September 1979

"The Worst Disease": Blake's Tiriel

Stephen C. Behrendt

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 15, no.3, September 1979, p.175-187

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mkelly@colby.edu.
"The Worst Disease": Blake's Tiriel

by STEPHEN C. BEHRENDT

A tyrant is the worst disease & the cause of all others.

William Blake, Annotations to Bacon

Blake's Tiriel presents the critic with a complex set of difficulties. Since the poem was never engraved, one may justifiably speculate on just how "finished" it actually is; the manuscript itself contains many corrections and deletions. Blake made at least twelve drawings illustrating Tiriel, but there is no evidence of any attempt on his part to integrate text and designs in the manner of his illuminated poems. After the set of drawings was broken up in 1863, individual designs were scattered widely and three have apparently been lost. We cannot determine conclusively whether or not the drawings were produced at the same time as the text of the poem, but must hold out the possibility of their dating several years apart.

1. Blake may have intended Tiriel to be published in the conventional manner, much as The French Revolution was. The manuscript cover is inscribed "Tiriel / MS by Mr. Blake," as if the poem were to be submitted to a publisher.

2. See William Blake, Tiriel: Facsimile and Transcript of the Manuscript, Reproduction of the Drawings, and a Commentary on the Poem, ed. G. E. Bentley, Jr. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), pp. 26-29, for a history of the drawings. Bentley's is the most thorough discussion of the Tiriel drawings. All textual references to the poem follow Bentley's edition, with line numbers cited parenthetically in the text. I have likewise followed Bentley's numbering of the drawings. All other quotations from Blake follow the text of The Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. David V. Erdman, fourth printing, with revisions (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), and are cited parenthetically in the text and identified by "E," followed by page number. For reproductions of Blake's other engraved works, see The Illuminated Blake, annotated by David V. Erdman (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974); these references are identified by "IB."

3. The manuscript of Tiriel is undated and, while the poem is usually arbitrarily assigned a date about 1789, Erdman has suggested a later date; see Blake: Prophet Against Empire, rev. ed. (1969; rpt. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969), p. 131. Both Bentley and Erdman have suggested that the final section of the poem, beginning with line 355 (section 8, line 5) was composed at a later period than the rest of the text. While this seems a distinct possibility, the difficulty of verifying Erdman's and Bentley's claims is amply demonstrated by Geoffrey Keynes: "W. M. Rossetti, owing to a change in the handwriting near the top of p. [14], thought that the greater part of section 8 was composed at a later date than the rest of the poem, but Dr. Sampson points out that the change is merely such as might have been produced by the sharpening of a quill pen which had grown somewhat coarse." A Bibliography of William Blake, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (New York: The Grolier Club, 1921), p. 24.

The style and technique of the Tiriel drawings suggests that they may date from as late as 1793, the latest date suggested for The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, with which Tiriel is thematically grouped along with The Book of Thel, The French Revolution, and Visions of the Daughters of Albion by William F. Halloran, "Blake's Tiriel: Snakes, Curses, and a Blessing," South Atlantic Quarterly, LXX (1971), 161-62. The style of the drawings resembles that of other early India ink drawings of the period up to about 1793. They should be compared, for instance, to "Job's Complaint" (ca. 1792) and the earlier "Youth Learning from Age": see Laurence Binyon, The Drawings and Engravings of William Blake (London: The Studio, 1927), pls. 16, 3. See also the first and third drawings reproduced in Michael J. Tolley's "Some Blake Puzzles—Old and New," Blake Studies, Ill (1970-71), 107-28. In the latter of each pair appears a striking visual echo of the patterned dress worn by Mmetha in drawing 4 and the bedcover of drawing 11.
Added to these implicit difficulties are the problems involved in following Blake’s complicated allusions. Recent critics have devoted considerable time and effort to the discovery of possible links—in terms of similarities of names or events—between the poem and the various works of occult history and philosophy with which Blake may have been acquainted. But such concentrated attention to these minute particulars has often tended to obscure the poem’s larger concerns. While the recognition of contextual links such as name derivations is sometimes helpful in explaining what Blake has done in his text or drawings, it is a mistake to make that the main object of our critical attention. In *Tiriel*, as in Blake’s other verbal and visual work, the variously derived details comprise a sort of allusive shorthand, suggesting connotations that clarify suggestions in his text and designs. The purpose of this discussion is to offer a new perspective on *Tiriel*, studying the poem through the characters and their interrelations, treating both the text and the drawings and taking into account the minute particulars of Blake’s allusions without subordinating his larger intentions to them.

