

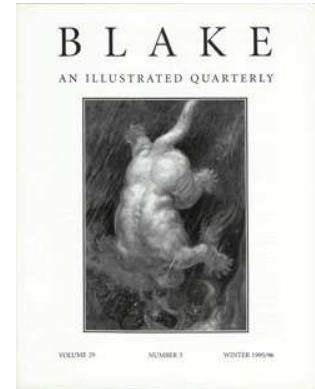
# AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

## Jeanne Moskal, Blake, Ethics, and Forgiveness

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*Blake: Innocence and Experience* by Elliot Hayes, with Michael Loughnan as William Blake. Directed by Valerie Doulton; designed by Gary Thorne; music for songs by Loreena McKennitt. At the Tristan Bates Theatre, Tower Street, London, 12-18 June 1995.

Reviewed by ANDREW LINCOLN

The one-person show is an apt vehicle for representing Blake, since it allows the voice so much freedom to determine the experience of time and space. In this production, the outward eye is repeatedly unsettled by the ear. The lights come up on an elderly man of shabby-genteel appearance—frock-coated, open-shirted, stubbled, balding and unkempt. Before long Blake announces that he is three months from his seventieth birthday, which would put him on (if not beyond) the brink of his death—"an Old Man feeble and tottering." Illness and weakness are figured by the medicine bottle and the occasional grimace, but the vigorous voice negates such evidence. At one point he appears to "fade away" in a chair, wrapped in a sheet—a winding sheet from which there is a semi-comic resurrection. This Blake is at once elderly and youthful, able to travel through the course of his own life at will, a man whose words are drawn in part from letters and poems spanning five decades.

In the restricted space of the Tristan Bates theatre, Michael Loughnan was able to use his full vocal range in making the invisible visible—as when expelling Joshua Reynolds's ghost in thunderous rage, or allowing us to overhear intimate exchanges with Catherine Blake. His enthralling delivery of lines from *America* suddenly transformed the tiny stage into a stormy Atlantic from which Orc arose "Intense! naked! a Human fire"—a vivid demonstration of the voice's ability to govern the eye, and overwhelming proof, should anyone need it, that Blake's prophetic books demand to be heard as well as read. A few of the songs were sung, unaccompanied, to specially composed melodies that Blake himself might have been pleased with. For me, the only point at which the direction faltered was when, as Loughnan recited "The Tyger," he wandered over the stage as if looking for something—a point at which the visual effect was allowed to compete with, and distract from, the voice.

Paradoxically, the very freedom of the voice can help to enforce a sense of the speaker's isolation and self-absorption. This Blake, devoted to recollection and recrimination, asserting his own convictions without fear of interruption (except from the visionary world), confronting and succumbing to his own driving envy, often seems to be addressing a mirror rather than the audience. In this context the familiar stories—of warning Paine to fly to France, of playing at Adam and Eve with Catherine in the garden—appear

as manifestations of a persistent tendency towards self-dramatization. Loughnan develops a convincing portrait of a passionate, tormented and unclubbable individual—one who might even become a hot-eyed bore—always ready to air his own ideas, but less ready to lend an ear to others.

The setting of the play allows the frustration and anger to be seen as manifestations of the selfhood that desire and vision must struggle to overcome. At the back of the stage three paint-covered easels stand like crosses. On the left is Blake's portrait of Catherine, on the right an empty sheet of paper—the focus for a tirade against portrait painting which prompts an exposition of the importance of the bounding line. In the center is Blake's painting "The Angel Rolling the Stone from the Tomb," in which the angel's outstretched arms enact the triumph over the cross. By the end of the play Blake has defined the limits of his own caverned existence: in the final stage picture, he stands with arms outspread, mirroring the angel in the painting behind him.

Any dramatization of Blake must inevitably exclude much. There is little room here for Blake the vulgarian; for the man who claimed to love laughing; for the man given to what is not too explicit ("London" is sung in an early version because, presumably, it seems easier for an audience to absorb). There is little room for the man immersed in the engraver's work, its negotiations and deadlines, its messy physical processes. But the limits of the play, and Valerie Doulton's expert handling of them, make for a portrait that is definite, determinate, and impossible to forget.

