

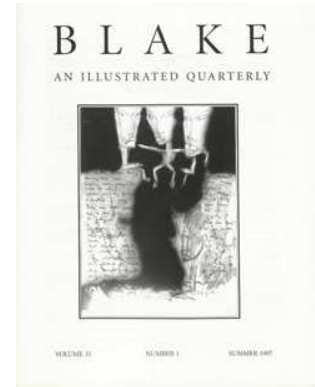
# AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Andrew Lincoln, *Spiritual History: A Reading of William Blake's Vala, or The Four Zoas*

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Andrew Lincoln, *Spiritual History: A Reading of William Blake's Vala, or The Four Zoas*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995. xvi + 322 pp. \$79.

Reviewed by JOHN B. PIERCE

Critical work on *Vala* or *The Four Zoas* has become something of a growth industry in the last two decades. While speculation about any point of origin is always risky, I might provisionally locate a moment of emergence around 1978 with the appearance of two important but very different publications devoted to the poem. The first was a special issue of *Blake* devoted entirely to *Vala*,<sup>1</sup> particularly the textual cruxes arising from the incompleteness and uncertain readings occasioned by the physical state of the manuscript itself. The importance of these articles cannot be understated in the history of the poem's reception since together they generated a set of debates about the handling of the two Nights VII<sup>2</sup> and a reliable text for Night I,<sup>3</sup> for example, that informed the production of Erdman's presentation of *Vala* in his revised edition of the *Complete Poetry and Prose* in 1982. As the "Standard Edition" of Blake's works, Erdman's edition exerts what might be considered an undue influence on subsequent critical readings of the poem.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, continuing in this tradition, articles devoted to consideration of the material condition of the manuscript have continued a series of debates in *Blake* about whether the poem is incomplete or unfinished and about what other material form the manuscript might have been destined for (although these debates tend to be more general than particular in their discussion of the state of the manuscript).<sup>5</sup>

The second notable event of 1978 was the appearance of Brian Wilkie and Mary Lynn Johnson's *Blake's Four Zoas: The Design of a Dream*, the first book-length reading of the poem. This first extended reading made the poem accessible in such a way that Wilkie and Johnson's book has become essential for anyone attempting to understand the basic narrative of the poem since the compressed symbolism, the allusive characterization, the sometimes tortured

and often ambiguous syntax, the narrative disjunctions and the constant rewritings of major texts of Western thought from Milton and the Bible and Young to Locke and Newton to Rousseau and Voltaire create the feeling that the act of paraphrase is not a heresy but a heroic action. This book prepared the way for Donald Ault's magisterial *Narrative Unbound* in 1987 and George Anthony Rosso's *Blake's Prophetic Workshop* in 1993.

What is intriguing about the legacy of these two publications from 1978 is the degree to which they have entrenched a separation of approaches to the poem into those which concern themselves with the minutiae of manuscript revision and those devoted to a sustained, coherent and complete reading of the poem. Indeed, what is yet perhaps more intriguing is the separation of these two approaches into different forms of publication. Treatment of the material difficulties of the poem occasioned by its status as a manuscript appears most notably only in article form, continuing in the tradition of the *Blake* special issue. Interpretive readings (and I stress the idea of a *reading* here) of the poem appear in book form with an obligatory nod to the difficulty occasioned by the state of the manuscript but little more than a few pages noting this in the preface or introduction and an appendix (almost a convention by now) on the "problem" of the two Nights VII. The tireless attempt by Bentley (back in 1963) to record types of paper, stitch marks, variations in the use of pen, pencil and crayon, writing styles, and other aspects of the poem's physical make up (along with Erdman's extensive reworking and critiques of Bentley's findings) have had limited visible impact on the construction of arguments by present-day critics of *Vala*. I do not mean to say here that these critics have not considered such matters fully and carefully in their private studies, but that the critical arguments following upon these private researches do not make full use of the material complexity of the manuscript. While these books have offered and continue to offer new avenues into the study of the thematic, contextual and narrative difficulties of the poem, none has yet fully embraced the material resistances of the poem—its state as manuscript with alternate readings, cancelled possibilities, uncertainties in direction and variations in pen, ink, crayon, color wash, stitch marks, writing styles, paper and so on. These matters mark the poem as graphically as its characters, themes and narrative complexities.

