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Paul Ferrell Brown

College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

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BLAKE AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT

A Thesis
Presented to
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In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements of the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Paul Ferrell Brown
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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

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[Signatures]

Author

Approved, July 1995

[Signatures]

Adam Potkay

Terry Meyers

Kim Wheatley
DEDICATION

The author wishes to dedicate this thesis to the memory of his aunt, Lucille Lanum, who passed away on January 18, 1995.
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that the theological system developed by William Blake in his satirical prose-poem *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is both a reaction against and a reflection of Enlightenment thought on religion. While Blake is typically represented as a counter-Enlightenment figure, his vision of God as a product of humanity’s poetic imagination is influenced by ideas exemplified in David Hume’s philosophical treatise *The Natural History of Religion*. The difference is that Blake’s populist emphasis produces a vision which emphasizes the imaginative divinity of the individual, as opposed to the elitist theology of Hume.

The paper begins by examining the influence of the counter-Enlightenment mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg on Blake’s thinking. Parallels between Swedenborg and the *Marriage* are apparent in Blake’s conception of the divinity and in the *Marriage*’s populism. Where Blake differs from Swedenborg, he clearly has been influenced by the Enlightenment; in particular, Blake’s conception of the visionary reflects the Enlightenment’s stress on experience. The combination of Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment theology produces Blake’s idea of the divinity: God as a poetic creation.

After examining Swedenborg, the paper closely compares the *Marriage* and the *Natural History*, arguing that Blake transforms the Enlightenment idea that religion originates in fear of natural phenomena by stressing the imaginative capacity of humanity. From this point, Blake proceeds to redefine Hume’s opposition between Hellenic activity and Hebraic passivity. Filtered through Blake’s vision of a poetic deity, this opposition becomes a productive interaction of contraries which must work against each other to keep the creative process in motion. This interaction shall lead to humanity’s full comprehension of God (or the Poetic Genius, as Blake calls Him), allowing for a populist liberation of humanity from oppression. In this respect, Blake overturns the Enlightenment’s philosophical elitism in favor of a democratic prophecy.
BLAKE AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT
William Blake’s satirical prose-poem *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* attempts to rework traditional Christian conceptions of religion, positing a God inseparable from the human imagination. In effecting this revision, Blake utilizes Enlightenment ideas of religion, as expressed with a certain typicality in David Hume’s *Natural History of Religion*, as the starting point of its imaginative project; but Blake transforms these ideas into the basis of his own system by combining them with a revised counter-Enlightenment theology derived from the writings of the Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg. Blake echoes Hume in his depiction of the origins of religion; however, while Hume maintains an elitist distance from the “vulgar” misrepresentations that give rise to religion, Blake celebrates the god-making power of the imagination. As a result, Blake’s emphasis is populist and democratic (exhibiting Swedenborg’s influence), as opposed to Hume’s elitism. This difference shapes Blake’s treatment of the distinction between Hellenic energy and Hebraic passivity, another area in which Blake resembles Hume on the surface. Blake’s conception of the deity, in which God both originates from and participates in poetic acts of creation, appears to favor activity at the expense of passivity, much as Hume privileges Hellenic heroism. Ultimately, though, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* breaks from the dichotomy posed by Hume, developing instead a theory of contraries in active opposition which allows the full exercise of humanity’s divine visionary imagination. This inherently populist conception is the result of Blake’s radical merger of Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment theology.¹

It is not clear if Blake read the *Natural History*; David Erdman notes that

¹
Blake was familiar with Hume’s *History of England* and criticized Hume in *A Descriptive Catalog* (1809) as a “reasoning historian” on the basis of that work (Erdman 67). Northrop Frye further claims that Blake “abhorred” the Enlightenment in general and “its elegantly skeptical historians Hume and Gibbon” in particular (Frye 161). Blake’s most explicit attack on the major philosophers of the Enlightenment appears in the section of *Jerusalem* entitled “To the Deists.” Blake defines Deism as “the Worship of the God of this World by the means of what you call Natural Religion and Natural Philosophy,” attacks it as “the Religion of the Pharisees who murderd Jesus,” and includes Hume in a catalog of Enlightenment Deists:

> Voltaire Rousseau Gibbon Hume charge the Spiritually Religious with Hypocrisy! but how a Monk or a Methodist either, can be a Hypocrite: I cannot conceive. We are men of like passions with others & pretend not to be holier than others: therefore, when a Religious Man falls into Sin, he ought not to be called a Hypocrite: this title is more properly to be given to a Player who falls into Sin; whose profession is Virtue & Morality & the making Men Self-Righteous. . . . Voltaire! Rousseau! You cannot escape my charge that you are Pharisees and Hypocrites, for you are constantly talking of the Virtues of the Human Heart, and particularly of your own, that you may accuse others & especially the Religious, whose errors, you by this display of pretended Virtue, chiefly design to expose. (Blake 201)

In this passage, Blake appears to align himself with religious orthodoxy through his use of “we,” identifying with the unpretentious man of the cloth as opposed to the Enlightenment philosopher, or “Player.” The latter is portrayed as an evil manipulator, a representative not of freedom from tyranny but of hypocritically moralistic repression instead. Since Blake includes Hume among the Pharisees, it would seem likely that the two shared little or no common ground on religious matters. The parallels between *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and the *Natural History of Religion* suggest, however, that Blake found ideas useful to his
developing religious conception in the Enlightenment study of religion. Whatever his distaste for “the Age of Reason,” Blake uses his visionary imagination to liberate its religious insights from their negative critical context.

Initially, Blake’s innovative prose-poem appears far removed from Hume’s *Natural History* in both form and content. The *Natural History* is a philosophical treatise written in elegant prose, proceeding in a logical argumentative style in an effort to prove the origin of religion in fear and to explicate the differences between monotheism and polytheism. In contrast, the *Marriage* feels loosely structured, consisting of a brief poem and a series of prose sections. Most of the latter are “Memorable Fancies,” visionary conversations with angels and devils which parody Swedenborg; there are also expository sections, a brief argument by “The voice of the Devil,” and a collection of aphorisms called “Proverbs of Hell.” This structure of conversational prose sections accompanied by illuminations bears little resemblance to Hume’s traditional philosophical arguments, and Blake’s work similarly exhibits few overt thematic links with Hume. Blake is not concerned with differences between polytheism and monotheism, or their respective strengths and witnesses; his *Marriage* is overtly visionary, an effort to unveil the infinite nature of the created world and the proper relationship between two key “contraries,” reason and activity.

Despite these apparent differences, there are affinities between Hume and Blake. The *Marriage*’s seemingly rambling structure is more carefully designed than it appears at first; though its arguments are not logical, the *Marriage* presents Blake’s theology in a balanced form which owes much to the Enlightenment. Furthermore, Blake’s visionary project is concerned with the origins of religion, and the “contraries” of reason and activity are parallel to Hume’s conception of the difference between monotheism and polytheism. These affini-
ties, and the manner in which Blake transforms them, will be discussed at greater length later.

This thesis will begin not with Hume, however, but with Swedenborg, for Blake’s assimilation and transformation of Swedenborgian concepts in the *Marriage* affected his treatment of Enlightenment philosophy. From Swedenborg, Blake derives his central idea of a deity produced by and centered in the human imagination; it is this concept which most strongly influences Blake’s treatment of Humean ideas in the *Marriage*. Blake’s populist transformation of Hume’s elitist celebration of polytheism relies on a combination of Enlightenment theology with counter-Enlightenment mysticism; thus, Blake’s relationship to Swedenborg’s writings is essential for a proper understanding of the *Marriage*’s relationship to the *Natural History of Religion*. The reading of the *Marriage* contained in this thesis is traditional; it does not challenge the importance of contraries in Blake’s writing and accepts Blake’s conception of the visionary imagination. Its goal is to utilize the sources of Blake’s theology to demonstrate how Blake arrives at his conception of God as the poetic imagination; the thesis concentrates on how Blake combines elements of Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment theology to produce his own visionary conception of Christianity.

