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R E V I E W

Jackie DiSalvo, *War of Titans: Blake's Critique of Milton and the Politics of Religion*

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over, any poet's attempts at lyricism, in this light, appear sinister, dangerous, almost psychotic. In forcing language toward the lyrical, he articulates an uncreating word which annihilates everything within its purview—man, nature, language itself. Through his terrible word-magic he intentionally disfigures his beloved; he murders to transform, and feels "a secret glee in the uncanny irrelation of the transfigured creature . . . to its homely source" (162).

Some readers, I should add, may be both stimulated and disconcerted by the equally unconventional appearance of certain favorite works when observed through Albright's lens. Miltonists may not wish to hear that "Lycidas is a spirit of disenchantment, a sober spoilsport," that at the poem's end his "transformation is incomplete . . . he is still dripping mud and seaweed onto the celestial floor" (192). Romanticists will want to challenge Albright's statement that in Wordsworth's "Essay on Epitaphs" "indiscriminateness, triteness . . . become proofs of sincerity and almost of poetic excellence" (171), or that similes in Shelley's "To a Skylark" which compare the bird to poet, maiden, glowworm and flower "[cross] the line from the unapprehended relation to the nonrelation," that they constitute "a lovely absurdity" (249), and thus serve only to demonstrate the impossibility of writing an ideal lyric.

In evaluating the book's contribution, one should keep in mind the dimension Albright calls "modality of perception." The author's sensibility appears to be centered in the early twentieth century, with Pound, Eliot, Yeats—where, literary historians might argue, the last extremes of Romantic lyricality were beginning to be explored. Starting with these poets' theory and practices, Albright looks backward, and from this perspective sees intimations of the indeterminacy he senses at the heart of the lyrical mode. Consequently, this critical performance might tentatively be compared to the effect of a minor, contrapuntal theme extracted from a rich, complex counterpoint and played as a solo, for the post-Pater vantage point is everything here. And yet the premise that lyricality is language aspiring to the condition of music is, in the long history of the lyric's evolution, a late and eccentric axiom.

Finally, I was puzzled by another fundamental argumentative strategy that remains implicit but is constantly powerful. The argument depends upon metaphors to convey the essence of the lyrical. Ariel and Proteus are as telling here as Wordsworth's fountain or Shelley's glowing coals. In fact Albright virtually identifies the metaphorical and the lyrical when he writes that the latter is "a swerving aside, a lifting at right angles from the usual axis of narrative of logical discourse—the antimimetic principle" (3). (This formulation so closely echoes Jakobson's distinction between the metamorphic and metonymic—which has also been described as the

crucial difference between poetry and prose—that it can hardly be accidental.) And Albright constantly declares this lyrical transformation (metaphorically speaking) to be "magic." Paradoxically, however, the book's conception of lyricality assumes the necessary failure of magic, the failure of metaphor. Albright apparently maintains that although the lyric poet's language continually seeks to enact the transformation of one thing into another (a change which language effects through metaphor), we readers are never deceived; the beloved's face perversely remains a grotesque, unnatural jumble of pearls, suns, snow, cherries, and golden wires. In other words, Albright's reader must accept the presiding metaphors of his argument even as he is urged to cultivate a relentless literal-mindedness in response to the poet's.

This book offers the reader an exciting yet disturbing voyage through a realm of literature which appears, more than ever, rich and strange—and the author seems bent upon practicing what he probes.

