

## William Blake: Mental Slavery and his Visions of Mental Freedom

By Alice Reininger\*

*William Blake belongs to one of those visionary artists who, during his lifetime, did not receive much recognition from society, was not understood and therefore even marked as “crazy”, his art “odd”. Nevertheless, a small circle of sensitive connoisseurs favored and supported him. But fortunately, his work was not completely forgotten. It seems that today William Blake is being highly valued. An extensive exhibition of his fine, masterful artwork was shown at Tate Britain in London till February 2020. His pictorial, sensitive works are of inestimable value to us today as they address areas that are so important for the further development of mankind nowadays. For William Blake, imprisonment of a human being does not mean only the physical, as a slave, but above all the spiritual, the mental. Unfortunately, mental slavery is not recognized as such by mankind, as Blake let us know, this is influence of sly forces. From early childhood he had visions of God and angels. For him it was clear and undoubted that man should be innocent as a small child and therefore is under God’s protection. However, according circumstances emanating from negative forces, man is enthralled and drowned in it.*

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### Introduction

William Blake was born in London, 28 November 1757, and was baptized in the church St. James, Piccadilly. He was the son of a craftsman, a hosier and haberdasher, the third child born into this family. From early childhood he had visions that accompanied him throughout his life. His first visions he had when he was four years old. He saw God. God put his head to the window and made the little boy screaming. But the little boy quickly understood what his task would be, which way he had to go. When, as a boy wandering around in the countryside of London, he looked up and saw a tree filled with angels. These imaginations became the inspirations of his marvelous sensitive works. Blake saw angels, he saw God, he saw the glory in his visions, but he also saw negativity, as it took over the whole of humanity. Later his wife Catherine told people when asked about her husband, that her husband is always in heaven, meaning his attention was on the one ultimate power of universe.

In 1863, Blake’s biography was published by Alexander Gilchrist, his book became the source of this outstanding artist. By that time when the book was published still some people were alive who could talk about Blake, who knew him well. Gilchrist (1942, p. 200) wrote about Blake’s early visions: “Trembling I [Blake] sit day and night, my friends are astonish’d at me, / Yet they forgive my

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wanderings. I rest not from my great task!/To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes/Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thoughts, into Eternity ...”

As soon he could hold a pencil in his small child’s hands, he began to draw, copied prints he could get. His parents supported him and later he became an engraver’s apprentice. After years of learning Blake became a painter, a poet, an engraver, a printer, last but not least: he was a prophet. In printing which he brought to perfection and excellency, he saw a medium in which he could spread his visions to humanity. He knew about the power of print media and how quickly news spread. This medium was able to bring his visionary art work among the crowd, to inspire them, that they recognize, and to warn them, and thus breakthrough for a new path, and to be freed from slavery, mentally and physically.

### **His Mission and Visions: Harsh Critics on Religion, Ancient Philosophers, Society and Arts**

William Blake is not easy to understand. He is radical. There is great beauty in his lyrics, but also simplicity, some might call them naive, but they are not. One has to deal with his work, understand it with the heart and not with the mind. Simple: to go beyond, *ultima sapientia*, to go beyond the limits of human mental limitation. Only then one can, like Blake himself, see the immeasurable glory of heaven. Human mind, the ratio, only a hinderance: “There is no natural religion ... Reason, or the ratio of all we have already known, is not the same that it should be when we know more” (Keynes 1984, p. 97).

Rationalism was an obstacle to William Blake, because there should only be one thing for man, namely: the spiritual. To what extent Jacob Boehme, Emanuel Swedenborg or other religious or occult writings influenced Blake, he left undecided. He analyzed them, criticized the texts and brought them into connection with the only truth, with the world that he saw in his visions. He knew his mission, through pictures, but also through his writings, to show humanity the right way. He recognized the power of the visual, he knew how to use it in a targeted manner. He denounced grievances: slavery in all its facets, cruelty, materialism, corruption, atheism, excesses of art, literature, etc. Blake was the prophet; he saw a religious devotion in his artistic work. He was convinced of himself, stable in himself, and therefore endured severe criticism from his contemporaries, including not being accepted by his fellow artists and being portrayed as crazy. Mind promotes ego, materialism, suffering of mankind in a neverending variety. This way of thinking is evident in the poem “London” in the volume “Songs of Experience”: “... In every cry of every Man. / In every Infants cry of fear. / In every voice; in every ban. / The mind-forg’d manacles I hear.” (Keynes 1984, p. 216).

The captivity of a human being does not mean only the physical but above all the spiritual. For him, who already had missions from God in his earliest childhood, it was clear and undoubted that man should be innocent as a small child. By circumstances, however, starting from negative forces, man is drawn into and becomes involved. “I went to the Garden of Love, / And saw what I never had seen; /A Chapel was built in the midst, / Where I used to play on the green.”

