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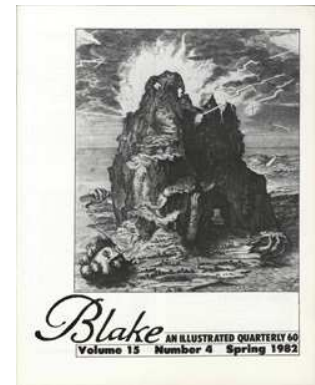
# BLAKE

A R T I C L E

## Blake's Swans

Robert F. Gleckner

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# BLAKE'S SWANS

ROBERT F. GLECKNER

**T**he swan is as rare a bird in Blake's works as he said London print shops were in his youth<sup>1</sup>--though their appearances, in text and design, span almost his entire working career from *There Is No Natural Religion* through *Jerusalem*. Critical interpretations of them have been sparse and, even if one cannot expect consensus, they are unusually varied: the Female Will, chariot of inspiration, a pen, the river Severn, arsenic, the soul, desire, the body (or Generation), Blake himself as poet-painter.<sup>2</sup> By far the most elaborate of these interpretations is Erdman's commentary in *The Illuminated Blake* on plate 11 of *Jerusalem*, which is the only one to really try to come to grips with that puzzling design by seeing it as a sublime allegory of Blake's marriage of copper-plate etching (of text and design) and the printing and coloring of that design on paper. Since the *Jerusalem* plate is especially complex, let me leave it aside for a moment to deal with some "simpler" swans.

According to the Blake concordance there are only two swans in his writings, neither apparently remarkable enough to elicit any comment except from Kathleen Raine who, in glossing the "bright swan" of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (plate 3), identifies the whole scene as Plotinian, the swan as "Plato's emblem of the soul," here dipping "its wing in the 'red earth' of the natural body, which is the ever-flowing river of generated life."<sup>3</sup> Although it is certainly possible that Blake was aware of this Neoplatonic interpretation of the *Phaedo*, Raine's gloss on the *Visions* passage (3:18-19; E 46) commits precisely the same error that so frustrates Oothoon in Theotormon's reaction to her rape and "defilement" by Bromion. Her invoking of the swan here is not to corroborate such simplistic body-soul dichotomizing but to counteract it. The swan is but one of three parallel images, the others

being fruit and lamb. As the worm feeds on the sweetest fruit, she argues, so is the "new wash'd lamb ting'd with the village smoke" and "the bright swan / By the red earth" of the river of life (that is, by the red clay of Esau-Edom in Genesis 25:25-30). But unlike these, she says, "How can I be defild when I reflect thy image pure?" Adopting Theotormon's mistaken orientation, she turns it against itself: unlike the swan "I bathe my wings. / And I am white and pure"--Blake's grammatical construction here denying a cause and effect relationship. She *is* sullied to Theotormon's morally jaundiced eye but to hers, bathing in "our immortal river" leaves no residue of "generation's" slow stain. The seed of Oothoon's conception, perhaps even the seed of Blake's entire conception in the *Visions*, is in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "As the caterpillar chooses the fairest leaves to lay her eggs on, so the priest lays his curse on the fairest joys"; but "The soul of sweet delight, can never be defil'd"--by village smoke, red earth, or hypocritical moral and religious judgement.<sup>4</sup>

Oothoon's swan, then, is not the Platonic soul but rather an image of her eternal imaginative individuality, her fundamental and divine ("pure") humanness in its "eternal joy" (8:8). In Raine's footnote to her Plotinian interpretation, however, she superimposes upon it an allusion to Plato that does lead us in a direction pertinent to virtually all of Blake's swan images, even as it leads us further and further away from *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*: "The soul of Orpheus," she reminds us, "enters the body of a swan, in the myth in the tenth book of the *Republic* (620A); but this is usually understood in a symbolic sense, the swan being the emblem of the poet."<sup>5</sup> While the Orpheus-swan connection in the *Republic* is clear, there is



no evidence so far as I know that that connection evolved into an iconographical (or even mythological) tradition. Nevertheless, the fact that Orpheus was an especial favorite of Apollo's (some said even his son) validates the swan association in that the bird was sacred to him. As Robert J. Clements points out, the most popular symbol of the poet in the Renaissance was the swan, its consistent linkage to Apollo according to prophetic powers.<sup>6</sup> Blake's intimate knowledge of Renaissance emblem literature is now generally accepted,<sup>7</sup> and Cesare Ripa (*Iconologia*, 1593), Geoffrey Whitney (*Choice of Emblemes*, 1586), and Alciati (*Emblemata*, 1551; it went through over 150 editions before 1621 and Clements calls it "the bible of emblem books" [p. 785])--as well as any number of their imitators--all identify the swan with Apollo, the poet, poesy, prophecy.

