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# *Once Only Imagined*

## **About the Participants**

**Morris Eaves** || **Robert N. Essick** || **Joseph Viscomi** || **Kari Kraus**

**Morris Eaves** is co-editor of the William Blake Archive with Robert Essick and Joseph Viscomi and Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly with Morton D. Paley. He is author of William Blake's Theory of Art and The Counter-Arts Conspiracy: Art and Industry in the Age of Blake. The Cambridge Companion to Blake, with new essays by fourteen contributors, will be published later this year. His research has been principally concerned with literature and the visual arts in connection with the histories of technology and commerce. In that vein, his current projects focus on the implications of editorial theories and practices. "Posterity," a book in progress, is about the editorial powers of the audience. He is Professor of English at the University of Rochester.

**Robert N. Essick** has been collecting and writing about Blake for over 30 years. Current projects include continued work on the online Blake Archive, an essay (with Joe Viscomi) on Blake's color printing methods, a facsimile edition of the Huntington Library copy of Visions of the Daughters of Albion, a Blake exhibition at the Huntington Art Gallery to open in January 2003, an essay (with Rosamund Paice) on some newly-discovered Blake pencil sketches, and the annual review of Blake sales for Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly. He is a Professor of English at the University of California, Riverside.

**Joseph Viscomi** has written numerous articles on Blake, including "Illuminated Printing" in the Cambridge Companion to Blake, a trilogy on the evolution of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, and a trilogy on Blake's nineteenth-century patrons and collectors. He is also the author of Blake and the Idea of the Book and Prints by Blake and His Followers, a catalogue to an exhibition he organized at the Herbert Johnson Museum, Cornell University, and the co-editor of volumes 3 (with Eaves and Essick) and 5 (with Essick) of the Blake Trust's The Illuminated Books. He is currently working on a web site for his 1983 theatre adaptation of Blake's An Island in the Moon, which will include video of the performance, music, text, and photographs; and on an essay on nineteenth-century Blake reproductions and forgeries. He is the James G. Kenan Professor of English Literature at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

**Kari Kraus**, a doctoral student in English at the University of Rochester, is interested in the changes that texts, paintings, other artifacts, and their reproductions undergo in the transmission through time and space. Extensions of that interest are the various techniques—ranging from capricious guesswork to textual stemmatics to state-of-the-art image processing advances—that have evolved over thousands of years to deal with information loss and gain. Conjectural criticism, the subject of her dissertation, is the attempt to reconstruct what an object once was or predict what it might be in the future. The dissertation in part takes a case study approach, examining the conjectural tradition in the history of Blake editions and reproductions.

# *Once Only Imagined*

## **An Interview with Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi**

**Interview conducted by Kari Kraus, University of Rochester**

The late David Erdman once called attention to S. Foster Damon's "eccentric and occasionally oracular" style—a statement of more than passing interest from a brilliant critic who in many ways could have been speaking of himself.<sup>[1]</sup> Blake scholars have long engaged in the sport of calling one another prophet or mystic, imputing the characteristics of their author to those who study him. Taunts of "oracle" and "occultist"—alternatingly maddening and clever, petty and spot-on, depending on the circumstances—lurk in Blake articles, monographs, reviews, notes, and conference papers.<sup>[2]</sup> The prophetic trope is more often than not delivered as a throwaway and read accordingly.

Two decades ago, in 1982, *Studies in Romanticism* published a special issue on Blake that turned the prophetic trope on its head. Conceived as a tribute to David Erdman, the issue included an interview with him and a round-table on the future of Blake studies edited by Morris Eaves.<sup>[3]</sup> Eaves not only found the soothsayers in his midst, but took things one step further by giving them an assignment. How he persuaded ten esteemed Blake scholars, all of presumably sound mind, to try on for size the mantle of prophecy I can't say, but the results make for startling reading, even—or especially—at this late date.<sup>[4]</sup> Regardless of whether or not individual predictions have made the transition from counterfactuals to factials in the twenty years that have lapsed since their publication, the round robin gives a bracing look at how its contributors imagined the future landscape of Blake criticism. The time is ripe to assess their prophetic hits and misses, as well as reach out to the next generation of Blake scholars who will one day stand in the same relation to these pages as I do to their prototype.

Because 2002 marks not only the twentieth anniversary of that remarkable issue of *SiR*, but also the tenth anniversary of the conception of the electronic [William Blake Archive](#) <sup>[5]</sup>, a project that for some has come to iconify the future of Blake studies, I asked its editors—Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi—if they'd be willing to do the mantic honors again, this time around as a threesome.<sup>[6]</sup> In the text of the interview that follows—conducted via email in January, February, and March of 2002—they've done just that, reprising their prophetic roles, and at my bidding reflecting on their own scholarship—past, present, and future. While topics of conversation run the gamut from the winsome (Blake kitsch) to the peculiar (hypothetical extensions of Blake's canon), such diversity is subordinate to recurrent themes that shape the momentum of the four-way exchange, particularly those of reproduction, materiality, and representation. Perhaps in the hands of this interviewer things couldn't have been otherwise. It is in this context that I have used the interview as an occasion to draw from Eaves, Essick, and Viscomi a view of the Blake Archive as they see it from the scaffolds and a sense of its place in the history of Blake reproductions and editing.

Because we live in an age when rapid technological obsolescence is a truism, the more technical questions and answers of the interview are likely to acquire a patina before their time. If today they hold the promise of new knowledge and research tools, tomorrow they will remind us that the future is always refracted through the eye of history, distorted by the force and limitations of a collective imagination. "What is now proved was once only imagined," Blake tells us (MHH 8, E 36),<sup>[7]</sup> on the face of it suggesting perfect agreement between conjectural and empirical truth, the one co-extensive with the other, although temporally disjoint. In this view, history plays the role of generative grammarian, transforming the subjunctive mood in which we cast our speculations about the future into the indicative mood of fact and experience. Yet it is a representation that fails to take into account the *prima facie* truth of prophecy, irrespective of its fulfillment in

time. The high jinks of the fool's prophecies in *King Lear* or the incandescence of the conjectures of A. E. Housman or the loud proclamations of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in his Futurist manifesto are specimens of a genre whose merits are measured by criteria other than provability.

The kind of prophecy practiced by Eaves, Essick, and Viscomi in the discussion that follows takes the more elementary form of a "personal accounting" and a "directive for future acts." The quotation comes from *Poems for the Millennium*, whose editors, Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris,<sup>[8]</sup> are describing manifestos, not prophecies, but its aptness points to a kinship between the two genres deserving of further attention. In her anthology of manifestos, Mary Ann Caws notes that the manifesto "is always opposed to something, particular or general."<sup>[9]</sup> In 1982, that something for Eaves was the myth of a Blake industry, the idea of a central command center responsible for overseeing traffic in Blake criticism. Using his introduction to the chain prophecy as a bully pulpit from which to knock down some wrongheaded ideas about Blake scholarship, Eaves had his fun with the prevailing conspiracy theory of the day. While the present interview makes no attempt to update Eaves's send-up for the new millennium, it shares with its predecessor other manifesto-like qualities, particularly in the way it "positions itself between what has been done and what will be done, between the accomplished and the potential, in . . . an energizing division."<sup>[10]</sup> To borrow Eaves's words of twenty years ago, I hope the results make for interesting reading.<sup>[11]</sup>

A print version of this interview appears in a special issue of *Studies in Romanticism* on Blake (Summer 2002, volume 41). I wish to thank the journal's editor, David Wagenknecht, and the general editors of Romantic Circles—Neil Fraistat, Steven E. Jones, and Carl Stahmer—for facilitating this publication arrangement. I'd also like to thank Matthew Kirschenbaum for creating the title image for the electronic version. **[KK]**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Erdman's remark appears in a review of Damon's *A Blake Dictionary* in the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 65 (1966): "One expected a 'dictionary' prepared by a mind as independent and forceful as Professor Damon's to be eccentric and occasionally oracular and no mere mill of data with complicated references" (607).

<sup>2</sup> The prophetic trope courses through the history of Blake criticism; let me limit myself to two examples that bookend the twentieth century: John Sampson's exasperation with the Ellis and Yeats edition of Blake led to a disdainful statement about the putative "occult powers" of its editors in the preface to his own 1905 edition (*The Poetical Works of William Blake* [Oxford: Clarendon P] xxviii). My second example, "cyber prophets," is chosen as much for its infelicity as its recent vintage. See Andrew Cooper and Michael Simpson, "The High-Tech Luddite of Lambeth: Blake's Eternal Hacking," *The Wordsworth Circle* 30 (1999): 130.

<sup>3</sup> Morris Eaves, ed., *Romantic Texts, Romantic Times: Homage to David Erdman*, spec. issue of *Studies in Romanticism* 21 (1982). Carl Woodring edited the Coleridge portion of the issue.

<sup>4</sup> The prophecies are collected in a subsection of the special issue: *Inside the Blake Industry: Past, Present, and Future* (389-443). Original participants included David Erdman, Robert N. Essick, Hazard Adams, Joseph Viscomi, W. J. T. Mitchell, Nelson Hilton, Morton D. Paley, Karl Kroeber, Robert Gleckner, and John

E. Grant.

<sup>5</sup> *The William Blake Archive*, ed. Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi, vers. 2.0, 1996-2002 <<http://www.blakearchive.org>>. For the genesis of the WBA, see Eaves, "Collaboration Takes More than E-mail: Behind the Scenes at the Blake Archive," *The Journal of Electronic Publishing* 3.2 (1997) <<http://www.press.umich.edu/jep/03-02/blake.html>>.

[6](#) An equally interesting but more logistically challenging exercise would have been to reassemble as much of the original cast as possible for a sequel.

[7](#) Unless otherwise noted, quotations of Blake's work are taken from David Erdman's standard one-volume edition: *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1965; revised edition 1982), here and elsewhere referred to parenthetically as "E". The in-text "E" documentation makes use of standard abbreviations for Blake's works.

[8](#) *Poems for the Millennium*, vol. 2, *From Postwar to Millennium* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997) 405. Rothenberg and Joris are quoted in the introduction to *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2001) xxi.

[9](#) Caws xxi.

[10](#) Caws xxi.

[11](#) 390. Hereafter quotations from *Inside the Blake Industry* will be referenced parenthetically in the text.

# *Once Only Imagined*

## PART 1

### 1.

**KK:** I want to begin at the most obvious place by having each of you take another look at Morris's original occasion for the 1982 round robin. His injunction at the time was to assess "the state of the art in Blake studies and to prophecy: what has been done and how well, and what needs to be done?" (390). It's a directive that prompted some highly variable responses twenty years ago. How would you answer the same directive today?

And to complicate the question somewhat, I'd like to get your thoughts on what kind of reading the round robin makes in retrospect. From my vantage point, for example, the Golden Age of Reproduction that has flourished in the decades after 1982, of which the Blake Trust series and the *William Blake Archive* are exemplary products,[\[12\]](#) looks like a largely unanticipated development. My sense is that there was a certain amount of complacency about reproductive issues among the various participants, a feeling that much of the necessary spadework had been accomplished and that it was time to turn to the more heady work of interpretation. Is that a fair assessment of how things stood in the early 80s?

**RNE:** Yes, I think that is a fair assessment. No one anticipated—perhaps no one could have anticipated—the impact of computerized presses (essential to the Blake Trust series of the 1990s) and the Internet. Both the editing of Blake's texts and the reproduction of his pictorial images have been profoundly affected by these technical innovations. And I can't recall anyone saying much about the importance of exhibitions, both as a medium for scholarly investigation and as a way of making Blake the artist better known to the public. But prophecy is more fun than history, so I'll try my hand at some predictions once again.

It seems to me (this is all very subjective) that there have been two major developments in Blake studies, over the last twenty years, in addition to the electronic revolution already noted. Certainly the School of Erdman has triumphed over the School of Frye. Situating Blake within various historical contexts has been a major occupation on both sides of the Atlantic. At the same time, Blake's technologies as a printmaker have been eagerly explored. There is also some interesting work underway (but little published to date) on Blake's media and techniques as a painter. To these two recent strands of Blake studies let me add a third and seemingly outdated one. Some of us have not totally given up on explication, at least in the classroom. Erdman's *Prophet Against Empire*, generally seen as the godfather of the modern historical approach to Blake, is a work of interpretation as much as contextualization.[\[13\]](#) I think that the next development in Blake scholarship may well be an attempt to synthesize these three approaches in ways that engage context (political, religious, social) in the direct service of interpretation and explore the interconnections among Blake's methods of writing, drawing, etching, printing. The ideological implications of graphic technologies, as it were, coupled with the ways Blake's texts and images were both shaped by and point toward their methods of production and their producer's social context. I'm cheating a little in making this prophecy because I have already seen this type of synthesis unfolding in Saree Makdisi's book on Blake, forthcoming from Chicago UP, and Rosamund Paice's essay on Blake's *Laocoön* engraving, forthcoming in *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*.[\[14\]](#)

**JV:** Although Gleckner, Adams, and a few others warned against reading the poetry to support theories (still excellent advice), you may be right about "reproductive issues" taking a backseat to "the more heady work of interpretation." But I guess you had to be there. Entering the 1980s, we seemed a long way from needing Bob's "Finding List of Reproductions of Blake's Art" (1971). What was once scattered was now coming together in a manageable number of reference works. Martin Butlin's magnificent 1981 catalogue raisonné of

the paintings and drawings (twenty years in the making, though actually begun by William Michael Rossetti for Gilchrist's *Life of Blake* in 1863) was now available, as were Bindman's *Complete Graphic Works of William Blake* (1978), Bob's *William Blake, Printmaker* (1980), with his catalogue raisonné of the separate plates in press; we had the Clarendon edition of Blake's *Night Thoughts* (1980); reproductions of Dante (1980); the illustrations to Thomas Gray (1971); facsimile editions of *Job, Grave, Vala, Tiriél* and the Notebook; and catalogues for exhibitions at Kunsthalle Hamburg, Tate Gallery, and Yale Center for British Art (1975, 1978, and 1982). In addition to the Blake Trust/Trianon Press facsimiles, we had Erdman's *Illuminated Blake* (1974) and affordable editions of *Marriage, Milton, Songs, and Urizen* in full color. We had two journals (*Blake Studies* and *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*); an annual bibliography; a reprint of Damon's dictionary with a helpful index by Morris (1979); Bentley's enormous *Blake Books*, describing every copy of every illuminated book and every engraving (1977); and fine editions of the poetry and prose by Keynes, Erdman, and Bentley. We even had a Norton critical edition (1979).

All this industry culminated in Blake finally making it into the standard reference of Romantic studies, Jordan's fourth edition of *The English Romantic Poets* (1985). Missing from the first three editions, Blake was no longer "preromantic"; *Blake Studies* had affected and benefited from ongoing re-evaluations of Romanticism itself, resulting in Blake becoming an essential figure of the movement. So, not only were we ready to get on with the "heady" stuff of interpretation, but we fully expected and hoped art historians would join in. Many of us recognized that reading Blake's art required more than translating pictures into text and interpreting the translation. We recognized the need for more dialogue across academic disciplines if, as Adams noted, "there is any hope of a language being developed that will deal more successfully with Blake" (401). Paley was so optimistic that he feared "a rash of iconographic 'readings'" and a misuse of all the new scholarly tools (427). Blake had been served very well by a few British and European art historians (Blunt, Butlin, Bindman, Lindberg, Dörrbecker), and what Bob saw as the prerequisites to legitimizing Blake in the eyes of American art historians were met: catalogue raisonnés, higher prices at the auction houses, and exhibitions. So why did American art historians not join the feast?

I'd like to think that the quality of the reproductions (black and white, too few in color, very few to size) failed to entice, but that can't be it. Art historians have been relying on poor reproductions for years. I suspect, as Adams noted, that art historians are still "too deeply submerged in assumptions that don't allow for Blake's existence" (401), or, as Grant put it, are trained to see by Reynolds (442). At the time, I said that art historians were usually no better informed about graphic art than their literary counterparts. Even in art history departments where British Art is not an oxymoron, print remains the bastard child and Blake continues to fall between the cracks. He is a graphic artist and a painter tied to the word, working—primarily in watercolors—and painting idealized figures in the great ages of portraiture and landscape painting in oils. Blake's place in literature required changes in literary taste; apparently, as Bob noted all those years ago, a similar change of "taste" in art history is still needed if Blake is to move from "naïve genius" outside the "main course of European art" to an essential part of that course.

