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R E V I E W

## W.J.T. Mitchell, Blake's Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry

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# REVIEWS

W. J. T. Mitchell. **Blake's Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry.** Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978. xix + 232 pp. illus. + 112 pls.

**Reviewed by Thomas Frosch**

**T**he fundamental argument of *Blake's Composite Art* is that, although the texts in Blake's illuminated poetry can stand quite well by themselves, we must, to understand them fully, read them together with their designs. Mitchell begins with a theoretical discussion of the illuminated format and then, contending that each illuminated poem is an organic unit and develops its own particular relationship of text and design, proceeds to detailed readings of three works: *The Book of Thel*, *The Book of Urizen*, and *Jerusalem*. This is a well-chosen series for several reasons. First, we see Blake in the early, middle, and late stages of his poetic career. Second, we see three critical developments in his mythology: the breakdown of Innocence, the evolution of the world of Experience, and the apocalyptic recovery of paradise. And third, we see three different styles of illumination: one in which the relationship of design and text is generally illustrative; one in which the designs assume a more assertive, independent status; and one in which the pictures play a complex iconographic and structural role in Blake's most formally difficult work. Because Mitchell's outline is logical and attractive and because his writing is clear, his book can serve as a sophisticated introduction to Blake, as well as a substantial advanced study.

Before we see how Mitchell's outline actually works out, we may ask "what kind of Blake" emerges

## BLAKE'S COMPOSITE ART | A Study of the Illuminated Poetry



W.J.T. MITCHELL

in his criticism. Basically, Mitchell has a contemporary and, I feel, sound concept of Blake. His is not an occult or mystical Blake but one who rejects transcendence and insists that "redemptive energies are in this world, or must be brought into this world" (131), one whose highest value is the imagination as a process, and one for whom a true apocalypse paradoxically "does not foreclose the possibility of continued evolution, possibly even new 'falls' into error" (136). At the same time, Mitchell's Blake has a highly distinct personality which will not appeal to every reader. His Blake is not the Piper of Innocence or Rintrah raging in the wilderness or the visionary vitalist Oothoon. His is Blake the artist--and the artist perhaps ultimately more as formalist, maker of art-objects, than as Romantic hero, although the latter is by no means absent. But more particularly, his is a Blake of ambiguities and balanced judgments, an existentialist Blake making meaning in the face of the void (Sartre and Camus dominate the few contemporary analogues), a "sane" Blake capable of laughing at himself. Above all, this is a gentle, tolerant Blake; the Blakean idea that prevails in this book is Forgiveness. Perhaps this is a Blake in keeping with a time like the late 70's when extremism is less in fashion than it was in the 60's.

Mitchell begins with a useful and effective study of the general relationship between text and



design. Arguing that Blake seeks "an energetic rivalry, a dialogue or dialectic between vigorously independent modes of expression" (4), he analyzes several common ways in which the designs diverge from a purely illustrative subordination to the poetry. The first way appears in "illustrations which do not illustrate" anything in the text and is clearly demonstrated by the picture of the bard carrying the winged child in the frontispiece to the *Songs of Experience*. For such designs, says Mitchell, the reader must supply his own poem. Using the traditional iconography of St. Christopher, Mitchell interprets the picture as a symbol of reader and poet, both of them burdened with the prophetic task of making meaning in a spectral world. The second way is the kind of counterpoint that appears in *America* where Blake uses a picture of a Urizenic Angel of Albion to illustrate a speech by Orc and one of Orc to illustrate a passage about the Angels; the result is a composite drama in which the aged oppressor is transformed into his youthful opponent (and perhaps vice versa). Here, Mitchell indisputably shows that text and design together create significance that can't be gained from either by itself. The third way is syncopation (Frye's term), in which the related text and design are widely separated. Mitchell's example, the title-page of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, is poorly chosen. He follows a questionable tradition in associating the embracing figures at the bottom of the plate with the Memorable Fancy in which the angel, embracing the fire, turns into a devil. Is it really necessary to go through the tortuous interpretations of this design required to establish such an identification when the embracing figures appear under the word "marriage" on their own plate and when the theme of sensual enjoyment runs prominently through the text that follows? Mitchell and others argue that the figures are not clearly male and female, but the term "marriage" in this work refers to many types of marriage--among them, reason-energy, passive-active, form-content, angel-devil, female-male--and de-sexualizing the figures permits the expression of this full symbolic range.

Mitchell's next example of pictorial independence, a case in which a design that apparently only illustrates really adds significantly to the poetic argument, is also poorly chosen. Mitchell often proposes sources for Blake's designs in pictorial tradition, and frequently he does this convincingly. In this instance, he uses pictures of the guardian angel theme to suggest that, although in the text of "The Little Black Boy" the English boy is white as an angel and the speaker is a lost soul, in the design their states are inverted. The trouble here is that Mitchell uncritically accepts a text which, as Bloom has pointed out, collapses into incoherence unless read ironically, for if the two boys are freed in heaven from their bodies, as the poem says they are, then the speaker can no longer use his blackness to guard the white boy. The point is that Mitchell's reading of the total plate is completely dependent upon his understanding of the text alone; if the textual reading has difficulties, the composite-art reading will just get us into deeper trouble. In line with this problem, I am particularly interested in Mitchell's statement that, especially in the longer works, the text is better read reprinted by itself, since deciphering

the handwriting and looking at the pictures distract one from the hard concentration that a Blakean text demands. This is a suggestive observation, although Mitchell doesn't develop it. Illumination pictorializes the poem; however, in the act of interpretation it is the words that assume primacy: in his full readings Mitchell always begins with the text, as I think nearly all Blake readers must. In effect, illumination functions as a strategy to suppress, even conceal, the words, in contrast with the exposure of the printed page. Mitchell does refer to Frye's notion of "conflicting aesthetic appeals" as a further type of independence; Blake makes distraction into an aesthetic principle, and I wonder to what extent and in what specific instances it might also be studied as a psychological principle.

