CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF

"The Marriage of Heaven and Hell"

Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" is the longest of his works included in this volume. This free-flowing series of writings begins as a poem; then offers a series of observations about life and brief stories about Biblical prophets, angels and devils; and ends with an almost apocalyptic verse. Blake questions and criticizes Christian beliefs, citing Roman and Greek mythology and the work of Milton to support his arguments. The final line of the work is telling: "For every thing that lives is Holy." Blake is opposed to organized religion, and in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" he explains the evolution in his spiritual life to his current beliefs.

The work starts with a section of prose, "The Argument", that describes the taking of a dangerous journey through life whose goal is arrival in Heaven. The holy path is treacherous, and a misstep can be fatal. A "villain" chases the good person off the path and into the wild to find his way among lions, problematizing the journey. In a style typical of Blake's poetic work, such as "The Tyger," the first lines are repeated to end the poem. In "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" this device is effective.

The next writing describes "a new heaven." It is the first Easter Sunday. Emmanuel Swedenborg, the Swedish scientist and theologian who founded the Church of the New Jerusalem, is the angel guarding the tomb of Christ. His writings are compared to the shroud of linen that covered Christ in death. Blake makes his views very clear: that humankind needs Heaven and Hell because without choice and opposites mankind would have no reason to evolve:

> Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate are necessary to Human existence.
>
> From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy.
>
> Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell.

The next segment criticizes the Bible and points out its errors. Simply put: Man has a body and a soul; energy is evil; reason is good. The body craves energy, which is evil. Blake criticizes the Bible for claiming that God will punish man for "following his Energies". Blake's truth is that the body and soul cannot be separated, that energy is life and reason surrounds energy. Instead of "energy" as man's temptation and ultimate downfall, then, it is his eternal delight. Blake cites Milton's *Paradise Lost* as an example of the result of desire denied.

At this point in the work, Blake breaks from arguing his theories on humankind and God to recount fables. The first of these "Memorable Fancies" takes Blake to Hell. There, he is among "Genius; which to the Angels look like torment and insanity." He uses the story as a segue to his "Proverbs of Hell", a series of maxims about life such as

"A wholsom food is caught without a net or trap"

"Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion."

"The fox condemns the trap, not himself."

"The bird a nest, the spider a web, man friendship"

"The best wine is the oldest, the best water the newest."

The next segment discusses the gods of ancient Greece and Rome. There, poets named the deities and ascribed to them characteristics of nature. The people in these times prayed and sacrificed to gods created by writers. This leads to the second "Memorable Fancy"; this time, Blake is having a conversation with the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel. In this fictional tale, the Prophets say they made up the God of the Jews—a divinity different from the gods of other countries. Isaiah and Ezekiel told Blake in this fantasy that the hardships they suffered were similar to what poets in ancient Greece and Rome and American Indians did for their art and beliefs.

When the dream ends, Blake predicts that the world will be destroyed by fire six thousand years after its creation. The flames will purify all, and all will live forever. He then says it is his mission to clarify the myth that man's body and soul are separate. He will do this by printing his word in the "infernal method"; and this he did do, publishing his own works by engraving on copper plates in a very labor-intensive and time-consuming process that prevented his

publishing as many books as he might have done through more conventional methods. In any case, Blake compares his form of printing to Hell: the flames of Hell melt away the superficial to show that all is infinite.

A theme of printing forms a bridge to the next "Memorable Fancy": a trip to Hell's printing house. There dragons, a viper, an eagle, and lions take books from their creation, dress them up, build them up, and then put them in libraries. It is not the most positive description of the industry.

Blake now gets back to the "contraries" mentioned earlier in the work. He contends that there are only two kinds of people, the Prolific and the Devouring, and that these opposites are both inimical to each other and necessary—for if they were reconciled mankind would cease to exist. Blake accuses religion of trying to unite these opposites and explains that even Jesus Christ came not to unite but to divide.

In the next "Memorable Fancy," Blake debates an angel. The angel warns Blake that the path he is on will lead to damnation and then asks the angel to show him the eternal choices, that he might decide which is the better. The speaker sees the fiery abyss, spiders, and horrific storms that would plague him forever in Hell; he then sees a moonlit river, near which a harp plays in peace. The speaker dresses in a white robe and takes the angel and the writings of Swedenborg to a place between the planet Saturn and the stars. They enter a church, pass through the Bible, and enter a pit. Here they find monkeys, chained up and scratching each other. The monkeys pretend to care for each other, then devour their own. The angel is upset by what he has seen. Blake ends the vision by telling the angel that attempts at the religious conversion of others are futile.

In "Opposition Is True Friendship," Blake attacks Swedenborg. He criticizes the theologian's writings as offering no new insights into religion, only old lies. He says Swedenborg's approach is one-sided, dealing only with angels and not with devils. With no "contraries" in his professed faith, Blake claims, he condemns humankind.

The next "Memorable Fancy" portrays Blake as witness to a discussion between an angel and a devil. The devil describes the worship of God as the appreciation of God's gifts in other people; if one is jealous of another's gifts, by the devil's reasoning, then one

does not love God. The angel replies that God is visible in Jesus Christ and Christ gave his blessing to the Ten Commandments. The devil retorts that Jesus did not always follow the Ten Commandments or any other tenet of Judaism. The angel then turns into the prophet Elijah; Blake calls the angel a devil, and they read the Bible together.

As we near the end of "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell", the work takes on an almost apocalyptic tone. "A Song of Liberty" offers a violent description of the end, painting England as a victim of a fiery destruction and military defeat. Ultimately, the King cries out, "The Empire is no more!" The "chorus" that follows foreshadows the end of the Church. The final line—"For every thing that lives is Holy"—reflects Blake's own beliefs. While his spiritual life exceeded the boundaries of established spirituality, the Church filled the necessary function of opposition: "Without contraries there is no progression."

