

**NOW THE SNEAKING SERPENT WALKS: DIABOLIC AS A
CREATION FORCE IN THE MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND HELL,
BY WILLIAM BLAKE**

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Abstract

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-1793), William Blake traces a flying route through the Universe. His muse, the “sneaking serpent”, supports the concept that ‘diabolic’ is not a synonym of ‘evil’ – nevertheless, it is an active springing of Energy, as, according to the poet, every existence is holy. This study understands the prophetic writing of a trip to the mystery as a way the poetic voice finds to stand up against Reason (Good), empowering himself in the Energy of Evil (or of Hell). Thereupon, it was adopted the idea of ‘devilish’ as a vital force, avoiding dogmatic and religious definitions of the term, a topic with which the author often struggled, especially considering his rupture with Emanuel Swedenborg’s thoughts. Another researched point encompasses distinct visual representations of the serpent in Blake’s illustrations, such as in “The Serpent Attacking Buoso Donatin” (1826-7, reprinted in 1892), and in “The Spiritual of Nelson Guiding Leviathan” (1805-1809). Both in written and pictorial artworks, the author asserts that the serpent symbolizes the sacred essence that lives in all profane things.

Keywords: Serpent; Diabolic; Energy; Lyric Self

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Preliminary Considerations: Blake's Opposition to Swedenborg

In his journey to Hell, right in the "Argument" that introduces *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-93), William Blake presents the Prophet-Poet who will guide readers to undisclosed dimensions. The lyric self has no Muse such as Dante's Beatrice nor Milton's Eve leading his voyage, but instead, a "sneaking serpent [which] walks in mild humility" (1906, 6). The poet opens unfathomable doors when capturing the "vision" and the "verb", which, in turn, are derived from the concept of "divine" (Frye 1991, 77). In this illuminated book, "the first truly Romantic work in English literature, written and printed in the year following the fall of the Bastille" (Murray 2004, p. 713), "divine" is described as the mystery, as the imagery that fits sundry allegorical elements, starting from the resonances provided by the sibilant cadence of the "sneaking serpent", crawling on unknown fields. When in Hell, the poet finds, in the second chamber, "a viper folding round the rock and the cave, and others adorning it with gold silver and precious stones"¹ (*The Marriage* 27).

The symbolism that surrounds the serpent's figure is current in distinct cosmogonies: from the Hebraic *nachash*, it is the speaking serpent of Eden, which seduced first the humans to fall into the forbidden. When explaining the word in the East, the Oxford Hebrew-English Dictionary (1998, 674) observes that *na(c)hash* means "to wheeze", "to whisper", highlighting the onomatopoeic sound of the hiss that the serpents produce when feeling threatened. In religious terms, it can be broadened to "to foresee", "to predict", in a way the poetic voice speaks as if it were "charmed". In the preface of *The Golden Bowl* (1904), Henry James realizes that writers should lead readers to "such a state of hallucination by the images one has evoked as doesn't permit him to rest till he has noted or recorded them, . . . with the desire or the pretension to cast a literary spell" (1999, 12). Therefore, as if he had spread around his "literary spell", the lyric voice of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* traces the first step of his route, aligned with the subterranean movement; way down to deepness: "Hungry clouds swag on the deep" (6). Scenery evokes the ethereal; however, not according to Emanuel Swedenborg's (1688-1772) patterns – no longer Blake's Master: "Swedenborg is the Angel sitting at the tomb: his writings are the linen clothes folded up. Now is the dominion of Edom, and the return of Adam into Paradise" (*The Marriage* 6).

