

On Blakes We Want and Blakes We Don't

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Wordsworth concluded that the innovative poets of his time would have to "create taste" for their work,¹ and in time he managed to do something like that for his own. But what happens when original poets fail? They fall onto the thorns of posterity and disappear, or other people have to rescue them by creating that taste in arrears. During his lifetime, Blake attracted the attention of some individuals who saw his potential greatness, attempted rescue, and not seldom concluded that he was his own worst enemy, "utterly unfit to take due Care of Himself," as Blake's sometime patron William Hayley remarked to Lady Hesketh.² Having taken due care of poor Cowper, Hayley transferred his attentions to Blake—as it later proved, with disheartening results for both of them.

As the Hayleys, Linnells, and Tathams of posterity, we take up our post as Blake's caretakers. He no longer needs rescue because that happened earlier. We can see how a sustainable taste for Blake was first created through the efforts of late Victorians and early Modernists from D. G. Rossetti and Swinburne through Yeats. Blake was not a poet when he died in 1827 but a visual artist who had left behind some poetry. It is an idle but to me interesting question how many lines of this poetry—in, say, *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*—were ever read by anyone other than the poet during his lifetime. In any case, by the time Swinburne and Yeats finished with him he had been transformed into a poet whose visual side had shrunk to manageable proportions. This reconfigured Blake—child of a generation of rebellious writers in opposition to the high Victorians, and the earliest model that could be called successful—was brought in not only for his

1. William Wordsworth, "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface of 1815," in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford, 1974), 3:82.
2. G. E. Bentley Jr., *Blake Records* (Oxford, 1969), 105–6.

outsiderly commitments (modified to serve the special purposes of his sponsors) but also for his combination of lofty artistic ambition with mysticism and multimedia craft, which, duly subordinated to his identity as a poet, could serve as yet another sign of his outsider status.

Blake was then and continues even now to be the sign of something new about to happen, partly because of his brand of obscurity, situated right between portentous sense and arrant nonsense, and partly because of the importance that posterity has granted to his difficult illuminated books, whose multimedia character makes them even more difficult to read, to see, and to exhaust by reading or looking. A persistent problem in creating a taste for this work has been how to motivate readers to climb walls of such difficulty. The present collection of essays demonstrates in several interesting ways how we are still at it, altering "Blake" as our desires, for him and for ourselves, alter.

Despite the fundamental early shift of canonical priorities from his art to his poetry, one of Blake's special advantages has always been his double talent for words and pictures, which, in the making of a durable cultural image of him, has allowed visibility to come in aid of legibility. Being read, after all, accounts for only a part, and sometimes not a terribly important part, of an artist's complex infiltrating and staying powers. Blake's durability seems to depend partly on his ready reproducibility in simple forms as a cultural marker—memorable images to decorate dust jackets, startling proverbs to launch book chapters, catchy phrases to name rock bands.

His ability to produce both words and images has made him doubly available and served him well as a signature, but it has often proved a serious liability. Sometimes it stretches him too thin across the vast reaches of the culture, with a loss of focus and a blurring of identity that threatens to dissolve in a sea of white noise. On the other hand, simple clarity is eventually monotonous; the attention of the audience must be captured and then kept. There must be resources available to supplement the original message and sustain interest in it. The illuminated books, so confusing and bizarre that they required both hard sell and simplification (such as the divorce of the poetry from the pictures) before they could make the necessary primary impression on an audience, have excelled at supplying the backflow of rich secondary resources that sustains interest in the long term—and the term in art *is* long, practically endless, which creates the kind of problem that politicians ignore until they become concerned about their "place in history." That may help to explain why concepts like "wide appeal," "popularity," and (the dignified form of the other two) "universality," flawed as they are,

keep resurfacing in critical discussion of the arts despite the considerable resistance to them.

In any case, the handmade picture books that Blake once glamorized as his "illuminated books" in "illuminated printing"³ have been closely bound up with his posthumous fate. Since most of the battles over his reputation have been fought over that corpus, it cannot be surprising that four of the five essays in this volume look chiefly to the illuminated books for what Tilottama Rajan calls the "material signifier" of his "system." Nor is it surprising, considering the layers of complication that the illuminated books supply, that they can support the several different kinds of exploration and critique that are launched by their critics and commentators in the present collection. By this late date, of course, Blake's canonical status is so entrenched and stable that he can easily withstand remapping (Rajan), severe criticism of his views (David Bindman and Anne K. Mellor), and tunneling through his material foundations (Joseph Viscomi). By this time it is clear to most readers, I think, that any of the twentieth-century theses posted on the door of this particular landmark are likely to be temporary stage directions in a theater of criticism that sustains itself by generating new images of its objects and new maps of the territory on which they lie. Some, like Rajan's, construct new positions from old ones by triangulation and synthesis. Others, like Bindman's and Mellor's, use eighteenth-century history to connect Blake with urgent, troubling twentieth-century issues of race and gender: by warning that he was of his time, they signal that they are of ours. Yet others, like Viscomi's, construct revised explanations of the "material signifier" sufficiently authoritative to strengthen and clarify a familiar icon; in the light of Viscomi's discussion, Blake seems more than ever a rare union of the practical artist with the profoundly creative thinker.

As Rajan indicates, her essay returns late to the postmodern party that once passed Blake through the "fires of deconstruction" (David Simpson's phrase, I think)—interestingly, again, almost always the Blake of the illuminated books. But Blake never proved terribly useful to deconstruction because he is just too eligible. One needs no special theory of language to make it happen; he self-deconstructs. It takes the massive intellectual pressure of a Northrop Frye to bind Blake's formidable difficulties into an illusion of total coherence, which, inevitably, falls into contradictions, fragments, and dead ends as soon as the pressure

3. [Prospectus], 1793, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, revised ed., ed. David V. Erdman (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982), 693. Page references to Erdman's edition (abbreviated "E") are given hereafter in the text.

lets up. Even Vincent De Luca's metaphor of Blake's "wall of words" (in *Words of Eternity: Blake and the Poetics of the Sublime* [Princeton, N.J., 1991]) is too elegantly architectural. In my experience, Blake's work is a heap of words—and pictures—that starts to become a wall when we readers apply the necessary intellectual pressure to get what we want from it: sense, structure, coherence. It meets us halfway—as Christopher Smart's writing does not—but every step beyond the halfway point is a struggle, pleasurable for some of us. But in Blake criticism the pleasurable anticipation of sense frequently stands in rhetorically for the actual demonstration of sense. Blake criticism is addicted to a rhetoric of false confidence, which in turn feeds a counteractive syndrome of reader letdown.

Although Rajan arrives late on the scene, then—having visited several times previously in her own poststructural phases—she comes seeking middle ground: to her right the "homogeneity" represented by "the structures stubbornly constructed by Northrop Frye and S. Foster Damon," and to her left "a logic of absolute difference in which the Blakean text exists only in its performances," represented by Donald Ault's reading of *The Four Zoas (Narrative Unbound: Re-visioning William Blake's The Four Zoas* [Barrytown, N.Y., 1987]). She finds both at fault for "protect[ing] the economy of literature" (which she implies should be left unprotected) and giving "self-satisfaction . . . to the critic" (who she implies should be left unsatisfied), presumably via the poststructural pleasures of killing this author (engraver, painter) and mastering his text. Linking, for reasons that are not clear to me, the "unifying pluralism" of "representative democracy" to this unsatisfying logic of absolute difference, she proposes an alternative that carries the implicit promise of unspecified improvements in the political order: a division between the so-called Lambeth books of the 1790s and the later books, chiefly *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. In this construction the earlier books betray, as it were, the compositional process by which Blake attempts but consistently fails to create his megamyth out of historical events, the artistic stresses and strains made visible and audible by an artistic lamination machine that, over and over again, fails to keep the shiny veneer of myth glued to the rough particleboard of history.

