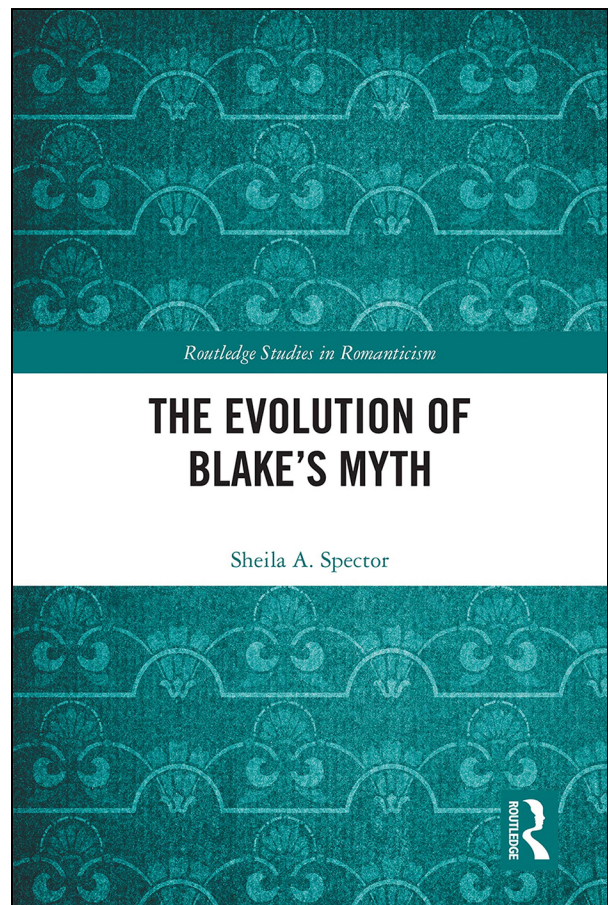


Sheila A. Spector. *The Evolution of Blake's Myth*. New York: Routledge, 2020. xxii + 370 pp. \$160.00/£120.00, hardcover; \$44.05/£33.29, e-book.

Reviewed by R. Paul Yoder

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- 1 IN the last week of 2019 I had the pleasure of spending two mornings with Sheila Spector touring the magnificent Blake exhibit at the Tate. We were the people blocking the line at copy B of *Jerusalem*. Spector was just finishing her latest book, *The Evolution of Blake's Myth*. I now realize that our conversation as we moved through the exhibit reflected the exoteric/esoteric tensions that are the subject of that new book. She brought an approach to the spatial composition of Blake's plates informed by a notion of four levels of reality that seemed analogous to Augustine's four levels of interpretation, but not quite. Her analysis of the arrangement of text and design on Blake's illuminated plates was fascinating, and over lunch we discussed the exhibit, Blake criticism, and the impact of Northrop Frye. By the end of our visit, I knew I wanted to read the book.
- 2 Spector has spent much of her career championing a "canon of rejected knowledge" that she describes in her book as having been "extirpated from the bibliographies of acceptable resources" (330). *The Evolution of Blake's Myth* is her most ambitious and persuasive statement yet on the importance of esoteric or "hidden" traditions, largely Kabbalistic, to Blake's work. Spector discusses almost all of



Blake's illuminated books and a good number of his paintings; she also develops a vocabulary for Blake's composite art that allows for a consistently integrated discussion of text and design. The reader is well advised to follow her suggestion that "the best way to approach this study is with an internet connection at hand, so that the plates and pictures can be accessed [at the *William Blake Archive*] as they are referred to" (xii).

- 3 She argues that "though Blake began as an exoteric thinker (admittedly with decidedly esoteric leanings), starting with the vision of his dead brother Robert in 1787, he began the transition to the esoteric mode of thought, which crystallized, in 1804, during a visit to the Truchsessian Gallery" (17). Blake's brief description of his ecstatic, liberating reaction to this massive exhibit appears in his letter to William Hayley of 23 October 1804, but Spector says little about what exactly he might have seen at the Truchsessian Gallery that led to this crystallization of an esoteric mode of thought. Instead, she uses 1804 as a sort of pivot point in Blake's career. Thus, after the introduction, her book comprises three main parts: the first focuses on *Jerusalem*, dated 1804 on the title page; the second part describes the development of both Blake's vision and the techniques

needed to express it, starting with his earliest illuminated books and culminating in *Milton*, also dated 1804; the third part looks at how Blake's new esoteric viewpoint influenced his work after 1804, including his revision of his own *Gates of Paradise*, his illustrations for the book of Job, and his unfinished project to illustrate Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