Jeanne Moskal, *Blake, Ethics, and Forgiveness*. Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1994. 240 pp., \$32.95.

Reviewed by STEPHEN COX

On the first page of her book, Jeanne Moskal suggests that consideration of Blake as an ethicist is a challenge to fashionable opinion. Literary scholars, she says, are reluctant to entertain ethical issues, because they are afraid of being led down the garden path to the abyss of "logocentric 'meanings.'" The public, meanwhile, has become convinced that Blake was a great "immoralist."

Moskal clearly exaggerates. The public, insofar as it is acquainted with Blake at all, regards him as the poet of certain commonly anthologized *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, poems which, as presented in most high-school and college classrooms, probably seem far from antinomian. And literary scholarship is in no danger at all of relinquishing its traditional moralism. Even when it claims to relinquish moralism for some higher purpose, such as the subversion of logocentrism, it seldom fails to insinuate that the pursuit



of this goal is itself morally bracing. Scholars of Blake have always been moralistic. No one has ever written on Blake without providing a moralizing gloss on what is obviously, though often unconsciously, regarded as Blake's moralizing text. (I include myself in that "no one.") The morality thus recommended is never the kind that would shock anyone likely to encounter it. No one has ever hesitated to pick up a book on Blake out of fear of reading something scandalous.

It is refreshing, however, to see a book on Blake that addresses moral questions straightforwardly, instead of representing its moral commentary as mere interpretation of Blake's attitudes toward Druids, the French Revolution, or the theology of Emanuel Swedenborg. Moskal focuses clearly on the ethical issues that arise in Blake's work, with special emphasis on his prophecies; and she places his ideas in relationship to a number of twentieth-century ethical theories. She pays Blake's moral ideas the compliment of searching criticism, exploring the various and at times incompatible ways in which he uses them.

Of special interest in this respect is her treatment of the difference between the "intersubjective" and the "intrapsychic" functions of those ideas. Forgiveness, in her account, is a central ethical concept for Blake because it is a means of adjusting both relations among people (the intersubjective function) and relations among the psychological forces within people (the intrapsychic function). Blake's assumption is that one's ability to forgive other persons depends on one's ability to deal with the accusing person within oneself.

This is an apparently simple idea. Complications arise when it is associated with another simple but powerful idea, Blake's doctrine of states.

If I want to stop accusing people of sin, I can try to remember that there is a difference between a person and what that person is currently doing or suffering, the "state" that he or she currently inhabits. When I make that distinction, I quiet the accuser inside me and forgive the sinners (or supposed sinners) outside. Blake's character Erin expounds the doctrine clearly:

Learn therefore O Sisters to distinguish the Eternal  
Human  
That walks about among the stones of fire in bliss &  
woe  
Alternate! from those States or Worlds in which the  
Spirit  
travels:  
This is the only means to Forgiveness of Enemies.<sup>1</sup>

Here is a bold and generous conception, one that invites

<sup>1</sup> Blake, *Jerusalem* 49.72-75, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, newly rev. ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1982) 199. Subsequent references to this edition cite it as "E," followed by page number.

the forgiving spirit to discern eternity through every cloud of temporal imperfection and preoccupation.

But Moskal argues, with reason, that the doctrine of states has one kind of effect when it is applied to intersubjective relationships and another when it is applied to intrapsychic ones. When Blake applies it intersubjectively, it helps him to recognize and appreciate the diversity of human beings, visualizing their difficulties as temporary results of the states that they are passing through: "Like parents who forgive their children because they are 'going through a phase,' Blake's potential forgiver looks forward to the journey's continuance to a better destination" (81). But when Blake applies the doctrine of states intrapsychically, he is tempted to write as if everyone were one person and to reduce all relationships to one relationship, manifested in "the decision of just one party to forgive himself." Blake sometimes "implies that all instances of . . . intersubjective forgiveness depend solely upon the intrapsychic self-annihilation, or renunciation of accusation" (121-22). The tendency is both to hold everyone to the same standard of self-annihilation and to deplore variations as effects of people's involvement in a state of accusation.

