

William Blake's Philosophical Legacy  
in Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun*  
and Metallica's "One"

The artistic work of William Blake (1757-1827) influenced many writers and artists that followed him. For example, the medium of graphic novels or "comic books" is indebted to Blake's methodology of the synthesis of text, printing and color illustration to tell fantastic stories that challenge the limits of human imagination. In some cases, such as the graphic novel medium, Blake's legacy is more obvious and a direct connection is apparent. However, a direct link to Blake is not necessary for an artist to be considered an heir to Blake's legacy. Even if an artist is totally unaware of Blake or his work and is not directly influenced by Blake, if that artist's work exhibits significant Blakean methodology or philosophy, whether intentional or not, he or she could be considered one of Blake's heirs. Like Blake before him, Dalton Trumbo (1905-1976), an American novelist and filmmaker, revealed his artistic vision through multiple artistic media, used color change to indicate a change in mood, offered an alternative to the biblical view of the nature and personality of Jesus Christ, and examined the ambiguities of human nature by revealing contraries. Likewise, Blakean thought is extant in the work of the heavy metal band Metallica, who expanded and evolved Trumbo's artistic vision.

William Blake was an English poet, painter and philosopher who was, for the most part, an unrecognized talent during his lifetime. Through his poetry, Blake had the ability to create mental images with words; he also was an accomplished engraver and painter who created visual images to complement his words. His visual art did much

more than simply provide illustrations for his poetry. From his perspective, his message would be incomplete if his audience were presented with only the poetry or only the visual art. He projected his message using multiple artistic media as if they were one. Blake wrote the text of the poetry, engraved negative images of the designs on copper plates with acid, printed positive images on paper, and then painted the paper to create color images of the text of the poetry framed with visual art.



Fig. 1. William Blake's "The Tyger" from *Songs of Innocence and Experience*

Blake was also a philosopher who not only was capable of "thinking outside the box"—he insisted upon it. He refused to accept the established tenets of philosophical or theological thought of his contemporaries. His artistic work reveals alternative interpretations of sets of concepts such as love and hate, Heaven and Hell, and good and evil. He did not consider such contrasting concepts to be opposites, but *contraries* that were both "necessary to Human existence" (Blake *Heaven and Hell* 109, 413). He

not only rejected the Anglican Christianity of his era, he offered an alternative interpretation of the very nature and personality of Jesus Christ that is significantly different than the biblical account.

### The Novel

Dalton Trumbo published a novel in 1939 called *Johnny Got His Gun* about Joe Bonham, an American World War I soldier, who is hit by a German artillery shell and loses both arms, both legs, and his face—including his mouth, eyes, nose and ears. He ends up in a military hospital on life support, unable to communicate, but with his consciousness fully intact. Everyone assumes that he is brain dead, and no one even tries to communicate with him, until years later when a nurse traces “Merry Christmas” on his chest and his reaction shows her that he understands her. Because of this nurse’s belief that Joe is self-aware and capable of communication, the hospital staff eventually discovers that the seemingly random bobbing of Joe’s head is actually Morse Code and they finally are able to communicate with him.

### The Film

In 1971, thirty-two years after his novel was published, Trumbo wrote the screenplay and directed the film version of *Johnny Got His Gun*—starring Timothy Bottoms, Jason Robards, and Donald Sutherland. The film is more than a simple adaptation of the novel. Although the most important features of the novel are present in the film, there are new concepts and perspectives that are found only in the film. It is significant to note that Trumbo’s own vision is now presented in a different medium. Just as it is rare for a poet also to be a painter, and to combine these artistic skills in the delivery of a single artistic message—it is also rare for a novelist to write and direct a

film adaptation of his own novel. Trumbo had the opportunity to refine his vision and, in my opinion, improve it.

A very important change in the film is the point of view. The novel is told by a third-person omniscient narrator—even the inner workings of Joe's mind. The point of view shifts into first-person only when Joe is “speaking” with his mind's voice. The doctors and nurses with whom Joe interacts are only revealed as Joe perceives them; we are forced to share Joe's sensory-deprived perception of his world. In the film, these other characters are shown, and we see them interact with each other. Also, there are scenes in the film that do not appear in the novel.

