

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY

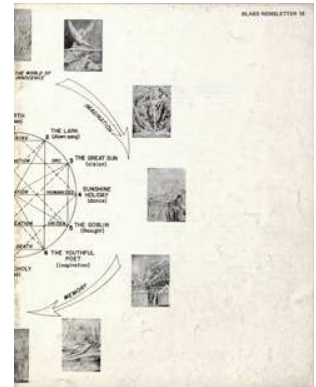
BLAKE

D I S C U S S I O N

A Reply to Irene Chayes

John Beer

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Page 61 In *TLS* 13 September 1957, 547, Kathleen Raine asked if anyone could identify the source of the quotation from Dryden on this page of the *Note-Book*, "At length for hatching ripe he breaks the shell." Just in case she never received an answer, Blake is quoting *Fables Ancient and Modern*, "Palamon and Arcite," Bk. III, line 1069.

Page 72 Compare the sketch to the figure running over the waves on the title page of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*.

Page 74 The woman standing over a supine child, upper left, is the preliminary for the same figures above the text of "Holy Thursday" in *Songs of Experience*.

I suspect that this volume will be rendered nearly useless when Erdman's new facsimile edition of the *Note-Book* appears from the Clarendon Press (announced in *Blake Newsletter*, Fall, 1970, p. 36). Until then, the reprint is all we have available.

DISCUSSION "With intellectual spears, & long winged arrows of thought"

JOHN BEER: PETERHOUSE, CAMBRIDGE

A Reply to Irene Chayes

Since my letter replying to John E. Grant appeared alongside a review of *Blake's Visionary Universe* [see the *Blake Newsletter*, 4 (Winter 1971), 87-90] which raises further points about my reading of Blake's visual designs, I should like to renew the discussion briefly. I was disappointed that Mrs. Chayes reviewed the illustrations and the section of commentary in isolation instead of (as I had hoped) studying both in the context of the book's argument, but this approach is consistent with her general "direct" view of Blake's art. As with her reading of *The Ancient Mariner* as an ironic poem about a deluded visionary (in *Studies in Romanticism* IV), moreover, her view of the early Romantics is so different from mine that it would need more than a note to discuss the larger points at issue. For my own part, her desire for a "concrete, practical, and definable meaning for 'vision' in Blake's art," however laudable, strikes me as quite inappropriate for the sort of vision that Blake himself enjoyed. Either one believes that Blake's interpreting imagination was constantly intervening between his sources and his designs, or one does not, however; and it is good that both points of view should be expressed vigorously. In this note, therefore, I want mainly to comment on the paragraphs in which she suggests that my interpretations of individual designs can be faulted on more elementary grounds.

One or two criticisms can be dealt with quickly. At one point she says: "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" Mr. Grant, of course, "pointed out" nothing of the kind. What he was claiming (entirely without justifica-

tion) was that I saw the women in *Jerusalem* 75 as men! And my purpose, in any case, was not to set up a contrast between men and women, but between energy unorganized and energy organized--states which have nothing to do with the gender of the protagonists. Similarly, she claims that in figs. 17-19 my purposes "seem to be served by the comparative plates alone, without reference to those by Blake." But these plates and their relevance to Blake are discussed in detail elsewhere, on pages 17 and 42-43 of my book, as reference to the index would have shown.

Other, more thoughtful points, need more detailed reply:

(1) Mrs. Chayes points out that when, in *Blake's Humanism*, I show figures entwined by serpents or serpentine forms I usually describe them as versions of the "selfhood," whereas in *Blake's Visionary Universe* I usually characterize them as "energies"; she suggests that this shows some contradiction, or change of mind, on my part. This is not so. The serpent is *always* in some sense an emblem of energy in Blake; that is, I would maintain, one of the few truly assured points in his symbolism. The further point is a slightly complicated one but would have been elucidated had she looked up the main entry under "Selfhood" in the index to *Blake's Humanism*, which would have led her to the following statement: "Blake illustrates the fall of Man by the rearing of his energy, isolated from vision, into an autonomous Selfhood which governs all his actions." My point, to elaborate slightly, is that Blake saw the original creation of the selfhood as contemporaneous with the creation of energy in the body. In the beginning it is innocent, as illustrated by its appearance as a giant earthworm (here I agree with Mrs. Chayes) in "The Elohim creating Adam." But if not organized by man, the destructive energy of the serpent takes over, turning innocent energy into the coils of an imprisoning Selfhood. What should have been part of man's own expressive being is turned against him as a constricting force. In the course of *Blake's Humanism* I draw attention to several versions of this paradigm, notably the series of designs known as "The Gates of Paradise." In terms of the serpent image, however, it is best seen in the various illustrations to *Paradise Lost*, where the distortion of energies at the Fall is depicted by a complete encircling of Eve by the serpent, and the redemption is prefigured by a crucifixion scene in which the nail through Christ's foot passes through the eye of a serpent now fully subordinated. Throughout, it is the dealings of men with their own energies that is in question.

(2) Your reviewer also maintains that I am wrong to think that the figure in *Europe* 4 is veiling the child and that she is really unveiling it. I did in fact think about this question for a long time. The design in question is basically ambiguous, since the female figure is leaning on a cloud, which cannot give her very much leverage in what Mrs. Chayes might call the "concrete, practical and definable" sense of the word. But from the energetic thrust of her outstretched arm I concluded that she was more concerned to establish the veil than to remove it. Mrs. Chayes wants to associate her with the words "Arise O Orc" in the text; but these are on the previous plate, and the relevant lines nearest to the design are:

Forbid all Joy, & from her childhood shall the little female
Spread nets in every secret path.

