The Metaphysical Grounds of Oppression in Blake's Visions of the Daughters of Albion

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by MARK BRACHER

It is generally recognized that the central doctrine of Blake’s thought, in many ways, is the sovereignty of the individual. And it is also generally recognized that virtually all of Blake’s poetry is an attempt to free individuals from the “mind forg’d manacles” that prevent them from exercising their sovereignty—mind-forg’d manacles being the prescriptive legal and moral codes which fetter desire and imagination. What is not so generally understood, however, is the way in which, in Blake’s view, these legal and moral fetters are themselves the result of restricted metaphysical perspectives—perspectives which glimpse part of existence and fancy that the whole.

Since (to paraphrase Blake’s observation in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell) everything we see is owing to our metaphysics, every action and feeling, every goal and desire that we have is ultimately grounded in and conditioned by our most fundamental metaphysical assumptions—assumptions which are usually only tacitly or unconsciously held. Simply put, one’s metaphysics determines the route one will take in seeking fulfillment. For example, if one equates Being with independence, as Albion does at the beginning of Jerusalem, then one will feel and behave very differently than if one equates Being with mutuality and participation, as the Saviour does in the same passage. It is thus of utmost importance that we properly “distinguish states from individuals,” as Blake puts it in Milton—that we know “what [part of our being] is eternal and what changeable.” That is, we must be able to judge which aspects or dimensions of our existence are essential and ultimate and which are merely accidental and contingent, so that we can achieve true fulfillment.

For Blake, this task means more specifically that we must distinguish three aspects of individual identity: 1) the individual’s immediate actuality or present state, 2) the individual’s essence or ideal form, and 3) the individual’s intrinsic process of moving from its present state toward its ideal form. Each of these three aspects of identity—which we might name the empirical, the ideal, and the organic—can be taken as metaphysically primary or ultimate. And the metaphysical decision which one makes regarding the priority of these three aspects has ramifications for every realm of one’s existence. Blake explores these perspectives and
their ramifications in *Milton* through his delineation of what he calls the Three Classes of Men—the Elect, the Reprobate, and the Redeemed, represented, respectively, by Satan, Rintrah, and Palamabron. But he provides a more direct account of the ramifications of these perspectives in his early prophecy, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*.

The basic story-line of *Visions* is simple: the maid Oothoon, on her way to her heart’s desire Theotormon, is raped by Bromion, who subsequently labels her a harlot and rejects her. Theotormon then also rejects Oothoon, maintaining that she is now impure, and binding her back-to-back with Bromion in Bromion’s cave. The rest of the poem is constituted by Oothoon’s criticism of the views of Bromion and Theotormon in her attempt to convince them that she is not defiled. On one level this story can be seen to embody, as most critics maintain, an “ethics of sexual release” and “a celebration of free love.” And as critics have also noted, the story treats of political freedom and slavery as well as sexual. In the received reading of the poem, then, Oothoon is taken to be “a free spirit,” “an exemplar of liberation and libidinal freedom”; Bromion is identified variously as “lust,” as the “spirit of scientific rationalism,” and as “moral law and possessive economy”; and Theotormon is seen as a “man tormented by his own idea of God,” as a “male chauvinist and weak moralist,” and as the embodiment of “ideals of purity and holiness.”

But, as I hope to show, the poem also has another level of significance, in which each character embodies a particular aspect of identity, and also represents a metaphysical perspective which accords ultimacy to that aspect of identity. Thus Bromion, who is at the most obvious level a rapist, a servant of lust or devotee of the senses, is also, insofar as he is devoted to the senses, an embodiment of empiricism, that metaphysical and epistemological perspective for which only that which affects the senses is real. And as an empiricist, Bromion is also an avatar of the tangible, or immediately actual dimension of existence itself.