The only other instance of a swan in Blake's writings seems to argue further for his awareness of this tradition, even if not for a specific textual or emblem source. In *The Four Zoas* Urizen, fallen and "shut up in the deep dens of Urthona," spills out his "Woes" in a lament for the lost Eden:

My fountains once the haunt of Swans now breed  
the scaly tortoise  
The houses of my harpers are become a haunt of  
crows  
The gardens of wisdom are become a field of  
horrid graves  
And on the bones I drop my tears & water them  
in vain (Night V, E 336)

The fact that Urizen is associated in the remainder of this Night with Apollo and the chariot of the sun solidifies the allusion, Blake of course transforming both the Apollo and Orpheus myths (which he knew probably from Ovid) into the fall of all Art. Though the fallen prophet's tongue (or the voice of wisdom) remains eloquent,

in vain the voice  
Of Urizen in vain the Eloquent tongue. A Rock  
a Cloud a Mountain  
Were now not Vocal as in Climes of happy  
Eternity  
Where the lamb replies to the infant voice &  
the lion to the man of years  
Giving them sweet instructions Where the Cloud  
the River & the Field  
Talk with the husbandman & shepherd. . . .  
(*Four Zoas*, Night VI, E 341)

More impressive evidence of Blake's knowledge of the swan of emblem literature, however, is in the most regal of all his graphic swans, that adorning the titlepage of his illustrations to Gray's poems. The caption is "The Pindarick Genius receiving his Lyre," the latter descending from the sky to the youthful poet who is riding the swan with so loose a rein that he virtually gives it its head. Blake, of course, may be merely echoing here Pindar's common characterization as the "Theban Swan,"<sup>8</sup> for he has indicated elsewhere that he was reasonably familiar, if not with Pindar's poetry directly, with his reputation and the legends and stories about him.

In *An Island in the Moon*, for example, Suction asks at one point "if Pindar was not a better Poet than Giotto was a Painter" (E 444), but the question is never answered in the ensuing squabble over whether Plutarch, who quotes Pindar but says little about him, was prejudiced against Italians. There is little evidence in the context that Blake knew much more about Plutarch than that he wrote "lives" --though it's interesting at least to recall, in connection with the poet-prophet idea, the comic discussion in Chapter 3 of *An Island* of "Phebus," who was, among other things according to Obtuse Angle, the "God of . . . Painting, Perspective . . . Phraseology . . . Mythology . . . in short every art & science adorn'd him as beads round his neck." He also "understood Engraving"--though in the course of the insane conversation he ultimately is confused with Pharoah.<sup>9</sup> Blake's only other mention of Pindar by name is in an inscription on one of his pencil drawings: "Corinna the Rival of Pindar Corinna the Graecian Poetess."<sup>10</sup> The allusion here is to the story that Pindar in his youth was defeated in a poetical contest by Corinna, who then advised him to use more mythology in his poems; when he did so she ungraciously criticized his using it too profusely. The suggestiveness of this Pindar-lyre-swan-genius association (occurring as it does about 1797 when Flaxman commissioned the Gray series for a gift to his wife)<sup>11</sup> is strengthened by the earlier appearance in *America* of a comparable swan (plate 11), like the Gray swan being ridden with gentle--though not quite so gentle--rein. Erdman describes this one as hastening "from Albion's fires . . . to safer homes inland" (*IB*, 149), though such action seems hardly to demonstrate prophetic power or fortitude. (If indeed the swan-rider is fleeing "the British bombardment of coastal towns" as Erdman claims, we might wonder why he heads East instead of West, as the fleeing family in plate 3 does.) Yet Erdman does identify the rider as an Orc-Los "image," as Samuel Adams (that is, "Boston's Angel" who speaks the prophetic words of plate 11), Tom Paine, and "the poet himself in disguise . . . like Horace." While his additional idea of this being a "pen swan" may not be as far-fetched as it sounds on the surface, Erdman's Horatian reference is most unfortunate. Horace did prophesy his poetic immortality in the context of feeling himself turning into a swan (surely echoing Socrates), but it is hard to imagine any poet who would serve less well as a prophetic model, or indeed any kind of poetic model, for Blake. The fact is, of course, that Horace is alluding to the very tradition Blake himself is making use of. Erdman is right: the rider is the poet, prophet, Blake--riding Eastward toward the advancing "dragon form" of "Albion's wrathful Prince" (*America* 3:14-15).