In this excerpt, Blake throws an acid criticism to his former "Prophet" and his theological works called *Writings for the New Church*, "whose teaching would bring about a spiritual regeneration of an age" (Rix 2006, 107). It must be pointed out that the poet's affiliation with The New Church was brief. T. S. Eliot synthesizes this polemic relationship: "Blake accepted Swedenborg, and eventually rejected him, for reasons of his own" (1932, 2). It is not by chance, then, that his old seer "is the Angel sitting at the tomb" (*The Marriage* 6). Henceforth, when the poetic voice of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* flows "Westerly through the night, . . . above the earth's shadow", he flings himself "directly into the body of the sun" (35). Irony takes place when the poet dresses up "in white" and takes along

“Swedenborg’s volumes”, which in turn “sunk from the glorious clime, and passed all the planets” till he arrived in “Saturn”, where he “stayed to rest and then leaped into the void between Saturn and the fixed stars” (35). At the end of his trip to the stars, the Poetic Genius reaches the severe conclusion that “Swedenborg boasts that what he writes is new; though it is only the contents or index of already published books”, a mere “recapitulation of all superficial opinions . . .” (*The Marriage* 37-39). Blake claims that “Swedenborg has not written one new truth”, but “old falsehoods” since “he conversed with Angels who are all religious, and conversed not with Devils who all hate religion, for he was incapable through his conceited notions” (*The Marriage* 38).

According to Thompson (1993), Stanger (1997), Como (2004), and Rix (2006), the author’s reasons for moving away from Swedenborg are substantially connected with the fact that he chose to center coalition with Antinomianism (from the Greek: ‘against’ + ‘law’), rejecting religion, moral precepts, social norms, and dogmas. Regarding this fact, here are some passages that express Blake’s disclaimer: “All Bibles or sacred codes have been the causes of . . . Errors” (*The Marriage* 8); “Prisons are built with stones of law, brothels with bricks of religion” (*The Marriage* 15), “Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse, not from rules” (*The Marriage* 41); “The tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction” (*The Marriage* 17). The author strongly declines all “[t]hose who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained” (*The Marriage* 9), therefore, “he who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence” (*The Marriage* 13). The prophetic voice widely understands that “. . . every thing that lives is Holy”, as concluded in the last verse of the Chorus (*The Marriage* 47).

Murray, in volume one of his *Encyclopedia of the Romantic Era* (1760-1850), evaluates that “*The Marriage* inverts the hierarchies that structure Swedenborg’s thought. Heaven and Hell are troped as psychological states, the first associated with reason, the second with energy and imagination” (713). One of the images that transcend this meaning – “in conformity with Swedenborgian doctrine, heaven supports the sedate, compartmentalized life of Earth” (713) – is displayed at the bottom of *The Marriage*’s third page: a naked devil and an angel are united in an erotic embrace, reveling the marriage of the contraries. The book wrecks moral precepts, announcing an era of libidinal, creative freedom, ergo, the figures of the devil and the serpent are powerful tools to follow Blake’s discourse paths.

The Sneaking Serpent

Thus, bewildered by the route that unfolds before his eyes when “the doors of perception” are enlightened, the poet’s clairvoyant convictions offer the experience to cherish eternity: “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite” (*The Marriage* 26). Praises to Blake: 18th Century closes its cycle. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* dialogues with the idea of circularity, mainly because the lyric voice reveals his eternal principles: “Energy is Eternal Delight” (9). Thereupon, eternity brings the intersecting between “always” and “never”,

simultaneously completing and diluting itself into the instances of time. In this sense, it is wise to consider the serpent which swallows its own tail as a symbol of the eternal, so-called Uroboros/Ouroboros, originated in the Egyptian iconography but brought to the Western tradition by the Greek. Later on, it was adopted as an icon in Gnosticism, Hermeticism, and Alchemy (Hornung 1999, 77-78).

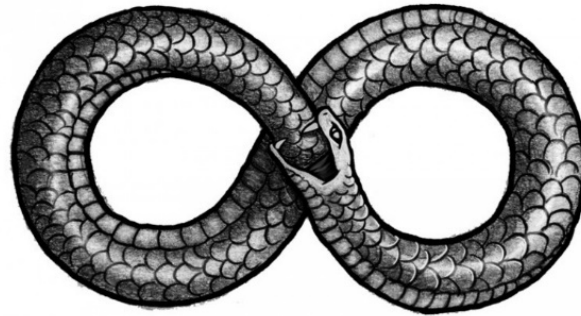


Fig. 1 – Ouroboros, the infinite symbol, mythologian.net/ouroboros-symbol-of-infinity/. Accessed May 27 2020.

