

# Pre and Post-Lapsarian Tension in William Blake's "The Garden of Love"

BY KELLY A. OSBORNE

Despite William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* being completed five years apart in 1789 and 1794, respectively, after their joint publication in 1794, the *Songs* have most often been read as an inextricable unit. The *Songs of Experience* are oftentimes read as a dark re-writing of the pastoral mode explored in *Songs of Innocence*. While this interpretation is undoubtedly true, what is lacking in this reading is the context surrounding the change from the pastoral to the post-lapsarian in *Innocence* versus *Experience*. In a poem such as "The Garden of Love" this drastic change can be best understood through an understanding of its relationship to Blake's *The Book of Urizen*. "The Garden of Love" has been analyzed for its overt criticism of dogmatic doctrine and prescriptive religion. But it has not been widely or extensively considered in its conversation with *The Book of Urizen*.

Also created in 1794, *Urizen* is Blake's rewriting of *The Book of Genesis*. In it, the world has been condemned to a post-fall state after the protagonist, Urizen, creates the corporeal world. In Blake's conception of his myth, the Biblical Fall did not occur when humans first committed sin, but rather when the Earth was created. *The Book of Urizen* seeks to communicate to its reader's Blake's major anxiety: that man "has clos'd himself up, [and] sees all things thro' narrow chinks

of his cavern”.<sup>1</sup> This anxiety is outlined in Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. In a post-Fall state, man and energy (the Blakean ideal) are bound by the “outward circumference” of reason and the five senses of the corporeal body. In *Urizen* the concept of “One Law” is the embodiment of this “reason” that binds and blinds man to the full scope of existence (as Blake calls it, “Eternity”). Urizen imposes “One command, one joy, one desire,/One curse, one weight, one measure,/One King, one God, one Law”<sup>2</sup> onto the inhabitants of Earth. While the imposition of “One Law” is characterized as being “Laws of peace, of love, of unity,/of pity, compassion, forgiveness”<sup>3</sup> in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* it is stated “One Law for the lion & Ox is oppression.”<sup>4</sup> This implies that while these laws stand for “peace, love, unity, pity, compassion, forgiveness,” to impose the same laws for all inhabitants of earth results in oppression.

This is the world that *Urizen* creates and the world that is then illustrated in “The Garden of Love”. This poem illustrates the post-lapsarian universe in which Urizen’s dogmatic “One Law” reigns and the “joys and desires” of the narrator have been bound and suffocated by the briars of religion. I would argue further that it is through the image that the Urizenic lens of the poem is most apparent. The text seems firmly enmeshed in the narrator’s present condition. It is perhaps by reading the image as only an illustration of the text that critics have mistakenly referred to “The Garden of Love” as one of Blake’s “more straightforward poems.”<sup>5</sup> For the text-image relationship is anything but straightforward. By using *Urizen* as a lens for understanding Blake’s project in “The Garden of Love” it becomes clear that while this lyric

<sup>1</sup> William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1994), pl. 14.

<sup>2</sup> William Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1997), pl. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pl. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 24

<sup>5</sup> Robert N. Essick, ed., *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 2008), 119.

poem is a study of the aftermath of Urizen's "One Law" and the narrator's inability to bridge the gap between innocence and experience, Blake offers hope for freedom from the earthly body through the narrator's unwillingness to conform and adapt to this post-lapsarian mode of existence.

There is an existing critical conversation surrounding "The Garden of Love" but it is one that focuses primarily on the narrative as being one of prohibition, confinement, and failed adaptation. Critics place emphasis on the institutionalization of religion and establish the binary of the Garden in its pre- and post-lapsarian states but do not acknowledge the impetus for this change (what I argue is *The Book of Urizen*). Due to this narrow scope of interpretation that excludes *Urizen* critics are wont to simplify the argument being made in the poem. Other criticism addresses "The Garden of Love" from a purely symbolic lens. Sir Geoffrey Keynes in his notes to *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* observes the importance of flowers, "the symbol of love,"<sup>6</sup> and proceeds to identify the implications of the various visual symbols Blake employs within the poem. He argues that the Chapel is a place of "negation, surrounded by the graves of the instincts"<sup>7</sup> and the priest represents organized religion and acts as the agent of repression. He also notes the grave-mound at the bottom of the plate, here identified as the bound "joys and desires" of the narrator. While themes of the poem are made clear by the narrator and the accompanying illustrations (critics frequently cite the "dark vegetation which admits no light"<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Sir Geoffrey Keynes, ed., *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 44.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Lincoln, ed., *The Illuminated Books Vol. 2: Songs of Innocence and Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 191.

and the replacement of flowers with tombstones), the poem's full scope of meaning is deceptively narrow.

