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The Geddes Bible and the Tent of the Eternals in  
the Book of Urizen

F. B. Curtis

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## BLAKE'S "ANCIENT FORESTS OF EUROPE" Joel Morkan

In *The French Revolution*, Blake's Moloch, the Duke of Burgundy, exhorts the king "To rouze up the ancient forests of Europe, with clarions of cloud breathing war" (l. 101).<sup>1</sup> Burgundy warns that if this is not done the nobles will see "the ancient forests of chivalry hewn, and the joys of combat burnt for fuel" (l. 93).

David Erdman has commented on the power of Blake's epithet for the feudal aristocracy, but he has not chosen to explicate it.<sup>2</sup> The epithet, however, is another instance of Blake's careful fusion of history and myth in the poem, and it repays examination. On the mythic level the old nobility is Druidic, representing the primeval forest and the domination of the natural over the human. The historical reference, in turn, reinforces and intensifies the mythic dimension.

In 1669 Colbert promulgated an ordinance that closed the forests to the peasants.<sup>3</sup> They were banned from hunting in the forests or from gathering fuel wood. In the years just prior to the outbreak of the Revolution, the burden of this edict became even more onerous. Agents of the nobility exercised "planting rights" by growing trees on the road-side property of peasants, and further enforced the laws prohibiting them from the forests.<sup>4</sup>

During the weeks and days of turmoil immediately before the Revolution the agrarian lower classes vented their rage at these laws and moved to have "the ancient forests hewn, and the joys of combat burnt for fuel." When the Revolution was victorious, in fact, one of the first things the peasants did was to invade the forests and lay

claim to them.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, "forest rights" continued to be a serious political issue well into the nineteenth century. As Stendhal shows in Chapter XXIII, "Le Clergé, Les Bois, La Liberté," of *Le Rouge et Le Noir*, both the upper clergy and nobility intrigued to repossess *les forets domaniales* after the Restoration.

This historical data establishes the precision of Blake's epithet for the nobility. They represent the old world of privilege and dominance that maintains the world of Nature over the human world. The revolutionary forces, on the other hand, represent the human urge to liberate mankind from the domination of Nature and to subordinate natural forces to human needs. Through this compact and appropriate epithet for the aristocracy Blake conflated his mythic and historical intentions into a dense and dramatically functional metaphor.

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1 Geoffrey Keynes, ed., *Blake: Complete Writings* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), p. 138.

2 David V. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1969), p. 167.

3 Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution, 1789*, trans. Robert R. Palmer (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1947), p. 122.

4 Lefebvre, p. 14.

5 Lefebvre, p. 129.

## THE GEDDES BIBLE AND THE TENT OF THE ETERNALS IN THE BOOK OF URIZEN F. B. Curtis

The reaction of the Eternals to the creation of the "first female form now separate" (*Urizen*, pl. 18), is to close off the fallen Los and Enitharmon in a tent:

"Spread a Tent, with strong curtains around them  
"Let cords & stakes bind in the Void  
That Eternals may no more behold them"

They began to weave curtains of darkness  
They erected large pillars round the Void  
With golden hooks fasten'd in the pillars  
With infinite labour the Eternals  
A woof wove, and called it Science  
(*Urizen*, pl. 19, 11.2-9)

Although Blake was possibly thinking here of a traditional Biblical image--the tents of the wandering Jews--it is perhaps more than a coincidence that we find the following description of a tent and darkness in A. Geddes' *The Holy Bible* (Vol. 1, 20 June 1792), published two years before the printing of Blake's poem:

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And St Basil ascribes the darkness that covered the earth, before the appearance of light, to the interposition of an opaque body between it and the heavens. This he illustrates by an example that excludes all ambiguity. "Place around you", says he, "at high mid-day, a tent, composed of dense and opaque materials: the temporary darkness which, by shutting yourself up in it, you will procure, may give you an idea of that darkness, which covered the deep, and which did not antecedently subsist, but was the consequence of other things."

