

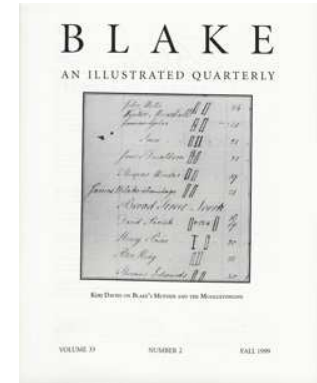
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R E V I E W

John B. Pierce, *Flexible Design: Revisionary Poetics in Blake's Vala or The Four Zoas*

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John B. Pierce. *Flexible Design: Revisionary Poetics in Blake's Vala or The Four Zoas*. Montreal & Kingston, London, Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998. xxvii + 9 illus. \$36.00.

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If Catherine Blake had been given to journal writing we might be fortunate enough to find an entry that read: "Mr. Blake told me today he decided what to do with his Vala poem. It will be. . . ." But Catherine was no Dorothy, and we are left with both a mystery and the fact that the "final state" of *Vala or The Four Zoas* is a manuscript. The unavoidable truth is put forcefully in Paul Mann's observation that "it is as manuscript that *The Four Zoas* must be read, and manuscript not in some fiction of completion which one's reading continually tries to approximate: that is, neither as the trace of an interrupted compositional trajectory nor as something to be read as if it were finished" (208). John B. Pierce's new book does not venture to solve the mystery of what final form Blake intended for the poem, or what phases his material plans for its production might have gone through, but he does claim to show us how to read the work as a manuscript. It is a promising, but in the end a frustrating and disappointing book.¹ The promise is to provide a "manuscript poetics" and a "poetics of revision" based on a "critical approach driven primarily by the physical state of the manuscript, with its many erasures, additions, and com-

plex rearrangements, which require careful, focused, and detailed scrutiny" (xv). Pierce claims to be "bringing the material force of the manuscript into play with an interpretative approach" in "a study weighted towards a close reading of textual detail" (xv). Unfortunately, his choice of text to quote is Bentley's transcript in his 1963 facsimile, which is decidedly inferior to Erdman in accuracy. Those who want to follow Pierce's close reading of textual detail will have to have a copy of Bentley, and even then it will be difficult to understand why he chooses one reading over another in some cases and gives alternate readings in others; or why at times he keeps Bentley readings even when they are clearly in error, and at other times goes for Erdman's infrared recreations.

Consider for example the two epigraphs that open Pierce's work, coming after the title page and before the table of contents. The 14 lines of quoted text (34:9-15, 21:1-7) differ from Erdman at seven points. The first of these differences is in the first line, where Pierce quotes: "Now Los & Enitharmon walkd forth on the dewy Earth," and Erdman has "For Los & Enitharmon. . . ." The answer would seem to be that the manuscript has "For ~~Now~~ Los & Enitharmon. . . ." which Bentley has rendered [For] Now Los & Enitharmon. . . ." and Pierce has chosen the earlier reading. This would jibe with his keeping the lower-case "elemental" in 34:15 even though the manuscript clearly shows it changed to "Elemental" as Bentley has indicated with his "[E] elemental." But in the second epigraph (21:1-7) he goes the other way, keeping the two manuscript revisions: from lower case to upper with "As One Man. . ." and the more substantial change of "One Man above Mount Giliad Sublime" to "One Man above the Mountain of Snowdon Sublime."² In neither case do the lines "taken from G. E. Bentley, Jr.'s facsimile edition" (xi) actually reproduce Bentley's typographic rendering, with its minimal graphic indications of revisionary stages.³

More important than the numerous basic mistakes in transcription that mar this book are the clearly strategic decisions that seem in conflict with its announced goals.⁴ The most glaring of these is the choice to examine only Blake's

¹ Although the publication date of *Flexible Design* is 1998, there are many signs that suggest it was basically written in the 1980s. Most conspicuous of these is Pierce's statement that the "standard edition" of Blake's works is "the revised edition of the *Complete Poems* in 1982" (xiv; he gets the title right in the bibliography), rather than the newly revised edition of 1988, which includes some further corrections of transcription and of mistakes made in 1982 (no more "abdominal void" in *Urizen*). He points out that "Magno and Erdman's facsimile offers helpful reconstructions of many of the erased drawings" (xv), but shows no signs of having used it. Indeed, he gives embarrassing evidence of *not* having used it when he gives us Bentley's description of page 12, where Bentley sees at the top of the page "a circle, perhaps for a head." Pierce goes on to say, "It is tempting to speculate that the 'circle, perhaps for a head' between Los and Enitharmon was to be that of Urizen (77). If he had consulted Magno and Erdman's facsimile, he would have found their description of that page, where with the help of Vincent De Luca and infrared photography we can now "see Urizen descend, with grinning human face but serpent body, swinging down from a tree to hover between them" (31).

² The other differences from Erdman are where Erdman reads lower case "c" in "contracting" and "call" where Bentley reads upper case, and lower case "o" in "one" where Bentley reads upper case.

³ When he does make use of editorial markings, he chooses Erdman's brackets with italics [. . .] to indicate deleted material and < . . . > to indicate new material, where Bentley uses brackets to indicate new material and italics to indicate deleted material. The result is mildly confusing and irritating for a reader attempting to check against Bentley, and another instance of Pierce's not in fact quoting Bentley's transcription. Also the lack of page references to Erdman makes it difficult to find quotations on those (quite a few!) pages where Erdman has different enumeration.

⁴ Some mistakes belong to Bentley, e.g., "I am made to sow thistle for wheat" (96, quoting 35:1) instead of "I am made to sow the thistle for wheat," a clear manuscript reading and in Erdman. He follows

verbal text, in spite of the claims to "make full use of the material complexity of the manuscript" (xiv) and "to take fully into account the material form of the manuscript as part of the reading process" (xxvi). This amazing decision is "dictated partly by the general incompleteness of many of the drawings" that "leaves the viewer lost in a field of conjecture with no firm basis for argument. In addition, the drawings do not readily lend themselves to the developmental discussion usually possible with a written text" (xv-xvi). Why does a study committed to "flexible design" and "the turmoil of composition and revision" (xix) require a "firm basis for argument?" Why does an argument so involved with "synchrony" require a "developmental discussion"? One would expect that Pierce's passion for "a synchronous narrative" (xxii) would lead him to privilege the drawings that provide a consistent manifestation of that quality.

