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## Infinite Indignation: Teaching, Dialectical Vision, and Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

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*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is one of William Blake's most famous, frequently anthologized works, and has probably been discussed by critics as much as any poem of its length in the English language. Especially since the 1960's, when Blake's relevance to so many of the political and intellectual concerns of the time became evident, this poem has been examined from every imaginable perspective. Since I discovered Blake when I left graduate school and began to teach and really learn great poetry, I must have taught this poem to between fifteen and twenty groups of students. I have written on Blake, pored over his meanings, and had the naive feeling that in *The Marriage* I had seen what there was to see. But when I discussed this poem in class recently, I discovered a moment in the poem that I had never seen before, a wonderful dialectical leap in which Blake forges a connecting link where few others would see one, and in so doing embodies his brilliant art of dialectic at its best.

That moment occurs in what I will call the banquet scene on plate 12 where Blake discusses prophecy with Isaiah and Ezekiel.

The Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel dined with me, and I asked them how they dared so roundly to assert. that God spake to them; and whether they did not think at the time, that they would be misunderstood, & so be the cause of imposition.

Isaiah answer'd. I saw no God. nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover'd the infinite in every thing, and as I was then perswaded. & remain confirm'd; that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God, I cared not for consequences but wrote.<sup>1</sup>

With regard to the startlingly matter of fact claim at the start, Geoffrey Keynes tells us that "contemporary and later critics have seized upon this statement as

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1. William Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (39). Further references will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

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indubitable evidence of Blake's insanity."<sup>2</sup> Keynes correctly chides such critics for ignoring the scene's presentation as a "Fancy," not literal but imaginative truth. And truly, given the outlandish things that happen to Blake and others in *The Marriage*, it is hard to believe that Blake's claim to hobnobbing with the prophets could have been taken as a delusionary claim to literal, mechanical truth. Instead, it must be seen as a defense of visionary, imaginative perception.

Blake was threatened with punishment as a small child when he claimed to have seen angels in a tree; he was actually punished by his mother for saying he saw Ezekiel (Bentley 7, 519). All his life he both feared punishment for his visions and continued to defend them: at the time he was writing *The Marriage* he wrote in his notebook, "I say I shant live five years / And if I live one it will be a / Wonder" ("Memoranda from the Notebook" 694). One of his most famous poems was written to defend and explain his claims for his imaginative vision and his call for universal renewed and enlarged vision. This poem, known by its first line, "With happiness stretched across the hills," explains the relation between ordinary, "normal" sight and visionary perception through most of its eighty-eight lines in much the same way the brief, elliptical lines I have cited from *The Marriage* do. Not a God who spoke to him or a host of angels in the sun, but a "frowning Thistle" is his central example here: "And a double vision is always with me / With my inward Eye 'tis an old Man grey / With my outward a Thistle across my way" (22 Nov 1802, 721). When he has Isaiah respond to the same criticism he makes the same point. Isaiah says that in the "common sense" world of unimaginative perception, in the easily discerned space-time continuum which is the realm subjected to scrutiny by positivist science, "in a finite organical perception," "I saw no God."

Far from revealing madness, I think Blake is defending his sanity, assuring the reader he is not the victim of some involuntary hallucination which so darkens and deranges his perceptions as to make him incapable of "normal" awareness of his relation to his surroundings. But as the letter poem ends "May God us keep / From Single vision & Newtons sleep" (722), so in *The Marriage* the main point is not the ability to perceive "reality" as is considered normal, but the necessity to go beyond "finite organical perception" and to allow the senses to discover "the infinite in every thing." To a sane, right-thinking "Angel" of Respectability and Right such expanded perception indeed appears dangerous and "mad." But to Blake it is our main chance. In his discussion of modernism in *The Political Unconscious* Fredric Jameson sees such an understanding of expanded vision as a central response of artists to "everything lost in the process of the development of capitalism"—a response he describes as the "vocation of the perceptual, its Utopian mission as the libidinal transformation of an increasingly dessicated and repressive reality" (236-37).

