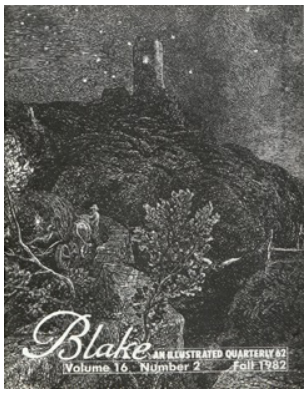
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

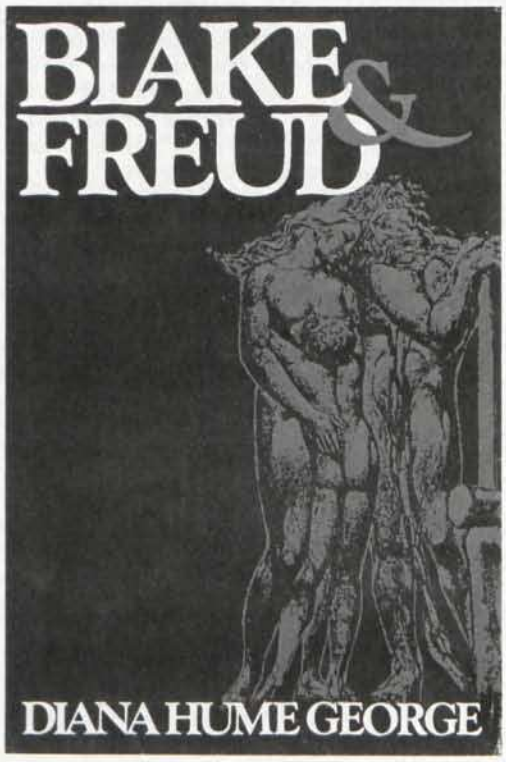
Diana Hume George, Blake and Freud

Thomas A. Vogler

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 16, Issue 2, Fall 1982, pp. 121-124



REVIEWS



Diana Hume George. **Blake and Freud.** Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980. $15.00.

Reviewed by Thomas A. Vogler

There are several general issues in the basic conception of Diana Hume George's book on Blake and Freud that are timely, significant, and promising, even though the book itself falls far short of fulfilling its promise. It is proposed as "a contribution to psychoanalytic theory and criticism" (17-18) in the form of an intertextual engagement between Freud and Blake, antagonists in a synchronic field of discourse. It is thus in different ways both a Blakean and a Freudian project, well worth the undertaking.[1] More conspicuously than most poets, Blake situated his work among other texts which he cited, engaged in battle, parodied and attempted to transform or correct, so producing an intertextual construct constantly aware of the semiotic processes which both made the project possible and at the same time tried to inscribe it in the already-written code of the competing Urizenic system. Thus to read Freud--"as Blake read Milton, and with similar purposes" (69)--as the author whose works "constitute the *Paradise Lost* of the twentieth century" (66) could be a most fruitful way to engage the too-long-deferred relationships between these two authors, to go beyond the Jungians who have had their archetypal ways with Blake's texts for so long, and to expand our growing awareness of the artistic and poetic dimensions of Freud's contribution to literature.

If there is anything distinctive about the discourse we call literature, and in that discourse especially true of Blake, it is that *how* something is said (or written) is given as much attention as *what* is said. Freud too followed this same emphasis, which led him to the discovery of a pervasive rhetorical or narrative dimension in the psyche and its productions. Certain aspects of his investigations have led in recent years to a series of refinements--for better or worse--on his discoveries, in which the unconscious can be interpreted as having a structure like that of language, or can be understood as being a modality of writing, or a manifestation of universal laws of tropology. In all these cases of what, for reductive convenience, we might call "French Freud," there is an attempt to follow Freud's insight that paying attention to the mode of exposition or representation (*Darstellung*) was the best way to obtain clues for interpreting the basic nature of the unconscious.

For George, however--who in spite of her interest in the "major revisionists" (18) of Freud, is curiously unaware of or indifferent to French Freud--the unconscious exists as a realm of freedom and a source of energy which artists can conveniently tap to enable them to overcome the constraints of the reality principle.[2] Unlike ordinary people, artists have "special gifts" which allow them "access to the unconscious" (49) where they can "cathect energy freely and intensely through the displacement and condensation processes. . . . While ordinary men and women live in the world of consciousness . . . the artist has retained the ability to reconcile paradox . . . to be certain and assert . . . and to escape time" (51). The artist "passes freely between and among pleasure and pain, reality and fantasy, time and timelessness" (52), and "The reality principle is thereby subject to, because created by, the artist" (63).

