

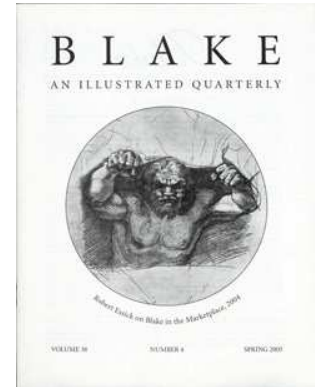
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R E V I E W

David Weir, *Brahma in the West: William Blake and the Oriental Renaissance*

Sibylle Erle

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ing new models of 'Divine Vision.' These pages seem to record and receive without ever exhausting the dream of presence" (120). Pierce's detailed reading reinvigorated my own interest in the frequently incoherent and fragmentary—yet fascinating—text of *The Four Zoas*. While I am frequently nonplussed by Pierce's claims that he is pushing new theoretical ground with regard to Blake, he can use that theory to draw attention to intriguing details in the text. For example, his comments on how explicitly Christian imagery is added during a later redaction of the text, which indicates some of the sedimentation and striation of Blake's mythological imagination, or how the appearance of the Council of God creates similar problems for a notional narrative and thematic unity of the text, are genuinely useful insights. These are absorbing examples of Pierce's archaeological "dig" performed on a poem that is often literally written under erasure.

The final chapter on *Milton* is less inspiring overall as it returns to some of the thematic and formal ideas examined earlier in the book (and is thus something of a disappointment after the experimental palimpsest of *The Four Zoas*). Pierce's claim early in the chapter, following Wittreich, that he is less concerned with Milton the man than in Milton refracted through eighteenth-century commentators, and that "the Milton of the poem is a discursive field rather than a representation of a historical personage" (131), can be frustrating. The rewriting of Milton, and Blake's contribution to that "discursive field," is potentially fascinating, yet Pierce's contextualization of such a field is too brief and sketchy to be convincing. Certainly there are other writers, such as Wittreich and Lucy Newlyn, who provide much more detailed analysis of Milton's contribution to Romanticism, and Pierce's discussion of the archive around this particular discursive field is far too paltry. Towards the end of the chapter we are presented with a page on Addison's rereading of Milton as an inveterate classicist (hence Blake's disgust at subservience to "Greek or Roman models"), with a nod towards Dryden and John Dennis. While the general point made by Pierce at this juncture is a fair one, that Blake was on the attack against a tendency by certain writers in the eighteenth century to judge contemporary poetry by its conformity to abstract rules, the evidence he offers here is simply too meager. Milton was not as thoroughly depoliticized as the example of Addison suggests, even in the eighteenth century; Samuel Johnson and John Toland, at different times and for extremely different purposes, attacked or invoked Milton in support of their own political positions. Even if we restrict ourselves to aesthetic theory, however, subtly different readings of Milton were available to Blake as part of the "series of discursive fields" surrounding the poet, such as the representation of Milton as a bardic, even mystical, poet of imagination in Collins's "Ode on the Poetical Character." Despite such frustrations, however, this chapter does have plenty of its own insights, most notable of which for me was the discussion of Los's printing press as not merely an externalization of the body in a technology of writing, but part of Los's labor, an act of intellectual warfare as much as an act of

mechanical reproduction. "The connection of the press with Los and his labor suggests instead a reinvestment of creative consciousness in the modes of production of meaning: the printing press is as much an extension of his body as his anvil and furnaces are" (142). Unfortunately, writing as political struggle is often missing from Pierce's account, but there are flashes within this chapter that suggest just how important the battle for Milton's inheritance was within an emerging literary public sphere that sought to confine this dangerous precursor within clearly defined "classical" boundaries.

