

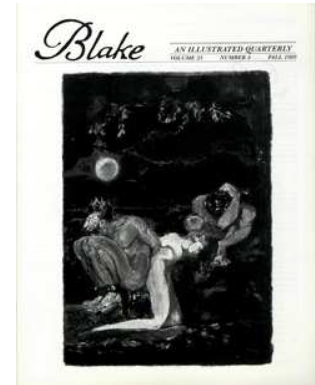
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R E V I E W

Jacques Blondel, trans., *Oeuvres IV: Vala ou les Quatre Vivants, et Annotations à divers ouvrages*

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REVIEWS

William Blake, *Oeuvres IV: Vala ou les Quatre Vivants, et Annotations à divers ouvrages*. Texte original présenté, traduit et annoté par Jacques Blondel. Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, 1983.

Reviewed by Martin Bidney

Despite the modest self-appraisal implicit in Jacques Blondel's remark that "Une traduction des Livres prophétiques de Blake peut faire penser à une tapisserie sans les couleurs" (48), his rendering of *The Four Zoas*—the first ever into French—is rich in color, a superb achievement. Of course the original rhythm ("le septénaire iambique et plus souvent anapestique" [50]) cannot be conveyed in a non-accentual language. Nor can long sequences of marching adjectives be rendered in analogous processions: "Hearing the march of long resounding, strong heroic Verse" becomes "Entendant le progrès du puissant Vers héroïque aux échos prolongés" (61). Blondel alters the rhythm, the placement of words, and sometimes even the logic of their interrelations because the French language requires these changes. "Long" has to refer to the resonance, the resounding, rather than to the verse itself, though in Blake's line it can refer to both. Certain fruitful ambiguities must be sacrificed to clarity. But not all. For instance, "Mighty was the draught of Voidness to draw Existence in" becomes "Le souffle du Vide était puissant pour aspirer l'Existence" (115). Here the punning play on "draught" and "draw" (and their alliteration, too) finds a perfect counterpart in the pairing of "souffle" and "aspirer." There are even bonuses. When "rav'ning like the hungry worm" becomes "vorace comme le ver avide" (115) we feel we have received an extra gift of evocative music.

A six-part introduction offers useful background to the new reader of Blake's epic. In "Révolution et révélation" Newton and Milton offer earlier precedents for Blake's insistence on the primacy of apocalyptic vision. In "Millénarisme et mysticisme" specimens of revolutionary-minded apocalypticism from Southey's *Joan of Arc* and Coleridge's *Religious Musings* enrich the context. As Blake is shown interiorizing his revolutionary hopes, parallels with Winstanley are drawn: Blake is pre-

sented as seer rather than mystic ("voyant" vs. "mystique"). "Le mythe des Quatre Vivants" makes the point that the Zoas "sont des personnifications, des états d'âme, et non des vertus et des vices, comme dans une allégorie médiévale" (27). ("Vivants" is a wonderful rendering of "Zoas," in my opinion, especially for the new reader of Blake; it clears up the line "We are become a Victim to the Living"—"Nous voilà devenus Victime des Vivants" [63]—in a way that is very helpful right at the outset. Blake's later explanation, "they are named Life's—in Eternity" is rendered by Blondel as "elles ont nom les merveilles de la Vie—dans l'Éternité" [425].) The section "Les nuits" sums up the plot and, borrowing a fine phrase used in another context by Gérard Genette (*Figures I*, 1966), characterizes *The Four Zoas* as "pourvu d'un surplus de sens inépuisable et toujours indéfiniment présent" (40). "Du chaos à la pastorale" relates Blake's pictorial art to Fuseli, Tibaldi, Barry, Flaxman, and Stothard. Blake's vivid baroque is encapsulated in Bachelard's aphorism that all three Blakean epics are "litanies de l'énergie qui sont comme des interjections qui pensent" (47). Finally, "Le langage symbolique" summarizes Josephine Miles' groupings of Blakean rhetorical figures and modes of diction.

Wonderfully Blakean is the epigraph from Saint-John Perse that heads up the Introduction; in part it says, "De l'exigence poétique, exigence spirituelle, sont nées les religions elles-mêmes, et par la grâce poétique, l'étincelle du divin vit à jamais dans le silex humain" (7). Study of the "spark" image in the poem itself shows Blondel's refusal to be bound by any strict literalism, his openness to context in modifying diction. "Los answer'd in his furious pride, sparks issuing from his hair" becomes "Los, superbe et furieux, répondit, les cheveux pleins d'étincelles" (179). The French Los has hair "filled" with sparks to match the fullness of his pride. The element of motion in "issuing" is omitted. But one page later, the sparks return, and this time they show twice as much motion in French as in English, to dramatize Los' redoubled fury as the translator wants us to feel it. Thus, "In scorn stood Los, red sparks of blighting from his furious head / Flew over the waves of Tharmas" now becomes "Méprisant se dressait Los, et de rouges étincelles dévastatrices jaillissant de sa tête furieuse / Volèrent au-dessus des vagues de Tharmas" (181). Here "sparks of blighting" are "étincelles dévastatrices" (superb majesty of destructive indignation!). But just a bit later, "From his mouth curses, and from his eyes sparks of blighting" becomes "De sa bouche sortaient des malédictions, et de ses yeux de funestes étincelles" (207). These new "sparks of blighting" are merely "funestes étincelles"; fatal, funereal, they make us think of a pyre, not a lightning blast from heaven. Moods change, and the translator responds.