William F. Halloran has correctly opposed Northrop Frye’s contention that *Tiriel* should be viewed as a tragedy of reason, suggesting that we should see the poem not as a tragedy at all, but rather as a poem of prophecy. For a proper tragedy we must have a recognition, an “awakening,” on the part of the tragic hero. As Blake tells us in *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, “whenever any Individual Rejects Error & Embraces Truth a Last Judgment passes upon that Individual” (E 551). This “Last Judgment” consists of an annihilation of Error, brought on by the individual’s recognition of that Error; it is the sort of act with which we expect a tragedy to culminate. The essence of this act of mental apocalypse is an assumption by the individual of his own responsibility for the perpetuation of Error. Such an acceptance of responsibility is prerequisite to the annihilation of Error and the consequent imaginative regeneration. It is epitomized in Blake’s diffuse epic, *The Four Zoas* (ca. 1796–1807), in Urizen’s repudiation of his own rationalistic tyranny, an act by which he is transformed into a radiant, energetic youth (E 375–76; *FZ* IX: p. 121). The conclusion of *Tiriel*, however, is a darkly ironic reversal of the procedure. Although Tiriel appears finally to recognize the error of his ways, he characteristically shifts the responsibility for his behavior to another, in this case to Har. Hence, *Tiriel* documents not the annihilation of Error but, rather, simply the annihilation of Tiriel. The whole poem is a prophecy in negatives, a study in


the self-destruction which is the ironic result of an inability to cast off the "mind-forged manacles" of the Selfhood, the tyranny of the reasoning intellect. Totally self-oriented, Tiriel is unable to interpret the omens continually thrust in his path; he dies without understanding that he alone must accept the responsibility for his degeneration. The poem deals centrally with Reason, but not in a tragic sense, for there is no redemption at the conclusion, no saving grace of insight. Instead there is only the dark despair of violent, unredeemed death. What positive results ensue from Tiriel's life and death can only be inferred from the important fact, visually emphasized in the final drawing, that at his death the curse is removed from Hela, his youngest daughter.

In calling Tiriel a prophetic poem, we ought to recognize that it is not of exactly the same nature as some of Blake's later poems we also call prophecies. Robert Gleckner has, in fact, objected to calling the poem a prophecy at all, on the basis of its "contemporaneousness with the Songs of Innocence and its suggestion of experience as a contrary state." Gleckner contends that in Tiriel Blake presents the "earthly father" who is absent from the Songs of Innocence, over which had presided "the earthly mother, at once protectress and teacher of the thoughtless child." Gleckner's argument suffers, though, from its reliance on the "companion works" theory. The natures of the Songs of Innocence and Tiriel are too markedly different to allow us seriously to consider them in terms of companion works. The very fact that the former is a set of separate short lyrics presented in an entirely different format ought to discourage such a consideration. Besides, the ideas Blake develops in the Songs of Experience are already implicit in the Songs of Innocence (hence Blake's lack of reluctance to continue printing and issuing separately the latter even after the Songs of Experience, which he never issued separately, had been completed). Yet Tiriel really does very little to develop or clarify the ideas embodied in the Songs, and its function as a poem, even considered with its illustrations, is decidedly unlike that of the Songs.

While we may, indeed, call Tiriel a prophecy, we should beware of attempting to impose upon the poem the definition of prophecy that was subsequently established by Blake's practice in later poems. For Tiriel is a prophetic poem, but an early representative of this developing form in Blake's poetry, one which operates entirely in the ironic mode, revealing by negative example. It is a totally ironic mythological study that examines the various aspects and consequences of evil and posits some possible means for eliminating it. It is the reader's responsibility to read the poem correctly in order to comprehend its meaning. In preparing men for the future, the prophet does not presume to predict it; rather, his

efforts are directed toward inducing in his audience, through the presentation of his own vision, a correct perception of the present and an understanding of the ways in which the members of that audience may themselves attain a fuller imaginative existence and thereby build Jerusalem "In England’s green & pleasant Land" (E 95; Milton: pl. 1). If we expect a statement of universal truths, we do get it in the final stages of the poem, as Tiriel rants to Har. But the apparent insight articulated in his speech proves to be merely empty rhetoric. It is lost upon its mouthpiece, the unperceptive, unrepentant Tiriel; it is up to the perceptive reader to recognize the irony of the speech’s appropriateness. The real truth is involved in the survival of Hela and the removal of the curse from her, a point reiterated to the reader by the final design. The inflexibility of Reason works the destruction of all who fall under its domination except, finally, Hela, the representative of Desire.  

