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WILLIAM BLAKE AND THE FOUR FACULTIES OF W.B YEATS

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1: The labors of William Butler Yeats as a poet can, for the sake of discussion, be very crudely divided into two major periods: a late 19th Century Romantic Period, during which the bulk of Yeats's poetic work was centered on the symbol of the Rose, and an early 20th Century Mystical Period, during which the bulk of his work was centered on the symbology he was to attempt to systemitize in *A Vision*. This paper focuses upon the second period with reference to Yeats's Four Faculties and the relationship to the work of the British mystic poet and artist William Blake.

That Blake had a profound influence upon Yeats cannot be doubted, and Yeats made many references in his writings to the early influences of this mystical thinker. Yeats's father read from Blake to the poet as a young boy, and Yeats was later to write, "My mind had been full of Blake from boyhood up " (in Moore, 1954: 88). Yeats was a student of Blake's symbolic system, as he was of other occult systems, and his 1893 study with Edwin Ellis of Blake's work in *The Works of William Blake, Poetic, Symbolic and Critical*, is perhaps the most thorough-going of these studies into occult systems. Yeats felt that through such systems he could locate the secret pattern of life; his lifelong obsessions were the secret patterns of magic and of his art. Formal religion was impossible for him as a result of his father's persuasive arguments against it, and he therefore spent a lifetime investigating informal and exotic religions in its place (Untrecker, 1959 : 19).

Yeats saw that Blake belonged to a spiritual line of heredity extending back in time to include the Druids, Paracelsus, Robert Fludd,

Swedenborg, and Boehme, and that their doctrines – as well as his own – were all based on a doctrine of correspondence. By emerging as it did in the poetry and art of Blake, it showed Yeats the proof of its strength. However, Blake's doctrines did not immediately affect Yeats's poetry – time was required for them to penetrate his subconscious – but eventually these ideas would unfold in all he thought, felt, did, and wrote, though they would be changed by his unique personality, environment, and experience (Moore: 99).

Yeats spent three years intensively studying Blake, the result of which was his collaboration with Ellis on *The Works of William Blake*. In a letter to Katherine Tynana (Ellman: 28) he wrote:

It has done my mind a great deal of good in liberating me from formulas and theories of several kinds. You will find it a difficult book, that Blake interpretation, but one that will open up for you as it has for me new kinds of poetic feeling and thought.

Yeats further noted in his own copy of the book that Ellis had done the preponderance of writing, but that “ the greater part of the ‘ symbolic system ’ is my writing ” (in Malins: 115). The intimate knowledge of Blake's symbolic system he gained through this study no doubt served him well as, in later life, he set about the task of creating his own symbolic system, which culminated in 1925 with the first version of his *A Vision*.

2: The symbolism created by Blake is remarkably comprehensive. The

four elements and the symbolic Four Zoas that he connected with them radiate through the universe as four aspects of the human mind. Yeats identified these four elements as Reason, Emotion, Sensation, and Energy. Central to this is the idea that all is based on a unity which we cannot see. Blake conceived of his Zoas as being originally and ultimately in harmony, which he called a state to which Humankind would ultimately be restored. As a result of their divided state, however, the fourfold elements could battle with each other, and in such confusion the Zoas lose their identities and split off into various sections of themselves. One such section is known as the Emanation of a Zoa's affective life. Another is the Spectre, or the Zoa's abstract reasoning power. Such segments of the Zoas, and on a lower earthly level, of the individual human being, retain their independent lives until Harmony is regained (Damon: 458 - 460).

As mentioned earlier, Yeats found the fundamental doctrines of Blake reflected in mystical symbolic systems, such as Druidism, Theosophy, and the Cabala, this latter of which is many-rooted. It is a doctrine of correspondences which affirms two orders, natural and supernatural, with the supernatural being primary. Correspondence is seen as existing throughout the universe, embodied in everything—in forms, in sound, in colors and so forth.

Blake did not explain this double arrangement in conceptual terms. As a poet, he found that parables were richer, briefer, and a truer way of speaking. He made his explanation of correspondences an extended parable in which the Four Zoas, or divisions of Humanity, struggle for redemption. The Zoas have correspondences in the human mind and body: Urizen being the head or reason; Luvah being the heart or emotion; Tharmas being the body; and Urthona being the imagination. Blake also identified these aspects of the human being and the Zoas with the car-

dinal points of the compass, the four elements, and the four beasts described by John *Revelations* as standing around the throne of the Lamb. There was a time when these fourfold aspects of human beings existed in flawless unity, says Blake; they existed in the archetypal man Albion, in whom they reflected the "Universal Man" or God. Albion, however, fell into opaque matter, and every state was thrown out of unity and into space. In Blake's mythology, Humankind was blessed and happy when the Four Zoas held their proper relation to the divine Order, because then the macrocosm and the microcosm were one with each other, Blake's universe in a grain of sand. Falling out of harmony with Heaven brought suffering, and having lost the Spirit, Humankind now wanders in the barren world of outer necessity and sensation. In other words, the Fall was out of unity and into division; and salvation, or restoration, can come only through the rediscovery of the vision of unity. This is a slow process that will continue through many incarnations, until the external part of Humankind, which is above the Four Zoas in the quintessence or fire of God and which cannot be destroyed, is brought again into harmony with the universal resonance of God. According to Blake, Humankind's only hope of achieving this is through Jesus Christ, and he asserted that only through Christ could Humankind be restored to its rightful place in Heaven. Blake set all of this down in *Vala*, and he said that in the end, all the suffering in the world will prove to have been worthwhile (Moore: 88 – 89).

