

Blake's Workshop

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“Mechanical Excellence is the Only Vehicle of Genius”

Allow me to take the easy way out of this “chain prophecy” by predicting three things in the future of Blake studies which are interrelated and which I think we can all agree are inevitable: 1) more of Blake’s art work will be made available to us through reproductions; 2) there will be more critical comment about Blake’s illuminated books from linguistic philosophers and art historians, as well as from literary scholars, and 3) the scholarship of Blake scholarship will become increasingly unwieldy.

Now, all this activity is good news if you think aesthetic experience is based on one’s relation to the work of art as well as to the experience of that work by others, which is to say, on the entire linguistic context in which the art work and one’s response belongs. On the other hand, if you think that art is “addressed to the Imagination, which is Spiritual Sensation, and but mediately to the Understanding or Reason,” [1] or that “it is impossible for the Understanding to comprehend Beauty,” [2] then what we will do to Blake has diminishing returns. The more a work of art becomes an object of criticism, the less it is an object of intuition. Nevertheless, whatever your definition of the aesthetic object or experience, one thing is certain: before there can be any kind of aesthetic or critical response, the work of art has to first come into being. This is true whether you identify the aesthetic object with the work of art itself, or locate it in the spectator’s mind, or in the interaction between the spectator and artifact, or in the artist’s mind, or think that the whole question about aesthetic objects is based on linguistic ambiguity in aesthetic discourse. And besides there having to be a work of art before there can be an experience of it, one other thing is certain: the conditions under which the art work comes into being shape what the work is and means.

Under what conditions did Blake’s works come to be? We have actually come a long way in answering this question in that we now know better than to think of Blake as a “naive genius” working

in a vacuum. We need, of course, still “more work that tells us just how Blake fits into his time,” but that he was “part of his social and intellectual climate” has, fortunately, become an article of faith, at least among literary critics. Yet, analyzing Blake’s art within the context of 18th-century culture, which admittedly makes good theoretical sense, will not tell us what Blake’s “pictorial art is all about,” nor will “more conversation across the academic disciplines” of literary criticism and art history, which admittedly is necessary before we can develop a “language that will deal effectively with Blake’s art.” We will never fully understand how Blake’s art came to be if this conversation continues to exclude voices able to speak the language studied, i.e., the language of art, and specifically the language inherent in the media Blake used, and if the context remains only social and intellectual and continues to exclude the workshop. Essick’s advice to “the methodological sophisticates [to] stay in close contact with traditional historical scholarship” applies here: art and literary critics should stay in contact with artists, for the artist’s point of view can provide a “crucial anchor for critical speculations.” If we do not include the workshop and artist in our conversations about Blake’s art, I think we will continue to remark: “This is not what pictorial art is all about.”

It is not that craft and technical matters are de-emphasized in critical analysis; they are simply ignored altogether. It does seem that one’s answer to the question “how does art come to be?” depends on the side of the easel one stands on. Perceiving art as the act of translating preconceived ideas or images into a given medium prevents one from realizing what artists acknowledge intuitively: that processes and materials play a significant role in defining the very nature of works of art. To perceive art as the act of translating ideas is to perceive media as simply an obstacle or mediating vehicle artists must deal with in order to express their ideas and visions. The critical question is: Where did the *idea* come from. Answer that and you’ll know how the work came to be. Never mind that the art work literally comes from the workshop, and that Blake knew that work brings inspiration and vision, that “Execution is the Chariot of Genius,” [3] never mind that Blake thought that “people [who] say give me the ideas, it is no matter what Words you put them into” and those who “say give me the design, it is no matter for the execution . . . know enough of Artifice but Nothing of Art.” [4]

This attitude toward the messy business of making art is manifest in our thinking that Blake is less concerned about the quality of the marks made than what the marks mean, or as Blake and his

contemporaries would have put it, less concerned about execution and more about invention. Aren't we treating Blake as a "naive genius" when we think the lines aren't quite right, but that's okay, the mind is in the right place? For the sake of the vision as a whole, poorly proportioned parts are justified, overlooked, or excused; the issue of bad art is sidestepped altogether. But no matter how literary and symbolic a painting is, visual art is not prose. The idea that the subject does not determine the meaning of a painting is, of course, anything but new, but giving it anything but lip service in Blake studies would be. And critics will continue to subordinate form to content not only because of an inability to understand the meaning of form, but also because of an eagerness to excuse or explain sloppy work—and, yes, many of the illuminated prints were pulled and colored carelessly and uncaringly. On the other hand, there are books like *Urizen*, copy F, *Marriage*, copies I and H, *Songs*, copies Y and Z, *Europe*, copy C, and many others whose visual splendor reveal a love and intensity which can only be realized when artist and craftsman—and thinker—are perfectly united. It must be admitted and remembered that without such a union there would be no cause for seriously studying Blake as an *artist* in the first place.

A related but distinct opinion that also results from thinking of Blake more as a poet-philosopher and less as an artist is that he was *overly concerned* with each and every mark made, that the "minute particulars" of swirl, leaf, and bird—not to mention the direction of Los's big toe—is overwrought with symbolic significance. Reading in this light, one critic even interprets the ink splatters in the background of *Jerusalem* prints as intentional mistakes made to remind the reader of the mechanical process behind the book. Acknowledging that process affects product is the right idea, but this is an overzealous interpretation, especially since Blake can never be accused of belonging to the "crystal goblet" school of printing. His books always show traces of the process. Indeed, it is snakes, birds, and other interlinear decorations that most clearly reveal the printing process, or rather, Blake thinking in terms of the process, of knowing that what he does during the execution of the plate-image will affect and be affected by what he does in later stages. Filling out a line of poetry and breaking up space with decorations makes good technical sense because a tightly composed design is easier to etch and ink: it does not have to be bitten as long and deeply as one with open areas, and it keeps the ink dabber on the surface, thereby decreasing the likelihood of ink being deposited in the

shallows—unintentionally. Breaking tip space also creates, of course, a visual arrangement of marks and space on the page, an arrangement that can move the eye of the reader or fix it on a certain word or image, in addition to being pleasing in itself. This is not to say that pictograms and other decorations in illuminated books are not significant, but only that marks on any given plate may function as part of the composition, or as part of the relief line system, and not necessarily, or only, as symbols from the Kabala.