If we were complacent about reproductions, it was because we seemed to have so many—and expected so little from them. Celebrating the publications of Butlin's catalogue and the Clarendon *Night Thoughts*, Grant said: "Although many of the reproductions in both volumes are not of good quality, their shortcomings are not seriously misleading" (442). This is true so far as it goes—compositions are represented in their entirety, but the images are not true to size or color (even the ones in color) and are but shadows of the originals. They point to the original rather than reproduce it. What you refer to as the largely unanticipated "Golden Age of Reproduction" that occurred in the 90s is golden, I think, less for the number of new (and affordable) color reproductions than for the incredible fidelity now possible. We now have digital reproductions that can be studied in place of the originals by editor, literary scholar, and art historian. And as Blake's popularity increases, resulting in more exhibitions and higher prices at the auction houses and, ironically, less access to the originals, the need for such reproductions will only increase. With print reproductions, we were satisfied with basic information about the composition. Now, with high-resolution, color-corrected digital images we

have information about the artifact; we can tell if something has been erased from the paper, added to the print, or altered in pen and ink, and much more. I hope that this kind of bibliographical, aesthetic, and technical information, as well the ability to manipulate images on one's home computer to detect what has heretofore required examination of the originals, stimulates new ways to teach, research, and think about art in general and Blake in particular. Bob's and my "Inquiry into Blake's Method of Color Printing" is a case in point.<sup>[15]</sup> It uses new technology and digital reproductions in the service of scholarship and could not have been written twenty years ago. Digital reproductions of Blake's color prints and of our facsimiles provided incredible details that enabled us to marshal material facts about production and technique that fall below the threshold of vision, even in the originals.

Our reliance on reproductions will increase, and changes in the mode and quality of reproduction will necessarily affect the what and way we know. These kinds of epistemological questions inevitably arise with changes in representation and are, in the wake of the Internet, affecting intellectual culture at large and not just the study of Blake. Nevertheless, it seems our hopes today echo those made twenty years ago. As Gleckner said then, we now have the scholarly tools to "reach a more intelligent interpretation" of Blake (435). The Blake Archive will continue to grow over the next decade with Blake's paintings, prints, sketches, drawings, and manuscripts; with its excellent reproductions, diplomatic texts, and searchable images, it will provide the raw material for critical, interpretive, bibliographical, and art historical analyses. May complacency about reproductions turn to enthusiasm and art historians take note.

**ME:** To some extent the 1982 assessment was correct. Joe gives the details that lay behind the sense of satisfaction that most of the basic scholarly tools and materials were finally in place—and, as he says, maybe you had to be there. It's also true that, as predicted, a healthy flow of criticism and interpretation continued in the 80s (and 90s), but for the most part it didn't, I believe, build on any consensus established in the previous period. That is, it refused to be fully part of any continuing project. Scholars like to talk about the "community of scholars" and their ongoing "conversations." Much of the published critical work in the last two decades of the century started more or less new conversations in tune with larger conversations in the humanities. Insofar as they've focused on political and historical issues they're in the line of Erdman, you might say, but by and large they haven't engaged directly with Erdman's interpretations of Blake.

But one of the chronic problems that Blake presents is information overload, and I comment further on this a bit later. Information overload is a problem that comes with being in the world these days, but Blake does exacerbate it—and makes the work of scholar-critics especially painful. Consider the prediction Bob made at the start of the interview, that "the next development in Blake scholarship may well be an attempt to synthesize these three approaches in ways that engage context (political, religious, social) in the direct service of interpretation and explore the interconnections among Blake's methods of writing, drawing, etching, printing." Whew—that's a pretty tall order. There are advantages, after all, of having your field of vision limited ("English" and "art history" are useful disciplinary limits; the unillustrated printed edition of Blake is an imposed technical and economic limit, also useful sometimes). Some of the most brilliant work on Blake has been done in ignorance of the total picture. That sounds perverse and irresponsible, but it's true, and ignorance is one of the enabling conditions of scholarship. Hypothetically, if we were to provide critics with a virtual copy of all the information relevant to understanding Blake, we would give them the London of Blake's time (for a start, before giving them the rest). That's why people go digging into archives of old papers and pictures, to simulate that recovery of the past as best they can two hundred years after the fact. But aren't they lucky that the number of surviving documents is so limited! That's a line of argument that lands us back in 1952, before all those wonderful resources for studying Blake became available.

I agree with Joe's assessment that "with print reproductions, we were satisfied with basic information about the composition. Now, with high-resolution, color-corrected digital images we have information about the artifact; we can tell if something has been erased from the paper, added to the print, or altered in pen and ink, and much more." No sooner did "we" have the reproductions in Butlin's catalogue and Erdman's *Illuminated*



Blake, Bob's catalogues, and even the six Blake Trust volumes than we saw that, with new media, we could have more. As someone once wrote, or rather etched, "less than All cannot satisfy Man" (NNR [b], E 2). (And I easily looked that up in the [electronic Erdman](#) in the Blake Archive.)

## 2.

**KK:** Bob, in your answer to my first question you touch on two venerable genres of scholarship as leading indicators of the state of the art in Blake studies; let me ask you about another in which you've had a longstanding interest. If editions and critical monographs, which you discuss above, are two obvious yardsticks by which we measure an author's critical reputation, then the scholarly biography is a clear third. Though I haven't tallied the number of Blake biographies that have been written to date, it's a fairly sizeable lot; lining them up side by side would offer visual proof—if any was needed—that the idea of a definitive biography is as much a myth to be debunked as that of a definitive edition. We keep churning out new biographies of Blake because each generation of biographers has its own totems and taboos; the question of Blake's sanity, for example, is one that has waxed and waned in popularity over time.

In 1982, you sounded the call for a new biography of Blake, one "informed by modern psychological insights" (399). By 1995, Peter Ackroyd had come out with a life of Blake, with G. E. Bentley Jr. following suit a few years later in 2001. In your opinion, what kind of Blake does each of them give us? And is the rich psychological portrait you imagined twenty years ago still a desideratum of Blake scholarship today?

**RNE:** I think that an interpretive life of Blake, one that takes into account modern insights into psychology, is still a requisite. To paint with a very broad brush, Ackroyd's *Blake* (1995) could be placed in the category of a "popular biography." Unlike some of my academic friends, who found some factual errors in the book and thus dismissed it, I think that Ackroyd does a good job, although the portrait of Blake that emerges is not all that different from what we knew about Blake's character from earlier biographers, Alexander Gilchrist (1863) through Mona Wilson (1927). Bentley's *The Stranger from Paradise* (2001) is a thorough documentary life, one that further narratizes his indispensable *Blake Records* (1969) and updates it. Bentley's portrait of Blake has a curiously (but perhaps accurately) split personality. While the book is filled with quotidian facts (commissions, money, work, patrons), Bentley's sense of Blake, as the title suggests, is of a very other-worldly personality. The transcendent and the mundane never quite come together, but perhaps they never did for Blake either.

The current biographical scene still allows room for the sort of interpretive life I envisioned back in 1982. Although it would run the danger of falling into the biographical fallacy (if that beast still exists), the type of biography I have in mind would make more use of Blake's poetry as a portal into his character. To repeat a point I made twenty years ago, Blake wrote one of the most complex psychological and biographical poems in the language, *Milton a Poem*. If Wordsworth's biographers delve into *The Prelude*, why can't Blake's biographers have a go at *Milton*? Other psychologically-oriented approaches also come to mind, including a more self-conscious struggle with the spirit/matter split indicated by Bentley's biography.

Tom Mitchell raised the issue of Blake's sanity in 1982. The topic still seems resistant to critical inquiry. Most of Blake's admirers, from John Linnell to the present, have felt compelled to defend their hero against charges of insanity (or even the sorts of emotional instabilities we are all prone to) so that Blake's work would be taken seriously. Those who write about Vincent Van Gogh feel no such need, but a prejudice against unusual forms of brain chemistry still inhabits Blake studies. I've had trouble dropping any hints about Blake's possible schizophrenia (although I may have sneaked a sentence or two past Morris for his forthcoming Cambridge volume). Having known a few marginal schizophrenics (it's always a matter of degrees, and takes many forms), I find that they make startling connections among things that "normal" (but less insightful?) people do not perceive. If they could write poetry, they would create long, rambling poems filled with

polymorphous metaphors that would lead any scholars who took such writings seriously to respond with long, detailed critical studies seeking out the full range of the text's radiant meanings. Remind you of anyone you know?

### 3.

**KK:** Morris, I can't resist bringing up that cranky tone you adopted in the SiR introduction all those years ago. For readers who may not have seen the original, here are a few of your opening words: "I have been noticing more than usual lately just how wrong people can be about Blake scholarship. In the past decade many a loose-tongued author has tossed off complaints about a 'Blake industry' or a 'Blake establishment.' Stretching the meaning of 'industry' to include the collective curriculum vitae of Blake scholarship is as parochial as stretching the definition of 'universal' to include your favorite Victorian poem, and it only goes to show that most scholars would have a hard time spotting a real industry or a real universe across the library quadrangle" (389). As a reality check, you go on to substitute the "little, homemade, bumptious, and entirely unintimidating world of high Blake scholarship" for the fiction of a Blake industry you found all around you.

A lot has transpired in Blake studies since you wrote that introduction twenty years ago. As Joe notes elsewhere in this interview, "Blake Studies [has] . . . benefited from ongoing re-evaluations of Romanticism itself, resulting in Blake becoming an essential figure of the movement." Has our author's climb up the institutional ladder of success resulted in Blake scholarship becoming more of a bona fide industry (whatever that might mean), less a cottage industry over the years? Or is it as "homemade" and "bumptious" as ever—a clear case of *plus ça change plus c'est la même chose*?

**ME:** Hey! I thought my tone might have been reassuring—at least to those who had been fantasizing about a Blake industry that would oppress their critical expressions. Though I think I may see what Joe means when he says that Blake studies has "benefited from ongoing re-evaluations of Romanticism itself, resulting in Blake becoming an essential figure of the movement," I'd want to add that the most recent waves of reevaluation, from the mid-80s on, have tended to diminish the useful authority of Romanticism as a label altogether. Furthermore, although the available evidence suggests that Blake's reputation in what remains of this Romantic "movement" or "era" hasn't altered drastically, I don't sense that Blake has the cultural centrality, the being-here-now kind of presence, that he temporarily had back in the 60s and 70s. It's probably not an accident that *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* was born in 1968 as Morton Paley's *Blake Newsletter*. Although Blake's become something of a fixture now, he was probably a more successful cultural icon twenty and thirty years ago. And Blake scholarship, as I say elsewhere in the interview, is less integrated, less a project, now than it seemed then, at least to some.

### 4.

**KK:** We'll circle back to the Blake industry, but I want to spend some time indulging in a little retrospective prophecy by turning to Joe's 1996 BIQ essay on Blake's death.<sup>[16]</sup> Joe, the picture you paint of Blake's last 24 months or so of life is especially poignant for its friction between Blake's body progressively racked by pain and disease, and his defiant spirit struggling to go about daily work in the face of chronic illness. Engraving and drawing, always a spiritual anodyne, increasingly became a physical hardship for Blake to bear. But as you relate, he was dogged to the end, propping himself up with pillows when bedridden to write a letter or labor over the Dante illustrations throughout much of 1827.

In this context, you go on to discuss Blake's contemporary biographer, Frederick Tatham, and his staging of a deathbed scene that shows a supernaturally prolific Blake rallying in his last hours "to color, draw, sing, and talk."<sup>[17]</sup> It's as though at some level Tatham sought to compress all Blake's unfulfilled dreams for the future

into a final energetic fit of industry and productivity climaxing in death. While the genre of the scholarly biography—putatively factual and historical in its account—may not be the most obvious space for this sort of imaginative extension of an artistic canon, it seems to me that the kind of prophetic exercise we're engaged in here is. Looking back on Blake's final works—the Job engravings, the Dante watercolors and engravings, and others—can the three of you by their light see where Blake might have gone next, as printmaker or poet? This is retrodiction, not prediction:[\[18\]](#) granting Blake another five to ten years of relatively good health to pursue the work he loved, can the three of you sketch out, as a critical experiment, a brief descriptive catalogue of what might have been or almost was? How might Blake have developed technically and stylistically in the years 1827-1837?[\[19\]](#)

**RNE:** Blake left several projects incomplete at his death, including the Genesis Manuscript (now in the Huntington Library), the Dante engravings (all seven are clearly unfinished), and the watercolors illustrating Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (private collection). These he would have finished, and perhaps he would have executed more engravings after his Dante watercolors and a selection of the Bunyan designs. The most significant development in Blake's late career as a printmaker was the return to traditional line engraving without etching. His meeting John Linnell in 1818 was crucial, both artistically and financially, in prompting this change. My best guess is that Blake would have continued to execute line engravings under Linnell's patronage, particularly if the Job and Dante proved reasonably successful in the marketplace. The Job engravings are of course a return to images Blake had produced years earlier. Continuing with that model, perhaps Blake would have been commissioned by Linnell to engrave some of his illustrations to John Milton's poems. We know, for example, that Blake executed at least three *Paradise Lost* watercolors for Linnell in 1822, much as he and Linnell copied the Job watercolors first executed c. 1805-06. The 1822 *Paradise Lost* designs may have been the first steps toward a complete set for Linnell, and that in turn could have been the basis for a series of engravings like the Job. I think it rather less likely that Blake would have produced more relief-etched illuminated books, with the possible exception of brief tracts like *On Homers Poetry [and] On Virgil*.

In the last few years of his life, Blake is not known to have composed much poetry. I suspect that would have continued if he had been granted another decade of life. Short prose statements of the sort covering the *Laocoön* engraving seem to have been his preferred genre near the end of his days.

**JV:** I've written a bit about what others were doing about Blake and with their Blakes the first few decades after he died, but never thought about what he might have done had he lived another ten years. I am sure his to-do list remained long and fascinating. As Bob mentions, he left many projects unfinished, but he also had a lifetime of works he could return to, and returning to images and ideas and, as Bob has demonstrated in *Language of Adam*, reconceiving them each time they are executed was characteristic of Blake.[\[20\]](#) He could return to sketches and develop them into finished watercolors, paintings, or prints; or to any number of design series and redo them; or to any of his hundreds of copperplates, including, of course, those forming illuminated books. During the last year of his life, he reprinted in bright reddish-orange ink *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (copy I) and *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (copy X), both for the poisoner Wainwright, and finished them in his beautiful, albeit labor-intensive, time-consuming, elaborate style. But he also reprinted *Jerusalem* (copy F) in stark black ink, leaving it boldly uncolored. It was not unusual for Blake to work in different media and different styles during the same period, but I think the *Jerusalem* white-line and "woodcut-on-pewter" designs, which appear almost primitive in their directness and lack of fine detail—and so perfectly realized in two-dimensional black and white—represent where he would have gone in relief etching. You see this very expressive manner, in which the marks of the tools in the act of making the image are plainly visible, in the Virgil wood engravings and the last relief etchings, *On Homers Poetry [and] On Virgil* and *The Ghost of Abel*. And you see it in each of the 102 Dante watercolors; at various degrees of finish, each celebrates process—or what Blake called "practise"—in its vigorous unerased pentimenti.

As Bob notes, the Dante engravings are unfinished, but I think we agree that they probably were not going to

be finished as densely as the Job engravings. With Job, Blake returned to a simpler and more direct way of delineating form, to a style of engraving lines characteristic of Renaissance or "ancient" engravers, whose style was considered almost crude compared to the sophisticated line systems (e.g., dot and lozenge hatching style) used by engravers of Blake's day. Job has Dürer in mind, but the Dante engravings are simpler still, more Raimondi and Mantegna, with more untouched, or white, space, that is, more like drawings, the original paradigm for engraving. Blake thought he was engraving like the ancient engravers all along, but in fact it was not until he began to show the younger artist, Linnell, untrained as an engraver, the works of the ancient engravers that he began to see them with new eyes and began the process of unlearning his own trade. This unlearning continued in the last three years of his life as he was surrounded by young artists—students really, Palmer, Calvert, Richmond, Sherman, Tatham—interested in graphic art but trained as painters. Despite his chronic pains, these last years were among his happiest. He had artists who loved and admired him and treated him as their "Interpreter," and in spirit he was feeling young again. I think had he lived, the Shoreham period, the period of Samuel Palmer's greatest works, would have lasted longer, and Blake would have continued his experiments at simplifying the pictorial plane. Maybe he would have executed another set of wood engravings.

I think all his life Blake enjoyed being a student in its purest sense, of returning to things with fresh eyes. In 1802, six days shy of his 45th birthday, he told Butts that he would not send him a drawing till he had again reconsidered his notions of art and "had put [himself] back as if [he] was a learner" (letter of 22 Nov. 1822, E 719). He says much the same thing two years later after seeing the Truchsessian gallery of pictures: "I was again enlightened with the light I enjoyed in my youth" (letter of 23 Oct. 1804, E 756). Art saved him, not only at the end of his life, prolonging it, I'm sure, but also during those years he clearly suffered from depression, when he "travel'd thro Perils & Darkness" (letter of 22 Nov. 1802, E 720). His way of fighting the spectre was to work daily—and, I suspect, to learn or see, if not also do, something new. He summed up his lifetime of working as an artist and fighting the losing fight against commerce and organized religion in the *Laocoön* aphorisms. One is particularly relevant: "Practise is Art If you leave off you are Lost" (E 274). As noted, Blake routinely looked to his own repertoire for inspiration, but I don't think he ever rested on his laurels. Like Picasso, his favorite work would have been "the next one." Tatham got the last hours wrong, but the last years were marked by the energy and spirit Blake expressed for another homecoming, from Felpham to London: "I have a thousand & ten thousand things to say to you. My heart is full of futurity" (letter of 25 April 1803, E 729).

