WILLIAM BLAKE'S CONCEPT OF IMAGINATION

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Abstract

This paper takes into close consideration various instances (drawn from textual references) of the concept of imagination in William Blake's thought. I evince that the creative self actively projects poetic worlds in conjunction with an inspirational medium, and subsequently explores them by a constant use of the imaginative faculty, which acts as an immanent, not a transcendent, force, originating from the artist's mental activity and instanced in visionary writings.

In order to facilitate the understanding of visionary imagination, I must first take into account the general functions of this intellectual faculty. The basic formula reads that imagination 'is the power to form mental images' (Kim and Sosa 235). However, it is generally admitted that, philosophically, the concept has two meanings: 'First, the capacity to experience "mental images," and, second, the capacity to engage in creative thought' (Cooper 212). Notwithstanding the fact that, in the general field of aesthetics, one may speak about 'creative imagination,' the syntagm has a more specific meaning when applied to the poetics of vision. Let me consider the first case, involving the broader sense. Whenever a person imagines something, his thoughts 'are not illusions about the real world, but undeceived depictions of a world that is not only unreal, but also known to be so' (Cooper 213). Thus, the subject imagines something and precisely because he is the originator of these thoughts he cannot create the illusion of verisimilitude. In the second case, involving the restrained sense of visionary poetics, the subject imagines something which, as soon as has been imagined, has acquired an autonomous ontological status. The imagined world becomes self-sufficient and functions on its own support. It does not require the external judgment of another beholder (i.e. another subject of knowledge); its contents are true simply because, *ex hypothesi*, their author has deemed them true.

The relationship between (mental) image and imagination looms large at this point. Some theorists hasten to state that images are the material components of the mental activity, describing them as symbols. A more appropriate definition of image could be that the latter 'may justifiably be regarded as a bridge between perception and thought' (Guttenplan 366), since any image involves an intricately elaborate connection between the sensorium and the intellectual faculty. Moreover, there are four main characteristics which link images and sensations. Thus, occurrence of images can be timed; they can vary in intensity, elude

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description unless one resorts to some sensory experience, and are characterized by subjectivity.[1]

The whole controversy as regards the function of imagination arises from a theoretical failure. As I have already underlined, it is not within the scope of my pursuit to present imagination diachronically, but rather to facilitate the understanding of the concept and its role in visionary poetry. R. G. Collingwood brilliantly synthesizes the three steps which the theory of imagination has passed in modern Western thought:

> (1) To most of the seventeenth-century philosophers it seemed clear that all sensation is simply imagination. The common-sense distinction was simply wiped out, and the existence of anything which could be called real sensation was denied. . . . (2) The English empiricists tried to restate the common-sense distinction, but were unable to reach an agreement. . . . (3) Kant (with important help from Leibniz and Hume) approached the problem along a new line. Instead of trying to conceive a real sensa and imaginary sensa as two co-ordinate species of the same genus, . . . he conceived the difference between them as a difference of degree (187).

So, the problem has been created by the philosophers' failure to make an apparently common-sense distinction between real and imaginary sensory data, i.e. impressions and ideas. If, in Baruch Spinoza (who merely resumes Hobbes's position), for instance, imagination is simply equated with sensation, in Kant, it constitutes the imperative connection between sensory data and understanding. It is at this point that Collingwood is able to coin his own theory of imagination, which responds to the foregoing controversy by simply acknowledging the existence of a *sui generis* sense experience, akin to the sense experience proper, and yet clearly distinct from the latter:

> There must, in other words, be a form of experience other than sensation, but closely related to it; so closely as to be easily mistaken for it, but different in that the colours, sounds, and so on which in this experience we 'perceive' are retained in some way or other before the mind, anticipated, recalled, although these same colours and sounds, in their capacity as sensa, have ceased to be seen and heard (202).

In my opinion, this is one of the simplest and clearest definitions of imagination in European aesthetics, which facilitates the primary understanding of the term.

