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M. B.
1 August 1987

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A few decades ago it might have seemed bizarre to attempt a comparison of Blake and Goethe. But Blake’s status has been rising. British and American readers seek in his works the wholeness and steadiness of outlook that Matthew Arnold and T. S. Eliot found in Goethe.1 Erich Heller gives a tantalizing hint of new possibilities for comparative study when he calls Goethe “a genius, who, more than any other of his time (with the possible exception of Blake), seemed to have been sent to fill with precious life whatever order of the spirit, whatever tradition he may have found upon his arrival—as Sophocles had done with the religious tradition of Greece, and Dante with the scholastic order of the Middle Ages” [emphasis mine].2 Instead of calling Blake and Goethe culminators of a tradition, as Heller appears to advocate, I see the two poets as seminal thinkers, introspective pioneers, imaginative reconnoiterers. But Heller has an accurate sense of their power and scope. Like Beethoven (1770–1827), who had much in common with both poets, William Blake (1757–1827) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) were creative titans of their age.

This book is the first extensive comparative study of Blake and Goethe. Until now critics have been reluctant to consider them on equal terms. Even Heller speaks of Blake as “a medieval count compared with Goethe, who had so big a share in mundane sophistication,” though he admits that Blake and Goethe were at one in their insistence on the danger that the isolated cultivation of abstract reason poses to the integrity of the whole person, and in their consequent critique of the Newtonian heritage.3 Northrop Frye approaches the idea of a Blake-Goethe comparison from the opposite direction, but with the same peculiar hesitancy. Blake, says Frye, “wanted to recover the mythological universe for the human imagination, and stop projecting it on an objective God or similar analogy of the external order. No contemporary poet made a comparable attempt to do this, except perhaps Goethe in the second part of Faust” [emphasis mine].4 Frye’s “except perhaps Goethe” and Heller’s “possible exception of Blake” open up intriguing perspectives, all too quickly closed off. Frye continues: “But Goethe, for all his vast philosophical and poetic powers, or perhaps even because of them, did not have as firmly articulated a skeleton of the imaginative cosmos in his mind as Blake, and the curiously miscellaneous structure of the second part of Faust reflects this.”5 (We may reply: The Four Zoas, where Blake’s central framework of mythmaking comes through best, is hardly a flawless unity either. Are such considerations as important as a shared attempt to recover the mythological universe for the human imagination?) In Heller’s and Frye’s remarks, we glimpse the unrealized possibility of a Blake-Goethe comparison that, if carried out, might show a deep communion of imaginative thought between kindred Romantic pioneers.

True, Blake and Goethe were individualists par excellence, uncompromisingly protective of their singular visions. In both Faust Part II and The Four Zoas, emphasis on the universality of the poet’s message contrasts with the resistant texture of a compressed style and the striking complexity of the mythological machinery. Blake likes to emphasize that he is not writing for the simple-minded; Goethe takes a teasing pleasure in keeping philologists busy. Faust and The Four Zoas are dramatic epics of Humanity, but embodied in a mythic language whose uniqueness and quirkiness are jealously guarded. Blake never published The Four Zoas, though it culminates his early prophecies and provides the indispensable key to the later ones. And Goethe refused to allow Faust Part II to be printed in its entirety until after his death. Both poets postponed the public’s discovery of their central works; secrecy was enforced as long as it could be. If, in spite of this carefully guarded spiritual independence, the two men are found to have been journeying down parallel paths, happening upon similar insights and expressing them in similar myths—sometimes even in similar diction and rhythms—a comparison of Blake and Goethe may provide material for an eventual reformulation of our thinking about the Romantic era as a whole. Romanticism may prove more coherent—or coherent in different ways—than we have realized.

Blake and Goethe are the most ambitious Romantic poet-thinkers. As introspective explorers they made imaginative discoveries with major implications for the twentieth century. The prescience I am claiming for Blake and Goethe will be illustrated in the next chapter, where their shared ideas and myths are described in detail. But first we need to show the central position of Blake and Goethe within the Romantic movement, and then to indicate the crucial concerns that unify the two poets’ works.