**RNE:** Joe's suggestion that Blake might have gone on to create more wood engravings is perceptive. Let me just mention one work that clearly moves in that direction: the detailed drawing on a woodblock of *The Prophet Isaiah Foretelling the Destruction of Jerusalem* in the British Museum. We can add this to the list of works left unfinished at Blake's death.

**ME:** That's a pretty peculiar question, Kari!—one of those what-might-Hamlet-have-done-after-the-play-was-over-if-he-hadn't-been-killed kinds of questions. Blake seems to have become calmer and more reflective in those final years, and probably nothing would have altered that trajectory. Bob has demonstrated more than once how in those years Blake opened himself to important stylistic influences from John Linnell, and, if he had lived longer, I can imagine that he would have opened himself further to new influences in the maturing signature styles of the young admirers in his immediate circle—Samuel Palmer, for example. Joe characterizes the last years of Blake's life as years when he was "unlearning" the conventions of "his own trade." Unlearning was so congenial an idea to Blake—it fits with his predilections, which led him to suppose that real learning was always a form of retrieving "original" ways from beneath layers of corruption, in this case original ways of execution, while discarding those corrupt new intrusions that The World was always trying to push on him. And while we're on this road, we may as well go further and imagine that his visual defensives, his theoretical devotion to line and definite form, might have collapsed entirely so that the spirit of Turner, say, might have entered him. Blake's later literary inclinations tended to brevity, as Bob points out—and there is something final about *Jerusalem* that doesn't anticipate second thoughts in multiple

installments of illuminated (or other) verse. But in the worthy cause of speculation, if nothing else, can't we imagine a return to poetry after he gets a bit tired of illustrating this and illustrating that (Job, Dante, Milton, etc.) on commission? Not that he wasn't a superlative illustrator, not that he wasn't intensely influenced by those young artists to produce visual rather than literary work, but I'd say Blake was always ready with more words. And then, if his wife Catherine had died before he did, of course—an entirely possible outcome—that might have changed everything in his mood and his imaginative responses to life. Naturally he might have done what so many bereft partners in old marriages do as their final exertion of imagination: made himself die. But if he could have gotten over that terrible threshold alive, he might have changed artistic directions radically. Unfortunately, death was terminal.

## 5.

**KK:** Morris, as editor of *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*, you get to sample a little of everything related to Blake that comes down the academic pipeline. Are there any recent critical developments that surprise you? It seems predictable to me that articles and monographs on Blake would mirror larger disciplinary approaches and trends—the "class-race-gender triad . . . codified as cultural studies" that you mention elsewhere, for example. What I'd like to know about is the wild card in Blake scholarship. Anything come to mind?

**ME:** I don't think I have much insight on this one, except insofar as the Blake Archive is a form of criticism, which is true to a point. Naturally I cherish the idea of the Archive as the wild card in Blake scholarship—but then, we're all in love with our self-aggrandizing delusions, and I'm afraid editors may be especially vulnerable because they always have to wonder if anyone is taking their work seriously. But really I don't think there's a wild card. There has been a fair amount of interesting work in the last two decades, including work on language, on gender and sexual orientation, on biographical issues. Some of the most interesting has produced a more detailed understanding of the discourses of radical and popular culture of Blake's time. It has been very suggestive, but its direct relevance to Blake is sometimes questionable, because it tends to take the form of "sounds/looks sort of like Blake" and "reminds one of Blake." And Blake always presents the problem of the unconventional, which I've discussed elsewhere—he may remind us of Christians as he does of pornographers, Muggletonians, Swedenborgians, and the electromagnetist sex therapists, but he is seldom an easy fit in the context because he's such a contrarian. Religion, I think, is largely unrecovered terrain. Morton Paley and Robert Ryan are among those who have written interestingly and informatively about it, but much, much more remains to be done before we'll come close to understanding Blake's age as the religious age it clearly, fundamentally was. But all these are more in the order of good ideas than of wild cards, if wild card is meant to suggest a winning hand. Though, always, I may be dead wrong.

## 6.

**KK:** Morris, your role in the original round robin all those years ago was essentially that of impresario: after convening the special assembly on the future of Blake studies, you retreated to the wings, choosing to keep your own hunches and meta-reflections under wraps. From my vantage point, though, it looks like you eventually offered a prophecy of sorts in arrears—some fourteen years later. It comes at the end of an astute essay published in the *Huntington Library Quarterly* in 1996.<sup>[21]</sup> "On Blakes We Want and Blakes We Don't" closes with a generally complimentary appraisal of the late E. P. Thompson's posthumously published *Witness Against the Beast*, a peculiar monograph that argues Blake was the last of an obscure antinomian sect.<sup>[22]</sup> You write: "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."<sup>[23]</sup> Given the six or so years that have lapsed since you wrote those lines, does Thompson's "focused, archival approach" seem as

full of potential today as it did yesterday, or are you energized by a different sort of critical response to Blake these days?

**ME:** I comment on this a bit above and below. Since I wrote the sentences on E.P. Thompson, Keri Davies has proved that Thompson's main bit of evidence, having to do with Blake's mother's supposed family connection to the Muggletonians, is wrong.<sup>[24]</sup> (I remember David Erdman saying years ago that he was sure Thompson, as savvy as he was, was on the wrong track in trying to pin Blake's radical heritage on a family connection so concrete and specific.) But, yes, I believe that Thompson's "focused, archival approach" is still the most promising at this stage. But it's also among the most challenging, because it doesn't lend itself to quick results; it demands years of close study in chilly, dark places. The academy's reward system doesn't give much incentive for that kind of work.

## 7.

**KK** (Question for Morris): Many of the critical essays you've written over the years have embedded in them a candid admission of your failure to understand Blake's later prophecies. It's a recurring trope that I've come to value in your work. Of these admissions (and there are a fair number of them), the following—a rewrite of something Harold Bloom once said about his experience with Blake's illuminated books—is likely the most heartfelt in its formulation: "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. 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 promise flickers in the darkness."<sup>[25]</sup> Most recently, as editor of the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to Blake*, you station this "difficult Blake" (your moniker for the Blake of the later prophecies) at the front door of the volume—not as a Cerberus to frighten the uninitiated away but as a welcoming figure to beckon them in. It is a testament to your powers as a scholar and writer that you succeed in making the invitation so attractive. As if in answer to the question Bob poses in his contribution inside—*Is Jerusalem unreadable?*—you write in the introduction: "The aim, in the long run, is to keep faith with Blake's fundamental unreadability."<sup>[26]</sup> As a precept, it's cogent, even beguiling. But talk a little bit, if you would, about what it means to translate the precept into critical practice. "Keeping faith with Blake's fundamental unreadability" recommends what sort of role for the critic?

**ME:** "Keeping faith with Blake's impossibility" may just be my pretentious way of saying that I think it's healthiest to fully acknowledge Blake's difficulty than to pretend otherwise. "Fully acknowledge": acknowledge that it's not average difficulty but difficulty degree zero. I think we have to avoid falling into a routine either of using the difficulty as a club to beat an "unreadable" Blake with, or of denying the difficulty by making confident assertions about the supposed meanings of the work, about political and social attitudes and opinions, biographical data, and so on that can't be better supported than most of them have been.

In the late 1950s and 60s, in the wake of Frye's and Erdman's books and the explosion of scholarly and critical interest in Blake, it was tempting to see Blake's work as a public works project, a critical problem that might be solved by critical labor that would build brick by brick on a firm foundation carefully laid and protected by the community of concerned scholars from careless misinterpretation. This temporary phenomenon probably helped give rise to the illusion of the "Blake Mafia" and "Blake Industry" that Tom Mitchell and I mention in the 1982 statements.

So what does a reader get out of Blake, then? It's hard to put your finger on, but I think it's close to the experience Bob described in his 1982 remarks: the "reader participation demanded by . . . 'open' structures" in which "the structure for the text is but the cue for an event wherein the reader realizes that the text is only one moment in a continuum of which he is himself a part" (398). This is true to some extent of all texts, I'm

sure, but it's so extravagantly true for Blake that it becomes a signature of his work. But readers (a thin term for people in this position) faced with such unusual demands, and finding that even their best reading skills aren't working with the usual result, cope with their anxieties in various ways. They may claim that Blake is fully comprehensible after all. This was often said in defense of Blake by Frye and then by others, though it's also true, I think, that Frye's occasional late interpretations of Blake became awfully formulaic. Or they may say that Blake is insane, hence unreadable, and doesn't deserve the attention he gets; that a careful look at the political or social contexts reveals that he is, after all, in a readable tradition (that happens to be a lot more readable than he is). Or they may say that he's really a poet but not an artist or really an artist but not a poet, thus limiting the information they feel compelled to tackle.

But my own experience jibes with Hazard Adams's: "It is always interesting to observe," he wrote in 1982, "what is simply skipped over in commentaries on the prophecies" (400). And, as for the "hope of a language being developed that will deal more successfully with Blake," he concludes, "I am not sure most of us know how to formulate the problem or even what it is" (401). Then, curiously but I would contend symptomatically, a page later he is saying that "In the end, though, there is a message or there are messages in Blake, and Blake scholarship and criticism ought to be involved in making these messages available to a needy world" (402). Similarly, Blake himself issues lots of promises to readers to the effect that what he's saying is crucial and that if only they'll follow his illuminated golden string through the darkness they'll end up in heaven's gate built in Jerusalem's wall. But if anyone has been able to follow that string I don't know it.

Two caveats: I don't mean to say that Blake is unreadable. He's eminently readable—just impossible to understand past a certain point. And I don't mean to say that scholarship and criticism have been ineffective in revealing the outlines or in filling in countless helpful details. I mean that the level of meaning that Blake allows, as far as I can tell, cannot be expected to support those important messages that Hazard mentioned, and that Blake certainly seems to claim he's delivering. But, as Hazard's comment shows, trying to make sense of Blake's work, stressful as it is, doesn't necessarily lead to despair. What Blake is, is thrilling to read. And the intensely participatory reading experience that Bob describes is what keeps the thrill alive. Together, that experience of reading on a high wire combined with the promise of rescuing a major artist from obscurity and oblivion have provided the impetus to keep readers reading and lookers looking ever since that group of Victorians showed how to make Blake audible and visible.

Finally, I would never deny the possibility that the impossible dream may someday become possible after all.

### [Next Part](#)

#### Notes

<sup>12</sup> *Blake's Illuminated Books*, general ed. David Bindman, 6 vols. (Princeton: The William Blake Trust/Princeton UP, 1991-1995).

<sup>13</sup> *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1954).

<sup>14</sup> Saree Makdisi, *Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2002); Rosamund Paice, "Encyclopaedic Resistance: Blake, Rees's *Cyclopaedia*, and the *Laocoön* Separate Plate" (further publication details not available at the time of this writing).

<sup>15</sup> *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 35 (2002): 74-103. An online version of the article, with 81 color illustrations, is available on the journal's web site at <<http://www.blakequarterly.org>>.

<sup>16</sup> Lane Robson and Joseph Viscomi, "Blake's Death," *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 30 (1996): 36-49.

[17](#) Robson and Viscomi 44.

[18](#) The term "retrospective prophecy," which I use in my question, comes from an essay written by nineteenth-century British biologist Thomas Huxley. Entitled "On the Method of Zedig: Retrospective Prophecy as a Function of Science," it represents prophecy as a methodology whose temporal movement is bi-directional--both upstream and downstream; moreover, according to Huxley, temporality is only partially relevant to prophetic practice: "Strictly speaking," he argues, "the term prophecy as much applies to outspeaking as to foretelling; and, even in the restricted sense of 'divination,' it is obvious that the essence of the prophetic operation does not lie in its backward or forward relation to the course of time, but in the fact that it is the apprehension of that which lies out of the sphere of immediate knowledge" (139). Huxley's essay is printed in *Science and Culture* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1882).

[19](#) The inspiration for my "peculiar question," as Morris calls it, is a little essay by Virginia Woolf on Jane Austen, first published in 1925 and reprinted in the *Virginia Woolf Reader*, ed. Mitchell A. Leaska (San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1984) 220-232. The essay unfolds as a seemingly straightforward stylistic analysis, written in Woolf's characteristically sparkling prose, but then unexpectedly turns into an imaginative "what-if" exercise: Austen, writes Woolf, "died at the height of her powers . . . Vivacious, irrepressible, gifted with an invention of great vitality, there can be no doubt that she would have written more, had she lived, and it is tempting to consider whether she would not have written differently. The boundaries were marked; moons, mountains, and castles lay on the other side. But was she not sometimes tempted to trespass for a moment? Was she not beginning, in her own gay and brilliant manner, to contemplate a little voyage of discovery? Let us take *Persuasion*, the last completed novel, and look by its light at the books she might have written had she lived" (229-230; my emphasis).

[20](#) Essick, *William Blake and the Language of Adam* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1989) 163.

[21](#) "On Blakes We Want and Blakes We Don't," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 58 (1996): 413-439.

[22](#) *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (New York: New Press, 1993).

[23](#) Eaves, "On Blakes" 439.

[24](#) Keri Davies, "William Blake's Mother: A New Identification," *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 33 (1999): 36.

[25](#) Eaves, "On Blakes" 418.

[26](#) From "Introduction: To Paradise the Hard Way," in the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, ed. Morris Eaves (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) (page numbers not available at the time of this writing).

## *Once Only Imagined*

### PART 2

#### 8.

**KK:** Joe, your conviction regarding the necessity of drawing artists into the conversation on Blake dates back to 1982 at least, when you wrote the following as part of your contribution to the special issue of SiR: "Art and literary critics should stay in contact with artists . . . 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'



" (405). In bringing your own studio arts background to bear on your—and our—understanding of Blake over the years, you've helped us see what Blake's pictorial art is all about. *Blake and the Idea of the Book* has helped refresh the perception of many literary scholars who, though they may have wrestled with the meaning or iconography of the illuminated books, hadn't previously thought to peer *behind* the images to their execution on copper or transference to paper.[\[27\]](#) By recreating Blake's workshop with its pigments, inks, rags, brushes, and glues, you've brilliantly illuminated the material dimension of Blake's artistry.

Continuing in this vein, I'd like it if you could talk some about how the artist-practitioner in you has influenced the facsimilist, both before and after 1992, when you set out with Morris and Bob to build a comprehensive electronic archive of Blake's work. Having spent a good deal of time over the last six years watching you hash out issues of digital reproduction with John Unsworth, director of the [Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities](#); Matt Kirschenbaum and Andrea Laue, technical editor and project manager of the WBA, respectively;[\[28\]](#) IATH programmers; and your fellow editors, I've become attuned to some of the ways in which the hand and eye of Visconti the artist overlap with the hand and eye of Visconti the facsimilist. Partly it's a page taken from the book of history: illusionary achievements in visual reproduction have time and again profited from an artist's knowledge of materials and processes. Weighing in the balance which intaglio process—mezzotint or stipple—will more accurately reproduce an oil portrait painting is the natural prerogative of the artist and technician alike. I would venture to say your acute sense of the limitations of digital media to imitate all characteristics of Blake's hand-colored relief prints owes much to your direct contact and experience with copper, acid, brushes, and ink. In what other ways do the artist and facsimilist in you co-mingle?

**JV:** My interest in facsimiles began in 1975 while assisting on an exhibition of nineteenth-century paper toys and theatres. Technically, these were etchings and large lithographs, with each sheet containing many parts, figures, or stages. Children would cut out the parts and color and assemble them into the toy or theatrical scene. We had a few original models assembled, but mostly we had uncut sheets, which were visually interesting in themselves—at least to me—but required the constructions to really make their point. So I selected various sheets from different periods and countries, had them photomechanically reproduced, and proceeded to play the industrious child, cutting and coloring and gluing to make the models. Oh yes—I also aged the paper and colors so the models looked authentic.

Working at the Museum of the City of New York, with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English and American books, toys, prints, drawings, and paper theatres was great training in material culture. I didn't expect it would also provide training in forgery, but it did. I learned a few valuable lessons working on that show: a facsimile intends to deceive legally, an unacknowledged facsimile can easily become a forgery, and an undetected forgery is an original. For me, these dubious distinctions between original and copy commented interestingly on Benjamin's idea of the "aura"—or historical authenticity—of the original. The "aura" is created not by the object but by the belief in the object as authentic and unique.

