

“As all men are alike (tho’ infinitely various)
So all Religions”
On the Philosophical and Religious Underpinnings
of William Blake’s Cosmogony

Arianna Antonielli

University of Florence (<arianna.antonielli@unifi.it>)

Abstract:

Moving from the Christian religion to the Western occult tradition, Blake’s religious syncretism emerges from a deep symbolic and thematic plot. This article aims to analyse how this religious and philosophical traditions may have played on Blake’s thought and to what extent it is possible to envisage in his poetical system a transmigration of symbols both from Christian doctrine and the Cabalistic tradition. Particular attention will be given to the analysis of the Prophetic Books, in which Blake created a cosmogony inhabited by Oriental deities, druids, and Old Testament characters.

Keywords: *Kabbalah, Christian doctrine, Creation, Prophetic Books, William Blake*

Blake’s religious, philosophical, mythical, and esoteric syncretism is encompassed within a vast system of symbols and themes, from Christianity through the Occultist tradition. This article aims to analyse how this dual philosophical-religious tradition affected the ideas and work of William Blake¹, and the extent to which it could be said that there was a symbolic transmigration from Christian doctrine and Kabbalistic tradition to Blake’s “system”².

Studies dealing with the influence of different religious creeds on Blake’s vision and works as well as the religious contexts in which he lived and worked, with a specific focus on the Christian religion, are numerous and illuminat-

¹ Due to space limitations, I will focus on the prophetic works.

² To follow Blake’s conventions, I will capitalise words like “God”, “Word”, “He”, “Truth”, “Universal Man”, and so forth.

ing, from Erdman's *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (1954), and Tannenbaum's *Biblical Tradition in Blake's Early Prophecies* (1982), through Erdman's *Blake and his Bibles* (1990) and Thompson's *Witness Against the Beast* (1993), until the more recent "Blake and Religion" (Ryan 2006) and *William Blake and the Cultures of Radical Christianity* (Rix 2007). As these volumes contribute to investigating and confirming Christian resonances in Blake's works, mostly focusing on his biblical allusions, the influence of Kabbalah remains a widely debated subject among Blake scholars. In 1920 Bernhard Fehr admitted that Blake had probably been introduced to Kabbalah by his reading the *Kabbalah Denudata* (Sulzbach 1677-1684) by Knorr von Rosenroth, which constituted in Blake's times the first and most comprehensive Latin compendium of Kabbalistic works, available in a language which was not Hebrew or Aramaic³. Almost twenty years later, in 1938, Percival admitted that Blake's background was not properly that of "Christian orthodoxy". Rather it was, in his own opinion, a religious and philosophical syncretism ranging from Orphic and Pythagorean traditions to Neo-Platonism, from the Hermetic to Kabbalah, Gnosticism and Alchemy, up to Erigena, Paracelsus, Boehme, and Swedenborg. Scholars would later claim that Kabbalistic elements in Blake's cosmogony were not to be considered a direct influence (Adams 1955), but a possible intermediation through Swedenborg (Percival 1938; Blau 1944). An interpretation that was not so distant from that advanced by Harold Bloom when he openly remarked that "the actual cabalists would have been outraged at the humanistic 'impieties' of Blake's myth" (1935: 935), admitting the possibility of an indirect and filtered influence of (incorrect) Kabbalistic paradigms on Blake. In 1969 Kathreen Raine acknowledged Blake's readings of Christian cabalists such as Agrippa⁴, Paracelsus⁵ and Fludd⁶ (Raine 1969: 13-15), but she added that Blake could nonetheless have learnt Kabbalah by talking with rabbis living in London. "[This] myth, though originating with Jewish mystics, had been adapted by Christian Kabbalists to conform with their — and, in fact, with Blake's — own brand of Christianity", that is not the brand of Pico della Mirandola, Johannes Reuchlin, Francesco Giorgi, and Henry Cornelius Agrippa in Sheila Spector's view (2001: 25). The adaptation

³ The first volume of "The Kabbalah Uncovered, or, The Transcendental, Metaphysical and Theological teachings of the Jews", displays and explains "the kabbalistic symbolism based on the *Zohar*, [...] and an explanation of the *Sefirotic* Tree, likely based on the work of Israel Sarug, along with some commentary by More" (Spector 2001: 31).

⁴ Heinrich Cornelius Agrippas, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* (Engl. translation, London 1651).

⁵ Blake had probably studied Paracelsus's *Three Books of Philosophy* (Engl. translation, London 1657).

