

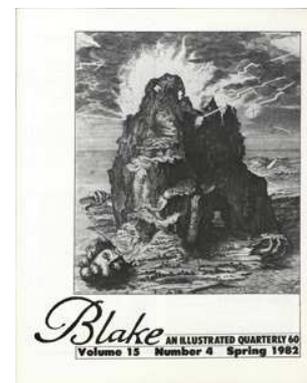
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M I N U T E
P A R T I C U L A R

Blake and the Novelists

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MINUTE PARTICULARS

BLAKE AND THE NOVELISTS

Christopher Heppner

A recurring fascination in the reading of Blake is to wonder how some of his statements and exhortations would feel if lived out in a real life--one's own, for example. Many of the novelists who have used Blake have explored this question, from a variety of perspectives. Joyce Cary in *The Horse's Mouth* gave us one version of the artist as hero, living out his own interpretation of Blake. Colin Wilson's *The Glass Cage* made its hero a Blake critic, but an oddly reclusive one, who appears a little ambivalent in his lived responses to the poet, and is now writing about Whitehead.

Both these novels are well known, but readers of Blake may not know the next two novels, which sparked this note. The first is R. F. Nelson's *Blake's Progress* (Toronto: Laser Books, 1975), which starts as a rather engaging biography of Blake, beginning with his marriage. It reveals that Kate remained a virgin for many years, was responsible for most of Blake's successful commercial engravings, and was generally invaluable. It also tells us that Blake's poetry is not really poetic fiction at all, but that the prophecies are full of names and images "taken from William's adventures as a time-voyageur through the alternate worlds, used to comment on the current political and social scene" (pp. 108-09). The book is fun, up to a point, but very literal at heart; Blake becomes a hero, but at the expense of his poetry, which becomes simply a fancy kind of space travel reporting.

The second book is very different. It is by a writer often labeled as a writer of science fiction, but in this case he bypasses science and technology completely. J. G. Ballard's *The Unlimited Dream Company* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979) is a tale about a young man called, simply, Blake. He is a not very successful creature of the twentieth century, and no explicit attempt is made to relate him to our William, except the name--and the story. One might begin a description by suggesting that it explores what it would be like to experience some of Blake's central metaphors, or that it is a kind of narrative version of "Auguries of Innocence" and "To my Friend Butts I write." In its progress, it almost convinces the reader that "vices in this world may well be metaphors for virtues in the next," offers vivid intuitions of what the vortices described in Plate 15 of *Milton* might feel like, and puts into narrative play Blake's musings about identity and identification.

By omitting all reference to Blake's life and writings, Ballard has written a *tour de force* that in some ways gets closer to the heart of Blake's vision than the more explicitly Blakean novels. [My thanks to Roberto Cucci and Barbara Heppner for drawing my attention to the last two novels.]

ANOTHER SOURCE FOR BLAKE'S ORC

Randel Helms

William Blake derived the name and characteristics of his figure Orc from a variety of sources, combining them to produce the various aspects of the character in such poems as *America*, *The Four Zoas* and *The Song of Los*. The hellish aspects of Orc probably come from the Latin *Orcus*, the abode of the dead in Roman mythology and an alternate name for Dis, the god of the underworld. In *Tiri-el*, Ijim describes Tiri-el's house, after his sons have expelled him, as "dark as vacant Orcus."¹ The libidinous aspect of Orc may well come, as David Erdman has suggested, from the Greek ὄρχις, "testicles."² "Orcs," from the Latin *orca*, "whale," appear in *Paradise Lost*, a poem much read by Blake, and in *America* Orc appears symbolically as "sometimes a whale."³ Finally, in Hoole's version of *Orlando Furioso*, for which Blake prepared an engraving in 1783, the poet would have noted that "the word *orca* . . . is applied to any monster or creature of the imagination [and] occurs in Milton."⁴ But Orc also appears as a fiery figure in association with Mount Atlas; these aspects of the figure derive from Jacob Bryant's *New System, Or, an Analysis of Ancient Mythology* (first published in 1774), which Blake as a young apprentice may have had a hand in illustrating.⁵ We know that the poet thought highly of the work, as his remark in the *Descriptive Catalogue* makes clear: "The antiquities of every Nation under Heaven, is no less sacred than that of the Jews. They are the same thing, as Jacob Bryant and all antiquaries have proved."⁶

In Bryant's chapter entitled "Of Ancient Worship, and of Etymological Truths Thence Deducible," Blake would have found the theory that the Hercynian Forest in Germany gets its name from the Greek δρυμὸς ὀρχύνιος, "the forest of Orcun."⁷ Bryant goes on to note that at the edge of this forest stands a mountain, the name of which, Pyrene, "signifies a fountain of fire," because the "mountain had once flamed. . . . The country therefore and the forest may have been called Orcunian upon this account. For as the worship of the Sun, the Deity of fire, prevailed greatly at places of this nature, I make no doubt Hercynia, which Ptolemy expresses ὀρχυνία, was so named from Or-cun, the God of that element."⁸ Bryant goes on to theorize that one of the "Puratheia, or open temples, for the celebration of the rites of fire," may have stood on Mount Atlas: "This Atlas (of which I have been speaking) is a mountain with a cavity, and of a tolerable height, which the natives esteem both as a temple, and a