For Rajan, the Lambeth years constitute a period of successful failure—successful in that she values the strewn wreckage of contradictions, the "false starts" and "raw material" and "process of shaping," more than the achieved but oppressive and antihistorical system of *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. That view is not explicitly defended but everywhere implied: the tumultuous processes of the Lambeth books are superior to the seamless products of later years, when an apocalyptic "master narrative" replaces "dialectical" struggle.

I admit that I am wary of this strong distinction on several grounds. As a formula it is too tidy to be quite real: it reproduces an all too familiar (call it Romantic) value system that ranks dynamic processes above static products; and it reproduces an all too familiar (Romantic) contrast between the radical young artist who grapples with history and the conservative old systematizer who abandons it for the consolations of religion and philosophy. The "later Blake" of Rajan's narrative aligns perfectly with the later Coleridge and the later Wordsworth of literary-historical mythology. These are hardly sufficient reasons for rejecting Rajan's formulations, but the ease with which they fall into place leaves me wondering if she is taking dictation from the master narrative of Romanticism.

To me, the neatness of her oppositions suggests that she may approach Blake too well defended against the shock of asymmetry. Whereas Damon and Frye first professed to find homogeneous structures, earlier readers had seen nothing but uncontrolled heterogeneity, which they usually personalized and branded with negative sociocultural labels (the lunatic, the fanatic). Rajan presents a highly schematic synthesis of the two heretofore dominant accounts of Blake's books: they are heterogeneous and indecipherable; they are homogeneous and entirely decodable. No, she suggests, the earlier ones are heterogeneous, the later ones homogeneous. Is her readiness to accept (some version of) Damon's and Frye's views on the systematic character of the later illuminated books purely pragmatic? Because a one-hundred-percent unsystematic Blake is useless to criticism, her argument may need Damon and Frye so much that they become its uninvited enablers. Their rigorous defense of what had always been, after all, the least defensible of Blake's books, those insane epics *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, is what gives her the opportunity to amputate the Lambeth books from the Damon-Frye canon and to elevate them for being open processes and demote the later works for being closed products.

This account does not line up with my experience of the later books. Rajan writes with more confidence about what is and is not in them than I can summon. No one, to be sure, is going to miss the signs of mythmaking energy that are everywhere in Blake: all those compass points aligned with all those characters, emanations, cities, cathedrals, professions, and bodily organs; and all those secular local events read by the light of sacred universal narratives. These seem to be elements of a rhetoric of conviction that Blake offers as a support-system for readers in time of their greatest need. All will be revealed, it implies, to those who tough it out: "Mark well my words! they are of your eternal salvation" (*Milton* 2:25, E 96). For me and I gather for others, those elements glittering on the surface

constitute one of the most seductive features of Blake's illuminated books, symbolizing the author's covenant with the reader that there *is* a deeply coherent system somewhere here, and that the investment of readerly exertions will eventually pay off in a grasp of it. To mount her argument, Rajan needs to take it for granted that Damon and Frye were right at least half the time—about *Jerusalem* if not about *The Book of Urizen*. I feel obliged to repeat what I have said perhaps too many times already: my best reasons for believing that there is a system that can really be understood come from the secondhand testimony of great systematizing critics like Frye. Personally I have never experienced the grasp of Blake's meaning to which they, and she, have so eloquently testified.

Nor do I find solace in magical notions of the power of the illuminated book as such, "which unites time and space" and is "the containing form of the system" that "accomplishes what the system by itself cannot. . . . the composite artifact of the book 'reduces' difficulty within the intricacy of a figured surface, allowing us to look rather than read, to assimilate the text as art rather than experience." Rajan's antivisual prejudice belongs to a venerable tradition in which words are associated with difficult adult "experience" and pictures with mere mesmerizing visual "art," a distraction from the real. (The construction is also reversible—why are the illuminated books not artified words but wordified art, a visual spectacle spoiled by hard language?) To revise something Harold Bloom once said of his experience of the illuminated books: I read some of the most ambitious and persuasive literary criticism in the language; I stare, disbelievingly, at the mystifying poetry and pictures it claims to account for, and then I try, too strenuously, to wind the golden string of the criticism into the heart of the illuminated books.⁴ I understand the criticism at least well enough to lipsync it, but I know I do not understand the poems and pictures . . . yet? The light of the Promise flickers in the darkness.

4. "I read one of the most eloquent descriptive passages in the language; I stare, disbelievingly, at an inadequate engraved illumination, and then I try, too strenuously, to isolate an image that Blake, as a poet, knew better than to isolate." From this experience Bloom proceeds to argue that Blake's later illuminated books, which for Rajan are coercive monolithic systems signified by the very integration of text and design, are instead experiments in "auditory and visual counterpoint" that succeed only as poetry (Harold Bloom, "The Visionary Cinema of Romantic Poetry," in Alvin H. Rosenfeld, ed., *William Blake: Essays for S. Foster Damon* [Providence, R.I., 1969], 18–35).



Nestled into the yin of Rajan's critical and theoretical macroeconomics is the yang of Joseph Viscomi's scholarly microeconomics. Skeptics who wonder if material signifiers are not always bloodless theoretical entities can find reassurance in Viscomi's essay, whose exhibit number one is the "disjointed, miscellaneous work entitled *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, . . . in some measure the result of a production history in which sections were written and executed at different times." With real, or perhaps material, questions at issue—what did Blake do, and how and when did he do it?—Viscomi measures every which way till the shoe fits. The "material signifier" is again the illuminated book, but "material" is broadened to encompass, beyond even paper and ink and watercolor, the materials of Blake's trade that he manipulated to produce the extant artifacts.

Viscomi's relentless archaeology, aided by exceptional powers of observation, produces a flow of brilliant insights. Where his predecessors have often found nothing or the wrong things, his intense scrutiny of physical evidence leaves us with a mountain of new fact—on which he balances, precariously, a second mountain of new speculation. From an immense range of harder material evidence—including habits of printing, shapes and sizes of plates, styles of lettering, catchwords—and softer but sometimes suggestive textual evidence—concurrent events, literary reference and allusion, logical and narrative and rhetorical structures—Viscomi is able to extract more ore than just about anyone else can. Reading his essay reminds me (again) how fortunate I am to have him as an accomplice. Even if one disagrees with him, as I occasionally do, he makes evasion hard. His mode of argument, though it can be dangerous for claustrophobics, is ultimately very satisfying in its ability to produce arguable, even testable, propositions in a field of study where the play of untestable Attitude and the leap of Conclusion can count for so much. As the first of a three-part study on the evolution of the *Marriage*, the present essay gives us every reason to look forward to the other two parts.