Mitchell continues his treatment of the text-design relationship with an excellent discussion of Blake's attitude to the idea of the Sister Arts as one of critique rather than acceptance. He shows how Blakean practice contradicts point by point the principles of the *ut pictura poesis* tradition, in which the imagination is given a visual analogy. Blake emerges convincingly here as an anti-perspectival, anti-pictorial artist; for him poetry and painting, far from seeking analogous methods, each have to find individual ways of being visionary. But with the text attacking objective time and the designs attacking objective space, both cooperate in reshaping the perceptual world.

Mitchell valuably places the relation of text and design within the context of Blakean dialectic in general. The apparent schism between poetry and painting is simultaneous with that between soul and body, intellect and sense, and, most radically, male and female; and thus composite-art criticism leads us straight into the central Blakean problem of dualism. The independence of text and design, says Mitchell, reflects Blake's vision of fallen duality, but at the same time the creative contrariety of text and design enacts the return from divided nature to unfallen unity.

To me, the most interesting observation that Mitchell makes in his entire theoretical discussion is that the "pictorial 'wars of intellect' which Blake conducted with the texts of the past [in his illustrations of other poets] continue, in a sense, even into his designs for his own poems," insofar as here too he refuses merely to be an illustrator (19). For Mitchell, this indicates that the "refusal to provide visual translations of texts . . . is not merely a sign of doctrinal differences with his subject, but is a basic principle in his theory of illustration" (19). I think Mitchell gets closer to the truth when he says later that Blake's illuminated style "embodies the drama of a divided, polarized consciousness seeking reunification--the subject of his prophetic books" (52). But what type of internal aggression and self-division is revealed in the spectacle of a Blake who rebels even against himself? What impelled Blake to develop two artistic gifts to an unmatched degree and bring them together in a complex double art? Doubleness in Blake seems anterior to any of its formal and thematic expressions. As Levi-Strauss has treated myths as embodiments rather than solutions of problems, so we see in Blake's double art a tremendously angry



and divided sensibility seeking external embodiments of its own structure. Yet we also see Blake struggling to transform wrath and conflict into non-destructive modes of doubleness: interplay, cleansing correction, brotherhood, and marriage, as well as the striving beyond doubleness to reunification.

Chapter II focuses on several central features of Blake's pictorial style. The first is the relationship of color and line. Mitchell writes that although Blake's theory vehemently suppresses color in favor of line, in his actual practice color and light play important roles and occasionally even predominate. In the theory and the poetic mythology, outline is permanent, male, Los, the naked body, while color is evanescent, female, Enitharmon, the garment, but what we actually see is a dialectic of the two, similar to the interplay of text and design. A second pictorial feature is the use of the human body as an organizational factor in composition. The body appears in a continuum of postures from the contracted, oppressed crouching form to the expansive, risen, leaping or flying form. Mitchell cautions us against oversimplifying a moral code to Blake's forms, however, by pointing out positive instances of contraction and negative of expansion; he does the same for the categories of translucence and opacity. Ultimately, each picture of the body is a frame in the "visionary cinema" of Albion's total body in its unfallen, all-flexible potentiality; and the limits of contraction and opacity have their own necessity within Blake's total vision. In this discussion, as in the section on color, we see Mitchell's characteristic spirit of reconciliation at work, redeeming common Blakean scapegoats.

A third, and especially interesting, pictorial feature is that linear composition in Blake is based upon four forms, used either in repetition or interaction within the frame: spiral, S-curve, circle, and inverted U. Here I think Mitchell teaches us to look at Blakean designs in a useful new way. The spiral and S-curve are generally associated with expansion in subject matter and the circle and inverted U with contraction. Furthermore, working from recurrent poetic motifs, Mitchell associates the spiral with the ear, the S-curve with the tongue, the circle with the eye, and the inverted U with the nose; he thus sees sensory opening and art work as parallel in that both are windows to be seen through. He develops in detail the spiral, as vine, scroll, serpent, whirlpool, and, particularly, vortex. The vortex, in his analysis of this complex and much-analyzed figure, is a gateway into a new level of perception, either upwards or downwards, and also an image of oscillation between a vision of the object as it is and a vision of the object as we see it. This latter formulation is fruitful, and the interpretation that depends upon it of the vortex passage in *Milton* is excellent. But one problem is that Mitchell speaks of poetic accounts of the vortex in visual terms even though he associates the vortex, together with all other variants of the spiral, with the ear. Relatedly, the two great descriptions of the vortex, in *Milton* and *The Four Zoas*, both concern acts of falling, whereas the spiral is usually associated with ascent. I would argue that we have

to separate the vortex from the other spiral variants and regard it *sui generis* as an image of visual experience. Perhaps we fall through the vortex of the perspectival eye and rise through the spiral of the ear.

