SERPENT IMAGERY IN WILLIAM BLAKE'S
PROPHETIC WORKS

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William Blake's prophetic works are made up almost entirely of a unique combination of symbols and imagery. To understand his books it is necessary to be aware that he used his prophetic symbols because he found them apt to what he was saying, and that he changed their meanings as the reasons for their aptness changed. An awareness of this manipulation of symbols will lead to a more perceptive understanding of Blake's work. This paper is concerned with three specific uses of serpent imagery by Blake.

The first chapter deals with the serpent of selfhood. Blake uses the wingless Uraeon to depict man destroying himself through his own constrictive analytic reasonings unenlightened with divine vision. Man had once possessed this divine vision, but as formal religions and a priestly class began to be formed, he lost it and worshipped only reason and cruelty. Blake also uses the image of the serpent crown to characterize priests or anyone in a position of authority. He usually mocks both religious and temporal rulers and identifies them as oppressors rather than leaders of the people. In addition to the Uraeon and the serpent crown, Blake also uses the narrow constricted body of the
serpent and the encircled serpent to represent narrow-mindedness and selfish possessiveness.

The second chapter deals with the serpent as a symbolic force of energy itself. Blake uses the serpent to represent birth, the life force, guardian of life forces, inner strength, resurrection, forces of destruction, and rebellion against tyranny. The Orc figure, a mythological creation of Blake, is the major representative of all phases of energy. He is a Promethean figure of rebellion and often described by Blake as having a "serpent body." His birth represents the awakening of a terrible, uncontrolled energy which will bring war, destruction, and death. He is an "eternal viper" with "ever-hissing jaws." Blake often uses this rebellious energy to deal with specific political issues in America, Ahania and Tiriel. The "serpent-formed transgressor of God's law" is also in rebellion against the binding, constricting laws of religion, and in a larger sense, against the visionless state into which mankind has fallen.

The third chapter considers Blake's use of the serpent and tree image. It is significant that he uses these familiar Christian symbols in various ways which suggest that occult lore and antiquarian mythologies must also be considered in their interpretation. The following five major types of serpent-tree symbolism and Blake's usages
are discussed in this chapter: The divine serpent and the tree of life, the serpent as guardian of the tree of life, the serpent as destroyer of the tree of life, the serpent-tempter and the tree of death, and the serpent as an unfaithful messenger of God. It is possible to draw all of these interpretations from Blake's works. By the very diversity of its symbolic associations the serpent provides a unifying factor in Blake. It is in itself a symbol of unity in that it appears consistently in almost all of man's religions and mythologies.
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CHAPTER I

THE SERPENT OF SELPHOOD

The Uraeon is an ancient symbol of the deity including a circle, wings, and serpent. M. Oldfield Howey interprets the circle in the symbol as the solar disk, the embodiment of God, or the universe. The serpent is the energizing quality of divine life from which all was created. The wings represent the omnipresence of divine love that pervades all. The emblem as a whole symbolizes God as a creator and preserver.\(^1\) The image appears often in Blake's writings, and it is significant that he almost always deals with the circle and serpent only. Blake was interested in the Druidic past of England and was familiar with such remains as those at Stonehenge and Abury. The fact that the Druids were the Celtic representatives of the oldest and most basic religions in the world drew Blake's attention and enabled him to support his ideas concerning "natural religion." The serpent temples, or Uraeon-shaped structures of the Druids, did not include the wings; and while some historians suggest that all traces of the wing formations have simply been erased by time, Blake drew

a different conclusion from their absence. John Beer discusses Blake's use of the symbol in *Blake's Visionary Universe*, stating that if the serpent represented energy, and the sun reason, then the addition of wings would result in full, creative, visionary man. Without wings, the sun would merely be the spectrous sun of analytic reason strangling itself in its own energies. This image was appropriate to Blake's interpretation of Druidism. While some scholars in Blake's time considered the Druid religion as being representative of a pure form of worship, Blake looked at their priests and sacrificial rites and saw a clear picture of fallen nature. Beer explains that in Blake's view, the Druids had once possessed a divine vision and unity with all creation, but that as a priestly class began to be formed, they lost their divine vision and worshipped only analytic reasoning and cruelty. For this reason, their temples without wing formations faithfully represented their religion as the enclosed circle, and serpentine lines depicted reason shut-up and constricted by a turning in of all its energies. It can be concluded, then, from Blake's interpretation of Druidism that whenever Blake uses the figure of the serpent temple or wingless Uraeon in his writing, he is presenting a negative picture of reason strangled

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3 Beer, p. 21.
by its own energies, which results in selfhood or the inability to be a part of the divine unity.

Harold Bloom, in *Blake's Apocalypse*, notes that Blake's first major direct use of Druid imagery occurs in Europe as "The fiery king" or Albion's Angels seek the ancient, serpent-formed temple. Blake is saying here that those who would seem to be protecting England are in reality destroying her by running to temples which represent the false religion of analytic reasoning and cruelty. Since the natural inhabitants of the temples are priests and "angels," they are the most dangerous elements in any society. While the serpent temple refers directly to Druidism, the image can easily be extended to include all confining religions or philosophies. The image occurs several other times in the same poem. The fact that humanity was at one time in a pure state which was destroyed by the confining Druidic religion is stressed as Blake refers to the repressed youth of England, writing that "They saw the Serpent temple lifted above, shadowing the Island white" (Plate 12, l.11). This

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5William Blake, *The Complete Writings of William Blake*, edited by Geoffrey Keynes (London, 1966), p. 242. All subsequent line references to Blake will be from this edition and will be noted in the text. Blake's non-standard spellings and capitalizations have been retained without the use of [sic].
"shadow" gradually bound man and caused him to lose the divine vision. Blake explains this process graphically: "Thought changed the infinite to a serpent . . . Then was the Serpent temple form'd, image of infinite/Shut up in finite revolutions" (Plate 10, 11.16-22). Blake has said specifically here that man's original psychic sense has been bound into the narrow, restricting body of a serpent. These lines refer both to the Druidic serpent found in the incomplete Uraeon and to the physical body of a serpent, one of the most narrow and confined of life forms. The image also suggests the encircled serpent, or the snake swallowing his own tail, which always connotes selfhood or the inability to see beyond the natural.

Middleton Murry, in discussing *Europe*, states that this serpentine temple is coextensive with the land of Albion itself and that England has become the symbol of eternal man in his fallen state. The same image of England shadowed by the serpent temple is reinforced in *America*. In *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* David Erdman notes that Blake imagines the original serpent temple as an edifice stretching all across the waist of England along the Thames. Blake places the head of the serpent in "Golden Verulam" because Verulamium is the site of Druid ruins and because

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Verulam was the baronial title of Francis Bacon, whom Blake considered to be the Machiavelli of British Imperialism.7

Blake's familiarity with the original meaning of the Uraeon is obvious in Milton. At one point in the work Albion tries to draw England into him. She responds by stretching out abysses of darkness against him, and a vision appears there which consists of the serpent of energy, the wings of love, and the human sun of light. The divine vision is shadowed forth from this Uraeon, but the vision is short-lived and the Uraeon finds its permanent, unenlightened form in the Druid serpent temples. The form of the Uraeon disintegrates even further later in Milton. Beer reproduces the illustration in which the wings appear to be fading and the serpent crawls at the foot of the page with the comment (written backwards) "Women the comforters of men become the tormentors and Punishers."8 It would seem in this illustration that Blake is stressing his reversal of the original meaning of the Uraeon in as many ways as possible. The fading wings suggest an ever-increasing lack of unity. Both the words in the comment on the illustration and the fact that they are reversed indicate complete corruption of the Uraeon, which was intended to represent unity.

8Beer, p. 250, fig. 38.
While Blake often uses the serpent temple image in relation to England's situation, it can easily be extended to include the state of man in any repressive culture. In the fourth chapter of *Jerusalem* Los sends pity and wrath through all the nations of Europe and the world and hears "The serpent temples thro' the Earth, from the/wide plain of Salisbury,/Resound with cries of victims" (Plate 80, 11.47-48). England here is the center of the sacrifice of energy to analytic reasoning, but the "cries of victims" sound from throughout the earth, including other cultures in the trap of reason. Later in the same chapter Los describes to Enitharmon what must happen when Albion arises from his dread repose. One of these things is that through vision and prophecy we must foresee and avoid the terrors of "Creation, Redemption, and Judgment" as they appear "Where the Druids reared their rocky circles to make permanent Remembrance/Of Sin, & the tree of Good & Evil Sprang from the rocky circle & snake/ of the Druid" (Plate 92, 11.23-27). Here the image of creative power destroyed by its own energies is related directly to the Christian religion. Blake refers to the basic concepts of orthodox Christianity as "terrors" and connects the church's ideas of good and evil with the serpent temple of the Druids. Whenever Blake connects Christianity and Druidism in this way, he is always referring to the confining and restricting laws of religion.
Jerusalem is concluded with an illustration of Los, guardian of vision, standing before the visionless eighteenth-century world, depicted by the familiar serpent temple without wings and trilitha with extended serpentine avenues. To Blake the eighteenth-century world was only a more complex and sophisticated example of Druidism at its worst, dominated by selfhood and with its energies enslaved by reason and "science." The distorted, wingless Uraeon first used by England's ancestors is a fitting image to depict Blake's interpretation of the state of man.

