# Poetry

# CRITICISM

VOLUME

157

# Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works of the Most Significant and Widely Studied Poets of World Literature*

## Volume 157

*Lawrence J. Trudeau*
Editor



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*Gale*
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# Poetry Criticism

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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." *Interpreting Blake.* Ed. Michael Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978. 32-69. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism.* Ed. Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 34-51. Print.

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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." In *Interpreting Blake,* edited by Michael Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. 32-69. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism.* Edited by Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 34-51. Print.

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# Contents

# *The Four Zoas*
## William Blake

English poet and essayist.

The following entry provides criticism of Blake's poem *The Four Zoas* (composed c. 1796-c.1807; first published in *The Works of William Blake* in 1893). For additional information about Blake's complete poetic career, see *PC,* Volume 12; for additional information about the poetry collection *Songs of Innocence and of Experience,* see *PC,* Volume 63.

## INTRODUCTION

Written, illustrated, and revised by William Blake (1757-1827) over an extended period, *The Four Zoas,* which he originally called *Vala,* is an important example of Romantic epic poetry. Although the work may not have been finished by Blake, it offers the fullest expression of his late mythology, which depicts humanity in its fallen state as it strives for redemption in the face of the coming Apocalypse.

### SUBJECT AND FORM

The Greek word *Zoa* may be roughly translated as "beast." In the King James version of the book of Revelation, the term refers to the figures that surround the throne of the Lamb: ox, lion, eagle, and human. In Blake's mythology, the Zoas personify faculties of the human psyche, and *The Four Zoas* presents the interaction of these faculties in the form of a narrative. Traditionally the four Zoas have been read as follows: Urizen represents reason; Luvah, known in the fallen world as Orc, is passion, energy, or will; Urthona, or Los in the fallen world, is poetic or imaginative power; and Tharmas is instinct, or unified perception, which the narrator describes as the "Parent power." Recent criticism, however, has rejected this reductive allegory.

Organized within a framework of nine "nights," the poem proceeds through digressions, flashbacks, multiplying narratives, and fragments. Having fallen from Eden, Albion, who represents both collective humanity and England, experiences the psychic split that creates the four Zoas. The Zoas themselves are also divided in the fall into fallen forms, feminized emanations, specters, and shades. All of the characters sense that they once had a better and more unified existence and struggle to recover it.

After the fall, the Zoas have lost much of their power, exchanged roles, and begun to battle with one another, moving through various levels of spiritual and aesthetic existence known as "states" beneath Eden. With the fall, the institutions of religion have fallen into error, and integrated perception has become impossible to achieve. The complicated spiritual conflict that follows depicts the characters falling in and out of love, going to war, and despairing in the face of their inability to find redemption and unification. With "Night the Eighth," the cast of characters suddenly expands to include many figures of the Bible, including the Lamb of God and Satan. The poem culminates in Apocalypse, at times a pastoral in the "Night the Ninth." Los, the spirit of poetic imagination, seems to play a major role in the Last Judgment that will return humanity to eternity, though it is unclear whether Los affects the Last Judgment through his choices or whether the Last Judgment was providentially preordained. After the Apocalypse, the Zoas are reunited with their emanations and seem to return to their eternal roles.

### MAJOR THEMES

*The Four Zoas* carries out the Romantic project of transforming the classical epic, typically concerned with the events and destiny of a nation or culture, into a form that depicts the psychological development of humanity. The poem is concerned with the interaction, disintegration, and restoration of human psychological faculties—in particular, the way in which these faculties became perverted or unbalanced in the fallen world. The assessment and criticism of the institutions, social movements, modes of thought, and other historical factors that both affect and reflect psychological development is inherent in Blake's analysis. While it is arguable that *The Four Zoas* provides little in the way of historical context or direct social analog, many scholars have contended that Blake's poem represents a criticism of Enlightenment thought, which claimed rationality as its ideal. Michael Ackland (1983) interpreted the character of Urizen as representative not only of reason but also of Enlightenment reason in particular. Ackland asserted that, for Blake, "a system of thought is to be judged as much by its end-products as by its avowed aims," and claimed that Blake had seen "the concept of Enlightenment used to justify the slave trade, rapacious mercantilism, domestic repression, and finally wars of empire." Ackland contended that the contradictions in Enlightenment reasoning are portrayed in the wars of Urizen in the seventh and eighth nights of *The Four Zoas.*

For Blake, Enlightenment metaphysics and reason were simply conditions of humanity's general fallen state, and one of the major themes in *The Four Zoas* is concerned with the redemption from that state. The work represents Blake's renewed interest in Christian theology and symbolism. *The*

*Four Zoas* can thus be read as a reenvisioning of the biblical story of humanity's origin and fall in Eden. Another condition of this fallen state is the degeneration of religion. Redemption is often portrayed as a reunion between humanity and the Lamb of God, but in Blake's view, it also encompasses a rejection of the errors of the church and its social evils, as well as the rational, materialistic, Newtonian worldview. He believed that humanity, with its reunified perception, can return to a state of innocence and union with God.

