

Heidelberg University English Department
Lecture Series: Another Place, Another Time

Blake's *Vala*: Dreaming of Finding the Truth

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Annika Elstermann: Welcome to this episode of the Heidelberg University English Department's lecture series *Another Place, Another Time*. Today I'll be speaking with Armen Hesse, who's working towards his PhD at the English department and the German department with a project titled, *Poetological Typologies. Aesthetic Attempts to Overcome Written Language in Blake, Nerval and Kafka*. We'll be talking about William Blake's *Vala* today and about dreaming of finding the truth.

So, just to get everybody kind of on the same page here as we start up: Who was William Blake, when did he write and what kind of texts did he write?

AH Thank you for that question, Annika. That's a good idea, to introduce Blake at first, because he has a very high status in literary studies but not many of his works are actually being read, neither at university, nor in the freetime. And William Blake, it depends really on the context: people who are interested in music, they might know him from The Doors because the name of the band The Doors comes from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and is part of a quote: "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite." Which also links nicely to the historical context, where you have the movement that supported liberalism and very liberal society, where you would also find Aldous Huxley, whose essay *Doors of Perception* came from his experience with drug use, mescaline, and also provided the name of the band The Doors. And even nowadays, the reception is very strong, at least in literary circle you have nobel prize winner Olga Tokarczuk and her novel from 2009, a fantasy mystery thriller, *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* is also a quote from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and from the movie-side you have the movie *Dead Man* from 1995 by Jim Jarmusch, a very extraordinary movie and the main protagonist is William Blake, or rather an incarnation, the reincarnation of William Blake.

But back to your initial question. [**AE:** [chuckling] Who was William Blake?] He is a poet as much as an artist. So, the style is illuminated printing, so you have poetry accompanied by illustrations. He was born in 1757 and died in 1826, so he lived through the whole period of Pre-Romanticism and Romanticism. Most people will associate him with *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience* which was published as one collection in 1794, it's a collection of lyric poetry, basically. But even before that he published *Poetical Sketches*, which is a collection of lyric poetry – you have a dramatic fragment in there, King Edward the third, and you also have some pieces of cadence prose.

AE: I think this already kind of indicates that Blake is really not like your traditional romantic poet, right? This is somebody who's very hard to categorise as well.

AH: True. If you look, for example, at Romanticism, you won't find any dramas, and at least he attempted to write a drama – which is not very successful to be honest, the attempt, but at least he tried to do this. Although, mainly, he wrote poetry, epic poetry, so you have a series of shorter prophetic books and then you have epic, long poems, which are *Vala, or the Four Zoas*, which will be

probably the main topic of today's talk, which remained also a fragment. And then you have *Milton*, so the middle epic poem where Blake or the poetic persona accompany Milton through a revision basically of Milton's own life and his literary outbreak, which is very ambitious to be honest, for someone like Milton. And in the end you have the *Jerusalem* poem: Not the lyric poem *Jerusalem* that is very often sung and performed almost a national anthem, but *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, which is also part of Blake's private mythology and the final version of his myth in a way.

AE: Now, we have a lot of different text types and so here. The title of your talk is Dreaming of Finding the Truth and I think this also is touched on through this concept of the doors of perception and the way it was used and so on. So, we have this concept of Blake as like a prophet poet and somebody who at least is looking at truth and so on. Dreaming of Finding the Truth implies that he is not necessarily successful at finding it in any kind of way, so maybe let's talk a bit about... Directly the title Dreaming of Finding the Truth. What is your reasoning behind this title?

AH: The reason why I chose this title is that, as you said, Blake is constantly looking for truth, so he's rewriting his own texts, revisioning his own texts and also writing different manuscripts of his texts where you find passages that are moved from one spot to another spot. So there is no final version of the texts in almost no poem. And the main thing about Dreaming of Finding the Truth is the dream-concept. Because dreaming is something that is so far removed from reality, if you dream, this is something that happens subconsciously and when you wake up, if you're lucky, you can remember the end of the dream but in most cases you won't remember the entire dream.