Tiriel draws upon the Bible, particularly Genesis, Paradise Lost, King Lear, and the historical and mythological studies popular during the eighties, such as the Middle Eastern studies of Jacob Bryant. Bryant’s work doubtless interested Blake in that it posits a unified overview (however faulty we now recognize it to be) of man’s history after the Deluge. The alleged history of the Cuthite people, to whom Bryant devotes a considerable space, offered a number of possibilities for Blake’s mythologizing. For one thing, Bryant associates this race with the Titans and points out that they were accounted extraordinarily large people. This physical immensity seems to have characterized particularly those Cuthites living in the west of Africa, in Mauritania. Both their size and their association with the Titans may have made Bryant’s Cuthites particularly interesting to Blake in that they suggested, for Blake’s early prophetic poem, a set of semi-mythological characters who were already "larger than life." Blake abandoned these essentially human, earth-bound characters in the later prophecies (only Har and Heva reappear, once, in the "Africa" section of The Song of Los [1795]) as he more assuredly developed his own mythology, an imaginative mythology that moved steadily away from the sort of physical restrictions and topical associations connected with the Tiriel characters.  

Tiriel is the embodiment of Reason, a forerunner of Blake’s archetypal tyrant, Urizen. He is entirely separated from Reason’s contrary, Desire, represented in Hela, and is a sort of mental abstract. His blindness is symptomatic of his lack of perception and insight, an absorption

7. Jacob Bryant, A New System; or, An Analysis of Antient Mythology: Wherein an Attempt is Made to Divest Tradition of Fable; and to Reduce the Truth to Its Original Purity. The first edition appeared in 1774 and 1776. I have used the more readily available 1807 edition (6 vols.; London: J. Walker, et al). Blake may have become acquainted with Bryant’s work early in his career; he engraved at least one of the plates in the early edition.  
8. In his Descriptive Catalogue (1809), Blake agrees explicitly with Bryant’s claim that the nations of antiquity were originally one (E 534).  
9. See Bryant, IV, 229ff. Here enters the significance of Myratana’s name and the reference to her as “once the Queen of all the western plains” (l. 3).
with himself as focal point and a consequent inability correctly to perceive his physical, emotional, and intellectual environment. Having no human (or humane) feeling, he is crippled in action and in thought. Wherever Blake first attributed to Tiriel some human emotional reaction—some trace of feeling, of compassion—(for instance, concerning sparing Har and Heva grief or overexcitement, ll. 96–97, 117–18), he deleted those portions from the manuscript, as he consistently deleted any positive, redeeming action or reaction on Tiriel's part. Tiriel can only "feel" what his self-centered mind dictates. Thus by the time the poem commences he has elevated himself to such an extent that his reaction whenever he is threatened (whether the threat is real or imagined) is a gesture grounded equally in egomania and self-pity. When his dictates are not strictly obeyed, he curses the "offenders." When he is not cursing, he is usually lying, and his lies—as for instance those to Har, Heva and Mnetha on his first visit—are motivated by a selfish desire to save face and avoid acknowledging the reality of his own failures.

Blake's central premise in the poem is this: Reason, in the person of the inflexible tyrant Tiriel, resists at all costs the acknowledgement of its own inadequacies, regarding its own failures rather as the failures of others and feeding upon itself, engendering ever greater tyrannies both of body and of mind. The particular irony of Tiriel's case is that he engenders both the extensions of his own tyranny, his sons, and the means for counteracting that tyranny, Hela or Desire. Reason's defiance of reality is most obvious in Tiriel's resistance to any admission of either his own mortality or his essential serpent affinity, even though he is confronted at every point with broad hints of both. By a set of obvious allusions, Blake develops Tiriel's relationship to Satan—particularly the Satan of *Paradise Lost*—and his alter-ego, the Serpent. To be saved, Tiriel must recognize his error and repudiate it, just as Milton later does in Blake's brief epic, *Milton* (ca. 1808). In that later prophecy Blake has Milton cast off his error after first recognizing in it his own restrictive and dogmatic Selfhood, which he equates, significantly, with Satan: "I in my Selfhood am that Satan: I am that Evil One!" (E 107; *Milton* 14:30). In the early poem, however, when things go amiss Tiriel prefers to blame everyone else, the reasoning Selfhood taking credit only for what it regards as positive developments. Hence Tiriel delights in the fulfillment of his curses, seeing their devastating results as reassurances of his power. Even at his most genuinely pathetic moment, when he seems for an instant to be on the verge of remorse after he curses Hela (ll. 322–23), Tiriel quickly transfers responsibility for the curse to Hela herself. Hints are frequent that if Tiriel can mete out his curses in such a way, then he can also bear the burden of their consequences.

