

John Cowper Powys and William Blake

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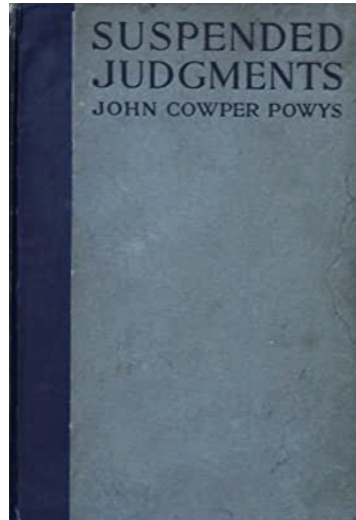
INTRODUCTION

Both John Cowper Powys and William Blake produced extensive bodies of work during their lifetimes. It might, therefore, seem an ambitious project to set out to discuss one in relation to the other. Each has also been subject to a cornucopia of ‘treatments’: literary, philosophical, psychological, philosophical, historical – and the rest. Add to all this, that my own Gnostic approach itself involves a difficult and contested area of theological and esoteric history, and it would appear that my quest is doomed to failure. But, I continue...

In this article I discuss Powys and Blake with respect to a series of salient features of their published writings (and paintings in the case of Blake). The fact that I consider Blake a Gnostic, and the philosophy underpinning Gnosticism as the key to understanding his sense and meaning, consequently entails me bringing the same perspective to Powys¹ in comparing their respective works. But, I begin by looking at what Powys himself wrote about Blake. Actually, there are various *en passant* references made by Powys to Blake, but the most extended discussion comes from a 1916 essay². I use this source to address the ‘tensions’ they both shared to a lesser or greater extent. I then consider what creativity meant for them; in terms of the relationship between a human mind and its surroundings. In particular, I am interested in ‘the self’ and ‘the other’, whether that latter be material, living or imaginary – or perhaps all three. It is on this basis that I consider the main tenets of Gnosticism (see below) to be a way of illuminating a series of features that might be found in Powys’ and Blake’s respective works. I offer some brief allusion to the history of Gnosticism and its defining elements in order to support the discussion. I explore Blake, Powys and Gnosticism in terms of the themes of Nature, (sexual) Union, Images, and Memory. There are elements of comparison and contrast in this undertaking. All these tease out the nature of the relationships Blake and Powys held with respect creativity, self, and indeed the source of narratives expressed in their work. I conclude by suggesting that although Blake and Powys shared similar problematics, their final respective resting places were significantly distinct.

Powys on Blake

The 1916 essay on Blake is included in a collection along with fifteen others, dealing with such writers as Balzac, Rousseau, Montaigne, Conrad, James, Wilde, and Pascal³.



Powys would have been 44 that year, and the list includes a selection of those authors he would have encountered in his own education, and indeed, on whom he had been lecturing in America. What he has to say about Blake is a typical Powysian sweep of insight and extemporization. He freely admits not touching the ‘prophecies’, which is perhaps a pity since they are closest to Powys’ own wild narratives. In fact, it is clear that his views on Blake are based almost entirely on the latter’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Powys’ preoccupation is therefore childhood as an idealized state and energy – especially sexual energy: But, it is immediately obvious, as with Blake, that such themes go beyond narrow definitions and ensnare others such as the relationship between the human and natural world, creativity, and artistic (literary) representations.

Powys is enthusiastic. Blake, he says, anticipated Nietzsche and is an artist on which every other great artist since has ‘brooded’. Nietzsche is referenced with respect to the ‘child’ who will come to inaugurate ‘the Great Noon’ – the new world that Blake expressed in *Jerusalem*. Powys then declares himself against the protestant and puritanical ‘cult of children’ who would suppress them; and for, the ‘renaissance’ of the ‘Catholic faith’ (one assumes universal) and ‘Pagan freedom’. But, the childhood condition that Powys identifies in Blake is to be found in ‘every man and woman’ as a state of ‘innocence’; although even here, it is an innocence forged in the fires of experience. Christ – who Blake referred to as the Imagination – is again quoted here as a ‘man-child’ who possesses a power drawn from the ‘depths of the universe’ with a ‘temper the very opposite to the ascetic one’. Indeed, this Christ seems more like Blake’s Devil from *Marriage*: a ‘Pagan Christ’ in opposition to restraint – the notion of Blake ‘energy is eternal delight’ comes to mind, or ‘I must create a system or be enslaved by another mans’ (*Jerusalem*, Plate 10)⁴. Men (*sic.*) must sport and play in a childlike state, as ‘emancipated flesh’ and ‘free spirit’, which Powys describes as ‘the triumphant nuptial of the soul and body’. Inevitably, there is no place for shame in sexual love, but an intellectual and moral freedom. Tellingly, however, Powys picks up again on Blake’s connection with innocence and

experience, this time in terms of sexual relations as part of a broader relationship to the natural world and human response to it. ‘One is never oppressed by the weight of natural beauty,’ Powys writes, and ‘a single tree, a single petal’, can transport us to ‘fields of light, in the mystic dance of creation’. This is the prerogative of an imagination: ‘that it can reconcile us to life as simplest and least adorned’. Happiness is, consequently, not gleamed from setting a greater before oneself, or to be found in optimism itself, or indeed in eating drinking and philandering for, quoting Blake, ‘he who binds to himself a joy, does the winged life destroy, He who kisses it as it flies, Lives in Eternity’s sunrise’⁵.

