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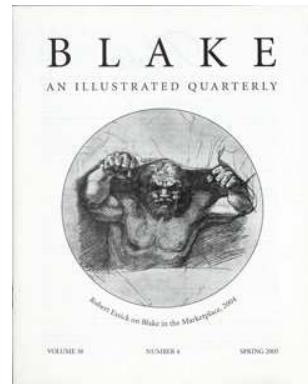
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R E V I E W

John B. Pierce, The Wond'rous Art: William Blake
and Writing

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John B. Pierce. *The Wond'rous Art: William Blake and Writing*. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003. 188 pp.; 7 b&w illus. \$39.50/£26.95, hardcover.

Reviewed by Jason Whittaker

John Pierce's latest book, an attempt to combine post-structuralist readings of Blake's texts with new bibliographical studies of the variant copies of those texts, offers a grammatical study of writing in a tradition that (he claims) extends back to the late seventeenth century and which has more recently been theorized by Walter Ong, Henri-Jean Martin and Nicholas Hudson as well as, of course, Derrida. In his introduction, Pierce posits a distinction in Blake between those approaches that concentrate on the material text of Blake's works where the material object is not always theorized, and those which pursue a highly theorized approach (for example in the work of Peter Otto, Molly Anne Rothenberg, Donald Ault and others) that does not always incorporate the material object into that study. As ever with such generalizations, it is easy to point out a few instances where the material object is theorized, notably in the work of Eaves, Visconti and Essick, while Pierce himself points out the importance of Vogler's and Hilton's *Unnam'd Forms* to his book. In addition, the easy binary between material object and theoretical rereading that he offers at the beginning of *The Wond'rous Art* (an opposition that will be wonderfully synthesized by his deconstruction) is more fragile at the beginning of the twenty-first century than he would lead the unsuspecting reader to believe. After all, using Derrida to destabilize the apocalyptic model offered by Frye and Bloom is itself hardly new, particularly for those who were first introduced to Blake studies in the eighties.

Nonetheless, Pierce's observation that Blake is being recovered as a prophet of *écriture* via publications such as the Blake Trust/Tate Gallery edition of Blake's illuminated books and the online Blake Archive is a useful one. He is also concerned with the ways in which Blake engages with writing not simply as process but also as illumination via rereading of the past: "Keeping in mind that Blake is an interpreter of Milton, the Bible, Bunyan, a host of others and also of himself, we can see that his work evinces this dual experience [of simultaneous writing and interpretation]" (14). Pierce points out several times that writing is invested with a "remarkable degree" of significance in Blake's texts; in turn, Blake's writing itself is interpreted by critics in multiple ways, for example the elevation of the bardic writer, Blake's own involvement in the production of his books, or via an examination of graphic technologies. Pierce is primarily concerned with writing as a thematic concern, that is how the act of writing is represented, how it functions as a form of communication, and finally as the theoretical site of signification. These are presented by Pierce within a fairly straightforward post-structuralist framework

in which Derrida is most important, followed by Foucault and Barthes.

The "wond'rous art" is a phrase from *Jerusalem* that Pierce interprets as referring to the "two principal functions—mediation and communication" offered by writing (38). In an initial contextual and theoretical section on these "scenes of writing," we see the ways in which writing could be seen as mediating the divine or, by contrast, as an entirely human and rationalistic progression of civilization that was ultimately democratic and demystifying. Blake, it is perhaps unsurprising to discover, arbitrates between the two, appreciating attacks on the social inequalities of priesthood while not agreeing with the Enlightenment removal of the divine from writing. In addition to this intervention between divine imagination and human reason, the "wond'rous art" also mediates between speech and writing, which Pierce frames as part of a very familiar Enlightenment and Romantic debate regarding the nature of voice and writing. To be honest, the contextualization offered in this section is weak and compares unfavorably with Essick's *William Blake and the Language of Adam*.¹ Pierce is on surer ground when he turns to the actual practice of providing deconstructive readings of his chosen texts. Thus, for example, while I am not entirely sure what he means when he says of the "Introduction" to *Songs of Innocence* that it "laughs the whole conceptual system of logocentrism into a state of suspension" (48), his comment alludes to some of the playfulness rather than pomposity of post-structuralist reading that is perhaps closer to Barthes at his most impish.

