

Guide to Blake: An Uncollected Early Review

By Thomas Merton

This review, which first appeared in The Nation 147.3 (16 July 1938) 74, is not listed in any of the Merton Bibliographies, nor is it included among the other early reviews in Appendix B of The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton. It is published here with the permission of the Thomas Merton Legacy Trust.

WILLIAM BLAKE'S CIRCLE OF DESTINY. By Milton O. Percival. Columbia University Press. \$3.50.

After challenging T. S. Eliot's statement that Blake lacked a "framework of traditional and accepted ideas," Mr. Percival hints that it can be proved that Blake exceeded Milton and was second only to Dante in the use of tradition. He does not set out to prove this himself, however, and he acknowledges that the tradition Blake does use is a heterodox line of little-known mystics, from the gnostics and Plotinus down to Boehme and Swedenborg.

Mr. Percival's book is entirely descriptive. He gathers up all Blake's symbols and trades them with those of his various predecessors. Furthermore, he confines himself to the symbols in the later prophetic books. Now in these books Blake expanded the dualism of his earlier poems, based on the struggles between Urizen (repressive reason, tyranny, etc.) and Los (genius, imagination), into the fourfold struggle of the "Zoas." It is here that Mr. Percival finds what he chooses to call the "circle of destiny."

This is merely a description of the way Blake symbolized his belief that nothing in the realm of being is static. And he does this by means of a "wheel of existence" common to nearly all mystics. Blake sees both man and macrocosm continually moving through various levels of enlightenment and blindness, liberty and oppression. Mr. Percival's careful study relates this to various other systems of mystics, of astrologers, of alchemists. In the attempt to fit Blake in with the astrologers and alchemists, it becomes hard to do more than simply point out the similarity: anything further tends to do violence to Blake. In reexpressing the "circle of destiny" in astrological, then alchemical symbols, Mr. Percival imposes too much rigidly on Blake's thought.

While the book is full of material to interest the student, it treats so many details with such minute care that it seems to lose in freshness, in clarity, and sometimes in perspective. Compared with those of S. Foster Damon, Mr. Percival's judgments seem often to lack sureness. For instance, a certain vagueness in his treatment of Blake's feminine symbols leads Mr. Percival to refer to some of them as if they were exact counterparts of Milton's Eve and played a similar part in the "fall." Damon is always careful never to involve Blake in any Miltonian stuffiness about sex.

In confining himself to a study of symbolism, Mr. Percival does not try to evaluate Blake's philosophy, and he never speaks of him as a poet. The book is simply a valuable aid toward disengaging Blake's vigorous thought from the fine, strange symbols that clothe it. More frequently the author simply identifies the symbols and assigns to each of them its own properties. In this respect his study is an excellent one, because of its completeness; it should be of great help to anyone simply reading the prophetic books, for even if it is not important to know what the symbols stand for — and perhaps no one really does know — it is at any rate essential to be able to recognize the symbols themselves and identify them every time they recur in the poems.