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# *'Naked Beauty display'd'*. Bodies, Souls and Sexuality in William Blake's Composite Art. *Part I*

**Abstract I:** Il sistema filosofico ed estetico di William Blake è una rielaborazione sincretica e originale del pensiero classico, neoplatonico, gnostico, cristiano ed ermetico. Ispirandosi altresì al mito del paradiso delle origini, a John Milton e alle Rivoluzioni francese e americana, Blake crea un linguaggio del corpo altamente simbolico con cui esprime la consustanzialità di opposti quali spirito e materia, divino e umano, macrocosmo e microcosmo. I corpi blakiani, rappresentati principalmente nelle due posture contrapposte di espansione e contrazione, sono spesso caratterizzati da torsioni 'serpentinate' e da tratti androgini che evocano l'arte di Michelangelo: considerando che il fine ultimo di Blake è la *coincidentia oppositorum* alchemica, l'androginia è un tema ricorrente nelle sue opere.

**Abstract II:** William Blake's philosophic and aesthetic system is a syncretic and original re-elaboration of classical, Neoplatonic, Gnostic, Christian and Hermetic thought. Inspired by the myth of the earthly paradise, by John Milton and by the American and French Revolutions as well, Blake creates a complex and symbolic body language that reveals the consubstantiality of opposites such as spirit and matter, the divine and the human, macrocosm and microcosm. His bodies, mainly represented in the two opposed postures of expansion and contraction, are endowed with a writhing movement, a serpentine pattern and androgynous features that evoke Michelangelo's art: considering that Blake's main goal is the alchemic *coincidentia oppositorum*, androgyny is a recurring theme in his works.

**Keywords:** Panism, Word and image, Socio-political radicalism, The human and the divine, Body language.

## 1. *'Every thing that lives is holy'*. Blake's Animistic Philosophy

According to the programme of the Pescara-Chieti conference ("Transitional / Transnational Identities, Gender Issues, and Cultural Dialogism from the Romantic Age to the Present") and complying with the subject of our Prin research project ("Bodies, Ecology and Moving Identities"), in this essay I will dwell on some aspects of William Blake's poetics and of his verbal and figurative art, both dominated by the meaning and role of the human body. This is the *fil rouge* that tightly connects the themes illustrated on these pages: the profound relationship be-

tween man and the natural world (section 1), the idea of a radically free and egalitarian society (section 2), Blake's fundamental sentiment of the human body (section 3), the compenetration of the human with the divine (section 4) and the ideal model of an androgynous sexuality (section 5). All these themes have a central position in Blake's work, a position that is essentially constant in time and throughout his macrotext: for this reason, I will consider Blake's verbal and visual work as a whole, as an organic source rich in passages and suggestions – visual and verbal – that refer to the themes under analysis. The following pages, thus, are not intended as an introduction to Blake but presume that the reader is familiar with his work and his culture. Due to limits of space, here are presented the first three sections (Part I), whereas the last two ones (Part II) will be published in the 2026 issue of this magazine.

Universally known as a pre-Romantic or Romantic poet, William Blake is not easily definable nor interpretable. He bases his philosophic and aesthetic system on a syncretic and original re-elaboration of classical, Neoplatonic, Gnostic, Christian and Hermetic thought[1] and concentrates all the features that in his opinion make a real and complete artist: in *The Laocoön* (1820), one of his last works, he declares that "a Poet, a Painter, a Musician, an Architect: the Man Or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian" (Blake 1979: 776)[2]. Blake regards himself not only as a poet, as a philosopher, a painter, an engraver and a musician, but also as a sculptor, a smith and an architect: moving from the traditional identification of poetry with smithery as well as engraving with sculpturing, he believes that the creation of a "System" of ideas has an architectural substance. In *Jerusalem* (1804-1820), his last and longest prophetic poem, Blake highlights the plastic and architectural quality of ideas and languages by defining English as "the rough basement"[3]: moving from the assumption that he "must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Man's", the blacksmith and alchemist Los – Blake's fictional alter ego – "built the stubborn structure of the Language" (*Jerusalem*, plates 10, 40. K. 629, 668).

Inspired by Pythagoras, Plato, Plutarch, Ovid, Porphyry, primitive Christianity, Renaissance Neoplatonism, alchemy, Jakob Böhme and Emanuel Swedenborg, Blake permeates both his life and his work with a respectful, reverential and almost animistic attention towards any element of the natural world, from the basest insect and humblest vegetal to the human being. The influential essay *The Moralists* by Antony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury, can be regarded as another source of inspiration for Blake since Theocles and Philocles, the two speakers of the philosophic dialogue modelled on Plato's *Phaedrus*, "feel Divinity present" in the awesome beauty of untamed nature:

> Here, Philocles, we shall find our *Sovereign Genius*; if we can charm the *Genius* of the Place (more chast and sober than your Silenus) to inspire us with a truer Song of Na-

[1] Blake is profoundly indebted to Thomas Taylor's English translation of Plato's and Plotinus's works: see Taylor (1969). For Blake and Neoplatonism cf. Harper (1961); for Blake's interest in Neoplatonism and in other religions see Raine (2002); for Blake, Gnosticism and other religions cf. Givone (1978).

[2] Henceforward Keynes's edition of the complete writings of Blake will be quoted as K. followed by the page number. Another excellent edition of the poet's works is Blake (1982).

[3] "I call them by their English names: English, the rough basement" (*Jerusalem*, plate 40. K. 668).

> ture, teach us some celestial Hymn, and make us feel Divinity present in these solemn Places of Retreat. Haste then, I conjure you, said I, good Theocles, […] some Divinity has approach'd us and already moves in you (Cooper 1709: 156).

Shaftesbury is convinced that God dwells in the natural world and, close to the Cambridge Platonists and to Böhme[4], argues that there exists a direct, immediate and personal contact between humanity and divinity. Embracing Shaftesbury's Panistic philosophy, Böhme's natural theology, Swedenborg's principle of the continuity between the infinite and the tangible reality[5] and Burke's celebrated elaboration of Pseudo-Longinus's theories on the sublime, Blake believes that the sacred vastness and infiniteness of nature and of the whole world mirror and contain divinity. If, praising Plato, Longinus argues that "the whole universe is not enough to satisfy the speculative intelligence of human thought; our ideas often pass beyond the limits that confine us" (Longinus 1995: XXXV, 3: 277), Edmund Burke maintains that "Another source of the sublime, is *infinity* […]. Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime (Burke 1757: Part II, Section VIII: 52).

In *There is No Natural Religion - second series*, Blake argues that "The bounded is loathed by its possessor" and that "The desire of Man being Infinite, the possession is Infinite & himself Infinite" (plates 6, 9. K. 98), thus attesting his appreciation of Longinus and Burke and anticipating Leopardi's "teoria del piacere"[6]: the poet, then, draws the conclusion that "He who sees the Infinite in all things, sees God" (plate 11. K. 98). Printed in 1788 and consisting of twenty-one tiny plates that expound philosophical aphorisms against the rational theology of Deism, the two series of *There is No Natural Religion* are Blake's first illuminated experiment: the poet produces these two minute works thanks to the original engraving and printing technique he has just invented, a method that, as Medieval manuscripts and as the Renaissance emblem tradition, combines word and image[7].

