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# WILLIAM BLAKE'S VISIONS FOR THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AND BEYOND

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WILLIAM BLAKE'S *VISIONS* FOR THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AND BEYOND

By

Lauren Vander Lind

THESIS

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## SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Lauren Vander Lind is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Associate Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies.

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## ABSTRACT

### WILLIAM BLAKE'S *VISIONS* FOR THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AND BEYOND

By

Lauren Vander Lind

William Blake offers Poetic Genius as the solution to repressive societies in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. Although his critique is chiefly aimed at the oppressive influence of the priesthood in late eighteenth century British society, which encouraged the suppression of individuality in the name of collective wellbeing, Blake speaks to all members of society. In *Visions*, Blake demonstrates how these systems may be overcome by awakening one's Poetic Genius and embracing all facets of human nature equally, whether rationality or sexuality. Blake's call for wholeness extends beyond the context of his time; there are significant ways in which Poetic Genius speaks to the postmodern American context. Namely, since Blake's time, a schism has occurred between sense of individuality and collectivity: postmodern American society places paramount importance upon individuality, repressing the meaning that may be gained through participation in society at large. Although Blake's original message emphasizes the importance of individuality, as seen in Oothoon's embrace of her sexuality, his call for wholeness still applies to contemporary culture. The same balance Blake calls for in *Visions* is equally necessary today; instead of reawakening our individualism, however, we must embrace the potential for meaning within a collective.

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This thesis is dedicated to the poet's namesake, my husband, Blake VanderLind.

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This thesis uses the guidelines provided by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.



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## INTRODUCTION

It all begins with William Blake's Poetic Genius. As Blake envisions the world, we should all recognize, embrace, and use our Genius to realize the infinite that lies within each of us and the larger world. A problem arose when, according to Blake, humankind began to meddle, bastardizing Genius in the name of organized religion. In *All Religions are One*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Blake targets the priesthood as the chief offender of all social institutions: according to *Marriage*, the priesthood dissociated humankind from Genius, placing the divine<sup>1</sup> outside of our reach, teaching the young and old alike to behave in accordance with their standards:

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. And particularly they studied the genius of each city & country. placing it under its mental deity. 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. And at length they pronounced that the Gods had orderd such things. Thus men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast. (38; Plate 11)<sup>2</sup>

While Blake is not targeting only the priesthood in *Visions*, we should not overlook its centrality to the problems he identified with late eighteenth century British society; in a time when the multitudes could not reasonably access a formal education, the church served as the hub of learning, and as such, perpetuated a system that sought to limit

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<sup>1</sup> As Blake states on Plate 11 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses . . . men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast" (38). Thus, "divine" cannot be taken in traditional terms; Blake notes that Genius, which connects us with the infinite (which is comparable to what we would call the divine), exists within all humans.

<sup>2</sup> Citations will follow the form (Poem; page; Plate; line) when all delineations are relevant.

individuals, most notably through sexual repression. To be a member of a society, there are norms one must assimilate to, and for Blake, these norms may limit our inherent potential as human beings by separating us from the divine (which I will also refer to as the infinite<sup>3</sup>) within ourselves: our Poetic Genius.

Blake's concept of the divine can be best understood within "The Divine Image" from *Songs of Innocence*. In this poem, Blake equates the divine with the human: "For Mercy Pity Peace and Love, / Is God our father dear: / And Mercy Pity Peace and Love, / Is Man his child and care" ("Divine Image"; 28; 5-8). Lines 5 and 7 draw a direct parallel between God and Man, asserting that both comprise "Mercy Pity Peace and Love." Of further significance are lines 11 and 15, which refer to "the human form divine" (28). Here, Blake calls our attention to the divine nature of humankind, thus reinforcing his stance that the divine dwells within humanity, a sentiment that he drives home in the final stanza of the poem: "And all must love the human form . . . Where Mercy. Love & Pity dwell / There God is dwelling too" ("Divine Image"; 28; 17-20). Taken alongside Plate 11 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, it becomes clear that, for Blake, there should be no distinction between humankind and the divine, for they coexist in the human form – "All deities reside in the human breast" (38).

Within *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Blake uses Oothoon to forward his agenda; she awakens her Poetic Genius, and as a result, is able to begin reconciling her individuality with her prescribed place in society. This is precisely what Blake wishes of his readers: a renewed sense of the importance of balance in life, balance between the

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<sup>3</sup> As will become clear, Blake envisions the infinite and the divine as interchangeable terms. By tapping into one's capacity for Genius (the infinite within), the individual recaptures the original state in which humankind existed before the advent of the priesthood, who bastardized the divine by separating it from humanity. In this way, the infinite and the divine are so closely tied that they become synonymous.

individual and the collective, between desire and rationality, ultimately seeking balance among all the human characteristics and every human being.

Within postmodern American society, we are in the midst of a similar predicament – the suppression of part of “the true Man” (*All Religions*; 47; Plate 4) and subsequent unbalance between individualism and collectivism, although the parallel is not perfect. In the wake of the adversary culture of the 1960s, we are driven to radical individualism by our consumer culture, which commands us to create our identities through consumer goods, and such increased emphasis on the subjective has caused us to lose a sense of collective belonging and purpose.

Even though Blake resisted collectivity for its tendencies towards oppression in the eighteenth century, his concern for the reawakening of all facets of humankind speaks to our current predicament. Without balance in how we conceive of our individual identities, we seem doomed to perpetual isolation if we do not embrace the positive potential of belonging to something larger; we, like Theotormon, cannot find meaning if we persist in isolation.

Our situation lies at the opposite end of the spectrum from the problems Blake identifies in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, but his works speak to our circumstances today just as powerfully as they did when they were written. The dissociation of the divine from humanity, although seemingly irrelevant, directly parallels the postmodern American condition. For Blake, individuals cannot realize their full “humanness” without reawakening the divine within (that is, Poetic Genius); in the case of the postmodern subject, the binary opposition of radical individualism and collectivism is equally problematic, hindering individuals from expressing all facets of their humanity.

As Oothoon asks, “How can one joy absorb another? are not different joys / Holy, eternal, infinite! and each joy is a Love” (*Visions*; 48; Plate 5; 5-6). How can one facet of identity absorb another? Are individuality and collectivity not equally part of human nature? We, like Blake’s original audience, are being called to reexamine how we balance the different parts of our humanity.

## Chapter One: Awakening the Genius Within

To understand the importance of Poetic Genius, it is crucial to start with one of Blake's early tractates: *All Religions are One*. "Principle 1<sup>st</sup>" tells us "That the Poetic Genius is the true Man. and that the body or outward form of Man is derived from the Poetic Genius. Likewise that the forms of all things are derived from their Genius" (47; Plate 4). Recalling Plate 11 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "the true M[e]n" were the "ancient Poets" who were fully in touch with their Poetic Genius, "their enlarged & numerous senses"; Genius, then, is a natural capacity humankind openly expressed before the advent of the priesthood. What is of utmost significance is Blake's statement that "the body . . . is derived from the Poetic Genius" (*All Religions*; 47; Plate 4). This makes Genius the starting point for our very existence; presumably, were it not for Genius, humankind would not be materially formed, which implies that humans are concurrently more than bodies and more than souls. For Blake, there are multiple facets to all objects and beings that can be perceived through the awakening or embrace of the Genius within us all: "all deities reside in the human breast" (*Marriage*; 38; Plate 11). We should further note that Blake sees the capacity for Genius present in all of humanity; although it may be tempting to conclude that Genius resides within the elite few – "the ancient Poets" – Blake clearly believes otherwise, as he states in "Principal 2<sup>d</sup>" of *All Religions are One*: "As all men are alike in outward form, So (and with the same infinite variety) are all alike in the Poetic Genius" (48; Plate 5). Thus, when Blake calls for a reawakening of Poetic Genius, he speaks to one and all, man, woman, and child of all classes and races.

The reawakening Blake seeks comes at the cost of the power of the priesthood and other social institutions, although the priesthood must bear the brunt of Blake's blame, as their beginning marked the suppression of Poetic Genius. According to Blake, "the ancient Poets" created a system, assigning the "Gods or Geniuses" to "all sensible objects," of which the priesthood took advantage, "attempting to realize or abstract the mental dieties [Geniuses] from their objects . . . pronounc[ing] that the Gods had orderd such things" (*Marriage*; 38; Plate 11). As such, Genius was forcibly separated from humanity, given reign over them in the name of Gods. The priesthood, then, is responsible for perverting an innate quality of humankind, creating a new system in which they held the power. When teaching others that Genius is separate from humanity, that it stands in control, the priesthood makes Genius appear inaccessible to the masses and places itself as the intermediary through which humankind can reach Genius. This is, to say the least, problematic for Blake, as "the Poetic Genius is the true Man," and in the hands of the priesthood, what makes humankind "true" has been abstracted, separated, and rendered unattainable (*All Religions*; 47; Plate 4).