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More recently, a number of aestheticians and literary critics have emphasized the importance of equally relevant issues raised by the concept under consideration. Thus, whilst Patrick Grant is of the opinion that '[t]he characteristic *modus operandi* of human knowledge mediating between Spirit and Matter . . . we may presume to call "Imagination"' (25), Thomas McFarland discusses the concept of 'imagination' in relation to the idea of 'originality.' The latter remarks that, because both terms 'historically accumulated value in inverse ratio to their clear and distinct definition, they tended not only to share a common aura, but also to restore that numinous which by the eighteenth century was increasingly divested from *soul* [italics in the original] as a term in its own right' (88).

As all literature scholars undoubtedly know, the concept of 'imagination' has often been deemed to parallel the concept of 'fancy.' I must stress that I am not particularly interested in differentiating between the two ideas, since Blake himself fails to. Suffice it to say at this point, just for the sake of the general argument, that the two terms have been transmitted to the modern intellectual thought via two sources: one is Latin (*imaginatio*), the other, Greek (*phantasia*).[2] The Latin tradition of the Middle Ages and its intellectual avatars employs them as either synonymous (St. Thomas Aquinas, amongst others) or not (Albertus Magnus, amongst others).[3]

At this stage, the reader should bear in mind that my discourse focuses on the main attributes of the creative imagination; that is why I intend hereafter to summarize James Engell's brilliant genealogical presentation of the idea of 'imagination' as an originative force. Starting from the premise that imagination, as an independent concept, is brought fourth by the Enlightenment, Engell asserts that it is in imagination alone that a valuable key to the concurrent understanding of both Enlightenment and Romanticism is to be discovered.[4] The teleological characteristics inherent in the creative power are best summarized by Engell himself:

> The creative imagination became the way to unify man's psyche and, by extension, to reunify man with nature, to return by the paths of self-consciousness to a state of higher nature, a state of the sublime where senses, mind, and spirit elevate the world around them even as they elevate themselves. The new concept of imagination enlarged the humanities and increased the expectations placed on secular art, and the promise and burden of those expectations continue today (8).

The concept of 'imagination' is central in Blake, and, although presented in comparatively simple terms, it affords a multitude of semantic refinements. On the one hand, C. M. Bowra

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believes that, for Blake, 'imagination is nothing less than God as he operates in the human soul. It follows that any act of creation performed by the imagination is divine and that in the imagination man's spiritual nature is fully and finally realized' (89). On the other hand, as Engell deftly notes, Blake's 'idea of imagination has roots in philosophical and religious traditions that include both esoteric and popular elements and which extend back through the eighteenth century, the hermeticists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Renaissance, medieval and ancient philosophy, and sacred Hebrew poetry' (245). Moreover, Engell points out that several connections may be established between Blake's imagination and that of Pico della Mirandola, Meister Eckhart, Jakob Böhme, Paracelsus, Cornelius Agrippa, Emanuel Swedenborg, and, of course, Kant and Schelling (245). His English forerunners include Bunyan, Milton, Shaftestbury, Joseph Warton, Akenside, Collins, and Christopher Smart (Engell 245). Despite all these influences, Blake's idea of 'imagination' retains original features, and is to be discerned and described appropriately. Engell's blunt yet suggestive definition, according to which 'Blake is a Protestant revivalist[5] in the radical sense of the word' (246), is quite fit in the context.

Further on, Engell remarks that Blake's idea of imagination can be closely related to that of both Coleridge and Schelling, although Blake fails to discern amongst various levels of imaginative force (247). The scholar also notes that the visionary poet restores to its full power the syntagm *natura naturans*, 'the forming or plastic spirit that works in God and in the human mind' (247), found in Spinoza or in Scotus Eriugena. Subsequently, Engell draws an interesting parallel between Blake's fourfold vision and the chronological development of Schelling's philosophical thought (the Fichtean *incipit*, the *Naturphilosophie*, the *Identitätsphilosophie*, and the mytho-theological synthesis).[6] The scholar's conclusive view on Blake coincides with Coleridge's, in that the visionary is an 'anacalyptic poet,' rather than an apocalyptic one, and the explanation which the scholar furnishes is satisfactory enough: 'The anacalyptic poet (from Greek *ana-* up, back, again, excessively + *calyptein*, to cover, conceal) literally re-covers in order to recover and restore; only when we become initiated to his symbols can he be called "apocalyptic"' (255). Thus, Blake's heterodox and confusing language is explained *via* an intricate network of etymological refinements. The conclusion of the whole study is that Blake furiously and repeatedly attempts to restore the already fully-fledged concept of antiquity: he is 'trying to reintroduce the oldest and most mysteriously resonant idea of a divine-human imagination' (256).

