

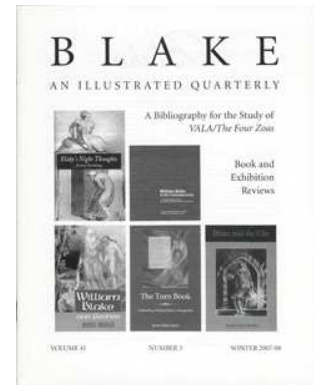
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R E V I E W

Jeremy Tambling, *Blake's Night Thoughts*

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Jeremy Tambling. *Blake's Night Thoughts*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. x + 202 pp. £50.00/\$85.00, hardcover.

Reviewed by Wayne C. Ripley

ANYONE looking for a close reading of Blake's *Night Thoughts* watercolors, or Blake's relationship to Edward Young, will be initially misled by the title of Jeremy Tambling's recent study. While there is an interesting chapter on *Night Thoughts* and Blake's designs, *Blake's Night Thoughts* takes night as a metaphor and structuring device and should be seen, rather, as a successor to David Wagenknecht's *Blake's Night: William Blake and the Idea of Pastoral* (1973). But whereas Wagenknecht considered Blake's conception of night within literary conventions and traditions, Tambling focuses on the wild topoi and discourses Blake associated with night and argues that Blake's night thoughts disrupt identity and challenge rationality at its most fundamental levels. Tambling associates night thoughts with the typical Blakean imagery of shadows, shade, stars, forests, dreams, and most of all darkness—a word that, the reader is told several times, spreads over six pages in the concordance—and he suggests that such imagery presents a realm of madness, irrationality, sexuality, and heterogeneity. Since night thoughts challenge grand narratives, one may be reminded of Donald Ault's idea of the non-Newtonian narrative in *Narrative Unbound*, but it would be closer to Tambling's point to think of classic descriptions of Beulah and Generation, concepts that one wishes Tambling had incorporated more, at least as an organizational device. As it is, Tambling has given us a poetics of Beulah that dares not speak its name.

The initial chapters are organized around a nexus of night thoughts images pulled from Blake's work as a whole, without consideration of chronology or development. Emulating his theme, Tambling moves stylistically in rhapsodic prose from one association to another. Sometimes his readings brilliantly illuminate unrecognized metaphoric patterns across Blake's works; other times these associations lead the reader down a seemingly endless signifying chain. One likes to think that this learned, rambling style is intentional, since the specter of an older critical tradition wanders throughout the book, in which literary analysis was the occasion for wider rumination and reflection as much as for tenure and promotion. It is unfortunate that Tambling does not embrace his leanings toward this type of criticism more forthrightly, because he always seems to be wrestling with more than just Blake. These wider concerns emerge briefly in the preface, where Tambling acknowledges the influence of F. R. Leavis, "whose wrestlings with Blake in seminars held me fascinated" (vii). But something in Blake kept the great critic at bay, for while Leavis was "utterly committed, he also seemed to be held back from de-

veloping writing on Blake in a way which I have attempted to think further about it [*sic*] in this book" (vii). The first chapter begins, accordingly, by tracing a genealogy of Leavis's 1972 *Nor Shall My Sword: Discourses on Pluralism, Compassion and Social Hope*, through "daytime" use of Blake by the patriotic and progressive forces of twentieth-century Britain. For Tambling, the nationalistic Blake of the "Jerusalem" hymn and the Blake allied with optimistic and progressive humanism distort the complexity and irrationality always at work in Blake's thought. As he will suggest in his conclusion, Tambling is just as ready to seize upon Blake as a symbol for Britain, but this dark Blake must always be a challenge to easy narratives of nationalism, urbanism, race, and empire.

Challenging the easy political uses of Blake, Tambling offers Ugolino as the organizing figure for his conception of Blake's night thoughts. Blake first drew a sketch of Ugolino between 1780 and 1785, and later employed the subject in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), *For Children: The Gates of Paradise* (1793), its revision *For the Sexes* (1820), and the Dante watercolors (1824-27). According to Dante, Ugolino devoured the dead flesh of his sons and grandsons in agonizing guilt and hunger when imprisoned in a tower, and, in the *Inferno*, he gnaws the head of his betrayer, the Archbishop Ruggieri. While the story itself possesses horrific ambiguities, the different contexts in which Blake employed the design add to the difficulty of its interpretation. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Ugolino appears on plate 16, which proclaims that the world is divided between the prolific and the devouring. In *The Gates of Paradise*, the illustration is recontextualized with the anticlerical recrimination "Does thy God O Priest take such vengeance as this?" (E 265).¹ As Tambling argues, Ugolino is both "a giant, embodiment of kinetic energy" and "the duality of creating and devouring" (6). Blake's Ugolino shatters simple categories of thought, and his anguished state of starvation and grief embodies the contradictions of night thoughts, "where desire for the morning and its reason contrasts with night and its reason, which is inseparable from a non-differentiated madness and death" (6).