### The Song and the Music Video

The heavy metal band Metallica became aware of Trumbo's novel and film, and in 1988 they produced a song based on Trumbo's character called “One,” followed by a music video in 1989, which incorporates footage from Trumbo's film. The story progressed from a novel, to a film, to a song, then to a music video. Each step in this journey through different forms of artistic media added something new to the legend of Joe Bonham.

In a video interview, Metallica drummer and songwriter Lars Ulrich explains how Trumbo's novel and film became a Metallica song and video. Ulrich states that James Hetfield, Metallica's lead singer and rhythm guitarist, told him about an idea that he had for a new song. Hetfield's idea was about “what it would be like if you were in this situation where you were basically like a sort of living consciousness, like a basket case kind of situation, where you couldn't reach out and communicate with anyone around you, where you had no arms, no legs and couldn't obviously see, hear, or speak or

anything like that” [sic] (Metallica, “Introduction”). Ulrich mentioned Hetfield’s idea to Cliff Burnstein, their manager, who had read Trumbo’s novel. Burnstein told Ulrich that Trumbo had already envisioned such a character. After some research, Ulrich and Hetfield discovered that there was a film version of the novel, which had fallen into obscurity and was very difficult to find. After watching the film, they knew that Trumbo’s story would become the Metallica song “One.” Instead of paying royalty fees to use Trumbo’s film in the video of the song, they simply purchased the copyright of the film (Metallica, “Introduction”). When the song “One” was released as a CD single, the cover art featured a skeletal figure with an exposed brain, wrapped in bandages, hanging from frayed and broken parachute cords and dripping black blood—the character from Trumbo’s imagination had evolved into a heavy metal icon.



Fig. 2. Cover of “One” CD Single

Trumbo’s saga of Joe Bonham was introduced to a couple of headbangers who were fond of dark imagery—and a heavy metal classic was born. The song “One” is unique; it stands in stark contrast to Trumbo’s novel and film; it is also *not* a typical heavy metal song. “One” was Metallica’s first major radio hit. Before that, Metallica “had

come up through the underground and gained their legions of fans through relentless touring and unparalleled live performances. Their success was won almost entirely without airplay” (Corwin 173). “One” was such a success on the radio and MTV that many diehard fans accused Metallica of “selling out” (Corwin 173-74). Joanna Corwin defends the band, stating that “the ‘One’ video is pure Metallica—edgy, uncomfortable, brutal [standing] in marked contrast to the decadent, glam productions typical of the times” (173).

### Color

One of the important techniques that Blake used in his visual art was his use of color—or lack of color. For example, in *Europe a Prophecy*, the contrasting shades of red, black, white and yellow found on the frontispiece (174) project a much different mood than do the darker shades of blue found on plate 13 (188).

