BETWEEN THE BLACK AND WHITE SPIDERS: ANATHEISM AND THE MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND HELL

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BETWEEN THE BLACK AND WHITE SPIDERS: ANATHEISM AND THE MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND HELL

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ABSTRACT

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William Blake displays a spiritual vision in his poetry, or an awareness of a significant arena of reality that most of us are blind to. It is this tremendous spiritual vision that makes Blake so exciting and spiritually nourishing to read. The main objective of the project will be to investigate this spiritual vision through the work of philosopher Richard Kearney. Kearney posits in his book *Anatheism* that human beings must undergo a period of atheism in order to come to a more genuine faith in God. I aim to synthesize the poetry of Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* with the philosophy of Richard Kearney. I intend to investigate the relation between despair and exultation as an anatheistic moment. By using each text to come to a better understanding of the other, I will show that *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is decidedly anatheistic.
Dedicated to Ghost
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INTRODUCTION

In *Anatheism*, Richard Kearney proposes that in order to have true faith in Christianity, one must experience atheism. Atheism emerges after reaching bottom, or experiencing death in life. We can come to a deeper faith in God only after this experience of atheism. Kearney posits that we must discover God after God. Kearney’s term “God after God” is the idea that in order to have a workable religious faith in the postmodern world, human beings need a new conception of God. We need to discover a new conception of God because our current conception of God has become inept and enfeebled.

Richard Kearney offers an alternative response and agreement to Nietzsche’s declaration that God is dead. In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche argues that the system of morals and sense of purpose that Christians associate with God are no longer relevant in the modern world, and cripple rather than strengthen human beings. Nietzsche unflinchingly abandons God and Christianity and declares that each person must create his or her own virtue. While Nietzsche’s solution is the affirmation of human will through his ideal of the over-man, Kearney prescribes a return to God. This return to God invites new possibilities for a spiritual life. In a qualified affirmation of Nietzsche Kearney writes: “Anatheism is not atheism then, but it does agree with enlightened atheism that the God of theodicy is dead” (167). In this work I will argue that William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is anatheistic in the sense that Richard
Kearney describes in *Anatheism*. There is a move from an atheistic view to an anatheistic view of God in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. This change is depicted through three primary arcs or characteristics—the iconoclastic, the prophetic, and the sacramental.

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Blake focuses on contraries, or opposites—“Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate,” all of which he claims are vital to life (3). Similarly, Kearney claims that initial, naive theism, followed by atheism, are necessary stages in the life of the believer. Theism and atheism are also contraries. Blake’s idea from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that “without contraries is no progression” when synthesized with Richard Kearney’s anatheism, generates a profound discussion of the role of different states in the spiritual lives of human beings (3). It is the experience of atheism that gives us the wisdom to return to God.

Previous scholars have called Blake a prophet or mystic. In *Fearful Symmetry*, Northrop Frye asserts that Blake lived during an age of “spiritual loneliness” (5). As religion faded and science grew in importance in the eighteenth century, people became more disconnected from the spiritual world. This disconnect from spirituality is evident in the political climate of the time. The American and French revolutions represented a dramatic breach in the Great Chain of Being; the hierarchy of human life that placed God above all. During this time, faith was shifting from God to human beings and their ability to reason. Despite the lack of spirituality present in society, William Blake produced inspired works of art that were spiritual to the core. It is this tremendous spiritual vision that makes Blake such a fascinating and spiritually nourishing poet to read.

Frye writes, “To Blake, the spiritual world was a continuous source of energy” revealing Blake’s awareness of and vision of the spiritual world (8). To Blake, the
spiritual world was something very real, something that could be tapped into and implemented in writing poetry and in daily life. I am interested in the ways that this spiritual vision synthesizes with the philosophy of Richard Kearney.

The close application of Richard Kearney’s theory to William Blake’s poetry reveals that Blake’s poetry has an anatheistic structure. Blake’s poetry provides the ideal gateway for Kearney’s theory. Simultaneously, Kearney’s philosophy provides the ideal gateway for Blake’s ideas about the spiritual world. When read together, the two point the way to a mystical experience through poetry and philosophy. The synthesis of Kearney’s philosophy and Blake’s poetry allows for an original spiritual life that takes into account all the contemporary criticisms of religion, yet provides a place for the rediscovery of the divine. When studied together, the works of Richard Kearney and William Blake synthesize in profound ways. Kearney offers a new kind of religious faith in God, while Blake’s poetry reveals and expands upon the primary characteristics of this faith.

Richard Kearney names three essential arcs of Anatheism. These three are the iconoclastic, the prophetic, and the sacramental (152). While by no means exhaustive of Anatheism, the three arcs provide a solid foundation for apprehending the essential concepts of Anatheism in the poetry of William Blake. I aim to show that Blake’s poetry displays iconoclastic, prophetic, and sacramental attributes through the careful application of these three arcs to The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. Both Kearney and Blake call for a return to God after God, and show their readers how to newly apprehend this newfound spirituality. When read together, Blake and Kearney impart to us a
dazzling spiritual vision—one that gives us real hope to experience the transcendent in the everyday.

