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Discussing the Arlington Court Picture, Part I

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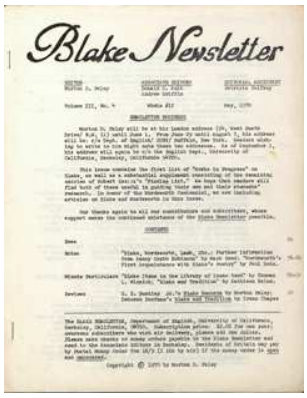
Blake Newsletter

C. Los's sons Rintrah, Palamabron, Theotormon, and Bromion have endured long periods of anguish in the Furnaces at which they now labor. The machinery there includes

iron rollers, golden axle-trees & yokes
Of brass, iron chains & braces & the gold, silver & brass
Mingled or separate: for swords; arrows; cannons; mortars
The terrible ball: the wedge: the loud sounding hammer
of destruction.

(Jerusalem 73:9-12)

Damn and Bless are always verbs, although the direct objects of Bless are consistently ironic: Tiriel's bald pate or the seventh day on which the children of Urizen rest after having shrunk up from existence. Damn, on the other hand, is used as a straightforward expletive, as in "damn sneerers" in the annotations to Lavater (Keynes, p. 67, Erdman, p. 574).

It seems highly likely that "Damn. braces: Bless relaxes" has more than one infernal or diabolical meaning. E. J. Rose has commented on "Blake's synchronization of parts of speech with his symbolism."[2] In "Mental forms Creating," for instance, "Creating" is both a participle and a verb. When corrosives have melted away apparent grammatical surfaces, Blake's ambiguity of syntax (Empson's second type of ambiguity) emerges. Both the first and second meanings, at the very least, are simultaneously communicated in a double-edged statement of infernal wisdom.

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[1] All quotations are from The Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. David V. Erdman (Garden City, N.Y., 1965).

[2] Edward J. Rose, "Visionary Forms Dramatic: Grammatical and Iconographical Movement in Blake's Verse and Designs," Criticism, VIII (1966), 111-125.

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2. Discussing the Arlington Court Picture

Part I: A Report on the Warner-Simmons Theory

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Seminar 23, devoted to Methods of Interpreting the Illustrations of William Blake, met for the second time at the Modern Language Association Convention in Denver on December 28, 1969, from 10:30 - 12 Noon, at the Brown Palace Hotel. About forty-five people were in attendance.

The topic was the Arlington Court Picture (ACP). For the first half-hour Janet Warner of Glendon College, York University, presented an interpretation of the picture which she had worked out in collaboration with Robert Simmons of Glendon College. Her exposition was greatly assisted by showing a number of good slides of the ACP, the preliminary drawing, and of several other Blake paintings. The ensuing discussion was a lively compound of comments and questions which continued after the formal conclusion of the meeting. David Erdman remarked afterward that the character of the discussion indicated real progress was being made toward achieving a consensus of understanding about the picture. But evidently non-Blakists in the audience were unable to recognize the progress or appreciate the broad base of agreement we felt we had achieved. It has always seemed to me that qualified Blakists tend to agree more than qualified Shakespearians or Miltonists, but there must be something in the idiom of our agreement that is subtly different from those of other consensi.

One thing that could hardly be disputed is that Blakists made their presence felt in Denver, due largely to the initiative of Roger Easson and Kay Long of Blake Studies. I first became acquainted with Roger in an elevator because he was wearing a good-sized white button with black lettering that declared for "Blake Power." Others of us were delighted to join in wearing these buttons, which Blake Studies generously made available, but it did occur to me that in the future we ought at least to change our colors so as not to seem to be denying that other good cause which is more exigent. Perhaps Liberty caps would be most appropriate even if Erdman has freed us from the legend that Blake himself wore one (of a certain color). Easson and Long had also had made up a number of large yellow posters based on the drawing that appeared on the cover of the second issue of Blake Studies with the Blake profile printed at various angles so as to give several-fold Zoa perspectives. With the Jerusalem hymn boldly printed at the bottom, it is mind-blowing. At this writing neither the costumes, the publicity, nor the agenda for the 1970 MLA has been settled, but a petition for a Discussion Group, rather than a seminar, has been submitted and Morton Paley is to act as chairman.