The profound significance for Blake of expanded and heightened perception has of course been widely recognized. Two plates later in *The Marriage* he will give it perhaps its most famous expression: "If the doors of perception were

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2. William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, facsimile edition, textual note, plate 12, verso.

cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is: infinite" (39). This formulation has provided in one striking line Huxley's title and the name of Jim Morrison's rock group. But a crucial implication of Blake's discussion of the matter here in the "banquet scene" in *The Marriage* seems not to have been critically recognized, and came to me after many readings, seemingly dependent on the heightened awareness of class discussion. Within the banquet scene the following sequence can be described: in response to criticism for "daring to assert that God spake to them" Isaiah turns the subject first from a question of hearing to one of sight, then to a vision of the infinite in every thing by all the senses, and finally to the matter of his *writing*, his prophetic practice. So the discovery by the senses of the infinite in every thing—"To see a World in a Grain of Sand" ("Auguries of Innocence" 490)—is the beginning: both what it means to see God and the source of prophetic vision. But immediately in the same sentence, Blake makes a breathtaking leap: "and as I was them perswaded and remain confirm'd; that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God. . . ." From the matter of perception, visionary imaginative expansion of the senses, he moves without grammatical or logical pause or mediation to the question of indignation, moral outrage at what is revealed through expanded awareness, namely those things in the world which hinder and distort perception, the "mind-forg'd manacles" of cautious, common-sensical, conventional vision ("London" 27). It is in the establishing of such links—this one unrecognized by me after scores of readings of the poem—that I see Blake's vision at its most dialectical, most important.

In *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* he links economic oppression, sexual repression and exploitation, priestly manipulation of religious power, and militarism in the same insistent, direct way in which infinite vision and indignation are mixed in the banquet scene. Blake's position is especially remarkable in its difference from the modernist position, even though he shares with modernism a concern with visionary imagination, heightened perception. For expanded awareness, the experience of the infinite, never meant for Blake an escape from "politics" or from history, from awareness of misery and the need for basic change in human material circumstances, whereas from Rimbaud through Ken Kesey modernists who urged the claims of such imaginative vision have almost always sought to move away from the social realm and its political, moral imperatives. For Blake, awareness of infinity both includes and generates indignation, as well as the urgent need to share the vision that humanity might move toward the human. Blake conceives of indignation in the sense I have already suggested: indignation at concrete social institutions that seem to be a reflection of "human nature" but which, from the vantage of expanded vision, can be imagined to be different and thus subject to change.

This sense of dialectical vision is not, primarily, the interaction of what Blake called "Contraries" or contradictions opposed to one another in binary fashion. Rather, it is a holistic sense of the dialectic between reality and imagination, Hegel's "the truth is the whole." Such a sense of the inter-connectedness and mutual influence and determination of all aspects of human reality is the dialectical wisdom embodied by Blake in *The Marriage* and elsewhere. In such a view,

one shared by Blake and Marx, the connections are seen as active, alive, so that all manifestations of desire, all relations of production, all the “ghosts of all past generations,”<sup>3</sup> interact with and shape one another, so that every aspect of human reality bears the overdetermined traces of all the others. This properly holistic and totalizing vision seems to me, in Blake as in Marx, the dialectic at its most important.

The term “dialectic” has a long and complex history. Raymond Williams in *Keywords* traces it from its earliest meanings in ancient Greece as “the investigation of truth by discussion” and Plato’s usage as “the method of determining the interrelation of ideas in the light of a single principle” through Hegel’s conception of the dialectical process as “the continual unification of opposites, in the complex relation of parts to a whole” (91, 92). All of these meanings are included in the term as I am using it in this essay and in the way in which I see Blake’s thought as dialectical. The first of them is particularly apt in the banquet scene and in the classroom situation where mystified or obscured truths become clear through interchange, through discussion. Also crucial to the sense of dialectic as I am using it and see it manifested in teaching and in this scene is what I have called the visionary, imaginative *leap*, the *moment* in the poem when Blake suddenly connects expanded, infinite vision with indignation. Of this aspect of the dialectic Jameson observes: “for a fleeting instant we catch a glimpse of a unified world, of a universe in which discontinuous realities are nevertheless somehow implicated with each other and intertwined, no matter how remote they may first have seemed” (*Marxism and Form* 8). Later Jameson argues that

insofar as dialectical thinking characteristically involves a conjunction of opposites or at least conceptually disparate phenomena, it may truly be said of the dialectical sentence what the Surrealists said about the image, namely, that its strength increases proportionally as the realities linked are distant and distinct from each other. (*Marxism and Form* 53-54)