While *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* draws on mainstream Enlightenment religious conceptions, it is also a satirical reaction to the religious philosophies of Swedenborg, a Swedish mineralogist “who had been inducted by angels into the spiritual arcana of the Old and New Testaments” (Erdman 141). Swedenborg’s writings differ substantially from the mythographic tradition of which Hume’s *Natural History* is a part; where such authors as Hume, Vico, and de Brosses sought to rationally examine the origins of religion, Swedenborg attempted to depict the true nature of God and the spiritual world as revealed to him in
his visionary conversations with angels. Swedenborg’s mysticism represents a counter-Enlightenment theology, stressing supernatural visions over the reason and experience favored by Hume. Though his motive differed from Hume’s, however, Swedenborg still dealt with issues which play a role in the *Natural History*: the true nature of the deity, evidence of his creation in the natural world (for Swedenborg, in the very form of man), and the pernicious effects of ignorance in creating false beliefs. Swedenborg’s handling of these subjects influences Blake’s treatment in the *Marriage*, particularly his emphasis on the visionary and the populism implicit in Swedenborg’s theology. This latter strain is apparent in Swedenborg’s idea that humanity can attain a portion of the divine wisdom through a conjunction of the will (defined by Swedenborg as love) and the understanding. At the same time, Blake’s interpretation of Swedenborg is influenced by an Enlightenment idea of empiricism (i.e. the value of direct sensory experience of the natural world) and an abhorrence of “priestcraft”; in this respect, Blake straddles the division between Hume’s Enlightenment philosophy and Swedenborg’s counter-Enlightenment mysticism.  

Blake developed a profound interest in Swedenborgian theology during the period just prior to the composition of the *Marriage*; he attended the first conference of Swedenborgians in London in April 1789 and read several of Swedenborg’s major works, including *Angelic Wisdom Concerning the Divine Love and the Divine Wisdom* (trans. 1788), *Concerning the Divine Providence* (trans. 1790), and *Apocalypse Revealed* (1791). Blake admired the first of these volumes; Erdman states that Blake found the work “something fresh and new though confirmatory of the human creed he [had] already begun to formulate in different terms” (Erdman 142). In the *Divine Love*, Swedenborg suggests that a visionary imagination is required to comprehend the divine; he establishes this
idea early in Part I, when he states, “That the Divine or God is not in space, although He is omnipresent with every man in the world, and every angel in heaven, and every spirit under heaven, cannot be comprehended by any merely natural idea, but it may by a spiritual idea” (Swedenborg 3). Swedenborg’s language suggests that his work is in part epistemological; though he does not investigate the origins of religion as Hume does, he searches for the origins and limits of a visionary knowledge of the spiritual realm. For Swedenborg, the spiritual realm is not a physical realm, and so cannot be understood through sensual conceptions of time and space. Instead, the truly spiritual man must abandon mere physical ideas and regard the heavens (Swedenborg denotes three heavens, each one closer to God than its predecessors) through a purely visionary lens.

This emphasis on the visionary recurs throughout the Divine Love; Swedenborg argues that mankind must abandon the physical conceptions of time and space in order to appreciate the angelic wisdom that Swedenborg has received. (Blake does not entirely accept this counter-Enlightenment idea, as will be discussed later.) There is a populist strain in Swedenborg’s work as well (as indicated above by his use of the words “every man”), particularly in the idea that all people can achieve the marriage of the will (or love, as Swedenborg likens it to the divine love) and the understanding required for a perception of truth. Of particular relevance to Blake is the notion of the infinite which this understanding of the truth shall bring:

It is well known that God is infinite, for He is called infinite; but He is called infinite because He is infinite. He is not infinite by virtue of this alone, that He is real Esse and Existere in himself, but because infinite things are in Him: an infinite without infinite things in Himself is not infinite but as to the bare name. Infinite things in Him cannot be said to be infinitely many, nor infinitely all, because of the natural idea of many and all; for the idea of infinitely many is limited, and the idea of infinitely all, although unlimited, is derived from limited things in the universe: wherefore
since man's ideas are natural, he cannot by any sublimation and approximation come to a perception of the infinite things in God; but an angel, whose ideas are spiritual, may by sublimation and approximation be elevated above the degree of a man, but yet not to the thing itself. (Swedenborg 7)

By "Esse" and "Existere," Swedenborg means "to be" and "to exist," respectively; for Swedenborg, God alone is pure Esse and Existere, with all created things below Him deriving their existence from His absolute essence. In this quotation, Swedenborg sharpens the distinction between natural and spiritual ideas noted earlier; no natural idea can be truly infinite, as all such ideas are derived from contemplation of the material world (which is by nature limited), not the true infinite spiritual being of God. Infinite things are spiritual, and are in God alone; limited things are in the world, and offer no glimpse of the infinite despite their original derivation from God. In distinguishing between the vision of humans and that of angels, Swedenborg suggests there are multiple levels of visionary understanding; later in the Divine Love, he indicates that humanity can approach a spiritual comprehension of the infinite, but only after the soul's liberation from the natural, physical body.

The influence of Swedenborg's conception of the infinite is apparent in Plate 14 of Blake's Marriage, where the infinite nature of the "whole creation" suggests a spiritual reality beyond the natural similar to the spiritual world Swedenborg posits in the Divine Love (Blake 39). Blake's conception of the senses' limitations, which prevent a total comprehension of the infinite, and the idea of the soul and body as a single entity, echo Swedenborg as well. Blake appears most receptive to the Swedenborgian ideas which run counter to the Enlightenment, stressing imaginative spiritual visions over reason; as a result, the Marriage appears to carry a counter-Enlightenment bias.
Despite his affinities with the *Divine Love*, Blake’s vision departs significantly from Swedenborg’s. Blake suggests that humanity will ultimately be able to perceive the nature of God to a fuller extent than Swedenborg allows for: “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is: infinite” (Blake 39). Blake’s notes on the *Divine Love* clarify the difference: “That there is but one Omnipresent Uncreate & God I agree but that there is but one Infinite I do not, for if all but God is not infinite they shall come to an end which God forbid” (Blake 604). In this note Blake undermines Swedenborg’s distinction between the spiritual and the natural; while he admits an infinite God as the original source of all things (as indicated by the word “Uncreate”, suggesting God’s existence before the creation of the natural world), he denies that natural things are limited. “If all but God is not infinite,” there is no opportunity for the “end” of true spiritual understanding which Blake’s imaginative vision points towards. Thus, where Swedenborg would limit the infinite to God and the spiritual realm, limiting humanity to the physical, Blake perceives the infinite in all things, prefiguring the potential spiritual liberation of humanity.

Similarly, while Blake seemingly derives the idea that “Man has no Body distinct from his Soul” from Swedenborg, Blake’s interpretation of soul and body differs from Swedenborg’s. In his discussion of Esse and Existere, Swedenborg presents his conception of this unity:

Esse and Existere in God-Man are also distinctly one, as soul and body: the soul does not exist without its body, nor the body without its soul. The divine soul of God-man is understood by the divine Esse, and His divine body by the divine Existere. To think that the soul can exist and exercise thought and wisdom without the body, is an error proceeding from fallacies: the soul of every man is in a spiritual body, after it has put off the material coverings which it carried about with it in the world.