Common Themes

This is heady stuff and, of course, is expressed as a personal odyssey. It is also a (lengthy) debate as to what extent Powys – or indeed Blake himself – ever achieved such a state of mind and body and, if so, how – about which more later. As suggested previously, Powys and Blake clearly shared various tensions in realizing this state of imaginative being, this (pagan) Christ-like innocence: for example, society versus the individual; spirit, v. matter; subject v. object; reason v. imagination; heaven v. hell; innocence v. experience; sensuality v. feelings; happiness v. desperation, etc., etc.

How man (*sic.*) might look out on the natural world with the eyes of a child – or not – is evident in two descriptions from Blake and Powys of personal experience; one actual, one fictionalised.

The first is taken from Blake’s description of the world as he saw it on the morning after his arrival in Felpham:

My Eyes did Expand
Into regions of air
Away from all care
Into regions of fire
Remote from Desire
...
I each particle gazed
Astonished Amazed
For each was a Man
Human formed. ...
Every Stone on the Land
Each rock & each hill
Each fountain and rill
Each herb and each tree
Mountain hill Earth & Sea
Cloud Meteor & Star...
Are men seen from afar?
(Letter to Thomas Butts, 2nd October, 1800)⁶

Next to this humanistic vision – albeit divine – we can set a different view from Powys from the opening pages of *Wolf Solent*:

He recalled the figure of a man he had seen on the steps outside Waterloo station. The inner despair upon the face that the figure had turned towards him. The face was repeated many times among those great curving masses of emerald green foliage...It was just the face of a man, of a mortal man, against whom Providence had grown as

malignant as a mad dog...He would have said that his magnetic impulses resembled the expanding of the great vegetable leaves over a still pool...the great struggle going on in Nature between Good and Evil forces...Outward things, such as the terrible face on the Waterloo steps were to him like faintly-limned images in a mirror, the true reality of which lay in his mind...beneath the dark waters of his consciousness... I've learnt sir to get my happiness out of sensation.⁷

In this juxtaposition, a critical issue is the relationship between man and nature (the world). In both extracts, what is described might appear as a kind of projection, albeit of a different worldview. However, such an explanation only works at a fairly superficial level, and there remains the question of what is the nature of this type of relationship: And, it seems far from being unproblematic. For example, Blake's description above is really quite ecstatic, and he also writes some of the most beautiful pastoral poetry in the English language:

First, ere the morning breaks, joy opens in the flowery bosoms,
Joy, even to tears, which the sun rising dries; first the wild thyme
And meadow-sweet, downy & soft waving among the reeds,
Light springing on the air, lead the sweet dance. They wake
The Honeysuckle sleeping on the oak (the flaunting beauty
Revels along upon the wind); the white-thorn, lovely may,
Opens her many lovely eyes. Listening the rose still sleeps-
(*Milton Plate 31*)⁸

But, elsewhere, he is seen to denounce the material world:

The eloquent descriptions of Nature in Wordsworth's poems were conclusive proof of Atheism, for whoever believes in nature said Blake: disbelieves in God - for Nature is the work of the devil.
(Crabb Robinson, *Diary, Letters and Reminiscences*)⁹

And,

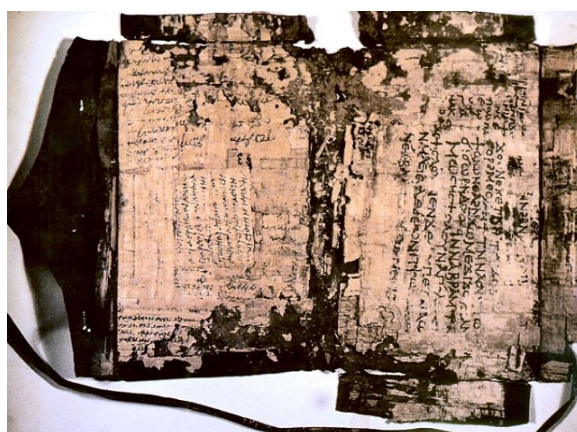
Natural Objects always did and do now weaken, deaden and obliterate Imagination in Me.
Wordsworth must know that what he Writes as valuable is Not to be Found in Nature.
(Blake's *Annotations to Wordsworth Poems*)¹⁰

Powys also, and despite his approving descriptions of what it is to live life from a Blakean worldly perspective, doubts what else there is lurking in the human mind. Everything we experience is in nature, he writes, although the opposite is equally true: 'the whole vast planetary experience of the human race is in our separate solitary mind'¹¹. Imagination then is for him a way of tapping into the 'vast reservoir' of planetary experience – as experienced by one man. And, certainly, across his writings, there are plenty of images of death, what is mortified, cruelty, torture, sacrifice – indeed 'the horror of nature – all 'cloaked' in his fictionalized images. At one point¹², he writes of the 'trick' of separating oneself from all this and regarding it for what it is, an act I shall return to below. Certainly, such a separation can also involve images literally 'looking back' at Powys as they do for his characters – the Ox-head in the butcher's shop in *Porius*, for example. But, what is the nature of these distinct viewpoints – from Blake and Powys – and, indeed, the views of these views? I am going to explore these questions with respect to Gnosticism/ Gnosis. Firstly,

however, I set out a brief description of what Gnosticism/ Gnosis is and suggest why it might be useful in elucidating our appreciation of Blake and Powys – together and separate.

The Gnostic Myth

A comprehensive account of Gnosis and Gnosticism is clearly beyond the scope of this short article. Broadly, there are 5 key periods to acknowledge in its history. Firstly, the issues at play in Gnosticism can be traced back to the Pre-Socratic philosophy of 6th Century BCE and indeed beyond. Secondly, the heretical Christian sects of 1st century AD – significant here because of the discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices in 1945, which gave us a whole different set of alternative gospels (the Gospel of Philip, Thomas, etc.)¹³.



