

Art History Research Paper

WILLIAM BLAKE'S USE OF WATER AS A SYMBOL IN
THE FIRST BOOK OF URIZEN

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The purpose of this research paper is to illuminate William Blake's use of water as a symbol in The First Book of Urizen. The plate under study (Plate 1) shows Urizen, with parted beard and blinded eyes, being born, or crucified, in a placental body of water. Blake's use of water as a symbol is rich in allegorical content. Water represents the material world, as derived from Neoplatonic thought, relates to the sea of time and space, and can be linked to the unconscious. Urizen is swimming or drowning in a womb, in the sea of time and space, or in an unknown region of the mind.

The Poet, Prophet, Painter, William Blake (1757-1827) created, illustrated, and printed The First Book of Urizen in 1794. The text is written in English and describes Urizen's creation and existence in the material world. The remaining copies and scattered pages indicate that the original edition had 28 plates.

Urizen represents fallen man, "he is the limiter of energy, the lawmaker and the avenging conscience" (Damon 1965:419). The First Book of Urizen depicts the nine-month gestation process of Urizen.

The plot describes Urizen's secret deeds in his dark world, then the promulgation of his tyrannic laws; the opposition of Los, who binds him in a human shape; the division of Los through Pity, which is the creation of Enitharmon, and the birth of Orc, Urizen's future opponent; the travels of Urizen through his world,

and the birth and cursing of his children;
and finally the degeneration of mankind
under Urizen's religion. (Damon 1965:53)

A Blake Dictionary defines water as a symbol for matter
derived from Neoplatonic thought. (Damon 1965:443)

Neoplatonism is a philosophy that interprets Plato.

The manner of that interpretation tends
to associate God with the principle
of unity making him completely transcendent
and related to the world by means
of a series of intermediaries who (or
which) derive from the One by a principle
of emanation. In this view reality
is a graded series from the divine
to the material, and man, who has in
him some parts of the divine, longs
for union with the eternal source of
things. (Reese 1980:385)

Blake looked to Plotinus, the 3rd Century A.D. Egyptian
philosopher, who inaugurated Neoplatonism. Blake's
contemporary, and Platonist, Thomas Taylor, translated and
made available The Enneads of Plotinus. The Enneads affirm
basic themes common to Platonic tradition, such as, the belief
in the immateriality of reality, a conviction that the
material world refers to a higher level of being, and a
preference for intuitive forms of knowledge over conscious
forms of knowledge.

Blake, in accordance with Neoplatonic thought used water
as a symbol for the material world. For example, Urizen is
inundated by the sensuousness of water. He is in an
exhilarating surf that cuts him off from his own divinity and

he is misguided by the illusion of truth in the physical world.

Urizen, himself, signifies all error caused when perception occurs only through the sensory organs...Urizen's name is an elision to "your horizon." Believing that only what we see, touch, taste, or feel is real, we find suspicious everything we cannot encompass by our senses. (Easson 1978:69)

Blake's engraving, Though Waterist Him with Tears, (Plate 2) demonstrates the anxiety caused by the separation of man and divinity. In Though Waterist Him with Tears, a grey haired man sits cross-legged and immobile. His hands and face show conflict. He is looking into the pool of his own tears and he sees the "surface of illusion's mirror." David V. Erdman comments, "Sit like this and your form of suicide will be stasis." (Erdman 1974:274) In the same manner, Urizen, in a crucifixion pose is born to a death. He is also immobile.

Blake was not obsessed with human anatomy. Urizen is not proportionally accurate because Blake did not seek to imitate materialistic reality. He refused to imitate nature, and for this reason, he despised Dutch and Flemish naturalism. Blake elevated art in the following statement:

Should painting be confined to the sordid drudgery of fac-simile representations of merely mortal and perishing substances and not be as poetry and music are, elevated to its proper sphere of invention and visionary conception! No, it shall not be so! Painting, as well as poetry and music, exists and exults in immortal thoughts. (Butlin 1971:11)

Blake believed that the real world exists within; he materialized the immaterial and externalized the internal. Fortunately, according to Kathleen Raine, "Now when facts of mind are once more being recognized as an order of reality distinct from the material, Blake is beginning to be believed." (Raine 1982:56)

The Arlington Court Picture (Plate 3) shows Blake returning to the Neoplatonic use of water as matter. Odysseus, the central figure, represents man. Athene stands behind Odysseus and points to the spiritual world with her left hand and to the material world with her right hand. Odysseus crouches at her feet and prepares to plunge into the Sea of Time and Space. The scene refers to the regeneration of man, to an eddy of events, the cycle of man's existence.

And what begins as a narrative with a single character concludes with a large cast of characters. This seemingly prolific linearity, nevertheless, is a sterile cycle, a "dull round", for all the characters are aspects of Urizen and are contained within him. Like Urizen, they are bound down to earth by narrow perceptions. (Easson 1978:71)

Urizen is drowning in a western conception of the Sea of Time and Space. Blake rejected the empiricists view that time and space are elements of the material world.

