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IN THE LAND OF ULRO: SATAN AS A CONCEPT OF MISTAKEN CREATIVITY IN WILLIAM BLAKE'S POETRY AND DESIGNS

Abstract

Unlike other famous Romantics, William Blake does not glorify Satan as an embodiment of such concepts as liberty, independence and freethinking. In the following article an attempt will be made to see how in Blake's poetry and painting the figure of Satan becomes associated with rationalism and the notion of misguided creativity. In this aspect Satan is consistently identified with Urizen, Blake's personification of the fallen human reason and the creator of the material universe. This identification functions as a critique of empiricism and rationalism characteristic for the Age of Reason.

The interest in the nature and the origin of evil has always surfaced as a frequent subject of the arts, visible in literature as well as in painting of all periods. Thus, in the Middle Ages hell was represented as a physical place, a land inhabited by the damned where the groans and the screams can be heard. Such renderings may be traced to various hagiographic texts as well as to Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Zalewska-Lorkiewicz 62). These visions, being extremely suggestive, were the means of propagating proper (in the religious sense) way of living by keeping people in the constant fear of hell. In the Renaissance the increasing fascination with the devil as the embodiment of evil corresponded to the development of philosophical doctrines. It can be concluded that while belief in the devil was gradually decreasing, people grew more and more interested in his moral, physical and poetical attributes (Rudwin 6). The seventeenth century witnessed the emergence of such an ingenious personification of the evil spirit as Satan from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which by far exceeded all previous representations of the devil in literature. In Romanticism, in turn, Satan became associated with the figure of Prometheus and thus gained enormous popularity as a rebel against the

established order and the injustice of this world. This stance transpires in such poetical works as Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* or Byron's *Cain*.

William Blake's figure of Satan departs from the romantic tendency to glorify the spirit of evil as a personification of such concepts as liberty, independence and freethinking. Yet, Blake creates an extremely powerful vision of Satan, dazzling in the scope of its rendering. Blake's Satan is a character who both acts and undergoes some mental development, yet at the same time Satan is a state of error. There is a close connection between Satan and the concepts of chastity and morality, which Blake captures under the name of the Natural Religion, and he makes Satan the God of this religion. Next, quite traditionally, Satan is the adversary of Christ. Then, most importantly, he is an internalized principle in man, the principle of inner selfishness and withdrawal, which Blake denominates as the Spectre or Selfhood. Finally, he is associated with reason, rationalism, and mistaken creativity. As such, he is usually identified with Urizen, who stands for reason in Blake's humanized landscape. It is this last aspect of Satan that I will attempt to discuss in this paper.

In Blake's humanized and deeply psychological vision of the universe the number four plays a prominent part. There are four worlds, ranging from the highest Eden through the middle Beulah and Generation, to the lowest hellish Ulro. There are also four parts of the universe, corresponding to four sides of the world, which Blake personifies and calls the Four Zoas. Apart from being the key figures in Blake's mythological system, the Zoas embody the faculties inherent in every man. Thus, they stand for imagination, reason, instinctual life and emotional life respectively. In a passage from his prophetic poem *Milton* Blake explains:

Four Universes round the Mundane Egg remain Chaotic,
One to the North, named Urthona; One to the South, named Urizen;
One to the East, named Luvah; One to the West, named Tharmas.
They are the Four Zoas that stood around the Throne Divine.
(19:15–18 K500)¹

The universes are in the state of chaos because their primordial harmony has been destroyed by one of the Zoas. Blake's poetry is largely informed by his myth of the fall. Usually he attributes the responsibility for the fall to Urizen, the human reason, who separates himself from the other Zoas because he craves domination, just as Miltonic Satan famously preferred to reign in Hell rather than serve in Heaven. Blake asserts the affinity between Urizen and Satan in numerous passages of his poetry and also in his visual art. Sometimes the link is straightforwardly voiced, at other times only suggested. Thus, in *Milton* the poet emphasizes the fact that Urizen and

Satan are one (10:1 K490). Yet, their identification does not indicate the merge of the two figures, however strange this may seem. It rather denotes that Urizen has become Satan for as long as he stays in his fallen condition. In this way a vital aspect of Satan becomes apparent: apart from being a character in Blake's myth he is also a state of existence which is entered by a person being in a state of error. Thus, when Urizen falls, he enters the state of Satan.