Two factors have obscured the kinship of Blake and Goethe within Romanticism. One of these is the surprising extent (puzzling, but
PHY AND HISTORY. GIVEN THE ENORMOUS RANGE OF EACH POET'S WORK, WE MUST ALSO EXCLUDE WRITINGS NOT ESPECIALLY FRUITFUL FOR COMPARISON: VERSE DRAMA (APART FROM FAUST); PROSE (WITH VERY FEW EXCEPTIONS, MOST NOTABLY THE PROSE MYTH OF ELOHAIM AND LUCIFER FROM GOETHE'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY); AND—WITHIN THE MAJOR WORKS DISCUSSED—THE ELABORATE COURT PAGEANTRY IN ACT I OF FAUST PART II AND THE REPETITIOUS CARNAGE SCENES TOWARD THE END OF THE ZOAS.


SHARED IDEAS AND MYTHS

POETS WHO HAVE "MORAL IMAGINATIONS" AND WRITE "CRITICISMS OF LIFE" OBLIGE US TO TAKE CAREFUL ACCOUNT OF THE LINK BETWEEN CONCEPT AND MYTH IN THEIR MORAL VISIONS. ON THE ONE HAND, SUCH POETS MAKE STATEMENTS THAT, HOWEVER IMAGINATIVE THEIR SOURCES AND SCOPE, CONTAIN CONCEPTS AND PROPOSITIONS THAT MUST BE UNDERSTOOD FOR THEIR IMAGINATIVE IMPACT TO BE FELT. ON THE OTHER HAND, THE MYTHIC PATTERNS THAT Govern THE METAPHORIC EMBODIMENT OF THESE IDEAS AFFECT THE WAY IN WHICH WE "FEEL" THIS CONCEPTUAL CONTENT. MORE THAN THAT, MYTHIC PATTERNS REVEAL DEEPER, MORE PERVERSIVE IDEAS, HALF-CONSCIOUS ASSUMPTIONS THAT UNDERLIE THE MORE EXPLICIT ONES THAT THE POET CONSCIOUSLY FORMULATES. AND THE MORE DEEPLY FELT A SHARED ASSUMPTION IS, THE MORE CENTRAL IT WILL BE TO THE KINSHIP OF THE POETS BEING STUDIED. TO UNDERSTAND BLAKE AND GOETHE AS KINDRED THINKERS, WE MUST ALSO SEE THEM AS KINDRED MYTHMAKERS.

IF "MYTHIC" ELEMENTS IN POETRY ARE THOSE REIMAGININGS OF TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS OR MYTHOLOGICAL MATERIAL THAT INVEST THE POET'S IDEAS WITH A LARGER-THAN-LIFE INTENSITY AND BREATH, WE CAN SAY THAT BLAKE AND GOETHE GIVE THEIR SHARED IDEAS MYTHIC STATURE THROUGH SHARED WAYS OF REWRITING THE BIBLE. THE FIRST PARADIGM, THE DIALECTIC OF SELF-AFFIRMATION AND SELF-TRANSCENDENCE, IS EMBODIED IN THE CREATIVE TENSION BETWEEN A SELF-TRANSSCENDING GOD-Figure AND A SELF-ASSURING DEVIL-Figure—BY NO MEANS PURELY DEVILISH AS IN NEW TESTAMENT TRADITION. THE SECOND BLAKE-GOETHE PHILOSOPHICAL CONCERN, AN ONTOLOGICAL PSYCHOLOGY OF NEGATION, IS EXPRESSED IN THE DRAMATIC CHARACTERIZATION OF THIS SAME DEVIL-Figure, A DEVIL QUITE HUMAN WHILE STILL DEEPLY THREATENING. AND IN THE FOURFOLD MODEL THAT REPRESENTS EACH POET'S FINAL REDEEMING VISION OF THE INTEGRATED PSYCHE, THE DEVIL-Figure IS IN BOTH CASES PROMOTED TO THE STATUS OF A COPARTICIPANT IN THE FOURFOLD CREATIVE COLLOQUIUM OF IMMORTALS, OF MUTUALLY CONTRARY MENTAL FORCES.

