

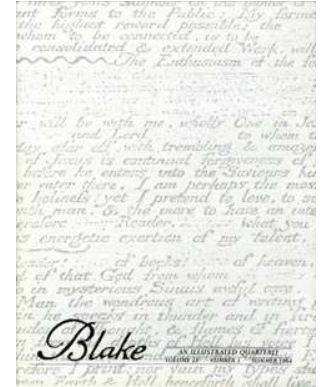
# AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

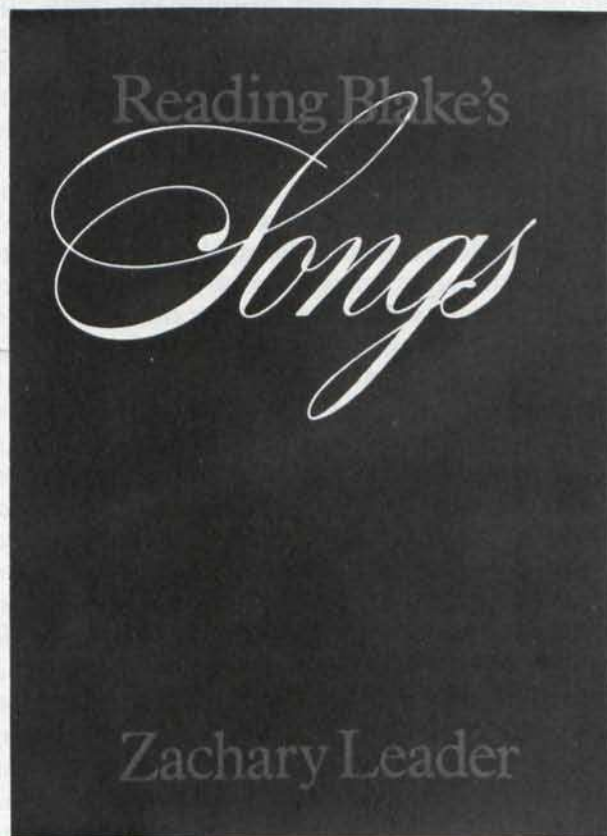
R E V I E W

## Zachary Leader, Reading Blake's "Songs"

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Zachary Leader. *Reading Blake's "Songs."* Boston, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981. xxiii + 259 pp., 25 b & w illus. \$27.50.

Reviewed by Thomas A. Vogler

The announced goal of this new book is to read Blake's *Songs* as "the expression of a single, carefully organized, and ultimately coherent vision," which places it within what W.J.T. Mitchell has called the "third phase" of Blake criticism, in which critics work from "the assumption that 'every word and every letter' (and every graphic mark) 'is in its fit place.'"<sup>1</sup> Perhaps none of Blake's "works" poses more obstacles to such an approach than the *Songs*, since there are thirty-four different arrangements of plates in *Songs of Innocence* (SI) and eighteen different arrangements in *Songs of Experience* (SE)—all but 2 of these in versions of SE combined with SI. These differences, together with the enormous range of variations in color and detail, make it difficult to speak meaningfully of the *Songs* as if it / they were a single text.

To those familiar with the editorial conventions and assumptions that govern the production of printed versions or hybrid facsimiles—based on the fiction of an "ideal text" being represented in the most adequate fashion—it will come as no surprise that Leader takes as "text" for his "reading" of the *Songs* the familiar copy Z.

David Erdman follows the order of copy Z in his hybrid facsimile "partly for convenience, since it is the order followed in standard editions, and partly because it is the order which Blake settled down to in later years."<sup>2</sup> Leader's rationale for his choice of text is a curious blend of sophistication and naiveté. He begins by acknowledging that "an eclectic interpretation based on a study of several copies tends to obscure the internal coherence and consistency of separate versions," and that "each copy, in effect, constitutes a separate text." He rejects the option of "reading" a hybrid version, in order to concentrate exclusively on copy Z as "an independent work of art," asserting that "we may look to other copies for help in interpreting its designs, but only if we remember that each new coloring creates a new work." This approach allows him to assert that the female figure on the first plate of "The Little Girl Lost" can be "confidently identified as Lyca" because "her hair and dress are similar in color [i.e. similar in copy Z] to those of the maiden on the second plate," who is clearly Lyca. But what this insistence on detail in copy Z means is that in other versions where the colors are different (e.g. FABY) the maidens must be different too. Thus Erdman, who argues for *difference* of color as confirming that the first maiden is Ona (from "A Little GIRL Lost") may be right that the plates "are colored differently, to keep us from confusing them," but he will be wrong for the poem as it exists in copy Z taken by Leader as "an independent work of art." Given two "copies" of this poem, one in which the coloring is similar, one in which it is different, it is feasible according to Leader's approach to argue that in one copy Blake was showing that the two figures were the same, and in the other he was showing that they were different. Thus in his discussion of "The Little Boy Found" Leader can cut through the notorious problem of gender in the adult figure by asserting that "no matter what its appearance in other copies, or how much it resembles Blake's Christs elsewhere, in copy Z the little boy's rescuer looks more like a masculine female than a feminine male."