Finally, Jameson observes that “the shock indeed is basic, and constitutive of the dialectic as such: without this transformational moment . . . there can be no question of any genuinely dialectical coming to consciousness” (*Marxism and Form* 308). It is this sort of moment of illumination, in which new light is cast on the interaction and ultimate unity of opposites or contraries, that I have in mind when I refer to the dialectical nature of Blake’s thought. Such dialectical vision is perhaps made most clear in terms of the conceptual modes it opposes, the linear, positivist, empiricist “one-dimensional” thought which Blake calls Urizenic single-vision. The popular notion (after Fichte rather than Hegel) of the dialectic as a rigid triad of thesis-antithesis and synthesis seems more a continuation of such linear thought than a genuine step above or beyond it.<sup>4</sup>

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3. Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” (595). Here and elsewhere in Marx I have tinkered with the translation.

4. David Punter has some excellent discussions of Blake’s dialectic in “Blake, Marxism and Dialectic” and in *Blake, Hegel and Dialectic*. The latter work includes a chapter on *The Marriage*, but in neither work does Punter deal specifically with the banquet scene. Harold Bloom’s early essay, “Dialectic in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*,” does not deal with the banquet scene either, nor does it contribute a great deal to an understanding of the operation of Blake’s dialectic; it is only a brief demonstration that “the unity of the *Marriage* is in itself dialectical, and cannot be grasped except by the mind in motion, moving between the Blakean contraries of discursive irony and mythical visualization” (501).

Embedded in the moments of illumination thus conceived are, indeed, “contraries,” Blake’s term for the fundamental, paired contradictions which can be seen as primary causal forces in history. Earlier in *The Marriage* Blake says, “Without Contraries is no progression” (34), and his use of “Reason” and “Energy” in this poem illustrates the thesis-antithesis version of dialectics brilliantly. But in lesser hands that notion of dialectics as binary opposition can be sterile and misleading, confusing the fluid holistic and historical awareness of Blake and Marx with the question-answer debates of the ancient Greeks, or hypostatizing the binary oppositions into paired sets, such as bourgeois and proletarian, seen as “acting” in “history” as in a vacuum, unaffected by other aspects of reality.

Such an impoverished version of the dialectic and of reality is antithetical to Blake’s. A central purpose of *The Marriage* is to expose the falsity of such dualisms and separations, seen by Blake as typical of thought and vision tyrannized and restricted by the hegemonic power of the dominant discourse. That is why the link forged here by Blake between perception by the senses of the infinite and the voice of honest indignation is so important, especially since most artists of the modern period have used heightened, visionary awareness to move not toward but away from indignation.

Yet as different as is Blake’s position from the usual position of high modernism, it is interesting to note its similarity to Marx’s. When the young Marx describes the alienation of the working class, he says that the very existence of that class in the given conditions and relations of production “is, within depravity, an *indignation* against this depravity, an indignation necessarily aroused in this class by the contradiction between its human *nature* and its life-situation, which is a blatant outright and all-embracing denial of that very nature” ([From *The Holy Family*] 324). Elsewhere he says of the movement of criticism which he was helping to found that “*indignation* is its essential mode of feeling, and *denunciation* its principal task” (“Contribution to the Critique” 56). And in the famous letter to Ruge which is always among the first items in any collection of “the young Marx” he disavows simplistic “prophecy” in just the way Blake did and urges a bravery in the performance of the critical task very similar to Blake’s Isaiah who “cared not for consequences, but wrote.” In answer to questions regarding the specific shape of the post-revolutionary future, Marx says that “we do not attempt dogmatically to prefigure the future, but want to find the new world only through criticism of the old.” Unlike idealist philosophers who “had the solutions to all riddles lying on their desks, and the stupid uninitiated world had only to open their mouths to let the roasted pigeons of absolute science fly in,” Marx calls for only “relentless criticism of all existing conditions . . . : the criticism must not be afraid of its own conclusions, nor of conflict with the powers that be” (13).

