

William Blake's Fourfold Vision

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In his early 19th century book *Jerusalem*, English poet, painter, and printmaker William Blake writes: "I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's. I will not reason and compare: my business is to create." Blake was an anti-authoritarian revolutionary. Although largely unrecognized during his lifetime, his liberatory influence has been felt in the spheres of politics, poetry, religion, economics, art, and sexuality.

He has inspired generations of philosophers and artists, ranging from Allen Ginsberg to Bob Dylan, from Fredy Perlman to the Fugs and U2. The influence of Blake's innovative artist style can be seen in today's graphic novels and fantasy art. His thinking on anarchist ideas and individual autonomy is more relevant today than ever.

Blake was born in London in 1757 and died at the age of seventy in 1827. He was an artistic prodigy and saw visions from childhood. He published his first book of poetry at age twenty-six.

The next year Blake purchased a copper-plate rolling press and opened a small business as a commercial engraver. While making a living this way, he developed a new technique he dubbed Illuminated Printing. The first book of his own illuminated poetry was *The Songs of Innocence* in 1789.

He wrote the poetry, engraved it on a page surrounded by original artwork, then printed and hand colored each page, binding it into a book. His illuminated manuscripts are among the most beautiful ever printed.

The U.S. revolution of 1776 and the French revolution of 1789 awakened the hopes of many social radicals, including William Blake. He saw both as rebellions against monarchy and the religious establishment, and the dawn of a new millennium.

In the early spring of 1790, Blake produced *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, a unique blend of poetry and prose that includes his aphoristic "Proverbs from Hell." While Blake was writing *The Marriage*, he was enlarging his circle of friends to include such political and social radicals as Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, and the artist Henry Fuseli.

The lines were drawn, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *Vindication of the Rights of Man*, and Thomas Paine published *Rights of Man*.

The English rulers were wary of the forces playing out in North America and France, and felt their authority threatened. In May of 1792 a Royal Proclamation was issued banning all "seditious writing" targeting both authors and printers. Paine was forced to leave England under cover of darkness. There were hints that Blake had a hand in his escape.

Blake's poetry and self-publishing certainly fell under the rubric of sedition since it openly incited resistance to established secular and religious authority, and he was a known sympathizer with revolutionary causes. So, he decided to publish *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* anonymously.

However, Blake was brought to trial on another matter. He confronted a British soldier telling him, "Damn the king and all his soldiers." He was tried for high treason and it was only by the intervention of friends that he escaped conviction.

Blake's illuminated books created a great mythopoetic system set in prophetic prosody where he advocated what he called Fourfold Vision. He described this in one of his poems saying:

Now I a fourfold vision see,
And a fourfold vision is given to me:
'Tis fourfold in my supreme delight
And threefold in soft Beulah's night
And twofold always, may God us keep
From single vision and Newton's sleep!

This poem has three rhyming couplets which express, in very condensed form, the essence of Blake's vision. In the last couplet, single vision is when you can only see the world one way, when you are locked into an interpretation of reality that can't see anything outside it. Newton's sleep is the sleep of reason where the world is viewed solely through the narrow lens of science. To Blake, Newton represented the triumph of materialism where we end up at war with nature.

Blake abhors single vision and urges us to be "twofold always." This is symbolic vision recognizing that all phenomena are multi-dimensional and have layers of meaning, one leading to another. Twofold vision accepts both rather than being in an either/or dynamic. Twofold vision is poetic vision.

Blake was revolutionary in every way. His poem, "Auguries of Innocence," is a statement of his revolutionary politics insisting on the right to life and freedom without qualification:

A Robin Red breast in a Cage
Puts all Heaven in a Rage.
A dog starv'd at his Master's Gate
Predicts the ruin of the State.
Each outcry of the hunted Hare
A fibre from the Brain does tear.
The wanton Boy that kills the Fly
Shall feel the Spider's enmity.

Each couplet is an illustration of the philosophical perspective that so long as any one person is imprisoned none of us is free. It is the ultimate call for justice that includes all creatures.

Blake was also revolutionary in his view of the prevailing economy, writing, "Where any view of Money exists, Art cannot be carried on but War only." Finally, he was artistically revolutionary, inventing a new form bringing together drawing, engraving, painting, and poetry that exalts the imagination.

In his poem, "Auguries of Innocence," Blake indicates that with liberated vision you can:
See a World in a Grain of Sand.
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower.
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand.
And Eternity in an hour.

This is a revolution that overcomes all authority that is vested in the political, religious, or scientific establishment. In Blake's vision, even your sense of self, the ego that is based in a dualistic, materialistic world is transcended. It is the realm of supreme delight, it is the place inside yourself where you can feel unity with all other people, with all other things, with all of nature and the experience of it is bliss.

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