Thirdly, the Cathars of South-West France in the 12th Century. Fourthly, the broad tradition of first millennium Hermeticism, which inspired an array of philosophers in Renaissance Europe (for example, Paracelsus) from the 15th Century. Fifthly, is its influence in a range of 19th and 20th Century esoteric, occult and artistic writings.

There are countless narrative variations and oppositions across these traditions and the texts that characterize them. However, certain key notions predominate. One is the creation of the universe itself as expressed in Gnostic myth. One example has it that in the beginning is a god of gods, a 'first cause', an unknowable Monad, who/which exists as a unitary being or oneness. This entity is the fount of existence, the 'fullness of being' often referred to as the 'pleroma' in Gnostic scripts. Its unity exists as a perfect marriage of contraries and opposites. The gender bias of the language used here is to note here; as even in this primeval oneness, the unity is expressed in terms of the fusing of sexual opposites. Nevertheless, the feminine aspect of the unity has a name - Sophia - originating from the Greek word for wisdom (knowledge!). She is a goddess in her own right, but she and her male consort 'act as one'. At some point in cosmic history, Sophia wishes to act alone and so creates the demiurge or chief architect of the material world – thus, a separation of mind and body. This Jehovah-like character then creates Adam and Eve, Nature, and all forms within it – thus, a separation of human and the natural/ material world. Sometimes, these creations are splendid, but at base they are all forms of the *fallen world*; since, unlike 'the spirit', they all obey strict laws of boundary and definition - restraint. Sophia, recognising her error consequently enters into the world, into mortality, in

order to give mankind a spark of eternity. She becomes Eve, the archetypal heavenly woman, who now contains the eternal goddess Sophia. Adam and Eve consequently fall from the Garden of Eden and pass into the material world; if they did not no-one would know of the demiurge's flawed creation. However, by passing into the material world, and hence relying on a messenger of truth (the Gnostic redeemer who brings the Gnosis, or secret revelation), Adam and Eve, and all their mortal descendants, have the possibility of escaping the division and darkness of materiality and regaining their eternal positions as gods. This story is summed up in one Gnostic script:

In the beginning the father intended to bring forth the angels and the archangels.
His thought leaped ahead from him.
This thought, who knew her father's intention.
Thus she descended to the lower realms
She bore angels and powers, who then created the world
But after she bore them she was held capture by them
She suffered every indignity from them
And she could not return to the father
In a human body she came to be confined
And thus from age to age she passed from body to body.¹⁴

In theory at least, we know that Blake had access to lengthy expositions of Gnostic thought: for example, in Pierre Bayle's Dictionary, Issac de Beausobre's *Histoire Critique de Manichée et Manichéisme*, Nathaniel Lardner's *History of Heretics and Credibility of the Gospel History*, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and any number of works of the Unitarian theologian Joseph Priestley: of primary documents, 'Poimandres' a Gnostic treatise within the *Corpus Hermeticum*, 'Pistis Sophia', a late Gnostic treatise, and Richard Laurence's 1821 translation of *The (Ethiopian) Book of Enoch*, which was discovered in 1773. However, we also know that he read the works of Swedenbourg, Jacob Boehme and Paracelsus, and it is probably from these sources – and (Hermetic) others - that he would have come across Gnostic influences. Echoes of the creation myth are everywhere in his work, as well as the sense of a trapped/ alienated feminine aspect:

Sophia/ Jerusalem

And they enclosed my infinite brain into a narrow circle
And sunk my heart into the Abyss, a red round globe burning
Till all from life I was obliterated and erased.
(*Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Plate 2)¹⁵

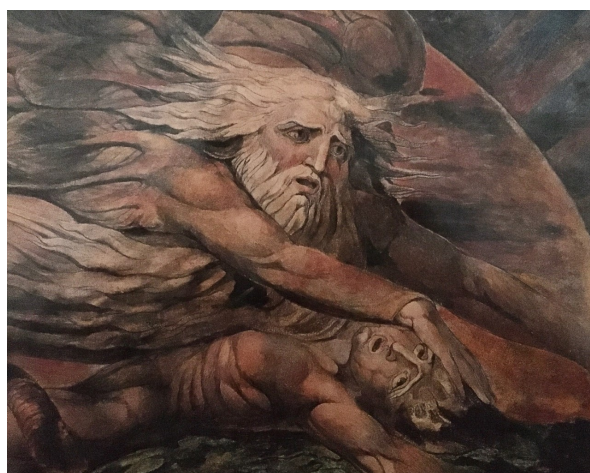
'Lost! Lost! Lost! are my emanations...
We are become a Victim to the Living We hide in secret
I have hidden Jerusalem in Silent Contrition O Pity Me'
(*Vala*, Plate 4)¹⁶

We know that John Cowper Powys also claimed to read esoteric texts 'all the time'. Key themes from the Gnostic myth to explore with respect to Blake and Powys might hence be summed up as: the *imperfect nature* of Old Testament God; the nature and status of the *material World*; the *feminine spark* (spirit) within man and nature. It is these tensions and problematics, which necessitate the kind of inner *personal quest* referred to above: that it is necessary to 'redeem' them, also implying an 'inner god'

