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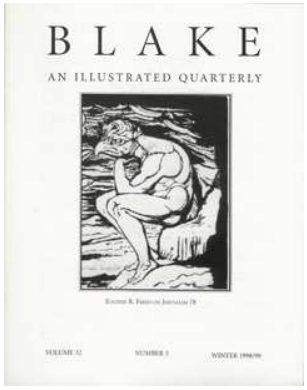

William Richey, Blake's Altering Aesthetic

Jennifer Davis Michael

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inable reconstruction of what Blake meant to write. And as transcriptions of the words and punctuation on the finished pages these texts seem to be very reliable: working from the reproductions in the book I found no apparent errors. In general the compositors did an excellent job of reproducing the format and lineation (and even the word-spacing) of Blake's pages—the only problem I can see is that when Blake inserted the end of a broken line above rather than below the line it completes, the typesetter (or the typesetting program) adjusted the line spacing so that the fragment is placed closer to the line above than to the broken line that it completes.

I can't testify about the color accuracy of the reproductions in this volume, for I have not examined them side by side with the originals. But because so many of the original pages are color-printed in thick smears of ink, the images here cannot be facsimiles of Blake's pages but rather very plausible color-offset reproductions of very sharp and carefully lit photographs. The reproductive processes used cannot even approximate the look of most of Blake's originals, which often feature richly textured impasto effects and other unreproducible elements such as gold leaf, but they do provide a reliable record of most of what is there to be seen. The photographs used were very sharp, and the offset screens so fine that it is impossible to perceive with the naked eye the tiny dots of ink that make up the image. In all seven copies that I have examined the printing plates were perfectly registered, so that the printing colors were applied exactly where they should be. As a result of all these circumstances, the images are exceptionally beautiful and very useful for scholars. The hairline features of the intaglio-etched texts of *Ahania* and *The Book of Los*, for instance, are almost as clearly reproduced as in the photo-collotype Trianon Press facsimiles, and all pages are sharper and more subtly colored than in any other reproductions now available except the best color slides and, perhaps, the digital images that will eventually be available from the electronic Blake Archive. This resource (http://www.iath.virginia.edu/blake), still under construction, presently offers a dazzling glimpse of the technology that will revolutionize the reproduction of Blake's pictures for scholarly purposes, and will undoubtedly (and unfortunately) forestall any future publishing projects like the one that produced the volume under review. (On the other hand, it seems likely that an electronic archive coupled to advanced printers could eventually be used to produce high-quality paper copies on demand, so all the romance of the printed page may not be lost forever.)

The problem of choosing copies to reproduce and determining the ordering of pages in them is simple for *The Book of Ahania* and *The Book of Los*, since the complete copies are unique, but devilishly difficult for *The Book of Urizen*, which is ordered and constituted differently in almost every copy. Blake made twenty eight printing plates for *Urizen*, all at roughly the same time, but except for copies A and B he didn't use all the pages that the plates could print, and while some pages may have been extracted (or added) by later owners, Blake's foliation and other evidence suggest that he regarded several different forms of the book as complete and satisfactory. Indeed, the copy reproduced as a whole in this new edition, Copy D, lacks not only plate 16, but also plate 4, which includes about a tenth of all the text. Flawed but plausible cases could be made for several of the more complete copies as the "best" text to reproduce, but as long as one must choose an exemplar—and for paper editions of the illuminated books, I guess one must— Copy D of *Urizen* is an attractive copy and a sound choice. Worrall includes a generous sampling of variant pages (among them the two missing from Copy D) and indicates the variety of alternative orderings.

I am still slowly working my way through these new Blake Trust editions systematically, but I have been using them unsystematically for some time as my primary reference texts for the illuminated books. The whole series seems to me a resounding success—the level of the scholarship is high, the overall editorial approach sound, and the execution of the volumes very good. There is always room for caviling—such a magnificent presentation should be attended by both careful color-checking of the illustrations and perspicuous proofreading (and graceful editing for style), and some volumes didn't receive enough attention in these respects. But no serious Blake scholar can do without these books, and the Blake Trust, the Tate Gallery, Princeton University Press, and the editors should all be proud of all of them. David Worrall's contribution to the series is consistent with the high standard that prevails throughout.

William Richey, *Blake's Altering Aesthetic*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996. xii + 197 pp. $37.50.

