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**“Albion beheld thy beauty”. Vala, Jerusalem and Blake’s Holistic Approach to the Cosmos**

**Abstract I:** Alla luce dell’attuale rilevanza degli studi blakeani e con particolare attenzione ai personaggi di Vala e Jerusalem, questo studio si propone di discutere l’atteggiamento controverso dell’autore nei confronti del mondo naturale e della dimensione femminile. Il ruolo di Vala come crudele dea della Natura sembra poter essere rivalutato se interpretato alla luce del simbolismo legato alla divinità egiziana Iside, a sua volta associato al *topos* dello svelamento, così come alla metafora della tessitura. Considerando, inoltre, le figure femminili di Thel e Lyca, questo saggio intende dimostrare come l’originale rapporto tra parola e immagine che caratterizza i *plates* blakeani contribuisca a promuovere la necessità di un’interazione empatica tra le dimensioni umana, naturale e divina: una relazione di *inter-in-dipendenza* tra uomo e cosmo che, sul modello degli antichi Misteri, può essere compresa esclusivamente attraverso un percorso iniziatico di rivelazione.

**Abstract II:** Moving from the current relevance of Blakean studies and focusing on the two female characters of Vala and Jerusalem, this essay discusses the author’s still debated approach towards nature and femininity. Vala’s role as a terrifying goddess of Nature can be reassessed if read in the light of the symbolism of the Egyptian deity Isis, in its turn associated with the *topos* of the veil and with the weaving imagery. Also considering the figures of Thel and Lyca, this study is an attempt to demonstrate that Blake’s revolutionary use of the written and visual media celebrates the necessity of an empathic identification between the Human, the Natural, and the Divine: on the model of ancient Mysteries, this relationship of *inter-in-dependence* between microcosm and macrocosm can be comprehended only through initiatory revelation.

**Introduction**

Northrop Frye concludes his introduction to *A Collection of Critical Essays* (1966), a volume that is still indispensable to every Blakean scholar, by praising the universality of the British poet’s Art<sup>1</sup>: “It is the peculiar quality of a definitive poet”, Frye observes (1966: 6), “that he always seems to have a special relevance to the preoccupations of one’s own age, whatever

<sup>1</sup> In using the term *Art*, rather than *art*, I am following Morris Eaves’ statement that William Blake epitomises “nineteenth-century dreams not of arts but of Art” (Eaves 1993: 237).

they are". Underlining the striking topicality of Blake's artistic achievements with regard to twentieth-century culture, Frye (1966: 6-7) expects Blakean art to be equally relevant to readers of the following centuries: "whatever the cultural interests of the year 2000 may be, it will be discovered in that year that Blake had them particularly in mind, and wrote his poems primarily to illustrate them". Frye's prediction has undoubtedly been fulfilled as well as Blake's hope that his work would be "a Memento in time to come [...] to speak to future generations by a Sublime Allegory" (Keynes 1972: 825)<sup>2</sup>. Almost completely ignored in his lifetime, Blake is now internationally regarded as one of England's most innovative poets, painters, and printmakers, as it is also testified by the exhibition "William Blake: the Artist" that has recently opened at the Tate Britain of London. The event's main purpose, as its curators announce, is to highlight how the author's artistic innovations, his personal struggles in a period of political terror and oppression, and his social commitment have possibly never been more worth perusing<sup>3</sup>. It is also worth noting that considerable attention was devoted to Blake, as both poet and visual artist, during the two conferences on Romanticism that were held in Nottingham and Manchester in July and August 2019: multiple panel discussions about the British artist were organised at the University of Nottingham by the British Association for Romantic Studies, as well as in Manchester, at the International Conference on Romanticism, which I personally attended.

One of the reasons behind the steady growth of interest in Blake that has characterised literary criticism from the mid-twentieth century onwards is the way the author engaged in the social, cultural, and political issues of his time by employing "the Divine Arts of Imagination" (J, "To the Christians", K. 716-717) in a nonconformist way. His revolutionary engraving technique, known as "relief etching", is aimed at escaping any form of artistic and institutional slavery, as the author himself proclaims in *Jerusalem*: "I must create a system, or be enslav'd by another man's. My business is not to reason and compare. My business is to create" (J, 10: 20-21, K. 629). "Every Christian", Blake remarks, should "engage himself openly & publicly before all the World in some Mental pursuit for the Building up of Jerusalem" (J, "To the Christians", K. 717), thus reiterating a concept already expressed in the preface to the poem *Milton*:

I will not cease from Mental Fight,  
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand  
Till we have built Jerusalem  
In England's green & pleasant Land (M, K. 481).

Considering that Blake's aesthetic values are profoundly rooted in his "social vision"

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter all quotations from Keynes (1972) will be marked as K. followed by the page number. The abbreviations employed for the titles of Blake's works are the following: ARO (*All Religions Are One*); BT (*The Book of Thel*); DC (*A Descriptive Catalogue*); E (*Europe, a Prophecy*); FZ (*Vala, or The Four Zoas*); J (*Jerusalem*); M (*Milton*); MHH (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*); NNR (*There Is No Natural Religion*); VLJ (*A Vision of the Last Judgment*).

<sup>3</sup> See "William Blake: the Artist", Tate Britain, London: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/william-blake-artist> (consulted on 19/04/2019).

(Ferber 1985), it is not surprising that Jerusalem is one of the key symbols of his mythological and philosophical system as well as the title of his last prophetic book, usually regarded as a *summa* of his thought. As both a woman and a city, Jerusalem is “the Holy City of Peace, which is the perfect society”, the “inspiration of all mankind”, the “Divine Vision in every individual”, and a personification of “Liberty” (Damon 1988: 206). In contrast with Jerusalem is the ambiguous and polysemous character of Vala, who epitomizes, instead, man’s “loss of Vision” (Beer 1969: 110). Vala, “buildded by the Reasoning power in Man” (*J*, 44 [39]: 40, K. 675), personifies the realm of external, objective nature as separate from both the divine and the human dimensions. Since at the core of Blake’s inclusive Art is the belief that “Without contraries is no progression”, however, Jerusalem and Vala, as well as all opposite categories, should not be regarded as mutually exclusive, but, rather, as “necessary to Human Existence”<sup>4</sup>. As it has been claimed, “Blake’s critique of culture is never apart from aesthetics” (Adams 1986: 436) and, therefore, a perusal of his artistic principles is essential in order to shed further light on the complex relationship between Vala and Jerusalem within the author’s holistic philosophy.

