant, what is the reader to conclude when the black boy remains black? In the lines referenced above, the term “clouds” seems to be vital in its meaning. In the first copy, the implication suggested that heaven required other ethnicities to assimilate into a Caucasian sphere of racial norms. To Blake’s predominantly white readership such a conclusory image moderated the perhaps radical contents of the poem. Readers who regarded Africans and non-whites as mostly savages might have raised an eyebrow at the notion of an African boy being a support and providing shelter for the weaker white child; racial associations with Christian morality correlated whiteness with purity and holiness. By depicting the redeemed state of the children as white, however, prejudiced readers might tolerate the more radical notions of racial equality in Christian terms, allowing for the black boy to be physically more resistant to the sun’s radiance yet still attaining white status in Heaven.

In light of the revised image, however, readers’ preconceived notions of the multimodal message are disrupted and challenged, forcing them to reconsider their perception of racial politics and religious orthodoxy. Richardson expressly finds a redemptive measure to this final tableau, contrasting it with more traditional antislavery narratives: “Through presenting the black speaker

as an equal and, if anything, closer to God than the 'English boy,' Blake offers the child reader of his time a powerful alternative to the lesson in condescension enacted in a poem like Anny Taylor's 'The Little Negro'" ("Colonialism, Race, and Lyric Irony" 246). The black boy remains the stronger of the two, shading the white child and cooperating with Jesus to protect the weakling from the radiance of God. However, he is distinctly darker in skin color, maintaining his racial identity even in the redeemed state. The "clouds" of "black bodies and this sun burnt face" cannot refer to physical pigmentation in this case, which coincides with the later line that says both the black *and* white boys are liberated from their respective "clouds". In this case, then, the clouds may refer to racial perceptions and prejudices rather than actual skin tone, since the enlightened black boy is liberated and still black, while the white boy receives instruction at the feet of Christ. Blake's multimodal variance seems to suggest an even greater radical agenda than previously imagined, addressing the racial hostility that exists and that will ultimately be eradicated when all are redeemed. Blake therefore relocates liberation and redemption in terms of perceptions of race as indicators of morality and civilization rather than in the abolishment of any inferior races in favor of whiteness. The image reveals to readers the error of equating spiritual redemption and holiness with racial or national identity in order to debunk any stereotypes and to advocate for equality of marginalized groups. Furthermore, it

does so through by means of artistically marginalized forms, using the visual variance among editions to comment and revise interpretations of the verbal content. This reading may represent the hopeful and optimistic perception of the child unjaded by experience and willing to look past skin color as indicative of moral and spiritual status; it is the state of innocence Blake celebrates and would retain if possible.

One objection to a redemptive reading of the final visual and verbal depiction of the black boy leads the discussion to a meta-textual commentary. For while the child may exist untainted by the oppressive indoctrination of children's literature and antislavery narratives, the experienced adult requires recidivist strategies to confront and confound his limited perception. Despite the apparent celebration of the black boy's blackness as equally holy in heaven as seen in his depiction with dark skin, some readers might wonder if the black boy has been subjugated once more to a subservient role, that of shielding and serving the needs of the white boy, who also receives Jesus' full attention while the black boy stands in the background. Even in heaven, blackness still comes in second to whiteness in Heaven's priority. The black boy's optimism finds a devastating rebuke, one only heightened by the multiple copies that display variation. However, such a perception turns the indoctrinated reader's own vision back upon himself in a rebuttal to the antislavery narrative that Blake

seeks to deconstruct. By situating the black boy in the periphery of Paradise, Blake demonstrates the racial hierarchy inherent in abolitionist rhetoric that still regards blacks as inferior even while arguing for their freedom. Elevating them to a Christian, European, Caucasian normality appears benevolent but in fact continues to prioritize the dominant cultural paradigm responsible for the plight of indigenous peoples in the first place. The experienced and indoctrinated reader thus receives a reeducation in racial and abolitionist politics, exposing their own superiority and participation in the broken system.

