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Pamela Dunbar, William Blake's Illustrations to
the Poetry of Milton

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Pamela Dunbar. *William Blake's Illustrations to the Poetry of Milton*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980. xvi + 207 pp., 92 illus. \$59.00.
Reviewed by Bette Charlene Werner

Blake's *Ancient of Days* displays the paradox of creativity. The creator's tools inscribe form where there was once only chaos and void. But every decision made is a limit set. So with the writing of books, as Blake observed in his *Memorable Fancy* of the printing house in hell. Each choice a writer makes contributes form by removing possibilities. In Pamela Dunbar's study *William Blake's Illustrations to the Poetry of Milton*, two decisions and two consequent salient features of the book—its comprehensive nature and its plate-by-plate format—in large part account for both success and failure.

The author's attempt to compile all possibly relevant information in her commentary is advantageous to the reader using the book for reference. Introductory treatments for each of the series of illustrations include facts of provenance, discussion of dating, identification of themes, and preliminary suggestions about Blake's attitude toward Milton's text. The commentary for the individual plates provides, in addition, some precise physical description along with discussion of composition and design. Related works by Blake, his probable sources, and contemporary analogues are noted. The origins for the illustrations in Milton's text are cited. Relatively full mention is also made of passages in Blake's poetry that may touch upon Milton's concerns, echo his language, use similar imagery, or in some manner match the ambience of the designs. Since the compilation of information makes this book useful as a general first source, it is unfortunate that its select bibliography is so slim. Notably absent is any mention of significant interpretive pieces by John Karl Franson, Karl Kiralis, and, at the time of Dunbar's publication, five articles by Stephen Behrendt. Still, the book's broad sweep through its subject does bring together a rich potpourri, a wealth of detail, and more than a few provocative insights.

It picks up clutter as well. The attempt to be complete in the discussion of each separate plate produces redundancy and a great deal of internal inconsistency. The

author painstakingly observes, for instance, each and every occurrence of the spread-armed Jupiter Pluvius motif as if it were a new discovery. If one illustration in some way resembles another, the reader may count on being told that, twice. Perhaps here the advantage of completeness to a reader looking up one design may outweigh the stylistic annoyance to another who is pursuing the entire text, but the author's habit of first adopting an interpretive stance for one series of illustrations and then changing the premises when she comes to discuss another series is less defensible.

For instance, Dunbar explains *Il Penseroso* 3, *The Spirit of Plato*, as Blake's aspersion against the malign influence of Plato on Milton, but her reading of the *Paradise Regained* series depends upon Blake's holding an approbatory view of Milton's Platonism. In discussing *Paradise Lost* 1, *Satan Rousing his Legions*, Dunbar decides that Satan is given a negative characterization because of his association with the rocky landscape of hell. Her interpretation is based on connections between the design and the solidified, stony, constricted world of the fallen Urizen, Blake's poetry being taken as the proper reference point for the interpretation. In the *Paradise Regained* series it is Christ who is firmly planted in a rocky landscape. Here Dunbar ignores the deprecatory possibilities of the setting for Blake and reads the connection as a positive one. Christ is associated with the steadfastness of rock in *Paradise Regained*, and here the interpreter makes Milton's poetry, not Blake's, the reference point. Such inconsistencies occur not only between series but within them. For example, Dunbar claims that Christ's pointing heavenward in *Paradise Regained* 2, *The Temptation of Bread*, indicates simply his concern with spiritual values, ignoring any subversive implication in that the gesture is made with his left hand. However, she emphatically invokes left-right symbolism in *Paradise Regained* 7, *The Temptation of the Kingdoms*, when she interprets a similar gesture by Satan as indicative of his reversal of proper values.

The method of treating each separate design as a discrete entity results, then, in inconsistencies and uncertainties in understanding the whole of Blake's Milton criticism. The lack of a consistent interpretive stance is not simply a want of cohesiveness or finished juncture. It marks a failure of decision that one looks for in literary criticism, to which one turns, not just for creative possibilities, but for clarity.

Complementing Dunbar's decision to read each design independently is her decision to treat all variants of a design together. The method has again the advantage of comprehensiveness in that all versions of a design are touched upon during one primary discussion. The approach tends to emphasize similarities, while blurring distinctions between illustrations that exist in multiple series, often widely separated in time and varying significantly in tone—two series of illustrations for *Comus*

(c. 1801, and c. 1815), two for the Nativity Ode (1809, and c. 1815), and two full series and a partial third for *Paradise Lost* (1807, 1808, and 1822).

