

# BLAKE'S POETRY AND DESIGNS



SELECTED AND EDITED BY  
MARY LYNN JOHNSON AND JOHN E. GRANT

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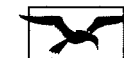


ILLUMINATED WORKS  
OTHER WRITINGS  
CRITICISM  
Second Edition

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W W N O R T O N

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## JOSEPH VISCONTI

### [Blake's Relief Etching Process: A Simplified Account]<sup>†</sup>

In 1788 William Blake began to experiment with relief etching, the innovative printmaking process he used to create the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794) and most of his other beautiful illuminated books. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (ca. 1790–93), he called it the “infernal

<sup>†</sup> Condensed and adapted from *The Art of William Blake's Illuminated Prints* ([New York]: Manchester Etching Workshop, 1983 [edition of 200, accompanying “Facsimile and Monochrome Editions

drawings, scrawling graffiti in the margins of his Reynolds, throwing acid on the names of his enemies. Blake was not a nice man: he was filthy with work and visionary conviction. Despite Catherine's famous claim that "Mr. Blake don't hurt," he could wipe his ass on the poem of a competitor and compare the shadows in Rubens' paintings to excrement.

III. INCOHERENCE: "And the dim Chaos brightend beneath,  
above, around! Eyed as the Peacock."

The greatest challenge and the most threatening scandal for the formalist appropriation of Blake is the threat of incoherence, nonsense, failure to communicate; the presence of accident, random sloppiness, lack of technical facility; the cranky miscalculation of audience; the self-defeating strategies of isolation; the self-fulfilling prophecies of paranoia; the megalomania of "Giants & Fairies" and the solipsistic absorption in the silent, solitary obsession with "Writing" for no audience but oneself. The hermeneutic imperative of formalism is that every word and every letter be studied and put in its fit place; it asks us to take Blake's word that he knows what he is doing, or that poetry and painting, through him, know what *they* are doing.

But suppose that Blake, like the rest of us, is a weak vessel, a flawed instrument. Suppose that, as both poet and painter, he nods as often as he awakens us or himself. May it not be time to consider the hypothesis that *Jerusalem* is a botched poem? Every sophisticated formal analysis of this poem in the last twenty years has tried to rescue it with some paradoxical and quasi-modernist formula of "form in anti-form," treating the failure of the poem to conform to any narrative or rhetorical scheme as part of a master design to disrupt our reliance on narrative, causal, and temporal order, and to replace it with a non-linear, visionary, diagrammatic and "eternal" aesthetic. Now the fact that this anti-Aristotelian sense of form has a traditional pedigree in the texts of sacred literature, particularly prophecy and apocalypse, helps to secure our confidence in its integrity and offers the best hope for a formalist recuperation of Blake's literary art. But we will also need to remind ourselves that religious justification of Blake's strange and difficult art is not the same thing as an aesthetic justification. To demonstrate that Blake is a great prophet is not equivalent to showing that he is a first-rate English poet. At least not yet. We have to make Blake strange again, which at the present time will not be to make him a modernist. It will be to distance him historically, to see his difference from us, and *then* to see what his poems are and do. We have appropriated him and familiarized him, made him safe for modern consumption through Freud, Jung, and Marx; employed the strategies of formalism, the discourses of phenomenology, existentialism, modernism, aestheticism, and even romanticism, which as Northrop Frye pointed out long ago, takes him out of his proper milieu, the Age of Sensibility.

It is time for the pendulum to swing back toward defamiliarization and the rediscovery of Blake's exotic, archaic, alien, and eccentric character, toward the recovery of his difficulty, the recognition of his involvement in contingencies which may erode the truth (by whatever standard) of his art. As we swing back on this pendulum, however, it will be important for us not to suffer amnesia, not to forget the accomplishment of Frye and the classical era of Blake criticism. If we hope to preserve continuity with what

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method" and described it as "melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid." Put less symbolically, Blake drew a design on a copper plate with an acid-resistant varnish and etched away the unprotected metal to bring the design in relief. He printed the plates on an etching press and colored the impressions by hand; each copy of each book is unique.

It has often been suggested that Blake used relief etching because it enabled him either to combine text and illustration on one plate or to escape the division of labor inherent in reproductive engraving. That the medium appealed to Blake technically and aesthetically is no doubt true, but text and illustration can be combined, and complete control of production secured, in intaglio printing also, as the etched plates to *The Gates of Paradise* (1793) and *The Book of Ahania* (1795) demonstrate.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, only in relief etching could Blake write and draw autographically and reproduce certain book conventions, such as facing pages. Blake's choice of relief etching may have been based on the kinds of tools and materials he preferred to work with and not only on the kinds of visual effects he hoped to create.

