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R E V I E W

Robert N. Essick, *William Blake and the Language of Adam*

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suggests, distressingly, that somehow we have an understanding of the designs before we employ the interpretive tools of a codified "language of art" to reinforce it—an understanding perhaps derived via the "intuition" she cites in her preface as "one's greatest aid in interpreting Blake, even when one is a seasoned scholar" (xvii). But if it is "often" that this visual language illuminates the ideas of the text, how can we know when it doesn't, or why it doesn't, or, if it does, how it does? Presumably by "context," for Warner herself now argues that "the issue *always* comes down to . . . what the context [does] to the form in question" (my emphasis). What it does, she says, is "point us in the direction of meaning"; but at the same time the "kernel of meaning" that the visual vocabulary has in and of itself is the meaning that "the context will elaborate for us"—a sort of hermeneutic reciprocity that at least teeters on the brink of indeterminate oscillation of meaning, if not arguing the power of the text to determine, in some general way, the meaning.

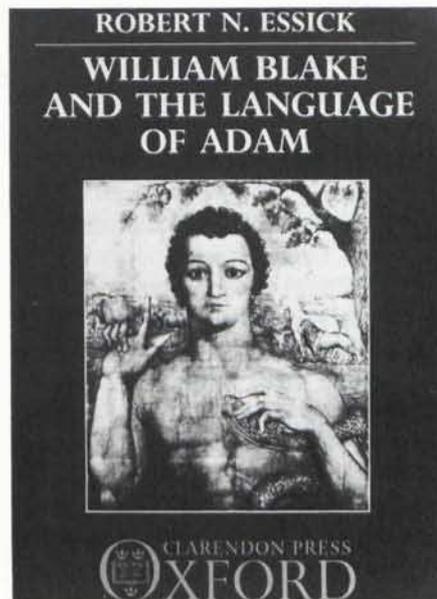
I guess this is where intuition comes in, but to my mind that is a tenuous, gossamer-like, not to mention anarchically subjective guide out of what she herself calls "the mysterious labyrinths of the interactions between word and image" in Blake (185). While one might well argue that by way of the first half of this book we have been given the end of a golden string, manifestly an appropriate "mental pursuit," the fine piece of book-making that McGill-Queens has produced warranted a more rigorous, detailed, and extensive (not to say subtle and delicate) commentary than Warner, I regret to say, has given us. For all her extended study of the problem, she has not been able to do much more than "lead us in at [the] gate" to the treasure of Blake's intellect.

Robert N. Essick. *William Blake and the Language of Adam*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. x + 272 pp. 8 illus. Index. \$55.

Reviewed by
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Robert N. Essick needs no introduction to readers of this journal, who, more than any other audience, best fulfill his vision of the "something very like a hermeneutic community generated by Blake's works" (224) and who have already embraced Essick's catalogues and his studies of Blake's "materials and methods of production, the ways they determine the images they convey, and the historical and quotidian engagements their use entails" (1). This latest contribution sets out "to situate Blake within the history of language theory and to generate a hermeneutic on the basis of that history" (2). The result is vaguely reminiscent of Morton Paley's *Energy and the Imagination* (Oxford, 1970) as Essick presents in Blake's works a kind of paradigm shift from structuralism (and post-) to phenomenology; that is, from "dyadic signification (signifier/signified) to triadic interchanges among author, text, and reader" (223); or again (subsuming Paley), from signs to Logos and "power" (235, 5). All of this makes for provocative reading, and the seventy-five pages that selectively epitomize—with special regard to Blake's interests—seventeenth and eighteenth-century speculations on the origin and nature of language will, in particular, prove useful and rewarding.

