

THE 'EROTIC' BLAKE: THE CONCEPT OF ENERGY IN *THE MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND HELL*

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Abstract

*Energy is a central concept in Blake's oeuvre of thinking through which Blake perceives the dynamics of creation. It is a liberating force that is chaotic in nature. By construing energy as a vital element in Blake's poetic creed, this paper tries to understand Blake's creative eros. Energy, excessive by nature, is an organic force which is "prolific", erotic and libidinal. It operates on the basis of an 'economy' of excess. It is revolutionary in itself and critical in proliferating revolution. The poetic mind, for Blake, is excessive in nature. It "overflows" beyond it-self. It is self-transcendental and challenges the straight roads of system or convention. It is created by the "contraries" and projects "contraries." It is this crisis of creation and creation of crisis that permeates the "progress" through the "contraries" and conveys Blake's poetic creed in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.*

Keywords: Excess, energy, creation, abyss, vacuum, *śūnyatā*

"Excess generally causes reaction, and produces a change in the opposite direction, whether it is in the seasons, or in individuals, or in governments."

— Plato, *Republic*.

"We are no longer in a state of growth; we are in a state of excess. We are living in a society of excrescence. The boil is growing out of control, recklessly at cross purposes with itself, its impacts multiplying as the causes disintegrate."

— Jean Baudrillard, "The Anorexic Ruins."

Dr. Johnson in his *A Dictionary of the English Language* interprets energy in four different ways—a force of expression, strength of signification, a spirit and life. Dr. Johnson's hermeneutic attempt to define energy is a curious one: while it 'energizes' energy with life or spirit; it nevertheless limits it by the very act of defining it. As Natural Philosophy was 'locating' the trajectories of objectivity in the seventeenth century, views of subjective

energy— distinct, however not very discrete, emerged from the religious disputes at the same time. Meanwhile the Cambridge Platonists, in their conflict with materialism and atheism had no alternative than to stick to their essential position— the “energy of the soul.” Henry More, for instance, in his ‘Platonic song of the soul’ provided an interesting observation in this regard. For talked about the ‘primate,’ ‘sensual’ energy of the body that nevertheless, stirs the soul energetically; whereas the more subtle, distinguished energy comes out from within the soul. Energy, for More, is the “operation, efflux or activity of any being: as the light of the Sunne is the energie of the Sunne, and every phantasm of the soul is the energie of the soul” (More, *Platonica: A Platonical Song of the Soul*). Eugene Victor Walter, while commenting on More’s definition notes, “the body stirred the soul in perpetual sensual energy, dimming the more subtle phantasms rising from the soul itself or occasioned by representations. Fantasy or the indigenous imagery of the soul, as well reason and the sensory experience of the external world all contributed to the energy of the soul, meaning every manifestation of thought and emotion. Henry More, then, suggested a complex idea of energy as a compound of elements that included reason, fantasy, impulses from the body, sensory data, and representations” (Walter, 127). More’s concept was very influential on Blake, especially in regard to his ‘theorization’ of energy in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. The fact that Blake himself believed in a nonhierarchical cosmos of existence made More’s observation even more important for him to consider. In this sense, there is no Cartesian hierarchical demarcation between the body and the soul/mind; as for Blake, the “Body is a portion of the Soul discern’d by the five senses” (‘The Voice of the Devil’).

During the time when Blake was writing *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the term energy had a currency on the language of scientific or pseudo-scientific speculations, particularly after the publication of Joseph Priestley’s book *Disquisitions relating to Matter and Spirit*. Although Blake had a few similarities with Priestley’s notion of non-dualism, he had fundamental differences too. Unlike Priestley, for Blake “Man has two real existing principles: Viz: a Body & a Soul” (‘The Voice of the Devil’). The body is not separate from the soul. Body is the source of energy —the driving force or the *elan vital*: “Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy” (ibid). It is ‘erotic’, libidinal and a source of “Eternal Delight.” It is ‘evil’ in nature —a raw subliminal force beyond the bounds of the moral or ethical Good. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake portrays the figure of the Just Man as the symbol of energy, of revolution, change, revival and passion. It is the Just Man whose ‘unjust,’ erotic and excessive acts forestall the liberating force of energy, a force that takes him beyond any ‘just’ or ethical categories of approximation. He is the man of contraries for whom ‘progress’ is not about following the conventional, linear, straight road but the “crooked roads”—the roads of (un)conventionality, the roads of the Genius: “Improve[me]nt makes strait roads; but the crooked roads without Improvement are roads of Genius” (ibid). He is symptomatic of what Satan is in *Paradise Lost* or Orc in *The American Prophecy*—an exuberant, “aberrant signifier” for whom “the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom” (ibid). He represents a ‘poetic frenzy,’ a certain kind of madness that Blake himself was often blamed of. This is

what for Blake would be artistic (re)thinking, a (re)thinking that (re)thinks beyond the conventional and thereby defies it. He is at the same time a “Devil,” a “Dragon-Man,” a “Viper,” an “Eagle,” a “Lion,” the “Unnam’d forms” and the Man “clearing away the rubbish from a cave’s mouth” so that one perceives the ‘true light’ beyond the surface of appearances. It seems that these sublime energies were also felt by William Shakespeare:

*“The poet’s eye, in fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to Earth, from Earth to heaven.
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.”*

[*A Midsummer’s Night’s Dream*, Act V, Scene I]

This is an attempt that clearly marks out his difference with the Enlightenment understanding of Reason where he moves out of the ideas of Bacon, Newton and Locke. Unlike them, he regarded Human Imagination as the essential divine quality by which God manifested Himself in Man. This was nearly an effort to see Man in analogous with God and Art with Christianity. When Blake was writing *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* he still appreciated some of the Swedenborgian characteristics and almost in a *play* of satire he based his own philosophical treatise on Swedenborg’s *Heaven and Hell* by calling it *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and thereby, subverting not only the conventional connotation of the term ‘marriage’ but also ‘Heaven’ and ‘Hell.’ For Swedenborg, the spiritual world was a realm of mechanistic equipoise quite different from Blake’s ideal of creative energy of which Man’s spiritual life ought to consist of. The “contraries” that mark Blake’s philosophical position is a friction between Heaven and Hell which nevertheless, creates a fission---a ‘restlessness’ or ‘unpeace’ that ‘marriage’ is---the source of all energies, the *creative eros*. Blake points out vehemently that Hell is not the *other* of Heaven, an ‘unfinished’ Enlightenment project that Tradition had always tried to sustain. Rather, for Blake, Hell is Heaven’s own-other whom Heaven had so long failed to acknowledge. For Blake, Hell is the contrary of Heaven, true; but a contrary where no-one is (in)dependent of the other. Just like Body and Soul, Energy and Reason, “Love and Hate,” “Attraction and Repulsion,” Hell and Heaven are the contraries, the antithetical halves of a single being, where both are (inter)dependent on each-other. Their (co)existence is only realised through argument and dialogue: “Without Contraries is no progression” (‘The Argument’). One cannot suppress the temptation to see this ‘non-dual consciousness’ that Blake projects in the light of Vedanta as well as several other Hindu Philosophical traditions. The truth that without contraries no progression is possible, a principle that is often termed as Blake’s central philosophical stance, is reiterated by the “Two Truths doctrine” in Madhyamaka, also known as Śūnyavāda. In Nagārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, for instance, it is used to preserve the understanding of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) with emptiness (*śūnyatā*): “The Buddha’s teaching of the Dharma is based on two truths: a truth of worldly convention and an ultimate truth. Those

who do not understand the distinction drawn between these two truths do not understand the Buddha's profound truth. Without a foundation in the conventional truth the significance of the ultimate cannot be taught. Without understanding the significance of the ultimate, liberation is not achieved" (Nagārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārika*). According to Madhyamaka, all events are void of any "essence" or *svabhāva* as they are dependently co-arisen. And because all occurrences are dependently co-arisen, they don't possess any essential, 'sovereign' reality of their own. In Madhyamaka, as perceived by David J. Kalupahana in his book *A History of Buddhist Philosophy*, 'the concept of an absolute reality or Self is also disputed as ultimately, "absolute reality" is not an absolute but the deconstruction of such reifications' (Kalupahana, *A History of Buddhist Philosophy*). In plate 6 and 7 Blake echoes this concept of "emptiness" or *śūnyatā* where he defines the Holy-ghost as a "Vacuum," where "infernal wisdom" is only possible "on the abyss of the five senses, where flat sided steep frowns over the present world, I saw a mighty Devil folded in black clouds, hovering on the sides of the rock, with corroding fire" (Blake). The inherent "vacuum" that rests beyond any limit is necessarily the "emptiness" or "nothingness." "Emptiness" as José Ignacio Cabezón observes, "is a consequence of *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent arising), the teaching that no dharma ("thing") has an existence of its own, but always comes into existence in dependence on other dharmas" (Cabezón, "Tsong Kha Pa"). For Blake too, it is crisis that leads to creation, it is "vacuum" or "emptiness" that leads to "Infernal Wisdom." According to Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "Emptiness as a quality of dharmas, in the early canons, means simply that one cannot identify them as one's own self or having anything pertaining to one's own self... Emptiness as a mental state, in the early canons, means a mode of perception in which one neither adds anything to nor takes anything away from what is present, noting simply, "There is this." This mode is achieved through a process of intense concentration, coupled with the insight that notes more and more subtle levels of the presence and absence of disturbance." (Bhikkhu, *The Buddhist Religions: An Historical Introduction*). This "Vacuum" is also concurrent in Nietzsche's conceptualization of Nothingness, which he calls "an epistemic abyss," an "abyss" that "can consume, but [...] can also motivate" (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*). Even the most radical sceptic or nihilist can resurface, and the crisis that he undergoes in his epistemic abyss acts as a new force towards his resurgence. This "epistemic abyss" is engendered by energy—energy as excess and excess as energy. It brings forth a state of "rupture," a disjuncture that Revolution *is*, into the (w)hole system of Tradition —of 'holiness:' "you never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough" ('Proverbs of Hell'). The energy of the Just Man or Satan or the Tempter operates on basis of an economy of excess, not the "Restricted Economy" as Georges Bataille would term it, but the "General Economy"—an economy that believes in dynamics of waste, indisbursement without return, in sacrifice, in continuous annihilation without reserve. It denounces the economy of Hegel as evinced in *Phenomenology of Spirit*—and with it, the structure of estimation, reserve and exchange arising in the dialectic. This energy can only be realized when one exceeds reason and steps into the realms of the nonsense, when one transgresses the bounds of structure. And it is in