- 4 Spector has explained these issues repeatedly elsewhere, but I do think it would be helpful in the present book if she were more explicit at the outset about the general distinction between exoteric and esoteric. The easiest answer here is that "exoteric" includes phenomena, perceptions, and concepts that are generally replicable and externally confirmable by others. These principles of replicability and confirmability serve as the rationale for material laws, scientific inquiry, the view of the human as limited to the senses, and the various moral, religious, or philosophical systems derived from those principles. "Esoteric," on the other hand, refers to a range of more personal, mystical, or alternative traditions, which include but are not limited to Kabbalah. These traditions tend to share a reliance on correspondences between levels of reality, as well as transformations or transmutations from one form or state into another. Kabbalah, and especially Christian Kabbalah, is perhaps the most well-known esoteric tradition, and the one developed in the most detail, with a full cosmology and mythic structure. Spector traces the development of these esoteric perspectives as a response to various interpretive crises in the history of biblical exegesis, until "Isaac Luria (1534–1572) consolidated the kabbalistic myth" and created "a unique horizon of [interpretive] expectations," which was then Christianized by Christian Knorr von Rosenroth (1638–89) and especially by Francis Mercury van Helmont (1614–99) (xix). She believes that most Blake critics are ill informed about these traditions in general and Blake's relation to them in particular, a point that I readily concede for myself. Nonetheless, her argument here is less about the errors of exoteric readings, and more about the value of readings made available by the esoteric interpretative horizon.
- 5 The language of exoteric/esoteric that Spector employs in this book grants her a level of abstraction that enables her to extend her argument to include concepts and relationships whose value does not depend strictly on Kabbalah. Nonetheless, one important element of her argument is that esoteric approaches to Blake, including Kabbalistic ones, do have a long history, dating at least back to Ellis and Yeats. However, following Frye's *Fearful Symmetry*, these approaches were displaced by more exoteric assumptions that understated Blake's relationship with Western mystical traditions. Spector seeks to correct that view, and in many ways, I am her target audience. I was trained to be suspicious of associating Blake with any sort of mysticism. The root of these misgivings, as she points out elsewhere on the

same question, is that "while we generally assume that the problem of Blake's [relation to] Kabbalah would be clarified if only we had his direct source, actually, the question is much more fundamental, for . . . there is no universal agreement about the material with which we are dealing."¹ Even when we know of Blake's interest in mystics like Boehme or Swedenborg, for example, Spector says, "the mainstream [of critical commentary] has, for the most part, limited investigation to superficial source studies, rather than considering any deeper implications" (4). Without a clear direct source for Blake's connection to Kabbalah, Spector's argument for those "deeper implications" depends on the preponderance of evidence, which consists largely of parallels between Blake's ideas and esoteric structures, and contrasts between his earlier and later work. I think she makes a persuasive case.

- 6 One reason Spector's argument works is that she grafts the language of exoteric/esoteric onto terms familiar to a Blakean context. For example, concerning *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Spector notes that the Prolific and the Devourer "can be read as symbolizing the esoteric and exoteric modes of thought" (94). The "exoteric system" depends on "material laws" (134), and the "exoteric doctrine" is "predicated on original sin and the cult of virginity" (145). It is marked by a "specious rationality," and is often represented by Blake as "a bearded old man" (145). Exotericism is associated with empiricism and a moral system based on atonement and the vanquishing of the other. On the other hand, according to Spector, the esoteric "does not oppose the exoteric in the binary sense. Rather, viewing exotericism as an obstacle to be transcended, the esoteric unmasks the flaws inherent in the material laws on which the exoteric system is predicated" (134); that is, "The goal of the esoteric myth is to transcend the bounds imposed by the exoteric setting" (180). The corporeal, postlapsarian world in exoteric terms is the "penalty of Adam," while in esoteric terms it is "the arena in which the primordial error can be compensated for" (191). The esoteric reading "transforms original sin into the fortunate fall, the means by which the initial error can be corrected" (200). As Spector explains, "Theologically, the exoteric church had institutionalized the doctrine of original sin, and the concomitant cult of virginity, ostensibly to prepare man for the last judgment. From the esoteric perspective, not only was that entire mode of thought wrong, but it had consolidated into an impediment that prevented, rather than facilitated, cosmic restoration" (206). On plate 11 of *Marriage*, Blake himself makes much the same point, describing how institutional religion appropriated and corrupted imaginative experience; what is new in Spector's

