

## **Man in His Spectre's Power: William Blake's Concept of the Selfhood**

In the illustration to Plate 41 of his mature epic work, *Jerusalem*, William Blake wrote:

Each Man is in his Spectre's power  
Until arrival of that hour  
When his humanity awake  
And cast his Spectre into the Lake. (K 669)<sup>1</sup>

In my paper I intend to look closely at the implications of this quotation and to analyse Blake's opposing concepts of Spectre and humanity in man, which, as the text suggests, are in war with one another. What is the Spectre? Why does it control and possess man? Why is man's humanity asleep? When does it wake up? How can the Spectre be cast away and what are further consequences of this action? These are the questions I am concerned with in this article.

Blake defines the Spectre as the rational power of the mistaken man:

It is the Reasoning Power  
An abstract objecting power that Negates every thing  
This is the Spectre of Man, the Holy Reasoning Power  
And in its holiness lies the Abomination of Desolation. (J 10:13-16 K629j)

This passage epitomises Blake's reaction against rationalism. The power of reason is abstract, works through negation, results in desolation. Visibly, Blake protests against materialistic and empirical trends in 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophy, seeing them as spectral, almost satanic. The adjectives "abstract" and "holy" in this quotation determine the denotation of the nouns they define. "Abstract" points to generalisation and in Blake's writings can be translated as "non-human" (Damon 4), while the word "holy" is deeply and bitterly ironic. In this holiness lies everything that was unacceptable for Blake in orthodox, established religion – repression and restraint, laws of chastity and of prudence, based on external threat. This is why the "holy reasoning power" or the Spectre operating via negations is a principle opposed to Imagination. In another, similar passage Blake writes:

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations of Blake's poems are from *Blake: Complete Writings with Variant Readings*, edited by Sir Geoffrey Keynes, Oxford University Press, 1966. Quotations are given by the abbreviated title of the work, followed by plate, line number, and finally the page number in Keynes (K). I provide the list of abbreviated titles at the end of the article.

The Spectre is the Reasoning Power of Man, & when separated  
 From Imagination and closing itself as in Steel in a ratio  
 Of the things of Memory, It thence frames Laws & Moralities  
 To destroy Imagination, the Divine Body, by Martyrdoms and Wars.  
 (J 74:10-14 K 714)

The Spectre's holiness is thus false, linked with hypocrisy and smirking smiles. It does much more harm than good and has to be cast away if man is to regain his internal balance. A man being in the Spectre's power lives an unhappy life, being prone to mechanisms by which the Spectre gains control over an individual, namely delusion, imputation of guilt, repression of inner promptings of energy which had been declared sinful by „Laws and Moralities“, and a fear of punishment for following his needs and drives. Blake's famous statement from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that “God will torment man for following his energies” (MHH 4 K149) illustrates the belief of the man who lives in the power of his Spectre. It is vital to add at this point that Blake does not object to reason as such, but to its authority. Blake opposes two different mental states that man can be in: fallen and regenerated. In the fallen state man is asleep, he has lost his capacity of visionary experience, the power of exercising Imagination as his chief leading faculty, he is in the power of his Spectre. All that is left to him is his reason. However, such a viewpoint is illusory and mistaken. Even on the semantic level the word “Spectre” suggests shadowy, unrealistic, though menacing concept. The regenerated man, on the other hand, is the one who has regained his paradise, coming back to the prelapsarian state in which reason is only one of man's intellectual powers, not the chief and controlling one. In the regenerated man reason and imagination are not enemies, but contraries, one essential for the other, and none of them struggles for dominion. Annihilation of the Spectre is one of the chief conditions of human regeneration.

