

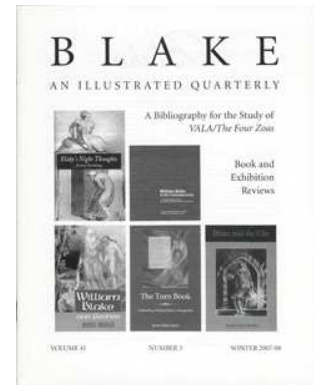
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

Jason Allen Snart, *The Torn Book: UnReading
William Blake's Marginalia*

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Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 41, Issue 3, Winter 2007-08, pp. 129-
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ity (11). As Tambling observes, gender cast off from identity is a return to the Eternal Man, who contains both "feminine" and "masculine" portions (91). Gender destroys real identity, splitting "the fantasised identity seen as bisexual in Lacan's mirror-stage" (11). But time and time again, the instability of identity is associated by Tambling with women and not men. Gender may be a fallen condition in Blake's universe, but too often in Tambling's argument, gender means femininity. In his interpretation of *The Four Zoas: The Torments of Love and Jealousy in the Death and Judgment of Albion the Ancient Man*, jealousy exists only between men and women, since Blake follows Young in believing that jealousy, "in the context of male friendship, is controllable" (72). Observing that this maxim was not true for Blake and his relationship with Hayley, Tambling removes male jealousy from the realm of night thoughts by associating it with Urizen (72). This is odd, since Hayley is very much aligned with Satan and hermaphroditic imagery in *Milton* and the notebook poems. Yet if jealousy exists only sexually between men and women, one is at a loss to explain Tambling's question whether the "torments" in *The Four Zoas* subtitle refer to men alone, since females are "derivations of men" (92), which seems to translate to "men are tormented because women get jealous." In an early scene between Los and Enitharmon, they are described as angry with one another, "Alternate Love & Hate his breast; hers Scorn & Jealousy" (9:24, E 305). As Tambling explicates the line, it shows that "in this ranking of qualities ... it is worse to be the woman than the man" (73).

If Tambling's exploration of gender is problematic, his argument regarding night thoughts and their relationship to cities shows true innovation. As a scholar of Charles Dickens and Henry James, Tambling brings new light to London and the bewildering array of place-names in Blake's later works: "Place names help to hold on to a past so wholly swept away as to seem never to have existed. To write the city through these names is to build it: it is the work of Golgonooza" (110). His pairing of "London" with the lyric on plate 27 of *Jerusalem* illustrates well Blake's awareness of the changing nature of his city and his efforts to preserve local histories in the swirl of physical and moral reform in the early nineteenth century. In Tambling's account, the evolving city is the province of night thoughts since it reveals the acute "spatial" and "temporal" confusion of Blake's historical moment (109): "[P]lace names no longer relating, or conferring identity, or recording what has disappeared, or changed, engender the other night, space of madness and of the 'neuter', the loss of self in the act of writing the city" (123).

The final chapter, on the Dante illustrations, which are alluded to throughout the book, undertakes the ambitious task of reading the designs not only as emblems of London in the year 1824 but also as Blake's engagement with Byron and Dickens. The former is more tenable, since Blake had dedicated *The Ghost of Abel* to Byron two years earlier and was likely aware of Byron's 1824 death. Tambling pairs Dante and Byron in Blake's mind as political exiles and reads in the illustrations

mutual concerns of Blake and Byron regarding the poor and outcast. The association between Blake and Dickens, however, is far more speculative, and Tambling pines for the notion that Dickens may have read Blake. But the link between the authors becomes interesting when he compares Dickens's experience of the city as a young man with Blake's late in life. The developing metropolis in the nineteenth century in many ways destroys for Tambling the possibility of night thoughts by literally and figuratively abolishing the dangerous streets and thoughts outlined in Blake's "London" through street expansion, gas lighting, and utilitarian surveillance.

Having begun by dispensing with the patriotic uses of Blake in twentieth-century British history, Tambling ends his book by denouncing Peter Ackroyd's biography of London² for using Blake to turn what was vibrant and alive into something that is "dead, finished, [and] knowable" (172). Ackroyd assumes the "constancy of places" (173), and the new city imagined by its planners is all day thoughts now for Tambling, creating an "information economy based on telematics, the apparent reverse of night thoughts in making information visible" (171). He finds London's hope not in an ossifying fusion of the present and the past but in the vibrant multi-cultural streets of London, which tell new, local histories and introduce new night thoughts.

2. Peter Ackroyd, *London: The Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus-Random House, 2000).

Jason Allen Snart. *The Torn Book: UnReading William Blake's Marginalia*. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2006. 213 pp., 22 b&w illus. \$48.50/£29.95, hardcover.

