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## *The Life of Love: Blake's Oothoon*

by ROLAND A. DUERKSEN

IN THE *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, William Blake presents in simple profundity what for him are the essence and the scope of both life and love. Essentially the subject is the same as that of *The Book of Thel*, the difference being in the main characters rather than in the challenge that confronts them. Instead of Thel's timid retreat from the need to annihilate self in order to live in and through all selves and experiences that she might encounter, we witness in the *Visions* Oothoon's complete annihilation of selfhood, her abandonment of restrictions and limitations that traditionally are assumed to insure preservation of ego, public respect, and influence. By this "death" to all that enslaves the daughters of Albion, Oothoon discovers that the liberty of love consists in the ever-present potentiality of an audaciously free and imaginatively involved life.

Yet the impact of the poem is in a sense ambiguous, for the ultimate tone of it is that of wailing and lamentation. Although Oothoon, in this sense representing the poet as prophet, is free and acts in complete liberty, she cannot fully appropriate this freedom while still isolated or separated from other selves. Until they, too, come to her state of being, consummation of a reciprocally shared communion in life remains only a grand potential. On the other hand, her independent experience of that which might be shared gives her the energy and incentive to continue in the cause of awakening Theotormon and the daughters of Albion to its potentiality.

Oothoon's state before she plucks "the bright Marygold of Leutha's vale," is that described in the first stanza of the poem's "Argument":

I trembled in my virgin fears,  
And I hid in Leutha's vale!<sup>1</sup>

The need to hide in the vale of Leutha is what Oothoon overcomes when she plucks the flower. It is the fearful submission to ordered discipline, sexual repression, and fearful sublimation to which the daughters of Albion are still enslaved. Because it prevents the exertion of energy, which is life, such repression is in Blake's view the greatest of evils. Plate 5 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* opens with:

1. *The Complete Writings of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 189. Other plate and line references to Blake's works, made parenthetically in the text, also refer to this edition.

Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough  
to be restrained; and the restrainer or reason usurps its  
place and governs the unwilling.

And being restrained, it by degrees becomes passive, till  
it is only the shadow of desire.

This is the slavery into which, as already indicated, Albion's daughters have fallen and from which Oothoon has escaped.

The Marygold, we may note, appears to Oothoon "now a flower / Now a nymph" (1:6-7). As flower it is the utmost in earthbound aspiration, as is the lily in *The Book of Thel*; as nymph it is a loosened spirit. Having broken the stem, thus severing the flower from earth's restraint, Oothoon places it in her bosom where it takes on the quality of a fiery spirit, "to glow between my breasts" (1:12). The imagery suggests that the Marygold and Oothoon become essentially united and that this new being takes on the quality not of an earthbound flower but of a perpetually renewing flame.<sup>2</sup> Being thus dependent on nothing but sheer energy,

Over the waves she went in winged exulting swift delight,  
And over Theotormon's reign took her impetuous course. (1:14-15)

But immediately the reasoning, restraining, dogmatic Bromion rapes her. Blake's symbolism here depicts with keen insight the self-righteous delusion by which a power system arbitrarily based on scientific rationality can impose the label of criminality upon brave spirits who have dared freely to challenge repressive laws. On the basis of his established "rational" doctrine, Bromion denies his own guilt while dogmatically accusing the free-spirited Oothoon of "whoredom." There is significance in Bromion's committing the rape in the realm of Theotormon, where Oothoon's "whole soul seeks" for a union of love in which her new-found freedom could have achieved full realization.

S. Foster Damon says of Theotormon: "His name might be a combination of *theo* (god) and *torah* (law), signifying the divine in man under law. His Contrary is Bromion (reason)."<sup>3</sup> What Oothoon's soul seeks is a reconciliation of the divine in man with its true means of expression: a free and impetuous indulgence in life. What she finds is that Theotormon, the divine potentiality, has become so enthralled by rationality that he reacts to the rape of liberty only by seeking somehow either to wash or to hide the "adulterate pair" in the "black jealous waters" (2:4) of his establishment-oriented philosophy or theology. When this fails, he sits pathetically weeping at the entrance to Bromion's cave, doing nothing to abate the "voice of slaves" that comes to him from the caves of religious-economic collusion. Oothoon's efforts throughout the remainder of the poem are directed toward rescuing Theotormon from this state of victimized impotence.