Two years later I began my recreations of Blake's illuminated prints. I wanted to reproduce his prints by reproducing his production process, by using the tools, materials, and processes he did. You don't make relief etchings by hand, though, if you intend to reproduce the model exactly. For that you need photography, and the resulting plate does not even need to be a relief etching. I found that out a year later when I discovered two forgeries in a monochrome copy of *America*.[\[29\]](#) The two plates were lithographs with faked embossments; the images easily fooled the eye (they had been reproduced in books before) but not the hand. Because of my recreations, I could tell that the paper was wrong and that led me to examine the images more closely. Their ink was too flat and they were slightly elongated along the diagonals, signifying the projection of a negative onto a sensitized zinc plate. I don't know if the two pages were produced with the intention to deceive or as facsimiles to complete a copy missing these pages, but when the copy changed hands, they were not documented and hence were taken as Blake's prints. I do know that I was able to detect these fakes and a number of others over the years—as well as authenticating prints as Blake's—because I was also able to

make them or envision making them. Redrawing Blake's designs on copper forces you to see the subtlest events in the originals, because, as any drawing master from Blake's day would tell you, drawing is the art of seeing. It trains your eye from looking to seeing, or, as Blake would put it, from general forms to minute particulars, and "Unless. You Consult. Particulars. You Cannot. even Know or See Mich: Ang. or Rafael or any Thing Else" (anno. to Reynolds, E 645). Such direct consultation, I would hope, can only help an editor and scholar.

Being able to make and print plates that looked and felt like Blake's may have sensitized my eye but it also spoiled me. I expected facsimiles of Blake to be works of art in their own right while remaining true to the original, like those produced in 1983 by the Manchester Etching Workshop. I expected the best of them to recreate the initial reading experience. What a shock it was to see digital reproductions on IATH monitors in 1993, when Morris, Bob, and I visited IATH for the first time. With the Web in its infancy (the Mosaic Web browser was just then morphing into Netscape 1.0.), computer monitors were designed for word processing and not graphics. Their size, resolution, number of colors, and color management system were not impressive, to say the least. The reproduction was way off in color and size and looked different on each monitor, and I thought, "Hell no, I'm out of here. I'm not signing on to a project whose reproductions are no better than color photocopies." It took John Unsworth, the director of IATH, and a high-end monitor designed for graphics to reassure me that such display problems would soon be resolved for the general, non-professional user. Planning for the future while working within the present material and physical limitations of our medium has been a hallmark of the project—and at times a difficult juggling act, technically, editorially, and mentally.

Monitors have come a very long way since then, as have scanners, computers, storage systems, and bandwidth. But the best digital facsimile is not going to get confused with the original or require—or reward—the "suspension of disbelief" of printed facsimiles. I made this simple point a few years back in a lecture at the NASSR conference in Halifax, on Romanticism and the New Technology. For a lecture on Blake and reproductions, I brought Bob's impression from plate 4 of *Urizen* copy G—or that is what I claimed it was. It was actually a doctored-up color photocopy. At the end of the lecture, I took it out of its gold frame and mat to demonstrate how an original would be examined bibliographically—and proceeded to "accidentally" spill a glass of water on it. The audience gasped in horror. Then I told them the truth: for one hour that copy had the "aura" of the original, something a digital facsimile could never have. And I miss that; I think humans are hard-wired to touch things, to know with our hands. But that is a different kind of knowledge and experience, and the image you can't touch can be more accurate to the original image and provide more visual information than any printed reproductions. And I think this raises one of the crucial issues addressed by the Archive: when do you need to consult the original and when will a reproduction suffice? I think the answer has changed radically because of the Archive.

The Archive's 100dpi images are displayed in an applet that enables the viewer to receive them true size,<sup>[30]</sup> which is why we refer to them as digital facsimiles, and they are connected to 300dpi enlargements. Neither can recreate the original reading experience, nor can they reproduce the material artifact. But then, the best of the printed facsimiles do not fully reproduce the artifact either. As Bob and I show in our color-printing article,<sup>[31]</sup> Blake's plates were rarely well-aligned on the page; they fall, slant, rise, or are too close to the edge, but this registration information is unrecorded because reproductions are cropped to the image and facsimiles are centered on the sheet. Misregistrations, along with the lack of uniformity in plate size and margins, are, in effect, edited out. Nor do printed facsimiles reproduce the original condition of an illuminated book, as it left the "Printing house in Hell," but rather, at best, a nicely bound version of the book as it was once "socially situated" in a collector's library. The Archive does not reproduce the full sheet either; it is cropped to the image, albeit for technical rather than aesthetic reasons. Cropping allows us to get the image as large as possible on the reproductive source (usually a 4 x 5 inch color transparency), allows most illuminated book images to be displayed to size, minimizes scrolling, and keeps file sizes smaller. Cropping to the image is yet another compromise to the materiality of our medium, to monitor sizes, storage capacities,

bandwidths, and reproductive sources. Recognizing that we are not alone in making this editorial decision and that our medium is not transparent makes it easier to accept the limitations of digital reproductions and to focus on their strengths.

## 9.

**KK:** I'm curious to know if the path of influence runs both ways: has your academic work on Blake in turn shaped your development as an artist over the years?

**JV:** Around 1977, when I began studying Blake seriously, I had already been painting and drawing for over ten years but making prints for only a few years, mostly book-size etchings, relief etchings, and woodcuts. I had my own small press, which enabled me to experiment with monoprints and color printing. So, I was already working small and in media that Blake used, though I did not know that. Nonetheless, there would be an influence, but not of the obvious kind. I didn't start to combine words and images, illustrate poems, draw Blakean subjects, or develop a more linear style. I did, however, rethink my idea of what a print was and abandoned the idea of it needing to be exactly repeatable. I stopped numbering prints in editions and started to focus more on image-making rather than printmaking, using etchings or relief etchings as basic matrixes but not as models I had to duplicate in paper. In effect, my prints became monoprints, which I'd continue to work up in watercolors and/or pastels. I wasn't bothered by the variations. In fact, creating drawings in series that are basically variations on a theme dominates my art to this day. I used to think this was from having played in bands that improvised a great deal (or needing to do something till I got it right), but your question makes me realize that it started not long after I began studying Blake.

If you were to place on a table all the impressions printed from one of Blake's illuminated plates, you would have a series of images that are basically variations of the plate's design; you would also see how an image or motif can evolve through its production, that is, how execution can generate invention. The works at the end of the series differ significantly from those at the beginning but could not have been reached without all the intermediate works. What for Blake was a historical process, with overt changes the inevitable result of change in production styles, is for me collapsed into a three to six month period, with changes very deliberately evoked. For example, I am currently working on three related series of drawings of fruit with violin, and recently finished a series of fifty drawings of a still life that I think of as "six circles in a basket." In these series, no two drawings are alike; they differ in colors, textures, and medium, but rarely in size (14 x 17") and only minimally in composition. Last year I did six series of drawings of various articles of clothing, from twenty to fifty in a series, produced one after the other, each one suggesting the subsequent one. These drawings, many of which are true size or larger, range from being very sketchy to more representational and yet most look more like color prints or serigraphs (silk screens) than drawings because the colors are flat and subordinate to strong black lines. In regards to Blake, the violin series is probably the more interesting, because these drawings are a kind of print taken from relief outlines (figure 1). I make a key drawing and then with glues and resin build it up into relief, like a collotype, but instead of printing it, I take a rubbing of it to transfer the outline (the technique is called "frottage"), which I then work up in various media and usually combine four to a frame. The drawings in all of these series, though, however they were executed, differ from what I was doing in the 80s, which were smaller, more abstract, almost minimalist, but even then, when I first began making more drawings than prints, I liked working up the same theme over and over again in different media, from graphite to charcoal to hard and soft pastels to oil pastels to watercolors and oil paint and combinations of these media. It is repetition without duplication, and with variations and visual effects created and encouraged by the manner and materials of execution.

Blake made prints that look like drawings; I like making drawings in the spirit of print production that often look like prints. I guess Blake's largest impact on me personally is his unorthodox ideas of print and his experiments at combining drawing and printmaking.

**KK:** Joe, perhaps the connections I want to make here are too forced—you can let me know—but the printmaking metaphor lying behind your drawing experiments takes on added dimensions and theoretical interest when considered in conjunction with Bob's comments a little further down on the virtual concept of "copy" that Dynaweb, the Archive's search engine and display tool, imposes on categories like "drawings" and "paintings." It seems to me that each of the objects in your series based on a still life, for example, could with a little license be designated as a "copy" (copy 1 of 50, copy 2 of 50 . . . copy 50 of 50). But of course those are your drawings and metaphors—not Blake's. I realize I'm setting myself up for accusations of methodological fallacies, the most obvious of which is anachronism, in projecting your practices onto his, but bear with me. As you point out, Blake modeled relief etching on drawing, taking up brush and pen rather than the tools of engraving to execute his designs. It's a topic to which you give dedicated space in *Blake and the Idea of the Book*. Is there any evidence, Joe, that Blake ever put the metaphor in reverse, in effect transposing its two parts, tenor (printing) and vehicle (drawing)? Relief etching is like drawing, but drawing and painting are also like printing? Blake's monotype prints of 1795—the so-called "color-printed drawings"—come to mind, for example, for their fusion of drawing, painting, and printmaking paradigms.

One of the things that has always provided grist for Morris's intellectual mill is the intensity of Blake's metaphoric imagination. In his introduction to the *Cambridge Companion*, he writes that Blake 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." How, then, did that synthetic insight influence Blake's thinking about the various media in which he worked? Did he see a convergence of all media? If so, maybe Dynaweb isn't such a procrustean bed after all—not when it comes to Blake.

**ME:** May I interrupt? As far as synthesis and Blake's illuminated-printing process are concerned, I wouldn't say that he took up drawing tools *rather than* engraving tools. It wasn't either/or but both. Of course, he needed the basic materials of etching—copperplates, stopout mixtures, acids—to make his texts and images reproducible. But even in writing the texts and drawing the images on the plate, while he used stopout varnishes as if they were ink for brushes and pens and he used copper as if it were paper in some respects, he also used burins, etching needles on the same copperplates. He saw the possibilities for relief in plates designed for intaglio and the possibilities for intaglio in plates designed for relief work. His mind wasn't the mind of a printmaker or the mind of a painter (or, for that matter, the mind of a poet) but a fusion of all. I suspect that this characteristic was both a matter of natural talent and cultivated skill reinforced by attitude (he thought he *should* be that way, and he was determined to be). Though he seems to have been comfortable with simple combinations of rudimentary tools, materials, and procedures—technical solutions that required intricate mechanical manipulation and elaborate coordinations don't seem to have appealed to him—he was resistant to narrow constructions of his task that would force him into a single groove (I guess that's a hip-hop metaphor converted into an engraving metaphor). But he was also a technician proud of his inventions and discoveries. The pride comes through in his announcement of illuminated printing and its advantages in 1793 (E 692-693), his recipes for engraving and "woodcutting" on pewter (E 694), and his self-identification as the inventor of "W Blake's Original Stereotype . . . 1788" at the end of *The Ghost of Abel* (1822), one of his last illuminated works (pl. 2, E 272).

But none of that changes the fact that Dynaweb *is* a procrustean bed. But so is XML, so are all tools and materials, including pen, ink, and paper: they allow you to do some things, they force you to do other things, and they keep you from doing yet other things. That is the price of admission—we must pay to play.

**JV:** I'm sure Morris has heard the phrase, "No Representation without Taxation." Every medium comes with a price, and that of course includes Blake's as well as ours.[\[32\]](#) "Pay to play" indeed. We are outlining some

of the costs—and some of the benefits they pay for—in this interview.

Blake's experiencing everything in terms of everything else might explain why he can so easily move from graphic art to painting and drawing and back again in his Public Address and most of his other commentaries about art. What he says about one appears equally true of the others. I am not sure, though, if Blake's sense of equality among media, which I assumed was an insight born of practice, constitutes a vision of media convergence. If there is a convergence, then I suppose it would be similar to how "all religions are one," that is to say, maybe all arts are one in that they all come from the same source, the "poetic genius," with their differences reflecting material limitations or the medium's natural language—the "tax"—rather than inherent values or rankings.

Theoretically, Blake reduced all art to drawing, as he explicitly states numerous times: he who draws best is the best artist and engraving is drawing on copper and painting is drawing on canvas and nothing else.<sup>[33]</sup> This is not literally true, of course, but by reducing all art making to drawing, as verb and noun, that is, to the inventing process and to the product defined by strong lines, Blake eliminated the grounds for valuing one medium over another. Just as in genre, there was a hierarchy in media: oil painting was above watercolors and both were above engravings—or works on canvas over works on paper over works on copper. Reducing all art making to drawing was Blake's way of leveling the playing field, of removing the taint of craft from his work as a printmaker. This is a very smart strategy for a printmaker who hopes to raise his status from craftsman to artist and have his original prints taken seriously. But maybe what Morris calls his "synthetic imagination" was playing its part as well, and the vision of equality among the arts was more than theory born of defensiveness or practice.

In any event, in practice, the pull was "upward," with his relief-etched prints and color prints moving to the status of the unique, autographic work on paper and away from the mechanical and multiple. Works in the *Small and Large Book of Designs* and, as you mention, the large color-print drawings are the beautiful results of combining printing and painting with finishing in strong pen and ink outlines. The direction or influence was mostly one way but not exclusively. His willingness to experiment in graphic art to create visual effects that exploited the tools and language unique to that medium, as in "woodcut-on-pewter" and white-line etchings, or simulated alla-prima painting, as in color prints, spilled over into painting, as is evinced by the experimental paintings in the *Descriptive Catalogue*, such as the *Spiritual Form of Nelson*, and his so-called "tempera" and "fresco" paintings, which capture the visual effects of color printing. His attention to "minute particulars," as in the fine pen and ink line work in the Milton illustrations, appears influenced by his working small as well as working as a line engraver.

But I am not sure if any of this reveals a mind thinking of convergence, unless we assume the still point of convergence to be line and drawing as Blake defines them. What I see is an intense sensitivity to each medium he worked in and to what it shared with other media and what made it unique. I agree with Morris that Blake resisted narrow constructions of his tasks—and avoided unnecessary complexities or expensive ways of doing things (what working man doesn't?)—and that it was never an either/or type of thing for Blake. Indeed, one of his great strengths as an artist lay in his ability to mix it up within one media and to work simultaneously in various media that seem mutually exclusive. Dynaweb, on the other hand, is either/or, and it has prints as its paradigm only because we used it first with the illuminated books. What worked perfectly well in marking up prints, however, forces us, in the metadata (not in the display), to treat unique works as though they were copies or parts of a series. This is another case of how our medium's physical or structural limitations affect our choices—and I look forward to the day we move beyond Dynaweb to a search engine that recognizes a more flexible mark-up, "and/both" rather than "either/or." I think it would be pretty cool if Dynaweb inadvertently revealed or reflected how Blake thought about media—and I can see theoretically how a new medium of reproduction could reveal new insights about the things reproduced or the manner or spirit in which they were produced—but I don't think it does in this case. But then maybe I just can't fully transcend traditional categories of production.

## 11.

**KK:** Looking back on the original SiR symposium on the future of Blake studies, I find myself somewhat surprised, as I've already mentioned, by the backseat representation took in the prophetic musings of the various contributors, who chose to frontload interpretation and its futures instead: Foucault, deconstruction, formalism, evaluative criticism—all of them more or less eclipsed things bibliographic and editorial. Nelson Hilton and David Erdman's prescient but brief remarks aside, the only contributor to engage reproduction with any intensity was John Grant, who, to his credit, adumbrated something not unlike the *William Blake Archive* in scale, comprehensiveness, and image-intensiveness. As to why the original coven of prophets overlooked "future editors," as Grant addressed them in the vocative, we can perhaps point an accusatory finger at Butlin's magnificent catalogue raisonné of Blake's paintings and drawings, hot off the press in 1982, [34] whose stature cast a shadow so long that it was difficult at the time to see what might supercede it.

In 1996, with the publication of *The Book of Thel*, copy F, the *William Blake Archive* put issues of digital reproduction on center stage in a big way. I'd like to quote an editorial statement excerpted from some of the WBA's online materials:

We are hoping, of course, that the Archive, once extended to encompass the full range of Blake's work, will ultimately set a new standard of accessibility to a vast collection of visual and textual materials that are central to an adequate grasp of the art and literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But we have also come to see the Blake project as a pacesetting instance of a fundamental shift in the ideas of "archive," "catalogue," and "edition" as both processes and products. Though "edition" and "archive" are the terms we have fallen back on, in fact we have envisioned a unique resource unlike any other currently available—a hybrid all-in-one edition, catalogue, database, and set of scholarly tools capable of taking full advantage of the opportunities offered by new information technology.[35]>

Can I get your reflections on the new era of representation that the WBA has ushered in? What kind of precedent does it set for the next generation of Blake editors?

**RNE:** A difficult question, or really set of questions. The Archive was originally designed for scholars, but its full impact on scholarship has yet to emerge. It may take a few more years to move beyond the "my, that's a pretty picture" stage and into the full exploitation of some of the Archive's resources, particularly text and image searches. I suspect that younger scholars, now just entering graduate school (or kindergarten?) will figure out ways to use the Archive unimagined in the dreams of older folks like myself.

