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R E V I E W

Janet A. Warner, *Blake and the Language of Art*

Robert F. Gleckner

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REVIEWS

Janet A. Warner. *Blake and the Language of Art*. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1984; Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1984. xx + 211 pp. \$32.50.

Reviewed by
Robert F. Gleckner

As she indicates in her preface, Janet Warner has been studying for a number of years what she calls variously Blake's visual vocabulary, pictorial language, visual shorthand, visionary clichés—in short the language of art of her title. From 1970 through 1977 she published several essays that have become the heart of this book, most notably "Blake and the Language of Art" in the *Colby Library Quarterly* (1977). There she more firmly articulated, and elaborated, the thesis first essayed in her contributions to David Erdman and John Grant's 1970 *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic* and to Morton Paley and Michael Phillips's 1973 festschrift *William Blake: Essays in Honour of Sir Geoffrey Keynes* (chapters 3 and 6, respectively, of the present book). We have learned much from her about Blake's "formula-figures" as she calls them, their poses, postures, and gestural configurations which "carry a nucleus of meaning" that "often work[s] in conjunction with his verbal text" (but not always), that constitute a language "sometimes . . . complementary to the poetry" (sometimes not), but that always extend our understanding of "the important concepts of Humanity, Form, and Energy which all Blake readers must strive" to know if we are to know what Blake is all about

(xviii)—not to say how, as we have learned to say, his composite art is to be experienced.

I shall come back to my two parenthetical remarks later on, for they raise important hermeneutic issues that are insufficiently addressed by Warner but are faced by all Blake interpreters. But first I go back to my opening sentence and its phrase "the heart of this book"—a generous phrase, in one sense, since the previously published articles actually constitute the bulk of the book's pages. If we exclude for a moment full-page illustrations, about 34 pages of text represent work previously published. Of the 186 pages of the book (excluding the preface, notes, and index), 71 are either full-page illustrations (53) or near-full-page illustrations (18), seven are blank, and one contains three brief paragraphs introducing part 2 of the volume. There remain the equivalent (counting the part-text part-illustration pages as well) of 73 pages of previously unpublished discussion. Needless to say, my arithmetic is not intended to suggest an oversupply of illustrations, especially for a book devoted to Blake's designs; indeed, while they are generally well chosen and of good quality, Warner refers us to a number of other books as well, Butlin's *Paintings and Drawings*, the Erdman et al. *Night Thoughts*, Roe's *Divine Comedy*, and Bentley's *Four Zoas*, occasioning thereby some awkward logistical reading problems (unavoidable in many cases, but annoying nevertheless). In any case, a book that has 106 illustrations, even one in which each illustration does not require major discussion, a little over one page of text per illustration in what purports to be more than a compendium or taxonomy simply cannot raise it much beyond that status. Yet Warner's claim is that she demonstrates how Blake's designs "can be the key which unlocks the treasure chest" of meanings (xvii), how they "underline" (and even help to define) major ideas and concepts in the work (xviii), how they often derive from an extraordinary

array of artistic repositories of images, symbols, allegorical figures, emblems, and the like not only in the history of art but also in the theory and history of acting, pantomime, dance, oratory, commercial textile design, and physiognomy. The thoroughness and assiduousness of her research, then, paradoxically lead to a disappointing cursoriness of critical discussion, the impact of which is further diminished by an odd mixture of firm and shrewd interpretations, guesses (both provocative and unilluminating), and the non-disentangling of the obvious or commonplace from the learned or derivative.

What we have, then, is a book that is at best informative with respect to Blake's possible, sometimes probable, sources of a visual, gestural language that had been codified in a variety of ways, at least since Aristotle, Plutarch, Suetonius, Horace, Quintillian, and nearer Blake's own time, Charles LeBrun (*Expression des Passions*, 1698; translated into English in 1701), Gerard de Lairese (*The Art of Painting in All Its Branches*, 1738 English translation of 1707 original), Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* (English edition 1789, to which Blake contributed 4 plates), John Bulwer (*Chirologia: or the Natural Language of the Hand and Chironomia: or the Art of Manual Rhetoric*, 1644), Gilbert Austin (*Chironomia*, 1806), and John Weaver (*The History of the Mimes and Pantomimes*, 1728)—among others, of course. It is an interesting history in its own right, a rather remarkable reflection, as Warner notes, of the eighteenth century's "obsession" with "the naming and categorizing of gesture and attitude in the arts," an encoding of meanings that had become "the general lore" understood by performing and graphic artists of Blake's time (68), and clearly familiar to Blake himself if only through his early training in Pars's drawing school, where "Copy Forever" was not only the rule he enunciated for himself in his Annotations to Reynolds but the standard school rule as well. Along with what Blunt, Hagstrum,