#### “Redeem the Contraries”. Blake’s Inclusive Art

Blake’s Illuminated Books, which combine the visual and the written dimensions in a unique, and at times disquieting, way, aim precisely at arousing “the faculties to act”<sup>5</sup>. At the core of the author’s philosophy is the belief that man has fallen into a state of “Division”, both material and spiritual, a condition in which “Man is by his own Nature the Enemy of Man” (*J*, 43 [38]: 52, K. 673). The “fall into Division” (*FZ*, l. 21, K. 264) is consequent upon the separation of the so-called Zoas, the “Four Mighty Ones” who lived in “a Perfect Unity” in the body of the Universal Man Albion<sup>6</sup>. Anticipating Jung’s fourfold analysis of human personality<sup>7</sup>, Blake associates the Zoas with the four main aspects of man, *i.e.* body (Tharmas), reason (Urizen), emotions (Luvah), and imagination (Urthona) (Damon 1988: 458). This prelapsarian state of harmony was turned into discord when “The Four Zoas clouded rage” (*J*, 74: 1, K. 714) and, each one trying to usurp their equals’ position, “their Wheels in poisonous / And deadly stupor turn’d against each other” (*J*, 74: 5-6, K. 714). Notwithstanding the evident complexity of Blake’s mythology, the idea underlying his macrotext is that the separation of the Four Mighty Ones has resulted in the condition of mental warfare typical of the “World of Generation”. Blind to the fact that in their eternal state “Contraries Mutually Exist” (*J*, 17: 33, K. 639), in his fallen dimension man perceives reality in terms of opposite and conflictual categories that he can hardly reconcile.

<sup>4</sup> “Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and repulsion, reason and energy, love and hate are necessary to human existence” (*MHH*, pl. 3, K. 149).

<sup>5</sup> “The wisest of the Ancients consider’d what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction, because it rouzes the faculties to act” (To Dr. Trusler, 23 August 1799, K. 793).

<sup>6</sup> “Four Mighty Ones are in every Man; a Perfect Unity / Cannot Exist but from the Universal Brotherhood of / Eden” (*FZ*, ll. 9-11, K. 264).

<sup>7</sup> In his groundbreaking book *Psychological Types or The Study of Individuation* (1923), Carl Gustav Jung identifies four main functions of consciousness: thinking, feeling, sensation and intuition.

Overtly challenging the Classical tradition of *ut pictura poesis*, i.e. the Horatian theory according to which poetry and painting are “sister arts” (Lee 1967: 3), Blake’s illuminated technique serves an explicit “hermeneutic function, in that the contrariety of poem and picture entices the reader to supply the missing connections” (Mitchell 1978: 33). It is precisely the dialectical relationship between word and image that, while reflecting the division of the fallen world, also highlights the possibility to retrieve that “place where Contraries are equally true” (J, 48: 14, K. 677). In the *Songs* as well as in the epic poems, the illustrations accompany the author’s lines by enlightening but also contradicting them, in a relation that implies cooperation and autonomy at the same time and that evidently transcends the limiting tenet according to which “painting is mute poetry, poetry a speaking picture” (Lee 1967: 3)<sup>8</sup>. With the purpose of avoiding any attempt to reduce the multiple facets of reality to single interpretations, Blake does not intend the relationship between the written and the visual dimensions as one of static equilibrium, but, rather, as a dynamic exchange or, in Mitchell’s words (1978: 4), as an “energetic rivalry, a dialogue or dialectic between two vigorously independent modes of expression”. As a result of the creative encounter of two autonomous expressive media, then, Blake’s composite Art evidently longs for the establishment of a world in which “contraries exist productively in dynamic tension” (Lee 1983: 133). Line and colour, far from simply denoting two aesthetic categories, actually function as a metaphor for all opposites. Moving from Lessing’s assumption that poetry and painting belong to the temporal and the spatial dimensions respectively<sup>9</sup>, Blake identifies time and space and, therefore, word and image, with the masculine and the feminine: “Time and Space are real beings, a Male and a Female. Time is a Man, Space is a Woman” (VLJ, K. 614). Influenced by the association word-soul and image-body typical of Renaissance emblem books and by Lessing’s coeval theories on the sister arts, Blake conceives of his composite Art as the fruit of a “dynamic relation of alterity” (Colebrook 2000: 6) between line and colour, soul and body, time and space, man and woman. His own works are the product of the fruitful partnership with his wife Catherine: the two closely collaborated in the act of artistic creation, Blake etching the lines and drawings and Catherine colouring the prints<sup>10</sup>.

Since both pictorial and verbal signs contribute, in all their diversity, to the overall significance of a given work and neither the visual nor the written dimension dominates over the other one, it is fairly evident that Blake’s Illuminated Art mirrors the author’s inclusive approach towards all religious, mythological, and cultural traditions, an attitude

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<sup>8</sup> See also Barkan 2013.

<sup>9</sup> In his celebrated treatise *Laocoon. An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766), the eighteenth-century German thinker Gotthold Ephraim Lessing objects to the tradition known as *ut pictura poesis* and, referring to the sculptural group of the *Laocoon*, maintains that poetry, which gives expression to progressive actions, is a temporal medium, whereas painting and sculpture, being static forms of art, belong to the spatial domain and should, thus, relinquish all representations of time. Blake’s *Laocoön* engraving (1826) testifies to his indebtedness to Lessing’s innovative theories on the relationship between poetry and the visual arts.

