

# WILLIAM BLAKE'S TRACTATES: LESSONS IN PROPHETIC ENCOUNTER

by

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(Under the Direction of Nelson Hilton)

## ABSTRACT

Though Northrop Frye asserted sixty years ago that the tractates *All Religions are One* and *There is No Natural Religion* “are evidently intended to be a summarized statement of the doctrines in the engraved canon” and afforded them a primary place in *Fearful Symmetry*, these short illuminated books have been largely ignored or diminished by critics, most of whom dismiss them as early, crude experiments in printmaking or as rhetorically underdeveloped attacks on natural religion and rationalism. My dissertation, in contrast, considers the tractates as foundational, primary, and essential to Blake’s work, best described as a sort of exploratory tutorial in which Blake (in his own temporal life) discovered the possibilities of his newly-formed craft and in which each reader (in his or her own temporal experience of the books) discovers with Blake how illuminated printing speaks, acts, and lives. Chapter 1 begins the study with a review of the tractates’ scholarly ill-treatment in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, then explains how the ingenious methods Blake used in creating his books accomplish something no conventional book could ever do – interact with a reader with the physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual fullness of a human encounter. Chapter 2 moves from theory to history, synthesizing a number of historicist studies of Blake and his period to establish the social and cultural context from which the tractates initially emerged. Chapter 3 examines the rhetorical working of Blake’s illuminated books, and the tractates in particular, considering

how Blake's open text approximates orality by creating an embodied, spontaneous, and gestural form of printing, and how his use of emblematic and aphoristic traditions furthers his pedagogical program. Finally my last three chapters act out and record the effects of a Blakean encounter on a receptive mind in an imaginative encounter with Blake's living books.

INDEX WORDS: William Blake, Tractates, Orality, Illuminated Books, All Religions are One, There is No Natural Religion, Etching, Engraving, Printmaking, Radicalism, Artisan, Prophecy, Prophet

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## DEDICATION

All thanks and devotion to my wife Carrie for her patience, forgiveness, and love.

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## INTRODUCTION

“every thing that lives is holy”

### **Rituals of Initiation: My Blake Memoir**

This dissertation project began in an unarticulated feeling and ends in an experiential performance. The feeling was a surprising sense of identification reading a reproduction of Blake’s tractates *All Religions are One* and *There is No Natural Religion* for the first time. It was not my first encounter with Blake. As an undergraduate English major one of my mentors was a Blake specialist whose office walls displayed framed prints of *The Ancient of Days* and *Newton*, and whose enthusiastic lectures were punctuated by the wicked cackle “Isn’t that scary?” As a master’s student I wrote and published a short paper on “The Fly,” not realizing at the time that my experiment at reading the text and design in tandem would be my model for a dissertation. My master’s thesis, after all, was on S.T. Coleridge and Gerard Manley Hopkins, and my writing on Blake was still for my own entertainment. Yet my reading of Blake’s works – even *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and the *Songs*, which were then my favorites – though they were pleasurable, left me feeling somehow unsatisfied; even with reproductions of the designs, I felt I was only reading part of the work. I attempted to wade through the minor prophecies with charts of character relationships and allegorical identities; the major prophecies I anxiously deferred until I “got” Blake.

My anxiety over reading Blake correctly was a species of the twinned diseases Saree Makdisi ironically details in *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s*:

Not seeing any immediately obvious meaning, not even recognizing in Blake's text any of the conventions and cues which normally guide readings, [some readers] find themselves repelled by the text's seemingly obscure words and bizarre images and ultimately find reading Blake a tiring and unrewarding activity, involving a great deal of effort and very little definite accomplishment. Other readers admire Blake's work for the very same reason: confronting the seemingly impenetrable wall of words and images, they arm themselves with formidable scholarly guides, dictionaries, and code books, writings of long-forgotten mystics and visionaries, and they seek out the text's buried treasures, relishing the extraction of what they take to be the mysterious knowledge contained within, access to which is seemingly barred to all but those who have passed certain (presumably secret) rituals of initiation. (162)

To me, Blake was too compelling to ignore, but my resort to code books and rituals proved frustratingly incompatible with my pleasure in simply reading the works. Reading the tractates, however, struck me immediately as mysteriously involving. I had a dim awareness of being present at something monumental, a conception or a birth, and this feeling persisted out of all proportion to the technical quality of the works: they were not so beautifully colored as the reproductions of the *Songs* I had read, nor was their content as aggressively provocative as *The Marriage*. Yet the endearingly tentative gestures of *All Religions*, and the sudden bursts of visionary expansiveness in *No Natural Religion*, convinced me that my encounter with these books was somehow formative, even seminal. In reading the tractates, I was not just a reader, but a witness to, even a participant in their creation, an experience I had not felt in reading other

works, insulated as I was from their experiential greatness by their institutional “Greatness” and the parasitic accretions that hang on that enshrinement.

As I began researching for a graduate seminar essay on the tractates, however, I was disappointed to find that my experience of Blake’s first illuminated books was, in fact, unique, perhaps even eccentric. Besides Northrop Frye, modern Blake criticism’s grand old *paterfamilias*, few critics seem to think of the tractates at all, or if so, only as afterthoughts. None, not even Frye – who otherwise enthuses over Blake’s mythology with the sincerity of a convert – reacts with any discernable passion for these books, which they apparently regard as dry philosophical guidelines for proofing Blake’s more complex poetry. Yet the powerful, subrational reaction I felt only intensified as I read the tractates over and again. I became convinced that this oversight in the mainstream of Blake criticism represented a crucial, perhaps even devastating gap in our understanding of Blake, especially as I began to immerse myself in recent historicist studies that situate Blake in the anti-authoritarian, auto-didactic subculture of artisan radicalism. My realization that Blake was an artisan, a craftsman – an identity I, like all Blake scholars, knew, but which had been diminished and overlaid by critics with “artist,” “poet,” “prophet,” and “mystic” – suddenly threw Blake’s work into a focus that made sense of my reaction to the tractates. For a craftsman’s relationship both to his work and to his audience (or, to put it more frankly, to his customers) is a radically different thing than our relationships to artists, poets, prophets, or mystics. It is at once more practical and more personal, founded on the making and using of objects rather than the assertion or negotiation of authority. My reaction to the tractates was not a distant, abstract appreciation of their artistry, or an objective analysis of their probability or plausibility: it was an encounter with an object in which its maker somehow inhered, an object that seemed to respond to my response and to move in sympathy with my own

mental and emotional movements. And that feeling I found nowhere discussed in Blake criticism.

Thus, the present dissertation project began as a way to critically articulate the unarticulated (and perhaps finally inarticulable, without the disfiguring of translation) feeling that first convinced me of the tractates' incalculable significance. I found, as my research and exploration progressed, that the tractates seem most themselves when read in the spirit of discovery, and therefore determined that I could best describe them as a sort of exploratory tutorial in which Blake (in his own temporal life) discovered the possibilities of his newly-formed craft and in which each reader (in his or her own temporal experience of the books) discovers with Blake how illuminated printing speaks, acts, and lives. The rest of the project developed from this assumption, and I began to situate the works in their theoretical, historical, and rhetorical contexts to prepare for the only means I could imagine for realistically describing my unorthodox assertions about the tractates: by reading them, performatively and experientially, in a deliberate act of creative criticism.

### **The Dissertation's Progress**

This Introduction began with memoir because of my conviction that the plane of personal encounter is the only plane on which to fully experience Blake's unique works. So, while this dissertation will center on the tractates, beneath that superficial focus I am arguing for an enhanced and refreshed reading of Blake, an "improvement of sensual enjoyment," as it were (*Marriage* plate 14). I say so not to dismiss or escape analytical rigor, nor to discount the impressive work done by Blake scholars over the last century. Rather, I make my assertion as a reminder to critics to recollect our first encounters with Blake's work, to recognize that passion for an appropriate response, and to harness the unreasoned, spontaneous and liberating

experience of Blake's books in our assessment and critique. For passion, love, enthusiasm, and excitement are all responses in Blake's own spirit, for the man who argued "Exuberance is beauty" could hardly have found a controlled and moderate analysis satisfying. In Blake's spirit, then, I would have Blake scholars recreate the art and craft of criticism, to bring to our reading of Blake at least a touch of the intellectual, emotional, and creative imaginative play that Blake infused into his eternal books.

Chapter 1 begins the study with a review of the tractates' scholarly ill-treatment in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I find, performing a wide survey over Blake criticism, that scholars generally treat the tractates in one (or a combination) of three ways: by shortly dismissing them as crude, underdeveloped experiments not worthy of serious attention as poetic, prophetic, or philosophical efforts; by considering them as historical or biographical benchmarks but of less artistic and intellectual significance than the later poetic works; or by exploiting them as "quote mines" for useful phrases and terms that critics can use as heuristics for explicating later writings. But serious, sustained encounters with the tractates are rare. I therefore consider at length the two critics who have given the tractates the most meaningful attention: Northrop Frye and Jack William Jacobs. These two critics, so different in many ways – separated by over fifty years, Frye's *Fearful Symmetry* represents the first modern standard of Blake criticism while Jacob's distinguished dissertation remains unpublished – are united in one crucial shortcoming: neither considers the tractates as illuminated books, treating them instead as written prose. In each case, the incomplete reading results in a misleading assessment of the books: Frye reads them as defining the doctrinal orthodoxy underlying Blake's mythology, while Jacobs argues that the tractates are rather didactic than prophetic. Yet, these readings miss the inherently destabilizing, unorthodox effects of Blake's illuminated printing that, as I argue in

Chapter 1, allow Blake a unique means of embodying his prophecy in a prophetic book, a book that can actually substitute for his body and voice. The main significance of Chapter 1, then, is to explain the ingenious methods Blake used in creating his books, and how these methods taken together accomplish something no conventional book could ever do – interact with a reader with the physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual fullness of a human encounter.

In Chapter 2 I move from theory to history, synthesizing a number of historicist studies of Blake and his period to establish the social and cultural context from which the tractates initially emerged. In this study I stress the influence of Blake's class position as an artisan on his political, religious, and aesthetic development, finding that an energetic confluence of millennialist enthusiasm, working-class radicalism, and a thriving, artisan-driven network of underground publishing surrounded Blake. It was an environment in which his eccentric opinions and art would have been, if not widely read or accepted, at least understandable and not entirely alien. In this social context, Blake's attachment to artisan radicalism, which agitated for both democratic liberty for the lower and middle classes from upper-class hegemony, and economic freedom for artisans from the exploitation of the bourgeois merchant class, gives a practical grounding to the anti-authoritarian, anti-elite qualities of Blake's illuminated printing project which would otherwise seem merely personal obsessions. This grounding in a rich, complex religious and political culture helps explain why Blake could, at least early in his career, have anticipated wide interest in his prophecies, and why, at the same time, Blake found it necessary to redefine prophetic writing for his already media-exhausted society, creating an open text that would liberate readers from a hierarchical, authoritarian media and encourage an enthusiastic explosion into a prophetic worldview. Finally, I develop from this historical situation explanations for two troubling questions related to the tractates: firstly, why Blake took

no apprentices to expand his printing capabilities; and secondly, why Blake did not publish the tractates until six years after etching them.

After considering textual theory and critical reception in Chapter 1, and historical context in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 examines the rhetorical working of Blake's illuminated books, and the tractates in particular. I first discuss the way Blake's open text approximates orality by creating an embodied, spontaneous, and gestural form of printing. By incorporating Blake's generative gestures into its form and surface, provoking oscillation and conversation between different modes of thought and experience in the reader, and by immersing the reader in a sensual encounter of color, texture, and multidimensional, polysemous meaning, the illuminated book permits Blake to relate to his readers as a prophet would relate to his listeners, and allows the reader to interact with Blake through his book. From this discussion of the illuminated book in general, I turn to the emblem-book and the aphorism, two rhetorical influences that critics have not seriously considered as formative for the tractates. Blake's appropriation of emblem-book traditions and conventions contributes to the pedagogical program of the tractates by making Blake's work more accessible; while the emblem-book was primarily a Renaissance-era form, even in Blake's era they were still published and reprinted, and were still frequently used for meditation, devotion, and catechistic education. The emblem-book, of course, is merely a starting-point for Blake – while he makes use of its surface conventions, he transforms conventional expectations of text/image hybrids, in which an image was expected to precisely illustrate a text (or vice-versa in the emblem-books). By subversively exploiting reader expectations – creating designs that do not illustrate the text, pairing texts with superficially unrelated images, crafting illustrations that contradict or undermine their texts – Blake turns the rigidly pedantic emblem tradition into a site for multiple readings and conversation. The second

tradition Blake uses particularly in the tractates – aphoristic writing – furthers the conversational and polyvalent characteristics of the tractates. Because aphorisms are understood as personal (expressive of their writer’s personality and worldview), frequently ambiguous or gnomic, and tied to satire, parody, and irony, the aphorism meets many of Blake’s rhetorical needs in the tractates – which are designed to acculturate readers in Blake’s satirical, gnomic, personal writing style. By building the tractates’ arguments from aphorisms, Blake’s parody of empiricism and his desire for an open, conversational form come together to invite reader engagement and response.

Following a brief theoretical introduction to Part 2, Chapters 4-6 put into action the methods of reading I have built in the previous chapters, with one chapter each dedicated to the three sets of aphorisms that make up *All Religions are One* and *There is No Natural Religion*. The theoretical introduction covers in more depth the idea of conversational reading; considers W. J. T. Mitchell’s theory of Blake’s composite art as a limiting, misleading reading; and suggests an appropriate route for encountering Blake’s books. In short, the illuminated book is best experienced as a performance, and a sympathetic counter-performance is the fullest, most productive means of responding to it. My last three chapters, then, record in detail a performance of a reading, my own reading, of the three sets of aphorisms that make up the two books of *All Religions are One* and *There is No Natural Religion*. This reading takes the written text and design as equally significant elements of the reading process, and I argue that the incorporation of the two into a single rhetorical statement is more than the sum of the parts. So my recorded performance attempts, as much as is possible in the linear, temporal space of writing, to consider the interaction of the two elements and their combined rhetorical effect on my imagination. This sort of performance, as far as I know, is unprecedented; while it resembles

close reading and reader-response, it is not primarily analytical or rationalistic, but experiential – I record my interpretations and impressions as experiences rather than conclusions. The conventional elements of literary criticism – analysis, interpretation, translation, generalization, citation, etc – become texture to the overall picture. Above all, in these chapters I strive to demonstrate the effects of a Blakean encounter on a receptive, imaginative mind, attempting to act out and record an imaginative encounter with Blake’s living books: not to impose a definitive, authoritative model, but to inspire and encourage further encounters with Blake’s endlessly productive work.

## CHAPTER 1

### “I fear I have not many enemies”: The Critical Reception of the Tractates

hell is the being shut up in the possession of corporeal desires  
 which shortly weary the man  
 for all life is holy  
 - Marginalia to Lavater (E 590)<sup>1</sup>

#### The Ground

Though Northrop Frye asserted sixty years ago that the tractates *All Religions are One* and *There is No Natural Religion* “are evidently intended to be a summarized statement of the doctrines in the engraved canon” and afforded them a primary place in *Fearful Symmetry*, these two<sup>2</sup> short illuminated books have been largely ignored or diminished by criticism, most of which dismisses them as early, crude experiments in printmaking or as rhetorically underdeveloped attacks on natural religion and rationalism, wisely discarded by Blake after settling on a richer poetic approach to his prophetic task. Mark Schorer’s *Politics of Vision* (which in 1946 set the terms for discussing Blake’s radicalism) discusses the tractates only as sites in which Blake “instinctively rejected” in “axiomatic prose” the “conventional eighteenth-century vocabulary of this [revolutionary] discussion and some striking items in its content” (162). Similarly David Erdman refers to the tractates only passingly in *Prophet Against Empire*, describing them as “the three tiny booklets” in which Blake “establish[es] the principles and terminology from which he corrects Lavater and Swedenborg” (139). In both cases this

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<sup>1</sup> References to Blake’s prose and non-illuminated works come from David Erdman’s edition of *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* and will be designated simply “E.”

<sup>2</sup> Or three, depending on whether the critic chooses to consider *No Natural Religion* one book in two parts or two books – I shall consider it one book in two parts.

oversight is surprising for books focusing on Blake's political radicalism, considering the tractates' chronological place at the center of Blake's vocally and publicly radical years. The standard Blake biographies, if they mention the tractates at all, merely register them as milestones in Blake's technical development. Peter Ackroyd, for instance, calls them "small and deliberately simplified works, in the style of the chapbooks and handbills he would have known as a youth" and explains away Blake's continued attachment to them as nostalgic: "They represented, after all, one of his defining moments; he had produced, for the first time, a complete statement in which words and images are unified" (115-16). G. E. Bentley dismisses the tractates as "remarkably tentative: The plates are tiny, the designs rudimentary and sometimes merely decorative, and on the frontispiece to *There is No Natural Religion* Blake forgot to reverse the lettering of 'The Author & Printer W Blake', so that it prints backwards" (*Stranger* 131). Generally, then, Blake's major modern biographers and historicists regard the tractates with a little embarrassment, as if they were juvenilia rather than the first productions in a long-gestating, mature art form.

Critics generally make the same misleading assumptions about the tractates. First, the obvious lack of polish in comparison to the later illuminated books prompts a more casual, less considered attention to the imagery than Blake's other works seem to demand. If they do not ignore it entirely, most critics dismiss the imagery, as Bentley does, as "rudimentary" or "decorative" (115). This assumption frequently leads critics to treat the tractates' imagery as simple, uncomplicated illustration, tossing off easy translations by a one-to-one allegorical ratio. Even John Howard, whose *Infernal Poetics* recognizes Blake's complex perspective and use of parody in the tractates, treats the images as mere symbols with clearly definable meanings: thus the old man on *No Natural Religion* plate 4 "is a representation of man perceiving naturally, and

the act of looking downward will become an icon for the limited perception of the senses in the ensuing plates” (34), while the child reaching for the swan in plate 8 “represents the spiritual perception that the words seem to deny” (41). In *The Scattered Portions* Rodney Baine similarly takes the images as straightforward allegorical illustrations, though wording his interpretations more tentatively than Howard; so “a bare tree on plate 5 [of *NNR*]<sup>3</sup> apparently suggests the sterility of the ‘reasoning power’” (137), or “The dove probably suggests divine inspiration in the final plate of *All Religions Are One*, where the wings alone hover just above the water and just below the assertion that ‘The true Man’ is the source of prophecy and religion, ‘he being the Poetic Genius’” (68). Janet Warner, writing on “Blake’s Use of Gesture,” exemplifies another common approach to the imagery of the tractates. She treats them as foreshadowing more detailed, rich versions, Blake not yet having decided for certain what the gestures “mean”: “The hovering, bearded man in Plate 10 of *All Religions are One* may illustrate ‘The True Man’ (as I have suggested), but in his next appearance, in *Marriage* 11, the text concerns the separation or abstraction of the divine from human and how ‘men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast’” (182). Such an approach implies a hierarchy of development in Blake’s imagery, placing the tractates a step above the notebook sketches in which many of the images first appear, but below the more refined versions found in later works.

The unpolished quality of the printing, in turn, leads to the conclusion that their content is similarly unrefined and developmental. Thus Morton Paley tells us that the tractates “put forward Blake’s early view of the imagination” using the “somewhat looser, more inclusive, and less structured concept” of the Poetic Genius rather than the Imagination (24). The assumption

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<sup>3</sup> In in-text citations, the tractates will be identified as “ARO” (*All Religions are One*) and “NNR” (*There is No Natural Religion*) and cited by their plate number in the Blake Trust edition edited by Eaves, Essick and Viscomi.

that the philosophical content of the tractates is un- or underdeveloped causes critics to consider the books primarily in relation to other books, as warm-ups for the serious work to come later. Stephen Behrendt, for instance, reads them in relation to the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, as “gnomic tractates” which “reduced-scale works scarcely foreshadow the splendid pages of the *Songs*” (42). Though Behrendt’s study seeks to explain the “exceptionally interactive process of reading” that Blake’s works require, the only value he can afford the tractates is to say that *No Natural Religion* “provides important hints about how we are to read the *Songs*,” by giving a simpler version of a bipartite work (42). Similarly, David Fuller considers the tractates valuable only as they “preface” the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* “on the central issues of religion and the nature of consciousness” (4). As with Warner’s attitude toward the imagery, a sort of hierarchy is assumed, one that places the prose tractates on a level below the poetry: D. G. Gillham skips over them “as an essay in philosophy rather than in poetry” (149), while Bernard Blackstone calls them “essays in the theory of vision, provoked no doubt by the shock of his brother’s death and the need to protest that the dead are not beyond our companionship” (14). Many critics use the tractates as quote mines, borrowing phrases for handy translations of the more difficult later prophecies; in this way Morris Eaves, Matthew Green, Stuart Peterfreund, S. Foster Damon, and other students of Blake’s thought pull phrases and terms like “Poetic Genius” or “same dull round” as heuristics for more developed ideas. Surprisingly, Robert Rix, whose work focuses on Blake’s religion, manages only a few weak references to the tractates in *William Blake and the Cultures of Radical Christianity*. Still more surprisingly, W.J.T. Mitchell does not even consider the tractates in *Blake’s Composite Art*, though they are Blake’s first and, presumably, foundational composite work.

Even many latter-day textual and rhetorical theorists give the tractates short shrift, though from a post-structuralist perspective an early, experimental work should reveal more about its rhetorical workings than a more polished text. As works reading Romanticism through modern rhetorical theory multiply, rhetorical readings of Blake proliferate in turn. Yet even the most provocative and significant – Stephen Carr on illuminated printing, Darren Howard on Blake’s symbolism, or Ian Balfour on Romantic prophecy, to name a few – seem distressingly incomplete. While a number of rhetoricians have attempted to illuminate Blake’s methods of using words and images, none have done especially well considering his usage of *both* simultaneously. Most do not try; it seems that rhetoricians are comfortable examining either words or images, but prefer to avoid the frustrating and schizophrenic phase-shifting required to consider how Blake marries word and image. Morris Eaves implies this tendency when he writes of “different tastemakers” who have “at different times sponsored either Blake the poet, the painter, or the printmaker as most acceptable and read accordingly, allowing the others to be temporarily set aside” (*Theory* 131). Yet a full study should consider Blake’s whole craft; Blake’s medium was not writing, nor drawing or painting, but the illuminated book, a medium unto itself. Blake’s writing and drawing, printing and painting cannot be divorced. The images do not merely illustrate the text, nor is the text merely part of the design. The *text* of an illuminated book is not its words – the book *is* the text. More than one critic has realized the centrality of the body to Blake’s poetry and considered the embodiment achieved by Blake’s infernal method of printing.<sup>4</sup> Words and image, in Blake’s books, are one flesh; what Blake hath put together, let not critic put asunder. Yet contemporary criticism seems content to make exception for the tractates.

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<sup>4</sup> In the last ten years: Eynel Wardi, Son-Moo Ryu, Hisaoy Ishizuka, Sibylle Erle, Tristanne Connolly, and David Baulch, not including dissertations.

Thus we see in Blake criticism a general, deterministic pattern toward the tractates: the tractates, being Blake's first illuminated books, are somewhat crudely crafted in comparison to the later works; as the craftsmanship, so the content, rendering the tractates valuable only as they foreshadow the later works. Therefore the imagery should be oversimplified or ignored entirely, an approach that effectively treats the tractates as prose texts rather than as illuminated books; the content of these books, as prose, is less significant than the poetic prophecies and should be considered as uninspired essays rather than prophetic works; and, as they are less significant than the poetry, the tractates are useful to critics only for quotable soundbites – if they are to be considered at all.

But the critical dismissal ignores the obvious importance Blake himself gave to these little books. Ackroyd states, "Blake never forgot or abandoned them. In fact he was printing them from the original copper plate some twenty years later, and there was a stock of unbound sheets found in his lodgings after his death" (116), though strangely this fact does not give the tractates significance in his own study. Matthew Green notes that "Blake reprinted the tract in 1795 after he had engraved and printed *Urizen* with its scathing attacks on both empirical philosophy and orthodox religion" (13), implying that Blake continued to consider the material relevant even after "developing" to a more complex position. Finally, in his last illuminated poem (*The Ghost of Abel*, 1822), Blake confirmed the year 1788 – the year of the tractates – as the date of his "Original Stereotype" (plate 2), implicitly giving these books a priority in his oeuvre. Blake's arguments in the tractates against natural religion and scientific rationalism are fundamental to his prophecies, and these preoccupations continue to surface as far from these first works as *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. In fact, most of Blake's common poetic and design tropes – parody, ironic reversals, mirror-thinking, gnomic utterances – are already present and fully developed in

these early tractates and one may see his subsequent works not as refinements (suggesting the tractates' disposability) but as founded upon them.

### **Encountering the Prophet (in the) Book**

This dissertation, then, seeks to turn the destructive prioritizing pattern of critical consensus on its head: I will consider the tractates as foundational, primary, and essential to Blake's work. My argument will depend not on examining the tractates as mere prose pamphlets to be read passively and added to the storehouse of Blake quotations, as so many critics have assumed; instead, I will consider them as carefully designed models for readers to follow, instructional books as well as seeds for the future works. In their relative simplicity of form and style they are the first, accessible vehicles for encountering a form that requires, as Stephen Behrendt puts it, an "exceptionally interactive process of reading" that "is more dynamic – and frequently more disturbing – than anything for which most readers' training and previous experience have prepared them" (1).<sup>5</sup> Much of the trouble Blake critics have faced in learning to read the illuminated books effectively, I further assert, comes from their failure to take these small, inconspicuous tractates seriously as preliminary readings. That is, if we were to read the tractates first (in an experiential if not chronological sense), many of the challenges we face in reading Blake's illuminated prophecies would be relieved, if not dispersed altogether. We would no longer be inclined, as critics, to rely on the literary-critical methods that have become second nature and instead would be flung into a world-view that demands imaginative engagement and re-creation.

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<sup>5</sup> Stating the same observation negatively, Eaves suggests that "the history of Blake's reception can be read as a history of readers soured by their confrontation with works making such unusual demands" ("Disruptive Technologies" 130).

I come to this conclusion through a confluence of Blake's own assertions and the chronology of his works. Frustrated with what he perceived as imaginative blindness in patron John Trusler, Blake asserted in a letter to Trusler that his visions had been understood by "a Great Majority of Fellow Mortals" and "Particularly [...] Elucidated by Children who have taken a greater delight in contemplating my Pictures than I even hoped" (E 703) – that is, those who were without the confidence of sophistication and available for education. The progress of the illuminated books seems to take an educational trajectory, beginning in 1788 with the simplicity of the tractates (which, though they express sophisticated philosophical concepts, are constructed for the utmost ease, with the clarity of emblem books and one principle per page to digest); progressing to the superficially familiar fables and ballads of *Songs of Innocence* and *The Book of Thel* (1789); to the more sophisticated, but still youthful and vibrant, radicalism of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), *America: A Prophecy*, and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (both 1793); then to the comparative maturity of *Europe*, *Songs of Experience*, and the "Bible of Hell" books (1794-95). This progression does not, as many psychologically-inclined critics would argue, signal Blake's growing maturity as a writer and thinker (he was, after all, over thirty years old when he began the project, and these books were all completed within seven years); rather, they demonstrate a carefully designed program of instruction in which Blake seeks to educate readers in how to comprehend his prophetic method and prepare them for the major prophecies that would come later (the aborted *Vala* and the completed *Milton* and *Jerusalem*). The books, if read in the order in which they were written and first published, document a dual process of education and development – that is to say, even as Blake is refining his methods and developing his message, the products of that work constitute a tutorial designed to produce a

reader who can witness the kind of prophecy he is developing. The tractates are the first, essential lesson.

In his work as a commercial engraver, Blake came to despise the mechanized, soul- and imagination-enervating process of commercial printing. The book, as product of commercial printing, was the corrupt work of divided labor – the author who wrote, the typesetter who put together the forms, the artist who designed the illustrations, the engraver who reproduced them in copper, the printer who ran the presses, and the innumerable assistants, secretaries, apprentices, and “devils” who moved the whole process like grease in a machine. By the time the book was sold and bound (by still more anonymous hands) it lacked a face or a soul. Such an impersonal product could not suit Blake’s needs as the prophet of the imagination, for a prophet must be a communicating person.<sup>6</sup> Even the Biblical prophecies as written and collected in the testaments are written after the fact of prophecy, records of the prophetic act and not prophecy itself. A prophet must be a person with a voice, but as an artist in a culture becoming rapidly media-saturated Blake needed a way to marry prophetic presence to mechanical production. Production of books, pamphlets, broadside, newspapers, and magazines was growing exponentially during Blake’s time, and the effect was much like the effect of electronic information today – information overload, a kind of cultural overstimulation. A single man speaking his words could not cut through to be heard, and Blake did not have the financial means or personal access to mass-production that popular prophets like Richard Brothers and Joanna Southcott could afford.<sup>7</sup> But Blake could etch, engrave, and paint, and he owned a printing press. If a single man speaking could not be heard by all, perhaps a single man self-producing his words in a hand-

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<sup>6</sup> Chapter 2 features a more in-depth discussion of Blake’s definition of the prophet as one who “utters his opinion both of private & public matters” (E 617).

<sup>7</sup> These figures, their relationship to the popular book market, and Blake’s failures at commercial publishing, will be discussed in Chapter 2.

made parody of mechanized mass-production could at least be heard by a “fit audience [...] tho’ few” (E 527).

Jerome McGann explains Blake’s requirements as follows:

What was needed was an art that could not be turned into an abstraction, an art that no one would fall down and worship. It must be an art that would urge no programs and offer no systems. (10)

Hence illuminated printing: in its endlessly variable form and its many stages of production Blake’s illuminated book presents a multi-vocal, self-critiquing, polysemous hybrid text that resists stability. This method Blake describes in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* as “printing with corrosives” that burn away “apparent surfaces” and reveal truth (plate 14). At its simplest level, Blake’s relief etching involved painting text and images directly onto a prepared copper plate with an acid-resistant substance, and bathing the plate face in acid, thereby etching away the negative space and leaving a raised positive surface for inking and printing. No one has illuminated the implications of this method so well as Robert Essick, who argues in *The Language of Adam* for the unity achieved by illuminated printing: “The distinguishing feature of relief etched texts is their autographic nature, the results of direct composition on the plate. [...] Relief etching joins manuscript and printable letters in one continuous operation” (169). It was this method that made fully possible a practical expression of Blake’s theoretical “unity of conception and execution” which “requires continual revision as a form of reconception” (163). Essick argues that for Blake “there can be no conception without a medium of execution to conceive in, but it also prompts its adherents to promote the presence of conception in every act of execution” (163), an idea made possible by Blake’s process, which allowed for reconception at every stage of book-making – etching, inking, printing, and even binding (167-69). Building

from Essick, Stephen Carr brilliantly theorizes how this process “disrupts the very possibility of simply repeating some authoritative version of a design over and over again” (184), since it opens up so many potential moments for error. By creating and embracing such an unstable method, Blake insulates himself from the “same dull round” he warns against in *There is No Natural Religion* (plate b6).

Blake’s exact materials and techniques are still rather mysterious, debated and tested at length by experts in etching and engraving over the past century. A nearly contemporary account says that Blake painted with a conventional “stopping-out varnish” used by virtually every engraver, but experiments by Robert Essick and Joseph Viscomi indicate that Blake must have used some other recipe to achieve both the needed viscosity and drying qualities for painting directly on copper (Viscomi 56). The kind of acid used in etching is also controversial, though Viscomi is convinced that nitric acid would have been Blake’s best choice, a choice that, like many of Blake’s techniques, would have been both innovative and old-fashioned – an unconventional use of a nearly obsolete material (79). For many years critics assumed that Blake must have written his texts forward, then transferred them in mirror-image to the plate, but both Essick and Viscomi have demonstrated that such a method would not have fit the style of the illuminated books, nor Blake’s philosophy of the book (Viscomi 24) – he must have painted the text directly to the plate in reverse. Nor would reverse-transfer have been necessary; though lettering would have been a specialized position in a high-production engraving-house (where labor was usually divided, individual assistants performing the part of the process they did best), Blake would likely have had lessons as an apprentice, and sheets of the *Notebook* show backward lettering practice (Essick *Printmaker* 90). Finally, even Blake’s method of inking is obscure – many possibilities have been suggested, but Essick provides much evidence that Blake used an

“inking ball,” a method which required a great deal of practice and skill, and which Essick considers a “lost art” (*Printmaker* 101). Such a method agrees with Viscomi’s assumption that Blake would have needed to use familiar tools in new ways rather than invent new tools, in order to produce his books at a rate sufficient to make a profit (154-55), and with Essick’s argument that the relief method Blake invented was actually a “more stable matrix” for inking and printing than an intaglio engraving, making the process less mechanical, more gestural, as well as faster and more productive (“How Blake’s Body Means” 204). Both Essick and Viscomi agree, however, that Blake never had a single, unchanging method – the production of the illuminated books was a life-long process of trial-and-error experimentation to find the best materials and methods for the work at hand.

While the methods and tools Blake used may have varied, the fact that the books appear in Blake’s own hand is essential. It is more than a little amazing to realize that, with the exception of the *Poetical Sketches*, the prospectus “TO THE PUBLIC,” the exhibition catalogue, and the first book of *The French Revolution* (printed only in proof), all of Blake’s published works were published, literally, in his own hand. Every single published copy of Blake’s illuminated books bears the shape of his own lettering, the work of his hands, pens and brushes, and most printings from the copper plates are finished or corrected by Blake’s own hand to some degree. The physical dimension of “his own hand,” however, is essential to Blake’s prophetic project. As early as the manuscript *An Island in the Moon* Blake mentions the desire to print words and images on the same page, several years before he had found a means to accomplish it (the teasing fragment that reads “I would have all the writing Engraved instead of Printed & at every other leaf a high finishd print all in three Volumes folio, & sell them a hundred pounds a

piece” [E 465]). And when he found the means, the words were published not in typeface but in Blake’s handwriting.

Behind all of Blake’s methods, however – the use of conventional materials, writing by hand rather than transfer, creating a simpler etching method closer to drawing or writing than engraving – lies the same prophetic urgency: produce the books, get them into the world, and invest them with life through whatever means at hand. As Saree Makdisi argues, “Drawing, and hence compositional ‘originality’ in the act of production itself, rather than printmaking, with its logic of reproduction, was the defining aesthetic” (189). Blake’s need to embody his prophecies in a vibrant, immediate form drove him to find in the craft he knew a way to work more gesturally and spontaneously than any other engraver ever could; Makdisi writes, “Blake has adapted the mechanisms of printmaking in order to produce drawings” (192). For Blake to connect his prophetic utterances to prophetic tradition, he had to engage his whole person – mind, body, spirit, citizen, husband, artisan. Makdisi also centers Blake’s prophetic process in the process of book-making:

It does not, I think, require much of an imaginative leap to consider how the figural cutting, folding, and repetition we encounter in Blake’s work might be related to the material cutting, turning, folding, and printing of sheets of copper and of paper in Blake’s workshop. For the figural movement here is intimately linked to the material process of production through which these images were generated in a number of different copies during Blake’s etching and printing of the illuminated books. (189)

Quite simply – not magically, not mystically, not even spiritually, but practically and very nearly literally – *Blake is in his books*.

If the prophet uses his body to disseminate words, which are themselves not permanent; and if the prophet's body is the critical part of the act of prophecy, because the word of God cannot be presented in dead letters, but only through living human voice; then for Blake, who cannot provide a human body and a human voice to distribute his prophecies, the act of writing in a permanent form on copper plate, near-simultaneously illuminating that writing with visual characters that interact with and overlap with the writing, makes possible Blake's physical presence in each book. The plates record the movements of his hands, the touch of his brushes and pens, the physical weight of the letter-press (operated by Blake or his wife Catherine), the cutting and handling of the paper – every aspect of Blake's physical process is inscribed on each book. Blake's gestures, his body, become felt, tactile aspects of the reading act.<sup>8</sup> The books, then – the letters, the designs, the paper and ink and watercolor – become Blake's bodies physically and metaphysically.

This sort of understanding of illuminated printing and of Blake's illuminated prophecies directly challenges the assumptions that have led previous critics to discount or underappreciate the tractates within Blake's body of work. It means that, as the tractates are illuminated books, any consideration of the tractates must consider the role imagery plays in coordination with the text. A reading of the text without reference to their illuminated form is no encounter with the book. Further, against those critics who dismiss the tractates as "prosaic," as something less than the poetry, or as not prophetic, this conception of the illuminated books presents a stern warning: Blake's illuminated printing is, by nature, prophetic, and any work Blake executed in this

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<sup>8</sup> Edward Larrissy suggests that "it seems eminently probable that Blake is specifically relating touch and sight by reference to a precisely contemporary phenomenon: the invention of relief printing for the blind. [...] It seems likely, then that Blake is providing an analogue of relief printing for the blind, one that exploits the figurative senses of blindness and vision, in that it makes relief etching a means of access to imaginative vision among those who require their 'doors of perception' to be cleansed" (66)

method is intended as a prophetic act. Before attempting my own encounter with the tractates, then, I will examine the way in which an incomplete reading of the tractates distorts the prophetic spirit of the books and renders them non-prophetic. I will examine in particular the two critics who have given the tractates the most attention in 20<sup>th</sup> century Blake criticism: Northrop Frye and Jack William Jacobs. Despite understanding the lessons of the tractates intellectually and articulating them eloquently, neither of these critics at either end of modern Blake studies encounters them as whole prophetic works in illuminated printing. The following sections will demonstrate how an incomplete, prose-centered reading of the tractates may lead to acceptable conclusions, but miss the imaginative, creative spirit of the project.

### **Northrop Frye's *Fearful Stability***

My consideration of the tractates' critical history must begin with Northrop Frye's *Fearful Symmetry*. To this day, sixty years from its first publication, Frye's book remains one of the few to consider the tractates in depth, devoting most of its first chapter to their debate with Locke; moreover, *Fearful Symmetry* remains a force to be reckoned with even as Blake scholarship has moved away from narrow considerations of the poetry *qua* poetry and arguments over canonicity, to wider-ranging issues of social and historical context, rhetoric and textuality, and the very question of what Blake's work *is*. Old-fashioned as Frye's reading may be, with its emphasis on categorizing and systematizing Blake's mythology, defining the canon of Blake's works, and elucidating Blake's "doctrine," Frye's sense of Blake as a living, thinking, acting individual remains poignantly vivid:

To Blake, the spiritual world was a continuous source of energy: he harnessed spiritual power as an engineer harnesses water power and used it to drive his inspiration: he was a spiritual utilitarian. He had the complete pragmatism of the

artist who, as artist, believes nothing but is looking only for what he can use. If Blake gets into the rapt circle of mystics it is only as Mercury got into the Pantheon, elbowing his way through with cheerful Cockney assurance, his pockets bulging with paper, then producing his everlasting pencil and notebook and proceeding to draw rapid sketches of what his more reverent colleagues are no longer attempting to see. (8-9)

This rough, rude, exuberant Blake is the Blake of the *Notebook*, the marginalia, and the letters – brash, aggressive, confident, and fascinating, both prickly and attractive. Even more than the neo-Marxist and New Historicist critics who emphasize Blake’s artisan-class consciousness, Frye presents Blake the ingenious craftsman rather than the mystic or even the artist (though he persistently insists on the word “artist” even while dismissing “mystic”). In just the above paragraph, Frye anticipates

- the “spiritual utilitarian” Matthew Green would call a “visionary materialist” (*Visionary Materialism* 3);
- Jon Mee’s depiction of Blake as *bricoleur* (*Dangerous* 3), “Looking only for what he can use”;
- and with Blake “elbowing his way through with cheerful Cockney assurance,” Saree Makdisi’s Blake, whose “orgasmic excesses” would have disgusted the “hegemonic liberal-radicals” with whom he has been so often associated (44).

Without intending to overstate the case, there is no way to talk about Blake critically without at least acknowledging Frye.

Yet, even as he intuitively anticipates later critical developments, Frye’s reading of Blake, and of the tractates, remains entrenched in a perception of Blake’s program at odds with the

contemporary vision. Frye insists, for instance, that “Blake’s poems are poems, and must be studied as such. Any attempt to explain them in terms of something that is not poetry is bound to fail” (6), though the whole field of Blake studies has taken for granted, since the first groundbreaking work of Essick, Eaves, and Viscomi, that Blake’s art *is* something other than poetry – and something other than engraving, etching, drawing, painting, or writing altogether. The contemporary Blake scholar bristles at Frye’s assumption that “the engraved poems were intended to form an exclusive and definitive canon” (6), that term “canon” stinking with Urizenic sulfur, and even more so “doctrines” of that canon (14). His assumption that “the engraved poems of Blake form a canon” leads him to the conclusion that “anything admitted to that canon, whatever its date, not only belongs in a unified scheme but is in accord with a permanent structure of ideas” (14). While any contemporary Blake scholar would agree without hesitation that Blake considered all of the illuminated books to form a whole – after all, he continued to reprint them throughout his life, from the earliest tractates to the last pages (the two-plate *The Ghost of Abel*, the single-page *Homer* and *Virgil*) – to call them a “permanent structure” again rubs one the wrong way. Throughout his book Frye clings to the language of permanency, stability, and unity that most Blake scholars have since rejected in approaching the disruptive and anti-authoritarian illuminated books.

Yet, something rings true in Frye’s assertion that Blake’s “principles he held with bulldog tenacity all his life”: indeed, as Frye states, “The lyrics of his adolescence, the prophecies of his middle period, the comments which blister the margins of books he read on a sickbed at seventy, are almost identical in outlook” (13). His 1799 letter to Rev Trusler, for instance, could well have been written at any time of his life:

As a man is So he Sees. As the Eye is formed such are its Powers You certainly Mistake when you say that the Visions of Fancy are not be found in This World. To Me This World is all One continued Vision of Fancy or Imagination & I feel Flatterd when I am told So. (E 702)

Compare an 1827 letter to Cumberland:

I have been very near the Gates of Death & have returned very weak & an Old Man feeble & tottering, but not in Spirit & Life not in The Real Man The Imagination which Liveth for Ever. (E 783)

These sentiments accord as well with 1788's *All Religions are One*:

The true Man is the source he being the Poetic Genius. (plate 10)

But to call these doggedly maintained beliefs “doctrine” assumes a sort of repressive impulse against which even Frye inadvertently argues. Despite his certainty that the illuminated books form a canon and a doctrine, Frye argues that “The first point in Blake to get clear, then, is the infinite superiority of the distinct perception of things to the attempt of the memory to classify them into general principles” (16). Here Frye implies, rightly, that Blake’s “metaphysical system” is in fact “an art-form, to be judged in terms of its inner coherence” (28). Yet Frye does not take his intuitive recognition to its obvious end, considering the variability of Blake’s styles and methods: that Blake’s “system” is not a system at all, and that an “art-form” such as Blake’s cannot be judged by “inner coherence” but by its power to induce the “distinct perception of things” in its audience. If, as Frye realizes, Blake is not interested in classifying or generalizing, his system must be something that cannot be named “canon” or “doctrine.”

Despite his adherence to the language of permanence and stability, Frye demonstrates a remarkably deep and personal recognition of how Blake’s project works upon those who

experience it. He recognizes, for example, that “still less has his teaching to do with that of most of those who tell us that we should make our lives a work of art and live beautifully. The cultivators of ‘stained-glass attitudes’ do not usually mean by beauty the explosion of energy that produces the visions of the dung-eating madman Ezekiel” (29). Here again is the gross, vulgar, vivacious Blake that Frye’s mythological taxonomy will obscure, presented almost despite the critic’s best domesticating efforts. Frye argues that “If there is such a thing as a key to Blake’s thought, it is the fact that these two words [*form* and *image*] mean the same thing to him. He makes no consistent use of the term ‘idea.’ Forms or images, then, exist only in perception (15). Curiously, though, this insight does not bring Frye to realize that Blake uses no terms consistently, and that such exuberant inconsistency is the essence, the real “key” to experiencing Blake’s art. And though he insists that Blake’s poetry must be read as poetry, and his reading of the prophecies gives only the barest attention to their visual context, Frye admits that, for Blake, images are a kind of language: “‘All Religions are One’ means that the material world provides a universal language of images and that each man’s imagination speaks that language with his own accent. Religions are grammars of this language” (28). The “infinite superiority of the distinct perception of things” tells us that the experience of something is superior to the explanation or retelling of it – that, as my examination of the tractates will demonstrate, the experience of prophecy is superior to the mere reading of prophecy. In fact, Frye’s intuitive understanding of Blake despite his attachment to an antithetical language illustrates more vividly than any other example the truth that Blake’s thought and work is better experienced than explained.

Most important to my project, though, is the precedent Frye sets for prioritizing the tractates. Again, his authority stands on the language of permanency:

His engraving process was perfected about 1788, and the first products of it were three series of aphorisms, two called *There Is No Natural Religion* and the third *All Religions are One*. These aphorisms are evidently intended to be a summarized statement of the doctrines in the engraved canon, and as they are largely concerned with Blake's theory of knowledge, it will be following Blake's own order to start from there. (14)

Despite the assumption that there is a doctrine to be summarized, Frye understands something crucial: that a full consideration of Blake's art must begin with the tractates. If, as Frye argues, they are a summary of Blake's doctrine, then obviously one must begin with them; otherwise, without a simple prose grounding in the doctrines, how would one ever comprehend the dense allegorical mythology of the prophetic books that Frye must spend chapters systematizing? But if Frye's basic argumentative ground is wrong – there is no doctrine to learn – the impulse is right. The tractates are the correct place to begin reading Blake's prophetic books: they are, temporally and metaphysically, *first*. For Blake, they are the necessary first lessons in making prophetic books, first lessons plagued with all the inconsistencies to which first lessons are prone; but for the reader, they are more essentially first lessons in encountering a prophetic book – lessons not in *reading* or *interpreting*, but *encountering* the prophet-text. Where Frye's reading stops short, despite his realization that the tractates come first, is in reading them as prose rather than encountering them as illuminated books. It means that Frye follows his own prescription in word but not in spirit, and this misbeginning will plague even the most insightful readers of the tractates – all of whom make the mistake of assuming that the tractates are different from the prophecies in kind when they in fact differ only in scope; none of whom

realize that the primary lessons to be learned from the tractates are not the philosophical principles, but the experience of the prophetic book itself.

### **The Tractates as Performative Prophecy**

An accomplished but still unpublished dissertation by Jack William Jacobs, *William Blake's Performative Prophecy*, exemplifies the lapses inherited from Frye's insistence on reading Blake's works as prose rather than prophecy. At around eighteen thousand words, Jacobs' chapter is probably the longest treatment dedicated entirely to the tractates. A capable and trenchant reader of Blake's books, Jacobs recognizes, in his main line of argument, that Blake's prophecy "treats all kinds of religious, scientific, and philosophical thought relatively equally as sites where humans' ability to create, and our tendency to reject our ability to create, come together" (20). Against those critics who take Blake's Christianity too literally (including Frye and S. Foster Damon), Jacobs asserts that rather than affirming Christian tradition, Blake's use of Christian doctrines in the tractates "seeks to revitalize these Christian doctrines by uncovering what is prophetic and therefore performative about them" (74). Jacobs posits Blake's prophecy as "performative," which is to say that it "is to carry out the act of revitalization what has been codified and conceptualized" (19). Quite reasonably, Jacobs argues that Blake "strives to resist conceiving of prophecy as an essentially religious act and instead presents prophecy as an iconoclastic act that is dedicated to freeing people from the tyrannies generated by systematic, conceptual thinking in general" (20-21).