Similarly, Theotormon, who is most simply a “man tormented by his

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2. Martin Nurmi, *William Blake* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State Univ. Press, 1976), p. 103. Nurmi goes on to say that the poem “is also, and I think more importantly, an eloquent plea for an understanding of female sexuality.”
own idea of God," also embodies the metaphysics which valorizes the pure essence or ideal of a being in separation from the being's actual existence; this particular metaphysics, in fact, is the source of Theotormon's torment: it is the type of Platonic and also Christian idealism which demands that actual existence conform to a pure, abstract ideal—a demand which, as Blake's spiritual heir Yeats was later to show, torments or (as Yeats put it) "breaks hearts." Further, as the perspective which valorizes the essence, telos, or ideal of a being, Theotormon is also, as S. Foster Damon suggests, a combination of theos and torah, which might be translated as a being's "divine potentiality" or ideal form.

Oothoon, likewise—though at one level a "free spirit" and "an exemplar of liberation and libidinal freedom"—is also the proponent of an organicist metaphysics of individual sovereignty and intrinsic being. And as a proponent of such a metaphysics, Oothoon is also the embodiment or avatar of that intrinsic dynamism—that potentiality or fertility—of organic existence itself: namely, that power by virtue of which an individual being is always growing and transforming itself, moving beyond its immediate, actual state (Bromion) and toward its essence or ideal form (Theotormon).

Blake begins the poem with a demonstration of the organicist view that an individual's being must be distinguished from its immediate actuality, or present state. This point is made through the image of the plucking of a flower. We are told that when one flower is plucked, "Another flower shall spring, because the soul of sweet delight / Can never pass away" (1:9-10). Destruction of the immediate existence of an entity does not destroy the dynamic principle of that existence, which gives rise to a new actual existence. The organic self-transforming and self-productive aspect of reality—i.e., life—thus implicitly harbors a distinction between its immediate actuality and its true being. And for an organicist metaphysics, the ultimate being of an entity consists precisely in its process of mediating between its present actuality and its telos (beyond actuality)—i.e., its process of becoming.

This intrinsic being of the individual is denied ultimacy by both empiricism and idealism—by empiricism's valorization of the immediate, actual state of existence (that from which the self-transforming...
process moves), and by idealism’s absolutizing of the ideal or telos of existence (that toward which becoming moves). Empiricism, first of all, denies that the internal dynamism is either intrinsic or ultimate, maintaining instead that it is a mere epiphenomenon produced by the deterministic succession of actual states, which are, from this perspective, the only reality. This vision is epitomized by Bromion’s rape of Oothoon, which symbolizes the expropriative rapacity implicit in the empiricist perspective: rape portrays the true nature of empiricism, which assumes that the individual has no intrinsic being or value at all, that its only being and value are extrinsic, a function of the use that can be made of the individual. This metaphysical assumption underlies not only acts of literal rape but also any rapacious, expropriative use of a thing, including slavery and the rape of the land, as Bromion’s declaration indicates:

Thy soft American plains are mine, and mine thy north & south: 
Stampt with my signet are the swarthy children of the sun: 
They are obedient, thy resist not, they obey the scourge: 
Their daughters worship terrors and obey the violent. (1:20–23)

If Bromion enacts expropriation of individual being through the hedonist/empiricist valorization of actuality, Theotormon enacts a similar but less obvious expropriation through idealism, which devalues the individual’s actual state and demands purity or perfection of the individual—demands, that is, that the individual embody its essence or telos in full present actualization. As this demand for perfection, Theotormon is that which the individual naturally seeks to unite with of its own accord: Theotormon is the goal toward which the process of becoming or self-transformation moves—that which Oothoon’s “whole soul seeks” (1:13). Thus when Oothoon’s encounter with the flower shows her that her present actuality can be lost without occasioning the loss of her being—i.e., that she can change without losing her identity—she immediately seeks to leave her immediate, actual state and unite herself with this purity, perfection, and absoluteness which constitutes her telos (1:11–15). Such devotion, however, to the ideal essence (Theotormon) prevents the union with an extrinsic, contingent power or entity from being fulfilling to either party. Thus Theotormon’s “jealous waters” are said to bind Bromion and Oothoon “back to back in Bromions caves” (2:4–5). Idealism, that is, relegates both actuality (Bromion) and the process of becoming (Oothoon) to the realm of illusion: it locates actual entities, in their contrary modes of “terror & meekness” (2:5)—i.e., user and used, agent and patient—to a restricted, illusory realm of being, while the ideal or absolute itself (Theotormon) dwells outside the cave in the realm of true being.