CRITICAL VIEWS ON

"The Marriage of Heaven and Hell"

Joseph Anthony Wittreich Jr. on Parody of Religious Writings

> [Joseph Anthony Wittreich Jr. taught at the University of Wisconsin and co-edited *Blake's Sublime Allegory*. He also wrote *Nineteenth-Century Accounts of William Blake* and the essay "Painted Prophecies: The Tradition of Blake's Illuminated Books". This essay compares "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" to the Bible's Book of Revelation and Blake's interpretation to those of Milton and Swedenborg.]

Swedenborg had announced a "new heaven" in 1757, but as Blake looks around himself he discovers that Swedenborg's "heaven" is "the Eternal Hell revive[d]," that Swedenborg is, by his own definition, the devil in that hell (*MHH* 3: 34). In *The Apocalypse Revealed*, Swedenborg distinguishes between the hell called "the Devil," by which he means the hell created by those "who are in the love of self," and the hell called "Satan," by which he means the hell created by those who live by "falsities" and "who are in the pride of their own intelligence."[20] Swedenborg begins *The Apocalypse Revealed* with a proclamation: "There are many who labored in the explanation of the *Apocalypse*; but, as the spiritual sense of the Word had been hitherto unknown they could not see the arcana which he concealed therein. for the spiritual sense alone discloses these." Then he makes a pronouncement: *I* am the visionary with "a particular enlightenment" and will now reveal the Book of Revelation.[21] From Blake's viewpoint, Swedenborg "conciev'd himself as much wiser" than be really was. Swedenborg "shews the folly of churches, & exposes hypocrites, till he imagines that all are religious, & himself the single one on earth that ever broke a net." However, this is the "plain fact," says Blake: "Swedenborg has not written one new truth: Now hear another: he has written all the old falsehoods" (*MHH* 21–22; 41–42). *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is structured around the opposition between the true and false prophet represented

in the satire by Milton and Swedenborg respectively. Like Newton, Swedenborg tried to reduce the spiritual sense, the sublime allegory, of Revelation to corporeal understanding and thereby perverted true religion into a corrupt orthodoxy. Like Milton, Blake preserves the visionary dimension of prophecy, even if doing so requires transforming all the Lord's people into prophets. Rather than perverting sublime allegory into falsehood, Blake would convert an entire civilization into a nation of visionaries. This Newton refused to do and Swedenborg failed to do, both of them by bruising Saint John's minute articulations, and Newton by denying that God ever designed to make people into prophets.[22]

Even so, if Newton and Swedenborg were seen by Blake, on occasion, as types of the false prophet, they were also seen by him, on other occasions, in the posture of the redeemed man. Both Newton and Swedenborg articulated conceptions of prophecy compatible with Blake's own, which explains why in *Milton* Swedenborg is represented as "strongest of men" (22: 50) and why in *Jerusalem* Newton rides a chariot when, "at the clangor of the Arrows of intellect," the apocalypse occurs (98: 7). Precisely because Newton was bound to his own religious culture, he understood that the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation were related not only to one another but to all other scriptural prophecies, "so that all of them together make but one complete Prophecy" that "consists of two parts, an introductory Prophecy, and an Interpretation thereof."[23] Each prophet is both creator of his visions and interpreter of them; and every subsequent prophet repeats the pattern but, in the process, becomes an interpreter both of his own visions and of the vision of his predecessors. Behind Newton's understanding is the perception that the Apocalypse subsumes all previous prophetic structures. The Apocalypse is simultaneously an interpretation and a prophecy; by way of repeating all previous prophecies it comments on them, but it also introduces a series of seven new visions, each of which interprets the one it supersedes until in the final vision all things burst into clarity. Swedenborg reveals exactly this understanding when he depicts chapter 22 of Revelation as both in individual vision and a revelation of the total meaning of the Apocalypse.

From Newton and Swedenborg incidentally and from Spenser and

Milton quite centrally, Blake took his prophetic stance; and from them all he learned that prophecy had a structure, which epic poetry could appropriate and accommodate. Austin Farrer has observed quite perceptively that in composing the Book of Revelation "St. John was making a new form of literature," but he concludes quite mistakenly that John "had no successor."[24] In Blake's epics, conventional structures are subdued, though not fully eliminated, and the living form of Revelation prophecy imparts the "new" epic structure. Blake's epics turn to Saint John, the last great prophet in Scripture, and to John Milton, the last great prophet in the epic mode; and then they turn, for their structural model, to the culminating vision of each prophet: Milton's vision of paradise regained and John's of apocalypse. In those prophecies, "the summe of Religion is shewed," and it is Blake's task to reveal the essence of those visions, which commentators on Revelation understood as "allegories," penetrable by only the initiated, and which eighteenth-century commentators on Milton seemed not to have understood at all.[25]

NOTES

20. Translated by John Whitehead (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1931), I, 113.

21. Ibid., p. iii.

22. See Newton, *Observations*, esp. pp. 251–252, where he says that "the folly of Interpreters" has been to speak "as if God designed to make them Prophets," and then argues that "the design of God was much otherwise."

23. Ibid., p. 254.

24. *A Rebirth of Images: The Making of St. John's Apocalypse* (London: Dacre Press, 1919), p. 305.

25. See Hugh Broughton, *A Revelation of the Holy Apocalypse* ([London], 1610), and my Introduction to *Milton's "Paradise Regained": Two Eighteenth-Century Critiques by Richard Meadowcoart and Charles Dunster* (Gainesville, Fla.: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1971).

> —Joseph Anthony Wittreich Jr., "Opening the Seals: Blake's Epics and the Milton Tradition," *Blake's Sublime Allegory*, ed. Stuart Curran and Joseph Anthony Wittreich (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), 29–32.

MAX PLOWMAN ON HOPE AND FEAR

[Max Plowman wrote *An Introduction to the Study of Blake* in 1927. In this excerpt, Plowman discusses Blake's Heaven and Hell as representations of man's hopes and fears.]