In what is by now a familiar vein of his work, Viscomi casts his argument as a correction of the view that Blake composed his illuminated books from end to end before executing them—what we might think of as the usual way that modern writers work with publishers and printers. A writerly approach to the medium of reproduction has helped to sustain the image of Blake as a coherent writer—writing out his system, so to speak, in a coherent and systematic manner. But because Blake executed and designed plates before completing a manuscript, it

became “technically possible for him to think and work outside the letterpress paradigm,” which dictates that a text is “written on paper and then set in type . . . with labor moving determinately . . . from author to compositor.” By breaking with the techniques of conventional printing, Blake achieved “unprecedented interplay between graphic execution and textual composition.” Viscomi seeks to mark a strong separation between the “paradigms” of watercolored relief etching and those of conventional letterpress printing (and the habits of authorship that have grown up with them, such as the creation of “far copy”—manuscripts, or, more recently, typescripts and output from computers—for the editor, compositor, and printer). Thus do Viscomi’s researches help define one of the hallmarks of Blake’s reputation, the special status granted to his illuminated books as texts. Viscomi, however, shares with Rajan, at least, the opinion that in some of the early books a lot of Blake’s seams are showing.

Viscomi’s core proposition is that “plates 21–24 preceded not only the other *Marriage* plates but possibly the idea of the *Marriage* itself. That idea appears to have originated in what were originally two separate projects, an anti-Swedenborgian text, presumably meant as an independent work, and the Bible of Hell announced at the end of the pamphlet.” The harshest thing one can say about Viscomi’s masterful arguments in support of this proposition is that some of them are highly conjectural. I see a fundamental division between the set of arguments about sequence that depends on the intricate details of printing and a second set that rests on notions of narrative integrity and Blake’s reactions to Swedenborg. The first set—including Viscomi’s analysis of the copper sheets, Blake’s squirrely *gs*, and his catchwords—are so wondrously documented and defended that for my money they can be put down as unassailable in our lifetime. The second set—right down to Blake’s fulfillment of those Aristotelian requirements for a four-part oration—can seem, by comparison, a bit pat and mechanical. In general, Viscomi marks the second class of evidence with provisional phrasing—for example, “is consistent with the theory that” instead of “strengthens the evidence for the conclusion that” or “helps to prove that”—that nonetheless becomes the tissue that connects key pieces of his argument. Toward the end of the essay, the odd notion of one plate’s “awareness” of another’s themes (“this news from hell [on plate 4] appears aware that the ‘jews code’ and ‘ten commandments’ have already been criticized on plates 13 and 23 [and 27?]”) and one plate’s ability to “recognize” another seems to ask personification to bear more weight than it can, given that the chronology of awareness is reversible—plate 4 is said to be aware of 13 and 23, but 13 and 23 can also be aware of 4. The awareness (which can itself be very tenuous) does not

establish a sequence; it identifies a group of plates with thematically related material. Similarly, the conviction that plates 21 through 24 are thematically and rhetorically more coherent than any other textual unit is highly subjective; several other units seem to me quite as coherent, and, after all, coherence in the product does not establish coherence in the process. In my experience, coherent processes often produce disjointed products. Coherence may be achieved only on a second or third pass, and it may not be the goal at all. Finally, in such conclusions as "when plate 4 is placed within the composing process and read in light of the many plates it in fact follows, Blake's original intentions for this plate and for the devil's views throughout the *Marriage* begin to reveal themselves," Viscomi's faith in the power of narrative analysis to expose original intentions is stronger than mine. Readers will, as we say, have to judge for themselves how much support this second-string evidence adds to Viscomi's fundamental claims.

Mixed in among his most astute arguments on the construction of the *Marriage* is an unexplained investment in specific alternative plans for certain sections of the work. The most baffling of these is the thesis that the *Marriage* has its genesis in an "independent pamphlet" comprising plates 21–24. "Independent pamphlet" ("independent unit," "independent work," and so on) becomes something of a mantra that has little bearing on the more compelling argument that the composition of the *Marriage* simply began with plates 21–24. Why does this independent pamphlet not look more like a pamphlet? Why, at a minimum, has it no title (nor author, printer, date)? The evidence of careful registration and separate printing seems slight by comparison with the counterindications. A similar argument is advanced for yet another independent pamphlet comprising plates 25–27, "A Song of Liberty." Here at least there is a title but, again, no evidence of separate publication, just one instance of separate printing. Because Viscomi's larger argument persuasively outlines the conditions under which the separate printing of textual units is entirely possible—and two distinct instances in the compass of what eventually became one work normalize it even more—it is difficult to understand why the separate-pamphlet conjectures are anything other than extra baggage.

Viscomi also proposes that the Proverbs of Hell were part of Blake's Bible of Hell. The Bible of Hell runs second only to Tatham's supposed destruction of Blake's works in its power to generate speculation about the artist. Because Blake includes the Proverbs of Hell in the *Marriage* as plates 7–10 and then arranges the plates of the work to put the narrator's announcement of the Bible of Hell as a forthcoming work on plate 24, what reason is there to suppose that the

Proverbs of Hell are (or were) part of a Bible of Hell project that preceded the announcement and was (partly) combined with the anti-Swedenborgian material? He might have, after all, easily eradicated his announcement if it had become, as it were, out of date in the process of organizing the *Marriage*. He seems to have designed a separate title page for his Bible of Hell project (untraced since 1876 but described by W. M. Rossetti), probably after finishing the *Marriage*—it mentions Lambeth, where Blake moved in 1790.⁵ In any case, all discussions of the Bible of Hell are based on a very few uncertain facts and a vast deal of conjecture, on which, fortunately, little in Viscomi's reconstruction depends.

A useful way to situate Viscomi's argument might be in relation to prior readings of the *Marriage*, which have always had to contend with its wild and crazy assortment of materials. The usual defensive maneuver has been to tack on "apparently" before "miscellaneous" and then to explain the apparent heterogeneity by reference to some mixed but esteemed literary model, if not Menippean satire then the Bible. The defender who springs first to mind is Max Plowman, who was the earliest to claim—three years after Damon had called the *Marriage* a "scrapbook"—that he had discovered its structure: "a poem as prologue" (pl. 2); "a prose argument composed in six chapters," each one delimited by pictures (pls. 15–16, for example); and "a song as epilogue" (pls. 25–27).⁶ As I recall, Plowman was making no claims about the process of composition by which Blake might have arrived at his final product, but clearly Plowman was offering his account of structure partly as a defense against the mischievous notion that Blake's works are a hodgepodge because his mind was a hodgepodge—perhaps a homemade English individual talent, as T. S. Eliot concluded, whose works do not belong with the smoother and more systematic contributions to Western poetic tradition. Blake's eccentric works were something to be kept in the archive, probably, but in the attic rather than the public gallery. On the contrary, Plowman hinted, if even the most miscellaneous-looking of Blake's works has a beautifully articulated structure, then what deep orders might we discover in the rest of the illuminated books! Plowman's discovery constituted one more episode in the narrative by which a completely coherent Blake might be constructed. Here was

5. Martin Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*, 2 vols. (New Haven, Conn., 1981), no. 221v.
6. See S. Foster Damon, *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols* (London, 1924), 88; and *Blake's Poems and Prophecies*, ed. Max Plowman (1927; reprint, New York, 1954), xxiii.

a kind of critical progress: if everyone by then admitted the value of the *Songs*, the *Marriage*, by virtue of its uncharacteristic "accessibility" to readers, was surely the next step for those who wanted to explore further. By establishing the structure of the *Marriage*, Plowman was preparing the way for even bolder forays into the Blakean outback.

