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June K. Singer, The Unholy Bible: A Psychological Interpretation of William Blake

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June K. Singer. *The Unholy Bible: A Psychological Interpretation of William Blake*. New York: Putnam's Sons, for the C. G. Jung Foundation for Analytical Psychology, 1970. Pp. xvi + 270, facsimiles (part color). $10

Reviewed by Margret Shaefer

June K. Singer's *The Unholy Bible: A Psychological Interpretation of William Blake* is a Jungian reading of Blake's prophetic books with special emphasis on *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Unfortunately, it is neither psychological nor interpretive. Singer, a Jungian analyst, regards Blake's works as "a pre-form of certain of Jung's essential concepts," and in her book she has set out to explain Blake's thought by systematically recasting it into Jungian terminology. The problem with her effort is that it merely involves a translation of one poetic mythology into the terms of another. Unfortunately, this process neither explains nor clarifies, but merely obfuscates Blake's thought. For Blake's Angels, Devils, Emanations, Dragon-men, and Unnam'd Forms Singer substitutes mandalas, animas, shadows, uroboroses, quaterneries, *conjunctio oppositiones*, and "incomprehensible mysteries"--an exercise which is often interesting and sometimes ingenious, like a rebus puzzle (e.g. find the mandala hidden on the title engraving of *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*), but not in any sense "interpretive." To interpret, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, means to "render clear or explicit; to elucidate; to explain," and that is precisely what Singer's book does not do: one cannot explain a difficult and often obscure symbology by imposing upon it another equally obscure, if more programmatic one.

In fact, after wading through all the

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as an entre to the fine discussion of the relatively neglected "Dis Aliter Visum." Once having offered these pontifical judgments, however, one must acknowledge immediately that scintillating explication of some poems for their own sakes is not the overriding purpose of this book.

Professor Kaplan's second aim, then, is to try to establish the fact that these poems, and by implication other Romantic and Victorian poems, *are* what they are *about*. That is, by his manipulation of imagery, syntax, rhythm, and structure the poet attempts to create in the reader an "experience" akin to that the poet himself went through in the total creation of the poem: the poem as both process and product. Thus Blake's tiger "is, among other things, *this* poem in particular" (p. 18), the "artistic form" to which we as readers respond in the same way Blake responded to the tiger in the first place. More readily seen, perhaps, "Tintern Abbey" becomes a "surrogate for nature" just as Dorothy at the end of the poem becomes "a 'moveable feast,' an embodiment 'for all lovely forms . . . for all sweet sounds and harmonies'. . . . the human equivalent of a Wordsworth poem" (pp. 41-42). This is an extremely attractive thesis (although Professor Kaplan really cannot sustain it beyond Wordsworth--or perhaps Coleridge in "Frost at Midnight"), but it is not one that can unify this book. In a sense some of the poems examined could be seen not as surrogates at all, but rather as living testaments to the inability of the poet to create such "moveable feasts," poems which as product describe, dramatize, or recount process without ever becoming process. Indeed, Professor Kaplan misses a good bet by not pursuing a splendid idea further and thereby distinguishing more sharply than he does poems of the Romantic and Victorian eras. And, of course, Shelley would have played a major role in such a book.

But again I seem to be carping at what Professor Kaplan is not finally about. His largest claim, and in great measure his achievement, is quite otherwise--and also quite grand. It is to demonstrate "that a major key to Romantic [and, presumably, Victorian] poetry is an understanding of how the artist reveals in his poetry his concern with himself as artist and with his art" (p. 11), "the self as poetic process and poem" (p. 77). Or, taking his cue from Wallace Stevens' "Of Modern Poetry," Professor Kaplan hopes "to affirm the self-conscious poem of 'the act of the mind' as an important phase in the poetic tradition" (p. 13), at least from the Romantics to the present. Or: to explore "the nineteenth century's confrontation with the relationship between creative anxiety and the vehicle through which that anxiety is communicated" (p. 13). Or: to chart the progressive demythologization of nature as a tenable "symbol or vehicle in a process of the rebirth of the poetic imagination" (p. 68). Or, finally and most grandly, "to arrange and interpret

paraphernalia with which Singer, under the guise of explication, encumbers Blake, one finds that her book is but a repeat of the standard interpretations of the texts put forth by critics such as Frye, Damon and Bloom. Bloom in particular has already spelled out for us in what way *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is "about the marriage of contraries, the union of opposites, the basic duality of man as expressed in the terms 'material and spiritual' or 'body and soul' and the nature of the relationship between them." Singer has merely taken a good many of such interpretations and added a welter of references to ancient history and mythology, religion, alchemy, astrology, and hermetic philosophy and has tied everything together with a pastiche of citations from such Jungian luminaries as Erich Neumann, Alan Watts, Jolanda Jacobi and, of course, Jung himself. Further, she has imposed all this heavy structure upon poor Blake with an allegorizing and spiritualizing rhetoric intended to convince by its appeal to emotion rather than to intellect.