Yet Jacobs begins from a basically faulty assumption about the tractates that, while it does not lead to faulty conclusions about Blake's prophecy in general, severely undervalues the tractates as prophetic and pedagogical books. Jacobs pre-determines that the tractates "may be classified as 'telling-' rather than 'shewing-texts,' sites where Blake tells readers about prophecy,

where he explains and justifies prophecy as a concept, rather than sites where he actually seeks to carry out prophecy” (16). This argumentative ground, though, is based on some of the same assumptions we have already seen applied to the tractates: that they are not “poetic,” that their imagery is unworthy of consideration, and that their content is simplistic, readily understood, and therefore not “prophetic.” As Jacobs writes, “*All Religions Are One* seeks to prepare readers to accept a crucial link between poetic utterance in the everyday sense (poetry), and poetic perception in Blake’s grand sense (Poetry) indicated by the term ‘Poetic Genius’” (47).<sup>9</sup> Here Jacobs introduces a distinction between poetry as a form of writing, and Poetry as a form of perception, that leads him into tricky analysis. We have found many critics, seeing that the prophecies are written in the form of prose, automatically treat them as substantially different from the ostensibly poetic prophecies. And, as Blake posits the “Poetic Genius” in the tractates as the highest form of perception, a slippage between these two distinct concepts (poetry the form of writing and Poetry the form of perception) is inevitable.

Once that slippage occurs, however, the tractates are the victim of misperception. For, as Jacobs argues, “Blake strives to convince readers that prophecy, as the communication of the ‘Spirit of Prophecy,’ is always a kind of poetry (although, implicitly, not all poetry is necessarily an instance of prophecy)” (48). This manner of thinking of prophecy as poetry, in turn, is predicated on the argument that “what poetry and Poetry have in common for Blake is performativity, i.e., a sense in which neither is subject to the limits that rule constative thinking and/or constative understandings of humanity. And prophecy is the performative bridge, if you

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<sup>9</sup> Jon Mee uses the much more helpful formula of scripture vs poetry: “the opposition between scripture, represented as an oppressive mode of writing associated with the law, and poetry, a mode of writing which is open, multiform, and seeks the imaginative participation of the reader” (*Dangerous* 12).

will, that joins them together” (47). So we have the fundamentals of Jacob’s definition of prophecy:

For Poetry is the activity, according to Blake, that humans perform as they perceive, and the ‘Spirit of Prophecy’ is an awareness of this ability on the part of individual Poetic Geniuses. Prophecy, then, must be an expression that communicates such an awareness, that leads its audience to begin freeing itself from falsely imposed limits on perception. And in order to do so it must be a performative utterance, an utterance that acts rather than explains, because to explain prophecy would be to duplicate the kind of error that leads philosophies and religions away from universal Poetic Genius. (47)

Jacobs’ definition of the prophetic, then, disqualifies the tractates out of hand. But while Jacobs attempts to keep the distinction between poetry and Poetry clear, his argument for why the tractates are not prophetic is obviously circular: one gets the sense that if the tractates were poetry, they would at least be closer to Poetry and therefore to prophecy. But as the tractates are not performative, they can be neither poetry nor Poetry; as they are not poetry or Poetry, neither can they be Prophetic. Yet Jacobs has come to these conclusions because of a preconceived notion that the tractates are not “shewing-texts” but “telling-texts,” that they are inherently constative rather than performative. Seemingly the only thing that disqualifies the tractates from being performative is the assumption that they are not, and nothing besides their prose (not *poetry*) form seems to automatically disqualify them from performativity. If, however, the tractates could be performative without being poetic, or be Poetry without being poetry, perhaps they would be eligible for Jacob’s definition of performative speech and prophecy.

Because Jacobs has begun with the assumption that the tractates are not performative, he

ignores another bare fact: that the tractates are illuminated prints, not writing. Therefore, he excuses himself from considering either the role of process in illuminated printing, or the role of the designs in encountering the illuminated plate. In other words, the only reason Jacobs can call the tractates constative rather than performative is because of his *a priori* decision to treat only the written words and not the entire rhetorical unit of the plate. For his definition of performative speech depends on two qualities: first, prophecy is

a specific type of performative language. Independently of the accuracy of any particular concept to which a given prophetic utterance refers, the utterance itself is to carry out the act of revitalizing what has been codified and conceptualized, and it is to lead its audience into a state of mind, which I will be calling “interrogativity,” that makes it possible for them to begin to overcome perceptual boundaries. (19)

Secondly, prophecy is “an iconoclastic act that is dedicated to freeing people from the tyrannies generated by systematic, conceptual thinking in general” (21). From these principles, Jacobs establishes two rules: prophecy “makes what it perceives rather than simply taking it in passively,” and prophecy “must be a speech act that resists systematization” (45). By these two rules, you will know prophecy when you read it. Yet, if we attend to his wording, we see the limitation of Jacob’s definitions for encountering Blake’s texts: for Blake’s illuminated prints are not “utterance,” nor “speech acts,” nor “poetry,” nor language at all strictly defined. As we have already noted, Blake’s prophetic books (tractates included) are not merely written products, texts in written language – they are whole works of art, in which the process of making the work is an essential part of its message, and in which the oscillation between states of mind and kinds of “reading” is an essential part of the encounter. By treating the tractates as only their written

texts, without regard to the process of their creation or the interaction of the text with the imagery, Jacobs *reads* only a fraction of the book (for if the text is one part, and the design is another part, the interaction between the two adds up to much more than their sum). Only for this reason can Jacobs argue that the tractates “are not especially dedicated to bringing about any change beyond convincing readers that what they propose is true” (16): he has not allowed them their full transformational powers.

If we take into account the fullness of the illuminated printing project, the tractates meet Jacob’s criteria for prophetic utterance without fail. Just in the process of its creation illuminated printing is *per force* performative; the physical acts involved in *making* are inscribed on the page in plate marks, pen-and-ink corrections, and all of the eloquent variations in coloring and tone. As we have argued above, Blake’s performance in the writing and printing of his illuminated books is as much a part of the meaning of the works as the words written. When we consider illuminated printing in this way, we can see that the tractates doubly accomplish Jacob’s dictum: they make what they perceive “rather than simply taking it in passively” (45). At the level of their creation, Blake is making what he perceives, not simply writing it passively in dead letters. At the level of reader encounter, the reader, required by the hybrid text to perform an unfamiliar and challenging form of “reading,” must make what s/he perceives: for what the reader of an illuminated print perceives is more the interaction between forms than the taking in of written information. What the reader perceives *is* the interaction between word and image, and to recognize this interaction for the act that it is requires a complementary act of prophetic imagination. Reading an illuminated print in its fullness, then, requires that the reader become a prophet.

Jacobs' second rule, that prophecy must "resist systematization," the tractates also meet, if, again, we treat them as full illuminated prints rather than simply written language. If we turn to plate 5 of *All Religions are One* (which Jacobs skips, though he discusses each of the other Principles), we can see an example of the ways in which Blake uses the illuminated print as a whole rhetorical unit and thereby makes it prophetic by resisting systematization.<sup>10</sup>

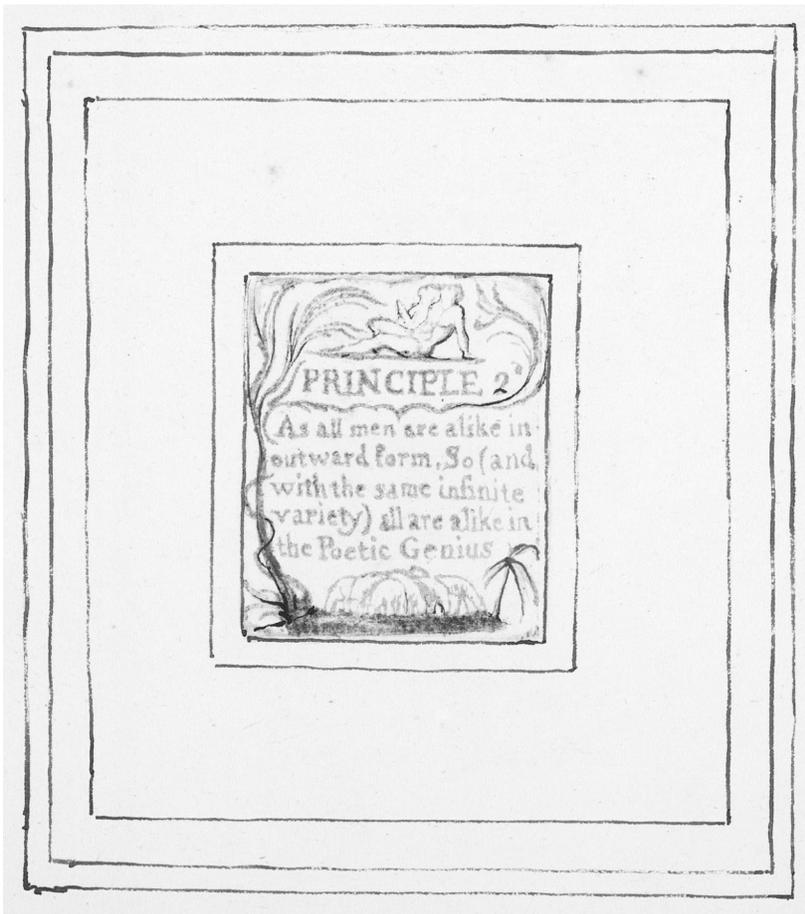


Fig. 1 ARO plate 5<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *The Early Illuminated Books*. Eds. Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi. *Blake's Illuminated Books V. 3*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP; London: William Blake Trust, 1993.

<sup>11</sup> All figures reproduced by permission of the Huntington Library.

The aphorism, Principle 2d – “As all men are alike in outward form, So (and with the same infinite variety) all are alike in the Poetic Genius” – stands in the center of the page, the focal point of a design that encircles the words. In the total design, there are several distinct divisions; the male and female figures at the top are contained within the same circle as the title, a circle formed by the limbs of a tree at far left, while within that circle the figures and the title are separated by a line representing either the ground beneath the figures or their shadow. Beneath the boundary the words of the aphorism are contained within a second circle formed by the long branch extending across the whole page, the tree trunk at left, the sheep at the bottom, and the small palm tree at the far right. All of this overdetermined division is in keeping with the parody of empiricist rationalism informing the tractates, a mode of thought that emphasizes division and classification over unity, and argues for this division as a natural function. Thus, the design, acting as a unified image even as it divides, visually represents the theme of sameness in variety in the aphorism, even as it visualizes the tractate’s overall parody of empirical logic.<sup>12</sup>

At the top of plate 5, a man and woman are partially risen from a prone position looking up, as if out of the page. On one level, two figures of different gender would illustrate Blake’s point that human beings are simultaneously alike and various in form. The design of these figures, however, is complexly unstable: the female figure’s torso perfectly molds to the male’s, as if we were seeing Eve growing out of Adam’s side. At the same time, the figures could be one figure, as in Plato’s myth of the two-in-one humans divided by the gods; their torsos are not clearly defined, and they seem to share three legs. The third, longest leg, in fact, may not even

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<sup>12</sup> Jennifer Michael makes an intriguing point about Blake’s use of framing designs: “the resulting print is itself a surface, which Blake makes transparent, as a doorway or a window. At the same time, by including white space around his images rather than allowing them to fill the pages, he reminds us that these windows and ‘doors of perception’ have limits” (41). This emphasis on limits is also keeping with the tractate’s empirical parody.

be a leg; it seems to merge with the vegetation at the left side of the page. If we read the leg as an extension of the vegetation, we have an image of mankind growing naturally from the soil, as if the figure(s) were the fruit of the tree. They are, however, also bound within material nature, looking out of a small hole in the vegetation. The figures can be seen as waking up to the heavenly potential of the Poetic Genius, though not yet freed from their materialist conception. We have, then, an image representing the double bind of human nature: its organic relation to the earth, and its simultaneous imprisonment within that material realm, Blake's theme in these first aphorisms. This heading image, then, allows for multiple reading, each of which would complicate and consequently enrich Blake's notion of sameness in variety – as does the ironic image of grazing sheep at the bottom of the page, an archetypal representation of sameness. Taken altogether, the interaction between the words and the design resist the systematization that Jacobs takes for granted: Principle 2d is not a constative utterance to be judged true or false, but a prophetic utterance to be experienced within the prophetic matrix of the plate, a context that deepens the simple statement into an ambiguous act that requires a creative response.

These examples demonstrate a fact central to this argument: Blake's illuminated books cannot write constatively: they are prophetic *by design*. Where constative speech requires a singular, authoritative meaning, "logical propositions that are to be judged true or false, right or wrong" (Jacobs 16), Blake's illuminated printing is incapable of singular statements. The hybrid of word and image automatically creates a double reading, short-circuiting the authoritarian impulse before it has a chance to impose an absolute meaning on the words. When a reader encounters the tractates, then, they do in fact accomplish what Jacobs argues they do not: they "carry out the act of revitalizing what has been codified and conceptualized" (19). What has been codified is the act of prophecy itself; the tractates revitalize prophecy by teaching their

readers, by example and doing, how to be prophets. A full account of how this teaching takes place will take up the final three chapters of this dissertation. Before enacting this account, however, we will consider how, in Blake's age, prophecy was codified and conceptualized to such a state that Blake's "explosion of energy" became necessary.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Mortal Fellows and Lucid Children: The Problem of Blake's Contemporary Audience**

Receiving a Prophet As a Prophet is a Duty which If omitted is more Severely  
 Avenged than Every Sin & Wickedness beside  
 It is the Greatest of Crimes to Depress True Art & Science.  
 – to Hayley, 1805 (E 767)

I have, in Chapter 1, outlined how Blake intended the illuminated book to function as a prophetic body for his message. But, as a prophet needs a body, so a prophet needs an audience. This chapter will, in turn, consider the historical contexts – social, political, and religious – of Blake's artisan class in the 1780s and 1790s that shaped the tractates as public documents and illuminated printing as a unique but historically comprehensible technology for prophetic education. Along the way I will consider how Blake's apprenticeship into the craft of engraving and his involvement with the larger socio-political culture of the artisan underclass fed his imagination with populist radicalism, antinomian enthusiasm and the virtues of self-education. I will discuss how, from this curiously varied fertilization Blake conceived of the need for his class to free themselves from the repression of the merchant-dominated market and how this specific form of liberation opens out into all levels of political and religious liberation. Finally, I will argue for the shaping influence of the plebian popular culture on the tractates and illuminated printing in general as part of Blake's self- and national-improvement project, and how Blake turned vulgar artisan political ideology into searing, eternal statements of prophetic encouragement intended to leave behind generations of apprentice prophets to carry on with their

own unique visions, suited to their individual weaknesses – and how it ended, if not in failure, in near-perpetual deferment.

### **Eros in Labor**<sup>13</sup>

The conventional historical reading of Blake generally places the not-yet-prophet between two poles – Swedenborgian mysticism and Jacobin radicalism.<sup>14</sup> In this conventional history, Blake was torn between two spheres of influence just prior to beginning his prophetic project. At one pole, Blake and his wife were immersing themselves in Swedenborgian prophecy, even visiting and signing the charter of a New Church (though Blake would soon repudiate Swedenborg decisively in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*). At the other, through his association with his sometime employer and publisher Joseph Johnson and his friendship with Henry Fuseli, Blake was introduced to the rationalist circle of English Jacobins that included Godwin, Wollstonecraft, Priestley, and Paine. For Blake, feeling the pull of something more significant than the drudgery of copy-engraving and the occasional poeticizing published in the *Sketches*, both sides must surely have seemed attractive. On the one hand, political revolution, the overturning of an old, outworn institutional system and the creation of a new utopia; on the other, release from the old religious order with a startling and vibrant new vision. But both options would have presented Blake with a problem: each replaced the corrupt institution with another institution rather than freeing the creative soul from its material, psychological, and religious chains. The celebrated vision of Robert presents a middle way to Blake: not the way of political revolution, and not the way of Swedenborg, but the creation instead of a new art that

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<sup>13</sup> Borrowed from Ferber (36).

<sup>14</sup> This is the version established by Schorer's *Politics of Vision* and minutely adapted until the New Historicists began to investigate other religious and political influences in the 1980s.

would not enslave its readers in yet another system, but liberate them by challenging their conceptions of art, literature, faith, and perception itself.

But more recent work by literary historians like Mee and Makdisi complicates this conventional history. The Blake who emerges from these new readings is not only no compromiser, but opposed to both mysticism and radicalism with the same fervor with which he opposes the status quo. As Makdisi argues,

Blake's most important criticisms – simultaneously and inextricably religious, political, economic, philosophical, conceptual, and material – were leveled not only at an actual ruling class, but at a future ruling class; not only at a current mode of production, but at a future mode of production which was in the 1790s only in its infancy; not only at the reactionary defenders of the state religion, but at the radicals who espoused the sacred cause of individual liberty. (75-76)

This Blake is a brilliant auto-didact who “unapologetically recombines elements from across discourse boundaries such that the antecedent discourses are fundamentally altered in the resultant structures” (Mee *Dangerous* 3), profoundly influenced by the twinned religious threats (to the established Church, at least) antinomianism and enthusiasm, and deeply resistant to all authoritarian discourses that claim closed knowledge over inspiration. This Blake has a complex relationship to bourgeois English Jacobinism, which combined anti-authoritarian radicalism (which earned Blake's approbation) with rationalistic Deism and Natural Religion (which earned his scorn), and which refused entry to those of the lower labor- and artisan-classes in their desire for social respectability.<sup>15</sup> It is out of this contentious mix of class, religion,

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<sup>15</sup> Laura Quinney offers a rather facile but nevertheless affecting psychological explanation for Blake's rejection of Enlightenment values: “He portrays this literary circle as hostile to enthusiasm and prophecy; certainly it was hostile to him, and in the end he ceased to be welcome

education and vision that Blake's prophecy – vulgar, anti-authoritarian, difficult, and uncompromising – explodes into the year 1788.

What we must realize is that Blake's prophecy is fundamentally the prophecy of an artisan, informed by the values of Blake's class – liberationist, self-determining, auto-didactic – and accessible to those without formal learning but open to education that benefited them directly and materially. Recent historicist studies such as those by Mee, Makdisi, David Worrall, and Michael Ferber make a compelling case for Blake's significant ideological overlap with others of his artisan class, a class increasingly under pressure during Blake's lifetime both from a government anxious over growing radicalism in the working class and from an elite bourgeois-radical class seeking to separate the vulgar from their respectable revolution. David Worrall posits a "plebeian radical culture" emergent around the same time as the tractates and the early prophecies that was at the receiving end of violent repression by the government, a repression that resulted in "Artisan radicalism's generation of a separate public sphere [...] allied to the necessity for self reinvention within a linguistic space perceived to be distant from Burke's literary high ground" ("Plebian" 202). Makdisi confirms "Working-class and artisanal articulacy – let alone literacy – was therefore a primary target of the state, and the government sought to stifle it, partly by splitting the literate from the illiterate, those for whom knowledge is entertaining from those for whom knowledge and above all articulacy are dangerous" (50). Recognizing this plebeian radical culture with its own underground of public discourse puts a good deal of Blake's early illuminated writings into context. It helps, for instance, supply a practical explanation for Blake's choice to print his prophecies rather than speak them – the speech of Blake's class was suspect and subject to official retaliation. Nor was Blake the only

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on account of his vehemence. Thus his rejection of empiricism is bound up from the beginning with his own loneliness and cultural alienation" (28).

writer with his own printing press in his home: Worrall compares Thomas Bentley, who issued inflammatory political tracts from his own press (“Plebian” 200). In addition, the contrast with “Burke’s literary high ground” gives further resonance to Blake’s literary production in the midst of artisan-class pamphleteering, though as Worrall notes, “Neither would the combination of poetry and design in the illuminated books have shielded Blake,” as “anti-George visual images, under some circumstance, merited prosecution and persecution” (“Plebian” 203).

On the other hand, the political sympathies between artisan-class radicalism and the bourgeois radicalism exemplified by the Johnson circle were strained by the lower class’s ties to religious enthusiasm and their lack of formal learning. Robert Rix helpfully defines “enthusiasm” and “antinomianism” in this historical context: “they were primarily pejorative terms used by conservative detractors about tendencies believed to undermine religious and social authority” (8). Unorganized and unofficial, these often linked terms “may best be described as approaches or attitudes shared by a number of often very different individuals or groups” (8). As for Blake himself, both Mee and Makdisi remind us, despite his economic connection to the radical circle surrounding his frequent employer and would-be publisher, Blake’s religious enthusiasm “would probably have alienated the intellectuals of the Johnson circle” (Mee *Dangerous* 51); “It is likely that Johnson’s circle would have regarded Blake as a peripheral figure, a copy-engraver who worked for Johnson rather than a writer or artist published by him (221).<sup>16</sup> Makdisi explains that, during Blake’s era, “the amorphous assemblage that was still in the process of making itself into ‘the English working class’ could – depending on who was articulating it – include not only artisans and tradesmen, but also ‘sansculottes’ and

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<sup>16</sup> The exception seems to have been Fuseli, who regarded Blake as a like mind and appears to have been behind most of Blake’s commissions from Johnson; but where Fuseli’s eccentricities seem to have added to his foreign mystique, Blake’s must have marked him as incorrigibly vulgar.

‘the mob,’ abstractions who carried an ideological charge that far outweighed their actual existence,” a perception that prompted higher-class radical societies to “steer a determined course away from the spectacle of mob violence and leveling so often imputed to them by conservative and reactionary writers [...] and hence they had to steer away from more enthusiastic and plebeian forms of radicalism” (27). Needless to say, perhaps, “Blake the engraver, steeped in antinomian traditions and artisanal activism, producer of extraordinarily wild and dangerously incoherent, not to say inarticulate, illuminated works, would have belonged firmly on one side of this line” (53).

In his essay “National Arts and Disruptive Technologies,” Morris Eaves finds a fascinating corollary to Blake’s artisan-class identification. In studying Blake’s *Prospectus To the Public*, Eaves determines that

The story that Blake tells [in the *Prospectus*] incorporates an explicit critique of the artists’ limited access to markets and the limitations of their autonomy, which translates in political terms to a lack of liberty. Blake’s story also incorporates an implicit critique of unenriched information, while it promises, above all, to solve long-standing production problems and liberate English artistic identity at its core.

The story begins in extravagant hope and ends in fairly extravagant temporary failure. (120)

In contrast to Reynold’s opening of the Royal Academy in 1769, which “leaves the future of the English school firmly and traditionally in the hands of polite patronage [...] but presciently leaves the door of commerce open” (121-22), and Boydell’s Shakespeare Gallery, which “shifted attention away from the custom-made objects demanded by traditional patrons to one of the characteristic forms of modern marketing, readymade goods for the retail rack, with standardized

sizes, colors, styles, and prices” (122), Blake introduces his illuminated printing as a “technical solution to a shared technical problem of communications” which “promised to eliminate the merchant middleman” and allow artists to “capture, for the first time, the profits that these intermediaries had siphoned off” (124-25). Viewed as Eaves suggests, Blake’s Prospectus is less an advertisement to the public than a call to economic liberation for artisans, introducing as it does a means and hope for members of that class to free themselves from bourgeois exploitation.<sup>17</sup> Despite Eaves’ terminology, Blake is not calling to “artists,” who already have access (through the Royal Academy and commercial ventures like Boydell’s gallery) to the bourgeois class, but to *artisans* who are shut out from both the public via middle-class middlemen, and from entry into that self-determining economic sphere to which the merchants belong.

This reading of the Prospectus provides a concrete example of the elements of artisan-class ideology to which Blake held, even while underscoring those to which he did not. For, as Eaves explains, Blake’s proposal does not elevate artisans to the merchant class so they can merely take the place of the merchants: “once liberated, the heretofore restrained English artistic identity will expand to fill the new medium and produce not just old forms of information more cheaply and efficiently, but enriched new forms capable of combining painter and poet” (127). If adopted, Blake’s technology promises to make reproduction, the standard of industrial

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<sup>17</sup> Jennifer Michaels puts it this way in *Blake and the City*: “Blake, in other words, was no primitivist when it came to technology: in his dedication to preserving the integrity of the creative process, he actively sought and discovered new methods of printing that increased efficiency while maintaining the artist’s control over his own work. Moreover, by drawing frequent analogies between his own plate-making, the ancient labor of the smith, and the new industrial processes, Blake emphasizes the role of human imagination and human labor in creating the complex environment of the city” (20).

practice,<sup>18</sup> “a by-product of original expression rather than a nefarious and expensive technological threat to the full expression of imagination” (127). To see in more depth how Blake responds to the artisan ideology, we can turn to Michael Ferber’s *The Social Vision of William Blake*. Ferber argues that, because “[by] 1790, artisans could feel a new pressure besides the immemorial struggles with middlemen and merchants – the increasing proletarianization of unskilled rural labor in the factory towns,” the artisan class was “willing to follow the lead of this emerging [entrepreneurial] sector even where their interests conflicted for the sake of their common struggle against aristocratic privilege, the landed interests, and the old corporations” (34). While Blake shared with others of the artisan class “the Dissenters’ great stress on liberty [...] he could hardly have made *laissez faire* a foundation of his social ideals, as his insistence on the interdependence of all people attests” (35). While others of the artisan class were absorbing the individualistic rhetoric of bourgeois radicalism, seeking a place to assert their own self-determination as artists, Blake distrusts both self-interest and the capitalistic structure it underpins; “O What Wonders are the Children of Men!” Blake writes in an 1805 letter to Hayley, “Would to God [...] that they would Promote Each others Spiritual Labours” (E 767). As Ferber puts it, “Blake appeals both to an ideal community and to what remains of real precapitalist social bonds” (35), expressing these bonds in explicitly spiritual language.

The spiritual, prophetic language with which Blake approaches economic matters is also of a piece with his artisan class, in which, as Mee puts it, enthusiasm was “a contagious disease capable of rapidly infecting the lower orders” (*Dangerous* 49). For Blake “inherits the Enlightenment critique of superstition and clerical obscurantism” along with “the philosophes and Dissenters as well as the majority of the artisan class of his day” (Ferber 37), with superstition

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<sup>18</sup> We may note here Makdisi’s argument that copy-engraving, with its division of labor among apprentices and masters, provides the “conceptual ancestor of the modern factory” (9).

defined as blind adherence to the authority of the established church, as opposed to the not at all superstitious faith in the “inner light” and the immediate accessibility of God and divine vision to all people. As Blake puts it in his annotations to Lavater, “I do not allow that there is such a thing as Superstition taken in the strict sense of the word A man must first decieve [sic] himself before he is <thus> Superstitious & so he is a hypocrite” (E 591). To follow the a second-hand revelation, Blake argues, requires not “ignorant honesty” which is “beloved of god & man,” but willful self-deception, which “is as distant from superstition. as the wolf from the lamb” (E 591). This view of ignorance and honesty, the distinction between superstition and hypocrisy, relates quite comprehensibly to Blake’s religious enthusiasm and artisan-class ideology: the sympathy given to “ignorant honesty,” for instance, points both to a basic faith in humanity (as Blake would have it, the divinity of the human) and to a political sympathy with the uneducated classes. Ferber explains that “Blake’s intellectual milieu was peopled by brilliant autodidacts” whose technological innovations were “born of senile religion and infantile science” but also expressed “the beauty and skill, the attention to detail, the harmonizing of disparate realms, and the originality that we prize in any work of an artisan or artist” (38-39). The artisan class to which Blake belonged, as Ferber thoroughly demonstrates, was intensely interested in self-improvement through self-education as a way of raising their social class and entering into more elite levels of society. As Ferber notes ironically, “Blake himself sought recognition as ‘artist’ as well as ‘artisan’” (35), and his inability to enter the Royal Academy due to his artisan training was a life-long source of bitterness.

As with all of Blake’s ideology, auto-didacticism has both a religious and a socio-political thrust. After all, if visions and spiritual inspiration come to man directly from the divine imagination, without the need for mediators and middle-men, so an anti-authoritarian mindset

such as Blake's would prefer self-education to education obtained by submitting to an authority.<sup>19</sup> Jon Mee recognizes this complex interconnection between spiritual and religious freedom as they relate to formal, rationalistic education:

Blake and his fellow millenarians looked to the imminent fulfillment of an older communitarian vision, founded on the authority of the believer's inner light and *self-consciously hostile to polite learning and reason*. The appeal to critical reasoning was always defined in terms of certain minimum educational and cultural requirements that *guaranteed the exclusion of the unlearned and unlettered*. (my italics, "Doom" 98)

The pattern holds at all levels of social involvement: Blake was refused entry to the Royal Academy due to his lack of formal education, so he turned to self-education and technological experimentation on his own authority, developing far beyond the bounds of the Academy (though without financial reward in his lifetime); the artisan-class radicals were refused entry into the bourgeois radical agenda, so they developed their own underground publishing network and rhetoric that developed in quite different directions than the Johnson circle (unfortunately for them, into historical obscurity as the bourgeois-radical became the *status quo*).

We see all of these ideological concerns in Blake's famous letter to Rev. Trusler, particularly the seething class division that would define his brand of prophecy. Against Trusler, who disapproved the obscurity of a design for which he had commissioned Blake, the engraver indignantly answers, "What is Grand is necessarily obscure to Weak men. That which can be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care" (E 702). Instead, Blake asserts, "I am happy to

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<sup>19</sup> We can easily see, now, the religious connotations of the Prospectus, which promises to free artisans and artists from the middle-man merchants and the authority of official publishing channels just as faith in direct divine inspiration frees the human soul from the repression of priests and churches.

find a Great Majority of Fellow Mortals who can Elucidate My Visions & Particularly they have been Elucidated by Children who have taken a greater delight in contemplating my Pictures than I even hoped” (E 703). This confrontation with Trusler is indeed a microcosm for Blake’s prophetic program, a fact makes it especially beloved among Blake scholars.<sup>20</sup> For, as Mee argues, “It should come as no surprise that an autodidact like Blake, who was continually being denied the status of artist and poet (as well as sometimes lacking sufficient work to practise his trade as an engraver), should have shared an antagonism to those who valued ‘Learning above Inspiration’” (*Dangerous* 41). At the same time, Blake complains to Cumberland of Trusler, “I despair of Ever pleasing one Class of Men—Unfortunately our authors of books are among this Class” (E 703). The Rev. Trusler is, of course, by virtue of his title and social position one of the learned who value “Learning above Inspiration,” while those who lack learning – “a Great Majority of Fellow Mortals” and children, namely – “can Elucidate My Visions” without trouble. Blake worries to Cumberland (with an intriguing choice of words), “how soon we Shall have a change for the better I cannot Prophecy” (E 703). Blake uses “prophecy” ironically here; always making a point to differentiate prophecy from fortune-telling, Blake admits that he cannot tell when such men as Trusler will ever change: so entrenched in their own wisdom and authority, only a miracle or apocalypse could alter the balance. But Blake’s Fellow Mortals, we may easily surmise, are those like Blake – unlearned in a formal sense, without official authority, mere children to those with both learning and authority. But, most importantly, as we have seen, these Fellow Mortals are open to education, people for whom things can “change for the better” so

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<sup>20</sup> As an aside, it also demonstrates that Blake’s steadily declining fortunes over his career, as patrons deserted him and employers transferred contracts to other engravers, may have had less to do with their lack of imagination than with the fact that, from an employer’s perspective, Blake the employee was difficult at best and frequently impossible.

long as it benefits them. They are, in short, people like Blake – the artisans, workers, and marginal members of society.

### **Receiving a Prophet as a Prophet**

Based on Eaves' and our reading of the Prospectus, we can see that Blake definitely intended his illuminated books to speak to a public. That public, judging from the Prospectus, was not only a general public who would buy the books themselves, but in particular the artisan class, who would most benefit from Blake's technology and the concept behind it. From the letter to Trusler, in addition, we can argue that Blake also had in mind a program of prophetic improvement through education, directing his discourse toward those who were open to such instruction. And this combination, drawn from values that circulated among Blake's contemporaries but combined through Blake's unique bricolage (to borrow Mee's term), in large part determines the scope and method of Blake's prophecy. Mee demonstrates in *Dangerous Enthusiasm* that London was in an apocalyptic fever in the decades leading up to Blake's prophecies, a rich stew of millennial anxieties and growing religious enthusiasm that boiled over in the 1790s. Blake was hardly the only prophet to emerge during this time: almost exactly parallel to Blake's prophetic works were the letters of Richard Brothers, whose apocalyptic warnings to the government from 1791 to his imprisonment in an insane asylum in 1795 convinced many that he was indeed God's nephew, as he claimed. The building millennial pressures after the American Revolution resulted in what Mee calls a "flurry of prophetic activity" by the 1790s (*Dangerous* 33); Mee names among Blake's contemporaries William Bryan, John Wright, George Riebau, Garnet Terry, Sarah Green, Joanna Southcott, and a number of anonymous writers and pamphleteers (*Dangerous* 29ff). Besides these contemporary writers of prophecy, there sprang up a "multitude of reprints from earlier prophetic texts, including those

of seventeenth-century enthusiasts” (*Dangerous* 33). All of this furious publication of prophecies, Mee argues, points to “in the popular culture a strong self-awareness of the prophetic heritage” (*Dangerous* 33). Blake was, therefore, not unique in writing prophecy for a popular audience; in his own time he would have appeared (at least superficially, and if his work had been read at all) as one of a multitude of inspired madmen and women issuing apocalyptic prophetic announcements to a public hungry for sensation but apparently less mobilized for action.

We notice something significant about this prophetic number, however; though many of these writers appeared on the lecture circuit of the day and were known as public figures, they were all primarily writers: their works were written and published, delivered from notes in lecture halls, not proclaimed in the city square or sidewalk. While most of them shared with Blake a working-class, self-educated (or uneducated) background, that ideological background did not inform their relationship with their readers and followers in the same way it informed Blake’s. Blake, we must recall, had no followers until the end of his life; his prophetic works were etched and printed in obscurity. But in his works, unlike the works of his contemporaries, Blake is not predicting the future, nor bolstering his own authority as a leader of a movement; he is, rather, attempting to open his readers up to the accessibility of prophecy for themselves, to not only prophesy but to teach prophecy: that is, to perceive the world prophetically. David Worrall speculates (perhaps reasonably, but mostly just suggestively) that the great turning point in Blake’s prophetic urgency came not with the vision of Robert, but with the Great East Cheap Swedenborg conference of April 1789 (“Female Prophet” 48). For it was here, Worrall imagines, that Blake met, for the first and only time, an actual prophet, Dorothy Gott. In contrast to his exposure (if it occurred) to the other prophets of his day through printed writing, this was

Blake's only known encounter with a prophet in the flesh, and one can extrapolate the importance of that meeting in relation to Blake's concern for encounter and experience in prophecy. For while Gott also published her prophecies, meeting her would have represented, for Blake, a crucial realization that prophets were living human beings, unlike the dead Swedenborg known only through translated texts. Worrall argues that "Blake carefully modulated and differentiated his discourse from that of his contemporaries," and that knowing whom Blake met at the Swedenborgian conference, "It is now possible to posit the moment when that process first began" ("Female Prophet" 50). But Worrall's theory, however intriguing it may be, misses one essential fact: Blake had already begun his prophetic program the year before with his creation of the tractates. Though they were (presumably) not yet published, the course had been set before Blake ever met a prophet. Blake's meeting with Dorothy Gott (if indeed it occurred) could only have confirmed for Blake what he already knew: that his prophecy had to be different from the prophecy around him, and that difference had to be one of substance as well as message.

Blake's marginalia and letters provide insight into how different Blake's idea of prophecy was from the conventional vision. Blake faced a public already used to *reading* prophecy, and to reading *about* prophets, but it was not a public accustomed to experiencing prophecy either through direct encounter with prophets or through their own visionary experiences. Yet Blake thinks of the prophet's role rather differently than his contemporaries:

Prophets in the modern sense of the word have never existed  
 Jonah was no prophet in the modern sense for his prophecy of Nineveh failed  
 Every honest man is a Prophet he utters his opinion both of private & public matters/Thus/If you go

on So/the result is So/He never says such a thing shall happen let you do what you will. a Prophet is a Seer not an Arbitrary Dictator. (E 617)

We must realize that the social immediacy Blake affords the prophet is by no means totally unique. Mee finds a precursor in the scholarly writings of Robert Lowth from the 1750s. Lowth's influential (at least in educated circles, not in the non-elite working and lower classes) lectures on Hebrew poetry had established a "stress on the rhetorical function of prophecy" for the Hebrews, "since it was central to his representation of the Old Testament prophets as public figures involved in the transmission of 'history and politics, as well as the principles of religion and morals'" (*Dangerous* 27). By Blake's time there was an established sense of "the public and even political nature of prophetic office," and many radical intellectuals had already placed prophecy automatically on the counter-culture, anti-establishment side (*Dangerous* 27). Mee supposes that "the actual practice of prophecy was read as intrinsically threatening by the status quo" (*Dangerous* 47), considering the political pressures put on public prophets by the government, and the fact that those conservative writers who attempted to jump on the prophetic bandwagon "seldom laid claim to prophetic inspiration themselves" (*Dangerous* 47) – they always placed their authority to speak prophetically in their adherence to Biblical orthodoxy rather than immediate inspiration.

This key difference, then, is what separates Blake's prophecy not only from those of the loyalist establishment, but also from his radical prophetic contemporaries: his "assertion of the continuing and general availability of prophetic inspiration" (*Dangerous* 34). For though the conservative religious establishment could make prophetic predictions (usually about the inevitable failure of the Jacobins and God's approval of the crown), their prophecy was authorized by the Bible; and though figures like Brothers and Southcott inspired other prophetic

responses from their inspired followers, these responses were sanctioned by their relation to the masters' inspirations, in the same way that Swedenborg's followers enhanced and expanded the master's visions with their own that nevertheless fit in with the boundaries established by Swedenborg. In this model of prophetic inspiration vision, even when stemming from an "inner light," must be judged and approved by some authority, however anti-authoritarian that authority might be. Yet we see the difference in Blake's definition. Blake firstly dismisses with a sneer the idea of prophecy as prediction: Jonah's "prophecy of Nineveh failed," after all. Prophecy "never says such a thing shall happen let you do what you will," but rather makes statements based on what is presently happening: "Thus/If you go on So/the result is So" (E 617). This seems less like prophecy as we (still) tend to think of it than reasonable speculation about the future based on critical analysis of past and present events. Indeed, the version of prophecy Blake defines here in his annotations to Watson is strikingly practical. "Every honest man is a Prophet," Blake affirms; "he utters his opinion both of private & public matters" (E 617).

Let us take a moment to think about the implications of this short statement. First of all, if every honest man is a prophet, then every man has the potential to be a prophet, provided only that he be honest. We have seen already some of Blake's thoughts on honesty in relation to superstition: Blake's sympathy for "ignorant honesty" takes us even farther here, to the suggestion that even the ignorant have the potential to be prophets. Prophecy, then, requires no specialized knowledge or wisdom. It does not even require special inspiration: the prophet, as Blake puts it here, does not utter God's words from on high, but "his opinion." This distinction is absolutely critical: it removes altogether the need that we have seen in other definitions of prophecy for outside authority of any kind. The prophet does not need the sanction of a sacred book, of a prophetic forefather, or even, apparently of the Heavenly Father – only the authority

of his own opinion. Though elsewhere Blake will talk about prophecy coming from divine inspiration, the simplicity of his statement here implies something important about divine inspiration: divine inspiration does not come from an outside authority. This is, obviously, not only far removed from conventional ideas about prophecy, but from conventional ideas about authority in general and divinity itself. But it accords with principles Blake writes in the tractates: in *There is No Natural Religion* Blake tells us “He who sees the Infinite in all things sees God” (plate b11), and that further “God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is” (plate b12); but even more to the point, Blake informs us that “The true Man is the source he being the Poetic Genius” (ARO plate 10), placing the human being – the “true” human being – on par with the Poetic Genius, which is the source of “all sects of Philosophy” and the “Religions of all Nations,” including the “Jewish & Christian Testaments.” If we be so bold as to identify “true” in this passage with “honest” elsewhere, we have a solid connection between the “honest ignorance” of the superstitious man, the prophet who need only be an “honest man,” and the Poetic Genius, the creative source of all knowledge and wisdom subsequently distorted and “adapted to the weaknesses of every individual” (ARO plate 6). Put together, we get a brief but potent assertion that divine inspiration comes not from an outside authority but from the human prophet him/herself, and that nothing else is possible but for that prophet to speak his opinion “both of private & public matters.”

Further, the distinction Blake refused to make between private and public continues to redefine the conventional idea of the prophet. Just as Blake’s liberation of prophecy from outside authority gives the prophet sanction to speak freely, so his expansion of prophecy to both private and public spheres opens prophecy to all people. For there was already, as we have seen, a basis for thinking of prophecy in public terms based on Lowth theories and Biblical precursors

– the prophets of the Old Testament issue warnings to kings and lords to change their ways and their nations, combining private change of the king’s heart with public change in policy. In the case of Jonah’s prophecies in Ninevah (Blake’s intriguing choice of example), the king’s conviction leads to the city’s conviction and their salvation:

For word came unto the king of Nin'evah, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nin'evah by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water: but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands. (Jonah 3.6-8, KJV)<sup>21</sup>

Because of the king’s conviction, “the people of Nin'evah believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them” (3.5), and God spares the city. But Blake’s identification of public and private is different still; it does not assume that a change in the king’s heart will result in a change in the nation’s, but that the prophetic change must come in each individual’s heart through his or her recognition of the Poetic Genius inside. Private space, then, is intensely private in Blake’s formulation – the most private space of all, the individual spirit. It is, again, within the sphere of the antinomian enthusiasm identified with Blake’s class, but intensified as in all of Blake. For the prophet has the authority and responsibility to prophesy not only about public matters – like revolution and equality – but also

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<sup>21</sup> I cite from the King James (Authorized) Version of the Bible pointedly; Mee argues a “popular feeling that the Bible, and particularly the Authorized Version, belonged to the people. It had been appropriated to become an active part of the popular culture” (*Dangerous* 73). The King James Version therefore has a significant political import underlying my use of it here.

about the state of his own spirit and heart, a cousin to the self-expression we attribute to the later Romantics but emerging from an even more intrinsic source of authority. Blake's prophecies perform all of this utterance of his opinions, in both public and private spheres, but it goes even farther: it teaches and encourages others to do the same.

When we consider how deeply influenced Blake is by his artisan-class values, we can begin to understand another aspect of his illuminated works that is often forgotten or overlooked: their simplicity. For, though critics take for granted the difficulty and obscurity of Blake's prophecies, our conviction that the prophecies proper are difficult and obscure blinds us to the fact that just as many of Blake's works are simple and direct, particularly during the early period of illuminated printing. The tractates are, of course, aphoristic works with each plate bearing a single statement; *Thel* and the *Songs of Innocence*, reflections of popular fables and ballads; *The Gates of Paradise* a book explicitly *For Children*; even the *Marriage* and the *America* and *Europe* prophecies have sufficient connection to public events to make them comprehensible to a contemporary popular audience. And, if I may be blunt – they are all picture-books, as Behrendt helpfully reminds us: “The single most prominent exception in the twentieth century to this rule of custom” – the separation of words and pictures – “is the fully illustrated children's book, which perhaps most closely approximates in form and function the sort of interdisciplinary art form to which Blake's illuminated texts aspire” (13). We all know that we learn to read text through such books, using illustration to help us comprehend the words we are beginning to recognize. In some sense (at the risk of diminishing the illuminated books, though I am certain they can stand on their own), Blake may be meeting his contemporary readership – plebian, formally uneducated – halfway with illustrated books, although these books, as we have seen, function quite differently than conventional illustrated books. As I have already suggested (in

Chapter 1), the progress of these books situates them in an intensive educational campaign, their accessibility allowing entry to all levels of society, but particularly to those of the working, artisan, and uneducated classes. And it is this pedagogical function that fundamentally separates Blake's prophetic works from those of his contemporaries: Blake is using his illuminated books (all of which, as I have said in Chapter 1, have an inherently prophetic function) not to merely proclaim his enlightenment, or to attract followers to his movement, but to teach the teachable to be prophets themselves. He is, following his own advice, a "seer, not an Arbitrary Dictator" (E 617) – with the cutting pun on "Dictator" as both "speaker" and "authoritarian," certainly distinct from the sort of speaking and authority of the prophet.

Blake's use of superficially simple forms and genres (picture-books, aphorisms, fables, songs) in the early illuminated books puts him in line with a significant movement of his day to democratize the space of public discussion. As Mee argues, "Central to the democratization of the text pursued by radicals in the 1790s was an attempt to reach an expanding popular audience with political ideas" (*Dangerous* 18). Mee's example is Thomas Paine, who attempted to "achieve a style which confounded hegemonic distinctions between the polite and vulgar languages" and "to write in a political language accessible to the disenfranchised" (*Dangerous* 72). In Paine's writing, Mee argues, the "implication was that the vulgar language and its speakers could participate in the public and political life of the country" (*Dangerous* 72), a belief Mee sees echoed in Blake's assertions that inspired honest men should proclaim their opinions in the public sphere. And hand-in-hand with this democratization of language is the democratization of reading in the experience of the prophetic books. As Behrendt argues, "The impulse toward heightened reader involvement that characterizes Blake's art was no isolated phenomenon but was rather in very much in keeping with the temper and texture of later

eighteenth-century English culture” (11). Paine’s vulgar political language, the popular underground presses of the artisan class, the distribution of inflammatory pamphlets and broadsides that we have already seen, are all part of this heightened reader involvement; in a curious way, the sudden proliferation of writing from outside established market controls in the 1790s prefigures the explosion of commentary and opinion made possible by digital technology in our own 90s.<sup>22</sup>

Blake’s use of the illuminated text resembles digital technology in another way as well – its openness. The open – interpretable, flexible, non-constative – nature of Blake’s illuminated books is now taken as a given by most Blake scholars. As Makdisi writes, “Both in the reading and in the making of the illuminated books – their ‘meaning’ and their production – the category of the book as such seems almost an organizing fiction, a convenient rubric or packaging, a useful mode to try to contain what turn out to be uncontainable images” (191). In Makdisi’s figuring, Blake’s books are only books because no other technology was available that could meet his needs or demands, but that technology nonetheless needed significant and even extravagant reinvention to be suitable for Blake’s program. To complicate our accepted view of Blake’s illuminated printing as a technological revolution, however, Behrendt argues that “what we now see as a powerfully subversive element in Blake’s art might have appeared much less so in 1790”: “our modern view of how literature and visual art works is in many ways less generous, less accommodating, and certainly less flexible than that which held sway in Blake’s time” (9). As Behrendt argues, Blake’s production of illuminated printing was possible largely because literature and art had not yet gone through the heightened codification (and commodification) that the 19<sup>th</sup> century would bring; despite his political and religious radicalism,

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<sup>22</sup> We will consider other connections to digital technology in Chapter 3.

in this respect Blake was ironically more free than the moderns to experiment with form and rhetoric. But whether Blake's illuminated printing is a revolutionary epiphany or a natural outgrowth of the literary and artistic milieu in which he lived – and I would argue that these do not need to be mutually exclusive descriptions – Blake's open text is in keeping with the ideology we have been defining here: freedom from outside authority, the moral responsibility to speak one's opinion openly, the universal accessibility of what Blake called (at this time) the Poetic Genius and what others may call the imagination or inspiration.