2. See the graphic art of Plate 8.

3. *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1965), p. 401.

To begin to comprehend the scope of the *Visions*, we must understand it not only as a commentary on the organic unity of being but also as a view of the interactions of individuals in actual society. An excellent example of the latter is David Erdman's interpretation<sup>4</sup> of the poem in the historical context of the slave trade and of the consequent distortion of values in both England and America. From yet another point of view, the poem is an examination of the break-up of the self in the world of experience, an interpretation that may serve as a kind of parallel or key to the other two. And on this level, Blake's concept of the Self, its Spectre, and its Emanation is portrayed in a special way in the *Visions*.<sup>5</sup> Blake saw the selfhood of fallen mankind as divided into three fragments. That shadowy fragment which we call the individual's consciousness in the physical body is represented by Theotormon. Torn from him, on the one hand is the Spectre fragment (fallen rationality) here known as Bromion, and on the other hand, the Emanation fragment (fallen imagination) in this instance represented by Oothoon.

The Humanity is the united, whole fourth state that results from the proper reunification of the three divided states already enumerated. This four-fold unity is both the aim and the culminating experience of human existence. In deadly sleep, however, mankind has fallen into the three-part division. Oothoon is the only part of the divided self that makes the crucial move toward reunification, and she tries desperately to draw the other two fragments with her. Empty, insubstantial, and dependent though he is, Theotormon is the medial figure or part through whose self-reliant acceptance of both Emanation and Spectre, Oothoon and Bromion can be brought together—the three fragments thus becoming the transformed, unified, waking state which Blake calls Humanity.

The urgent need, as in numerous Blake poems, is this reunification which will restore also the right priorities. The restoration is of vital importance; while Bromion dominates his shadow Theotormon, imposing a spirit of disciplined restrictiveness, the tendency is toward perpetual death:

"Thou knowest that the Spectre is in Every Man insane. brutish.  
 "Deform'd, that I [the Spectre] am thus a ravening devouring lust continually  
 "Craving & devouring. . . ." (*Four Zoas*, VII, ll. 304–306)

If Oothoon should gain dominance, the tendency would be toward ever-renewing life. She would not restrain and imprison even Bromion as he does the daughters of Albion, but would accept him fully in his rightful role of ordering the simple requirements and common necessities of life.

4. *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969), pp. 230–42.

5. See George Wingfield Digby, *Symbol and Image in William Blake* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 76. Although, in my opinion, he misinterprets the figures on Plate 1, Digby points toward an understanding of the poem on this level. And Mary V. Jackson, "Additional Lines in *VDA*," *Blake Newsletter* 31, VIII, No. 3 (Winter 1974–75), p. 93, suggests that the main characters of the poem anticipate the emanation-spectre roles.

Being dominated by Bromion, Theotormon is secretive, apprehensive, fearful. Bromion, after his rape of Oothoon, openly declares that she is now both slave and whore and that he will use Theotormon to legitimize her offspring. To this Theotormon does not respond; he continues to sit at the cave's entrance, "wearing the threshold hard / With secret tears." The imaginative or creative aspect of the personality, represented by Oothoon, seems totally unattainable to him. When Oothoon, desperately trying to rescue him from Bromion's thrall, howling and writhing, calls Theotormon's own Eagles (his own ideals or devices of law and order), that is, when she demonstrates by nonviolent resistance her willingness to take the risk of using her whole being as a contrary to law-distorted "nature,"<sup>6</sup> they rend her bosom, and "Theotormon severely smiles." It is the pathetic smile of a well-intentioned but perverted morality. When in her bleeding, "pure transparent breast," "her soul reflects the smile, / As the clear spring, mudded with feet of beasts, grows pure and smiles" (2:16, 18-19), Theotormon cannot respond to the discovery of imaginative involvements implicit in the reflection. He sees Oothoon as corrupted and impure because she has been invaded by the cruel actualities of life—even though she has been able fully to subdue their power to pollute. Unable to understand *soul*, he remains fearfully aloof because he cannot trust his senses, as she does, to lead to values beyond legality, egoism, and materialism.