Blake makes use of another ancient serpent symbol to characterize priests or anyone in a position of authority. In Egyptian religion, the serpent "crown" worn by a high priest or ruler symbolized both his authority and unapproachability of the deity. To Blake this symbol of authority was a thing of evil because the evolution of a priestly class was felt by him to be the first step toward man's lost vision. His use of the serpent crown and other serpent imagery when employed in connection with priests or rulers was, of course, a deliberate ironical distortion of the original meaning of the symbol. The high priests and Pharaohs were highly respected and feared while Blake makes a mockery of figures of authority, identifying them as oppressors rather than leaders of the people. It is true that they are to be feared, but for their treachery rather than their power. Blake consistently uses such terms as
"sneaking," "creeping," and "false" in referring to priests. Thus the original power symbol of priests is used ironically, and the serpent imagery is extended to develop a picture of priests who crawl through society with the deadly intent of striking the unwary.

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Blake writes of the "perilous paths" in which "Now the sneaking Serpent/Walks in mild humility" (Plate 2, l.70). Bloom says of this passage that on the social level, it is likely a parable of exploitation. The sneaking serpent symbolizes an "angel" of mild humility, and the term "perilous paths" is made ironic. The "just" man becomes an outcast in this situation and is the unheard prophet. The sneaking serpent is the seemingly mild angel or priest who is actually destroying man by confining him in laws and morals while pretending to lead him to vision and life. The image is presented more strongly in a later plate as Blake pictures a printing house in Hell. The subject is the transmission of knowledge, and a viper is seen folding around the rock while other vipers adorn it with gold and silver. While priests are not mentioned specifically in this passage, it is obvious for several reasons that the vipers are the priests and lawmakers of society. The bound rock adorned with gold and silver can be compared to the stone tablets of law.

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9 Bloom, p. 75.
given to Moses in Judaeo-Christian mythology. Priests eventually bound these laws in gold and silver and worshipped the laws rather than God, or the spirit of creation. The bound rock in *Marriage* can also be related to Blake's later use of Urizen's book of laws, which is a bound knowledge. Bloom discusses this passage and refers to the viper folding around the rock as a censorious restrictor, seeking to confine man within his fallen limits.¹⁰ This interpretation explains precisely the function of priests who restrict man's activities with confining moral codes and constantly remind him of his sinful, fallen state. Erdman also defines the "sneaking serpent" as the priest or any pious hypocrite opposing freedom, and compares him to the "crawling villain" in *America* who "preaches abstinence & wraps himself/ In fat of lambs" (Plate 1111.14-15).¹¹

The entire work *Tiriel* employs serpent imagery to convey the hypocrisy and oppressiveness connected with authority. *Tiriel* is identified with religious tyranny by Bloom, who suggests that *Tiriel's* name may be a combination of the Greek root of "tyrant" and "El," which is Hebrew for "the Almighty," one of God's names.¹² Tiriel represents

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¹⁰ Bloom, p. 89.
¹¹ Erdman, p. 175.
¹² Bloom, p. 30.
aged hypocrisy and selfhood. He refers to his sons as "serpents" and "worms of death feasting on your parents' flesh" (l. 33). The sons seem to represent a continuing selfhood feeding upon the blind hypocrisy from which they sprang.

The sons—called serpents by Tiriel— are spectres of their father, and Tiriel curses them, not realizing that they are like him. The serpent imagery is repeated later in the poem, as Ijum, in describing Tiriel's hypocrisy, refers to him as a "bright serpent." The image is strongest near the end of the poem. After Tiriel has vainly gained insight into his own character, he refers to himself as a serpent and to his words as "thirsty hissings."

In America Blake at one point relates priests directly to serpents in appearance and action as he writes "Priests in rustling scales/Rush into reptile coverts" (Plate 12, l.20). Bloom's interpretation of this passage is that the plagues covering Europe are plagues only to the orthodox because these fires of hell expose the angels and priests as the serpents they really are. The passage also implies that the orthodox, represented by their priests, hide in the laws of religion rather than facing life. Laws and rituals provide convenient holes or "coverts" for those who fear life. Just as the snake is safe from harm when he reaches the underground darkness of his den, the priest is safe when he runs to the commandments of his religion.

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13 Bloom, p. 127.
Erdman discusses an illustration in Europe which relates serpents to figures of both religious and temporal authority. The plate shows the angelic queen on the right with a serpent coming from beneath her gown and pestilence, in the form of serpents, darting from the queen of France. This symbolism can be interpreted in several different ways. The most important meaning is probably that while those in authority might appear to be benign rulers with the good of their subjects as their goal, they are in reality deceptive, treacherous, and consumed with selfhood. It is also significant that Blake pictures queens rather than kings with snakes crawling from beneath their robes. It has been mentioned earlier that Blake wrote on one of his illustrations that women had become the punishers and tormentors of men. This concept of the female is reinforced when she is shown with serpents crawling from beneath her dress, suggesting the image that she is deceptive—pretending good while working evil.

In "Infant Sorrow" Blake develops the image of priests as being treacherous serpents and laments the effect of their influence on man:

My father then with holy look  
In his hands a holy book  
Pronounc'd curses on my head  
And bound me in a mirtle shade

14Erdman, p. 205.
Here Blake is very specific about the character of priests. He stresses their being hidden under vines by day, implying that their true nature is deliberately hidden from man as they pretend to be good and holy. In reality, however, they are serpents who crush the blossoms of life wherever they find them.

Serpent imagery is used in connection with authority many times in The Four Zoas. In the Second Night Enion "wails from the dark deep," "I have chosen the serpent for a counsellor" (11.386, 389). This line is the realization that priests, considered to be natural counsellors to the people, in reality, counsel in a way that can only destroy. Their rules bind man until the energy and love within him are both destroyed, leaving him helpless and floundering. In the Sixth Night we see again the crown of serpents, signifying what Blake considered to be the corrupt British government, dominated by selfhood. Erðman discusses this image, noting that British policy is a curse destroying

15 Parts of these lines were deleted or altered by Blake. See Keynes' edition for complete copy.
the peaceful arts, exchanging the "colors of loveliness" for "blackness," crowns for "wreath'd serpents," and "sweet odors" for "stinking corruptibility." In the Seventh Night, Blake again uses the serpent in direct relation to religious authority. In one instance Blake writes that Orc knows that the arts of Urizen are pity and meek affection "and that by these arts the serpent form exudes from his limbs" (1.135). Urizen has set himself up as an all-powerful figure of authority. He pretends pity, but the serpent emerging from him reveals that his humility is false and that his pity is deceptive. Also in the Seventh Night we find a situation in which the serpent of the woods and waters irritates all living souls with his harsh voice. The Prester Serpent runs through the ranks crying:

'Listen to the Priest of God, ye warriors;
'This Cowl upon my head he plac'd in times of Everlasting.
'And said, 'Go forth & guide my battles; like the jointed spine
'Of Man I made thee when I blotted Man from life & light.
(11.114-17)

The term "Prester Serpent" is probably Blake's most direct assertion that priests are in reality serpents. Priests are not generally related to war, bloodshed, and the destruction of man, but Blake pictures a bloodthirsty priest goading men into destruction of one another in the name of God. This God, of course, is Blake's "Nobodaddy," consumed by selfhood and evil himself since he has taken life and light from man.

16 Erdman, p. 345.
The term "selfhood" has been used extensively in the above discussion of priests as serpents. It is a word used by Blake to describe a state of being where the divine vision has been lost and replaced by analytic reasoning, which can perceive only physical reality. Blake often uses the coiled serpent to represent this negative and confining state because it is a turning inward and limiting of the consciousness rather than the constant expanding and unification -- Blake's ideal of existence. One of the most graphic portrayals of the coiled serpent of reason occurs in an illustration to America. A large serpent, originally representing energy, is being reduced by reason to analytic coils among flames and tormented beings. An illustration of the coiled serpent appears again in Marriage; but this time Blake pictures the death of analyzed energy, and the serpent is shown drowning in a turbulent sea. Its "death" has been brought about by the very nature of analyzed energy, which ultimately must destroy itself because all such energy is turned inward upon itself. Bloom discusses an image appearing in The French Revolution of a serpent coiled around the heart. He identifies the serpent as the prophecy which has been hidden from the light. This inner binding is matched by the similarly figurative outer binding of the people's oppressors, the nobles.\footnote{Bloom, p. 64.}
The encircled serpent as an image of selfhood appears in several forms in *The Four Zoas*. In Night Six, when Urizen recognizes the three women who would not let him drink as his daughters, he curses them and gives them "wreath'd serpents" for crowns. Serpent crowns have been discussed previously as symbols of corrupted authority, but here the meaning is more general. The wreathed serpent crowns identify the three women as being consumed in selfhood. It is ironic that Urizen should bestow the crowns on his daughters, for he represents the first and most flagrant instance of selfhood in Blake's mythology. A similar image is repeated a few lines below as Urizen wandering in the "Abyss" sees the ruined spirits, once his children. Some of them have crowns of serpents, indicating that like Urizen they have become dominated by selfhood. In the Seventh Night Orc has reminded Urizen that when he stole his light it became fire "and Orc began to organize a Serpent . . . A Self-consuming dark devourer rising into the heavens" (11.153-56). These lines may be considered Blake's own explanation of his image relating the serpent to the concept of selfhood. It is an image of terror, devouring both itself and all other life. The image is extended a few lines below as Urizen, knowing that wisdom reaches "high and deep," makes Orc in serpent form compelled to stretch up the mysterious tree, hoping in that way to draw all humans into submission to his will (1.163).
In the Ninth Night the universe has exploded into eternal birth; and "All spirits deceas'd, let loose from reptile prisons, come in shoals" (l. 235). The reptile prisons can be interpreted as being the serpent bodies where the energetic spirit of life was confined while man was in his fallen state of lost vision. Frye supports this view of the serpent imagery, stating that one thing the serpent symbolizes is the fallen body of man. The "serpent body" forced to the ground to eat dust and clay is the constricted body of the natural man. Its ability to shed its skin makes it a symbol of death and rebirth.\(^\text{18}\)