So both in the emphasis on indignation and in the call to disregard potentially dangerous or painful consequences Marx and Blake are strikingly similar: they both assert that “vision” and “social action” are not separate, but dialectically connected. The connection is even more strikingly illustrated in a famous passage from his annotations to Watson where Blake disavows the “fortune teller” version of prophecy just as Marx does, arriving at a very similar view of the proper

tasks of the visionary: "Every honest man is a Prophet he utters his opinion both of private and public matters / Thus / If you go on so / the result is So / He never says such a thing shall happen let you do what you will. a Prophet is a Seer not an arbitrary dictator" (617).<sup>5</sup> Thus for both Blake and Marx an honest, unflinching holistic awareness sparks indignation, demands a commitment to change.

Now, a danger of any totalizing or holistic vision is that it can collapse all distinctions into the undifferentiated oneness or unity of all mystic vision. As is classically true of Eastern wisdom, such a view must arrive at a tolerant acceptance of what is, since any basis for moral distinction dissolves into visionary oneness. Both in the political and intellectual realms there is much to be feared in such a view. Geoffrey Hartman and the Yale School are rightly suspicious of the "totalitarian" potential in any totalizing view, though their "one step toward the Gulag" view of any totalizing vision has more than a whiff of bad faith, of what Fredric Jameson calls "the strategy of containment," about it. Terry Eagleton deconstructs that view beautifully in terms of the absolute privileging of "freedom" over truth, of radical scepticism, "the revulsion from the domineering, totalizing and unequivocally denotative; the privileging of plurality and heterogeneity"—all adding up to the classic posture of the alienated-but-privileged liberal intellectual (137-38). But, like Marx's, the totalizing, holistic dialectic in Blake is in no way monolithic or totalitarian, never tends to collapse diversity and distinction into some passive oneness; his famed insistence that reality is to be found only in "minute particulars" as well as the insistence on indignation clearly indicate the contrary.

To force into our consciousness awareness of connections among realms or practices we had not seen as related is Blake's primary purpose. And when raised into a perception of the infinite, "doors cleansed," what we achieve is not some nirvana of pure contemplation or the idle speculation of the detached intellectual, but rather indignation at the "marks of weakness, marks of woe," the "mind-forg'd manacles" of "London" (27). Blake's dialectical expansion leads from heightened awareness on the part of the poet to indignation at the ironic, intolerable gap between the infinite possibilities for humanity revealed by the imagination and our actual historical situation, and then to a sense of vocation, to a mission to devote oneself to what an activist of our day might term "work in the cultural sphere." As Eleanor Wilner points out, this makes Blake a uniquely "self-conscious visionary whose subject contains its own exegesis—a vision which makes the process of vision itself visible" (54)—in such scenes as the banquet in *The Marriage*. The dialectic of vision and indignation produces an active awareness of the interconnectedness of all things and of the appalling necessity that basic relations, disclosed through full awareness, be changed in basic ways. Thus Blake demonstrates the movement of consciousness and conscience<sup>6</sup> which is the *sine qua non*, the necessary first step, toward significant change in the political/social realm.

5. Ronald Schleifer calls attention to this same distinction in Blake in his "Simile, Metaphor, and Vision: Blake's Narration of Prophecy in *America*" (570).

6. It is interesting that in French one word, "*conscience*," meaning both "consciousness" and "conscience," combines vision and indignation. Blake was clearly fascinated with the word; its importance here in *The Marriage* is obvious, and in the "Annotations to Reynolds" Blake plays with the word in defending his notion of an innate human moral sense: "The Man who says that we have No Innate Ideas must be a Fool & Knave. Having No Con-Science (or Innate Science.)" (648).

