

**“I must create a System ...”**

**The Blake Society, 25 October 2005: St James’s Church,  
Piccadilly**

I see that the title of this lecture is given as BLAKE’S DARK MATERIALS. Now in the lecturer’s handbook, the second rule says “You need take no obsessive notice of the title that has been announced in advance.” Whether Blake’s materials are dark or not I couldn’t really say, but I am going to talk about Blake, partly, and partly about religion. Appropriate, perhaps, in a place like this, but you might think not appropriate from someone whose reputation is that of a scoffer or mocker or critic of religion; but I haven’t come here to scoff or mock. Nor have I come here to recant, as a matter of fact. I’m profoundly interested in religion, and I think it’s extremely important to understand it. I’ve been trying to understand it all my life, and every so often it’s useful to put one’s thoughts in order; but I shall never like God.

I should also say that I’m delighted to be giving this lecture for the Blake Society, which is an excellent organisation of which I am the entirely undeserving President. Having done nothing to justify my occupation of this exalted office, I was very glad to say yes when they asked me to come and give this lecture. William Blake, as we know, had such extraordinary and penetrating insights into the nature of religion, and expressed them with such force and clarity, that it’s always worth looking at what he has to say on the question. So I’m going to flutter around Blake like a moth around a lamp, trying not to burn my wings, and trying to see with my moth-eyes what the lamp illuminates; because this particular moth is like the drunk man

who has lost his keys over there, but is looking over here because this is where the light is. This moth is also slightly like a butterfly, and slightly like a bee, but I shall come to his uncertain insect-hood at the end, when I describe what he believes, in the form of seven axioms.

But I'll start with an odd thing that happened to me a few years ago. At that time I was deep in writing the novel *The Amber Spyglass*, which is the final part of a trilogy called *His Dark Materials*. Because I'd stolen the name of the trilogy from *Paradise Lost*, and because the view I'd formed of Milton had been influenced by Blake's, I was naturally interested in anything that spoke about the two of them. So when I saw a new book called "The Alternative Trinity: Gnostic Heresy in Marlowe, Milton, and Blake," I bought it at once. It was the word Gnostic that attracted my attention as well. I thought I had the Gnostic thing clear in my mind, but it was always good to have a new point of view.

The book was by A.D. Nuttall, who was Professor of English and Fellow of New College, Oxford, and a very good book it was. It was so good that I began to read it at once and found myself fascinated. But as I read, I was conscious of a faint grinding sound from somewhere, a slight but distinctive shudder in the structure of something, an almost subliminal unease in that part of the ear that deals with balance. In fact I felt as if I was on board a very large and massively moving vessel whose keel had encountered, on the sea bottom, an equally large and massively immovable rock.

What Nuttall does in this book is to look at his three authors and the tension displayed in their work between orthodox Christian doctrine and that tendency of thought called Gnosticism, especially the branch of it known as the Ophite heresy. The Ophites (the name

comes from the Greek *ophis*, serpent) emerged in Egypt early in the Christian era, and according to an authority quoted by Nuttall, they believed that ‘the *serpent* by which our first parents were deceived, was either CHRIST himself or *Sophia* [wisdom], concealed under the form of that animal.’

Well, that’s the sort of thing I like to hear.

As a matter of fact, that was the very sort of thing I was writing. The scene with the serpent and the temptation was exactly what I was leading up to, but I hadn’t got there yet. I stopped on the way to read Nuttall’s book. And I found myself reading this fascinating account of the underground survival, as it were, of the Ophite serpent-wisdom idea as it manifested itself in Milton and in Blake. And that was when the grinding sound and the deep shuddering feeling and the uncertain loss of balance kicked in.

And very soon they all stopped together, giving way to another feeling – that of having stopped. I stopped writing the novel and I stopped reading the book. The vessel had succumbed to the rock.

I’ll step away from that metaphor now. I’ll abandon that ship for a minute. What had happened was that the more I read about Milton’s use of the *felix culpa* idea, the happy sin, or Blake’s complex transformation of the moral imperatives of orthodox doctrine by means of a form of the Ophite heresy – the more I was impressed by Nuttall’s account of Blake and Milton, in short – the more perplexed I found myself to be with relation to my own novel.