I do not know whether Viscomi would resist Plowman's description. He engages in a little shadowboxing with unspecified straw men (disguised as "one") over the notion that Blake composed the *Marriage* according to some preconceived plan ("one is hard pressed not to envision [Blake] writing and rewriting the entire composition on paper before committing it to copper, because one still imagines Blake working as a poet in the manuscript tradition and using illuminated printing subsequently as a mode of reproduction"). But might a product as orderly in the arrangements of its parts as Plowman describes be the result of a process as haphazard as the one Viscomi describes? Viscomi seems to believe at least that coherent products suggest coherent processes of composition. He clearly believes the converse, that incoherence in the product—dead ends, missing catch words, *gs* that won't settle down, mismatched plate/page sizes, misregistered impressions, references on later plates that predict the coming of plates the reader has already read (if part of the Bible of Hell announced on plate 24 is the Proverbs of Hell on plates 6–10)—points to incoherence in the process. Viscomi dwells intensively on the order in which Blake might have executed the plates of the *Marriage*; he never says what principles might have guided Blake's assembly of these plates into a final order.

If indeed Blake conceived his *Marriage* as a parody of "the theory that the Old Testament is a gathering of redacted fragments,"⁷ then it is ironically appropriate that Viscomi analyzes the composition of Blake's bible with a version of the editorial methods used by those Bible critics for more than two centuries. In some respects Viscomi's approach resembles the textual criticism that attempts to determine the "strands" that have been editorially woven into the Pentateuch and the "genetic" textual criticism of (mostly) Continental editors, best known in North America through the element of genetic reasoning in Hans Gabler's controversial edition of Joyce's *Ulysses*, published in 1984. Unlike Gabler, Viscomi does not seem to be establishing an editorial rationale that would make

7. Robert N. Essick quoted by Viscomi; see *Representation, Anxiety, and the Bibliographical Sublime*, forthcoming in *Huntington Library Quarterly*.

any difference in an edition of the *Marriage*, though he certainly lays the foundation for such an edition (and sometimes comes close to suggesting, more subversively, that such an editorial rearrangement might be superior to the *Marriage* that we have, at least in terms of narrative integrity). One might reasonably ask, then, why *does* Viscomi go to such lengths to reconstruct the process of composition of the *Marriage*?

The research presented here certainly advances Viscomi's work on Blake's production processes, but I suspect that a compelling part of the answer is more biographical than editorial or technical: this analysis of the *Marriage* adds support to the image of the historical William Blake that Viscomi has been constructing by the indirect means of technical recipes and procedures. Viscomi's method does not promise to deliver just Blake's methods of production; it also promises Blake the person, present in his work and workshop. Viscomi is unflinchingly into what used to be called, back in the Derridean days, presence: "Witnessing the *Marriage* unfold through its production enables us to answer basic questions about the *Marriage's* form and Blake's original and final intentions. . . . In short, it enables us to see more of Blake's mind at work." The investigator shows enormous faith in the ability of his material methods to get at the soul of Blake's machine—not just final intentions but also literal intentions and even manifestations of the holy spirit itself, "Blake's mind at work."

By getting the present story of the making of the *Marriage* straight, Viscomi puts more flesh on the bones of his Blake, very much the dirty-handed artisan who cuts copper sheets, wields hammers and quills, mixes etching grounds, uses whatever is on hand, takes shortcuts, prints negligently—and composes on the fly. Viscomi's Blake is a chronic improviser and Viscomi's *Marriage* is the product of multiple sessions of improvisation, as Blake riffs here on an inspiring fragment, there on a political event, a biblical genre, a controversy among the London Swedenborgians, or an ad in the back of a Swedenborg volume.

Thus is Viscomi advancing the project of revamping the most influential old Blakes—Damon's mystic philosopher, Frye's archetypal poet—to produce a Blake more in line with the known facts of his historical situation, headquartered in an engraver's and painter's workshop-studio rather than a writer's study, for whom the burning questions of the day were primarily those that aroused engravers, painters, and sculptors rather than poets, novelists, and critics. A very appealing Blake to those of us who like ours both jazzy and grounded.

To the extent that the artist Viscomi is discovering is known in advance, however, he is shaped on the armature of a well-known Romantic ideology. This Blake "behave[s] like an artist," which in this construction means that he em-

plays a "hands-on, workshop style of composing." But this is about more than dirty hands. As an "artist," this Blake "think[s] nonlinearly" according to a "creative logic." Evidence that might suggest that Blake is *just* foolhardy, sloppy, hasty, or careless is taken rather as evidence of this creativity, which causes him to "deepen the meaning of his text," for instance, "by responding creatively to his own first prints." He is not only or merely an artisan, like his peers among the reproductive engravers. Blake's "workshop" is elevated to critical importance as the material signifier of his "mind." In an adventurous essay full of risks well and wisely taken, the greatest danger, I feel, looms whenever Viscomi is tempted to work backward from the physical facts to a Romantic metaphysics of presence—and then forward again to the physical facts, a circular approach by which Viscomi may get what he wants—a certain kind of Blake who composed a certain kind of work—too easily.

A major consequence of construing an engraver-artist's workshop in specifically Romantic terms is to preserve and indeed in some respects shore up the bridge to the other, much more familiar Blake—a rather conservative construction tied to a related set of conventional (and powerful and influential) Romantic ideas of art and the artist: the ideological Blake who actually cares, in a disputatious but still linear sort of way, about articulating his own ideas in relation to Swedenborg's; a Blake whose thought processes can be benchmarked to standards of "narrative integrity," and even to Aristotle's rhetoric. This is the sober-sided Blake I find standing behind such statements as "Blake sees what he has accomplished, and sees the creative import of passionate response. In the *Marriage* he not only expresses opposition but at the same time engages in the intellectual combat—or 'Mental Fight' (*Milton* 2:13)—that he believed essential." Or, similarly, "Contrary to Swedenborg, who believed vision required leaving the body, Blake knew as an artist that it could occur while in the body and through the physical body of art."

In such "creative" struggles Blake belongs with, say, Keats or Wordsworth; a study of the "production history" of the *Marriage* belongs alongside a study of the "development" of *The Prelude*. Which is to say that Viscomi does not depart from the usual view that Blake's creative imagination and his ideas are the most important things about him (to us). Viscomi's essay is packed with those hallowed ideas. The difference lies in his conviction that they are manifest in the ways Blake—literally—handled them in his workshop. As I say, this is a Blake to whom my sympathies also incline, although I cannot share its more orthodox Romantic attributes. The matter is significantly complicated by Blake's participation in eighteenth-century discourses, secular and sacred, that contradict

workshop realities on the one hand and the ideas of the Romantic literati to which posterity has tied him on the other.

