



## **‘Striving with Systems to deliver Individuals’: William Blake’s Psychic Re-animation of Greek Myth**

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The real issue at hand is whether or not there can be an individual and interior mythical vision, a vision that is not simply the reflection of an ancient mythical tradition, but a new creation, a vision that reflects and unveils a new form of the cosmos and history. All of us know that the old myths are dead. But does this mean that myth itself has died?<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

The subject of this article involves the depictions of madness in Greek mythology and their comparison with William Blake's ideas concerning the disturbances and reshaping of consciousness. Blake argued that Greek mythology in terms of a visionary force was dead but that it contained some lustre pertaining to a ‘Golden Age’ of thought. Blake investigates the Fall and madness of the everyman, Albion, to show how the ‘Divine Vision’ that Greek mythology lacked could arise again. My argument is that, for Blake, this had to occur through madness, which is therefore purposeful, the same kind of madness found in Greek rituals that allowed the fulfilment of a visionary capacity and it is this that Blake noticed as reflecting true ‘Vision’. In Greek culture, the mad were viewed as scapegoats at times, but they were also seen as visionaries. Blake’s tendency to unite history, mythology and religion reflected a concern that was typical of a period in which syncretic mythographers, such as Reverend Jacob Bryant and Edward Davies attempted to establish the notion of an ‘Ur-Myth’.<sup>2</sup> Blake’s own view that the ideas of poets had been appropriated by state religion indicates an involvement in eighteenth century debates concerning the seeds of religion in mythology and the studies of what have been called the, ‘historico-psychological mythographers’.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, for Blake, Greek myth presents a context in which the debasement of poetical vision takes place while involving a reaction of thought that attempts to reinvigorate a ‘Golden Age’. However, for Blake, the corruptions of Greek society prevented the redevelopment of a ‘Poetic Genius’ and Blake’s interest in mythography led him to investigate the cultivation of aesthetic ideas in other societies.

In Greece, the gods were viewed as responsible for the frenzies of mortal men, and therefore held the cure for the diseases that they had supposedly caused.<sup>4</sup> The Greeks regarded these men as special or divinely inspired by such as the Corybantes or Dionysus, and were even used in sacrifice in acts of appeasement to the gods.<sup>5</sup> Madness was thus considered to be purposeful, and divine in its nature, so much so that sacrifice to the gods was logical according to primitive beliefs. This is part of the complex patchwork of mythological influences in Blake’s work, which compares Greek mythology with different forms of mythology in order to understand their meaning and evaluate them. The need to define a stage of visionary liberation explains Blake’s interest in Greek mythology and his view that

psychic disturbances should be viewed as part of a single mythic soul. While this article focuses on Greek myth, it should be noted that Blake's works may be seen as a tablet on which world myths are written as he allows himself to experience various myths in order to further an understanding of poetic liberation. Andrew Cooper writes of Blake's myth as concealing neurosis, according to Paul Youngquist who argues that the same myth, 'enacts a purposeful interpretation of pathological experience' and that 'such experience is in fact proof of poetic empowerment'.<sup>6</sup> While Cooper discusses a repression of neurosis within Blake's mythology, Youngquist's thesis is that the mythology 'becomes an act of healing in the life of its author' as it changes hallucination into vision. This article is not concerned with explicating Blake's mythology in terms of a vehicle for repression or self-therapy but argues that Blake's interest in mythical depictions of illness results from his view that illness is therapeutic and that, for Blake, the power of Greek mythology lies in this fact. Blake's view of illness is such that it has a prophetic dimension and rather than being an inimical element that needs to be controlled, it contributes to the world of 'Vision' that, despite its corruptions, can be seen in Greek mythology. I will outline some aspects of the background of Blake's relationship to myth-making in his period, mythical interest in disturbances of the psyche and Blake's own view of Greek mythology and Blake's view of the unconscious. There will be a focus on Blake's interaction with the psychological elements of Greek mythology, his view that madness can be purposeful in order to stimulate vision and inspiration, and his own attempt to reanimate what he perceived to be the corrupt myth of the Greeks.

### **Blake and Mythography**

Due to an interest in primal inspiration, Blake had a fascination for ancient stories that were retold in his period, as in Jacob Bryant's *A New System or Analysis of Antient Mythology*.<sup>7</sup> The allusion to a 'system' recalls Blake's poet-prophet Los who insists that he will, 'Create a System' and neither, 'Reason & Compare' while constructing it.<sup>8</sup> Los intends to fight, 'Systems to deliver Individuals from those Systems' and while the meaning of 'Systems' is generic, in the context of eighteenth-century interest in mythography, such a reference is rich with meaning.<sup>9</sup> As Blake's Los does not intend to 'Reason & Compare', the method by which he must defeat those analytical or mythical 'Systems' is not clear. However, the fact that Blake chooses to weave mythical strands together in the later works in which his figure of the imagination plays a prominent role suggests the notion that myths, at a psychological level, are interchangeable. Unlike Bryant, Blake does not wish to analyse and compare mythical systems but seamlessly presents them in his grand narratives.

As with other mythographers of the period, Bryant dedicated himself to presenting the pagan stories of diverse mythical structures, including that of Greek culture, to a Christian audience. Greek mythology was treated with suspicion by Christians during the eighteenth century but the work of the mythographers made such myths more palatable, arguing that Greek myth was essentially monotheistic in an earlier period and that it had become corrupted and pagan. For this reason, Alex Zwerdling has noted that for the mythographers, 'Greek religious thought...[was] not radically opposed to Christianity, and that its seeming polytheism is merely the result of the accretion of centuries of poetic flattery or vulgar superstition'.<sup>10</sup> Blake, as both artist and poet, had a hand in engraving Bryant's book and was familiar with the references to Egyptian, Grecian and Druidic myths outlined in the book. He makes specific allusions to Bryant's theories, one of which is the transformation of Eros in classical mythology: 'The Greek and Roman Poets reduced the character of this Deity to that of a wanton, mischievous pigmy: but he was otherwise esteemed of old'.<sup>11</sup> Blake questions such changes and mockingly describes the deity, 'To Chloes breast young Cupid slily stole / But he crept at Myras pocket hole'.<sup>12</sup> In describing a lost painting entitled 'The Ancient

