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Blake's attitude towards the Bible was ambivalent. He believed it is at once revelatory in its prophetic mode and yet repressive in its espousal of the moral law – the Mosaic Law or Decalogue. His radical aesthetic challenges the notion that the Bible, as the embodiment of the Law, is a semantically stable and formally unified text and that, as such, the implication that it contains a single, infallible meaning. The Bible, despite being the Law, is not subject to the laws or conventions of reading and writing which promote a single, authoritative voice or textual presence. Blake's poems similarly challenge the notion of reading and writing as creative acts bound by formal and institutional laws and conventions.

Samuel Beckett notes an etymological connection between the origin of the word law and the act of reading in the evolution of the Latin word *lex* (Beckett 11). The word *lex* originally meant a crop of acorns and its correlative verb *legere* meant to gather (acorns). Gradually, *lex* came to mean a gathering of peoples into an assembly – a political or legal assembly – and hence law; and the verb *legere* came to mean a gathering of letters into a word, to read. In the light of the notion that the Bible promotes an unbound, lawless reading, it is necessary to consider to what extent the activity of reading and interpretation is bound by law and convention.

For Owen Fiss, reading is a circumscribed, law-bound act which can be measured against a set of norms made possible by “disciplining rules” (Fiss 744): interpretation is not predetermined by a source external to the interpreter but is constrained “by a set of rules that specify the relevance and weight to be assigned to the material...as well as...the procedural circumstances under which the

interpretation can occur". The disciplining rules, which constrain the reader, function to transform the act of reading from a subjective into an objective process and constitute the principle of right reading or the "standards by which the correctness of the interpretation is to be judged".

In his essay 'Fiss v. Fish', Stanley Fish opposes the notion of objective interpretation. For him, reading is an unconstrained and subjective activity: the constraints or disciplining rules that Fiss suggests are themselves readable, interpretable 'texts' and so cannot delimit interpretation. He believes that nothing exists outside of the text: the rules of reading are not independent of the context or "field of practice" (*Doing What Comes Naturally* 124-125) in which they function. Constraints are internal to the text and are internalised by the reader. Fish believes that the reader's capacity to make sense of the text is predetermined by the reading practices of the interpretive community to which they belong. Interpretation is a "structure of constraints...because it is already in place, renders unavailable the independent text and renders unimaginable the independent and freely interpreting reader" ('Chain Gang' 562). Reading, therefore, takes place within a literary enclosure: the reading process is one of a regulated, "controlled subjectivity" (*Is There a Text* 49). Fish's informed reader is one who has assimilated the interpretative Strategies of the interpretive community and the idea that readers internalise certain codes, conventions and laws of reading relates to the notion of literary competence.

For Jonathan Culler readers do not approach a text without an "implicit understanding of the operations of literary discourse which tells one what to look for" (Culler 113-114). Texts have meaning only in relation to the system of codes and conventions of reading that the reader has assimilated so that "To read a text as literature is not to make one's mind a *tabula rasa* and approach it without preconceptions". For example, in his analysis of Blake's poem entitled 'Ah! Sun-flower', Culler observes that there are certain conventions operative in reading poetry which tell the reader what to look for, such as the "rule of significance...metaphorical coherence" and the "convention of thematic unity"

(115). Readers acquire a literary competence through the assimilation of certain laws and modes of reading: reading is “a rule-governed process of producing meanings...which both makes possible invention and imposes limits on it” (126). Reading, then, involves the reader in the production of meaning, though reading is principally a disciplined activity governed by normative principles and conventions that, in turn, form the “constraints of the institution of literature” (116).

The conventions of poetry are constituents of the institution of literature and so it is misleading to discuss individual poems as autonomous, organic unities complete in themselves and as existing outside the literary institution. Reading practices, then, are controlled by the literary institution. S. H. Olsen defines an institution as “a set of constitutive rules” (Olsen 196). He suggests that the aesthetic properties of a text are determined by these rules or formal laws and have no relevance outside of the institution in which they function. The text is an “institutional transaction” (22); its meaning is defined by institutional conventions that enable the reader to identify its aesthetic properties. To interpret a text is to understand its properties and how they conduce to its meaning within a literary tradition and field of practice, that is, literary criticism. This process is made possible by the literary institution that at once regulates, codifies, legitimises reading as a social and critical practice.

The idea of legislation involved in the act of reading inevitably raises the issue of authority and authorship. In the twentieth century, a number of theorists replaced the Wordsworthian concept of the author as an authoritative, omniscient presence with the notion that the author is an absence, a hypothetical and linguistic construct. For instance, in his seminal essay ‘The Death of the Author’, Roland Barthes asserts that the author as an origin, an anterior presence and authority, is undermined through the very act of writing. The author is, in effect, already written, a “ready-formed dictionary” (Barthes 147): the singular voice of the author is unheard amidst the babble of diverse discourses that comprise the

“stereophonic plurality” (159) of the text. For Barthes, to give the text an author is to constrain it, to “impose a limit”, to “close the writing” (147).

Barthes believes that a text is composed of multiple writings focused ultimately upon the reader so that the text, its meaning and its unity, inheres “not in its origin but in its destination” (148). This notion undermines the autonomy, the aseity of the Author-God. The reader is the textual space in which the multiple writings converge so that the writer is erased, written out of the text whereas the reader is inscribed, written into the text. In the “multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered” (147); meaning cannot be anchored to an ultimate signified. The stereographic text liberates reading so that to refuse to fix meaning is to “refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law”. The death of the Author-God as law-maker is an affirmation of textual *jouissance* – of the free play of the signifier – and, moreover, heralds the birth of the reader as law-breaker.

