Neglected in his own lifetime, considered mad by many of his contemporaries, William Blake is a mighty eagle who cannot be pigeonholed. There are those who stress his social roots and political commitment and those who celebrate his perennial philosophy, admiring his metaphysical and psychological insights. He has been called a mystic, a prophet, an idealist, a materialist, a humanist, and an anarchist. He has been the noble savage of the oversophisticated and the psychedelic guru of the Flower Power Generation. Both the political right and the left have hijacked his great poem "Jerusalem." And yet he continues to soar beyond the critics and commentators,
riding the wind of his own imagination, cleansing the "doors of perception" and seeing that "everything that lives is Holy."

It is the main argument of this essay that the social and spiritual aspects of Blake are inextricably interwoven. That is his great strength and appeal. While he may have seen angels in the trees as a boy and listened to the voices of "Messengers from Heaven," he had his feet firmly on the ground in late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century England. Indeed, his unique attraction lies precisely in the fact that he combined the social and the spiritual with what we would today call the ecological.

Blake was rooted in his age as a revolutionary romantic, but he looked back to the gnostic heresies of the Middle Ages and anticipated modern anarchism and liberation ecology. Despite the failure of the French Revolution, he did not abandon the radicalism of his youth and retreat into a craggy and misty wilderness in his later prophetic writings. Throughout his difficult life, the "Liberty Boy" rebelled against authority, whether in the form of the State and King, Church and God, Master and Mammon. He searched for social and spiritual freedom so that all humanity could free themselves from their "mind forg'd manacles," exercise the "Divine Arts of the Imagination" and become priests, monarchs, and artists in their own homes. Indeed, he set no limits to personal liberty: "No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own wings." (51)

The Tradition of Dissent

The most important influence on Blake's world view was his Protestant background. It was a radical libertarian Protestantism which rejected the repressive aspects of Puritanism. Excluded from public life in Church and State, the Dissenters in Blake's own day formed a separate interest and constituted a permanent undercurrent of social criticism. The Dissenting Interest, as it came to be known, encouraged individualism and self-examination and had an instinctive suspicion of all authority. It pitted the right of private judgment against established beliefs and received opinions. Its culture produced the great radical thinkers Thomas Paine, Richard Price, Joseph Priestley, and William Godwin, who felt the same enthusiasm as Blake about the outbreak of the French Revolution.

But while sharing the libertarian assumptions of these rational Dissenters, Blake was also in touch with an underground heretical
tradition which influenced his thought in a communitarian and chiliastic direction. It finds its roots in the mystical anarchists of the millenarian sects, especially the Brethren of the Free Spirit of the Middle Ages. It reemerged in the extreme left amongst Anabaptists, Ranters, and Diggers of the English Revolution, who wanted to build God's kingdom on earth and live in perfect freedom and complete equality. It continued in the sects like the Muggletonians and Taskites which survived in London in Blake's youth. It was a tradition that expressed social aspirations in Biblical language, that wanted to replace the Babylon of existing Church and State with the Jerusalem of a free society in which people would live according to the Everlasting Gospel of mutual aid and forgiveness. Indeed, Blake was far from alone amongst the radical Dissenters in the 1790s in using the imagery of the Revelation to express his revolutionary aspirations, arguing about the rule of Antichrist and hoping for the millennium.

When Blake added to this radical Dissenting tradition what he found in the esoteric tradition of the Cabbala, the Hermetic Tradition, and in the mystical writings of Swedenborg and Boehme, it became a heady and revolutionary brew, indeed. But whatever the influences at work on the young Blake, he made them his own. By the use of his creative imagination, he fashioned his own distinctive worldview: "I must Create a system," he wrote, "or be enslav'd by another Man's./ I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create." (629) The result was that where Godwin developed the rationalist tendency within Dissent to anarchist conclusions, Blake elaborated the mystical tradition, commented on "a certain meanness or culture" in Blake's thought and rather disparagingly likened his philosophy to an "ingenious piece of home made furniture." Although a largely self-taught thinker and primarily a painter and poet, Blake is more than a philosophical Robinson Crusoe, patching odd and esoteric bits of knowledge together. His philosophy does no creak and sway but has a solid, massive, and organic wholeness about it. It is more like a Henry Moore sculpture than a rustic tool. Moreover, it not only questions many fundamental assumptions in moral and political philosophy

**Opposition Is True Friendship**

T. S. Eliot, standing in a very different Catholic and monarchical tradition, commented on "a certain meanness of culture" in Blake's thought and rather disparagingly likened his philosophy to an "ingenious piece of home made furniture." Although a largely self-taught thinker and primarily a painter and poet, Blake is more than a philosophical Robinson Crusoe, patching odd and esoteric bits of knowledge together. His philosophy does no creak and sway but has a solid, massive, and organic wholeness about it. It is more like a Henry Moore sculpture than a rustic tool. Moreover, it not only questions many fundamental assumptions in moral and political philosophy.
but threatens the materialist and rationalist premises of Western civilization itself.

The most striking and decisive aspect about Blake's thought is its dialectical nature. He rejected the mechanical and materialist philosophy which dominated the universities and schools. Like Lao-tzu, he saw reality as a constant process of flux and believed that change occurs through the dynamic interplay of opposing forces. Every substance has two inherent qualities which Blake called "contraries":

Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.

