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R E V I E W

Vincent Arthur De Luca, Words of Eternity: Blake and the Poetics of the Sublime

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REVIEWS

Vincent Arthur De Luca.
*Words of Eternity: Blake
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Reviewed by Stephen Cox

"The sublime" is one of the least promising objects of contemporary study. As a cultural and intellectual fashion of the eighteenth century, it deserves a work of history analyzing its origin and fate; and that work has been written, repeatedly. As a set of artistic devices designed to create certain effects on its audience, it also deserves study; but so apparently unchallenging are those devices that when one begins to analyze their use in literature of any importance, interest easily drifts from them to the cultural attitudes they expressed and helped to shape, and attention leaves the sublime as such. One's impulse is to study the pearl and discard the oyster, especially if twenty treatises on oysters can already be found in the college library.

But if there were a book that actually attended both to the pearl and to the oyster, while posing provocative questions about the oceans in which such objects lurk, that book would be worth reading. Vincent De Luca has written this kind of subject-redeeming book about Blake's poetic uses of the sublime and about the peculiar seas of thought to which the Blakean sublime is adapted. One doesn't have to agree with everything De Luca says—and I don't—in order to recognize that his book addresses some of the most important matters with which Blake studies can be concerned.

But why should anyone make an issue of Blake's connection with the sublime? It's a question that's bound to come up, and De Luca faces it immediately. The fact that Blake used the word "sublime" a good number of times doesn't mean that he shared his contemporaries' respect for the theory and practice of the sublime effect. Blake disliked the worship of nature that his contemporaries routinely associated with sublimity, he disliked Edmund Burke's treatise on the sublime and beautiful,¹ he never explicitly elaborated any theory of his own about the subject, and he used the phrase "sublime poetry" only once. But as De Luca argues, the passage in which Blake did so is well worth examining as a possible indication of the kind of sublimity that he could work with. Here Blake says that "Allegory addressd to the Intellectual powers while it is altogether hidden from the Corporeal Understanding" is his "Definition of the Most Sublime Poetry."²

To De Luca, this suggests that Blake understood and could use the process or structure of the sublime that was fundamental to his contemporaries' enjoyments. Blake saw the sublime as a hiding and a revealing, a blocking of one kind of mental activity so that another can be released. Brought into the presence of a sublime object—an ocean, a tempest, a landscape of ruins bordering an abyss of time—the ordinary or "Corporeal" understanding is daunted, but a greater power, susceptible of deeper wonderment, is awakened. Blake's contemporaries usually thought of that power as a function of "sensitivity." To Blake, it is an "Intellectual" power. In either case, however, sublimity involves a progress from frustration to liberation, "deprivation" to "plenitude" (26).

That's De Luca's hypothesis, and it's not something that he deduces merely from the passage just quoted; he treats that passage as a convenient summary of concepts implicit throughout Blake's major works, instinct as they are with opportunities both for the

frustration of commonplace means of knowing and for the liberation of "intellectual" means. But De Luca distinguishes between two different modes of the sublime as it was practiced by Blake.

De Luca calls the first mode the "bardic." It is Blake's more commonplace means of transcending the commonplace. When Blake writes in this mode, he offers the imagery of wonder and alienation that English antiquarians and Scotch reviewers had approved for the use of aspiring modern bards: "fallen kings turning to stone, Thor-like heroes at the forge contending with batlike apparitions, continents rolling apart, dire Druidical circles and human sacrifice" (134). Bardic sublimity appears in poetry's content, in what poetry signifies (101).

The second mode of the sublime appears in poetry's form, in how poetry signifies—or refuses to signify. This is a sublimity at home with the faintly representational or the non-representational, a sublimity of the naked signifier. De Luca calls it the "iconic" sublime. This kind of sublimity can be seen in the ranks of close-set words that confront us on many plates of Blake's prophecies, words not easy to pry apart, words with meanings not easy to pry apart from them. The "iconic" sublime can also be seen in the prophecies' many "highly organized codes, not obviously meaningful in themselves": arrays of zoas, city gates, eyes of God, ages of humanity, cathedral cities, sons and daughters of Albion, all resembling "the signifiers of an unfamiliar language" (201). Blake's "iconic" mode confronts our Corporeal Understanding with a text that is "a kind of wall, against which it presses itself, groping along, trying in vain to peer through chinks in the hard, opaque surface" (32).

