BLAKE, BYRON AND THE BLUSHING ARCHANGELS

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One of my more amusing experiences in 1999 was going through a proof copy of Benita Eisler's *Byron, Child of Passion, Fool of Fame*, and feeling curiosity give way to disbelief, as elementary howler followed elementary howler. One of those howlers is of pertinence to us tonight. Desperate to contextualise Byron in the English Romantic Movement, Eisler had sought one famous London name here, there, and everywhere, without success so far, but had at last, as she thought, cornered him:

> Write but like Wordsworth, – live beside a lake

… she noted, from *Hints from Horace*; good – evidence of Byron's determination not to write like Wordsworth – we knew that – but look what followed!

> And keep your bushy locks a year from Blake …[1]

An Eislerian sentence was down at once, on Byron's wariness about modelling his verse on that of William Blake. What was I to do? Should I leave this alone? There were enough howlers in the book already to sink the Titanic: I had them all typed out, ready, Quixote-like, to e-mail them to the publisher. To leave this one alone was a temptation – but – magnanimity triumphed – I could not allow the error to stand so exposed – and noted for the publisher, not without a twitch of regret, that this "Blake" was not the poet, visionary, and engraver, but a famous men's hairdresser who practised in Fleet Street ("as the line might suggest", I believe I added).

The error disappeared from Eisler's published text (as did all the rest of the major howlers – the world has had fun since, finding a lot more tiny ones); but with it, of course, disappeared the only use of the name "Blake" in the whole volume. For the two men never met. Blake knew of Byron – who didn't? But Byron never knew of Blake. Southey met Blake, and, it goes without saying, pronounced him to be "evidently insane" and his designs (they were the ones for *Jerusalem*) to be "hideous".[2] Coleridge knew of Blake, and recognized his genius at once;[3] Caroline Lamb heard of Blake, and even, it seems, had him to dinner;[4] but Byron left London, left England, and died, without knowing anything about Blake.

What a pity! For the two, so dissimilar in some ways, had much in common. In this paper I wish to examine some of the similarities.

To dispose at first, however, with the obvious dissimilarities.

Byron was an aristocrat: Blake not. Byron was (more or less) rich: Blake not. Byron was internationally famous: Blake known only to a few. Byron had an eventful life (to understate the case): Blake an uneventful one – in external particulars, at least: his internal life was far richer

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1: HfH 474-5; CPW I 306.

2: Simmonds 134.

3: Holmes II 473-4.

4: L.G. Mitchell's biography of Lord Melbourne, p.84, refers generally to the fact that Blake was a protegé of the Lambs, along with William Godwin and Sir Thomas Lawrence, and that he dined there. David Cecil's biography, p.156, says specifically that Blake dined with the Lambs in 1820. Mitchell references P. Marshall's William Godwin (Yale UP 1984) pp.355, 374. Also a letter of W. Godwin to Melbourne 22 Sept. 1834; Melbourne MSS Box 42/109. Lady Charlotte Bury, *The Diary of a Lady in Waiting*, London 1908, ii pp.214-215. (I am grateful to Paul Douglass for his help here.)

than that of most men. Byron travelled in Portugal, Spain, Greece, Albania, Turkey, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and Italy: Blake made one unsatisfactory move into Sussex. Byron had an unsuccessful marriage, but compensated with so many other liaisons that it confounds the spirit to contemplate them: Blake had a happy marriage, was never unfaithful to his wife, and she was never unfaithful to him. Byron wrote in a variety of styles, but none so strange as to court incomprehension; and he enjoyed large print-runs: Blake wrote much of his most important work in a style which still baffles non-specialists, and few of his works – hand-engraved as they were – reached more than a dozen single imprints. Byron's work, though it *received* much illustration, is in no *need* of it: with Blake's heavily-pictorial work, to speak of "illustration" is to miss the point, for the texts and the engravings are indivisible, and each complements the other within a whole which is greater than the sum of its parts. Byron was an admirer of the eighteenth-century rationalists, Voltaire, Hume, and Gibbon: Blake started by admiring them, but changed his mind, depicting them, in *Jerusalem*, for instance, as despairing, incommunicative figures squatting bound in a dark cave. [5] Byron was a charismatic, who, however, never enjoyed visions (or if he did, he kept quiet about them): Blake was a plain man, who had regular visitations from angels and prophets as he walked about the streets of London. Perhaps it was this sense of being privileged supernaturally which enabled Blake to remain happy in England, while Byron felt it necessary to leave and become a citizen of the world: Byron gave up on the country, and one cannot imagine him voicing such innocent patriotic aspirations as

> And now the time returns again:
> Our souls exult & London towers
> Receive the Lamb of God to dwell
> In Englands green & pleasant bowers.[6]

… even though one of Byron's more memorable characters, Junius in *The Vision of Judgement*, gains a cheer on his climactic line, "I loved my country, and I hated him!"[7]

To dispose of some interesting similarities.

Both poets hated well, and let their detestation of England focus on one particular person. It is an interesting measure of the different attitudes each had to his readership that Byron chooses Southey, the well-known Poet Laureate, as his fall-guy (harbouring private as well as public grudges against him): where Blake chooses (among others) the otherwise unknown Private John Scofield, cause of his trial for sedition after their altercation outside the Fox Inn, Felpham, in August 1803. As Blake, in being acquitted of the charge, may be said to have triumphed over Scofield, in a way that Byron never finally triumphed over Southey, the case is even more singular.