**Jackie DiSalvo. *War of Titans: Blake's Critique of Milton and the Politics of Religion*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984. xi + 391 pp. \$35.**

**Reviewed by Robert F. Gleckner**

Christopher Hill, a sort of presiding deus in this book (as well as, apparently, an early reader of its manuscript version), was right: "DiSalvo's linking of Blake and Marx is brilliantly dashing, and will annoy the orthodox in both camps" (press release by University of Pittsburgh Press). At least I *think* he's right, for it is difficult to know precisely what an "orthodox" Blakean or "orthodox" Marxist is, not to say what "brilliantly dashing" means. For purposes of this review, I shall eschew commentary on the relationship of "brilliantly dashing" to its only minimally buried variant, "dashingly brilliant," and the relevance of both to DiSalvo's *War of Titans*; and I shall attempt a definition of neither of Hill's orthodoxies. Instead, whatever her ideological and critical druthers are, and however *she* defines those druthers, let me grant them to DiSalvo and try to determine not whether they are the "right" druthers but, rather, whether her "approach" to Blake is illuminating or not. To be more specific, is her approach to "Blake's Critique of

Milton and the Politics of Religion" revelatory significantly beyond what we already know of Milton, Blake, and their extraordinary "friendship" (or "mental fight" *par excellence* as Blake would consistently define it)?

What is not clear, initially, is that DiSalvo's book is on *The Four Zoas*, not on *Milton*—and hence not really an investigation into the "Blake-Milton" relationship *in toto*. In fact *Milton* is given short shrift by DiSalvo (except for some commentary on the Bard's Song), as is *Jerusalem*, despite the fact that the latter absorbs much of the matter of *The Four Zoas*, not to say the historical forces DiSalvo is interested in. And what little she does say of *Milton*—or, more accurately, the uses to which she puts *Milton* in pursuit of her thesis—are symptomatic of problems that permeate the entire fabric of the book. For example—and it is, I believe a fair example of the slipperiness of DiSalvo's logic and her use of Blake quotations—after quoting the fourth stanza of "And did those feet" (*Milton* 1) we are told that "Blake understood, of course, that images of heavenly warfare had acquired quite opposite meanings," an understanding that is somehow corroborated by a quotation from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* commenting on the two "histories" of the restraining of desire, *Paradise Lost* and the Book of Job: "'this history has been adopted by both parties'"—presumably angels and devils respectively. What *this* passage has to do with the *Milton* hymn is not explained; moreover, we are given to understand that the quotation itself refers to "the conquest and fall of Satan" whereas it refers to the history of desire and its restraints, a history that has been *interpreted* by Milton via the myth or story of *Paradise Lost* and by the biblical author of Job via that literary work's myth. Where "conquest" comes into either, not to say into the *Milton* hymn, is hard to fathom. But then we recall having been told that "images of spiritual warfare provide a justification for . . . political struggle," and that "the conquering Christ was reinterpreted as the arm of divinely appointed authorities suppressing the demonic revolts of chronically disobedient men" (pp. 26–27). These two sentences, which flank the neat verbal prestidigitation on *Milton*, *The Marriage*, and *Paradise Lost* cited above, enable DiSalvo to shoehorn sundry aspects of Blake into a socio-politico-economico-sexual set of interpretive contexts that all too often do considerable violence to Blake's poetry—or so stretch it out of shape through interpolation rather than interpretation that it becomes not Milton's Blake—or Frye's or Erdman's or the "orthodox Blakeans"—but a sometimes exciting, finally narrow and warped, DiSalvo's Blake.

Admittedly, the passage I singled out above is not a major part of the book's argument. If it were excised, the thesis would remain intact. Yet, the very anonymity of the passage (so to speak) is what bothers me. If there are fudgings of various kinds going on here, what of

the presentation of the book's major ideas? But let me leave that large question aside for a moment in order to address another that is related to the interesting near-absence of *Milton* in this book.

Throughout DiSalvo refers, in various locutions, to *The Four Zoas* as a "rewriting of *Paradise Lost*" (p. 312). It is an interesting thesis, surely worth investigating and writing about. But if the *Zoas* is such a rewriting, of what "use," to Blake or to us not to say to Milton, is *Milton*—unless (in the absence of any real discussion of it) we are to assume that the ultimately abortive *Four Zoas* led Blake to do something like it all over again in *Milton*? And since the *Zoas* was never put in final form, what impact does that fact (which DiSalvo ignores) have on the idea that Blake was rewriting *Paradise Lost*? Does it, for example, force us to see Blake as another Collins? Or to see him as a defeated ephebe? Or to interpret Blake's "failure" as a confession of the impossibility of doing what DiSalvo argues he is doing, indeed *has done* splendidly? And, if *The Four Zoas* is *Paradise Lost* and (presumably, though she does not quite come out and say so) *Jerusalem is Paradise Regained*, what does *that* patterning do to *Milton* (which is surely no *Samson Agonistes*—or is it)?