Blake takes up a prophetic voice in "Introduction" from *Songs of Experience*<sup>4</sup>, using the nameless "ancient bard" as his mouthpiece: "Hear the voice of the Bard! / Who Present, Past, & Future sees / Whose ears have heard, / The Holy Word, / That walk'd among the ancient trees. / Calling the lapsed Soul" ("Introduction"; 40; 1-6). We know that Blake, as a poet, considers himself among the ranks of ancient poets; what is surprising is that he uses Oothoon for this purpose in *Visions*. It is no small measure being one of the ancient poets, although such status is available to everyone, as it points

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the *Songs* referenced throughout are from copy Z (James 8).



to an awareness and mastery of Poetic Genius, which we have seen in *Marriage*. It stands to reason, then, that if Oothoon possesses Genius, she must be among the ancient poets, and as such, must be Blake's mouthpiece. Within *Visions*, Oothoon is indeed the ancient bard. This is most evident when comparing Oothoon's lamentations in *Visions* with Blake's Bard in "Introduction." The Bard calls to the Earth, which presumably represents all of humankind: "O Earth O Earth return! / Arise from out the dewy grass; / Night is worn, / And the morn / Rises from the slumberous mass. / Turn away no more: / Why wilt thou turn away / The starry floor / The watry shore / Is giv'n thee till the break of day" ("Introduction"; 40; 11-20). This call strikingly parallels Oothoon's entreaty towards Theotormon: "I cry arise O Theotormon for the village dog / Barks at the breaking day. the nightingale has done lamenting. / The lark does rustle in the ripe corn, and the Eagle returns / From nightly prey, and lifts his golden beak to the pure east; / Shaking the dust from his immortal pinions to awake / The sun that sleeps too long. Arise my Theotormon I am pure" (*Visions*; 47; Plate 2; 23-8). In both cases, Blake's mouthpiece calls out for a reawakening, an end to sorrow with the dawning of a new day.

Oothoon's capability of poetic perception is underlined by her perception of the Marygold as both flower and nymph – "Art thou a flower! art thou a nymph! I see thee now a flower; / Now a nymph!" (*Visions*; 46; Plate 1; 6-7). Blake's Genius is alive in her, as evinced by her "enlarged & numerous senses" (*Marriage*; 38; Plate 11) which perceive the Marygold in multiple ways simultaneously; the Marygold is at once a flower and a nymph, thus Oothoon "dare[s] not pluck thee [it] from thy [its] dewy bed" (*Visions*; 46; Plate 1; 7). Presumably, were it merely a flower, Oothoon would not think twice about plucking it; now that she perceives it poetically – that is, in multiple forms – she cannot

ignore the Marygold's inherent value. Its identity has grown in her estimation, due to her awakened Genius, and she cannot treat it as she might have in the past.

This awakening is of the utmost significance, as it marks the beginning of re-identification of the world and a widening perception of who and what holds value. One should also note that Oothoon's "awakening" takes place at a time when "[she] was not ashamed" (*Visions*; 45; Plate iii; 2), much like Eve's awakening in Genesis occurs when she is not ashamed of her nakedness. Like Eve, Oothoon contentedly conforms to the social structure until knowledge is imparted upon her; whereas Eve gains knowledge after eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Oothoon gains knowledge when plucking the flower. The difference in these narratives lies in the intention behind the imparting of knowledge and the outcome.

In Genesis, Eve is tempted by the serpent to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in an attempt to separate humankind from God. Although the serpent claims to be making Adam and Eve "as gods" (*The King James Bible*, Gen. 3.4-5), one may presume that the serpent would have been fully aware of the forbidden nature of the tree of knowledge of good and evil; thus, by encouraging Eve to eat of the tree, the serpent is in fact seeking to bring about her fall from the good graces of God. In *Visions*, the goal is vastly different: the Marygold is imparting knowledge upon Oothoon in order that she may become aware of the infinite within her. As the Marygold states, "pluck thou my flower Oothoon the mild / Another flower shall spring, because the soul of sweet delight / Can never pass away" (*Visions*; 1; 46; 8-10).

God instructed Adam not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil upon penalty of death; knowing the story, however, we see this is not immediately true. When

Adam and Eve eat the apple, they are punished, but not by immediate death as God implied. Instead, their lives are made more difficult, and death does become an eventuality; notably, the pair is exiled from Eden to prevent them from gaining eternal (or infinite) life by eating of the tree of life. We should note that, at the outset of the narrative, Adam and Eve “were both naked . . . and were not ashamed” (*The King James Bible*, Gen. 2.25), much like Oothoon at the outset of *Visions*. From the illustrations, we see that Oothoon is, in fact, naked. There also exists a parallel between what the serpent tells Eve and what the Marygold tells Oothoon – “And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat [of the tree of knowledge of good and evil], then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil” (*The King James Bible*, Gen. 3.4-5) and “pluck thou my flower Oothoon the mild / Another flower shall spring, because the soul of sweet delight / Can never pass away” (*Visions*; 46; Plate 1; 8-10). The serpent instructs Eve quite as the Marygold instructs Oothoon; the Marygold is opening Oothoon’s eyes to the infinite, as “Another flower shall spring” even after the Marygold has been plucked. Not surprisingly, this indicates that Blake would have us obey the serpent, becoming “as gods, knowing good and evil.”

Perhaps most notably, both Eve and Oothoon’s self-perceptions change through their respective awakenings. Eve now sees herself as a sinner who has disobeyed God and must accept punishment; Oothoon, on the other hand, is now able to see herself as more than society would have her believe, as the awakening of her Genius has allowed

her to tap into the infinite, which in turn leads to her discovery of the multiple facets to herself as an individual.

Characteristics of the parts reflect the whole, as Blake highlights with his juxtaposition of the infinite and microscopic in *Visions*: “Unknown, not unpercievd, spread in the infinite microscope” (48; Plate 4; 16); this is why Oothoon’s recognition and embrace of her Genius is so crucial. Change begins with the parts of society – women, men, children, of all classes – recognizing and more broadly identifying themselves (that is, going beyond the limits society imposes), and extends into the whole of society. Oothoon may be only one woman, but her triumph demonstrates potential for positive change, could all of society but reawaken “the true Man” (*All Religions*; 47; Plate 4) – the Genius inside themselves.

## Chapter Two: The Oppressive Priesthood and Liberating Poetic Genius

The priesthood, for Blake, represents the multitude of institutions that “control” or determine society’s structure. The negative ramifications of this limiting identification extends to all social problems of Blake’s day: most predominantly, slavery and class disparity, as seen in “The voice of slaves beneath the sun, and children bought with money” (*Visions*; 46; Plate 2; 8) and the subjugation of women, which Bromion also references, saying, “Stampt with my signet are the swarthy children of the sun: / They are obedient, they resist not, they obey the scourge: / Their daughters worship terrors and obey the violent” (*Visions*; 46; Plate 1; 20-2). Within this excerpt, we see limiting identification at work; women are expected to obey and worship men, as if they are slaves (“Stampt with” their master’s “signet”). Society prescribes an identity to women – one of subservience – which seeks to limit how they can express themselves.