The fruit of the indignation in the banquet scene is that “I cared not for consequence, but wrote.” Blake responds to his vision with *discourse*, writing, not some transitory oracular *parole*. Since it is by means of what Michel Foucault and others have taught us to see as the dominant discourse that the “mind-forg’d manacles” are established and maintained, it is through writing, which creates the possibility of subverting that discourse, that they may be exposed, demystified, uprooted and left behind. This is the vocation Blake assigns himself in the famous Preface to *Milton*, written many years after *The Marriage*: “I will not cease from Mental Fight, / Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand: / Till we have built Jerusalem, / In England’s green & pleasant land” (95-96). That there be no doubt about what Blake meant by “mental fight,” in the prose paragraphs which precede these lines he says: “Rouze up O Young Men of the New Age! set your foreheads against the ignorant Hirelings! For we have Hirelings in the Camp, the Court, & the University: who would if they could forever depress Mental & prolong Corporeal War.” This is certainly the voice of honest indignation of *The Marriage* raised against those who speak the language of the paymaster and in one way or another engage in hegemonic apologetics for the existing order, dismissing the claims of conscience and vision.

In the banquet scene Blake ends with one more exchange between Ezekiel and himself and a rhetorical question which again forges the dialectical link between perception and conscience which is so crucial and so elusive:

I then asked Ezekiel why he eat dung, & lay so long on his right and left side? he answered the desire of raising other men into a perception of the infinite this the North American tribes practice & is he honest who resists his genius or conscience only for the sake of present ease or gratification?  
(39)

Even though, as a footnote always informs the student, the peculiar diet and posture about which Blake enquires is in fact assigned to Ezekiel in the Bible (though it appears that the dung may have been fuel rather than food), I have always assumed that Blake was returning here at the end of the scene to the question of his vocation, “the desire of raising other men into a perception of the infinite,” with the diet of dung as a striking metaphor for the revolting necessities, the bitter fruit, which accompany such a task. In any case, most important is the linking here, overlooked by most critics, of the two elements fused so significantly at the start, awareness of the infinite and indignation.

That he makes a key use of a rhetorical question in accomplishing this purpose, ending the entire banquet scene with a question mark, is also important and typical. Blake’s use of such questions, placing them at crucial points—or using them *exclusively*, as in “The Tyger”—is an important aspect of his work.<sup>7</sup> He signals thereby that his dialectical vision is not a blueprint “do what you will”; it is not rigid and hypostatized or “totalitarian.” Rather, it is totalizing in the sense of dialectic I am using—open, fluid, and heuristic—and as such offers a sense of the whole without the premature closure Derrida and the post-

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7. See my discussion of the use of rhetorical questions in Blake’s Lambeth Prophecies in “‘Mind-Forg’d Manacles’: Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony in Blake.”



structuralists critique in certain Marxists and Hegelians. But that “infinite,” ever-open aspect of his view does not lead him away from engagement, as do both the supposedly radical post-modernisms and classic liberalism. To be “honest” is not to resist linked “genius [and] conscience,” but to follow their impulses. And the use of “honest” here returns us, of course, to the “honest indignation” and brave writing of the opening. Wilner terms this acceptance of the full implications of vision, of complete awareness, “the experience of the unbearable, . . . the refusal to look away from the death, perversion and suffering which nothing less than apocalypse can resolve without relinquishing awareness” (57).<sup>8</sup> As I will discuss in a moment with regard to my own failure to see this connection through so many readings of the poem, I agree with Wilner that the dialectical vision is very rare, usually powerfully blocked or resisted.

Certainly many critics have acknowledged Blake’s involvement in political and social issues of his time,<sup>9</sup> but accounts of his work have rarely seen his thought in the holistic, dialectical mode I am proposing. Thus in *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* David V. Erdman tends to read Blake’s works as responses to the immediate political and social events of his day, ignoring for the most part the dialectical interaction between those immediate concerns and Blake’s imaginative vision. Similarly, but from another side, Harold Bloom says that in Blake the political, moral, and mythic “meanings” exist on “quite distinct levels” (*Blake’s Apocalypse* 154). In the “Commentary” to their edition of *Milton* Kay and Roger Easson—in one of the few places where critics examine the passages from *The Marriage* I have been working with—cite the banquet scene as evidence of Blake’s desire to present “spiritual instruction.” Blake, they continue,

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8. Wilner’s religious term here might be misleading, but in her fascinating study of the prophetic imagination, she uses religious vocabulary much as it was used by Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin. They all appropriate this vocabulary, not to designate a separate “spiritual” realm, but to fuse the religious and the political, with “apocalypse” here bearing as primary referent revolutionary radical change in human life, in Blake’s words, “in this world.”