"In Blake's emergent view," Moskal says, "it is no longer one party's *offense* that provides the occasion to be forgiven, but *the very fact of his otherness* from the forgiver"—an otherness that is "overcome" in the act of "forgiveness" (69). This is a radical and abstract statement of the problem. Read literally, perhaps too literally, it may imply that Blake resented people simply for being different from him; and that's not exactly the way Blake was. But Blake's own processes of abstraction are radical indeed; the pressure in his work toward subsuming variety in universality is very great; and, as Moskal sees, the pressures of his own life must often have made it difficult for him to see the "celebration" of human variety as a major ethical imperative.

Moskal suspects that Blake's concern with self-forgiveness gained emphasis from feelings of guilt over his trial for sedition, when he was unable to acknowledge a vision that actually was, in some sense, subversive. She also suspects that forgiveness appeared especially important to him because of his conflicting feelings about William Hayley, a would-be benefactor for whom Blake had contempt (6-7, 86, 89). Hayley was about as different from Blake as a person could be; Hayley's otherness, viewed in close quarters, would certainly be difficult to forgive. Moskal notices that in *Milton* Blake aims at forgiving Hayley and ends up forgiving Milton, who was a good deal easier to forgive (94). Milton had the intrapsychic advantage of seeming to resemble Blake himself much more closely than Hayley ever could.

Moskal's treatment of all these issues is well worth studying. Unfortunately, however, her book is a much harder study than it needs to be. Like many other books on Blake, it gives no help to the general reader and less help than it should to the specialist. If you think you may be interested in Blake's ideas about ethics but you don't know what the Spectre of



Urthona is or how John Milton ever got involved with something called Ololon, you will not get far with this book. If you do know these things, your progress will still be impeded by the author's unnecessary summaries and repetitions, her preference for wordy explanations of simple concepts (especially when those explanations can be quoted from alleged authorities), her frequent resistance to putting the clearest evidence for an hypothesis anywhere near the hypothesis itself, and her steady suppression of a sense of humor. In its rhetoric, in other words, *Blake, Ethics, and Forgiveness* is a typical academic book, and that is a pity.

The book's problems are not all stylistic and organizational. Some of Moskal's intellectual positions have not been thought through carefully enough. Consider, for example, one of her arguments about "alterity."

Discussing the idea that Blake finds it easier to illustrate forgiveness between characters who are alike than between characters who are different, she asserts that "he consistently (but not always) excludes the more radical versions of alterity (sexual alterity, generational alterity, and human-divine alterity) in order to clear the decks for a forgiveness between two versions of the same, for it is forgivenesses between men (who are parts of One Man) that Blake considers normative" (106). Moskal's point about Blake's treatment of otherness carries some force, but she is inclined to make it still more forceful by reading such terms as "Man" and "brotherhood" as obvious synonyms for "males" and "male relationships." Granted, many of Blake's attitudes toward women deserve criticism on ethical grounds, but he cannot be interpreted fairly by the application of modern-American inclusive-language norms.

Meanwhile, Moskal leaves several interesting aspects of the "alterity" issue unexplored. Why, one might ask, is sexual or generational "alterity" necessarily more "alter" than other kinds of "alterity"? Is it really true that the difference between males and females is harder for Blake to forgive than the difference manifested by males who think in ways that he does not agree with? And, speaking of differences among people, why did Blake write that "[i]t is easier to forgive an Enemy than to forgive a Friend" (*Jerusalem* 91.1, E 251)? Moskal quotes this passage (103). We all quote it. But why did he write it? What happens to the remark when it is put beside another hard saying, which Moskal also quotes (142): "Friendship cannot exist without Forgiveness of Sins continually" (*Jerusalem* 52, E 201)? I'm not sure that any of us has an answer to this now, but it would be interesting to have one, and it seems to lie in Moskal's field of inquiry.