Britons' in the *Descriptive Catalogue* for his only public art exhibition in 1809, Blake argues that such ideas of divine love and forgiveness possessed an ancient source:

The antiquities of every Nation Under Heaven, is no less sacred than that of the Jews. They are the same thing as Jacob Bryant and all the antiquaries have proved...All had originally one language, and one religion, this was the religion of Jesus, the everlasting Gospel. Antiquity preaches the gospel of Jesus.<sup>13</sup>

Bryant also observes that the Greeks had misinterpreted place-names from other cultures and had deified these names, another fact of which Blake is aware in referring to 'ancient Poets who animated all sensible objects with Gods or / Geniuses calling them by the names'.<sup>14</sup> While Bryant had argued that an original Old Testament monotheism had degenerated into pagan sects Blake believed that the heroes of British mythology, such as King Arthur, were representative of 'an ancient glory' that would rise again and act as an inspiration to artists. Myth and vision are thereby bedfellows in Blake's narrative but supporters of violent Greek and Roman cultures are not advocated: 'Visionary Men are accounted Mad Men such are Greece and Rome Such is Empire or Tax See Luke Ch 2 v i'.<sup>15</sup> Visionary enthusiasts in Blake's period were considered insane by such eminent men as Edmund Burke and Blake was categorically pilloried as 'Mad'.<sup>16</sup> The reference to 'Visionary Men' expresses an awareness of a community of seers that is counterpointed with the corruptions of the Greek and Roman empires where mad men and not visionaries dwell. However, the phrase is also suggestive of the fact that 'Visionary Men are accounted Mad Men' in both Greece and Rome, thus relating 'Vision' to insanity in classical culture. In view of his own experience at the hands of vitriolic art critics, Blake was acutely aware of how 'Vision' and insanity were viewed as interchangeable in his period. However, in being conscious of corruption in classical culture and considering the work of the eighteenth century mythographers, Blake stated that it was his 'Endeavour to Restore [what the Ancients calld] the Golden Age'.<sup>17</sup>

### **Blake, Greek Myth and the Psyche**

Blake's mythology has a similar purpose to that of the early Greek psycho-philosophers in that he tried to understand the workings of the mind, and embraced its dysfunctional aspects with the need to explore how these might lead to mental health. As he states, 'Understanding or Thought is not natural to Man it is / acquired by means of Suffering & Distress i.e Experience'.<sup>18</sup> In describing suffering and dysfunctional states of mind, Greek mythology contains numerous examples of the loss of mental equilibrium, which is often associated with depictions of physical shredding. Such examples include the wanderings of Orpheus after the loss of Eurydice and his subsequent fate of being torn apart by Thracian women, the mania induced in Heracles, the furies pursuing Orestes and the frenzy visited upon the unfortunate by the rabid Lyssa. Other stories such as Archaeon being ripped apart by his maddened hounds, the fate of Prometheus disembowelled on a daily basis by an eagle, and the Dionysian frenzy induced by Hera partly suggest physiological metaphors for psychic dissociation and regeneration. Dionysus himself was viewed as the bringer of divine madness but was also considered to be a 'liberator', meaning that he could help men and women achieve a heightened sense of awareness in the midst of frenzied dancing. As such, this ties in with specific Grecian beliefs concerning madness. According to Plato, Socrates stated that, 'the greatest of goods come to us from madness, provided that it is bestowed by divine gift. The prophetess at Delphi, no less, and the priestesses at Dodona do many fine things for Greece when mad, both on a private and a public level, whereas when sane they achieve little or nothing'.<sup>19</sup> Divine artistic inspiration is thereby identified with madness. From a Grecian point of view, fits of madness signify a sense of heightened awareness. Such psychological divergences were regarded as acceptable if they were inspired or took place in moments of

ecstatic vision. As with the Delphic Greeks, Blake also rejected overtly rationalistic traditions of thought and insisted on the need to embrace a world of visionary fancy. In so doing, he compared and contrasted Greek cultural ideas with the world's mythologies and the biblical stories in order to produce a unique narrative out of diverse forms of expression, some of which he considered to be inspired, others to a lesser degree and others not.

The similarities between the Grecian and Blakean myths are striking where the imagery of physical dissolution is concerned. Physical dissections, apparent in mythical retellings of psychic disorder, are in evidence throughout Blake's mythology. In almost a parody of modern anatomical science, one of Blake's characters, Urizen, is pieced together out of an array of flailing body parts such as, 'A vast Spine [that] writh'd in torment / Upon the winds'.<sup>20</sup> In his poem *America*, Blake describes sickness as follows: 'Pale quivering toward the brain his glimmering eyes, teeth chattering / Howling & shuddering his legs quivering; convuls'd each muscle & sinew';<sup>21</sup> this description suggests that the eyes are upturned, an image that is reminiscent of Blake's illustration, 'Head of a Damned Soul in Dante's *Inferno*'.<sup>22</sup> Los gives birth to his counterparts from both his chest and his back, and this is reproduced over and over again in the myth. Children even give birth to their parents, characters speed through the arteries and nerves of Albion and they cleave each other in two with spears, or rocks, as when, in Blake's *Book of Ahania*, Fuzon wounds Urizen in his genitalia, which immediately produces a spawn of life and he himself is then killed with a poisoned rock thrown by his previously felled opponent.<sup>23</sup> Characters push roots into the earth, spreading fibres in all directions and form a hideous polypus that threatens to overwhelm creation.<sup>24</sup> Figures hide in each other or are hidden away, forming hermaphroditic entities, such as those in Greek and Hindu mythology.<sup>25</sup>

Scholarship has revealed the fact that Blake's praise for the classics is strong prior to his commissioned work for his patron William Hayley, during his three-year stay outside London in Felpham.<sup>26</sup> Hayley's work involved a passion for poets such as William Cowper and John Milton, whose ideas caused him to argue that Homeric mythology had caused much warfare and strife. Despite the fact that Blake chose to admonish Hayley in a thinly-disguised account of their relationship in his own poem, *Milton* (1803), he inveighed against classical accounts, referring to Shakespeare and Milton as having been infected by 'the silly Greek / & Latin slaves of the Sword' and under the sway of the 'Daughters of Memory' rather than those 'of Inspiration' in the context of a discussion about the need to assert the human imagination in art.<sup>27</sup> This idea of the corruption of literature and art by thoughts of war remains with Blake, in his admonition of classical civilisation in *On Homers Poetry* and *On Virgil* -- 'The Classics! it is the Classics," says Blake, " & not Goths nor Monks, that Desolate Europe with Wars' -- and *Laocoön*.<sup>28</sup> The message is that a pure artistic form cannot prosper if produced in a culture determined towards war.