<sup>10</sup> The exhibition “William Blake: the Artist” at the Tate Britain is also intended to uncover Catherine Boucher Blake’s role as “a hugely important creative force” in her husband’s life, thus possibly shedding further light on the author’s still highly debated approach towards the female dimension. See <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2019/apr/04/tates-william-blake-show-celebrates-wifes-creative-influence> (consulted on 19/04/2019).

that is clearly expressed in the early treatise *All Religions Are One*. The poet actually defines all dichotomies as “cultural constructs” (Hutchings 2002: 19), generated by the Reasoning Power in man and consequent upon the separation of the Zoas. It is the dominion of reason over imaginative insight that leads humanity to distinguish everything into the false categories of Good and Evil, thus creating what Blake calls “Abstracts” and “Negations”: “They take the Two Contraries which are call’d Qualities, with which / Every Substance is clothed: they name them Good & Evil; / From them they make an Abstract, which is a Negation” (J, 10: 9-11, K. 629). The “Reasoning Power”, as the author explains a few lines below, is “An Abstract objecting power that Negatives every thing. / This is the Spectre of Man” (J, 10: 13-15, K. 629). In differentiating “Negations” from “Contraries”, Blake firmly concludes that “The Negation must be destroy’d to redeem the Contraries” since the former is “the Spectre, the Reasoning Power in Man” (M, 40: 34, K. 533). The latter causes man to lose “any feeling of kinship with others” (Lincoln 1995: 259) and gives rise to “the self-centered Selfhood” (Damon 1988: 381). Completely “unable to sympathize with any other person” and to acknowledge the necessary coexistence of all opposites, in both artistic and philosophical terms, man has gradually become a victim of that “selfish ‘superiority complex’ which is determined to be the God of the universe” (Damon 1988: 381). In the song *On Another’s Sorrow*, however, Blake clearly highlights the need to recover an attitude of empathy towards all living things: wondering whether it would be possible to “see another’s woe, / And not be in sorrow too” (ll. 1-2, K. 122) or to “Hear the small bird’s grief and care, / [...] And not sit beside the nest” (ll. 15; 17), the author comes to the conclusion that “Never, never can it be” (l. 24).

By showing that all contraries, while retaining their individuality, are, in fact, part of a totality, Blakean Art is endowed with a wider social and cultural significance that, as it has been pointed out, promotes “unity in diversity” (Adams 1986: 436). Somehow anticipating the holistic approach to the cosmos endorsed by the theologian and historian of religions Raimon Panikkar, Blake’s works display an unsurpassed example of *inter-in-dependence* between word and image, poetry and painting, time and space, man and woman, soul and body, spirit and matter. Panikkar (2010: 278) coins the term “inter-in-dependence” to describe the law of reality according to which we are all “correlated and interconnected, but each independent in an interdependent way”. In like manner, at the core of the British author’s philosophy and Art is the belief in the “interrelation of all living things” (Lefcowitz 1974: 123-124), as it is well expressed in the celebrated line “Everything that lives is Holy” (MHH, pl. 26, K. 160). Advocating the “sanctity of all life” (Damon 1988: 133) by a process of empathy, Blake’s Art is intended to awaken man’s ability to *see* “not with but through the eye”<sup>11</sup>, thus overcoming the restrictive state of the “Single vision” (To Butts, 22 Nov. 1802, K. 818) and acknowledging that “Every thing that lives / Lives not alone, nor for itself” (BT, 3: 26-27, K. 129). Serving the double purpose of highlighting the division of the generated world and, at the same, the *inter-in-dependence* and mutuality of all opposites, the contrariety of poetry and picture that characterizes Blake’s plates also reflects, I believe, the “free

<sup>11</sup> “We are led to Believe a Lie / When we see [With *del.*] not Thro’ the Eye” (*Auguries of Innocence*, ll. 125-126. K. 433).

connection" that, according to Panikkar (2010: 277), governs the very "Rhythm of Being". As will be discussed below, one of the consequences of what Blake defines as man's "single Vision" is the dichotomy between soul and body, or spirit and matter, an issue the author addresses through the female characters of Vala and Jerusalem: the two women symbolise respectively the earthly, 'natural' world and the spiritual dimension.

### **"Nature is Imagination itself". Man, Nature, and God**

Vala, whose name is the original title of Blake's epic on the Fall of humanity, a poem now usually referred to as *The Four Zoas*, is undoubtedly the most debated character of the Blakean macrotext. As a personification of Nature, Vala has all the controversial attributes of female goddesses of the Earth and still elicits opposite interpretations. If some scholars argue that she embodies the author's anti-naturalism and misogyny<sup>12</sup>, others, conversely, consider her as the result of "limited male vision" (Lincoln 1995: 24). According to this reading, Vala's most threatening features epitomise Blake's criticism of a mechanistic and utilitarian society that deprives man of the possibility to enjoy a creative, spiritual union with the cosmos. Her "dynamic and energetic poetry" represents, in Hutchings's words (2002: 187-88), an "implicit critique of patriarchal science and established gender roles". Testifying to the fact that in much of Blake's writing "nature and femininity are closely related" (Hutchings 2002: 17), Vala symbolises "nature as passively feminine" (Hutchings 2002: 21) on the model of the female character of Earth in the song *Earth's Answer*. In the short lyric, a female voice addresses the Bard, the poet speaking in the previous poem, and denounces the state of imprisonment she is forced in, thus highlighting woman's as well as nature's "enslaved condition under patriarchy" (Hutchings 2002: 188).

In embodying both alienated femininity and objectified nature<sup>13</sup>, Vala is the so-called "shadowy female" (*E*, pl. 1, K. 238): in the state of division consequent upon the separation of the Zoas, the shadowy female is the "Woman Old" who, as suggested in Blake's poem *The Mental Traveller*, is the primary cause of man's loss of eternity (see Bouwer-McNally 1978-79). The Biblical and Neoplatonic theme of man's "falling in the powers of the females" (Raine 1963: 364) recurs also in *Jerusalem*, when Albion, entranced by Vala, falls asleep upon her bosom, thus sinking into the slumber of earthly life: "Embalm'd in Vala's bosom / In an Eternal Death" (*J*, 23: 9-10, K. 646). Since in its primeval state "Humanity knows not of Sex" (*J*, 30 [44]: 33, K. 656), however, Female Emanations become evil and selfish when they are separated from their male counterparts and acquire a will of their own: "Her shadowy form now separate; [...]. Two wills they had, two intellects, & not as in times of old" (*FZ*, ll.