Reviewed by Jennifer Davis Michael

In this radical reassessment of Blake's aesthetic theory, William Richey takes aim at a sacred tenet of Blake scholarship: Blake's espousal of the Gothic and rejection of the classical mode of art. Given Blake's early sketching of medieval tombs in Westminster Abbey and his vehement denunciation of "Greek and Roman models" late in his career, most critics have followed Frye's assumption that his attitude toward the Gothic remained consistent throughout his life.[1] As recent criticism has tended to reject mono-

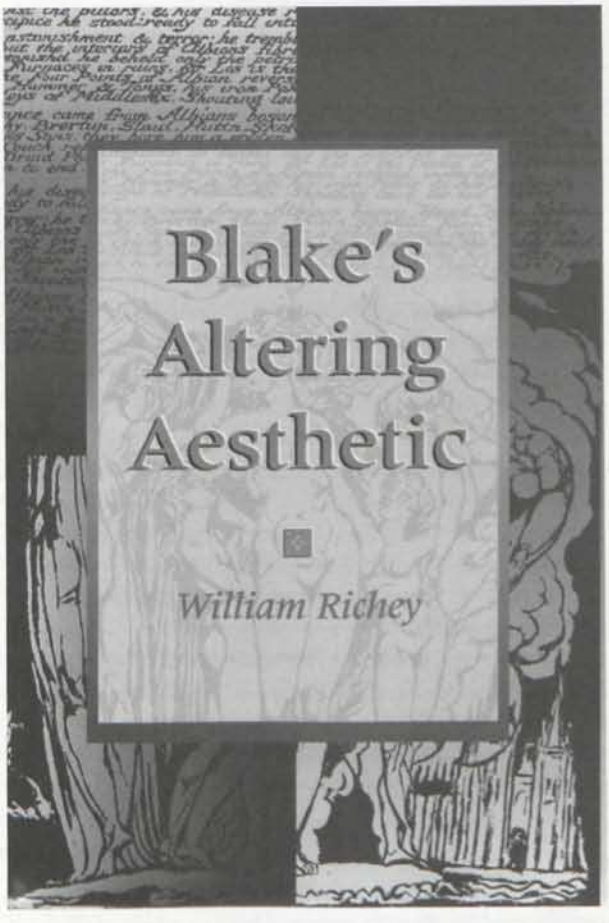
[1] See *Fearful Symmetry* 148-49.

lithic readings of Blake and to emphasize change and even contradiction over the course of his career, it is suprising that no one has seriously challenged the belief that, in Jean Hagstrum's words, "The Gothic became Blake's steadiest symbol for the good" (29).[2]

Anne K. Mellor (whom Richey acknowledges as a mentor) briefly mentions Blake's reaction against classical forms as a late development: "In Blake's late art, Gothic motifs replace Greek motifs as the vocabulary of the sublime language of primal imaginative vision" (246). Yet she does not examine this shift in detail or account for it in political and cultural terms, as does Richey. Richey challenges Hagstrum, Frye and others by arguing that "Blake before 1804 exhibited an appreciation for Greek art that was nearly as intense as his later antipathy for it" (4), and devotes his book to exploring and accounting for that radical shift. In the language of his title, Blake's aesthetic "alters" in both transitive and intransitive ways: it changes over time, while it also alters the categories of "classical" and "Gothic."

Central to Richey's argument is his recognition that for Blake, as for his contemporaries, aesthetic codes are "highly politicized mode[s] of discourse" (5) that can be modified by their users. While Reynolds and his colleagues used neoclassicism to support the aristocratic establishment, the young Blake embraced an "eclectic primitivism" common to the late eighteenth century in which a variety of ancient cultures—Hebraic, Norse, and Celtic as well as classical—provided models of liberty and purity. Richey contends that in his early work "Blake regularly opposed this classicized idiom to the Gothicism of the Middle Ages" (6), which he represented as a corrupt and decadent old order, replete with tyranny, hypocrisy, and sexual repression.

In Richey's first chapter, "Neoclassical Primitivism," Blake's early visual and verbal works receive the kind of attention that has been rare until very recently.[3] His depictions of medieval subjects such as *The Penance of Jane Shore*, often dismissed as "the unscholarly historicism of 'Strawberry Hill' Gothic" (Butlin 5), are taken seriously here. Although Richey finds Blake's early work dominated by "the neoclassical ideal of simplicity" (18), what seems paramount at this point is not the aesthetic idiom but the Rousseauist idea of primitive virtue. In other words, both ancient Greece and ancient Britain could exemplify



"prelapsarian glory" (21). Turning to *Poetical Sketches*, Richey challenges the opposition between Hellenism and Hebraism that other readers have found in "To the Muses" and the seasonal poems. Not only through his close readings but also by stepping outside the East/West polarity, he shows that for the early Blake, both classical and biblical literature were authentic sources of inspiration.

