

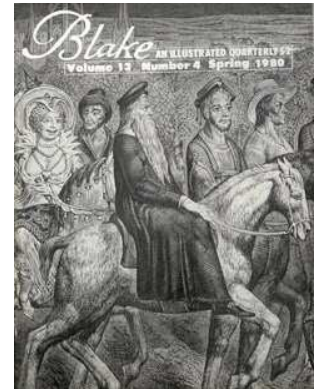
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R E V I E W

Christine Gallant, *Blake and the Assimilation of
Chaos*

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REVIEWS

Christine Gallant. **Blake and the Assimilation of Chaos.** Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979. \$12.50. **Reviewed by Leslie Tannenbaum.**

BLAKE and the Assimilation of Chaos



Christine Gallant

Christine Gallant's *Blake and the Assimilation of Chaos* offers a Jungian interpretation of Blake's major prophecies. Accordingly, this study equates chaos with the Jungian unconscious and reads *The Four Zoas*, *Milton* and *Jerusalem* as expressions of the mythmaking process whereby Blake, through the use of what we can now identify as Jungian archetypes, was able to move from the "static" mythology of the Lambeth books to a more dynamic mythology--a mythology of "ongoing process"--by assimilating chaos or the unconscious. Blake achieves this assimilation by recognizing that chaos and creation, non-myth and myth, are necessary polarities that must co-exist in the reintegrated psyche. Gallant sees Blake's mythic system in the Lambeth books as being static because, she contends, it contains a dualism still closely allied to traditional Judeo-Christian millenarian thinking, which, according to Gallant, posited a linear vision of time and projected an eschatological vision that would totally exclude the darker aspects of the human psyche. In *The Four Zoas*, on the other hand, Blake begins to reject this dualistic view, as he enters into chaos and fully explores its psychological implications. Blake's first major prophecy, then, is a record of "consciousness . . . trying to comprehend the unconscious without being overwhelmed by it," depicting (1) a descent into the unconscious (the fall of the Zoas, who are agents of the conscious mind); (2) the revelation of the darker aspects of the unconscious (such as the manifestation of Vala as the "Devouring Mother" archetype), which

the conscious mind either succumbs to or rejects; and (3) the acceptance of the unconscious through the imaginative use of its energies to create a mandala, a holistic vision that integrates consciousness with the unconscious (represented most prominently by the building of Golgonooza). In the last two Nights of *The Four Zoas* Antichrist is recognized as the "dark aspects of the [Jungian] Self," a complement of Christ that must be accepted and "incorporated into the process of Regeneration rather than being cast out." The apocalyptic ninth Night, with its invocation of agrarian imagery, becomes, for Gallant, the ritualized re-enactment of the "myth of the eternal return" (as defined by Mircea Eliade), playing out the necessarily cyclic interaction and interdependence of Christ and Antichrist, cosmos and chaos, as a universal, repetitive "cycle of generation, death and regeneration."

Having traced this Jungian pattern in *The Four Zoas*, Gallant sees similar patterns working on the biographical level in *Milton* and on the public level in *Jerusalem*. *Milton* is described as Blake's autobiographical journey through the Jungian process of individuation, as Blake recognizes and penetrates his persona (his socially correct self, represented by Satan-Hayley), incorporates his Shadow (the darker side of his psyche) and avoids being overwhelmed by the archetypes of the unconscious through the invocation of Milton as the archetype of the Wise Old Man, an archetype that helps Blake's

conscious ego avoid the temptation to appropriate to itself the mana (or power) of the unconscious and thus helps him escape schizophrenia (either seeing his visions as objective reality, or perceiving himself as a literal incarnation of Milton). Like *Milton* and *The Four Zoas*, *Jerusalem* is treated as an exploration of the unconscious, but, Gallant says, in his last major prophecy Blake, from the very beginning, more confidently affirms his hard-won acceptance of the unconscious and uses this new consciousness to diagnose and attempt to cure the psychological/sociological ills of nineteenth-century England, the cause of which is Albion's failure to acknowledge and come to terms with the unconscious. As in *The Four Zoas*, the apocalypse is initiated by the recognition and acceptance of the unconscious, in the form of the Antichrist, as the source of energy for the reintegration of man's fallen psyche.

