

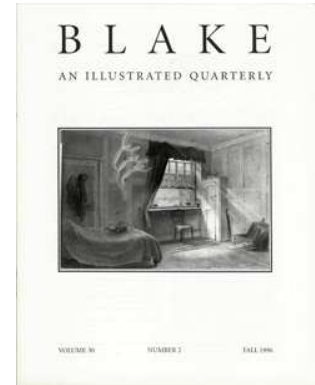
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

D. W. Dörrbecker, ed., William Blake, *The Continental Prophecies*

Michael J. Tolley

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unique in his combination of design and calligraphic text; Ilive's decorated initial capital is his only gesture in this direction. Nevertheless, both play upon the reader's experience of opening a conventional Bible, only to present a text subversive of such a Bible. Finally, just as *Jasher* concludes after its last verse (37: 32) "*The End of the Book of Jasher*," *Urizen* concludes "*The End of the [first] book of Urizen*" (E 83), both in imitation of colophons in medieval texts. Did Blake recognize Ilive's private press-room as a forerunner of his own Printing House in Hell?

R E V I E W S

William Blake, *The Continental Prophecies: America: a Prophecy; Europe: a Prophecy; The Song of Los*. Edited with Introductions and Notes by D. W. Dörrbecker. Princeton: William Blake Trust/Princeton University Press, 1997. Blake's Illuminated Books Volume 4. General Editor David Bindman. 367 pp. \$75.

Reviewed by MICHAEL J. TOLLEY

This series of Blake's Illuminated Books is a noble one, and as I have read carefully through Detlef Dörrbecker's book I have felt like somebody reading a kind of variorum edition. Many viewpoints are presented from a number of leading critics, and particularly of recent writers, though also with representation of the major earlier studies. In his establishment of the historical background to the text, new works have aided the editor considerably, as they have also aided his insistence on a free, open, but well-advised approach to the reading of the numerous difficulties. Individual scholars will retain the liberty in studying these libertarian works to develop their own researches, but they will do so on the basis of some sound counsel.

"Continental Prophecies" is not a familiar phrase, but this division of the Lambeth books is most helpful. In particular, it draws attention to *The Song of Los* as a considerable work in the threefold scheme. The works are discussed together (11-24) in a prefatory essay, and then each is presented in turn, first by means of a discussion of the text, then by a study of the designs, then by the illustrations with the printed text, some supplementary illustrations, and some notes to Blake's text. This division means that the reader has to do some flipping backwards and forwards, but the editor has explained his pattern of work in "A Note on Citations, Abbreviations, Texts, and Variants" and also his brief system of annotation through simple references to the

"Works Cited." The reader will doubtless have a problem in laying hands on each item in the thorough bibliography which Dörrbecker has had the benefit of studying through his work at *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*, but the problem is like every problem in Blake studies—all you need is intelligence, time, money and access to a superb library!

That major themes in each poem are discussed first, before the plates themselves and the textual footnotes, necessarily involves some repetition (chasing after, say, the nameless shadowy female or Albion's 'Angel'). This was presumably considered worthwhile, but readers should be warned. It seems that most of the significant matters of theme and context get considered somewhere or other in the discussions.