Blake introduced the notion of "states" in order to reinforce his concept of forgiveness and to condemn error at the same time. According to this concept, when man errs, he or she enters the state of sin, and while the state cannot be redeemed, the sinner can leave it without being condemned. It is the state that is being blamed and not the individual:

Distinguish therefore the States from Individuals in those States.
States change, but Individual Identities never change nor cease [...]
States are not, but ah! Seem to be!
(*Milton* 32:22–23 K521)

This quotation sheds light on the permanent nature of individuals as contrasted with the temporary and illusory nature of states, which only "seem to be." Therefore, an evil act is committed by a man who is in the state of sin—a state of Satan. Consequently, men can move out of this state. Although "the state nam'd Satan never can be redeem'd in all Eternity" (*The Four Zoas* 8:81 K351), the individuals can be redeemed if they "put off Satan eternally" (*The Four Zoas* 8:286 K348). When sin is renounced, Satan ceases to be the state of sin, but he does not cease to exist (Nesfield-Cookson 354). Even Satan is not condemned because, being at the same time an individual, he is also able to reject sin. To "put off Satan" is to renounce one's error and to annihilate Selfhood, the principle of inner selfishness and the main cause of error. The creation of states is attributed to Jesus and understood as an act of divine mercy (Damon 586) for without them, man would be lost, since he, and not states, would have to be annihilated. In this way, even Satan retains some positive aspects in Blake's myth.

The fall of Urizen results in his misguided attempts to assert his supremacy which entail the creation of the material world. Blake unequivocally ascribes it to Urizen and writes it off as a mistake. It must be a mistake, since the creation is accomplished by a fallen principle of reason (Urizen's name suggesting "your reason" or equally limiting "horizon") without any aid from the imagination, which is always identified with creativity in Blake's verse. Urizen, when himself divided from the other Eternals, loses his knowledge of the spiritual world. Reason, when separated from imagination, passions and emotions (after emotions), attains a distorted perception of the

whole world, ceases to be the source of ideas and becomes logic, “Ratio only” (*All Religions Are One* K98). As such, Urizen’s reasoning is purely rationalistic, abstract and imperfect. This is illustrated by the fact that his act of creating is shown as “dividing and measuring” (*The First Book of Urizen* 3:8 K222) of space. Unlike in the Bible, where the various stages of divine creation (separating darkness from light, land from water and the sky) are unequivocally declared benevolent (“and God saw it was good”), Urizen is dividing the primordial unity and this is primarily why his act cannot be good. It is also the reason why he himself “sicken’d to see / His eternal creations appear” (*Urizen* 23:8–9 K234). Therefore, as Bernard Nesfield-Cookson notes, Urizen “attains his separate consciousness, self-consciousness, only after he has lost the all-embracing perception of the Whole” (213).

What is Urizenic creation like? Blake describes it as the “abominable void”, “a wide world of solid obstruction.” (*Urizen* 3:4, 4:24 K222, 224). It is a world of hail and ice, suggesting cold, lifeless, petrified forms. There are almost no light colours in Blake’s description. This realm is black and bloody, full of “flames of Eternal fury” (*Urizen* 5:18 K225). The inhabitants of the Urizenic world live in constant anguish and discord. The relationship between men and women (which is shown on the example of the first couple, Los and Enitharmon) is presented as a struggle for domination, jealousy and manipulation. Their reality is regulated by Urizenic laws disregarding any individuality, obliterating all difference: “One command, one joy, one desire / One curse, one weight / one measure” (*Urizen* 4: 38–39 K224). Finally, after having seen the world of his own making, Urizen sheds tears over his creation, out of which a web of religion is formed. This web is subsequently called the “Net of Religion” (*Urizen* 25:22 K 235) and it indicates threat and restriction, a trap set for people living in the material world. Its main deception is belief in fallen reason (Urizen) as the supreme god.