Blake enlarges his conviction that when seeing "the Infinite in all things, we see God" claiming that "every thing that lives is Holy", a sentence that recurs numerous times throughout his work, since the beginning of his career. In his *Annotations to Lavater's Aphorisms on Man*, written in 1788 as well[8], he states that "All life is holy" (K. 74), that God "is become a worm that may nourish the weak" and that "every thing on earth is the word of God & in its essence is God":

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[4] For the links among Shaftesbury and the Cambridge Platonists see, for example, Patrides (1969). For Böhme's influence on Shaftesbury cf., among others, Brett (2020).

[5] About 1789 Blake writes *Annotations to Swedenborg's Wisdom of Angels Concerning Divine Love and Divine Wisdom* and about 1790 *Annotations to Swedenborg's The Wisdom of Angels Concerning Divine Providence*.

[6] "La tendenza nostra verso un infinito che non comprendiamo, forse proviene da una cagione semplicissima, e più materiale che spirituale. L'anima umana (e così tutti gli esseri viventi) desidera sempre essenzialmente, e mira unicamente, benché sotto mille aspetti, al piacere, ossia alla felicità" (*Zib*. [165], 12-23 July 1820. Leopardi 1991: 164).

[7] For Blake's complete composite works see Blake (1991a, 1992, 2009). For a study of Blake's visual and verbal production cf. Mitchell (2019).

[8] For Blake's interest in the Swiss theologian and philosopher Johann Kaspar Lavater see Erle (2017).

> God is in the lowest effects as well as in the highest causes; for he is become a worm that may nourish the weak. For let it be remember'd that creation is God descending according to the weakness of man, for our Lord is the word of God & every thing on earth is the word of God & in its essence is God (K. 87).

Few lines above the aforementioned passage Blake quotes Job[9] and reckons that "It is the God in *all* that is our companion & friend, for our God himself says: 'you are my brother, my sister & my mother'"; then he mentions St. John to express the idea that God is "a brother and a friend" that lives in humanity, and vice versa[10]: "& St. John: 'Whoso dwelleth in love dwelleth in God & God in him'" (K. 87). In the beginning of *Jerusalem*, the lyrical voice – the very Blake – reports that it was God who revealed to him that the human and the divine are consubstantial:

> […] I see the Saviour over me
> Spreading his beams of love & dictating the words of this mild song.
> "Awake! awake O sleeper of the land of shadows, wake! expand!
> I am in you and you in me, mutual in love divine:
> […] I am not a God afar off, I am a brother and friend:
> Within your bosoms I reside, and you reside in me"
> (*Jerusalem*, plate 4, ll. 4-7, 18-19. K. 622).

If we consider that, as just read, "God himself says: 'you are my brother, my sister & my mother'" and "'I am a brother and friend: / Within your bosoms I reside, and you reside in me'", the anthropomorphic representation of Nature depicted on the second-last plate of *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise* – a series of seventeen small line engravings accomplished in 1793 – explicitly identifies herself with both the Creator and the worm when exclaiming

> I have said to the Worm:
> Thou art my mother & my sister
> (*The Gates of Paradise*, plate 16. K. 770).

On the frontispiece to *The Gates of Paradise*, humanity is visually represented as a divine creature and, at the same time, as a worm ready to be united to a chrysalis (see plate 1)[11]. Dante Alighieri, whose *Comedy* is illustrated by Blake[12], exquisitely exposes the classical idea of man as a worm-butterfly when attacking the *superbi*:

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[9] "I have said to corruption, Thou art my father: To the worm, Thou art my mother, and my sister" (*Job*, 17: 14).

[10] "And we have known and believed the love that God hath for us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him" (*John*, 4: 16).

[11] The illustrations are at the end of the essay, before the Bibliography.

[12] Exhorted by John Linnell, in 1824 Blake starts his drawings for Dante's *Divine Comedy*. See, for example, Blake (1983) and (2025). For Dante's *Comedy* see Alighieri (1984).

non v'accorgete voi che noi siam vermi
nati a formar l'angelica farfalla,
che vola a la giustizia sanza schermi?
(*Purg.*, X: 124-126).

The worm that stands for the body (human and divine) and the butterfly, or ψυχή, that stands for the soul[13], moreover, graphically allude to Blake's conviction that "Man has no Body distinct from his Soul", an audacious theory expounded in the revolutionary prophetic book *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, etched about 1790-1793: in the beginning of this work, Blake proclaims that "All Bibles or sacred codes have been the causes of the following Errors: 1. That Man has two real existing principles: Viz: a Body & a Soul" (plate 4. K. 149). This seemingly blasphemous confutation of the biblical word assumes coherence if observing that Blake has always interpreted the Bible and the main tenets of Christianity in the light of their primitive and authentic principles, rejecting orthodox interpretations: if on the last plate of *The Marriage* the poet reveals that he reads the Bible "in its infernal or diabolical sense" (plate 24. K. 158), in *The Everlasting Gospel*, written in 1818, claims that

Both read the Bible day & night
But thou read'st black where I read white
(*The Everlasting Gospel*, ll. 13-14, p. 33. K. 748).

After confuting some erroneous principles of the Bible, Blake declares that "the following Contraries to these are True: 1. Man has no Body distinct from his Soul; for that call'd Body is a portion of the Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age" (plate 4. K. 149). Most significantly, the last words of *A Song of Liberty*, the 'biblical poem' that concludes *The Marriage*, are "For every thing that lives is Holy" (plate 27. K. 160).

## 2. *'That stony law I stamp to dust'*. Blake's Vision of Society

Firmly convinced that "every thing that lives" is sacred, Blake believes that the rigid and hierarchical organisation of society should be replaced by a brotherly and democratic commonwealth in which social classes, gender and ethnical discrimination, economic categories, political constrictions and State institutions such as marriage, churches and militarism are abolished. Blake's attempt to recreate a sort of primeval Eden is undoubtedly inspired by Milton's *Paradise Lost*, a poem that he and his wife admire so profoundly that they use to declaim it strolling in their garden "in naked majesty", as Adam and Eve[14]:

Two of far nobler shape, erect and tall,
Godlike erect, with native honor clad,
In naked majesty seemed lords of all,

[13] The Greek term ψυχή means, as it is well known, both 'butterfly' and 'soul'.

[14] For Blake and Milton cf. Wittreich (1975). For Blake's biography see Raine (2014); Ackroyd (1995); Gilchrist (1863). See also Holmes (2005). For *Paradise Lost* see Milton (1993).

And worthy seemed […]
(*Paradise Lost*, IV: 288-291).

I am convinced that also Thomas Tryon's vehement struggle against slavery and the exploitation of the New World, and in particular his essay *Friendly Advice to the Gentlemen Planters* (Tryon 1684), is an important source of inspiration for Blake's Edenic ideal: it is worth considering that the Americas, in spite of their being placed in the West, have always been perceived by the Europeans as the concrete earthly paradise described in the Bible, placed in the East[15]. The very Milton provides a parallelism between "our first parents" and the Amerindians:

[…] Such of late
Columbus found th' American so girt
With feathered cincture […]
(*Paradise Lost*, IX: 1115-1117).

