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**WILLIAM BLAKE:**

**CONFLICT OF OPPOSITES AND THE ALCHEMICAL TRADITION**

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Aos meus amigos, por todo o riso e companheirismo. Aos distantes, também. Vocês colorem a minha vida.

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*“Ora  
Lege, lege, lege, relege, labora  
Et invenies”.*  
(Alchemical division)

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## ABSTRACT

This work aims at analyzing the historical influence the alchemical thought had on William Blake's work. By comparing the conflict of opposites present in *The marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790) to the approach given to it in other historically previous texts – as in Meister Eckhardt's, Jacob Boheme's and in some ancient Eastern traditions such as Taoism – the idea was to set a background to this spiritual conflict and to set Blake as an 'inventor of his own precursors', as Jorge Luis Borges would put. The study of these systems showed some of the reasons why Blake's philosophy seems so outsider for post-Enlightment readers, filling a symbolic gap that I intended to diminish.

Giving new meanings to the past is giving new meanings to the present. In this sense, the work of William Blake may dialogue with issues that have been intensely felt in post-modernity, such as the will for integration, expressed through polyvalence and environmentalism.

**Keywords:** William Blake. Alchemy. Intertextuality. Conflict of opposites. Post-modernism.

## 1. Introduction

Sometimes one cannot distinguish the obvious from the complex. Reading Blake's poetry may be a similar situation, but with one addition: the line between obvious and complex dissolves like an aquarelle and makes no sense at all in his mystical world of energy. All doubles that pulse from his illuminated works accuse and kiss each other in a unique act, drawing a line of perspective that leads to infinite through the sensation of entirety. This unconscious tendency or conscious posture can be seen in many of his plates.

Much has been said about William Blake's poetry. It is a mythical universe that seems to refract all theories, since his poetry is not against this or that, but against the intrinsic dichotomies that chain thought when it belongs to one or another party. Blake's world is extremely quaint and, at the same time, one cannot find a self as we usually see: the poet does not narrate his visions as a particular *persona*. This way, the poems are laughed and left in the air, as religion free from institution, and so, pure poetry, the fruit of Poetic Genius.

William Blake was born on November 28<sup>th</sup> 1757 in London. Son of an Irish engraver who lived in England, William Blake developed high techniques concerning the printing of his poetry, the so-called illuminated books. The quality of his method and art made William Blake one of the most complete artists of all time, as editor, printer, engraver and writer of his own poetry. During his lifetime, William Blake had many financial ups and downs, which led him to engrave silverware in the hardest times. His wife, Catherine Blake, who married him in 1782 and stayed with him during his whole life, was known for serving empty dishes when there wasn't food at home. This difficulty in dealing with practical life was compensated by a pulsating creativity and a faithful conviction in his beliefs, which were fed by his so-called visions. These visions helped build the image of Blake as a mad soul, tormented by spirits and images from his mind. The rumor that he had been committed to a psychiatric hospital vanished with real documents that proved that it was a matter of translation in the French version of a paper mentioning a similar name. This event contributes to the idea that, rather than real evidences, the caricature of William Blake derives more from current standards of normality (based on the application of the scientific method on psychological issues) than from his mental health.

Since the beginning of his work with *All religions are one* (1788) to his artistic maturity in *The marriage of heaven and hell* (1790), it is possible to perceive a philosophical project admirably built by William Blake. It has a hard core of ideas<sup>1</sup>, a very complex structure that

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<sup>1</sup> Expression taken from the poem *Poetry* (1968), by Carl Solomon. "Most poetry today is either boring, incomprehensible or both. I prefer poetry which is attempting to make some sort of philosophic point. It must be baked up by a theory, or illustrate a theory to really interest me. If it lacks a hard core of ideas, then it is merely words" (p.32).

would take years to be fairly explained – in case it could be. *All religions are one* accounts on his whole work with seven principles that set the basis of his poetic approach: some of them are the concepts of Poetic Genius and Spirit of Prophecy, the power of imagination, equality between religions and the importance of experiencing. It is interesting to notice the presence of ‘Oneness’ in this first work and the duality of Heaven and Hell in the latter. Regarding the first, it led me to the ideas of Meister Eckhart on Oneness, a spiritual approach very similar to some Eastern doctrines such as Taoism and the Zen. Heaven and Hell took me to the mists of alchemical tradition, with its principles and legendary figures, like the alchemists Jacob Boehme and Paracelsus.

This work aims at analyzing how William Blake systematized a whole symbolic universe concerning the alchemical tradition and the conflict of opposites, creating, as Jorge Luis Borges (1952) would put it, his own precursors. William Blake set his ideas apart from both religious institution and the concept of science, putting his world aside from Christianity and Enlightenment. He was a visionary, and his genius calls even more attention if we try to track the tradition from which such originality derived, or, at least, was inspired by. This essay is an effort to contextualize Blake’s genius in a flow of universal symbols, which seems to have blossomed in Europe especially from 1300 to 1600. Scholars point to this period as the moment in which Europe and the Eastern world were philosophically closest.

Deepening in such distant world would not be possible without the efforts of Carl G. Jung to promote the rescue of this very peculiar and still mysterious landscape of History. The rescue of alchemical thinking was endeavoured by him in the beginning of the twentieth century. Works like *Psychology and Alchemy* (1944) express Jung’s idea of a collective unconscious drawn by alchemical method, and that such drawings had an ancient common root. As Jung’s ideas were discredited during the last century, it is also interesting to notice that the same happened to William Blake and alchemy along History, causing the sedimentation of some views and the disappearance of others. Many perspectives that were kept obscure during the development of scientific thinking can now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, be interpreted with fresh eyes. Although the difference between metaphors and lies is still quite usual these days, it is possible to guess the rise of a sort of dialectic new thinking directly derived from Cartesianism. Besides the visionary work of Carl Jung, there is Joseph Campbell and his studies on myths, Mircea Eliade with his studies on religion and many others who praised the importance of symbols in an increasingly hollow society.

In the first part, some readings of Blake will be presented, especially T. S. Eliot’s. The intention here is to see how William Blake was read by one of the most important minds of English Literature during the apex of Modernism. The idea is to compare different approaches to Blake’s poetry and to establish intertextuality as the basis for the present analysis.



The second part of this work is centered on William Blake's concepts of good and evil, taken from *The marriage of heaven and hell*, and the dynamics between them. Through the use of concepts such as intertextuality, influence and interdisciplinarity, his ideas will be localized in historical correlation with other conflict-of-opposites perspectives, such as Meister Eckhardt's outsider theology, alchemical thinking and some ideas present in Taoism.

The third chapter is a brief view of post-modernism by Michel Maffesoli and the importance of William Blake's work in this context. The subject here is the relevance of his genius in the twenty-first century as well as the importance of this subject in a multiple, polyvalent world.

Even though I feel fascinated by Blake's visual art, considerations on it would go beyond the objective of this work. However, a selection of opportune images is attached in the Appendix.

I hope I make myself clear and be gentle to such subtle issues.

## 2. William Blake and his precursors

The basis of this work is the idea brought by T. S. Eliot that “past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past” (1921). There is not proof that William Blake belonged faithfully to any institution, but it is certain that he dialogued with many texts behind him. Except for the fact that he admired Paracelsus, Jacob Boehme and that he attended the Swedenborg Society during a long period, the work of mapping the footprints behind his work is very hard. It would demand a deep historical research, which goes beyond this work. The intention here is to bring together possible correlations between works marked by the attempt to organize a certain nature of problems concerning opposites, their conflict and the solution.

Julia Kristeva’s concept of intertextuality lays on the fact that “todo texto é absorção e transformação de outro texto. Em lugar da noção de intersubjetividade, se instala a de intertextualidade, e a linguagem poética se lê, pelo menos, como dupla” (KRISTEVA, apud CARVALHAL 2006:44). Intertextuality is the sovereignty of symbolic connection rather than historical connection between works of art, the unconscious creation of a dialogue between generations through points of connection. The historical relation between the authors is irrelevant, for the sake of the work itself. In this sense, such approach eases a formalist view of poetry, rather than its social representation. It approximates poetry to Psychology or Art as much as History, identifying links that are primarily pertinent in terms of human nature, and not necessarily of social structure. The rescue of Brazilian baroque by the Brazilian concretist poets Augusto de Campos and Haroldo de Campos is an example of how present alters past, reinventing tradition and altering the canon as much as literary novelties do. Thus, finding similarities in different works from different worlds is more about finding material forms that stimulate a sort of intellectual activity than discerning historical contexts or depicting authors’ personalities. The problem concerning personality is very old and should not be mistaken for the work of art itself; personality, from the ancient Greek *persona* (mask), has very little to do with the truthful creative process.