The theoretical discussion, both in its many local observations and in its general portrayal of a dramatic, dialectical composite art is on the whole an excellent piece of Blake criticism. Mitchell's first application of the theory in his reading of *The Book of Thel*, however, is the weakest section in the book. In his argument the work, although apparently straightforward, is permeated by ambiguities in both text and design. Most notably, it is framed by two enigmas: the opening motto, in which alternative answers can equally well be supplied for Thel's questions about eagle, mole, rod, and bowl; and the closing picture of the serpent ridden by the maiden and children, which can equally well be interpreted as a flight from Experience or as a fusion of Innocence and Experience. Mitchell finds that in general the work both elicits and undercuts the two most common interpretations of Thel's fate as a regression from reality or a justifiable escape from a nightmare-world. Particularly, "we cannot judge Thel a coward because Blake strips away all possible superior vantage points from which we might pass judgment." Furthermore, "the moral structure of the poem is implicitly based on the process of Self-annihilation" (as revealed, I suppose, in the speeches of the comforters), and anyone who had undergone Self-annihilation "would be capable only of forgiving her, not judging" (95).

To Mitchell, Thel's questioning is the admirable sign of her humanity; but ultimately her reasoning powers are used to retreat from experience and create a spectral self. Her problem is to confront death, and she is finally unable to understand "the paradoxical interdependence of life and death experienced by her comforters" (90). At the same time, in its total structure the work gives us a vision of such paradoxical harmony as mediated "through a perspective [Thel's] which sees life as antithetical to death" (106). The root of Thel's problem, Mitchell suggests, is her search for a "transcendent father." It is her discovery in the grave that this "illusory deity" does not exist that shatters her. And the absence of God for Thel is paralleled by the absence of a moral norm for the reader; in reading we experience the same ambiguity that defeats and divides her and are thus forced "to ponder issues which may ultimately defy all pondering" (106).

This reading is lively and, to a certain extent, helpful. But it is also badly strained; Mitchell seems to want to make *The Book of Thel* into a "skeptical form," reading it as works like *Antony and Cleopatra* and "The Nun's Priest's Tale" are often read. It is true that the world Thel rejects is a world of ambiguity and uncertainty, as evidenced by the famous paradoxes of the body in the speech from the grave. It is also true, I think, that the poem, with the motto in part possibly derived from Ecclesiastes, develops the kind of skepticism that



was later to satirize the Urizenic search for an ultimate answer, a solid without fluctuation. But to make this general point, it is not necessary to force everything in the poem into ambivalent form. The closing picture of the serpent, for example, does not seem to me a case of terminal ambiguity. While a number of ways of looking at it are possible, they are not equally convincing. The reading of the picture as an emblem of Higher Innocence, antithetical to Thel's fate, seems far more probable than any other both from internal and contextual perspectives. Hagstrum's adducing of the traditional iconography of Cupid and serpent is convincing; Oothoon's later celebration of eros in terms of Innocence ("Infancy, fearless, lustful, happy! nestling for delight / In laps of pleasure") is hard to ignore; so is a structure in which, since the title plate also depicts sexuality, Thel's story of a rejection of sex seems to be framed by symbols of acceptance. That sexuality might appear in a somewhat ambivalent form is to tinge it with Thel's perspective. But in treating aesthetic ambiguity we have to distinguish between possibilities that are equal and possibilities that are more and less likely, between the mutual refutations of skeptical form and the richness of an image surrounded by auras of qualifying connotation.

The same is true of the motto. While it may be a general Blakean principle that, as Mitchell says, we need both panoramic eagle-knowledge and intimate mole-knowledge, simply in terms of Thel's quest, the mole is more likely as a relevant guide; a "blind," or spectral, human being could tell her more about what human experience is like than any of her non-human comforters. As for whether love and wisdom can be put into rod and bowl, if the question means, "Can love and wisdom be known purely through the symbols employed by instruction or theory?" the answer is no, while if it means, "Are love and wisdom discovered in action, as opposed to abstract ideal?" the answer is yes; but in both cases the meaning of the answer is the necessity of experience. Furthermore, insofar as the questions are epistemologically unanswerable, we must remember that this is designated as Thel's motto, not *The Book of Thel's*, and is therefore taken more logically as an expression of intellectual helplessness than as any salutary skepticism. The questioner who does not know how to reply is no hero for Blake. As in "The Tyger," the interrogative form, when not rhetorical as in Oothoon's questions, expresses an imaginatively flawed sensibility, one that is unwilling or unable to achieve crucial recognitions, one that can discover only intellectual circularity: thus the structure of a lyric like "The Tyger," in which the last stanza is merely an intensification of the first stanza, or the adventure of a voyager like Thel, who can only end where she began.

As for the problem of judging Thel, Mitchell's reading hardly transcends the field since he clearly evaluates her behavior negatively, pointing, for example, to her retreat into selfhood, her inability to resolve the dualities of experience, her infantilism in identifying with the helpless worm. These are certainly judgments with moral implication, and I also agree with them. We need to distinguish between the narrowly moralistic judgments of con-

ventional good and evil, on the one hand, and psychological, philosophical, or imaginative judgments on the other. Blake wants to wean us from the former to the latter. To condemn Thel moralistically is beside the point, but so is merely forgiving her. Instead, the poem forces us to understand her both analytically and sympathetically as a failure in the same way that we must analyze the poignant failures of many of the characters in the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. It is not precisely that we must identify with Thel, as Mitchell argues, but that we must apprehend her cathartically as that part of ourselves that regresses when faced with the challenges and dilemmas of Experience and of adult self-consciousness.