THIS REWRITING OF THE BIBLE BY BLAKE AND GOETHE IS BASED ON THE "HERESY" OF A REDEEMED OR JUSTIFIED DEVIL. BY DRAMATIZING HUMAN PROB-
lems through encounters of cosmic-scale supernatural forces, Blake and Goethe not only emphasize the world-wide consequences of these problems but also attempt to convey a cosmic-scale melliorism, a faith in the eventual reintegration of Universal Humanity expressed in the vision of an ultimate cosmic balance. This faith in the victory of creative contrariety over destructive negation is problematic and troubled. But it is inherent in the pattern of the poets' Devil-redeeming myth. And this myth is the crucial one in both men's imaginative worlds.

In their attempts to assign a legitimate function to the Devil, Blake and Goethe explicitly continue a project begun in the biblical Book of Job. But by projecting their ideas of our possible psychological and moral progress onto the canvas of cosmic-scale myth, the two poets also implicitly express three articles of imaginative faith that go beyond what the Book of Job offers. The form of this new shared myth embodies a faith in unity, process, and immanence. The God-Devil polarity is now a creative tension, not a mutual exclusion; beneath all contraries lies the unity of mutual indispensability. In addition, the Devil undergoes a process of growth and learning. The Devil's ontological denial of Becoming and his psychological denial of creative energy are problems we all share: if we can grow and learn, so can the Devil, and vice versa. Finally, the new shared myth expresses a theodicy of immanence. All Jobean enigmas are to be transcended in the unity that arises from the process of growth through introspective discovery. The fourfold colloquy of immortals—pairs of mutually contrary mental forces in productive tension—takes place within us: the Sons of God that sang at the morning of creation in Genesis may again join voices within regenerate humanity—if only after epic nightmares of negation. This shared faith in unity, process, and immanence, which the form of the shared myth expresses and that both poets try to maintain in the face of cataclysms of negation, is at the heart of the Blake-Goethe attempt to redeem the Devil. In their new Books of Job (*Faust* and *The Four Zoas*), they hope to overcome what are felt to be unfruitful elements of unrescinded dualism, stasis, or otherworldliness within received tradition.

The unity and mutual indispensability of concept and myth in the works of Blake and Goethe are shown at each stage in the two poets' thinking and imagining. As each of the poets' three shared ideas is developed in a corresponding stage of their shared Devil-redeeming myth, the myth lends these ideas biblical resonance, while at the same time helping to replace elements of dualism, stasis, and otherworldliness with a new feeling of unity, process, and immanence. To be sure, the Devil-redeeming project is imperfectly carried out. The possibility of creating an integrated vision such as both poets desire is threatened at every turn by modern psychological and social fragmentation, by regressive social and political fixations, and by a consequent sense of the instability of human nature and culture. It comes as no surprise that neither Blake nor Goethe could avoid confusion and contradiction. What is remarkable is the degree of clarity and imaginative strength the two men did achieve.

*Creative Tension: “Selving” and “Unselving”*

For Goethe as well as for Blake, fruitful competition between opposing forces is the law of life in both mind and world. The contraries are in mutual opposition, but their creative tension is the life-giving power that paradoxically unites them. As Goethe says in one of the “Talismans” from the “Singer's Book” of the *West-East Divan*:

Im Atemhölen sind zweierlei Gnaden:
Die Luft einziehn, sich ihrer entleden.
Jenes bedrängt, dieses erfrischt;
So wunderbar ist das Leben gemischt.
Du danke Gott, wenn er dich preßt,
Und dank’ ihm, wenn er dich wieder entläßt.

("Talismane" ll. 17–32)

[In the act of breathing there are two gifts of grace: taking in the air and being relieved of it. The former oppresses, the latter refreshes; life is so wonderfully mixed. Thank God when he burdens you, and thank him when he sets you free again.]

Or, as Blake puts it: “Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence” (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Pl. 3). Contraries are crucial to human existence, and evidently to cosmic existence as well: the concepts of attraction and repulsion had been given prominence in the intellectual world of Blake's day through the influence of Cartesian and Newtonian science. “Without Contraries is no progression,” no life in mind or world, is what Blake means when he says, “Opposition is true Friendship” (*MHH* Pl. 20).