On my interpretation, it is the child of Joy that is being veiled here. Mrs. Chayes wants to associate Orc with Jesus; again, I would disagree. What I have argued in *Blake's Humanism* (pp. 120-24) is that the "secret child" of *Europe* is "the Christ whom the Christians worship, a figure of secrecy and shame" and that Enitharmon's invocation of Orc is an invocation of a complementary figure of energy, visualized by her as an ambiguous Dionysus, who expresses himself in destruction, or at best intoxicated pleasure, rather than in the lineaments of the full, fourfold human. Behind both the secret

child, Jesus, and the child of pure energy, Orc, there is a Blakean child of true "four-fold" vision and energy, and it is this child that the woman is seen veiling beneath the cloud she kneels on in *Europe* 4. My point in juxtaposing this design with Raphael's "Madonna of the Veil" was to suggest that since Blake would probably have seen in Raphael's design an image of the human Jesus who was, in his view, veiled by the Churches, he might well have found inspiration here for his own design to express a more complicated version of the process by which the original child of vision is veiled. My interpretation is open to further discussion, obviously, but it is perfectly self-consistent--and there are no misprints.

(3) Whether one finds an "extraordinary resemblance" between Piero della Francesca's "Death of Adam" and the designs showing Blake's Har, Heva and Mnetha is clearly a matter for legitimate difference: I find an amazing likeness of tone and atmosphere to "The Death of Adam" in Blake's designs--where Mrs. Chayes sees only "the uncertainties of his early style." But since, as I point out, Blake could hardly have known Piero's design, we are in any case talking about a coincidence and a possible kinship of vision, not about any question of influence or of detailed resemblances. And it is unjust (even gratuitously so?) to accuse me of "leaping ahead of my evidence here," and of taking a theme from Piero as a step in my own argument, where I go on to identify the figures on the title-page of *Songs of Experience* as Har and Heva. The relation between Har and Heva and Adam and Eve is traced in my books as a central theme in Blake's myth-making. His own version, I argue, of the Adam and Eve story was to suppose that the vision and energy of the original Adam had been separated out into the ineffective vision of Har and the destructive energy of Tiriell: consequently Har stayed in paradise with Heva, becoming more and more foolish, while Tiriell ranged the world of experience outside destroying others, and, eventually, himself. The fact that Piero's design should be called "The Death of Adam" was simply, for me, a further facet to a notable coincidence: my interpretation of Har and Heva was undertaken quite independently.

(4) Several of Mrs. Chayes's remarks suggest that she thinks Blake was always more likely to know original paintings than engravings after originals. In my book I have tended to work from the opposite assumption. Much here, obviously, must depend on where and when particular paintings were available in the England of Blake's time, but my general assumption is that he spent far more time in the "print-shops" than in the "king's palaces" that B. H. Malkin speaks of (see p. 369 of my book). It would be good to have more light on this question.

The basic question remains: is one to interpret Blake's visual work and his use of earlier sources primarily through his immediate visual memory of them, or through the intervention of an imagination that was always searching for significance and for symbolic patterns? Both approaches, clearly, have their legitimate place, and when I have refrained from commenting on visual likenesses it has often been because I thought they would be obvious to the reader--that, after all, is one reason for reproducing illustrations in the first place. But I must resist the claim that my approach reduces the interpretation of particular designs to a "closed circle of abstractions." This is the very opposite of my intention. Vision was not for Blake an abstraction, nor was energy, or liberty, or desire, or innocence, or experience. They were all for him states which he experienced in himself and which he felt to be so urgently real that he wanted to express his sense of them to others at whatever price, and by whatever means. If the reader, coming across such words in my study, does not find them corresponding to an inward state in himself, then he should shut the book and go back to look for the particular lineaments of vision, energy and so on in the original designs. If he reaches a point where such words cease to be abstractions and begin to speak through a particular slant of the eye, say, or a particular thrust of the fore-

head in Blake's figures, he will have begun to understand the nature of the language that I am trying to use in my books, and will have been rescued from the net of abstraction that always lurks in any attempt to seize Blake through interpretative commentary.

MINUTE PARTICULARS

LOUIS MIDDLEMAN: CARNEGIE-MELLON UNIVERSITY

"Bring out number, weight & measure in a year of dearth"

William Blake's use of the Bible is copiously documented, but it has as yet gone unnoticed that one of the Proverbs of Hell, "Bring out number, weight & measure in a year of dearth," is built on a close translation of the Aramaic writing on the wall (Daniel 5.25-28), "mene, mene, tekel, upharsin," or "numbered, numbered, weighed, divided."

Blake announces in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* the advent of a new heaven consequent upon the destruction of a rationalistic epistemology based on a reductive materialism. The writing on the wall appeared at the feast of Belshazzar, last king of Babylon, prophesying the fall of his kingdom, the biblical analogue of Blake's prophecies against the Babylon of Newton, Bacon, Locke, and other despicable "Angels."

JOHN ADLARD: HIGHBRIDGE, SOMERSET

"The Garden of Love"

And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tomb-stones where flowers should be;
And Priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars my joys and desires.

Most writers on Blake appear to find the stanza too simple to need much comment, but R. B. Kennedy, editing for Collins' Annotated Student Texts, remarks: "The joys and desires seem almost personified as children."

This suggests that few, if any, readers know that binding with briars was to be seen in graveyards in Blake's day and up till Victorian times. A writer in *Notes and*