If Leader were consistent in his emphasis on the autonomy of each copy, we might look forward to more readings of Blake's *Songs* in the combined form, and to twenty readings of *The Songs of Innocence* in their separate versions, each one showing its "single, carefully organized, and ultimately coherent vision." Perhaps we could also have seventeen separate "readings" of the *Songs of Experience*, in those cases where Bentley has noted a separate production "as demonstrated by the



distinctly different sets of printing colours."<sup>3</sup> Before panicking at this prospect, however, we should note that Leader is quite capable of fudging his principles when they prove inconvenient, as in his discussion of the "ivy" on the frontispiece to *SE* where the leaves are emphatically ivy for him even though "they look less like ivy than do those on other copies" because "no attempt has been made to color them green."

We are further saved from the spectre of endless "readings" by the fact that Leader does not really believe in what he says. When he reaches the point of discussing the last poem in copy Z, "The Voice of the Ancient Bard," his reading of it discovers a "final flash of redemptive self-knowledge," the "inevitable outcome" in which "at the last, the Bard sees himself aright." Leader's reading of "The Voice" endows it with a univocal meaning that subsumes all the other variant copies and preliminary versions; it turns out that copy Z is not separate and equal, it is separate and superior; it is not only "more carefully and thoughtfully produced than others," and "more alive with visionary and artistic intelligence," it is revelatory of Blake's "ultimate purpose in writing *Songs*." His reading of this poem is "ultimate" in a double sense, each of which is illustrative of common Blake interpretive practice. First, his reading is in large part based on what Paul Mann has aptly called the "compositional fiction," that practice which overcomes interpretive difficulties by inventing a teleological narrative of maturing authorial intentions.<sup>4</sup> In Leader's approach the "pattern or story" which he finds in copy Z is "autobiographical," which means that what Gleckner calls the "contextual peregrinations" of the "compositional chronology" are an "odyssey" (Gleckner's term) in which Blake and the poem arrive home at the end. Thus even though this poem appears first in *SI*, and even though it appears there in extant copies (both individual and combined) more often than in *SE* (nineteen times in the twenty separate *SI*s, fifteen times in combined copies; it appears only eight times in *SE*, seven of these in the final slot), this affects its rightful home no more than the fact that Homer spends most of his time getting Odysseus home and in place. Blake was "a life-long apostle of unity," and "we can reconstruct Blake's intentions," knowing that he was not the sort to have us play a game with hedgehogs for balls and flamingos for mallets: "Of all homogeneous truths at least, of all truths respecting the same general end, in whatever series they may be produced, a concatenation by intermediate ideas may be formed such as, when it is once shown, shall appear natural; but if this order be reversed, another mode of connection equally specious may be found or made."<sup>5</sup>

What Leader is in fact doing by adopting copy Z (what is it a "copy" of?) is merely shifting ground, seeming to reject "the assumption of a single unified canon" and poems with "only one possible meaning" while still preserving his notion of *Songs* as a single, carefully

organized volume of verbal and visual art." It's as if he is willing to admit that we can't step into the "same" river (i.e. "text" of the *Songs*) twice, but still wants to insist that we can do it once. Thus the spectre of a Derridean *différance* with an endless disseminating movement of play is safely brought under control.<sup>6</sup>

The second sense in which "The Voice" is the ultimate poem in the *Songs* is even more revealing in its exemplary conventionality. All ambiguities and local interpretive problems are safely brought under the univocal control of a narrative progression in which author, critic and reader march forward together like Bunyan's Pilgrim, sharing "what we have been through and become," to reach the appointed end in which "Ours have become the eyes of innocent wisdom. We have learned the lessons of vision, tested them, and put them into practice. In the process, we have also realized Blake's ultimate purpose in writing *Songs*." In spite of the familiar sound this conclusion will have for anyone who has read even a little Blake criticism, Leader claims that "my book is the first to uncover what I believe to be the full 'story' of *Songs*—the narrative or drama that runs through and links its groupings." This book is yet another example of apocalyptic narcissism, in which the interpreter "uncovers" a meaning which consists of Blake "uncovering" the very "meaning" which the interpreter has brought with him to his critical task.

For Leader "getting this story right" involves tracing "the process through which the reader begins to learn how, as well as why, he should adopt child-like ways of seeing." His basic approach is anticipated in the emphasis in his title on "reading." Here method and interpretation are the same, since the poems are treated as a succession of actions on the reader who presumably comes to them with completely predictable expectations and reactions. The structure and "meaning" of the *Songs* emerge through an account of these reactions and the reader's activity. The arbitrary fictionality of this method / meaning is particularly patent in this version, in which we pretend to be playing a game of follow-the-Reader, while in fact we are playing follow-the-Leader. The basic procedures of the game will be familiar to those who have followed Stanley Fish's reading of *Paradise Lost* as "a poem concerned with the self-education of its readers."<sup>7</sup> But where Fish's Milton seems to be at all times in control of the process, Leader's Blake often shares the confusion and surprise of the reader.

