

William Blake's Black Bible as a Spectacle of Doom: A Recent Note to Blakean Reception in Romania

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I

¹ HAVING discussed on another occasion the vagaries of Blakean critical reception in Romania,¹ I intend in this paper to focus on a lesser-known, yet highly significant, aspect of Blake's aesthetic reception in southeast Europe. The radio play *William Blake's Black Bible* (*Biblia neagră a lui William Blake*) represents—as one learns at the end—a tribute to the victims of the Colectiv Club fire, which occurred in Bucharest on 30 October 2015.² The site itself was a blast from the past: established as a private venture by a prominent bourgeois family, Prodanof, between the two world wars, it became a successful footwear factory during the communist era and was left derelict after the demise of the Ceaușescu regime in late 1989. It was subsequently rented by private businessmen and turned into a fashionable events club after 1990.

² It was this place (ironically, one that Blake would promptly have labeled a "dark Satanic Mill") that was meant to host a grand night for the native metalcore band *Goodbye to Gravity* (founded four years before, in 2011). They had prepared a musical feast for their fans to celebrate the release of their

second album, *Mantras of War*, thus seeking to capitalize on the fame acquired from their debut, the eponymously titled *Goodbye to Gravity* (2012). The five members of the band³ planned a grand finale, complete with fireworks. The concert was off to a good start at about 9 p.m. Tragically, though, ninety minutes later, everything that could have gone wrong did: the pyrotechnics did not work well indoors and the bloody outcome was exacerbated by the fact that the polyurethane acoustic foam in the club, which was meant to enhance the sound, was itself highly flammable. The fire consumed the foam voraciously and caused the ceiling to collapse, thereby allowing the release of toxins, which eventually poisoned a great number of the people in attendance. Panic ensued, with the few hundred people present desperately dashing to the exit doors, only to be caught in a stampede. The result was grim: twenty-seven people died on the spot and thirty-seven more died of injuries in various hospitals over the next days and weeks. Almost 150 people were injured, the majority seriously (mostly severe burns and respiratory problems). Barring an aviation catastrophe, it was the deadliest incident ever to occur in present-day Romania. More than anything else, it led to massive social protests throughout the country, triggering the toppling of the government and the resignation of the prime minister, Victor Ponta.⁴ In fact, the Colectiv Club tragedy was the spark that kindled the fire of popular revolt against the political class in general, which ever since the fall of communism had been perceived as increasingly anachronistic, corrupt, and inefficient. Corruption plagued all ex-communist countries in Europe, but it was mainly in Romania and Bulgaria that the phenomenon was exacerbated by a lack of reform in the social and political system. The tragic event encapsulated and epitomized the impotence, neglect, and spiritual poverty of an age not unlike that of Blake.

II

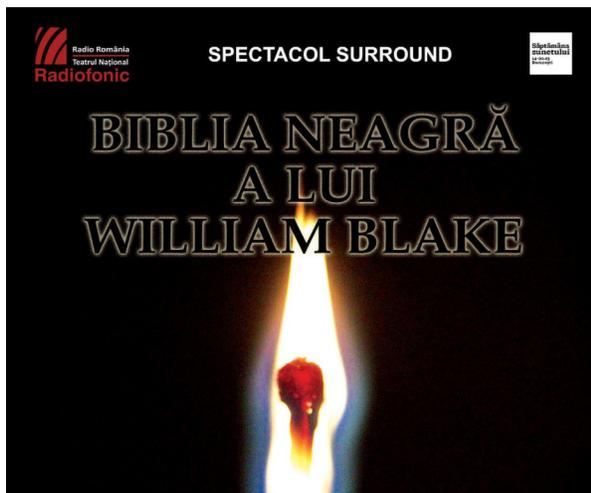
³ *Biblia neagră a lui William Blake* was written and directed by the talented Romanian artist Ilinca Stihi. The project coordinator was Crenguța Manea, the original musical score was composed by Vlad Pasencu, and some of the actors cast in the production included up-and-coming names, such as Andrei Huțuleac, George Ivașcu, and Anca Sigartău, as well as the mezzo-soprano Georgiana Mototolea. The play, which premiered in February 2016, has steadily gained national and even international recognition, obtaining prestigious nominations and prizes in Romania, Italy, and Croatia.