The Wondrous Art concludes by returning to a detail from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* where a devil dictates to scribes, part of what Pierce calls "the Infernal Scriptorium." The devil dictating as part of this scriptorium, engaged in argument, is intrinsically dialogic rather than monologic and is invoked as an example of Barthes's scriptor. Pierce's comment that he wishes to emphasize this social aspect of writing so as not to detach a theory of writing from historical and social concerns "as some strands of American deconstruction have appeared to do" (156) is, unfortunately, too little too late. Nonetheless, his attempt to recuperate a theory of Blake's writing from mechanical repetition is a worthy one, and while I find *The Wondrous Art* a little too implicated in precisely those ahistorical traits that have dogged certain "strands of American deconstruction," it illuminates some of the minute particulars of Blake's writing.

David Weir. *Brahma in the West: William Blake and the Oriental Renaissance*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003. xiii + 170 pp.; 11 b&w illus. \$21.95/£13.75, paperback.

Reviewed by Sibylle Erle

Blake has for some time ceased to be the "solitary visionary" with no "definite contacts with Hindu texts" depicted in Raymond Schwab's *Le Renaissance orientale* (1950, English trans. 1984).¹ Thanks now to David Weir, the source texts and also those who possibly mediated Hindu myths to Blake have been further identified. More importantly, *Brahma in the West* puts Blake's references to Hinduism, long since brought to our attention through the scholarly intuition of S. Foster Damon, Northrop Frye, and Kathleen Raine, into their contemporary discourses (45ff). Weir's book is a fresh attempt at interpreting the dynamic of Blake's Zoa and Emanation constellations.

1. Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880*, trans. Gene Patterson-Black and Victor Reiking (New York: Columbia UP, 1984) 97.

While delineating the scholarly ambitions and different agendas of those who wrote on Hinduism in the late eighteenth century, Weir argues that Blake was not only highly sensitive but also very receptive to the political implications of the Oriental Renaissance. *Brahma in the West* is essentially an attempt to historicize Blake's engagement with the knowledge of Hinduism potentially available to him at the time. Although the links between Blake and some of the protagonists of the Oriental Renaissance are tentative, information about India was easy to come by. While Blake refers to Charles Wilkins as late as 1809, Weir documents that the *Analytical Review* discussed the translation of Hindu myths as early as 1790 (91). He stresses further that the comparative studies of Eastern religion "found a ready audience among members of London's dissenting community" (87). Casting Blake as a fervent reader of the radical press and firmly establishing him within the radical and dissenting circle of Joseph Johnson, Weir points out that Blake's perception of Hinduism was biased towards radicalism from the very beginning. It was through Johnson's *Analytical Review* that Blake was encouraged to equate political content with mythological form. This approach makes Weir a stimulating read.

In Britain, Indian politics were perceived as part of the expansion of the Empire. With the India Act of 1784—an attempt to assume responsibility and regulate the administration of India and its inhabitants—the Pitt government made clear its intention to curb the economic power of the East India Company. Though in *Brahma in the West* we learn little about global war, British imperialism, colonial rule, or even the role of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Weir's discussion of the complex and complicated situation of Indian politics and the British constructs of the Orient is often broad and general, and his referencing of Blake's potentially India-inspired metaphors is meticulous. When it comes to Blake's poem "The Tyger," Weir takes an imaginative leap to India: encouraged by the power vacuum left by the French Revolution, the Muslim leader Tipu Sultan—self-declared "Citizen Tipu"—began to attack the British. Even though he was overwhelmed by General Munro in

