CHAPTER I

Introduction
Introduction to the theme of research

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1- Tradition of religious poetry in general, Figural interpretation of history

The aim of this comprehensive introduction is to give a critical idea about the tradition of a religious poetry in general with a special reference to Blake’s mystical poetry concerning his use of symbolism and biblical mythology.

In this chapter, the researcher tries to answer the question as to why Blake is selected among all authors? What characteristics make him distinct? What kind of literature has survived? Religious or secular? Has religion been a mark for its eternity? To answer such questions, the researcher considers that religious literature is the only kind of literature that can survive because of its eternal truth. Religion in itself is amazing since it speaks the truth in a world of lie. What man is ever searching for, is truth. Blake’s poetry expresses the truth with a simplicity that all may enjoy hearing and understanding.

The tradition of religious poetry in general with a special reference to the Romantic period is to be considered and one important question which may be raised is that why Blake should be the topic of the study and again why this aspect in Blake’s poetry. The researcher makes an enthusiastic effort to answer such questions in detail.

In order to discuss the tradition of religious poetry in general, it is better to start with Erich Auerbach who holds in his *Mimesis*, there is a difference between the reality of *Scripture* and that of a work of art. It is significant to compare these texts in order to reach a starting point for the study. According to Auerbach “The *Scripture* stories seek to subject
us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels. Where as a work of art flatters us that it may please and enchant us. Far from seeking, like a literary text, merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, the Scripture seeks to overcome our own reality.”¹ The world of the Scripture stories is not satisfied with claiming to be historically true reality, “it insists that it is the only real world, is destined for autocracy.”² The reader of the Scripture is at every moment aware “of the universal religio-historical perspective which gives the individual stories their general meaning and purpose.”³

It is essential to understand Auerbach’s discussion of “figural interpretation” because he comes very close, the researcher believes, to the notion of religious poetry in general. Thus he gives its definition: “If an occurrence like the sacrifice of Isaac is interpreted as prefiguring the sacrifice of Christ, so that in the former the latter is as it were announced and promised, and the latter ‘fulfils’ the former, then a connection is established between the two events which are linked neither temporally nor causally. It is established only if both occurrences are vertically linked to Divine Providence, which alone is able to devise such a plan of history and supply the key to its understanding.”⁴

Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first…Both, being real events or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical life. Only the understanding of the two persons or events is a spiritual act, but this spiritual act
deals with concrete events whether past, present, or future...since promise and fulfillment are real historical events, which either have happened …or will happen.\textsuperscript{5}

A part from Auerbach’s penetrating discussion of “figural interpretation of history”, he even insists that the idea of dramatization which has played an essential role in the history of poetry has roughly been taken from the Scripture as it is apparent in the story of Eve’s creation and let us have an example which stands for many: “It is a visually dramatic occurrence that God made Eve, the first woman from Adam’s rib while Adam lay asleep”.\textsuperscript{6}

Auerbach’s most important contribution to an understanding of the religious poetry concerns his argument about the classical rule of styles. “It was the story of Christ with its ruthless mixture of everyday reality and the highest and most sublime tragedy, which has conquered the classical rule of styles”.\textsuperscript{7}

2-A brief history of religious poetry from Plato and onward

After approaching the religious poetry in the light of the Scripture, the researcher becomes curious to trace religious poetry from Plato and onward.

It is useful to consider “Dante’s assertion that in the Commedia he presented true reality”\textsuperscript{8}, the fact that Platonic ideas can be closely
connected with Auerbach’s figural interpretation of history in which an occurrence on earth signifies not only itself but at the same time another, which it predicts or confirms, without prejudice to the power of its concrete reality here and now. Poetry in Plato’s view is “the lie in words and since truth should be highly valued, imitation in the sense of deception should not be logically admitted to find expression in the state.”

In our historical discussion concerning the tradition of religious poetry in general, Aristotle and Horace are to be considered briefly. Since the former in his Poetics as the first systematic treatise on the art of poetry had hidden seeds of the modern theory of art for art’s sake. The latter also in his Ars Poetica associated native gift with genius. Thus the researcher in them can not find any trace of religious poetry.

3-Sir Philip Sidney’s the concept of poet-prophet

In Longinus, the element of sublimity is to be observed seriously which is unique, eternal, and amazing like religious ecstasies. In fact, Sir Philip Sidney in his Defense of Poesy as the first English criticism suggested the concept of poet – prophet for the very first time and he tries to answer Plato’s famous attacks on poetry. Sidney believes that “Flowers smell sweeter in the works of the poets than they do in real gardens.” Thus the poet in Sidney is thought to have some divine characteristics; “he can directly express the secret ideas; poet is as much as a diviner, foreseer, or prophet” Again he asserts that “Nature never
set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with so pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, not whatsoever else may make the too much loved earth more lovely. Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden.”