There is an inevitable circularity in this process, where the method for reaching the goal and the goal to be reached are the same: "Like children at their books, we are to live out the themes of Innocence through *the very act of reading*." As Jonathan Culler has pointed out, what is claimed in this appeal to the "experience" of the reader always "has this divided, duplicitous character: it has always already occurred and yet is still to be produced—an indispensable point of reference, yet never simply there."<sup>8</sup> In this process the critic must *produce* the very



responses he assumes and relies on in the course of his interpretation; if the act of reading were controlled by the text alone, the book would be completely unnecessary. The critic pretends to be a mirror for the reader, but in fact is offering her an aggrandized self-portrait which must be copied for a correct reading.

With *Leader* this circularity is thematized in both method and message. "Slowly, imperceptibly, from one plate to another, we discard our old, conventional ways of looking at the world, and replace them with the habits of vision." It may seem strange to think of "vision" as a habit, but *Leader* is a critical Pavlov, a Skinnerian who can criticize Keynes for telling the reader too soon that the shepherd-piper is a poet. "Immediate disclosure of the figure's full identity works against Blake's purpose, because it encourages the wrong kinds of reading habits." *Leader's* ideal reader, then, is what drug researchers call a "naive user," one who has never tried the stuff before. We have here one of many glimpses behind the curtain, an implicit acknowledgment that the interpreter is working the puppet-strings of a fictive reader. It is not the Piper who "shows us the way . . . teasing and coaxing us . . . forcing us to exercise our own imaginative powers," but *Leader* himself. Here are a few examples taken at random:

We notice them before / our first impulse is / we are forced to retract /  
our uncertainty deepens / our immediate impulse is / we realize / The  
more we look / tiny ripples of doubt disrupt the reassuring flow /  
we are also vaguely troubled / the impressions it makes upon us /  
We worry again / we are made to move too quickly / as their  
meanings subtly evolve, so too do our reading habits. Suggestive  
details constantly tempt us into interpretations . . . which sub-  
sequent plates almost always confirm / Nor can we prevent our-  
selves. . . .

Fish is canny and candid enough to admit that in this kind of game the poem's "outer or physical form, so obtrusive, and, in one sense, so undeniably there, is, in another sense, incidental and even irrelevant" (341). *Leader*, however, constantly insists that we pay "careful attention to detail" and that we take "the poem 'exactly as it comes.'" The designs in particular "repay the closest possible attention" and "when discussing the designs, no seemingly 'Insignificant Blur or Mark' will go unexamined." A suitably close attention to the minute details of the designs will have "a larger and more general effect: by taking certain liberties with the text . . . they encourage a similar freedom in our own interpretations." The reader's covenant then promises that a commitment to the details of the designs will free us from a similar commitment to the details of the "text." What do these details and liberties produce? An abundant harvest of inconsistencies, improvisations, and rampant ad hocery.

Sometimes "our first impulse" is determined by the designs because "we notice them before we turn to the text." For *Leader* "this is even more true in *Experience*,

where the poems invariably undercut and overturn the expectations we bring to them from the designs." Apparently this is not the case with the "Introduction" to *SI*, since our encounter "ought to begin on a literal level" and we have four pages of comments on "the text" and "its narrative" before we turn to the design. With "The Tyger" we are instructed to read the poem first and then find an "obvious discrepancy between poem and design." Although "undercutting" is favorably discussed in some other poems, in "The Tyger" the "reader is much too abruptly wrenched out of the mood of the poem," which "is simply too powerful to be undercut so brutally." When it seems to serve his purpose (i.e. twice in the whole book) *Leader* pays attention to metrics. For example, in discussing "The Lamb" he says "we must pay especially close attention to the stylized child-likeness of the speaker's tone. . . . The multiple repetitions of word and phrase, the sing-songy, jingle-like quality of three- and four-beat trochaic lines . . . all point to the child's way of seeing and speaking." If he had attended to metrics and repetitions in "The Tyger" (either before or after looking at the design), with its similarities to "Twinkle twinkle little star" or "Barber barber shave a pig," he might not have been so insistent that Blake "momentarily loses his sense of tact" in producing the design.

*Leader* notes that "the frequently minute scale in *Songs*, makes interpreting physiognomy (always a tricky business) especially difficult." He is able to overcome the difficulty quite often, however, claiming that the Black Boy's "sense of separateness" is mirrored in "the troubled expression on his face," finding faces that are "eerily calm and single-minded, as if charmed or spellbound," "faces vacant, abstracted," faces with "the impression of patient uninterest." He notes that "Blake has even taken the trouble to give him [the Ancient Bard] a smile in copy Z (in other copies he looks worried), in contrast to the blank impassivity of the child led." For the most part, however, he settles for "the oddly remote, generalized placidity of the faces of Blake's figures." In discussing the design to "Nurse's Song" he says, "We have seen this willow before. It appears on the second plate of 'The Little Black Boy,' where its melancholy presence . . . has disturbing implications." But his discussion of "The Little Black Boy" does not come "before"—it starts on the next page; when we get to take a close look at the second plate, seven pages later, we are told that "the drooping willow that bends Christ's back resembles no other tree in *Innocence*." Perhaps this is what *Leader* means by "teasing." He has an equally puzzling eye for "posture," noting that the "mother" on the titlepage to *SI* is excluded from *Innocence* because "we sense something a bit too rigid and proper about her. Despite her youth and pleasant face, she sits straight-backed, stiffly 'composed'" (my emphasis). This postural principle has apparently been forgotten when we get to the second plate of "The Little Black Boy" and find that Christ is sitting in a



"crouch" instead of "a healthy, upright and assertive posture." "Crouched, bent or weary forms rarely represent divinity or nobility," so we find the Piper "strong and erect" and the shepherd "attentive and upright." We can recognize the child in the design for "LONDON" as one of "the divinely human innocents" because "he stands upright."