Valentine Cunningham states that the rejection of “real authors, as origins for utterances and texts is explicitly, in the case of Barthes...part of a strong ultimate rejection of the existence and authority of God as author and origin” (Cunningham 16). In the context of Blake, Jon Mee writes: “At the root of Blake’s attitude to the Bible lies a hostility to the very notion of the pure text...to the notion of a text which claims a transcendent authority” (Mee 11-12). According to Blake, the signifier ‘God’ or the Word had an origin or fixed signified until the rise of Priesthood which sought to abstract the mental concept of God from its object (see *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in Erdman 38-39)^[1]: this conception of God as an abstract entity – a floating signifier without a signified – is oppressive: narratives and ideations that abstract their form from their origin – the Poetic Genius – and so divorce the sign from the signified are those in the service of the oppressive Church and State which utilise abstract conceptions of God, morality and Law for their own ideologically hegemonic ends. This process of abstraction is associated with abstract reasoning, as well as the classical poets, and is a form of allegorizing. For Blake, allegory is potentially an oppressive form of poetry in

that it may be serviceable to those in power that maintain ideological hegemony through the foregrounding of the immutable signified.

Allegory presupposes a stable relationship between sign and signification. For Blake, it is “the poetry of moral virtues” (Mee 12) – that is, the scripture of the law and the Decalogue. In his *A Vision of the Last Judgement*, he asserts that “The Hebrew Bible and the Gospel of Jesus are not Allegory” (Erdman 554). For him, the meaning of the Bible lies hidden beneath the surface of the text and is to be revealed via a process of critical, active reading; it is a Sublime Allegory in the sense that it is not composed of abstract ideations but rather contains narratives which allude to a specific historical reality; a reality which operates as a mythic paradigm and which repeats itself throughout history: narratives based in the past “are used prophetically to bring the past...to bear upon a situation located in the present” (Tannenbaum 117). Indeed, this notion of biblical narratives as *exempla*, proleptically or prophetically signifying the future, is referred to as typology and relates to Blake’s conception of Christ as a type, an *exemplum*, in his fulfilment of the Mosaic Law: “I cannot conceive the Divinity of the...Bible to consist either in who they were written by or at what time or on the historical evidence which may be all false...but in the Sentiments & Examples” (Erdman 618).

Tannenbaum identifies that in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* “The disagreement between the Angel and the Devil centers (sic) around the issue of the sense in which Christ is a fulfilment of the Law” (Tannenbaum 115). The Angel perceives Christ to be the fulfilment of the Law in terms of being the culmination of a historical, typological process. The Devil, on the contrary, perceives Christ’s fulfilment of the Law to be perpetually renewed throughout history in different manifestations and in different historical contexts: Christ represents not the culmination but rather a specific stage within the redemption narrative. Christ is a type or paradigm of the regenerative process – of self-annihilation – which Man must emulate in order to enter the Divine Humanity or body of Christ. Blake utilizes types in his poetry: his characters are composite, multi-faceted, consisting of a number of types, such as Los in *The Book of Urizen*

who, as Tannenbaum notes, signifies at once Jehovah, Adam, Abraham, Apollo, Jupiter and many more historical figures or types that inhabit a specific historical reality. In this way, Blake's types are multi-form, multivalent, and so ambivalent: ambivalence in Blake's poetry functions to engage the reader on an imaginative, typological and subjective level and to challenge the disciplining rules of right reading – that is, by rousing the reader's faculty of interpretation to engage imaginatively with the characters on multiple levels as representatives of the past, present and future in the sense that “typology posits a vertical view of history in which events are not related to each other chronologically...but thematically” (118). Indeed, the visionary reader is roused into action becoming an active agent of the Word, not a passive hearer, in the sense that Christ acted from impulse, from the Spirit, not from rules, from the Law, and embodies the dictum “be ye doers of the word, and not hearers” (*The Holy Bible: King James Version*, James 1: 22).

As Cunningham observes, *I Peter 2, 21* describes Christ as a text, a piece of writing (see Cunningham 18). He argues that Christ is a *hupogrammos* – that is, “that line of writing written out by the Greek schoolboy at the top of the schoolboy's wax writing tablet for him to keep copying out as handwriting practice” (18-19). The *hupogrammos* included all the letters of the Greek alphabet so that Christ is envisioned as an alphabetic, textual entity – “the whole of language's potential” (19) – and the entire alphabet from *alpha* to *omega*. Cunningham notes that the *hupogrammos* was frequently a sentence comprising neologisms composed by the schoolmaster for practice in the formation of letters as opposed to the study of their sense. In this way Christ as a text – a *hupogrammos* – becomes a mishmash of letters, of nonce-formations, of non-sense words so that he is non-referential, multivalent, a set of graphic and semantic traces.

Derridean Deconstruction promotes the idea that any text is composite of verbal and semantic traces which elude a transcendental signified: it foregrounds what is expressly ‘literary’ about literature so that the term ‘literature’ is endowed with

authority and so capable of destabilising the logocentric discourses and institutions from which it originates. For Derrida, the ‘law’ of literature, its literariness is, in fact, its inherent lawlessness: literature inherently defies, destabilises and deconstructs the institutional and logocentric Law of Literature and so, in a similar fashion, the figure of Christ as *hupogrammos* promotes textual pluralism in order to oppose the logocentric hegemony of the Word. For Cunningham, Christ-as-text signifies the concept of logocentrism as the foregrounding of multivalent textuality; of the interweaving of multiple voices in the text; of Christ as the ultimate polysemous sign, signifier or *semeion* (20). As *hupogrammos*, the body of Christ is a body of letters, a gathering of words (*legere*), and so replaces the singular, monologic and oppressive Word of God: Christ is a body, a text, and so represents an anthropomorphic conception of textuality which is germane to Blake’s conception of art in bodily terms: “The head Sublime, the heart Pathos, the genitals beauty, the hands and feet Proportion” (Erdman 37). For Blake, the Word of God as incarnate in Christ represents not homology but plurality: it manifests itself typologically throughout history and therefore its meaning is not fixed and immutable but rather it is infinitely renewable – “Its Eternal Image & Individuality never dies but renews by its seed just as the Imaginative Image returns according to the seed of Contemplative Thought” (Erdman 555); it is an ever-present, ever-changing signifier within the synchronic present and not a fixed, static signified anchored to a specific historical or diachronic moment.

