

TWO WAYS OF THE IMAGINATION

Howard Nemerov

1963

TWO WAYS OF THE IMAGINATION

The poetry I wish to talk about may be considered as meditation upon analogy by means of analogy, or as perceptions regarded from the point of view of what they tell us about the nature of perception, or as the making of equations between the inside of things and the outside of things. These are hard sayings, and worse are to follow. Here, for instance, are some sentences of the largest obtainable generality. You need not quite believe them, only entertain them speculatively for a time; and grains of salt will be handed out by the ushers. Anyhow, as Augustine said, "These things are true in a way because they are false in a way."

1. The subject of poetry is the relation of soul and body, mind and world.
2. The poetry in English during the whole of the 'modern' period -- since Shakespeare -- has had increasingly to define itself in relation to the conventional worldly view of this relation, the view named by Alfred North Whitehead as 'scientific materialism': "the fixed scientific cosmology which presupposes the ultimate fact of an irreducible brute matter, or material, spread throughout space in a flux of configurations. In itself such a matter is senseless, valueless, purposeless." (Science & The Modern World, 25-26).
3. The so-called alienation of poetry from society is a function of this self-definition, and so too is an observable tendency for poetry to become the subject of itself.

These are simplicities, and that is what makes them difficult. An appropriate gloss upon the problem they present might be the following passage from Whitehead; he is writing of the same period, roughly from the beginning of the XVII century:

"The enormous success of the scientific abstractions, yielding on the one hand matter with its simple location in space and time, on the other hand mind, perceiving, suffering, reasoning, but not interfering, has foisted onto philosophy the task of accepting them as the most concrete rendering of fact.

"Thereby, modern philosophy has been ruined. It has oscillated in a complex manner between three extremes. There are the dualists, who accept matter and mind as on an equal basis, and the two varieties of monist, those who put mind inside matter, and those who put matter inside mind." (ibid., 81-82).

It is the charm of that last statement, that it gives to the amateur at thought a master's assurance that his problem is simple even while it is also impossible.

I am not to attempt a history of this development as it reveals itself in poetry, but hope rather to elucidate my sentences by means of a comparison between two poets, Blake and Wordsworth, whose major writings offer evidence that a problem exists in the mind's relation with the world, and who represent two approaches to its resolution. First, however, I should like to consider very briefly something about the simplicities of William Shakespeare, for whom all this, though a mystery, seems not to have been a problem at all.

Shakespeare's tragedies seem to work on the belief, deep enough to require no justification, that there exist several distinct realms of being, which for all their apparent distinctness respond immediately and decisively to one another. There is the realm of the soul, the mind, the secret wish, or dream, or thought. There is the realm of human community, in itself a complex of several related relations: the lovers, the brothers, the body politic, the nation which is at the same time the family. There is the realm of sublunary nature, ranging, say, from the primrose to the storm at sea. There is the realm of the ancestral dead, shaken from their sleep and appearing ambiguously as portents or symptoms of great mischief. There is the realm of the astronomical and astrological heavens, and there is the realm of supernatural solicitings, which in themselves "cannot be ill, cannot be good." And there is the realm of the gods, or of god.

All these mutually reflect one another. You cannot disturb the balance of one mind, or of one king's court, without the seismic registration of that disturbance in the near and remotest regions of the cosmos: an error of judgment will strike flat the thick rotundity of the world; a wicked thought will tumble together the treasure of nature's germens even till destruction sicken. The result is a world of dreadful splendors, but every piece of it is rhythmically articulated with every piece; and the realms which have priority in initiating the great releases of energy are ambiguously psychological and supernatural at once, ~~but~~ unequivocally the realms of spirit, will, mind. All life, and all the scene of life, the not-living around and beneath and above, poise in a trembling balance which is complete, self-moving, extensive in detail through the four elements, from "Let Rome in Tiber melt" and "Kingdoms are clay" to "I am fire and air" and "O eastern star!" This, then, is the sublime and terrible treasure which afterwards was lost. Our theme is the attempt of the poets to find it again, and of two poets in particular.

William Blake (1757-1827) and William Wordsworth (1770-1850) are poetically about as unlike one another as they could be. But what makes the unlikeness significant and the comparison possible illuminating is the fact that it arises out of numerous and rather particular resemblances between them.

Although they are by thirteen years not of an age, the substantial overlap includes for both men the period of their greatest and most significant production. This was the period of the French Revolution and of Napoleon, time of radical hopes, radical despairs, amounting to a dramatically sudden ~~xxx~~ overthrow of ancient ways of looking at the world, and the overthrow, as dramatic and sudden, of the new way which was to have replaced these. Both poets approached the French Revolution as radicals, to a certain extent even as "subversives", "English Jacobins", strongly opposed to the English war with France. For both poets the events of the period had disastrous repercussions on the personal life -- for Wordsworth, his immediate experience of revolution and the Terror, and his liaison with Annette Vallon; for Blake, his trial on a false and malicious charge of sedition -- and for both the Revolution became the subject of a poetic analysis which made of the political and social events a myth about human motive. Both, in their very different ways, began poetical revolutions against the canons of the XVIII century, and these revolutions, however they may seem to have begun with technical questions such as the reform of diction, involved their authors in a deeper examination of the premises of perception, the question of the relation between thoughts and things. Out of their poetical inquiries came radically different though related assertions concerning world and mind, or soul.