According to George, this "theory of art . . . lay buried in Freud's major works" (52), which means that "Psychoanalysis contains the seed of hope and vision of which Blake's system was the harvest a century before" (60). But Freud failed to nourish his seed of hope, which therefore "remained latent, that is, unwritten" (66). Freud denied himself "the prophetic and prescriptive voice" (147) and instead "whispered his manifesto . . . because he dared not shout it, perhaps not even to himself" (138). It is only when he is "freed of his mistakes" by George (70) that he can be heard to stop muttering and begin shouting what he really means (69-70). Presumably it is George's insight into the "fourth dimension of imaginative liberty" as a "redemptive overlay on other ways of thinking, interacting, and being in the world" (76) which sharpens her hearing in this manner. Blake, on the other hand, was early able "to reverberate the themes" in a manner loud and clear, "prophetic and prescriptive" (147).

> Blake's own solution was expressed numerous times throughout his career in language that remained almost identical throughout several decades, from its first expression in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* to its final expression in *Jerusalem*. It consists of a fantasy of free love so radical that it still sounds peculiarly shocking in our time. (142)

What follows this assertion is a lengthy quotation from what George calls the "visionary poet-prophet of *Visions*" (127), the Oothoon who expresses "Blake's own solution" and "Blake's ideal" (142).

George's acknowledgement of Freud in this context is thus rather like Freud's basic approach to literature; he never tired of admiring it for having anticipated what he took to be the truths of psychoanalysis. But chiefly, perhaps, Freud discovered and appreciated what he took to be the mode of production of truth in the literary text, in which the truth is deferred because the literary theme does not offer itself directly to the reader as such. In this respect, literature was seen to share the most general characteristic of the unconscious, that of a modality or economy of indirect representation. For Freud the great universal opening for interpretation was the insight that discourse itself can always be read as a symptom of something else, as a practice of representation in which the relationship of conscious subjects to the discourse they produce is always eccentric. In such a view the ultimate Truth is of less concern than the process of signification or meaning (*Deutung*) as it is available to our understanding through the observation of its practice of representation. The problematic relationship between subjects and their writing practices constitutes a working area where subjects can learn both about themselves and about the nature of language and its functioning by observing that practice closely. As Freud says,

> There is often something in the material itself which takes charge of one and diverts one from first intentions. Even such a trivial achievement as the arrangement of a well-known piece of material is not entirely subject to an author's own choice; it takes what line it likes and all one can do is ask oneself after the event (*nachträglich*) why it has happened in this way and no other.[3]

There is thus in Freud a profound and pervasive economy of deferral which constitutes both the practice of the unconscious and the psyche in general, and becomes the basic and necessary modality of meaning (*Deutung*) and the governing principle of art itself, which must wait to be "completed" by interpretation. In this view the "Truth" of the Oedipus complex is less important for our understanding of meaning than is attention to the process of deferral which informs the structure and texture of the tragedy as an interpretable text:

> The action of the play consists in nothing other than the process of revealing, with cunning delays and ever-mounting excitement--a process that can be likened to the work of a psycho-analysis--that Oedipus himself is the murderer of Laius, but further that he is the son of the murdered man and of Jocasta.[4]

This description of the "process" of the tragedy is an apt and knowing self-description of Freud's own characteristic mode of exposition, in which belatedness (*Nachträglichkeit*) is chosen over the illusion of a truth immediately available and transparent to the author--a process in which postponement of comprehension, of final interpretations and truths, is both justified by and made necessary by the nature of meaning itself. Wherever we read in Freud, we find this profound and formal sense of process which governs science, art and life, and which must also govern the manner in which we interpret and talk about them.

> We bring expectations with us into the work, but they must be forcibly held back. By observation, now at one point and now at another, we come upon something new. . . . We put forward conjectures, we construct hypotheses, which we withdraw if they are not confirmed, we need much patience and readiness for any eventuality, we renounce early convictions so as not to be led by them into overlooking unexpected factors. . . .[5]

Freud's voice here (as at the end of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) is not unlike that of Los in Blake's *Milton*, urging his Sons to "be patient yet a little" in order to avoid the "fury premature" that results in "Martyrdoms & Wars."

