

URIZEN AS WILLIAM BLAKE'S DOPPELGÄNGER:¹ THE EGO VS. THE SELF

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Abstract: As a longtime student and champion of dialectics, Blake is fond of designing mirror figures, thereafter pitching them in visionary battles. My purpose in this paper is to analyse the manner in which Blake designs an opposite image, against which aesthetic, as well as spiritual, war may be successfully waged. This image is Urizen's, the counterpart of the Blakean homo agonistes, Los, who constitutes the embodiment of poetic genius. In psychological terms, this conflict translates the clash between the ego and the self.

Keywords: William Blake, poetry, vision, double, ego, self, Urizen, Los.

To speak about a relationship between Blake (or, rather, his creative self) and one of his characters, i.e. Urizen, may seem strange. But I must stress that it is precisely in this relationship that one must seek the key to the whole Blakean creative process, wherein the creative self seeks to exorcize the presence of the dark, sterile half of the psyche, i.e. the ego. Let me proceed with some preliminary explanations.

An important question which naturally arises when a scholar approaches the theme of the creative self is that concerning the poet's self-awareness and, concurrently, his 'presence' in the text, although this 'may seem an unBlakean notion' (O'Neill 3). That this is yet not so is shown by Vincent Arthur De Luca's brilliant assertion, which points out at once Blake's self-identity and his lack of blunt egotism: 'in the aggressive and expansive self-identity that is writ large throughout Blake's works, there is no Selfhood in the baleful sense. Blake offers the whole of himself in his art and thus risks the possibility of a humiliating total rejection . . . ' (228-29).

In my opinion, Urizen's figure represents a Blakean mirror image, a force which is simultaneously constructive and disruptive. Undoubtedly, Urizen is Blake's most self-conscious character. Yet, it is quite obvious that he does not stand for the creative self, but for the poet's fallen ego, proud and vain. That Blake the man takes pride in the *étalage de moi* is not an object of critical dispute. As John Beer writes, 'Blake did not acknowledge a need for humility. . . and the isolation of his position made him less likely to consider his own claims to genius arrogant or presumptuous' (84). Peter Ackroyd too observes that '[d]espite growing obscurity in the world he continued obstinately to believe in himself . . . and indeed the more

¹ I employ the term *Doppelgänger*, invented by Jean Paul, as a perfect equivalent of the English *double*. Originally, however, the term designed a certain ill-omen 'ghost' of a human being, an *alter ego* emerging from the deep strata of the psyche (hence, its immaterial condition). For a theory of the *Doppelgänger*, especially its hypothetical nine premises, see Webber 3-5. John Herdman underlines that 'the double as a literary device has its roots in human experience, natural, religious, psychological and parapsychological . . . ' (2). I must also point out that I am not interested in opening a debate concerning the double; as it will be seen, the concept itself constitutes a mere critical tool, used to shed some light on a complex relationship, not the *nervus probandi* of my argument.

marginalised he became, the more grandiloquent he grew' (12). Finally, Edward J. Ahearn notes that 'Blake, or his narrative persona . . . indeed exudes an utter self-confidence' (22).

The 'textual' Urizen affords a baffling richness of hermeneutic tracks. Where Michael O'Neill justifiably unveils irony and 'unsmiling jokes at the expense of its figures, creator, and readers' (6), a different angle of interpretation might also discover serious visionary considerations on the act of artistic creation, whose outcome is neither comic nor ironic, but tragic. Its tragic character derives from the perishable nature of any material creation, which represents a poor substitute for the absolute, eternal one.² As a solid construct, any human artefact is self-contained, since expansion is unimaginable. Thus, it is doomed to become part and parcel of a rigid system, be it social, philosophical, aesthetic, or religious, in other words, it is destined to fall prey to the Urizenic. Again, it is Urizen's overdeveloped and senseless ego which ultimately triggers his fall: when this happens, the creative self is purged of its unwanted psychological appendix, and can act freely in accordance with the Divine Vision. For, in the end, by depicting the fall of the supreme idol, the creative self points to human alienation, induced by the domination of reason and artificiality. In this sense, one must remember Northrop Frye's dictum concerning Blake's pivotal theological idea, according to which 'the God who created the natural order is a projected God, an idol constructed out of the sky and reflecting its mindless mechanism. Such a God is a fragment of man's alienation . . .' (13).