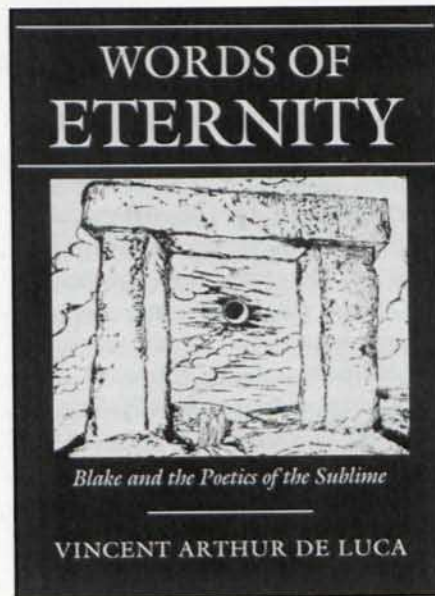
We have all groped along such Blakean walls, clinging to their surfaces like lizards ignorantly traversing words inscribed on fallen monuments. De Luca describes some of the difficulties of Blake's text as "rhetorical

equivalent[s]" of the menacingly sublime topographies with which other eighteenth-century authors plotted to daunt and inspire their audience (59). The difference is that Blake is not leading his readers into the verbal wilderness in order to surprise them, at last, with a sense of the mind's oneness with the sublime powers of time or nature. He intends to surprise them, instead, with a conviction of the mind's own powers, including and especially its sublime power of signification, the definitively human and "Intellectual" power. Blake's iconic mode presents the mind with a world in which humanly invented signifiers try to free themselves from every natural thing and exist for themselves in autonomous splendor.

As De Luca puts it, the signs in Blake's poetry "share some of the arbitrary patternings found in linguistic signifiers without participating in the attachment of such signifiers to known signifieds" (205). Thus the aroma of eighteenth-century theory fades, overwhelmed by that of postmodern theory. We are used to the Blake who eerily anticipated the best thoughts of Freud, Marx, and Jung. Does De Luca mean that Blake anticipated postmodern speculations about signs that point only to signs, about "writing" that refers, in an infinite regress, only to some more abstract "writing"?

De Luca's vocabulary indicates that the spectre of a postmodern Blake is present to his mind, and not entirely unwelcome. But De Luca is too conscientious a thinker to mistake resemblance, real or imagined, for identity. He finds in Blake no wry postmodern scepticism about our ability to know reality. He finds, instead, an emphasis on the deep and perhaps the ancient truth of things. De Luca evokes not just the theory but the look and feel of Blake's poetry, a look and feel that are far from Derridean. In this poetry, he says,

a vision out of the Burkean sensibility, a world of metamorphosis, swathed in the mists of the North, of measureless times and spaces, indistinct forms, loss, and



obscurity surrounds and adjoins another vision—one that brings to mind sacred sculptures standing in the solar clarity of the ancient East, a vision determinate and singular, measured and finite, a miraculous (or astonishing) compression of all contingent forms into one intellectual identity—the living Word of Eternity. (102)

This description, like many others in De Luca's book, carries conviction because it reacquaints us with much that we already knew about Blake's bardic and iconic modes. And it reacquaints us with something we already knew about Blake's relationship to the postmodern: the purpose of Blake's iconic sublime, the sublime of free-standing verbal "sculptures," is not mere postmodern play.