Christ, then, is the Word as a collective body of letters forming a text, an alphabet, *hupogrammos*. Related to this idea, Northrop Frye argues that the interplay of the two fundamental units of art – the audible and the visual – is central to Blake’s aesthetic (see Frye *Fearful Symmetry* 55-74): words, or the audible unit of art, may connote various sounds^[2] both among each other and in the images they signify; the sounds of words are represented graphically or visually by letters which are arbitrary signs and, according to Frye, it was not a moral law which was

prescribed in Mount Sinai, but rather an alphabet derived from God, the Word, who is both *alpha* and *omega*.

The opposition between signifier and signified and the hegemony implicit in the reification of the sign is dramatized in *The Book of Los*. In the poem “the rock of eternity” (Erdman 92) that incarcerates Los – and is symbolic of the Mosaic Law – is replaced by him with the sun that he fashions. The sun is, according to Tannenbaum, an icon of natural religion that signifies “the worship of the finite world that the sun inscribes and whose materialistic premises... establish the hegemony of the Law” (Tannenbaum 279). The sun is false icon, a false signifier divorced from its signified – that is, God – and so it is falsely reified, falsely worshipped. This notion of iconoclasm, of false worship, relates to Jean Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra – “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality” (Baudrillard 1) – which is an ersatz object, icon, or signified: for Blake, natural reason, as it is prevalent in State religion, separates the signifier and the signified so that the object of worship is a mental deity abstracted from its referent; it is fashioned as an object of Mystery – that is, it is merely an empty, non-referential sign; it has meaning merely as an object or icon. In the poem, then, the sun represents a deified simulacrum, a false idol and object of worship so that the Law, as an abstract system of moral codes derived from the object of worship, is itself a simulacrum, a hyper-real, a model without an origin or reality.

The worship of an external object or icon may be related to the practice of outward religious ceremony or prayer as a hyper-real activity. In his annotations to Thornton’s translation of *The Lord’s Prayer*, Blake satirises the ceremoniousness of the Lord’s Prayer, underscoring its hypocrisy given the social injustices and inequalities at the time: “Lawful Bread Bought with Lawful Money & a Lawful Heaven seen thro a Lawful Telescope by means of a Lawful Window Light The Holy Ghost...” (Erdman 668): Blake is criticising natural religion which perceives in nature, both human and vegetative, the supposed divinely sanctioned natural laws of God – the laws of economy (lawful bread), morality (lawful heaven) and Newtonian science (lawful telescope) and so on – which, in

truth, have no origin, no reality, but are utilised by the State as a means of ideological hegemony.

Blake associated the repressive power of State religion which maintained its ideological hegemony by regulating the assimilation and dissemination of knowledge among the public, epitomised in the figure of Bishop Llandaff – a State trickster – who excoriated Paine’s radicalism. Blake was wholly averse to the regulation of ideology via closed texts. Blake’s radical aesthetic promotes open texts which require an active and subjective mode of reading unconstrained by disciplining rules. He states that “that which can be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care” and that the best kind of writing is that which “rouzes the faculties to act” (Erdman 702). Indeed, Blake endeavours to subvert and transcend repressive, conventional and disciplining paradigms of reading by positioning the reader centripetally to the text: oppressive reading is associated with passivity, objectivity, and the disciplining rules of logocentric, institutionalised literature disseminated by repressive and hegemonic forces; radical or lawless reading is associated with mental fight, subjectivity, and the death of the author as a consequence of what Barthes calls the foregrounding of the anti-logocentric, stereographic plurality of the text.

Derrida refers to reading as an act (see Derrida 37-76) – it is at once a performance, an action, an event, as well as an ordinance, a law, a contract. Indeed, for Derrida the text *per se* signifies a contract that has been signed by the author. Reading involves the inscription of the reader’s countersignature to confirm or validate – to countersign – the signature of the author. The reader, however, in the act of reading, in signing, repeatedly inscribes his or her signature upon the text or contract, and so its meaning is infinitely renewed and renewable. This process constitutes what Derrida calls the “law of iterability” (68): no reading is new or renewed without this “multiplicity of countersignatures” (69), yet can never be wholly new as the reading act entails repetition, re-inscription, reiteration. This notion of a contract also implies contraction – a drawing together into a bond, so that the act of reading is both a bond – a sense of reciprocity

between reader and text – as well as a bind – a legal or contractual obligation. Significantly, the word ‘testament’, from the Greek word meaning ‘covenant’, implies this idea of a contract: the word ‘covenant’ from the Latin *convenire*, meaning ‘agree, assemble, fit’, is a compound of *con*, together, and *venire*, come, meaning a coming together, a contract.

In Derrida’s view the text itself is an institution: it constructs and instructs its readers, equipping them with a literary competence which subsequently enables the act of reading. Derrida states that “the work’s performance produces or institutes...a new competence for the reader...who thereby becomes a countersignatory” (74). The (contr)act of reading, as re-inscription, validates a text that has already within itself constructed or inscribed its reader so that the reading act supplements the text. According to Derrida, the meaning of the text is already inscribed within the reader before it is read. On the other hand, it may be argued that if the act of reading involves rereading, limitless re-inscription, then the text is constantly being re-inscribed, re-written: the reader’s literary competence enables multiple acts, multiple performances, multiple readings, and so destabilises the logocentricity of the text. The internalisation of a literary competence does not, in this respect, constrain but rather licences the reader.

