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WILLIAM BLAKE

EDITED BY
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I

MORRIS EAVES

Introduction: to paradise the hard way

I recently heard one poet praise another for achieving “balance between restraint and revelation.” Few would think to offer that praise to Blake. James Joyce’s characterization would be more applicable: “Armed with this two-edged sword, the art of Michelangelo and the revelations of Swedenborg, Blake killed the dragon of experience and natural wisdom, and, by minimizing space and time and denying the existence of memory and the senses, he tried to paint his works on the void of the divine bosom.”¹ Though wrong in some details, Joyce’s characterization conveys well the extravagance, even the impossibility, of Blake’s ambitions, which has played a major part in the attraction–repulsion response that has always dogged him. His poetry risks every kind of excess to achieve revelation. It brushes aside elements that might restrain it, including formal poetic conventions that help to shape and contain the drive to revelation. Enveloping the stressful, straining poems are the handsome, odd, bizarre, grotesque, weird, lovely images, which supply no balancing force.

William Blake testified that “a Great Majority of Fellow Mortals... can Elucidate My Visions & Particularly they have been Elucidated by Children...” (E 703). They would have been very exceptional children. Many original artists are hard to understand, but the difficulty of Blake can seem of another order. Hence the many passing references to it in the present volume, which is designed, accordingly, to be a helpmate in your early encounters. The basic strategy behind this Cambridge Companion is to respond to the difficulties with a variety of critical and historical explanations from several perspectives which seem to offer the most hope of catching Blake in the act of meaning something we can understand. The coverage is as broad and various as it can be under the circumstances, limited only by the usual practical constraints.

Simplifications

If the prospect of Blake's difficulty alarms you initially, you should be aware of the many well-trodden ways to sample simpler Blakes. Two techniques, especially, have proven their value for generations of readers. (For reasons that will become apparent, "readers" is a grossly inadequate term for Blake's audience, but I shall use it as convenient shorthand throughout.) One: stick to the shortest and simplest works. Two: parse them into their constituent parts, usually words and images, and keep those segregated. Blake is simplest when the two techniques are combined.

The venturesome newcomer can "read" Blake's two-part collection, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, as Blake originally published them: words combined with images in a graphic medium he called "Illuminated Printing" (E 693). But the *Songs* have been most often approached as short poems and appreciated by readers of literary inclination for a rare combination of simplicity with formal variety and lyrical intensity. *The Tyger* (E 24–25) may be the most anthologized poem in English, and several others from the collection are transplanted nearly as often. The *Songs* have that wondrous characteristic that even great poems can only occasionally claim: they are enjoyable at any level of scrutiny. Their concentrated music makes them sound good when read aloud the first time and the fiftieth; most of them make some kind of sense right away, while repeated readings yield new insights. And they read remarkably well as a collection; their multiple interconnections can make them seem a hall of word-mirrors, each refracting at least several of the others.

But it is also possible to appreciate the original pages of any illuminated book simply as a set of small-scale pictures. When the visual design is the main object of attention, the poem is perceived as one visual element among other visual elements organized in the space of the page to satisfy the desires and habits of the eye. This is a very old method of appreciating Blake. Since his contemporaries knew him primarily for his images, they often came upon his work from this angle – not in the search for words in literary forms, as a bookbuyer might, but for images in artistic forms – and purchased them with this in mind. Joseph Viscomi has emphasized that Blake's own treatment of his illuminated books changed between the 1790s, when he tended to favor book-like formats and light coloring, and later years, when he started treating them as portfolios of highly finished images, more picture than book.

Either of these searches for a more accessible Blake, by the verbal or the visual road, can be extended. He left manuscripts of unpublished writings that include (to the surprise of readers who come expecting the pious devotion of a religious poet) big helpings of scurrilous, angry, naughty, and hilarious