Prior to Blake's involvement with Hayley, he argued that Greek culture had revealed the mythology and art of the Egyptians to be corrupt.<sup>29</sup> Significantly, in his earlier work, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, composed and printed in 1790, Blake refers to the cross-cultural nature of the 'poetic genius' and the inspired man:

I also asked Isaiah what made him go naked and barefoot three Years? He answerd, the same that made our friend Diogenes the Grecian I then asked Ezekiel. why he eat dung, & lay so long on his right Right & left side? He answerd. The desire of raising other men Into a perception of the infinite this the North American tribes Practise. & is he honest who resists his genius or conscience?<sup>30</sup>

While Hayley's reading of Milton's epics implies that Homer produced the madness that accounts for war with his stories of divine madness, Blake's view of Diogenes and Ezekiel in *The Marriage* promotes prophetic madness as an essential stage for the production of genius.

The examples that Blake cites at this stage of his analysis have a strong parallel with three of the four categories to which Socrates alludes in his consideration of madness and inspiration: prophetic madness (Ezekiel and Isaiah), poetic madness (Diogenes) and teletic or ritual madness (North American Indians).<sup>31</sup> Of the first of these types, Henry Maudsley, the eminent Victorian psychiatrist wrote that, 'There was... a mania which was divine inspiration, and a mania which was properly madness or possession by an evil spirit'.<sup>32</sup> Blake was concerned with both as being present in his analyses of myth, including that of the Greeks and in his own myth of inspired Zoas and spectral forces.

In the 'Greeks and the Irrational', E.R. Dodds argues that prophetic madness was due to an innate faculty of the soul itself, which it could exercise in certain conditions, when liberated by sleep, trance or religious ritual both from bodily interference and rational control.<sup>33</sup> For this reason, madness stops people being themselves and sets them free from rationalism as the true individual emerges. Such a notion finds its parallels in Blake. Blake's form of prophetic madness and specifically that of Grecian culture emerges in his engagement with enthusiasm. He refers to his being 'drunk with intellectual vision' whenever he takes a 'graver into [his] hand' and the word 'madness' is twinned with enthusiasm.<sup>34</sup> This recalls Apollonian ritualism, which through the figure of the Pythia, is suggestive of mediumship and trance-like states, specifically those connected with possession.<sup>35</sup> Blake's reference to Diogenes and Ezekiel embraces the role of the prophets and the state of inspired frenzy into which they enter. The inversion of knowledge created in such fits of inspiration is a process that Blake wishes to chart but there are obstacles to this, just as psychological disturbances are inflicted by the gods in Greek myth. Blake promotes the idea of the contrarities of the soul, involving the spectral journey into the underworld by which the Greek mind was fascinated.

There are two aspects to prophetic madness, one illuminating and one dangerous. The Apollonian trances and the Dionysian frenzy are two ways to discover the illuminations of prophecy through a de-centering of the self and Blake explored the Apollonian methods more strictly. In the fifth century, the frenzied Dionysian poets emphasized abnormal mental states as routes to knowledge, so that finding wisdom and being mad are interconnected.<sup>36</sup> Linked to this is Blake's interest in perception, which is given impetus in his study of Democritus in whose theory shifts in visual perception are induced by sub-atomic variation in the ether. The creation of perceptual shift, as a concomitant experience of the Apollonian trance-like state, reveals an inner feeling of ecstasia in the state of prophetic madness. According to Dodds, such Grecian ideas, 'introduced the conception of the poet as a man set apart from common humanity by an abnormal inner experience, and of poetry as a revelation apart from reason and above reason'.<sup>37</sup> Stories in Greek mythology evoke Blake's Orc, Fuzon and visual demons, as they focus on figures bound with chains for diverse reasons, one of which is to stem the destructive force of frenzied energy. For example, Sisyphus binds Thanatos on a hillside and Leucippe is bound while tearing her clothes and foaming at the mouth, as an apparent victim of the rabid Lyssa or mania.<sup>38</sup> The mythical characters constitute abnormalities of the psyche so that gods represent aspects of the human microcosm, just as in Blake the psychomachia interact to produce different effects.

### **The Corruptions of Greek Myth**

One of Blake's devices in the description of his own myth lies in the concept of multi-myths that represent different perspectives put forward by individual speakers.<sup>39</sup> This is noticeable in *The Four Zoas* in which different characters give diverse and contradictory accounts of the death of Albion. The fact that the myth is retold represents Blake's view of the myth-making process and the difficulties inherent in the passing of mythical stories from one generation to another, and his view that corruption of the original story must take place over time. It should

also be noted that the concept of long-term transmission of aesthetic methods and ideals was very much an aspect of Blake's philosophy.<sup>40</sup> Such beliefs are demonstrated in Blake's inheritance of the myth-maker's mantle in *Milton* and his vision in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: 'I was in a Printing House in Hell & saw the method in which / knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation'.<sup>41</sup> According to Richard M. Dorson, the retelling of stories is a relatively modern view of mythography: 'that myths contain folktale elements and reflect the styles of individual storytellers is a large step forward in comparative mythological study'.<sup>42</sup> Myth theorists have also argued that Homeric writing was already corrupted as a literary mode of expression rather than being pure and corrupted by the storytellers who emphasized different aspects of the myth.<sup>43</sup> This would support Blake's claim that Homer's writings had been 'Perverted', and the fact that the Greeks were advanced in warfare and art in the eighth and ninth centuries B.C. explains Blake's view that such perversion of art forms lay in the Grecian predilection for war.<sup>44</sup> However, Blake's assertion that, 'No man can believe that either Homer's Mythology, or Ovid's / were the production of Greece or of Latium' demonstrates that while he attaches importance to the cultural impact on art, his attitude is a complex one. As he considers these examples to be fables that are both allegorically inferior and yet contain Vision, he argues that war-like states could not have produced them. However, Blake insists several times in *On Homers Poetry*, *On Virgil* and in *Laocoön* that art and war cannot exist in unison, and he notes that only by building a new kingdom of Jerusalem can the 'Golden Age' be revisited.<sup>45</sup> For Blake, the madness associated with war is what makes such tales corrupt but that which is indicative of a prophetic stance is what elevates them to a level of ultimate vision.