“The point of view which I am struggling to attack is perhaps related to the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul: for my meaning is, that the poet has, not a “personality” to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways” (ELIOT, 1921).

The poet is also referred as a “receptacle”, not a personality itself. According to Eliot, “the bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious and conscious where he

ought to be unconscious. Both errors tend to make him “personal.” (ELIOT, 1921). In Blake, this ‘persona’ is completely erased, and his anguishes are all transmuted into a highly mythological world.

Intertextuality also tends to put authorhood in check. The basilar short story *Pierre Ménard* (1944), by Jorge Luis Borges, accounts for this. The narrator points to the ‘visible’ art of Pierre Menard, the fictional author of *Don Quixote* in *Ficciones* (1944). Ironically, the first method Pierre Ménard attempts to write *Don Quixote* – not to rewrite – “era relativamente sencillo. Conocer bien el español, recuperar la fe católica, guerrear contra los moros o contra el turco, olvidar la historia de Europa entre los años de 1602 y de 1918, ser Miguel de Cervantes.” (BORGES, p.52). Thus, when it comes to intertextuality, the idea is to find points of contact between different works than to focus on *tête-à-tête* influence between authors. It is not a matter of finding autobiographical clues between authors, but developing a weaving of meanings on the reading layer .

Either way, it is certain that William Blake was a voracious reader of Paracelsus and Jacob Boehme, both diluted in what is sometimes referred to as alchemy. The concept of alchemy is by no means contrary to the scientific method, since both areas dialogue with different corpora: alchemy is the realization of psychological processes through an external representation, also called a projection. Alchemy is based on parameters that have been applied since Ancient times, as it will be further explained. Besides this, alchemy is deeply based on the relation between opposite elements and the purification of them throughout the chemical conflict, while, on the other hand, science develops a technique to be applied in commitment to progress. In this sense, alchemy has followed the same methods for centuries, because the main idea is to keep the balance, preserving and sometimes healing the harmony between elements, microcosms and macrocosms. Alchemists saw nature as a delicate relation that they did not intend to alter, but to keep in balance.

If we think about this cosmogony, the holism in which everything was diluted, it is easy to visualize the anthropocentric man from Renaissance. Leonardo da Vinci, Paracelsus and Jacob Boehme were much closer to the integrate man than the post-Enlightment individual. William Blake was in the middle of it and described with huge brightness what this in-between place meant: the anguish of separateness, and even disintegration, can be felt as a psychic struggle throughout his work. Even though mental illness is frequently associated to William Blake, what he expresses may be interpreted as a passionate confront between huge historical periods concerning European approach to reality, knowledge and individuality.

Apart from few historical references, the connection between William Blake and Paracelsus or Jacob Boehme can be felt especially due to the alchemical undercurrent present along his work. As Mark Ryan points out in the beautiful essay *Mental things are alone real* (2011), many of the subjects colorfully alive in Blake’s poetry were also present in Paracelsus’

and Boehme's works, like ghosts that dwell in the primitive mind, that of collective unconscious. Nevertheless, diminishing his art to a psychoanalytical explanation is failing to understand the tradition in which he was inscribed and that fed his genius. As Georges Bataille states,

The epopee of William Blake, his accuracy of vision, his necessities and profusion, his disruptions, his worlds' creations, his combats between sovereign or rebellious divinities seem adequate to psychoanalysis since the beginning. It is easy to notice there the authority and reason of the father, the stormy rebellion of the son. It is easy to look for the tense attempt to the opposites' conciliation, the will for peace to give a final sense to the disorder of war. However, from the psychoanalysis from Freud or Jung – what do we risk finding if not psychoanalysis? Therefore, the attempt to understand Blake based on Jung tells us more about Jung's theory than about Blake's intention.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, it would be more appropriate to consider Carl Jung and William Blake as some sort of similar shamans of this subtle world than to depict Blake according to Freud's or Jung's ideas. To do so, it is interesting to sink in Jung's *The red book* (or *Liber Novus*), written between 1914 and 1930, which was kept as a rumor for almost one century. This book contains texts and drawings of visions that emerged from his unconscious during this period, imagery that motivated his further psychological fathom for the human soul. The strength of the symbols presented here is very similar to that of Blake's illuminate books, which reinforces the idea that they would better be conceived as similar receptacles, both deeply connected to their unconscious (specially if we take into consideration that Jung never considered himself an artist).

In the same way, contents in Blake's poetry are very similar to Boehme's and Paracelsus'. It seems like Blake, Jung and the alchemical tradition are all concerned with the same thing: the spiritual overcome of the conflict of opposites through a specific language.

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<sup>2</sup> (1957, p.77, my translation).

### 3. Heaven and Hell

#### 3.1 Blake's poetry

*The marriage of Heaven and Hell* is probably Blake's most famous work. It is a poem based on the relation between good and evil from his perspective. Goodness carries the principle of order and repetition that keeps things working properly; Evil, on the other hand, is presented as the transforming energy that changes the world and that makes it evolve. In this sense, each contains the principle of steadiness and mutability. Even though both are necessary, Blake emphasizes that one should "expect poison from standing water" (p.418), a metaphor that marks the relative character of the elements. In this case represented by the water, even the steadiness of good may be poisonous. Blake sees Hell as a creative force, which should be as legitimate as Heaven. At the end of the strophe 'The voice of the Devil', he points that "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & Gods, and at liberty when of Devils and Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devils party without knowing it." (p. 413). This concept of evil has an interesting aspect that lays on the transformation it promotes: if, on the one hand, goodness may lead to poison, on the other one, "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom." (p. 415). Having this in mind, it is impossible to set Blake into the general view of the conflict of opposites between good and evil that was current in Europe. The complex nature of Blakean Heaven and Hell does not match the simple differentiation stimulated by church: that heaven is all good and hell is all evil. This is not to say that William Blake intended to harmonize them: in p. 415, he points that the Prolific and the Devourer should not be reconciled, which is the endeavor of all religion. Thus, Blake does not seek harmony: the opposition is necessary. He brings the words of Christ to his discourse:

"But the Prolific would cease to be Prolific  
 unless the Devourer as a sea received the excess  
 of his delights.  
 Some will say, Is not God alone the Prolific?  
 I answer, God only Acts and Is. In existing beings  
 or Men.  
 These two classes of Men are always upon  
 earth. & they should be enemies; whoever tries  
 to reconcile them seeks to destroy existence.  
 Religion is an endeavor to reconcile the two.

Note. Jesus Christ did not wish to unite  
but to separate them, as in the Parable of sheep and  
goats! & he says I came not to send Peace but a  
Sword. (...) (BLAKE, 2010, p. 415)

This excerpt contains many aspects raised along this work. Heaven is represented by the Prolific, while Hell is represented by the Devourer. Blake emphasizes the necessity of the conflict, as he puts it as the basis of existence. Religion here is put as the attempt to destroy existence, since its objective is to reconcile the opposites. It is not clear if the poet criticizes religion as the moral institution present in Europe or if he means religions as the universal attempts to sacredness and to the supernatural. However, he brings biblical words from Christ to defend his point of view, which is already controversial. Cartesian thought simply does not find place.

Another important element is the absence of words to define god. "I answer, God only Acts and Is" (BLAKE, p. 415). He is the Verb, he "acts" and "is" in an intransitive way. This perspective is in accord with the Old Testament principles, thus in accord with the basis of monotheism. At the same time, the idea that God only 'acts' and 'is' has some correlation to the imprecision of words to achieve god, which, in this work, is interpreted as the instinct for transcendence. From these verses, it is possible to set Blake in a tradition that sees language as a medium, not an end itself; and that, consequently, emphasizes the beyond-word world through the exquisite use of language, in a hermetic way.

### 3.2 Meister Eckhart's philosophy of Oneness

One of the first mystical Christians to influence philosophy considerably was Meister Eckhart. He was born in Germany in 1260 and joined the Dominican priory probably at the age of fifteen. Meister Eckhart was one of the first men to write sermons in German rather than Latin, which made him be considered one of the first German thinkers of History. His relevance for this work lays basically on his concept of Oneness, which opposes to the general belief at that time on the sacred trinity as the most depurated form of Christian spirituality and, as doing so, brings Europe closer to some Eastern ideas.

