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Natures and Spaces of Enlightenment

The David Nichol Smith Seminar in Eighteenth-Century Studies XVI

ANZSECS Conference, Brisbane 2017

The Daimonic Human in William Blake

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This paper examines William Blake's daimonic conception of the human being. My aim is to clearly present the concept of the daimon within Blake's oeuvre as a Romantic solution to the perceived narrowness of the Enlightenment model of the human. I will first define the traditional concept of the daimon and briefly outline its genealogy from classical antiquity, continuing through Christianity to eighteenth-century ideas of genius, to its eventual flowering among the Romantics. I will then present Blake's concept of the daimonic human and discuss this in greater detail, including illustrative commentary drawn from two of Blake's paintings.

The daimonic literary tradition spans from antiquity to the present day, and more recently includes studies on specific Romantics by scholars such as Robert Stock, Angus Nicholls, Gregory Leadbetter, and Charles Patterson, although discussion of Blake remains considerably less than that of other Romantics. While critical literature on Blake's poetry and art is often peppered with various forms of the descriptor *daimonic*, there has been no thorough study, to my knowledge, on the importance of the daimon within Blake's work. This paper is derived from my doctorate thesis, which addresses the absence of study of the daimon in Blake, shows how Blake participates in the broader daimonic tradition, and discusses the literary-humanistic implications of Blake's daimonic human.

THE CONCEPTION AND GENEALOGY OF THE DAIMON

The term *daimon* exists among a cluster of synonyms, which, when examined together, show multiple facets of a shared concept. This diversity of terms is an indication of the complex nature of the daimon, which Johann Wolfgang von Goethe describes as ambiguous and contradictory (Patterson, 'The Daemonic in *Kubla Khan*' 1037). The most common synonyms for *daimon* include genius, angel, spirit, demon, and daemon—the latter two being variant spellings of daimon. The term *daimon* (from the Greek δαίμων) appears as early as Western civilisation itself, being found in the works of Homer, Hesiod, Heraclitus, Plato, and many other classical writers; it carries the meaning of a meditating spirit between the sacred and the mundane worlds, as well as being a determiner, guide, and protector of an individual's fate (Liddell and Scott, 'δαίμων'). *Genius* and *spirit* have similar meanings, often amoral in nature. The daimon is also akin to the muse as a source of inspired knowledge.

Early Christian texts utilised the term *angel* (from the Greek ἄγγελος, messenger) as an equivalent concept, and *daimon*—and its variant spellings—became a reference to heretical, non-Christian traditions, leading to connotations of the evil demon, in contrast to the good angel (Weiner 1: 668). Here I prioritise the term *daimon* as inclusive of all these synonyms and indicative of a wider concept, while recognising there remain a variety of specific depictions of the daimon among the tradition of daimonic writers.

The eighteenth-century concept of genius is closer to the daimon than is genius in its current-day, secular sense. During the eighteenth-century interest in neoclassicism, a diversification of Christian thought, and the expanding Enlightenment all provided conditions for theorising genius, through writers such as Alexander Gerard, William Duff, and Edward Young. Genius is presented as a creative power, typically in connection with the imagination, which serves to manifest the primal, divine, or natural potential of the universe through a

cultivated earthly individual; as such it is interchangeable with the daimon. Eighteenth-century genius takes a cultural approach to the daimon, and is often associated with creativity, enthusiasm, imagination, and mastery of rules in the arts and sciences (Weiner 2: 294). This genius still retains its earlier religious sense, only now it serves a religious society in transition to the secular.

This transition is conspicuous during the Romantic period; a period which could itself be described as daimonic, for it offers a vision that unifies the religious and secular worlds, as M. H. Abrams discusses in his book, *Natural Supernaturalism* (68). Romanticism arose when a diversity of ideas were flourishing, which provided a fertile ground for an artistic exploration of genius leading into the nineteenth century. Many Romantics had a literary interest in the daimon, and being self-reflective artists, their work is expressive of daimonic consciousness. This is seen in Goethe, Coleridge, Keats, Mary and Percy Shelley, Byron, and Blake. Although Blake had little contact with other Romantics, he produced works which exemplify, in his own unique way, the daimon of Romanticism, thereby extending the daimonic literary tradition.

