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NEGATIVE THEOLOGY, RANDOM PROFANITY, AND SUBVERSIVE SEMIOTICS IN WILLIAM BLAKE'S *THE MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND HELL*

WİLLİAM BLAKE'İN *CENNET İLE CEHENNEMİN EVLİLİĞİ* ADLI ESERİNDE NEGATİF TEOLOJİ, RASTGELE PROFANLIK VE GÖSTERGEBİLİME TAHRİPKAR YAKLAŞIMLAR

Neslihan ŞENTÜRK UZUN

Dr., Karamanoglu Mehmetbey University, Faculty of Letters, Department of English Language and Literature, Karaman, Turkey
ORCID: 0000-0001-9963-6495

Sorumlu yazar/ Corresponding author:
Neslihan ŞENTÜRK UZUN, Dr, Karamanoglu Mehmetbey University, Faculty of Letters, Department of English Language and Literature, Karaman, Turkey
Email:
neslihansenturk@kmu.edu.tr

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Abstract

The focus of this study is an examination of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790) by William Blake (1757-1827), the English poet and engraver, aiming to demonstrate its provocative exploration of language and semiotic paradigms. By navigating through the expanse of Blake's revolutionary and semiotic approaches, it seeks to shed light on his deliberate subversion of politically charged, traditional linguistic and religious norms during the Romantic period. Additionally, the study underscores the pivotal role of "negative theology" and "random profanity" – essentially, an unorthodox treatment of religious experience and an outright departure from expected communication norms in a religious context, respectively – within Blake's narrative, examining Blake's adept fusion of the sacred and the profane to disrupt conventional semiotic frameworks. The study specifically notes that *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* itself is an attempt to invert not only the so-called one-to-one correspondence between the sign and the meaning it refers to, but also the binaries that are culturally conceived as contrasting and incongruous. In pursuit of these objectives, this paper aims to draw thought-provoking parallels between Blake's subversive linguistic techniques and the semiotic theories advanced by St. Augustine (354-430) and C. S. Peirce (1839-1914). It accentuates Blake's deliberate deviation from such fixed signs methodologies as put forth by St. Augustine, pointing out the consonance between Blake's approach and Peirce's dynamic triadic model of signification. Ultimately, the study endeavours to elucidate how Blake's disruptive linguistic position in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* not only contests customary sign systems but also actively fosters interpretations that are not only profound but subversive as well. Serving as a crucial conduit, Blake's seminal work serves as a significant bridge connecting established semiotic conventions with the dynamic semiotic vision posited by C. S. Peirce, ultimately fostering a more nuanced and expansive apprehension of Blake's literary and philosophical legacies.

Öz

Bu çalışmanın odak noktası, İngiliz şair ve gravür sanatçısı William Blake'e ait (1757-1827*) Cennet ile Cehennemin Evliliği* (1790) adlı eserde dil ve semiyotik paradigmaların provokatif bir şekilde ele alınması üzerine bir inceleme sunmaktır. Bu makale kapsamında Blake'in devrimci ve semiyotik yaklaşımlarının derinliklerinde gezinmekteki amaç, şairin Romantik dönemde politik açıdan yüklü, geleneksel dil ve dini normları kasıtlı olarak nasıl altüst ettiğini ortaya koymaktır. Ayrıca çalışma, Blake'in anlatısında kullanılan "negatif teoloji" ve "rastgele profanlık" gibi yöntemlerin hayati rolünü vurgular. Şairin kutsal ve dünyevi arasındaki farklarını silikleştirilmek suretiyle esasında onları yekpare hale getirmesinin, geleneksel semiyotik çerçeveleri nasıl altüst ettiğini inceler. Bu kapsamda burada öne sürülmektedir ki özellikle *Cennet ile Cehennemin Evliliği* adlı eserde altüst edilmek istenen, yalnızca işaret (sign) ile onun tekabül ettiği varsayılan anlam (meaning) arasındaki sözde uyum değil, aynı zamanda kültürel olarak zıt ve uyumsuz kabul edilen sözde ihtilaflı ikili yapılardır (binaries). Yukarıda sıralanan amaçlar doğrultusunda bu makale, Blake'in *Cennet ile Cehennemin Evliliği* adlı eserindeki tahripkâr dil teknikleri ile St. Augustine (354-430) ve C. S. Peirce (1839-1914) tarafından ortaya konmuş göstergebilim teorileri arasında bir gerek çatışma gerekse uzlaşıdan kaynaklı birtakım süreklilikler ortaya koyar. Blake'in St. Augustine tarafından savunulan "sabit işaretler" (fixed signs) metotlarından niçin sapmayı tercih ettiğini irdeler ve Blake'in yaklaşımının Peirce'in dinamik bir anlayışla oluşturduğu "işaretlemenin üçlü modeli" (triadic model of signification) ile uyumlu olan taraflarını gösterir. Sonuç olarak bu çalışma, Blake'in *Cennet ile Cehennemin Evliliği* adlı eserindeki ezber bozucu dil kullanımının sadece geleneksel işaret sistemlerine meydan okumakla kalmayıp aynı zamanda derin ve tahripkâr yorumları da aktif olarak teşvik ettiğini açıklamayı amaçlamaktadır. Blake'in okuyucuya yeni ufuklar açan eseri, yerleşik semiyotik kuralları C. S. Peirce'in dinamik semiyotik vizyonu ile birleştiren önemli bir köprü vazifesi görerek, şairin edebi ve felsefi mirasına daha incelikli ancak kapsamlı bir bakış açısı sunar.