Concerning the discussion of ACP, I shall not attempt to present a complete summary of the interpretation put forward by Mrs. Warner because she and Simmons are completing a detailed study and it would be unfair for me to anticipate their final position. Instead I shall merely indicate the main points of Mrs. Warner's presentation and also some of the comments and questions that came up afterward. I have been assisted by a draft of her remarks which she kindly made available to me. But what follows is more involved than a secretary's notes. I have thought for a long time about the picture and have noticed many connections in symbolism with others of Blake's pictures, a number of which I shall mention even though there was no opportunity to discuss them in the Seminar. I wish to thank Mrs. Warner and David Erdman for reading a draft of this report and to apologize to the reader for its lack of polish.

According to Mrs. Warner ACP has to do with the assuming of mortality rather than casting it off, as both Raine and Digby tended variously to maintain. For her it also depicts the birth of mythology and history, "the illusions that man creates for himself -- both Greek and Christian illusions." She devoted considerable time to a description of the "composition," the geometry of the picture, believing it to be a key to meaning. In opposition to Keynes, who discerned a basically circular composition, Mrs. Warner prefers to distinguish a circular pattern in the upper left which includes the sky god and the sea goddess and, more loosely, implicates the central figures of the man in red and the standing Veiled Lady. The whole lower right area of the picture is seen as a triangle running from the shore at the lower left to the trees at the upper right. The foci of this area are three cave-like areas: at the lower left, the middle right, and the upper right. "The circle ... represents ... the eternal realm, outside of history. The triangle represents the mortal and rational -- man within history." The actions in these areas correspond to aspects of the central man dressed in red. His gaze is directed at the reader and the moment of eye-contact represents "the moment of the fall; the moment of sleep of the eternal world, and the creation of the mortal."

A crucial difference between this interpretation and those of Digby and Raine is that the central female figure, especially because of her veils, is taken to be sinister. Moreover the sun god is sleeping, his horses are being restrained, and the company of angels at the top right are contained within a cavelike area. The similarity in posture between the woman and such figures as the "Evening" (Tempera Paintings, no. 4) and "Eve Tempted by the Serpent" (Masters, pl. 7) particularly, indicates that the woman is "Nature" as sinister temptress, or Enitharmon in her sinister aspect.

The man can be identified with Los and the gesture he makes with his hands has both creative and spell-binding suggestions, as indicated by the similarities to both God in Job 14 and the Accusers in Job 10. A declension in the eternal realm is depicted in the upper left area where the sea goddess of night takes over from the sleeping sun god of day. But the sea goddess is at least a Beulah figure, who represents the creative potentiality of love guiding the four Zoas. Since the man in red turns away from her at the moment she is created, he confirms his bondage to the Veiled Lady who is Nature. These two, because they are on a larger scale than the other figures, dominate the picture and also serve to link the compositional circle and triangle. On the other hand, they have the curious effect of not quite being "in" the picture at all (cf. Gainsborough's otherwise utterly unlike Mr. and Mrs. Robert Andrews), which is additional evidence that ACP is about them.

The triangular area depicts Ulro and Generation: at the lower left man is in hell, dominated by the Fates. The horned man suffers from the deed of the man in red and is also the uncreative counterpart of the sea goddess, whose position he echoes, struggling against death. The focal figure in the second area is the woman trying to carry the water

of generation up to where she can participate in the work of the weavers of generation. The top level may be a kind of Beulah state also, but it is presented as an endless uncreative succession that is not transcended. It represents the upper level of Greek vision as indicated by the Greek temple depicted at the base of the cliff near the wild sea. Thus this cavernous area is characterized by a pseudo-serenity comparable to that in the heavenly realm above where the four women are unharnessing the horses of the sun god. Any apparent progress in the area of the triangle is delusory. Man's only chance to escape is to embrace the sea goddess, but according to the Warner-Simmons thesis his turning away from her means accepting the fruitless domination of the Veiled Lady.

Much of the ensuing discussion in the Seminar was devoted to achieving accurate descriptions of what is represented in every part of the picture. In my opinion this aspect of cooperative study is more valuable than a premature attempt to formulate a complete interpretation of the allegory. This opinion is not intended as a criticism of the propriety or success of the Warner-Simmons undertaking, for which there was time only for a preliminary report. Rather my point is that, as a group, our primary task was not to decide whether the Warner-Simmons interpretation is "correct," but to try to come to an agreement as to both the objects and actions depicted. I shall say something more on this subject later but here we should observe that no published account has so far given a wholly accurate description of the forty-one or more figures and the various symbolic items and places associated with them. Yet according to Blakean principles, until the interpreter has identified each "minute particular" he cannot understand the ways in which it is an "infinite particular."