Some decisions are bound to be a little irritating. Quite sensibly, in his own terms, the editor has decided to ignore changes in the text from, say, roman to italic type. When one reads, say, the titlepage to "AMERICA / a / PROPHECY," one expects the last word to be in italics, but it is not. This demands a note when the page is discussed, but in the note we are told that the same kind of titlepage in *Europe* reverses the order—"EUROPE / a / PROPHECY." However, as soon as one looks at the pages, one sees that more is going on in the *Europe* titlepage than this, even with the lettering. One thing which is not noticed, though perhaps worth noticing, is the way in which the final Y looks like a tree in *Europe* and almost like a tree in *America*. However, there is so much to notice in the Michelangesque figures of *America's* frontispiece and titlepage—which are described as a diptych (48)—that one is hardly likely to worry about the putative decorative or illustrative gesture on each single word. The editor is wise to suggest that the reader should not think of Abdiel and Abdias when looking at the wailing mother in the frontispiece and the reading "sibyl" (if that is what she is) in the titlepage. The context must change the significance of a figure which may nevertheless come from a classic design—and this is equally true in many of the textual allusions. Accordingly, I would not say that "[l]ike Milton's Messiah in *Paradise Lost*" the Guardian Prince is "armed with diseases . . . to rage bacteriological war." The Messiah's plagues are mental blows, not merely "mythic plagues," and I would rather say that the Guardian Prince is "Unlike Milton's Messiah." Nevertheless, one has to acknowledge the Miltonic reference before worrying about the difference between the Prince and the Son of God. It is no wonder that art historians and students of intertextuality find the previous scholarly work of identification of a "source" with a text enough to have achieved. Blake was some way ahead of modern scholars and critics in his narrative insights.

In *America*, the chained figure that squats, though winged, in the breach of the wall in the frontispiece should perhaps have been related by Dörrbecker to biblical passages of which he seems aware in his note on the text (134 on

America 16:20), but perhaps he was put off by Tannenbaum, who sees the breach as that between man and God but identifies the angel as Orc, who fails to achieve Christ's mediating power. This figure in the breach is recognized as Moses in Psalm 106.23, who "stood before [God] in the breach, to turn away his wrath." Dörrbecker refers to a text in Ezekiel 22.31, about the idea of having a biblical source for such plagues which befall those who have sent them; Exodus 22.30 is parallel to Psalm 106.23, but fascinatingly ironic, because no Moses type (or Abraham type, as in Genesis 18) will appear to save the Jews from the "day of indignation": "And I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it: but I found none."

Whether this fascinating material is indeed relevant, I do not know, but it would tend to identify the angel as a "Guardian" figure, which could well associate his posture with despair. The terms "Guardian" and "Albion's Angel" are being placed under unusual ironic stress in *America*, and these terms should perhaps be considered, I suppose, more fully. We obviously should see an ironically pictured "Guardian" in the warder of *Europe* 15(16). At the same time, bearing in mind the remarks I make later on *The Song of Los* 4, fallen and protective figures must be distinguished. The idea of the "Covering Cherub," which Dörrbecker also considers, is related to these; when one draws or presents an image of despair, one is not thereby making clear the truth.

The way current scholarship presents some of the newly discovered effects in the Blakean manifold text is to suggest a narrative scheme which is closer to a series of inter-related cartoons (after the manner of Hogarth and Gillray) than to epics in the free narratives of Virgil and Milton. At the same time, the students of the epic or the classic tragedy or folk narrative must find more and more significance in particular details than had previously troubled them. Blake himself must have thought he was following the particular effects of writers rather than of innovating them.

Sometimes the intellectual facilities and political programs underlying many of our recent and even older critics get the better of them, as is nowhere found more obviously than in the notes to *America* 8 and 9 (58f). The former shows a resurrecting young man, emerging from the ground (he is more supercharged in the *Glad Day/Albion Rose* group of drawings and engravings). The creatures at the bottom of the plate are thus described:

The animals and plants depicted at the bottom of the plate, Damon saw as 'the symbols of misdirected humanity' (*Philosophy and Symbols* 340), while Baine recognized in them the threat of 'a poisoned future' (*Scattered Portions* 154). However, the lizard, the frog, and the small serpent may as well be emblematic references to the republics of France and the United States . . . ; the plant between these animals either rep-

resents a thistle, Blake's 'general emblem for tyranny' which here 'bends toward the ground, symbolically subdued by the figure above it' (Carretta 200)—or the 'harmless knapweed' (Erdman, *Illuminated Blake* 144). In a political context, the thistle (and the rose) was a conventional emblem associated with the British crown (see Bindman, *Shadow of the Guillotine* 156, no. 145). It has also been argued that as an emblem of Scotland, the thistle may here refer to George III and the 'Scotch politics' of his tyrannical rule. (Carretta 200)

These creatures should rather be compared with the spiders, frogs and snakes that festoon so many of the pages in *Europe*. They belong to the marsh and the earth from which the man arises and their place is with the grave and its skull from which he comes; they are graveyard creatures absurdly preoccupied with corporeal life and death. Individually, they are not symbols of republics, Scotch politics, George III and a poisoned future, except insofar as anything else from the swamps might be.