In *Laocoön* Blake uses free-form text in such a way that it impinges on his illustration of the mythical scene. The text contains the principles of Blake's aesthetic philosophy and in crowding around the static illustration there is an assertion of Blakean values as a critique of classical ones. He states, 'Art Degraded, Imagination Denied, War Governed the Nation'.<sup>46</sup> The warlike 'Egypt' is aligned with an art of 'Imitation', as is Greek culture, with the allusion to 'memory'.<sup>47</sup> True art is associated with Christian values, such as love and forgiveness, and for this reason Hebrew art is asserted, war is despised and such values are present in those moments of illumination within Blake's poetry. Blake writes in his letters that for years he was besieged by what he calls, 'a Spectrous fiend', who he equates with the 'Jupiter of the Greeks, an iron-hearted tyrant' who ruined Greek art.<sup>48</sup> This theme recurs throughout Blake's later writings, as he propounds the view that war and art are antithetical to each other, and that where a culture is militaristic no cultural product of any worth can be forthcoming. Blake's view of ancient Greek art reflects the idea that some loss of a 'Golden Age' has occurred, so that inspired vision suffered a corruption and the travails of war affected the propensity to create works of art that intersected with Blake's aesthetic model.

Blake recognises an urgent need to create inspired art works but insists in his poem, *Milton* that, 'We do not / want either Greek or Roman Models if we are but just & true to / our own Imaginations'.<sup>49</sup> This represents a realisation that a corruption of the classical models has occurred, and that seeking knowledge in previous cultural art works or artefacts is inferior to the gifts of the human imagination. What Blake proposes instead is, 'Mental War', which suggests that war within the individual, and an effort to alter consciousness, is necessary for the production of a new myth and perfection in art. Blake also considers the fact that Christ and the disciples were artists whose works were destroyed by the church and thereby suffer the same fate as poets, whose words, according to Blake, were reapplied by the priesthood. In Blake's Notebooks, 'Why was Cupid a Boy' is a deceptively light poem that ends with the lines, 'Twas the Greeks' love of war / Turn'd Love into a boy, / And Woman into a statue of stone - / And away fled every joy'.<sup>50</sup> Earlier in this short poem, Blake questions the gender of Cupid, and posits a caustic psychological rationale to explain his

rejection of a masculine cupid. Significantly, he questions the basis of the myth, and puts forward the idea that war, the destroyer of art, must also be the destroyer of love. War not only affects the gender of the mythical archetypal figure but freezes human emotion and turns the sexes against each other.

The notion of a 'Golden Age' often associated with Homer and Hesiod has been critiqued by G.S. Kirk as one that did not produce imaginative myth-making in its entirety but was deficient in its content in this respect compared to many other types of myth, in which irrationality is a prime aspect of their creation.<sup>51</sup> In focusing on the Gods, Kirk argues that imagination is at a height when Kronos and Rhea fight over their children, and the war with the Titans is described, but the stories of the rapes by Zeus, births and arguments are rationalistic, devoid of strong imaginative content and representative of Asiatic mythological themes such as in Zeus' resemblance to Marduk.<sup>52</sup> Blake's view of corrupted story-telling and its reanimation through the purity of vision is complex, indicating that where vision is lacking, mythical story-telling must suffer but he also states that the remnants of the 'Golden Age' that preceded Greek corruptions continues in certain works:

Poetry as it exists now on earth, in the various remains of ancient authors...Painting and Sculpture as it exists in the remains of Antiquity and in the works of more modern genius, is Inspiration, and cannot be surpassed; it is perfect and eternal. Milton, Shakspeare, Michael Angelo, Rafael, the finest specimens of Ancient Sculpture and Painting, and Architecture, Gothic, Grecian, Hindoo and Egyptian, are the extent of the Human mind. The human mind cannot go beyond the gift of God, the Holy Ghost.<sup>53</sup>

'The Holy Ghost' acts as an inspiration to the artist and is superior to the 'Daughters of Memory' that, from Blake's viewpoint, are both the vehicles and the corruptors of Greek myths.<sup>54</sup> Such ideas accord with what modern myth theorists posit in arguing that rationalisation of literate story-telling in Grecian culture was already present and the corruption of the imaginative heights of Homer's story resulted from a continual habit of literary creation, and story-telling. This is present in Blake's own appraisal of such literature in his preface to *Milton*: 'The Stolen and Perverted Writings of Homer & Ovid: of Plato & / Cicero which All Men ought to contemn: are set up by artifice'.<sup>55</sup> Blake here demonstrates his belief that a purer form of art preceded that of the Greek myths, which had become 'Perverted' or corrupted. In this regard, Albert J. Kuhn and others have noted Blake's assertion that the, 'Gods of Priam are the Cherubim of Moses & Solomon, The Hosts of Heaven' and argue on this basis that, 'The gods of Greece, patterned upon the cherubim, were once characterized by the same imaginative genius as the sacred emblem'.<sup>56</sup> With such emphasis on the transformation of the Cherubim into mere idols, Blake argues that different expressions of high points of thought are subject to theft and distortion in man's failure to understand reality through the use of symbols. In other words, such symbols are devalued in the retelling, and the oral tradition that handed down these ideas and stories corrupted their imaginative content. Blake is aware of this, and in his appraisal of mythic distortion he is also aware of the corruption of art, as both myth and art are devalued at source, which involves the perversion of the 'Poetic Genius'.

