

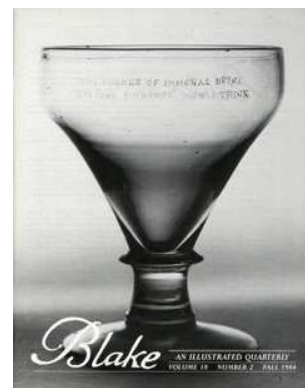
# AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Charu Sheel Singh, *The Chariot of Fire: A Study of William Blake in the Light of Hindu Thought*

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territories. The comparison with Essick is especially interesting, because Essick's book, like Tannenbaum's deals with subjects and materials which many people in many different fields have been concerned with. Essick's book is, however, at once a careful recapitulation of earlier findings and an important, not to say dramatic, advance.

For myself, reading Tannenbaum's first four chapters was most useful for clarifying the current state of Blake studies in the area of biblical tradition—for indicating very clearly what we now know (or think we know), and what has yet to be done. What Blake scholarship still badly needs is an elucidation of the social and institutional networks in which the literary-critical traditions were immersed, in the eighteenth century especially. Tannenbaum takes up some of these matters in his first chapter but the treatment is schematic and only shows that a great deal of original historical scholarship has yet to be done if we are to have anything more than an ideological understanding of Blake's use of his prophetic and typological traditions. When this historical matrix is provided for these biblical and religious traditions, we shall be prepared for a truly monumental synthesis of Erdman's work and Tannenbaum's interests.

The six chapters which concentrate on individual

works are the most important part of this book. Here Tannenbaum offers close readings of the particular poems, and in the process he provides the reader with a wealth of new, particular information about their allusive contexts. Most of this new material is related to the Bible or its exegetical tradition, but Tannenbaum unearths a fair amount of other, equally interesting materials used by Blake out of other traditions. His discussions of *The Song of Los* and *The Book of Los* are especially notable in this respect. Less catholic but even more significant are the (related) chapters on *The Book of Urizen* and *The Book of Ahania*, which will serve as points of departure in Blake studies for some time, I suspect.

One interesting aspect of Tannenbaum's individual readings is that he does not attempt to place these poems in some processive interpretative scheme. No "development" is essayed in the presentation, no suggestion that these poems have to be understood in some significant order of production. But neither are the poems looked at in a purely seriatim fashion. Tannenbaum deals with them in their historical order of composition, but he is not interested in that order as such. Rather, he is concerned to demonstrate how the poems make their special and particular uses of the biblical traditions which Blake incorporated and transformed.

**Charu Sheel Singh. *The Chariot of Fire: A Study of William Blake in the Light of Hindu Thought*. Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Univ. of Salzburg, 1981. iv + 194 pp. \$25.00.**

**Reviewed by Mary V. Jackson**

The best that can be said for this book is that it was too hastily rushed to press. It is a model of botched research offered in support of half-thought-through ideas conveyed in prose that is generally stale and often fuzzy-minded. Added to these are a smug patronizing of almost

anyone who has ever written about Blake or thought about Hindu thought and a pointless peevishness about Anglo-Indian relations. The wonder is that *The Chariot of Fire* was published at all. It is the 104th volume of the *Salzburg Studies in English Literature*, the *Romantic Reassessment*, edited by Dr. James Hogg. Heretofore, the Romantic section has published books like Boleslaw Taborski's *Byron and the Theatre* (1972), Henry R. Beaudry's *The English Theatre and John Keats* (1973) and Warren Stevenson's *The Divine Analogy: A Study of the Creation Motif in Blake and Coleridge* (1972)—works that demonstrate, at the least, reliable scholarship and a respectable level of critical accomplishment. *Chariot* is one of the series' most recent books on Blake, and that is a pity. For the publication of a work like this does nothing whatsoever to enhance Blake criticism in general, let alone the troublous matters of Blake's art and belief in relation to certain mystical traditions. It is difficult enough to keep one's critical footing as one tracks Blake's poetry through snow (or sand), without having to do so knowing that something perilously close to a travesty of such legitimate efforts is around. Prof. Singh is right when he tells us that Blake's indebtedness to Hinduism is significant and has been somewhat neglected; but we'd all have been better off had it remained so a bit longer.

