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## Nelson Hilton, *Literal Imagination: Blake's Vision of Words*

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alism" and the radicalism of Blake and Paine, but also between the views of Blake and Paine themselves. The only drawback to the introduction is its terseness—it takes up a mere seven pages, including footnotes. One would welcome fuller elaboration on a number of James's observations about the historical and religious context of Watson's book and Blake's annotations to it.

The facsimile itself reproduces Watson's book in its entirety, including unannotated pages. Both Watson's text and Blake's comments are clear, though more along the lines of a good photocopy than of a photograph. It is only fair to say, however, that examination of the original in the Huntington Library makes one sympathize with the photographer, for the pages, made of poor quality paper, are dirty and splotted, and Blake's ink has faded considerably. The clarity of some of Blake's pencil annotations, probably faint to begin with, has not been enhanced by the passage of nearly two centuries. It is therefore understandable that the pencil jottings are sometimes harder to read than the writing in ink, but even so, a surprising number of the pencil annotations are quite legible. Still, the slight thickening of lines in the facsimile results in some letters, particularly Blake's "e," being much harder to recognize than they are in the original. Similarly, it is more difficult to make out deleted words in the facsimile, thus calling into question the ability of the photographic reproduction truly to allow, in James's words, "readers to decide for themselves about problematic punctuation marks, capitals, deletions and so on. . . ." In many instances, this might be possible, but for the most problematic words, one must still turn to the original.

James's transcription of the annotations, which follows the facsimile, avoids any "improvement" on Blake's punctuation, and observes the exact arrangement of Blake's own writing on the page. The transcription is extremely helpful whenever Blake's hand, or the effects of time and dirt, pose difficulties. Moreover, like the facsimile, the transcription enables us to see exactly where Blake's comments begin and end, thus avoiding the specious links between annotation and text that can result from placing the annotations directly beneath excerpts from Watson, as is commonly done.

My only complaint about the layout of the transcription is the presence of large white spaces, instead of Watson's printed words, in the central area of the transcription pages, so that the annotations seem to hover about a phantom text. A more convenient arrangement would include relevant pages of Watson's text, thus preventing the constant back-and-forth flipping through pages that readers must engage in so as to connect the transcriptions with specific passages in Watson. It would also help if James marked insertions as well as deletions; on p. 9 of the original, for instance, Blake adds the word "peculiar," with a distinct caret

beneath it, to the space between two other words, yet the transcription includes the word with no indication of its being an insertion.

The main strength of the entire edition lies in the notes accompanying the transcription. James's sixty-seven footnotes constitute a kind of running commentary that clarifies obscure allusions, draws parallels between the annotations and passages elsewhere in Blake, and demonstrates a thorough grasp of Blake criticism, which James skillfully applies to a number of issues raised in Blake's comments. James scrupulously explains his reasoning in those instances where his transcriptions differ from those of Keynes, Bentley or Erdman, and he meticulously refers us to previous scholarship on the annotations. He concisely sets forth his own interpretations, and draws our attention to such noteworthy things as the extent to which Blake, in his eagerness to defend Paine, comes uncharacteristically close to religious orthodoxy in the annotations. No less admirable are the light touches of ironic wit that enliven James's footnotes. The edition's final pages present us with a reproduction of the conclusion to the second part of Paine's *The Age of Reason*.

All in all, the Blake scholar, for whom the facsimile is plainly intended, will find here a helpful tool and an editorial treatment that reflects good judgment and good taste. Introduction, facsimile, transcription and footnotes alike can help us achieve a more accurate, intimate understanding of Blake's mental fight with the Bishop of Llandaff.

**Nelson Hilton. *Literal Imagination: Blake's Vision of Words*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif., London: University of California Press, 1983. xviii + 319 pp. \$30.00.**

**Reviewed by David Wagenknecht**

A more accurate subtitle for Nelson Hilton's new book might have been "Blake's Vision IN Words." Blake interpretation in general, it is quite true, has tended to such a preoccupation with the prophetic *mise en scene* that the "minute particulars" of his vision, at least the lexical nuts and bolts, are overlooked. They are "a Void, outside of Existence," but Nelson Hilton in these pages enthusiastically enters in, showing us convincingly that Blake's genius, delicate but determinedly prehensile, could wrap itself around a vocable as easily as it could draw down Prometheus. One horizon of Hilton's approach is some-