I find it necessary to make these by now rather familiar observations on Freud in order to characterize George's book adequately as a pursuit of Truth ("I pursue this truth. . . . " [p. 27]) which in its haste to reach the appointed end belies the promise of its beginnings. George is consistently patronizing of Freud, whom she sees as Blake's "Idiot Questioner" who "publishes doubt & calls it knowledge; whose Science is Despair" (178). But her most persistent criticism of him is that he failed his promise, by not adopting the role of "prophetic and prescriptive" utterance and shouting the Truth of his discoveries.[6] In this she has not only a remarkably naive and prescriptive view of the author-

function, but one which is very much like what Freud was guarding himself against as a violation of his whole theory of interpretation, and rather like what Blake reveals as the temptation of Milton to found a new religion with a pre-emptive doctrine and discourse of Truth. Foucault has shrewdly observed that what he calls the "author-function" is a more complicated construct, that it does not develop "spontaneously as the attribution of a discourse to an individual," but is rather the result of a "complex operation which constructs a certain rational being that we call 'author,'" and that the author-function "is not defined by the spontaneous attribution of a discourse to its producer, but rather by a series of specific and complex operations" which do not "refer purely and simply to a real individual."[7] Foucault further isolates a particular author-function which I would like to appeal to in this context, citing Freud and Marx as exemplars: *viz*, authors who are not just the "authors" of their own works, but authors who define the possibilities of producing other works, including the rules that govern those works. Such authors can be seen as "founders of discursivity" in Foucault's terminology, in that they define or initiate a discursive practice or a field of discursivity. The task they leave for subsequent practitioners of discourse is thus either extremely simple (to continue within the conspicuous limits of the founding discourse) or extremely difficult: to struggle at the necessary task of transforming the discursive practice itself, while the power of that practice continues to define the possibilities of what can be said as nothing more than variable functions of the originating discursivity itself. The point to be made from this is that the field of discursivity founded by Freud, and his own discursive practice, are both thoroughly and directly counter to prophecy and prescription, and to the author-function that George would have had him assume--contrary not as mere matters of style and temperament, but as the essential dimension of sound interpretive practice itself.

What then of George's assumption that the Truth is immediately available to Blake, for whom Milton's "three major mistakes" turn out to be "relatively minor but debilitating" and can readily be cured, producing a Milton who is a "giant striding the mountains of Blake's imaginative universe, afire with sexual and intellectual energy" (69)? For George the "readings" that Blake's poems "invite are as theological as they are poetic" (147). She discovers Blake's "theological" Truth in a process of reading that ignores distinctions of voice and dramatic context and "hears" Blake's voice as the voice of Truth speaking through Oothoon, through the voice of the Devil--wherever the longed-for message can be found. Freud was too old and too sick to be up to the job (220), but Blake, who "knew everything about everything" (17) and seemingly had no difficulties or self-doubts, was easily able to complete the job begun and botched by Freud, the job of discovering and announcing the Truth. The Truth, of course, is that art as a realm of freedom can structure or restructure reality according to polymorphously perverse desire, realizing total sexual fulfillment. Genital sex, which chains us to reproduction, can be transcended by an indulgence in the full range of sexual acts, and the joys of sex will turn out to be intellectual (not "natural," for "nature" is evil for Blake, and a stumbling-block for Freud) as we all, like Ololon, are "consumed and fulfilled in the orgasmic fires of intellect" (181). Freed from genitality, sexuality becomes "expressive of what Blake thought the highest in humankind--liberty, inspiration, imaginative freedom, art" (180).[8]

If this new and revolutionary truth sounds familiar, it is because the Freud in these pages is the "American Freud" of Marcuse, N. O. Brown, and the early Reich (before his "increasingly narrow and eventually monomaniac focus" [19]). These are George's "major revisionists" (18) of Freud, operating within a liberated discursivity that in her view is properly prophetic and prescriptive. Like Blake, they have transcended Freud's failure to envision "art as a way out of the closed system" or to embrace "art as an escape from determinism" (220, 228). We are thus left with a pathetic view of Freud as a sick, old Jew dying of throat cancer in Nazi-occupied Vienna, not realizing that if he had chosen to be a "prophet" rather than an "analyst" he could have escaped the determinism of his environment. We should "understand Freud's pessimism, and love him for the modicum of hope and vision he retained," but to avoid his fate we should embrace art and live in Jerusalem. We should become "Blakers" (17) and do what "Blake says" (78); to "restore ourselves to mythic stature . . . why not poetically, mythically, imagine an unfallen and expansive body that corresponds to our own" (78)? In Blake's "Program" (80) any "adjustment to external reality and capitulation to natural limitation" are simply "a waste of time" (80). After all, Blake "knew exactly what he was doing" (106), and he "made it perfectly clear" (82).