As attractive as all this may be, one may still wonder about the swan's being bridled, however gently.<sup>12</sup> If indeed its rider here is Orc-like, as his origins in the fiery figure of plate 10 suggest, what we have in the total icon is poesy or prophecy being pressed by its rider into the violent action of bloody battle and the final loosing of plagues, "fierce disease and lust" (16:21) on England, a holocaust totally out of keeping with Apollo, Orpheus, the "Pindarick Genius," poetry, and prophecy as Blake understood them. It is instead



prophecy perverted to war-song, one of the things he saw happening in Gray as well. Is this why the rider looks back, doubletaking his own violent image as well as the lost Eden of Atlantis on the previous plate? And is this why, as it seems to me, the swan strains at the rein? The contrasting view is seen in the serpent figure at the bottom of the page, which Erdman properly sees as smilingly attentive to its riders, so limply reined as to be free (note the limp arm of the rein-holder as distinct from the sharply tensed wrist of the swan-rider),<sup>13</sup> its tail spiralling off into infinity-  
eternity, its riders "in long drawn arches sitting" feeling "the nerves of youth renew" (15:24-25). These riders, we should note, reverse (and hence annihilate) time through the true prophecy of the serpent, Blake moving us from the youthful rein-holder back to child back to infant back to the prophetic coils of the snake's tail, repeating almost exactly the curlicue soaring upward from the "P" of "Prophecy" on plate 3,<sup>14</sup> growing "vitally upward in endless communication that expands into words and poetry" (IB, 143). Erdman himself seems to sense something of the falseness of the Orc-prophecy and the dawning of Los-like vision in his commentary on the "Preludium": "The poem beginning on Plate 3 presents a potentially cyclic revolution of rise and fall, rebellion and enslavement, threatening a perpetual dull round";<sup>15</sup> and also in his interpretation of the "Finis" design at the foot of plate 16, corroborating my reading of the serpent-swan opposition on plate 11: "Coiling among thorny but blossoming red roses, his head another rosebud, he directs his tongue in the proper prophetic position . . . ."<sup>16</sup>

The *Illuminated Blake* indexes a number of other etched swans in the early works--up through *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (though I find none in "The Echoing Green" or on plate 8 of *The Marriage* as indexed), none of them incontrovertible except those in *There Is No Natural Religion* and "The Little Boy lost." While it is possible that in the former (plate 8a) the boy approaches the swan because it "might be ridden" (IB, 29), the text suggests it as the visible expression of the increasingly unlimited desires of the reaching child. If "More! More! is the cry of a mistaken soul" and "less than All cannot satisfy man" (*No Natural Religion*, 7b), the child as he stands is no better off than the reachers of *No Natural Religion*, 7b; but as the numerically comparable plate 7a vividly suggests, that "All" is the imagination that produces "the spiritual music rising from the pipe of the musician" (IB, 29). In plate 8a, then, the swan *will* rise and fly freely (not, I think, reined) as the Renaissance's Poesia or Blakean prophecy in precisely the same way as the mind-forged-manacled man of *No Natural Religion* 8b rises from the morass in plate 9b. It is quite possible, of course, that such a "retrospective" reading of this earliest of all Blake's swans, from the perspective of *America* and the Gray illustrations, is an over-reading, but the nature of the prophetic tracts, along with the earlier allusions to "Phebus" and Pindar in *An Island in the Moon* at least allow the possibility. In this light Erdman must be correct about "The Little Boy lost" plate in saying that the swan there, also floating behind (or in) the "y" of "Boy" in the title, is a "fitter

object for boy with outstretched arms [precisely, one might add, in the same striding position as the *No Natural Religion* boy--though he moves *toward* the swan and is, importantly, unclad] to pursue . . ." (IB, 54). And "The Little Boy lost" is, of course, also a poem about erroneous perception. In both cases, then, it seems proper to identify the swans, not with desire itself, but rather with the prophetic, visionary, imaginative perception and art that is the product of desire, and the child as the incipient poet who will not ride the swan but, like Orpheus or Pindar, become it.<sup>17</sup>

I pass over *Jerusalem* 71 here as a clear anti-swan image, bat-winged and not only firmly planted (apparently on the ground) but even grovelling ridiculously and "fatuously kissing or nibbling at the toes" of the Leda-like Vala (IB, 350). If she puts on his knowledge with his power (both of which seem calculatedly absent in Blake's satiric portrait of the spectrous swan), both will eventuate in the maze of error, prophecy become labyrinthine mystery, emanating from the Vala-like figure's head. But we cannot pass over the most troublesome of all Blake's swans, the one in *Jerusalem* 11.