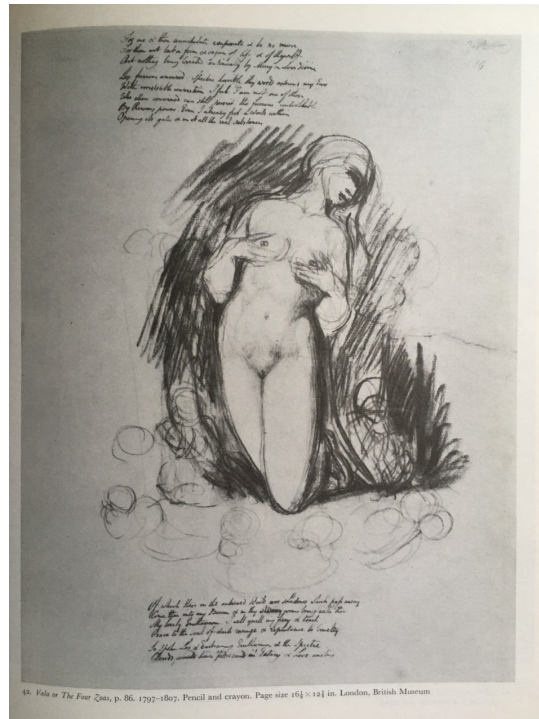
to be found in place of an *outer* authoritarian one who requires obedience to his Will. To sum up with the 2nd / 3rd Century Gnostic monk Monoimus:

Abandon the search for God and the creation and other matters of a similar sort. Look for him by taking yourself as the starting point. Learn who it is within you who makes everything his own and say, 'My God, my mind, my thought, my soul, my body.' Learn the sources of sorrow, joy, love, hate...If you carefully investigate these matters, you will find him in *yourself*.¹⁷

These positions return us again to the issue of nature; as a product of the 'fallen' world created by the fallen God – Elohim¹⁸.



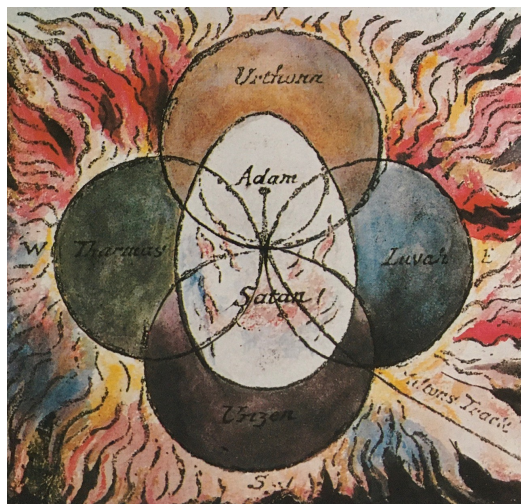
Since nature is created by a separated god, Blake comments as above, that nature – the material world - 'deadened' him; that is, it lacked spiritual unity. Yet, and at the same time, it is an odd sort of 'deadening'; in fact, more a sort of alluring, attractive relationship which tempts (separates) him from himself – or at least his feminine aspect; which is why he nature poetry can be so seductive. Such is why nature is similarly personified by Blake as a woman - *Vala* - in his cosmology of the *Four Zoas*¹⁹: she is also the female emanation of the male Zoa Luvah – Passion! In other words, the material world restrains passionate energy.



Powys also evidently held ambiguous feelings about nature and the so-called ‘First Cause’ that produced it, and about how natural objects embody spiritual aspects. If all men have ‘consciousness’ of nature, he writes, the objects of the material latter similarly have ‘under-essences’ that also share the same experiences of ‘sun’, moon’, ‘stars’ etc.: Men engage with the nature of these ‘essences’ – ‘their souls’ - of materiality as well²⁰. It is in this way, that Powys can dwell on what a leaf might be thinking. But, all is not well in such materiality and, if it can be the source of beauty, creativity, animate objects, and art, it can also be the sources of cruelty, fear, horror, and suffering. In the *Brazen Head*²¹, matter is literally impregnated with male (the wand of Merlin) and female (ghosta) energy by the Black and White magicians Roger Bacon and Peter Peregrinus. Similar to the Gnostic myth, therefore, not only can materiality imprison spirit, its energy might be ‘good’ ‘or bad’; although which is which might well be debatable as Blake declared in the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Powys draws a similar picture when he writes that the ‘First Cause’ - the ‘primordial power’ that encircles the earth and which formed the ‘stellar constellations’ and ‘higher dimensions’ - is ‘Itself divided against Itself’²² - and, ‘Its primordial goodness is warring forever against its primordial evil’²³. In fact, it is only its vast energy – and waste - that ‘holds life up’. That being said, of course, Powys on more than one occasion writes of his suspicion that such visions may just as well be more ‘projections’ of what hold souls together than ‘actual living gods’²⁴. Interestingly, this again seems to set the ‘spiritual’ against the ‘social’: that both the beauty and the horrors he sees in the material world might just as well have a human source rather than a theological one. Since the principal argument of this essay is that the redemption of one is to be understood and expressed in terms of the other, for the moment we might see this distinction as being of secondary importance to our discussion.

Yet, whichever comes first for Powys – the universe as seen or the mind that sees it – his universe is a ‘living one’. ‘We see to interpret the universe in terms of human life’, he writes ‘an immense plurality of separate universes (which) find...a

single universe of personal universes'²⁵. We 'see' with reason, he argues similarly in an almost Kantian manner, synthesized with 'imagination', and it is 'instinct', 'imagination', 'intuition' and 'experience' that enjoins Nature and Humanity²⁶. What we share in this is a unity – *de facto*, the emotion of love (all is one) – where human souls 'touch'²⁷. Blake takes a not dissimilar line, but offers an entirely more complex cosmology. For him, the material world is imagined as 'the mundane shell' (or egg)²⁸, which literally holds us in.



