

# The Significance of “Mental Fight” in Ben Okri and William Blake

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## Summary

Drawing principally from *Mental Fight* and *Jerusalem*, this article explores the ways in which both Ben Okri and William Blake prophesy the redemption of humanity through the power of words and the participation of all people in a new “dream” by means of which a more humane civilisation may be attained. It explores the significance of some of Blake’s central symbols in relation to his vision of man’s Fall and Redemption and how closely the poetry and prose of Ben Okri echo Blake’s themes and motifs.

By entitling one of his anthologies of poetry *Mental Fight*, Ben Okri succinctly acknowledges the Romantic poet William Blake as a source of inspiration. These two simple words, to anyone familiar with Blake’s poetry, would immediately recall his impassioned declaration in *Milton*:

I will not cease from Mental Fight,  
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand  
Till we have built Jerusalem  
In England’s green & pleasant land.

(*Milton*, 1804-1808 Preface II. 13-16, K 481)

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel put hoofsaaklik uit *Mental Fight* en *Jerusalem*, en ondersoek die maniere waarop sowel Ben Okri as William Blake die bevryding van die mensdom deur die mag van woorde en die deelname van alle mense in ’n nuwe “droom” deur middel waarvan ’n mensliedender beskawing bereik kan word voorspel. Die belang van sommige van Blake se kernsimbole met betrekking tot sy visie van die Val en Bevryding van die mens word ondersoek en daar word beskryf hoe fyn Blake se temas en motiewe weerklank vind in die poësie en prosa van Ben Okri.

Deur een van sy versameling van gedigte *Mental Fight* te noem, erken Ben Okri die Romantiese digter William Blake bondig as bron van inspirasie. Vir enigiemand wat vertrou is met Blake se poësie roep hierdie twee eenvoudige woorde sy hartstogtelike verklaring in *Milton* in die geheue:

I will not cease from Mental Fight,  
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand

Till we have built Jerusalem  
In England's green & pleasant land.

(Milton, 1804-1808 Preface ll. 13-16, K 481)

This article explores how closely Okri's vision of "mental fight" equates to dreaming into reality a better future for mankind and how this theme is central to understanding what Blake means by building the spiritual city of Jerusalem through imaginative endeavours and revisioning the ways in which mankind can rehumanise.

For Okri, the artist is a transformer of reality and breaches the ramparts of all that limits man's freedom to evolve into being truly civilised. As explained in his essay "The Joys of Storytelling" in *A Way of Being Free* (1997: 69), "Mental Fight" involves "planting beautiful epiphanic dynamites within innocent-seeming texts ...". The image of awakening mankind from a "Sleep" of the soul is also central to the themes of both poets. In his Introduction to *Songs of Experience* (1789-1794), Blake adopts the persona and voice of a prophetic bard "Who Present, Past and Future, sees" (l. 2), calling on Earth to awaken.

The image of awakening mankind from a "Sleep" of the soul is also central to the themes of both poets. In his Introduction to *Songs of Experience*, Blake adopts the persona and voice of a prophetic bard "who present, past and future sees/ ... Calling on Earth to awaken". In his so-called Prophetic Books, he explores this theme in detail, evoking how Eternal beings may fall from the realms of light in Eternity into the dark substantial world and forget that all beings are members of God's divine body:

Awake! Awake O sleeper of the land of shadows, wake! Expand!  
I am in you & you in me, mutual in love divine; ...

(Jerusalem, Chap. 1, ll. 6-7, K 622)

Okri similarly sees the poet, artist and storyteller as "disturbers of deceitfulsleep" in *A Way of Being Free* (1997: 63). He sees the role of those with awakened vision as being "creative participants in the universe, to redream our world. The fact of possessing imagination means that everything can be redreamed" (p. 49). For Blake, there are moments in time "that Satan cannot find,/ Nor can his Watch Fiends find [them]" (*Milton Book the Second* 35 ll. 42-43) – moments which expand into Eternity and which can illuminate the fallen world (*op. cit.* 35 l. 45).

... the Industrious find  
This moment & it multiply, & when it once is found  
It renovates every Moment of the Day ...

(Milton, Book the Second, Plate 35, ll. 42-44, K 526)

In *Mental Fight*, Okri expresses similar thoughts in the following lines:

Then the celluloid of what seems  
Like the real world  
Is stripped away ...  
I dream of what this  
Millennial moment can be: ...  
Best excuse in a thousand years  
To transcend our grim ancient fears.