1. Sheila Spector, "Kabbalistic Sources—Blake's and His Critics," *Blake* 17.3 (winter 1983–84): 84–101, on 85.

statement is her mapping of that Blakean narrative onto the exoteric/esoteric framework.

- 7 One of the strongest parts of Spector's argument is her deployment of the concept of the "image act." She argues that Blake developed the image act as the "unit of discourse" necessary to express the complexity of his ideas (xii). She sees it as constituting the individual picture or engraving plate, with this important provision—Blake's use of enjambment "between plates, as well as between mediums within plates, to problematize the expectation of the *image act* as a whole, or any of its component parts in particular, as self-contained units" (xii). Thus, for Spector, the notion of the image act tends to foreground the individual plate, but that does not mean that the plates should be considered as isolated moments, any more than the text or illumination should be considered separately. She begins "with the assumption that Blake apprehended what he called the divine vision, an imaginative projection of the multivalent *idea* that comprises the One" (xi-xii). In order to divide the idea into smaller parts and articulate their implications, he "required a bimodal medium, one in which the verbal and visual each had its own responsibility in manifesting the *idea*" (xii). Each image act "potentially, can be the result of the interaction among three different manifestations of consciousness: the narrator, responsible for the verbal portion; the visualizer, responsible for the pictorial component; and the compositor, for the coordination of the two into a unified and coherent *image act*" (xii). Spector derives this notion of the image act from W. J. T. Mitchell's work on Blake's "composite art" and the "pictorial turn," by way of Kocku von Stuckrad's particular consolidation of Mitchell's theories with several other approaches, including that of Liza Bakewell, who seems to have coined the term as "an application of Austin's theory of speech acts to the field of pictorial communication" (xi). "Completing the circle," Spector takes "Stuckrad's approach back to Blake" (xi). The result is a remarkably consistent consideration of the interaction of the verbal and visual throughout the book.
- 8 Of particular interest to me are the implications of Spector's argument for character in *Jerusalem*, especially that of Los. Blake's epic characters are often treated more as "mouthpieces" for Blake's ideas than as actors in a drama, but Spector's approach to *Jerusalem* actually helps to clarify Los's development as a character. Identifying Albion with the Kabbalistic "Adam Rishon," "comparable to the biblical Adam" (34), and Los with "Adam Kadmon," "a manifestation of Blake's Saviour" (38), she explains that "in the kabbalistic myth *Adam Kadmon* (primordial man, the first completed entity) was intended to serve as the passive model for *Adam Rishon* (created or first man) to emulate" (38). I initially found this formulation doubtful because I have always understood Albion to be anterior to all of the

other characters in *Jerusalem*, except for the various manifestations of the divine. But Spector continues that "after the initial fault [Adam Rishon's/Albion's fall] *Adam Kadmon* was forced to assume an active role in cosmic restoration" (38). If she is correct in identifying Los with the "passive model," who only assumes an active savior role after Albion falls, that may help to explain why his learning curve is so steep in *Jerusalem*—Los must learn hard lessons about the "terrible wonder" of punishment and forgiveness; he gets frustrated with the Friends of Albion and he learns about the dangers of trying to enforce a moral code; he mistakes murder for "Vision," and "He saw in Vala's hand the Druid Knife of Revenge & the Poison Cup / Of Jealousy, and thought it a Poetic Vision of the Atmospheres" (*Jerusalem* 63.36, 39-40, E 214-15). One implication of Spector's argument is that Los's character must learn how—and how not—to save Albion.