Blake suddenly saw these two great contraries as complementary. So he joined them in holy wedlock and wrote *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. He solved the mystery in himself. Heaven, the realm of Hope, lay before him. Hell, the region of Fear, lay behind. Vision was the synchronization of the two. The meeting of hope and fear was vision, and vision was the perception of identity itself.

The spiritual life descended and was from Heaven. The instinctive life ascended and was from Hell. As the plant had its roots in the ground while its shoots aspired towards the sky, so man, rooted in Hell, aspired to Heaven and flowered upon Earth. Life instead of being, as the Churches taught, the opportunity for exercising moral virtue or goodness, and thus showing that man was one with the Divine Essence, was the means by which man achieved conscious individual identity, which identity had nothing to do with good or evil, being an eternal reality awaiting human recognition. This Principle of identity held good for all things. Sheep and goats, angels and devils, good men and evil men, cunning and courageous, prolific and devourers—all were necessary to human existence, for Without contraries human life was unthinkable. Mortality was not the opportunity for man's pathetic effort towards eternal sameness, but was immortality made visible: distinction and difference revealed so that every living thing might exhibit its eternal form, and by showing its eternal form reveal its individual holiness.

Thus at one bound Blake released himself from the toils of morality and surpassed not only Swedenborg but his old friend the moralist Lavater. Henceforth Good and Evil ceased to be the essential differences; the essential differences lay deeper and were not to be resisted, being as necessary to human life as the contrary acts of respiration were to the body.

For a moment Blake rejoiced in the sense of freedom that always ensues when we have put behind us restraints not of our own making, and all restraint seems to be the work of the devil. But of course Blake had not solved the insoluble problem of duality: he had

only raised the standard. The moment we cease to conform to external discipline, in that moment life imposes upon us the necessity of conforming to a far more rigorous discipline—the self-discipline upon which true form depends. Blake passed from the discipline of good and evil to the far more rigorous discipline of imaginative or unimaginative life, and having written the enfranchising *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, he was soon to find, in tears of repentance, that the very means whereby we achieve spiritual enfranchisement quickly turns to pride unless we pass from vision to vision. God made duality that man might know the supreme joy of balance in the ecstasy of creation; but when vision fades and we eat in pride the fruits of vision, fancying that we have attained, we turn our joy to sorrow. In his moment of insight Blake enfranchised the human body as a part of the human soul; but unless I misinterpret the tears of Urizen in the Fifth Night of *Vala*, the body, in Blake's idea, assumed a pride in its own glory during the years that intervened, and taught Blake that Gods may "combine against Man setting their dominion above The Human Form Divine", and that none is so ready to do this as a rightly-enfranchised instinct.

But now Blake saw very clearly what has since been demonstrated psychologically, that the repression of energy only changes its shape.

How did this discovery appear in the light of Christian dogma?

The Christianity that was based upon the Ten Commandments appeared to exist chiefly to exercise this restraint upon human instinct. It put division between the soul and body and by this putting asunder attempted to frustrate the essential purpose of mortal life which was the manifestation of the soul in form. It separated human life from the continuous life of Eternity by making moral perfection, which was only possible to God as essence, the ideal of human life; the true ideal being the complete revelation of individual identity. In consequence it necessarily destroyed the whole purpose of incarnation. God was removed from earth and transplanted to the abstract heaven, and Jesus, instead of being the Incarnate Word, became merely an ideal historical character.

Blake regarded the Christianity of his day as the spiritual atavism Jesus came to destroy. It was the worship of God as light, a worship which Blake indicates in "The Little Black Boy" as natural and right

to man in the childhood of the race, but atavistic and wrong to those who lived in the imaginative manhood of the race. The Divine Image a human form displayed. Even the Little Black Boy, living in the childhood of the race as he is, learns that he is put on earth a little space not only that he may learn to bear the beams of love, but that when he has done this, it may be for the express purpose of shading, his white brother: of being "like him" and thus discovering the Divine Image in a human form.

Blake saw the crux of the whole matter lay in the denial of spiritual purpose to instinctive life. So *The Marriage* resolves itself into a justification of instinct. Not the restraint, but the imaginative redemption of instinct is the purpose of experience; for when this is complete, not only will the five senses appear as "inlets of soul", but the cherub with his flaming sword will leave his guard at the Tree of Life and everything will appear as it is, infinite and holy. Everything that lives is holy, for everything possesses within itself its own sacred law of life, a law that can only be contravened by the imposition of any external law.

> —Max Plowman, *An Introduction to the Study of Blake* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1967), 116–119.

David V. Erdman on Spirituality Versus Society

> [David V. Erdman taught at the State University of New York, Stony Brook. He edited *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* and wrote *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* and the *Concordance of the Works of Blake*; he also served as editor of the publications of the New York Public Library. This essay contrasts the spiritual side of the writing to the work's social implications.]

Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* mocks those who can accept a spiritual apocalypse but are terrified at a resurrection of the body of society itself. "Energy is the only life and is from the Body," announces the Devil, and it is "Eternal Delight" though the religious may call it Evil (pl. 4). The birth and resurrection of Christ are not the equal and opposite exhalations of the theosophists but

progressive stages in the life of man.[8] Blake rejects Swedenborg's "spiritual equilibrium" between good and evil for a theory of spiraling "Contraries" that will account for progress. "Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence" (pl. 3). Such *unnecessary* opposites as Bastilles and Moral Codes and the "omissions" due to poverty are merely hindrances that may be scattered abroad "to the four winds as a torn book, & none shall gather the leaves." They "spring from" the *necessary* Contraries but are not to be confused with them. Christ stamped the ten commandments to dust, and history will not return to them except perversely.