After examining all these theories concerning imagination and its chief creative traits, I am now ready to offer my own. According to my definition, at the empirical level, imagination constitutes *the subject's inner ability to filter, to magnify, and to modify the basic*

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visionary data of experience. At the creative level, insofar as visionary poetry is concerned, imagination represents *the self's inner capability to transform the raw contents of the visionary experience into a work of art, without thereby entailing the active participation of an exterior agent*. Thus, this intellectual capacity involves the personal involvement of the creative self, that does not wait for a transcendent voice to furnish a finite work of art. The subject is the sole organizer of the creative process. However, in Blake, this is the case only at a theoretical level, for, at a practical one, one discovers an ontological fusion between imagination, as an internal power, and inspiration, as an external one, the former contributing to the expansion and intensification of vision, as induced by a transcendent force. This holds true both for empirical visions (wherein the subject's imagination appropriates and reforms the inspiration-generated visionary contents) and for aestheticized visions (wherein the self's imagination alters the first draft made available by an external agent, be it definite or indefinite).[7]

It is my intention now to take into close consideration various instances (drawn from textual references) of the concept in Blake's thought. I shall commence by trying to shed additional light on what the poet means by 'imagination,' at the same time taking into account, as Andrew J. Welburn reasonably suggests, 'not only the power of the image, but also the difficult issues that arise when poetry touches upon the limits of imagery and representation' (15).

In Blake's thought, imagination ranks as the foremost mental faculty at both immanent and transcendent levels (human and divine), but, as I shall further evince, its ultimate meaning is to be sought in its closely interdependent relationship with inspiration. If one were to give credit to Damon's interpretation, one should say it is Paracelsus who originates the pivotal role of imagination in Blake's art. According to the German physician and alchemist, imagination plays a capital part in all human activities, operating 'through man's spiritual body, which dominates his physical body' (Damon 322). Be that as it may, it is safe to say that Blake borrows at least a few ideas from the alchemical tradition. Moreover, Leonard W. Deen's careful analysis of the role played by imagination in Blake's poetic thought leads me to believe that the artist's aesthetic credo may well originate from the ancient alchemical idea, according to which successful spiritual harmony stems from the conjunction of the masculine, or active, element, and the corresponding feminine, or passive, one: 'In Blake's psychology, imagination is not the ruler over desire and reason but their source, and hence the balance they achieve when the energy of desire has the initiative' (56).

In order that he may properly grasp the ultimate meaning of imagination, Blake contrasts the latter and the mnemenic faculty in man. Blake reaffirms the nature of

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imagination as an essentially spiritual mirror of man, and, concurrently, marks an already familiar distinction between fancy and memory: 'Imagination is the Divine Vision not of The World nor of Man nor from Man as. he is a Natural Man but only as he is a Spiritual Man Imagination has nothing to do with Memory' (E 666).[8] Thus, memory disrupts vision, and causes an artistic work to be imbued with conventionality, artificiality, and imitative characteristics. Although invoked in *Poetical Sketches*, memory is afterwards discarded and even ridiculed by Blake, in a Herculean attempt to purge his work of all philistine, non-visionary traits. The poet even comes to conceive of two sets of feminine figures: the Daughters of Inspiration, who govern visionary art, and the Daughters of Memory, who protect mimetic art (fable or allegory).[9] Frye holds that 'imagination is constructive and communicable,' whilst '"memory" is circular and sterile' (32). Kathleen Raine, in her turn, speaks about the double meaning of 'art' and 'life' in Blake, one pertaining to visionary imagination, the other – to mimetic ratiocination: 'the art and life of imagination, informed by intellectual vision; and the art of the ratio, of the human spectral selfhood, based upon the copying of nature. . .' (II 208). Finally, Damrosch, Jr. underlines that memory is tantamount to fracture and dispersion, as opposed to the constructive unity of imagination: 'Memory . . . is in Blake's view the symptom of a fragmented consciousness that interprets reality as a collection of discrete phenomena instead of a single form. Imagination . . . has no need of memory because it perceives everything as simultaneous unity' (27). Nevertheless, Damon contends that '[t]here was more Memory in Blake's Visions than he admitted' (268), implying that any poet, however biased towards theoretical originality he may be, falls victim to the acquired artistic instruction, as well as to the literary conventions of his age.