I found myself thinking “Well, I’ve got *this bit* wrong, so I’d better go back and see if I can put it right,” and “Oh dear – I’m not giving nearly enough weight to such-and-such a strand in the narrative – is it too late to change it?” and “I’ll have to be careful

when I get to *that* passage, because I don't want to make any mistakes ...”

In fact, I found myself immobile, held down by a thousand tiny threads.

Putting it another way, I could no longer tread with any confidence through my narrative. I felt I had to tiptoe through a large house that didn't belong to me, trying not to make a noise, not to knock things off the shelves, trying to make no more disturbance than a mouse.

Putting it another way, I had felt my ankles sinking into a quicksand, and I knew that the only way to avoid sinking altogether was to keep as still as possible.

In other words, I was royally stuck. I was in real difficulties. It seemed that I was writing an examination paper rather than a story, and one that was going to be marked very severely, what's more, because I hadn't done nearly enough work in the library. It was a curious state to be in.

What freed me from it was remembering the well-known lines from plate 10 of *Jerusalem*:

I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans  
I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create.

Those are Los's words, 'in fury & strength'.

Well, I seized on them with gratitude and relief, and repeated them to myself several times like an incantation. And I'd like to think that the delusion that had briefly enslav'd me behaved like the Spectre described in the lines that follow:

... in indignation & burning wrath  
 Shuddring the Spectre howls. His howlings terrify the night  
 He stamps around the Anvil, beating blows of stern despair  
 He curses Heaven & Earth, Day & Night & Sun & Moon  
 He curses Forest Spring & River, Desart & sandy Waste  
 Cities & Nations, Families & Peoples, Tongues & Laws  
 Driven to desperation by Los's terrors & threatning fears ...

I'd like to think it did, as I say, but the delusion that had me in its toils didn't quite behave like that. Instead it softly and suddenly vanished away, just like the hunter of the Snark that turned out to be a Boojum. As soon as I realised that *of course* I was creating my own system, and *of course* my business was to create, and not reason and compare – with one bound I was free.

But it was a nasty moment.

Anyway, with a profound nod of thanks to William Blake, I went on and finished the book.

I should have remembered that Milton had saved me from a similar predicament at the very beginning, when I found myself inexorably – helplessly – bound into the writing of a fantasy, a genre of story I neither enjoyed nor approved of. I didn't think much of fantasy because most fantasy I'd read seemed to take no interest in human psychology, which for me was the central point of fiction. It was only when I realised that *Paradise Lost*, a poem I loved and admired more than any other, was itself a sort of fantasy, and that the angels were not simply big-people-with-wings but could also be understood as emblems of psychological states, that I felt free to go

ahead with my ideas about dæmons and talking bears and alternative worlds and what have you. I could use the apparatus of fantasy to say something that I thought was truthful and hoped was interesting about what it was like to be a human being. Milton had showed me that, and now Blake was showing me that I didn't need to creep around in somebody else's system trying not to knock things over or make too much noise. I could arrange things exactly as I needed them in my own story, because I was creating my own system.

The relief was immense. I felt rather like the freed slave in Blake's *America*:

Let the slave grinding at the mill run out into the field,  
 Let him look up into the heavens & laugh in the bright air;  
 Let the chained soul, shut up in darkness and in sighing,  
 Whose face has never seen a smile in thirty weary years,  
 Rise and look out; his chains are loose, his dungeon doors are  
 open;

And let his wife and children return from the oppressor's  
 scourge.

They look behind at every step & believe it is a dream.

Well, something like that.

But that disconcerting experience, and my rescue from it, raise a couple of questions, and I want to think about them now and see if I can come to any conclusion. The first one is: what is a system? The second one is: are the only two attitudes possible towards systems to create them or to be enslav'd by someone else's? And there is a third question too, which I'll come to later.

So, first of all, what do we mean by a system? One large and obvious meaning it could have, in the context of this discussion, is undoubtedly religion. To call oneself a Christian, for example, is to announce your allegiance to a system, and a fertile one, too. The Christian religion, which is the one I know about, has provided a system – an account of what the universe means, and of our place in it – that underpins the greatest part of our cultural heritage, including, not least, *Paradise Lost*. Being a Christian used to mean that you believed certain things and behaved in certain ways, but these days we can't assume that we know exactly what those things are; any system that can claim the allegiance of both the Reverend Don Cupitt and the Reverend Jerry Falwell is a pretty accommodating one. Christianity, more than more religions, perhaps, has been characterised by inveterate fissiparousness. Sect divides from sect, and the more closely they're related, the more they hate each other. But never mind; there are people who are supremely happy to know that they belong to the only true faith, the Reformed Independent Baptist Exclusive and Particular Redeemed Seventh-Day Rapturous Children of God. Everyone else will go to hell.