### **Blake's View of the Unconscious**

Blake lived at a time when enthusiasm or the sense of divine possession was widespread in different religious communities. Catharine Arnold writes that the public perception of 'madness' was such that

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the majority of press and parliament appeared clinically insane, with the religious enthusiasts a narrow second and an ongoing dispute between the [journalists] and the poets as to who was the maddest.<sup>57</sup>

Such enthusiastic fervour was met with astonishment by Charles Wesley in December 1739 when he shared a room with a man called Isaac Hollis who suddenly, 'fell into violent agitations' and made various guttural noises. This was not viewed as an act of divine possession but of insanity or a demonic 'inspiration' by Wesley.<sup>58</sup> Similar inspired madness is evident in the activities of the self-proclaimed prophet Richard Brothers, who believed that he had a central role in the enactment of biblical prophecy and was imprisoned and considered to be politically dangerous as well as insane.<sup>59</sup> Physicians in charge of Bedlam asylum, such as Thomas Monro, supervised patients such as James Tilly Matthews, whose 'political delusions' were considered to represent a threat against those in control.<sup>60</sup> The eighteenth century was a time when the secrets of the unconscious and psychological defects were not very well understood and the period is described pointedly by Michel Foucault as, 'the age of Insanity' rather than the Age of Reason.<sup>61</sup> In this context, Blake attempted to understand the psyche and allowed the archetypes of various cultures into his own mythical narrative. Blake's presentation of madness in his myth and the way he questions the perceptions of mental illness of his day are prominent aspects of his art. That he challenged and disagreed with the physiological explanations of illness that were widespread in the latter half of the eighteenth century is evident in his references to scientific inadequacy in *An Island in the Moon*, *The Four Zoas* and *Jerusalem*, for example. In *An Island in the Moon*, Blake refers to John Hunter, a famous physician of his period as, 'Jack (Hunter) Tearguts', whose style of surgery is presented as being excessively violent.<sup>62</sup> In *The Four Zoas*, Blake refers to 'the Grey Obscure' and 'the Vast Unknown' beyond the realm of science, thus implying that there is much that scientific enquiry has not revealed and in *Jerusalem*, the 'arguments of science' are used to trick Los, the representative of the human imagination.<sup>63</sup> Blake's analysis highlights the flaws of eighteenth century approaches to cognitive disturbance. The norms of defining mental illness focused on the animalistic tendencies of man, the loss of reason and an over-blown imagination, the latter of which often resulted in millennial preoccupations. A study of the eighteenth century reveals that Blake had more in common with the ideas about consciousness, discussed by such writers as Thomas Tryon than the so-called 'mad doctors' and physicians such as William Battie and the Monro family.<sup>64</sup> The difference lies in the fact that the former addressed the psychological aberrations of individuals to some extent, while the latter divorced this from the physical determinants of illness. Blake insisted that the two could not be separated and, in referring constantly to the human physiology, he is parodying the theories of the physicians in circulation at the time and viewing the body as part of the soul, as well as investigating psycho-physiological explanations.

Blake considered the price of egotism, rationalism, and self-centredness to be a high one, particularly as he associated it with such creeds of the day as Deism, or Natural Religion, and empiricism. His metaphors and imagery reflect this fact as he alludes to chains, wheels, mills, labyrinths, manacles, malformed creatures, dark lakes, the 'Mundane Shell', voids and abysses, all of which carry mystical and mythical significance. These are descriptive of the disharmony and repetitive ignorance that occurs within the individual who has lost sight of 'Vision', and has focused so much on the minutiae of his own existence that the potential to have a truly imaginative thought is lost.

For Blake, all men possessed the potential to achieve this visionary state at any time, but he recognised that the barriers to such realities were numerous.<sup>65</sup> For this reason, one of the dominant images in Blake's myth-making is that of the constant weaving, spinning, welding and building involved in constructing the palace of the imagination, otherwise

known as Golgonooza, set against the dark, competing forces of the mind. The metaphors that Blake uses can explain the inner mental processes of the human being, and he often refers to these in terms of physical imagery, such as the nerves, the brain, fibres, and arteries, the heart and the inner sensory chambers of the ear, the eye, the nose and the mouth.<sup>66</sup> Significantly, medical books of Blake's period embrace the Grecian idea of mania and its concomitant symptoms, so that the anxiety conditions and physiological phenomena associated with those affected by the furies, the rabid Lyssa or Dionysus find their way into such accounts. Dr Thomas Arnold, writing in the 1790s, lists the various references to the symptoms of mania assembled by his contemporaries, noting their appropriation of Greek notions of insanity and casting suspicion on such classifications: 'I am sure that mania furibunda, mania mitis, and melancholia, or raging mania, mild mania, and melancholy, the three species into which Dr. Crichton divides insanity are all commonly seen to run into each other'.<sup>67</sup>

Although the Grecian idea of mania was used as one of the main classifications for mental disease in the eighteenth century, the consideration of mania as providing insight had been lost. Arnold also questions the usefulness of the term, 'idea', as proposed by John Locke to denote 'a mental idea' and calls it 'unphilosophical', while noting the ubiquity of its use, both by the ancients and the moderns. Blake's rejection of associationism as appropriated by David Hartley and David Hume from the writings of Locke is based on his assumption that no progress could be made without disrupting the sensory, inputted ideas. Thus, illness as described in Blake's prophetic works promotes Albion's questioning of his own inner reality. Arnold's questioning of the usefulness of the Lockean term in relation to discussions of types of melancholy and mania, 'means the internal representation, or mental perception, of an object of sense only'.<sup>68</sup> Arnold distinguishes between ideas and notions, and argues for the need for further explanation from the philosophers. Like Blake, he is questioning the categories of the mind into which descriptions of illness have been fitted and this causes him to assert that 'it is certain that every maniac, as described by authors, is either not at all, or not at all times, incoherent, however absurd he may be'.<sup>69</sup> The Grecian notion that mania is intermittent is disclosed in Arnold's observation, although the taxonomies borrowed from older traditions of thought are questioned. Lucidity during the experience of mania is represented in the sightings of the 'Divine Vision' by Blake's Albion in his confusion. His experience of the Divine and his feeling that he cannot retain it further deepens his mental disease, paranoia and sense of a deathly state. For Blake, such a disclosure of vision hovers above the Greek myth-makers as it does around Albion but it is prevented by the corruptions of memory.