For both Blake and Wordsworth, poetry has a crucial connection with childhood, and this connection too, however differently they handled it, is revolutionary, a new and independent discovery made by each alone. (Some hints may have been got from Vaughan, but Traherne's work, lost after his death, was not recovered and published till much later). And both poets, after achieving reckonable success with brief lyrics, turned to the largest possible form of epical and prophetic writing, with the double object of system and vision -- oddly as these two traits may appear to go together.

Finally, both Blake and Wordsworth wrote poems which were in a decisive way about writing poems. They attempted, that is, to imagine the imagination, Wordsworth in The Prelude especially, and Blake in many places, but especially in Jerusalem.

This seems to me a very strange and fascinating circumstance, because the concern of poetry with itself in this decisive way had really not happened before in English, where the self-reference, or reflexive character, of poems had been largely conventional and as it were by the way: assertions of immortality in and by means of verse, invocations to the Muse, or jokes -- "I am two fooles, I know,/ For loving and for saying so/ In whining poetry."*

* We must make one grand exception for Alexander Pope, whose Dunciad ought ideally -- given enough time -- to be studied in connection with our theme.

So we may say that in writing works whose subject included and largely was the question of what it means to write works, these two poets introduced into poetry something substantively modern, that is, a doubt which led them to view their own vocations as problematic and subject to investigation. For neither does this mean any diminution of the claims of the imagination; rather the reverse. Imagination now becomes central to the universe and the most important thing to understand about the universe; but becomes this precisely because it has become problematic and doubtful. I should add that this characteristic of the imagination reveals itself no less in Blake's fierce intellectual anger, the appearance he gives of absolute intolerant certainty, than in Wordsworth's more hesitant and tentative balancings, his quieter confidence going over occasionally into a religious smugness.

2.

The Prelude, William Wordsworth's creation myth about himself, is in the first place an autobiographical work -- it is, said the author, "a thing unprecedented in literary history that a man should talk so much about himself." His observation is in error, for we think at once of Pepys or Evelyn, but the error is a useful one, directing our attention to a striking trait of this autobiography, subtitled "The Growth of a Poet's Mind," which is, that it does not at all consist of the daily life, the record of events such as usually occupies journal or diary. From the very beginning the biography is idealized, mythified, made into fiction, and regarded from a lofty distance, whence it gains its form. Gains, in fact, two forms, both of them perceptible: the intended one, and the one that actually resulted.

The intended form of this early portrait of the artist is a pilgrimage, or journey to salvation. It is a Comedy, in the sense that, although it tells sometimes of lamentable things, it ends happily, with a grave and dedicated happiness. It is also, as I have said, a myth. The stages of the journey are the stages of

initiation, wherein the hero, a child especially favored by a divinity, in this instance Nature the Great Mother, enters the world in blessedness, falls into alienation through knowledge, endures certain trials associated with terror, death, the loss of identity, and is reborn "on a higher plane" in such a way as to redeem his early promise and assert more fully the theme of his original divinity.

In this respect The Prelude resembles the story told by Dante, the story told by Bunyan; it resembles those modern stories of Stephen Dedalus, Paul Morel, Marcel, Adrian Leverkühn, wherein the young artist, passing through worldliness and suffering, including especially sexual suffering, achieves, or fails to achieve, wholeness, dedication, strength. And the poem is reflexive, like Proust's novel, telling how it came to be, and having for subject that life which prepared the way to its composition.

So much for the form which appears as the intention. A man writes a poem telling how he got to be a poet. Towards the end of this poem, he announces that he is a poet, and offers the poem itself as interim evidence of the fact, to suffice until he does something still greater, or anyhow (as it turned out) still bigger.

But there is something else, amounting toward the end to a quite different form for the poem. For surely many readers of this immense and beautiful poem find that somehow it fails of the planned completion, that the promised rebirth, confidently proclaimed to have happened, either did not happen at all, or not to the degree asserted, or else went by us unremarked. Perhaps this has to do with the unwritten but powerful law which forbids a man from describing his own success: even in speaking of one's own humility a tone of pride sneaks in, even in ascribing the victory to God, Nature, or Reason, there may appear a flat noise of self-gratulation:

Long time in search of knowledge did I range
The field of human life, in heart and mind
Benighted; but, the dawn beginning now
To reappear, 't was proved that not in vain
I had been taught to reverence a Power
That is the visible quality and shape
And image of right reason; that matures
Her processes by steadfast laws; gives birth
To no impatient or fallacious hopes,
No heat of passion or excessive zeal,
No vain conceits; provokes to no quick turns
Of self-applauding intellect; but trains
By meekness, and exalts by humble faith...

Yet in somewhat failing thus, if it does, the poem achieves a sort of grandeur other than that intended: not quite a tragedy, perhaps, yet ^{not} without elements of the tragic, it has ~~the~~ solemn pathos attendant upon the spectacle of a human failure, which commands sympathy because we all must fail, but it has also a certain grim and moralizing humor because of the poet's resolute refusal to allow for what may have happened, or failed to happen. He goes on proclaiming praise to the end, whereas we might see rather a sad parody of ~~the~~ what is claimed in the titles of Books XII and XIII: Imagination and Taste, How Impaired and Not Quite Restored.