⁶ Robert Fludd, *Mosaicall Philosophy: Grounded upon the Essentiall Truth or Eternal Sapence* (Engl. translation, London 1659).

to which Spector refers is rather the Christian interpretation of Lurianic kabbalah, that may have been at the base of Blake's entanglement in Kabbalistic theories, models and symbols⁷.

From the Hebrew *Kabel*, קָבַל (lit. "received"), the word Kabbalah refers to received secret arcane wisdom. Religiously drawing on Judaism, Kabbalah comprises three branches: theoretical, meditative and magical. The theoretical Kabbalah is mostly based on the teachings of the book of the *Zohar* (in Hebrew זוהר, lit. "Splendour" or "Radiance"), which are related to the spiritual reality inhabited by the *Sefirot* or emanations (from the Hebrew *Sappir* or "light of God") of the *Ein-Sof* (or *En-Soph*) or Infinite (Scholem 1974: 88). The Godhead, which created the world, manifests itself through its ten emanations⁸. Representing both the human faculties and the first ten qualities of God, in their divine union they form the so-called *Sefirotic Tree*, which attests both the Sefirot's relation to each other and to the deity. It is graphically represented in three columns or pillars depicting both the ten divine emanations and the twenty-two paths⁹ for the ascent of man. Creation in the *Zohar* is described as a beam of light emanating from the deity.

The entire creation consists of only ten Sefirot. Yet, since every Sefira includes all the others, and since all of them are interconnected, every world, degree, or Sefira includes the properties of all the others, and consists of their parts. [...] In all, $5 \times 5 \times 5 = 125$ Sefirot or steps of the ladder that separate us (the lowest) from the Creator (the highest). (*The Zohar* 2007: 74)

Blake's cosmogony, enriched by characters whose names or representation suggest Eastern divinities, druid figures, Greek gods, and figures from the Old and New Testament, covers the biblical period that ranges from Creation to Apocalypse. The ring that starts the circle is the fall of Albion, the Eternal Man, from the heavenly state of Eden to the infernal state of Ulro, where he is trapped within a space-time confine – the so-called Circle of Destiny (K 267)¹⁰ – that prevents him from striving for eternity.

⁷Named after its inventor, the Jewish rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572), Lurianic Kabbalah gives a description of Creation coming from Luria's own interpretation of the book of the *Zohar*, which is a commentary on the *Torah*.

⁸Kether, Chockmah, Binah, Chesed, Geburah, Tipheret, Netzach, Hod, Yesod, and Ma-kuth are the names of ten *Sefirot*. In her contribution to the "Blake Quarterly" Spector points out that "in the thirteenth century, kabbalists added an eleventh *Sefirah*, *Da'at* (Knowledge), which in time became the focal point of the occult versions of Kabbalah" (1983-1984: 85).

⁹Twenty-two are also the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

¹⁰When Tharmas separated from Enion, his emanation, "he stoop'd his innocent head, and stretching out his holy hand in the vast deep sublime, turn'd round the circle of Destiny with tears & bitter sighs, and said: 'Return, O wanderer, when the day of Cluds is o'er'" (*Four Zoas*, Night I, 72). After nine days, "on the tenth trembling morn, the Circle of Destiny [was] complete" (*Four Zoas*, Night I, 87).

Far from the Christian representation of the first man or Adam, in Blake's vision Albion¹¹ represents the self-generated archetypal man who is one with God and an integral part of his deity. As Kabalistic Adam Kadmon is the one who "contains the whole of manifest creation" and "expresses the ten prime attributes of the Creator" (Scholem 1974: 21), Blake's Albion embraces Humanity as he is the one in whom everything exists.

Albion can enjoy this harmonious unity and belong to the "Eternal Great Humanity Divine" (K 481) only as long as the different parts forming his body are together. These members are made up of a feminine principle, Jerusalem, the personification of "freedom from strife or, as Milton would have said, his Christian Liberty" (Bloom, Trilling 1973: 72)¹² and his four primary or mental faculties, the four zoas ("he who lives" or "living being")¹³ in Blake's cosmogony. Albion being the Universal Man, it follows that the four principles are in everyone ("Four Mighty Ones are in every Man; a Perfect Unity / Cannot Exist but from the Universal Brotherhood of Eden", K 264) and part of the Divine Council¹⁴, forming and supporting the Divine Chariot.