One of Blake's illuminations of Milton contains a unique serpent/selfhood image. The chariot in the figure consists of snakes whose tails are coiled into wheels. John Beer calls the design a commentary showing tyrannical and visionless creatures whose energies, instead of harmonizing into a chariot of fire, have become intractable serpents.\(^\text{19}\) Again, the serpent, intended to represent energy, is forced into coils by analytic reasoning. The crushing quality of this coiled serpent is portrayed in Chapter I of Jerusalem: "Reasonings like vast Serpents/Infold around my limbs, bruising my minute articulations" (Plate 15,1.12). The effect of


\(^{19}\) Beer, p. 248.
existence dominated by reason can be clearly seen here. The energy of life is encircled and crushed as if by a huge serpent because reason has no comprehension beyond the physical. Bloom sees this line as a revealing statement of Blake's fear that even he may be crushed by the reasonings of the scientific age he is crying out against. Natural science has become the intellectual garment of natural man; and Blake, who is only one prophet against an entire age, is afraid that even the serpentine Orc within himself may suffer the fate of becoming a part of the systems he is striving to overcome.\(^{20}\) The fact that even a prophet can be caught in the grip of analytic reasoning and destroyed by it suggests that cold reason is strong enough to overpower divine vision because of the weakness of man. In an illustration for *Jerusalem* Blake implies that not even the artists and poets of society can escape the clutches of selfhood. Beer discusses this scene, in which Dante and Virgil visit the city of Dis. All the humans in the city are being tortured and are fully within the bonds of selfhood. One drawing shows Vanni Fucci gesturing against God with one serpent repeating his gesture while another serpent coils around his arm. In the background, one serpent is swallowing another, the logical conclusion of devotion to selfhood. The same theme continues in Blake's

\(^{20}\)Bloom, p. 383.
next design, with Agnello Brunelleschi being attacked by a serpent in a circular position of swallowing its head while it is still attached to his body. This, of course, is physically impossible. Beer feels that it is Blake's intention to express the inner state of a man devoured by his selfhood. Other designs of this scene show more instances of men being attacked by and transformed into serpents.  

Images found in On a Vision of the Last Judgement repeat the idea that selfhood and analytic reasoning have corrupted true religion, a creation of divine vision, and have turned religion into rigid and constricted dependence on cold laws. In one picture, "beneath Moses & from the Tables of Stone which utter lightnings, is seen Satan wound round by the Serpent & falling headlong" (p.443). The tables of stone represent bound and restricted religion to Blake; he would suggest that it is this kind of restricting that has connected evil with Satan, who dared to defy God. In Blake's view, of course, Satan is a positive force of energy while the "God" of orthodox religion is the "Nobodaddy" of selfhood. False reasonings and laws have bound Satan with their serpentine coils and have caused man to fear his energies rather than appreciate them. In another scene Blake again pictures Satan falling into an

\[21\text{Beer, p. 277.}\]
abyss, wound with the tail of the serpent who is also wreathed around the cross to which he is bound (p.606). This image can be related to an illustration discussed earlier in which the serpent of energy is being forced into analytic coils. Here Blake seems to be comparing Satan to Jesus, whom the orthodox nailed to the cross and destroyed because he defied the law. Because Satan also possessed powerful and compelling energies, he too was considered a malevolent threat to the orthodox.

Closely related to the image of the coiled serpent is another occasionally used by Blake, that of the narrow reptile form slinking along the ground. This image also connotes selfhood, but in addition includes the idea of fear or deceit. In the "Africa" section of the Song of Los, Har and Heva fled the lust of the world and shrank to reptiles. This occurrence might be considered to parallel the Garden of Eden myth. God took away the legs and voice of the serpent, reducing him to his reptile form because he dared to challenge God's power and encouraged man to experience knowledge and life. Blake, conversely, reduces Har and Heva to serpents because they refuse to face experience. The narrow, enclosed body of the snake is a fitting prison for souls who are afraid of the experience of life.
The image of the slinking or creeping serpent is repeated in Milton in the song of the males working at furnaces and anvils: "Ah shut in narrow doleful form/ creeping in reptile flesh upon the bosom of the ground" (Book I, Section 5.11.19-20). The state of man is being described in the above lines. Because he has lost the divine vision, his eye is "narrow" and his body is also confined to a narrow form. The fact that he is creeping on the ground suggests several ideas. Literally, because he can see no farther than the natural world of physical reality, he is confined to the ground and cannot rise into the infinity of divine vision. Also, as a result of his state, he must necessarily live in fear of the unknown and of God and therefore continually slinks along the ground. Blake uses the same image in Jerusalem: "... Creeping in reptile flesh along the bosom of the ground!/ The eye of man a little narrow orb closed up and dark" (Plate 49, 11.33-34).

Some of Blake's serpents are described as being crested with precious stones. This "glittering" serpent seems, for several reasons, to fit into a discussion of selfhood. In his general discussion of the image, Frye theorizes that if the fall of humanity is represented by the fall of the serpent, then the serpent before the fall must represent the Druid culture which preceded Adam.
In its dying states, that culture consisted of constant, ferocious war and human sacrifice. In relating the adorned serpent to this culture, Frye describes him as a creature of terrible strength and beauty with scales of glittering precious stones and a gold-crested head. This image is related by Frye to Milton's portrayal of Satan in his tyrannical pride before his form had lost its original brightness (Book I, 11.85-86). This interpretation of the adorned serpent becomes clear when Blake's use of the image is examined in Book I of Milton. In describing the wine press of Los, which is war with its accompanying pain and disease, Blake writes,

...The toad and venomous Newt, the Serpent cloth'd in gems & gold
They throw off their gorgeous raiment: they rejoice with loud jubilee
Around the Wine-Presses of Luvah, naked and drunk with wine. (11.22-24)

"Wine" here is blood. In war, where hatred and evil dominate, the serpent is "naked." He is in his natural element and has no need to conceal himself in deceptive raiment to be accepted by man and even worshipped by him. As the serpent is a symbol of selfhood, war is a direct product of it. When man has divine vision he is at one with all creation; but when selfhood dominates, he feels the separateness of life rather than the unity of it, and war results from his consequent greed and hypocrisy.

Frye, p. 22.
When Blake's serpent is adorned with precious stones, then Blake is portraying him as selfhood, but disguised, so that man, not seeing beyond his apparent value, will worship the very selfhood that must ultimately destroy him. Treachery and deception are the most important aspects of this adorned serpent. The image appears again in Book I of Milton as Leutha speaks:

"Twas then; with our dark fires  
"Which now gird round us (O eternal torment!) I form'd the Serpent  
"Of precious stones & gold, turn'd poisons on the sultry wastes  
"To do unkind things in kindness, with power arm'd to say  
"The stings of the serpent are to do unkindness & do  
"The most irritating things in the midst of tears & love (11. 28-33)

The deceptive character of the jeweled serpent is made very clear in these lines. The apparent beauty of the serpent turns to poisons, and his very nature is to appear full of love and humility while working evil. This image appears again and is reinforced in the fourth chapter of Jerusalem. Albion says to Jesus (the Divine Image);

"O Lord, what can I do? My Selfhood cruel  
"Marches against thee, deceitful, from Sinai & from Edom  
"Into the Wilderness of Judah, to meet thee in his pride.  
"I behold the Visions of my deadly Sleep of Six Thousand years  
"Dazzling around thy skirts like a Serpent of precious stones & gold  
"I know it is my Self" (Plate 96, 11.8-12).

In these lines, Albion recognizes the fact that he is consumed by selfhood and compares his state to that of a jeweled serpent who would seem to "dazzle around" Christ pretending devotion, but who is in reality a deceitful force of evil.
Confining, restrictive laws and lack of vision can also be seen in nature through Blake's use of serpent imagery. In Night III of *The Four Zoas* Luvah and Vala go down into the human heart, and

"In jealous fears, in fury & rage, & flames roll'd round their fervid feet,
"And the vast form of Nature like a Serpent play'd before them;
"And as they went, in folding fires & thunders of the deep,
"Vala shrunk in like the dark sea that leaves its slimy banks,
"And from her bosom Luvah fell far as the east & west
"And the vast form of Nature, like a Serpent, roll'd between" (11.96-101).