Moskal's analysis might also benefit from a more thorough exploration of the historical relations of Blake's ideas. In describing his historical context, she relies so heavily on the conventions of Blake scholarship that a reader unfamiliar with those conventions might easily conclude that she had forgotten what century he was born in. She refers, for example, to Blake's "contemporaries, the heterodox Ranters

and other religious sects" (4). But didn't such "contemporaries" flourish a hundred years before Blake's birth? Well, yes, but what Moskal calls "the current consensus about Blake's antinomianism" (4) positions him as close to those worthies as possible, and this despite the fact that he never refers to them and in no sense required their influence—or the influence of any of their eighteenth-century intellectual heirs—for the development of his ideas.<sup>2</sup> You don't need to school yourself in an antinomian tradition in order to become an antinomian; every age offers enough laws and commandments to rebel against. And every age can find those interesting crossroads in the Pauline epistles where one can, if one wishes, take an antinomian turn.

Moskal argues that Blake finally rejects antinomianism, if antinomianism entails a conviction that defiance of law is valuable in itself. Blake realized that such a position would simply be a reactive concession to the significance of law. But what was Blake's reaction to ethical ideas that, unlike antinomianism, actually permeated his culture? Here Moskal discovers a curious view of the nature of late-eighteenth-century ideas. The era, she believes,

was singularly arid in its exclusive emphasis on duty, obligation, and reason. Some of the eccentric twists in Blake's treatment of human forgiveness were caused historically, I think, by the domination of ethical discourse in his time by theories of duty, obligation, and universal law over theories of sympathy and benevolence. (4)

Surely, if there was ever a time when "sympathy" and "benevolence" were in vogue, it was the later eighteenth century, which gave those moral concepts their typically modern forms and disseminated them with all its might. Moskal is apparently operating in the old tradition of scholarship that sees Blake as rebelling against "reason" and therefore projects an imperious cult of reason for him to rebel against. She misses the fact that for the eighteenth century, sympathy and benevolence, and the "sensibility" in which they were supposed to originate, were themselves a duty and an obligation.

<sup>2</sup> The antinomians who may have influenced Blake can be tracked through the scholarly literature from A. L. Morton's *The Everlasting Gospel: A Study in the Sources of William Blake* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1958)—a thin and thinly argued book, still routinely cited as an authority—to E. P. Thompson's vastly better informed *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (New York: The New Press, 1993); but the quarry has never quite been captured. There are a good many cross-trails, too. "Antinomians" have a way of getting mixed up with "millenarians," or "radicals," or opponents of "hegemony" (Thompson, 108-109), or people who simply had peculiar ideas. There is the optimistic sense, in this scholarly literature, of an encounter with people who in one way or another *might* have influenced Blake—provided, of course, he didn't derive the influences in question directly from some more prominent source, such as the Bible.



It is hard to overemphasize the impression, both favorable and unfavorable, that the ethic of sensibility made on Blake.

Blake could satirize sensibility as effectively as he satirized anything else:

[H]e saw that life liv'd upon death  
The Ox in the slaughter house moans  
The Dog at the wintry door[.]  
And he wept, & he called it Pity  
And his tears flowed down on the winds.  
(*The Book of Urizen* 23.27, 25.1-4, E 81-82)

Urizen's tears are those of thwarted benevolence and futile sympathy. But sympathy and benevolence are ethical values for Blake, too. The *Songs* and the great prophetic works are fully, if fractiously, at home in the beginning of the first historical era that was sympathetically concerned and then morally indignant about poverty, slavery, and the oppression of women.