But if that's what it's *not*, what *is* it? De Luca maintains that Blake's "language . . . is an attempt to recreate a discourse that once flourished in our now dimly recollected time of origin, when reality and sign formed a single being" (204-05). Signification unchecked by anything external would, presumably, be totally free. Under these conditions, De Luca suggests, reality would be "entirely a matter of signs in free but harmonious interplay" (201). Take it one step further: if signs could be liberated from the external realities to which they are ordinarily thought to be attached, then the users of these signs might also be liberated

from externals and freed for pure self-enjoyment in their self-definitive exercise of signification. If this is Blake's final vision of the text, it broods not upon a Derridean "abyss of receding origins" but upon "the place of true beginnings, where . . . we are most ourselves." If Blake is leading us anywhere, it is to a "homecoming" to "what each one of us knows best and loved first, our own delight in our special inner being" (222).

De Luca has asked himself what Blake is doing with the sublime, and that question has led him to the question of what Blake is doing it *for*—the question of Blake's basic values. De Luca's answer is not what one might expect to hear these days. Blake's values, as De Luca represents them, are fully compatible with the individualist humanism that contemporary criticism so often denies or regrets in romantic art. De Luca's evident pleasure in Blake's cultivation of the self's delight in its special being implicitly challenges the currently fashionable unbelief in the value of the individual self and the existence of a final reality that any individual self could come home to. It is refreshing to encounter a work of criticism that does not devote itself to a predictable exposure of the supposedly social and contingent nature of truth and the banality of the modern and Western concern with individual selves.

Gently dissenting from post-Foucauldian orthodoxies, De Luca indicates that he prefers to believe that "the integrity of the self" is not "merely a construct of baleful power structures," and he admires Blake for "hoping otherwise," too (231). Hopes and beliefs aside, it is clear that De Luca's notion of a Blake concerned with "our own delight in our special inner being" can explain a lot more of Blake's text than could the rival idea of a Blake who viewed individualist values as figments of false consciousness, mystifications of a hegemonic social system. If *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (to cite one instance) is not about a woman who rightly asserts

the integrity and significance of the self, as opposed to all structures of power inscribed by external forces, then what is the poem about?

Recent interpretations of Blake as a proto-Marxist labor under the burden of demonstrating that Blake's mission was not to indicate the means by which individuals can free themselves from social and historical determinations but to reveal the fact that individuals are inextricably involved in them. The ideological burden is not easily borne;³ De Luca does not try to bear it. He is well-informed about Blake's historical context; some of the most interesting parts of his book are delineations of the ways in which eighteenth-century cultural history influenced Blake's work. Blake did not, after all, invent the sublime; it was a fashion that he used and adapted. But in showing how Blake did that, De Luca wisely declines to take his study in a social-historicist direction. His emphasis is on the shaping power of Blake's demonstrable intentions, on what Blake wanted to do, and did do, with the cultural resources at his disposal. Here also De Luca seems to have chosen—quietly, gently, without trumpet calls—an unfashionable position, since there is nothing less common in current academic criticism than a continued emphasis on the integrity and significance of authorial intentions.

De Luca describes Blake's vision of the free self as a vision controlled by a free self, a self that can do what it wants with its own texts. De Luca talks frequently and without embarrassment of Blake's plans and purposes; he does not imagine that such highly individual things as Blake's texts could precipitate out of the eighteenth-century sublime without the constant intervention of Blake's conscious intentions. De Luca's intentionalism redresses the balance lost in studies of Blake (both recent and older) in which words and their possible meanings often acquire more importance than the authorial intentions that choose the words and try to define the meanings.

De Luca's book may, in fact, have gone a bit too far in the right direction. He believes that Blake intends to shock and frustrate his readers; that is how the sublime was supposed to operate, and Blake adopts that purpose as his own. De Luca has evidence for this. But he sometimes writes as if every shock administered by Blake's text is just what Blake intended. He sees even the apparent confusions and self-contradictions of the *Four Zoas* manuscript as evidence of Blake's virtually providential control of his material.