Since the colored reproduction in the Masters' Blake volume has unaccountably been trimmed on both sides, one figure in the upper left is omitted and one of the three trees at the right is hardly discernable. Following Keynes, Mrs. Warner called attention to the double row of dots or bubbles extending between the right foot of the sea goddess and the head of the veiled lady. The two-color nimbus and aura of the sky god was mentioned and a member of the audience called attention to what appears to be the curious navel cord of the sea goddess, but the four white (lightning) tips extending down from the clouds and the two wheels of the sea goddess's chariot were not mentioned. There was little discussion of the five figures at the right wheel and none of the five behind the sun god's chariot. The question was raised as to whether the nymph touched by the sun god's scepter is indeed the same character who appears as the sea goddess below, as some interpreters have contended. The luna-esque configuration of the sea goddess's hair was remarked, and the man and woman at the sides of her four dark horses were taken to be "the male and female forms the goddess could assume when her potential was realized." Without attempting to refute this inference, I would point out that the male figure is almost identical with the smaller figure, that of Reuben, in J 15.

When the subject was broached at the end of the discussion, no one was

willing to support Miss Raine's contention that the vortex-cloud above the sea goddess's right hand is meant to represent the veil of Ino-Leucothea in the Odyssey. Neither could anyone agree that the gesture of the man in red is that of a person who had just thrown anything. Hughes rather equivocated in his review of Miss Raine's book in the last issue of the Newsletter, but no Blakist, except perhaps Harper, seems now to believe that the Neo-Platonic interpretation, so strenuously advanced by Miss Raine, is basically persuasive.

Mrs. Warner's assertion that the sea seems to be rising provoked no demurrals, but it was generally agreed that the gesture of the man in red is directed in front of the goddess's chariot, off the picture. It was noted that Bromion's attention, in the frontispiece to VDA, is likewise directed to something to the left of the picture. Blake also employed this device in "The Approach of Doom" (Separate Plates, pls. 8 + 9) and other pictures as well. The conjurer's gesture toward the sea of the man in red also recalls King Canute, whom Blake evidently depicted in Night Thoughts no. 262, though in a different position. The red "coral" on which the man is seated was observed by a member of the audience to resemble brain tissue. I pointed out that the angle of the man's arms was lowered, as well as the direction of his gaze, from what it had been in the preliminary drawing now in the Morgan Library (Pencil Drawings II, pl. 40). It is doubtful whether in either version his gesture is that of a diver, as was asserted to be the case by Keynes.

It has been observed the face of this man quite closely resembles that of the somnolent sun god. I briefly mentioned that the figure is also similar in appearance and position to the figure of Philoctetes in the rather unfamiliar drawing of Philoctetes and Neoptolemus at Lemnos (Figgis, pl. 87 -- Blake Studies plans to reproduce it in their Fall issue). I believe that this picture is highly relevant to the Arlington Court Picture because it helps to clarify Blake's attitude toward Classical culture, a problem unquestionably treated in ACP. Also closely connected is the Judgment of Paris (Graham Robertson, pl. 24), which I discussed in some detail in Blake Studies I, 2. One fact that should be asserted strongly on the basis of the Philoctetes: Odysseus is there carefully delineated as a Strong Man who stands at the right with two other suppliants. He looks not in the least like the man in red in ACP, though Raine has persisted in identifying the man in red as Odysseus. But Blake's actual Ulysses in the Philoctetes does resemble very closely the Odysseus depicted in Flaxman's Odyssey (conveniently repr. as pl. 25 of Raine's Blake and Tradition). To explain away the non-correspondences between ACP and her interpretation Raine has been willing to identify the Greek temple as Odysseus's house and to intimate that perhaps Blake hadn't read Homer for a long time before starting to illustrate him in ACP. It is doubtful whether even those who may have been attracted by Neo-Platonic explanations will hereafter attempt to connect the Conjurer in Red with Blake's Odysseus. A more fruitful connection might be with the Visionary Head of The Man Who Taught Blake Painting (Tate, no. 44). To be sure, the guru is clean

shaven and has bumps on his head rather than much hair. In any case the Conjurer in Red is similar in appearance and posture to Philoctetes.

