Nick Rawlinson, William Blake’s Comic Vision
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15. Though the a-religious sociability and middle-class sensibilities of English Freemasonry would hardly have appealed to Blake, the remarkable surge in mystical Masonry of the late eighteenth century surely would. These groups sought a spiritual regeneration for the world through “true science and true reason,” by which they meant alchemy, Kabbalah, mesmerism, Swedenborgian spiritualism, and the Bible. See Clarke Garrett, Respectable Folly: Millenarians and the French Revolution in France and England (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975) 99. For example, the Avignon Society, an offshoot of mystical Masonry, supported Richard Brothers and believed in the regeneration of the world through revolution. They derived this belief from a system of kabbalistic numerology they called “the Holy Word” (Leslie Tannenbaum, Biblical Tradition in Blake’s Early Prophecies: The Great Code of Art [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982] 17). William Bryan, who published testimonies of his belief in Richard Brothers, was a leader of the Avignon Society and at one time or another was interested in practically every aspect of late eighteenth-century occult, mystical and pseudo-scientific inquiry. He was close friends with William Sharp, through whom Blake could have met him, and with their mutual friend Thomas Duché, a talented painter and son of the Rev. Jacob Duché (Garrett 176), whose sermons were influenced by both Boehme and Swedenborg, and whose Discourses on Various Subjects (1779) Blake owned (G. E. Bentley, Jr., The Stranger from Paradise: A Biography of William Blake [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001] 126). Even if Blake did not come in contact with the Avignon Society through the tirelessly sociable Sharp, he could have read a denunciation of them in the Swedishenburg Church’s New Jerusalem Magazine for April 1790, where they are decried as “the Antipodes of the New Church, erected on the very borders of Babylon.”

16. Many groups of Dissenters mixed the same fervor for spiritual regeneration and belief in the esoteric with political radicalism, and Blake had definite affinities with antinomian millenialist groups. The Ancient Deists of Hoxton, for example, were actively involved with occult and mystical traditions, and spoke of conversations with angels and departed spirits (see William Hamilton Reid, The Rise and Dissolement of the Infidel Societies in This Metropolis Including The Origin of Modern Deism and Atheism; The Genius and Conduct of Those Associations; Their Lecture-Rooms, Field-Meetings, and Deputations; From the Publication of Paine’s Age of Reason till the present Period [London: J. Hatchard, 1800]). Like Blake, too, many of these new converts to the dissenting sects were London craftsmen, whose training in the sects, with their egalitarian and revivalist, Messianic rituals, led them to embrace Jacobin and radical political ideas at the outbreak of the French Revolution. See E. P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (1963; rpt. New York: Vintage-Random House, 1966) 51-53; and George Rudé, History of London: Hanoverian London, 1714-1808 (London: Secker & Warburg, 1971) 114. On Blake’s affinities with these groups, see M. H. Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1971) 51-55; Garrett 147; Christopher Hill, Milton and the English Revolution (New York: Viking, 1978) 467-69; A. L. Morton, The Everlasting Gospel: A Study in the Sources of William Blake (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1958) passim; Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class 41, 50-52; Thompson, Witness Against the Beast passim.

17. Writers like Thomas Maurice or any of the writers on the Druids found a primordial Christian Kabbalah at the heart of all the religious mysteries of the world. Numerous antiquaries held that the deepest Druidic mysteries were really the secret Kabbalah given to Adam by God. The Reverend Evan Evans, for example, spoke about a “Druidical Cabbala,” in his Some Specimens of the Poetry of the Antient Welsh Bards (London, 1764) 18, and there was a copy of Evans’s work in Hayley’s library (Munby 119).

In sum, “Wonders Divine” offers a brilliant explication of the kabbalistic pattern of Blake’s development: from his early use of Kabbalah to liberate himself from the restrictions imposed by the exoteric myth of Christianity to his full retelling, in the major prophecies, of Adam Kadmon/Albion’s fall into division and eventual reunification with the exiled Shekhinah/Jerusalem. More, the book firmly establishes the Kabbalah as the structuring principle of Blake’s cosmogony and theosophy, in which the Christian myth is transformed into only part of a larger cycle of existence. I believe, though, that the next step is to link Blake’s Kabbalah more firmly with the Christian esoteric tradition.

There were several other antiquarian writers whose works on the Druids Blake would have known: Henry Rowlands, William Stukeley, Rowland Jones, Edward Williams, William Owen (Pughe), and Peter Roberts. Like Blake, they believed that the Druids and the Patriarchs shared a common kabbalistic religion and language.

From very similar designs in Rowlands (1723, 1766) and Stukeley (1740), Blake derived the visual context for his “Joseph of Arimathea among the Rocks of Albion,” in which Blake made his Joseph into a Druid (see Dena Bain Taylor, “The Visual Context of Joseph of Arimathea among the Rocks of Albion,” Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly 20.2 [fall 1986]: 47-48).

