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R E V I E W

Cettina Tramontano Magno and David V. Erdman, The Four Zoas by William Blake: A Photographic Facsimile of the Manuscript with Commentary on the Illuminations

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REVIEWS

Cettina Tramontano Magno and David V. Erdman. *The Four Zoas by William Blake: A Photographic Facsimile of the Manuscript with Commentary on the Illuminations*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1987. 258 pp. \$65/£45.

Reviewed by Andrew Lincoln

This is the second facsimile of *The Four Zoas* manuscript. The first, edited by G. E. Bentley, Jr. (1963), helped to clarify the textual problems in Blake's poem by including a detailed transcription of Blake's revisions.¹ This new facsimile complements the first: there is no transcription of the text as the editors' primary concern is to define and interpret the visual designs. In the manuscript there are more than 80 pages of drawings and several dozen specimens of Blake's engraving. The new facsimile provides the first truly comprehensive examination of these illustrations, and makes an important contribution to our understanding of Blake's technique of "illumination."

The manuscript is reproduced in monochrome, and four pages are also reproduced in color. The prints in this facsimile are smaller than the manuscript leaves, as the editors explain: "Photographs we have seen in full size [i.e., about 12¾ x 16½ inches] show less detail in faint places than do the 8 x 10 inch prints, many in infrared photography, obtained for this work, and we were advised to print from them without enlargement, to retain their sharpness of detail." Comparison with the Bentley facsimile shows the wisdom of this decision. Many features that are invisible or barely detectable in Bentley become clearly visible here, including a full-page design (the figure beneath the text on page 16), several individual figures (e.g., the figure rising in the left-hand margin of the title page) and a number of small details (such as the female breasts on the standing figure on page 31). At other points details that were visible in Bentley achieve a new clarity (the reclining figure on page 6; the design at the foot of page 12; the erased areas of the marginal figures on page 26; figures beneath the text of page 132). Sometimes the price of the increased definition is a murky page tone that makes

The Four Zoas by William Blake



*A Photographic Facsimile of the Manuscript with
Commentary on the Illuminations*

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the text difficult to read (presumably the result of infrared), but the price is worth paying. There are a few places where the reduction leads to a slight (but not significant) loss of detail: drawings on pages 92, 108, 118, 134 and 144 seem, to my eye at least, clearer in Bentley. A hair seems to have got onto the camera lens in the plate of page 75.

The four color plates are disappointing. The manuscript leaves have weathered into a lemon ochre, which becomes darker and more orange in the color prints. As a result color contrasts are flattened: the delicate pink on the shoulder and legs of the figure at the foot of page 5 becomes more difficult to see. I doubt whether any of these plates really justify their cost.

Some photographic prints are supplemented with tracings, and even "enhanced" tracings of problematic details (there are 23 tracings in all). This difficult work has generally been executed with great care. It helps to clarify both large-scale drawings (on pages 16 and 126) and local details (such as the three distinct faces disentangled from a revised sketch on page 17). Some tracings are colored by the editors' guesswork. A tracing of page 22 (previously page 20) isolates loops and curves which in the original appear to be part of a larger sketch,



very faint, that continues under the text and into the left hand margin. The editors construe the isolated portion as "a large grinning figure," but the evidence scarcely supports this construction. A small, indeterminate detail from page 64 has been transformed in tracing, and appears in the commentary over the title *Jester with cap and bells*. The tracing adds dark shading which makes the figure look more definite than it is, and substitutes a dot for a loop, thus creating an "eye." Presumably the tracings were taken from photographic prints; these two might have been checked more carefully against the manuscript.

As the editors explain in their introduction, the arrangement of the leaves in the present binding of the manuscript is the result of editorial judgment, primarily that of the poem's first editors, W. B. Yeats and — especially — Edwin J. Ellis. In this facsimile 24 leaves have been relocated. The changes affect three areas of the manuscript. First, the leaf containing pages 21–22 has been inserted between pages 18 and 19. Second, the two Nights VII have been conflated to follow the narrative sequence given in Erdman's *Complete Poetry and Prose*.² Third, two leaves, pages 113–16, bound at the end of Night VIII have now been inserted between pages 104–05.

There are problems here which don't afflict the editor of a printed text. In more than one instance Blake has divided a page of text into portions, and assigned each portion to a different location. In a printed text such rearrangements can be accommodated with ease. But a manuscript page — and the design that appears on it — can have only one location. In such cases *any* arrangement of the leaves will involve some disruption of the text. One answer to this problem is to reproduce the manuscript in its existing order, as Bentley does, and note the errors and complications in the commentary. But in this facsimile the editors have a special interest in the appearance of the manuscript, and in the relationship among the designs.