Both were admirers of Milton; though Blake admired him as a poet and fellow-visionary, and Byron less as an artist and more as a type of incorruptible political integrity.

Blake, an underpaid artificer himself, had much sympathy with the poor, and much disgust for the hypocritical indifference with which England treated them:

> … Because of the Opressors of Albion in every City & Village:
> They mock at the Labourers limbs! They mock at his starvd Children.
> They buy his Daughters that they may have power to sell his Sons:

5: *Jerusalem*, plate 52. See also ibid, plate 90, 64-6.
6: *Jerusalem*, plate 77.
7: TVOJ 83, 8.

> They compell the Poor to live upon a crust of Bread by soft mild arts:
> They reduce the Man to want: then give with pomp & ceremony.
> The praise of Jehovah is chaunted from lips of hunger & thirst …[8]

Byron, from his own perspective, would not disagree:

> I have traversed the seat of war in the peninsula, I have been in some of the most oppressed provinces of Turkey, but never under the most despotic of infidel governments, did I behold such squalid wretchedness as I have seen since my return in the very heart of a Christian country …[9]

Blake and Byron both detested militarism. Here's Blake:

> Wilt thou now smile among the scythes when the wounded groan in the field
> We were carried away in thousands from London: & in tens
> Of thousands from Westminster & Marybone in ships closd up:
> Chaind hand & foot, compelled to fight under the iron whips
> Of our captains; fearing our officers more than the enemy.[10]

Byron's lighter tone, and his emphasis on mercenaries, should not blind us to the strength of his feelings on the same subject:

> Then there were foreigners of much renown,
> Of various Nations, and all Volunteers,
> Not fighting for their Country or its Crown,
> But wishing to be one day Brigadiers,
> Also to have the sacking of a town,
> A pleasant thing to young men in their years;
> 'Mongst these were several Englishmen of pith –
> Sixteen called Thomson, and nineteen named Smith.[11]

Neither poet was a friend to English imperialism. Here is Blake, in his own idiom:

> Such is the Ancient World of Urizen in the Satanic Void
> Created from the Valley of Middlesex by Londons River
> From Stone-henge and from London Stone, from Cornwall to Cathnes
> The Four Zoa's rush around on all sides in dire ruin
> Furious in pride of Selfhood the terrible Spectres of Albion
> Rear their dark Rocks among the Stars of God: stupendous
> Works! A World of Generation continually Creating; out of
> The Hermaphroditic Satanic World of rocky destiny.[12]

8: *Jerusalem*, plate 30.
9: Frame Worker's Speech, CMP 26.
10: *Jerusalem*, plate 65.
11: *Don Juan* VII stanza 18.
12: *Jerusalem* late 58.

And here Byron, in his (Don Juan is approaching London):

> The Sun went down, the Smoke rose up, as from
> A half-unquenched Volcano, o'er a space
> Which well beseemed "the Devil's drawing room",
> As some have qualified that wondrous place;
> But Juan felt, though not approaching *home*,
> As one who, though he were not of the race,
> Revered the Soil, of those true Sons the Mother,
> Who butchered half the Earth, and bullied t'other. *
> (* Byron's note: India – America.)[13]

But there are further, deeper similarities and parallels, which I now wish to address.

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At stanza 61 of Byron's *The Vision of Judgement*, the Archangel Michael has just challenged Sathan to bring up the witnesses necessary for claiming the soul of George III. He does so with a certain smugness, for he, the Sir Humphrey Applebee of Heaven, can't see – or is feigning not to see – just how heavily the odds are stacked against *any* monarch gaining entrance there: but when Sathan produces, not just two witnesses, but hundreds of thousands of them from all over the globe, Michael does something which non-physical beings are not supposed to be able to do – he changes colour:

> When Michael saw this Host, he first grew pale,
> As Angels can; next, like Italian twilight
> He turned all colours, as a Peacock's tail,
> Or Sunset streaming through a Gothic Skylight
> In some old Abbey, or a Trout not stale,
> Or distant lightning on the horizon *by* night,
> Or a fresh rainbow, or a Grand review
> Of thirty regiments in red, green, and blue. –[14]

It is not an original idea: a *happily* blushing Archangel occurs at *Paradise Lost*, VIII 618 - 619: but for a much more striking parallel to Michael here, Byron need only have looked up his copy of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* – if only he had possessed one:

> Once I saw a Devil in a flame of fire, who arose before an Angel that sat on a cloud, and the Devil uttered these words: The worship of God is Honouring his gifts in other men each according to his genius and loving the greatest men best, those who envy or calumniate great men hate God, for there is no other God.
>
> The Angel hearing this became almost blue but mastering himself he grew yellow, & at last white pink & smiling ...[15]

13: *Don Juan* X stanza 81.
14: *The Vision*, st. 61.
15: *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plates 22-3. See also *Jerusalem*, plate 91, 7-10.