Most recently David Bindman, obviously unhappy with the Erdman reading I shall turn to in a moment, advanced two other interpretations of plate 11 (Ovid's King Cygnus legend and the swan as the River Severn), only to argue persuasively against both.<sup>18</sup> I am less sceptical about Erdman's elaborate allegory of the swan as both singing and etching the plate with its beak, complemented by the swimming-flying figure at the bottom of the plate producing "infinite illumination": "Like the serpent of Hell [in plate 15 of *The Marriage*], the serpent-necked swan projects lineation. Like the eagle, the feather-finned skimmer adorns the surface with living colors (needing the spectral fins while the colors are wet, the feathers for rising from illustration to Illumination)."<sup>19</sup> Given the text of the plate, there seems to me little doubt that Erdman is on the right track, however much one may balk at his wrapping up all of the plate's minute particulars so tidily. Even so, I still have some problems with his reading. While the design, as he notes, is one of only ten white-line etchings in *Jerusalem*, the text is in Blake's usual relief etching, the contrary processes married. It doesn't really matter, then, which process the swan is engaged in. What is to the point are its bubbles (acid), eating into the plate, and swimming-flying through it, corroding apparent surfaces away to reveal the infinite that was hid. Part of the "infinite" is the text itself, which we note is under water, that is, within the plate on which the swan-prophet-graver sits. The rest of the infinite is the text humanized, still streaming the acidic bubbles on wrists, neck, and hair (or head-dress).<sup>20</sup> At the same time, although Blake repeats in this lower design the lines of the water above to remind us that the swimmer is within the plate, not merely "on" it, the figure is also clearly flying, arms outstretched in a familiar Blakean gesture of airy freedom. In a sense, then, this is the swan, now fully humanized and in full flight, no longer merely floating (or planted) in the materials of the artifice but assuming total mythographic status as poet-prophet-artist as well



as poem-prophecy-art. The entire plate is thus the Erin of the text, not merely the swimmer-flyer as Erdman suggests: "And the Spaces of Erin reach'd from the starry height, to the starry depth," the spaces that are the enabling agency for the process that will eventuate in the immediately following plates (12ff). It is, to borrow Angus Fletcher's terms, the prophetic moment, space and time (Los's "pulsations of time, & extensions of space" during and in which he performs his "sublime Labours"--J, 11:2 and 10:65). That the moment does not last the text tells us, as well as the parody of this visionary creative activity that is imaged in the margin of plate 12--for "Around Golgonooza lies the land of death eternal; a Land / Of pain and misery and despair and ever brooding melancholy" (13:30-31). But the moment's augury is too powerful to be denied: the embrace of plate 99 will come.

Even if we accept the view of plate 11 that I have advanced, or some compromise between it and Erdman's, the sexes of both swan and swimmer-flyer, as well as the Indian appearance of the latter still nag (on the Indian see my note 20). The safest answer is the one Erdman gives: "In their present appearance both figures are androgynous, possibly nearer Eternity than Beulah, possibly nearer Ulro" (IB, 291). Possibly. Damon sees both as female, the swan "the Female Will," the lower figure "Inspiration (an Emanation)," and Yeats suggests "Leda-Swan" for the one, "Vala, or America, as Oothoon, taking 'her impetuous course' o'er Theotormon's reign" for the other.<sup>21</sup> If indeed *Jerusalem* 71 recalls the Zeus-Leda myth, as it certainly seems to, can we arbitrarily ignore that myth on plate 11 and invoke Horace and King Cygnus instead? I think not. I have already indicated that Horace is a most unlikely and inapropos allusion, and none of the three Cygnus stories told by Ovid has the remotest connection with anything on this plate--not to mention, as Bindman reminds us, that Cygnus was "indubitably male."<sup>22</sup> If a simple spectre-emanation contrariety were all that Blake wanted, he surely would have made that clearer. What, then, does the Ledeian swan have to do with the Orphic swan?