Another thing *system* might mean is theory. So, for example, you might feel yourself enslav'd by psychoanalytical theory and the need to interpret everything through the glass of infantile sexuality and the Oedipus complex, so you break free of it and create your own system that involves a collective unconscious and archetypes and images from alchemy and Eastern religion. You feel free in this new system; it fits the contours of your mind and your imagination and your temperament; it doesn't constrict any part of you. In other words, you are Jung breaking away from Freud, and your system is a

psychological one. Or else your system could take a political form. Casting around for a way to explain the injustices and cruelties that press on your consciousness daily, but which most of your fellow citizens don't even seem to notice, you discover feminist theory. At last! Suddenly a hundred things whose causes and relations were troubling and obscure become linked in a web of crystalline light. Everything is clear, from the smallest example of fatherly disapproval to the furthest reaches of tyranny and despotism. Or else you discover Marxism, with exactly the same result. Or else you become a devotee of the capitalist market system, with exactly the same result. A discovery of that sort would be an example of finding another man's system in which you felt perfectly at home, and not enslav'd at all; in fact you could say, and many people do, that it was only through finding this system that you first tasted freedom itself, and the slaves are those who have not yet entered the system with you, and who languish in the ignorance and darkness outside.

The word narrative suggests another meaning that *system* might have, and that's mythology, with a set of stories about characters like Yahweh, or Zeus, or the giant Albion, or Jesus Christ. Mythologies deal with the creation of things, and the appearance of human beings in a world we did not create. I'm not aware of any mythology that says the universe was created by human beings; we always turn up afterwards, and the relation we have with the place we find ourselves in is part of what gives the system its emotional tone: determines whether it's tragic, or optimistic, or dramatic, or whatever. Sometimes we are the rebellious children of the great creator; sometimes we are the children made by a sub-creator who rebelled against the first creator, like the creatures of Prometheus;

but our presence here is accounted for in the story. We are part of everything that's going on; even if we don't fully understand it, we have the sense of coherence somewhere. Blake's mythology is a case in point, being endlessly complex and rich enough to sustain many an interpretation, with its gallery of enormous figures emerging from the clouds and the fires to howl their rage and defiance and disappear again into obscure darkness. What makes it great to a sympathetic reader is our awareness that although we can't always fully understand the precise relations between Los and Urizen, or Rintrah and Palamabron, Blake himself has a clear idea of it all. It's not like seeing part of a painted landscape through a window and guessing that if you moved a little to one side, you'd see the edge of the painting and the bare wall beyond it; it's like seeing part of a real landscape through a window, and knowing that however far you moved to one side or another, there would always be more landscape to see. The parts we can't see, the things we can't understand, are really there beyond the edge of our vision, and in a proper relationship to one another – it's just that they're not easily visible. In other words, Blake's system is a true system, and not the arbitrary ravings of a lunatic which it seemed to some of his early readers.

So *system* could mean religion, or it could mean theory, or it could mean mythology. Could it mean science? Or if not science itself, then an attitude to the world that accepts the value and importance of the scientific method, and the truth of what that method discloses?

Undoubtedly science does provide an explanatory narrative about the way things are, and that narrative includes ourselves. The difficulty for many people about the large-scale explanations that some scientists give is that these explanations reduce the importance

of the part about us to insignificance. Some of them – the well-known book by Jacques Monod called *Chance and Necessity*, for example – paint a picture of a universe so bleak and pitiless, so empty of any meaning or consolation, that they demand an unusual degree of courage and resolution from us if we're to accept them as they stand. Which raises the question: does a system *have* to console? Why should a system exist for our benefit? It might have its own meaning and purpose, which are too big and mysterious for us to understand. Nevertheless, I think we could live with that, because of the hope that one day we might understand it, and that would give us the purpose of trying to find out the bigger purpose. I think we could even live with a malign purpose. It might even be bearable to discover that we had been put here to be fattened and eaten by some immense greedy god, in the form of human *foie gras*, because then we would have the great and noble aim of rebellion and the overthrow of tyranny. But science doesn't seem to let us have even that savage purpose. The physicist Steven Weinberg says "The more we understand about the universe, the more it seems to be utterly pointless." It seems that we need a certain amount of moral fortitude if we're to live our lives believing in nothing but science. It's a noble system, no doubt, if it is a system at all, but it's an austere and demanding one.