This angel eventually goes over to the other side, and becomes a devil, Blake's "particular friend" with whom he "often read[s] the Bible together in its infernal or diabolical sense".[16] *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is only known to have been given nine individual printings between 1793 and 1825:[17] in which case, great minds are thinking alike. Byron, though he would never have put it that way – his religious thinking was too conventional – certainly *intuited* that the only worship that really mattered was that of man by man, or of spirit by spirit. Witness the first greeting of Sathan and Michael, in *The Vision's* thirty-fifth stanza:

> The Spirits were in Neutral space, before
> The gate of heaven; like Eastern thresholds is
> The place where Death's grand cause is argued o'er,
> And Souls dispatched to that world or to this,
> And therefore Michael and the Other wore
> A civil aspect – though they did not kiss,
> Yet still between his Darkness and his Brightness
> There passed a mutual glance of great politeness.

All Sathan can give to the gate of Heaven – seat of the unseen Jehovah – is "a glance of supernatural hate":[18] but between him and his old colleague (from whom he is now divided eternally, thanks to the inscrutable will of Jehovah within) there still exists that respect from which worship flows, and of which "a glance of politeness" – even between contraries – is the natural expression. "The most sublime act", as Blake has it, "is to set another before you."[19] I am not the first to read Michael as an embodiment of Blakean U-reason, and Sathan as an embodiment of Los-like Blakean energy.[20] But Byron plays an unconscious joke in *The Vision of Judgement*, on Blake's dictum that "without Contraries is no progression":[21] even with such vigorous and contrasting contraries as Michael and Sathan, there is, in a universe ruled by Byron's unseen and enigmatic Jehovah, no progression possible at all. George III begins the poem outside Heaven; by its end, he may *think* he's got in, but no-one yet has seen him there – all he's been able to do is to start "practising the hundredth Psalm" – we don't know what the angels will do with him when they return and find that he has "slipped into heaven for one".

I find it remarkable that Byron could picture the beyond with such immediacy and complexity as he does in *The Vision of Judgement* – after all, he never "was in a Printing house in Hell" as Blake was,[22] never saw angels at Peckham Rye, and never had "The Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel" to dinner, as Blake had.[23] However, he would without doubt have been aligned by Blake with Milton:

16: The *Marriage*, plate 24.
17: See *Blake's Poetry and Designs*, ed. Johnson and Grant, p.82.
18: *The Vision*, line 195.
19: *The Marriage*, plate 17.
20: Credit for that seems to go to Bernard Blackstone. See *Byron, A Survey* (1975) 283.
21: *The Marriage*, plate 3.
22: *The Marriage*, plate 15.
23: *The Marriage*, plate 12.

> Note. The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devils party without knowing it.[24]

… except that I find Byron writes quite freely of Angels (if not necessarily of God) for he would, like Blake, have been happy to acknowledge himself "of the Devils party". His Sathan is a clear descendant of Milton's – but unshackled and undefeated in a way that Milton cannot allow.

After all, is Heaven, as depicted by either Byron, Blake, or Milton, worth aspiring to, or worth staying in? In *The Vision of Judgement* we know that "the Angels all were singing out of tune" and that "The Angels had of course enough of song / When upon service",[25] and we know from Lucifer's words in *Cain*[26] that the angels only sing because they're forced to:

> Cain: ... I have heard
> His seraphs sing; and so my father saith.
> Lucifer: They say – what they must sing and say, on pain
> Of being that which I am – and thou art –
> Of spirits and men.
> Cain: And what is that?
> Lucifer: Souls who dare use their immortality –
> Souls who dare look the Omnipotent tyrant in
> His everlasting face, and tell him, that
> His evil is not good!

Blake had already addressed this issue. In the Innocent version of *Holy Thursday*, he had imagined the music in an ideal heaven, in his simile describing the singing of the London orphans in St. Paul's Cathedral:

> Now like a mighty wind they raise to heaven the voice of song,
> Or like harmonious thunderings the seats of Heaven among.

It sounds beautiful. But in the Experienced *Holy Thursday* Blake gives us the brutal reality:

> Is that trembling cry a song?
> Can it be a song of joy?
> And so many children poor?
> It is a land of poverty!

As with the orphans in St. Paul's, so, we may imagine, with the angels in Heaven. They, like the orphans, sing because they'll be punished if they don't. No-one, after all, could worship "Old Nobodaddy aloft" with love or religious awe, still less with musical finesse. You will remember how

> … old Nobodaddy aloft
> Farted & belch'd & cough'd,

24: *The Marriage*, plate 6.
25: *The Vision*, lines 9 and 731-2.
26: *Cain* I 132-6: CPW VI 236-7.

And said, "I love hanging & drawing & quartering
"Every bit as well as war & slaughtering.
"Damn praying & singing,
"Unless they will bring in
"The blood of ten thousand by fighting or swinging."[27]

The detestable Wordsworth (friend of the snarling Southey) would have agreed with Blake's idea here, though not with his implicit negative evaluation of the Deity: in a verse addressed to God, which Byron holds up for our inspection, he writes:

But *thy* most dreaded instrument,
In working out a pure intent,
Is Man – arrayed for mutual slaughter, –
Yea, *Carnage* is *thy daughter!"* [28]

Byron comments (we are at *Don Juan*, VIII, stanza 9):

"Carnage" (so Wordsworth tells you) "is God's daughter;"
If *He* speak truth, *She* is Christ's Sister, and
Just now behaved as in the Holy Land.