Both empiricism and idealism are thus shown to usurp the intrinsic

15. All citations of Blake’s works are from The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. David V. Erdman (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1982).
being of individuals. And these two metaphysical perspectives work in collusion, Blake now reveals, to promote oppression and expropriation of individual being:

... beneath him [Theotormon] sound like waves on a desert shore
The voice of slaves beneath the sun, and children bought with money.
That shiver in religious caves beneath the burning fires
Of lust, that belch incessant from the summits of the earth. (2:7-10)

If we carefully map out the somewhat confusing topography of this passage, it becomes evident that the literal slavery mentioned here is only a manifestation and result of the more primordial ontological slavery produced by the collusion of idealism and empiricism, which are revealed to be mutually implicit. On the one hand, idealism is seen to be a type of expropriative lust: the fact that the “religious caves” of ontological and epistemological restriction lie “beneath the burning fires of Lust” indicates that religion, the institutionalization of idealism, is a subset of expropriative lust in general. On the other hand, this expropriative lust is itself presided over by idealism (symbolized by the sun).

These powers together occupy a position above (superior to) individuals, who are here relegated to the status of slaves and children (beings without sovereignty) in subordination to the higher realm where dwell Theotormon (like the Sun) and the fires of Lust.16

Having asserted the existence of empiricist and idealist usurpation of individual being, Blake proceeds to elaborate on the manner of transgression. Empiricism’s subjugation of the individual, it is revealed, occurs first of all by virtue of empiricist epistemology, which maintains that all the contents of an individual’s mind are derived from the external world via the five senses, thus reducing the individual’s intrinsic being to its vegetative functions:

They told me [Oothoon says] that the night & day were all that I could see;
They told me that I had five senses to inclose me up.
And they inclos’d my infinite brain into a narrow circle
And sunk my heart into the Abyss, a red round globe hot burning
Till all from life I was obliterated and erased. (2:30-34)

The unique intrinsic being of the individual is obliterated by the empiricist assumption that uniqueness and individuality are merely the deriv-
tives of the contingency of the experiences which assail an organism adrift in a chaos of sensations. From this perspective, “Instead of morn arises a bright shadow, like an eye / In the eastern cloud: instead of night a sickly charnel house” (2:35-36): instead of a cycle of renewal and decline, that is, empiricism sees only creation and destruction, denying that the intrinsic being of the flower, for example, remains after the present, actual flower is destroyed. To empiricism, emergence of a new existent is merely an illusory, insubstantial phenomenon like the arising of “a bright shadow”—such as when the rising sun breaks through a cloud: what appears to be a bright new existent, possessing intrinsic being (internal light), is actually just an epiphenomenon produced by the contingent interaction of general and universal substances (the sun and the clouds). Likewise, the decline of a being has no significance for empiricism beyond the rotting flesh and moldering bones which the five senses can apprehend in “a sickly charnel house.”

Finally, Oothoon says, her enslavers maintained not only “that I had five senses to enclose me up” (2:31) but also—because the individual is intrinsically just a glob of amorphous life adrift in the abyss—

That Theotormon hears me not! to him the night and morn
Are both alike: a night of sighs. a morning of fresh tears;
And none but Bromion can hear my lamentations. (2:37-3:1)

According to empiricism, that is, the ideal or absolute is totally divorced from actuality, which, from the perspective of the absolute, is merely an unredeemable vale of tears. Empiricism thus maintains that an individual can hope for no support from an ideal or absolute power beyond existence; only devotion to the tangible (Bromion) can provide an answer to the deficiencies (manifested here as “lamentations”) experienced in actuality.

Oothoon rejects both the idealist and the empiricist denial of ultimacy to the unique, intrinsic being of the individual. The empiricist view, first of all, is contradicted by the facts of existence itself, Oothoon maintains: the unalterably different responses which different species bring to existence constitute irrefutable evidence that individual beings, do, in fact, have unique intrinsic being and are not, as empiricism would have it, the mere precipitates of their sensations. Since all animals have the same five senses, Oothoon reasons, how can empiricism account for the manifest differences among animals?