What all Blake's sources have in common is that they form a coherent body of knowledge whose premises are not those of Western Materialism. Every culture

is established upon certain premises, and the modern West upon the supposition that 'matter' is the substance and basis of the universe, and that matter exists autonomously outside apart from the perceiving mind. Other civilizations, more traditionally orthodox, have held mind, or spirit, to be the living ground and 'place' of the universe. Blake with almost no knowledge of far Eastern thought had to work within the Western esoteric tradition... (Raine 1982:11-12)

Having much in common with Kant, Blake believed that time and space are integral parts of the mind.

Kant terms space and time the primary forms of intuition, intuition being, "that through which a mode of knowledge is in immediate relation to objects. These forms of intuition necessarily underlie and participate in our knowledge by allowing us loosely to organize our experience around the coordinates of space and time before the understanding organizes it conceptually. Like the empiricists, Kant appears to ground his epistemology in sensation, and yet here is the vital difference, he insists that these forms of intuition are not given in sensation, but are forms latent in man's mind and contributed by him to his experience. (Essick 1978:117)

Urizen is struggling in the Sea of Time and Space, out of breath and unable to surface. He floats in an outer space rather than an inner space.

Urizen, with parted beard, is composed of contrary states or different forms of consciousness. He denies the lawless energies of his imagination in favor of the forces of reason, organization, and order. He exists in a false reality, a

world created by infinite perceptions. The blind deluded Urizen is in search of a world that is solid, without fluctuation, and so he falls into a world without light. He sees, but he really doesn't see.

With the belief in the reality of the unconscious, Blake unknowingly prefigured the work of the contemporary depth psychologists. For example, Urizen is drowning deep beneath the surface. He is unable to face the frightening aspects of his unconscious; he is unwilling to explore the unknown, and he is distressed at the notion that the infinite cannot be measured. When repressed material remains contained and his instincts are unrecognized, Urizen becomes static, never growing, with a false sense of self-awareness.

Blake had an instinctive desire to span the gap between the conscious and the unconscious, and although, "before Freud it cannot be said that the unconscious was conceived of as a functioning entity," (Singer 1970:9) Blake certainly believed in the reality of it. Freud and Jung demonstrated that the conscious and the unconscious flow in and out of one another, that they are streams that merge.

Every phenomenon consciously experienced by man is accompanied by it's polar opposite in the unconscious, and the psychological site of man is determined by the kind of relationship which he is able to maintain between these opposites. (Singer 1970:11)

Blake himself face the frightening darker regions of the unconscious and this enabled the visionary experience.

Blake looked unashamedly at his own soul, came face to face with the unconscious, if you will, and then enunciated principles which would be empirically tested and affirmed by Jung, a century later ... the back and forth between a balanced tension and a precarious imbalance in the psyche of Blake was in itself a dynamic, out of which creative activity could proceed, in the presence of favorable conditions. (Singer 1970:12)

Urizen is the manifestation of Blake's inner drama. He is shown tenaciously exploring his personal inner psyche. In addition, he represents wider patterns of meaning.

Blake was in search of universal forms of knowledge. For instance, although Blake denounced politics, he applied revolutionary principles to the development of the individual. His work responded to the problems of his contemporary world in addition to the farther reaching problems of the individual. Urizen is revolutionary man caught up in turbulent times, trying to direct the flow of life.

Blake created an independent personal philosophy, but it is the universal quality of his work that makes him a prophet. June Singer contends that,

Blake was in so close of a relationship with his personal unconscious and with wider unconscious realms that his psychic experience merged at some point with the collective experience - that the collective flowed in and through him and that in some contexts he was indistinguishable

from it. This seems to be substantiated by those incidents in Blake's life which demonstrated his ability to sustain visions, that were not only beyond an ordinary sensory capacity but were also beyond the scope of Blake's personal experience. (Singer 1970:35)

Blake and his 18th century contemporaries were obsessed with ancient lore and mythology. Blake was an academic in the sense that he borrowed sources. He is considered a revolutionary, yet his art is enriched by the art of the past, so he is also considered traditional.

Blake's work is like a river into which two different colored steams would flow and mingle; sometimes perfectly blended sometimes in currents separated to the eye by their color; one is the modern and rational thought, the other is the most ancient and fanciful mythology, or rather again, a mixture of all mythologies. (Saurat 1964:;47)

Blake provided spiritual instruction through the use of symbolism. Water, as a symbol, does not tell us what we already know; it elevates and transcends, enables participation in the creative process, and links the known to the unknown.



Plate 1. Urizen

(Easson 1978:16)



Plate 2. Though Waterist Him with Fears

(Klonsky 1977:53)



Plate 3. The Arlington Court Picture

(Lister 1986:53)

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