Blake is half in jest when he speaks of the "marriage" of Heaven and Hell, for Hell does not exist except as the negative way of looking at Energy, while the Heaven of things-as-they-are is really a delusion like the senile "innocence" of Har and Heva which springs from a denial of the true Heaven of progression. Blake's theory admits of a true or necessary Reason as "the bound or outward circumference of Energy" but leaves it no role in "life" except to be pushed about. Reason is the horizon kept constantly on the move by man's infinite desire. The moment it exerts a will of its own and attempts to restrain desire, it turns into that negative and unnecessary Reason which enforces obedience with dungeons, armies, and priestcraft and which Blake refers to, as "the restrainer" which usurps the place of desire and "governs the unwilling." Tiriel was such a deity, and so is the dismal god of the Archbishop of Paris who can no longer restrain the millions from bursting the bars of Chaos. Blake will soon invent for this sterile god a comic name, Nobodaddy (old daddy Nobody), and an epic name, Urizen, signifying *your reason* (not mine) and the limiting *horizon* (Greek . . ., to bound).[9] The poet's hostility toward this "Governor or Reason" is thoroughly republican or, to the modern mind, socialistic.

Blake's intransigence toward any marriage of convenience between Hell and Heaven appears further in an extended metaphor of conflict which he introduces with a play upon Rousseau's pronouncement that man is born free but is everywhere in chains:

> "The Giants who formed this world . . . and now seem to live in it in chains are in truth, the causes of its life & the sources of all activity, but the chains are, the cunning of the weak and tame

minds, which have power to resist energy . . . .

"Thus one portion of being, is the Prolific, the other, the Devouring: to the Devourer it seems as if the producer was in his chains, but it is not so, he only takes portions of existence and fancies that the whole."[10]

There is a substratum of reference here to the economic struggle of producer and exploiter or producer and consumer, not without a Mandevillean echo. This struggle is "eternal" in the sense that the producer and consumer even in the false relationships of slavery and commerce are doing what must always be done to sustain life. They are doing it the cheerless way, but even in the freedom of a classless paradise there will always be work and always an audience for the artist-workman, for "the Prolific would cease to be Prolific unless the Devourer as a sea received the excess of his delights."

But Blake's more immediate focus is upon the politics of moral restraint, and he is condemning the conservatism which seeks to confine the oppressed to a passive acceptance of tyranny. "Religion is an endeavour to reconcile" the "two classes of men" who "should be enemies," i.e. to unite the lion and its prey. But "Jesus Christ did not wish to unite but to separate them, as in the Parable of sheep and goats! & he says I came not to send Peace but a Sword."[11] The illusion that energy can be quietly repressed by celestial "wisdom" is exploded by the very fact of revolution. But the fear that revolution means the cessation of all productive relations and of the very means of existence is equally illusory, as Blake proceeds to demonstrate in his fourth "Memorable Fancy."

In this parable Blake and a conservative Angel who is alarmed at his radical "career" undertake to show each other the post-revolutionary future from their respective points of view. The Angel is unwilling to plunge with Blake into the void of the coming century to see whether the Swedenborgian "providence is here also," because what he sees ahead is a "monstrous serpent" with a forehead colored "green & purple" like "a tygers" (17–18). This is what the Revolution looks like to a Tory, and it is symbolic of the fear of Hell which makes him restrain desire. The monster that terrifies him boils up out of the nether deep beside a "cataract of blood mixed with fire" in a manner that prefigures the birth of Orc in *America* which terrifies the King of England.[13] Blake's "friend the Angel" is

frightened away. But Blake stands his ground; and since he does not allow himself to be imposed upon by the Angel's "metaphysics," he finds that he ends up, not in the belly of a monster, but sitting peacefully "on a pleasant bank beside a river by moonlight hearing a harper who sung to the harp, & his theme was, The man who never alters his opinion is like standing. water, & breeds reptiles of the mind."[14] The Angel is quite surprised to find that Blake has "escaped" alive. But it is only to the stagnant mind that the energy of revolution appears reptilian and sympathy with rebellion a career leading to a "hot burning dungeon . . . to all eternity" (18).

Blake then "imposes upon" the Tory in his turn, showing this Guildenstern a vision of his future lot, assuming the Swedenborgian Hell to be true. The Tory's clinging to the status quo means that he accepts a phantasmal eternity of cannibalistic relations between Producers and Devourers. A person who assumes that people belong in chains and who scorns the multitude as swinish has nothing to look forward to but a loathly conflict of "monkeys, baboons, & all of that species chain'd by the middle." The Devourers, politician-like, grin and kiss "with seeming fondness" the body of a victim they are devouring limb by limb.[15] The implication seems to be that only those who cannot imagine progressive social change must view the Negations as eternal and assume that human relations will be forever those of joyless slavery.

NOTES

8. To Swedenborg "the delight of the body" is definitely "not heavenly." And his ordered hierarchy of identical but opposite celestial and infernal institutions suggests an essentially static universe. The rich and poor remain rich and poor in Heaven—and presumably in Hell—and the wise Angel, as Swedenborg has been told by Angels of distinction, does not aspire above his rank. *Heaven and Hell*, pars. 35, 375–381, 537.

9. The "reason" in "Urizen" has long been accepted. First to note the "horizon" in it was F. E. Pierce, in 1931. "Nobody's daddy" for "old Nobodaddy" was suggested by John Sampson in 1905.

10. *M.H.H.* 16. A discussion of the "Argument" of *The Marriage*, proper at this point, will be found below (p. 186)—because I originally believed it to be of later vintage; I now see, from the style of lettering, that it cannot have been etched later than 1791.

11. *M.H.H.* 17; cf. *An Answer to the Parson*, *N*. 103: "Why of the sheep do you

not learn peace[?] Because I don't want you to shear my fleece."

In *M.H.H.* Blake is, as he hints, turning back from Swedenborg's sweetness to the "Wrath" of Boehme, who wrote that "unless there were a *contrarium* in God, there would be . . . nothing . . . merely God . . . in a sweet meekness," and that strife "between the fierceness and the meekness" must continue, to eternity. See citations in Stephen Hobhouse, *Selected Mystical Writings of William Law*, New York, 1948, p. 370. For Blake's use of Swedenborg and Boehme in *M.H.H.* see Nurmi, *Blake's Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, pp. 25–59.