There is a tendency in Blake scholarship to prefer the radical affiliation or influence to the bourgeois-liberal one, to emphasize the Ranters, say, rather than the preachers of sympathy and sensibility. Moskal follows this tendency, unaware of the fact that some of her own ideas are similar to those of the late-eighteenth-century liberal moralists. Describing the process of forgiveness, she says:

When we see the other, who has offended us, as a suffering human being, we project outward our own experience of suffering, an experience that we know intimately only when it is our own suffering, onto the other. Then we feel compassion for him as for ourselves. (9; see also 117)

This passage reflects Moskal's own thinking, inspired by remarks of Hannah Arendt and Reinhold Niebuhr. It could also pass for an outline of Adam Smith's argument, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, about the mechanism of compassion. It is certainly more useful than most of the passages Moskal cites from her long list of twentieth-century authorities (besides Arendt and Niebuhr, the list includes Martin Buber, Martin Heidegger, Alasdair MacIntyre, Luce Irigaray, Emmanuel Levinas, and others). It is useful because it identifies the problematic nature of the moral act with which Moskal is most concerned: the act of forgiving other people without losing a sharp sense that they are, in fact, *other people*.

Let me explain. Moskal is bothered (as Blake was) by ethical codes that neglect the individuality of the persons involved with them. She therefore derives her "basic definition of forgiveness" from Arendt's statement that "*what* was done is forgiven for the sake of *who* did it"; the idea, as Moskal says, is that "forgiveness establishes an eminently personal relationship" (7). Moskal is attracted, in addition,

to the far less perspicuous comments of Levinas, who writes about "redefining the other as exterior and excessive, 'a form of exteriority, separate from and unpredicted by the subject,' and 'the site of excess, an unabsorbable, indigestible residue the subject is unable to assimilate to itself'" (105). This says nothing, however, about how we can establish an eminently personal relationship with the "exteriority" of all those people whom we are supposed to know and forgive but with whom we try to sympathize through the medium of our own experience, an experience that we imaginatively "project outward . . . onto the other."

Adam Smith saw the difficulty with this approach. Imaginative projection has its limitations:

As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. Neither can that faculty help us to this any other way, than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case.<sup>3</sup>

It is quite possible, as any good late-eighteenth century moralist (or novelist) can tell you, that when I think I am sympathizing with you, I am actually just imagining how I would feel *if I were you*.

Blake saw this difficulty. He embodied it in his characters. Urizen is a good example: he thinks that all the other Eternals suffer as he does and that they should therefore submit to his special treatments of "love" and "forgiveness":

Why will you die O Eternals?  
Why live in unquenchable burnings?  
.....  
Lo! I unfold my darkness: and on  
This rock, place with strong hand the Book  
Of eternal brass, written in my solitude.

Laws of peace, of love, of unity:  
Of pity, compassion, forgiveness.  
(*The Book of Urizen* 4.12-13, 31-35, E 71-72)

Blake's symbolism offered him a chance to escape the limitations of projective emotional sympathy. It offered him a chance to transcend his narrowly personal experience so as to see the great world beyond and try to forgive it. Every "alterity" could, at least theoretically, be expressed in symbols and make itself determinately known, both to his audi-

<sup>3</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) 9.



ence (if any) and to himself. Yet the symbolism that emerged was all too clearly the projection of an extraordinarily powerful mind's own priorities upon all "others." Real, recognizably living "others" are so scarce in Blake's work that Moskal, looking assiduously for one such other, can produce none more "powerfully individualized" than Milton, in Blake's poem of that name (135). And even this claim may not carry much weight; Blake's Milton speaks as Blake would presumably speak and acts as Blake would presumably act under the various circumstances that Blake creates for him.

Blake's ability to create a universal symbolism permits him to imagine everyone at last "put[ting] off by forgiveness, every sin," in Albion's reunion with Jesus (*Jerusalem* 96.19, E 255). Moskal believes, however, that it also permits Blake to "minimize or deny altogether the intractable otherness," the individuality, of the people by whom forgiveness is achieved (10).

