

AMERICA a PROPHECY

Blake's *America* is at once a political allegory based on the American Revolution, an introduction to one poet's mythic world, and a moral prophecy in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. For the political allegory, see Erdman, pp 53-60 [56-63] and pp 234-241 [254-263].

PRELUDIUM

1:1-10 This opening scene suggests the world of Northern mythology. The shadowy and nameless female is an early form of Vala. Red Orc (from the Latin "Orcus" for Hell) is the imprisoned spirit of organic life. At "fourteen suns", puberty, halfway through the lunar cycle, he is ready to revolt. Politically, the fourteen suns refer to the years 1762-1776.

1:11-2:17 Orc portrays his aspirations by references to political symbols of revolt (for their authenticity, see Erdman, p 239 [259]n). The silence of the shadowy female identifies her with nature, barren when not possessed by man. Orc's rape is intended to give her a voice, and succeeds, and yet is felt by nature as torment and "eternal death", Blake's ironical term for generative life.

2:18-21 For a probable biographical interpretation of these lines, see Erdman, p 264 [286].

A PROPHECY

3:1 This is repeated as the last line of *Africa*, in *The Song of Los*.

3:14-15 This is the King of England, a dragon form even as Pharaoh is identified with a dragon by Ezekiel.

4:7-II Orc rises as a Devil to oppose the King as Angel, in a vocabulary drawn from the *Marriage*. For line II, see *Paradise Lost* I 62-63.

5:1 The Stone of night suggests the pillows of Jacob in Genesis 28:11, and the tablets of the Law.

6:1-15 In Orc's great oration, we can hear what Erdman terms "Blake's poetic paraphrase of the Declaration of Independence". Lines 1-2 recapitulate the opening of the *Marriage*, while throughout the speech there are echoes of Oothoon's chants. Orc's final lines are repeated in Blake's first attempt at Apocalypse, Night IX of *The Four Zoas*.

7:1-7 One of Blake's most ironic speeches, since it is the Angel who is actually "serpent-form'd", being the dragon of death.

8:1-17 Orc identifies Urizen with the Jehovah of Exodus, as he was in *A Song of Liberty*. Redeemed man (lines 15-16) is identified with the walkers in the furnace of Daniel 3:25. In lines 16-17, redeemed man is associated with the image of Nebuchadnezzar's dream (Daniel 2:31-35), with the subtle and crucial difference that Orc's man is one stage nearer to salvation than Nebuchadnezzar's image is, for the feet of iron and clay are feet of brass, the thighs of brass are of silver, and the silver breast is golden, like the head.

9:1-27 This Angelic reply attempts to arouse the king's governors against Orc, but Washington and the other rebels have already turned themselves defiantly toward the eastern world of Urizen's England (line 11). The mother of Orc is Enitharmon, but Blake does not name her in this speech, and Albion's Angel appears to identify Orc's mother with the shadowy female of the Preludium. Either way, Orc is a child of nature who has rebelled against her restraints.

10:1-12 Damon (pp 336-337) gives the fullest account of Blake's possible sources for this version of the Atlantis legend. Whatever the sources, Blake's use of the legend differs in emphasis from any other I know. Britain and America are separated by the Atlantic, fallen form of Atlas, whom Blake took as another version of his Albion. Now, in vision, the summits of Atlantis rise up again for Blake, as a consequence of the American Revolution and the mythic revolt of Orc. The archetypes of Eternity are revealed in an ancient palace, built by Ariston, king of beauty and "best" of the Greeks. Yet, whatever his merits, his bride or emanation was a stolen

one, which may be Blake's suggestion that the archetype of Atlantis itself was stolen from a British-Hebrew original. This use of Ariston is probably derived from Herodotus (Book VI, 61-66). Ariston occurs again in Blake in *Africa*, in the *Song of Los*.

11:1-14:16 This is the central action of *America*, and is properly a political one. The Angels become Devils and follow Boston in repudiating the covenant of Urizen. Governor Bernard was recalled from Massachusetts in 1769, but Blake identifies him with British colonial rule in general.

Against the rebel Americans, Albion's Angel sends the enormous plagues of the Book of Revelation, for he claims to be the scourge of God.

14:17-16:23 This reversal of the plagues onto England's shores is treated fully by Erdman (pp 53-60 [56-63]), who traces this apocalyptic visitation upon England to the precedent of the Great Pestilence in 1348, which followed English aggressions against France. Among the consequences are mass desertions among the British troops (15:3-5), the sickening and madness of the ruling circles (15:6-10), and the exposure of the Angelic timeserving laureate for the reptile he is (15:16-18). More fundamental even is the rout of the priests (15:19-22), which liberates females from the tyranny of marital restraints (Erdman, pp 58-59 [62-63]). As the flames of desire advance, Urizen-Jehovah is revealed (16:3-12) in all his leprous impotence, to prevail only for the twelve years more until France joins the Revolution (16:14-15). In the poem's final lines, thrones shake in France, Spain, and Italy, and the flames of desire advance to consume the five fallen senses, so as to restore men to their unfallen potential.