The three arcs of *Anatheism* (the iconoclastic, the prophetic, and the sacramental) take root in the Bible. The iconoclastic is evident in the destruction of idols in the Old Testament, as well as in Christ’s whipping of the Pharisees in the New Testament. Blake fulfills the iconoclastic arc of *Anatheism* through the destruction of crippling theological tenants and religious figures in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. The prophetic is evident in Moses, Elijah and Isaiah of the Old Testament, as well as John the Baptist in the New Testament. William Blake fulfills the prophetic arc of *Anatheism* through a calling for healing and emancipation in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. The sacramental is palpable in the Bible as Christ began the tradition of holy communion. Blake fulfills the sacramental arc of *Anatheism* through the transformation of the material to the spiritual in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. 
PART I

BLAKE AS ICONOCLAST

Richard Kearney describes the iconoclastic arc of Anatheism in the chapter entitled “In The Act”. In this chapter Kearney links critics of religion with iconoclasm. He writes, “In the modern epoch iconoclastic voices have been heard in the indignant critiques of religion that go under the heading of a “hermeneutics of suspicion” (152). Despite writing spiritually infused works of poetry, William Blake was also critical of contemporary Christianity. Richard Kearney labels this critique of religion as iconoclasm. Blake, like other writers who critique religious institutions provide “a welcome deconstruction of the false idols that every religion has carried on its back at some time or other” (152).

In War of Titans Jackie DiSalvo claims that Harold Bloom, while “undoubtedly right about the iconoclasm of much modern poetry” in The Anxiety of Influence was “dead wrong about Blake” (4). Disalvo explains that like other Romantic poets, Blake hoped “to save the meaning of biblical symbols from the wreckage of ecclesiastical doctrine” rather than to destroy them (4). She claims that Blake is not an iconoclast. Nonetheless, her terminology brings to discussion the ways in which the poetry of Blake displays iconoclasm. While Disalvo sees Blake as wanting to save biblical symbols, an anatheist reading of Blake suggests that he wanted to direct the reader towards a rediscovery of God.
“Proverbs of Hell”

Blake’s poetry is iconoclastic in the “Proverbs of Hell”. In several of these short proverbs, he dismantles conventional ideas about Christianity and exposes them as lies. Blake criticizes society in a number of different ways in the “Proverbs of Hell”. Through his poetry, he attempts to rip down societal realities such as prisons, laws, brothels, and religion. Blake’s ripping down fits the iconoclastic arc of Anatheism. He rips down old beliefs in order to build new ones, just as Kearney discards old conceptions of God in order to make way for new ones. By bringing together two supposedly different institutions such as prisons and law or brothels and religion, Blake reveals the corruption of society. He writes, “Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of religion,” linking the outcast members of society with religion (8). Blake shows that prisons and brothels are the result of organized Christianity. His criticisms of Christianity tear down ideals that his readers may hold about Christianity and begin the work of freeing his readers’ minds from lies.

In another criticism of Christianity Blake writes, “As the caterpillar chooses the fairest leaves to lay her eggs on, so the priest lays his curse on the fairest joys” (8). He exposes the hypocrisy and sinister nature of priests, tearing down faith in them. The purpose of Blake’s iconoclasm is to open the reader “to a moment of radical receptivity” or a moment when the reader is freed from misconceptions and open to a new conception of God (63). This moment of receptivity is a primary part of Anatheism. Kearney describes this anatheistic moment as “a moment when one abandons all inherited certainties, assumptions, and expectations (including religious ones) in order to open oneself to the radical surprise, and shock, of the incoming Other” (Kearney 63).
Stripping down the lies and dogma allows the reader to open him or herself to something new. Lowering the corrupt priests in the reader’s belief system allows for an unadulterated encounter with God. In a broader sense, this moment of receptivity is symbolic of Richard Kearney’s turn from atheism to anatheism—to God after God. Iconoclasm is a vital arc of Anatheism because in order to rediscover God, one must first tear down his or her false conception of him.

Blake and the Angel in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

In this section, I will reveal Blake’s iconoclasm in the context of Anatheism in his interaction with an angel in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. In order to understand how Blake’s iconoclasm leads the way to an encounter with God after God, it is important to understand Kearney’s explanation of a new encounter of God. According to Levinas, Kearney writes, “the gift of Judaism to humanity is atheism—namely, separation from God so as to encounter the other as absolutely other” (62). Blake’s iconoclasm in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is best understood in this context. By rejecting the God that men have created through the lies of religion, Blake opens himself and the reader to the other, to the unknown and essentially spiritual where a real encounter with the divine, separate from the lies and dogma of men can operate. An anatheist reading of Blake shows that both iconoclasm and atheism are part of his search for spiritual freedom and a genuine faith. This is shown in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in which Blake and an angel visit Heaven and Hell in order to decide which is the better place. By the end of their journey, the angel has become a demon and Blake’s friend in Hell. Through the transformation of this angel Blake employs iconoclasm towards traditional Christian theology to help the reader to rediscover God.
This angel condemns Blake at first saying, “O pitiable young man! O horrible! O dreadful state! Consider the hot burning dungeon thou art preparing for thyself to all eternity, to which thou art going in such career (17).” The angel condemns Blake for his heretical ideas, beliefs, and poetry. Perhaps like some traditional or orthodox Christian readers of Blake, the angel condemns and rejects Blake’s poetry initially because his work is not supportive of orthodoxy. Blake’s narrator says, “perhaps you will be willing to shew me my eternal lot & we will contemplate together upon it and see whether your lot or mine is most desirable” (17). Blake challenges the angel to compare their respective eternal resting places.