From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy.

Good is Heaven. Evil is hell. (149)

This conflict between the contraries at the root of all things is not only inevitable but also beneficial; indeed, "Opposition is true Friendship." (157) The higher synthesis of wisdom, moreover, can emerge only from the conflict between innocence and experience, good and evil, liberty and authority. Intellectual and corporeal war is therefore an integral part of reality. This dialectical way of looking at things was as essential to Blake's vision as the cornea is to the eye. As his iconoclastic annotations show, he even engaged in a dialectical polemic with the authors he read.

In the end, however, Blake foresees a higher synthesis taking place in the new society of Jerusalem. In personal and historical terms, there comes a marriage of heaven and hell, a reconciliation between mind and body, imagination and reason, conscience and desire, rich and poor, humanity and nature. As in Marx's communist society, Blake believed that at the end of history there would be no longer any antagonism between man and man, and man and nature.

Blake's metaphysics may best be described as a kind of pan-theistic idealism. He rejected the rationalism of Newton, the empiricism of Bacon, and the sensationalism of Locke which presented the external world as matter in motion governed by universal laws. For them, the world consisted of a finite quantity to be weighed and measured and classified. Blake was convinced that their mechanical phi-
losophy, which shaped the dominant worldview at the time, made
the cardinal error of separating the perceiving mind from the object
of perception, the observer from the observed.

Blake, on the other hand, was a philosophical idealist, believ­
ing that the world is not made of matter but of organized spirit. The
everyday world of apparent permanence and stability presented to
the senses is illusionary but not the spiritual and visionary:

A Spirit and a Vision are not, as the modern philosopher
supposes, a cloudy vapour, or a nothing: they are organised
and minutely articulated beyond all that the mortal and
perishing nature can produce. He who does not imagine in
stronger and better lineaments, and in stronger and better
light than his perishing, mortal eye can see, does not imagine
at all. (576)

For Blake, there is no difference between the observer and the
observed for all things exist in the imagination: "To Me This World is
all One continued Vision or Fancy or Imagination." (793) Since all
natural phenomena exist only in consciousness, it follows that a per­
son's perceptual apparatus will determine what he perceives: "As a
man is, So he Sees." (793)

At the same time, Blake believes that the independent and sep­
arate existence of the physical world is ultimately a delusion. Like the
contemporary Platonist Thomas Taylor, he distinguishes between the
fleeting world of time and space presented to the senses and an eter­
nal and unchanging world perceived by the imagination: "Accident
ever varies, Substance can never suffer change nor decay." (589) This
"vegetable Universe," as Blake calls it, is thus "a faint shadow" of the
real and eternal world. It is the purpose of the artist, he believes, to
use the "Divine Arts of Imagination" to depict this real world, depict­
ing purer forms than those perceived by the mortal eye. (716–717)

Blake was also a nominalist, in that he believed that there are
no universals or general terms but only particulars: "Every class is
Individual." (460) This had important corollaries for his art, morality,
and politics. In the first place, he hated the kind of generalized nature
Joshua Reynolds tried to portray and insisted that the artist should see
nature in terms of minute particulars: "To generalize is to be an Idiot.
To Particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit." (451) This approach
was central to Blake's way of seeing the world. Some of his most beautiful images are of the minute objects in nature: wild thyme, meadowsweet, the pebble, the clod of clay, the ant, and the grasshopper. In addition, Blake's nominalism led him in the sphere of ethics and politics to anarchist conclusions. Like Godwin, he believed that every case should be considered a rule unto itself. As a result, he went on to reject all moral rules and man-made laws.

**Nature Is Imagination Itself**

Blake's concept of nature follows from his dialectical and idealist position. On the one hand, he stresses that "Nature Teaches us nothing of Spiritual Life but only of Natural Life." (412) The science which only studies nature is therefore the "Tree of Death." (777) But Blake here is talking only of Newton's nature, the nature of matter in motion. If we accept that "Nature is Imagination itself" (793), then the "sweet Science" (379) of true knowledge is possible. Like modern ecologists, Blake adopted a holistic approach to nature, stressing its interdependence, its unity in diversity, and its organic growth. If we go beyond our five senses, if the doors of perception are cleansed, then we will see that "everything that lives is Holy." (160)

Human beings are not separate from nature like subject and object, but an integral part of it. Unfortunately, utilitarian and exploitative man has interfered with the beneficial course of nature: "The Bible says that God formed Nature perfect," Blake wrote, "but that Man perverted the order of Nature, since which time the Elements are fill'd with the Prince of Evil." (388) Men in their fallen state have therefore introduced self-interest and cruelty into the originally pure natural order. But this is not true of all men; a few like Blake are horrified by the callous treatment of other species. In *Auguries of Innocence*, he makes one of the most eloquent pleas for animal rights ever made:

A Robin Red breast in a Cage
Puts all Heaven in a Rage.
A dove house fill'd with doves & Pigeons
Shudders Hell thro' all its regions.
A dog starv'd at his Master's Gate
Predicts the ruin of the State.
Horse misus'd upon the Road
Calls to Heaven for Human blood.
Each outcry of the hunted Hare
A fibre from the Brain does tear.
A Skylark wounded in the wing,
A Cherubim does cease to sing.
The Game Cock clip'd & arm'd for fight
Does the Rising Sun affright.
Every Wolf's & Lion's howl
Raises from Hell a human Soul.
The wild deer, wand'ring here & there,
Keeps the Human Soul from Care.
The Lamb misus'd breeds Public strife
And yet forgives the Butcher's Knife.