\* \* \*

In ordinary etching, a ball of "ground" consisting of wax and resins is melted and spread over a warm degreased plate. The plate is smoked with waxed tapers to darken and harden the ground, and the design is then cut through the ground with a needle. The metal thus exposed is bitten below the surface with acid. In relief etching, however, the design is not cut out or incised by any metal instrument; rather, it is drawn on a bare copper plate with pens and brushes using a liquid medium. This medium must be acid resistant like an etching ground, but also must flow easily, adhere when dry, not spread or blot on the plate, and, like writing ink, be usable in pens and brushes. John Linnell, Blake's friend and patron, identified his "impervious liquid" as being "the usual stopping as it is called by the engravers made chiefly of pitch and diluted with Terps."<sup>2</sup> In the fine arts, the term *pitch* usually referred to rosin or to natural bitumens like asphaltum. Such resinous substances dissolve in volatile solvents like turpentine to form "simple-solution varnishes," which are acid resistant and used to paint over lines sufficiently etched to "stop" the acid from biting them deeper.

of . . . *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*]), 1, 3, 4, 8–9, 10–12, 14–15, 16, 19–20, with adapted footnotes and page references. By permission of the author. For an expanded account of Blake's methods, with illustrations, see Viscomi's contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake* (2003), ed. Morris Eaves available in The William Blake Archive ([www.blakearchive.org](http://www.blakearchive.org)). See also Viscomi's *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (1993) and his articles with Robert N. Essick in *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly* 35 (2001–2), 74–103 and 36 (2002), 49–64, which challenge aspects of Michael Phillips's technical analyses in his *William Blake: The Creation of the Songs from Manuscript Draft to Illuminated Printing* (2000 [reaffirmed in *Print Quarterly* 21 (2004) 18 ff. and 22 (2005) 138 ff.]), and supported by Martin Butlin, *BIQ* 36 (2002). This intense debate is accessible online from the *BIQ* home page ([www.blakequarterly.org](http://www.blakequarterly.org)). Also important are Essick, *ELH* 52 (1985) 833–72 and (on the copper plates) Bentley, *University of Toronto Quarterly* 76 (2007), 714–65.

1. See Michael Phillips, "William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* from Manuscript Draft to Illuminated Plate," *The Book Collector* (Spring 1979), pp. 35–36; Robert N. Essick, "Blake and the Tradition of Reproductive Engraving," *Blake Studies*, vol. 1, no. 5 (Fall 1972), p. 66; Essick, *Relief Inventions of William Blake* (Los Angeles, 1978), p. 31; Kay Easson, "Blake and the Art of the Book," *Blake in His Time*, ed. Essick and Donald Pearce (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 35; and Morris Eaves, "What is the History of Publishing?" *Publishing History*, vol. 2 (1977), p. 61ff.

2. *Blake Records*, 2d. ed. G.E. Bentley, Jr. (2004), p. 609 n.

\* \* \* [Blake] probably used one of the stopping-out varnishes then available, perhaps adding a little lampblack for color and oil to prevent coagulation. An "impervious liquid" on a copper plate makes the design positive and direct: the marks of the tool are dark on a light background and are the marks that print. This is not the case in woodcut, a relief process in which the design is produced indirectly and the marks of the tool do not print. For Blake, such a liquid used with pens and brushes made the execution of the design autographic, a quality unique to the graphic arts of the day—and one that may have been as attractive to a poet as to a graphic artist.

\* \* \*

The technical difficulty in illuminated printing lies not in writing backward, but in giving the letters the proper slant and mastering the writing varnish and instruments. Varnish was normally used from a shell, which exposed the solvent to the air and, as Linnell noted, made it "glutinous." Although it can still be used as a stop-out in this state, for writing it had to be kept "diluted with terps," or mixed with a little linseed oil. Blake probably dipped the brushes directly in the shell but loaded the pen with a small brush, a method used by illuminators to keep pens from clogging.

It seems that Blake wrote his text with a quill pen and not a brush; the lettering style and the variations between horizontal and vertical strokes do not show the variety that is typical of a brush—or, for that matter, of a formal pen hand.<sup>3</sup> Technically, writing a ten- or twelve-point Roman and italic script backward with a brush is far more difficult than writing with a quill. In fact, lettering with a brush was a very uncommon skill. According to Thomas Astle's *Origin and Progress of Writing* (1784), brushes were not used in the West except in making very large letters.<sup>4</sup> We do not know if writing with a brush was one of Blake's skills, but he had certainly mastered writing with a quill—even in a medium more viscous than writing ink. Indeed, in *Jerusalem*, plate 37 (41, p. 261 herein), Blake pictures himself writing backward with a quill. On the other hand, Blake used fine brushes to execute the broad lines and solid areas of the illustrations and, of course, to paint the impressions.