Tristanne Connolly, reading Blake from a Kristevan perspective, argues (particularly in reference to the gouged-out words in *Jerusalem*, but for all of Blake's books): "The measured amount of openness left in the text puts the onus on the reader to interpret, and to be aware that the interpretation must be tentative, a revelation of the reader's desires as well as the 'meaning' of the text" (12). Insightfully, Connolly recognizes that it is "where a didactic purpose is being served, where the message all previous or following hints should add up to is to be revealed: those are the points at which Blake inserts openings" (12). This opening up of the text at the most critical times is a profound statement from Blake about the nature of prophetic education: as we have seen, to become a prophet as Blake presents it means leaving behind all authority but that which is inherent in the prophet's own Poetic Genius, so leaving fissures in his pedagogy is one of the characteristic ways in which Blake refuses authority over his reader. In this way we may think of the missing plate b5 in *No Natural Religion* – as a place in which the reader must supply the missing aphorism, or make a leap of logic and faith from II to IV. Connolly, however, reads this fissures also as gatekeeping, "attempts to ensure that the right reader will continue and the wrong one will give up" (12). I would not follow Connolly this far; I cannot see Blake's texts as exclusive, considering Blake's disgust for elitism and the boundary-setting

of learning or wealth. Blake is not seeking to “control who [his] audience will be” (12) as Connolly argues, but to prepare his audience. In this case, as we have already seen, the audience is not necessarily the one who buys the book, but the one who responds to it. I would rather see these sorts of entry points not as gates for exclusion so much as points for the reader to consider whether he is prepared to pass. For Blake’s books are not linear, one-time events, but perpetual, infinite and eternal events; the reader who is not prepared to enter now may be later.

We must remember, as well, that, as with all of Blake’s ideas, what is spiritual is also practical, and the illuminated books are as much about practice as they are about any informational content. As Makdisi argues, the “technical and material aspects of Blake’s production practice are, in other words, inseparable from the conceptual matrix associated with them, which is also elaborated, even if in a different mode, in the books themselves” (93). In an important sense, this means that Blake’s open text and open invitation for his readers to become prophets themselves is another version of the liberation of artisan labor we have seen in the *Prospectus*. The liberation of spirit into prophecy, for Blake, is one with the liberation of reproductive labor into creative art. Many scholars, like Ferber, have noted in Blake’s work “images of unrepressed labor, of work wholehearted, inspired, full of passion and pleasure, to set against the enforced tasks of a cold and calculating Urizen” (36). As long as art remains “not an isolated, abstract, and idealized activity, but rather an ensemble of material practices, makings, beings, thoughts, images, and imaginations” (Makdisi 262), it cannot be enslaved by a Urizenic system. This is the meaning of what Makdisi calls Blake’s “philopoesis,” his love of making (265). An artisan like Blake dedicates his life, mind, and body to the making of objects, but Blake develops this dedication theoretically to such an intensity that the political, religious, cultural and social implications of his craft become palpable even when they are not explicit.

They become as palpable as the bodies that strain for release from the prints and as palpable as the body of the books themselves. The illuminated books take part in a vast, contentious but productive conversation across Blake's era and into our own. They are proof that "the ultimate political power (of creation, of making, of production) rests with humanity rather than with abstract gods and rules, with systems of nature, with unquestionable divine principles" (Makdisi 267).

### **Closing Concerns**

I am left now with two final considerations, one a mere intellectual curiosity, the other perhaps crucial to my entire project in this dissertation. First, I wonder why Blake did not take on apprentices to further his prophetic agenda, acolytes who could have aided him in production and carried on his work. As Bentley records, Blake never applied for the official Freedom of the Guild that would allow him to enlist apprentices, and seemingly never had any intention of doing so even during his most productive periods (14). Instead, he made his wife Catherine his assistant. The most likely explanation seems to be that Blake did not want to continue the repression inherent in the division of labor in the printing shop; as we have already mentioned, the production method of the engraver's shop (with multiple apprentices handling discrete stages in production, such as polishing the plates, arranging tools, performing preliminary etching, and so on, all under the supervision of a master who completed and signed the final plate) provided the model for industrial factory production; perhaps even as early as the end of his apprenticeship, when he could have first applied for his Freedom, Blake realized that the sort of printing shop in which he had apprenticed was a microcosm for all what was wrong with labor in his era. Perhaps as well he did not, once he embarked upon his prophetic calling, wish to become a priest, to reify his position as did prophets like Southcott (who literally sold entry into

Heaven) or Swedenborg (whose many followers seemingly divided over the smallest disparities in interpretation). The answer to this question relates back directly to the need for the prophetic book, for if the prophetic books succeed in their educational program they will create something more important than apprentices – fellow prophets, attuned to the Poetic Genius and prophesying their own public and private visions.

Secondly, we come to the question of why the tractates were not published until 1794 and 1795, and then only in limited, commissioned copies. As I am making the case that the tractates are necessary introductions to Blake's prophecy, the fact that they were not published first constitutes a glaring problem. But, while they may be primary in spirit, the means by which they came to be left behind could be mundane or even disappointing. One explanation could be purely practical – around this time (1788) Blake appears to have still been trying to publish through more conventional channels, mainly through Joseph Johnson. We know, of course, that in 1791 Johnson printed but did not publish the first book of *The French Revolution*, and that in 1793 *For Children* was published under Johnson's imprint (at least according to the title page). So it is reasonable to believe that in 1788 Blake could have still held out hope that Johnson would have published the tractates. If that were the case, it would also be reasonable to suspect that Johnson would not have been interested in them; Mee argues that Blake's connection to the Johnson circle was complicated by that radical class's "defining itself as bourgeois, sorting itself out both from the patrician culture above and the unrespectability of those below. I believe Blake's vulgar enthusiasm functioned as the mark of an unrespectability which excluded him from this emergent public sphere" (*Dangerous* 220). By this reasoning, the tractates could likely have been somewhat embarrassing to Johnson, carrying an undesirable whiff of enthusiasm and plebian vulgarity. Their technical crudity would further have marked them as something

Johnson would not have been comfortable carrying in his shop alongside his more elite merchandise.

A second possibility could be situated within our discussion of the plebian radical culture and its underground publication network. For, as we have already suggested, Blake would have had an interest in creating affordable, accessible publications, for which the tractates, with their small size and simplicity of design, would have been ideal. Both Makdisi and Worrall confirm an existing market for such publications, and the potential for Blake to produce cheap versions of his illuminated printing: “Before he turned to the more elaborate, less precisely controlled and probably more expensive books in colour-printing for 1784 and 1795, Blake worked with a degree of political provisionality reflected in the topicality of his works,” a provisionality reflected in “the unique copy L of *A Song of Liberty* printed uncoloured, as Essick notes, on laid paper ‘as an independent pamphlet’” (Worrall “Plebian” 194-95). Makdisi points out that the monocolour copies of the *Marriage*, *America* and *Europe* indicate that “Blake could easily have printed more of these rough-and-ready pamphlets cheaply and in relatively large numbers, though there is no record of Blake’s actually having done so” (51-52). If Blake desired a popular audience, as seems possible, we may wonder why Blake did not make an effort to produce these cheap pamphlets. But the answer may be uncomfortably obvious: Blake may have been, at least in part, protecting himself from prosecution. As Mee points out, there was a sense in which cheapness itself was automatically suspect; the cheapness of Brothers’ publications, for instance, prompted the *Gentleman’s Magazine* to suspect their attractiveness to “the bulk of the people, whose minds in these days do not need disquiet” (qtd in *Dangerous* 49). A low price indicated to censors a popular audience, which in turn raised suspicions of republican sympathies. Makdisi points out that “Blake’s illuminated works, of course, were not cheap reproductions, and

at ten shillings *America* might not have been worth prosecuting, even if any one had understood it" (51). Had the tractates been published for a popular audience, their subversive religious message, covered though it is in parody and irony, may have brought Blake more official attention than he desired.

Rather than any one verifiable reason, it was probably a confluence of bad timing and inability that prevented Blake from publishing the tractates, leading Blake to move on to the *Songs of Innocence* and *Thel*, less obviously subversive books, the following year. By 1795, however, after having made the bolder, even more topical prophetic statements *America* and *Europe*, Blake may have felt safer making new prints of these forgotten books, restoring them to their proper place in his prophetic order. At any rate, it is not so much ironic, as Mee suggests, that "Blake never achieved a significant readership while he lived" (*Dangerous* 18) as it is an unfortunate reality that the readership Blake seems to have thought he had in 1788 and the early 1790s did not really exist. But if Blake had in his lifetime only a "handful of individuals with antiquarian interests who bought his work" (*Dangerous* 224), what fit audience though few buys and actually reads Blake's impossible works today?

## CHAPTER 3

### Written in Golden Letters on Our Temples: The Practical Rhetoric of Prophetic

#### Embodiment

Some cannot tell what they can write tho they dare  
- Marginalia to Lavater (E 588)

#### A Golden Sentence

I suggested, in Chapter 1, that the tractates are to be read as preparatory books, lessons toward forming the readers Blake needs to witness his prophetic visions. To do so, the tractates must prepare readers in two ways. Textually, they must act as succinct, thorough, and exemplary samples of Blake's illuminated printing so that readers may familiarize themselves with the challenging perspective-shifting necessary to "read" the books. Rhetorically, the tractates must introduce readers to the fundamental principles underlying Blake's prophecies while prodding them to be fully awake and engaged readers, prepared for the syntactical and lexical complexities, multiplicities, and reversals which characterize Blake's writing. Beginning with an image of John the Baptist pointing the way into *All Religions are One*, the tractates stand as Blake's prophetic calling cards, recording the moment in which Blake, the intriguingly unconventional but still imitative poet of the *Poetical Sketches*, is reborn as Blake the prophet. Their priority in Blake's work, however – both in time, and in their place as a calling card and a condensation of ideas Blake would later work out in imaginative depth in the prophecies – requires that we give the tractates more attention than conventional literary scholarship has done.

Rhetorical theory has proven to be extremely useful for critiquing media that defies conventional literary theory, and in a number of ways the tractates more resemble oratory (rhetoric's traditional subject), sermons, or propaganda (genres less accessible to literary study than to rhetoric) than they resemble poetry. Because these brief sets of aphorisms outwardly differ so from Blake's mature poetic tales and prophecies, because they present themselves ostensibly as persuasive, discursive works rather than as imaginative visions (the disguise that has led so many critics astray, as discussed in Chapter 1), a rhetorical reading seems not only appropriate, but necessary.

This chapter will examine the rhetorical methods by which Blake approaches his readers in the manner of a prophet rather than as a poet or artist. I will, therefore, examine some of the ways in which the prophetic books, and the tractates especially, appeal to readers, convincing them of Blake's prophetic charge and making them susceptible to the education the tractates provide. An obvious objection may be that Blake, having such conviction of his own (a "firm pervasion" as he puts it in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* [plate 12]), did not require other affirmation of his prophetic status. It seems apparent, though, from correspondence and personal conversations recorded by others, that Blake desired to be heard in his own time, and believed that he had an essential message for the England of his age. Blake created his prophecies urgently, with a palpable sense of immediacy, so it seems reasonable to approach the tractates as timely communications crafted for ultimate impact and expecting response.<sup>23</sup> In addition to the basic principles of illuminated printing (which have been discussed in Chapters 1 and 2), the tractates in particular draw from two traditions to advance Blake's pedagogical program: the

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<sup>23</sup> As Worrall notes, the existence of a single-page pamphlet version of *A Song of Liberty* and the uncolored copies of *America* and *For Children* indicate "Blake's wish to retain a degree of flexibility and immediacy to respond to shifts in the turbulent radical politics of 1793" ("Plebeian" 195)

emblem-book, and the aphorism.<sup>24</sup> Each of these traditions offers Blake unique means for writing the body and introducing readers to the specialized prophetic rhetoric Blake can only accomplish through his illuminated printing. By embodying his prophetic message in the unique medium of illuminated books, Blake enacts a prophetic voice perfectly suited to the modern world, one that becomes ever more compelling as modernity redefines textuality, orality, and rhetoric itself.

### **The Rhetorical Uses of Illuminated Printing**

The illuminated book is essential for Blake's rhetoric; no other method would do. Because a method did not exist, Blake was forced to create one. Writing itself could not have been sufficient: only through the combination of writing with design and imagery could Blake achieve the physicality that would allow him to embody his prophetic message. Throughout his poetic production, Blake concerns himself with writing as a physical, imaginative, and spiritual act, an act embodied in the illuminated books and enacted by every human reader who processes the poems in his or her own imagination. For a poet so concerned with the meaning of writing, it is no surprise that writing appears as an image embodied in puns, in written scenes, and in visual motifs. Perhaps no book is so concerned with its bookishness as *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Written references to books and writing abound – angels read the Bible, Devils read it infernally, and Blake visits the printing house of Hell for a lesson in “the infernal method” of printing (plate 15). *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* are likewise concerned with their own being-written, as the “Introduction” to *Innocence* reveals. The singer takes a reed and makes “a rural pen,” then “[stains] the water clear” and writes the very “happy songs” we are about to read

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<sup>24</sup> These two are not unique to the tractates; the late prophecies *Milton* and *Jerusalem* are sources for many of Blake's most powerful aphorisms, and Blake used emblem-book structures, images, and styles throughout his works. The tractates, however, use these traditions as their primary rhetorical methods, while later works merely include them as secondary features.

(plate 1). Many years later, in *The Everlasting Gospel* Blake reminds us “thou readst black where I read white” (E 524). As a visual motif in the illuminated books, writing is as central as the nude, energetic human body. Scenes of writing and reading (as verb and noun) appear throughout Blake’s illuminated books: Urizen copying onto stone tablets an indecipherable script as he keeps his place with his toe; devilish and angelic students taking notes in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*; governesses with books in their laps in the tractates and *Songs*; engraved motifs on doors, tombs, and walls; Milton dividing his name on the title page of MIL/TON. As early as the tractates we see tiny sketches of figures reclining with books, reading, writing, teaching; as late as *Jerusalem* we see words inscribed on bodies, in corners, across expanses, becoming at once transparent vessels of intelligible meaning and opaque representations of shape and form.

But in considering the power of illuminated printing to provide a living body and uttering voice for Blake’s prophecy (in Chapter 1), I have not yet considered what it means for the illuminated book to have a “voice.” Yet for the illuminated book to be fully embodied, it must also be *oral*. This oral quality of the illuminated book may seem counterintuitive, but others have noted it. As Essick puts it in *The Language of Adam*,

Unlike an author who must place his words in the hands of printers and booksellers, the orator delivers his words directly to the public. By being his own etcher, printer, and bookseller, Blake retained a similar level of production control over his written words. When an orator gives the same speech more than once, no two performances are identical in tone and pacing. The proliferation of variety in colour and texture through multiple printings of the illuminated books insured an equivalent performative diversity. (174)

In an article more thought-provoking than satisfying, compositionist Gregg Hecimovich argues that “Blake aimed for a method of interchange that invited permanence, rational reflection, and dissemination, as well as immediacy, spontaneity, and passionate expressiveness” (137), a method he found in the freedom afforded by painting with wax on the copper plate. Far more natural and expressive than the graver, resist painting offered Blake “a spontaneity usually associated with oral forms” which could be, or at least seem, “unprompted, an immediate and altering engagement between author, medium, and intended audience” (140). Again, this way of thinking of Blake’s books points to prophetic urgency, the need to distribute the book – to spread the word – in a way that was both productive and retained the presence of a body and orality.

While Hecimovich’s claims may be difficult to substantiate, particularly his argument that the illuminated book represents “one of the earliest uses of interactive print technology” (140), Richard Lanham’s *The Economics of Attention* further grounds the potential for text and printing to embody orality. Surprisingly, many of Lanham’s pronouncements concerning digital text can be applied to Blake’s books. While conventionally printed books represent fixity and invisibility – “Fixed in time because fixed in stuff, print on paper” and “transparent but containing; metaphysically invisible” (80) – Lanham argues that “fixity comes unglued in digital expression, and in the process we come to see the expressive surface, typography and style, to look at it rather than through it” (80). Just as “text itself is a self-conscious expressive choice” in digital media, so Blake’s handwriting method makes his own text a self-conscious choice. Blake’s handwriting – or word-drawing, to make the act more conspicuous – changes throughout his illuminated texts, from the firm Latin letters of the tractates to the delicate cursive of *Thel*, the various scripts of the *Songs* and the assured calligraphy of the late prophecies. Blake’s word-drawing, obviously by hand and unmistakable for printed letters, calls attention to Blake’s hand

in the drawing, disrupting the invisibility of print and evoking the author, while the variation even on a single page disrupts fixity. Here Jerome McGann mistakes: Blake's is not an art that "would not be seen but would be seen through" (10). It is an art that wants to be looked at – and *heard*.

As Lanham says of conventional printing, "Printed books [...] because the text is unchangeable, almost always present an authoritative presence. [...] 'Editing' a book means getting rid of such embarrassing intimations of oral mortality" as error (108). As Stephen Carr shows, however, Blake's method not only leads inevitably to mistakes, but fixes them in the plate. Just as an oral mistake cannot be unsaid, so a mistake in etching cannot be unmade; it can only be covered over, as further words in conversation cover over misspeaking. As any textual scholar will confirm, Blake's corrections call attention to themselves as well; they can never be entirely covered, and often the covering only accentuates them (Essick, "How Blake's Body Means" 207). The frontispiece to *There is No Natural Religion*, for instance, reverses Blake's signature, an error that could be interpreted as intentional but is just as likely an accident. In Copy G Blake covered (but did not completely erase) the error, while in Copy B it is left visible. Thus, in trying to correct error, Blake continues to call attention to himself and his own action, his gesture.

By its nature the illuminated book reenacts its own creation. Every stroke of the brush and movement of the press is literally inscribed on the page for all to see and "hear." As Makdisi recommends, "If Blake's text were to be read as an activity and a practice, rather than as an inert object or set of objects, for example, the logic of live performance here might be taken to challenge that of the book understood as a fixed object" (175). Here though we must separate the author as a prophet from the author as an "authoritative presence" in Lanham's sense. For

the “presence” printed text conjures is not only authoritative, but dictatorial – in the conventionally printed book, there is only one authority, and that authority is supreme. But the prophetic author of a prophetic book conjures a different sort of authority; perhaps call it “autonomy” rather than “authority,” as its presence does not restrain the reader but merely asserts itself as existing and communicating. While the words and images on the page may not change, being fixed in ink and color, when linked to such an author as Blake – a writer more concerned with “utter[ing] his opinion both of private & public matters” than with issuing dictatorial commandments (E 617) – they turn over to the reader the authority usually reserved, in a conventionally-printed book, to the editor: the authority to cut, cover, rearrange, and recontextualize the text by creative, engaged reading.

Blake’s illuminated books, as hybrid texts, provide a site for the “oscillation” that Lanham finds in digital space “between conceptual thought and behavior” by combining the sequential reading of alphabetic letters with the immediate apprehension of the picture plane (102-103). Though in conventional, printed reading words “create one order of meaning, images another, and we don’t want them too close together” (85), Blake’s page requires a reader to take in the whole design, work through the words (in the sequential, word-by-word method necessitated by writing), and to consider the images, which often incorporate text themselves. By marrying word and image, Blake’s illuminated books partake, long before digital media, of the reconstituted orality that Lanham sees as transforming culture; while Western civilization is energized by the continual oscillation between literacy and orality, the future of communication will be characterized by a healing of the divide and a “dynamic interchange” between literacy and orality (110). Yet this future can be seen clearly in Blake’s plates, which despite their status as print share many of the qualities of orality, particularly “ideas exchanged in the emotionally

charged field of attitude and design, of voice and gesture” (110). By incorporating visual gestures Blake’s illuminations reestablish that emotionally charged field through print. These visual gestures sometimes take the form of a character literally gesturing: the youthful prophet-figure on plate 1 of *All Religions* points the reader’s attention to the right, while plate a6 of *No Natural Religion* features a shockingly aware cherub pointing to the aphoristic words above him, vainly attempting to draw another figure’s attention to them. Or, as in a number of plates from the tractates, design elements carry the rhetorical weight of gesture; for example, an imposing black tree on *No Natural Religion* plate a8 reaches threateningly into the word space; abstract lines emerging from a figure’s head give motion to an image of stasis (NNR plate b3).

The illuminated book’s relationship to orality, its capacity for multivalent readings and ironic counterpoint, makes it an essential tool for Blake’s prophetic mission. This unique, hybrid creation makes it possible for Blake to establish his credentials as a prophet to a rapidly secularizing world in the first labor pains of mass media. Historically, prophecy is an oral genre, spoken by an embodied, inspired person. Prophets, whether in Biblical or Greco-Roman tradition, pronounce their prophecies; they are written only later, usually by someone else, usually after they are fulfilled (or fail to come to pass, at which time they must be reinterpreted, as the imminent return of Christ is reinterpreted by Revelation, and Revelation continually reinterpreted throughout Christian history). By finding a way to embody orality in a printed book, Blake makes his prophetic voice distributable in a way no prophet could have previously managed, while still retaining the essentially oral nature of prophecy. Furthermore prophecy, as Ian Balfour puts it, “is always already a repetition of the divine [word], a quotation with or without quotation marks” (5). The prophetic word both belongs to the prophet and does not. With his voice the prophet speaks divinely inspired words in his own tongue, whether the words

of the Judeo-Christian God or the classical gods and muses. By making his books at once his body and autonomous bodies, Blake disconnects himself from his text, so that the words both are and are not his own, even as he embodies himself and his words in it with the motions of writing, drawing, and painting (in ARO, for example, the lack of a signature combined with an insistent “I” speaker suggests that the book makes itself). Making his book, in another sense, is Blake’s prophetic gesture, a visible emblem like Ezekiel’s lying on his side for days (in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that physical gesture enacts “the desire of raising other men into a perception of the infinite” [Plate 13]). In yet another sense, the book itself becomes a prophet, speaking Blake’s words in his absence, as Essick reminds us: “the only ‘Blake’ actually existing in this world is the various, recalcitrant, and material body of the manufactured objects he had a role in producing” (“How Blake’s Body Means” 217).

Finally, the prophetic word is repetitive. The prophet does not prophesy once; he proclaims the word of God until someone listens, or until God’s will is done. Then, when God’s will is done, prophecy ends. Balfour again: “Unlike the psalmist, whose praises can be sung *ad infinitum*, the prophet looks forward to a time when his or her own message will be superfluous, such that his voice need no longer cry in the wilderness or anywhere else” (2). And, at the same time as it looks to the future, prophecy “is also profoundly a thing of the past, an echo, a citation” (129). Again, creating a prophetic book allows Blake to qualify as a prophet in both instances: the fixity of a book makes the prophecy endlessly repeatable, until it is no longer needed; its fixity also makes the book always a thing of the past, always something that has already been done even as, like the illuminated books, its method allows it to continually reenact its own creation. Makdisi argues that “the illuminated books can perhaps be thought of, even heuristically, as a performance to be repeatedly recreated without the intervention of a

controlling principle designed to guarantee its outcome or meaning – or at least without *absolute* principles, since what we encounter in Blake’s work is not really sheer dissemination but rather a series of repetitions through preexisting channels of reiteration” (175). Essentially, Blake’s books *never end* – just as, for example, the plot complex of *America, Europe*, and the books of *Los, Urizen*, and *Ahania* keep cycling through one another. Each new reading brings new eyes and prods the reader to further readings.

Balfour suggests that Blake is more attracted to the term “seer” than “prophet” because of his identification as a visual artist (130). But such an explanation does not cut to Blake’s deeper concern with prophecy as a present act. When he writes in his commentary to Watson, “a Prophet is a Seer not an Arbitrary Dictator” it is not in the context of the prophet as a seer, but as someone doing something in his present time, “utter[ing] his opinion both of private & public matters” (E 617). While Blake may be looking forward to a time in which his words will be unnecessary, he would never assume that prophecy *itself* will end: prophecy is nothing more than an “honest man” speaking truth. The prophecy that Blake is most concerned with is not a prediction of the future (that, he says, has “never existed” [E 617]); his words are endlessly repeatable because people do not change: they always need honest men speaking truth, for “It is mans fault if God is not able to do him good. for he gives to the just & to the unjust but the unjust reject his gift” (E 617).

The frontispiece of *All Religions are One* (plate 1), which we should recall is the first of Blake’s illuminated books, exemplifies the principles we have been building in this chapter. As a print, plate 1 bears the marks of an early, unpolished work: the original printing is rather hazy, and Blake has made many corrections in pen, most visibly defining the lines of the figure’s body and face. As we have already seen above, Blake’s self-reflexive corrections have two effects: its

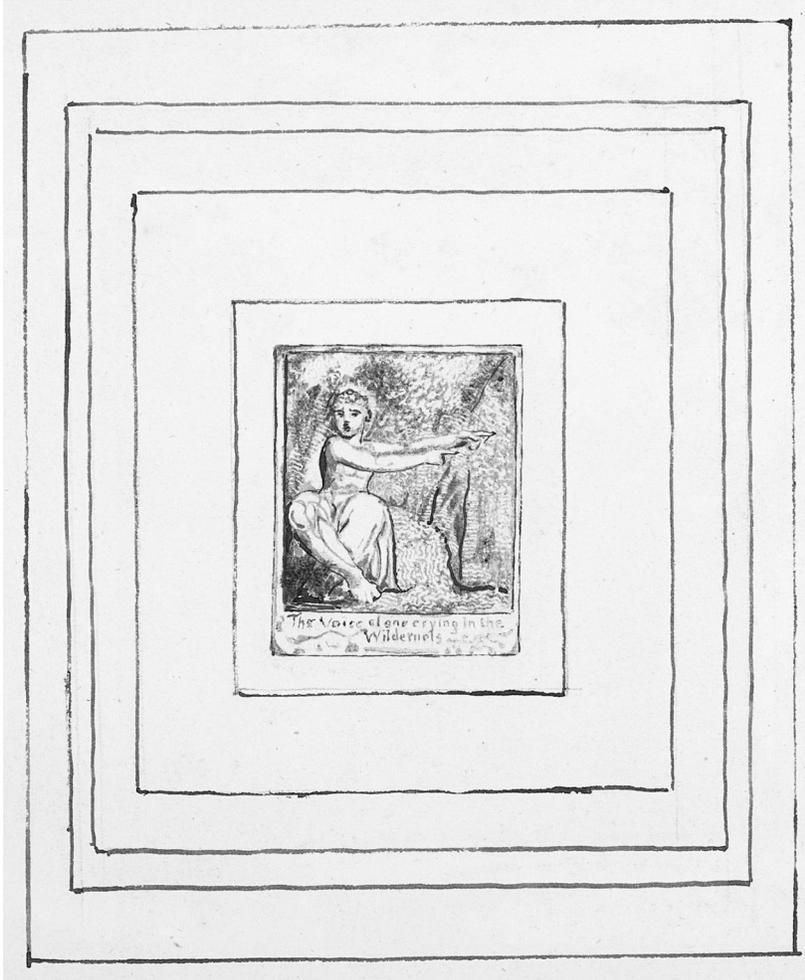


Fig. 2 ARO plate 1

immediate purpose on the plate, of course, is to define the figure and bring it forward out of the hazy background to the reader's attention; however, it also calls attention to the correction itself, as the pen-drawn lines stand out from the printed surface obviously, calling to our awareness the fact that Blake has touched the page after printing. The attention to the outlines of the body remind us of Blake's marginalia to the works of Joshua Reynolds, in which he praises Reynold's assertion that "A firm and determined outline is one of the characteristics of the great style in painting" (E 649) even as he rails against Reynolds' praise of the modern painters whose "Broken Colours & Broken Lines & Broken Masses are Equally Subversive of the Sublime"

(652). However, Blake also used his pen to emphasize lines in the background which are less easily readable; the Blake Trust editors see “a wilderness represented by foliage and tree trunks” (34), but the background seems nearly abstract. If there are tree trunks, they are only the suggestion of tree trunks, and Blake’s pen lines actually confuse the image farther by not *quite* becoming trunks. It could just as easily be read as the interior of a cave, which would present a radically different interpretation of the image. This background illustrates how, in Essick’s words, “Blake directs his reader to experiences offered by his productions other than iconographic and verbal meanings” (“How Blake’s Body Means” 210): the near-abstraction of the background become a purely textural and sensual experience rather than a signification. We thus have Blake asserting his own presence as a prophet through his corrections, but also giving to the reader the authority to determine in what environment the figure sits. In both instances, plate 1 illustrates what it means for a book to have physical presence by highlighting that physical presence and making that presence a meaning in itself.

The fact that the plate image is dominated by a figure further emphasizes the principle of embodiment in the book. The figure, generally taken to be a representation of John the Baptist because of the inscription, need not be any particular prophet (if it were the Baptist, it would have to be a much younger representation than the Bible gives us, since John the Baptist would have been at least thirty years old by his introduction to the Gospel narrative, while this figure is distinctively boyish). The inscription does, however, indicate that the figure is a prophet. This figure is both resting – sitting on what appears to be a rock – and engaged, his “energetic arm gestures” pointing the reader to the right, forward in reading (Eaves et al. 34). Every detail of the figure emphasizes his physicality: his muscular torso, his youth, his nudity (though his genitals are covered by a cloth), and particularly the forced perspective with which his

disproportionately large, muscular legs jut out toward the reader. Remarkably, these seated legs actually have a dynamic quality at odds with the fact that they are seated and not moving, as their extreme proportions and muscularity (the right knee wider than the waist) cause them to move assertively forward in space. The arms, too, are visibly out of proportion, too large and too long – not to a surreal degree, but obviously enough that their signification (pointing) comes across with greater urgency. The prophetic urgency with which Blake printed his books (as we have mentioned in Chapter 1 and above) he here embodies in the gesture of the prophet-figure, while the figure’s powerful physicality images the prophetic body that is the book.

### **The Emblem-Book: Divine and Infernal Mis/uses**

Formally, the tractates derive much of their rhetorical impact from Blake’s appropriation of Renaissance emblem-book traditions. Critics have long taken for granted the similarity of many of Blake’s works to the emblem tradition, and rightfully so; the tractates, *The Gates of Paradise*, the *Laocoon*, and many of the individual plates across Blake’s corpus from the *Songs of Innocence* to *Jerusalem* draw on the imagery and structure of the emblem book.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, there is good rhetorical reason for Blake to draw on such a rich tradition, one still current in his own time (though, like many of his production techniques, somewhat outdated), as a way of making the tractates accessible. According to Aquilino Sanchez Perez, while the emblem book, with its simplistic morality and often conservative theology, lost intellectual ground as the Enlightenment took hold in 18<sup>th</sup> century England, “Ordinary people, it must be remembered, took longer to accept the new Rationalist ideas, and, in some cases, never came to accept them” (22). Perez confirms that, though they were less frequently published and reprinted than they had been in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, emblem books were still a staple of the educated middle-

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<sup>25</sup> Aquilino Sanchez Perez traces many discrete Blake images to their emblem-book ancestors in *Blake’s Graphic Work and the Emblematic Tradition*.

class library, and in many homes still as common as the Bible and the *Book of Common Prayer*. While Perez finds frustratingly little evidence that Blake had a deep or consuming interest in emblems *per se*, there is much reason to believe Blake would have found the emblem book structure useful for his rhetorical program.

Just what aspects of the emblem book Blake emulated, however, may be difficult to pin down. Part of this difficulty lies in understanding just how the emblem book works, and that in itself is a matter of scholarly controversy. The most common definition, derived from the principles of 17<sup>th</sup>-century emblem-writer Scipioni Bargagli, is that formulated by Karl Josef Hölzgen:

[The emblem's] meaning, a general truth or insight, at first often a little obscure, emerges from the interaction of its three parts, Motto, Pictura, and Epigram. (25)

Most scholars of the emblem-book subscribe to some form of this definition, assuming that the emblem is a hybrid form in which the parts “not only go together but depend on each other” (Perez 20). It is the interaction of the elements, not the visual form itself, that makes an emblem; as Perez puts it, “The physical fact of having a picture presented with a poetic or prose text does not make an emblem” (20). The image must present an interpretable symbol, the text must elucidate it, and the whole must establish a “relationship of allegoric parallelism between what is expressed in the drawing and its application to human activity, usually with moral-didactic force” (Perez 18). By framing the definition as an interactive relationship rather than as a form – that is, by defining an emblem (and emblem-book) by what it *does* rather than what it *is*, we are an important step closer to understanding how Blake makes use of the emblem tradition. For, as Perez finds in his study, Blake does not simply mimic the emblem tradition: “The originality of Blake’s genius was too powerful for him ever to become simply a writer of emblematics”

(171).<sup>26</sup> An uncontroversial pronouncement, perhaps, and in accordance with conventional assumptions of Blake's uniqueness and eccentricity – but less helpful than it could be. After all, it only tells us what Blake did not do – it does not tell us what Blake *did* with the emblem, or why.

The *why* we may comprehend by considering the conventional rhetorical uses and abuses of the traditional emblem and emblem-book. The emblem-book was conventionally meditative and perforce educational, “moral-didactic” as Perez puts it; emblem-books were used both to indoctrinate readers in conventional piety and as secular educational tools for the development of memory. In *Speaking Pictures* Michael Bath elucidates the pedagogical uses of the emblem-book, warning that while “we should not exaggerate the extent to which actual emblem books found their way onto the syllabus,” nonetheless the traditional education in the English grammar school found the related emblem and emblem-book forms especially helpful for teaching Latin composition, “which encouraged the pupil to compose themes by elaborating material in predetermined ways out of the inherited stock of *loci communes*” (32). Like the commonplace books in which grammar students were encouraged to write phrases and passages worth remembering and appropriating for their own compositions, the emblem form illustrated a means of arranging topics that would both improve the memory and aid *inventio*. By learning to attach worthy mottos, maxims, and sentences to images, as the emblem does, the grammar student learns the fundamental principles of Aristotelian arrangement, and the basic methodology of what Bath calls Renaissance-era “subreading” – the recognition of and re-interpretation of source material (Bath 31). As this method of education persisted well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century (though

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<sup>26</sup> Similarly W.J.T. Mitchell argues that “His art is not reducible to the conventions of manuscript illumination, the emblem, the *impresa*, the book of icons, or another forms of book illustration, because he is capable of using any and all of these forms when it suits his purpose” (14).

Locke's *Thoughts Concerning Education* gradually made it obsolete<sup>27</sup>), Blake could reasonably have expected an educated audience to be familiar with this use of the emblem form (much as one can assume that, in our age of pop culture, a contemporary educated reader retains a memory of the pedagogical methods of *The Cat in the Hat*, *Sesame Street*, and *Schoolhouse Rock* cartoons). If we take Blake's purpose in the tractates to be largely didactic, teaching his readers to comprehend his radical prophetic message and put into action his principles of imagination, his appropriation of emblem tradition appears intuitive – using a common means to deliver an uncommon message.

With a basic sense of *why* Blake would find the emblem-book a useful model for the tractates, we can begin to understand *what* Blake did with the form by stretching some of the related elements of the conventional definition. Firstly, the mutual dependence of image and text neatly (too neatly, as we will see) conforms to Blake's own stated attitudes toward his illuminated printing. As Blake complains in an 1818 letter to Dawson Turner, printing a book of designs without poems would result in “the Loss of some of the best things For they when Printed perfect accompany Poetical Personifications & Acts without which Poems they never could have been Executed” (E 771). Clearly Blake thought of his image/text plates as indivisible, and the designs for the tractate plates often underscore this mutual dependence visually, sometimes by surrounding the text with continuous designs, sometimes by literally linking the text to the design by vines, tendrils, and other vegetative motifs appearing to grow from the letters. Further, while the statement could be read to prioritize the poems – without the poems the images “never could have been Executed” – if we consider it in relation to the emblem tradition, something important emerges. Perez compares Blake's hybrid of image and

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<sup>27</sup> See Bath 36ff; Perez 22ff.

text to the emblem tradition thusly: “As emblem writers used to say when referring to the elements of an emblem: ‘the picture is the body and the text is the soul’” (26). But such a comparison makes us cringe if we hear it with Blake’s ears, for one of the primary motivations for illuminated printing, as he declares in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, is to expunge “the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul” (plate 14). To think of the image as the body and the text as the soul is to admit a fundamental, irreconcilable division that directly contradicts the assertion that text and image are indivisible: the body and the soul are separable, and their separation means death for one and life for the other. In this formulation, the text could presumably go on without the image, losing none of its rhetorical authority, while the image without the text would be a dead thing.<sup>28</sup>

The conventional definition of an emblem, then, is inherently broken. John Horden, in a tribute volume of essays dedicated to Hölzgen, challenges this conventional understanding of the emblem, and these challenges have significant implications for our understanding of how Blake uses the emblem tradition. Horden warns us that Bargagli’s principle of mutual dependence between text and image has been mis-applied and overgeneralized by emblem scholars, since Bargagli writes only of particular kinds of text-image hybrids, and since actual Renaissance-era practice varied greatly. Far from a mutual dependence,

As far as the reader of an emblem is concerned, it is the picture which makes the immediate impression, even if its total effect is absorbed involuntarily, and perhaps subconsciously. The implications of a brief motto may, perhaps, be absorbed along with those of the picture at this moment of first sight. But the

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Essick, “How Blake’s Body Means”: “By making books with a physical presence, a body, that we cannot ignore, Blake tries to prevent his readers from separating out a ‘soul’ or verbal meaning and leaving the body behind” (210).

impression which has been made – no matter how fully or how imperfectly it is at first understood – is only secondly interpreted and refined by the text. (71)

Even Perez, who emphasizes the mutual dependence of elements, hints at the same fact: “The picture is the visual substratum of the text, which first strikes us as an appeal to our senses. The text represents a further, sometimes only supplementary, elucidation derived from a visual impression” (20). While some emblem-writers may have considered the elements of the emblem inseparable, clearly this aspect of the emblem cannot be considered primary or universal: it is merely one of the rhetorical possibilities presented by the emblem.

Indeed, the indivisible union of text and image in Blake’s illuminated printing seems less inspired by the emblem tradition than a perfection of it. Blake’s formulation in the *Marriage* corrects this fatal flaw in emblem tradition by literally inscribing image and text together so that they would be inseparable. If we view the invention of relief printing in relation to the emblem-book tradition, we can see one of the reasons this innovation appeared revolutionary to Blake: it would allow him to produce a form akin to the emblem without the problems that conventional printing methods introduced into the process. Printing as it had developed up until Blake’s time would not allow the printing of engraved plates on the same page with type; letterpress and copperplate pressing required different machines and, therefore, had to be printed on separate pages. One could, as with many of the emblem-books, print woodblock prints along with letterpress, but the image and words would still be physically separated, and woodblocks could not withstand as much printing as metal type and would have to be replaced much sooner, making this method less attractive economically. Blake’s “infernal method,” however, permits a perfection of the emblem form by uniting the image and text, both executed in the same hand, both composed on the same page. Without the poems the images “never could have been

executed,” but it is important to note that the removal of the poems results in the loss of only “some” of the best things. So Mitchell tells us that the “aesthetic and iconographic independence of Blake’s designs from their texts [...] entices the reader to supply the missing connections” (33). Divided from its accompanying text, the image from an illuminated plate is only incomplete, not incomprehensible, in the way and emblem-book design would be incomprehensible without its explanatory text.

So we see that Blake had to reform the emblem structurally to make it useful to his program. But in content and theory the emblem book as it existed needed further reformation. It could, perhaps, go without saying that the content of the emblem-books is conservative, their didacticism the kind that stifles rather than encourages creative interpretation or critique. Perez bluntly characterizes the emblem books by their “narrow and austere formalism” (53), ruled by “fairly rigid norms” (171), and argues that “This very regimentation caused a corresponding deterioration in the literary quality of emblems at the same time that it gave access to many who used the genre, not to pursue greater artistic excellence, but for moralizing sermonizing” (171). Furthermore, the writing of the emblem, like the printing of the emblem-book, was a divided effort. As Perez explains, “Emblem-artists were usually average or below average personalities in the literary field. The pictures were not generally drawn by the authors themselves, either, but by professional engravers. When authors did also act as engravers, as Peacham did, for example, the results might be of an extremely low artistic standard” (56). As we have already seen, a divided labor is fundamentally opposed to Blake’s method, as the prophet must communicate with his entire body, and to his politicized ideal as described in the *Prospectus*;<sup>29</sup> again, for Blake’s purposes the emblem-book is theoretically useful but practically flawed.

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<sup>29</sup> Chapter 2 (44-45).

Bath sees the problem of interpretation as resulting partly from a fundamental schism in the theory of the emblem:

the emblem was conceived both as an art of rhetorical invention in which novel or witty connections were suggested between signifier and signified, and at the same time as an art which used inherent meanings already inscribed in the Book of Nature by the finger of God. (3)

The emblem was, in part, designed as the plaything of an educated elite (hence its pedagogical use as a means of introducing students to “subreading,” teaching them to practice the associative, learned reading demanded by deeply allusive Renaissance writing styles). Comprehending the meanings of emblem symbols requires a reader steeped in earlier writings – the classics, the Bible, the Middle Ages – as well as earlier imagery and emblems, both of which were inaccessible outside of the elite. In some circles, emblems were characterized and judged by how clever and obscure their associations were: “the rules of the *impresa* theorists insisted that these [mottoes] should be above the heads of vulgar readers” (Bath 43). At the same time, however, the emblem-books rely on “moral commonplaces” (Bath 32), the stock of received wisdom that requires readers (and even writers) not to create new meanings but to supply the correct, previously determined meaning. Because the allegorical readings of the emblem images and the orthodox morality of their accompanying texts are predetermined, making “constant appeals to commonplace assumptions, proverbial expressions, and the citation of authorities” (Bath 6), the reading of an emblem is less an interpretation than a translation. The emblem does not admit the imagination, only the memory.

But John Horden suggests an aspect of emblem tradition that undermines the formalism and rigidity that Blake must have found stifling: the possibility that the elements of an emblem

could, in a sense, argue rather than present a singular statement. The emblem is generally thought of as allegorical, with each visual element corresponding to a set, articulable meaning drawn from tradition (Bath, for instance, considers at length the pelican feeding its young with its own blood, one of the most common emblem images). But in his incisive study of the cracks in emblem theory, Horden proposes a new way of thinking of “unattached symbols” – elements in an emblem not directly related to the focal allegory and not explained in the text but which, by virtue of their placement in an emblem, demand interpretation. Such a reading comes from the recognition that “it should not be inferred that ‘focus’ and ‘foreground’ are synonymous” (83); in a given emblem, the focal point need not be the object or figure in the foreground, and the most significant symbols may not be in the focal point. Such a reading, furthermore, introduces “a tension or conflict between such symbols” (84), a fact that Horden argues has been “underestimated” by emblem theorists. While the emblem has traditionally been interpreted as having a unified, singular interpretation, the presence of unattached symbols places the elements of an emblem into dialogue, even argument, as visual symbols jostle for interpretive primacy and symbols that do not fit the unified interpretation inject their disputes. For Horden, the presence of an unattached symbol, which of course would not figure into the accompanying text, “negates the point of view which holds that the final authority on the meaning of any emblem must be the explanatory text” (87) – that is, liberates the image from the text.

Viewed from Horden’s perspective, the unattached symbol further separates the image from the text in an emblem, intensifying the broken status we have already discussed. But, if we consider the uses to which Blake puts the emblem tradition, the conflict or dialogue between symbols and text could be liberating in another way: not separating the image and the text, but putting all of the elements of an illuminated page into a vivacious conversation with themselves

and with the reader, fostering a communicative encounter between reader and illuminated image/text. If, as Horden argues, the unattached symbol “may exert a strong modifying influence upon adjacent symbols” (86), then it must exert such influence upon the text as well; the unattached symbol, therefore, need not separate the image from the text, but simply complicate the interpretive process. Blake’s images are rarely directly interpreted by the text; they may often illustrate the text, but most often the images (as do those of the tractates) are oblique rather than direct illustrations, and even those images that seem to illustrate the text are filled with Horden’s unattached symbols.<sup>30</sup> Rather than undermining a unitary interpretation (as Horden argues for the traditional emblem), Blake’s unattached symbols enliven the page and bring a greater sense of embodiedness to the book by tangling image and interpretation until only the physical presence of the book itself can answer.<sup>31</sup>

We can see an example of how Blake uses an unattached symbol to produce a dialogue in his illustration to *All Religions are One*, Principle 3d (plate 6). Blake establishes, in Principle 3d, that “No man can think write or speak from his heart but he must intend truth. Thus all sects of Philosophy are from the Poetic Genius adapted to the weakness of every individual” (plate 6). In itself, Principle 3d represents a striking reversal from expected thinking, in that “speaking from the heart” and “truth” would be considered strengths, but it resembles Christian teachings which stress the strength in weakness and wisdom in foolishness (ie Jesus’ pronouncement that “the last shall be first and the first last” [Matthew 20.16]; developed by Paul in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1.25,

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<sup>30</sup> This use of the unattached symbol illustrates what Mitchell calls Blake’s desire to “transform the dualism into a dialectic, to create unity out of contrariety rather than similitude or complementarity” (33).

<sup>31</sup> Essick reads much the same in the “availability of Blake’s colors, ink droplets, and textures” – many produced accidentally – “and their resistance to conceptualization” (“How Blake’s Body Means” 210). The “child or uneducated collector,” being more aware of these physical aspects of the book than the literary or textual interpreter, “have known all along that Blake’s books are unreadable” (211) – that they can only be experienced.

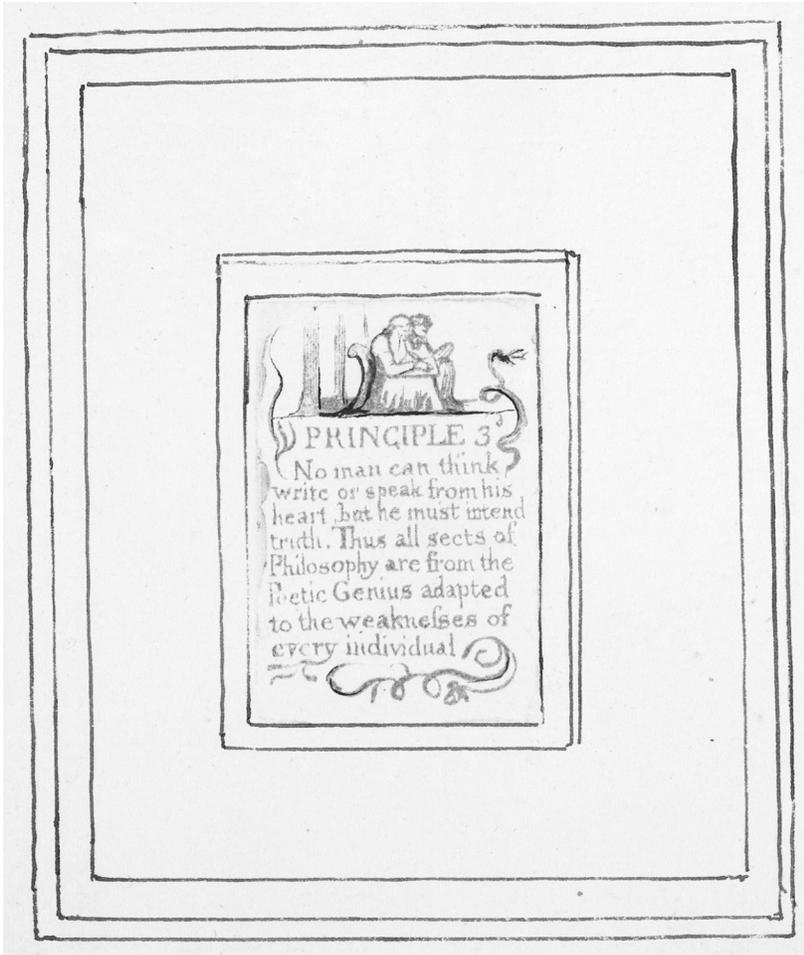


Fig. 3 ARO plate 6

“Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men”). The perverse reversal of conventional wisdom obviously delights Blake; as usual, Blake’s emphasis on the weakness of an individual constituting his uniqueness is in keeping with Blake’s embracing instability and imperfection as expressions of vitality (as we have seen with the illuminated book itself). Blake’s illustration completes this aphorism illustratively and ironically. Principle 3d is headed by an image of a white-bearded old man seated on a chair writing in a book, a younger, dark-bearded man sitting beside him reading. The bench on which they sit is shrouded by the old man’s robe (the robes of wisdom and learning obscuring the

foundation of knowledge?), and the young man, echoing precisely the posture of the old man's head, seems almost a reflection. They could, in fact, represent a double image of the same man, his youthful meditation on received wisdom giving way and priority to his elderly transmission of that same received dicta. Behind them, Greco-Roman pillars place the scene in a vaguely classical era (the Blake Trust editors suggest that the pillars could be trees, but the curved chair back – “typical of neo-classical furniture” [35] – the old man's robe, and the tablets conspire to set the scene in ancient Greece or Rome). Recognizing that Blake is working in the dusk of England's neo-Classical era, in opposition to the Greek- and Roman-inspired champions of rationality, we must read a classical setting ironically, particularly when it is a scene of writing and reading, the transmission and reception of knowledge.