I would also take issue with Mitchell's treatment of the comforters. Mitchell seems to take their acceptance of death as part of a greater harmony as an ideal recognition that Thel is unable to achieve, and he also says that their mode of being, as portrayed in the pictures, is no different from hers. But their pictorial smallness in relation to her is, I feel, indicative that their mode of being is indeed different. They are not "Human Forms identified"; they are elfish creatures of primal Innocence, where lamb, child, and God all share the same level of being. Further, the story of the poem is in part the story of the aborted emergence of a human consciousness from its identification with nature in the state of Innocence. The comforters cannot really help Thel because they do not know death as a self-conscious human mind knows it. They know only the cycles, metamorphoses, and ultimate unity of nature. Thel's problem is to break away from one connection to nature and accept another; she must assume her alien humanity and then provisionally betray it to mortal clay. The comforters urge acceptance of the given body of nature; Thel resists it in the form of chastity and denial of death; ultimately Blake was to urge resistance in the form of eros and art. I might add that Mitchell is mistaken to say that the poem deals primarily with death. What we have when the voice from the grave speaks about sex is a precise conjunction of sex and death. We can understand this in that the full discovery of the genitality of the body and the discovery of its mortality are twin adolescent phenomena and may be said together to mark most dramatically the boundary between the child's sense of himself and the adult's. I would further suggest that it is relevant to Blake's poem that sex and death also come together in the castration anxieties of the oedipal phase, that stage of experience which, as Jacques Lacan stresses, divides nature from culture. What Thel--whom, as Mitchell notes, we first see on the title-page gazing ambivalently at two flower-people making love--hears from her grave-plot is, in essence, a warning that concern with sex can lead to death, and a confirmation of the anxiety that sex and death are the same. Thel is an Oedipus who cannot answer the riddles of the sphinx. Blake chooses a childlike female hero to express a failure to overcome castration anxiety, a failure to assume a phallus, that is, emotionally acknowledge and accept it. It is not for nothing that a blind mole--that is, a blinded, or castrated, Oedipus-surrogate--appears in the motto as a potential guide to the depths of Experience.



There is one point in Mitchell's chapter that I do unreservedly admire, and that is his treatment of parentalism, Thel's search for a transcendent father and her "vision of human fulfillment as merely a state of innocence and infantile dependency" (100). This is nowhere better shown in anything I have read than in Mitchell's interpretation of Thel's response to the Matron Clay: when Clay tells Thel that God has called her the mother of his children and has anointed her with oil, Thel answers that she did not realize that God would cherish a lowly worm with milk and oil. Her non-sequitur reveals her inability to emerge from childhood, as a nuptial relationship with God is translated into a filial one.

The chapter on *The Book of Urizen* is much more successful in its entirety. In "Blake's most spectacular picture book," the full-plate pictures never appear in the same order in any two editions, which is an extreme example of Blake's refusal to compromise individualism even by copying himself, as well as, in Mitchell's terms, a renunciation of the illustrative principle of the *ut pictura poesis* tradition. Metaphorically, Mitchell writes, the radical separation of text and design, including a tendency to divide the plate into distinct pictorial and poetic areas rather than letting them interpenetrate, is appropriate to a theme of division and isolation, to a story in which Urizen separates from the Eternals, Los from Urizen, Enitharmon from Los, and Orc from the last two, and to a set of pictures in which the human form appears locked in its own solitude, even when other humans do happen to be present. To me, the climactic pictorial example of separation occurs in the picture of the orphan and his howling dog in modern London, a discordantly composed picture in which the two figures are disposed on either side of a central emptiness and in which the viewer can't look comfortably at either figure without being drawn away to the other.

Mitchell interestingly reads Los as a figure who enters Blake's mythology as a mediator in this nightmare of division. The split between Urizen and the Eternals is not, Mitchell shows, a schism of fallen and unfallen but of one sensibility into reason and emotion. Blake thus "develops a new concept of the prophet . . . as mediator, not between man and God, but between the conflicting claims of human nature" (121). Far from healing the schism, however, Los, in his divided allegiance, is himself divided into male and female. The fall into division is by its nature also a fall into the void, which the artist must fill, even if only with a Human Illusion; Los's mistakes are better than a surrender to nothingness. Indeed, Mitchell makes anticipatory use of *Jerusalem* in calling the fall into nothingness fortunate for without it "Blake's ultimate moral and visionary act--the act of Self-annihilation--becomes meaningless and unnecessary" (135). In line with this theme, Mitchell closes his book with an epilogue in which Los-Blake is compared to Camus' Sisyphus, with the Void of the former paralleled to the Absurd of the latter and with Blake, like Camus, affirming action in the face of nothingness. This is an enjoyable part of the book, and Mitchell is quite good in delineating the changing visions of emptiness in Blake's career: the absence of a protecting

father in *Thel*, the "abyss of subjectivity" in *Urizen*, and the "Void, outside Existence" through Death's Doorway in *Jerusalem*. We should remember, though, that in existentialism there is nothing that corresponds to the word "Existence" in Blake's line. Los is trying to recover a lost sense of radical humanity that in existentialism, as well as in more recent French thought, would be regarded as a religious illusion, a myth of Presence. Mitchell claims that the Blakean imagination is not an absolute, in the conventional religious sense, because it is conscious of itself as a maker of illusions; but I think we have to face the fact that Blake's supreme fiction is that the imagination is no fiction.