A reason for this failure, less personal than the one already suggested, is built into the formal problem of a reflexive poem, a poem about poetry. For poetry may be a subject like time, of which Augustine said, "I understand what it is until I try to tell you." There may be a necessary anticlimax in the poet's announcement that he has just now achieved what we have seen him doing extremely well for a dozen books and more. We may see from many modern examples that for a poem to be about poetry is no guarantee of its being a good poem, if only because a poet in doubts or difficulties about the meaning of what he is doing is always liable to appeal to this apparently easy way out and end with a vision of himself standing there with his mouth open, in lines which are the equivalent of the fighter pilot's "There I was at five thousand feet with no oil pressure."

To put this in another way, I read in the operating instructions for a sewing machine, "The machine will sew its own thread in crossing from one piece of material to another, but it is not advisable to let it do this for long." O well, I thought, that's true of any Singer.

So Wordsworth's problem at the end of The Prelude is a vexing one, and his solution for it is in the main assertion that the miracle has happened, prayerful pleas for belief that it has happened, and explanations of what it is that is said to have happened. There are, to be sure, several visions -- of the girl on the hill, of the Druids at Stonehenge, the revelation from the top of Snowdon -- yet these ~~revelations~~ revelations are curiously reluctant to reveal, they do not always reveal exactly what ~~they~~ they are announced as revealing, and the insistent work of assertion resumes once more.

Another reason for this failure is more difficult to present because it demands knowledge not given in the poem -- indeed, specifically withheld by the poet. Without the researches of ~~xxxxxx~~ Legouis and Harper we should not be able to see that the brief sketch of two lovers at the end of Book IX was Wordsworth's attempt to deal with -- or avoid dealing with -- his love, his illegitimate daughter, his betrayal (whether or no he could have done otherwise) of Annette Vallon, which amounted at the same time to a political conversion ~~xxxx~~ to a conservative point of view.

Poetically -- which is to say, somewhat ~~truthlessly~~ truthlessly -- this crisis might have been divinely appointed for the crisis of this poem, for in it the personal and the political become subject to one decision, a parallel in the true Shakespearian style, hence the opportunity of a dramatic rather than a hortatory ending. But the poet was somehow under the necessity of avoiding it. We are not to judge of this necessity, nor to tell that well-known story again, but rather to make some observations about The Prelude which can now be made independently of the story, even though the story is what started us thinking about the poem in a new way.

A striking thing about Wordsworth's vision is that it contains almost no natural evil. Such natural evil as it does contain tends to be majestic and awesome and soothingly remote; all grandeur and no poison ivy. Aldous Huxley puts the point neatly in an essay called "Wordsworth in the Tropics", saying that the Nature Wordsworth wrote about was already humanized, civilized, not to say Anglicanized, and that a few weeks in the equatorial rain forests might have cured the poet of

"the cozy sublimities of the Lake District." Of course, Mr Huxley sees quite well that the problem is not to be solved by a simple change of venue, for it is a problem of imagination, or primary belief, without which no 'Nature' is thinkable. We may confirm this by noticing that Blake, at about the same time and also from England's green and pleasant land, was viewing Nature as "a devouring worm," as

a wat'ry flame revolving every way,
And as dark roots and stems, a Forest of afflictions, growing
In seas of sorrow.

The difference is accountable to the fact that Blake reads Nature as illusion (Vala, the veil) resulting from the shrunken senses of the divided man; resulting, that is, from the Fall. But for Wordsworth Nature is herself divine, and the Fall a rather limited, almost parochial phenomenon having to do with his fastidious or even fearful reprehension of cities, human beings, love, and accordingly he approaches the crisis of his poem, the second journey to France, by seeing himself very Miltonically as Adam,

yet in Paradise
Though fallen from bliss, when in the East he saw
Darkness ere day's midcourse, and morning light
More orient in the western cloud, that drew
O'er the blue firmament a radiant white,
Descending slow with something heavenly fraught.

If I pursue the question a little further, asking what is the evil which is missing from the wordsworthian Nature, I remember the definitions offered by the psychoanalyst Ella Freeman Sharpe, to the effect that, for the superego, good ~~wk~~ is whatever has nothing to do with sex, and evil is whatever has anything to do with sex. It is true, and rather remarkable, that The Prelude's great meditation on how things come to be and on the sources of our being is just about entirely silent on the subject of carnal generation. Even in the lines about the two lovers, Wordsworth contrives to avoid the mention of sex and birth entirely by referring the reader to his poem about Vaudracour and Julia (originally composed for this place in The Prelude, but withdrawn) instead of telling their story.