1. INTRODUCTION

William Blake (1757-1827), the English poet and engraver of profound visionary insight, stands as an individual luminary whose singular *oeuvre* eludes classification within conventional boundaries. The distinctiveness of his creative output renders any attempt at categorisation a formidable challenge. From his earliest days, Blake professed to have experienced mystical religious encounters ranging from the vision of God's countenance nearby to celestial apparitions and visits from such prophets as Ezekiel (Tatham, 1906, p. 20). The fusion of such experiences coalesced into a continuum of profound and remarkable episodes in Blake's life, presumably acting as a catalyst for a lifelong odyssey marked by profound spiritual quests. Indeed, the full expanse of Blake's artistic and literary output offers persuasive documentation of the profound and unwavering faith "imbued with a religion of piety, enthusiasm and vision" (Ackroyd, 1995, p. 18).

On another biographical note, one can see that Blake's work is also characterized by heavy symbolism, recurring themes of familial dysfunction, and a portrayal of the "father figure" as both oppressive and symbolic, appearing as "a serpent or a priest" (Ackroyd, 1995, p. 21). Considering the hardships in terms of building a healthy relationship with his family, it is almost unsurprising that Blake's creative efforts were aimed at forging a distinct literary heritage. Blake's "instinctively questioning and potentially rebellious nature" (Beer, 2005, p. 3) motivated him to create epic poetry driven by a desire to establish a unique legacy and lineage entirely of his own making (Ackroyd, 1995, p. 21), without exclusively or approvingly relying on governing bodies, existing traditions, or influences.

Given this biographical framework, it is reasonable to assert that Blake's earlier literary corpus brims with a rebellious ethos, positioning itself as a resolute resistance against the constraints imposed by figures of authority, which notably include dogmatic religious tenets. This defiant sentiment finds its most poignant expression in his seminal work, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790).[1] In this literary opus, Blake offers a profound critique of rigid religious dogmas and a simultaneous exaltation of the "Devil" as a symbol of heroism, unwavering in his defiance against the autocratic bodies masquerading as sacred figures.

The distinctive argument of this paper lies in its exploration of Blake's subversive semiotics within *The Marriage*, drawing connections between his approach and the semiotic

[1] From this point forward in the paper, the full title *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* will be abbreviated as *The Marriage* for brevity and ease of reference.

theories of notable figures such as St. Augustine and C. S. Peirce. At its core, this study rests on the premise that this visionary masterpiece, true to its name, not only challenges the *status quo*, but also offers a critical scrutiny of established semiotic norms. *The Marriage* indeed stands an audacious endeavour aimed at disrupting the established associations between signs and their assigned meanings. It is an act that, in the process, confronts and shakes the very foundations of deeply ingrained cultural dichotomies. Moreover, with its unorthodox treatment of religious experience (negative theology) and its outright revolt against expected norms of communication in a religious context (random profanity), Blake's masterpiece emerges as a powerfully provocative catalyst for dismantling and subsequent reshaping of the very fabric of communication. Taking these ideas into consideration, the investigation in this paper seeks to delve into the intricate layers of Blake's artistic and philosophical pursuits, thus facilitating a deeper insight into his legacy as a pioneering Romantic poet.

By establishing links between Blake's (1757-1827) subversive semiotic discourse in *The Marriage* and such influential figures in semiotics as St. Augustine (354-430) and C. S. Peirce (1839-1914), this paper aims to highlight the depth of Blake's intellectual engagement in theological and semiotic scholarship, and situate his approach within a broader domain. St. Augustine, a prominent figure in Western theology and philosophy, profoundly influenced the understanding of the relationship between language, semiotics, and theology. His seminal works including *On Christian Doctrine* (397) stand as a cornerstone for understanding the complex relationship between signs and meanings within a religious context. Juxtaposing Blake's creative and intellectual contributions with St. Augustine's insights on theological and semiotic paradigms casts a light on Blake's engagement with and departure from such established conventions.

Likewise, C. S. Peirce, widely recognized as the pioneer of modern semiotics, is a prominent figure in the field. His triadic model of signification, focusing on the dynamics between the sign, the object, and the interpretant, served as a fundamental underpinning for contemporary semiotic thought in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Through a comparison of Blake's provocative and unorthodox use of signs and symbols (i.e., his semiotic rebellion) with Peirce's triadic framework, this paper aims to shed further light on the extent to which Blake positions himself within the semiotic discourse by contextualizing his work within the theological and semiotic traditions that preceded and followed his time.

2. BLAKE'S SUBVERSIVE SEMIOTICS

The field of semiotics, dedicated to the study of signs and their application, explores the intricate ways in which meaning is generated, communicated, and comprehended across a range of sign systems, including language, visual symbols, and gestures. On the other hand, "semiotic subversion" involves the purposeful disruption or defiance of established meanings, conventions, dominant ideologies, power structures, and social norms expressed through signs and symbols. Within the historical context of the 18th and 19th centuries, characterized by notable socio-political shifts (i.e., the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and revolutions)[2], a subversive semiotic approach served to critique and challenge prevailing power structures, at times aligning itself, albeit ambivalently, with the period's revolutionary *ethos*. This course of semiotic subversion has undeniably left an enduring mark on cultural and artistic expression, ultimately laying the groundwork for the emergence of postmodernism in the 20th century, where the deconstruction of signs and symbols emerged as a pivotal aspect of literary and artistic movements.