One is not hard pressed to find some rationale for this separation: even brief articles on the complexities of the *Vala* manuscript require extraordinary exertions on the part of the writer and the reader, and it would be difficult to sustain such close attention to detail over a two- or three-hundred page book. Moreover, the desire by publishers to produce books for the widest possible audience necessarily dictates the kinds of criticism that can be published in book form. The problem with such separations, of course, is that they leave us with an incomplete understanding of

<sup>1</sup> See *Blake* 12.2 (1978).

<sup>2</sup> Kilgore, Lincoln, "Revision," and Lefebvre engage in a debate about the placement of Night VIIb, a debate which was instrumental in causing Erdman to integrate VIIb into the end of VIIa.

<sup>3</sup> Lincoln, "The Four Zoas" and Erdman, "The Four Zoas," discuss the potential reconstruction of the text on pages 5, 6, and 7.

<sup>4</sup> The Santa Cruz Blake Study Group's review of Erdman's *Complete Poetry* offers a trenchant commentary on the critical influence of typographic editions on the understanding of Blake. See 13-16 for specific commentary on *Vala*.

<sup>5</sup> The debate begins with Mann, "The Final State," and Essick, "The Four Zoas," continues with Otto, "Final States" and culminates in the exchange between Mann, "Finishing Blake," and Otto, "Is There a Poem in This Manuscript?"



the complexities of Blake's poem, and often only a repressed sense of the importance of connecting the material form of the work with the interpretive act for a fuller understanding of both. The extensive work by authors such as Eaves, Essick and Viscomi (to name only a few) and the recent publication of the facsimiles by Princeton University Press and the Blake Trust have brought about a return of this repressed dimension in a treatment of the illuminated poems, but the technical complexities of the *Vala* manuscript have not yet received full attention.

Andrew Lincoln's *Spiritual History* thus marks a significant departure from its forerunners, not so much in its reading of the poem as in its incorporation of the material exigencies of the manuscript in the construction of its argument. While Lincoln argues that he mainly attempts to provide a contextualizing "reading" (ix), it is a reading with a difference, since *Spiritual History* bases the interpretive activity initially on "the process of revision," and seeks to address "the question of how the different 'layers' of the text might be related" (ix). Key to Lincoln's approach is the idea that this poem can (and should) be read in terms of coherent "layers" of textual additions, layers that were added as part of a series of related and coherent sets of revision. The notion of distinct layers offers Lincoln a way out of the morass of detail that might weigh down a line-by-line and variant-by-variant reading of the poem and offers entrance into a systematic reading of consecutively composed and transcribed layers in the poem. Thus Lincoln avoids the minutiae of particular revisions in favor of more general issues in the poem's development. With this approach in mind, Lincoln cautions that his "aim is not to provide a comprehensive history of the poem's development, but to allow a staged reading—one that moves, as Blake himself moved, from simpler to more complex forms of writing" (ix). Thus, his treatment of the poem is to approach it in terms of four layers or stages. Part 1 looks at what Bentley called the Copperplate text, "the earliest part of the surviving manuscript" (ix); part 2 considers "the narrative as a whole, but leave[s] out of account the references to Jesus & his role in history (mostly contained in revisions)" (ix), while part 3 turns to these explicitly Christian revisions. Finally, part 4 turns (very briefly) to "Blake's unfinished attempt to place the myth within a specifically British framework" (ix). The result of this approach in the first two parts, for instance, is a view of the manuscript with a thematic or narrative structure that pivots around the change in paper and writing styles at page 42. Pages 1 to 42 are written in the Copperplate Hand on blank sheets of J. Whatman paper; pages 43 to 139 are written in Blake's usual hand on proof sheets for Young's *Night Thoughts*. This physical change is accompanied by a change of events in the text; at this point Urizen casts out Ahania, his Golden World collapses and the chaos of Tharmas returns. Lincoln points out a series of intriguing parallels between these two sections. Pages 1 to 42 offer a portrait of a fallen world

animated by divine power aspiring towards an ideal cosmic harmony, one which "corresponds to the teleological, homocentric world-view that survived until the Renaissance" (72). Pages 43 to 139 depict a view of the universe animated by natural powers, a world-view that corresponds "to the scientific universe that displaced [the Renaissance view] . . . in the seventeenth century" (72). Lincoln's argument is much more subtle and complex than my summary sounds, but I think it is essential to note the way in which his interpretive approach grounds itself in the material complexities of the manuscript.