The path to Blake’s destination is arduous. Together they travel through a stable, a church, a mill and a cave (17). When they reach the end of the cave they discover “a void boundless as a nether sky” (17). The two hang from the roots of a twisted oak tree and gaze into the abyss (17). Far away beneath them they see “the sun, black but shining round it were fiery tracks on which revolv’d vast spiders, crawling after their prey” (18). The angel informs Blake that his eternal lot lies “between the black & white spiders” (18). Blake explains that these spiders are also “Devils” or “Powers of the air” (18).

In an anatheistic sense, this abyss, or Blake’s eternal lot in between the black and white spiders crawling on a black sun, can be interpreted as a spiritual abyss, or the abyss of atheism; Blake’s rejection of orthodox Christianity has resulted in his eternal lot of the abyss. Blake’s vision shows us the spiritual experience of atheism for the once-believer.

Blake and the angel discover many other wondrous things as they explore Blake’s eternal lot including the Leviathan, which as Blake writes was “advancing towards us with all the force of a spiritual existence” (19). His use of the term “spiritual existence”
indicates that this experience is taking place in the spiritual realm (19). That is, Blake’s narrative occurs in a mystical third space outside of the material world. The angel climbs back up from the abyss, leaving Blake behind. After the angel leaves, Blake finds himself “sitting on a pleasant bank beside a river by moonlight hearing a harper who sun to the harp & his theme was “The man who never alters his opinion is like the standing water, & breeds pestilence” (19). After this sudden change in setting, Blake decides that his former vision of Hell was merely the result of the Angel’s metaphysics.

The harpist’s aphorism, “The man who never alters his opinion is like the standing water” relates to Kearney’s philosophy because *Anatheism* is full of “radical turns” towards and away from spirituality (Blake 19 Kearney 20). Changing one’s mind is encouraged in both Kearney and Blake. Blake reminds the reader that changes in belief are vital to a vibrant spiritual life. Blake plays the role of the iconoclast in this section of the poem by tearing down traditional assumptions about Hell, substituting a “pleasant bank” for infernal fires and punishment (19). Blake employs iconoclasm by tearing down these assumptions. Iconoclasm serves to disclose the reader to a new conception of God.

Blake’s conclusion reveals an anatheistic understanding of atheism and iconoclasm. He shows us that atheism is perhaps a necessary, even vital part of the path to God because it removes one from his or her inert conceptions of who God, what he is like, and what the spiritual realm is like. While many Christians view atheism as a kind of spiritual death or abyss, Blake sees it as something fruitful, as in the harpist creating beautiful music. Blake tears down the orthodox Christian teaching that the result of
atheism is the abyss of Hell. Through iconoclasm, Blake helps the reader to change his or her fundamental view of atheism.

The vision he has of the harp player suggests that Hell is not an eternal abyss of fire, but rather a “pleasant bank” of artistic and musical creativity (19). By substituting the dwelling of the harp player for the abyss, Blake reverses the traditional theological order of eternity in an iconoclastic gesture. Now, Hell is a much more desirable place to be than heaven. Blake’s iconoclasm is furthered as Blake and the angel discover the angel’s eternal lot.

Blake discovers the angel’s eternal destiny as they travel together through a stable and a church and come to a Bible that opens to a “deep pit” (19). The two find a group of monkeys and baboons. Blake describes these primates as “grinning and snatching at each other” in what is supposed to be heaven (20). This is where the angel is to spend eternity. Blake’s picture of heaven is far from the eternal paradise portrayed in the Bible. Heaven is instead a place where monkeys tear each other apart and devour each other. Blake writes, “I saw one savourly picking the flesh off his own tail; as the stench terribly annoyed us both” revealing that the heaven of the angel’s strict theology is not only uncomfortable and devoid of love, but is disgusting as well (20). Adding to this awful scene he writes, “the weak were caught by the strong and with a grinning aspect, first coupled with them & then devoured by plucking off first one limb and then another till the body was left a helpless trunk, this after grinning & kissing it with seeming fondness they devoured too” (20). Blake depicts heaven as a place where the strong devour the weak. The angel will spend eternity in this disgusting grotesque, cruel place, and it is quite clear whose lot is worse.
Blake displays the characteristics of an iconoclast in this picture of heaven. He tears down the reader’s image of heaven as a paradise and places in its stead a den of cannibalistic baboons. Kearney writes that mystical texts “testify to an anatheist gesture of detachment from assumed faith that prizes open a possible return to a second faith” (56). For Blake, “assumed faith” meant conventional Christianity (56). Kearney’s statement applies to Blake’s poetic works. In this particular section of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell he detaches from the “assumed faith” of traditional Christianity (56). Although his inversion of Heaven and Hell may seem like blasphemy, his rejection of stale religiosity displays openness towards a second faith that investigates a rediscovery of God apart from conventional theology. His turn away from Christianity includes the atheistic stage of anatheism.