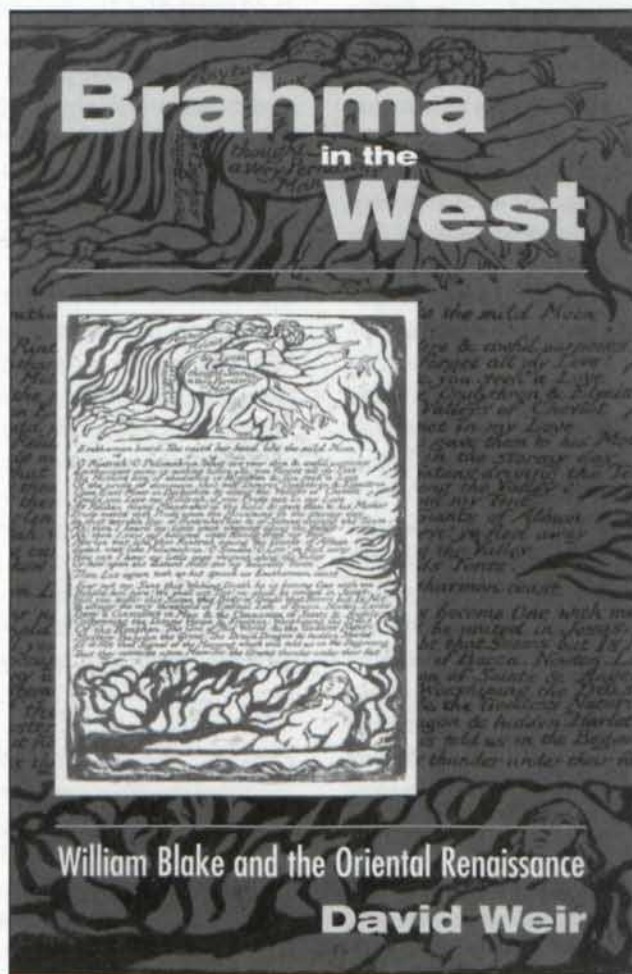
1792, a different kind of defeat was noted by the British public when it became known that the general's son had been killed by an Indian tiger in the same year. Weir's neat conclusion is that "The Tyger" was not only written in response to young Munro's death, but that its tiger was also partly Indian (20).

Within Britain the arguments about empire and revolution centered around Edmund Burke, who condemned the French Revolution and criticized the former Governor General of Bengal, Warren Hastings (1732-1818). Whereas Burke's polemic campaign against Hastings resulted in a conservative policy success, the English Jacobins began to see both the

Governor General and India as victims of the Pitt government (25). The possible connection between Blake and Hastings is Charles Wilkins's 1785 translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Hastings not only supported this translation, but also wrote its preface and claimed that Hindu faith was a variation on Christian doctrine. Weir writes: "there are parts of Hastings's account of the *Gita* that relate in general terms to theological elements in Blake's evolving mythology" (94).

By the late eighteenth century works on Hinduism, written by the linguist and first president of the Asiatic Society of Bengal Sir William Jones (1746-94), were widely available. According to Weir, Jones's "On the Gods of Greece, Italy, and India," reviewed by Henry Fuseli for the *Analytical Review* in 1790, may in particular have encouraged Blake to insist on the antiquity of the Eastern faith when challenging the authority of the Western church

in his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (often dated 1790-93). Indeed, most of the mythographic studies of the 1790s were either published by Johnson or reviewed and discussed in the *Analytical Review* (46). The arguments of these works—often inherently theological and sometimes anti-French—are often closely intertwined, which leads Weir to conclude that Blake was attracted to India via Jones and his followers rather than through Joseph Bryant's *A New System, or, An Analysis of Ancient Mythology* (1774-76)—an edition for which Blake had made engravings during his apprenticeship to James Basire. Kathleen Raine in *Blake and Tradition* (1969) concedes that Blake may have been familiar with Jones and Wilkins, and



then emphasizes what she had identified as the "link between Blake's philosophical studies of Berkeley and the mythology of the veiled goddess."²

Weir analyzes "the Mundane Egg" and the "Veil of Vala" in relation to Thomas Maurice's *The History of Hindustan* (1796-98) and William Jones's "A Hymn to Narayena" (1785). Blake's use of the spider in *The Four Zoas* is referenced to Joseph Priestley's *A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with Those of the Hindoos and other Ancient Nations* (1799), and the attack on priestcraft is glossed with William Julius Mickle's "Enquiry into the Religious Tenets and Philosophy of the Brahmins" (1798). Weir also identifies key visual quotations in *Jerusalem* and traces them back to Edward Moor's *The Hindu Pantheon* (1810), pointing out that Moor's engraver, Moses Haughton, lived with Fuseli (75).