The suppression of Greek mythology in the first half of the eighteenth century due to concerns with the corrupting influence of paganism occurs at the same time that Lockean theory is attempting to criticize support for the imaginative capacity. The two critical biases are not unconnected, as Locke's objections to imaginative fancy as preventing the ordered association of ideas and reason relates to the rejection of Grecian stories of gods interfering in nature and the decision-making of men. Locke's fears concerning fantasies that tend to disrupt the possibility of an orderly set of sense-impressions relates to the sense of the Grecian gods' interference with the natural order of things, and is set against the precepts of Natural Philosophy. As Joel Faflak notes, 'Like Johnson, Locke associates the aberrancy of empiricism with madness and the imagination's "violence"'.<sup>70</sup> However, for Blake, the imagination is equated with the 'Divine Vision', which echoes the Grecian notion that the divine directs and guides human mental life. The nature of the unconscious in the eighteenth century was discussed by poets and philosophers, rooted as it was in the medical interest in the body and the consideration of the connection between man, nature and the cosmos. Blake appropriates such imagery to refer to Albion as the 'Atlas of the Greeks', and one of the

'giants' in mythology, describing his growth and physical transformation as mirrored in terms of the aberrations of his psychic growth.<sup>71</sup> In this regard, Gary Bedford advances the view that, 'mythological psychology...claims a radically different psychological stance than ego or historical depth psychologies all because it seeks to serve the historical self by grounding it in the ontological reality of the life of soul and the imagination'.<sup>72</sup> For this reason, Blake's mythical figures do not remain static and, to some extent echo the shape-shifting qualities of certain Grecian gods, from which other gods form.

In contrast, Freud's interest in Greek mythology emerges in terms of an informing set of static psychic phenomena that reveal the hidden depths of the unconscious. The Oedipal and Elektra complexes signal Freud's acceptance of the psychic content of stories in Greek myth as applicable to an explanation of the modern unconscious. While Blake accepts that Greek myths have psychic content, he does not subscribe to the view that such static myths can be used as templates for unconscious motivations but rather he uses the archetypal architecture of myth to develop his own analysis of the psyche. The reason for this is stated in his response to Doctor Thornton's perceived attack on 'The Kingdom of Jesus': 'The Greek & Roman Classics is / the Anti-Christ I say Is & not Are as most expressive & correct'.<sup>73</sup> In *Milton*, Blake expresses a similar concern about the perceived promotion of 'Laws from Plato & his Greeks to renew the Trojan Gods, in Albion; and to deny the value of the Saviours blood'.<sup>74</sup> This reflects Blake's rejection of the growing tendency by the beginning of the nineteenth century to assert paganism over the figure of Christ, who was paramount in Blake's reasoning. The everyman Albion experiences illness as he rejects the 'Divine Vision' and Blake wishes to explore the dissociation of Albion as formed from the growing inability to trust his own perceptions. This is crucially important for his attempt to appropriate the idea of archetypes from Greek myth and reconstitute them as his Zoas inside the human psyche. Blake describes the self as a mixture of mythical gods that represent the suffering components of the psyche and although they constitute the human, they also intimate Blake's own conceptualization of the divine.

## Conclusion

Across his works, Blake was attempting to reformulate consciousness in such a way to produce a release from delusion or restrictive reason. That is, if archetypes are taken to mean ideal forms, the like of which point towards the divine, there is the need to retrace our steps and escape the realm of the 'Selfhood', the narrow ego that does not allow an imaginative reformulation of consciousness. Blake insists upon a person throwing away his rationalistic husk in order to achieve a sense of liberation, imaginative ferment and a chance to experience the divine within. From this perspective, divinity is equivalent to unbridled humanity and creative impulse.

Blake's myth indicates a wish to step beyond the boundaries of mythical and religious ideas in order to find a way back to the divine or what constitutes the ancient order, which the poet deeply admired. Blake's 'Last Judgment' or a sudden visionary experience leads to the ancient, ultimate reality suggesting that truth is bound up with insight that can be due to a heightening of consciousness as a result of illness. Blake believed that corruption of Greek culture was due to conflict which precipitated illness, such as is represented in Blake's *Milton*, in which an oppressive scenario leading to repression is portrayed in the story of Palamabron and Satan. However, he is adamant that such illness cannot result in visionary or creative moments but turns man into a Spectre. All conflict of this kind can only provoke psychic disturbance that ushers in nothing of the prophetic or the poetic elements recognisably present in the 'divine madness' in which both Blake and Plato are interested.

Thus, for Blake, illness that still remains truth-seeking will lead to utopian vision and, while it has been argued elsewhere that Blake's own visions in Felpham represented a threat

to his mental health he is convinced that suffering is necessary for any real enlightenment to occur.<sup>75</sup> Scholarship has revealed that ‘there is some evidence to show that the ancient Greeks considered a madman sacred...[when] filled with a kind of inspired madness’ and that, ‘inspiration implied insanity’.<sup>76</sup> Two paths appear to be open to the person who is ill, the first of which is cognitive disturbance leading to a repeated Spectral disruption of perception, quite different from the second type that reflects a higher utopian reality. While Blake is convinced that Greek and Latin culture is the ‘Anti-christ’ as its cruel war-like posture involves a complete lack of forgiveness or restraint, those artists who are touched by the divine, such as Homer, Ovid or Apuleius and those who are ill have the potential to rise above the corruptions of their cultures. Such experiences of illness as mentioned here receive attention from modern psychiatrists, such as Stanislav Grof who has noted the existence of ‘holotropic experiences’ wherein, ‘consciousness is changed [not grossly impaired and] we experience invasion of other dimensions of existence [and] they are usually accompanied by a variety of intense psychosomatic manifestations and unconventional forms of behaviour’.<sup>77</sup> Although there is no measure of the correlation between such unconventional behaviours and those depicted in Greek mythology and Blake, it suggests the fact that there is a realm of strange mental experiences that attain to those of visionary states.