The Foreword by Prof. P.S. Sastri sets a tone that



Singh maintains, and it is anything but the impartial spirit of investigation we are accustomed to expect from books that represent themselves as examples of literary scholarship and criticism. We are told that *The Chariot of Fire* offers an explication of aspects of Hindu thought in Blake, which is "possible only to an Indian scholar who knows his Sanskrit and the Scriptures of ancient India" and has "delted deep into the springs of Blake's poetry" (p. i). Blake's art is declared, moreover, to have been persistently viewed by critics "through the insular binoculars of the British Isles alone," an ill that *Chariot* will correct (pp. i-ii). A knowledge of Sanskrit might have enhanced the study in unforeseen ways, and certainly a true competency in the Scriptures, at least those available before 1826, is necessary. The book contains little evidence of either, however, unless we count the undigested lumps of arcane terminology that too frequently substitute for clear, thoughtful exposition.

Furthermore, the early chapters are often graceless and carping because of the inappropriate sense of grievance that haunts them. It is as though the author could not tear his attention from remembered wrongs of British colonialism and its underlying racism—real and important issues, but not constructively aired here. Apropos of nothing, for example, comes this quotation from Trevelyan's *English Social History*: "Never was an empire won at smaller cost than was ours in Canada and India" (p. 2). A little further on, we are peevishly informed that "no real attempts were made by the Europeans to study Indian culture in its full outgrowth although they were not ignorant of a culture 'fully conscious of its own antiquity'" (p. 5). Perhaps not, but the large number of studies and translations that Singh himself catalogues suggests there was some interest in some aspects of that culture.

In any case, of what value is it for this book to belabor European sins of neglect, eighteenth or twentieth century, when—as the author himself admits—the efforts of the "indologists employed in the East India Company were largely reliable," except where they were forced to depend upon corrupt contemporary texts? Even though Singh twice commends these pioneers for their "catholicity and openmindedness" (pp. 15, 17), he too easily lapses into complaint that they did not do enough or that their efforts did not dent the general European ignorance and prejudice. Of course they were not successful in wiping out that prejudice with the facts they lovingly collected, though that was the openly proclaimed intention of several of them; but they cannot reasonably be blamed for that. Furthermore, it has been my experience that modern scholarship has had occasion, all things considered, to alter relatively little of their work. After much study, a garbled passage is clarified, or a wrongly rendered word here or image there corrected—but in the main those early translations are

rather astonishingly sound. All of which argues for approaching them, at least, with a sense of respect and mild gratitude.

The book's grievances and biases would not be worth considering at all, however, if they were not partly responsible for Singh's failure to make a contribution to our understanding of Blake's sources and still unclear views on a number of important issues. Instead, we too often find ourselves witnesses to a covert contest between the author and those commentators who insist on viewing Blake through "insular binoculars" or, even more absurd, to a contest between Hindu and other religious sources. *Chariot* contains many examples of the unseemly aura of the latter rivalry, as Singh seems bent on showing how Hinduism "wins out" over all other ancient religions as the "first" if not the "sole" source in a contest for points for an image or concept—the mundane egg, Albion, the zoas, symbolic trees, serpents, Blake's three classes of men, and so on (pp. 22, 23–24, 27–28, 77–80, 156, 167). All other matters aside, I hardly think that the idea that the ancient Egyptian and Greek religions were influenced by elements of Hinduism will take the scholarly community by surprise. Of course, that is not to say that knowing who or what influenced Blake is not important. It is, but the value lies in the ability of such knowledge to enrich our understanding of Blake's ideas and stimulate a more sensitive appreciation of the artistry of his poems. Surely, the only appropriate contest is between fact and error, good judgment and poor, great aesthetic discernment and little—in other words, between the scholar and his materials as he wrestles to form an illuminating symmetry while preserving a just understanding of all the particulars it encompasses.