The Archive's influence in the long term may have more to do with the issues it raises, in terms of editorial theory and concepts of representation, than its utility in support of traditional types of textual and iconographic research. Our concentration on the object, and on the unique qualities of each exemplar of a particular "work" or "image," leads to a multiplication of textual instantiations of what was previously thought to be a single text—not *the* text of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* but *a* text of copy A, a text of copy B, etc. The approach accords with certain materialist strains in recent critical theory and works counter to any notions of an image or text that transcends its physical embodiments. In that sense, the Archive can appear to be anti-intellectual, too much concerned with objects and not sufficiently oriented toward ideas. But criticisms in that vein (which I personally enjoy) fail to grasp the way the Archive implicitly raises some rather complex ideas in the form of questions about what constitutes a text, a work, a copy, an image, a picture, a representation.

Let me give just one example about how the Archive breaks down some of our traditional ways of defining these terms. The common-sense notion of a "copy" of a book is deeply embedded in the architecture of the Archive as originally developed for the presentation of Blake's illuminated books. But what happens when we move from books to drawings and paintings? The hierarchical structure of our Dynaweb program makes it very difficult to eliminate the "copy" level without serious distortions in functionality and display. Thus, we have been forced to continue with an implicit (or virtual) concept of "copy" even for drawings. When there is more than one drawing of a particular design, even with considerable variation among them, the concept of "copies" takes on a meaning we generally express through the term "versions." When there is only one drawing of a design, then we are dealing with "copy 1 of 1." But what is being "copied"? An image in Blake's mind, one could imagine—although following that line of thinking has transcendentalizing implications I'm not too comfortable with. But "copy 1 of 1" also might suggest that Blake could have drawn or painted more exemplars of the "same" (and just what does that mean?) design. And maybe he did; we just need to turn up "copy 2 of 2" one day. In the meantime, we can contemplate the ways the Internet influences our thinking about very basic concepts.

**JV:** Bob's right, of course, that the Archive's full impact on scholarship has yet to emerge and is probably still a ways off, but there are signs that it has started. A special session on new technology and Blake, with a focus on the Archive, is scheduled for 2002 MLA, and there have already been similar sessions at MLA (most notably two in 1998 that resulted in a special issue of *The Wordsworth Circle*, Summer 1999)[\[36\]](#) and at NASSR, and there have been master theses and articles written on the Archive from the perspective of humanities computing. The Archive will not have its fullest impact on Blake scholarship, though, until we add even more Blakes, particularly the non-illuminated works. At the moment, we have over 2000 unpublished images. These are still being scanned, color corrected, transcribed, or tagged to make them searchable, and they include all of Blake's original and commercial prints; all 537 *Night Thoughts* designs; nearly all of Blake's designs to Milton's works (including two copies of *Comus*, *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, and *Paradise Lost*); all the drawings, sketches, watercolors, and prints relevant to the study of *The Book of Job* and Dante; and all the drawings and sketches in the British Museum. We will continue to add Blake's art and manuscripts from various collections over the next few years, including never-before-reproduced illuminated books. The lag time between what the editors and staff do and what the public sees will decrease significantly for the non-illuminated works, because we have created a new "Preview" wing in the Archive in which they can be viewed with all their bells and whistles without being searchable. Eventually they will be, of course, but because making them so is so labor intensive, requiring our marking them up in Standard Generalized Markup Language (SGML), that is, identifying or "tagging" every "characteristic" of every component of an image—the searchable terms on our search page give you an idea of how one figure alone could have many dozens of characteristics—we have decided to publish them when they are visually and bibliographically ready.

More works—most never reproduced in color before—and many works never before reproduced at all should by themselves have an effect on Blake scholarship. But I think the Archive's full impact will be felt when the "virtual lightbox" which our technical editor, Matthew Kirschenbaum, and his team are developing for the Archive, is fully operational.[\[37\]](#) A lightbox is used to sort transparencies (e.g., 35mm slides, 4 x 5" transparencies and larger), and it is literally that, a box with a frosted glass top over a light source (usually color-corrected florescent tube illuminated at 5000K so the colors are displayed accurately). Imagine turning your monitor screen or a portion of it into a lightbox and dragging images or their thumbnails from anywhere in the Archive onto it, and imagine being able to resize those images or any part of them by clicking till you have whatever sizes you want, with the details remaining clear and unpixelated. (The new JPEG2000 compression formats for images will make this possible.)[\[38\]](#) The comparison feature we currently have in the Archive for the illuminated books is a powerful tool, but it can only compare different versions of the same object (e.g., "The Tyger" from all the Archive's copies of *Songs*). The lightbox will enable you to compare images from across media, juxtapose them as you wish, and resize them to provide the details you need. Some of these things can be done now using a robust image editor like Adobe Photoshop, but the more

user-friendly "virtual lightbox" will be an integral part of the Archive's environment and will consolidate those editing features that will facilitate critical, editorial, and art-historical analyses.

The lightbox will be a boon to teaching as well as research. The images that you bring to and arrange on the lightbox—say a sequence consisting of preliminary drawings, finished watercolor, and later variants of the composition or key motif, or a sequence consisting of pages from the *Four Zoas* and their counterparts in *Milton* and *Jerusalem*—can be projected from one's laptop via a projector onto a slide screen in the classroom. You can use images in the Archive, in other words, as slides, literally, placing them into folders from which you can bring them to the lightbox/carousel. For personal research, though, the ideal will be large, high-resolution flat monitors, the size of the literal "desktop." In such an environment, you can use part of the screen for the lightbox and work with multiple documents scaled to size; browse or search the Archive in another part of the screen; and use Inote, the Archive's Image Annotation tool,[\[39\]](#) to outline areas on images that you wish to annotate for your private use or attach to the images you wish to project. Teachers and researchers, of course, will need to keep in mind the "Fair Use" clause of copyright law.

Now, for me, the best of all possible worlds will arrive when there are other scholarly sites like the Archive and we all have borrowing privileges from one another. Imagine working with Blake's texts or images and bringing onto the lightbox images downloaded from related sites, devoted to such artists as Romney, Hogarth, Barry, Rowlandson, Fuseli, Flaxman, Reynolds, or Turner, as well as from more specialized exhibitions of art works in the virtual Romantic Circles Art Gallery. Working in this manner will, I think, make possible new ways of thinking and writing about Blake. I would hope to see more studies in which images generate the text rather than interpretations looking for images as illustrations.

I seem, with this emphasis on "the future availability of Everything pictorial, by precursors, cursors, and the Interpreter himself" (392) to have recapitulated Erdman's expectations. I seem to have also modulated back to the first question, but while I am here, let me say that a few things wished for did come about. Adams and Gleckner hoped for studies that examined what Blake read to see if his readings of others were as "eccentric in his time as we have tacitly supposed" (400). I think in aesthetics Morris has done much to answer this question, showing in his *Counter-Arts Conspiracy* that Blake joined arguments and did not start them, and used the language of those contemporary discourses, with all their analogies, plots, narratives, and metaphors intact.[\[40\]](#) But along the same lines, Gleckner noted that there are no shortcuts to good interpretations, to knowing Blake's connections with the literature of his day and before him: "We make ourselves art critics and iconographers but, as Erdman suggests, few of us work at learning to read seriously *Night Thoughts* or *The Grave* or *The Faerie Queene* or *The Canterbury Tales* or *Pilgrim's Progress*. Blake did—but oddly enough we have not really got very far beyond the Bible and Milton, considerable as they are" (432). I wonder sometimes if the Archive's image search engine is providing shortcuts to knowing Blake. Why study 537 illustrations when you can ask the machine to find things for you? Are search engines convenient scholarly tools like concordances or "only the Contents or Index of already publish'd books" (MHH 21, E 42)? To finish my recapitulation of Erdman: are they an inevitable result of being "overwhelmed" by the "availability of Everything pictorial" or the "new language" of humanities computing?

**ME:** Trying to talk about representation makes me feel like I'm getting a stomach virus. There are tons of things worth saying about it if only I were smart enough to think of them. But, as Kari says, one of the notable features of those 1982 responses was indeed the attention to interpretation. Deconstruction, the new historicism, and signs of the class-race-gender triad that was soon codified as cultural studies were everywhere, while editing was pretty much nowhere—a pale artifact of the 50s and 60s (Fredson Bowers, the overweight American-edition projects generated by the MLA and NEH, and so on). That soon began to change, though, with the challenges to fundamental editorial assumptions and methods issued by Jerry McGann and others in the 80s and turned into pointed, protracted, and productive debates by the responses from Thomas Tanselle and others. Textual criticism suddenly took off and became what it seldom has been allowed to be, an interesting subject—and so it fortunately remains, in my opinion. Those helped prepare the



editorial ground for taking advantage of the rise of networked desktop computing and the Web in the 90s. Let's put down a couple of then-and-now markers: by 1982 I think I may have seen an Osborne 1 "portable" desktop computer and soon after bought a KayPro 2 with a 6-inch monitor for "word processing." In 1992 I was using email regularly, but I'm not sure I had yet heard of the World Wide Web. In 2002, well, everyone knows the story—wireless everything, gigabytes as common as kilobytes used to be, the human genome, the resurrection of Shakespeare from the dead. I may be gullible, but it's all enough to make me want to say that in those twenty years representation has become everything—or many things anyway. (An interview like this gives me the right to say reckless things that will turn into ridiculous things in far less than twenty years.) So when Jack Grant—the only 1982 soothsayer to mention computers, I think—brings computers into his prediction, as he frequently does, they're always one hundred years away at the end of the 21st century, when scholars will be able to push a button on their computers and get the Variorum Blake. It's all very 2001. Someone else mentions videodiscs, a medium now replaced by the DVD—temporarily, until its replacement comes along, which it will soon enough, or too soon. Most of the respondents seem to envision the medium of the future as microform, of all things. (This must have been about the time the MLA got into the business of promoting the purchase of a handy desktop microform reader by all its members!—before it turned to promoting *Nota Bene* as its favorite word processing application.) That shows you how absurd it is for English professors to predict the future.

On the other hand, representation certainly isn't absent from those twenty-year-old predictions. On the very first page David Erdman asks rhetorically if readers have ever felt the scholarly agony of trying to compare several of Blake's *537 Night Thoughts* drawings in the print room of the British Museum. He asks, "Will the future availability of Everything pictorial by [Blake's predecessors, contemporaries, and Blake himself] in full color in projectible and comparable microform—will this overwhelm our team—or teach us a new language?" (392). Those are problems and promises of representation that are central to the purpose and design of the Blake Archive. Books and microform aren't very well suited to solving such problems (which is not a casual dismissal of microform, much less books, just a straightforward acknowledgement of their limitations as specialized forms of information storage).

I agree with Bob that working on an editorial project like the Archive forces (not too strong a word) you to think about representation in alarmingly particular and general ways. It can be quite a surprise to find yourself acting out, as it were, the McLuhanesque idea (speaking of reckless—and McLuhan, typically, recycled the idea from someone else, in this case Lyman Bryson) that technology is explicitness: you can't make a machine that spins yarn or weaves yarn into fabric without being explicit about the processes and the assumptions that underlie them, principle by principle and step by painful step.<sup>[41]</sup> The machine represents, is a dynamic metaphor for, that explicitness. The same is true when it comes to computing machines, which is why we, in trying to figure out how to make a Blake Archive, necessarily end up trying to figure out what a Blake Archive is, what texts and images are, and how they can all live together under one roof of hardware and software. That's why it's interesting work and not just a lot of work (which it is too).

Consequently you end up arguing over the most absurd things. A classic example from the Archive would be the months we spent trying to decide how to number the lines of words (poems, prose, "texts") that constitute transcriptions—the transformations of words that have been extracted from one source or platform or support, such as the printed impression of a plate from one of Blake's illuminated books, and rematerialized onto another, such as your monitor in Darwin, Australia. We struggled mightily with that issue—it soon stopped being an issue and became a problem—in all its ramifications: editorial assumptions of the conventional kind, of course (what are our editorial principles? Is the Blake Archive making "critical" editions of Blake, or "documentary" editions, or something else entirely? Are we attempting to honor Blake's artistic intentions in some way, even in line numbering?). But the struggle quickly expanded to include the editorial history of aids to reading (such as divisions between words, page numbers, paragraphs, chapters, indexes, tables of contents). Where would we locate ourselves in that history? Should we try to make our numbering more convenient by following previously established conventions (which are, we discovered,

irregular, inconsistent, and incomplete) of numbering Blake's lines, or should we break with convention in favor of a new system designed specifically for our specific purposes? And at some point we must always factor in the issues raised by our electronic medium: what will the hardware and software permit us to do? In electronic editing you meet the medium very forcefully because it's always an unfamiliar medium no matter how familiar you are with it, and you meet it as an editorial issue, to be weighed along with the rest of the entire editorial legacy (that is, the way other editors have represented Blake), pure principle, and so on. All over a silly thing like line numbering, which no one ever notices.

I'm sure this all sounds incredibly tedious to people who aren't directly involved in the argument (are you serious? line numbering?). But even in protracted arguments about line numbering—and I could name a quick hundred other examples, from standards of image reproduction (no matter how precise and elaborate, are they ultimately groundless?) to the structure of a table of contents to the design of the BAD, the Blake Archive DTD,[42] to the ins and outs of image-and text-searching—I've experienced over and over the outright thrill of getting down to that editorial bedrock where basic assumptions are exposed—a sort of private viewing of the most intimate recesses of representation and its secrets. But I've said much too much already.

## 12.

**KK:** Bob, you predict above that "it may take a few more years to move beyond the 'my, that's a pretty picture' stage and into the full exploitation of some of the Archive's resources, particularly text and image searches." Joe points to a forthcoming MLA session, organized by Sheila Spector, that aims to lay the groundwork for just that kind of sustained exploitation. Spector's central question—how do electronic resources like the WBA and Nelson Hilton's [Blake Digital Text Project](#) extend traditional scholarship?—seems to me a timely and important one.[43] Joe and Morris, I'd be curious to know how each of you might answer it. Can you imagine a hypothetical book project, for example, that couldn't have been written pre-WBA? I'll tip my hand by saying that I'm particularly curious as to how image searches might be imaginatively exploited, not least because of the cautionary tales I've heard the three of you tell about how *not* to use them: e.g., in the service of heavy-handed semiotic analyses that revel in every infinitesimally small image variant. But let's assume for the sake of argument that our hypothetical researcher intends to heed all the important caveats; in that case, what new knowledge might emerge from systematic use of WBA resources?

**ME:** Electronic resources like the Archive and Nelson Hilton's project "extend traditional scholarship" by making it potentially deeper, wider, and less parochial because less bound to a limited pool of information. Joe has pointed to an interesting feature of the history of reproductions of Blake's illuminated books: a few copies get reproduced over and over, while others have never been reproduced, and most research has understandably focused on those copies that are most easily available—maybe in reproductions, but maybe also in museums that welcome curious students rather than in museums that don't, or museums that are in attractive locations that are cheap to get to rather than in hostile far-flung outposts.[44] We lament this the way *Thel* laments mutability, but it's inevitable, and any one limitation stands for a host of others that we must always live with; it's better when we're aware of those restrictions than when we're not, but being aware does not necessarily remove the restrictions, it just makes you a bit more cautious about the conclusions you draw.

I've described so many images in such tedious detail for the Archive that I can hardly bring myself to think about how those might be used in constructing image searches that would actually benefit someone else. It's my impression that so far no one has made much use at all of the image-search function in the Archive; if they had, I'm sure we'd have received many more questions and complaints, because the system is far from perfect. But the only complaints we've received have been from people who use the image-search function to

look for the titles of works they've heard about, and image searches aren't designed for that. That said, I'm pretty sure that Bob, Joe, and I are united in the belief that the image search is full of wonderful possibilities for future research, simply because it allows you to find images (shapes, characters in poses, actions, natural objects, manmade structures) that are like other images across the Blake canon. Our instincts tell us that this has to be a useful thing to be able to do, if only because it puts images into a searchable category parallel to words, and everyone understands the value of being able to search through a stock of words. Now if you want to find out how Blake uses "rock[s]" in his work, you don't have at your disposal a nice, efficient concordance for words on the one hand and an utterly frustrating, undifferentiated, unsystematic pile of catalogues and other books with reproductions in them on the other.