But still it is something apparently that people look for: If you say you 'dream of something' or 'dream of having something' then this sounds like a wonderful vision in a way that you try to achieve. But still you never get the whole concept of the dream. So this is something that remains in the subconscious and you could say that what you dream might be something that you wish to have, but you will never get there in the end and you will never grasp the entire concept.

AE: How do we find this negotiation of the concept of truth in Blake's work?

AH: Truth is something that you can only imagine. So, in Blake's own mythology, you find different figures, Los is one figure, he represents the poetic genius, who is the concept of imagination in Blake's own mythology. And then you have an antagonist, Urizen, who – and the name is very similar sounding – is the concept of reason. These two are constantly in a struggle for truth so you have Urizen, who is reason, who attempts to fix the truth and to have everything adhere to a law and to be the one authoritarian figure in the mythology and also try to subsume all the other figures from Blake's own mythology.

And then you have Los, who is the poetic genius, who contrasts Urizen in a way, because he attempts to reverse the actions of Urizen in a way that he tries to build a world that is fluctuating. But at least in *Vala, or the Four Zoas*, he fails several times, because – and Blake is very clever in doing that – when you compare them to the descriptions of Urizen you will find very similar descriptions in the passages where the speaker is talking about Los. So as to identify these two and to say, to show that even imagination can be a very restrictive concept.

So Los tries to separate himself very much from reason and from Urizen and the problem is that he will never achieve his aim without reason. So the vision of truth in Blake is a constant back and forth between reason and imagination: Neither can be 'the one ruler' in the mind.

AE: Just very briefly, to kind of clarify this for people who aren't familiar with the text: This, all of this that you just mentioned, this is part of Blake's own mythology that he came up with and these figures: Are they essentially gods in that mythology? Do they interact with anybody else? Is there a plot to this? Or is it all like, poetical philosophy?

AH: That depends on the texts you look at. The narrative of *Vala* is a very fragmented and disrupted narrative and it is entirely set within the mind. It's a dream within a dream in a way. So it's all only the mythology. When you look at other poems such as *Milton* for example or *Jerusalem*, there you have also instances of historical reality being part of a poem. But here in *Vala*, because it is a dream and the mythology is not in any way corresponding to a historical reality is also fictional. The only thing that is really related to a historical context or at least to a metaphysically historical context is the identification of biblical figures and biblical reality that you will find very often mentioned in *Vala*.

AE: So, there's a link between kind of between Blake's mythology and the belief system that the people and his readership at the time would also have been familiar with.

AH: Definitely! Because, what Blake's trying to do is a revision of scriptural truth and also of scriptural texts. Los, who is the poetic genius, can also be identified with Jesus, who in Blake's terms would be the embodiment of imagination and something or someone who is present in every individual's mind and reality, which also shows that this poem, although it is very subjective and very individual, contains a universal idea. Because Jesus or the imagination is present in everyone. So people would be familiar with it, because it's in parts very closely linked to genesis and a revision of genesis, but also you will find quotes that are actually marked in the manuscript where they are to be found in the bible. So, you can easily go back and forth between the bible and the texts.

AE: There are so many different points at which I think we could start on interpretation and a reading of this. But before we do that, do you want to give a very quick overview over how this has been read, you know, through the last, let's say, a hundred or two-hundred years, the reception of this, what some of the different approaches have been?

AH: Yeah, sure! The funny thing about Blake, and he's probably a singularity in that sense, is that by the time he lived, he had difficulty providing a living, because he wasn't able to sell his works, and neither was he able to print his works, because he didn't want to have them printed, so he kept everything in his own house—

AE: Oh, yeah, because he also, you said earlier, he had these illuminations and that would have been impossible to print at the time, right?

AH: Yeah, sure and he was also the one who developed the technique so no one else could reproduce it in a way. So, you could say, he was rather poor and also until 1863, when the first biography was published on Blake, not really many people knew about him, and then only around the turn of the century from the 19th in to the 20th century, also when Yates published a first three-volume collection of Blake's works and then it really started. And from then on has been a meteoric rise. The reception,

especially in the middle of the 20th century, is enormous. You will find most literary person and also artists will refer in one way or another to Blake. And this is also when literary scholarship came in and started looking at the works of Blake, so there's an editorial branch who tries to establish texts firstly, but then – and this is why I want to talk about truth – you associate Blake with the prophet poet, who really gives the truth to readers and who apparently had an access to truth, and people have come from various directions, looking at this concept of truth.