Scholars like Joseph Viscomi have objected to reading an aesthetic philosophy into the variance between copies of Blake's illuminated books. According to Viscomi, "Coloring and printing variations among edition copies were not intended to alter the text or to make each copy a unique version of the book. Rather, pronounced printing and color differences among copies signify either recoloring or, more likely, different printing sessions, usually twenty or more years apart" (*Blake and the Idea of the Book* 157). Any variation, he argues, is a product of different printing sessions, following his earlier claims that Blake produced copies of works like *The Songs* not steadily over his life, but in short concentrated outbursts. However, the two copies compared above were both printed in the same year, presumably in the same printing run that saw seventeen copies of *Innocence* produced. Clearly, the variance in coloring cannot

be based on time lapses between printing sessions. Another objection suggests that Catherine, Blake's wife, also assisted in the printing and coloring of his works, meaning that she might have exercised a creative impulse to diverge from her husband's original color scheme. Yet, given the early stages of Blake's creative and printmaking career and her relative novelty as his assistant artist and printmaker, it seems unlikely that she would assert an aesthetic independence from her husband's vision so soon after learning the ropes. The stark difference in the second plate of "The Little Black Boy" seems to confirm that such a discrepancy must be intentional.

Viscomi, in explaining the scholarly impulse to read into such divergences, wryly remarks upon an issue of critical over-interpretation: "the ideas that illuminated poetry was central throughout Blake's creative life and that variations signify intentional revision are partly based on the scholar's need to believe that Blake spent as much time printing and coloring each copy as the scholar does analyzing it" (156). This critique of Viscomi's is certainly consciously self-applicable, coming as it does in an exhaustively researched monograph on the bibliographic history of Blake's manuscripts. However, it does apply to hypercritical and needlessly complicated studies. As I mentioned in the introduction to this study, the impulse to create a kind of priesthood around Blakean criticism violates his own attitudes about concretizing and

intellectualizing art and life. Yet in this case, as indeed throughout this thesis, the systems and approaches developed intend to both explicate and participate in the spirit that motivated Blake's awesome ingenuity, a spirit that prioritized active audience participation in the Poetic Genius.²⁰ In the instance of variations between copies, the third stage of aesthetic messianism encourages artists to return and revise their own works, to become their own audience who recreates and reinterprets art they produced. In reading so much into a single and simple difference between copies, this study participates in this third stage of revising and reinterpreting an existing work, enacting the creative engagement with Blake's works that he endorsed. In doing so, artists are able to reeducate themselves out of the limiting and subservient attitudes imposed upon them by indoctrinating systems, continually striving to reconsider their own preconceived notions and worldviews.

Oppositions in Blake's Performance and Principles

Blake's multimodal texts purport to illustrate and encourage an aesthetic process of creation and recreation that leads to a transformation of the individual. Through creative interpretation, creative production, and creative

²⁰ Wagner comments upon the popularity of "The Tyger" along similar lines, observing that "critical descriptive categories are themselves interpretive and constitutive of their object" (42).

revision, aesthetic messianism promotes an outward engagement with art and the physical world that turns inward in a progression of recalibrating and recreating one's own perceptions of the world and oneself. Blake believed that the redemption of humanity and the restoration of an idyllic civilization free from oppression and fear lay in tapping into the spirit (or Spirit) of creative energy that he dubbed the Poetic Genius. Despite his lofty ambitions, however, the question arises whether he himself practiced such a continual reconsideration of his own theories and his own attitudes, as well as his appreciation of reader reception and participation. Ever the idealist, Blake's resolute loyalty to his conceptions prohibited him from ever penetrating the general populace's awareness in terms of art; though he acquired a small and fervid circle of followers and admirers, as well as occasional respect from fellow artists and radicals, his works never reached a mass audience, and most of his legacy in general literary studies as expressed in anthologies is limited to *The Songs* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. His recipe for revolution thus was mostly ignored and relegated to relative obscurity.