*The Four Zoas* also reveals much about the development of Blake's thought, mythology, and experiments with different media. Blake began the poem while illustrating Edward Young's nine-night poem *The Complaint; or, Night Thoughts* (1742-46), and Blake's earliest drafts suggest that *Vala* was a continuation of his early illuminated poetry (1788-95). Blake took the manuscript with him when he moved to Felpham in 1800 to work with the poet William Hayley. Robert N. Essick (1984) points out that the poem's revisions at Felpham seem to incorporate both what Blake learned about book publishing from Hayley and the deep spiritual and aesthetic crisis that Blake's break with Hayley and his capital trial for sedition in 1804 had fostered. Joseph Viscomi (1993) found that the latest set of revisions to the poem utilized the same mythological and religious symbolism of the illuminated epics, *Milton* and *Jerusalem,* both of which are dated 1804, though not completed until much later. These parallels may suggest either that Blake left off *The Four Zoas* for these works or that he revised the manuscript poem in light of his new mythological imagery and thought.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

The initial critical response to *The Four Zoas* differs from the early response to much of Blake's writing because the poem, owned by the English artist John Linnell and his descendants, was not published during Blake's lifetime. It was not published until 1893, when Edwin John Ellis and the Irish poet William Butler Yeats included it in *The Works of William Blake.* The availability of *The Four Zoas* made *Milton* and *Jerusalem,* which often allude to the story of the Zoas, more intelligible, and the increased accessibility of the texts laid the groundwork for critics such as Northrop Frye (1947) to explicate Blake's mythic system and thought. Frye's analysis of *The Four Zoas* especially remains a key starting point for understanding the poem.

David V. Erdman (1954) situated *The Four Zoas* within the context of English politics. Arguing that Blake was keenly aware of the relationship between industry, colonialism, and war in his day, Erdman contended that the author depicted the awakening of the industrial spirit and its attendant violence in his epic poem. Rejecting such sociohistorical interpretations, Helen T. McNeil (1970; see Further Reading) contended that readers would not encounter any of the "references to the Bible and Britain" that serve to connect Blake's later prophetic works to "external history, theology, or myth." She asserted that *The Four Zoas* dispenses with exposition and explanation, thereby thrusting the reader directly into an "epic of situations, in which action has been reduced to a series of violent, absolute confrontations taking place in a cosmic limbo." According to McNeil, the absolute and chaotic world of the poem forces a confrontation in which the reader must come to terms with Blakean psychological myth.

Much has been made of Blake's adaptation of Christian mythology and symbolism, but they are not the sole sources of his religious thought. Terence Allan Hoagwood (1978), for example, examined the parallels between *The Four Zoas* and "Defence of the Philosophick Cabbala," from the *Kabbalistic Conjecture* (1653), by the English philosopher Henry More, known for his idiosyncratic interpretations of Neoplatonist thought. Hoagwood traced the influence of More's notion of the "Soul's *Vehicle*" on the feminized emanations in the poem.

The history of the composition of *The Four Zoas* is complicated, and the illustrated manuscript is a palimpsest of revisions. Blake wrote the text in three different styles of handwriting, and he possibly abandoned the work, though some scholars have posited that what remains more or less represents his final intentions. Responding to editorial efforts to capture a finished version of *Vala* buried in *The Four Zoas* manuscript, Erdman (1964; see Further Reading) examined the erasures, palimpsests, and fragments of the manuscript, as well as the history of the widely differing versions made by Blake. Though Erdman fully acknowledged the difficulty of conclusive reconstruction of an original or intended text, he declared that "we expect any study of *Vala* to take us closer to a perfect reading of the text." One of the more significant textual anomalies in *The Four Zoas* is the existence of two versions of the seventh night. Scholars have claimed that the later version was intended to replace the earlier one, but Peter Otto (1987) presented textual evidence indicating that the relationship between the two is more complex. Otto proposed that there is significant evidence of narrative continuity between the two texts, which suggests that they cannot be conflated.