In his second chapter, Richey contends that Blake's depiction of the medieval Gothic, already negative in "To Winter" and "Gwin, King of Norway," becomes even more so in his revolutionary poems of the 1790s. Blake's classical idiom blended naturally with the neoclassical iconography of the French Revolution, but more specifically, Richey suggests that Blake was motivated by his opposition to Edmund Burke, whose Gothic sublime he associated with Burke's defense of monarchy. Moreover, the Burkean sublime, emphasizing darkness, obscurity, terror and confusion, ran counter to the classical "humanistic sublime" that Blake espoused, with its focus on light, clear delineation, and the human form. Richey reads *The French Revolution* as a critique of both Burke's aesthetic and political theories, drawing also on Paine's *Rights of Man* and on Ossian's *Fingal* to distinguish between different uses of primitivism

[2] Hagstrum acknowledges that Blake derived some negative "visual motifs" from the Gothic, such as the tyrant's spiked crown, but he does not see in this usage any evidence of ambivalence toward Gothicism. On the other side of the issue, Morris Eaves has thoroughly examined Blake's use and adaptation of classical and neoclassical theories of art, but he makes surprisingly few references to Gothicism. David Bindman notes Blake's early attraction to simmplicity of form in both Gothic sculpture and classical art, but he resists narrowly Gothicizing Blake's English history paintings: "If Blake went so far as to have a conception of the Gothic period in his early years, it was a notably bleak one" (49).

[3] The other recent example of note is Greenberg's collection of essays on *Poetical Sketches*.

and the sublime. This distinction, he shows, is even more apparent in the illuminated poems such as *America: A Prophecy*, where Albions Angel appears as a Gothic tyrant, often cloaked in gloom, while Orc resembles a statue of Apollo or Hercules, gloriously naked and bathed in light. Whereas Burke's sublime gains its power through intimidation and obscurity, Blake's humanistic sublime is based on "naked beauty displayed." Burke's love of obscurity went hand in hand with medieval chivalry and chastity or, as Blake would call it, "pale religious letchery." Richey therefore interprets the rape in the preludium to *America* not only as a deliberate response to Burke's chivalrous defense of Marie Antoinette, but also as a redefinition of the revolutionary act as one that brings not destruction, but union, liberation, and new life.[4] Many readers will not be able to excuse Orc's rape of the Shadowy Female on those grounds, but the reading of the Shadowy Female as Marie Antoinette, "bearing [Orc's] daily bread—or perhaps more accurately, his cake" (63) is provocative and memorable.

Richey finds that Blake's rejection of classicism accompanied his disenchantment with the French Revolution, as Blake blamed the Revolution's failure on its devotion to the Homeric cult of war. This reversal, however, was neither simple nor instantaneous. Richey's third chapter considers *Vala* as the high-water mark of Blake's classicism and its revised form, *The Four Zoas*, as his later attempt "to purge *Vala* of what he had come to consider its corrupt classical ideology" (77).[5] Richey re-evaluates Hayley's influence on Blake, arguing that Hayley's attitude toward the classics was "more conservative than revolutionary" (79), and that under Hayley's tutelage, Blake enhanced his knowledge and use of classical sources. In a series of closely read passages, Richey shows Blake rewriting specific episodes from the *Iliad*, such as the confrontation between Achilles and Agamemnon, and relocating them within the psyche. Most important, he points out how the figure of Los/Urthona combines the determination of Achilles with the peaceful creativity of Vulcan, creating a new kind of hero.

The last part of the chapter turns to the composition of "The Grey Monk" as a pivotal point in Blake's attitude toward the classics and his revision of the epic. The early drafts of this lyric, Richey suggests, serve as "a wildly expressionistic transcript of his trial" for sedition after the encounter with Schofield (98). Here Blake rejects Achilles as a model of the heroic poet and, more generally, rejects physical warfare as a model for intellectual fight. Richey's attempt to account for Blake's reversal in this way is scrupulously detailed, but the precise reason continues to elude him: "Having had his own virtue publicly held up to scrutiny, Blake appears to have radically rethought his former system of values . . . " (100). However, Blake's thought process is not outlined for us, nor is it clear why, as Richey notes, Blake suddenly portrays Gothic figures and images in a positive light. Richey is right, though, as he goes on to argue that Blake's revision of the epic was not just a christianizing of its mythology but also a purging of self-righteousness. In *The Four Zoas*, Los's problems arise more from his own character than from external causes (102). Rather than simply liberating himself, the artist now wins glory by sacrificing himself for others. Blake thus shifted the epic onto the new ground he would explore further in *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. In those poems, Richey traces another change in Blake's approach, as Blake resumes some of his "classically derived self-righteousness" (109) to engage the classical aesthetic directly in "Mental Fight."