thing as old-fashioned as image-clusters: he picks out boss words (*engraving* and *interring*, *mourning* and *morning*, *chains*, *spinning* and *weaving*, *veil*, *vale* and *Vala*, *spectres*, *stars*, *vortex*, *polypus*) and tries to encounter each "in its force-field of sound, etymology, graphic shape, contemporary applications, and varied associations," thereby exposing the "war/p and woof" of Blake's thought (p. 7). But whereas old-fashioned pursuit of image-clusters tended to limit itself to the conceptual, and therefore to recapitulate in its discoveries the author's narrative idea (or sometimes to replace the apparent narrative with the true one), Hilton claims to be doing here something more narrowly lexical, to be uncovering the poet's fundamental ideas only in his words. He as it were refuses to come out of Blake's rough basement, but just as Frye (whose fictional approach overhead on the first floor Hilton would avoid) liked to pretend that Blake's mythological method was only the method of all poetry in a somewhat eccentric form (which made Blake beget archetypal criticism on the *Anatomy* of Spenser), Hilton is fond of claiming similarly that his method too is Jungian-universal, and not at all limited to the special genius of Blake: "I do not suggest that Blake was conscious of all these factors; I do argue that all are present in 'the source . . . the Poetic Genius'" (p. 2).

This idea (and its analogue in Frye) seems to me highly questionable, but it is undeniable, in the midst of all the special Blakean delights Hilton discovers, that many are convertible to delight in poetry generally, and of a sort to inspire us to look for their brothers and sisters in other poets. For example, next to the *Four Zoas* lines, "But the bright Sun was not as yet; he filling all the expanse / Slept as a bird in the blue shell that soon shall burst away," Hilton notes, "Here again we note Blake's delight in 'literal' transformation as 'Sun . . . bird . . . shell' becomes 'soon shall burst'" (p. 181). Blake is beyond the need for our praises, but if I had been clever enough to notice this effect I'd have been more reluctant than Hilton is to turn the responsibility over to anything collective: "While this relational process occurs initially in the mind of the perceiver, it can develop through and toward structures in the 'mind,' or *episteme*, of English, and collective imagination" (p. 3). As everyone knows, the trouble with arguments appealing to collectivity is their neglect of agency and intention, and Blake's agent Hilton here deserves full credit, even if at times he is an *agent provocateur*. Blake has a way of inspiring in his specialists fits of demotic self-consciousness, and Hilton's interest in the genius of the language (even at the expense of his own) may be traceable to some such.

It must also, however, have something to do with the opposite "horizon" of his methods, which is punning. Hilton's fancy argument is that he is eschewing "symbols, metaphors, or figurative language in general"

(which I doubt) to "enter the space of the sign" (which I do not understand, especially if I am eschewing metaphors) until the sign "becomes a sensuous idea"—which is something like an expanded pun (p. 11). Whether we think of them as irresponsible play or as spontaneous statements by the unconscious, puns are in such bad odor that we can well understand their subversive appeal to a (theoretically) very demotic critic, committed to denying conscious control of them to their author. But puns tend to go too far, and while we are not surprised to find them in the poet of "Enough! or Too much," Blake's remark may ominously seem to constitute the only possible critical control on their suggestiveness. Hilton reminds us of Johnson's animadversions against punning, but then—perhaps because they were directed at Shakespeare—fails to take them seriously, and in the midst of what I assume will stand as the definitive explication of the "stars" who "throw down their spears" in "The Tyger"—a characteristically rich soup of scholarship, association and interpretation—the reader of Hilton, if he is to enjoy these pages, must occasionally enjoy "Too much" (e.g., "turn in a gyre: tyger"—p. 179—or "sphereful symmetry"—p. 180) together with all the "enoughs" and "just rights."

It would be nice, however, to have some sort of principle other than a quantitative one for distinguishing "too much" from "enough," even if both (from a fourfold perspective) are delightful. Here Hilton's totalizing or Jungian tendencies are unhelpful, and one can't help noticing that his own genius is more a sharp noticing one than a theorizing one. His tendency when faced by a theoretical challenge is to bull it through rather than think it through (e.g., "The poem's self-unchaining does not, of course, usher the delighting reader into any realm of absolute free-play, that 'allegorical abode where existence hath never come'" [p. 66]—which leaves the reader wondering whether it is Freud or Derrida being brushed out of the way), and the challenge of punning produces impressionism more than actual instruction: "In this dungeon of London," we are told, "Blake's strategy for unlocking the reader is the multiplication of significance, breaking the vocal chain at its weakest link, the univocal sign. This deconstruction involves reorienting logic according to synaesthetic relations of eye and ear" (p. 64). One may assent in general to the spirit of this, and enjoy as well the exuberant readings of the "Marriage hearse" (in "London") which ensues ("These words, hear-curse-tear, bring to bear the contradictions of sight and sound as we hear/see them coalesce in the final word 'hearse.' The oxymoronic image of the 'marriage hearse' points to the impossibility of imagining that sight and sound, signified and signifier can be eternally 'linkd in a marriage chain [FZ 58.13, E339], wedlocked"—pp. 64-65), and still find oneself more pedantically wondering whether



these effects are as integral to Blake's more mythic meaning (as it were "causes" rather than "effects" of it) as Hilton seems anxious to imply.

