A Reply to John Grant

John Beer

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The Grey Monk: (This poem is separate, later than Songs of Innocence & Experience) On the Revolution, French then, American now, these fragments of Blake's thought returned to my mind in melodious form on a bus up Bayshore Freeway Los Gatos to San Francisco August 10, 1968 or thereabouts riding back from visit to wooden urned ashes of the body of Neal Cassidy old love friend & heroic American mind angel died in mid-life. "They never can work war's overthrow." He'd been imprisoned by the State 1959-61 several years for giving a free grass cigarette to the secret police, ruined off his railroad vocation and plunged into homeless psychedelic exploration thereafter till death. "Fayette Fayette thou'rt bought & sold, & sold is thy happy morrow," & other Blake verses remembered after touching Cassidy's ashes were the first music that occurred to me tuned to Blake's rhymes. "This hand," wrote in Howl, "Mo Lock whose fate is a cloud of Sexless Hydrogen." My brother is Leroi Jones; Thy father's sword was drawn in North Vietnam; The Panthers have armed themselves in steel to avenge the wrongs thy children Feel: But Vain the sword & vain the Bow, They never can work war's overthrow. Violent Vengeance perpetuates self-righteous Tyranny, and A sign is the Sword of An Angel King.

DISCUSSION "With intellectual spears, & long winged arrows of thought"

JOHN BEER: PETERHOUSE, CAMBRIDGE

A Reply to John Grant

In Part Two of his article on the Arlington Court picture (Blake Newsletter, 4 [August 1970], 12-25), John E. Grant devotes some time to my interpretation of the design in my Blake's Visionary Universe. I hope that his very dismissive remarks about my work will not deter the readers of the Newsletter from reading it and giving serious attention to my ideas.

In one instance, to be sure, he has spotted a mistake. When I read Keynes's article on the preliminary drawing for the Arlington Court picture, I was pleased to find that this, also, had in the past been described as possibly an illustration to Revelation 22:17. In memory, however, this ascription became conflated with the fact that another ascription ("The River of Oblivion") had actually been pencilled by someone on the back of the drawing itself. The point ought to have been picked up when I checked my references, but I missed it; I hope that it may be possible to correct it.
Mr. Grant also suggests, however, that I do not describe Blake's pictures correctly, claiming that I see the figures in plate 25 of *The Book of Urizen* as male, whereas they are "obviously female". Here the lack of strict accuracy is, I am afraid, his. If he will look again at the figures in question, he will see that while the foremost figure and the nearly submerged one on the right have fairly clear female characteristics, the figure near the top has the hair and lineaments of a Blakean male. The design seems to refer to the process which begins near the end of the previous page, when Urizen "curs'd/Both sons & daughters". My caption, "Men gripped by spectrous Energies", which deals with the process more generally and uses "men" in the generic sense, is correct, therefore, whereas "Women gripped by spectrous Energies" would not be.

Mr. Grant's next point, that I see the figures in *Jerusalem* 75 as male, I find totally inexplicable. The plate is mentioned twice in my book: on the first occasion (p. 192) I refer to the "women who control" dragons of energy and on the second (p. 372) to the "daughters of Jerusalem". Where does Mr. Grant find his "men"? His charge that it is I who am "hasty" and cannot describe what is actually there strikes me as a little cool, to say the least.

Mr. Grant now moves to a different sort of criticism, claiming that in my discussion of "A Vision of the Last Judgment" in connection with the Arlington Court picture, "the wiry bounding line of rectitude becomes invisible". I have re-read my discussion and can find no grounds for such a charge. What I am saying there is that while the scene depicted in *VLJ* is clearly not identical with that in *ACP* there are enough resemblances between individual elements in the two pictures to make one ask whether Blake's interpretative commentary for one may not also be relevant to the other. Where is the lack of rectitude? One begins to suspect that Mr. Grant's own sense of sound argument sometimes falters—all the more so when one discovers him assuming that because my second book appeared within two years of the first it must have been written in as short a period, allowing me no time to study the full range of Blake's visual art. For the record, it may be pointed out that the two books were written together over twelve years, during which I examined every available design of Blake's.

When Mr. Grant turns to one of the chief points in my interpretation, the remarkable series of parallels between items in the text of Revelation 22:14-17 and various features of the Arlington Court picture, he is swiftly dismissive, referring merely to the verse "The Spirit and the Bride say, Come..." and commenting that the figures in the centre of Blake's picture cannot be saying "Come!," that they cannot be inviting anyone to drink, and that if they were they would be offering nothing more than sea-water. There is more than one way of saying "Come!," however, and the text in question does not say that they are offering drink, at least directly:

And the Spirit and the Bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.

The text states only that those who respond to the invitation will find their thirst satisfied. And this is precisely what is beginning to happen to the figure who is rising from the river and who will shortly exchange the waters of oblivion in her scaly bucket for the waters of life that are flowing in the paradisal landscape above. What the Spirit and the Bride are inviting her to (as one might expect in Blake) is the exercise of energy and an awakening to vision: and it is this that is indicated by their gestures.
Mr. Grant does not bother to mention the other parallels which I have noted, except to say that they are "without exception insubstantial". Since the argument here is detailed and cumulative, I can only refer the reader to my original chapter and leave him to judge for himself; it is time to turn to a larger question raised at the end of the discussion.