The above passage is a part of Blake's account of the fall of Albion and his surrender to Vala, or the outward form of nature with its unvarying laws. Beer explains that Luvah and Vala, in their restricted forms, now see nature with an analytic vision—its energies remaining apart from them. Bloom also discusses this passage, stating that these are the exact tones in which the merciful element in the mind would react to the collapse of love in the organic cycle of creative passion into the serpent of nature. The eighteenth century, an age of science and Deistic religious concepts, viewed nature in just this way—a visible, organic indication of unvarying laws set into motion by an unchanging, unknowable god. Blake's

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23 Beer, p.152.
24 Bloom, p.225.
concept of a true God is in direct opposition to this "Nobodaddy" of orthodox religion, and when he writes of nature as being "like a serpent" he is speaking of a frightening and misleading creation of a visionless mankind. Beer comments that man sees this kind of creation because his energy has been cut off, and in this restricted form, he can no longer be one with nature and therefore sees only its outer shell.²⁵

²⁵ Beer, p. 152.
CHAPTER II

THE SERPENT OF ENERGY

J. E. Cirlot asserts that the serpent by its very nature is symbolic of the force of energy itself, and thus is incorporated into a great variety of symbolic meanings relating either to the serpent as a total organism or to its major characteristics. The meanings discussed by Cirlot which are relevant to this chapter are birth, the life force itself, guardian of life forces, inner strength, resurrection, forces of destruction, and rebellion.

Blake often uses the serpent as a symbol of rebellion against tyranny, implying that although it represents destructive energy, rebellion is good when it destroys tyranny to protect life forces. His "Orc" figure can be identified with this fierce spirit of rebellion. Erdman, who adopts this point of view, explains in a note that the word "orca" is sometimes applied to any monster or creature of the imagination. The name also suggests Orcus, Hell's inexorable reaper of kings. Orc's image as a spirit of rebellion is most obvious in The Four Zoas. Beer discusses the account of Orc on the mountain in Night V,

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referring to him as a Prometheus figure who struggles eternally in spite of his bonds. Through his struggles he has a vision of infinite energy and beauty in all things:

His nostrils breathe a fiery flame, his locks are like the forests
Of wild beasts; there the lion glares, the tyger & wolf howl there,
And there the Eagle hides her young in cliffs & precipices.
His bosom is like starry heaven expanded; all the stars
Sing round; there waves the harvest & the vintage rejoices; the Springs
Flow into rivers of delight; there the spontaneous flowers
Drink, laugh & sing, the grasshopper, the Emmet & the fly;
The golden Moth builds there a house & spreads her silken bed (V. 127–34).

As the struggles of Orc's rebellion reach the point of open warfare, however, all his energies and perceptions become turned more and more towards destruction. Los shouts, looking forward to the war; Tharmas looks for revenge; Eritharmon becomes terrified; and even the trees in the earth force their way into existence in order to have a part in the impending war. The scene as a whole exemplifies a pattern used often by Blake: positive energy arising from rebellion against tyranny, turning by its very nature into a force of simple destruction--war for the sake of carnage. Bloom also refers to the serpentine Orc as a Prometheus figure in his discussion of Night VI. Here Orc has been raging against Urizen, but is beginning

to weaken and in desperation reveals his true identity. Though Urizen is terrified, he has triumphed; for Orc's organic energy has not been enough to overpower Urizen's cunning reason. At this point the Orc cycle completes itself as he begins to "organize a Serpent body" (VIIa, 152-53) and is compelled to stretch himself on the tree of mystery like a crucified god. Bloom's interpretation of this passage is that Orc has become a sacrifice of life to death rather than a liberator, and that political revolution always ends in "revolution, the revolving of another cycle of revolt aging into repression." As Orc dies into Urizen's religion, we see the French revolution evolve into the despotism of Napoleon. 4

In America the serpent form of Orc is pictured clearly as a spirit of rebellion:

"Dark Virgin," said the hairy youth, "thy father stern, abhor' d,
"Rivets my tenfold chains while still on high my spirit soars;
"Sometimes an eagle screaming in the sky, sometimes a lion
"Stalking upon the mountains, & sometimes a whale,
I lash
"The raging fathomless abyss; anon a serpent folding
"Around the pillars of Urthona, and round thy dark limbs . . ." (Plate I, 11.11-16).

In the next plate, the daughter of Urthona recognizes Orc in his serpent form and cries "I know thee, I have found thee, & will not let thee go:"Thou art the image of God

who dwells in the darkness of Africa, "And thou art fall'n
to give me life in regions of dark death." In these lines
she realizes that he is an image of freedom and her only
hope for life in a dark world. In Plate VII of the same
poem Albion's Angel (a guardian of false values to Blake)
dresses Orc as "serpent-form'd," "Lover of wild rebel-
lion," and "transgressor of God's Law." The angel, of
course, is wrathfully denouncing Orc for his blasphemy
and transgression of God's laws, but the "Angel" cannot
understand Orc's serpent form or his true nature since he
is so tightly bound by the laws of religion. Orc reveals
his identity and purpose as he answers;

"I am Orc, wreath'd round the accursed tree:
The times are ended; shadows pass, the morning
gins to break;
The fiery joy, that Urizen perverted to ten commands,
What night he led the starry hosts thro' the wide
wilderness,
That stony law I stamp to dust; and scatter
religion abroad
To the four winds as a torn book, & none shall
gather the leaves;" (Plate 8, 11.1-6).

The serpent and tree image is considered in detail in
the third chapter of this thesis. At this point it is
sufficient to note that the tree stands for the mysteries
with which a jealous god has concealed life from man and
that the purpose of the serpent-formed Orc is to destroy
these mysteries. He further discloses his rebellion
against Urizen as he swears that he will scatter religion
to the winds and stamp its stony laws to dust.
Blake also uses the serpent as a figure of rebellion in more general instances. In one of the Memorable Fancies (Plates 15-17) of the Marriage, he pictures variations of serpents symbolizing opposing qualities. The viper folding around the rock and serving as a censorious restrainer is discussed in Chapter I. In the first chamber, however, a Dragon-Man is clearing away rubbish, and other dragons are inside hollowing out the cave. Bloom sees these dragons as phallic images symbolically widening the body's potential for imaginative knowledge. Thus they represent rebellion against man's closed concepts of experience resulting from artificial moral restrictions.

In two of the poems from his notebook, Blake specifically pictures serpents which are figures of rebellion against the "Nobodaddy" god of organized religion. In the sixth of these poems, a serpent forces his way into a golden chapel that none dared enter and vomits his poison onto the bread and wine. This would seem to be an image of evil, but to Blake the serpent represents positive energy destroying false religion. This serpent is almost certainly related to a Satan image, but in this poem Satan cannot be considered wholly evil. It is the chapel rather than the serpent which is destroying life. The very fact that it is golden suggests a graven image rather than a place of worship, and because "none dared enter," the chapel becomes a foreboding

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5 Bloom, p. 89.
place of terror. In this case, destruction is necessary to preserve life and freedom from the tyranny of a demanding god. A related image appears in the twenty-first poem, "To Nobodaddy," as Blake writes "That none dare eat the fruit but from/The wily serpent's jaws" (ll.7-8). The fruit is the traditional "apple" representing knowledge of good and evil, or simply life experience. Blake's interpretation of the symbol seems to be that a jealous god set artificial restrictions on man to preserve his own power and mystery and that only the cunning serpent--again a Satan image--had the strength of energy to oppose him. A deeper meaning appears in this image, however, as Blake clearly states that man dares take the fruit of experience only from the jaws of the serpent. This implies that man's senses and mind have become so perverted through repression that he does not see life experience as positive and good. He feels that he is "sinning" when he experiences life and calls the serpent "evil," failing to realize that his only chance for freedom and vision lies in the energy of the serpent.

Serpent imagery in Blake sometimes reflects specific instances of political rebellion as well as the more cosmic rebellion against the laws of a Urizenic god. Bloom, in discussing Erdman's interpretation of America, agrees that, when Orc is portrayed as a serpent, he is often a patriotic
emblem of political revolt. Erdman writes that Blake is giving symbols of historical authenticity to certain revolts preceding the American Revolution as he pictures a lion in Peru, an eagle in Mexico, and a whale in the South Sea. Blake then describes the "serpent folding around the pillars of Urthona" and, according to Erdman, is suggesting that Orc, in these struggles of self-sacrifice, is grooving for the truth from which will ultimately come the "human fire" of the American Declaration of Independence. Erdman also describes the progressive cartoon in Plate V of America. A trembling king is held aloft and judged by three youthful patriots, then flung hurtling toward infernal flames. Finally, the king is caught up in the coils of a serpent and decapitated. The cartoon clearly portrays American defiance of King George III of England, and the serpent decapitating the king is an imaginative version of the spirit of rebellion which severed the controls which England had over America.

The theme of political rebellion can also be seen in the serpent imagery in Ahania in a more general sense. Chapter IV includes a description of the tree of mystery with the living corpse of Fuzon nailed on it:

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6 Bloom, p. 105.
7 Erdman, p. 239.
8 Erdman, p. 189.
Round the pale living Corse on the Tree
Forty years flew the arrows of pestilence.

Wailing and terror and woe
Ran thro all his dismal world;
Forty years all his sons & daughters
Felt their skulls harden; then Asia
Arose in the pendulous deep.