Let us go back to Cygnus for a moment. There is an interesting connection between the Leda-Swan story and Cygnus in that both have reference to the Trojan War. In Book XII of the *Metamorphoses* Achilles, in the height of the battle for Troy, seeks out Cygnus, who unknown to Achilles, has been made invulnerable to spear and sword by his father Neptune. Achilles finally corners him, however, pressing him against a rock, then throws him down and, kneeling on his ribs, strangles Cygnus with the thongs of his own helmet. It is at that moment that Neptune transforms Cygnus into a swan. As I indicated earlier, it seems ridiculous to associate *Jerusalem* 11 with this bloody story, but the collocation of Leda (who, we should recall, became Nemesis after her rape), Zeus-swan, the Trojan War, Achilles, and Cygnus-swan is difficult to ignore entirely. However circuitous a route this is into Blake's conception on plate 11 of *Jerusalem*, that plate does immediately precede the building of Golgonooza (as opposed to the destruction of Troy), the "realizing" of true prophecy as opposed to the bloody realization of "all human history flowing

from" the false prophecy inherent in Leda's rape.<sup>23</sup> Although the union of Zeus and Leda would seem to be especially apropos in light of Blake's woman-swan, then, its applicability, if any, must lie in his transformation of Bromion-like tyranny and its consequent vengeful destructiveness into the productive union of divine and human as the artist-builder. Blake was not unacquainted with Homer, as we know. His antipathy to the "Classics . . . that Desolate Europe with Wars" erupts angrily in the 1820 etching "On Homer's Poetry & On Virgil":

Sacred Truth has pronounced that Greece & Rome  
as Babylon & Egypt: so far from being  
parents of Arts & Sciences as they pretend:  
were destroyers of all Art. Homer Virgil &  
Ovid confirm this opinion. . . .

Rome & Greece swept Art into their maw &  
destroyd it. . . . Grecian is Mathematic Form  
Gothic is Living Form. . . .<sup>24</sup>

Such living form is what the swan of *Jerusalem* 11 creates, the product of a "redeemed" Leda-Swan / Los-Enitharmon being not war but the corrosive spirit that burns away the apparent surfaces of history to reveal the infinite "Nature of Eternal Things . . . All Springing from the Divine Humanity" (*A Vision of the Last Judgment*, E 551); for

All things acted on Earth are seen in the bright  
Sculptures of  
Los's Halls & every Age renews its powers from  
these Works  
With every pathetic story possible to happen  
from Hate or  
Wayward Love & every sorrow & distress is carved  
here  
Every Affinity of Parents Marriages & Friend-  
ships are here  
In all their various combinations wrought with  
wondrous Art  
All that can happen to Man in his pilgrimage  
of seventy years  
Such is the Divine Written Law of Horeb & Sinai:  
And such the Holy Gospel of Mount Olivet &  
Calvary (*Jerusalem* 16:61-69)

With no mention of Leda anywhere in Blake's works, however, we may still rest discontented with this sort of Blakean transformation of the "classics" and the "detestable Gods of Priam" (*Milton* 14:15)--though it is worth recalling here that in such influential emblem books as Ripa's *Iconologia* and Christophorus Giarda's *Icones symbolicae*, Poesy (or Poesia) is almost always a female figure, holding a lyre in one hand and a plectrum in the other, with a white swan attendant.<sup>25</sup>

One final suggestion about Blake's swans, one that may have some bearing, particularly, on *Jerusalem* 11: Spenser's *Ruines of Time*--which I have already suggested Blake knew well<sup>26</sup> and which includes allusions to "fair Ledaes warlick twinnes" (1.386), Orpheus and Eurydice (11.391-92), and the immortality of art, which laments the ruin of "Verlame," and which is an elegy on the death of Sidney--concludes with six verbal emblems, the first two of which may have some relationship to *Jerusalem* 11. The first of these is Sidney as a swan floating



down the Thames and sweetly singing "the prophecie / Of his owne death in dolefull Elegie," after which

With loftie flight aboue the earth he bounded,  
And out of sight to highest heauen mounted:  
Where now he is become an heauenly signe.  
(11.599-602)

Similarly constellated is the Orphean harp of the second emblem:

Whilest thus I looked, loe adowne the Lee,  
I sawe an Harpe stroong all with silver twyne,  
And made of golde and costlie yuorie,  
Swimming, that whilome seemed to haue been  
The harpe, on which *Dan Orpheus* was seene  
Wylde beasts and forrests after him to lead,  
But was th'Harpe of *Philisides* now dead.