Leader is quite assertive in his criticism of critics who are assertive in their criticisms. "We ought not to be bullied," he says, by those who have been influenced by copies other than Z. He notes favorably the contrast between Blake's poems and "their bullying counterparts in conventional literature," and criticizes the Bard because he "decries authority, yet speaks from it." But on the next page he is quite capable of a severely authoritative put-down of a rival critic: "To say, for instance, as does Gilham . . . simply will not do." Leader himself is assuming the "authority" to tell us where "a proper reading of the poem ought to begin," and to tell us when all the other critics who have written on the *Songs* are right and when they're wrong.

Leader has added a few more pages to the apparently endless gender disputes that trail after poems like "The Little Boy Found." Here his keen attention to detail leads to the important discovery that the adult figure "looks more like a masculine female than a feminine male." Why this distinction is important is not clear, since he settles for androgyny, but apparently it is. In looking at "The CLOD & the PEBBLE" the "starkness or sharpness of the alternatives [Blake] offers us" is emphasized because "sheep (ram as well as ewe) and lambs stand side by side with cattle." Here I can see the difference between the sheep and the cattle, and the ram must be the sheep with the horns; but how does Leader know that there are two lambs and one ewe rather than the two ewes and a lamb that Keynes sees? At any rate, he seems to be on firm ground with the ram. But his attentiveness flags when he looks at Hogarth's engraving of "Evening" (No. 3 of *The Four Times of Day*, included in the illustrations) and "sees" a bull. If Blake had taken as much trouble to indicate the secondary sex characteristic of his figures as Hogarth took with the ample udder of this cow, we would not have had all this trouble.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps this is what Blake anticipated when he wrote: "Some find a Female Garment there / And some a Male . . . Truly My Satan thou art but a Dunce / And dost not know the Garment from the Man." In defending Fuseli's painting of Ugolino, Blake wrote: "The child in his arms, whether boy or girl signifies not," which would be of great help had he not gone on to add: "(but the critic must be a fool who has not read Dante, and who does not know a boy from a girl)." Blake's Albion seems most often to be "masculine," but his minstrel in "King Edward the Third" has the Trojans address her as feminine: "'Be thou our mother, and our nurse,' they said." Perhaps they were fools; perhaps it

"signifies not." At any rate, Leader has not earned the right to lead us in these matters.

Leader's insistent dismissal of traditional symbolism and iconography in favor of "careful attention to detail" leads us back to a more theoretical level, where whether or not he is consistent is less important than the question of whether or not what he proposes can be done in fact instead of in fiction. He asks, "Do all twisting trees (or entwining vines, or vines twining around trees) give rise to the same impression," and offers this as his answer:

Some vines remind us of serpents, others do not; the identification depends upon context and careful attention to detail. If we allow so singularly unattractive a vine [titlepage to *SI*] to symbolize Christ, then all vines can be Christ symbols and all the trees around which they twine symbols of sinful life. We need only look ahead to the delicate beauty of the vine-entwined sapling on 'The Lamb' plate to see how wholly willful and inappropriate an approach of this sort can become.

For Leader, to "ignore the particular qualities of these trees and vines" is to content ourselves with a "symbolic significance . . . too broad to mean much of anything." It is contrary to the principle of "taking the poem 'exactly as it comes.'" The fact "that words and symbols are historically or culturally or socially determined . . . is right and necessary but, in the immediate context, may also be unhelpful." Helpful or not, can readers any more than poets and artists simply dismiss determinants that are "right and necessary" in order to look with innocent eyes at "details" which communicate their meaning from within the isolation of the "immediate context"? And can the difficulties of this very real question be overcome by mere assertion? Can there be a universal, contextually reasonable, and culturally understandable visual semiosis that is natural and inevitable? Can a visually-perceived work of art form its own language which communicates directly by nonverbal rules of creation and perception, with a purely internal structural coherence? To answer yes to all these questions is to assume the major wager of what we call "Romanticism" as a *fait accompli*.

It is particularly interesting that Leader takes the tree / vine topos as the main target for his insistence, and that it is one which occurs frequently in both *SI* and *SE*. One example from many finds him discussing "Nurse's Song" from *SI*: "Nor can we prevent ourselves from associating the creeper-entwined tree at right with the several forms of constriction and encroachment to which the children will doubtless be subjected as they grow into experience. Like the nurse, we are forced to look beyond the graceful and energetic joy of the children at play." Leader's reading here is clearly determined or influenced by a whole range of cultural associations which he brings with him to Blake. He has a quite different reading of the same topos in "Night," which illustrates how different affective impressions can be: "The soothing rhythms of the text find their complement in a tall, slender tree . . . gently arches its branches . . . curving up and back to



cradle the title . . . as loosely as the tree itself is encircled by a delicately spiralling vine. The soft flow of tree, branch and vine. . . The over-arching protective tree is a motif that reinforces our sense . . . that 'Night' is also a part of innocence." Can such an extreme range of differing affect really be generated by the "impression" made on us by the closely-observed details of a visual image?

