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Blake's Atlantis

by MICHAEL HOLLEY

To the common imagination, Atlantis is a mysterious place name, connoting the “long ago and far away,” “lost grandeur,” or simply the ineffable and untenable. It’s a familiar concept yet rarely a clear one. In contrast, Atlantis enjoys a vigorous and definite role in Blake’s dramatic mythology. He disperses the Urizenic clouds that often have made the popular image of the isle so nebulous and elusive. He creates a fresh frame within which the myth may be viewed; and this frame offers a perspective that looks forward to apocalypse, not backward to petrified ideals. His Atlantis appeals to the revolutionary spirit that would raise the ideals, the palaces, and even the earth itself from the deep if necessary. What makes Blake’s interpretation of Atlantis so stirring and unique is that it couples the archetypal power of the legend with his own urgent message that paradise must be recreated, not merely regained.

Certainly the Atlantis motif plays a minor role in Blake’s whole mythology; but tracing its distinctive place in his poetry yields valuable insights into the way Blake adapts popular myth for his own use and how this adaptation reflects his fundamental world vision. Primarily, the Atlantis myth is instrumental in America and Visions of the Daughters of Albion, those dramas enacted on the oceanic stage between England and America. This stage is precisely the absence of the Atlantean continent. And so the underlying continental schism resonates throughout both poems.

* * *

The overt theme of America is political revolution. But chiefly the poem concerns Blake’s lifelong theme—the fallen condition of the human soul and its potential for redemption. Atlantis, too, as Blake interprets it, operates on both political and anagogical levels, and in terms of both its position is the same: it is a beginning, a point of origin, the initial stage of a journey. Superficially, this “beginning” appears infernal. Fiery and eruptive force characterizes the island in America, as it did in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell where it was first the cradle of Orc:

On those infinite mountains of light now barr’d out by the atlantic sea, the newborn fire stood before the starry king. (25:8)

As mountains of “light,” Atlantis lies constitutionally between the rising heat of Orc’s fires and the oppressing frigidity of Urizen’s starry glow; nevertheless it
is more akin to fire, inasmuch as it is the immediate force behind Orc’s explosive flight.

Because it generates the life of Orc, Atlantis is the land of revolutionary impulse, and Orc would be its defender against the repression of Albion’s Angel in America. It must be remembered that Atlantis is not fire itself; it is described alternately as “mountains of light” and “bright summits” (America, 10:7). There is nothing infernal about the light of Atlantis. But when this light shoots comet-like from the visionary land, it adopts the heat of Orc’s flame and will do combat in the political realm. While Atlantis is not fiery, the explosive power of Orc has its source in this island. Without this base in “light” Orc could never launch himself into explosive action. Necessarily there exist close yet clearly defined relationships both between Atlantis and Orc and between light and fire, the latter elements being akin to the former (specifically they are lower states of the former), but destined for destruction.

The relationship between the light and fire of Atlantis indicates a parallel relation between inspiration and revolution. In America, when conflict between England and her colony grows imminent, Blake employs Atlantis as a kind of private meetinghouse for the American revolutionary leaders:

Here on their magic seats the thirteen Angels sat perturb’d
For clouds from the Atlantic hover o’er the solemn roof. (10: 11–12)

They rest upon the bright summits just prior to leaping into action; in this place they form their revolutionary ideals and summon their spiritual courage for what will follow. It is evident that Atlantis is a land of greater purity than either the shores of England or America since it remains free of the cynicism and crimes that accompany institutionalized politics. Most broadly, it represents the inspiration to re-create which precedes revolution. At this moment prior to war the rebels are, most completely, without a nationality; gathered on their “magic seats,” they find themselves in a fraternity of visionary enthusiasts. Their shared vision is Atlantis, and serves as their only homeland; for the moment, this realm is as yet unstained by acts of war, like light without the destructive heat of Orc’s fire but with the illuminating power not attributable to Urizen’s frigid stars. In psychological terms, Atlantis would correspond to a flash of insight just prior to action, in which one perceives the necessity, glory, and beauty of the action—when the mind is reconciled and integrated with the world of events.