A key figure in the Romantic movement, Blake aimed to challenge the established norms and systems of his time, specifically the authority of the monarchy and the Church of England. His works were marked by a fervent dedication to social justice, addressing concerns such as child labour and societal hypocrisies.[3] Blake's *The Marriage* was written and completed in the early 1790s, during the radically turbulent political landscape of the French Revolution. Whereas such influential figures as Edmund Burke, whose *Reflections on the Revolution in*

[2] The Enlightenment period of the 18th century prominently prioritized reason, scientific exploration, and a faith in human advancement. Within this milieu, semiotic subversion often materialized as a confrontational stance against religious and monarchical authority, employing satire and irony as instruments to subvert established beliefs and practices. The literary endeavours of Jonathan Swift and Voltaire stand as exemplary instances of utilizing satire and irony to subvert societal and political norms. Their works dared to challenge the prevailing *status quo* and provocatively interrogate the authority wielded by the ruling elite. On the other hand, the 19th century marked the ascendancy of Romanticism, a movement that celebrated emotion, individualism, and nature. Semiotic subversion in this era often entailed a recalibration of established artistic and literary conventions, fostering the genesis of inventive and novel forms of expression. Renowned artists of the 19th century, including Francisco Goya, employed visual subversion as a compelling means to illustrate the brutal realities of war, castigate social injustices, and articulate potent political and emotional messages within the realm of their artistic endeavours.

[3] Although Blake remained unaffiliated with any recognized political faction, the language he used to express his apprehensions with the detrimental consequences of the Industrial Revolution, and his employment of symbolic language to narrate the far-reaching repercussions of the French and American revolutions and capture the nuanced complexities of these historical events consistently embodies a rebellious spirit against the misuse of class power, a theme thoroughly examined in David V. Erdman's seminal work *Prophet Against Empire: A Poet's Interpretation of the History of His Own Times* (1954).

France (1790) aimed to reduce the early English enthusiasm for the revolutionary cause,[4] considering the revolution as a total break with the past, Blake viewed it as a return to a tradition[5] even older than the one on which Burke had based his argument.[6] Especially influenced by J.J. Rousseau and Thomas Paine at this stage in his career, Blake believed the French Revolution would return humanity to its original, uncorrupted form (Richey, 1992, pp. 817-818). Blake's work, situated within the socio-political and intellectual context of his time, underscores the profound significance of the quest for a pristine language and, consequently, the deliberate practice of semiotic subversion.

Furthermore, Blake's deep spiritual and mystical perspective called for a language that could rise above conventional religious expressions, allowing him to convey his direct, personal connection with the divine. Blake's goal was to devise an untainted language that would eliminate the dangers of miscommunication and misrepresentation. This language was intended to challenge authority, champion individualism, convey personal experiences, express mysticism, criticize social injustice, and nurture artistic innovation during his era. In this respect, it could be held that semiotic subversion not only gave Blake the means to critique and undermine the symbols and language established institutions relied on to perpetuate their authority; but it also enabled him to stress the pressing nature of social issues and bring attention to the plight of those in the margin.

Blake's Romantic and visionary stance in *The Marriage* corresponds with his view of the revolutionary stance, specifically within the context of the French Revolution, as a potential

[4] Blake articulates his disapproving views of figures such as Burke in the following note, providing a clear expression of his critical assessment: "I read Burkes Treatise when very Young... I felt the Same Contempt & Abhorrence then; that I do now." (qtd. in Ackroyd, 1995, p. 25)

[5] Sophia Rosenfeld in *A Revolution in Language: The Problem of Signs in Late Eighteenth-Century France* (2001) juxtaposes the evolving ideas of language and the all-encompassing upheaval that swept over France in the latter half of the eighteenth century and draws a connection between the French Revolution and the dispute over "signs," which she demonstrates preoccupied the thinking of numerous intellectuals and cultural critics from the 1740s to the early nineteenth century. "At the end of the eighteenth century," states Rosenfeld, "enlightened inquiries into the evolution and function of signs had a decisive impact on how people saw the political struggle around them unfolding, how they imagined or tried to shape its conclusion, and, finally, how they wrote its history" (p. 246). Accordingly, she adds, the revolutionaries devoutly struggled from 1789 to "purify and rationalize the national language in accordance with *the rules ostensibly provided by nature*" (p. 130, emphasis added).

[6] It is essential to recognise, however, that the investigation into William Blake's intellectual connection with the French Revolution represents a multifaceted issue that underwent a transformative evolution over time. Recognition must be given to the fact that Blake's approach to the revolution cannot not be characterised as stable; within his ideological stance, temporal nuances were evident. This is particularly pronounced when examining the significant shift occurring between 1789 and 1792, coinciding with the Reign of Terror. For a thorough exploration of Blake's changing views on the French Revolution, it is advisable to refer to influential scholarly texts such as Northrop Frye's *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (1947), David Erdman's *Blake: Prophet Against Empire: A Poet's Interpretation of the History of His Own Times* (1954), and Jacob Bronowski's *William Blake and the Age of Revolution* (1965).

means to rediscover a purer, unspoiled state of human existence. This perspective enhances the work's lasting impact in the domains of literature and philosophy. Blake's conviction that prevailing social, political, and religious systems had tainted and constrained human nature led him to see the revolution as an opportunity to transcend these restrictions and enable individuals to rediscover a sense of freedom, authenticity, and a connection with their genuine, uncorrupted selves. Aside from mirroring the prophetic scriptures (Altizer, 2009, p. 33), *The Marriage* was therefore composed to deliberately convey Blake's profound Romantic and revolutionary ideals (Mee, 2003, p. 137), including his distinctive approach to language and random blending of the sacred with the profane – which ultimately functions to problematise the rigid and dogmatic facets of traditional religion.