Gregory Luther

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

### Poetry

*Poetical Sketches.* London: Privately printed, 1783.

*The French Revolution: A Poem in Seven Books.* London: Johnson, 1791.

***Illuminated Printings**

*The Book of Thel.* London: The Author, 1789.

*Songs of Innocence.* London: The Author, 1789. Rev. and expanded ed. *Songs of Innocence and of Experience.* London: The Author, 1794.

*America. A Prophecy.* Lambeth: The Author, 1793.

*Visions of the Daughters of Albion.* London: The Author, 1793.

*Europe.* Lambeth: The Author, 1794.

*The [First] Book of Urizen.* Lambeth: The Author, 1794.

*The Book of Ahania.* Lambeth: The Author, 1795.

*The Book of Los.* Lambeth: The Author, 1795.

*The Songs of Los.* Lambeth: The Author, 1795.

†*Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion.* London: The Author, 1804.

‡*Milton.* London: The Author, 1804.

***Modern Editions***

*Vala; or, The Four Zoas.* London: Oxford UP, 1963.

*Tiriel.* London: Oxford UP, 1967.

§*The Illuminated Blake.* Garden City: Anchor/Doubleday, 1974.

*William Blake: The Complete Poems.* Ed. Alicia Ostriker. New York: Penguin, 1977.

*The Four Zoas: A Photographic Facsimile of the Manuscript with Commentary on the Illuminations.* Ed. Cettina Tramontano Magno and David V. Erdman. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1987.

*Blake: The Complete Poems.* Ed. W. H. Stevenson. London: Longman, 1989.

*Selected Poems.* Ed. G. E. Bentley, Jr. London: Penguin, 2005.

**Other Major Works**

****Illuminated Printings***

*All Religions Are One.* London: The Author, 1788? (Treatise)

*There Is No Natural Religion.* London: The Author, 1788? (Aphorisms)

*For Children: The Gates of Paradise.* London: The Author, 1793. Rev. and expanded ed. *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise.* London: The Author, 1818? (Aphorisms)

*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.* London: The Author, 1793? (Poetry and prose)

***Modern Editions***

‖*The Works of William Blake, Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical.* Ed. Edwin John Ellis, William Butler Yeats, and John Linnell. 3 vols. London: Quaritch, 1893. (Poetry and prose)

*The Writings of William Blake.* Ed. Geoffrey Keynes. 3 vols. London: Oxford UP, 1925. Rev. ed. *The Complete Writings of William Blake.* London: Oxford UP, 1957. Rev. ed. London: Oxford UP, 1966. (Letters, plays, poetry, and prose)

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*Blake published many of his works using illuminated printing, a kind of etching that he invented.

†Blake dated the title page 1804, though he seems to have worked on the poem until perhaps 1820.

‡Blake dated the title page 1804, though he seems to have worked on the poem until perhaps 1808.

§This edition is annotated by David V. Erdman.

‖Includes the first publication of *The Four Zoas,* which was composed in 1796-1807.

## CRITICISM

### Edwin John Ellis and William Butler Yeats (essay date 1893)

SOURCE: Ellis, Edwin John, and William Butler Yeats. "The Three Persons and the Mirror," "The Four Zoas," and "The Symbols of the Four Zoas." *The Works of William Blake: Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical.* Vol. 1. London: Quaritch, 1893. 246-50; 251-54; 255-61. Print.

[*In the following essays, Ellis and Yeats outline the system of symbols and correspondences utilized by Blake in* The Four Zoas *and trace the connection between Blake's thought and that of the occultist Jakob Böhme. They also relate the division of the Trinity and a fourth matrix known as the will or imagination of God to the four characters in* The Four Zoas.]

### The Three Persons and the Mirror

Blake at the beginning of his longest poem bids the muses sing man's "fall into Division and his resurrection into Unity," and Jacob Boehmen would have echoed the words. The universe, according to both seers, arose from the divine unity, and by a process of division and subdivision almost identical in both systems, so far as its earlier stages are concerned and having many analogies throughout. Boehmen, however, continually returns to cast his plummet into the dark fountain of things, whereas Blake follows the river of mystical truth down into the meadow lands of human love and human hope. The abstraction so dear to Boehmen did not supply the palpable images and moving affections needed for poetry. Hence, although the name of God occurs continually in the symbolic books of Blake, there is little philosophic exposition of His nature. The general character, however, of the Blakean system, its resemblances to, and divergences from that of Boehmen, and a few explicit statements here and there leave little doubt as to Blake's view of the first cause.