Blake wrote Roman and pseudoitalic scripts, both of which we see in *Songs*, though the latter, probably for technical as well as aesthetic reasons, came to dominate. Italic script looks more difficult to execute, but to connect letters and to give them a slant in the direction the pen is moving is actually easier than to write one letter at a time with a vertical axis while moving from right to left. Because there are fewer letter ends to coordinate, an italic script makes it easier to keep lines straight and words the same size. Besides simplifying the writing of the text, italic script also simplifies biting the plate: words are better protected against foulbiting and undercutting when fewer letter ends are exposed to acid.

3. Graily Hewitt, Percy Grassby, and "most calligraphers would maintain [the script] could not be accomplished with any instrument other than a pen" (Grassby, "William Blake as Printer and Engraver: A Note," *The American Printer*, "Craftsman Number," vol. 79, no. 3, 1924, unnumbered). Hewitt, one of the twentieth-century's finest calligraphers, found Blake's script "commonplace" and "undistinguished," for which he partly faults the technique: writing backward directly on the plate with a quill pen (as noted in Mona Wilson's *The Life of Blake*, 1927, rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1971, pp. 382–83).

4. (London, 1784; rev., 2nd ed. 1803), p. 208; the illustrations demonstrating letter brush writing are on plate VIII and are over seventy-two points [a measure of size].

Another example of Blake's thinking in terms of the process, of his knowing that one material or stage can affect, or be affected by, a later one, is his breaking up space with ascenders, descenders, and interlinear decorations. A tightly composed design needs to be etched less deeply than one with open areas and thus spends less time in acid. It also keeps the ink dabber on the surface and thus helps to prevent ink from being deposited in the shallows, those areas that are bitten below the surface and are supposed to print white. By filling out lines, interlinear decorations are part of this line system, and by breaking up space, they decrease the number of open areas, or shallows. This is not to say that the pictograms in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and other books are not significant, but only that marks on any given plate may function as part of the composition or as part of the line system, and not necessarily, or only, as arcane symbols.

The illuminated prints look as though they were written and drawn, not necessarily because Blake was intent on making prints in imitation of illuminated pages—had that been his sole objective, he could have used other media—but because the materials and tools of relief etching allowed him to actually write and draw. Pens and brushes exercise less dictatorial control over hand and eye than do burins and needles, the use of which was heavy with technique, convention, and translation. In relief etching, unlike engraving, Blake could freely conceive, compose, and execute in terms of the same medium. All of this made relief etching technically and aesthetically appealing but not inherently more creative than engraving, nor did it make engraving a medium that Blake despised or sought to avoid. In any event, it is not fair to compare engraving with an autographic medium that seems to have appealed to the poet and painter in Blake as well as to the graphic artist. For Blake, multiple styles and different media were never mutually exclusive, and if his working in unconventional media reflects anything, it is not a desire to escape reproductive engraving but rather a desire to experiment and explore. "My business," he said, "is to Create."<sup>5</sup>

\* \* \*

For the design to retain its autographic quality, it had to be bitten accurately and sensitively. Controlling the bite required knowledge of acid and additives and much skill. Blake probably used nitric acid, the acid "commonly employed by engraving" in his day.<sup>6</sup> Because of nitric acid's strength, though, it can pit or lift the etching ground, and because it bites laterally (that is, as it bites down, it also bites sideways, thus forming a rounded cavity), it can undercut and thus collapse fine cross-hatching. To avoid the problem of using this strong acid on a plate with fine and precise line work, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century manuals often advised etching with a weaker, vinegar-based acid. This advice, however, did not apply to Blake; in his relief plates the areas to be bitten were not delicate and fine, but open and broad, and had to be bitten deeply.

\* \* \*

The borders of the plates [visible in proof impressions] were caused by the sides of the plate being embedded in strips of bordering wax. The wax formed a walled-in area to hold the acid, which was poured on the surface

5. *Jerusalem* 10:21.

6. Robert Dossie, *The Handmaid to the Arts* (London, 1764, 2 vols.), I, 147.

about a quarter inch deep, turned blue, and bubbled along the varnished lines. \* \* \* During the biting, the design appears dark brown on the reddish copper plate in its blue-tinted bath. Hours later, a relief plate, or cast, is produced.

\* \* \*

After a forty-five- to ninety-minute etch puts the design in slight relief, the plate can be rinsed and dried, and the words (not the individual letters) can be carefully painted over with stopping-out varnish. This will save details such as serifs, ascenders, and descenders. \* \* \*

Just how long—and thus, how deeply—Blake's plates were bitten is a matter of debate. Based on the striations in electrotypes made from the original relief plates (1861–63), it has been suggested that the plates were bitten very deeply and stopped out three times, which would have made the biting and repainting processes quite complicated.<sup>7</sup> But an electrototype, though it exactly reproduces the surface appearance of the original plate, does not record its depth. The method by which the electrototype is made includes preparing an intermediate matrix and then building up the relief areas of the matrix, so that its cast, the electrototype, is deep enough to be commercially printed.