Bromion, then, as the Spectre fragment of the divided self, is the spirit of scientific rationalism, insisting that law, order, and cold objectivity are the essential ingredients of human nature. Since Oothoon's "breaking loose" into a reveling in experience is the direct antithesis to this dogma, he attacks her in the only way by which he, in the question-begging perversion of his own rationalism, can discredit her and make her to appear to the deluded Theotormon as the very opposite of what she really is. Separated from Theotormon, the Spectre yet imposes upon him the reasons for his remaining aloof from his Emanation.

Oothoon, as that Emanation, is the self's highest likings or delights—the true art or artistic expression of the self which, by plucking the flower of *life*, demonstrates a total confidence in the power of the creative imagination. By placing the Marygold in her bosom, she challenges Theotormon also to break free from his Spectre-induced timidity. This action symbolizes the imaginative consciousness challenging society to bring art and life together lest the truth of the former be sacrificed merely to avoid disturbing the stagnant quiescence of the latter. Oothoon's

6. My interpretation of Oothoon's action is not intended to be comprehensive or exhaustive. As Harold Bloom points out in *Blake's Apocalypse* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), pp. 113-14, there are both subtlety and irony in this scene, and it is perhaps subject to several valid interpretations. Bloom sees in it mainly an example of the perversion implicit in unwarranted sexual restraint. David Erdman's interpretation (pp. 233, 240)—closer to my own—is that Oothoon insists upon enduring the slavery imposed upon her until she can assert her own liberation on the basis that her soul reflects the same human "image" as Theotormon's.

lengthy appeal is a plea to humanity, an insistence that mankind must follow the paths pointed out by the best in art. To be able to follow Oothoon's call, the three fragments must die into each other to form one living self that is not ego-centered and restrictive but that, in turn, is willing to die to itself in unselfish identification with all life. Then Bromion will not rend Oothoon in frenzied zeal to preserve his constricted realm but will, as needed, provide intellectual bases and bounds for her imaginative ventures. Then Theotormon, motivated by these interacting influences of Oothoon and Bromion, will express himself freely in expanding life.

The application of this principle on the social level is readily made. Whatever the size or orientation of the social group, the imaginative spirit (Emanation) exerts an influence for a perpetual dying to the old and being born into the new. This Emanation asserts the necessary paradox that the group can *live* only by continually ceasing to be what it has been and by simultaneously becoming what it has not yet been. But in the social group there is also the establishment spirit (Spectre) that looks back to what the group has been defined to be and relentlessly administers nostrums to preserve the disciplining influence of the past. The Spectre can see in the advent of a new form for the group only the threat of a blazing tiger<sup>7</sup> or of the desert beast of Yeats's *Second Coming*. That this Spectre has been and is as dominant a force in society as Blake depicts it in the *Visions* is given strong support by the usual tendency of social renovations. Immediately upon the formation of a humanely-motivated revolutionary movement, the urge to establish, to dogmatize, to codify, and to restrain from innovation becomes a powerful force. While this urge is dominant, Theotormon, who is the society in need of liberation, sits at the entrance to the caves of self-interested power and weeps pathetically over the war, slavery, poverty, racism, or other societal crimes against which the new movement seems powerless. Against the odds of such a tendency, Oothoon has emerged from her captivity to take on the personal responsibility of imagining and implementing ways to energize and activate the wrongly dominated Theotormon, whom she loves.

Both levels of interpretation—the psychological and the social—are incorporated in Blake's general or universal concept of oneness in diversity. He frames the direct opposite to this concept in the disciplined uniformity or restrictiveness implied in Bromion's rhetorical questions:

"Ah! are there other wars beside the wars of sword and fire?  
 "And are there other sorrows beside the sorrows of poverty?  
 "And are there other joys beside the joys of riches and ease?  
 "And is there not one law for both the lion and the ox?"

7. See Harold Bloom's interpretation of Blake's "Tyger," *The Visionary Company* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961), pp. 31-35. See also Plate 7, line 30, to Plate 8, line 5, of Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*.