Dr. Will W. Adams helps readers to understand Blake’s path towards spiritual freedom in his article “William Blake’s Integral Psychology: Reading Blake and Ken Wilber Together.” Adams argues that both Blake and Wilber “articulate a grand path of individual, interrelational, and collective awakening: moving beyond one-dimensional caverns of habit, convention, and defense” (55). In The Marriage of Heaven and Hell Blake moves beyond one-dimensional ways of thinking about eternity (55). It is this kind of awakening to new ways of thinking and experiencing the world that Blake invites his readers to in his poetry. This awakening begins by iconoclasm towards conventional Christianity.

The argument between Blake and the angel continues even after they have visited Hell and Heaven. Blake expresses his faith in the imagination of man and defines “the worship of God” as “Honouring his gifts in other men each according to his genius” and
“loving the greatest man best” (22). He argues that men ought to be valued based on the quality of their genius. A person’s genius is dependent on the quality of his or her imagination. Blake follows this statement with, “those who envy or calumniate great men hate God, for there is no other God” (22). If there is no other god than “great men” then for Blake the most divine thing of all is the imagination (22).

Blake’s metaphysics and theory of the imagination are representative of his iconoclasm. To argue that there is no God other than great men is to tear down established Christian ideals, such as the idea that we are to love even the weakest people as if they were Christ himself. Blake turns away from church teaching and embraces the unknowable Other, the poetic imagination, trusting it to lead him to a true spiritual or mystical experience of the world. Kearney expresses faith in the imagination as well. He writes, “The imagination is a “bride of God” serving as a bridge between spiritual and corporeal worlds (41).” The imagination can also serve as the bridge between atheism and atheism.

As Blake’s discussion with the angel continues, more is revealed about his iconoclastic approach to conventional Christianity. Blake’s angel friend does not approve of his assertions. The angel confronts Blake with standard Christian theology that Blake has contradicted, claiming that God is one “visible in Jesus Christ” (23). The angel also cites the Ten Commandments and men and women’s obligation to uphold them, after which Blake gives examples of the ways in which, according to him, Christ broke each of the Ten Commandments. He writes, “I tell you, no virtue can exist without breaking these Ten Commandments; Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse: not from rules”
(23-24). Blake exhibits his iconoclasm by rejecting the rules of Christianity to the point of heresy.

The angel stretches out his arms, “embracing the flame of fire” (24). He is consumed and arises as Elijah (24). Blake writes, “Note. This Angel, who is now become a Devil, is my particular friend: we often read the Bible together in its infernal or diabolical sense which the world shall have if they behave well” (24). Blake’s combination of Christian mythology (Elijah and the Bible) and diabolical imagery displays an iconoclasm towards church teaching and theology. These disruptive gestures of accusing Christ of breaking the Ten Commandments and transforming the angel into a devil help to remove the mind of the reader from limiting or reductive theology, offering an alternative faith.

Simultaneously, Blake’s iconoclasm can be understood as an anatheistic turn. The angel turns away from heaven and Church doctrine and embraces the unknowable other of the fires of Hell. In the chapter entitled “In The Moment” Kearney discusses the importance of greeting the stranger or “Other” with hospitality rather than hostility. He writes, “the decision for hospitality over hostility is never made once and for all; it is a wager that needs to be renewed again and again, anatheistically” (19). The angel renews his hospitality towards the Other when he embraces the fires of Hell and becomes Blake’s devil-friend. His turn away from God is a turn towards rediscovering God as stranger, apart from the systematic teachings and rules of organized religion. Like Mary, the angel “chooses grace over fear” embracing Blake and the devil just as Mary embraced the angel who told her she would be with child (24).
For Kearney, a turn away from God can be a very fruitful thing. A turn away from God offers the opportunity to encounter God in a new way. Kearney defines atheism as “a salutary movement of estrangement, a departure from God” and claims that it may provide “the possibility of a return to a God beyond God, a God who may come back to us from the future” (39). In this way we can understand the angel’s choice to become a devil and turn away from God as an anatheistic turn.

The angel’s turn away from heaven and towards Hell is a model of the iconoclastic arc of Anatheism. By embracing Hell, the angel affirms Blake’s iconoclasm towards conventional Christianity, rejecting “the God of theodicy” in order to open up the possibility for an encounter with God after God (167). As Kearney explains, this encounter with God after God ought to be free from the entrapments of contemporary Christianity. Kearney writes, “it is precisely at the edges of imagination—before and after theory, ideology, or dogma—that the aboriginal signs of the heart-well are first sounded and received” (52). The iconoclastic arc of Anatheism serves to revive the imagination. For Kearney, the imagination is linked to an experience of the sacred (52). With the stale, vapid elements of conventional Christianity gone, the believer is led to encounter God in a new way. Rather than affirming doctrine and theories, this new encounter with God affirms the imagination. By breaking down Christianity in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell through iconoclasm, Blake recovers in his readers the “aboriginal heart”—the spiritual imagination that could lead us to a mystical experience of a “postdogmatic God” (52). In Anatheism, this awareness or “aboriginal heart” can only be reached when we are free from conventional Christianity.
In “William Blake’s Integral Psychology: Reading Blake and Ken Wilber Together,” Dr. Will W. Adams explains that Blake “warned of the dangers of excessive conformity to convention, of seeking (apparent) security and consolation while foreclosing individual freedom and collective social justice” (56). Blake’s rejection of heaven is simultaneously an affirmation of “individual freedom” as well as spiritual freedom (56). Blake’s affirmation of individual freedom supports the idea that the individual must encounter God after God alone, without the entrapments of conventional Christianity.