I argued against the contention of Mrs. Warner that the Veiled Lady is necessarily sinister, instancing the similarity in posture of "Mirth" in the L'Allegro series--which is more striking in the second state of the engraved version (Keynes, Separate Plates, pls. 35 + 36). I also mentioned the figure of Jerusalem in J 46 [32], who is standing in a similar position, though she is undraped, as opposed to the draped figure of Vala shown from behind in that picture. I would add that the veil on the figures in J 28, which I discussed in the Festschrift for Damon, and the posture of Los in J 7 must also be considered. Mrs. Warner had overlooked Damon's pithy account of ACP (Dictionary, item "The Circle of Life") but could draw sustenance from Damon's identification of the Veiled Lady as Vala. It has been remarked that Beatrice in Purg. 30 (Masters, XIV) appears in similar form as Vala, but I am not satisfied with this identification either, as I have indicated elsewhere. One of Blake's primary concerns in Jerusalem is to unperplex the figures of Jerusalem and Vala. This is a nicer task of discrimination than one would gather from most published accounts. I shall return to the question of evaluating pictorial similarities and dissimilarities in my discussion of iconography in the second part of this article.

In ACP the sea goddess is undoubtedly a counterpart of the Veiled Lady and is to be preferred because of her primal nakedness. She is a version of triform Hecate as sea goddess, an association strengthened by the horns of her hair, but especially prompted by the fact that she drives dark horses while the sun god sleeps. In Blake's best known representation, Job 14, she drives two serpents but in "The Virgin Blest" for Milton's Hymn (Huntington, pl. 19) a similar lady who holds the Star of Bethlehem has two horses for her car. Basically her "recumbent Venus" posture is like that of Earth in "Introduction" to Songs of Experience, the figure brought to life in "Night Startled by the Lark" in the second design for L'Allegro. The fact that both are seen from the rear while the sea goddess is seen from the front is a meaningful difference, but it does not mean the figures are unrelated. If one compares the figure of "Nature" in On the Morning of Christ's Nativity with that of Eve in "Michael Foretells the Crucifixion" in the Paradise Lost series (Particularly the Whitworth and Boston versions) he will see two other visions of this woman. Even more closely related to ACP is the figure of Dawn, who, in this picture is represented as a woman drawn by a team of four horses. If the Indian lady J 11 were combined with Jerusalem as she appears in J 57 and J 93, the composite figure would be much like the sea goddess -- though this observation is not of much assistance for interpretation of ACP.

As Keynes observed, especially relevant to ACP is the third design for Il Penseroso, "Milton and the Spirit of Plato." The posture of Plato and even the position of his hands somewhat resembles that of the Veiled Lady in ACP, though he appears in front of his pupil, if invisibly, on a cloud standing before his pernicious book. In her discussion of this

picture Raine will not recognize how anti-Platonic the vision is and even Damon does not indicate how severe Blake makes his judgment against Platonism. In Plato's scheme the three Fates are above the realms of the three sinister Great Gods and are thus dominant in the universe, whereas in ACP the Fates are only attempting to triumph over the lower horned and shell-helmeted form of Blake's central man. As I pointed out, the three Fates in ACP are closely related to Tirzah, Vala, and Rahab who are shown undoing Albion in J 25, but they are less clearly dominant in ACP, in spite of the evident malice of Lachesis. For one thing, she is evidently compelled to draw the rope over her head as Urizen does in "The Human Abstract."

I also pointed out that in the drawing the horned and shell-helmeted man held a second river urn in his right hand, rather than the distaff of rope, but that in the painting this had been given to the sleeping Nixie in the lower right corner. The urn that the man still retains in his left hand appears to contain fire which spreads like burning oil above the water that is identified by Digby and Damon as the Water of Death. Mrs. Warner would prefer a less categorical identification of the water, perhaps as the source of "life" in Generation, but she is clear that the scales on the bucket indicate that this water is unredeemed. I would argue that the Water of Death has to be transformed by the Purgatorial fires in the lower cave before it can be carried as the Water of Life in scale-less buckets by the procession of good women in the upper cave. In its regenerated condition it is the fit source of the three visible rivers of Eden, which are discussed by Digby.