Further along the chain of being, Blake sees the plants and objects as having a spiritual and aesthetic quality. In his poems, clods of mud and pebbles talk, flowers feel. Blake's profound ecological sensibility also comes through in his letters where he laments the fact that in this fallen world dominated by the cash nexus to the eyes of a miser “a Guinea is more beautiful than the Sun, & a bag worn with the use of Money has more beautiful proportions than a Vine filled with Grapes. The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the Eyes of others only a Green thing that stands in the way.” (793) Blake speaks directly to those modern ecologists who argue that a forest cannot be merely seen in terms of an economic unit but as an integral part of the earth's ecosystem which nurtures animal life as well as the human spirit. When the sun rises, Blake did not see a round disk like a guinea but “an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.'” (617) He was one of those people who are able

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour. (431)

The Divine Image
The human species finds its place within the organic world of nature, but it is the most important species: “Where man is not, nature is bar-
Humanity is unique in that it is made in God's image, the Divine image. Like the Christian anarchist Tolstoy, Blake believes that the kingdom of God is within us: "All deities reside in the human breast." (153) There is no distinction between the creator and the created: "God is Man & exists in us & we in him." (775) Man is thus primarily a spiritual thing and is not bound by his physical body: "Spirits are organized men." (577) Blake calls this spiritual human essence the "Imagination" or "Poetic Genius" and insists that the "Poetic Genius is the true Man, and that the body or outward form of Man is derived from the Poetic Genius." (98) At the same time, Blake does not fall back on traditional dualism, separating the mind from the body, praising the one to the detriment of the other. He remains a thoroughgoing monist idealist. Body and mind are two aspects of a common spirit. The body is not only organized spirit but also the source of creative energy:

1. Man has no Body distinct from his Soul; for that call'd
   Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the
   chief inlets of Soul in this age.
2. Energy is the only life, and is from the Body; and Reason is
   the bound or outward circumference of Energy.
3. Energy is Eternal Delight. (149)

Blake thus sees the unconscious and instinctual side of our makeup as a positive driving force. And like Godwin, who defines the will as the last act of the understanding, Blake insists "Thought is Act." (400) Blake calls the human essence the "Imagination" but he also celebrates imagination as the most important creative faculty within us. Indeed, his theory of the imagination in which inspiration is contrasted with memory recalls Coleridge's distinction between Imagination and Fancy. At the same time, Blake is highly critical of the faculty of reason: "Man by his reasoning power can only compare & judge of what he has already perceiv'd." (97) But it would be wrong to conclude that Blake is irrational or anti-intellectual. He does not reject reason out of hand but only that kind of reason which controls the passions and serves self-interest: "He who sees the Ratio only, sees himself only." (98) Reason, in Blake's mythology, becomes Urizen, the "horizon," and is presented as a burdened, entangled, listless tyrant. Blake hates the kind of instrumental and analytical reason
which can destroy what it dissects and which argues that ends justify means. He abhors the reason which acts as "an Abstract objecting power that Negatives every thing." (629) On its own, naked reason can only curb, govern, and destroy:

The Spectre is the Reasoning Power in Man, & when separated
From Imagination and closing itself as in steel in a Ratio
Of the Things of Memory, It thence frames Law & Moralities
To destroy Imagination, the Divine Body, by Martyrdoms & Wars. (714)

But Blake here is only talking about analytical and instrumental reason. It is the task of naked reason to recognize its own inadequacy, not to abolish itself entirely. Moreover, Blake makes no crude distinction between reason and the passions, "For a Tear is an Intellectual Thing" as well as an emotional one. If the understanding encourages the passions rather than curbs them, then the "Treasures of Heaven" can be "Realities of Intellect." (615)

In Blake's psychology, the whole person is made up of four essential components, which he calls the Four Zoas: body (Tharmas), reason (Urizen), emotion (Luvah), and spirit (Urthona). Blake does not suggest that one should exist without the other. Love, for instance, involves physical, intellectual, and emotional states, but in true sexuality the spiritual is needed to perfect the physical. Moreover, to achieve a state of heightened consciousness, to obtain full visionary awareness, it is necessary to reconcile energy, reason, emotion, and spirit. In his scheme of things, Blake calls this a "fourfold vision."

On the first level of consciousness, mechanical reason holds sway in darkness (which Blake calls heaven). The second level, associated with fire, is the realm of energy (hell). The third is a state of light which unites the first two into The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, as Blake's prose poem puts it. The fourfold vision is the inspired state of full light which brings together all the other levels of consciousness:

Now I a fourfold vision see,
And a fourfold vision is given to me;
'Tis fourfold in my supreme delight
And threefold in soft Beaulah's night
And twofold Always. May God us keep
From Single vision & Newton's sleep!

Beaulah is the country in Bunyan from which the pilgrims can see the city they are searching for.