EUROPE a PROPHECY

This is the subtlest and most difficult of Blake's poems, outside of the three epics, and perhaps the most rewarding as a poem. For its historical allegory, see Erdman, pp 185-86 [201-202] and 193-207 [209-225], and for an account of its prophetic framework, Erdman, pp 245-49 [265-269]. For an attempt at a comprehensive critical reading, see Bloom, pp 146-61.

The broad political allegory of *Europe* traces the process by which England entered into war with France in 1793, following the execution of Louis XVI. As myth, *Europe* is a more imaginatively audacious version of *America*, taking the non-historical events of that poem and placing them in a more revelatory perspective. *Europe* precedes Blake's epics in trying to give a vision of all the Christian centuries, the seventh Eye of God or Orc cycle in Blake's symbolism.

PLATE iii

This charming introductory plate provides an absolute tonal contrast both to the Preludium and the poem proper. In a light vein, Blake repeats the central truth of the *Marriage*: human sensual limitations are willful, and keep us from the eternal world. The fifth sensuous window, sexual touch, is open to us, but the perverse pleasures of inhibition keep us from reality.

PRELUDIUM

1:1-2:18 This Preludium, following the situation of the one to *America*, is a prophecy of the Apocalypse. It begins with the same "nameless shadowy female" of the earlier poem, but now she has a voice, with which she laments the mortality of her beloved, brought forth and then destroyed in cycle after cycle. Orc is a Tammuz, and this lament echoes the ones for that dying vegetative god in Ezekiel 8:14 and *Paradise Lost* I 446-457. Enitharmon, Queen of Heaven, presides over these cycles, unaware that the coming eighth birth of Orc, as Jesus, will be the final one.

A PROPHECY

3:1-4 This is a parody of the first stanza of the Hymn in Milton's "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity". For Blake's very complex allusiveness here, see Erdman, pp 245-247.

- 3:11-12 Another ironic allusion to Milton's poem, here to stanza VI.
- 4:1-14 This is all part of a song of Los, with the sons of Urizen dramatically depicted in it as uttering lines 3-9. Erdman (p 246 n 5 [226 n 6]) reads it differently, assigning lines 3-9 to the sons of Urizen directly, and lines 1-14 to Enitharmon. This is very possible, but loses the complex irony of Los's dramatic self-deception and his misunderstanding of the new birth. See Bloom, p 150.
- 6:1-8:12 This is the song of triumph of the Female Will, with its cult of chastity (6:5) and its alliance with the dream of a remote heaven (6:6-7). Enitharmon sends her sons, the primal artists, to instruct the human race in her deceptions. Rintrah and Palamabron ought respectively to prophesy and civilize, but instead their functions are subverted by their emanations, Ocaly-thron, a goddess of jealousy, and Elynitria, a goddess of chastity.
- 9:1-5 This is the nightmare of the eighteen Christian centuries, the passage serving as a transition from mythic origins to contemporary history.
- 9:6-16 We are taken back both to the close of *America* and *A Song of Liberty*. The council here historically is the one that collapsed in 1783, after the climax of the American War (Erdman, pp 194-195 [211-212]). In literary terms, this passage alludes to the defeated host of Satan in *Paradise Lost* I. Even as that host built Pandemonium for their comfort, so Albion's Angels now seek out a giant temple for further deliberations.
- 10:1-15 This is the beginning of Blake's use of the Druids in his symbolism. There is a full commentary on this element in Blake in Fisher, pp 32-53 and 63-66. The temple here may be the famous serpentine one at Avebury. Albion's Angels are about to sacrifice humans in a war against Orc, and so Blake sees them as priests of Druidic natural religion. Historically, they are George III, Pitt, and the cabinet that tried three times to go to war, in 1787, 1790, 1791, while mythically they represent all fallen mankind, warring against their own salvation. Verulam, the home of Bacon, and the title he took, is the entrance into the temple, for Blake insists upon associating the experimental and empirical approach to nature with Druidism. The Zodiac, fixed order of Urizen's star world, serves as the pillars of the temple.
- 10:16-23 For this anticipation of contemporary phenomenology, see Bloom, pp 155-156.
- 10:24-31 The southern porch is the temple's intellectual quarter, for Blake identifies the serpentine temple with natural man. The Stone of Night, a Jacob's Pillow and Decalogue in *America*, is here also the fallen human skull, in a parody of Plato's Cave.
- 11:1-5 The brazen Book is the Bible of Heaven, the orthodox reading of the Bible as opposed to Blake's reading in his Bible of Hell, or canon of engraved poems. The copies of the brazen Book are the legal and doctrinal codes of kingdoms and churches.
- 12:1-20 Here the youth of England are compelled to hear their doom proclaimed by Albion's Angel, in a ban against the thought-creating fires of Orc. Erdman (pp 197-198 [214-215]) is able to identify this with precision as the particular ban ushering in a period of reaction in 1792. Lines 14-20 are identified by Erdman (pp 199-200 [216-217]) as the downfall of Chancellor Thurlow, handled by Blake as an omen of the ultimate downfall of all Albion's Angels.
- 12:21-31 This passage, particularly in Enitharmon's triumph, parallels the lyric "London" in *Songs of Experience*.
- 12:32-13:8 For the historical allegory here, involving Pitt's three attempts to lead England into war, see Erdman, pp 195-196 [212]. Mythically, Rintrah, the "red limb'd Angel" of 13:1, makes three attempts to bring about an apocalyptic situation, but only the fourth attempt, by Newton, is a success. The use of Newton here is clearly a satiric stroke on Blake's part. Newton, who himself wrote a commentary on Revelation, blows the trumpet of Apocalypse because his achievement fully revealed the cosmos of Deism. Newton's "enormous blast" is his explanation of the universe, which exposes the Angelic hosts as so many dying leaves of autumn.
- 13:9-14:36 Enitharmon summons her children, for history has now reached its climax. Eth-inthus is an emanation associated with the waters' rejection of the earthworm, and so is a spirit of exclusive female materiality. Manatha-Vorcyon has all the emblems of inspiration, but being

