

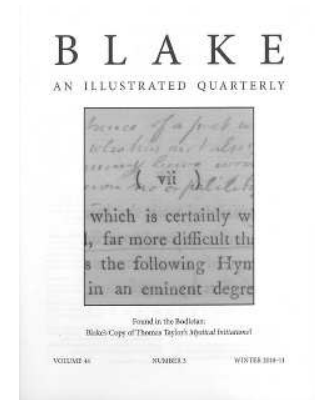
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

Michael Phillips and the Infernal Method of
William Blake, Cornell Fine Arts Museum, Rollins
College, 12 September 2009-3 January 2010

James Rovira

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111



plates comes closer to Blake's own practices. This difference in inking methods between the Manchester and Flying Horse impressions underscores the tension between an attempt to re-create aesthetically pleasing prints with the visual qualities of Blake's own and an attempt to reenact his processes. In my review of the Manchester portfolio I complained (mildly) about the rough texture of the paper on which the plates were printed. To my eyes, the texture and lighter color of the Flying Horse paper are a little closer to Blake's own. We should, however, be grateful for the instructive differences between the two publications. Except for the minor problems noted here, I suspect that the Manchester and Flying Horse editions of Blake's *Songs* are as close as we are likely to come to new prints from Blake's own plates—short of a discovery even more breathtaking than the nineteen *Grave* watercolors.

Much of Phillips's essay in the Flying Horse portfolio deals with Blake's own etching and printing methods rather than with their reenactment. Many of his observations are controversial, including the depth of bite in Blake's early relief etchings and the type of inking instrument he used (see notes 16 and 18 here). Phillips relies heavily on the description of Blake's methods in Jackson and Chatto, *A Treatise on Wood Engraving*, and particularly their comment that Blake "was accustomed to wipe the ink out where it had touched in the hollows. As this occupied more time than the mere inking of the plate, his progress in printing was necessarily slow."¹⁹ Phillips believes that the Jackson and Chatto account has considerable authority because it "suggests that they visited Blake in his studio at No. 3 Fountain Court, the Strand, some time between Jackson's arrival in London in 1824 and Blake's death in August 1827" (11). These statements and Phillips's own experiences with relief printing lead him to conclude that Blake's art of illuminated printing required exacting craftsmanship and painstaking, time-consuming labor. For Phillips, "the evidence" shows "that the processes of creation and reproduction were rarely accomplished simply or easily" and that "Blake's method of production was neither simple nor efficient"²⁰

In the 453 double-column pages of *Blake and the Idea of the Book*, Viscomi does not cite the Jackson and Chatto description of Blake's method and, in stark contrast to Phillips's views, claims that "inking small relief plates ... and printing them ... was relatively easy" and that, "working alone with handmade ink and a linen dabber," he "pulled thirty good impressions" from "electrotypes" of the *Songs of Innocence* title page and "The Lamb" in "less than two hours."²¹ My own study of Blake's prints etched in relief led me to conclude that,

"in the majority of his relief etchings, Blake did not have to wipe bitten surfaces in order to keep them clean enough to meet his own inking and printing requirements."²² I have consistently emphasized the ways in which relief etching is a direct and autographic process joining invention and execution, one that freed Blake from the trammels of his profession as an intaglio engraver of other artists' designs. These practical characteristics allowed Blake to claim that his process "combines the Painter and the Poet" and "produces works at less than one fourth of the expense" of "Letter-press and Engraving."²³ These differing views are not merely trivial disputes over technical details, for they evince fundamentally different visions of Blake. Perhaps Viscomi and I could be accused of succumbing to a now-discredited romantic ideology in which "first thoughts are best in art, second thoughts in other matters."²⁴ Perhaps Phillips could be accused of assuming that original composition and execution are as time-consuming as replication and succumbing to a modernist literary ideology in which complexity is the hallmark of genius.