The Blake Trust editors suggest that the figures may be philosophers, but do not fully acknowledge a compelling unattached symbol, the “tendrils to the right” which “looks a bit like a serpent” (35). This unattached symbol introduces a double reading which, as we have seen, is clearly in keeping with Blake's method; while it rhymes with the vegetative tendrils on the other side of the page, the icon to the right is certainly also a horned serpent, rising out of the “his” of “his heart.” Emerging, as it does, from “his heart,” the serpent could be considered a figure for the Poetic Genius, the “true man.” An image common in world mythology, from Native American to Celtic and Nordic tradition, the horned serpent generally represents a seminal, but unpredictable, creative power, in keeping with the snake's status as a symbol simultaneously of rebirth and danger – something Blake, student of Anglo-Saxon and early Germanic lore, would certainly have carried in the back of his mind. Ironically, then, Blake pictures his philosophers looking over (or through) their texts – the truth adapted to their weakness – to the Poetic Genius,

represented as a figure the neo-Classical scholars would certainly rather bury than acknowledge: the unrestrainable and ever-changing serpent, a creature that will not be controlled by dicta.

To summarize, we find that the emblem-book tradition provides Blake with some necessary components for his rhetorical needs: first, a convention linking image and text in a way that, at least in some formulations, contributes to a theory of text as body Blake was developing and expressing in the tractates; secondly, this same tradition, when viewed from an *infernal* perspective, reveals inherent cracks that allow Blake to introduce an argumentative method based on conflicts between ambiguous and polysemous textual elements (both images and words). Blake's transformation of the emblem form allows him to benefit from the moral-didactic uses of the emblem-book – educating his audience in the imaginative reading of the illuminated text – even while undercutting the stultifying effects of the traditional emblem-book's rigid, conservative moralizing.

### **The Aphorism: Argument Without Argument**

Blake had read Johann Lavater's *Aphorisms on Man* (translated by his friend Henry Fuseli) with great gusto after being commissioned to engrave the frontispiece (after Fuseli's design) for Joseph Johnson's edition (E 26). Lavater's influence on the tractates is palpable; the second principle of *All Religions are One* directly echoes Lavater's first two aphorisms. Where Lavater writes, "1. Know, in the first place, that mankind agree in essence, as they do in their limbs and senses," and "2. Mankind differ as much in essence as they do in form, limbs, and senses – and only so, and not more" (E 583), Blake asserts, "As all men are alike in outward form, So (and with the same infinite variety) all are alike in the Poetic Genius" (plate 5). Blake refers to Lavater's first two aphorisms in his annotations as "true Christian philosophy" (E 583), three extraordinarily loaded words from the idiosyncratically Christian Blake. It is important,

particularly, that Blake changes Lavater's "essence," an impersonal, essentialist expression, to "the Poetic Genius," a term that with its capital letters implies personality or subjectivity (by appearing as a proper noun) and transcendental oneness (by appearing as a universal). If the "forms of all things are derived from their Genius" (not the Poetic Genius, which is proper to man), and these Geniuses are "Angel & Spirit & Demon," what then is the "Poetic Genius?" Thus the "Poetic Genius," from which "the body or outward form of Man is derived" (plate 4), is not simply another word for "soul," nor a synonym for "God" – it is, rather, both and neither. So, in Lavater, Blake found not only a rhetorical method suited to his current purposes – the aphorism – but a starting place for arguing for the single source of all religion.

But why is the aphorism, and Lavater's method in general, so appropriate to Blake's purposes? Partially, the manner in which Lavater invites his readers to an encounter seems particularly suited to Blake's prophetic program. Taking Lavater's 643<sup>rd</sup> aphorism at face value<sup>32</sup>, Blake assiduously annotated his copy, underlining favorite phrases, writing "uneasy" or marking "X" beside those he considered unreliable, and making extensive marginal commentaries (E 583). In Lavater's language we can see what attracted Blake: not only does Lavater predicate self-knowledge in terms of an act, but he situates it specifically as a dialectical or conversational act; further, Lavater encourages the reader to share the book, thereby spreading the word. Challenging the reader to self-knowledge through encounter with a human rhetorical act, while also challenging the reader to go forth as witnesses or missionaries, gives Lavater's statement a hint of the prophetic, though it may not be so of its own virtue. But we may speculate that Blake caught the prophetic scent. By explicitly inviting response from his reader,

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<sup>32</sup> "If you mean to know yourself, interline such of these aphorisms as affected you agreeably in reading, and set a mark to such as left a sense of uneasiness with you; and then shew your copy to whom you please" (E 583).

Lavater presents a model that would appeal to Blake for many reasons. Most importantly, no doubt, a writing that elicits response corresponds rhetorically to the prophetic act; prophets, historically, do not write their prophecies, but speak them to people, usually in public places. The prophet expects and even requires a response from his audience (and the Old Testament has more than one instance in which the wrong response results in disaster, as well as one significant instance – Jonah – in which the correct response angers the prophet). As Blake marginally comments on Lavater, so he would hope for his readers to comment on his tractates, to engage in a conversation. So Lavater’s aphoristic structure would obviously appeal to Blake, as a simple way to encourage diligent reading and response from an audience. It presents, in fact, one of the simplest gateways to constructing a book that functions as a prophetic act.

To one of Lavater’s aphorisms, Blake succinctly objects that “Aphorisms should be universally true” (585). Such a pronouncement, however, would seem to contradict much of our contemporary thinking about aphorism – as well as Blake’s own method, in *There is No Natural Religion*, of presenting a set of true aphorisms only to demolish them in the second set. James Geary, editor and aphorism collector, states five laws for defining an aphorism: 1. It must be brief; 2. It must be definitive; 3. It must be personal; 4. It must have a twist; and 5. It must be philosophical (8ff). His second rule, definitivity, would seem to match Blake’s rule of universality – a definitive statement would necessarily have to be true in every context. But Geary also requires that aphorism be personal (that is, immediately identifiable with its speaker’s personality, worldview, and style), and that it have a twist. And it is with these two that the aphorism comes alive. If an aphorism is personal, tied intimately to a speaker – so much so that, as Geary suggests, an aphorism should be immediately attributable to its author, so that no one else could have said or written it – then aphorism is rhetorically both oral, and embodied. While

it may be written, aphorism carries the same value as the spoken word, as much the author's as if he had spoken it. While it is words, aphorism carries the same value as gesture, which would be senseless divorced from its performer. If an aphorism can be so intimately tied with its writer that they cannot be separated without violence, then the writing of aphorism is a way of asserting self-hood and writing the body. Furthermore, such a union between word and speaker provides the model for illuminated printing itself, with its embodying union of word and image. Finally, if the aphorism requires a twist – if it must circle back upon itself, at once teasing the reader and establishing a self-regarding critique – then it resembles the self-reflective illuminated book itself.

In “The Rhetoric of the Aphorism,” however, Gary Saul Morson develops a definition of aphorism that would seem to challenge this tentative description of Blake's method. Aphorism, according to Morson, “presupposes the *inadequacy* of reason or mind to the most important questions” (253). Unlike a witticism, which trusts in the mind's cleverness to answer difficult questions, or a dictum, which imposes an absolute authority that silences inquiry, the aphorism frustrates our will to order. “If life were a riddle,” Morson tells us, “everything could be solved. But it is not. It is a mystery” (255); “Dicta close all loopholes. (Aphorisms cultivate loopholes.)” (257). Most importantly, he finds this “trope that recurs in aphorisms: the methods we use to find what we most want prevent us from seeing it” (262). This definition of aphorism fits Blake's method much more closely than Blake's own (“Aphorisms should be universally true,” above). We have long since recognized that Blake's primary poetic motivation is to liberate the mind from the restraints of conventional wisdom, piety, and patriotism, to free man from a crippling dependence on reason, and to establish a life of imagination and pre-lapsarian exuberance for England and the world. Such a mind would despise dicta, which “aspire to

absolute clarity [and] eschew metaphor, which is, if present, restricted to mere illustration and kept under rather strict control” (258). The dictum, in Morson’s formulation, is oppression, one law for the lion and the ox. Yet Blake’s demand for universal truth in the aphorism seems to push his understanding of aphorism in the direction of dictum, to a closed and certain truth that can be expressed in a closed and certain language. Obviously, nothing could be farther from what we know of Blake than a closed and certain language.

This problem of definition is one that must be put away before we can adequately understand how Blake’s aphorisms work. If they are dicta rather than aphorisms, Blake’s entire program crumbles. As Darren Howard asks, “If rhetoric is conceived as the use of language to persuade or manipulate, how can we reconcile a rhetorical function of Blake’s works with his evident purpose of exposing and criticizing the manipulation of others?” (563). Howard justifies Blake by claiming that Blake’s rhetoric is “only manipulative in the sense that it forces the readers to recognize and be critical of the rhetorical aspect of discourse” (563), but this explanation seems a bit dismissive; at best, it reduces Blake’s vision to the paradoxical order “Be spontaneous!” But neither can the problem easily be solved by altering the conception of rhetoric from “the use of language to persuade or manipulate,” because Blake is indeed presenting a persuasive argument in the tractates. There can be no doubt that Blake’s tractates resemble logical arguments, each aphorism setting the conditions for the next. Howard’s concern echoes Jerome McGann’s: if “Blake’s program was to free man forever from the domination of intellectual programs [...] [one] may well wonder, therefore, why Blake should have created his own elaborate system and how he expected it to serve the arts of creation rather than destruction” (9).

Blake's rhetorical solution to this very real problem, as we should expect from Blake, is multiple. The answer lies in the parodic nature of the books, in the nature of the argument as an argument *by* aphorism, and in the multiple reversals and polysemous readings in the illuminated text that undermine and reconstitute the authority of the principles. Critics take for granted that a major component of Blake's overall prophetic program is the refutation of Locke, Bacon, Newton, and the entire empirical system of reason. Frye, after all, begins his seminal *Fearful Symmetry* with "The Case Against Locke," and readings of Blake and the Enlightenment make up a tidy, dense subset of Blake scholarship.<sup>33</sup> The tractates, as foundational works, take up this program perhaps more directly and explicitly than any of Blake's subsequent works, which obscure the debate in mythology and allusion. In both, the arguments, while they proceed by reason, must be viewed as parody. The Blake Trust editors recognize that in the tractates "Blake exaggerates (and thereby parodies) their [Locke's and Bacon's] method by forcing it even closer to a syllogistic sequence of propositions and deductions reminiscent of Euclidean geometry" (28). As in much parody, the method works by *ad absurdum* reduction, most pointedly by using the polysemous nature of language and syntax to demonstrate the folly of treating words as interchangeable, as equal terms in mathematics can be used interchangeably; so, for example, Poetic Genius and the true Man, while synonymous to some degree in *All Religions are One*, take on distinct meanings when the syntax of Blake's argument changes.<sup>34</sup> By reducing the terms of his argument to mathematic absolutes, then gleefully demolishing those absolutes, Blake undercuts the ostensibly language-independent philosophical foundation of empiricism.

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<sup>33</sup> See, for instance, Donald Ault's *Visionary Physics: Blake's Response to Newton*, Wayne Glausser's *Locke and Blake: A Conversation Across the Eighteenth Century*, Stuart Peterfreund's *William Blake in a Newtonian World*., as well as articles by Matthew Green, Michael Farrell, and M. W. Jackson.

<sup>34</sup> See Chapter 4 (158-59).

The parody of empiricism is ironically empirical in structure. Matthew Green perceptively notes that the tractates represent the “the reclamation of empirical modes of thought” (*Visionary Materialism* 12), not mere opposition. The empirical itself, we can imagine, is not the problem; it is the restrictive program that accompanies empiricism, the closing of experience within the senses, that Blake opposes. The argument of *All Religions* thus begins with a solidly empirical tenet, “As the true method of knowledge is experiment the true faculty of knowing must be the faculty which experiences” (plate 3), while *There is No Natural Religion* begins with the argument that “Man has no notion of moral fitness but from Education Naturally he is only a natural organ subject to sense” (plate a3). Neither of these base assumptions will be refuted in the aphoristic arguments that follow; rather, their terms will be defined (or redefined) so that Blake’s anti-rationalistic deductions rationally follow from them. Here, the nature of argument by aphorism becomes crucial to Blake’s purpose. Where Locke and company compose dicta (as defined by Morson), delivered in language that aspires to absolute, fixed, and univocal meaning, Blake’s aphorisms use a language enlivened by multiple meanings; his arguments in both tractates hinge on altering definitions. The stress, then, in “argument by aphorism” should be not on “argument,” but on “aphorism” – the mode that revels in paradox, mystery, and polysemous definitions.

The parody extends to the illuminated books’ design, especially the lettering. Rather than the elegant, ornamental hand we normally associate with Blake’s illuminated texts, the words in these tractates are written in a more measured, vaguely Roman script.<sup>35</sup> Just as with the neo-classical design of *All Religions are One*, plate 5, the lettering visually represents the

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<sup>35</sup> The notable exceptions are “The Argument” and “Therefore” in *No Natural Religion*, which are presented in a fluid cursive. I will discuss the special case presented by “The Argument” presently.

Enlightenment fetishizing of the classical age, a corollary to their fetishizing of Reason. So, just as his parodic argument works by emulating his opponent, Blake's design appropriates the Enlightenment's visual system as well. In their clarity, definition, and disconnection from one another, letters in this style neatly represent the certainty of logical reason and the authority of dicta. Each letter is clearly represented; there is no danger of mistaking one letter for another, nor of mistaking one word for another. These letters do not admit alternate interpretations by seeming something they are not, or by presenting a bi-stable image. They obscure the motion of the hand by appearing singular, unlike cursive in which the hand is visible in the connections between letters. In fact, they closely resemble the letter style in mechanically printed books of the time, and we have already seen in Lanham the characteristics of mechanical print: "fixity" and "invisibility," the perfect medium for empirical dicta. It will be left, then, to the other elements of the design to contradict and undermine the rationalistic face of the words.

For another concrete example, Blake's "Argument" in plate a3 of *No Natural Religion* is positively gnomic in its multiple readings. First of all, in terms of design, this plate is one of the two in *No Natural Religion* written in a cursive script. As I have suggested, if the Romanesque script in the rest of the book represents dicta, cursive could be said to represent aphorism, as it allows for ambiguities and multiple readings more readily than block letters. Even at first glance, then, we are aware of the potential for multiple readings. The content of those letters follows suit. Should we mentally place a period after "Education" (an interpretation permitted by the capitalized "Naturally"), we have two clearly sequential sentences, asserting that man has no understanding of morality without education – that is, by nature, needing socialization to learn morality – and that man is a natural creature who relies on his senses to experience the world. If, however, we read "Education Naturally" as a single rhetorical unit, the nature of that education



Fig. 4 NNR plate a3

changes; it is now an education by, in, and from nature, not a socialized education. In this reading, man need not be subjugated to socialized education for “moral fitness,” but can receive his moral knowledge directly from nature, of which he is a part (a “natural organ”). The first reading privileges social integration over nature, suggesting that man is morally incomplete without education; the second privileges nature, suggesting that man is already moral as a part of an uncorrupted nature in need of no refinement. The design, significantly, supports either reading; a scene of instruction, the illustration pictures a woman reading or writing on a tablet, a child to the right reading, and another figure to the left lying on the ground reading. As these figures reside in a natural landscape, surrounded by trees, vegetation, and hills, we have a scene of education in nature. It is not, however, a scene of education *by* nature, as the figures are all reading books. The scene, thus, could be read either as “Education Naturally” or socialized

education that separates humans from nature. From another of his marginal commentaries on Lavater, Blake would seem to fall in the pro-nature camp: “human nature is the image of God” (E 597).

Blake undermines this naturalistic reading, though, by emphatically overdetermining “nature” in the aphorism. The double use of “natural” signals parody, and we remember that the empiricists argue that reason is a natural faculty, their method merely a refinement of natural cognition. This reading makes nature itself problematic; note that the natural man is “subject” to sense, oppressed and restricted by his material condition. This doubleness is particularly important if we read Blake’s enterprise not as a refutation of empiricism, but as a redefinition and reclaiming of rationality from the empiricists’ perverted corruption of it. Blake’s aphorism potentially responds to a number of philosophical positions: against those who claim the inherent corruption of man, the moral rightness of nature; against those who claim man is unfinished and needs socialized education for completeness, the fitness of nature; against those who privilege nature over sophistication, the necessity of education; for those who restrict experience to the senses, the oppression implicit in that restriction. In a single, outwardly simple aphorism, Blake embeds a complex position: while man is naturally moral, he is yet bound by his senses if he remains in the natural state. What he needs, then, is a special education: not the education of society, but the education of the Poetic Genius, which both inheres in his own body and is a force impelling his imagination.

This position, more subtle than the two positions previously suggested, is further supported by a reading in concert with the illumination. In the letters of “The Argument” at the top of the plate, a number of tiny figures emerge from the text. One figure leans against the “T.” Between the words, a winged figure hovers, reaching down to a figure seated in the left-hand

curve of the “A,” who reaches up in turn. Another figure on the right side of the “A” reaches out to a bird that appears to be swooping and soaring above the “u” and “m.” According to the commentary by Eaves et al. in the Blake Trust edition, “taken together [these motifs] suggest a source of education more energetic and spiritual than can be provided by the books and vegetation below” (38). While this reading is surely valid, the figures emerging from the letters admit another possibility, one in tune with the principles of the illuminated text we have discussed. To picture these exuberant human bodies as one with the printed letters of the text is to literalize visually many of the characteristics of illuminated text: embodying experience, cognate with orality, composed of word and gesture, ekphrastic and synesthetic. We have seen the ways in which illuminated text allows the prophet to be present in the text while absent materially. In a sense, these little figures can be read as figures of the prophet, as miniature, even somewhat cheeky self-portraits of Blake himself engaged symbolically in the acts of a prophet: receiving inspiration from on high, grasping for the freedom and vitality of the swooping bird, swooping and soaring himself on the updrafts of imagination. In another sense – as we have seen how illuminated text enacts an encounter between author and audience – we may see ourselves, the readers, in these tiny figures: reaching for the inspired, winged prophet who reaches down to us, calling upon inspiration to take us with it on its flight, or merely resting ourselves in the shelter of the text, content and realized, identifying ourselves with its manifold significance. Above all, we can take these figures to remind us of a truth Blake underlined in his copy of Lavater’s *Aphorisms*: “every genius, every hero, is a prophet” (E 592).

## INTRODUCTION TO PART 2

### “Reading in the Bible of the Eyes of the Almighty”: Toward a Critical Practice of Reading Prophetically

If the lion was advised by the fox. he would be cunning  
- *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (plate 10).

The first three chapters have outlined the theoretical, historical, and rhetorical foundation for this dissertation. But I have not yet considered how to read the illuminated books. The illuminated books are meant to be encountered, not merely read, and thus far there is no critically rigorous way of enacting such an encounter. An effective reading of the books requires not a scalpel but a conversation, a dialogue, an act of imagination in the same spirit of inspiration that Blake urges from the tractates to the *Laocoon*. The method, therefore, will be something in the spirit of Blake’s prophecy itself: equal parts rigorous, direct rhetoric, analytical skepticism, psychological projection, and imaginative poetry. Just as Blake’s books are to be read as a performance, they are to be read in performance by a self-aware, analytical, interpreting reader engaging imaginatively with the text. The reading I will be performing in the next three chapters will attempt to accomplish three tasks simultaneously: 1) to re/enact a first-hand, experiential reading of the plates as singular expressions to be taken as unified rhetorical subjects, and to record the varied, often conflicting or mutually exclusive interpretative potentialities in that reading; 2) to describe analytically the means by which the plates work upon the reader as rhetorical documents, particularly as they challenge and interrupt conventional reading habits;

and 3) and to situate each plate in Blake's corpus and in tradition, insofar as these contexts may be important to enacting an educated, transparent reading.

This reader must be me. To call that fact an unfortunate necessity would be both falsely humble, and wholly inappropriate to Blake's project. As a hater of abstractions and generalities Blake could hardly have desired an objective reader, and until Blake scholars can release themselves from that enslaving abstraction, the illuminated books will remain distant, inscrutable objects, wheels in criticism's grinding mill.

### **The Prophetic Conversation**

The conceptual heart of Blake's encounter with readers is conversation: imaginative, spiritual, as close to human intercourse as a book and a reader can manage. Jon Mee discusses the significance of "conversation" to eighteenth-century social discourse in the article "'A Little Less Conversation, A Little More Action': Mutuality, Converse and Mental Flight." Mee finds in the eighteenth-century a highly developed, multi-faceted theory of conversation, encompassing polite salon chatter, intense debate, and sexual temptation: "by the time Blake came to produce his illuminated books, there was an intensifying emphasis on sentiment and sincerity in the conversible world, exerting its own torque on earlier eighteenth-century ideas of politeness" (126-27). While conversation "was widely regarded as a feminine arena," there existed a second tradition, exemplified by Godwin's theories of conversation, that regarded "'collision' and conflict as part of any genuine conversational encounter" (128); and these two modes of conversation, "one more polite and consensual, the other capacious enough to include contention and dispute" (129), clearly influenced Blake's way of thinking about the illuminated book. Mee sees conversational theory as shaping Blake's idea of progression by contraries, showing in *An Island In the Moon* "stunned silences and indignant disagreement to be an integral

feature of open-hearted intercourse” (131) while introducing, in *The Marriage*, “infernal conversations” that “may continue on into possibilities as yet unknown” (135). But, as Mee points out, underlying conversation was an intense sexual anxiety, as the presence of women, who functioned as a “regulatory principle, guaranteeing polish and restraint,” could also “provide a sexual stimulant” (132).<sup>36</sup> Considering how much we have already seen about the book as a body, this potential for conversation to become sexual contact – for “intercourse” to become *intercourse* – must be considered in reading the illuminated books. As Mee demonstrates, Blake’s works are so full of conversations, both those between characters and those implied between the narrator and the reader, that we may consider conversation a fundamental trope in Blake’s writing.

Stuart Peterfreund takes the idea of conversation a step farther, in a direction more suited to the present discussion. Peterfreund argues that conversation and argument become the method to Blake’s instructional program as a rebuke to priestcraft and rationalist “selfhood.” For “priesthood and selfhood are in fact argumentative positions that deny the existence of any argument whatsoever, in light of their self-image of authoritativeness and permanence” (25), closing off even the possibility of questioning or progression by declaring that what is known and only what is known is true. The “antithesis” of this position is prophecy, which as I have already argued (in Chapters 1 and 2) is based fundamentally on interaction between the prophet and his listeners – on conversation, in other words. In the prophetic mode, “the fact that language is always argument, always coming from an interested position, is openly acknowledged, and the creative, verbal energy liberated by that very acknowledgement is of a magnitude comparable to that of the Zoas as they create and recreate space and time in their

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<sup>36</sup> This is, of course, a common trope in eighteenth-century novels, especially when male and female characters whose “intercourse” has been restricted to letter-writing meet.

respective images” (25). The mark of prophetic identity is to be able to encounter and interact with those who hear the prophetic message; thus Blake created the illuminated books to substitute for his body and voice. Jack William Jacobs seems to recognize this same interactive, conversational function when he argues that the purpose of prophetic utterance is to “lead its audience into a state of mind” that he calls “interrogativity” (19). His choice of term reflects a continuing series of questions and answers which prompt further questions, a progressive dialectic that mirrors Blake’s progress of contraries.

As Peterfreund argues, Blake models the proper interrogative state in his annotations, “where his designedly *ad hominem* stance is aimed at producing from behind his words the writer who has refused to take full responsibility for the substance and implications of his text” (26). Blake’s antagonistic relationship to the authors he is reading is clearly one of deep imagination, as he often writes directly to authors (some of them decidedly dead) as if he expected response: to Bishop Watson, for instance, who suggests that Thomas Paine would have better never lived to write, “Presumptuous Murderer dost thou O Priest wish thy brothers death when God has preserved him” (E 612). Similarly he writes in furious response to Bacon’s claim that “A king is a mortal god on earth,” “O Contemptible & Abject Slave” (E 624). We see in Blake’s annotations the reader calling the author out to explain himself; but to take the same approach with Blake presents problems. Mitchell (perhaps a bit tongue-in-cheek) writes, “I suspect, however, that there are many readers like myself who find it difficult to read Blake’s text in his illuminated books with any extended concentration,” and suggests that Blake’s writing “is thus most readily grasped, as a text, in a form where it can be underlined, annotated, and easily read” (14). This, of course, is the typical way of “conversing” with conventionally printed books – by making marginal notes, underlining or highlighting key passages, and generally

commenting to ourselves on our reactions to the text. This means of conversing is not sufficient for Blake's illuminated books. Certainly, annotating an illuminated book would be a challenge. Just on the practical side, no one would want to mark up an original print, even if given the opportunity. Not only would the work be spoiled, but, unless the annotator were also the owner, the library or museum would not react cheerfully. One could write in the margins of a reproduction, though underlining would be difficult to see, and, again from an economic standpoint, high-quality reproductions are expensive enough on their own. So obviously we would not converse with an illuminated book in the same way we would converse with a conventional printed text.

But an illuminated book is not a conventional printed text. It does not behave as a conventional printed text behaves, and we do not encounter it in the same way in which we read a printed text. These principles we have discussed at length already, as we describe in Chapter 1 what Blake's illuminated book is, and in Chapter 3 how it works rhetorically. What concerns us here is how we respond to it. If we do not read and annotate it, how do we engage in conversation with the illuminated book? At least in part, the frustration Mitchell experiences in reading the illuminated books is part of the experience. Certainly not all; some editions are simply poorly printed, and we have seen how Blake's corrections sometimes make more problems than they solve. Others have deteriorated with time. But even in a well-printed, pristine copy, Blake's text can be difficult to read. Partially this difficulty is a side product of handwriting, which I have argued in Chapter 1 is essential to illuminated printing. As Mitchell complains, Blake's hand suffers from "occasional illegibility and frequent smallness of print," unavoidable consequences of Blake's method. He composed, after all, in reverse, sometimes writing lines *in situ*, and often cramming many lines into small spaces either to save on

expensive copper plate or to keep plates to a pre-determined number (as we see in the cramped, text-only plates of *Milton* and *Jerusalem*). Yet, as we have said, the illuminated books must be in Blake's handwriting to fully effect the embodiment involved in Blake's prophetic program. As Blake's handwriting is essential to the prophecy, so we must learn to deal with the inevitable difficulties if we are to experience the prophetic books fully.

The difficulty in reading Blake's handwriting is a necessary evil, then, that we can nevertheless theorize as a virtue. For, though Mitchell grouses that he cannot read the illuminated books "with any extended concentration," we must first of all wonder what he means by "extended concentration," and secondly whether such concentration is desirable. He could mean by extended concentration simply focus and meditation, in which case, Blake's books would be failing in their purpose, for the entire prophetic project depends on readers becoming immersed in the books, deeply and imaginatively engaging with them as living, speaking objects. However, Mitchell could mean by "extended concentration" what we generally mean: the ability to take in a great deal of information efficiently. And Blake's books are certainly not designed for that. But Mitchell's wording reveals an approach to Blake's work that influences how he encounters the prophetic books. In his frustration trying to read Blake's text (words), Mitchell refers to "the distraction continually offered by rather striking designs" and the "tendency of readers to take the line of least interpretive resistance" (13). Since we have already discussed how the interaction between word and image *is* the text of the illuminated book, and how *reading* and *interpreting* are less important than *experiencing* and *encountering*, we can easily see from where Mitchell's frustration stems. For the designs are only a "distraction" if one is trying to read the words alone, without reference to the imagery; and the tendency to take the "line of least interpretive resistance" is only a tendency for those who are used to interpreting

conventionally printed text, particularly literature (since non-literary modes presumably do not require “interpretation”). At the risk of seeming antagonistic, I assert that reading the written text of the illuminated books is not reading the *text* – it is reading the *words*, and any frustration that comes from the difficulty in reading the words without reading the whole text is entirely the reader’s problem – not the text’s.

Mitchell’s frustration with the illuminated books comes as a result of a theory of reading fundamentally unsuited to experiencing or encountering Blake’s texts fully. Mitchell’s influential theory of Blake’s composite art argues that in Blake’s illuminated printing “is, to some extent, not an indissoluble unity, but an interaction between two vigorously independent modes of expression” (3). On one level, Mitchell’s theory is reasonable; the words and images cannot be perfectly unified until we perceive words as images and images as words, a perception perhaps impossible except in rare flashes of insight or some sort of benevolent dysphasia. So, when Mitchell argues that “neither the graphic nor the poetic aspect of Blake’s composite art assumes consistent predominance” he is entirely correct (4) – indeed, I would argue that Blake would never intend either to dominate. Mitchell argues “their relationship is more like an energetic rivalry, a dialogue or dialectic between vigorously independent modes of expression” (4). But Mitchell’s reasonable theory brings him difficulties that he explains as Blake’s refusal to make “concessions to the ‘corporeal eye’” (13). Mitchell is right, of course; Blake’s text makes few, if any, concessions: it is what it is, and must be met as it is. But Mitchell hints at his recognition that the problem really comes from *what* eye is looking. For Blake’s art is not for the “corporeal eye” alone, but the imaginative eye. We might suggest, then, that Mitchell’s “extended concentration” (if understood as the desire to take in much information) is precisely what that illuminated book is designed to thwart. For all of the elements of the illuminated book

– the handwritten words, the “striking designs,” the inconsistent coloring and imperfections in the printing process – are all part of a program to force the reader into an experience of slow reflection rather than a consumption of information – into an imaginative encounter. Blake’s handwriting deliberately slows the reader’s consumption of information, even frustrating it; the designs distract the reader to remind him that the written text is not *the* text, and to lead him to read the words in their relation to the design.

Mitchell assumes that, in the illuminated books, we deal with “two equally compelling art forms, each clamoring for primary attention” (13). As Blake’s illuminated works depend on conversation, however, it is best to read them as conversation between word and image, and to read them conversationally as an interaction between the author and the reader through the page. Stephen Behrendt’s formulation is perhaps healthier: “verbal and visual texts make simultaneous and often quite different demands upon the reader” (1), though it still does not go far enough in recognizing that these different demands are in fact different aspects of the same demand. The difference is one of practice and effect. In actual reading practice, it is impossible to read the illuminated books without oscillation: as Makdisi explains, “Much of the experience of reading one of the illuminated books, then, involves alternating between reading words and reading images, and turning back and forth through the plates, tracing and retracing different interpretive paths through the gap between words and images” (164). The effect of this reading, he argues, is “essentially incompatible with the straightforward linear sense of time, and indeed the very habits of reading, to which we have been generally conditioned” (164), and by breaking up our linear sense of time Blake prepares us for the infinite. But the illuminated book also shakes us loose from linear temporality by being a visual object; Behrendt tells us that “we perceive any picture first in its entirety, as a visual totality, and only afterward do we explore it in curvilinear

fashion as our eye works its way along and through the visual pathways the artist provides,” while words require us to “take in the words in linear fashion, as time elapses, before the whole verbal ‘picture’ – the statement that is the sum of the words – can be comprehended as a totality” (15). To put it in a more Blakean language: we get the generality of an image first, then its minute particulars; but the generality of a written text is built up from its minute particulars over time. This disjunction between ways of comprehending also serves to separate us from linear time, and it is only by the combination of modes (not their competition) that we are thus liberated.

But it is important that we first encounter the plate as a whole object. And it is here that we must consider how to experience the illuminated book. For I find remarkably convincing Behrendt’s assertion that Blake

continually emphasizes the mediatorial function of art, which serves as catalyst in a transformation of mental state: the reader or viewer is fundamentally altered by the transaction with the artist’s vision as it is mediated in the physical work of art – in this case the illuminated page. Blake is hinting, I believe, at a sort of telepathic communication between artist and audience which establishes a community of knowledge that is intensely subjective. (23)

While the suggestion of a “telepathic communication” may seem unnecessarily new-age or even comical, it is just another way of stating what I have already been arguing: that Blake’s books foster an imaginative connection between the prophet and the witness that cannot be described as simple reading. Makdisi suggests that a proper reading of Blake “would involve ‘unlearning’ whatever it is that makes us ‘learned,’ or taking seriously Blake’s implicit suggestion that our very ‘learning’ is what stands in the way of our reading his work with all the freshness of a

child,” arguing that “the very way we have learned to read is precisely what prevents us from reading Blake properly, in which case, perhaps embracing – rather than recoiling from, or trying to normalize – those aspects of his work that make it special or unusual might enable not merely greater appreciation for it, but also actual pleasure in reading it” (162-63). Typical “learning” is the learning of “priesthood and selfhood,” to borrow Peterfreund’s words: “argumentative positions that deny the existence of any argument whatsoever” (25). Typical learning gives us assurances of the truth, assurances that are expected to be permanent and universal, but are so only if we reject all other images of truth. And so typical reading places us in the safe and confined world in which linear temporality is certain and text says what it means.

### **Reading Like the Fox**

I am reminded of Blake’s proverbs of Hell: “If the lion was advised by the fox. he would be cunning” (plate 10). The fox, of course, “provides for himself,” unlike the lion, for whom God provides (plate 9). These proverbs handily illustrate the way to read the illuminated books: only a fox can read them properly. The lion receives his provision directly from God – dicta, hard truth, the certain knowledge of priests and rational Deists alike. The fox makes his own. The fox has cunning; the lion, certainty, having no need to learn of the horse “how he shall take his prey” (plate 9). The lion’s roar may be a “[portion] of eternity too great for the eye of man” (plate 18), but it is only a portion, just as “The Jewish & Christian Testaments are An original derivation from the Poetic Genius” (ARO plate 9), but only a portion, for they mistake their voices for the only voices. But, *nota bene*, “The fox condemns the trap, not himself” (*Marriage* plate 8). I could, as with many of Blake’s proverbs, spin this proverb a number of ways.<sup>37</sup> From a certain perspective, for instance, Mitchell is right – his difficulty in reading Blake’s illuminated

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<sup>37</sup> The essence of my process of reading the tractates, to follow, will be in finding the multiple ways to read the texts openly.

books is because of the books, not himself – if, of course, he were the fox and the book were the trap. I could argue, on the other hand, that Mitchell is not the fox, but the lion, for he approaches the books with a theory that pre-determines that he will be frustrated. He may argue that his theory comes from his experience of difficulty, but in fact his difficulty comes from reading with the theory, however unformulated, already in his mind – that is, he comes to the books assuming that text should be transparent, readable, and understandable without undue effort, and that conversing with text is a matter of annotating it in a conventional way, when in fact the nature of Blake’s books is to undermine ease and compel readers to active, imaginative engagement. So, in this reading, Mitchell is the lion, provided for by God, but his provision lands him in a trap. If Mitchell were advised by the fox, however, he would be cunning, and know that the trap is not Blake’s books, but a conventional understanding of reading that locks him out of them.

I will, therefore, attempt to read like a fox, albeit with a reasonable sense of balance. I will make no attempt to approximate a “typical reader” of Blake’s time or of Blake’s books, as there is on the one hand no way of defining a typical reader, nor is there any evidence that any such thing existed for Blake’s books (Blake had few enough readers, much less a “typical” one).<sup>38</sup> In presenting my reading as an instance of encounter with the tractates, I will neither pretend that I am reading them for the first time, nor that I have read no scholarly criticism of them or of Blake’s work in general. Behrendt warns, “We cannot in reality separate ourselves so thoroughly from our reading selves that we approach each of Blake’s poems in a vacuum. Nor would an artist whose work is so insistently allusive have wanted us to do so” (3). Rather than attempt to fashion some artificial reader, I will follow Behrendt’s advice and attempt to be the sort of reader he suggests a reader of Blake should be: “alert to the ways in which apparent

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<sup>38</sup> We have already seen in Chapter 2 the milieu from which Blake wrote and was not read. If anyone wishes to fashion a typical reader for him or herself, Chapter 2 is the place to begin.

similarity may serve to illuminate or to underscore actual difference [...], flexible, as well as adventurous” (3); Blake “requires of us not proficiency but inquisitiveness and daring, not mastery of astonishingly diverse subject matter but rather a lively curiosity” (5). For the sake of smoothness and clarity, I will separate references to critical interpretations of various passages in notes to keep my reading my own; this division will likely result in some frustration, but I hope no *more* than the frustration in reading Blake’s work. So artifice will be kept to a minimum: I will merely attempt to elucidate what effects the illuminated book as a form has on one sympathetic, receiving mind, and to describe this mind, how it may behave, and how it encounters Blake’s prophetic books.

Therefore, I make no claim for this reading to be an authoritative reading in any sense besides the authority of the individual reader to experience the illuminated books each from his own perspective. Though this may, I realize, put me in danger of taking part in the “fearsomely generative propensities” critics are prone to in dealing with Blake’s variations and accidents (Essick “Meaning” 834), I believe Essick provides a solid grounding for the type of reading I am performing here. Essick warns, “one must still attempt, whenever possible, to make distinctions between variant features that are clearly the result of specific, purposeful acts and those that are likely to have been accidental. [...] their role in interpretation must be different because their production bears a different relationship to the artist's actions” (“Meaning” 841). As I am going to be reading the tractates primarily as rhetorical objects, analyzing their effects upon me, the reader, and determining how these effects come, I would argue that, rather than fixating upon jots and tittles, or mistaking accidents for intentions, I am rather demonstrating how Blake’s whole method – intentional effects and accidental effects – contribute to an overall intention that depends upon both intent and accident for rhetorical success. Again, I recognize with Essick that

“an analytical methodology has its own power to emphasize some types of perceptions and suppress others” (856), and that “The act of comparison generates its own meanings” (855); part of the benefit of performing this type of wide and deep reading with the tractates is because there are few copies to compare. But even considering the need to compare, Essick provides a sensible reason to restrict a reading to one copy: “Could his contemporary audience make the comparisons necessary for perceiving differences? More importantly, could Blake himself have printed and hand colored his works with full knowledge of how his treatment of an impression varied from earlier ones?” (856). This reasoning does not put us in the difficult position of trying to identify a typical contemporary audience, which we have already stated is impossible; rather, it points out the obvious fact that our modern access (particularly today, when the online Blake Archive provides multiple copies of every book)<sup>39</sup> allows us to forget: Blake never would have expected a customer to have multiple copies of the same book to compare. Any reader who owned a prophetic book would have known that book only in his own copy, and his experience of the book would therefore have been only with that one copy. While contemporary critics concern themselves with exploring variations, we fail to realize that a true prophetic encounter is designed to come from encounter with a single, whole book.

I am following Makdisi’s suggestion that the illuminated books can best be understood as “an activity and a practice, rather than as an inert object or set of objects,” implying that “the logic of live performance here might be taken to challenge that of the book understood as a fixed object” (175). Considering the form as performance, then, suggests that the best way to discuss encounter is also through performance, that is, by *performing* a reading. Unfortunately, there will be one aspect of this performance I will be unable to accomplish: that of encountering the

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<sup>39</sup> Except, of course, for ARO, which exists in only one copy and a single variant plate.

books physically. My position is that described by Tristanne Connolly, the problem of the “untouchability of Blake’s books, in libraries and museums or in reproductions” (19). As Connolly points out, the sexual aspect of the prophetic encounter (hinted at above but left off for this very reason) is impossible for all but a few of Blake’s readers today: “for collectors anxious to preserve their Blake books, and now, for most readers, the skin of the text, its actual surface, is inaccessible to their sense organ of touch, their skin” (19). As I have no access to the books I am considering, I have no choice but to rely on the reproductions of the Blake Trust and the online Blake Archive.<sup>40</sup> While I do fear that this separation could diminish my project, I take comfort in Connolly’s speculation that “perhaps the skin is a border which is not permeable enough compared to taste, sight, smell and hearing which all involved orifices rather than surfaces” (19). Since I would probably not taste an original print, perhaps I can live without touching one either.

For the reading performance I am about to attempt in the final chapters, I am indebted to a number of theorists, including Berehdnt and Makdisi, as well as Mitchell (to whom I apologize for setting up as an effigy). Behind my reading also lies Nelson Hilton, whose *Literal Imagination* had a profound effect on how I read Blake. Hilton warns the Blake reader, “Ambiguity is not an appropriate word to apply to Blake because the very word and its associations presuppose the binary logical thought process that Blake targeted for transformation: ambiguity is in the mind of the beholder” (10). With that warning in mind, I will use the word “ambiguity” only when it is psychologically appropriate, that is, for the effect the

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<sup>40</sup> *All Religions are One*, only one copy of which is known to exist, is housed in the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, except for the title-page in the Fitzwilliam Museum (Cambridge) and a title page from an alternate printing in the Victoria and Albert Museum (London). Copies of *No Natural Religion* (many of them reproductions made from the plates after Blake’s death) are found in the Huntington Library, the Pierpont Morgan Library, the Fitzwilliam Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Yale Center for British Art, along with impressions in the hands of many private collectors. Many are accessible to scholars.

work has on my own reading mind; otherwise I will use the words Hilton presents as appropriate, “polysemous” and “multidimensional.” My consciousness of Blake’s books as performances owes in part to Makdisi, but also greatly to Kenneth Burke’s dramatism, which, as outlined in *The Philosophy of Literary Form, A Grammar of Motives, A Rhetoric of Motives, and Language as Symbolic Action*, first made me aware of the ways in which language could be a form of action, and thus how Blake’s texts could be actions. My consciousness of the motions of my mind in the act of reading owes a great deal to the work of Stanley Fish in *Is There a Text in This Class?* and *Surprised By Sin*, two works that early in my studies taught me that literature is a species of rhetoric, or perhaps that rhetoric is a species of poetry. While I may not quote from all of these works, they inform my sense of what poetry does and what I do as a reader reading texts.

## CHAPTER 4

### Alone in the Wildernets: The Performance, Act 1

#### ALL RELIGIONS are ONE<sup>41</sup>

##### Plate 1

In the frontispiece a boyish figure sitting on a rock points emphatically to his left (the reader's right). While obviously young (he has no beard and the curly, close-trimmed hair of a conventional cherub), his muscular body identifies him as a young man rather than a child, perhaps even an adolescent. His face has been defined from the initial impression by pen and ink, giving his eyebrows a concerned expression and tightening his mouth into either a concerned "O" or pursing his lips. This face is not confident, but worried and anxious. Though he is sitting down, the figure's body is remarkably dynamic due to foreshortening perspective and exaggerated limbs. His legs, the massive muscles also emphasized by pen lines, appear to push forward in space through subtle use of perspective, Blake having drawn the knees and calves quite large while keeping the visible foot in proportion to the rest of the body. This effect is heightened in two ways: firstly, by making his right leg naked while covering the left with a cloth, Blake calls more attention to the musculature and mass of the exposed right leg, which is the larger; secondly, by shading out the foot of the left leg, and emphasizing in pen the curve of the exposed calf, Blake brings out that exposed leg even more, creating a simple illusion of space

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<sup>41</sup> Without wishing to add any confusion to the proceedings, I feel it necessary to denote the titles of the tractates in two different ways: when I am referring to them as literary works in the context of the history of ideas and rhetorical statements, I use the conventional italics; but in the present context, as I am considering them in their status as printed plates, I will approximate Blake's writing by following his pattern of capitalization on the title pages. Thus, in this and subsequent chapters, the present book will be not *All Religions are One*, but ALL RELIGIONS are ONE.

and weight. Further, the gesticulating arms, which emphatically point to the right, are slightly long in proportion to the rest of the body, particularly the left arm which juts out past the right much farther than the figure's shoulders would allow. Again, Blake has used pen and ink to bring out the arms and to separate the hands from the background with which they would otherwise begin to blend.

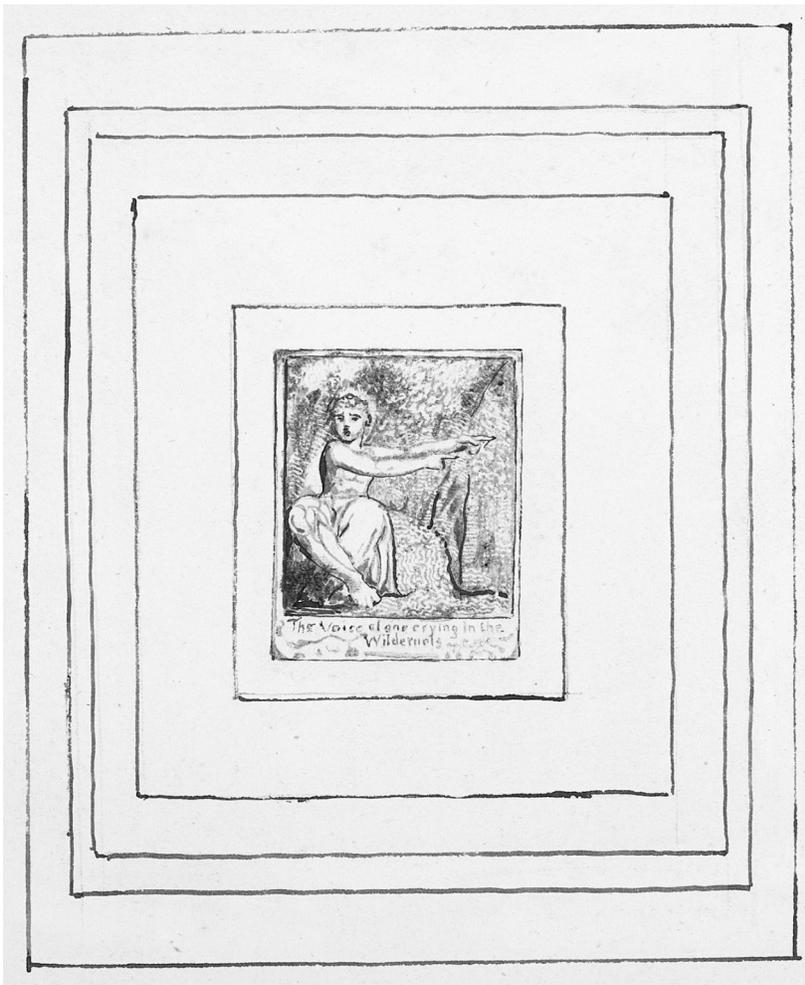


Fig. 5 ARO plate 1

The background is intriguingly problematic. It is composed of nothing more identifiable than reticulated lines approximating the swelled texture lines of engraving, in patterns that follow

the curve of the young man's body and the motion of his arms. At the top of the page poor inking has rendered the pattern blotchy. The rock is separated from the rest of the background by a different swelled-line pattern which curiously appears to flow in wavy lines from the figure's side and could easily be taken for water.<sup>42</sup> The outline of the stone has also been defined by pen and ink lines. Most oddly, Blake has also added vertical pen lines above the rock, but these are difficult to identify. They break off as they approach the figure's hands, and seem to converge in a single line, slanting right, above the hands. These lines call into question just how the background should be seen.<sup>43</sup> The heavy texture of these background lines read, in fact, as the same material as the rock on which the figures sits, suggesting a cave; in this case, the vertical pen-lines may be read as an opening in the cave toward which the figure points. Here would be a comprehensible reading of the image – the figure is pointing the way out of the cave. But the pattern on each side of the vertical lines is the same. If the vertical pen lines represent the opening to a cave, then the horizontal printed lines may represent shadow rather than texture, but this reading is a pessimistic one – the figure is pointing the reader out of the cave, but into the same darkness.

