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R E V I E W

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# THE CONTINUING CITY

William Blake's *Jerusalem*

MORTON D. PALEY



Morton D. Paley. *The Continuing City: William Blake's Jerusalem*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983. 330 pp., 22 illus. \$57.00

Reviewed by V.A. De Luca

*Jerusalem's* reputation as a great English poem is essentially a post-war phenomenon. Indeed this reputation, in so far as it commands reasonably wide assent in the profession, is largely a product of the past twenty years, gathering its momentum from the enthusiasms of the apocalyptically inclined sixties. By the time the poem began to be taken seriously, the New Criticism, with its emphasis on nuances of language and subtleties of formal technique, was well on the wane. The older modes of literary scholarship—the elaboration of historical background, the tracing of sources and influences, the inventorying of themes and formal features—were even more remote to nascent Blakeans. The criticism of Blake's longer poems found its distinctive voice in an impassioned translation or paraphrase of themes, in which a

certain evangelical impulse played no small part. This enthusiastic approach was enormously valuable for kindling a widespread interest in Blake, and only now is it beginning to give way to more specialized and technical kinds of inquiry into his work. But the approach also led to an impoverishment in our sense of the ways in which *Jerusalem* works as a poem and of its place in a historical and cultural context. Because of its belated arrival in the canon, the study of *Jerusalem* has passed from fervent interpretation to scholarly specialization without having paused to offer a clearly outlined, basic description of the thing itself. Categorical description, the forte of the older modes of criticism and regularly applied to poems whose reputation consolidated earlier, say, *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Faerie Queene*, or *The Prelude*, has not until now figured significantly in work on *Jerusalem*—much to our cost.

These circumstances heighten the importance of Morton Paley's much-awaited study. As Paley himself points out, "at this point we do not need yet another recension of the beliefs of an idealized Blake" (p. 32), and in *The Continuing City* he avoids any such thing. The originality and strength of the book lie in its refusal of a thematic centering, in its disinclination to translate Blake's poem into an argument or to impose an argument of the author's own devising. Although Paley refrains from stating what he considers the aim of his study to be, that aim is clear enough from the design of the whole: to explore the essential frames of reference in which an adequate study of *Jerusalem* might begin. It attempts more or less to describe in an orderly fashion what the poem contains, where it finds its models, and how it works. Sometimes, as in the introductory chapter and occasionally elsewhere, this approach involves a survey of familiar material (such as a review of the poem's publishing history and of its critical reception) that is readily available in other secondary sources. The inclusion of such material indicates that Paley aims ultimately not for novelty but for comprehensiveness. Indeed, in its range of coverage and its willingness to stoop to the familiar and to basic facts, *The Continuing City* resembles nothing so much as those impressively magisterial introductions that one or two generations ago would accompany critical editions of major texts—say, Maynard Mack on *The Essay on Man* in the Twickenham Pope or Frank Kermode's introduction to the Arden *Tempest*. It is precisely this sort of treatment—erudite but plain-speaking, objective, comprehensive, topically subdivided—that *Jerusalem* has sorely lacked, as it has lacked the honor of a definitive annotated critical edition (a need, incidentally, that Paley recognizes). *The Continuing City*, more leisurely in pace, more loosely textured, is perhaps not quite in the class of Mack on Pope, but the comparison serves to suggest the kind of scholarly company that Paley's work keeps and the importance of what

he has accomplished.

Like the imaginative city that gives the book its title and provides the subject of its central chapter, this work too is a structure with many gates, each leading from a different direction to the sanctuary of the poem itself. There are chapters on the verse of *Jerusalem* and its relation to period styles and theories, on approaches to the reading of the designs, on the millenarian framework and its symbolism, on the *dramatis personae*, and on the formal organization. This varied set of concerns calls for a range of different skills in handling them, and although certain chapters do rise above others in distinction, virtually all parts of the work display a shrewd common sense, a facility in discovering relevant connections, a resourcefulness in posing interesting kinds of issues to address, and a thorough command of background information.