1. See Ghiță.

2. In 2019, the Romanian-born German director Alexander Nanau launched a powerful documentary on this tragedy, entitled *Colectiv*. The film has garnered numerous awards.

3. Their names were Mihai Alexandru, Bogdan Enache, Andrei Găluț, Alex Pascu, and Vlad Țelea. Only Găluț survived the ordeal.

4. He led a strange political coalition, bringing together socialists and liberals.



- 4 Fragmentary and obsessive through its employment of musical and textual reiterations, it focuses on the development of Nichita (a male name in Romanian), a troubled teenager in whose life adolescent rebellion, drugs, and illicit sex revolve dizzily. Constantly misunderstood by his dysfunctional family, he undergoes a series of spiritual crises, culminating with suicide. Far from constituting a materialization of failure, Nichita's taking of his own life reifies a position of ultimate personal freedom.
- 5 The title of the work is conspicuously uttered and displays a play on words, centered on the paronyms Blake-Black and intended to suggest that William Black wrote a Black Bible. The implication is reiterated by Nichita himself, who notes that his grandmother's "face looks ever more like Black William's face" (3).⁵ After the old woman dies, the protagonist again says that his grandmother "looked like Black Will" (4).⁶
- 6 Another iconic character is the black DJ, a sort of a protagonist's double, if you will, voicing the latter's thoughts—sometimes explaining, at other times adding pathos—and all the while engaging the audience at multiple semantic and philosophical levels. My critical intuition in this regard has been confirmed by Stihl in a private letter.
- 7 The preliminary material, which seeks to shape the public's "horizon of expectation" ("Erwartungshorizont," as Hans Robert Jauss so aptly puts it),⁷ plays a very important role, as it constitutes a mix of phonic elements suggesting the crisis of our contemporary world, bringing together such heteroclit details as the original recording of the first

5. "Fața ei seamănă tot mai mult cu fața Negrului William."

6. "Semăna cu Negrul Will"

7. See Jauss *passim*.

atomic experiment in Alamogordo, New Mexico, a Russian chorus, and a Tyrolean song. The effect is at once a cacophony of absurdity and an unadulterated slice of life, meant to shed light on an otherwise untranslatable experience, much as Blake's prophetic books defy reason when approached with exclusively logical tools of interpretation.

- 8 Suddenly, the DJ's voice cuts in, uttering lines that crystallize the ideological marrow of the play. Around these fundamental words gravitate the rest of the strange dramatic occurrences: "Why should we see an opposition between life and life as a system? Because systems *will* sometimes oppose one another. In this particular case, the system created by man opposes the system created by God" (2).⁸ One may easily detect here a reference to Los's famous assertion whilst building Golgonooza in chapter 1 of *Jerusalem*: "I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans / I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create" (E 153). System-creation, it seems, goes hand in hand with system-destruction, as is further made clear in chapter 3: "It is the Spiritual Fourfold / London: continually building & continually decaying desolate!" (E 203).

III

- 9 As already alluded to, *Biblia neagră a lui William Blake* represents a convoluted yet exciting spiritual recasting of Blake's complex and often baffling mythological universe. This reworking is undertaken by means of deeply syncretic forms of expression: the fusion of rock and opera and the reconciliation of modern modes of expression with the alliterative tradition. The atmosphere acts as a *sui generis* catalyst of the plot, dictating the rhythm of the action, which slackens or accelerates accordingly.
- 10 Classical music is employed throughout to suggest an eighteenth-century mood. After the preliminaries, the DJ recalls the story that, in June 1780, when Blake was on his way to a shop, he joined a mob that laid siege to the infamous Newgate Prison with a view to releasing the prisoners, and the outcome of these protests and riots, which lasted several days, was the establishment of the police force in Britain.⁹ The fact that his voice mingles not only with the music but also with protesters' voices emphasizes from the beginning the militant positioning of the play,

8. "De ce să opunem viața sistemului? Pentru că sistemele se opun unele altora. În cazul acesta, sistemul creat de om se opune sistemului creat de Dumnezeu."