In relation to this observation, myth scholarship has referred to the Prometheus myth as opening ‘our understanding of psychosomatic illness through an ancient culture’s mythological understanding, which did not seem to confine human suffering to ego-psychological or medical models of disease, but rather imagined suffering on a plane of experience inhabited by gods and mortals alike. Suffering becomes imbued with a soul-purpose’.<sup>78</sup> Illness in Blake’s mythology, as in the case of Albion in *Jerusalem* and Palamabron in *Milton* is provoked by erroneous perceptions of the world. Blake’s words indicate that truth-seeking is bound up with being true to one’s own imagination and that this is of specific importance for prophets. This truth-seeking in a state of prophetic madness is apparent in Blake’s depiction of his own visionary experience in his garden, as described in *Milton*. As such, the illness based on error that afflicts Albion and Palamabron can be contrasted with the liberating mental shifts as found in Greek mythology and Blake’s art.

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### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Thomas J.J. Altizer, ‘William Blake and the Role of Myth in the Radical Christian Vision’ in Thomas J.J. Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), p.171 (171-191).

<sup>2</sup> Edward Davies, *Mythology and Rites of the British Druids* (London: Printed for J. Booth, 1809).

<sup>3</sup> Frank E. Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1959), p.132.

<sup>4</sup> Agnes Carr Vaughan, *Madness in Greek Thought and Custom* (Baltimore: J.H. Furst Company, 1919), p.46.

<sup>5</sup> E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (California: University of California Press, 2004) and first published as Volume 25 in the Sather Classical Lectures Series, 1951. Dodds examines the idea of early times that madness was of divine origin, inspired prophecy and also the ritual of Dionysus and the Corybantes. It should be noted that the accounts of such scapegoat sacrificial rituals as cited are the subject of debate, as in Walter Burkert’s *Greek Religion* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press (1985), p. 82 and Jan Bremmer’s ‘Scapegoat Rituals in Ancient Greece’, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 87 (1983) pp. 299-320.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Youngquist, ‘Criticism and the Experience of Blake’s *Milton*’ in *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 30, 4 (Autumn, 1990), p.567 (555-571). Youngquist responds to Andrew M. Cooper’s arguments in, ‘Blake’s Escape from Mythology: Self-Mastery in *Milton*’ in *Studies in Romanticism* 20, 1 (Spring, 1981), pp.85-110.

<sup>7</sup> Jacob Bryant, *A New System or Analysis of Antient Mythology* (London: T. Payne, 1774).

<sup>8</sup> William Blake, *Jerusalem* 10.20-21; Erdman, p.153.

<sup>9</sup> William Blake, *Jerusalem* 11.5; Erdman, p.154.

<sup>10</sup> Alex Zwerdling, ‘The Mythographers and the Romantic Revival of Greek Myth’ in *PMLA*, 79, 4 (Sept, 1964), p.449 (447-456).

- <sup>11</sup> Jacob Bryant, *A New System or Analysis of Antient Mythology* (London: J.Walker, 1807), p.200.
- <sup>12</sup> William Blake, 'To Chloes Breast'; Erdman, p.516.
- <sup>13</sup> William Blake, *Descriptive Catalogue* p 43, Erdman, p. 543.
- <sup>14</sup> William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 11; Erdman, p.38.
- <sup>15</sup> William Blake, 'Laocoon'; Erdman, p. 274.
- <sup>16</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: printed for J. Dodsley, 1790).
- <sup>17</sup> William Blake, *Visions of the Last Judgment* 72; Erdman, p. 555.
- <sup>18</sup> William Blake, *Annotations to Swedenborg's Divine Love and Divine Wisdom*; Erdman, p.602.
- <sup>19</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, translated by C.J. Rowe (London: Penguin, 2005).
- <sup>20</sup> William Blake, *The Book of Urizen* 10.38; Erdman, p. 75.
- <sup>21</sup> William Blake, *America, a Prophecy* 15.7; Erdman, p. 57.
- <sup>22</sup> This large-scale print was completed circa 1790 in order to entertain Blake's friend, Henry Fuseli and depicts a large head dominating the foreground with the whites of the eyes showing as the head tilts upwards and the mouth hangs open as part of an agonized expression.
- <sup>23</sup> William Blake, *The Book of Ahania* 3.39; Erdman, p. 86.
- <sup>24</sup> William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 15: 3-5; Erdman, p. 159. As depicted in *Jerusalem* in which the 'Sons of Albion / Enrooted into every Nation: a mighty Polypus growing / From Albion over the whole Earth'.
- <sup>25</sup> In Greek mythology, the figure of Hermaphroditus, the son of Hermes and Aphrodite was combined with a nymph or Ardhanarishwarar in Hindu Mythology who was a combination of Shiva and Shakti.
- <sup>26</sup> Joseph A. Wittreich, Jr, 'Domes of Mental Pleasure: Blake's Epics and Hayley's Epic Theory' in *Studies in Philology* 69, 1 (Jan, 1972), p. 108 (101-129).
- <sup>27</sup> William Blake, *Milton*; Erdman, 95.
- <sup>28</sup> William Blake, *On Homers Poetry* 21; Erdman, 270.
- <sup>29</sup> William Blake, *On Virgil*; Erdman, p.270.
- <sup>30</sup> William Blake, *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 13; Erdman, p. 39.
- <sup>31</sup> E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (California: University of California Press, 2004), p.64 and first published as Volume 25 in the Sather Classical Lectures Series, 1951.
- <sup>32</sup> Henry Maudsley, *Responsibility in Mental Disease* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1892), p.50
- <sup>33</sup> E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (California: University of California Press, 2004), p.71 and first published as Volume 25 in the Sather Classical Lectures Series, 1951.
- <sup>34</sup> William Blake, Letter to William Hayley; Erdman, p.757.
- <sup>35</sup> The experience of the Pythia is linked to enthusiastic experience, to which Blake was exposed and was characterized by auto-suggestion and vocal changes.
- <sup>36</sup> Dodds has noted that Democritus' ideas precede those of the fifth century cults of Dionysus and such idea are in alignment with those of Blake, who was familiar with the philosopher.
- <sup>37</sup> E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (California: University of California Press, 2004), p.82 and first published as Volume 25 in the Sather Classical Lectures Series, 1951.
- <sup>38</sup> Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (London: Penguin, 1977).
- <sup>39</sup> Don Bahr, 'What Happened to Mythology?' in *Wicazo Sa Review* 9, 2 (Autumn, 1993), pp.44-49 and Donald Ault, *Narrative Unbound: Revisioning Blake's The Four Zoas* (New York: Station Hill Press, 1987).
- <sup>40</sup> Emmanuel Swedenborg notes that ancient stories were what he referred to as divine-human 'correspondences', the instinctive knowledge of which was transmitted through many nations and transformed into myths by the Greeks.
- <sup>41</sup> William Blake, *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 15; Erdman, p. 40.
- <sup>42</sup> Richard M. Dorson, 'Mythology and Folklore' in *Annual Review of Mythology*, 2 (1973), p.111 (107-126)
- <sup>43</sup> Geoffrey S. Kirk, *Myth, Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970). One such critic is Kirk who argues against earlier appraisal of the nature of Greek myths, admiring its depictions of heroism but not its lack of imagination.
- <sup>44</sup> G.S. Kirk, 'Greek Mythology: Some New Perspectives' in *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 92 (1972), pp. 74-85.
- <sup>45</sup> William Blake, *Vision of the Last Judgment*, 72; Erdman, p. 555.
- <sup>46</sup> William Blake, 'Laocoon', Erdman, p. 274.
- <sup>47</sup> William Blake, 'Laocoon', Erdman, p.274.
- <sup>48</sup> William Blake, *Letter to Hayley* Erdman, p. 756.
- <sup>49</sup> William Blake, *Letter to Hayley* Erdman, p.756.
- <sup>50</sup> William Blake, 'Why Was Cupid' 18; Erdman, p. 479.
- <sup>51</sup> William Blake, *Letter to Hayley* Erdman, p.756.
- <sup>52</sup> G.S. Kirk, 'Greek Mythology: Some New Perspectives' in *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* Vol. 92 (1972), p.82 (74-85).