In brief, although fire springs from Atlantis and is an integral part of Blake’s motif, the land itself is a visionary milieu, not merely a revolutionary training camp. Rather than civil war, the final goal in terms of the vision of Atlantis would be the resurrection of the entire Atlantic seabed, unifying England and America. This resurrection would displace the oceanic stage of America and nullify the strife between the two antagonistic factions, leading to a single, cooperating culture. Destructive fires are not Atlantis’ end; instead, the vision born there intends the bridging of two realms. David Erdman offers an explanation of the unity which Atlantis’ brief appearance intimates:
In this view Albion and America are not separated by a great gulf but are parts of the base of the Atlantic mountains. There are many indications that the apparently central image of continents divided by an Atlantic deep is a false or temporary image. A more eternal image is of Atlantean hills, seen as the One Earth of true human geography. (586)

Of course this “true human geography” cannot appear on a two- or even three-dimensional chart because a prophecy cannot be mapped so simply. In that respect, Atlantis differs from the symbol of America, which as an empirically verifiable continent must represent worldly events and experience. In contrast, Atlantis represents the moment in which the world is perceived as Orc rising in a rush that could lead to the closing of the ocean. Atlantis belongs to a visionary geography and is employed for that reason: it can serve as a symbol of undefiled inspiration and unthinkable resolution. This unification does not mean the erasing of contraries; conversely, the interaction of two contraries (imagination and nature) makes it possible for vision to vanquish Negation which, in this poem, is both the Sea of Time and Space and Albion’s denial of America’s freedom. Since Albion is an agent of repression, it is the negation rather than the contrary to America in this fallen state. The “One Earth” finally is made possible by surmounting Negation or by the flash of insight in which the mind is suddenly freed from Vice which is “the hindering of act in another” (Annotations to Lavater).

The instigators of the American Revolution take their seats on the peaks of the Atlantean mountains in order to depict dramatically that they momentarily have escaped the great Negative of the British Empire and have not yet “hindered action in another” in any manner in America nor become Negative themselves; from this unique vantage point, they can perceive the passage to the Golden World. Separated from the fallen worlds of Albion and America, they are poised to continue to the visionary world, completing the spiritual journey that is Blake’s primary concern. Potentially, the thirteen are prophets, invaluable links to beatific existence. In fact, the ability to connect separate spheres of being is the peculiar power posited in Atlantis, as shown in America’s fullest description of it:

On those vast shady hills between America & Albion’s shore,
Now barr’d out by the Atlantic sea, call’d Atlantean hills
Because from their bright summits you may pass to the Golden World,
An ancient palace, archetype of mighty Empires,
Rears its immortal pinnacles, built in the forest of God
By Ariston the king of beauty for his stolen bride.
(10: 5–10)

In Blake’s geography, as evidenced by this passage, the Atlantis that surfaces in his drama is depicted not as the Golden World itself but rather as the threshold to that world: “Because from their bright summits you may pass to the Golden World.” Just as his island should be related to the inspiration rather than the violence of revolution, it also should be regarded as the intimation rather than the totality of Blake’s paradise. In neither case does it represent the fully developed phenomenon. Atlantis is a moment of beginning—of inspiration and sublime
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insight—and for this reason it does not have the ultimate responsibility that accompanies the terms “revolution” and “paradise.” It precedes both the full revolution of the Orc cycle and the completed paradise of Jerusalem. These terms are heavily laden with cultural significance and expectations, whereas Atlantis is free to represent a unique and glittering moment, the moment in which blossoms the little flower that is “the labour of ages” (Marriage, 9:56).