And he adds, in a prose note:

To wit, the Deity's: this is perhaps as pretty a pedigree for Murder as ever was found by Garter King of Arms. What would have been said had any of us free-spoken people discovered such a lineage? – – –

The detestable Wordsworth waited twenty-seven years before removing the lines to which Byron objected.

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For both Blake and Byron, ("free-spoken people," haters of war and imperialism both) Heaven is a kind of Hell. Not only Heaven: since "The worship of God" is "Honouring his gifts in other men each according to his genius", human society, in so far as it involves the *dis*honouring of the gifts in other men, is a kind of Hell too.

I'm sure I need to tell no-one here where the following lines come from. You can see them in the pavement on the South Bank any time you walk from the old County Hall to the R.F.H.:

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.[29]

27: Fragment: Keynes 1946, 102.
28: *Ode: The Morning of the Day Appointed for a General Thanksgiving*. January 18, 1816 (1816 edition, page 17).
29: *London*, st. 1.

Thirty years later, Byron was to write of the same metropolis, in a lighter idiom, but with similar abhorrence:

> The line of lights, too, up to Charing Cross,
> Pall Mall, and so forth, have a coruscation
> Like Gold as in comparison with dross,
> Matched with the Continent's illumination,
> Whose cities Night by no means deigns to gloss;
> The French were not yet a lamp-lighting nation,
> And when they grew so, on their new-found lanthorn,
> Instead of Wicks, they made a wicked man turn.[30]

Byron's tone is facetious where Blake's is sombre and compassionate; Byron's historical perspective is at once wider and more specific: but the streets are alike – ghastly in the contrast between what they pretend to be and what they actually contain. Blake continues:

> In every cry of every Man,
> In every Infant's cry of fear,
> In every voice, in every ban,
> The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.[31]

And Byron:

> A Row of Gentlemen along the Streets
> Suspended, may illuminate mankind,
> As also bonfires made of Country seats;
> But the old way is best for the purblind;
> The other looks like phosphorus on sheets,
> A sort of Ignis fatuus to the Mind,
> Which, though 'tis certain to perplex and frighten,
> Must burn more mildly ere it can enlighten.[32]

Blake's "mind-forg'd manacles" transmute readily into Byron's "Ignis fatuus to the Mind". Again, both detail and historical perspective differ: Byron's "ignis fatuus" is revolutionary violence, where Blake's "manacles" are open to any interpretative gloss the reader brings – both poets, however, make the same Rousseau-esque point: man is his own misleader, and his own jailer. Now it is Blake's turn to get more specific:

> How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
> Every black'ning Church appals;
> And the hapless Soldier's sigh
> Runs in blood down Palace walls.
>
> But most thro' midnight streets I hear

30: DJ XI st. 26.
31: *London*, st. 2.
32: DJ XI st. 27.

How the youthful Harlot's curse
Blasts the new born Infant's tear,
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.[33]

Byron's parallel passage is deceptively chatty and cheerful (none of his wordplay has the triple-layered density of Blake's "appalls") and takes longer to make its point, but, eventually, he gets there:

But London's so well lit that if Diogenes
Could recommence to hunt his *honest man*,
And found him not amidst the various progenies
Of this enormous City's spreading spawn,
'Twere not for want of lamps, to aid in dodging his
Yet undiscovered treasure; what *I* can,
I've done, to find the same throughout Life's journey –
But see the World is only one Attorney.

Over the Stones still rattling! – up Pall Mall,
Through Crowds and Carriages – but waxing thinner
As thundered knockers broke the long-sealed spell
Of doors 'gainst duns, and to an early dinner
Admitted a small party as Night fell;
Don Juan, our young diplomatic sinner,
Pursued his path, and drove past some hotels,
St. James's Palace, and St. James's "Hells."[34]

Blake would recognise the palace as being the same as his own, fouled-over in the same way his is, just as oppressive, brutal and hellish as his is ("… the hapless Soldier's sigh / Runs in blood down Palace walls"). In a prose note on "Hells", Byron comments, lest we should miss the effect of *his* word-play:

> "Hells" – gaming houses. What their number may be in this life I know not; before I was of age I knew them pretty accurately, both "gold" and "silver". I was once nearly called out by an acquaintance, because when he asked me where I thought his Soul would be found hereafter – – I answered "in Silver Hell." –

Byron's original version of his next stanza *would* have gone:

At length the boys drew up before a door
From whence poured forth a tide of well-clad waiters
(While on the pavement many a hungry whore,
With which this Moralest of cities caters
For Gentlemen whose passions may boil o'er)
Stood, as the unpacking gathered more spectators,
And Juan found himself in an extensive
Apartment, fashionable but expensive.[35]

33: *London*, sts. 3-4.
34: DJ XI sts. 28-9.