The problem is that Hilton's discussion never evolves theoretically to the point where questions like this (and others) can even adequately be raised. Leaving an "eternity" of wedding out of the question for the moment, some "marriage of convenience" would seem minimally to be necessary if even the distinction between "literal" polysemy and "metaphorical" univocity be recognized, and it does not help matters either that Hilton's revision of the more usual connotations of his terminology seems to encourage his hospitality to blank contradiction. On the one hand, "refusing to read in symbols" and so on, the literal word is a "sensuous idea": "if we encounter something 'burning bright,'" he remarks, "we should at least admit its fiery body" (p. 11). But six pages earlier he is remarking (via the last line of *Jerusalem*), "If the Spirit has been incarnated in language, then it should be possible to move through the corporality of the word back to the Spirit, to recognize—to name—the Word in the word" (p. 4). If that's not univocity, I don't know what is. Hilton illustrates it with one of his best puns, drawing this time on the conclusion to *Milton*, where "Jesus is seen coming in 'The Clouds of Ololon folded as a Garment (a gArMENT) dipped in blood (42.12), a description returning us to the Revelation of John, where one who is 'called Faithful and True'—the Amen—comes 'clothed in a vesture dipped in blood: And his name is called the word of God' (19.11,13). This name is the process, the idea, the being of naming with 'a name written (inscribed), that no man knew' . . ." (p. 4). But the helpfulness of this explication is not borne out by the stuttering theoretical application: "the process, the idea, the being."

It is of course to Hilton's credit that Blake himself makes rather heavy weather of the theoretical issue with which he is preoccupied here, as anyone can attest who has wrestled with the terms "identified," "likeness and similitude" or "individual" in the last pages of *Jerusalem* (e.g., 90.28-29 or 96.5-7), but it is not especially to Hilton's credit that he never broaches the issue, so integral to his own argument, as expressed by Blake himself. And this is rather typical of Hilton's way with difficulty. A footnote tells us he is "obviously completely unsympathetic" to critics who argue that words are roughly analogous to embodiments in *Generation* and therefore ideally dispensable, and he cites Leopold Damrosch and Robert Gleckner by name (p. 263), but since sympathy is hardly the issue, rather the enormous question of embodiment (including the referentiality of language), more direct encounter than a footnote might have been helpful.

All reviewers' objections and obiter dicta emanate, of course, from the Reasoning Negative, and I do not

mean to indulge my spectre here, but to suggest that Hilton's theoretical limitations sometimes contribute to certain misgivings one has about the special genius of his readings even while they encourage him to make the readings in the first place. For example, I want to cite Hilton's interesting commentary on

Then Los took off his left sandal placing it on his head,  
Signal of solemn mourning

(M 8.10-12)

The commentary is a characteristic melange of Too Much and Poetic Genius. First we are told (p. 236), "The sandal is the signal the servants behold, and its rising initiates the mourning, the awareness of Loss. The sandal would be the sun if we could only step into it"—which led me to want to break someone's harp. But as he persists, Hilton achieves some remarkable effects:

Through its "aggressive strangeness," the passage discloses a level of organization distinct from the odd picture offered by the narrative; indeed, the description seems to be intentionally "unfortunate" in order to draw attention to the process of literal transformation at work. Thus in this passage *sun* becomes *risen*, becomes *Los*, or *sol* anagrammatically, and then becomes *sandal* becomes *signal* becomes *sol/emn*—and all ending with *morning*. The underlying theme, literally, is the Sun (p. 236).

In the nature of things there are going to be readers who feel that such a reading strains credibility, but Hilton's flights of like mind are sustained enough that if the reader will stay with his explications they will earn at least grudging assent. For me they are exercises of the imagination, or at least Divine Improvisation, and I have no systematic quarrel with them as readings. (Their model, incidentally, would seem to be the inspired fancifulness of Erdman's readings of the illuminations in *The Illuminated Blake*, and therefore part of the significance of Hilton's book may be that it is the first extended study to apply illumination-reading to the text rather than vice versa.) But there is in them, again, a determined subsumption of quite distinct linguistic and imaginative categories, which subsumption, in my view, is mistakenly identified by Hilton as something platonically more general: "While the idea of such an arbitrary (and never attested) principle of composition is almost incredible, it does seem that in the passage at hand the Poetic Genius (not to be identified with the conscious poet) elaborates a pre-text concerning the Sun" (p. 236).