Amateur psychoanalysis is not to the purpose, even though an autobiographical poem might be supposed to be self-revealing. But, continuing to speak only of the poem, the absence of any account of natural generation suggests another observation, on what might be thought of as the absolute segregation of the sexes in Wordsworth's view of life. It is a very slight exaggeration to say that Wordsworth, like some primitive peoples, does not know about the role played by the father in the getting of children. Certainly he never acknowledges it. The world of The Prelude is very largely the world of mother and child in the ~~fixxxx~~ first place; and it is right, I think, to say that every male figure entering the poem is a solitary: the veteran met on the road at night, the Bedouin of the dream who is also Don Quixote, the Blind Beggar seen in London, the Shepherd (portrait of the poet's ideal type among men), the French officer modeled on his friend Beaupuy ("A patriot, thence rejected by the rest"), and finally, of course, more than the rest, Wordsworth himself. His mother receives an elegy of some fifty lines -- beginning, I am afraid, "Behold the parent hen amid her brood!" -- but his father is mentioned only once, to say that he died, and that certain related circumstances made the event appear "a chastisement."

It is perhaps not this avoidance alone which impairs the poem as an account of creative mind, but certain parallel avoidances implied in it and made necessary by it. The omission of fatherhood in the natural sense somewhat weakens and limits the account of a process which may be not so natural as to a thoughtless eye it may at first appear, the process of the imagination's dealing with the world, and this poet cannot say, as Shakespeare does, "My brain I'll prove the female to my soul,/ My soul the father," or speak so energetically as Shakespeare does of "the quick forge and working-house of thought". His "wise passivity" seems sometimes a touch too passive, too receptive, and of his attempt to hold, as at his best he does, a monist and interpenetrating balance between the mind and nature, we might say, as I suspect Blake is saying in certain passages we shall soon consider, If you don't beat nature, nature will beat you; there is no middle ground.

How this works in The Prelude may be seen from the poet's unconscious use of that tradition of natural symbolism, the initiatory ascent from earth through water and air to fire, which all poets come into some relation with whether knowing or unknowing. Seen in one way, The Prelude is a series of mountain climbs, with visions at the top of each mountain, climaxed by the grand vision from Mount Snowdon; that is, each time he attains the Earthly Paradise, the most refined earthly element of air, traditionally feminine (Blake calls it the region of Beulah) and traditionally representing the achievement of a ~~refined~~ purified natural reason. Further than this, the point at which Dante takes leave of Virgil and flies beyond the sun and stars, Wordsworth does not go: the sun, the fire, the father, remain unknown to him; his poem belongs to earth, water, air, to Nature as protecting mother, it is written under the auspices of the powers of the air, and its highest moment of vision -- universal mind, "a majestic intellect" imaged by clouds imitating the forms of earth and sea -- takes place not in the fiery sun but by the light of the full moon.

One excerpt may serve to sum up the poet's approach to and withdrawal from the complex of feeling I have tried to outline. It comes in Book XII, just before the mention of his father's death, to which in scene-setting it is explicitly a parallel.

He remembers how as a child he strayed into a valley "where in former times/ A murderer had been hung in iron chains." Though gibbet and bones were gone, there remained on the turf the murderer's name, carved in "monumental letters" annually cleared of grass "by superstition of the neighborhood." Fleeing in fear from this gloomy scene he climbed a hill and saw

A naked pool that lay beneath the hills,
The beacon on the summit, and, more near,
A girl, who bore a pitcher on her head,
And seemed with difficult steps to force her way
Against the blowing wind.

It is for him an "ordinary sight", yet full of "visionary dreariness," and fascinating enough for him to speak again of

moorland waste and naked pool,
The beacon crowning the lone eminence,
The female and her garments vexed and tossed
By the strong wind,

and to remember that the same scene, when he was in love, appeared pleasurable.

This is his closest and clearest approach to the mystery of generation, composed in the sign of crime, punishment, and superstition, the murderer's name spoken as by the earth itself. He views the landscape exclusively in genital and sexual terms: hill and naked pool its natural symbols, beacon and pitcher its emblems in the realm of human artifice. The girl with the pitcher walking against the wind, her garments "vexed and tossed", glancingly allusive to legends of virgins impregnated by the wind -- he sees that all this is somehow about love. But it puzzles him, and he retires ~~to~~ on a somewhat general moral, which the passage itself only in very general terms will support, and delivers a sadly accurate prophecy of the future as a falling back, a return to the past:

So feeling comes in aid
Of feeling, and diversity of strength
Attends us, if but once we have been strong.
Oh! mystery of man, from what a depth
Proceed thy honours. I am lost, but see
In simple childhood something of the base
On which thy greatness stands; but this I feel,
That from thyself it comes, that thou must give,
Else never canst receive. The days gone by
Return upon me almost from the dawn
Of life: the hiding places of man's power
Open; I would approach them, but they close.
I see by glimpses now; when age ~~comes~~ comes on,
May scarcely see at all....

Those hiding places of man's power are indeed associated with vision, though sometimes negatively and dreadfully, as in Edgar's saying to Edmund about their father, "The dark and vicious place where thee he got/ Cost him his eyes." But for Wordsworth, what Nature generates, over and over again, is thought, and thought alone.