This rhetoric, vaguely inspirational and exhortatory, is typical of most Jungian efforts at literary analysis and is a serious barrier to understanding in this book. It has a pervasive adjectival insistence which has evident designs upon the reader: everything is described insistently as "transcendent," "numinous," "holy," "sacred," "ineffable," "mysterious," "tremendous," "incomprehensible," "dark," or even "divine." Concrete images are allegorized by being classified as archetypes and dignified by being given scholarly-sounding Greek or Latin names. Thus, every image of a woman is an "anima," every guide a "psychopomp," every marriage a *conjunctio oppositiones*, every snake an "uroboros," and every geometrical figure a mandala. Archetypes themselves are glorified as "autonomous," "ineffable," or "wise." It may be that some readers derive a sense of spiritual uplift from reading this sort of thing, but I feel that rational analysis is better criticism than surreptitious theology and romantic mysticism.

What this rhetoric can do to a poetic text is exemplified by Singer's comments on the opening lines of the "Proverbs of Hell" (plate 10), which are "The head Sublime, the heart Pathos, the genitals / Beauty, the hands and feet Proportion":

some portion of the legacy bequeathed to us by nineteenth-century poetry and to order and structure a myth that may become part of the tradition we pass on" (p. 157). While I am not entirely certain what this last statement means, the fact that this "tradition" is forwarded by Joyce, Nabokov, Eliot, Pound, Auden, Frost, Williams, and most especially Stevens is duly acknowledged by Professor Kaplan.

The fact remains, however, that this expansive thesis produces both some interesting as well as some relatively uninteresting results. The latter are largely those referred to above in my comments on the explications or readings themselves. Often these are less revelatory of what has hitherto been unrecognized in the poems than shrewd reshapings of much that is already known--or re-readings of these poems in the light of what Professor Kaplan perceives as a valuable context in which to view the history of poetry from the Romantics to the present. The continuity that he sees in the poet's concern for himself, the creative process, and the poem--and the various permutations of that concern as it evolves over a time when the shape and structure of poetry, as well as of the cultural, social, and religious milieu, was changing substantially--is clearly a valuable insight and makes great sense in any attempt to see late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poetry whole rather than as bifurcated into two distinct and relatively unrelated "periods." And, further, that that continuity is demonstrable in the structure, imagery, syntax is a significant achievement, worthy of our careful attention. What I guess I'm saying is: I think we knew much--or even all--of this, but I don't know of anyone who has to date put it all down before us.

From the point of view of Blake studies, I must add regretfully that I find the Blake section the least satisfactory in the book. If we can assent to the idea that Blake's poetry (and in particular poems like "The Tyger") "is a triumphantly unself-conscious expression of the expansion of his consciousness and a celebration of his limitless powers as a poet" (p. 15), I for one cannot agree that "the tiger . . . is the clarified and unambiguous product of the artist's imagination, taking its substance from the disordered real world and existing as an art product in that world" (p. 20). Or, that the poem for Blake is an "imposition" by the artist of "form upon matter," the grasping of "unformalized experience and nature" and the "shaping" of them into a work of art (p. 23). Or, that the "chain" of "The Tyger" is what "holds down, as in a firm vise, the artifact being made" (p. 24). Or, finally, that for Blake "There is no gap or distinction between the creator of all things and his creation on the one hand, and the poet and his poem on the other" (p. 27). From this point of view it's a shame that Professor Kaplan began with Blake. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley would have served him--and his thesis--better.

> The genitals are the creative aspects of consciousness, yet their creative activity is not that of thinking--they are, rather, the dynamic activity that springs over the hurdles of *logos*; nor are they Pathos, for their function refuses to become dissolved in the morass of sensuality. The genitals symbolize, rather, that intuitive connection between that which is felt as experience and that which is not yet conceived; and from that connection is born Beauty, the possibility of a new creation.