In discussing plate 9, the sharp difference between the text which sets out Albion's Angel's idea that Orc is a "Blasphemous Demon" and the illustration showing a ram and children sleeping in a peaceful sylvan landscape should, common sense suggests, be discussed in terms of the story in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in which an Angel's lurid fancy about Leviathan is exchanged for an alternative vision: "this appearance was no more, but I found myself sitting on a pleasant bank beside a river by moon light hearing a harper who sung to the harp. & his theme was, The man who never alters his opinion is like standing water, & breeds reptiles of the mind" (pl. 19, E 41-42).

As is explained so often in Blake, when one is asleep, one has nightmares about "reptiles of the mind"; like Samson, one is a slave at the mill. Common sense explains that a vision about America is a dream, and what we see on these two plates shows exactly the narrative progression at work. The illustrations show us what we would see if our senses were not asleep. This remark is simple but an editor should not forget to make it when placing critical insights in perspective.

The effect of spiritual and material inversion must also be applied to *America* 11, as the white on black illustration suggests that an internal sense is being shown. Thus the prostrated wheat is at odds with the growing weeds or flowers, as Erdman has noted in *Blake's Illuminated Books* (for plate 9); Erdman identifies these as poppies, though he admits that this does not conform fully to the whole form of the plants. Dörrbecker relates the poppies to "a symbol of death," citing Baine, *Scattered Portions* 153; but their connotation with sleep seems more appropriate, following my own reading. If Urizen (pl. 10) represents the birth of waters (as in Blake's borrowing from the engraving he performed after Fuseli of the *Birth of the Nile*), then the birth of a child, whether called Orc or not, is one that occurs in a

storm. This birth is seen as unprotected, because it is one that occurs in the post-Atlantic world of America, rather than guarded as in *America* 8, where the plants of the marsh are wilted. However, sometimes the baby is not dead but pink-fleshed, a more optimistic vision, which is allowable because Urizen cannot enforce his own mental rules directly: his nightmare may be seen as a mere dream.

Dörrbecker's notes on the text (127-38) are not, for obvious reasons, sufficient, though they are helpful. He seems to be somewhat impressed by the influence on the poem of Erasmus Darwin, influenced by another of the editors to this series (for volume 6: "The Urizen Books"), David Worrall. As I was reading through the notes, Dörrbecker had me wondering if the account of the moon, in the alternative plate *b*: 4-7, is not so different from the one in Darwin (because the motion described is of the earth descending below the moon, rather than of the moon ascending from the Pacific), that we should be more wary in supposing a relationship. Dörrbecker is aware of some of the biblical references in the text, and I think he adds a Miltonic one which seems plausible (for 12:1-3), but he is not always accurate about which previous commentator came first in publishing a note on an allusion (I have read widely in this field and I would feel hesitant about who came first). Thus (see 131), on 9: 3-4, Damon, *Philosophy and Symbols*, 336 came before Paley; and, on 10: 8, Stevenson, *The Complete Poems* 196 comes before Ostriker.

The discussion of *Europe* seems to me to be the fullest account I have read, and it is strange to me to see this work presented as a subject of major interest. I wrote an article on *Europe* 25 years ago, when it seemed a vague intuition of mine that *Europe* is a great work. My own readings of those times seem to stand now as valuable, but in relation to all the more recent studies they appear as minute particulars in a much larger world, if not to say a void. I am particularly pleased by Dörrbecker's preference for open readings, which suits my own attempts to discern significances in, for instance, the *Night Thoughts* designs and the *Songs* or *Marriage*. Some of his readings could, however, be quietly left unexposed to the modern reader's view, such as the importance of the seven apertures to a woman (278) as an understanding of Leutha's seven churches. Also, references to Proust and Dr. Spock seem to be undue acts of accommodation to modern readers. It need not be expected that someone like myself shall always agree with the editor's references to certain critics I have attacked, such as Tannenbaum; or that I shall wonder about some omissions and must, occasionally, be puzzled by some of his own personal choices. I will not elaborate on all of these.