12. A suggestion for the passage may be seen in Swedenborg's *True Christian Religion*, par. 74, in which the seer himself is the spokesman of a doctrine that alarms his auditors (they are shocked at how much his stress on "order" seems to *bind* the Omnipotent; he advises those who see a Leviathan in this to hack through it as Alexander did the Gordian knot).

13. The monster is sighted "in the east, distant about, three degrees" or about the distance of Paris from London, as Nurmi points out.

14. *M.H.H.* 19. The harper is doubtless Welsh. In 1791 Blake was employed by Johnson to illustrate a small book by Mary Wollstonecraft. His pictures are faithful to the text with the exception of "The Welsh harper in the hut." Here the story calls for an elderly bard, but Blake has drawn an eager-faced youth.

Note the later ironic comment, in *J.*65, during the long war: " . . . this is no gentle harp . . . nor shadow of a mirtle tree."

15. *M.H.H.* 20. Blake elaborates with Dantesque literalness here Swedenborg's par. 575 on "the gnashing of teeth." He also draws heavily on par. 585 for the cavern entrance to Hell, for an allusion to "stagnant pools," and for a description of the "continual quarrels, enmities, blows, and fightings" in one of the hells. And of course Blake is making the most of Swedenborg's own definition of the fires etc. of Hell as only "appearances."

—David V. Erdman, Blake: *Prophet Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 178–182.

Harold Bloom on the Contraries in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell"

[Harold Bloom is a Sterling Professor of the Humanities at Yale University. He has written more than 16 books and edited more than 30 anthologies, including *Blake's Apocalypse*, *William Blake's* Songs of Innocence and of Experience, and *Modern Critical Views: William Blake*. In this extract, Bloom considers the various contraries

presented in the poem and how they relate to what is human. He also touches on the irony of progress with respect to the cyclical nature of the poem.]

The poem that opens the *Marriage* as "argument" has not been much admired, nor much understood. Rintrah, the angry man in Blake's pantheon, rears and shakes his fires in the burdened air; clouds, hungry with menace, swag on the deep. The poem is a prelude, establishing the tone of prophetic fury that is to run beneath the *Marriage*; the indignation of Rintrah presages the turning over of a cycle.

The poem itself has the cyclic irony of *The Mental Traveller*. The "just man" or "Devil" now rages in the wilds as outcast, having been driven out of "perilous paths" by the "villain" or "Angel." This reversal is simple enough, if it is true reversal, which it is not. The initial complication is provided by the sixth to ninth lines of the poem:

> Roses are planted where thorns grow,
> And on the barren heath
> Sing the honey bees.

Grow, not *grew*; *sing*, not *sang*. We are already involved in the contraries. Cliff is opposed to river, tomb to spring, bleached bones to the red clay of Adam (literal Hebrew meaning). The turning of this cycle converts the meek just man into the prophetic rager, the easeful villain into the serpent sneaking along in mild humility. The triple repetition of "perilous path" compounds the complication. First the just man keeps the perilous path as he moves toward death. But "*then* the perilous path was planted . . . / *Till* the villain left the path of ease, / To walk in perilous paths."

We grasp the point by embracing both contraries, not by reconciling them. There is progression here, but only in the ironic sense of cycle. The path, the way of generation that can only lead to death, is always being planted, the just man is always being driven out; the villain is always usurping the path of life-in-death. When the just man returns from being a voice in the wilderness, he drives the villain back into the nonexistence of "paths of ease." But "just man" and "villain" are very nearly broken down as categories here; the equivocal "Devil" and "Angel" begin tn loom as the *Marriage*'s

contraries. The advent of the villain upon the perilous path marks the beginning of a new "heaven," a "mild humility" of angelic restraint. So Blake leaves his argument and plunges into his satiric nuptial Song:

> As a new heaven is begun and it is now thirty-three years since its advent, the Eternal Hell revives.

Swedenborg, writing in his *True Christian Religion*, had placed the Last Judgment in the spiritual world in 1757, the year of Blake's birth. In 1758 Swedenborg published *his* vision of judgment, *Heaven and Hell*. Now, writing in 1790, at the Christological age of thirty-three, Blake celebrates in himself the reviving of the Eternal Hell, the voice of desire and rebellion crying aloud in desert places against the institution of a new divine restraint, albeit that of the visionary Swedenborg, himself a Devil rolled round by cycle into Angelic category.

Before the *Marriage* moves into diabolical gear, Blake states the law of his dialectic:

> Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.

The key here is *Human*, which is both descriptive and honorific. This is a dialectic without transcendence, in which heaven and hell are to be married but without becoming altogether one flesh or one family. By the "marriage" of contraries Blake means only that we are to cease valuing one contrary above the other in any way. Echoes of Isaiah xxxiv and xxxv crowd through the *Marriage*, and a specific reference to those chapters is given here by Blake. Reading Isaiah in its infernal sense, as he read *Paradise Lost*, Blake can acknowledge its apocalypse as his own. As the imaginative hell revives, the heaven of restraint comes down.

> And all the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll: and all their host shall fall down. (Isaiah xxxiv.4) (. . .)

Therefore, the contraries, when next stated in the famous "Voice of the Devil" passage, have ceased strictly to be contraries. Blake's lower or earthly paradise, Beulah Land, is a state of being or place where contraries are equally true, but the *Marriage* is written out of the state of Generation, our world in its everyday aspect, where progression is necessary. Christian dualism is therefore a negation,

hindrance, not action, and is cast out beyond the balance of contraries. Blake does not build truth by dialectic, being neither a rational mystic like Plato nor a mystic rationalist like Hegel. Nothing eternal abides behind forms for Blake; he seeks reality in appearances, though he rejects appearance as it is perceived by the lowest-common-denominator kind of observer. Between the cloven fiction of St. Paul's mind–body split and the emotionalism of the celebrator of a state of nature exists the complex apocalyptic humanism of the *Marriage*, denying metaphysics, accepting the hard given of this world, but only insofar as this appearance is altogether human.