(Okri 1999: 7)

For both poets, everyone, especially those who have suffered great oppression, should be involved in the “mental fight”. Okri writes:

It seems to me that the age demands that each man and woman become a light, a fire, a responsible heir to all the veins of freedom and courage that have enabled us to get here, in spite of the forces of darkness all around ... it is possible for the unvalued ones to help create a beautiful new era in human history. New vision should come from those who suffer most and who love life the most. The marvellous responsibility of the unheard and the unseen resides in this paradox.

(Okri 1997: 102-103)

Blake would heartily have endorsed these sentiments giving, as he does, artistic voice to the usually disregarded or patronised denizens of 18th-century London such as the Chimney Sweeper and the Little Black Boy – but also to all the invisible spiritual beings whose divine humanity has been incarcerated in physical matter, such as the Clod and the Pebble, and the Sunflower, Lily of the Valley, Rose, Cloud, Dew and Fly.

... for Cities  
Are Men, ... and Rivers & Mountains  
Are also Men; everything is Human, mighty! Sublime!  
In every bosom a Universe expands ...

(*Jerusalem*, Plate 38 [34], ll. 46-49, K 665)

In “The Cross Is Gone” (*An African Elegy* 1992: 15), Okri’s perception of the trees as sentient beings – “All around us the trees were heaving./ Their comrades had fallen/ The great spirits trapped ...” – is reminiscent of Blake’s vision of how nature, though a fallen image of that in Eternity, nevertheless retains vestiges of its eternal divine human form. Blake writes:

... Each grain of Sand,  
Every Stone of the Land,  
Each rock & each hill,  
Each fountain & rill,  
Each herb & each tree,

Mountain, hill, earth & sea,  
 Cloud, Meteor & Star, Are Men seen Afar.

(Ll, pp. 24-32, "The Letters")

Okri's poem is also Blakean in its evocation of man's fallen state as well as the possibility of redemption: "The trees sang to us of a darkening age/ With mysteries dying .... We talked about a single voice/ .... / That could bring down thunder on corrupt lands" ("The Cross Is Gone", p. 16).

In *Mental Fight*, Okri advocates holding on to "the best things of the awakened mind" in the hope that the future of humanity may turn out better than its bloody past. Blake similarly calls on Earth to awaken from her "Sleep" so that a better, more humane age can emerge:

O Earth, O Earth, return!  
 Arise from out the dewy grass;  
 Night is worn,  
 And the morn  
 Rises from the slumberous mass.

Turn away no more;  
 Why wilt thou turn away?  
 The starry floor,  
 The wat'ry shore  
 Is giv'n thee till the break of day.

("Songs of Experience", Introduction, ll. 11-20)

Both poets regard themselves as seers. In particular, Blake takes up the "Mental Fight" against those who, in the name of God, perpetuate cruelty by restraining natural energies and calling these Sin – who pride themselves on their morality but are accusers and demonisers of others. This is the theme of shorter poems such as "The Garden of Love", "Holy Thursday" and "On Another's Sorrow" in "Songs of Innocence" and "Songs of Experience" and one which is sustained throughout his longer works. In the "Songs", Blake broaches the subject in simple terms that even children might understand:

Think not thou canst sigh a sigh  
 And thy maker is not by;  
 Think not thou canst weep a tear  
 And thy maker is not near.

O! he gives to us his joy  
 That our grief he may destroy;  
 Till our grief is fled & gone  
 He doth sit by us and moan.

("On Another's Sorrow", "Songs of Innocence", ll. 28-35, K 123)

In *Jerusalem*, Blake reiterates the unity of all beings within the bosom of a loving deity:

For not one sparrow can suffer & the whole Universe not suffer also  
In all its Regions, & its Father & Saviour not pity & weep.

(*Jerusalem*, Plate 25, ll. 8-9, K 648)

The deeper we plunge into the cosmology of Blake, the more it becomes evident that Jerusalem is not simply seen as symbolic of how art and poetry can help to bring about a more humane civilisation in future ages. More important is Blake's perception of Jerusalem as the Garment and Emanation of every eternal being who has cast off the inhuman and become one in spirit with Jesus:

In Great Eternity every particular Form gives forth or Emanates  
Its own peculiar Light, & the Form is the Divine Vision  
And the Light is his Garment. This is Jerusalem in every Man,  
A Tent & Tabernacle of Mutual Forgiveness ....