Mitchell reads *The Book of Urizen* as a parody of *Paradise Lost*, in which Blake is anxious to subvert, above all, Milton's orthodox and clear-cut moral categories but is equally desirous of avoiding a simple, Satanic inversion of those categories. Thus, in a complex system of allusions, Urizen appears at different times as both Milton's Satan and Milton's God, and Los as both "cosmic creator" and "tormented Adam"; and thus while the establishment of law and the apotheosis of reason are the primal acts of the fall, the primal redemptive act is neither the violation of law nor the valorization of emotion. Once again, we are being weaned from the categories of good and evil, and now an ostensible villain, Urizen, turns out not to be quite so bad after all. The designs portray him alternately as a titanically tragic figure and as a laughable one. Perhaps the ambivalence is captured most strikingly in the "handstand" picture, in which his search for a point of view, or, as Mitchell puts it, a supreme fiction, is represented as itself an act of falling; in this brilliant image we see both *tragic* and bathos at the same time. It is certainly true that Urizen is not synonymous with Nobodaddy; rather, he represents an internalization of that more blatant villain. And Mitchell is right to say that we can't cast out Urizen as the mistaken Eternals do since he, as much as they, is part of the mind. Mitchell helps us sophisticate our response to Urizen, but his idea that Blake criticizes Milton for assigning all moral virtue to one party and suppressing his sympathy for the other is not the best formulation of the problem since this involves a redistribution of good and evil, not an advance beyond them. Nor is Mitchell helpful when he defends Urizen by saying that his oppressive One Law is after all motivated by a desire for peace, love, and forgiveness, for the passage in which this point is made is clearly satirical in structure.

Mitchell extends his point about Urizen in a provocative discussion of the relations between Urizen, Los, and Blake himself. Every character in the poem, he notes, appears Urizenic at one time or another, and in the designs Los even takes on Urizen's beard when he is playing the Oedipal father with Orc. Most strikingly, the title-page portrayal of Urizen, seated before a pair of tombstone-decalogue tablets and ambidextrously copying from a book half-hidden by his beard, can be read as a self-parody of the double artist. This is the most extreme form of a "self-directed irony" that Mitchell points out, in this poem and elsewhere, to show Blake humanizing a



godlike point of view and countering the potential megalomania of the prophet by poking fun at himself. Mitchell's depiction of Blake's style of humor is not quite accurate. Blake tends to use humor in a Rabelaisian way to enhance his romantic conception of himself and his work, rather than in a Byronic way to qualify or even puncture it. Another fact about Blake that we have to face is that he does have a titanic sense of himself--as he does of mankind in general. His tongue-in-cheek humor tells us prophetically that he is aware of his own egomania, enjoys it, and is in creative control of it. Blake's portrayal of kinship with Urizen is also the result of a pitiless analysis of human creativity in the attempt to develop a concept of a true prophetic artist. And it is, in addition, the result of his equally acute recognition of the potential dangers in his own quest to be, unlike Thel but like Urizen, an emancipated, autonomous subject, free of parents and other men's systems. The purpose of Blakean self-parody is analysis and correction; to "humanize," for him, is to elevate, not to lower. Mitchell is much better when he treats Urizen as a caricature of the Blakean illuminator in that he is apparently using one law for the lion and ox in the fashion of *ut pictura poesis*, and in that, in the closing plate where Urizen is floundering in the webs of religion, he exemplifies the danger of "entrapment by one's own creation," a constant Blakean fear. Lawmaker and artist, both writers, are antitheses; furthermore, the Urizen on the title-page is a copyist, while in the narrative he is a solipsistic originator, and these are two opposite dangers for the artist. Mitchell continues persuasively to portray *The Book of Urizen* as Blake's critique of the historical role of the prophet as subordinate to a transcendent deity and of the difficulty of assuming the prophetic function in the absence of such a moral absolute.

On the whole, Mitchell's chapter is as strong a discussion of *The Book of Urizen* as any I know, but it is marred by the same over-insistence on tolerance that troubles his *Thel* chapter. At one point he writes that "Blake combines Miltonic sublimity with a Shakespearean relativism in questions of ethics and epistemology" (118). Once again I find Mitchell collapsing an important distinction. Getting away from a narrow moralism of vice and virtue is not the equivalent of moral relativism. Blake is certainly an extreme relativist in that he treats behavior and perception as dependent upon a subject's state of being. But he does, unlike Shakespeare, insistently call upon us to behave and perceive in certain ways; imagination is a moral category for him, and he demands that we expand our faculties to the fullest extent in a challenging and intense ethic of art and vision. "I care not whether a Man is Good or Evil; all that I care / Is whether he is a Wise Man or a Fool. Go! put off Holiness / And put on Intellect"; "A Poet a Painter a Musician an Architect: the Man / Or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian": these are not expressions of Shakespearean relativism. Shakespeare, like Chaucer, wants to give us insight into reality. Blake, like Milton and Spenser, wants to transform reality; they are writers of the Human, as opposed to the human. However many crossovers there might be, these are distinct styles of imagination, and much is lost by assimilating them.