There is little in this intertextual venture that had not already been mapped by Blake in his anatomy of discourse in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, where Oothoon shouts "Love! Love! Love! happy happy Love! free as the mountain wind!" and Theotormon does not listen. But Oothoon does not listen to Theotormon either, and there is no power in her rapturous rhetoric to change him. To equate the voice of Blake with Oothoon alone is to continue to misread this most misread of all Blake's works, and to trivialize the energetic exertion of his talent in the continued quest for a poetic form that could change, rather than reinforce, the pattern of voices that "impose" on each other without ever constituting a discourse that could be called a conversation. Without suggesting that they are right in any ultimate sense, I would still urge that the French Freudians have been paying Freud more respectful attention than George, who basically uses a limited view of Freud as a straw man to set off a transcendent genius in Blake who "knew everything about everything."

I do think that George is right, in her notion that Blake and Freud are profound antagonists. But in spite of her proclamation of anticipatory victory for Blake, the battle is never fairly engaged, and the power of Freud's views on the limits of the possibility of discourse cannot be overthrown by proclamation. George does at least recognize that "Freud's choice of words was the linguistic

representation of his own and his culture's processes of symbol formation" (217). But she engages with the problem as if it were one of "diction" (217) and "terminology" (219) on the simple level of the choice of words.[9] The work of Laplanche and Pontalis, even after their eight years of research, has probably only begun to show the labyrinthine interconnections of concepts, extensions, connotations and implications of Freud's terminology for the conceptual organization and practice of psychoanalysis and interpretation.[10] The practice of discourse cannot be freed from the processes of representation and available meanings that are inscribed in the very structure of linguistic and cultural codes by a simple avoidance of "conventional terminology" (227) and "diction," as George seems for the most part to suggest.

The end of *The Book of Urizen* is relevant here:

> 8. So Fuzon call'd all together
> The remaining children of Urizen:
> And they left the pendulous earth:
> They called it Egypt & left it.

To *call* it Egypt and leave it is not to enter the promised land of fully liberated discourse, but to enter a linguistic desert of doubt and despair, where the already-inscribed code constantly offers itself as the only path. This is why Los's task in *Jerusalem* is described as building "the stubborn structure of the Language, acting against/Albion's melancholy, who must else have been a Dumb despair" (E 181). There is one extended moment, in Chapter 6, where George seems to realize and articulate the essence of the basic problems which she elsewhere glides over:

> Blake's problems with portrayals of sexuality and of women, as I see it, are problems of symbol formation that express themselves in the limitations of language. . . . Blake's vision of the human was constantly rendered problematic by language. He had to try to speak the literally unspeakable. Language and art were his tools for reunification of the Human Form Divine, but the images available to him to communicate his vision of the eternal were necessarily drawn from the repository of the material and natural world. That world--its images and therefore its language--was sexual. Blake wished to portray everything as human, and humans in this world are sexual beings. He was thus compelled to express ultimately genderless human forms in gendered terms. . . . To accomplish this task, he turned in every direction; most of all, to the sexes. Here, where he tried hardest to heal, he was constantly confronted with the wound. Sometimes, ironically, he deepened the wound. (199-200)

This passage alone is worth almost the whole of the rest of the book, and I hope that it indicates the future direction of George's efforts.

[1] The only other comparable work I have come across in this area is Morris Dickstein's study of the "influence" of Freud on Blake, which concentrates mainly on the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*: "The Price of Experience: Blake's Reading of Freud," in *The Literary Freud: Mechanisms of Defense and the Poetic Will*, Vol. 4 of the Psychiatry and the Humanities Series, ed. J. H. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

[2] The only French author cited in the whole study is Bataille, whose "somewhat wiggy theses" are described as "valuable to the psychoanalytic critic" (239).

[3] *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (S.E.), ed. James Strachey *et al.*, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), XVI, 379.

[4] S. E., IV, 261-62.

[5] S. E., XXII, 174.

[6] I find it hard to avoid here the image of Mr. Huffcap (who "would kick the bottom of the Pulpit out, with Passion, would tear off the sleeve of his Gown, & set his wig on fire & throw it at the people hed cry & stamp & kick & sweat and all for the good of their souls") or of Quid ("I will fall into such a passion Ill hollow and stamp & frighten all the People there & show them what truth is") in *An Island in the Moon* (E 443, 456).

[7] "What is an Author," in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. J. V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 150, 153.

[8] Cf. Leopold Damrosch's remark: "The solution is constantly announced by Blakeans:. abolish secrecy, improve sensual enjoyment, dispense with jealousy and indulge in Oothoon's 'lovely copulation.' But Blake's closest affinity with Freud lies in his deep appreciation of the difficulty of doing this" (*Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980], p. 216).

[9] It is interesting that, although Freud's "use of terminology is problematic" (219), his main utility is seen as a purveyor of terminology: "Blake needs Freud to clarify Blake's contributions to psychology in accessible terms" (25).

[10] Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973).