Reviewed by Jennifer Davis Michael

SOME of Blake's most trenchant and pithy comments come to us from the margins of the books he owned: "To Generalize is to be an Idiot," or "If Morality was Christianity Socrates was The Savior" (E 641, 667). Thanks to the recovery and collection of these marginalia by such editors as Keynes and Erdman, students of Blake may and do quote from them as readily as from Blake's self-published writings, as I have just done, focusing on their content at the expense of context. In doing so, we follow the example of Frye, Bloom, Thompson, Damon, and other leaders in the field. However, as Jason Snart argues in his new book, to extract these marginal interventions from their material context is to risk not only misreading the statements themselves, but also misinterpreting what books meant for Blake as a reader and printer.

Snart's thesis is that "Blake's experience as a reader both informed and reflected his thinking about what books could do and be" (35). Therefore, the annotations do not express, or emerge out of, a preexisting theory (30). Rather, they embody a process of readerly engagement, which, Snart argues, is "flatten[ed]" or even eclipsed entirely when scholars treat all Blake's textual productions as equivalent (31): for example, placing an annotation to Reynolds alongside a line from *Jerusalem*. Snart is interested in the marginalia not as products, but as process. While Snart's book has some shortcomings and some underdeveloped points, its great value lies in its attention to the marginalia as material interventions in the books of others, leading to questions and hypotheses about scenes of reading, writing, and printing in Blake's own illuminated poems, notably *The Book of Urizen*.

Snart is not alone in focusing on marginalia in order to illuminate the practice of reading: H. J. Jackson has published two books in the past six years, *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* (2001) and *Romantic Readers: The Evidence of Marginalia* (2005). Snart acknowledges the first, broader study, not as a "source" but as "responding to many of the same developments in scholarship" (12). I mention Jackson's latter book, however, because it throws into sharper relief the different ways in which she and Snart approach marginalia. While both seem to agree that annotation "synthesizes . . . the functions of reading and writing" (Jackson, *Marginalia* 90), Jackson maintains the sense of a coherent and preexisting philosophy that is solidified and confirmed by Blake's reading practices. She cites his account, on a blank page of Reynolds's *Discourses*, of his own annotations to Locke and Bacon (now lost), testifying to the consistency of his opinion over time. Blake, she concludes, "used his system of annotation to argue in favor of his own convictions, building up and defending a contrary position" (*Romantic Readers* 158). Repeatedly Jackson speaks of Blake's "system" or "method" of annotation.

Snart, on the other hand, characterizes all of Blake's work as an "anti-system project." The "UnReading" in his title "looks to avoid the conventional reading of marginalia for content in favor of asserting and maintaining their difficulty" (23). This approach requires that Snart resist the urge to make Blake coherent. Rather, he rewrites Los's famous line from *Jerusalem* (E 153) to read "I must not create a system, or be enslaved by another" (127): this appears, without comment, as the epigraph to chapter 4. Thus Snart participates in the post-Derridean and anti-Frygean practice of attending to the textual instabilities of Blake, in the tradition of Donald Ault (one of his dissertation supervisors, and a heavy influence) and Molly Anne Rothenberg. At the same time, his attention to the materiality of the marginalia and the physicality of Blake's readerly interventions forms a bridge between a more abstracted deconstructionism and the material investigations of Michael Phillips and Joseph Viscomi into Blake's book production.

Before turning directly to the marginalia, Snart spends two chapters exploring what he calls Blake's "anti-Newtonianism" and the tension between "fixity" and "fluidity" in his (or in-

deed any artist's) work. While Snart acknowledges that Blake's opposition to "Newton's sleep" is often oversimplified (45), he himself falls prey to the convenient use of "Newtonian" to refer to a linear system of cause and effect, described in language that transparently reveals an objective reality (36-37). Indeed, the phrase "Newtonian narrative," which Snart borrows from Ault, risks following in the path of the notorious "Orc cycle" as a critical commonplace. The second chapter, after helpful close readings of several plates from *Songs*, focuses largely on *The Book of Urizen* as "a book about the impossibility of getting *outside* of the book one is writing" (96). While Paul Mann has already discussed *The Book of Urizen* as "a book about books" (Mann 49), Snart explores the interpretive challenges posed not only by the book itself but also by the editorial impulse to pin "Urizen" down, to identify pictured figures as "Urizen," as well as, inevitably, to decide the order in which to read the plates. The end of chapter 2 offers, rather awkwardly, a brief "Preludium" to Snart's examination of the marginalia themselves. Here, as elsewhere, Snart tends to tell us repeatedly what he is doing, a likely residue of the dissertation that might well have been edited out of the published volume.

