

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY  
**BLAKE**

M I N U T E  
P A R T I C U L A R

A Note on Cowper and A Poison Tree

Nelson Hilton

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 12, Issue 3, Winter 1978-79, p. 203



## A NOTE ON COWPER AND A POISON TREE

Nelson Hilton

Cowper's incidental poem, *On the Death of Mrs. Throckmorton's Bullfinch* (1789, 1792) offers a likely source for a description in Blake's *A Poison Tree*, in the *Songs of Experience* (dated 1794). In Blake's poem the wrath of the speaker grows to bear "an apple bright"; this is beheld by the envious "foe" who--the last stanza relates--

. . . into my garden stole,  
When the night had veild the pole;  
In the morning glad I see;  
My foe outstretched beneath the tree.

In Cowper's poem, "Bully" leads a peaceful existence in his well-latticed cage, since his "Dire foe" the cat is not permitted to live in the house. Unfortunately, on one occasion his foe was a rat:

Night veil'd the pole--all seem'd secure--  
When led by instinct sharp and sure,  
Subsistence to provide,  
A beast forth-sallied on the scout,  
Long-back'd, long-tail'd, with whisker'd snout,  
And badger-colour'd hide.

(31-36)

"Poor Bully's beak," like Orpheus' head, is all that "remain'd to tell / The cruel death he died."

Blake's adaption or unconscious echoing of this material is hardly central to his poem, but it does offer further evidence of his early attention to Cowper. The poem could have been seen by Blake on its first appearance in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, February 1789; again in the *Speaker*, 1792; or possibly in the offices of Joseph Johnson, who published it in the 1794-95 edition of Cowper's *Poems* (see Cowper, *Poetical Works*, ed. H. S. Milford, 4th ed., corr., add. Norma Russell, Oxford Standard Authors [London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967], p. 383).

## WILLIAM BLAKE'S VISIONS OF THE DAUGHTERS OF ALBION: A POEM BASED ON DOUBT

Dwight E. Weber

Among the unique features of William Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* are the names. The names of all five major "characters" appear for the first time in this poem. Harold Bloom has stated that the "Father of Jealousy . . . whom we have met before in Blake as Winter, Tiriel, Restraint, the Devourer, and the Nobodaddy who successfully masquerades as God the Father in *Songs of Innocence*" is "first introduced in this poem

under his Blakean name of Urizen."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, while Oothoon and Theotormon, the doubtful lovers, reappear in *Europe a Prophecy* and *The Song of Los* and, along with the Daughters of Albion and Bromion, in *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*, they all originate in the 1793 printing of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*.<sup>2</sup> Blake may have selected the names for their derivative significance. For instance, Theotormon is nominally "the man tormented by his own idea of God."<sup>3</sup> The name of Urizen, likewise, may suggest "the horizon of thought,"<sup>4</sup> as he and his agent try to restrain Oothoon's imagination, or, quite possibly, it may play upon the words "your reason." However, another, more covert method of naming exists, antecedent to this search for derivatives.

Blake's names, all original with this poem, are functions of their first letters. That is, the poet started with the initial letters and then found apt names to complete each letter, or character. These characters form an anagram for "doubt" (Daughters, Oothoon, Urizen, Bromion, Theotormon). Indeed, the poem begins and ends with doubt. The Daughters of Albion watch Oothoon's progress and doubt their ability to seize a similar freedom from Leutha's vale. Bromion assaults the exultant Oothoon and casts doubt upon the validity of her so-called independence. Finally, Theotormon's conscience keeps him dubious of the love and sexual freedom to which Oothoon wishes him to awake. Blake, then, reveals his poetic theme anagrammatically through his names.

Certainly, doubt is a major theme in the poetry of William Blake. Plate 4, "Air," of *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise* shows a miserable character "On Cloudy Doubts and Reasoning Cares";<sup>5</sup> moreover, in the accompanying poem, Blake attacks "Doubt which is Self contradiction" (E265). His "Auguries of Innocence" warns: "He who shall teach the Child to Doubt / The rotting Grave shall neer get out" (E483). One may think of the Daughters, the children, of Albion in this connection. Urizen, the source of all this doubt, may come to mind as well in Blake's satiric verse, "You dont believe I wont attempt to make ye" (E492). Here the word "Doubt" is placed in the mouth of Sir Isaac Newton, the scientist parodied by Blake in "The Ancient of Days," who, in the frontispiece to *Europe a Prophecy*, defines the "horizons of thought" with his compass.<sup>6</sup> Doubt limits a person, hinders him from becoming all he can be, and prevents him from drawing the "distinct, sharp, . . . and wirey . . . bounding line" (E540) by which he will live his own life. In *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Blake places Urizen at the center of doubt, both in a thematic and anagrammatical way. In fact, Urizen and Bromion act in the poem and in the anagram to separate the Daughters and Oothoon, the females, from any consummation with Theotormon, the male.

This approach to the poem through anagram does not refute any of the previous speculations about the derivations of the characters' names. The names of Theotormon, Bromion, and Oothoon, as Northrop Frye claims, may well be Ossianic, in so oceanic a poem.<sup>7</sup> Yet the focus on the anagram places the horse back before the cart. Blake appears to have predetermined