At length out of the Riuer it was reard  
And borne aboue the cloudes to be  
diuin'd. . . .<sup>27</sup>

Even if the swan here is indubitably as male as Cygnus (was Blake conflating the indubitably female swans of the *Prothalamion* with this one?), the context of *The Ruines of Time* is marvellously apt--for, as we know, "The Ruins of Time builds Mansions in Eternity" (E 678), precisely what swan-flyer-swimmer, Los-Enitharmon, Sidney-swan, Orpheus-harp, and Blake all demonstrate in their own respective ways. In his youth Blake, imitating Spenser, called upon these detestable gods of Priam--Apollo, Mercury, Jove, and Pallas Athena--but it did not take him long to recognize that pantheon's dead-endedness and to take flight, in his own transmutation of part of that pantheon, as a swan.

<sup>1</sup> *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), p. 679, hereafter cited in text and notes as E plus the page number.

<sup>2</sup> Successively S. Foster Damon, *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols* (New York: Peter Smith, 1947; orig. ed. 1924), p. 469; David Bindman, *Blake as an Artist* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1977), p. 182; Erdman, *The Illuminated Blake* (Garden City: Anchor/Doubleday, 1974), p. 149, hereafter cited in text and notes as IB plus the page number; Bindman, loc. cit.; W. H. Stevenson, ed., *The Poems of William Blake* (London and New York: Longman/W. W. Norton, 1972), p. 646n.; Kathleen Raine, *Blake and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), I, 177; Erdman, IB, 54; Joseph Wicksteed, *William Blake's Jerusalem* (Trianon Press, n.d.), p. 217; Erdman, IB, 54, 290. There are others as well. Interestingly Damon does not index the swan in *A Blake Dictionary* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1965).

<sup>3</sup> *Blake and Tradition*, I, 177. In the *Phaedo* Socrates, talking to Simmias of immortality, mentions swans as sacred to Apollo and as having the gift of prophecy, but he does not specifically identify the swan with the soul.

<sup>4</sup> Orc reiterates Blake's point, even more powerfully, in *America*, plate 8:

That stony law I stamp to dust: and scatter religion abroad  
To the four winds as a torn book, & none shall gather the  
Leaves;  
But they shall rot on desert sands, & consume in bottomless  
deeps;  
To make the deserts blossom, & the deeps shrink to their  
fountains,  
And to renew the fiery joy, and burst the stony roof.  
That pale religious lechery, seeking Virginity,  
May find it in a harlot, and in coarse-clad honesty

The undefil'd tho' ravish'd in her cradle night and morn:  
For every thing that lives is holy, life delights in life;  
Because the soul of sweet delight can never be defil'd.  
(5-14)

<sup>5</sup> *Blake and Tradition*, I, 410-11. While, as almost all critics note, Plato is clearly the source of Shelley's "Enchanted Boat" lyric, with its swan, in *Prometheus Unbound*, the application of his imagery to Blake is justifiable only if one is indifferent to Blake's unalterable opposition to the ideas that inform Plato's conception. Besides, Raine ignores Plato's explanation of Orpheus's metamorphosis: his soul "chose" the swan because of hatred for womankind (since women had killed and dismembered him) and because therefore he did not wish to be conceived and born of woman. Cf. Wither's emblem of Ganymede astride Jupiter's eagle as the soul mounting to heaven (*A Collection of Emblems* 1635, ed. John Horden [Yorkshire: Scolar Press, 1968], p. 156). Piloo Nanavutty in "Blake and Emblem Literature," *Journal of the Warburg & Courtauld Institutes*, 15 (1952), p. 260, identifies *America* 11 with this myth.

<sup>6</sup> "Iconography on the Nature and Inspiration of Poetry in Renaissance Emblem Literature," *PMLA*, 70 (1955), 784. Clements notes that Cicero, in the *Tusculanae Disputationes*, says that swans were gifted with powers of divination. The information in the rest of this paragraph is from Clements. See also J. Rendel Harris, "Apollo's Swans," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 9 (1925), 372-416.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Nanavutty's essay cited above, pp. 258-61; Mary Lynn Johnson, "Emblem and Symbol in Blake," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 37 (1974), 151-70; and Judith Wardle, "'For Hatching ripe': Blake and the Educational Uses of Emblem and Illustrated Literature," *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*, 81 (1978), 324-48, esp. her "Appendix."

