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R E V I E W

## John Beer, Blake's Visionary Universe

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## REVIEWS

John Beer. *BLAKE'S VISIONARY UNIVERSE*. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press; New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1969. Pp. xiv + 394. 78 illus. 70s; \$11.50.

*Reviewed by Irene H. Chayes, Silver Spring, Maryland*

This book is the companion and continuation of *Blake's Humanism*, published just one year before; there are some overlappings, repetitions, and revisions, and some of the same difficulties, beginning with the present title. The words "vision" and "visionary" were used in the earlier volume, and in *Coleridge the Visionary* as well, with an evasive looseness that has not been remedied. Blake's "vision" here is not primarily, as some might expect, his creative imagination as a poet or an artist. Sometimes the word is a synonym for "fantasy," or it merges with the plural "visions" of anecdote, which Beer refers to but makes no attempt to examine critically. (The Ancient of Days above the staircase is invoked several times.) Often, "vision" seems to be no more than the quality inferred from a passage of lyrical affirmation or moral exhortation, the effect of Blake's poetic powers rather than the cause. In his more general remarks, Beer stays close to Blake's own language and juggles his terms, noun and adjective, in sentences which reach completion without yielding up a definition. When Blake is said to stress the "visionary element" of world myths, for example, he is seen arguing that "all alike were telling a common story of the decline of Man from original Vision" (p. 15). Later, following the account of *Jerusalem*, the word-play is carried to the subject of the whole study: "Blake had come to acknowledge that the most important point about his visionary universe was not that it was a universe but that it was visionary" (p. 263).

Unlike "vision" and "visionary" alone, however, "visionary universe" does have a practical equivalent in the specific discussions here. It is the not unfamiliar world of the prophetic books, "a symbolic and interpretative landscape," as Beer eventually calls it, whose traditional and mythological elements have been well investigated by Damon, Percival, Raine, and Hirst, as well as by lesser workers in the same vineyard. Beer has little to add to what is already known of Blake's background in these matters, and he does not fully develop the motifs he himself singles out for emphasis: "pathos" and "sublimity," the sceptre and crown, the shell, the "phallic lapse." Instead, and rather surprisingly, the contribution of his study turns out to be straightforward commentary, sustained over the three central chapters and covering both *The Four Zoas* and *Jerusalem*, book by book. Inevitably there are some misreadings and distortions of Blake's texts, balanced by felicities of observation and insight elsewhere; a literate new reader who previously had only glanced at the poems undoubtedly would gain enlightenment from Beer's commentary, and the acknowledgments in the Preface suggest that it is such a reader who is being addressed in the expository portions of the book. I leave a detailed critique of these chapters to other reviewers. Instead, in this limited space I would like to consider Beer's way of looking at Blake's pictures, which is more revealing than the commentary and more pertinent to current discussions in the *Newsletter*.

The interpretation of the Arlington Court painting which John E. Grant has challenged<sup>1</sup> is included in a chapter dealing mainly, and conventionally enough, with the illustrations to Young, Dante, and the Book of Job. My concern is with Beer's inter-



pretations in another section of his book, where the illustrations cited in the critical text are grouped according to a private scheme of the author's own, with a separate commentary. The terms used in the captions are from Blake--"Innocence," "Experience," "energy," "desire," "moral law," and of course "vision"--but the phrasing and the combinations and contrasts are Beer's, and to the hypothetical new reader who may have been won by the chapters on the poetry the relation of the captions to the illustrations is likely to be as mysterious as the relation of the plates to each other. Interpretive captions are usually assigned only to Blake's designs, although pictures from other sources are introduced for comparison; on occasion, Beer's purposes seem to be served by the comparative plates alone, without reference to those by Blake. (See, e.g., Figs. 17 and 18, "The Imposition of Law," and 19, "Cruelty under the Law.")

Beer perhaps would defend his arrangement and his captions by quoting what he asserts in his last chapter about the work of the "visionary" painter: "the symbolic meaning is a guide to the internal organization of the design" (p. 297). But even if it were possible, at the present stage of Blake studies, for all to agree that a "symbolic meaning" is what must be sought in each Blake design, and that John Beer has found the key: even so, objections would have to be made to Beer's descriptions and interpretations on elementary grounds. In *Blake's Humanism*, every serpent entwining a human figure (including the earthworm in "Elohim Creating Adam") was an image of "selfhood"; here, serpents either coiling in spirals or entangled with groups of human figures (Figs. 24-30) are designated "energies." "The picture actually changes for us as we learn what it is about," Beer says of "visionary" painting; but the changes in these designs that are implied by the captions are unacceptable. The opposition set up between men in *Urizen* 25 (Fig. 29) and women in *Jerusalem* 75 (Fig. 30) is clearly wrong, as John Grant also has pointed out, and it is doubtful that the creatures in Fig. 29 can be called serpents at all. (The Ghisi engraving reproduced as Fig. 28 is identified only as "Serpents attacking men." Actually, the struggling group is a detail from a famous original, which itself is relevant to both Blake designs--but not in Beer's terms.)