This returns us to the sexualized – or at least gender-ised – nature of this man-nature relationship. For Blake, the division of the sexes was clearly a source of distress; no less than their separation from the material/ nature. This is why, he sought some 'liberation' or 'reconciliation' with the feminine spirit it contained. 'Although our human power can sustain the severe contentions of friendship, he consequently writes 'our sexual cannot but flies into the Ulro' (his name for chaos) (*Milton*, plate 41)²⁹.

For Powys, sex is similarly a manifestation of the 'First Cause': 'What mortals call Sex is only a manifestation in human life, and in animal and vegetable life, of a certain spasm, a certain delicious shudder, a certain orgasm of a purely psychic nature, which belongs to the personality of the First Cause'³⁰. And, of course, everywhere in Powys' literary and personal lives there is evidence of his distress – horror even – of male-female relationships, the intimacy they imply, and their consequences. If the opposition – literally – is the issue at stake, the resolution nevertheless implies some sort of union.

Human sense, male/ female relations and materiality/ spirit are for Blake here archetypically the driving forces of the universe but played out in terms of a set of impulses – the Zoas – which determined what does and does not happen in the cosmic worlds. Many of these Zoas are similar or the same as Powys universal impulses, but they are grouped in gendered pairs which match *Spectre* (male) with *Emanation* (female): Urizen (reason) – Ahania (pleasure) ; Tharmas (sensation) – Enion (sex) ; Luvah (passion) – Vala (body/ nature) ; Urthona (imagination) – Eniharmon – (care). Most of Blake longer 'prophecies' are played out in terms of this *dramatis personae* as they are set one against the other. They are also positioned according to a spiritual geography. Most of the problems of Albion (England) occur when Urizen moves to the ruling position of the north so that he separates from his female emanation

Jerusalem (creativity) and rules through reason. Redemption is then when he re-assumes his correct position (in the south as Urthona – imagination – returns to his rightful position in the North); in the course of which, Albion becomes once again united with his emanation Jerusalem (see *Jerusalem* plate 99³¹).



The consequence is that there exists once again what Powys calls this ‘unity of love’ - oneness. The sense of ‘eternity’ – ‘to see the world in a grain of sand...’³² ‘to kiss a joy as it flies...’³³ – is always spiritual reality underlying temporal phenomena and is the consequence of this re-unification. For Blake, this process – this psychic reconciliation - is conceived as being within ‘one man’³⁴. Moreover, the Luvah archetype – passion – arrives ‘enfolded’ in ‘robes of blood’ and ‘crown of thorns’³⁵; a clear reference to Christ but now as the imagination and the suffering he must undergo for the transformation to occur. In this way, Luvah (passion) is reconciled with Vala (nature/ materiality) and separation/ division is overcome through the union of gendered opposites; also involving something of an ex-static surrender of ego to the linearity of time (see below). ‘Sexual’ union in these broader terms of opposite and opposing forces within the cosmic spiritual war of the fallen world hence becomes a precursor to redemption: where spectres/ emanation, spirit/ matter, mind/ body have the possibility of returning to harmony. This is depicted in *Jerusalem*, and is always the conclusive point of Blake’s longer prophecies.

However, such a point is not simply one of mutual forbearance; it is an actual ontological state of union – a-sexual even but not hermaphroditic. For Blake, the latter, a creature possessing organs of both sexes is sterile. In the *Four Zoas*, Satan is declared ‘nature as hermaphroditic priest and king’³⁶, unreconciled, still warring. On a more personal level, hermaphroditic is used to express ‘doubt’, ‘self-contradiction’³⁷. This is the exact opposite of ‘androgyny’ where ‘male’ and ‘female’ are permanently at-one as the natural state of the soul. In the Gnostic *Gospel of Philip* this union is referred to as ‘the Bridle chamber’³⁸; but it is evidently intended not as the coming together of husband and wife but as taking place within an individual as the union of opposites at a spiritual level: spectres and emanations in Blake’s terms³⁹. The ‘bridle

chamber' is the 'Holy of Holies'. Baptism includes the resurrection and the redemption; and that redemption takes place in the bridle chamber. Christ came to repair the separation, which was from the beginning and again unites the two, and to give life to those who died as a result of the separation and unite them. What is united in the bridle chamber will no longer be separated.

For Blake, a similar place is described as Beulah, a source of poetry and dreams, and thus 'where contraries are equally true' (*Milton*, plate 30⁴⁰), and where 'sexes wander in dreams of bliss' (*Jerusalem* plate 79⁴¹) and relations are ideal and unrestricted (*Jerusalem*, plate 30⁴²): and, 'In Beulah the female lets down her beautiful Tabernacle, Which the male enters between her Cherubim, And becomes one with her, mingling and condensing in Self- love'.

Powys writes in similar terms when Sam and Nell come together:

...this feeling that lovers so have, that they have found the one solitary 'alter-ego' in the universe whose identity supplements their own...(they) knew it this night of the Full Moon (*Note: Blake refers to Beulah as a 'moony night'*)...they plunged into it so desperately, so utterly, that in the mingling of their identities, there seemed no portion of their identities – body, soul or spirit – left over, that was not merged and lost in the other.⁴³ (*my italics*)