The point here is that if we are going to treat Blake's illuminated books seriously as art, then we cannot excuse poor work because we are more concerned with ideas, nor can we read all marks as hieroglyphics. There are many reasons why something is the way it is in the illuminated books, why something is added, or deleted, or changed, looks good or bad. Aesthetic and technical considerations, and not just ideas, should be given more attention since they play a more important role in compositional decisions than is generally acknowledged.

The formula that Blake “had intense ideas and a peculiar imagination which he wanted to express” [5] should not blind us to the fact that ideas and forms—both visual and poetic—do not exist separately or causally, as is implied by the syntax: first there is an idea and imagination, then there is its expression. To think that they do is to fail to understand that in bringing forth the artifact there is a dialogue between the artist and the medium in which the artist both creates and receives impressions, and, even more importantly, that this dialogue is already taking place in the mind of the artist before anything touches the paper or canvas. This is why the means of expression is part of the idea expressed.

Perhaps if the two dominant ways of viewing art, i.e., as a means of expressing and communicating ideas, that is to say, symbolically, and as formal design, that is to say, objectively, were not seen as mutually exclusive (like cultural and technical contexts), we would not feel so obliged to place Blake in only the former camp and read his visual art like poetry and prose. These two views form a continuum of ideal types; artists, however, are real people and Blake, as a real artist, must have existed somewhere in between these ideals, recognizing in the artifact both its symbolic and objective realities. This syllogism may be simplistic, but I do feel very strongly that Blake knew that whatever else art communicates, it must communicate itself to succeed as art. Literally and

metaphysically the image *is* the idea, and the artifact must be experienced, and not just be about an experience, if it is going to qualify as an “improvement of sensual enjoyment” [6] and be experienced by the senses, “the chief inlets of [the] Soul.” [7] It is the combination of formal organization and communication, and not just the combination of poetry and illustration, which makes the illuminated books composite art.

Analyzing the poetry, art, and aesthetics in the context of the physical and metaphysical workshop is, admittedly, more difficult than most other kinds of analyses. What little has been done to date is of dubious value, mostly because the attempt to acquire an approach as interdisciplinary as Blake's has relied on “conversation across . . . *academic* disciplines” only. I would like to agree with Essick about art historians being able to discern the importance of “formal and stylistic considerations,” but it has been my experience that too many tend to distrust people who get their hands dirty and that they seem, as Adams has pointed out, to be “deeply mired in assumptions that don't allow for Blake's existence.” They are just as prone as literary critics to read art as icon rather than as graphia. And when it comes to the illuminated books, they are no better informed than literary critics about the literature pertaining to the graphic arts, the diversity within 18th-century graphic arts, and the aesthetic context in which Blake's relief etchings properly belong.

So, if a literary or art critic does not already know the arts of printing and painting—knowing in the sense an artist knows, which is, I suppose, analogous to knowing Young, Blair, and Ossian as an 18th-century poet knew them—the critic is not likely to understand in any great detail terms and practices no longer used, nor be able to see how the historical record reflects the thinking of artists, a kind of thinking we see manifested in Blake's art and ideas about art. There seems to be, then, something of a “catch 22” preventing our entering the workshop and obtaining Blake's point of view regarding his pictorial art. One needs to already know the processes to fully understand the historical record, but without scholarly research into 18th-century practices one cannot completely know the processes. But the paradox is only apparent. It is not a question of one person having to synthesize all these things well, but rather of critics, scholars, and artists acknowledging that the conditions that shaped and brought forth Blake's art are technical as well as intellectual and social, and that all of these conditions should be taken into account when studying the art, the aesthetics, and the man.

It makes good theoretical and practical sense, then, to think of the workshop as an integral part of the cultural context in which we place Blake and his art. The art materials and methods that he used and the vocational literature of his day form a significant part of the cultural and psychological context out of which evolved Blake's art, his ideas on art, and his conception of himself as an artist. By knowing this particular technical matrix, we can begin to examine the effect that Blake's work as a printer and painter had not only on the language and imagery in the composite art, but also on his aesthetics and his idea of self. By knowing the cultural associations as well as the details of the processes, we will also begin to recognize verbal and visual allusions to technique that have been overlooked, misread, or whose significance has been underestimated. It is my belief, at any rate, that studio work combined with historical research is a kind of investigation that should be encouraged and taken more seriously; it will help us to understand what Blake borrowed, altered, rejected, and invented in practice and theory, and to appreciate more fully Blake's pictorial art as art.

NOTES

[*] *Studies in Romanticism* 21 (Fall, 1982):404-409.

[1] "To Rev. Trusler," August 23, 1799, *The Letters of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1970), p. 30.

[2] G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics*, tr. by T. M. Knox (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1975), vol I, p. 111.

[3] "Annotations to Reynolds" in *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1965), p. 632.

[4] "Public Address"; Erdman, p. 565.

[5] Laurence Binyon, *The Drawings and Engravings of William Blake* (London: The Studio Ltd; 1922), p. 3.

[6] *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 14.

[7] *Ibid*, plate 4.