Given his choice to focus on the graphics of the verbal, and the dynamics of textual revision, it is surprising that Pierce has no interest in communicating Blake's textual dynamism with even the minimal potential of a printed text. Thus after a gesture towards *Vala* or *The Four Zoas* as the "title" for the work under consideration, he settles in for *Vala* through the rest of his study. One would at least expect *Vala* in this context—or better still, *VALA*. But Pierce is attracted to "the bold calligraphy" of "VALA" and sees that title "with only a slight pencil mark through it, a mark distinct enough to be registered but not definitive enough to cancel out its potential status as a title" (148).⁵ Since even "Blake's Careful Hand" (73) could be scraped away for palimpsestic revision, it seems odd to belittle the pencil, so easy to change that *not* changing it can almost seem to affirm it. At any rate, Pierce's holograph ontology sees text in pencil as *de facto* having a "rather tentative nature" that shows it "was not an integral part of *Vala*" (93). One could argue equally well that Blake's "careful" copperplate hand is that of a copyist, the quickly penciled text that of the inspired poet. Pierce reads the poem's subtitles as offering a choice: "The Death and Judgement of the Eternal Man" suggests "a teleological structure leading from death to judgment and

Bentley's "Enitharmon let loose in the troubled deep" (57) instead of the manuscript and Erdman "on the troubled deep." At other times he silently corrects Bentley's errors, as when on page 67 quoting 8:14 he includes "Beech" (as per the manuscript and Erdman) instead of Bentley's "Beach." I'm not sure whether the fact that many quotations are punctuated with periods not in the text (e.g., 57, 67, 82, 87, 89, 96, 132) is an example of mistake or inconsistency, since occasionally a quotation not ending with a period will be closed by Pierce with an ellipsis.

⁵ See my argument for *MIL/TON* as preferable to *Milton* in "RE: Naming *MIL/TON*." Pierce claims that "the pull towards the title of *The Four Zoas* in Blake criticism generally registers a desire for a return to the work after the cacophony of textual revision" (148-49). The pull in Pierce towards *Vala* as title would seem to register the opposite desire, manifested at the end with his attempt to transcribe the full copperplate text of the poem.

Flexible Design

Revisionary Poetics
in Blake's *Vala* or
The Four Zoas

John B. Pierce

presumably to redemption," while the later addition "Torments of Love & Jealousy" bespeaks "emotional turmoil," indicating a "shift from teleology to states of torment" and to what Pierce calls a "poetics of character" (66). Thus in terms of his analysis they are equally pertinent to the poem in spite of the difference between writing style and instrument.

Early in his study Pierce quotes with approval a statement from "the Santa Cruz Blake Group" (he does get the name right in the bibliography): "what the manuscript exhibits in the most graphologically explicit fashion is an ongoing, unfinished process of self-editing, a process which print ordinarily shuts down." He then claims that "This statement acts as a background to my own methodology" (xx). A distant background, for it is not only the title where he rejects graphic mimesis. He explains that "where it is relevant" to his discussion he gives "Bentley's (or on occasion Erdman's) readings of erased or canceled words," but that he does not "include erasures or cancellations where they might needlessly complicate a passage under discussion" (xi). However, it is often difficult to follow his sense of relevance, and more often than not his quotations are brought "under discus-

sion" by stripping them of precisely that (needless?) complication that constitutes the manuscript experience. Consider this simple example. On page 132 Pierce gives a quotation described as the "final lines of the addition to page 105":

there was hidden within
The bosom of Satan The false Female as in an ark &
veil
Which christ must rend & her reveal.

(105:24-26)

A look at the manuscript or either facsimile shows that these are not the "final lines," and that line 105:26 as quoted is half (with no period) of the first of an additional three lines that are indented and end with "The daughters &c". The manuscript strongly supports the reading "then" instead of "there," and Erdman chooses that alternative for his text. This may seem like a very small change, but when one is arguing, as Pierce is here, about "the diachronic demands of narrative development" (132), the difference between a temporal "then" and a spatial "there" can be significant. Here is the way Bentley transcribes the final lines of the addition to page 105:

[[there was hidden within]]
[Which give a tincture to false beauty *therefore they*
were call'd
[The daughters &] [[The bosom of Satan The false Female as in an ark & veil
[[Which christ must rend & her reveal Her Daughters are Call'd
[[Tirzah She is *call'd* nam'd Rahab their various divisions are call'd
[[The daughters &c]]

Pierce's proposal to treat the manuscript as "a distinctly layered event" whose "meaning exists in the stages of development of the poem, not its organic unity" (xxvi), can be seen in action in his discussion of page 4 of the manuscript, one of those opening pages that exhibit a palimpsestic agon of re-re-revision. Starting with what he calls "the earliest surviving reading" (99, italics added) of 4:10-11, he goes on to attempt a layered series of readings of material forms of the manuscript, some of which could never have existed in isolation or been available to an actual reader, and none of which is available to the reader of the manuscript in its present form. Here is how he presents the case: "I have hidden thee Enion in Jealous Despair / I will build thee a Labyrinth where we may remain for ever alone." These lines begin a story of Tharmas's jealousy and possessiveness" (99). Presumably this is a "surviving" reading because "I have hidden. . . ." (how appropriate!) is written over a prior erased

copperplate line.⁶ Whether the line includes "O Pity Me" or not, its "reader" (who? when?) would have experienced it as written over an erased prior state, one which—as copperplate script—would have been a transcription of a still prior state. On the next page we find Pierce's version of the next stage of revision:

I have hidden <Enitharmon> in Jealous Despair O Pity
Me
I will build thee a Labyrinth <also O pity me O Enion>

Now we have "the pitying quality that Tharmas is generally noted for but that was virtually non-existent in phase 2" (100) and we have "Enitharmon" in the place of "Enion." But this is the way the text would look if Blake had made a new transcription at this stage, if this does indeed accurately represent a stage. What we would actually have in the manuscript at that hypothetical stage would look more like this:

Jerusalem
I have hidden ~~thee Enion~~ in Jealous Despair O Pity Me

The hypothetical reader of this hypothetical line would clearly see that Jerusalem had replaced Enion in a change to a line that had displaced a prior, erased line that had been a transcription of a still prior version.

