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Is There a Poem in This Manuscript?

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that lies somewhere behind its pages," so Otto tries to retrieve an ideally unfinished poem from somewhere behind the manuscript; the difference is that the unfinishedness of earlier critics was "bad" while his is "good." There is a certain identity between these earlier critics and Otto: in either case we end up without the manuscript. But it is precisely the manuscript that is at issue, precisely the manuscript that is least recuperable by either a metaphysics of unity or a metaphysics of incompleteness; it is precisely the manuscript that *has never been read*. If the only way to get rid of the notion of failure is by abandoning the manuscript or recuperating it into some ideal state, then perhaps we must learn to live with the idea of failure. In fact, at the level of (the) work itself, the failure of *The Four Zoas* might be a lot less troubling than it is out here in critical discourse. Perhaps, for Blake, failure might not have been so unthinkable a judgment on a work that at one or more stages of development was clearly intended for publication but never published. What's so terrible about failure? It might be less of a problem for a working artist, for whom in a sense nothing can ever be wasted, than it is for a discourse whose responsibility is always in some part the determination and maintenance of canons. What we have in Otto is one instance of the general attempt to recuperate that failure so that the poem can exhibit a distinctly literary *value*. What we do not yet have is a way to read *The Four Zoas*.

But whose will be the final state-ment?

¹Paul Mann, "The Final State of *The Four Zoas*," *Blake* 18 (1985); Robert N. Essick, *The Four Zoas: Intention and Method*, *Blake* 18 (1985): 204-200; Peter Otto, "Final States, Finished Forms, and *The Four Zoas*," *Blake* 20 (1987): 144-47.

²It is easy to dislike writers who use footnotes to advertise their other works, but I promised to be brief here and can only do so by glossing this article thus: See my "Apocalypse and Recuperation: Blake and the Maw of Commerce," *ELH* (Spring 1985): 1-32; and my "Editing *The Four Zoas*," *Pacific Coast Philology* XVI.1 (1981), which may in fact anticipate Otto's argument.

³Otto 144, citing Rajan, *The Form of the Unfinished: English Poetics from Spenser to Pound* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 1985) 14.

⁴Essick defines this word more precisely than Otto: "Given the practical exigencies of image production, as well as Blake's insistence on the radical unity of conception and execution, it is reasonable to assume that the preliminary stages in the development of an image may reveal the medium in which Blake intended to produce the final form of that image" (216).

⁵*The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, newly revised edition (Garden City NY: Anchor Books, 1982).

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As I happen to agree with the devils that "Opposition is True Friendship," it was with some pleasure that I sat down to read Paul Mann's response to my own response to articles by himself and Robert Essick. One of the pleasures of argument is the transformative force that can sometimes transform devils into angels, Leviathans into Pipers and what is down into what is up. I was fascinated by my own transformation from an Antipodean Blake scholar (one who comes from "down under," as popular geography would have it) to a figure who had somehow attained a prominence from which he was able to keep the "key to the scriptures," undertake the "surveillance" of Essick's hypothesis, assert that what is "must stay that way," and at the same time represent "the central movement of Blake criticism." A metamorphosis indeed!

As these preliminary remarks might suggest, the terms of Mann's response are broadly homologous with those used by Blake in the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. The high ground of authority and the dematerialized world of the spirit are claimed by the angels, while the nether world, the world of fact and action, is claimed by the devils. Mann believes that he occupies the world of material fact (he deals with the physical manuscript), while I along with Blake criticism as a whole have imposed my "phantasy" on the poem. It is, however, not the "phantasy," at least not in the first instance, that Mann is concerned about. (In fact, he is ready to affirm that my hypothesis is "in the case of *Four Zoas* criticism . . . certainly an improvement.") What bothers Mann is the swerve that he detects in my reply and in Blake studies as a whole away from the physical material manuscript towards some form of "ideal" text. His later and contradictory assertion that my hypothesis regarding the form of *The Four Zoas* does not assist with the reading of the poem is a conclusion derived from his analysis of that swerve.