Blake's dichotomy between imagination and memory is a Romantic cliché, a differentiation which survives well into the twentieth century (Gaston Bachelard, amongst others, distinguishes between a creative form of imagination, free from any mnemenic constraints, and a reproductive one, based on memory). But one of the earliest and most interesting instances of the dyad is found in Philostratus. In his famous religious opus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, the writer has Thespesion (an Egyptian) and Apollonius involved in a heated argument concerning the zoomorphic representation of Ethiopian gods, the former holding that imitation is based on visual stimuli only, whilst imagination emerges from deeply-embedded strata of consciousness, without any reference whatsoever to perceptive reality: 'Imitation will fashion what she has seen, imagination also what she has not seen. She will form her conception with reference to reality. Amazement (*ekplesis*) often baffles imitation; nothing baffles imagination' (Russell and Winterbottom 552).

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We have seen that imagination must be properly distinguished from memory, but what is the exact nature of the former? A tentative answer is attempted in *A Vision of the Last Judgment*: 'The Nature of Visionary Fancy or Imagination is very little Known & the Eternal nature & permanence of its ever Existent Images is considerd as less permanent than the things of Vegetative & Generative Nature yet the Oak dies as well as the Lettuce but Its Eternal Image & Individuality never dies. but renews by its seed' (E 555). Thus, Blake's *incipit* of argument can be traced back to the Platonic tradition, and refers to the legendary *archei* or the primary principles of things. Moreover, the idea that individuality is imperishable can be related to Plato's belief in the omnipotence of Eternal Forms.[10] Only now does one come to comprehend fully the extent of Blake's thought, for the artist declares explicitly that it is for the infinite and eternal world of imagination that the human soul departs after death: 'This world of Imagination is the World of Eternity it is the Divine bosom into which we shall all go after the death of the Vegetated body' (E 555). Again, Blake deploys his favourite trope, and ventures to personify human imagination, as the latter appears 'as Coming to Judgment. among his Saints & throwing off the Temporal that the Eternal might be Establishd' (E 555). One may also notice Blake's obsession with time perishable and time eternal is recurrent, as the former may be restored by the latter through the exercise of the divine will, which is possessed of benevolence and sanctity.

Subsequently, imagination is simply equated with the body divine, residing within each and every living individual. In *Annotations to Berkeley's 'Siris,'* this idea is thrice reiterated, each time with only slight alterations: 'Imagination or the Human Eternal Body in Every Man' (E 663), 'Imagination or the Divine Body in Every Man' (E 663), 'The All in Man The Divine Image or Imagination' (E 663). The same definition is repeated in '[The Laocoön]:' 'The Eternal Body of Man is The IMAGINATION [capitalization in the original]' (E 273), and in Blake's last letter to George Cumberland, dated 12 April 1827: '. . . The Real Man The Imagination which Liveth for Ever' (E 783). At one point in his *Annotations to Berkeley's 'Siris'*, Blake attributes God's anthropomorphization to the theological conceptions of Jesus, Abraham, and David, whose views are in sharp contrast with the abstractions of Plato and Aristotle: 'Jesus as also Abraham & David considerd God as a Man in the Spiritual or Imaginative Vision' (E 663). This naturally induces the idea that it is Jesus himself who identifies Imagination with the Real Man: 'Jesus considerd Imagination to be the Real Man . . .' (E 663). Finally, once the poet has attributed his own ideas to an illustrious biblical tradition, thereby accrediting and even ennobling them, he can draw the conclusion that 'Man is All Imagination' (E 664) and that man and God are one. Of course, Greek philosophy is pernicious, and must be dealt with quickly and harshly: 'What Jesus came to

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Remove was the Heathen or Platonic Philosophy which blinds the Eye of Imagination The Real Man' (E 664). Trapped in his own flamboyant convictions, Blake seems to forget that, in his own writings, he felt free to borrow from Plato and Aristotle more than once, and that the Gospel of John which he much admires has a purely Platonic idea at its heart, i.e. the pre-eminence of the Logos.