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literary efforts in a heady genre stew of epigrams, jingles, shorter poems, longer ones, prose and verse satires, essays, letters, and marginal comments in books, among others. Likewise, on the visual side it is entirely possible to explore Blake's considerable lifetime output of pictures in several media and relish the creative abundance of powerful and striking ways of picturing physical and mental worlds in two dimensions. His longest illuminated book, *Jerusalem*, comprises 100 plates that can seem, from the verbal standpoint, utterly dominated by the thousands of lines of poetry and prose. But when laid out in full sequence on the walls of an art exhibition, those plates create an array of visual innovations strong enough to stun the eye into the realization that Blake was one of the most inventive artists who ever lived. We can experience this without reading a word of *Jerusalem*. Moreover, he produced many other works that will repay the efforts of the eye through far more conventional and familiar subject matter, such as his many watercolors in illustration of the Bible or of Milton's poems. Many have regarded Blake's late series of line engravings, *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1825), as his masterpiece. The Job series forms a natural cluster with other late graphic projects, such as the exquisite shadow-world of Blake's miniature Virgil illustrations (1820), his only wood engravings, and the fine drawings and engravings of the extensive Dante project that he was still working on when he died in 1827.

Complications

But no matter which route you take, if you travel far enough, the wide, well-paved roads will dwindle, the going will get rough, and you will arrive at a mountain of difficulty. Traditionally the difficult Blake has been identified with his so-called "prophecies," a term harvested from the titles of two illuminated books (composed, along with most of the others, in the 1790s) but then applied generically to all the more narrative works in illuminated printing through to the most ambitious and extensive ones, *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. From there "prophecies" is easily and naturally broadened further to cover unpublished earlier and later works such as *Tiriel*, *The French Revolution*, and *The Four Zoas*. Having gone this far to make Blake an obscure prophet, it is tempting to throw in other items, such as *The Mental Traveller*, that seem to be in one way or another products of his lifelong effort to concoct an original but universal myth that would retell the story of human existence so as to reveal its fundamental meanings.

I can think of no adequate word to characterize this, the quite extraordinary Blakean world of newly minted characters and places – Oothoon, Urthona, Enitharmon, Urizen, Golgonooza, Udan-Adan, Bowlahoola,

Entuthon-Benython – who appear alongside familiar-sounding ones – Albion, Eden, Jerusalem, London, Jesus, Satan – and real-life entities in partial disguise – Hyle for Blake’s erstwhile patron William Hayley, Hand for the Hunt brothers who edited a magazine critical of Blake – and those using their own first names – brothers William and Robert Blake. These furnish an extensive but dense web of plots that unfold in a multidimensional, multimedia space where (ultimately, in the later developments) much attention is given to the symmetrical arrangements of a “fourfold” fictional universe – furnished with four Zoas, four faces, four levels, four stages, four compass points, four gates, etc. – penetrated by vortexes in an elaborate game of Identities and Selfhoods subjected to conversions, redemptions, and cosmic marriages. Here the world we may think we know, the London and Felpham of real people, streets, and houses and the Britain of real mountains, rivers, towns, trees, birds, and cathedrals, are mapped onto and against the Jerusalem and New Jerusalem of the Bible.

Such elaborate and apparently precise symmetries have always tantalized some members of Blake’s audience into searching for the system that presumably produced them. Even readers who are usually wary of such aggressive private mythmaking ultimately find it impossible to avoid completely. Yet here again the two techniques of simplification can be effective: stick to the shorter, simpler prophecies (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* has been a favorite entry point) and focus attention on either words or images. But, because he had unprecedented capabilities of creating difficulty wherever he went, a few even of Blake’s *Songs* display in miniature the puzzling quality that has stumped readers of the “prophecies.” *The Tyger* reads hypnotically, but it is tough to explain satisfactorily in any terms other than its own (it has inspired many elaborate commentaries).

Other notable examples of great difficulty in a small space include the pair of poems that introduce *Songs of Experience: Introduction* and *Earth’s Answer* (E 18–19), which make it apparent that Blake is envisioning even his short lyrics of social criticism, such as *London* or *The Chimney Sweeper*, as well as his psychological fables, such as *A Poison Tree*, as components in an evolving narrative framework of fall and redemption that is applicable on several interpenetrating levels – individual, social, religious, political, artistic, cosmic. Narrative perspectives shift alarmingly as Blake cultivates his extraordinary penchant for telling several stories at once in a system constructed to deliver simultaneously the fall and redemption of a single human life *and* of humankind *and* of a single work of art *and* of Art, etc. But who would know how to read such stories?

