

PANTHEISM IN THE ROMANTIC POETRY: WILLIAM BLAKE AND WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

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It is well known that the Romantic Movement was much more than a simple literary school. It was the result of a set of changes in the social, economic and cultural organization. Absolutism was losing its strength, and bourgeois had been increasing successfully since the sixteenth century. Such changes inevitably had its impact translated into art and the aesthetic movement that begun in the second half of the eighteenth century and was already disappearing in Europe in the first half of the following century came to put all classicist aspirations down. *'Imagination and feeling, emotion and sensibility conquer slowly the place occupied by reason'* (Coutinho, 1976, p. 141)¹. If before art had to search for universal truths by the exercise of reason and the control of feelings, now man was free to feel and to imagine.

Art was no more limited to the 'real world', it was the mean through which new atmospheres were created. Coutinho (1976, p.143) said that 'if we want to group the romantic spirit in a single quality, it would be imagination'. Imagination permits the poet to visualize realities quite different from real world. He is conscious of the real world, however, he does not accept it, people are slaves of rules, imagination is the gate to freedom lands.

Society had all its moral values put into doubt and Religion was sharply attacked by some of romantic writers. Among them is William Blake (1757 – 1827) who wrote *The Garden of Love* and *I Saw a Chapel*, which expresses a strong feeling of repulse against church and suggests a kind of Pantheism that will bloom with William Wordsworth (1770-1850) poetry. I will compare those poems by Blake to *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud* and *Lines Written in Early Spring* by Wordsworth considering how they refer to nature in order to demonstrate how Pantheism is expressed in these poems in terms of differences and similarities.

First it is necessary to define what Pantheism is. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica online, it is the doctrine that the universe conceived of as a whole is God and, conversely, that there is no God but the combined substance, forces, and laws that are manifested in the existing universe. To Spinoza, there is no separation between God and the sensitive world. Each thing is part of a bigger universe – Nature (PADOVANI & CASTAGNOLA, 1972, p. 295). Nature is a complex of antagonistic powers which are always 'fighting'. Considering the whole universe as a live being, there is no evil or no good, every motion of Nature is an attempt to overcome its own limits which are never ceased. Contrastive movements compound the music that rules the universe. Every human effort to overcome natural rules is frustrated because nature always wins. There is no gain, losses or winner. Gains and losses, good and evil only exist when we think about individuals. These concepts are not sustained when the complete universe is considered in its completeness.

¹ My observation.

To a pantheist the human error resides in our constant desire of becoming immortal as individuals. It is not only impossible, but seems to deprive man of living intensively the very present moment. This immortality desire is the heart of Christianity. Jesus is the Son of God and he was able to die and turn to life again. This religion is severely criticized by William Blake in *The Garden of Love*, which is transcribed below:

The Garden of Love

I went to the Garden of Love,
And saw what I never had seen;
A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut
And "Thou shalt not," writ over the door;
So I turned to the Garden of Love
That so many sweet flowers bore.

And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tombstones where flowers should be;
And priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars my joys and desires.

The poet relates the pain of having his 'Garden of Love' destroyed by Church. He was happy before, but now in the place where there were flowers, there are tombstones. Here, he points a contradiction in Christianity: intending to bring life, it kills man. For man is led to deny the present pleasures of flesh for the sake of a spiritual life. The Church doctrine was like briars to the poet who had his 'joys and desires' bound.

The Garden of Love was a lovely place where he could play till the moment that a church was built in the midst. I would like to emphasize the meaning of the underlined verb. Children are used to playing more than adults. What makes children happy? Freedom to do whatever they want. Adults have to follow many rules. Rules, in fact, make man less free and the knowledge of them disturbs his conscience because he will be always asking himself if what he does is good or bad. Church has the role of telling him what to do. The phrase 'thou shalt not' which is written over the door is a reference to the ten commandments. It also suggests that what he wants the most, that is, his joys and desires, are sins. In short, the Christian morality was, to William Blake, against human nature.

The chapel is an interesting image. Its gates are shut. The poet states that God can not be found there. Then, where to find him? Perhaps in Nature, in flowers. However, he finds 'tombstones where flowers should be'. Tombstones mean death and they appeared after the chapel was built. Blake believed that church established a separation between man and Nature/God through the idea of sin. This idea imprisons man once he begins to recognize himself as guilty for all his desires are in contrast with the law of God. The result is sadness, anguish and death.

While Blake lamented to be disconnected to nature due to Christianity, Wordsworth wrote an exquisite poem about his perfect relationship with nature. We can feel the poet's relationship with nature in the verses below:

I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud

I wandered lonely as a cloud
 That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
 When all at once I saw a crowd,
 A host, of golden daffodils,
 Beside the lake, beneath the trees
 Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
 And twinkle on the Milky Way,
 They stretched in never-ending line
 Along the margin of a bay:
 Ten thousand saw I at a glance
 Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced, but they
 Out-did the sparkling waves in glee: -
 A poet could not but be gay
 In such a jocund company:
 I gazed -and gazed -but little thought
 What wealth the show to me had brought.

For oft, when on my couch I lie
 In vacant or in pensive mood,
 They flash upon that inward eye
 Which is the bliss of solitude;
 And then my heart with pleasure fills
 And dances with the daffodils.