Well, I've looked at some of the things that might be meant by the word *system* in Blake's lines. I want to go on now to my second question, which was about the two alternatives he proposed. "I must create a System, or be enslav'd by another man's," he said. Are those the only two options, I wonder? Is there another attitude we could take?

And remember I'm talking about urgent practicalities here, about profound and vital questions. I'm not talking about adopting a system as one might take up a hobby, or choose a new tie or a new colour for the bathroom; I'm talking about something that will make it possible to write, or prevent it. I'm talking about what will allow life to flow through you, or what will choke it off and kill it. It's that important.

Well, the first option, to create your own system, certainly worked for Blake. And he wasn't the only writer to try that method. Another great poet who developed a private mythology was W.B. Yeats – a great admirer of Blake, of course. The use that a writer makes of a private mythology may be quite independent of its merit, by the way. As far as I can understand, Yeats's system is absolute bunkum; miscellaneous bits and pieces of occult symbolism, numerology, invented ritual from the Order of the Golden Dawn, rubbish about the phases of the moon, and the like. You wouldn't give tuppence for it if it were sold separately. But without it, Yeats wouldn't have written those great poems of his final period – some of the most thrilling poetry in our language. The greatness of the poems, though, lies in the language and not in the system that inspired them, and we might – though it's with the greatest possible tentativeness that I advance this view under the auspices of the Blake Society – we might think the same of some of Blake: that the greatness of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, for example, is independent of their setting; even if we'd never heard of the rest of his system, even if we'd never seen his extraordinary illuminations. *The Sick Rose* and *The Tyger* and *The Little Girl Lost* and so many others would work their enchantment over us because of the majestic and magical

power of his language. The value of a writer's system, to the general reader, is not so much that it can be entered and enjoyed and lived in for its own sake, as that it gave rise to the work. No system, no work; or at any rate, much less interesting work.

The alternative to creating your own system – Blake's alternative – was, you remember, to be enslav'd by another man's. Well, I described earlier on, with reference to A.D. Nuttall's book, how I found myself inadvertently enslav'd for a brief spell by a system that I certainly didn't create; and it's a profoundly irksome thing. But thinking of this *slavery* image for a minute, and remembering Blake's famous words about Milton – that he “wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, ... because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it” – the implication of the *fetters* is that Milton was for some of the time enslav'd by a system that didn't suit his particular genius. The sharpness of Blake's perception here is summed up, for me, in the last three words: Milton was of the devil's Party *without knowing it*. There have been plenty of writers who did not know where their true talent lay. It's perfectly possible to be enslav'd by a conception of *the right thing to do* which is totally at variance with the equipment you have to do it with. Sir Arthur Sullivan thought his duty was to write grand opera, and was impatient with that fellow Gilbert and his silly notions; and yet how many performances of the opera he did write, *Ivanhoe*, are there for every thousand of *The Mikado*? If you're lucky, you find out where your talent lies before it's too late. It took me a long time to rid myself of the enslaving notion that the only proper sort of novel to write was a sternly realistic one. You can make yourself work in the shackles of duty for a certain amount of time,

but it's hard and painful; slave's work, unredeemed, in a phrase of Ruskin's, or making the will do the work of the imagination, in a phrase of Yeats's. It's trying to make cobwebs out of clay. When you discover where your talent genuinely lies, it really does feel like being set free. The enslavement Blake speaks of isn't always imposed from outside. Mind-forg'd manacles are just as heavy as any other.

So when it comes to systems and our relation to them, you can create a system; you can find yourself enslav'd by one; and you can discover a system or a theory that you didn't create, but in which at last you feel free, as I described a few minutes ago in the case of the person who is set free by their discovery of feminism, or Marxism, or whatever. Those seem to be the three main options. But earlier on I mentioned two questions I had in mind about systems: what is a system, firstly, and secondly, what are the possible attitudes to take towards systems; and I said there was a third question I'd come to later. Well, here is the third question: does a writer need a system at all? Is it possible to have no system? What would it be like to have no system? To be committed to nothing, to be enslav'd by nothing, to be labelled by nothing, to be known as nothing, to be fixed and limited by nothing?