**Iconoclasm vs. Nay-Saying**

Blake’s iconoclasm opens a new facet of experience. He shows his readers that the institutions they take for granted such as organized Christianity are entrapments. But iconoclasm is by no means the fundamental aspect of his poetry. If it were, it would make him what Kearney calls a nay-sayer, or one who “is motivated by the struggle against the old belief and lives only for its negation” as Kearney quotes Max Scheler (168). Echoing this statement, Kearney writes, “If one never gets beyond accusing the accusers and negating the negators, one remains at the level of nay-saying” (168).

Blake inflects a similar sentiment in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in his criticism of Swedenborg. Blake writes that 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” (22). Blake recognizes the folly and vanity of criticizing without finding anything else to affirm. His iconoclastic criticisms of religion are therefore more than just criticism or bitter nay-saying, but a necessary moment in his own spiritual journey. Blake despises nay-saying that refuses to affirm anything in its stead.
He writes, “Now hear a plain fact: Swedenborg has not written one new truth: Now hear another: he has written all the old falsehoods” (22). Blake compares Swedenborg to the angel, seeing in each of them a definite lack of imagination.
PART II

BLAKE AS PROPHET

The prophetic arc is the next step of Anatheism. Prophecy prevents iconoclasm from becoming nay-saying by opening up new possibilities for a spiritual life apart from the failure of contemporary Christianity. Kearney explains, “Nay-saying, however salutary, needs to be answered by a yea-saying once again” (153). Blake accomplishes yea-saying through the prophetic arc of Anatheism. In his description of the prophetic arc of Anatheism Kearney writes, “This second moment lets symbols speak of new things still to come” (153). In The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Blake presents symbolic figures from the Bible such as Satan and Elijah in new ways. He inverts symbolic places in Christianity such as churches, heaven, and Hell in order to provide them with new meanings. For example, he presents Satan as a heroic figure, Elijah as a prudish angel, and heaven as Hell. Blake’s prophetic refiguring of Biblical symbols presents the possibility for an encounter with God after God.

The prophetic arc of Anatheism is evident in the beginning of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. Blake writes, “Rintrah roars & shakes his fires in the burdend air; Hungry clouds swag on the deep” (2). Rintrah resembles a prophetic figure. He shakes his fires and in his anger begins Blake’s prophecy of the spiritual awakening of the human spirit.
Kearney affirms the necessity for prophets in *Anatheism*. He writes, “For iconoclasm on its own leads only to nay-saying and, ultimately, nihilism”. Concerning prophecy Kearney writes, “the initial moment of iconoclasm, which unmasks mendacious and illusory idols, needs to be supplemented with a second anatheist moment—the moment of prophecy” (153). For Kearney, prophecy “recuperates stories of healing and emancipation from Exodus and Isaiah to the Sermon on the Mount or the ecstatic songs of Mirabai and Kabir” (153). In Kearney’s view, prophecy is characterized by healing, emancipation, and “ecstatic songs” (153). Blake’s poetry displays all three of these qualities.

Healing, Emancipation, and Ecstatic Songs

Blake’s poetry utilizes the language of healing and emancipation. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* he writes prophetically, “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is: Infinite” (14). This line is a call for the emancipation of sight and perception. The world has imprisoned our perceptions, making it impossible for us to even apprehend the Unknowable Other, much less greet the Other with hospitality.

Blake writes, “For man has closed himself up till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern” providing a new image for his prophetic cry that we are trapped within our own minds (14). Once again, Blake’s statement about man’s entrapment is stated in terms of sight or vision—man sees “all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern” (14). We cannot make the turn away from God that Kearney posits in *Anatheism* because we are unable to see what is wrong with religion. In order to be set free, one must first be able to see or recognize that he or she is enslaved.
Blake continues his diagnosis of human beings as enslaved throughout *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. He writes, “The Giants who formed this world into its sensual existence 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 weak and tame minds which have power to resist energy” (16). The most powerful beings are held back by resisting desire. Because human beings do not fulfill their desires and follow their energies, Blake diagnoses them as in chains.

Literary critics have discussed Blake’s disdain for the rules of traditional Christianity in detail. Jackie DiSalvo sees this disdain as a result of Blake’s “intense repugnance for Genesis morality and the doctrine of original sin” (147). This repugnance, anatheistically understood, is part of Blake’s prophetic freeing of men and women from a narrow and lifeless existence.