(*Jerusalem*, Plate 54, ll. 1-4, K 684)

In "The Human Race Is Not Yet Free", in *A Way of Being Free*, Okri (1997) cuts to the persisting problem with all religions in language stripped even of the enchantment of symbolism:

If anyone questions the validity of these great religions, it may be because they have failed us, let us down, made us smaller. By "us" I do not mean adherents and the devout. I mean the entire human race. For in their ... codes and earthly domination .... [t]hey have unleashed pogroms, beastly wars, vile inquisitions; they have sanctified slavery, racial hatred, and an almost universal uncharitability.

(Okri 1997: 59)

It is evident that Blake and Okri agree that "in the dream of their orthodoxy some of the great religions lost touch with noble love that inspired and sustained their births in the first place. They lost touch with the basic compassion without which even the most beautifully inspired religion becomes an empty shell of dogma" (Okri 1997: 59).

The significance of the words "Mental Fight" in both poets therefore emerges as a spiritual imperative – as a task not to be avoided by anyone interested in bringing about a better future for mankind. However, for both Okri and Blake, the weapons most appropriate to overcoming a descent into chaos and terrifying inhumanity are love, courage to speak the truth in the most adverse of circumstances, and the rejection of moral certainties which enslave others and hinder their progress.

*A Way of Being Free*, Okri writes in “The Joys of Storytelling 1”):

We await ... the collapse of the last remaining towers – for then and only then can the beginnings of a true world history and genius flower; only then will a new age of miraculous rivers, hidden dreams, flowers of unsuspected beauty, philosophies of unknown potency emerge and astound future generations; only then might the world hope as one and struggle as one, towards the first universal golden age.

(Okri 1997: 30-31)

In Blake’s vision, the rebuilding of Jerusalem in the hearts of all is a central symbol signifying far more than achieving harmony and a humane civilisation on earth. It is undertaken by the unremitting labours of Los, Albion’s Prince of Imagination, whom Blake conceives as speaking the following lines:

“I took the sighs & tears & bitter groans,  
“I lifted them into my Furnaces to form the spiritual sword  
“That lays open the hidden heart ....”

(*Jerusalem*, Plate 9, ll. 17-19, K 628)

Here, Los is seen as building Golgonooza, a city that retains vestiges of what Jerusalem was like in Innocence in Eternity. Blake sees Los as having a Gate which cannot be found except by those who have regained their understanding that “there is no Limit of Expansion & Translucence” (See *Jerusalem*, Plate 39 [35], l.3, K 666; and Plate 42, ll. 35-36, K 670).

He perceives Jerusalem as the feminine aspect and emanation of Jesus, and their divine union as creating and sustaining all that exists in Eternity. From Blake’s longer poems it emerges that to regain Innocence in the “sweet golden clime” (“Songs of Experience”, 1789-1794 l. 3) of Eternity to which all of us (as represented by the Sunflower, youth and maiden in “Ah! Sunflower”) aspire is to recognise that our divine origins and ultimate destiny are in the expansive realms of light of Eden and Beulah. These two realms are where all beings participate in the love and energy of the “Naked Human Form” of the “Great Humanity Divine”. Restored to their full splendour in God’s gardens of “... Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love” (“The Divine Image” l. 5), their spiritual forms appear once again as “One Man, Jesus” clothed in the light of Jerusalem the Bride and Emanation of Jesus (*Jerusalem* 99, 1-5; 91, 31).

Okri also sees “all of humanity ... as one person in the sense that ‘what happens to others, affects us ... all’”. He therefore calls on all of us to participate in recovering our inner luminosity. In *Astonishing the Gods* (1995: 157), Okri’s “liminal archangel of invisibility” and “unicorn with a diamond horn ... pointed heavenward” are strongly reminiscent of Blake’s watercolour Designs in which the personae often point heavenwards,

reminding us that the truth about our immortal selves is directly accessible to us without the intervention of purveyors of sterile dogma. Okri calls this knowledge the discovery of the "invisibility of the blessed" (1995: 159). For him, it represents the ultimate insight of the spiritual quest undertaken by the protagonist of his novel for "perfection of the spirit and true mastery of life" (p. 67).

While the personae of Jesus and his Bride and Emanation, Jerusalem, are central in the unfolding of Blake's apocalyptic visions, Okri (1999), in *Mental Fight*, arrives at similar spiritual insights by focusing on the positive outcome of suffering which can bring about "a spiritual dawn":

Apocalyptic visions are of great value.  
They show us what the world  
Will be like if we don't  
Open ourselves ...  
To light, to freed thinking.