The Prophet Ezekiel, from whom Blake conspicuously draws, refers to four beings that appear on the banks of the Chebar and guide the chariot of the Divine Spirit (*Merkabah* in Hebrew) in the first of his visions¹⁵. As

¹¹ Blake also considered the giant Albion to be the father of the English people. In *A Vision of the Last Judgement* (1810), Blake writes that Albion is "our Ancestor, patriarch of the Atlantic Continent, whose History Preceded that of the Hebrews & in whose Sleep, or Chaos Creation began; at their head the Aged Woman is Britannica, the Wife of Albion [...]" (K 609). On this point, see Spenser and Milton.

¹² The origin of Jerusalem, in the symbolic-semantic sense that emerges from Blake's work, can doubtlessly be traced to the Holy Scriptures, especially the *Book of Revelation* (21: 1-8), in which the Prophet says he saw "the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of Heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (all Biblical quotations are from the 21st Century King James Version of the Holy Bible). Blake indeed represents it as the Bride of the Lamb, and, therefore, Albion before his fall (as he was one with God). Jerusalem is a symbol of vision, love, universal forgiveness, and unity.

¹³ The term "living being" first appears in *Genesis* (2: 7-8). Biblical influence was taken for granted among Blake scholars, who considered Blake's zoas identifiable with the biblical cherubs. Cherubs often appear in the books of the *Old Testament* as celestial beings at God's service (*Sal.* 18). From the Hebrew tradition, we know the angels have anthropomorphic features, and the cherubs have wings and animal features, which may explain Blake's choice between "zoa" and "bio" as only the term "zoa" clearly refers to life in an animal sense.

¹⁴ The Divine Council is made up of the "Eternals" or "Immortals", the four Zoas that constitute the body of the Eternal Great Humanity Divine. In Damon's words: "The DIVINE FAMILY, or Council of God, is the Communion of Saints, that aggregate of Christian thought, the Body of Christ, consisting of all the Elect, dead or alive. Blake, however, never called them by their conventional name. [...] ast times [they] confer in the 'Council of God,' where they may argue but always act as one, as Jesus" (1988: 105).

¹⁵ See *Ezekiel*, 1, 4-12: "And I looked, and behold, a whirlwind came out of the north [...] Also out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their

observed by Harold Bloom, "The central image of Blake, from whenever he first formulated his mythology, is Ezekiel's, the *Merkabah*, Divine Chariot or form of God in motion" and, he adds, "The Living Creatures or Four Zoas are Ezekiel's and not initially Blake's" (Bloom 1971: 65-79).

In Kabbalah, the Holy Living Creatures that bear the throne of God in heaven are named the *Chaioth ha-Qodesh*. They take part in the fullness of the Ein-Sof and "are on the highest of all the angelic orders" (Penczak 2007: 185). Their corresponding Sefira in the Tree of Life is Kether, the first one, deriving from Hebrew word meaning "Crown" and representing the undifferentiated Godhead. The four winged, living creatures are a man, a lion, an ox and an eagle: the symbolical animals of the vision of Ezekiel (the *Mercabah*).

These four creatures with animal features are also found in the *Book of Revelation*, where they are again asked to protect and hold up the throne of God¹⁶. The number four is also important in the *Book of Daniel*, in which it is written that King Nebuchadnezzar cast three men into a fiery furnace (Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego) for the offense of not worshipping the golden statue he had erected, and then he looked in and saw a fourth without any of them having been burned by the fire. The King realizes there is a divine intervention (the fourth man sent from God) to save his servants and decides to take them out of the furnace¹⁷.

Significantly, in Blake's description of the fall, he speaks of three archetypal men, originally joined into a single man, but made up of four beings (K 109). He states the coexistence within the primeval being of a "Strong Man", a "Beautiful Man" and an "Ugly Man". Blake is probably referring to Albion¹⁸, the Eternal Man, in his unity with God and the faculties, before his fall. This would clarify the image of three men being part of a single human being, who, in turn, is made up of four parts; the fourth part could be

appearance: they had the likeness of a man. And every one had four faces, and every one had four wings".

¹⁶ See *Revelation*, 4, 6-8: "[...] And in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, were four living beings full of eyes in front and behind. And the first being was like a lion, and the second being like a calf, and the third being had the face of a man, and the fourth being was like a flying eagle".

¹⁷ See *Daniel* 3, 91-92: "Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astonished, and rose up in haste and spoke, and said unto his counselors, 'Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?' They answered and said unto the king, 'True, O king.' He answered and said, 'Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God'".