Three other resemblances between "Milton and the Spirit of Plato" and ACP may be mentioned though their applicability to ACP may remain problematic. The figure of Jupiter has his left foot depressed and holds a sceptre rather like that of the somnolent sun god in ACP. God with his left foot depressed is, of course, a familiar motif from Job 5. The connection with the sceptered figure of "The Great Sun" in the third design for L'Allegro is still closer in some ways. Behind Milton's chair a figure is netted and falls into water, a fate clearly in store for the girl carrying the scaled bucket in ACP if the figures at the right effect their wills. The closest connection of all is between the figures of woman and man lying at the lower right in the Il Penseroso picture and the almost identical figures just to the left of the upper cave of water carriers in ACP. According to Platonic vision, the male spirit of Earth must be dead, but in Blake he attends to the procession of the Water of Life which is to issue behind him and his consort as one of the rivers of Eden.

The girl with the scaled bucket certainly has to pass by the women on the landing of the first flight of stairs, both of whom are trying to hide their gins and snares, which have been well explained by Damon. She must also bring her water to be purified past the three weavers, daughters of Enitharmon, who is seen plying a similar shuttle in J 100 and the Cumberland card (Separate Plates, pl. 38). Just how their loom frame articulates with the net lines that pass around the third tree

from the right was the subject of considerable discussion. It was pointed out that this tree appears to have been disfigured as a result of having been so wrapped. But the fires in the lower cave also cut across beneath the ninth step on which the three weavers stand. Presumably it will take such fire to purify the Storge water and make it fit for paradise above. One reason I am confident that the cavernous area at the top right is not sinister is that Milton's similar "Mossy Cell," depicted in the last design for Il Penseroso, is a home of vision, not of bondage. As I have mentioned before, almost every symbol in Blake is represented in both benign and malign aspects: caves are no exception. During the Seminar I suggested that the water carriers were reminiscent of the little girls in bondage at the bottom of "Holy Thursday," but, on further consideration, I doubt whether this is a correctly applied analogy. A more apposite analogy would be to the composed five Wise Virgins as opposed to the disorderly five Foolish Virgins (Masters, pls. XVII/cover/).

It was noted that two cliffs were added at the left of the midmost tree in the picture (which is probably but not certainly leaved, rather than barren) in an awkward way which is incompatible with the original configuration of the hillside as it is represented between the two trees. Presumably Blake recognized that he had left out essential symbols and was willing to risk disfiguring this important painting in order to get them in. Perhaps the Greek temple as well as the additional river goddess were both added at this time, though one would have to study the picture with this hypothesis in mind to ascertain whether paint had thus been superadded. As was observed by Mrs. Warner, there is a considerable similarity between this part of the picture and that in "The Overthrow of Apollo" in the Nativity series (Huntington, pl. XVII--the Whitworth version is closer still).

A number of other aspects of the picture were also mentioned, such as the matted effect on the shoulders of the dress of the water carrier, the fact that her hair is bound up, as opposed to that of the weavers, and that the Nixie who sleeps on the bucket at the lower right seems to be her double, just as the guardians of the trees also have doubles. It is noteworthy that the Nixie was seated beside the girl who holds the skein and that her feet were probably also in the water in the drawing (cf. the Genesis title-pages, Huntington, pls. XXXII + XXXIII). Her hair is curiously curled in the final version and her original position is taken up by the extraordinary tree roots, one of which is touched by the left foot of the horned shell-helmeted man, among which other rope-like loops appear. One might also observe that of all the figures in the picture the girl who holds up the skein is evidently the most satisfied since she has at least a slight smile on her face.

A professed non-Blakist in the audience made an interesting criticism toward the end of the Seminar which I attempted to refute and perhaps did not succeed in doing very persuasively. The comment was somewhat as follows: the symbolism of this picture is fascinating but it really isn't a very successful painting and may not be worth the trouble.

This reminded me that an able Blakist had expressed much the same opinion in a conversation some months previous. The Blakist had contrasted the rather busy and disorganized impression created by ACP with the wonderful symmetry of Blake's Last Judgment or Jacob's Ladder.