Paley is at his best when he has tangible kinds of evidence before him to engage his attention. He clearly likes to gather and correlate information, to probe it for its implications, and to dispose it in orderly arrangements for his reader. The role of literary historian seems particularly congenial, and one of the most impressive things in *The Continuing City* is the devotion that Paley bestows in detailing a tradition of analogues to Blake's four-gated city. As Paley proceeds methodically from Ezekiel, Revelation, and Josephus, through such later visionaries of millennial architecture as Villapandus, Lightfoot, and John Wood, the very accumulation of examples gives the reader a vividly heightened sense of the perennial force of the visionary impulse, a process aptly caught in Blake's trope of Golgonooza, "ever building, ever falling" (*Milton* 6.2), only to give rise again in successive prophets. As a summary account of sources and analogues for Blake's city of vision, this part of Paley's book is likely to remain definitive; future students of the subject will want to consult it before any other account.

But the triumph of Paley's empirical approach comes not in his investigations of literary history but in his analysis of *Jerusalem's* form. His skill in handling formal matters is evident early in the book, in the chapter on versification, where through an array of resourceful and patiently applied methods—scansion, syntactical analysis, comparison with analogues—he arrives at characterizations that are virtually always on the mark (e.g., "pauses do not typically create a balanced tension, as often in Augustan poetry, but rather appear to resist the onrush of the verse and then yield to it; . . . enjambement transfers energy from one line to another and creates a sense that statements [not always sentences] are structural units" [p. 51]). The best treatment of form in the book is reserved, however, for last. In this chapter, simply called "Form," Paley unquestionably makes his most useful contribution to the criticism of *Jerusalem*.

After surveying some possible models for the poem's peculiarities of organization (the most interesting of which, from the Blake critic's point of view, is Handel's *Messiah*), he launches into a scrutinizing analysis of the work's construction. There is a valuable exposition of the problem of the two extant arrangements of plates in Chapter 2, and although this treatment cannot be taken as definitive (the interested reader may wish to compare Paley's findings with my own somewhat different account of the same matters, previously published in these pages [Spring 1983]), it demonstrates clearly that a critical understanding of *Jerusalem's* foundations cannot proceed without a firm bibliographical understanding. More important still is Paley's comprehensive and illuminating attempt to chart the recurrences of the important narrative and thematic motifs in the poem. Borrowing his technique from synoptic tabularizations of the four gospels (why has no one thought of applying this technique to *Jerusalem* before?), Paley analyzes these motifs into their component parts and pinpoints their recurrences on a spatial grid representing *Jerusalem's* four chapters. As a result any reader consulting these tables may henceforth take in at a glance the location of the major narrative strands and motifs, the distribution of their recurrences throughout the poem, and the weight of concentration Blake gives to each. At once a concordance of *Jerusalem's* motifs and a map of its thematic structure, these tables are likely to prove an indispensable reference tool.

Paley's close investigations of the poem's construction pay off in some finely judicious observations on the rationale of the structure of the whole. Usefully distinguishing what he calls the "organization" of the work (its "official" symmetrical division into four equal chapters) from its "form" (small, potentially shiftable gatherings of plates, or synchronous narrative events recurring in unpredictably distributed clusters), he concludes that Blake's technique, in effect, is to set the two kinds of order in a kind of antagonism to one another: "The organizational container reinforces the expectation of a strong narrative line, an expectation which is subverted time after time in the work itself"; "regularity is an aspect of what I have called the 'container'; the poem and the designs build up a tension with that regular order" (pp. 302, 307). From this strong insight it follows that "attempts to view the chapters as discrete units depend upon rationalizing after the fact, and quite different chapter constructions could be so rationalized" (p. 303). One hopes that this firmly persuasive observation will lay to rest finally all those by now wearisome attempts to allegorize *Jerusalem's* four-part scheme as a thematic medley or as stages in a conceptual argument. The schematic divisions of the text, it would seem, confer meaning no more readily than rhyming or isochronous meter do in prosody. They are formal points



of departure for an unpredictable play of intellectual and emotional energy, the definite outlines from which an infinite potential recoils.