In fact the stanza went (perhaps after Mary Shelley, his copyist, had objected);

They reached th'hotel; forth streamed from the front door
A tide of well-clad waiters, and around
The mob stood, and, as usual, several score
Of those pedestrian Paphians, who abound
In decent London, when the daylight's o'er;
Commodious but immoral, they are found
Useful, like Malthus, in promoting marriage;

… which brings his "joke" close to Blake's, about the "marriage hearse", which I take to be about the syphilis caught in the brothel and transmitted from the husband to the wife. Byron had made a joke very like Blake's already (without being aware of the theft) when he wrote to Annabella on December 31st 1819, about having approached Seaham "on my way to our funeral marriage".[36] (Blake's marriage was of course far happier than his.) *Don Juan* continues:

But Juan now is stepping from his carriage[37]

Into one of the sweetest of hotels,
Especially for foreigners, and mostly
For those whom Favour or whom Fortune swells,
And cannot find a bill's small items costly;
There many an Envoy either dwelt, or dwells
(The den of many a diplomatic lost lie)
Until to some conspicuous square they pass,
And blazon o'er the door their names in brass.[38]

The prostitutes are the same – pictured with greater intimacy, detail and horror by Blake, with greater insouciance by Byron, even though, I'm sure, he'd known more of them, and known more about them, than had Blake. But, as with Blake's "charter'd" streets, the brass blazoning with which Byron's Londoners and foreigners decorate and dignify their locales are mere emblems of power, pride, and hypocrisy. And in the next canto of *Don Juan*, Byron is to use another London reference, to widen the scope of his criticism of the way London treats its women:

I think you'll find, from many a family picture,
That daughters of such mothers, as may know
The World by experience rather than by lecture,
Turn out much better for the Smithfield Show
Of Vestals brought into the Marriage Mart
Than those bred up by Prudes without a heart. –[39]

35: DJ XI st. 30 (original version).
36: BLJ VI 260.
37: DJ XI st. 30 (final version).
38: DJ XI st. 31.
39: DJ XII st. 46.

Byron's Smithfield is the one which Blake would recognise. Smithfield was a very microcosm of Hell: horse- and cattle-trading did not cease there until 1855, when it was closed down because of its riot and debauchery; criminals were hanged there, cattle slaughtered there, and both witches and martyrs had been burnt there. Byron's line about "the Smithfield Show / Of Vestals brought into the Marriage Mart" makes use of the commonplace expression "to make a Smithfield bargain". Francis Grose's *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1823) defines this as

> A bargain whereby the purchaser is taken in. This is likewise used frequently to express matches or marriages contracted solely on the score of interest, on one or both sides, where the fair sex are bought or sold like cattle at Smithfield –

For Byron, as for Blake, London is one vast blasphemous brothel, a market where men sell women, parents sell children, and women sell themselves. So much for "The worship of God … Honouring his gifts in other men each according to his genius and loving the greatest men best."

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Blake seems to have respected Byron – what a pity, to repeat, that Byron never had the chance to honour Blake in return. Because, you see, in 1822 Blake etched *The Ghost of Abel / A Revelation In the Visions of Jehovah Seen by William Blake*. It is a very short sequel – only two plates in length – to Byron's *Cain*, the play I quoted from earlier, which had been published the previous year, and which had stirred up much controversy – even the threat of prosecution. It is subtitled *To Lord Byron in the Wilderness*, and is the last illustrated book Blake created. Four copies only are known to exist.

It is the only one of his works in which Blake refers to a contemporary poet.

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Blake had written

> Now the sneaking serpent walks in mild humility. / And the just man rages in the wilds where lions roam.[40]

Some fellow-feeling must, I'm sure, have established itself in Blake's mind as he read *Cain* and heard all the controversy and cant it stirred up. Was not he himself "rag[ing] in the wilds where lions roam" from his home in Fountain Court, south of the Strand, just as much as Byron was, from the Palazzo Guiccioli in Ravenna? And did Byron not deserve an answer, a creative response, from a fellow-exile? As if to confirm the echo, Blake engraves a charging lion just above the words "To Lord Byron …"

Here is Blake's epigraph:

> To Lord Byron in the wilderness.
>
> What doest thou here Elijah? Can a Poet doubt the Visions of Jehovah? Nature has no Outline; but Imagination has. Nature has no Tune: but Imagination has: Nature has no Supernatural & dissolves: Imagination is Eternity.

The first question here ("What doest thou here Elijah?") is derived from I Kings: Elijah has defeated and destroyed the Prophets of Baal, (the prophets of Baal are, presumably, in this Blakean context, the Anglican clergy). He has incurred the wrath of Ahab and Jezebel, and has

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40: *The Marriage*, plate 2.

fled, assisted by angels, on his forty-day journey to Mount Horeb, where God, failing (as I'm sure you all remember) to appear before him in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire, finally appears reassuringly before him in "a still small voice"[41] and asks "What doest thou here, Elijah?" Having thus impressed Elijah, God sends him back from the wilderness to renew his prophetic work, anoint the Kings of Israel, and to pass his mantle on to Elisha.

Blake's equation of Byron with Elijah is, to say the least, flattering. Or is he equating himself with Elijah, and Byron with Elisha, designated by the Lord to assume the mantle of the older prophet, for the next generation? If this is the case, Byron's pre-decease of him in 1824, three years before his own death, will have been a disappointment.

The second question ("Can a Poet doubt the Visions of Jehovah?") may be ironical, given the doubtful quality of Jehovah's imaginings; Byron might have read it that way. But its three-part sequel, hymning the superiority of Imagination, is sincere, for Blake believed in the Imagination above all other faculties. Byron affected not to:

> It is the fashion of the day to lay great stress upon what they call "Imagination" and "Invention" the two commonest of qualities – an Irish peasant with a little whiskey in his head will imagine and invent more than would furnish forth a modern poem.[42]

Letter to John Murray Esqre, from which this double-edged sneer comes, was published in 1821, and Blake could well have read it. Perhaps he was given the authority and inspiration to write his "still small" play, in admonishment of Byron's insult to the Imagination, by Elijah himself.