Many have "seen" these tree / vine relationships quite differently, but none of us—Leader included—has ever seen them with unmediated eye. As far back as the invention of viniculture the union of grapevine and tree has evoked symbolic responses. For Vergil in the *Georgics* the union of vine and elm was synonymous with agriculture, with culture itself, and with civilization properly conducted. His often-repeated pleasure at contemplating this interrelationship (cf. *Georgics* I.2, II.221, II.357 ff.) was echoed centuries later by Goethe when he finally arrived in Italy: "There trees are planted in long rows upon which the vines are trained to their tops. Their gently swaying tendrils hung down under the weight of the grapes. . . This is what a festoon ought to look like" (*Italian Journey*, Vicenza, Sept. 19). For Catullus the relationship between the elm and vine was the most apt image for marriage and a proper sexual relationship between wife and husband, so that the vine without its elm is scorned by farmers and eligible bachelors alike (No. 62). In the more explicitly sexual *Collis o Heliconiei* (No. 61 the woman yearning for her man is bound to him by her sexual passion as tightly as the ivy—sacred to Bacchus—is bound to its tree (*ut tenax bedera huc et huc / arborem implicat errans*).

Milton traces the image back to Eden, where Adam and Eve "led the Vine / To wed her Elm; she spous'd about him twines / Her marriageable arms, and with her brings / Her dow'r th'adopted Clusters, to adorn / His barren leaves" (V.215-19). Pope shared this sense of horticultural propriety and extended the figure to man's relationship to God: "Man, like the gen'rous vine, supported lives; / The strength he gains is from th'embrace he gives" (*Essay on Man* III.311-12). George Herbert could not contemplate a grape vine climbing or "hanging" on its support and bearing fruit without reading the whole story of the gospel in it ("The Sacrifice," "The Bunch of Grapes"). For Cowper, the gardener who would "see his flow'rs dispos'd / Sightly and in just order" knows that

Few self-supported flow'rs endure the wind  
Uninjur'd, but expect th'upholding aid  
Of the smooth-shaven prop, and, neatly tied,  
Are wedded thus, like beauty to old age . . .  
Some, more aspiring, catch the neighbour shrub  
With clasping tendrills, and invest his branch,  
Else unadorn'd, with many a gay festoon  
And fragrant chaplet, recompensing well  
The strength they borrow with the grace they lend.  
(*The Task* III.657-69)

In this practice he knowingly follows Milton's Eve who, ironically "herself, though fairest unsupported flow'r, / From her best prop so far," still "oft stooping to support, / Each Flow'r of slender stalk, whose head though gay / Carnation, Purple, Azure, or speckt with Gold, / Hung drooping unsustain'd, them she upstays / Gently with myrtle band" (IX.427-31). And at the end of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* Amelia is urged: "Grow green again, tender little parasite, round the rugged old oak to which you cling!" So pervasive and durable is the potential for figuring the dynamics of a relationship in this topos that it can be playfully inverted, to describe a marriage between a strong woman and a weak man as a union of "the clinging oak and the sturdy vine" (*Time*, 13 June 1983, p. 73).

The same image has been adopted by both parties, so that Ovid could seize its metamorphic potential to describe the "marriage" of Salmacis:

She holds him fast though he strives against her, steals reluctant kisses, fondles him, touches his unwilling breast, clings to him on this side and that. At length, as he tries his best to break away from her, she wraps him round with her embrace, as a serpent, when the king of birds has caught her and is bearing her on high: which, hanging from his claws wraps her folds around his head and feet and entangles his flapping wings with her tail; or as the ivy oft-times embraces great trunks of trees. . . .

(*Metamorphoses* IV. 358-65)

Swift observed that creeping and climbing are acts performed in the same posture, giving a humorous political twist to the actions of Milton's Satan: "About the mossy Trunk I wound me soon" (IX.589). And Isaac Watts "saw" the same sinister significance in children, who

with their little hands  
Hang closest to our souls.  
Thoughtless they act th'old serpent's part;  
What tempting things they be!  
Lord, how they twine about our heart,  
And draw it off from thee!  
(*"On the Hazard of Loving the Creatures"*)

Hardy gives it an equally negative twist in "The Ivy Wife":

In new affection next I strove  
To coll an ash I saw,  
And he in trust received my love;  
Till with my soft green claw  
I cramped and bound him as I wove . . .  
Such was my love: ha-ha!