By the time we reach the "latest revisions" Pierce is losing interest. Blake was "not thoroughly consistent" (103) and the changes are "tentative" or marked by accidental neglect as Blake shifts from meaningful revision to "tampering with this text" (104). Line 4:10 (Erdman 4:9) is now quoted in reduced form as "Hidden <Jerusalem> [instead of Enitharmon] in Silent Contrition." But we are now up to the current stage of the manuscript, and what the reader encounters in Bentley's transcript of 4:10-4:15 is:

[Jerusalem in Silent Contrition]
I have hidden *thee Enion* in Jealous Despair O Pity me
[also O pity me O Enion]
I will build thee a Labyrinth *where we may remain for*
ever alone
[why has thou taken sweet Jerusalem from my inmost
Soul
[Let her Lay secret in the Soft recess of darkness & silence
[It is not Love I bear to Enitharmon It is Pity

⁶ According to his announced policy, Pierce must be following Bentley here; but Bentley includes "O Pity Me" at this stage and Pierce does not, presumably because "it is not always possible to tell which erased text is the earliest copperplate one" (97) and because he wants it to be in stage 2 where it shows character transformation (cf. 100). He should cite Erdman, but Erdman numbers the lines 9-10 rather than 10-11.

⁷ Another sign that Pierce does not favor this "stage" is that he inserts "[instead of Enitharmon]" here, but did not write "[instead of Enion]" in his prior transcription.

[She hath taken refuge in my bosom & I cannot cast her out.]⁶

I have gone through line 15 (Bentley's numbering) here to illustrate one last point about this dense scenario where Enion and Enitharmon and Jerusalem all seem to be competing (if that's the right word) for the same space. If Jerusalem were winning, how could Blake not have changed "Enitharmon" in line 4:14? Pierce suggests that the change was "only very tentative" (compared with what else in this context?) or—quoting Erdman—that Blake "accidentally neglected making the same change here as in lines 9 and 11" (that line number problem again) or that Blake's "incomplete revision signaled his temporary abandonment of the text" (104). That last alternative might serve as a generic description of any manuscript at any stage; anything less than "completion" is abandonment.

In a brief concluding chapter, Pierce invokes Joseph Viscomi's discussion of the illuminated works as supportive authority on "how Blake constantly revised his works" and how "Fluidity and change become the norm" (141). In doing so, he drastically misreads and misrepresents Viscomi's position. Abandoning his own earlier assertion that "the sharpness of definition is the sharpness of the engraving technique—the antithesis of the tentativeness and freely shifting boundaries of the pencil sketches" (xxv), Pierce now claims that "the copperplate becomes a medium with the flexibility of the sketchpad" (141), and therefore the site for meaningful revisions. But Viscomi rejects the notion that the plate can be seen as "the initial invention" separated from printing and coloring, and he also rejects the view that differences among copies mean we can equate execution with revision (178–79). More explicitly still, Viscomi asserts that "the plate image cannot be treated like a manuscript that has been distorted or deliberately altered" (178). Viscomi

⁶ Bentley's notes to these lines help convey some of the complexity of the manuscript at this point: "Line 10: the alteration first read in pencil 'Enitharmon in Silent <?> Contrition'; then 'Enitharmon' was changed in pencil to 'Jerusalem'; and then the whole was darkened in ink. The deleted words are crossed out in pencil. Line 11: the words deleted were crossed out in pencil, and 'also pity me O Enion' written above them; the addition was then confirmed in ink, with the added addition of 'O'. Lines 12–15, 18–26 (a single block) seem to be written over about twelve erased modified copperplate lines which had been written over the erased copperplate lines. The modified copperplate lines begin farther to the left than those in the copperplate hand. Of the modified copperplate lines only 'Enion' at the end of the next to last line, and 'light <?> of day' at the end of the last line are legible. Lines 12–15 seem to be written over the same thing in pencil (with the exception of line 12), which were written over erased modified copperplate lines, which in turn were written over erased copperplate writing. All this alteration makes reading exceedingly difficult, and the erasure has almost worn through the page. Line 12 read in pencil:

[Jerusalem]

'[Why hast thou taken] Enitharmon from my inmost soul'

argues that *meaningful* differences between the works must be understood at the level of *editions* rather than—with rare exceptions—of the individual copy. Nothing could be more explicit than his assertion that Blake's "variations do not signify a rejection of uniformity and all it supposedly represents" (175), that "the absence of more pronounced differences among copies within an edition is quite surprising, and the differences themselves seem minor" (175), and that "what is questionable are the ideas that Blake willfully produced variants within editions for the purpose of making each copy of the edition a unique version of the book, that he believed variants within editions altered the book's meaning, and that variations express a conscious desire to rebel against engraving uniformity" (183).

Pierce's invocation of Roland Barthes' distinction between "work" and "text" in that chapter seems even more off the mark. In his eagerness to show that he is "a post-Saussurean, poststructuralist reader" (xvi) and "to take account of recent theoretical movements" (xv), he claims that his "approach to the work as text, as a network of signifiers, delivers the work into the order of language and writing" (143). But Barthes firmly associates the category of *manuscript* with the notion of the *work* (160), and the two together with the authority of the author. The work is *material* for Barthes, "a fragment of substance" that "can be seen" and "can be held in the hand," whereas "the text is held in language" (156–57). How is this different from "the material complexity of the manuscript" (xiv) with its "material resistance" (xv) that Pierce takes as his object of study? For Barthes, the *work* "refers to the image of an organism which grows by vital expansion, by 'development'" (161), and this is precisely what Pierce attempts to do as he "traces the evolution of Blake's poetic thought" (xvi) through the "conscious revision and correction of an essentially diachronic narrative" (xvii–xviii). While claiming that "any study of the manuscript will be heavily driven by such conceptualizations of author as intentional consciousness" (144), Pierce wants to keep that conceptualization only for the manuscript changes that "suggest an attempt to achieve coherence and consistency" (144). But any change that is not systematically registered through the whole manuscript "calls into question the use of a unified conception of an author embodying conscious and singular intentionality. Did Blake forget, give up, or get careless?" (144). We are offered "an author figure [who] can only be reconstructed as embodying multiple conceptions of the poem simultaneously rather than as presenting a unified or consistent consciousness," but one who is nevertheless a "figure" based on hypothesized states of consciousness. Here too we can see a conflict between a poststructuralist pose that claims, "I am not attempting to reconstruct Blake's subjective thought processes, rather to trace out the evolution of a poetic construct. Intentionality is thereby a function of the manuscript rather than of an individual consciousness" (xvi), and Pierce's actual prac-

tice, which claims to "trace Blake's process of composition in great detail" (xx) and insists repeatedly that "Blake's poetics are the result of conscious revision and correction" (xvii) and "This type of revision seems conscious on Blake's part" (56).