Complicating whatever answers we might make to these questions (or whatever additional questions we might generate from these) are the implications (to DiSalvo) of linking *The Four Zoas* closely to *Paradise Lost*. For example, the *Zoas* "might be seen as a retelling not only of Genesis but also of Milton's version of universal history in Adam's vision," a statement that tends to subordinate Blake's "rewriting" of *Paradise Lost* to his rewriting of the Bible (not to say of Edward Young, whose nine-night organization of *Night Thoughts* provided Blake the terms of the patterning, if not the pattern itself, of the *Zoas*). But elsewhere we learn that Milton's attempt "to reconstruct Genesis" was "to bring its long-hidden meanings into focus" (p. 137). Those "meanings" DiSalvo conveniently summarizes on this same page (as succinct an epitome of her "reading" of Milton as one can find anywhere in the book), but part of the basis of her argument uncomfortably leans on the necessity of our believing the truth of "Satan's heretical self-justifications" and "his allegation that Jehovah, like Jove, 'usurping reign'd' (*PL* 1.514)." For it is only out of such a belief that "a whole counter-reading of the Bible" can emerge. Satan, she concludes, formulates "a critique of the Judeo-Christian God" that links Genesis and Hesiod's *Theogony*, "intimating" an "alliance between a deposed maternal goddess in an expropriated paradise" and a clutch of fallen divinities who are her children. Had Milton been "sufficiently conscious" of this "stash of cultural dynamite," and "if he had known what history, anthropology, and comparative mythology were later to reveal," he would have written *The Four*



*Zoas* rather than *Paradise Lost* (p. 138). Clearly possessing such a consciousness, which DiSalvo regards as "the consummation of a long tradition of plebeian radicalism which had seen Eden as a utopia, lost through social, rather than individual moral degeneration," Blake "anticipates the assessments [of the Fall] later shared by socialist thinkers" (pp. 139–40). One must wonder, in light of that conclusion, what Blake might have written instead of *The Four Zoas* had he known what history, anthropology, comparative mythology—and DiSalvo—were later to reveal. Probably a manifesto slouching toward Bethlehem to be born.

But to return to Blake's rewriting of *Paradise Lost* in the *Zoas*, DiSalvo argues that Blake's self-appointed task necessitated a separation between, on the one hand, "the priestly reading of the Fall as original sin, and a justification of existing oppression as either a punishment for or a consequence of the moral perversity of human nature," and, on the other hand, the "revolutionary . . . tendencies in Christianity," two "traditions . . . exasperatingly fused by the Puritan revolutionary." And somehow that idea is relatable to Blake's opening of *The Four Zoas* with a dramatization of Enlightenment nullifications (largely in Locke and Rousseau) of "the Universal Brotherhood of Eden" as "visions of history based upon amnesia." And then this extraordinary interpretation is "proved" by an expropriation of a brief, unrelated (and irrelevant) passage from page 54 of the *Zoas* (pp. 140–41). If we are not sufficiently dazzled by this remarkable procedure, *The Four Zoas* is presented as "offering"

a theory of historical stages similar to that proposed by nineteenth-century theorists—in particular Marx and Engels—in which a primitive communist Eden characterized by egalitarian sexual relations is destroyed through the rise of hierarchic class civilizations based upon such institutions as private property, the family, and the state. According to this political theory, the tribal communism of nature-worshipping, mother-right clans gives way to stratified agricultural societies, and then either to slave empires or the 'asiatic mode' with its theocratic bureaucracy. After the fall of these ancient civilizations, new developments would produce in turn feudalism, capitalism, and, presumably, socialism. (p. 141; cf. the other version of this history, on the following page, ending in "a totally fascist Ulro.")

