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Genius and Identity-as-Community in Blake's Los*

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## Conversing in Paradise

Poetic Genius and Identity-  
as-Community in Blake's Los

Leonard W. Deen



Leonard W. Deen. *Conversing in Paradise: Poetic Genius and Identity-as-Community in Blake's Los*. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1983. Pp. 274. \$23.00

Reviewed by Mary Lynn Johnson

For twenty-five years the fullest investigation of a single figure or character in Blake has remained Henry Petter's patient dissertation in the German manner, *Enitharmon: Stellung und Aufgabe eines Symboles in dichterischen Gesamtwerk William Blakes*, published in 1957 in the Swiss Studies in English monograph series and now rarely cited. Edward J. Rose, in a book-length series of articles spanning two decades, has conducted the most sustained and multifaceted investigation of Los, and Rose's articles on Los and his family have been amplified or refined by

several other essayists or dissertation writers who have been active since about 1970. As the pivotal figure in Blake's mature work, as archetype of the artist, the artisan, and the prophet, as creator of systems and striver against systems, as the most psychologically complex and humanly understandable personality among the Zoas, and as an idealized self-portrait of the author himself, Los appeals strongly to the critical imagination. The time certainly appears ripe for a generously proportioned treatment of Blake's most heroic character. A book that alludes to Los in its title ought to be warmly received.

The names of books can of course be misleading in a variety of ways; some are oddly revealing even when they are not especially informative. Leonard W. Deen's awkwardly inclusive title, *Conversing in Paradise: Poetic Genius and Identity-as-Community in Blake's Los*, attempts like the book itself to use Los as a precipitant for a diffuse mass of ideas and symbols. Although interesting local insights and fresh reformulations of familiar ideas appear frequently, the study suffers from a puzzling lack of vividness. It is difficult to keep the main line of argument in mind. Even the title character does not help much. Compelling though the figure of Los is in one's experience of Blake's poems, and useful though a single-figure study might seem to be at this stage of Blake criticism, Deen's soft focus on "Poetic Genius" has the effect of dissolving Los's distinctive lineaments.

Deen describes Los as "a character as 'real' as any in Shakespeare and Dickens," considers him in *The Four Zoas* to be a "human—even novelistic—character," and interprets the Los-Enitharmon plot as being on one level "the history of a marriage." But *Conversing in Paradise* is really about "identity-as-community," an ideal state toward which Los struggles. The phrase "identity-as-community" describes "the form of a body of poetry as well as an ideal of brotherhood" enacted by Los. Through Los, "Blake shows the position from which the poet in a fallen world must start," for "the first form of reasserted identity in a fallen world is Mental Fight; the achieved form is the community of Eden."

Deen works entirely within the critical framework devised by other scholars, notably Frye: "My approach to Blake is neither to analyze his problems nor to seek his sources or his tradition, but to stick closely to the terms and characters of his poetry in order to reveal the whole shape of his myth." Deen's few quotations and paraphrases of thinkers other than Blake—introduced from time to time as general background—are filtered through secondary sources, as with the synopsis of Enlightenment views of identity for purposes of contrast with Romantic and Blakean myths of identity. Most of his frequently-drawn parallels with literary and mythological figures seem intended merely as casual analogies. His modest purpose is to clarify "a form" of the received Blakean myth, "one around the figure of Los,

an ellipse whose two foci are identity and community." But his critical method, as he describes it, almost guarantees vague results: "My effort is speculative and is an attempt to see Blake's myth as he might have seen it—not as philosophy or psychology or criticism (though it contains these, largely in the form of Mental Fight), but as poetry."

In the introductory chapter, "Identity and Community in English Romantic Poetry," Deen advances his main theme: for Blake "Identity is community." This manifesto means three things: the solitary individual has no true identity; the community acts in and recreates itself through the individual; and community in both its fallen and regenerated states is to be identified with a single person. Deen repeatedly emphasizes that his subject is not "personal identity," a term that Blake would understand as appropriate only to a closed, self-absorbed state at the Limit of Contraction. Individuals realize their full identity only when warring inner elements are brought into harmony and when the private self joins others: "Community achieved as a conversing in paradise is Jesus; struggling to create itself, it is Los." Albion regains his identity when he communes with universal humanity, Jesus, through his friend, Los, and Blake attains his own full identity as an artist and as a human being when he becomes one with—or "identified" with—his larger self in Los.