this 'nonsensical' act that a 'fool' is born, "a fool (who) sees not the same tree that a wise man sees" ('Proverbs of Hell'). The more he persists with his 'nonsensical' act, the wiser he becomes: "If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise" (ibid).

Claire Colebrook in his book *Blake, Deleuzian Aesthetics, and the Digital* notices that "while Blake's works repeatedly narrate a fall, lapse or forgetting of an animating force that becomes enslaved to systems, thereby suggesting that all poetry and reading (and indeed living) should be directed towards regaining an original energy and spirit, he also diagnoses that same narrative of fallenness suggesting that the true art of poetry – and revolutionary politics – lies in an abandonment of mourning, an acceptance of the positivity of loss, and a privileging of eternity" (Colebrook, *Blake, Deleuzian Aesthetics, and the Digital*). In addition to reformulating the relation between sense and the sensible, Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* deals with the theme of the beginning of the literary object, and of meaning in general; and this becomes more clear in the manifesto proclamation: "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 [...] 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" ('Proverbs of Hell'). Unlike the Swedenborgian metaphysics, where 'marriage' is considered to be a harmonious, equilibrium site of existence, almost similar to the Hegelian "Absolute Spirit;" for Blake it is a space of constant struggle, 'restlessness,' an 'unpeace' that is always in a state of dialogue with (it)self. Colebrook's observations are instrumental in this regard: *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* "is poised curiously between a vitalist and 'continuist' thesis (where all sense, meaning and work can and should be traced back to animating senses, including the very hand that touches the body of the work) and a 'discontinuist' and poetic thesis in which the created object has a being of its own that cannot be traced back to, reduced to, or mastered by its origin. That curious ambivalence that at one and the same time privileges the unity of a single ground and the production of multiple, dispersed, unknown, and irrecoverable distinctions remains to the very end of Blake's works" (Colebrook, *Blake, Deleuzian Aesthetics, and the Digital*).

The fact that Blake started writing *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* a year after the fall of the Bastille signifies an outlook which is confident and exuberant, anticipating the birth of a 'new earth' and a 'new heaven' which French Revolution was supposed to deliver. The roaring of "Rintrah" and the "Hungry clouds" hanging over the future of Europe anticipates an Apocalyptic moment in which energy, discharged by the Just Man, will enter history in order to rewrite it:

"Rintrah roars & shakes his fires in the burden'd air;

Hungry clouds swag on the deep.

Once meek, and in a perilous path

The just man kept his course alon

The vale of death" ('The Argument')

This energy combined with the prophetic Imagination instills through an excess which is sublime in nature. In his 'Proverbs of Hell' Blake lists a number of sublime phenomena which includes "the roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword, are portions of eternity too great for the eye of man". The point at which Blake differs from others is in his act of locating the sublime in the energies of humanity itself and therefore, making it central to his dialectic of liberation. By talking about the sublimity of the human body referring to the head as "Sublime, the heart Pathos, the genitals Beauty, the hands & feet Proportion" (ibid) Blake emphasizes how regenerated by these energies life becomes "a mode of Art" (ibid).

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