Lincoln establishes the importance of this approach in his preface where he argues that the failure of editors and later commentators to take note of the layered nature of *Vala* has fostered an ongoing sense that the manuscript is intrinsically fragmented. In offering a counterbalance to this sense, Lincoln states, "I do not assume that the revised narrative does or should constitute a perfect unity—but I do attempt to provide a reading that has more coherence, and may be more accessible, than the disordered appearance of the manuscript might lead us to expect" (ix). Recognition of the coherent layers, argues Lincoln, may lead to a greater sense of "coherence" and accessibility than has generally been observed by editors and critics. I can concur to some extent with his arguments about "coherence"—however odd that word may sound in relation to Blake—but arguments about greater accessibility may seem a bit abstracted. His critique of the editions presented by Keynes and Bentley—editions which attempt to indicate layers of addition through brackets, italics or other typographical indices—makes me wonder how *Vala* should ideally be read. Can there be an edition which makes the poem accessible? Moreover, what Lincoln's book both hides and reveals is the weighty textual scholarship by Blake's editors (Bentley and Erdman in particular) that brings scholars to the current level of understanding of the manuscript. Lincoln offers brief introductory notes to each part of his book which summarize the portions of the manuscript which constitute a distinct layer, but these notes compress an enormous amount of textual scholarship within a narrow range and do not indicate fully the rationale for such choices. In this criticism I may be speaking from the perspective of the more specialized reader, asking Lincoln for a book somewhat different from the one he has written. He does point out that "This book is intended to serve as a guide to new readers of *The Four Zoas*, although . . . [he] hope[s] it will also be useful to those who are already familiar with the poem" (i), and I can concede that to introduce extensive defenses and rationales for textual choices may limit the audience for his book and the accessibility of his arguments for "new readers." Having said this, I am inclined to ask at what cost we gain accessibility to such a complex work.

Lincoln's notion of separate layers, however, offers a good entry point into the manuscript, although, as I suggested



before, the content of these layers must be accepted on faith rather than rational demonstration. I am left wondering, for instance, why the additions to the end of Night VIIa are treated in part 3 along with the Christian additions. While Los and Enitharmon mention the Lamb of God in the final portions of Night VIIa and therefore this passage has some connection with the Christian additions, it might be argued that the several extensions of VIIa take the poem in a different direction—towards the personal artistic revelation rather than the universal theocentric revelations of the Christian additions.

Moreover, the revision of the Los-Enitharmon story is extensive both in the latest portions of Night VIIa (and VIII for that matter) and in the earliest portions of the Copperplate text (see, for example, Blake's revisions to pages 10 and 11) and offers a potential disruption across all four of the layers of *Vala*. As part of the preparation for (or accompanying development of) Los's central heroic portrait in Jerusalem, the revisions could be treated as a separate layer, since for many readers these revisions open out *Vala* into the later works. Lincoln presented some background arguments in a very important article on the composition and transcription of Nights VIIa, VIIb, VIII and IX ("Revisions"), and some of the useful discussion in that article could have been incorporated in this book without compromising the clarity of *Spiritual History*.

The interpretive dimension of Lincoln's argument attempts to place *Vala* within the cultural and intellectual contexts of its own time. In so doing, Lincoln situates his work alongside that of Jackie DiSalvo and George Anthony Rosso and this does seem a fair assessment of his critical approach. Concerned with illuminating the contemporary contexts of *Vala*, Lincoln sets *Vala* against such contemporaries as Young and Pope, Volney and Condorcet and Adam Smith and Gibbon in an attempt to lay to rest the extreme views either that *Vala* represents a retreat from historical engagement or that revisions to the poem "represent an attempt to keep up with the rapidly changing events of contemporary history" (290). I think Lincoln is persuasive on these points throughout his book; however, I remain slightly unclear about the exact parameters of his notion of "history." If history is not, as he claims, "a given sequence of events, but . . . a discourse that shapes and is shaped by consciousness" (xiii), does this give it a Frygian archetypal form or does this draw history into the Foucauldian realm? His idea of a "spiritual history" appears to have strong affinities with archetypal structures, affinities which seem to strain against Lincoln's intensive concern for careful contextualizations. He states that

This reading constructs the text as a 'spiritual history', a history that attempts to delineate the forms which all temporal developments must take, forms that may illuminate eras widely different in chronological time.

