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28 June 2008

William Blake's Philosophical Legacy
in Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun*

William Blake (1757-1827) was an English poet, painter and philosopher who was, for the most part, an unrecognized talent during his lifetime. Blake was a gifted poet, who 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. Blake's visual art did much more than simply provide illustrations for his poetry. Blake's intended message would be incomplete if his audience were presented with only the poetry or only the visual art. Either of them alone would be inadequate—a synthesis of the two is required. Blake had the extraordinary ability to project his message using two different artistic media as if they were one. Blake was also a philosopher who not only was capable of “thinking outside the box”—he insisted upon it. One of the most important elements of Blake's philosophy was his concept of *contraries*—two contrasting things brought together which create something new.

Dalton Trumbo (1905-1976) 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 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 novel was made into a film in 1971, directed by Trumbo, who also wrote the screenplay—starring Timothy Bottoms, Jason Robards, and Donald Sutherland. Then, in 1988, the heavy metal band Metallica produced a song called “One” based on the novel, 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. The Metallica video rescued Trumbo's novel from near-obscure and provided it a place in pop culture (Corwin 173-74). Each step in this journey through different forms of artistic media added something new to the story. Dalton Trumbo may or may not have been familiar with the artistic work of William Blake; however, Blakean philosophical thought is evident in Trumbo's artistic work and in the artistic work of Metallica that followed.

Blake was a unique individual who presented his artistic message using more than one artistic medium. He wrote the text of the poetry, engraved negative images of the designs on metal plates, printed them on paper, and then painted the paper to create color images of the text of the poetry framed with visual art. While viewing facsimiles of Blake's painted engravings, I wondered what Blake could have accomplished if he lived today, and was able to use *Photoshop*.

Trumbo, who lived a century and a half after Blake, had technology available to him that Blake did not. Thirty-two years after the novel was published, Trumbo wrote the screenplay and directed the film version of *Johnny Got His Gun*. The film is more than a simple adaptation of the novel. Although the most important features of the novel are present in the film, the story of the novel brought together with the film medium produce a synthesis that is unique. 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.

One of the important techniques that Blake used in his visual art was his use of color. For example, in *Europe a Prophecy*, the contrasting shades of red and black found on the frontispiece (174) project a much different mood than do the darker shades of blue found on plate 13 (188). 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. 1. 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.

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. Perhaps the most important scene that is unique to the film is the one in which Joe has a personal conversation with Jesus Christ, as portrayed by Donald Sutherland.



Fig. 2. Donald Sutherland as Jesus

Blake rejected many of the premises of Christian theological thought, including 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.

Trumbo, likewise, offers an image of Jesus Christ that challenges the biblical image that is familiar to most of us. 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. The most likely 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 Jesus Christ—just as Blake had done many years before.

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 idea of two contraries 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 next step in the evolution of the legend of Joe Bonham is an example of the dialectical process. In a video interview, Metallica drummer and songwriter Lars Ulrich tells the story of how Trumbo's story 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").



Fig. 3. 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). 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).

The creation of the song “One” expressed as a dialectic is as follows:

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 me, 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 these ideas to be contraries that were both necessary and that alone were both inadequate. However, Blake created synthesis that did not necessarily involve contraries. Would he have considered 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. However, considering Blake's desire to live by his own rules, and create new ideas, in my opinion, he would have approved of the joining of a novel and a heavy metal band to create a new 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 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 describes Joe's ambiguous state of consciousness as “Leaving my soul 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.

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 innocence and experience, that others would label opposites, as contraries—both of which are necessary and yet 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. In 1989, Metallica released a music video version of “One” using footage from the film. Trumbo 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:

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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