(Swedenborg 6; emphasis mine)
Until the final sentence, Swedenborg’s conception sounds very much like Blake’s, but the notion of a spiritual body distinct from the natural stands in direct opposition to Blake’s conception of the physical form as “a portion of Soul discerned by the five Senses” (Blake 34). Swedenborg’s distinction between a material and a spiritual body is closer to the traditional division of soul from body than Blake’s idea; Swedenborg does not clarify how the “spiritual body” and the soul differ. For Swedenborg, only God exhibits a true unity of soul and body, as only God is infinite; for Blake, all things are infinite, and soul and body are thus one in humankind. Blake’s annotations to the Divine Love similarly note humanity’s ability to achieve spiritual wisdom while in the body, interpreting Swedenborg’s ideas in a Blakean sense.

Though Blake found much in the Divine Love that was to his liking, the elements of Swedenborg which Blake parodies in the Marriage are already apparent, and Blake’s notes hammer away at inconsistencies in Swedenborg’s arguments. To Swedenborg’s comment that “man, whilst in natural heat and light, knows nothing of spiritual heat and light in himself,” Blake responds, “This is certainly not to be understood according to the letter for it is false by all experience. Who does not or may not know of love & wisdom in himself?” (Swedenborg 60; Blake 605). Where Swedenborg’s writings appear to diminish the ability of mankind to perceive God through the imagination by cutting off access to “spiritual heat and light”, Blake reasserts imaginative power, particularly by referring to God frequently in his notes as the Poetic Genius. This term, used throughout the Marriage, suggests a merger of poetic imagination with the divine that goes beyond Swedenborg’s conception of a God that, though present in all things, remains to a certain extent separate from and not fully comprehended by humanity.
Blake’s mention of “experience” further indicates that his reading of Swedenborg is influenced by Enlightenment criteria; for Blake, experience of the natural world (also important in Hume’s arguments) plays a role in achieving the visionary understanding Swedenborg imputes to the spiritual world alone. This application of Enlightenment thought to Swedenborg brings out implications of Swedenborg’s parallel between the will and understanding and the heart and lungs which Swedenborg refuses to deal with. Swedenborg likens the physical structure of human beings to the spiritual structure of heaven; the will is akin to the heart as the essential motivating force of life, while the lungs correspond to the understanding, distributing life through the body. For Swedenborg, however, the biological explanation of the spiritual remains a purely metaphorical argument; the natural and spiritual realms remain distinct from one another. Blake connects the natural to the spiritual in a more concrete manner. The resultant merger of Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment theologies is apparent in Blake’s treatment of Swedenborg’s next major work.

With Concerning Divine Providence Blake came to regard Swedenborg as “a spiritual Predestinarian’ supported by ‘Lies and Priestcraft’” (Erdman 142). Erdman refers here not only to Blake’s comments concerning the work itself, but also a remark on the Translator’s Preface, which claims that “Nothing doth IN GENERAL so contradict Man’s natural and favourite Opinions as TRUTH, and... all the grandest and purest Truths of Heaven must needs seem obscure and perplexing to the natural Man at first view” (Blake 609). Blake’s response, “Truth is Nature,” further undermines the distinction between natural and spiritual man which Blake’s notes to the Divine Love often dispute. Blake’s notes on the Divine Providence are far less extensive than those on the Divine Love, and all make the same point as the note on N. 277: “Predestination after this Life is more
Abominable than Calvins & Swedenborg is Such a Spiritual Predestinarian" (Blake 610). Blake’s reaction against Swedenborg mirrors the Enlightenment’s animus against predestination and priests; Hume similarly attacks “priestcraft” in the Natural History. At the same time, Blake does not reject the counter-Enlightenment theology of the Divine Love out of hand. Instead, Blake’s Enlightenment tendencies are combined with an emphasis on the imagination in a manner which radically transforms Swedenborgian theology.

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, begun during the period when Blake was reading the Divine Providence, reflects this duality. On the one hand, the work overtly parodies Swedenborg in a number of ways. Plate 3 proposes the beginning of “a new heaven” whose advent was thirty-three years previous (Blake was thirty-three in 1790, when the plate was engraved), and goes on to state that “Swedenborg is the Angel sitting at the tomb; his writings are the linen clothes folded up” (Blake 34). By likening Swedenborg’s writings to the garments which the resurrected Jesus no longer needs, Blake suggests that Swedenborg’s work promotes not a revolutionary vision, but an outmoded theology. The reactionary tendencies Blake discerned in the Divine Providence are satirized in third Memorable Fancy, in which Blake defies the “metaphysics” of a Swedenborgian angel “whose works are only Analytics” (Blake 42). Blake’s terminology suggests that the angel’s works are purely rationalistic theology, devoid of the visionary and imaginative quality which Blake initially believed characteristic of Swedenborg. In Plate 22, Blake explicitly condemns Swedenborg himself because he “has not written one new truth... he has written all the old falsehoods” (Blake 43).

At the same time, judging from Erdman’s account of Blake’s marginal comments on the Divine Love, the Marriage’s central idea proceeds from Sweden-
borg’s conception of God:

The warmest part of the new reading of the Scriptures was a simple worship of Christ as “One God in One Divine Humanity” and a belief that “Love is the Life of Man.” Blake’s comments mark his relish of passages stressing the primacy of the Affections over the Understanding. He sides with Swedenborg and “the common People” against those who “pronounce God to be invisible” and supports his case with the imagery of *Songs of Innocence*. But he must translate Swedenborg’s too abstract theology. “Spiritual idea” he reads as “Poetic idea.” The “Negation” in society that “constitutes Hell” is not “the Negation of the Lord’s Divinity” but rather “the Negation of the Poetic Genius”: for “the Poetic Genius... is the Lord.” (Erdman 143)

Blake’s use of Swedenborg provides a clear example of his method: while Blake parodies or simply discards those ideas from Swedenborg he dislikes, he seizes on those insights he finds amenable to his project and transforms them into his own terms. Moreover, his transformation of Swedenborg’s conceptions into a focus on “the divinity of the creative individual” is in keeping with the more general shift from mimetic theories of representation to expressionist theories which occurred with the onset of the Romantic period (Erdman 143). According to M.H. Abrams’s classic study of aesthetics, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, whereas art in the “Age of Johnson” was perceived as “a kind of reflector, though a selective one,” with the artist conceived of as “the agent holding the mirror up to nature,” the conception of art in the Romantic era placed the emphasis on interiority and the creative imagination of the artist (Abrams 41-2). Abrams describes the expressive theory as exemplified by Wordsworth:

In general terms, the central tendency of the expressive theory may be summarized this way: A work of art is essentially the internal made external, resulting from a creative process operating under the impulse of feeling, and embodying the combined product of the poet’s perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. The primary source and subject matter of a poem, therefore, are the attributes and actions of the poet’s own mind; or if aspects of the external world, then these only as they are converted from fact to poetry
by the feelings and operations of the poet’s mind. (Abrams 22)

Though Abrams claims the expressive theory did not become predominant until 1800, the date when Wordsworth’s Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* was published, Blake’s earlier writings reflect the central tenets of Abrams’s definition. At the same time, Blake is focused not so much on the individual poetic ego, as Wordsworth and Coleridge would be later, but on human imagination in a more universal sense. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* does, however, figure this imagination in artistic terms, as will be discussed in more detail later, and in doing so clearly reflects the expressivist theory.