As *The Ghost of Abel* is little known, I shall try and discuss its themes while describing its action.[43] It starts where *Cain* ends. Cain has left the stage (and gone off to dwell in the land of Nod).[44] The body of Abel lies, where Abel fell. Adam and Eve lament over it, and Blake does what Byron studiously refrains from doing[45] – brings Jehovah on stage. The parents assail Jehovah with their grief: for it is notable that Blake emphasizes, not the effect which the first murder has on Cain, but the effect which it has on our first parents. Eve cries:

> Is this the Promise of Jehovah! O it is all a vain delusion
> This Death & this Life & this Jehovah!

In the left-hand margin Blake places here a small picture showing Adam and Eve beneath the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, with fruit still hanging unpicked from it. It is the moment just before the Fall – the last tick of Innocent Time. How far they have come since then, the text seems to comment.

The eponymous Ghost of Abel then enters – although Eve denies that that is what it is:

41: I Kings xix 12.

42: *Letter to John Murray Esqre*. CMP 143-4.

43: I have consulted the following: Tannenbaum, Leslie. *Byron's* Cain *and Blake's* The Ghost of Abel, Modern Philology 1972, 350-64; Tayler, Irene. *Blake meets Byron on April Fools*, English Language Notes 1978, pp 85-93; Bidney, Martin. Cain *and* The Ghost of Abel: *Contexts for Understanding Blake's Response to Byron*, Blake Studies 1979, pp 145-65; McKeever, Kerry Ellen. *Naming the Name of the Prophet: William Blake's Reading of Byron's* Cain: A Mystery. Studies In Romanticism 34 (1995), pp 615-36; and Sorensen, Peter J. *Blake as Byron's Biographer: An Anthroposophic Reading of* The Ghost of Abel. The Wordsworth Circle 30.3 (Summer 1999), pp 161-65.

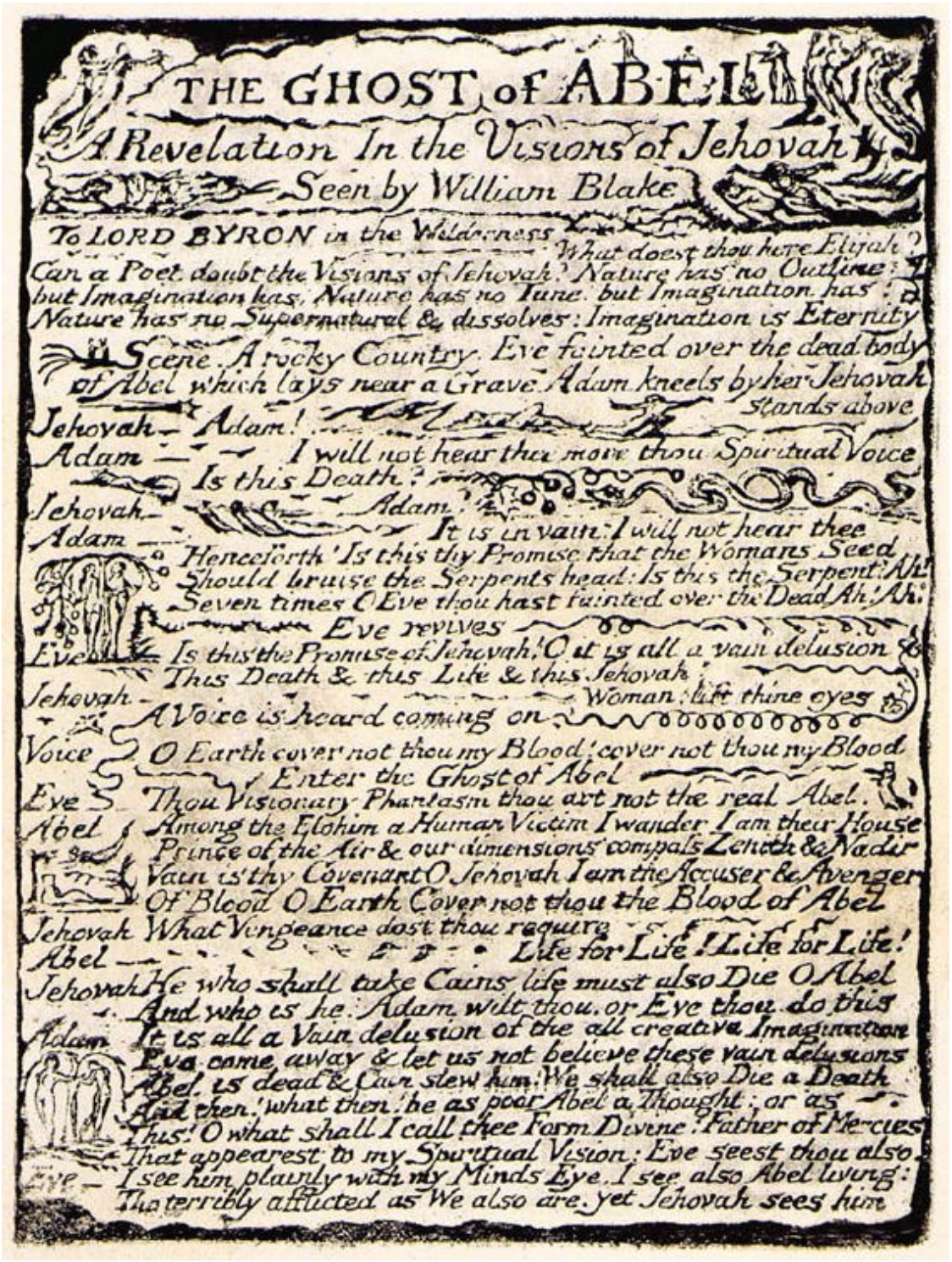
44: Genesis iv 16.