We find in both Blake’s and Goethe’s visions of creativity in mind and
Between Selving and Unselving:  
“The Authentic Pulse of Life”

A quick overview of the shared ideas and myths of Blake and Goethe has shown that the three major shared ideas are all stages in the unfolding of one basic conception, creative contrariety, and that the three shared myths are analogous stages in the unfolding of one basic myth, the redemption of the Devil. The “devilish” or destructive potential of negation must be counteracted at each stage of our oscillation or respiration, our symmetric movement back and forth between the two contraries of selving and unselving. Thus our basic humanness is preserved, the “Devil” in us redeemed.

Each swing of the selving-unselving pendulum is necessary to maintain a creative tension between contraries, but each swing of this pendulum also carries with it the danger of an unbalancing negation. Blake and Goethe associate the “Devil” explicitly with negation through excessive self-affirmation. But there can be negation through excessive self-transcendence as well, even if the dangers of this are not as readily apparent. In the broadest sense, any negation becomes “devilish” once it upsets the selving-unselving balance that constitutes our healthy spiritual breathing, our “authentic pulse of life,” as Goethe calls it in his prose myth of Lucifer and the Elohim.

The preservation of a redeeming, creative contrariety, despite the “devi- lish” threat of negation from the extremes of both selving and unselving, can be shown through a representative sampling of lyrics from the works of Blake and Goethe. In the lyrics, as in the longer forms, one must keep in mind the integral relationship between the conceptual paradigm and its mythic embodiment. Blake and Goethe express their spiritual or psychological movements of selving and unselving, particularly in their “lyrical prophecies” and “great odes,” by embodying these impulses in gods or quasi-supernatural beings and by depicting these gods or demiurges in an imagery of natural elements and cosmic powers. Myths of immortal beings and images of cosmic forces are appropriate here, for mental contraries resemble both the gods of myth and the forces and properties of nature (contraction and expansion, opacity and translucence) in that mental contraries too create a world, a universe. If these mental forces become mutual negators on a grand scale, they can also destroy a universe. The myth of creative contrariety, Devil-redeeming in the broadest sense, tries to ensure that this threat of annihilation is averted. The more potentially disruptive and mutually negating the psychological contrasts become, the more the mythic imagery of supernatural, cosmic powers reminds us that these opposing forces are alike in their universal scope and import, alike in belonging to a unified myth of mental contraries that presents an organized mental “world.”

Conceptual and mythic parallels in the lyric utterances of Blake and Goethe are fortified by parallels in verse form, meter, and diction. In their earliest pieces and in later dramatic lyrics that show a radical formal departure from these youthful works, Blake and Goethe express their psychological and mythopoetic affinities in strikingly similar formal patterns. So similar, in fact, are the formal innovations in Goethe’s “great odes” and Blake’s “lyrical prophecies” that the failure to notice these parallels must be considered a major oversight in the literary history of Romanticism. So strong, apparently, is the spiritual kinship between Blake and Goethe that similar impulses in the two poets not only prompt similar mythic expressions but on occasion even require close parallels in the poetic forms that convey shared paradigms and myths.

Our representative survey of lyrics will be roughly chronological. The selving-unselving dialectic begins to unfold in the two men’s adolescence. Then, in their dynamic lyric utterances of early adulthood (Goethe’s “great odes” and Blake’s “lyrical prophecies”), the swings of the pendulum widen and the power of contrasts grows intense. Representative samples of these powerfully innovative poems will be studied in detail, as will selections from the two men’s later works. The final pair of lyrics examined are poems in which a vision of balance is momentarily achieved through ironic detachment: here the pendulum swings both ways within each poem. The survey as a whole focuses primarily on four psychological inhalations or selvings alternating with four exhalations or unselvings. The experience of these alternations will give concreteness to the poets’ shared psychological and moral paradigm, as well as conveying a sense of the motive force of the two men’s lyric development.
And builds a Heaven in Hells despair.

So sang a little Clod of Clay,
Trodden with the cattle's feet:
But a Pebble of the brook,
Warbled out these metres meet.
Love seeketh only Self to please,
To bind another to its delight;
Joys in another's loss of ease,
And builds a Hell in Heavens despite.