So you have for example various historicists, like David Erdmann and E.P. Thompson, who himself is a historian, who established Blake as a political prophet and the godfather of radical, and you'd have to say Marxist revolutionary thought. Someone who was against authority and who really was a revolutionary and apparently he read a lot of pamphlets and radical newspapers in his time, at least Thompson tried to establish that. So this is the one Blake we have.

And the second Blake is the complete opposite of a historical Blake, because it's a mystic Blake. So someone who, if he really had read everything people thought he had read from mystery tradition, he would have done nothing else probably, because that is quite an amount. And because of the visions Blake had already in his childhood apparently, we have the concept of the *Unio Mystica*: Blake who emerges with the divine and then mediates the texts to the readers, divine truth – but also an excuse not to understand some passages, because since they are the divine truth, how could someone who is not a mystic understand them?

And then a third Blake is the Blake that we already mentioned in the beginning: The Blake that was taken up by bands like The Doors, the counterculture that tried to distance itself, not only from established traditional artistic circles, but also from any political or standard political directions. An idealist, who tried to do his own thing, too.

AE: I think all of these three are in some ways linked with one another and the counterculture Blake is linked to the Mystic Blake in the way that, if we just wants to express something, he doesn't necessarily care that he's widely understood and so on and the Mystic cannot be understood because he is a mystic. And I think if anybody ever read Jim Morrison's poetry, you can also very much see that he also doesn't really care about being understood. There are also links between the political prophet who shuns authority and the counterculture Blake of course, because counterculture also shuns authority, and all three of them try to kind of give or find some sort of truth, right?

AH: All three, you're right, all three try to find some truth in Blake but what they try to find is not the truth that Blake gave, but the truth that they themselves believed in. So, of course, Jim Morrison being the artist he was, wanted Blake because he was so inspired by him, to be of the same kind in a way. And then people who came from the mystic branch, they also put their truth into Blake. Basically, they subsumed Blake and put the truth into his texts that is not necessarily there, or at least only partly.

AE: I think this is a very interesting problem in relation to the topic of truth in general, because truth. It sounds, I mean if you say 'the truth' it sounds like something that should be objectively verifiable. But that's facts and truth really is something extremely subjective. So, to some extent, if you think of a concept of pure truth, the point would be that you can't grasp it.

AH: No, you cannot get to the truth in a way. And if you think about it from an epistemological perspective – so epistemology being the discipline that tries to look at where knowledge comes from, how knowledge is produced, manifested and then established in a culture. So, looking from an epistemological perspective: Even if you go back to Plato and his allegory of the cave: You will see that there are ideas, so true ideas or forms, both terms can be used, which refer to a higher truth that exists eternally. But humankind cannot access this truth. And the allegory of the cave shows that. Because literature is something that is on a second level removed from the truth being something that is produced by humans who cannot view these ideas. It is very much distant.

AE: It's another degree of separation.

AH: So, this is the foundation of the epistemology. And then you will find throughout the philosophical position various people who attempted to grasp that concept of truth and to rephrase it. So you have Descartes, who tried to have reason and the reason itself with the "Cogito ergo sum." which is a very egoistic concept in a way if you look at it this way, to have the self as the only notion that can express the truth. And then you go to John Locke who was an empiricist and who argued that by perceiving things all knowledge is being processed but not from the human mind itself, but only from the objects that we perceive. And then, this goes on and is re-envisioned by Berkley, who was also a bishop which probably influenced his own thought.

AE: Roughly when was he writing/thinking?

AH: Berkeley was in the 17th century, so at the end of the 17th century, he was writing during that time. And he argued, well, on the one hand, he agreed with Locke that perception is the one important aspect in establishing knowledge and in finding a truth, but then he said it's not the objects that give us the ideas and we are passive, but we create things by perceiving them. Now the problem is if you look in one direction and you see that there's a person, now you are sitting in front of me, but behind me I know that there is, for example, a chair that I am sitting on. I can't see that chair, still how can it exist? And Berkeley solved that very elegantly, by referring to God. So you have an infinite mind that perceives everything, which is why everything exists and suddenly all his problems are solved.