“And is there not eternal fire and eternal chains  
 “To bind the phantoms of existence from eternal life?” (4:19–24)

Although one may find numerous declarations of Blake’s imaginative answer to such questions, none serves better than Oothoon’s own rhetorical question, asked earlier in the poem: “How can I be defil’d when I reflect thy image pure?” Her total commitment to infinite liberty of indulgence in all that does not hinder or restrain is reiterated in her final exclamation: “Arise, and drink your bliss, for everything that lives is holy!” The way through this complete self-death into universal life begins in experience—in the acceptance of the senses for what they are, without any imposition of, or slavish consent to, repression. Because, on this level, Theotormon cannot apply to Oothoon’s sexual experience anything but preconceived notions of what is and what is not properly disciplined, not only he but all the fruits of the mind (Albion’s daughters) remain in the caves of slavery.

Oothoon asserts (Plate 3) that the instincts of the animals attest to value or perception that lies beyond mere sense experience. Because Theotormon, however, has not even responded to the senses enough to be able to distinguish night from morn (Plate 2), her lamentations from the realm beyond the senses do not get through to him. Because none but Bromion can hear her lamentations, Oothoon (the creative) is at the enormous disadvantage of having all her cries filtered through the distorting barrier of Bromion’s translation (in terms of objective, materialistic philosophy). In his dark world, isolated from any direct human approach, Theotormon asks unanswerable questions, their rhetorical appeal being to mystery. He has a kind of belief in a “remote land” beyond the limits of rationality, but he totally mistrusts what may happen if, from there, “thou returnest to the present moment” (Plate 4).

After Bromion has responded with his disbelief in anything not established by means of the scientific method, Oothoon waits “silent all the day and all the night,” in the hope that Theotormon will see the futility of such barren question-bartering with Bromion. But there is no response at all from Theotormon who is in a stupor that parallels the “allegorical Abode where existence hath never come” that, in *Europe: A Prophecy*, is a part of Enitharmon’s dogma—a part of the same dogma that declares “that woman’s love is sin.” And, paralleling Oothoon’s entreaty to Theotormon, the “nameless shadowy female,” in the Preludium of *Europe*, calls to Enitharmon, imploring her:

Stamp not with solid form this vig’rous progeny of fires.  
 I bring forth from my teeming bosom myriads of flames,  
 And thou dost stamp them with a signet; then they roam abroad  
 And leave me void as death.

Instead of responding, Enitharmon indulges herself in a sleep of eighteen hundred years before she awakes and, to her surprise, finds her son Orc

ready to begin the great revolution.<sup>8</sup> In the *Visions*, however, there is no Orc, no revolution, no bringing Theotormon out of his torpor or the daughters of Albion out of their bondage. Oothoon represents potentiality and process; fulfillment awaits the rousing of Theotormon, the active self.

Throughout the poem Oothoon remains consistent in her certainty that simply to live in the love of all things is to be pure. Blemishes, she asserts, are not only entirely outward but are indications of a certain attractiveness and of intimate contacts with that which is not self:

"Sweetest the fruit that the worm feeds on, & the soul prey'd on by woe.  
 "The new wash'd lamb ting'd with the village smoke, & the bright swan  
 "By the red earth of our immortal river. I bathe my wings,  
 "And I am white and pure to hover round Theotormon's breast." (3:17–20)

Blake would have agreed fully with Shelley's declaration, "Undoubtedly, no person can be truly dishonoured by the act of another."<sup>9</sup> Oothoon fully realizes that acknowledging this essential virginity would bring to Theotormon the revivifying unification with herself and Bromion in the proper relationship for true vitality.

But because she also realizes that Theotormon is totally deaf and therefore dead to her lamentations, she addresses her final lengthy appeal to Urizen, the god of rationalistic materialism who through all such underlings as the fragmented Bromion and Theotormon holds the world in slavery. Not unlike the worm in her own parable who erects "a pillar in the mouldering church yard / And a place of eternity in the jaws of the hungry grave," Oothoon confronts Urizen, this "Demon of heaven," with the fact of her own virgin purity despite all his laws that would call her impure:

"But Oothoon is . . . a virgin fill'd with virgin fancies,  
 "Open to joy and to delight where ever beauty appears;  
 "If in the morning sun I find it, there my eyes are fix'd  
 "In happy copulation; if in evening mild, wearied with work  
 "Sit on the bank and draw the pleasures of this free born joy."  
 (6:21–23; 7:1–2)