While Abrams’s description focuses on the aesthetic dimension of Blake’s compositional method, Blake’s artistic conception of God in the *Marriage* is not a product of Romantic aesthetics alone. Blake’s visionary ideal is intertwined with his politics; the *Marriage* reflects a radical populism which stands in sharp contrast to Hume’s elitism. Blake’s democratic politics are particularly evident in his transformation of the concept of the passions and its implications for his imaginative conception of the deity. Adam Potkay discusses the predominance of the passions in the writings of Hume and his contemporaries, noting that Hume in particular personifies the passions as controlling agents. This emphasis on the passions (which occurs throughout the *Natural History of Religion*) has the ultimate goal of creating a unified community, but this seemingly utopian vision has a distinctly elitist bias:

Of course, eighteenth-century authors always assume that membership has its price. Clifford Siskin, in the course of arguing . . . that personifying the passions at once assumes and instates an ideally unified community, does well to note that Augustan texts in fact address the personified qualities shared by a very limited number of people – that is, the elite that reads Augustan texts . . . This elite community corresponds to what I would call the polite: those who are actuated in common not so much by raw passion as by the civilized recognition and refined echo of the less circum-
spect feelings of others. Polite society seeks to unify itself through shared passions it would outwardly restrain. (Potkay 179)

Where Hume attempts to maintain a polite Hellenism, aimed at an elite community, Blake puts forth a far more revolutionary perspective less concerned with restraint. Blake no longer personifies the passions in the direct manner of Hume or Fielding, but instead recasts them in his Devils, representatives of creative energy. Where for Hume the passions needed to be repressed in order to maintain polite society, Blake advocates a recognition and a proper utilization of the energies embodied by the Devils. Instead of using rationality to control the overwhelming passions, Blake supports a heroic artistic activity centered in the Devils’ energy. This creativity is open to the whole of humanity, as indicated by Plate 14, and is not to be feared or restrained but embraced (as the angel embraces the fire in the final Memorable Fancy). The change from passions to Devils is overtly aligned with Blake’s democratic political leanings through the binding of “A Song of Liberty” with all extant copies of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. This brief poem introduces many of Blake’s important symbolic figures, most notably the revolutionary Orc, and expresses Blake’s sympathy with the French Revolution. Through “A Song of Liberty,” Blake ties the idea of a divinity resident in the imagination which has gone before to a revolutionary democratic ideology—a political position diametrically opposed to Hume’s polite Hellenism.

Blake proceeds from the conception of God as “the divinity of the creative individual” to consider and alter ideas central to Hume’s Natural History of Religion. The first striking parallel between the Marriage and the Natural History also points out the manner in which Blake alters Enlightenment religious thought. After positing the origin of religion in fear of events whose causes are unknown, Hume proceeds to a figural analysis of the creation of gods. Hume claims that
there is a universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object, those qualities, with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious” (Hume 29). Hume compares this tendency to the use of prosopopoeia in poetry, suggesting that the gods of polytheism are the product of an inability to think in terms of figures (as opposed to thinking in figures). The first polytheists attributed “thought and reason and passion, and sometimes even the limbs and figures of men” to the “unknown causes which continually employ their thought,” then came to reify these poetical figures.

Hume’s figural argument derives from Lucretius, whose version of the fear theory was tremendously influential in the eighteenth century. Frank Manuel’s study of religious historiography, The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods, discusses the impact of Lucretius:

The most magnificent ancient expression of the fear-theory was the philosophical poem of Lucretius [De Rerum Naturam]. In this form it had the profoundest effect upon the minds of Europeans, after the Renaissance discovery of the text. World literature has few more gripping passages than the description in the third book of the torments of religious fear, the anticipatory terror of the punishments inflicted by the gods in Tartarus which poison man’s whole existence and embitter his every pleasure... In every psychological discussion of the origin of religion the verses of Lucretius were either quoted directly or were echoed, for his golden passages, like the “images” he described, found their way into the souls of his eighteenth-century readers. (Manuel 145-6)

The Lucretian conception of the origins of religion put forth by Hume parallels Giambattista Vico’s arguments in The New Science (1725; rev. 1744). Vico claims that “at the same time that the divine character of Jove took shape – the first human thought in the gentile world – articulate language began to develop by way of onomatopoeia, through which we still find children happily expressing themselves” (Vico 150; sec. 447). He notes that the names given to Jove in vari-
ous languages derive from the sound of thunder, indicating the primal origin of religion in fear of natural phenomena, and then proceeds to give an account of the figuration of gods which Hume’s later work closely parallels:

Human words were formed next from interjections, which are sounds articulated under the impetus of violent passions. In all languages, these are monosyllables. Thus it is not beyond likelihood that, when wonder had been awakened in men by the first thunderbolts, these interjections of Jove should give birth to one produced by the human voice: *pa!*, and that this should then be doubled: *papel*. From this interjection of wonder was subsequently derived Jove’s title of father of men and gods, and thus it came about presently that all the gods were called fathers, and the goddesses, mothers . . . (Vico 150; sec. 448)

The people, unable to think in terms of figures, give the figures a literal voice, attributing reality to gods which have no external reality. The general current of ideas established in Vico is clearly in evidence in Hume, including the elitist contempt for the “vulgar” which animates Hume’s text. In both, the figural analysis leads to the same end result: a misinterpretation of poetic figures by the “vulgar” leads to religion.

Hume’s conception differs from Vico’s, however, in its extreme pessimism. Manuel notes that “Vico . . . had meant the resurrection of the primitive world to serve profound moral and religious purposes,” and indicates that Vico intended the *New Science* to establish that humanity in general had risen above the level of primitive abasement:

It was an act of piety to establish the true history of man’s ascent from the feral state and to demolish the false one, thereby founding God’s law upon sound demonstrations, not erroneous ones which had a tendency, when disproved in a rationalist age, to lead men into atheism. Finally there was for Vico a dire warning in this revelation of the blood and flesh primitive, an admonition to mankind that if they departed from the rational way of life which they had achieved under divine guidance and abandoned themselves to vices, to hypersophistication, like the decadent Romans of the late Empire, humanity would again “fall back into the dregs of Romulus.” (Manuel 166)
Vico’s progressive vision, as outlined in the Conclusion of the *New Science*, requires a monarch and “the force of laws” to ensure that humanity does not revert to barbarism, but it suggests that the mass of humanity can achieve a degree of rationality and understanding (Vico 424). Hume’s *Natural History*, with its conception of a flux and reflux of polytheism and theism, is more pessimistic than Vico, and less trustful of mankind’s ability to establish truly rational civil societies. What progress Hume allows for is reserved for an elite coterie of philosophers; the remainder of mankind would always retain the fear of future events which prompted their initial figural error, and so would never be capable of a true understanding of religion.

In Plate 11 of the *Marriage*, Blake presents an account of the origins of religion which resembles the fear theory exemplified by Hume and Vico, but is subtly different:

> 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 and numerous senses could percieve.
> 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.

(Blake 38)

Like Hume, Blake finds the origin of religion in a misinterpretation of poetic figures, but Blake’s story emphasizes different things than Hume’s. Blake places a far greater emphasis on the conscious or free human imagination, suggesting that the “Poets” who first posited the gods were intelligent enough to realize that
the gods were only figures. Blake’s choice of words suggests that the “ancient Poets” were conscious of the artistic nature of their creation; they “animated all sensible objects,” bringing to life the spiritual side of the natural world. Blake’s use of the phrase “mental deity” further indicates the conscious creative work involved. Unlike Hume, who finds humankind unable to think in terms of figures from the start, Blake posits a poet-race highly aware that their system was poetry. The degeneration sets in with distance from the source; it is the first priests who lead humanity into the error of thinking in figures, not the first humans.