AE: So this was also his solution to this question of: "If a tree falls down in a woods and there is nobody there to hear it, does it make a sound?"— And then Berkeley would say 'Yes, because God is listening.'

AH: In a way, yes. Because God is always there and everywhere, sees everything. And then you have Blake who took an issue with this kind of externalisation of an infinite mind of a god. And I think that's what made him so appealing to bands like The Doors, because they had a very subjective, a very individual notion of truth and Blake also had that, in the way that he internalised the external infinite mind and that god existed somewhere or there. And that's also part of the revision of biblical history, because you have the crucifixion of Jesus and then Jesus ascends to heaven again. And Blake would rather have Jesus staying on earth and being part of humankind as he was meant to be.

So he says: 'Well, there is an infinite mind that creates the world, but this infinite mind doesn't exist externally but internally within each individual's mind. So, vision suddenly becomes that enormous

power that can shape the world and that can create the world. But the problem remains on how to get to this vision and how to get to truth.

AE: Does Blake link this to— So, when you say that the aspect of the infinite mind exists within every person: Does Blake still link this with a god? So, is this a part of a divine being— I'm thinking of the transcendentalists, for instance and this idea of God is part of each of us and so on and you can transcend yourself. . . Is this Blake's kind of thinking as well, or is this kind of free enlightenment or enlightenment thinking that separates us from this divine being.

AH: Uhm. Both. [**AE:** Okay.] So, what he attempts to establish, this infinite mind, is a manifestation of Jesus. But Jesus is the same as a universal notion, a universal notion of the imagination and of the self that we have. So Blake is in line with Enlightenment thought, because he says there is a self that exists in us, but this self is also somehow divine, so there is a spark of Jesus within this self. And this is also why you need both Los and Urizen to write the poem *Vala* and to access this infinite mind or this vision. Because – and here, I have to take a slight detour, because I'm always speaking about Jesus. So, it's not the Jesus that we have in the bible as I mentioned before, but this Jesus is pre-dating myth and pre-dating any scriptural religion: It's a universal idea that existed before systematic religion as he also said in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and two tractates that he wrote before that and now we have this Jesus. So the divine part within the mind, within the self and we have the self, that is a notion very much related to Enlightenment and of course the mind is that which expresses ideas and which works with language and also enables Blake to frame these visions in a poem, a linguistic structure or some structure if you take the illustrations, but mainly linguistic structure. So, if you attempt to pre-date enlightenment and also religion and also ancient history, which is a speaker who is aware of the fact that without the progress that the age of enlightenment gave to humankind, it is not possible to convey any ideas, because you need to mediate them somehow because they are only within your mind.

AE: Yes, so this was actually in the kind of timeline from Plato to Blake, which I found very interesting and also relate him to some of the themes that we discussed in this lecture series so far, especially when talking about authenticity and so on: You said that this Cartesian idea, this rational self, the Cogito Ergo Sum, this is something that's very egocentric. It's 'I think therefore I am and this is how I generate truth and knowledge about the world.' and so on, whereas what Blake is doing aims at a more universal idea, something that is a shared truth a shared concept of truth in order to share this concept of truth in order for it to be not centred on something that is entirely on the individual. You do have to be able to communicate it in some ways. You have to be able to package it up in language and words and some kind of expressions and this seems to be something which Blake is definitely struggling with, right?

AH: Yes, that is why you will also see that, I mean, all of the epic poems have the same theme and they use the same figures, but you will find also the same story told from different perspectives, which is a very modern idea in a way. And to convey this individual truth, Blake needed to convey language and otherwise it would remain a very individual truth. And he saw that people, because of the restrictions imposed on them by law or by institutionalised religion, he had to liberate their vision and that part of the infinite mind within each being. So he had to mediate the ideas he had and he had to use language to do this, so that readers could read the texts and imagine them for

themselves; that they are part of this universal notion of an infinite mind and truth. And also to imagine – and here we go away from the ego – that all other beings surrounding them are part of this universal notion and are inhabited by a part of this infinite mind, which is – and this is why vision is so important – because vision creates the world, and once you have this idea of yourself and all other beings you create a very different world from one that is very egocentric.