This obfuscation of the concrete text, this substitution of highly abstract and tenuous concepts for concrete images, is pervasive in the book. It almost succeeds in eroding the concrete physical reality that Blake insisted we recognize and affirm. A tenuous spirituality takes the place of the powerfully concrete image laden with feeling. To take another example: we are not to think that when Blake said, "The Nakedness of woman is the work of God," he meant to affirm the value of the naked female body and of sexuality itself. No, Singer insists,

> Here Blake cannot [sic] mean the objective woman, anymore than pride, lust or wrath are to be found outside the individual . . . Man must acknowledge and come to terms with the feminine principle within himself, he must know her in her nakedness for what she is--an integral part of his own psyche.

Criticism of this sort must be written out of a belief that all external reality is only a symbol--that is, does not merely have a symbolic dimension along with a concrete one, but is *only* symbolic. For Jungians, even incest is *merely* symbolic! As Singer tells us, the idea of incest really has to do with an "urge to inner incest" and is about a "man's involvement with the anima," i.e., his feminine aspect. Singer finds every figure of a woman in Blake to be an anima, which means that every female figure in Blake's poetry is a representation of Blake's feminine self. The solipsism of this point of view should be emphasized, expecially since it is recommended to the reader as the essence of wisdom. Most psychology would call such a notion of woman on the part of a man a narcissistic one: she is only a self-representation, not a person, not a life center in her own right. It is one thing to say that Blake had such a view of women (which may or may not be true) and another to talk as if all women were no more than symbolic representations of men.

Not only does Singer lose the concrete surface of Blake's text, but in her zeal to impose the Jungian framework on it, she is guilty of the same kind of reductionism that some of the early Freudians can be accused of. Her method involves a systematic feeding of all of Blake's rich images and symbols into a constricted system which translates them into a limited number of "archetypal" symbols. The rationale for this process is the assumption that these symbols, the archetypes, somehow constitute the ultimate meaning and reality of things. More than once does Singer call these archetypes, which are said to antedate experience, "divine." In practice, however, Singer has merely translated one symbol (Blake's) into another (the Jungian) and more conventional one which she happens to find more congenial and more "meaningful."

So much does Singer wish to cast Blake into a Jungian mold that she at times entirely ignores the text in favor of her own reading. A particularly striking example of such a wishful misreading is her analysis of the proverb, "Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires." She says,

> Blake is speaking of the killing of the infant within, that is, not letting the Divine Child [sic] of inspiration grow to maturity. That is the infant in Blake's cradle, and he must be freed to go forth like the mythic infant Hermes.

Now, this reads as if Blake had said, "*don't* murder an infant in the cradle" rather than, as he did, "*sooner* murder an infant in the cradle. . . ." Similarly, she misreads the second line of the poem, "hungry clouds swag on the deep" as "burdened, heavy clouds." Blake did not say "heavy" clouds, but "hungry" clouds, a difference which has escaped many commentators, but which surely ought to be important to a psychologist.

In fact, as I have already pointed out, it is surprising how unpsychological this book is as a whole. Perhaps this is because Jungian psychology as applied to literature is in itself curiously unpsychological, if by "psychology" we mean the study of a mind. Singer's book does not seek to relate Blake's text either to Blake's mind or to the mind of the audience. If it is concerned with any mind at all, it is a mythic, universal, transpersonal "mind." The reference point of Jungian psychology always seems to be the "numinous" archetype which antedates experience, not experience itself. Blake's personal history and experience are of very little interest to Singer. He is merely a vessel through which the archetypes may assert themselves.

For the immense richness of human passions, conflicts, and desires, and the complexity of a dynamic interplay between biology, the mental structures of the individual, and society, Jungian psychology substitutes a simplistic dualism and opposition of Conscious and Unconscious. Jung elevated an early model of the mind, which Freud developed and later discarded as inadequate, into a set of metaphysical absolutes of which all other things are mere symbols. Singer talks as though they were entities which interact and "talk to" one another: for example, we are exhorted to have a "meaningful relationship" with our unconscious, to allow it to "hold dialogue" with the ego and convince it of its "wisdom." Conscious and Unconscious are linked with sexual reality in

that apparently, at some level, females are always symbols of the Unconscious, males of the Conscious, and androgynous figures or four-sided geometrical objects represent the union of the two. The Jungian analysis of the meaning of a symbol is thus mechanical in the extreme. Although Singer says that every symbol is an "incomprehensible mystery," in practice she appears to know exactly what it means.