Blake’s Atlantis is a fantastic territory; but it’s important to remember that he borrowed a historical place name in creating his unique land of inspiration. Instead of coining his own name for the place, he deliberately used one with much historic and mythic weight. This weight and Blake’s deft handling of it deserve consideration if we are to clarify the significance of Atlantis in his personal mythology. For example, in America his treatment of Atlantis parallels his use of the names of historical figures, particularly the American revolutionaries. Hazard Adams describes the tone the historical names carry on these plates printed eighteen years after the event:

even in these poems [French Revolution and America], the actual names seem not to represent actual people but instead the broader aspects of the actions of these people. (125)

Adams’ perspective here clarifies the significance of the historic Atlantean myth by suggesting that the actual name must carry the archetypal significance of an entity in the poetic motif. Thus, “Washington” is not just the man who lived from 1732 to 1799; but neither is he merely a character who rises against the East in a fictitious struggle for Freedom against Negation. The popularly known facts of his life must augment his image in Blake’s drama, and in this way Blake both adds significance to his characters and criticizes them as historical figures. Washington is sacrosanct in American history, but by associating him with Orc’s horrific fires Blake has somewhat subverted this celebrated man. Trapped in the Orc cycle, Washington may be criticized: he doesn’t follow from the “bright mountains” to the “Golden World”; instead, he foments fires that in the end induce snowy repercussions. Similarly, the name Atlantis carries strong connotations which both add dimension to the message and are critiqued by Blake’s treatment of it.

The historical basis of these connotations is outlined by James Bramwell in Lost Atlantis. Bramwell summarizes the legend of Atlantis as given in Plato’s Timaeus and Critias (31–42), and this popular version of the myth is vital to Blake’s motif. The aspect of the myth which is particularly relevant to the study of America is its resemblance to Blake’s Orc cycle in which rebellion leads to growth, ossification, and finally oppression which in its turn leads to fresh rebellion. In the fallen world, every Orc is fated to become a Urizen; the fall of the Bastille contains historically and in symbol the falling blades of Robespierre’s guillotine.

The popular history of Atlantis, too, follows this deep and unswerving pattern. The “archetype of mighty Emperies” began, Plato tells us, as an idyllic kingdom, founded by gods, with the purpose of facilitating love when Poseidon wed Clito and formed this homeland. However, as the strain of divine blood
gradually weakened, the people grew avaricious and imperialistic, enslaving their neighbors and expanding their borders. Eventually the kingdom was destroyed in a cataclysmic war with a Grecian power, and it sank into the sea. In this tale Plato figuratively sketches, across all boundaries of time, the cyclic course of his own city-state, and of Rome, and as well of Nazi Germany. Similarly Blake, at the birth of the American nation, anticipates that empire’s cyclic course into the twenty-first century. In each instance, the Circle of Destiny determines historical events, and, in Blake’s unique portrayal, the lessons of Atlantis serve as a warning to the America of 1775. For both the mythical and actual states their seminal vision is gradually perverted by political aims of wealth, territory, and power (the thinning of the divine blood is the collective loss of vision), and this perversion leads inevitably to Urizenic empire and to chaos once again. The political and thematic implications of the place name Atlantis are portentous and partially explain its use in Blake’s poetry.

By mixing popular legend with private myth Blake creates a tough amalgam: a powerful motif which can intimate disaster while remaining the isle of inspiration, the source of fire, and the means of accessing the sacred. Atlantis becomes an island that exists in two distinct but tangent dimensions which may be labeled “historical time” and “visionary time.” Potentially, it leads from the former to the latter, but, when confined to its fallen, historical form, it is nothing more than a stage in a frustrating cycle. In his debut in “A Song of Liberty,” Orc stands “on those infinite mountains of light,” but defiant in the face of “the starry king” he is destined to rocket from his footing on infinity only to fall “like a sinking sun into the western sea” (13). Regardless of what follows in the Orc cycle, however, Atlantis’ symbolic role remains constant: it is a land of light that engenders fire, linking eternity to history in a tangible image and unique event.

* * *

Although Blake disagreed with Plato on most counts, he agrees with him precisely on Atlantis. Both use the island to relay a difficult lesson to their audiences. Demanding that the reader consider a land “that does not exist,” both impel him to comprehend a meaning “that is not there” superficially. By this method, Blake is able to make his prophetic visions comprehensible to the Lockean mind, inspiring it to look through the surface of the Sea of Time and Space and to confront profoundest meanings.