As this short survey may highlight, several authors and works manifest the same conception of the relationship between man and the natural world inherited, and expressed in a personal way, by Blake. Relying, like Blake, on the sacredness of any living being, Tryon is against flesh-eating and, as he illustrates in his treatises *The Way to Health* (Tryon 1683) and *Pythagoras* (Tryon 1691), advocates vegetarianism, for both moral and healthy reasons. In all paradises, as in the classical golden age, humanity and animals live in harmony, speak the same language, only know eternal spring and immortality and are nourished by the fruits, berries, herbs and vegetables that offer themselves spontaneously. As Tryon, close to Böhme's philosophy, argues that the beginning of wars and rivalry within human society is the consequence of killing and eating animals after the Fall, so Milton rejects the Cartesian conception of animals as machines without intelligence and feelings and believes that all living creatures have a soul and a mind. In order to comfort Adam, frightened by solitude, God assures him that he can enjoy the company of animals since, like the human beings, "they also know, and reason not contemptibly":

"What call'st thou solitude? Is not the earth
With various living creatures, and the air
Replenished […]?
[…] Know'st thou not
Their language and their ways? They also know,
And reason not contemptibly; with these
Find pastime […]"
(*Paradise Lost*, VIII: 369-371, 372-375).

In his translation of the XV Book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a Book centred on Pythagoras's moving defence of animals, Dryden exclaims "For all Things have an equal right to live" and rejects "the sacrilegious tast of Blood":

[15] See Marx (1967); Greenblatt (2017).

> Take not away the Life you cannot give:
> For all Things have an equal right to live.
> Kill noxious Creatures, where 'tis Sin to save;
> This only just Prerogative we have:
> But nourish Life with vegetable Food,
> And shun the sacrilegious tast of Blood
> (*Of the Pythagorean Philosophy. From Ovid's Metamorphoses Book XV*, ll. 705-710. Dryden 1700: 529).

Among the works of the Platonist Thomas Taylor, the first English translator of Plato's works[16], it is worth mentioning *A Vindication of the Rights of Brutes* (Taylor 1792)[17], a mock-serious defence of the rights of animals that – in spite of being an ironical response to Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* and to Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* – fosters thoughtful meditations on the dignity of animals. Close to Pythagoras, Plutarch, Porphyry, Tryon[18] and Taylor, Blake refers to a vegetarian diet when, in one of his *Proverbs of Hell*, argues that "All wholesom food is caught without a net or a trap" (*Marriage*, plate, 7. K. 151).

Along with Tryon's and Taylor's considerations and, more in general, along with the new sensitive approach towards the natural world encouraged by numerous classic authors, by Neoplatonism and by the philosophic reflections derived from the "scientific Renaissance"[19], the ideals conveyed by the French and American Revolutions strongly contribute to Blake's democratic and radical vision of the natural world and of society[20]. Edmund Burke's extremely unsympathetic *Reflections on the Revolution of France* (Burke 1790) prompt two replies by Mary Wollstonecraft and one by Thomas Paine: if in 1790 Wollstonecraft answers with *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, followed by her celebrated *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), in 1791 Paine responds with his famous and effective *Rights of Man: Being an Answer to Mr Burke's Attack on the French Revolution*. Thomas Paine, sincerely esteemed by Blake[21], is the inspirer of the independence of the American colonies from Great Britain and the author of *Common Sense* (Paine 1776) and *The American Crisis*, two pamphlets written at the beginning of the American Revolution[22].

Two of Blake's early works are precisely *The French Revolution*, printed in ordinary type

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16 Blake is deeply inspired by Taylor (cf. note 1).

17 Cf. the facsimile edition: Taylor (1966).

18 See Plutarch (1957); Porphyry (2000); Tryon (1691).

19 The still-surviving strong influence of Neoplatonism during the scientific revolution, the Copernican and Galilean theories depriving man of his sovereignty in the universe and the reaction to the mechanistic vision of the world implied in the new science led to a respectful and even animistic approach towards the natural dimension. The formula "scientific Renaissance" is coined by Marie Boas, one of the first scholars of the impact of modern science on sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries culture, particularly in Great Britain: see Boas (1962). For the approach to nature in the modern age see Thomas (1984).

20 For Blake's revolutionary ideals cf. Erdman (1991); Williams (1998); Thompson (1994).

21 Cf. Essick (1991b).

22 *The American Crisis* is a series of sixteen pamphlets published between 1776 and 1783.

for the bookseller Joseph Johnson in 1791 and never published[23], and *America: A Prophecy*, accomplished in 1793: *The French Revolution* is Blake's only work conceived for conventional publication[24], whereas *America* is a composite prophetic poem printed with the author's original technique. In 1793, the year in which he etches *America*, Blake participates in the illustration of the *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* by captain John Gabriel Stedman, a work in two volumes (Stedman 1796; Stedman 1813) that, by describing slavery and other aspects of colonisation in the New World, continues Tryon's moral battle against slavery and becomes an important tool in the early abolitionist cause. The sixteen engravings produced by Blake for Stedman's *Narrative*, the most moving and powerful among all the drawings that illustrate the two volumes[25], depict some of the atrocious cruelties against slaves that the captain witnessed, including hanging, lashing and other forms of torture. In the etching entitled *The Execution of Breaking on the Rack*[26] (see plate 2), Blake represents one of "the reclaimed" that Joseph Conrad will bitterly describe in *Heart of Darkness*, i.e. slaves that have the tragic task of controlling, subduing and punishing their fellows, defined "unhappy savages" and "raw matter": "Behind this raw matter one of the reclaimed, the product of the new forces at work, strolled despondently, carrying a rifle by its middle" (Conrad 2000: 33).

In the early prophetic poem *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, printed, as *America*, in 1793, Blake dwells on the theme of colonialism and slavery in the New World and draws inspiration from some of his engravings for Stedman's *Narrative*, etched in the same year. By presenting the female character of Oothon, "the soft soul of America" (plate 1. K. 189), Blake expresses explicit proto-feminist views and celebrates free eroticism[27]. Oothon casts doubts on deeply rooted social habits and moral conventions such as chastity, possession and jealousy and innocently exclaims:

> "How can one joy absorb another? are not different joys
> Holy, eternal, infinite? and each joy is a Love.
> […] I cry: Love! Love! Love! happy happy Love! free as the mountain wind!
> Can that be Love that drinks another as a sponge drinks water,
> That clouds with jealousy his nights, with weepings all the day?"
> (*Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, plate 5, ll. 5-6, plate 7, ll. 16-18. K. 192, 194).

Oothon, morally and sexually free, and her beloved Theotormon, imbued with a hypocrite sense of Christian righteousness[28], are interpretable as the fictional counterpart of cap-

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[23] In *Let the Brothels of Paris be opened*, a lyric included in *Poems and Fragments from the Note-Book* (1793), Blake deals again with the French Revolution (K. 185).

[24] As observed by Keynes, "only one copy now remains, probably a set of page proofs. […] This was preserved in the collection of John Linnell until 1918, and is now in the H. E. Huntington Library, California" (K. 887).

[25] The other illustrators of the *Narrative* are Inigo Barlow, Francesco Bartolozzi, Michele Benedetti, Thomas Conder, Thomas Holloway, John Perry and Anker Smith. For Blake's contribution see Essick (1991a).

[26] Stedman (1813): unnumbered plate placed between p. 308 and p. 309.

