



READING
WILLIAM
BLAKE

Saree Makdisi

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READING WILLIAM BLAKE

William Blake (1757–1827) is one of the most original and influential figures of the Romantic Age, known for his work as an artist, poet and printmaker. Grounding his ideas both in close reading and in the latest scholarship, Saree Makdisi offers an exciting and imaginative approach to reading Blake. By exploring some of the most important themes in Blake's work and connecting them to particular plates from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Makdisi highlights Blake's creative power and the important interplay between images and words. There is a consistent emphasis on the relationship between the material nature of Blake's illuminated books, including the method he used to produce them, and the interpretive readings of the texts themselves. Makdisi argues that the material and formal openness of Blake's work can be seen as the very basis for learning to read in the spirit of Blake.

SAREE MAKDISI is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Los Angeles. He is the author of *Making England Western* (2014), *Palestine Inside Out: An Everyday Occupation* (2010), *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* (2003), and *Romantic Imperialism* (Cambridge, 1998).

For my aunt Grace

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Introduction

I'm not sure that William Blake would have liked the idea of this book. He certainly thought his work needed no explanatory introduction. "You say that I want somebody to Elucidate my Ideas," he once wrote to a reader who complained to him that his work was too difficult to understand. "But I am happy to find a Great Majority of Fellow Mortals who can Elucidate My Visions & Particularly they have been Elucidated by Children who have taken a greater delight in contemplating my Pictures than I even hoped."¹ No matter how accessible Blake thought his work was, however, its reputation for difficulty has been sustained rather than reduced by the plethora of guidebooks and handbooks intended to help readers approach what he called his illuminated books. There are now many guides and companions to Blake (not to mention countless essays or articles or book chapters devoted to readings and explications of each one of the illuminated books). Many, going back all the way to S. Foster Damon's 1965 *Blake Dictionary*, have been written with the primary intention of making Blake more accessible by helping readers decipher or decode particular texts.

And yet there remains a great deal of truth to Blake's assertion that his works need no elucidation. It's not just that the more layers of interpretation we add to our approach to any one of Blake's texts, the more difficult that approach ends up being, but also that if we read Blake through all those layers we run the risk of losing much of what is most exciting and original about his work – we end up reading the layers, as it were, rather than gaining access to the work itself. When I teach Blake to undergraduate students, I urge them to dispense with the commentaries and notes offered by most editions of his work, and to read the words and images on their own rather than as filtered through the commentaries. I also tell them that every single time I have taught Blake over the past two decades, I have witnessed undergraduate readers in the classroom propose, on their very first approach to Blake, ingenious and exciting interpretations and readings of particular lines or images or words that

have never occurred to me and (far more significantly) have never been advanced in the proliferating scholarship on Blake.

That, of course, reinforces Blake's claim about the openness and accessibility of his work. No matter how much we have written about him, there is always more to see, to read, and to discover – and the best such readings and discoveries can come precisely from untrained and uninitiated readers, rather than solely from the body of scholarly experts licensed to talk about Blake. This should not, of course, be taken to diminish the value of the many books on (or guides and companions to) Blake, to which I have made my own previous contributions, I should confess. Nor should it diminish the value of teaching Blake or studying him in a class as opposed to reading him on one's own, since we can always find yet more to discover in these astonishing works when we think them through from a variety of different vantage points, or with particular questions in mind. But it does raise the question of why the world needs yet another guide to reading William Blake.

What I want to offer in the present volume, however, is neither a guide nor a companion, certainly not a guide or companion to specific poems, images, books, or other works by Blake, and absolutely not a decoding manual claiming to provide the definitive reading or explanation of this or that character, name, line, image, or reference in Blake's work. I don't think particular works by Blake should be read through the optic or filter or an interpretive frame or a commentary provided by someone else. Rather than offering such a filter or interpretive frame, what I propose in this book is a set of discussions of some of the most important concepts in Blake's work; concepts that, in our age, have come to acquire very different meanings and implications from what they used to signify in Blake's age. These discussions are not intended to frame or filter particular readings of specific works by Blake but rather simply to open up what I hope will be useful ways of thinking about them. In other words, the discussions I provide here are intended to help you develop your own readings and interpretations of Blake's work rather than imposing mine on you ("thy phantasy has imposed upon me," protests the Angel in one of the Memorable Fancies of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*; "& thou oughtest to be ashamed.")² I should add right away that the book is devoted specifically to Blake the author and printer of illuminated books (and to some of the major themes running through the latter). There are other Blakes, of course, and Blake the painter of watercolors and temperas, or Blake the intaglio engraver of his own masterpieces (such as his illustrations for the Book of Job) won't receive much attention in what is to follow.

It's useful to discuss Blake's key ideas and to try to locate them in the situation and moment out of which his work emerged because many readings of Blake approach him from the standpoint of the culture (or to be precise the particular strand of the culture) of modernity that was being consolidated in his own time – and hence they fail to recognize Blake's antipathy to that culture and his refusal of many of its core principles. Since he came from the emergent age of individualism, for example, he has often been read as a steadfast individualist, even though individual selfhood as we normally think of that notion is not only not particularly evident as a structuring principle of his work but is repeatedly scorned or condemned by it. Since he can be seen to share various forms of affiliation with the mainstream radicals of his day – including a distaste for the hereditary power of England's traditional political elite – he has long been seen as an advocate of the rights of man in the mold of Tom Paine or the artisan activists of the London Corresponding Society (one of the earliest organizations dedicated to the cause of British democracy). The word “rights” doesn't occur anywhere in the illuminated books, however, whereas “desire,” the very bane of London radicalism (which often saw itself as engaged in a war against the unregulated desires of a dissipated and indulgent, “unmanly,” or Orientalized aristocracy) is one of the most important principles driving Blake's work. Since the work is replete with many adoring references to Christ, he has long been read in conventional Christian terms, even though “priests” are right next to “kings” in his array of villains, and churches collapsed into palaces and prisons. And his many references to England have long been taken to justify views of him as a jingoistic nationalist, even though his work makes it clear that he sees the lineaments of God in “every man from every clime,” and not only in Englishmen.

Trying to force Blake to fit the interpretive grid of the dominant form of modernity that structures our present-day world doesn't work because he was at odds with so many of its ideas and values. In an age of individualism, he articulated a view of our being that insisted that each of us is tied in with and inseparable from others, and that we share a common unity in God. In an age of war and commerce, he insisted on the values of love and the imagination. At the very peak of the industrial revolution, he invented a method of printing that stood the logic of industrial production on its head, using its technologies to slowly and laboriously produce a stream of handcrafted artworks that bore no relation whatsoever to the endless flood of cheap mass-produced commodities that was already beginning to wash over England and the rest of the world. And

in an age when the British empire was beginning to accumulate more and more territory and to dominate the lives of millions of people around the world, Blake refused the idea that one people could claim superiority over another, and he steadfastly rejected the notions of war, occupation, massacre, and ethnic cleansing that have been the hallmarks of empire in the modern age.

If all this makes Blake sound as though he was out of synch with his own time, there is certainly truth in that. And yet the other way of thinking that he was out of synch with his own time is to suggest that he also saw the potential carried within modernity for creating a very different kind of world, more closely integrated and networked, and yet also fairer, motivated by principles of love and sharing rather than aggressive, acquisitive selfishness. Strangely enough, this makes Blake all the more valuable for us not only as a figure to be more thoroughly grounded and located in his time, but also as an observer and a critic of our own, since it was in his day that our age was violently given birth. In observing our age from an odd angle, he helps us better understand it.

Both his profession and his location may have helped him in this. As I mentioned briefly and return to discuss at greater length in the chapters to follow, his status as a professional engraver – but one who used the printing technology of copperplate engraving to stand its reproductive commercial logic on its head – gave him a uniquely privileged standpoint from which to think through and develop a critique of an industrial culture that was based precisely on the same logic of blind repetition and unimaginative copying, essential to commercial engraving, that Blake set out to subvert and contest. And his status as a Londoner gave him an unobstructed view of the emergence and development of a global system of empire and exploitation from its very center.

Indeed, London in Blake's time was altered beyond recognition by the same processes of empire and commercial and industrial growth that would go on to transform the rest of the world. In his own lifetime he would have seen his native Soho be transformed from a heterogeneous and unevenly cosmopolitan district at what had been the edge of the urban built-up area to one caught on the wrong side of the virtual wall between the "respectable" and the "unrespectable" that was developed in John Nash's Regent Street project. Regent Street, London's first modern urban renewal project, was designed to introduce speed and movement into densely packed urban neighborhoods. In so doing, it separated those parts of the metropolis where freedom of circulation and of communication were privileged from those other parts where everything seemed to grind to

a halt in disorderly degradation. The project was in that sense, as Nash himself put it, designed to effect "a boundary and complete separation between the inhabitants of the first classes of society, and those of the inferior classes."³ The very same lines of distinction and axes of superiority and inferiority, development and underdevelopment, civilization and barbarism, Occidentalism and Orientalism, that helped to define the world-space of empire were also in play and actively imposed on London itself. Not only would Blake have rubbed shoulders with people from every corner of the planet, but his frequent walks between Soho and the City, where he worked with publishers including the great Joseph Johnson, would have taken him right through the area of Seven Dials and St. Giles's, whose inhabitants came to be seen from the standpoint of the prosperous and respectable as culturally, civilizationally, and racially indistinguishable from those of India or Africa or Arabia: a third-world Orient right in the middle of Westernizing London.⁴ Toward the end of such a walk, or as he would have prepared to turn right to cross Blackfriars Bridge over to Lambeth (where he moved in the 1790s), Blake would have seen the very embodiments of state and religious power so frequently condemned in his work. At the junction of Fleet Street and Ludgate Hill across what had been the Fleet Market, for example – the crossroads linking the publishing world around St. Paul's Churchyard, where Joseph Johnson's shop was, with Blake's residences at one time or another in Soho and Lambeth – he would have taken in, in all but a single glance, the commercial charters "near where the charter'd Thames does flow," the Fleet Prison, the notorious Bridewell workhouse, the shadow of Newgate Prison just a little farther along and, rising above it all, the great dome of St. Paul's. That conjuncture – commerce, state, and religious power all in a single glance – gives new meaning to the cries and groans we hear in "London" in *Songs of Experience*.

Each of the following short chapters offers a brief discussion of what I see as the most important concepts animating Blake's illuminated books, from joy and desire to power and making. To ground the discussion, I have focused each chapter on a reading of one of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, the work that is generally regarded as the "gateway drug" to the world of Blake's illuminated books since it is both accessible and widely available – and is also by far the most likely text with which any student of Blake will begin. The readings and arguments are offered with the aim of opening up pathways and avenues into Blake's work and his ideas. It will quickly be evident that I think Blake's work need not be – and really cannot be – read systematically, since by its very

nature it offers an open network through which we can trace our own interpretive paths. I hope these chapters will be read in the same way as you find and pick up what is useful and what gives you something to think with or of or about and leave behind that which does not. They are offered in the hope that you will quickly develop your own way to read in the spirit of Blake.