Andrew Lincoln reads the poem with the understanding that "the speaker who goes to the Garden of Love apparently assumes that love is set apart from the rest of life"<sup>9</sup> and that the emphasis of the poem is on "confinement, as sorrow and fear dominate."<sup>10</sup> Even those critics that come close to addressing the prophetic contexts of Blake's poem neglect to explicitly state those connections to *Urizen*. One critic, Elaine Kauvar, touches briefly on the relationship between "The Garden of Love" and Blake's prophetic *Book of Urizen* in her article "Landscape of the Mind: Blake's Garden Symbolism." As Kauvar states, "The garden in Experience does not thrive and blossom abundantly; instead, it sanctions priests and replaces flowers with tombstones. The vegetation in Experience is dead or dying because the briars of Urizenic, abstract, moral law have withered the primal vigor of Innocence."<sup>11</sup> Indeed in the image<sup>12</sup> shows the insertion of a priest clothed in a black robe kneeling over an open grave and accompanied by two young children.

We may look to the relationship between text and image in order to gain a better understanding of the Urizenic contexts being addressed in "The Garden of Love". Critics frequently do not address the word-image relationship in "The Garden of Love" and its

<sup>9</sup> Lincoln, *The Illuminated Books Vol. 2: Songs of Innocence and Experience*, 191.

<sup>10</sup> Lincoln, *The Illuminated Books Vol. 2: Songs of Innocence and Experience*, 191.

<sup>11</sup> Elaine Kauvar, "Landscape of the Mind: Blake's Garden Symbolism", in *Blake Studies, Volume 9*, (Rochester: University of Rochester), 60.

<sup>12</sup> I have chosen to use copy E of "The Garden of Love", as used by Essick in his edition of *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.

implications for the Urizenic context with which we can read the poem. The image actually picks up and extends where the text leaves off and it is through the image that the Urizenic context is made the most overt. The image is absent of any lively vegetation other than the briars which enclose the text and knit together to form the burial mound at the bottom of the plate. In the state of experience, having lost innocence, virile vegetation can only be dead or dying. Kauvar's explicit mention of Urizen acknowledges the prophetic context of the work, in addition to aligning Urizen with this post-Edenic space. In Eden and in the Garden of Love's innocent state Urizen had not yet imposed his laws of morality upon humanity—indeed, the world has not yet fallen. But even Kauvar's essay does not go further in assessing how the prophetic work can be used as a persuasive lens for the poem. My argument thus also seeks to illuminate the meaning of Blake's "Garden of Love" in both text and image through the lens of *The Book of Urizen*.

The universe Urizen created is the world we see in "The Garden of Love". In the image we see the prescriptive "Thou Shalt Not" written over the door of the chapel, erected on the site where the Garden of Love and fields of green used to be in the narrator's childhood memory. The reader is first introduced to the Garden of Love as the narrator remembers it: a reimagining of the Garden of Eden where organized religion does not exist and the narrator is free to be a child. The narrator's memory of the garden is innocent, youthful, and perhaps naïve; it is a place where the narrator "used to play on the green"<sup>13</sup>, implying the passage of time. When the narrator returns to the site after a period of separation, however, he is surprised to find that the Garden of Love is no longer the place of youthful and pastoral harmony that he remembers but

<sup>13</sup> Blake, "The Garden of Love", line 4.

has been replaced by the darker and more structured side of religion that comes with knowledge and experience.

The Garden of Love in the narrator's memory is depicted as a place in the *Songs of Innocence*—children are lambs that play on the green, innocence abounds and they are allowed to exist in a recreated Eden because they have not yet sinned or fallen into experience. In the postlapsarian Garden of Love, however, nature has become a controlled object which has been transformed by religion (see fig.1). This is evidenced not only by the erection of the chapel on the ground which the Garden occupied previously, but in the image at the top of the plate where vegetation has fused with the façade of the church (see fig. 2). A tree is just barely visible behind the three figures at the top of the plate, but the tree does not appear to be healthy or vibrant—its trunk is colored black, nearly blending in with the chapel wall behind it, the vines in the background adhering to this chapel wall.

This illustrates a visual convergence; the church has appropriated and absorbed a natural image. The three bowed figures in the top image, a priest and two accompanying children are rendered in a similar dull gray color. While these specific figures are nowhere mentioned in the text here they represent the effects that this appropriated garden has on humans. The children are visual echoes of the narrator himself in his days of playing on the green, but now (like the tree) have been repurposed as symbols of the effects of a dogmatic religion. The inclusion of the children in the image implies that the loss of innocence has affected all. The priest, holding a Bible and leading the children in prayer, stands in for Urizen in enforcing his "One command, one joy, one desire,/One curse, one weight, one measure,/One

King, one God, one Law.”<sup>14</sup> Now even children must forfeit their innocence in the face of religion. They are no longer the lambs playing on the green but are implicated in this fallen world.

