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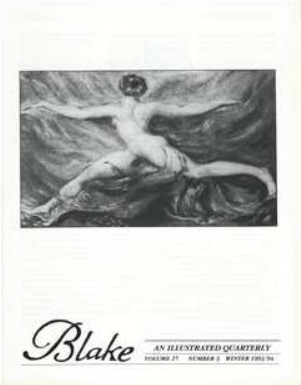

The Image of Canada in Blake's America a Prophecy

Warren Stevenson

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Nor wandering thought. We thank thee, gracious God!
For all its treasured memories! tender cares,
Fond words, bright, bright sustaining looks unchanged
Through tears and joy. O Father! most of all
We thank, we bless Thee, for the priceless trust,
Through Thy redeeming Son vouchsafed, to those
That love in Thee, of union, in Thy sight,
And in Thy heavens, immortal!—Hear our prayer!
Take home our fond affections, purified
To spirit-radiance from all earthly stain;
Exalted, solemnized, made fit to dwell,
Father! where all things that are lovely meet,
And all things that are pure—for evermore,
With Thee and Thine!

This melodramatic prayer of thanksgiving changes the final emphasis of the poem from a celebration of Catherine/Teresa to a more conventional celebration of God the Father—from a matriarchal to a patriarchal vision, from the human to the divine. The painter/poet now becomes priest as well. Hemans revises Cunningham's construct this second time to reflect the way in which her own agenda and notion of her poetic role had changed toward the end of her life. But in both of her retellings, Blake is neither the wild eccentric nor the mad painter, but a sensitive, generous, and talented artist/poet with a nobility of spirit and an enormous capacity for love. That Felicia Hemans, a poet who probably sold more books than Byron, identified with Blake and mythologized his death in such a positive way to a large general reading public only four and a half years after the event, suggests that the story of Blake's early posthumous reputation may be far more complex and interesting than biographers have so far acknowledged.

[1] 6 vols. (London: John Murray, 1830) 2: 140-79.

[2] Henry Crabb Robinson records reading Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* to Wordsworth on 24 May 1812 and notes, "He was pleased with some of them, and considered Blake as having the elements of poetry a thousand times more than either Byron or Scott."

[3] Some early reviews did take notice of the unreliability of certain aspects of Cunningham's account. See, for instance, *The Athenaeum* for Saturday, 6 February 1830 and the *London University Magazine* for March 1830. John Linnell also made no secret of his dismay at the liberties Cunningham took with the truth. [G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1969) 395.] Mona Wilson believes that the speech beginning "I glory in dying" and the other beginning "I am a changing man" are Cunningham's own inventions. See *The Life of William Blake* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1969) 191, 301, 370n372.

[4] Blake died in 1827, and was 69, not 71.

[5] She also draws on Cunningham's later observation: "The affection and fortitude of this woman [Catherine Blake] entitle her to much respect. She shared her husband's lot without a murmur, set her heart solely upon his fame, and soothed him in those hours of misgiving and despondency which are not unknown to the strongest intellects."

[6] One of her earliest books was *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy: a Poem*, 1816.

[7] Disconcertingly, life has a way of imitating art. Only three years after the first publication of "The Painter's Last Work," Hemans was herself dying, writing until nearly the end. Biographers and contemporary readers would make much of her last poem, "Sabbath Sonnet," dictated from her deathbed, amid fever and delirium.

[8] Published in 1834, in Edinburgh, by William Blackwood and in London by T. Cadell.