At first, Urizen is posited as something remote and alien, apparently exterior to the Blakean creative self (only later do we come to realize that Los, the projection of this *moi créateur*, is a psychological prolongation of a grossly asserted Urizenic ego). This external gaze on the part of the auctorial voice enables its recipient to detach itself from the dark side of the self. Urizen's *ébauche*, his incipient figure as an indomitable god, is found in an early poem, written in a copy of *Poetical Sketches* and called *To Nobodaddy*. Given its brevity, I can quote it in full:

Why art thou silent & invisible
 Father of Jealousy
 Why dost thou hide thyself in clouds
 From every searching Eye

Why darkness & obscurity
 In all thy words & laws
 That none dare eat the fruits but from
 The wily serpents jaws
 Or is it because Secresy
 Gains females loud applause (E 471).³

Blake's derision and frustration are devastating, and his whole rhetorical anger is directed against a jealous *deus otiosus*, who, because of his barren nature, does not find joy in

² In fact, this is an ancient, Platonic idea.

³ I must say that all Blake quotations are drawn from *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Ed. David V. Erdman. Commentary Harold Bloom. Newly revised ed. Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1982, hereafter abbreviated to E.

anything. It is, of course, Urizen, ‘the all-bounding one’ (Brown 110), who grins from behind the stern mask of Nobodaddy. He is nothing short of a sterile demiurge, wrapped in utter solitude and self-deception, who metaphorically takes possession of his prerogatives in a fatuous manner. The whole scene of the allegorical coronation is to be found in *The Book of Urizen*, described by Michael O’Neill as ‘a psychodrama in which Blake opposes two kinds of poetry: the solipsistic and the would-be redemptive’ (7). The former is embodied by Urizen, the latter, by Los:

Lo, a shadow of horror is risen
 In Eternity! Unknown, unprolific!
 Self-closed, all repelling: what Demon
 Hath form’d this abominable void
 This soul-shudd’ring vacuum? – Some said
 ‘It is Urizen’ (E 70).

The obsessive repetition of the personal pronoun in the first person singular stylistically marks both Reason’s egotism and its alleged infallibility.⁴ The hard consistency of the books of universal knowledge works in tune with the unassailable character of their artisan. The creative self also suggests that Urizen and the surrounding void, which is ever present in the background, are consubstantial:

And self balanc’d stretch’d o’er the void
 I alone, even I! the winds merciless
 Bound . . .

 Here alone I in books form’d of metals
 Have written the secrets of wisdom (E 72).

Further depicted as ‘A self-contemplating shadow, / In enormous labours occupied’ (E 71), the god of sterile creation strives to complete his gigantic enterprise. The act of self-contemplation suggests that Urizen is the Beholder, but his sight is restrictive and circular. As Ronald Paulson notes, ‘Urizen is the eye because he measures space, lays out caves, rationalizes darkness, and writes books. Urizen is the “I” of the one-point perspective system’ (122). Urizen’s subsequent collapse is but an inevitability, for the ego cannot expand forever. It ultimately reaches its confines, and is severed from the whole: ‘But Urizen laid in a stony sleep / Unorganiz’d, rent from Eternity’ (E 74). ‘The Eternals,’ who translate Blake’s refined concept of ‘divine identity,’ reflect upon the fate of the ego, concluding that the latter is perishable. That is because the supreme identity (Blake’s goal as a visionary artist) seeks integration, not insularity, and therefore flatly rejects the ego’s futile attempts to subvert the everlasting unity of the ontological contents: ‘The Eternals said: What is this? Death / Urizen is a clod of clay’ (E 74).

⁴ In point of fact, Urizen asserts his omnipotence more than once in different yet illuminating contexts. In *The Four Zoas, Night the First*, he claims that he is nothing less than ‘God from Eternity to Eternity’ (E 307). Further on, in *Night the Third*, one comes across renewed rhetorical pretensions to supreme authority: ‘Am I not God said Urizen. Who is Equal to me / Do I not stretch the heavens abroad or fold them up like a garment’ (E 328).