<sup>12</sup> Mellor (1982-83: 148), among others, highlights "Blake's consistently sexist portrayal of women". See also Mellor (1993). Colebrook (2000) and Bruder (2006), on the contrary, maintain that Blake's negative depiction of the "Female Will" (see Damon 1988: 447) is, in fact, aimed at criticising gender stereotypes. See also Bruder (1997). A more recent and controversial work expanding the boundaries of Blake criticism concerning issues of gender and sex is Bruder-Connolly (2013). As far as Blake's seeming anti-natural approach is concerned, Hutchings (2002) argues that the British author's criticism is not directed at nature *per se*, but, rather, at the way humans interact with and exploit the natural world.

<sup>13</sup> Colebrook (2000: 9) argues that "Blake uses the concept of the 'feminine' as a metaphor for alienated otherness in general".



Fig. 1. W. Blake, *Jerusalem*, 1804-1820, pl. 28.

204, 206, K. 285). In like manner, Vala assumes “a cruel and destructive separate existence” (Raine 1968: 209, vol. 1) when she divides herself from her shadow Jerusalem. As a matter of fact, the two female characters once formed an indivisible whole (Fig. 1): “He [Albion] found Jerusalem upon the River of his City, soft repos’d / In the arms of Vala, assimilating in one with Vala” (*J*, 19: 40-41, K. 642)<sup>14</sup>.

Albion himself loved Vala and, in revering her beauty, he attested to the original harmony between the human, the natural, and the divine worlds:

Albion beheld thy beauty,  
 [...].  
 The Veil shone with thy brightness in the eyes of Albion  
 Because it inclos’d pity & love, because we lov’d one-another.

<sup>14</sup> Plate 28 of Blake’s last epic, picturing two female characters embracing each other, possibly celebrates the archetypal union between Vala and Jerusalem as it existed in ancient times. However, in his prophetic books, Blake regularly employs the device known as “syncopation”, *i.e.* “placing designs at a physical and metaphoric distance from their best textual reference” (Mitchell 1978: 193), thus making it difficult for scholars to trace a logical and exact connection between lines and pictures.

Albion lov'd thee: he rent thy Veil: he embrac'd thee: he lov'd thee!  
(*J*, 20: 32, 34-36, K. 643).

As Jerusalem dolefully recalls, that was “a time of love”, a condition that has been replaced by a state where the earthly, natural dimension must necessarily be *negated* in favour of the spiritual one: “Then was a time of love. O why is it passed away!” (*J*, 20: 41, K. 643).

One of the “negations” Blake most abhors is certainly the one entailing the separation of spirit and matter, or body and soul (Adams 1986: 433). Albeit temporarily enclosed within a physical body, man is potentially infinite and, as a consequence, he has no body distinct from his soul: this delusive belief, the author remarks in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, “is to be expunged; this I shall do by printing in the infernal methods, by corrosives” (*MHH*, pl. 14, K. 154). Since spirit and matter are necessary to each other, the so-called “Vegetable Glass of Nature” (*VLJ*, K. 605) is a reflection of the divine realm, in the same way as Vala is a shadow of Jerusalem. Profoundly indebted to the German philosopher and mystic Jacob Böhme and to the alchemical and Hermetic Renaissance traditions, Blake sees man as a microcosm, *i.e.* a mirror of “that which is above”<sup>15</sup>. As Böhme (1651: 77) remarks in his *Signatura rerum*, “the whole outward visible World with all its Being is a Signature, or Figure of the inward spiritual World; whatsoever is Internally, and howsoever its operation is, so likewise it hath its Character externally”. Constantly advocating “a synthesis of the natural and human” (Lefcowitz 1974: 123), Blake himself maintains that Nature, “tho’ it appears Without”, is, in fact, an integral part of man, who originally bore in his “own Bosom” both Heaven and Earth:

For all are Men in Eternity, Rivers, Mountains, Cities, Villages,  
All are Human, & when you enter into their Bosoms you walk  
In Heavens & Earths, as in your own Bosom you bear your Heaven  
And Earth & all you behold; tho’ it appears Without, it is Within (*J*, 71: 15-18, K. 709).

Further attesting to the timeless significance of Blakean Art, the poet’s celebration of the prelapsarian interaction between man, Nature, and God, introduces, in essence, the cosmotheandric vision of reality expounded by Panikkar (2010). According to the latter’s holistic approach, the “Divine, the Human, and the Cosmic are correlated and interconnected” (Panikkar 2010: 277). However, as the Spanish theologian remarks a few words below (278), this principle “cannot be com-prehended by reason” and is unintelligible to “an exclusively rational mind”<sup>16</sup>. Employing the metaphor of musical response, Panikkar (277-278) observes that, the relation between man and the cosmos being one of *inter-in-dependence*, “[e]ach

<sup>15</sup> The first principle of the *Tabula Smaragdina*, the sacred text of alchemists attributed to the legendary Hermes Trismegistus, celebrates the identity of microcosm and macrocosm: “True it is, without falsehood, certain and most true. That which is above is like to that which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above, to accomplish the miracles of one thing” (Linden 2003: 28).

<sup>16</sup> As Panikkar maintains, “*Inter-in-dependence* [...] may appear as a quandary to a merely rational mind: either dependence or independence, but not both. Yet we are not trespassing the principle of non-contradiction when defending the inter-in-dependence of the three dimensions of the real” (2010: 277).



hearer has an inter-in-dependent reaction" since "[w]e are free agents and yet mutually connected". In a way close to Panikkar, Blake asserts that only "the man of imagination" can truly experience an empathic identification with the cosmos, since "In the eyes of others" Nature is "all ridicule and deformity":

The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing which stands in the way. Some see nature all ridicule and deformity, and by these I shall not regulate my proportions; and some scarce see nature at all. But to the eyes of the man of imagination, nature is imagination itself. As a man is, So he Sees (To Dr. Trusler, 23 August 1799, K. 793).