Their rearrangement of leaves in Night VIII seems fully justified. The new sequence makes good sense of Blake's instructions on page 104 (calling for the interpolation of text from page 113). And it makes equally good sense of the instruction on page 106 (asking the reader

to "turn back 3 leaves" in order to interpolate the second portion of text on page 113). There is some disruption for the reader here, but Blake's instructions clearly authorize such disruption, and signal the point of dislocation (the two portions of text on page 113 are clearly separated by a line). The arrangement places the fascinating visual sequence of three images of Christ (resurrected, page 114; crucified, page 115; walking on earth, page 116) at the climax of the Night.

The other changes involve textual difficulties that seem less easy to resolve. Pages 19–22 are two added leaves which apparently contain additional material for the end of Night I. From the evidence of the narrative sequence the leaves were almost certainly bound in reverse order, and by placing 21–22 before 19–20 the editors have rectified the error. They assume that these pages follow on from the original ending of Night I on page 18, and that Night II begins on page 23. Those readers who (like me) accept Blake's marginal note indicating that Night II begins on page 9, and who think the text on pages 19–22 may follow 9:33, will still have doubts about the appropriate place of these two leaves.³ But few could doubt that the new arrangement is an improvement, and that it produces a readable text.

Inevitably, the arrangement of the Night(s) now known as VIIa (pages 77–90) and VIIb (pages 91–98) is the most problematic. Blake left clear instructions for the transposition of two parts of the *text* of VIIb, but the instructions (unlike those in Night VIII) appear to assume that the reader will encounter the manuscript *leaves* in their untransposed order.⁴ If the leaves are transposed, page 95 becomes a problem as it contains both the new beginning and the new ending of the Night. Should it appear at the beginning or the end? In either position it will contain an isolated fragment of text. The editors put it at the beginning of VIIb, thus isolating the new ending. The other aspect of the revision, the interpolation of the transposed pages of VIIb between pages 86 and 87 of VIIa, seems even more problematic. The editors' justification is the assumption that Blake's narrative is least disrupted if the transposed VIIb is inserted into VIIa after 85:22. But the textual evidence on which this assumption rests is ambiguous.⁵ And here again, the movement of pages splinters the text, putting lines 85:23–86:14 before VIIb, whereas in the desired textual sequence they follow on from VIIb. The editors claim that "The pictorial suitability of this sequence seems clearly to justify" the arrangement. But in their detailed comments on the visual designs they offer surprisingly little to substantiate the claim. As Blake left no instructions to authorize this interpolation, it may have been wiser to reproduce the existing order of the manuscript (VIIa followed by untransposed VIIb), and to outline the alternative sequence in the commentary. Perhaps one day we shall have a facsimile with loose leaves,

that will allow each reader to make his or her own arrangement of the two Nights VII.

The major effort in this facsimile is directed to the interpretation of the illustrations. Here the authors have wrestled with a formidable task, for the most finished illustrations in the manuscript are the engravings originally designed to illuminate a quite different text, Young's *Night Thoughts*, while the illustrations drawn for Blake's own poem are often no more than tentative sketches. The authors bring to their task an undaunted optimism, an intimate knowledge of the text, and a keen sense of the relationships that appear among different elements of Blake's art. They show very clearly that even those drawings that appear to offer simple and direct illustration of the narrative can be related subtly to the interplay of dramatic perspectives created in the poem. For example, in considering the figure sketched at the foot of page 7, which accompanies the description of the "Mingling" of Enion and the Spectre of Tharmas, they say: "Insofar as we see this 'monster' as a female body, half serpent rather than half fish, we attribute the traditional guile and treachery of the serpent to Eve herself, as a stage of exorcism. Visibly opposed to the sleeping but human spectre on the opposite page, Enion appears to embody the loathed part of himself which Tharmas scorns." The relationship between text and drawings is often far from simple or direct, and in such cases the authors' keen awareness of parallels and patterns within the work as a whole can be very helpful. In the text on page 82, for example, Los laments his inability to enjoy Enitharmon, while his Spectre woos the Shadow of Enitharmon beneath the Tree of Mystery. This is an intensification of error that paradoxically results, as the authors note, in a "progression of the imagination." At the foot of the page Blake drew a female figure who holds or turns a circle in which eight stars are visible. The design doesn't provide a direct illustration of the text. But the authors relate the wheel to other images within the poem—the Circle of Destiny, the "starry wheels" that feel the divine hand in Night IV, the dismal squadrons or Urthona that "o'erwheel" at Urizen's command, the eight eyes of God—and thus tentatively suggest its relationship to the idea that forms of error can serve the scheme of divine providence.