I have described this image in words, in linear time, but taken it in almost instantaneously. Only by taking the time to translate the printed ink into words by describing the image have I come to this point, and now turn to the inscription at the bottom of the page: "The Voice of one crying in the Wilderness," which, as words, can only be read in time.<sup>44</sup> The inscription again

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<sup>42</sup> This rock strongly resembles the rock on which Newton sits in the 1795 color print.

<sup>43</sup> Eaves et al. in the Blake Trust edition identify the background as "foliage and tree trunks" (34), but only these two lines have any vertical motion; the rest of the background is blotchy, wavy horizontal lines, registering as pure, abstract texture rather than trunks.

<sup>44</sup> This inscription has typically been read as Blake's own announcement of his prophetic intentions; and while I can accept such a reading on one level (this being the first page of the first illuminated book), my experience of the book (below) suggests that such a reading is too easy

forces me to take time and reassess the image. The quote from the Gospels suggests that I identify the figure as John the Baptist, but when I try, I find myself resisting: John the Baptist was a middle-aged man by the time we see him in the Gospels, and is usually depicted as grizzled and emaciated, not clean-shaven and well-built like this young man. At this point, I try to make the image I see make coherent historical and chronological sense: perhaps this is a representation of a young John, whom we never see in the Gospels but assume would have existed. This is John as a boy, then, just at the beginning of his prophetic career. In relation to the background, it would imply John going out into the darkness of the world to prophesy and inviting me to join him. I, however, have the foreknowledge of knowing John will die alone in prison, having seen only a glimpse of the Light of the World he came to announce. That reading would make unitary sense of the scene, symbolic sense out of the darkness of the background, and emotional sense if I project the future onto the concerned eyes and mouth of the John figure.

The inscription itself, however, threatens to come apart in a polysemous display of alternate readings. If I only glance over the words, I read them as they are “supposed” to be, knowing the Biblical source well. I know them so well, I do not need to think about the words “The Voice of one crying in the Wilderness” to read them; they have become something like a visual image that I can take in at once. As I scan the words I see as well that they are situated within some ambiguous lines that seem, to the left of “Wilderness” to be vegetable, but to the right to be unformed words. These lines seem to be incipient hieroglyphics not completed, and they continue beneath the English words as provocative possibilities of further, inaccessible

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and too optimistic. If it announces Blake’s project, it announces a long, difficult project full of darkness and failure – as was the case with Blake’s prophetic career. But such a proleptic reading would imply that Blake assumed at the beginning that his prophecy was doomed to fail, which seems unlikely.

writing.<sup>45</sup> This obscure writing creates a sense of wonder and frustration, as well as a bit of foreboding, for I feel as if I am missing something significant. My confidence in the meaning of the inscription thus diminished, I return to the English words and find them not at all what they were a moment before. For all at once the words “of one” coalesce into “alone,” and I am a little stunned. Now I read “The Voice alone crying in the Wilderness” and the figure – boyish, anxious – becomes deeply alone, and I begin to feel concerned for him. He is no longer semantically “one crying” but “The Voice alone” – the ultimate, capital V Voice, but of what I do not yet know. Projecting into the future of the book, I can interpret The Voice as being the Poetic Genius, but experientially, as I encounter this plate, I have no Poetic Genius to identify the figure with. I have only a worried, lonely young man. This is not a propitious beginning for a book. I look to the inscription again, and with my mind now open to polysemy, “Wilderness,” with its elongated first S, becomes “Wildernets,” and the background is again thrown into a new view. Neither a forest nor a cave any longer, the background with its rough patterned lines is a net descending upon the figure,<sup>46</sup> who warns me away with fear but does not attempt to escape himself. With this understanding, even the insignificant, decorative borders drawn around the plate (which in the one extant edition is printed on paper much larger than the plate), become oppressive and nervous, seeming to close in on the figure.<sup>47</sup> His gesture is no longer an

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<sup>45</sup> Eaves’ comments on hieroglyphics may be pertinent here: “much of the eighteenth-century literature on that form of writing would have bolstered Blake’s sense of Egypt as a fallen state of consciousness. It was generally believed that hieroglyphs began as natural signs [...] but these were usurped by priests and converted into a mysterious code. Thus Egypt, like Babel, was the place of a fall from a motivated into an arbitrary mode of signification” (*Theory* 23).

<sup>46</sup> Projecting even farther into Blake’s future works, I could identify this figure with Urizen struggling in the net of religion he himself created.

<sup>47</sup> Connolly suggests something very like this same idea in relation to Blake’s pages: “Paradoxically, while Blake describes his acidic etching as ‘melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid’, the resulting print is itself a surface, which Blake makes transparent, as a doorway or a window. At the same time, by including white space around his

invitation, but a warning, and the frontispiece fills me with dread as I prepare to turn the page.

I have described with some drama what it feels like to work through the frontispiece. As I have argued that the tractates are to be experienced as preparatory, educational books, I feel the need at the outset to explain how this encounter fits into and begins the pedagogical process. From the reader's perspective, this plate begins immediately the necessary process of undermining conventional understandings and taking the reader off his/her sure footing, and does so through the remarkable choice of revising a Gospel text. For, in Western culture, the figure of John the Baptist and the words "The Voice of one crying in the Wilderness" would be accessible to very nearly every literate person, even those not educated in religion; to a less literate but more traditionally religious person, they would be as familiar as Jesus himself. The frontispiece, then, on the surface is perfectly transparent – the figure is John the Baptist and the words are the Gospel's description of him. But by subtle effects Blake undermines this confident knowledge for the sensitive reader: by manipulating the character's body and face to look unlike the traditional image of John, Blake sets the reader off-kilter and introduces the possibility that things are not going to be as they seem; with the ambiguous background, Blake introduces the need for interpretation where it would not normally be; and with the unstable text, Blake opens the reader's mind to the polysemous use of language that will make possible the prophetic act. All works together to take the reader out of his or her conventional manner of reading; the plate demands more, and if met, refuses to answer. Even at such an early point in the education, the illuminated book is asking the reader how committed he wants to be. The figure's gesture, then, is both (as I suggested earlier) an invitation and a warning. If John the Baptist is being ensnared in a net, not to continue the prophetic journey into the book, he may be begging me to continue it

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images rather than allowing them to fill the pages, he reminds us that these windows and 'doors of perception' have limits" (41).

– passing on the prophetic responsibility. If that is the case, it fits with what I have taken to be Blake's ultimate purpose in the prophetic books – to make prophets of his readers. But it is also throwing the reader to the lions, as it were. On-the-job training is a fearful thing for an occupation that ends at the chopping block.

## Plate 2

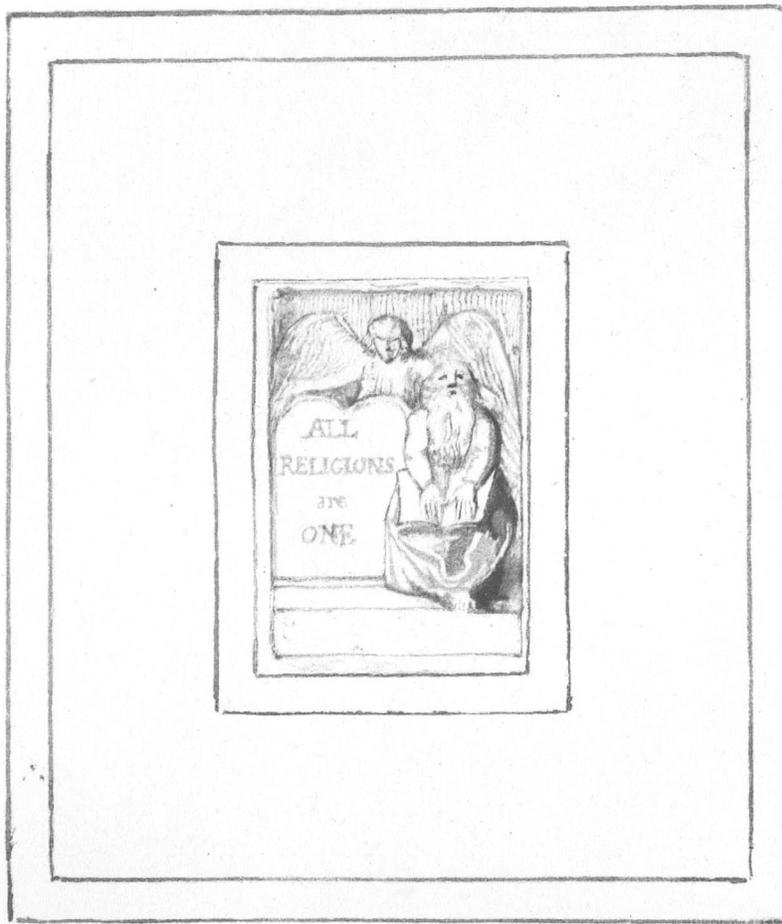


Fig. 6 ARO plate 2

With the sense of imbalance and dread established by the first plate, I turn to the second to find, again, conventional Christian symbols, but with the destabilizing work of the first plate I

cannot accept these images at face value; I immediately begin to look for alternate meanings. The title, ALL RELIGIONS are ONE, appears carved in stone, in firm Roman letters. All of the words but “are” are in all capitals. There is, of course, no reason to take the double-arched surface on which the letters appear to be stone; it appears as a smooth surface, no texture as was engraved on the rock in the first plate. I automatically take it to be stone because of other contexts, particularly because its conventional shape, and the presence of the old man and the angel, identify it as the Decalogue, in which case the old man represents Moses. This scene, at its surface, would imply a clear, conventional reading: Moses sits beside the stones of the Decalogue, a representation of his divine appointment as God’s emissary to the Hebrews; looking up reverently to heaven for a divine interpretation of the book in his lap, Moses demonstrates that his authority is willed by God, who is the true authority to which Moses looks; while a guardian angel hovers over Moses and the holy law, embracing both the law and the law-giver in his protective arms and visibly standing for God’s divine sanction over them. This would be a reading that supports the earthly authority of the church and tradition, an authority granted directly by God and supported by his power.<sup>48</sup>

But the first plate has already set me in a position to distrust the conventional interpretation of conventional images. While the stone could be the Ten Commandments, the shape and the style of lettering call to mind a gravestone, the title reading as the name of the dead. The fact that these letters are written in an obviously Roman style, rather than something more Hebrew influenced (as the Old Testament associations would suggest) or Gothic (as one might expect

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<sup>48</sup> The Blake Trust edition offers an optimistic Blakean reading of the title-page: the old man “has abandoned the letter of the law in the book and now contemplates the ‘Poetic Genius,’” while the angel suggests the “spiritual union” of the law and the prophet “in fulfillment of Blake’s title thesis” (34). But in the plate-to-plate encounter with the book, this hope in the Poetic Genius is not yet present.

from a prophet influenced by the Authorized Version of the Bible), implies another sort of reading: that of the Catholic Church, apogee (to Protestant England) of all that is corrupt and hypocritical in religion.<sup>49</sup> In this slanted reading, then, the tables of the law have a decidedly sinister, morbid quality. This second association is surely prompted by the anxious feeling established by the first plate, but seems to be supported by other elements of the design. The old man who sits beside the title has hand-drawn corrections to his face in ink, as does the angel. His expression, like that of the prophet-boy in the first plate, registers as fearful rather than reverent – his down-turned eyes and open mouth indicate something like wailing or moaning, while the hand-corrected face of the angel has a sinister mask-like blankness – inward-slanting slits for eyes, an abstracted nose, and no visible mouth.<sup>50</sup> His wings visually rhyme with the shape of the Decalogue stone, making the angel a humanoid figuration of the Law – the law-enforcer, perhaps. For a reader of an anti-authoritarian bent, or one sufficiently destabilized by the effects of the multiple readings, the scene – conventionally a reassuring image of stability and faith – becomes a frightening image of oppression and mortality. The angel is no longer protective: his terrifyingly inhuman face give his outstretched arms much the same quality as the background of Plate 1 when we suddenly see the background as a net rather than a forest or cave. His gesture is not unifying, guarding embrace, but threat and repression. The old man, if we are

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<sup>49</sup> I have previously suggested, in Chapter 3 (96-97), the rhetorical differences between Blake's Latin script and his own cursive hand.

<sup>50</sup> As a matter of comparison, the alternate title page from a 1794 printing, reproduced in the Blake Trust edition, shows a much more conventionally cherubic face on the angel, with softer facial features and curly hair. The inking and printing appear to be much better than that of the full copy I am analyzing here. As I have already discussed, however, the most effective encounter is with the entirety of a single copy, so alternate printings are interesting to this endeavor only for the sake of curiosity; if the rest of the alternate copy existed, it may provide a very different encounter.

still to identify him with Moses, is now trapped within the law of his own making, and looks up to heaven failing to realize that the God who ensnared him will not save him.<sup>51</sup>

One last element solidifies the scene: a line across the bottom of Moses' foot suggests a stage, implying that this scene is a drama or statue.<sup>52</sup> Either of these interpretations could support the pessimistic reading I have been drawn into: as a drama, the scene merely confirms that the whole of the Old Testament law is an elaborate theater designed to obscure the fact that the law is oppression and death; as a statue, that the law and the law-giver, once human and vital, have been reified by tradition into static, dead objects. Like the first, unstable image of the boy-prophet, this title page scene takes conventional images and refuses them their traditionally reassuring stability. The stability of statuary is instead another sort of trap; the exuberance of drama and performance, a slight-of-hand routine concealing a more sinister trick. So far, by simple, subtle rhetorical touches Blake's unstable illuminated text has placed me into a mindset prime to receive his prophetic instruction with a suggestive skepticism: anything I see from henceforth I will distrust unless convinced otherwise. Such a state of mind conforms to the way modern readers like Makdisi, Mee, Behrendt and Hilton have taught us to read Blake: a polysemous, anti-authoritarian text unwilling to accept dicta and ready to encounter the reader with challenges less intellectual than visceral.

### **Plate 3**

#### The Argument

At the head of the page the words "The Argument" appear surrounded by more foliage,

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<sup>51</sup> The Blake Trust editors recognize the similarity to the title page of *The Book of Urizen*, and suggest that "the later criticism is latent" in this plate, but that "such later negative meanings need not necessarily pertain to an early work" (34) – an interpretation which seems unfortunately circumscribing.

<sup>52</sup> Again, Eaves et al. read it as a "plinth, as though the whole image, not simply the tablets, were sculpted in stone" (34).

like the inscription on the frontispiece. The style of the lettering is also similar to that of the frontispiece, unlike the authoritarian script of the title page. The style of the lettering with its foliage, then, implies a connection to the boy-prophet rather than to the angel or Moses figure,

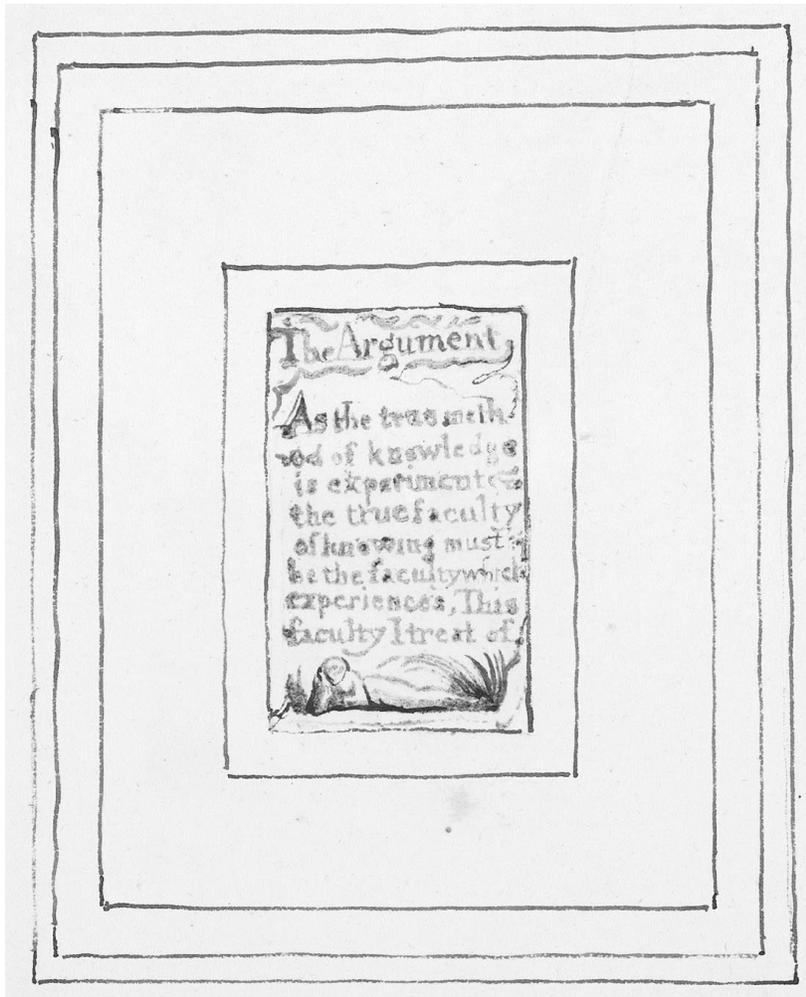


Fig. 7 ARO plate 3

suggesting that, rather than the oppressive traditional religion of the title page, I am in the realm of prophecy. While the foliage of the frontispiece seemed to imply words, the leaf-like lines around “The Argument” are less script-like, more gestural – they seem more like expressions of movement than intelligible signs. They follow the letters of the heading with sinuous, unifying

curves, breaking only for the tall capital “A” and the low “g.” Below the letters of the heading, the line underscoring “The Ar” dips down as if to reach the A of “As” on the first line of text, while the line beneath the lower-case “g” in the heading flies off tangentially to connect to the “h” of “meth.” At the end of the heading, a looping line breaks away to dangle down to the “h” as well. These three lines, branching off from the lines surrounding the heading, effectively connect “The Argument” to the first line of text: “As the true meth.” This intimate connection between lines of text is an obvious difference from the title page, which kept a strict separation between the letters and the design, confining the letters to the stone, and between the words themselves by putting them on separate lines.

The vine-lines of the heading lead me down to the lines of the text:

As the true meth  
 -od of knowledge  
 is experiment  
 the true faculty  
 of knowing must  
 be the faculty which  
 experiences, This  
 faculty I treat of.<sup>53</sup>

These letters, rather crammed into the space of the plate, nevertheless have room for multidimensional flourishes that, like the foliage in the frontispiece inscription, suggest interpretive possibilities that are hidden. A mysterious, curved line, thin at the top and thick at

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<sup>53</sup> Matthew Green argues that this aphorism “clearly links the faculty which experiences not only with the body, but also with others who by entering into relation with that body give life to experience. The Poetic Genius is thus the presence in the self of the power that initiates newness and makes experience possible by embodying existence in form” (*Visionary Materialism* 47).

the bottom, fills the space between the word “experiment” and the border of the plate. I cannot identify it in any way – it does not seem vegetable or figural, and while it is clearly not a word or a letter, it is also not anything mimetic. It is simply an abstract space-filler, but its very existence, and its placement beside the word “experiment,” teases me. The words tell me, after all, that “the true faculty of knowing must be the faculty which experiences,” and if experience requires experiment, perhaps the text is compelling me to experiment with what that blot could be. If so, my imaginative experiments fail – nothing I can think of makes that curved line of blotted ink anything I recognize. A blot beside the word “must” has a similar effect on me – it could be a letter, an arcane symbol, a figure, an animal, a plant – or it could be a blot.

At this point in my experience of the plate I begin to feel I’ve been had – my experimental, experiencing faculty is playing tricks on me, suggesting possibilities that are not there yet remaining convinced that they exist and that I should recognize them. With this frustration I come to the image at the bottom of the plate. This is obviously a human figure lying on its side, its feet in tall grasses that lean over its legs, its head resting on a bent arm. The figure is not recognizably male or female; it may have short hair or long hair swept back behind its shoulders. It may be nude, or wearing a robe that stretches to its feet, the bottom obscured in the grass. Blake has emphasized the figure’s head and arms, as well as defined the bottom of the body, in pen; the ink along the figure’s bottom side suggests a shadow and gives some degree of substance to the body, which is otherwise hazy. The figure, resting its head on its hand, seems conventionally melancholy.<sup>54</sup> A blur beside the figure’s arm could be more vegetation, but is too indistinct to really identify, another teasing instability. In contrast to the words, the figure is a

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<sup>54</sup> Eaves et al. suggest that the figure “may be reading, but no book is clearly indicated” (34). Reading would traditionally go along with the melancholy pose, but without anything to clearly suggest a book, I assume that the figure is simply lying sadly on the ground. Reading would be a sort of action; this figure is inaction personified.

model of melancholy inaction – it does not appear to be doing anything, simply lying on the ground, eyes closed, resting. The image does not illustrate the aphorism: this figure is not experimenting or experiencing, but seems felled by some off-stage sadness. The figure’s feeling, however, is in keeping with my own as I vainly attempt to construct a logical meaning for the blots in the words above; perhaps the figure has given up trying to understand the text and lies down in defeat.

The plate, then, frustrates my reading: it instigates me to experiment by placing an indecipherable blot beside the word “experiment” and then refuses the reward of knowledge; it offers an illustration that does not illustrate the words but instead suggests an avenue for the frustrated reader – secession from the experimenting/experiencing puzzle into the comforting stasis of melancholy. Like the images of stasis and entrapment in the frontispiece and title-page, this image suggests the outcome of stability and mistaken knowledge – the grasses that overarch the figure could be comforting it, or enveloping it – or even growing from it, as from a corpse. Instead of a vital, inquisitive figure vivaciously experimenting and experiencing the world, we have a failure of spirit in the face of ambiguity and difficulty. Because of its similarities to the frontispiece, I automatically find myself importing the sense of warning and foreboding from that plate onto this one, and therefore find myself wondering just what this design is warning me against. If in the frontispiece the design was warning me about the repressive cloud descending upon the boy-prophet, this design may be warning me against giving in to defeat and returning to the comfort of objective existence, corpsehood, thing-ness. While I have been frustrated by trying to follow the advice of the aphorism, I also have a sense that I should not trust any statement at face value, not even scripture or the title of the book. I must not, then, trust the impulse to experiment and experience without knowing fully the “faculty” that “I” will treat.

And who, precisely, is “I”? The author? No author being identified on the frontispiece or the title page, I can only assume that “I” is the book itself. I am, therefore, placing myself in the book’s keeping, hoping that it will treat this “faculty” and provide some explanation.

#### Plate 4

#### PRINCIPLE 1<sup>st</sup>

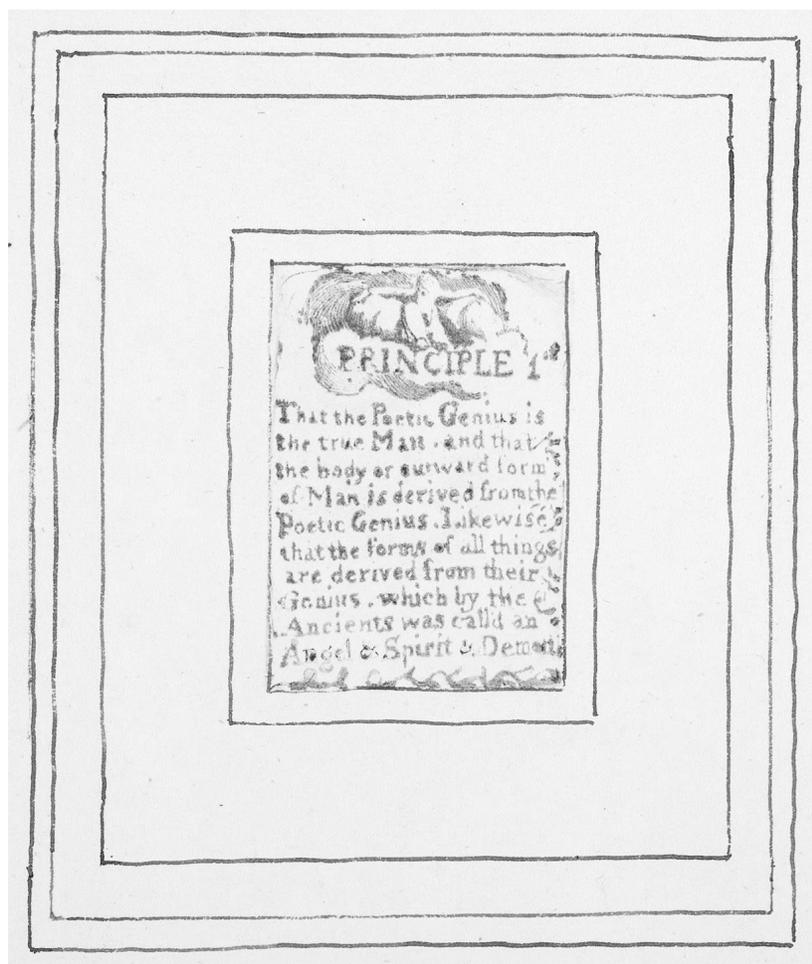


Fig. 8 ARO plate 4

At the top of the page, a bearded figure in a long robe sits in a mass of clouds, his arms stretched out over the clouds as if he sat a throne. This old man in the clouds is easily identified

by any Western reader as a Jehovah figure, enthroned in the literalized heavens above mankind. Contained within the cloud, beneath the seated figure, are the words “PRINCIPLE 1<sup>st</sup>” in all capital letters. However, just as “The Argument” echoes the frontispiece, so this plate echoes the title-page – the stretched-out arm gesture calls to mind the angel reaching around the tablets and the old man’s shoulders, and the long beard reminds one of the Moses figure himself. The letters of the heading, in turn, are again the Roman capitals of the title page rather than the more handwritten style of the frontispiece and “The Argument.” Just as before I automatically attributed the worry and anxiety from the frontispiece to “The Argument” because of their similarities, so I automatically begin importing the feelings of oppression and weight from the title page to this plate. Influenced by this suggestion, I notice the black sky behind the seated figure – this Jehovah sits in a thunderstorm. The heavy shading of the clouds gives them a further dreadful appearance, and the words of the heading appear trapped by the darkening clouds just as the old man in the title page appears trapped by the angel’s embrace. While the old man in the title page appeared to be wailing or moaning, this figure’s face is barely legible; his pose takes the place of a facial expression, and its similarity to that of the angel places this old man in the position of oppressor. By his body language and his positioning in the stormy sky, I am compelled to read him as aloof, distant (literally, as his smallness contributes, along with the clouds, to making him seem far away), and unapproachable. If he is to be taken as a Jehovah-figure, he is the fearsome god of the Patriarchs.<sup>55</sup>

With this patriarchal God looming, I come to the words of the aphorism, the first principle of this argument:

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<sup>55</sup> Janet Warner argues that this figure “can perhaps be said to suggest at best God-in-man, the Poetic Genius, and at worst, fallen man’s idea of God as authority” (180).

That the Poetic Genius is  
 the true Man. and that  
 the body or outward form  
 of Man is derived from the  
 Poetic Genius. Likewise  
 that the forms of all things  
 are derived from their  
 Genius. which by the  
 Ancients was call'd an  
 Angel & Spirit & Demon.

These words offer a new context for experiencing the oppressive figure at the top of the plate. First, with the introduction of the term “Poetic Genius,” I am tempted to identify the figure with the term: if the image worked as a conventional illustration, I could easily assume that it illustrates the main term of the text. I have already noted, however, that the conventional images hide unconventional, unstable meanings, and as I proceed through the aphorism, I am pulled along to further possibilities. If I take the figure to be the Poetic Genius, then the statement “the body or outward form of Man is derived from the Poetic Genius” makes sense – human beings take their form from this form, which appears human. But the next terms call this reading into question: “the forms of all things are derived from their Genius.” The Poetic Genius, then, is not the only Genius, only the Genius of Man – there are other Geniuses.

I can, at this point, continue to identify the seated, bearded old man with the Poetic Genius, and thus to identify the Poetic Genius with the oppressive, patriarchal Jehovah that the title page has already warned me about. But the lines which follow continue to destabilize those

identifications: the Geniuses of “all things” “by the Ancients was call’d an Angel & Spirit & Demon.” If I want to identify the Poetic Genius with the biblical Jehovah, this last identification presents a problem, for it equates angels, spirits, and demons (much like the classical *daemon*), which in Christian orthodoxy are quite distinct beings. Blake does not specify who these “Ancients” are – the Hebrews, the pagans, the Greeks, the Romans? By not specifying, Blake implies the possibility that all “Ancients” believed the same thing, and the title now begins to come into focus. He implies, further, that angels, spirits, and demons are in fact the same thing as well, Geniuses variously named but of the same substance and nature (their placement on the same line, ampersands separating them neatly, visually implies their equality of substance). And taken even further, this aphorism itself does not give any priority to any of the Geniuses – the Genius of Man, the Poetic Genius, is only one of the Geniuses. But this interpretation makes impossible the identification between the Poetic Genius and the Jehovah-figure at the top of the plate, for the God of orthodoxy is a singular God apart from all other, false gods, and angels are not the same as spirits, which are not the same as demons. The figure at the head of the plate therefore, must be identified differently, somehow: perhaps it is Jehovah, in which case Jehovah loses his traditional supremacy and becomes simply another angel, spirit, or demon; or, perhaps it is the Poetic Genius, in which case the Genius of Man is by nature a dark, repressive patriarch. Whichever interpretation I lean toward, I find, yet again, my conventional expectations about religion destabilized, and I have been drawn closer to the premise of the book, that all religions are one.

## **Plate 5**

PRINCIPLE 2d

At the head of the plate a male and female couple are seated above the title “PRINCIPLE 2d,” again in the stern Latin capitals. The couple are seated in a rising position, as if waking up from sleep, and they turn their faces upward. The man supports his upper body with one straight arm; the woman lifts her arm slightly, as if in surprise. They and the title are surrounded with

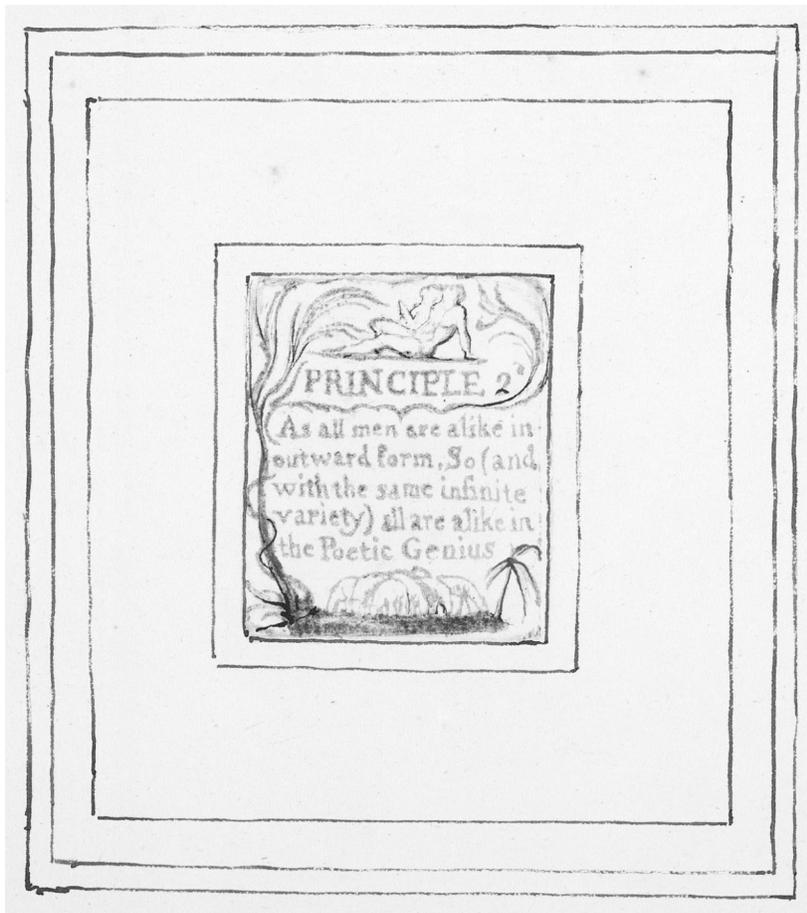


Fig. 9 ARO plate 5

long tendrils of vegetation which, followed along the left side of the plate to their source, grow from a landscape at the bottom of the plate, beneath the aphorism. Sheep graze in this landscape, which is bordered on the right side by a palm tree. On the surface I see a pastoral scene surrounding the aphorism, and find my eye carried all around the aphorism from the top to the

bottom right. As I begin to see how the elements interact, however, I am again thrust into a world of multiple meanings and polysemous imagery. The couple at the top of the page is problematic; while Blake appears to have darkened the outline of the underside of the man's body, he has not emphasized the separation between the two bodies, which is rather hazy. In fact, as I examine the bodies, they do not appear clearly separated at all – the female figure seems to be growing out of the man's side like Eve in the Genesis myth, or in the Platonic myth of man's conjoined ancestors separated by the fearful gods. This effect is heightened by the ambiguity of the legs – the man's two legs are clearly defined, but the woman either has no visible legs, or else the curved lines proceeding from between the man's knees represents her leg. These uncertain lines present me with multiple possibilities as well; if they form the woman's leg, it is no human leg, for human legs cannot bend in that direction. Or, they could be tendrils from the plant at the left of the plate. If vegetation, the figures seem to be growing directly from the plant like fruit, another incipient creation myth to incorporate.

At the top of the page, then, we have a complex gestational creation myth that echoes a number of different interpretive possibilities. Eve split from Adam's side calls to mind the gods Yahweh and Elohim, the problematic names of the Hebrew creator(s) (*Jerusalem Bible* 3).<sup>56</sup> This problem is well enough known: the plural Elohim create man and woman together from the earth, in his own image; the singular Yahweh creates man first, then decides man is lonely and creates woman from his side. It is this Yahweh God who sets the test of the trees of Life and Knowledge, and who banishes Adam and Eve for eating from the tree of knowledge. In contrast, the Elohim merely creates man and woman, bids them “Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and

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<sup>56</sup> When referring to the Bible as Blake would have known it best, I refer to the Authorized (King James) Version; but here, for scholarly purposes, I am using *The Jerusalem Bible*, whose scholarly notes explain these translation issues.

conquer it” (*Jerusalem Bible* 1.28), and seemingly leaves them on their own. In relation to the dark views of religion already shown in the tractates, the appearance of the Yahwist myth in this plate further deepens the impression I get of religion as a repressive, divisive force.<sup>57</sup> For the Yahwist story of creation is, essentially, a story of a patriarchal god setting arbitrary rules and punishing his creation for breaking them; a god who, unlike the Elohim (who are always satisfied with their creation, noting at each stage “it was good”), does not create perfectly the first time and must correct his work by an act of division rather than creation.<sup>58</sup> With this image of woman divided from man, Blake rhetorically amplifies the anti-establishmentarian view of religion to which he has been gradually leading.

With the bi-stable (or merely unstable) image, however, Blake pushes the implicit critique of authoritarian religion still further. For, by presenting the second echo of Aristophanes’ satiric creation myth from Plato’s *Symposium*, Blake brings the critique from another tradition (the Classical). This story is nearly as well known; “the primeval man was round, his back and sides forming a circle; and he had four hands and four feet, one head with two faces, looking opposite ways, set on a round neck and precisely alike; also four ears, two privy members, and the remainder to correspond,” and the sexes were three: man-man, woman-woman, and man-woman (androgynous). These double humans, however, were too powerful and threatened the gods, so Zeus determined to “humble their pride and improve their manners” by dividing them, with Apollo refashioning them into human beings as they are now – with bilateral features “that the man might contemplate the section of himself: he would thus learn a lesson of humility” and with their sexual organs on the front so that “the male generated in the female in order that by the

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<sup>57</sup> With the Genesis myth in mind, the vine snaking up the left-hand tree may implicate the Serpent, whose tempting words prompt the fall; he is making his way to the newly born couple.

<sup>58</sup> This Yahweh, reading ahead into Blake’s mythology, is obviously a type of Urizen.

mutual embraces of man and woman they might breed, and the race might continue; or if man came to man they might be satisfied, and rest, and go their ways to the business of life” (Jowett). By this arrangement, man would continue to give sacrifices and worship the gods, but no longer be powerful enough to threaten their authority; for man would forever after be weak, dissatisfied, and incomplete, always seeking fulfillment and reunion. In this myth, again, we see the pattern of an authoritarian, patriarchal god dividing and punishing the human, his actions motivated by a mixture of fear, pity, and self-interest. This critique rhymes with the critique drawn from Judeo-Christian tradition, and, attributed to Aristophanes by Plato, carries a sharp satiric overtone that provides a valuable clue to me that I should read Blake’s rhetoric ironically.<sup>59</sup>

The third way of viewing the design, as I have suggested, places us in a third religious tradition; for to read the couple growing as fruit from a tree places us in an animistic or pagan setting. To see them as vegetable presents the possibility that man’s generation is not divine, but natural, that man comes as naturally as the leaves to a tree (to snatch a line from Keats). But this possibility is not necessarily more comforting simply because it does not imply a repressive overlord. For as I examine the design, I find that the tendrils of the tree are rather unstable themselves; the branches that underlie the title and curve up at the right side of the plate are not directly attached to the tree. The figures are also rather tenuously connected to the tree, as though they were breaking off. And as there is a shadow beneath them, implying that they are lying on the ground, the physical setting of the design seems strange – there are somehow two grounds, the ground at the bottom of the page and the ground on which the figures sit at the top of the page, which separates them from the title. The curving vegetation further divides the

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<sup>59</sup> Though I know from long reading in Blake to be prepared for irony, thus far in the tractates this distant association is the first suggestion that there is any irony afoot. As a reader, I will mark it to see if it continues.

figures and title from the aphorism, and encloses the figures, who are looking expectantly upward through a break in the vegetation. Thus, along with Aristophanes in the Greek tradition, we have a further irony in that the animistic myth – which one would expect to emphasize the unity of life, with man growing naturally from the soil, connected intimately to the earth his mother – is also built on images of division, enclosure, entrapment, and escape. While the vegetation is not dividing the man and woman (yet), it is setting them apart from the rest of the design, breaking the unity of the design and separating them from the natural scene beneath.

Attuned to the polysemous, multi-dimensional nature of Blake's work through my encounter with the first few plates of the book, I am able to draw from one aspect of design a multiplicity of contrasting, inter-critiquing meanings. Blake creates, in a multi-stable image, a critique of authoritarian belief from three different cultural traditions, the three traditions that shape his religious and philosophical culture: Judeo-Christian, Classical, and pagan. In this way Blake is already demonstrating the title, that ALL RELIGIONS are ONE – but not as a positive statement. Rather, all religions appear as forces of division and entrapment.<sup>60</sup> I must, however, consider how this design interacts with the aphorism beneath it.

As all men are alike in  
outward form, So (and  
with the same infinite  
variety) all are alike in  
the Poetic Genius

In the last plate, I encountered the problem of how to view the Poetic Genius. Here, Blake's

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<sup>60</sup> Here the etymological relationship between “religion” and the Latin “ligo” – “to tie or bind,” which the OED identifies as a “supernatural feeling of constraint, usually having the force of a prohibition or impediment” – seems significant, as does Cicero's suggestion of “*relegere* to read over again.” Blake's usage implies both senses, confinement and repetition.

words tell me that the Poetic Genius is somehow related to outward form; this follows from PRINCIPLE 1<sup>st</sup>, which suggests that “the body or outward form / of Man is derived from the / Poetic Genius” and that all other things take their form from their own geniuses. This aphorism, then, supplies a further specification – that as all men are formally derived from the Poetic Genius, they are all alike; yet in their similitude, they have infinite variety. Having read this aphorism, the design brings me to the bottom of the plate where I again encounter the flock of grazing sheep, all alike and barely distinguishable from one continuous mass. Already in an ironic frame of mind, this image strikes me as amusing – there is no more apt image for sameness in variety than a flock of sheep, all of whom look alike but are nevertheless different. Like the couple at the top of the page, the sheep are closed in on all sides by vegetation, words, and ground; like the couple, they seem simultaneously unitary and divided. To identify the sheep with man, however, returns us to the Platonic/Aristophanean myth, for sheep are traditionally considered weak, stupid, and dependent, the state to which Zeus successfully reduces mankind by dividing them. I must take this aphorism carefully, then – while it seems innocuous and even encouraging, I have already been warned by previous plates to be aware of the buried critique of division, authoritarianism, and entrapment. At this stage in my reading, I am not yet certain whether the Poetic Genius is trustworthy, or simply another version of this dividing and conquering god.

### **Plate 6**

#### PRINCIPLE 3d

At the top of the page two male figures sit together writing and reading. The columns in the background, the curved back of their chair/bench (which has been emphasized with pen lines), their short hair, long beards, and togas, altogether identify them as classical philosophers

(appropriately, since the previous plate called to mind Plato and Aristophanes).<sup>61</sup> The nearest man, whose white hair and longer beard identify him as the elder, writes on a tablet; the farther, with dark hair and a shorter beard, reads in a book. Both their heads are down, each absorbed in

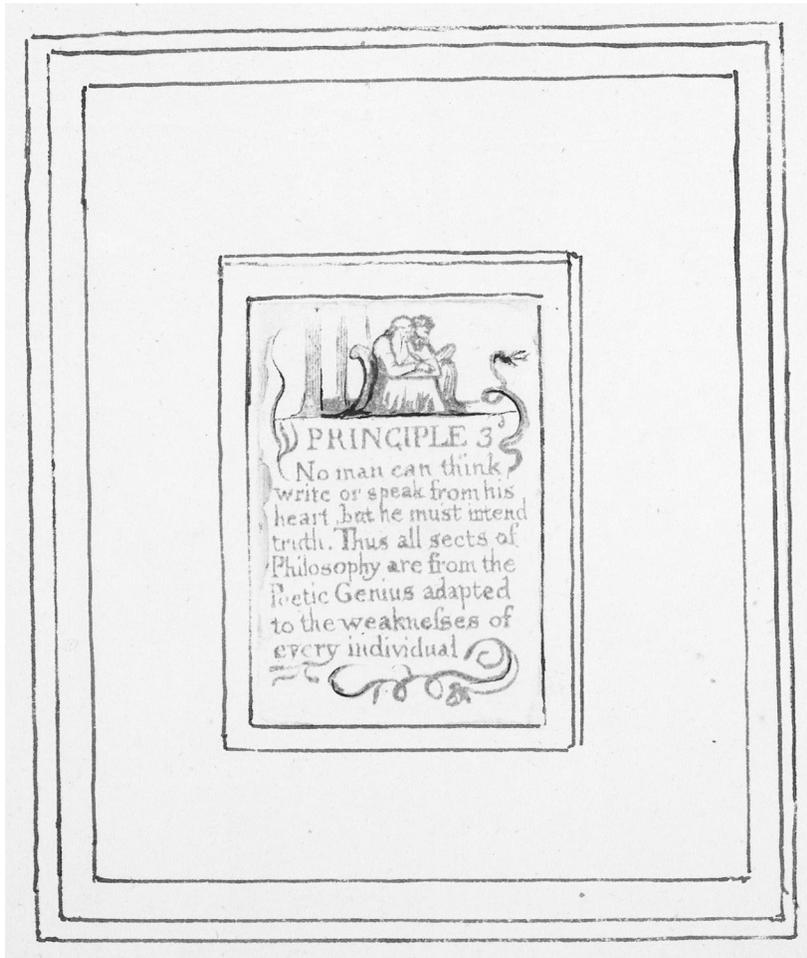


Fig. 10 ARO plate 6

his writing and reading, not interacting with one another. Like the couple in plate 5, the two philosophers are separated from the title, “PRINCIPLE 3d,” by a firm line denoting their shadow on the floor. These philosophers, sitting quietly in the stable, Apollonian setting of a columned

<sup>61</sup> Chapter 3 (89) already explains my interpretation of the setting as Classical.

room, evoke a feeling of calm, rational reflection that contrasts strongly with the previous designs, with their dark warnings and unstable ambiguity. The only sense of ambiguity in the two figures is the intriguing possibility that I could interpret them as two pictures of the same man – studying in his youth, passing on his wisdom as an old man. Even reading them as two men, the same pattern appears, a comfortingly linear, measured guide for a directed, intellectually useful life. This could be an image of how the life of contemplation should be, each man in his correct place keeping the tradition of Western wisdom alive.

The aphorism beneath the scene reads:

No man can think  
 write or speak from his  
 heart, but he must intend  
 truth. Thus all sects of  
 Philosophy are from the  
 Poetic Genius adapted  
 to the weaknesses of  
 every individual

Read on their own, the words increase the sense of solidity and continuity established by the image. With this aphorism, we have the optimistic assumption that to “think / write or speak” from the heart is to “intend / truth.” Taken in concert with the design, the aphorism confirms our hopes for how the transmission of wisdom takes place: that, right or wrong, those who speak from their hearts do so intending to pass along truth. It is important, though, that Blake specifies that the thinker/writer/speaker *intends* truth – he does not give every speaker who speaks from his heart absolute Truth, but only the benefit of good intentions. I am simultaneously warned

and comforted, then, that “all sects of / Philosophy are from the / Poetic Genius adapted / to the weaknesses of / every individual.” The word “weaknesses” is somewhat jarring; it is a deeply subversive way of accounting for the differences in philosophies that come from the same source.<sup>62</sup> The differences, Blake argues, are not based on differing needs or differing situations, but differing weaknesses, and like “Wilderness” in the frontispiece, the long S brings back that polysemous “nets” I have already seen. The comforting stability of the classical scene is already beginning to degrade.

Again, the meaning of the whole plate is intensified and troubled by the way the words interact suggestively with the design; vegetation grows from “No” along the left side of the design to create a border for the classical scene; another rises up from “his” alongside “think” to border the right side. Since I have seen in the previous plates vegetation dividing and enclosing, the fact that this enclosure issues from the negative “No” and the “his” of “his heart” becomes quite significant. The design is, again, warning me about the limits of thinking, writing, and speaking from the heart – for, while the aphorism does not need to consider what happens when a man thinks, writes, or speaks from some source other than his heart, it is enough to recognize that even those speaking from the heart are still speaking from a closed-off, divided source. On the right side of the design, a strange figure, so strongly reminiscent of a horned serpent,<sup>63</sup> injects another divisive note into the design; alongside the classical philosophers, this image from pagan prehistory violently destabilizes the sense of serenity and reason evoked by the philosophers. They, absorbed in their written wisdom, do not appear to see the serpent, or else they are using

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<sup>62</sup> Many critics, Jack William Jacobs for example, make the mistake of reading into this aphorism “strengths and weaknesses” (Jacobs 34), but Blake gives us only “weaknesses.” For us as critics to supply “strengths” is to distort the words in a more optimistic direction that undermines Blake’s rhetoric.