She has a point. Blake's symbolic forgiveness of his characters is often far from what Smith or Arendt or anyone else would regard as forgiveness of living, breathing, individual people. It is not the kind of forgiveness that Blake seems to request for himself when he addresses the readers of *Jerusalem*. Here he is interested in a personal relationship, with Jesus and with his audience:

I am perhaps the most sinful of men! I pretend not to holiness! yet I pretend to love, to see, to converse with daily, as man with man, & the more to have an interest in the Friend of Sinners. Therefore [Dear] Reader, [forgive] what you do not approve, & [love] me for this energetic exertion of my talent. (*Jerusalem* 3, E 145)

As Moskal observes, Blake begs his audience to forgive him, while deftly implying that he has the moral standing to forgive his audience (95). And there is a universalizing tendency even here. The audience is, potentially, everyone, all the members of Albion, the universal form, who neglected him, tried him for sedition, accused him of madness, and committed even worse sins against its own soul. Forgiving "Albion" was difficult. From the passage quoted above, Blake removed the words in brackets. His audience wasn't necessarily "Dear," and it wouldn't necessarily "love" and "forgive" him in return for his own offers of forgiveness. But forgiving Albion as a whole was much easier for Blake than forgiving some of the individual persons of whom Albion was composed.

Nevertheless, Blake's willingness to universalize comes off a good deal worse, in Moskal's analysis, than it deserves to do. She is worried not only about his universalizing symbolism but also about its connection with a universal "ethics of obligation," especially of the kind recommended by Christianity; and she is worried about this despite the fact that a sense of moral obligation, based on principles con-

sidered universally applicable, would appear to offer Blake another, quite promising means of transcending "the selfhood" and forgiving other people.

Blake's Jesus recognizes the difficulty of forgiveness and love; he declares that "every kindness to another is a little Death." Still, he says, Man can only "exist . . . by Brotherhood" (*Jerusalem* 96.27-28, E 256). It's hard, but it's an ethical imperative for everyone. Moskal, however, seems to see Christianity's universal ethic as something that necessarily reduced Blake's regard for the individuality of other people. She argues that in his early writings he attacked conventional notions of moral duty, exalting "contrariety" over the "universalizability" of moral precepts; but in his later, essentially Christian works, he "in a sense, defected, by practicing a version of the fault in obligation-based ethics that he earlier deplored—that is, its emphasis on the universalized individual" (9). She implies that no ethics of obligation can provide a fair treatment of "alterity."

This is a currently fashionable and superficially plausible assumption, but it is an assumption that undermines the very idea of ethics. The truth, in plain terms, is that there is no ethics that is not an ethics of obligation. Ethics does not merely describe all the things that various people are inclined to do; it prescribes what they ought to do, whether or not they are inclined to do it. An ethics without an "ought"—without a sense of obligation—would simply lack the distinctive quality of ethics. It would be scrambled eggs without the eggs.

Almost as hard to imagine is an ethics that excludes any reference to universally applicable ideas. Such an ethics would hardly be able to provide a coherent reason for its particular prescriptions; it would be a collection of double, triple, or multiple "standards." Adapt ethics as much as you like to individuality or (to use the Blakean term that Moskal prefers) "contrariety"; declare as loudly as you like that "One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression" (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 24, E 44); the sense of universal obligation remains, if only in the implication that all people, whoever they are, ought to respect individual freedom and refrain from imposing one law on both the lion and the ox. When we judge Blake as unfair to the individual human objects who get swept up in his universalizing symbolism, we judge him against a universal principle, a presumed obligation to show regard for individual differences of character.

Ethical relativists may pursue their line of reasoning to the boundaries of paradox, and beyond, without ever being able to lose the sense of obligation that inheres in the basic concept of ethics. Even orthodox and dogmatic moralists, however, ordinarily recognize the fact that fundamental moral obligations need to be fulfilled in different ways by different individuals. Jesus preached generosity and simplicity as general principles, but he did not tell everyone he met, "Sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor" (Luke 18:22).



A universal ethics of obligation may actually promote fair play for "alterity" by insisting that everyone, no matter how "other," is on the same moral footing. Blake's contemporary, the novelist Elizabeth Hamilton, made this point when she had one of her characters remark that Jesus was the first philosopher who taught respect for women, because he preached a truly universal ethic, one that decreed no special moral rules for women:

Women, we learn from the gospels, frequently composed a great part of his audience: but to them no particular precepts were addressed, no sexual virtues recommended. . . . His morality was addressed to the judgment without distinction of sex. His laws went not to fix the boundaries of prerogative, and to prescribe the minutiae of behaviour, but to fix purity and humility in the heart.<sup>4</sup>

Blake's Christianity may not have prompted him to worry very much about other people's "unabsorbable, indigestible residue"; but neither did it prompt him to prescribe the minutiae of their behavior. He thought that the commandment to love and forgive other people implied a commandment to let them be free: "Jerusalem is called Liberty among the Children of Albion" (*Jerusalem* 54.5, E 203). Liberty was grounded on moral principles that could be recommended to everyone.