The primary function of imagination in actual life is to establish an empathic connection between the individual and the cosmos. According to Blake, the self can escape formulaic depictions and emotional shallowness by using a certain imaginative trope: the prosopopoeia. [11] The exterior universe can only be loved by means of the latter's personification. A human presence ennobles an otherwise static vista, and allows the imaginative beholder to experience love divine, as Blake holds in his *Annotations to Swedenborg's 'Divine Love and Divine Wisdom'*: 'Think of a white cloud. as being holy you cannot love it but think of a holy man within the cloud love springs up in your thought. for to think of holiness distinct from man is impossible to the affections' (E 603). The very same idea is poetically expressed in *The Little Black Boy* (*Songs of Innocence and of Experience*): 'Look on the rising Sun: there God does live / And gives his light and gives his heat away' (E 9). In a *Public Address*, concerning *Chaucers Canterbury Pilgrims*, the artist emphatically claims that it is the world of imagination, not of matter, that deserves any recognition whatsoever: '[*Imagination is My World this world of Dross is beneath my Notice & the Notice of the Public*] [italics in the original]' (E 580). Moreover, according to Blake, it is through the incessant exercise of this foremost faculty that the creative self apprehends noumenal reality (if I may employ this Kantian epithet). Phenomenal contents of the world can exert a pernicious function on the unfolding of imaginative components, in the sense that the former may be able to slacken the activity of the latter: 'Natural Objects always did & now do Weaken deaden & obliterate Imagination in Me' (E 665).

At a purely aesthetic level, imagination acquires a prominent status. That Blake attributes not only the inchoate stages of creativity but also its final ones to imagination becomes transparent if one examines the artist's *Annotations to Wordsworth's 'Poems:'* 'One Power alone makes a Poet – Imagination The Divine Vision' (E 665). Imagination is converted into the epitome of the aesthetic process, the regulating force that is able to fashion a work of art according to the artist's own convictions, beyond the confines imposed by the inspiring agents. Imagination also accounts for the perfection of forms as a result of the poet's mental activity, nature playing no part in their generation. Herein lies the active principle of an anti-naturalistic consciousness, refusing any involvement of nature (perceived, in this particular context, as *natura naturata*) in the aesthetic field, and placing human activity above

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all other values. Man's intellect is to be extolled mainly because it is capable of projecting flawless worlds (although stemming from an *afflatus*[12] experience), rather than perfectible natural universes, as Blake points out in his *Annotations to 'The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*:' 'All Forms are perfect in the Poets Mind. but these are not abstracted nor compounded from Nature <but are from Imagination>' (E 648).

The great prophetic books bring little, if anything, new in regard to Blake's already discussed idea of imagination, but I elect to examine them briefly for the sake of exhaustiveness. Thus, in *Milton*, the creative faculty is described as '. . . the Divine Vision & Fruition / In which Man liveth eternally . . .' (E 132) or, even better, as 'the Human Existence itself' (E 132). In *Jerusalem*, imagination is involved in a fierce conflict against abstract philosophy, and is again equated with 'the Divine Body of the Lord Jesus' (E 148). Albion's lament subsequently identifies the foremost human power simply as 'Divine Body' (E 169), a syntagm pasted once again in the description of the Spectre attempting to contain 'the Divine Body' by a carefully designed net of moral laws (E 229). At one point, Blake states boldly that imagination is the universal receptacle of *cogitatum*, the ontological support of reality components: 'For All Things Exist in the Human Imagination' (E 223). Therefore, the entire universe, in its refined, unalterable form, is located not outside but inside man; the latter has to acknowledge this truth before going any further in his gnoseological investigations. The transcendent and the transcendental mingle, and the resulting fusion is an ecstatic moment of metaphorical perfection:

> . . . when you enter into their Bosoms you walk
> In Heavens & Earths; as in your own Bosom you bear your Heaven
> And Earth, & all you behold, tho it appears Without it is Within
> In your Imagination of which this World of Mortality is but a Shadow (E 225).