They reptilize upon the earth.
(Chap.IV, 36-43)

Since Fuzon is another image of Orc, the "reptilizing" of Fuzon's sons and daughters probably represents the formation of a new period of political rebellion in Asia.

Erdman finds a political analogy in Tiriel which again makes the serpent a symbol of rebellion. He relates Tiriel to King George III of England. Three of his sons had joined in flagrant rebellion against the moral code by making public exhibitions of drunkenness and flaunting prostitutes. In Blake's poem, Tiriel's sons rebel against their father's cruel law, bringing tears to their mother, and the king curses them as "serpents, not sons." A scene of complete desolation is pictured, relieved solely by the sounds of music heard by Enitharmon, but even those are drowned by her groans. It is at this point that Blake describes the birth of Orc, introducing a new dynamic force into the pervading desolation.

The birth of Orc is also vividly described by Albion's Angel in Plate 9 of America:

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9Erdman, p. 123.
10Beer, p. 133.
"Ah vision from afar! Ah rebel form that rent the ancient
Heavens! Eternal Viper, Self-renew'd, rolling in clouds,
I see thee in thick clouds and darkness on America's shore,
Writhing in pangs of abhorred birth; red flames the crest rebellious
And eyes of death; the harlot womb, oft opened in vain,
Heaves in enormous circles: Now the times are return'd upon thee,
Devourer of thy parent, now thy unutterable torment renews.
Sound! Sound! my loud war trumpets, & alarm my thirteen Angels!
Ah terrible birth! a young one bursting! where is the weeping mouth,
And where the mother's milk? instead, those ever-hissing jaws
And parched lips drip with fresh gore: now roll thou in the clouds;
Thy mother lays her length outstretch'd upon the shore beneath.

(11. 14-25)

In this passage Orc's birth strongly represents the awakening of a terrible uncontrolled energy, and the Angel recognizes that the serpentine Orc will bring war, destruction and death. These lines also contain an image which has traditionally been linked to the serpent, that of death and continuous rebirth. This concept, of course, arose from the snake's ability to shed its skin and grow a new one, which signified to the ancient writers an ability to shake off old age. Blake employs this image, calling the viper "eternal" and "self-renew'd"; but he also incorporates it into his own image of terror and destructive energy. Its birth is abhorred and terrible and portends war and bloodshed. Again, however, this destruction is necessary to the preservation of life and freedom. The "mother" can be
interpreted as England, and thus the serpent devouring its parent represents mythically American's rupture of its restrictive ties with England. According to an old folk-belief, young vipers are born by devouring the mother's body; that is, they "eat their way out." The origin of this belief is doubtless the fact that some snakes bear living young.

The First Book of Urizen also describes a serpent phase of Orc's birth. The child was first a worm within the womb of Enitharmon; then he began to change to a serpent which Blake describes as lying coiled, emitting dolorous hissings and poisons. Finally, "With sharp pangs the hissings began/To change to a grating cry," and Enitharmon bears an infant boy. It is the serpent phase of his birth which is the most terrifying and which indicates the indestructible energy which the child possesses. Los sees this energy within the child and chains him to a rock at the top of a mountain in an attempt to restrain the destructive powers within him.

Serpents also appear in relation to the awakening of destructive energy in Chapter II of Jerusalem: "And his dark Eon, that once fair crystal form divinely clear,/Within his ribs producing serpents whose souls are flames of fire" (Plate 40, 11.41-2). Again the image is one of birth, and the double image of serpents and fire produces an effect of pure and dangerous energy.
Just as Blake uses the serpent phases of the birth of Orc to symbolize the awakening of energy, he also makes the serpent a more general symbol of energy unrestrained by vision. Beer writes that in using this symbol Blake is concerned with an important contemporary theme. Scientific study, especially in electricity, had focused the attention of many thinkers on the concept of energy, and Blake was no exception. His art as well as his writing explored modes of representing energy, and his interest in serpent worship provided an abundant source of symbols for this purpose. Beer hypothesizes that Jacob Bryant's *Analysis of Ancient Mythology*, with its plates devoted to the Ophites and their emblems, including serpents and their eggs, influenced Blake's speculations about man and his use of energy. The egg would represent the early state of reason in which energy is easily controlled because it has never known freedom. This state, however, leads to doubt and frustration, at which point energy either dies or breaks out into unrestrained violence, and the free serpent then can attack both by biting and by using coiled force to crush its opponent. Through these images Blake was able to represent three moments of experience: simple reasoning, the breaking out and exploitation of energy, and the final stage in which visionless energy poisons man and crushes the vision within.¹¹

¹¹Beer, pp. 21-23.
This cycle of destructive energy can be clearly seen in The Book of Ahania as the wounding of Urizen by "an enormous dread serpent" is described:

The Globe shook, and Urizen seated
On black clouds his sore wound annointed;
The ointment flow'd down on the void
Mix'd with blood -- here the snake gets her poison.

(Chap.III, 11.47-50)

Because of Blake's complex reasoning it is always necessary to assume several possible interpretations of images. For example, the above passage might contain an idea discussed by Cirlot in reference to Jung's belief that the caduceus is a vague representation of homeopathy, or the idea that an ailment can be cured by its cause. The serpent, then, becomes the source of healing for the wound caused by the serpent. Bloom interprets the passage in yet another way. He discusses Urizen's slaying of the serpent and sending an arrow poisoned by its blood to Fuzon, calling the arrow Urizen's rejected sexuality. He has prepared revenge on his son because he is separated from his capacity for joy. The mixed blood and balm flowing into the wound become the snake's poison of experience, the moral negations of good and evil.

The Four Zoas contains several instances in which a serpent image is used to portray unrestrained, destructive

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12 Cirlot, p. 276.
13 Bloom, p. 178.
energy. In Night the First, the body of Urthona is pictured as a raging serpent as it falls around the holy tent:

"Urthona stood in terror, but not long; his spectre fled "To Enion, & his body fell. Tharmas beheld him fall "Endlong, a raging serpent rolling round the holy tent. "The sons of war, astonish'd at the Glitt'ring monster, drove "Him far into the world of Tharmas, into a cavern'd rock."

(11.530-34)

The glittering serpent is an image of pure energy. The "sons of war" recognize its destructive powers and drive it away, obviously fearing it.

The image of a glittering serpent is repeated in Night the Eighth as Orc is pictured as an awful jeweled serpent:

But he saw Orc a Serpent form augmenting times on times In the fierce battle; & he saw the Lamb of God & the World of Los Surrounded by his dark machines; for Orc augmented swift In fury, a Serpent woundrous among the Constellations of Urizen.

A crest of fire rose on his forehead, red as the carbuncle, Beneath, down to his eyelids, scales of pearl, then gold & silver Intermingled with the ruby overspread his Visage down His furious neck; writhing contortive in dire budding pains The scaly armour shot out. Stubborn, down his back & bosom The Emerald, Onyx, Sapphire, jasper, beryl, amethyst Strove in terrific emulation which should gain a place Upon the mighty Field, the fruit of the mysterious tree Kneaded in Uvith's kneading trough. Still Orc devour'd the food In raging hunger. Still the pestilential food, in gems & gold, Exuded round his awful limbs, Stretching to serpent length His human bulk . . . .

(11.65-80)

In this image the glittering gems seem to hide a pestilence
while they magnify the destructive energy of Orc. Throughout Blake's description of the raging battle, this image of the glittering serpent contains the highest concentration of energy. Night the Eighth contains an image of energy rarely used by Blake. The serpent is not specifically mentioned, but as Urizen forgets his own laws for a moment and begins to pity and then to embrace the shadowy female, he is described as turning into a scaled form with an immense tail. The image is carried further as Urizen, "no longer erect" (1.439) lashes his tail, and his transparent scales give off light. While Urizen is almost always portrayed as pure reason which seeks to control energy to the point of destroying it, this image suggests that even he contains a dormant energy that possesses the possibility of becoming both powerful and beautiful when emotion is allowed to take precedence over reason. A related idea appears in a different form several lines below in a vision of Ahania:

"The Eternal Man sleeps in the Earth, nor feels the vig'rous sun
"Nor silent moon, nor all the hosts of heaven move in his body
"His fiery halls are dark, & round his limbs the Serpent Orc
"Fold without fold encompasses him, And his corrupting members
"Vomit out the scaly monsters of the restless deep. "They come up in rivers & annoy the nether parts
"Of Man who lays upon the shores, leaning his faded head
"Upon the Oozy rock inwrapped with the weeds of death. (11.507-14)

Here man is portrayed in a state of sleep, which can be
interpreted as being unaware of life experience and his own dormant energy. Even while he is in this state, however, energy (the Serpent Orc) is ever-present, waiting to break out. The scaly monsters which "annoy" him are symbols of the energy within him; thus Blake is clearly saying here that while the energies of man may seem to be subdued, or even dead, they are ever-present and capable of breaking loose at any moment. A few lines below, another serpentine image of energy is presented as the vision of Ahania is continued, but here it is more clearly destructive: "And the pale horse seeks for the pool to lie him down \& die/
"But finds the pools filled with serpents devouring one another." The horse symbol is extremely complex, but in this passage can probably be identified with the old English and German belief that the image of a white horse, for instance in a dream, portends death or a death-wish. The fact that Blake's horse cannot find a place to die because serpents are devouring each other in the pools is an indication that the existence of a powerful destructive energy within man prevents his "dying" or giving up life experience.

