

# JERUSALEM THE EMANATION OF THE GIANT ALBION



William Blake, from *Jerusalem The Emanation of the Giant Albion*,  
Chapter 2, plate 28, 1804  
Relief etching with pen and watercolour, 22.2 x 16 cm  
Yale Centre for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

Here's a beautiful two-liner, by the nineteenth-century poet Thomas Lovell Beddoes:

A lake  
Is a river curled up and asleep like a snake.

It's like a dictionary definition. A word is given, and then its meaning is unpacked. Or perhaps uncurled. The shape of the couplet mimics its subject. The compact first line uncurls into the long second line (and by English verse standards it is a long line, a twelve-syllable Alexandrine). Lake stretches out into snake.

But it's hard to say whether the epigram is more about lakes or about snakes. It says that every lake contains a coiled-up river, a river that's still there, even though its banks are lost, and even though – unlike a snake – it can never uncoil itself again. That's an interesting way to feel about a lake. But equally, it suggests that a snake, when it's curled up and asleep, is like a lake, because a sleeping snake *does* (in a way) lose its banks, its sense of its own bodily boundaries, and becomes fused into a single pool of sensation. The simile works both ways. And what the poem makes you feel about the sensations of snakes is probably the more piquant effect.

Also possibly untrue, of course. Maybe the life of snakes isn't like that at all. But you can imagine it *could* be like that. When a snake is all wound up and interlooped, the skin's sense of touch, and the body's proprioception of its position, might well generate confusing signals about what was what, and where – all the more so, if the snake is sleepy. Even with humans, very low levels of consciousness lead to a vagueness about the difference between different body-parts. Our sensory banks blur. We flow into ourselves. And when two humans are closely intertwined that can breed further confusions about what's mine and what's yours.

There's an image by William Blake that holds one of the closest embraces in art. It comes from Chapter 2 of his illuminated poem, *Jerusalem*. As with most of Blake's illustrations to his own and other people's writings – in fact, as with any good illustration – there's a considerable distance between the picture and the words. In the body of the text, the giant Albion is denouncing 'unnatural consanguinities and friendships horrid to think of' but at the top of the page there is this extravagant image of love, two bodies enfolded in the cup of a lily. You could try to make it fit with the poem in various ways. But it speaks so much more powerfully than the poem, that whatever the connection might be, is a matter of secondary interest.

Blake's great artistic discovery was the potentialities of two-dimensional life. No artist before him understood so clearly the uses of the flat page to create a transcendental world, a world in which things are simultaneously material bodies and spiritual forces. In this image he takes the idea of sexual/mental/physical union and gives it an irresistible shape.

The two enfolding figures (and they may be both women) are certainly distinguishable. You can see which limb is meant to belong to which body. Yet at almost every point their forms are designed to slip into and pick up on one another. They are bonded together in a single continuous curvaceous shape. Their long flowing streams of golden hair contain them, and in the arc going over their heads the edges of both these tresses, and the edges of both raised forearms, converge and coincide as a single curving edge. The outline of an arm flows into the outline of a thigh. Their lips are sealed together to make a single mouth. There are several other, almost subliminal joins and ambiguities. Curled up, curled round each other, they lose their banks and boundaries and fuse into a single flesh. Only a two-dimensional image could do this effect so strongly.

More alarmingly, there's a similar slippage between the undulating lines of their shared form, and the undulating shapes of the lily's petals. We're to feel that the humans are not just bedding down in the lily's cup, they are physically emerging from it, merging into it. Animal is fused with vegetable. They're an integrally, organically growing part of this lily.

This is a strange sensation. It breaks a powerful taboo. Standard metamorphosis legends have many stories about humans *being turned* into vegetables, but that's a different matter. These transformations always mean the end of the human life in question. Daphne becomes a laurel tree. She may be pictured at the moment of transition with leaves growing from her arms and roots from her feet. But she doesn't continue to live in this halfway state. She rapidly becomes all tree, and grows in the ground.

What Blake shows is that these lovers are fused to their lily, *alive*. Animal and vegetable are symbiotic. One may well agree with Albion about 'unnatural consanguinities' (though the poem doesn't mention anything like this). It's like the mandrake, the horrible humanoid creature that grows as a root in the ground and screams when uprooted, fatal to the hearer.

Or maybe there's a more high-minded thought at work – that the union of lovers is at one with the union of all living things, that separation is the great evil, and that love is a great big merge, between individuals, across species barriers, everything – a thought that's here given an uncomfortably palpable realisation. Or maybe the picture is just about the homely feeling of snuggling up, and feeling the bedclothes as your safely cocooning nest. The petals do look a bit like sheets.