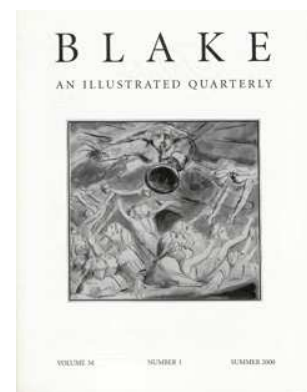


AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

N E W S

Conference at Essex

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 34, Issue 1, Summer 2000, p. 32



The ambivalence of the circumscribed urban space—simultaneously blessed and cursed—echoes that of the sacred (source of order and disorder). The relationship between the two terms goes well beyond a formal analogy. Each is the source and consequence of the other, and each depends utterly upon the other. The city's survival requires sacrifice and sacerdotal power; the survival of the sacred needs a fixed point of reference acknowledged by a community. Violence is simultaneously the object of the law and its means of enforcement. Murder is then perceived as divine and necessary; it inaugurates a new sacred based on the collective murder of an expiatory victim (311). In the Bible violence is no longer concealed but made visible. Its order does not exclude crisis altogether; rather, it relies on a constant reinforcement of its authority through interdict and rituals. For Girard, these two elements precede the advent of a culture: they keep the sacred at a distance while ensuring that it is visible to the community. Sacrifice being thus legalized, self-destruction becomes forbidden and unnecessary. Through ritualized sacrifices, revenge is transferred to the higher power of God disguised in transcendence (334). As a result, man's responsibility in violence is concealed, and so is his ability to put an end to it.

The true role of religion is now unveiled: it keeps violence within controllable distance. Girard insists that the eighteenth-century ideal of a Natural Law was not only an illusion but also petrified man in a state of alleged innocence, an idea which reverberates throughout the Blakean canon. This error results in a heightened repression of human dual nature and the survival of a dehumanizing structure. Deprived of a dialectic which fosters forgiveness, man is bound to remain in the net of the sacred; he is then required to

forsake his prophetic faculty and consent to turn violence against exterior enemies. With Jesus—born from and for forgiveness—divinity ceases to impose violence. Man's responsibility for the violence of the sacred can no longer imputed to God.

Blake argues that Redemption is the work of man only; yet he is also convinced that Jesus was the only being capable of renewing a privileged relation to the divine. God for him was knowable in his son only (394), since the latter was neither profane nor sacred. Neither was he the product of a theological construction. What Blake resented in religion (Christianity as taught by theologians) was the veneration of a dead God rather than of the Divine Humanity. Girard's theory emphasizes the contradiction between Christianity and the classical idea of religion based on a separate sacred order. For him, incarnation is a definitive profanation of the sacred (401): God sacrifices himself, assumes man's misery until death in a formidable gesture of forgiveness. As Piquet points out Blake evolved towards a very similar perception. He had equated the crucifixion with the humiliation of man in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* but interprets it as a sign of self-sacrifice in *Jerusalem*.

According to Girard and Blake, Christ's death is a voluntary gesture of acceptance of the city's violence. With his blatantly unjust death—in which the sacred does not play any role—Jesus urges man to cease uniting around a sacred murder. It is now impossible to deny its workings within the urban space. The Son of God has shown the right approach to existence by focusing not on the sin but on the ability to forgive; imagination is concretely translated into forgiveness which in turn deprives the sacred of the fascination it exerted (416).

N E W S L E T T E R

CONFERENCE AT ESSEX

"Friendly Enemies: Blake and the Enlightenment," a conference on the inheritors and antagonists of modernity, was held at the University of Essex on 24-26 August, with keynote speakers Jon Mee, Anne Mellor, Joseph Viscomi, and J. Hillis Miller. The organizers plan to publish a book based on conference proceedings. For information contact Noreen Harburt, Centre for Theoretical Studies, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester, Essex CO4 3SQ UK. Email jorde@essex.ac.uk.

EXHIBITION AT THE TATE

From 9 November through 11 February the Tate Gallery is presenting an exhibition billed as "the first major exhibi-

tion of Blake's work in more than twenty years." It will include more than 200 works from private and public collections worldwide. The curators are Robin Hamlyn, Curator, Tate Collections, and Michael Phillips, University of York. For further information see the Tate web site: <http://www.tate.org.uk>.

SYMPOSIUM AT YORK

Interest is invited in a symposium on William Blake and the 1790s at the Centre for Eighteenth Century Studies at the University of York, 10-11 December, on the occasion of the Blake exhibition at the Tate Gallery opening in November 2000. Please write to John Barrell or Michael Phillips at the Centre for Eighteenth Century Studies, King's Manor, York, YO1 2EP, Great Britain, or email cmb14@york.ac.uk.