BLAKE'S DAIMONIC PROCESS

Blake's unique expression of the daimon appears through a diversity of terms, ideas, poetic language, and artwork within his oeuvre. An entry-point into Blake's concept of the daimon can be found in his short tractate, *All Religions are One*. He writes:

PRINCIPLE 1st That the Poetic Genius is the true Man. and that the body or outward form of Man is derived from the Poetic Genius. Likewise that the forms of all things are derived from their Genius. which by the Ancients was call'd an Angel & Spirit & Demon. (ARO, E1)

Blake designates Poetic Genius, or what the ancients “call’d an Angel & Spirit & Demon,” as “the true faculty of knowing” and “the faculty which experiences” in the human being (*ARO*, E1). The term *Demon* arises from the Middle-English spelling of the Greek *daimon* and Latin *daemon*. And this statement explicitly links Poetic Genius with the daimon, as the essence of the human being.

All Religions are One argues that the root of all cultural influence is in Poetic Genius, and considers derivations from Poetic Genius as culturally specific subsets—often limited, weakened, even ossified, displays of original genius. These derivations participate in death due to their fragmentation and distancing from the totality of life within Eternity—Blake’s “Living Form”—wherein original genius abides (*OV*, E270). Blake considers specific religions and philosophies as circumscribed derivations of this original genius. On the one hand, this reveals Blake’s openness to cultural diversity, systems, and viewpoints; an all-inclusive openness modelled in the city of Golgonooza, which is the creation of his main protagonist Los, containing “All things acted on Earth” (*J8*:17, E153; *J16*:61-12, E161). Yet on the other hand, these specific manifestations of culture are subsidiary to the boundlessness of Poetic Genius, which is the origin of all diversity, the absence of which compromises all-inclusive openness within human culture.

Still, Blake is not naively or passively open. He is strongly opposed to the state of what he calls “Single vision” that only honours the “God of this World”, Urizen, who to Blake exercises a narrow-minded tyranny which threatens, because it is threatened by, the openness of Poetic Genius (*J52*, E201; E722). Yet paradoxically, also to Blake, “opposition is true friendship,” and Blake’s conclusion is that singular vision must ultimately be reintegrated—in a balanced manner—as a valid aspect of humanity (*MHH20*, E42). This reintegration is what I term Blake’s *daimonic process*, which works to restore discrepancies between fragmented and eternal consciousness, resulting in the renovated, daimonic human. In the process of

renovation, singular vision is neither exiled nor eradicated, although the manifested forms produced of its falsehood are cast off, as a necessary procedure to restore original vision (J12:13, E155). Singular vision, or Urizenic consciousness, imposing upon living creation its abstract laws, cannot enact the renovation of humanity, though it does have a place in Eternity when integrated within Poetic Genius: it provides measure and proportion through the human faculty of reason. In *All Religions are One*, Blake argues for re-integration with Poetic Genius, reflecting his vision for individual and cultural wholeness in relation to the dominant, often monosemic, contemporary culture of Enlightenment thought and Church doctrine.