In “A Memorable Fancy”, the lyric voice narrates a similar image of circularity: along with the Angel, they both see “seven houses of brick” (*The Marriage* 36). They enter one: “in it were a number of monkeys, baboons, and all of that species, chained by the middle, grinning and snatching at one another, but withheld by the shortness of their chains” (*The Marriage* 36). The poet notices that the primates kept growing “numerous[ly], and then the weak were caught by the strong, and with a grinning aspect, first coupled with and then devoured by plucking off first one limb and then another till the body was left a helpless trunk” (*The Marriage* 36). Yet, the movement does not cease: “after grinning and kissing it with seeming fondness, they devoured too. And here and there I saw one savourily picking the flesh off of his own tail” (*The Marriage* 36-37).

Chevalier & Gheerbrant (1996, 230) picture the mythical figure as the representation of a new evolution cycle, giving the ideas of movement, continuity, and self-fecundation. Appropriately, in Blake’s text, it may be described as an archetype of an endless flow, as the trend of the Universe. In *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, Borges and Guerrero explain the origin of the creature: “Heraclitus had said that in the circumference the beginning and the end are a single point” (2006, 150). They follow on with the explanation: “A third-century Greek amulet, preserved in the British Museum, gives us the image which best illustrates this endlessness: the serpent that bites its own tail” (150). The authors mention that “a world-circling serpent is also found in Norse cosmology An oracle warned the gods that these creatures would be the earth’s downfall” (Borges and Guerrero 151).

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the image of Uroboros is a metaphor of the quickening of time and its inherent cycles: beginning and end; before and after; expansion and destruction. So, the serpent, which devours its own tail, closing its circumference, evokes the cyclical provisions of the Creation. In

ancient books, the symbol often comes associated with the expression *Hen to pan* (“All is one, one is all”), putting off with the thought of “resurrection”; of “rebirth” (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 230).

Biederman (1994, 322) outlines Ouroboros as the serpent rolled up in an egg, a common figure for the Egyptian, the Druids, and the Hindu. The Brazilian Modernist painter, Tarsila do Amaral, precisely pictures the Uroboros figure described by Biederman in her oil on canvas “O Ovo” (“The Egg”), also known as “Urutu” (1928). In short, “Urutu” is the popular name for *Bothrops alternatus*, from the family Viperidae, one of South America’s most poisoned snakes (Campbell and Lamar 2004, 134). It was created during the prolific phase of Oswald de Andrade’s *Manifesto Antropófago*. In his Manifest, Andrade states that Brazil is the “country of the Big Snake” (1928, 1 – our translation). Amaral’s official homepage informs that the artist composed her artwork inspired by *Cobra Norato* (1931), a book written by Modernist poet Raul Bopp, who got inspired by the Amazonian folklore and myths of the “Big Snake”:



Fig. 2 – “Urutu”, by Tarsila do Amaral (Chateaubriand Collection, MAM, Rio de Janeiro), tarsiladoamaral.com.br/obra/antropofagica-1928-1930/. Accessed May 27 2020.

The canvas (60x72cm) portrays hyperbolic dimensions and intensive colors: at the center lays a gigantic egg, surrounded by a snake, rolled up around a mast. A structural view of the figure shows a symmetric distribution of the central image in comparison to the median lines, in a way the spectator’s eyes concentrate directly in the whiteness of the egg, emphasized by the blue shades in the background, and by the red/rose tone of the serpent. This art piece is a metaphor of the Genesis, and although Amaral and Blake composed their respective works in a gap of two centuries, dealing with different contexts, Amaral’s image interacts with *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* as a reference of the Creation. The Brahmanical

culture called snakes as *dvija*, which means “twice-born”, inasmuch “as they were born of eggs. The laying of the egg was likened to the ‘first birth’ – that is, the natural birth of man” (Campbell 1983, 189). Blake’s book dialogues with the idea of “Energy” as “the only life and is from the Body” (*The Marriage* 8), as well as with the interaction of contrary forces: “Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and repulsion, reason and energy, love and hate, are necessary to human existence” (*The Marriage* p. 7). The English poet goes on: “From these contraries spring what the religious call Good and Evil. Good is the passive that obeys reason; Evil is the active springing from Energy” (7).

Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that in the poem “evil” should not be taken as “bad” or “diabolic”, but as “the active springing from Energy” (*The Marriage* 7). And just like in microphysics it is nonsense to consider the matter in a static nature, once it exists only as energy, the poet is also rattled by riot against reasoning, or “good” – instead of it, the lyric voice is eager to get empowered by the devilish Energy. It is a primary fact to the reader of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that the term “diabolic” should be taken as the collapsing of all sacred things (Eliade 1991). Nietzsche (1974, 87) sees the “diabolic decadence” as a legitimate refusal of the “ideal” wrongly linked with human nature, foremost due to the multiplicity of selves who depict mankind, therefore projecting reality as a disperse flux of happenings. In music, *diabolus* plays an active role in creativity, and it must be avoided by a series of compositional strategies since it provokes a “malfunction” on the scale (Randel 2003, 64-66). According to Chaos’s Theory, “diabolic” represents “movement”, “the propulsive forces of Nature” (Cambel 1993, 37).

In order to capture the “propulsive forces”, or the devilish forces, Blake reassures that it must be wiped out “the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul”, and this is only achieved “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” (*Marriage* 25-26). When insisting on these terms, the artist seems to craft his own “infernal method”, in such a way the soul dissolves “apparent surfaces away”, so “infinite” is endless.

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell delivers eulogies to diabolic forces, for creative “Energy” means exuberance, the contrary of contention: “Exuberance is beauty” (*The Marriage* 19). Lockhart, in an article written for the notorious *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, describes the Romanticism outbreak filled with “infusing exuberance throughout” (1818, 520). It is not unpretentiously, then, that the word “Devil” appears twelve times along the poem, as well as “evil” (four times), and “Satan” (three times). Throughout the reading experience, it is ascertained that “diabolic” does not assume a negative force nor is related to horror, it is the necessary empowerment for movement. As a matter of fact, “God” is also associated with Nature’s creative potency – the word ‘creation’ is repeated twenty-three times in the book. A shared existence of the indivisible “Body & Soul” duo sparks fertile potencies: “The Giants who formed this world into its sensual existence and now seem to live in it in chains are in truth the causes of its life and the sources of all activity” (*The Marriage* 28). As stated by

Blake, the devilish creation – or the profane power – encompasses a “sensual existence”, whose incessant wavy forces are the “causes” of “life” and all kinds of “activities”. When processing this comprehension, the poet insists that “weak and tame minds [...] have the power to resist energy” (*The Marriage* 28).

Etymologically, the Greek expression *diaballein* is divided into *ballein* (“to throw”; “to reach”), and *dia* (“to throw across”), therefore “diabolic” is literary “to attack”, “to slander” (Beekes 2016, 207). As seen before, the term *diabolus in musica*, derived from Latin, has been applied since the early 18th Century, and it is composed of adjacent whole tones (Randel 65). No doubt the noun is gathered with breakthrough movements. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* marks this fact as the construction of the text is presented in a multifarious way – in Plates, written and illustrated by Blake; and colored by his wife, Catherine. They are entitled as: “The Argument”, “The Voice of the Devil”, “Proverbs of Hell”, “A Memorable Fancy”, “A Song of Liberty”, and the “Chorus”. The Plates were created by applying the *illuminated printing* technique, which consists of printing the drawing on a copper surface, very alike watercolor procedures (Davis 1977, 61). In his innovative work, Blake utters that form and content go beyond the classic patterns, in a manner all figurative plates suggest “a theo-philosophical approach, in part because it addresses that moment of epiphany or awareness that results from the willingness to submit to uncertainty when faced with unexpected silence” (Hartman 2009, 47).