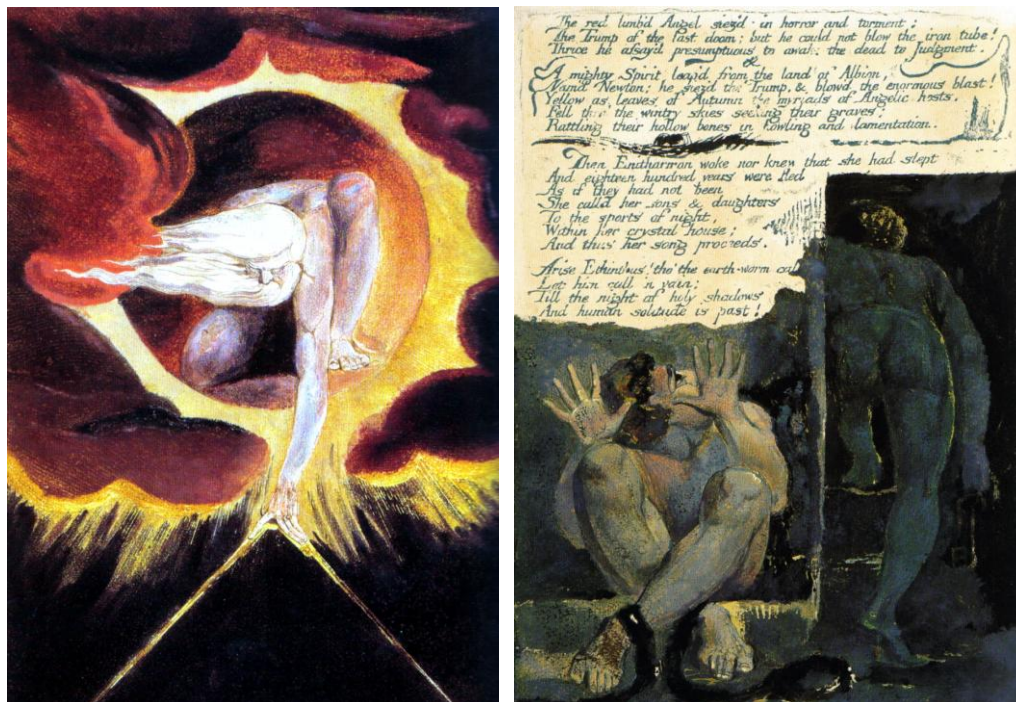


Fig. 3. Frontispiece and Plate 13 from Blake's *Europe a Prophecy*

Likewise, Trumbo's film uses color change to portray a change in mood. The scenes that depict the “real world,” where Joe is lying helpless in his hospital bed, are in black and white.



Fig. 4. Joe Bonham alone in his bed

Conversely, the scenes that depict Joe's memories and dreams are in color. This contrast, the opposite of what one might expect, is extremely effective. It communicates the message that Joe's reality is less real to him than his fantasies. For example, Joe perceives that a rat is crawling on him (Trumbo 94-96), but is not sure if it really happening or in his imagination. In the film, all of the scenes in the hospital are in black and white, with the single exception of the rat scene, which is in color—indicating to the audience that it is, in fact, a dream. Metallica's music video features excerpts from Trumbo's film, some of which are black and white and some of which are color. The images of the band are presented in black and white—thus preserving the concept. A similar shift between color and black and white was also used in the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz* to reveal that Dorothy's adventures in Oz were actually a dream induced by a bump on her head; however, Trumbo's film shifts back and forth throughout the film.

### Another Jesus

William Blake challenged many of the premises of Christian theological thought, such as the concept of good and evil. S. Foster Damon offers the following:

[Blake] rejects these, for he sees that Good is only the established conventions of life, and Evil the energy working without regard to those conventions. All the greatest men, including Jesus [. . .] have been Evil in this meaning of the word [by acting] according to their own impulses, ignoring all established laws of morality [and following] every instinct to the most complete form of self-expression. (89)

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake states that “no virtue can exist without breaking [the] ten commandments; Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse, not from rules” (129-30, 416). Blake not only challenges the biblical concept of good and evil, but the very nature and personality of Jesus Christ, who is depicted in the Bible as a man who is selfless, and who never gives in to the temptation of evil or his own impulses: “I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me” [sic] (John 5:30, KJV).

Trumbo also offers an image of Jesus Christ that challenges the familiar biblical image. One of the most important scenes in Trumbo’s film, which does not appear in the novel, is the one in which Joe has a personal conversation with Jesus Christ, as portrayed by Donald Sutherland.