[27] For Blake's attitude towards sexual freedom and female desire see Matthews (2011).

[28] In the Argument to the poem, Oothon says: "I loved Theotormon / And I was not ashamed; / I trembled

tain Stedman and his companion Joanna, a slave of African origins living in Suriname: in his *Narrative*, Stedman describes his relationship with Joanna in romantic terms, avoiding any reference to the colonisers' habit of sexually exploiting slaves and natives. It is worth noticing that on the last plate of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Oothon advocates bodily pleasures, thus attacking obtuse probity and unnatural chasteness, by precisely arguing that "every thing that lives is holy": "Arise, and drink your bliss, for every thing that lives is holy!" (plate 8. K. 195). Orc, the revolutionary spirit of the New World, can be aligned with Oothon when he proclaims "For every thing that lives is holy, life delights in life" (*America*, plate 8. K. 199).

The 'manifesto' of free sexuality presented by Milton when describing the natural eroticism of Adam and Eve in the earthly paradise[29] and the ideas and personality of Mary Wollstonecraft have – along with the news from the New World and along with the more open approach to sexuality fostered by the French Revolution[30] – a profound influence on Blake. Attesting his sincere admiration, he dedicates to the French and American Revolutions his two eponymous works[31], to the author of *Paradise Lost* the prophetic poem *Milton*, completed in 1804, and to Mary Wollstonecraft the lyric *Mary*, composed about 1794: Blake admires so sincerely the initiator of modern western feminism that even imagines a triangulated spiritual and erotic relationship with her and with Heinrich Füssli, the Swiss artist living in London that has a relevant influence on him. In the poem dedicated to Wollstonecraft, Blake celebrates her moral dignity and freedom as well as the liberation from "the spells of law"[32], from "the frozen marriage bed"[33] and from "the Marriage hearse"[34]:

> And Mary arose among Friends to be free,
> But no Friend from henceforward thou, Mary, shalt see.
> Some said she was proud, some call'd her a whore,
> And some, when she pass'd by, shut the door.
> […] She remembers no Face like the Human Divine.

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in my virgin fears, / And I hid in Leutha's vale! / I plucked Leutha's flower, / And I rose up from the vale; / But the terrible thunders tore / My virgin mantle in twain" (*Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, plate III. K. 189).

[29] "[…] into their inmost bower / Handed they went; and, eas'd the putting off / These troublesome disguises which we wear, / Straight side by side were laid, nor turn'd, I ween / Adam from his fair spouse, nor Eve the rites / Mysterious of connubial Love refus'd: / Whatever hypocrites austerely talk / Of puritie and place and innocence, / Defaming as impure what God declares / Pure, and commands to some, leaves free to all" (*Paradise Lost*, IV: 738-747).

[30] For the freer attitude towards sexuality encouraged by the French Revolution see, for example, Offen (1990); Heuer (2023).

[31] For Blake and the American Revolution see Freedman (2018).

[32] "Till she who burns with youth, and knows no fixed lot, is bound / In spells of law to one she loathes […]" (*Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, plate 5. K. 193).

[33] "Such is self-love that envies all, a creeping skeleton, / With lamplike eyes watching around the frozen marriage bed" (*Ibid*., plate 7. K. 194).

[34] "But thro' midnight streets I hear / How the youthful Harlot's curse / Blasts the new born Infant's tear, / And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse" (*London*, in Blake, *Songs of Experience*, 1789-1793, plate 46. K. 216).

All Faces have Envy, sweet Mary, but thine
(*Mary*, ll. 15-18, 43-44. *Poems from the Pickering MS*. K. 428-429).

Further expressing his advocacy of moral and sexual freedom, in *The Everlasting Gospel* Blake considers that "If Moral Virtue was Christianity, / Christ's Pretensions were all Vanity" (*Supplementary Passages*. K. 758), rhetorically asks "Was Jesus chaste? or did he / Give any lessons of Chastity?" (p. 48. K. 753) and, in seemingly blasphemous terms, questions:

Was Jesus Born of a Virgin Pure
With narrow Soul & looks demure?
If he intended to take on Sin
The Mother should an Harlot been,
Just such a one as Magdalen
With seven devils in her Pen
(*The Everlasting Gospel*, ll. 1-6, p. 120. K. 756).

We should not forget that Blake disproves conventional interpretations of the Bible, or, as Milton would say, "Whatever hypocrites austerely talk / Of puritie and place and innocence"[35]. In the beginning of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, he announces that "All Bibles or sacred codes have been the causes of […] Errors" and in *A Song of Liberty*, its conclusion, declares: "Let the Priests of the Raven of dawn, no longer in deadly black, with hoarse note curse the sons of joy" (plate 27. K. 160). The poet parallels the institution of priesthood, with its moralistic and repressive law, to a noxious caterpillar and to a cemetery; if in *The Marriage* he states "As the caterpillar chooses the fairest leaves to lay her eggs on, so the priest lays his curse on the fairest joys" (plate 9. K. 152), in *The Garden of Love* – one of the lyrics included in *Songs of Experience* (1789-1794) – he explains how the intrusion of priests has transformed a luxuriant and pleasant garden into a cemetery:

So I turn'd to the Garden of Love
That so many sweet flowers bore;
And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tomb-stones where flowers should be;
And Priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars my joys & desires
(*The Garden of Love*, ll. 7-12. K. 215).

### 3. *'The Human Divine'*. Humanity and Divinity in Blake's Bodies

Advocating the doctrine of primitive Christianity and believing in the sacredness of any living form, Blake sustains equalitarianism, democracy, the abolition of slavery, feminist ideas, free love and sexuality and, as a natural consequence, is profoundly interested in the position and role of humanity within the whole universe, or, in other terms, in the identity of the human and the divine, in what he calls, as in the above-mentioned poem *Mary*, "the Human Divine".

[35] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, IV: 744-745.

The divinity of mankind is the reason why human bodies deserve the most important, if not unique, position in all the designs by Blake whereas the natural world has a symbolic meaning and does not represent an autonomous subject in his visual work: far from being ignored, the natural dimension is contained in Blake's "Human Divine" since the human body epitomises the sacredness of any living form and "All Things are comprehended […] in the divine body of the Saviour, the True Vine of Eternity, The Human Imagination" (*A Vision of the Last Judgment*: 70. K. 605-606). Blake concludes his minute first composite work with a syllogism: on the second-last engraving of *There is No Natural Religion - second series*, he announces, as already said, that "He who sees the Infinite in all things, sees God" and concludes the sentence stating that "He who sees the Ratio only, sees himself only" (plate 11. K. 98). On the last etching, he completes the syllogism with the words "Therefore God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is" (*Application*, plate 12. K. 98), explicitly declaring that humanity is identifiable with divinity, and vice versa: as announced in *The Marriage*, "men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast" (plate 11. K. 153).