“What is Grand is necessarily obscure,” writes Blake, but this is not to say that “what is obscure is necessarily grand.” In his annotations to Sir Joshua Reynolds, Blake directly discounts such a reading: “Obscurity is Neither the Source of the Sublime nor of any Thing Else” (658). Obscurity itself does not augment the meaning of a symbol; but when the meaning becomes myriad and profound it necessarily will appear “obscure to Weak men.” Jung would agree: “The true symbol . . . should be understood as the expression of an intuitive perception which can as yet, neither be apprehended better, nor expressed differently” (232). The symbol expresses the concept as clearly and profoundly as possible though not in explicit terms, requiring from the reader an “intuitive perception”
of it. By penetrating the preliminary obscurity of the symbol, the source of truth can be perceived, and the material symbol understood: the “strengthened” reader perceives the material image as symbiotic with the intuited truth (the body beheld as Poetic Genius; i.e., the two are merged). On the etched surface, the image may be a puzzle; clearly perceived, it becomes an instructional key, a crystallized truth.

For example, in approaching the question of Atlantis the reader is faced with a world already defined (albeit loosely) in Western myth yet which plays a unique role in Blake’s dramatic poem America, so that he is required to reconcile conflicting elements in the motif. To intuitt the relation of the symbol to the “facts” is, in Blake’s terms, to comprehend the Poetic Genius manifest in the particular image. In the case of James Bramwell’s Atlantean inquiries, the myth of Atlantis presents just such a dichotomy between myth and literal “fact” which he cannot resolve. He explains the difficulty in this way: “Atlantis, if it existed, was a Stone Age culture. Neither history nor archaeology knows anything of orichalc, the mountain of copper which glowed like fire” (91). To Bramwell, the island’s mythic geography appears incongruous in that it includes a valuable metal not associated with its purported historical epoch. Similarly, empirical sciences know nothing of the role of Atlantis in the American Revolution. In both cases, the material facts deny the poetic assertion—that orichalc existed in Atlantis, or that Atlantis rose as the revolution began. Nevertheless, there is a simple method of clarifying both of these Atlantean conundrums. The key is to perceive the questionable element with childlike fascination, or through “recreational” interpretation. To the ancient myth maker, the mount of orichalc must have been the visionary form of mundane matter—the mountain seen at the moment of fascination, at the moment that Moses met with God, Mohammed with Allah, or Zarathustra with his existential epiphany. The reported golden metal would be the base element transformed in the momentary flame of visionary inspiration: “orichalc” would be literally, in Blake’s myth, the “‘bright summit’ from which Orc bursts.” (Perhaps there is an etymology here but more likely only a coincidence.) In the poet’s myth, Atlantis is obscure yet as solid as the Azores, and he uses it as a cornerstone for prophetic teachings. The paradoxically solid-yet-absent island reveals, as a symbol must, a truth beyond its literal implications; he who sees that the ultimate goal of the revolution is to raise Atlantis will also see orichalc in his native land and eternity in a grain of sand.

Clearly Blake’s Atlantis opens the way to a radically optimistic perspective that discovers the “divine” as latent in the particulars of the present moment; the particular island itself can be considered a stepping stone to a state of completely clarified perception. In short, if Atlantis is not interpreted precisely and imaginatively, the poem America is significantly weakened. Without the inspiration of Atlantis, the American Revolution would be seen as founded on capricious violence and material dissatisfaction instead of on a vision of complete political and spiritual liberation from repression. To imagine the potential symbolized by Blake’s Atlantis is to recognize what the revolution meant to the poet in terms
of the human spiritual condition. In *America* the interpretation of the Atlantis motif is crucial because of its interconnectedness with the historical and psychological themes of the entire poem; it adds sublime significance to actual events, and therefore demands more than cursory attention.

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**Blake’s attraction to** the myth of Atlantis has been viewed by some as an instance of Romantic primitivism; but that is to read into his works an inveterate nostalgia. Blake rigorously criticizes nostalgia in his *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, where the Atlantis motif implicitly plays a vital part, so that the two—nostalgia and Atlantis—can be shown to have a close and consequential relationship. Whereas in *America* the hope for the re-creation of Atlantis is raised by fiery exuberance, in *Visions* the “lostness” of Atlantis is ensured by regressive nostalgia.