This is not the place to engage further in this long-running debate. Rather, it is the time to welcome, indeed to celebrate, the two publications of scholarship and beauty which it has been my pleasure to review in *Blake*.

22. Essick, *Printmaker* 104.

23. "To the Public," *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor-Random House, 1988) 692. I suspect that part of the savings in "expense" can be accounted for by savings in labor.

24. A remark attributed to Blake in Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1863) 1: 370.

Michael Phillips and the Infernal Method of William Blake. Cornell Fine Arts Museum, Rollins College, 12 September 2009–3 January 2010.

Reviewed by James Rovira

Editors' note: Illustrations of the exhibition and of some of the Phillips copperplates and impressions are online at the journal's web site <<http://www.blakequarterly.org>>.

DURING the 2008-09 academic year, Michael Phillips served as an inaugural scholar in residence of the Winter Park Institute of Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida. Phillips presented a series of lectures on Blake, conducted printmaking demonstrations, and produced in the studio a facsimile edition of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* for the institute. His production of this facsimile edition served as the basis of an exhibition at the Cornell Fine Arts

19. [John Jackson and William Andrew Chatto], *A Treatise on Wood Engraving, Historical and Practical* (London: Charles Knight, 1839) 716-17.

20. Phillips, "The Printing of Blake's *America a Prophecy*," *Print Quarterly* 21.1 (2004): 20n5, 38.

21. *Blake and the Idea of the Book* 118, 397n22. See also Viscomi, "Illuminated Printing" *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, ed. Morris Eaves (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 41: "Illuminated printing was not mysterious, complex, or difficult."

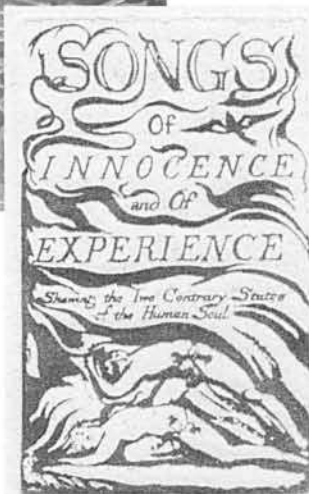
Museum of Rollins College entitled Michael Phillips and the Infernal Method of William Blake.

The exhibition included Phillips's reproductions of Blake's relief-etched copperplates and impressions taken from them of eighteen prints from the *Songs*, the frontispiece to *America a Prophecy*, and five prints from *Europe a Prophecy*, along with inking daubers, historical pigments, and other materials used in the making of these facsimiles. These impressions represent attempts to reproduce Blake's printmaking methods as closely as possible following a careful study of Blake originals, canceled plate a of *America*, and John Jackson's *A Treatise on Wood Engraving* (1839), a possible eyewitness account of Blake's procedures. Phillips's process involved very shallow

etching of the relief plates, careful inking with a dauber using a re-creation of Blake's pigmented printing ink, and extensive hand wiping of the plate before printing. The paper used in printing was handmade by Gangolf Ulbricht in consultation with John van Oosterom of JvO Papers in England to match the J. Whatman and other wove papers that Blake used. Also on display was the portfolio of eighteen facsimile impressions of the *Songs* published by Flying Horse Editions in conjunction with the exhibition. Phillips printed the facsimiles with such painstaking attention to detail that they could almost be mistaken for originals; they constitute a valuable contribution to our understanding of how Blake may have produced his illuminated books.

WILLIAM BLAKE

Songs of Innocence and of Experience



Meticulously researched by Blake scholar Michael Phillips, this facsimile edition includes 18 monochrome impressions from plates that have been relief etched following Blake's method, inked using a leather dauber, and wiped and printed exactly as he printed the first combined issue of the *Songs* in 1794.

The edition is limited to 33 copies including those now in the collections of:

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The Morgan Library and Museum, New York

The Berg Collection at New York Public Library

Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress, Washington DC

Victoria University, Toronto

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