<sup>63</sup> Chapter 3 (90).

their books to ignore it. Their conventionally written philosophies, then, allow them to remain in their secure, carefully modulated, rational world, though the reader sees what their design has allowed them to hide – the common origin of their rationalistic philosophy and the dark animistic mystery alike. At the bottom of the page, the “y” of “every” sprouts its own branches, and a looping grapevine underlines “individual.” Since I have already seen, in plates 3 and 5, the ensnaring and dividing power of vegetation, I am already inclined to distrust these branches and vines when I see them, and since they are so closely associated with “every individual,” I find myself questioning the meaning of this term. For, as in the Judeo-Christian and Classical creation myths from plate 5, individuality comes as a result of division. It is, itself, inherently a weakness, perpetrated intentionally by anxious, self-interested gods. So, though all sects of philosophy come from the same Poetic Genius, once they are expressed by men they become part of the world of division and weakness.

### **Plate 7**

#### **PRINCIPLE 4.**

At this point, Blake is still defining the Poetic Genius, and I am still trying to synthesize the definition into a clear concept. It is, I understand up to this point, the common origin of human form, both in the outward form of the body and in the form of philosophy. It is associated with the human heart in its search for truth, but in its association with the human heart it is also implicated in the division and entrapment that renders man weak. It is still not clear, at this point, whether the Poetic Genius is to be identified with the possessive, repressive god who divides and weakens man, but the third principle seems to imply that it is not identical – rather, the Poetic Genius is expressed within the weakened context of man’s experience, but is not the cause of that weakness. As I turn to plate 7, then, I have a sense of the Poetic Genius as

something distinct from the closed, weak state of man in division. I immediately notice that, unlike previous plates, plate 7 has only a design at the top (perhaps because of the aphorism's length), and that this design, for the first time, is enclosed by nothing but the normal boundary of

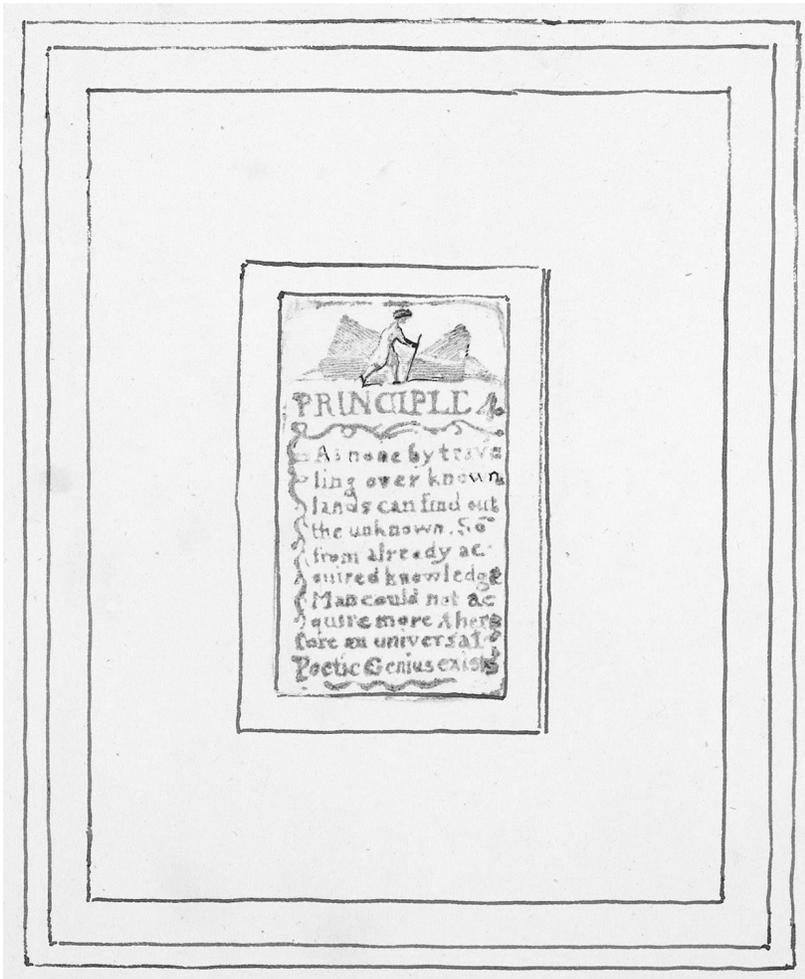


Fig. 11 ARO plate 7

the plate's edges – no vegetation, cloud, or stone surrounds the design. A figure carrying a walking stick walks vigorously through a desert scene indicated by pyramids in the background. On his head is a large hat or turban; with the headdress and short, puffy trousers the figure looks vaguely Arabic, an effect intensified by the Egyptian setting. The pyramids are rendered in

sharp converging lines that meet in the figure, further emphasizing him as the subject of the design.

The aphorism functions almost like the epigram of an emblem, rendering the image's meaning in words:

As none by trave  
 ling over known  
 lands can find out  
 the unknown. So  
 from already ac-  
 quired knowledge  
 Man could not ac-  
 quire more. there  
 fore an universal  
 Poetic Genius exists

The figure in the illustration (for once, the image seems to be a straightforward illustration of the text, or vice-versa), then, would appear to be the traveler. This aphorism works by analogy – as a traveler can learn nothing new by traveling in lands he has already traveled, so we can learn no new knowledge from knowledge we already have. This aphorism is a direct affront to the classical philosophers in plate 6, who read old wisdom and transmute “new” wisdom from it. Such cannibalism is not true knowledge, this aphorism suggests; for that, Man must look elsewhere. The traveler figure, therefore, walks through the East, traditionally (in Orientalist

Western thought), shorthand for “unknown” and “mysterious.”<sup>64</sup> Presumably by traveling in this unknown land the traveler will acquire new knowledge. But, as Orientalist thought also associates the East with danger and instability, the traveler’s presence in Egypt introduces an element of danger into this design; the knowledge that the traveler acquires may be perverted or not from the heart.<sup>65</sup>

The aphorism makes a bold leap in logic at the end by concluding that man’s inability to acquire new knowledge from old proves the existence of a “universal / Poetic Genius.” It is, in fact, a difficult leap to make with him, and I find myself attempting to justify it rationally. If I go back and think about what I have been experiencing in this book, I find that at every step Blake has been encouraging, even forcing me to reconsider what I think I know – about John the Baptist, about Moses and the Ten Commandments, about the creation of man and about philosophy. Yet I have not acquired new knowledge in the narrow sense of facts or understanding; I have, rather, been acquiring a different perspective on the knowledge I already have. So PRINCIPLE 4 demands that I reconsider my definition of “knowledge” – I have not been traveling over unknown lands, but rather over known lands with changing eyes.<sup>66</sup> This is the educational program of the tractates exemplified: new knowledge comes not from new facts,

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<sup>64</sup> Essick compellingly argues that Blake would have considered Egypt a type for “a fallen state of consciousness” in which natural signs (hieroglyphics) had been perverted by priests into a secret language (*Adam* 23).

<sup>65</sup> There is vigorous debate over just how much Blake accepted his era’s Orientalist attitudes, as demonstrated by collections like *Blake, Nation and Empire* and *Blake’s Reception in the Orient*. Whether Blake ascribed to Orientalist assumptions, however, seems less important to me than the fact that he would certainly have known the Western stereotypes of the East and have found them rhetorically useful in this design.

<sup>66</sup> DeLuca, in *Words of Eternity*, notes Blake’s subversive use of the journey and the traveler: “In literary symbolism, the vision of temporal continuity is typically expressed in the figure of the journey, but this figure exists in Blake’s work mainly to be parodied and subverted. [...] Most of these travelers are compulsive, obsessed with origins and destinations, and their days are bound each to each with a vengeance” (58).

but from changing the witness's perspective. I notice, as I consider this interpretation, that the quality of the vegetable decoration in the design has changed: a vine-like border runs along the left side of the aphorism and below the title, but does not enclose the words; this border also ends with the last two lines, leaving "fore an universal / Poetic Genius exists" open on both sides. With the "fore" of "therefore" separated and aurally converted to "for," these last two lines could be read as a singular statement: "For an universal Poetic Genius exists." At the bottom of the page, the aphorism is closed by a single curving line that this time does not resemble either vegetation or a serpent: it is a pure decorative line without obvious content. All of these alterations to the previous pattern suggest something has changed in this plate, but I cannot be entirely certain what just yet.

### **Plate 8**

PRINCIPLE, 5.<sup>67</sup>

The period after the 5 in the title, like that in PRINCIPLE 4, seems to denote this Principle as somehow definitive. This time, driven by the curious excitement generated by Plate 7, I am drawn first to the aphorism in the center of the page:

The Religions of all Nati-  
 -ons are derived from each  
 Nations different reception  
 of the Poetic Genius which  
 is every where call'd the Spi  
 -rit of Prophecy.

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<sup>67</sup> Erdman's edition of Blake's text includes a period after the 5, though the text transcription in the Blake Trust edition does not. I follow Erdman, since the period is obviously there.

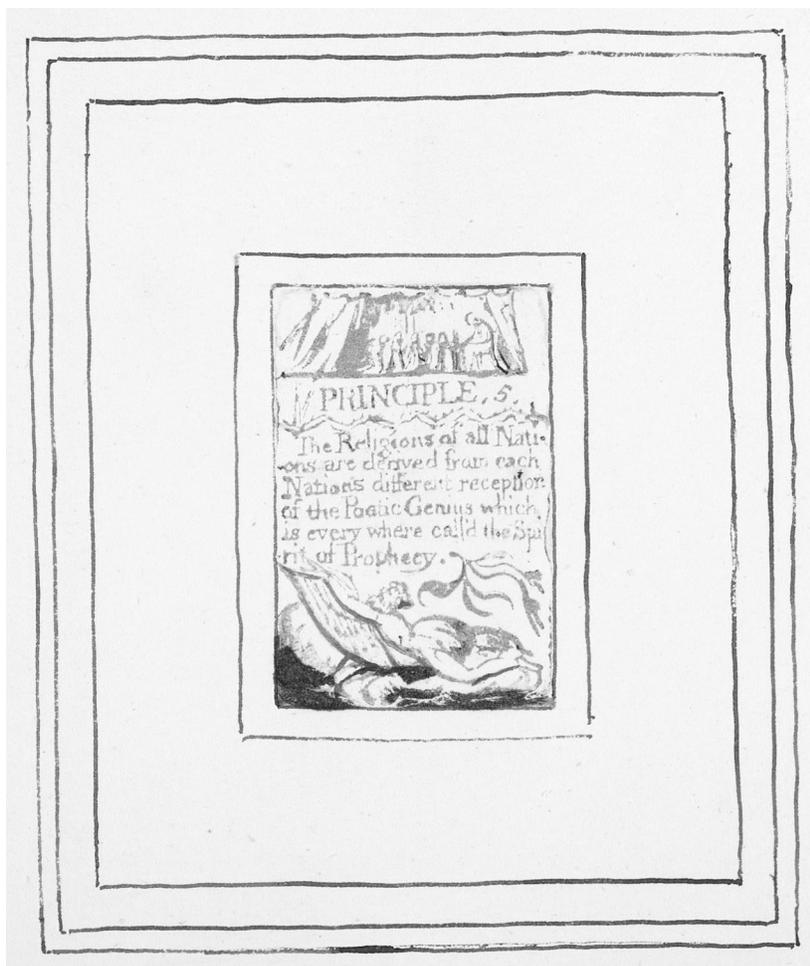


Fig. 12 ARO plate 8

This aphorism returns to that of Plate 6, now explaining the actions of the Poetic Genius in religion rather than philosophy.<sup>68</sup> It follows the logical path set up by the previous principles, applying the inherent sameness in difference of man's outward bodily form and the common origin of all sects of philosophy to religion, arguing that, just as all men have the same form and origin, and thus all philosophies, thus all religions as well. We know from PRINCIPLE 3, of course, that the differences appear as a result of the weakness of divided human nature, and if we

<sup>68</sup> As Jacobs argues (33), this aphorism is the clearest sign that Blake equates all religion with philosophy, not merely the non-Christian.

can apply the principles equally between human form and philosophical form, then we can apply it to religious form as well. As each individual's weakness sets the conditions for his philosophy, so each nation's weakness sets the conditions for its religion. I find myself, then, equating human individuals with human nations, philosophies with religions, bodies with ideas.

With these associations in my mind, I return to the top of the page to examine the design. A group of small figures, presumably children, are standing before a seated adult figure in a scene of instruction. The sex of the adult is ambiguous; as s/he is teaching children, I would conventionally expect it to be female, but the line that may indicate long hair could also be simply the line defining the figure's bent shoulders. The figure bends down toward the children reaching with her hand, as though literalizing the transmission of knowledge. The oddest thing about this scene, however, is the setting; it could be inside a tent, calling to mind the Hebrew Tabernacle, or it could be on a theatrical stage, the stage curtains opened on a dramatic scene. I have already seen this effect in the title page, where the scene appeared either a statue or a play. The possibility that the scene of instruction appears on a stage brings me back to the possible interpretation I suggested about the title page: that the forms of religion are a kind of performance, a sort of theater, that take place either for someone's entertainment or as a screen for the Law's violent repression. The two words switch back and forth, one (performance) presenting an innocent, artistically creative fiction, the other (theater) presenting a farce in which the human race is the butt of a joke. And, if the characters are in a Tabernacle, I already know they are in the realm of enclosure and repression.

Seeking some definitive interpretation that I nevertheless know (from my previous experience) will not be definitive, I look down to the design at the bottom of the page. A bearded, curly-haired nude man holding a large harp seems to fly across clouds like an angel. I

am led to associate this figure with the “Spi / -rit of Prophecy” by a decorative element of the design, the intense, flame-like lines branching from the end of the last line, which direct my eye from “Prophecy” to the figure. The large harp identifies the man as either an angel or a bard, and historically with David, Homer, and the Celtic bards alike. As we have seen the juxtaposition of Judeo-Christian, Classical, and pagan myths already, the multiple possibilities continue a precedent already set: this figure, taken at once from all Western traditions, unites them all in another visual representation of the principle that “ALL RELIGIONS are ONE.” However, he is surrounded by two design elements I have already seen in repressive contexts: clouds (like those the old man of Plate 4 sits) and vegetation (seen throughout the plates). But I instinctively feel that this context is different, and examine the image to determine why. Unlike the Jehovah of Plate 4, this figure is not sitting enthroned on the cloud; he is leaping or flying across it. The dark, blotted inking below the figure suggests that he is leaping over the darkness we have seen in Jehovah’s clouds on Plate 4. The image, therefore, is not one of stultifying rigidity, but dynamic action. The vegetation that points toward his body, in turn, seems to be of a different nature than that we have seen before; it is, again, flame-like, dynamic rather than creeping, and oriented not upward like natural vegetation, but emphatically downward, taking on a gestural, indicative form rather than an enclosing form – it is not a boundary but a statement itself, appearing at the end of a short line as though to finish the thought.

By seeing these visual motifs changed so substantially, and by being led in the previous principle to think of knowledge as perspective rather than fact, this design helps me reconsider the image at the top of the plate. If the same visual motifs can change meaning so completely by viewing them in a different context – the plants that confine can also gesture, the clouds and darkness that oppress can be overleaped – then I see that the image at the top presents a choice

for me as the witness to this prophetic statement. It is, in fact, the introduction of the term “prophecy” that has provided the intense change I noted in the previous plate but could not yet define. For the Spirit of Prophecy, if I follow the line of thought, embodies perspective and choice, the means of seeing known lands differently and thus acquiring new knowledge. For I am only stymied in my reading if I insist on singular, unified definitions; if I accept the bi- and multi-stable images as the multidimensional statements they are, I realize that my own reading determines how I will proceed. The thorny vines separating the title from the aphorism underscore this dilemma. If I choose, therefore, to see the scene at the top in a Tabernacle, I am trapping myself in the repressive climate of patriarchal authority; if I see it as a stage, I have a further choice, to see it either as a farce put on for the scorn of a malevolent authority, as a comedy for the entertainment of an enlightened viewer, as a tragedy that warns me of the dangers of transgressing established laws – or, as the angel/prophet/bard below suggests, as a dynamic, vibrant performance of creativity and imagination. The scene is, in fact, all of these; the difference is whether I see it prophetically.

## **Plate 9**

### PRINCIPLE 6

At this point, Blake’s illuminated book has taken me a major step forward in the educational project I have been performing. By reading the book in a receptive frame of mind, I have allowed Blake to lead me to an understanding that the Poetic Genius is also the Spirit of Prophecy, and that the forms of all things – whether bodies or ideas, individuals or nations – are derived from this Genius. The argument of the title, ALL RELIGIONS are ONE, has been made in its essentials, and as I have been situated into the interactive reading process of illuminated printing, I see the workings of the prophetic book performed in my encounter. I now turn to the

ninth plate and as I scan the whole page find that, while the basic structure of a head image, word block, and a bottom image remains, one design element I have come to expect is missing – there is no more vegetation. There are, rather, two visually rhyming shapes at the top and bottom; at the top of the plate, the Decalogue tablets return from the title page, this time surrounded by a

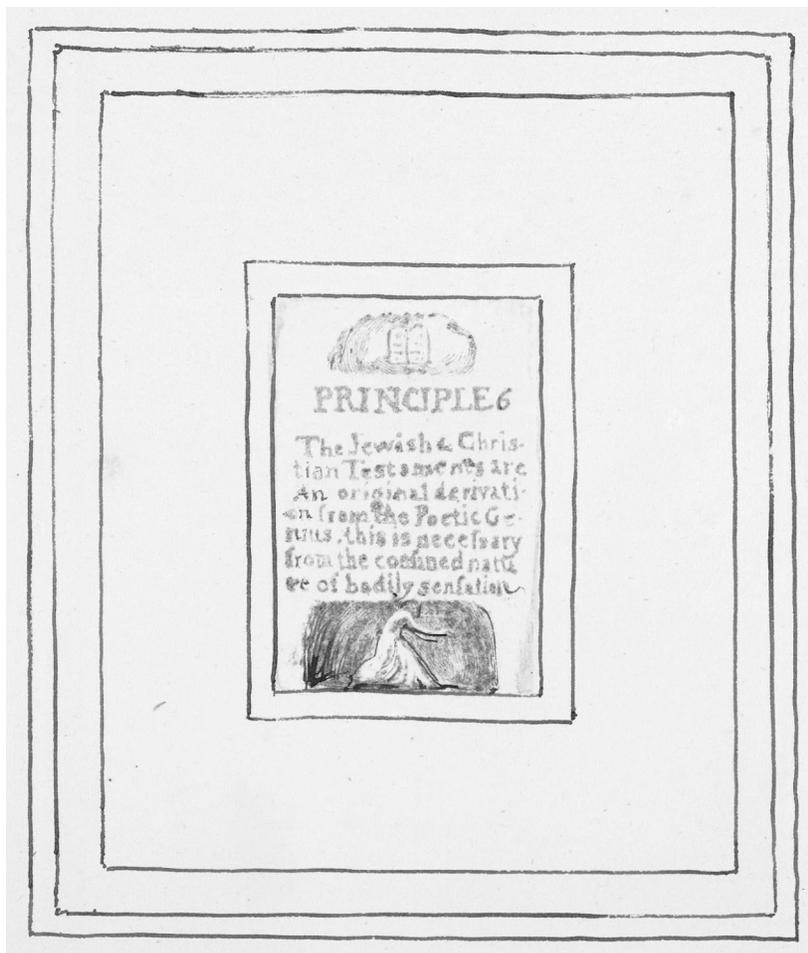


Fig. 13 ARO plate 9

shadowy arch of hatched lines, while at the bottom a bent figure in a long robe walks tentatively forward, arms out, in a dark arched vault. The visual similarity immediately links the Law with blindness and darkness, a visual summary of the underlying, sometimes subconscious

associations that have been shaping my reception of the aphorisms. The aphorism between these two images tells me

The Jewish & Chris-  
 tian Testaments are  
 An original derivati-  
 -on from the Poetic Ge-  
 nius. this is necessary  
 from the confined natu  
 re of bodily sensation

This aphorism returns me to the problem of plate 4, when I found it difficult to resolve the relationship between the Poetic Genius and the oppressive Jehovah figure pictured at the top. Now the imagery seems directly contradictory to the aphorism's content; the design clearly connects the Ten Commandments, fundamental law of both the Jewish and Christian religions, with stumbling through darkness, yet the aphorism suggests that both are "original derivation[s]" from the Poetic Genius. At first, it would seem to imply what I found difficult to reconcile in plate 4 – that the Poetic Genius is identical with Jehovah, or Zeus, or the earth – that is, with repressive authorities of all kinds.

That identification is complicated by the second statement of the aphorism: the derivation from the Poetic Genius "is necessary / from the confined natu / re of bodily sensation." With this aphorism Blake is acknowledging explicitly what plate 5 only implied with its echoes of three creation myths – that the nature of human experience is divided, weak, and constrained. This constraint is the result of the limitation of the human body and its senses, which constrains our perceptions. So the argument proceeds from the previous plate, with its evocation of the Spirit of

Prophecy, which now becomes more clearly a function of perception: the human body, being a divided, incomplete derivation of the Poetic Genius (as the word “natu / re” is divided), is likened to human religion and human philosophy, which are also divided, incomplete derivations of the Poetic Genius in the guise of the Spirit of Prophecy. All of these forms, derived from the Poetic Genius, are equal; their gods, too, equal. The Poetic Genius, then, cannot be identified completely with any of these gods or concepts. I can only reason from this argument that the Poetic Genius is itself a morally neutral entity, not a self-interested force for oppression or division. Rather, its derivations become divided according to the weaknesses of the human prophets who communicate them. As the constraint of the bodily senses divides the original derivation, so the further constraint of the senses by those laws continues the division – the Spirit of Prophecy divided into prophecy and finally into oppressive testaments and commandments. So the Poetic Genius, to constrained human minds, becomes Yahweh, Zeus, Apollo, and all other repressive gods. Yet what the Poetic Genius is, this thing that is the source of all form physical, spiritual, and conceptual, remains uncertain. Only its visual association with the dynamic angel/prophet/bard of plate 8 gives it a substantial definition.

### **Plate 10**

#### PRINCIPLE 7<sup>th</sup>

As the top and bottom of plate 9 offered a visual rhyme, so does plate 10 offer a visual corollary to plate 9. Plate 10 is nearly a mirror of plate 9 in design, but its visual content reverses the visual content of its preceding plate. Where plate 9 had the Decalogue in darkness, plate 10 shows the upper half of a figure leaping from a dark vault as two figures fall down in a shocked faint. The middle figure lifts his arms in exuberant victory; the fallen figure on the left shields its face with one arm, and the figure on the right, its legs twined in the legs of the other fallen

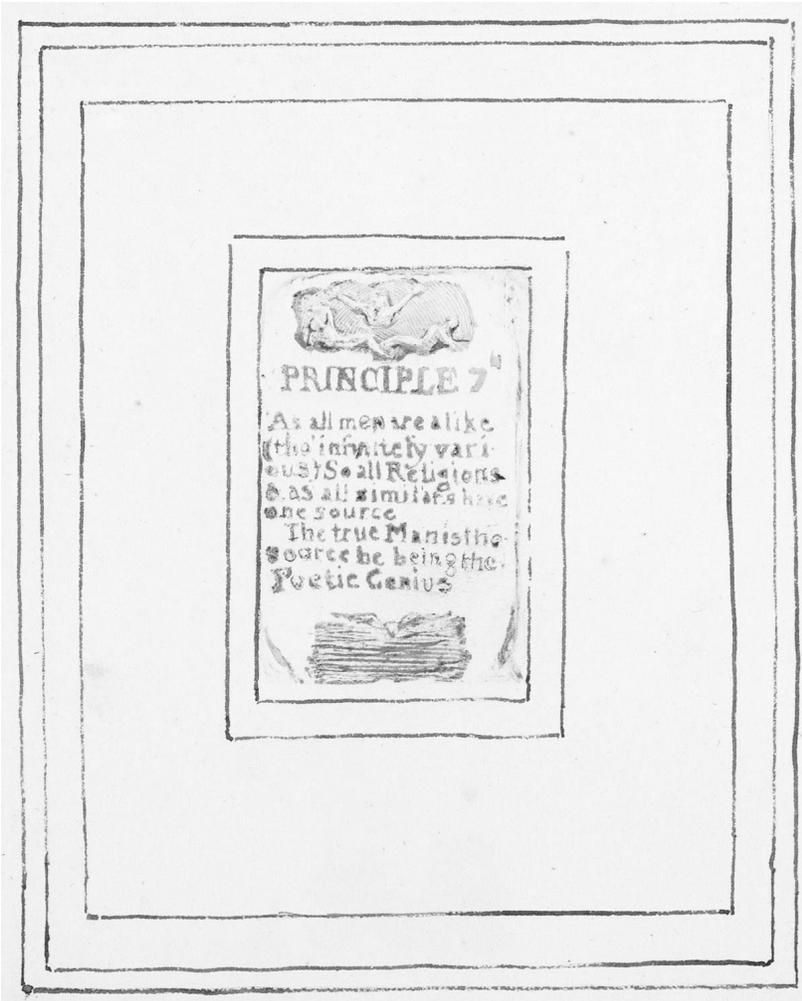


Fig. 14 ARO plate 10

figure, seems unconscious. In Western culture, there are two precedents for this image – Lazarus raised from the dead by Jesus, and Jesus raising himself from the dead. In both cases the witnesses are astonished, and the soldiers who guard Jesus’ tomb fall down as if they were dead. In place of the repressive Commandments, then, Blake presents rebirth into new life. The middle figure, though, as a figure of dynamic action, is also engaged in an act of separation: the two fallen figures appear to have their legs twined together, as though they were moments ago one

body.<sup>69</sup> Even here, Blake is retaining his multidimensional thrust, ensuring that I cannot rest easily on the conventional reading of an image. While Jesus Christ may be a type of salvation and new life, the religion of Christianity, Blake reminds me, is still only a derivation of the Poetic Genius; Jesus as a symbolic figure is subject to the same bounded human perceptions, and the religion that bears his name still acts as a dividing, weakening authority.

Realizing that the topmost image mirrors that from the previous plate, I immediately jump to the bottom of the page to compare, and again, I find an obvious visual parallel. On plate 10, just as on plate 9, the bottom is dominated by a dark mass; but instead of a blind figure feeling his way through the darkness, Blake has drawn a large bird with wide-spread wings soaring above the dark plane. Perhaps no other visual image could so decidedly counter that of a stumbling, blinded figure: while the bird may have cultural parallels to the Holy Dove<sup>70</sup> and the Holy Ghost brooding over the waters, there are also echoes of Noah's dove, the albatross (traditionally the souls of lost sailors and signs of good luck, as Coleridge later popularized), the pelican (whose maternal instincts are so strong she feeds her young with her own blood if she cannot find food), and the eagle, a nearly universal symbol of freedom and spirit. The bird soaring over the darkness, whatever bird with which we care to identify it, is a visual sign that, though man's perceptions remain confined, and division and weakness still distort the derivations of the Poetic Genius, hope can be found in energy and action.

The aphorism titled PRINCIPLE 7<sup>th</sup> sums up the main points in the overall line of reasoning:

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<sup>69</sup> Eaves et al. suggest this alternate interpretation in their notes to the Blake Trust edition.

<sup>70</sup> Baine takes it to be a dove, which "probably suggests divine inspiration" (68), but considering what I have seen in other plates I see no reason to restrict the bird to one species when there are so many other symbolically resonant birds.

As all men are alike  
 (tho' infinitely vari-  
 ous) So all Religions  
 & as all similars have  
 one source

Leading to the conclusion:

The true Man is the  
 source he being the  
 Poetic Genius

I have already seen this terminology in the first principle: “That the Poetic Genius is the true Man.” Its repetition here at the end, as a conclusion to the argument, therefore alerts me to the fact that Blake’s argumentative proof in this book has in fact been circular: it begins with the same premise it would seem to prove. While it appears to have gone through a logical sequence of syllogistic aphorisms, it has instead begun with the assumption that the Poetic Genius, the true Man, is the source of all things, and built upon that assumption proof that it is true.

But Blake has made one crucial alteration to his formula, one that would have no value in a strictly rationalistic logic (in which equal terms are equal regardless of order), but which means everything with a writer so attuned to the rhetorical power of syntax and its disruption. For the first principle states that “the Poetic Genius is the true Man,” a statement privileging Poetic Genius in the linear privileging of reading. The true Man, in other words, is defined in the first principle according to the boundaries set syntactically by “Poetic Genius.” It is this formulation that initially obscures the identification of the Poetic Genius, for the ordering of the sentence implies that the Poetic Genius has some sort of existence separate from man. From that

misunderstanding comes the mistaken possibility that the Poetic Genius may be identified with the dividing, repressive authoritarian gods. In the final principle, however, the order is reversed: “The true Man is the / source he being the / Poetic Genius.” In this formulation, the convergence of Blake’s argument, “Man” is instead given the privileged spot in the sentence, ensuring that both “source” and “Poetic Genius” must be understood as functions of “Man.” Thus, Man literally defines Poetic Genius, in all of the positive and negatives senses of “define”: that, as Blake has argued, the limitations of man’s perceptions defines (closes off, limits) the Poetic Genius in its complete expression, but at the same time, the true Man *is* the Poetic Genius and thus the source of all he subsequently defines.<sup>71</sup>

The implications of this idea are left unformulated; Blake does not explain whether, or how, the process of division can be stopped, or how the Spirit of Prophecy can be expressed without distortion. But the method of Blake’s argument provides a clue. Blake’s argument in this tractate is not a logical proof, as it pretends to be; rather, it is an experiential proof, proven by the experience of the book’s indeterminate rhetoric – its multidimensional imagery, polysemous language, and subtle instruction by action. By destabilizing traditional, conventional images and words, Blake counteracts division by forcing analysis past the bounds of normal rationalistic reasoning and into a realm in which the very multiplicity of possible meanings becomes a meaning in itself: dialectic becomes polysemy. Paradoxically, Blake uses division to obliterate division, pointing the way past division into the unity of the Poetic Genius.<sup>72</sup> At this

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<sup>71</sup> Green sees a problem in the way this conclusion “suggests a power which is both internal and external. [...] While it is possible that this tension may be the result of Blake’s inability to decide one way or the other, it may also reflect Blake’s unwillingness to fall into another dichotomous trap” (*Visionary Materialism* 68).

<sup>72</sup> Essick seems to see the same possibility in *The Language of Adam*: “If the otherness at the origin of Blake’s texts is language itself, then there can be no distinction between that source of conception and the medium of its execution: the medium *is* the origin. [...] Language is the

point in Blake's educational prophetic program, this receptive witness has a sense that the Poetic Genius is not something set apart from man, and that all form, whether natural, human, spiritual or intellectual, is somehow defined by human perception and thus a human creation. If my sense of the tractates' educational progress is correct, my experience with *There Is No Natural Religion* will further my understanding of Blake's artistic form and message.

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poetic genius within and without the individual, for it is simultaneously an extra-personal system by which he must allow himself to be guided, and an intensely personal medium, a necessary means for becoming a fully human consciousness to himself and to others" (161).

## CHAPTER 5

### Objects of Sense: The Performance, Act 2

*There is No Natural Religion* is the tractate that receives the most critical attention, far more than *All Religions are One*, largely for the reasons I discuss in Chapter 1: it seems a more developed and worthy work than *All Religions*, prompting critics to consider it more seriously. As a work of illuminated printing, it is certainly more refined and obviously improves upon the techniques Blake was developing in *All Religions*. The designs are more intricate and assured, the handwriting steadier and more ornate. The interplay between the two is heightened as well, as words more often turn into design elements and design elements intrude into the space of the words. In content *No Natural Religion* continues along the lines established by *All Religions* as well, assuming that the reader is familiar now with the origin of form in the Poetic Genius, which is connected to the Spirit of Prophecy that inspires religions and philosophies; that human physical form is related to the forms of both religion and philosophy, as all are derivations from the Poetic Genius; and that form is related to perception, though *All Religions* left the nature of all these connections frustratingly obscure. The implication, however, seems to be that physical form, like the concepts of religion and philosophy, is created by human perception, which, because it is divided and confined, does not recognize its own limiting effects; we incorrectly think, therefore, that physical form is different from concepts, when in fact both are functions of incomplete human perception.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Laura Quinney somewhat hyperbolically argues that “‘Empiricism,’ ‘Natural Religion,’ and ‘Deism’ exalt into an authoritative philosophical position what is actually a terrible fear haunting humankind: the fear that the natural world is the real world” (29).

By this point, after having experienced the form of illuminated printing in *All Religions*, the reader is familiar with Blake's destabilizing techniques and more easily able to navigate through the complex reading process; my performance, therefore, will speed up through these two books as I no longer need to explain certain rhetorical effects in full. Blake's main methods have been established and experienced: the interplay between design and writing; the multidimensional interpretive possibilities of the designs; the gnomic use of syntax and disruptive uses of handwriting; and the defamiliarization of conventional images, words, and concepts. All of these techniques will continue in the two series of *There is No Natural Religion*, extending the education begun in *All Religions* and leading the reader to a changed perception that will make him/her receptive to prophecy – indeed, to recognize that s/he has not only been experiencing prophecy, but performing it.

**THERE is NO NATURAL RELIGION, [a] series<sup>74</sup>**

**Plate a1**

The frontispiece to THERE is NO NATURAL RELIGION places four figures in a traditional pastoral scene. Two nude shepherds stand before an old robed man and a young robed woman beneath overhanging trees. The old man, with the white hair and long beard of the old men in ALL RELIGIONS are ONE, sits in a slumped posture that indicates his feebleness; he looks up with concern at the young, muscular shepherds. The young woman seated beside him appears to gaze mildly past the shepherds out of the frame, strangely as though she were

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<sup>74</sup> The textual history of NNR, as the Blake Trust edition describes, is a tangle of omissions and problems of arrangement. Addressing that confusion can in no way aid my performance project, but only create a distraction from the experience. As I argue in the Introduction to the second section, comparing variations has its scholarly value, but the prophetic encounter is designed to occur between a reader and a book, not a reader and a variety of variant copies. In order to focus my reading on the book, therefore, I will choose to follow the Blake Trust's ordering, considering first the color-printed and watercolor-washed [a] series (copy G), and the black-and-white full [b] series (copy L).

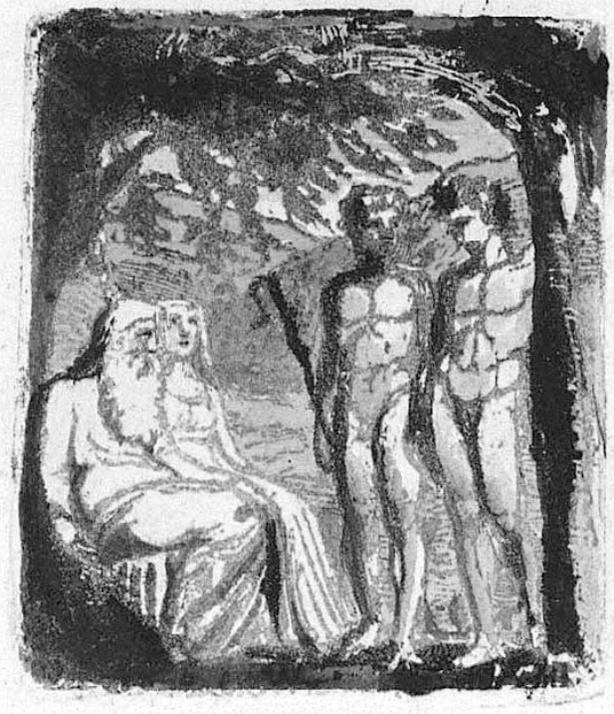


Fig. 15 NNR plate a1

looking out of the picture past the reader's right shoulder. The shepherd on the left, holding the crook loosely in his right arm, looks expectantly to the shepherd on the right, as though having just asked, or preparing to ask, a question; his partner, leaning with his arm up against a tree, looks down assertively, his eyeline matching the old man's in a contest of wills. Having just read *ALL RELIGIONS*, I cannot but see these figures as a reenactment of the first two plates of that work – the muscular young prophet of that frontispiece turned into a shepherd, the old man of the title page become a wary father or grandfather. Their intense gaze suggests that I will find a theme of confrontation in this book, between old and young, feeble and strong, authority and energy, the same underlying themes of *ALL RELIGIONS* turned outward.<sup>75</sup> The two witnesses

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<sup>75</sup> Eaves et al. argue for a “juxtaposition between natural and revealed religion in the text that follows” (37), but that interpretation implies more of a good/evil dichotomy than I believe the image allows.

to this confrontation, the young woman and the first shepherd, demonstrate opposed responses to the situation: the woman blissfully ignoring it, the shepherd nervously waiting for resolution. The blue-green mountains and golden field in the background suggest either sunrise or sunset, placing this confrontation in a symbolically resonant liminal time. The dark, mottled trees that border the scene and hang down oppressively over the figures remind me again of Blake's use of the same motif in *ALL RELIGIONS*, suggesting that the theme of perceptual limitation and boundedness will continue in this book.<sup>76</sup> Because of the border, I have no clear indication whether I am expected to choose one side in the confrontation; both are enclosed in the same vegetative confinement, suggesting that both are limited by their own perceptions and that their confrontation may not be between good and evil or right and wrong, but between two varieties of perceptual confinement. In all, the frontispiece to *NO NATURAL RELIGION* transitions from *ALL RELIGIONS* with motifs and themes familiar from that book, a visual sign that *NO NATURAL RELIGION* will take up and amplify the previous argument.

### **Plate a2**

THERE is ~ NO ~ NATURAL RELIGION<sup>77</sup>

The title page dramatically contrasts the frontispiece's pastoral with an intricate Gothic gate reminiscent of cathedral doors and windows. Like the sunrise/sunset coloring of the frontispiece, this title-gate places me at a threshold, visually indicating that entering the book will be entering a space. Religion will not be just the topic of the book – the book will itself be a religious space. Even at such a tiny size the complexity of the decorative motifs is daunting. A Gothic arch defines the bottom and side borders of the plate, with vertical spires, formidably

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<sup>76</sup> Eaves et al. agree, but I find odd their assertion of the “non-naturalistic settings of other group ‘a’ plates” (37) – nearly every image in the [a] series has a naturalistic or pastoral setting.

<sup>77</sup> In this section, I use the tilde to approximate the two lines on either side of “NO” which seem significant in emphasizing the word.

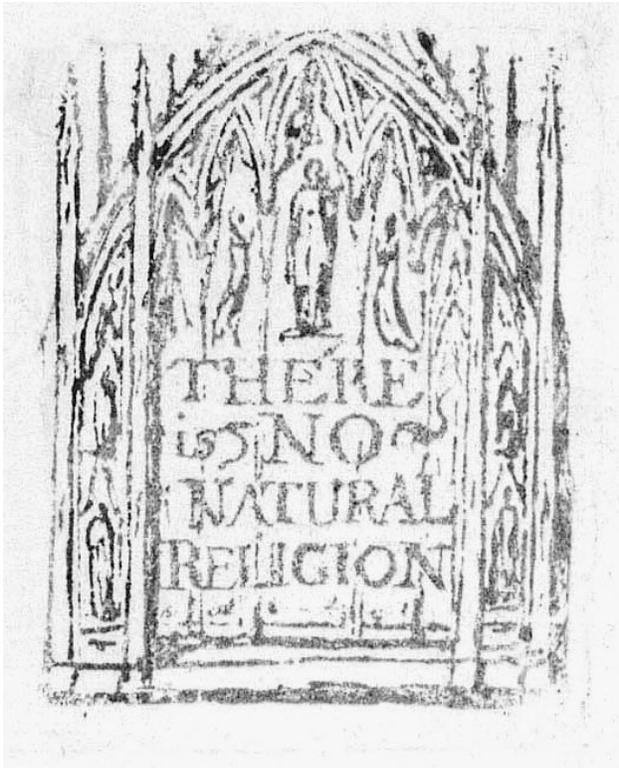


Fig. 16 NNR plate a2

studded with spikes, creating a discontinuous bound for the top. In the center focal point is a robed figure, apparently feminine and holding what is (from the Gothic context) probably a baby, identifying the central figures as a Madonna and Child if this were a typical Gothic window. In the arch above her is the faintest suggestion of a hovering figure, too indistinct to identify for certain but registering on a nearly subconscious level. Two much smaller robed figures, their hands together in attitudes of prayer, stand on either side of the Madonna. Beneath them, the title

THERE

is ~ NO ~

NATURAL

## RELIGION

appears in Roman letters. The contrast between the conventionally Gothic gate and the Latin letters creates an immediate sense of disorientation, accustomed as I now am to Blake's destabilizing juxtapositions. Just as in the frontispiece, in which the confrontation between the old man and the young shepherd is placed in the same limiting space, this juxtaposition of styles implies a kinship between outwardly dissimilar types. I return again to the argument of ALL RELIGIONS and consider whether these two plates are further examples of the one source for various things, the Poetic Genius. Here, too, Blake's words play textual games with the decorative motifs, as "NO" is set off and emphasized by two lines. On the left, a vertical curlicue that almost appears to be a capital "S" on the end of "is"; on the right, a more horizontally oriented flourish suggests a tongue of fire, a serpent, a leaf, or even a bird (its shape reminiscent of conventional abstract phoenix or eagle designs). Like other such flourishes I have seen, these tempt me to make them into coherent textual forms, while keeping my interpretive force paralyzed by their refusal to become anything certain. So too with the two tiny robed figures in the lower left- and right-hand corners; while I would, considering the context, wish to see the tangle of lines above them as tongues of fire and thus identify them as the Apostles, the design remains resolutely unstable, reminding me to be cautious in interpretation and conscious of the interplay of dimensions.

**Plate a3**

The Argument<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> I have already discussed this plate at length in Chapter 3 (96-99); some of my observations here, obviously, will be repeated from that analysis, but with the different context of this reading performance.



Fig. 17 NNR plate a3

I notice immediately as I scan the page that the structure is quite different from that of ALL RELIGIONS. Rather than the top and bottom designs enclosing the written text, I find the words at the top of the page and a design beneath it. The title to this plate, "The Argument," appears in an ornamental cursive hand radically different from the stately capitals of the title page. This cursive is vibrantly alive with flourishes and tiny figures: one figure leans against the "T" in a miniature echo of the confrontational shepherd of the frontispiece; between "The" and "Argument" a winged figure hovers, reaching down to a figure seated in the left-hand curve of the "A," who reaches up in response; another figure clings to the right side of the "A," reaching out as far as possible to a bird or winged human figure swooping above the "u" and "m." Though I have become used to seeing textually multidimensional flourishes in ALL

RELIGIONS, that book had nothing like this community of sprites and creatures.<sup>79</sup> The letters themselves teem with motion – the crossbar of the “T” doubled and tripled with lines, its tail dividing into a fork, the final “t” sprouting lines that again could double as vegetation or flame. But, alongside this vivacity remains my prior experience of the ambivalence of this vegetative motif – it is at once a sign of life and of constraint, the forked tongues of the serifs hinting at the division theme.

The aphorism below keeps the showy cursive:

Man has no notion of moral  
 fitness but from Education  
 Naturally he is only a natu-  
 ral organ subject to Sense.<sup>80</sup>

The sentiment communicated in the words would appear to be reasonable, even indisputable: that man’s moral knowledge comes from education, since in nature he is subject only to his senses, which have no moral component. This is the *tabula rasa* accepted widely by Enlightenment thinkers, a division between nature and society. But I have already seen in ALL RELIGIONS what division means, and recognizing the dialectic being set up here I look for what I know now to be Blake’s characteristic disorienting techniques. The textual/rhetorical methods Blake used in ALL RELIGIONS – dividing words, using incomprehensible flourishes as phantom words, punctuating ambivalently – appear amplified in this passage, splintering the coherent reasoning of the statement into a number of directions. Blake’s punctuation, first of all, destabilizes the

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<sup>79</sup> Eaves et al. argues that they “suggest a source of education more energetic and spiritual than can be provided by the books and vegetation below” (38).

<sup>80</sup> Hilton writes of “organ,” “In its primary sense, ‘to organize’ was ‘to supply with organs’ – ‘to form into a systematic whole’ was a meaning only gaining currency in Blake’s lifetime. [...] We participate in a system of organization whose complexity far surpasses our individual awareness” (*Literal* 252)

statement: if I mentally place a period after “Education” (an interpretation permitted by the capitalized “Naturally”), I have two clearly sequential sentences, asserting that man has no understanding of morality without education – that is, by nature, needing socialization to learn morality – and that man is a natural creature who relies on his senses to experience the world. If, however, I read “Education Naturally” as a single rhetorical unit, the nature of that education changes; it is now an education by, in, and from nature, not a socialized education. In this reading, man need not be subjugated to socialized education for “moral fitness,” but can receive his moral knowledge directly from nature, of which he is a part (a “natural organ”). The first reading privileges social integration over nature, suggesting that man is morally incomplete without education; the second privileges nature, suggesting that man is already moral as a part of an uncorrupted nature in need of no refinement. Neither, however, is rationally supportable without a great deal of ideological assumption and proof.

As elements of the visual design acting in concert with the intellectual content of the words, Blake’s written words continue this dialectical interplay. The forked serifs of the title appear on four significant words: “Man,” “Naturally,” “only,” and “Sense.” As I have the theme of division and weakness predominant in my mind from the earlier plates, I see these forked serifs as visual representations of division, and their appearance on these particular words indicates to me where division occurs. Man, of course, as we have seen from the previous chapter, is divided from his creation; the association with “Naturally” implies that nature, too, shares man’s division, just as the forms of nature share their origins in their own Geniuses (according to ALL RELIGIONS plate 4). For “only” to be indicated with division only makes sense; after all, onliness can only occur when one is separated from another. And, again continuing the principles established in ALL RELIGIONS, we find division tied to “Sense,” the

limitations of human perception. This division theme is continued in the design's image, in which three figures are engaged in "Education." In the center of the image, a robed woman sits writing on a tablet; to her right (my left), another figure (possibly nude, of indeterminate gender) lies on the ground with a book, while to her left (my right) a robed child stands reading a small book. The central woman and the child to the right ironically echo the Gothic gate of the title page, the woman with the tablet replacing the Madonna with child and the reading child replacing the praying saint. This subtle irony gives me a sense that the "Nature Religion" of the title may be something like this design; instead of the Christ child, human wisdom (recall the white-bearded philosopher of ALL RELIGIONS plate 6), and instead of prayer, reading. "Natural Religion," I thus assume, will replace the superstitions of conventional religion with "Education Naturally."