In terms of Christian-oriented philosophies, William Blake can be associated to Meister Eckhart in the sense that both created exquisite theologies if compared to the current statements concerning Christianity and its dogma. According to Oliver Davis,

It is the coincidence of these two – boldly speculative philosophy/ theology and the personal intuition of a transcendental state of consciousness – that forms the essential structures of Eckhart's thought and creates its compelling atmosphere. (1994, 23)

Both also go to the centre of monotheism, which lays on the namelessness and formlessness of god, directing the concept of god to an abstract sense of transcendence. It is possible to interpret that the Divine Trinity, as stated by church, can distract from the monotheist principle of oneness and soften the sense of entireness that characterizes the religious feeling, decreasing the level of holiness achieved by those who engage in this Christianity. In a certain way, it is as if the Church softened the holiness of monotheism by dividing divinity into three instances, reinforcing separateness and keeping religion a bit more mundane.

Meister Eckhart's effort to overcome separateness as a whole has some resemblance to Blake's attempt to overcome duality. Eckhart's restlessness regarding spiritual issues deals with the same Christian mythology preconceptions that most Western thinkers have embraced since the Middle Ages. Davies points out that

The challenge to Eckhart the Dominican is fundamentally to set a vigorous metaphysics of the One in the context of the Christian revelation, which in the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation professes multiplicity precisely at the level of the Godhead (p. 21).

His concept of oneness demands metaphysical thinking because the trinity has to be condensed into the highest layer of the spirit, the One. All things are from the One and are indistinct in the One, and, thus, indistinctiveness would be the key to overcome separateness

and the conflict of opposites. Unlike William Blake, Meister Eckhart perceives evil as the lack of God, or the distance from Him. It is not a thing itself. The morals under Eckhart's ideas are evident, while in William Blake evil is a form of energy as essential as goodness, as it works creatively and destructively towards the stable nature of goodness. Nevertheless, it is possible to notice a dialectic tune in Eckhart's theology, as everything that happens flows from the unique energy of Oneness to the distinct creatures, coming back to it. Thus, in his theology, evil works for the good; there is no such thing as the opposition of evil.

Since God in a certain way wills that I should have committed sins, I cannot wish that I had not committed them, for thus it is that God's will is done 'on earth', which is to say in misdeeds, 'as it is to heaven', which is to say in right doing (ECKHART, 1994, p. 64).

Eckhart emphasizes that Oneness is purer than goodness or truth. Oneness, as he says, is a negation of negation. This principle makes opposition worthless in the level of Oneness, thus revealing the role of verbal language in the pursuit of divinity.

If I say that God is good, then I am adding something to him. Oneness on the other hand is a negation of negation and a denial of denial. What does 'one' mean? One is that to which nothing has been added. The soul takes the Godhead where it is purified in itself, where nothing has been added to it, where nothing has been thought. (ECKHART, 1994, p.182).

Despite the huge importance attributed by Eckhart to the intellect, thoughts are considered deceitful. Eckhart's idea of Oneness derives then from his perspective towards language: Oneness is not to be handled with words; it hovers on a level prior to thought. "We should not content ourselves with a God of thoughts for, when the thoughts come to an end, so too shall God" (ECKHART, p.10). The philosopher also points out that the words come from the Word. At the same time that for him the intellect has huge importance regarding spiritual pursuit – it is *almost* God itself – he shows that it is not an end in itself. Regarding the limits of intellectual works, there is a similarity between Eckhart's theology and some ideas present in Eastern cultures, such as, Taoism, Zen-Buddhism and Brahmanism. The overcoming of intellect to solve conflicts, the conception of verbal language as a way and not an end in itself to pursue wisdom and the overcoming of rationalization for the sake of another level of human experience are some of them. The fight between ideas and the eternal spiral caused by them is wonderfully illustrated in a Brahman metaphor presented in *The art of loving* (1956), by Erich Fromm. The metaphor shows our duality (the spiral of thoughts) as two mirrors reflecting each other



endlessly; the final black point is where god<sup>3</sup> begins. In the same sense, Fromm presents a Zen-Buddhist image that shows a finger pointing to the moon; words would be like the finger: they show the moon, but they are not the moon. In another Brahman metaphor, God is like an elephant in darkness. Individuals touch one part and define god according to their personal experience, but, in doing so, they never achieve the whole.

Fromm collects these metaphors in order to compare their wisdom to the logical system stated by Aristotle that, more or less, has ruled the Western world since Ancient Greece. According to it, A is A, A is not B; B is B, B is not A. This sounds quite obvious, except if we take into consideration the mutable nature of everything – which is the basis of Chinese culture, for example, concerning Yin and Yang. In this sense, it is interesting to read just an excerpt of Tao Te Ching, an ancient text directed to Chinese governance based on Taoism.

Who can (make) the muddy water (clear)? Let it be still, and it  
will gradually become clear. Who can secure the condition of rest?  
Let movement go on, and the condition of rest will gradually arise. (TZU,  
Lao. Translated by James Legge, 1891)

Mutability is the essence of life; the negation of rational or moral opposition approximates William Blake to a preoccupation historically visible concerning the solution for the conflict of opposites.

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<sup>3</sup> God, of course, is being taken in this work as the general human attempt to contemplate mystery.

### 3.3 Alchemy

William Blake is still considered a shaman in occult sciences, as can be seen in many websites about occultism. His visions had a great impact in the hermetic culture, becoming part of its tradition – the first plate of *Jerusalem* (1804), *Los entering the grave*, for instance, is the opening cover picture of the book *El Museo Hermético: alquimia & mística* (Alexander Roob, 1997), a collection of alchemical art throughout history which includes several works by Blake and other writer's involvement with this culture. As Blake was against past and future, church and rationalism, it is worth understanding a little about alchemical principles in order to comprehend his perception of the universe as something integrated and infinite.

As Jorge Machado points out in *O que é alquimia* (1991), alchemy is an ancient science and art that was concerned especially with metallurgy and medicine. It is marked by three principles: first, it is a technique for experiencing events in a lab, which resulted in new techniques, substances and instruments; it has a philosophical principle, which reveals the world from a certain perspective derived from alchemy as a natural science; and third, it has its mystical aspect, which involves religiousness, austerity and faith.

This ancient tradition was present in the European, Arabian and Egyptian world for centuries without any significant change in its methods. It is believed that this steadiness, so unfamiliar to the mind used to the scientific method, has been so due to the alchemical belief in the equilibrium of nature. If alchemists changed their methods, the consequences would be unpredictable. The basis of alchemy is the investigation of an old revelation, through old principles.

A partir da concepção de que o conhecimento foi dado aos homens por Hermes, a Alquimia possuirá características de arte mágica, ou seja, adquirirá status de revelação: tal saber foi comunicado de forma perfeita e acabada nada lhe podendo ser acrescentado por pesquisa. Por esse motivo, o arcabouço da Alquimia permanecerá invariável ao longo dos séculos. (MACHADO, 1991, p. 32).

Alchemists saw themselves as heavenly cultivators of the Earth that intended to heal imbalance and find the ruling harmony under nature. Besides that, in times when it was easy to be considered a witch, it was wise to keep knowledge secret through the use of symbols only accessible to the initiated.

Alchemy was expressed through a very mysterious, even incomprehensible language, the so-called hermetic texts. The word hermetic comes from Hermes, the Greek deity that represented communication, traveling and information. When the Hellenics colonized Egypt, they found a god called Thoth, who represented magic and writing. Hieroglyphs were then

taken as divine symbols. The union of the gods Hermes and Thoth originated Hermes Trismegistus, considered the father of alchemy and the author of the Emerald Tablet, a text supposed to contain the alchemical principles of unity, correspondence of opposites, ideas concerning natural equilibrium among beings as well as the transformation of substances. According to this tradition, Hermes Trismegistus originated the word ‘hermeneutics’, the art of interpreting texts (originally divided in natural, supernatural, divine and human), and, due to his wisdom, became a god himself.