Fig. 5. Donald Sutherland as Jesus

When Joe is confronted with the inability to tell if the rat is real or a dream, he cries out from inside his own mind, “How can you tell what’s a dream and what’s real when you can’t even tell when you’re awake and when you’re asleep? Maybe the rat’s real, and the nurse here is a dream. Oh, Jesus Christ, how can I ever be able to tell the difference?” Upon framing this question, Joe finds himself in the presence of Jesus Christ. Trumbo’s Jesus is unsure of himself, and offers Joe a series of possible solutions to his dilemma based on incomplete information regarding Joe’s situation—Jesus is guessing. For example, Jesus tells Joe if the rat is real, all he would have to do knock it off, and Joe reminds him that he does not have any arms. After several similar failed attempts, Jesus tells Joe “Since your real life is a greater nightmare than your dreams, it would be cruel to pretend that anyone could help you. [. . .] Perhaps it would be better for you to go away now. You are a very unlucky young man and sometimes it rubs off.” Joe’s conversation with Jesus is in color; therefore, we recognize it as one of Joe’s dreams. My interpretation of the scene is that this was not the “real” Jesus communicating with Joe by supernatural means, but a projection of Joe’s own mental image of Jesus from his subconscious. In the novel, Joe recalls that he had “never read the bible story of christmas himself [sic]. He had only heard it as his mother read it to

him. He couldn't remember the words but he could still see the pictures that used to come into his mind as his mother read" (Trumbo 212). Joe, like many Christians, has a distorted secondhand concept of biblical characters and stories. Joe's subconscious image of Jesus, then, would reflect his fears that Jesus is really unable or unwilling to help him. Trumbo, through the imagination of his protagonist, presents an alternate image of the personality of Jesus Christ—just as Blake had done many years before.

### Blakean Contraries and the Dialectical Method

A crucial aspect of Blake's philosophy is his concept of contraries—the interaction of two ideas which together create a *new* idea. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake states that "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence" [sic] (109, 413). Blake scholars have different viewpoints about what Blake means by contraries. Robert Gleckner states that Blake "struggle[s] to define the two contrary states of the human soul" (373). According to Norman Nathan, for Blake, the word *contraries* "refers to the relationship of a kind of energy and a limit of that energy [such as] God and man [in which case] God is the imaginative energy and man is the limit of that energy" (52). S. Foster Damon offers a similar opinion: "Blake's philosophy [. . .] is that Poetry (Imagination) is the father of all great thought, and Reason is its limiter. Reason has petrified Man's instinctive life into an arbitrary code of false moral values, known as Good and Evil" (89).

The concept of two ideas coming together to create something new is extant in the writings of the ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato (Gadamer 3-7). In the eighteenth century, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804)

“transcendental dialectic of pure reason” revived the work of the ancient Greeks (Gadamer 3). Kant influenced others, including Georg Hegel (1770-1831) (Gadamer 3).

Manuel Velasquez states the following:

Central to Hegel's thought was the idea that reality is not fixed and static, but changing and dynamic. Life is constantly passing from one stage of being to another; the world is a place of constant change. [. . .] [T]he change [. . .] is [not] arbitrary [but] proceeds according to a well-defined pattern or method, termed a *dialectic*. The idea of the dialectic is that reality is full of contradictions. As reality unfolds, the contradictions are resolved and something new emerges. (575-76)

This dialectical method can be represented as:

Thesis: Assertion of position or affirmation

Antithesis: Assertion of opposite position or negation

Synthesis: Union of the two opposites (Velasquez 576)

Blake's concept of *contraries*, which predates Hegel's work, is very similar. Blake however, does not always resolve his contraries. Sometimes, he creates the contraries, with the implication that they should be resolved, but leaves it up to his readers to ponder the proper resolution. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, several of Blake's “Proverbs of Hell” are open-ended contraries with no resolution. For example, “The crow wish’d every thing was black, the owl, that every thing was white” [sic] (116, 414) states a pair of contraries, but does not offer a resolution. Blake is not saying that his contraries cannot or should not be resolved—he is simply giving his readers an opportunity to participate in the process.

The creation of the song “One” could be expressed as a Hegelian dialectic:

Thesis: Trumbo’s character Joe Bonham

Antithesis: Metallica songwriters Hetfield and Ulrich

Synthesis: The song “One”

My thesis and antithesis as stated above are not exact opposites. However, one of Hegel's dialectics was that when *thought* interacts with *inert matter*, the resulting synthesis is *nature* (Velasquez 576). The thesis and antithesis of Hegel’s dialectic do not appear to be opposites. The process of the creation of the song “One” is consistent, then, with Hegelian logic—but does it conform to Blakean thought?

