

THE REVOLUTIONARY VISION OF WILLIAM BLAKE

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ABSTRACT

It was William Blake's insight that the Christian churches, by inverting the Incarnation and the dialectical vision of Paul, have repressed the body, divided God from creation, substituted judgment for grace, and repudiated imagination, compassion, and the original apocalyptic faith of early Christianity. Blake's prophetic poetry thus contributes to the renewal of Christian ethics by a process of subversion and negation of Christian moral, ecclesiastical, and theological traditions, which are recognized precisely as inversions of Jesus, and therefore as instances of the forms of evil that God-in-Christ overcomes through Incarnation, reversing the Fall. Blake's great epic poems, particularly *Milton* (1804–08) and *Jerusalem* (1804–20), embody his heterodox representation of the final coincidence of Christ and Satan through which, at last, all things are made new.

KEY WORDS: *William Blake*, *coincidentia oppositorum*, *Milton*, *Satan*, *prophecy*, *Incarnation*

WILLIAM BLAKE (1757–1827) IS BOTH commonly and critically known as our most revolutionary visionary, but precisely thereby he is deeply unknown to us all, and unknown because we have so little sense of what a genuinely revolutionary vision is. Perhaps this is more true today than previously, and true if only because recent decades have seen the advent of the most conservative world since the birth of modernity, a world in which even our most radical thinkers become conservative when they speak theologically, and in which radical theology is more silent than ever before. Although Blake was almost universally judged to be a madman until a century after his death, his extraordinary stature as a poet, engraver, and painter is now widely recognized. Even so, he has had virtually no influence upon either our politics or our religion, and this despite the fact that he is hailed as our greatest modern prophet. Both our common politics and our common religion today can be known as true inversions and reversals of Blake's vision, but that itself gives us a way into his vision, a vision that is most revolutionary in being so profoundly centered in Jesus.

Just as Blake discovered an apocalyptic Jesus who was not otherwise historically recognized until the late nineteenth century, so, too, Blake was unique in so deeply centering his vision upon Jesus. In this he differs decisively from his poetic predecessors, Dante and Milton, just as he also differs from his poetic successors in the twentieth century. However, what is most uniquely Blake's own is his progressive enactment of an apocalyptic and imaginative *coincidentia oppositorum* that dialectically unites Christ and Satan. He accomplishes this through a radical disruption of our language itself, a disruption issuing in the advent of a purely apocalyptic epic, one that is only possible by way of the transfiguration of epic itself. That transfiguration is inseparable from a transfiguration of Blake's primal opponent and predecessor, John Milton (1608–74), and above all a transfiguration of Milton's Satan.

Milton's Satan is Milton's most original creation. There is simply nothing at all like this Satan prior to Milton, and certainly nothing like it in the Bible, apart from its partial predecessor in the Book of Revelation. A great biblical scholar and theologian, Milton gave us in his *De doctrina Christiana* perhaps our only critical and systematic biblical theology, though not even this theology is open to the Satan of *Paradise Lost*. There is, however, a deep opening to this Satan in a late work of Blake's, his illustrations to the Book of Job, where on the eleventh plate, the Creator and Lord who appears at the conclusion of the Book of Job is unveiled with a cloven foot, a decisive sign of Satan, and of that Satan who is absolute sovereignty and absolute sovereignty alone. This revolutionary vision of Blake is in genuine continuity with Milton, but only by way of inverting Milton's Creator, and inverting him so as to call him forth as his own ultimate opposite.