Of course you do have to take the time to figure out how to conduct an image search on our terms. You have to know, for instance, that we use a controlled vocabulary, and that our term is "stone" not "rock." Image searching is a hot topic in computer science, because there are so many compelling, and not a few lucrative, uses for the ability to search efficiently across huge stocks of pictures, whether you're looking for shirts to buy or targets to hit. And our way of making image searches possible isn't of much interest to computer scientists because it's way too labor intensive. But it has many virtues, such as that it's possible here and now, unlike more automated systems, and that, rather than start from raw data, it builds on the legacy of what we already know, or think we know, about the content of Blake's designs (we sometimes know Urizen from Los, or a sheep from a serpent), and what we know about the history of Western visual representation in general (that "contrapposto" is a conventional pose, and we can label it when we see it). I won't go on like this, because it gets so boring, but one point worth making, when it comes to predictions of future use, is that our system is probably better for extending what we already know than for discovering the never-before-known because we do build on the scholarly legacy. We are bound to it—and we pass our bound condition on to users of our image-search function the way families pass on their attitudes from generation to generation, the disease with the health, the blindness with the insight. I can't deny that starting over with raw data has its advantages, but quick results isn't likely to be one of them, and we wanted to get quick results for our pains—and to give other scholars quick results for their collaboration, or call it complicity, with us.

Meanwhile, for now, the critical challenges remain basically the same—though I'm very hesitant to say that, and of course "basically" is a big word, really just a hedge against being dead wrong before they even close the casket. But that's where you suddenly feel the puniness of your powers of prediction. You know, "as far as I can see": you try to peer beyond the horizon of what you know, and all you see is a more or less clever take on what you know, heavily shaped by what you don't know. But it's pretty safe if vague to note that every time the pool of accessible information gets bigger, the more likely it becomes that new things will turn up. When you learn new things, inevitably you or someone else figures out how to spring surprising new thoughts on you. How does Blake put it: what is now known, was once only imagined?<sup>[45]</sup> It is unimaginable that the availability of so much matter for thought won't alter the scholarship of the next generation.

**JV:** I have already expressed my fears of how search engines, as short cuts to Blake's images and texts, can create an illusion of knowing Blake that actually undermines knowledge of his works. But I also think that they have the potential to assist and deepen our understanding enormously. They have this potential because they enable you to search for multiple terms and motifs (up to nineteen) at the same time, and this can reveal patterns of thought and visual formulae. We know that there are lots of snakes in Blake, but how often does an image of a snake occur with, say, a book or writing instrument, or, in the illuminated books, without the word "snake" or "serpent" anywhere near? Are these patterns across categories or restricted to specific genres and periods? In other words: What occurs with what else more often than not? Where and when? I am sure we are in for some surprises. I got one when I did a word search for "God," "king," and "priest." If I were looking for any one of these very Blakean words/concepts, I would get hundreds of hits. But in combination as a triad I got only one, very much to my surprise. The words were used as a phrase in "The Chimney Sweeper" from *Songs of Experience*. When all the illuminated books, engravings, and illustrations to Job, Milton, Gray, Young, the Bible, and Dante are reproduced and searchable, I think we are going to see more

studies focused on Blake's iconography and more of Blake's art figure into literary analyses.

### 13.

**KK:** I'd like to return to the topic of editing by posing a curricular question. Morris has a terrific essay on the history of Blake editing in a recently published collection entitled *Reimagining Textuality*. I'll return to that essay later,[\[46\]](#) but for now want only to single out a blurb on the back of the book, which enthusiastically touts the collection as one that "deserves to push Textual Studies into the mainstream of humanistic scholarship." This mainstreaming sounds good in theory, but could be disastrous in practice within the context of Blake studies, given the awesome demands Blake's oeuvre places on the aspiring editor; it seems to me that the dilettante —unless properly forewarned— is well advised to steer clear of the pictorial Blake altogether. He exacts too high an admission price of an aspiring bibliographer, asking at the very least that she be both art historian and literary critic alike; in the end the probability that she'll end up a jack of all trades and a master of none seems pretty high. The dangers of dilettantism are addressed head on, Bob and Joe, in your recent essay on Blake's method of color printing, which offers an indictment of narrowly literary approaches to Blake as material artist.

Given such challenges, I'm curious as to what advice you would offer students of Blake who wish to study him from an editorial or bibliographic perspective. As artist (Joe), collector (Bob), and historian of technology (Morris), each of you, for example, brings some form of extra-literary knowledge to bear on your editorial work. Does this triad constitute a sufficient curriculum for editing Blake? What else does the modern student of Blake need to know now that technologies of representation embrace silicon and pixels—is it mostly a question of skill sets?

**RNE:** Some answers are implicit in the question. "All of the above," to begin with. Just as editors of texts extant only in the form of letterpress printings must know a good deal about how books were printed, and medievalists working with manuscripts must know about calligraphy and codicology, Blake's editors must know as much as possible about the way Blake produced his texts. Further—and this is crucial—Blake's editors have to understand the nature of the media in which their own, edited texts are going to be represented, be it letterpress, digital texts, digital images, or some combination of these and other technologies. The same general and two-fold rule—understanding Blake's means of production, understanding one's own means of production—also pertains to the reproduction of his pictorial images. In that regard, we need to learn a good deal more about Blake's habits as a draftsman and painter. And those who reproduce his work need to understand how images are reproduced today on paper or on monitors. I have a long way to go to live up to these criteria.

**ME:** No one is born an expert on anything, and no one can ever learn enough to be the world's leading expert in anything, even the tiniest area of human knowledge, for very long. That's simultaneously humbling and reassuring. I've come to see that for me personally Blake has been a shortcut, a focusing device, a knowledge-crutch—editorially and otherwise. I mean that he's been an opportunity to ask large questions in small places. All three of us are English professors, no matter what else we like to think we are or might once have been or might be in another life. Each of us has special areas of knowledge that make us (I believe) a good team of collaborators, because we have a base of shared knowledge (and interest—all of us have always been interested in the material/editorial representations of Blake) that is complemented by special knowledge and interests and perspectives that each of us has that the other ones don't have. That sounds like a cliché about teamwork and team spirit, but it's an honest observation. It's also largely accidental, so I'm properly grateful for the opportunity to work alongside such wonderful colleagues, which has been priceless.

As for what Kari calls the "price of entry," one of the special attractions of Blake's work is the very challenge it presents to the categories in which we store specialized knowledge, which for lack of better things to say

I've said too many times. That makes everyone a dilettante. Literary expertise is by no means sufficient, and neither is expertise in art history or studio practice or any other kind of history or practice. We could adjust this statement to fit anyone's work, Byron's or Verdi's or Giorgio de Chirico's—or any subject whatever. When it comes to putting demands on knowledge, Blake is not a unique case. But his extreme demands do make you realize sooner than other artists might that the cultural conventions of information storage—I mean information about texts and how to read them, images and how to view them, music and how to listen to it—are far too restrictive to give the poor reader/viewer a handle on his work. To quote Harold Bloom, "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."[\[47\]](#) Bloom wrote this as a negative comment on Blake's imagemaking talents, but it's also a comment on the limits of Bloom's perspective, which can stand for the limits of all of our perspectives, even those developed by intense specialization over a lifetime. With specialization comes inflexibility and blinkered knowledge.

A second difficulty with Blake's work is its unconventional draw on the resources in each of the conventional cultural categories where we store information about him (I mean, again, words and pictures, literature and art). It's not just that the combination of words and images is unusual (and therefore difficult to understand, record, and remember—speaking editorially rather than critically, of editorial understanding, recording, and remembering), but that the poems and the images are themselves unconventional. They don't fit all that well into the channels that guide our understanding of the information that flows through them. What this means, in effect, is that no conventional expertise can claim the best chance of understanding Blake even within a conventional category: literary critics aren't necessarily at the greatest advantage in understanding his writing, art historians aren't necessarily going to understand the visual work best, and artists aren't necessarily going to deliver the best understanding of his artistic techniques. Specialists, after all, are specialists in convention—literary conventions of the eighteenth century, for instance. Now all these kinds of expertise underwrite bibliographical and editorial expertise, and if there's structural failure at one point, failure across the board is likely. A useful cautionary tale, because it's all about facts and techniques and not about highflying criticism and theory, is the commendable effort, in the 1940s, to understand Blake's illuminated-printing techniques. Who was better qualified for the job than Stanley William Hayter (1901-1988), "probably the best-known printmaker of his time" (*Time*, 19 June 1961) and certainly among the most accomplished technically, and Ruthven Todd (1914-1978), who had attended the Edinburgh School of Art and made himself a formidable Blake expert? Hayter, Todd, and artist Joan Miró teamed up on an elaborate scholarly explanation of how Blake did illuminated printing that was, as Bob and Joe have demonstrated, dead wrong.[\[48\]](#) Their artistic training, experience, and outlook counted for something, no doubt, but it clearly wasn't sufficient. And one rightly wonders why no art historian quarreled with their judgments. You can multiply stories like that endlessly, of experts who have fallen afoul of Blake's unconventional imagination.

I can't afford to exaggerate his unconventionality, since I've invested years in trying to persuade my colleagues that, in important respects, Blake's ideas about art, at least, can be understood only in the context of other contemporary theories about art. Joe and Bob have shown in various ways how Blake was a conventional technician. And I don't know enough to deny Northrop Frye's attractive contention that key elements of Blake's literary works make them utterly fundamental products of the literary imagination—and utterly conventional in that positive sense. But you can't escape his strangeness, either, or tame him with history and context. He won't hold still for it. As Tom Mitchell cleverly put it in his 1982 remarks, Blake is a truant who won't behave, messy and undignified, out of the box, beyond the pale.[\[49\]](#) You can sometimes see where's he coming from, but you much less often can tell where's he's headed.

But you asked if I have any advice for the editorial and bibliographical crowd who may want to manage information about Blake in the future. Only of a uselessly general kind. I think it's less a matter of "skill sets" than attitude and maybe temperament. Curiosity, a sense of adventure, and skepticism are essential. Intense curiosity will pull new information into your field of vision; a sense of intellectual adventure will motivate

fearless category-jumping and keep the field of vision growing. Editing in new media I think of as Xediting (I've copyrighted that)—experimental editing not as an occasional thing but as a permanent condition, where you make the rules as you proceed, and where nothing offers even the illusion of permanence: any solution that works today probably won't work tomorrow. You have to be able to thrive in that environment. Skepticism is helpful in filtering new information and provides a degree of resistance to facile and opportunistic formulations—a proven danger with Blake, whose complexity gives a special allure to simple formulations that promise new insight at low cost (the price of entry again). And tying all these together is the *sine qua non* for all editors and bibliographers: if you don't have a large measure of anal retentiveness, you'll never get off editorial first base. And perhaps one final thought. You don't have to understand Blake to be his editor or bibliographer. If that were a requirement, he wouldn't have any editors. But then editors and bibliographers, more than critics, are used to that. They often don't feel the need to understand, in the usual sense, the objects of their attention, because they can operate at a certain conceptual distance from them, as they work with the objects so that other people can have the illusion of working inside them.

**JV:** I think that Morris is correct about one's approach, pedagogy, perspective, discipline, training, expertise, specialty—call it what you will—being both enabling and limiting simultaneously, which is why working collaboratively makes sense. Apparently scientists and health professionals, who are accustomed to working so, have an easier time acknowledging this than humanists, who are by training, if not nature, solitary creatures. Maybe learning how to work with others is one of the skills the next generation of Blake editors needs to acquire. And by others, I do not mean only other scholars. In creating the Archive, Bob, Morris, and I had to learn to work with computers and computer folks who spoke different languages and thought in different terms. We all had to learn to become a team, which in turn enabled us to envision something new and, as Morris notes, question every assumption we had about texts, images, editing, documents, reading, etc. And we had to unlearn "print-mind"—the idea that you publish things only in their final form—and adapt to a constant "work-in-progress" environment in which last year's sensible solutions are tomorrow's problems.

But as Morris also points out, even the collaboration of experts is no guarantee of success. His example, though, is worth examining closely. Hayter and team, with their extensive experience in etching and lithography, assumed that Blake's core technical problem was reproducing text without having to write it backward on the plate. They knew that the transfer methods then available to Blake did not work in relief etching, so they had him invent a method perfectly analogous to the one Senefelder invented for lithography—ten years later. Historically, their theory is anachronistic and fails to recognize Blake's ability (well known among his friends) to write backwards. They thought too much about how they would solve a problem Blake never encountered and too little about the historical Blake.

Of course, knowing Blake in his times is difficult even for dedicated Blakeans, as Erdman and others recognized twenty years ago. And as Bob and I pointed out back then, knowing how and when Blake created and produced his books is important too because it affects how editors think about Blake's texts. No doubt I would say that, given my own visual and graphic biases in these matters. As Blake said, "as the Eye is formed, such are its Powers" (letter of 23 August 1799, E 702) and "As the Eye—Such the Object" (anno. to Reynolds, E 645). So, yes, the way my eyes have been formed has affected my eye as an editor and scholar and my vision for and of Blake. Guilty as charged. But I think editors need to understand illuminated printing because misunderstanding it has had dire consequences—and still does, as is demonstrated in the essay you noted a moment ago on Blake's color printing. Twenty years ago, the books were thought to have been produced one at a time, usually by commission, leading reasonably to the assumption that each and every difference among copies signified intentional revision. The books were incorrectly dated, making it seem like Blake was printing a few copies of them every year for most of his life. Copies were loosely identified as "early" or "late," which was as historically placed as they could be. With no obvious copy text and the privileging of any specific copy on very shaky ground, editing Blake became, ironically, ahistorical. I am not referring to Keynes's reader's texts, which do not pretend to represent the historical texts, but to those established by Erdman and Bentley. Their texts purport to represent the texts as originally executed on the

copperplates, though they arrived at their reconstructions differently. Erdman established composite texts—what are in effect texts by consensus—by comparing various copies of the same work and averaging out the markings. Bentley relied on the clearest monochrome and posthumous copies in the belief that they could serve as copy texts.[\[50\]](#)

Reconstructing the nonextant plate text, like recovering manuscript or fair copy, aims at capturing the historical moment of first creation, but it resulted in abstractions of the kind Bob referred to as the "work" level, because the excavations cannot be verified and the methods deducing them are suspect. Whatever its source—notebook or back of a napkin—the text rewritten on the plate was in acid-resistant "ink" that was etched into relief, which could have removed fine details, like tails on commas. And the prints that reflect the etched texts do so imperfectly, because their appearance was affected by the way they were printed (e.g., underinked, overinked, inked with a stiff or oily ink onto paper of varying thickness and dampness). The text as originally written on the plate, in other words, is two removes from the printed text we read and is not recoverable.

That said, I think establishing the etched text for each book is an editorial project probably still worth pursuing. Bentley and Erdman had the right idea; the etched text is the constant matrix for all copies and provides the grounds for identifying variants. They just had less than optimal methods for establishing it. Today, with digital imaging, we can create three-dimensional models of the plates and examine each letter and mark in far greater detail than was possible using magnifying glasses, black and white photographs, and one's notes. The Archive's reproductions could possibly contribute to the reconstruction of etched texts, though all would require the reader to know Blake technically and have image-editing skills. Computer enhancement of a few copies of a book from different printings (and hence production styles) could yield and verify reconstructions of the plates (but not necessarily of the artifact, that is, the order of its plates) more exacting than those from consensus or any one particular copy. However, even with a methodology more systematic, consistent, and rigorous, the results would still be speculative, closer but still with built-in ambiguities, because a core problem in editing Blake—the defining of punctuation marks—is a subjective call: what appears oblong and comma-like to one editor can appear like a period to another and—more troubling—the same shape in a line or page of well-defined commas or an excess of round dots will appear/be read differently. Maybe the next generation of editors will need to study the phenomenology of reading?

Today we have a good idea of which copies of a book were printed together and when, which enables editors to establish a book's history and to recognize or at least question whether differences are deliberate revisions or the results of different printing styles years apart. Editing Blake historically, though, is still a challenge, for all the reasons cited by Morris and Bob and for all those still worth repeating. Illuminated poetry is pictorial; Blake's words are images and are versioned and embodied in particular copies and much of the punctuation requires interpretation and/or is not translatable into type. There really is no copy text for any book existing in more than one copy, and thus most of the theories governing editorial practice don't apply. Choosing the first or last copy of a book on the grounds that its text brings you closest to Blake's first or last intentions might seem like a good idea, but identifying such copies is impossible for all but one or two books.

The Archive doesn't attempt anything so grand (or impossible?) as establishing etched, base, or ideal texts, or deducing Blake's first or last intentions. We reproduce exemplary copies of each book from each of its printings, first, last, and everything in between, but, in effect, treat each copy as its own copy text and, within the limits of the medium (that price of entry again), establish diplomatic transcriptions of each copy as printed and retouched in pen and ink by Blake. This is the object orientation that Bob mentioned earlier, which keeps us historically grounded. From the start we saw our goal as providing trustworthy reproductions of Blake's pages for study—and as raw materials for editorial projects envisioned and conducted by others.

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## Notes

[27](#) Viscomi, *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993).

[28](#) Andrea Laue joins Matt Kirschenbaum as a technical editor of the Archive in Summer 2002.

[29](#) See Viscomi, "Forgery or Facsimile? An Examination of *America* copy B, plates 4 and 9," *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 16 (1983): 217-223.