The fourth chapter addresses *Milton* as an account of Blake's own artistic conversion from classical self-righteousness. Complicating matters, Richey sees Blake modifying the position set forth in "The Grey Monk" and *The Four Zoas* in the conflict between Satan and Palamabron. Blake now believed that excessive "forbearance" was a form of self-righteousness, and that honest confrontation was in fact more generous because it could also free the enemy from error (118-119). At the same time, he adopted the belief of Milton and others that Greek art and literature had been "Stolen and Perverted" from Hebrew originals. Hence Blake turned to the classics with a new energy, to restore them to purity. Richey therefore reads *Milton* as a revision not only of *Vala/The Four Zoas* and Milton's *Paradise Regained*, but also of the *Odyssey*, as *Vala* is a reworking of the *Iliad*. Blake, he argues, purges not only Milton but himself of two equally flawed notions of justice: the vengeful justice of the *Odyssey* and the "repackaged" classical justice that passes for Christianity in Milton's own works (130). Richey concludes the chapter with a highly effective comparison of the climaxes of *Milton* and the *Odyssey*. Both are moments of unmasking, but "Blake has . . . transformed Homer's retributive bloodbath into a moment of self-awareness in which Milton returns to his unfallen form by casting off his moralistic classical mentality" (131). I only wish Richey had pushed further his suggestion that *Milton* becomes "something like a Pauline conversion narrative" (10): his reading of Blake's verse in terms of its classical sources is so skilled that at times he neglects to spell out Blake's Judeo-Christian modifications with equal care.

Richey begins his chapter on *Jerusalem*, which he calls "Blake's anticlassical epic," with a discussion of Blake's tract *On Homers Poetry [and] On Virgil*. Richey makes the case that Blake was concerned less with Homer's actual writing than with what it had come to stand for and what critics

[4] One might think of some of the rapes in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, although Richey does not make this connection.

[5] Richey could be more explicit about the textual problems involved in making any claim about Blake's revisions. Although he has compared Margoliouth's edition of *Vala* with Bentley's transcript and photographic reproduction of the manuscript, his idea of *Vala* as a finished and definable poem should be weighed against Erdman's comments (818).

had made of it (135). While much more time could be spent unraveling Blake's claims about synecdoche, generalization, and allegory, Richey characteristically makes Blake not a lone reader but a participant in an aesthetic dialogue, citing Winckelmann and Le Bossu as well as Aristotle. Richey's main interest in the tract, however, seems to be that it announces Blake's new aesthetic ideal: "Gothic is Living Form." In *Jerusalem*, then, Blake offers an epic that embodies this "living form," replacing the artificial Aristotelian unity with a unity of poet and audience through "an intensely self-reflexive poem that is about its own composition and reception" (147). Richey's emphasis on the "total communion" Blake seeks with the reader may be overstated, given the fact that Blake gouged out much of the language of love and friendship in the preface.[6] But he also highlights Blake's other strategy of directly confronting the classical aesthetic, since that prevailing taste was the main obstacle between Blake and his audience. At this point, Richey's strategy in leading with *On Homers Poetry* also becomes clear. In *Jerusalem*, he argues, Blake attempts to reunite elements that Homer had wrongly separated in the name of a false aesthetic unity. Los combines elements of Ulysses and Achilles, and the individual journey of the *Odyssey* is interwoven with the collective struggle of the *Iliad*. Richey argues for the unity of *Jerusalem* not by analyzing its structure, but through close readings, which are a strength of his book as a whole. In each episode he examines, Blake is recasting and rewriting not only classical epics but his own earlier epics. With this approach, Richey makes *Jerusalem* the definitive "gothic" poem, achieving unity not through fixed form but through a "dazzling profusion of minute particulars" with which readers must actively engage (171).

In his conclusion, after examining several of the large designs in *Jerusalem* to address Blake's definitions of "classical" and "Gothic," Richey is forced to admit that Blake's conception of the Gothic is utterly idiosyncratic. While this idiosyncrasy prevents Richey from drawing strong connections to other Gothic Revivalists, as he has done with political and aesthetic critics in earlier chapters, he has done what he set out to do: to explore closely Blake's changing conceptions of the Gothic and classical modes and to liberate them from the stereotypical shorthand that many critics have applied. Along the way, however, he has drawn attention to the complexity surrounding classical and Gothic taste in the period, so his self-effacing conclusion understates what he has accomplished.

By using a specific lens to examine the bulk of Blake's oeuvre, Richey covers an extraordinary amount of material in fewer than 200 pages, and only occasionally does the argument seem rushed. The book, while not an "art book," is attractively put together, with a fair number of black and white plates to illustrate key points (although I could have wished for more in chapter 1, since the medieval paintings are not as widely known). The two great strengths of the book are the close readings of Blake's passages alongside Homeric sources and the highly readable style which keeps jargon, Blakean and otherwise, to a minimum. For both these reasons, this is one recent book on Blake that I would unhesitatingly recommend to bright undergraduates. Its insights and arguments, however, merit the attention not only of advanced Blake scholars but also of art historians and anyone interested in the cultural currency of aesthetic codes in Blake's time.

[6] Paul Yoder addressed the implications of these deletions and Erdman's emendations in his paper, "Gouging *Jerusalem*: Reading Blake's Erasures," delivered at the NASSR/BARS Conference, Strawberry Hill, 7 July 1998.

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