In *The Marriage*, Blake presents sections titled "A Memorable Fancy" that merge visionary encounters, mystical ideas, and provocative imagery. This part represents Blake's intent to undermine traditional religious narratives and meld the divine with the profane, potentially stimulating critical thinking and exploration of refreshed perspectives. In the very first "A Memorable Fancy", Blake creates an image of "walking among the fires of Hell, delighted with the enjoyments of genius (which to angels look like torment and insanity)" (Blake, 2007, p. 113). This image carries a profound message, asserting that the prevailing concepts of heaven and hell are essentially constructs imposed by established religion.[7] Additionally, it conveys the notion that human beings can draw insights from the "Infernal wisdom" (p. 113) as seen in the subsequent part titled "Proverbs of Hell". Evidently, this section stands out as one of the most memorable segments in the text, featuring a series of deliberately blasphemous and randomly profane aphorisms when considered through the spectacles of traditional religion. As an illustration, it contains aphorisms such as "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom" (p. 113) and "The nakedness of woman is the work of God" (p. 114). These proverbs disrupt established moral and religious norms, prompting readers to re-evaluate the boundaries between what is sacred and profane.

Blake further exhibits his subversive approach in his treatment of the character of the Devil. Usually considered the embodiment of evil, the Devil in *The Marriage* is portrayed as a liberator and a harbinger of enlightenment. By casting a figure typically associated with evil as a hero and a symbol of resistance against an authoritarian God, Blake intentionally blurs the lines pertaining to the preconceived classifications of religion. Last but not least, throughout

[7] Therefore, for Blake, "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is—infinite." (*The Marriage*, p. 120)

The Marriage, Blake examines the concept of "contraries", proposing that the juxtaposition of opposites is a progressive act that unveils higher and deeper truths (e.g., "Without Contraries is no progression", p. 111). This philosophical stance contests traditional religious binaries and fosters the fusion of elements, underlining their interdependence.

The instances in *The Marriage* where Blake aims for the deliberate fusion of the sacred and the profane (referred to as his "subversive semiotics" in this article) carries substantial implications for the customary one-to-one association between signs and meanings. These ramifications disrupt traditional semiotic and linguistic conventions by emphasizing the multiplicity of meanings and the role of context in it, as they carry out the subversion of established symbols across the text, thus unveiling the intrinsic interplay of contraries. This progression ultimately results in a critical examination of signs thanks to Blake's implementations of "negative theology"[8] that at once points to the limitations and expansive capabilities of language, and "random profanity"[9] as a tool of provocation and reappraisal of the profane within the bounds of language.

Blake's purposeful melding of the sacred and the profane emphasizes the multitude of meanings that signs and symbols can convey. Traditional semiotics typically presumes a singular, permanent meaning to be linked with a sign,[10] but in Blake's work, the very symbols, words, and images can convey conflicting or layered meanings, disrupting the notion of a one-to-one correspondence and emphasizing the intricacy of interpretation. This is because, in Blake's text, the interpretation of signs is not haphazard but profoundly tied to the context. This is illustrated in *The Marriage* when the angel shows Blake his "eternal lot" in hell, but when the angel disappears, he finds himself "sitting on a pleasant bank beside a river by moonlight, hearing a harper who sung to the harp" (pp. 122, 123). When the angel asks him how he escaped, Blake says that "All that we saw was owing to your metaphysics" (p. 123). This part of the text accentuates the significance of considering the context in semiotic analysis, as meaning (i.e.,

[8] Negative theology describes the divine by emphasizing what God is *not*, acknowledging language's limitations in describing the transcendent. Blake's work, characterized by the tension between opposites, parallels this approach, but it not only highlights the limitations of language, but also its infinite potential when reversed, hence the need for nuanced understanding. In *The Marriage*, Blake challenges conventional religious narrative/symbols through unconventional portrayals of such figures as devil, angel, evil, and heaven, embracing negative theology and subverting traditional symbols to transcend language's confines.

[9] Random profanity comes to the fore when Blake's text deviates from established norms of communication through the use of offensive language. This disruption mirrors Blake's challenge to religious norms, using provocative language to subvert the traditional process of signification. Blake's linguistic "profanity" in the text, including the inversion of religious symbols and norms, therefore challenges established doctrines, prompting readerly reflection on their assumptions.

[10] See: Umberto Eco. (1976). *A Theory of Semiotics*. Indiana University Press. pp. 14-15.

hell as a place of eternal torment) does not solely arise from the sign (i.e., *hell*) itself but is profoundly impacted by the surrounding context (i.e., the angel's metaphysics). Blake's approach therefore subverts established symbols, particularly those with religious significance, raising questions about the notion that specific symbols should invariably convey culturally accepted meanings, thus underscoring the flexibility and subjectivity of semiotic interpretation. Thus, Blake's deliberate blending of boundaries and fusion of contraries exposes that opposites, such as good and evil, are not mere negations of each other but can exist together and even complement each other. Challenging the normative boundaries of interpretation, this critical perspective on semiotics calls into question the idea of passive reception of meaning and instead promotes active, reflective interpretation – ultimately suggesting that signs can exist along a spectrum, and their meanings can be fluid as well as context-driven.