Carl Jung identified alchemy as a culture based on the relation between chemical elements and their correspondence to the internal psychic states of the alchemist. For this reason, the psychologist found the alchemical skeleton of symbols very useful for the interpretation of dreams, the comprehension of psychological conflicts and, more than that, identified the symbols as something universally present in some level of the human mind. Thus, alchemy in this work is perceived as the symbolic relation between physical elements and their roles as representations of psychic states of mind. The elements contained certain spiritual charges that, identified with the inner emotions of the alchemist, could represent a solution to psychic processes. Thus, the criteria of scientific method are not relevant to the concept of alchemy that deals with natural elements as the representation of conflicts and their solution. Alchemy and science are based on completely different parameters and purposes. In that regard, the following text from the astronomer Johannes Kepler exemplifies the exquisite mixture of scientific discovery and religious feeling that once was possible:

Aquilo que, vinte e dois anos atrás, profetizei,  
tão logo descobri os cinco sólidos  
entre as órbitas celestes;  
Aquilo em que finalmente cri,  
muito antes de haver visto a Harmonia  
de Ptolomeu; (...)  
Há bem poucos dias o próprio sol  
da mais maravilhosa contemplação brilhou.  
Nada me detém.  
Entrego-me a uma verdadeira orgia sagrada.  
Enfurecerei a humanidade com a cândida  
confissão de que roubei os vasos de ouro  
dos egípcios, a fim de construir com eles um  
tabernáculo para o meu Deus...  
Perdoai-me.  
Eu me regozijo.  
Podeis irar-vos  
e eu vos suportarei.  
Os dados foram lançados.  
O livro está escrito.  
Não me importa que seja lido agora ou apenas pela posteridade. Ele pode  
esperar cem anos pelo seu leitor, se o próprio Deus esperou seis mil anos para  
que um homem contemplasse a Sua obra. (KEPLER apud MACHADO,  
1991, p. 49).

‘Hermetic’ became a word to define what is closed. What is hard to achieve and difficult to get in contact with. Hermeticism, in a broader sense, fathoms what is under the verbal universe, what is hard to be perceived, comprehended, understood. The lack of certainty when dealing with hermetic texts is precisely its basis. This sort of language demands intuition and the use of the senses. “If the doors of perception were cleansed/ Men would see everything as it is: infinite”. (BLAKE, 2010, p. 417). Blake was aware of this culture and, as part of it, dealt with language in a very peculiar way that can be localized in terms of Hermeticism, especially when it comes to his last works, such as *Jerusalem* (1804), which is almost impenetrable due to unconscious use of language, strong self mythology and complex web between characters. At least, Blake can be impenetrable if we start from our common understanding of understanding. Rationalism has to necessarily follow the opposite of Hermeticism, as the rule for its understanding is the clear use of language. In hermetic literature, it is as if the non-verbal were as or even more important than clear data. Nevertheless, its mystery is achieved through the power of language. Hermeticism is the celebration of the unfathomable mystery behind language *in* language.

One of the basilar hermetic texts to have been written is the Emerald Tablet. Some believe it was written in Ancient Egypt and found a long time later. It is believed to contain universal wisdom divided in ten principles. This version is a translation by Isaac Newton<sup>4</sup>:

1. Tis true without lying, certain most true.
2. That which is below is like that which is above that which is above is like that which is below to do the miracles of one only thing.
3. And as all things have been arose from one by the mediation of one: so all things have their birth from this one thing by adaptation.
4. The Sun is its father, the moon its mother,
5. the wind hath carried it in its belly, the earth its nurse.
6. The father of all perfection in the whole world is here.
7. Its force or power is entire if it be converted into earth.
  - Separate thou the earth from the fire, the subtle from the gross sweetly with great industry.
8. It ascends from the earth to the heaven again it descends to the earth and receives the force of things superior and inferior.
9. By this means ye shall have the glory of the whole world thereby all obscurity shall fly from you.
10. Its force is above all force. for it vanquishes every subtle thing and penetrates every solid thing.
  - So was the world created.
11. From this are and do come admirable adaptations whereof the means (Or process) is here in this.
12. Hence I am called Hermes Trismegist, having the three parts of the philosophy of the whole world.

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<sup>4</sup> Isaac Newton is believed to have been part of the alchemic circle. Even as just a rumor, it is interesting to notice his appearance in some drawing by Blake (see Appendix). This translation was found among Isaac Newton’s paper, as reported by B. J. Dobbs in "Newton's Commentary on the Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus" in Merkel, I. and Debus, A. G., *Hermeticism and the Renaissance*. Washington: Folger, 1988.

13. That which I have said of the operation of the Sun is accomplished and ended. (1988)

As can be seen, the problem of opposites and the efforts towards their harmonization have been a crucial part of human questionings since a very remote times, and, especially, in terms of alchemical thought. The alchemical tradition is oriented by the overcoming of such opposites, by the chemical and psychological investigation of the relation between them by means of a philosophical approach to the problem. The essence of this current is the purification and transformation of matter into something with higher value, which is materialized in the attempt to turn lead into gold and, in other example, by the search of the philosophical stone.

William Blake was certainly aware of this ancient tradition, especially if we take into consideration the fact that he associated to Swedenborg Society in 1788 (in the same year he was finishing an exemplar of *All Religions are One*). However, he later left Swedenborg philosophy, affirming that it was only “all the old falsehood” (*The marriage of Heaven and Hell*, p. 416). Emanuel Swedenborg was a Swedish mystical Christian who wrote many sermons and was known for his visions of angels. Many consider him an alchemist, and, in this sense, his work has crucial importance for the comprehension of Blake’s *Marriage of heaven and hell*: the Swedish wrote a book called *Heaven and Hell* in 1758. According to George F. Dole (2000), the first English translation of Swedenborg’s *Heaven and Hell* was published in 1778. Blake’s *Marriage of heaven and hell* is from 1790, and as David Bindman (2010) affirms, the choice of this title was a satirical mention to Swedenborg’s work. Along the poem, Blake clarifies his intentions:

Now hear a plain fact: Swedenborg has not written  
one new truth: Now hear another: he has written  
all the old falsehoods.  
And now hear a reason. He conversed with Angels  
who are all religious, & conversed not with devils who  
all hate religion, for he was incapable thro’ his conceited  
notions.  
Thus Swedenborg writings are a recapitulation of  
all superficial opinions, and an analysis of the more  
sublime. but no further.  
Have now another plain fact: Any man of mechani-  
cal talents may from the writings of Paracelsus or Ja-  
cob Behmen, produce ten thousand volumes of equal  
value with Swedenborg’s. and from those of Dante or  
Shakespear, an infinite number.  
But when he has done this, let him not say that he  
knows better than his master, for he only holds a can-  
dle in sunshine. (BLAKE, 2010, p.416)

The general idea presented by Blake in that Swedenborg had a superficial view of heaven and hell due to his difficulty in dealing with ‘devils’, or, in other words, the shady side

of nature. That is to say that he had an approach narrowly moralist for this complex subject, merely reproducing a poetics based on ‘falsehoods’ – which matches the Church’s view current at the time.

Keeness of intellect and mystical feeling hardly ever find each other. That is what James Joyce points out in a lecture given in March, 1912, affirming that in William Blake both qualities are incredibly strong. In that regard, Blake exceeded other poets or mystical thinkers due to this combination.

‘To determine what position Blake must be assigned in the hierarchy of occidental mystics goes beyond the scope of this lecture. It seems to me Blake is not a great mystic. [...] Blake is probably less inspired by Indian mysticism than Paracelsus, Jacob Behmen [Boehme], or Swedenborg; at any rate, he [220] is less objectionable. In him, the visionary faculty is directly connected with the artistic faculty. One must be, in the first place, well-disposed to mysticism, and in the second place, endowed with the patience of a saint in order to get an idea of what Paracelsus and Behmen mean by their cosmic exposition of the involution and evolution of mercury, salt, sulphur, body, soul and spirit. Blake naturally belongs to another category, that of the artists, and in this category he occupies, in my opinion, a unique position, because he unites keeness of intellect with mystical feeling. This first quality is almost completely lacking in mystical art. St. John of the Cross, for example, one of the few idealist artists worthy to stand with Blake, never reveals either an innate sense of form or a coordinating force of the intellect in his book *The Dark Night of the Soul*, that cries and faints with such an ecstatic passion. / The explanation lies in the fact that Blake had two spiritual masters, very different from each other, yet alike in their formal precision - Michelangelo Buonarrotti and Emanuel Swedenborg (...) (JOYCE, 1913, p. 221)

Another interesting aspect of the excerpt from *The marriage of Heaven and Hell* is Blake’s conception of imitation and originality. He claims that Swedenborg only holds a candle in sunshine, as his philosophy is not exceptionally bright or creative. For him, Swedenborg reproduces ideas that do not have a hard core of complexity, especially because of his ‘conceited notions’.