Androgyny by another name is that instant of sexual union. The spiritual potential of this place is also emphasised by Powys when Sam in fact goes off to an ascetic life after this encounter with Nell – there is no going back to separation and division after this experience. Aspects of it can also be found elsewhere in the fictional lives that Powys created. For example, an 'out of body' oneness is referred to by Witch Betsy in *Ducdame* as 'Cimmery land'⁴⁴. Child-like innocence is again evoked here, 'where folks live like unborn babes', again implying this sense of 'innocence regained through experience'. Here, there is the collapse of the subject and the object, as if nothing separates the observer and the observed. Powys describes similar conditions in a number of other situations. For instance, Rook Ashover in *Ducdame* has a vision of a young man on a horse as he is about to die (one thinks of Shakespeare's *Pale Rider*); with a face very much akin to his own, yet, 'with a beauty and power in it beyond anything he had ever approached'⁴⁵. Here, there is almost a reversal of the Dorian Gray painting, where the vision represents the good rather than the bad he had potentially affected in life. The madman Adrian Sorio in *Rodmoor* also has his son Baptiste appear out of the swirling mists⁴⁶ as an 'angel of nothingness', the counterpoint to the 'being' by which he is obsessed. Powys writes of 'This image, of a shape dim and vast and elemental...'; something that might also well describe Blake's fantastic imaginings, in both written and graphic forms.

This relationship within and in front of 'the image' is similarly central to the Gnostic tradition. Meister Eckhart, for example, stated:

When the soul wishes to experience something, she throws out an image of the experience before her and enters into her own image⁴⁷.

Here, there is a collapse of the manifest and the un-manifest. In the Gnostic *Gospel of Philip*, we also read:

Truth did not enter this world unclad, but it came in types and images. The world will not receive truth in any other manner. There is rebirth and there is an image of rebirth. It is truly necessary that the human being should be born again *through the image*. If one does not acquire the images for oneself the name will also be taken away from one. But if one receives them in the anointing of the Pleroma (of the might of the cross), which the apostles call the right and the left, then such a person is no longer a Christian but a Christ⁴⁸. (*my italics*)

The message consequently is that *you become what you see*:

You saw the spirit, you became the spirit. You saw the Father, you shall become the father. You see yourself and what you see you shall become'.
(*Gospel of Philip*⁴⁹)

'They became what they beheld'
(*Jerusalem*, plate 32⁵⁰)

But, is what you see you – for good or bad – or some sort of external reality? What do you see? – how did Blake and Powys see this?

As above, we know that both writers were able to conjure up horrific images. Powys writes of 'cloaking' his imagination with images. Blake's imagination, on the other hand, was so vivid, he literally 'saw' what he imagined as 'visions'. In both cases, there is a deeply psychologically therapeutic element behind this image-ing; one of externalization. Again, Gnostic scripture describes this process:

If you bring forth what is in you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is in you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.
(*Gospel of Thomas*⁵¹)

... seeing *what we are* as *seeing what is*. Such a relationship is also perfectly consistent with the contemporary phenomenology of the subject-object relationship. For example, in *The Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty writes of the 'study of perceptions' with the intent of putting 'essences back into existence'⁵². For him, there is a two-way process between what he terms *noesis* and *noema*. The *noematic* is all that is 'known' about an *object of perception*; whilst the *noetic* is an individual *act of (cognitive) perception* – not all that 'is known' is brought to mind at 'one time'.

It follows in a similar manner when Merleau-Ponty writes of 'a process of physiognomic perception'; of the 'drawing together the subject and object in dialogue'; of being 'diffused through the object, and by the object, of the subject's intentions' and 'arranging around the subject a world which speaks to him of himself'⁵³. In this way, for Merleau-Ponty, the subject-object becomes 'one flesh': a subject consciousness 'sees' the object but, in doing so, the object 'calls' on the subject to know what it already knows/ sees. Here, Merleau-Ponty obviously does not intend that the world is sentient, as human, of course. It is subjective consciousness that sees the world, but this world still 'calls' – interpolates – on the subject to know *what it already knows*, to be conscious of what it is already conscious of (at a deep unconscious level, of course). This is axiomatic of a kind of *metanoia*⁵⁴.

But, the experience can be psychically, if not psychologically, disturbing for the individual undergoing and faced with its effects. Powys was obviously horrified by the images he ‘saw’ in his fiction – whether to be found in nature or his own imaginings. Blake also saw how images can deceive and alienate (in a seductive manner); for example, in the poem *The Crystal Cabinet*⁵⁵. Here, the protagonist is at first seduced by images of the material world; he is thus initially intoxicated. The heightened sense of reality at them gives him a ‘new’ view of England – London and Thames – and he is thrilled by what he sees, that ‘burns like a flame’. However, he forces the matter and projects beyond the image (forcing a transcendence) and, by overstretching the external view, collapses the whole vision. The message is, as with nature, attractive images – as a form of escapism - lead men astray.

But, what is the alternative?

Faced with both ‘love’ and ‘malice’ in his images of the world⁵⁶, Powys states that he seeks to be ‘immune to all invasion’⁵⁷ – invasions, that is, from projections which are ultimately his own⁵⁸. He also refers to doing this as ‘Apex thinking’. If the ‘eternal vision’ is both ‘ourselves and not ourselves’, we need both ‘self and non-self’ – to get ourselves out of the way in order to develop a kind of non-egoistic cosmic consciousness⁵⁹. He describes this as a ‘new emotional psychology’⁶⁰ and as ‘I Not-I’. This latter echoes somewhat Saint Paul’s declaration in Corinthians and Galatians with respect to ‘I as I am’ and ‘I as the living Christ within me’. Here, as with Powys, there appears the suggestion that it is somehow possible to ‘sidestep’ the ‘empirical self’ and all that springs forth from it in order to speak with a more liberated self – Christ within me so to speak; although Powys would not articulate it so explicitly. Yet, it is a very distinct position from the one that Blake adopts: as ‘I *am* Christ’. At one point, when Crabb Robinson quizzed him on the ‘Divinity of Jesus Christ’, he received the answer from Blake that, ‘He is the only living God...and so am I and so are you’⁶¹. This statement is itself a very Gnostic exclamation, but still pertains to an inner transformatory process that has to be undergone in order to achieve such a state of, well, ‘living consciousness’. Once again, ego is involved – Blake’s spectre – that literally has *to be put in its place* through union with a different sort of relationship to nature, other people (especially female), images of the mind, and its own consciousness. For Blake, this process begins with what he calls the tearing down of ‘the selfhood of deceit and false forgiveness’:



I come in self-annihilation & grandeur of inspiration,
 To cast off rational demonstration by faith in the Saviour;
 To cast off the rotten rags of memory by inspiration;
 To cast off Bacon, Locke & Newton from Albion's covering;
 To take off his filthy garments, & clothe him with imagination;
 To cast aside from poetry all that is not inspiration

.....

These are the destroyers of Jerusalem, these are the murders
 Of Jesus, who deny the faith & mock eternal life;
 Who pretend to poetry, that they may destroy imagination
 By imitation of nature's images drawn from remembrance,
 These are the sexual garments, the abomination of desolation
 Hiding the human lineaments as with an ark & curtains
 Which Jesus rent & now shall wholly purge away with fire,
 Till generation is swallowed up in regeneration

(Milton Plate 41⁶²)

From this, one might conclude that although Powys and Blake were along the same lines – Gnostically - there are finally important differences between them, and these have significant consequences for the epistemology that underpins their individual life worlds. I shall take one further example: time and memory.

A ‘timeless’ realm is, of course, another aspect of that childlike state that Powys so admires and encourages. Yet, he also writes about memory, which connects the past with the future and here he declares himself:

‘I am a born *reactionary* and so I think is the Devil... the Devil has a romantic passion for the past...when you carry the past back far enough it becomes the chaos out of which our energetic and lively world scrambled into being’⁶³.

Memory of the past is therefore one way of understanding (and indeed the source of) the origins of the grotesque present:

‘(it) winnows and purges reality of its grossness, of its dullness, of its poisonous hurtings... (it) seems to retain... at the bottom of its being, essences that have the power of redeeming all’⁶⁴.

There is no such ‘give and take’ for Blake, who dismisses ‘the gates of memory’⁶⁵ and instead advocates ‘self annihilation (and) back returning to life eternal’ (*ibid.*). There is no internal reference to the past and future here, just a submission to the present for those who would ‘kiss a joy as it rises’; that is, ex-static, not substantiated. This state is very different to that of Powys where he seems to positively wallow in the fact that his imagination is detached from his mind and his mind from his senses⁶⁶. It is a material sensuality that he still craves for – child-like – where he can cloak God’s creation with his *own* images.

To Conclude...

This exploratory essay has offered a comparative reading of William Blake and John Cowper Powys. That the latter admired the former is in no doubt when one considers what Powys wrote about Blake. The issues they shared might be considered ‘universal’. I have sought to articulate exemplification of some of its elements through a reading of Gnostic, and associated esoteric, philosophies. We know that both Blake and Powys were influenced by various esoteric ideas, which I have grounded in Gnosticism. This influence can be seen, both explicitly and implicitly, in their own readings but, more importantly, in the resonances they found there with respect to their actual personal experiences and subsequent creative lives. I have set out a thumbnail sketch of Gnostic myths and quoted from various Gnostic texts in relation to principal tensions to be found in both Powys and Blake: subject/ object alienation, the power of nature and relations to it, sexual energy, images, and time/ memory – both real and imagined. I have argued that the works of both Blake and Powys are awash with these tensions. However, how they each sought to resolve them is finally significantly different.

As an aside, I might add that what I set out here is not unique to Powys and Blake. André Breton, the assumed leader of ‘surrealism’ – an artistic practice with its own images of the psychological grotesque – also draws attention to this relation between the subject and object at a point in time – where contraries, contradictions and oppositions are united ‘as one’:

Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. Now, search as one may one will never find any other motivating force in the activities of the Surrealists than the hope of finding and fixing this point.

(Breton: *Second Manifesto*⁶⁷)

In many ways, it is this search, to resolve this ‘contradiction’, which keeps the work alive and the artist still searching for a oneness that reconciles such opposites⁶⁸. The stages of alchemical purification similarly involve a process where the ego – the subject – is subverted and the ‘lower’ liberates the ‘higher’ through Exaltation,

Multiplication, and Projection seen, in a very Gnostic way, as a 'fall' and a 'ascension'. Anton Ehrenzweig⁶⁹, addressing the 'hidden order of art', also describes artistic expression itself as a condition of neurosis and psychosis; where there is a 'externalisation of schizoid fragments' that can be unconsciously scanned - that is, objectified consciously - and subsequently reintegrated (re-introjection). In the course of this process, there is a similar collapse of the subject-object relationship from whence the ego is liberated – a process which he describes as the 'dying god'. It is not difficult to see both Blake and Powys working in this manner; as a way to reintegrate the contraries and contradictions as the source of their psychic distress.

However, when expressed as a 'heaven' and a 'hell', Powys and Blake end up with very different relations to and between them. Powys acknowledges this, or at least suspects it:

Shall I agree with Blake that Heaven and Hell are close...is it true that the prismatic bubbles of truth which rise most beautifully, and float on the air the lightest, come from the consummation of the marriage of these antipodes? *I am not sure*⁷⁰.