Saree Makdisi argues that Blake’s illuminated works, like the Bible, signify via thematic, conceptual and aesthetic interrelations not only within a single text but across multiple texts and moreover, not only in words but in images, and so require constant acts of rereading. He writes: “Much of the experience of reading one of the illuminated books...involves alternating between reading words and reading images, and turning back and forth through the plates, tracing and retracing different interpretive paths” (Makdisi 112). This sense of reading and re-reading disrupts the notion of a linear chronology and so necessitates a form of spatial reading and, in this sense, the meaning of the poems emerge from the multiple modes of reading they require. For Blake, radical reading involves Imagination or Vision - a renewed mode of perception - which challenges prescriptive modes of right reading and the assimilated literary competence of

Fish's informed reader: Blake's use of multi-media, that is, the synaesthesia of words, sounds and images in his poetry, opens up a textual space in which diverse, often contradictory meanings are invoked, subsequently rousing the reader's faculties to actively engage dialogically with the text. For instance, Blake's illustration to plate 24 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* depicts a subterranean locus inhabited by an anguished, aged, Urizenic figure crawling beast-like on his hands and knees and which is, furthermore, reminiscent of Blake's 1795 print, *Nebuchadnezzar*. The illustration signifies contrapuntally to the written text on the plate, which concerns the conversion of the Angel to a Devil in reading the Bible in its infernal or diabolical sense. Beneath the illustration are the words "One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression". The image, in the context of the written text, is multivalent - unanchored by the written text - and so invites a plurality of readings: the figure may signify the Natural Man who "receiveth not the things of the Spirit" (*The Holy Bible: King James Version*, 1 Cor. 2: 14), who reads the Bible in its literal and non-diabolical sense, and who is earth-bound by the five senses; or it may signify the tyrant oppressor who is bound by his own inflexible moral law. The image must also be read in the context of Blake's print of 1795; and so Blake's illustration signifies ambivalently across texts, intertextually, as well as within the text, intratextually, thereby demanding the reader to suspend his or her prescribed literary competence in order to read the text diabolically, that is, in its infernal or radical sense. In this way, Blake challenges prescriptive modes of right reading.

As Culler suggests, the concept of misreading inevitably leads one to consider "what are the processes of legitimation, validation, or authorisation that produce differences among readings and enable one reading to expose the other as a misreading" (Culler 179). Harold Bloom claims that the production of poetry entails a creative misreading or 'misprision' of earlier works: "every poem is a misinterpretation of a parent poem" (Bloom 'Anxiety' 94). Misreading represents a poet's endeavour to overcome the anxiety of influence through the creative transformation of a parent poem: misreading, then, is a critical, re-visionary act.

Milton dramatises Blake's anxiety of influence in refashioning the eponymous poet as a politico-theological revolutionary and in fashioning his own mythology. Blake believed that Milton was constrained by both the aesthetic and ideological paradigms of his time – he was subject to the aesthetic law or canon (from the Greek *kanon* meaning law) of literary tradition – and so wrote in fetters. In the composition of *Paradise Lost*, Milton believed that his use of blank-verse or “English heroic verse without rhyme” signified the recovery of an “ancient liberty” from the bondage of formal conventions associated with Classical verse. For Milton, as well as for Blake, rhyme is not an intrinsic property of poetry – a law or unchangeable literary convention – but is rather “the invention of a barbarous age” and is both a “hindrance and constraint” (Milton 211) to the expression of the subject matter which takes precedence over form. However, Blake perceived that the “Monotonous Cadence” of blank verse employed by Milton was nevertheless constrained by the conventions – the formal laws or disciplining rules – of poetic tradition. For Blake, “rhyme itself” is bondage so that in his poem *Jerusalem* he resolves to produce “a variety in every line, both of cadences & number of syllables”: the propriety of form is such that “Every word and every letter is studied and put into its fit place” (Erdman 145-146); poetic form is subordinate to and functions in the service of the poet's prophetic Vision. In this way, Blake liberates the Imagination – the Poetic Vision – from the constraints or laws of literary form and literary tradition: “We do not want either Greek or Roman Models if we are but just & true to our own Imagination” (Erdman 95).

For Blake, like Milton, the liberation of poetic form from the bondage of convention and tradition is a form of politico-aesthetic liberation – that is, it signifies liberation from the past; from history: Blake associates classical aesthetics with the hegemony and oppression of the past: Classicism is associated with a long history of political hegemony which is the radix of civil conflict: “it is the Classics... that Desolate Europe with Wars” (Erdman 269-270); a “Warlike State can never produce Art” (270). Blake's radical aesthetic, then, is a direct,

politically charged challenge to the laws or conventions of classicism and neo-classicism and, in turn, the ideologically disciplining modes of right reading prescribed by the literary institution.

Indeed, Blake's poetic may be said to be radical in the sense that it challenges and subverts the ideologies and conventions of classical and neo-classical aesthetic paradigms which privilege the propriety of poetic form or, in Blake's terms, Mathematical Form, over matter or content (see Roston 15-42). Tannenbaum writes: "The subordination of the general to the particular, with a reliance upon internal coherence among the arts rather than upon an externally imposed order" (Tannenbaum 25) was the aesthetic principle that Blake saw to be operating within the Bible. Blake was opposed to formalism in the sense of an externally imposed unity in a work of art. For him, the formal unity as well as the semantic coherence of the text – its Living Form – inheres in its synthesis of the particular with the general; in the internal unity of the parts as opposed to an externally and imposed order: "when a Work has Unity it is as much in a Part as in the Whole" (Erdman 269-270). As Tannenbaum notes, this aesthetic principle is identifiable in the Scriptures. He states that "In biblical poetry... form is subordinated to significance" (Tannenbaum 26). The fundamental unit of Hebrew verse is the self-contained distich of parallel lines which embodies a concrete, vivid and precise image. Hebrew verse verges on the prosaic in its foregrounding of sense as opposed to structure: it employs "a flexible, undulatory rhythm produced neither by syllabic quantity nor accentuation, but by the antiphonal sense-pattern of the passage" (Roston 23). The meaning and the unity of Hebrew verse resides in the semantic juxtaposition of parallel lines; in the particular as opposed to the general; in its self-contained internal semantic units as opposed to an overriding externally imposed formal structure. Blake's poetry is similarly asymmetrical and anti-linear, relying upon an internal unity of semantic elements for its structure and coherence.