Unlike other contemporary radicals, Blake believed in innate ideas. Writing against Reynolds, he maintained that we are born with a sense of ideal beauty and a moral conscience: "Innate Ideas are in Every Man, Born with him; they are truly Himself." (459) Where Godwin and Paine argued that we are products of our circumstances, Blake insisted that intelligence is genetic: "The Man who says that the Genius is not Born, but Taught—is a Knave." (470) Indeed, nothing important is acquired in a person's makeup for he brings all that he has into the world with him: "Man is Born Like a Garden ready Planted & Sown." (471)

Unfortunately, the growing child can forget his innate knowledge as he becomes lost in the cave of the five senses. The grown adult, absorbed in external nature, easily becomes cut off from his or her innate universal ground. For this reason, Blake believes that children, who have not had their visions clouded by sensuous infatuation and worldly interest, are more capable of appreciating and elucidating his visions.

Although we have an innate moral sense or conscience that we can rely upon as the "voice of God," it is no easy task to adopt the right course of action. (385) Within all of us, there is a constant struggle between our good or bad side, between our Emanation and Spectre. The Spectre represents for Blake everything that is negative in the world: tyranny, empire, false reason, conventional religion, and self-hood. It is associated with the Jehovah God of the Old Testament. The Emanation, on the other hand, stands for all that is positive: creative energy, imagination, forgiveness, and Jesus. The struggle between the two forces takes the form of corporeal and mental war:

My Spectre around me night & day
Like a Wild beast guards my way.
My Emanation far within
Weeps incessantly for my Sin. (415)
Nevertheless, the conflict between the forces of good and evil are not eternal as in the Manichean universe. Good can triumph over evil, the Emanation can defeat the Spectre when the individual realizes his or her divine potential:

Each man in his Spectre's power  
Until the arrival of that hour  
When his Humanity awake  
And cast his own Spectre into the Lake. (421)

Out of this dialectical struggle between the Spectre and Emanation should emerge the higher synthesis of Divine Humanity which will reconcile all the opposing forces. This is the ultimate goal of Blake's visionary humanism which insists: "The worship of God is: Honouring his gifts in other men, each according to his genius, and loving the greatest men best: those who envy or caluminate great men hate God; for there is no other God." (158)

Blake's contemporary radicals like Paine and Godwin rejected the notion of innate ideas because they believed that it could be used to justify social inequality. Blake, however, felt that a belief in innate intelligence offered no grounds for social discrimination. Not everyone is born a genius, but for Blake everyone is equally made in the divine image and has a divine potential. This led Blake to talk in terms of Universal Humanity while recognizing local differences: "As all men are alike (tho' infinitely various), So all Religions & as all similars, have one source." (98)

While the lawyers of the French Revolution were prepared only to extend political rights to property-owning white males, Blake made an impassioned plea for racial and sexual equality. He deplored slavery and knew of its cruelties directly. He depicted the horrors of the slave trade for his antislaver friend Stedman and was so horrified by his drawing of the "A Negro on the Rack" (1796) that he left it unsigned. He thought the African as capable as the European of spiritual enlightenment and social freedom. In "A Song of Liberty," Blake calls on the citizen of London "enlarge thy countenance!" and exclaims: "O African! black African! (go, winged thought, widen his forehead)." (159) In a "Little Black Boy," Blake at first seems to link the black and white boys with good and bad angels, but he goes beyond this moral dualism by presenting the black boy as teaching the white:
When I from black and he from white cloud free,
And round the tent of God like lambs we joy,

I'll shade him from the heat, till he can bear
To lean in joy upon our father's knee;
And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,
And be like him, and he will then love me. (125)

Color is therefore superficial and unimportant: black and white skins are merely the outward appearance of the physical bodies of children which will eventually vanish like clouds.11

When it comes to sexual equality, Blake's position might at first sight appear more ambivalent. On the one hand, he saw like his friend Mary Wollstonecraft that women were enslaved in the institution of marriage as the slave was enthralled in the plantation and that loveless marriage was no different from prostitution. Blake and Wollstonecraft not only collaborated together—he illustrated her Original Stories from Real Life (1788)—but were also close friends. At the end of her novel Mary (1788) the heroine longs to enter that "world where there is neither marrying, nor giving in marriage."12 Many years later Blake echoed her sentiments in Jerusalem where Albion tells Vala "In Eternity they neither marry nor are given in marriage." (660) In the Visions of the Daughters of Albion (1793), he condemns the cruel absurdity of enforced chastity and marriage without love:

Till she who burns with youth, and knows no fixed lot, is bound
In spells of law to one she loathes? 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 longing that wake her womb
To the abhorred birth of cherubs in the human form,
That live a pestilence & die a meteor, & are no more. . . .

(193)
To end this state of affairs, Blake calls for an end to patriarchal possessiveness and defends the right of women to complete self-fulfillment. Nevertheless, while Blake advocates "Love! Love! Love! happy happy Love! free as the mountain wind!" a degree of ambivalence arises when he describes such freedom in terms of constraint: "silken nets and traps of adamant will Oothoon spread" to catch "girls of mild silver, or of furious gold." Is he suggesting that Oothoon should supply her lover with girls so that she can watch them in "happy copulation" on a bank and draw the "pleasures of this free born joy"? Or is he referring symbolically to instincts which should not be mutually exclusive? Again, although Blake clearly loved his companion Catherine deeply, she acted as if her chief role was to be his supporter and handmaiden.

