

Blake and Freud. By Diana Hume George. Ithaca, N.Y.:
Cornell University Press. 1980.

In *Blake and Freud*, Diana George has two main aims. The least important to her is to illuminate the poetry of William Blake with the analytic theory of Sigmund Freud. Although as George admits, the choice of Freud rather than Jung might surprise many, the business of reading a poet through a theorist from another discipline is a familiar critical procedure. And George, I think, does this more sensitively than most. Of this more later.

Her larger and more theoretical goal is also more controversial. She contends that Blake, writing more than a century earlier, was in some respects more correct than Freud about certain matters, particularly about the position of women in the whole of human affairs. She isn't only saying that Blake is more suggestive than Freud or that he lends symbolic or artistic expression to theories that Freud would later expound. Rather, George comes right out and says that in certain areas, Blake knew what Freud did not:

Blake's system often points in directions taken by revisionists only after Freud's death, and just as frequently gets where psychoanalysis has yet to go. I intend this study, then, as a contribution to psychoanalytic theory and criticism, regardless of any interest the analytic reader may or may not have in Blake as poet. [Pp. 17-18]

Blake embodies the system George refers to in his poems and engravings. Her willingness to explore his system for contributions to our knowledge of women (or of anything) reveals her belief in the power of poetry and the visual arts. In her view, poetry and engravings (in Blake's case) are not simply charming decorations designed to amuse a cultivated mind—instead, they are conduits of truth; bearers of substantive, not just decorative, content. This is not a new idea, of course, but it is unusual to see someone take it quite so much at face value.

Like many other processes in interpretation, George's is a bit circular. You get going in understanding Blake by seeing him through Freud's eyes (the first of her aims in this book). Then, with a large part of the poet understood, you begin to read Freud more critically, and the poet, at times, seems to see things more clearly than the analyst.

This is implied in George's statement of the program for the second half of the book:

Together with *The Four Zoas* and *Jerusalem*, *Milton* constitutes Blake's version of Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, and *Moses and Monotheism*. These . . . Freudian texts, like Blake's major prophecies, attempt a reconstruction of psychic evolution. As we have seen. . . Freud occasionally gave expression to deep regret that psychic patterns evolved as they apparently did. Blake expressed regret as deep as Freud's, based on a vision as dark as Freud's, but Blake also spoke in the prophetic and prescriptive voice Freud denied himself. [P. 147]

For Freud, Blake, and George, individuals develop primarily, centrally, as sexual individuals, as males and females; not only physically, but especially in their interior, mental development. The events in each life that lead to the developed individual, as well as the events in history or myth that account for humankind's developing in sexual ways, are, for George, "psychic development."

George is not only a Freudian, she is also a feminist. This theme of psychic development, however, takes her some distance from the usual feminist critical concerns. Rather than asking the usual question, What is the image of women in these writers' texts? she asks instead a much more interesting question, What is the nature of women, and how can these two acute observers of humanity contribute to our understanding of it? This is refreshing. And she looks to the future of womankind; she is worried about how it will all end. She finds evidence that Blake and Freud were also worried about this, but particularly Blake, possessor of the prophetic voice.

George finds that Freud was not completely comfortable with what he had said about women. And it would be easy for her to condemn him for his male-active, female-passive identification. Many feminists do. But George has decided that this identification is more description than anything else, and she cites Freud's later writings to point out his uneasiness over this division. He could have avoided this discomfort, this unease, she claims, had he permitted himself a prophetic or artistic escape from his own observations. George sees Freud as trapped by his too-scrupulous attention to nature and the natural, the source of his observations. This slavish attachment elicits some strong language from George as she explains how Freud sought to justify, almost sanctify, his enterprise: "Freud could not outgrow his acolytic attitude toward nature and her science, which promised that illusory objectivity his own discipline anatomized. He worshiped her as a goddess" (p. 222).

In George's view, however, Blake escaped the limitations that kept Freud from acting on his uneasiness. The prophetic and artistic were his sphere, and his view of women was more expansive. He could see beyond what was—Freud's "illusory objectivity"—to imagine Eternity, where (when?) fallen humankind could be redeemed.

In his later, longer poems, Blake created characters or beings to give flesh to abstractions or generalizations about human nature and its future. To embody the essence of womankind, he imagined, in *Jerusalem*, a series of female characters or categories, among them the Female Will, an active character, and the feminine, passive; and he tried to distinguish both of them from the female. All three of these are merely aspects of an ideal Human Form Divine that has male components as well. Or so George sees it. As she admits, these divisions are often unclear, and Blake did not sustain a positive view of these creations of his. For instance, the Female Will, a hopeful sign for feminists because it is an active force, has a dark side. Still, whereas Freud could see womankind only as passive, Blake, at least, could envision an active female even if he did not sustain his optimism in the face of such a creation. And he could envision a sexless, divine form for humanity. His *vision*, as George would have it, went beyond Freud's *description*, and is therefore better. It envisioned womankind in a redeemed state; Freud described womankind in their passive, fallen state.