More recently, the sinister potential in the topos has been used to describe the relationship between the deconstructionist (parasite / vine) and a supportive host: "We cannot attack substantive centers . . . without ourselves relying on substantive centers. . . . Thus every effort at original or 'free' interpretation is plainly and simply



parasitical on the work of people like Abrams, whose solidity . . . is relied upon in every act of deconstruction. . . ."<sup>10</sup>

The point of citing these few instances of a pervasive topos is to suggest that although *as topos* it seems inevitably to suggest its availability as an image of the dynamics of relationship between different (contrary?) forces or modes, there is no innate "meaning" in a vine—whether grape, flower or ivy—growing on a tree or stake; nor is there an unmediated "meaning" in a representation or image of tree and vine, no matter how detailed it may be. The appropriate semiotic code(s) cannot be read on the *surface* of the representation, *pace* Leader, and a truly innocent reader, if there is one, would be able to "read" only her own innocence in what she sees. Leader, in spite of his attempts, is a good example of the impossibility. "We have seen this willow before," he says. When he looks at sheep he sees "the very symbols of innocence." An Englishman, contemporary with Blake—especially if he had read John Dyer's *The Fleece*—might have rather different "symbolic" perceptions since the sheep was a key element in British commerce, providing the high-quality wool that enabled Britain to dominate the textile trade internationally, and the meat that gave them the highest protein diet in Europe. "We are reminded of . . ." echoes throughout this book, and often these "reminders" are as personal and contingent as the connection for Leader between the girl with the wide-brimmed hat in "The Echoing Green" and the horns of the "bull" located directly behind the husband in Hogarth's "Evening." In addition to Hogarth, the book includes illustrations from Bellini, Leonardo, David, West, Blake, and anonymous artists, still further eroding whatever ability we might have brought with us to see Blake's designs as Leader would have us.

Thus he posits the study of signs as evidence for what he claims to know, attempting to read visual images in Blake as signs (having meaning or *signification*), without making any theoretical provision for symbolic images. Some definitions from Peirce will make the importance of this failure more clear. For Peirce a sign is that aspect of what is present to an interpretant which may be interpreted as evidence for something *more than itself*, its *signatum*. He defines three kinds of signs:

An *icon* is a sign which would possess the character which renders it significant, even though its object had no existence. . . . An *index* is a sign which would, at once, lose the character which makes it a sign if its object were removed, but would not lose that character if there were no interpretant. Such, for instance, is a piece of mould with a bullet-hole in it as a sign of a shot; but there is a hole there, whether anybody has the sense to attribute it to a shot or not. A *symbol* is a sign which would lose the character which renders it a sign if there were no interpretant. Such is any utterance of speech which signifies what it does only by virtue of its being understood to have that signification.<sup>11</sup>

Leader's rudimentary theory of signs produces interpretations which move from image to affect ("impression")

and from affect to concept. For example: "The embrace of old man and naked youth on 'The Little Vagabond' plate is . . . a kind of smothering. The outstretched arm and poised comb, with sharp-pointed teeth, of the nurse in 'Nurse's Song' suggests threat and restriction. . . . The outstretched arms of the child in 'Infant Sorrow' and the female form of the rose at the bottom of 'The Sick Rose' signify fear and resistance rather than joy and communion." The theory claims that the signs being interpreted have the status of those signs which Peirce calls indices; but Leader's practice is in fact that of a mode of "symbolic" interpretation in Peirce's terms. The goal can be seen as the desire to get out of one semiotic system (adulthood, experience) into another, to *transcend* the semiotic condition of experience. But the method for reaching this goal already assumes the innocent semiosis, the ability for Blake to produce and the reader to understand a signification that does not depend on the interpretant. Leader's practice shows that for him the signs he reads are already encoded in a literary-iconographic system which determines his affective response more than the "signs" he claims to be reading as if they were indices. If he actually found a plate that did not "remind" him of something, what would he be able to say about it?

Leader tacitly acknowledges the situation for all of his discoveries of signification; while claiming to respond to the unmediated presence of the sign, he is enveloped in the mediation of other signs, his "revelation" merely the reproduction of yet another representation in a series that does not have the "origin" that he claims. Peirce again:

The meaning of a representation can be nothing but a representation. In fact, it is nothing but the representation itself conceived as stripped of irrelevant clothing. But this clothing never can be completely stripped off; it is only changed for something more diaphanous. So there is an infinite regression here. Finally, the interpretant is nothing but another representation to which the torch of truth is handed along; and as representation, it has its interpretant again. Lo, another infinite series.<sup>12</sup>

But by Leader's assertions, if his reader doesn't have the same affect / impressions that he does in looking (for example) at the frontispiece to *SI*, then he has failed to perceive its character as a collection of signs—like seeing a hole in the molding without having the sense to attribute it to a shot, in this case the single, originary "shot" of Blake's authorial intentions.

Thus the reader who can in fact *read*, who has served time in the prison house of language and takes up this book promising the good news of his release, will find that it's too late, that he must already *be* innocent in order to follow Leader's fable of reading. If she is too fallen to follow she will find herself shut out of the magic circle of Innocence, unable to participate in its power politics. For at bottom, or near it, this book is as much about politics as it is about poetry and art. The fact that



its political subtext is hidden beneath its surface is yet another typifying characteristic of the book and of the ideological dimension of much Blake criticism.

Leader's interpretations are built on the uncritical acceptance of his own bland and naive critical impulses, which operate safely within the mainstream of our all-too-familiar liberal humanism even while making the usual claims to be radical and daring. What he calls the "heroic exposure . . . to a world of pain and suffering" in *SE* turns out to be simply a "reader or workbook" which "tests" the "alphabet and guide to doctrine" which was taught to us in *SI*. In order to pass, we must avoid the example of the Bard of *SE* with his "infection" and his "unwitting 'lapse'" from true doctrine. The Bard is bad because he *uses* the speaking personae of *SE*, and because he is concerned with the "larger 'truth' of social discontent." The Bard "reminds us" of "concerned politicians talking with ghetto children," and this is bad because it violates "the easy commerce between Piper and floating child in the innocent 'Introduction.'" The Bard is afflicted with "abstract sympathy" and has become an "activist poet," a "polemicist, a prophetic activist" who "substitutes an unreal and unrealizable vision for the more complex paradise of innocent songs."