All the aforementioned examples allow us to draw the proper conclusion: the creative self actively projects poetic worlds in conjunction with an inspirational medium, and subsequently explores them by a constant use of the imaginative faculty, which acts as an immanent, not a transcendent, force, originating from the artist's mental activity and instanced in visionary writings. In Leopold Damrosch. Jr.'s words, 'the function of visionary imagination is thus to get beyond the images of the ordinary world to the true forms in which they participate' (14). One should conclude by saying that, in Blake's case, the ordinary world simply ceases to exist, and that, from a certain point onwards, this material universe, an erroneous construct in itself, is replaced by a transphenomenal reality called Eternity, entirely governed by the omnipotent

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components of imagination. I might venture to add that Eternity itself becomes, in *The Ghost of Abel*, the equivalent of the creative power: 'Imagination is Eternity' (E 270). For, as the artist sententiously declares in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, '[e]very thing possible to be believ'd is an image of truth' (E 37). Thus, in Blake, one can definitely identify an aesthetic extremism at work, 'a kind of tyranny of art over life' (XI), if one were to quote Berlin, a pivotal conviction in the Romantic Age, when the frontiers between the real and the possible were easily effaced, and the heritage of the French Enlightenment, triggered by a bloody Revolution, was quickly substituted for a new set of dogmas, anti-rationalistic and idealistic perhaps, but still as implacable as the former. If the *philosophes* indefatigably preached that the material universe is the only creditable epistemological object, Blake and the Romantics rose to defend the autonomy of imagination, and their steadfast determination and lack of ideological concession put the latter on a par with Reason.

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Notes

[1] See Cooper 212-13.

[2] In Greek, *phantasia* is synonymous with 'appearance.' Anne Sheppard points out that the term 'is therefore applied as much to what we imagine as to the faculty of imagination, and ancient discussions of *phantasia* tend to contrast the imaginary with the true, the merely apparent with the real' (15). Interesting enough is the subsequent introduction to the avatars of the concept in Greek philosophy, from Plato and Aristotle to Philostratus and Proclus (see Sheppard 12-18).

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[3] For a cogent presentation of 'fancy' and 'imagination,' see Preminger, *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* 270-71 and 370-77.
[4] For an extended argumentation, see Engell 3-6.
[5] By 'revivalist,' one commonly understands a person dedicated to enhancing the strength of a particular religious trend or thought.
[6] For a complete demonstration, see Engell 249-51, especially 250.
[7] According to my definition, at the empirical level, as opposed to imagination, inspiration represents *the subject's outer ability to experience a vision induced by an exterior agent, be it definite or indefinite*. At the creative level, insofar as visionary poetry is concerned, also as opposed to imagination, inspiration constitutes *the self's outer capability to apprehend the already aestheticized contents of visionary experience and to translate them materially into the tangible work of art*. In the context of imagination, the visionary data which must be incorporated into the finite work of art is refined and embellished by the imaginative faculty, involving the active participation of the creative self. In the context of inspiration, the visionary contents are readily available, the creative self's only function being that of apprehending them in a proper manner. So long as the state of inspiration is manifest, the creative self only plays a passive role in the aesthetic process. Unlike imagination, which entails the faculty of volition in its highest sense, *afflatus* presupposes restraint and even subjugation of personal will. The task of aesthetic modification of the visionary contents is assumed by either an indefinite or a definite transcendent force, external to the creative self.
[8] All Blake quotations are drawn from *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Ed. David V. Erdman. Commentary Harold Bloom. Newly revised ed. Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1982, hereafter abbreviated to E.
[9] For more details, see E 554.
[10] Blake's putative Platonism is the subject of a study by Edward Larrissy, entitled simply 'Blake and Platonism.' The author himself concedes that 'most, though not all, of Blake's references to Plato himself are hostile' (187). For more details, see Larrissy 186-98.
[11] Prosopopoiea may be equated with anthropomorphism. It is worth mentioning here that John Ruskin is the originator of the 'pathetic phallacy' syntagm, aimed to describe the metaphorical anthropomorphization of inanimate objects.
[12] *Afflatus* is a synonym for 'inspiration,' the term being chiefly employed by Cicero (in *De Oratore* and *De Natura Deorum*). For additional details, see Preminger, *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* 8.

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