Like Boehmen and the occultists generally, he postulates besides the Trinity a fourth principle, a universal matrix or heaven or abode, from which, and in which all have life. It is that represented by the circle containing the triangle of the ancient mystics, and may be described as the imagination of God, without which neither Father, Son, nor Spirit could be made manifest in life and action. In one of the aphorisms written in the Laocoon plate, it is called "The Divine Body," and men are valued according as it enters into them, for we are told that "The unproductive man is not a Christian." To this emanation, to give it the Blakean term, of the Father, is applied constantly by Boehmen the word "looking-glass," and Blake, when he uses the same expression in connection with a corresponding though minor being of his mystical mythology, and writes of "Enitharmon's looking-glass," as also when he speaks in the essay on "The Last Judgment" of "the vegetable glass of Nature," adopts the term as his own. God looking into this mirror, ceases to be mere will, beholds Himself as the Son, His love for His own unity, His self-consciousness, and enters on that eternal meditation about Himself which is called the Holy Spirit. "Council" it is sometimes called in Boehmen, a term which is lengthened into "The Council of God" in the "Mystical Writings." This Holy Spirit, or "Council," is the energy which wakes into being the numberless thought-forms of the great mirror, the immortal or typical shapes of all things, the "ideas" of Plato. It and the mirror make up together divine manifestation. At first the thought-forms subsist and move in this universal "imagination which liveth for ever" without being manifest to themselves and each other as separate individualities, not being lives but thoughts of the universal life. Then comes the contrary of the universal life, "the reaction of man against God," the longing of the shapes and thought-forms for a vivid sensation of their own existence. Desire is its name, and to it Boehmen traces the fall into physical life. Blake will have none of this doctrine, for desire is to him essentially sacred, because essentially vital, for "all that lives is holy." "Contraries are not negations," he tells us in **"Milton,"** and it is to the negation of God that we owe the physical body and its troubles. It was only when limited to its own narrow experience and divorced from imagination by what Blake calls reason, "its outward bound," that desire brought corporeality to impede life in its action. This reason is the eternal "no" warring on the eternal "yes" of God, and the creator of the opaque, the non-imaginative, the egoistic. He means by reason something quite different from what he calls intellect. It means with him the faculty that entices us to claim exclusive reality for our own sensations, and build up selfhoods, dwelling in memories of their own experiences—the great "chaos"—to promulgate "laws of prudence" for their protection, and "call them the laws of God." It is what we call materialism, and has caused all evil and all misery, for once we believe that our selfhoods, or spectres as Blake names them, alone exist, we seek to feed them and preserve them at whatever sorrow and toil to others. Hence this reason is the maker of every war and the doer of all rapine. For it, "on the land, children are sold to trades of dire necessity, still labouring day and night," and for it "slaves in myriads, in shiploads, burden the sounding deep." It closed up the forms and thoughts and lives within the narrow circle of their separate existence, whereas before they had "expanded and contracted" at will, hiding them from the light and life of God, and from the freedom of the "imagination which liveth for ever." The mirror was changed under its influence to that hard stepmother we call Nature. Desire, before reason came to set bounds to it, was merely joy seeking its own infinity, but restriction changed it to a devouring flame. "Thought," says Blake in **"Europe,"** "changed the infinite to a serpent," that is, to a self-torturing and desirous selfhood or spectre. As soon as reason had set bounds to life, "the laws of the numbers" began, and multiplicity endeavoured to take the place of unity, continually struggling with that from whence it came. In the struggle the indignation of unity is called "the wrath of God," and is the cause of our unending dissatisfaction with ourselves and all things. Boehmen appears to make this wrath arise from desire itself, but Blake more correctly considers it an essentially different principle.

The personal desires shrink further and further from the impersonal wrath. Hence God, as Will, became wrapped in darkness, and man would never again have known the divine freedom he had fallen from, did not God as Love descend perpetually within the forms and lives. The unity contends with the multiplicity, and seeks to conquer it in the will, but descends into it to redeem and succour in the love, for "One must be all, and contain within Himself all things both small and great." Hence the beauty and harmony of Nature. "God," writes Blake in the notes on Lavator, "is in the lowest effects as well as in the highest causes. He is become a worm that he may nourish the weak. For let it be remembered that creation is God descending according

to the weakness of man; our Lord is the word of God, and everything on earth is the word of God, and in its essence is God." It is the perpetual aim of the love to persuade all lives "to unite as one man," and all thoughts and feelings to put off their separate egoism and become "the divine members."