¹⁸ In the *Descriptive Catalogue* (written by Blake for an unsuccessful exhibition in his brother James's shop, from May to September 1809), he says that only these three types of humans survived the flood that sunk Atlantis: the Strong Man, a being that represents the sublime for his wisdom; the Beautiful Man, who represents the passionate being, and the Ugly Man, the symbol of the rational being (K 578).

explained as the divine human spark. The Prophet Daniel recounts a vision that the king had in a dream of an enormous statue with a head “of fine gold, his breast and his arms of silver, his belly and his thighs of brass [...] feet and toes, part of potter’s clay and part of iron” (*Daniel*, 2: 32-33); the statue is struck by the stone from a mountain and falls into many pieces and is blown away by the wind, and the stone turns into a large mountain. Daniel tells the King that his dream represents the ages of man (the statue’s materials) and the coming of the Lord’s eternal kingdom (the stone turned into a mountain)¹⁹. According to Frye, the vision that Daniel described may have influenced Blake and led him to identify Albion with the statue, and the four different metals of which the statue is made with the four zoas²⁰. He argues that the statue’s dismemberment represents the splitting of the Zoas from Albion’s mystical body, and, therefore, the fall, whereas the meaning of the mountain is in the union between God and Man in Eternity (see Frye 1949: 276).

While Adam in the Old Testament is described as God’s son, Albion²¹ belongs to the “Eternal Great Humanity Divine” (K 481). The Perfect Unity epitomized by Blake, in which the human component and the divine one are perfectly integrated the one with the other, can be preserved only in Eden. On the contrary, with Albion’s fall, the four faculties of his own being prevail one upon the other and bring to the ruin of “the Universal Brotherhood of Eden” (K 264). In Blake’s system, the friction created between these beings is caused by an act of selfhood, or principle of individuation, which turns the Universal Self into an empirical, tyrannical ego. This is why the fall is, above all else, “a fall into Division”: the four zoas, namely Urthona, Urizen, Luvah and Tharmas, split from each other, discovering and desiring themselves as individual beings and no longer as a single entity. By abandoning Albion, they

¹⁹ See *Daniel*, 2, 37-44: “Thou art this head of gold. And after thee shall arise another kingdom inferior to thee, and another third kingdom of brass, which shall bear rule over all the earth. And the fourth kingdom shall be strong as iron, inasmuch as iron breaketh in pieces and subdueth all things; and as iron that breaketh all these, shall it break in pieces and bruise. And whereas thou sawest the feet and toes, part of potter’s clay and part of iron, the kingdom shall be divided; but there shall be in it the strength of the iron, inasmuch as thou sawest the iron mixed with miry clay. [...] And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.”

²⁰ Indeed, in Blake’s works we find a large collection of pairings between Zoas and those metals; for example, Urthona’s metal is iron (K 278), Urizen’s metal is gold (K 284-285), Luvah’s is silver, and Tharmas’s is cotton (see *Jerusalem*). Gold and silver also stand for sexual union, and iron and brass for the phenomenal world.

²¹ “[...] Blake had come to believe that fallen Man is sleeping with his ‘faded head’ laid down ‘on the rock of eternity, where the eternal lion and eagle remain to devour’ (*FR* 96). In *The Four Zoas* he gave the name Albion to the hitherto nameless ‘Eternal Man’ or ‘Fallen Man’ (*FZ* i: 477, 485, etc.)” (Damon 1988: 9).

also cause the splitting between the Universal Man and the Eternal Being. Albion is driven by a dark inner conflict caused by the zoas and discovers his individuality, breaking his close union with God.

Thus the fall, in its evolution into the apparent, the phenomenal, the passive, the feminine, and the rational, is permeated and controlled by the four creative principles of Albion. It is worth of note that Blake uses this image as the starting point for many of his works, first and foremost because, in the shadow of Christian tradition, he is not immune from the appeal of the divine punishment of humanity for having sinned against God. This punishment takes precisely the form of the fall from divine grace to the material world. Significantly, in the tradition based on the *Old Testament*, the chapter about Genesis is the first one, because it describes God's first act, namely that of creation. Human creation happens not on earth but in the Earthly Paradise and takes the form of the birth of Adam. By contrast, Blake considers Albion's creation into a new fragmented being and its subsequent fall to be the true origin of the history of humanity.

Jerusalem, Plate 43, 29

Then frownd the fallen Man, and put forth Luvah from his presence
Saying. Go and Die the Death of Man, [...]