The same awareness of relationships that appear between different aspects of Blake's work informs the discussion of the *Night Thoughts* proofs used in the manuscript. The authors argue that the effect of the proofs on Blake's text and drawings "is usually noticeable, sometimes striking":

Often the design drawn on the page facing an engraved scene mirrors or balances it. A body lying with slightly raised head is matched by a different body in the same position. A spear or dart in the engraving is matched by some weapon in the adjacent drawing. And the text too has its reverberations both ways.

The detailed commentary amply justifies this claim, and gives a vivid sense of Blake's working methods. The authors usually consider with admirable deftness both the original context in Young's poem, and the new context in Blake's. On page 45, for example, in which the resurrected Tharmas laments the loss of his emanation Enion, Blake uses an engraving of Jesus raising Lazarus. The authors note that the design originally illustrated, and transformed, "Young's argument for the unique efficacy of 'the cross.'" Blake changes Young's "symbolic touching to a direct human eye-and-body communication between the despairing Zoa of touch, Tharmas, and an instantly ready Saviour." The inclusion of the engraving here, they suggest, is far from arbitrary. Indeed, as the gesture of Lazarus mirrors the drawing of Tharmas on the facing page (page 44) Blake "must have planned to use this *Night Thoughts* design" when he made the drawing. Moreover the design hints at the conclusion of Blake's poem: "The text gives no hint of the Saviour's presence, but both lovers take steps that could bring him near. Enion repents, forgetting her 'sin' and rebellion; Tharmas recoils from his 'fierce rage' . . ." The authors note that the same print was used again in Night VII (page 97), in which Tharmas again recalls his separation from Enion: "Blake rescues his worthy demon by holding forth the silent promise of Christ's hand." Such comments throw much light on Blake's practice in the poem, and exemplify the kind of attentiveness demanded by this work.



The authors' commitment to the close "reading" of Blake's designs entails a minute attention to detail that is consistently revealing. Their clear descriptions repeatedly point to the presence of features that might be missed even on close scrutiny, and clarify potentially misleading impressions. On page 24, for example, a figure in the left-hand margin looks at first (and second) sight to be a phallus. With the aid of the commentary

we can see that it is in fact "the torso of a female with legs apart but with neither head nor feet." Such difficulties abound in the manuscript, and the authors, building on the work of earlier scholars and frequently surpassing it, have clarified many cloudy areas.

But there are limits to what can be achieved here. It is often extremely difficult, and sometimes impossible, to define the image with certainty (is the figure male, female, young, old, rising, falling—does the vague configuration constitute a figure at all?). The slightest detail *can* have significance, or might be merely incidental, or might even be an illusion created by the unfinished state of the sketch. Is the standing figure at the foot of page 12, for example, "sheathed in protective clothing from head to foot" with "a round helmet resembling a fencing mask" (as the authors suggest), or is the clothing an illusion—simply alternative postures



sketched in? The authors argue that the strongest evidence to resolve such uncertainties may be in the text. But deciding which part of the text (if any) is relevant is not always easy. For example, the authors interpret the drawing at the foot of page 14 in the light of an added passage, the song of war sung at the feast of Los and Enitharmon. Accordingly the three-headed female is seen as "a united committee of outrage." The authors explain: "All seem agreed on the combat demanded by the outstretched right arm with upraised palm." But if

the design is seen in the light of the original copperplate text that survives at the top of the page, in which bright souls of vegetative life "Stretch their immortal hands to smite the gold & silver Wires," the female heads become singers "soft warbling," the outstretched hand reaching to "Wires" visible in the left hand margin. Similarly, at the foot of page 56 an aged seated man holds by the hands or wrists a kneeling youth who stretches towards him. If we interpret this in the light of the last passage inscribed on the page (in which "Limit Was put to Eternal Death") we may, like the authors, see the youth as "cheerful." The commentary explains: "Setting a Limit, he balances his energy against the gripe of one who chooses not to die, transforming mummy into man." But conversely, if we see the drawing in the light of the lines marked to come in at the end of the inscribed text (lines in which Los "became what he beheld") we may see the youth being pulled reluctantly into the power of Urizen. Even where the text appears to offer one clear theme, the visual image may be ambiguous. If we agree that the male and female figures at the foot of page 27 in some sense illuminate the "bondage of the Human form" referred to in the text, should we see, as the authors do, "The body of man . . . dependant on the womb of woman" or should we see woman emerging from the rib of man as a captivating presence?