Furthermore, the meanings of some of those little poems are quite unstable: *The Sick Rose* is as much riddle as poem; it drives the reader to guess what

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“rose” and “worm” stand for, but never answers (and readers have kept guessing). *The Chimney Sweeper* and *The Little Black Boy of Innocence*, which seem to offer simple religious solace to children in dire situations, may be highly ironic – or not, or they may toggle back and forth in a very Blakean way between contrary perspectives of harsh critique and Christian consolation. *The Little Girl Lost* and *Found* take the form of a brief mythical episode that may or may not be about the family consequences of an adolescent’s sexual development; like *Introduction* and *Earth’s Answer*, they seem to posit other narratives that are implied but not present.

The pictures could help clarify and stabilize the meanings of the poems – but that, we soon realize, is a drunkard’s dream. Instead, the pictures have the maddening habit of multiplying the contested territory of meaning, often of destabilizing it – the little “black” boy can be pictured as white or black depending on the copy. Texts and pictures, despite their presence on the same pretty page, coexist as semi-autonomous strata: rifts and faults in one stratum disrupt the features of the adjacent stratum, making conditions ideal for mental earthquakes. The more closely you scrutinize those little *Songs*, and the further you move out from the words on the page to the designs to other words and other designs in the collection, the larger the contested territory becomes and the higher the level of enigma rises. Such leaks, as it were, around the edges of all simplified approaches are sure indications of their inadequacy: they are critical reductions, and sometimes useful for that, but not critical solutions.

Routines of resistance

Blake’s difficulties seem to reside in an impenetrable kernel of meaning at the center of a vast linguistic and pictorial architecture. As the reader circles the core, the architecture of the whole refuses to stand still, appears different from every angle, making orientation a word-by-word, picture-by-picture problem.

The vortex, which Blake grew fond of in his later works, sometimes seems to describe his audience’s lot all too well. His reassuring promise to the reader of *Jerusalem* –

I give you the end of a golden string,
Only wind it into a ball:
It will lead you in at Heavens gate,
Built in Jerusalems wall

(*J* 77, E 231)

– reminds me of the paradises promised to persuade gullible nineteenth-century travelers to move their lives to the outbacks of Australia or North

America. Blake's pledges to his audience – "Mark well my words! they are of your eternal salvation" (*Milton* 2:25, E 96) – are also claims upon his audience, and such ultimate claims on "your" devotion can leave you feeling hung out to dry, with only yourself to blame for your failures.

His extreme demands have produced a fascinating history of reader resistance and resentment that marks his place in cultural history. These routines of resistance have been remarkably long-lived – they amount to a critical history of encounters with Blake's difficulty – and the repertory of his potential audience and anti-audience remains well stocked with them. A short list of the most revealing begins with the most extreme (but also one of the most common): outright rejection via the accusation of insanity – why else would the works be so far removed in medium, style, and message from the conventional channels through which we make artistic sense? "Perfectly mad," writer Robert Southey's dismissal of *Jerusalem-in-progress* (BR 229), was a label applied so often and so painfully that Blake read a book on insanity (E 662), presumably to see if he could locate his own mind somewhere in it.

Other forms of resistance have found in his work the evidence of uneven talents and skills. The closely allied notions that he could conceive but not execute (good ideas, bad technique), or that he could paint but not draw (interesting compositions, awkward figures), have often served as reasons for demotion. Other common criticisms have employed similarly divisive tactics: his poems are better than his images; his images are better than his poems; his early work (more lucid) is better than his later "prophetic" work (obscure, off the rails); or (the most complex assessment), his simple but original early poems are better than the immature and derivative early images, but as the later poems sink into obsessive ranting, his images belatedly shine forth – a chiasmic, or X-shaped, evaluation assembled from the previous two.

These critical formulas have led a double life. They have been offered up as reasons for readers and viewers to restrict attention, but they have also served as useful ways of focusing attention by underwriting the very techniques of simplification with which we began. The process of simplification got well underway during Blake's lifetime, and there are many examples. Anthologists lifted the words of individual poems from the *Songs* from their imagery for reprinting in conventional formats alongside other word-only poems. In the other direction, Blake himself, probably in response to customer requests, separated images from their original texts to make up portfolios of designs. After his death, when his executor Frederick Tatham tried to come up with a way of selling *Jerusalem*, he urged customers to ignore the words and appreciate the sublime images (BR 520).