45: BLJ X 103.

Thou Visionary Phantasm thou art not the real Abel.

Whatever it is, it demands from Jehovah “Life for Life!” Jehovah protests that “He who shall take Cains life must also Die”, and Adam, numbed by it all, exclaims, a bit repetitively:

It is all a Vain delusion of the all creative Imagination
Eve, come away & let us not believe these vain delusions.



… in seeming agreement with Byron as to the value of the Imagination. May Blake imply that with real sin, as opposed to nominal sin, comes the need to blaspheme man's greatest gift? To the left of these lines he engraves a second picture of Adam and Eve beneath the Tree of the

Knowledge of Good and Evil – but this time with no fruit dangling from its branches. With the Fall, he implies, comes the sophistication and scepticism (and / or the distrust of the Imagination) which allow Adam the mental freedom to question and rebel, as shown in his lines above.

Eve answers:

> … were it not better to believe Vision
> With all our might & strength tho we are fallen & lost?

… and the defeated couple kneel before Jehovah – even though they suspect him to be a vain and imaginative delusion. He promises them something which Byron's Lucifer had glanced at only to mock,[46] namely "a Lamb for an Atonement instead / Of the Transgressor". But the Ghost of Abel will not kneel, and sinks into the grave, lamenting

> Compelled I cry O Earth cover not the Blood of Abel!

Satan (given his postlapsarian name, not Byron's prelapsarian "Lucifer") now arises from the grave into which Abel has just sunk (implying perhaps that Eve was correct, and that the Ghost was really him), "Armed in glittering scales" – as if in covert denial of Byron's Lucifer's denial that he was the Serpent in the Garden. He demands of Jehovah two things: "Human Blood & not the blood of Bulls or Goats", and that "Thou shalt Thyself be Sacrificed to Me thy God on Calvary". Jehovah "Thunders" that such is his will, but prophesies that Satan will in turn "go to Eternal Death / In Self Annihilation, even till Satan Self-subdued Put off Satan / Into the Bottomless Abyss whose torment arises for ever & ever". Next to this, again to the left, are our First Parents beneath the Tree again – but the Tree is now bearing a second season's fruit!

This lust for atonement via blood, shared by the Two Principles, goes to the heart of the issue, for, as Peter J. Sorensen writes,

> … blood atonement is the heart of Catholic and Anglican doctrine, so Cain's rhetoric, for example, implies that traditional Christianity is perverse.[47]

But Blake seems to have neither the desire nor the space to work out a convincingly dramatized conflict which would work through this vital problem, and we have to take it for granted, sight-unseen, that universal harmony is reached. As "The Curtain falls", Satan and Jehovah, the "Elohim", or "Principles",[48] face each other, as two choruses of angels enter, and sing antiphonally of their final (but dramatically unexplained) reconciliation, "… trembling over The / Mercy Seat, each in his station fixt in the Firmament by Peace Brotherhood and Love". Sharing, perhaps, "a mutual glance of great politeness". It goes with the idea that the Fruit will grow again, perhaps, this time, not to be tasted.

This is the bright message of Blake's words. However, if *The Ghost of Abel* be taken holistically, or as we should say these days as a multi-media event (and I assume it must be), the message darkens: for by far the largest illustration on the two sides is that at the bottom of plate 2, after the text has concluded, showing the dying Abel, with a skin around his loins, still resting on his elbow but with his head drooping in death, and a head and half-torso rising from a mist swirling about him. This emanation seems to be his Ghost (or as we may guess from the play, Satan), with an expression of wailing and wretchedness on its face, and the legend "The Voice of Abels