The oppressive force of the priesthood is a major concern for Blake, and can be found within the *Songs of Experience* in a couple places. The first occurrence lies in “Earth’s Answer,” where Blake points to an unnamed oppressive force: “Prison’d on watry shore / Starry Jealousy does keep my den / Cold and hor / Weeping o’er / I hear the Father of the ancient men / Selfish father of men / Cruel jealous selfish fear / Can delight / Chain’d in night / The virgins of youth and morning bear” (41; 6-15). This situation directly parallels how Bromion, Oothoon, and Theotormon are described in *Visions*; Oothoon and Bromion are bound back to back in the cave of jealousy, while Theotormon sits in the entryway, his tears wearing the ground. This leads one to the conclusion that Bromion and Oothoon, who are chained together, mirror “delight / Chain’d in night”

("Earth's Answer"; 41; 13-4), which is further supported by Oothoon's association with delight: "the soul of sweet delight / Can never pass away" (*Visions*; 46; Plate 1; 9-10). Thus, Theotormon is "Starry Jealously" "keep[ing their] den" ("Earth's Answer; 41; 7). This leaves, then, "the Father of the ancient men / Selfish father of men" ("Earth's Answer"; 41; 10-1) which must represent Urizen, whom Oothoon refers to as "Creator of men" and "Father of Jealousy" (*Visions*; 48, 50; Plate 5, 7; 3, 12). One can draw the conclusion that Blake sees this "Selfish father of men" as the oppressor in "Earth's Answer," and likewise, Urizen is the main force of oppression in *Visions*. The implication for "Earth's Answer" is that a God figure, or by extension, the priesthood, seeks to keep "delight / Chain'd in night" (41; 13-4).

Blake further builds his position against the priesthood, this time more implicitly, in "The Garden of Love." Blake describes returning to what was once a garden to find it now occupied by a church. His indictment of the priesthood is clear: "And the gates of this Chapel were shut, / And Thou shalt not. writ over the door; / So I turn'd to the Garden of Love, / That so many sweet flowers bore. / And I saw it was filled with graves, / And tombstones where flowers should be: / And Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds. / And binding with briars, my joys & desires" (54; 4-11). The words "Thou shalt not" speak volumes here, as it indicates the restrictive tendency of the priesthood, mandating what humankind ought not to do. It is also important to note the implication that the priesthood is making these mandates in the name of God. Just as human intercessors are placing restrictions on acceptable behavior for the masses in name of a higher being here, Bromion acts as intercessor in *Visions*, seeking to enforce such restrictions upon Oothoon in the name of Urizen.

The question remains, how does the priesthood, as Blake claims, seek to limit individuals? This is perhaps most evident within *Visions* itself. As evinced in Bromion's speech, he is seeking to oppress Oothoon: "*They* are obedient, *they* resist not, *they* obey the scourge: / *Their daughters* worship terrors and obey the violent" (*Visions*; 46; Plate 1; 22-3; emphasis added). Here, Bromion is instructing Oothoon to behave likewise; she has attempted, by seeking out Theotormon, to behave of her own will and desires. Given the social norms of the late eighteenth century, Oothoon is acting out of accordance with the standards imposed upon women; they were not to be openly sexual beings.

As seen in Bromion's attempted oppression of Oothoon, rationalism and passion (such as sexuality) are at odds with one another. That Bromion rapes Oothoon is a direct reaction to her overt sexuality; she, upon the urging of the Marygold, "turn[s her] face to where [her] whole soul seeks" and "over Theotormons reign, t[akes] her impetuous course," for "[She] loved Theotormon / And [she] was not ashamed" (*Visions*; 46, 45; Plate 1, iii; 13, 15, 1-2). Clearly, Oothoon sets out to have sex with Theotormon, and as indicated by "her impetuous course" (*Visions*; 46; Plate 1; 15), she is doing so in direct opposition to the rules of society.

That open female sexuality is not acceptable is further evidenced in line 16 of Plate 1, where Bromion calls Oothoon a "harlot" (*Visions*; 46). Presumably, she is not a harlot because Bromion rapes her, but because she dares to express her sexual desires. Interestingly, in contrast to this, Bromion uses Oothoon as a mere womb. This is highlighted by Bromion's statements to Theotormon immediately following the rape: "Now thou maist marry Bromions harlot, and protect the child / Of Bromions rage, that Oothoon shall put forth in nine moons time" (*Visions*; 46; Plate 2; 1-2).

Bromions actions initially appear to be without motive, but upon further investigation, it becomes clear that he is simply acting in accord with societal expectations. As Oothoon demonstrates in her lamentations towards Urizen, he is the “Creator of men” who seeks “to form men to [his] image” (*Visions*; 48; Plate 5; 3-4). Bromion, then, is behaving how Urizen (and by extension, the priesthood) has instructed him.

This is further present when Oothoon asserts, “They told me that the night & day were all that I could see; / They told me that I had five senses to inclose me up, / And they inclos’d my infinite brain into a narrow circle. / And sunk my heart into the Abyss, a red round globe hot burning / Till all from life I was obliterated and erased” (*Visions*; 47; Plate 2; 30-4). Presumably, the priesthood is the nameless “they” to which she refers; as in “The Garden of Love,” the priesthood oppresses humankind through statements such as “Thou shalt not” (54; 6). Because the priesthood functions as a social force in Blake’s day, we can conclude that the characters in *Visions* would likewise be influenced by it. In this case, Urizen acts on behalf of the priesthood, instructing Bromion and Theotormon how to behave by seeking to “form men to [his] image” (*Visions*; 48; Plate 5; 4). All levels of society, then, are working to limit female expression of sexual identity. As Oothoon states, her “infinite brain” was “inclos’d” “into a narrow circle” because she has been told she “ha[s] five senses to inclose [her] up” (*Visions*; 47; Plate 2; 30-1); rationalism, as advanced by the priesthood, ought to be the dominant human faculty, subjugating all desires, which operate contrary to the forces of reason. Oothoon, by expressing her sexual desires, has become a threat to the system put in place by the priesthood. However, throughout the poem, she refuses to be “obliterated and erased”



“from life” (*Visions*; 47; Plate 2; 34) – she will continue to “howl incessant writhing her soft snowy limbs” in protest (*Visions*; 46; Plate 2; 12).

For Oothoon, to deny one portion of her humanity is now impossible, as she has tapped into the infinite, and hence all aspects of her humanness, through Poetic Genius. This is perhaps most clear in Oothoon’s address to Urizen: “How can one joy absorb another? are not different joys / Holy, eternal, infinite! and each joy is a Love” (*Visions*; 48; Plate 5; 5-6). Here, “joy” refers to the different traits of humankind, including reason and desire; Oothoon argues that all aspects should be equally expressed, and that reason should not “absorb” (overtake, subjugate, oppress) desire. Presumably, only Oothoon and the Daughters of Albion, who “hear her woes. & eccho back her sighs” recognize the importance of all facets of humanity (*Visions*; 46; Plate 2; 20). Oothoon’s “incessant” “howl[ing]” is lost on Bromion, Theotormon, and Urizen, as they refuse to listen to her arguments time and again, for “every morning wails Oothoon. but Theotormon sits / Upon the margind ocean conversing with shadows dire” (*Visions*; 51; Plate 8; 11-2). It is only the female characters who recognize their full potential and can become “the true Man” Blake describes in *All Religions Are One* (47; Plate 4).

### Chapter Three: Cogs in the Machine of Oppression

As has been touched upon, Bromion, Theotormon, and Urizen all function to perpetuate the oppressive system of the priesthood within *Visions*. Each works, directly or indirectly, to repress Oothoon's new-found sexual liberation, and by extension, her Poetic Genius. They all work on behalf of the ancient men who "took advantage of [the system of Geniuses set up by the ancient poets] & enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realize or abstract the mental dieties from their objects . . . . And at length . . . pronounc[ing] that the Gods ha[ve] orderd such things" (*Marriage*; 38; Plate 11). In the following sections, we will see how each male character perpetuates this system of the "abstract[ion of] the mental dieties" while concurrently being trapped within it.

#### *Bromion's Lamentation*

When Bromion first speaks in *Visions*, he is a forceful proponent of the supremacy of rationality over desire: he "ren[ds Oothoon] with his thunders" and taunts the would-be lovers, laying claim to Oothoon with the statement "Thy soft American plains are mine, and mine thy north & south" (47; Plate 1; 16, 20). His forcefulness, however, does not last long; after his address to the pair, Blake reveals that Bromion is in fact negatively affected by his act: "Bound back to back in Bromions caves terror & meekness dwell" (*Visions*; 46; Plate 2; 5). In case there should be any confusion as to whom Blake refers as "terror & meekness," the next line reveals that "Theotormon sits" "At [the] entrance" "wearing the threshold hard / With secret tears" (*Visions*; 46; Plate 2;

6-7). This is also evident in the frontispiece<sup>5</sup> (see fig. 1), which shows Bromion and Oothoon bound together in chains while Theotormon is slumped over himself in woe (Eaves, Essick, and Viscomi 245). We could not know Bromion's sufferings as acutely without Blake's frontispiece. In this image, it is plain that Bromion, Theotormon, and Oothoon all suffer alike, which implies that no one can exist within this oppressive society unharmed. As noted earlier, however, Oothoon is only harmed physically as an aftermath of her rape; when considering Bromion and Theotormon, the damage runs much deeper.