Here it has been too easy to mistake Blake for Nietzsche, for D. H. Lawrence, for Yeats, for whatever heroic vitalist you happen most to admire. The *Marriage* preaches the risen body breaking bounds, exploding upward into psychic abundance. But here Blake is as earnest as Lawrence, and will not tolerate the vision of recurrence, as Nietzsche and Yeats do. The altogether human escapes cycle, evades irony, cannot be categorized discursively. But Blake is unlike Lawrence, even where they touch. The Angel teaches light without heat, the vitalist—or Devil—heat without light; Blake wants both, hence the marriage of contraries. (. . .)

In crude terms, the problem is where the stuff of life comes from; where does Reason, divinity of the "Angels," obtain the substance that it binds and orders, the energy that it restrains? By stealing it from the *Urgund* of the abyss, is Blake's diabolic answer. We are almost in the scheme of *The Four Zoas*: the Messiah *fell*, stole the stuff of creativity, and formed "heaven." One contrary is here as true as another: this history has been adopted by both parties. One party, come again to dominance among us, now condemns Blake as a persuasive misreader of *Paradise Lost*. When, in another turn of the critical wheel, we go back to reading *Paradise Lost* in its infernal or poetic sense, as Blake, Shelley, and a host of nineteenth-century poets and scholars did, we will have to condemn a generation of critical dogmatists for not having understood the place of dialectic in literary analysis.

The "Memorable Fancies," brilliant exercises in satire and humanism, form the bulk of the *Marriage*, and tend to evade Blake's own dialectic, being, as they are, assaults, furious and funny, on

Angelic culpability. The dialectic of the *Marriage* receives its definitive statement once more in the work, in the opposition of the Prolific and the Devouring. If one grasps that complex passage, one is fortified to move frontally against the most formidable and properly most famous section of the *Marriage*, the "Proverbs of Hell," where dialectic and rhetoric come together combatively in what could be judged the most brilliant aphorisms written in English, seventy gnomic reflections and admonitions on the theme of diabolic vision.

> —Harold Bloom, *The Ringers in th eTower: Studies in Romanntic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 56–60.

W.J.T. Mitchell on the Marriage of Images and Words

> [W.J.T. Mitchell is the Gaylord Distinguished Service Professor of Art and Literature at the University of Chicago. His publications include *Blake's Composite Art*, *Picture Theory*, and the essays "Visible Language: Blake's Wond'rous Art of Writing" and "Metamorphoses of the Vortex: Hogarth, Turner and Blake". In this writing, Mitchell explains how the artwork accompanying "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" complements the combination of contraries.]

It is important to remember the adjective "apparent" when talking about the discrepancies between Blake's designs and text, however, for if we are correct, the most disparate pictorial and verbal structures must conceal a subtle identity of significance. The title page of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* {3} exemplifies the way in which the apparent unrelatedness of content in design and text belies the close affinities of formal arrangement. A pair of nudes embrace in a subterranean scene at the bottom of the page, the one on the left emerging from flames, the one on the right from clouds. The top of the page is framed by a pair of trees, between which are two sets of human figures. No scene in the poem corresponds to this picture,[17] and yet it is a perfect representation of the poem's theme, the marriage of contraries:

> Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human Existence.
>
> From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy.
>
> Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell. (*MHH* 3)

Every aspect of the composition is deployed to present this vision of contraries: flames versus clouds, red versus blue, the aggressive inward thrust of the female flying up from the left versus the receptive outward pose of the figure on the right. At the top, the trees on the left reach their branches across to the right, while the trees on the right recoil into themselves. The couple beneath the trees on the left walk hand in hand toward the right. The couple on the right face away, and are separated, one kneeling, the other lying on the ground. This last detail suggests that the composition is not simply a visual blending of contraries, but also a statement about their relative value. The active side presents a harmonious vision of the sexes; the passive, an inharmonious division, in which the male seems to be trying to woo the female from her indifference by playing on a musical instrument.[18] This tipping of the balance in favor of the "Devil's Party" is accentuated by the direction of movement that pervades the whole design. If we were simply to have a balanced presentation of contraries such as the text suggests, we would expect a simple symmetrical arrangement, with a vertical axis down the center. But, in fact, the whole kinesis of the composition, accentuated by the flying nudes in the center, produces an axis which goes from the lower left corner to the upper right. If one were to draw vectors indicating the probable course of the figures in the center of the design, the result would be [a] diagonal axis.

This tilting of the symmetry of the contraries, is, of course, exactly what happens to the theme of the *Marriage* as Blake treats it. Although the contraries are theoretically equal, Blake has all his fun by identifying himself with the side of the devils. The poem is not simply a self-contained dialectic; it is a dialogue with Blake's own time, and he felt that the "Angels" already had plenty of spokesmen, such as Swedenborg and the apologists for traditional religion and morality. At his particular historical moment, Blake felt that the axis needed to be tilted in favor of energy. Hence, all the good lines in the work and the advantageous pictorial treatments are reserved for the

representatives of Hell. But the style of lettering in the title page returns us to the theoretical equality which Blake sees between the contraries. Both "Heaven" and "Hell" are printed in rather stark block letters; the flamboyant, energetic style of free-flowing lines and swirls is reserved for the key term in the poem, "Marriage."

Blake's departure from the literalist implications of *ut pictura poesis* was not, however, simply confined to the avoidance, in his own work, of mere illustration. The doctrine also had implications for the nature of poetry and painting in general, apart from their employment in a composite form like the illustrated book. The concept of the ideal unity of the arts was used to encourage, on the one hand, "painterly," descriptive poetry like Thomson's, and on the other, "poetical," literary painting like Hogarth's. Poetry was to become pictorial by evoking a flood of images which could be reconstituted in the reader's mind into a detailed scene. Painting was to become poetical by imitating a significant action, with beginning, middle, and end.[19] not just a fleeting moment, and by representing not only the surfaces of things but also the interior passions and characters of men. Each art was expected to transcend its temporal or spatial limitation by moving toward the condition of its sister.