With what sense is it that the chicken shuns the ravenous hawk?
With what sense does the tame pigeon measure out the expanse?
With what sense does the bee form cells? have not the mouse & frog
Eyes and ears and sense of touch? yet are their habitations.
And their pursuits, as different as their forms and as their joys:
Ask the wild ass why he refuses burdens: and the meek camel
Why he loves man: is it because of eye ear mouth or skin
Or breathing nostrils? No. for these the wolf and tyger have.
Ask the blind worm the secrets of the grave, and why her spires
Love to curl round the bones of death; and ask the rav’nous snake
Where she gets poison: & the wing’d eagle why he loves the sun
And then tell me the thoughts of man, that have been hid of old. (3:2-13)

If natural life manifests such diversity, Oothoon implies, and if this
uniqueness is intrinsic and not gotten from somewhere or produced by
some external cause—as it must be, since the external world is the same
for all creatures, before their unique perception forms it—then how
absurd to suppose that the numberless and limitless “thoughts of man”
could be derived solely from the influence of the external world. For as
Blake observed several years later, “Man varies from Man more than
Animal from Animal of Different Species.”

Having established the uniqueness and intrinsicalness of individual
being, Oothoon is now prepared to refute the idealist denial of individ­
ual ultimacy. If the being of the individual is intrinsic, and not a mere
precipitate from external forces (experience), then no matter what expe­
riences it has been subjected to, and no matter what its present actual
state, the individual is still always intrinsically itself and thus embodies
implicitly its ideal form or essence, as Oothoon maintains:

Silent I hover all the night, and all day could be silent.
If Theotormon once would turn his loved eyes upon me;
How can I be defild when I reflect thy image pure?
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 Theotormons breast. (3:14-20)

Oothoon here pleads for the absolute to take account of her and ac­
knowledge her intrinsic worth and being. Her intrinsic being, she
argues, is not identical with her actual existence; rather, her true being,
or soul, is like the “bright swan” (Plato’s symbol for the soul), while
her actual existence is like the “red earth” (the literal meaning of
“Adam,” one’s natural being) on the swan’s wings. And if one’s
unique, intrinsic being is not coterminous with one’s immediate state of
actual existence, Oothoon maintains, then union between an individual
and its telos, or the absolute, should be possible apart from immediate
actuality. Distinguishing states from individuals, she reasons that the
contingent, present actuality of an individual’s existence ultimately has
no bearing on the individual’s relation to the absolute, that as long as
the unique intrinsic being of the individual reflects the absolute—even if
only implicitly—it does not matter whether or not that absolute is fully
actualized in the individual’s immediate state. In fact, Oothoon reasons,

if the actuality of one individual is expropriated and defiled by the rapacity of another, that very occurrence proves the intrinsic value of the defiled individual, for the fruit that the worm feeds on is the sweetest—i.e., desire always expropriates the most valuable being. Defiled actuality is thus from her perspective a badge of intrinsic value and purity, or union with the absolute.

The very notion, however, of an implicit, intrinsic dimension of individual being is rejected by both empiricism and idealism. One might expect that idealism, since it denies the ultimacy of actual existence, could easily embrace Oothoon's notion of the implicit dimension. But although idealism affirms—indeed, accords ultimacy to—the implicit, non-manifest dimension of reality in general, it denies the implicit, non-manifest dimension of individual being. And in doing so, moreover, idealism is ironically relying surreptitiously on the metaphysical postulates and epistemological criteria of empiricism. For as Theotormon's response to Oothoon demonstrates, idealism rejects the implicit, intrinsic being of the individual precisely because such being cannot be observed or located in immediate actuality:

Tell me what is the night or day to one o'erflowd with woe?
Tell me what is a thought? & of what substance is it made?
Tell me what is a joy? & in what gardens do joys grow?
And in what rivers swim the sorrows? and upon what mountains
Wave shadows of discontent? and in what houses swell the wretched
Drunken with woe forgotten. and shut up from cold despair.
Tell me where dwell the thoughts forgotten till thou call them forth
Tell me where dwell the joys of old! & where the ancient loves?
And when will they renew again & the night of oblivion past?
That I might travers times & spaces far remote and bring
Comforts into a present sorrow and a night of pain
Where goest thou O thought? to what remote land is thy flight?
If thou returnest to the present moment of affliction
Wilt thou bring comforts on thy wings. and dews and honey and balm;
Or poison from the desart wilds, from the eyes of the envier.
(3:22-4:11. My emphasis.)