3: In establishing his own symbolic and mystical system, Yeats was following an essential dictum given by Blake that a person must create his own system or become the slave of another's. This approach to life's emotional and religious core had particular appeal to the artist in Yeats,

who had observed in his autobiography that while the works of the great Impressionists—Blake, Ingres, Rossetti, and others—had created whole schools of imitators, they created no universal language. Yeats noted that (1978 : 371).

Administrators of tradition, they seem to copy
everything, but in reality copy nothing, and not
one of them can be mistaken for another.

Such is the mark of individuality, the distinction of voice without which an artist is nothing. A creator creates his own system. In contrast, an imitator must always be enslaved to the master he is dedicated to copying.

No system stands in complete isolation of every other system, however. Quite the contrary, each system tends to draw compatible elements from other surrounding systems into its own structure, recasting the old into something new, much like the artist does through the creative process. This was Yeats's approach in forming his own system, and he turned to mystics and philosophers like Blake and Nietzsche for direction. In particular, he turned to Blake, whose system he was intimately familiar with. This is especially obvious in his *Four Faculties*.

Ellman noted the relationship between Nietzsche and Yeats in terms of the Doctrine of the Mask in so far as a systematization of this aspect of Yeats's philosophy is concerned, but also that it is Blake to whom Yeats is closer in his view of humankind and human psychology (Ellman: 93). Unlike Nietzsche, whose philosophy says "Surpass man" — which suggests that there is something negative in humankind—Blake's gentler (and perhaps more realistic) view says "Restore Man," and Blake symbolized this in the New Jerusalem. In Yeats's hands, the Mask of Nietzsche's *Urbemensch* doctrine becomes a symbol of Restoration.

This connection between Blake and Yeats's Four Faculties is further strengthened by Yeats himself, who wrote: "*Mask and Body of Fate* are symbolic woman, *Will and Creative Mind* symbolic man; the man and woman of Blake's Mental Traveller " (in Vendler: 53). Yeats drew other elements from Blake's work as well, embodying them in his poetry and other writings. His various treatises on Blake and his philosophy, particularly *The Works of William Blake*, testify to Yeats's abiding interests and predilections concerning Blake (Malins: 59).

In devising his own system of interpreting the world, Yeats agreed with Hegel that every thesis has implied in it an antithesis, and he modified the notion that every movement holds the seeds of its own decay by identifying those seeds as a counter-movement (Ellman: 153). Yeats symbolised this with the gyre. In Yeats's poetry the gyres that represent the world of appearance are wedded in antagonism, symbolizing the elements that constitute existence. Examples of these would be sun and moon, day and night, life and death, love and hate, man and woman, human and God, human and beast, human and his spiritual counterpart or "daimon." This gyre is roughly similar to the rising spiral that Hegel employs to describe his own theory that a thesis in conflict with an antithesis gives rise to a synthesis. On a more abstract level, Yeats's gyres may be seen as permanence and change, the one and the many, objectivity and subjectivity, and the natural world and the supernatural world.

One restatement of the gyres made by Yeats has two parts. The first is the juxtaposition of the Self and its spiritual opposite, or daimon—which is a mask elevated to a plane beyond the human. In the second part of the restatement, Yeats divides the Self into two sets of symbolic opposites: Will and Mask, and Creative Mind and Body of Fate. These are the components of the Four Faculties, and each set can be roughly interpreted as representing Imagination and Environment respectively. They are

equivalent to fire and water, earth and air, and their interrelationships become more complex in Yeats's later works.

The faculties of the daimon are exactly opposite to those of the human counterpart. When the Four Faculties are in certain stages that place them in harmony rather than in conflict, they might then attain the equilibrium of Unity of Being. It is in this instance that the Four Faculties most resemble elements in Blake, particularly his Four Zoas. The linkage is legitimate, though qualified. There is a resemblance only in the sense that, like the Four Zoas, the Four Faculties represent a four-fold picture of the human psyché. Unlike Yeats's Four Faculties, Blake's Zoas have directly traceable Biblical origins.

