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[The "Third Text" of Blake's Illuminated Books][†]

William Blake's illuminated poems naturally invite the hard questions about the relation of visual texts and verbal texts in any illustrated book, and in his in particular. I should like to revisit a few of the more troublesome problems that continue to face us as readers and viewers of Blake's illuminated pages, and to pose some questions about those pages and the ways in which Blake may or may not have intended us to proceed in digesting them. I say 'digesting' deliberately, for it seems to me that Blake asks us to 'consume' his texts in a manner analogous to that of John of Patmos, by means of a distinctively *physical* process through which we quite literally internalize the texts. This is 'informed consumerism' with a peculiarly Blakean twist. The account in Revelation is that the voice from heaven commanded John to 'Go and take the little book which is open in the hand of the angel which standeth upon the sea and upon the earth' (Rev. 10.8). The result is just what the angel predicts: 'And I took the little book out of the angel's hand, and ate it up; and it was in my mouth sweet as honey: and as soon as I had eaten it my belly was bitter' (Rev. 10.10). Significantly, the angel makes it clear what must transpire next: 'And he said unto me, Thou must prophesy again before many peoples, and nations, and tongues, and kings' (Rev. 10.11).

Much as John was told to consume and thereby internalize the visions revealed to him in an act replete with sacramental overtones of the Eucharist, Blake asks us to treat his texts with comparable appetite and fervency, their often inherent bitterness notwithstanding. * * * [F]or Blake the act of reading is to be regarded in fact as essentially sacramental in nature, at least when that act is performed correctly, for it is a prelude both to individual insight and to social—or community—prophecy and redemption. When done incorrectly, however, whether frivolously or with deliberate intent to misread, the sacrilegious treatment of the text is certain to produce intellectual and imaginative indigestion. This is not to imply that Blake's notion of 'reading' is ever entirely consistent, nor is it to disregard his irreverent and often deliberately perverse rendering of everything from physical and imaginative myopia to the immensely fruitful polyvalence (and polysemy) that at once tantalizes and frustrates modern poststructuralist approaches to his verbal and visual texts alike. We shall need, therefore, to proceed from the outset with some care.

But first a problem of taxonomy: what are we to call Blake's texts? This question is not so frivolous as it may at first appear, even in the wake of Joseph Viscomi's thorough examination of Blake's books (Viscomi 1993).[1] We usually call them 'illuminated texts', but every time I teach Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, students almost without exception talk about 'the texts and the pictures'. Nor are the students alone in instinctively prioritizing the verbal text over the visual in this fashion. Writing in

† From "'Something in My Eye': Irritants in Blake's Illuminated Texts," chapter 3 in *Blake in the Nineties*, ed. Steve Clark and David Worrall (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd.; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 78–81, 82–83, 84–85, 86–88, 90–91, 93–94, with adjustments in citations of sources. Abridgement approved by the author.

1. See the "Selected Bibliography" for works cited parenthetically [*editors' note*].

Engaging English Art, for example, Michael Cohen refers to Blake's *Songs* in terms of 'text and picture' or 'design and poem', while David Bindman, writing earlier, likewise calls the illuminated works essays in 'combining text and design'.[2] Indeed, this dichotomous and apparently mutually exclusive terminology recurs with surprising frequency in much of recent post-structuralist commentary on Blake's work.[3] Language of this sort implies that only a literary text can be a real 'text' and that the visual text is at best the weak and subservient sister art whose function is not *textually* significant and whose nature *as art* is only minimally and marginally important in the generation of meaning. Even so perennially perceptive a student of Blake as David Erdman seems to have been driving along this one-way street, if we are to take at face value his comment in *The Illuminated Blake* that 'every graphic image has its seed or root in the poetry' (Erdman 1974, p. 16). Yet as Molly Anne Rothenberg has noted this sort of bifurcation blurs the distinction that exists between Blake's illuminated poems as 'works' and as 'texts', and between the opposing tendencies towards restriction and liberation, or demarcation and freedom, that customarily typify the two (Rothenburg 1993, p. 1).[4] In reminding us of the strongly performative—and therefore communitarian—nature of Blake's illuminated poems, Rothenberg helps to redirect our attention to what is transpiring on the pages (as aesthetic entities or 'wholes') and in the individual consciousnesses of a varied (and varying) readership.