NOTES

17. It has been suggested by John E. Grant that the title page "illustrates" the text of *MHH* 24, which describes the dialogue of an angel and devil, and the conversion of the former into the latter. A considerable number of qualifications would have to accompany this view of the relationship: 1) the textual devil and angel are males, while the pictured figures are female; 2) the text describes a conversation followed by a self-immolation, while the design depicts a sexual encounter; 3) the other details of the design do not seem to refer to the text of plate 24. An accurate understanding of the relationship between the design and any textual echoes of its details must take into account, it seems to me, the complex transformations involved in transposing the elements of one to the other. One could argue, for instance, that self-immolation and sexuality are a kind of natural metaphor, and certainly a very Blakean one; yet this would still only scratch the surface of the complex metaphorical layers that would be involved in any equation of *MHH* 1 with *MHH* 24.

J.E.G.: I agree that some of these reservations need to be borne in mind lest one assume, as Damon does, that the episode depicted is intended as an "illustration" in the sense of a literal depiction of the last Memorable Fancy. The hazards of descriptive generalizations based on a single copy, however, need

also to be guarded against: the round buttocks and long hair on the figure at the left in copy F (Blake Trust facsimile) make the figure seem female, the more svelte buttocks in copy H (Dent facsimile) could easily be those of a male; hair length is not a safe guide; and Blake often chose not to depict the genitalia of indubitably male figures. One could argue that the pictured "Devil" and "Angel" are both androgynes, but it seems simplest to treat them as male and female respectively, as I have done in my discussion of the page in "Two Flowers in the Garden of Experience," in Rosenfeld, *Essays for Damon*, 363–364. For one thing, the word "Marriage" in the title and these embracing figures on the same page (though the page contains other details, since it is designed for viewers, not just readers) require readers to concern themselves with implications that make sense of the conversion of the Angel at the end of the poem. This conversion is described as his encountering "a Devil in a flame of fire" (cf. the left-hand figure in flames in the title page) and, from where he sits "on a cloud" (cf. the right-hand figure), stretching "out his arms embracing the flame of fire"—upon which "he was consumed and arose as Elijah," who, we are reminded later, "comprehends all the Prophetic Characters" (*VLJ* 83). To summarize this as "self-immolation" is to ignore the transparent and traditional sexual symbolism and to forget there was a Devil in this flame. Were not Blake's title and title page designed to make the human presence of a long-haired Devil in the flame embarrassingly obvious to angelic readers? One must, so to speak, take a Black Panther to lunch before he is fit to enter the kingdom of prophecy.

Those who find anything but the expression of this principle anachronistic are invited to observe several facts. The first is that in copy F, the Blake Trust facsimile, the figure at the right is colored dark brown, quite dark enough to be counted as "black" either in the eighteenth century or now, especially when it is contrasted with the very pinkish "white" figure at the left. It would be more convenient for the reader if this color symbolism were reversed so that the infernal character were black, but the viewer will find the further ironies of the actual coloration both intelligible and satisfying. He will also observe that Blake did not employ this color symbolism in most versions of the book, but understand that this does not negate the significance in copies where he did so.

If a contemporary racist, such as Gillray, had seen the title page of copy F, he might have concluded that Blake was advocating miscegenation. But two other considerations will assist the appreciation of Blake's point in all versions of this design. Although the relationships indicated in the background are more intimate, the central consummation depicted is clearly no more than a kiss. In the text of *MHH* 24 Blake neglects to mention the human form in the flame embraced by the Angel—and thus prevents the conversion of angelic character from seeming easy. In the introduction to this section, in plate 22, Blake declares that the writings of Dante are infinitely more informative than those of the angelic Swedenborg; perhaps Blake had already read that episode in the *Purgatorio* where Dante, like all pilgrims to eternity, must pass through the circumambient fire of love to return, like Adam into paradise, to where Beatrice is.

There have been many accounts of what *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

is about. I say it is about the education of the Prophetic Character. Blake is committed to showing how much pain and dislocation such an education demands. Though he was honest about the magnitude of the task, he was glad to join with Moses and Milton in praying that all the Lord's people become prophets.

18. The reclining figure is clearly a woman in copy C (Morgan Library) and in copy D and the Trianon Press facsimile of this copy; the instrument held by the kneeling figure is only suggestively etched—probably a flute or shepherd's pipe, or it could be a lyre.

19. See ch. 9, "The Unity of Action," in Lee's "'Ut Pictura Poesis.'"

—W.J.T. Mitchell, "Blake's Composite Art," *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic*, ed. David V. Erdman and John E. Grant (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 63–66.

Algernon Charles Swinburne on Music and Meaning

[Algernon Charles Swinburne, an influential 19th-century poet and literary critic, was a great admirer of Blake. His essays were published in *The Complete Works of A.C. Swinburne*. In this excerpt, Swinburne, praising the musical quality of the prose, calls the poem Blake's greatest work and comments on Blake's message.]

In 1790 Blake produced the greatest of all his books; a work indeed which we rank as about the greatest produced by the eighteenth century in the line of high poetry and spiritual speculation. The *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* gives us the high-water mark of his intellect. None of his lyrical writings show the same sustained strength and radiance of mind; none of his other works in verse or prose give more than a hint here and a trace there of the same harmonious and humorous power, of the same choice of eloquent words, the same noble command and liberal music of thought; small things he could often do perfectly, and great things often imperfectly; here for once he has written a book as perfect as his most faultless song, as great as his most imperfect rhapsody. His fire of spirit fills it from end to end; but never deforms the body, never singes the surface of the work, as too often in the still noble books of his later life. Across the flicker of flame, under the roll and roar

of water, which seems to flash and resound throughout the poem, a stately music, shrill now as laughter and now again sonorous as a psalm, is audible through shifting notes and fitful metres of sound. The book swarms with heresies and eccentricities; every sentence bristles with some paradox, every page seethes with blind foam and surf of stormy doctrine; the humour is of that fierce grave sort, whose cool insanity of manner is more horrible and more obscure to the Philistine than any sharp edge of burlesque or glitter of irony; it is huge, swift, inexplicable; hardly laughable through its enormity of laughter, hardly significant through its condensation of meaning; but as true and thoughtful as the greatest humourist's. The variety and audacity of thoughts and words are incomparable: not less so their fervour and beauty. 'No bird soars too high if he soars with his own wings.' This proverb might serve as a motto to the book: it is one of many 'Proverbs of Hell'.