As Blake himself remarks, "As a man is, So he Sees"<sup>17</sup>, thus suggesting that it is according to one's spiritual state that the distance between Jerusalem and Vala, *i.e.* spirit and matter, or macrocosm and microcosm, becomes greater or less (Raine 1968: 209, vol. 1). After the separation of the Zoas, mankind has lost the vision of "the Human Form Divine" (*A Divine Image*, l. 3, K. 221) and "the Starry Heavens are fled from the mighty limbs of Albion" (*J*, "To the Jews", K. 649). The spiritually *blind* man, unable to perceive the bond between spirit and matter, inevitably sees Vala as a threatening and cruel Goddess of Nature: "Vala, The Goddess Virgin-Mother. / She is our Mother! Nature!" (*J*, 18: 29-30, K. 640). As attested by Eliade (1965: 172-173), however, in all ancient and primitive cultures that which is called *nature* is the product of a gradual secularization of the cosmos. The so-called *homo religiosus* always acknowledges the existence of an absolute, sacred reality that, while transcending this material existence, also manifests in it and sanctifies all its living things (Eliade 1965: 171). Ancient poets, as Blake notices in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, conceived of the present world as a mirror of the macrocosm and, therefore, "animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses":

The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their enlarged & numerous senses could perceive (*MHH*, pl. 11, K. 153).

It was when "Priesthood" began and "a system was formed" that "Poetic tales" were finally replaced by delusive "forms of worship" and "men forgot All deities reside in the human breast"<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> Blake was well acquainted with George Berkeley's doctrine according to which *esse est percipi (aut percipere)*, *i.e.* "to be is to be perceived (or to perceive)". The Irish philosopher maintains that the physical world, being a collection of "ideas" or sensible qualities, is mind-dependent and that the source of our sensory ideas is the infinite mind of God, the "Author of Nature". In one of his annotations to Berkeley's *Siris*, Blake observes that "Forms must be apprehended by Sense or the Eye of Imagination. Man is all Imagination. God is Man & exists in us & we in him" ("Annotations to Berkeley's *Siris*", K. 775).

<sup>18</sup> "Till a system was formed, which some took advantage of, & enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realize or abstract the mental deities from their objects: thus began Priesthood; Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales. [...] Thus men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast" (*MHH*, pl. 11, K. 153).

In a way consistent with his belief in Albion's eventual release from "the mind-forg'd manacles" (*London*, l. 8, K. 216), Blake suggests that the "human form divine" can be retrieved by "every man, of every clime" through the constant exercise of "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love" (*The Divine Image*, ll. 11, 13, 1, K. 117). However, as Mellor observes (1971: 596), this is not only "a mode of vision": "it is also a fact, the given object of perception" since "[t]he human form *is* divine: it is God as He exists on earth; it is infinite". By recovering the ability to see "the mutuality of all entities inhabiting Blake's divine cosmos" (Hutchings 2002: 218), man will ultimately regard Nature not as an end in itself but, rather, as the "signature" of the world above and, therefore, as infinite. Drawing attention to the eco-critical and holistic perspective inherent to Blake's works, Hutchings (2002: 206-207) remarks that his poetry gives voice to "the philosophical devaluation, physical domination, and ultimate desolation of the Earth, its ecosystems, and its living creatures, both human and non-human". As will be discussed below, Vala is the character that, recalling the Egyptian goddess Isis, most evidently epitomizes Blake's critique of man's dominating and Promethean attitude towards Nature.

### "He rent thy Veil". Vala and Isis

According to ancient and Classical traditions, "the worship of a divinely animated cosmos" has usually been conveyed through the symbolism of Isis (Assmann 1997: 143), the Egyptian Goddess of Mother Earth and a universal female principle (Grimal 1951: 238). The latter, traditionally identified with the inscription *una quae es omnia*, i.e. "You one, who are all", has come to symbolise the manifestation in the present world of "the invisible source of everything" (Assmann 1997: 88). Especially significant to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature and iconography and, in particular, to the German Romantic poets Novalis, Schlegel, and Schiller<sup>19</sup>, Isis is also essential to a proper understanding of Vala, who has inherited all the ambiguous attributes of her mythological predecessor. The features of several female deities belonging to different cults and geographical areas have actually been attributed to Isis throughout history. As attested by an Egyptian hymn dating from the first century B. C., Persephone, Demeter, Athena, Artemis, Leto, and Aphrodite are only a few of the goddesses whose symbolism has variously merged with that of Isis (Assmann 1997: 49). Apuleius clearly highlights the latter's polysemous features in the eleventh book of the *Metamorphoses*, when the Egyptian goddess reveals to the protagonist Lucius that she is "adored by the whole world in varied forms [...] and with many diverse names" (*Apu. Met.* XI. 5, tr. Griffiths: 75). Most interestingly, considering that Isis is a female deity "transcending all cultural differences" (Assmann 1997: 49), a perusal of her rich imagery is also of primary importance to shed further light on Blake's habit of merging different traditions in a new, 'illuminated' way.

<sup>19</sup> As Hadot (2006: 262) points out, "[a]t the end of the eighteenth century, [...] the motif of Isis/Nature was to invade literature and philosophy and bring about a radical change in attitude with regard to nature". In contrast with the scientific approach to the cosmos that characterized the previous century, an aesthetic attitude to nature, that introduced an emotional, sentimental, and irrational element into the relation between mankind and nature, started to appear in the writings of Goethe, Schiller, Schlegel, and of German Romantics (see Hadot 2006: 263).



Fig. 2. W. Blake, *Jerusalem*, 1804-1820, pl. 51.