Mr. Grant claims to find the key to my attitudes in my use of the word "idiosyncratic" to describe Blake and goes on to maintain that, being "deeply read" in "occultism" I miss the "infinite implications" of his art. At this point I begin to despair and to wonder whether he has really grappled with my book at all. For my main argument, stressed again and again, is that Blake read occult literature not for its own sake but for its "infinite implications". The point which I concede to his hostile critics is that occultism in general tends to work through tradition of various kinds, thus providing lines of communication for those who have begun to learn its language, and that Blake, by standing at an angle to such traditions, forfeits this ease of communication, compelling his reader to learn a new language. It is in this sense, and this sense alone, that I refer to him as "idiosyncratic" and I argue that it is precisely this independence and concern with the infinity of energy and vision that gives him his unique power as an artist. It is my theme from cover to cover.

Perhaps it is because he has missed this central argument that Mr. Grant is so resistant to the idea that the Arlington Court picture is an illustration to verses from the Book of Revelation. At first sight such an interpretation might seem to betray Blake back into the hands of orthodox Christians and impose a narrowly pietistic framework upon his picture. But this danger passes as soon as it is grasped that Blake is reading the Book of Revelation on his own terms, and that the Spirit and the Bride are not the Holy Spirit and Church of orthodox biblical exegesis, but the Energy and Vision of his own universe. So the red-clad figure of enduring creative energy folds out his hands over the sea to indicate his faith that "the sea shall be no more" but will be displaced by the city of vision and desire when the sleeping figure in the chariot above awakens to drive his chariot of fourfold vision. At present he is fore-shadowed by the naked goddess of liberated sexual energy on the waters (Vala released from the hindrances of the law). The Bride, meanwhile, expresses all that Blake has ever had to say about the relationship between nature and imagination. The gestures of her hands indicate the extremes: the oblivion below of those who are totally pre-occupied with birth, copulation and death, and the freedom of those above who minister to the energies of fourfold vision. Her body, darkly veiled in parts, but also beautiful in face and crowned with stars, indicates the more limited range between the single vision of analytic thinkers and the threefold vision of organized innocence. Near her veiled part can be seen the wooded Greek temple which, as Mr. Grant points out, can be associated with Blake's critique of Greek philosophy and art: the latter is seen by him as a developed form of single vision, its passion for beauty being restricted by its devotion to number and measurement. On the right of the picture, on the other hand, is enacted the process by which the awakening spirit learns to embrace the energy of twofold vision, passing through the fires of experience and emerging triumphant in creation; above, figures thus initiated emerge into the clarified three-fold vision of Blake's Beulah, from which, dwelling near the waters of life, they can discern the potential triumph of fulfilled desire.

It is in this way, on my reading of the picture, that Blake works upon and re-interprets the text of Revelation; and I find for my own part that such a reading structures the dynamics of the design in a way that brings out its infinite dimension and makes it a pleasure to look at. It is natural that interpretations should differ, of course, and I have no dispute with Mr. Grant on that score. I have dealt with his remarks at length simply because he has chosen to go further: he has described Blake's Humanism as "unreliable" (and even rebuked the reviewers who found things to praise in
Without producing a scrap of evidence in substantiation; and so far as Blake's Visionary Universe is concerned he has accused me of being "shoddy" and "unsound" in my scholarship and lacking in "rectitude" in my arguments—all on the basis of what turns out on examination, to be a single error. In doing so, moreover, he has not always shown himself to be exactly impressive either for the accuracy of his own scholarship or for his methods of argument. In all fairness, however, I should add that I found many of the detailed points in the remainder of his articles interesting and persuasive, and I look forward to reading his forthcoming interpretation. I hope that those who are interested in the Arlington Court picture will read both that and others (including my own, in its full context) and work towards an interpretation which squares with their own sense of the way in which Blake works as an artist.

MINUTE PARTICULARS

JANET WARNER: GLENDON COLLEGE, YORK UNIVERSITY, TORONTO

James Vine, according to rumor, was supposed to have been one of Blake's principal patrons, and the man who commissioned Milton. He is mentioned in the Keynes-Wolf Census (p. 102), and in Bentley's Blake Records he turns up lunching with Blake and Linnell (p. 275), and purchasing Job, but there is little evidence to date that he was a principal patron, or is there even much certainty about his identity. However, I was able to discover a few more details about him, while coincidentally spending last summer on the Isle of Wight.

The Census calls him James Vine, a merchant of Puckster, Isle of Wight. For this information it refers to Bohns catalogue of 1843, which seems to be non-existent, according to Blake Records. In any case, the proper address on the Isle of Wight is Puckster Cove. Vine was buried in the churchyard of St. John the Baptist Church in Niton, Isle of Wight, on 16 July 1837 at the age of 63. In this same church, a brass plaque has been erected to the memory of his daughter, Augusta, by her son, Arthur.

Augusta was born in Puckster in 1821, implying that the Vines were living in the house called Puckster Close at the time. This was presumably their country house, Blake and Linnell having lunched in London. According to the church records, Augusta married Alexander Mitchell-Innes, but their son later took the name of Arthur Vine Innes-Vine and lived on at Puckster Close. He is still remembered by the church sexton at Niton. Arthur is said to have turned Roman Catholic and sold the house before he died, having been well known as the local squire and benefactor. If James Vine did indeed purchase much of Blake's work, it would be interesting to find out if an Innes-Vine descendant has a book or painting hidden away.

G. E. Bentley, Jr. wrote me from England that he has recently found a few more