This "teleology of progress" is to be "brought about by development of the forces of production." The idea of a communal Eden diverges from the mythical maternal and/or natural paradises that have historically been employed by ax-grinders of various ilk to obscure the true history of mankind, and these contrarious traditions will be "brought back together" again "only in our own time in a new marriage accomplished by the cross-fertilization of radical—especially Third World—and feminist primitivisms" (p. 142). The mind fairly boggles, and not merely because by the time we hear all this we're nearly halfway through the book.

And so we retreat in an effort to re-orient ourselves to DiSalvo's procedures—somewhat oddly as it turns out, not to the "Critical Introduction" that is Chapter 1 but the "Acknowledgements" in which, in addition to making appropriate bows to literary and historical scholars, DiSalvo gives us a mini-autobiography of her days in the late sixties and early seventies when "we sat in continuous session at a mostly informal, interdisciplinary seminar discussing literature, politics, philosophy, economics, psychology, history, and so forth—determined . . . not to disband until we had fully comprehended the roots of our culture and the possibilities for reconstructing it"—not to say understanding "the world" and proposing how to change it. From this University of Wisconsin experience, and subsequent immersion in the now defunct Livingston College of Rutgers ("that brief and wonderful experiment in a multicultural, socially concerned educational community where visionary teachers served the intellectual hungers of black and white working-class students"), DiSalvo emerged as, in her own description, a "passionate female Orc." I do not denigrate in any way this history, and DiSalvo's account of it is in its own way a moving testament. What I do question is the assumption, for it is an assumption, that Orcs of *any* kind are Blake's ideal readers. Or Milton's.

What her Orcism means for this book, among other things, is the ridiculous charge that the Blake of most, if not all, serious readers to date is increasingly "the frustrated revolutionary brooding bitterly upon the limits of our fallen condition" rather than the "prophet of liberation . . . who championed 'mental war' against all tyrannies, political and religious" (p. vii). Christopher Hill's "orthodox" Blakean, then, turns out to be all of us. Whoever, specifically, it is that provoked this curious erection of an even curiouseer straw man remains (or remain) invisible throughout the book but the cannon-ading against him/them remains no less insistent—and it is the Orcian fusillades that tend to mar what is bright and original and provocative here.

The book proper opens, perhaps predictably, with other straw men, those who (as read by DiSalvo) deny the political significance of *Paradise Lost*. It is, of course, a goodly unvisionary (if unnamed) company. Only Christopher Hill's *Milton and the English Revolution* (1978; a date, incidentally, by which DiSalvo says her own book was "largely completed"! ) reads Milton properly. What DiSalvo adds to Hill is an exploration, "through Blake," of the "ideological dimension" of *Paradise Lost* that "forces us to refocus our approach to *every* issue in it" (my italics), for "there is no society in the world today that is not being defined by its relation to the values and institutions of Milton's England" (pp. 10–11). It is hard not to exclaim, simply, "Wow!" But wows aside, this refocusing, translated into Blake's efforts in *The Four Zoas*,

leads DiSalvo to regard the poem as a "survey" of "all of history." Nights I-IV depict the rise and fall of ancient civilization, Night V the appearance of radical Christianity and its subsequent "distortion" under "feudalism," Nights VI-VII the rise of modern England on Miltonic (read "erroneous") foundations; and Night IX the revolutionary future—not merely of Blake's time but ours. If we once recognize this structure of *The Four Zoas*, we will also be able to see the poem, finally, as a "reconciliation" of Frye and Erdman. DiSalvo is not yet ready to give us an account of that reconciliation, however; she hopes "to write about it in the future." What she does give us, despite her own claim that "any interpretation which reads [Blake] solely as class-conscious materialist . . . leaves something out," is largely Blake as class-conscious materialist. Hence, she has selected "interpreters whose insights are congenial to Blake's own perspective," that is to say, congenial to her perspective on Blake's own perspective. These interpreters include the current "literature on the family and woman's social role"; "women's liberation" which Blake got interested in through his "friend" Mary Wollstonecraft; the mythographic studies of Bachofen, Frazer, and Engels as well as Jane Ellen Harrison, Robert Graves, and Joseph Campbell; since Blake was "influenced by an incipient ethnography," evolutionary anthropologists like Lewis Henry Morgan, Briffault, Vera Gordon Childe, Leslie White, and Eleanor Leacock; and so on (pp. 15–17).