If this necessarily simplified summary of Gallant's argument makes *Blake and the Assimilation of Chaos* appear to be reductive in its application of Jungian psychology to Blake's poetry, a more detailed examination of the argument would only serve to confirm this conclusion. Although Gallant clearly shows the attractiveness of Jungian psychology as a potential tool for analyzing Blake's works and begins her study with a *caveat* against the pitfalls of carelessly imposing Jung's system upon Blake's, her performance undermines her own good intentions and becomes an unintentional example of the dangers of imposing another system upon Blake's. While scholars such as Northrop Frye, Mary Lynn Johnson and Brian Wilkie have been more wisely cautious in their application of modern psychological systems, valuing these systems mainly as analogues that may aid in our understanding of Blake, Gallant asserts that "it is *only* through attention to the changing pattern of Jungian archetypes" (the italics are hers) that we can understand the changes that occurred in Blake's myth during the composition of *The Four Zoas*. Her determination to demonstrate the value of Jung's system as an exclusive means of apprehending the psychology of Blake's mythic process leads to the kind of oversimplification of Blake that she warns against, as well as to some serious misreadings of the texts and some distortions of Blake's thought.

The biggest problem underlying *Blake and the Assimilation of Chaos* is its use of the term "chaos." A great deal of Gallant's argument begs the question because of her unproven and unqualified equation of the Jungian concept of the unconscious with Blake's idea of chaos. As most readers of Blake are aware, Blake names many different things "chaos" and represents many things as being chaotic: the void created by Urizen's fall and the equally chaotic laws inscribed in his book of brass in *The Book of Urizen*, the social disorder described in *America* and *Europe*, the states of "Non-entity" and "Eternal Death" mentioned in numerous prophecies, the Mundane Shell, the "unorganized Blots & Blurs" of bad art--to name just a few examples. In short, Blake applies the word "chaos" and its analogues to everything that is not imaginatively organized (including rational constructs such as Deism) and not exclusively to

what we can recognize as Jung's idea of the unconscious. To be sure, some of the voids described or mentioned by Blake, such as the one created by Urizen's fall in *The Book of Urizen* and Urthona's dens in *The Four Zoas* resemble the unconscious; but more often than not Blake uses chaos as a means of identifying modes of false consciousness or false vision. Therefore, not every mention or depiction of chaos represents Blake's confrontation with the unconscious, nor do symbols of error, which Blake desires to cast out, represent the unconscious that must be acknowledged and assimilated.

This loose application of terminology undermines Gallant's argument, leading either to confusion or to conclusions anathetical to Blake's basic tenets. For instance, it is absurd to assert that Blake accepts chaos and creation as necessary polarities of existence when Blake himself asserts in *The Vision of the Last Judgment* that the idea of a creation *ex nihilo* "is the most pernicious Idea that can enter the Mind, as it takes away all sublimity from the Bible & Limits All Existence to Creation & to Chaos." For Blake, the necessary polarity to creation is Eternity. Of course, it can be argued that in the passage I have quoted Blake is using chaos in a different sense than he usually does in his prophecies, but that is just the point: one needs to discriminate among these different ideas of chaos if the term is to have any value. Similarly, while Blake's Antichrist may represent chaos, he does not represent the unconscious or even symbolize unconscious forces that must be accepted as a necessary polarity of existence. Here Gallant completely disregards Blake's distinction between contraries and negations, and she also overlooks Blake's statements about the apocalypse as the casting out of error. When she says that Blake's advocacy of the wirey bounding line in opposition to chaos "no longer holds" in *Jerusalem*, since she sees chaos as an essential part of Blake's final vision, Gallant seeks to reconcile that which Blake desires to separate: the imaginative vision that triumphs over chaos.

This tendency to impose Jungian categories indiscriminately upon Blake's poetry persists throughout the book. In her analysis of *The Four Zoas*, Gallant tactfully resists the temptation simply to identify the emanations with the Jungian anima, but by the time we reach *Milton* we are told that Leutha and Ololon are both anima figures. Without explanation or qualification, Ulro becomes the personal unconscious. The nameless shadowy female in the Preludium to *Europe*, because of her snake-like hair, is likened to and thus identified with Medusa, who is an archetype of the threatening unconscious; and to support this interpretation Gallant accordingly describes the female's speech as being "savage," despite the fact that the form of her speech (a lament), Blake's allusions to Spenser and the Wisdom Books of the Bible, and the tone and rhetoric of the passage itself make the female an object of pathos rather than terror. In the analysis of *Milton*, Blake's poetic forebear is identified as the archetype of the Wise Old Man, even though in every illustration and most of the poetry Milton appears as a man in his prime.