In part, this ineffectiveness and marginalization to the contemporary periphery of both cultural and literary consciousness may be traced to his stubbornness and refusal to participate fully in the third stage of aesthetic messianism, a tragically unintentional irony found in the midst of his satirical

works. Though he represented the need to critically interpret and reinterpret the dominant systems of thought in his day through his subversive revision of children's catechisms and abolitionist literature, he failed to perform a similar movement on his own theories. Revising a base text using ink, color, shading and new designs falls under the purview of artistic expression, a revision Blake willingly practiced and demonstrated; revising his theories both of the universe and of cultural expectations in literary and artistic terms, which he promulgated using Swedenborg and a host of other referents, found a flat refusal from the prolific inventor. As he says in a 1799 letter to Reverend Trusler, "I really am sorry that you are falln out with the Spiritual World Especially if I should have to answer for it I feel very sorry that your Ideas & Mine on Moral Painting differ so much as to have made you angry with my method of Study. If I am wrong I am wrong in good company" (E 702). He continues to align himself with past master artists, retorting "I have therefore proved your Reasonings Ill proportiond which you can never prove my figures to be. They are those of Michael Angelo Rafael & the Antique & of the best living Models" (E 702). Drawing upon his own reinterpretations of the work of masters, Blake proved uncompromising throughout his life.

Blake was a victim of his own imagination, in this way, ascribing his own lack of popularity and relevance to political climates and indifferent populaces

rather than the opaqueness of his creations. Indeed, his later works grew even more abstruse and impenetrable; his epic prophecies *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, though brilliant and complex, prove far too confusing for a casual reader; even a member of the Blakean priesthood can lose herself in his labyrinthine allusions to other texts, both his and others', as well as the immense panoply of invented characters, locations, and tropes birthed from his own prolific imagination. Such daunting texts constitute exactly the necessity for a 'priesthood' of Blake studies that can study and comprehend the vast array of textual and meta-textual or contextual aspects of Blake's texts. Blake's desire to appeal to audiences comprised of children, women, poor and illiterate people, and those hailing from other cultural and ethnic backgrounds appears ironic in such a case; could someone barely able to read render his epic work of *Jerusalem* comprehensible at all? His intentions are admirable, but his methods are unsuccessful and perhaps unrealistic.

This reality should not obscure Blake's inventive works nor the performance of multimodal texts that challenges and undermines hierarchies of art forms while agitating for reformations of oppressive institutions. By capitalizing on the power of performativity to provoke and disrupt internal and myopic verbal texts through the contrariety of visual elements, Blake demonstrates the potential for multimodal texts to cleanse and expand human

perception both in terms of art and in social and religious change. Blake's messianic mission of encouraging his readers to redeem themselves by connecting with the aesthetic energy of creation embodies Romantic notions of art's ability to change the world for the better by changing the people in it.

CHAPTER SIX

Blake's Multimodality in the Age of Virtual Reproduction

Blake's theories and practices provide a unique opportunity to explore the possibilities and hermeneutics of multimodal texts and the methods of producing them. The aesthetic messianism proposed by this thesis reveals how Blake wedded his vision of revolutionary redemption to his multimodal art. By promoting the visual arts to equal status with verbal and written forms Blake displays his concern for marginalized groups and shifts authority for a text's meaning to the reader. Additionally, Blake capitalizes upon prophetic and millennial narratives and roles in order to agitate for a multifaceted redemption, one that enjoins the populace to participate in the revolutionary movement while simultaneously calling for a messianic catalyst. The specific avenues of transformation and redemption in Blake's prophetic works draw upon liturgical forms and procedures that value repetition and provoke tensions between transcendent and quotidian modes of living. This cyclical structure is found in Blake's innovative printmaking methods, serving both as a liturgical example and a performance of ultimate significance. The liturgical aspect of Blake's printmaking raises questions about the performance of his multimodal texts, specifically the parodic subversion of antislavery narratives in children's

literature. Throughout the discussion, Blake's multimodal works offer ways to reconsider traditional paradigms of literary criticism and production, using creative opposition to open interpretive gaps into which readers may enter and embark on the process of aesthetic messianism.