Sometimes, the editor's sound habit of registering priorities of printed references to background texts cannot match my own records. For instance, I get credit, on 267, for listing imagery found in *Job* 38 and *Milton*, but my own

index cards show that I received these suggestions from Dennis Douglas, who had written a thesis on Blake and Boehme (he also mentioned Luke 2.7 to me). We both thought we were doing something unusual when we gave papers on *Europe* in Melbourne in those days, but now there is nothing strange about selecting *Europe* for particular study. Donald Moore's own 1972 thesis, an annotated edition of *Europe*, is one I have not seen. He will be as aware as I am that questions relating to the characters and episodes in *Europe* remain unduly obscure, even by Blake's standards.

The use of copy B for printing a reproduction is highly admirable, and it enables the editor to select the preface (additional plate 3) and confine discussion to an appendix. This may be a copout, but nevertheless, Dörrbecker's isolation of the Fairy's plate tends to emphasize the importance for Blake of the elemental figure, which is surely not a mere "lyric afterthought," as Erdman once described it.

With *The Song of Los*, the editor does his best to make what he can of what currently still seems an unhelpful critical assessment, in order to present the work as a serious if laconic part of Blake's survey of the four continents. I continue to wonder why Blake bothered so much as he did, not with the few remarkable large illustrations in the work as with the unusually opaque text. The text almost seems a sort of paralipomena, about which Margaret Hood has made the excellent remark that "Blake having presented *America* and *Europe* seems to have realised that he had wanted to SING of Revolution." She goes on to make some highly suggestive, though brief, annotations on the phonemic structure of the songs of Africa and Asia. (See Margaret Anne Hood, "The Voice of Song: A Prosodic and Phonological Approach to William Blake," M.A. thesis, Department of English, University of Adelaide, Dec. 1980, 175-84; this item is not in Dörrbecker's list of texts consulted.) I make a few brief notes in addition to those isolated by Dörrbecker.

Actually, one realizes the shakiness of the ground even in such a statement (290), as "Because it was 'in Ethiopia that the Angels were supposed to have fallen' (Beer *Humanism* 134); see Genesis 6.2 and *The Song of Los* 4: 20)." Beer's unsupported remark probably comes from his work with Coleridge, but if one looks to Genesis 6.2, one may find that the orthodox Christian view was that the Sons of God were not fallen angels, because angels were not given a sex. Furthermore, the angels fall to the earth in Revelation 12, not Genesis. *The Song of Los* 4:20 refers to African "deserts," but not to Ethiopia: Blake's reference is more likely to Egypt and the Sahara. Dörrbecker's words preface a denial that Blake's eternal view of the world's history had much to do with the biblical creation and fall myth or antediluvian, postdiluvian and covenant-law-grace myth; but this suggestion that views expressed in *The Song of Los* could ever have been extra-marginal or cometary flights of the spirit for Blake complicates discussion considerably. Blake con-

tradicted biblical history but I think it oversimplifies the issue to state that these matters "apparently meant very little to Blake."

Similarly, one has doubts about the reading of the full-figure plates. I am not convinced that the globe in plate 1 is a "light-consuming luminary body"; to me, it looks as if the globe gives out light but is obscured by dark patterns on its surface. I am surprised that Dörrbecker does not consider the globe as the worshipping figure's head or, rather, brain or intelligence. This is not a plate to which I have given a lot of study, but I would like to consider that the worship is given to a detached part of the praying figure. Thus, if the plate is a counterpart to the frontispiece to Europe, and both the human figures are Urizen, one forming a horizon, the other worshipping it, we do at least move towards some sense that there is a kind of inclusive Blakean design at work. This sense would continue into plate 2, where the old man and the skull may be readily related to *Elohim Creating Adam*.