Recalling the Old Norse prophetess and priestess *völva*, a character Blake possibly knew thanks to Cottle's (1797) and Gray's translations of Norse myths<sup>20</sup>, the very name Vala alludes to the word "veil" and, consequently, to the "mythology of the veiled goddess" (Raine 1968: 177, vol. 2). The iconography related to Nature's veil derives from the belief that "Nature loves to hide", a concept well expressed by Heraclitus' popular aphorism written in honour of Artemis of Ephesus (Hadot 2006: 1). Artemis and Isis, who have been conflated since antiquity (Hadot 2006: 236), are usually depicted with multiple breasts, a crown, and a veil, and a *peplum*, "a womanish pall [...] embroidered all over" (Cudworth 1845: 578, vol. 1), is also associated with Athena. Vala herself appears in plate 51 from *Jerusalem* with two of the attributes common to both Athena and Isis, *i.e.* a veil and a crown (Fig. 2).

Plutarch and Proclus report an inscription once placed at the Egyptian temple of Athena-Isis at Saïs that evidently focuses on the metaphor of the veil: "I am all that has been,

<sup>20</sup> On Blake's acquaintance with Norse poetry via Thomas Gray, see Sklar (2011: 130) and O' Donoghue (2014).

that is, and that shall be; no mortal has yet raised my veil" (Hadot 2006: 265). As Hadot attests (2006: 265), Athena and Isis descend, in fact, from Neith, who was also renowned for her veil or *peplum*. Either in the form of Neith, Athena, Artemis, or Isis, then, the image of Nature as a veiled Goddess is typical of several mythological traditions and has given rise to an ambiguity that has drawn the attention of poets and visual artists: Nature both hides herself from man and also *veils* herself in everything, thus becoming visible only to those who can *see* beyond her veil. Assimilating "in literal similarity and reversal with 'live' and 'evil'", moreover, the term "veil" highlights the contradictory attributes that are inherent to all Goddesses of Mother Earth (Hilton 1983: 2): in the words of Beer (1969: 110), Vala "represents a similar ambiguity in Nature".

The image of the veil and the *topos* of the unveiling of Nature have traditionally symbolized man's relationship with the cosmos (Hadot 2006). As already said, Albion could once rend Nature's veil: "Albion lov'd thee: he rent thy Veil: he embrac'd thee: he lov'd thee! (J, 20: 36, K. 643). On the contrary, in the fallen world, Nature's mantle becomes the delusory vision of scientific materialism. According to Hadot, two approaches can be identified throughout the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Modern periods, *i.e.* a Promethean and an Orphic one. If "Promethean man demands the right of domination over nature" (Hadot 2006: 95), the Orphic attitude, by contrast, implies a creative union with the cosmos that comes through initiatory gnosis, "after the model of the mysteries of Eleusis"<sup>21</sup>. The initiation into the secrets of Mother Earth is the primary aim of all ancient Mysteries (Eliade 1965, 1994), among which are precisely the Greek Eleusinian celebrations, whose rituals re-enacted the myth of Demeter and Persephone. That Blake was well acquainted with the tradition of the Eleusinian rites and with the imagery related to the two goddesses of grain and agriculture is testified by the songs *The Little Girl Lost* and *The Little Girl Found*. The protagonist of Blake's poems, Lyca, is usually identified with Persephone: divesting herself of her "slender dress"<sup>22</sup>, *i.e.* abandoning her human form, Blake's heroine enters a cave, emblem of the telluric womb, where she symbolically *dies*, thus retracing the descent into the underworld accomplished by her mythological prototype (Raine 1968: 130, vol. 1). In the same way as Persephone's descent into Hades's reign is followed by her eventual rebirth in springtime, so Lyca is *found* by her weeping parents only after being *lost* in the "desart wild"<sup>23</sup>. As scholars have pointed out, Lyca's path of loss and recovery is also reminiscent of the Neoplatonic doctrine of the human soul's descent into and ascent from the generated world. It is very likely through the influence of the philosopher and translator Thomas Taylor that Blake conflated the imagery of the Eleusinian Mysteries with the soteriological theories of the Neoplatonists Plotinus and Porphyry (Zamparo 2015). In the latter's treatise *De Antro*

<sup>21</sup> "Orpheus thus penetrates the secrets of nature not through violence but thorough melody, rhythm, and harmony. Whereas the Promethean attitude is inspired by audacity, boundless curiosity, the will to power, and the search for utility, the Orphic attitude, by contrast, is inspired by respect in the face of mystery and disinterestedness" (Hadot 2006: 96).

<sup>22</sup> "While the lioness / Loos'd her slender dress, / And naked they convey'd / To caves the sleeping maid" (*The Little Girl Lost*, ll. 49-52, K. 113).

<sup>23</sup> "Lost in desart wild / Is your little child" (*The Little Girl Lost*, ll. 21-22, K. 112).

*Nympharum*, which Blake himself engraved, the cosmos is described as a cave having two gates, “one prepared for the descent of men, the other for the ascent of gods” (Porph. *Antr.* 3: transl. Taylor 1788: 299). Porphyry’s work, which takes the form of a commentary on an obscure passage in Homer’s *Odyssey*, thus suggests that the created world is both a *grave* and a *womb*: it is, in Blake’s own words, “The Habitation of the Spectres of the Dead, & the Place / Of Redemption & of awakening again into Eternity” (*J*, 59: 8-9, K. 691). The idea of the threshold that has to be overcome in order to be spiritually reborn is clearly at the core of *Jerusalem*, whose frontispiece shows the artist and blacksmith Los while entering the cave-grave of mortal existence and, therefore, undertaking the “passage through / Eternal Death” and the eventual “awakening to Eternal Life” (*J*, 4: 1-2, K. 622).