(Preface, p. V)

The closeness in imagery is striking: Blake's "strong curtains" and "curtains of darkness" remind us of the "dense and opaque materials" in Geddes; both tents are interposed between the fallen earth and the heavens. Finally, the Geddes description states that the darkness "was the consequence of other things," which readily invokes the reason for the Eternals' action:

Wonder, awe, fear, astonishment,  
Petrify the eternal myriads;  
At the first female form now separate  
(*Urizen*, pl. 18, ll.13-15)

Of course, Blake's fiery imagination has

transmuted and refined this source. The labor of the Eternals is "infinite," the adjective "golden" in "golden hooks" promises brightness and light to come, and the word "woof" will become an integral image in Blake's developing mythology.

However, it is not unlikely that Blake had read this description in the Geddes Bible, sold as it was by the bookseller with whom Blake had the closest contact in this period, Joseph Johnson.<sup>1</sup> Blake had engraved plates for Johnson as early as 1780, visited his shop frequently and would hardly have failed to notice an important new edition of his beloved Bible among the immense volume of scriptural criticism, writings on prophecy, and sermons that stocked Johnson's premises in St. Paul's Churchyard.<sup>2</sup>

1 An article on Blake's relationship to the London booksellers, "Blake and the Booksellers," has been accepted for a forthcoming issue of *Blake Studies*, and contains detailed remarks on the Blake-Johnson relationship.

2 There were over eighty works on Prophecy and Revelation alone (excluding sermons and editions of the Bible) published in the period 1792-1818, and Joseph Johnson published nearly half--thirty-nine--of them. See article in note 1, above.

## A SIGNIFICANT EARLY REVIEW OF BLAKE Donald H. Reiman

In *A Blake Bibliography* by G. E. Bentley, Jr., and Martin K. Nurmi, there are recorded only 102 type-printed references to William Blake or his works through 1827, the year of his death.<sup>1</sup> Suzanne R. Hoover has added one allusion (for 1796) in her "Fifty Additions to Blake Bibliography."<sup>2</sup> Of these items, only a handful comment substantively on Blake's poetry or his designs, fewer name him, and even fewer comment favorably.

The addition of even a brief notice favorable to Blake as an artist is, therefore, of some value. The following short notice of one of Blake's least significant publications is the second earliest published notice, I believe, to comment favorably on Blake's art<sup>3</sup> and is certainly the first to name him in doing so. It appeared in the *European Magazine and London Review* for August 1802 (42:125-26).

*Designs to a Series of Ballads written by William Hayley, Esq. and founded on Anecdotes relating to Animals, dram, engraved,*

*and published, by William Blake. With the*

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1 This figure, derived from the "Table of Type-Printed References to Blake before 1863" (p. xvii), may be slightly askew; that list's entry for the year 1789 is, for instance, a mistake.

2 *Blake Newsletter* 19, 5 (Winter, 1971-72), 167-72.

3 The single earlier favorable mention listed by Bentley and Nurmi occurred in passing in the *Analytical Review's* notice of Mary Wollstonecraft's translation of C. G. Salzmann's *Elements of Morality, for the Use of Children* (1791). But the question of Blake's participation in that work is still open. See Bentley and Nurmi, item 402A (pp. 149-50).

THE FIRST BOOK OF URIZEN Reserv'd for the days of futurity, I have sought for a joy without pain, For a solid without fluctuation. Why will you die, O Eternals? Why live in unquenchable burnings?Â Thus the Eternal Prophet was divided Before the death image of Urizen; For in changeable clouds and darkness, In a winterly night beneath, The Abyss of Los stretch'd immense; And now seen, now obscur'd, to the eyes Of Eternals the visions remote Of the dark separation appear'd: As glasses discover Worlds In the endless Abyss of space, So the expanding. eyes of Immortals Beheld the dark visions of Los, And the globe of lifeblood trembling.Â 11. `Spread a Tent with strong curtains around them! Let cords and stakes bind in the Void, That Eternals may no more behold them.' The (First) Book of Urizen. Date of publication: 1794. This illuminated book is known in seven copies containing from twenty-four to twenty-eight plates, with some variation in the order. Copies [a] and [g] delete "First" from the poem's title. Copy [a] has several significant deletions and emendations. The Book of Urizen is B.'s ironic version of the biblical Book of Genesis. It is also the locus for his mythology in "A Song of Liberty", VDA, America, Europe, The Song of Los, The Book of Ahania and The Book of Los, all of which rest on the ideas presented in this poem. The story is as follows