- 9 The book's introductory materials begin with "A Note on Methodology: The Image Act," in which Spector introduces the key components of her approach to Blake's books and images. In the second introductory section, "Preface: Myth and Hermeneutics," she contends that the exoteric "horizon of expectations" (xviii) we bring to Blake's work has dominated Blake studies by suppressing the esoteric alternative; Spector's preface shows how this esoteric alternative developed into Christian Kabbalism, which, she argues, became the basis for Blake's mature mythology. She concludes the introductory material with "Introduction: The Theory of Myth," in which she lays out the vocabulary she will use in discussing Blake's work, primarily "foundational principles" (the "a priori assumptions that govern the entire system"), "symbolic form" ("an aggregate of symbols organized by an internal logic ... and interacting with each other in accordance with a characteristic operation"), and narrative ("flesh[ing] out" the symbolic form) (5). Many of the terms, concepts, structures, and modes of interaction will seem alien to most readers, but that is exactly Spector's point: there is a well-developed esoteric tradition that offers a legitimate alternative to what was handed down from Frye, but that we have been trained to disregard.
- 10 The first section proper, "Part I: The Consolidation of Blake's Esoteric Myth," uses two chapters to examine Blake's final epic, *Jerusalem*, in order to demonstrate his fully realized adaptation of esoteric perspectives and Christian Kabbalism into his artistic vision. The first chapter presents the "foundational principles" and "symbolic form" of Blake's late myth, demonstrating first "how Blake repudiated the exoteric laws of thought in favor of the esoteric characteristics," and then focusing on the symbolic form, "isolating the symbols, and then revealing the inner logic and characteristic operation through which they cohere into a dynamic system" (25). This chapter is a bit dry and dictionary-like

at times, simply because many new concepts and definitions must be introduced as Spector maps *Jerusalem's* characters and events onto the esoteric framework. The second chapter looks at the narrative in terms of purpose, medium, point of view, setting, characters, and plot. The most significant aspect of the esoteric narrative as described here is its replacing of the typical *agon*, in which a protagonist and antagonist struggle until one defeats or banishes or destroys the other, with a narrative whose climax depends not on conquest but on the identification and removal of “shards” of negativity that act as obstacles to the final resolution. This is why the climax of *Jerusalem* depends not on the vanquishing of the Spectre, but on Los's identification of error in his description of the Covering Cherub.

- 11 The four chapters of “Part II: The Development of Blake's Esoteric Myth,” discuss almost all of Blake's illuminated books from *There is No Natural Religion* to *Milton a Poem* in order to trace the intertwining development of Blake's evolving myth and the medium he needed to express it. Spector makes almost no mention of *Songs*—the focus here is on narrative—but she does discuss a good number of Blake's separate drawings and paintings. Chapter 3, “The Foundation Principles,” focuses on Blake's early composite art, dated roughly 1788–93; Spector argues that, especially in the prose works of this period, Blake developed the “compositor,” not quite a persona, but “the level of consciousness through which the visual and verbal could be unified into a coherent *image act*,” and that this development was tied epistemologically to “the substitution of the esoteric characteristics for the material laws as foundational principles” for his myth (85–86). In chapter 4, “The Symbolic Form,” she reads the five books dated 1794–95 “collectively as a five-act drama in which Blake recognized the need for and ultimately generated his own symbolic form” (82). Here is where Spector addresses the vexed question of negations and contraries, concluding,

Key to Blake's symbolic form is his recognition that negation is not a symbol to be opposed in binary conflict, but an operation to be corrected. As an operation, negation projects a linear plot in which a dominant force will eliminate its opposition. Its correction is effected through contraries, the cyclical process by which the supposed opponent is revealed to be a complementary value necessary for completion of the whole. (167)

- 12 Chapter 5, “The Narrative (1): The Logic of Complementarity,” considers Blake's illustrations to Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* in relation to *The Four Zoas* as the first phase in “transforming the symbolic form [developed in books of 1794–95] into a concrete narrative” (82). In chapter 6, “The Narrative (2): The Function of Self-Annihilation,” Spector argues that Blake “would use *Milton a Poem* to work out the

process by which self-annihilation could correct the primordial error and thereby effect cosmic restoration” (82). She concludes that instead of casting the plot as “a dualistic conflict, Blake introduces Merkavah Mysticism [based on contemplation of Ezekiel's vision] as the archetypal pattern for neutralizing the negation. Specifically, the plot consists of three parallel descents, contemplation of which is designed to elevate consciousness” (234).