The symbolism and representation of human bodies in Blake's composite art derive from two indissoluble premises: on the one hand, the author's philosophic and aesthetic syncretism and, on the other, his complex personality and multiple artistic skills. As already noticed, Blake concentrates all the features that in his opinion constitute the real and complete artist in the Renaissance meaning of the term: he is a poet, a painter, an engraver, a philosopher, a composer and, since he has created and constructed a system of ideas, he is also a smith and an architect. Exactly as he is firmly convinced that "Man has no Body distinct from his Soul", Blake overcomes the boundaries between the intellectual and the physical dimension by identifying the creation of ideas and languages with a plastic and architectural construction. Being also convinced that "God is a man"[36], that "every thing on earth […] in its essence is God" and that God told him "I am in you and you in me", Blake embraces the classical, Christian, Neoplatonic and Hermetic principles according to which man is the "likeness & similitude"[37] of God and of the universe and, by means of an intricate body language and symbolism, visually illustrates what he calls "Human Form Divine"[38]: Blake's Human Forms Divine are spiritual bodies that graphically represent the intellectual and physical faculties of the human being and symbolise the identity of body and soul, above and below, macrocosm and microcosm, the divine and the human, or, in Swedenborg's terms, the identity of the infinite and the tangible reality.

Blake' human bodies are mainly represented in the two symbolical and contrasting postures of expansion and contraction, two postures that have inspired modern ballet dancers[39]: it is worth mentioning Ralph Vaughan Williams, who bases his ballet *Job: A Masque for*

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[36] "God is a man not because he is so perciev'd by man, but because he is the creator of man" (*Annotations to Swedenborg's Wisdom of Angels Concerning Divine Love and Divine Wisdom*, 1789 circa. K. 90).

[37] Blake, *Jerusalem*, plate 96 (K. 743).

[38] Blake, *A Divine Image*, l. 3 (K. 221): this lyric, etched about 1791, is added to *Songs of Experience*. As observed by Keynes, "the print bearing this poem was never included by Blake among the *Songs of Experience*, but it is found with two sets of prints which were made from the plates after his death" (K. 894).

[39] For a pioneering study on Blake and dance cf. Howe (1938). For the influence of Blake on contemporary arts cf. Clarke, Connolly & Whittaker (2014). Cf. also Whittaker (2010).

*Dancing* (1930) on Blake's *Illustrations of the Book of Job* and on a scenario derived from them by Geoffrey Keynes (Frye 2013: 477), as well as Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham, the pioneers of twentieth-century avant-garde dance, who centre their technique precisely on 'contraction and release', or, in Blakean terms, on contraction and expansion. In Blake's visual language of forms, a human body with outstretched arms and legs in a lively attitude of extension and expansion evokes Christ crucified and stands for the act of self-sacrifice, generosity, forgiveness and open-mindedness, whereas a contracted, crouched and stiff posture alludes to mental closure, selfishness, spiritual limitation and constriction[40].

In the light of the symbolic meaning of bodily expansion, it is clear why on the fourth plate of *Jerusalem* God exhorts the lyrical voice to awake and to *expand* in order to redeem the world: "Awake! awake O sleeper of the land of shadows, wake! expand!" (K. 622). The design in the upper part of this page, a page that marks the very beginning of the poem[41], provides an interesting instance of Blake's two contrasting poses (see plate 3): the crouched, cowled female figure wearing a heavy grey-blue tunic and evoking, as observed by Morton Paley (Blake 1991b: 135)[42], the Delphic and the Persian Sibyls painted by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel stands for spiritual blindness and mental contraction, whereas the leaping, athletic and naked figure on the left soaring in an expanded posture with extended arms – Jerusalem followed by her daughters – alludes to the path of liberation and redemption presented in the poem. The open arms of the contracted and hooded 'Sibyl', however, can be interpreted as a signal of her longing for spiritual rebirth. Since the personification of Nature on plate 16 of *The Gates of Paradise* is precisely represented as a crouched and hooded woman wearing a tunic, the 'Sibyl' on plate 4 of *Jerusalem* is interpretable as Vala, the symbol of the natural dimension of humanity, opposed to Jerusalem, the spiritual dimension of mankind. The contrast between clothes and nakedness is another important symbolic conflict in Blake's designs, as testified by this plate and by the beginning and end of *Jerusalem*: Los-Blake starts his mental journey wearing a black smock and a broad-brimmed hat and concludes it – enlightened and spiritually reborn – with an adherent and transparent robe that does not conceal his "naked majesty" (plates 1, 97). In *Mirth* and *Melancholy*, two designs that illustrate Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*[43], Blake reproduces the leaping and slightly Christological pose of Jerusalem and that of the hooded, stiff and crouched 'Sibyl' depicted on plate 4 of *Jerusalem*: whereas Mirth is wearing a transparent veil, Melancholy is cowled and heavily dressed.

The engraving *Execution of Breaking on the Rack* (see plate 2 again) is another example of the two opposed Blakean postures. If the "reclaimed" slave acting as a torturer of his fellow sufferer is portrayed in a contracted pose, the victim displays extended arms and legs in an expanded and explicitly Christological position: besides being wounded and mutilated, he

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[40] For Blake's symbolic language of the body see Warner (1994). See also Connolly (2002).

[41] Plate 1, a full-page design showing Los-Blake entering a gothic door, is the frontispiece; plate 2 is the titlepage; plate 3 is an address "To the Public"; plate 4 is the beginning of the poem. Each of the four parts of *Jerusalem* is addressed to a specific audience: "To the Public", "To the Jews", "To the Deists", "To the Christians".

[42] Paley's majestic edition of *Jerusalem* reproduces copy E (Paul Mellon Collection).

[43] *Mirth* and *Melancholy* (pen and watercolour, 16.1 x 12.1 and 16.2 x 12.2 cm, circa 1816-1820) are, along with the other ten watercolours illustrating Milton's twin poems, in the Pierpoint Morgan Library, New York. Lister (1991: plates 54, 55).

is tied to a sort of cross. The hanged slave, the hills and the two palms in the background of the plate further evoke Christ's ascent to Golgotha and his crucifixion. Conrad as well represents in Christological terms the Stoic dignity with which the African slaves endure injustice, suffering and tortures (their chains are interpretable as metaphors for the cross): "A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps" (Conrad 2000: 33).

Blake elaborates his two main body postures, especially the crouched one, innumerable times throughout his visual work. The frontispiece to *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, for instance, majestically exemplifies the squatted pose by depicting three naked figures (Oothon, the "soft soul of America", Theotormon, her moralistic beloved, and Bromion, a slaver that has raped her) chained in a Platonic cave close to the sea (see plate 4): physically contracted, mentally closed and symbolically blind, they are all unable to see the sun, metaphor for light, freedom, life, divinity. Significantly enough, the three figures are not 'closed' in the same way: if Bromion (Oothon's raper) is totally contracted and Theotormon has a tragic countenance, Oothon has a serene expression and is trying to extend her trunk[44].

On the titlepage to *The Book of Urizen*, printed in 1794, the eponymous character – symbol of the rational and limited intellectual dimension of humanity – is crouched on the ground in a pose of contraction that in Blake's language of the body also signifies materialism, narrow-mindedness and despair (see plate 5). The stony and cold colours that dominate the plate, the dry branches of the weeping willow forming an archway, the biblical tablets of the Law, Urizen's heavy gown, his closed eyes and his contracted posture are unequivocal signals that in Blake's symbolic and aesthetic system refer to spiritual blindness and death.