The limits of this kind of oversimplification of experience, this allegorization of the mind, are readily apparent as soon as it is applied to a concrete personality. Singer does devote one chapter of her book to Blake's personal history before the writing of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, discussing his life from birth to age thirty-three. It is a chapter remarkable for its superficiality and the complete absence of any consideration of the nuances of Blake's relationship with his parents and siblings. This absence is typical of Jungian psychology as a whole. It corresponds to Jung's own lack of interest, in fact, disregard, of the vicissitudes of childhood and "the first half of life" in general. This disregard of "how life grew to be this way," along with the far-reaching reductionism of the archetypes and the dualism of the opposition Conscious-Unconscious, makes Singer's psychology seem inadequate to explain the experiential, concrete workings of a particualr, individual mind.

An example of this inadequacy is Singer's explanation of why Blake fell in love with a "callous, frivolous beauty" who rejected him. He did so because, we are told, she represented his anima, i.e. his feminine self, and therefore also his unconscious side. We read that the callous beauty "was internalized as the free-spirited partner of his [Blake's] maleness," and was "the image of the untamed feminine aspect within the man, the anima who inspires him to participate in that mysterious inner union which makes possible the conception of art." Are we meant to conclude from this that Blake's "feminine aspect" was "frivolous and callous"? And if so, what might that mean?

Similarly, Singer "explains" Blake's intense emotional relationship with his brother Robert, his preference for him over his wife Catherine, with the idea that he was attracted to "the anima in Robert," i.e. Robert's anima. Thus, if one loves a woman, it seems, it is because she is the embodiment of one's anima; if one loves a man, it is because *his* anima embodies one's anima. Since every woman (and potentially, it seems, every man) represents one's anima, it is hard to see how this theory explains why Blake fell in love with any woman or any man in particular--either the callous beauty or Catherine or Robert. I can only plead, with Byron, "I wish she would explain her explanation."

There is a current notion that, however overgeneralized and over-schematized Jungian psychology may be when applied to an individual life, it is particularly suited to an analysis of literature--perhaps because it so emphasizes symbolic constructs. But in fact Jungian analysis of literature suffers from the additional problem of being based upon an extremely simplistic view of art as a sort of direct expression of the contents of the Collective Unconscious. This point of view, ultimately deriving from the romantic tradition, leaves no room at all for the crucial considerations of artistic form and control. Singer's analysis of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, for example, is remarkable in that it never once shows any awareness of the obvious, and highly significant, fact that the work is in form a satire, or what Frye has called an "anatomy."[1] Indeed, it belongs in the tradition of great satire as practiced by Swift and Sterne. Bloom has said that "the specific difficulty in reading *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is to mark the limits of its irony: where does Blake speak straight?"[2] Singer entirely ignores this aspect of the work. For her, the poem is a direct expression of the Collective Unconscious working through Blake, a reductionistic notion which gives us not a Blake capable of what Frye calls "apocalyptic irony," but merely a Pompous High Priest.

No, there is no room for humor and irony among the "ineffable spirits" and "dark forces" which people the "wise" Collective Unconscious in the terms of the Jungian view of the mind. In the last analysis, the Jungian view of creativity is itself profoundly denigrating to the artist. For Singer as well as for Jung himself, despite protestations to the contrary, the artist is not a shaper and harmonizer of complex forces from within and from without himself, not an active agent, not someone who achieves a difficult mastery over competing needs and demands, but merely a profoundly passive agent whose achievement lies mainly in his ability to let himself be passively invaded by the "dark forces" of the unconscious and the "ineffable," autonomous archetypes. This notion is very different from Kris's psychoanalytic one of the artist as someone capable of a "regression in the service of the ego,"[3] in which he gains access to material which he is then able to control and master. Kris's notion stresses ego-control, whereas the Jungian notion stresses the helplessness of the ego in the face of the unconscious.

The Jungian recipe for the artist is a mystical one which advances the necessity of an impotent ego as the royal road to creativity. Blake's own mastery of what Singer calls "the emerging contents of his unconscious" gives the lie to such a notion. Even the form of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, for example, satire, is one which demands an unusually high degree of conscious skill and

1 Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake*, (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1947), p. 67.

2 Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1961), p. 76.

3 Ernst Kris, *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* (New York: International Universities Press, 1952), p. 46.

preconscious ego mastery along with an ability to transform aggressive thoughts and feelings into irony and humor. Blake was surely more than a passive vessel for the "creative spirit," surely more than a conduit for the expression of transpersonal, ageless, mystical images. Is Blake the individual, the master craftsman, the lyrical genius, so unimportant? Is his glory merely that of submission to the religiosity of the mythic Self? Jung said about Goethe that "Goethe did not write Faust; Faust wrote Goethe." I would like to think that Blake wrote *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Milton* and *Jerusalem* and *The Four Zoas*--and not the other way around.