

Review of *Brahma in the West: Blake and the Oriental Renaissance* by David Weir, *Chicago South Asia Outreach Newsletter*, vol. 28, n. 2 Spring/Summer 2004, 9-10.

Review

David Weir, *Brahma in the West: William Blake and the Oriental Renaissance* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003)

William Blake seems to have been for a long time English literature's own noble savage: an untutored naïf whose uncorrupted nature gave free reign to an honest and spontaneous imagination of cosmological scope. Blake's composite art of printed word and engraved image defied the general Romantic privileging of an imagination above and beyond plain vision and the dead letter. Thus Blake could be seen as relishing in a primitive hieroglyphics, or a "despotism in symbols," as Samuel Taylor Coleridge disparagingly described his work. Since Blake's artistic expression went beyond "a framework of accepted and traditional ideas," as T.S. Eliot bemoaned, this has lent to his work enigmatic, mystical, and even hallucinatory qualities difficult to assimilate for absolutist traditionalism. Yet, the contradictions and inconsistencies that abound in Blake's oeuvre on account of his exposure to non-western thought are of course perfectly suited for the ironing board of the archetypal criticism of a Carl Jung or a Northrop Frye. That is, once the eastern influence was acknowledged, the situation was ripe for a whole series of a-historical readings that would instantly domesticate Hinduism in western esoteric traditions only to confirm Blake's place within the latter. Or, even worse, these readings involved simply "[m]atching up a little Blake with a swatch of [Ananda K.] Coomaraswamy," as David Weir writes in this new carefully researched work.

Weir's project works against the grain of such strands of Blake scholarship by grappling especially with the problem of Blake's mythology in the context of the poet's own times. By situating Blake's poetry in the larger drift of the Oriental Renaissance of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Weir sees his literary creations as "an understandable product of the historical context that brought political radicalism, mythographic analysis, and religious dissent together at the same time." The contextualization, as Weir is perfectly aware, risks making Blake less of an artistic anomaly – that is, less of a Romantic ideal – but the dividends are surely worth it: the radical blurring of distinctions between politics, myth and religion in Blake is enough to rattle the reader from our contemporary intellectual stupor. Here, as Weir demonstrates, scholarship on the Orient could inspire anti-imperialist protest and was not deployed simply for buttressing the aims of British imperial domination. The historical moment reconstructed here is one in which Blake as republican proponent of the French Revolution could see an affinity between his own aims and those of Indians resisting British imperial pursuits on the subcontinent. With the Church and King as common enemies, this is a world in which "Blake did not need to be mystical to be interested in India."

Blake is no longer looked upon as a half-educated craftsman of London's lower middle classes, but has begun to appear as a syncretistic polymath who drew upon on all the intellectual currents of his day to fashion a new transformative art and world view. With this turn in Blake scholarship, the problem has become identifying what exactly Blake may have been reading, since historians have yet to identify what his library may have actually included. Thus literary interpretation becomes a game of speculating on the set of texts that could have been strewn about Blake's workshop. Alongside the usual gambit of antinomian polemics, Neo-Platonic musings, Jacobin propaganda, and New Jerusalemite interpretations of the Bible, Weir makes a convincing case that Blake was always within the orbit of Oriental scholarship. Over three chapters entitled "Politics," "Mythography" and "Theology" respectively, Weir provides first a convincing picture of the auspices under which Blake would have encountered Indian thought and its imminent political potential, then the striking parallels between Blake's mytho-poetic narratives and those of the Hindu system to which he was exposed, and finally, Blake's total

manifestation of the intellectual challenges that Oriental scholarship presented to Western thinkers in terms of theology and traditional authority more generally. All throughout *Brahma in the West*, Blake's imagination is presented as heroic, always holding out the possibility of incorporating the Hindu system into Western tradition without subjecting it to Christian bias, of seeing in it an original moment of a universal poetic inspiration, and of deriving from within it potential for a new cultural and social future beyond the political debacle of his times. Weir certainly wields his learning and research findings well to make his argument that Blake's appropriation of Hindu thought ultimately represents an intercultural transaction resulting in the re-articulation of both familiar and foreign traditions. And along the way, one is treated to the coincidences that could have certainly colluded to produce the famous poem "The Tyger" – the two Indian tigers kept near Blake's residence and the mauling to death of the British General Sir Hector Munro after his defeat of Tipu Sultan in Mysore – a "fearful symmetry" if there ever was one. Or the various extracts of *Asiatick Researches* reprinted in *Analytic Review*, a journal published by Blake's erstwhile employer Joseph Johnson. Or the uncanny resemblance between Neo-Platonic terminology and the choice terms Charles Wilkin's used for translating key passages of the Bhagavad-Gita. Such intrinsically interesting tidbits are manifold in this work.

But occasionally they can overwhelm the argument (as is the case in the discussion of Warren Hastings in the first chapter) or can preclude disclosing the broader historical context and contemporary concerns within which the story of Blake's appropriation of Hindu thought is especially significant today. Furthermore, if any criticism has to be leveled against *Brahma in the West* at a theoretical level, it should concern Weir's reluctance to face squarely problems of the relation between aesthetics and politics, historical contingency and artistic evocation of eternal verity, even though Weir himself concludes that "Blake's mythology belongs, all at once, to Eternity and history together." How so? Where and exactly how ought one to depart from historical inquiry to grasp the eternal aspect of the art, or vice-versa? Other questions of this sort could be posed, but such questions may divert one from recognizing what this work actually accomplishes: accounting for the reach of the Oriental Renaissance beyond the continent, and, in Britain, beyond the vicissitudes of the Indo-mania and Indo-phobia of the official scholar-servants (though Weir himself does not explicitly thematize this). This account ought to certainly challenge the dominant platitude of our times that all talk about the Orient in the West was ineluctably tied to imperial aims (a point that very well could have framed the entire exposition). Be that as it may, Weir's work reveals one instance of the phenomena of cultural transaction between East and West that seems to have been fairly commonplace over the course of the imperial age, yet all too often go unacknowledged today. These phenomena would include, alongside political inequality, domination and discontent, the threat of traditional distinctions going blurred, of civilizational wholes being rent asunder, and of an undertow of political dissent to the imperial program surfacing from within the metropole itself. For a larger history of such cultural transaction, *Brahma in the West* is a significant contribution.