While the creation of the material world is univocally attributed to Urizen, Satan is the creator of Ulro, the lowest realm possible in Blake’s universe, also called a “Hell of his own making” (*Milton* 12:23 K493):

Thus Satan rag’d amidst the Assembly, and his bosom grew
Opaque against the Divine Vision: the paved terraces of
His bosom inwards shone with fires, but the stones becoming opaque
Hid his from sight in an extreme blackness and darkness.
And there a World of deeper Ulro was open’d in the midst
Of the Assembly. In Satan’s bosom, a vast unfathomable Abyss.
(*Milton* 9:30–35 K490)

Ulro is a world of error which elsewhere Blake identifies with the material world (Damon 419), in this way further stressing the affinities

between Satan and Urizen, their creators. Ulro is called “the deepest night” (*Jerusalem* 42:17 K670) and the “Seat of Satan” (*Milton* 27:45 K514), which strongly emphasizes the spectral character of the place. It is opaque and dark, not transparent. However, the above quotation provides a striking description of the actual moment when this spectral world is called into existence. The image is strongly visual, appealing to the reader’s imagination through the picture of a paved city, at the same time black and opaque and lit with fires. This vision brings associations with the traditional representations of hell, which was often depicted in the same way, and similarly the hellish fires did not manage to disperse the darkness. In fact, this is exactly what Ulro stands for: in Blake’s poetry it is the only physical place which can be associated with hell. But, although it is a part of the universe, at the same time it is the place within an individual. In the quoted passage the reader can observe how this realm opens up within Satan, and, consequently, how Satan becomes responsible for creating it. What is also remarkable in this excerpt is the fact that suddenly the reader is granted an insight into Satan’s bosom and it is this inside which becomes the subject of the description. On the one hand, such an idea may seem unusual; however, it is worth remembering that there are not many descriptions of places in Blake’s poetry and if they are present at all, they are imaginative pictures of the states of mind. Therefore, this quotation emphasizes the fact that just as any other realm in Blake’s poetry, hell is a part of the inner landscape of man.

Ulro is synonymous with delusion. It is a place of “unreal forms” (*Four Zoas* II: 112 K283), of “dreams [...] dark delusive” (*Four Zoas* VII: 331 K328). The primary delusion of Ulro concerns religion and its restrictions. The inhabitants of Ulro are plagued “by terrors of Chastity that they call by the name of Morality” (*Jerusalem* 36: 46). It is a mistaken belief, yet Blake asserts that “mental things are alone real” and, consequently, that “What seems to Be, Is, To those it seems to Be, (*Jerusalem* 36:51 K663). Thus, when one takes Urizen as his God, he starts to live in Ulro – not only in the material world, but in the mental condition of repression, fear and a sense of guilt.

Because Blake commonly equates Satan with the law-giving God, at the same time whenever he speaks of Urizen, he mentions his action as a legislator. He writes his laws in the book of brass, and they usually connote Ten Commandments, sterile, inflexible constraints. Both Satan and Urizen devise “Seven deadly Sins”, and the rigid “Moral Laws and cruel punishments” to deal with them. Both accuse and condemn instead of providing the spiritual enlightenment which arises in man when he meets total love and forgiveness (Nesfield-Cookson 138).

Even early poems by Blake demonstrate what the land of Ulro is like. In “Garden of Love” the image which dominates in the poem is the chapel that

was built in the middle of the garden. The same garden had earlier been the place of love full of roses, but as a result of the workings of Urizenic (or Satanic) religion it has been changed into the garden of death, a graveyard. The poem mostly works by oppositions: youth-old age, freedom and play – restriction and prayer, past – present. The central image of the chapel connotes religious oppression: its doors are shut with an inscription “thou shalt not” written over the door. At the same time, all natural drives are declared as sinful: “The priests in black gowns were walking their rounds/and binding with briars my joys and desires” (11–12 K215). The priests use briars – the thorny remains of the withered roses – to impose restrictions on the drives of the flesh. Consequently, flowers have been replaced by graves, just as love changed into death.