One of Blake's most vivid images of destructive, visionless energy occurs in an illustration he drew for The Book of Urizen. Men with anguished expressions are shown with serpents wrapped around them. Beer reproduces this plate, calling the illustration "Man gripped by

14 Cirlot, p. 270.
spectrous energies." The idea conveyed by this image is that man can be overpowered by the strength of the force of energy within himself.

*Jerusalem* contains some suggestions of the same destructive energy. "Cover'd with precious stones; a Human Dragon terrible/ and bright stretched over Europe & Asia gorgeous./ In three nights he devour'd the rejected corse of death" (Plate 89, ll.10-13). While Blake uses the term "dragon" here rather than "serpent," the image is very similar to several discussed above. The force described is both "gorgeous" and "terrible"; destructive and beautiful. Again Blake implies that while energy can destroy all, it is nevertheless a positive force. Beer discusses another appearance of destructive energy in *Jerusalem* in the scene where Dante and Virgil sail into the city of Dis, which shows a still further decline of the state of man. Here the angel who opens the gate, his wings spread like those in the Egyptian hierogram, is greeted by a gorgon-like figure of anti-vision from whom serpents spit forth poison. In this instance, man's energy, through total lack of vision, has degenerated into a force of pure destruction. Blake uses no terms which connote beauty, brightness, or life in his description of these serpents.

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15 Beer, illustration #29.

16 Beer, p. 277.
Blake occasionally creates the image of the crucified serpent, which again can be related to his concept of energy. Cirlot discusses this image as being opposite to the encircling or triumphant snake, the figure of the reptile nailed to the cross representing the feminine principle vanquished by the spirit. He also notes that the same idea may be represented by the victory of an eagle over a serpent. Used in Blakean context, this image may be interpreted as the triumph of reason over energy. The image of a crucified serpent, of course, immediately suggests Jesus, and here a general discussion of serpent imagery relating to Christ may be helpful to understanding Blake's images. In his chapter concerning the Ophites, Howey stresses that the serpent has a double significance. Originally it held a high position of honor in religious typology, where it became the symbol representing the Deity as all, and only a misunderstanding led it to be regarded by today's Christian churches as a representation of evil or of the Devil. Because certain aspects of Ophiolatry relate closely to Blake's basic religious beliefs, a brief discussion of the Ophites may explain Blake's concept of Jesus and Satan and his use of serpent imagery to portray that concept. Howey states that the Ophites received their name from their doctrine that the serpent-tempter of Eve

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17 Cirlot, p. 270.
was not evil, but rather "the impersonation of Divine Wisdom, the great teacher and civilizer of the human race, the parent and author of all knowledge and science." Their reason for this interpretation is the Ophites' belief that the god who created the material world was subordinate and antagonistic to the supreme God. This proud, revengeful, and jealous god—the Jehovah of the Old Testament sought to limit man and keep him in a state of servile submission and for this reason forbade him to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge. The supreme God, or Divine Wisdom, at this time assumed the serpent form to defeat the purpose of the lesser god by tempting man into disobedience of him: "And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be open, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen.iii. 4,5). According to the Ophite system, then, the "fall" of man was actually a move upward from a state of unconscious limitation to one of conscious freedom. Even this very brief outline of Ophite beliefs shows a close resemblance to Blake's thought. When Christianity is considered within the context of these ideas its implications are radically altered. Christ becomes a force leading man from Jehovah

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19 Howey, p. 227.
20 Howey, p. 228.
to the true god of Divine Wisdom. Because he is antagonistic to Jehovah he has essentially the same purpose as Satan; to lead men away from blind obedience to a jealous avenging god. When men begin to rely on their own intelligence and desires rather than following laws, they come closer to the true essence of God.

When the image of Jesus is viewed within the above context, he appears to be closely related to Orc, who fought constantly against the stony laws of Urizen. This relation is specifically stated in America:

"The morning comes, the night decays, the watchmen leave their stations;  
The grave is burst, the spices shed, the linen wrapped up;  
The bones of death, the cov'ring clay, the sinews shrunk and dry'd  
"Reviving shake, inspiring move, breathing, awakening,  
"Spring like redeemed captives when their bonds & bars are burst.  

(Plate 6, 11.1-5)

Bloom explicates the above passage by stating that Orc begins by identifying his release and the start of the American Revolution with the resurrection of Jesus. There are many parallels between Orc and Christ. Each is a revived god who is also man, and Orc's revival is as radical as that of Jesus; Orc bursts both the grave and the limitations of the fallen body.  

21 Bloom, p. 122.
Just as the American Revolution is identified with the resurrection of Christ, the close of the African civilization as described by Blake may be identified with the death of Christ, or the overpowering of energy. In discussing this episode, Frye notes that the end of the African civilization comes with the collapse of the Elohim cycle, which is recorded in the story of Adam and Eve. This story, in which the major symbols of the dying Orc, the cursed serpent, and the tree of death appear is described at the end of The Book of Urizen. The brazen serpent hung by Moses on a pole represents the death of this culture; the same symbol accepted by Jesus as a prototype of his own death: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up" (John iii.14). Frye also writes that while the hanged serpent is not otherwise related directly to Christ, there is an important connection between them. He refers to the serpent of the wilderness which, according to the Old Testament, was worshipped for centuries by the Israelites: "He removed the high places, and brake the images, and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces the brazen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it; and he called it Ne-hush-tan" (II Kings xviii.4). By worshipping this serpent they were

22Frye, p. 213.
in reality worshipping their own death-principle, which would become the Antichrist in the next cycle. The dead body of Christ left on the cross is the body of Antichrist because the dead Christ (not related to Orc.as is the dying Christ) on the tree of mystery is the achievement of Hell's revenge on humanity.

Bloom, commenting on The Book of Ahania, notes that there are several serpent images connected with the nailing of Fuzon to the tree and that this act relates the image of Fuzon closely to that of Christ. The body of Fuzon is nailed to the tree by Urizen. This destruction of son by father in itself recalls Christ (since Jehovah allowed Jesus to die upon the cross), and the image of crucifixion further relates Christ and Fuzon. But since Fuzon's instrument of death was a serpent-bow and it is hinted that he himself turns into a serpent on the tree, there is also an allusion to the brazen serpent of Moses. Fuzon does not die, but becomes a "pale living corse" on the tree. Blake substitutes forty years of reptilization for the forty years of Israelite wandering in the wilderness. Each ends in a renewal of energy and the beginning of a new cycle in history.

24Bloom, p. 179.
It has been mentioned above that Christ and Satan are sometimes closely related in Blake's writing. At other times, however, Blake employs a more traditional framework in which Satan represents evil, and the serpent image is used to portray both views of Satan. This seeming contradiction may be reconciled through a belief among many ancient nations in two antagonistic serpents. Howey explains that one of these serpents was crooked, crawling, and deadly, representing everything that was evil. The other was the Reconciler or the Life-giver and was winged and radiant. The opposition of these two serpents was one of the leading tenets of the Gnostic sects, who identified the radiant serpent with Christ and the deadly one with Jehovah, whom they considered to be identical with the serpent of Evil or Satan.

Blake writes often of the fall of Satan, but his complex religious theories make the meaning of the "fall" difficult to analyze. Beer refers to Ezekiel xxviii. 13.14, which is an imaginative Biblical account that corresponds to the degradation of Satan described by Milton:

So having said, awhile he stood, expecting Their universal shout and high applause, To fill his ear; when, contrary, he hears On all sides, from innumerable tongues A dismal universal hiss, the sound Of public scorn; he wondered, but not long Had leisure, wondering at himself now more.

His visage drawn, he felt to sharp and spare,
His arms clung to his ribs, his legs entwining
Each other, till supplanted, down he fell
A monstrous serpent, on his belly prone.

(Paradise Lost, X. 504-14)

Beer interprets this to mean that the desire that could once walk among the stones of fire is now low and mean. The beautiful proud serpent adorned with gems has become the creeping serpent moving through the dust.\(^{26}\) To Blake, however, this "fall" of Satan into the form of a creeping serpent only is a result of his own lack of vision. In this case, Satan would in reality be the radiant life-giving figure discussed above since he led man to a state of experience. This interpretation is supported by a passage in The Four Zoas: "But when Luvah in Orc became a serpent, he descended into/That state call'd Satan"

(Night VIII, 11.382-83). In these lines there is a direct relationship among Orc, Satan, and serpent imagery. Since the serpent form of Orc has been discussed above as a positive, liberating force, it is logical to conclude that Satan may also be viewed as the same type of force when linked through serpent imagery to Orc. Frye discusses a more complex image of Satan in Night VII of The Four Zoas.

When Urizen finds Orc there is a sharp passage-at-arms; then Orc is crucified and reduced to serpent form. Orc and Urizen then combine into Satan as the culture dies, and all the energy of Orc goes into a warfare motivated by

\(^{26}\) Beer, p. 37.
a destructive nihilism of spirit. Frye calls this the expression of the final victory of moral virtue which crucifies Orc. Frye does not comment on the significance of the fusion of Orc and Urizen but explains the scene described above as representative of a stage of collapse which Blake expected Europe to reach soon. In the light of this phenomenon, the combination of Orc/Serpent/Urizen/Satan would seem to indicate a joining of all the negative, destructive aspects of the four images and the exclusion of positive energy and vision.