[30](#) For more on the Archive's ImageSizer applet, see "The Persistence of Vision: Images and Imaging at the William Blake Archive," *RLG DigiNews* 4.1 (2000) <<http://www.rlg.org/preserv/diginews/diginews4-1.html>> and "A Tour of the William Blake Archive," WBA <<http://www.blakearchive.org/public/about/tour/index.html>>.

[31](#) See note 3 for "Inquiry into Blake's Method of Color Printing."

[32](#) "No representation without taxation": for a clever metaphoric deployment of this phrase in a literary context, see W. J. T. Mitchell, "Representation," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990) 21.

[33](#) From the Public Address: "He who Draws best must be the best Artist" (E 582); "I request the Society to inspect my Print of which Drawing is the Foundation & indeed the Superstructure it is Drawing on Copper as Painting ought to be Drawing on Canvas or any other [table] <surface> & nothing Else" (E 572).

[34](#) Martin Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1981).

[35](#) "The Archive at a Glance," WBA <<http://www.blakearchive.org/public/about/glance/>>.

[36](#) Vol. 30.

[37](#) Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, Jerzy W. Jaromczyk, Amit Kumar, The Virtual Lightbox 1.1.1, Beta Version July 2001 <<http://www.glue.umd.edu/~mgk/lightbox/>>.

[38](#) For JPEG2000, an up-and-coming image compression standard using wavelet technology, see the JPEG2000 pages at <<http://www.jpeg.org/JPEG2000.htm>>. Each image in the archive is currently preserved at multiple sizes, resolutions, and formats; JPEG2000 promises to change all that by delivering the image at multiple resolutions in the same codestream. Such efficiency would obviate the need on the production end to store multiple versions of an image and on the user end for multiple downloads.

[39](#) For more on Inote, see "Persistence" and "Tour."

[40](#) Eaves, *Counter-Arts Conspiracy: Art and Industry in the Age of Blake* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992).

[41](#) See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964) 63.

[42](#) A "DTD," i.e., Document Type Definition, is a specially designed tag set used to describe the structure of a given document or group of related documents (a document genre). For a technical discussion of the WBA's BAD DTD, see Daniel Pitti and John Unsworth, "After the Fall: Structured Data at IATH," ACH/ALLC Conference, Debrecen, Hungary, 7 July 1998. Available online at <<http://www.iath.virginia.edu/~jmu2m/ach98.html>>.



[43](http://www.english.uga.edu/~wblake/home1.html) Hilton, *Blake Digital Text Project* <<http://www.english.uga.edu/~wblake/home1.html>>.

[44](#) For more on this reproductive rut, see Viscomi, "Digital Facsimiles: Reading the William Blake Archive," *Computers and the Humanities* 36 (2002): 30-31 and 30n6. Viscomi provides some rough statistics to drive home the point: "Typographic editions and reproductions of only about 20% of Blake's illuminated canon (40 or so of the 175 copies of the 19 illuminated books Blake produced between 1788 and 1827, when he died), reproduced sometimes well, sometimes execrably, but in no coherent historical order and insufficient detail to sustain scholarly and editorial research--this was the state of Blake studies when in 1993 the editors of the Blake Archive began to conceive of reproducing Blake digitally" (30-31).

[45](#) From the Proverbs of Hell: "What is now proved was once, only imagin'd" (MHH 8, E 36).

[46](#) Eaves, "Graphicality," *Reimagining Textuality: Textual Studies in the Late Age of Print*, ed. Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux and Neil Fraistat (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2002) 99-122.

[47](#) "The Visionary Cinema of Romantic Poetry," *William Blake: Essays for S. Foster Damon*, ed. Alvin H. Rosenfeld (Providence: Brown UP, 1969) 18-19.

[48](#) For Todd and Hayter's theories on Blake's technique, see Todd, "The Techniques of William Blake's Illuminated Printing," *Print Collector's Quarterly* 29 (1948): 25-36.

[49](#) From Mitchell's contribution to the round robin: "Everything suggests to me that we are about to rediscover the dangerous Blake, the angry, flawed Blake, the crank who knew and repeated just about every bit of nonsense ever thought in the eighteenth century; Blake the ingrate, the sexist, the madman, the religious fanatic, the tyrannical husband, the second-rate draughtsman" 410-411.

[50](#) *William Blake's Writings*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1978).

## *Once Only Imagined*

### PART 3

#### 14.

**KK:** Joe, the distinction you draw between a recovery mission that attempts to conjecturally restore a lost copperplate image and an archival project that strives to represent a finished impression as accurately as technology permits is one that has divided Blake editors and facsimilists into competing camps for well over a hundred years. What seems to me particularly telling in your remarks is the idea that the WBA, with its high-end reproductions, could potentially breathe new life into a more conjectural model of representation. As part of an emerging class of electronic projects in the humanities organized according to the conceit of an archive, the WBA was designed to fulfill the promise of a mimetic model of editing. Like other archives, it has what Estelle Jussim would call "retinal-recording intentions." I've watched the archive go up pixel by pixel for more than half a decade, so I know firsthand how deliberate your departure has been from the more conjectural blueprints of your predecessors. Bentley and especially Erdman, whom you mention, though the most immediate of those predecessors, are antedated by scads of others who were likewise lured by the siren call of conjecture, though with far less reputable results. There's every Blake bibliographer's favorite whipping boy, Yeats, of course, and his co-editor, Ellis, but also someone like W. M. Rossetti.[\[51\]](#) Trying to divine what was etched in Blake's mind, these last three were led astray in pursuing a quarry even more elusive than the plate text. Not surprisingly, conjectural experiments can come in many guises: Bob discusses at some length the myriad ways in which hand-facsimilists have tried to reclaim Blake's copperplate outlines

in a 1985 review of the Manchester Etching Workshop's facsimiles of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. [52] So I'm fascinated by your remarks, Joe, about how the WBA might ultimately fit into this narrative: an archive founded on principles of factual reporting that ultimately paves the way for more speculative forms of representation. It promises to be a fascinating chapter in the history of Blake editing, no? Bob, can I get your thoughts on Joe's thoughts?

**RNE:** Joe of course makes all the right observations about Blake's methods of production. My one point of departure from his view of the whole matter is that I am less certain about the value of trying to retrieve the copperplate image. It is certainly not the Holy Grail of Blake editing. As Joe's description of relief etching indicates, accident inhabited the production of the plates, not just the printing process. And Blake's punctuation is continuous/analog, not discontinuous/digital as in letterpress. His autographic punctuation can, and often does, inhabit the interstices between, for example, a period and a comma. As I recently learned by editing the Huntington Library copy of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, [53] Blake's punctuation even includes hybrid forms, such as a comma with a vertical line (as in an exclamation mark) above it (figure 2). I suspect that, even if we found the relief-etched copperplates themselves, we could of course see precisely what was etched, but would still find on the coppers the anomalies we find in impressions from them, such as an ovoid shape somewhere between a period and a comma. Thus, the metal plates (much less a reconstruction of them on the basis of all extant impressions) would not solve the problems that constantly crop up when translating Blake's handwritten but printed texts into typography.

The above observations lead me to conclude that Blake did not care all that much about accurate—in the sense of consistently repeated forms of—punctuation. If he had, such intentions were thoroughly subverted by his chosen means of production at all of its most important stages—writing in reverse with an acid-resistant liquid (hard to control precisely on the small scale of punctuation marks), etching in relief (hard to control under-biting and lifting, particularly of very small areas like the tails of commas), and printing (hard to represent precisely the plate image, as we can see by comparing multiple impressions from any one plate). Oddly, the best representations of what was on the copperplate are probably posthumous impressions. But what do we do if a particular mark prints as a comma in a single posthumous print, but always as a period in all lifetime impressions pulled by Blake and his wife? Do we conclude that the Blakes carefully and intentionally converted that metal comma to an ink period? It's difficult for me to imagine that they were that obsessive when the basic characteristics of their graphic practices suggest a good deal of freedom. If not quite free-play, at least a level of liberty that allowed the nature of the medium to express itself. Tom Paine would have approved. Or, to misquote Nietzsche, we shall never rid ourselves of Urizen as long as we believe in punctuation.

I don't want to give the impression that we should ignore Blake's punctuation. Indeed, there is a good deal of interpretive work to be done on his habits as a punctuator, even if highly various. Do his practices change over time? Are there any differences between the punctuation in his pen and ink manuscripts (including his letters) and the illuminated books? What does it mean to have a period (or at least a dot that looks rather like a period) in the midst of what appears, from every other vantage, to be rather like a sentence? What sorts of historical precedents, going back to medieval illuminated manuscripts, informed his methods? The Blakean *punctum* needs interpretive attention, not just editorial fiddling.

Let me confess what will be considered heresy in some circles. When I read Blake just for fun, even serious fun, I read the Geoffrey Keynes edition. I think he (with the help of Max Plowman, particularly on *The Four Zoas*) did a fine job at using twentieth-century punctuation conventions to represent Blake's verbal content. [54] My evidence for this assessment is the paucity of modern essays pointing out how misleading Keynes's punctuation is or how he misconstrued Blake's meaning. Perhaps after we exhaust attempts to recover the copperplate images or what Blake "really intended," a quest that assumes a level of intentionality that he may not have had when it comes to punctuation, we will begin to explore "creative" and interpretive forms of letterpress transcription. And that might just lead us back to Sir Geoffrey.

**KK:** Because the topic of conjectural criticism is so far-reaching in its implications, I'd like to stay with it through another question. Joe, you suggest that reclaiming Blake's etched text will always be problematic, but that whatever gains we do make will likely owe their success to image processing advances. Already we can see how such advances have brought about a watershed in conjectural modeling in humanistic fields such as art conservation. Two recent examples that come immediately to mind are the computer-assisted reconstructions of earlier versions of paintings by the Dutch Abstract painter Piet Mondrian and the virtual restoration of damaged parts of Michelangelo's sculpture 'Moses' in San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome.<sup>[55]</sup> Closer to home, Vladimir Mistic, a graduate student in Electrical and Computer Science at the University of Rochester, is working with reproductions of some of Blake's hand-colored intaglio prints to develop a compression scheme that distinguishes printed lines from finishing work, paving the way for separate processing of each.<sup>[56]</sup> Whereas more familiar compression models, such as jpeg, treat the formal content of Blake's images as invariant, Mixed Raster Content (MRC), as the technology is known, is sensitive to the heterogeneous character of the pictorial composition as a whole. By treating printed (engraved and/or etched) lines separately from colored image layers, MRC minimizes image degradation and the inevitable loss of information. The result is superior raster imagery: digital facsimiles that show greater fidelity to their prototypes, as a comparison between an original scan of one of Blake's commercial print illustrations and its MRC reconstruction makes evident (figure 3.1) and (**figure 3.4**). But it's a byproduct of Vladimir's work that in the end may be of most interest to Blake scholars: because applied image segmentation can essentially lift the color overlay of an impression, it additionally provides the student of Blake the unique opportunity to model both the underlying copperplate image and the artist's coloring process (figure 3.2) and (figure 3.3).

Bob, you've suggested that if Vladimir's after a real challenge, he might try the separation of intaglio lines from surface color printing in a work like "Albion rose" or, even more ambitiously, of etched from engraved lines in any number of Blake prints. The achievement of the latter would be, in your words, "pure magic." Could you elaborate?

**RNE:** My challenge to Vladimir grew out of my own attempts, unassisted by computer imaging, to determine the state of one of Blake's intaglio prints that he color printed from the surface. Years ago, I figured out (at least to my own satisfaction) that the Huntington color-printed impression of "Albion rose" (and thus almost certainly the British Museum colored impression, very probably printed just prior to the Huntington example) was printed from an intaglio plate in an earlier state than what we see in all extant intaglio impressions (figure 4). My high-tech method of determining this was to slip the print out of its mat (the curator had left the room) and hold it against a window with Southern California sunlight streaming through it. I could perceive the intaglio lines etched into the plate because they revealed themselves either as "blind" (i.e., white) lines lacking the color-printing medium printed from surrounding areas, or (paradoxically) as color-printed lines somewhat denser than surrounding areas because the medium had worked its way into the intaglio lines and been printed from them more thickly than from the plate's surface. The fact that the Huntington impression is a maculature (a second pull from the plate with little or no addition of more printing medium) helped a good deal; I doubt that the British Museum impression would give up its secrets to backing sunlight because of the density of the colors. I tried the same game with the Huntington impression of "Lucifer and the Pope in Hell" but without success because of the dense pigments.

I hope that this long-winded explanation indicates why working with such prints would challenge Vladimir's methods. As I understand his technique, he can separate black-ink intaglio lines from overlying hand coloring. That would not work if there is no ink in the intaglio lines. But let me issue another challenge: could Vladimir separate ink from color-printing medium in a relief etching? That could be very helpful when working out the details of Blake's method of color printing in the illuminated books.

This may be a bit off the point, but let me cite one of my own experiences in how helpful computer imaging can be when dealing with conservation issues. Even before acquiring a color-printed impression of *The Book of Urizen* plate 22 from *The Small Book of Designs* copy B, I knew that it had a visually distracting fox mark in the upper right margin. But the foxing (or whatever it was) was stable and not in the image. Would it be worth the risk to try to remove the blemish, or should I leave well enough alone? In search of an answer, I asked John Sullivan, head of the Imaging Lab at the Huntington Library, to scan the print, place the digital image in Adobe Photoshop, and electronically erase the foxing. The visual impact was considerable; indeed, my overall apperception of the work was altered for the better. I turned the print over to Mark Watters, a skilled paper conservator, who, having determined that a black pigment in the print was unstable when exposed to water, used a "dry" and localized procedure to remove the foxing and fill in with new paper fibers. I doubt that I would have gone to all this trouble if I had not seen on a monitor, almost prophetically, what the restored print would look like.

**ME:** A couple of quick points about conjecture. David Erdman was highly conjectural in his readings of obscured and deleted passages in Blake's work—so much so that no one has ever been able to confirm or deny several of them.<sup>[57]</sup> I wonder if Vladimir's technology can help provide those confirmations. Second, I would emphasize just how traditional, how conservative you might say, such hypothetical reconstructions are in certain key respects—and how undertheorized. Conjectural reconstructions of putative originals have a long history as a respectable editorial and archaeological enterprise, though the results have often been controversial. In this typology somewhere belong conjectural adjustment with no prior original in mind—as in Jerry McGann's "deformations"<sup>[58]</sup>—and adjustment with respect to the future rather than to the past, as when we adjust texts to calibrate them to some putative state of a future reader's mind—which is a common motivation behind editorial acts. The editor asks, in effect, who is the future audience for this edition and what will it want or need—and then responds, editorially, to that hypothesis.<sup>[59]</sup>

## 16.

**KK:** Morris, previously I mentioned a forthcoming essay of yours, "Graphicality," which takes a historical and technological look at how each generation of Blake scholars and editors has remade Blake for its own times. Among the various historical players you single out for special attention is the nineteenth-century poet and critic Algernon Charles Swinburne, who realized that if Blake was to have any currency in a future age, he'd have to be represented by a good publicist ready to cater to posterity's tastes. Swinburne rose to the occasion, in your words "rescu[ing] Blake from his chosen profession, painting and engraving, for, of all things, literature."<sup>[60]</sup> You go on to say that "William Blake is always eligible for rescue, and among his rescuers Swinburne is neither first nor last. Rescue is, and has always been, one of the coordinates by which we fix Blake's position in arts histories."<sup>[61]</sup> As you take stock of the last five or ten years of Blake scholarship, do you see evidence that Blake critics have been operating in rescue mode? And if Blake is always eligible for rescue, he's by implication also always being set up for another fall. In your opinion, what are we doing now that, despite all our good intentions, will meet with skepticism, revision, and bemusement down the road?