But this education scene, which ought, according to the aphorism, to give a "notion of moral / fitness," nevertheless divides; the figures are not learning together, but from separate texts in the same space. As these figures reside in a natural landscape, surrounded by trees, vegetation, and hills, we have a scene of education in nature. It is not, however, a scene of education *by* nature, as the figures are all reading books. The scene, thus, could be read either as "Education Naturally" or as socialized education that separates humans from nature and from one another. If, as I suspect, the figure on the left is nude, then I can apply the same idea from the frontispiece: clothing, particularly the robe, denotes conventional wisdom and authority, while nudity denotes activity and vitality, but both (as in the frontispiece) are restrained by the same setting; the nude figure is in the same field reading a book just like the clothed figure. The difference between clothed and nude, then, is only superficial – perhaps significant to the characters, but only outward signs of difference that conceal the inward similitude. Returning to

the aphorism from the image, I find that Blake undermines any positive connotation of “naturally” by drastically overdetermining “nature” in the aphorism. The double use of “natural” signals parody, and this reading makes nature itself problematic; note that the natural man is “subject” to sense, oppressed and restricted by his material condition, the limitations of his perception by physical senses. I notice, too, that the word “natu- / ral” itself is divided, a further visual indication that nature is in the same limited category as man.

#### **Plate a4**

I

The ironic overdetermination of the word “nature” continues in the next plate:

Man cannot naturally Per-  
 cieve, but through his natural  
 or bodily organs

This time the word “Per- / cieve” is divided, Blake again using a visual textual technique to embody a rhetorical message. The repeated “naturally” and “natural” links “nature” to “body,” confirming what I anticipated in the previous plate – that “nature” is of the same kind of substance as the human body, as ALL RELIGIONS argued. The vegetable motif here encloses the aphorism as we saw so often in ALL RELIGIONS, suggesting as always the divided and confined nature of perception, but as with plate a3 there is more going on than simply the claustrophobic vegetation. At the far top right a tiny human figure sits on a vine playing a flute, three birds hovering around him, while birds flank the “I” at the top center. The bottom of the “I” is a stolid Latin serif, but the top of the letter becomes a sinuous line rhyming with the vines under and alongside it, another visual representation of divided but unified nature. The vine curves around the letters of aphorism to its origin in a tree, the right-hand boundary for the

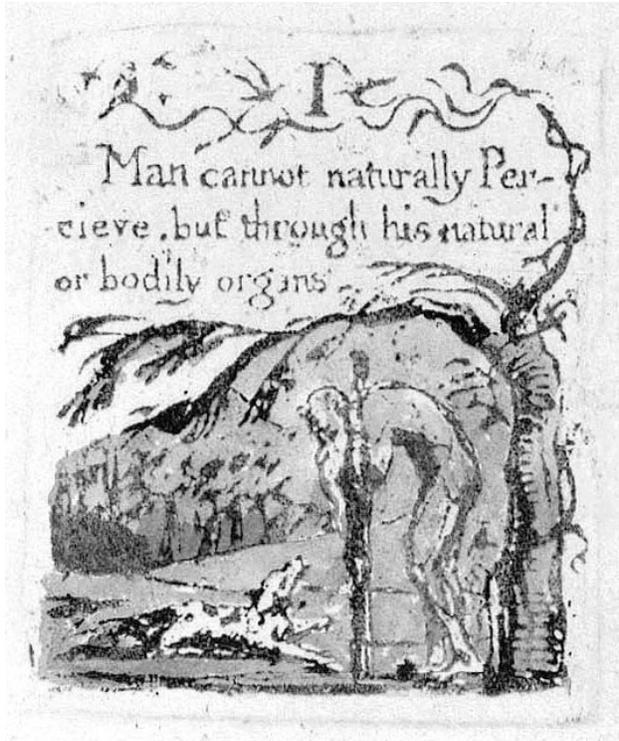


Fig. 18 NNR plate a4

design. From this tree a curving branch stretches over the bent back of an old man, a visual parallel that confines the old man to a natural boundary like the figures in the frontispiece and, by the way in which his back and legs perfectly follow the line of the branch and trunk, identify him as a “natural organ.”

Like all of the old men I have seen in the tractates, this man has a long white beard, but he is notably bald, and even more feeble than the seated man in the frontispiece; he bends precipitously, clinging to a walking stick that keeps him from falling. His feebleness is further emphasized by his nudity, another distinct difference from the previous old men, though his emaciated body retains a definite musculature that suggests his former or potential strength. If he is to be taken as an allegorical figure, the mixture of extreme old age and feebleness with the confident nudity and muscularity of youth argues yet again for a transition – this old man, as

opposed to the old men in positions of authority (ARO plates 4 and 6 for instance) or of threatened authority (as in the frontispiece to NNR), is in a position to synthesize and go beyond these binaries. A spotted dog at his feet, though, ironically echoes the confrontational glare in the frontispiece; the dog now stands in for the robed old man, and the nude old man for the nude youth.<sup>81</sup> The alteration concisely argues for the sameness of the situation – an old man is a young man is a dog, all “natural organs subject to Sense.” But, as I know from ALL RELIGIONS, all are derivatives of their Geniuses, and the human genius is the Poetic Genius, inherently different from the genius of a dog.<sup>82</sup> The confrontation, therefore, is fundamentally different in this plate: not between differing states of humanity, but between human and non-human. The previous plates of this series have alerted me to a sense of ironic doubling (in the second and third plates), suggesting a parallel relationship between this pair (plates a1 and a4); as the transition between the second and third plates reconfigured the devotional visual language of the Gothic window into a scene of pastoral education through books (emphasizing the division inherent in such education), so these two plates transform the confrontation between two human states (age and youth, authority and rebellion) into a confrontation between two states of being, human and non-human. The fact that the confrontation takes place between a dog (a natural creature domesticated and thus socialized by man) and the young/old man (with his bent back and muscular body, a visual fusion of human states) implies that the confrontation is indeed the

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<sup>81</sup> John Howard argues that “The whole is a representation of man perceiving naturally, and the act of looking downward will become an icon for the limited perception of the senses in the ensuing plates” (34), but the doubling takes my reading in another direction.

<sup>82</sup> According to Eaves et al., “if man’s vision is no better than a dog’s then it is decayed like the body of the old man” (38), but such an interpretation ignores a) the old man’s retained muscularity, and b) the inherent difference in man and dog.

same in substance, just as “nature” and “body” are the same in substance.<sup>83</sup> All have the same source, which has not yet been named in this series. The specificity in Blake’s wording, however, implies other possibilities: natural perception occurs through the natural or bodily organs, but ALL RELIGIONS speaks of the Spirit of Prophecy, a function of the Poetic Genius, which is the source of all natural forms. While Blake does not evoke either of these names here, they remain in my memory from the previous book, and as these two tractates are on the same subject, religion, the terms must be transferable. The question, then, becomes “Where would *unnatural* perception come from?” The old man and his dog give us a clue: the Poetic Genius, which is also called the Spirit of Prophecy, is specifically the genius of man; the dog has its own genius, which is not Poetic. I can imagine, then, that man must have some other organs for perception than the dog.

### Plate a5

#### II

A dark branch intrudes between the title “II” and the aphorism beneath it, the trunk from which it grows forming a border along the left side of the plate. The visual motif of division continues, then, rather starkly in this case.<sup>84</sup> The twigs on the branch expand to fill the empty space beside the “II” and, while the branch separates the title from the aphorism, its direction turns away from the words rather than toward them as so often appears in earlier plates. The

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<sup>83</sup> The Greek *kynikos*, the “dog-like” origin of “cynic,” could be in play here, in which case the old man could be identified with Diogenes; it could also identify the figure with Blake himself, Quid the Cynic in *An Island in the Moon*. Such specific associations, while outside my immediate purview (*Island*, as an unpublished manuscript, is not available within this performance, and the image does not include the lamp or tub which typically identify Diogenes), imply that Blake’s use of the dog is in a playful and teasing spirit, another means of underscoring the polysemy of his text and of embodying himself in his books.

<sup>84</sup> Baine argues “a bare tree on Plate 5 apparently suggests the sterility of the ‘reasoning power’” (137), a likely enough explanation.

separation here is definitive, but not obviously restrictive – the branch does not close anything in, merely divides. The aphorism reads

Man by his reason-  
 ing power. can only  
 compare & judge of  
 what he has already  
 perciev'd.

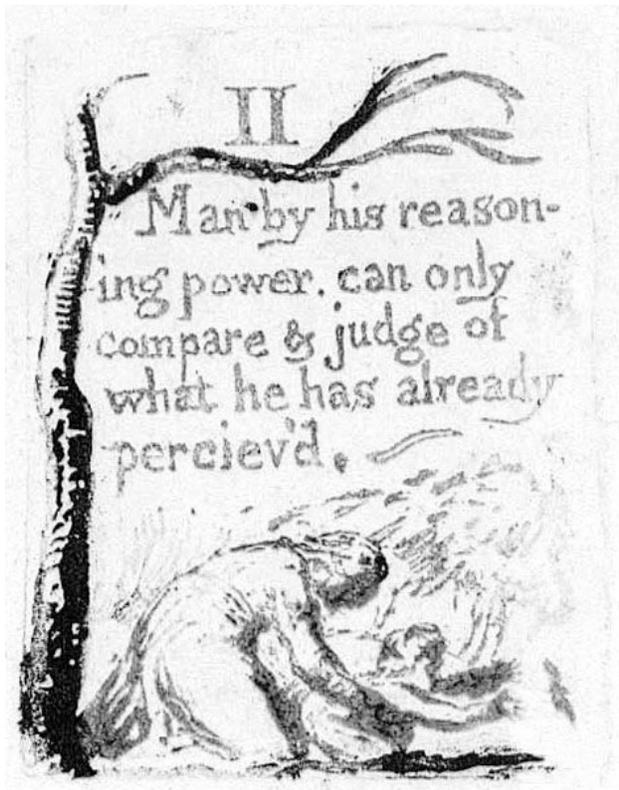


Fig. 19 NNR plate a5

Yet again I find a significant word divided conspicuously, and, like “natu- / ral” in plate a3 and “Per- / cieve” in plate a4, it is a word directly related to the human experience of the world:

“reason- / ing.” There is a definite pattern emerging here: the “natu- / ral” senses which “Per- / cieve” are the basis of “reason- / ing,” and all are divided, broken and weakened by man’s state. Reasoning, as this aphorism has it, is merely a comparing and judging based on prior perception, and the incompleteness of this perception, issuing from an incomplete nature, means that man’s reasoning power will automatically be incomplete as well. Working backward to ALL RELIGIONS, the initial division of man’s being (which is implied to be the work of an authoritarian power, though that power is not identified as a single, particular power) creates a cycle of divisions by which all of man’s actions are divided, constrained, and frustrated.<sup>85</sup> While reasoning suggests agency and thus authority, this agency is undermined by the inherently broken nature of that reasoning. As the dividing branch at the top of the plate suggests, man in his reasoning does not need direct restraint, only the seemingly innocuous passive restraint of his own weakness.

The image follows the aphorism’s implications by showing a woman restraining a child who tries to chase and catch a bird.<sup>86</sup> The hazily printed linework in the background suggests foliage, and the tree to the left helps identify this as another pastoral setting, site of man’s limited perception. This image, like so many others, has multiple edges; the robed mother figure grasps the naked child, their clothes again calling to mind the distinction I have already identified between clothing and nudity as signs of restraint and activity. But, just as in plate a1 and a3, the clothed and nude figures are only outwardly different; they are under the same pattern of restraint. The mother’s posture is essentially the same as that of the child, a visual echo of the

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<sup>85</sup> It has been my argument, of course, that Blake’s books, as part of their educational program, make us aware of this condition by exaggerating division and constraint and thereby frustrating the reader to leap into a new mode of thinking. That process was left frustratingly incomplete in ARO; as I will demonstrate here, NNR brings the reader to that crucial leap in perception.

<sup>86</sup> John Howard sees the robed figure as a man, “an analogical presentation of the ‘reasoning power’” (40), but Eaves et al. see a woman as well (38).

tree and branch stretching above her, and just as the design reaches over to close her in, and just as she bends to close the child in, so the child wishes to reach over and restrain the bird.

Ironically, however, even without the mother restraining him the child could not catch the bird, which is already flying away. He would still be restrained by the physical limitations of his immature body. As with the patterns I have seen before – clothed and nude, old and young, human and animal – this pattern shows an underlying sameness beneath all the difference: the same restraint in different forms. Those who restrain are restrained, and those who seem to have authority are ruled over. As ALL RELIGIONS warned, “this is necessary / from the confined natu / re of bodily sensations” (plate 9).

### **Plate a6**

#### III

I immediately note that the pattern of doubling continues from plate a5 to a6: the design of a6 is structurally identical to that of a5, only reversed. I would assume that this indicates some kind of symbolic reversal, and begin to read a6 looking for it to take a significant turn from a5 in some way. I notice, first, that the vegetation separating the title “III” from the aphorism this time is a winding grapevine rather than a black tree branch, but I cannot immediately think of a qualitative difference between the two; in fact, where the branch only separated the title, the grapevine in a6 actually surrounds and closes off the title. While it is more visually appealing, then, the grapevine is actually more restrictive than the branch, a gilded cage, as it were, an ironic reversal of the kind I am expecting to find. As I examine this grapevine, I wish to make some indistinct lines at the top left into the kind of winged figures or birds I saw in plates a3 and a4, but they do not prove to be anything decipherable; either poorly printed or merely stray lines,

they nevertheless frustrate me, since this reading process has made me so aware of trivialities.

Ironically, the aphorism has something to say of this effect:

From a perception of  
 only 3 senses or 3 ele-  
 -ments none could de-  
 -duce a fourth or fifth

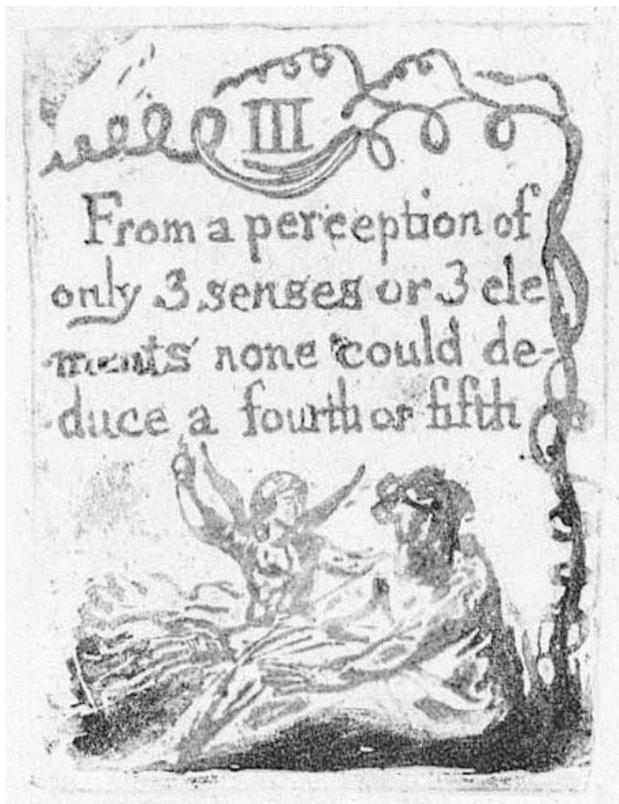


Fig. 20 NNR plate a6

As I am frustrated over the limitation of my physical perception, the aphorism states an obvious fact – that our perceptions, being limited, limit even our perceptions of our perceptions. The pattern of breaking significant words continues, even intensifies, in this plate: “ele / -ments” and

“de- / -duce,” words related to perception and reason respectively, are divided, “de- / -duce” divided especially emphatically with two hyphens. The breaking of these two words is particularly ironic in that they are both dividing words, both implying the splitting of a thing into its constituent parts, even down to its most basic parts. And both are words of analytical reason, which as I have argued Blake is pushing past its logical limits. My sense that this plate would be a special case, a turning point, seems to be bearing out so far: by breaking “breaking words” Blake has come as close to explicitly stating his purpose as he is likely to do. Reason and its workings – analysis and deduction into elements – are now fully implicated in the divided nature of the human body and senses. Further, this aphorism seems to imply the question I asked in regarding plate a4: “Where would *unnatural* perception come from?” If three senses could not deduce a fourth or fifth, by logic five senses could not deduce six or seven; there may be, Blake argues, more senses than we know, but we do not know them because of the limiting effects of the senses we know.

The design of a6 is another kind of restraint. As a mirror-design to a5, the grapevine on the right of the page creates a border; viewing the two plates side-by-side, the tree on the left of a5 and the grapevine on the right of a6 form a continuous border over the two designs, suggesting that they be read together. At the bottom of a6 a curly-haired, bearded man, nude except for a cloth wrapped around his waist, looks away from a cherub that emerges either behind or between his legs. His knees are lifted and he wraps his arms around them in a typically protective gesture, as if closing himself up from physical vulnerability. The winged cherub is not the usual chubby Renaissance baby, but a small, muscular man; his chest and abdominal muscles are particularly defined. With his left arm the cherub touches the man’s shoulder as though to get his attention, while his right arm points up to the word “a” as though

calling the seated man's attention to the words above his head.<sup>87</sup> This is the first time in the tractates that I have seen the characters in a design show their awareness of the letters; it is an intensely disorienting moment, invoking a meta-critical consciousness in this cherub that further confirms my expectation that this plate is special.

The cherub, aware that he is a figure in a book, attempts to alert the other figure to the fact – to increase his senses, in other words, to an awareness of another plane of experience. If the two-dimensional man were to become suddenly aware of “a fourth or fifth” sense, what, I wonder, would be the outcome? The seated man, however – in a between-state of nude and clothed, I must note – looks away and down, either willfully ignoring the cherub or simply unable to perceive him either. I know, from the bordering grapevine, that this figure is closed in his perceptions. Perhaps, as a two-dimensional figure, he lacks the third sense necessary to perceive the cherub, who, if perceived, would make him aware of the fourth and fifth senses. The man's state of un/dress suggests that he is in a liminal state and capable of making a transformation, but he must first look up. I cannot forget, however, that the cherub as well is a two-dimensional figure, contained within the same border; his perceptions, while wider than the man's, are still confined. His awareness, then, is not a full awareness – he may know he is a character etched in a plate, but he has not escaped the page on which he is printed, if such an escape is even possible. After all, an escape from the page, if we consider the page as a representation of the field of perception, would be an escape from perception itself, and an escape from perception would mean losing experience altogether. If we cannot imagine a fourth or fifth sense from three known senses, we cannot imagine through our perception something outside of perception – unless, as I am beginning to imagine, the only way out is through.

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<sup>87</sup> Eaves et al. describe this as a “gesture often associated with prophets” (39).

## Plate a7

IV

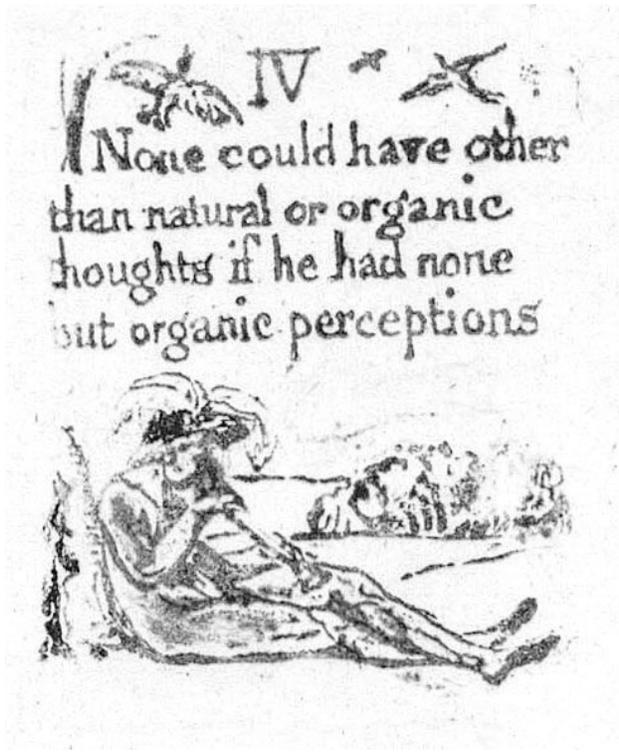


Fig. 21 NNR plate a7

A curious change from previous plates: there is no enclosing vegetable border on plate a7. A partial trunk and branch stand beside the first line, but the trunk is broken by the words and the branch cut off by the edge of the plate. Instead of branches or vines surrounding the title, two large birds on each side of the “IV” and one small bird to the right fly upward from the aphorism:

None could have other  
 than natural or organic  
 thoughts if he had none  
 but organic perceptions

Again, as in aphorism I, “natural” is tied to “organ” and thus to the physical body. Blake is further implying, from aphorism III, that there is something other than “organic perceptions,” else he could not take about them in the negative. With only the perception of the physical senses, there could be no concept of anything but organic perceptions, just as three senses could not conceive of four or five. This aphorism, like III, echoes PRINCIPLE 4 of ALL RELIGIONS: “from already ac- / quired knowledge / Man could not ac / quire more” (plate 7). In ALL RELIGIONS, the conclusion from this fact is that “an universal / Poetic Genius exists” which allows man to acquire new knowledge through new perception. The relative openness of plate a7, in comparison to the previous plates, implies that something new has been introduced to the argument, though it is not here named the Poetic Genius; while the aphorism speaks of organic perceptions in the negative, the design knows a positive alternative.

At the bottom of the page, a nude youth in a posture echoing the man in a6 (yet another doubling of design, again reversed) sits leaning against a tree playing a flute. He is completely nude, unlike the man in a6, and he wears a conspicuously feathered hat. The feathers identify him with the birds at the top of the page,<sup>88</sup> but it is important to note that he is still a conventional pastoral figure in a conventionally pastoral scene, and that his nudity is not necessarily a sign of his freedom. He is, rather, relatively free, in comparison to the man in plate a6 or the contentious shepherds in a1; the tree behind him is merely a support rather than a confinement. I am reminded of the angel/prophet/bard in ALL RELIGIONS plate 8, and note that between the two freedom seems linked to musical expression – the angel/prophet/bard with his harp, this shepherd with his flute. They are the only images so far of creative acts, and both have a sense of vibrance

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<sup>88</sup> John Howard argues that “with a winged hat upon his head [...] he has learned the message of the angel illustrated on the preceding plate” (41), though I would suggest it is too early in the series to assume that any one has “learned the message” fully.

and vitality missing from other designs. I would like to deduce from this pattern the idea that creativity is another sense beyond organic perceptions, but the previous aphorism has warned me about the limited quality of my own deductions: “deduction,” after all, is a breaking of what is already broken. But, if I can safely invoke the Poetic Genius from the similar aphorism in ALL RELIGIONS (plate 7), I can at least begin to create a tentative connection between the Genius and non-organic perceptions.

### **Plate a8**

V

After a7's momentary respite, the design to a8 closes in again as the aphorism returns to the limitations of perception. A skeletal black branch hung with vines arches over the title “V,” branches and vines reaching down toward the letters. The tree creates a border on the left of the plate, and another branch intrudes into the body of the aphorism, forcing to the right the “ons” of the divided “percepti / ons.” In direct contrast to the design for plate a7, as though to remind me violently that perception is still limited by the divided nature of human senses, the design for a8 confines and attacks the words. The aphorism explains the difference between the two designs, for it returns to the theme of limited perception:

Mans desires are  
 limited by his percepti  
                   ons. none can de-  
 -sire what he has not  
 perciev'd

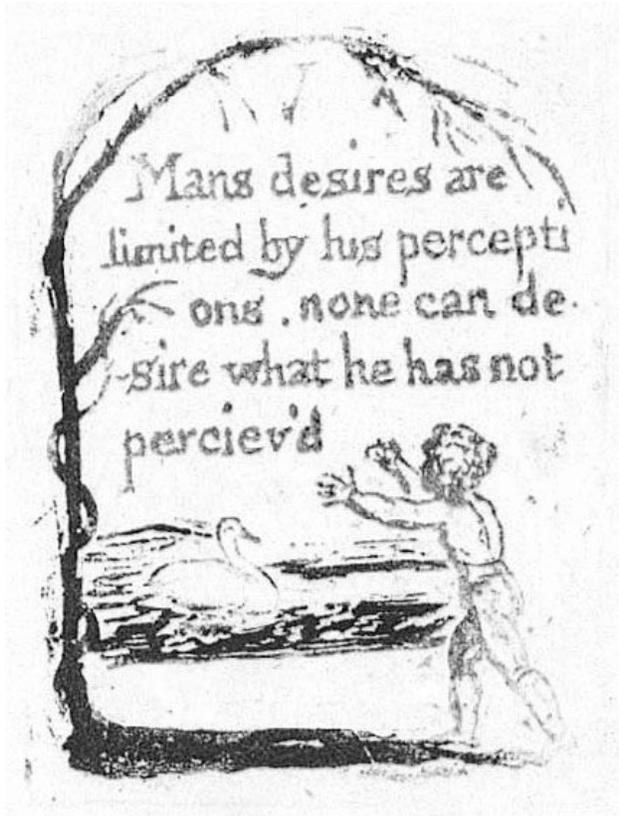


Fig. 22 NNR plate a8

Unlike aphorism IV, in which none of the words were divided, here we again have two divisions; first “percepti / ons” is broken by the end of the overhanging branch at the right, and its second half is assaulted by a smaller branch on the left. This is a more visually aggressive division than those I have previously seen, arguing that the peace and passivity in plate a7 is only temporarily possible, perhaps only during moments of creative endeavour like music. Into this rough repression enters the term “desire,” which has not figured into any of the aphorisms yet. After noting that desire is limited by perception, the second instance of “de- / -sire” is broken, like “de- / -duce” by two hyphens (plate a6), pointing to another link in the chain of divisions – as perception is limited by division, so desire is limited by perception. In a world of organic perceptions, desire is limited to what we have already perceived.

The image below the aphorism refers back to the image on plate a5. Here, however, the child is bigger (though still nude), the small flying bird is a swan floating on the water, and the mother is no longer present. But the child is still restrained, though having outgrown his mother's restraints; the swan is inaccessible in its element, the water, so the child can no more catch it than the smaller child on a5 could catch the flying bird, even without his mother's restraint. Returning to an earlier image, though, is another ironic illustration of the aphorism; I have already perceived another version of a child and a bird, so I desire that this child and this swan be the same as what I have already experienced. They are not, however; a small flying bird is not a swan, and a walking child is not a crawling baby. Their outward differences are real, though they illustrate the same constraints. Blake's work is yet again prodding me to awareness of my own perceptual limitations, and the faulty, incomplete deductions I make from them. My own experience of the plate thus confirms the truth of the aphorism – that I can only desire what I have already perceived, as I desire to make sense out of an image by comparison to an image I have already seen – and simultaneously points me out of this trap by being what it appears to be – that is, the image on a8 *is* a version of a5, just as every human form is a version of the Poetic Genius. As I began to suspect near the end of ALL RELIGIONS, it seems the way out of the perceptual trap is by perceiving not more, but differently – perceiving that a thing is and is not what it seems, for instance. Perhaps, paradoxically, by acknowledging the limits of my perception, my perception broadens.

## Plate a9

VI

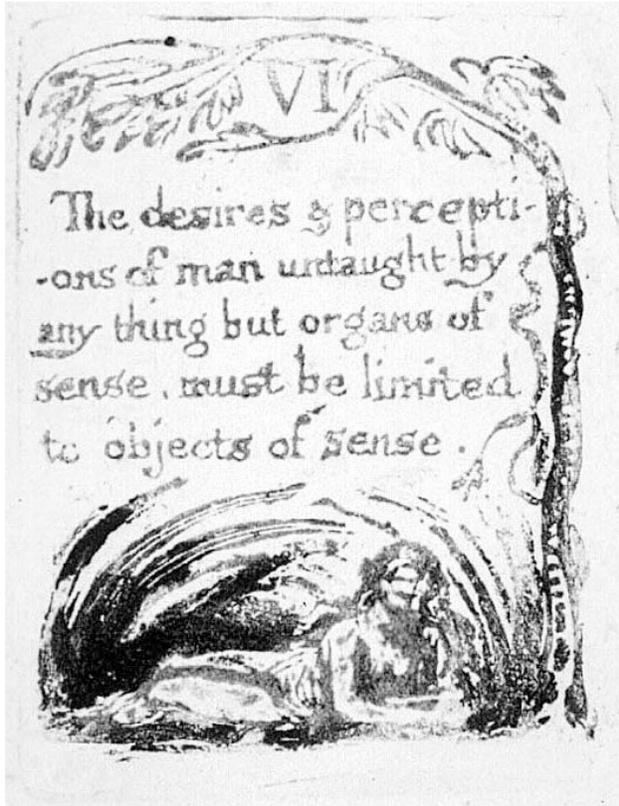


Fig. 23 NNR plate a9

On this final plate of the [a] series, as with the mirror design of a5 and a6, the tree and branches of a9 complement those of a8 and form an overarching design across the two plates. Just as with that earlier pair, the title is again surrounded by branches, though they contrast distinctly with those in the companion plate; rather than spiky, ominous branches of a8, these are loaded with soft foliage, making restraint a kind, motherly sort (recalling a5) rather than threatening. At the top right-hand corner, the bunch of foliage bursting from the branch actually resembles a bird, returning me to the happier scene in a7. With aphorism VI Blake closes the

series not yet having solved the problem of perception, but solidifying the line of argument that began in “The Argument:”

The desires & percepti-  
-ons of man untaught by  
any thing but organs of  
sense, must be limited  
to objects of sense.<sup>89</sup>

Once again, “percepti- / -ons” is emphatically divided with two hyphens, continuing the pattern that has so consistently influenced my interpretations of the word. The literal meaning of the aphorism is an obvious corollary to the two previous, a positive way of stating what Blake stated in the negative in aphorism V – that if “none can de- / -sire what he has not / perciev’ d” (plate a8), then man can only desire and perceive what his sense organs can sense. But this aphorism suggests some intriguing possibilities – one, that desire and perception are in some way similar things, as they are both defined (“taught”) by organs of sense; I extrapolate that perhaps if one can be changed, the other can be changed. That is, if man could desire something he has not perceived, perhaps perception would enlarge. The other optimistic possibility is the implication that “untaught” desires and perceptions can be “taught” by something. The deliberate “any thing,” I suspect, is rather specific than casual: Blake does, in fact, mean “thing,” in that some *thing* – a real thing rather than an abstraction or generalization – must teach the desires and perceptions, something larger than the limited organs of sense. Blake is arguing, in other words,

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<sup>89</sup> Matthew Green reads in this aphorism that “Blake is not rejecting perception as a mode, or even *the* mode, of knowledge acquisition, but rather is seeking to redefine perception as something that is not limited to the sensory ‘organs’ as described by thinkers such as Locke. Far from refuting the proposition that ‘The desires & perceptions of man untaught by any thing but organs of sense, must be limited to objects of sense’ [...], Blake seems to be admitting such limitation is a very real, and a very undesirable, possibility” (*Visionary Materialism* 84).

that some sort of education is needed to enlarge man's perceptions and desires – just as I hypothesized entering into this performance.<sup>90</sup> Further, this education must be enacted by a *thing* – such as an illuminated book.

At the bottom of the page, a figure reminiscent of the melancholic figure in ALL RELIGIONS plate 3, and the student lying on the ground in NO NATURAL RELIGION a3, lies on the ground reading. This figure is more detailed than either of those figures, however, and therefore opens herself up for more detailed consideration. She is a feminine figure, and, like the man on a6, loosely wrapped in a cloth but mostly nude, a transitional state of dress signaling once again a character in a liminal, and therefore teachable, position. She is, of course, at another liminal moment, in that she occupies the last plate of the [a] series, and presumably a change of some sort will occur in the transition between plates. While the man on a6 ignored or could not perceive the cherub, this woman is absorbed in reading a book, her head propped on her hand. In contrast to the melancholy figure in ARO plate 3, though, her head is more raised and alert, not sunken in defeat or frustration. She is engaged with her text. As usual, of course, her setting confines her; in addition to the tree and overhanging branches, tall blades of grass bend directly over her body, almost swallowing her up. I can think of more than one interpretation for this image: the woman may be becoming lost in the artificial wisdom of the book, therefore not perceiving the grass growing threateningly around her as the man on a6, lost in contemplation, does not perceive the cherub who tries to get his attention; further, her book may be one with the grass, both representing false sorts of wisdom in which she could be

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<sup>90</sup> John Howard: “The unstated conclusion is that man has a faculty of knowledge other than reason. Indeed Blake's logic is based on Locke's premises, with the single exception that Blake denies that Reason can deduce spiritual truths. Thus, Blake's statements are intended to reduce Locke's notions to absurdity and to make the reader search for a faculty other than reason to explain mans' desire for and perception of spiritual existence” (40).

swallowed up and lost, another example of the outward difference/same restraint motif I have already experienced throughout this book. Or, I could choose to read the scene more positively – the woman’s alert, thoughtful engagement with the book could be keeping the approaching grasses at bay, as her participation in an imaginative conversation protects her from the passive reception of incomplete knowledge. I could even imagine, in this instance, that the young woman is reading a Blake book, perhaps *All Religions are One*, and that she is being educated (as her dress implies) into a changed state of perception. The education process is not complete, however, as she is still threatened by the grasses, but she is on her way.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Green again: “What [Blake] does not seem to be suggesting, however, is that the solution to this problem is the invocation of an abstract and transcendental ideal. The visionary materialism that Blake’s works promote is tied to a particular conceptualisation of the divine that positions God within, rather than beyond, the bounds of human experience” (*Visionary Materialism* 84). I would agree – not transcendence but full engagement.

## CHAPTER 6

### Vegetable Dialectic: The Performance, Act 3

#### THERE is NO NATURAL RELIGION, [b] series

##### Plate b1<sup>92</sup>

My experience up until now with the illuminated books has taught me to distrust conventional images, and this plate dividing the two series of NO NATURAL RELIGION is no different. On the surface, I recognize a version of the raising of Lazarus, as a robed Christ-figure stands over a nude man who is rising up from the ground. As with many of the plates in ALL RELIGIONS (which was printed in the same edition as NNR copy L), Blake has emphasized the lines of the nude man's body in pen, enhancing his musculature and bringing him out from the background. By now I am used to the dichotomy between clothed and nude figures, and their dress is my first signal that the conventional image is under scrutiny. I have already seen, in a number of other designs, clothed figures in the role of restraining authority and nude figures as frustrated rebels or prophets, so the usual reading of a resurrection scene is easily reversed – the Christ-figure may not be raising him, but ordering him to stay down, a command against which the nude man argues emphatically with his woefully raised arm. This may be a restraint, or merely a warning that he is not ready to get up. Whatever the case, the restraint is gentle, as

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<sup>92</sup> Eaves et al. register some controversy over the ordering of the [b] series, suggesting that if NNR “was etched as a single work, then plate b1, a full-plate design, can no longer serve as the frontispiece to the second series” (25), arguing instead that it be moved to the end as a concluding plate. There is much to recommend this reasoning, but as it has traditionally held place at the beginning of the second series, and as some division is necessary to make sense of beginning the numbering over, and as the Blake Trust edition retains it as the first plate in the series, I will leave it there as well, as a divider plate rather than a frontispiece. I will, however, skip the repeated plate a2; as I stated in Chapter 1, page 1, I consider NNR a single work, meaning the second series does not need its own title page.

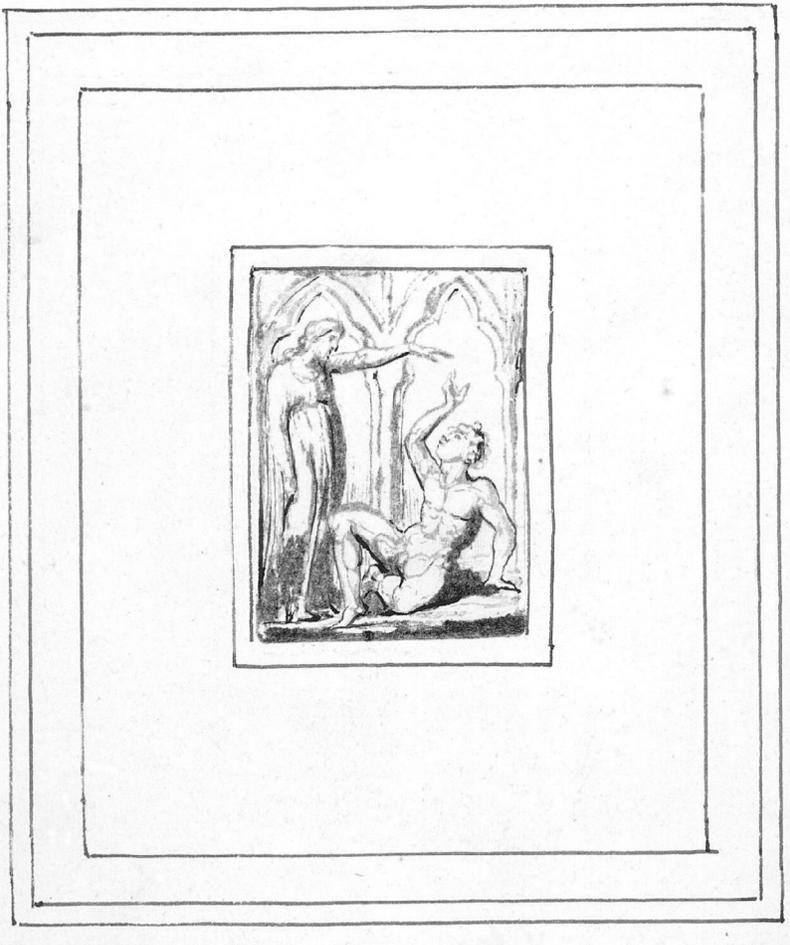


Fig. 24 NNR plate b1

emphasized by the noticeably feminine stance of the Christ-figure (who is, judging by his beard, certainly male). This androgynous character suggests that what is going on here is a different species of restraint than that perpetrated by either the patriarchal Jehovah-figures or the gentle mother-figures I have seen before; this Christ-figure fuses the two, much the same way the half-clothed figures fuse the robed and nude figures into one liminal figure. That sense of liminality, then, may suggest that this Christ-figure will be a guide to the transition between the two series, and thus into the continuation of the educational program begun in ALL RELIGIONS. It also allows his gesture bistability: it is at once a resurrection scene and a scene of restraint. This

simultaneous resurrection/restraint prepares me for the rest of my education – while I may want to run off on my own, with half-formed notions of escape from the senses and broadened perceptions, there is still too much I have not yet experienced.

**Plate b3**

I

Mans percepti-  
 -ons are not bound  
 -ed by organs of  
 perception. he per-  
 -cieves more than  
 sense (tho' ever  
 so acute) can  
 discover.

Blake leaps straight into an aggressive refutation of the [a] series' entire argument with aphorism I. This aphorism states baldly that perceptions are not bound by the senses, despite what the previous series has argued. To make sense of that complete reversal, I find myself wondering what precisely “perception” and “sense” must mean in this changed context. The dividing plate b1 suggested that a significant transition had happened – that division itself was changing states. Yet at the top of the page I see “Mans” covered over with vegetation, while in the text I still see “percepti- / -ons” divided with the same intensity as previously patterned. And this instance of the word syntactically belongs with “not bound / -ed,” another divided word. The individual words in “organs of / perception,” however, are not divided. Syntactically, Blake has confusingly divided the words that claim to end division and restored to wholeness the “organs”

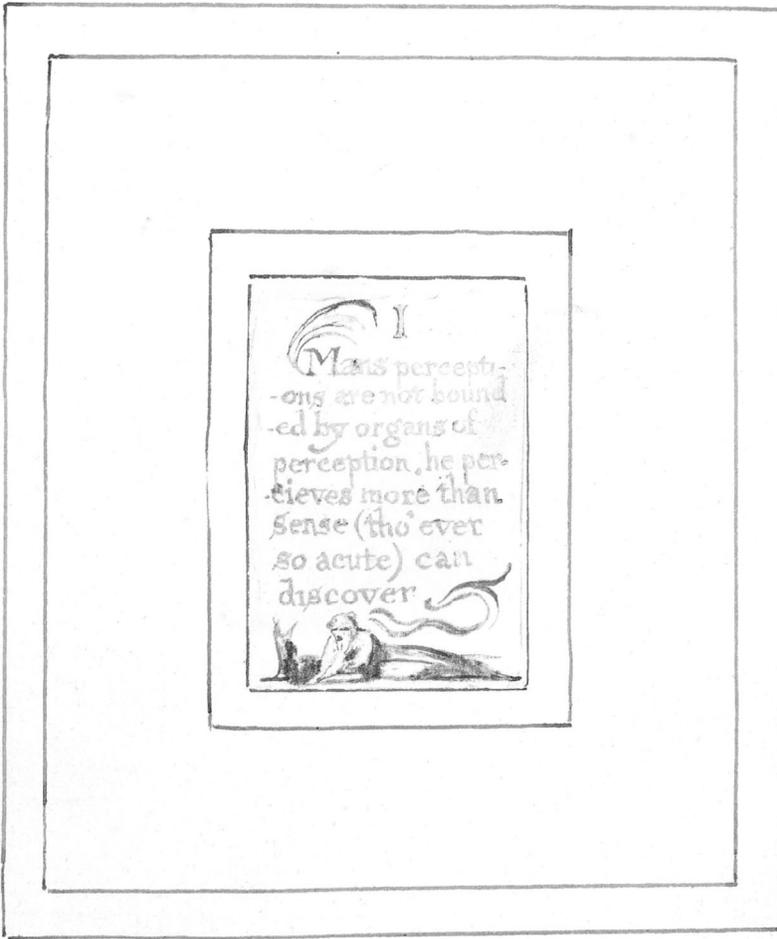


Fig. 25 NNR plate b3

that had previously been a site of division. Once again I am disoriented after thinking, as I experienced the movement of the argument in series [a], that I had discovered a pattern I could follow. Such disorienting reversal, just as I had established an organization that seemed authoritative, should not surprise me; after all, the theme of ALL RELIGIONS was the overturning of authoritative narratives. Once I placed myself in a position of authority, then, the book dethrones me and once again forces me to figure out where I am rhetorically. The altered pattern of division argues that I have been trapped in an organizing pattern – a misleading pattern leading to my own organs of perception being confined. The organs of perception themselves

are not the causes of division; their divided nature is only a symptom of a prior division. They can, therefore, appear whole even as their confined and confining nature is refuted. The second half of the aphorism pushes me beyond the senses, arguing that “he per- / -cieves more than / sense.” The organs of sense, then, are not the only mode of experience and perception, though they are themselves not evil or destructive, nor even incomplete except in relation to some other organ or sense. The senses are complete in themselves; but perception is not bound just to the senses as I have previously understood – perception and sensory experience are not synonymous. Perception includes something other than sense.<sup>93</sup>

The reading figure at the bottom of the page, who echoes in reverse the woman on plate a9, is thus also changed by the shift in perception. This bearded man appears to be wearing a robe, but the lines of his body and legs are not obscured by his clothing. He seems in this way to be analogous to the half-clothed liminal figures in the [a] series. He is also not holding up his head with his hand, banishing that conventional sign of melancholy. A sweeping decorative flourish seems to issue from his head, curling around to point to “discover;” rather than vegetation, it seems to vaguely call to mind an elaborately plumed bird or winged serpent. Either of these possibilities could imply an embodiment of the imagination issuing from the man’s mind. I recall the destabilizing horned serpent sneaking out of “his” in ARO plate 6 and note how Blake’s images so often cut two or more ways – destabilization is itself a sign of the imagination at work. On the man’s left though, an ambiguous blot of ink could be more vegetation or his own shadow. If vegetation, it tells me that the man is still not fully free of the

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<sup>93</sup> Paley argues that “Of the chaos of sensory data, the Poetic Genius or primary imagination creates and orders, an act parallel with – not merely analogous to – God’s creation of the universe, and to the artist’s creation of the work of art” (25), but NNR makes it clear that there is no “chaos of sensory data,” but in fact a paralyzing paucity of sensory data, a limited perception that must be expanded rather than ordered. The function of the imagination is not to order what is already known, but to open perception to what is yet unknown.

bounds of his organic senses, or has not yet realized that his organic senses are not his only senses; if his shadow, it would seem to be cast from the decorative bird/serpent, suggesting a light emanating from the man's active imagination. This light, sourced from a design element but strong enough to cast a physical shadow, suggests the source of the perception beyond the organic senses. For a non-mimetic element in the design to influence a mimetic element, just as when a design element influences words and vice-versa, argues actively for the interdependence of all the elements of the print.

#### **Plate b4**

#### **II**

More abstracted vegetation surrounds the title "II," this time two distinctly different forms: on the left, a looping vine and long, crisp leaves swoop up and under the numeral; on the right, a budding bough. The pairing of vegetation types emphasizes the dialectical structure of the argument so far, and even more so when surrounding the Roman numeral II. The aphorism too is paired:

Reason or the ra-  
-tio of all we have  
already known. is  
not the same that  
it shall be when  
we know more

Blake's eccentric punctuation creates two distinct statements of one syntactically coherent sentence. Blake defines "Reason" for the first time in the series; whereas I have been compelled before to take "reason" in its conventional meaning, as a process of analysis and synthesis, Blake

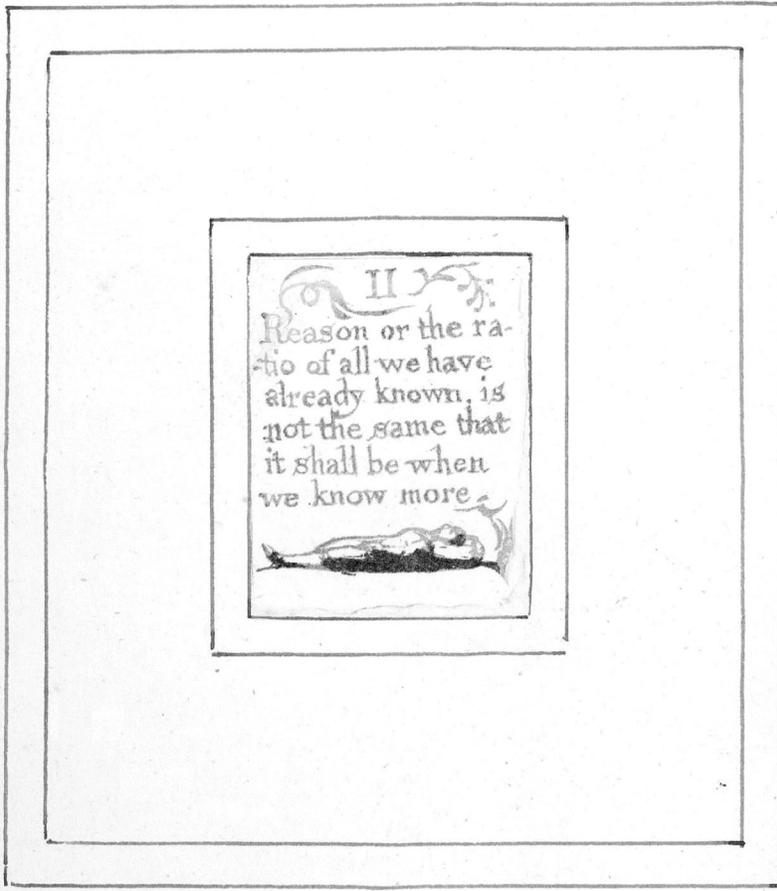


Fig. 26 NNR plate b4

instead defines it as “the ra- / -tio of all we have / already known.” Reason, then, is not a process, but a stasis, a fixed relationship between fixed “known” things. It is not a dynamic working of the mind. Punctuated with a period, the definition forms a sentence fragment in a syntactical image of reason’s incompleteness – though it encompasses “all” we have known, this ratio “is / not the same that / it shall be when / we know more.” On its face, this is an obvious statement: of course the ratio of all we know will be different when we know more. There will be *more*. But, the aphorism still implies, the difference will be only one of volume; all things will still be in a ratio, just a somewhat larger ratio that admits and fixes the new knowledge.