> —Algernon Charles Swinburne, "Critics on Blake: 1803–1941," *Critics on Blake: Readings in Literary Criticism*, ed. Judith O'Neill (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1970), 21–22.

Mark Bracher on How "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" Changes the Reader

> [Mark Bracher is Assistant Professor of English and Associate Director of the Center for Literature and Psychoanalysis at Kent State University. His published work includes *Being Form'd: Thinking Through Blake's Milton* and several articles on Blake and psychoanalytic approaches to reading. In this essay, Bracher explores the impact of Blake's writing on his readers.]

In the past half century Blakeans have made considerable progress in comprehending these difficult and often intractable elements, but relatively few attempts have been made to understand how these elements might work to effect that psychological transformation of the reader that Blake so expressly desired. Though many commentators refer to "the reader" in discussing Blake's poetry, their attention tends to focus on the reader's immediate (and

transient) response, rather than on more substantial and permanent transformations that the poetry might promote. The only long-term changes that are even considered are alterations of the reader's philosophical ideas—i.e., the reader's "sacred code" (*MHH* 4)—and even here, little is said about how such alteration is elicited, or about its significance for the reader's total psychic economy. This omission is of course easily explained by the fact that criticism has until recently lacked the tools to carry out such an investigation: it has had no clear notion of how literature might promote psychological transformation. Now, however, although a comprehensive theory of such transformation has still not been developed, advances in our understanding of the role language plays in the psychic economy make it possible to begin to analyze and assess Blake's poetry in the terms in which he himself clearly viewed it: as a force capable of promoting change in the reader. (. . .)

Such, at least, is one path our interpretation can take through the discourse of the Prolific and the Devouring. In the memorable fancy that follows (*MHH* 17–20), we have little choice: we are thrust upon this path by a powerful interpellation. Here we are forced to experience, with the speaker, the power of language from both sides: that of being interpellated, imposed upon, castrated by it, and that of using it to express one's own subjective realities and force others to recognize them. In the first episode of the fancy, we see the "eternal lot" of the speaker as that lot is determined by the angel's orthodox code. We are made to experience a series of repulsive images, which, however, disappear as soon as the angel leaves, to be replaced by a pleasant scene. What we thus experience is the fact that any given code automatically interpellates a hearer into a particular position that entails a proximity with certain specific images and fantasies, together with their attendant anxieties and desires. This is stated quite explicitly when the speaker declares to the angel: "All that we saw was owing to your metaphysics"—i.e., to the fundamental signifying chains of the angel's code. In the second episode of the fancy, we experience the same fact, only this time from the other position, that of phallic potency, as the speaker, with whom we have identified, shows the angel the angel's lot. In this fancy we thus experience in both the imaginary and the symbolic registers the power of the symbolic code to determine imaginary, subjective

experience—i.e., the code's phallic/castrating power.

After a condemnation of logic and systematic reasoning—of remaining within a particular symbolic system, not conversing with devils (desire) and thus opening up the symbolic to the imaginary—we encounter the poem's final memorable fancy, in which we are led through an experience of how our desire can express itself even when we are within an alienating code that denies recognition to our desire. This phallic potency resides in interpretation, and we experience interpretation here in what is perhaps its most potent form—a proto-deconstructive reading. One key term of the orthodox code, "Jesus," is interpreted in such a way as to contradict another key term, the "ten commandments," which the orthodox code places in concord with "Jesus" (as the angel puts it, "Has not Jesus Christ given his sanction to the law of ten commandments?"). In this way, "Jesus," the supreme *point de capiton* of the sacred code, is placed in opposition to other *points de capiton* and, in fact, to codes as such: "Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse: not from rules." This interpretation allows recognition not only for particular desires forbidden by the ten commandments, but for all desire whatsoever. Desire, the antithesis of system, is thus inscribed as a radically self-deconstructing element of the symbolic system itself, and desire as such thus acquires being.

Hence, through this final fancy, we experience two ways of overcoming the castrating power of language and regaining phallic potency: we can accept the code but interpret it in such a way that it accommodates our desire (the speaker's strategy), or we can refuse to accept the given code (Jesus' strategy) and thus (implicitly or explicitly) subscribe to an alternative code. Our desire, that is, can gain recognition either through (strong) reading or (strong, poetic) writing. As Blake's speaker indicates at the first ending of *The Marriage*, we can either "read the Bible," the given code, "in its infernal or diabolical sense," or we can write a "Bible of Hell," a new code in which desires are explicitly recognized, legitimized.

As we have seen, it is in such recognition of desire—such a marriage of heaven (the sacred code) and hell (desire)—that Lacanian psychoanalysis locates the efficacy of the psychoanalytic process. By evoking our repressed desires, by providing us with a new code that offers fuller recognition of our desire, and by

interpellating us to a position where we must either accept such a code or construct it through interpretation, Blake's poem arouses our faculties to act in such a way as to enact a marriage that constitutes psychological transformation. This process constitutes a marriage of heaven and hell in another sense as well: by eliciting deep fantasies of phallic potency and castration within a metaphysical context, the poem allows our desire to assume more coherent, less conflicting forms, in which a (displaced and sublimated) fulfillment (heaven) is possible even in face of the inescapable reality of castration, or human finitude (hell).

> —Mark Bracher, "Rouzing the Faculties: Lacanian Psychoanalysis and the Marriage of Heaven and Hell in the Reader," *Critical Paths: Blake and the Argument of Method*, ed. Dan Miller, Mark Bracher, and Donald Ault (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 168.