10. Blake's manuscript indicates his concern that Tiriel should call attention to his age only on occasions upon which he seeks pity and consequently compliance; e.g., to Har and Heva, l. 102, to Hela, l. 324. Elsewhere, Blake has deleted Tiriel's use of "aged" concerning himself (ll. 7, 9). As narrator, however, Blake refers repeatedly to "aged" Tiriel.
profusion, so too must others be able to do so, and so too should he expect to feel the effect of those other curses, as he is reminded by Heuxos (ll. 40-42) and Hela (ll. 313–16). In calling his sons “sons of the curse” (l. 219), Tiriel fails to realize he is ironically identifying himself both as the curse and as the son of another curse. Tiriel’s final tirade, just before his death, is no admission of guilt at all—no tragic recognition—but simply one last attempt to “pass the buck” back to Har. In his letter of 1799 Blake told Dr. Trusler that “As a man is So he Sees” (E 677), an observation that seems related to his early reading of Lavater’s Aphorisms on Man (1789), in his copy of which Blake underlined these two statements, commenting favorably on both: “As the interest of man, so his God—as his God, so he”; “Where thy treasure is, there will thy heart be also—the object of your love is your God” (E 573).

Tiriel’s nature is such that he cannot but consider his whole environment rebellious and threatening, for he is a solitary god, loved only by himself. He is incapable of accepting blame because he is incapable of recognizing it in himself. He is authority without responsibility—a tyrant of reason.

However, Tiriel is not alone in his corruption. All other characters, even Hela, are also imperfect to varying degrees. The world of Tiriel is a dead-end, except for Hela who survives it and who has the curse removed from her at the instant of Tiriel’s death. The evils of Reason take many forms, and the other figures who people the world of Tiriel embody a catalogue of flaws and deficiencies.

Har and Heva are customarily associated with the decline of the arts under the influence of neoclassicism, presided over by Mnetha, who is herself associated with Athena and Mnemosyne, wisdom and memory. The inadequacies of memory are clearly demonstrated when Mnetha fails even to recognize Tiriel on his first visit, stubbornly resisting acknowledgment of the present declined state of Tiriel and clinging instead to memories of his past state (ll. 68–72). The vales of Har are a place of reversion, symbolized by the reversion of Har and Heva into childish imbecility. It is most difficult to accept Anne Mellor’s recent defense, even though it is finally a qualified one, of the vales as a positive state. The resemblance of the vales to the land of Innocence is not


12. Anne Kostelanetz Mellor, Blake’s Human Form Divine (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1974), esp. pp. 28–32. My own evaluation of the world represented in the Songs of Innocence is greatly at odds with Mellor’s. What she interprets as the “utopian image of a paradise on earth . . . a religious vision of such power that it can psychologically sustain one even among . . . acknowledged social atrocities” (pp. 12-13), seems to me more a portrait of blind faith in action, mouthing diversionary platitudes and catechetical responses as an orthodox response to worldly adversity. Innocence is a state in which one does not seriously question circumstances, much less attempt to alter them, thereby avoiding (or simply missing the opportunity for) the creative conflict that enables one to improve one’s state. Hence, unlike Mellor, I read such poems as “Holy Thursday,” “The Little Black Boy,” and “The Chimney Sweeper” as highly ironic statements.

https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq/vol15/iss3/4
necessarily a positive sign. We should recall that the world of the *Songs of Innocence* is filled with children and their guardians. Mellor’s favorable assessment of Har and Heva as “two adults who have preserved the vision of Innocence into old age,” playing like children, guarded by their “nurse,” is misleading. Har and Heva are not children but adults. They have preserved their mock-Innocence, as Mellor has to admit, 11 by retreating from Experience, from antagonistic reality, into an isolated garden out of which they never venture. Blake consistently condemns such reversions as failures to engage in the creative conflict of contraries involved in the progression through Experience to higher Innocence. The adults of Innocence are not children, nor do they seek to be, even though, like old John of “The Ecchoing Green,” they may participate in the children’s amusements. Nor should we accept the claim that “Har and Heva embody the divine love that welcomes and nourishes all life.” 15 They are totally nondiscriminating, first retreating in fear from Tiriel, then responding with a variety of absurdities. Their response is one not of love but rather of curiosity; Tiriel is for them a new possession, a new toy.