Edward Williams (Iolo Morganwg, 1747-1826), the indefatigable Welsh poet, lexicographer, and enthusiastic forger of both poetry and historical evidence, claimed to have documentary evidence of the original “Patriarchal Religion of ANCIENT BRITAIN.” See Edward Williams, Poems, Lyric and Pastoral (London, 1794) II: 194; quoted in A. L. Owen, The Famous Druids (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962) 73. Williams was a close friend of Blake’s friend William Owen (Pughe), and Blake may have attended Druid rituals on Primrose Hill with them both. (See Dena Taylor, “A Note on William Blake and the Druids of Primrose Hill,” Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly 17.3 [winter 1983-84]: 104.)


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Nick Rawlinson reveals the impetus for William Blake’s Comic Vision to be “a simple hunch” that he and other readers enjoy Blake, in part, because he is a comic writer (vii). Notwithstanding E. D. Hirsch’s long-ago observation that Blake is the most humorous of the romantics, classifying the man behind the scaring eyes of the familiar portraits as a comic writer may seem a bit of a stretch. Rawlinson challenges any incredulity by showing the abundance of comedy in Blake and the significance of its function, and in so doing he allows us to hear Blake in a different key. His book proves to be more than an inventory of the comic elements in Blake,
however. It is an intriguing argument that comedy is Blake's vehicle for vision.

Initially, Rawlinson situates Blake in the comic tradition by way of a particular definition of comedy. At the outset of his argument, he stipulates: "Comedy deflates pretensions, disrupts patterns, and lurks behind the façade of reality to prove that reality to be false. But it goes beyond deconstruction because it insists on a meaning even in meaninglessness—and 'always meaning' leads to God" (3). Fundamental to comedy is its role of unmasking impostors, as Rawlinson contends, but the reality it reveals is typically more literal and far less sublime than the one created by pretense. Comic elements often lead to mayhem rather than meaning, and to Godot instead of God. Nevertheless, as Rawlinson argues in this book, comedy in Blake's early poems has a serious function.

Rawlinson's study calls out of the shadows poems of Blake that are often bypassed for the "essential" Blake, the long, obscure prophetic works. Blake's early poems, ranging from the Poetical Sketches to the Songs of Innocence and of Experience, are well served by viewing them through a comic lens. Rawlinson deftly shows in these poems how Blake introduces comic elements to challenge everything from social structure to empiricism. He argues, for example, that "Tiriel is not just a generalized attack on tyranny but Blake's next attempt to offer a comic alternative to materialist aesthetics" (90); and of the Songs, he writes, "Characterized by a recurrent contrast between sentimental pastoral and satirical urban viewpoints and with a wealth of social voices, they display both wise-foolish and knavish readings of contemporary society" (172).

By foregrounding the comic and carnivalesque motifs in Blake, Rawlinson checks a tendency to read him as an austere mystic. One of the pleasures this study offers the reader is the opportunity to engage Blake's early poems in what seems to be their natural element. Within a comic context they appear unusually vibrant and substantial, so much so that some of the poems seem ekphrastic, as if Blake has breathed life into Hogarthian illustrations. Their affinity with eighteenth-century illustrations, according to this book, is not accidental. In a short history of comedy in England, Rawlinson shows how rich and various that tradition is in both its literary and graphic manifestations, documenting how Blake draws generously on the comic tradition: "By participating in the contemporary use of satiric imagery and style, Blake was able to de-mystify political, religious and social authority" (215). But he also shows how Blake exploits the tradition for nontraditional purposes: "Blake's use of carnival imagery is a challenge to the increasing inwardness and separation implicit in the work of Bacon, Newton, Locke, Hume, Hobbes and Descartes. It leads us, jokingly, back to the Divine Humanity" (216). Though most of the poems Rawlinson examines do not have a prophetic function, he contends that their teleology is vision, which he defines in Blakean fashion as "a matter of seeing beyond material existence to eternal truths" (13). He elaborates on this point, arguing that comedy, to Blake, was "a poetics of reading that was both an artistic and social practice." He then explains: "By using puns, wordplay and absurd humour he tried to disrupt the sense that language conveys a material reality (in the sense of a set of rules and laws external to the self) and to reinforce the importance of the reader in creating meaning" (215).