Much might be said in defence of the poet; for surely the times were out of joint, they always are. But after it is said there will remain something about this wonderful poem sad, guilty, and unachieved. There is a marvelous moment just about at the middle of The Prelude, when the poet sees something about the human condition, and sees it clearly. In a London street, "lost Amid the moving pageant," he sees a blind Beggar,

who, with upright face,
Stood, propped against a wall, upon his chest
Wearing a written paper, to explain
His story, whence he came, and who he was.
Caught by the spectacle my mind turned round
As with the might of waters; and apt type
This label seemed of the utmost we can know,
Both of ourselves and of the universe;
And, on the shape of that unmoving man,
His steadfast face and sightless eyes, I gazed,
As if admonished from another world.

"My mind turned round as with the might of waters." Or, as Blake says, "in Time's ocean falling drown'd". For that written paper includes all the poems ever written or to be written. But from this dire vision of blindness Wordsworth retreats, as we all do every day, as only the very greatest now and then do not.

22 3.

Wordsworth and Blake were not acquainted, though Wordsworth read some Blake poems in manuscript sent for his inspection by Henry Crabb Robinson, and was "interested" -- as well he might be, writes Robinson, for there is an affinity between them "as there is between the regulated imagination of a wise poet and the incoherent outpourings of a dreamer" (George McLean Harper, Wordsworth, II, 342). Blake, on the other hand, thought Wordsworth the greatest poet of the age, but sometimes feared he might be an Atheist. For Blake, as Robinson correctly reports, "Atheism consists in worshipping the natural world, which same natural world, properly speaking, is nothing real, but a mere illusion produced by Satan." Robinson also preserved for us Blake's marginal annotations in a copy of Wordsworth's poems, and some of these may exhibit strikingly the difference which is our subject.

For Wordsworth at his best the mind's relation with Nature is mutual, a matter of the finest, most hypnotic transactions flowing between substance and sense, whereby the world becomes what Yeats calls "a superhuman mirror-resembling dream". But for Blake the point ~~xxxx~~ of art becomes increasingly as he goes on the rejection of nature altogether as a wicked enchantment. Of Wordsworth's famous 'natural piety' -- epithet as celebrated in its time as 'artifice of eternity' in ours -- Blake writes in the most unequivocal manner: "There is no such Thing as Natural Piety because the Natural Man is at Enmity with God." Similarly, if Wordsworth regards Natural Objects as strengthening the imagination, Blake's response has the sound of immediate violence: "Natural Objects always did & now do weaken, deaden & obliterate imagination in Me. Wordsworth must know that what he Writes Valuable is not to be found in Nature." And, later on, "Imagination is the Divine Vision....Imagination has nothing to do with Memory." Wordsworth writes in The Excursion of how exquisitely the mind is fitted to the external world, and how exquisitely, too, the external world is fitted to the mind; Blake writes in the margin: "You shall not bring me down to believe such fitting and fitted. I know better & please your Lordship."

These too are hard sayings, and it should go with them that Blake said, about a proposed meeting with Wordsworth: "You do me honour. Mr Wordsworth is a great man. Besides, he may convince me I am wrong about him; I have been wrong before now."

Blake's views of Nature and the Imagination are not easy for us to understand or give a full assent to. Yet it remains true at the very least, as Professor Harper writes, that "the convictions, however singular, of this rare spirit demand our entire respect, and are of value to us in proportion as they conflict with all our ways of thinking."

Jerusalem is a huge poem, in many details extremely obscure, and in any event scarcely compassable in only part of one lecture. But it is also a very reckonable poem, whose incoherencies are largely peripheral (I sometimes think that some of its incidental impossibilities, such as huge compounds of geographical, historical, and mythical names, are there because similar things happen in the Bible.) At its center the poem is coherent for all its strangeness, and our difficulties with it might well be ~~a~~ resistances masquerading as criticism. Blake is really writing prophecy, that is to say, a very ancient thought lost sight of by his contemporaries yet about to become, in part by his instrumentality, a very modern thought; no wonder if the expression of it was full of difficulty.

Jerusalem is a vision of the Fall of Man -- of the giant Albion, who is like the primal man of light, the Adam Qadmon, of The Cabbalah -- and its consequence in his enslavement to space, or Nature, and time, or History. The piece ends with the redemption of Albion by the fiery work of Los (Sol?), the poet, poetry being seen as the type of man's proper work; but the plot moves rather by repetition and development than in linear sequence, and might be thought of as having the form of a theme, variations, and finale. It views the events as always happening; one of the substantive claims of the poem is that the process described in it is psychological and metaphysical in a primary way, and historical only secondarily:

All things acted on Earth are seen in the bright Sculptures of
Los's Halls, & every Age renews its powers from these Works
With every pathetic story possible to happen from Hate or
Wayward Love; & every sorrow & distress is carved here,
Every affinity of Parents, Marriages & Friendships are here
In all their various combinations wrought with wondrous Art,
All that can happen to Man in his pilgrimage of seventy years.

The key to this poem, its metaphorical or mythical or religious premise, is that the spiritual is primary and substantive, the material world its phantasied derivative. The failure to see this is the Fall, dividing man against himself and creating the world of Nature, that is, of sexual generation and death. For because imagination is primary, the universe is in the first place human, its truth a human truth. Imagination, Blake says, is Jesus Christ, meaning at the very least that imaginative sympathy is the power of forgiveness of sin.