For instance, in *America* Blake commingles tenses and thus disrupts the chronological flow of the narrative; he employs anthropomorphic synaesthesia

(“the hungry wind”, “loud winds”, “angry shores”) in order to engender a notion of semantic multi-dimensionality; and dynamically deploys various symbols (such as fire, clouds, fetters) in various semantic contexts (“fiery joy”, “lustful fire”), thereby achieving a sense of textual unity and coherence through sense and symbol as opposed to structure. The principle of parallelism is exemplified in plate 8 lines 5-6 (“That stony law I stamp to dust; and scatter religion abroad To the four winds as a torn book, & none shall gather the leaves”). The stony law of ecclesiastical theology is initially associated with the Decalogue – the stone tablets of the law – and these are subsequently assimilated with writing – with scripture (from the Latin *scribere*, to write) – and the tyranny of the written word. The change in association is implicit in the verb “stamp” which connotes the stamping or printing of words. Moreover the verb “scatter” initially refers to religion (here used as a metonym for the Law) and it precedes the qualifying simile “as a torn book” – the metaphorical association between religion and the law is proleptically signified in the verb “scatter” which precedes the actual metaphor; a metaphor which is at once figurative in that the dissipation of religion is associated with the scattering of leaves from a book; and literal in that the religious Law is a written law. This dynamic use of metaphor is carried across the distich: the second line expands upon and qualifies the meaning of the first line, thus achieving a unity (and expansion) of sense as opposed to a unity of structure. As previously noted, the relationship between law and literature is etymological and, in this context, the word for law, *lex*, refers to the act of writing, that is, the gathering of letters in a word, into a sentence.

Bishop Robert Lowth identified this principle of parallelism in his *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*. He believed that form is artificial, restrictive and oppressive to the prophet-poet who, “guided by the nature of the subject only, and the impulse of divine inspiration” (Lowth 221), seeks primarily to emphasise the semantic import of his verse as a means to inspire the reader towards both Vision and action. Hebrew verse is “loosely constructed and so free from metrical rigidity” (Roston 19). In contrast with the aesthetics of neo-classical verse, the

nature of Hebrew poetry promotes the subjective effusion of creative and visionary energies unbridled by a restrictive and decorous formal system of poetic diction or verse structure.

In his Preface to *Jerusalem*, Blake explains his rejection of conventional, regular metre in favour of a rhythm dictated by the sense of the passage: the principle of parallelism is employed by Blake throughout his later works (see Roston 164-167). Blake's *Jerusalem* is ostensibly a narrative poem composed from a third person perspective; it has named characters and a series of events. However, these constituent elements "resist linkage into a chronology of represented actions constituting a story, much less a sequence of causes and consequences forming a plot" (Essick 251): the characters are representative of shifting states of human consciousness and so lack a sense of stability and fixed identity; space is indefinite, alternating between actual and imaginary loci; and the temporal sequence of the poem is fragmentary "with moments and eternities containing each other". The poem is structured on the non-sequential interplay of thematic and verbal signifiers. Robert Essick describes *Jerusalem* as "a poem to be experienced, not understood". Despite Blake's claim that in the poem "Every word and every letter is studied and put into its fit place" he rearranged the sequence of plates of chapter 2 in the final two copies of the poem he collated. As Essick notes, there are multiple and various allusions throughout the text to fibres, threads, and the action of weaving and argues that the repetition of these allusions to weaving, to textuality (from the Latin *textere*, to weave), collectively engender a semantic or "image field" within the poem which is structured on the principle of metonymy – that is, "the linking of words through shared lexical categories". These allusions furthermore function to establish parallels between the characters at various junctures throughout the narrative so that "*Jerusalem* becomes not a seamless but a multi-seamed fabric of interwoven metonymies". The poet ostensibly reiterates the same concepts and themes throughout the narrative in varied ways, thereby establishing parallel actions composed into non-chronological synchronism.

Essick states that “The metonymic image fields in *Jerusalem* function much like the sound patterns shaping oral-formulaic poems such as *The Iliad* and *Beowulf*” (258). Oral composition may additionally have influenced the repetitions in syntax and diction which constitute the Biblical parallelism. For Blake, the usurpation of speech by writing is a form of oppression in the respect that the written word is associated with the law of the letter (see Simpson 40). Plate 10 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* represents a half-demonic, half-angelic figure overseeing the transcription (as opposed to the oral dissemination) of the written Law by two scribes or clerics, thereby suggesting the hegemony of the written word or law which is disseminated throughout history by the institutionalised Church in the form of an oppressive moral code.

In *Jerusalem*, images occur in clusters throughout the poem – one image is presented and, like oral formulae, initiates a concatenation of similar images which comprise an image field, and so places an emphasis on the oral dimension and function of language which transgresses the notion of the fixity of writing – the law of the written word – and so enables an active mode of reading. For Bloom conventional, law-bound, passive readers simply *read* whereas unconventional, liberating, active readers *misread*. He proposes that a conventional or right reading as opposed to an inventive misreading is one that follows the generic conventions of a text: a right reading is therefore legitimated, validated and authorised by at once the writer’s adherence and the reader’s obedience to the law of genre.