AE: You just mentioned the word “mediating” and I think this is something that is so interesting in connection to this concept of Jesus that you just mentioned and this whole idea of mediating between different.— If you see Jesus as something in between God and humanity and then the revisions that you already alluded to, I would really like to talk about this in the context of Blake's work. Like what does he do with this pre-biblical Jesus: How does he write about him? What happens there? And what are some of the motifs that he's using?

AH: Okay so that's going very deep into Blake's mythology and into Blake's world. Looking at the poem *Vala* – let's stick to that one, dreaming of finding the truth – we talked about the truth, we talked about the dream, but *Vala* is part of the mythology and it is mainly about a giant Albion... So because this idea of the universal finite mind, infinite mind, of course, is not attainable, Blake has to create a manifestation within his own mythology and this is the figure of Albion. So Albion would be the cultural manifestation of the universal notion of the poetic genius within the context of England. Because in one of the tractates Blake says that this universal mind finds different manifestations which would also explain different religions. But because he is from England he takes Albion and this is how it is manifested.

But then Albion is not only part of the mythology, he is part of an allegory that constructs his whole mythology and because a private mythology would be very difficult to mediate to readers, Blake needs to use means such as the allegory in order to make it clear to the readership that there is a second level to this mythology that can be read and can be understood. So you try to use allegory as a way of disrupting language and of disrupting truth, showing at the same time that you cannot access this truth, but somehow you need to mediate the idea of it. If that answers your question.

AE: So, in some way this would imply that if we go back to the allegory of the cave and Plato that kind of the shadows on the wall can give you some kind of truth in themselves, so if you have an allegory that abstracts to an extent that can maybe tell you something about the truth at the heart of it through the abstraction?

AH: Yes, that's possible. One definition of allegory would be to disrupt truth and if you take an allegory then you do disrupt truth, but because you can never get to the truth in the end that has to be a continuous process, a cyclical process. History is cyclical in a way and also is the production of truth and I think that's also part of the struggle that Blake had when writing about truth: He had to revision his texts all the time, because he wasn't able to produce a final text so in a way it is an unfinalisable work to try to get to truth. So allegory is a way of somehow getting there, so getting closer to the idea of truth that you cannot really perceive—

AE: But also cannot really communicate!

AH: Yes. You know that you're working with limited means but not to do it would be to accept

defeat which is not something and— truth, and that might link also to the idea that truth is in everyone, because of the manifestations of the universal infinite mind, it is also something that needs to be continuously rewritten but also that needs to be continuously debated between individuals. So you, for yourself can never get to a truth, but you can get closer to a truth by also talking about it and sharing the truth that you have and accept that there might be other truths.

AE: There's something you said earlier, which I thought was nicely paradoxical in the context of Blake's work, you were talking about the different readings of Blake and that in the first example the two historians were writing about Blake as somebody who gives us the truth. Which of course is paradoxical because Blake doesn't give us the truth, because he can't and it seems to be the whole point of his work, that not one single person can give us the truth in the sense of 'he has identified, pinpointed it and now gives it to us clearly and through his word', but he can understand the truth. But it seems to be, from what you're saying now that's it's more understanding Blake's work means understanding that truth is nothing finalisable, like you said, and it's nothing that can be pinpointed in any way, but something that has to be dynamic and has to be debated and discussed and so on continuously without ever reaching an end to it, right?

AH: Yeah.

AE: There is one phrase or term that has come up a lot now and that is that of the poetic genius and it seems to also be something that is debated within Blake's own mythology, with the two figures that you mentioned in the beginning, maybe— I just want to talk about this for a moment, or have you talk about it for a moment rather, what is the poetic genius, especially in the context of Romanticism and how does Blake configure this for himself, this idea?