These symptomatic instances became systematic when the principles behind them hardened into editorial procedures. It is one thing to express a

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preference for poems or images but more consequential to divide, physically, the produce of Blake's imagination into specialized products. The same Victorians who laid the foundations for Blake's successful revival after years of neglect were also the first to see clearly the advantages of isolating the culturally familiar parts of his strange work for delivery to specialized audiences through well-established specialized channels. The most important channel by far was literary. Blake's illuminated works were streamlined for literary transmission by systematically deleting the images and rectifying some unconventional features of the text – Blake's handwriting (transposed into standard type fonts), spelling, grammar, and punctuation – to make his poetry friendlier and more legible. This editorial transformation boosted it out of the twilight zone of painted picture poetry into the cultural daylight of British poetic tradition, and thereby gradually emerged the William Blake who, as a major Romantic poet, earns a place in this Cambridge Companion series.

Editorial simplification also prepared the way for serious study and reflection on a scale previously unthinkable. As W. M. Rossetti wrote in reaction to a nineteenth-century facsimile of *Jerusalem* (1877), “the publication in ordinary book-form, without designs . . . of the *Jerusalem* and the other Prophetic Books, is highly to be desired. Difficult under any circumstances, it would be a good deal *less* difficult to read these works in an edition of that kind, with clear print, reasonable division of lines, and the like aids to business-like perusal.”² Here is the straight road of literacy and legibility. When, after all, did someone first read all the words of *Milton* or *Jerusalem* in sequence – much less read them slowly and thoughtfully? Almost certainly no one in Blake's lifetime ever did, though his wife Catherine may have been exposed to long stretches of recitation. A careful reading probably did not occur until the time of those Victorian rescuers, if then. And no matter how much time they spent with the difficult works, they certainly began to recognize and advertise the *value* of reading them, and hence the value of providing others with readable texts.

Why so difficult?

What do these formulas of resistance, echoed in simplifications, tell us? They depend largely on specialized habits of mind that characterize modern human understanding.

The problem is that Blake is fundamentally resistant to specialization, which puts him at odds with the long list of social routines that it aids and abets: rationalization, scientific thinking, professionalization, industrialization, commercialization, institutionalization, modernization. This is not

always strictly speaking Blake's choice: in various ways he participated in his profession, in the marketing and sale of his work, in the spirit of technological innovation. But virtually every attempt he made turned sour for one fundamental reason: he was a synthesizer, and not an encyclopedic one but a mythic or metaphorical one. This involved a rejection of key aspects of modern human life and various "returns" to past states of being, as he imagined them: to religion (from science), to archaic artistic styles (from modern taste), to paradise (from corrupt modern society).

That reductive summary points toward a root cause of Blake's difficulty. His choice, perhaps his destiny, to work as maker of words, maker of images, and crossbreeder of both, amounted to a decision to live in incommensurable neighborhoods of meaning. In doing so he positioned himself facing upstream against the mainstream of modern human understanding, whose bedrock is the principle of specialization as a means of acquiring, organizing, encoding, and transmitting information. He abandoned us in turn to a modern dilemma: can the whole be understood through its parts? Can a simplified, specialized approach ever connect us to the vast and elusive whole that he used his multiple talents to incorporate in one package?

Blake's tangled and troubled relations with the structures of conventional knowledge contributed to his problems and ours. Again, very simply, information as we understand it cannot be efficiently gathered without highly specialized categories that are mirrored in specialized systems of encoding facts, perceptions, and ideas (as images, for instance, and as words). Tongue in cheek, Blake describes how "knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation" when a printing house in hell – his own – is available instead of the usual boringly earthbound ones (*MHH* 15, E 40). Blake's reader confronts a challenge to the techniques of information management that create familiar circuits of production and reproduction. Blake attempted, ambitiously and perhaps recklessly, to interrupt the ordinary processes of this central dynamic structure by feeding into it complex information that it could only reject or reconfigure. Reactions to Blake often follow from this fundamental incompatibility. His defiance of the institutional structures of knowledge and the technological divisions that correspond to them resulted in unorthodox works that seemed ungainly if not ugly and shocking to his potential audience, who in their aversion have sometimes perceived a mind operating out of control.