Now the time of Blake's most revolutionary vision was also the time of the advent of a purely dialectical Western philosophy, for the first time a philosophical *coincidentia oppositorum* was purely and comprehensively enacted in the West was in G. W. F. Hegel's philosophy, an enactment truly paralleling Blake's vision. Thereby, Blake's truly revolutionary vision had a profound philosophical ground paralleled by no other imaginative vision. Even if Blake could not possibly have understood Hegel (nor could Hegel have understood Blake), their ultimate enactments nonetheless coincide, and most manifestly coincide as purely dialectical enactments. Hegel, of course, was the first philosopher to enact the death of God, just as Blake was the first visionary to enact that death (in *America*, published in 1793), but Hegel was also the first philosopher to know the absolute self-alienation of God, wherein Absolute Being becomes its own "other," thereby withdrawing into itself and becoming self-centered or "evil." That self-alienation culminates in death, a death that is the death of the alienation or evil of the divine Being (Hegel 1807/1977, 778–80).

Blake names an absolute self-alienation as Satan, but this occurs through his own gradual transformation as a visionary, wholly transforming his earlier vision of Satan, and only now is Satan called forth as the uniquely Christian Creator. This is just the point at which Blake is most deeply known as a Gnostic visionary, but it would be difficult if not impossible to imagine a more anti-Gnostic visionary than Blake. Not only is he a purely erotic poet and visionary, but he has given us a total vision of Body itself, and of that Body that as body is the New Jerusalem. This is the body whose own opposite is the body of Satan, a body that only becomes fully incarnate with the birth of the modern world, but then it is truly and actually everywhere, and everywhere as an absolutely repressive body. Blake discovered repression before its discovery by Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud, and discovered it by way of his discovery of the totality of Satan, a Satan who is not only the opposite of Christ, but whose very totality is the totality of old aeon or old creation, an old creation not manifest until the advent of the new creation, and a new creation whose name is Jerusalem or the apocalyptic Christ.

In Blake's mature vision, the enactment of Jerusalem or the new creation is the enactment of the "Self-Annihilation of God," an annihilation calling forth the dead body of God, a body that is the body of Satan, and one only becoming incarnate through the self-annihilation of God. Here we are at the center of Blake's most revolutionary vision, one calling forth God Himself as Satan, or calling forth the uniquely Christian God as Satan, that very God whom Nietzsche in *The Anti-christ* can know as the deification of nothingness or the will to nothingness pronounced holy (1982, 18). This Satan is the very embodiment of the Nothing, a Nothing not fully envisioned until Blake, and one only enacted philosophically in F. W. J. Schelling (1775–1854) and Hegel, for not until Schelling and Hegel is the imagination itself philosophically enacted, an enactment inseparable from an enactment of the depths of abyss.

Certainly those depths are called forth by Blake, but they are most decisively called forth as the very body of Satan. The self-annihilation of that body is the ultimate sacrifice, and hence a sacrifice inseparable from the sacrifice of Christ. Blake has given us our fullest imaginative and poetic enactment of the Passion of Christ, a passion called forth even in the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, but it is the very center of *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, and hence the center of Blake's apocalyptic epic. That passion is envisioned as the "Self-Annihilation of God," one long known as such in the depths of Christian experience, but one always refused by Christian theology, a theology refusing to know the death of Christ as the death of God, and precisely thereby closed to the ultimacy of that passion. Only now is that passion fully enacted

imaginatively, but now this ultimate death is only finally or apocalyptically realized by the death of Satan, and by that self-annihilation of God that is the self-annihilation of Satan.

The penultimate plate of *Jerusalem* depicts the apocalyptic union of Satan and Jerusalem, one that is perhaps the most erotic in all of Blake's art, as the body of Jehovah or Satan ecstatically penetrates the body of Jerusalem, a penetration realizing an absolute apocalypse, and an absolute apocalypse occurring here and now. If we have ever been given a Christian Tantric art, this is surely its purest expression, and one truly reversing the Augustinian foundation of Western Christianity. Let us remember that in the *City of God*, the most decisive sign of our ultimately pathological condition is the advent of sexual orgasm (14.16), an orgasm that did not exist before the Fall. It arises after the Fall as a consequence of a new dichotomy between the body and the soul, a violently discordant state in which passion and mind are wholly unlike but wholly commingled, thus making possible a climax wherein the mind is overwhelmed. This is the very moment and condition that makes possible the transmission of original sin, and also the moment in which the will is least free. Each of us has our origin in that moment of pure lust or pure sin, wherein original sin becomes the sin of all, and our actual origin becomes the very opposite of our origin in the creation. That pathological origin is totally reversed in Blake's apocalyptic vision, and reversed by calling forth an apocalyptic orgasm, and an apocalyptic orgasm that *is* apocalypse itself.