According to Sidney, it is only the special privilege of the poet to produce another nature by virtue of his own invention: “Only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own invention doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite a new, forms such as never were in nature, as the Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies, and such like: so as he goes hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit.”

The notion of poet-prophet originated by Sidney has influenced the development of poetry and especially religious poetry in general. From Sidney’s point of view, the poet is to create a better world than the real world and Sidney however can be considered as William Blake’s predecessor in this regard. But the notion of poet-prophet in the neoclassic period finds different expression because the reader discovers religious concepts such as Deism as a new kind of religion. “This natural religion reaches God not only through the starry heavens above, but also through the moral law within; through Reason as well as nature. Intra te quaere Deum; look for God within thyself.”
4-Follow Nature

Thus “Follow Nature” in its religious sense was taken to mean the reproduction within the microcosm, the same harmony, order, and rule which is perceived in the macrocosm; the comparisons between microcosm and macrocosm had already been observed in the previous centuries; but it has here concealed a rational element in its large applicability. In the present age of physico-theology, religious emotions formerly attached to super-nature are being transferred more and more to “nature”. So the law of nature now becomes the law of God, or as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, “That part of the law eternal which is made known to man through his reason”.

John Dennis in the *Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704) has asserted a very illuminating idea which somehow supports the present discussion, and in which the relationship between the microcosm and macrocosm is seen to be complementary in two different senses, namely, religious and literary:

“A man is more perfect, the more he resembles his Creator, the works of man must needs be more perfect, the more they resemble his Maker’s. Now the works of God, though infinitely various, are extremely regular.”

Unlike Eighteenth-century theorists who regarded poetry as primarily an imitation of human life in a frequent figure, a mirror held up to nature, which the poet artfully renders and puts into an order designed to instruct and give artistic pleasure to the reader; the Romantic poets like Wordsworth repeatedly described all good poetry
as, at the moment of composition, “The spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” Again Blake and Shelley described a poem as an embodiment of the poet’s imaginative vision, which they opposed to the ordinary world of common experience.

5-Romantic Poets’ declarations of artistic independence

Romantic critics voiced declarations of artistic independence. Keats listed as axiom, “if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree it had better not come at all.” Blake himself insisted that he wrote from Inspiration and Vision and that his long “Prophetic” poem Milton was given to him by an agency not himself and produced without Labour or Study. Shelley also maintained that it is an error to assert that the finest passages of poetry are produced by labour and study, and suggested instead that they are the products of an unconscious creativity. A great statue or picture grown under the power of the artist as a child in the mother’s womb. Hazlitt remarked that it acts unconsciously.

Like Blake, Coleridge in his early poems, and later on Shelley, Wordsworth presents himself as what he calls a chosen son, or Bard. That is, he assumes the persona and voice of a poet-prophet, modelled on Milton and the prophets in the Bible, and puts himself forward as a spokesman for traditional western civilization at a time of profound crisis, a time, as Wordsworth said in book two of the Prelude, “of dereliction and dismay and the melancholy waste of hopes over thrown. As bards, Wordsworth and his visionary fellow poets set out to revise
the Biblical promise of divine redemption by reconstituting the grounds of hope and pronouncing the coming of a time in which a renewed humanity will inhabit a renovated earth on which men and women will feel thoroughly at home.”

6- The creation of a symbol system by Romantic poets

Another religious characteristic which Romantic poets share is to create a symbol system. Wordsworth for example revives the ancient theological concept that God’s creation constitutes a symbol system, a physical revelation parallel to Revelation in the Scriptures - Characters of the great Apocalypse, The type and symbols of Eternity, of first, and last, and midst, and without end. This view of natural objects as corresponding to an inner or a spiritual world served also as the understructure for a tendency, especially by Blake and Shelley, to write a symbolist poetry in which a rose, a sunflower, a mountain, a cave, or a cloud is presented as an object instinct with a significance beyond itself. “I always seek in what I see, the likeness of something beyond the present and tangible object” Shelley said. “And by Blake mere nature, as perceived by the physical eye and unhumanized by the imagination, was spurned, “as the dirt upon my feet, not part of me.”