Four Zoas, Night VII, 86

Then Los plucked the fruit & Eat & sat down in Despair
And must have given himself to death Eternal [...]

Jerusalem, Plate 54, 6

But Albion fell down, a Rocky fragment from Eternity

Jerusalem, Plate 57, 12

But Albion fled from the Divine Vision

Whereas Adam is the man created by God, Albion is the self-generated divine humanity. As a result, since creation is already embodied in an androgynous figure, the punitive act cannot take the form of another creation, but rather the splitting of the first creation. If in the Old Testament the creation of man is an act of love by God and the resulting fall to earth is a punishment by the same God betrayed by his son, creation leads in Blake to the splitting of the original being, who had been one with God²². In other words, according to the Christian tradition, the division of the androgynous being into male and

²² For more information about the Gnostic influences in Blake's thinking see Givone 1978; Solomon 1993; Sorensen 1995; Grenfell 1996.

female was not a “punitive” consequence, as it is in Blake²³, but another act of divine love. As stated in the Bible, after having created Adam, God shaped Eve out of Adam’s rib. Their apparent disunion is envisioned as a prelude to their physical and spiritual union.

Punctuating the cyclic journey of man in the fallen world, the act of rebellion and pride leads firstly to the Luciferian fall of the Universal Man from Eden to Beulah and secondly to Generation and Ulro. During the first fall from Eden²⁴ to Beulah²⁵, the principle of individuation that brings to the division of the Zoas takes a step further, causing the division between the masculine and feminine principle or *Shekhinah*, to use the kabbalah based term. Before the fall, the four Zoas contained their female counterparts, to which Blake gives the names of Ahaniah (symbol of physical pleasure), Vala (symbol of the phenomenal world and mother-nature), Enion (the sexual impulse) and Enitharmon (the personification of spiritual beauty that inspires Los, the Prophet)²⁶.

When they are separated from each other, the masculine element, or zoa, represents unfulfilled egoistic desire, and it becomes a spectral entity standing for the principle of individuation, which continuously feeds the frustrated desire to reunite with its feminine principle, which, in turn, represents jealousy and the desire to control its counterpart. In the Lurianic Kabbalah, the *Kellipot* are the “husks” or “shells” confining the beams of divine light that were exiled from God as a result of the Breaking of the Vessels²⁷. They are evil

²³ Blake may also have drawn on Ovid and the Symposium of Plato for the androgynous figure.

²⁴ In Blake, Eden is the place, or rather the highest state in which Man lives, in perfect communion with God and his feminine principle, making the Human Form Divine, the Cosmic Man. In this condition all dualism is reconciled.

²⁵ Beulah is a state between innocence and experience, the spiritual and material life, where the soul rests and rejoices. In Hebrew, the word Beulah means “married” and is one of the names of Jerusalem once reunited with God. In Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Beulah is like an earthly paradise where pilgrims rest before crossing the river of death and bringing together back with God. In Blake, this state is both a place of rest and peace, and a place of dangerous fascination. Humans can indeed be caught up by the blind entrancement that this place has on them and want to stay there instead of ascending to Eden (see *Milton*, K 518): “There is from Great Eternity a mild & pleasant rest Nam’d Beulah, a soft Moony Universe, feminine, lovely Pure, mild Gentle, given by Mercy to those who sleep, Eternally created by the Lamb of God around, On all sides, within & without the Universal Man” (K 266).

²⁶ In the world of Generation, Enitharmon is not only Los’s wife and lover, she is also Eve, as the mother of Orc and of all humanity: “And she bore an enormous race” (K 234). Los is the artist, the prophetic spirit that helps Man approaching the Divine Vision, limiting human *contraction* with the material reality beyond which he cannot fall but only rise again; and Enitharmon is the artist’s inspiring muse. In *Europe* and *America*, Enitharmon also embodies the Female Will, in its will for sexual repression and domination of her male counterpart.

²⁷ *The Zohar* 2007, 327: “The thing is that the breaking of the vessels and Adam’s sin constitute the same breaking, disappearance of the screen (anti-egoistic willpower or intention

entities. But, whether Adam is immune by *Kelippah's* hideous actions, Albion turns into the victim of the spectre. Spectre and Emanation are non-beings, remote, partial semblances of the Eternal Great Humanity Divine, shadows of their nature and original existence: "The Feminine separates from the Masculine & both from Man, [...] In howling torment, to build stone walls of separation, [...]" (K 736).