AH: Okay so in Romanticism we have the idea of a genius, the notion of a genius who inspires poets to produce something, to mediate a higher metaphysical truth, so Blake lived through Pre-Romanticism, his first works are clearly, if you can say that, in the period of Pre-Romanticism and that his main body of work is situated within Romanticism. And although there is a debate about truth within the movement of Romanticism, there is always the idea, within other romantic texts, that something dreamlike, that something mythical can actually get to a metaphysical truth. And Blake differs from that because he uses the same means as the other Romantics in a way, he is distinct from them in that he says 'well, we have that idea of the genius, but we cannot really get to a truth, and we should not really go against enlightened thought and the ratio of things because even we, being part of that idea of genius, cannot mediate this idea. So that's what makes Blake very much part of Romanticism on the one hand but which is also very different, or at least clearer than in other works of the period of Romanticism.

AE: We have, in previous talks of this lecture series, we heard of Poe's approach to writing poetry which was very non-romantic and that he emphasised the construction and the constructedness of the poem and so in that case we can say that the ratio or the idea of reason is very strong with Poe's own approach to his poetry. That was what Dieter Schulz was talking about in his contribution to the series. And then on the other end of the spectrum we would have this very highly romantic idea of the divine spark of inspiration, you have a dream, you wake up and write a poem and then it's written down and that is kind of the perfection of the poetic genius on the page. Which Blake's own

way of working, as you have said several times now, the revisions and the continuous reworkings of his own poetry and his other writing implies that this is very much not the case because if there was a divine spark and a poetic genius, and also the ideal version of the poem, then he wouldn't at some point have to keep revising it.

AH: No, it's an eternal craft in a way but it's a craft, nonetheless. We don't have this idea of the *Furor Poeticus* that inspires you and you write down something that's perfectly metrical and rhymed and you have the motifs just popping up at various points somehow and they are connected to get you to a higher meaning. That's not possible. So Blake exercised total control of what he produced. And you don't even have to look at the poems closely to see that, as you mentioned you have the revisions of the texts, you also have a wish to print the text by yourself, and also to have the illustrations that— You developed a technique to do the illustrations and you illustrate your own poetry even between the lines of verse, not only as pictures separate from the text and metrically you see that. . . I mentioned already, the identification of Urizen and Los through semantic associations, this is not something that comes out of nowhere, this is something that the writer probably thinks about and constructs very very consciously.

And also this— people interpreted for example the metrical foot that he used, so the septenary, where you have seven stresses although they are very irregular, but there are seven stresses, they said okay, because everything in Blake is so individual and so subjective, this is part of the vision, this is what he was dictated to do by this divine spark of inspiration. But if you look at that foot then you will see that you find the septenary in various other works throughout literary history in English literature. It is not something that is individual and very subjective, but – and this is part of the revision of scriptural truth in Blake – in Middle English literature the septenary is the dominant metrical foot when you look at allegorical poems, where stories from the bible – so the bible and the new testament, the old and new testament – are rewritten allegorically to get a truth and to mediate, again, a truth to the readership for those people, for those people who were unable to read, for the illiterate.

So when you look at the 11th century, you have only a few clergymen who are able to read the bible and then to mediate the contents. They do this allegorically in long poetry, using this metrical foot and now Blake, also using allegory, and rewriting spiritual history, uses exactly this foot, so this metrical foot, the septenary, in order to overwrite not only spiritual history but also literary tradition that was related to biblical texts and also consciously not using, for example, the iambic pentameter, the blank verse, because this is the epic tradition, the very war-like epic tradition so historical war, but rather placing himself in the— he always spoke of the mental war. So, using a metre and then again exercising perfect control over this metre and how it varies throughout the poem to remediate the vision that these Middle English poems, for example, tried to mediate to readers.

AE: I think it's also very important to just stress this again – because you just mentioned the mental war – that a lot of these things are in some way externalised so his writing about his mythology and creating this mythology and so on, but very much of this has to do, or it's a representation, it's an allegory for an internal struggle. So you have this struggle between the poetic genius, the inspiration and probably something very chaotic as well and reason and structuring and rationality and all of these, so this is not just the poet's internal struggle for his own creation process but also a struggle for how the individual looks at the world, just to kind of stress this again, because I think that it's a

thread that goes through everything that you have mentioned thus far.

There is again something which seems to me to be a bit paradoxical about this and that is that in a way Blake writing these things down, illustrating them and so on, is an attempt to express something which he senses or fears, or experiences internally. So for instance this internal struggle, this mental war, it's an attempt to express this and also to communicate it because otherwise he wouldn't be using language. He wouldn't have to use language if it were just something that he needs to process or so, I mean this now arguably— he would still need to use language but he wouldn't need to write it down.