*Visions* features a setting similar to *America’s*; the absence of Atlantis separates America from Albion and represents a fundamental schism in politics, culture, love, and psyche. Theotormon is the spirit of the sea which effects this harrowing split: as Frye notes, he “is with the ocean which still keeps the two halves of Atlantis separate” (241). Because of him the Atlantean hills remain submerged and hope drowned: Orc’s spark is needed but is not present, except perhaps in perverted and destructive form in Bromion; and of course some of his cleansing fire is discernible in Oothoon. In contrast to Orc, Theotormon is deplorably passive and self-absorbed. In response to Oothoon’s appeal for love, he withdraws rather than takes the constructive part of Ariston, and pathetically offers only a reiteration of the *ubi sunt* motif:

Tell me where dwell the thoughts forgotten till thou call them forth?
Tell me where dwell the joys of old? & where the ancient loves?
And when will they renew again & the night of oblivion past?
That I might traverse times & spaces far remote and bring
Comforts into a present sorrow and a night of pain!
Where goest thou O thought? to what remote land is thy flight?
If thou returnest to the present moment of affliction
Wilt thou bring comforts on thy wings and dews and honey and balm [?] (4: 3–10)

It is Theotormon, not the poet himself, who longs for a “remote land” which will provide the “dews and honey and balm” which would redeem the “present moment of affliction.”

Theotormon represents that which “represses” Atlantis—his ocean is precisely the negation of these promising peaks. It is interesting that as a negative force he is even more effective at oppression than Albion’s furious Angel in *America*, an effectiveness which bespeaks the breadth and depth of Theotormon’s subversion of the impulse to raise Atlantis and open the door to the Golden World. Albion’s Angel meets the revolutionaries with a specific and limited form of repression, like the Newtonian form of time and space which denies the possibility of inspired vision by limiting the human mind to that scheme’s constrictive parameters. No means of escaping the Newtonian perspective
exists; it is simply impossible to perceive the Atlantean continent in its risen state from that perspective. As a result, the inspired cries of revolution fall on deaf ears, plugged with the solid wax of Newtonian rationalism and egotistical despair. Following Oothoon’s heartfelt affirmation of a glorious Now (“for every thing that lives is holy!”) Theotormon demonstrates the opposite spiritual impotence:

but Theotormon sits
Upon the margind ocean conversing with shadows dire. (8: 11–12)

What are these shadows? Shadows of Atlantis? Phantom forms of abstract Time and Space? Regardless, Theotormon remains insensitive and resigned, the shadows intimidate rather than invigorate, and the sea rolls on opaque. Blake ironically closes Visions with a triumph of the Negative, nostalgia, failure of vision.

At least in part, America provides resurrection of this thwarted vision, offering a glimpse beyond the Sea of Time and Space of a “Golden World.” This glimpse is achieved through a renovation of both the scheme of time and the character of the human mind whereby nostalgic hyperopia is supplanted by apocalyptic vision. As I have suggested, the Atlantis motif embodies the visionary moment, and it is apparent that the resurrection of Atlantis and the cogent application of its myth are possible through adoption of a perspective that notably will not support notions of nostalgia, primitivism, the “long ago and far away.” True, the Atlantis motif derives much of its poetic power precisely from its remoteness. And it may appear paradoxical to assert that nostalgia has no part in its emotional force. But “remote” does not necessarily mean a retreat backwards in sequential time; the power of the image as an archetype is neither nostalgic nor primitivistic. The motif of Atlantis appeals to the intuitive imagination because of its established existence in what Jung calls the collective unconscious and not just as a particular memory. Therefore, nostalgia for an ideal separated from the ego by some “space” of time is an altogether inappropriate way to approach Atlantis. That is to say, the image of Atlantis already belongs to the contemporaneous mind as an archetype; to desire to return to it or to possess it in any other way is a mistake.