To his horror Blake had to realize that his Garden of Love had completely changed. Instead of flowers gravestones, the ground now consisting of graves and over it, in black gowns scary acting monks walking over: "... And binding with briars my joys and desires" (Keynes 1984, p. 215). Garden of Eden, paradise, was lost, Blake let us know in his poem "The Garden of Love" in the volume "Songs of Experience". He knew how much humanity longed for this circumstance of simplicity, of innocence, which he regarded as the most original state.

Religions, of whatever kind, are signs of falsehood, prison, which contributed that the innocence of humanity lost thereby. It is the priests who extend their tentacles and hinder others in their spiritual development, who contributed to the fact that this most original state was lost. However, the Christian idea, in Blake's eyes, is different from the Christian religion because religion is man-made and barely has anything, or very little, to do with the divine words from the mouth of the Most Highest of the Universe. Even the representatives of religion are also prisoners in this system who act blindly in it.

Blake is the mystic who let us see the divine, who leads us humbly and sensitive to the Most High. Blake is deeply religious; the Bible is his constant companion. For Blake the whole Bible was filled with imaginations and visions. Religion is not necessary for him. He believed in one universal religion, official church as an institution is dominant and cruel. "All Religions are One," he wrote in a series of aphorisms and etchings in 1788 (Keynes 1984, p. 98). Inner spirit is connected with the outer body. Therefore, he opposed this institution as all religions have only one source, natural religion does not exist as well. Reflecting his baptism as a newborn child he was the opinion that the priest cursed his head, because God himself laid "... his Hand on my [Blake's] Head & gives blessings to all my works ..." as he wrote from Felpham in a letter to Mr. Butts on April 25, 1803, (Gilchrist 1942, p. 162).

As classical culture meant war and materialism, these conditions were in an absolute contrast to Christian idea, the Christian attitude that Jesus Christ personally taught to man. In Jesus he saw all virtues gathered in one, existing only out of pure light. Unfortunately, these values have been lost through reason and selfishness. Blake also criticizes the attitude of people who identify themselves as "Christians", who exclude other people with regard to a dark complexion, or different culture. For these so-called Christians, these dark-skinned people also possess a dark spirit and must be brought to the Christian religion by all means and, if necessary, with fire and sword.

Blake was aware of images of slavery which were produced and spread during his lifetime as well. They showed cruelty in a most brutal way and affected him deeply. He referred to these publications in etchings and engravings<sup>1</sup> and a poem "The Little Black Boy" in Songs of Innocence: "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." For William Blake existed

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<sup>1</sup>In 1796 J. G. Stedman published "Narrative of a Five Years Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam". This book included 80 illustrations by Stedman himself. About thirteen Blake engraved, etched and signed from Stedman's watercolour and drawings. And: Bindman, D. (2007) *Mind-forg'd manaces: William Blake and slavery*. London: The Hayward Gallery Publishing.

no differences between mankind, a dark skin did not represent darkness of the soul, a spiritual darkness which excluded automatically from divine light. In this poem he showed in his sensitive, inimitable kind that both, the “Little Black Boy” and the “white” English child are equal, both are loved by God without any difference: “... we shall hear his voice, / Saying: ‘Come out from the grove, my love & care, / ‘Around my golden tent like lambs rejoyce.’ ...” (Keynes 1984, p. 125) (Poem: “The Little Black Boy” in Songs of Innocence).

He denounced the fatal situation in urban life as well. He saw people in their misery, he knew only too well what it meant to be poor. He himself suffered most time of his life as he did not make out any profit of his art. But: he was happy in his poverty, as he saw the spiritual sun. The misery of life shows mental slavery and chains, consequence of materialism, industrialism, social grievances, injustices. Enslavement is carried out through the whole world. People are frustrated, suffering, a constant struggle, are imprisoned in a net of their own devising, of jealousy. For mankind world in this situation is a prison, only liberation is death from the body. The soul leaving the body, rises up to the golden Door of Death. The soul returns to real life. He also painted “The River of Life”<sup>2</sup>, showed how all souls are travelling down the river into the bright, holy sun, a passage out of the Book of Revelation. The thread of life is cut by Fate. The poem “The Chimney Sweeper” talks about child’s labour in those days but in the end, they are liberated by an angel who came by “...who had a bright key, / And he open’d the coffins & set them all free; ...” (Keynes 1984, p. 117 (Poem: “The Chimney Sweeper” in Songs of Innocence).

