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Vampire Bats & Blake's Spectre

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MINUTE PARTICULARS

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Blake Anthologies

In examining ten poetry anthologies published in 1974-75 for "Introduction to Literature" courses,¹ I discovered the following surprising (and for the Blake enthusiast, gladdening) facts: first, Blake appears in all ten. If most of the poetry read in this country is read from college texts (and I suspect it is) and if most of this poetry appears in "Introduction to Literature" anthologies, Blake is now among the most commonly anthologized poets in the language. Second, Blake and Pope, the latter also appearing in all ten, are the most anthologized of all eighteenth-century British poets (Swift, who appears in eight, is next). In regard to Blake, these statistics parallel those gathered by MLA, which show that at present there is more scholarly interest in him than in any other eighteenth-century British author.² We should add, however, that each of the five other major Romantics, Byron, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth, also appear in all ten anthologies and thus the Romantic Movement itself is highly represented, for only twenty-seven poets appear in all ten volumes. Third, "The Tyger" is one of only two poems that appear in all ten anthologies ("Dover Beach" is the other). This may indicate that "The Tyger" is the most commonly printed poem in the language and certainly indicates that it is the most commonly anthologized eighteenth-century poem (the next, Gray's "Elegy," appears in only seven). From the five other major Romantics, "Kubla Khan" and "Ozymandias" do appear in nine of the volumes, and Keats' "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn" in eight, but no other poem from the Romantics appears in more than six.

¹ The anthologies consulted are William C. Cavanaugh, ed., *Introduction to Poetry* (Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown, 1974). John Ciardi and Miller Williams, eds., *How Does a Poem Mean?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974). Frank Brady and Martin Price, eds., *Poetry: Past and Present* (N.Y.: Harcourt, 1974). James Burl Hogins, ed., *Literature: Poetry* (Chicago: SRA, 1974). J. Paul Hunter, ed., *Poetry* (N.Y.: Norton, 1975). X. J. Kennedy, ed., *An Introduction to Poetry*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974). John Frederick Nims, ed., *Western Wind: An Introduction to Poetry* (N.Y.: Random House, 1974). Lawrence Perrine, ed., *Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry*, 4th ed. (N.Y.: Harcourt, 1974). Richard Sugg, ed., *Appreciating Poetry* (Boston: Houghton, 1975). Henry Taylor, ed., *Poetry: Points of Departure* (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop, 1974). Note that several of these anthologies are among the most widely sold in the nation.

² *MLA Newsletter*, Dec. 1973, p. 4.

JAMES BOGAN

Vampire Bats & Blake's Spectre

"The Spectre is, in Giant Man, insane and most deform'd" (*J* 37:4). This aspect of the divided man is a vicious aggregate of shame, doubt, despair,

deceit, compulsion, brooding melancholy, negation, vengeance, selfishness, fear, cruelty, cannibalism, mindless rage, blind hunger, self-righteousness, pride, insanity, etc. The Spectre has all the energy of hysteria and does his powerful worst to devour any and all that stand between him and the objects of his insatiable lust, born of the craving for the lost emanation. The Spectre is the rational power divorced from the heart, "but he is anything but reasonable; rather, he is a machine which has lost its controls and is running wild."¹ The blood-sucking Spectre tries to drain the life out of the living man by all manner of deceit, treachery, and temptation. Once he has debilitated the healthy soul, then he usurps the place of "humanity" and goes on a bootless rampage once again to capture life.

In Blake's day, the standard definitions of "spectre" included ghost, phantasm, horrid sight, apparition of dread and terror, all of which can justly be applied to the Spectre. There is another dimension to the Spectre that should not be overlooked. He is usually pictured as dark and bat-winged; indeed he is a spectre-bat, a true vampire, a literal blood-sucker. The image of this winged cannibal came to Blake's attention before he started to work on the major prophecies. Blake was hired by Joseph Johnson in 1792 to help with the engravings to John Stedman's *Narrative of a five year's expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*. Stedman recounts the following episode:

I cannot here forbear relating a singular circumstance respecting myself, *viz.* that on waking about four o'clock this morning in my hammock, I was extremely alarmed at finding myself weltering in congealed blood, and without feeling any pain whatever. Having started up, and run for a surgeon, with a firebrand in one hand, and all over besmeared with gore: to which if added my pale face, short hair, and tattered apparel, he might well ask the question,

'Be thou spirit of health or goblin damn'd,
Bring with thee airs of Heav'n or blasts
from Hell!'