"The walls of separation" are found below Beulah in the material universes of Generation and Ulro. In the state of Generation, sexual impulses arise and urge human beings to reconcile with each other and evoke their original unity. The state of Ulro is the phenomenal hell in which living beings burn in the flames of the phenomenal world, far from any imaginative, spiritual life; it is a sterile, desert land, marked only by emptiness and non-existence in which humanity is paralyzed, and lives a totally passive life²⁸. In these realms, man suffers all forms of pain to redeem his errors and start on a path of salvation achieved through love ("The worship of God is: Honouring his gifts in other men, each according to his genius, and loving the greatest men best [...]", K 158) and the Revelation. "[...] Contracting our infinite senses", says Los to Albion in *Jerusalem*, "We behold multitude, or expanding, we behold as one [...]" (K 221).

Cabalistic cosmogony conceives of four worlds as well. The nearest to divine perfection and, therefore, directly controlled by God, is Azilut, inhabited by the ten Sefirot; Beriah, the second one, is "the location of the Divine Presence in the created cosmos", which control creation; Yezirah, is "the World of (Archetypal) Formation" which is "occupied by super-natural creatures"; and, last, Asiyyah, governed by the Planetary Powers (Spector 2001: 21). The names of the four realms can be found in *Isaiah* 43, 7, "Every one that is called by My name and for My glory (Atzilut 'Emanation/Close'), I have created (Beriah 'Creation'), I have formed (Yetzirah 'Formation'), even I have made (Asiyah 'Action')".

to act for the Creator's sake). The difference is that the breaking of the vessels signifies the breaking of the screen in the Partzuf [degree of concealment from the Creator down to the material world] called "world," while Adam's sin is the breaking, disappearance of the screen in the Partzuf called "soul." The difference between these two Partzufim is that the Partzuf called "world" is external with regard to the inner Partzuf called "soul." The soul exists within the world and is sustained by it.

²⁸ Blake's space-time confine, circumscribing all human freedom, brings to mind Plato's myth of the cave, which may have influenced Blake's representation of Ulro. The cave symbolizes the material reality and, above all, the physical body that cloaks and imprisons the human soul. In Blake's imagery, it seems that this cave takes the guise of an eggshell, the Mundane Shell, which encloses the material world and separates it from the eternal reality, preventing humans from seeing it. Also in Blake, this symbol corresponds to the veil that Vala weaves to envelop the world.

Blake's worlds are also characterized by two opposing movements: one of expansion and one of contraction. While Urlo originates from the contraction of the infinite in the finite, Eden is given by an act of expansion that allows unity. According to van Lieshout, "contraction and expansion are the two extremes of Blake's perception that display Eternity respectively as multitudes of men and One Man" (1994: 109). Likewise, he argues, "The human identity of Eternity is revealed in the harmonious interaction between the perceptual contraction into multitudes of men and expansion into One Man" (109).

Jerusalem, Plate 42

There is a limit of Opakeness, and a limit of Contraction;
 In every Individual Man, and the limit of Opakeness,
 Is named Satan: and the limit of Contraction is named Adam.
 But when Man sleeps in Beulah, the Saviour in mercy takes
 Contractions Limit, and of the Limit he forms Woman: That
 Himself may in process of time be born Man to redeem
 But there is no Limit of Expansion! there is no Limit of Translucence.
 In the bosom of Man for ever from eternity to eternity

In Lurianic Kabbalah, Isaac Luria explained the act of creation with the doctrine of the *tzimtzum* or *tsimtsum* (from the Hebrew *תְּצַמְצִים*), meaning "contraction", "constriction" and "condensation". God's infinite light was all that existed before creation. Afterwards, God created a *Khalal/Khalal Hapanui* (*קְוִנְפָּה לְלֵה*) or empty space, by contracting and concealing his *Ein-Sof* light and allowing new creative light to shine. In the empty space, spiritual and physical Worlds, as well as free will can coexist. Spiritual realms and the physical world hide the infinite spiritual light of creation to different degrees. In Koren's words: "Prior to *Tzimtzum* the Godhead was a perfect and infinite unity, and its contraction-withdrawal into the transcendent allowed for the creation of space (*halal hapanuy*, "the empty space") in the center, in which the universe was thereafter created" (2010: 281).