A sign of Blake’s ‘chaotic’ method of creation in his book is his innovation towards words and iconic impressions, as his researches approach: “*The Marriage* is notoriously difficult to categorize: in its pages, satire rubs shoulders with formal reasoned argument proverbs are followed by visionary travelogues, and prophecy exists in tension with comedy” (Murray 713). Ault et al., when discussing the “proverbial wisdom” of the book, understand that “excessing and crookedness are methodological virtues” brought up by the poet, concerning that “this view accepts the necessity of roads and goes on to suggest that the best way will be the most self-complicating path” (1987, 14).

It is unanimous by part of the experts that Blake rises as the introducer of Romanticism in England (Eliot; Bloom 1963; Thompson; Acroyd 1996). Most importantly, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* astonishment takes place when the Poetic Genius runs across “the fires of hell”: “As I was walking among the fires of Hell, delighted with the enjoyments of Genius; which to Angels look like torment and insanity” (11). The path is never linear since imagination is the chaotic and prolific substance of the poet: “Everything possible to be believed is an image of truth” (*The Marriage* 16); “What is now proved was once only imagined” (*The Marriage* 16). Here is the metaphor of the fountain, a fertile flow of ideas, images, and scenes that never stems: “The cistern contains, the fountain overflows” (*The Marriage* 16).

In *Paradise Lost* (1667), by Milton, more specifically in book IX, Satan appears in the form of a serpent. He finds Eve alone and starts complimenting her beauty and grace. Devil seduces Eve by telling her about the gift of speech and of intelligence if she only eats a tasteful fruit in the garden: “Meanwhile the hainous and despightfull act / Of Satan done in Paradise, and how / Hee in the

Serpent had perverted Eve” (Milton 2005, 424). Lured by Satan, Eve follows him to the Tree of Knowledge, and there, she bites the fruit: “The Serpent me beguil’d and I did eat”. Earth then is all corrupted by this action, and humankind falls: “And on the Serpent thus his curse let fall” (432).

Not only *Paradise Lost*, but *The Divine Comedy* had strongly influenced *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*'s figure of the serpent, providing connections and ruptures with the divine and the profane. During the period 1826-27, decades after the plates from *The Marriage* were released, the topic of the serpent was still prevailing in Blake's thoughts, as it may be perceived in his illustration from Canto XXV of Dante's *Inferno*. The image shows Cavalcanti, a thief under the guise of “an adder all on fire” (Dante 2008, 74). He is all set to attack Buoso Donatin, another thief. In the next scene, which was also illustrated by Blake, Donatin is metamorphosed into a serpent and Cavalcanti into a man. That means their punishment is to suffer this terrible transformation from man to snake and back again forever: “He ey'd the serpent, and the serpent him. / One from the wound, the other from the mouth / Breath'd a thick smoke, whose vap'ry columns join'd” (Dante 75):



Fig. 3 – “The Serpent Attacking Buoso Donatin”, by William Blake (1826–7, reprinted 1892), www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/blake-the-serpent-attacking-buoso-donati-a00009. Accessed May 27 2020.

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the Poetic Genius creates chaotic cycle images in the domains of “the infinite abyss” (32). The lyric self, accompanied by the Angel who rides along in the paths of mysteries, sees nothing but horror: a “black tempest” and a “cataract of blood mixed with fire” (33). The grotesque-fantastic space is very suitable for the rising of a terrifying snake: “appeared and sunk again the scaly fold of a monstrous serpent” (33). This adder antecedes the vision of the “head of Leviathan”, whose “forehead was divided into streaks

of green and purple, like those on a tiger's forehead", advancing towards the poet and the Angel "with all the fury of a spiritual existence" (34). For the Jew, Leviathan is a sea serpent, referenced in the Hebrew Bible (Oxford 587). Indeed, sea serpents are prominent in the mythology of the Ancient Near East: registered three thousand years b. C. in the Sumerian iconography, they represent the forces of chaos and are also considered the creators of God (Uehlinger 1999, 511).