Insofar as Pierce has a method, it can best be described as an example of "compositional fiction," a phrase coined by Paul Mann. Emphasizing "the fact that the 'final state' of *The Four Zoas* is a manuscript," Mann points out that any hypothetical reconstruction of what Bentley calls its "composition and growth" is "an entirely separate concern" (208). "No matter how tentative and conditional the language of these compositional fictions they regularly determine editorial decisions" (208) and in Pierce's case they regularly reconfirm his simplistic view of Blake's writing practice in *VALA*.⁹ In fact, Pierce has two different compositional fictions for Blake's manuscript, both highly speculative. His argument embodies the same "conflict" he attributes to the manuscript, with subtle accounts of seamless transition alternating with dramatic accounts of quantum-leap "ruptures." On the one hand, the "manuscript tells a tale of steady addition and enlargement" (142) through "conscious revision and correction of an essentially diachronic narrative" (xxvii-xviii). But even though Blake's poetics was fundamentally and essentially narrative (xvii), it "underwent a gradual shift during composition, transcription, and revision of the poem, a shift accompanied by a growing emphasis on synoptic and synchronic tendencies" as he "gradually altered the shape of the poem" (xvii). On the other hand, "Blake's process of revision and recomposition seems part of a sometimes frantic attempt to save all that he wrote" (19). Blake was given to "tampering with this text" (104), and produced "fractures in the framework of his epic" (109), creating "vertical rupture" and "disruptions" that "mark a breakthrough in narrative strategy" (46), causing "a multitude of shifts in the poem that disrupt an earlier 'concept-

tion' of the poem's narrative" and producing "a radical effect on the poem's design" leading to "a late but overwhelming notion, one that overpowers the bulk of the base transcription of the poem" (49). In particular, "Blake made three separate additions to the end of Night VII[a], each more disruptive than the last, producing a serious rupture in this narrative sequence, a rupture that increasingly precluded any attempts at maintaining sequential 'fit'" (51).

Pierce sees Blake as an author unable to decide whether he is writing a "diachronic" poem or a "synchronic" poem. At times Pierce claims that Blake was striving to move the poem "away from a diachronic concern with narrative sequence towards a synchronic principle of juxtaposition or discontinuity" (48) only to succeed in the end in producing a "material failure" (xxvi). At other times he writes as if the synchronic "ruptures" were spoiling a poem that wanted to be diachronic narrative, so that a "sequentially coherent and consistent narrative structure" was being ruined by "a subversively disjunctive and disruptive narrative" (109). In either case the result is a failure, but the two views are quite different. At still other times Pierce suggests a positive sense of "flexible design" (xxii) and a process in which "the poem is revised to enact its own meaning through emergent forms" (xxvi). This sounds much better than failure. There are still other times when "all additions and revisions cohere around a single mythic core until at the end of the poem a right balance is established among the four faculties within the mind of the eternal man" (85). These contradictions in Pierce's text can be read as embodiments or enactment of his basic intuition, but they are not consciously deployed. Pierce seems bent on seeing *VALA* as a unique site of conflict, but what he describes are universal aspects of apocalyptic or eschatological writing in general and of Blake's writing in particular. Vincent De Luca adopted the dynamics of the sublime to discuss Blake's structural *peripeteias*, arguing that Blake intentionally designed his poetry so that the reader's time-bound and narrativized "Corporeal Understanding" will be frustrated and overwhelmed by "a vision determinate and singular, measured and finite, a miraculous (or astonishing) compression of all contingent forms into one intellectual identity—the living Word of Eternity" (102).

As long ago as 1971 I was discussing what Pierce calls "the unresolved conflict between a diachronic and a synchronic poetics" (32) as it appears in the work of Blake, Wordsworth, Keats and Hart Crane.¹⁰ Another book that anticipates Pierce's formulation and qualifies its claims for Blake's uniqueness is Thomas Greene's *The Descent from Heaven* (1963). Greene discusses numerous prior instances of the topos of "descent" in precisely the dynamics Pierce attributes

⁹ For examples of the frequency of speculation, see 72: "Blake's aim here seems to be . . . those above possibly suggest . . . seem to predate . . . This addition may also . . . Presumably, the fact that . . . Although we cannot always know for certain . . . those figures seem thoroughly compatible . . . figures on page 8 'seem to represent' . . . Enion appears bent over . . . These ideas and designs were probably a part of . . . One factor that seems consistent . . . Another set of additions that might be early . . ." On page 35 we get five speculations in ten lines: "Blake may have contemplated rejecting the preceding Night and starting his epic with the second Night. It is possible that he considered beginning *Vala* with the Second Night while reconsidering the appropriateness of the original text on pages 3-7. Perhaps the revisions he required were so significant that he considered discarding the whole Night. It is also possible that, even after he made extensive revisions to these pages, he was still unhappy with the results. Therefore, he changed the title of the Night to 'Night the First' and at the same time may have changed the 'Then' of the first line to 'The' in an attempt to remove or blunt the sense of narrative continuity implied by the adverb."

¹⁰ In *Preludes to Vision* I map some of the same narrative structural issues Pierce discusses, using temporal epic and atemporal lyric as polar examples of structure.

to Blake. For Pierce, Blake's "descent of the Lamb" comes when "a truly divine revelation is needed" (45), and "the descent of the Lamb acts as a vertical marker, a synchronic disjunction, that ruptures the teleology of a diachronic narrative of war as it moves to its temporal climax and spatial completion" (46). "The vertical rupture brought to this narrative of death through the intervention of the Lamb of God offers an alternative focus, redirecting attention from the foregrounded cataclysms of sequential development to the apocalypses of synchronic perception" (46). In his study of the epic, Greene focuses on "the history of a minor form within a larger, encompassing form," choosing "the descent of an emissary god or angel from heaven bearing a message to earth. . . . In most respects the celestial descent makes a peculiarly useful point of critical departure. For it does more than describe the swift and dramatic movement of a body through space. It constitutes typically a crucial nexus of the narrative; it represents the intersection of time and the timeless" (237).