But then Blake doesn't seem to be particularly keen on actually sharing this with the wider world and as you indicated he doesn't want anyone else to print it, he doesn't want anybody else to have control over this text that he has produced. And it also sounded in the beginning that it wasn't exactly widely read at the time. Is this a paradox that Blake seems to be aware of in his writing that he's trying to communicate at the same, trying to keep these things to himself and his own very subjective individual perspective or did he make any attempts for instance in letters that he wrote or anything like that to actually directly communicate with other people about his work?

AH: That's a good question. So the first volume of poetry that I mentioned, the *Poetical Sketches* from 1783, is actually, apart from the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, the only work that was published by Blake himself or by friends of himself, of Blake, no one really knows, but it was published— [**AE:** During his lifetime.] During his lifetime, directly when he composed them they were published and then the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* as well. The other works, they were not published. He only, he printed them, so print-on-demand, to use a modern phrase, so if someone wanted to have these texts then he would print them and also he would recolour them and so he was very aware of the fact that he wouldn't get the distribution he would have been able to if he had used a publishing house.

So that was something that he did very consciously and I think it also, again, if you give it to a publishing house, if you give this work of art to a publishing house, then you disseminate one text on a large scale, which is something that is contrary to the idea that this is something that cannot be finalised. And also giving into the authority of someone, maybe even establishing a text that Blake wasn't satisfied with, is not something that he wanted to do, or would have wanted to happen. You know in theatres for example you have the licensed playhouses and the non-licensed playhouses, so playhouses that are allowed to perform and to have performances for an audience and then these who are not allowed. This kind of authority imprinted on books is something that Blake worked against, linking back to Milton for example, he also had very similar ideas in 1644 with the *Aeropagitica* and so when you look at letters, for example, from Blake then you will see that he writes to people who would be able to print his works that they are not quite finished or that he had another vision and so he wasn't able to finish the work and so on. So in a way there's that very romanticised image that exists of Blake. It doesn't come from nowhere. So you find in letters and also in his own texts the idea that he probably will never be done with the poem and that's why he will never publish it, so he'd rather rewrite it and do a print for himself and maybe give one or two pages to other people.

AE: It's a fascinating, different look at the role of an author and authorship and so on in general.

The idea of an author, and one which we today talk about a lot or who's very well known, but who isn't producing finished works. I think it's absolutely fascinating and it's also, to an extent, seems to me when somebody is writing about expression or writing down expressions of their inner selves, having this as something dynamic, seems to me to be actually more authentic than claiming that something is a finished thing.

AH: Yes, it is in a way more authentic but then if you think it to the end, what Blake does is he argues that, for example, you cannot produce something that is finished because then you would have to fix the truth that you want to put on the paper and in this he himself proposes a truth, because that's the truth that he gives, so he himself is very much caught in that paradox of not wanting to express something finalised but then expressing something that in a way is a final truth, without wanting to do so.

AE: And it's also something that you alluded to earlier at some point you have to make a choice and if you say I cannot express a finalised fixed truth, is the other option then, not expressing anything at all, also problematic, because then, like you said earlier, you're just kind of giving up.

AH: Yeah, art would be pointless. So this art for art's sake is really not something that exists not even in the movement of art for art's sake and for Blake definitely not so, so you'd rather express a truth that is not finished and as authentic truth as you can give. That's the point.

AE: Yeah. And also, of course, the point at which you share the truth or at which you share your current state of expression is one where you can then enter a dialogue with other people. Which I'm not sure if this is something that Blake does, from what you've been saying, it doesn't necessarily sound like he was influenced by people that he was in direct contact with, so much as people who lived before him, for instance, but as something that has been done in dialogue with Blake's work. Kind of, if you put an unfinished thing into the world then at least people can receive it, can react to it and you can amend your own text, your own ideas and concepts and expressions of your inner life and so on in communication with other people.