The depth of plates executed before 1793 was probably greater than of those executed afterwards. There are fewer broken lines in the later prints, a sign that the plates spent less time in acid, as well as of Blake's increased designing and biting skills. Plates to *The Book of Urizen* (1794) seem quite shallow.<sup>8</sup> They were probably executed with color printing in mind; a shallowly bitten plate does, in fact, facilitate the simultaneous printing of colors from the lower and raised levels of the plate. The first six of the seven copies of *Urizen* were color printed, which supports the idea that Blake conceived the product in terms of the process. It is probably a mistake, however, to deduce from the *Urizen* plates that color printing necessitated a shallow bite, or from the *Innocence* plates that Blake ordinarily etched his plates deeply. As in most technical matters, Blake did not seem to adopt any rigidly standard practice, but continued to experiment from book to book and plate to plate.

\* \* \*

Unlike letterpress printers, Blake printed the plates of his books one at a time, not in forms, and, it seems, on paper cut to page size, not on large sheets that were folded in gatherings. By being printer as well as artist and etcher, Blake retained full artistic control over impressions; he could conceive of the design in terms of its entire execution, and make choices in earlier and later stages accordingly. For example, a dark ink is neither easily washed over nor harmonious with an elaborate coloring style, whereas a bright ink is more suitable for this kind of illumination. The variants among impressions from the same plate resulted not only from coloring but also from the way the plate was printed and the kind of ink used.

7. John Wright, "Blake's Relief-Etching Method," *Blake Newsletter*, vol. 9, no. 4 (Spring, 1976), p. 95.

8. In relief etching, *deep* and *shallow* are relative terms. The plates themselves were probably between 16- and 18-gauge, and with both sides etched, such plates could not structurally support depths of even 1/32nds of an inch. Essick has carefully measured the depth of the *America* fragment and platemakers' marks and has concluded that Blake's plates, at least the later ones, were quite shallow (Essick, *Printmaker*, p. 92).



\* \* \*

Because Blake printed with relatively light pressure, his prints are usually free of any pronounced platemarks. Thus, unlike intaglio printers, Blake could print on both sides of the paper, which made it possible for illuminated books to have facing pages, like conventional books. Facing pages and continuous paging in illuminated books seem to have been part of Blake's original conception.

\* \* \* He changed his printing format after the color-printing experiments of 1794, perhaps because the opaque colors printed simultaneously from surface and lower levels changed the appearance of the page so dramatically that a facing page created tension and distraction. As graphic art, Blake's prints are most effective when viewed independently of other pages—when they are seen as prints and not just as pages. By reprinting his books on only one side of the sheet, Blake changed the focus of attention. He forced the reader to experience the book as a physical, beautiful artifact, not just as a vehicle for narrative and pictorial ideas.

\* \* \*

There are, of course, many interrelated reasons for Blake's producing so few copies of his books. Two or three weeks is not much time to print a copy—even if it is only eleven or eighteen pages—but considering how few copies Blake could produce during the “run” of multiple copies of the same title, we can see that his was a labor-intensive, and not cost effective, means of production. Printing relief-etched plates is not technically difficult, but inking and printing plates on a rolling press is slow. And so, Blake was “never . . . able to produce a Sufficient number for a general Sale by means of a regular Publisher,” as he told Dawson Turner in 1818.<sup>9</sup>

Blake came to see his illuminated books as more than symbols and as something other than symbolic in their function as communicative vehicles. The evolution from print-as-page to print-as-painting reflected Blake's perceiving of the book as an art object. Indeed, when late in his life Blake reprinted the plates, he was not only republishing books of poems but also issuing series of prints or miniature paintings. The poems on the metal plates were unchangeable and could have been twenty-five or more years old, whereas the appearance of the impression was not fixed by the plate image but could be worked up fresh each time—“at least as well as any . . . yet produced.” It was the illuminated book as artifact, not as an edition of poems, that his friends and patrons were buying. And it seems that he, a poet who believed his books had given him a “great reputation as an artist,” was also chiefly selling on those terms.

Blake's work in relief etching belongs not only to the history of books and bookmaking, but also to the *peintre-graveur* tradition in the fine arts. His experiments in relief etching not only anticipate developments in the industrial arts, such as zincos and process blocks, but also the deep etch and viscosity printing methods used by graphic artists today. The illuminated books are not books or publications in any conventional sense. They do not consist of “exact repeatable images,” since the plate image is invariably altered in each impression. They are, each and every copy, works of original pictorial and graphic art.

9. See p. 491 herein.