But where Paley could point into the text and the inverse fates of his chosen terms dramatized in pre- and post-Felpham word-counts, Essick's argument depends on our acceding to a host of words he brings to the feast. "Logos" is



one, and a bit more than a minute particular, given that the book culminates in "The Return to Logos" (chapter 5). The index suggests that this Big Word (it's always capitalized here) relates to "language, God's"; one context identifies it as "God's Word, which brings the universe into being" (11), others as an "ideal" form of semiosis with "the co-presence of conception and execution" (85) and "the power" to "create . . . objects or give them organic life" (26). Blake never uses the word, though he certainly knew the Greek of John 1:1, and perhaps the accusative form (*logon*) together with *zooas*, "living," oozes in his good news of Golgonooza (that un-ideal place of semiosis). Some accounts derive the noun *logos* "from the Greek verb *lego*, 'to pick out, to gather,' as seeds were gathered by the early food gatherers," an etymology pertinent to Jesus' gloss that "the seed is the word" (Luke 8:11). The spore, or sperm, or semen, is logos.

Essick's book begins by bringing some words to an untitled painting of Blake's, which, he agrees with Rossetti, should be called "*Adam Naming the Beasts*" and labels "a painting about language" (10). He proceeds to educe two "readings" of the design, one of which evokes "the dream of the motivated sign" and the "companionship"

of phenomenologists like Humboldt and Heidegger, while the other, focusing on the serpent, privileges "absence and difference" and the evidently less congenial "company" of more structural thinkers like "Nietzsche, Sartre, and Derrida" (16). The picture thus becomes a signifier for "the double perspective on language" (27, 208) that the book proposes. Although he reports that he "can see no easy way of eliminating one of the two opposing interpretations" and does not "feel any great compulsion to do so" (16), an inherent logocentrism emerges in subsequent descriptions of the second reading as "my negative or ironic interpretation," "my negative or Derridean interpretation" (41, 135-36). But returning to the design (see dust-cover, reproduced above), one wonders if there isn't at least a third position, like the one triangulated by—and "shewing"—"the two contrary states of the human soul." This position would incorporate the seed Adam's finger points to, a curiously emphasized acorn which seems rather precisely to mirror the outline of Adam's own head indicated by his thumb (one might fill in the curve joining the outer halves of Adam's eyebrows to see, like a beginning artist, the seed for the sketch). Seed, head, and thumb-index joint are thus the corners of a triangle or triadic relationship which is itself "the seed of Contemplative Thought" by which "the Imaginative Image returns."²

"*Adam Naming the Beasts*," as the history of that title illustrates, offers an example of Blakean dissemination: seeds—words, texts, designs—are planted "To spring up for Jerusalem" which "IS NAMED LIBERTY" (J85.29; 26). "Blake's way of producing texts," writes Essick, "leads us to view language performance as the liberation of an inherently limited self" (190). But the liberation comes not in performance *per se*, but rather "in a book [*liber*, Lt.] that all may read," and the irrecoverable, scattering dissemination of writing-being read/reaped. For Essick,

however, there is no loss in this process since we still have "[r]eading aloud from books—a literal return of the written back into speech" (172): the ideal is not dissemination in writing or "producing texts," but in spoken conversation. "[S]poken language, more than any other semiotic medium, generates and almost seems to achieve that illusive and perhaps illusory ideal, the Adamic sign" (185), that is to say, "the ideal union of word and world, represented by the Adamic or motivated sign" (84). Union, communion, conversation, community, all figure as ways of circumventing those "negatives," absence and difference, and establishing identity or self-presence. The difficulty of the task appears as Essick contends that "[i]n rapid or ecstatic speech, we enter unself-consciously into the medium" and don't sense "a gap" between thoughts and the words that seem "in a fully motivated union with our thoughts" (185) only to note, rushing on, that "[i]n rapid conversation, we all say things we don't mean" (191).