Via these interpreters Blake's "revival" of Milton is seen as signifying "the need of a rising working class to confront and sort out the progressive and oppressive aspects of its legacy from the bourgeois revolution and its Christian traditions." In this sense *The Four Zoas* (or more broadly Blake's Milton) will "prove to be the enduring form of the Puritan poet's artistic bequest long after his neo-orthodox apologists take their places on the shelves of infrequently circulating books in library basements." And, since "Blake's poetry cannot be comprehended outside its Miltonic context, and Milton is never better comprehended than through his follower" (pp. 44–45), DiSalvo's book will obviously relegate much of Blakean scholarship and criticism (*his* neo-orthodox apologists who are the same as Hill's orthodox Blakeans) to the dustbin as well.

But I started out by arguing, in effect, that whatever the ideological pudding, the proof of illumination must be in it, as well as evidence of an honest tasting. DiSalvo is not always scrupulous about either, and I shall close this review by citing some of many unproofs and questionable tastings—for the most part without comment since they speak for themselves.

In *The Four Zoas* 70:21 ff. we have "women marching o'er burning wastes / Of sand" with "thousands stricken with / Lightnings" and "myriads moping in the stifling vapours." They are, according to DiSalvo, "armies of

female wage slaves and their blazing furnaces" in "Manchester, Birmingham, and Leeds" (p. 55). On a related tack, Blake is said to emphasize, like Marx, "a collective, rather than merely individual breakthrough," his epistemology has "class content," and all his life he insisted upon "the influence of class biases on perception" (p. 61). At the same time Blake's "seemingly theological passages become comprehensible *only* within that tradition of radical Christian incarnationalism expounded by Thomas Altizer" (p. 67; my italics). It seems that there are class biases and then there are class biases depending upon which class bias the perception derives from.

Somehow Blake "would have agreed" apparently *only* "with Marx about the effects of material degradation on human beings." Ergo *The Four Zoas* is Marxian in that it "traces the effects of human impoverishment and enslavement on the evolution of human consciousness" (p. 68; see also p. 22). No other human is credited with perceiving these effects. As to Los, his "first task" in *The Four Zoas* is, DiSalvo says, to "Unbar the Gates of Memory" (a phrase in Night VIIa), the result of which will revive a "historical consciousness" (p. 83); but the rest of the passage describes no such revival but rather Los's Spectre urging Los to look on his Spectre "Not as another but as thy real Self" who, "inspired," will speak about the renewal of the fourfold universe. And if Los refuses to re-unite with his Spectre, the Spectre warns that "Another body will be prepared / For me & thou annihilate evaporate & be no more / For thou art but a form & organ of life & of thyself / Art nothing being Created Continually by Mercy & Love divine." So much for historical consciousness.

On page 87 of the *Zoas*, lines 13–21 are purported to dramatize "a fatalistic vision" produced by "a history of scarcity and want in nature" (p. 84), but if one reads those lines carefully, in addition to the preceding and following passages, DiSalvo's claim that the entire passage substantiates her interpretation appears more and more like wish-fulfillment. A page later Enitharmon is said to "feel" that "if the abused masses are not restrained," they "will not 'redeem us but destroy' (FZ87:60)"—though the "abused masses" are nowhere to be found. Still, their "revolution" will be "an orgy of vengeance—'fit punishment for such / Hideous offenders.'" This line, which occurs *prior* to the one on the abused masses, is now quoted wildly out of context in order to create the package logic of DiSalvo's readings. Three pages later something similar occurs. There Los proposes that he and Enitharmon create a new vision, this one of the dead living on through their creations; in this way they will be able to contribute to later generations "who will build on the sacrifices of those who preceded them." If there are "setbacks" in this effort to serve "the present in its task of liberation," DiSalvo