As Bramwell recognizes, Atlantis is “a great world memory, of which Plato’s story is merely one of the broken and distorted fragments” (144). Blake’s revolutionary response to this fragmented vestige doesn’t resemble Bramwell’s, however, but yields a unified vision of the myth. Blake relies on apocalyptic vision to reunify the “lost island myth” and to relate it to present civilization. He foretells an apocalypse which would disrupt utterly the scheme of Newtonian time while affording great significance to experienced time and to the “march of events.” By treating time as apocalyptic rather than durational, Blake is able to show the phenomena of the past bursting forth anew in the tumult of the present; that is to say, the mind as “memory” need not labor in servitude to nostalgia. This change of temporal perspective allows one to appreciate what the Atlantean peaks portend in Blake’s work:
The rise of a new civilization of English origin in America... the reintegrating of Atlantis, the disappearance of the Atlantic ocean, and the return of the Golden Age. (Frye, 206)

The forward-looking and apocalyptic sensibility watches for and envisions the return of the Golden Age instead of longing for a return to it; and its initial sign will be the emergence of the "bright summits."

Blake’s answer to primitivism is in this dynamic involvement with both the future and the "great world memory"—a mental, re-creative effort in the present, a determination to forge paradise within the existent world. In America Atlantis acts as a messenger from beyond the Circle of Destiny; its image must inspire the reader to see past those revolutions of sequential time and to behold the Golden Age. The fundamental requirement is comprehending Blake’s idea of apocalyptic time. This vision of time opposes that of Newtonian time, yet it enters the world of historical revolution via Atlantis in America. In this notion of time, each second is not equal to the next and does not lead inexorably to the next; the Golden Age may be manifest in the Moment. As he writes in Milton,

Every Time less than a pulsation of the artery
Is equal in its period & value to Six Thousand Years.
For in this Period the Poet's Work is Done: and all The Great
Events of Time start forth & are conceived in such a Period—
Within a Moment: a Pulsation of the Artery.
(28:62—29:3)

As Milton must enter the world of Generation to fulfill his poetic genius, so Blake must depict the Golden Age emergent in the Sea of Time and Space. Both actions represent supremely creative efforts which liberate from the "mind-forg’d manacles" of puritanical rationalism and intellectual memory.

When Atlantis bursts above sea level in America the body of world history experiences just such a pulsation. Orc’s revolution that follows is less creative than reformative, however; the apocalyptic impulse quickly relaxes to the sequence of seconds, minutes, hours, and years. The poem closes with what Harold Bloom rightly calls an "apocalyptic program for action" (136) which is provisionally liberating although not entirely promising. In the final scene the true light of Atlantis has been usurped by Orc’s rampant flames, casting the world into an exuberant yet menacing revolution:

They slow advance to shut the five gates of their law-built heaven,
Filled with blasting fancies and with mildews of despair,
With fierce disease and lust, unable to stem the fires of Orc:
But the five gates were consum’d, & their bolts and hinges melted.
And the fierce flames burnt round the heavens, & round the abodes of men.
(16:19–23)

There is a perceived apocalypse as the five senses ("gates") melt and the "law-built heaven" is burst. The revolution effectively razes the empire of empiricism and vanquishes the specter of nostalgia. But the uncontrolled violence of the fires portends equally violent repercussions; the "mind-forg’d manacles" are likely to return.
Considering the ambivalent conclusion of *America*, it is evident that Blake neither predicts the final reunification of the Atlantean continent nor discounts the power of its myth in the contemporaneous world. Rather, he uses the myth to show what is in fact possible beyond prevailing Newtonian perspectives and yet avoiding the pitfalls of mysticism and nostalgia. As Blake sees it, the America of 1775 will continue in the historical path of the Orc cycle; the visionary promise of Atlantis will sink again beneath the sea; the two spheres that are brought together early in the poem, when Orc emerges from the "infinite mountains of light," are ultimately sundered as divine inspiration sinks to worldly violence. The magnetism of the unknown land proves too weak to pull the world permanently from its historical course. Nevertheless, Atlantis has served a vital purpose: it has provided a glimpse of that Golden World which is, rather than regressive and passive, progressive and visionary.

*Works Cited*