Kearney avers that the prophetic arc of *Anatheism* involves “a step beyond the hermeneutics of suspicion to a hermeneutics of affirmation or, perhaps we should say, a hermeneutics of reaffirmation for we are concerned here with gaining back a living God after forsaking an illusory one” (153). Blake’s lines in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* are of the hermeneutics of affirmation. He affirms the infinite world that we are blind to. In doing so, he affirms a rediscovery of the divine in an anatheist sense.

**Satan and Errors Due to Sacred Codes**

Blake re-imagines Satan as the embodiment of human desire and creativity. Satan is the messiah called forth by Blake that represents the powerful spiritual existence of which he believes human beings are capable. Blake sets up his introduction of Satan as the affirmation of human desire in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* by writing, “All
Bibles or sacred codes, have been the causes of the following Errors” (4). This section of the poem begins with the subtitle, “The voice of the Devil” (4). By invoking the name of the Devil, Blake introduces a speaker into his poetry who is loathed and feared by most Christians.

Blake claims through the voice of the Devil the error of the idea “That Man has two real existing principles: a Body & a Soul” (4). The very claim that this notion is an error is a kind of prophetic gesture. Dr. Will W. Adams explains that Blake, “subverts the (supposed) Cartesian separation of body and mind/soul” (62). Blake’s gesture is prophetic in part because, as Adams explains, psychologists and philosophers would go on to make this claim later (62). By denying the separation from body and soul, Blake also denies the separation of the physical and spiritual world. He does this in part to increase our awareness and perception of the spiritual world—a world that is all around us and that coincides with the physical or material world. This is a prophetic gesture because it is a gesture of emancipation from limiting and imprisoning ways of perceiving the world. It is part of Blake’s project to cleanse the doors of his readers’ perception (14). In order for the doors of our perception to be cleansed, imprisoning attitudes and ways of thinking must be abandoned and we must be freed from them (14).

Satan is perceived as the embodiment of evil itself. Blake invokes Satan to free his readers from the fear that is the result of organized religion. He summons the most damned or hated character in Christian theology as a hero in order to emancipate his readers from fear of human desire. The next error that Blake perceives as the result of “Bibles or sacred codes” is the idea “That God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies” (4). Blake names the lies of organized religion in order to free his readers
from them. Through his dismantling of these lies, he makes the prophetic call to his readers that they might reject a God of falsehood and greet the unknowable other with hospitality. As Adams writes, Blake sought to reveal the ability of “conventional rationality and morality to suppress our vitality” (63). Blake’s declaration can be seen as an emancipation from fear, a call to rediscover the infinite spiritual world.

Blake advances the prophetic refiguring of Satan as a hero through his affirmation of human desire; something he has already associated with the Devil in the beginning of the section entitled “The Voice of the Devil”. He writes, “Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained: and the restrainer or Reason usurps its place & governs the unwilling. And being restrained it by degrees becomes passive till it is only the shadow of desire” (5). The affirmation of desire is important because only the desire for something beyond the cavern of our minds can propel us to seek the unknowable other.

Desire in human beings has been restrained and killed by the rules of society and religion. This has also been the result of “Bibles or sacred codes” which serve as the foundation for organized religion and society (4). Blake prophetically calls his readers to affirm and embrace their desires as something integrally human. He calls his readers to move past fear and embrace desire, making it something much more than the mere “shadow of desire” (5).

Blake defends his choice of Satan as the representative of desire by citing Milton’s Paradise Lost. He claims that in “the Book of Job Miltons Messiah is call’d Satan” (5). Like Milton in Paradise Lost, Blake heroizes Satan and claims, “the Jehovah of the Bible being no other than he who dwells in flaming fire” making a clear reference
to Satan (5). Blake’s affirmation of Satan is also his affirmation of human desire, creativity, and imagination. His turn to Satan can be construed anatheistically as a turn away from God. By discovering human desire and imagination, Blake seeks the rediscovery of the divine through finding the sacred in the mundane. Satan serves as the unknowable other in his own right.

Blake writes, “The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devils party without knowing it” (6). In order to be aligned with Blake and Milton as “true poets” or at least as those who like them, affirm the imagination, we must not be afraid to be “of the Devils party” and turn away from God in order to rediscover the divine.

“A Song of Liberty” and “Chorus”

Blake’s prophetic art continues in “A Song of Liberty” from The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. He announces the emancipation of the human soul. Blake writes, “Spurning the clouds written with curses stamps the stony law to dust, loosing the eternal horses from the dens of night crying Empire is no more! and now the lion & wolf shall cease” (27). The “stony law” refers to the Ten Commandments which Blake despised as discouraging people from acting on their desires and energies (27). As the clouds stamp the Ten Commandments to dust, so does Blake proclaim the necessity for people to follow their desires and refuse to submit to rules. The “eternal horses from the dens of night” are loosed, symbolizing the freedom of men and women from the crippling institutions that prevent them from a mystical experience of nature and the world around them (27). This page of “A Song of Liberty” is illustrated with the images of two horses
galloping and rearing up, symbolizing the emancipation of the human soul that Blake has prohetically announced.