The next clue of Bromion's sufferings comes later, when he "sh[akes] the cavern with his lamentation" (*Visions*; 48; Plate 4; 12). Up to this point, only Oothoon has been described as lamenting; when Theotormon speaks, he simply "answer[s]" (*Visions*; 47; Plate 3; 21). The word "lamentation" indicates Bromion's torment in a way his words do not.

In his lamentation, Bromion poses direct questions concerning the nature of knowledge and perception to Oothoon, seeking to confound her by reminding her of that which she has been taught, presumably by the priesthood and other members of society.

Thou knowest that the ancient trees seen by thine eyes have fruit;  
But knowest thou that trees and fruits flourish upon the earth  
To gratify senses unknown? trees beasts and birds unknown:  
Unknown, not unpercievd, spread in the infinite microscope,  
In places yet unvisited by the voyager. and in worlds  
Over another kind of seas, and in atmospheres unknown[.] (*Visions*; 48;  
Plate 4; 13-8)

Bromion appears to be drawing a distinction between perceiving and knowing, as creatures exist that are "Unknown, not unpercievd" (*Visions*; 48; Plate 4; 16). It would seem, then, that Bromion is arguing that knowledge can only emerge from perception;

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<sup>5</sup> The engravings referenced are from copy G (Eaves, Essick, and Viscomi 226).

what can be seen is what one can know. Blake's dense language in this section becomes slightly more transparent when taken into consideration alongside "Principle 4" from *All Religions are One*: "As none by traveling over known lands can find out the unknown. So from already acquired knowledge Man could not acquire more. therefore an universal Poetic Genius exists" (50; Plate 7). Here, Blake is emphasizing that one cannot know all through perception. There must, instead, be some inner quality that enables humankind to know beyond what can be readily seen (for Blake, this is Poetic Genius).

Blake would have been familiar with the works of Descartes and Locke, and so we can apply their philosophies to understanding what Blake wishes to impart. Descartes proposed that thought, not perception, are to be trusted; therefore, knowledge comes through thinking, which occurs within the individual, and emerges from innate ideas. Locke, on the other hand, forwarded the idea that humans are all blank slates; knowledge can only be arrived at through perception of the surrounding world.

Returning to *All Religions are One*, we can see that Blake would not support the notion that perception is the only mode towards gaining knowledge, "As none by traveling over known lands can find out the unknown" (50; Plate 7). There lies much more beyond what we can easily perceive, and so perception cannot be the road to knowledge on its own. Instead, there are ideas beyond our knowing in such a manner; these ideas can only be arrived at, according to Blake, through Poetic Genius. This stands in direct opposition to Bromion's supposition that what is "Unknown [is] not unpercievd" (*Visions*; 48; Plate 4; 16). This reading is further supported when Bromion states "Thou knowest that the ancient trees seen by thine eyes have fruit" (*Visions*; 48; Plate 4; 13) – here, knowing is directly tied to seeing (that is, perceiving). Ultimately, Bromion appears

to be questioning Oothoon's new perspective that has been awakened through Poetic Genius, as it does not fit with his rationalist worldview.

It is also important to note that Bromion calls Oothoon's attention to the creation narrative from Genesis – “the ancient trees” presumably would conjure the image of Eve eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, as Oothoon would have been taught by the priesthood. Perhaps this is why she “wait[s] silent all the day, and all the night” after Bromion's lamentation (*Visions*; 48; Plate 4; 25). New in her discovery of Poetic Genius, Oothoon would likely be conflicted when recalling what she has been taught all her life; needless to say, it is no easy task to throw off the teachings of one's youth, particularly when they pervade society so completely as in *Visions*. Presumably, Bromion would be aware of this, having been raised in the same society, and so it stands to reason that his questions seek to remind Oothoon of what she, as a “good” member of society, ought to know.

This approach is further evident when Bromion asks “And is there not one law for both the lion and the ox? / And is there not eternal fire, and eternal chains? / To bind the phantoms of existence from eternal life?” (*Visions*; 48; Plate 4; 22-4), calling the teachings of the priesthood to Oothoon's attention. This may also explain her reluctance to respond, as she “wait[s] silent all the day, and all the night” (*Visions*; 48; Plate 4; 25). Bromion's questions perhaps remind her that, within the system laid out by the priesthood, she would be bound “from eternal life” and doomed to “eternal fire, and eternal life” because of her disobedience: openly expressing her sexual desires.

In terms of the larger picture, Bromion is advocating the collectivity forwarded by the priesthood. His questions aim to remind Oothoon of the rules members of society

must abide by to be considered a member of the collective. We should note that Oothoon only ceases her complaints after Bromion has brought the collective to her attention; at no other place in *Visions* does Oothoon remain silent for such an extended period. Earlier, she states “Silent I hover all the night, and all day could be silent” (*Visions*; 47; Plate 3; 14), but it is not until Bromion confronts her with the ramifications of her overt sexuality that she actually does so. Significantly, the one reason she claims will bring her extended silence is not what actually provokes it: “If Theotormon once would turn his loved eyes upon me,” she states, “all day could [I] be silent” (*Visions*; 47; Plate 3; 14-5). As we will see, however, Oothoon’s wish will not come to fruition.

#### *Theotormon’s Torment*

As evidenced in his name, Theotormon is tormented by God (in the context of *Visions*, Urizen). Like the others, Theotormon has been raised under the oppressive conditions laid out by the priesthood; he is so repressed, in fact, that he only speaks once during the course of the poem, and his words convey his utter inability to cope with Oothoon’s rape and sexual liberation. As we can see in the frontispiece (see fig. 1), Theotormon is so affected by Oothoon’s rape that he turns within himself in sorrow, “wearing the threshold [to Bromion’s cave] hard / With secret tears” (*Visions*; 46; Plate 2; 6-7).

In a Promethean turn, Oothoon “call[s] Theotormons Eagles to prey upon her flesh” so that she may “Rend away [her] defiled bosom that [she] may reflect. / The image of Theotormon on [her] pure transparent breast” (*Visions*; 46; Plate 2; 13, 15-6). While her exact purpose here is unclear, we can discern that Oothoon is attempting to

break Theotormon from his sorrows. She makes a sacrifice of herself, allowing her flesh to be torn to demonstrate her innocence, her remaining purity, to Theotormon. “The Eagles at her call descend & rend their bleeding prey” (*Visions*; 46; Plate 2; 17), assisting Oothoon in making a blood sacrifice, washing herself of any perceived sin – “her soul reflects [Theotormon’s severe smile]; / As the clear spring mudded with feet of beasts grows pure & smiles” (*Visions*; 46; Plate 2; 18-9). It seems that Oothoon is pulling from the teachings of the priesthood, in part, as she “grows pure” when washed with blood; in Christian theology, sins are absolved through the blood sacrifice of Jesus when he dies on the cross. This is further emphasized on Plate 3, when Oothoon asks “How can I be defiled when I reflect thy image pure? / Sweetest . . . The new wash’d lamb . . . & the bright swan / By the red earth of our immortal river: I bathe my wings. / And I am white and pure to hover round Theotormons breast” (*Visions*; 47; 16-20).

Finally, Theotormon breaks his silence, but his response is not what Oothoon would wish. In reply to Oothoon’s complaint that “to [Theotormon] the night and morn / Are both alike” (*Visions*; 47; Plate 2; 37-8), that he fails to recognize “the night is gone that clos’d [her] in its deadly black” (*Visions*; 47; Plate 2; 29). Theotormon begins: “Tell me what is the night or day to one o’erflowd with woe?” (*Visions*; 47; Plate 3; 22). To him, these delineations are meaningless, as he is completely lost in his sorrows. Even metaphorically, night and day are irrelevant to Theotormon.

Throughout *Visions*, it becomes clear that night and day represent time for sorrows and new beginnings, respectively; as Oothoon wails:

I cry arise O Theotormon for the village dog  
Barks at the breaking day. the nightingale has done lamenting.  
The lark does rustle in the ripe corn, and the Eagle returns  
From nightly prey, and lifts his golden beak to the pure east;

Shaking the dust from his immortal pinions to awake  
The sun that sleeps too long. Arise my Theotormon I am pure.  
Because the night is gone that clos'd me in its deadly black. (47; Plate 2;  
23-9).