Whether or not Har and Heva are Tiriel’s physical parents is not explicitly spelled out, but they are clearly his intellectual parents. Har is an aged parody of an authority figure, first fleeing in terror at the seeming threat posed by Tiriel’s appearance, then “defending” Mnetha while he cowers in her arms, emerging to bless the wandering tyrant, finally commanding Heva to join him in the blessing. 16 When Tiriel announces his intention to leave, Har issues an ironic warning to the blind man, a weak echo of a Tiriel curse but all he can muster: “If thou dost go . . . I wish thine eyes may see thy folly” (l. 127). Even in his fallen state, Har is still a figure of self-love, like Tiriel, and cannot extend pity to another without claiming some for himself. Pointing out that he is older than Tiriel (l. 112), he forces a pity-gathering equation of their situations, saying “My sons have left me; did thine leave thee? [O twas very cruel” (l. 128). Both consider themselves sadly misused by their sons’ desire for independence, a subtle observation on Blake’s part concerning the psychological resistance of parents to the recognition of their children’s maturity and independence. That this stifling resistance is not without disastrous consequences to both parents and children is obvious.

Heva, too, is fit ancestor for the embodiment of restrictive Reason.

---

16. Halloran’s study focuses perceptively upon the ironic counterpoint of curses and blessings in *Tiriel*, examining this counterpoint in terms of its background in the Bible and *Paradise Lost*.

Damon has suggested that Har represents the “traditional spirit of Christianity” as well as poetry in its decadent state (p. 405). While both these connotations may legitimately be inferred from Har, I suggest that we expand the perspective, viewing Har as the doddering elder representative of an entire Reason-oriented cultural spectrum of which traditional dogmatic Christianity and decadent poetry are only single symptomatic aspects.
Once she blesses Tiriel she wants to possess him, first, and mistakenly, as husband and father of himself ("Thou art my Tiriels old father" [l. 93]), then as guest, and finally as son. Significantly, when Tiriel expresses his intention to leave, she responds twice in the phraseology of the Commandments: "Thou shalt not leave us . . . Thou shalt not go" (ll. 122, 132), to which Mnetha finally adds "Thou must not go . . ." (l. 143), prompting Tiriel's ominous frowns and his reversion to a command. Then, too, there is the matter of the cage of Har and the catching of birds, the emblematic object of Blake's contempt in "The School Boy" from Songs of Experience: "How can the bird that is born for joy, / Sit in a cage and sing" (E 31) and in The Gates of Paradise, plates 7 and 11 (IB 272, 274). Clearly, we stop short of Blake's intention if we call Har and Heva merely "helpless"; their words and their actions suggest they remain far more insidious, even under the supposed "protection" of Mnetha, herself a type of the overcautious, "twisted" nurse of Experience.

This peculiar old couple appear in various states in Blake's Tiriel drawings. While Har is consistently aged, with long white hair and beard, Heva appears both young (drawings 2, 6, and 11) and old (drawing 4), like Mnetha, who appears young twice (drawings 2, 11) and old once (drawing 4). Perhaps this variation is due, as G. E. Bentley suggests, to the potential threat posed by Tiriel in drawing 4. 17 The mutual interplay of Har and Heva is suggested by their postures in their first appearance (drawing 2, see front cover), forehead to forehead and partially submerged in a stream or pool. It is a curious pose, but one which has something of a precedent in James Barry's engraving of the "Temptation of Adam" (see back cover), done in the late seventies. In Barry's engraving Eve inclines her head toward the troubled Adam (who looks forward at the viewer) in much the way Heva's head is inclined against Har's. As Marcia Pointon suggests, Eve's posture suggests the way in which she "insinuates herself in gesture and expression into the mind of her partner." 18 Something of this sort seems to be occurring in drawing 2. That Barry's engraving is of Adam and Eve makes it doubly interesting to speculate on Blake's borrowing, for Har and Heva have occasionally been identified with Adam and Eve, and their garden home with a type of Eden.