In De Luca's account, Blake's failure to smooth his drastic revisions of *The Four Zoas* into a coherent narrative was an attempt to mine the resources of sublimity concealed in layered and conflicting narratives. According to this analysis, Blake used his many-layered manuscript, so forbidding to the Corporeal Understanding, to convey a sublime sense of human origins lying buried beneath the ruins of successive ages. De Luca's study of the poem is one of the most engaging and compelling we have. But his reliance on authorial intentions would be more securely founded if he gave due weight to the distinction between intention and effect, if he considered more seriously than he does the possibility that what Blake achieved may often have been something other than what he most wanted to achieve.

One may doubt, for instance, that Blake "may well have been content with the look of the [*Four Zoas*] text precisely as he left it to posterity" (115). To people like me, the look of that text is more confused than sublime. It's hard for me to imagine that even the most intransigent antiorganicist could be *content* with that look. Nevertheless, De Luca performs a distinct service to healthy debate among Blakeans, not just by prompting reexamination of the various meanings that may be conveyed by the formal qualities of Blake's work, but also by emphasizing the possibility that Blake often cares more about developing or preserving the discon-

tinuous parts or layers of his poems than he does about ensuring their organic wholeness.

De Luca analyzes *Jerusalem* as a collection of episodes—sections somewhat resembling the pericopes into which books of the Bible can be divided—so that he can investigate what each might mean in isolation as well as in combination with other parts. Again, De Luca doesn't need to go as far as he goes; he doesn't need to claim that each pericope is "internally self-sufficient" (127). But his approach does allow him to illustrate the degree to which Blake's intentions for the parts of a poem can evade the discipline of his vaguer, or later, intentions for the whole.

Blake often focuses "on the piece of writing directly before him" (127). When he compiles the pieces, the result may be, in De Luca's apt analogy, a "sublime" text like the Ossianic cycle or "the Bible, as the Higher Criticism conceived it"—a text that "presume[s] the existence of a primordial core of mythic 'truth,' and then proceed[s] both to provoke a supercharged fascination with this core and to interfere with our access to it" (132). My objection to this idea—and Ossian is my witness—is that real difficulty of access need not render any work sublime. The intention may easily fail of its effect. Ossian fails of sublimity, or at least has failed for almost two centuries; Blake does not always achieve it, and he sometimes achieves it only in the eyes of analysts to whom devoted study has provided a privileged access to the core.

De Luca generally sees the most challenging aspects of Blake's text as the most significant. One of the challenging features of De Luca's own text is what he says about Blake's iconically sublime visions of a time when "reality and sign formed a single being" (205). As De Luca argues, Blake's prophecies are often so formidably full of signs that they have the look and feel of substances, substances hard enough to produce the familiar wall-like effect. De Luca ob-

serves that at the conclusion of *Jerusalem*, Albion speaks "Words of Eternity in Human Forms"; it is an explicit demonstration that language can become substantial reality (*Jerusalem* 95.9, E 255; De Luca 217). But peculiarly close relationships between language and reality exist throughout Blake's work; De Luca might have found them even in passages that do not pretend to sublimity.

Consider the statements about "contraries" in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Sometimes the contraries appear as propositional representations of reality. After listing a series of angelic propositions, *The Marriage* announces: "But the following Contraries to these are True"; then it lists a contrary series of propositions, each one a "true" representation of the condition of life, "true" in respect to something else (*MHH* 4, E 34). But in other passages, contraries are more than ideas asserted in so many words. "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence" (*MHH* 3, E 34). These contraries aren't just propositions. They are "realities."⁴

Blake's habit of turning the insubstantial into the substantial created the ontological climate in which De Luca's iconic sublime could flourish. The habit solved certain problems for Blake. It made visions mediated by signs seem as formidable as physical objects; it obscured, or transcended, the distinction between vision understood as a "Representation of what Eternally Exists" and vision understood as the "Eternal World" itself (*A Vision of the Last Judgment*, E 554, 555). By attempting to "unite representation and substance in one concept" (in Dan Miller's phrase⁵), Blake made visionary declarations of truth appear impossible for scepticism to refute. One can refute a proposition by showing its lack of correspondence with substantial reality; one cannot refute reality itself.