3. PRE-SEMIOTIC THOUGHT OF ST. AUGUSTINE AND BLAKE'S POST-LAPSARIAN LANGUAGE SCHEME

This section examines the fundamental distinctions and correlations between St. Augustine's pre-semiotic philosophy and William Blake's innovative use of language. Investigating these divergent perspectives offers insights into Blake's departure from established theological and semiotic traditions through the utilization of negative theology and random profanity in *The Marriage*.

St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD) established the specifically Christian Medieval theory of the *apriori* basis of signs (i.e., the language of Adam,[11] independent of any phenomenal experience). According to St. Augustine's theory of signs, as Vincent B. Leitch points out, only a meaning that already exists may be communicated through language, which therefore cannot be "reflexive" or frivolous, and it must obliterate itself in order to point to "the preexistent truth it represents" (2001, p. 9). In *On Christian Doctrine*, St. Augustine defines the sign as "a thing which causes us to think of something beyond the impression the thing itself makes upon the senses" (1958, p. 34). In the framework of Christian theology, this viewpoint affirms, for instance, that heaven is desirable, and that hell has an undesirable connotation because the sign system cannot but reflect an everlasting "truth" predetermined by God – which can never be tarnished by language, itself being a post-lapsarian[12] sign system. In the words of St. Augustine,

[11] See: Robert N. Essick. *William Blake and the Language of Adam*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. p. 36.
[12] The term "post-lapsarian" is used in Christian theological contexts to describe language or communication that transpired after the fall of humanity.

> …when we speak the truth, that is, speak of what we know, then the word which is born from the knowledge itself which we retain in the memory must be altogether of the same kind as that knowledge from which it is born. For the thought formed from that thing which we know is the word which we speak in our heart, and it is neither Greek, nor Latin, nor of any other language, but when we have to bring it to the knowledge; of those to whom we are speaking, then some sign is assumed by which it may be made known. (2001, p. 193)

In this view, the sign that pre-exists language is pre-linguistic, yet it is the likeness of the truth, the word of God - word that is pre-semiotic. This presupposition suggests that the meaning is to be directly conveyed by this scheme because, no matter which system is used, the truth will eventually be revealed. For St. Augustine, as Margaret W. Ferguson duly points out, "…all language is a metaphorical detour in the road to God because no sequence of words, even 'proper' words, can adequately represent an atemporal and holistic significance" (1975, p. 844). In this regard, similar to Blake, St. Augustine appears to complicate the relationship between the signifier and the signified. His distinctive contribution, as Leitch posits, is the fusion of the theory of signs with the theory of language, which had previously been treated as separate (2001, p. 186).

On the other hand, St. Augustine posits that signs are categorized into two groups: *natural* and *conventional*. Accordingly, the word "fire", for example, which signifies accidental heat, light, and flames that uncontrollably harm and destroy things belongs to the former category. Considered within the context of sacred books, "fire" is conventionally associated with "hell", which is automatically connoted to a place not only undesirable but also painful – the dwelling of sinners for eternal punishment.[13] One can hence find "wisdom" in an angelic realm; and one can "enjoy" heavenly atmosphere. St. Augustine's sign theory in this respect implies that the occurrences and concepts are motivated by a self-evident *intentionality*. Difference or relationality, however, are not matters of consideration.

In contrast, William Blake's perspective in *The Marriage* deviates from the idea that language intrinsically mirrors Adam's pre-linguistic language. Blake's objective is to sidestep

[13] Augustine explains that "Conventional signs are those which living creatures show to one another for the purpose of conveying, in so far as they are able, the motion of their spirits or something which they have sensed or understood. Nor is there any other reason for signifying, or for giving signs, except for bringing forth and transferring to another mind the action of the mind in the person who makes the sign. We propose to consider and to discuss this class of signs in so far as men are concerned with it, for even signs given by God and contained in the Holy Scriptures are of this type also, since they were presented to us by the men who wrote them." (1958, pp. 34-35)

the archetypal interpretations of the origin and function of language. Following the tradition of Dante's *Inferno* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*[14], Blake in *The Marriage* deviates from St. Augustine's language scheme right from the outset, beginning with his choice of title. In Blake's subversive approach to language, the notion arises that it might not be some pre-existing truth that dictates the course of language, but rather, it is highly plausible that the situation is reversed: language, being a post-lapsarian construct, generates and shapes human beings' grasp of truth.

To this end, Blake travels to hell, details his heavenly encounters and, more provocatively, profane exploits. Harold Blooms formulation that "[i]n content, the *Marriage* compounds ethical and theological 'contraries'; in form it mocks the categorical techniques that seek to make the contraries appear as 'negations'" (1958, p. 501) resonates in Blake's vision in *The Marriage*, evoking the idea that there is a dynamic relationship between, for example, the stable "heaven" and an energized "hell". As a result, a consciously subversive narrative unfolds, detailing Blake's imaginative journeys in hell, specifically in the section titled "A Memorable Fancy":

> As I was walking among the fires of hell, delighted with the enjoyments of genius (which to Angels look like torment and insanity), I collected some of their proverbs: thinking that as the sayings used in a nation mark its character, so the proverbs of Hell, shew the nature of Infernal wisdom better than any description of buildings or garments. (p. 113)

Here Blake is not only wandering among the fires but quite blasphemously *enjoying* it. For him, it is a delight, but for angels, it appears to be torment. Moreover, against the idea that anything coming out of hell must be evil and of inferior nature, the "proverbs" Blake collects from hell do reflect "Infernal wisdom". In this instance, he exhibits not only a sense of irony but also an inclination towards deconstructing the established paradigms pertaining to hell and the religious doctrines.