I have to say that of all the ways of being I've described so far, my own nature leaps towards that one like a lover. But, of course, it's not as simple as that.

Because we may be without a system, but we're certainly not without all sorts of other mental baggage. It might be delightful if we were. In Tove Jansson's *The Exploits of Moominpappa*, the young Moomin runs away from the Foundlings' Home. Having made his escape, he says "I had nothing to call my own. I knew nothing, but

believed a lot. I did nothing by habit. I was extremely happy.”

However much we might wish to be back in that condition, it doesn’t last very long. Habits grow quickly; and no-one is without a temperament that colours their perceptions of the world, and inclines them to joy or to melancholy, to irritability or to patience; and hazard or sickness or fortune soon begin to make their marks, and those marks are indelible, and they keep coming until our characters are a palimpsest of the graffiti of circumstance; and if all those weren’t enough, we absorb the assumptions and prejudices of our parents and the social class we’re born into so early that they come to seem the only natural way to think and feel, whereas if we’d been born a mile away, with a differently coloured skin, we might have a completely different view of everything around us.

So every one of us has a whole complex of attitudes and experiences that, if they’re not as coherent as a worked-out system, function in a similar way. They provide the solid and unquestioned support for all the work we build on top of them. And not only the work. They function like an invisible armature shaping every action we take, every assumption we make, every view we form of society or politics or religion. They are there whether we know it or not. And sometimes we deny they’re there at all. People who are successful in a worldly way, in administration or business or politics or journalism, for example, often claim that they see things clearly and they’re not taken in by any fancy theories and they know what’s what and they’ve got their feet on the ground. The system they have acquired by a thousand tiny chances doesn’t seem to them like a system at all; it seems to be a perfectly designed edifice of truth,

mighty, beautiful and flawless, which corresponds in every particular to the way things really are.

But it works. As long as they don't think about it, it stands. It might seem from the outside like a haphazardly acquired combination of prejudice, ignorance, random experience, scraps of cracker-barrel sententiousness, things they were taught before they were seven, superstition, sentimentality, wishful thinking and saloon-bar knowingness; a gimcrack, jerry-built, patchwork thing, crawling with dry rot, with rats in the basement and death-watch beetle in the attic, with staircases that lead nowhere and corridors blocked off by fallen masonry, with broken windows banging in the wind and great holes in the roof letting in the rain. Never mind. As long as the inhabitants don't question its absolute rightness and truthfulness, it'll stand. Plenty of people live their entire lives in a state of boundless confidence, and die never once having doubted the happy certainty of the things they know. Lucky them; this unquestioning confidence is a source of great strength.

In literary work, which is my main concern, a system like that – the one you don't know you've got – often only becomes clearly visible a generation or two after the work was first published. As the sun moves round, the shadows change; and popular fiction of the first half of the twentieth century seems to a reader of today to be darkened by shadows that readers then didn't notice. Anti-semitism, for example. The attitude many such stories embody is that Jews are not like *us*, somehow – the *us* that is understood to be the reader that books of that sort seem to expect. Jews may be very clever, they may be imaginative and artistic; but somehow they are not like *us*; we unconsciously signal the difference by referring to their Jewishness

all the time. Better books reflect the same social assumptions, but more subtly: in Graham Greene's *Stamboul Train* of 1932, the author signals this all-pervasive awareness of difference by locating it either in the words or the consciousness of the characters. The purser on board a cross-Channel ferry is talking to a waiter. "That Jew," he said, "did he give you a good tip?" A young actress is coming round after having fainted: "She was aware of the heavy slow movement of the train. Lights streamed through the window across the doctor's face and on to the young Jew behind."

I dare say that much work of the present day, including my own, will in time reveal some equally unfortunate attitudes, some ugly shadows, of which we're quite unconscious at the moment. The point is that we cannot be free of these things; to claim that we have no system, that we see things exactly as they are, that we write without any preconceptions or hidden ideology, is to deceive ourselves. We are already enslav'd.

When we first realise that, it comes as a terrible shock. And all that sunny confidence we had when we didn't think about it vanishes at once. Blake in *The Auguries of Innocence*:

If the Sun & Moon should doubt  
They'd immediately go out.