9. The outcome provided by the play is not technically accurate. Although the first constables appeared in the mid-eighteenth century (the Bow Street Runners), it was not until 1829 that the then home secretary, Robert Peel, introduced the Metropolitan Police Act, thus creating the first police force in Britain. For additional details, see Emsley.

committed to defending social autonomy as well as personal freedom and peace.

- 11 Blakean symbolism, enriched with late twentieth-century tropes, permeates the dramatic substance. For instance, toward the end, the stage directions indicate “Metallica on the radio,” and one can distinctly hear “Enter Sandman” being played in the background. This is the title of the first single from the fifth studio album—*Metallica* (1991)—of the American heavy-metal act. “Enter Sandman,” cowritten by the band’s front man, James Hetfield, is a dark meditation on death and evil, sometimes from the perspective of a helpless child, left to fight the demons of the night all by itself. Nichita’s musings while listening to the music, before setting himself free at last—“I imagined there would be a day. A day when I meet God. And he wouldn’t have the face of Buddhist monks, nor of Woodstock suckers” (20)¹⁰—play upon the idea of contemplating God’s true face, which turns out to be “the face of a savage black man who has just shattered the chains of his slavery. The impetus of the battle and the light of victory blend on his face. He has blood on his hands and at his ankles, from the iron. He won’t recognize me” (20).¹¹ This image echoes, in a more positive manner, Blake’s portrayal of the “black African” in “A Song of Liberty”—“O African! black African! (go. winged thought widen his forehead.)” (E 44).¹² “Enter Sandman” also carries the very essence of pessimism, and that is the feeling that the Romanian play seeks to render by indirect, if fuzzy, means. Read as a postmodern insertion into a Blakean prophetic pattern, the song anticipates the dramatic outcome of the play, as the protagonist confronts, and eventually overcomes, his demons.
- 12 In true postmodern fashion, intertextual allusion and reference abound. For instance, as Allen Ginsberg’s voice is distinctly heard reciting Blake’s “Cradle Song,” the voice of the DJ utters ominously in the background, “On a summer day in ’48, Allen Ginsberg was 26 and Blake appeared to him in person. Then Ginsberg told friends and family: *Wow! I have found God!*” (6).¹³ The DJ goes on to address the audience directly, “I am DJ Will. Black Will,” thereafter hastening to add, “We’re here to write together the Black Bible of

William Black.”¹⁴ The old postmodern trick of the narrator evincing his own metanarrative tools is at hand: “But William Blake cannot see us. This is fiction. It’s a piece of fiction” (6; spoken in English). Nichita also listens to rock icon Marilyn Manson, who quotes the first three lines of Blake’s “Proverbs of Hell”: “In seed time learn, in harvest teach, in winter enjoy. / Drive your cart and your plow over the bones of the dead. / The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom” (E 35).

- 13 Based on Blake’s denunciation of evil, the play offers a general indictment of war. When Nichita’s mother tells him that “there’s been peace since the Second World War,”¹⁵ he painfully retorts, “Peace? But Africa? Vietnam, Iran, Iraq, the Ukraine?” (16-17).¹⁶ There is a clear indication that the son is lost, a sign promptly augmented by an anonymous voice reciting “The Little Boy Lost”: “Father, father, where are you going / O do not walk so fast” (E 11). It is an apt description of modern society’s typical dysfunctional family. This has to be paired with Nichita’s lament that “men are the ones who leave first, as a rule. The true wars are carried on by women and children” (16),¹⁷ the latter thus being depicted as heroic victims. This dichotomy between oppressors and oppressed hints at Blake’s aphorism “One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression” from “A Memorable Fancy” at the end of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which is subsequently quoted by the DJ: “Note: the Angel who turned into a Devil is my special friend. We’ve often read the Bible together in its infernal, diabolical meaning. And that’s the sense that the world will receive, if they behave in the proper way. I have also The Bible of Hell, which the world shall have whether they will or no. One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression” (20).¹⁸
- 14 The climax of the play is at hand. Nichita fails to integrate into a world that has donned the garb of madness and decides to commit suicide by shooting. He gives voice to the putative question raised by his death: “Why has this been done? Why? That’s the only question I’m going to leave behind. It’s a question without an answer that I’ll ask fate. Death cleans up. It doesn’t ask for your permission” (20).¹⁹ A fitter requiem for a young man’s death could hardly be

10. “Mi-am imaginat că o să vină o zi. O zi în care o să-l întâlnesc pe Dumnezeu. Și el nu va avea fața călugărilor budiști, nici a fraierilor de la Woodstock.”