Bindman, and a host of others have taught us about Blake's borrowings and thefts from classical artists through an amazing variety of others right up to his own day, and with what Bo Lindberg has revealed about Blake's use of pathos formulae in his Job designs, Warner's history obviously adds to our fund of visual linguistic lore, without which we could not appreciate what Stephen Behrendt in *The Moment of Explosion* calls the iconographical "flexibility and adaptability" of Blake's visual imagery. As he argues in careful detail with respect to Blake's Milton illustrations, those qualities force us out of the "intellectual automatism" of culturally conditioned responses to certain icons, gestures, postures, even colors, "into the sort of informed analysis and interpretation governed not by convention" (certainly not by convention alone) but by our entering into active engagement with living forms, at once unique and universal (Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 1983 [182-83]).

Part 2 of Warner's book, entitled "Blake's Visionary Forms," is intended to do precisely what Behrendt says we should do. And there are moments when Warner does it very well indeed. Yet overall, upon completing the four essays, I came away with a sense of something like *déjà vu*, of knowing

much of this already, certainly in part from Warner's previous publications, but also from our own (however acquired) visual-linguistic lore. The three brief paragraphs introducing the essays give away the burden of the mystery, if indeed there was one:

figures with outstretched arms stand for creativity or, in their fallen state, power perverted to tyranny; huddled and head-clutching figures signify psychic energy; and dancing figures appear to be symbols of energy of the body, mortal impulses.

This hardly reassures us that she will pursue in detail her announced "central concern," the discovery of "to what extent their meanings are defined by the context in which they appear" (xviii)—presumably both graphic and verbal contexts. More often than not we get something like the odd sequencing of chapter 3 on the gesture of outstretched arms. The opening pages remind us of much that we know about cruciform positions, followed by a brief account of Blake's variations on the basic, standing form in hovering and "knee-raised" figures with arms outstretched. The latter position, we are told, "*can perhaps be said to suggest* at best God-as-Man, The Poetic Genius, and at worst, fallen man's idea of God as authority" (92, my emphasis). "At worst" and "at best" are hardly clear, but presumably they refer to the flat declarations that immediately follow: "Poetic genius is implied by the figure of an old man with raised knee in *All Religions Are One* . . . ; the similar figure of *America* 8 represents Urizen, man's perversion of this poetic genius into authority." C'est ça. We are back to the introductory paragraph quoted above. No comment on hand positions, despite all the pages spent on hands in part 1 of the book; nothing on faces despite similar analytic preparation; no real contextualization. Only a list of other figures in similar poses elsewhere in Blake which "appear to have similar connotations"—followed by the conclusion, (solidified somehow beyond the tentativeness of "can perhaps be said to suggest," "appear," and "simi-

lar"), that "we have seen already that this is the stance of the Poetic Genius" (my emphasis). It is not, alas, an isolated instance.

Four pages later (96) we are reminded that "there are details . . . which help to contextualize the forms so that the variations or additional facets of meaning become clear." Hand positions, for example, though "subtly differing . . . can modify the meanings of the outstretched arms like signals helping us to experience the designs with greater delicacy." There follows a descriptive list of different hand positions—upward, palms out; forward; downward; "sloping." No further comment—until page 102 where we are told what these several hand positions mean, more or less regardless of context. Again on page 120, in Warner's dealing with hunched-up figures of despair, Blake's variations on this basic form are described as "always subtle—a head bowed or unbowed, a gesture of arm or hand, knees open or ankles crossed—and yet they are always important clues to meaning." Fine; but it is precisely the elucidation, interpretation, and argument about this subtlety that Warner all too often sacrifices in favor of declarative namings, a kind of visual allegoresis that undercuts rather than highlights the very delicacy that she obviously sees (and that we see at her prompting) but for whatever reason all too rarely explores.

In her conclusion, Warner returns to her "central concerns" about context in two rather odd (at least to me) ways. Her first sentence of the "Conclusion" (185) asserts that her "principle concern" has been twofold: "to demonstrate that a visual language exists in Blake's designs" and that language can "reinforce our understanding" of the designs, "often" illuminating "the ideas of the texts they illustrate." As I indicated earlier, by now there are few of us who haven't discovered that visual language one way or the other—including our reading of Warner's own earlier work. Moreover "reinforce our understanding"

suggests, distressingly, that somehow we have an understanding of the designs before we employ the interpretive tools of a codified "language of art" to reinforce it—an understanding perhaps derived via the "intuition" she cites in her preface as "one's greatest aid in interpreting Blake, even when one is a seasoned scholar" (xvii). But if it is "often" that this visual language illuminates the ideas of the text, how can we know when it doesn't, or why it doesn't, or, if it does, how it does? Presumably by "context," for Warner herself now argues that "the issue *always* comes down to . . . what the context [does] to the form in question" (my emphasis). What it does, she says, is "point us in the direction of meaning"; but at the same time the "kernel of meaning" that the visual vocabulary has in and of itself is the meaning that "the context will elaborate for us"—a sort of hermeneutic reciprocity that at least teeters on the brink of indeterminate oscillation of meaning, if not arguing the power of the text to determine, in some general way, the meaning.