<sup>8</sup> Gray himself, however, whose steady praise of Pindar and his own writing of "Pindarics" Blake obviously knew well, describes Pindar as the "Theban Eagle . . . / Sailing with supreme dominion / Thro' the azure deep of air" ("The Progress of Poesy," l. 115--subtitled "Pindaric" with an epigraph from Pindar). Gray's note to the passage simply says that "Pindar compares himself to that bird." The swan epithet belongs to the family of Mantuan Swan and Swan of Avon, though it was Cowley who attached the swan to Pindar (noted by Roger Lonsdale, *The Poems of Thomas Gray*, William Collins, Oliver Goldsmith [London: Longman, 1969], p. 176). That attachment is echoed by Denham in his "On Mr. Abraham Cowley." Irene Tayler, in *Blake's Illustrations to the Poems of Gray* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), identifies the swan of Blake's titlepage to Gray as "Apollo's bird" (p. 22).

<sup>9</sup> E 442-43. Earlier Blake invokes Apollo with his "rays of light" and "truth's beams" in his *Poetical Sketches* poem, "An Imitation of Spencer."

<sup>10</sup> See *Pencil Drawings of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London, 1927), p. 45. The Corinna episode was among the most commonly retailed of Pindar anecdotes.

<sup>11</sup> Mary K. Woodworth, *Notes & Queries*, 215 (n.s. 17) (1970), 312-13.

<sup>12</sup> In commenting on Blake's water-color drawing of "Fiery Pegasus," however, Robert Essick says that this "emblem of inspiration . . . must be organized by a more restrained vision. The reins will become the bound and outward circumference of creative energy without destroying it" ("Preludium: Meditations on a Fiery Pegasus," in *Blake in His Time*, ed. Essick and Donald Pearce [Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1978], pp. 9-10). I'm not so sure of that. Prince Hal's vaulting into the saddle, "turning and winding" Pegasus, and "witch[ing] the world with noble horsemanship"--the passage from *Henry IV, Part I* that Blake is illustrating--seems hardly an appropriate paradigm of the prophetic poet; more like Pope's *Essay on Criticism*. Is this why Blake does not have the flying poet-prophet (?) bridle Pegasus at all but has him fly with (or as) Pegasus?

<sup>13</sup> One might compare this limp rein with the even limper one of the strange phallus-cloud-borne figure atop plate 1 of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (IB, 129), where the rein is attached, appropriately, to the "V" of "Visions," the other vertical of the "V" terminating in a serpentine prophetic trumpet.

<sup>14</sup> In the cancelled variant of this plate (IB, 392) that curlicue is absent.



<sup>15</sup> *IB*, 139. The bridled swan, like Essick's potentially (or necessarily) bridled Pegasus, has its counterpart in the Gray titlepage, which may, then, be a satiric rather than complimentary portrait. In fact, the poet of the title-page may be seen as an idealized portrait of Blake himself (the Gray of plate 2 is at least reminiscent of Gray's profile, and in any case is most unlike the face of the "Genius"). Tayler, in *Blake's Illustrations to . . . Gray*, takes no note of the differences but does certify plate 2 as "strikingly similar to Gray's as it had appeared in the Basire engraving done while Blake was Basire's apprentice, and also to Blake's later pencil sketch, 'The poet, Gray'" (p. 22). My suggestion is lent credence by the final plate of the series, "Gray himself, guided by his visionary illustrator," as Tayler puts it (p. 146). Here Gray and Blake look alike.

<sup>16</sup> *IB*, 155. In Ovid as elsewhere Venus's chariot is drawn by winged swans (*Metamorphoses*, X), making an association of serpent, rose, and swan in Blake at least tantalizing. In Edward A. Armstrong's *The Folklore of Birds* (New York: Dover, 1970; orig. ed. 1958), there is an engraving (after an unidentified Roman work) of Apollo in a swan-drawn chariot (p. 51) and one of a vase or wine-jar design of Adonis and Aphrodite riding in a chariot drawn by two swans (p. 45). For other less-than-sanguine readings of *America* see Robert E. Simmons, "Unraveling: The Symmetry of Fear"; Michael J. Tolley, "Europe: 'to those ychain'd in sleep'"; and Erdman's longer version of his *IB* commentary, "America: New Expanses"—all in *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatis*, ed. Erdman and John E. Grant (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970). The latest "pessimistic" reading of *America* is Minna Dosek's "William Blake's *America*: The Story of a Revolution Betrayed," *Blake Studies*, 8 (1979), 167-186.

<sup>17</sup> In *IB* Erdman indexes a number of other possible swans in the *Songs*, *The Marriage*, and *Milton*, some of these, at least, suggesting a confusion in his mind (or eye) between his bird of paradise (the imagination, often accompanying the birds of the five senses) and swans. Perhaps Blake's lack of discrimination, or etched definition, here is intentional? In any case, it is probably safe to say that flying swans are "better" than floating ones.