The *Jerusalem* chapter is largely concerned to develop an accurate structural description of the poem. Analyzing *Jerusalem* as an "antiform" that deliberately denies our usual expectations of poetic structure, especially in terms of linear development and causality, Mitchell gives several positive accounts of its form, including calling it a comic anatomy. But his chief suggestion is that the poem is organized thematically and that each of its four equal chapters deals with the peculiar "errors and visionary possibilities" of the audience addressed in prose at the beginning of each chapter. The poem thus repeats itself, adapting its theme to its different classes of readers. Chapter I, addressed to the sheep and goats of the Public, introduces to a universal audience the poem's major characters, actions, and themes, and concentrates on the universal man, Albion, in his fatal rejection of imagination. Chapter II addresses the Jews, assigning to them the special error of patriarchy and masculine obsession; the chapter accordingly concentrates on moral self-righteousness, especially regarding chastity, and on the development of the spectre, a male ego that worships a female world. The female world is the nature of "Greek philosophy" and Druidism, and so Chapter III is addressed to the Deists and concerns the ravages of the Female Will. Just as Chapter I exhibits the division of Albion into sons and daughters, the fourth presents their deadly assimilation into "the apocalyptic form of error, the hermaphroditic Covering Cherub." In this destructive combination of the sexes, male legalism and female naturalism come together, as they do for Blake in eighteenth-century Christianity; Chapter IV is addressed to the Christians and is concerned to revise the orthodox concepts of Jesus, sacrifice, and redemption. Blake articulates this structure in the designs by using the framing devices of frontispiece, headpiece, and tailpiece as "pictorial summaries" of the theme in each chapter. For example, the frontispiece of Chapter II shows a meek Jerusalem before an overbearing, accusing Hand, the "aggregate form of the Sons of Albion"; the headpiece shows a contrary vision of sexual enjoyment above poetic lines in which "every labor of Love" and "every act" become "a Crime. and Albion the punisher and judge." In the tailpiece we see Hand metamorphosed into the three-headed male spectre, Bacon-Newton-Locke. We need as many accounts of the rich and multifold structure of *Jerusalem* as we can get, and Mitchell's scheme is a major contribution to our understanding of the poem.

The pictures in *Jerusalem* have a special iconographical complexity, and in reading them Mitchell is often able to define an essential Blakean type of ambiguity more thoroughly than I have ever seen it done elsewhere. For instance, he finds in the intriguing design of the bird-headed man watching the sunrise (plate 78) convincing evidence to identify the figure both with Hand and Los. We can thus see the form of Los emerging within the form of Hand, or Hand transformed from predator to eagle-eyed visionary, and we can understand why elements of melancholy (the birdman's expression and posture) and of hope (sunrise) are combined in the picture. Similarly, plate 76, showing Albion's adoration of the crucified Jesus, is read as revealing a transformation of the worship of the false



Jesus of orthodox religion into the worship of the true Jesus, the imagination within the self and the friend who sacrifices himself for another. And in *The Book of Urizen* the remarkable picture of the fetal skeleton demonstrates, for Mitchell, that the most contracted form of the body is also the beginning of a potential movement toward expansion; thus fallen and unfallen perspectives are intertwined in the same picture. Clearly, Mitchell is eager to see an optimistic symbolism wherever at all possible; even in the agonies of *The Book of Urizen* he finds that "compulsive repetition" is not "cyclic nightmare" but "typological ripening" (132). In this case I prefer Frye's concept of demonic parody, which Mitchell explicitly rejects here. But I do think that in general Mitchell makes an important contribution to our understanding of Blakean doubleness, helping to clarify the process by which error contains truth and may be transformed into it. But his tendency to see affirmation everywhere sometimes leads him to severely strained interpretations, as well as denials of Blake's capacity for expressing the purely nightmarish, as when he sees in the *Jerusalem* design (plate 25) of Tirzah, Rahab, and Vala operating on the agonized body of Albion signs of lifegiving as well as torture in "a symmetrical vision of hope and fear" (201).

It is in such instances that the principle of forgiveness is generalized out of Blakean shape. Blakean forgiveness applies to individuals, not states, and in the above plate we are witnessing the state of Tirzah. The entry of Bacon, Locke, and Newton into Eden certainly does not imply any reconciliation with their views, any cessation from mental fight. Intellectual enemies are not forgiven their wrong ideas in *Jerusalem*, any more than the angel is in *The Marriage*. Reading Mitchell, with his emphasis on the themes of moral accusation, judgment, punishment, and forgiveness, one gets a vivid sense of *Jerusalem* as a journey deep into the tormented core of a guilt culture and as an epic celebration of a healing new love that seems, thematically, as different from eros as it does from agape and pity. But when Mitchell writes that in the apocalyptic embrace on Plate 99--an embrace that in its pictorial details comprehends both sexual and non-sexual love--we see not only Albion and Jerusalem reconciled, but Orc and Urizen, and Thel and her "father-lover," forgiveness has to be distinguished very sharply from the premature type of reconciliation that Urizen is always preaching. For Thel to find her father is to consummate a hallucination. Her missing father and God could only return to her as an exuberant sense of the deity within her own breast and within the breast of a lover. Mitchell does point out significantly that the patriarch is forgiven and redeemed by his prodigal child or emanation-lover, as much as the reverse. But the complexities of Blakean forgiveness go even further. What does it mean for Blake to conflate on plate 99 a sexual embrace with a reconciliatory embrace, and a coming together of man and woman with a coming together of parent and child, even father and son? Mitchell notes that in one copy of *Jerusalem* the two figures are both male. He also observes, as I noted earlier, that the sexes of the embracing figures on the title-page of *The*