No wonder then that we find constant reinforcement for "our doubts about the Bard's character," since we are being "taught" to see his "aims" and to "see them for what they are—passionately caring, but deeply flawed, and potentially dangerous." His most dangerous flaw is his desire "to communicate the evils of religious and social compulsion." Leader is also upset by the Little Vagabond because, although a child, he is not a true innocent. His "overt social concern" does not have "sympathy" for the "victimizers as well as the victims" and it is "explicit" rather than "muted" or "tentative and implicit" as it should be. Leader warns us of the duplicity of the little boy speaking in "The GARDEN of LOVE," who wrongly attempts to blame "external institutions" for the problems in his libidinal economy, trying "to mask or play down his responsibility." After all, "he must himself bear some responsibility . . . since the 'joys and desires' bound by the priests . . . are his own." And if the responsibility is indeed his own, then no "external institutions" can help him to recover. As Edmund Burke wrote, around the time Blake was finishing the *Songs*: "They brought themselves into all the calamities they suffer, not that through them they might obtain a British constitution; they plunged themselves headlong into those calamities, to prevent themselves from settling into that constitution, or into anything resembling it."<sup>13</sup> And shortly thereafter: "Let government protect and encourage industry, secure property, repress violence, and discountenance fraud, it is all that they have to do. In other respects, the less they meddle in these affairs the better; the rest is in the hands of our Master and theirs."<sup>14</sup> After a while one wonders if Leader is writing literary in-

terpretation or a guide to correct social protest. His doctrine is that "individual identities" are "compromised" and "sacrificed" when any "causes or ideas" are "espoused." The nuptial force of "espousal" suggests the point: better not to marry ideas *or* to burn, either of which would sully the purity of an innocent "individual identity."

This does not mean that the world cannot be made a better place, however, or that we are discouraged from working for change. "An *individual* apocalyptic vision can transform the world. We . . . have it in our power to alter those conventional modes of perception and understanding which alone keep us from a life of vision." What we can do, in other words, is to change our own status in the world provided that our praxis is correct. Redemption for Leader is the reward for virtue in a meritocratic system, the prize for the "successful" reader for performing properly the *mental* labor of interpretation. The most vivid image of this reward comes in his reading of "Nurse's Song." There he sees the children collectively representing the state of "vision" and playing "their own game," prolonging it by the power of their innocence and the force of their desire. They represent what we should become; "if we can return to a perpetual present, vision will again be ours."

Fortunately this "life of vision" will include a servant class made up of those like the Nurse in the design, whose visionary powers "do not withstand the processes of time and custom," and who therefore are excluded from the class of innocents. "But *is* the nurse included in the circle?" The answer is no, and it is the Nurse's own fault. What relegates her to a secondary status is that after having attained "vision" for a moment (in stanza one), she suffers a "lapse into memory and reflection." Unlike the Bard, who can still save himself in spite of his more serious-sounding ("infected or corrupted") lapse, the Nurse has found her niche. She becomes not a social critic but "an exemplary guardian" who will "preserve and foster vision in others." As if this weren't already enough, Leader caps it with the perfect simile: she is "like one of Chekov's busy servants." Come the revolution, however, she will not be tempted to participate because she "accepts with quiet dignity the fact that she will never again lead a life of vision."

My comments on the sociopolitical subtext of this book so far merely constitute what Frederic Jameson has characterized as an "essentially negative hermeneutic function."<sup>15</sup> It is important to point beyond this somewhat simplistic stage, to suggest the instrumental function of this book as a cultural object which is projecting its utopian vision as the symbolic affirmation of a specific historical and class form of collective unity, represented by the ring of dancing children whom we can either join by our individual mental labors, or serve with quiet dignity, acknowledging their superior status. On this level, Leader's fable of moral virtue and redemption by mental labor in the form of a "proper reading" comes



into focus as a protonarrative or class fantasy about those anonymous collective characters which constitute the classes in opposition.

What this book is, then, is a mixture of religion and politics masquerading as literary criticism. The *Songs* read as scripture are a holy writ that leads to Truth and Enlightenment. Moral virtue is embracing these wide-ranging values which are projected onto Blake's poems and labeled as "Innocence," ignoring the possible implications of "contrary states." It is the endorsement and practice of a form of what Lawrence Stone calls "affective individualism," with an academic twist that makes "interpretation" the functional equivalent of the mental labor that characterizes the values and dynamics of the middle class as it emerged in the eighteenth century. It is a praxis, in the Aristotelian sense of happiness as praxis, or mode of being. Leader's "Innocence" is what he is able to conceptualize as value and desire, and to read into Blake's poems as a message and meaning for the happy ones who are able to understand it.