- 13 In “Part III: The Implementation of Blake's Esoteric Myth,” Spector contends that “Blake used his myth not only to articulate his own vision, but for hermeneutical purposes as well” as he reread works by himself and others. She argues that he “mediated texts through the narrative consolidated in *Jerusalem*” (254–55), and she provides a good summary of that consolidated narrative, now considered in light of its development across Blake's work before *Jerusalem*:

To reprise, in its final form, Blake's narrative is a revision of [Francis Mercury] van Helmont's four-part cycle: the Primordial Institution, the State of Destitution, the Modern Constitution and the Supreme Restitution. In *Jerusalem*, Blake refocuses the phases. To begin with, he reduces the Primordial Institution to a kind of lost Eden, indicated through allusion and flashbacks. To compensate, he divides the State of Destitution into two distinct phases. The first, fragmentation, corresponds to the loss of the original unity; and the second, negation, redefines man's error as the intellectual choice of reason over vision. This is followed by the negation of negation, the phase in which man corrects his error by transforming negations into contraries, so that, finally, in the fourth phase, cosmic restoration can be achieved. (255)

The typical reader may well have found the terms of this summary baffling at the outset of Spector's book, and it is a measure of her success that by page 255 these statements not only make sense, but also seem comfortably familiar.

- 14 Chapter 7, “Blake Interpreting Blake: *The Gates of Paradise*,” demonstrates “how Blake used the consolidated myth as the basis for reinterpreting his own work” (255), in this case “to remediate his vision through what had become his own horizon of expectations, adding some mottos, a verbal apparatus and a concluding bimodal *image act*, all to create a new perspective from which to view *The Gates of Paradise*” (259). In chapter 8, “Blake Interpreting the Bible: *The Book of Job*,” Spector compares Blake's Job watercolors of 1805–06 with the Job engravings of 1823–26 to show how his reading of the biblical book changed in light of the esoteric narrative he developed in *Jerusalem*. In the final chapter, “Blake Interpreting the Visions of Others: *The Divine Comedy*,” Spector notes that Blake “seems to have been fixated on [Dante's] Count [Ugolino] for most of his professional life,” and that he “seems to have used Ugolino as the vehicle for develop-

ing his own esoteric Christian doctrine” (295). She concludes that “although Blake never completed the [Dante] project, it seems likely ... that he intended to follow the procedure established in revising *The Gates of Paradise* and the Job illustrations, of mediating Dante’s vision through his own esoteric myth, as consolidated in *Jerusalem*” (296).

- 15 In “Conclusion: The Truth of Myth,” Spector goes back to Frye to consider how the exoteric approach gained dominance in Blake studies. She summarizes her point, saying,

If, as I argued in the introduction to this study, we familiarize ourselves with the canon of rejected knowledge, we will recognize the truth: Blake did not simply rename already existing mythological figures. Rather, he introduced new symbols to convey concepts either omitted from, or else distorted by the accepted canon, in order to convey meanings beyond the range of conventional hermeneutics. (330)

- 16 Not everyone will like this book, and not everyone will be persuaded by it. One of the things I like about it is that Spector keeps her eye on her own argument, and refuses to engage in what she sees as pointless debates:

Finally, it is conventional to contextualize scholarship, indicating how one’s approach or interpretation conforms to or conflicts with current thought. However, because the purpose of this study is to place Blake within a completely different intellectual milieu, whether or not my inferences agree with or differ from those of mainstream interpretations is not particularly relevant. Therefore, while I will point out the general outlines of accepted opinions, I see little value in quibbling over minute particulars. (xiii)

How one responds to her argument may well depend on how one responds to this attitude. Spector is careful to refer the reader to the most mainstream readings of Blake (usually the introductions and notes in the Blake Trust editions), but she is starting from a completely different set of assumptions and expectations. For her, the mainstream readings are like the encrustations protecting the selfhood that must be cast off in *Milton*, so that the narrative of that casting off can be folded into Blake criticism. She has been trying to get us to see this for years. This time she may actually succeed.