As the symbolism of all ancient Mysteries well demonstrates, then, rending nature’s veil implies a *descensus ad inferos* on the model of both Lyca and Persephone. The initiatory journey into the womb of Mother Earth, traditionally perceived as dangerous and threatening, is variously represented as the entry into a cave, into the belly of a monster, into a telluric womb, or into a hut (Eliade 1994: xiv). Overcoming the secular, *natural* state of man, *i.e.* of the one who is spiritually *blind* and ignores the sacred origin of all life, always corresponds to some kind of death followed by a new birth (Eliade 1965: 162). Wondering whether it would be wise to raise Nature’s mantle, behind which unknown dangers dwell, Schiller actually claims that “knowledge is but death”:

Is it wise to raise the veil  
Where terror, threatening, dwells?  
Life is naught but error,  
And knowledge is but death  
(*Kassandra*, 1802, ll. 57-60)<sup>24</sup>.

In his erudite study *The Veil of Isis*, Hadot argues that what is most frightening about the unveiling of Goddess Nature is the growing awareness of the principle underlying earthly existence: the mystery of metamorphosis and the coexistence of life and death. Both Lyca and Persephone are required to symbolically *die* in order to attain a new life, thus following the natural cycle of birth, decay, death, and rebirth, a never-ending process which Blake constantly praises: “As one age falls, another rises; different to mortal sight but to immortals always the same” (*DC*, K. 567). Heraclitus’ popular aphorism on the Goddess of Saïs, usually translated as “Nature loves to hide”, conveys, in fact, a much more profound truth: “By this literary form, he also wanted to provide a glimpse of what, for him, is the law of all reality: the battle among contraries, and the perpetual metamorphosis that results from this eternal combat between opposing forces” (Hadot 2006: 2). “Reality is such”, Hadot continues (2006: 10), “that within each thing there are two aspects that destroy each other mutually. For instance, death is life and life is death”. If carefully perused, then, Heraclitus’s enigmatic saying on Athena-Isis “expresses astonishment before the mystery of metamorphosis and of the deep identity of life and death” (Hadot 2006: 11-12).

<sup>24</sup> The English translation of Schiller’s lines is from Hadot (2006: 271).

There is a character in Blake's macrotext who epitomizes man's fears before the image of an unveiled Nature: the female protagonist of *The Book of Thel*. In contrast to Lyca and Persephone, Thel refuses to descend into the underworld, which in Blake's imaginative system is the so-called state of Experience, *i.e.* "the world of the soul which has 'died', or 'lapsed'" (Raine 1968: 129, vol. 1): "The eternal gates' terrific porter lifted the northern bar: / Thel enter'd in & saw the secrets of the land unknown" (*BT*, 6:1-2, K. 130). Unable to bear the sight of "the secrets of the land unknown", the girl flees to her world of illusory innocence: "The Virgin started from her seat, & with a shriek / Fled back unhinder'd till she came to the vales of Har" (*BT*, 6: 21-22, K. 130). As Lefcowitz argues (1974: 123-124), Thel's inability to perform the necessary descent into Nature's womb is consequent upon an "[i]nadequate perception of the need for natural identity, which must serve as the first step toward eventual fusion of self and other under the aegis of the imagination". Failing to comprehend that physical death is but a prelude to rebirth, the young lady compares herself to a vanishing cloud and does not accept "the inevitability of her own death" (Lefcowitz 1974: 123-124): "Thel is like a faint cloud kindled at the rising sun: / I vanish from my pearly throne, and who shall find my place?" (*BT*, 2:11-12, K. 128). Vala, on the contrary, "is able to sacrifice her selfhood to the point where natural identification is possible" (Lefcowitz 1974: 123-124). At first concerned about the inescapable law of mutability that underlies all earthly processes<sup>25</sup>, she is immediately comforted by the Zoa Luvah, invisibly hovering over her "in bright clouds" (*FZ*, l. 385, K. 367): "Yon sun shall wax old & decay, but thou shalt ever flourish. / The fruit shall ripen & fall down, & the flowers consume away, / But thou shalt still survive; arise, O dry thy dewy tears" (*FZ*, ll. 419-421, K. 368). Aware that she "will ultimately be able to transcend mere generation" (Lefcowitz 1974: 123-134) by accepting and revering the mysteries of Mother Earth, Vala is finally willing to merge with the natural elements around her:

Hah! shall I survive? Whence came that sweet & comforting voice?  
 [...].  
 I am not here alone: my flocks, you are my brethren;  
 And you birds that sing & adorn the sky, you are my sisters.  
 I sing, & you reply to my song; I rejoice, & you are glad  
 (*FZ*, ll. 422, 443-445, K. 368).

In *The Book of Thel* Blake demonstrates how the physical body, which is "potentially redemptive" (Paley 1973: 127), might, instead, constitute "that pitying urge for protection that can give rise to the selfhood" (Lincoln 1995: 74). As "a woven object", the human "garment" is related in Blake's works to the "weaving theme" (Paley 1973: 120) and, therefore, to the female dimension. In ancient and Classical traditions, "to wield a spindle held deep ideological, philosophical, as well as practical meanings" and female spinners "were especially revered for their cosmic associations with life and death" (Taylor 2018: 26; 28). The

<sup>25</sup> "Alas! am I but as a flower? then will I sit me down, / Then will I weep, then I'll complain & sigh for immortality, / And chide my maker, thee O Sun, that raisedst me to fall" (*FZ*, ll. 410-412, K. 368).