The concept of genre is related to the idea of legislation in that it implies an institutionalised system of classification, a standard or norm by which to judge literary works. Tzvetan Todorov observes that in the classical period literary critics sought to prescribe generic laws and manifested a “penalising tendency” (Todorov 138) to judge works according to those laws. The individual work was judged in relation to a general system, a general law of genre or, alternatively, in relation to a generic standard (a canon, from *kaneh*, meaning measuring rod) such as tragedy. Indeed, any text relies upon its participation within a general system

for its readability: to be interpretable, a text must belong to a genre, a set of formal conventions, serving as “a norm or expectation to guide the reader in his encounter with the text” (Culler 136). Genres, then, provide a system of codes and conventions for reading a text: a genre at once enables and limits reading, constraining it to a specific function, type, or genre of reading already implicit in the laws it prescribes so that the law of genre legislates the reading act.

For Derrida, however, the law of genre licences lawlessness. In his essay ‘The Law of Genre’ he observes that genres, in their evolution, inevitably transgress the very constitutive laws that bring them into being. Genres are therefore occupy a liminal space both inside and outside a general system and so never belong to it entirely. Within any generic system there is always a “principle of contamination, a law of impurity” (Derrida 227) introduced from the outside so that the potential for genres to be contaminated, mixed or hybridised constitutes one aspect of the law of genre itself.

The Bible is a *genera mista*; it is “a pattern of commandments, aphorisms, epigrams, proverbs, parables, riddles, pericopes, parallel couplets, formulaic phrases, folktales, oracles, epiphanies” and is composed of “snippets from historical documents, laws, letters, sermons, hymns” and so on (Frye *The Great Code* 206). In this sense it does not have a formal unity but rather a unity of content or a unifying vision – an “imaginative unity” (218); and it is in this sense that, for Blake, the Bible is Sublime. Given that the Bible has multiple authors and, given that it is an aggregate text formed over many years and, despite the fact that it contains a number of laws or commandments, the claim to authority that it has is essentially one of Vision. Its meaning is polysemous, not in the sense that it contains multiple significations, which would imply that the meaning of the text is arbitrary; but rather in the sense that its significance may be apprehended on a number of levels – that is, literal, moral, allegorical, and anagogical (220-221). In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake refers to the composition of his illuminated books as the “infernal method” of printing which melts away the apparent surface of the text, exposing to the reader “the infinite which was hid” in

the multiple layers or levels of meaning (Erdman 39): he promotes the notion of infernal writing and infernal or diabolical reading; that is, a mode of reading which sees beyond the mere superficialities of the text.

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell is a composite work, which may be apprehended on a number of levels, hybridizing a number of genres and literary modes, synthesizing argument, and narrative, and so challenges the reader's literary competence or their assimilation institutionally prescribed modes of reading. It is essentially structured on the concept of contrariety; of "opposed voices" (Miller 495): Blake presents arguments from contrasting points of view, often with an ironic tone, so that there is no stable, singular, authoritative voice in the text. In this way, the authorial voice of *The Marriage* is multiple; polyvocal: there is no overriding presence of the author in the text and in this way it may be said that the text is decentralised or depersonalized – not in the sense that there is no authorial personality or in the sense that the perspective of the text is essentially an objective one; but rather in the sense that there is no singular personality, no identifiable authorial voice but a conflict of voices which constitutes the stereographic plurality of the text. Blake, like the Hebrew poets, diverts his attention away from himself-as-poet towards himself-as-prophet – that is, towards his subject matter – and subsequently achieves a condition of depersonalization, ultimately by "transmuting passions without obtruding his own personality upon them" (Roston 27). This dialogic mode is necessary to engage the reader with the text: without dialogue or contraries there is no progression towards Vision, towards Truth.

In his poetry "Blake is constantly seeking to break down the notion of scripture as monolithic authority" (Mee 14). *The Book of Urizen*, for example, exists in multiple versions, each with varying configurations of the plates and none providing a sense of narrative cohesion or continuity, which, in the words of W. J. T. Mitchell, "suggests that this atemporal, antisequential quality is a deliberate formal device" (Mitchell 137). The poem is intentionally unstable, fragmentary, and so multivalent; and engages in contemporary discourses surrounding the state

of Biblical texts. Jerome Mc Gann argues that the poem is a direct response to the new developments in contemporary Biblical and textual studies, most notably the theory of Biblical texts known as the fragment hypothesis expounded by Alexander Geddes: in the poem “the textual anomalies are structural; they are part of a deliberate effort to critique the received Bible and its traditional exegetes from the point of view of the latest research findings of the new historical philology” (Mc Gann 324). Geddes argued that the Bible, as a conglomerate text derived from multiple sources, is a heteroglot work or, in Bakhtin’s terms, a *polyglossia*, and subsequently does not convey any single, pure, original inspiration or historical, political, or theological viewpoint. The Bible, then, does not have a single author and so it cannot claim to be the voice of a single authority. For Blake, the notion of textual monologism – of a singular voice or viewpoint and authority which denies that there exists outside of it another consciousness (see Bakhtin 79-85) – is a manifestation of the hegemony of the written word in precluding the possibility of diverse readings. Blake’s textual mode, as seen in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, is essentially dialogic or polysemic and subverts the hegemony of the authoritative, monologic text.

The Book of Urizen imitates the textuality of the Bible so that to read the poem “is to discover a Bible one had never known before; it is to learn to read the traditional Bible in an entirely new way” (Mc Gann 324). Blake’s conception of myth or narrative is similar to and may derive from the neoteric notions of Biblical textuality espoused by forms of Biblical hermeneutics practiced by Lowth and others in the mid to late eighteenth century. Blake perceived that all sacred texts are comprised of mythologues or poetic tales which have their provenance in the Poetic Genius and which encode and reflect certain culturally specific ideologies. The Bible does not comprise a seamless, coherent narrative, or a single, all-embracing ideology; rather, it is replete with textual ruptures, gashes and inconsistencies, semantic lacunae, reiterated passages; it is fissiparous, fragmented, and inaccessible to Reason; it is a Bible of Hell *per se*. Indeed, the Bible is “the product of a complex, continuous, and often arbitrary set of historical

interactions” (320); it is “a heterogeneous collection of various materials gathered together at different times by different editors and redactors” (321) and derives from a number of cultures, traditions, literary and historical contexts.