But Blake's procedures created problems as well as solved them. If

there is such a thing as falsehood, and Blake certainly thought that there might be, one can get rid of it more easily if one regards the symbols that may embody it as representations or references than if one regards symbols as "a single being" with reality. A sign that makes a false reference to reality can be erased and forgotten; but if a sign entails a reality, any mention of falsehoods, even to refute them, may seem to give them substance. This is one reason why Blake wrestles so hard with Satan and the Spectre. Although he wants to be able to deny their ultimate existence, his symbolism renders them massively substantial. If the "text" is the closest we can come to reality, as various postmodernisms would have us believe, or if textuality can free itself from "known signifieds" and thus become a kind of autonomous reality, as De Luca would have it do, then the achieved reality may not be a pleasant one. Any falsehood in text or textuality will be "real," irrefutable.

The tendency of recent writers on Blake has been to preach Blakean substantialism as an ideal. Robert N. Essick, for instance, cheerfully concedes that Blake does use signs as references, but he describes the Fall as an event in which Urizen creates "the difference between sign and referent, signifier and signified." He applauds Los for seeing signs as "Things"; he regrets that the Spectre sees them as "abstraction[s] detached from substantial and individual being."⁶ De Luca works with roughly similar assumptions. He sympathetically summarizes Blake's ideas in this way:

[I]t would seem that the primal catastrophe of separation . . . involved the breakup of a unitary body of signs. Out of the wreck there came into being, on one hand, a universe of objects or referents, dumb in themselves, and on the other, a fragmented, ever-shifting, inadequately expressive array of ex post facto verbal systems that pass for the natural languages of man. (201-202)

De Luca characterizes "texts" as "belated and dependent, forever referring

back to a body of meaning that they partly reveal and partly obscure." The alternative to "texts" (in this sense of the word) is "textuality," which is "a priori and autonomous, not a vehicle of meaning but the sum of the conditions of ordering that make meaning possible"; and he calls "ordering operations" the "nonreferential ambassadors of ideal textuality" (135). De Luca's iconic sublime is largely an effect of signs that confront, like objects, instead of signifying like normal words (205). They create "the reification of a visionary textuality" (134). De Luca believes that to "reify the signifier" is to produce "the sublime experience" (90).

But if one tries to think of a signifier that is literally an absolute, non-referential reality, one may begin to wonder if this is not what Blake said an "atom" was: "A Thing that does not Exist."⁷ A signifier that really did not refer to anything beyond itself would not be a signifier at all; it would be a mere object, a mark on a piece of paper, something ontologically indistinguishable from a rock lying in the middle of a highway. When regarded from certain angles, it might have an aesthetic effect, even a powerful one; but it would not be a sign until it was taken by some visionary as a sign of something. The concept of non-referential signs would seem to be a contradiction in terms, like a two-legged quadruped, a four-sided triangle, or the sound of one hand clapping—a notion that may tease us out of normal ways of thinking, but only because it teases us into an il-limitable, because impossible, quest for its meaning.

Even in Blake, signs are notably resistant to attempts to turn them into self-subsistent entities. The conclusion of *Jerusalem*, which represents certain signs as if they were entities and certain entities as if they were signs, refers to living creatures "convers[ing] together in Visionary forms dramatic . . . creating exemplars of Memory and of Intellect / Creating Space, Creating Time . . ." (*J* 98.28-31, E 257-58). Dis-

course, form, signification are strongly identified with a reality that they help to create, but the entities created are still "exemplars" of, references to, something.

De Luca presents numerous examples of "schematic, largely nonreferential patternings of signs" (215) that may in fact be strongly referential. His argument depends, indeed, on the strong referentiality of Blakean signs. As he observes, the abstract and schematic elements of the last prophecies, their fours and sevens and twenty-fours, which have so little obvious reference to reality as we know it, suggest the existence of another kind of reality, "a world that once consisted solely of intellectually organized forms" (201). In other words, they are not self-subsistent entities but refer to something beyond themselves. They may be "highly organized codes, not obviously meaningful in themselves" (201), but that's the point: *no* code is meaningful in itself; it's *just* a code.