Around his concept of the Spectre Blake creates a cluster of images whose denotations flow one onto another. Apart from being a reasoning power, the Spectre also is man's Selfhood, the principle of selfishness, and Satan. In *Milton* Blake claims: “I in my Selfhood am that Satan: I am that Evil One! / He is My Spectre!” (M 14:30-31 K4968). Blake's Satan, equalled with the Selfhood, is the internalised principle of egotism, self-centredness and self-withdrawal, which needs to be rejected, or, to use Blake's term, annihilated. Fortunately, it is only the hood of the self, a false garment, not a part of identity. Blake calls it “a false Body, an Incrustation over my Immortal Spirit” (M 40:30-36 K532,533). The poet's dualism of spirit/matter, or soul/body is not Cartesian, but Pauline. Blake, like Saint Paul, declares that the body-garment is not to be rejected altogether, only transformed (Damrosch 171).

How does the Selfhood/Satan/Spectre work? His mechanism of creating illusion and imputation of guilt is well manifested in a passage from *The Four Zoas*, which shows how he gains dominion over man: Above him rose a shadow from his wearied intellect

Of living gold, pure, perfect, holy; in white linen pure he hover'd  
 A sweet entrancing self-delusion, a wat'ry vision of Man (...)  
 Man fell upon his face prostrate before the wat'ry shadow,  
 Saying: “Oh, Lord whence is this change? Thou knowest I am nothing”.  
 (FZ 3:50-52, 54-55 K293)

These words exemplify the moment when man starts to worship his own Spectre, a satanic principle within himself. The delusive, unreal nature of this principle is emphasised in a twofold manner. First, Blake calls it “a sweet self-delusion” and describes it as a “wat’ry shadow” which suggests the fact that this principle does not exist in reality, but man is persuaded to believe its existence. Secondly, the dream of being perfect, pure and holy is the delusion itself, impossible in real life. However, the Selfhood is powerful exactly because of this delusion - man, not being able to live up to the spectral standard is bound to feel guilty and to be terrified that the principle whom he worships as the only God is going to punish him for his non-existent sins. This is also the moment when man degrades his own humanity, believing in his own nothingness, wretchedness and insignificance, rejecting the fact that there is a divine spark, Imagination, in every human being. Elsewhere Blake writes:

We heard the voice of the Slumberous Man, & thus he spoke  
 Idolatrous to his own shadow, words of Eternity uttering:  
 “O, I am nothing when I enter into judgement with thee.  
 If thou withdraw thy breath I die & vanish into Hades;  
 If thou dost lie thine hand upon me, behold I am silent;  
 If thou withhold thine hand I perish like a fallen leaf”.  
 (FZ 3:58-63 K293)

The man worshipping his Selfhood/Spectre lives in a condition of permanent threat. As visible in the quotation above, the punishment can be indeed terrifying: self-destruction. The fallen man believes that the price for disobedience and making the deity angry would be his own dissolving into nothingness. Man’s integrity is lost in this religion. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that Satan in his disguise of the Selfhood/Spectre has such a power upon man. The ironic thing, however, is that self-annihilation does not lead to destruction of man. Quite on the contrary, it leads to his regeneration. It denotes getting out of satanic control and into the world where threats, delusion, feeling of guilt, limitations and moral law of restrictions are non-existent, to the world of freedom, forgiveness of sins, vision, brotherhood and free, unrestricted love. The Spectre is opposed to humanity in man; to become really human, we need to cast off our Spectre and everything it represents.

Blake consistently contrasts living in the fallen world under the Spectre’s rule with existence in the real, visionary state using the sleeping/waking metaphor. When he describes Albion (his Primal Man, who comprises the whole of humanity within him) as fallen, he talks of the state of deadly sleep, the sleep of Ulro (J4:1). When Urizen, his mistaken principle of Reason, fails in his creation, he lies in “stony sleep” (BU 6:9-10 K226). This sleep is a spiritual state of numbness and oblivion, passivity and indifference, as such similar to the idea rendered in Gnostic religion, where material existence is sleep, while spiritual renewal is synonymous with awakening. Similarly, Blake underlines the necessity of awakening of man’s humanity, his true human and divine essence, in order to annihilate the Spectre in us. The whole drama of Blake’s myth passes inwards, into human psyche. Satan and reason as well as imagination and God are internal principles. This concept is perceptively summed up by Mark Schorer, who suggests that in Blake’s poems our God is fashioned according to our condition. Therefore, if we are plagued by the sense of sin, our God is a judge; if we worship our reason, our God is a rationalist (Schorer 121).