In the last chapter the "first degree" is compared to the Father, the second to the Son, and the third or "natural degree" to the Holy Spirit. The "natural degree" is something more than a correspondence for the Holy Spirit, for in it also is the fallen substance of the mirror. The two between them making up the seeking and alluring, masculine and feminine, repulsive and attractive, of corporeal life; for when the lives become spectres or selfhoods, the mirror, in its turn, grows spectrous, and is changed into a "vortex," seeking to draw down and allure. It ceases to be a passive maternal power and becomes destroying. This double being of corrupted spirit and mirror is the serpent-woman of the first night of **"Vala"** and the *virgo-scorpio* of the ancient occultists. It is "the delusive goddess Nature."

poetry. Hence his system is mainly busy with the lesser powers through which the Deity manifests in our created world, for "God only acts or is in existing beings or men." The unity is mysteriously united to the diversity and finds therein its body and its opportunity for life and motion, by that union of incompatibles which is the supreme paradox. The "beings" in the sentence quoted from **"The Marriage of Heaven and Hell"** are the spirits or mental states. The present chapter has to do with their classification into four great divisions corresponding to the division of the Divine Nature into Father, Son, Spirit and, what we have called with Boehmen, "mirror." These four kinds of mental states and their corresponding physical symbols are called the four Zoas, or "Lifes," from the Greek word ζωα, life. They are identical with the wheels of Ezekiel and with the four beasts of the Apocalypse, and resemble closely Raphael, Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, the Kabalistic regents of the cardinal points, and like them preside over psychic and bodily affairs. They are the mighty beings, Urizen, Luvah, Tharmas, Urthona, whose deeds and words fill page after page of "The Mystical Writings."

TABLE OF CORRESPONDENCES

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| DIVINE. MACROCOSM. | Father— Divine Will. | Son— Divine Love. | Mirror— Divine Imagination. | Holy Spirit— Divine Energy. |
| HUMAN. MACROCOSM. | First Degree— Mood. Genius. Universal. | Second Degree— Thought. Symbol. Particular. | Third Degree— Manifestation. Body. Concrete. | |

The mood or genius, which is the centre of human life, is the impression upon man of the divine quarternary, and is variously identified with both Father, Son, and Spirit and imagination, according to the particular function it fulfils for the time being, for all things are fourfold, and repeat in miniature the great fourfold of the universe. In the Swedenborg notes, for instance, it is identified with the Lord, whereas in the Crabb Robinson notes the genius of Voltaire is described as the Holy Spirit, and in the **"Marriage of Heaven and Hell"** the poetic genius and the Father are spoken of as one.

### THE FOUR ZOAS

The process we have just described is going on, eternally, in regions of thought and life far above the perceptions of corporeal mind. We can do no more than figure it to ourselves in terms of the world about us and tell of "wrath," "reason," "desire," and so forth. The reality is mental but not after the fashion of our embodied minds. Blake, as we have seen, appears to have felt the incongruity of setting forth the earlier and more spiritual phases of it, at any rate, in images and figures so vivid and definite as those of

When life falls into division the First Person of the Trinity gives place to Urizen, "creator of men, mistaken demon of Heaven," and "god of this world." He is Reason, the enemy of inspiration and imagination. Urizen before he sought dominion as Reason was wholly subordinate and enwrapped in the divine fire and as such was a principle of spiritual or imaginative order, but separating himself from the Divine, as the cold light of the mind, he became a selfhood, a life living from and for itself, and not from and for the source of all lives, and was transformed into the cause of the formalism and deadness of unimaginative thought and of the rigidity and opaqueness of iron and stone. Before, he had been the tendency of things to group themselves by a natural affinity into shapes of beauty and joy, and now he turned into the tendency of things to contract about their own centres, and to subordinate all to themselves. From being the creative will of the divine he became the creative will of the body and corporeal mind. He is described as falling into the chaos, which is memory, because memory is the record of the merely egoistic experience, thus differing from inspiration, which is direct knowledge. It is he who creates those "laws of prudence" to preserve the selfhoods, or spectres, and calls them "laws