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The Self-Annihilation of God

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William Blake first envisioned the death of God in his first prophetic book, *America* (1793), envisioning God as Urizen, an alien and tyrannical God whose death realizes an ultimate liberation. As Blake's vision evolved, so too did his vision of the death of God, finally knowing that death as "The Self-Annihilation of God," an ultimately apocalyptic death, transfiguring everything whatsoever. Blake's "Self-Annihilation of God" fully correlates with Hegel's absolute "Self-Negation" - both are purely and comprehensively kenotic or self-emptying movements, and both are genuinely and fully apocalyptic movements, thereby recovering a long lost and original apocalyptic Christianity. Just as Blake enacts a total imaginative vision, comprehending everything to which it could possibly be open, Hegel's is the only truly total philosophical system in the world, comprehending everything within its own horizon. There is an acute irony in Hegel's system being purely kenotic and truly total at once, an irony parallel by a Blakean system that is absolutely anti-systematic and absolutely systematic at once, or purely chaotic and purely harmonious simultaneously.

The *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) is the first philosophical enactment of the death of God, thereby revolutionizing philosophy, but here the death of God becomes possible and actually

real only when Spirit has realized itself in its most negative mode and epiphany. Only when Spirit exists wholly in self-alienation and self-estrangement can it undergo an ultimate movement of self-negation - a movement in which a real ending or death occurs of a wholly alienated and estranged mode of Spirit, a mode that Blake knows as Satan, thereby knowing the Alien God as Satan, a God who finally undergoes and apocalyptic death, as first envisioned in *Milton*. This apocalyptic death is renewed again and again in late modernity. Perhaps this most dramatically occurs in *Moby Dick*, our great American epic. Just as the White Whale is the absolutely Alien God, the profound ambivalence of his death is one of our deepest mysteries, one releasing nihilism itself - a nihilism that is an inescapable consequence of an ultimate epiphany of the absolutely Alien God, or an ultimate epiphany of that alien totality which Blake knows as Satan. This Satan is an embodiment of the dead body of God - an absolutely self-alienated and self-estranged body, and one only realized by the self-annihilation of God, a self-annihilation emptying the heavens, and actually and ultimately negating all absolute transcendence.

Then an absolute transcendence can only be manifest and real in a truly alien mode - an alienating process realizing itself in all of our religious bodies today - as new outpourings of "the Spirit" realize themselves in empty and vacuous bodies - bodies inseparable from a new and truly nihilistic world - and bodies themselves embodying the dead body of God. Our nihilist world is itself a primal witness to this ultimately alienating process. If now we can only speak of God by speaking in tongues, these are not tongues of fire but wholly vacuous tongues, and tongues embodying an emptiness that is truly new, and truly new as a consequence of the death of God. Now Blake truly is the prophetic Blake, and perhaps most prophetic in his vision of Satan - that Satan who is the dead body of God, the deepest and most comprehensive of all visions of Satan, a Satan who seemingly has become incarnate in our very midst, and a Satan who can even be verified by a raw and naked tasting of our world. Of course, all such tasting has truly become inactivated or suspended in our new world, and suspended to preserve the illusion of life, an illusion never more comprehensive than it is in our world, and never more dazzling in its all too seductive power.

One sign of this illusion is the absence of a prophetic voice in all of our religious bodies, an absence paralleled by the apparent ending of painting - an ending that is the culmination of one of the richest periods in the history of painting, and one giving us overwhelming images of a new and absolute emptiness, and even an emptiness that could be portrayed as a pure and total chaos. This, too, can be understood as a consequence of the Self-Annihilation of God, a self-annihilation absolutely reversing everything whatsoever, giving us a world turned upside down, not an upside down world as prophesied in the Radical Reformation, but far rather an inverted world as prophesied by our most nihilistic prophets. Nietzsche is the foremost of these prophets - the one enacting the advent of an absolute nothingness, a nothingness consuming everything whatsoever, and one which is the consequence of a death of God that has wiped away our whole horizon. That horizon has not been restored by our contemporary illusions, but rather emptied all the more fully

and decisively, an emptying that is perhaps the only actual praxis in our inverted world.