Such uncertainty also results in non-resolution of the tensions referred to above. Indeed, Powys also states that, 'my imagination converts every mental process into a ritualistic symbol...god's world into my own'⁷¹; in other words, his ego has to 'own' it. In this way, he looks to the products of imagination as a substantialisation of its contents. Whilst for Blake, it is Imagination itself, which is at the core of his cosmology and visions: that is, Imagination as ex-static in the instance of consciousness, which is also an expression of the divine providence of the spirit of Jesus Christ. For Blake, that moment is understood as offering the possibility of an instantaneous resurrection because 'error' (Satan), in all its rationalistic, egoistic and divisive forms (Urizen), is then put off; or, at least *put in its place* by the re-unification of Urizen with its emanation Ahania, resulting in the kind of union of opposites through which so many of his prophecies end – literally, a cosmic consciousness. One might conclude, therefore, that finally Blake was more (*sic.*) of a Gnostic than Powys – or at least his life's journey was more completely animated by a Gnostic faith and all it entailed for him personally and teleologically.

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NOTES

¹ See also: Michael Grenfell, Blake and Gnosis, *The Journal of the Blake Society*, 1996, pp. 19-29.

Michael Grenfell, John Cowper Powys and William Blake, *The Blake Journal*, 2002, pp. 6-17.

Michael Grenfell, Blake and Gnosticism. *The Gnostic*, 2010, vol. 3, 62-74.

² John Cowper Powys, *Suspended Judgments*. New York: Arnold Shaw, 1916.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Geoffrey Keynes, *Blake – Complete Writings*, OUP, 1976, p. 629.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 179.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 804f.

⁷ John Cowper Powys, *Wolf Solent*, Macdonald, 1961 (1929), chapter 1.

⁸ Geoffrey Keynes, *Blake – Complete Writings*, OUP, 1976, p. 520.

⁹ Henry Crabb Robinson, *Extracts from the Diary Letters and Reminiscences of Henry Crabb Robinson*, The Perfect Library, 1898, p. 25.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Keynes, *Blake – Complete Writings*, OUP, 1976, p. 783.

¹¹ John Cowper Powys, *Obstinate Cymric*, Village Press, 1973b (1947), p. 153.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ James M. Robinson (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library*, Harper, 1990.

¹⁴ <http://www.michaelgrenfell.co.uk/literature/blake-and-gnosis/> Accessed 11th October 2022.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Keynes, *Blake – Complete Writings*, OUP, 1976, p. 191.

¹⁶ Geoffrey Keynes, *Blake – Complete Writings*, OUP, 1976, p. 264.

¹⁷ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, Penguin, 1982, p. 18

¹⁸ Morton Paley, *William Blake*, Omega Books, 1983, Plates 15 and 28.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, Plate 42.

²⁰ John Cowper Powys, *A Glastonbury Romance*, Picador, 1975b, p. 812f.

²¹ John Cowper Powys, *The Brazen Head*, Macdonald, 1956.

²² John Cowper Powys, *A Glastonbury Romance*, Picador, 1975b (1933), p. 77.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ John Cowper Powys, *The Complex Vision*, Village Press, 1975a (1920), p.132.

²⁵ John Cowper Powys, *The Complex Vision*, Village Press, 1975a (1920), p. 164.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 251

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- ²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 120
- ²⁸ Robert N. Essick and Joseph Viscomi, Joseph (eds.), *William Blake - Milton – a Poem*, The Tate Gallery, 1993, Plate 32.
- ²⁹ Geoffrey Keynes, *Blake – Complete Writings*, OUP, 1976, p. 533.
- ³⁰ John Cowper Powys, *A Glastonbury Romance*, Picador, 1975b (1933), p. 666.
- ³¹ Morton D. Paley, (ed.), *William Blake – Jerusalem – The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, The Tate Gallery, 1991, Plate 99.
- ³² Geoffrey Keynes, *Blake – Complete Writings*, OUP, 1976, p. 431.
- ³³ *Ibid*, p. 179.
- ³⁴ W. H. Stevenson, *Blake – the Complete Poems*, Longman, 1971, p. 310.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*: p. 455.
- ³⁶ Geoffrey Keynes, *Blake – Complete Writings*, OUP, 1976, p. 789
- ³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 770.
- ³⁸ James M. Robinson (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library*, Harper, 1990, p. 151.
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- ⁴⁰ Geoffrey Keynes, *Blake – Complete Writings*, OUP, 1976, p. 518.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 721
- ⁴² *Ibid*, p. 656
- ⁴³ John Cowper Powys, *A Glastonbury Romance*, Picador, 1975b (1933), p. 311.
- ⁴⁴ John Cowper Powys, *Ducdame*, Doubleday, Page and Company, 1925, p. 264.
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- ⁵² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1989, p. vii.
- ⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 132.
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- ⁵⁴ Michael Grenfell, *Bourdieu's Metanoia*, Routledge, 2023.
- ⁵⁵ W. H. Stevenson, *Blake – the Complete Poems*, Longman, 1971, p. 583.
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- ⁵⁷ John Cowper Powys, *A Philosophy of Solitude*, Jonathan Cape, 1933, p. 63.
- ⁵⁸ John Cowper Powys, *The Complex Vision*, Village Press, 1975a (1920), p. 132.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 134ff
- ⁶⁰ John Cowper Powys, *In Defense of Sensuality*, Victor Gollancz, 1931, p. 172.
- ⁶¹ Henry Crabb Robinson, *Extracts from the Diary Letters and Reminiscences of Henry Crabb Robinson*, The Perfect Library, 1898, p. 7.
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- ⁶⁴ John Cowper Powys, *A Philosophy of Solitude*, Jonathan Cape, 1933, p. 108.
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- ⁷¹ *Ibid*, p. 104.