*Marriage* seem to vary. Such changes of sex have a surreal effect. I am reminded of the Charles Addams cartoon in which the head of a man in a barber's chair is reflected back and forth in a series of mirror-images, all of which are identical likenesses, except one, which is the head of a werewolf. In the headpiece to *Jerusalem*, Chapter II, sexual variation from copy to copy leads Mitchell to suggest that the embracing figures represent a view of both joyful heterosexuality and also "the ambiguous lesbian union of Jerusalem and Vala" (206), ambiguous because that union itself represents both "prelapsarian harmony and freedom" and the corrupting assimilation of imagination to nature. Aside from the consideration that both heterosexuality and homosexuality would seem to be fallen categories in Blake, such a reading takes ambiguity to the point of vertigo. What is all this changing of gender, this figurative erasing of genitals, that goes on in Blake's art?

Thematically, the answer is that the Blakean sexual ideal is androgynous. As Mitchell points out, his pictorial ideal, like Michelangelo's, is an androgynous athlete; and Edenic sex is a commingling "from the Head even to the Feet." However, from an external, psychoanalytic perspective, the vision of androgyny is based on a pregenital regression, and idealization of the time before people had sexes. I think such a perspective is required to understand the apocalyptic embrace of plate 99, which hovers between the parental and the sexual. In the redemptive return to Existence we see, among other things, the child's fantasy of erotic union with the parent of the same sex, just as we originally saw the void, in Mitchell's reading, as the absence of the protective father. The theme of forgiveness hinges on a textual problem of gender which forces us to read Blake on a latent level, a critical path which Mitchell points us toward but doesn't actually take himself. If we follow that path, we are compelled to consider the possibility of a Blake whose diatribes against authority, Nobodaddy, and Urizen conceal a fantasy of rescuing the father and reuniting with him.

In the same way that I find Blake more problematic, less neat, and less optimistic on ambiguity and forgiveness than Mitchell does, I find him so on the question of his attitude toward woman. Mitchell interprets Gwendolyn's reversal in Chapter IV--in which, having carried her campaign against the male sex to the point of reducing Hand to a tiny worm, she suddenly repents in horror at what she has done and enters Los's furnaces--as a sign "that the apocalyptic reversal of history is sparked by woman, or by the feminine aspect of consciousness" (191). Another such sign occurs in the treatment of the birth of Enitharmon in *The Book of Urizen*. Using evidence from the designs, where Enitharmon plays a more important role than she does in the text, Mitchell argues that, although her emergence horrifies the Eternals and represents an ultimate schism, it also transforms Urizen's nightmare into "a night-vision of inspiration" and redefines the void "as a field for exploration and creativity" (154); she thus appears at, or as, the nadir and also as an image of hope. Similarly, Mitchell defends Los's pity for Urizen as the only positive alternative to complete surrender: "his



division into sexual forms is a way of guaranteeing that the prophetic role will be fruitful . . . to provide imaginative alternatives to the societies bred by Urizen" (133). In the case of Gwendolyn, we see an expression of Blakean faith in a dialectical structure of existence that does not permit total annihilation: to reach bottom, as in Dante, is to turn upwards. But Mitchell's stress on the crucial initiative of woman, while an agreeable and intriguing theory, is by itself forced and misleading. Once again, I think we have to turn to a latent level to explore the problem further.

I think we first have to accept the idea that Blake's imagination, like Milton's and unlike Spenser's, is ruled by a male principle. As Brian Wilkie has written, Blake follows epic tradition in portraying the life of total imaginative energy in "severely masculine" terms (*Visionary Forms Dramatic*, ed. Erdman and Grant, p. 367). His image of fulfilled, heroic humanity, Jesus Christ, is male; it is a male, Los, who in *Jerusalem* actually sparks the reversal of history through the totality of his efforts; and the pictorial androgynes are long-haired males without genitals, just as the textual androgynes, like Albion, are male in their relationships and their pronouns. Woman, or the female aspect of consciousness, is a necessary force in the work of redemption but only after being subdued and subordinated. In general, when women spark anything by themselves, they are acting, as Vala does, in a phantasmagoric extension of the error of uxoriousness. The wars of intellect, the clashings of contraries, are subverted by the values identified in both Blake and tradition as feminine--repose, reconciliation, passivity--unless the latter accept a second place. All this seems clear on the surface, and it is what Mitchell is trying to see through. But I think when we see through it, we do not find exactly what Mitchell says.