The difficulties in taking hold of Blake with conventional categories can be seen in the difficulty of labeling him. You may come to him knowing that he "was" a painter, for instance, or a poet, printmaker, prophet, or visionary. Blake certainly wanted to be taken seriously in all these categories and was distressed whenever others questioned his aspirations to them. He

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himself put “a Prophecy” in the titles of two works (*Europe: A Prophecy* and *America: A Prophecy*), “Visions” in another (*Visions of the Daughters of Albion*), “a Poem” in a third (*Milton*). And who composes prophetic visions and poems except prophet-visionaries and poets? But then it was not for nothing that he kept having to return to his self-image as John the Baptist, outcast prophet in the wilderness. Blake made a career of being an outsider looking in, an interloper aspiring to legitimate modern vocations (painter, poet) by performing roles of questionable legitimacy (prophet-visionary).

“I know myself both Poet & Painter” (E 730–31), he asserted in response to his sometime patron Hayley’s attempts to restrict the range of his activity, as several others including his most powerful allies did as well, no doubt thinking that restriction was in his best interest – as surely it was, from what we might now see as a career perspective. Painter and especially poet were callings for which his credentials were flawed and suspect, leaving him some distance from the center of the contemporary professional action – less poet or painter than one who sought status in both roles on the condition that the dominant definitions of each change to accommodate his aspirations.

But his claims to the title of printmaker were solid. He acquired the credentials of the trade conventionally and he practiced it all his life with varying success. In trying to understand Blake it can be very helpful to come to grips with the proposition that in many respects he thought, acted, and survived economically as a printmaker with a printmaker’s social position and alliances. Much of what we today consider his best work was executed as prints in printmaker’s media. But he did not thrive economically even in that role, largely because he defied the expectations associated with it. He was unique among his peers for investing so much effort in original prints, often using innovative technical means and homemade-looking styles, even when he was not seeking ways to amalgamate printmaking to painting, poetry, and prophecy. Even as he resisted the role of printmaker as ordinarily defined, his society resisted granting him many of its rewards for being one of its printmakers.

When his contemporary audience, faced with this manifold conglomeration of efforts, asked who he was, it could not answer to its own satisfaction. In its confusion, it applied outlandish labels. This underlying problem of recognition is at the heart of Blake’s difficulties then and his difficulty for us now. He was determined to make a creative life for himself by doing some of several different things and – this is important – putting all the particularly Blakean bits together whenever he could, if necessary by methods of his own devising. (Illuminated printing and monotype color printing were of course among those methods.) That is, he was not notably distracted by his multiple talents into multiple pursuits; he did not flit from talent to talent. He

was capable of extraordinary focus and persistence, but he was, by nature it seems, a synthesizer whose electrified senses tended to experience, because they desired to experience, everything in terms of everything else, to see all channels of life as the tributaries of one vast waterway. The concept of an isolated episode or accidental occurrence seems to have been anathema to him. Whenever he found a broken connection between A and B, he read it as a defect and attempted a remedy. Early on he learned to make constructive use of those (otherwise dispiriting and potentially tragic) moments of blocked perception as installments in an endlessly extensible, ever more complex and layered narrative of fall and redemption.

You can see the evidence in virtually all he said or did. One of his first works in illuminated printing, the brief tractate *All Religions are One*, makes the classic Blakean move to synthesis when it concludes that “all men are alike (tho’ infinitely various)” and “all Religions . . . have one source . . . The true Man . . . the Poetic Genius” (E 1–2). He insists here, as he always will, that variety need not be sacrificed, but he manages to do so only through paradox. The variety, however infinite, is contained within the ultimate unity. Note too – this is again utterly characteristic – how close the sequence “men . . . Religions . . . Man . . . Poetic Genius” comes to pure metaphorical identification: the poetic genius is the true man, the true man is all (true) men, and all true men are the true religion (because they embody it). The language of the previous six “principles” that lead to this final seventh is similarly all-inclusive: “all men are alike in outward form,” “all men are alike in the Poetic Genius,” “all sects of Philosophy,” “The Religions of all Nations,” etc.