Dörrbecker has a lengthy discussion of plate 5, the king and queen on a lily, relating them to Oberon and Titania. I would have thought that the biblical lily reference would tend to associate the king with Solomon and therefore, perhaps, the queen with Sheba; brilliantly dwarfed by the terms of Matthew 6.27-29, which deals with adding cubits to one's stature, taking thought for raiment, and not being arrayed like a lily-flower; the Song of Solomon idea of feeding amongst the lilies would also be appropriate in this context, following such a highly metaphoric reading. Dörrbecker sees "a faint echo" of the biblical text (314), but I would rather see this text as the major source. Nevertheless, Dörrbecker's lengthy account of this plate is a helpful contribution and it may seem a little facile for a reviewer to add or emphasize further suggestions.

Recently, the editor has revealed that he is worried by the misprints in the book, but I was surprised to find how few of those he listed for the benefit of people who use computers (the Ogs on the road to enlightenment) are ones I noted myself. It did not occur to me to worry about such a misspelling as "faceted"; surely, I thought, even Americans would read this without trouble. The Web list has been sent me by Peter Otto, although parts were illegible by the time they got to my university machine. I add some notes of my own (and some of the mistakes are strange and could not be allowed by a word-check, if one was employed).

p. 8, ll. 27f: I am not at all sure what D. means by his reference to the textual note for *The Song of Los* 3:1-5, in relation to distinctions between roman and italic lettering. I assume that the reference is to p. 347.

7 lines from bottom: spell "multiple"

p. 15, l. 7: there's a missing apostrophe for the second quotation

p. 17, l. 18: read "Blake's model ... is"

p. 18, ll. 25-26: delete the second "such"

p. 19, l. 24: spell "status"

p. 28, l. 8: spell "gaoler's"

p. 31: 14 lines from bottom (ignoring here as elsewhere, the footnote): instead of "much" read "many"

p. 38, l. 3: spell "sovereignty"

l. 16: I would have thought it better to read "Unlike Milton's Messiah"

p. 48: 12 lines from bottom: (not a plural) read "be read"

p. 57, l. 19 spell "Notebook"

p. 60, 5 lines from bottom: spell "trilogy"

p. 69, 7 lines from bottom: spell "artist-poet"

p. 129, 15 lines from bottom: spell "Isaiah"

p. 130, 8 lines from bottom: make it "Genesis 28.12, 18"

p. 133, l. 20: the note should indicate that the Angel "burns outstretchd ..."

p. 157, note 13, 3 lines from bottom to the bottom line, try: "With Tolley and Tannenbaum all that these studies have in common is that Blake is seen as critically revising and 'revisioning' Milton's celebratory hymn, a view that has been contradicted by Wittreich alone (see *Angel of Apocalypse* 90)."

p. 160, 13 lines from bottom: spell "contradictory"

p. 161, l. 19 spell "worthwhile"

p. 179, 17 to 16 lines from bottom: it seems redundant to have all that "falling ... fall ... fallen" repetition

p. 185, l. 23: spell "Rintrah's"

p. 194, l. 9: spell "acrobats"

p. 196, l. 15: spell "De Groot"

p. 199, l. 17: the last word is "be"

p. 203, 12 lines from bottom: spell "led"

p. 214, l. 24: read "11[13]"

p. 266 [for *Plate 3(4)*, l. 8], line 3: delete "to"

p. 274, four lines from bottom: read "Howard has suggested that we identify"

p. 275, 15 lines from bottom: spell "institutions"

p. 276, 4 lines from bottom: read "Colonies remain"

p. 282, l. 2: spell "dystopian"

p. 296, 2 lines from bottom: spell "which"

p. 298, 8 lines from bottom: spell "eighteenth century"

p. 304, l. 1: spell "compositional"

p. 348, l. 16: spell "philosophers"

p. 357, 3 lines from bottom: spell "Darwin"

p. 366, 18 lines from bottom: spell "Webster, Brenda S."