**ME:** This is not a phenomenon unique to Blake and his audience. All criticism, all scholarship, is a rescue operation as we rediscover Byron and reread Shelley. And Rescue is the accomplice of Discovery. I do see Blake, though, as a sensational, hyperbolic instance of that familiar pattern, and the difficulty of understanding him makes him impossible to master, to position, to control. So he is one of those artists who allow his posthumous public to feel that we're always discovering him. You ask about the rescue attempts of the last several years. Critics such as Jon Mee and David Worrall, among numerous others, can be seen as attempting to rescue Blake the political radical from more conservative Christian readings by documenting similarities between his ideas and the ideas of contemporary radicals, or between the form of an illuminated book and the form of a radical political broadsheet.<sup>[62]</sup> There's an ongoing tug of war over the trajectory of

Blake's political commitments. Are his later works increasingly Christian quietist or do they maintain, in some form, his radical commitments of the 1790s? David Erdman always argued for the latter, as do Erdman's contemporary avatars, if I understand them. Of course these are honorable and honest scholarly arguments about the truth of the matter, but, again, the truth in Blake is so hard to come by that it's easy to construct the argument either way, making the motivation of his discoverers—what kind of Blake do they want to discover?—a more significant factor than usual. And various features of Blake's life and work do often seem to make his sponsors want a particular Blake for their pains. Naturally I'm not going to let this question go without circling back to the Blake Archive, which takes its place in a long line of editorial rescue-and-discovery missions, in this case dedicated to discovering the whole Blake (not for the editors but for others, editing being almost always framed, it seems, in a rhetoric of altruism), thus rescuing the real Blake from the misleading fragments that are held by literary critics, art historians, etc. As for the cyclical pattern you mention, we Blake Archivists know that, "despite all our good intentions," our efforts "will meet with skepticism . . . down the road" (your words), because we've already heard early warnings from our critics, who disapprove of the digital lockbox we're putting their Blake into. (For examples, see Articles about the Archive, in About the Archive, on our web site.[\[63\]](#))

## 17.

**KK:** Bob, regular readers of *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* affectionately anticipate your annual, end-of-the-year round-up of Blake in the Marketplace. Over the years, you've introduced us to a diverse cast of characters, ranging from curators to book collectors to auctioneers to hoodwinked amateurs involuntarily caught up in the rough-and-tumble of international connoisseurship. Much more than a mere inventory of Blake sales, the genre as you've defined it over the years is part detective story, part comedy of errors, and part autobiography, with a soupcon (sometimes more) of gamesmanship and turf battles frequently thrown in for good measure. Taken collectively, the essays offer a rich memoir of your life as a Blake collector.

Could you talk some about your dual identity as a Blake scholar and collector? Are the two ever at odds with one another, or do they complement each other in useful ways?

**RNE:** The symbioses outweigh the contradictions—although I frequently revel in the latter as much as the former. It's pleasant not to know if I have spent an afternoon pursuing my hobby or my profession. Sometimes dealers become confused by my dual identity, not knowing if I'm a potential customer or just another annoying scholar who might question the authenticity of the merchandise (answer: both). In these circumstances I like to represent myself as a professional collector and an amateur scholar. In several respects, I've modeled my two selves on the life of Sir Geoffrey Keynes, fortunate enough to be an "amateur" (in the root sense of the word) at both endeavors. Sir Geoffrey's third identity was being a surgeon; I suppose my third is teaching English courses such as "Introduction to Poetry" and "Children's Literature" in a desert town called Riverside. More delicious contradictions.

Revelations about further identities will have to await publication of *Memoirs of a Blake Collector*. I've been living the story for thirty years, but have yet to key in a word.[\[64\]](#)

## 18.

**KK:** I don't know for sure but would be willing to guess that even when basking in the afterglow of a rare find, the mind of a collector turns inevitably to the unrecorded painting, the lost masterpiece, the rumored document of an artistic process. In the case of Blake, what else could surface in an auction house or dusty attic sometime in the future—realistically, of course, but also at the outer reaches of fantasy? And how would such discoveries change things?

**RNE:** If you had asked this question in the spring of 2001, I doubt that I would have had the prescience to mention Blake's watercolors for his illustrations to Robert Blair's *The Grave*, nine unrecorded pencil sketches, and three unrecorded prints from the illuminated books. Yet all these turned up in the summer of 2001. If past is prologue, more treasures will reveal themselves for years to come. The most likely type of discovery will be more sketches on the versos of already recorded drawings. Indeed, I can confidently promise at least one such revelation in the next year or two. Responding to the requirements of conservation and exhibition, institutions and private collectors remove drawings from old backing mats to which the art work was firmly affixed on all corners. Whatever might be on the versos is revealed.

Martin Butlin's great catalogue of Blake's paintings and drawings includes a good many untraced works; some will probably turn up eventually. Blake enthusiasts have dreamed for years that one of the lost paintings from Blake's 1809 exhibition would be rediscovered, but I suspect that most have decayed (because of the instability of Blake's medium) and been destroyed. *The Spiritual Form of Napoleon* was exhibited in 1876 and may have passed through a Christie's auction in 1882, and thus one can't entirely give up hope.

We can also expect some discoveries in Blake's work as a commercial engraver of book illustrations, although the pace of such discoveries has been surprisingly slow over the last several decades. Less probable are new copies of the illuminated books (unless Detlef Dörrbecker extends his searches throughout the world). I think the least likely category for revelation is texts of unknown poems, unless contained in a letter. Several of Blake's letters to William Hayley were sold at auction in 1878; these may turn up some day. Only one unrecorded letter emerged from a private collection in the last fifty years; it contains several lines of verse.[\[65\]](#)

The discovery of even a minor pencil doodle can tell us something about Blake's methods of composition, particularly when the sketch is related to some more finished work. Practically any scrap of writing is of interest, particularly to the biographer. But I doubt that we will find anything that fundamentally revises our sense of Blake's life and ideas.

## 19.

**KK:** Bob, because it's good fun, I want to ask you about the market in Blake kitsch, which has really flourished of late. Blake posters, T-shirts, magnets, erasers, coffee mugs, pens, pencils, and the like are seemingly everywhere, with museums a leading purveyor of such goods. Over the years you've collected these kinds of mass-produced trinkets right along with costly originals. I don't quite know what would constitute a "prize" in this byway of connoisseurship, but do you have any favorites? And what do you think the kitschification of Blake says about his role in popular culture?

**RNE:** Just learned a new and very useful word—"kitschification." I'm all for it. The more kitsch the better. I have dipped into this highly specialized field of collecting, although with more amateur zeal than expertise. My two favorite prizes are the Blake stamps issued by Romania in 1957 and the former Soviet Union in 1958. I acquired the latter on eBay in 2001 from a woman in Lithuania—another demonstration of how the Internet has transformed our hobbies as well as our professional lives (figure 5). Both stamps are part of what I'm proud to say is the world's "smallest" Blake collection—stamps (real and fake), miniature books, small refrigerator magnets, and ceramic boxes with Blake quotations or pictures that I fill with clippings of tiny Blake reproductions. And some people think Blake was nuts.

My miniature collection is complemented by a few larger items—Blake pillows, T-shirts of course (preserved in their original wrappers—I never wear them), coffee mugs, shopping bags, and what I like to think is the world's largest collection of Blake post cards. But I do have my limits. A few years ago, while Morris and I were in London, he acquired a paper lamp bearing some Blake images. I successfully resisted temptation

because it was the ugliest lamp I'd ever seen (figure 6). Here in Southern California I came upon a large faux-antique wooden chest with quotations from Blake written on it. I'm sure that the price—\$1200 if I recall—had something to do with the fact I didn't buy it.

I suppose that the Holy Grail for Blake kitsch collectors is one of the "Chaucers Canterbury Pilgrims" lampshades printed by the Philadelphia book dealer, Charles Sessler, from the original plate in 1941. Some were printed on silk, others on a vellum-like paper. My old friend Lucile Rosenbloom (from whom I acquired some non-kitsch, the "Deaths Door" white-line etching and the *Laocoön* engraving) had one, as did the New York book dealer John Fleming, now also deceased. I do not know what happened to these examples, but perhaps one will turn up someday on eBay.

Do the so-called "Camden Hotten" Blake forgeries, which probably started life as innocent preparations for reproductions, count as kitsch?[66] They are another item on my list of desiderata. Over the years I've managed to acquire 41 original drawings by Blake (or at least I hope they are by Blake), but I've never been able to bag a Camden Hotten. Please get in touch if you have one.

## 20.

**KK:** I'd like to close by remembering David Erdman, to whom the special issue of SiR paid tribute in 1982. What is his legacy as a Blake scholar, and how will he be remembered in the future?

**RNE:** David's legacy is enormous, and all for the good. As I noted earlier, the School of Erdman has dominated Blake scholarship for the last few decades. But David was intensely interested in explication and interpretation, not just filling in background information for its own sake. A good deal of historicist work, clearly indebted to Erdman, has neglected this dimension of his work, perhaps a principal motivation for his historical researches. History as a tool for understanding and appreciating an artifact that exists now, as much as it did in the 1790s, needs more attention if Erdman's full legacy is to be honored. And perhaps a bit more of David's enthusiasm could find its way into academic prose. I can remember his shouting at me, from a distance of about two feet, about an interpretation he had of one of the designs in the illuminated books. Made little sense, but it was energetic and great fun. A bit like Blake himself?

**ME:** In my opinion it's his editorial work, especially his *Complete Poetry and Prose of Blake* of course, but also his brilliant (and daunting) "type facsimile" of Blake's Notebook (with Donald K. Moore),[67] his *Illuminated Blake*—more useful as a handy edition than as a commentary[68]—and, in the not-Blake realm, his volumes of political writings in the Collected Coleridge.[69] David cleared the editorial path for Blake through the last half of the twentieth century. That's why his indispensable edition of Blake's texts has already found not one but two electronic homes, in Nelson Hilton's Digital Blake site and in the Blake Archive. I can't see doing without my Erdman edition anytime soon. His early Blake criticism, in *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*, though many of its readings seem questionable to me, proved beyond a doubt that Blake's work could repay time spent in historical-political research, and in that respect it is a critical model that anchors a whole line of Blake criticism.

Erdman's legacy should be looked at in other less concrete ways. For its significance to the future of editing, I'd single out his penchant for collaboration. Listen to the first sentence of his 1982 statement: "We sons and daughters of Los and Enitharmon have felt happiest when working as a team . . ." (391). Jack Grant follows up with an appeal for "collective deliberation" (436). I'm temperamentally immune to the sons-and-daughters-of-Los business and alert to the danger of creating the impression that there is a Blake industry, much less a Blake mafia. Nonetheless, an artist as difficult as Blake can benefit from collaboration. I would distinguish critical from editorial collaboration. Both are possible but the latter is generally more productive more quickly.

Collaboration has a long history in editing, which is one of the factors behind the easy accommodation of editorial projects in the digital realm. Editing can provoke theoretical speculation, which I personally enjoy, but it also has a very practical side where principles have to be acted on, and actions have to take material form. Editing adapts well to teamwork because it's progressive to a degree and always labor intensive. Knowledge about it can be shared—the whole purpose, after all, is to put information into communicable, transmissible forms—which means that it can be learned and taught, which in turn means that labor can be divided and work distributed. So it's not accidental that in recent years editorial collaboration in the humanities (where solo scholarship has been the rule) has spread like a wildfire. It quickly jumped the firebreak between print culture and digital culture (dumb terms, but they fit well in that sentence). Attractive ideas for new editorial projects in electronic form were suddenly a dime a dozen. Putting those ideas into practice involves lots of work, expertise, and money, so many of them won't be realized, but networked computing has helped to launch a new era in editing, and Blake's under-represented work (literally under-represented) stands to benefit more than most.

As far as collaboration in other areas is concerned, let's put it this way: you couldn't produce *Fearful Symmetry* (which Grant rightly calls "the one book we can most confidently recommend to the Blake scholar of 2100 A.D.") with a team.<sup>[70]</sup> But I can easily imagine Erdman-style teamwork making the pursuit of historical and artistic contexts, deep in the archives of record offices, libraries, and museums, more efficient with very helpful results. But then, establishing the significance of those contexts to Blake's work?—well, it's a tough thing to do in teams, and the history of collective critical work in the humanities suggests to me that its primary effect is the elevation of individual morale through the sense of participation in a group effort rather than the production of great co-authored essays and books.

**JV:** I've not much to add to what Morris and Bob have already said. I know that I use Erdman's editorial works all the time and that our talking here about a critical work written in 1954 as anchoring a whole line of Blake criticism still dominant today reveals a legacy matched by few others in any field. I have often heard Erdman referred to as one of the godfathers of New Historicism (the other one being Carl Woodring, who edited the Coleridge portion of that extraordinary SiR volume twenty years ago). I don't think his legacy lies there, though, because he used historical and political contexts to illuminate the art and artist rather than vice versa, that is to say, rather than using art to reflect or discuss very specific strands of the cultural tapestry, such as class or gender or race, which seems characteristic of much criticism touting itself as historical. Erdman was an excellent researcher, someone who really did read what Blake read and examine the art and prints that Blake saw, and he tried to do so from Blake's perspective as much as he could, and I think he succeeded because he had a creative imagination equal to his intellect. Some of his readings may be questionable, but they are always thought-provoking and often inspiring.

While the importance of the historical-political context for understanding Blake is now well recognized, I share Morris's fear that spending years of "close study in chilly, dark places" is not very inviting or much encouraged in a profession that has a tenure clock. I like Morris's vision of Erdman-style teams working the dusty archives of libraries, museums, and public record offices, but don't anticipate seeing any formed anytime soon. It does, though, testify to how much Erdman was an indefatigable research team unto himself.

### [Previous Part](#)

### Notes

<sup>51</sup> See John Edwin Ellis and W. B. Yeats, eds., *The Works of William Blake, Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical*, 3 vols. (London: B. Quaritch, 1893); William Michael Rossetti, ed., *The Poetical Works of William Blake: Lyrical and Miscellaneous* (1874; London: George Bell and Sons, 1891).

<sup>52</sup> *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 19 (1985): 39-51.



[53](#) *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, ed. Robert N. Essick (San Marino: Huntington Library P, forthcoming 2002).

[54](#) Keynes, ed., *Blake: Complete Writings* (1966; London: Oxford UP, 1974 with corrections of the earlier edition). Keynes notes Plowman's help with *The Four Zoas* in *The Writings of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, 3 vols. (London: The Nonesuch P, 1925). All Keynes's later editions of *The Four Zoas* are based closely on this 1925 text.

[55](#) On Mondrian, see Zoe Ingalls, "Seeing the Hidden History of a Great Painter's Work," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 25 May 2001: A35 (also available online at <http://chronicle.com/free/v47/i37/37a03501.htm>). On Michelangelo, see David F. Salisbury, "Digital Michelangelo Project: Creating Virtual Sculpture," 1999 [http://graphics.stanford.edu/projects/mich/publicity/campus\\_report/campus\\_report.html](http://graphics.stanford.edu/projects/mich/publicity/campus_report/campus_report.html).

[56](#) Vladimir Mistic, "Segmentation and Compression of Blake Archive Images," Nov. 2001 <http://henry.ee.rochester.edu:8080/~misticv/CTLTR/CTLTR.PPT>.

[57](#) Though a number of Erdman's writings and editions can be informatively approached as case studies in editorial method, his work on *Jerusalem* stands apart as a proving ground for his conjectural criticism. See "The Suppressed and Altered Passages in Blake's *Jerusalem*," *Studies in Bibliography* 17 (1964): 1-54.

[58](#) For McGann's deformations, both pictorial and textual, see his "Imagining What You Don't Know: The Theoretical Goals of the Rossetti Archive," 1997 <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/%7Ejmm2f/chum.html> and, with Lisa Samuels, "Deformance and Interpretation," <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/%7Ejmm2f/deform.html>. An augmented version of the latter is available in print: *New Literary History* 30 (1999): 25-56.

[59](#) Conjectural criticism as a tool to predict future states of texts and aesthetic objects is explored in depth in "Outside the Archive: Conjectural Criticism and the Digital Humanities," a co-authored manuscript by Matthew G. Kirschenbaum and Kari Kraus, part of which was presented as a plenary talk at the Society for Textual Scholarship, Graduate Center of the City University of New York, NYC, 19 April 2001. See also Kraus, "Conjecture," keyword essay in *Performance Research* 7 (2002), a special issue on editing.

[60](#) "Graphicality" 104.

[61](#) "Graphicality" 103.

[62](#) See, for starters, Jon Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism in the 1790s* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1992) and David Worrall, *Radical Culture: Discourse, Resistance, and Surveillance, 1790-1820* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1992). Any account of the line of Erdman must also include Michael Ferber's judicious earlier study, *The Social Vision of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985).

[63](#) See especially Cooper and Simpson, "High-Tech Luddite" 125-131 and (a follow-up) Cooper and Simpson, "Looks Good in Practice, but Does It Work in Theory? Rebooting the Blake Archive," *The Wordsworth Circle* 31 (2000): 63-68.

[64](#) For more on how Essick's identity as a collector has influenced his relationship to Blake's work, see his "Blake and the Production of Meaning," in *Blake in the Nineties*, ed. Steve Clark and David Worrall (New York: St. Martin's P, Inc., 1999) 7-26.

[65](#) See Robert N. Essick and Morton D. Paley, "'Dear Generous Cumberland': A Newly Discovered Letter

and Poem by William Blake," *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 32 (1998): 4-13.

[66](#) For the Camden Hotten facsimiles, see Morton D. Paley, "John Camden Hotten, A. C. Swinburne, and the Blake Facsimiles of 1868," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 79 (1976): 259-296.

[67](#) *The Notebook of William Blake: A Photographic and Typographic Facsimile*, ed. David Erdman and Donald K. Moore (1973; rev. ed. New York: Readex Books, 1977).

[68](#) *Illuminated Blake* (Garden City: Anchor P/Doubleday, 1974).

[69](#) Erdman, ed., *Essays on His Times*, vol. 3 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, gen. ed. Kathleen Coburn, 16 vols. (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1969-).

[70](#) Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1949).