Tiriel's sons are likewise less than admirable. Having rebelled against Tiriel for the right reasons—the proper response to tyranny is necessarily rebellion—they have themselves perpetuated tyranny in their continued enslavement of the tribe of Zazel, as line 35 indicates. While they

17. Bentley, p. 20. I disagree with Bentley concerning drawing 6; Heva appears quite young here. It seems somewhat pointless to discuss even tentatively the content of the three lost drawings, nos. 3, 5, and 9, since we have to guide us only the 1863 catalogue descriptions by W. M. Rossetti, himself not a particularly reliable interpreter of Blake's visual works.

call Tiriel “unworthy to be called the father of Tiriel’s race” (I. 13), apparently because he is cruel and tyrannical, they fail to recognize the same traits in themselves. In their self-righteousness they consider themselves Tiriel’s superiors, an indication of the manner in which the robes of corruption are put on along with those of power. Likewise, once Tiriel left his palace after their rebellion, the sons stayed on and, at some point, offered their father their “charity” (ll. 37–39). In so terming it here, they reinforce their own posture of dominating superiority, much as, according to Blake’s early reading, the God of Paradise Lost maintains an offensive subordinationist posture through his condescending promise of “mercy” to fallen man (PL III.130–34; X.54–62).

To remind us of the continued royal stance assumed by Tiriel’s sons, to which he gives a negative connotation, Blake depicts Heuxos in drawings 1, 7, and 8 attired in dark royal robes and crown. If the sons were indeed behaving admirably, they would have nothing to fear from Ijim, nor would they necessarily be silent and confounded when Ijim carries in Tiriel (ll. 197–200, 215, 220–24). It is perhaps most appropriate to regard the other two sons of drawing 1, wearing bay leaves and vine leaves respectively, as representatives of the arts and religion in league with political and social tyranny, represented in its continuing state by Heuxos. While the bay-leaf garland belongs to the traditional iconography of the poet, the religious connotation of the vine-leaf garland may have been suggested to Blake by Bryant, who notes that one aspect of the Cuthite worship involved the wearing of ivy crowns. Tiriel’s sons are an unattractive and rather vindictive lot, and their harsh fate serves to illustrate that an inordinately dominating Reason destroys even its own productions—its offspring, so to speak—in its blind destructiveness. That Tiriel’s sons seem ready to adopt their father’s mistaken ways seals their doom.

The imperfect condition of Ijim is indicated immediately by his home, the “secret forests” where he wanders “in desolate ways” (I. 242). These are clearly the forests of Error, and Ijim’s error is, in its own way, nearly as extreme as Tiriel’s. Damon tells us that “Ijim symbolizes the people, superstitious and all-powerful,” while W. H. Stevenson has narrowed the focus, concluding that Ijim is “an old fashioned Puritan—honest but grim, always a ready adversary for Sin.” Finally, Gleckner has observed that “because of his low intellectual state, he has been

19. The derivation of Heuxos’ name is rather interesting in this light. Bryant notes that two names, “Ucsous” and “Ucousos,” correspond to “the noble Cusean,” i.e., Cuthite (IV, 298–99). He also tells us that “Uc-cusus” is a word “which signified a king” (I, 94–95). Bryant seems to feel that these names were applied to the Cuthite kings, who were also known as “the royal Shepherds,” and he observes that “It is remarkable that the first tyrant on earth [Nimrod] masked his villainy under the meek title of a Shepherd,” calling himself a shepherd to his people, chosen by God to protect them (IV, 304–05). Perhaps, then, the shepherd’s crook in drawing 7 is not Tiriel’s (Bentley, p. 38, had been puzzled by its transformation from the straight staff Tiriel had held in the previous drawing) but Heuxos’, a sort of emblematic sceptre.

20. Bryant, IV, 250.
duped by the man-made god, Tiriel." This final point is the most telling, for it is the crippling effects of the laws turned out by the man-made gods, the tyrants of Reason epitomized in Tiriel, that Blake attacks with such vehemence in Tiriel and in other poems. As Blake perceived, the error of puritanism—whether religious, artistic, or social—stems from the precedence it gives to the man-made doctrines of orthodoxy and the strict obeisance it demands from its followers. The power of Ijim, feared by all parties, is the power of the masses, of the mob: an easily-misled, blind force that, once duped by Reason-generated doctrine of whatever sort, interprets any opposition as a threat and seeks to rout it out for destruction. Such is the fear of Ijim among Tiriel’s sons that in a cancelled passage Blake has them ready to submit to Ijim’s will, whatever it may be (ll. 225–34). Mistakenly believing that Tiriel has invoked Ijim’s strength in an alliance against them, the sons would offer no resistance but would “repent,” a facile and doubtless insincere promise calculated to lessen the supposed wrath of Tiriel’s brother. Calling himself and his brothers “but the slaves of fortune” (l. 229), Heuxos appeals to Ijim’s pity, even dropping to his knee before him, a gesture that only confuses Ijim further. For though he has been deceived about Tiriel’s greatness to the point where, like Mnetha, he cannot accept the reality of his brother’s present declined state, even though he does recognize his form (ll. 157–61), Ijim is no less culpable for having accepted and perpetuated that deception. Tiriel wreaks destruction through his curses, but it is Ijim’s “mighty arm” (l. 223), his physical power, that constitutes his weapon. Yet even at these divergent extremes of operation, they are still brothers, related in their mutual delusions, their mutual intolerance of opposition. Thus the image of Tiriel borne upon Ijim’s shoulders is an awesome, if bitterly ironic, one.