Here, Oothoon argues that with “the breaking day” comes a renewal, as she has made it through “the night . . . that clos'd [her] in its deadly black” – her rape. This is further apparent with her mention of “the nightingale” who “has done lamenting” and “the Eagle” who “returns / From nightly prey.” Oothoon is the nightingale, as she “hovers by [Theotormon’s] side” (*Visions*; 47; Plate 2; 22); because she “has done lamenting,” she pleads with Theotormon that he cease lamenting as well. Bromion, “the Eagle,” has likewise ceased his “nightly prey.” Now, Oothoon argues, a new day can begin, should Theotormon simply recognize it as such.

It will become apparent in Theotormon’s speech, however, that he cannot move forward as Oothoon urges him to do; he is too fixated upon abstractions to see the reality before him. One possibility is that Theotormon, “form[ed] . . . to [Urizen’s] image” (*Visions*; 48; Plate 5; 4), does not possess the necessary skills to cope with the intense emotions that followed Oothoon’s rape because he is such a part of the rationalistic system that dominates society. His questions hint at this, as he does not make any statements when replying to Oothoon; clearly, he is uncertain of how to proceed. As we can see in his opening question – “Tell me what is the night or day to one o’erflowed with woe?” (*Visions*; 47; Plate 3; 22) – Theotormon is so overwhelmed by his emotions that he cannot process the world as he once did. Emotions, like desire, stem from an irrational place; they are subjective, and as such, unfamiliar to Theotormon, who has been raised within an oppressive, highly rationalistic society. As Oothoon points out in her address to Urizen, Theotormon has been formed to an objective, rational image. It is little



wonder, then, that he cannot begin to cope with Oothoon's rape. According to Theotormon's worldview, she has been tainted, made Bromion's property: her "soft American plains are [his], and [his her] north & south" (*Visions*; 46; Plate 1; 20).

Theotormon's confusion becomes clearer when he begins questioning the nature of the abstract: "Tell me what is a thought? & of what substance is it made? / Tell me what is a joy? & in what gardens do joys grow? / And in what rivers swim the sorrows? and upon what mountains / Wave shadows of discontent?" (*Visions*; 47-8; Plate 3-4; 23-1). Here, Theotormon is torn between what can be perceived ("gardens," "rivers," and "mountains") and the abstract ("thought," "joy," and "sorrow"). He struggles to place the abstract within reach of his senses, questioning how he can deal with abstractions if they are not part of the natural, observable world. His questions reveal the extent of Theotormon's isolation: he cannot grapple with what he cannot see or touch (such as emotions), a result of his upbringing in a strictly rationalistic society, and as such, he cannot be part of the world Oothoon inhabits, the realm of the infinite. He has been so stifled by society that he lacks any sense of autonomy; could someone but tell him how to reconcile his emotions with his worldview, perhaps he could break out of his sorrow, but he seems too conditioned by society to be able to see beyond what he has been taught. As he pleads, "Tell me where dwell the joys of old! & where the ancient loves? / And when will they renew again & the night of oblivion past? / That I might traverse times & spaces far remote and bring / Comforts into a present sorrow and a night of pain" (*Visions*; 48; Plate 4; 4-7). Theotormon clearly wishes to overcome his "present sorrow," "renew[ing] again" "the joys of old" he experienced before Oothoon's defilement. Even so, he does not trust that such renewal can occur, as he asks "If thou [O thought] returnest to the

present moment of affliction / Wilt thou bring comforts on thy wings, and dews and honey and balm; / Or poison from the desert wilds, from the eyes of the envier” (*Visions*; 48; Plate 4; 9-11). As we will see in Oothoon’s address to Urizen, Theotormon will not find any such comforts; he cannot break free of the system which dictates Oothoon has been rendered impure, and he will not be able to see beyond the abstractions that tell him this. Theotormon will continue, tormented by God, removed from the reality before him.

### *Unseen Urizen*

After fighting in vain to awaken Theotormon from his woes, Oothoon turns towards the source of everyone’s suffering: Urizen. Although he remains unseen and unheard in *Visions*, Urizen takes on great significance; Oothoon addresses him from Plate 5 through 8, half the length of the poem, which is also more speech than is directed at Theotormon and Bromion combined. Evidently, Blake would have us consider Urizen carefully, albeit it through the lens of Oothoon’s words. Notably, she turns to Urizen after Bromion’s lamentation in which he invokes the teachings of the priesthood, confounding Oothoon into “silen[ce] all the day, and all the night” (*Visions*; 48; Plate 4; 25).

Given the placement of both speeches, we can conclude that Oothoon has realized the futility of addressing Bromion directly; if he will only continue to assert the teachings of the priesthood, presumably, Oothoon decides to go straight to the source, Urizen himself, “Creator of men! mistaken Demon of heaven” (*Visions*; 48; Plate 5; 3). Here, it becomes evident that Oothoon sees possibility for change from two directions. She is not limited to seeking change within individual members of society; it is equally possible to

effect change from the top down, taking on the priesthood's mouthpiece (i.e. Urizen), the being through which their teachings are perpetuated.

We should note that Oothoon, having awakened and embraced her Poetic Genius, has become an outsider in society, and in light of Bromion's question – "And is there not eternal fire, and eternal chains? / To bind the phantoms of existence from eternal life?" (*Visions*; 48; Plate 4; 23-4) – she may fear losing her place in eternity, perhaps remaining sentenced as "A solitary shadow wailing on the margin of non-entity" (*Visions*; 50; Plate 7; 15). In this light, her plea becomes one for salvation. Once again, however, none but "The Daughters of Albion hear her woes, & echo back her sighs" (*Visions*; 51; Plate 8; 13).

Even so, we can see that Oothoon has achieved some measure of liberty, if only in that she continues to openly voice her beliefs. She may not succeed in awakening the Genius within Bromion and Theotormon, but that she sees her identity extend beyond the limits imposed by society, she has triumphed. Over the final four plates of *Visions*, she makes a striking case for the naturalness of her sexual expression, which she could not do at the outset of the poem, when she "trembled in [her] virgin fears" (45; Plate iii; 3).

Oothoon's address to Urizen begins with a discussion of the infinite, which appears to be contrary to Urizen's goal of the finite and rational: "Thy joys are tears! thy labor vain, to form men to thine image. / How can one joy absorb another? are not different joys / Holy, eternal, infinite!" (*Visions*; 48; Plate 5; 4-6). By seeking to "form men to [his] image," Urizen is "absorb[ing] . . . different joys," attempting to eradicate individuality expressed through what he would deem irrational desire. Recalling that Urizen represents the human faculty for reason, we can conclude that Oothoon sees

Urizen attempting to subjugate the other human faculties, most notably sexual desire, in the name of rationality. As she notes, however, “different joys” are “Holy, eternal, infinite,” meaning Urizen seeks to confine the infinite, rendering it finite so that it may be approached rationally.

Given the connection between the infinite and Poetic Genius, it becomes clear that Urizen stands in direct opposition to Genius, as it taps into multiple facets of humanity, some of which (again, most notably desire) fall outside the realm of rationality. We should also recognize Oothoon’s use of “holy” – she seems to imply that Urizen, by attempting to “form men to [his] image,” is undertaking an unholy task. It would seem, then, that Urizen operates in opposition to what is truly holy; because Urizen is a tool of the priesthood, they are, by extension, carrying out unholy tasks as well. To Oothoon, sexual desire is anything but unholy; it is instead a natural characteristic of humankind.

This becomes apparent when Oothoon lays bare the nature of sexual repression, and by extension, the oppression of women in her society:

[S]he who burns with youth. and knows no fixed lot; is bound  
In spells of law to one she loaths: and must she drag the chain  
Of life, in weary lust! must chilling murderous thoughts. obscure  
The clear heaven of her eternal spring? to bear the wintry rage  
Of a harsh terror driv’n to madness, bound to hold a rod  
Over her shrinking shoulders all the day; & all the night  
To turn the wheel of false desire: and longings that wake her womb  
To the abhorred birth of cherubs in the human form  
That live a pestilence & die a meteor & are no more.  
Till the child dwell with one he hates. and do the deed he loaths  
And the impure scourge force his seed into its unripe birth  
E’er yet his eyelids can behold the arrows of the day. (*Visions*; 49; Plate  
5; 21-32)

Oothoon’s use of binding imagery illustrates the oppressive nature of her society, particularly from a woman’s standpoint; women are “bound” to their husbands (“one she

loaths”), made to “drag the chain / Of life,” “obscur[ing] . . . [their] eternal spring[s],” “bound to hold a rod . . . all the day; & all the night.” Of further significance is her depiction of motherhood, “the abhorred birth of cherubs in the human form,” which only perpetuates the cycle of misery and servanthood, as these children will likewise be yoked in marriage to “one he [or she] hates,” “do[ing] the [sexual] deed he [or she] loaths.”