According to Deen, Blake shares with Wordsworth and other Romantics a conception of true identity as a return to a source, a deeper, fuller, more genuine self. This is one of two Romantic paradigms of identity; the other is a Keatsian process of individuation. Deen organizes major Romantic poems into an ascending continuum of dialogues that move toward community: soliloquy (self with self), soliloquy-address (self with self and another), mental fight (confrontation between visions), and conversation (self with another as an image of God). The first two stages of this hypothetical arrangement tend to be "replaced," as Deen puts it, in Blake's work by solitary struggle or solitary dramatic lament, while the last two stages are "more developed" in Blake than in the other Romantics. Indeed, Blake alone among the Romantics "fully imagines human identity as active conversing in paradise" among beings who are identified with one another and with God.

Deen tracks what might be called the Los principle throughout Blake's literary work (but not in the designs). This complex of ideas drives inexorably toward the fulfillment of what seems, in retrospect, a pre-ordained design: the "unfolding of the abstract Poetic Genius of 1788 into the character Los and into the brotherhood of the risen poem-man at the end of *Jerusalem*." Deen accepts without reservation the doctrine, received from Frye, that Blake's myth is a seamless whole—meaning that his mythic personages are at least

implicitly present throughout his poetry, whether or not they are mentioned by name. Looking at Blake's body of work chronologically—but selectively, and without mentioning troublesome overlaps in time of composition or revision—Deen can say that most of the early prophecies "begin in paganism" and that the later prophecies end in forgiveness of sin and redemption, so that Los's "awakening as Christian poet-artist-prophet in Night VII of *The Four Zoas*" stands as the "decisive conversion, or turn toward redemption, in Blake's poetry as a whole."

To confirm his proposition, Deen looks for telltale signs of Los's omnipresence, whether actual or potential, occluded or revealed. Two of his eight chapters are on works in which Los is not a character: one on *All Religions are One*, *There is No Natural Religion*, *The French Revolution*, and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*; the other—perhaps the best chapter in the book—on "The Mental Traveller." Between them is a chapter on the Lambeth prophecies in which the two poems named after Los are considered in less detail than those in which he does not appear at all. But Los need not be present for a work to be fair game. The early tractates introduce the "idea of Los," the Poetic Genius; *The French Revolution* introduces another of Los's aspects, Mental Fight; and this attribute is fully developed in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (although Los "has still not appeared under his own name"). In *America* and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* Los is "absent" or "inactive," but other characters play parts of the role that Los later fills.

In "The Mental Traveller," Los is "missing" or in "decline" before he reappears in his mature form in *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*. The poem itself, "in some ways the middle missing from the short prophecies of the 1790s," presents "an evasion of Mental Fight," the "negative-ironic form of Blake's myth" or "the 'shadow' cast by it." Deen has some valuable and interesting things to say about the cycle of male-female relationships, and he enlarges his frame of reference by developing carefully drawn parallels with classical mythology and with Marvell's "The Definition of Love" and Shakespeare's "Venus and Adonis." The chapter on "The Mental Traveller," which has little to do with Deen's thesis, works very well as a free-standing unit; it is closely engaged with the poem and, broadly yet discriminately, with its entire body of commentary.

The chapter on the Lambeth books, more than fifty pages into the book, discusses works in which Los has at least a "minimal" role—an evident or implied presence that Deen expands to ubiquitousness. In *Europe* "Los-Albion dreams as Enitharmon and awakens in Orc, but the whole of Europe divided and at war is nevertheless moved by a single impulse, and this movement—a fall—Blake calls Los." And in *The Book of Urizen*, where Los is "source" of the other characters, Deen claims that "we ought to speak of Los-as-Urizen, Los-as-Enitharmon,



Los-as-Orc."

The teleological fallacy generates false problems, such as "why it takes Los so long to emerge as a figure from his idea in the Tractates," and why, even when the character named Los does at last appear, he lacks so many of the attributes that Blake later gives him. One explanation is that Blake "seems to have been diverted by the French Revolution into concentrating on Orc and Urizen" or two-party conflict. Another is that "Blake does not know what to put in place" of what he clears away in the early prophecies. A third is that Blake only gradually separated Los's role from that of Orc as redemptive energy and that of Albion as universal man. Most importantly, Los is not fully himself until he has been converted to Christianity.