dominated by Ethinthus, he is reduced to a "soft delusion". Leutha, previously encountered in *Visions*, is frequently used by Blake as a symbol of hypocrisy in sexual matters. Antamon, who ought to represent the graphic arts, is merely a sensualist under Leutha's sway. The seven churches (14:20) are an ironic reference to the seven churches in Asia, to whom John the Divine addressed Revelation. Sotha, who ought to be the spirit of music, and his emanation, are merely intended by Enitharmon as seducers of Orc. This obscure paean of Female triumph ends with Orc's rejection of his mother (like the rejection by Jesus of Mary) and Enitharmon subsequently weeps.

14:37-15:11 This is the Europe of early 1793, on the eve of war between England and France, taken by Blake to be the wars of Edom, preceding a Last Judgment. In 14:37-15:2 the light of the morning appears in France, as the French finally follow the Americans in revolution. The coming vintage will be of blood, and the rising of Los is an ambiguous one, involving the serpentine thunder of the Druidic Urizen. Yet the prophetic cry of Los shakes nature, and the strife of blood may be a liberation. This passage is illustrated on Plate 10 of *America*, which is reproduced in this volume.



THE SONG of LOS

Of Blake's revolutionary prophecies, this is the weakest, because of the merely pedestrian *Africa* section that begins it. Yet *Asia*, its second part, is a remarkable and very effective poem in its own right. The purpose of *The Song of Los* is to give the background for the action of *America* and *Europe*, and also for the *Urizen-Ahania-Los* sequence of poems. By doing so, *The Song of Los* connects the two series, binding together myth and history, particularly in *Africa*, which precedes America in historical action, ending as it does with the first line of *America*. (See Erdman's essay "The Symmetries of *The Song of Los*" in *Studies in Romanticism* XVI Spring 1977.)

AFRICA

3:2 The four harps are the four principal continents.

3:11 Rintrah, the oldest son of Los, is here only an agent of Urizen. Later in Blake he will tend always to be a spirit of angry prophecy.

3:18-19 Palamabron is made the giver of Hermetic doctrine, which Blake associates, rather unfavorably, with less esoteric Greek modes of thought.

3:20 The sons of Har would include all men, on the basis of his role in *Tiriel*.

3:22-24 Blake clearly associates the Gospel with his own *Visions* poem, though to make Theotormon the patron of Christianity implies that faith's nearness to the springs of jealous torment and repressed desire.

3:28-31 These lines are based very loosely upon *Europe*. Antamon is a spirit of graphic art, but associated with Leutha, a spirit of sexual hypocrisy, and is credited with the "loose Bible" of Mahomet, which presumably means only that the Koran is a poor reflection of the Bible. The Northern mythology of Odin, with its warlike emphasis, is given by Sotha, a spirit of music, whose vagrant emanation, Diralada, figured in *Europe* as Thiralatha. Blake attempted to clarify these dark matters in *Milton*, Plate 27.

4:1-21 This very rapid sketch of European intellectual history traces the main stages in Blake's myth of decline, from the loss of Eternity (lines 1-4) to the emergence of natural man (5-12), to the growth of abstraction and empiricism in metaphysics with its culmination in Newton and Locke (13-17) until the final manifestation of natural religion in Rousseau and Voltaire, which comes to cover the whole earth (18-21).