Theotormon's rejection of the implicit dimension of individual existence focuses on the inadequacy of immediate, present actuality—"the present moment of affliction," he calls it—and implies that existence is in itself futile because it can never recover past actuality ("thoughts forgotten," "joys of old," "ancient loves"). The implicit, intrinsic dynamism of an individual's existence is here dismissed as being insubstantial in two ways. At best, the intrinsic dynamism of a being is insubstantial in the sense of inconsequential: what does it matter, Theotormon inquires scornfully, whether there is growth or decline, life or death ("night or day") when "one is o'erflowd with woe" in either case? In addition, however, the interior, intrinsic dimension of an individual is
insubstantial in the sense of being unreal, merely epiphenomenal: "Tell me what is a thought?" Theotormon demands, "& of what substance is it made? / Tell me what is a joy? & in what gardens do joys grow?" Theotormon’s speech thus reveals the inability of the idealist or theocentric perspective to account for the intrinsicalness and uniqueness—the non-manifest interiority—of individuals. Thoughts, joys, and sorrows, which constitute the interior resonance of individual being, are not locatable in the idealist universe, where individuals and particulars occur only insofar as they are constituted by a universal "substance" (their "what") and positioned in the universal grid of space and time (their "where" and "when"). This basis for the denial of the intrinsic dimension of individual being ironically reveals the idealist / religious perspective to be strikingly unspiritual and, once again, closely allied with the empiricist view: idealism / religion denies the intrinsic dimension of individual being precisely because such intrinsicalness is not immediately manifest or experienceable, thus assuming the fundamental postulate of empiricism that something can be said truly to be only if it is in some way immediately graspable or apprehendable.

The empiricist perspective, of course, is equally oblivious to the implicit dimension of individual being, as the speech of Bromion immediately demonstrates:

Then Bromion said: and shook the cavern with his lamentation
Thou knowest that the ancient trees seen by thine eyes have fruit:
But knowest thou that trees and fruits flourish upon the earth
To gratify senses unknown? trees beasts and birds unknown:
Unknown, not unpercieved; spread in the infinite microscope,
In places yet unvisited by the voyager. and in worlds
Over another kind of seas, and in atmospheres unknown:
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?
And is there not eternal fire, and eternal chains?
To bind the phantoms of existence from eternal life? (3:13-25)

Bromion here differs with Theotormon, maintaining that actuality does, in fact, have all that is necessary for a fulfilling existence; it is simply a matter of exploring actuality and discovering the satisfactions which it offers. You acknowledge, Bromion reminds Theotormon, that there have always been and continue to be some sources of fulfillment in the actual world: "Thou knowest that the ancient trees seen by thine eyes have fruit," i.e., produce fulfillment. But you have ignored the fact, Bromion continues, that there are many other sources of satisfaction ("trees and fruit") in actuality which will provide pleasure for us if we can simply develop the sensitivity ("senses unknown") for them. For Bromion, then, existence should not be spurned, as Theotormon would have it, but should rather be explored as a source of epicurean gratifica-
tion. Like Theotormon, however, the epicurean Bromion refuses to acknowledge the unmanifest, intrinsic dimension of individuals which harbors their potentiality and dynamism. For although he asserts that what is immediately perceptible is not all there is, he conceives of the non-present elements of being in terms of natural, actual, material things—i.e., as "trees and fruits... upon the earth." First, he imagines that this being must simply be infinitesimal—"spread in the infinite microscope"; like those naturalists who explained generation as the successive emergence of homunculi that were preformed and packaged, Chinese-box fashion, at the beginning of time, Bromion assumes that what is intrinsic but unmanifest must simply be very small and therefore difficult to observe and understand—"unknown, not unperceived," as he puts it. In a perspective which denies the validity of the dynamic, organismic vision, latency or potential is conceived of as actuality-in-miniature. But Bromion also conceives the domain of latency or potential in macroscopic terms, imagining it as lying "In places yet unvisited by the voyager, and in worlds! Over another kind of seas, and in atmospheres unknown." Here his metaphor of "another kind of seas" is on the verge of escaping the empiricist bias for the manifest and tangible. Unfortunately, this possibility is not realized and instead of apprehending the dimension of intrinsic being or the spiritual per se, Bromion moves in the direction of supernaturalism, in which the actual world is declared unreal or at least subordinate to an invisible realm—an invisible realm which, however, is conceived according to the categories of the actual manifest world. Thus Bromion's epicurean/empiricist contemplations of "other wars," "other sorrows," and "other joys" ossify into a deistic vision of an invisible order in which there is "one law for both the lion and the ox," and in which continuous destruction ("eternal fire") and laws of determinism ("eternal chains") "bind the phantoms of existence [i.e., actual existing individuals] from eternal life." Here Bromion's sensualist, empiricist perspective is shown once again to be closely allied to Theotormon's religious or idealist vision, for idealism and the supernaturalism of religion are also constituted by a doubling and inversion of the empirical world which paradoxically denies true being to actuality while surreptitiously using that very actuality as the paradigm for true being.