My quibble here is less with the terminology than with the logocentric bias it betrays. Blake offered us at least partial guidance when in his advertising prospectus of 1793 he described the *Songs* and the early prophetic poems as works executed 'in Illuminated Printing', each 'with [*n*] designs' (E693). Blake says, 'The Illuminated Books are Printed in Colours', but he goes no further in defining what he means by 'illuminated', either here or anywhere else in his writings. The *OED* tells us that in eighteenth-century usage 'illumination' commonly referred to rich adornment of the page with gold, silver or colour, and to the use of 'tracery and miniature designs, executed in colours', as for instance in illuminated medieval manuscripts. This more modern and technically specific meaning of the term had in Blake's time become concurrent with its older and clearly relevant connotations of enlightenment and elucidation. It would seem that the 'designs' to which Blake refers in his prospectus are therefore those substantial visual images that range in size from a quarter-page to a full page; presumably the interlinear and minor marginal visual details do not in themselves add up to

2. Michael Cohen, *Engaging English Art: Entering the Work in Two Centuries of English Painting and Poetry* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1987), pp. 65, 76; David Bindman, *Blake as an Artist* (Oxford: Phaidon; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977), p. 43.
3. See essays in the following collections: Nelson Hilton and Thomas A. Vogler, eds., *Unnam'd Forms: Blake and Textuality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Dan Miller, Mark Bracher, and Donald Ault, eds., *Critical Paths: Blake and the Argument of Method* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987). More helpful—and probably more faithful historically and intellectually to Blake's aesthetic in the context of his times—is the notion of the sort of 'composite' art discussed some time ago by W. J. T. Mitchell, *Blake's Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); and, still earlier, the encompassing tradition of the 'sister arts' invoked by Jean H. Hagstrum, *William Blake: Poet and Painter. An Introduction to the Illuminated Verse* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1964). I have discussed this matter in some detail, in a somewhat different context, in Behrendt, *Reading William Blake* (London: Macmillan Press, 1992), esp. Chapters 1 and 2.
4. Rothenberg here draws the distinction which Roland Barthes examines most specifically in 'From Work to Text', in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979) pp. 72–81.

what Blake means by 'designs',[5] though they do come remarkably close to the 'tracery and miniature designs' to which the *OED* refers.

We can, however, say with greater certainty what Blake's interdisciplinary texts are *not*. They are not texts-with-illustrations in the fashion of the eighteenth-century printed book adorned with engraved full- or partial-page illustrations, books in which the areas devoted to verbal and visual texts not only are kept separate by physical means but also are typically executed by different hands (the typesetter who 'sets' the author's verbal text, the illustrator who engraves a design—perhaps from a sketch supplied by yet another hand, and the printer-bookmaker who assembles the package under the supervision of the editor, publisher or bookseller). In producing his illuminated books Blake either saw to every one of these tasks himself or oversaw the work that his wife Catherine did when she worked with him to print, colour and otherwise prepare copies. In this respect, either alone or—as frequently happened—in creative partnership with his wife, Blake was able to maintain virtually absolute control over every aspect of the aesthetic nature of the final interdisciplinary product.

Blake's texts are not simply verbal texts with illustrations 'to' or 'of' them, and their verbal / visual interplay is of quite a different nature from that which governs his designs for, most notably, Milton, Gray, Young, Wollstonecraft, Dante and the Bible. Nor are they the sort of text that he seems to have envisioned for *Tiriel* (c. 1788), for which work the verse and the pictures seem to have been conceived as firmly separate (and separated) components—more in the manner of the conventional eighteenth-century typeset book with full-page illustrations. Nor are they essays in the familiar form of the later eighteenth-century illustrated children's book, although Blake also tried his hand at a variant on that form (*For Children*, subsequently reworked as *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise*).

Blake's illuminated poems generate what is essentially a 'third text', a meta-text that partakes of both the verbal and the visual texts, but that is neither the sum of, nor identical with either of, those two texts. The verbal and visual texts stimulate different varieties of aesthetic, intellectual and affective responses which are firmly grounded in the disciplinary natures of the two media and in the tradition and 'vocabulary' (or reference-systems) particular to each. Certainly one would scarcely think of suggesting that Blake's pages are in the manner of Hogarth, whose productions are insistently and inescapably *visual* texts—pictures—no matter how much verbal material the artist introduces into them in the form of inscriptions, bits of printed matter lying about, and so forth. When we say that we 'read' a Hogarth print, we are well aware that we are using the verb 'read' in a very special way to suggest a process of perception and cognition (or recognition) that finds an analogue—and only an *analogue*, however near a one—in the largely sequential activity by which we read a conventional printed verbal text. Even the powerful *narrativity* of many of Hogarth's pictures—and certainly of sequences like his 'progresses'—is nevertheless intrinsically different from Blake's art. Perhaps the more historically apt point of contrast is furnished by the popular caricature art of Blake's time, where the striking visual textures of images by Gillray, Woodward, Rowlandson, Isaac Cruikshank and others are regularly interrupted by inscriptions,

5. Comparing Blake's counts of the 'designs' with the numbers of pages containing such large-scale visual images appears to corroborate this claim.

speech balloons and undemarcated lines of dialogue that seem to float in the visual space.