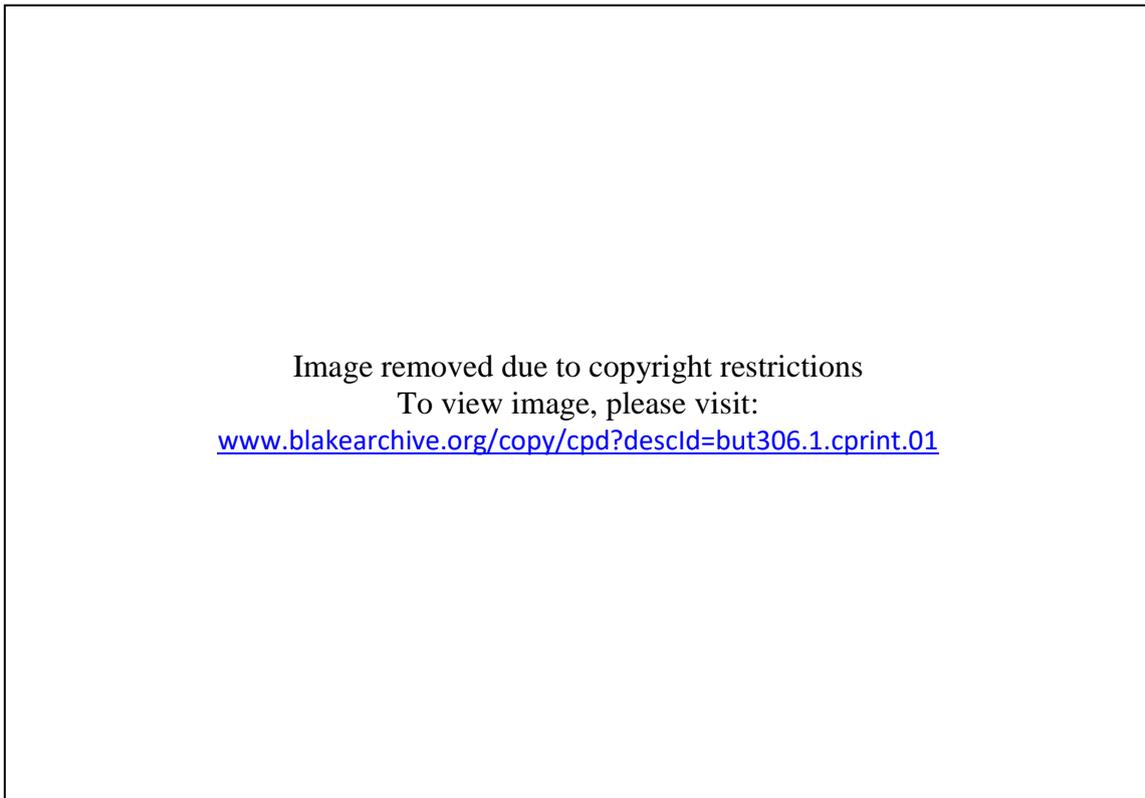


Figure 1. Blake, William. Newton. 1795, coloured print, ink, and watercolour on paper, Tate Collection, London.

NEWTON

Blake's *Newton* (fig. 1) depicts the state of singular vision. Newton sits on the seafloor, entirely unaware of his surroundings. His sharp, rational mind is intent on abstract measurement on a flat cloth or paper scroll. Despite the rich colour and diverse detail of his surroundings, his focus is entirely limited to simple shapes and their logic. The dark background suggests the unknown, and the base of the seafloor also suggests the lowest point within the sea of consciousness—the unconscious. Newton's entire action is focused through his eyes, mind, hands, and fingers; the rest of his body is unconscious to his task, merely providing a base from which to perform it. This painting shows Blake's skilful satirising of Newton and the Urizenic mode of knowing that Newton typifies for Blake.

To Blake the abstract philosophy of Newton is not an evolution of human discovery but an isolating fragment. The arguments Blake offers in *All Religions are One*, and also in a similar work, *There is No Natural Religion*, seek to centralise the true human—"the faculty which experiences"—and show that the natural human of the deists is a derivation—to Blake an especially dull and harmful derivation—of the true human (*ARO*, E1). Blake argues that the Poetic Genius—synonymous with the daimon—is the true human as experiencer, and the source of all philosophies, religions, and scientific thought; in short, all cultural knowledge.

In relation to Blake's argument, his usage of "derived" needs examination. He writes: "the body or outward form of Man is *derived* from the Poetic Genius" and "the forms of all things are *derived* from their Genius" (*ARO*, E1; my emphasis). Therefore, not only is cultural knowledge the creation of genius, but so are the forms of objects, including the human form. Poetic Genius coincides with Blake's concept of the imagination as a divine creative power, ultimately having no limits but those it itself imagines. The true human is Creator, and in Blake's *The Laocoön* is equated with God, the imagination, and Jesus, signifying the originator of all forms of experience (*L*, E273). Yet human beings, in Blake's understanding, have the

tendency to fragment their consciousness; through the process of experience, their habit is to “become what they behold” (*J66:36, E218*). Another way to express this is that humanity derives itself from original genius, forming and then exclusively identifying with selective and specific biological, cultural, religious, and philosophical expressions—becoming fragments of the whole.

Within this partial embodiment of humanity, Blake recognises a longing for the infinite, which prompts the awakening of the human to the wholeness of Poetic Genius, the true human. However, it is not enough to say Blake’s human is exclusively the true human, excluding any fragments. The true human includes its derivatives; it is the relational dynamic between, and inclusive of, both the eternal and the temporal human. Therefore, Blake’s concept of the human is daimonic—the daimonic human—because it is a process bridging God’s nature with the organic human. For Blake, this human ideal is exemplified in Christ. He writes: “God becomes as we are, / that we may be as he / is” (*NNRb, E3*). Between the organic human and the true human, between historical culture and eternal culture, is an ongoing daimonic pulse, an ever-evolving expression of visionary creativity and experience, which is the Divine Imagination.

