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إعداد: الأستاذة الدكتورة أروى حسن الدوري

البريد الإلكتروني الجامعي dr.arwa.hussein@tu.edu.iq

The Dialectic of Heaven and Hell/ Harold Bloom

For Bloom, Blake's Marriage of Heaven and Hell does not resolve the opposition between Heaven and Hell; rather, it transforms opposition itself into the source of human progression, creativity, desire, and apocalyptic transformation.

1 .The central concept: the “contraries”

Bloom begins by defining the whole structure of Blake's work through opposition: “The Marriage compounds ethical and theological ‘contraries’. Bloom's crucial point is that Blake does not simply oppose Heaven to Hell and then choose one side. The oppositions themselves constitute the intellectual and imaginative energy of the work. The “contraries” include :Heaven / Hell, Reason
/ Energy, Love / Hate, Angel / Devil, Restraint / Desire, Institution / Revolution. Bloom therefore calls the unity of the work dialectical: the reader has to move between opposing perspectives ratherthan settle immediately on one.

2“ .Without Contraries is no progression”: Bloom identifies Blake's famous statement as the law of his dialectic. Blake immediately explains: Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence”.Bloom's interpretation is particularly important here. He says that Blake's dialectic is:a dialectic without transcendence”This means that Blake does not ultimately escape the world of oppositions into some higher realm where the contradictions disappear. Instead, human existence itself is constituted by these tensions. Progress does not mean eliminating opposites; progress comes from maintaining their creative tension.

3 .Heaven and Hell must be “married,” but not unified. One of Bloom's most useful formulations is: heaven and hell are to be married but without becoming altogether one flesh or one family”. This is an excellent quotation for an essay because it explains what Blake means by “Marriage”.The marriage does not mean that Heaven and Hell become identical. Instead, the two forces remain different while entering into a productive relationship. Thus: becomes marriage becomes creative coexistence of contraries. Bloom therefore rejects the idea that Blake's dialectic produces a simple synthesis.

4 .Blake's attack on Christian dualism: Bloom argues that Blake rejects traditional Christian dualism because it turns contraries into absolute oppositions.He writes:Christian dualism is a negation, hindrance, not action”This is fundamental to Bloom's interpretation.Christian dualism divides reality into fixed categories such as:good / evil, Heaven / Hell, body / soul. Blake instead asks what happens when the supposedly negative side—Hell, desire, energy, the body is recognized as necessary to human creativity.Bloom consequently argues:Religion seeks to end the warfare of contraries”whereas Blake wants that conflict to continue because the conflict itself produces development.

5 .Energy versus Reason: This is probably the most important opposition for understanding Bloom's essay.Bloom quotes Blake:Energy is the only life, and is from the Body; and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy”.Energy is Eternal Delight, but reason”, but reason hinders it. Bloom immediately warns against interpreting this as a simple rejection of Reason.He explains:The Angel teaches light without heat, the vitalist or Devil heat without light; Blake wantsboth”This is an extremely useful formulation.

Light = Reason, intellectual illumination VERSUS Heat = Energy, passion, desire, creativity. Blake does not simply want “Hell” instead of “Heaven.” He wants both heat and light.The ideal human condition requires the interaction of Energy and Reason, not the destruction of either.

6 .Desire is not inherently evil: Bloom devotes considerable attention to Blake's treatment of desire.He quotes Blake's proverb:He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence”.Bloom interprets this dialectically: desire becomes meaningful when it moves toward action.

He also quotes:The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom”.This is deliberately shocking because conventional morality normally associates excess with danger or sin .For Blake, however, excess can become a route toward knowledge because experience, desire, and action allow the individual to move beyond imposed limitations.

Bloom explains that:Desire is positive; it leads to an action”Thus, the problem is not desire itself but desire that remains suppressed or inactive.

7 .The “Devil” as a revolutionary voice: The Devil in Blake is not simply the traditional ChristianSatan.

Bloom describes the Devil as representing:desire, rebellion, energy, creative force, and opposition to institutional authority. Bloom connects this to Blake's historical moment, particularly the revolutionary atmosphere surrounding the French Revolution and political unrest in England.

He describes the revolutionary force as:The Revolution is the active springing from Energy"This is why "Hell" can become associated with liberation and creative energy, rather than simply moralevil.

8 .The difficulty of irony: One of Bloom's most sophisticated observations concerns irony.He asks:where does Blake speak straight"?This is a crucial question. The Marriage contains:Blake's apparent statements, the Devil's statements, Angelic arguments, satire, prophecy, parody which provide contradictory perspectives. Therefore, we cannot assume that every statement is Blake's straightforward philosophical position.Blake's rhetorical strategies—satire, paradox, irony, exaggeration—sometimes become more powerful than a straightforward philosophical argument.

9 .Dialectic and rhetoric: Bloom makes an important distinction between dialectic and rhetoric.Hesays:

The unity of the Marriage is in itself dialectical"but he also emphasizes that Blake's rhetoric complicates that dialectic.Bloom describes The Marriage as:a miniature 'anatomy"'using Northrop Frye's concept of a literary form that can combine satire, intellectual argument, and imaginative vision.

10 .Apocalypse as dialectical transformation: Another major issue is apocalypse.Bloom writes:

Apocalypse is dialectical in the Marriage"The apocalypse in Blake is not merely the destruction of the existing world. It represents transformation the overturning of restrictive structures and the release of suppressed energy.Bloom connects this to revolutionary energy and the possibility of radical transformation.The important distinction is: Revolution means destruction of restrictive structures and release of energy, rather than simply political destruction.

11 .The Prolific and the Devouring: Bloom identifies another fundamental Blakean opposition:The Prolific represents creative production, generation, and abundance.The Devouring represents consumption, limitation, and containment.Again, Bloom does not reduce this opposition to “good versus evil.” The two are structurally related.This reinforces his central argument that Blake's thought depends upon interdependent contraries rather than fixed moral binaries.

12 .The “Proverbs of Hell”Bloom regards the Proverbs of Hell as one of the most important parts of Blake's work.He calls them:the most brilliant aphorisms written in English” and describes them as reflections on:the theme of diabolic wisdom”.The apparent paradox is crucial:Hell leads to wisdomThis overturns conventional Christian expectations.Examples include:The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom”.He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence”.Exuberance is Beauty”.The Tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction”.Bloom argues that these statements sound radically antinomian—against established moral laws—but their deeper meaning depends upon Blake's dialectical understanding of action and desire.