Tiriel’s enslaved brother Zazel is likewise defective. A self-confessed fool (l. 339), Zazel exists in a state of degraded and despairing experience. Damon calls him the “chained and outcast genius,” while Gleckner sees him as “the broken intellect,” without the power to cope with the author of its destruction and hence living in the caves of despair. Either way, Zazel bears a strong resemblance to Satan and his alter-ego, the Serpent, as he appears both in the Bible and in Paradise Lost. Cast out of heaven and imprisoned in hell, Milton’s Satan turns to despair, taking as his only pleasure the subversion of the plans of the God he had unsuccessfully opposed. After the Fall, the Son of God curses him, in the form of the Serpent, to crawl upon his belly and to eat the dust of the earth (Genesis iii.14). Such is the essence of Zazel’s existence, and

23. We are not told why Zazel was first enslaved by Tiriel; perhaps he resisted his brother’s tyranny, or he may simply have been the victim of Tiriel’s malevolence. Stevenson also notes (p. 74n.) that Zazel appears in the occult Hebraic-Christian tradition as “a demon of earth, who eats dust and to whose power corpses are left.”
it provides the clearest warning to Tiriel to this point in the poem. Living in the dusty caves of Experience—or generation—the same sandy plain upon which Tiriel eventually dies, Zazel is associated allusively with both mortality itself and Satan, the Serpent. As Tiriel’s brother, he connects the tyrant with both these associations. Hence we should take note of Tiriel’s fear, as expressed to Ijim, that he may prove mortal (l. 184–88), and his complaint to Har that he has become “subtile” (the very word from Genesis iii.1 and Paradise Lost IX.307, 324, 560) as a serpent (l. 388). In each case, while Tiriel’s words appear on the surface to constitute admissions or recognitions, they bring about no alteration in his behavior, no insight into his own responsibility for his condition; they are nothing more than melodramatic expressions of self-pity. Likewise, while Tiriel heard Zazel’s words of warning and “smote his breast” in a stock gesture of contrition, still he “passed on” (l. 340), trembling but unaltered.

Hela, Tiriel’s youngest daughter, is the only character for whom we find any real sympathy. The most attractive character Blake depicts, she is the most important survivor, outside the vales of Har, of the reign of Tiriel. Indeed, with the death of Tiriel the curse is removed from her: the snakes vanish from her hair. Generally regarded as a representation of the sense of touch, the only sense not “killed” outright by Tiriel’s curse (ll. 271–74), Hela may well represent, as Damon claims, “Sex under the curse.”24 In fact, Damon’s suggestion is supported by the nature of the curse Tiriel places upon Hela. The snakes suggest an obvious association with the Serpent, the tempter of Eve. The doctrinal contention that the Fall is related to sexual excess is thus reinforced by the puritanical tyrant, Tiriel, Hela’s affliction physically recalling not only the Medusa but also, more importantly, Eve and her fall. Furthermore, the eventual removal of the curse at Tiriel’s death signals a reinstatement of the unfallen state, a regaining of paradise. Whether we wish to see this reinstatement as a physical or an imaginative transformation, it is clearly apocalyptic. This transformation, to which the designs specifically point, is Blake’s most explicit indication to the reader of the means necessary to his recovery of paradise. The irony of Hela’s selection as Tiriel’s guide back to the vales of Har is obvious, for Tiriel needs to experience a sensual apocalypse—the annihilation of the mistaken belief that sensual/sexual activity is evil—as a prelude to an intellectual apocalypse.25 That Tiriel curses Hela for her defiance is inevitable: Desire necessarily opposes Reason, which cannot tolerate it in a free state but invariably invokes strictures upon it.

25. In this context I find it interesting that no one has suggested that Hela’s name may be meant to suggest “healer.” Note, too, that previous to line 293 Blake seems to have written the name in some other form (Stevenson, p. 87n., suggests “Hili”), for both vowels appear to have been altered in the manuscript in these first occurrences.