If nothing else, this vision shines a penetrating light on theology's continual refusal of apocalypse. Perhaps nothing else so unites the innumerable expressions of Christian theology, and this despite the fact that Christianity was originally an apocalyptic faith or way. No other religion or way has so comprehensively reversed itself as has Christianity in its historical evolution, beginning already in the later expressions of the Pauline tradition and reaching a kind of consummation in the rebirths of theology in the twentieth century, all of which are truly non-apocalyptic theologies. This explains why no poet or artist has been more refused or evaded by theology than Blake, even if Blake's language and imagery is more comprehensively Christian than is that of any other fully modern artist or poet, and refused precisely because his is a revolutionary Christian language. It is fascinating that many forms of Marxism have been open to Blake, as have been other forms of modern radicalism, but the name of Blake is virtually unknown in the world of theology, and even unknown to all but our most radical churches.

We may see in Blake, more fully than in any other visionary apart from Dante, a totality of revolutionary vision, a totality comprehending all realms whatsoever. Deity, nature, politics, religion, art, body, and

interiority are conjoined, but only conjoined in their ultimate reversal, as each becomes the very opposite of its given or manifest expression, thus making possible a truly comprehensive apocalyptic vision. Nowhere is this reversal more decisively manifest than in Blake's revolutionary vision of Godhead itself, as for the first time Godhead is envisioned as becoming the very opposite of itself, wherein a "Self-Annihilation of God" becomes an absolute transfiguration of the Godhead, a transfiguration that is an absolute apocalypse. That is the apocalypse transfiguring Satan into Jerusalem, or the God of Judgment into the God of Grace. Only an absolute reversal of the depths of judgment makes possible a realization of the depths of forgiveness or grace, so that Satan as Satan is absolutely essential to this redemption.

Thereby, we can apprehend the ultimate necessity of Satan, one not known or enacted until Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*, and just as Blake knew himself as an epiphany of Milton, as recorded in his great epic *Milton*, Blake's most revolutionary vision revolves around an absolute reversal of Milton's Satan, a reversal in which Satan is envisioned as the absolute Lord and Creator, an absolutely solitary Lord not known until Milton, and that is the solitude and the absolutely sovereign solitude whose ultimate reversal realizes an absolute apocalypse. That reversal occurs through an absolute death, but that death in crucifixion is apocalypse itself, one first openly enacted by Blake, and only in the wake of that enactment did New Testament scholarship unveil the Pauline and Johannine enactments of crucifixion as enactments of apocalypse itself. Yes, Blake is a visionary of eternal death, but an eternal death that is an apocalyptic death, and precisely so as the eternal death of Satan.

Only that eternal death realizes an absolute compassion or the compassion of Christ, a compassion truly reversing all Satanic judgment and repression, but a compassion inactual apart from that reversal; hence the absolute necessity of Satan, the absolute necessity of Satan for apocalypse itself, and the primacy of Satan in all apocalyptic vision, and the fuller the apocalyptic vision, the fuller the vision of Satan. Inevitably, Satan is absolutely primary in Blake's vision, a primacy apart from which there is no possibility of that "Self-Annihilation of God" that is absolute atonement, and therefore no possibility of an ultimate redemption or regeneration. A purely or finally apocalyptic redemption is not envisioned until Blake, and then it is envisioned as an absolute transfiguration of everything whatsoever, a transfiguration released by the "Self-Annihilation of God." That annihilation is an absolute sacrifice, the absolute sacrifice of Satan, a Satan who thereby realizes a *coincidentia oppositorum* with Christ.

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