Highly acclaimed philosophers of antiquity, such as Plato, Homer, and others, whom he opposed, did not bring mankind closer to the Divine, but promoted only ego and blinded the true spirit. However, in later years, he turned to shocking, hard-spoken words about ancient philosophers because he did not want to hide the ultimate truth anymore, he had seen and his task was to spread. Their writings were perverted for Blake: “The Stolen and Perverted Writings of Homer & Ovid, of Plato & Cicero, which all Men ought to contemn, are set up by artifice against the Sublime of the Bible; but when the New Age is at leisure to Pronounce, all will be set right ...”. These harsh words he wrote to his work “Milton”. Further: “... Shakspeare [sic!] & Milton were both curb’d by the general malady & infection from the silly Greek & Latin slaves of the Sword” (Keynes 1984, p. 480). He blamed Plato for twisting the four cardinal virtues -- justice (iustitia), moderation (temperantia), bravery (fortitudo, magnitudo animi bzw. virtus) wisdom (sapientia/prudentia) -- into “the four pillars of tyranny” as he knew nothing. Ancient philosophy was just a delusion and “blinds the Eye of Imagination.” He saw no meaning in it as empty idioms, fictional fights of the mind, production of power and egoism, forgetting the very roots. “The Greek & Roman Classics is the Antichrist. I say Is & not Are as most expressive & correct too” (Keynes 1984, p. 786). These roots, however, Blake showed in his pictures. Sensitive and unmistakable. Even Newton still sits on the bottom of the sea, not able to emerge;

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<sup>2</sup>The River of Life, (C. 1805), ink and watercolour on paper; Tate Gallery London.

as he is, all the others are, still engaged with themselves, egoistic. These philosophers do not speak about truth, truth about God, the *ultima sapientia*.

One exception: Socrates. Socrates used “pretty much the same language”, Blake told when asked about his visions on him, and added: “... I was Socrates ...” and after a pause “... or a sort of brother.”<sup>3</sup> To criticize these Greek thinkers was and still is a sacrilege that philosophers dismiss with horror and react with incomprehension. For Hegel Plato was one of the world-historical individuals, his philosophy one of the world-historical existences, which have had the most important influence for the formation and development of the spirit from its origin in all subsequent times. Blake did not care about.

Man’s mental captivity, according William Blake, is a result of that classical culture. For him, classical culture meant war and materialism, a total contrast to traditional thinking. Therefore, Blake knew no mercy when it comes to the only truth existing in the world. He was of the opinion that ancient thinkers and others were unjustly worshiped because their scriptures in no way testify to the truth that comes from God. For him, these thinkers seek definitions only, build a powerful ego, and cannot give answers. They cannot answer the question of what man is. Their ideas: purest tautology according to Blake! For Blake man is the image of God, which he sets out graphically in the person of Albion who finally is liberated.

This opinion about ancient philosophy were written down by Blake in several treatise in later years, when he clearly as radically spoke about the divine truth. At a young age, Blake already read many books of ancient philosophers, felt that these thinkers had all the capabilities to be taken seriously, but they failed. To our astonishment: Blake did not change his opinion when he grew older, he stuck to his earlier statements written in his notebooks.

Even against rationalism represented by John Locke, Isaac Newton (as mentioned before), Burke and others, Blake turned. For him, they brought no closer to humanity that state man should have: only one single task to praise God and follow his words. The same way as ancient philosophers did. If man is in this state, he develops the love he should feel, for that he obtains his salvation:

Burke’s *Treatise on the Sublime & Beautiful* is founded on the Opinions of Newton & Locke; on this *Treatise* Reynolds has grounded many of his assertions in all his *Discourses*. I read Burke’s *Treatise* when very Young; at the same time I read Locke on *Human Understanding* & Bacon’s *Advancement of Learning*; on Every one of these Books I worte my Opinions, & on looking them over find that my Notes on Reynolds in this Book are exactly Similar. I felt the Same Contempt & Abhorrence then that I do now. They mock about Inspiration & Vision. Inspiration & Vision was then, & now is, & I hope will always Remain, my Element, my Eternal Dwelling place; how can I hear it Contemned without returning Scorn for Scorn? (Keynes 1984, pp. 476-77).

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<sup>3</sup>Blakes refers to Lord Byron in Byron’s writings on the ethics of Christ. Blake’s comment: *If morality was Christianity, Socrates was the saviour*, Cf: Keynes (1984, p. 786), Gilchrist (1942, p. 97), Raine (2002, p. 75).