Pierce claims to have identified "a new kind of narrative form towards which Blake was striving" (44) and thinks that the form was fulfilled in *Jerusalem*, where the diachronic is fully abandoned for the synchronic (109). He suggests repeatedly that Blake is striving to make *VALA* become *Jerusalem*—or we might rather say, a poem that can be read the way we have been taught to read *Jerusalem* ever since Frye announced in *Fearful Symmetry* that the poem was the climax of a poetic canon produced "in accordance with a permanent structure of ideas" (14). But Morton Paley, who is praised by Pierce for demonstrating that *Jerusalem* is synchronic in structure, does not in fact make the extreme claim attributed to him. Rather he insists that "There is a story in *Jerusalem*, consisting of many episodes, but this diachronic aspect of the work is for the most part subordinated to its synchronic aspect. . . . The organizational container reinforces the expectation of a strong narrative line, an expectation which is subverted time after time in the work itself" (303). This sounds more like Pierce's view of *VALA* than like the unilateral triumph of an oxymoronic "synchronic narrative." The co-existence of the diachronic with the synchronic, claimed by Pierce as a unique feature of *VALA* is an inevitable aspect of all narrative, and is a dominant feature of all texts in the apocalyptic tradition.¹¹ As Paul Youngquist notes, "To isolate the synchronic thus requires a prior immersion in the diachronic, which the resulting 'single archetypal pattern' functions to repress. Synchronism

in fact arises through the diachronic process it subsequently subordinates. The recognition of repetition that underwrites traditional criticism of *Jerusalem* is also the cipher of time and contingency. In the barely visible gap that opens within 'spatial form' to define its self-identity can be glimpsed its diachronic origins in the process of reading the poem" (604). Far from being unique to or originary with *VALA*, the eschatological dynamic Pierce finds there is everywhere in Blake and as old as the Christian Bible, carefully edited so that the diachronic temporality of the "Old" Testament and the synoptic gospels give way to the synchronic realm of the Gospel of John ("Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am.") and to the apocalyptic climax of Revelation. What Blake is doing in *VALA* is typical of an apocalyptic tradition that includes writers as different as Dante and Wordsworth. Dante increasingly notes the distinction towards the end of the *Paradiso* as he approaches the point at which all time becomes present ("il punto a cui tutti li tempi son presenti") coming to eternity from the temporal ("all'eterno dal tempo era venuto") he finds that a single moment can produce more effect than twenty-five centuries ("Un Punto solo m'è maggior letargo / che venticinque secoli alla 'mpressa"). In *The Prelude* Wordsworth recounts those vertiginous moments of estrangement and vision where he felt in touch with the hiding places of Power. Such spots of time can be found and multiplied, like the "Wild Thyme" of Blake's "Moment in each Day that Satan cannot find."

Pierce's problems in gaining a coherent perspective on the poem reflect those he claims to find in the poem, and are related to the ways in which a teleological narrative of origins is taken to be the *repetition* in time of a prior structure of temporal events. He remains what Donald Ault calls a "Newtonian reader," in spite of his appeals to Ault's notions of Newtonian and anti-Newtonian narrative. His compositional fiction, seeking "a sequentially coherent and consistent narrative structure" (109) of the poem's origin, holds him back from a reading of the manuscript as *manuscript* that would be congruent with Ault's argument that

the *Four Zoas* narrative is a purely relational process that has no existence (cannot be pointed to) in any form except through the act of reading. . . . This radical relational narrative process undermines Newtonian narrative ontology (through retroactive transformation, aspectual interconnection, and so on); it invades and desubstantializes the independently existing Newtonian reader and text, reconstituting them relationally as the primary conditions of the coming-into-existence of the narrative. (22)

¹¹ Barthes gives a typical structuralist description in his "Structuralist Analysis of Narratives": "To understand a narrative is not merely to follow the unfolding of the story, it is also to recognize its construction in 'storeys', to project the horizontal concatenations of the narrative 'thread' on to an implicitly vertical axis; to read (to listen to) a narrative is not merely to move from one word to the next, it is also to move from one level to the next" (87).

All of the characters in *VALA* are "fallen," and all seek to "remember" what caused them to fall, in the process of which they construct a multitude of stories without realizing that they are "actively constructing rather than passively remembering" (Adams 636). Thus narrativity—or a mistaken notion of narrativity and time—is the fallen condition. *VALA* is the only one of Blake's three great works in which he does not constantly and explicitly refer to himself as author, reminding the reader of the ongoing present of writing and physically producing the work in what Adams calls a "dramatic mimesis of visionary creation" (630).¹² In *VALA* that dramatic mimesis is continuous in the material form of the poem itself and the reader/editor of the manuscript is called on to become co-producer of whatever meaning emerges in the reading process. As Ault points out, "In its naked preservation of the traces of its struggle to be (re)composed, *The Four Zoas* pushes to the foreground the productive labor of writing; it is a text that insists on its own radical heterogeneity, on its own struggle to be different from itself, indeed, ultimately on its process of eradicating a potentially unitary textual 'self' from which 'it' could 'differ'" (xiii).

Blake did not simply set out to write a diachronic narrative, as if that were an aesthetic or formalist decision. His initial goal seems to have been to achieve a Hegelian *Aufhebung* through time, as in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), to reach through memory a triumph of the mnemonic over time in an apocalyptic self-absorption at the end of history when past and present, being and becoming are harmonized. In the process of working on the poem he made the discovery that was to mark the nineteenth century—that memory is the mechanism by which ideology materializes itself, and that a transformational account of human structures is common both to the political theorist and to the visionary poet. In *The Sense of an Ending* Frank Kermode deploys the useful terms *chronos* and *kairos*, where *chronos* is the linear sense of history and *kairos* is a sense of time that integrates past, present and future: "*Chronos* is 'passing time' or 'waiting time'—that which, according to Revelation, 'shall be no more'—and *kairos* is the season, a point in time filled with significance, charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end" (47). *Kairoi* are historical moments that are out of time, and eschatology plots the pattern of *kairoi* in relation to the End. It is possible to see many of the temporal experiments of high modernism as motivated by an inspired ideal of *kairos* in opposition to linear history.

Modernism itself, informed by "spatial form" and the model of cinematic montage, self-consciously sought to become the art of a new consciousness that would disprove Lessing's relegation of the verbal arts to the temporal di-

mension. Joyce's "Bloomsday" in *Ulysses* and his Viconian *ricorsi* in *Finnegans Wake* were attempts to align the literary work with the force of *kairos*. Virginia Woolf, whether poised between the gendered temporal poles of Mrs. Ramsey's *kairos* and Mr. Ramsey's *chronos*, or focused on Mrs. Dalloway's day, or an interval "between the acts" of history, sought the same effect. Yeats revealed the same concerns in his obsession with occult repetitions, as did Lawrence in his striving for apocalyptic endings to his novels, or in his *Apocalypse*, where he announced that "Our idea of time as a continuity in an eternal straight line has crippled our consciousness cruelly" (quoted in Bradbury 51). The tension between *chronos* and *kairos* is the central theme of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, where we see the Dantesque poet ("So here I am, in the middle way") revealing a secular perception of diachronic time challenged by Christian eschatology:

A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments. So, while the light falls
On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel
History is now and England.

(237–41)

In many ways as different from Blake as another poet could be, Eliot here shares with Blake the struggle against linear time, and looks to patterns preserved in national tradition and archaic myths of organic community, to find the possibility of a redeemed temporality.