What initiates Albion's fall we are not told at once; in the very beginning of the poem he is already the "perturb'd Man" who turns away down "valleys dark", and the overwhelming of the imagination is signified by a Flood:

In all the dark Atlantic vale down from the hills of Surrey
A black water accumulates.

In successive episodes this fall is related variously with Pride, Fear, & Lust, and held responsible for creating the body, the world, extension in time and space. But its primary form is the ~~xxx~~ separation of the abstract reasoning power from the rest of man's faculties, and its attempt to create and impose on the creation the tyranny of an abstract, rational, and ultimately punitive world whose God is both invisible and merciless. This is the world of human institutions, religious, political, educational, and scientific equally, an insane, meaningless mechanism devoted to suffering, repression, and death:

I turn my eyes to the Schools & Universities of Europe
And there behold the Loom of Locke, whose Woof rages dire,
Wash'd by the Water-wheels of Newton: black the cloth
In heavy wreathes folds over every Nation: cruel Works
Of many Wheels I view, wheel without wheel, with cogs tyrannic
Moving by compulsion each other....

These wheels are the cold wheels also of the astronomical heavens, with their inhuman order, and they relate to Whitehead's vision of the "irreducible brute matter", which "just does what it does do, following a fixed routine imposed by external relations which do not spring from the nature of its being."

The Fall of Albion creates the vegetative world of generation, suffering, and human sacrifice:

Hertfordshire glows with fierce Vegetation; in the Forests
The Oak frowns terrible, the Beech & Ash & Elm enroot
Among the Spiritual fires; loud the Corn-fields thunder along,
The Soldier's fife, the Harlot's shriek, the Virgin's dismal groan,
The Parent's fear, the Brother's jealousy, the Sister's curse....

It is strange to consider that such a phrase as "the cornfields thunder along" will be regarded as wild, meaningless excess by people who view the statement that "an army marches on its stomach" as the plainest sense.

Now this Fall consists for Blake in the false perception of this world as another, as other than human: this false perception is what at every moment creates an unreckonably large part, perhaps all, of the world of sin, pain, and death, at least all death inflicted by human beings on human beings. Since, in the refrain of the poem, you become what you behold, the consequence of man's viewing the world as other, as over against, is that he imitates in his history and institutions this phantasy of a something other, an external something mighty and imposing and ultimately immortal because inhuman: the State, and the State Religion, deemed by Reason to be the right true and deserved consequence of an alienated Nature to be appeased by Moral Virtue, punishment, human sacrifice, according to the "demonstrations" of a materialist science. Art itself, under the domination of this phantasy, becomes Memory, the mere copying from nature, and it is this that Blake means when he says that Imagination has nothing to do with Memory. Mathematic form, machines, warfare, are all seen as consequences of man's pursuing an ideal other than his own being. This tyranny, under which we all live, is regarded as feminine, not because Blake is a misogynist -- "the lust of the goat is the bounty of God...the nakedness of woman is the work of God" -- but because Nature, considered as thing in itself, rather than as an Emanation of the divine-human, is traditionally thought of as a woman (Mother Nature, Mother Earth), and the bondage to this Nature is a sexual, generative, and mortal bondage:

If Perceptive Organs vary, Objects of Perception seem to vary:
If the Perceptive Organs close, their Objects seem to close also.
"Consider this, O Mortal Man, O worm of sixty winters," said Los,
"Consider Sexual Organization & hide thee in the dust."

In Jerusalem, as elsewhere in Blake, this woman is called Vala, her name is sometimes associated with the word 'veil' because in her separation from Albion she is Maya, the veil of illusion, and in this character she invites Albion to sexual knowledge:

"Know me now Albion: look upon me. I alone am Beauty.
"The Imaginative Human Form is but a breathing of Vala:
"I breathe him forth into the Heaven from my secret Cave,
"Born of the Woman, to obey the Woman, O Albion the mighty,
"For the Divine appearance is Brotherhood, but I am Love
"Elevate into the Region of Brotherhood with my red fires."

Albion's answer is sublime poetry; perhaps no poet has ever been more terrifying and majestic than Blake here in the simple statement of these relations, the devastating identification of sexuality, under the traditional image of the plow, with plowing the earth for food and plowing men under in war:

"Art thou Vala?" replied Albion, "Image of my repose!
 "O how I tremble! how my members pour down milky fear!
 "A dewy garment covers me all over, ^{all} ~~my~~ manhood is gone!
 "At thy word & at thy look, death enrobes me about
 "From head to feet, a garment of death & eternal fear.
 "Is not that Sun thy husband & that Moon thy glimmering Veil?
 "Are not the Stars of heaven thy children? art thou not Babylon?
 "Art thou Nature, Mother of all? Is Jerusalem thy Daughter?
 "Why have thou elevate inward, O dweller of outward chambers,
 "From grot & cave beneath the Moon, dim region of death
 "Where I laid my Plow in the hot noon, where my hot team fed,
 "Where implements of War are forged, the Plow to go over the Nations
 "In pain girding me round like a rib of iron in heaven?"

