

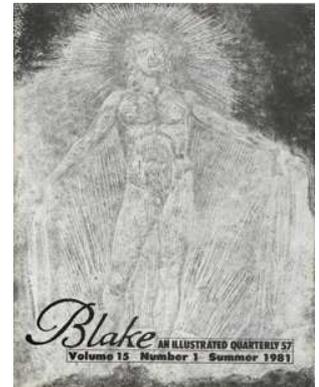
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

Kathleen Raine, *Blake and the New Age*

Martin K. Nurmi

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 15, Issue 1, Summer 1981, pp. 51-52



Kathleen Raine. **Blake and the New Age.** London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979. Pp. 179 x + viii. \$17.95.

Reviewed by Martin K. Nurmi

This book is a collection of essays all but two of which were delivered as lectures during the past decade or so. The essays are: "England's Prophet"; "'Everthing that Lives is Holy'"; "Blake's Christianity"; "Blake's Last Judgement"; "Taylor, Blake and the English Romantic Movement"; "Blake, Wordsworth and Nature"; "Innocence and Experience"; and "Berkeley, Blake and the New Age." The book is intended, says the Preface, "not for the academic, but for the common reader and especially for those in search of what Blake himself claims to have possessed, spiritual knowledge, and all the essays are said to be "studies of Blake's thought as it has an immediate bearing on changes taking place at the present time" (vii).

Raine sees the new age that Blake called for in the Preface to *Milton* as the "change of premises" going on in the last part of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth that will replace materialism and restore mind as the first principle of the universe. She does not deal with these changes or with the direct relevance of Blake's thought to them except very generally, almost incidentally. And, as readers of Miss Raine's *Blake and Tradition* would know, Blake's thought is conceived of less as ideas developed by himself than as spiritual knowledge received and transformed from the esoteric tradition of the west, especially from



What is Man?
The Sun's Light when he unfolds it
Depends on the Organ that beholds it.

BLAKE and the NEW AGE

Kathleen Raine

Plotinus and Plato through their contemporary interpreter and translator, Thomas Taylor.

Blake's originality is vigorously denied in this book: "Blake was not an original thinker, and the arrows he loosed with such force from his bow of burning gold, though tipped with his own fire, were seldom of his own making" (p. 151). And "At the risk of shocking those lovers of Blake who see in him a visionary of absolute originality, I must say that with better knowledge of Blake's own deep studies it seems to me that his most remarkable gift was that of imaginatively assimilating the ideas of his chosen teachers" (p. 115). While no one I think during the past three decades at least would claim for Blake "absolute originality," taking away as much of it as these statements do is to take away too much of the reason for being interested in him at all.

In addition to what is called here "the Platonic tradition," among Blake's immediate teachers are not only Thomas Taylor but also Swedenborg and Berkeley--who again share in the Platonic tradition as conceived here. Returning in the last essay of the book to the theme of the New Age, Raine writes:

It was Blake who proclaimed the new age; not on his own authority but upon that of Emanuel Swedenborg . . . When in his *Marriage of*

Heaven and Hell Blake announced 'a new heaven is begun', the prophecy is Swedenborg's; and the new vision of the age is--allowing for common sources within a tradition--Berkeley's philosophy. (p. 151)

Though recognizing that such a sweeping statement may "well be challenged" and may need definition and limits, the only limits set by Raine consist of her saying that in the Platonic tradition "it is not always possible to say which particular writer is the source of some common idea" (p. 151). There is no indication that a reader looking into *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* would there find Swedenborg very vigorously and unambiguously attacked, though it is true that Blake did owe more to Swedenborg than his treatment of him in *The Marriage* would suggest. In the discussion that follows there are many suggestive parallels between Berkeley and Blake drawn piecemeal from a variety of works. But if, as was suggested, the new vision announced in *The Marriage* was based on Berkeley's philosophy, there are only four incidental references to *The Marriage* to show for it, and no mention of Blake's idea of the Contraries, one of the central themes of the new vision.

Thomas Taylor is mentioned throughout the essays, but the strongest claims for his importance not only to Blake but to the Romantic movement as a whole come in the fifth essay, where Raine asserts that, though no "great flowering of the arts could ever have one cause, . . . the most powerful source of inspiration of the Romantic Movement was a revival of the Platonic philosophy" through the translations

and commentaries of Thomas Taylor. There is a good deal of useful information here about Taylor and the extent to which he was known in his time. But the view of Romanticism we get is limited to literary Romanticism and that only in England. Romanticism was indeed a "great flowering of the arts"--not only literature--and of politics, etc., in numerous languages and cultures, in which influences of the Platonic tradition or, much less, Taylor do not always seem to appear.

It seems to me very unfortunate that Raine feels she must deny Blake's originality as much as she does. Blake is certainly not the completely culturally isolated phenomenon he was thought to be by some many years ago, and he has some roots in the esoteric tradition as well as many other places. But if he was not as original as once thought--and probably no one ever was--he was fiercely independent; and it is very difficult to imagine his being as derivative as he is said here to be. It seems to me that Blake's sources may be more profitably studied if we don't deny the affective impression we all had on first looking into him, of an enormously fresh and original poet and artist with depths of meaning only to be guessed at, rather than a visionary transmitter of ideas merely assimilated from Platonic tradition--and from Swedenborg and Berkeley. In considering his debt to the Platonic tradition and to Plato himself as made available in his time by Thomas Taylor, there is the stubborn fact that Blake in all his works has few kind words to say about Plato.