We need cite only a few examples of Singh's treatment of Blake criticism. David Erdman is taken to task for misreading and misunderstanding the ideals of the *Gita* in Singh's remarkable passage (pp. 45–46) that misquotes *Prophet against Empire* in such a way as to suggest clearly that the exact words "the doors of perception" were taken from Charles Wilkins' *Bhagvat-Geeta* (1785) and then cavalierly dismisses as bias Erdman's point that *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* reverses the values of the *Gita*. The phrase from Wilkins' translation is "all the doors of his faculties," close enough to need no help. And the *Geeta* quite unequivocally states that *desire* is "the inveterate foe" and directs man to find happiness by renouncing *all forms of it*, with Krishna's help, the precise opposite of Blake's elevation of desire as "the comforter" in *The Marriage*, as Erdman argues. Singh might have made a strong case for the similarity of Blake's later ideas to the *Gita*, had he acknowledged that the early attitudes are not entirely the same as those in *Milton* or *Jerusalem*. But he seldom allows for the evolution of concepts or the flexibilities and ambiguities



that in fact exist in the poetry. His understanding of what Blake says and how he says it is elementary, even simplistic.

Among the critics Singh frequently finds himself in charity with are S. Foster Damon and Northrop Frye, both of whom are frequently cited for extremely minor or commonplace matters as well as for significant ones. What soon becomes clear is that Singh is more interested in culling their works to extrapolate proofs to support his case for Hindu dominance than in understanding their comments on the diversity of Blake's sources and the complexity of his creative transformations of them. Of Damon's discussions regarding the confluence of sources that shaped Blake's concept of the zoas, the only two elements Singh mentions are Buddhist and Hindu, the latter being, as it turns out, the more important (pp. 69-70, 86-87, 167, 171). And out of the complex amalgam of concepts, analogues and ironic transformations that Frye describes in one portion of his commentary on the three classes of men, all that is here cited is his observation that the *Gita's* three gunas may also have influenced Blake. Having brushed aside all the obvious Christian parallels, Singh proceeds to equate the classes and the gunas. He never asks why they aren't called by the gunas' names, nor what Blake's reversal of puritan terms and values may signify, nor whether Blake might have viewed with similar ironic shrewdness the politics of spiritualism in the gunas as castes. Why is Satan Elect, and not *sattva* (wisdom, the highest) or even *tamas* (the lowest, most despised guna)? "Satan is called elect, because he is in actual control of the mundane world. He rules those who accept established religions, follow the passive angels of goodness described [in *The Marriage*]" (p. 94).

Perhaps even more surprising is Singh's neglect of Kathleen Raine's *Blake and Tradition*, which he infrequently mentions. Even though it explores with some care and no little insight many of the very issues touched on in *Chariot*, Raine's work seems to have made no impression on Singh's thinking. If it had, a good deal of the parochialism in this book might have been eradicated. However irritating one may consider her recent pronouncements that melt Blake down from prophetic poet and painter to medium, *Blake and Tradition* contains some perceptive discussions of Blake's vision in relation to gnosticism, neoplatonism, occult literature and Hindu thought, analyses distinguished by their persuasiveness, critical tact and careful documentation. Singh would have done well to have studied them, both for the quality of their arguments and the model they offer of the "rules of evidence" that must obtain for discussions of analogous ideas and literary influence, matters he does not seem to understand. Here, the existence alone of a reference to the sun or veils or trees—no matter what the context, let alone the texture of language—constitutes

not a mere similarity but an indisputable borrowing from Hindu texts.

We are told, for example, "the creation myth . . . sees the world as having emanated from the body of the giant god who is also man." Although he does not, at this point (p. 22), say that the Hindu Brahma is the source for Blake's Albion, Singh cites it as his sole analogy. What he fails to mention are the numerous versions of the symbol Blake would have known from Taylor's Orphic hymns, from Jacob Boehme and Robert Fludd (both of whose works include engravings of it) and many other sources, cosmic man having been a common idea throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance. (Some reproductions of engravings illustrating this idea would have been available to the author in *Blake and Tradition*.) When the subject recurs in *Chariot*, however, Singh takes the equation of Albion as Brahma as a given, blithely reminding us of his earlier "proofs" (pp. 78ff.). Likewise, he is at great pains to seize, as it were, Blake's mundane egg from the clutches (as *the* source) of Orphic or any other cosmogony. He admits the others contain such an idea but insists (after a tangled passage that has Jacob Bryant and Madame Blavatsky reading Blake and trying to show him or us the error of other interpretations) that the Hindu mundane egg is closest to Blake's symbol (pp. 23-24, and especially 109-10). In fact, the phrase from *Laws of Manu* is not "mundane" or even world but "golden egg."