The Bible is not to be apprehended literally in its natural sense but rather in its spiritual or diabolical sense – “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life” (*The Holy Bible: King James Version*, 2 Cor. 3: 6) Blake believed that an externalised literalism which subordinates words to their referents or objects, the signifier to the signified, relates to the Natural Man’s mode of limited perception: the Natural Man sees only the ratio of things and does not receive the Spirit. The Bible is essentially composed of metaphorical or immanent language which emphasises the sense of language – the signifier – as opposed to its external, objective referent – the signified (see Frye *The Great Code* 77): Frye describes the language of metaphor as “the language of immanence” which is inherently poetic in so far as it does not divorce the signifier from the signified, unlike metonymy, which is “the language of transcendence”, of abstraction and analogy. Although the Bible is “addressed to the Imagination, which is Spiritual Sensation, & but mediately to the understanding, or Reason” (Erdman 703), its aesthetic sublimity lies in the fact that “the most Ignorant & Simple Minds Understand it Best” (667): the sense of the Bible is “equally true to all & equally plain to all” (618) – it is an open, anti-logocentric text.

As Mc Gann notes, Blake believed that the Bible should be read critically as an open, polysemous text and not as a closed text in terms of “its own self-conceptions, moral codes, or forms of worship” (Mc Gann 315). Read as an open text, the Bible is revelatory and liberating: read as a closed text, it is repressive and constraining. Blake observed that the religious authorities of the State, under the aegis of Reason, read the Bible uncritically as a closed, absolute text and, in this respect, used it for their own hegemonic ends.

Barthes advances the notion of the polyphonic, polysemous or multivalent text. He perceives that the semantic units or *lexia* of a text are governed though not

disciplined by five interoperative codes that create a “network, a topos through which the entire work passes” (S/Z 20). The codes do not manifest a homologous structure or centre – “a paradigm that must be reconstituted” – but rather allow for the possibility of their configuration or “structuration” into *lexia*. The codes are the intertextual fragments of something at once already read and yet unread: their convergence produces writing, a “stereophonic space” (21), within the text that, in turn, permits a plurality of readings. This notion of polysemy is dialectical in the respect that each level of meaning unfolds from its previous level: the text gradually unveils itself “like a plant out of a seed” (Frye *The Great Code* 221). Frye writes: “The dialectical expansion from one ‘level’ of understanding to another seems to be built into the Bible’s own structure, which creates an awareness of itself by the reader, growing in time as he reads” (225). The text enters into a dialectical or dialogical relationship with the reader so that the process of reading, in Blake’s terms, is assimilative to the winding of a piece of string, given to the reader by the author, into a ball (see Erdman 231).

Barthes refers to the codes as ‘voices’. It may be said that these voices are potentially cacophonous, a babble, unintelligible in their interweaving. It is the role of the active reader to make the voices cohere, to speak sense, to speak a language that he or she can understand so that interpretation becomes a process of translation. The Latin word *interpretari* means precisely to translate. Translation is a process of transference: the verb to translate derives from the Latin *transfere* meaning to bear across so that to bear meaning across a textual space necessitates agency. Reading and interpretation as a correlative of reading demand the active participation of the reader.

Wolfgang Iser perceives that the act of interpretation reveals an inherent problem concerning authority. Interpretation, on the one hand, authorises texts though, on the other hand, the text is always anterior to the reader and so prescribes the conditions of its own reception and interpretation, thereby opening to question Derrida’s concept of the activity of the lawless reader as a countersignatory of the text. Iser refers to this antinomy as the “ineradicable duality of interpretation”

(Iser 5). It is the active role of the reader to impose order upon disorder, to discipline the text through the act of interpretation: “texts in and of themselves do not legislate the conditions of their own reading” (19) and so it is the act of interpretation that authorises the meaning of a text and the conditions of its reception and interpretation: the reader imposes order, legitimates and disciplines the stereographic plurality of the text so that the reader has licence over the reading process, over interpretation, and so the agency to establish its laws. In this sense, the reader is the authorising agency of the text: the birth of the reader is at the cost of the death of the author. From a Blakean point of view, however, it may be said that if interpretive authority resides with the reader who disciplines the text, then the reader has the potential to liberate the text from the conventions of right reading and institutional traditions of interpretation.

According to Iser the concept of interpretation arose out of the exegesis of the Torah. The Torah, meaning an instruction is translated into Greek *asnomos* or Law. It is the product of various scribal traditions and so has no ascertainable author: the text itself is not self-authorising – its authority as the Law was endowed from the outside through its interpretation and translation so that the act of reading authorised and established the Law: it is “the work of interpretation to make the law concrete” (Gadamer 294). It is through this process of interpretation – of law-making – that texts become canonised and interpretations potentially become fixed, law-bound, themselves canon law.

The word ‘canon’ etymologically derives from a Semitic word meaning reed that is in Hebrew *kaneh*, meaning a measuring rod – a rule, a standard or norm. Iser suggests that the canonisation of a text may entail one of two processes: the authorisation of a text may become an unrepeatable act so that the text becomes hermeneutically sealed; or the authority conferred upon the text may be supplemented by additional authoritative texts.