I'm going to follow this line for a minute, because it leads back at last to the other word I mentioned in the title of Nuttall's book, the word "Gnostic," and I want to think about whether the Blake I love – that small corner of the great continent of all his work that I've wandered about in, and grown to know and revere – can truthfully be called Gnostic, and whether the Gnostic system is one in which I might feel free.

So: this business of doubt.

William James, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, has a name for people who have never doubted the assumptions they live by: he calls them once-born. And once you've doubted, once you've seen the arbitrary and contingent and contradictory nature of the system you didn't think was a system at all, you become as it were twice-born. Not *born again*, in the modern phrase that comes originally, I suppose, from the Southern Baptists; being *born again* is a very different thing. It means conversion to a particularly shrill and enthusiastic form of Christianity. Born-again people have all the certainty of the once-born, with an added and obnoxious self-righteousness. But twice-born people are in a different condition. William James describes the difference like this: "In the religion of the once-born the world is a sort of rectilinear or one-storied affair, whose accounts are kept in one denomination, whose parts have just those values which naturally they appear to have, and of which a simple algebraic sum of pluses and minuses will give the total worth. Happiness and religious peace consist in living on the plus side of the account. In the religion of the twice-born, on the other hand, the world is a double-storied mystery. Peace cannot be reached by the simple addition of pluses and elimination of minuses from life. Natural good is not simply insufficient in amount and transient, there lurks a falsity in its very being ... it gives no final balance, and can never be the thing intended for our lasting worship."

James doesn't mention Gnosticism directly in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, but in that last couple of sentences, he perfectly summed up the attitude that fuels it. Gnosticism is a perennial system of radical existential scepticism that flares up in times of millennial

crisis such as the present. It's an extraordinarily intoxicating system, because it tells a thrilling story that's exactly like a conspiracy theory, involving our very deepest selves. The idea is that the real God is nowhere to be found in this universe, but is infinitely distant. Our souls (it's a little more complicated than that, but *souls* will do) belong with Him, the distant unknowable God, and not here in this world, because each soul is a spark of divinity that was stolen and imprisoned here by the evil creator of the material universe, the Demiurge or false God who is worshipped by all those who aren't in the secret. Only those who *know* can pass on the secret knowledge of how to find our way back to our true home. What could be more thrilling than to feel ourselves in possession of knowledge like that, and of a fate so grand and all-encompassing? To feel our own lives bound up so intimately with the origins and the destiny of the universe itself? It's no wonder that the Gnostic impulse keeps flaring up again like an underground fire that can't be put out. It lies behind a lot of popular narrative art of the sort that deals with the questions of who we are and why we're here and why those in authority are deceiving us: *The X Files*, *The Truman Show*, *The Matrix*, *Blade Runner* ... And *The Da Vinci Code* borrows from it as well: *the truth* about Jesus, or God, or our own deepest identity, is not what we have been told up till now. *The truth* is something radically different, which is in the possession of a few initiates, and if only people knew what it was, it would change their view of everything.

Anyway, Gnosticism forms a natural refuge for the twice-born. It accounts for all kinds of things, not least for the existence of evil in a world that was supposedly created by a good God – because the world was created by a *bad* God, and the real God is somewhere else.

It accounts for the mysterious feeling of alienation that the twice-born suffer – because it's natural to feel alienated from a world where you don't belong, a world where you are yourself an alien. It accounts for the power of the Christ story – because Christ was not a man at all, but an emissary from the distant Godhead sent to show us the way back home. There are secret gospels, and secret ways of reading the familiar gospels, that make this clear to those in the know. Everything we have taken for granted is wrong, and must be re-interpreted in order to be understood in a new way.

Now there are passages in Blake that sound very like this. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the Devil, in conversation with an Angel, speaks about Jesus Christ: “Now hear how he has given his sanction to the law of ten commandments: did he not mock at the sabbath and so mock the sabbath's God? murder those who were murder'd because of him? turn away the law from the woman taken in adultery? steal the labour of others to support him? bear false witness when he omitted making a defence against Pilate? covet when he pray'd for his disciples, and when he bid them shake off the dust of their feet against those who refus'd to lodge them? I tell you, no virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments. Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse, not from rules.”

The Angel who's being addressed, says the narrator of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, “is my particular friend; we often read the Bible together in its infernal or diabolical sense, which the world shall have if they behave well.”