A more traditional portrayal of Satan as a serpent is found in Book I of Milton. Bloom discusses Blake's invocation to the Daughters of Inspiration in which he commands them to admit their errors, to "tell also of the false tongue." Bloom defines the false tongue as Tharmas in his fallen state, or the human taste of innocence which turned into the poisonous tongue of Satan's serpent form when Tharmas began his fall in Beulah. Here Satan is the lying, deceiving serpent portrayed in traditional Christian literature.

To Blake, man would exist in a perfect state if the contraries energy, vision, and intellect could be combined, and he occasionally portrays such a state in his writings and illustrations. In his discussion of Thel Beer notes

27Frye, p. 223.

that at the end of the poem Blake reproduces a favorite device of his in which children are pictured playing on the back of a bridled serpent. Beer feels that this image and the voices of the Lilly, the Cloud and the Clay who speak against Thel's discontent make the poem one of hope rather than pessimism. He states that in Blake's eyes, the bridled serpent suggests a condition of "organized innocence," which is a contrasting state to the normal human condition where the energies of nature are distorted and repressed--here they are lightly controlled by innocence. To Blake the play of innocence within a state of visionary desire was the essence of childhood joy and the key to adult happiness.29

Blake's most vivid images of energy controlled by vision occur in Jerusalem. Near the end of the book, he portrays a state of common vision:

... And I heard Jehovah speak
Terrific from his Holy Place, & saw the Words of
the Mutual Covenant Divine
On Chariots of gold & jewels, with Living Creatures,
starry and flaming
With every Colour, Lion, Tyger, Horse, Elephant,
Eagle, Dove, Fly, Worm
And the all wondrous Serpent clothed in gems &
rich array, Humanize
In the Forgiveness of Sins according to thy
Covenant, Jehovah.

(Plate 98, 11.40-45)

Beer explains that all men become one in common vision and that all animals--even the terrifying and wondrous

29Beer, p. 259.
serpent—humanize under the spell of forgiveness. The image appears again in one of Blake's illustrations to Jerusalem entitled "Energies and Vision Reconciled." Beer reproduces it (fig. 30) showing giant serpents being caressed by human beings. This image suggests strongly that man can coexist peacefully with his destructive energies when he also possesses vision.

30 Beer, p. 259.
CHAPTER III

THE SERPENT AND THE TREE

One of the most significant and climactic points in Blake's prophetic writings occurs in The Four Zoas where Orc is crucified on the tree of mystery. Because of the familiarity of the Christian images of the serpent, tree, and crucifixion, Blake's complex levels of meaning have often not been thoroughly interpreted. Margaret Bottrall speaks in The Divine Image of Blake's liberalism and idealism in religion, saying that "unfortunately" Blake sought support for his ideas in occult lore, in the theories of pseudo-scientific antiquarians, and in speculative mythologists.¹ Bottrall's use of the word "unfortunately" indicates that she, like many other Blake scholars, has attempted to fit Blake's thought into a strictly Christian interpretation. To thoroughly and realistically understand his images it is necessary to approach Blake with a certain expansion of consciousness. The climactic crucifixion of Orc is one incident in which it is extremely important to keep in mind not only that Blake chose his symbols because they fitted what he was saying, but also that he sometimes changed the meanings of his symbols as he went from one

idea to another. We have already seen that his uses of serpent imagery changed to fit diametrically opposed ideas of narrowness and tyranny and of freedom and energy. Orc's crucifixion widens the range of Blake's serpent imagery even further, and it is not only possible but necessary to employ many legends and their various interpretations in analyzing Blake's climax in *The Four Zoas* as well as the similar crucifixion of Fuzon's body in *The Book of Ahania*.

Trees have been connected in various ways with serpents in the folklore and legends of a wide range of cultures. Howey has classified these legends into five major types of symbolism which might serve as an aid to understanding Blake's uses of the serpent-tree image.

The divine serpent and the tree of life is one widely held concept. Howey notes that the serpent and the tree were, in ancient mythology, symbols of the sun in a two-fold aspect. Together they establish the nature of God as active and passive, spirit and matter, male and female. Entwined around the tree, the serpent is energizing, fructifying—a masculine force. The tree is passive, yet fruit-producing. Wrapped by the divine serpent of life, she bears the fruits of knowledge and leaves for healing. The cross is a symbol of the tree before the serpent caused blooming and is the symbol of inert,
formless matter. While many early Christian cults venerated the serpent as holy, there is little evidence that they recognized the double image of the serpent and tree. The early Lombards were an exception. They worshiped a golden viper and a tree on which the skin of a beast was hung. This type of symbolism, however, was discouraged, and in 663 they were persuaded by the Bishop of Benuvento to chop down the tree and melt the golden viper down into a chalice. Other instances suggest that serpent and tree imagery had been discarded in orthodox Christianity but that a few sects continued to use the images. Many Chinese legends also are centered around the serpent and tree. Details of the legends vary; but basically, there is a mysterious garden with a tree in the center which bears apples of immortality and knowledge and is a symbol of the mother goddess. A serpent, symbol of divine wisdom, guards the tree.

Other legends differ somewhat from those just noted in that the serpent is only a guardian of the tree of life and is not divine. These legends can be found in countless books of folklore pertaining to the different cultures. Howey discusses some of the more well-known. The famous Greek legend of the Garden of the Hesperides is a famous example of this type of symbolism. The garden is similar to that in the Eden myth. The golden apples

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of the goddess Hera were kept by garden nymphs and the serpent, Ladon. In the Greek version, the apples were jealously guarded from man; and Hercules, who conquered the serpent with the aid of Atlas, was called the "deliverer" who had done a great service to mankind. The important discrepancies between this and the Judaeo-Christian myth are discussed later. A Highland version of the legend has a rowan tree representing the tree of life. The tree bears fruit every month, and its red berries are supposed to stave off hunger indefinitely if but tasted. It is, however, guarded from man by a dread serpent. Buddhistic writings also tell of a garden of wisdom in central Asia with a tree of life and a tree of knowledge guarded by a serpent. A Chaldean carving of a tree, a serpent guardian, and two figures on each side exists in a British museum. Remains of Assyro-Babylonian monuments also show a tree of life guarded by serpents. 3

Another version of the serpent and tree legend places the serpent as a destroyer of the tree of life. This is almost entirely a Scandinavian myth. Howey cites the Norse legend of Odin's creation of an enormous ash tree named Yggdrasil. It was the tree of life and grew until it filled the world. A serpent, Nidhug, lived underground and gnawed continually at the roots of the tree, aided

3Howey, pp. 111-12.
by worms. His purpose was to kill the tree and bring the downfall of the gods. Here the serpent is totally evil. Another Norse legend exists in which the serpent is afraid of the tree. Still another instance in which the serpent is hostile to the tree occurs in the Persian legend of the fall of man. In a garden called Heden, in Iran, a tree gave birth to the first man, whose body divided into male and female. They were pure and perfect until they were seduced by Ahriman, the prince of darkness, in serpent form. They then rendered to him the worship due to Ormuzd, the god of light. The similarities between this and the Hebrew myth are clear, but again there are important discrepancies. Howey states that the Persian and Hebrew accounts are merely two versions of one legend, and that the Persian is probably the older of the two.4

The most familiar symbolism involved with the serpent and the tree is that of the serpent tempter and the tree of death. This type of symbolism is almost entirely a product of Hebrew and Christian mythology. Howey explains that the early esoteric Christian churches adopted the more idealistic view with both the tree and the serpent as positive forces. The esoteric doctrine, however, taught an opposite view in which a benevolent but limited and anthropomorphic god was opposed and thwarted by a wicked antagonist. In this view the serpent was hated and feared

4Howey, p. 114.
and became a symbol of evil. The tree was also degraded from the tree of life to a bearer of deadly and deceptive fruit. This version of the legend was adopted by most Christian churches.

A final category designates the serpents as an unfaithful messenger of God. Many of the more savage cultures held the idea that both God and man were outwitted by serpents who secured for themselves the immortality intended for men, and Howey states that there is evidence that some Semitic tribes also held this view. He cites an incident in the Gilgamesh epic—one of the Semites' oldest poems—as an example of this belief. In this poem, Gilgamesh is given a branch from the sacred tree of life, but on his journey back to his tribe a serpent seizes the branch through trickery. This legend typifies jealous-minded gods who wished to rob man of his immortality. There is enough correspondence between this legend and the third chapter of Genesis to suggest that the original story might have been that of a serpent who was supposed to be God's messenger to man of his immortality, but who perverted the message.