The Image of Canada in Blake's *America a Prophecy*

Warren Stevenson

The theme of *America a Prophecy*[1] is less the emergence of a new nation—about whose post-revolutionary course, involving as it did the persistence of slavery, Blake had major reservations—than the downfall of tyranny as a prelude to the millennium. More than any of the other English romantics, with the possible exception of Shelley, Blake had a global perspective, reflected in his frequent use of the term "America" and its cognates with reference to a hemisphere comprising two continents. Blake's earliest such reference is the one in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (pl. 13) to the "North American tribes"; in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1:20) Bromion, epitome of British imperialism, exclaims to Oothoon, "Thy soft American plains are mine, and mine thy north & south"; and in *Milton* (35:17) the similar phrase "America north & south" occurs, continuing the continental emphasis. Compare *Jerusalem* (58:43): "Britain is Los' Forge; / America North & South are his baths of living waters."[2]

In *America a Prophecy*, notwithstanding the poem's revolutionary bias, one notes the continental drift of such lines as, "Then had America been lost, o'erwhelm'd by the Atlantic" (14:17). And in the text of the Preludium, in which the "shadowy daughter of Urthona" confronts Orc, her sibling ravisher, in addition to the former's curious use of the Bromionesque phrase "my American plains" (2:10), there is reference to Canada (twice), Mexico, Peru, and Africa.

The atypical doubling of the Canadian reference is particularly intriguing. In his most pointed overture during the aforementioned verbal exchange, Orc tells the unnamed "Dark virgin," his sister-love, "anon a serpent

folding / Around the pillars of Urthona, and round thy dark limbs, / On the Canadian wilds I fold. . ." (1:15-17). She is not slow to respond: "I see a serpent in Canada, who courts me to his love" (2: 12). It will be the contention of this article that these hints as to the poem's overall meaning are developed in the pictorial symbolism of the final Plate.

II

David V. Erdman, in an influential article entitled "*America*: New Expanses" and in *The Illuminated Blake*, astutely observes that the hair of the mysterious bowed, praying figure on the last Plate (16) of *America a Prophecy* creates a "Niagara Falls" effect, which "can be seen as a conflation of the worshipful male of 14 and the bowed female of 15 (compare the conflation of persons toward the end of *Jerusalem*) . . . "[3] That is tantamount to saying that the bowed figure is meant to be androgynous, a suggestion with which I find myself in happy accord. Further, the Niagara Falls effect to which Erdman refers is created not only by the bowed figure's hair, but also by his/her tears. Compare Urizen's tears as described on the same Plate: ". . . his tears in deluge piteous / Falling into the deep sublime!" (16: 4-5). In addition to epitomizing the androgynous sublime, the bowed figure may be seen as a conflation of the "shadowy daughter of Urthona" referred to in the poem's opening line, Urizen,[4] Los-Urthona, and (by prolepsis) his emanation Enitharmon as an aspect of Jerusalem.

Erdman's perception of Blake's Niagara Falls allusion seems worth exploring. The bowed figure is pointing both upward and north, in the direction of Canada, which as we have seen is significantly mentioned twice in the Preludium. Pointing in the same direction—upward and to the right of the Falls (which flow north)—is the headless, forked tree curving over the back of the bowed figure, and the serpent with its flicking tongue at the bottom of the plate. Compare the shadowy daughter of Urthona's response to Orc's incestuous overture: "I see a serpent in Canada, who courts me to his love" (2:12). One of the two tiny figures on the back of the praying figure is both kneeling on one knee and pointing skyward as well as north—probably to the North Star (the dark coloration of the sky suggests that it is nighttime), which is presumably invisible because located beyond the upper right margin of the design. The northward momentum of the plate is also indicated by the curious white mass sloping up and off to the right beyond the Falls, adumbrating both Urizen's "icy magazines" (16:9) and the glacier which caused the formation of the Niagara escarpment thousands of years ago, still as it were receding. The diagonal inclinations of the tiny pointing figure's arm (the only one visible), the praying figure's right forearm (the only one clearly visible), the slope of the white mass, and the serpent's forked tongue—a possible hint of ambivalence (compare the tiny buoy-like woman walking over the thorny branch away from the phallic rose past the serpent's mouth)—and the forked, headless tree arching over the praying figure, are all approximately the same, pointing in the "North Star" direction.[5]