In the two last paragraphs, he argues that one may create thousands or even infinite pages based on other writings, and that this is the art of holding candles in sunshine. The idea of imitation is very strong here. According to Blake’s words, imitation is connected to superficiality, lack of keeness and over-analysis. On the other hand, Blake himself praises the genius of Paracelsus, Jacob Boehme, Dante and Shakespeare to give examples of good intellectual and artistic foundations. Swedenborg, on the other hand, was chained to the moral layer. In the alchemical tradition – in Taoism, as well – transformation is the key to understanding.

While Emanuel Swedenborg, as an observer of visionary experience offered a range of symbolism that both explained and, to some extent, accorded with Blake's own insights, his notion of psychic equilibrium struck Blake as a static, rather than a dynamic contemplation of mental phenomena (RYAN, p.10).

As an artist, Blake knew the difference between formal education and the creative spark. Even though many of his concepts can be found in Boehme's and Paracelsus' texts, it is dialogue rather than influence, and influence rather than imitation. Thereby, Blake created his own precursors and invented a literary tradition that would be even further from our reality if he hadn't altered past with his sense of regurgitation – that made such distant issues tangible for his readers – even if intuitively.

As it was previously marked, Blake's poetry seems to refract all theories. Critics end up saying more about themselves than about the poetry. For this reason, learning about his 'precursors' may avoid the simplification of his work; it is easy to justify Blake based in Carl Jung's theories, as well as it is so using Freud's ideas; Eliot points to the formlessness and excessive attention Blake delivered to his visions; the exuberance of his poetry lays in the plurality of interpretations; rather than explain it, the idea is to see its articulation with similar works.

According to Mark Ryan, "Blake's emphasis on the imagination and archetypes derive from a tradition of alchemical philosophy, which greatly occupied both Paracelsus and Boehme" (RYAN, p. 8). Although scholarship acknowledges it, the true meaning of it has never been completely accepted, as its principles go against the common sense of modern life. Blake's honesty has disturbed readers since ever, especially after the disregard for any culture previous to Enlightenment. In that regard, Ryan goes to the core of the question:

The main ideas of the origin of evil, alchemical archetypes, imagination as a positive force, the notion of contraries and selfhood have all been the subject of critical focus in discussing the effect of Paracelsus and Boehme on Blake. As Boehme and Paracelsus are concerned with how the divine manifests itself in the human being, Blake scholarship has argued that there is a need to relate these concepts to Blake's humanism due to his notion that transcendentalist ideas of god advanced in the eighteenth century had to be expunged (RYAN, p. 9 and 10).

Indeed, William Blake gave a great importance to imagination in his work. From the idealistic imagination of the Poetic Genius<sup>5</sup> presented in *All Religions are One* to the subversive

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<sup>5</sup> An innate faculty of human beings for creativeness. On this issue, see the principles in *All religions are one* (1788) to understand his concept of Poetic Genius. "As none by traveling over known

imagination from hell in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake delivers evil as a necessary part of nature and the one responsible for changes, which, in alchemical terms, is necessary, healthy and psychically refreshing. The stage of *nigredo* (combustion) is part of the alchemical purification and, thus, it is essential for the renewing life.

The concept of evil presented in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is very similar to Boehme's. For the latter, evil is necessary for the manifestation of God's goodness.

As Boehme states, natural beings are "nothing without contrariety" and, as with the psyche, the "divine will" must seek and desire itself. The desire of entireness and complete self is seen in Blake through the conflict between different sides of his psych, which tended to split in different representations (RYAN, p. 12).

As Boehme states, natural beings are "nothing without contrariety" and, as with the psyche, the "divine will" must seek and desire itself.

The idea of movement is also present in Boehme. It is very present through the image of the wheel, which symbolizes the spirit of mutability. Contrariety is important to make elements purer according to alchemy; in Jung, the conflict is healthy in the sense that it renews the psyche; both visions are based on the idea of cycles. This approach concerning contrariety and circularity certainly attracted Blake.

(...) the elements of Boehme's wheel, as that which constitutes the Godhead, the spirits of God and Christ, are visible at all times. Boehme summarizes this in the image "Thus God is one God, with seven qualifying or fountain spirits one in another, where always one generateth the others, and yet it is but one God, just as these seven wheels are but one wheel" (RYAN, p. 18).

The excerpt shows how Boehme deals in a similar way with the idea of separateness and oneness previously seen in Eckhart's philosophy, which, concerning Christian 'mythology', in a certain way preserves the holiness of monotheism apart from the concept of a divine trinity and its symbolical consequences to the simple believer. Boehme's wheel takes account on the idea of cyclicity, mutability and oneness.

The oneness that summarizes the efforts of alchemists, Jung and Blake towards a higher level of existence is present in Paracelsus in many ways. He puts evil as part of nature and emphasizes the need of the 'fall' for a dialectical expansion of realization in nature. This expansion is only achieved through the conflict, in his case, between desire and will (Ryan,

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lands can find out the unknown. /So from already acquired knowledge Man could not acquire more. /There fore an universal Poetic Genius exists" (Principle 4<sup>th</sup>; 2010, p.24).



p.26). Paracelsus uses the concept of ‘*lumen naturae*’ to refer to the spirit of nature, or the hidden ingredients in it that could cure diseases. “The ‘*lumen naturae*’ cannot come into being until the fire of anger, or wrath is part of nature. Anger, or wrath, as part of this schema, implies that anxiety, as felt in man, is a result of the growth of the godhead that needs to know itself through the exacerbation of such tensions.” (RYAN, p. 26 and 27). His words are very similar to Blake’s when it comes to the importance of the fall (desire).

Only he who has known defeat can achieve victory. He who remains alive cannot be victorious, because he has never been smitten. Only he who has been smitten, carries off the victory. He alone has stood his ground (Paracelsus, p. 52).

Paracelsus, born Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim (1493-1541) was a Swiss Renaissance physician, botanist, alchemist, astrologer, and general occultist. As a physician, the matter of human diseases and the alchemical thought complemented each other as a sort of physiological philosophy. According to alchemical principles, Paracelsus saw himself as an instrument of God, and only awareness of the integration between every thing could lead to real cure. Nevertheless, as Jolande Jacobi points in *Paracelsus: his life and work* (1942, p. xiv in Paracelsus), “For a materialistic century like the nineteenth, which came close to defining the soul as merely ‘an effect of hormones’, this view was hard to accept’. In Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, it is clear:

But first the notion that man has a body  
distinct from his soul, is to be expunged; this  
ishall do, by printing in the infernal method, by  
corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and me-  
dicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and  
displaying the infinite which was hid,  
If the doors of perception were cleansed  
every thing would appear to man as it is, in-  
finite –  
For man has closed himself up, till he sees  
All things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern’ (BLAKE, 2010, p. 414)

And, to see everything as it is, infinite, the alchemists cultivated a sophisticated relation with nature. Something very similar to this ancient approach can be seen in the current efforts towards ecology and a sustainable world.

### 3. Conflict of opposites and post-modernism

T. S. Eliot was mentioned before due to his words on authorhood and the dissolution of the self to increase the flourishing of poetry. This perspective applies also to the nakedness of William Blake, who wore off himself from any masks. Eliot was an admirer of Blake's work and paid direct words for him in the collection of his early articles *The Sacred Wood* (1921), in which he dedicates one to the poet.

In that text, he argues that Blake's poetry had the quality of great poetry: nothing to be added, the simplification that denotes genius. This directness had "an honesty against which the whole world conspires, because it is unpleasant." (ELIOT, 1921). The unpleasantness Eliot refers to is the one that grows from the vices of formal education – which was not part of Blake's education; he, on the contrary, was self-educated, completely independent in terms of his own mentality. Thus, the only technical education he had was directed to being an engraver and a painter, professions also inherited from his father. Thus, as we consider these elements in accord with Blake's personality, it is easy to imagine the strength of his poetry – after all, I believe we still live in a world "too frightened to be honest" (ELIOT, 1921). Eliot develops his ideas on Blake's poetry from praising its honesty in direction to its formlessness, which he believes occurred due to the over-attention Blake gave to his visions and ideas. In his opinion, the formlessness of Blake's poetry points to his mistake: losing himself in his personal daydreams caused his language to become foggy and incomprehensible, compromising his philosophic project to the point of invalidating his views. Although this perspective is reasonable, it is quite adequate to a period that was marked by formalist approaches to art and the methodic analysis of it.