Blake's poem is, as he says elsewhere, "Allegory addressed to the Intellectual powers, while it is altogether hidden from the Corporeal Understanding." Its language therefore is often strange to us, because in order to address the Intellectual powers rather than the corporeal understanding it is convenient and perhaps necessary to speak of relations by giving strange and not traditional names to what things are to be related. It was in just this sense that Aristotle said human actions could not be depicted except by the use of human actors; and Blake's way of putting this, in the preface to Jerusalem, is to say: "We who dwell on Earth can do nothing of ourselves; everything is conducted by Spirits, no less than digestion or sleep."

That is a hard saying, too. And yet I think we have come to understand it quite well. In the XVIIth century, according to Moliere's mockery, sleep was said to be produced by "virtus dormitivus". Another two centuries, according to Darcy Wentworth Thompson, saw a great advance in knowledge, so that sleep was said to be produced by a substance of unknown properties called "dormitin." We may translate generally thus: in abstract discourse, in discourse having to do with invisible things, or relations, every substantive is a Spirit, and only by becoming a Spirit gains the potential of becoming allegory addressed to the intellectual powers. So when Blake proclaims the four-fold wholeness of the truly human, and names its divisions as Urizen, Luvah, Tharmas, & Urthona, the sense of these names may be teasing to us (though not without the possibility of being interpreted even so), but we are merely deluded if we think that the abstract names given to forces and influences in ordinary discourse are less mythological on account of their supposed familiarity, when in fact these nouns exist only to stopper up the abyss which opens at both ends of a sentence. Here for example is a contemporary account of something like what Blake is talking of when he describes the Fall:

"Possessive mastery over nature and rigorously economical thinking are partial elements in the human being (the human body) which in modern civilisation have become tyrant organizers of the whole of human life; abstraction from the reality of the whole body and substitution of the abstracted impulse for the whole reality are inherent in homo economicus.

Norman O Brown, Life Against Death, 236.

In effect, one thing that Blake is saying is that when the intellect breaks up any wholeness into parts for "purposes of discussion" (to discuss= to break apart) the separate parts may become imbued with lives and purposes of their own, inimical to the wholeness from which they came. Naive believers will always to be found who will take these names as realities, or gods, and defend their mysterious purposes with fire and the sword. The contemporary I have quoted is telling a very similar story:

"possessive mastery over nature" and "rigorously economical thinking" regarded as "tyrant organizers" come close to being, and are no less mythological than, Blake's "Urizen," his "priestcraft" and "Druids", his skygod whom he calls "Nobodaddy."

It will be fair, by way of summary, to translate rather freely. The Fall, for Blake, begins when man, identifying his humanity with his power of abstract reasoning, turns against his bodily or animal self, the way he had of being at home in the world, and creates abstract time and space out of his new feeling of being lost; having rejected himself, he experiences himself as an other, and this other both loves and hates him. Unable to accept himself, then, he cannot accept the other human beings for whom he himself is an other; he cannot believe in the community without giving it the ~~max~~ phantasied form of a most powerful other coming over against him from outside, a father, a mother, an abstract god who in the name of forgiveness of sins exacts obedience in the form of religious, moral, and legal codes, human sacrifice in the form of slavery, punishment, and war.

The key word in Blake's account is "division." Two divisions are especially ~~important~~ to be remarked. Man's reasoning power divides from the rest of him and holds in subjection the other qualities which might roughly be thought of as passion, sense, and spirit; and man divides from woman, rejecting the feminine in himself (as Freud said, every love affair takes place between four people). Hence sexuality is viewed as domination and submission. For the male, it becomes a military exploit to 'invade' and 'possess' -- setting up in this way a dialectical relation wherein the female, precisely because viewed as an other, an enemy, is by definition eternally unpossessable, the image of a cruelly smiling Nature who beckons to destruction by love and war. It is thus that Nature herself divides: Vala in eternity, in time she becomes ambiguously Rahab and Tirzah, Tirzah being prudery and sexual hypocrisy, Rahab -- the harlot who saved her life by betraying the city -- whoredom and sexual license. The separation of the Spectre, or reasoning power, on one side, and the Emanation, or sexual love, on the other, leaves Los "the victim of their love & hate", and the Spectre, mocking, says of Man and Woman, "I will make their places of joy and love excrementitious."

Blake sees these and other, consequent divisions as responsible also for the mad dream called History, that record of the relation of suffering and knowledge which, speaking plainly, appears very often to have the purpose of propitiating the God of any given time, whatever his name, with human sacrifices. In the following passage Luvah, one of the four Zoas, or primary qualities of the human, may be thought of roughly as Passion, set free from the original balance and growing cancerously in freedom:

Luvah tore forth from Albion's Loins in fibrous veins, in rivers
Of blood over Europe: a Vegetating Root, in grinding pain
Animating the Dragon Temples, soon to become that Holy Fiend
The Wicker Man of Scandinavia, in which, cruelly consumed,
The Captives rear'd to heaven howl in flames among the stars.
Loud the cries of War on the Rhine & Danube with Albion's Sons:
Away from Beulah's hills & vales break forth the Souls of the Dead,
With cymbal, trumpet, clarion & the scythed chariots of Britain.

And the Veil of Vala is composed of the Spectres of the Dead.