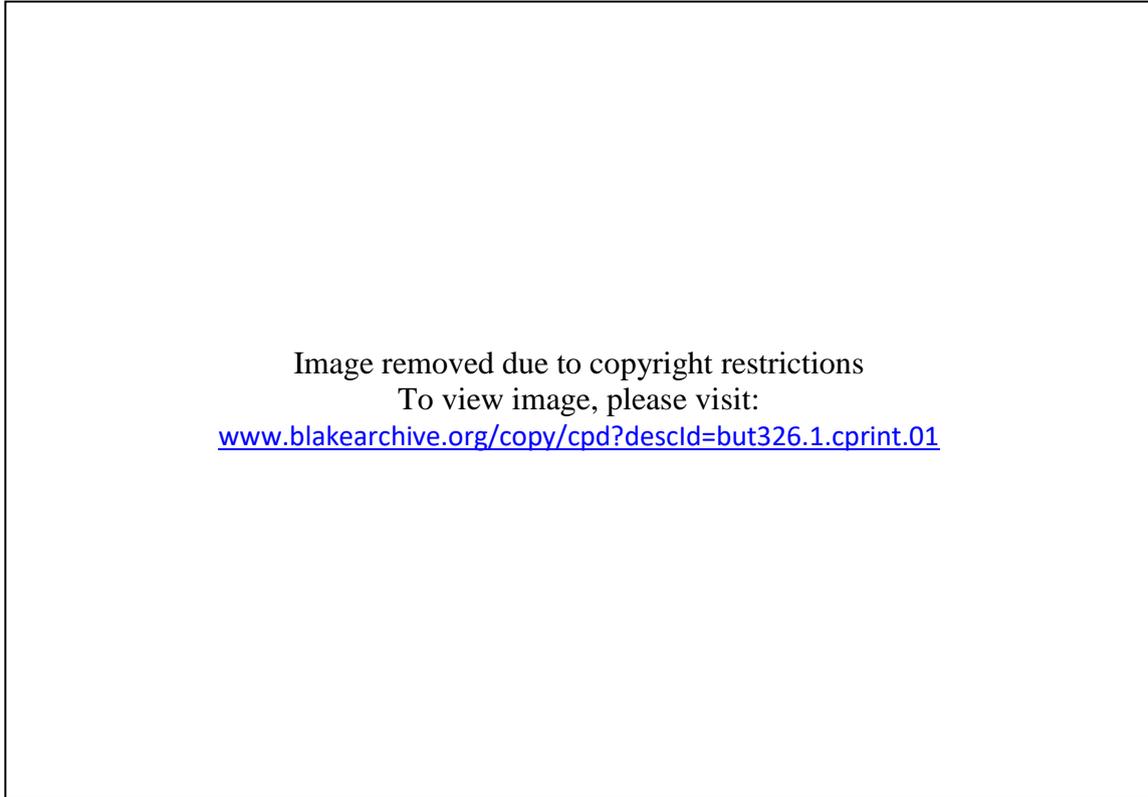


Figure 2. Blake, William. *Christ Appearing to the Apostles After the Resurrection*. 1795, planographic colour printing with watercolour and pen and ink additions to the impression on paper, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

CHRIST APPEARING TO THE APOSTLES AFTER THE RESURRECTION

Christ is Blake's exemplary daimonic human, being both God in the human and the human in God. To Blake, Christ is Divine Imagination itself (*L*, E273). *Christ Appearing to the Apostles After the Resurrection* (fig. 2) illustrates Blake's state of Eden, or fourfold vision. Christ provides shelter and inspiration to those around him in the lesser state of threefold vision, named Beulah, a state receptive to love. Christ's body expresses an openness entirely transparent to the universe. His face expresses mercy and his open hands suggest generosity along with supportiveness. He stands in strength, without tyrannical dominance over his surroundings, and presents himself as equal to his Apostles. Yet the Apostles cannot abide in the same state as Christ, and bow to him, seeking at his feet the shelter of Beulah, in a state of

love that lacks the full wisdom that Christ exudes. As Tristanne Connolly notes in her *William Blake and the Body*, Blake's bodies tend to depict their state of vision through their posture and clothing: Christ's posture is upright and open and his robes are thin, appearing almost transparent and clearly mapping his body's outline, while the Apostles are bent over and their robes are thicker, cruder, and concealing their forms (Connolly 71-72). Christ is offering an example of Edenic being to his Apostles, yet, bound by their own limitations—their mind's ratios of Selfhood, which places Christ above themselves—they are unable to take the imaginative leap to become Christ-like.

Just as Christ can be upheld as more-than-human by others, so can the daimon. From the perspective of the fragmented, or fallen, human, such figures often communicate an intensity of experience, which can evoke fear, awe, or wonder. Yet this intensity is the normal state for the daimonic human who abides in the fourfold vision of Eden. As Northrop Frye writes, to Blake, the various heightened capacities of genius show supreme normality, not abnormality (Frye 30). Genius expresses the latent potential of humanity, whose ultimate capacity is the expression of God—or the infinite (Frye 30). Blake consistently associates power with creativity and virtue with unbounded energy, as an exemplary holy state of divine enaction. This is precisely descriptive of the daimon, as a force evolving humanity towards Infinity.