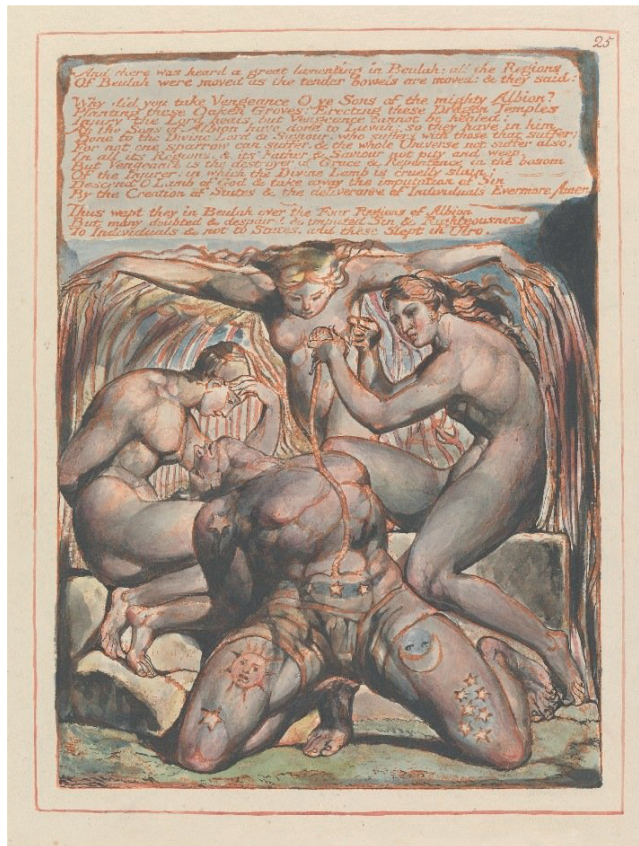


Fig. 3. W. Blake, *Jerusalem*, 1804-1820, pl. 25.

activities of spinning and weaving, in their turn connected with creation (Taylor 2018: 27), were part of the imagery of all Goddesses of Nature: Neith and Isis were believed to have intertwined the whole created universe on their *peplum*, in the same way as Vala's "beautiful net of gold and silver", a cloth that she had "woven with art" (J. 20: 30-31, K. 643), is the veil upon which the splendid variety of the cosmos originally shone with brightness in Albion's eyes. As attested by Porphyry, Persephone herself, "who presides over every thing generated from seed, is represented weaving a web" (Porph. *Antr.* 14: transl. Taylor 1788: 305).

Given the significant associations between the imagery of weaving, creation, and the iconography of Nature Goddesses, plate 25 from *Jerusalem* is worth focusing on (Fig. 3). The illustration, which closes the first part of the poem, shows the Cosmic Man Albion while being eviscerated by the three female characters Vala, Rahab, and Tirzah during a Druid sacrifice. On Albion's left side is Tirzah, who is winding the latter's bowels into a ball in her hand, whereas Rahab is standing on his right in a melancholic posture. Hovering over the three characters and covering them with her mantle is Vala. It is fairly evident that Blake's women recall the Greek *Moirae*, also known to Roman culture as *Parcae*, i.e. the Classical Fates who presided over the destiny of men and heroes by deciding upon one's lifespan and decreeing the time of a person's death (Taylor 2018: 28-29). However, if considering that the term *Parcae* derives from the Latin verb *parire*, i.e. "to give birth to", it is clear that these divine spinners, with their "bittersweet symbols" of the wool and spindle, were also harbingers of new life (Taylor 2018: 29).

Weaving is likewise "an ambivalent activity" in Blake's macrotext: it "provides a model of divine creation, one which might allow the material world to be seen as a temporary, protective covering for humanity, but which actually makes it seem like a form of bondage, the product of a sinister goddess of fate" (Lincoln 1995: 74-75). As far as plate 25 from *Jerusalem* is concerned, it is not clear whether Vala is ominously hiding or, rather, benevolently protecting Albion with her fibrous veil (Romero 2010: 140). Despite her enigmatic features, a key to interpret the Goddess's ambiguous attitude is offered by the myth of Isis and Osiris as it is described by Plutarch. Beer (1969: 109) points out that the story of Isis, Osiris, and Typhon actually "provides a perfect parallel with the lost Man, dimly remembered

and yearned after by the four Zoas, but now existing only in destructive heat". The myth recounts that Isis, who stands for "the healing principle in nature", is "constantly and patiently seeking to find pieces and restore her lost husband" Osiris, who has been mutilated by Typhon, "the evil destructive principle in nature" (Beer 2007: 106). Interestingly enough, in order to regenerate her husband, Isis asks the help of the Mesopotamian goddess of weaving Tayet (Taylor 2018: 27). The story of the "moon-goddess who is trying to re-create [Osiris]" (Beer 1969: 109) can thus support a positive reading of Vala. In Plutarch's words, Isis "signifies *knowledge*" and, opposing her adversary Typhon, "collects, compiles and delivers [that *holy doctrine*] to those who aspire after the most perfect participation of the divine nature" (Plut. *De Iside* 2: transl. Squire 1744: 2). If read in this light, Vala is not entrapping Albion, but, rather, she is fostering the latter's spiritual awakening: since the Latin word *velum* also means "tent" (Romero 2010: 140), it can be asserted that Vala's veil functions as the hut, *i.e.* the threatening passage, that in all initiatory Mysteries leads to rebirth. In view of the fact that the access to spirituality is always expressed through the imagery of death followed by regeneration (Eliade 1965: 162), even Rahab's role acquires a peculiar significance. Her melancholic posture, which recalls a work of art much appreciated by Blake, *i.e.* Dürer's engraving *Melencolia I* (Romero 2010: 141), stands for the phase of darkness and suffering that is traditionally a prelude to inner renewal: according to alchemical and Hermetic sources, which Blake was highly familiar with, every initiatory death corresponds to internal melancholy (Brann 1985: 126). In the attempt to retrieve "the Human Form Divine", Valas-Isis, both "queen of the dead" and "of heavenly beings" (Apu. *Met.* XI. 5, tr. Griffiths 1975: 75), is guiding the lost man Albion to a full identification with the sacred dimension, thus helping him to overcome his exclusively material, *natural*, and selfish existence. Moreover, as testified by the fact that the sun and moon, "the Starry Heavens", are again visible on Albion's "mighty limbs" (J, "To the Jews", K. 649), it can be assumed that the Goddess is "reconciling Man's inward nature with the inward nature of the universe" (Beer 1969: 110), thus showing that, in Panikkar's words, "All is inter-related" (2010: 278). It follows that Vala's mantle does not *veil* the sacred origin of all life, but, rather, *reveals* to Blake's Universal Man the true essence of humanity. In this "enlightened state", as Raine remarks quoting Blake's own words (1968: 186, vol. 2), "nature is not rejected but seen for what it is: 'One Continued Vision of Fancy or Imagination'".

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