7- Romantic interest in unusual modes of experience

Another Romantic tendency that Walter Pater later called the addition of strangeness to beauty was Romantic interest in an unusual
modes of experience. Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge in their poetry explored "visionary states of consciousness that are common among children but violate the standard categories of adult judgment."²²

Romantic poets described the mind as creating its own experience. In Blake, the mind creates its proper milieu only if it rejects the material world. Many Romantic writers also agreed that the mind has access beyond a sense to the infinite, through a special faculty they called either Reason or Imagination. Infinite longing in Shelley’s phrase, the desire of the mouth for a star, was a recurrent theme also in English literature of the day. Blake announced, “Less than everything, can not satisfy man,”²³

8-Romanticism

Since by the guidance of great Romantic poets like Blake, Wordsworth, and Shelley, it is essential to consider a brief background of the Romantic period. Romanticism is marked by a number of revolutions and other transformative changes in society which can be listed as follows:

The American Revolution, the French Revolution, the rise of the middle classes, the Industrial Revolution, Urbanization, and finally Increasing literacy rates. Some of the effects of these changes on the idea of the subject include the following: As each individual subject is seen as valued, a new emphasis is placed on internal feelings and inspiration, leading Wordsworth in his Prelude to move epic form away from external battles and inwards
towards the formation of an individual subject. The rise of urbanization leads to a counter-reaction: artists begin to extol the value of nature, including sublime landscapes like mountains and oceans that would have been considered forbidding by early-eighteenth-century aestheticians. We are also presented with the formation of the Romantic hero (Promethean, sometimes, Satanic, solitary, self-exiled, in search of extremes in nature and the self, tormented by inner guilt). We are now firmly entrenched in guilt culture, which is reflected in the revolutionary changes in politics, ideology and state institutions.

There are some other elements of Romanticism which are significant in understanding the nature of this period such as: a valuation of originality over convention, a desire to champion the rights of the oppressed, a new emphasis on individualism, a desire to abandon oneself to nature, emotion, and the body, and a degree of irrationality.²⁴

9- The master theme of the Romantic period, The French Revolution: Apocalyptic Expectations

What is the master theme of the Romantic period? How can the literary consequences of it be interpreted? In a letter to Byron in 1816, Shelley declared that the
French Revolution was the master theme of the epoch in which they lived. A judgment with which many of Shelley’s contemporaries concurred. As one of this period’s topic, “The French Revolution: Apocalyptic Expectations,” demonstrates that the intellectuals of the age were obsessed with the concept of violent and inclusive change in the human condition, and the writings of those we now consider the major Romantic poets cannot be understood, historically, without an awareness of the extent to which their distinctive concepts, plots, forms, and imagery were shaped first by the promise, then by the tragedy, of the great events in the neighbouring France. And for the young poets in the early years of 1789-93, the enthusiasm for the Revolution had the impetus and high excitement of a religious awakening, because they interpreted the events in France in accordance with the apocalyptic prophecies in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures; that is, they viewed these as fulfilling the promise, guaranteed, by an infallible text, that a short period of retributive and cleansing violence would usher in an age of universal peace and blessedness that would be the equivalent of a restored paradise. Even after what they considered to be the failure of the revolutionary promise, these poets did not surrender their hope for a radical reformation of humankind and its social and political world; instead,
they transferred the basis of that hope from violent political revolution to a quiet but drastic revolution in the moral and imaginative nature of the human race.25

*The Bible* ends with the book of *Apocalypse* (literally, Revelation), prophesying a return of human beings to their lost Edenic felicity, first in the millennium of an earthy kingdom, then in the eternity of a new heaven and a new earth, this consummation of history is symbolized as a marriage between the New Jerusalem and Christ the Lamb. At the outbreak of the French Revolution, Joseph Priestley and other Unitarian leaders hailed that event as the stage preceding the millennium prophesied in Revelation. Coleridge and Wordsworth, in their early poems, also interpreted the Revolution as the violent preliminary to the new earth and heaven of apocalyptic prophecy. And Blake’s the *French Revolution* (1791) and *America, a Prophecy* (1793) represented both these revolutions as apocalyptic portents of the last days of the fallen world.26

10- William Blake’s life in brief

Apart from the period and various influences of Romanticism on poets, the last question which will be answered in this chapter is the character of William Blake himself. Why Blake is selected among all authors? What characteristics make him distinct? How should the
modern reader approach Blake? In order to answer such questions, it is helpful to consider his life in brief.