I think we can be better readers of Blake if we stop thinking of him as a solipsistic creator of a private myth and see how many concerns he shared with other significant writers of the modern period. Similarly, we should not think of his manuscript struggle with *VALA* as a uniquely "Blakean" experience as Pierce suggests, but take note of how the more we learn of the text life of other authors the better we can understand the real process of *writing* (verb) *writing* (noun). One of the more serious omissions in Pierce's study is the context provided by work done in recent years on recovering and reading the manuscripts of other romantic and nineteenth-century writers.

Especially relevant here is work on Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley. If we read *The Prelude* (of course that title begs the question!) in its full textual plurality, or "Home at Grasmere" (originally intended as Book I of the never-written *Recluse*), along with the myriad of poems Wordsworth continually rewrote and rearranged, we see that Wordsworth was a poetic Penelope who wove and reweave his poems endlessly to avoid the spectre of closure. Wordsworth's obsessive (the term is de Selincourt's) revisions include many poems he seems never to have intended to publish at all. His famous inability to leave his poems alone has led to the Cornell Wordsworth project, organized with the aim to print texts of poems and all variants from first draft to final life-

¹² There is only one explicit indication in *VALA* that someone is writing it: Night V (6:9) where Blake wrote, "I write not here but all their after life was lamentation."

time (or first posthumous) publication, together with facsimiles of available manuscript versions. The growth of his *Prelude* can now be traced through up many different versions. His constant alteration of his poems, even after they were published, is notorious. If we see these poems as traces of a scene of writing, rather than as finished products, we can sense how Wordsworth continually altered his poems in order to keep the activity of writing going. His endless process of alteration was a way to preclude a closure of identity in a fixed text, to avoid becoming one who had written rather than one who was writing. His was a writing project that had to inscribe itself as something ever more about to be, in order to avoid being a copy of something that already was.¹³ The long-standing Cornell Wordsworth project has led to an enhanced sense of Wordsworth as reviser of his own work, and has helped in particular to identify multiple versions of *The Prelude*, ranging from its humble beginning in 1798 on the last page of a German lesson notebook ("Was it for this?") to the 14-book version that was left at his death. We can now read the poem as a scene of action rather than a report on events that happened elsewhere in the past, events that are "over." Coleridge too is increasingly seen as a Penelope. Jack Stillinger asks "How Many Mariners Did Coleridge Write?" in an essay where he considers how Coleridge "undermines the concept of a stable text by his continuous revising" (38). One might equally well ask how many *VALAS* (or *Urizens* or *MIL/TONS* or . . .) did Blake write?¹⁴

Useful recent work in this area has not been limited to English authors. Blake's contemporary Hölderlin left behind a horde of manuscripts, especially those of the remarkable elegies and hymns from his later years, that resemble palimpsests on which the poet constantly revised his work, using all the space in the margins and even the space between lines. In contrast to the "authoritative" text of the monumental *Grosse Stuttgarter Ausgabe*, the life-work of Friederich Beissner and his colleague Adolf Beck, the new *Frankfurter Ausgabe*, edited by Dieter E. Sattler (and published by a leftist publishing collective called Roter Stern) provides a *Rezeptionstheorie*-friendly edition for readers who believe that meaning is generated through acts of reading. Where Beissner sought to produce the effect of authoritative readings, creating the impression that definitive versions of the work could be recovered, the Frankfurt Edition provides a mapping of poems in process that keeps the graphic integrity of Hölderlin's poetic process with a facsimile of the manuscript, accompanied by a diplomatic transcription that follows the spatial configurations of the original. In addition there is a "phase analysis" of the manuscript that converts the spatial arrangement of the page into a linear sequence where the different stages of com-

position are indicated by different typefaces. Finally, there is an explicitly "provisional" reading text version of the work.

Recent textual work on post-romantic writers can also help prepare us to read *VALA* in its manuscript form. For example, the last 10 years have shown a remarkable intensification of interest in the materiality of Emily Dickinson's writing. The facts that her writing is almost exclusively in manuscript form, that she regularly suggested alternative words or phrases and produced alternate versions, that the distinction in her writing between poetry and prose is not always clear, have led to a growing body of writing on her work dealing both with editing and reading theory.¹⁵ As Jerome McGann states, "Dickinson's scripts cannot be read as if they were 'printer's copy' manuscripts, or as if they were composed with an eye toward some state beyond their handcrafted textual condition" (*Textual Condition* 38). One of the significant features of Dickinson's manuscripts is the inclusion of alternate readings with no indication of status or priority. Similar cases occur in Blake when multiple revisions leave the text suspended. A good example can be found in *VALA* 5:44-53 and 6:9-7:7, where the lines are deleted in pencil, but circled in ink—a printer's symbol for reinstating text according to Andrew Lincoln, whose presentation convinced Erdman to include them in the text. As Ault writes, these considerations "are compelling but not decisive; it is as though Blake's text leaves open or indeterminate the rules for interpreting what should be excluded or included" (501). Another area of textual scholarship that could be useful to those interested in a better understanding of "manuscript poetics" is the growing field of genetic research in Joyce, especially *Finnegans Wake*. The *James Joyce Archive* includes 15 thick volumes of facsimiles for the surviving Joyce notebooks and 20 volumes that reproduce drafts, typescripts and galley proofs for the different stages of the text of *Finnegans Wake*. The manuscript evidence ranges from handwritten sketches to final galley proofs, and genetic criticism of Joyce's *Wake* is rooted in the manuscript remains of his work habits from 1922 to early 1939.¹⁶

I'm concerned here with the experience of reading Blake's

¹⁵ In "The Importance of a Hypermedia Archive" Martha Nell Smith describes the organization of the Dickinson Editing Collective. Susan Howe, Ellen Louise Hart, Marta Werner, Roland Hagenbach, Jerome J. McGann, and Jeanne Holland are other members of the Editing Collective whose work has greatly advanced the understanding of Dickinson's handwritten poetic experimentation in punctuation, lineation, calligraphic orthography and mixed media layouts.

¹⁶ Graham Falconer has a useful survey of contemporary genetic criticism in his "Genetic Criticism." A somewhat dated bibliography of *Wake* genetic criticism can be found in the revised edition of McHugh's *Annotations to Finnegans Wake* (1991). Ongoing archival research is regularly reported on in *Genesis*, the journal published by the *Institut des Texts et Manuscrits Modernes* in Paris. The *Institut* is dedicated exclusively and rigorously to genetic studies and has included among its more notable members Daniel Ferrer, Jean-Michel Rabaté, Laurent Milesi and Claude Jacquet. There is also an Antwerp school of

¹³ I discuss Wordsworthian revision at greater length in "A Spirit, Yet a Woman Too!"

