

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY

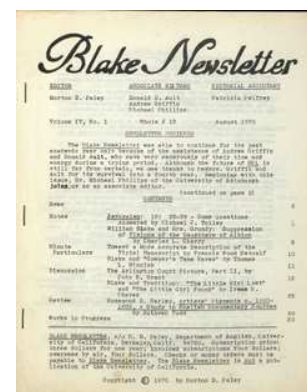
# BLAKE

D I S C U S S I O N

## Blake and Tradition: "The Little Girl Lost" and "The Little Girl Found"

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appears in an important though a little-known picture identified by Essick as representing the "Genius of Shakespeare" (repr. Apollo N.S. LXXIX (1964), 321.) But the exact counterpart of the Sea Goddess is to be found at the center of the "Whirlwind of Lovers" (Divine Comedy nos. 10 and 10E) where she is working to overcome those deprivations which would forever forbid the return of mankind into paradise. I shall maintain that this great picture acts as an explanatory sequel to ACP.

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2. Blake and Tradition: "The Little Girl Lost"  
and "The Little Girl Found"

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In his review of Kathleen Raine's Blake and Tradition (BNL, Vol. III, Whole # 11), Daniel Hughes mentions my name in connection with a pair of Blake's poems on which I have taken a stand in print. Since Mr. Hughes does not examine any of the Raine readings he commends, I would like to supplement my incidental criticism of seven years ago.

For at least some of us who have needed no introduction to Thomas Taylor and have remained unconverted, what is at issue in the Neoplatonist chapters of Blake and Tradition is what was at issue when they were published first as separate essays: not the "poetic process," but critical method; not whether Blake knew Taylor's translations and commentaries (he probably did, as he knew other books of the time), but how close they can or should be brought to his poetry; not what Taylor said, but what Blake means. With respect to the Lyca poems, I still believe that there is something of the Dissertation on the Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries in "The Little Girl Lost", and something less and of a different kind in "The Little Girl Found." The images in the first poem (I would not call them "symbols") of the moon and the caves, the desert, the "southern clime," the animals and their ceremonial behavior, do gain from the associations of both the Mysteries ritual and the Neoplatonic concept of the descent of the soul, which Taylor brings together in a confused mixture of metaphor, abstraction, and allegory compounded upon allegory. But I still maintain also that the Dissertation contributes less to the whole poem, and less to some of the same images, than such other sources of analogy as the ballad "The Children in the

Wood," the first canto of the Inferno, and the episode of Una and the lion in The Faerie Queene--as I have already argued. Even the theme of initiation, which comes to the fore in the second poem and could very well have been suggested by the general subject of the Dissertation, is dependent primarily on Inferno I when it first emerges.

Reading Kathleen Raine, Mr. Hughes thinks of the poetic process, which seems to concern the poet less than the audience, and he is content to leave the poems themselves in the background. Miss Raine, in turn is thinking of Thomas Taylor, and her method is to translate the poems into the rigid, allegorical terms of the Dissertation. The "fullest possible content" that Taylor is able to find in the Eleusinian Mysteries is considered full enough for Blake's purposes, which are assumed not to differ from Taylor's; here, at least, the operation of "tradition" allows only one meaning, and by implication turns any new work of poetry into a devotional exercise in repetition. Such a premise may be useful to the commentator herself as a personal poetic, but in relation to Blake it is open to objections so obvious they should not have to be raised in answer to a reviewer writing for an audience of Blake scholars and critics. The least that can be said against the conception of Blake in these chapters of Miss Raine's book is that it makes the vigorously dissenting poet submissive to the arid and obsolete doctrines of Neoplatonism as he never was to any still viable system of belief in his own time, and that it denies him the subtlety, imagination, and independence we take for granted in the handling of received or borrowed material by other poets, both earlier and later.