- <sup>53</sup> William Blake, *Descriptive Catalogue* 46; Erdman, p.544.
- <sup>54</sup> William Blake, *Annotations to Reynold's 'Discourses on Art'* 5; Erdman, p. 642.
- <sup>55</sup> William Blake, Preface to *Milton*, Erdman, p. 95.
- <sup>56</sup> Albert J. Kuhn, 'Blake on the Origin and Nature of Pagan Gods' in *Modern Language Notes* 72, 8 (December, 1957), p.567 (563-572).
- <sup>57</sup> Catharine Arnold, *Bedlam: London and Its Mad* (London: Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2008), p. 115.
- <sup>58</sup> Marsha Keith Schuchard, *Why Mrs Blake Cried: William Blake and the Sexual Basis of Spiritual Vision* (London: Pimlico Books, 2007), p. 27. The source derives from Colin Podmore, 'The Fetter Lane Society, 1738', *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, 47 (1989), p. 165.
- <sup>59</sup> Brothers' intention was to rebuild the temple of Jerusalem, and he believed that certain biblical prophecies of which he wrote in detail heralded the events of the period and prophesied the completion of his mission.
- <sup>60</sup> Roy Porter, John Haslam, *Illustrations of Madness* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 14-38. Porter's account in the introduction explains the background to a case that highlights early nineteenth century doubts about psychiatric analysis.
- <sup>61</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (London: Vintage Books, 1998). This book was first published as *Histoire de la Folie* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1961).
- <sup>62</sup> William Blake, *An Island in the Moon* 6.12; Erdman, p.454.
- <sup>63</sup> William Blake, *The Four Zoas* 80.42; Erdman, p. 356 and 72.14; Erdman, p. 349. *Jerusalem* 7.6; Erdman, p. 149.
- <sup>64</sup> Thomas Tryon, 'A Discourse of the Causes, Natures and Cure of Phrensie, Madness or Distraction' from *A Treatise of Dreams and Visions* (London, 1689) .
- <sup>65</sup> Throughout his prophecies, Blake describes scientific, psychological and economic obstructions that prevent an awakening of consciousness.
- <sup>66</sup> The main figure in his later prophecies, Albion is depicted as a Universal 'Giant Man', whose body is inhabited by other characters, who are in turn physiologically described. For this reason, references to the body abound in Blake's writing.
- <sup>67</sup> Thomas Arnold, *Observations on the Nature, Kinds, Causes and Prevention of Insanity, Volume 1* (London: Richard Phillips, 1806), XV.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, Xvi.
- <sup>69</sup> Thomas Arnold, xix.
- <sup>70</sup> Joel Faflak, *Romantic Psychoanalysis: The Burden of the Mystery* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2008), p.40.
- <sup>71</sup> William Blake, *The Descriptive Catalogue*; Erdman, p.543.
- <sup>72</sup> Gary S. Bedford, 'Notes on Mythological Psychology: Reimagining the Historical Psyche' in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49, 2 (June, 1981), p.234 (231-247).
- <sup>73</sup> William Blake, *Annotations to Thornton*; Erdman, p.667.
- <sup>74</sup> William Blake, *Milton* 53-54; Erdman, p.118.
- <sup>75</sup> Paul Youngquist, 'Criticism and the Experience of Blake's *Milton*' in *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 30, 4 (Autumn, 1990), p.569 (555-571).
- <sup>76</sup> Agnes Carr Vaughan, *Madness in Greek Thought and Custom* (J.H. Furst Company, 1919), p.30. Vaughan notes an Epirote custom by Strabo who alludes to the existence of sacred slaves 'inspired by the deity' and maintained in luxury by high-priests before being sacrificed a year later.
- <sup>77</sup> Stanislav Grof, 'Psychology of the Future: Lessons from Modern Consciousness Research' (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp.1-2.
- <sup>78</sup> Gary S. Bedford, 'Notes on Mythological Psychology: Reimagining the Historical Psyche' in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49, 2 (June, 1981), p.236 (231-247).