Or there is Fig. 54, the design from Plate 4 of *Europe*. Evidently recalling the verbal imagery of veiling and covering in the poetry, Beer labels this "Woman veiling child of Vision," in spite of the summons "Arise O Orc" in the text.<sup>2</sup> Fig. 53 is an engraving after Raphael's "Madonna of the Veil," offered in contrast; yet if Enitharmon's action is recognized as *unveiling*, there is not a contrast between the two scenes but a parallel, which confirms and is confirmed by the Orc-Jesus analogy at the beginning of *Europe*. In his picture commentary, however, Beer fuses the two figures as "Jesus who has been veiled by the Church" (p. 374) and bewilderingly (unless it is a misprint) cites Fig. 53.

On the other hand, when Beer seems to be reporting direct observation he may be equally unreliable. There is *no* "extraordinary resemblance" (p. 370) between Blake's three figures in "Har and Heva Bathing" (Fig. 2) and "corresponding figures" in Piero della Francesca's fresco "The Death of Adam," one of the series at Arezzo mentioned by Grant. In the fresco group Beer must be referring to but does not illustrate, the resemblances are only general: staring eyes, a use of profiles, an archaic stiffness of attitude, which in the case of Blake would be explained by the uncertainties of his early style. Otherwise, in the setting, the placement of the figures and their relation to each other, and their individual poses, Piero's scene is very different from Blake's; moreover, it is the mortality of Adam and Eve that he emphasizes, their physical decline in old age, not the perpetual youthfulness Blake bestows on Har and Heva along with their white hair. Since Beer adds that Blake "could hardly have known" Piero's fresco, what he seems really to be saying is that the *idea* of the death of an aged Adam enables him, the commentator, to leap ahead of his evidence and identify the white-haired corpses in his Fig. 3, the title page of *Songs of Experience*, as Har and Heva "laid out in death."



At the beginning of his special commentary on the illustrations, Beer speaks of exploring "the relationships between Blake's visual symbolism and the images of earlier art." Unfortunately, such an exploration is precisely what is missing, although some of the pairings of Blake's designs with likely sources or models can be corroborated by those of us who, for different purposes, have been making similar investigations. A recognition of "resemblance" or of Blake's "different treatment" of a theme shared with another artist is the most Beer has to offer the reader who is not committed to a search for symbolic meanings but who may be curious about the pictures placed before him in juxtaposition. This critical default damages even the best and most suggestive exhibits, none more strikingly than Figs. 31 and 32. I agree that Michelangelo's "The Fall of Phaethon" was surely Blake's model for Plate 5 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and that the particular version Beer has chosen--the last of three drawings on the same subject, made for Michelangelo's friend Tommaso Cavalieri--was probably the one Blake knew. (Beer publishes an engraving. The original drawing is in the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle.) Something in the graphic imagery or the composition of the two designs must have impressed Beer in some way when he first looked at them; the relation he noted between them must have been based on something more than the idea of *fall*. Curiously, however, what he says about them he might have said without reference to an illustration of any kind. In the text (pp. 150, 154) the fall of Phaethon, in terms of the myth, is mentioned only as a simile. "The fall of visionary desire" is the caption assigned to MHH 5 as Fig. 32, and it obviously comes from Blake's capsule reading of *Paradise Lost* in the text of the same plate ("It indeed appear'd to Reason as if Desire was cast out"). When Beer says in his picture commentary, "The Fall of Phaethon is for Blake a story of the failure of Desire under the Law" (p. 372), he is forging a last link of his own to join the subject of Michelangelo's drawing and Blake's view of Miltonic contrariety, and the result is a closed circle of abstraction which excludes the particularities of both narratives no less than those of both designs.

