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## Another Source for Blake's Orc

Randel Helms

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# MINUTE PARTICULARS

## BLAKE AND THE NOVELISTS

### Christopher Heppner

A recurring fascination in the reading of Blake is to wonder how some of his statements and exhortations would feel if lived out in a real life--one's own, for example. Many of the novelists who have used Blake have explored this question, from a variety of perspectives. Joyce Cary in *The Horse's Mouth* gave us one version of the artist as hero, living out his own interpretation of Blake. Colin Wilson's *The Glass Cage* made its hero a Blake critic, but an oddly reclusive one, who appears a little ambivalent in his lived responses to the poet, and is now writing about Whitehead.

Both these novels are well known, but readers of Blake may not know the next two novels, which sparked this note. The first is R. F. Nelson's *Blake's Progress* (Toronto: Laser Books, 1975), which starts as a rather engaging biography of Blake, beginning with his marriage. It reveals that Kate remained a virgin for many years, was responsible for most of Blake's successful commercial engravings, and was generally invaluable. It also tells us that Blake's poetry is not really poetic fiction at all, but that the prophecies are full of names and images "taken from William's adventures as a time-voyageur through the alternate worlds, used to comment on the current political and social scene" (pp. 108-09). The book is fun, up to a point, but very literal at heart; Blake becomes a hero, but at the expense of his poetry, which becomes simply a fancy kind of space travel reporting.

The second book is very different. It is by a writer often labeled as a writer of science fiction, but in this case he bypasses science and technology completely. J. G. Ballard's *The Unlimited Dream Company* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979) is a tale about a young man called, simply, Blake. He is a not very successful creature of the twentieth century, and no explicit attempt is made to relate him to our William, except the name--and the story. One might begin a description by suggesting that it explores what it would be like to experience some of Blake's central metaphors, or that it is a kind of narrative version of "Auguries of Innocence" and "To my Friend Butts I write." In its progress, it almost convinces the reader that "vices in this world may well be metaphors for virtues in the next," offers vivid intuitions of what the vortices described in Plate 15 of *Milton* might feel like, and puts into narrative play Blake's musings about identity and identification.

By omitting all reference to Blake's life and writings, Ballard has written a *tour de force* that in some ways gets closer to the heart of Blake's vision than the more explicitly Blakean novels. [My thanks to Roberto Cucci and Barbara Heppner for drawing my attention to the last two novels.]

## ANOTHER SOURCE FOR BLAKE'S ORC

### Randel Helms

William Blake derived the name and characteristics of his figure Orc from a variety of sources, combining them to produce the various aspects of the character in such poems as *America*, *The Four Zoas* and *The Song of Los*. The hellish aspects of Orc probably come from the Latin *Orcus*, the abode of the dead in Roman mythology and an alternate name for Dis, the god of the underworld. In *Tiri-el*, Ijim describes Tiri-el's house, after his sons have expelled him, as "dark as vacant Orcus."<sup>1</sup> The libidinous aspect of Orc may well come, as David Erdman has suggested, from the Greek ὄρχις, "testicles."<sup>2</sup> "Orcs," from the Latin *orca*, "whale," appear in *Paradise Lost*, a poem much read by Blake, and in *America* Orc appears symbolically as "sometimes a whale."<sup>3</sup> Finally, in Hoole's version of *Orlando Furioso*, for which Blake prepared an engraving in 1783, the poet would have noted that "the word *orca* . . . is applied to any monster or creature of the imagination [and] occurs in Milton."<sup>4</sup> But Orc also appears as a fiery figure in association with Mount Atlas; these aspects of the figure derive from Jacob Bryant's *New System, Or, an Analysis of Ancient Mythology* (first published in 1774), which Blake as a young apprentice may have had a hand in illustrating.<sup>5</sup> We know that the poet thought highly of the work, as his remark in the *Descriptive Catalogue* makes clear: "The antiquities of every Nation under Heaven, is no less sacred than that of the Jews. They are the same thing, as Jacob Bryant and all antiquaries have proved."<sup>6</sup>

In Bryant's chapter entitled "Of Ancient Worship, and of Etymological Truths Thence Deducible," Blake would have found the theory that the Hercynian Forest in Germany gets its name from the Greek δρυμὸς ὀρχύνιος, "the forest of Orcun."<sup>7</sup> Bryant goes on to note that at the edge of this forest stands a mountain, the name of which, Pyrene, "signifies a fountain of fire," because the "mountain had once flamed. . . . The country therefore and the forest may have been called Orcunian upon this account. For as the worship of the Sun, the Deity of fire, prevailed greatly at places of this nature, I make no doubt Hercynia, which Ptolemy expresses ὀρχυνία, was so named from Or-cun, the God of that element."<sup>8</sup> Bryant goes on to theorize that one of the "Puratheia, or open temples, for the celebration of the rites of fire," may have stood on Mount Atlas: "This Atlas (of which I have been speaking) is a mountain with a cavity, and of a tolerable height, which the natives esteem both as a temple, and a