De Luca says that in Blake's iconic mode, "the text is foregrounded as text and *is* what it says, and is *seen* for what it is" (62). Precisely; and a text, as opposed to an object, such as a truly autonomous mark on a piece of paper, is something that refers, and not just to itself. What De Luca has in mind, of course, is the way in which Blake's text can seem to be *nothing but* a code, a code that seems to stand by itself because it has no obvious meaning and that therefore invites its audience to attach to it "omnipresent possibilities" of meaning (205). But still it is not simply a rock in the highway, if it leads us to think of codes rather than mere confusion, if it leads us to feel as if we were in the presence of an "unfamiliar language," or if it encourages us to think—in De Luca's excellent phrase—of "sacred sculptures standing in the solar clarity of the ancient East."

The conclusion that needs to be drawn, perhaps, is that Blake cannot be enjoyed solely on his own terms, if we assume that his terms entail a successful rebellion against referentiality. If we insist on his transcendence of the

mundane distinction between signs and realities, we may lose the sense of his inventive use of signs to signify particular kinds of reality beyond themselves. We may lose the sense of Blake's struggle to maintain an authority emanating from someplace beyond mere signs. We may even lose the sense of what De Luca rightly values, the freedom of the self to choose the signs appropriate to individual expressions of reality.

The startling thing about De Luca's treatment of Blake's "words of eternity" is his assumption that the pure, self-substantial signifier is an ideal, that the degree to which Blake may have been "tied to the referentiality of language" was unfortunate (61). This assumption makes it appear that the marvellous thing about Blake's cities of Golgonooza and Jerusalem is the fact that they consist of signifiers that possess a "freestanding autonomy, transcending mere descriptiveness" (89). De Luca justifies any referential quality still to be found in these cities of words by asserting that their ultimate reference is to an ideal "conclave of signifiers" from which "contingent signifieds are virtually squeezed out" (99).

De Luca does not need to argue the thesis that this rump session of signifiers represents an ideal; he can rely implicitly on the general disgust for referentiality expressed in current works of criticism, a disgust that need not be induced by argument but can simply be taken for granted. One wonders how such a strange and virtually unprecedented emotional phenomenon could ever have made itself so thoroughly at home in literary studies—which, after all, are concerned with the analysis of what people do with systems of reference. The phenomenon has been considered as an episode in the history of ideas, institutions, and social groups.⁸ It might also be examined in theological terms, as a manifestation of a peculiarly severe form of instinctive monism, a sense of outrage that the One, whatever it is—history, textu-

ality, or some other term—should ever be obstructed by such detached and secondary things as reference, paraphrasable meaning, and the possibility of contradiction, modification, or denial.

It remains surprising that so acute and independent an analyst as De Luca could swallow this particular postmodern camel, after declining so many others. The problem, perhaps, is his delicacy about subjecting to criticism Blake's own attempts to transcend referentiality. Accepting on its own terms Blake's visionary ambition, he acquiesces in the kind of postmodernist assumptions that seem most Blakean. Exception should be taken, then, not so much to De Luca as to the tendency that we all have to accept without argument the premises of the Master and the premises of at least some of the critical orthodoxies of our time. De Luca's book is stimulating, provocative, rich in ideas; it is a landmark in the study of its subject; it should be read.

¹ Blake, annotations to Joshua Reynolds, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, newly rev. ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1982) 660. Future references to this edition cite it as "E," followed by page number.

² Blake, letter to Thomas Butts, 6 July 1803, E 730.

³ It is often, indeed, thrown down. Jerome J. McGann, for example, regrets that Blake the prophet of a socially contingent gospel is nevertheless prone to write in a Christian vein about the possibility of transcending historical circumstances, something which cannot, supposedly, be done (McGann, *Towards a Literature of Knowledge* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1989] 34, 2-5). This is somewhat like saying that Dickinson would be improved if she didn't write so much about death, or—to use Blake's sarcastic words—that "Homer is very much improv'd by Pope" ("Blake's Apology," E 505).