The canonisation of texts potentially results in the institutional control of interpretation (see Kermode 72-86). The literary canon “controls the texts a

culture takes seriously” and so disciplines “the methods of interpretation that establish the meaning of ‘serious’” (Altien 42). Bloom states that “A canonical reading . . . attempts to stop the mind by making a text redundantly identical with itself, so as to produce a total presence, an unalterable meaning” (Bloom *Poetry and Repression* 29). Canonical texts, then, are models of authority and represent a standard by which to judge all other texts and how they are to be read. The etymological connection between *kanon* as a reed and the canon and reading is perhaps implied in Blake’s use of homophony in the Introduction to *Songs of Innocence*:

Piper sit thee down and write

In a book that all may read –

So he vanish’d from my sight

And I pluck’d a hollow reed (Erdman 7)

As well as subverting canonic or regulated modes of reading, Blake opposed the notion of the established literary canon. In his Preface to *Milton*, he vociferously asserts that “We do not want either Greek or Roman Models if we are but just and true to our own Imagination” (Erdman 95). Eric Chandler notes that here Blake is opposing the conventions and laws of literary composition derived from the classics, subsequently ingrained in literary tradition which, for Blake, Shakespeare and Milton were constrained by, and which comprise the literary canon (see Chandler 71). Blake demands that the revised canon should consist of “those Grand Works of the more ancient & consciously & professedly Inspired Men” (Erdman 95) – that is, the “Sublime of the Bible” – which, unlike the typical objective detachment from life of the classical poets, places an emphasis on subjective emotion, on matter not metre, on function not form.

Blake associates Memory with traditional, canonical, classical aesthetics – “The Stolen and Perverted Writings of Homer and Ovid: of Plato and Cicero” – and sets it in opposition to Inspiration, the Sublime of the Bible. He envisions artistic

freedom from the constraints of classical models and so the triumph of Imagination over Memory, using the Bible as model: the liberty of the Imagination entails a rejection of all aesthetic paradigms which constrain Imagination. Chandler observes that the substitution of the Bible for classical aesthetic paradigms results in contradiction. He states that “Blake manoeuvres around this problem, however, by suggesting that there is a difference between the model that inhibits or contains the artist and the inspiration that stimulates and expands the imagination” (Chandler 71): the Bible as a literary model may be equally oppressive to the creative Imagination, depending on how it is read – that is, critically or uncritically, actively or passively, diabolically or conventionally. The Bible is an embodiment of the moral Law, and it is also canonic. Blake challenges the canonicity of the Bible by reading it infernally; by reading Christ as a polyvalent sign: *hupogrammos*, that is, Christ, the Word, as an anti-logocentric, anti-hegemonic incarnation of textual stereography; a revolutionary figure who “acted from impulse: not from rules” (Erdman 43). Blake believed that the Bible is true Inspiration in cleansing the doors of perception and, subsequently, in its ability to rouse the artist and reader to realize the creative potential of his poetic/prophetic Imagination.

For Blake, then, the Bible, despite being the Moral Law, is “a Poem of probable impossibilities, fabricated...by Inspiration...Poetry & that poetry inspired” (Erdman 616-617); it is the great code or instructive paradigm of art which enables him to synthesise his political and theological outlook into a single, coherent, creative Vision. In his poetry he is preoccupied with “the opposition between scripture, represented as an oppressive mode of writing which associated with the law, and poetry, a mode of writing which is open, multi-form, and seeks the imaginative participation of the reader” (Mee 12) and, in this light, Blake’s radical aesthetic, derived from the Scriptures, challenges textual logocentricity and the idea that the Author-God of the text is an infallible presence; and the idea that there are certain conventions or laws of reading and writing a text which constitutes the literary tradition or canon and which, in turn, prescribe the reader’s

literary competence. Blake, then, envisaged the Bible as a paradigm for lawless or diabolical reading and writing: in opposition to institutionalised forms of reading and writing which utilise the Bible for hegemonic ends, Blake promotes the primacy of subjective reading and the active role of the reader in opposition to prescriptive, law-bound and objective modes of reading governed by institutionalised conventions or disciplining rules.

Endnotes

^[1] All quotations from Blake's works and letters are taken from David Erdman's edition of *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (New York, 1988).

² The audible unit of poetry is intrinsic to Hebrew verse which signifies via the principle of semantic parallelism. A number of critics have noted that Blake's aesthetic derives from Hebrew verse and from the radical modes of Biblical exegesis practiced by Bishop Robert Lowth in the mid 1700s. See Tannenbaum *passim*.

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The Holy Bible: King James Version.

First Response

This is a thorough, thoughtful and scholarly account of Blake's choice of the Bible as a paradigm for 'lawless' reading and writing. While the approach is broadly consonant with prevailing orientations in Blake criticism, the focus on law, textuality and the Scriptures is at once apt and illuminating.

Clear and carefully researched as the paper is, it seems to me to be predicated upon two paradoxes. Firstly, the binary opposition between the law-bound and the lawless is steadily eroded as the discussion progresses. This is illustrated by the reference to Derrida's essay on 'The Law of Genre', in which genres are seen to 'occupy a liminal space both inside and outside a general system and so never to belong to it entirely' (see p 19). In a not dissimilar way, Blake faces a dilemma in deciding to substitute the Bible for classical and canonised literary criteria; as Chandler notes, he is obliged to outflank this simple binarism by contrasting models which constrain the artist with those that stimulate and enrich imagination (see p 27). The Bible can, in fact, be read narrowly and coercively, just as it can be multiply interpreted through modes of inspiration which endorse the reader's individual praxis. The law and the lawless define and undermine each other, they interpenetrate and shape each other, because neither extreme can become entirely self-sufficient - wholly lawless reading would be incomprehensible.

Secondly, this essay makes a persuasive case for multivocality in reading and writing (perhaps reading as rewriting); it foregrounds a complex and engaging set of published critical opinions within a context of open debate. Yet relatively little space is accorded either to Blake's texts (which are usually treated synoptically) or to the Hebrew poetry of the Bible. The theory foreshadows the desired practice, but falls short of consistently illustrating or enacting it. Vision is subordinated to intellectual discourse even in the moment of its strongest vindication.