According to Harold Bloom, "the specific difficulty in reading *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is to mark the limits of its irony" (1958, p. 501). This intricacy stems from the uncertainty of whether Blake is expressing his genuine insights at a given passage, or employing

[14] By engaging with themes related to the human condition, spirituality, and the dichotomy of good and evil in a provocative fashion, Blake in *The Marriage* follows a thematic lineage established by Dante and Milton. Much like Dante's descent through Hell and Milton's portrayal of the Fall of Man, Blake's work navigates these themes through a narrative that is visionary and laden with symbolism, offering an alternative perspective on the nature of good and evil, divinity, and the human experience.

an ironic voice. Because he does not "speak straight" (p. 501), Blake's writing might at first seem to be deliberately enshrouded in the ambiguity of the meaning he intends to impart through words. This is what St. Augustine would find difficult in determination of the meaning from a text because in his system, figurative language, which includes irony, is a sheer handicap for proper communication,[15] disrupting the correspondence between the signifier and the signified. For St. Augustine, then, literal is normative, institutional; hence denotation, the dictionary definition of a word, poses the authoritative meaning. Blake, in contrast, seemingly repeating the institutionalized language of sacred books with an underlying irony, prepares the reader for the argument he is going to build vis-à-vis the Augustinian precepts. When he famously writes "Good is Heaven; Evil is Hell" (p. 111), Blake ironically mimics the language of the sacred books, religious people, as well as the angels, but later twists them by making iconoclastic statements such as "The tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction" (p. 115). Obviously, Blake's intent is not conformity but subversion; and initially priming the reader with an expectation of a traditional religious argument, he subverts the familiar discourse and dismantles conventional religious precepts by injecting his own iconoclastic ideas.

Nevertheless, Blake's position is not characterized by complete rejection. Instead, his stance can be framed as a commitment to negative theology. He seems to maintain in *The Marriage* that divine teachings could be viewed through an alternative lens, one that is less confining. By disrupting the customary meanings to which dualities point, this perspective aims to reveal the grandeur of God. With this objective in mind, he challenges the notions that religious doctrines extol by employing oxymorons in such "Proverbs of Hell" as "Prudence is a rich ugly old maid courted by incapacity", "The pride of the peacock is the glory of God", "The lust of the goat is the bounty of God", "The nakedness of woman is the work of God" (pp. 113-114). Here, in contrast to affirming or making positive judgments about who or what God is, Blake's negative theology engages with the Divine through negation; that is, only in terms of what has not conventionally been regarded as the ways and works of God. In this way, Blake constitutes his own narrative that consists of a language system that is not bounded by mainstream perceptions.

While in St. Augustine's sign system, language carries an inherent and pre-existing meaning within it, making it less reflexive than the figurative language of poetry as the former

[15] "There are two reasons why things written are not understood", states St. Augustine, "they are obscured either by unknown or by ambiguous signs. For signs are either literal or figurative. They are called literal when they are used to designate those things on account of which they were instituted… Figurative signs occur when that thing which we designate by a literal sign is used to signify something else. (1958, p. 43)

represents the eternal truth, Blake offers a dissenting perspective in another "Memorable Fancy":

> The Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel dined with me, and I asked them how they dared so roundly to assert that God spoke to them, and whether they did not think at the time that they would be misunderstood, and so be the cause of imposition. Isaiah answered: "I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception: but my senses discovered the infinite in everything; and as I was then persuaded, and remain confirmed, that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God, I cared not for consequences, but wrote." (p. 117)

Isaiah's response underscores that in the absence of a direct sensory interaction with God, a profound perception of the infinite in everything through one's senses can serve as a valid replacement. This epitomises Blake's conviction that language and perception function as dynamic means for generating truth, and that divine revelation need not be restricted to conventional religious frameworks. Blake's stance is in accord with the idea that language goes beyond the mere conveyance of pre-existing truths; it actively partakes in the formation of meaning and truth. This showcases his iconoclastic and forward-thinking approach to language and spirituality. The conversation continues with a fundamental philosophical question, and Isaiah underscores the transformative potential of the human intellect and the pivotal role that poets and artists assume in shaping perception and belief:

> Then I asked: "Does a firm persuasion that a thing is so, make it so?"
>
> He replied: "All poets believe that it does, & in ages of imagination this firm persuasion removed mountains…" (p. 118)

In Blake's universe, the prophet as a religious figure contradicts St. Augustine's perspective by explicitly affirming that he, akin to poets, has the capacity to create meaning through the agency of unwavering conviction. This line of thought leads to the premise that the formation of meaning occurs through language. In this context, Blake reiterates the argument that figurative linguistic techniques could also serve to transform and create truth, rather than being necessarily derived from any pre-existing truth.