The Nurse fails to rise, having had her chance and failed to pass the "test" of Experience. But how can she pass, when even Oothoon, who is "perhaps the most eloquent champion of vision in all of Blake's works," who has "learned that 'everything that lives is holy,'" cannot make the grade? In spite of Oothoon's eloquent championing, the world "remains one of disunity and suffering, and the reader is left with the impression that Oothoon is subject to forces beyond her control." What are these forces that exonerate Oothoon, while the plea of external causality is dismissed for the others? I doubt that any of the innumerable celebrators of Oothoon's rapture and rhetoric have ever *joined* her in any meaningful way; it is safer to use her as a mirror and speaker for our safely-controlled fantasies while we go about business as usual. Leader's equivocation on Oothoon can be taken as a touchstone for the whole book. He doesn't want to be like the speaker in "Holy Thursday" (SI) who "forces himself" down, "too weak to embrace true innocence—to join Oothoon in rejecting a limited, reason-bound vision . . . inadequate and harmful." But when Leader contemplates what happens to Oothoon, rather than what she says, the outcome must be determined by "forces beyond her control." Like the speaker at a graduation ceremony, addressing those who have presumably learned the lesson of Innocence and passed the test of Experience, Leader can celebrate the "eternal present" and chatter on about "what we have been through and become over the course of the previous fifty-one plates," assuring us that "the world of inevitable fading, of 'smile and fall' . . . is itself an illusion." But on the fact of it, he cannot even convince himself that he is "getting the story right."

This book did not really "begin life" as a Harvard doctoral dissertation in 1977, as is claimed in the Acknowledgments. Its main features had been clearly de-

lineated long before Leader entered graduate school. Although his name appears on it as "author," with the joint implications of author-ity and "source," we are all to some degree implicated in its existence. It would be uncharitable and an error to attribute its foolishness to Mr. Leader alone, who is no doubt merely striving to achieve some degree of eminence in a field where there are predictable expectations and standards. The work was approved as a dissertation at a major university; it comes to us from a reputable press, which presumably sought expert guidance before undertaking to publish it; hundreds of libraries will buy it on automatic purchase plans and it will be "arranged" on their shelves according to "the method in which knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation" (MHH, pl. 15). Morris Eaves has argued that the "Blake Industry" is really "only a cottage industry" which produces "ghostly explanations" and can't "serve as the heavy father in a simple comedy of scholarly conspiracies."<sup>16</sup> But a book like this is *not* the product of a cottage industry; it is a cultural artifact beyond the power of a solitary individual to produce. I think that we are part of a collectivity which, whether cottage industry or some other kind, has reached the time when it is necessary to retool. I suggest that as part of this retooling we declare a moratorium on publishing this kind of vaguely prophetic humanism, of which we already have more than enough examples.

<sup>1</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, "Dangerous Blake," *Studies in Romanticism*, 21 (Fall 1982), 410.

<sup>2</sup> *The Illuminated Blake*, annotated by David V. Erdman (Garden City: Anchor Press / Doubleday, 1974), 41.

<sup>3</sup> G.E. Bentley, Jr., ed., *William Blake's Writings* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), I, 682.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Mann, *A Preface to William Blake's Four Zoas* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1980), 55. A recent and very detailed example of the "compositional fiction," discussing the same poem, is Robert F. Gleckner's "The Strange Odyssey of Blake's 'The Voice of the Ancient Bard,'" *Romanticism Past and Present*, 6 (1982), 1-25.

<sup>5</sup> Pope, J.P. Hardy, ed., *Johnson's Lives of the Poets, A Selection* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 219.

<sup>6</sup> The question of plurality of texts was addressed in a more consistent and useful way by Stephen Carr in a paper given at the Blake and Criticism conference at Santa Cruz in May 1982. It will be published as "Blake's Works of Illuminated Printing: Toward a Logic of Difference" in a collection of essays edited by Nelson Hilton and myself, called *Unnam'd Forms: Blake and Textuality*.

<sup>7</sup> Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: the Reader in Paradise Lost* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: Univ. of California Press, 1971), 341.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982), 63.



<sup>9</sup> The udder is prominently placed in the center of the engraving, two of its teats being clearly milked into a pail. Hogarth's humor is in part the juxtaposition of the cow's two teats grasped by hands with the adjacent and equally conspicuous bosom of the wife.

<sup>10</sup> Wayne C. Booth, "M.H. Abrams: Historian as Critic, Critic as Pluralist," *Critical Inquiry*, 2 (Spring 1976), 441. In the same issue Abrams replaces himself in the image as "substantive center" or host with "the most obvious or univocal reading" (458). J. Hillis Miller defends the "parasite" in "The Critic as Host," *Critical Inquiry*, 3 (Spring 1977), 439-48.

<sup>11</sup> Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1965), II, 304, emphasis added.

<sup>12</sup> *Collected Papers*, I, 171.

<sup>13</sup> Edmund Burke, "Speech on the Army Estimates," *Works* (London: Rivington, 1815-27), V, 14.

<sup>14</sup> "Third Letter on a Regicide Peace," VIII, 367.

<sup>15</sup> Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), 291.

<sup>16</sup> Morris Eaves, "Introduction" [to "Inside the Blake Industry: Past, Present, and Future," ed. Morris Eaves] *Studies in Romanticism*, 21 (Fall 1982), 389-90.