Earlier in the book Rawlinson elaborates on his call for a new poetics of reading, arguing that it is necessary if we are to read the comic elements of Songs of Innocence and of Experience "in a spiritual, positive way" (171). In his commentary on the Songs, he proposes a specific way for reading those comic elements: "It is significant that carnival echoes appear at those moments in the Songs that critics have concentrated on as showing the positive elements of play and imagination. Carnival is also notably absent from some of the songs where the speaker's viewpoint seems hopelessly limited" (180-81). Though the simplicity of the Songs creates the illusion that they conform to symbolic and iconographic codes, two centuries of Blake criticism testify to their elusiveness. Rawlinson's binary sounds reasonable, but in practice it does not address the complexities of the Songs. In "Introduction" to Songs of Innocence, for example, Blake creates a carnivalesque scene of a piper and airborne child, but their imaginative play, arguably, leads away from vision. As the multi-talented piper/singer/writer "stain[s] the water clear," the poem itself gradually moves from the free-floating participles in the opening lines to rote, monolithic syntax. In his analysis of the Songs, Rawlinson further argues that "Wherever it appears, humour in the Songs is usually aimed at provoking an alternative reading" (181). Since humor in literature almost always provokes an alternative reading, one may conclude from Rawlinson's observation that Blake uses humor in the Songs in a mundane way—a conclusion that is counterintuitive to any reader of Blake. The sheer pervasiveness of the comic and carnivalesque in the Songs, which Rawlinson aptly notes, tantalizes one to inspect those features more carefully to see how they participate in those shy poetic epigrams.

Though most of Rawlinson's study addresses Blake's literary art, he devotes one chapter to his graphic art. In a move parallel to his analysis of Blake's poetry, he argues that Blake introduces comic elements into his visual art to serve both conventional and unconventional purposes. He points out that Blake, like many comic illustrators of his day, creates visual puns, caricatures, and carnivalesque motifs to satirize social and political institutions; but he further proposes that Blake incorporates comic elements to advance a larger vision. Sometimes these two objectives coalesce, as he demonstrates in his analysis of Blake's 1795 color printed drawing of Nebuchadnezzar. In the illustrations of other artists, the biblical king is presented as an epitome of all political leaders who are humbled by their own hubris. Blake's portrayal carries that political dimension, but, Rawlinson contends, through Nebuchadnezzar's crouched posture and beastly claws Blake correlates his humiliating predicament to the doctrine of the
part playscript, part performance, part experimental novel" (161). Few critics have given An Island such a prominent place in Blake’s body of work, but Rawlinson’s argument is convincing (or his exuberance is contagious). An Island does, indeed, seem to be a culmination of Blake’s comic efforts, and, as Rawlinson’s rhetoric urges, it deserves to frequent more undergraduate syllabi.

Rawlinson’s readings of Blake are by and large rewarding. His thesis is nevertheless problematic in one respect. Whether or not Blake is a comic writer and artist depends, naturally, on how one defines “comedy.” In Rawlinson’s study, “comedy” is a rather flexible term. As noted earlier, it is sometimes defined broadly as anything ironic or festive, while at other times it assumes a very particular definition, requiring a moral teleology. Running into problems of genre may be unavoidable since (in the words of a former professor of mine) Blake “displaces too much water” to fit comfortably into any literary tradition. Yet Rawlinson’s observation that Blake creates “a new form of literary expression” invites us to approach the problem in another way. Blake, in his contrary manner, produces prophecies that are carnivalesque and burlesque poems that have philosophical weight, each type of poetry gravitating toward the other. In effect, he deconstructs the prophetic/profane binary, opting for a hybrid genre in which that oppositional friendship might flourish.

Toward the end of his study Rawlinson invites other critics to examine the comic and carnivalesque characteristics in Blake’s prophetic poetry. If we extrapolate from the argument Rawlinson presents in this study, we might suspect that Blake introduces comedy into his prophecies also in the service of vision, perhaps giving it the specific function of critiquing the institutionalized ways of reading prophecy, which militate against visionary reception. Then, again, Blake is not above self-mockery, which suggests alternatively that he introduces comedy into the prophecies capriciously to check any essentializing tendencies. To discover whether Blake charges the carnivalesque characters in his later work with a prophetic function or simply enlists them to snicker on the sidelines would require us to take another critical journey—one that exceeds the itinerary of this study, but one for which Rawlinson has provided a topographical map of Blake’s comic terrain.

fearful sublime. “At a stroke,” Rawlinson states, “Blake has linked visionary and aesthetic failings with the dominion of oppressive kingship” (198).

Rawlinson’s most extensive analysis is saved for An Island in the Moon. His enthusiasm for the unpublished satire is almost evangelical: “[I]nside this apparently random concoction of prose, song and slapstick, with its eccentric mix of real and imaginary characters that read like the cast list of an absurd farce, lies an extraordinary, almost dazzling examination of the relationship between our habits of reading and the society they produce” (99). He further extols the work by declaring it “a masterclass in the development of the satirical style” (99) and “nothing less than a degree course in comic Vision” (100). “An Island,” he writes, “is Blake’s attempt to produce a theatrical experience, a comic education in how to read. This marvellous text is so dense that perhaps the best way to approach it is to treat it as if it were a carnival procession; first having a look at the cast and then discussing each episode sequentially, before summarising the action as a whole” (104). And elsewhere he describes An Island as “an important and valuable work, an extensive comic education that explores the interrelationship of language, society and God” and calls it “Blake’s first attempt to produce a new form of literary expression,