The argument into which Urizen and Los are drawn unveils the acute conflict between the ego and the creative self. In this sense, a valuable exegetic tool is provided by Geoffrey H. Hartman's dialectic, which posits a distinction between an outer and an inner self. The critic sets in contrast the common self and the Romantic 'I', remarking that 'the Romantic "I" emerges nostalgically when certainty and simplicity of self are lost' (304). He further elaborates on the idea of the fictional self: 'The very confusion in modern literary theory concerning the fictive I, whether it represents the writer as person or only as persona, may reflect a dialectic inherent in poetry between the relatively self-conscious self and that self within the self which resembles Blake's "emanation" and Shelley's "epipsyche"' (304). In my terminology, the Hartmanian 'relatively self-conscious' self merely denotes the ego, whereas the 'self within the self' stands for the creative self. It is the self that eventually controls the ego, for visionary intuition eventually surpasses mimetic ratiocination. Urizen's spine is symbolic of his artificial structure: the god is devoid of flesh and sinews just as his intellect is never imbued with visions and divine images. There is a fearful symmetry in the apothecic finale of *The Book of Los*, which, as Damon puts it, 'retells the story of *The Book of Urizen* from the point of view of Los' (51). It is almost superfluous to say that Los's perspective parallels Blake's own visionary stance:

. . . . the Deeps fled
 Away in redounding smoke; the Sun
 Stood self-balanc'd. And Los smild with joy.
 He the vast spine of Urizen siez'd
 And bound down to the glowing illusion (E 94).

Following St. John of the Cross's hierarchical distinction between the sensual soul and the spiritual soul, one may intuit that Blake stages an overt war between base and refined expressions of poetic personality. The visionary stance is made possible by the eventual stifling of the ego. Earle J. Coleman notes essentially the same thing when he refers to a more general psycho-mystical phenomenon, and his consideration may be readily applied to Blake's poetic conflict: 'Only when the superficial, self-centered ego does not interfere is it possible for an individual's deeper self to merge with her object of attention – whether a person, an artwork, nature, or the divine' (72). In my opinion, the Urizenic element corresponds to Böhme's *Selbheit* or to Schelling's *Ichheit*,⁵ both terms signifying ontological division, i.e. separation from the primordial divine unity, and impossibility of direct access to vision. In the course of the long and often painful creative process, the rich visionary force is to supplant the obsolete power of the ego:

O Saviour pour upon me thy Spirit of meekness & love:
 Annihilate the Selfhood in me, be thou all my life!
 Guide thou my hand which trembles exceedingly upon the rock of ages,
 While I write of the building of Golgonooza, & of the terrors of Entuthon:
 Of Hand & Hyle & Coban, of Kwantok, Peachey, Brereton, Slayd & Hutton:
 Of the terrible sons & daughters of Albion. and their Generations (E 147).

⁵ For more details, see Abrams 295.

This carefully disguised Blakean prayer in *Jerusalem* is for selfhood to be taken away by Jesus, the Saviour of the Divine Vision, who is simultaneously the supreme incarnation of imagination, the actualization of Los at a supreme level. Moreover, Urizen is pictured not only as a negative projection of the creative self, but also as a personified protest against the falsity of institutional Christianity, as Robert Ryan notes: '[i]n Urizen, Blake embodied his objection to the entire theology of submission, self-denial, contrition, and expiation that institutional Christianity fostered' (156). Blake's (involuntary?) sarcasm implies that, evil though Urizen may be, Christianity, with its hosts of false ideals, is even more so.