⁴ A provocative account of the reification of contraries is presented by Peter L. Thorslev, Jr., "Some Dangers of Dialectic Thinking, with Illustrations from Blake and His Critics," in *Romantic and Victorian: Studies in Memory of William H. Marshall*, ed. W. Paul Elledge and Richard L. Hoffman (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1971) 43-74.

⁵ Dan Miller, "Blake and the Deconstructive Interlude," in *Critical Paths: Blake and the Argument of Method*, ed. Donald Ault et al. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1987) 156.

⁶ Robert N. Essick, *William Blake and the Language of Adam* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) 97-103, 150, 195-96, 208-10.

⁷ Blake, letter to George Cumberland, 12 April 1827, E 783.

⁸ See, for example, Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); and Frederick Crews, *Skeptical Engagements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

William Blake. *Songs of Innocence and of Experience: Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*. Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Andrew Lincoln. Princeton: The William Blake Trust/Princeton University Press, 1991. 209 pp. \$59.50.

Reviewed by Irene Tayler

This is the second volume (after *Jerusalem*) of a projected collected edition of Blake's illuminated books, under the aegis of the Blake Trust and the general editorship of David Bindman. Both for itself and as part of this larger project, it is a welcome work.

Part of the pleasure of this lovely volume results from Andrew Lincoln's intelligent introduction and commentary. The Introduction conveys a lot of technical and contextual information in readable English; and the fact that the footnotes are on the page (rather than being gathered at the back) is an advantage, especially in a volume that readers will wish to handle carefully and conserve for long life. And the commentaries at the back—which describe and discuss both the text and the plates—are helpful without pretending to be definitive.

But the greatest pleasure by far is the color reproduction itself. This volume reproduces the King's College, Cambridge, copy, which has been called "Blake's own" copy, and is certainly one of the most beautiful and finely

finished copies we have. Each of the 54 plates not only has all the usual attractions of Blake's hand-colored *Songs*, but here he also surrounded each plate with a delicate water color border that in each case bears thematically on the content of the plate itself. Several of these borders are extremely complex in design and richly colored, as in the case of the combined title-page, which is wreathed in thorns and flames and half-animate leaf-life. Others (like those for "The Blossom" of *Innocence* and "London" of *Experience*) are restrained and monochromatic, as if to suggest that in such strong encounters with the life and death of the spirit, further "decoration" could only detract.

It is pleasant to know that this copy was for 55 years owned by the novelist E. M. Forster; literary history does not often offer such appropriate convergences. The book was given to Forster in 1903 by his aunt Laura May Forster, who inherited it from her father, who received it in turn from John Jebb, Bishop of Limerick, who bought it from Catherine Blake in 1830, three years after William Blake's death. It was Forster who willed it to King's College, Cambridge, where it has remained one of their great treasures, much talked of among Blake scholars but never before available to a wide audience.

At \$59.50 it will be hard to require students to purchase this edition of the *Songs*, even for an advanced Blake seminar; but every college library should own at least two copies, as any student at all interested in Blake's composite art will want to study it carefully, and every teacher of romantic poetry will want to keep it on reserve. It will be especially useful as a tool for teaching how Blake varied his copies, both



because it affords a nice comparison with the Oxford paperback color reproduction (likewise based on a late copy of the *Songs*), and because it includes 12 other color plates for comparison—offering for example three starkly divergent images of "The Divine Image," all on a single page. On the other hand it is not clear to me why the texts of the *Songs* needed to be transcribed twice—once facing each page of color reproduction, and once again at the head of each entry of the commentary at the back. To my mind, the space saved by offering a single transcription might have been put to good use in an annotated bibliography of the most important scholarly work that has been done on the *Songs*, replacing the rather brief list of "Works Cited" that we have here. But let such small caveats not cloud my overall point: this is a volume that every Blakean may joy to own.