Nonetheless, Snart makes a convincing case that Blake's "composite art," with its inclusion of competing and even contradictory evidence, poses a challenge to the univocal authority of a "Newtonian" text. The marginalia thus become another means of challenging that Newtonian singularity. By "unfinish[ing]" a "finished" text, "the qualities of completeness (unity), univocality (repression), and closure could be contested if not dismantled outright" (38). This analogy between annotated and illuminated books raises another question, however: did Blake view his marginalia as an artistic production, even a publication?

Like Jackson, Snart cites Lavater's final aphorism, which invites readers to "interline" and "set . . . mark[s]" as they read and then to show their annotations to others. For both critics, this directive suggests that "Blake did not annotate only as he read a volume for the first time" (Snart 161). Both also note the apparent addresses to a reader in the marginalia, as well as the signing of them as "Will Blake." Snart further notes the "uncanny" production of an alternative "title page of sorts" in Blake's annotations to Reynolds's title page (152). While Blake de-centers the "original" text and often makes it difficult for the reader to ignore his comments, "rarely if ever has Blake defaced the original text to the point that it is unreadable" (150). Without the original, the sense of a contrary statement would be lost.

While Jackson asserts that Blake circulated his annotated books as an "alternative form of publication" (*Romantic Readers* 169), Snart does not go so far.¹ Snart is more interested in integrating Blake's experience as an annotator with his experience as an author and printer, suggesting, for example, that the

1. Morton Paley makes a case (266) for at least some of Blake's annotations being intended for an audience, "fit . . . though few."

"wall of words" V. A. De Luca notes on some pages of *Jerusalem* (De Luca 218) represents a deliberate defense against the contesting voice of annotation (Snart 142-43). Snart shares with Jackson, however, a fascination with Blake's use of pen to ink over his penciled notes, which Snart construes as evidence that Blake expected an audience to read them (132-33).

The strongest parts of Snart's argument are those that stick closely to the marginalia themselves. Even where he briefly introduces topics for further study, as in the closing section, "Areas for Further Research," he zeroes in on glaring gaps in our understanding of Blake's annotation. The links to Blake's own poetry and illuminated books, however, are not always as convincing. For instance, I am not persuaded that Urizen's "trac[ing] ... verses" in *The Four Zoas* is in any way connected to Blake's tracing over his marginalia in pen (144). Moreover, *The Book of Urizen*, as I have suggested above, takes up an inordinate amount of space in a relatively brief book about marginalia.

Despite these cavils, Jason Snart is to be commended for so acutely challenging the prevailing mode of reading the marginalia purely for content. Like the Santa Cruz Blake Study Group, whom Snart frequently cites and who first called attention to the distorting effect of typeset editions of Blake, Snart has shown the inadequacy of extracting marginalia from their context. He also calls attention to the alarming deterioration of many of the annotations, as pencil fades and pages crumble. We can only hope that someday some of these annotated pages might become part of the Blake Archive.

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Reviewed by C. S. Matheson

As a student at Oxford I earned a bit of money working part-time in the college library. The hourly wage was small, but the labor wasn't taxing, except for locking up and shutting down the lights in a long gallery reputedly haunted by the ghost of someone disappointed at Finals (a person, incidentally, who turned up well albeit wrinkled at a gaudy in my last term).

But the shelving and the cataloguing and the reserve requests were really made tolerable by the possibility of an outing with the college librarian. Periodically the librarian would receive word that someone had donated his or her library to the college and then she—and sometimes to my delight she and I—would be dispatched to examine the books and carry away our selections. These alumni seemed to favor the environs of North Oxford, or else they had followed the Woodstock Road along a bit further and daringly settled in the Cotswolds. They inhabited similar houses—not architecturally similar of course, but eerily alike in their proportion of armchairs to reading lights, cretonnes to bookrests, and well-used dictionaries to presentation copies. In the librarian's venerable Morris Minor we would travel at an unflappable 30 mph towards these quiet houses and their expectant libraries. I was always waiting for the bright moon to drop behind the cottage roof.

These excursions were my first proper lesson in the deep autobiography that is serious book collecting. They taught me just how many layers of self are manifested in a library, and the extreme generosity of selves who can project their libraries forward into another sphere and towards another set of readers. I learned that bookshelves stand at the convergence of dense, humming lines of testimony: not just to a person's subject and expertise and interests, but to his or her travels, experiences, consolations and connections; not just to the provenance of rare volumes, but the point at which a book's passage through the world merges with the whole journey of a collector. A life lived with books can be wholly different from a career enacted through them. There are times when geomancy seems a more necessary science than bibliography.

Now imagine how these issues are amplified when the collection in question is "one of the three most important Blake collections, institutional or private, formed in the second half of the twentieth century" (Robert Essick, quoted in the "In-