The principle evoked here is parallel to Earl Wasserman's lovely idea in his Shelley book that Shelley was aiming by means of de-localized allusions at a kind of Ur-Text, or Source for the specific contexts from which a less completely idealized poetics had historically drawn. This theory founders on contradiction, for unless the unideal localized text is recognized, in the form of allusion, the transcendence of allusion is not something the reader will notice either—but at least Wasserman

retained the idea of authorial responsibility. Hilton, I would guess partly because of the strain on credibility exacted by punning, would make his pretext the word of the Muse speaking through Blake's unconscious. Evidently this escape from censorship is liberating for Hilton, and he feels free to goose-chase chains of association through Blake's texts in a wonderfully uninhibited fashion. But he is encouraged as well into theoretical hypocrisies with respect to the "other tradition" of commentary. "Rather than add to the infinitely proliferating possibilities of symbolic commentary, we might strive instead to study how Blake's polysemous words and contexts support each other" (p. 11). Obviously Hilton earns the right to his own emphasis, but where does our knowledge of context come from if not from the proliferating commentaries? And what makes Hilton think his is not one of them?

In other words, the idea that word leads to word in Blake's texts without any mediation by "symbolic" commentary seems to me untenable. The mediation, finally, has to be the myth Blake produced, and since Hilton seems delighted by polysemy in words I can't for the life of me figure out why he is disturbed by "proliferation" in commentary. Moreover, this error (as I see it) terribly and unnecessarily limits what he could have done with his talents as a reader. "These constructions," he writes (p. 4) "do not disclose anything about the narrative, but they do create aspects of the background and frame. . . ." But after all, since so many of Blake's primary mythological names are themselves puns, it is no very great leap to the notion that the myth itself may be only an "extension"—as it were shorthand—for the linguistic activity studied here. Of course it is one thing to ignore the leap for reasons of economy or space, but Hilton's attempt to make a theoretical virtue out of ignoring it seems to me a grievous self-imposition. To pursue words as if they told us nothing about Blake's narrative is to be only half-Blaked.

To carry on as if this were not the case, and if his own commentaries weren't led at every point by a specialist's awareness of symbolic commentary, commits Hilton to a mode of disclosure which, since it traces term-associations at the expense of narrative-associations, fails to discover a *critical narrative* worthy of his discoveries. For example, the chapter on "Stars and Other Bright Words" moves from the extraordinary reading of "The Tyger" with which it begins to an elaborate discussion of the conceptual associations between stars and reason, taking us from the *Night Thoughts* illustrations through *The Book of Urizen* to *Milton* and beyond. I learned something for which I am grateful every step of the way, but in the absence of any critical narrative except association I found the process of argument tedious and arbitrary. In this book it is as if the usual relationship between argument and footnote had been

reversed, and the reader left to make what he will of the notes. Given the talents of the reader, I found myself wishing for more. There is no desirable conflict between fiction-readers and word-readers of Blake, or at least none that couldn't be made into a Blakean war in heaven. Lacking this, however, it is not so terrible to find oneself where "Contraries are equally True," and we should be grateful to Nelson Hilton for giving us Beulah.

**Nancy L. Pressly. *Revealed Religion: Benjamin West's Commissions for Windsor Castle and Fonthill Abbey*. San Antonio: San Antonio Museum of Art, 1983.**

**Reviewed by Allen Staley**

From September to November 1983 the San Antonio Museum of Art presented a small but distinguished exhibition of sketches by Benjamin West for three ambitious cycles of paintings and stained glass windows depicting biblical subjects. The organizer of the exhibition and author of its extremely informative catalogue was Nancy Pressly, the museum's chief curator, who previously had organized the exhibition of *The Fuseli Circle in Rome* at the Yale Center for British Art in 1979.

The three series for which the exhibited sketches were preparatory studies were intended for the Royal Chapel in Windsor Castle, St. George's Chapel also at Windsor Castle, and Fonthill Abbey in Wiltshire. The two Windsor undertakings occupied West on and off for over two decades. The Fonthill commissions came only in 1796, when William Beckford started to build the Abbey, and West's work for Beckford all seems to have been done by 1801. West did complete eighteen very large pictures for the Royal Chapel, all of which he exhibited at the Royal Academy between 1781 and 1801, but they were never installed in the Castle. For St. George's Chapel he painted an altarpiece and made designs for five windows, of which four were installed. These were on a vast scale (the triptychal east window depicting the *Resurrection* measured some thirty-six feet high by twenty-eight across) and, as they were in the fully late-Baroque style that West used consistently for the biblical subjects he painted in the 1780s and 1790s, they conflicted dramatically with the Perpendicular Gothic style of their architectural setting. They were removed and destroyed in mid-nineteenth-century restorations of the Chapel. For Fonthill Abbey, West's chief religious subjects were intended for a Revelation Chamber planned