North is of course a pivotal direction in Blake's myth, as well as in Canada's mythology. Convenient examples of the latter are the line that runs "the True North strong and free" from Canada's national anthem—a line inadvertently contributed by Tennyson, who had the new Dominion in mind when he wrote in *The Idylls of the King* of "that True North, whereof we lately heard"—and contemporary poet Al Purdy's remark that "the North is Canada's true identity."[6] In Blake's myth, as Foster Damon points out, "the NORTH symbolizes the Imagination. It is the compass-point of Los-Urthona . . . Urizen always wants to usurp the North." Compare Blake's listing in *Jerusalem* (72:41) of Canada as the twenty-fifth of the 32 nations which shall guard liberty and rule the world.[7]

III

Apropos of liberty, the first British territory to legislate against slavery was the newly formed (1791) province of Upper Canada (now Ontario), which had been settled almost entirely by those leaving the revolting Colonies to come to loyal British land: that is, those who came to be called the United Empire Loyalists. The Lieutenant-Governor, John Graves Simcoe, a Loyalist who had fought in the Revolutionary War and was opposed to slavery, led the attack. Simcoe, who arrived in Upper Canada in July 1792, chose Newark (later Niagara, now Niagara-on-the-Lake) as his capital, and the province's first elected assembly met there in September of that year. Simcoe and his Attorney-General, John White, wanted to abolish slavery outright; this was bitterly opposed among the mercantile and farming classes, and a compromise bill was arranged, which established that any slave who came into the province—whether brought by his master or fleeing from his master—would be considered legally free. There was also provision for the gradual freeing of slaves born to those already in the province.[8]

The catalyst appears to have been an incident involving Chloe Cooley, a slave who put up such spirited and vigorous resistance when her owner had her bound and transported across the Niagara River to be sold to the Americans that the matter was reported in the first meeting of the Executive council, on 21 March 1793 (Winks 96). On Simcoe's instructions, Attorney-general White introduced to the House of Assembly the aforementioned bill for the gradual abolition of slavery. White guided the bill through the lower house against, as he wrote, "much opposition but little argument."[9] This opposition came mainly from the farmers who had brought their slaves north with them. "White was skillful and Simcoe was persistent, however, and within two weeks [i.e., by early April 1793] the bill received

unanimous passage" (Winks 97). It was given royal assent on 9 July 1793.[10]

The same year the American Congress passed its first Fugitive Slave Law, which provided for the reclamation of slaves who fled states within the American union, with the result that "virtually from [its] very beginnings. . . Upper Canada. . . existed as a haven for runaway slaves who could not remain with security in the United States."[11] Blake's *America a Prophecy* was announced for sale in his prospectus of October 1793, but, according to Erdman, "perhaps the final version. . . was completed a year or two later."[12] Thus Blake would have had time to respond with evident interest and cautious enthusiasm to events in Upper Canada emanating from the Niagara Legislature. One may deduce from all this Blake's low-keyed optimism, focused on what could be called for lack of a better term "the spiritual form of Canada," tending to subvert the surface pessimism of the poem's ending; compare the two versions of the tailpiece design, one with, and one without the word "finis" emblazoned across the fork-tongued serpent.[13]

[1] All references to the design of *America a Prophecy* unless otherwise indicated are to the Blake Trust facsimile of the work (London, 1963).

[2] All quotations from Blake follow *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, New rev. ed. (New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1988)—subsequently cited as E. Plate numbers followed by line numbers are given in parentheses.

[3] "*America*: New Expanses," *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic*, ed. David V. Erdman and John E. Grant (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970) 98; David V. Erdman, annot. *The Illuminated Blake* (Garden City: Anchor-Doubleday, 1974) 155.

[4] A full discussion of Urizen's role in *America a Prophecy* would require a separate paper. Erdman's aforementioned analysis of the bowed figure is useful, but his remark in "*America*: New Expanses" (98) that "[Joel] Barlow's focus on the December hailstorm which prevented the revolutionists' capture of Quebec evidently prompted [Urizen's] 'snows poured forth, and. . . icy magazines' [16:9]" fails to take into account the possibility of a providential reading of this passage according to which "Urizen is necessary." (Northrop Frye, in conversation with the author at the International Blake Exhibition and Conference in Toronto, Feb. 1983. Frye's remark was about the role of Urizen in Blake's myth, and was not apropos of any one work or critic.) The concept of Manifest Destiny would not have appealed to Blake.