Absent from Blake’s account is the idea that religion originates in fear of natural events; instead, the initial creation of religion is depicted as a deliberate artistic process, an act of “overflowing” and “exuberance.” Even before the crucial closing line, Blake indicates that the imaginary gods are projections of the one God contained in humankind through the aforementioned term “mental deity”: the poetic gods proceed from the creative power of the individual and are imaginative manifestations of the Poetic Genius. This God can only be perceived through “enlarged and numerous senses” attuned to the infinite aspect of all things; Blake’s vision of the ancient poets suggests that, in the beginning, all humanity possessed this imaginative power.4

Blake’s conception of this creative power leads him to reject the contempt for the “ignorant multitude” which characterizes Hume’s depiction of religion (Hume 24). Hume’s view of the common people was typical of the Enlightenment historiographers of religion, despite the fact that Vico’s portrayal of the masses holds out the possibility of progress. Hume draws on the conception of a primitive psychology which was developing during his lifetime, and applies this notion to the people in general, who follow popular religion for the same reasons as the primitives. Manuel describes the Enlightenment portrayal of primitive men-
Europeans had been watching and writing about savages for over two hundred years; a growing interest in child behavior is attested in works on education; and madmen, particularly demoniacs, had been the subject of medical analysis during the seventeenth-century outbursts of witchcraft. At the turn of the century Fontenelle had still regarded the difference between the primitive mind and the contemporary principally as one of degree; in later eighteenth-century writers the mentality of the primitive became more distinct, individualized to the point where a different human nature was recognized. (Manuel 141)

The difference in human nature Manuel notes, however, was a distinction not merely between the primitive and the modern, but between the rational Enlightenment philosopher and the common, unenlightened man. The educated were elevated above the level of the vulgar by their superior rationality; the ordinary, illiterate masses, in thrall to superstitious religious beliefs, could not be elevated to a superior level because their very mentality would not allow it. Like such earlier mythographers as Bayle and Fontenelle, Hume primarily parallels the primitive to contemporary savage societies, as when he states, “In very barbarous and ignorant nations, such as the AFRICANS and INDIANS, nay even the JAPONESE, who can form no extensive ideas of power and knowledge, worship may be paid to a being, whom they confess to be wicked and detestable,” but Hume’s condemnation of popular religion in general implicitly extends the primitive mentality to all adherents of popular religions (Hume 66).

Blake, in contrast, entertains no such ideas of the masses as ignorant primitives in his writings. Blake’s radical populism is apparent in his earliest works, particularly the ballad *Gwin, King of Norway*, where the situation of the “nations of the North” is comparable to “the nations of North America oppressed by King George” (Erdman 20). The ballad depicts a successful populist revolution against a tyrannical king, and opposes the rights of the people to the murderous oppres-
sion of Gwin, who is ultimately decapitated by the heroic Gordred. Blake’s sympathies for both the American and French Revolutions were later developed in “A Song of Liberty” and the prophecy America (1793), whose language reflects the rights established by the Declaration of Independence. Blake’s egalitarian view of society also manifests itself in the Songs of Experience, where Blake attacks the societal conditions which produce poverty. Erdman claims that Blake’s notes on Lavater provide an indication of his egalitarianism:

The idea that poverty and hunger “appall” the mind of the charity children [in “The School Boy”] is elucidated by a note (640f.) in which Blake speaks of “the omissions of intellect springing from poverty.” In modern terms this would amount to an observation that juvenile delinquency is caused by malnutrition and substandard living conditions, for Blake is talking about what is mistakenly “call’d Vice.” He accused Lavater and others of confusing energy, exuberance, and “all the Loves & Graces”—in short “all Act”—with “contrary” behavior such as murder, theft, and backbiting, which is really “the omission of act in self & the hindering of act in another: This is Vice, but all Act is Virtue.”

(Erdman 129)

Blake’s note proposes a society based not on the hindrance of oppressive law, but on the free exercise of active virtue by all members of society. “Act” is all behavior which serves to benefit humanity; “Vice” is whatever behavior works to the detriment of humanity. For Blake, traditional Christian theology had mistaken positive expressions of energy in favor of an oppressive emphasis on passive suffering; Blake attempts to restore a positive idea of energy by revealing its benefits to society. This concept accords with Blake’s ideas on the origins of religion in Plate 11, where the institution of priestcraft curbs the proper expression of energy and brings humanity into fearful subjection. Thus, Blake’s egalitarianism is a major force in his transformation of religious ideas.

Hume’s negative conception of the people is incompatible with Blake’s
democratic impulse and his intense belief in human grandeur. Blake still refers to the "vulgar" in his account, but they are not immediately to blame for changing poetic figures into real gods; instead, Blake places the blame for the misinterpretation on a vaguely defined "some" who became the first priests. The tendency to create external gods with human attributes is no longer a universal attribute of humankind; it is an intentional strategy by which a minority gain power over the whole of society. Blake's account introduces an Adamic parallel similar to Hume's conception of Milton's Adam; however, where Hume implies (through the words "as represented by MILTON") that Adam is a literary creation different from the reality of "a barbarous, necessitous animal (such as man is on the first origin of society), pressed by numerous wants and passions," Blake attributes Adamic characteristics to the whole of humanity (Hume 24). Blake suggests that man possessed an original knowledge of the nature of God, but fell from that knowledge because priests, in order to subjugate the many, reified the poetic gods.

Blake further develops the idea of the Poetic Genius in the second Memorable Fancy, in which he dines with Isaiah and Ezekiel. Blake inquires as to how the prophets could have claimed to have heard the voice of God; the question presupposes that God is not an external being who could speak in a human voice, but an internal force. Isaiah's response restates the argument of Plate 11 concerning poetic creation of the gods in a manner which makes Blake's own vision of the deity clearer:

Isaiah answer'd. I saw no God. nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover'd the infinite in every thing, and as I was then perswaded. & remain confirm'd; that the voice of honest imagination is the voice of God, I cared not for consequences but wrote. (Blake 38)

Isaiah's statements go significantly beyond the account of Plate 11; the poetic
creation of gods is not simply a part of polytheistic religions, but also integral to Judaism (properly understood) and, by extension, Christianity. The Bible is thus not an historical record of actual events, but a poetic fiction created by an imaginative understanding of “the infinite in every thing.” The passage also suggests that the poets who create the poetic figures of deities are not responsible for their later misinterpretation. Isaiah wrote from a “firm persuasion” that his perceptions were accurate, which “all poets believe” makes them so; he realizes the difference between the poetic figure of God and the reality, and so has acted properly despite the possibility that the emergent class of priests depicted in Plate 11 will willfully literalize his vision.

Isaiah’s words are followed by Ezekiel’s lengthy speech, which exhibits parallels with Hume’s conception of the emergence of monotheism but also extends Blake’s particular vision. Hume argues that polytheists eventually come to worship one of their many gods as the supreme deity, either because their nation fell under the jurisdiction of that particular god or because they imagine the gods to follow human models of government, with one god ruling all others. Once again, the vulgar mistake the figural for the literal, and their mistakes lead to extremes of devotion to their new supreme deity:

Whether this god, therefore, be considered as their particular patron, or as the general sovereign of heaven, his votaries will endeavor, by every art, to insinuate themselves into his favor: and supposing him to be pleased, like themselves, with praise and flattery, there is no eulogy or exaggeration, which will be spared in their addresses to him. (Hume 43)

Ezekiel exhibits a similar point of view in describing the fervency with which the Israelites (and King David in particular) proclaimed the superiority of their God over all others. Once again, though, the differences between Blake and Hume show Blake’s reworking of this idea. Blake’s Israelites do not propose that their
God is superior to all others, but instead that He is the origin of all others: Ezekiel claims that the “Poetic Genius (as you now call it) was the first principle and all the others merely derivative” (Blake 39). In contrast to Hume’s (and Vico’s) conception that polytheism must be the original form of religion, Blake depicts the Israelites as pure theists who understood that God was inseparable from the human imagination.