The book's "double perspective" on language can be correlated with the division between semiology and semiotics, Saussure and Peirce. Simplistically put, Saussure sees the sign as *signifier* and *signified* existing in synchronic and diachronic dimensions. The exponentiation of these (and other) pairs to deal with change is easily forgotten, and Saussure's binary predilections make him seem the epitome of "rationalist linguistics" (135). C. S. Peirce, by contrast, "gives us a definition of a sign that adds to the sign/object, signifier/signified relationship the interpretant, a sign in the mind, and he argues that his triadic relation is irreducible."³ A crucial point—for it is where time and change enter—is that for Peirce the individual "interpretant" is, as he puts it, "nothing but another representation to which the torch of truth is handed along; and *as a representation*, it has its interpretant again. Lo, another infinite series" (Sheriff 119). Both of these sign-systems are "open" in that they do

not posit an ontology or teleology and accompanying value system—in every communication there is some slippage, some lurking quantum differential, some possibility of mutation. Since Saussurian semiology is to be discarded as negative and "fallen" (53), its openness poses no threat, but in order to save the alternative, Peirce's semiotic must somehow be closed. This closure, with all that it entails, looms as a memorable and distinguishing mark of Essick's book.

Discussing the painting, untitled by Blake, "*Christ Blessing*" (why not "*Jesus Blessing*"?), Essick focuses on the blessing hand as a "kerygmatic or 'performative' gesture" which "does what it signifies." "The structure of this sign," he explains, "is not dyadic (signifier/signified) but triadic, requiring for its completion the signifier (physical gesture or sound), the signified (blessing), and the recipient believer whose condition is changed by his inclusion within the signifying process" (25-26). And here a footnote explains, "My sense of the triadic nature of performative signification is based in part on C. S. Peirce's analysis of all signs as triadic. His concept of the 'interpretant' fulfills the same function within signification as my 'recipient,' but the two cannot be equated in other respects. Peirce's interpretant is another sign, whereas my recipient is a human response necessarily included within the performative sign to complete it as such" (25n). The ideal sign is to be completed: the message delivered: presence assured: no loss. For Essick's Blake, "the chain of signs, arbitrary or motivated, must begin and end somewhere," and "this point of origin and ultimate reference is the immutable truths of religious conviction" (99). Like Blake's works and the "hermeneutic community" they have generated (224), "Christ's kerygmatic signs avoid the solipsism of pure self-referentiality by extending incarnation to the community of faithful recipients" (26)—"[t]he process is circular," in other words, "and avoids solipsism only

for those who have faith in a transcendental power" (54-55).

"The sublimity of Blake's allegory," then, "depends ultimately on what is signified (transcendental truths) and who is addressed (true believers)" and posits "a triadic structure (sign, referent, recipient) based in turn on the community of speaker, audience, and the medium joining them" (97). This medium is language ("[t]he mediatory action of language" [234]), that is to say, Christ (with his "traditional mediatory role" [200]), or, finally, "Logos." Hence, in the "trajectory of linguistic recovery shaping the language of the *Songs of Innocence*" (112), "[i]ndividual words (*child, lamb, meek, tender, voice, He, I, thou, and name*) achieve their full meaning only [!] in relation to Christ, conceived either as a shared origin and referent or as a universalized form of C. S. Peirce's 'interpretant,' the companion sign providing the necessary context" (113). But for Peirce there cannot be any such "universalized form" since "a sign is a dynamic, triadic relation of representamen, object, and interpretant within a certain ground" or, (Wittgenstein's term) "language game" (Sheriff 92, 94).

What are Essick's grounds? He quotes with approval Schleiermacher's opinion that "[i]n interpretation it is essential that one be able to step out of one's own frame of mind into that of the author" (222) and states in the afterward that "[i]n the spirit of Schleiermacher's hermeneutic, I have frequently identified my interpretative orientation with what I take to be Blake's own linguistic suppositions" (238). What, then, is one to make of the capitalized pronominal references to God and Christ, not to mention the preference for "Christ" over "Jesus"? One of Blake's "models for language," argues Essick, is "Christ's body, the signifier with a motivated relationship to a spiritual—not a fallen or utterly natural—signified. As Blake writes at the conclusion of *There is No Natural Religion*, 'Therefore God becomes as we are, that we

may be as he is'" (115). Yet seven pages on, we read that "the belief that God becomes as we are so that we may be as He is, so clearly enunciated on the concluding plate of *There is No Natural Religion*, offers . . . more than stylistic implications" (122). Indeed: the *b* altering altars all—as, in a quite different way, does Blake's lower case *c* for "christ" (FZ 105.28).