Another irony in the selection of Hela as Tiriel’s guide is introduced by Blake’s pointed references to
Yet Hela, too, is a questionable character. She accedes to Tiriel’s demand that she lead him to Har and Heva, doing so in the hope that they will curse Tiriel as he has cursed his children. But her speech reveals a critical misconception that points to another portion of the poem’s abstract content. Hela states that Har and Heva are unlike Tiriel: “O they are holy & forgiving[,] filld with loving mercy / Forgetting the offences of their most rebellious children” (ll. 303–04). We do not get this sort of view of the pair, except in the essentially negative sense of the affected blessings and sentiment they recite on Tiriel’s first visit. If anything, we get the impression that Har’s reactions have been something like those Blake describes in an epigram: “He has observd the Golden Rule / Till hes become the Golden Fool” (E 499). We can easily see how Har and Heva might forget the offenses: they seem to forget everything. Yet Har himself has recalled the departure of his sons, and he has not forgiven that departure at all, but still regards it as “cruel” (l. 128). Har and Heva seem instinctively to shrink from conflict (as they do in The Song of Los, “Africa”) rather than engage in the progressive, creative activity that is entailed in the conflict of contraries. In their mock-Eden Har and Heva have declined because innocence shielded perpetually from experience is inherently a state of decline, even as the total immersion in experience, like Tiriel’s, is one. Tiriel errs by attempting a magical cure-all through a return to innocence in the vales of Har, an impossible journey; Har and Heva merely attempt to remain protected behind their nurse, memory. They all err in their refusal to acknowledge the salutary—if sometimes painful—effects of conflict. Milton cited this necessity in his Areopagitica: “I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat.... that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary.”26 Blake put it more simply in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790–93): “Without Contraries is no progression” (E 34). Neither contrary state can be wholly dominant if progress is to occur; both must exist, free for conflict. Hence the absolute tyranny of Tiriel and the isolation sought by Har and Heva are both wrong, for each seeks to preclude opposition.

Hela’s estimation of Har and Heva, then, is a questionable one, and

probably is meant to indicate the degree to which even she is capable of error and delusion. Even so, that Blake wishes us to recognize the beneficial nature of the sensual life for which she stands is indicated by the final drawing, showing Tiriel dead at Hela’s feet. The snakes have been removed from her hair, as she discovers in putting her hands to her head; Desire is reinstated and sensual activity freed from the curse, now that the tyrant of Reason is dead. Further to emphasize the point, Blake shows, for the first time, fruit (perhaps grapes) on the vines winding up the trees in the background as well as, at the right, one of the twining trees of Experience. Hela’s survival, free of the curse, is an important point which we might miss if we failed to read the drawing, for Blake does not emphasize it in the conclusion of his text. The removal of the curse is only vaguely promised as a reward for Hela’s obedience in leading Tiriel to the vales of Har (ll. 325–26). In like manner, it is the drawing which finally explains the “drear sandy plain” of line 390. Tiriel’s death occurs in the vales of Har, a place of vegetation, as drawings 2, 4, 6, and 12 indicate. The sandy plain is a mental wilderness, the intellectual desert of Reason’s king.

Like the repressor Bromion, who asks in the *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1792–93) “And is there not one law for both the lion and the ox?” (E 47; *Visions* 4:22), Tiriel has lived in service to the concept of one law—the law of Reason. Questioning this devotion, he finally asks Har, “Why is one law given to the lion and the patient Ox[?]” (l. 360). While integration or unification is, for Blake, a positive gesture, it cannot be an externally enforced oneness, but must rather be chosen by each individual in an imaginative act of giving. It is interesting that Tiriel, and Har before him, should have succumbed to this desire for enforced unity and its disastrous consequences for all, for if we go back to Bryant’s Cuthite history we are told that the Cuthite age was “for the most part a time of usurpation and tyranny under the sons of [the patriarch] Chus, which was in a great degree put a stop to at the dispersion; at least the intention of keeping mankind together, and constituting one great empire was prevented: for this seems to have been the design of the Cuthians and their leader.”

Certainly this bit of “history” sheds some light on the poem, but *Tiriel* transcends topical concerns, as this study has sought to demonstrate. Such an empire as the Cuthians envisioned is only a single aspect of the works projected by the doctrinaire, reasoning intellect. The failure of such ventures, as Blake would assert repeatedly, stems from their basis in the self-oriented nature of Reason’s tyrannical spokesmen. While his history is the darkest and the most unredeemed, Tiriel is only one of these spokesmen.

*Elizabethtown College*  
Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania

27. Bryant, IV, 193.