In one of Blake’s last relief-etched works, thirty-odd years later, the urge to synthesis is, if anything, stronger than ever. On a single sheet, around his own reproduction of the famous *Laocoön* statuary group depicting an event from the Trojan wars, Blake has wrapped a cluster of tightly spaced aphorisms that at a glance appear to be on several different subjects: the ancient Greeks and Trojans, the ancient Romans, the ancient Hebrews, Jesus, statements about war, religion, morality, philosophy, science, and art, with the occasional Hebrew and Greek characters mixed in with the roman alphabet and the English language. The mixture seems extraordinarily heterogeneous, bizarre, artistically grotesque, and perhaps insane unless you come to it forearmed with some sense of what to expect from the man who made it, in which case you soon recognize the familiar gestures of thought by which all these different things from different times and places, some mythical (Lilith, Adam and Eve), some actual (Plato, Socrates, Virgil), are all present on the same page because they are all cross-convertible into the same things, into one another. And the primary aim is neither historical,

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factual, or fictional narrative about Greeks, Trojans, Romans, or Hebrews but present application. Nothing is “neutral” or “historical”; all references to past events are relentlessly applied to this present moment. Everything points to what can be learned from it . . . now. “Then,” in fact, *is* “now.” As time is collapsed, so is space: all places are *here*, and talking about Jerusalem “then” is a way of talking about London “now.” The fusion of the human and the divine in such a scheme can be no surprise:

The Eternal Body of Man is THE IMAGINATION.
God himself
that is [Yeshua] JESUS we are his Members
The Divine Body
(*Laocoön*, E 273)

Once we notice this pattern, the number and extent of pure metaphorical sequences is staggering: Lilith *is* Satan’s Wife *is* the Goddess Nature *is* War and Misery; the whole business of man *is* the arts; Christianity *is* art; Jesus and his apostles *were* artists; prayer *is* the study of art; the man or woman who *is* not an artist *is* not a Christian; the Bible *is* the great code of art, etc.

In a sense Blake had the conclusion of his master plot in mind all along. The larger problem was how to get there. In its naked forms the purely metaphorical landscape could be very monotonous, and indeed one of Blake’s most difficult assignments as a forger of poems and images was to learn to vary it – a test that prolific Swedenborg had failed miserably as he explored his own prefabricated visionary universe, based similarly in the metaphorical structures he called “correspondences,” in book after book. Drama comes from conflict, but where is credible conflict to come from when the drive to unity is so fierce and urgent? At bottom, Blake seems to derive his conflicts from two simple elements: pure negation, the direct opposite of metaphor (A is not B), and what he sometimes calls “hypocrisy,” or one thing disguised as another, named for another, pictured as another, taken for another, and so on (X mistaken for Y): “Nor pale religious lechery *call* that virginity, that wishes but acts not” (emphasis added; *MHH* 25, E 45). Negations and hypocrisies are, simply, *illusory* obstacles to the drive for unity. Blake’s epic plots depict a complex process of masking and subsequent confusion and misery, followed by equally complex unmasking, the identification of negations posing as metaphors, and the restoration of the true (original) links of identification: paradise regained, with everything back in its rightful place with its true identity under its actual name.

For the reader, the challenge is to appreciate how subtle and sophisticated Blake’s dramatic skills became without losing sight of his ultimate holistic

aim, which was to arrive at a point of reunification where the immense variety of human life can be contained in a single metaphorical sequence, a kind of artistic genetic code that reveals the simple unity underlying all complex variation. *Jerusalem* is, to my mind, the definitive illustration of both Blake's mature dramatic skills and this primary urge to union, which combine to produce a plot of daunting complication that twists and turns its way to a magnificent conclusion as powerful as anything in the Bible. The ending of *Jerusalem* is solidly founded on the anticipated string of metaphorical identifications, which reach out to support and encircle the redeemed universe projected by Blake's synthetic imagination:

Four Living Creatures Chariots of Humanity Divine Incomprehensible...
are the Four Rivers of Paradise And the Four Faces of Humanity fronting
the Four Cardinal Points... And they conversed together in Visionary forms
dramatic... Creating Space, Creating Time... throughout... Childhood,
Manhood & Old Age... & Death... & every Word & Every Character...
& they walked To and fro in Eternity as One Man.

