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Blake's Debt to Pope

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NOTES

I. Blake's Debt to Pope

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S. Foster Damon has provided the starting-point for these suggestions. In chapter III of *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols* (1924), Damon touches on Blake's debt to eighteenth-century poets, ending with the remark that "of the great Alexander himself there is absolutely nothing". This suggestion is not contradicted by Damon's *Dictionary*, the article on Pope taking note only of Blake's criticism of Pope with Dryden in the *Public Address*, and of Blake's portrait of Pope in the Manchester City Art Gallery: "In doing Pope's portrait for Hayley's library, Blake (or Hayley) selected for supporters the *Elegy on an Unfortunate Lady* and *Eloisa to Abelard* as his best poems. Neither is a satire."

Granted the suggestion that Blake most likely preferred Pope's elegiac and lyric works to his satires (though Blake may not have supposed these two poems to be absolutely Pope's best), the evidence I have collected so far indicates that Blake's knowledge of Pope's work was more extensive than Damon assumes. The notes I have made are the product only of a casual and partial survey, and I offer them mainly in the hope of stimulating other scholars to add to this, still brief, list of possible sources. It will be interesting to find out how large Blake's total debt to Pope was; probably Pope's Homer provided several ideas more than those I note here.

For Blake's seven mentions of Pope I refer readers to the *Concordance* (two of these are near-repetitions), adding the reference in Blake's quotation from Sir Joshua Reynolds in Letter 23 (Keynes 814). Reynolds says that we should think the word Taste to be improperly applied to Homer or Milton, but "very well to Prior or Pope". Blake seems to agree with Reynolds. His own so-called "imitation of Pope A Compliment to the Ladies" is far from being written in the "Grand Style". (It would be nice to know what Blake thought he was imitating here: the art of sinking?)

In *M.H.H.* p. 5, Blake glosses "the restrainer or reason" (Erdman's Doubleday edition, p. 34). Pope has this line in his *Essay on Man* (ll. 50):

"Self-love, to urge, and Reason, to restrain;"

which seems close enough to be a source. Pope's whole discussion of the relation of Reason to Self-Love (Blake's "desire") can be usefully compared with Blake's analysis.

One of Blake's most-quoted phrases is "the human form divine" (from "The Divine Image"), and several scholars seem to think this comes from Milton, but the source is apparently in Pope's *Odyssey* x.278:

"No more was seen the human form divine"

Stevenson, in his *Home-Book of Proverbs, Maxims, and Familiar Phrases*, gives this

passage from Pope without reference to Blake and notes, "In *P.L.* III 44 Milton speaks of the 'human face divine,' but the phrase never obtained the vogue of Pope's." (The only signs of this "vogue" I have so far noted are in Southey, *Kehama* VII.4.7 and *Roderick* II.57, both of which could possibly have been influenced by Blake, but most likely were not.) Blake may have had Milton's phrase in mind in another place, his manuscript poem "Mary", line 43:

"She remembers no Face like the Human Divine".

Incidentally, Mary Wollstonecraft also borrowed the phrase, "the human face divine", in her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), 2d. end., p. 59. Whatever the source of Blake's phrasing, however, I agree with Morton D. Paley's suggestion to me that the concept of the human form divine in Blake owes much to Swedenborg. See, for instance, chapter XI of *Heaven and Hell*, entitled "It is from the Lord's Divine Human that Heaven as a whole and in part resembles a man".

From Pope's *Iliad* I.92-4, I note a possible echo in Blake. Pope describes

"Chalcas the wise . . .
That sacred seer, whose comprehensive view,
The past, the present, and the future knew;"

and Blake writes in "Introduction" to *Songs of Experience*:

"Hear the voice of the Bard!
Who Present, Past, & Future sees".

Pope's lines are perhaps even more suggestive, incidentally, of Johnson's *Vanity of Human Wishes*, I f:

"Let Observation, with extensive View,
Survey Mankind, from China to Peru".

In Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, though the expression is conventional, the line,

"Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove",

from "The Little Black Boy", could derive from Pope's "Spring" (lines 72-3):

". . . I love

At Morn the Plains, at Noon the shady Grove;"

G.E. Bentley, Jr., in his edition of Blake's *Four Zoas*, p. 176, has rightly given a source in Pope's "Epistle to Augustus" 267-9, which I need not quote here. David V. Erdman has supplied an important source in a letter to me where he notes: "It seems to me that both 'When France got free . . .' (Marg. Reynolds, p. ciii: Doubleday p. 630) and 'Now Art has lost its mental Charms' (Notebook p. 79: Doubleday p. 471) derive from Pope's first Epistle of the 2d Book of Horace, lines 263-264:

"We conquer'd France, but felt our captive's charms;
Her Arts victorious triumph'd o'er our Arms:".

I am grateful to Robert P. Kolker for another allusion to Pope which may be found in Night the Eighth of *The Four Zoas*. Ahania, in a horrible vision of decay and death, sees the fall of the "Strong Eagle", and

Beside him lies the Lion dead & in his belly worms
Feast on his death till universal death devours all
(109: 7-8)

The last phrase seems to be a version of the last line of *The Dunciad*:

And Universal Darkness buries All.

Robert P. Kolker notes that, interestingly enough, Pope's line, according to the Twickenham Edition, is an allusion to Shakespeare, *II. Henry IV*: "Let Order die . . . /And darknesse be the burier of the dead".

The concept of the fairy's functions in "A fairy skipd upon my knee" (Doubleday, p. 473) seems to have gained something from the machinery of Pope's mock-epic *The Rape of the Lock*, particularly the guarding of Belinda, and there is a further sign that Blake was familiar with this poem, in his adaption of the name "Naamah" for the wife of Noah, for which he need go no further than Pope's footnote to Canto I, line 145: "Antient Traditions of the Rabbi's relate, that several of the fallen Angels became amorous of Women, and particularize some; among the rest Asael, who lay with Naamah, the wife of Noah, or of Ham". Pope's reference is to "Bereshi Rabbi in *Genes.* 6.2".

Finally, as F. W. Hilles has noted in presenting "A 'New' Blake Letter" to the world (*Yale Review*, lvii, 1967, 85-9), Blake's letter to Hayley of 16 July 1804 includes a varied quotation from Pope's "The Temple of Fame", applied to Caroline Watson.

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2. Sterne and Blake

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There are few obvious connections between Blake and Sterne, beyond the fact that Blake made an engraving for *Sentimental Journey* in *The Novelist's Magazine*, Volume IX (1782) and, according to his letter of 4 May 1804, hoped to make others from *Tristram Shandy* for Hayley's *Romney* (1809). Certainly their imaginations appear to be pointed in quite different directions; the irrepressibly impulsive Yorick is difficult to picture in the same creative world as the titanic Los calling all his sons to the strife of blood.

There is however, a passage from *Sentimental Journey* (1768) which seems to be echoed in Blake's *America* (1793). In the chapter called "The Captive. Paris" Yorick relates how he heard a caged bird repeating pathetically "I can't get out" and immediately