It is a history that is nearly always in dialogue with other versions of history, and which is often closely engaged with other texts. (xiii)

While this passage suggests that the poem is engaged with the temporal and spatial developments that constitute history, the spiritualization of such history would seem to lift these contextualizations, as it were, out of context and into general and universal forms. Such a procedure moves the ultimate concerns of his argument closer to the archetypalism of Frye and away from the Marxism of DiSalvo. To some extent, Lincoln confronts this difficulty by arguing that the poem's revisions went through "a process of engagement with, and final renunciation of, Enlightenment assumptions [about universalizing frameworks and Christian theology]" (1). When dealing with the final revisions to the poem, revisions which introduce particularized references to British geography and druidic traditions, Lincoln does argue that later additions offer a critique of the tendency in the earlier transcribed text to universalize history: the late revisions, he writes, "can be seen as a renunciation of the Enlightenment influence, an attempt to free the 'acts' of history as far as possible from the generalizing arrangement or 'disarrangement' of them" (285). I find this suggestion of self-critique tantalizing but (alas) this last set of revisions receives only the briefest of treatments. This is a pity since part four of Lincoln's book might be drawn out into more extended speculations on the process of textual self-critique in *Vala* in particular and perhaps lead to further speculation on self-critique in Blake in general. Moreover, the latent critiques of universalism and providential schemes that Lincoln describes in part 4 seem part of an attempt by Blake to draw the poem directly into intensive engagements with national history. This possibility is an intriguing one and calls for further development by Lincoln.

I think here I am not asking for a much longer book, but instead some added commentary along the way about the relation between the four layers of the manuscript. The idea of a progression through layers of text is, as I have said, a fruitful way into *Vala*, and although Lincoln offers some occasional statements regarding the developments and even contradictions between layers, I would be interested to see such a commentary brought to the fore. The sense of stress and strain between and among the manuscript layers does not lead to a serious lack of coherence, but instead creates a dynamism, a vitality that leaves the resulting artefact an ongoing site of study and debate. At times, however, there seems to be a tension within Lincoln's book between the attempt to acknowledge the significance of the physical dimensions of the manuscript and the desire for a thorough, coherent reading of the poem. Often it seems that the latter receives the fullest emphasis, leaving several aspects of manuscript revision to minimal coverage in a set of appendices. Lincoln's book does, however, set a new standard for critical discus-



sions of *Vala*. In light of Lincoln's book, the physical aspects of the manuscript can no longer be separated from interpretive discussion. This new standard adds a level of sophistication and complexity to considerations of *Vala* that has already emerged in treatment of the illuminated works. Such wide-ranging considerations of the material and thematic complexities encountered when reading this difficult manuscript may also renew our way (or ways) of thinking, talking and writing about Blake.

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*20/20 Blake*. Written and Directed by George Coates. North American Premiere: Civic Center Theater, San Francisco, 17 January 1997. World Premiere: Teatro Sérgio Cardoso, Sao Paulo, Brazil, 4 September 1996.

Reviewed by JAMES MCKUSICK

*20/20 Blake*, a dramatic and musical performance based on the life and work of William Blake, recently concluded a production at the Civic Center Theater in San Francisco. Perhaps the most innovative feature of this lush scenic production, written and directed by George Coates, is its digital manipulation of Blake's paintings and engravings to create the illusion of three dimensions when viewed by the audience through special 3-D glasses. Familiar images from Blake's illuminated books are magnified to enormous size and projected onto the stage, thus enabling the performers to walk into, through, and behind the engravings. This technique, initially somewhat disorienting to the observer, is nevertheless effective in drawing the audience