Her every act of true joy, whether it be copulation or an artist's recreation of an evening scene, is for her a virgin act, a state of becoming. Beyond the attribute of purity, the term *virgin*, in this poem, suggests not

8. That Blake was concerned with the same theme in writing both poems is evidenced in the following passage from *Europe*, where Enitharmon chides Oothoon and seems to exult sadistically in Theotormon's unhappiness:

"I hear the soft Oothoon in Enitharmon's tents;  
 "Why wilt thou give up woman's secrecy, my melancholy child?  
 "Between two moments bliss is ripe.  
 "O Theotormon! robb'd of joy, I see thy salt tears flow  
 "Down the steps of my crystal house." (14:21–25)

9. Preface to *The Cenci*, in *Shelley: Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson; new ed., corr. G. M. Matthews (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 276.



permanence but a perpetually renewing transience. What keeps Oothoon a virgin is her continual dying to the old state and being born into the new—always anticipating and accepting the joy that it permits her to experience and to share.

The effects of repressing virgin joys Oothoon states most emphatically in the lines,

“The moment of desire! the moment of desire! The virgin  
 “That pines for man shall awaken her womb to enormous joys  
 “In the secret shadows of her chamber: the youth shut up from  
 “The lustful joy shall forget to generate & create an amorous image  
 “In the shadows of his curtains and in the folds of his silent pillow.  
 “Are not these the places of religion, the rewards of continence,  
 “The self enjoyings of self denial? Why dost thou seek religion?  
 “Is it because acts are not lovely that thou seekest solitude  
 “Where the horrible darkness is impressed with reflections of desire?” (7:3–11)

The passage is not a moral pronouncement on masturbation; it is, rather, a straightforward comment on the effects of restrictiveness, applied indiscriminately to all, regardless of personal differences or of the changing needs from one moment to another. Repressiveness, Oothoon is saying, cannot remove desire, and where desire is strong, it will be satisfied as best it may. Blake could well have supplied other examples: in a state of poverty and hunger some people will steal bread; being effectively barred from desired equality, the disadvantaged may be driven to seek it by violence; when the expectation of meaningful education is not fulfilled, serious students will be forced to seek it outside the established academic mold. The implication is clear: if the effects of repression are undesirable, they certainly cannot be removed by further or increased disciplinary control.

The case that Oothoon presents to Urizen is the opposite of all that Urizen stands for. Urizen is the very spirit of jealousy; Oothoon would not be jealous even of Theotormon's lusty indulgences. Urizen represents dark, miserly repression; Oothoon contrasts to this the sun “in glorious raiment.”<sup>10</sup> Urizen is associated with the “wintry blast” that destroys life; Oothoon envisions a sea fowl using “the wintry blast as a cov'ring to her limbs”—an image very appropriate to her own condition of invulnerable “virginity.”

Perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of Oothoon's plucking the flower is that it makes her a non-categorizer. Religion, law, art—whatever categories others may establish—none of these are for her separate from life. If it is not true and good in life itself, how can it be true and good at all? Religion, law, and art: all are evidences of the desire for the good in human life. But all are perverted in a Urizen-ordered universe

10. In Hazard Adams, *William Blake: A Reading of the Shorter Poems* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1963), p. 73, see the discussion of Oothoon's comment on the “glowing tyger” as one of the threatening creatures of Urizen's dark night that are simply blotted out or absorbed by the glorious sunlight in which she now lives.

that separates them from the life of the moment, from genuine living. And in his fragmented, reason-dominated condition, Theotormon cannot even hear the cries of his Emanation. Oothoon has plucked the flower and has soared to a new level of existence; the encrustations that have sealed off Theotormon's senses must be shattered if he is ever to be able to hear and follow her. The tragedy at the end of the poem lies in the fact that the daughters of Albion see no evidence of any attack upon these encrustations. Yet in Theotormon's eventual bursting out of them, to join Oothoon in her life of uncalculating love, lies the only prospect of joyful consummation. It must have been Blake's hope that for him and his readers the isolation from their Emanations—from the truths revealed in their art—would not be so absolute as in Theotormon's.

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