It is interesting to see how Weir positions himself with respect to the research undertaken into Blake's theology—beginning with J. G. Davies's *The Theology of William Blake* (1948), extensively revised by Jon Mee and E. P. Thompson in the early 1990s, and more recently amended in an attempt to identify Blake's theology with a specific religious alignment of 1790's dissent. Weir makes references to E. P. Thompson's discussion of Muggletonianism and A. D. Nuttall's of Gnosticism, but seems strangely unaware of Keri Davies's work, which gives compelling evidence that Thompson was wrong in linking Blake to the Muggletonians.³ Indeed, how can Weir assume that Thompson as a Marxist historian would discuss religion on its own terms? Ideally, Weir ought to have drawn on a wider range of authorities on eighteenth-century dissent and antinomianism before plunging himself—and trying to pull his readers after him—into a deep discussion of Blake's theology. One example of Weir's rushed shortcuts is his suggestion that the Behmenists constitute a sect (127).

Weir's neoplatonist argument is important. He essentially reintroduces Blake as a neoplatonist while presenting him as a combination of radical writer and mystic poet. Blake's link to neoplatonism in the wake of its "revival" (104) is usually based on his acquaintance with the Plato translator Thomas Taylor. In *Witness against the Beast* (1993), E. P. Thompson argued that this connection was not very helpful. Interestingly, while Thompson in his revision of G. M. Harper's *The Neoplatonism of William Blake* (1961) tries to separate interpretation from biographical fact, Weir seems to be doing the reverse. He argues that next to the antinomian undercurrent with which Hindu myths were offered to their late eighteenth-century audience, there also existed a tendency to make Hinduism neoplatonist: "the antinomian points of Wilkins's *Gita* have a kind of theological complement in William Jones's Neoplatonic explanations of the Hindu system"

(104). The link to Blake is obviously the *Analytical Review*, which disseminated the combination of antinomian mythography with neoplatonist belief made explicit in Jones's "On the Gods of Greece, Italy and India." Weir stresses that neoplatonism was an integral part of dissenting theology. Consequently, Blake "set antinomianism and Neoplatonism in a reciprocal theological relationship and made them reinforce one another" (105). Neoplatonism in Blake has most notably been discussed by both Kathleen Raine and E. P. Thompson. While Raine insisted on Blake's gradual and selective absorption of hermetic thought, Thompson rejected this stance to differentiate between an early exposure to radical-dissenting interpretations of the Bible—in particular, those proposed by Behmenists and Philadelphians—and a later, mature engagement with the sources themselves. In the end it is not entirely clear how Weir resolves the contradictions between Raine and Thompson. Regrettable also is that Weir does not acknowledge the pioneering work of Piloo Nanavutty. She identified a number of available publications on India as well as of Indian texts and started looking for traces of Hindu thought in Blake long before Raine.⁴

In relation to the scholarly interest taken in Blake's theology and politics in the 1790s, this study of Blake not only revises—or rather reopens—the discussion on Blake's awareness of Eastern religion, but also argues convincingly for Blake's participation in the Oriental Renaissance. *Brahma in the West* fits in well with the recent developments in Blake studies. It highlights the possible interpenetration of Blake's creative mythography and the late eighteenth-century Westernized version of Hinduism and thus gives a highly useful description of the interaction between religion, society and cultural change.

4. Piloo Nanavutty, "William Blake and the Hindu Creation Myths," *The Divine Vision: Studies in the Poetry and Art of William Blake*, ed. Vivian de Sola Pinto (London: Victor Gollancz P, 1957) 163-82.

2. Kathleen Raine, *Blake and Tradition*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969) II: 177.

3. Keri Davies, "William Blake's Mother: A New Identification," *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 33.2 (fall 1999): 36-50.