In another poem from *Songs of Experience*, “The Human Abstract”, Blake demonstrates how under Urizenic law even the positive concepts are transformed into their oppositions. Thus, “Pity would be no more / If we did not make somebody poor” (1–2 K217) – first there is harm, and only then compassion starts. Similarly, “Mutual fear brings peace, / till the selfish loves increase” (5–6 K217) – peace is not a result of universal harmony, but of the fear of war; what follows is that the concept of love mutates into plural “loves” and is denominated as selfish. The final image in the poem is of a gigantic tree, which Blake calls the Tree of Mystery. Instead of apples it bears “the fruit of deceit, / Ruddy and sweet to eat” (17–18 K217). Blake ends the poem reminding his readers of the psychological aspect of his verse: the Tree of Mystery is not to be found in nature, because it grows in the human brain. Blake’s fall is not only into matter, but into the mental condition of Ulro.

Apart from the delusory nature of Ulro, Blake also stresses its lack of definite boundaries, its chaotic, chthonic nature. It is “a vast unfathomable Abyss” (*Milton* 9:30–35 K490). In a similar way, when he speaks of creation in *The First Book of Urizen*, he uses such phrases as the “soul-shudd’ring vacuum”, (*Urizen* 3:5 K222) “the petrific, abominable chaos” (BU3:5, 26 K222), “a state of dismal woe” (*Urizen* 13:3 K229). It is instructive to notice that although the language of the sublime is used very frequently by Blake, the artist seems to employ it mostly to describe negative phenomena. Thus, such words as “infinite”, “unimaginable”, “limitless”, “petrific”, “unfathomable” although they probably inspire awe in the reader, they first of all denote fallen, negative concepts in Blake’s poetry. Lack of boundaries, a traditional image of freedom in romantic poetry, is seen as chaotic and dangerous. Thus, the unvisionary state of Albion, physically represented as a part of the Ulro world which has been created by Satan is described in terms of a deep forest:

The deeps of Enthuthon Benython
dark and unknown night, indefinite, immeasurable, without end,
Abstract Philosophy warring in enmity against Imagination.
(*Jerusalem* 5:56–58 K624)

Whereas “Vision is Determinate and Perfect” (K457) the unvisionary state into which Albion has fallen is symbolized by a maze of abstract forms, which Blake calls Enthuthon Benython. Even its name is abstract and without precise denotation. It is a physical frame of the generated man (Damon 126), “a world of deep darkness, where all things in horrors are rooted” (*Four Zoas* 3:181 K296). To emphasize the negative meaning of such a state, Blake piles up phrases bearing derogatory connotations. Thus, Enthuthon Benython is a dark forest of the night, where no spiritual light can be perceived. It is immeasurable, indefinite, it has no end. As such, it belongs to Urizen/Satan (*Jerusalem* 88:48 K734). Whoever finds himself in such a state lies in darkness and is not capable of vision. Blake once again expresses his belief that “Truth has Bounds, Error None” (*The Book of Los* 4:30 K258), which means that the truth is perfect and definite, while error has no outline, cannot be measured, is abstract and indefinite. Thus, the definite forms become the basis for Blake’s theory of art, which he expresses in such words:

The great and golden rule of art, as well as of life, is this: That the more distinct, sharp, and wirey the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art. The want of this determinate and bounding form evidences the want of idea in the artist’s mind. How do we distinguish the oak from the beech, the horse from the ox, but by the bounding outline? What is it that distinguishes honesty from knavery, but the hard and wirey line of rectitude and certainty in the actions and intentions? Leave out this line and you leave out life itself (*A Descriptive Catalogue* K585).

As it can be easily inferred from the passage, the “bounding line” as well as an “outline” in Blake’s use of the terms take on a distinctly decisive character, as they determine more than just the quality of art: they decide upon the retaining or the loss of identity. The strong assertion that line is primary in art was the main reason why in the art history Blake was placed on the side of the two-dimensional linearists in the aesthetic battle between linear and painterly schools (Eaves 19). Blake asserts the connection between line and intellect, saying in *A Descriptive Catalogue* that lines are “receptacles of intellect.” As Morris Eaves points out:

The line, then, carries the weight of Blake’s version of the traditional intellectual and artistic values of clarity, precision and simplicity [...] As a metaphor, the line in art is part of a family with members in history, philosophy and science, such as metaphors of accuracy and precision, (“definition”, for instance) as distinguished, perhaps, from metaphors of intensity and profundity. Metaphors of

precision have very close relatives, too, in teleological metaphors of ultimate truth, of final distinctions, in Christian theology (20).