I wonder whether Viscomi's familiar and generally helpful opposition between the autographic and the mechanical—which reappears here in the opposition between illuminated printing (autographic) and letterpress printing (mechanical) and their respective “paradigms”—does not quite own up to the extent to which illuminated printing is mechanical, or, more precisely, the extent to which the autographic is mechanical. Viscomi's reluctant acknowledgment of apparent exceptions to the paradigms, such as D. G. Rossetti, carries the unfortunate implication that printers cannot be creative because they use “mechanical” pieces of type instead of “autographic” script. Handwriting is itself a mechanical procedure—a technology. Any of these media, including Blake's, are to some degree eligible for mechanization, organization, and institutionalization. If Blake had been trained as a letterpress printer, would he have set—for that matter composed—his own compositions in type? Nothing in the technology would have prevented it.

In the inclination to romanticize Blake's medium by identifying its autographic character with his creativity, Viscomi occasionally overstates the medium's flexibility and slights its rigidity. After all, the unit of convenient substitution in movable type is the individual letter; in Blake's medium, it is the entire plate and all the text on it. Thus Blake had good technical reasons, once a plate was etched, to stick by its text; writers revise their galley proof and even their page proof a good deal more freely, for equally good technical reasons. The fact is that Blake, like any author using almost any conceivable method of production, could *choose* to create his texts bit by bit, in or out of final order, or to start with some beginning and write his way to some end. Most of the time, writers working with printers have to turn in completed works in some form and they lack control over the final product. Blake had a greater range of control and hence choice. He could behave like a writer (who in this case is his own printer) or, if he chose, like the Blake of Viscomi's argument, building his work piece by piece. Nothing but the evidence can suggest what he did in any individual case.

Among the host of interesting questions stirred up by Viscomi's discussion, the unresolved one that fascinates me most is what might have happened to the manuscripts that Viscomi supposes Blake produced while working out the *Marriage* on copper: “an assortment of texts written at different times, probably on various sizes and kinds of paper, but never a fair copy of a completed manu-

script. As with his other illuminated books, Blake did not know the number of plates *Marriage* would require until after it was executed." It is worth remembering, however, that Blake had much more control over the number of plates in his works—and over what goes on any individual plate or group of plates—than authors of printed prose narratives ordinarily do. That is why the unit of narration in Blake's books is much more often the single plate/page than it would have been had he turned manuscripts over to a letterpress printer—because the page/plate unit is a physical presence in front of him as he works, a cross between a writer's sheet of paper and a painter's canvas (that is, an expensive, relatively troublesome material object within whose borders much labor will be expended). This is not to say that Blake always exercised the control that his medium allowed—not to say that he composed the *Marriage* in any way other than the piecemeal way Viscomi imagines. But Blake could choose between freer and more controlled ways of working; both were available in his workshop and in his medium.

Viscomi rejects too hastily, I believe, the possibility that Blake composed spontaneously in his head, stored lines in memory, and wrote them onto copper later. Following Blake in demonizing "memory" will not do as a reason for rejecting this possibility (see Viscomi's essay, n. 16). Just as Viscomi rightly feels free to emphasize Blake's practical interactions with materials without fretting over the blatant contradictions with his antimaterialistic theories of art, so must it be with memory. Blake objected to theories of art that value memory—that is, imitation—above original inspiration, but, like all human beings, he depended on his own memory for storage, fundamentally and inescapably. He is not against storage; the etched texts themselves are a form of storage. And there is persuasive evidence that the memories of Blake's generation ordinarily developed far greater wordhoarding capacities than do ours.⁸ Could the explanation for Blake's "missing" manuscripts be the simplest one, that they never existed? Or that Blake's references to taking dictation in large batches of lines (see Viscomi's essay, n. 16) point to habits of composition closer to Wordsworth's method of composing out of doors for later transcription from memory at home than to the manuscript-to-print methods of later writers? In that context, the survival of *The Four Zoas*, say, in manuscript may well be evidence that it was never intended to be an illuminated book. But the survival of that manuscript also suggests that, if there had been manuscripts, even scrappy ones (and much of *The Four Zoas* is pretty

8. Perkins's essay "How the Romantics Recited Poetry" (*SEL* 31 [1991]: 655–71) is a useful starting place: "Wordsworth dictated ninety-two pages of verse from memory—not his own verse" (p. 656)—though the emphasis is on vocal performance rather than the cultural history of memory.

scrappy), some would have survived. We might imagine, with Viscomi, that short works could be composed on bits of paper that were thrown away; it is far harder to imagine that this happened to the yards and yards of text in *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. The absence of manuscripts suggests a method of composition that did not call for composition on paper. For what it is worth, my own vote is for either execution from memory directly onto copper or spontaneous composition directly onto copper, or, more likely, a combination of the two—with, no doubt, occasional exceptions (a reality principle is healthy even when dealing with Blake).



When Henry Crabb Robinson, curious as ever, made Blake the target of a mission of local ethnology, he did so as one taken with the stranger in his midst. Robinson handled his odd and provocative informant with care, quoting his words, turning them over for close scrutiny, analyzing them to see how they might make sense if properly construed. In explaining Blake's particular form of insanity—not "mere madness" but "Monomania," he said—he found a helpful historical comparison with "the theosophic dreams . . . of *Swedenborg*."⁹ (One might usefully contrast his cautious approach to exotic Blake with the self-assurance of John Gabriel Stedman's reports on plantation life in distant Surinam.) The essays of Bindman and Mellor have normalized, it seems to me, that historical Blake of the weird and dangerous opinions not despite history but with it, and in the process raised some perplexing questions about the uses of historical evidence.

Historical evidence is always partly shaped by the hypothesis it supposedly demonstrates. What that means in practice is that something is always brought to the evidence that helps to sort it, simplify it, and focus it. Particular ideas about Blake—the kind of man he was, the kind of man it was possible for him to be at the time—control the use of historical evidence in both Bindman's and Mellor's discussions. Both are scholarly papers of our time in their desire to put ideological distance between then and now by tying Blake down to some commonplace ideas with influence in his time and place but beneath contempt in ours. The considerable, and perhaps unavoidable, risk is the one that Nicholas Penny has termed "anachronistic indignation."¹⁰

9. Bentley, *Blake Records*, 53.

10. Nicholas Penny, review of Patricia Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari: Art and History*, in *London Review of Books*, 16 November 1995, 18.

In a smart little essay, "Teaching Ideology in [*The Songs [of Innocence and of Experience]*],"¹¹ David Simpson dramatizes the familiar experience of a class of students "visibly scratching its collective head" over three ideologically enigmatic songs in *Innocence*—"Holy Thursday," "The Chimney Sweeper," and "The Little Black Boy." For the two latter poems, as Simpson indicates, "we have an urgent contemporary occasion" (p. 51)—the plight of sweeps and the slave trade—and both "can be read (though perhaps should not be read) in either of two ways with more or less equal credibility. They are not at all vague in their social messages, but they can be interpreted convincingly as offering either of two different messages" (p. 49): one "a savagely ironic exposure of the quietistic effects of Christian doctrine"; the other the quietistic message itself, which can be read "in good faith by anyone who believes that the next life really does make up for the shortcomings of this one" (p. 51). Finally, Simpson considers the possibility that "Blake finally ask[s] to be defined as a writer"—we can add artist—"who dramatizes the inevitable clash of ideologies in the social evolution of 'meaning'" (p. 53) and rejects that possibility in favor of another: "When we . . . know more, Blake will seem less and less the canny, perspectively ironic Derridean that classroom convenience and the limits of our historical knowledge make him out to be. Considering the sheer amount of Blake criticism, very little of [the necessary] work has been done: we have all been too busy with our interpretations" (p. 55). That is, too busy interpreting and not busy enough looking in the historical archives for the "precise occasion[s]" for Blake's language and images.