In responding to Mann and Essick's illuminating hypothesis regarding Blake's production intentions for *The Four Zoas*, I proposed that we consider *The Four Zoas* in its final state as an unfinished rather than an incomplete poem. In contradistinction to views of the poem that maintain, for example, that Blake abandoned the manuscript because he did not foresee the Peace of Amiens (Erdman) or because of some personal failing (Bentley), I argued that the poem is arrested by forces which are intrinsic to its subject matter. Mann begins his critique of this position by detailing a logical paradox or conundrum.

To produce a "*finished discourse* of unfinishedness" is, for Mann, to complete the poem on the level of "critical recounting." If this is done, then, he argues, "there is . . . *no inherent reason* why, if the poem was *essentially* unfinished, Blake could not have devised a form for its publication as such." He concludes that "the condition of the manuscript is merely an image, an ornament, a suggestion, a formal hint for a reading that is, at bottom, in no way dependent upon it." It is difficult to see the logic in this sequence.

To claim that the fabrication of a "*finished discourse* of unfinishedness" completes the poem and becomes "the ideal form of the poem's publication" is surely to confuse levels. To explain why a mechanic was unable to build a car because of problems with the way in which that car was first imagined does not (in any sense evident to me) produce a workable car. To discourse about why one has failed to complete a project is not in my experience at least to complete that project.

The recognition of the problems intrinsic to a particular work may, of course, lead one to attempt a very different kind of project. This is a response to the "failure" of *The Four Zoas* which Blake seems to have adopted when he wrote *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. Yet it would clearly be absurd to say that either of these poems was a complete version of *The Four Zoas*. Of course, in elaborating a "*finished discourse* of unfinishedness" one sets up a contrast between the unfinished poem and the finished discourse, but what is involved here is a difference in object. To attempt to narrate a history of the world, from Fall to Apocalypse, is very different from the attempt to explain why for Blake that narrative could not be completed.

I should hasten to add, however, that if one accepts that there is a broad homology between unfinished poem and fallen world, then Mann is right to point out that in elaborating a "*finished discourse* of unfinishedness" one is adopting a position outside of the "chaos" of the text that the narrator and the poem's characters are unable to attain. As Mann observes:

The issue is one of mediation: in order for the poem to enter discourse, for there to be any commentary on it at all, *someone* must stand "outside" it; an outside must somehow be established, an archimedean fulcrum for levering the manuscript into Blake studies must be found.

Levering *The Four Zoas* into Blake criticism may not on all occasions be a reprehensible act; yet even putting this equivocation aside, the issue is not as straightforward as Mann suggests.

A poem that attempts to recount the history of the fallen world (from Fall to Apocalypse) must enclose narrator, author, and critic within its spaces. The forces that ensure that the poem's narrator is unable to oversee a his-

tory of which he is an effect also ensure that the critic is unable to attain a vantage point from which to survey the whole. This puts readers of the poem in a curious position, for to claim to have attained a position from which we are able to "view all things beneath [our] feet" is to assert that we have reached the position denied to Urizen. We must stand outside of the poem to comment on it; but each claim to have reached an outside from which we can see the poem in its entirety is proof that we remain inside the dream. The poem undoes the authority of the reading that at the same time it seems to invite. Even on the level of critical appropriation the poem is therefore unfinished (an observation which is itself subject to the same vicissitudes). Rather than offering "a solid critical framework on which to hang the manuscript's rags," the notion of an "unfinished poem" is itself unstable. This relentless undoing of the reader's position is clearly appropriate for a poem that attempts to wake its readers from the sleep of the fallen world, an observation which has implications for our understanding of Blake's production intentions and even his "production-aesthetic."

At times Mann's concerns about "mediation," and some of the implications of the argument that unfolds from his critique of the critic's position outside of the text, seem to imply rather remarkable conclusions. All reading assumes an ability to adopt (at least provisionally) a position with regard to the text. Insofar as reading is the yoking of the reader's discourse to that of the text¹ it would seem to involve some form of mediation. Does this mean that *The Four Zoas* cannot or should not be read? This possibility is certainly suggested by Mann's reference to "the strange and irreducible inaccessibility of the manuscript." But surely the manuscript is not *that* inaccessible. If this is the price one must pay to keep the manuscript safe from the iniquities of dematerialization, then it is too high.