[5] "headless tree": a probably androgynous (cf. the breasts) allusion to the guillotining of the French King (Jan. 1793) and Queen (Oct. 1793), as it were pointing the way to something better. Cf. The *Book of Ahania*, Pl. 5, showing severed heads and decapitated trunks, and Erdman's commentary in *The Illuminated Blake* (213). Cf. also Erdman's remark in "*America*: New Expanses" (108) that "January 1793 is at the center of the prophecy." For the probable period of composition of *America* see note 12, below, and text.

[6] Epilogue "To the Queen," from *Idylls of the King*, 1.14 and note, *Tennyson's Poetry*, ed. Robert W. Hill, Jr. (New York: Norton, 1971) 430. Cf Alfred Purdy, *North of Summer: Poems from Baffin Island* (Toronto/Montreal: McLelland and Stewart, 1967), Preface *et passim*. "O Canada" was originally composed with words in French by Alphonse Routhier and music by Callixa Lavallée in 1880; the first English version was written by R. Stanley Weir for Quebec's tercentenary in 1908. A modified form of this translation was approved by Canada's Parliament in 1980, the French version having been approved in 1967. Laureate Tennyson had the Dominion of Canada (as it was then known) in mind when he wrote the above-quoted line. Impressed with the sound and sense of it, Stanley Weir improved on the phrase when he penned the line that still runs "the True North, strong and free" in "O Canada." (From *The Globe and Mail*, 1 July 1991, A15.)

[7] See S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary* (Providence, RI: Brown UP, 1965) s.v. "North" and "Canada."

[8] W. R. Riddell, "An Official Record of Slavery in Upper Canada," *Ontario History* 25 (1929): 393-97; Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP; New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1971) 96-98—subsequently cited as "Winks."

[9] William Renwick Riddell, *The Life of John Graves Simcoe, first Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada, 1792-96* (Toronto, 1926) 193, quoting from White's diary for 14 March—subsequently cited as "Riddell."

[10] The unpopularity of the Antislavery Bill can be gauged from the tone of a contemporary letter by Mrs. Hannah Jarvis from Newark (Niagara) to her father, Rev. Dr. Samuel Peters: "[Simcoe] has by a piece of chicanery freed all the negroes." This piece of indignant inaccuracy is followed by the more accurate prediction that "the Attorney-General . . . will never come in again as a representative" (quoted by Riddell 202). White never won a seat in any subsequent parliament. When Simcoe, who had earlier (1790) voted against slavery in the British House of Commons, died in 1806, his grateful county, Devon, commissioned Blake's sometime friend Flaxman to sculpt a memorial for him, which stands in Exeter Cathedral. There is also a statue of him in Queen's Park, Toronto—where Simcoe had moved the provincial capital prior to his departure in 1796—with no Blakean associations. Is it too fanciful to suggest that the curious white mass slanting upward in front of the bowed figure on the last plate of *America* is Blake's passionate, eponymous tribute to John White's sacrifice of political expediency on the altar of principle—a conflation of Urizenic (colonial) ice and principled fire? Cf. the bowed figures—particularly Job's wife—kneeling before the triangular pyre in Blake's Illustrations to the Book of Job, Pl 18, and the white rectangle of light toward which she is looking immediately in front of her right knee.

[11] James W. St. G. Walker, *A History of Blacks in Canada* (Hull, Quebec: Canadian Government Publishing Center, 1980) 47. The courts in Lower Canada (Quebec) effectively abolished slavery when Chief Justice James Monk in 1800 gave the opinion that slavery was illegal and refused to use state power to return runaways. Similar developments took place in the Maritime provinces "by about 1800," with the result that "slavery had virtually died out in what is now Canada by the time slavery was legally abolished [throughout the British Empire in 1834: legislation, 1833]" (Walker 24-25).

[12] Erdman 802.

[13] A serpent also of course appears on the revolutionary flag of Vermont, which borders on Canada, with the motto: "Do not tread on me." Vermont was the first state in America to abolish slavery (July 1777).