In the prophetic books, Blake also often presents the female figure in the traditional role of the cunning temptress or the passionate destroyer. Los's female Emanation, in the guise of Enitharmon, is opposed to the imagination, embodying both the indulgence and repression of the passions. She comforts Los but also emasculates him. However, this is only half the story. Later in the guise of Jerusalem, the Emanation of Albion, woman represents liberty, the desire to unite with Jesus, and becomes one with Albion.

Blake in reality thought that the male and female principles are not separate and lodged in bodies of different genders, but are within us all: when Enitharmon is divided from Los, for instance, man becomes divided and jealousy comes into being. Ultimately, Blake believed that sex belongs only to the divided world of time and space: true "Humanity knows not of Sex (65) and "Humanity is far above/ Sexual organization." (72)

**Things as They Are**

Blake's politics are not presented as a coherent system or in a consistent manner. He had a very low opinion of traditional political philosophy, associating it with the mechanical and utilitarian mind of John Locke whose defense of government as the protector of private property had become the dominant Whig ideology. Blake even put down the wretched state of the arts in Europe directly to the "wretched State of Political Science, which is the Science of Sciences." (600)

It has been suggested that Blake came to despair of politics after his trial for sedition at the turn of the century. Certainly, he
wrote around 1810, “I am really sorry to see my Countrymen trouble themselves about Politics.” (600) Yet Blake despaired of politics only in its conventional sense of factions and parties jockeying for power. His position can be called antipolitical only if politics is defined in its narrow sense of the art of government. Blake was not frightened from politics but he reached the anarchist conclusion that conventional politics in the form of governments is a denial of life and an insuperable bar to human freedom.

Blake never rejected politics in the broader sense of the relationships between human beings in society. His political views are not presented in isolation, for they form an inseparable part of his religious thought: “Are not Religion & Politics the Same Thing?” he asked, adding, “Brotherhood is Religion.” (689) And just as his political and religious beliefs are intertwined, so they are both in turn based on his particular view of nature, society, and the self.

There is a critical and a constructive dimension to Blake’s politics. He offered both a devastating critique of existing society and a powerful alternative vision of a free society. Although he pictured transformed humanity living in the new society of Jerusalem in the future, he drew inspiration from the mythical past. Like the Brethren of the Free Spirit, the Diggers, and the Ranters whom he resembles so closely, he wished to restore humanity to its original state. He assumed like them that in the Garden of Eden man and woman lived in a state of innocence and wholeness, without private property, class distinctions, and human authority: “When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the Gentleman?” Indeed, Blake seems to have felt that “The primeval State of Man was Wisdom, Art and Science.” (621) After the Fall, men and women were condemned to toil, poverty, and suffering. They became weighed down by positive institutions, mangled by Church and State, oppressed by Lord and King: “A Tyrant” Blake declared, “is the Worst disease & the Cause of all others.” (402) As private property developed, and the State was established to defend it, people became divided against each other and classes came into direct conflict. With the loss of human innocence, experience thus created a world of contradictions, between Man and Nature, State and Society, Capital and Labor, Church and Christianity.

As always with Blake, there is a close parallel between psychology and politics: the state of the individual reflects the state of society in which he lives. Within man himself, a conflict developed
between reason and imagination, conscience and desire, body and soul. The sleeping soul fell into "its deadly dreams of Good & Evil when it leaves Paradise following the Serpent." (614) But this state of affairs is not inevitable. Revolutionary energy is also at work in the individual, and history can transform things as they have become.

Blake saw it his express purpose to try and recreate the lost age of innocence and freedom which he supposed had once existed at the beginning of time. "The Nature of my Work is Visionary or Imaginative," he wrote. "It is an Endeavour to Restore what the Ancients called the Golden Age." But in the fallen world of experience it is impossible to go back to an original state of innocence; the only way is forward to create the whole person in a new society in a higher synthesis of innocence and experience. In The Book of Thel (1789), Blake implies that when the virgin hears of the dangers to which her own five senses will expose her, she is wrong to fear the world of experience and withdraw. There can be no genuine innocence which has not been tested by knowledge of the world since "Innocence dwells with Wisdom, but never with Ignorance." (380)

Blake lived in an age of revolution and like most of his fellow radicals experienced the extremes of hope and disappointment. He lived at a time when the Nation State in Britain oppressed and exploited the people who came under its way both at home and in the colonies in India and America. He witnessed the Industrial Revolution which not only threatened his craft as an engraver but was turning England's green and pleasant land into a polluted desert of dark satanic mills. In the new cities, he saw "turrets & towers & domes/ Whose smoke destroy'd the pleasant gardens & whose running kennels/ Chok'd the bright rivers." (361) To the north, the new factories of England belched smoke and fire and consumed workers; from the south came the din of revolutionary war and the stench of rotting corpses on the battlefields of Europe.