Urizen’s ideology is echoed in “The Garden of Love” in the presence of the chapel, the destruction of the pastoral Garden of Love in favor of this dogmatic one, and the briars which “bind the joys & desires” of the narrator. The world that Urizen creates in his separation from the Eternals is that of the corporeal world which humans inhabit, bound and limited by the five senses. The briars are evocative of the chains Urizen is bound by once he receives his corporeal body and leaves him “in chains of the mind locked up,/Like fetters of ice shrinking together.”<sup>15</sup> These chains represent the limitations of the five senses and the restrictive qualities of Reason, One Law, and organized religion and the Net of Religion that Urizen creates.

This organized religion is represented by the erection of a chapel in the former Garden of Love and the presence of the Priests; once religion enters there is no room for love, only the chains of Reason and dogma. The narrator, having departed the world of innocence and entered into adulthood, joins the sons and daughters of Urizen that “no more could rise at will/In the infinite void but, [were] bound down/To earth by their own narrowing perceptions.”<sup>16</sup> Thus it follows that in the Blakean cosmology the entrance into adulthood is a forceful eviction from innocence; man’s Eternal Form is shrouded in the corporeal body, an earthly mantle of jealousy and narrowed perceptions.

<sup>14</sup> William Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, pl. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, pl. 12.

<sup>16</sup> Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, pl. 25.

With this Urizenic reading in mind, we can observe at the bottom of the frame what appears to be a large mound of earth or a series of twisted vines (see fig.3). Its position at the very bottom of the plate implies burial, as does the fact that in the top image of the priest and children they kneel praying over an open grave. The open maw of the grave opens onto the mass of text and the viewer's eye is drawn visually downwards from the open grave to where the bound figures lies. This binding is not only representative of the briars that the priests used to "bind the joys & desires" of the narrator, but the "Net of Religion" that in *The Book of Urizen* is cast over the sons and daughters of Urizen.

It is woven from the "sorrows of Urizen's soul"<sup>17</sup> and is yet another aspect of human life that limits perception and causes those beneath it to "shrink together... for the ears of the inhabitants/were wither'd, & deafen'd, & cold, /and their eyes could not discern/their brethren of other cities."<sup>18</sup> The Net of Religion binds and buries the inhabitants, making the object engraved at the bottom of the plate curiously evocative of this Net. The figure is so heavily bound that the body beneath is completely obscured and eerily echoes the fact that in *Urizen* "None could break the Web, no wings of fire,/So twisted the cords, & so knotted the meshes, twisted like to the human brain./And all call'd it the Net of Religion."<sup>19</sup> The Net of Religion is made tangible in the engraving; the briars with which the priests bound the narrator's joys and desires become the Net of Religion and burial mound in this Urizenic context.

<sup>17</sup> Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, pl. 25.

<sup>18</sup> Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, pl. 27.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

In *Urizen* the Net of Religion causes those beneath it to “[forget] their eternal life.”<sup>20</sup> But it is clear that our narrator, while visually bound, has not forgotten the state of bliss and innocence in which he existed before dogmatism and prescriptive religion were imposed by Urizen’s “One Law”. The narrator makes explicit mention of his memory of the Garden of Love in its pre-lapsarian state: “I went to the Garden of Love,/And saw what I never had seen:/A chapel was built on the midst/Where I used to play on the green”<sup>21</sup> and notices that there are “tomb-stones where flowers should be.”<sup>22</sup> He still retains memory of life before “One Law,” and it is because of this unwillingness or inability to adapt and convert to this new mode of existence that the narrator cannot assimilate and, as a result of this stasis, perishes.

Blake’s decision to show the narrator having been bound as a result of this unwillingness to cope and adapt speaks to the implicit contention that the Urizenic conception of the body and corporeal life is to be rejected in favor of the afterlife. This rejection of the earthly form implies a body vs. soul dynamic in “The Garden of Love” that could be aligned with the already-present pre- vs. post-lapsarian binary. Hutchings understands the body/soul dynamic in “The Garden of Love” to be similar to that of Foucault’s poststructuralist model of Christianity which believes the soul’s voice to “[reside] in our physical being—that functions constantly to police and regulate bodily acts...the conscience admonishes believers to eschew the pleasures of the flesh”<sup>23</sup> implying that the soul is “the prison of the body”<sup>24</sup> and not vice versa. Hutchings argues that Blake takes a similar approach in “The Garden of Love” by

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Blake, “The Garden of Love”, lines 1-4.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, line 10.