4. C. S. PEIRCE'S TRIADIC FORMULA OF SIGNIFICATION AND BLAKE'S IDIOSYNCRATIC USE OF WORDS

This section is dedicated to exploring the affinities between C.S. Peirce's investigations into the concept of signs and William Blake's strikingly innovative use of language in *The*

Marriage. Examining these viewpoints offers a window into Blake's visionary thought, which he endeavoured to communicate by means of negative theology and random profanity. This comparative analysis of Blake's daring approach to signs and symbols (i.e., his semiotic rebellion in which one can find the notion of unlimited semiosis and openness of the text) vis-à-vis Peirce's triadic model seeks to illuminate Blake's position within the semiotic discourse, situating his work within one of the most influential semiotic traditions (i.e., Peirce's triad of semiosis) that followed his era.

In *The Marriage*, Blake challenges the conventional notion of words having fixed and stable meanings. Instead, he uses words in a way that makes their references act as signs. One example is Blake's use of the words "Energy" and "Reason". According to traditional religious interpretations, Blake explicitly states that "Energy" is assigned a specific, unchanging definition associated with force or power, and it is also termed Evil, while "Reason" is affiliated with Good (p. 111). Nevertheless, Blake does not adhere to this fixed, customary correspondence. He employs the word "Energy" in a manner that transcends its conventional meaning, transforming it into a symbol for a more intricate concept, including creativity, vitality, and transformative power. In contrast, his use of "Reason" gradually shifts to denote passivity and stagnation, taking on a dynamic and multifaceted role. In light of this, Peirce's triadic logic about the signification process does not come across as unfamiliar:

> A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen. (1932, p. 228)

This interaction between the *representamen*, the object, and the interpretant is referred to by Peirce as "semiosis". Accordingly, the connection between the sign (*representamen*) and the object is not fixed but can be rather fluid as well as different, which underscores the fact that the sign has the potential to carry multiple meanings at once, with the consequence that "there is no such thing as a Lockean idea whose meaning is immediately, intuitively known or experienced" (Hoopes, 1991, p. 7).[16] Peirce within this premise asserts that a sign, rather than

[16] "A sign receives its meaning by being interpreted by a subsequent thought or action… what Peirce called an interpretant… The meaning lies not in the perception but in the interpretation of the perception... Peirce held that… every thought is a sign without meaning until interpreted by a subsequent thought, an interpretant. Thus the meaning of every thought is established by a triadic relation, an interpretation of the thought as a sign of a

directly signifying something on its own, relies on the mental concept or understanding it triggers in the interpreter's mind, known also as the interpretant.

By extension, Peirce's semiotic theory posits that a semiotic object can also operate as a sign, permitting signs to represent other signs or semiotic objects. This recursive process results in a multifaceted network of signification, a fundamental element of Peirce's semiotic philosophy:

> The object of representation can be nothing but a representation of which the first representation is the interpretant. But an endless series of representations, each representing the one behind it, may be conceived to have an absolute object as its limit. The meaning of a representation can be nothing but a representation. In fact, it is nothing but the representation itself conceived as stripped of irrelevant clothing. But this clothing never can be completely stripped off; it is only changed for something more diaphanous. So there is an infinite regression here. Finally, the interpretant is nothing but another representation to which the torch of truth is handled along; and as representation, it has its interpretant again. Lo, another infinite series.[17]

The triadic model, therefore, might as well necessitate a deferral of a concrete and stable meaning.[18] The quoted sentence suggests that, depending on the viewpoint and context of consideration, one object can yield different interpretants. Just as Peirce's quote indicates, the meaning behind Blake's utilization of "Energy" in *The Marriage* is akin to an ever-evolving, infinite chain of interpretations. The interpretant itself acts as another representation, persisting in an unbroken cycle. This interpretation never reaches a definitive, absolute object; rather, it remains in a state of constant evolution and transformation.

Peirce's triadic formula, in its essence, is not intrinsically subversive; it is a descriptive model for examining and comprehending the dynamics of sign interpretation. However, its application in diverse contexts, particularly those of a subversive framework, has the potential to undermine established norms. A demonstration of the correspondences between the semiotic

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determining object." James Hoopes, 1991, p. 7. "Introduction". *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic*. James Hoopes (Ed.) Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 1-13.

[17] See: Peirce, vol. 1, p. 339.

[18] As M. Gottdiener states, "semiosis" for Peirce is "a process of infinite regression… Meaning is always deferred, always in a state of becoming through contrast between sign and sign (its interpretant)." (2015, p. 161). It must be noted, however, that as per Peirce and his pragmatic approach, this deferral does not prevent us from understanding something. Because all thinking is conducted through signs, it is impossible to utterly get rid of the sign system and the problems in practice.

subversion in *The Marriage* and Peirce's triadic formula can be found in Blake's interaction with the Angel as mentioned in earlier sections.[19] The initial *sign* (representamen) in this context is the angel's revelation of Blake's "eternal lot" in hell, which acts as the representation that initiates the interpretation process. Blake's interpretant is defined by his perception and experience, stripped of religious or cultural elements, where he finds himself seated on a picturesque riverbank in moonlight, listening to a harper's music. This fresh experience embodies the mental concept that Blake connects to the angel's revelation. The object in this instance pertains to Blake's liberation from the previously unveiled "eternal lot" in hell, a result he attributes to the influence of angel's "metaphysics". This indicates that the Angel's perspective may be falling short of encompassing the complete scope of divine truth. In another instance, after giving reference to the Gospel, Blake makes fun of the concept of holy trinity by saying: "But in Milton, the Father is destiny, the Son a ratio of the five senses, and the Holy Ghost, Vacuum" (p. 112). Blake's adoption of random profanity in his work has the aim of muddling the distinctions between the divine and the diabolical. Nonetheless, Blake proposes that this profanity might also serve as a vehicle for not only subverting established norms but also comprehending the divine in its primordial form.