And yet as a boy, Blake had been thrilled by the news of the American Revolution and as a young man had greeted with wild enthusiasm the French Revolution, convinced that it would inaugurate a new reign of peace, prosperity, and freedom on earth. He became deeply disappointed when the Revolution degenerated into the Terror and horrified when Britain went to war with France. In 1800, he recalled how in his life a "mighty & awful change" threatened the earth and despaired how it ended in war:
The American War began. All its dark horrors passed before
my face
Across the Atlantic to France. Then the French Revolution
commenc'd in thick clouds,
And My Angels have told me that seeing such visions I could
not subsist on the Earth. . . . (799)

But Blake never lost in his darkest moments his vision of a free soci­
ety which the two revolutions had inspired. While most of his radical contemporaries went over to the reaction or fell by the wayside, Blake remained faithful to his libertarian and egalitarian ideals. He always believed that "When the Reverence for Government is lost it is better than when it is found." (401)

**The Golden Age Restored**

Despite his devastating critique of his contemporary world, Blake did not despair. He offered an alternative system of values and believed that it was possible to create a new society which would be both free and fulfilling. The first thing to do was to get rid of repressive religion, loveless marriage, and war. As "An ancient Proverb" has it:

Remove away that black'ning church:
Remove away that marriage hearse:
Remove away that man of blood:
You'll quite remove the ancient curse. (176)

Blake does not elaborate a comprehensive and rigid moral code. Like the Brethren of the Free Spirit, he goes beyond conventional definitions of good and evil to suggest Divine Humanity is incapable of sin. As an antinomian and libertarian, he admires Jesus precisely because he rejected moral principles and broke the ten commandments. Nevertheless, Blake’s fundamental values do come through in his writing. They are both simple and sublime, available to every person regardless of wealth or rank or intelligence.

Jesus personified what Blake valued most: forgiveness, energy, and creativity. Blake shaped Jesus in his mythology to his own subversive and revolutionary ends and argued that he rejected all hierarchies and tyrannies: "The Kingdom of Heaven is the direct Negation of Earthly domination." (407) Even the summation of Jesus’
teaching in the golden rule of loving one’s neighbor can be applied too rigidly: “He has observ’d the Golden Rule,” Blake writes, “Till he’s become the Golden Fool.” (540) The key to Christianity for Blake is not to be found in the threat of punishment but in forgiveness: “The Gospel is forgiveness of Sins & has No Moral Precepts.” (395)

Blake is totally opposed to a stoical or repressive approach to life; in a marginal note to Lavater; he observes that “True Christian philosophy” teaches the “most refined Epicurism” and the maximum amount of enjoyment. (75) And while accepting the claims of both sensual and intellectual pleasure, Blake believes that the highest degree of enjoyment comes from creative energy: “Energy is Eternal Delight.” (149) He knew of no other Christianity and no other Gospel than the “liberty both of body & mind to exercise the Divine Arts of Imagination.” (716–17)

Just as Blake refused to develop a rigid moral code, so he declined to elaborate a formal blueprint of a free society. He does, however, suggest what direction a free society might take. Early in his life, the experience of the American and French Revolutions had filled him with hope. In the Songs of Innocence (1789) he sketched a picture of how things might be: caring elders look after children playing on the echoing green; chimney sweepers leap and laugh in the sun; black and white children respect and love each other; and thousands of little boys and girls sing together in the presence of wise guardians. All is infant joy. The “Divine Image,” Blake was convinced, could shine through humanity.

For Mercy has a human heart,
Pity a human face,
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress.
Then every man, of every clime,
That prays in his distress,
Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace. (117)

Two years later, Blake in The French Revolution (1791) looked forward to the imminent realization of heaven on earth:

“Then the valleys of France shall cry to the soldier: ‘Throw down thy sword and musket,
And run and embrace the meek peasant.' Her Nobles shall hear and shall weep, and put off
The red robe of terror, the crown of oppression, the shoes of contempt, and unbuckle
The girdle of war from the desolate earth; then the Priest in his thund'rous cloud
Shall weep, bending to earth, embracing the valleys, and putting his hand to the plow,
Shall say: 'No more I curse thee; but now I will bless thee. . . .” (144)

Even as the Revolution in France was degenerating into the Terror, Blake could end The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790–1793) with “A Song of Liberty,” in which the fiery spirit of revolution is born. He overthrows the jealous king, and stamping the “stony law” to dust, cries: “EMPIRE IS NO MORE! AND NOW THE LION & WOLF SHALL CEASE.” (160) The Chorus prophesies a time of sexual and social freedom:

Let the Priests of the Raven of dawn, no longer in deadly black, with hoarse note curse the sons of joy. Nor his accepted brethren—whom, tyrant, he calls free—lay the bound or build the roof. Nor pale religious lechery call that virginity that wishes but acts not!

For every thing that lives is Holy. (160)

The crabbed and compressed Urizen, symbol of authority and tyranny, will be replaced by Albion who, rising “from where he labour'd at the Mill with Slaves,” will dance in joy and freedom, naked and open-armed. (160)

In his Visions of the Daughters of Albion (1793), Blake further called for a sexual and political revolution which would bring an end to the “mistaken Demon” whose rigid patriarchal code divides mind and body and turns women and children into objects to be possessed. He yearned for the realization of love through freedom and for the whole of creation to behold “eternal joy.” (195) In the same year, he summarized his love of freedom and his affirmation of life in a notebook:
He who binds to himself a joy
Does the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity's sun rise.