Paley's finest critical insights, then, are reserved for matters of form. In its handling of theme and meaning, however, the distinction of *The Continuing City* is oddly enough not so assured. The two explicitly thematic chapters "The Myth of Humanity" (Albion-Vala-Jerusalem) and "The Prophetic Myth" (Los-Enitharmon-Spectre) are not themselves problematic; they do not bring many new large-scale insights to bear on these "myths" (there are many gratifying small illuminations) but the mode of exposition is as lucidly and as rationally organized as we are likely to find in any commentary on Blake's longer poems. The chapter on "Art" however raises problems of a larger order, for here Paley's concern is explicitly with the search for meaning itself and the principles according to which such a search might be based. Using five designs from *Jerusalem*, chosen as exemplary of differing kinds of interpretative problems posed by the visual side of Blake's work, Paley hopes to show "How to Read Blake's Pictures" (p. 89). As usual, his principles are sensible, his observations keen, and his references learned. But the discussion as a whole begs the question of what it means to "read" a picture. It proceeds on the assumptions that interpretation is a self-evident desideratum and that the meaning of a picture is to be found in a presumed doctrinal intention paraphrasable in words. But such assumptions merely extend to the world of designs that yearning for a "re-cension of beliefs" or for "rationalizations after the fact" about which Paley is properly skeptical elsewhere in the book as a program for Blake criticism. Paley appears somewhat uncomfortable with the otherness of the pictorial medium, with the evasiveness of its response to demands that it serve a signifying role; hence his preference that ambiguous "readings" of certain designs be settled on one side of the argument or the other. Yet one needs to ask why Blake takes refuge intermittently in pictures at all, if the pictures can be re-spoken as words conformable to unequivocal words that the poet has already used.

Take, for instance, what from the standpoint of interpretation are the two most difficult of Paley's five exemplary cases. According to various critics the crucifixion scene on pl. 76 depicts either a vegetated Christ, in which case we are to deplore Albion's posture of reverence, or a Christ sacrificing himself in divine Friendship, in which case we are enjoined to imitate Albion's *imitatio*. But are we to assume that Blake's advice regarding which attitude we should choose is somehow encoded in the visual lines of the picture? It seems more likely that the design is an invitation to choice, not a determination of it. After alluding to the crucifixion in various contexts, positive and negative

throughout *Jerusalem*, Blake is saying, in effect, here is the thing itself, the visual sign for a permanent act or reality, a "Representation of what Eternally Exists. Really & Unchangeably." (VLJ, E 554). He who would see in this visual depiction a display of divine love and he who would see a religion of atonement with a corpse as centerpiece see, to borrow a phrase from Wallace Stevens, nothing that is not there in the design itself. The alternatives are both encoded in its iconographic details and in the religious assumptions of viewers, whether liberated or benighted. Paley is on the right track when he suggests that it is better to trust our intuitive response to designs such as this than to consult some doctrinal abstract of Blake's thought for our opinion. But what is required here is an intuitive response to the crucifixion itself, not to a "message" of the poet regarding it. Perhaps the function of this design, and many others in *Jerusalem* as well, is to suspend the strongly directive voice of the poet and to yield to the spectator the opportunity to test his or her own imaginative capacities in an act of *seeing*.

The same point holds for the other difficult case among Paley's samples. The notoriously recondite chariot vision on pl. 41[46] is, as Paley admits, "almost a Rorschach test for Blake scholars." Prolific with unknown metamorphic forms and half-recognizable iconographical hints at accessible meaning, it virtually begs for interpretation. But what it so conspicuously invites it then proceeds to impede. Paley is inclined to see this design as a dark vision, a triumph of Vala, but if one is inclined to view the design as a representation of the fulfillment of apocalyptic prophecy, the supports for such a reading are also readily available. If the woman in the chariot is clothed, and hence Vala, as Paley argues, one might point out that *Jerusalem* also appears clothed on pls. 26 and 92; the older bearded figure embracing the woman appears somber, but no more somber than he does in similar embraces in the indisputably ecstatic and apocalyptic contexts of pls. 96 and 99; and the last line of verse on pl. 41, directly over the design of the embracing couple, refers to "The Bride and Wife of the Lamb" (J 41.28). As for the drawers, one might be reminded, as Paley is, of certain pictorial sources that suggest Covering Cherubs or rides through the underworld; but iconography even more readily yields, in response to the lion-maned, human-faced, ox-hooved, eagle-guided creatures depicted here, the traditional scriptural emblems of the Four Living Creatures that surround the Divine Vision; from Blake's own works one might point to the collaboration of serpents, eagles, lions, and men in *MHH* 15 to bring grand works of art into being, or to those vehicular serpents on which energetic children joyously ride in *America* 11 and *Thel* 6. To collect counter-evidence against Paley's position is not, however, my point here; it is not a question of

right and wrong interpretations. If Paley's treatment falls short of a full response to the complexities that pl. 41 poses, it is not for any lack of skill in the reading of emblems; rather, it is because he bypasses an issue that Blake's technique in many parts in *Jerusalem* raises insistently: why does the "Rorschach" effect appear so frequently in the designs (and not just the designs) unless Blake is making a point about the process of signification itself?

