

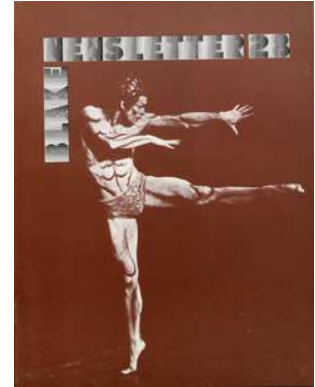
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Poisonous Blue

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MINUTE PARTICULARS

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"Poisonous Blue"

I would like to suggest an interpretation of a curious phrase which appears on Plate 65 of *Jerusalem*.

They vote the death of Luvah & they nail'd him to
Albion's Tree in Bath,
They stain'd him with poisonous blue, they inwove
him in cruel roots
To die a death of Six thousand years bound round
with vegetation. (J 65:8-10, K 699)

Damon identifies "poisonous blue" as woad.¹ And given the general context, a Druid sacrificial rite, it does seem likely that Blake was thinking of the dye with which ancient Britons colored their skin. Yet there is nothing particularly poisonous in the chemical makeup of woad. Therefore I suspect that Blake may also have had in mind another coloring

substance--the pigment known as Prussian blue.

Prussian blue was first produced in Berlin in 1704 and by the end of the century had come into wide use among artists--Blake included.² In 1782, the new pigment aroused the curiosity of the Swedish
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- 1 S. Foster Damon, *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols* (1924; rpt. New York: Peter Smith, 1947), p. 459.
- 2 Sir Geoffrey Keynes and Edwin Wolf 2nd, *William Blake's Illuminated Books: A Census* (New York: Grolier Club, 1953), p. 44. One instance of Blake's use of the color is mentioned.

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Joel Morkan

Milton's Eikonoklastes & Blake's Mythic Geography: A Parallel

There is an interesting parallel between a passage in Milton's *Eikonoklastes* and the way Blake conflates Biblical and English geography for mythic purposes in *Milton, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and *Jerusalem*.

In his attack on Charles I as a Urizenic tyrant, Milton wrote:

Ireland was as *Ephraim*, the strength of his head, *Scotland*, as *Judah*, was his Law-giver; but over *England* as over *Edom* he meant to cast his Shoo; and yet so many sober Englishmen not sufficiently awake to consider this, like men enchanted with the Circaean cup of servitude, will not be held back from running thir own heads into the Yoke of Bondage.¹

The fusion of English and Biblical geography, the mythic humanization of the nation, and the figure of the whole people as a sleeping or enchanted giant under the foot of a brutal tyrant are all elements familiar from Blake's poetry. Some of this is attributable to the imaginative

compatibility of the two writers, and also, no doubt, to their common grounding in such scriptural passages as Psalm 60:7-8: "Ephraim also is the strength of mine head, Judah is my lawgiver. / Over Edom will I cast out my shoe."

There are, however, more specific connections between Blake's use of allegorical geography and this passage from Milton. In *Eikonoklastes*, Ireland is Ephraim, and in Blake's *Jerusalem* (72:23) the seven counties of Connaught are assigned to Ephraim. In Milton's passage Scotland is Judah, whereas in *Jerusalem* (16:54) one of Judah's functions is to
(continued on page 89, column 2, bottom)

- 1 Merritt Y. Hughes, ed., *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1962), II, 488.

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chemist, Karl Wilhelm Scheele, and he performed a series of experiments attempting to analyze the "coloring principle" in Prussian blue.³ Scheele was successful in isolating the chemical, and four years later the French *Encyclopédie* gave it the name "l'acide prussique."⁴ Prussic acid is today more generally known as hydrocyanic acid or hydrogen cyanide, and it is recognized as one of the most poisonous substances in existence. Scheele himself was apparently not aware of the dangerous qualities of the acid he had discovered: it was not until 1803 that its highly poisonous character was fully understood.⁵ Since then the chemical has had an inglorious history: the Zyklon-B used at Auschwitz and the gas released in execution chambers in this country were both forms of hydrocyanic acid.

What was Blake's point in alluding to Prussian blue in this passage? David Erdman suggests that Plate 65 was revised at about the time of Napoleon's Hundred Days.⁶ In the Belgian campaign--that final assault by the sons of Albion against Luvah--England's chief ally was Prussia. It was the arrival of Prussian troops under Blücher that determined the outcome of the battle at Waterloo. In describing the sacrificial death of Luvah, Blake saw the appropriateness of identifying the blue dye of the Druids with the poison-based color named for Prussia.

the possession of Hooper's daughter, Mrs. Greely S. Curtis, Jr., of Boston, and given by her sister, Mrs. Ward Thoron to the Houghton Library, Harvard University, in 1951 in memory of her father.

Further pencil notations, that are not necessarily essential to the physical description of Copy U, appear as follows:

(1) On the verso of pl. 3 "Introduction" to *Innocence* appears the following notation: "Typ 6500 (50-208-210)".

(2) Inside the front cover is a history of the ownership of this copy.

(3) On the verso of pl. 21 ("The Little Boy found") appears the notation: "H.D. Chapin 60 Beacon St. Boston High 3-4 40 inches - 11246".

(4) On p. 30 of the *Descriptive Catalogue* in the margin opposite "H. _____ says" in the text appears the name, "Hoppner".

(5) On p. 32 of the *Descriptive Catalogue* in the margin opposite "Mr. S. _____" appears the name, "Stothard".

(6) On the end paper appears the note: "A copy of the *Descriptive Catalogue* of 1809/Sold in the Beckford Libr^y/Hamilton Palace Sale for £9/E.W.H."

One does not know when the pages of this copy became loose. They may have been loosened sometime between 1921 and 1953. The extra leaf for "The Little Black Boy" may have been inserted after Keynes originally described this copy, but it is unlikely. Similarly, the three leaves from *Experience* may have been added subsequent to 1921, again unlikely. If the three leaves from *Experience* were actually added to this copy in 1838 or shortly thereafter, as the pencil note indicates, the pages of this copy may have been loosened before Keynes originally described it in 1921.

³ His account of the experiments is included in *The Chemical Essays of Charles-William Scheele*, trans. Thomas Beddoes (London: John Murray, 1786).

⁴ J. R. Partington, *A History of Chemistry*, III (London: Macmillan, 1962), 527.

⁵ Partington, III, 234. In 1803, the poison derived from laurel leaves was identified as prussic acid. Was it coincidental that in this year (probably) Blake wrote: "The Strongest Poison ever known / Came from Caesar's Laurel Crown"? (K 433) Or had he read somewhere an account of the discovery?

⁶ Blake, *Prophet Against Empire*, 2nd ed., rev. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), p. 466n.

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guard Aberdeen, Berwick, and Dumfries. Finally, in Blake, Edom is a fallen land (*Milton* 17:20; *Jerusalem* 49:43; 92:23; 96:9), but is also both the giant who must recover his lost inheritance and the land that must be transformed before the apocalypse (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 2:14-20, 3:5-6).

One hesitates to put more weight on these parallels than they will bear; however, they do point in a direction that could be fruitful in further explorations of both Blakes's mythic geography and history in the prophetic Books, that is Milton's historical and polemical prose and his native antecedents in the use of allegorical geography: Spenser, Drayton, Phineus Fletcher, and William Browne of Tavistock.