As the ambiguous and tortuous symbol of Ugolino suggests, Tambling wants to move beyond a simple binary analysis of night and day to a place of tortured irrationality. As he writes, a central question in Blake's night thought is "[w]hat enables distinguishing and naming discrete forms and identities?" (124). But while Tambling effectively uses words like "ghost" and "echo" to capture the transient uncertainty of the polysemous meanings found in night thoughts, methodologically he frequently bisects his night thought imagery into pairings of related but distinct concepts. Instead of the binary of day and night, there are actually two nights. One is unremittingly evil, and it is the night properly to be feared and escaped. Tambling doesn't specify it as such, but this aspect of night should be glossed as Generation, Ulro, or Udan-Adan,

1. David V. Erdman, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, newly rev. ed. (New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1988).

which are always encroaching upon richly prolific Beulah. The other night, which gives us *true* night thoughts, is always in "shadow"—a nice Blakean doubling. Typified by Ugolino's ordeal, this shadowed night represents prolific indeterminacy, producing meaning even as it undermines it. Madness and the other night thoughts imagery follow the same pattern of dual meanings. Both forms of madness "make identities pale, deranged" (123), but Tambling associates the latter with William Cowper's wish to be, like Blake, "mad as a refuge from unbelief" (E 663). Because this wish appears to be identity affirming, however, Tambling must explain how creative madness can slip into the Urizenic abstractions associated with the Spectre and Nebuchadnezzar (146-47). The distinction between these subcategories is never absolute, and neither, it seems, can it be, since rationalism itself in night thoughts exists in a state of complicity with that outside of its boundaries, always "inseparable from the passion that fascinates it" (148).

The creative instability of night thoughts is exemplified for Tambling in "The Tyger," which he ties to "the voice of the Devil" in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and the claim that "Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy" (pl. 4, E 34). As this maxim suggests, reason and energy are never free from one another, but necessarily imply and require each other. This condition is typified by the Devil himself, who is caught within the very theological system he critiques, bound to the contrary views he denies (125). As a creator, Blake himself is in a similar position. He praises the virtues of the outline in opposition to abstraction, but "it is the line, the boundary, the limit which separates the inline from the outside line" (125). Yet this observation implies more for Tambling than "[w]ithout Contraries is no progression" (pl. 3, E 34). The outline not only creates the abstraction through exclusion but requires abstraction to define itself. In "framing" the Tyger, the creator (in all of its meanings) must delineate an outline out of the dynamic chaos of energy and reason. The line itself will negotiate between form and abstraction. For Tambling, these contradictions and complicities are at the essence of night-thoughts semiology. In "The Tyger," they emerge in "the forests of the night"; in Dante, the "dark wood" (*Inferno* 1:1-3). In "Mad Song," the narrator rejects the dawn, turning his

back to the east,
From whence comforts have increas'd;
For light doth seize my brain
With frantic pain. (E 415-16)

As Tambling comments, "[f]or 'Mad Song,' fulfilment of the lyrical, giving light, would give 'frantic pain.' Night thoughts are preferred, Spring is rejected before it comes, and the light of Enlightenment rationality is a source of madness" (135).

Despite their relatively obscure subject, Tambling's chapters on Young's *Night Thoughts*, the illustrations, and *The Four Zoas* are more accessible. In contrast to many Blake critics, he locates Young's credentials not only in the context of the Graveyard school but also in the context of German romanti-

cism and surrealism, citing André Breton's 1924 "Manifesto of Surrealism": "Young's *Nights* are Surrealist from one end to the other" (44). By viewing Young in this context, Tambling conveys well the excitement, novelty, and utter strangeness that can be found in a work that critics often malign, and he also accurately sees night in Young's *Night Thoughts* as "the moment when Lockean daytime passivity is broken and thoughts wander unlimited" (58). Tambling reads *Night Thoughts*, the illustrations, and *The Four Zoas* in tandem with *For the Sexes*, which paraphrases Young in its final plate and suggests Blake's lifelong interest in Young. Given the size and complexity of these works, the reading admittedly moves quite fast, but Tambling seizes effectively upon those moments of night thoughts that best reflect his analysis of Blake's other works. He combines the standard line that *The Four Zoas* manuscript embodies its fundamental themes of splitting and division with his own notion of night thoughts. The manuscript poem is "an impossible dream" because "[n]ight thoughts presuppose splittings within the text, which argue not for an ordinary psychic split, but that there can be nothing but a split state to start with" (72). Like the meeting of reason and energy in the creation of the Tyger, the duplicitous nature of jealousy leads simultaneously to the division between Tharmas and Enion even while it binds Urizen and leads to Los's binding of Orc. Because night thoughts are inherently fragmentary, Tambling leaves off his reading of the poem with Night Eight as Blake "moves away from night thoughts, to something more deliberate, by adopting figures from Christianity" (89). While Tambling never addresses this issue explicitly, the implication is that Edenic Christianity, at least as Blake understood it later in life, was part of the dawn, belonging to the world of day thoughts; as such, it would not be within Tambling's focus.

More problematic is the role gender plays within night thoughts. Resisting simple binaries makes it difficult to associate one gender with night thoughts, but Tambling oftentimes employs Blake's patriarchal language uncritically, resulting in an inadvertent sexism that associates women with difference. It is in this element of night thoughts that the omission of Beulah is particularly damaging to Tambling's argument. Beulah is a necessary place of repose in Blake's later works, and it remains the highest state achievable by man after the fall from Eden. While the male characters march, fight, and proclaim, the women in Beulah do much of the labor in restoring Eternity. Neglecting these scenes in Beulah for moments like Enitharmon's night in *Europe*, where the gender dynamics of night are laid out around the errors of female will (8), misrepresents the complex role of women in Blake's thought, a role made more complex with the discovery of Blake's Moravian heritage and its spiritual feminization of men. As Tambling explicates them, Blake's plots invariably revolve around male protagonists, while females are doomed to be ephemeral, marginalized, and vilified. He reads, for example, Enitharmon into the "Nurse's Song" of *Innocence* and *Experience*; the nurse's true identity, he suggests, is disguised by her feminin-

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.