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Final Exam Essay

Time in a Bottle

In William Blake's illuminated books, the flow of time often moves at different rates of speed as perceived from different perspectives. In plate 28 of Blake's *Milton*, we read: "For in this Period the Poets Work is Done: and all the Great / Events of Time start forth & are concievd in such a Period / Within a Moment: a Pulsation of the Artery." Sometimes, such as in the above example, Blake's discrepancy of time perception is deliberate, and serves Blake's poetic purposes; at other times, it is the indirect result of the synthesis of poetry and visual art because of the inherent differences of the two artistic media.

There is a passage in the Bible that some people interpret as evidence that time flows at a different rate for God as compared to man: "[. . .] [O]ne day is with the Lord as a thousand years [. . .]" (2 Peter 3:8 KJV). This biblical passage is the only one, that I know of, that could possibly suggest a discrepancy in the speed of time dependent on perspective. Even then, this passage, like many others in the Bible, is probably taken out of context, and therefore misinterpreted. A more likely interpretation is that God does not consider a thousand years to be *more significant* than a single day. But let us assume, for the sake of argument, that Peter literally meant that when God experiences one day that a thousand years passes on earth. If this were true, considering there are 365.25 days per year, there would be 365,250 days in a thousand years. Since there are 86,400 seconds in one day, and assuming the "pulsation of an artery" is

about one second, the pulsation of an artery in God's time would only be about 4.23 days here on earth—hardly an impressive span of time for Blake's poetic purposes. It is doubtful that Blake considered this passage of scripture or the Bible at all, for that matter, as a rationale for changing the perception of time.

Like Dante and Milton before him, Blake created imaginative fiction that is only roughly based on the Bible. Blake took a few ideas from the Bible, which he then used to create an alternate reality with new characters interacting with biblical characters who are themselves barely recognizable. Since Blake created this alternate reality, he has complete control of it—including the passage of time.

The concept of time passing differently depending on perspective is common in literature—particularly in the fantasy genre. For example, in C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the children spend many years in Narnia and grow to adulthood. Then, upon returning through the wardrobe portal, only a few moments have passed in our reality and they are children again. In *Prince Caspian*, the next novel in the *Narnia* series, one year has passed in our reality, but upon returning to Narnia, the children discover that several hundred years have passed there. Time manipulation is also very common in science fiction. In *Star Trek* alone, there are numerous examples of traveling through time, time moving backwards, parallel time, nonlinear time, and alternate realities where time moves at different rates of speed.

There is a different type of incongruity of time perception in Blake's illuminated books, which involves the perception of Blake's audience. Poetry is usually perceived temporally; it requires a measurable amount of linear time to read it. Visual art, on the other hand, is usually perceived spatially; the viewer looks at a painting at once as a whole; it is like a single

immeasurably small frozen moment of time—a snapshot. By combining poetry and visual art, Blake enhances both the temporal and the spatial perception of his artistic work.

Consider plate 18 of Blake's *Milton*. There is a significant amount of text on this plate; I estimate about 700 words. Considering the size and style of the font, my poor eyesight, and the depth of the meaning, it would take *me* at least thirty minutes to read this text carefully. However, I got a general impression of the visual art—that the background contained three or four colors, and that there were figures along the right-hand border—in only a second or two. Note that I stated that poetry is *usually* perceived temporally and visual art is *usually* perceived spatially. Reality, at least in *our* plane of existence, is both temporal and spatial—one does not exist without the other.

Without reading it, the text of plate 18 offers me a general visual impression. On the other hand, after my initial impression of the visual art of the plate, my eyes are drawn to the figures on the right, and I look at them more carefully—which takes time. I observe temporal progression in these figures, and discover that they are sequential, and that they follow the text, at least in part, from top to bottom. There are other plates in *Milton*, such as plate 23, which have sequential visual images—like a primitive comic book.

Comic books, often known today as graphic novels, first appeared in the early twentieth century. A series of panels, which are presented sequentially, offer a combination of textual and visual information that are perceived together. The speed of time, as perceived by the reader, is determined by how fast each individual can read.

The next logical step in the synthesis of pictures and words is the motion picture media, which combines visual images that appear to move in real time, synchronized with sound—including human speech. The visual image is actually an optical illusion created by a series of

still images presented at a speed of twenty-four frames per second. The human brain is not capable of sensory perception at that speed, therefore the image appears to be moving—time is actually moving at one speed, but is perceived at another.

Our reality is both temporal and spatial. We perceive this reality through our five senses. Blake's illuminated books provide a synthesis of poetry and visual art. Blake's artistic work was extremely innovative for his time, and predates other combinations of textual information and visual imagery such as graphic novels and motion pictures. Blake was a genius who did amazing things with the technology that was available to him. Blake's legacy is evident in our modern world. Blake, and many others like him, set the stage for the progression of new ideas. People with great minds, such as Blake, will continue to inspire us and shape the future.