Unfortunately, historical developments were to prove that Blake's confidence in imminent revolution was ill-founded. When Britain declared war on revolutionary France, the party of Church and State triumphed. By the turn of the century, Blake and Godwin both fell with liberty into one common grave. Blake's *Songs of Experience* (1789–1794) showed graphically how terrible things had become. But while he came to see life more tragically, he still lived in the hope of rebuilding Jerusalem and ending the divisions in humanity and society. He held firm to the Divine Image in times of darkness and strife. Born in an age of revolutions, Blake never lost his confidence that out of the dialectic of innocence and experience, liberty and authority, reason and imagination, a higher synthesis of the whole person in a free society would emerge.

With Pitt's "Gagging Acts" soon introduced after the outbreak of war with France and Church and King mobs ready to hunt down the mildest radical, Blake realized that "To defend the Bible in this year 1798 would cost a man his life." It was a time, he wrote, when "The Beast [of the State] & the Whore [of the Church] rule without control." (383) But he did not silence himself. Instead, he chose the same path as the persecuted Ranters in the English Revolution who developed a secret language to carry on a wary and clandestine propaganda. He was aware of what Paine called the Bastille of the word," the tyranny of language with fixed meanings, and sought to create a language of private meaning so that he could express his thoughts through his own symbols. He therefore disguised his revolutionary and libertarian message in prophetic allegories to escape the censor and the hangman. To those who are ready to make the effort to find the key to his language and mythology, his message in plain enough. For all the complex symbolism and misty rhetoric of the prophetic writings, Blake's Jerusalem is not a religious fantasy or political utopia but the vision of a free society which he believed would be realized on earth one day.

In the *Book of Urizen* (1794), Blake first developed his own creation myth of the material world and humanity, in which Urizen, the
God of Reason, is the Creator. It offers the starkest account of the Fall of Man. The creation involves Los, the central figure in Blake's thought, who represents the poetic genius or imagination. From Los emerges his Emanation, Enitharmon, his female counterpart. But the world does not remain under the eternal rule of the tyrant Urizen who tries to entangle humanity in the net of religion, for the offspring of Los and Enitharmon is Orc, the spirit of revolt. In *The Book of Los* (1795), the myth is continued with Los creating the sun and forcing Urizen to create the material world, thereby compelling him to define and act so that he can be overcome. In *The Book of Ahania* (1795), Urizen casts out his Emanation, or Pleasure. The theme continues in *Europe: A Prophecy* (1794), with the coming of war between England and France heralded by Enitharmon imposing her dominion on the world. But terrible Orc is still ready waiting for the coming revolution: "And in the vineyards of red France appear'd the light of his fury." (245)

Although Blake began to express himself increasingly in the convoluted allegories of his prophetic writings, his libertarian vision shone as brightly as before. In swelling rhetoric, he may have presented the revolution in the apocalyptic language of the Gnostic sects, in terms of a Last Judgment bringing about the Everlasting Gospel in Jerusalem, but the celebration of moral, sexual, and social freedom is as vigorous and enthusiastic as ever. *Vala, or the Four Zoas*, written between 1795 and 1804, is full of prophetic gloom, but at the end Los and Enitharmon build Jerusalem. With the sound of the trumpet of the Last Judgment

The thrones of Kings are shaken, they have lost their robes & crowns,
The poor smite their oppressors, they awake up to the harvest,
The naked warriors rush together down to the sea shore Trembling before the multitudes of slaves now set at liberty: They are become like wintry flocks, like forests strip'd of leaves:
The oppressed pursue like the wind; there is no room for escape. (357)\(^{18}\)

Out of the inevitable struggle of heaven and hell, innocence and experience, intellectual and physical war, Blake was convinced that
Jerusalem, the city within and without, could be built. In his preface to *Milton*, written between 1804 and 1808, when radical political hopes were at a nadir in Britain, Blake exclaims

> Rouze up, O Young Men of the New Age! set your foreheads against the ignorant Hirelings! For we have Hirelings in the Camp, the Court & the University, who would, if they could, for ever depress Mental & prolong Corporeal War. (480)

He recommits himself to the intellectual and social struggle:

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

Milton foretells that the Children of Jerusalem will be saved from slavery. They will be redeemed from the tyrannic law of “Satan, the Selfhood,” the creator of natural religion and the legislator of moral laws which curb the passions. But in order for the “Eternal Man” to be free, it will first be necessary to destroy the “Negation of the Reasoning Power” in man by self-examination. In Blake’s dialectic, it is necessary to negate the negation. Milton, the inspired man, declares

> “There is a Negation, & there is a Contrary:  
> The Negation must be destroyd to redeem the Contraries.  
> The Negation is the Spectre, the Reasoning Power in Man:  
> This is a false Body, and Incrustation over my Immortal Spirit, a Selfhood which must be put off & annihilated alway.  
> To cleanse the Face of my Spirit by Self-examination,  
> To bathe in the Waters of Life, to wash off the Not Human,  
> I come to Self-annihilation & the grandeur of Inspiration,  
> To cast off Rational Demonstration by Faith in the Saviour,  
> To cast off the rotten rags of Memory by Inspiration,  
> To cast off Bacon, Locke & Newton from Albion’s covering,  
> To take off his filthy garments & clothe him with Imagination,  
> To cast aside from Poetry all that is not Inspiration,
That it no longer shall dare to mock with the aspersions of Madness
Cast on the Inspired by the tame high finisher of paltry Blots
Indefinite, or paltry Rhymes, or paltry Harmonies,
Who creeps into State Government like a catterpiller to destroy. . . ." (533)