The poem's very last line offers another fine instance of precision and care combined with vividness and force. For "The dark Religions are departed and sweet Science reigns" Blondel gives us "Les sombres Religions ne sont plus, et du Savoir délectable c'est maintenant le règne" (483). Here he tries to reproduce the cadence, the rhythm, and he does it so well that we do not feel the syntactic inversion as at all forced. "C'est maintenant le règne du Savoir délectable" would be quite inappropriate, for we wish to end with a sense of innocence re-organized, of organic form, of a rule which is not Urizen's dividing rule. The translator, incidentally, as word-connoisseur has done as much careful thinking about the word "sweet" in Blakean usage as he has devoted to the imagery of sparks and blighting. In the Introduction he contrasts Blake's "sweet Science" with the Shelleyan "sweet eclipse / When soul meets soul on lovers' lips" (45) to help illustrate the difference between the more earthly apocalypse of the *Zoas* and the ethereal one of *Prometheus Unbound* Act IV. "Sweet," in Blake, also proves quite variable in meaning according to context. "Redd'ning, the demon strong prepar'd the poison of sweet Love" becomes "Rougissant, le puissant démon prépara le poison de l'amour souriant" (285). This is translation as interpretation, and it deserves high praise.

One can always cavil about a few details. I don't know why "all the black mould sings" should be weakened to "toute la terre noire chante" (457). "Mould" here refers to the rich, friable, black topsoil; why not "l'humus noir" instead of "la terre noire"? And surely it is more than a cavil to suggest that the Erdman text should have been used, not the Keynes.

But overall, the version is excellent. I cannot resist citing still another instance of taste and discernment. "Fearing thy frown, loving thy smile, O Urizen, Prince of Light" becomes "Redoutant le courroux de ton front et aimant ton sourire, O Urizen, Prince de Lumière" (411). "Le courroux de ton front" was by no means the inevitable choice for "frown"; there are many possibilities—"renfrognement," or "froncement de sourcil," or "regard courroucé." But the mention of Urizen's "forehead" is perfect in a picture of this Zoa of the head, or Schoolmaster of the Sky—and "front" even sounds like "frown." The whole *Quatre Vivants* abounds in exquisite touches of this kind. The notes to Watson, Bacon, and Boyd included in the same volume are also finely done into French. And the sample sketches reproduced from the *Zoas* manuscript increase our pleasure.

A total of six volumes is envisioned for this bilingual Blake series, which is under the direction of Pierre Leyris.

Donald Ault, *Narrative Unbound: Re-Visioning William Blake's The Four Zoas*. Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1987. xxvi + 518 pp. \$37.50 cloth/\$14.95 paper. Reviewed by Paul Mann

An enormous, astonishing, monumental book; a quantum leap in the reading of *The Four Zoas*; etc. (It is difficult, at one level, to avoid the rhetoric of dust-jacket superlatives in appraising the scale and importance of Ault's accomplishment; but so too the puny scale of a review will inevitably belittle his book even in singing its praises.) For more than fifteen years, patiently, obsessively, Ault has labored over *FZ*, his "master text," reading and rereading, revising and revising and revising ("re-visioning"). The phrase "master text" (xviii) is in fact exemplary. But Blake sought no disciples and Ault is no false-humble acolyte. What we are given are the results not only of scholarly study but of a sustained attempt to rise to *FZ*'s occasion, to answer to its demands. In fact, *Narrative Unbound* is nearly as demanding as *FZ* itself. One imagines readers so severely tested by the demands *NU* transfers to them—outrageous demands, for a patience and obsessiveness approaching Ault's own—that they resort to the stock charge of self-indulgence. Here, they will say, is still one more critic who thinks he deserves as much attention as the poet he interprets, who doesn't read and explicate but usurps, who overwhelms us with an excess that some Blake slogan or other calls for but no one really wants to witness. Just who is the master of this master text, Blake or Ault? But in reading Ault's vast book one might also come to the conclusion that the only way really to appreciate *FZ*, to be faithful to it, is to exceed it, or rather to *keep it* excessive, to refuse reduction at all costs.

What sort of mastery does this master text require? For Ault, reading must see itself in the light of Blake's radical insistence on the primacy of perception. It is no longer a matter of choosing between a hypostatic Poem Itself that pretends to bracket off every "extrinsic" relation and one immersed in some "concrete" historical context, nor between authorial intention and readerly affect. Ault's proper reader is neither usurper nor servant, neither before nor after meaning: in *FZ*, Ault discovers, "text and reader come into existence simultaneously to constitute and alter one another at each point