Discussing "The Lamb"'s "language of innocence," Essick argues that

The reflected symmetry of "He is called by thy name" and "We are called by his name" indicates the common derivation and interchangeability of "child," "Lamb," and Christ, immanent through the *Songs* whenever these names for Him are spoken. "Shepherd," "father," and all their attendant adjectives and named qualities also gather about, and derive their meanings from, this central point of origin. (113)

But perhaps this "reflected symmetry" is a bit more fearful than Essick's frame allows: Jesus in point of fact never "calls himself a lamb," which stresses for us the question of who *is* active behind the passive "He is called," "We are called." As this unspeaking voice of "The Lamb" makes clear, one cannot talk about naming without entering into power, the imposition of form, Althusser's "interpellation" (our being "called" by a discourse and in responding, acquiescing to its authority), Lacan's "Name/No [Nom/Non]-of-the-Father," and everything else that helps us understand the language instruction that is "education." In his *Innocence*, Essick accepts Christ "as the sign of the father/origin" (113), but I suggest that Blake knows as well as Lewis Carroll that the question in naming is "who is to be master," who is to say what's "immanent" or "innocent"; and what Essick sees as the "extra-linguistic, even ontological, origins" (113) of relationships among words in "The Lamb" can be located more materially in the child's verbatim repetition of snippets from Sunday-school catechism and hymn-singing (cf. James' lesson in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, part 2, which begins, "Canst thou tell who made thee?" and

Charles Wesley's "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild" in his *Hymns for Children*). This is merely to acknowledge, as Essick does elsewhere, "the simple yet necessary event of . . . hearing the word . . . before naming. . . ." (236). Given such implicit recognition that "By the act of speech the external world becomes converted into an internal one" (232), one regrets the absence of any psychological model for considering the interconstitutive relations between language and imagination, or kinds of motivation in a "motivated sign" (the Lacanian Symbolic and Imaginary would seem particularly apposite to such considerations). The child is, to be sure, naturally (i.e., genetically) motivated to exercise its limited degree of semiotic mastery, but that exercise is thoroughly coded and channelled by culture—as evident, for instance, in the different ostensibly onomatopoeic ("motivated") representations of animal sounds in different languages.

The "double perspective" of *William Blake and the Language of Adam* emerges in contrasting discussions of *The [First] Book of Urizen* and of *Jerusalem*, which contrast works to highlight the shift Essick sees in Blake's "ideas about language's essential character" (238). The contrasts between "the grammatical and the phenomenological, the differential and the constitutive" (239), not to mention (same difference?) the "rationalist and theological" (27) are of course not absolute but serve to illustrate "the different ways texts respond to different conceptions of language" (238). *Urizen* here thematizes "the problem of difference and its presence in semiosis" (128), in keeping with Urizen's "fall" into "the language described by the rationalist tradition of sign theory from the seventeenth-century grammarians to Derrida" (149-50). *Jerusalem* directs us to "[t]he kind of semiosis, if any, Urizen falls away from" and, according with its grounding in the different linguistic tradition "nascent in Boehme, emergent in Humboldt, and continued by Heidegger" (149, 238) of-

fers as "an alternative to the self-defeating structuralisms of Urizen" the "three key semiotic concepts" of "articulation, conversation, and community" (203). The language presented in *Urizen* "constructed out of differential signs will, in its very attempts to bridge difference with reference, carry with itself the void, the absence, from which it sprung" (150—the possible analogy here with another "miraculous birth to a sign" [24] goes unremarked). But "[t]he desire of language to win existence in reality" carries *Jerusalem* "to a vision of language reclaiming its power as the Logos" (235). In the world of *Urizen*, the identification "'It is Urizen,'" "[t]his simplest of all copular structures, asserting the unity of 'it' and 'Urizen,' presupposes their difference" and "unavoidably replicates" it (150), while in the universe of *Jerusalem*, "the medium is the origin" (161) and "Jesus is the 'Divine Revelation'" (202).