Both Bindman's and Mellor's essays move in that direction, away from the play of linguistic and graphic possibilities and toward those precise historical occasions that help to put language and image in focus for us. We might learn not just about abolitionists pure and simple but also about differing abolitionist ideologies espoused by particular groups; not just about eighteenth-century views of race but also about how Africans were drawn and how conceptions of skin color changed over time; not just about the liberation of women but also about *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* as a specific response to Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, conditioned by reports about colonial slavery gleaned from experiences with Stedman and his *Surinam Narrative*.

Bindman wants to produce a Blake for the '90s—the 1990s—by refuting certain features of David Erdman's ultraprescient Cold War–radical Blake, who could see through the hypocrisy of both pro- and antislavery factions, advocate

11. In Robert F. Gleckner and Mark L. Greenberg, *Approaches to Teaching Blake's Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (New York, 1989), 47–56. Page references to this essay are given in the text.

sexual freedom, and recognize the humanity of African slaves. Bindman erects his far more human, which is to say limited, counterconstruction on a stark but uneasy opposition between the evangelical and the rational-scientific (or what was passing for rational science in Blake's time). He finds in Blake a flawed composite of the two: "Blake's passing reference to the African's narrow forehead is, therefore, probably derived from an unattractive bit of [quasi-scientific] late-eighteenth-century racial theory, while 'The Little Black Boy' appears to be inflected by [evangelical] theological traditions that assume Africans to be spiritually disadvantaged." Theology and science come together in a "complex and often contradictory web of ancient and modern beliefs" about race from which Blake could not extricate himself, just as we cannot extricate ourselves from the "contradictions" of our age. Here, through a transhistorical use of history, Blake's condition, as it has so many times before, comes to stand for ours. The "complex web" of beliefs that Bindman invokes, however, is often not presented with enough complexity to accommodate the Blake that he wishes to characterize. The most troubling feature of the argument, I think, is the simplicity of the categories said to constitute the complexity.

In the narrative of salvation that Bindman finds in "The Little Black Boy," evangelical abolitionists—whom he associates with Blake's views—opportunisticly find blacks benighted in order to give Christianity a chance to save them. Bindman locates this racial ideology in another document of the period, *The African Widow*, said to be a "point of reference for Blake's poem": "Behind the poem"—*The African Widow*, but also "The Little Black Boy," the claim being that both poems are outgrowths of a common ideology—"is the evangelical abolitionist view that it is a Christian duty to convert the African," who is under the curse of Ham, Bindman says, quoting an impenetrable passage from *The Song of Los* that does not mention Ham or a curse but describes the transmission of "Abstract Philosophy." The suggestion is that Blake was a "fervent antirationalist" and an evangelical Christian; evangelical abolitionists thought this way about black people; Blake thought this way about black people.

A problem, of course, is that "evangelical" is an extremely broad classification, and arguments based on Blake's connection with it may not withstand scrutiny. Not that Blake has *no* affinities with the class, but he is certainly far enough on the fringes that we are led to ask: What is an evangelical if Blake is one? What, for instance, is all that free-love doctrine that Bindman and Mellor find in *Visions* doing in the poem of an evangelical? Sure enough, in response one might usefully point to the dispute among London Swedenborgians over the keeping of concubines, but turning over that rock would also uncover ideas about

race very different from the comforting abolitionist line that Bindman cites. "Among the Gentiles in Heaven," wrote Swedenborg, after one of his visits to that place, "the most beloved are the Africans"¹²—and they allow polygamy. Africans think more "internally" than the Gentiles, they better understand God's human form, and they enslave Europeans, especially monks, for not properly understanding religion.¹³ I have been surprised to notice that Swedenborg and the Swedenborgians are very rarely mentioned in books about the slave trade or European attitudes toward Africans.¹⁴ Their potential importance in this instance does not depend on the untenable position that Blake was a Swedenborgian. But Swedenborgian attitudes expand the spectrum of *possible* attitudes toward race at the time and of the uses of such attitudes.

Blake's own attitudes are, as usual, far more difficult to get a fix on. I believe that the true test of a reading of "The Little Black Boy" starts with a reading of "The Chimney Sweeper" (of *Songs of Innocence*), where once again an attitude that Bindman might call evangelical is put forward, in this case the acceptance of one's earthly lot, no matter how dire, in the name of eventual access to heaven. The narrative situation in "Chimney Sweeper" is similar to the one in "Black Boy": a counselor figure attempts to answer the probing questions of an innocent with optimistic scenarios of what will happen in heaven to set things right in the long run. If one's view of Blake leads to the position that his "Chimney Sweeper" endorses the quietistic advice offered by the older sweep to the younger, then "The Little Black Boy" falls into line behind it. But if not—and I think *not* is right—then ironic exposure, not advocacy, of the mother's apology for racism seems far more likely to be the aim of "The Little Black Boy." In that case we are getting something closer to *Candide* than to *The African Widow*:

—Yes, sir, said the negro, that's how things are around here. . . . when my mother sold me for ten Patagonian crowns on the coast of Guinea, she said to me: 'My dear child, bless our witch doctors, . . . they will make your life happy; you have the honor of being a slave to our white masters. . . .' The Dutch witch doctors who converted me tell me every Sunday that we are all sons of Adam, black and white alike.¹⁵

12. Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, trans. George F. Dole (New York, 1976), n. 326; see also n. 514.

13. Emanuel Swedenborg, *A Treatise Concerning the Last Judgment, and the Destruction of Babylon* (London, 1788), nn. 1198–1203.

14. Gretchen Gerzina, *Black London* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1995), is a recent instance of this tendency to ignore the Swedenborgians.

15. Voltaire, *Candide, or Optimism*, trans. Robert M. Adams (New York and London, 1966), 15.

Bindman does not mention "The Chimney Sweeper," and he considers the possibility of ironic exposure in "The Little Black Boy" only to dismiss it. He traces Blake's view of the spiritual inside of Africans to the evangelicals who want to save the souls of black folks but not necessarily to respect their minds or liberate their bodies. He traces Blake's view of the physical outside of Africans to the rational strain of Enlightenment culture that was finding new ways to measure, classify, and draw human skulls. Bindman ties Blake to the physiognometry of "racial classification" by noting that Blake knew about John Caspar Lavater's *Physiognomy* through his friendship with Henry Fuseli, and that Lavater's kind of physiognomy had been applied to race by a Dutch painter, Pieter Camper—also a surgeon, I believe—whose book was not available in English till 1794 (too late for this argument), although the painter himself had been connected earlier with Benjamin West, telling him how to draw Jews; and with the "circle of the Hunters," one of whom ranked a collection of skulls to suggest racial superiority.

An unnoted complication, however, is that when Blake draws Africans in the 1790s he does not draw them according to this Enlightenment physiognometry at all. That seems to be why Bindman pairs Camper's drawings of heads not with Blake's drawings of heads, as one might expect, but with a line of text from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that calls for the widening of African foreheads, presumably in a metaphorical sense. In fact, as both Bindman and Mellor acknowledge, Blake's visual representation of the Little Black Boy is so much like his representation of the Little White Boy that the black boy looks precisely like the white boy in some copies of "The Little Black Boy" (see color plates XII–XV). This interchangeability of course raises questions of its own but not the questions that Lavater and Camper raise.