Thus, awakening means recognition (also in the sense of re-cognition) of spiritual truths, inner transformation and renewal. It is the loosening from bondage of the natural world, its deceptive religion and its false morality. It denotes the final discovery that the only true God is Jesus, whom Blake consistently describes as a principle of Imagination and creativity. It is also a change of attitude to other human beings – to the one defined by love and friendship. This comes through annihilation of the Selfhood/Spectre/Satan. However, as it is a process of abandoning any violence, self-centredness, pride and egoism, it is not a fight, but reconciliation and an act of selfless love. It cannot be done by force, for this would lead to another chain of domination and repression:

Satan ! My Spectre! I know my power thee to annihilate  
 And be greater in thy place & be thy Tabernacle  
 A covering for thee to do thy will, till one greater comes  
 And smites me as I smote thee & becomes my covering  
 Such are the Laws of thy false Heav'ns; But Laws of Eternity  
 Are not such ; Know thou, I come to Self Annihilation.  
 Such are the Laws of Eternity that each shall mutually  
 Annihilate himself for others' good, as I for thee. (M 38:29-35 K529,530)

If one used force to fight his Spectre, one would become another "false covering", an author of further repression and chain of domination, another Tabernacle. A Tabernacle is the shrine for God, specifically, the portable shrine carried by the Israelites through the Wilderness. It was heavily curtained; behind the Veil there was the Holy of Holies, which contained the Ark, where dwelt the invisible God. For Blake the idea of the hidden, invisible, unapproachable God was unacceptable. This God hidden in the Tabernacle was therefore not Jesus, but Satan. But instead of founding a new religion of oppression on the destruction of the old (Damon 396), we can practise Self-Annihilation, rejecting any selfish impulses of egotistical pride, selfish love, or desire to dominate. The most detailed description of the major principles of this process is given to us in *Milton*:

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 in 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 coverings  
 To take off his filthy garment & clothe him with Imagination.  
 ( M 40:37,41:1-6 K533)

The ruling image of this passage is cleansing as washing off everything that is unreal and inhuman, which prevents man from returning to his unfallen condition. To bathe in the "Waters of Life" and to wash off the "Not-Human" is to remove the Spectre, this false covering which oppresses and restricts man, an unreal projection of his own self, so that what is left is the true human, living, holy form, since, as Blake writes, "everything that lives is holy" (FZ 2:366 K289). The quoted passage

is very dynamic, since verbs play a major role here, which also emphasises the importance of the actions mentioned above. As Alicia Ostriker explains:

Bad syntax of this quotation is irrelevant, since the rhetoric proceeds by another logic than that of grammar. It is the logic of the repeated “to cast off... cast off... cast off... take off...”, the repeated “Inspiration” at the end of the lines, the alliteration of “rational”, “rotten” “rags”. Except in the repeated phrases Blake has scarcely any sound – echoes here, for he is aiming rather for magnitude than for intensity. A central break divides these lines into approximately equal halves, each the equivalent of three very free metrical feet, which creates the rough symmetry. (187)

What is more, Blake’s ethics is the ethics of love and care, the philosophy of friendship. Blake, instead of traditional romantic opposition reason – faith, creates another binary: reason – love. Reason comes to denote all the principles already discussed under the guise of the Spectre. Love comes to mean true humanity. In one of the final passages of *Jerusalem*, Albion discovers the true meaning of self-annihilation:

Wouldst thou love one who never died  
 For thee or even die for one who had not died for thee?  
 And if God died not for Man & giveth not himself  
 Eternally for Man, Man could not exist; for Man is Love  
 And God is Love; every kindness for another is a little Death  
 In the Divine Image, nor can Man exist but by Brotherhood.  
 (J 96:23-28 K743)