In this poem, poet and nature are fused. He contemplates nature placing himself as part of it. He feels as if he were a cloud. There is no better position to admire nature than from above. As a cloud he could do it. The image of a cloud is fascinating because it brings to our minds the idea of softness, quietness and peace. I dare to propose/suggest that that cloud smiled at every scene *she*² could observe. It was a state of complete happiness, nothing was missing. Nothing is missing in nature for it is beautiful and complete.

In *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*, nature is alive and in feast. The daffodils are 'dancing in the breeze'. They are tossing their heads in a 'sprightly dance'. They are so content that they make the poet feel the same when he recollects all that beauty in moments of sadness and solitude. Here is the idea that man can find happiness in nature. All he has to do is to get closer to it. This thought is close to Blake's. The difference is that Wordsworth does not approve or disapprove of Christianity explicitly. He is calling our attention to something we may neglect which is the beauty present in nature.

² The pronoun *she* was used in the place of the pronoun *it* due to the fact that nature is personified in the poem.

The poem also brings an interesting idea: Solitude is a good thing and there is pleasure in it. The poet was lonely, but not alone. He was lonely because there was nobody with him, however he had the company of nature with which 'a poet could not be but gay'. Solitude is usually avoided, but the poet whose eyes are sensitive to nature has his heart filled with pleasure.

One may say that the pleasures both poets talk about are not exactly the same. Wordsworth wrote about the pleasure of admiring nature, Blake also did so, nevertheless, his main preoccupation was to claim for those pleasures condemned by Church. He had his space invaded by it and priests whose function was to impose a moral which was against his nature.

In *Lines Written in Early Spring*, Wordsworth laments 'what man has made of man'.

I heard a thousand blended notes,
 While in a grove I sate reclined,
 In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
 Bring sad thoughts to the mind.

To her fair works did Nature link
 The human soul that through me ran;
 And much it grieved my heart to think
 What man has made of man.

Through primrose tufts, in that green bower,
 The periwinkle trailed its wreaths;
 And 'tis my faith that every flower
 Enjoys the air that it breathes.

The birds around me hopped and played,
 Their thoughts I cannot measure: --
 But the least motion which they made,
 It seemed a thrill of pleasure.

The budding twigs spread out their fan,
 To catch the breezy air;
 And I must think, do all I can,
 That there was pleasure there.

If this belief from heaven be sent,
 If such be Nature's holy plan,
 Have I not reason to lament
 What man has made of man?

He says that there was pleasure in every scene he had seen in nature, but there was pain in man's attitudes. It is clear that he was worried about society. He suggested something was wrong with it, maybe it needed to have its morality changed. All natural creations were 'fair', but man has a kind of control over nature and acts as a minor creator. Man creates man, or, man manipulates man. If we think of moral as a culturally created element that limits human liberty, then it is harmful when it goes beyond the necessary³. Blake thought of Christian morality as unnecessary, his

³ There are social rules in every kind of society. The Latin statement 'Ubi societas, ibi jus' is a Truth. However, there are societies with more rules than others and these rules are different from society to society.

pleasures would not kill nobody. Wordsworth, however, does not reveal 'what man has made of man'. When he opts for not specifying man's actions against others, he has the advantage of being general and universal as well. Every reader in any age or place could think about different things. Religion would be in Blake's list, classes fighting in Marx's, Foucault would think about the human thirst for power.

Any answer to that question would just explain a fact: man is far from nature. It is necessary to rescue a healthy relationship with it. That was one of the main objectives of romantic writers. Wordsworth fulfilled his mission writing pieces of art of extreme beauty. *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud* is filled with peace, joy and pleasure. The last poem I analyze brings the poet's lament about human deeds against their own nature. Among these deeds Religion must be included in Blake's opinion. He saw all his pleasures threatened by Church and his response was sharp. Just for a better illustration, I finish this article with the last stanza of *I Saw a Chapel*. In this stanza the poet says he would better be in a sty than in a church.

Vomiting his poison out
 On the bread and on the wine.
 So I turn'd into a sty
 And laid me down among the swine.

Blake destroys the religious speech. Church is said to be the best place people can stay. It is said to be the place where love domains. However, the poet states the opposite: it is worse than a sty. These verses are shocking because a sty is a synonym of dirt. He is saying without the use of euphemism that Church is immoral in the sense that its morality does not bring peace to mankind. Considering this point of view, Church's morality has its purpose on itself. That is, man can make an effort to follow all Church's rules, however, in spite of having his spiritual thirst satisfied, he would have it intensified.

The bread and the wine symbolizes the holy supreme sacrifice of Jesus through which every believer would have their sins cleansed and could, therefore, live everlasting. however, these elements are poisoned, and the discussion may lead us to state that this poison consists of Church doctrines.

The discussion above allows us to draw the following conclusions: (1) Both William Blake and William Wordsworth loved Nature with all their hearts; (2) they viewed Nature as the fountain of pleasure, life, inspiration and love; (3) Nature is perfect to both poets; (4) all human pains have their origin in our own faults because differently from other beings we are able to create realities and transfer them to new generations, this is what is called culture; (5) while Wordsworth was more comprehensive in *Lines Written in Early Spring* when he referred to attitudes men take against themselves, Blake was very specific in *The Garden of Love* and in *I Saw a Chapel* when he points Church as a social disease. (6) Wordsworth poetry was affirmative once it tries to consolidate Pantheism as he did in *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*. (7) Blake, on the other hand, tried to do it, but through the via of negation. His strategy obviously finds a stronger resistance of the public but it

does not mean necessarily less effectiveness. This discussion can be the objective of another study. Pointing some differences and similarities between the studied poets is just a step to a wider work.