Blake’s declares the emancipation of human beings from conventional Christianity in the “Chorus” from The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. He writes, “Let the Priests of the Raven of dawn, no longer in deadly black, with hoarse note curse the sons of joy. Nor his accepted brethren whom tyrant he calls free; lay the bound or build the roof. Nor pale religious letchery call that virginity, that wishes but acts not!” (27). In these lines, he declares the freedom of human beings from the oppression of traditional Christianity. He condemns the religious figures who deny their desires and the desires of other people.
The sacramental arc is the third step in Richard Kearney’s Anatheism. For Kearney, the sacramental arc includes both iconoclasm and prophecy. The sacramental arc is “a third step fueled by both protest and prophecy as it goes forward to recover a second faith” (153). It is the culmination of the two previous arcs. The sacramental arc of Anatheism focuses on “embodied divinity,” or the transformation of the material to the spiritual (153). Blake reveals the “embodied divinity” of nature and human beings in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. In the “Proverbs of Hell” Blake links animals and aspects of nature to God. In the “Chorus” that ends The Marriage of Heaven and Hell he declares the divinity of human beings. The sacramental arc of Anatheism is an essential facet of Blake’s project to transform our minds and re-connect us to the spiritual world. In an anaethistic sense, Blake’s project is to lead his readers to an encounter with God after God.

In Anatheism, Richard Kearney discusses the way in which several modernist writers maintained a sacramental vision in their writing. He analyzes the sacramental arc of Anatheism in the works of Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce. In the chapter entitled “In The Text” he studies “the degree to which many authors remained deeply committed to a sacramental imagination that defied the either/or division between theism and atheism” (101-102). This approach is also helpful when studying the works
of William Blake. I conjecture that Blake was also committed to a “sacramental imagination” (101). His “sacramental imagination” is evident in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

Kearney elucidates what is meant by a sacramental aesthetic with a quote from James Joyce. When explaining the goal of his art to his brother Joyce said, “I am trying in my poems to give people some kind of intellectual pleasure or spiritual enjoyment by converting the bread of everyday life into something that has a permanent artistic life of its own” (103). Blake accomplishes this in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. He takes nature and everyday sights and exposes the infinite within them. He gives the everyday a lasting artistic vivacity.

**Blake and Transubstantiation**

Richard Kearney writes, “I deem it valuable in this secular era to consider how certain nonconfessional authors deploy an art of transubstantiation to explore a mysticism of *God-after-God*” (130). Blake deploys this art of transubstantiation in his poetry. By converting nature and human beings to the sacred and divine or to an indicator of the divine, his poetry explores the very kind of mysticism inherent in *Anatheism*.

Jared Richman writes about Blake’s sacramental aesthetic in his article “Milton re-membered, graved, and press’d: William Blake and the fate of textual bodies”. Richman explores the ways in which Blake employs transubstantiation in his poetry. He writes about the way in which the relationship between Blake’s poetry and the spiritual world is similar to the relationship “between Word and seed” in Christianity (388). According to Richman, Blake merges the “printmaker’s work” and the farmer’s work, achieving “a kind of creative power that defies mortal limitations” (388). Just as the
Bible is figuratively written with the blood of Christ, the wine of the first printing press created the ink for the poetry (391). For Richman, Blake was similarly “transubstantiated through print technology” (391).

Richman focuses on Blake’s Milton throughout the article, and claims that Blake resurrects Milton through the creation of this book. He writes, “Blake’s Milton thus emerges from the printing press as Christ rises from the wine-press—each transubstantiated from flesh to Word” (393). Richman sees Blake as capable of transubstantiating “the Eternal poet” through his poetry, revealing the power of his sacramental aesthetic (393).

In The Marriage of Heaven and Hell Blake writes, “How do you know but ev’ry Bird that cuts the airy way, / Is an immense world of delight clos’d by your senses five?” (7). A bird--something that we behold every day and take for granted--is rendered in a new way by Blake that helps his readers to rediscover its spiritual nature. According to Blake, this sentence was written by “a mighty Devil folded in black clouds hovering on the sides of the rock, with corrosive fires he wrote the following sentence now perceived by the minds of men, & read by them on earth” (7). Blake’s demonic imagery escapes his sacramental approach from organized Christianity and pushes the bounds of our perception. He spiritualizes the everyday through the use of demonic imagery.

“The Proverbs of Hell”

Blake teaches the reader to accept the stranger or unknowable other in the everyday things around us such as birds. This is how his sacramental aesthetic works. We can rediscover a beautiful spiritual world, an “immense world of delight” in our surroundings, particularly in Nature (Blake 7). Blake attains this idea when he writes in
the “Proverbs of Hell,” “A Fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees” (7). For Blake, a wise man perceives the spiritual nature of the tree. The beauty of the tree comes from its connection to the spiritual world. Blake suggests that we are surrounded by the infinite beauty of nature all the time, beauty that we ought to take in and relish. By exposing the infinite in the material, Blake participates in the artistic project of “fixing the relations between the visible and the invisible” (Kearney 97). He converts the material to the spiritual through revealing the infinite beauty present in the everyday tree.