(Okri 1999: 13)

For both poets, to remain unawakened (as if in Plato's cave) is to build Babylon in place of Jerusalem in every age. It is to miss the transitional moment, or threshold in time through which a higher order of civilisation may be dreamed into being by sufficient people to effect momentous change. It is to miss out on escaping from the "labyrinth" of "lovelessness" and "selflessness" as "Babel" is "rebuilt" and "reborn" (Okri 1999: 17, 24).

Blake also uses the image of the "labyrinth" to evoke the maze of wrong choices, perceptions and illusions hindering man from evolving into his full humanity. Like Okri, he recognises the power of words to lead us safely back to knowledge of our true selves:

I give you the end of a golden string:  
Only wind it into a ball,  
It will lead you in at Heaven's Gate  
Built in Jerusalem's Wall.

(The MS Note-Book, 1808-1811)

For both poets, to build Jerusalem is intimately associated with the writing of poetry. Blake claims that "Poetry Fetter'd Fetters the Human Race. Nations are destroy'd or flourish, in proportion as their Poetry, Painting, and Music are destroy'd or flourish! The Primeval State of Man was Wisdom, Art, and Science" (*Jerusalem*, "To the Public" 1804-1820: 621).

In similar vein, Okri in *A Time for New Dreams* (2011) persuasively says, "Poetry hints at the godlike in us, and causes us to resonate with high places of being" (No. 7: 5) and "Poetry is ... the great river of soul murmurings that runs within humanity" (No. 4: 4). Also:

Poets want nothing from you, only that you listen to your deepest selves.  
True poets just want you to honour the original pact you made with the  
universe when you drew your first breath from the unseen magic in the air.

(Okri 2011 No. 8: 6)

Blake, with equal clarity, asks:

Can you think at all, and not pronounce heartily: that to labour in knowledge  
is to build up Jerusalem; and to despise knowledge is to despise Jerusalem  
and her Builders .... Let every Christian, as much as in him lies, engage  
himself openly and publicly, before all the World, in some mental pursuit for  
the Building of Jerusalem.

(*Jerusalem*, 77, "To the Christians" 1966: 717)

While Blake specifically calls on all Christians to overthrow warlike  
Babylon and build Jerusalem in their hearts, minds and also in the real  
world, Okri extends his hopes for a better world to all nations. He (2011 No.  
3: 15-16) claims that "when a nation celebrates its true writers, it celebrates  
itself .... A nation that does not honour its truest, bravest, most creative,  
most enduring writers is a nation that has fallen out of love with itself".  
And, in the following words, Okri could well be describing Blake's own  
perception of Jerusalem as opposed to Babylon:

So long as poetry sends our minds into realms of gold and questions, and  
touches our deep and tender humanity ... it will always be a force for beauty,  
for good, in the world, neutralizing slowly the noise of guns and hatred.

(Okri 2011 No. 6: 5)

Both Okri and Blake also see the limitations of current systems of education  
which fail to answer the most fundamental questions regarding the meaning  
of life, the nature of God, the transience of our short-lived selves, and our  
immortal origins and destiny. Blake pities the School Boy who has to  
forsake the joys of being alive on a beautiful summer morning for the  
rigours of school life:

... to go to school in a summer morn,  
O! it drives all joy away;  
Under a cruel eye outworn,  
The little ones spend the day  
In sighing and dismay.

Ah! Then at times I drooping sit,  
And spend many an anxious hour,  
Nor in my book can I take delight,  
Nor sit in learning's bower,  
Worn thro' with the dreary shower.

("The School Boy", "Songs of Innocence", ll. 6-14, 1966: 124)



Okri (2011: 33) is likewise deeply aware of how narrow-minded instruction of the young can destroy all chance of our reaching for a more humane civilisation in the future. He writes: "Wonder is driven out from the world ... the child is misshaped. Its open Nature is closed off; ... its mind trapped; its joys made suspect; its laughter imprisoned".

In contrast with the schooling received by the child in "The School Boy", the Mother figure in Blake's poem about "The Little Black Boy" teaches her child "underneath a tree", lovingly taking her boy onto her lap and tenderly explaining to him that he is as loved by Jesus as any white child. The Mother says:

"... we are put on earth a little space,  
"That we may learn to bear the beams of love;  
"And these black bodies and this sunburnt face  
"Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.

"For when our souls have learn'd the heat to bear,  
"The cloud will vanish; we shall hear his voice,  
"Saying: 'Come out from the grove, my love & care,  
"And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice.'"