Deity."<sup>9</sup> These passages in Bryant stand as another source of the name of Orc, and may in part lie behind Blake's assertions that "The cave of Orc stood to the South, a furnace of dire flames," and that "Orc on Mount Atlas howld, chain'd down with the Chain of Jealousy."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 278.

<sup>2</sup> David V. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 3rd ed., 1977), p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> See *Paradise Lost*, XI, 835, and *America* 1:14.

# NEWSLETTER

## HAPPY 95th to SIR GEOFFREY

Birthday greetings to Geoffrey Keynes, who turned 95 years old on 25 March. Lest anyone suspect us of favoritism, we promise to wish happy birthday to all our subscribers who are 95 and over.

## YALE CENTER/TORONTO EXHIBITION

15 September–14 November 1982

This major loan exhibition will demonstrate the imaginative scope of Blake's interests, the high quality of his graphic art, and the technical inventiveness into which he combined verse and illustration. It will also explore new interpretations of his work in the light of the intellectual and aesthetic currents of his times.

David Bindman is the organizer of the exhibition and the author of its illustrated catalogue. He has selected approximately two hundred works, including a substantial number of the watercolor and tempera illustrations to the Bible and the works of Milton, Gray and Dante. One significant feature of the exhibition will be the unique colored copy of *Jerusalem*. The most important of the "illuminated" books and individual color prints will be represented by several copies in order to demonstrate the development of Blake's ideas throughout his working life.

*William Blake: His Art and Times* will be the most comprehensive exhibition of Blake's work in North America in recent years. It draws upon the extensive Blake holdings at Yale and in the collection of Mr. Paul Mellon. The Tate Gallery and the British Museum are foremost among foreign lenders. From Yale the exhibition will travel to the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto.

<sup>4</sup> Erdman, *Prophet Against Empire*, p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> See Geoffrey Keynes, *Blake Studies* (London: R. Hart-Davis, 1949), pp. 42-49.

<sup>6</sup> *Blake: Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 578.

<sup>7</sup> Jacob Bryant, *A New System, Or, an Analysis of Ancient Mythology* (London: T. Payne, 1776), I, 210.

<sup>8</sup> Bryant, I, 211.

<sup>9</sup> Bryant, I, 221.

<sup>10</sup> Erdman, *Poetry and Prose*, pp. 344, 66.

## ROSENWALD MEMORIAL EXHIBITION

Ruth Fine, formerly curator of Lessing J. Rosenwald's Alverthorpe Gallery and now curator in the Department of Graphic Arts at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C., has organized an exhibition in honor of Rosenwald. *Lessing J. Rosenwald: Tribute to a Collector* opens at the National Gallery 21 February and runs through 9 May 1982.

With 100 works selected from the 22,000 pieces that Rosenwald collected during his lifetime, the exhibition will represent the range of Rosenwald's interests in medieval manuscript illumination, fifteenth-century woodcuts and engravings, Blake, the impressionists, post-impressionists, and German expressionists, among others. Among the Blakes in the exhibition is *The Vision of Queen Katherine* (Butlin 549). A fully illustrated catalogue of the exhibition is available.

## MLA SPECIAL SESSION 1981:

### "Blake and the Art of His Time"

Perhaps because they are by nature or inclination themselves extremists, Blake people seem equally undeterred by the earliness or lateness of their appointed hour, as this past year's two MLA Special Sessions demonstrated. The Sunrise Semester Special, "Blake and the Art of His Time," attracted a good crowd, whose members were treated to four slide-illustrated presentations: Dennis Read on Blake's "Death's Door," Alexander Gourlay and John Grant on a possible Blake-Reynolds connection involving the latter's portrait of Anne Dashwood, Kevin Lewis on the apocalyptic and millennial in the art of Blake's contemporaries, and John Wright on Blake's stereoptic art and its relations to the popular art of the period. The Gourlay/Grant paper, incidentally, has now been accepted for publication in the *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*. All the presentations, as well as the discussion that ensued, stressed the clear need for further exploration of Blake's ties with the visual milieu of his times, a need that is at last being seriously addressed, as recent publications on Blake's work attest.

STEPHEN C. BEHRENDT  
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA