

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

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

Urizen and Orc, Cortés and Guatimozin: Mexican History and The Four Zoas VII

Martin Bidney

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 23, Issue 4, Spring 1990, pp. 195-198



MINUTE PARTICULAR

Urizen and Orc, Cortés and Guatimozin: Mexican History and *The Four Zoas* VII

Martin Bidney

"Am I now reposing on a bed of flowers?"¹

(*Guatimozin, defying the tortures imposed by Cortés*)

"Sure thou art bath'd in rivers of delight on verdant fields"²

(*Urizen, mocking the tortures endured by Orc*)

A surprising number of detailed verbal parallels and analogous images makes it likely that in composing Night VII of *The Four Zoas* Blake was building in part on the episode of Cortés' torture of Guatimozin (Montezuma's nephew, son-in-law, and eventual successor) in *The History of America* by William Robertson, a work of continuing popularity first published in London in 1777. Similarities in wording and image patterns between the Blake and Robertson works shed light on the Urizen-Orc conflict as well as on the grotesque predicament of Los in his relation to each of the deadlocked contenders. Robertson helps us understand these struggles both from the psychological and political points of view. By doing so, he helps illuminate the dynamics of Blake's mythmaking at a crucial point in the poem's progress since it is in Night VII that the epic's central act of conversion or awakening (Los's recognition and embrace of the Spectre) takes place. The need for such an awakening—as well as Blake's impetus for providing

it—becomes clearer when we understand the Urizen-Orc conflict within the historical and psychological context provided by Robertson's history.

I find no mention in the Blake literature of Cortés or Guatimozin. But the story of Cortés' cruelty and Guatimozin's mocking defiance was well known to other British romantics. In *Peter Bell the Third* Shelley describes Peter's (or Wordsworth's) dullness as sufficient to deaden Guatimozin's pains:

But in his verse, and in his prose,
The essence of his dullness was
Concentred and compressed so close,
'Twould have made Guatimozin doze
On his red gridiron of brass.
(ll. 718-22)³

Donald H. Reiman, whose annotation clarifies this reference, further explains (in a letter to me dated 8 August 1988) that he had first become aware of the Guatimozin story—and had first become interested in seeking its source, which he found in Robertson—after reading an expurgated journal entry (21 October 1838) wherein Mary Shelley complains of being maligned by Jane Williams. Mary writes:

When I first discovered that a trusted friend had acted thus by me, I was nearly destroyed—my health was shaken. I remember thinking of Guatimozin's [sic] bed of torture & with a burst of agonizing tears exclaiming I would prefer that to the unutterable anguish a friend's falsehood engendered!⁴

Reiman adds that Keats knew Robertson's history too.⁵

Blake never mentions Robertson's work, but it was published early enough for him to have used it imaginatively in composing *The Four Zoas*.⁶ Blake's interest in Mexico, expressed as early as the passage in *America* (1793) where Orc sees "In Mexico an Eagle, and a Lion in Peru" (2:13), was stimulated, as Erdman informs us, by Mallet's account of "human sacrifice" practiced in Mexico and Peru as a "harvest rite."⁷ In *America* Blake is thinking about human sacrifices and harvest rites, and

about the tragic confounding of life and death-directed motives in various traditional cultures. He has begun, too, to imagine the psychology of Orc, Spirit of Revolution, in a context shadowed by awareness of (among many other things) the Mexican historical heritage. Later, in *Jerusalem*, Blake will also imagine "Tharmas dash'd on the Rock of the Altars of Victims in Mexico" (J38:70).⁸

The struggle involved in Cortés' seventy-five-day siege of Mexico was, Robertson says, both "more obstinate" and "more equal" than "any between the inhabitants of the Old and New Worlds," a fact owing in no small measure to the "great abilities of Guatimozin," who had acceded to Montezuma's throne after the brief interim reign of the latter's brother. Quetzlavaca had been cut short by the pox (2: 387, 364). Guatimozin's "great abilities" are counterbalanced by the extraordinary shrewdness of Cortés in Robertson's account. When Cortés' own men begin to rebel, his unmasking of a conspiracy reveals Urizenic cunning. Cortés coolly professes ignorance of the conspiratorial activities of all participants except the main organizer; the rest of the plotters, relieved to be exonerated, redouble their zeal in the commander's service to prove their loyalty, and the cynical Cortés meanwhile observes in detail the behavior of each, mentally organizing his observations while he quickly musters his troops for new onslaughts (2: 368-70). The outstanding leadership capabilities of both Cortés and Guatimozin, taken together with the larger impression presented by Robertson that the Spaniard-Aztec conflict was conducted on terms more nearly equal than other such struggles in the western hemisphere, make the parallel with the Urizen-Orc standoff an inviting one since Urizen and Orc are the (co-equal, co-eternal) Zoas whose conflict is "more obstinate" than any in the Blakean psychic world.

But it is specifically in the accounts of Guatimozin's tortures and those of

Orc that the parallels in wording and imagery become precise. Cortés imposes the torment partly to defend himself from disaffection in the ranks when his men feel dismay at the lack of available booty, though Robertson insists that the sadistic deed to which Cortés has recourse "stains the glory of all his great actions" (2: 389). When the Spaniards take possession of all the treasure still remaining for them to capture, the amount of it proves disappointingly small: the "Indian auxiliaries" of the Spaniards have made away with much of the treasure during the siege, and Guatimozin himself, having directed the rest of it to be "thrown into the lake," refuses to divulge its whereabouts (2: 388). So Cortés subjects "the unhappy monarch, together with his chief favourite, to torture" (2: 389) to make them talk. The wording of Robertson's account here seems to have impressed Blake:

Guatimozin bore whatever the refined cruelty of his tormentors could inflict, with the invincible fortitude of an American warrior. His fellow-sufferer, overcome by the violence of the anguish, turned a dejected eye towards his master, which seemed to implore his permission to reveal all that he knew. But the *high spirited* prince, darting on him a look of *authority mingled with scorn*, checked his weakness by asking, "Am I now *reposing* on a bed of flowers?" Overawed by the reproach, the favourite persevered in his dutiful silence, and expired. Cortes, ashamed of a scene so horrid, rescued the royal victim from the hands of *torturers*, and prolonged a life reserved for new indignities and sufferings. (2: 389-90; emphases added)

Fire is not mentioned, but most readers (see the above-quoted Shelley stanza, especially the phrase: "red gridiron of brass") will assume Cortés used fire, a parallel with the fiery torture of Orc: "Yet throw thy limbs these fires abroad that back return upon thee" (FZ 78:33). We also learn that Orc's "awful limbs cast forth red smoke & fire / That Urizen approachd not near but took his seat on a rock / And rangd his books around him brooding Envious over Orc" (FZ 77:17-19). The theme of

envy fits both situations; Urizen envies Orc his invincible fortitude, while Cortés and his men covet Guatimozin's treasure. (The treasure is largely submerged in a lake; note that Orc is punished in a "lake of fire" [FZ 78:28].) As Orc begins to organize a serpent body Urizen, still "envious," watches him "Flame high in pride & laugh to scorn the source of his deceit" (FZ 80:49-50); here we note similarities to Robertson's phrases: "high spirited prince," "authority mingled with scorn."

Urizen's taunting speech to Orc presents still more analogues, in both wording and dramatic situation, to Robertson's account:

Pity for thee movd me to break my dark
& long repose
And to reveal myself before thee in a
form of wisdom
Yet thou dost laugh at all these *tortures*
& this horrible place
Yet throw thy limbs these fires abroad
that back return upon thee
While thou *reposest* throwing rage on
rage feeding thyself
With visions of sweet bliss far other than
this burning clime
Sure thou art bathd in rivers of delight
on *verdant fields*
Walking in joy in bright Expanses
sleeping on bright clouds
With *visions of delight so lovely* that they
urge thy rage
Tenfold with fierce desire to rend thy
chain & howl in fury
And dim oblivion of all woe & desperate
repose
Or is thy joy founded on torment which
others bear for thee
(FZ 78:30-42, emphases added)

Variations on the word "repose," prominent in this passage, are reminiscent of Guatimozin's "Am I now reposing on a bed of flowers?" The "verdant fields," the "visions of delight so lovely," and the image of "sleeping" on something "bright" further suggest a strong Blakean memory of Guatimozin's imagined flowery rest. "Desperate repose" is a particularly nice characterization, quite applicable to Guatimozin's extraordinary attempt at stoic indifference. Even Urizen's claim that "Pity" aroused him to appear

before Orc in a "form of wisdom" has its grisly analogue in Robertson's history, for we recall Montezuma's scornful response to the Spaniards' hypocritically compassionate attempts to convert him to their enlightened religion: "In a transport of rage he tore the bandages from his wounds, and refused, with such obstinacy, to take any nourishment, that he soon ended his wretched days, rejecting with disdain all the solicitations of the Spaniards to embrace the Christian faith" (2: 344).

Finally, the last line in Urizen's taunting monologue, "Or is thy joy founded on torment which others bear for thee," makes even more obvious sense in the context of Guatimozin's situation than it does in Orc's. Orc has not forced anybody else to fight his battles or bear his burdens; Urizen is reduced to farfetched (and typically sadistic) reasoning in his attempts to explain away Orc's fortitude. But Guatimozin's power against Spain is in fact largely dependent (as Robertson sees it) on the Aztecs' subjugation of other native peoples, who have to bear burdens on behalf of their conquerors, and who resent having to do so:

The great abilities of Guatimozin, the number of his troops, the peculiar situation of his capital, so far counterbalanced the superiority of the Spaniards in arms and discipline, that they must have relinquished the enterprise if they had trusted for success to themselves alone. But Mexico was overturned by the jealousy of neighbours who dreaded its power, and by the revolt of subjects impatient to shake off its yoke. By their effectual aid, Cortes was enabled to accomplish what, without such support, he would hardly have ventured to attempt. (2: 387)

It appears, then, that Guatimozin's political power, if not his "joy," has in large part depended on "torment" (a "dreaded . . . yoke") borne by others, a fact that may have left its subliminal imprint on Blake's (and Urizen's) thinking at this point in *The Four Zoas*, as we watch Orc begin to turn into a "dark devourer"—"Self consuming," but also "poisond" in a way that does

not bode well for others who must suffer in turn the consequences of his resentful rebellion (*FZ* 80:48, 46).

Urizen and Orc, then, are like the practiced strategist Cortés and the valiant rebel Guatimozin, himself not free from the taint of tyranny. Indeed, war always makes enemies mirror each other in the Blakean world.⁹ Orc comes unexpectedly to resemble Urizen. Perhaps Blake has noted how the bloody-mindedness of Guatimozin's men resembles that of Cortés' troops: certainly in the *Zoas* it is not only Orc but Urizen too who seems to borrow attributes from the Aztecs of Robertson's history.

A look at the war god's temple where the Aztecs sacrifice their Spanish captives reveals striking similarities to the temple of Blake's war god, Urizen. When Guatimozin (this is before his capture by Cortés) gives a signal, the "priests in the principal temple" strike "the great drum consecrated to the god of war"; after the ensuing battle, in which forty Spaniards are captured,

The approach of night, though it delivered the dejected Spaniards from the attacks of the enemy, *ushered in, what was hardly less grievous*, the noise of their barbarous triumph, and of the *horrid festival* with which they celebrated their victory. Every quarter of the city was illuminated; the *great temple shone with such peculiar splendour*, that the Spaniards could plainly see the people in motion, and the priests busy in hastening the preparations for the death of the prisoners. (2: 380-81; emphases added)

Similarly, when Urizen and the "myriads" of his "Sons" build a "temple"—"The day for war the night for secret religion"—Urizen's priests and priestesses insure that, like the rite conducted by Guatimozin's clergy, their war god's temple ceremony will also be illuminated with peculiar splendor (see *FZ* 85:31-33, 96:18). They do this by taking away "the sun that glowd oer Los" and forcing it in chains into Urizen's martial sanctuary (*FZ* 96:9-15). This surely produces an effect of quite uncommon illumination:

... they put the Sun
Into the temple of Urizen to give light to
the Abyss
To light the War by day to hide his secret
beams by night
For he divided day & night in different
orderd portions
The day for war the night for secret
religion in his temple
(*FZ* 96:14-18)

In other words, as Robertson says, the "approach of night" ushers in what is "hardly less grievous" than the activities of day: the (Urizen-like) war-worship of Guatimozin's men.

The relation of Los, the eternal prophet, to the war god Urizen becomes particularly revealing at this point when viewed in a Robertsonian context. No more eager to be subservient to Urizen than Orc is, Los—like Orc—nevertheless winds up resembling Urizen in their mutually destructive conflict. Apparently resentful that Urizen has hijacked the solar sphere that "glowd" over him, Los in his defiance begins to look like a war god himself, hardly more sinned against than sinning. Immediately following his account of Urizen's temple-building, Blake describes the sudden appearance of Los:

Los reard his mighty stature on Earth
stood his feet. Above
The moon his furious forehead circled
with black bursting thunders
His naked limbs glittering upon the dark
blue sky his knees
Bathed in bloody clouds, his loins in fires
of war where spears
And swords rage where the Eagles cry &
the Vultures laugh saying
Now comes the night of Carnage . . .
(*FZ* 96:19-24; emphases added)

Why does Los appear "naked" in this horrid pageant? Very likely he is presented this way because Blake remembers Robertson's vivid evocation of the spectacle disclosed to those Spaniards who catch a glimpse of Guatimozin's temple preparations:

Through the gloom, they fancied that they discerned their companions by the whiteness of their skins, as they were *stript*

naked, and compelled to *dance before the image of the god* to whom they were to be offered. They heard the shrieks of those who were sacrificed, and thought that they could distinguish each unhappy victim, by the well-known sound of his voice. *Imagination added to what they really saw or heard, and augmented its horror*. The most unfeeling melted into tears of compassion, and the stoutest heart trembled at the dreadful spectacle which they beheld.
(2: 381)

The entire Robertson passage abounds in tragic ironies, which Blake seems to have detected and extended. The victims have to dance before the war god to whom they will be sacrificed—but all the followers of War are (re-)made in its image: the soldiers of the tyrant Cortés *and* the soldiers of the tyrant Guatimozin. Los appears naked like a victim, but bloodied and fiery like the war god who demands victims: victim and victor are hardly distinguishable in this "night of Carnage." We know that Los absorbed the Urizenic spirit as early as Night IV when he bound Promethean Orc upon the mountain. Los, the Human Imagination, has "augmented" the "horror" of what is contemplated, and in an even larger sense than Robertson makes explicit. Victors and victims are all seized with war fever, an infection of the imagination. Already in Night V the fallen imagination, infected with hostility born of nervous fear, is emblemized in a comparable picture of Los: "Infected Mad he danccd on his mountains high & dark as heaven . . . From his mouth curses & from his eyes sparks of blighting" (*FZ* 57:1, 3). Victim and (infected) victor are melded, both here and in the image of Los appearing naked in darkness near the war temple of Urizen—as naked as the captives dancing "before the image of the god" of war. The imagination, in Blake as in Robertson's account, augments the horrors brought on by the war god, who makes his victims revere his "image."

Guatimozin is eventually hanged (2: 405), and when we read in Robertson that "The Spaniards were not satisfied with the glory of having

first encompassed the earth; they expected to derive great commercial advantages from this new and boldest effort of their maritime skill" (2: 398; emphases added), Urizen's comparable ambitions may come to mind: "First Trades & Commerce ships & armed vessels he buildd laborious / To swim the deep"; "the Universal Empire groans" (FZ 95:25-26, 30; emphases added). Of course, Blake is probably speaking mainly about the British rather than the Spanish empire, but none of the parallels adduced here is in any way exclusive. Moreover, if Blake is building in part on Robertson, as I suggest, his overall intent as social and political critic is not exclusive either. Rather, he wishes to show the interweaving, the mutual interinvolvement, of war and religion, victor and victim, reason and energy and imagination, in the tragic conflicts of the fallen world, thus preparing the way for Los' (and our) humbling recognition of the Spectre as everyone's own.

¹ William Robertson, *The History of America*, 5th ed., 3 vols. (London, 1788) 2: 389; references are indicated parenthetically by volume and page. Robertson's history went through many editions over many decades; we cannot know which edition Blake may have used, but I have cited one published well before 1796 when Blake is thought to have begun work on *The Four Zoas*. For *Zoas* dating see David V. Erdman, ed. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1982) 817.

² *The Four Zoas* (hereafter FZ) 78:36. All FZ references are to Erdman.

³ *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977) 346. N. 2 identifies Guatimozin as follows:

The nephew and successor of Montezuma led the Aztec defense of Mexico City against Cortes; after his capture he and a friend were tortured on a hot metal grid. In order to keep up his companion's courage, Guatimozin said, "Am I now reposing on a bed of flowers?"

⁴ Abinger Collection, Duke Microfilms, Reel 11, cited in Donald H. Reiman, *Romantic Texts and Contexts* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1987) 308.

⁵ The Robertson-Keats connection is standard in criticism of that poet; see, for example, Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (New York: Oxford UP, 1966) 25, 88, 476.

⁶ See n. 1 above; Blake is fond of mentioning Mexico. In addition to the verses discussed immediately below a couple of others may be cited. Druid temples, Blake tells us, "were reard from Ireland / To Mexico & Peru west, & east to China & Japan" (*Milton* 6:22-23). And he lists "Mexico" (along with such places as "Negroland" and "Carolina") among the "Thirty-Two Nations" that wait for Jerusalem (J72:37-42). S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake* (Providence: Brown UP, 1965) 271, cites all these Blakean mentions of Mexico and adds that "Plate 15 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* depicts an eagle soaring with a serpent in its talons; Blake's design anticipates Shelley's *Revolt of Islam* I (1818) and the adoption of the Mexican flag (1821)."

⁷ David V. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*, 3rd. ed. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969) 251.

⁸ Erdman notes that "The Sacrifice of Tharmas in Mexico can be accounted for by the execution in 1811 and 1813 of Hidalgo and Morelos and other Mexican insurgents by Spanish firing squads" (*Prophet* 482).

⁹ See my *Blake and Goethe: Psychology, Ontology, Imagination* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1988) 129-33 ("Personality Changes: Violence and the Dissolution of Character"), where I apply René Girard's principle of "conflictual undifferentiation" to help explain the Urizen-Orc standoff.

DISCUSSION

with intellectual spears & long winged arrows
of thought

Bunyan at the Gates of Paradise

John B. Pierce

In a recent issue of *Blake*,¹ Nelson Hilton offers some useful insights into possible sources for Blake's "The lost Travellers Dream under the Hill," the last line of "To The Accuser who is The God of This World." In particular, he remarks on the possible biblical antecedents for this concluding line from the epilogue to *The Gates of Paradise*, focusing especially on the last half as a reference to "the Sinai revelation of Exodus." Hilton's equation of the "Hill" with Sinai is supported not only by references to the Law in the prologue, as he points out, but also by the implications of the ten coils (corresponding to the decalogue) of the snake depicted below the title of the epilogue.² Yet while his discussion of "under the Hill" seems satisfactory, his identification of the "lost Travellers Dream" as a reference to Moses seems more tenuous. I believe Blake's commentary on Mosaic law is filtered through an intermediate source—John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. A reading of the episode in which Christian meets Mr. Worldly-Wiseman and passes by the burning hill in conjunction with the epilogue to *The Gates of Paradise* will strengthen the connections among Sinai, the traveler's dream, and the illustration in "To The Accuser Who is The God of this World."

Blake's approbation of Bunyan's work is evident in his comments on "A Vision of the Last Judgment." While distinguishing between the "Fable" as "a totally distinct & inferior kind of