19. As Gleckner notes, "he 'visualizes' new things on the basis of the rational analysis of, and comparison with, like things already known" (p. 211).

20. Ironically, Bromion's questions at times clearly articulate, if read metaphorically, a radical critique of the very perspective he is espousing. When he asks, for example, "Are there other wars, beside the wars of sword and fire!" his words point toward the concept of intellectual warfare which Blake was later to formulate more explicitly. It is perhaps this ambiguity in his speech—expressing an ambiguity inherent in empiricism and hedonism themselves—that causes Oothoon to cease lamenting for a day. For it is possible to hear in Bromion's words an acknowledgement of the intrinsic value of individual being—a recognition which Oothoon had earlier said would silence her lamentations (3:14-15).
In the remainder of the poem Blake goes on to sketch out the practical results of each of these three perspectives, showing how hedonism and theocentrism lead to jealousy, the urge to expropriate the being of other individuals, and how organicism gives rise to love and pity, the urge to celebrate and support the being of other individuals. Jealousy is the natural correlative of theocentrism and hedonism because both this affective state and these metaphysical perspectives are based on the implicit denial of irreducibly unique and intrinsic being to the individual, assuming instead that the individual's being is extrinsic and homogeneous. And if the being of an individual is extrinsic and fundamentally identical with the being of other individuals, then it is interchangeable with the being of other individuals and hence expropriatable. It is this tacit assumption that the being of another is expropriable that is both cause and effect of jealousy.

Organicism, in contrast, since it assumes the individual's being to be irreducibly unique and intrinsic, has neither hope of expropriating another's being nor fear of being expropriated by another. Its mode of interaction with otherness is thus characterized by the affects of pity and love, a respectful support and delightful appropriation, in contrast to the rapacious expropriation which characterizes hedonism and theocentrism. Blake contrasts this respectful appropriation with jealous expropriation in Oothoon's final speech:

Does the sun walk in glorious raiment on the secret floor
Where the cold miser spreads his gold? or does the bright cloud drop
On his stone threshold? does his eye behold the beam that brings
Expansion to the eye of pity? or will he bind himself
Beside the ox to thy hard furrow? does not the mild beam blot
The bat, the owl, the flowing tyger, and the king of night.
The sea fowl takes the wintry blast. for a cov'ring to her limbs:
And the wild snake, the pestilence to adorn him with gems & gold.
And trees. & birds. & beasts. & men. behold their eternal joy.
Arisex little glancing wings, and sing your infant joy!
Arisex and drink your bliss, for every thing that lives is holy! (7:30-8:10)