¹⁴ Stillinger is expanding on J. C. C. Mays's "Reflections on Having Edited Coleridge's Poems."

writing, in as full and unmediated a way as possible. One major hindrance to realizing this goal is access to the manuscript text in suitable form. Few of us can visit the British Museum to read the *VALA* original, and the two facsimile options are expensive to own and difficult to read. We may never know what final form Blake intended for *VALA*, and it is quite likely that his material plans for the poem went through several phases. A more tractable but still difficult question is, in what form is the work best made available to the prospective reader? The possibility of an edition along the lines of Sattler's edition of Hölderlin is appealing, but none that I know of is in the works. The closest thing to it in Blake studies is the invaluable facsimile *Notebook* with diplomatic transcription that David Erdman did with Donald Moore back in the 1970s. But then we need not be limited in our study of Blake's materiality to a literally material version of his text. The poem has not appeared yet on the Blake Archive priority list, but it is tempting to anticipate the kind of polymorphous textual experience that a proper hypertext edition could make possible.¹⁷ If when we read a manuscript we are reading writing *as writing*, then every aspect of the text exemplifies its physical contingency, its distance from that ideal unique unchanging work that leads a textual critic like Thomas Tanselle to claim "that language is an intangible medium and that words on paper are therefore not verbal works themselves but only guides to the reconstitution of such works" (*Textual Criticism* xi). Tanselle claims that many critics (both textual and literary) "have been led into muddy thinking by a failure at the outset to recognize the basic distinction between texts of works and texts of documents" (*Rationale* 35). Over against the mud metaphor he posits the clear thinking of a material text that is "the crystal goblet of typography and calligraphy [that] conveys a cargo that is abstract" (*Rationale* 40). But Tanselle's clear thinking is muddled on a number of important ontological issues and—perhaps even more telling—it is divorced from the actual practice of writing engaged in by many literary artists, and from the text-work they produce.

I have concentrated so far primarily on Pierce's emphasis on the manuscript status of *VALA*. He has a second related focus on what he calls a "poetics of character," for which he claims that his "use of character arises from the suggestions offered by Barthes in *S/Z* that character 'is an adjective, an attribute, a predicate,' or, more in keeping with 'the ideology of the person,' 'the sum, the point of convergence' of a set of signifying elements (what Barthes calls 'semes') that

cluster around a proper name." Pierce has difficulty with Blake's revisions because Blake's "clustering of 'adjectives' can lead to a set of apparent contradictions in character attributes with each reworking of the poem" (xxiii), making the poem exhibit a "contradictory sense of the whole idea of stability in characterization" (xxiv). It's not surprising that Barthes' formulation doesn't work all that well for a work like *VALA*, since Barthes is describing the conventional coding of conventional fiction where the *effect* of "character" is produced by semiotic consistency readers have learned to expect. As Melville pointed out in his *Confidence-Man*, "there is nothing a sensible reader will more carefully look for, than that, in the depiction of any character, its consistency should be preserved" (69). But Melville goes on to ask, "is it not a fact, that, in real life, a consistent character is a *rara avis*?" (69). Neither Melville in *The Confidence-Man* nor Blake in *VALA* is committed to the representation of something that could be called "character," and it is not at all clear that the names that multiply like weeds throughout the manuscript should be interpreted as signifiers of character. Bentley identifies 143 different "symbolic names" in *VALA*, and according to his count 117 names (82% of the total) appear only in added passages or in Night VIII, while 94 (66%) appear on only one page.

I think it is rather Pierce's need for consistency that is at work here, as he labors through many pages to show how he thinks Blake is consistently revising to create stable "characters" who can be consistently and *judgmentally* identified by the reader as "evil" or "blatantly evil" or "malevolent" or "sympathetic" or "fallen." Here too as with the compositional fiction, we have a program of staged readings where for Pierce Blake can only imagine a shift from one essentialism to another, as sympathetic (i.e., good) characters become evil and evil characters become repentant, so that "as Tharmas grows more evil, Enion becomes a more sympathetic (or simply pathetic) victim" (104). Pierce seems oblivious to the fact that these descriptions of character are often spoken by other "characters" who are tendentious to the extreme. For example, he cites Ahania's "first approach" to Urizen, where she says: "Thou sitst in harmony for God hath set thee over all" (after 37:9; see E 830), and notes that Blake "struck out this line and made a series of other changes that undermine any positive value in Urizen's creation" (90). Is this in fact a change by Blake in an omniscient valorization of Urizen, or is it a change in Ahania's perception of him, or a change in her rhetorical strategy in dealing with him? *VALA* is not a disembodied "story" that portrays "character," but a dramatic logomachia in which "voices" with different names hurl accusations and confessions at one another.

According to Pierce's criteria Milton, when he got to the point where Eve and Adam ate the apple, would have to go back and re-establish their essential "character" as fallen in order to be convincingly consistent. As Davis P. Harding pointed out long ago, Milton, "as a theologian, was com-

genetic Joyce criticism, led by Geert Lernout, who has also done a study of Hölderlin. In Ireland the leading genetic scholars are Danis Rose, Vincent Deane, Roland McHugh and John O'Hanlon.

¹⁷ Bill Ruegg's "Experimental Hypertext" and accompanying essay are suggestive to a certain degree. The Emily Dickinson Editing Collective has plans for a hypertext archive of her writing to supplement the new variorum edition being prepared by Ralph Franklin.

pelled to maintain a spotless innocence in Adam and Eve until that precise moment when Eve actually eats the Fruit. As a poet, he was compelled to anticipate the Fall by implying in both our first parents not only a predisposition to sin but the specific frailty out of which the sin could grow and take its shape, as a plant is formed from its seed" (68–69).¹⁸ Blake and Milton were both writing in traditions where radical, inexplicable character transformation was possible, for better and for worse, and Pierce's labors to convince us of Blake's labors for consistency are not successful. Pierce writes, "There is no essential character that [Blake] fears violating in such revisions" (xxiv); the point is, that there is *no essential character*.¹⁹ When Blake in 29:1 writes "Eternal Man," then erases "Eternal" and writes "Fallen," then writes "Ancient" above "Fallen" in pencil, then erases "Fallen" and return us to "Ancient," he is not going from one essential attribute to another one, but creating a site where there is no fixed identity.