So far, so Gnostic. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is one of the most radically troubling and exhilarating works that has ever been written, and a great deal of it seems to support a sort of antinomian

reversal of conventional morality (“Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires”) which has formed a strong part of the Gnostic tradition. A.D. Nuttall’s reading of Blake demonstrates that although that is certainly there, it’s far from the whole of it, and that Blake’s Gnosticism is seen even more vividly in the opposition he depicts between the aged father-tyrant and the revolutionary, life-bringing son.

Well, possibly. Blake’s genius was so protean that it’s possible to find support for all kinds of theories about it in the teeming riches of his verse.

But for me, although Nuttall doesn’t agree with this, the tendency of the poetry points the other way. The Blake I love was not a Gnostic. The defining mark of Gnosticism is its mistrust and hatred of the natural world, its contempt for bodily experience, and that is why, for all the intoxicating excitement of the conspiracy theory of creation, I could never be a Gnostic, and I could never love Blake if I thought that he hated the physical world.

But remember, I’m seeing this with the eyes not of a scholar but of a moth, as I mentioned at the start. All I can do is tell you what I see with those eyes. I say moth; I might as well say butterfly. I admitted in the afterword at the end of *The Amber Spyglass* that my principle was “Read like a butterfly, write like a bee,” and what I meant was that I read unsystematically, carried from place to place by the impulse of the moment; I sample dozens of flowers every morning; if a strong wind comes along, I’m lifted helplessly and deposited a hundred miles away; whatever attracts me can have my attention for as long as it can keep it, and then I’m off. That’s how I read.

But there are some flowers I return to again and again for the quality of their nectar, as a butterfly, or there are some lights I can't help fluttering back to, as a moth. And this tiny insect-brain or insect-instinct knows what's good for it and what's bad, and little by little it's been gathering drops of nectar from here, and beams of light from there, and making them into something which, if it isn't as grand and all-embracing as a system, is at least a series of Axioms, if you like, which make it possible for the moth-butterfly, when he returns to his little hexagonal cell and becomes a bee, to write with a sort of coherence.

So here, to end with, are seven of the drops of nectar and beams of light that this unstable insect has gathered from Blake. They are engraved on the walls of the cell under the title *The Republic of Heaven*.

**Axiom number one:** The moth-butterfly-bee believes that this physical world, this matter of which we are made, is amorous by nature. Matter rejoices in matter, and each atom of it falls in love with other atoms and delights to join up with them to form complex and even more delightful structures: " ... and shew you all alive This world, where every particle of dust breathes forth its joy."

**Axiom number two:** things arise from matter-in-love-with-matter that are not themselves matter. Thoughts emerge from the unimaginable, the non-disentangle-able complexity of the brain, thoughts that are not material, though they have analogues in material processes, and you can't say where one ends and the other begins, because each is an aspect of the other. "Man has no Body distinct from his Soul; for that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five senses."

**Axiom number three:** the consciousness that emerges from matter demonstrates that consciousness is a normal property of the physical world and much more widely diffused than human beings think. “How do you know but ev’ry Bird that cuts the airy way, Is an immense World of delight, clos’d by your senses five?”

**Axiom number four:** bodily experience underlies, sustains, feeds, inspires, and cherishes mental experience. “Energy is the only life, and is from the Body; and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy. Energy is Eternal Delight.”

**Axiom number five:** we should use what works. And if invoking ghosts, demons, spirits, gods, demigods, nymphs or hobgoblins helps us to write, then we should banish the superstition about not being superstitious and invoke them without embarrassment or hesitation. “All deities reside in the human breast.”

**Axiom number six:** the true object of our study and our work is human nature and its relationship to the universe. “God Appears & God is Light To those poor Souls who dwell in Night, But does a Human Form Display To those who Dwell in Realms of day.”

**Axiom number seven:** the work we do is infinitely worth doing. “Eternity is in love with the productions of time.”

Well, those are some of the things that this moth-butterfly has learned from Blake. These are the axioms he lives by. Whether it amounts to a system he couldn’t say; but he’s still young; he’s not sixty yet. He will continue to visit the flowers in the garden of Blake – and elsewhere too, and not only the flowers of poetry, but the flowers of music and painting and philosophy and science and those that occur naturally in the landscapes of the sky and the earth and the sea

– and gather nectar of all kinds until his wings grow too old to fly with.

And from time to time, as I say, he goes back to his cell and becomes a bee and begins the long silent contemplative process of turning the nectar into words. But that's another story.