Blake’s insistence on an originary monotheism as a pure, uncorrupted visionary religion suggests another area in which Blake differs from Hume: an insistence on a unity between reason and energy, passivity and activity. Despite Hume’s elitism, he privileges polytheism because it promotes active virtues, as opposed to the emphasis Christianity places on passive suffering. Blake, in contrast, prefers a dialectic ultimately leading to unity. Both the active and the passive are present in Ezekiel’s vision, in the fervency of the Israelites’ promotion of their God and in their acquiescence to his rule; the interplay of the two allows for unity, and humanity’s recognition of the Poetic Genius as a product of mankind’s creative activity.

Ezekiel’s account further suggests how the Israelites’ conviction in this ideal religion was corrupted by the misinterpretation of poetic figures. This idea becomes apparent in Ezekiel’s depiction of the result of King David’s words:

... and we so loved our God, that we cursed in his name all the deities of surrounding nations, and asserted that they had rebelled; from these opinions the vulgar came to think that all nations would at last be subject to the jews.

This said he, like all firm persuasions, is come to pass, for all nations believe the jews code and worship the jews god, and what greater subjection can be. (Blake 39)

It is strange that Ezekiel, presented as a true prophet, gives an account that so clearly contradicts the idea of God that Blake has put forth. Yet while Ezekiel is
oddly uncritical of the events he relates, Blake ironizes them by way of their context. The use of the term “vulgar” suggests the same class division as in Plate 11, implying once again that a priestly class is responsible for the reification of God as an external entity. David’s statement that God “conquers enemies and governs kingdoms” is not a literal truth, but an expression of the idea that “all Gods would at last be proved to originate in ours & to be the tributaries of the Poetic Genius” (Blake 39). David is aligned with the “ancient poets” of Plate 11, while the unspecified “we” comes to stand for the equally vague “some” of the earlier account. Ezekiel is unaware of the import of his own story: he is depicting the same fall from original knowledge described in Plate 11. That these events are not a good thing is made clear by his final statements; the word “subjection” acquires an ironic sense in relation to the enslavement of Plate 11. Through this choice of terms, Blake indicates how the worship of the Poetic Genius has degenerated from a true understanding of God as imagination into a tyrannical worship based on laws. The code of the Jews is paralleled by Plate 11’s false ordering of the universe, further reinforcing the sense of decline.

Ezekiel’s ironic speech calls to mind Hume’s condemnation of corrupt theism, in particular the tyrannical manipulation of superstition by the Catholic Church. Yet Blake’s account once again reworks Hume’s conceptions in order to promote Blake’s vision of God. As in Plate 11, popular religion is not the problem, since the people begin with a proper conception of the Poetic Genius. Instead, the evil influence of a minority corrupts popular religion, turning the people away from their true understanding of God. This fall from grace necessitates the apocalypse envisioned by Blake in Plate 14, where an “improvement of sensual enjoyment” shall make the world “appear infinite and holy whereas it now appears finite and corrupt” (Blake 39). Blake posits a move from a fallen state where God
is perceived literally (as an exterior being) to the expanded senses of the "ancient Poets" and an imaginative appreciation of God. Northrop Frye accurately describes the essence of this passage: "The end of the world, the apocalypse, is the objective counterpart of the resurrection of man, his return to the titanic bodily form he originally possessed" (Frye 194). The apocalypse serves as a poetic figure for man's return from the tyranny of false religion to the imaginative world of the poets— a move found nowhere in Hume.

The visionary poetic realm Blake exalts is connected to energetic activity; one of the Proverbs of Hell proclaims, "Exuberance is beauty", and such beauty appears available only to those with "enlarged & numerous senses" such as the originary poets possessed (Blake 38). The connection is further clarified in Plate 14:

The ancient tradition that the world will be consumed in fire at the end of six thousand years is true, as I have heard from Hell. For the cherub with his flaming sword is hereby commanded to leave his guard at the tree of life, and when he does, the whole creation will be consumed, and appear infinite and holy whereas it now appears finite & corrupt. This will come to pass by an improvement of sensual enjoyment. But first the notion that a man has a body distinct from his soul, is to be expunged: this I shall do, by printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid. (Blake 39)

Through the Proverbs of Hell, Blake has already connected infernal creativity with energy; Plate 14 develops this link, with the "cherub with his flaming sword" serving as a figure of energetic creativity parallel to Blake himself. Both Blake and the cherub reveal a beauty previously hidden by the corruption of the world; both do so through an energetic poetic creation symbolized by the cher-
ub’s sword. Since the “improvement of sensual enjoyment” produced by this activity is necessary to regain the ancient poets’ understanding of the Poetic Genius, the energy and exuberance that have been lost in the corrupt present must be restored. (The reference to corrosives specifically links creative liberation to Blake’s method of printing his illuminated plates, suggesting the form of the Marriage is a direct manifestation of spiritual poetic creation.) This artistic energy is connected to desire through the juxtaposition of the Devil’s discussion of the former in Plate 4 with Blake’s depiction of the latter in Plate 5:

Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained; and the restrainer or reason usurps its place & governs the unwilling.

And being restrained it by degrees becomes passive till it is only the shadow of desire. (Blake 34)

In positing this apparent opposition between reason and desire, between passivity and active creative energy, Blake draws on an idea which Hume delineates at length. Hume distinguishes between these two concepts in Section X of the Natural History, “With Regard to Courage or Abasement.” Hume aligns energy and activity with polytheism, particularly the Greek gods, and passivity with Catholic saints. He locates the difference in the degree of power attributed to the gods in polytheism:

Where the deity is represented as infinitely superior to mankind, this belief, though altogether just, is apt, when joined with superstitious terrors, to sink the human mind into the lowest submission and abasement, and to represent the monkish virtues of mortification, penance, humility, and passive suffering, as the only qualities which are acceptable to him. But where the gods are conceived to be only a little advanced from mankind, and to have been, many of them, advanced from that inferior rank, we are more at our ease, in our addresses to them, and may even, without profaneness, aspire sometimes to a rivalship and emulation of them. Hence activity, spirit, courage, magnanimity, love of liberty, and all the virtues which aggrandize a people. (Hume 52)
Hume’s sympathy clearly lies with the active virtues fostered by polytheism as found in the ancient pagan world of Greece and Rome; he notes Machiavelli’s comment that Christian doctrine had made mankind fit for slavery. Hume’s depiction of Christianity is markedly similar to Blake’s account in Plate 11 of the priesthood’s enslavement of mankind, though in Hume’s account the bondage comes in the change to theism and not in the originary polytheism. This difference gives Hume’s depiction a more clearly anti-Christian bias than Blake’s, which effects instead a transformation of Christianity through the acceptance of activity. Hume’s celebration of activity is echoed by Blake, who celebrates energy throughout the *Marriage*. The difference is once again in the elements of the conflict between activity and passivity that Blake chooses to emphasize.