Blake considered the comparison of *contraries*—not opposites. Concepts such as *good and evil*, or *love and hate*, which many would clearly consider opposites, were not considered so by Blake. He considered such ideas to be contraries that were both necessary and that alone were both inadequate. Would he have considered his poetry and visual art to be contraries? In the case of Blake's illuminated books, he apparently considered both poetry and visual art alone to be inadequate, and that a synthesis of both artistic media was necessary to communicate his message. We have no way of knowing what Blake would have thought of Trumbo's novel or heavy metal music, but I doubt that he would have considered them to be contraries that were both inadequate unless synthesized into a song.

There are philosophical concepts, however, in Trumbo's novel and film, and Metallica's song and video that more closely conform to Blakean thought. The concepts of *life and death*, the state of being alive and the state of *not* being alive, would be considered by most people to be simple opposites. Blake may agree if these two states

were considered as they generally apply. However, Blake may see these as *contraries* when specifically applied to the case of Trumbo's protagonist Joe Bonham.

In the most literal biological sense, Joe is alive—his heart is pumping blood, he is breathing. Joe's brain is active—he is thinking. But biological reality is far less important than Joe's own perception of himself. In the film, Joe observes “I don't know if I'm alive and dreaming, or dead and remembering.” Even after Joe becomes aware that he is biologically alive, yet trapped in his body, unable to communicate—he is still aware that in all the ways that matter, he is neither truly alive nor dead. This state is known clinically as *locked-in syndrome* (Zaner 189). This ambiguity is expressed in the Metallica song as “I cannot live / I cannot die.” In the case of Joe Bonham, life and death are Blakean contraries. Joe's life, like any human life, is of value—and is necessary. Joe's life, however, is inadequate. Death, it could be argued, is the inevitable conclusion of the cycle of life—and therefore necessary. Conversely, death, if understood as the total absence of thought, emotion and interaction with anyone or anything—is inadequate. Joe's death, like any death, would be necessary yet inadequate. Like many of Blake's contraries, we are not shown a resolution. The only possible progression for Joe would be to transcend both life and death—to achieve a new state greater than either. This progression, of course, is contingent on the existence of a “higher power”—which can neither be proved nor disproved by human reason. Blake, however, through his own artistic work, explored the concept of the existence of supernatural realities outside of our own.

Other ambiguities of Joe's existence include his inability to discern whether he is asleep or awake—dreaming or daydreaming—accurately recalling memories of past

events or experiencing dreams that have no basis in reality. The opening lines of “One” state “I can't remember anything / Can't tell if this is true or dream.” Although there are contemporary medical methods of discernment of the difference between being awake and asleep, in Joe's world, these two states are not exact opposites. For Joe, being awake and being asleep are both necessary, and both inadequate. Since Joe cannot be sure if he is awake or asleep, he has progressed to a synthesis of the two—something new, yet something horrible. The last line of the song states that Joe's ambiguous state of consciousness has “left [him] with life in hell.”

The most obvious ambiguity of Joe's existence that exists as Blakean contraries is that of *mind and body*. Joanna Corwin states the following:

Philosophers have long contemplated the paradox dubbed “the mind-body problem,” that the human being is an interactive composite of both mind and body and yet is one. How can a nonphysical mind interact with a physical body? René Descartes (1596-1650), the philosopher who first raised the mind-body problem, also coined philosophy's most famous phrase in his “I think, therefore I am.” (174)

Expressed as a dialectic:

Thesis: Mind

Antithesis: Body

Synthesis: Human being

Let us consider the *mind*. Theologians would call it the *soul*; Descartes actually used the terms *mind* and *soul* interchangeably (Corwin 181). It is our consciousness, our sense of self, the source of our thoughts. Descartes calls it “thinking substances”

that is not material or physical (Corwin 176-77). For Descartes, the “essence of our existence is our minds to the exclusion of our bodies. Not only do I know that I am, that I exist, because of my thinking, but in fact *thinking* is what I am” (Corwin 177). Thinking, then, is *necessary* to human existence—but is it adequate? If we learn nothing else from the story of Joe Bonham, we learn that thinking alone is *not* adequate. Metallica states in the song:

Darkness  
 Imprisoning me  
 All that I see  
 Absolute horror  
 I cannot live  
 I cannot die  
 Trapped in myself  
 Body my holding cell

The body and the mind are dependent upon each other for human existence. A person who has a biologically viable body, but who is in a comatose or vegetative state—someone who does not think—is not a complete human being. Likewise, without the body, and the sensory input it provides, the mind—the part that thinks—would have nothing about which to think. Blake would surely agree that both the mind and the body are necessary, that neither of them alone is adequate, and that the synthesis of the two is necessary for meaningful human existence.

### Conclusion

William Blake was a talented artist who combined poetry and visual art in a meaningful way. He challenged the philosophical and theological thought of his time by rejecting the conventions of such concepts as good and evil, love and hate, and even the nature and personality of deity. Blake considered pairs of contrasting concepts such as good and evil, that others would label opposites, as contraries—both of which are necessary and yet alone are inadequate. The union of these contraries is something new, which surpasses both of the original concepts. Blake did not always offer the resolution of his contraries; he often gave his readers the opportunity to participate in the process. Blake's concept of contraries is similar to the process known as the dialectic extant in the work of philosophers such as Hegel.

In 1939, Dalton Trumbo wrote a novel called *Johnny Got His Gun*. In 1971, Trumbo wrote the screenplay and directed the film version of his story. In 1988, Metallica released the song “One” based on Trumbo's novel and film. In 1989, Metallica released a music video version of “One” using footage from the film. Trumbo or Metallica may or may not have been familiar with Blake; however, Blakean philosophical thought is evident in the story of Joe Bonham.

Both Blake and Trumbo presented their artistic message using different artistic media. Both used the visual stimulus of color, or lack of color, to convey a change in mood. Both challenged the established biblical image of the character and personality of Jesus Christ. Both men were aware of the ambiguity of human existence. Blake's concept of contraries is applicable to the ambiguities faced by Joe Bonham such as life and death, awake and asleep, or mind and body.



Finally, Blake was passionate about new ideas—progression. He challenged the status quo of church and state. He was a man who refused to accept reality as it was presented to him. The story of Joe Bonham evolved through the years. It started as an antiwar novel and eventually became a heavy metal video seen on MTV's

*Headbanger's Ball* (Corwin 174). Consider this passage from the novel:

It was like a full grown man suddenly being stuffed back into his mother's body. He was lying in stillness. He was completely helpless. Somewhere sticking in his stomach was a tube they fed him through. That was exactly like the womb except a baby in his mother's body could look forward to the time when it would live. (83)

Fifty years later James Hetfield would sing these words on MTV:

Back in the womb it's much too real  
In pumps life that I must feel  
But can't look forward to reveal  
Look to the time when I'll live  
Fed through the tube that sticks in me  
Just like a wartime novelty  
Tied to machines that make me be  
Cut this life off from me

Appendix

One

James Hetfield and Lars Ulrich

© 1988

I can't remember anything  
Can't tell if this is true or dream  
Deep down inside I feel to scream  
This terrible silence stops me

Now that the war is through with me  
I'm waking up, I cannot see  
That there's not much left of me  
Nothing is real but pain now

Hold my breath as I wish for death  
Oh please God, wake me

Back in the womb it's much too real  
In pumps life that I must feel  
But can't look forward to reveal  
Look to the time when I'll live

Fed through the tube that sticks in  
me  
Just like a wartime novelty  
Tied to machines that make me be  
Cut this life off from me

Hold my breath as I wish for death  
Oh please God, wake me

Now the world is gone I'm just one  
Oh God, help me hold my breath as I wish for  
death  
Oh please God, Help me

Darkness  
Imprisoning me  
All that I see  
Absolute horror  
I cannot live  
I cannot die  
Trapped in myself  
Body my holding cell

Landmine  
Has taken my sight  
Taken my speech  
Taken my hearing  
Taken my arms  
Taken my legs  
Taken my soul  
Left me with life in hell

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