The complexities of this kind of Christianity are not quite captured by Moskal's reference to Blake's Jesus as "an alternative way of looking at the moral life from the grid of obligations and duties used by promulgators of universal laws" (32). Still less helpful is Moskal's characterization, derived from Stanley Hauerwas, of ethics as it is ordinarily understood: "in its emphasis on duty and obligation as they pertain to all individuals interchangeably, the standard account [of ethics] alienates each individual from his plans, metaphors, and stories" (2).

Moskal tends to measure Blake's success as an ethicist by his (imperfect) success in forming ethical conceptions that escape the terms of the "standard account." But her idea of the "standard account" is needlessly reductive. The notion that people are morally obligated, for instance, to love their neighbors as themselves doesn't imply that they have to alienate themselves from their own plans, metaphors, and stories; it doesn't even imply that they have to *like* their neighbors. (Indeed, one's sense of the neighbors' otherness will probably be sharpened considerably by one's sense of an obligation to forgive them.) Every great system of belief associates its ethic of obligation with a rich variety of metaphors, stories, and plans of life. This richness is surely one of the reasons for Blake's attraction to Christianity and for

his ability to adapt its ethical narratives and metaphors to his own literary and intellectual plans.

It is regrettable that Moskal brings current intellectual assumptions to bear on Blake without subjecting them to the kind of criticism to which she subjects his own ideas. In this respect, however, she is by no means unusual; few contemporary critics interrogate their framework assumptions as skeptically as they interrogate their primary texts. Moskal's subject, however, is of unusual interest, and what she says about it is also of unusual interest, both for its own sake and for its ability to provoke debate.

### "The Genitals are Beauty." Exhibition of "An Interior of William Blake." House of William Blake, London. July-August, 1994.

Reviewed by KERI DAVIES

"The Genitals are Beauty" is the second exhibition organized by Tim Heath at the House of William Blake. In July and August 1994, three floors of 17 South Molton Street were taken over by "An Interior for William Blake," a mixed show of artworks and craft pieces, some on a substantial scale, exploring the themes of Innocence and Experience in celebration of the 200th anniversary of the *Songs*. Monday-Friday, 6-17 February 1995, the House of William Blake staged a second show, on a more intimate scale and confined to one room of the former Blake residence (and the only survivor of his London homes). Tim Heath had invited a number of artists and craftspeople to respond to the line from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "The head Sublime, the heart Pathos, the genitals Beauty, the hands & feet Proportion" (E 37).

The genitals, in art as in life, can still be a source of consternation and anxiety. Not all the artists who took part in the first show were willing to work to the new brief. In the event, 41 artists and craftspeople provided paintings, drawings, ceramics, jewelry, photographs and sculptures on the theme of the human sexual organs.

The history of genital display in English art is a history of concealment and suppression. Blake's erotic drawings in the Vala manuscript were mutilated (perhaps by John Linnell), while Turner's were burned with the agreement of the National Gallery.<sup>1</sup> There are, however, two notable early examples of upfront sexuality in the history of English art: the Cerne Giant (an ithyphallic figure, possibly of Hercules, cut

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Hamilton, *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800; rpt. New York: Garland, 1974) I:199-200.

<sup>1</sup> Not by John Ruskin, as is sometimes claimed. Turner's erotic drawings were left to the nation. Ruskin couldn't possibly have been allowed to destroy state property—it was a government employee, the National Gallery curator Ralph Nicholson Wornum, that struck the match. See Tim Hilton, *John Ruskin: The Early Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) 250.