Next, Oothoon works to defend her sexual expression, both attacking society’s structure and indirectly pleading with Theotormon. She characterizes her sexuality as “Infancy, fearless, lustful, happy! nestling for delight / In laps of pleasure; Innocence! honest, open, seeking / The vigorous joys of morning light; open to virgin bliss” (*Visions*; 49; Plate 6; 4-6). Her use of “Infancy” intimates that she believes sexual desire to be a natural capacity of humankind, one that exists from birth. As such, we can conclude that sexuality, contrary to the view of the priesthood and society at large, should neither be repressed nor seen as a perversion; instead, sexual desire is “Innocen[t]! honest, [and] open” when it has not been tainted through the imposed perspective of the priesthood.

Oothoon further illustrates the negative influence of society on the perception of sexual expression, asking “Who taught thee modesty, subtil modesty!” (*Visions*; 49; Plate 6; 7). Presumably, modesty is taught by the priesthood, and we soon see Oothoon’s disdain for it, as modesty, once taught, creates “modest virgin[s] knowing to dissemble / With nets found under thy night pillow[s], to catch virgin joy, / And brand it with the name of whore” (*Visions*; 49; Plate 6; 10-2). Here, the “modest virgin” abstracts “virgin joy,” “brand[ing] it with the name of whore” – condemning sexual desire in the name of false modesty. This strikingly parallels Plate 11 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in

which Blake describes the ancients who “attempt[ed] to realize or abstract the mental dieties from their objects” (38).

According to Oothoon, the priesthood continues to abstract the infinite, here in the form of desire, attempting to make it finite, subjugating it beneath the rational. Once “virgin joy” has been “brand[ed] with the name of whore,” Oothoon argues, the “modest virgin” “sell[s] it in the night, / In silence. ev’n without a whisper, and in seeming sleep” (*Visions*; 49; Plate 6; 12-5). Thus, the oppressive system of the priesthood is perpetuated without a word, almost subconsciously, “in seeming sleep.” It is, then, of the utmost importance that Oothoon draws attention to the bastardization of sexual desire, as it has become so engrained in all members of society no one else thinks to do so. In Oothoon’s world, sexual repression has become a natural part of everyday life.

Within this system, Oothoon notes, she “is . . . a whore indeed! and all the virgin joys / Of life are harlots” (*Visions*; 50; Plate 6; 18-9). However, now that she has awakened her Poetic Genius and is able to see herself outside the realm society dictates women exist within, “Oothoon is not so, a virgin fill’d with virgin fancies / Open to joy and to delight where ever beauty appears” (*Visions*; 50; Plate 6; 21-2). Her defense of sexuality is perhaps most distinct in her assertion that “The virgin / That pines for man; shall awaken her womb to enormous joys / In the secret shadows of her chamber” (*Visions*; 50; Plate 7; 3-5). This statement removes the tainted lens the priesthood has laid over sexual delight, reinstating it to its former place as a natural, shame-free act that ought to be enjoyed. Oothoon would have all her listeners, most importantly Theotormon, understand that sexual expression, as a joy, is “Holy, eternal, infinite,” and should not be “brand[ed] . . . with the name of whore” (*Visions*; 48, 49; Plate 5, 6; 6, 12).

When sexuality is viewed as such, Oothoon argues, “the youth shut up from / The lustful joy. shall forget to generate. & create an amorous image / In the shadows of his curtains and in the folds of his silent pillow” (*Visions*; 50; Plate 7; 5-7). Although her address is directed at Urizen, this passage certainly speaks to Theotormon. We can draw this conclusion because of the circumstances: presumably, Theotormon cannot see beyond the standards of sexual repression set forth by society, as he continues to consider Oothoon defiled. His misidentification of her leads us to believe he would also carry similar misapprehensions about sexuality; here, Oothoon points to his insecurities – he is “the youth shut up from / The lustful joy” who can only fantasize about sexual experience, “creat[ing] an amorous image / In the shadows of his curtains and in the folds of his silent pillow.” Again, we see an image of Theotormon, like he appears on the frontispiece (see fig. 1), turned within himself, disconnected from the world around him.

In case we should have any misgivings about the cause of Theotormon’s isolation, Oothoon reminds us of the culprit: “Are not these the places of religion? the rewards of continence? / The self enjoyings of self denial? Why dost thou seek religion? / Is it because acts are not lovely, that thou seekest solitude, / Where the horrible darkness is impressed with reflections of desire” (*Visions*; 50; Plate 7; 8-11). Yet again, religion – and the priesthood – lies at the heart of the matter. Oothoon would have us understand the influence the priesthood has over sexual matters, which she considers personal and natural. Here, we see the priesthood teaching “self denial,” and we can presume that because she is addressing Urizen, rationality plays a role in such teachings. The suppression of desires, particular those sexual in nature, appears to be a cornerstone of society in *Visions*. Oothoon seems to understand that Theotormon, because he lives up to

society's standards, cannot but "[seek] solitude, / Where the horrible darkness is impressed with reflections of desire;" he cannot express his sexual desires openly, and accordingly, is left to brood over fantasies, mere abstractions of sexual experience, and all in the name of religion, which teaches that "[sexual] acts are not lovely."

Once more, Oothoon draws our attention to Urizen's culpability in this, wailing: "Father of Jealousy. be thou accursed from the earth! / Why hast thou taught my Theotormon this accursed thing?" (*Visions*; 50; Plate 7; 12-3). This lends further significance to her earlier question, "Is it because acts are not lovely[?]" (*Visions*; 50; Plate 7; 10). Urizen, the embodiment of the human capacity for reason, has "taught . . . Theotormon" "acts are not lovely." Sexual acts, as Oothoon has demonstrated, are driven by desire, and as such, lie outside the realm of the rational; although this is not problematic for Oothoon, given her embrace of all human faculties as "Holy, eternal, infinite" (*Visions*; 48; Plate 5; 6), it certainly creates difficulty for Urizen, the priesthood, and all members of society, who have been "form[ed] . . . to [Urizen's] image" (*Visions*; 48; Plate 5; 4).





Fig. 1 William Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, copy G, 1795, The William Blake Archive, object 2, Web, 26 Feb. 2012.

## Chapter Four: Blake's Postmodern *Visions*

As we have seen, William Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* calls readers to reexamine how we identify ourselves, whether narrowly, like the priesthood teaches, or broadly, through Poetic Genius, like Oothoon. By awakening her Poetic Genius, Oothoon is able to free herself from the oppressive forces of her society, embracing the different capacities of humankind, most explicitly her sexual desire. While Blake's intent is presumably to help the readers of his day break free from social norms, reawakening a lost sense of individuality (with the aim of building a less restrictive society), *Visions* speaks beyond the circumstances of late eighteenth century British society; here, we will discover how Poetic Genius may retain its importance in postmodern American society, albeit in an opposite manner to Blake's original intent.

Postmodern American society lies on the other end of the spectrum from late eighteenth century British society; we now live in a society of predominant individualism, whereas in Blake's time, the climate was one of oppressive collectivity. The problem, we shall see, is that our society has allowed "one joy [to] absorb another," forgetting that, as Oothoon argues, "different joys / [are] Holy, eternal, infinite" (*Visions*; 48; Plate 5; 5-6). Instead of rationalism overtaking desire, as in *Visions*, today, desire holds the upper hand, and is now the oppressor of reason. This phenomenon is perhaps best expressed in terms of what Slavoj Žižek calls the injunction to enjoy; Žižek identifies the postmodern shift in "which *permitted* enjoyment, freedom-to-enjoy, is reversed into *obligation* to enjoy" (qtd. in Myers, "Postmodernity" 53). In other words, postmodern American society has transformed enjoyment from a luxury to a requirement,

something all individuals must experience as often as possible. In this way, enjoyment becomes one of Oothoon's "different joys" which "absorb[s]" others, such as rationality.