There are other considerations of importance to critics of Blake, which Mr. Hughes neglects. Although it is the transaction between Miss Raine and her readers that interests him most, her statements are about a text which has an objective existence and can be consulted, even without the guidance of a Mystagogue; and checked against any convenient edition of the Songs, the Neoplatonist reading of "The Little Girl Lost" shows signs of strain from the beginning. (About "The Little Girl Found" Miss Raine finds relatively less to say, and less use for the Dissertation in her discussion.) Lyca's act of lying down to sleep, for example, can be fitted into the pattern only by being made into both an effect and a cause, and the metaphor of a metaphor. The emphasis is continually on isolated images taken out of their own context and delivered to Taylor and his Neoplatonists for a systematic reduction in meaning. Repeatedly, from the first stanza to the last, Lyca is seen as the pre-existent soul descending by various metaphorical means into the realm of "generation" and corporeal life, all without regard for time

relations, allegorical consistency, or the narrative itself. In the last stanza, however, something interesting happens: the text rebels against the commentator. Blake seems about to confess his allegiance by using a standard Neoplatonic metaphor, but he immediately overturns it; whereas the soul descending from eternity ends by putting on the mortal body as a garment, Lyca's "slender dress" is "loos'd," and when she is carried to the caves, she is naked.

Such a jolt to conventional expectations (if Blake did indeed know the Dissertation, he would have been aware of how conventional they were to Taylor) would usually be recognized as a signal from the author, and so I believe it should be here. Coming as it does at the climax of a poem in which there have been earlier ambiguities and disparities (unfortunately lost in Miss Raine's absolutist reading), it is Blake's indirect assertion of his own meaning, an evocation of the Dissertation for the purpose of rejecting the values assumed there. We are being notified, in effect, that the story of Lyca is to be separated from Taylor's allegory and understood according to a different set of values, which are also accessible through the imagery of the poem. Lyca is "dying from this world," not into it, and she is descending to an even lower state, not like the space-travelling soul of the Neoplatonists but like Aeneas in the Underworld or like Dante's pilgrim, whose wandering and sleep she has reenacted in the earlier stanzas and who descended, going by "another way," so that ultimately he could rise out of his own lost state. It is at this point, through the associations of the Inferno most especially, that the initiation theme comes to the surface and reflects back to the opening prophecy to suggest how the sleeping earth one day may be able to "rise and seek/ For her maker meek."

The last stanza of "The Little Girl Lost" is a test of the kind of commentary to which Miss Raine has committed herself, and she does not try to bridge the distance that opens up between Blake's poem and Taylor's Dissertation at the very moment she is preparing to wind up a triumphant demonstration that, in effect, Blake is Taylor versified. Instead of questioning either her premise or her method, however, she responds by patronizing Blake. Lyca can only be the fallen soul, which necessarily puts on a garment; therefore "it seems as though Blake, in attempting to keep all his multiple meanings in mind simultaneously, has failed at this point.... Yet the line is beautiful and imaginatively satisfying, if we do not insist.... In the total impression one would not wish...." This must be what Mr. Hughes is remembering when he finds Blake "confused or even careless."

In the analogy he sets up between initiation into the Mysteries and "experiencing" Blake, Mr. Hughes at first assigns the role of Mystagogue, the sponsor and guide of the initiate, to Blake himself, although his, Mr. Hughes's, own practical choice is Kathleen Raine speaking through her commentary. A better role in the Mysteries ritual for the actual author of the poem would be that of the Hierophant, the high priest of Eleusis, who at the supreme degree of initiation spoke the sacred words and exhibited the sacred objects. Those were the "secrets," neither concealed nor explained but uttered and exhibited--presented for understanding directly to the initiate by their official guardian. Such a ritual exhibition, the epopteia, takes place as part of the narrative in "The Little Girl Found" when the transformed lion-king allows Lyca's parents to see their sleeping daughter. There the formal Hierophant is the "Spirit arm'd in gold," who in the first poem, in his animal shape, has been an epopt himself, "viewing" the same sleeping figure. In both poems, presiding over the enlightenment of the personages in the narrative and of the reader as well, the ultimate Hierophant is Blake, and he too presents his meanings directly, in words and images that are the equivalent (according to the analogy introduced by Mr. Hughes) of the sacred words and objects revealed during the epopteia at Eleusis.

It is such an exhibition, I submit, that is being offered in the last stanza of "The Little Girl Lost," and all the reader-initiate needs to learn for his "salvation" is contained in what Blake the Hierophant puts before him. Mr. Hughes, alas, seems prepared to turn his back and join Kathleen Raine in rearranging the objects in a counter-display.

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#### REVIEW

Rosamond D. Harley, Artists' Pigments c. 1600-1835, A Study in English Documentary Sources, The International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, London: Butterworths, 1970. ix + 230 pp. + 8 plates £3.4s. (new style £3.20 in U.K. only).

Although this book makes no mention of the name of Blake, there being no reason why it should have done so, I would like to draw it to the attention of all of us who are working on the matter of Blake's drawings and paintings.