If this is not the case, human egoism and materialism will take over. This becomes clear in the drawing a writings “Urizen”. Urizen spreads the book of materialism to lure mankind. And: Blake made portraits of evil forces. For some time, he lived in John Varley’s<sup>4</sup> house who sat next to him, when Blake had his visions. In these nocturnal sittings Blake made pencil drawings like portraits, spoke with these entities. Sometimes great historical persons appeared before him. When these spirits visited Blake, he described them to the small auditorium, while he was making the drawings. The next day he reaffirmed his drawings: “... Oh, it’s all right! ... I saw it so.” (Gilchrist 1942, pp. 264-266).<sup>5</sup>

Blake also criticized artists who were famous in his time and well appreciated, f. e. Reynolds, he criticized poets such as Wordsworth and others. Art should be done out of inspiration as art is inspiration. Michelangelo, Raffael, Duerer and some others more were, according Blake, of such a caliber, such greats, as genius is above ages and time. Blake had never been abroad to study great Italian artists, he simply knew their works. Criticized artists found Blake’s words as hostility towards them. But these words were an honest contempt matched with high spiritual aims. He did not condemn them because they did not understand the sublime. In “Discourse VIII” he wrote:

I see in Wordsworth the Natural Man rising against the Spiritual Man Continually, & then he is No Poet but a Heathen Philosopher at Enmity against all true Poetry or Inspiration. .... Natural Objects always did & do now weaken, deaden & obliterate Imagination in Me. Wordsworth must know that what he Writes Valuable is Not to be found in Nature. Read Michel Angelo’s Sonnet, vol 2 p. 179: [Heaven-born, the Soul a heaven-ward course must hold; / Beyond the visible world She soars to seek, / For what delights the sense is false and weak / Ideal Form, the universal mould.] (Keynes 1984, p. 783).

### **Last But not Least, There is Hope: The Golden Age brings Liberation and Salvation**

Blake wouldn’t be Blake if he shows us the glorious future, which he clearly depicted in the art work “Allegory of the Spiritual Condition of Man” (Figure 1). We should be centered, our attention should be on the Spirit, the Allpervading Power of the Universe, otherwise we are lost and will not reach the ultimate stadium being in God’s glory. However, there is the hope in a new age, the Golden Age, that all this negativity will be eradicated, that a new generation of young, born out of innocence, who have regained their innocence through divine grace, will prepare the way of the future human beings and through the activity of these lead the right

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<sup>4</sup>John Varlay (1778-1842) was an artist himself, a landscape designer and a well known professional astrologer In the 19th century, worked with Blake on visionary heads, where hundreds of paintings were produced.

<sup>5</sup>Ghost of a flea: “... “During the time occupied in completing the drawing, the flea told him that all fleas were inhabited by the souls of such men as were by nature blood-thirsty to excess, and were therefore providentially confined to the size and form of insects ...” According Gilchrist: “... The devil himself would politely sit in a chair to William Blake, and innocently disappear ..”

way to God. Blake's spiritual world is clarity, purity, and light. To gain this state men must throw off the chains and, as it is written in the Bible, must be born again through the spirit.

**Figure 1.** *Allegory of the Spiritual Condition of Man*



Source: Blake 1811.

Blake does not see himself as a judge, he does not want anything, as he got everything. Blake urges us to trust Jesus Christ, the eternal, everlasting innocence, for it is he who gives us the wisdom that leads us, through the narrow door of the kingdom of heaven, for here too, to the words of the Bible "A camel goes through the eye of a needle rather than teaching through the gate to the kingdom of heaven." We are judged finally by the ultimate, never-ending power of the universe (Figure 2). In Blake's eyes God had created nature perfect, but man perverted this order and the elements now are filled with the "Prince of Evil" (Keynes 1984, p. 388).

**Figure 2.** *The Vision of the Last Judgement*

Source: Blake 1808.

“The Last Judgement is one of these Stupendous Visions. I have represented it as I saw it; to different People it appears differently as everything else does; for tho’ on Earth things seem Permanent, they are less permanent than a Shadow, as we all know too well. ... This World of Imagination is the World of Eternity; it is the Divine bosom into which we shall go after the death of the Vegetated body. This World of Imagination is Infinite & Eternal ...” (A Vision of the Last Judgement from the Note-Book. For the Year 1810. Additions to Blake’s Catalogue of Pictures.)

## Conclusion

Kathleen Raine wrote about William Blake: “But we are able to recognize only what we are qualified to discover ...” (Raine 2002, p. 2. The quotation below the image “The vision of the last judgement”: Keynes 1984, p. 605). It is divine permission, what



humanity should know and depends on the level one can bear and understand. Blake, it looks like it, did not reveal everything to us, the mystic is still there, which we have to discover for ourselves in its depth and complexity.

Blake is unique. He touches our hearts when reading his poems, inhale the spirit of his artworks. His criticism on arrogance on humanity, on self-satisfaction and weakness, should be taken seriously, as he was a man of great force and – great love for all mankind. His soul, his knowledge derived from ancient times which have nothing to do with widespread esoterics and different New Age movements.

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