Waxed in Blake

Nelson Hilton

"The Cunning sures & the Aim at yours" may have been spurred by its association with Cromek's fashionable marketing language.  


Waxed in Blake

BY NELSON HILTON

THOSE who write on Bob Dylan appear to take for granted the influence of Blake on his "Gates of Eden" (in performance by 31 October 1964, then issued on Bringing It All Back Home, March 1965, and as the flip side to the single version of "Like a Rolling Stone," July 1965). Michael Gray speaks for many, if at greater length, in stating that "the purposive force of what is palpably Blakeian impinges in every verse. It is the major Dylan song prior to 'Every Grain Of Sand' that is most like Blake, and like the most characteristic Blake at that." Without giving specifics, Gray argues that "the general themes of 'Gates of Eden' could not be more Blakeian and nor could their treatment. Dylan is treating of balances of opposites—of material wealth and spiritual; of earthly reality and the imaginatively real; of the body and soul; of false gods and true vision; of self-gratification and salvation; of mortal ambitions and the celestial city; of sins and forgiveness; of evil and good." Lawrence Wilde suggests, more concretely but equally without evidence, that "William Blake's poem 'Gates of Paradise' may well have inspired Dylan's composition," and Mike Marqusee finds "an apt reference to Blake" in the song's seventh-stanza reference to "kingdoms of Experience." The recent publication in facsimile of a manuscript version of "Gates of Eden" enables further speculation about Blake's presence in the song's first stanza, at least, and how it came to pass. As published and recorded, the first stanza reads:

Of war and peace the truth just twists
Its curfew gull just glides
Upon four-legged forest clouds
The cowboy angel rides
With his candle light into the sun
Though its glow is waxed in black
All except when 'neath the trees of Eden.

The facsimile has in the third line not "four-legged" but "fungus forest cloud." This, together with the twisting of the truth, the black glow, and the setting "'neath the trees," seems strongly to recall "A Memorable Fancy" in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, plates 17-18. There the speaker, in the company of "An Angel," finds himself "sitting in the twisted root of an oak, he was suspended in a fungus" and beholding "the sun, black but shining" (E 41). In the facsimile the cowboy angel "lights his candle in the sun" (itself replacing the original "his candle burns the day"), which flips us a few plates forward in Marriage to the argument that a "man of mechanical talents" producing volumes—or vinyl recordings "waxed in black"—from the writings of inspired authors should "not say that he knows better than his master, for he only holds a candle in sunshine" (pl. 22, E 43).

It seems likely that Dylan may have come upon or have been reminded of Blake's work through a rapidly developing friendship with Allen Ginsberg that began in early 1964. Ginsberg's long-standing and idiosyncratic, deep involvement with Blake is well known, and he "had studied, in particular, the visionary masterpiece, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell." Dylan may have come to his title image not only through Blake's Gates of Paradise, but also through Ginsberg's very early collection The Gates of Wrath. Though not published until 1972, the unique manuscript of these "rhymed poems, 1948-1952," was, surprisingly, in Dylan's possession. There, beginning his twenty-fourth year in May 1964, Dylan could have read "Ode: My 24th Year" and its concluding line, "Here is no Eden: this

4. The power of this image is evident again several years later in John Gardner's Graild (New York: Knopf, 1971), where the protagonist "recall[s] something. A void boundless as a nether sky. I hang by the twisted roots of an oak, looking down into immensity. Vastly far away I see the sun, black but shining ..." (137).  


7. Ginsberg relates in a "Hindsight" to the 1972 edition published by Grey Fox Press (Bolinas) that "Gates of Wrath ms. was carried to London by lady friend early 60's. It disappeared, and I had no complete copy till 1968 when old typescript was returned thru poet Bob Dylan—it passed into his hands years earlier." The volume has Blake's "Right thro' the Gates of Wrath" as one of its epigraphs and two directly Blake-inspired poems, "On Reading William Blake's 'The Sick Rose'" and "The Eye Altering Alters All."


is my store." By the release of "Gates of Eden," Dylan was close enough to Ginsberg that they are depicted each wearing the same top hat in photographs on the back cover of Bringing It All Back Home (pictures evidently taken early in 1964). For his part, Ginsberg felt strongly enough about the song that in "Who Be Kind To," first read at the International Poetry Incarnation, 11 June 1965, Royal Albert Hall (shortly after he accompanied Dylan's UK concert tour recorded in Don't Look Back), he celebrates the raising up of "joyful voices and guitars / in electric Afric hurrah / for Jerusalem— / The saints come marching in, Twist & / Shout, and Gates of Eden are named / in Albion again."


WILLIAM BLAKE

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