As the previous chapter's conclusion noted, a tension that pervades any analysis of Blake or his wildly creative texts exists in the potential contradiction between his stated ideal of audience membership and participation, and the reality of attempts to comprehend and respond to his works. Joseph Viscomi's remarks indicate the tension alluded to in the introduction of this study, the priesthood that has sprung up around Blake's works. This priesthood of a select few scholars who delve into the works would seem antithetical to Blake's ideal reader, the children and uneducated readers mentioned in chapter two. Yet such is often the case: to begin to comprehend the full scope of Blake's works requires an extensive, even exhaustive, knowledge of the wide array of the characters, situations, referents, and sources Blake uses to create his ever-evolving philosophical and artistic world. Either Blake is foolishly optimistic about his readers' ability to discern the intentional revisions of works and concepts necessary in order to grasp his subversive texts, or his fecund imagination simply ran away with his artistic output in such a way that no child or uneducated reader could hope to understand. Regardless, a gap exists between

the sort of reader Blake desired and the sort who still examines and responds to the majority his texts, certainly the complex prophecies in which he creates new cosmoses of characters and events. Blake's longer works rarely appear even in graduate-level courses, let alone traditional college literature courses or the pleasure readings of a casual reader.

This reality, however, does not invalidate the fundamental ideals Blake envisioned in his early works regarding diversity of readership and multimodal texts as productive areas of creative tension. In fact, the larger questions this thesis gestures towards hold potential ramifications for the future of literature and the arts in the twenty-first century. The two issues addressed in this study that resonate with the changing landscape of technology's interaction and influence upon art are the multimodality of texts and the materiality of the artistic process of creation. It is these two issues that literary and art critics should investigate in order to anticipate and influence public perception of literature and the arts, an issue never more relevant than the time in which we now live. Specifically, the potential for future development of this discussion lies in the technological implications of producing and disseminating multimodal texts through virtual means. Furthermore, Blake's works lend themselves to a meditation upon the artistic process itself, and technology's impact upon the future of artistic expression.

In 2012, Steve Clark, Tristanne Connolly, and Jason Whittaker edited *Blake 2.0: William Blake in Twentieth-Century Art, Music and Culture*, an electronic collection of essays investigating the impact of Blake's works in non-literary mediums. They distinguish their scope from traditional approaches to Blake's works in digital interfaces and online platforms; as they explain in the introductory remarks, "Whereas the Blake Archive results in the rather narrow focus of comparison of individual plates, other nodes on the network of transmission activate Blake in music, sculpture, film, graphic novels, and digital animations" (4). Their objection to resources like the Blake Archive lies in its tendency to treat Blake's works as a self-contained universe rather than clearing a space for creative response. The expansion of Blakean studies beyond literary and verbal forms accords with this thesis, but of greater importance is their assertion of the applicability of Blake's multimodality: "the combination of progress and impediment in reproducing Blake is dynamic, continually producing experiments with various methods of re-creation....Blake's work itself seems actively to entice processes of translation, mutation, proliferation into other media" (2). The multimodality when freed from the constraints of a strictly verbal context can inspire innumerable forms of expression, and technological and online capabilities offer expanding opportunities for experimentation and dissemination.

Blake's multimodality can be conceived of as networks of expression and discourse. Scholars have begun to consider Blake's plates in such frameworks; Saree Makdisi argues that "the stable self-containment of a single illuminated book is superseded by the wide virtual network of traces among different plates" ("The Political Aesthetic of Blake's Images" 115). Jon Saklofske agrees: "Blake's minute particulars serve as nodes in larger relational networks and each node in this network mutually imposes on the others" (382). This network theory even applies to the components of an individual plate, specifically the multimodal features; Roger Whitson's chapter in *Blake 2.0* explores a filmmaker's deconstruction of "The Tyger" into an animated film. As Whitson explains, "the Tyger's physical materiality is hollowed out and transformed into a set of networks moving together in the same form" (45). The filmmaker Marcondes creatively interprets the multimodal "Tyger" in order to produce a new spin on the themes and features of Blake's works; each visual and verbal facet becomes a node of meaning and artistic expression that can generate a new node of artistic production, creating a network out of the materiality of the original work. The network and nodal paradigm offers a way to conceive the applicability of this study's subject—Blake's treatment of multimodal art as a medium of social change—to the modern technological landscape.