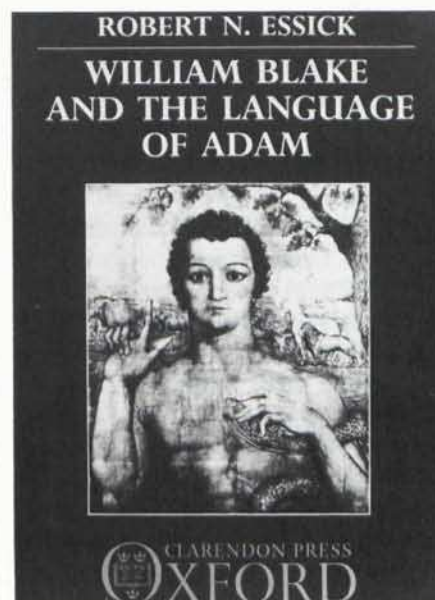
I guess this is where intuition comes in, but to my mind that is a tenuous, gossamer-like, not to mention anarchically subjective guide out of what she herself calls "the mysterious labyrinths of the interactions between word and image" in Blake (185). While one might well argue that by way of the first half of this book we have been given the end of a golden string, manifestly an appropriate "mental pursuit," the fine piece of book-making that McGill-Queens has produced warranted a more rigorous, detailed, and extensive (not to say subtle and delicate) commentary than Warner, I regret to say, has given us. For all her extended study of the problem, she has not been able to do much more than "lead us in at [the] gate" to the treasure of Blake's intellect.

Robert N. Essick. *William Blake and the Language of Adam*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. x + 272 pp. 8 illus. Index. \$55.

Reviewed by
Nelson Hilton

Robert N. Essick needs no introduction to readers of this journal, who, more than any other audience, best fulfill his vision of the "something very like a hermeneutic community generated by Blake's works" (224) and who have already embraced Essick's catalogues and his studies of Blake's "materials and methods of production, the ways they determine the images they convey, and the historical and quotidian engagements their use entails" (1). This latest contribution sets out "to situate Blake within the history of language theory and to generate a hermeneutic on the basis of that history" (2). The result is vaguely reminiscent of Morton Paley's *Energy and the Imagination* (Oxford, 1970) as Essick presents in Blake's works a kind of paradigm shift from structuralism (and post-) to phenomenology; that is, from "dyadic signification (signifier/signified) to triadic interchanges among author, text, and reader" (223); or again (subsuming Paley), from signs to Logos and "power" (235, 5). All of this makes for provocative reading, and the seventy-five pages that selectively epitomize—with special regard to Blake's interests—seventeenth and eighteenth-century speculations on the origin and nature of language will, in particular, prove useful and rewarding.

But where Paley could point into the text and the inverse fates of his chosen terms dramatized in pre- and post-Felpham word-counts, Essick's argument depends on our acceding to a host of words he brings to the feast. "Logos" is



one, and a bit more than a minute particular, given that the book culminates in "The Return to Logos" (chapter 5). The index suggests that this Big Word (it's always capitalized here) relates to "language, God's"; one context identifies it as "God's Word, which brings the universe into being" (11), others as an "ideal" form of semiosis with "the co-presence of conception and execution" (85) and "the power" to "create . . . objects or give them organic life" (26). Blake never uses the word, though he certainly knew the Greek of John 1:1, and perhaps the accusative form (*logon*) together with *zoöas*, "living," oozes in his good news of Golgonooza (that un-ideal place of semiosis). Some accounts derive the noun *logos* "from the Greek verb *lego*, 'to pick out, to gather,' as seeds were gathered by the early food gatherers," an etymology pertinent to Jesus' gloss that "the seed is the word" (Luke 8:11). The spore, or sperm, or semen, is logos.

Essick's book begins by bringing some words to an untitled painting of Blake's, which, he agrees with Rossetti, should be called "*Adam Naming the Beasts*" and labels "a painting about language" (10). He proceeds to educe two "readings" of the design, one of which evokes "the dream of the motivated sign" and the "companionship"