Mellor, pursuing Blake's "erasure of *difference* between races," cites Lavater and Camper not as racist sources but as models that Blake should have imitated to escape visual "Europeanization" and achieve a "more documentary" visual style. But along with Bindman she argues for "Blake's participation in a colonialist visual discourse" in "The Little Black Boy" and uses this claim to make the transition to *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. This participation, she argues, "is even clearer in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*," which is approached as a rather blunt attack on Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*—as "more direct criticism," even, than that apparent in Blake's illustrations to Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories from Real Life* (1791), where Mellor finds Blake "hostile" to Wollstonecraft's images of "positive rational compassion" in the form of "intelligent charity." But, as the subtitle of the book—*with Conversations, Calculated to Regulate the Affections, and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness*—

suggests, there was little in Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories* to appeal to Blake, who, aside from his aversion to all that calculating, regulating, and forming, was consistently critical of condescending acts of petty charity. On the other hand, Mellor may be so concerned to portray Blake as one who "reinforces his culture's hegemonic construction of the female gender" that she risks whitewashing Wollstonecraft and neglecting the area of agreement between the two of them, as when Mellor asserts that the "subtil modesty" condemned by Oothoon in Blake's *Visions* is "that very rational modesty advocated by Wollstonecraft." To the contrary, the "subtil modesty" of "a modest virgin knowing to dissemble / With nets" (*Visions* 6:7-11, E 48) is the kind of female cunning analyzed and disparaged by Wollstonecraft herself.

For Mellor the meaning of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* is plain enough—Oothoon is "raped by the slave owner Bromion to increase her value"—and, like Bindman, she makes connections seem more plausible than they may be in fact by transferring to Blake the opinions of his characters. At a minimum we know, however, that he was wide awake to the difference between author and character. When someone quotes Theseus from *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* on the power of imagination and attributes it to Shakespeare, Blake comes back hard: "Thus Fools quote Shakespeare The Above is Theseus's opinion Not Shakespears You might as well quote Satans blasphemies from Milton & give them as Miltons Opinions" (E 601). Mellor assumes that "Blake here affirms" what the character, the black child, speaks; she then uses that affirmation to underwrite what she calls "Blake's solution" to the woman problem in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*—that is, Oothoon's solution: Blake's solution "is, as Oothoon proclaims . . . 'free love.'"

Such shortcuts assume that we know what the author thinks and can then simply look for quotations to demonstrate it. I question whether there is such easy reading to be obtained here. Much of the difficulty in reading Blake is traceable precisely, I find, to his radically metaphorical narratives—which resist plain translations to the effect that Bromion is a slave owner who rapes Oothoon to increase her value—and his extreme perspectivism, his devotion to the dramatic in almost Jamesian terms in the least Jamesian of modes. He lets his character-like constructions speak for themselves, and the context in which they speak—by which we try to figure out what he means and where he stands—is typically a network, or perhaps a web, of other baffling speeches by other characters rather than authorial exposition. For one of so ardent and argumentative a nature and such potent opinions—judging from his letters, say, and the reports of acquaintances—he seems willing to wander extraordinarily

far out along the dangerous narrative path toward pure impersonation, where the reader ends up with the excruciatingly difficult task of weighing implications without clear points of reference. Blake strikes me as at once the most opinionated and the most dramatic of artists, who forces readers to oscillate between the authority of his opinions and the autonomy of his characters (or unstable speaking metaphors).

Oothoon promises to catch for Theotormon "girls of mild silver, or of furious gold" whom she will watch in "lovely copulation" (*Visions* 7:24–26, E 50) with him. This, says Mellor, following several others including Leopold Damrosch, is only a "male fantasy"—and, presumably, Blake's fantasy.¹⁶ (For what it is worth I would add that, in the history of pornography since the eighteenth century, males have shown equally strong evidence of attachment to the opposite fantasy, of watching their female lovers in copulation, lovely or not, with other males.) But could Oothoon's proposal be only one side of a dialogue that should have two sides? Oothoon tells what she will do for Theotormon. That creates a space for Theotormon to respond in kind—what will he do for Oothoon? The fact that he fails to respond surely counts against him; what Oothoon offers only seems to count against her *because* Theotormon fails to provide the Y to her X. She speaks of a "heaven of generous love" where "selfish blightings" (*Visions* 7:29, E 50) have no place. If Theotormon were a selfless lover fit for such a heaven, the world of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* would be very different—and what it is is clearly not satisfactory, because Oothoon and those daughters of Albion, whoever they are (colonial slaves and/or English women and/or America and/or mental attributes) are left to wail and sigh with no liberation in sight.

Mellor draws Stedman and his slave-lover Joanna into the network of possible allusions: "Perhaps," she says, "Blake was thinking of Stedman's own bedroom frolics with Joanna and B—e." But then again, if we want to play that game, perhaps he was thinking of Joanna, who stood her ground and refused to leave Surinam with Stedman. When Mellor then skips from Stedman, who was sufficiently liberal to allow that even the woman might have other partners, to "Swedenborg and the Muggletonians," who "explicitly forbade this," and concludes that Blake must be one with Swedenborg and the Muggletonians because "*Blake's* Oothoon never presents this possibility to Theotormon" (my italics), I am again left wondering why it is not the adequacy of Theotormon's response—or call him *Blake's* Theotormon—that is in question rather than the adequacy of Oothoon's. "At the level of sexual politics," Mellor writes, "this poem—like

16. Leopold Damrosch Jr., *Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth* (Princeton, N.J., 1980).

Stedman's *Narrative* before it—must finally be seen as condoning the continuation of female slavery under a benevolent master." But *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* ends unhappily, and we do not have Blake's happy version of the ending—unless perhaps in *Night the Ninth of The Four Zoas!* In my opinion there is no one satisfactory version of that ending, no "program" of liberation that can be positively inferred from *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. "The continuation of female slavery under a benevolent master," though, certainly does describe the unhappy ending we have if we do not stress the benevolence. If that unhappy ending represents Blake's sexual politics, why is it unhappy? The suggestion is, I gather, that "this poem—like Stedman's *Narrative*" does not want to change the system but only to clean it up a bit. In that construction of Blake's views, as "friends" with Stedman (a characterization unsupported by evidence as far as I know), Blake sees nothing fundamentally wrong with the Bromion-Oothoon-Theotormon triangle that a little more sensitivity on the part of the males would not fix. If Theotormon would not be so stuffy and repressed and would let Oothoon bring him those gold and silver girls, then free love would reign and, as far as Blake is concerned, all would be well.

Near the end of her essay Mellor observes that Bromion, not Oothoon, wears the ankle fetters of the slave in the frontispiece, suggesting that "*all three* characters remain trapped within Bromion's caves" (her italics). Yes: if Blake learned something from Wollstonecraft, perhaps it was that slavery involves both the slave and the tyrant in an extensive economy that is financial, psychological, sexual, political, and moral. If Oothoon is a slave, she is unlikely to be, in any plain way, Blake's spokesperson; neither is Bromion or Theotormon. The character who speaks an attractive language or who looks great in pictures but is dangerous—tyrannical, misleading, or incomplete—is very familiar in Blake. Why suppose that Oothoon is the exception? I submit that Oothoon is only *a* voice, not Blake's voice, in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*.