Blake certainly reproduces monstrous figures as a sign of his pioneering presence in Romanticism. Later on, from 1805-1809, the artist recalls the myth of Leviathan in a tempera-on-canvas (30"x24") named "The spiritual of Nelson guiding Leviathan". Nowadays, this artwork is hosted by the Tate British Museum, and it brings the protagonist Horatio Nelson, flag officer in the English Royal Navy, one of the most epic figures of Trafalgar's Battle, in 1805, leading a great victory over Napoleon's armada – although he was fatally wounded. In the canvas, Nelson is pictured with Christian attributes: the halo and the loincloth; however, this is not the only concept adopted to picture the national hero, as Blake claimed to have been "taken in vision" when creating it, mainly because the artist was a Hindu art admirer (Saurat 1929, 107-122). It must be pointed out that "Leviathan comes from Old Testament, and like Shiva, is said to represent the forces of destruction in the world", leading to a doubled interpretation: "while Shiva destroys in order to transform and so is seen as a positive force, in Christian tradition at least, Leviathan is generally held to be an agent of Satan" (Pollitt 2020).

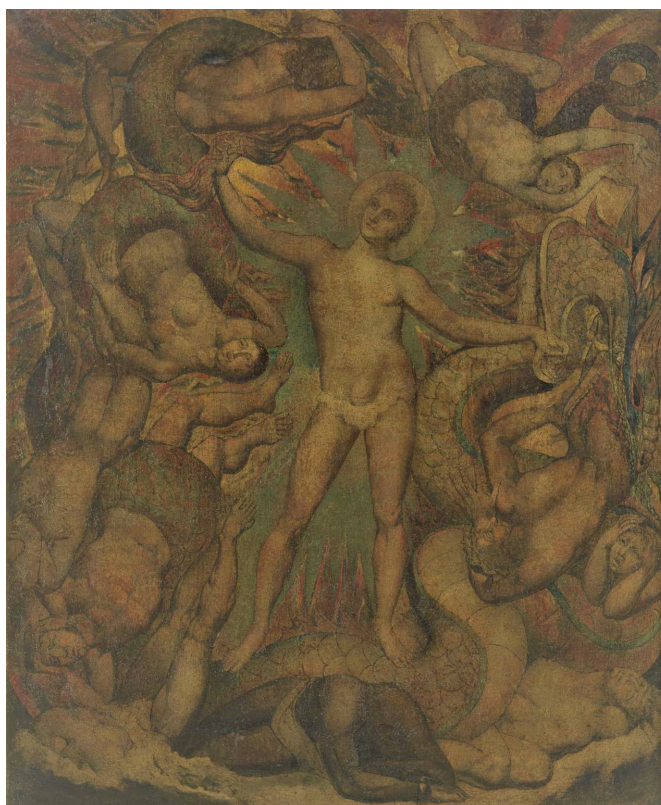


Fig. 4 – "The spiritual of Nelson guiding Leviathan", by William Blake (1805-1809), www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/blake-the-spiritual-form-of-nelson-guiding-leviathan-n03006. Accessed May 27 2020.

Notably, Blake pictures a melodramatic scene: a dying hero, encircled by the Biblical Leviathan. Human figures surround the imponent man, and they are all trapped by the serpent: these bodies portray the European nations defeated by the British during the Napoleonic Wars (Saurat 77). Although this image exposes patriotic feelings, capturing the nationalist outpourings of the time, the agonizing expressions of the defeated individuals (nations) contrast with Nelson's superiority look, embodied in classic patterns of art. Pollitt observes that this painting reveals "a nightmarish quality giving one the distinct impression that is more a critique than a celebration of Britain's naval supremacy, a view supported in the fact that Blake himself was a pacifist" (Pollitt). Another detail that must be pointed out is the fact that Blake was an opponent of slavery. The black body pictured at the bottom of the frame is a strong reference to the Slave Trade Act of 1807, proclaimed by the Parliament of the United Kingdom, prohibiting the slave trade in the British Empire. This Act strongly forced other nations to quit with slavery (Cox 2008, 90). Hence, it may be said that the black body symbolizes not a single enslaved man, but several African ethnicities whichsoever that claimed for the end of oppression.