Considering that Blake has always read the Bible refusing conformist interpretations, no wonder, then, if the Ten Commandments placed behind Urizen represent a negative feature. On the last plate of *The Marriage*, the poet declares that "no virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments. Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse, not from rules" (plate 24. K. 158) and, when arguing that "the son of fire […] stamps the stony law to dust", means that the "ten commands" must be destroyed (*A Song of Liberty*, plate 27. K. 160). Using the same words, Orc, the voice of the American Revolution, defends "the fiery joy" (as Oothon) and revolts against Urizen's "stony law":

> […] I am Orc, wreath'd round the accursed tree:
> […] The fiery joy, that Urizen perverted to ten commands,
> […] That stony law I stamp to dust; and scatter religion abroad
> To the four winds as a torn book, & none shall gather the leaves
> (*America: A Prophecy*, plate 8, ll. 1, 3, 5-6. K. 198).

We should not fail to notice, however, that on the titlepage to *The Book of Urizen* the paradigm of sterile rationality is trying to open his arms – exactly as the cowled 'Sibyl' at the beginning of *Jerusalem* (see plate 3 again) – as if to outstretch them and give birth to his

[44] For Blake's political bodies see Makdisi (2003).

creation in an act of generous self-sacrifice: explicitly referring to the artistic activity of the very Blake, Urizen is writing and engraving a book.

Among the numerous examples of the crouched posture in Blake's visual macrotext, it is worth mentioning the colour-printed drawing entitled *Nebuchadnezzar* (see plate 6), a figure portrayed on the last plate of *The Marriage*, above the words "One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression" (plate 24. K. 158); the gigantic naked angel on the frontispiece to *America*, squatted and chained since he is still spiritually slumbering; plate 41 of *Jerusalem*, displaying a stately figure crouched on the floor in a contracted posture: besides evoking Füssli's *Silence*, this plate provides an interesting occurrence of a Blakean visual self-representation since the tiny figure on the left writing in reversed letters on a scroll is a portrait of the author. It is worth mentioning also plate 51 of *Jerusalem*, a plate that depicts Vala, the goddess of Nature, in a cowered and melancholic pose, wearing a blue-grey weighty clothing.

Between 1795 and 1805 Blake creates the large colour print *Newton*[45], a portrayal of the English scientist that in his opinion represents the archetype of barren scientific and rational thought and, thus, is a personality that he associates with Urizen (see plate 7). Isaac Newton is represented in a crouched and contracted posture, busy at drawing a triangle with the compass he holds in his left hand: the huge sculpture accomplished in 1995 by Eduardo Paolozzi and placed in the courtyard of the British Library is a three-dimensional reproduction of Blake's *Newton*.

Blake's favourite and most re-elaborated plate is *The Ancient of Days*[46], a picture that shows the Old Testament God, shrank in a squatted pose, when creating the universe with his compasses: "When he prepared the heavens, I was there; when he set a compass upon the face of the depth" (*Prov*., 8: 27). Blake illustrates both the Bible and *Paradise Lost*:

> […] in his hand
> He took the golden Compasses, prepar'd
> In Gods Eternal store, to circumscribe
> This Universe, and all created things
> (*Paradise Lost*, VII: 224-227).

The two plates that conclude *There is No Natural Religion - second series*, Blake's first composite work, provide the earliest visual instance of the two opposed postures, thus documenting the central symbolism they have within the philosophic and aesthetic system of the poet[47]. The second-last etching represents the human being that "sees the Ratio only, and therefore sees himself only" as a hunkered figure with a compass that can be interpreted as an embryonic anticipation of *Newton* and *The Ancient of Days*; the last engraving offers the

[45] The third and last version of the plate *Newton* (1804-1805), a colour print finished in watercolour (46 x 60 cm), is now in the Tate Gallery, London. See Townsend (2003) and Butlin (1978).

[46] *The Ancient of Days*, or *God Creating the Universe*, is the frontispiece to Blakes's prophetic book *Europe* (1794). A relief etching of this plate finished in gold, body colour and watercolour (23.4 x 16.8 cm) and perfected by Blake in his deathbed (1827) is now in the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester. Lister (1991: plate 75).

[47] The first series of *There is No Natural Religion*, etched about 1788 as well and consisting of nine little plates, presents three early instances of the crouched posture (plates 4, 5, 7) and one of the expanded pose (plate 6).

conclusion of the syllogism – "Therefore God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is" – and visually depicts the ecstasy of being united with God as a human figure in an expanded posture, with radiations round its head and with outstretched arms.

On the frontispiece to *The Gates of Paradise* (see plate 1 again), the worm-body is contracted and the chrysalis-soul is extended in a perfect complementary pose to visually testify that, as much as body and soul are indissoluble, the two Blakean contrasting postures and all the other oppositions are necessary, as the poet declares in *The Marriage* when stating that "without Contraries is no progression":

> Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence. From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy. Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell (plate 3. K. 149).

On the following plate Blake expounds some errors implied in an orthodox reading of Christian doctrines, as already said, and explains what for him is true:

> All Bibles or sacred codes have been the causes of the following Errors: 1. That Man has two real existing principles: Viz: a Body & a Soul. 2. That Energy, call'd Evil, is alone from the Body; & that Reason, call'd Good, is alone from the Soul. […] But the following Contraries to these are True: […] 2. Energy is the only life, and is from the Body; and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy (plate 4. K. 149).

The sentence "Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence" may be integrated with the adjective 'Divine': considering that Böhme and Blake are convinced that God is a polarity of opposed forces and contains both good and evil, spirit and matter, light and darkness – "Heaven and Hell", "Reason and Energy" –, the reflection should be "Attraction and Repulsion, […] are necessary to Human *and Divine* Existence". Moving from the Neoplatonic principle of the unity of contraries in God, the German theologian and philosopher argues that the Creator is the eternal absolute unity and, therefore, the religious experience is basically the experience of an ineluctable series of dualisms.

A watercolour created by Blake in 1793-1794 circa and entitled *The Good and Evil Angels struggling for Possession of a Child* (see plate 8)[48] depicts a blond good angel above a seascape and a dark evil angel against a background of flames contending the soul of a child in order to visually represent the necessary coexistence of contraries: as announced in *The Marriage*, "Opposition is true Friendship" (plate 20. K. 157). Water, connected to the good angel, and fire, connected to the evil angel, have always been regarded as the two opposed elements

[48] The pen and watercolour design (29.2 x 44.5 cm) here reproduced, created in 1793-1794, is in the Cecil Higgins Museum, Bedford. A later, larger and reversed version of this subject (1795-1805 circa, 44.5 x 59.4 cm), a colour print finished in pen and watercolour, is now in the Tate Gallery: in this later version the colours are brighter and the evil angel has blank eyes and a tragic countenance that evokes Nebuchadnezzar's expression (see plate 6 again).

par excellence. If for alchemists all metals, consisting of mercury (associated with water) and sulphur (associated with fire), derive from water and are purified by fire, for Ovid all things are created thanks to the "inharmonious harmony" (*discors concordia*) implied in the union of water and fire, two elements "naturally at enmity":

> quippe ubi temperiem sumpsere umorque calorque,
> concipiunt, et ab his oriuntur cuncta duobus,
> cumque sit ignis aquae pugnax, vapor umidus omnes
> res creat, et discors concordia fetibus apta est
> (*Met.*, I: 430-433).