<sup>18</sup> Bindman, *Blake as an Artist*, p. 182. Erdman mentions Cygnus also, gingerly; see *IB*, 290. Yeats predictably invokes "Leda-Swan" (*The Works of William Blake*, ed. Yeats and E. J. Ellis [London: Quaritch, 1893], II, 357).

<sup>19</sup> *IB*, 291. Erdman's yoking of swan and eagle, albeit qualified by his reference to the serpent, interestingly parallels Gray's "confusion" of Pindar as swan and eagle (see my note 8).

<sup>20</sup> It would be nice, if perhaps foolish (though his detailed recall of his own past work is astonishing), to think that Blake here remembered a part of the "Phebus" passage in *An Island in the Moon*: ". . . in short every art & science adorn'd him [Apollo] as beads around his neck" (E 442). Is it possible that Blake knew any of the myths of swan-maidens, which appear all over Europe and in Ireland (not, so far as I know, in England), and which involve, among other characteristics in common, a magical necklace as not merely a talisman of swan-womanhood but the agency of the transformation? See Anna Louise Frey, *The*

*Swan-Knight Legend*, in *Contributions to Education Published under the Direction of George Peabody College for Teachers*, No. 103 (Nashville, 1931). Ripa has an interesting Indian with head-dress and beads in his "America" emblem (*Baroque and Rococo Pictorial Imagery*, ed. Edward A. Maser [New York: Dover, 1971], No. 105). In any case, Aradobo and Obtuse Angle ignorantly confuse Phebus and Pharaoh, and if Mrs. Sigtagatist chides them all for "making use of the names in the Bible" (E 443), Blake did not hesitate to put the classical sun-god in the Bible and, in the true Christian tradition, Christianize him into Jesus Christ, the imagination, the archetypal Artist.

<sup>21</sup> William Blake: *His Philosophy and Symbols*, p. 469; Ellis and Yeats, II, 357. In his admirable *Blake's Composite Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), W. J. T. Mitchell argues a similar opposition between the two figures, the "prophetic swan-woman versus the fashionable goldfish-woman" (p. 200), part of a pattern he sees throughout *Jerusalem* of contrasting female images, one "the naked, sexually liberated guide . . . who leads humanity to the realm of imagination and forgiveness . . . and the heavily clothed Vala-sibyl who keeps her subjects' minds . . . on mundane matters" (p. 199). Mitchell seems to have in mind Blake's goldfish in his designs to Gray, and it is certainly true that plate 4 of "Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat" includes two figures reminiscent at least of the swimmer-flyer of *Jerusalem* II. I see less thematic and iconic connection here, though, than in Gray's lines on the "Theban Eagle" Pindar in "The Progress of Poesy" where he "sails" with "supreme dominion / Thro' the azure deep of air." In any case, given the entire text and design, I cannot regard the two figures in *Jerusalem* II as opposed to each other.

<sup>22</sup> Blake as an Artist, p. 182.

<sup>23</sup> Raine, II, 306.

<sup>24</sup> E 267. Such sentiments are found in Blake as early as *King Edward the Third*; see especially its sixth scene (E 428-30). We should also recall his condemnation of Jupiter as "the enemy of conjugal love . . . an iron-hearted tyrant, the ruiner of ancient Greece," a "spectrous Fiend," and "the ruin of my labours" (letter to Hayley, 23 October 1804, E 702); also *The Laocöon* plate and the half-dozen references in his works to the "Gods of Priam."

<sup>25</sup> Clements, "Iconography . . .," p. 782. According to A. and B. Rees's *Celtic Heritage* (1961), "swan" was frequently used in both Irish and Greek literature as a metaphor for "girl" (noted in the very beautiful book, *The Swans*, ed. Peter Scott [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972], p. 155; see also the entire essay, "The Swan in Mythology and Art" by Mary Evans and Andrew Dawnay, included in this book).

<sup>26</sup> "Blake's 'I Saw a Chapel All of Gold,'" *Colby Library Quarterly*, 15 (1979), 37-47.

<sup>27</sup> LI. 603-11. Ovid has the waters of Hebrus receive Orpheus' dismembered head and lyre and, as both floated down midstream, "The lyre uttered a plaintive melody and the lifeless tongue made a piteous murmur" (*The "Metamorphoses" of Ovid*, trans. Mary M. Innes [Baltimore: Penguin, 1955], Book XI, p. 247).