Blake's illustrations placed in this essay demonstrate that not only in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, but also the outcome of his iconic artwork reproduces the monstrous, the devilish, true predictions of his Romanticist ideas. In a way perceiving mythical figures, such as the serpent, seems to be a dramatic way to express the dissoluteness and the conflicts of the being. It is not randomly that the poet evokes the ancient poets: "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 . . ." (*The Marriage* 20), almost like dreaming about the return of the mythical times. The same feeling is found in the Preface of *Cromwell* (1827), by Victor Hugo: "[...] the purpose of art is all but divine: to resurrect, if it is about history; to create, if it is about poetry" (Hugo 1906, 69).

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake refuses to praise steady religious systems once he sees "priesthood" as a way some individuals found to take "advantage" over other men; a simple way to "enslave" with the oppressive mindset that says "God had ordered such things": "Till a system was formed, which some took advantage of and enslaved 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 ordered such things" (*The Marriage* 20-21). All these conditions were settled with dominating goals, distancing mankind from the original meaning of the divine: "Thus men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast" (*The Marriage* 21).

By denying the sense of 'divine' strictly linked with "priesthood", Blake also ruptures with the chronological matter in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. And just like the Uroboros indicates the spiral of evolution and reconstruction, the reading of this book conjures up the principle of the eternal return, the "hourglass of existence, turned over again and again", as Nietzsche writes in aphorism 341 of

The Gay Science (75). Substantially, the long-length poem merges a wish to work with cyclic forms, with eternal concepts of time, with the substance that finds no death, since numinous time has no beginning nor ending: “Eternity is in love with the productions of time. . . . The hours of folly are measured by the clock, but of wisdom no clock can measure”, as sung by the poet in the “Proverbs of Hell” (*The Marriage* 14). Thus, “always” and “never” are complementary instances of the same reality: “The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword, are portions of Eternity too great for the eye of man” (*The Marriage* 15). By admitting that the “portions of eternity” are way “too great for the eye of the man”, Blake breaks up with the idea of chronological time. In turn, these “portions of eternity” are lyrically characterized by resounding metaphors (the “roaring of the lions”, the “howling of the wolves”, the “raging of the stormy sea”), and by the epic image of a “destructive sword”.

Almost two centuries earlier than the publication of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in the year 1600, the Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno was blamed guilty by the Holy Inquisition for he came up with contradictory arguments against the medieval dogmas of the universe, mainly in the book *On the Infinite Universe and Worlds* (1584). On the seventh argument of his “Fifth Dialogue”, Bruno explores the “infinite universe” as “a continuous, composed by ethereal regions and worlds” (2014, 78). This logic derives from Lucrecio’s appointments in *De Rerum Natura* (II, 1040-51), who stated that the mind wishes to know what stashes “beyond the borders of the world”, “what is hidden, but moves”, “what intelligence wants to explore at its most, and through it, our thinking wants to spontaneously fly” (qtd. in Bruno 78). Bruno completes these arguments saying that because “the eyes of our senses” are not capable “to see the end”, they are “surrendered by the immense space”, as “the senses are perplexing, and force reason to add up always space to space, region to region, world to world” (78-79).

By considering the space, the infinite, and the forces moved in this continuum, alternation never reaches and ending, for “One thought feels immensity” (*The Marriage* 16). In *Theogony*, the Muses do not come before, after nor simultaneously with Zeus. For one of these three possibilities to occur, an absolute time, pre-existing by itself, must arise (Hesiod 1987, 103). However, unlike the mythological concept of time, in which the homogeneous course is surrounded by events that cannot affect it, Blake finds in the poetic record a way of picturing the sacred space-time relation. This is to say *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* offers nothing but an imaginative, a contemplative look, performed with the body and all senses, comprehending admiration, beauty, spirituality, horror, amazement, and doubts. It is certainly a slow look, which demands a certain time of introspection. Blake’s creation invites to a meticulous look, freed from the bonds of a “finite organical perception” (*The Marriage* 22), as Prophet Isaias answers the poetic voice when questioned about the assurances God has revealed to him: “. . . my senses discovered the infinite in everything, and as I was then persuaded, and remained confirmed, that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God” (*The Marriage* 22).