Viewing works of art as nodes within a network of expression and discourse requires several reconfigurations of traditional approaches, reconfigurations expressed in the second and third chapters of this thesis. First, the shift away from a logocentric and hierarchical system that privileges verbal and written forms of art above other art forms facilitates the construction of a networking system in which the free exchange of ideas and art is encouraged. The challenge to conventions inherent in multimodal texts encourages creativity, a process which Blake viewed as a cleansing of the doors of perception. Technology with its ability to easily create new forms of multimodal texts that expand beyond the confines of Blake's day offers a wider scope of creative expression that serves as a potentially revolutionary method for promoting the diverse and multifaceted society Blake envisioned. Furthermore, as chapter three outlines, networks with their nodal systems contain possibilities for revolution, claiming that both an individual artist and the collective populace are indispensable to this process. Through collective efforts born of individual instances of modeled creation, people tap into the aesthetic and creative energies available to all of humanity, which could reduce the sectarianism and divisiveness that comes from cultural and political differences. This idea also resonates with modern networking technology, which provides spheres of influence for the individual expression that creates a node in the interlocking

web, and allows for an egalitarian exposure to the node and creative capacities to everyone, who will expand the web through their own creations. Through multimodal creation, the network of artists and art can flourish, creating works that inspire and challenge audiences to open-minded and flexible thought processes.

As beneficial and groundbreaking as it is, technological innovations in the production of multimodal texts entail a potential downside in the process of production itself. The very ease and rapidity of virtual digital production and online dissemination offer concerns that are raised by considering the materiality of Blake's printmaking procedures. Though Blake thoroughly espouses the creation of multimodal texts, he also finds profound meaning in the process of creating texts. In other words, the means of creation is inseparable from the results. Blake's training at the engraver's table inculcated a diligence and methodical approach to the execution of his burgeoning imagination; as chapter four of this study noted, the limiting force and disciplined practice of etching metal plates with artistic energy was an essential expression of Blake's principle of contrariety. This methodical materiality embodied in the base plates allowed for the return and repetition of a creative act outlined in chapter five, the inwardly directed revision first practiced on external stimuli that ultimately provides opportunity for continual self-reflection and self-improvement. Such a

movement would not be as overtly present without the materiality of the plates and the heavy emphasis upon working with metal; the prophet-artist Los frequently labors as a blacksmith in the illuminated texts. Though Blake may have imagined that his disciples would take up the graver's tool as he did, such expectations do not coincide with modern artistic endeavors. Yet the principle of dedicated, methodical aesthetic production that takes place over time and culminates after expending much energy seems transferable to modern contexts.

Thus, another set of oppositions arises in applying Blake's multimodal texts to questions of technological and material creativity. Multimodality has never been easier to accomplish and to share, to create a network of nodal junctions that encouraged the activities I have identified with the first and second stages of Blake's aesthetic messianism, creatively interpreting a text and creatively producing a new text. Just as Blake's own collection of texts and their various versions are available to unprecedented audiences, so too others who are inspired by their engagement with his texts may produce their own creative responses and disseminate them at global scales. However, the facilitation of creative production and creative interpretation that technology and the internet afford raises concern for the quality of the artistic process, the temporal culmination of influences and practices that lead to transcendent aesthetic expressions such as Blake imagined. Creating opportunities for self-reflection is a

hallmark of aesthetic endeavors, but self-reflection usually requires time and struggle, things that technology expressly attempts to eliminate. These questions and the tension generated between them can, in true Blakean fashion, provide an important and intriguing direction for future projects. As artists and critics adapt to the new media possibilities, they can continue the quest of affecting and edifying their audiences, an aesthetic redemption of which Blake would heartily approve.

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