9. As I indicated earlier, David Punter’s work does seem to me to view Blake in a genuinely dialectical manner. In addition to his works cited above, his “Blake: Creative and Uncreative Labour” is excellent. Also close to my position are the Blake essays by Punter and by David Aers in *Romanticism and Ideology: Studies in English Writing, 1765-1830*, eds. David Aers, Jonathan Cook, and David Punter. Jackie Di Salvo’s *War of Titans: Blake’s Critique of Milton and the Politics of Religion* is also an excellent Marxist approach to important aspects of Blake, though it does not address the specific matters of concern to me in this essay. Of the other major works which stress the relevance for Blake studies of political, social and historical concerns, David V. Erdman’s *Blake, Prophet Against Empire* remains the most important; all of us who seek to look at Blake from a holistic, materialist perspective will always be in his debt for grounding Blake in such a rich, full texture of the immediate history of his time. Even closer to my concerns, but still marred by various forms of reductionist error and/or lack of theoretical sophistication, are Mark Schorer, *The Politics of Vision*; J. Bronowski, *William Blake and the Age of Revolution*; and Stewart Crehan, *Blake in Context*. Although these works differ, in all of them the social and historical tends to be privileged and separated rather than being seen in dialectical interaction with Blake’s other preoccupations. *The “Heaven” and “Hell” of William Blake* by G. R. Sabri-Tabrizi purports to be a “Marxist” interpretation; but it is certainly an embarrassment to anyone else who wishes to work within that tradition; its howlers and malapropisms are matched only by its simplistic interpretations and its complete lack of theoretical understanding. The treatment of Blake by E. P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class* remains a model of thoughtful, non-reductionist and effective use of literary materials by a great historian. Finally, Raymond Williams’ works have always provided crucial insights into the dialectic of culture and society. On Blake see *The Country and the City*, especially the discussion of “London” (148-51).

“is a spiritual teacher, a prophet, who, having ‘discovered the infinite in every thing’ is committed to ‘raising other men into a perception of the infinite’” (Blake, *Milton* 135).<sup>10</sup> The agency of mystification here is the repeated word “spiritual.” By separating the spiritual “level” from matters of, say, sexual repression and economic oppression, the Eassons, like Bloom, deflect the arrows of Blake’s critique. They obscure Blake’s central awareness that the “spiritual” must not be seen as a separate realm but in its dialectical inter-relation with all other aspects of human social reality. The very fact that they don’t see the implications of Blake’s linking infinite awareness with indignation and conscience in the instances they cite is a significant fact: it indicates the *difficulty* of Blake’s dialectical vision and the strength of the powerful resistance it occasions.

In the “Preface” to *Marxism and Form* Jameson sums up the effects and implications of our intellectual tradition—“that mixture of political liberalism, empiricism and logical positivism”—in this way:

the anti-speculative bias of that tradition, its emphasis on the individual fact or item at the expense of the network of relationships in which that item may be embedded, continue to encourage submission to what is by preventing its followers from *making connections*, and in particular from drawing the otherwise unavoidable *conclusions* on the political level. (x; emphasis added)

Jameson is describing exactly what Blake himself called “single vision,” the mechanistic, “horizoned,” marked off, “chartered” thought where “Science” and imagination are assumed to be entirely separated and disconnected realms. The Eassons’ assumptions of entirely separate “spiritual” understanding is another sort of single vision, as is the infinite deferral of judgment or even of truth in Derrida and the post-structuralists, a deferral which abolishes a priori the honest indignation and engagement which is both fruit and root of Blake’s holistic dialectical vision.