Within the flux of the poet who writes induced by the knowledge of his inner voice, or by the divinity which echoes inside, there is no need to physically see with the eyes, as the introspective light is enough for him. Opening the eyes would only be a concrete action: “A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees” (*The Marriage* 13). This poetical composition teaches that spiritual concerns are not only linked with a mystical-religious unity, but they are always an ontological reflex, the interaction between form and content, sacred and profane, diabolic and divine, body and spirit, way beyond the realms of Christian Creation. It is no overstatement to say that *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* recreates Genesis, however, in the “infinite deep” (*The Marriage* 32), and just like the Supreme Entity crafted mankind and all the elements of Nature, Blake blows into the nostril of his text-illuminations the breath of life. His blow animates, moves the static matter, so from its amorphous, isolated condition, word transmutes itself (and transmits itself) into images, sensations, perspectives, and forms. The Energy of the Diabolic is unremittingly consummated.

In Hebraic, the term *ruah* corresponds to the “spirit” derived from natural phenomena such as “wind” and “respiration” (Oxford 720). From the fluids of an ethereal, mutable environment, *The Marriage* writings bring the hunger of the colors pictured in a “perilous path” (*The Marriage* 5), where the “sneaking serpent” crawls. The snake is, for sure, one of the most archaic deities: old Egypt extolled *Nehebkau*, the serpent god, the one who arrests the souls, the one who guards the entrance of the underground, dissipating/consuming the vital energy flux of the being (Oxford 721). Such a flux does not escape from the poet’s eyes. By denying Swedenborg and formal supporters who establish moralist thinking towards religion/arts, Blake announces his true Master: “But in Milton, the Father is Destiny, the Son a ratio of the five senses, and the Holy Ghost vacuum!” (*The Marriage* 10). He continues his argument: “Note: The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels and God, and at liberty when of Devils and Hell, is because he was a true poet, and of the Devil’s party without knowing it” (*The Marriage* 10).

The poet emphasizes that Milton belonged, just like his lyric self, to the “Devil’s party”, although he was not aware of it. And the triad: “Father/Destiny”, “Son/Ratio of the five senses”, “Holy ghost/Vacuum!” reveals the “ontological time per excellence, which precedes the plot and the consciousness, identified as Cosmos or Nature”, as Bergson ponders in *Immediate Data of Consciousness* (2012, 38). In Blake’s composition, time happens to be a trap framed to catch the fragments of the divine, so “we project time into space, and we express duration in terms of extensity, and succession thus takes the form of a continuous line or a chain, the parts of which touch without penetrating one another” (Bergson 27). Bergson understands that “mental image thus shaped implies the perception, no longer successive, but simultaneous, of a before and after” (27). Therefore, *The Marriage’s* time, unconnected with the horizontal or merely chronological plans, bestows the lyric self to narrate the voyage across the Universe, recreating Paradise and Hell’s circles. Blake’s vigorous way of writing and illustrating his poem is a genuine desire for freedom, a wish that forces the voice to get rid of

the ordinary discourse, reaching for a breaking point, settled under the sign of infinite. Blake writes in ecstasy.

In Old Sumer, Enki used to get presented as the king of the waters of the wisdom, symbolized by a huge serpent body, just like his son, Ningizzida, whose image is portrayed by two twin serpents (Wilson 1999, 237). In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the poetic voice is also pictured as the mystic serpent, a metaphor of knowledge and consciousness, just like the Angel, who “become[s] a Devil” at the end of the poem: “I beheld the Angel, who stretched out his arms embracing the flame of fire” (*The Marriage* 42). This verse is an evident allusion that existence is only possible within the impulses of contrary forces, so Devil and Sacred are complementary parts of the Cosmos’ dance.

Note

1. All quotations from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* will be written/spelled respecting the 1906 version, ignoring corrections or contemporary grammar/text adaptations.

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