But this scheme of Blake's, as George admits, has problems. In addition to being unclear and confused, it does not hold out much hope for womankind in

this world. Even for Blake, woman is not redeemed until Eternity. And to further point to the problems, George herself quotes Northrop Frye on the nature of the Eternity that Blake envisioned:

“In Eden there is no Mother-God. . . . God is always the Supreme Male, the creator for whom the distinction between the beloved female and created child has disappeared.”

Then she adds this comment:

Despite Blake’s warnings to the contrary, even so sensitive a reader as Frye has managed to miss Blake’s point. But it might also be suggested that Blake missed his own point. [P. 197]

Missed his own point? George explains this lapse on Blake’s part by claiming that he ran out of language to use to express the redemption of fallen sexuality:

. . . compelled to express ultimately genderless human forms in gendered terms he fell into confusion and error. If “Humanity is far beyond sexual organization” then it is also beyond language and image. [P. 200]

This is always a disconcerting argument—that fallen poets must at some point in their poems succumb to the flaws in our fallen language; that our language, flawed as it is by gender, provides these poets no escape from the values that this gender-laden language drags along with it. It is especially disconcerting to see this argument invoked in the name of a poet who so clearly set himself up, and none too humbly, as a prophet. How do you prove that this lapse into fallen language is what happened to Blake, and not that he is simply unclear on this point or that he contradicts himself? To put it another way, how does George catch a point that eludes both Northrop Frye and even, perhaps, Blake himself? She does not tell us.

It is here that *Blake and Freud* becomes political. But it is a scrupulous, self-conscious, gentle kind of politicization. The tanks of dogma and self-righteous preconception do not come rolling in to flatten and distort Blake’s difficult, delicate poetry. In fact, George is at considerable pains to criticize Susan Fox, another feminist critic of Blake, for first imposing her expectations on Blake’s work and then condemning Blake for failing to meet those expectations. But I think George is guilty of another critical error involving expectations. She is compelled to imagine, and perhaps even expect, a better future for woman-kind. This expectation, I think, pushes her reading of Blake toward a discovery of this brighter future whether it is in his work or not. I have overstated things a bit—George does not invent passages in Blake to support her hope, but I think she undervalues some of the conflicting material, dismissing it in favor of other material for reasons that she does not share with us.

The other side of this hopefulness, however, is her intolerance of a prevalent attitude among contemporary feminists:

The need to be free of responsibility for things-as-they-are is, I believe, a disturbing characteristic of the neo-feminist movement, one that implicitly attempts to salvage the exclusive privileges that accrue to the oppressed in a historical scenario in which women are only victims. [P. 207]

The book is valuable for this alone.

If the views George ascribes to Blake's system are partly the result of her desire to see those views expressed by a poet she admires (she styles herself a "Blaker"), individual interpretations she offers of his poetry, her first and lesser aim in this book, seem particularly free of this error. *Blake and Freud* is thematic and thus moves through Blake's works quickly in pursuit of certain large issues: innocence, experience, marriage, psychic organization, and the value of the feminine. But at times a difficult poem or passage is thrown into the strong light of a careful Freudian interpretation, and the darkness that surrounds much of Blake for many of us non-Blakers and non-Freudians does disperse. Particularly nice was her analysis of the last stanza of Blake's early *Book of Thel*, in which she identifies the voice from the grave as Thel's own unconscious and explains both the violence and the ambiguity of the series of questions that the voice delivers. At these moments she takes us inside Blake's poetry and helps us understand it better.

As you might imagine in a book dealing with two difficult, complex thinkers, the reading of it can be heavy going. Although George's style is typically clear, she does mention at one point that the book was a much longer manuscript that she edited down to its present length (253 pages, including notes and index). I wonder if *Blake and Freud* might not have been easier to read had it been longer. The ideas here are densely packed.

The assumption underlying this whole enterprise is an attractive one. Without ever really preaching about it, George seems to believe that we are all engaged in an attempt to better humankind's lot and that thinkers like Blake and Freud have a particularly key role to play in this betterment, acting, as they do, as acute interpreters and daring visionaries to help us see the kind of world we would like to have, sometimes before we realize that a better world is possible. This lofty, noble view of our enterprises as thinkers suffuses this book, raising our sights from our immediate squabbles to contemplate the future of humankind.

PAMELA REGIS

Western Maryland College