VALA raises the question of character identity by thematizing it, and by embodying it textually with parts of the manuscript that are not clearly in or out of the poem, or that enter and leave the poem as it is revised and revised again. The instability of the text, reflected in its material manuscript embodiment, is not an accident or an aesthetic choice, but a reflection of a problematic subject and theme that is intimately related to the interrelationship between narrativization and the grounding of identity in memory as a dimension of human consciousness. From the time of Locke on, in the Anglo-European discourse, personal identity as a state of continuous subjectivity has been intertwined with narrating and tropes of writing as a special effect. But if identity is grounded in memory, and in the ability to remember and narrate, then fluidity of memory will preclude the traditional grounding of stable identity. As Theodore Adorno expressed it,

The unstable character of traditional philosophy's solid identity can be learned from its guarantor, the individual human consciousness. To Kant, this is the generally

¹⁸ Harding's study is a wonderful revelation of Milton's rhetorical stratagems to "implant in the minds of his readers a secret, furtive, tentative uneasiness about Adam and Eve—not so much doubts as the shadows of doubts—while simultaneously maintaining the illusion of their entire sinlessness" (69).

¹⁹ Pierce adds to—or reflects—the situation by making seemingly contradictory assessments of "characters." For example, at one point we read about "preparation for the transfer of power into Los later in the poem" (117) and later we read that "Los becomes a mere product of the Fall who will disappear at the end of time" (122). Pierce claims that it was the development of Tharmas as a "significant character" that caused Blake to abandon his elaborate copperplate fair copy (114), but even though Tharmas "as chaos, is father to Los, the human creative principle" (116) and has "symbolic ascendancy over the other Zoas" (125) and it is his cry that "begins the action of the poem and expresses the universal anxiety felt by all the characters in the work" (126), he is said to have "only very local and very limited effect in the plot" (117). If these contradictions are meant to be statements that apply to different stages of revision of the poem, Pierce needs to be much more precise in his formulations.

predesigned unit underlying every identity. If fact, if an older person looking back has started early on a more or less conscious existence, he will distinctly remember his own distant past. It creates a unity. Yet the 'I' which he remembers in this unreality this I turns simultaneously into another, into a stranger to be detachedly observed. (154)

The analogue for a Kantian identity is a belief that time is related to a fundamental continuum that provides the condition of possibility for memory and narrative. Paul Ricoeur, in *Time and Narrative*, has given a thorough and exhaustive treatment of this concept, arguing that time is possible because of a continuum we are always in, a *chronos* uninterruptedly continuous with the earliest "archaic" moment (*arkhè*, as beginning, origin, principle). Ricoeur presents Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* as a prime example of his theory, claiming that the novel demonstrates the connection of the narrator's involuntary memories through the non-temporal zone or grounding continuum that Proust calls "time." Freud subjectifies this concept and problematizes it, by hypothesizing an unconscious that functions like Ricoeur's continuum for the individual psyche: "It is a prominent feature of unconscious processes that they are indestructible. In the unconscious nothing can be brought to an end, nothing is past or forgotten" (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, SE 5:577–78). This unerring repository of our past with its equivocal power is both the problem Freud sought to solve and the solution. For Freud, the unconscious contains an unchanging record of the past, somehow "written" in us in a mysterious material form. But consciousness "circulates a mobile and ungrounded *representation* of these contents to which direct access is theoretically impossible. These two memories cohabit within us but cohere nowhere; these two pasts constitute us but conflict ceaselessly" (Terdiman 289).²⁰ The memory that might permanently ground our identity, for better or worse, is not directly available to consciousness, and the representations produced by the memory function in consciousness demonstrate a protean volatility in which things can be changed into other things interminably. Derrida observed that "The substitution of signifiers seems to be the essential activity of psychoanalytic interpretation" (210), and in this the Freudian hermeneutic and the textuality of *VALA* as manuscript are alike both in cause and effect.

Since the transition to consciousness is not a derivative or repetitive writing, a transcription duplicating an unconscious writing, it occurs in an original manner and, in its very secondariness, is originary and irreducible. Since consciousness for Freud is a surface exposed to the external world, it is here that instead of

²⁰ I am indebted in these observations to Richard Terdiman's discussion in *Present Past of Freudianism* as a theory of memory.

reading through the metaphor [i.e., of writing] in the usual sense, we must, on the contrary, understand the possibility of a writing advanced as consciousness and as acting in the world (the visible exterior or the graphism of the literal, of the literal becoming literary, etc.) in terms of the labor of the writing which circulated like psychical energy between the unconscious and the conscious. The "objectivist" or "worldly" consideration of writing teaches us nothing if reference is not made to a space of psychical writing. (Derrida 212)

I offer these observations on Freud because the prophetic ambition of Blake's *VALA* suggests the cultural equivalent of psychotherapy, and because they suggest how instability of identity and instability of text can both be related to the thematics of *VALA* and its manifestation in the text as unstable writing or manuscript—what Terdiman aptly calls "the unlimited plasticity" of representation in general and the "extravagant mobility of psychic contents" (292). For both Freudian hermeneutics and Blake's *VALA*, the basic problem is how a stable representation of the past can be possible. I also want to avoid the possible implication in my discussion that there is anything like a universal "manuscript poetics" which governs or manifests itself in all manuscript writing. I am convinced that *VALA* remained in manuscript because it became a poem about writing, and about its own writing, a dynamic, ongoing process with no conceivable end. "There is more than enough work to do on the specifics of Blake's daily (changing) practice as writer, printer, engraver, and painter" (McGann, *Literature of Knowledge* 13), while the ongoing process of writing, in its immediacy and materiality, is available for a myriad of contingent relationships to the "meaning" of innumerable texts by other authors. In spite of its shortcomings Pierce's book will have served a useful function if it directs our renewed attention to reading Blake's writing.

the books remaind still unconsumd
Still to be written & interleavd with brass & iron &
gold
Time after time for such a journey none but iron pens
Can write And adamantine leaves recieve nor can the
man who goes
The journey obstinate refuse to write time after time
VALA 70 (second portion) 39–43

In conclusion, I'd like to return to my initial statement in this review. I do believe that the manuscript of *VALA* calls out for study as a manuscript. Surely Blake deserves the kind of careful scrutiny that is being brought to bear on the manuscripts of other authors; and Blake studies, especially of *VALA*, can benefit from some of the critical and methodological gains being made in contemporary textual studies. In spite of my disappointment with Pierce's book, I want to emphasize that it is situated in an important but still rela-

tively unexplored area of Blake studies. He is right when he points out that

critical arguments do not make full use of the material complexity of the manuscript. . . . 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, colour wash, stitch marks, writing styles, paper, and so on. These matters mark the poem as graphically as its characters, themes, and narrative complexities. (xiv–xv)

My own hope is that future work on *VALA* will be broader in its focus than Pierce's book is, and will be informed by an awareness of recent textual studies and theory that can help to refine our ability to read Blake's manuscript.

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