Deen rightly insists that Blake's characters cannot be neatly allegorized. But instead of making a fresh start with a more productive approach, he partially accepts and then rejects a plethora of allegorical possibilities—for example in his comments on *Visions*, never clearly related to the central ideas of the book. Deen begins with the proposition that *Visions*, *America*, and *Urizen* are revolutionary prophecies "dominated by roughly the same three figures," one female and two male characters who are "'parts' of Los": "a mother or object of desire; a youthful and desirous rebel; and an old figure of authority." So he sets about finding this pattern in *Visions*. On the grounds that all the letters in Oothoon's name and most in Bromion's may be found in "Theotormon," Deen suggests that Theotormon is a "containing figure," with Bromion and Oothoon as "his conflicting psychic elements," even though Oothoon is the one who "seems more complete"—not, as one might think, because of her fuller humanity but "because she is in touch with all four elements." He consistently holds that Oothoon plays her part as the "object of desire" who gradually awakens into "desire irrepressible," but he wavers among contradictory and irreconcilable interpretations of the other two characters. Is Bromion "a figure of usurping reason" and Theotormon "desire so self-restrained that it has become the shadow of desire"? Or should Theotormon be thought of as "reason, Bromion as the desire which (after an outburst) he has bound"? Or—if Bromion is reason and Oothoon is desire—is Theotormon "the torment generated by their conflict"? Or are both Bromion and Theotormon "images of reason tormented by desire"? The indiscriminate entertainment of so many permutations of possible meanings suggests not so much that the text is "multivalent" as that the reason-desire-object scheme is unsuitable and perhaps that the critic may be wishy-washy.

Phrases like "so to speak," "almost like," "seems," and "as if" bring in tenuous suggestions by the side door that could not bear the strain of straightforward exposition. Particularly in casually suggesting numerous

mythological parallels Deen carries to extremes his tendency to systematize what he deems untidy and fill in what he considers to be gaps. He muses, for example, that Bromion

looks as if he should be Dionysus ("Bromios" or "Bromius"). But he seems more like Zeus—thunderer—and Oothoon seems a Semele burnt by Zeus's thunderbolt, so the child that Bromion expects Oothoon to produce ought to be Dionysus. . . . Even though Oothoon has no child, the effect of the rape-in-thunder and of the attack by Theotormon's eagles that she invites in *Visions* is an ecstasy that might be described as Dionysian. . . . —as if Oothoon-Semele had become a maenad follower of her son Dionysus (not yet born) in one of Blake's extreme condensations of pagan myth. Or perhaps the child she brings forth is Dionysian vision. . . . [Blake] seems to have led up to and stopped short of (or skipped) the birth of Dionysus.

Or again, Deen speculates that Los's labyrinth in *The Four Zoas* suggests

the brain of jealousy become a secret and hidden labyrinth, or the labyrinthine serpent form of the umbilical cord in the womb, as if Los had put mother Enitharmon into a womb of his own. (Since Orc is like a bull and the bulls of Luvah are mentioned in Night VII, . . . the labyrinth suggests that Los is both Minos and Dedalus, and that hiding Enitharmon-Pasiphae in the labyrinth is designed to prevent her coupling with the bull Luvah-Orc and conceiving and bearing the Minotaur—as if Los half-remembered and meant to prevent Minos's fate.)

As one would expect, Deen's theories work best in the main chapters of the book, on *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*, the poems in which Los comes into his own. Deen sees Los and the other major characters as entering *The Four Zoas* with the experiences they have acquired in earlier poems, after they have generated enough sons and daughters and developed sufficiently complex relationships to form a community. Los's change of heart in Night VII, his forgiveness of his Spectre (which Deen describes as a conversion to Christianity) is also his liberation from reason as internalized tyrant, paralleling Blake's experience at Felpham that he describes in his well-known letter to Hayley of 23 October 1804. Deen develops this parallel in some detail, and he provides a well-considered commentary on the two poems about Los that appear in Blake's letters to Butts. He also attempts to "put the fall-and-recovery in terms of speech"—running from self-obsession through various levels of expression and response to the ideal of conversing. But in this enterprise the poem refuses to cooperate. When Deen claims, for example, that "as *The Four Zoas* progresses, lament or speech or song begins to evoke more response and moves toward dialogue or responsive song," he cites Enion's response to Ahania in Night VIII but passes over their antiphonal laments that conclude Nights II and III. Near the end of Night IX, when the "conversing" finally takes place, it is with "animal forms of wisdom," only "midway" to the ideal state.