Now Hegel could know an absolute Self-Negation of God as an absolute Self-Saving of God - this is the deepest of all Hegelian scandals - and it is fully paralleled in Blake's vision of "Self-Annihilation." Both Blake and Heel have been known as Gnostics in this context, for Gnosticism did and does enact a Self-Saving of God. Yet in every other perspective Blake and Hegel are absolutely anti-Gnostic and most manifestly so in their absolute affirmations of body and the world. As opposed to every possible Gnosticism, Blake and Hegel are profound enactors of the Crucified God and of Crucifixion itself as Apocalypse, thereby recovering a Pauline and Johannine enactment that was not discovered by New Testament scholarship until the twentieth century. Nothing could be further from Gnosticism, or further from the dead body of Christendom, a Christendom finally closed to every possible Christian ground, as most deeply known by Kierkegaard.

If Kierkegaard and Marx are finally and fundamentally Hegelian thinkers, nothing else could be a deeper witness to the revolutionary Hegel. The revolutionary Hegel is fully paralleled by the revolutionary Blake, the most radical of all Christian visionaries, and perhaps most radical in his enactment of "The Self-Annihilation of God." Yes, this is a Self-Saving of God, but it occurs only by way of the absolute apocalypse of God - an apocalypse that is an ultimate transfiguration of God, and even one that can be known as an absolute reversal of God. This is a reversal that is a reversal of the Alien God, and therefore a reversal of Satan, or a reversal of the uniquely Blakean Satan, who is an absolutely negative totality, a totality that is an absolute reversal of primordial Godhead itself. Not even Hegel can equal or parallel Blake's radicality at such crucial points, but it is by such radicality that Blake has had such an overwhelming impact - probably greater than that of any other visionary since Dante and Milton. Dante, Milton, and Blake have had their deepest impact in their enactments of Hell, but it is Milton and Blake that are here the true polar wins, and most so in their visions of Satan.

This is a depth that philosophy simply cannot enter, being closed in all of its expressions to an absolute evil, an absolute evil that is absolutely primal in Dante, Milton, and Blake, who if only thereby are truly united with each other. Yet it is Blake alone who can know such evil as being embodied in Godhead itself, and in an absolutely fallen Godhead, one apparently known only to Blake, who here is a truly unique visionary. Just as Hegel can know that it is only the Alien God who undergoes the death of God, Blake can know that it is only Satan who undergoes the Self-Annihilation of God, a self-annihilation that is the self-annihilation of the absolutely negative God, or the absolutely alien God, or an absolutely reverse or inverted Godhead. Only Blake has given us a vision of the absolutely inverse or reverse Godhead, and if this is his most scandalous or offensive vision, it is perhaps here that he is most prophetic or most truly apocalyptic. It is not for nothing that Christianity has become most closed to apocalypse - an apocalypse that was its original ground, and closed if only because of what apocalypse has become in late modernity, as most deeply enacted by William Blake.

Yet a truly negative apocalypse, and a truly negative apocalyptic God, are absolutely necessary to an absolute apocalypse, or to an absolute transfiguration of Godhead itself. While Hegel could think this transfiguration, and was the first thinker to do so, he could not think it theologically, or think it of the Godhead itself, even if he could know an absolute transfiguration of Spirit. It was not only the censorship of Hegel's day that blocked this, but also his own development, as witness the immense distance between the *Phenomenology* and the *Logic* and the later university lectures, as most manifest in their theological language. Not even Nietzsche could speak as freely or as blasphemously of God as Blake, but Blake's ultimately blasphemous language is absolutely necessary to his revolutionary vocation. Only the blasphemous language of *Finnegan's Wake* challenges the blasphemous language of Blake, but the late Joyce can be understood as a rebirth of the late Blake, and both enact an absolutely joyous Yes that is inseparable from an absolutely negative No.