The scientific method changed society as a whole and thus influenced all artists – way in or way out. The poet Edgar Allan Poe, for instance, was deeply concerned with the impact of scientific thought in art. In *Philosophy of composition* (1846), he explains the technical creation of *The Raven* (1845), his most famous poem. Besides, the own idea of a literary genre markedly investigative (mostly towards crimes and, in a deeper frame, death) is a natural derivation of the new perspective brought by Enlightenment. Since the advent of Science, there has been an effort towards the conscious use of artistic matters and tools; in the twenties, Russian formalism developed a whole school of language interpretation based on the formal marks of the texts (such studies on poetry culminated in the development of Phonology as a science, for instance). The relation between artist and his or her historical awareness can be contextualized by the following words from Eliot, on his explanation on the depersonalization of the artist in favor to his historical awareness:

There remains to define this process of depersonalization and its relation to the sense of tradition. It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science. I shall, therefore, invite you to consider, as a suggestive analogy, the action which takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide (ELIOT, 1921).

In that regard, considering Eliot's view of Blake's poetry, it is possible to recognize a sort of intuition that this sort of poetry would not be at ease in a post-Enlightenment world, especially during the 1920's. Besides that, the psychoanalytical discoveries by Sigmund Freud flew in the same scientific current, stigmatizing many cultures that were suddenly 'magic thought', lies instead of metaphors, superstition.

The matter of belief has always been essential to man. Through the suspension of disbelief, an artist can produce; people believe in something, even in their disbelief. The sovereignty of hard sciences did not help develop an individual connected to the environment, which led to many spiritual and ecological misunderstandings. The ideas about Blake presented by Eliot show a prime reading from an age marked by the rise of technicism and rationalism. Eliot focuses on the primitivism of Blake's mind and its lack of connection to formalism and reality.

But if there was nothing to distract him from sincerity there were, on the other hand, the dangers to which the naked man is exposed. His philosophy, like his visions, like his insight, like his technique, was his own. And accordingly he was inclined to attach more importance to it than an artist should; this is what makes him eccentric, and makes him inclined to formlessness. (ELIOT, 1921)

Which, in terms, is true. His last works, like *Jerusalem* (1804), are quite incomprehensible, at least in the way we have been encouraged to conceive knowledge and understanding. His hermetic language may be a natural consequence of his philosophy, expressing an unconscious flow that cannot be understood in the rational way and, thus, that could not even be taken into consideration during the twenties.

We have the same respect for Blake's philosophy (and perhaps for that of Samuel Butler) that we have for an ingenious piece of home-made furniture: we admire the man who has put it together out of the odds and ends about the house. England has produced a fair number of these resourceful Robinson Crusoes; but we are not really so remote from the Continent, or from our own past, as to be deprived of the advantages of culture if we wish them. (ELIOT, 1921).

These advantages of culture represent among others urbanism, industrialization and the comforts of modernity for the civilized man. It is interesting to remember that Blake was

interpreted as a representative of Freud's theories during the same time, in the sense that his poetry is always relevant for different explanations in different times.

We live in the twenty-first century and new meanings for Blake are prone to arise. If Freud helped map and even construct the psychic structure of the modern man, Jung may have said things that have not been fully understood yet. His works on archetypes, the collective unconscious and alchemy as a symbolic well are still marginal. Jung is still one of the weirdest men from the last century and, in a similar way, the defamiliarization caused by Blake's poetry seems to flow from the same lake.

Analyzing the importance of reading Blake in the twenty-first century goes beyond the objectives of this work, but there are some aspects that can be raised. The first one concerns the strong effort towards ecology. This is quite comprehensible if we take into consideration the damages that humankind has caused to the planet and, consequently, to itself. 'What is above is like what is under' and 'what is inside is like what is outside' (TRISMEGISTUS apud DEBUS, 1988). Such simple notions may be revolutionary for an individual apart from nature. In Blake, the alchemical notion of correspondence between micro and macrocosm takes place in the psychic conflicts expressed through geographic wars and different deities, as in *Jerusalem* (1804), where Albion is simultaneously the gigantic man who suffers and the land in conflict.

Another interesting aspect is the pursuing of equality between genders and species, as it is expressed by movements pro feminism, vegetarianism and LGBT rights. Beings, peoples and genders look for their sameness.

The sociologist and philosopher Michel Maffesoli points to the difference between modernism, marked by the dramatic feeling, and post-modernism, in which there is the rescue of the tragic feeling. The difference between these approaches would lay in the duality of modernity – where the individual is allowed and free to choose his side (capitalist or socialist; heterosexual or homosexual, etc.) and responsible for his or her choice – and the polyvalence of post-modernity, where individuals struggle to find a free zone to be in a broader sense of community.

No drama moderno, encontramos a pretensão otimista da totalidade: minha, do mundo, do Estado. No trágico pós-moderno, há uma preocupação pela interidade, que induz à perda do pequeno eu em um Si mais vasto, e da alteridade, natural ou social. O narcisismo individualista é dramático, a primazia do tribal é trágica (MAFFESOLI, 2006, p.8).

There is today the praise of playfulness, in a primitive approach to life that reflects a will for integration with the whole. Ecology and the return of feminine archetypes (such as Gaia or Pachamama) are quite representative of this tendency. There is an attempt towards the co-existence of alterities, not only in the economical sense of globalization, but in the individuals'

attempt to live in a complete way, identifying similarities rather than discerning differences. Words historically hunted like ‘mysticism’ and ‘holism’ may be renewed through their ancient root. The idea of ego as an object from a wider self (MAFESOLLI, 2006, p. 35), so current in Jung’s theory, finds place in the post-modern: integration with(in) nature, individuals and their multiple facets.

The alchemical thought and the circle symbolize a sort of new way of living, where things are relived many times and the idea of past, present and future and blurred: it is the mythologization of life through technological equipment, such as cameras, transforming linear time into circular, or, as Vilém Flusser (1983) would put it, the awakening of an imaginary (use of images) world after the conceptual world. According to him, we live in Post-History, as a dialectical consequence of Pre-History (marked by a cyclic time, by the absorption of life through images) and History, which formed civilization as we understand it: a linear time marked by written language and the conceptualization of life rather than imagination. In this sense, thinking of a renewing era characterized by the use of technological instruments to reimagine life takes account of many issues, such as the presence of alchemical circularities rather than only linear, conceptual thought.

Giving new meanings to the work of Blake is giving meanings to these new times. The conflict of opposites and their marriage dialogue very much with the polyvalence of an age marked by multiplicity. His work may set a link between the entireness sought by the old alchemists and the paradoxical heroes of post-modernity “‘Sinergia do arcaísmo e do desenvolvimento tecnológico’. É a única definição que me permite dar conta da pós-modernidade” (MAFFESOLI, 2006, p. 10).

Alchemical thought, spiral of images, unconscious flow, myths that reintegrate yin and yang. If consciousness characterizes the limit of words, the unconscious – or maybe a new state of mind – can take account of the reliving, the circle, the primitive absorption of life through technology: magic and re-enchantment of life. The enchantment flows from what Maffesoli calls presentism, which is nothing but the tragic acceptance of present and its enjoyment. The sensation of transcendence is unavoidable. And a desire.

## Conclusion

The human mind lives in the conflict of opposites. Our consciousness is held by them - high and low, wide and narrow, big and short, good and evil. The opposition is very visible in the process of language acquisition; it is atavic.

Scientifically speaking, the conflict is even physical. The left lobe processes rational results to set a methodology, so that the ego is able to organize past and future, linearly, according to its previous experiences; the right hemisphere is responsible for the pure sensorial reception of life.

I've had a sensorial impression with Blake's poetry. The harmony between drawings and words, even if not (or exactly because it is not) in a direct way, pulled me to an intuitive comprehension of it, grasped through the senses.

Many writers knock on the doors of perception, radically or not. Some of them make them disappear. Besides William Blake, there are other writers in Literature considered alchemists, like James Joyce and Clarice Lispector, for instance. Writers with this characteristic are prone to be a medium rather than the expression of a persona.

Hermeticism in language calls for comprehension through the senses. Antiquely, perceiving meant comprehension; comprehending was understanding. "Where is the wisdom that we lost with knowledge, and where is the knowledge that we lost with information?", Eliot once pointed. Hermeticism is the attempt to comprehend through the senses.

Reading Blake is something difficult for many people. I believe some of the reasons for that were made clear along the work. For those who can dive into his world, I hope this work has enriched their ride.