In pursuing this kind of analysis, all too often Gallant uses the following rhetorical pattern: (1) Blake says x; (2) x resembles Jung's (or Eliade's) concept of y; (3) therefore y is identical to and explains x. This confusion of resemblance with identity, caused by a failure to notice important distinctions, produces, among other problems, a total misapprehension of Blake's concept of time. Drawing upon the agricultural imagery in Night Nine of *The Four Zoas*, Gallant equates Blake's apocalypse with the agrarian rituals that Mircea Eliade interprets as the re-enactment of the cyclical "myth of the eternal return," the repeated process of generation, death and regeneration. Through this ritual re-enactment, "sacred time" abolishes profane time, as the participants in the ritual return to the primordial moment when creation emerges out of chaos. Gallant distinguishes this concept of time from "the linear Judaic" concept of time, perceiving the latter as dominant in Blake's earlier poetry and the former as a new concept of time that Blake unconsciously reached in the process of writing *The Four Zoas*. This argument not only misconstrues Blake's concept of time in his earlier and later prophecies, but oversimplifies the biblical concept of time as well. Like the "consciously inspired" writers of the Bible, Blake was aware of the implications of the agrarian myths and rituals of the pagans; and, as we see in *Europe*, Blake represents and rejects the idea of mythic-cyclical time through the symbol of Enitharmon's sleep. In this work and in his other prophecies as well, Blake sees time as being both cyclical and progressive--a view of time that is perfectly in accord with the Bible and with eschatological tradition, as M. H. Abrams and Ronald L. Grimes have pointed out. While the narrative of the Bible is essentially linear, it progresses by repetition, as can be seen most obviously in the allusions to the Old Testament in the New and in the repetition of key motifs even within the Old Testament. Through this repetition of types, a dialectic of constancy and change, repetition and progress, cyclical and linear time, is at work in the Bible; and it is at work in Blake's poetry as well. Against the essentially conservative *duplication* of the processes of nature through the use of myth, both Blake and the Bible posit the continual radical *re-creation* of divine events through the use of types, which are rooted in man's historical experience. This distinction between mythology and typology--and the concept of time that each implies--lies at the very heart of Blake's aesthetic and explains, in part, Blake's preference for the Bible over the classics. To say that Blake abandons historical time in favor of mythic time is to ignore the function of history in his prophecies and to forget that, however radical his Christianity may be, Blake is still a Christian poet whose very radicalism is derived from and sustained by Judeo-Christian tradition.

One cannot, of course, take Gallant to task for not elucidating this or any other traditions that inform Blake's work, since her approach is not literary-historical. Nor can one affirm that because of the problems exhibited in *Blake and the Assimilation of Chaos* a valid Jungian interpretation of Blake is impossible. Such an interpretation, however, does need to be tempered by some historical perspective, as well as by some more critical tact. One senses that Gallant is not completely wrong: Blake's later prophecies do show a greater integration of elements of the human psyche that were formerly undiscovered or rejected, as witnessed, for example, by the change in the relationship between Los and Urizen in *The Four Zoas*. Yet one questions whether Gallant's application of Jung's system adequately explains this change, since the methodology is not one that "grants the work its own stubborn autonomy," despite Gallant's claims to the contrary. The problem lies, I think, in that which makes Jung's system appealing in the first place, the fact that Jung himself is the product of traditions that he shares with Blake, including the Romantic tradition. As with Blake's similarities to Boehme (with whom Jung was also familiar), the similarities between Blake and Jung are so striking that they may tempt the critic to suspend skepticism and become lax about probing differences. Building upon these similarities, the critic may then assume, since Jung is more modern and has the benefit of modern psychological research (which, like Blake, is really constructing metaphors of the human mind), that Jung has a more conscious grasp of what was unconscious in Blake. However, this assumption is shaky at best, since Blake, through his knowledge of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century mythographers, was quite consciously working with what Jung later identified as archetypes and was constructing, also quite consciously, his own model of the human mind and its processes. Therefore, it is difficult to determine what parts of Blake's work are a recording of a personal descent into the unconscious and what parts are a conscious exploitation of traditional mythic and literary material. Perhaps Blake's work is a combination of the two; but until this issue is explored more thoroughly, one must at least recognize the fact that Jung and Blake were consciously using many of the same traditions but not necessarily in the same way, that both writers were co-workers in the same enterprise (the exploration of "the extent of the human mind") and, therefore, that the differences between their systems are as important as their similarities. Most of all, when comparing Jung's system with Blake's, one must discriminate between analogy and identity. It is the absence of this kind of discrimination that makes the methodology of *Blake and the Assimilation of Chaos* so questionable and the book's conclusions so unconvincing.