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With pictures, viewers typically begin with an overall impression that forms quickly upon first apprehension of the picture and gradually work their way into the image, letting their eyes explore the full image in response to the artist's prompting. Readers, on the other hand, must proceed in just the opposite fashion, putting the subject together like a jigsaw puzzle, in linear, chronological fashion, in order to construct the overall image with its attendant impressionistic, imaginative shadings. The actual process, of course—as contemporary phenomenologies of perception, cognition and interpretation quickly remind us—is a good deal more complicated, involving as it does simultaneously ongoing activities of recognizing, sorting, comparing, reconciling, rejecting, retaining and modifying data and 'meaning' literally with every piece of information that is encountered and registered. Nevertheless, there remain profound differences in the nature and the effect of the linearity involved in apprehending the content of information conveyed in each medium, differences that are a direct consequence of the nature of the individual artistic medium.

Not surprisingly, these two very different ways of presenting their materials and thus engaging their audiences indicate the extent to which the two arts are both grounded in, and directed towards, different sorts of aesthetic, intellectual and affective modes of creation and response. The really crucial difference, it seems to me, is not that of the opposition between the inherently powerful initial dramatic impact of the stunning visual image, on one hand, and the accumulative, prolonged crescendo of impact generated on the other by the verbal passage. Rather, the crux of the matter lies, I believe, in what the responding mind is asked to do in dealing with the two arts.

The visual artist controls the picture's system of references, presenting—typically—a representational image of something or someone about which (or whom) we may or may not know anything in advance. The artist also provides—and we respond to—a variously coded set of contextual indicators that might include visual conventions, specific iconography, historical or cultural references, along with what might be called 'tonal' indicators (colours, textures, 'technique' and, of course, size) that demonstrably influence our affective response to the pictorial image.

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Given one of Blake's illuminated pages, like *Europe*, plate 9 [**12**, p. 102 herein], for instance, one almost without exception first 'sees' the visual text and—unavoidably—formulates an initial response to that visual statement. I choose this page deliberately, since it effectively demonstrates one of the most characteristic and challenging intellectual 'problems' we face in dealing with Blake's illuminated poems. This lovely, graceful, visual image portrays a pair of figures whose apparent function it is to blight the crops, an act that is in fact recounted not in *Europe* at all but rather in the poem that preceded it, *America*. The visual image is an intellectual and aesthetic trap for the unwary: its seductively attractive visual aspect disguises what subsequent investigation reveals as evil, as menace, as a force of destruction.

Is a page of this sort primarily a verbal or a visual text? That seems to me just one of the many *wrong questions* that critical commentary often permits to distract us from the real matter at hand in Blake's art. These heterogeneous pages, with their decidedly differing and often contradictory aesthetic and intellectual demands, constitute deliberately interdisciplinary physical representations intended to put us in touch with a body of meaning, or signification, of which each text—taken both separately and in tandem—is at best merely an approximation, an analogue. Robert Essick is certainly on the right track when he observes that Blake seems in his art to be aiming at creating 'a hermeneutic community whose members share a common language' (Essick 1989, p. 223). But that community—and its language—is only partly physical, and it is only partly subject to or restricted by the limitations of the verbal and visual media that seek to convey what they in fact cannot contain.