In a similar vein are the Fall as "imprisonment of the spirit"; fallen life as "dream and sleep"; "the recurring image of the spider's web"; "the symbolism of the numbers three and nine," of nets, "woof, veil, loom and wheel" (pp. 25-26, 27-28, 37, 77, 78-80, 156)—all are traced to Hindu sources, including the *Upanishads* which were not published in Blake's time. Halhed completed a partial translation, but there is nothing to indicate Blake ever saw it. Yet they are frequently quoted as a source, sometimes from editions that are not clearly identified in the notes or bibliography. Are there serpents to be found in Blake's poems? "Crishna . . . slew a terrible serpent" (pp. 80-81); and this, we are invited to see, is their source as well as the prototype for Blake's Orc. Or again, Blake is said to owe his image of the sun in *Poetical Sketches* to Vedic hymns. This we know because both mention the sun and depict it as "a natural cycle." Therefore, he asserts, after some razzledazzle to settle any problems of *chronology*, "Blake derived his idea of the natural cycle and the sun from the *Vedic* hymns" (pp. 25-26).

This ill-advised attempt to lay to the credit of the *Rig Veda* both the images and original inspiration for poems from *Poetical Sketches* leads to one of the more egregious errors in the book. It is necessary to quote:

Even the earliest poems of William Blake, published in the volume *Poetical Sketches* (1783), manifest diverse influences includ-



ing something akin to the sensibility of the ancient Hindu poetry. The "Miscellaneous Poems," with which the volume opens, contains poems on the four seasons, "The Evening Star" [*sic*], "The Morning" [*sic*], and a number of songs which can be placed in the line of ancient Hindu poetry, particularly of the *Vedic* age. While it is true that Blake's poems on the seasons may have been stimulated by Spenser and James Thompson [*sic*], it is equally true that he may have fused in them some of his indological readings . . . The sun is imaged, as in the *Vedic* hymns, to be riding a chariot drawn by horses. Consider the following lines from "To Summer" for evoking the image of the sun:

O thou, who passest thro' our vallies in  
Thy strength, curb thy fierce steeds, allay the heat  
That flames from their large nostrils!

And now consider these lines from the *Rig Veda*:

Thy seven ruddy mares bear on thy rushing car.  
With these, thy self-yoked steeds, . . .  
Onward thou dost advance.

The idea of the sun riding a chariot drawn by horses is common both to the Hindu and the Greek traditions, and Blake may have derived his image from either. What is significant about Blake's poems . . . is his depiction in them of a natural cycle. This natural cycle occurs in the "Purush Sukta" of the *Rig Veda*, where gods performed the sacrifice of the Primal Man "with Purusha as the oblation," and "the spring was its butter, the summer its fuel, and the autumn its (accompanying) offering." Michael Davis thinks that Blake wrote his poems to the seasons after he had composed the rest of [PS]. . . . If this is true, then it is very likely that Blake derived his idea of the natural cycle and of the sun from the *Vedic* hymns. (pp. 25-26)

So much for the quality of thought and language one finds throughout *Chariot*.

Having secured a toehold, Singh proceeds to direct our attention to lines from the *Rig Veda* which he thinks are the source of "How sweet I roam'd":

But closely by the amorous Sun  
Pursued and vanquished in the race,  
Thou soon art locked in his embrace,  
And with him blendest into one. (p. 27)

This, he argues, inspired

He caught me in his silken net,  
And shut me in his golden cage.