Faced with such possibilities, definite interpretations and identifications can seem oddly reductive, or merely arbitrary. A willingness to remain in uncertainties and doubts often seems an appropriate response. The reader who is capable of remaining content with half knowledge will at least not confuse definiteness with accuracy. The most significant limitation of the commentary is, paradoxically, the authors' irrepressible reaching after fact and certainty in the grey areas of the manuscript: their attempt to determine the indeterminate. They define the head sketched on pages 21–22 as that of an *old* man, but it could be that of a middle-aged man or even a young man. They claim that in the "social cluster of naked bodies" sketched and partly erased on page 38, Blake is offering an undressed version of the elegantly clothed bodies in an illustration (by Thomas Stothard and Anker Smith) of Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*. I admire their ingenuity here, but find the evidence frail and quite unconvincing. When they say of the cupid on page 112 "He looks old; his hair must be a wig," I feel they must be joking.

The same readiness to offer boldly decisive judgments in areas where the evidence is ambiguous or slight also mars some of the comments on the *Night Thoughts* proofs. The most startling example appears in the comments on page 121, whose uncolored design is reproduced in one of the four color plates. The engraving is marked by a spotted line of stains. In the commentary

the line is related to Blake's reference on the previous page to "That line of blood that stretchd across the windows of the morning." The authors comment:

the bloody line on the engraved proof can be seen to mark exactly the moment when one sees or does not see the "windows of the morning." If the line was present in the proof, by accident, before Blake wrote on this leaf, it may have inspired his writing. It seems only remotely possible that he put it in to illustrate his text. Either way, he was redeeming the plate "from Error's power."

The caption of the color plate states "streak across chest of reclining figure, dull red." The authors quote in support of their interpretation my own description of the stain as "very dark brown dried blood/rust colour." The word "blood" seems to have encouraged a slide from "very dark brown" to "bloody" and "dull red." If the authors had looked carefully at the manuscript they would presumably have seen that the stains are not red. There are comparable stains on page 117, but these are not mentioned in the commentary. We have no way of knowing how the stains appeared—they might conceivably have arrived after the manuscript had left Blake's possession. The authors' determination to miss no significant detail is admirable, but it does not always redeem them "from Error's power."

The commentary does much to dispel the traditional view that the poem evolved through a chaotic and arbitrary process of composition. It is therefore regrettable that the introduction should lead back to this view by offering a brief history of the manuscript based on untested assumptions rather than on a study of particular revisions. In order to account for the composite nature of the manuscript the authors imagine Blake "working over the text year after year, with increasing doubt that a perfected volume would ever be called for." Accordingly, "as the margins filled up" Blake "resorted to making fair copies on fresh sheets," and "As time passed . . . Blake made revisions with less and less attention to any finished appearance." At this stage "the easiest way to borrow designs from the published *Night Thoughts* (and to save paper) was to coopt the proofs that survived from that labor." This account seems to imply that the text on the proof pages evolved from a continuous process of revision that overran one, or possibly two, previous fair drafts. The surviving evidence makes this seem highly unlikely. Where there are marginal revisions in the manuscript the texture of the revised narrative is relatively fragmented—more fragmented, for example, than the basic text of pages 43–85 (on proof pages), which seems as homogeneous as any part of the poem. The authors' own commentary suggests that Blake was sufficiently concerned about the appearance of the manuscript to choose the *Night Thoughts* proofs with care. The transition from copperplate text to proof text coincides with a major transition within the narrative: the breaking of

the bounds of destiny, the fall from the teleological vision embodied in Urizen's Golden World into the blind materialism of the Caverns of the Grave. Any account of the poem's development should at least take such evidence into consideration. But here the authors do not engage significantly with the manuscript evidence at all.

A project of this complexity will inevitably have weaknesses. But they should be seen in the light of the authors' overall achievement. The writing is crisp and lively, and communicates an infectious excitement. When the commentary grapples with the minute details of Blake's drawings, with alternative interpretations, and with the complex relationships that appear among the constituent parts of Blake's work, it provides a challenging example of the kind of interpretative exercise that Blake's illuminated writings were surely intended to stimulate. In its attempts to determine the indeterminate, to authorize particular readings where the evidence is ambiguous, it will inevitably leave many readers dissenting. But the book provides sufficient detail in its reproductions, descriptions, and comments to allow readers to form their own judgments. It is well indexed, compact enough to be used easily, and—given the quality of its reproduction, and the price of other facsimiles—relatively inexpensive. This is a book that every library should own, and that every reader of Blake will want to have.

¹G. E. Bentley, Jr., ed., *William Blake, "Vala or The Four Zoas": A Facsimile of the Manuscript, A Transcript of the Poem, and a Study of Its Growth and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1963).

²David V. Erdman, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, rev. ed. (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1982).

³See the textual arrangement of Nights I and II in Stevenson, W. H., ed., text by David V. Erdman. *The Poems of William Blake* (London: Longman, 1977).

⁴A note under the Night heading on page 91 reads "This Night begins at line 15 the following comes in at the End."

⁵See the discussion of the textual evidence in *Blake* 12 (1978): 107–39.