These theoretical and contextual chapters of *The Wond'rous Art* are followed by a section on narrative in which Pierce attempts to outline how tensions operate in narrative between a move towards cohesive completeness and individual elements that disrupt or decay that closure. This point has been made many times before, perhaps most forcefully in Morris Eaves's "On Blakes We Want and Blakes We Don't," where Eaves observes that he has as often failed to find narrative "support-systems" in Blake's prophecies: "my best reasons for believing that there is a system that can really be understood come from the secondhand testimony of great systematizing critics like Frye. Personally I have never experienced the grasp of Blake's meaning to which they ... have so eloquently testified."² Pierce's argument that Blake may be deliberately exploiting incoherencies within a narrative support-system is more appropriate to the shorter Continental Prophecies than the later

1. Robert N. Essick, *William Blake and the Language of Adam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). While Pierce refers to Essick several times, his main interest appears to be in Essick's work on Blake as a printmaker; while in itself this is probably a just assessment, *William Blake and the Language of Adam* covered similar ground to this section of *The Wond'rous Art* with generally more fruitful results—primarily because Essick is so conscious of the wider historical context in which Blake's ideas were operating.

2. Morris Eaves, "On Blakes We Want and Blakes We Don't," *William Blake: Images and Texts*, ed. Robert Essick (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1997) 137-64 (142).

prophecies, because these earlier texts do appear to have been arranged according to some sort of formal structure that repeats properties (names, lines, physical format and such like) at the same time that those texts challenge simple attempts to read a unified narrative. Thus *America* followed by *Europe*, with *The Song of Los* as a framing sequence of events, does indeed appear to indicate a narrative of closure. Yet working out a coherent temporal framework in these prophecies (from prehistory to apocalypse) is extremely difficult, with events in *Europe* not simply following those of *America* but also paralleling, preceding and retelling the conflict of the earlier story. This is one of the reasons, for example, why Makdisi labels Blake's work in the 1790s as an impossible history, "challenging the sense of linear flow" that saw a progress of liberty from Britain to America.³ It is right, therefore, if not exactly radical, to state that narrative frameworks in the short prophecies are always provisional, always complicated. More usefully, Pierce offers a clear explication of this process at work, and is particularly interesting (following McGann) when discussing how the visual narrative of *The Song of Los* and the frontispieces of the Continental Prophecies encode the reader's own struggles with enslavement and redemption, blindness and insight, as we move from Urizen's fearful contemplation of shadowy forms to the rest and recuperation of Los after his labors. Pierce also has some pertinent points to make when reading *The [First] Book of Urizen* as a Blakean text that is not only concerned with books and writing, but which also offers an almost post-structuralist autocritique of its own systems and status. At its most basic, this is effected by the book's resistance to the basic determinants of the book form, with each extant copy offering alternative plate orders, but Pierce's argument also extends to theoretical and thematic representations of writing within the text. Detailed readings of copies C and A, for example, with reference to other copies printed in 1794, undermine the notion of the "ideal" scholarly text.

What we have, then, and this is Pierce's most intriguing assertion at this point, is a "torn book," the sacred text deliberately violated as befits the Bible of Hell. Again, it would be ingenious to claim complete originality for the methodology being pursued here, and Pierce himself credits the most important and innovative insights to various sources such as the Santa Cruz Blake Study Group and Visconti. What *Wond'rous Art* does is to tease interesting potential from the new bibliography. It is not clear, however, that he has drawn on Thomas Vogler's rather severe criticism of his previous book, that (with reference to Visconti) "meaningful differences between the works must be understood at the level of *editions* rather than—with rare exceptions—of the individual copy."⁴ While *Urizen* could be considered one of those rare exceptions, the