Reintegration to the Almighty is expressed through the term *tikkun*, which implies Adam's healing and his coming back to Eden. In *America* (1793)²⁹,

²⁹ In *America*, Blake epitomizes his ideal of rebellion against every kind of oppression; in his eyes, the American Revolution is a fight for freedom. Moreover, America's geographical coordinates, to the west on the globe, in Blake's imagery, are identified with the human body, and thus with Tharmas, the Zoa of physicality located to the west. In terms of time, Blake associates the revolt of the thirteen American colonies with the start of the Golden Age (from a Platonic perspective, America was born from the ruins of Atlantis), resulting from the fall. From a space-time perspective, the rebellion of the American States, leading to a new physical birth of Atlantis, represents the struggle and victory of "good" against "evil", against the tyranny of a cruel, distant Father-God: the English state, rationalism, the Christian Church, or Urizen. Blake constructs his literary works by looking at history and all revolutionary movements that

the events end with the destruction of the phenomenal world, marked by the Apocalypse, and Man's reunion with God. This reconciliation was made possible by Orc's sacrifice; just like Christ in the New Testament, Orc kills death, the material world, sacrificing himself. His sacrifice entails the abandonment of his bodily robes, which are burned in purifying fire to be reborn as spiritual robes (see Plate 12 in *America*). Ulro's destruction is essential because it lets us keep a perspective of the interconnection between the arrival of Orc on earth and the first and last apparition (according to Blake) of Jesus, also on earth. Accepting that the sacrifice made by the zoa is essential to achieve a new unity with the divine (as he also destroys his own sins by abandoning his material guise), means accepting Christ's sinning humanity: Christ redeems himself and us by dying. Moreover, this image seems to allude as well to the first account of Daniel, so we can identify the three men thrown into the fire with the "material" figure of Orc-Jesus, and the fourth man born of them with the "spiritual" other of Luvah-Jesus. In other words, Blake's vision emerging from this first prophecy is twofold, just as the semantic and symbolic role of the fall is twofold. In the prophecies of *Milton* (1804-1808) and in *Jerusalem* (1804-1820), as well, the respective protagonists, Milton and Albion, must pass through the "furnace of affliction". Additionally, fire seems to have a twofold symbolic/semantic meaning, because it is the element used by Urizen (who is indeed the god of fire³⁰) to forge the world, and the purifying element whose flames destroy the world itself. As the final tool given to man by God's mercy to attain salvation and then rebirth, it is ultimately the paradigmatic symbol of suffering as a prelude to eternal bliss. The passage through fire includes the descending movement down to Earth, in which Man moves through the phenomenal fire with which Urizen shapes the material globe, and the ascending movement to Eden where fire is now Christ the Redeemer feeling both joy and suffering ("[...] the Eternal Human / That walks about among the stones of fire in bliss & woe", K 680). Thus, the Urizenic creation represents both the extreme consequence of Man's rebellion against God, and an act of grace by God, who prevents Man from falling into the earthly abyss ("Thus were the stars of Heaven created like a golden chain / To bind the Body of Man to heaven from falling into the Abyss", K 287).

The free, merciful love of Jesus emerging in Blake's works as the semantic core of the doctrine of forgiveness and thus the cause of Christ's apocalyptic arrival on Earth, destroys the states of Generation and Ulro and reintegrates all the children of Albion³¹, finally resolving the conflict between truth and

seem to propel the cycle of history forward. The struggle for independence of the thirteen American colonies, the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, to name only a few major events, are the subjects of his prophetic works.

³⁰ In Gnostic tradition, the demiurge is made of fire and air.

³¹ Blake's vision of a "Good and merciful God" likely comes from a Gnostic mythology. We find the first dualistic opposition between "God of the world" and "Good God" in Marcion.

error, good and evil, and therefore every dualism originating from it (“Error is created. Truth is Eternal. Error, or Creation, will be Burned up, & then, & not till then, Truth or Eternity will appear”, K 617).

The semantic reversal of the two symbolic poles – good and evil – is essential to understanding Blake’s religious thinking. It is not actually “good” or the “goodness” taught by Christ that Blake denies; but the good identified with the God of the *Old Testament* and the Word that He dictated and is professed by the Church. By contrast, “evil” takes on the meaning of active, revolutionary, creative energy:

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. (K 158)

In *America*, the reversal is quite explicit through the figure of Orc³² the fourteenth Zoa chained by his father afraid of his power. He represents the state of rebellion, the icon of the apocalyptic Christ (“Thou art the image of God”, K 196) who came down into the material world “to give [...] life in regions of dark death” (*ibidem*). The character of Orc, skilfully explained in the “Shadowy Daughter of Urthona” (K 195), through an imaginative dual representation, tends to highlight that he represents a forgiving God rather than the Old Testament God, the demiurge (l. 9, “And thou art fall’n to give me life in regions of dark death”).