The image at the bottom of the page pictures a body lying down (on the ground, a bed, or a bier), his head on a pillow or stone. He is either dead or sleeping, but there are no other contextual clues to conclusively argue for either. This figure's status has a significant influence on how I read the aphorism; if he is dead, the design either controverts the optimism of "when we know more" or demands a resurrection like that of the dividing plate b1.<sup>94</sup> The figure may be a symbol for the ratio of all known things, since nothing that is alive and in flux can be known fully. But if he is sleeping, the figure could be said to represent the potentiality of knowing more. At some point, one would assume, he will wake up and the ratio will enlarge as he knows more. Neither of these possibilities is mutually exclusive; both could be considered accurate depictions of the ratio viewed from different perspectives or defined in different terms. But this figure is paired with the reading figure on b3 by the presence of another decorative flourish that suggests an abstracted figure leaping from or over his head. This figure, like the bird/serpent on b3, fuses Blake's three design modes – image, decoration, and the written word – by acting simultaneously as all three. As a decoration, it links the image to the aphorism by becoming a period to the second half of the statement, but as a figure, its head *becomes* that period, an entirely different state that would give the tiny figure an agency and authority in the writing of the aphorism. The tiny leaper determines when the aphorism ends and does so physically, with a dynamic act (leaping) and with his own head (home of the brain, the organ of imagination and creativity).

Read as a figure, then, I could consider this flourish an image of the active imagination, and its relation to the sleeping/dead figure prompts more analysis. This image reminds me of a simplified version of plate a6, the half-clothed but awake man replaced by a nude and

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<sup>94</sup> Alternately, as Nelson Hilton suggests in a personal comment to me, Blake may be making a needling pun: "when we know mor(tality)."

sleeping/dead man, the cherub replaced by an abstraction. In some way, Blake seems to be going backward; when he used this motif in the [a] series, the man's half-clothed appearance seemed to suggest the possibility of education, though he could not yet see the cherub in front of him. But this more abstracted design returns to the dichotomies of the [a] series with a nude figure (who appears to be covering his genitals with his hand) who is not only failing to notice the figure above him, but not even conscious. So while the aphorism is giving hope for an expanded base of knowledge that will alter the ratio of the known, the image undercuts that optimism by showing that such a changed state is not necessarily going to happen. The image, in fact, seems to dwell in the alternate line of thought the aphorism leaves unsaid: that knowing more is not necessarily knowing better, and that simply adding knowledge to the ratio, while it will change the ratio, will still leave a ratio – a fixed and dead relationship between known things.

### Plate b6<sup>95</sup>

#### IV

Aphorism IV directly addresses my qualms about the nature of knowledge and the ratio by arguing

The bounded is  
 loathed by its pos-  
 -sessor. The same  
 dull round even  
 of a univer[s]e would

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<sup>95</sup> The plate that would be numbered b5, of course, is lost. Eaves et al. speculate that this plate reintroduces the term *desire* “to free it from the empiricist confines in which it was first raised on plate a8. If it were not for desires that transcend Lockean limits, we would be trapped in a machine-like universe which would be ‘loathed by its possessor’ and prisoner” (32).

soon become a  
mill with complica-  
-ted wheels.

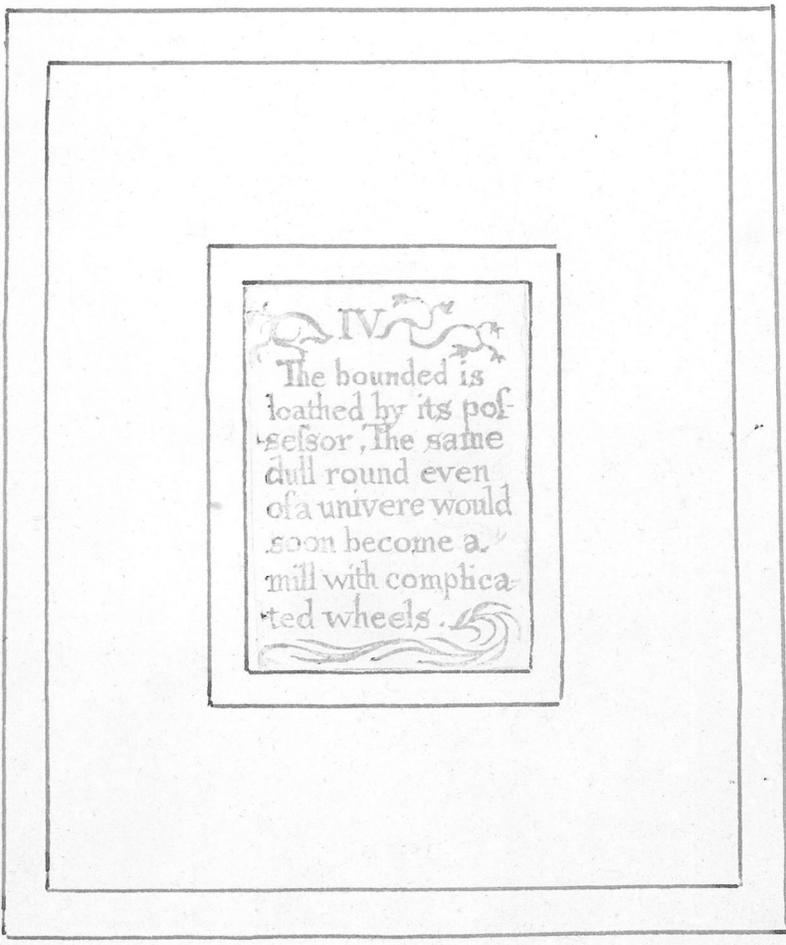


Fig. 27 NNR plate b6

As I suspected from aphorism II, the introduction of knowledge alone does not alter the fact of a ratio, only the scope of it. And no matter how large the scope, even a universe becomes “the

same dull round,” a “mill with complicated wheels.”<sup>96</sup> No matter how complicated, once all things are known, all knowledge possessed, “the bounded is loathed by its possessor.” Such is the situation with “known” knowledge, knowledge that is closed into a fixed ratio rather than a dynamic process. Blake emphasizes the importance of this aphorism by enclosing it in a design with no image, only vegetative motifs. Another dialectical pair flanks the title IV, a thorny branch on the left and a leafy vine on the right, reminding me of the duality at play. At the bottom of the plate, flowing lines loop under the last half of “complica-” and back around beneath “-ted wheels;” while they could be vegetation, they look more like a long, wispy feather, bringing back the bird and feather imagery from the [a] series, where the bird and feather seemed associated with desire beyond the senses. Here, then, the return of the feather reminds me that the “same dull round” can only be if desire is restricted to the objects of the senses; the “mill with complicated wheels” needs only the introduction of desire to turn it into a creative rather than static machine.

### **Plate b7**

V

Another simple design, lacking a proper image, plate b7 pairs with b6 visually and rhetorically. The title “V” features another dialectical pair of boughs, a branch I would identify as an evergreen (its branches appear to have needles rather than thorns or leaves) on the left and a weeping willow on the right. Like the thorns and leaves of b6, this pair carries profoundly different connotations, the evergreen implying eternal life and the willow suggesting mourning,

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<sup>96</sup> Schorer identifies the political implications of the image: “For when the image of the ‘mill’ first appears in [Blake’s] writing, it is in his attack on deism, *There Is No Natural Religion*, and it is the symbol not of the factory itself but of the method of logic, of rationalism, and of scientific theology. Later it become more expressive of industry itself, and of other elements; but it came from industry in the first place, from the novel sight of men at machines” (175).

morbidity, and mortality. These are two sides of human experience, reflected in the aphorism, which continues the theme of IV:

If the many be-  
-come the same as  
the few, when pos-  
-sess'd, More! More!  
is the cry of a mista-  
-ken soul, less than  
All cannot satisfy  
Man.

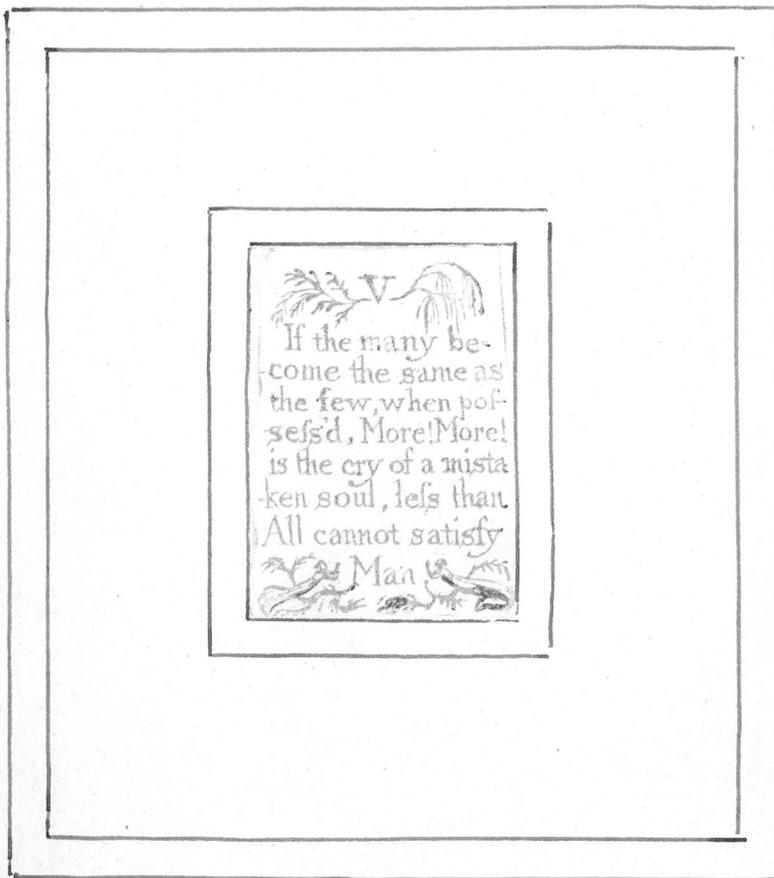


Fig. 28 NNR plate b7

Aphorism IV argued that no matter how large, whatever is “bounded” or known in full is “loathed by its possessor;” aphorism V demonstrates the outcome of this loathing.

Overabundance becomes the same as scarcity, the many becomes the same as the few, because what is possessed is loathed as never enough. The result, then, is desire for more, which can never satisfy. I return again to the theme of desire from the [a] series, recalling the assertion there that “none can desire what he has not perciev’d” (plate a8), which either means that man has perceived “All,” or that there are multiple definitions of “desire” at work here. For if “less than / All cannot satisfy / Man,” then man can only desire more if he has perceived that there is more than he has – more knowledge to be had and possessed. This desire is only possible if, as plate b3 argues, “Mans perceptions are not bounded by organic perception,” for man can only desire what he has perceived, and if he is not satisfied with “All” there must be some perception beyond “All.” Yet the desire for “More! More!” is a mistake. As I speculated in regard to plate b3, the correct desire must not be “More!” but “different.”

The aphorism does not yet describe what that “different” might be; however, the little praying figures on either side of “Man” may be ironic hints. These figures call to mind the Gothic window in the title page, and the transformation of that figural arrangement in plate a3, as the conventional religious figures were replaced by natural religious figures. Here, the Madonna is replaced by capitalized “Man” and the praying figures are superimposed over evergreen branches. Thus far in NO NATURAL RELIGION “Man” has only appeared capitalized at the beginning of sentences; within the sentence, the word has been lowercase. But “Man” appears capitalized in another context: ALL RELIGIONS are ONE consistently capitalizes “Man” in relation to the “true Man,” which is identified with the Poetic Genius. So, though the Poetic Genius has not appeared in this tractate, the capitalized and isolated “Man” harks back to that

concept. The praying figures, in this case, have an ambiguous significance. When they first appeared in plates a2 and a3, I noted an unmistakable hint of irony in their usage; and that irony carries over to their reappearance here. The image of figures praying to the word “Man” is no more appropriate than those praying to a woman writing on a tablet or a woman holding a baby; in any of these cases, they supplicate to an illegitimate authority. But, insofar as “Man” is identified with the Poetic Genius, it is somewhat more legitimate in that the Poetic Genius is the origin and source of all gods and religions. So, while the praying figures are ironic, their irony also gives them a sort of secret truth; by praying to “Man” they are praying to the source behind all other things men pray to.

### **Plate b8**

VI

Rather than the dialectically opposed vegetative designs, the title VI is surrounded by a single burst of vegetation that arches over the numerals and fills the empty space at the top of the plate. The aphorism presents the outcome of the line of reasoning from the last two plates as a conditional statement:

If any could de-  
 -sire what he is in-  
 -capable of posses-  
 sing. despair must  
 be his eternal  
 lot

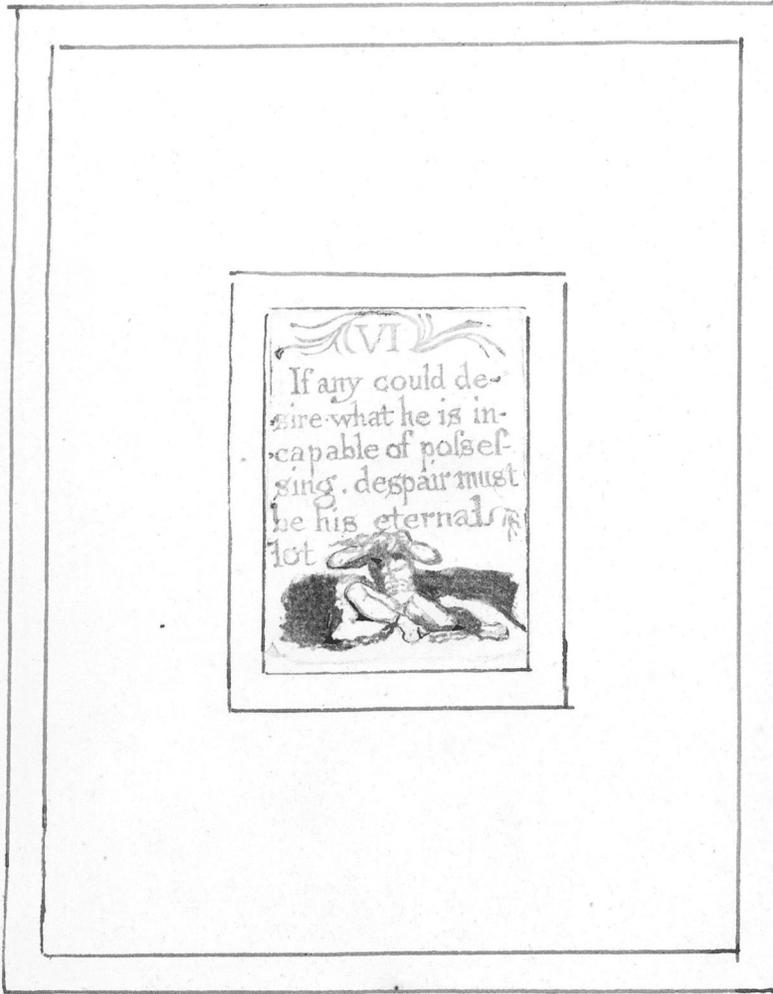


Fig. 29 NNR plate b8

Such is a logical conclusion: if man cannot be satisfied with all, and can still desire more, than there is no other possibility than despair. Yet Blake pointedly makes this statement conditionally: "*If any could* desire what he is incapable of possessing" (my italics). The implication then, is that man may not be able to desire anything that he cannot possess: that is, either he can only desire things he can possess (which aphorism V denies) or, conversely, that he actually can possess anything he desires. It may yet be true that man's eternal lot is despair if he desires something he cannot possess, in which case I must consider how it could be that man

could desire something he cannot possess. Blake has already shown images of people desiring things they cannot possess, in the images of the baby reaching for the flying bird (plate a5) and the child chasing the swan (in plate a8). In the first case, the baby is restrained by his mother; in the second, the child is restrained by nature. In the image that accompanies aphorism VI, the man who writhes with his head in his hands has chains on his feet restraining him. In these three related images, then, are three kinds of restraint: the protective restraint of the mother, the natural restraint of the physical world, and the man-made restraint of chains, with their strong political connotations. As I observed in the [a] series, all these restraints are outwardly different, but all the same in being restraints. Thus, man's inability to possess something he desires results from restraint.

As ALL RELIGIONS explains, however, these restraints come from an authority – a god, a mother, nature – that is in fact created out of the weakness of man's perceptions. That is, original derivations of the Poetic Genius are adapted to man's limited, organic senses and result in limited, confining authorities.<sup>97</sup> Consequently, then, though these restraints seem to originate outside of man, they in fact originate in perceptual limitation, not from an oppressive outside force. So, if man can desire something he cannot possess, the reason he cannot possess lies in his failure to perceive (to *realize*) that he can possess it. The alternate reading that results from the division of “posses-sing,” then – “sing. despair must / be his eternal / lot” – ironically commands me to proclaim (muse-like, prophet-like) this truth to the chained figure. The small flowering branch shooting from “eternal” reminds me that his “eternal lot,” like mine, takes place within a limited world of organic perception, not in true “eternity” but in what we think to be the only eternity simply because this world of perception is all we know. But most

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<sup>97</sup> Recall the origin of “religion” – the Latin “ligo,” “to tie or bind” (Chapter 4 [139]).

importantly, this plate has given me a hint of what is expected of me after my encounter with the book: I must sing.

**Plate b9**

VII

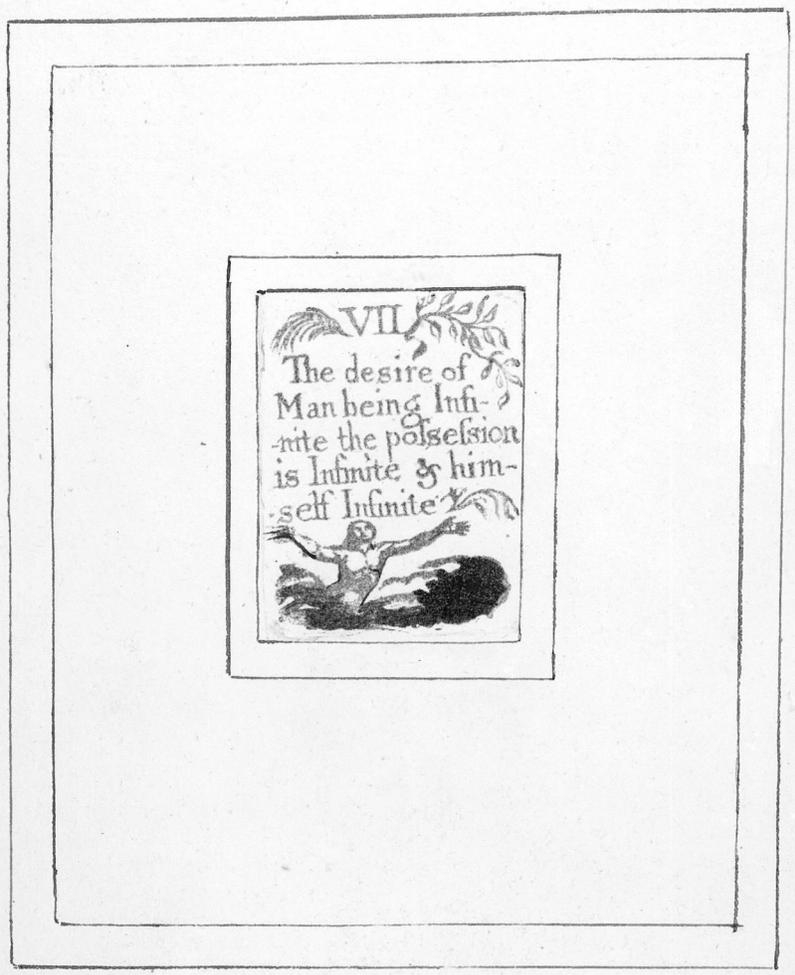


Fig. 30 NNR plate b9

The dialectical contrast of vegetative forms returns around the title VII with a fern or palm on the left side of the title and a leafy branch on the right. Neither form encloses the numeral, but shoot off from it as previous examples have done. The leafy branch extends

downward along the side of the first two lines of the aphorism, which boldly controverts aphorism VI. Rather than man desiring what he cannot possess, thereby sinking into eternal despair, plate b9 asserts:

The desire of  
 Man being Infi-  
 -nite the possession  
 is Infinite & him-  
 -self Infinite

This aphorism confirms my deduction from plate b8, that man's inability to possess was a result of his own perceptual failure rather than any restraint. In fact, this aphorism argues, Man's desire – note again the capital Man of the “true Man,” who is the form of the Poetic Genius – is infinite. There is a logical leap from the conditional statement of aphorism VI to this statement: VII assumes, without proof, that despair is *not* man's eternal lot. I realize that Blake's argument, like the end of ALL RELIGIONS, is circular; instead of predicating despair on unpossessable desire (which is logical), Blake has turned the argument around to predicate possession on desire – that is, the conditional statement of VI which implied that man may not be able to desire what he cannot possess in fact means that if man can desire any thing, he can possess it. Blake's syntax, in fact, implies that it is Man's infinite desire that actually makes his possession infinite and, furthermore, makes Man himself infinite. Blake perhaps means that Man's infinite desire is a sign of his infinite being; but given the importance he has attached to desire, I prefer the illogical interpretation.

Blake's design, however, further complicates the unified reading, as usual. I notice, at first, the significant divided words “Infi- / -nite” and “him- / -self,” both divided with redundant,

emphatic hyphens. Just because I have noticed a trend in dividing words related to perception and reason, I cannot necessarily assume that the pattern will hold for these words, which are of a different connotative order. Plate b3 already alerted me that the patterns I felt were established and consistent in the [a] sequence were no longer necessarily the same. Yet I feel a certainty that these divisions cannot be ascribed solely to space; Blake squeezes “possession” into a small space, and the word “Infinite” is divided only in relation to “desire,” not to “possession” or to “him- / -self.” The vegetable dialectic in the title is still present, and there are fronds growing by the final “Infinite,” which I observed in b8 suggested to me that the “eternity” was a limited perception of eternity. The problem, perhaps, could be with the meaning of “Infinite.” This is also the problem of the accumulation of knowledge, and of the desire for “More! More!” If we think of knowledge as being the accumulation of facts, the many becomes the same as the few; in the same way, if we think of “Infinite” as being “bigger than anything else,” the pattern holds the same – Infinity becomes the same dull round as a universe. So I begin to see the aphorism as a warning: the wrong kind of Infinite will be just as limited by the senses as the universe. And this wrong kind of Infinite may be the kind that proceeds, as does the aphorism, from desire rather than Man. Even at this point, I am still bound by the limitations of my perception, though I self-righteously begin believing my perceptions have been expanded.

Beneath the aphorism, a nude male in a conventional pose of Christian divinity piques my skepticism, as I have learned with conventional images in the tractates.<sup>98</sup> The young, muscular man rises up from dark clouds, his body below the waist still obscured, his arms

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<sup>98</sup> Warner accepts the image at face value, noting “Accompanying Proposition VII, which with the Application on the following plate links ‘God,’ ‘Man,’ and ‘the Infinite,’ he etched a torso of a nude male with outstretched arms, who looks somewhat Christlike (fig. 5). The Application itself stressed the divinity of this link (‘He who see the Infinite in all things sees God’) and thus, as it were, authenticates the cruciform implication of the illustration” (179).

extended wide in a cruciform gesture. The spray of vegetation I previously associated with the final “Infinite” could also appear to be thrown from his hand, tying together this figure and “Infinite.” Earlier in this chapter I examined my discomfort with the dividing plate b1, arguing for the Christ-figure’s bistability. As a conventional figure of orthodox religion, Christ is just as available for authoritarian or oppressive interpretations as for redemption and resurrection. The figure in b9 is just emerging from the clouds, and while he may be associated with “Infinite,” he also carries the detritus of the natural and authoritarian worlds with him. So, while this triumphantly rising, divine-human figure signals a moment of triumph, it is a mixed triumph, still doubled, still dialectical, and still divided and divisible.

### **Plate b10 (b11)<sup>99</sup>**

#### Conclusion

Where previous vegetative decoration has been typically mimetic, the decorative features of this plate are shockingly dynamic and ambiguous. Vine-like lines burst into flames while long abstract wavy lines create an unthreatening border. With so many words in this aphorism, there is no image at the bottom of the page:

If it were not for the  
Poetic or Prophetic  
character. the Philo-  
-sophic & Experimen-  
-tal would soon be  
at the ratio of all  
things. & stand still,

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<sup>99</sup> The Blake Trust editors cite a dispute over the ordering of the next two plates. I follow Eaves et al. in reasoning that there must first be a Conclusion in order to argue an Application for it.

unable to do other  
 than repeat the same  
 dull round over a-  
 -gain

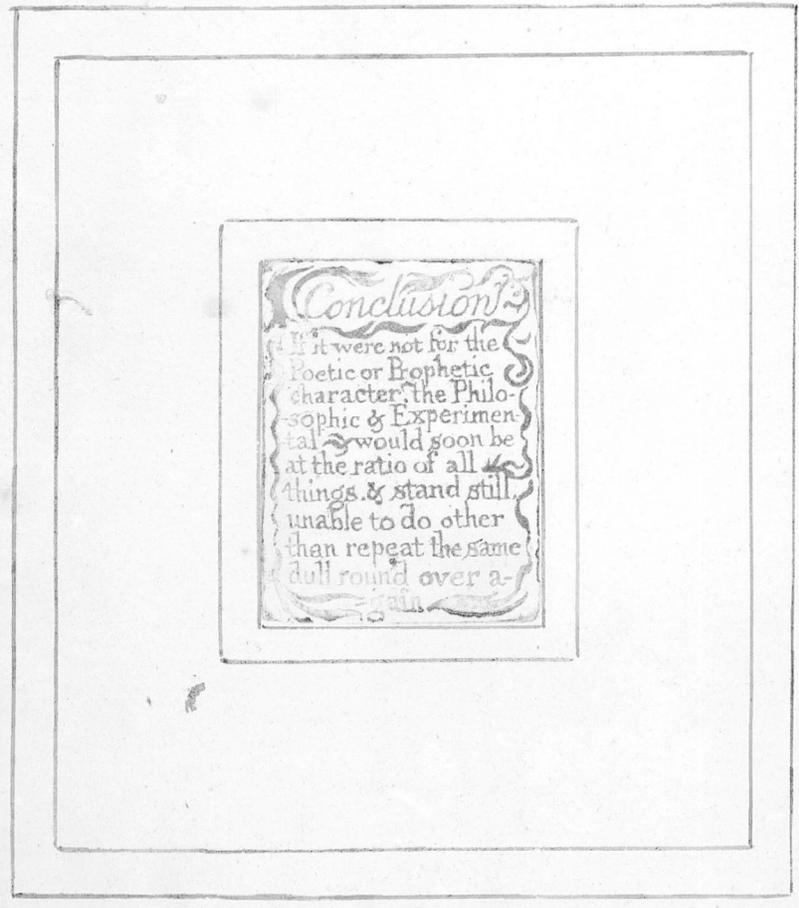


Fig. 31 NNR plate b10 (b11)

Though Blake has not reintroduced the term "Poetic Genius," the Conclusion clearly harks back to ALL RELIGIONS by linking the Poetic and Prophetic (as ARO plate 8) and, especially, in ascribing the Poetic and Prophetic as "character." An example of Blake's polysemous writing at

its fullest, “character” in this aphorism simultaneously evokes a multitude of information about the Poetic and Prophetic. Of the many meanings current in Blake’s time, according to the OED, in its oldest meaning “character” refers to marks or alphabetic letters, to the acts both of decorating and of writing, and specifically to the styles of marking “peculiar to any language” or “peculiar to any individual” (4).<sup>100</sup> The “Poetic and Prophetic character” is thus, in one of its meanings, readable as “Poetic and Prophetic designing and writing,” and in its association with uniqueness refers specifically to the illuminated printing project Blake is creating. This aphorism therefore defines its own nature even as it is being created – the Poetic or Prophetic “character” is unique and personal as well as social. “Character” also carried in Blake’s English the meanings of “distinctive features of any thing; essential peculiarity” (9), as well as the “sum of the moral and mental qualities which distinguish an individual or a race” (11), and “[moral] qualities strongly developed or strikingly displayed” (12); these meanings, of course, are still current in our own use of the word. Again, the emphasis in relation to Blake’s Poetic or Prophetic character can be placed on distinctiveness and “moral and mental qualities” – the Poetic or Prophetic character is, in part, a distinctively human quality that unites all aspects of human nature and individual nature into a creative power – the Poetic Genius. And, as the Poetic Genius is pictured as an entity, so it is a “character,” an acting participant in a drama or fiction. This meaning, according to the OED, was relatively new in Blake’s time, little more than one hundred years old; the first citation the OED gives is to Dryden’s use of the term in 1664 to refer to a *dramatis persona* (17). Yet this possibility, coming as it does in a creative work like the tractates, suggests something important about the Poetic Genius – we are best to regard it as a fiction. For investing a “character” with authority is the first mistake of religion; to maintain a

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<sup>100</sup> As I am using the online edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, second edition (1989), my citations refer to the numbered definitions of “character, *n.*”

sense of a character's fictive nature is to refuse it authority, to acknowledge it as a way of thinking of things as they are and not as *the* way of knowing things "as they have to be" (to borrow a phrase from Jacobs [17]). Recalling that Yahweh is a way of thinking of divinity refuses Yahweh, a human creation, authority over the human mind. The Poetic or Prophetic character, in this sense of "character," thus remains Poetic or Prophetic and does not become perverted into an oppressive authoritarianism.

The Poetic or Prophetic character is necessary, else "the Philo- / -sophic & Experimen- / -tal would soon be / at the ratio of all / things"; while the philosophic and experimental were proposed in the [a] series as the basis of human knowledge, when placed in context with the poetic and prophetic they are exposed as limiting qualities or characters which rely on the confined senses and thus result in limited, confined observations. It is the philosophic and experimental which creates the ratio, the fixed relation between known things that does not admit any knowledge that does not fit, and which attempts to fit all new knowledge into an unchanging system even if that new knowledge must be distorted to do so. For that reason, any attempt to understand the poetic or prophetic according to the standards of the philosophic and experimental – as I observed in the earlier plates of the [b] series – results in divided, limited, and incomplete understandings of desire, the Infinite, and Man. I note, per the pattern established in the [a] series and so troubled in the [b] series, that while "Poetic or Prophetic" is given a full line, both "Philo- / -sophical" and "Experimen- / -tal" are divided, while in the sentence in which they occur decorative elements further destabilize the text, separating "-tal" and "would," forcing "all" and "things" apart. The result of the ratio – of ratiocination, rationalization, reason itself – is stasis, standing still "unable to do other / than repeat the same / dull round over a- / -gain," but in the text the ratio is vigorously shaken and disrupted. Blake

ironically repeats “the same dull round” from aphorism IV, a lexical enactment of the phrase, but the surrounding design does not allow the plate to sink into dullness. The stand-alone “-gain” of “a- / -gain” sprouts flaming foliage wings at the bottom of the page, insisting that some division is gain, if it disrupts the ratio and opens up the field of knowledge to creative action.

**Plate b11 (b10)**

Application

In the Application Blake summarizes the problem of perception within the ratio of philosophy and experiment:

He who sees the In-  
-finite in all things  
sees God. He who  
sees the Ratio only  
sees himself only.

The curious division of “In- / -finite” opens up two reading immediately, both reminders of the limited nature of perception: “He who see the In” suggests the self-involved vision of he who “sees himself only,” while “finite in all things” reiterates the limitation of vision that has been the subject of the tractates throughout. This separation of the word challenges me to put it back together – to see the Infinite in all things is far more difficult even than seeing the infinite in myself, as plate b9 suggested I do. However, this Application explains the trouble I had with the mixed triumph of plate b9, in which Infinite Man is still nonetheless divided and bound to natural organic perception. According to the Application, it is not enough to see the Infinite desire and possession in Infinite Man – Man must see the infinite in all things. Reversing the second half of the aphorism, he who sees only himself sees the Ratio. So an awareness of Man’s

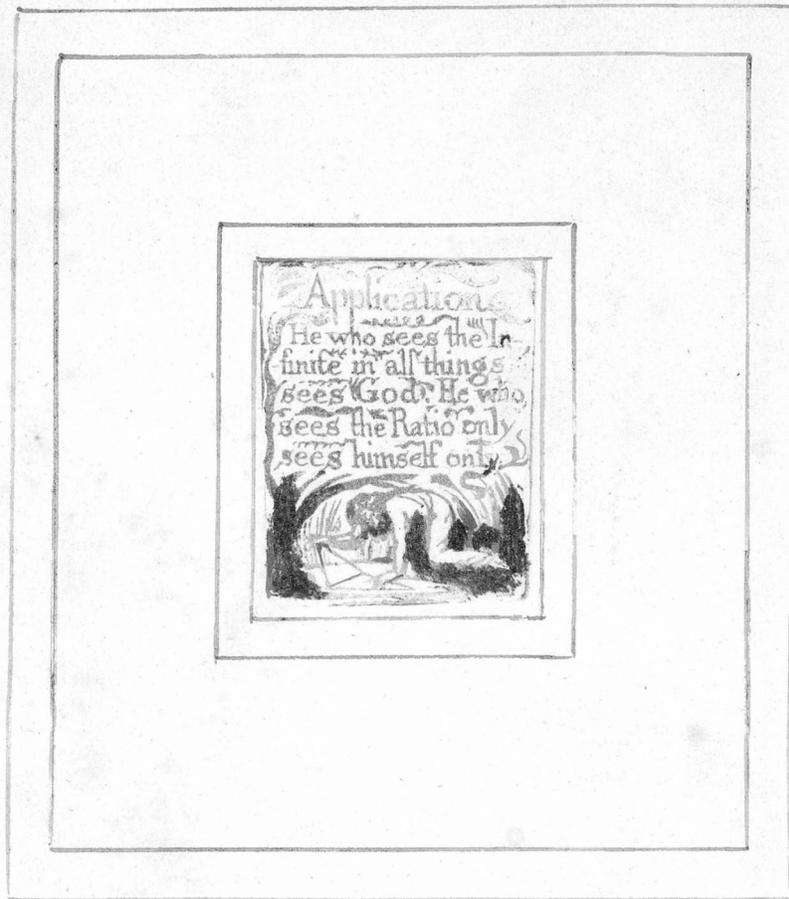


Fig. 32 NNR plate b11 (b10)

infinity is still only a partial awareness of Infinity. Blake seems to be arguing for a reinterpretation of God as well, since the God I have seen so far in the tractates has been an authoritative, repressive Jehovah who divides man to conquer him. That God, however, was the Ratio, a connection made clearer by the capital "R." Now in the Application God and Ratio are directly opposed, both carrying the significance of the capital initial and redefining God as the Infinite in all things.

The image below the Application depicts a bearded man literally measuring a ratio on the ground with calipers.<sup>101</sup> He appears to be wearing a robe, returning to the robed/nude dialectic that ran through the [a] series. This figure, wearing the robe of authority and restriction, is ironically restricted by his robe, which appears to pull tightly across his back and to constrict his legs. He is further closed in by the aggressive pools of black ink that surround him; they could, like the background of the ALL RELIGIONS frontispiece, be either threatening trees or a dark cave; in either case, the blackness intrudes violently not only on his space but on the space of the text, reaching in between lines of writing and connecting to the tails and serifs of letters. The whole text of the Application is under siege by the Ratio, the obvious sloppiness of the inking (either intentionally or unconsciously, on Blake's part) denoting the underlying decay of the world of divided perception. In the center of the image, the cleanly rendered calipers and triangle diagram give a false sense of order and security to the swirl, as the superficial order and security of the Ratio hides the decay and division that forms it.

I recognize, with some discomfort, the implications of plate b11 for my own analytical project. My approach to the tractates begs the question of whether I am finding ratios that form the work or whether I am imposing ratios upon a thing to make it correspond to a fixed, absolute system. The philosopher on his hands and knees measuring a triangle drawn on the ground is not necessarily imposing a system; the triangle already belongs to a system, one he could be merely measuring and seeking to understand. But, the presence of a triangle on the ground of a forest or the floor of a cave implies agency; did the philosopher draw the triangle? Is he using the calipers to complete and perfect his drawing? Or did he discover the triangle already drawn and is now analyzing that triangle for his own knowledge? The prospect of someone drawing the triangle in

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<sup>101</sup> It could go without saying that this image prefigures Blake's color-print *Newton*.

the past, and the philosopher now studying it, points to the author/reader relationship, and more so to my relationship with the author as a scholar. The drawing of a triangle, of course, is not the making of an illuminated book; even synecdochally the triangle cannot stand in for a creative act in Blake's scheme, as a perfect triangle is not a spontaneous creative act but a measured and exacted abstraction from nature. But this distinction would implicate me, as a critic, for treating the illuminated books as if they were merely more sophisticated triangles ("a mill with complicated wheels") to be analyzed and dissected. It is from fear of thus violating the books that I adopted the performance model, describing my reading as a sort of "acting out" of the prophetic encounter with the tractates. But here, at the end of the project, plate b11 gives one final warning: the encounter must not become a self-regard. He who sees himself sees only the Ratio – that is, analysis is self-regarding, and my performance, recording the activity of my own mind in reading the plates, is self-regarding. But "He who sees the Infinite in all things sees God." In other words, he who recognizes that all things (as was the lesson of ALL RELIGIONS) have their origin in the form of the Poetic Genius also recognizes his kinship with all things, and encounters them as equals with whom to interact, as characters. So, Blake's characters (in all the relevant meanings of the word, whether letters, designs, or figures) act, make demands on the reader, and live within the creative, imaginative space of the reading. This recognition prepares me for the final plate, the "Therefore."

### **Plate b12**

Looping vines and sprays of foliage underline and enliven the fluid cursive letters of "Therefore," finally redeeming the vegetable motifs that have filled the pages of the tractates. The words of the aphorism cut both ways, judging from what I have observed before:

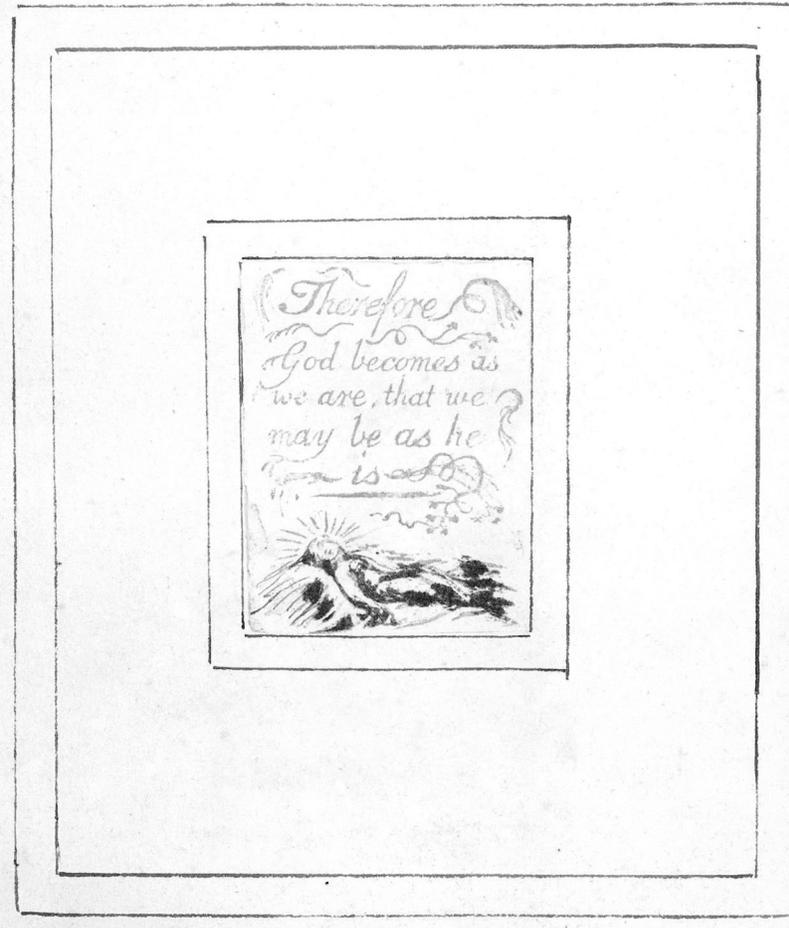


Fig. 33 NNR plate b12

Therefore  
 God becomes as  
 we are, that we  
 may be as he  
 is

God becomes as we are because we make our God, which in turn excuses us to emulate our (self-generated) God. Therefore, if we make God an authoritarian despot, we do so so that we can become despotic ourselves. If, however, we make our God the Poetic Genius, the Spirit of

Prophecy, the true Man who resists abstraction and division, we take on the qualities of those characters. The enthusiastic emphasis given to “is” – placed alone at the center of the page, with a fan of willow branched on the left, an energetic looping vine on the right, and a bold underline – demands attention for a charged word. This verbal form of continuous being suggests that the making of God is neither a past nor future event, but an act that is ongoing. God is always becoming as we are because we are always becoming. Human beings are in a constant state of creation, though we restrict and control it with artificial modes of rational order that obscure our true Heraclitian form.

The young man asleep with halo-like rays around his head contrasts sharply with the sleeping figure in b4. That he is not awake, but seemingly beatified in some way, certainly points to a conventional image of the Incarnation and Resurrection of Jesus, but this figure is a boy.<sup>102</sup> I am reminded of Blake’s disruption of the John the Baptist figure in the frontispiece to *ALL RELIGIONS* and find a similar destabilizing technique here. This boy’s pose and halo are reminiscent of images of Christ’s Resurrection, but he is nothing like conventional depictions of Christ; the feminized Jesus of b1 is closer than this youth. The setting of the image plays with stability, as the boy seems to be asleep across rolling hillsides, transforming his face into the rising (or setting) sun. This fusion of the human and the natural landscapes, associated by the aphorism with man and God uniting, raises multiple interpretive possibilities that suggest the number of possible directions a reader can follow in leaving this encounter behind. In one way of reading, the plate seems a warning to remember how easily man’s limited, confined

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<sup>102</sup> Damon reads the “Therefore” as a vision of the Incarnation: “This last sentence, which describe the Incarnation, is surprisingly close to Athanasius [...] But where the theologians all use the past tense, as of a historical event, Blake uses the present tense, for the act is eternal and is always going on” (402). But ARO would argue that the Incarnation is only one derivation of an ongoing act of creative imagination.

perception can turn an original derivation of the Poetic Genius into the dull round of a ratio; read in this way, the fusion of human and nature is a reminder that we make our gods out of our organic perceptions. Reading through plate b3, I could take the human/landscape hybrid as an image of broadened perception, a visual representation of seeing the infinite in all things and the Genius behind all forms; I might then recognize that this broadened perception, which now admits perceptual senses besides the five organic senses, makes it possible for me to see a sleeping boy as the rising sun. Or, if I read the plate as the last lesson of an educational program, I recognize it not as an end but as a temporary stop, the rising sun indicating that there is another day ahead, the sleeping youth an indication that, educated though I have been through two prophetic books, I am still not yet raised to prophecy myself. The tractates have tutored me in reading them prophetically, in opening up my perception to senses (as in “meanings”) beyond the obvious, but they have not made me a prophet. Instead they have made me a receptive, perceptive witness.

## CONCLUSION

My inconclusive last chapter begs conclusion, but my experience with the tractates argues against ascribing boundaries. Blake himself preferred open-ended, generative conclusions to closure; the eternal present tense of *No Natural Religion*'s "Therefore God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is" closes nothing, instead inviting its audience to take part in the infinite becoming. The magnificent apocalypse that closes *Milton* is a directive for new work:

All Animals upon the Earth, are prepar'd in all their strength

To go forth to the Great Harvest & Vintage of the Nations (plate 43 [50])

And *Jerusalem* closes with Human Forms "Awaking into his Bosom in the Life of Immortality" (plate 99). Blake seems constitutionally, even pathologically opposed to the kind of reassuring closure modern readers expect and demand of literature. And while it may be liberating, such freedom can be maddeningly frustrating.

I suggested in my Introduction, perhaps hubristically, that my underlying theme in this dissertation would be the "improvement of sensual enjoyment" (*Marriage* plate 14), and that its ultimate objective would be to encourage pleasure in Blake criticism. While the performance of experiential reading in the last three chapters may be of dubious pleasure for the reader, the experiment has, I hope, been at least an example of reading fully, engaging the intellect, the emotions, and the senses, and widening the narrow sensual paths in which we normally read. I have discovered, in the process, that reading Blake's illuminated books is not only difficult intellectually, but *work*: a process that makes physical as well as intellectual demands upon a reader, and that becomes a creative business in itself. The additional work of recording my

experience with the books had a curiously schizophrenic or dissociative affect: my reactions could not be entirely spontaneous, as I constantly required myself to record my reactions, yet at the same time the need to articulate and register those passing, sometimes instantaneous fits of thought made them concrete, almost embodied objects themselves. While it may be an easy suggestion theoretically – that an engaged, imaginative encounter with Blake’s books could itself be a kind of creative act, and thus a species of prophecy – in my experience, it rings true (or sings musingly<sup>103</sup>). Though the title of my Introduction to Part 2, “Toward a Critical Practice of Reading Prophetically,” would fit the dissertation as a whole, perhaps it requires a redefinition of “critical.” As I have demonstrated, Blake’s texts undermine and dissolve all pretenses of critical objectivity or objective perception. In the place of objectivity, Blake invites an experiential critique, which conventional literary criticism does not supply. The foregoing performance, as a work of criticism, is an artifice, but like Blake’s illuminated books, it is an artifice that turns its constructedness into a virtue: it is a made thing, a craftwork, and it is therefore real even as an artifice.

I have come to the conclusion that the most worthwhile direction for developing Blake criticism would be a revised sense of the critical process: to learn to view criticism as a craft rather than a science or even an art. This would not mean commodifying criticism, making it a product for consumption; Blake clearly did not consider either the craft of copy-engraving, or the making of his illuminated books, commodities. Rather, to think of criticism as craft would be to focus rather on the human *poesis* of criticism. Such a way of thinking would free Blake criticism from two of the destructive impulses (both the legacies of Frye, and behind him, hero-worshipping Romantic criticism) that I hinted at, but did not labor, in Chapter 1: first, the

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<sup>103</sup> Chapter 6 (205).

tendency to treat our critical role as priestly, holding the keys to Golgonooza, as it were; and, secondly, the tendency to think of Blake's prophecy as a unique and unrepeatable phenomenon. It is the same sort of confining attitude that convinces orthodox believers that the age of miracles and prophecy is over, the same faith in perception that convinces us that the ratio of our known senses is all there is to experience. But Blake everywhere assures us that we may take part in his visions, and experience our own, if we are only willing. Thus, while my critical reading performance may not be *Jerusalem*, it is a step in a productive direction for Blake criticism. For we have traveled over the known countries of Blake's text, context, pretext and subtext. What we as critics have not traveled are the unknown lands of our own subjective, imaginative, creative experiences wakened by Blake's prophetic works. If every honest man – everyone who speaks his opinion, who sees things as they are, who perceives beyond the ratio – is a prophet, then anyone who reads the illuminated books with a willing, conversational spirit, is worthy to be called prophet. And if my conviction proves to be no more than the superstition of a true believer, I take comfort in Blake's promise that "True superstition is ignorant honesty & this is beloved of god & man" (E 591).

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