As much as I read, the relevance of the dynamics between past and present grew in importance. In this sense, the words of T. S. Eliot on Blake's poetry and the ideas presented in *Tradition and the individual talent* (1921) had a great importance for a clearer construction of my thoughts. In terms of History, we may see William Blake as a poet who created his own precursors, sewing together texts from different cultures and ages by the thread that separates and unites the One. The aspects from alchemy and the conflict of opposites were brought as hooks to the world of William Blake and, perhaps, the most important element to be taken from the analysis of the conflict of opposites in Blake and in other works is the circle, which is present in the cosmic egg<sup>6</sup>, Boehme's wheel, yin and yang mutability and is part of a post-modern experience to life. In *Psychology and Alchemy* (1944), Jung affirms that

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix.

"When the alchemist speaks of Mercurius, on the face of it he means quicksilver (mercury), but inwardly he means the world-creating spirit concealed or imprisoned in matter. The dragon is probably the oldest pictorial symbol in alchemy of which we have documentary evidence. It appears as the Ouroboros, the tail-eater, in the Codex Marcianus, which dates from the tenth or eleventh century, together with the legend 'the One, the All'. Time and again the alchemists reiterate that the *opus* proceeds from the one and leads back to the one, that it is a sort of circle like a dragon biting its own tail. For this reason the *opus* was often called *circularare* (circular) or else *rota* (the wheel). Mercurius stands at the beginning and end of the work: he is the *prima materia*, the *caput corvi*, the *nigredo*; as dragon he devours himself and as dragon he dies, to rise again in the *lapis*. He is the play of colours in the *cauda pavonis* and the division into the four elements. He is the hermaphrodite that was in the beginning that splits into the classical brother-sister duality and is reunited in the *coniunctio*, to appear once again at the end in the radiant form of the *lumen novum*, the stone. He is metallic yet liquid, matter yet spirit, cold yet fiery, poison and yet healing draught - a symbol uniting all the opposites." (JUNG, 1944)

If manhood happens to overcome their individual weaknesses, they themselves become sources of infinite energy. A man becomes infinite, part of Nature, once his personality is worn off and the Poetic Genius can freely emanate.

Finding meanings in William Blake's works is not something easy, nor simple. At the same time, everything can be felt as hard as reality. He cleansed the doors of perception, and that is why reading it is delightful and sometimes incomprehensible. The hermetic philosophers express themselves "más clara y libremente, con más rigor, mediante un discurso sin palabras o incluso sin discurso, o con imágenes de los misterios, que con las palabras, incluso en aquellos enigmas representados por figuras" (Horlacher apud Roob, p.11). They intend to get to the intellect through the senses. This imagery is addressed to intuition instead of discursive faculty, which is considered destructive. Paracelsus wrote that "Lo que vive según la razón, vive contra el espíritu" (apud Roob, p. 11).

One of the reasons for Blake's hermeticism may lay in the fact that he did not intend the clergymen to understand his words. As David Bindman points out in the introduction to William Blake's complete works, even though there are different levels of meanings in his works, he probably didn't want us to find them out. A certain

obscurity of meaning was a protection, and enriched his texts. People who couldn't understand what was there would not be able to distort it. What matters in Blake's art is the journey of perpetual discovery, towards the text and ourselves. The contingency in his works will always reveal new wisdom and make the reader move further, comprehending the characters and the strengths played in his spiritual plays. It is simpler and more complex than just understanding.



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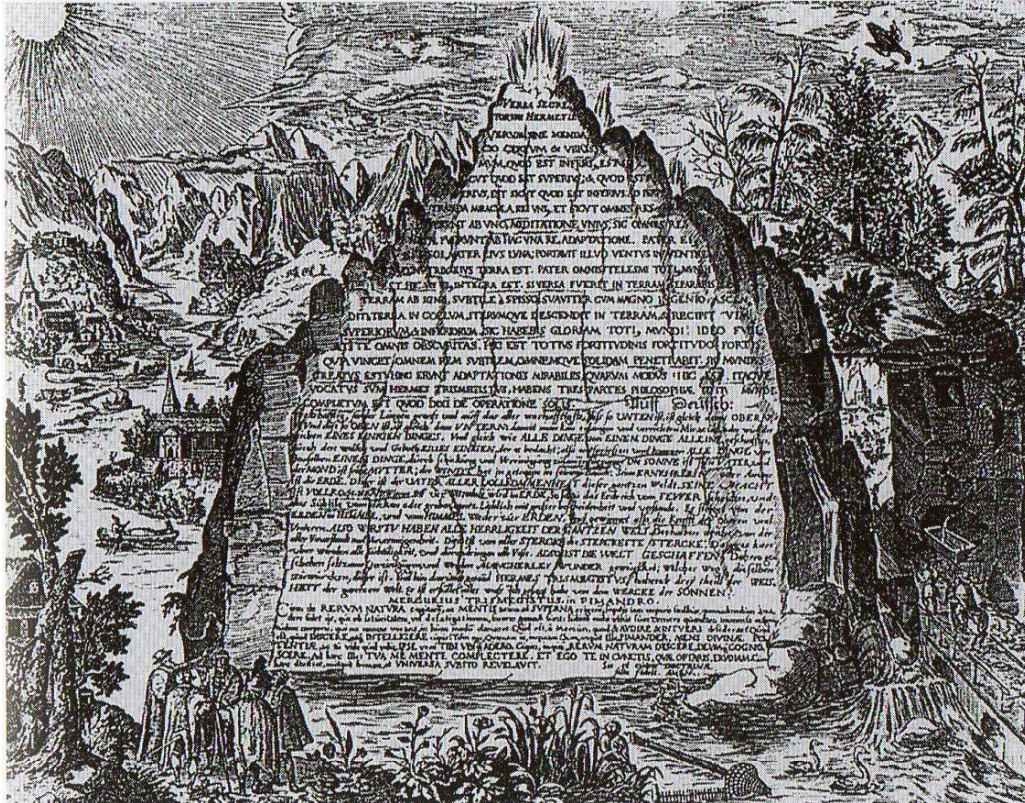
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## APPENDIX

(a) Emerald Tablet. Alchemy and Mysticism



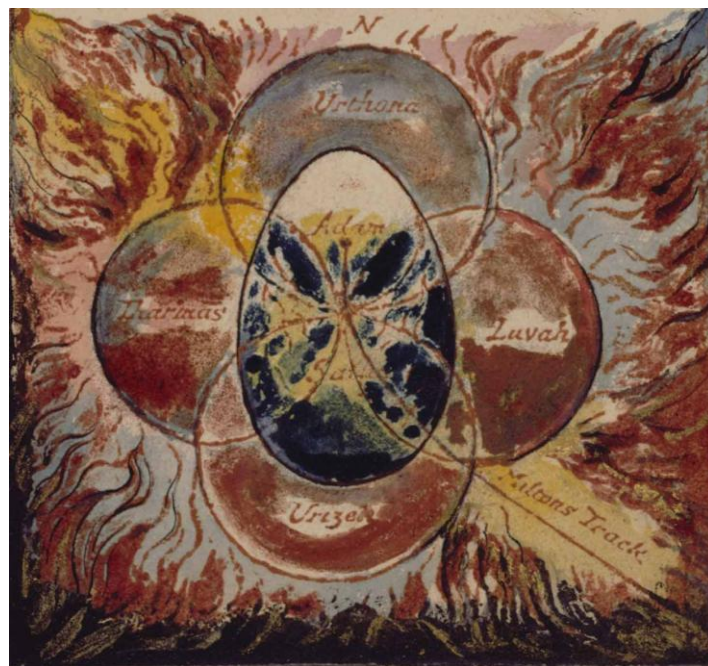
From The Hermetic Museum Author: Heinrich Khunrath Work: Amthitheatrum sapientiae aeternae Date: 1606

(b) The Androgenous Man or Rebis. Also called The hermetic androgyne.