These are only a few examples of serpent-tree myths which have existed in various world religions. Blake's

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5 Howey, p. 115.
6 Howey, p. 122.
use of the serpent-tree motif does not correspond exactly to any one of the above instances, but an awareness of these various legends and their symbolism can provide a key to Blake's use of the images. He was reinterpreting the whole idea of religion and the God-Man relationship in his prophetic books, and the few instances in which he employs serpent-tree imagery are important to an understanding of his own religious mythology. Two very important instances of serpent and tree imagery occur in *The Book of Ahania* and in *The Four Zoas*. In both of these, Blake combines the serpent and tree with the crucifixion of a God, and in so doing invests the familiar symbols with a peculiarly Blakean significance. In chapter II of *The Book of Ahania* an enormous serpent, "scaled and poisonous," approaches Urizen, who is seated on his "dark rooted oak." The serpent is revealed to be Fuzon, and a mighty conflict follows in which Fuzon is slain. With great pain Urizen bears the corpse to a tree whose growth Blake explains in the next chapter:

For when Urizen shrunk away  
From eternals, he sat on a rock  
Barren: a rock which himself  
From redounding fancies had petrified.  
Many tears fell on the rock,  
Many sparks of vegetation.  
Soon shot the pained root  
Of mystery under his heel:
It grew a thick tree: he wrote
In silence his book of iron,
Till the horrid plant bending its boughs
Grew to roots when it felt the earth,
And again sprung to many a tree.

Amaz'd started Urizen when
He beheld himself compassed round
And high roofed over with trees.

(Chap. III. 55-70)

In Plate 4, Blake returns to the present, describing the tree as still growing over the void, enrooting itself around an endless labyrinth of woe. The corpse of Fuzon is then nailed to this tree of mystery. After years of pestilence and war, Fuzon groans on the tree with the awakening of Asia. Ahania laments, weeping over the Tree of Fuzon. The last mention of the tree is that her tears fell round it eternally from the clouds.

Blake always uses the term "tree of mystery" rather than of life or of death as in most myths, and in this case, the symbolism of the tree has several possible interpretations. The idea of a gigantic tree spreading its roots and continually growing seems related to the Scandinavian legend of Yggdrasil, the tree of life. Urizen's tree, however, breeds war and pestilence instead of life. Morton D. Paley, in *Energy and Imagination*, explains this tree of mystery as the network of church and state religion. While this concept could be part of

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Blake's symbolism, he might also have been saying that what should have been a tree of life had been perverted by the narrow, jealous god into a tree of mystery. Frye discusses this symbolism in a similar manner. He states that the energy of Orc, which broke away from Egypt, was perverted into the Sinaitic moral code which is symbolized by the nailing of Orc's serpent form to the tree of mystery. This image of a divine visionary bound to a natural world, represented by the tree of mystery, is the central image of the fallen world. Bloom also refers to this image. According to him the tree belongs to Urizen, the god of repressive morality, and as an outgrowth of his envy and tyranny must of necessity be a threat to the visionary. The bondage of a visionary in the natural world is represented by Urizen's hatred of Orc, which is the hatred of youth by age, revolt by reaction, and the alive by dead convention. Jehovah/Urizen has led man to believe that the energy of life itself is evil and sinful and results in man's bringing pestilence and war upon himself. Urizen's nailing the corpse of the serpent on the tree would therefore be a further mockery and degradation of the energy of life. The serpent, as energy, should be divine as is the tree of life, but Blake realized that man, with his jealous god, could no longer

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8 Frye, p. 136.

9 Bloom, p. 272.
understand energy or imagination and made it an evil thing along with life itself.

Another serpent crucifixion occurs in Night VII of The Four Zoas. After receiving Urizen's instruction, Orc curses his cold hypocrisy which already encircles the tree "In scales that shine with gold and rubies." A serpent is not specifically mentioned here, but since hypocrisy is described as having scales, it may be assumed that hypocrisy is the serpent guarding the tree. It is possible that this serpent of hypocrisy is, like Jehovah, a product of man's conception. He might well be related to the mythical idea of the serpent as an unfaithful messenger of God. The Jehovah/Urizen/Nobadaddy god steals man's immortality for himself and blocks man's communication with the enlightened God of life-love-energy-unity. Again, Urizen's nature has perverted both the tree of life and its guardian into an evil, threatening entity.

The image changes as Orc begins to "organize a serpent body," rejecting Urizen's cold light. Urizen then compels Orc to stretch up and wind himself around the mysterious tree. The upward reaching of Orc on the tree can be seen as the symbol of man's upward path which, in several stages, opens his awareness to wisdom, knowledge, experience, and a gnawing consciousness. At the same time, Blake's use of the crucifixion image symbolizes the death of such upward growths of consciousness. The tree, too,
is made an implement of death rather than life. The tree is mentioned in several stanzas, but the most vivid description of its properties begins at line 212:

[The tree] ...Began to blossom in fierce pain, shooting its writhing buds 
In throes of birth; & now, the blossoms falling, shining fruit 
Appear'd of many colours & of various poisonous qualities, 
Of Plagues hidden in shining globes that grew on the living tree. 

(11.212-15)

It would seem from these lines, and especially from the word "poisonous," that the tree of mystery is one of death. A few lines below, however, the "poison of sweet love" is mentioned, which indicates that the other poisonous fruits might also be positive and essential qualities of life and energy. Further below, the spectre of Urthona says "Thou lovely Vision, this delightful Tree/"Is given us for a Shelter from the tempests of Void and Solid ..."
(11.267-68). It is possible that when the energy of the serpent Orc stretched around the tree, its qualities of life were released. This idea is substantiated in lines 214-220 in Part 6 of the Seventh Night. Here nothing remains of Orc but the serpent around the tree of mystery:

The form of Orc was gone; he rear'd his serpent bulk among 
The stars of Urizen in Power, rending the form of life 
Into a formless indefinite & strewing her on the Abyss 
Like clouds upon a winter sky, broken with winds & thunders. 
This was, to her, [life's] Supreme delight. The Warriors mourn'd disappointed. 

(11.215-20)
These lines indicate that when life's energies are released and scattered they are no longer subject to destruction and tyranny.

It is not only possible, but probable, that all of these interpretations of serpent imagery can validly be drawn from Blake's works. By the very diversity of its symbolic associations the serpent provides a unifying factor in Blake. It is in itself a symbol of unity in that it appears consistently in almost all of mankind's religions and mythologies. Even the earliest alchemists saw the serpent as a symbol of life's unity. In discussing the earliest records of alchemy, C. A. Burland mentions the picture from the early Leiden papyrus known as The Gold-making of Cleopatra. The drawing is of a symbolic half-light and half dark serpent eating its own tail. Burland sees it as being similar in import to the Chinese symbol of Yin and Yang. The text under the picture is important. It reads: "One is the serpent which has its poison according to two compositions, and One is All and through it is All, and by it is All, and if you have not All, All is nothing." The picture is further related to the serpent Ouroboros, which is labeled "One is All," and is a good description of the necessity for the individual to be aware of the unity between conscious mind and a great, overall, unconsciousness.¹⁰ One of Blake's most consistent

concerns is man's unending attempts and failure to find unity. This disunity exists in religion, society, the state, human relationships, and the self. It is a main theme in his prophetic books, and it is most certainly reflected in his serpent imagery. While it would seem that Blake's symbolism shifts so often in meaning as to preclude any consistent theme, it must be remembered that Blake believed that all parts were a microcosm of the whole; and his using a symbol, the serpent for instance, in various ways serves to emphasize that all meanings are organically connected, if not actually one and the same. His short poem, "All Religions are One," is a clear statement of this attitude.

"The Argument." As the true method of knowledge is experiment the true faculty of knowing must be the faculty which experiences. This faculty I treat of.
PRINCIPLE 1st. That the Poetic Genius is the true Man, and that the body or outward form of Man is derived from the Poetic Genius.
Likewise that the forms of all things are derived from their Genius, which by the Ancients was call'd an Angel & Spirit & Demon.
PRINCIPLE 2d. As all men are alike in outward form, So (and with the same infinite variety) all are alike in the Poetic Genius.
PRINCIPLE 3d. No man can think, write, or speak from his heart, but he must intend truth. Thus all sects of Philosophy are from the Poetic Genius adapted to the weaknesses of every individual.
PRINCIPLE 4th. As none by travelling over known lands can find out the unknown, So from already acquired knowledge Man could not acquire more: therefore an universal Poetic Genius exists.
PRINCIPLE 5th. The Religions of all Nations are derived from each Nation's different reception of the Poetic Genius, which is everywhere call'd the Spirit of Prophecy.

PRINCIPLE 6th. The Jewish & Christian Testaments are An original derivation from the Poetic Genius; this is necessary from the confined nature of bodily sensation.

PRINCIPLE 7th. As all men are alike (tho' infinitely various), So all Religions & as all similars, have one source. The true Man is the source, he being Poetic Genius.

When we realize that everything is actually one, Blake's symbolism becomes more clear. In his use of a serpent and tree together, for instance, we may find suggestions of symbolic meaning from many different religious legends, while not one is exactly duplicated by Blake in form or meaning. If all religions are one, then the imagery and symbolism must essentially merge into one meaning, and individual cultural interpretations no longer matter. Blake was working out his own mythology—a system that would reflect this unity; but there was much struggle and conflict in his system for man, and man's gods, tend to reject unity in a constant struggle for independent power and domination. Mankind cannot understand that the true essence of life has no division or domination of one part over the other. Blake's attempt to explain his idea of unity and of man's struggle to attain it accounts for much of his serpent imagery.

Part of his explanation for the merging of all into one is the idea of contrary states: good balanced by evil,
hate balanced by love, and so on. All life is composed of these contraries, and while they would seem to be contradictions, pulling away from each other, they actually serve as balancing, merging forces.
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