"The symbolic meaning is a guide to the internal organization of the design." It is this principle, evidently, that enables Beer to make what is in effect his own prophetic book out of his seventy-eight heterogeneous illustrations, for which the captions and the special commentary seem intended to perform much the same function as Blake's engraved inscriptions for the copied figures of Laocoon and the pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea. In the instance of the design from MHH 5, the caption actually makes it unnecessary for the reader to devote more than a glance to the illustration itself, if, like the exegete, he is impatient to uncover its "symbolic meaning." Yet the design from MHH 5, in particular, if it were adequately seen and fully explored in relation to both Michelangelo's drawing and *Paradise Lost*, might demonstrate that "internal organization" and "visual effect" can have a significance of their own which is not dependent on the kind of symbolic meaning Beer deduces, but which is not a matter of merely technical description or the annotations of an art historian. An exploration of this kind might in fact help to establish a concrete, practical, and definable meaning for "vision" in Blake's art.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Blake Newsletter, 4 (August 1970), 15ff. A neutral bystander might note of this particular dispute that if Beer's "vision of the Book of Revelation" tends to dissolve the images of the painting into the prose of the King James Bible, Grant's "minute" descriptions threaten to replace the carefully organized whole by a Urizenic sum of its parts, and the parts of a number of other Blake pictures. Perhaps the emphasis on composition promised for the Warner-Simmons essay will be a corrective.



<sup>2</sup>On *Europe 4*, see my "The Presence of Cupid and Psyche" in Erdman and Grant, eds., *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 218-19.

Allen Ginsberg. ALLEN GINSBERG/WILLIAM BLAKE: "SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE" BY WILLIAM BLAKE, TUNED BY ALLEN GINSBERG. With Peter Orlovsky, variously accompanied. [MGM "Verve" FTS-3083 \$5.98.] Side 1, *Songs of Innocence*: "Introduction," "The Shepherd," "The Ecchoing Green," "The Lamb," "The Little Black Boy," "The Blossom," "The Chimney-Sweeper," "The Little Boy Lost," "The Little Boy Found," "Laughing Song," "Holy Thursday," "Night." Side 2, *Songs of Experience*: "Introduction," "Nurses Song," "The Sick Rose," "Ah! Sun-Flower," "The Garden of Love," "London," "The Human Abstract," "To Tirzah," (and in addition) "The Grey Monk."

*Reviewed by Morris Eaves, University of New Mexico*

This is a full stereo package in the new style of providing a single disc in double covers (as the record companies used to do for two-disc sets only), leaving room to reproduce some of the plates from the *Songs* outside, pictures of Ginsberg and Orlovsky inside, along with an extra sheet of lyrics, and--unusual these days--a whole page of very densely printed liner notes. Mr. Ginsberg has very kindly allowed us to reprint the liner notes here (see "To Young or Old Listeners" in *COMMENTARY* following this review, pp. 98-103).

# I

I shall begin with a long and more or less "theoretical" digression and come back to the performances later. The reader may want to skip from here to Section II.

There are two ways of thinking about Blake's work in illuminated printing. One is Blake's way, and the other for convenience I shall call Jacob Bronowski, Stanley Gardner, and Harold Bloom's way, recognizing however that Bronowski, Gardner, and Bloom have said out loud what many others have silently believed, and that neither Bronowski, Gardner, nor Bloom has extended his argument as far as I extend it here. It may be fairest for the reader to regard my "Bronowski," "Gardner," and "Bloom" as straw men. At any rate, the two ways of thinking about Blake's work in illuminated printing, theirs and Blake's, head off in opposite directions.

Blake asserted that "Poetry Painting & Music" are "the three Powers in Man of conversing with Paradise which the flood did not Sweep away" (*VLJ*, in Erdman's edition of *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* [hereafter *E*], p. 548). He was obviously proud of his ability to combine the first two Powers in his invention of "Illuminated Printing" (*Prospectus* 1793, *E* 670) and hoped that the public would find his combination an improvement over the separate arts: "If a method of Printing which combines the Painter and the Poet is a phenomenon worthy of public attention, provided that it exceeds in elegance all former methods, the Author is sure of his reward" (*E* 670). Although in illuminated printing he could not easily combine the Musician with the Painter and the Poet, Blake nevertheless liked to think of music as being there to make a third with poetry and painting. He called attention to the presence of music in the *Songs* simply by naming the collection, and later, to the presence of music in all poetry by speaking of poetry as "sounds of spiritual music" with "accompanying expressions of articulate speech" (*Desc Cat* 1809, *E* 532). Blake's belief in art as