<sup>23</sup> Hutchings, “Nature, Ideology, and the Prohibition of Pleasure in Blake’s “The Garden of Love””, 196.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

suggesting that through his critique of priestly prohibitions against the pursuit of earthly “joys & desires” Blake suggests “the conventional privileging of spirit over body functions to control the body’s pleasure-seeking impulses by demonizing sensual expression and the physical world in which such expression occurs.”<sup>25</sup> While the body/soul binary is a complicated one in Blakean ideology, Hutchings’ argument lacks a crucial understanding of Blake’s attitude towards the soul which informs our understanding of the narrator’s rejection of the Urizenic body in “The Garden of Love”.

Blake placed much importance on the the belief that the body and soul are not separate but one within the human body, and “that call’d Body is a portion of Soul discern’d by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.”<sup>26</sup> As addressed previously, the five senses are lenses through which humans perceive the world around them but to their detriment; the five senses restrict Energy and, as voiced by the narrator, “Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.”<sup>27</sup> Energy is restricted by the “outward circumference” of the body in a fallen universe such as the one seen in “The Garden of Love”. In death the narrator is able to liberate this energy and free his Eternal form, no longer confined by Reason (which in “The Garden of Love” takes the form of the Church) and the Body (represented by the bound burial mass at the bottom of the plate). While energy comes “from the Body” according to Blake, the body is limited by the five senses which were created when earthly form was.

<sup>25</sup> Hutchings, “Nature, Ideology, and the Prohibition of Pleasure in Blake’s “The Garden of Love””, 196.

<sup>26</sup> Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, pl. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

Thus is illustrated a classically Blakean contradiction—the body is the source of Energy (the “eternal delight”<sup>28</sup>) but also a restriction and a boundary on the Eternal Form because of the limitations of the five senses. In the context of “The Garden of Love”, the body is positioned as a negative creation because it is an agent of Urizen. The body (specifically the creation of the earthly body) in Blakean texts has traditionally been considered a fallen act. The creation of Urizen’s body is described as being wrought in iron, confining the soul with a newly created body likened to chains: “For with noises, ruinous, loud,/With hurtlings & clashings & groans/The immortal endur’d his chains,/Tho’bound in a deadly sleep.”<sup>29</sup> The creation of the earthly body is not a thing of beauty but rather “deadly black,/In chains bound.”

The body is something that the narrator escapes in death because it is able to be bound and gagged by the priests’ briars. The narrative voice comes from beyond the grave—implying that the soul cannot be bound by earthly objects and is freed while the earthly form remains constricted. In death the narrator is able to liberate energy because while his earthly body has been tied with the vines of religion his soul has been freed to return to the remembered garden no longer bound and filtered through the limiting and earthly five senses. Through the juxtaposition of image and text Blake manages to create a narrator that is earth-bound yet simultaneously spiritually liberated. If we were to read the text without the accompanying image and vice versa we would lose an entire scope of meaning that otherwise illuminates the work being done in “The Garden of Love”. Read together, it is clear that the narrator’s failure to

<sup>28</sup> Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, pl. 4.

<sup>29</sup> Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, pl. 15.

adapt to the post-lapsarian world is not really a failure—his death instead points to the liberation offered by a rejection of Urizen’s “One Law”.

As a fallen man, Blake acknowledges that his art form itself is a fallen object, a mere vegetable form existing apart from Eternity. This self-consciousness is evident in his attempt to marry the verbal and visual on his copper plates; in the case of “The Garden of Love” he remedies this anxiety with the liberation of the narrator through death. The narrator indeed perishes at the end of the poem, but to interpret this as being a morose occurrence would be to argue against Blake’s own anxieties about the Fallen world. *The Book of Urizen* concludes with the lines:

“So Fuzon call'd all together  
The remaining children of Urizen:  
And they left the pendulous earth:  
They called it Egypt, & left it.  
And the salt ocean rolled englob'd”<sup>30</sup>

This final stanza positions Fuzon (one of Urizen’s four children) as a Moses figure leading the Jews out of Egypt. In this instance, the Egypt they are leaving is the world itself, the salt ocean evoked in the last line becomes the Red Sea which is no longer parted. The last stanza is hopeful in a poem that otherwise condemns humanity to a fallen world, much like the image of “The Garden of Love” lends hope that the narrator has also escaped the “pendulous earth” in favor of rejoining Eternity. By freeing the narrator visually and implying that the language of the poem comes from beyond the grave, Blake frees his narrator from the chains of jealousy and the

<sup>30</sup> Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, pl. 27.

five senses, allowing his soul to once more be unburdened by the narrow perception of a  
Urizenic fate.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2, detail



Fig. 3, detail