It is pity that divides the soul into male and female, and woman is the embodiment of pity; Enitharmon is the "piteous image of my soft desires and loves" (*Jerusalem*, plate 17). Thematically, pity is an emotional allegiance to the fallen, or nature, not the unfallen--Urizen as he is, not as he was. Some of Mitchell's most inspired writing comes in explication of the astonishing picture in *Urizen* in which Los is suspended over a red globe with his hands to his head; this is "Los giving birth to his 'Pity' for Urizen in the form of a globe of blood which is the embryonic form of Enitharmon." This plate, Mitchell continues,

fuses the imagery of birth and creation, and their associated feelings of pleasure and pain. One view of the design will enlarge the globe to a diameter of eight thousand miles, placing it in outer space with a giant deity hovering over it. A blink of the eye reduces it to a human being alone in darkness, dreadfully wounded and pouring out his life in cataracts of blood. The setting of the picture is the most absolute void in the whole book--a dead blackness which offers no sign of element, horizon, or boundary. The synaesthetic networks of hair, veins, nerves, tears, and milk which

flow from the figure produce a related ambiguity, forcing us to see the figure as weeping, bleeding, and suffering extreme pain (indicated by the rigid extension of the fingers), and yet simultaneously involved in a life-giving, nourishing, protective act, as if the process of impregnation, formation of womb and placenta, gestation, and birth were being undertaken as a single act of conscious, external creation. The maternal overtones are so strong, in fact, that it has been difficult for some viewers to see this as the male figure of Los; Keynes identifies it as Enitharmon.

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I would add the following: we see a male giving birth; we see a male functioning as a woman. And the picture itself, with the globe of blood torn away from Los's body, is perhaps above all an image of castration. To feel pity, to experience the soft emotions, is to become a woman. We should recall this plate when we see pictures of Los carrying the red globe or the sun of vision to understand how the imagination can be construed as an external object, an appendage. Following the imagery of *Jerusalem* plate 100, which Mitchell reads in terms of the unfallen androgyne Urthona with his emanation Enitharmon and his spectre Los hauling the globe back into fallen history, we can say that to fall from androgyny is to undergo through the oedipal phase a division in which one discovers one's gender, in which the other sex, as castrated male (or female with phallus), embodies one's anxiety about oneself, and in which the lost part of the self returns in the form of one's imagination, which is one's memory of wholeness, one's Divine Vision. We need to understand the extent of Blake's dread of being ruled by a woman or by his own inner feminine elements. We also need to understand that the fear of being a woman is connected with a desire to be the prodigal son and embrace the father.

Even so, insofar as the female aspects of the mind, in the form of the lost emanation Jerusalem, are represented as suppressed and desired, we also need to see in Blake a longing to reintegrate those aspects and a struggle to understand the female in terms other than castration. Albion feels that "Love and Pity are the same; a soft repose! / Inward complacency of Soul: a Self-annihilation" (plate 23)--both castrations; but, in context, this is the fallen error of a dreaming humanity. *Jerusalem* depicts a struggle between positive and negative evaluations of the female element within the male. It embodies both a conflict and an attempt to heal and transform that conflict. One way that Blake represents this doubleness is the poem's counterpointing of two relationships, one (Los-Enitharmon) in which the male is in the right, and the other (Albion-Jerusalem), in which the female is in the right. *Jerusalem* expresses Blake's inner struggle to accept as integrative, rather than disintegrative, certain elements in himself which he identified as feminine--such as passivity, love for a father, and subordination to another, as in self-sacrifice. I am not sure that the issue is decisively resolved one way or the other since the ultimate fallen image



(the hermaphrodite) and the ultimate redemptive image (self-annihilation) can both be interpreted as symbols of the female aspect of the male. We are confronting here, it may be noted, a problem close to the one that Freud dealt with, much more pessimistically, at the close of one of his own essays in the awakening of sleeping humanity, "Analysis Terminable and Interminable," when he wrote that the greatest obstacle to the analytic treatment was the male's "masculine protest," his resistance to accepting a cure from his analytic father-surrogate, and the woman's resistance to giving up her wish that the treatment might provide her with a penis. It is in terms like these that we must see the poem as, to use Mitchell's words, an anatomy of Blake's own melancholy.

**M**itchell begins his book by saying, "It has become superfluous to argue that Blake's poems need to be read with their accompanying illustrations" (3). As much as I share the feeling that Blake's illuminated poetry offers one of the most unusual and powerful artistic experiences available to us, as grateful as I feel for the excellent work, including Mitchell's, on that composite art in the last decade, and as much as I agree with Mitchell that we need detailed studies, of the type he provides here, for all the illuminated poems, I would insert a small *caveat*. I would not want to see composite-art criticism become a new orthodoxy in Blake studies, and I would be sorry to think that, for example, any graduate student might

feel any reservations about undertaking a dissertation that happened not to treat the designs. I feel it necessary to say this because composite-art criticism has a tendency--although perhaps not an inevitable one--to produce a largely centripetal, formalistic kind of study; therefore, in effect it defines an approach rather than a field of subject matter. This centripetal tendency is further accented when Blake is interpreted primarily according to his own categories--an understandable strategy since his categories are as intriguing as anybody else's.

*Blake's Composite Art* is a lively and substantial example of this formalism. Its only major weakness is a frequent straining in its interpretations, but this straining arises from a concept of Blake in which every inconsistency and every element that might disturb a contemporary sensibility is only apparent. I prefer a Blake with somewhat rougher edges; and I feel that the most interesting problems raised by Mitchell's formalism cannot be fully explained purely in terms of that formalism. If we acknowledge the problems as not apparent but real and if we are willing to use external perspectives, such as the psychological one I have attempted in this essay, to complement and extend a thematic approach, I think we may discover an even larger, richer, and more dramatic Blake than we usually encounter at present, a Blake, for example, who both analyzes and expresses melancholy at the same time.