main thrust of Vogler's criticism here is that it is questionable as to whether Blake ever willfully produced variants within editions to make each copy unique, or that such variations represented a conscious rebellion against "engraving uniformity." The "torn book" is a fascinating working hypothesis—but it is no more than that, and recognition of the tentative nature of the hypothesis undermines Pierce's confident declaration that "As we turn to other copies of *Urizen* and subject them to the kind of scrutiny provided by the perspective of the torn book, we find different patterns designed to suggest the order, design, and structure of the sacred book, but disrupted enough to undermine complete closure" (101). The key phrase here is "we find": in terms of a reception theory that concentrates on the social, indeed, infernal, illumination offered to and by the active reader (which would accord with Pierce's arguments about Blake's rereading and rewriting of Milton, Bunyan, the Bible and others), the motif of the torn book is an extremely interesting premise; unfortunately, within a paragraph or two we return to declarations such as "Blake offers a minor disruption to the narrative continuity of the plates," leading us to suspect that we "find" what Blake intentionally left in the text for us to discover.

The final part of the book, "Re-Writing," offers some of Pierce's most sophisticated readings, with particular regard to *The Four Zoas* and *Milton* (though, surprisingly, not *Jerusalem*). The problem of studying the manuscript of *Vala* or *The Four Zoas* is familiar territory, being in part a return to his arguments around narrative experiment in *Flexible Design*.⁵ Central to this argument is an extended application of Foucault's notion of archaeology, mediated through De Quincey's description of the palimpsest in *Suspiria de Profundis* and Derrida's reading of Freud's essay on the Mystic Writing Pad. With regard to post-structuralist examinations of texts and textuality, we are on familiar ground—but the obvious appeal of Blake's unfinished epic as palimpsest offers Pierce plenty of opportunities to discover the strata of the archaeology of the poem, how the writing and editing of *The Four Zoas* immediately resists a drive towards a "law of coherence," a drive that Pierce finds in readings offered by Brian Wilkie and Mary Lynn Johnson, Anthony Rosso and even Ault (although he does not appear to be aware of, and certainly does not cite, Peter Otto's recent book, *Blake's Critique of Transcendence*, which shares similar deconstructive concerns when reading *The Four Zoas*).⁶ Once again, the methodology is a familiar one, but Pierce's critical readings repeatedly offer illuminating interpretive judgments into this "space of writing," as when he concentrates on page 99 of the original manuscript to demonstrate how the "archaeology of writing here reveals writing's capacity to preserve underlying layers while actively receiv-

3. Saree Makdisi, *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 155.

4. Thomas A. Vogler, review of John B. Pierce, *Flexible Design: Revolutionary Poetics in Blake's Vala or The Four Zoas*, in *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 33.2 (fall 1999): 51-62 (54).

5. John B. Pierce, *Flexible Design: Revolutionary Poetics in William Blake's Vala or The Four Zoas* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998).

6. Peter Otto, *Blake's Critique of Transcendence: Love, Jealousy and the Sublime in The Four Zoas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

ing new models of 'Divine Vision.' These pages seem to record and receive without ever exhausting the dream of presence" (120). Pierce's detailed reading reinvigorated my own interest in the frequently incoherent and fragmentary—yet fascinating—text of *The Four Zoas*. While I am frequently nonplussed by Pierce's claims that he is pushing new theoretical ground with regard to Blake, he can use that theory to draw attention to intriguing details in the text. For example, his comments on how explicitly Christian imagery is added during a later redaction of the text, which indicates some of the sedimentation and striation of Blake's mythological imagination, or how the appearance of the Council of God creates similar problems for a notional narrative and thematic unity of the text, are genuinely useful insights. These are absorbing examples of Pierce's archaeological "dig" performed on a poem that is often literally written under erasure.