Hume’s celebration of heroic virtues has a specifically Hellenic context, which Blake mirrors in his discussion of *Paradise Lost* on Plates 5-6. In celebrating Milton as a “true poet and of the Devils party without knowing it,” Blake recalls Milton’s depiction of Satan in terms of Hellenic heroism; Satan, particularly in the first two books of *Paradise Lost*, exhibits an active determination to liberate himself from Hell and build a new world for himself. His resolve, and Milton’s depiction of him as a military leader during the war in Heaven, suggest parallels between Satan and the Homeric epic heroes. Blake’s invocation of Milton indicates an admiration of that activity parallel to Hume’s. Yet these plates also introduce Blake’s unique twist to the subject: the idea of Christ as Hellenic hero. Hume insists on an absolute distinction between Hellenic energy and Hebraic passivity; Blake portrays a Christ defined more by activity than by suffering. In Plates 5-6, Blake depicts the conflict in terms of a struggle between desire and reason, and suggests that the two were united in the Messiah:

It indeed appear’d to Reason as if Desire was cast out. but the Devils account is, that the Messiah fell. & formed a heaven of
what he stole from the Abyss.

This is shewn in the Gospel, where he prays to the Father to send the comforter or Desire that Reason may have Ideas to build on, the Jehovah of the Bible being no other than he, who dwells in flaming fire.

Know that after Christ's death, he became Jehovah. (Blake 34-5)

Blake's depiction of Christ suggests that heroic energy and passivity, which appeared to be irreconcilable opposites in Hume, were actually conjoined properly (or "diabolically") in the Gospels. The Marriage further likens Blake's conception of Christ to the Poetic Genius, furthering the notion that God (united in Christ and Jehovah) is indistinguishable from the human imagination. This portrayal of Christ is reinforced in the final Memorable Fancy, where a Devil debates an Angel on the nature of the worship of God. The Angel, infuriated by the Devil's suggestion that worship is "loving the greatest men best," speaks in literal terms of God and Jesus Christ, mistaking the poetic figures for the reality. The Devil offers his own alternate portrayal of Jesus which strengthens Blake's earlier characterization:

The Devil answer'd: bray a fool in a morter with wheat yet shall not his folly be beaten out of him: if Jesus Christ is the greatest man, you ought to love him in the greatest degree; now hear how he has given his sanction to the law of ten commandments: did he not mock at the sabbath, and so mock the sabbaths God? murder those who were murderd because of him? turn away the law from the woman taken in adultery? steal the labor of others to support him? bear false witness when he omitted making a defence before Pilate? covet when he pray'd for his disciples, and when he bid them shake off the dust of their feet against such as refused to lodge them? I tell you, no virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments: Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse: not from rules. (Blake 43)

Blake's theology in this passage is highly unorthodox, particularly his claim that Christ committed murder, but the Devil's relentless questioning has a positive pur-
pose. Where the angel smugly reiterates a received point of view, the Devil engages in creative activity by asking a series of questions. In reconceptualizing Christ in terms of energy, the Devil exemplifies the theory he espouses. He also sharpens the distinction from Blake’s notes between “Act” and “Vice.” Christ’s violations of laws served a beneficial purpose, and so were “Acts” opposed to the stultifying obedience of the angel. The depiction of the Ten Commandments connects to the earlier speech of Ezekiel, which suggested the oppressive nature of the Jews’ code of law. The Devil suggests that all religious law is repressive of energy and therefore evil; in so doing, he portrays Christ as a Greek hero, with “virtue” defined not in the prevailing eighteenth-century Christian sense of sexual chastity, but in the Hellenic sense of active courage.

At the same time, Blake’s account does not claim this is the only side to Christ; much as the Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience contain parallel visions of the lamb and the tyger, so the Marriage reestablishes the dual nature of Christ. If the Marriage emphasizes the energetic qualities of Christ, it is more because these aspects of his being have been neglected than because they are the only aspects. This restoration of Christ’s duality is not explicitly expressed in the descriptions of Jesus, but is instead manifested in the Marriage’s presentation of contraries. This element of the Marriage points to one additional conjunction with Hume’s Natural History of Religion: a sense of balance.

At first the Marriage does not seem balanced in the same sense as Hume’s work. Hume maintains a merely linguistic sense of balance by yoking descriptions of rises and falls, moving from elegantly rational language in his descriptions of the beautiful to a more agitated, frenetic syntax to capture the sensation of terror experienced by primitive man. This characteristic is exemplified by the juxtaposition of two sentences in the first chapter: “On the contrary, the more regular
and uniform, that is, the more perfect nature appears, the more is he [primitive man] familiarized to it, and the less inclined to scrutinize and examine it. A monstrous birth excites his curiosity, and is deemed a prodigy" (Hume 24-5). The first sentence captures the calm, measured thinking of a rational Enlightenment philosopher, reflecting logically on the nature of the world. The second reflects the thinking of Hume’s theoretical primitive man in the moment of fear, creating gods from natural phenomena out of terrified ignorance. Hume’s balancing, however, is primarily stylistic; there is little interaction between the contraries contained in his sentences, as Hume consistently privileges the Hellenic over the Hebraic.

Blake, in contrast, indulges in a more excessive, energetic language embodied by the Proverbs of Hell. This apparent indulgence is reflected in the Marriage’s structure. The work begins with “The Argument”, a preliminary poem, but is not similarly balanced by a closing poem; “A Song of Liberty” is technically not part of the Marriage, and is structured in a series of numbered lines far removed from “The Argument”’s more traditional verses. In between, Blake’s prose sections do not initially appear to be structured by any overarching principle; there are few overt narrative connections between sections (the link between the first “Memorable Fancy” and the “Proverbs of Hell” is an exception), and the individual sections do not follow the model of philosophical argument used by Hume. As Martin K. Nurmi notes, “it is developed according to no traditional logical or rhetorical plan” (Nurmi 28).

There is, however, a balance to the Marriage’s form which is not immediately apparent. Nurmi suggests that the Marriage resembles “the A-B-A’ of the ternary form in music, in which a first theme and its development are followed by a second theme and its development, followed in turn by a return to the first sec-
tion or a modification of it” (Nurmi 29). Prior to the first “Memorable Fancy”, the idea of contraries dominates the text; the emphasis then shifts to expanded sense perception. Blake develops this idea at length before returning to contraries in the third “Memorable Fancy”; when the first theme returns, though, it is combined with the themes of the second section, as expanded sense perception becomes necessary for the productive interaction of contraries. With this musical structure, Blake merges the underlying balance of the Enlightenment with a surface appearance of disarray; the work’s form thus reflects its combination of seemingly contradictory ideas.

Blake’s privileging of energy in the text is similarly not absolute. Northrop Frye comments that “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell . . . has nothing to do with the simple inversion of moral good and evil which is known as sadism, and which forms an important aspect of Romantic culture” (Frye 198). Instead, Blake focuses on the necessity of the interaction of contraries for the move towards the recognition of the Poetic Genius. Plate 3 establishes the idea of contraries which Blake amplifies throughout the text:

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. (Blake 34)

Blake’s starting point is the transvaluation of values later delineated by Nietzsche, in which Hellenic good (energy) becomes Christian evil and Hellenic evil (passivity) becomes Christian good. Like Hume, Blake expresses an admiration for Hellenic virtue and attempts to partially reverse the transvaluation of values by celebrating energy. Blake’s view is more complicated than this, though, as
is made apparent in Plate 4, “The voice of the Devil.” Here, the Devil poses as a contrary to the notion that “God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies” the idea that “Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy” (Blake 34). The interdependence of reason and energy later delineated in Blake’s portrayal of Christ is established here, suggesting that energy must work in opposition to the “outward circumference” formed by reason to be genuinely productive. Without the opposing force of reason to work against, energy will be unproductive. As long as the body, as a portion of soul, remains bound by the five senses, dynamic energy and limiting reason will be engaged in a dialectical exchange. Instead of a return to simple Hellenic values, then, Blake attempts to reach an understanding of the true roles of energy and reason in human existence.