True to what we could call “the principle of reversal” of every commonly accepted religious value (from which all other values depend in Blake’s eyes), seemingly defining much of his thinking, Orc is not the force of evil. Blake’s identification of Christ with the infernal Orc allows for an assimilation of demonic power (creative and revolutionary) with the principle of “good”³³.

³² The four Zoas, in the vegetative world, represent the extreme consequences of their faculties. Orc is the temporal form of Luvah; he represents the revolutionary hero who fights against Urizenic infringements; Luvah’s sensual energy manifests itself in Orc as a spirit of transgression and rebellion, creating a single Dionysian figure (Dionysus is the image of the poet *par excellence*, who draws his creative energy from the sexual and vital power), and whose task is to reawaken the Eternal Man through his revolutionary song; and Urthona, or the Zoa of the subconscious, takes the name Los in the phenomenal world, symbol of the poetic imagination and “Poetic Genius” itself. The figure of Orc suggests the Greek Prometheus who Zeus tied to the mountain and was rebellious against the deity.

³³ The word “good” is in Blake a synonym of stasis, passivity, and petulance. Looking at the figure of Urizen, he appears to be a highly static character who observes the other Zoas from above while they physically follow his instructions by building the “Veil of Vala”; it is a passive figure as he awaits Luvah’s usurping act (seizing the sun) to carry on his phenomenal dream; and

Before the fall, Orc was named Luvah, which in Blake's cosmogony is the main manifestation of Jesus. Finally, Orc awakens Albion from his dream of death³⁴, loosening the chains that hold him prisoner: "The grave is burst, the spices shed, the linen wrapped up; 'The bones of death, the cov'ring clay, the sinews shrunk & dry'd 'Reviving shake, [...]" (K 198). With this image of Orc turning over the stone of the grave, Blake represents both Christ, who rose from the dead and gave humanity Eternal Life, and his vision of the victory of Imagination against Reason, in purely Christological terms.

Poetic Imagination, or "Poetic Genius", is "the first principle and all the other merely derivative" (K 153), since, as in Kabbalah the Ein-Sof emanates its light or *shofar* through art, which is the receptacle of divine energy (or *malbut*), Blake conceives art as a monument *sub specie aeternitatis*, the very means of connection and communication between God and the eternal man, leading towards the palingenesis of Christ's realm. In *Fearful Symmetry* (1947), Frye read Blake's concept of Imagination as a reality in which "[e]verything worth doing and done well is an art" (89-90). Art is a form of religious ministry, since it is the communication of Vision through Imagination or Christ or the Poetic Genius. By means of the poetic imagination, human beings can enter the Infinite. Thus, the true meaning of reality has to be sought only in the inner nature of man, whereas its phenomenal reality is the outward shape of the soul. Admitting that "As all men are alike (tho' infinitely various) So all Religions & as all similars have one source", Blake consequently acknowledged that "The true Man is the source, he being the Poetic Genius". Further, "The Jewish and Christian Testaments are an original derivation from the Poetic Genius", as from the different ways in which the Poetic Genius is perceived by human beings so the different religions originate (*All Religions are One*, 1788, K 98). In other words, the source comes through the one and true Man, or Poetic Genius, "who is the eternal all-protecting Divine Humanity":

'I am inspired! I know it is truth! for I sing
According to the inspiration of the Poetic Genius
Who is the eternal all-protecting Divine Humanity,
To whom be Glory & Power & Dominion evermore'. (*Milton*, K 495)

he certainly shows his petulant character when he says he is God. The dynamism that he conveys is theoretical, closely tied to a word that his attitude constantly contradicts. Like Urizen, the Angel of Albion is also an obstructed figure, paralyzed before the Tree of Life, passively waiting the warrior Orc to whom he shows all of his insolence. Significantly, Orc is his rival, his opposite: In *Lavater's Aphorisms*, Blake also maintains that "Active Evil is better than Passive Good".

³⁴Albion's sleeping on the rock indeed becomes the symbol of Man paralyzed in a vegetative state. Albion's reawakening, which happens because he overcomes imaginative stasis and recovers his spiritual dimension, significantly, corresponds to the beginning of the Apocalypse, the basis of the return of the archetypal man to the eternal reality of the Father.

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