The miser, in valuing everything in terms of an extrinsic, homogeneous substance (gold) and devoting himself to the accumulation of this substance, epitomizes both theocentrism and hedonism, which reduce the intrinsic being of individuals to a homogeneous extrinsic substance that is expropriatable by another. This miserly perspective is incapable of achieving that expansion that occurs when one views another individual with pity—i.e., when one sees another as sovereign, an end in itself, which is of ultimate value and which one thus finds oneself called upon to support and suffer for. Pity embodies a metaphysics of individual sovereignty, which views each individual as an ultimate value and which thus does everything in its power to nurture and protect the individual.
Such respectful appropriation of another individual (as opposed to expropriation) occurs whenever one individual makes use of or adapts itself to the unique being of another individual—such as when “the sea fowl takes the wintry blast. for a cov’ring to her limbs: / And the wild snake, the pestilence to adorn him with gems & gold.” And such appropriation also occurs when others “behold their eternal joy”—i.e., when others make the joy of the sea fowl and the wild snake part of their own being by celebrating it and responding to it with joyous empathy. For the organic perspective, fulfillment through interaction among individuals is always a consequence of the unique, intrinsic being of the individuals involved, rather than the result of acquiring some homogeneous substance constituting them, and the goal of such interaction is never the glorification or enhancement of something outside of or beyond individuals, but rather the fulfillment of both of the individuals themselves. Fulfillment is therefore identical with joy—i.e., with the individuals’ own experience of fulfillment, rather than with the individuals’ achievement of, or coincidence with, some external standard or telos. Since the individual is ontologically ultimate, the individual joy is by rights the ultimate goal: Oothoon therefore urges, “Arise you little glancing wings, and sing your infant joy! / Arise and drink your bliss, for every thing that lives is holy!”

But although such may be the true nature of things, it is not the actual state of things, for idealism remains intransigent in the fact of organicism’s argument, thus demonstrating the poem’s motto that “The Eye sees more than the Heart knows.” The poem therefore ends with two opposing metaphysical perspectives in deadlock: “Thus every morning wails Oothoon,” we are told, “but Theotormon sits / Upon the margind ocean conversing with shadows dire” (8:11–12). Every morning the generous, dynamic, productive aspect of being (Oothoon) moves toward fulfillment, its renewal witnessing to the absolute intrinsic being—the holiness—of everything that lives. But the truth manifested by this self-moving, self-transforming dimension of existence is not accommodated by the dimension of essences and absolutes, as constituted by the idealist or theocentric perspective. Instead of embracing the joy to be found in

21. In fact, there is evidence that Oothoon’s organicist vision is itself tainted with self-contradiction—i.e., that organicism itself implicitly partakes (and thus tacitly acknowledges the validity) of the expropriative attitudes of idealism/religion and empiricism/hedonism. For as Leopold Damrosch has pointed out (Symbol and Truth in Blake’s Myth [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980], p. 197), Oothoon’s promise to catch girls for Theotormon with nets and traps resembles very closely the activity of the parson criticized earlier (plate 5). In addition, the fact that Oothoon, the generous, self-transforming dynamism of beings, remains devoted to the ideal or pure essence—rather than to the process of existence which she herself is—suggests the perhaps insurmountable contradiction that seems to plague all organicist or process metaphysics: the fact that process presupposes a cause, efficient or final, outside itself. Thus organicism must tacitly valorize either the efficient causality of empiricism or the final causality of idealism and religion (as Oothoon attempts to do here), in either case subverting the supposed primacy of process. Thus although the metaphysical perspectives of religion/idealism and hedonism/empiricism are shown to be tyrannical and invalid, overcoming this tyrannous delusion is not an easy matter. For both these perspectives are partially true, being based upon real elements of being, as even the organicist perspective tacitly admits.
existence, “in every thing that lives,” this perspective dwells in the realm of amorphous, homogeneous, universal substance (symbolized by the ocean) and holds converse not with actual beings but rather with the unreal, insubstantial projections of those beings—i.e., with “shadows dire.” This intransigence of idealism makes itself felt not only in circles of abstruse thought but in the world of common experience as well: for when Oothoon wails, “The Daughters of Albion hear her woes, & eccho back her sighs” (8:12). Blake’s point is clear: the failure to overcome this theocentric idealism in our culture is not merely failure to achieve metaphysical consistency or ideological supremacy; it is also a failure of the vital quest to bring true fulfillment to individuals.

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