Being trodden by cattle has not made the clod any happier than selfishness has made the gleefully warbling pebble. Neither clod nor pebble is an edifying moral emblem; both their fates are unappealing. Both options, self-denial and self-assertion, become negations, not creative contraries, when each is cultivated “despite” or in “despair” of the other. Instead of mutually exclusive isolation, Blake implicitly urges a dialectic of self-affirmation and self-transcendence, a mediation between the “Hell” or “Satan” of contraction or selving and the “Heaven” or “God” of expansion or unselving. Like Goethe in his prose myth of Lucifer and Elohim, Blake sees authentic life as a pulsation between two poles, each valuable only insofar as it keeps the pulse in motion.

Looking at the list of representative voices—Blake’s Urizen and Fuson, the Goethean self-devourer in the mountains and the Goethean Prometheus, Ganymede and Alania, Los and Mohammed, Goethe’s fire-drawn butterfly and Blake’s sublime self-immolator, Hatem and Suleika, Clod and Pebble—we can easily find tendencies toward some form of negation in all of them. Only in such a representative survey is it possible to see how the underlying pattern of oscillation between selving and unselving continually works to counteract negations in the service of contrariety. Criticism of consciousness, of conceptual paradigms in their interrelation with mythic (and, where appropriate, formal) structures, shows in the lyric output of Blake and Goethe a psychological and moral pattern within which individual poems take on greater meaning than they would reveal in isolation. This unifying pattern is a shared one, and the affinities it reveals are strong.

Overcoming Negations:
Problematics of Reason and Desire

An overview of the selving-unselving dialectic in the lyrics of Blake and Goethe has shown how this dynamism of spiritual balance continually counteracts the dangerous excesses of negativism. Now it is time to focus attention on the origins and development of two types of negations. How, we must ask, does the selving-unselving balance operate in the areas where negation poses its greatest threat, namely, psychology and ontology? How do these negations spring from an excess of selving? How does each type of negation grow and develop? And how does imagination work, through increasing self-transcendence, to counteract both types of negation in the service of creative contrariety? These are the crucial questions for an understanding of the problems of negation and contrariety in psychology and ontology. We will devote a chapter to each area, as explored in the lyrics of the two poets. This approach will provide the basis for an understanding of The Four Zoas and Faust, where psychological and ontological analyses combine in an unprecedented mode of dramatic characterization.

For both Blake and Goethe, the most problematic form of psychological negation is reason’s negation of desire. One can arrange representative lyrics of each poet in a series of psychological case studies ranging from milder to more virulent forms of antosexual negation. If the two sequences are examined together, each Blakean case study paired with its Goethean counterpart, the result is a Blake-Goethe phenomenology of antosexual negation, a developmental tracing of the gradually increasing tyranny of Order as it seeks, with growing desperation, to negate its legitimate contrary, Energy. The range of moods expressed by these sequences of lyrics is as extensive as the range of case studies surveyed. Less threatening negations are presented with coarse, farcical humor or interpreted in epigrams and distichs influenced by neoclassical wit and satire. At the other end of the spectrum of emotional intensity are the lyrics
—recalls Blake’s argument in favor of seeing Jesus’ mother as harlot not virgin, so that the mediator might have a body appropriate to his mission of redeeming sinners, “A Body subject to be Tempted / From neither pain nor grief Exempted.”

Goethe’s pariah myth, like Blake’s Magdalen myth, also embodies the idea of the selving-unselving dialectic. For while both Brahma and the new goddess have now become imaginatively, selflessly open to the Untouchables’ pleas, it is equally true that the devious Brahma and the newly apotheosized sinner-saint have attained equally impressive confirmations of their own power. The Untouchables themselves have acquired unprecedented self-assertive power not only to influence but even indirectly to create deities. “The Pariah’s Thanks,” which concludes the poem, announces the Untouchables’ ruling that the new goddess is nothing less than the savior of Brahma, for only through her is his divinity placed beyond question.

Großer Brahma! nun erkenne ich,
Daß du Schöpfer bist der Welten!
Dich als meinen Herrscher nenn ich,
Denn du läßtest alle gelten.

(“Dank des Parias” ll. 1–4)

[Great Brahma! Now I recognize that you are creator of the worlds! I name you my master, for you allow value to everyone.]

Redemption of the Untouchables is at the same time the justification of Brahma. Pariah and deity are necessary to each other. Devil and God are mutually interdependent, equally indispensable contraries, just as in the great central Devil-redeeming myth that Blake and Goethe share.