William Blake (1757-1827), English poet, painter, and engraver, who created a unique form of illustrated verse; his poetry, inspired by mystical vision, is among the most original, lyrical, and prophetic in the language. Blake, the son of a hosier, was born in November 28, 1757, in London, where he lived most of his life. Largely self-taught, he was, however, widely read, and his poetry shows the influence of the German mystic Jakob Boehme, for example, and of Swedenborgianism. As a child, Blake wanted to become a painter. He was sent to drawing school and at the age of fourteen was apprenticed to James Basire, an engraver. After his seven-year term was over, he studied briefly at the Royal Academy, but he rebelled against the aesthetic doctrines of its president, Sir Joshua Reynolds. Blake did, however, later establish friendships with such academicians as John Flaxman and Henry Fuseli, whose work may have influenced him. In 1784, he set up a printshop, although it failed after a few years, for the rest of his life Blake eked out a living as an engraver and illustrator. At twenty-four, he married Catherine Boucher, daughter of a market gardener. She was then illiterate, but Blake taught her to read and to help him in his engraving and printing. His wife helped him print the
illuminated poetry for which he is remembered today. Blake’s younger brother Robert was also to play an important role in his life. Robert died in 1787, devastating Blake. He, later on attributed his method of illuminated printing to his departed brother, saying Robert, soon after his death, showed Blake, the technique in a dream. This painstaking method of etching, which he used in conjunction with hand colouring, is not completely understood. The most likely explanation is that he wrote the words and drew the pictures for each poem on a copper plate with a liquid impervious to acid, which was then applied, leaving the text and illustration in relief. Ink or a colour wash then used, with the printed picture finished by hand in water colours. Blake lived his life as a poor artisan, and was not recognized as a major poet until long after his death. He worked tirelessly right up until his death in 1827, convinced that mankind would profit from his efforts. Blake’s final years, spent in great poverty, were cheered by the admiring friendship of a group of young artists who gathered around him. He died in London, in August 12, 1827.  

After studying his life briefly, it is time to consider his brilliant characteristics as a poet. In fact William Blake is one of the greatest geniuses England has ever produced. A chapter in the first biography of Blake, published in 1863, is entitled “Mad or not Mad.” William
Wordsworth once wrote that William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* were “undoubtedly the production of insane genius, and yet, there is something in the madness of this man which interests me more than the sanity of Lord Byron and Walter Scott”\(^29\). Samuel Taylor Coleridge, another contemporary, doubted Blake’s mental balance, but also called him “a man of Genius”\(^30\). Blake believed that a poet is a mystic visionary whose inspiration arises from within.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Wordsworth and Coleridge were recognized for having heralded English Romanticism with their joint work, the 1798 volume of *Lyrical Ballads* but Blake was over looked. Blake was not thought of as a major Romantic poet until after World War II, Morris Eaves says,“ He’s a kind of modern invention-although now, the most anthologized poem in English language is ,Tyger Tyger, which gives some indication of Blake’s popularity.”\(^31\) Blake was considered an eccentric by his generation and died with little acclaim. Yet his influence has grown through the decades. The Pre-Raphaelites admired his poetry and artwork, as did W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, the French surrealists, and the American beats.

“He approached everything with a mind unclouded by current opinions. There was nothing of the superior person about him. This makes him terrifying.”\(^32\) T.S.Eliot wrote.

Blake claimed to experience spiritual visions from his early age. When he was nine years old, he told his mother that he had seen “a tree filled with angels, and not long after, in a field of workers gathering hay, a vision of Angelic figures walking.”\(^33\)
“My personal opinion is that he suffered from a kind of schizophrenia. He saw visions, heard voices. Later in his life he claimed that he was not a poet, but that his poems were dictated to him.”

Eaves says.

The first two illuminated books he created were All Religions are One and There is No Natural Religion, both of which reject the rational, empirical philosophy of Bacon, Newton, and Locke, and deism, or “natural religion”. Viscomi says, “Blake was very opposed to the church and state.”

He was deeply a spiritual poet, yet very opposed to organized religion. He was against society in toto: its prisons, churches, money, morals, fashionable opinion; he did not think that the faults of society stemmed from the faulty organization of society. To him the only restrictions over man are always in his own mind, “the mind-forg’d manacles.”

Kazin writes.

The Blakes were Dissenters and are believed to have belonged to the Moravian sect. The Bible was an early and profound influence on Blake, and would remain a crucial source of inspiration throughout his life. Blake declared, “all he knew was in the Bible and that The Old and New Testaments are the Great Code of Art”. His life is, perhaps, summed up by his statement that the imagination is not a state: it is the human existence itself. Blake was the most original religious poet in the Romantic period, although he rebelled against some of its principles such as Romantic “Nature poetry” which will be dealt with in detail in next chapter.

But, had Blake received any kind of formal education like Wordsworth, his poetry would have been quite different. His mind was
to function according to an original system; it is sometimes very pure and simple which reminds the reader of nursery rhymes like Songs of Innocence. On the other hand, his Songs of Experience are full of Blakean mythology and symbols. In fact, the researcher may conclude the first chapter by asking an amazing question from William Blake the poet. Since the present study has illuminated some of the brilliant aspects of Blake’s poetry, the enthusiastic reader can discover the fearful symmetry in Blake himself, and now it is time to ask him:

When the stars threw down their spears
And water’d heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee? 39