In Blake’s great culminating statement, Jerusalem, completed in 1820, the oppression of Church and State is at last cast off. Humanity realizes its divine potential and lives in peace and love. The moral law, imposed as a curse, is no longer valid. The division between the sexes ceases and the Eternal Man bearing the stamp of the Divine Image stalks the land from Amazonia to Siberia. Within every person, Blake insists, there is Jerusalem:

In great Eternity every particular Form gives forth or Emanates
Its own peculiar Light, & the Form is the Divine Vision
And the Light is his Garment. This is Jerusalem in every Man,
A Tent & Tabernacle of Mutual Forgiveness, Male & Female Clothings.
And Jerusalem is called Liberty among the Children of Albion.
(684)

In his old age, Blake’s revolutionary views inevitably made him an outsider. A republican and an anarchist, he could hardly feel at home in Tory England. Apart from Godwin and Hazlitt, nearly all the old radicals of his generation had died or lost their way. In 1827, he wrote to a friend, “since the French Revolution Englishmen are all Intermeasurable One by Another, Certainly a happy state of Agreement to which I for One do not Agree.” (878) In the same year, in his annotations to Thornton’s New Translation of the Lord’s Prayer, Blake offered his own liturgy. It shows that for all the complexity of his imaginative world and the depth of his alienation from the everyday world, he was still calling for economic justice and social freedom to prevail on earth. He continued to pray for an end to capitalist exploitation (Price), repressive morality (Satan), and political authority (Caesar). Praying to Jesus, not God, he declares
Give us This Eternal Day our own right of Bread by taking away Money or debtor Tax & Value or Price, as we have all Things Common among us. Every thing has as much right to Eternal Life as God, who is the Servant of Man. His Judgment shall be Forgiveness that he may be consum'd in his own Shame.

Leave us not in Parsimony, Satan's Kingdom; liberate us from the Natural man & [words illegible] Kingdom.

For thine is the Kingdom & the Power & the Glory & not Caesar's or Satan's. Amen. (788)

Blake's prophetic vision is not merely that of a spiritual New Age. His view of paradise has its roots in the "sunny side" of eighteenth-century London life as well as in the hills, sky, and sea of the Sussex coast. He is undoubtedly a visionary, but he combines mysticism with social radicalism and common sense. He valued above all bread, music, and the laughter of children. He asked for a fair price for the depiction of ideal beauty. Like the Brethren of the Free Spirit and the Ranters before him and like Godwin in his own day, his vision is of a free society which transcends conventional politics and the struggle for power and which ensures that every individual is "King & Priest in his own House." (879) It is a society based on mutual aid, for "Brotherhood is religion," (689) and complete forbearance, for "What is Liberty without Universal Toleration?" (413) It is a society which would allow communal individuality to flourish, combining voluntary cooperation with personal autonomy. Men and women would live in sexual equality and enjoy free love. Human relations would no longer be corroded by the cash nexus. Workers would receive the product of their labor and all would enjoy the fruits of the earth in common. Human beings would be able to realize their creative natures and be free to exercise the "Divine Arts of Imagination." (716–17)

While Blake dramatically pictures transformed humanity in a free society in harmony with nature, it is not a utopian dream or a mystical fantasy. "Every thing possible to be believ'd is an image of truth," he reminds us, and "Truth can never be told so as to be understood, and not be believed." (152) He may have been a visionary but he was not content with passive contemplation. He interpreted the world in his own way but he also wanted to change it.
Blake made no shallow distinction between theory and practice since "Thought is Act." (400) At the same time, he believed that one could begin to realize a free society here and now. It is not necessary to wait for a cataclysmic upheaval or divine intervention. Everyone can begin to change society by changing their own lives: "Whenever any Individual Rejects Error & Embraces Truth, a Last Judgment passes upon that Individual." (613) If one cleanses the doors of perception, one will see everything as it is, infinite, living, and holy. Blake believed that the political is the personal, and called for individual rebellion in everyday life even while working for a total transformation of society.

In his own life, Blake was an outsider, an eccentric living in virtual internal exile. He lived in a State of "Empire or Tax" (777) in which on his own account all visionary men were accounted madmen. Yet we can now see him at the center of the Age of Revolution in which he lived and as a key figure in English romanticism. He is the quintessential revolutionary romantic.

We continue to live in a very similar world, with warring nation states threatening to engulf the whole planet in an unimaginable cataclysm. Instrumental reason, unchecked by feeling and uninformed by the imagination, coolly plans the total annihilation of humanity and the complete destruction of the earth. The machine still dominates human beings who are divided within, from each other, and from nature. The agents of Urizen are still at large.

For this reason, Blake's message remains as potent and relevant as ever. He offers the prophetic vision of a free community of fully realized individuals who act from impulse and who are artists, kings, and priests in their own right. Neglected in his own day, distorted by posterity, Blake's star is beginning to rise as the third millennium dawns.

Notes
4. All quotations are take from Blake: Complete Writings, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London & New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972). The number
given in parentheses after each quotation in the text refers to the page number in this edition.
EVOLUTIONARY ROMANTICISM draws on almost two centuries of intertwined traditions of cultural and political subversion. In this rich collection of writings by artists, scholars, and revolutionaries, the transgressions of the past are recaptured and transvalued for the benefit of the struggles of today and tomorrow.

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