Interestingly, in his visual art even when he represents error, Blake's line is determinate and clear, his outline sharp. In his paintings and engravings numerous affinities between Satan and Urizen are also easily noticed. The most famous design which portrays Urizen in his Satanic aspect of misguided creativity is *The Ancient of Days*. Blake depicts the moment when Urizen creates the material world. The demiurge is depicted crouching on the globe of light right in the centre of the picture. He is an aged figure with a vast beard and tousled hair, he is bent, as if constricted and confined. Significantly, his eyes are closed and therefore he appears to be blind. Symbolically, he is blind to spiritual vision, turning his back on the real, spiritual sun, as if refusing to behold it. Another prevalent element of Blake's design is the scenery, resembling the barren landscape, with overshadowed light, with no living form. Since in Blake's poetry landscapes were largely mental states, so in his painting they also express the inner condition. As the materialistic mind cannot see the limitations of his self-contained system, Urizen reaches out and in his left hand holds the compasses. This object, symbolizing the Newtonian mathematical and unimaginative science is the tool he uses to create the world. The compasses penetrate the darkness, cutting it into two, and in this way dividing the primordial unity and harmony of the prelapsarian universe. This is the reason why Blake considered the creation of the material world to be the beginning of dualism, the split of opposites. Accomplished by the process of dividing and measuring of space with the rationalistic tool of reason, the act of creation with all the derogatory connotations is attributed to the bounded mind closed off from eternity and constructing the world in terms of the five senses (Raine 51).

The iconography of Blake's paintings visibly stresses the similarities between Urizen and Satan. In *The First Temptation* and *The Second Temptation*, two of Blake's designs where Satan is fully outlined, he is presented as an aged man, with long hair and a long, tangled beard. His facial expression, like Urizen's in *The Ancient of Days*, is grim and serious, even pained. His body is strong and manly, muscles and sinews accented. Blake's line, like his vision, is determinate and perfect. Crucially, both Urizen and Satan visually recall Blake's depictions of the Old Testament God. In his paintings *Elohim Creating Adam* or the representation of the Almighty in plate 2 of the *Book of Job* series the similarities are too great to be overlooked. Satan, Urizen and God the Father all share the facial features, the look of seriousness or even suffering, grey hair and a long beard, in Blake's visual art common indicators of the old age. Also, the body postures both of Satan and Urizen are rather cramped, which points to the fact that

the posture also indicates mental states of figures portrayed. Thus, bent or crouching figures are an obvious contrast to figures leaping, standing straight or soaring, which corresponds with free or uninhibited circulation of energy.

To conclude, the affinities between Satan in his aspect of misguided creativity and Urizen, the fallen Creator, are clearly spelled out in Blake's poetry and sustained in his visual art as well. The identification of human reason with the satanic principle of evil functions as a critique of the Enlightenment and its empiristic philosophy. It also testifies to the romantic rejection of the world governed by rationalism and the philosophy of the five senses. Still, it is vital to recognize that Blake never objects to reason as such, only to its authoritarian tendencies. Urizen has his proper place in Blakean universe, equally valid and important as the other Zoas. Already in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* the artist states that "Reason is the bound or outward circumference of energy" and that "attraction and repulsion, reason and energy are necessary for human existence" (4–6 K149–150). If the fall resulted from division, egotism and the reason's domination of the other functions in the human psyche, it is only natural that the restoration of Urizen to his proper sphere is the condition of regeneration, the return to the original unity and harmony from before the fall.

NOTES

¹ All excerpts of Blake's poems are quoted from *Blake: Complete Writings with Variant Readings*, edited by Sir Geoffrey Keynes, Oxford University Press, 1966. Quotations are given by plate, line number, and finally the page number in Keynes (K).

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