Like Oothoon is in *Visions*, we are surrounded by the push and pull of individuality versus collective belonging; in postmodernity, the lure of subjectivity, of creating one's unique identity from the ground up, has become so great that we are losing our sense of solidarity as a society. According to Paul Hollander, "Preeminent among the corrosive effects of modernity are the decline of the sense of purpose and community, the weakening of social solidarity and the problems of identity" (206). With the onset of modernity came an increased emphasis on the individual subject, much like Blake calls for in *Visions*. He cannot have foreseen, however, the negative ramifications accompanying the breakdown of universality. One may question the importance of collectivity, particularly because we live in a culture which encourages radical individualism, but nonetheless, we are suffering for its decline.

### *The Prohibitive Society of Visions*

As Todd McGowan describes in *The End of Dissatisfaction?*, "A society of prohibition requires all its members to sacrifice their individual, private ways of obtaining enjoyment<sup>6</sup> for the sake of the social order as a whole. That is to say, one receives an identity from society in exchange for one's immediate access to enjoyment, which one must give up" ("Psychoanalysis" 3). This is, McGowan argues, the traditional structure of societies, and it certainly applies to the society of William Blake's *Visions of*

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<sup>6</sup> In the postmodern context, it is crucial to understand the connotation of "enjoyment;" it often refers to the intense sensation of pleasure (and sometimes pain) known as *jouissance*, which Tony Myers defines as "the pleasure beyond mere pleasure itself—a pleasure that has an orgasmic charge, indexing the point where pleasure becomes pain" ("Men and Women" 86).

*the Daughters of Albion*. As we have seen, members of this society (namely, Oothoon, Theotormon, and Bromion) are expected to relinquish their personal enjoyments (explicitly, sexual desire and expression), and as such, their individual identities, in order to be accepted within that society.

This is perhaps most apparent in Theotormon, who can no longer envision Oothoon as his lover after she has been raped by Bromion; in accordance with societal norms, he must deny his sexual desires for her, as they do not conform with the standards of strict rationality. In exchange for his sacrificed enjoyments, Theotormon receives a set identity which society (led by the priesthood) has dictated to him; he is expected to deny himself in the name of religion, which is revealed in Oothoon's wailings: "Are not these the places of religion? the rewards of continence? / The self enjoyings of self denial? Why dost thou seek religion? / Is it because acts are not lovely, that thou seekest solitude, / Where the horrible darkness is impressed with reflections of desire" (*Visions*; 50; Plate 7; 8-11). As McGowan would have us believe, "those who are enjoying themselves are not, at the moment of enjoyment at least, 'productive members of society'" ("From Prohibition" 13). Thus, in *Visions*, Theotormon must deny enjoyment in the name of social wellbeing, for "enjoyment represents a threat to the social order and its stability" (McGowan, "From Prohibition" 13). The prohibitive society, then, thrives upon the collective sacrifices of individuals; without such self-denial as Theotormon's, supposedly, the society in *Visions* could not maintain itself.

Although it is tempting to dismiss the prohibitive society entirely for its tendency, as in *Visions*, to suppress individual expression, there are some subtle benefits to be reaped from such a system, given that it is not, as Blake depicts, an overwhelmingly

oppressive force that renders all individuality to be publicly perceived as destructive. According to McGowan, “Social coherence depends on the enjoyment that subjects derive from the sacrifice of their private enjoyment for the greater good of the society<sup>7</sup>” (“From Prohibition” 13). This does not fit neatly, however, with the society Blake creates in *Visions*. We see Theotormon giving up his “private enjoyment,” presumably “for the greater good of the society,” but there is no indication that he receives any enjoyment in return. Throughout *Visions*, Theotormon is tormented, brought down by his society, unable to function as an individual entity because of its prohibitions.

Theotormon is perhaps best characterized with McGowan’s discussion of Freud’s primal Father, who is murdered by his sons because they are jealous of his enjoyments:

After this point, the enjoyment embodied by the primal Father becomes only a memory [following his murder], the object of fantasy for all those who have agreed to give it up. That is, the murder of the primal Father has the effect of triggering fantasies about the enjoyment that he experienced prior to his death. These fantasies sustain those who have sacrificed their own enjoyment in the collective renunciation that made the murder possible. (“From Prohibition” 15)

In this light, Theotormon’s fixation upon abstract sexual fantasies becomes clearer.

Sexual enjoyment has been marked by society as the sacrifice all must make to exist as a collective, and as such, like the enjoyments of Freud’s primal Father, they have been replaced with fantasy. Theotormon cannot openly engage in sexual acts because of the injunctions of society, and so the best he can hope for is to retain shadows of sexual enjoyment through his imagination.

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<sup>7</sup> For the purpose of this project it is best to envision “the greater good” as a changeable quality, one which varies from society to society depending on what the collective values. In *Visions*, “the greater good of the society” would be that which forwards the ideals of the priesthood.

In contemporary America, prohibitive society lingers as a memory from the distant past. It tends to be viewed either nostalgically or with vehemence, as Paul

Hollander notes:

A heightened receptivity to the real or perceived injustices of American society has a long tradition; high expectations and the value placed on nonconformity have deep roots in American social and cultural history. Strong beliefs in the perfectibility of human beings and institutions have for centuries been an essential attribute of the American view of the world, as has an indefatigable optimism regarding the solubility of all social, political, and personal problems. The social critical temper of the adversary culture has always fed on the high expectations that American society has generated and nurtured from its earliest days. (205)

Adversary culture, which has its roots in the atmosphere of radical change of the 1960s, still functions today, breeding discontent among the American cultural mass. As Hollander demonstrates, traditionally, American standards aim high, for perfection, and not surprisingly, fail to achieve it. This has led to a distrust in the traditional prohibitive society McGowan describes, as it once promised greatness, and has fallen short time and again. In postmodernity, the mood of discontent pervades everyday life; if we could not be guaranteed prominence and happiness when we sacrificed our personal enjoyments for the good of society at large, contemporary American culture suggests, such enjoyments ought not be denied anyone. As we will see, these shifting perspectives and values take the matter too far – to an extreme that renders too great a disparity between social good and personal enjoyment; the two need not be mutually exclusive.

### *Enjoyment's Triumph over Meaning*

Returning to *The End of Dissatisfaction?*, McGowan tells us “Because subjects experience themselves as lacking, as not fully enjoying themselves, they look to the

Other [that is, society as a whole] for what they are missing, for the piece that would allow for complete enjoyment. . . . In contrast, the enjoying subject does not look to the Other for what it lacks, but rather sustains an attitude of indifference toward the Other” (“From Prohibition” 17). This shift from looking to “the Other” for meaning to “indifference toward the Other” characterizes postmodern American society; individuals no longer look to society to provide the meaning they require to fill the hole left by their sacrificed enjoyment.

In fact, according to McGowan, our society – the society of enjoyment – does not ask us to make such a sacrifice any longer: “The salient feature of contemporary American society is the premium it places on enjoyment” (“Psychoanalysis” 1). Instead of being told by society, like the characters in *Visions*, that we must sacrifice personal enjoyments (such as sexual desire), we are commanded to partake in those very enjoyments. As McGowan states, “Whereas formerly society has required subjects to renounce their private enjoyment in the name of social duty, today the only duty seems to consist in enjoying oneself as much as possible” (“Psychoanalysis” 2). We are, then, called to behave more like Oothoon, but to an even greater degree; whereas Oothoon chooses to embrace the multiple facets to her individuality, thus overcoming the oppressive forces of her society, we are being commanded to hold individuality to the highest possible standard, focusing on our subjectivity at all times, forgoing any perceived need to build a sense of social community with the rest of our nation.

The trouble with a society of enjoyment, McGowan notes, is that “rather than being tied together through a shared sacrifice, subjects exist side by side in their isolated enclaves of enjoyment” (“Psychoanalysis” 2). This isolation calls to mind Theotormon,

who lies at the opposite end of the spectrum, turned within himself, away from the outside world, because of the enjoyments denied him by the injunctions of his prohibitive society. Both extremes are equally troubling in that they lead to such isolation. Again, as McGowan argues, “the society of enjoyment commands [its members’] enjoyment—private enjoyment becomes of paramount importance—and the importance of the social order as a whole seems to recede” (“Psychoanalysis” 3). When concerns are weighted heavily towards the individual’s enjoyment, it seems only natural that the concerns of collective enjoyment – making personal sacrifices for the benefit of society at large – would fade into the background.