The essence of Blake’s true religion is Christian: it is selfless love, forgiveness of sins and a will to sacrifice oneself for others’ good. It is turning the other cheek instead of seeking retribution. Already in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Blake writes that “The most sublime act is to set another before you” (MHH 7:17 K151). Also, the idea of Brotherhood is important: all humanity is like one man, Albion, having within himself the divine principle of Imagination. Every act of love towards another is a moment in which humanity wins over the Spectre and casts the Selfhood into the lake. Blake’s love, however, denotes not only loving other people, but also loving one’s self. Although it may seem contradictory with the teaching of self-annihilation, these notions do not clash. Loving one’s self (or oneself) does not mean selfishness and pride, but an accepting and understanding attitude to one’s mistakes. Nobody is perfect, Blake warns, and trying to become perfect we plunge into evil. He particularly detests the notion of self-righteousness:

In Hell all is Self Righteousness; there is no such thing there as Forgiveness of Sin; he who does forgive sin is Crucified as an Abettor of Criminals, & he who performs Works of Mercy in any shape whatever is punished &, if possible destroyed, not thro’ Envy of Hatred or Malice, but thro’ Self Righteousness that thinks it does God service, whose God is Satan. (VLJ K616)

Self-righteousness this is the greatest of sins. To be self-righteous means to abandon true God and to worship Satan. Furthermore, it also denotes being right in the self, and the Self, as it has been already explained, is the principle which Blake considers to be satanic, but which exists in every man and needs to be destroyed. The act of destroying the Self is the chief condition of regeneration. Moreover, self-righteousness means self-centredness, closing up, egotistical pride, being submitted to one's own ego. This concept is opposed to the idea of forgiveness of sin, which in turn is the essence of true religion. In this sense Blake says:

The spirit of Jesus is continual forgiveness of sins; he who waits to be righteous before he enters into the Saviour's kingdom, the Divine Body, will never enter there. I am perhaps the most sinful of men. I pretend not to holiness: yet I pretend to love, to see, to converse with daily as man with man & the more to have an interest in the Friend of Sinners. (J 3 K621)

Self-righteousness is opposed to the spirit of Jesus, the principle of love. At the same time holiness is contrasted with the basically open, receptive attitude: trying to be upright, holy and perfect, Blake seems to say, clashes with openness towards God, man and the world. Instead of glorying in one's own blamelessness we should show interest in other human beings, since "Attempting to Become more than Man, we become less" (FZ 9: 709 K 376).

Thus, freeing oneself from the power of one's Spectre is an act of reasserting one's humanity. It becomes tantamount to choosing the ethics of friendship and care over that of war for domination and control. Love and forgiveness win over intolerance and rigidity. Man opens up towards the world, can live the life of vision, stand in awe in front of every wonder he encounters. Only after casting his Spectre into the lake we become truly human, able to entertain the attitude beautifully rendered in *Auguries of Innocence*:

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. (1-4 K 431)

### Abbreviations

- FZ     *Vala, or The Four Zoas*  
J       *Jerusalem*  
M       *Milton*  
MHH   *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*  
VJL    *A Vision of The Last Judgement*

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**STRESZCZENIE**

W powyższym artykule autorka opisuje dwa kontrastowe pojęcia w twórczości Williama Blake'a: Samoosobność (Selfhood/Spectre) i Człowieczeństwo. Są to pojęcia wykluczające się: prawdziwe Człowieczeństwo opiera się na odrzuceniu Samoosobności, spersonifikowanej zasady, którą Blake często nazywa również 'Spectre' i Szatanem. Ten odrzucany pierwiastek to egoizm, skoncentrowanie na sobie, zamknięcie na potrzeby innych. Jest to również postawa życiowa oznaczająca kierowanie się rozumem i kalkulacją, a nie sercem. Tworząc taką postać w swoim systemie mitologicznym Blake daje upust romantycznej nieufności wobec nauki i filozofii empiryzmu, którą widzi jako ograniczającą i odczłowieczającą. Aby stać się w pełni ludzkim, twierdzi Blake, należy wybrać miłość, przebaczenie i troskę o innych, odrzucając chłodne rozumowanie, ocenę moralną i zamknięcie w sobie. Takie właśnie są bramy do raj, i droga do duchowej wizji.