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R E V I E W

Francis Curtis and Richard Dean, *Blake: A Software Package*

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"Life, Death, and Other Theories," *Historical Studies and Literary Criticism*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (U of Wisconsin P, 1985) 190-91.

⁶*Vision and Disenchantment: Blake's Songs & Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads* (Cambridge UP, 1983) 66-99.

⁷Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, "Against Theory," *Against Theory*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1985): 15-16. My point here is that these authors deliberately conceived of a far-fetched set of circumstances in which Wordsworth's poem might conceivably appear in order to illustrate a theoretical point about how it would be transformed thereby. There is nothing wrong with entertaining thoughts about such an hypothetical situation even though it would never occur to any reader trying to construe the poem. In thus employing the term "construe" to express a basic aim of interpretation I am following Abrams, who argues persuasively for the rehabilitation of this venerable standard for criticism. The Knapp-Michaels discussion about Wordsworth's poem, on the other hand, does not pretend to be a construal and thus differs from erroneous or postposterous interpretations, which do.

Francis Curtis and Richard Dean. *Blake: A Software Package*. West Sussex Institute of Higher Education, Bishop Otter College, College Lane, Chichester, West Sussex, England, PO19 4PE, 1987.

Reviewed by David Worrall

The search for new ways of teaching is as essential as keeping up with the latest developments in literary theory; indeed, it might even be said that literary theory *necessitates* new ways of teaching. *Blake: A Software Package* is not the answer to all of our problems in presenting Blake to undergraduate students previously virtually unacquainted with his work, but it presents an interesting field for further exploration and I found the process of evaluation quite a revealing one.

My students do a fairly traditional English literature program which they take with one other subject such as sociology, history, classical studies, drama, or geography. Blake is a year-two author in a traditional "author"-based course where he is taught after Wordsworth but before "the others." Seminar groups each comprise about eight to ten students who have been reading and discussing, at least, *The Book of Thel*, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, and *America*, while lectures will have introduced them to the wider work of Blake. Blake's illuminated books are projected, as complete works, onto the seminar room wall and discussion takes place on that basis. It was within this framework of teaching that I introduced the software package at the end of the course



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William Blake

A COMPUTER SOFTWARE PACKAGE

of seminars. The Blake software is easy to load and runs on a BBC microcomputer with 32K of RAM. It is currently the system most widely found in the U.K. for use in schools and in further and higher education.

The title of the program, *Blake: A Software Package*, is rather misleading as it is based entirely on "London" and does not offer an introduction to the rest of the *Songs* let alone Blake's other works. My first impression on using the program was how odd it seemed to go back to the *printed* word (even in electronic form) after looking quite intensively at the combination of Blake's word and image. Perhaps one would need to look forward to a new age of electronics (and a new age of funding) for software which could incorporate high-quality visuals with some sort of enhancement to explore the detail of Blake's between-the-line illuminations. Nevertheless, loading the floppy disc is easy and you soon have another "person" in the seminar room as the TV. monitor's ice-cold eye awaits appeasement and suggestion.

The program's introductory messages are laid out in colored blocks of text with simple instructions. Using the software via the keyboard is extremely easy, merely a question of typing in words or letters or using the space bar. It's not much good as an introduction to the BBC hardware or to computing but, on the other hand, it quells computer fright. The first menu is the only part of the program that is truly interactive and this simply asks you to "fill in the missing word" so "charter'd" must be correctly contracted and punctuated even if one of the other missing words, "appalls," swallows up the comma at the end of the line if you are to get the CORRECT message. This proved to be quite a good way of seeing how closely students had acclimatized themselves to Blake's writing.

The second phase of the program leads to simple manuscript revisions of "London" which signal obvious points for general discussion: such as why Blake eventually decided "charter'd" rather than "dirty," "mark" rather than "see," "Infants cry of fear" rather than "voice of every child." It's at this level that one realizes that the software package is aimed at schools at least as much, if not more than, institutions of higher education. There is also no further scope for interactivity between student and program after this section. Indeed, the program implicitly reintroduces the tutor so that monitor and program virtually become a colored open text book.

The third phase presents a rather traditional list of "high" literary texts which might provide a literary context for Blake's "London." These include Johnson's "London: A Poem," Swift's "A Description of the Morning," and "A Description of a City Shower," Gay's "Trivia, or the Art of Walking the Streets of London," essays such as Addison's on "The Royal Exchange," Steele's "The Hours of London," and passages from Defoe's *Moll Flanders* and Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. The student then looks these pieces up in the anthologies often available for undergraduate teaching.

The fourth part of the program calls up Wordsworth's "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge" and *The Prelude* (1805) 7.593-598 for further discussion and comparison. The fifth and final part of the program isolates gnomic looking lines from Johnson's "London":

In vain, these Dangers past, your Doors you close,
And hope the balmy Blessings of Repose:
Cruel with Guilt, and daring with Despair,
The midnight Murd'rer bursts the faithless Bar;
Invades the sacred Hour of silent Rest
And leaves, unseen, a Dagger in your Breast. (236-241)

Studying the lines out of their Johnsonian context, on the screen, in the seminar room, it seemed to us that Blake's "Harlots curse" of "plagues" might suggest a similar "venereal disease" reading of Johnson's lines. This is the most sophisticated work we did on the pro-

gram; the compilers have suitably tailored it so that the greatest degree of difficulty of response is reached at the end. The students did find it, at first, slightly unusual to have a T. V. monitor rather than just me on the end of the desk but within a few minutes they were able to accept it as being a neutral object in the room to which one referred as to the printed page. The most noticeable feature of using this software was exactly this, that it became a talking point around which the discussion could, but needn't, circulate.

The major limitation of *Blake: A Software Package* is the tiny capacity of the floppy disc and the BBC computer: there's very little one can do with such a small memory and it seems to rule out searching individual words across, say, the *Songs*, or calling up full, line by line revisions. Given that the lack of a good graphics facility is likely to continue, I still think there are things that unsophisticated computers, and even more unsophisticated computer operators, can do to give an extra dimension to teaching.

For example, it would be good to have a program capable of referring the reader to texts which might be associated with the *Songs* but which are not "high" literature, such as contemporary texts relevant to chimney sweeps, or hymns for children or contemporary newspaper items. All these *are* difficult to get out of books without having a toppling pile in the seminar room. Gathering together such disparate materials on disc would be a useful aid to teaching. On a more specialized note, it would be good to have in a computer program the various orderings of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* with some simple function so that the student could work out Blake's statistical preferences. Again, I believe that this would be a more exciting use of information technology than merely using the program as a televised book.

Blake: A Software Package is neatly produced on screen, easy to read, easy to use (the accompanying handouts are rather dismal in their range of suggestions and presentation although the A5 format lends itself to photocopying as worksheets). It would be good to see Francis Curtis and Richard Dean have the opportunity to edit and publish more powerful programs in the field of Blake and Romantic studies.