Mann is, of course, not really opposed to reading the poem; instead he is championing a particular kind of reading. This is to be based on a study of Blake's "production-aesthetic." For Mann, ". . . Blake[s] . . . commitment to different material forms and modes of publication was a process of learning to see the work in the work." Although I have no quarrel with this project (I think it is one of the more interesting of the approaches to *The Four Zoas*), I do find it surprising that this kind of reading should be seen in competition with other ways of reading Blake (Mann mentions "poet(-prophet), inspired illustrator . . . [and] composite artist"). I am also skeptical as to whether such an approach is able to avoid a swerve similar to that which Mann traces in Blake criticism. Seeing the work in the work is closely allied to religious metaphors that would seem to bring with them the very swerve that Mann condemns.

It is perhaps not fortuitous that the swerve that is the subject of Mann's reply is located in those most spiritual and disembodied of realms, "the spaces between [my] paragraphs" and the gap between Mann's article and my reply.

These observations are not meant as criticism of a reading that aims to delineate Blake's "production-aesthetic." For me at least, the reading of *The Four Zoas* is only just beginning and at this stage of the process it would in my view be unfortunate to put too rigid a line between *The Four Zoas* as manuscript and as poem, as work and as text. As I suggested in my first response, what is striking about *The Four Zoas* is that it suggests both "... a drive towards clarity and completion (telling the whole story) and a residue or excess which must leave this drive short of its goal." Or to phrase this in a more parabolic style: the manuscript implies a poem which in turn implies a manuscript. To drive a wedge between these two dimensions is likely to result in a view of *The Four Zoas* which is less complete than others. This point is well made by the passage that Mann quotes from the *Marriage*.

The parable of the Ancient Poets begins with a description of a world in which there is an interaction between the material and the spiritual, the "natural" and the human worlds. On the one hand the Ancient Poets animate all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses and so impose their phantasies on the world; but on the other hand these Gods are called by the names and adorned with the properties of things that lie outside the Poets' world. They are adorned with "whatever their enlarged & numerous senses could perceive."² As a parable of Blake criticism, this suggests that in its prelapsarian state there was an interaction between the critics' phantasies (their animation of the inert manuscript) and the force exerted by the manuscript on the critic. Mann argues that in the time that has elapsed since those halcyon days, Blake criticism has drawn apart from the manuscript and has been used to form a system to enslave the vulgar. One could, however, argue that Blake criticism might just as easily be precipitated into this parlous condition if critics were to attempt to quarantine the manuscript from the improprieties of reading. A division of this kind would just as surely involve forgetting that "All deities reside in the human breast."³

In a poem/manuscript such as this—where there is both a drive towards completion and an excess which continually makes that drive fall short of its goal—the dematerialization of the manuscript that occurs in reading is not a problem so long as it is followed by a movement back towards the manuscript. This does not imply that I believe that consideration of the "manuscript's material conditions and production 'intentions' are dangerous." In fact my article was a response that began

from Mann's and Essick's reflections on the manuscript and provided what still seems to me to be a plausible conclusion to their own narrative. At the same time, however, I believe that in certain cases reflection on a manuscript can sometimes be corroborated or extended by a reading of the words contained by that manuscript. At this stage I will persist in thinking that to call *The Four Zoas* an unfinished rather than an incomplete poem does in some small way illuminate the manuscript. It may even provide a fulcrum for levering Blake studies some small distance towards that endlessly fascinating poem/manuscript, *The Four Zoas*.

¹Paul Ricoeur, "What is a Text? Explanation and Interpretation," in *Mythic-Symbolic Language and Philosophical Anthropology*, by David M. Rasmussen (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971) 135–50; 144.

²David V. Erdman, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, newly rev. ed. (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1982) 38.

³Erdman 38.