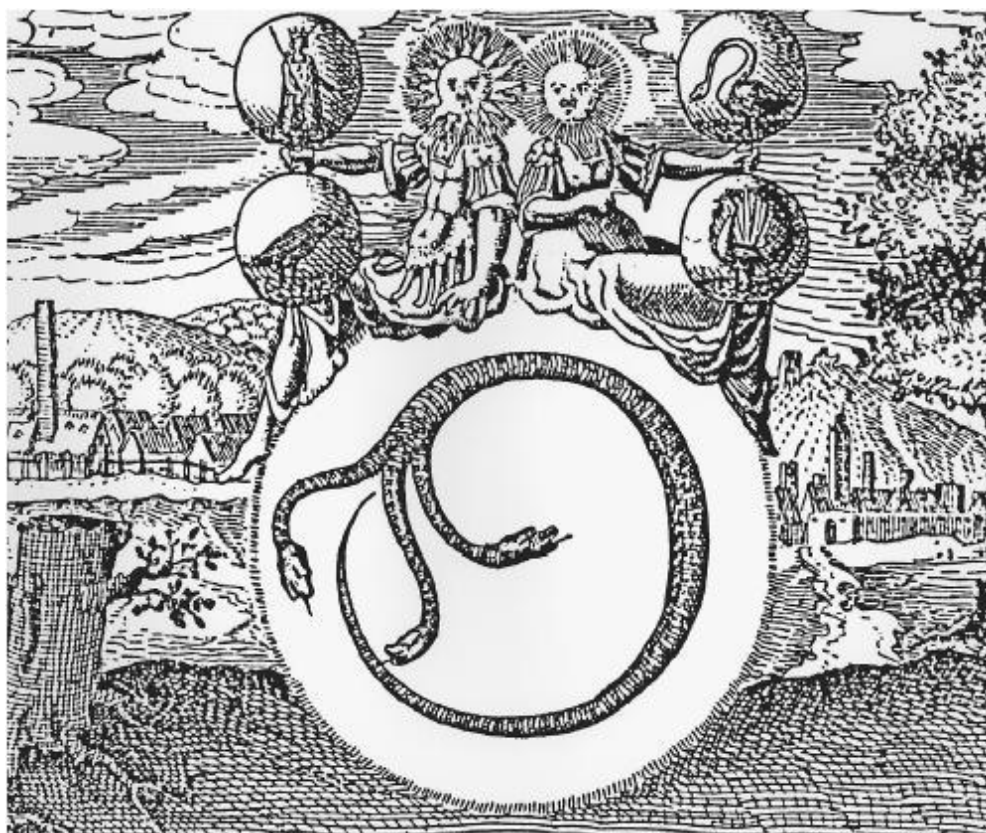
From *Materia Prima* by Basilius Valentinus, published in Frankfurt, in 1613.

(c) Mundane Egg.



William Blake, 1804.

(d) Philosopher's stone and the serpent of alchemy.

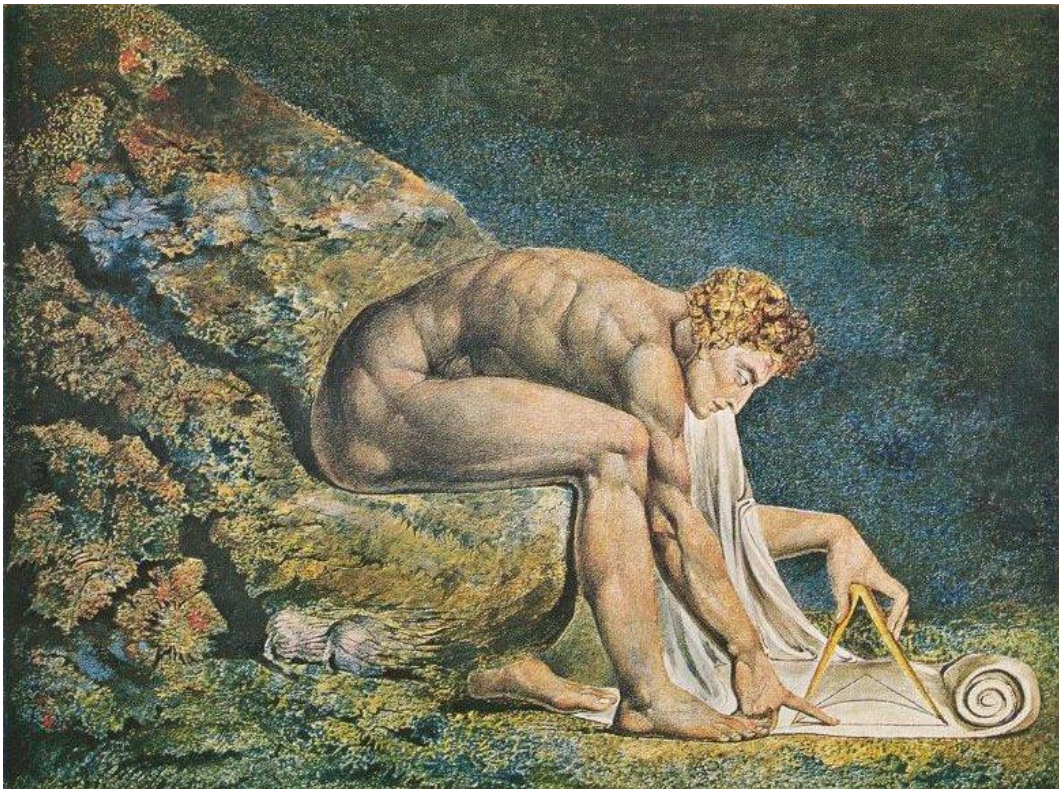


From the 1622 edition of *Philosophia Reformata* by J. D. Mylius.

(e) Ouroboros

Drawing by Theodoros Pelecanos, in alchemical tract titled *Synosius* (1478).

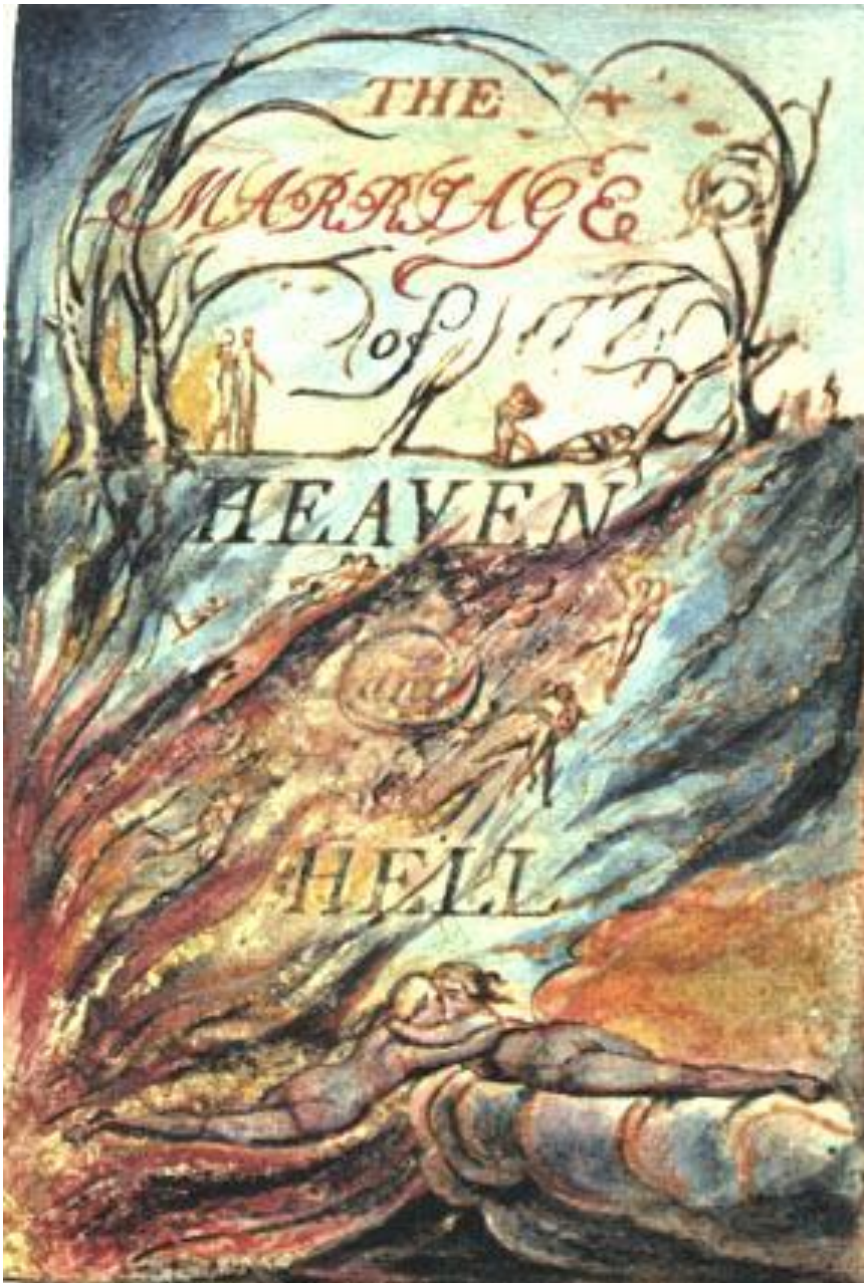
(f) Newton



William Blake, 1795.

(g) The Marriage of Heaven and Hell cover.





William Blake, 1790.