If a design or a passage of verse (such as the notorious vortex passage in *Milton* 15) perennially begets fresh interpretations and controversy, while continuing to frustrate the formation of a consensus opinion, then the interpretive effort becomes not a vehicle for overcoming a difficulty but rather a signifier of that difficulty; "difficulty" itself is foregrounded as the "message." Perhaps spots such as the design on pl. 41 have been established as interpretive Free Zones, fashioned so as perpetually to invite and to evade univocal readings. Such points might act as vortices in the surface of accessible meaning, drawing us down into the depths where all meanings are seen as potential, as "regenerations terrific or complacent" varying according to our perceptions or to the turns in a visionary conversation dramatic. The unreadable (or too variously readable) chariot of pl. 41 compacts such a conversation in a tightly determinate visual form.

Plausibly, Paley might respond to this argument with one of his own interpretive principles: "Interpretations according to which mutually exclusive meanings are seen as equally valid are not likely to be helpful. We should remember Blake's love of the definite" (p. 118). What one finds helpful of course depends on what one is asking the poem to supply; if it is a series of securely identifiable "correct" meanings, then Paley's cautions are well taken. But generally Blake praises the definite not as an attribute of meaning but as an attribute of form; it is a quality of the bounding outline, or to use Paley's own terminology, the regularity of the "container," and it applies to the incisive visual clarity of the signifier, not to the possibilities of the signified. For within the walls of the definite there ricochets its antonym the infinite, equally loved, a surging and ultimately untameable waywardness that will not abide our question or accommodate itself to our paraphrases. Despite some excellent remarks in Chapter II on the "Titanic striving" of Blake's sublime mode in *Jerusalem* and on the effort of its "language to abandon its function as mediator and to become meaning itself" (p. 64), in general Paley shows little responsiveness to this wayward element in the poem. It is a lack that demarcates the limits of his study of the subject.

I speak of limits not in any pejorative sense. A different kind of critical approach would have curbed the excellence that *The Continuing City* achieves in its

own kind, and one can only be grateful for a study that manages to pack between two covers as many valuable observations as it does in such a wide range of contexts. If one ventures to weigh the actual achievements of this work against the possibilities that it has neglected to explore, it is simply because the appearance of a major book on a great English poem impels us to take stock of the critical tradition gathering around that poem, locating the book in hand within the tradition by glancing at what has gone before and what might come after. *The Continuing City* functions as a practical guide; it is not surprising that Paley invokes the "helpful" as a principle in reading Blake's designs, for such a principle underlies his whole enterprise. This is indeed a genuinely helpful book, seeking everywhere to accommodate the strangeness and difficulty of *Jerusalem* to our understandings and vice versa, and its commonsense approach accomplishes what had to be accomplished sooner or later. But one suspects that a future criticism will make strangeness and difficulty its very theme, bringing to the fore a Blake who is himself anything but accommodating. Such a criticism is likely to differ as much from Paley's lucid, well-rounded course of instruction as that mode differs from the evangelical commentaries of the past generation, mentioned at the outset. Newer readings will have come to terms with a sensibility that in mood and in expressive tendency can be brooding, obsessive, devious, secretive, sometimes even brutal, even as it is also radiant and humane. Here lies a fruitful direction for the criticism of *Jerusalem* to take, not because a conception of Blake as problematic is desirable for its own sake (though a certain clearing of the air of pieties is always welcome) but because an unsentimental gauging of the human complexities and strenuous tensions in his work will serve to underscore his genius and to deepen our own thought. One need only glance at the history of Wordsworth criticism in the past twenty years to see the effects of a resourceful phenomenological probing of ambiguities; not only is Wordsworth now seen as a difficult proto-modern poet but he has moved to the center of that revival of Romantic concerns which has so significantly nourished the most venturesome and vital strands of recent critical discourse. To establish Blake, a poet of equivalent genius, in a similar nourishing and energizing role is an enterprise that all of us should want.

Nevertheless, as a conspicuously Orcan figure of our own day once phrased it, if you can't always get what you want you can get what you need. Before anyone can scale the craggiest heights or probe the gloomiest caverns of Blake's most demanding poem, there needs to be an expertly conducted exploration of the basic terrain, and this Paley has provided. As it stands, *The Continuing City* is the most significant and useful book on *Jerusalem* that we have.