The disadvantages of the composite view are most apparent in Dunbar's discussion of the *Comus* designs, where one of her own best insights is obscured in the interest of explanations that are stretched to cover two highly differentiated visual interpretations. In her introductory commentary Dunbar observes that while the earlier, Huntington series emphasizes an account of adolescent sexuality, the Boston version highlights the theme of Neoplatonic incarnation in Milton's masque. The insight is clearly valid, an inference substantiated by reference to the changed characterizations of both the Lady and *Comus*. Comparing the Huntington and Boston versions of *Comus* 1, 5, and 6, one observes that the Lady's gestures change from fearful, distraught, and morbidly self-defensive to open, relaxed, and self-assured. Comparing the characterization of *Comus* in the same designs, one observes that the antagonist is transformed from a clumsy, flatfooted oaf into a lithe and energetic tempter. If left-right symbolism is observed, one may note that the malevolent clod with his left foot planted firmly forward in the first version of *Comus* 6 becomes an energetic devil springing forward with his right in the later version of the design. Such fundamental changes, along with the movement away from the ponderous, dark coloration to a lighthanded watercolor touch in the later series and the introduction of the redemptive rainbow in the revised version of *Comus* 7, clearly indicate that Blake's second interpretation of Milton's masque was a more approving view. Since it is the Neoplatonic myth rather than the parable of virginity preserved with which Blake would have found favor, it appears that his method in the second interpretation, as in other series with multiple versions, is to break through the encrustation of moralizing error, to delve deeper, and to display more clearly in a final vision the underlying truth in Milton's poetry. The insight is suppressed in Dunbar's interpretation by the confines of her approach, that blends both versions into a blurred composite reading.

In the preliminaries to her *Paradise Lost* chapter, Dunbar presents her strongest Blakean argument. She sees Blake's designs for Milton's epic as revisionary, as criticism wrenching free into creation. She proposes that the series be read in the manner S. Foster Damon has read the Job series—as an inner drama, with Satan as Adam's spectre and the serpent as a further objectification of the hardened, negative qualities of fallen man. The thesis is admirably introduced in the discussion of *Paradise Lost* 1, *Satan Rousing his Legions*, where a doleful Satan, embodying extreme self-centeredness and immense despair, is displayed in a gloomy setting that evokes in Blake's terms the rocky congealings of self-love

and the livid, self-consuming fires of a mental hell of repression. Dunbar sees the image as a proleptic representation of man in the fallen world. The notion of an inner drama also provides Dunbar with an imaginative perspective upon *Paradise Lost* 4, *Satan Spying on Adam and Eve*. This design pictures Satan as a stripling cherub caught in the serpent's coils, hovering above the bower of Adam and Eve. Blake has devised for the scene an image of self-division, with the troubled cherub's countenance and the guileful serpent's glance suggesting that the devil is of two minds with regard to disturbing paradisaic bliss—wracked by remorse, but impelled by envy's sting. Dunbar's reading expands upon the theme of division by suggesting that Satan's sadness is explained by the fact that Adam is Satan's own fundamental self. From this perspective, the design as a whole becomes a symbolic representation of divisiveness and mental torment. The original androgynous man is already divided into the male and female. Further, Satan as Adam's alter ego is at odds with his serpent selfhood. Dunbar also employs the conception of *Paradise Lost* as psychodrama in her reading of the series' final plate. In describing Blake's version of *The Expulsion*, she observes that it is the serpent selfhood that leads Adam into the deadly sleep of the fallen world.

Unfortunately, however, the inner drama is lost sight of in Dunbar's commentaries for other designs of the series and is noticeably missing from what one might expect to be its central scene, the temptation. In discussing *Paradise Lost* 9, *The Fall of Eve*, and Blake's tempera painting *The Temptation of Eve*, Dunbar confines her commentary to remarks about Blake's notions of the sexual division of the primordial man and the depravity of female independence. The earlier thesis is dropped in favor of a new line of commentary. The temptation is interpreted as the appropriation of individuality by separated male and female entities. Dunbar's discussion of *Paradise Lost* 9 demonstrates her proclivity for mentioning analogues without specifying their significance. Citing *Vala*, she observes, "The ravishing of Enion by the Spectre of her principal, Tharmas, is described in terms that may remind us of the Eve-and-Serpent group of *Paradise Lost IX*" (p. 76). The vague connective "may remind us" is allowed to introduce an otherwise unexplained comparison. The surface affinities between the verbal and visual pictures of the ravishing of Enion and the fall of Eve are readily apparent. There may well be deeper connections as well, but Dunbar typically does not pursue such evidence to probe the way Milton influenced Blake's imagination or to discover the implications for understanding either Blake's own poetry or his interpretation of Milton's in the illustrations for his poetry. *William Blake's Illustrations to the Poetry of Milton* succeeds in being a compendium of creative possibilities, a montage of sometimes striking, but fragmented views. It fails to be a coherent piece of literary criticism.