11. “fața unui negru sălbatic care abia a smuls lanțurile sclaviei. Pe fața lui se văd amestecate turbarea luptei și strălucirea victoriei. Are mâinile mângiate cu sânge și în dreptul gleznelor, rănilor făcute de fiare. El n-o să mă recunoască.”

12. David Bindman notes that “the parenthetical aside implies the African’s mental backwardness” (379).

13. “Era o zi de vară din ’48, Allen Ginsberg avea 26 de ani și atunci i-a apărut Blake în persoană. Apoi le-a zis prietenilor și familiei: *Oau! L-am găsit pe Dumnezeu!*”

14. “Sunt DJ Will. Negrul Will. Suntem aici să scriem împreună Biblia Neagră a lui William Black.”

15. “De la al doilea război mondial, e pace.”

16. “Pace? Dar Africa? Vietnam, Iran, Irak, Ucraina?”

17. “Bărbații pleacă mereu primii. Războaiele adevărate sunt ținute de femei și copii.”

18. See E 44.

19. “De ce-a făcut asta? De ce? E singura întrebare pe care o las în urma mea. E întrebarea fără răspuns către fatalitate. Moartea face curățenie. Nu stă de vorbă.”

found. And everything ends, in true Hamlet fashion, in silence.

IV

- 15 From an Aristotelian perspective, does the play generate catharsis or does it merely reify, in a cold and detached fashion, a young man's revenge upon a hostile universe? The disjunctive terms of the interrogation above are hard to separate. Blake's lasting influence on the work is not so much textual as intertextual, based therefore on allusion and cross-reference. Redeeming and vindictive by turns, *Biblia neagră a lui William Blake* resists categorization and clear-cut distinctions. Blending styles and manners and carefully revealing and exploiting current-day *topoi* (terrorism, social disintegration, lack of purpose in life, the ontological void), it is a powerful reminder that the English poet serves as an idiosyncratic source of inspiration for every age and culture. All in all, we are faced with a reinterpretation of order amid chaos, and I am certain that Blake himself would have approved of the aesthetic result.
- 16 In her letter to me, Stihî notes that she perceived Blake to be "a rock star" from the viewpoint of urban culture. In her opinion, *Biblia neagră a lui William Blake* is "about all of us in the here and now, about the way in which teenagers can define themselves in the context of the values brought forth by modern society." Thus, Blake "comes to offer support and legitimacy to the choices made by the protagonist himself," his function being that of a mold of character. Stihî adds that "Blake's example, embodying at once artistic and social revolution, serves as a memento that history is accelerated by brave, passionate, and impudent characters." These are the young people who, in the wake of the Colectiv tragedy, took to the streets and triggered massive social change. The fact that the play is intended not only as a tribute to the oppressed and the victims but also as a eulogy of political courage and commitment is emphasized by the superposition of the credits and recordings of the antigovernment protests.
- 17 Further elaborating on her auctorial intentions, Stihî points out that the idea for the work was a result of her trying to cope with terrorist violence throughout Europe, from Norway to Great Britain, Belgium to France. As far as she is concerned, Blake's poetic creed "was the invisible ink which was used to reveal the genuine signature of our age," an age marked by youth radicalization, aimlessness, and deafening outbursts of gun terror.
- 18 In the final analysis, the audience is left to fend for itself as best it can, and perhaps this is the implicit message that the play strives to bring forth in a not too convoluted manner. Just as in the case of the Colectiv Club tragedy, where the

members of the crowd had to help one another in order to escape from a fiery hell, we must stick together to overcome sociohistorical hurdles, though the outlook remains uncertain.

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