Blake further explores this dynamic in Plate 16, with his tale of “the Giants who formed this world into sensual existence” (Blake 40). Here, Blake indicates that the division between energy and reason is the product of the fallen state which prevents us from achieving a full appreciation of the Poetic Genius; thus, in the poetic vision of Plate 11, no such dichotomy existed. In Plate 16 Blake suggests the Giants are the true manifestations of the Poetic Genius, chained because of the dominance of reason over energy. He then delineates two classes of human beings resulting from this division:

Thus one portion of being, is the Prolific. the other, the Devouring: to the devourer it seems as if the producer was in his chains, but it is not so, he only takes portions of existence and fancies that the whole.

But the Prolific would cease to be Prolific unless the Devourer as a sea received the excess of his delights.

Some will say, Is not God alone the Prolific? I answer, God only Acts & Is, in existing beings or Men.

These two classes of men are always upon earth, & they should be enemies; whoever tries to reconcile them seeks to destroy existence.
Religion is an endeavour to reconcile the two. (Blake 40)

This passage reinforces Blake’s earlier portrayal of contraries, by suggesting that the continual conflict of these “enemies” is necessary for the survival of humankind. This battle is necessary for the productive activity through which the human race can fully perceive the Poetic Genius; for the imaginative apocalypse of Plate 14 to occur, the Prolific and the Devourer must engage in this productive struggle. By trying to reconcile the opposites, by combining them in a fashion which does not allow for productive activity, the contemporary Christianity Blake assails removes all potential for creative change.

Much as Hume’s figural analysis determines the shape of his argument and his choice of language, so Blake’s artistic conception of the deity shapes his solution to the problem of contraries. The move beyond the senses to an infinite state is figured consistently in artistic terms mirroring the original creation of poetic fictions. The first Memorable Fancy depicts a Devil who writes upon a rock with “corroding fires” (a parallel to Blake’s process of illuminated printing); his message indicates the infinite which Isaiah later claims to have seen in all things, suggesting the transcendence of the senses shall come about through artistic processes. This image is further reinforced in Plate 14 by Blake’s reference to “corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal” (Blake 39). The soul and the body can only be revealed as indistinguishable from each other by way of a creation of poetic figures, cleansing the world of the misinterpretations of the old figures and reestablishing the infinite.

Hume’s General Corollary to the Natural History uses language similar to Blake’s in putting forth the argument from design: “A purpose, an intention, a design is evident in every thing; and when our comprehension is so far enlarged as to contemplate the first rise of this visible system, we must adopt, with the strong-
est conviction, the idea of some intelligent cause or author’’ (Hume 74). Hume’s “enlargement” of comprehension resembles Blake’s idea of expanded sense perception, but with the key difference that Hume seeks a purely rational expansion. While Blake also seeks an “enlargement,” it is of a very different sort; only expanded sense perception (not reason or “comprehension”) will reveal God. Blake seeks to reveal not a design, but instead the presence of God in all things through the poetic imagination. In his account of artistic transcendence, Blake ironizes the argument that Hume supports; even if we could see a design in all things, our senses are inadequate, and must be cleansed before we can perceive the infinite.

Blake’s conception of religion is ultimately both part of the Enlightenment and radically different from the eighteenth century’s intellectual mainstream. An understanding of Blake’s combination of Humean philosophy with Swedenborgian mysticism illuminates the traditional reading of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. Blake’s vision of God as the poetic imagination is not simply a product of Romantic thinking, as Abrams appears to assume; instead, Blake combines elements of Swedenborg (particularly his conception of God), revises them to fit with his populism, and uses these ideas to rewrite Enlightenment theology. Blake’s linkage of energetic activity with humanity’s poetic creation of the divine contrasts dramatically with the terror-stricken primitives of Hume and Vico, but Blake draws on and transforms both their theories and their sense of balanced form. The Marriage’s vision of a balanced universe in which contraries operate in productive opposition is inseparable from Blake’s manipulation of Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment theology. These two strains are the contraries whose productive interplay results in Blake’s imaginative vision of God.
NOTES

1 The connection between Blake and the Enlightenment is dealt with in Wayne Glausser’s “Atomistic Simulacra in the Enlightenment and Blake’s Post-Enlightenment” (The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation 32:1, 73-88) and Daniel Stempel’s “Blake, Foucault, and the Classical Episteme” (PMLA 96:3, 388-407). The former deals primarily with Milton and Jerusalem in its consideration of Blake as a post-Enlightenment (i.e. Romantic) writer; the latter discusses Blake’s relationship to the Enlightenment in similarly traditional terms, viewing Blake as primarily a Romantic rebel. Neither deals with The Marriage of Heaven and Hell at any length, and neither suggests that Blake incorporated elements of Enlightenment theology into his writing.

2 This thesis does not discuss the relationships between Blake’s illuminations and the text. The interaction between Blake’s illustrations and his text can shed light on the meaning of the Marriage; in particular, his interlinear illuminations often relate directly to the text. For example, Geoffrey Keynes notes than one of Blake’s interlinear drawings on Plate 4 depicts Joseph of Arimathea “preaching Christianity, that is artistic energy, to the people” (Keynes 38). In this respect, Blake’s illustrations reinforce his portrayal of the deity as artistic energy and his idea of contraries; they also differentiate the Marriage from the rational philosophical approach of Hume, adding an emotional appeal to Blake’s work. To discuss the illuminations at length, however, is beyond the scope of this thesis; it would take a far lengthier paper to do justice to their importance. This thesis limits its discussion of Blake’s visual artistry to noting the parallels, discussed by Blake in the text, between his process of illuminated printing and the divine power of artistic creation.

3 For more information on Blake’s relationship to Swedenborg’s writings, see G.E. Bentley, Jr.’s “A Swedenborgian Bible” (Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly 24:2, 63-64), Donald John’s “Blake and Forgiveness” (The Wordsworth Circle 17:2, 74-80), and Marsha Keith Schu-chard’s “The Secret Masonic History of Blake’s Swedenborg Society” (Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly 26:2, 40-51). Bentley focuses on the continuing influence of Sweden-
borg in Blake's later visionary prophecies. John discusses the marginalia, especially the influence of Swedenborg in Blake's notes on Lavater. Schuchard deals primarily with the history of the Swedenborg society Blake briefly belonged to, as well as with the myth that Blake's parents were Swedenborgians.

Plate 11 is not devoid of ambiguity; the phrase "Till a system was formed" suggests that the original poetic creation contained within it the potential for abuse. The ancient poets themselves may have been responsible for an unhealthy degree of reification which allowed the priests to "realize and abstract the mental deities from their objects." On the whole, though, Blake appears to place the blame on the priests, and the originary poets are portrayed in mostly positive terms.

Blake does not always blame societal conditions; "The Human Abstract," for example, suggests the root of evil lies "in the Human Brain" (Blake 27). "Infant Sorrow" provides a similar portrait, as its newborn baby is "like a fiend hid in a cloud" (Blake 28). In the Songs of Innocence and the Songs of Experience, Blake frequently places contraries beside each other in different poems; as a result, he does not provide a definitive indication of which point of view he believes. The Marriage, however, concentrates on the positive virtues of humanity, providing a view of humanity devoid of original sin; in this respect, it is closer to the egalitarian poems Erdman cites than the contrary position also offered in the Songs.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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Paul Ferrell Brown