I shall return here at the end to my recent flash of understanding in the classroom with which I began this essay. But even this formula, like that of the Eassons, is distorting: it wasn’t “my” understanding that was engendered, but rather “an” understanding, developed out of the concrete situation of the classroom. The power of the anti-dialectical hegemonic cultural forces with which Blake wanted to do battle is inscribed in our “common” usages of language, and that power is surely indicated by the fact that it took the adrenalin, shared enterprise, and shared insight of the classroom finally to allow Blake’s particular dialectical leap and its significance to appear to me after years of reading *The Marriage* and its critics, teaching it and writing about it. As on the occasion when I had intended to point out to my class in “The Modern European Novel” the significance of the fact that K. in *The Trial* was an officer in a bank but “forgot” to say it during successive class meetings, so with *The Marriage* I had not been

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10. In his review of this edition of *Milton*, Joseph Wittreich criticizes the Eassons’ Commentary, finding it to be “obviously mistaken” (51), but he makes no reference to their use of the passages from *The Marriage*.

able really to see what I now think is the most important wisdom of the banquet scene, though once the doors of perception become a bit more cleansed, it seems so clear, so obvious.

Such blatant blocking—to use Freud’s term for the exercise of the faculty of repression—is, of course, but one of the mind-forg’d manacles, the unconscious strategies of containment by means of which a dialectical understanding of our own situation is avoided. For Blake, exactly that dialectical awareness is the goal and source of his poetry. Because his holistic vision always revealed, in Jameson’s phrase, “the unavoidable political consequences,” the expanded awareness toward which he directs us has to include conscience, indignation, with all their urgings toward engagement. The obstacles to genuinely dialectical thought are so nearly overwhelming; the desire that we not reach radically oppositional political positions is but one indication and result of a dominant culture hostile everywhere to such thought. We all bring to our work modes of thought and perception of a generally American, “global” capitalist nature—the traditional modes of thought of the “humanities” which conceive of experience as a possession, and the self as self-subsisting outside of, or at least transcending, the relationships in which it is situated. Such modes of thought in complex and overdetermined ways keep us from awareness of the infinite, from making connections, with the result (among others) that we separate the “spiritual” from its network of dialectical and material relationships, “understanding” from its genesis.

This is why Blake’s writing lends itself so well to teaching, why his banquet, like that of Plato, describes the *situation* of teaching. There are, in the classroom situation, forces acting in dialectical opposition to the “humanistic” assumptions of our culture, forces which can counter and alter their negative effects—the complacency and self-congratulation they encourage, their narrowing of vision to exclude a larger view of their objects and of the possibilities of humanity themselves—without denying the positive “human” content of such assumptions. In the classroom from the sometimes desperate need to make things clear can come a Brechtian “*plumpes Denken*”—“think crudely!”—which sometimes forces a truth to the surface of awareness. The collective nature of the classroom enterprise can sometimes subvert the separations and fragmentations of “normal” academic thought. The genuine interactions in classroom engagements with a common text (when they in fact occur) allow us to achieve the dialectical knowledge which most of our cultural training makes so hard for us to see. Such is the genesis of “my” reading of Blake, the insight which is not simply a conception, but an engagement with the world first enacted in class. Blake’s prophetic vision, in *The Marriage* as elsewhere, seems the perfect text to inspire other discourse that moves beyond contemplation and refinement to the active engagement between discourse and human social reality.

This is why a banquet is such a fine metaphor for teaching: joining as it does body function, social life, and discourse, it inscribes our intellectual life, as teaching does, in a network of relationships whose aims—pleasure? duty? “understanding”? etc.—are as humanly complex as the vision Blake shares and engenders. Blake knew quite well it is possible to be misunderstood and to have

that misunderstanding transformed into an imposition upon us. But like any honest teacher, he assumes the intelligence of his interlocutors and the possibility of resistance to imposition. Thus he notes that what “can be made explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care” (702). What he does find worth his concern is not simply a vision arising out of engagement with others and with the world—although this is, of course, of great moment in Blake. What concerns him more importantly, as a prophet and a teacher, is the indignation that can arise out of that vision, so that “spiritual” and “intellectual” things remain engaged and are realized in the world.

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