> For when moisture and heat unite, life is conceived,
> and from these two sources all living things spring.
> And, though fire and water are naturally at enmity, still heat and moisture
> produce all things, and this inharmonious harmony is fitted to the growth of life
> (Ovid 1951: vol. I: 32-33).

Blake's fiery evil angel, with arms and legs extended, is hovering in an expanded and lively posture that evokes a crucifixion, whereas the watery good angel is standing in a stiff upright pose, with contracted arms. The child, with arms and legs outstretched but with a frightened expression, functions as the link between the two contending angels, as the spirit that unites body and soul: it is worth noticing that this design appears, much reduced in size, precisely below the text of plate 4 of *The Marriage*, a page that expounds the poet's theories on the identity of body and soul. In his comment on this plate of *The Marriage*, Erdman further highlights the opposed and complementary features of the two angels claiming that the good one is unequivocally a female (Blake 1992: 102): from this perspective, the child can be interpreted as the means for the fusion of man and woman, one of Blake's main tenets. Blake's idea of the original androgyny of humankind and of the necessary re-union of male and female is a theme analysed in Part II of this essay. Keynes, on the other hand, is convinced that "both figures are male" (Blake 1990: plate 4v) and concludes that the dark one is fettered by his ankle[49] to visually illustrate the third "Error" of "all Bibles or sacred codes": "That God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies" (plate 4. K. 149). Considering that this plate of *The Marriage* is entitled *The voice of the Devil*, the evil angel can be associated with one of the active and creative devils busy at confuting the "Errors" listed in the upper half of the page, an association corroborated by the drawing *Satan smiting Job with sore Boils*, a tempera on mahogany representing Satan with arms and legs extended in a similar Christological pose[50]: for Blake, as already said, "Evil is the active springing from Energy".

The modes and meanings of the representation of the human body function as the the-

[49] Erdman notices that "there is no chain or manacle on his ankle in copies A, B, C" of *The Marriage* (Blake 1992: 102).

[50] *Satan smiting Job with sore Boils* (pen, ink and tempera on mahogany, 1826 circa, 32.7 x 43. 2 cm) is in the Tate Gallery.

oretic and practical core of this extraordinary poet-painter-engraver and as the *trait d'union* that marks the conclusion of the first part of my essay and opens the path for the second one: in Part II the theme of the human body is fundamental also for the Blakean representation of the identity of the human and the divine and, as already said, for the ideal of an androgynous – and thus complete – sexuality.

## ILLUSTRATIONS


Plate 1. William Blake, *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise*, 1793, frontispiece.

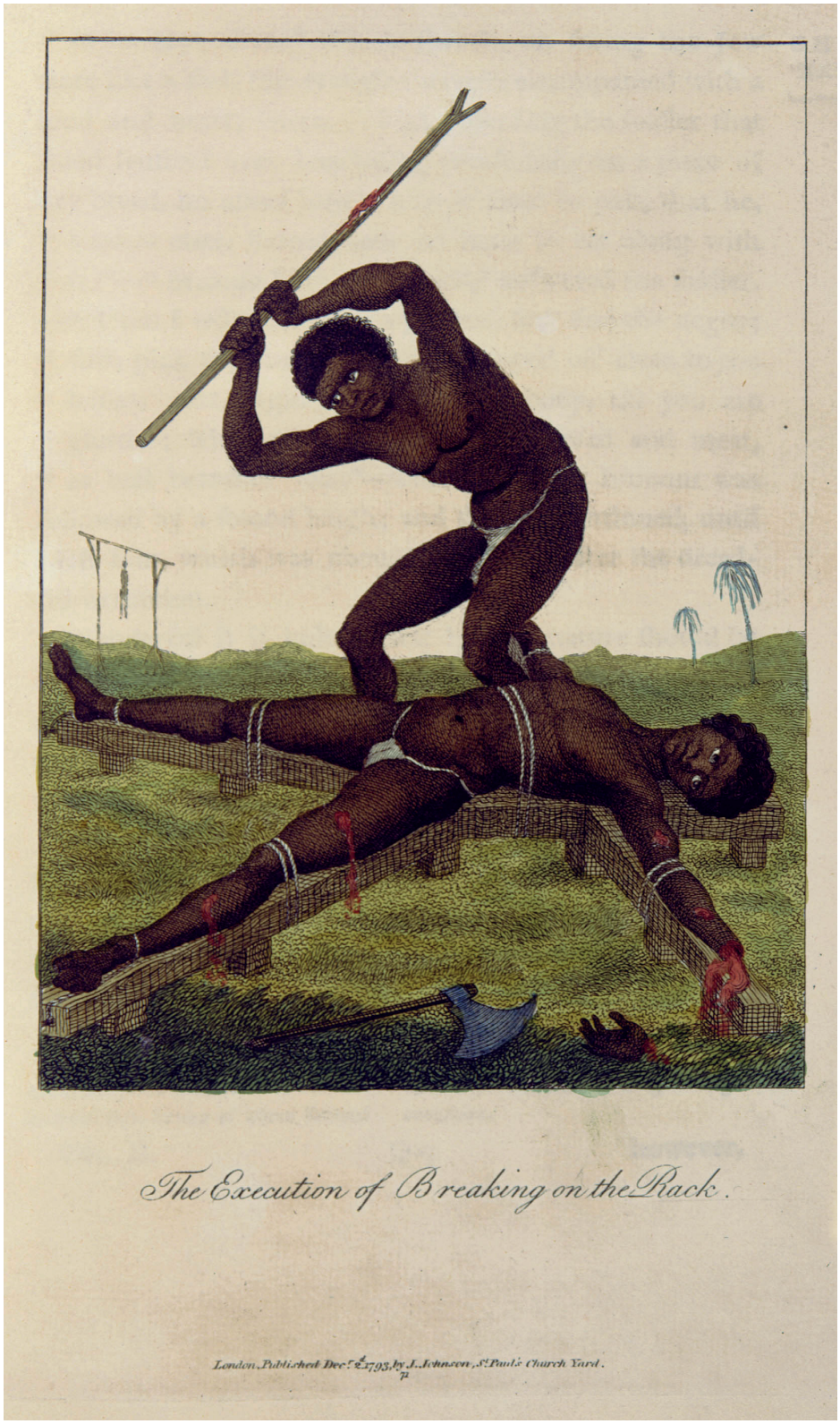


Plate 2. William Blake, *The Execution of Breaking on the Rack*, 1793.