AWAKENING THE HUMAN IMAGINATION

Yet there is also an innocence to Blake's daimon, not in a naive sense, but as a fearless capacity for creative exploration through the boundlessness of the sublime imagination. This sublime imagination becomes transgressive to the more conservative decorum upheld by influential figures during the eighteenth century, such as Edmund Burke, Joshua Reynolds, and Samuel Johnson. Yet in Blake's mythos, the sublime imagination is embraced joyfully because the

daimonic human recognises all beings (and things) as manifestations of God—expressions of Infinity and Eternity, “the breath of the Almighty” (*M30:18, E129*).

However, also from this state is the potential for descent, or fall. In Blake’s *Milton*, the Emanations—who are the matrices through which humans relate to one another—cannot perpetually withstand the unbounded joy of vision, so request the Eternals create for them a temporal habitation, Beulah, which is shaded from Eternity. Beulah is a realm of love, but not always wisdom. Therefore, negative emotions such as jealousy, fear, possessiveness, and hatred can cause further descent, into the world of conflicting dualities named Generation. An individual must then struggle for their survival, and may fall further through developing increased self-interest, into the lowest state of Ulro—isolating selfishness. From this fall, a contest—or battle—between limited states and the greater state of Vision plays out on various levels, whether philosophical, religious, moral, intellectual, or otherwise. Vision, being infinite and eternal, inevitably triumphs by encompassing, overwhelming, and reintegrating finite states. Thus from the eternal state of Eden to the fallen state of Ulro, and to reawakening again, the cycle of historical time perpetuates within Divine Imagination.

The task of bridging the gap between the fallen and eternal worlds is the work of the daimon, who, in Blake’s magnum opus *Jerusalem*, is represented by the character Los. The task undertaken by Los is the mediation between Eternity and the mundane world in an effort to reconcile the latter to the former. Just as the classical daimon provides a transformative medium, a metaphorical bridge, between the two states of God and human, so Los, equivalently, creates such a medium by building the city of Golgonooza with his Furnaces. This daimonic work performed by Los confirms his role as guide, protector, inspirer, and liberator, which the daimon is traditionally associated with. Since Los is Blake’s archetypal exemplar of Poetic Genius, it can be concluded that Blake’s Poetic Genius is equivalent to the concept of the daimon.

Jerusalem concludes with Albion, Blake's Primal Man, making the ultimate self-sacrifice for his friend Los, after recognising the devoted friendship Los exercised to aid Albion's awakening. Albion gives up his selfishness by entering Los's Furnaces for transformation, and he is restored to wholeness to stand alongside Christ as an equal. Albion is thus awakened to his own daimonic state of unbounded creative Imagination, commingling with his Emanation Jerusalem so that together they become one being: the Eternal Human.

CONCLUSION

Looking more broadly across literary works, it can be seen that Blake's daimon participates in the daimonic literary tradition, contributing to the Romantic conceptualisations of the daimon. While Blake mainly uses the term *Poetic Genius* to signify this, this concept is more akin to the Romantic daimon than current-day concepts of genius. Therefore, it is appropriate to consider Blake's Poetic Genius as synonymous with the daimon of the Romantics, while it draws upon earlier classical, Christian, and eighteenth-century ideas. Blake's concept of the daimon is also decidedly unique: it retains the theistic aspects of its classical origins while also being shaped by Christian (more-specifically Moravian) influences; it participates in Enlightenment ideas of genius and extends these influences into a Romantic, humanistic vision, furthering the daimonic tradition by embracing artistic originality and a grand renewal of cultural vision. This vision culminates in the restoration of an integrated human consciousness and resulting culture based upon human genius, which are conjointly daimonic. The daimonic human is, as I have shown, a centrally important motif within Blake's work, and is specifically purposeful in Blake's *Jerusalem*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABBREVIATIONS OF BLAKE'S WORKS

References to Blake's works are abbreviated (including plate and line numbers) as shown below. All of these works can be found in Erdman's *The Complete Prose & Poetry of William Blake*.

| | |
|------------|---|
| <i>ARO</i> | <i>All Religions are One</i> |
| <i>J</i> | <i>Jerusalem: the Emanation of the Giant Albion</i> |
| <i>L</i> | <i>The Laocoön</i> |
| <i>M</i> | <i>Milton: A Poem in 2 Books</i> |
| <i>MHH</i> | <i>The Marriage of Heaven and Hell</i> |
| <i>NNR</i> | <i>There is No Natural Religion</i> |
| <i>OV</i> | <i>On Virgil</i> |

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