Blake’s admonition to perceive the infinite beauty in nature is a way of making the mundane sacred. This is a sacramental process because, like the priest transforms the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, Blake transforms the birds, trees, and flowers to something of deep spiritual significance. He allows us to see the beauty of nature again without the impedance of what he calls the “mind forg’d manacles” in the poem “London”. This is the work not only of his writing, but of his paintings as well. The vibrant use of color and figures in his paintings expose the mystical in the material, converting the material to the spiritual.

Kearney posits that through his writing Proust “became” a “stream of light,” a participant in the sacred, in “transubstantiation” (112). Blake similarly becomes a “participant in the sacred” in his poetry (112). For example, in “The Proverbs of Hell” from The Marriage of Hell he writes, “the pride of the peacock is the glory of God. The lust of the goat is the bounty of God. The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God” (8). The repeated “of God” serves as the connection between the natural and the divine. Blake connects the characteristics of animals with divinity, making the everyday holy.
He shows his readers that animals can teach us something about eternity. The natural world is infused with the spiritual.

Blake writes, “The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword are portions of eternity too great for the eye of man” (8). The world around us is infused with “portions of eternity” according to Blake’s spiritual vision (8). There is sublimity in the natural world that we cannot perceive fully. Through his proverbs, Blake renders nature a sacred and unknowable Other that we must greet with hospitality rather than fear and suspicion. This parallels Dr. Will W. Adams’s claim that Blake calls his readers to realize “the holy, multi-dimensional nature of self, others, and world” (55). By coming to this newfound awareness, Blake’s readers experience the spiritual world in nature.

This newfound awareness restores dignity to nature. For example, Blake writes in his “Proverbs of Hell,” “When thou seest an Eagle, thou seest a portion of Genius. Lift up thy head!” (9) urging his readers to acknowledge and enjoy the magnificence of nature. By calling the eagle a “portion of Genius” he connects the beauty and glory of the Eagle to the power of man’s imagination, bringing man and nature together through his transubstantiation of everyday nature into the sacramental (9).

In the “Proverbs of Hell” Blake writes, “To create a little flower is the labour of ages” (9). In this aphorism, he presents nature as something extremely valuable. Normally, great cathedrals, the product of organized religion, would come to mind with the phrase “labour of ages” because it took many generations sometimes for large cathedrals to be built (9). But Blake instead associates ages of labor with a little flower because it is something sacred to him.
“Chorus”

Blake furthers his sacramental aesthetic in the “Chorus” which ends The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. He writes, “For every thing that lives is Holy,” connecting nature and human beings to the spiritual world (27). Through his poetry, he presents the idea that human beings, birds, trees, and all that lives are part of the spiritual world and hold a spiritual existence. Blake encourages his readers to see the spiritual in the material, both in nature and in human beings.

Readers of Blake can participate in this anatheistic rediscovery of the divine in nature. Kearney writes, “the anatheist wager involves a moment of refiguration from author to reader where the reader welcomes the “estrangement” of the fictional text in order to recover his or her sense of the sacramental in profane existence” (130). An anatheistic reading of the poetry of William Blake thus not only gives his readers a new understanding or interpretation of his poetry, but also a recovered “sense of the sacramental” (130). The key to unlocking a sense of the sacramental lies in greeting the unknowable other (in this case Blake’s poetry) with hospitality.

Kearney claims that the “marvel of transubstantiation” is “relating art to faith and faith to art” (130). It is at the convergence of faith and art that readers of Blake can discover an awareness of the spiritual world, and take part in Blake’s spiritual vision. As Kearney writes, “reading can serve to re-sacramentalize the aesthetic in our everyday world” (130). By reading Blake, we can find the gateway to the spiritual world from the everyday world.

In his book Form and Value in Modern Poetry R.P. Blackmur writes, “The supernatural is simply not part of our mental furniture, and when we meet it in our
reading we say: Here is debris to be swept away. But if we sweep it away without first making sure what it is, we are likely to lose the poetry as well as the debris. It is the very purpose of a supernaturally derived discipline, as used in poetry, to set the substance of natural life apart, to give it form, a meaning and a value which cannot be evaded” (34). As in Blackmur’s reading of Yeats, readers of Blake ought not to dismiss the supernatural merely because it is “not part of our mental furniture” (34). This would be to greet the unknowable other with hostility. It would be to dismiss a whole new way of experiencing the world. The spiritual or supernatural aspects of Blake’s poetry are vital to a deep experience of his poetry because his spiritual vision and “supernaturally derived discipline” help his readers to assign meaning and value to the natural world around them (34). He does this through the three anatheist arcs of the iconoclastic, the prophetic, and the sacramental.

As iconoclast, he tears down the institutions and miseries that keep us in chains and blind our perceptions. In its rebellion, the iconoclastic arc is similar to the turn away from God prescribed in Anatheism. As prophet Blake prognoses healing and emancipation from our former ways of thinking about and seeing our lives and the world we inhabit. Blake’s affirmation of human desire through the demonic imagery and Satanic figures in The Marriage of Heaven Hell provide the culmination of this prophecy of healing from our former ways of seeing and living. Through his sacramental aesthetic, he converts the material world into the spiritual world, and in doing so helps us to rediscover God. This is accomplished through his rendering of the infinite within the material.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