Overcoming Negations:
Problematics of Imaginative Becoming

The need to counteract psychological negations, threatening as these are, is only half, or less than half, of the total challenge confronting imagination in Blake’s and Goethe’s mental worlds. For both poets believe that psychological negations are rooted in ontological ones. Conflicts between reason and desire arise from deeper tensions between Being and Becoming. To keep these tensions creative rather than destructive is imagination’s crucial task. Faust and The Four Zoas are poetic ventures in ontological psychology. The ontologies worked out in these two major myths are epic-scale elaborations of issues presented more briefly, but often with equal depth, in the lyrical utterances of Goethe and Blake.

Ontological negations are related to the fear of change as the psychological negations just studied are related to the fear of desire. In both cases, fear generates preemptive, aggressive defenses, disrupting the selving-unselving dialectic. The resulting complexities can easily make ontological negations as subtly deceptive as psychological ones: a promising venture in Becoming can unexpectedly terminate in a form of static Being, which in turn conceals a Nothingness. The two poets explore these perils.

To generate countervailing, life-giving ontologies, Blake and Goethe make extensive use of their favored metaphoric model of contraction and expansion, along with the closely associated image of the sphere. Dead, rigid spheres are contrasted with vital, vibrant ones. The contracting and expanding sphere is always the Blake-Goehe image of the selving-unselving dialectic. In their ontological lyrics, the two poets apply this image to the study of our life in space and time.

Conscious of their own future death, people find living in time their chief ontological concern. But living in space is a related problem, both because attitudes toward time express themselves in spatial metaphors and
... urg’d by necessity to keep
The evil day afar, & if perchance with iron power
He might avert his own despair. . . .
(FZ 25.42–44)

We remember Faust’s despair as he beheld the presumptuous waves. For both power seekers, ontological fears find large-scale political expression. Blake and Goethe are penetrating critics of their age. The psychological consequences of ontological fears are shown to have sociopolitical repercussions. Oddly, both Blake’s and Goethe’s multilevel critiques were long withheld from the public. Blake (as noted earlier) never published The Four Zoas, and Goethe left instructions for Faust Part II to be printed in its entirety only after his death. The extreme inwardness, the intense privateness of each man’s vision makes the unexpected kinship of their ontological psychologies all the more remarkable. Any accurate assessment of major patterns of imaginative thought during the Blake-Goethe era will need to take these parallels into account.

The Spirit of Mediation:
Unselving and Becoming

Following the process of “conflictual undifferentiation” through ever more hostile forms of mutual negation between Mephistopheles and Faust, Urizen and Orc, we have traced the growth of a spiritual crisis in Faust and The Four Zoas. We have seen the members of each pair of rivals become mutually mirroring embodiments of the Spirit of Negation, all equally fixated on the idea of affirming the self by wailing out the other, the anti-self. As forces become fixated, they become spiritually petrified: wars of implacable opposing daemons threaten to bring psychic life to a standstill. Increasingly, the whole of the self seems composed of aggressive defenses, protective fortifications, walls, shells, armor, until the oppressive weight of the defensive coverings appears likely to crush the central spirit out of existence. If Humanity is to regain the authentic pulse of life, a Spirit of Mediation must counterbalance the Spirit of Negation.

To explore the nature of the mediating spirit is Blake’s project in Night VIIa of The Four Zoas and Goethe’s project in the Classical Walpurgis’s Night (Hellenic Hallowe’en) of Faust Part II. These are the crucial nights of initiation in the two men’s myths. Not all the problems of negation will be solved during these nights, but the paths toward their provisional solution will be disclosed. Imagination will be the force that initiates the psyche of Humanity into the possibilities of unselving. So far we have explored the Spirit of Negation in its ontological sources, psychological symptoms, and personality-destroying results. We will now see how Blake and Goethe complete the picture by bringing alive the Spirit of Mediation—by exploring the psychological, moral, and ontological aspects of imaginative self-transcendence. In the two poets’ nights of imaginative initiation, Romanticism’s pioneering introspective mythopoeia attains a triumph of exuberance. Imaginative unselving, we discover, requires a rich diversification of consciousness.