Blake offered a useful guide when he wrote in *A Vision of the Last Judgment* of the obligations that rest on the cooperating (and thus collaborating) ideal viewer:

> If the Spectator could Enter into these Images in his Imagination[,] approaching them on the Fiery Chariot of his Contemplative Thought[;] if he could Enter into Noahs Rainbow or into his bosom or could make a Friend & Companion of one of these Images of wonder which always intreats him to leave mortal things as he must know[;] then would he arise from his Grave[,] then would he meet the Lord in the Air & then he would be happy. (E560 [p. 435 herein])

An act of perception of this sort sets up a different dynamic than does the standard gallery picture, for it requires that the viewer be both participant and co-creator. It also dictates that the communication that is the object of *both* parties (artist and viewer) is of a sort that transcends the limitations of the physical medium and approaches a sort of telepathic communication that transpires 'in the air', where the viewer leaves the 'grave' of vegetable, human sensory activity and enters directly into the world of pure vision, pure Idea, which transcendent activity the artist endeavors to mediate (and, to be sure, also to *manipulate*) through the materials and the nuances of his art. For as Viscomi observes, for Blake 'the drawn line is analogous to the word of God; the inspired line is itself inspirating [*sic*] and true art is by nature sublime' (and hence capable of producing the sort of 'transport' we have come to associate with eighteenth-century notions of the Sublime) (Viscomi 1993, p. 42).

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One often hears that the verbal texts of various of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* appear to exploit ostensible emotional and intellectual differences, or distances, that exist between the 'naive' speakers of *Innocence* or the cynical speakers of *Experience* and the knowledgeable, intellectually mature *reader* of those texts. Analogous suggestions have been made about the verbal texts of the longer narrative poems as well. Much less consideration seems to have been given, however, to whether the *visual* texts of Blake's illuminated poems engage in any of the same deadly earnest playfulness with the viewer. Commentators may *describe* the formal visual aspects of 'The Lamb' or 'The Tyger', for instance; they may note that the asymmetrical tiger is anything but fearful or that the pastoral scene

depicted on the plate of 'The Lamb' is Edenic. But despite some early and passing inquiry into the functional relation of verbal and visual components, it has taken until fairly recent years for Blake scholarship to yield really detailed and systematic examination of the nature of the intellectual and aesthetic manipulations the illuminations invite us—even compel us—to pursue as part of the act of reading.

In 'The Tyger', for instance, are we asking anything like the right question when we debate (as many have) the relative realism or ferocity of the tiger? That is, we may well submit that the earnestly playful Blake offers us a visual image that shatters our expectations of a standard zoo tiger. But would we be thinking about a zoo tiger in any case? Certainly it would require an impossibly naive reader to read the verbal text in that fashion. Then why should we expect otherwise in the *visual* text? Nor does it help, for that matter, to call to mind the supposedly simplified visual vocabulary of the traditional children's book, for the child is in any event more likely than the rationalizing adult to accept that Blake's odd-looking creature actually *is* a tiger. One need only think of the imaginative paradigm behind the immensely popular American comic strip, *Calvin and Hobbes*. That is, the child is both more credulous and more imaginatively generous *by nature* than is the reasoning, Urizenic adult who can see only what is 'there'. Is the *image* of Blake's tiger, perhaps, itself a physical representation of the consequences (or the workings) of the same failed *vision* that struggles to see aright the tiger of the verbal text? If so, might we then attribute to the design (and by extension to the 'painter'—NOT necessarily Blake himself but some persona of an 'illustrator') the same sort of bound and faulty vision that informs the verbal texts (and by extension their speakers—*also* NOT Blake but rather personae who inhabit Experience)? Notice the number of plates in *Experience*, especially ('Earth's Answer' or 'A Poison Tree', for example), whose bleak designs begin to make greater sense when we consider them in this way. Much the same can be said about *Innocence*, for that matter, but with a nod instead to the positive, fertile, energetic vision the designs share with the verbal texts (e.g., 'Night' or 'Spring').

Suppose we come at the matter from still another angle and consider what happens when we regard the visual image of the entire illuminated *page* of 'The Tyger' to be the text—the 'third text' or meta-text I mentioned earlier. Suppose, too, that we nevertheless view the page with the conditioned, traditionalist eyes whose powers of observation are rooted in our *expectations* rather than in the truths that the page attempts to disclose. Given the page's small scale, the reader / viewer necessarily sees top and bottom more or less at once, picture and title serving in this relatively instantaneous apprehension reinforce one another. Or so it seems. The title encourages us to identify as a tiger that creature which we might otherwise puzzle over. What the eye first 'sees' on and in this page is this double reference, verbal and visual, tied together by the heavy tree-trunk on the right whose upper and lower lines, like its attenuated bare branches, extend out to title and picture.