The resemblance between the work of Yeats and that of Blake becomes more apparent in Yeats's *A Vision*, in which the Four Faculties are seen to fulfill some of the same functions as the Four Zoas of Blake. Yeats has the Unity of Being and the Sphere, which are approximately parallel to the harmony of the Zoas; and his daimon and "anti-self" are directly analogous to Blake's Emanation and Spectre. Blake writes in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" that

Without Contraries there is no Progression.
Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy,
Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.

This idea of paired opposites – the very heart of Blake's mystical philosophy – is central to Yeats's view of the world as well, and the idea of progression is expressed in his dynamic system of the gyres. It is in *A Vision* that the gyres are represented as one of a group of three symbols that mirror each other and demonstrate a complex philosophical

structure. The root symbol is the Sphere inside of which whirl a pair of interpenetrating gyres or cones, and Yeats sometimes referred to these as vortices. They are inseparably intertwined, yet are perpetually at war with one another. The Sphere represents for Yeats the unified reality beyond the chaotic appearance or the experience of reality. The gyres stand for the world of appearance, as noted earlier, showing the oppositions already discussed elsewhere in this paper. The gyres are, like the Sphere, not often mentioned overtly in Yeats's poems, but there are exceptions, such as his poems "The Gyres" and "The Second Coming" (Yeats, 1940 : 291, 184).

Many other occult writers have made use of the cone, gyre or vortex, and the sphere, and the former two can be found in Blake, who wrote in *Milton* 15 : 21,

The nature of infinity is this: that every thing
has its own Vortex, and when once a traveller
thro Eternity has pass'd that Vortex, he perceives
it roll backward behind his path, into a globe
itself infolding like a sun, or like a moon,
or like a universe of starry majesty, while he
keeps onwards in his wonderous journey on the
earth . . .

Which is Blake's way of saying that we learn by experience (Damon: 440). In this sense, Blake's vortices are rather like the world of appearances represented by Yeats's vortices, and Yeats's Sphere is not unlike Blake's "outward bound of Energy," that essential limit within which the vast panoply of human activity takes place.

The symbolism for *A Vision* was complete with the Four Facul-

ties, twenty-eight phases of the moon, and the two gyres, with the Sphere containing the whole. *A Vision* is indispensable for reading Yeats's later poetry because it ranged together a group of symbols which had in common what Yeats's earlier symbols, such as the Rose, lacked: a furious movement, as in the spinning gyres. A human being is a creature who turns around a single wheel during a single lifetime and around a larger wheel in the course of a cycle of reincarnations. The afterlife is seen as no more than the projection of tumult beyond the grave, and each succeeding lifetime is pictured as a tug-of-war between the Four Faculties of the human mind, the daimon, the dead, and various other forces.

The contest as delineated by Yeats is intricate and unpredictable, so much so that Yeats started out with a deterministic system that became reframed by succeeding parts and other poems, until it contained a large measure of free will (Ellman: 137-138). This is only appropriate for so loving an observer of Blake as Yeats was.

4: As touched upon previously, though Blake's influence on Yeats's symbolic system is undeniable—especially with regard to the Four Faculties—the resemblance between the two exists only up to a point. Blake was clearly dedicated to a Christian religious ethic, whereas Yeats clove to a secular mystical ethic. In any case, Yeats could not have heeded Blake's warning that he who does not create his own system is the slave of another's had he blindly copied or merely redefined Blake. Doing so would have made Yeats a slave to Blake. Furthermore, Blake used an extraordinarily complex, special terminology in his verse and mystical system, something which Yeats avoided in favor of offering various contrasts which would depend upon the Four Faculties while avoiding the confusion which would no doubt have resulted from using esoteric no-

menclature (Ellman: 159–160).

Yeats appreciated the problems of understanding that could arise when esoteric language was used in poetry, but as he wrote of Blake, “ If he spoke confusedly and obscurely it was because he spoke of things for whose speaking he could find no models in the world he knew ” (Yeats, 1961 : 111). Although Yeats had Blake for a model, his statement could as easily apply to himself. As he was to write in his later years (1940 : 299) in “ An Acre of Grass, ”

Grant me an old man’s frenzy,
Myself I must remake
Till I am Timon or Lear
Or that William Blake
Who beat upon the wall
Till Truth obeyed his call;

A mind Michael Angelo knew
That can pierce the clouds,
Or inspired by frenzy
Shake the dead in their shrouds;
Forgotten else by mankind,
An old man’s eagle mind.

The poem implies that perhaps the best way of seeing the self in relation to the world is to *not* have models.

In the end, it is only through strength of Will that the individual human being can remake himself and attain Unity of Being. As with Yeats, so it was with Blake, for whom the Will was an essential attribute of the individual. Being sacred to Blake, the individual Will could

be controlled only by the Divine Will, and only then without coercion: "By Providence Divine conducted, not bent from his own will lest Death Eternal should be the result, for the Will cannot be violated," Blake wrote in the *Four Zoas* (vi: 282). Yeats could only approve.

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