One notable difference between the traditional prohibitive society and the contemporary society of enjoyment is the lack of a paternal authority from whom to take guidance. This figure is present in Blake’s *Visions* in the form of Urizen, who works on part of the priesthood to impose the laws they have set forth. According to McGowan, however, no such figure exists in postmodern American society: “[a]lthough the society of prohibition requires and values the symbolic father, [‘who enforces this prohibition and thus acts as a barrier to enjoyment,’] this figure has almost completely disappeared from the contemporary cultural landscape. This absence of the traditional father is a symptom of the emergence of the command to enjoy” (“Paternal Authority” 41-2). Without the symbolic father to serve as a marker for what we must not do, nearly all becomes acceptable; we have lost the “barrier to enjoyment” that once separated us from the enjoyments we were called to sacrifice for the betterment of society. Thus, enjoyment has become paramount in postmodern American society, which has in turn caused individual enjoyment to eclipse any pleasures that may be gained from participation and



belonging in a collective. While such wide possibilities for individual expression may not initially appear problematic, there is a cost we should not overlook. With increased emphasis on subjectivity comes increased relativity, for which our ability to find meaning in our existence suffers.

This idea is supported by McGowan, who argues:

The distance that prohibition provides for subjects offers them the space for critical reflection. Through this distance, the structure of the society of prohibition thus allows for subjects to make sense of it. When this distance collapses under the weight of the imperative to enjoy, we lost our ability to interpret events occurring in the world—to connect isolated events to the larger social order. [. . .] We become so caught up in the immediacy of events that we lack ability to reflect on the mediations that underlie this apparent immediacy. A sense of immediacy prevails in the society of enjoyment to such an extent that events seem meaningless. (“Interpretation” 95)

It would seem, then, that prohibitive society is not a solely negative force. The framework of a prohibitive social structure, if we agree with McGowan, provides the necessary distance between individuals and events that meaning can be made. The more we focus inward, on nothing outside ourselves, the more difficult it becomes to make sense of the seemingly random, endless barrage of events in our daily lives. Part of this is tied to our society’s contemporaneity; as a capitalistic, consumer-driven nation within a globalized setting, we are perpetually bombarded with information, particularly advertisements vying for our attention. We are flooded with events, those of our lives, those of our peers’ lives, those of the lives of people from other parts of the world, and it becomes our task to make meaning out of them.

As McGowan illustrates, this is increasingly difficult in a society that emphasizes the individual, the subjective, the relative; everything has become so personal that we cannot separate ourselves from the events enough to be able to interpret them objectively.

Part of this, McGowan argues, lies in our growing sensitivity to the different lived experiences of individuals: “Universality has fallen into ill repute in part because of the link between universality and violence. . . . It is this violence implicit in universality that has occasioned so much opposition to it in recent years, so much insistence that we resist the lure of universality and confine ourselves to the less violent (and less grandiose) claims of multiple particularities” (“Interpretation” 97). This is apparent within the society of *Visions*; as we have seen, Urizen and the priesthood work to advance universality, chiefly through sexual repression. In the name of social unity, violent acts, such as Bromion’s rape of Oothoon, are perpetuated. It would appear that a less universally-minded social structure would use less violent tactics, or perhaps would not require them at all. This, certainly, would be Blake’s argument.

And so it persists in the present day: the imposition of universal standards and meaning is intimately tied to violent acts in the collective American imagination, and so universality is pushed aside in favor of subjectivity, the “multiple particularities” McGowan mentions. Rather than having a set cultural “meaning” or “significance,” we have multiple, particular meanings that vary from individual to individual. It is here that the problem of radical individualism begins to surface. According to McGowan, in reference to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, “What they miss, however, is what is lost along with the loss of universality. When we can no longer take up a universalizing perspective, we can no longer escape our isolated position to understand the social order as a totality. Without the universal, . . . we lose the ability to find meaning” (“Interpretation” 98). The loss of meaning seems to be the pitfall of postmodern American society; we are so focused upon individual enjoyment that we

have lost touch with the ability to forge a meaningful existence. The next question, then, is what we are to do about it.

### *Reconstruction through Poetic Genius*

The first issue to consider when tackling the problem of reconstructing meaning is the extreme to which we focus only at the subjective level; as McGowan notes, this is symptomatic of the cynicism of our culture, “an attitude that proclaims that things simply are as they are, that there is no changing the structure of the social order” (“Psychoanalysis” 6). The only change we see possible, he argues, is at the individual level; we do not feel sufficiently efficacious to change society, and so we shift our focus to what we can change within ourselves. This directly parallels Oothoon’s struggle in *Visions*; she fights to effect change within herself, by awakening her Poetic Genius and accepting her sexual desires as an innate part of all humankind; within those around her, by lamenting openly to Bromion and Theotormon; and within society as a whole, by addressing Urizen. Although Blake leaves us without any indication that Oothoon has succeeded in changing anyone but herself and the Daughters of Albion, her steadfast efforts underline the importance of such acts. It would seem that we could behave similarly; if McGowan is correct, then we already do work upon changing ourselves, but we continue to neglect other modes of change, those which could touch society as a whole.

The main difference between our approach and Oothoon’s may be easily ignored or overlooked, as postmodern American society keeps us so concerned with ourselves that we may justly consider ourselves masters of personal change. Nevertheless, we have

missed an important step in self-improvement: the awakening of our Poetic Genius.

While one could easily argue that Blake would not have sought a return to the traditional prohibitive society he describes in *Visions*, it seems unlikely that he would have supported the equally unbalanced society of enjoyment (postmodern American society).

We should remember that Poetic Genius is not simply a tool for awakening one's individual potential. Even though Oothoon comes to understand the importance of all aspects of her individuality through Poetic Genius, she also recognizes the potential for oppression by all parts of human nature. As she asks, "Can that be Love, that drinks another as a sponge drinks water?" (*Visions*; 50; Plate 7; 17). Oothoon may be arguing against the oppressiveness of rationalism over desire, but the opposite is equally possible: should we neglect to view all aspects of humankind as natural, or as Oothoon calls them, "Holy, eternal, infinite" (*Visions*; 48; Plate 5; 6), one can easily "drink another as a sponge drinks water," subjugating it. This is precisely what has happened in postmodern American society. As subjectivity came to hold utmost importance, universality – the notion that something larger than individuals exists and is significant – began to be oppressed.

Given our society's injunction to enjoy, it is no wonder that we have ignored collective meaning. Nevertheless, we continue to be members of society, of something larger than our individual selfhood, although we may prefer to overlook this aspect of our lives. Could we but reawaken our Poetic Genius, as Oothoon does, we could begin to restore balance to the human faculties. Like Genius enables Oothoon to reconcile her role in society with her individuality, it may perform a similar function for the postmodern

American, allowing one's senses of individuality and collectivity to coexist without impinging upon one another.

This need not require a return to the society of prohibition Blake fought against, either. We should remember that Blake did not call for a society of enjoyment, in which everyone existed for his or her own benefit alone; were this the case, Oothoon would not make an argument in favor of all human characteristics. Instead, we may presume, her tactic would be much like Bromion's – violent acts to force others to comply with her newly gained sexual liberty.

Oothoon is able to find meaning in her individuality because she awakens the Genius within herself, and if we could do the same, perhaps we could begin to find the meaning that can exist within collectivity. As McGowan cautions, “the gesture of confining oneself and one's actions to the private realm is precisely what fuels the predominance of the society of enjoyment, which makes large-scale change seem impossible” (“Psychoanalysis” 6). What he misses, though, is the possibility that large-scale change may begin within the individual, as it may for Oothoon. Her tireless wailing, which is echoed by the Daughters of Albion, may simply be the first step towards social change. Without any individuals stepping forward to strive for change, it will likely never occur. If we are to reconstruct meaning for ourselves, it seems we must start internally, recognizing that although our individuality is important, it is neither the only facet of humankind nor the sole path towards a meaningful existence. We need to remember, as Oothoon laments, “are not different joys / Holy, eternal, infinite? and each joy is a Love” (*Visions*; 48; Plate 5; 5-6). Perhaps if we, like her, remain “solitary shadow[s] wailing on the margin of non-entity” (*Visions*; 50; Plate 7; 15), we can begin to effect the social

change necessary to rediscover our collective meaning as Americans. We need to find the Genius within each of us, “the true Man” Blake calls us to reawaken (*All Religions*; 47; Plate 4), in order to break free from our society’s oppressive injunction to enjoy.

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