This vision – mystical vision indeed – of “All Human Forms identified even Tree Metal Earth & Stone. all Human Forms identified” (*J* 98–99, E 257–58, line divisions omitted) is the ultimate expression of Blake's holism. True, his version of unity labors mightily to incorporate far more opportunities for diversity than other comparable mystic–mythic constructions known to me – the biblical New Jerusalem and Christian Heaven are tedious by comparison – but it leaves no doubt about which, unity or diversity, trumps which. While orthodox Christians are dividing eternity between good and evil, Blake is leaving nothing behind in his myth of ultimate integration.

Alexander Gourlay, in the Glossary on p. 276 below, defines “Eternity” in two deft and reassuring strokes:

Eternity for Blake was not simply an infinite amount of time but rather the absence of the illusion of linear time and its sequentiality. From a truly eternal perspective, all events happen simultaneously and all space is the same infinite place. Much of the vertigo that attends reading Blake's prophecies diminishes when one recognizes that they are in part intended to make something like an eternal perspective available to us.

Easier said than done: from the everyday point of view, perhaps the sane point of view, the simplicity of this “eternal perspective” is very disorienting and difficult because it wants to eradicate all the distinctions that we depend upon utterly for daily living and install in its place an all-or-nothing logic, the dynamics of which run contrary to virtually all the structures of knowledge with which we operate.

Why bother?

Blake positioned himself as an outcast prophet in the wilderness, but why should we go out there in search of him? The trail of refusal and severely qualified appreciation is by now so long, wide, and well paved that it is virtually impossible to maintain that it leads *nowhere*. If Blake is going to prove impossible to master, why bother making the effort when there are so many satisfying but less taxing artistic experiences available? It is not necessary to commit to the ultimate readability of Blake to find him worth reading. I have only space enough to mention in the most general terms a few of the exceptional rewards for venturing into this wilderness of artistic offerings. Some of these come from personal experience, some from the accumulated experience of several generations of readers.

Blake's many faces conspire to make his works simultaneously among the most resistant and yet available of all artistic accomplishments – something in them will always respond to a particular reader's particular knowledge and experience. Of course there are many examples of critics who have brought Blake into their territory and “understood” him by their lights rather than ventured into his alien worlds. But in the end Blake forces you to read, look, and understand on his terms. That is among the most valuable of all artistic experiences, and Blake offers it in one of its most fundamental if extreme forms. On this I agree entirely with Northrop Frye, who explained what he got from Blake as a “necessary” lesson in reading poetry: “Blake, in fact, gives us so good an introduction to the nature and structure of poetic thought that, if one has any interest in the subject at all, one can hardly avoid exploiting him.”³ Not freakish nor unique, then, but the epitome of reading itself. As extravagant as this sounds, I believe there is something in it, even for those of us who feel less well equipped than Frye to grasp the utterly fundamental.

For those willing to venture, Blake can become a way to think, or call it a lesson in mythical thinking. In this respect he also presents a classic case of modern and postmodern appreciation, as an artist to be valued far more for the questions he raises, and for the contradictions a reader must embrace in digesting him, than for the answers he offers. I am not at all inclined to seek enlightenment through transcendence myself, but those for whom unanswerable questions are a means to enlightenment may find their share in Blake. Those seeking answers should keep their distance.

Blake is not a cornerstone of truth but a giant intersection in a vast network of facts, ideas, and speculations that run in all directions. In this way he may offer the ultimate centrifugal artistic experience. This is surprising, even tricky, because in most respects he seems quite the opposite, a stubbornly

centripetal artist who gives us, as he says, strings that lead inward to some central sphere of meaning. But the realization that there may be no such centerpiece at the end of the quest can be liberating. Instead, the connections made possible by the hard questions his hard work raises have been, for me, altogether more valuable than any internal connections that might have led to the gate in the new Jerusalem that he promises at the end of the golden string. His wide-ranging interests, because they fed his art and now feed our wonderment and confusion, have a way of becoming of necessity the audience's interests: painting, printmaking, and poetry are basic, of course, but other leads almost inevitably take a reader much further afield, to history, technology, the organization (especially the division) of labor, the organization of knowledge, and the organization of society. The history of "reception," as scholars call it – the ways in which audiences have regarded, and coped with, an artist's work – is always a potentially interesting subject for any artist, but remarkably so in Blake's case, where, as always, the picture is made so richly complicated by the number of interactive filaments. No matter which approach or combination of approaches you take, Blake always leaves you feeling that you lack some essential knowledge, some key connection that, if only you could make it, would lead you . . .