To get at Blake's racial and sexual politics another way, Mellor introduces an opposition between texts and designs: while his texts (like Stedman's) "acknowledge" or even "insist," his designs "deny," "evade," or "erase;" the text "insists" that Oothoon is pregnant but the design "visually erases" her pregnancy. Mellor finds it "more troubling" that "Blake's designs erase the spectacle of male violence against the female body. We do *not* see," she says, "Bromion raping Oothoon." Worse, Blake "transforms . . . slavery . . . into a . . . *metaphor*!" As *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* is unfortunately nothing *but* a tissue of textual and visual metaphors—where having sex (if that is what it is) is plucking flowers, and characters with names like "Oothoon" fly over the waves until characters with names

like "Bromion" do things like "rent her with his thunders" (*Visions* 1:16, E 46)—how can such a powerful hunger for literalization be satisfied?

By shrinking from realistic depictions of violence, Blake "distances us from the physical tortures of slavery": Mellor assumes that there should be a supporting, reinforcing relationship between text and image; if the text says "rape" (which it does not: it speaks of "renting" and "thunders"), the image should picture the rape of one human being by another in the "documentary style" that Lavater and Camper could have helped Blake cultivate. Such presumed obligations of image to text fail to take into account any of the vast differences, in substance as well as style, between textual and pictorial conventions. In general, one can write much more than one can show, as showing has been regarded as closer to doing than to thinking. (Thus Mellor treats Blake's pictures in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* as if they were after-the-fact tests of his words—he can talk the talk but can he walk the walk?—without explaining why we should not regard the words as explicit confirmations and reinforcements of suggestions first glimpsed in the pictures.) Those differences should leap to the fore in any consideration of text and illustration in Stedman's *Narrative*. I do not think I am alone in finding the violence depicted in the engravings (Blake's as well as the other engravers' who contributed to the project) more shocking in overall impact than the violence named in Stedman's text. Be that as it may, such outcomes are not simple matters of erasure in one medium of the message in another.

More important, since Blake is not reporting violence in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* but making it up—this is an allegorical fiction—it would seem necessary to make distinctions between the way we regard responsible and irresponsible writing in those two different forms. We may agree that the "physical tortures of slavery" should be adequately accounted for in documentary reports on slavery. (Whether it follows that an adequate accounting requires a graphic representation of every act of violence described in the text is questionable.) But I cannot see Oothoon's lot in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* as equal to the lot of a slave in Surinam or South Carolina. The standard of authorial responsibility cannot be the same. What does it mean to claim that Blake's poetry names violence that his design erases? Is this an act of (partial) retraction? Cowardice? Self-censorship? If so, why did he not revise the text? How is it possible to erase a text with a design? What gives the design such special powers? More broadly, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* is a lie, and lies cannot be directly and simply responsible for telling the truth, especially not our truths—even though the *ways* of the lie, its angles of inclination toward the truth, are certainly worth discussing. Mellor proposes a criterion of staggering authorial responsibil-

ity: "As the creator of this poem and its designs, Blake must take responsibility for what the work does not say as well as for what it does say." But then—what *does* the work say?

Bindman's and Mellor's ways of extracting ideology from poetic and pictorial evidence return me to my opening reflections on the significance of difficulty in the history of reading Blake's illuminated books. With their readings in mind, I might frame the issue as follows. Stedman is relatively easy to understand. Wollstonecraft is relatively easy to understand. Camper and Lavater are not all that difficult to understand. By comparison, Blake is very difficult to understand. I have read *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* perhaps fifty times and still cannot claim to get it. I do not understand the motto. (Neither do I understand the motto to *Thel*.)

I read a typical passage from Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*:

Slavery to monarchs and ministers, which the world will be long in freeing itself from, and whose deadly grasp stops the progress of the human mind is not yet abolished.

Let not men then in the pride of power, use the same arguments that tyrannic kings and venal ministers have used, and fallaciously assert that woman ought to be subjected because she has always been so. . . .

It is time to effect a revolution in female manners—time to restore to them their lost dignity—and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world.¹⁷

Now I read one from *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*:

Now thou maist marry Bromions harlot, and protect the child
Of Bromions rage, that Oothoon shall put forth in nine moons time

Then storms rent Theotormons limbs; he rolld his waves around.
And folded his black jealous waters round the adulterate pair
Bound back to back in Bromions caves terror & meekness dwell

At entrance Theotormon sits wearing the threshold hard
With secret tears; beneath him sound like waves on a desart shore
The voice of slaves beneath the sun, and children bought with money.

17. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), ed. Carol H. Poston, 2d ed. (New York and London, 1988), 45.

That shiver in religious caves beneath the burning fires
Of lust, that belch incessant from the summits of the earth

Oothoon weeps not: she cannot weep! her tears are locked up;
But she can howl incessant writhing her soft snowy limbs
And calling Theotormons Eagles to prey upon her flesh.

(2:1-13, E 46)

The first sounds to me like an explicit critique and condemnation of a social system and its effects, complete with equally explicit proposals for reform. The second sounds to me like a narrative poem (with pictures). However much the two may be said to overlap, the differences between them, I believe, are of major significance. "The Little Black Boy" and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* are not cast simply as political critiques. They are, rather, expressions of desire with elements of political critique. But neither is cast simply as an expression of authorial desire. Authorial desires in Wollstonecraft are reasonably apparent. She states what she wants directly. We are left to infer what Blake wants from narratives in which Blake is not a speaking character.

In Blake, especially, I would think, the codes are simply too complex and cryptic—or too ambiguous and contradictory—to be cracked by straightforward reference to big public categories such as "evangelical," "Christian," "rationalist," and "abolitionist," not to mention big late-twentieth-century categories such as "sexist," "racist," and so on. We can agree that Blake uses the discourse of Christianity as one of his master discourses, but he is no Christian in the regular sense; he is not convenient to history. He is simply too much the contrarian to be caught and held that way, just as he could not be captured in earlier efforts to make him out as the universal archetypal, or the purveyor of Kathleen Raine's "perennial religion." To his credit, E. P. Thompson saw the danger:

If Blake in these prophetic books moved away from deism, and ultimately into sharp antagonism to rationalism in the assertion of his own "everlasting gospel," it is not very helpful to argue that he was moving towards (or back to) anything recognisable as Christianity, orthodox or heterodox. For if he had been doing so he would have had no need to labour at the creation of his own mythic system.¹⁸

18. E. P. Thompson, *Witness against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge, 1993), 216.

Still, Thompson was too much of a collectivist himself—and a historian too devoted to the proposition that the present is the way it is because the past was the way it was to settle for Blake as a unique individual with a unique imagination. Instead, Thompson looked around until he located the smallest of small historical categories, Muggletonian, and drew *that* tiny circle around Blake as among the last of the Muggletonians—a category with a discernible past, a present represented by scarcely anyone other than Blake, and a future that ended in some British garage in our own time. That, I would say, is cutting it very fine. I do not personally see Blake as a Muggletonian in any interesting sense, although I respect the effort to see him as one for honoring the double enigmas of Blake's terrific oddity and his kinship with marginal others. The trend-lines at least are right, I believe, and Thompson's focused, archival approach is the one that promises the greatest gains at this point in the history of Blake studies.

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