Wordsworth too has a vision of that Wicker Man, a sort of cage in which victims were hung over the flames, and a comparison of the two passages is of interest.

In one of the greatest moments of The Prelude, the poet, on Salisbury Plain at night, sees "Our dim ancestral Past in vision clear." It is a vision of dark horror, warfare, death, and "barbaric majesty," and chief among its elements is

the sacrificial altar, fed
With living men -- how deep the ~~xy~~ groans! the voice
Of those that crowd the giant wicker thrills
The monumental hillocks, and the pomp
Is for both worlds, the living and the dead.

But this contemplation leads him on to consider the Druids and their astronomical knowledge, until he is charmed to see, "with believing eyes,"

long-bearded teachers, with white wands
Uplifted, pointing to the starry sky,
Alternately, and plain below, while breath
Of music swayed their motions, and the waste
Rejoiced with them and me in their sweet sounds.

Here we may see one more extension of the theme, which says that the imagination of nature is an imagination of history also. Wordsworth sees human history as somehow reconciling despite its cruelty: the pomp, he says touchingly, is for both worlds, the living and the dead. In that marvelous line he sees something of the tragic relation between suffering and civilisation, and the fearful fascination with death on which both are based; so that the poetry of human sacrifice is somehow at one with "geometric truth", though at a terrible price. In this, perhaps, he sees more deeply than Blake, who, abominating geometric truth as an example of the reasoning power abstracted from the human, intransigently holds to it that human history is evil and an offense against imagination and, finally, not necessary.

So the question of the two natures, that independent nature which is perceived and that other which is created by the imagination of man, may be seen as having to do with the question of how to handle the past; one's own and that of the race. For it may be said, and perhaps ought to be said, that poetry has always lived on wickedness, great cruelty, man's inhumanity to man, and, moreover, been richly at home in that realm; so that, morally speaking, poetry may be accused of cosmeticizing the cosmos, and bringing most reprehensible things under the dominion of beauty.

It seems to me that I am not in this to settle the rights of the matter, deciding for one poet and against the other; life is hard enough without that. But here are what might paradoxically be called some final balancings.

Wordsworth, who began by viewing nature and imagination as in fruitful tension, seems to have finished with reason: there was the world, the mind was somehow in it, and so, consequently, were the mind's institutions, state and church, the laws, modes, manners of the society of which he was a most distinguished ornament; it is true however that the imagination closed down on him.

Blake remained all his life a radical who held the imagination to be primary, and took literally its one instruction: forgiveness of sins. He held that intellectual fight could and ought to be substituted for warfare. To him, nature was a dream, history its aggravation into nightmare, and the institutions of human society

could not be tolerated on the foolish, insubstantial ground that they appeared to exist. Regarded as at best a dreamer, at worst as mad, he persisted in his folly, and even some of the wise who thought him insane ~~thought~~ also thought him a saint.

But, alas, this clear division is also mythological, for we cannot say that either man was as he was because he wrote as he did. In any event, it is perhaps fortunate that the choice offered is offered in poetry, for it is an impossible choice, between a grimly reasonable despair and an exuberant, gay madness. But what is poetry if it is not the place where the impossible, and perhaps the impossible alone, is true?

It will be well to allow, here at the end, that what we have is a comparison, not a competition. The Prelude and Jerusalem are individual expressions, they are not methods or recipes. In one way The Prelude has had a great advantage: it seems to belong to the tradition of English poetry as Jerusalem does not, hence it appears technically more accomplished. But such an advantage can turn into its equivalent disadvantage almost overnight, and a 'tradition' of a hundred and fifty years' solid dominance come to seem a mere parochial divagation from the true or real tradition. So subject are we to the rule of fashion, our modern name for the goddess Fortuna.

In a considerable degree, the rightness of a poem depends on our familiarity with it. That statement initiates, or takes up, a circular argument, for becoming familiar with a poem depends on interest, or love, which presumes a certain rightness even to what we do not perfectly understand. Yet within limits not clearly to be discerned the phrases of a poem gain a magic by many repetitions in many minds; and by the same means lose this magic betimes. So in the present age some few poems widely understood and agreed upon twenty years ago as sacred books now begin to appear to some of us who are older though not wiser as, to say the least of it, mistakes. We shed certain of our symbolic illusions not necessarily to reach reality, but, far more often, to pick up other symbolic illusions.

The recent renewal of scholarly and critical interest in these great lost books of Blake is probably not a mere momentary upset in a stable situation. More likely it is the symptom of a deep change in the mind of the world. If so, it is probable that Blake's prophetic phantasies will progressively lose some of their strangeness, some of their obstinacy of phrasing, and assimilate with the general character of thought, responding to intelligence, so it will seem, ~~xxxxxxx~~ in the measure that intelligence has responded to them. Our symbolic world will then reverberate to Blake's language more than to Wordsworth's, and that language, or the language we derive from it, will by ironic paradox come to seem 'natural' to us. For language, which Blake calls "the rough basement", is the symbolic intervention of imaginative mercy between ourselves and a further Fall into a dark and silent abyss; it was on this account, he says, that

Los built the stubborn structure of the Language, acting against
Albion's melancholy, who must else have been a Dumb despair.