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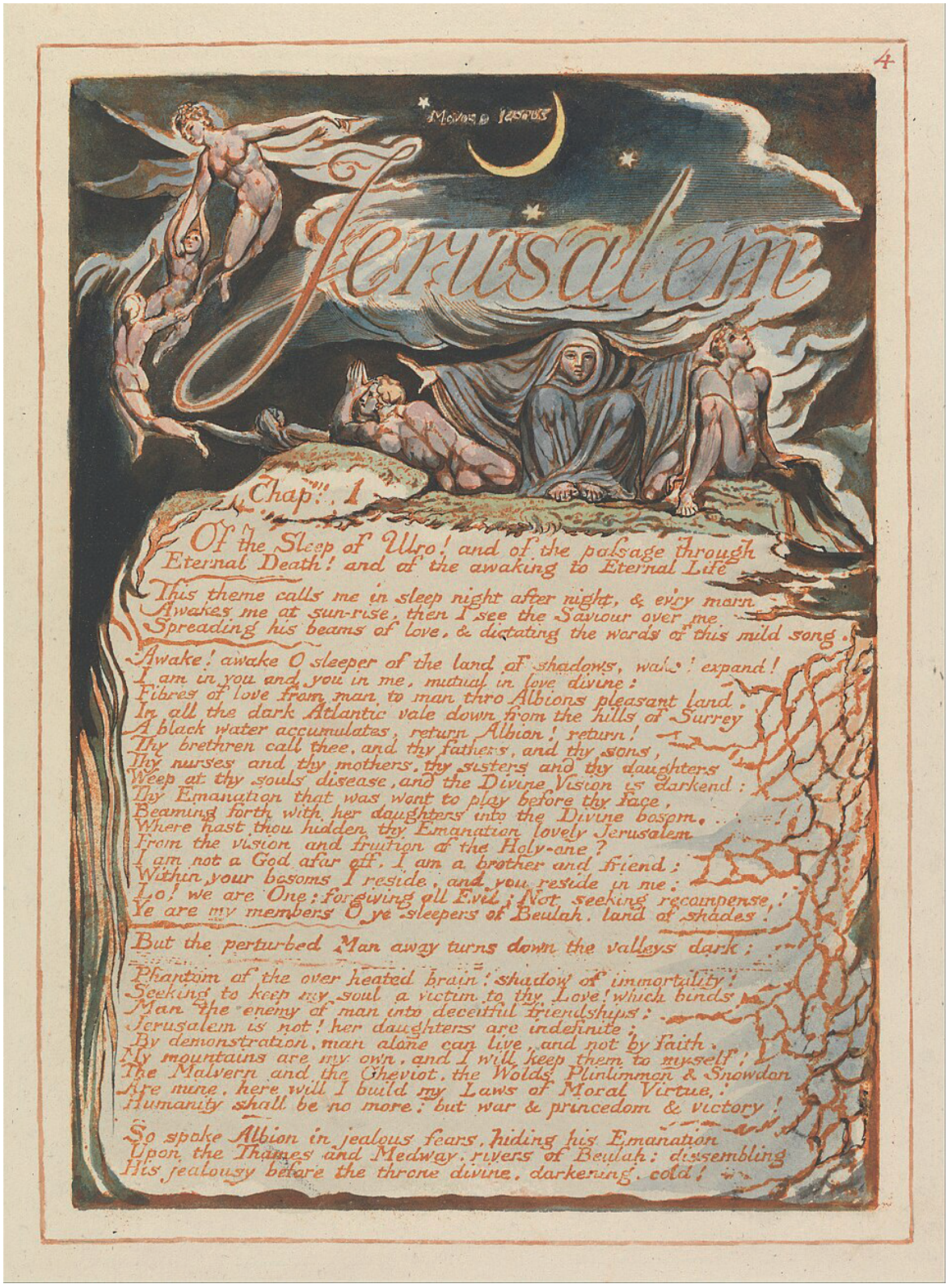


Plate 3. William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 1804-1820, plate 4.

Plate. 4. William Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, 1793, frontispiece.


Plate 5. William Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, 1794, titlepage.

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Plate 6. William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 1790-1793, plate 24 (detail).

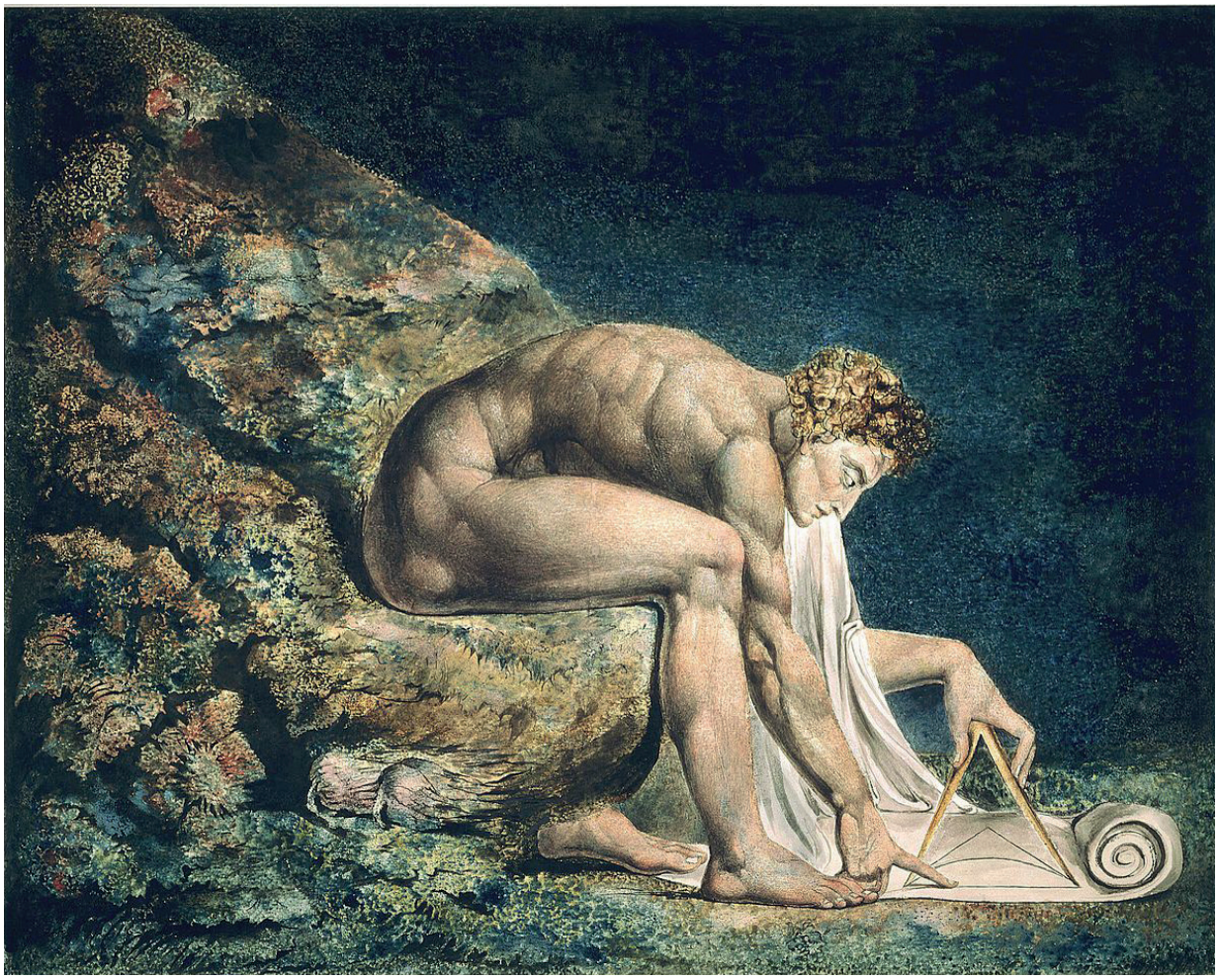

Plate 7. William Blake, *Newton*, 1795-1805 circa.

Plate 8. William Blake, *The Good and Evil Angels struggling for Possession of a Child*, 1793-1794 circa.

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