*Milton*, an "inward and confessional poem," lends itself particularly well to Deen's exploration of the Blakean concept of identity. Milton's journey brings him closer and closer to his most intimate self, until Satan's innermost disguise is unmasked as Milton's own Selfhood, the "anti-identity" that had overwhelmed the hero's true identity. In other words, Milton comes to understand that he had "put himself into *Paradise Lost* unconsciously and that he should have put himself into it consciously (as Blake . . . puts himself into *Milton*)." Milton's projection of his rebellious nature into the Satan of *Paradise Lost* is the source of his confusion of identity; the Bard's Song enables him to recover his projections and to recognize that his Selfhood is the true Satan. In discussing *Milton* Deen comments perceptively on the gap between some of Blake's images and the ideas that they represent: when one strains to visualize what cannot be apprehended, the "effect is of fallen sense experience being intensified to a point at which it is about to overcome its limits and to reveal the world as human."

In contrast to *The Four Zoas*, in which Blake's myth changes as he writes, *Jerusalem* presents the fully developed myth "in fragments or flashes." Deen astutely describes Los's saving action as his descent into error or illusion, through self-annihilation entering progressively deeper states of error and exposing their roots within his own mind. Deen sees the motive force of the poem as a "contest of extremes," one pair of which is "anti-identity and identity." Satan is the confusion of identity; Christ is authentic identity. Blake holds brotherhood above sexual love because the former allows the unique individual to "identify" with the universal community. Deen suggests that Los's hammer prevents the world from solidifying, so that changes leading to redemption may occur. When Albion is bewitched by sexual desire, he confuses sexuality with identity; when he sees the whole world as human, as part of himself, he accepts responsibility for it and regains his identity in community.

A final chapter, "Blake's Los," recapitulates and helps to reinforce the connections among the elements named in the title, with some help from additional mythological parallels. But each element in the mythic complex continues to mean so many different things that a kind of muddle remains the strongest impression. The relationship between identity and community really has been clarified in the course of the book, so that by the end we understand that "identity and community are the same supreme state seen differently, by contracted or expanded senses." But the hyphenated phrase, "identity-as-community" is supposed to mean "the exercise of one's unique Mental Gifts in the creation and exchange of the Mental Forms of a human world," as revealed in Los. And Poetic Genius "is the source and creator of our humanity, the seed that makes us both Homo sapiens

and unique human persons, and at the same time the cultural ground that fosters this development." A further difficulty is that conversing in paradise is "cut short" at the end of Blake's work and "remains mysterious"; it is from our perspective "a vanishing point in which we know what we know through having watched its coming into existence. . . ." Because all these concepts are so slippery, so tenuously related to one another, Los's concretizing role is crucial to Deen's argument. Los is "the generating force in the growth of Blake's systematic myth, the advancing edge of Blake's imagination projected into the poem, the embodiment of the principle of change through imagination as work." Deen is convinced that "wherever we turn in Blake's poetry, we are confronted by Los." Allowing for some exaggeration, this claim may be true. But I am not persuaded that all the ideas that Deen discusses in *Conversing in Paradise* take meaningful shape around the figure of Los.

**Richard B. Schwartz, *Daily Life in Johnson's London*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984; 196 pp. + xix; \$25.00 cloth, \$9.95 paper.**

**Reviewed by Max Byrd**

Sooner or later every reader must yearn to grasp one of Richard B. Schwartz's sentences at each end and wring it dry, like a wet towel. For twenty-five of the first thirty verbs in chapter one of *Daily Life in Johnson's London* he chooses either the passive voice or a form of "to be": "Traffic upon the Thames was slow . . . The smell of sewage was apparent . . . The city's streets were covered. . . ." And throughout the book his verbs continue to lie motionless in this way, on their backs and silent, their legs wriggling feebly in the air. Such passivity of style dejects us all the more because Schwartz employs it upon a subject matter that has become almost proverbial for its vitality: the great thrashing, bustling, unceasingly noisy London that Johnson made synonymous with life itself.

Schwartz has intended his book as an introduction "to certain aspects of eighteenth-century social history"