While *Urizen* suggests "difference as the fundamental ontological category" (149), the Blake Essick favors is primarily committed "to the shared ontological source of all form in spirit" (115). But "are they Two & not One?" (J 57.9). Does not Urizen "as origin of difference/dispersion" (151) [dissemination] ground "the possibilities for continual (re)conception Blake dispersed throughout the process of production" (192)? Consider the crucial moment Essick three times returns to, "when Urizen directly utters 'Words articulate'" (151; 153, 204). The passage, never cited, reads:

3. Shrill the trumpet: & myriads of
Eternity,
Muster around the bleak desarts
Now fill'd with clouds, darkness & waters
That roll'd perplex'd labring & utter'd
Words articulate, bursting in thunders
That roll'd on the tops of his mountains

4: From the depths of dark solitude . . .
etc. (3.44-4.6)

It's not Urizen ostensibly speaking here, but "clouds, darkness & waters." In his usual thorough way, however, Essick

supplies the key in reminding us, earlier on, that "[a]s Alexander Geddes pointed out in 1790, 'in the language which Moses spake, the word rendered *voice*, signifies, in general, every kind of sound, and . . . particularly the awful sound of thunder'" (105). The point, in view of "the primeval Priests assum'd power," isn't "the emergence of articulate speech out of natural utterance" (204), but the attribution, the projection of speech into nature (forgetting where All deities reside): in the imagined beginning was the word, which was what the thunder was heard to say ("no!" in thunder, no doubt). For this jump to occur there had to have been a complex interpretative and psychological structure "always already" in place. Urizen's "Words articulate" do not "lie at the heart of his taxonomic matrix" (204) so much as at the horizon of Blake's psycho-cultural vision.

"Words articulate, bursting in thunders" can exemplify what Essick very usefully discusses as Blake's "literalization of figuration." By this term he denotes how Blake "grants substantial being to what we would usually take to be only a figure of speech" (224). So, for instance, "Blake asks us to believe in the literal existence of his trope of the Last Judgment and to refuse its conversion into a trope" (99). In this case this means, I should think, that we must reconceive our notion of the Last Judgment (if "whenever any Individual Rejects Error & Embraces Truth a Last Judgment passes upon that Individual" [E 562—though the comedy shouldn't be overlooked: "a Last (act of) Judgment (until the next)"]). Such reconceptions would affect "Him" as well. For Essick, *The Book of Urizen* particularly evidences the "sinister uses of literalization" (225) and shows "a foolish mind reifying itself into a world" (229). Perhaps. But it strikes me that a great deal depends on how we take the speaking "I" of *Urizen's* "Prelude." If we hear him or her as other than Urizen (returning, with Essick, the written "primeval Priests" into a

spoken singular possessive meaning "Urizen's" [155]), then the "objectivist, grammatical, and spatial" scene Essick constructs is convincing enough. But if, as in "The Argument" to *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, this speaking "I" is the protagonist *in propria persona*, a sadder and a wiser man, then *Urizen*, as much as *Jerusalem*, "asks its readers to abandon synchronic reductions and follow an apocalyptic quest through the diachronic activities of the linguistic mind" (238-39) and into Blake's yoU-aRe-I-zen of our rise in reason and vision.

Robert Essick has long established himself as a leading authority on Blake's material production; with this volume he marshals exemplary scholarship to suggest how, in the terms of older linguistic theories, Blake in effect finds his way from structuralism to phenomenology; and he breathes new life into "the full ontological potency" and "the conversational dynamic of language in eternity," as well as "divine Logos" (233).

¹ Theodore Thass-Thienemann, *The Interpretation of Language*, vol. 1 (New York: Aronson, 1973) 44.

² David V. Erdman, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, rev. ed. (Berkeley, U of California P, 1982) 555. Hereafter cited as E followed by the page number.

³ John K. Sheriff, *The Fate of Meaning: Charles Peirce, Structuralism and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989) 57.