A cliché that one would prefer to avoid seems finally inescapable: Blake is an education – one of the best reading teachers available, a radical challenge to the reasoning mind, a training ground for knowledge in as many areas as you are willing to open for yourself. Perhaps all of the greatest creative artists are educations in themselves. Blake is no greater than they, less great by conventional measures, but capable of sustaining even greater interest, partly for being an altogether more demanding case, and to me, for that reason, more consistently, if strenuously, inspiring.

After Blake died, it took the passage of several decades and the emergence of a new artistic culture to provide the new openings that his work required to get its first fair hearing. Clearly, the chief rewards for those who led the Blake revival in the nineteenth century were the thrills reserved for pioneer adventurers. Their words and deeds resonate with the privileged pleasures of those who have ventured far out into the unknown and returned with reports of a new artistic wonder of the world previously buried, now recovered. Victorian explorers had their sea quests and their Africa; adventurous British literati had their Blake. Since then, curiously, Blake's difficulty has done much good work on his behalf. Having to bother a great deal with great difficulties in multiple media has been a key element in his almost magnetic attraction for some readers and viewers. For them – a human breed

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of extremophiles, those creatures that survive punishing environments – his works can be the intellectual equivalent of extreme sports, and the wisest of Blake’s audience have indeed coped with his challenges the way mountain climbers wring their hard pleasures from the toughest ascents and most catastrophic failures. Because the inner reaches of Blake’s work remain so impenetrable, it is impossible to venture into its essential strangeness without feeling a bit like an explorer yourself, even now. Furthermore, Blake’s works, with their ravenous, unsatisfiable demand for interpretation, benefit most from such adventurous readers.

Travel tips

A few final pointers may help you confront the challenges of Blake’s work fully armed. The most helpful techniques and attitudes will not, in the end, require simplifications or other fatal compromises; they will be capable of responding to the whole Blake. Because his metaphorical way of thinking embodies his holism, the most valuable technique, I suggest, is a mastery of metaphor, the building block of his synthetic narratives. Blake’s reader must be prepared to trace his metaphorical logic as it saturates language and image in the drive to express cosmic states of fusion.

The corresponding attitude is one that will help to withstand the assertions of firm belief and final resolution that crop up everywhere in Blake. Rather than be fooled by them, a reader will fare better by cultivating the attitudes suggested by Coleridge’s “suspension of disbelief” and Keats’s “negative capability” – strong openness to new artistic experiences, unbiased by prior commitments. Such positive indifference will increase your flexibility and stamina, help free you from resentment at being dragged into such difficulties, and keep you alert to Blake’s surprisingly refined ability to express himself in dramatic terms – that is, not as himself but as any one of his host of characters. It is all too easy to overlook just what a chameleon of a creator he is. The aim, in the long run, is to keep faith with Blake’s fundamental unreadability. He does not respond well to targeted searches for meaning – or he responds all too well. The journey is far more important than the destination.

Critics are often suspected of inventing mountains to climb where there are only molehills of difficulty. But Blake’s works leave no doubt that these are Himalayas. The pleasure lies in coping with extremes; at the summit there is only Blake’s (or Urizen’s) haunting question: “Which is the Way / The Right or the Left” (E 673)? The reader must be satisfied with survival and another chance.

Christian now went to the Spring and drank thereof to fresh himself, and then began to go up the Hill; saying,

*This Hill, though high, I covet to ascend,
The difficulty will not me offend;
For I perceive the way to life lies here;
Come, pluck up, Heart; lets neither faint nor fear. . . .*
(John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*⁴)

Notes

1. "William Blake," in *The Critical Writings*, ed. Ellsworth Mason and Richard Ellman (New York: Viking, 1959), p. 222.
2. Quoted in R. W. Peattie, "William Michael Rossetti's Aldine Edition of Blake," *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 12 (1978), p. 7.
3. Frye, "The Keys to the Gates," *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism and Society*, ed. Harold Bloom (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), pp. 234-35.
4. In *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners and The Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. Roger Sharrock (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 172.

Further reading

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