Within this engineered but nevertheless problematic bracketing of equivalency the reader next begins seriously to 'enter into' the poem's verbal text. As we proceed through the verses of 'The Tyger'—continuously building and modifying 'meaning' by interconnected processes of comparing, choosing, deleting, retaining and reformulating—the words come to seem less and less applicable to either our preconception of a tiger (which the title asks us to call up) or the beast represented by and in the image at the bottom of the page. Lies abound. The page is too well lit to square with 'the forests of the *night*', and in most copies the tiger's colours cannot honestly be called 'bright'. Most significantly, neither the beast *nor the illuminated page* is symmetrical: indeed the whole notion of 'fearful symmetry' is almost laughable, given the insistent asymmetry of the page and the absurdly mild aspect of the tiger.

When we approach this page 'on the Fiery Chariot of [our] Contemplative Thought' (VLJ, E560 [p. 435 herein])—when we follow that initial reading with one or more increasingly sophisticated and self-reflexive rereadings (each of which proceeds in light of—*illuminated* by—all the previous readings and the various responses and insights those readings have generated)—we begin to recognize how the intellectual and aesthetic complexity of the text-as-a-whole is generated in significant measure by the interaction among the expected and the unexpected, the conventional and the unconventional. This sophisticated, studious variety of reading, rereading *and contemplation* is, of course, that which historically attended the study of the medieval illuminated manuscript, in which verbal and visual texts likewise worked in mutual cooperation, even when it might appear otherwise at first glance.

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None of this is to take the easy way out and suggest that Blake's texts are simply—even randomly—indeterminate, or that they shirk the responsibility we typically place upon the author / artist (and certainly upon the 'illustrator') to be reliable and reasonably direct. Rather, Blake characteristically invokes and manipulates our expectations about determinacy (of word, of image, of 'meaning') to force us to recognize and appreciate the multiplicity of *potential* signification that resides in seemingly every word, every line, every suggestion. As he put it in *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, 'not a line is drawn without intention & that most discriminate & particular . . . as Poetry admits not a Letter that is Insignificant so Painting admits not a Grain of Sand or a Blade of Grass "Insignificant"' (E560, [p. 435 herein]). *In*determinacy is not the point, then, nor is the accidental ambiguity that stems from mere carelessness; the point lies instead that unconventional sort of determinacy that rests upon the intellectual and imaginative compact that Blake takes for granted between himself and his responsive, contemplative reader, a compact mediated physically by the illuminated pages. This compact, as Joseph Viscomi (most recently) has noted, is founded upon Blake's conviction that line (rather than colour or other tonal effects) is 'the foundation of art', because 'the line that discriminates and particularizes is the line that finds and fixes form in the initial chaos of lines, marks, and blurs' (Viscomi 1993, p. 167). This is why the many apparent 'variations' among copies of the illuminated works—especially variations in printing characteristics—are not the calculated and ideologically meaningful differences for which some critics have taken them,[6] but are, rather, essentially 'accidentals' resulting from the mechanical process of producing the copy:

6. See Jerome J. McGann, "The Text, the Poem, and the Problem of Historical Method," *New Literary History* 12 (1981), pp. 269–288; Stephen Leo Carr, "Illuminated Printing: Toward a Logic of Difference," in Hilton and Vogler (1986), pp. 177–196; Stewart Crehan, *Blake in Context* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1984); Morris Eaves, "Blake and the Artistic Machine: An Essay in Decorum and Technology," *PMLA* 92 (1977), 903–927; and his *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy: Art and Industry in the Age of Blake* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992).

they do not in this respect 'deviate' from the 'line' (of vision) the artist placed on the original plate to indicate 'real' (or Eternal) signification.

* * * Blake's campaign against worldly materialism—and against the seductive appeal of the material world in general—was intended not to reconcile us to the natural world, or it to us, but rather to draw us away from it and towards the imaginative and spiritual world of Eternity, itself a comparatively reactionary concept that likewise hearkened back to earlier times. Blake directed his art towards engendering in his audience the sort of accession to vision that had been Elisha's part. In this sense Blake's is a deliberately and radically iconoclastic *political* art in its distrust of—indeed its attack upon—the easy, conditioned 'answers' to complex problems that are the stock-in-trade of all Establishments bent upon maintaining control not just of individuals but indeed of all the artifacts and institutions of national culture. Blake's texts foster independence of mind and vision precisely because they deny us the comfort and intellectual leisure offered by determinacy. The more I return to Blake's illuminated poems, the more compelling is the evidence I find there of Blake's particular challenge to our expectations as readers. In the subversive, oppositional intent of his art generally lies much of the aesthetic and intellectual 'agenda' that is tangibly represented in the meta-text that emerges from Blake's illuminated pages.