The final chapter on *Milton* is less inspiring overall as it returns to some of the thematic and formal ideas examined earlier in the book (and is thus something of a disappointment after the experimental palimpsest of *The Four Zoas*). Pierce's claim early in the chapter, following Wittreich, that he is less concerned with Milton the man than in Milton refracted through eighteenth-century commentators, and that "the Milton of the poem is a discursive field rather than a representation of a historical personage" (131), can be frustrating. The rewriting of Milton, and Blake's contribution to that "discursive field," is potentially fascinating, yet Pierce's contextualization of such a field is too brief and sketchy to be convincing. Certainly there are other writers, such as Wittreich and Lucy Newlyn, who provide much more detailed analysis of Milton's contribution to Romanticism, and Pierce's discussion of the archive around this particular discursive field is far too paltry. Towards the end of the chapter we are presented with a page on Addison's rereading of Milton as an inveterate classicist (hence Blake's disgust at subservience to "Greek or Roman models"), with a nod towards Dryden and John Dennis. While the general point made by Pierce at this juncture is a fair one, that Blake was on the attack against a tendency by certain writers in the eighteenth century to judge contemporary poetry by its conformity to abstract rules, the evidence he offers here is simply too meager. Milton was not as thoroughly depoliticized as the example of Addison suggests, even in the eighteenth century; Samuel Johnson and John Toland, at different times and for extremely different purposes, attacked or invoked Milton in support of their own political positions. Even if we restrict ourselves to aesthetic theory, however, subtly different readings of Milton were available to Blake as part of the "series of discursive fields" surrounding the poet, such as the representation of Milton as a bardic, even mystical, poet of imagination in Collins's "Ode on the Poetical Character." Despite such frustrations, however, this chapter does have plenty of its own insights, most notable of which for me was the discussion of Los's printing press as not merely an externalization of the body in a technology of writing, but part of Los's *labor*, an act of intellectual warfare as much as an act of

mechanical reproduction. "The connection of the press with Los and his labor suggests instead a reinvestment of creative consciousness in the modes of production of meaning: the printing press is as much an extension of his body as his anvil and furnaces are" (142). Unfortunately, writing as political struggle is often missing from Pierce's account, but there are flashes within this chapter that suggest just how important the battle for Milton's inheritance was within an emerging literary public sphere that sought to confine this dangerous precursor within clearly defined "classical" boundaries.

The Wondrous Art concludes by returning to a detail from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* where a devil dictates to scribes, part of what Pierce calls "the Infernal Scriptorium." The devil dictating as part of this scriptorium, engaged in argument, is intrinsically dialogic rather than monologic and is invoked as an example of Barthes's scriptor. Pierce's comment that he wishes to emphasize this social aspect of writing so as not to detach a theory of writing from historical and social concerns "as some strands of American deconstruction have appeared to do" (156) is, unfortunately, too little too late. Nonetheless, his attempt to recuperate a theory of Blake's writing from mechanical repetition is a worthy one, and while I find *The Wondrous Art* a little too implicated in precisely those ahistorical traits that have dogged certain "strands of American deconstruction," it illuminates some of the minute particulars of Blake's writing.

David Weir. *Brahma in the West: William Blake and the Oriental Renaissance*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003. xiii + 170 pp.; 11 b&w illus. \$21.95/£13.75, paperback.

Reviewed by Sibylle Erle

Blake has for some time ceased to be the "solitary visionary" with no "definite contacts with Hindu texts" depicted in Raymond Schwab's *Le Renaissance oriental* (1950, English trans. 1984).¹ Thanks now to David Weir, the source texts and also those who possibly mediated Hindu myths to Blake have been further identified. More importantly, *Brahma in the West* puts Blake's references to Hinduism, long since brought to our attention through the scholarly intuition of S. Foster Damon, Northrop Frye, and Kathleen Raine, into their contemporary discourses (45ff). Weir's book is a fresh attempt at interpreting the dynamic of Blake's Zoa and Emanation constellations.

1. Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880*, trans. Gene Patterson-Black and Victor Reiking (New York: Columbia UP, 1984) 97.