Charles J. Rzepka furnishes a genuinely new and alluring interpretation of the concept of 'selfhood,' which I have already introduced in the hermeneutic equation. In my opinion, the scholar's attempt to equate selfhood with the human body is completely justified. The critic begins by stating a 'fundamental truth' (13), i.e. that any personal identity is dependent upon both Kantian introspection and the idea that the self, inasmuch as it possesses a physical body, thereby enabling other embodied selves to perceive it as such, becomes self-conscious. Further on, Rzepka infers that '[a] real sense of personal identity depends, at the most primitive level, on the assumption of embodiment' (13). This allows him to speculate on Blake's idea of 'selfhood' as a 'false body' or 'the person reduced to the phenomenal level' (13). Rzepka's subsequent analysis is, nevertheless, partially questionable. He notes that 'Blake's vision of redemption, like Hegel's conception of phenomenological dialectic, is expressed in the form of an historically evolving social aggregate: as Hegel looked to the State, as the final expression of the Absolute, Blake looked to the rejuvenated City . . .' (28). It should be noted here that Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's State is the epitome of German idealism in the early nineteenth century, being premised on an elaborate political, social, and ethical scheme. This cannot parallel Blake's construction of Jerusalem as a visionary construct, a pure reification of the human creativity idea.

One must really confess to astonishment upon having observed and, later, acknowledged the outcome of the terrible confrontation between the ego and the self. Whilst refraining from taking umbrage at the former's destitute creation, the latter takes up the task of re-shaping the ruined, disused structures. Aside from offering a complete and accurate picture of the demise of fallen works of art, the extended metaphor in *Night the Fourth of The Four Zoas* translates the idea of the creative self's attempt to reform mimetic art in a radical manner, according to eternally valid aesthetic postulates:

Terrified Los beheld the ruins of Urizen beneath
A horrible Chaos to his eyes, a formless unmeasurable death
Whirling up broken rocks on high into the dismal air
And fluctuating all beneath in Eddies of molten fluid

Then Los with terrible hands siezd on the Ruind Furnaces
Of Urizen. Enormous work: he builded them anew
Labour of Ages in the Darkness & the war of Tharmas (E 335).

The aforementioned conflict appears to be inherent in the creative process, as Jacques Maritain's assertions seem to prove. Maritain defines the creative self by insisting on its opposition to the self-centred ego: 'The creative Self of the artist is his person as *person*

[italics in the original], in the act of spiritual communication, not his person as material individual or as self-centered ego' (106). Further refining his arguments, Maritain holds that poetic acts are devoid of interest and therefore reject any involvement of the ego, which is the corrupt form of the visionary intellect. The self expires only to be resurrected in the finished work of art:

Thus, by necessity of nature, poetic activity is, of itself, disinterested. It engages the human Self in its deepest recesses, but in no way for the sake of the ego. The very engagement of the artist's Self in poetic activity, and the very revelation of the artist's Self in his work, together with the revelation of some particular meaning he has obscurely grasped in things, are for the sake of the work. The creative Self is both revealing himself and sacrificing itself, because it is *given* [italics in the original]; it is drawn out of itself in that sort of ecstasy which is creation, it dies to itself in order to live in the work . . . (107).

This excerpt helps us to understand why Blake conceived of a conflict between the self, as a superior personal expression, and the ego, as an inferior one, and, more importantly, why the ego must be annihilated at all costs. In *Jerusalem*, the supreme self (Christ) must sacrifice itself so that the fallen self, i.e. the ego (Satan), may disappear. For the ego, as the ultimate embodiment of error, cannot exist *per se*; it only acquires a vague ontological status when opposed to truth. Should truth vanish or hide its presence, error must vanish too. If a circumspect reader might be taken aback by my apparent mixture between the creative and the religious levels, he should be aware that this is due to the fact that, in Blake, the two co-exist, and that, moreover, the former cannot be fully understood in the absence of the latter.

It has become obvious, up to this point, that the problematic of the ego vs. the self implies yet another series of Blake's dichotomies, yet another set of contradictions. Blake's dialectic expands far into the realms of abysmal psychology, encompassing radically divergent aspects. I also wish to emphasize that Blake wrestled with the problem of the self for all his adult life, to the point that it became a concern of capital importance. Thus, Blake's self-image as a visionary expands far beyond textual connotations and inter-textual relations, into what one may call 'the realm of collective salvation,' for the artist does not confine himself to presenting a merely solipsistic medium.

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