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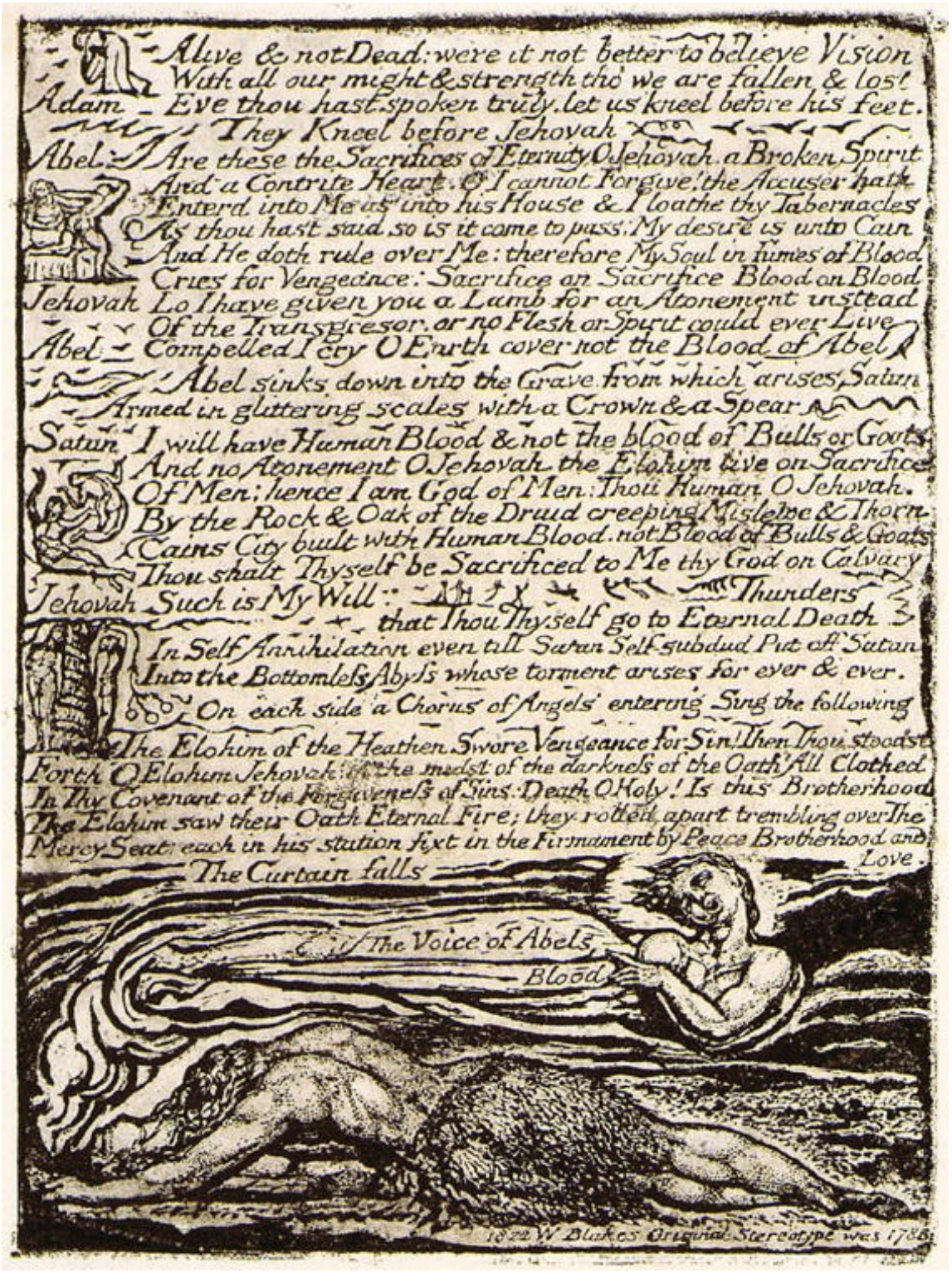
46: *Cain* I 161-6; CPW VI 237.
47: Sorensen, op. cit., p 162.
48: *Cain* II ii 404.

blood". The two beings – one collapsing to the left and the other arising to the right – complement one another in a flattened S-shape. Beneath the verbal junction of the Principles – engraved just above – Blake restates the physical disjunction of the fraternal antagonists, and the last impression our eyes have is one not of harmony but of renewed grief, suffering and guilt.



In stating that the two eternal Powers may at last (perhaps, somehow) be reconcilable, and in offering what Byron rejects, namely the Suffering and Atonement of Christ (in *The Vision of Judgement,* Southey's dunking in Derwent Water parodies the Suffering and Atonement of

Christ) Blake seems to wish to bring some Christian hope to replace Byron's despair. However, we are impressed by two things: Adam's first thoughts, namely that it may all be a question of human spiritual inventiveness having gone wrong, "a Vain delusion of the all creative Imagination" (an idea that would support Byron's scepticism about the Imagination): and by the equality Blake gives to the voices of Jehovah and Satan – "each" [finally] "honouring his gifts in the other". Blake confers the authority of his own Imagination on the kind of Manichean dualism which Byron's more orthodox conscience will not allow him to acknowledge, fascinating as he finds it. As Kerry Ellen McKeever writes, "Blake posits that the true God contains all things, including evil".[49] Byron hates Jehovah too much to give him equality with anyone – a problem which does indeed disfigure and imbalance *Cain,* in which Jehovah does not appear. If he did, Byron would have to dramatise his point of view, and the force of his own polemic would be lost. Blake's literary and religious insight is acute.

Blake's *The Ghost of Abel* concludes Byron's complex re-writing of Biblical myth with another re-writing, equally complex, even though at a fraction of the length of Byron's: one which does not refute, so much as offer a less pessimistic, though still slightly ambiguous, alternative to that of his fellow-prophet.

If only Byron could have seen *The Ghost of Abel,* how touched and intrigued he would have been! If only he and Blake could have met, and had discussions about philosophy, religion and life! It would have made a change from those long boring boat-trips and horse-rides with Shelley: and it would have been a deeper kind of communion between aristocrat and artisan than that which Byron enjoyed at the end of his life with *his* William – not William Blake, but William Parry.

49: McKeever, op. cit., p. 634.