Blake's *The Marriage* also offers numerous instances to illustrate his adoption of negative theology, inadvertently anticipating Peirce's triadic formula. The title serves as a prime example of Blake's approach. By placing "Heaven" alongside "Hell", he challenges traditional religious binaries, and throughout the text, he expands on this notion, indicating that the customary conceptions of heaven and hell might not faithfully portray the essence of divinity. Blake also provocatively blurs the lines between good and evil, suggesting that the divine and diabolical are not separate entities. By doing so, he shows that the devil might represent a necessary force in the balance of existence. By conducting these reassessments and juxtapositions, Blake provides a pathway to a more intricate grasp of the devil and divinity, effectively practicing "negative theology" by illustrating what the devil may truly represent.

Blake posits that a word's reference has the capacity to span a broad array of meanings, and the presumed direct correspondence between the two agents, the sign and the signified, is fundamentally problematic. As Blake's idiosyncratic conception of words does not appear to have room for a pre-linguistic truth, his subversive use of semiotics in *The Marriage* can be seen as predominantly at odds with St. Augustine's doctrines while also serving as an antecedent of Peircean semiosis.

[19] See: p. 7.

5. CONCLUSION

The investigation into William Blake's seminal work, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* brings to light the profound implications arising from his ground-breaking and semiotic initiatives. Deliberately fusing the sacred with the profane and employing a disruptive approach to linguistic conventions, Blake manifests his overarching objective of challenging established norms. This study endeavours to shed light on Blake's distinctive vision by juxtaposing his innovative language with the theological and semiotic doctrines of St. Augustine and C. S. Peirce. In arriving at its conclusion, the study proposes that whereas St. Augustine's pre-semiotic philosophy underscores a pre-existing, unchanging truth within signs, Blake's post-lapsarian language scheme posits that language itself is instrumental in shaping human understanding of truth. On the flip side, Peirce's triadic model of signification aligns with Blake's dynamic use of words, emphasizing the fluidity and multiplicity of meanings, thereby resonating with the notion of semiotic subversion evident in *The Marriage*. By challenging conventional interpretations, this approach cultivates a more profound understanding of divinity, consistent with the tenets of negative theology.

Conclusively, William Blake's unparalleled fusion of the sacred and the profane, along with his participation in linguistic and semiotic subversion, acts as a pioneering bridge linking traditional theological thought, transitional semiotic theories, and his avant-garde vision of human understanding and spiritual exploration. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* stands as a testament to the potency of language in shaping perceptions, inciting re-evaluation, and guiding individuals toward a more profound comprehension of truth and divinity.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is on the multifaceted linguistic and theological elements found in William Blake's seminal work, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. It examines the symbiotic relationship between Blake's revolutionary language and his subversion of traditional semiotic and theological norms. The analysis here unfolds in three interconnected parts.

The argument begins by elucidating the theological underpinnings of St. Augustine's examination of language. Blake's departure from St. Augustine's pre-semiotic philosophy becomes evident through the proposition that the poet contests the concept of a pre-existing truth embedded in language. Instead, Blake propounds a post-lapsarian language scheme, contending that language, far from mirroring a pre-linguistic truth, actively contributes to the shaping of human understanding. This deviation originates from Blake's revolutionary stance on language, paving the way for his intricate but idiosyncratic exploration of signs, symbols, and their theological implications.

The subsequent section delves into the deliberate semiotic subversion embedded within *The Marriage*. Blake's fusion of the sacred with the profane disrupts the conventional one-to-one association between signs and meanings. The particular emphasis on sections such as "A Memorable Fancy" seeks to unveil Blake's intent to confront orthodox religious narratives. Blasphemous and randomly profane aphorisms throughout the poem disrupt established moral norms, prompting readers to re-evaluate the boundaries between the sacred and the profane. The portrayal of the Devil as a liberating figure further exemplifies Blake's intentional blurring of religious classifications. Through the juxtaposition of "contraries", Blake goes beyond challenging binary oppositions; he fosters the fusion of elements, underscoring their inherent interdependence. The deliberate blurring of boundaries, in extension, lays bare the fluid and subjective aspects of semiotic interpretation.

The third section juxtaposes Blake's negative theology with C. S. Peirce's triadic model of signification. Blake's rejection of a pre-linguistic truth aligns with Peirce's emphasis on the fluidity and multiplicity of meanings within signs. The paper illustrates how Peirce's triadic formula resonates with Blake's dynamic use of words, showcasing an ever-evolving chain of interpretations. In Blake's universe, divine teachings are explored through an alternative lens, challenging conventional religious doctrines. The interplay of signs, objects, and interpretants in Peirce's model parallels Blake's assertion that meaning arises through language and perception, free from pre-existing truths.

In conclusion, this paper endeavours to demonstrate that *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* stands as a ground-breaking work, disrupting linguistic conventions while also seeking to transcend the binaries deeply rooted in cultural perspectives. It highlights the resonances between Blake's semiotic subversion and negative theology with Peirce's triadic model, showcasing a bridge between traditional theological thought and the dynamic semiotic theories of the future. In other words, Blake's intentional disruption of the sign system serves as an antecedent to Peircean semiosis, offering a radical departure from conventional semiotics.