Similarly, the opening of "To Morning"—"O holy virgin! clad in purest white,/Unlock heav'n's golden gates, and issue forth;"—is traced to a hymn to *Ushas* in the *Rig Veda*:

Hail, ruddy Ushas, golden goddess, borne  
Upon thy shining car, thou comest like  
A lovely maiden by her mother decked. . . . (p. 28)

And to yet another hymn to *Ushas* or dawn we owe the lines from "My silks and fine array" which contain the couplet, "His breast is love's all worship'd tomb,/Where all love's pilgrims come." The following is offered as its source:

Fair Ushas, though through years untold  
Thou hast lived on, yet thou art born

Anew on each succeeding morn,  
And so thou art both young and old

Their round our generations run;  
The old depart, and in their place  
Springs ever up a younger race,  
While thou, immortal, lookest on. (p. 29)

One needs an ear of petrified wood to credit the notion that these forced notes and banal sounds inspired Blake's often superb little poems. But that is not the worst of it. Who after all are these eighteenth-century poets who translated the *Rig Veda*? The footnotes merely cite "W.J. Wilkins, *Hindu Mythology* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 1978)" as the source for all the quotations. The book is not listed in the bibliography, a common omission even for works heavily relied upon. A bit of digging unearthed the original source: *Hindu Mythology: Vedic and Purāṇic*. W.J. Wilkins, of the London Missionary Society, Calcutta. Illustrated. Calcutta. . . . Bombay. . . . London: W. Thacker & Co. . . . 1882.

The passage said to have influenced "To Summer" was taken by Wilkins from Sir Monier-Williams' *Indian Wisdom* (London, 1875). The literary source for "How sweet I roam'd" came from John Muir's *Original Sanskrit Texts*, 5 vols. (London, 1858-60). The lines which supposedly inspired "To Morning" came from yet another hymn in Monier-Williams' work and that for "My silks and fine array" from a second translation in Muir's *Texts*. In his introduction, Wilkins clearly cites the two orientalists' works along with nine others as sources for his abridged guide to Hindu concepts and scriptures. Singh apparently used the modern reprint of the book, but it is nonetheless the height of carelessness not to have noticed that his presumed sources belonged to the latter part of the century after *Poetical Sketches*.

Unfortunately, it will not be surprising after a mistake of this magnitude that there are other lapses in precision in the book in primary and secondary sources. Among the former it is common to find a sketchy bit of text containing elements like "rebel angels," a "fall" or angry god, the terminology of eighteenth-century British translators, treated as though it had no parallels either in literature or the world's religions and cited as the source for *The Four Zoas* or as the plot or character profile for *Milton* and "Milton" or *Jerusalem* (pp. 52, 53, 64, 67, 83-85, 94, 99, 110, etc.). And of course, extreme dissimilarities, not to say clashes, in tone or values are never considered.

Among the secondary sources, two quite useful books are treated rather carelessly: Charles N.E. Eliot, *Hinduism and Buddhism, An Historical Sketch*, 3 vols. (London, 1921; reprinted, 1954), and P.J. Marshall, *British Discovery of Hinduism* (Cambridge, 1970). This is an anthology of judiciously selected excerpts from the works of the early Indologists, with scholarly introduction, notes and commentary. Although both are relied



upon extensively, neither is included in the bibliography and we are not informed that the 1954 book is a reprint. Marshall's texts are sometimes excerpted in *Chariot* so as to omit all signs of the social and political implications of spiritual order that bulk so large in many of the sacred works. Frequently these are exactly the sort of data that led Blake to reject and attack spiritual perversities in *The Marriage* and in *Milton*, for example. Not unrelated to that is the fact that Singh seems to have understood or benefitted little from Eliot's rich analyses of the dynamic of social, political and spiritual interests that molded Hinduism. He usually handles the text very superficially and carelessly, on one occasion making Eliot state the precise opposite of what he actually says. As Singh quotes him, "asceticism, celibacy or meditation formed part of its (Egypt's)[sic] older religious life. . . ."

He leaves out the crucial first part of Eliot's clause, "but it does not appear that . . ." (p. 173).

It would be easy but pointless to amass still more details to demonstrate the fallacies in Singh's discussions of Blake and his use or distortion of intrinsically reliable scholarly works. Anyone wishing to pursue such matters should read the book. To my mind all of these are secondary in significance for the reason that they stem from his original false step: this study is not a search for the truth or a truth or even the facts, but an effort to vindicate one "faction" and bury its "opponents." As such, it was doomed to fail. In this case, the opposition that would indeed have been true friendship should have come from Singh's editors at *Salzburg Studies*. It did not. Therefore, there is still a need for an inquiry into William Blake's vision and art in the light of Hindu thought.

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