("The Little Black Boy", ll. 13-20, K 125)

The above lines evoke poetically what Okri defines in prose with equal conviction:

The child should be taught to value all peoples, to respect all races and creeds. But the child is taught to be suspicious of difference. A flower is thus changed into a thorn, a river into a brook, a garden into a wasteland.

(Okri 2011 No. 3: 34)

Both Okri and Blake see childhood as embodying the potential for major shifts in how mankind perceives reality and for changing the world for the better. Okri (2011 No. 2: 10) writes: "Childhood asks us what reality really is, ... where life came from, and where it goes. Does the soul exist? Where was the soul before birth?" and "Small wonder the sages throughout time use the state of childhood to speak of the highest things, the highest peaks of our cultural and spiritual attainment" (p. 10).

Expanding on this theme, Okri (2011: 28) notes: "Higher consciousness studies ought to be a fundamental part of education. All students ought to be aware that they are the true spark for the transformation of the world". "The true purpose of the university ought to be to unleash the sublime possibilities of the human spirit" (p. 29).

For Blake as well as Okri, Africa has a unique role to play in bringing about a better world. In Blake's cosmology, Los, the Prince, or Zoa, of Imagination in Albion, works ceaselessly to rebuild Jerusalem in place of Babylon in the hearts of mankind. Blake pictures him as tending the

Furnaces of Albion's Imagination, stoking them so that Albion does not descend into an ever deeper Sleep of the soul. He sees Los as breaking down the ramparts of Babylon where those lacking in vision cause humans to labour in sorrow under cruel and warlike taskmasters. As has already been argued, Blake pictures Los as retaining vivid memories of Jerusalem as she was in Eternity, and as endeavouring to rebuild her on earth. In *The Song of Los*, he pictures Los as singing to listening Eternals of man's Fall from Innocence into Experience:

*I will sing you a song of Los, the Eternal Prophet:  
He sung it to four harps at the tables of Eternity.  
In heart-formed Africa.*

(Plate 3, AFRICA, *The Song of Los*, ll. 1-3, K 245)

It is finally Los who, in Blake's vision of Apocalypse, will free Earth from her "Mental Chains" by breaking them with the same blacksmith – like tools with which he originally created the universe:

In Golgonooza Los's anvils stand & his Furnaces rage,  
Ten thousand Demons labour at the Forges Creating Continually  
The times & spaces of Mortal Life, the Sun, the Moon, the Stars, ...  
Lulling the weeping specters of the dead, Clothing their limbs  
With gifts & gold of Eden. Astonish'd, stupefied with delight,  
The terrors put on their sweet clothing on the banks of Arnon,  
Whence they plunge into the river of space for a period, till  
The dread Sleep of Ulro is past ...

(“Vala or The Four Zoas”, Night the Eighth, ll. 202-217, K 346)

Okri, like Blake, seeks to liberate the pure energy “that can lead the world out of spiritual darkness enabling people to find ‘something new in the darkness of the sun’” (2011: 70). As with Blake's Los, Okri takes upon himself the task of liberating this new energy and of making “Africa smile again” (2011: 139). Articulating his own mental fight, Okri (2011: 71, 73) states: “I must do something transcendent” “Something is born from brave new souls, something like paradise ... ”.

Like Blake, Okri calls on future generations to hear his prophecy that Africa will emerge from its warring multiplicity of fables, stories and defeats of the spirit, and help to bring about the flowering of a new and humane age of harmony and peace:

O, ye who invest in Futures, pay heed to Africa ...  
Tomorrow she will flower and bear fruit, as the Nile once  
Flowered into the Pyramids, or like the Savannahs  
After the rains.

(Okri 2011 No. 9: 62)

In his own work, Okri has already succeeded in fulfilling his passionate desire "to do something astonishing" – to amaze the invisible deities who preside over the world's evolution – by wielding words "to split life into its splinters of pure beauty, the beauty of a new source of energy for the mind's eternal delight" (2011: 69). His fierce desire to see all of humanity exert its energies to create a better future for all matches that of Blake vowing never to cease from "Mental Fight" until the inner and outer darkness of Babylon in the fallen world is overcome and Jerusalem built again. In Okri's own words:

This distant music of the future  
Haunts me.  
And I think it will be something  
Amazing to hear,  
A delight to the gods ...  
Provided we are guided  
By our deepest love,  
The love that connects us all  
On this little globe of beauty.

(Okri 1999: 65)

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