The mystery however, was that I had been bitten by the *vampire* or *spectre* of Guiana, which is also called the *flying-dog* of New Spain. . . . This is no other than a bat of monstrous size, that sucks blood from men and cattle when they are fast asleep, even sometimes till they die; and as the manner in which they proceed is truly wonderful, I shall endeavour to give a distinct account of it. --Knowing by instinct that the person they intend to attack is in a sound slumber, they generally light near the feet, where, while the creature continues fanning with his enormous wings, which keeps one cool, he bites a piece out of the tip of the great toe, so very small indeed that the head of a pin could scarcely be received into the wound, which is consequently not painful; yet through

are long, rounded, and transparent: the cutting teeth are four above and six below.²

Stedman's spectre-bat has the qualities of gluttony, ugliness, and murderous intent associated with the spectres in the prophetic poems. Blake even draws the Spectre with a dark body and enormous bat-wings that are spread over Los to occlude a vision of higher realms (J 6).

The Spectre also haunts the reposed body of Jerusalem. With his page-wide wingspread, he separates her from the dying Albion (J 33). So, an image that had seized Blake's fancy while at work on a hired job eventually became transmuted into a baleful and portentous element of his epics.

¹ S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary* (New York: Dutton, 1971), p. 381.

² London, 1796, pp. 142-143.

MARTIN BUTLIN

"The Very William Blake of Living Landscape Painters"!

"He is the very William Blake of living landscape painters." This quotation from the *Illustrated London News* for 10 May 1845 is particularly surprising in its context. It does not refer to Samuel Palmer or Edward Calvert, nor even to such extravagantly imaginative landscape painters as John Martin or Francis Danby, but was discovered by my wife Frances during her researches into contemporary press accounts of J.M.W. Turner. Apart from the fortuitous and, so far as I know, unparalleled linking of the names of the two artists with whom I personally have been most involved, it would seem quite extraordinary to find the unchallenged, if highly controversial, leader of painting in Britain in the 1840s described in terms of an artist so little regarded at this time as to make every mention of his name a matter for the record.

The context is, alas, disappointing insofar as any new light is thrown on the two artists. The article, a survey of Turner's career, begins promisingly enough: "Art is never more the subject of conversation in the London circles of fashionable life than it is from the first Monday in May to the close of the Royal Academy Exhibition. Have you been to the Academy yet? Have you seen Mr. Turner's landscapes, or Mr. Grant's fine portraits? or what do you think of Collins or Maclise? are the questions that are regularly put to you . . ." There follows an account of Turner's beginnings with topographical watercolors and his first Academy successes up to about 1815. "Mr. Turner is equally distinguished for the excellence of his oil pictures and his water-colour drawings. He has the art of poetizing everything . . ." But his early works "are better of their kind than any of his after productions we can name"--this was a common criticism during Turner's later years. "Mr. Turner is an artist upon peculiar principles. It is either the



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this orifice he continues to suck the blood, until he is obliged to disgorge. He then begins again, and thus continues sucking and disgorging till he is scarcely able to fly, and the sufferer has often been known to sleep from time into eternity. . . . Having applied tobaccosashes as the best remedy, and washed the gore from myself and from my hammock, I observed several small heaps of congealed blood all round the place where I had lain, upon the ground: upon examining which, the surgeon judged that I had lost at least twelve or fourteen ounces during the night. . . .

Having measured this creature I found it to be between the tips of the wings thirty-two inches and a half; it is said that some are above three feet. . . . the colour was a dark brown, nearly black, but lighter under the belly. Its aspect was truly hideous upon the whole, but particularly the head, which has an erect shining membrane above the nose, terminating in a shrivelled point: the ears