At the Seminar I attempted to argue that in allegorical painting symbolical interest takes precedence over pictorial arrangement and representation and that, for example, even Rembrandt was often less concerned with character when he undertook allegorical painting. I would, of course, agree that some allegorical paintings are more satisfying than others but I am also aware that value judgments about painting are usually as opinionated and arbitrary as those about literature. If there are aesthetic standards for painting, they must be able to account for what may, contentiously, be called an art of clutter, as well as an art of symmetry. Though I suspect that Blake would not have approved of it, the aesthetic standards that can be applied to belittle such a picture as Bronzino's Allegory (National Gallery, London) are not compelling and may not be valid. Blake ought to be allowed to have departed with honor from his usual type of symmetry.

There is no doubt that a great deal of calculation went into ACP. A deep question for genuine aesthetics which respects ideas as well as images is whether all of the postures in the picture are deliberate and therefore meaningful or whether the picture is, as Northrop Frye once called it, "confused." For example, can we know for sure why the upraised left arm of the water carrier is out of drawing: is it a matter of stylization to fit a space as is the case with the right leg of the first weaver or the broken back of the horned shell-helmeted man? But having already lived to the end of the age of Picasso we are not likely to cavil over much about such distortions. Art is not life, as Blake also insisted.

A source of greater unease, perhaps comes when one tries to decide why directions are exactly as they are shown to be. For example, the Veiled Lady does not actually point at the Conjurer in Red with her right hand but downward to the women and man in the river. And her right hand indicates generally the women attending the horses, not the sleeping sun god. Is she looking at the same object toward which the conjurer is gesturing? Other details seem not to line up: the stairs of the sun god's chariot do not extend to a hypothetical back entrance to the cave of the angelic procession, though they may to one for the cave of the weavers. Is the sea goddess pointing with her left hand and looking at the Veiled Lady or just above her? Is the horned shell-helmeted man pointing, and at what, with his right hand or is he just holding his (more or less?) phallic distaff? Who are the five that follow the sun god's chariot and how are they related to the five at the wheel of the chariot (one of whom holds two horns and blows only one)? How are the various fires and ropes related? We know Blake could have answered such questions, but the indication that he was willing to graft on the seaside cliff implies that he was willing to change his

symbolism even in the "final" version--as in Jerusalem too, of course.

As a result of our discussion in Denver I am even more confident that Miss Raine has not discovered texts that this picture is primarily designed to illustrate. And I am much attracted to Mrs. Warner's idea that the viewer is expected to work out the meaning of the picture as a result of studying it rather than by looking elsewhere, even at other Blake pictures, for "the key." But other texts and pictures may at least strengthen our willingness to believe that what we are seeing is intelligible. It was evident that the company in Seminar 23 contained few art historians since the mere existence of the many river urns seemed remarkable, whereas Blake would have supposed this symbolism to be completely familiar to his viewer. But Blake almost always repeats his major symbols so that one can pick them up elsewhere in his work without having to ransack all previous periods of painting for a clue. He uses the river urns twice in the Gray designs, as was remarked during the Seminar, and again "The Sunshine Holiday," the fourth design for L'Allegro. And the huge rope distaff is often employed, notably on the titlepage for Night the First of Night Thoughts, no. 6 and, in a more closely related context, in Night Thoughts no. 30, as well as in the Cumberland card. Like the shuttle of Enitharmon in the cave of the weavers, also shown in the Cumberland card, it points to the beginning and the end of things, as in J 100, the MLA topic in 1968. The moral for interpreters is to be found by juxtaposing J 25 with J 77: in the former case the foolish curiosity of the three dispassionate virgins leads them to murder and dismember the father of us all. In the latter, the growing boy will not remain lost because he is able to follow the golden clue wherever it leads out of the forests of the night.

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QUERIES

1. Can anyone produce a convincing explanation of the following curious coincidence? It is reported in a footnote on page 443 of the revised edition of Erdman's BLAKE: PROPHET AGAINST EMPIRE (paper & cloth):

... a curious pair of entries in Crabb Robinson's diary ... suggest that critical opinion somehow got from Flaxman to Blake at least as late as the latter part of 1814, after the publication of Wordsworth's Excursion. On Dec. 19, 1814, Flaxman heard Robinson read aloud some passages out of the Excursion and "took umbrage at some mystical expressions ... in which Wordsworth talks of seeing Jehovah unalarmed. 'If my brother had written that,' said Flaxman, 'I should say, "Burn it."'" Flaxman and Lamb and Robinson debated the passage. Eleven years later, Dec. 10, 1825, when Robinson first met Blake, the