AH: And I think it is also a nice thought actually if you look at a text and you see that this text struggles with what it's doing and this will also show that in a way it's okay to struggle with the thoughts that you have and with the self that you have and also with concepts of truth that other people might have. The important thing is to continuously think about it and also to express it, even though you might not be sure that what you do and what you say is good but at some point, and I think that a PhD student especially can relate to that [chuckling], you need to finish the work that you're doing, knowing, and this translated to literary studies, that you'll never be finished doing the work and then it's not a finished product but it's as close as I can get. And then other people can work with it.

AE: Yeah. And to an extent I really think that having it as an unfinished thing, so having the finished book but having the thought process and the argument and so on as something which has open points occasionally, you know, not everything has to be smooth and without paradoxical points. These are the points where you can have a dialogue with other people. I keep thinking of how Blake published his own work and his revisions and so on, that he would have really really liked the internet. Like digital publication and the option of constant revisions and reworking the thing even after it has been

published.

AH: It's interesting that you mention that because when it comes for example to the notion of hypertext, we have the Blake archive, which has a digital version of almost all the Blake texts that exist. But then the editors who had the idea of constructing the Blake archive, they also immediately when the digital means were available, they were thinking of *Vala or the Four Zoas* so the text which we're talking about today, as hypertext, as the embodiment of a hypertext because you have all those open end things, where you can link from one part of the text to another and because you have those identical passages which are only variations of one another you can easily link them in a hypertext. So that very nicely supports what you just said.

AE: Yeah. I think this really, I mean the hypertext, the illustrations, so the multimediality of Blake's work and also the different versions of it and the constant revisions and so on would have been ideal if Blake could have had access to those means of publication. Something you just said just now or which we've been discussing regarding the unfinished state of the work, the openness of the work and the possibility for discussion, I think this is extremely relevant when we look at our world today, because the notion of having a finished product, of reaching a truth and the goal of doing that I think often reduces complexity and kind of leads people to making claims or stating things in a certain way which makes them sound as though they are absolute truths rather than leaving room for discussion. So I think this is one way in which Blake's work and the approach to truth and instead of finding the truth rather dreaming of finding the truth can be helpful for how we look at the world today as well. What are some other ways in which we can apply the themes of his work and the different readings and so on to today's world?

AH: So I mean of course there's this idea that there is a universal truth in everyone which leads to a society that can listen to each other and which can not only listen to each other but also express to one another what one really thinks. Because that is I think something— today communication is very, very fast. You need to come up with something as soon as possible in order to reply to something. You don't think about it any more in many cases. So this is something that we can take from this: we can listen to each other and also politicians or the media, they can really look at each other's texts or messages or statements and then think about it and get into a discussion. Not reply immediately to what the other party has said, without having thought about it and then you move further away from each other. But, and this is something that links back again to the 70s movement for example with The Doors, where vision is something that is something that is very singular and truth is very singular. It is a very elitist concept. As soon as you get away from this concept of vision being something that— and truth that only you have, you get into this dialogue. Into a continuous dialogue, which I think is very important because then truth becomes a very democratic concept and also the idea of having a vision of how something could be and you're not afraid of expressing it, because you know that other people can accept that this is only a work in progress but then they contribute something to my idea, to advance this work of progress and suddenly we develop, but as a whole. And each one individually as well.

AE: And in regards to the theme of this lecture series – this idea of another place, another time – the abstraction between your own view of the world and that which other people might perceive and so on, the abstraction necessary to communicate these things, is also something which kind of builds

the dialogue and builds the— I don't want to say the whole picture because I think we've established there is no whole picture, but the approximation of the whole and of this universal truth. And we need abstraction for that to some extent.

AH: We need abstraction for that and literature and art is a way of giving us the means of having this abstraction which makes art and literature so important and all kinds of literature. Because literature in most cases refers to another place, another time, simply because it's a fictional work. It's not reality that you have in literature. So you're always at another place in another time and it allows you to abstract ideas and that allows authors to communicate these ideas and also to influence the readership and to disseminate these ideas. So literature is essential in that process.

AE: I think these are perfect closing words! So thank you very much for taking the time to do this!

AH: Thank you very much, Annika, for bearing with me and Blake.

AE: And thank you all very much for listening. Next week I'll be speaking with Carolyn Burlingame-Goff about transporting social criticism into the fictional world of *Star Trek*.