interprets Blake as regarding those to be surmountable "through an increasing understanding of their roots in insufficiently radicalized institutions and ideologies" (pp. 85–86). I *guess* that means there weren't enough Orcs around to radicalize these roots, for Los's—and Blake's—vision of history is based on "the class struggle of Orc against Urizen." Yet, the more Orc "radicalizes" institutions and ideologies, the more he risks "mere insurrection" that will "consume itself." If this does not come as a "discovery" to most of us, perhaps we can charge the tone of discovery off to the fact that the book is almost seven years old at publication time.

"The Universal Family & that one Man / They call Jesus the Christ & they in him & he in them / Live in Perfect harmony in Eden the land of life" (FZ 21:1–6) is "the social unity of tribal society . . . ; with social atomization and exploitation" this unity is lost, then forgotten and denied—that is, DiSalvo tells us, misappropriating a passage from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast" (p. 170). It's a rather neat way to avoid the issue (here put, tellingly, in the passive) of which came first, "social atomization and exploitation" or men forgetting where deities reside—and to avoid the implications of quoting this particular passage from *The Marriage*, which has nothing to do with a "Universal Family" or "Jesus the Christ" or "Eden" or "social unity" or tribalism or "social atomization." Similarly, when DiSalvo describes Night IX of *The Four Zoas* as showing "that along with the rise of property and the family there is a diminution of human science," and that man "undergoes a kind of reversed metamorphosis" (pp. 181–82), the reader would be well advised to have page 133 of *The Four Zoas* open here, if only to make sure he and DiSalvo are reading the same poem. Indeed the *Zoas* needs to be opened to virtually each passage she cites in support of her thesis. Other occasions, of particular note, of the need to carefully check Blake's text against DiSalvo's interpretation occur on pages 200, 206–07, 209–11, 217, 222–23, 226, 230, 284, 308, 319–20, and 345.

It is no doubt unnecessary for me to conclude by saying that this is a provocative book. I suppose my capitalistic upbringing made me more prone to be provoked by the sort of reductionism I find almost always in critical approaches such as DiSalvo's. But hostile reader or no, any reader who cares for what Blake wrote ought to be provoked to irritation by biased handling of the evidence—in both Blake and Milton. Too bad, for there is much here that is provocative in the salutary sense, and even *I* find the core of the book, Chapter 8 on "The Politics of *Paradise Lost* and *The Four Zoas*," a rewarding discussion. The fact that it stands very well on its own says something about the superstructure the other chapters form. That superstructure seems to me to result from DiSalvo's inability to see that her sense of Blake's

anticipating of Marx's manifesto is not really a very important issue to argue for *or* against. If Marx picks "up his hammer" and rekindles Los's "furnaces" (as she not very disarmingly puts it on her penultimate page), that "fact" was not only not worth the anachronistic procedure of her book but was, finally, not very illuminating with respect to Blake and Milton beyond what we already know—even if what we already know is not talked of or written about in DiSalvo's language.

## On Blake's Painting of Jesus and the Woman Taken in Adultery

WARREN STEVENSON

The scene, as Blake portrays it, is perfect: the accusers departing discomfited, the woman lissome, bare-breasted her hair dishevelled her face, slightly flushed, resembling Jesus' as a sister her brother.

But what is Jesus drawing as he bends toward the ground? His right hand forms a compass like Newton's or that of the Ancient of Days. Is he having a private joke—perhaps mocking the Old Man's creation of forked Adam, cleft Eve?

The woman stands straight—her wrists bound behind her—with her head slightly bowed her gaze intent on the doodler's hand. She knows there remain only herself and this ironic jester—no more fucking sin.