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"The Eye Altering Alters All": Blake and Esthetic Perception

by NICHOLAS O. WARNER

IN THE current climate of critical diversity and methodological experimentation, it is natural to speculate on the value of various critical theories in approaching the notoriously recalcitrant work of William Blake. Among the plethora of such approaches, two that reveal a striking affinity with Blake's own esthetic theories and practice are E. H. Gombrich's concept of "the beholder's share" and Wolfgang Iser's phenomenologically based theory of reader-response. Blake's work is, of course, in no way reducible to the concerns of these or any other critical methodologies. But the two approaches to be discussed here provide a useful theoretical framework for studying Blake, in addition to the critical perspectives that have already been applied to his work.1 The insights of both Gombrich and Iser, those of the former applied to Blake's art, those of the latter to his writing, are particularly helpful in achieving the "energy of response" that Blake, as Northrop Frye long ago observed, demands.2 Their specific connections to Blake lie in an anti-Lockean epistemology which affirms the active nature of perception, and in their emphasis on the artist's transformation of traditional material. Before going on to a closer examination of these connections, we would do well to begin by looking at the clues that Blake himself gives us for probing his work and our relationship to it.

I

BLAKE repeatedly seems to call for a critical approach geared to creative perception and response: "A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees"; "The Sun's Light when he unfolds it / Depends on the

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1. Among recent studies to view Blake through critical lenses other than the archetypal one developed by Frye, the most notable are, to my mind, Anne Mellor's Blake's Human Form Divine (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1974), which discusses Blake's work in terms of Wolfflin's theories of open and closed form; W. J. T. Mitchell's Blake's Composite Art (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), a study of visual-verbal connections in Blake that often employs a structuralist perspective; Diana Hume George's Blake and Freud (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980), in which each of these figures is read in terms of the other; and Leopold Damrosch, Jr.'s Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth, a densely allusive work that draws heavily on French linguistics and structuralist criticism. Gombrich partially informs Mellor's and Mitchell's discussions of Blake, but Iser's work, as far as I know, has never been related to Blake.

Organ that beholds it”; “the Eye altering alters all” (E., pp. 35, 257, 476). Again and again Blake insists that what our eyes behold is partly the product, as well as the object, of our own perception. This view of the relativity and creativity of perception forms one of the most important themes of that central work in the Blakean canon, _The Marriage of Heaven and Hell_ (still one of the best glosses on Blake’s thought). Germane to the whole work is the paradox that one angel’s heaven is another’s hell, or perhaps that one angel’s hell is a devil’s heaven. Even humanity’s fall is seen from two entirely different viewpoints: “It indeed appear’d to Reason as if Desire was cast out, but the Devils account is, that the Messiah fell. & formed a heaven of what he stole from the Abyss” (MHH, E., p. 34). And, in one of the Memorable Fancies from _The Marriage_, Blake gives his theory of perception a humorous twist in the narrator’s description of his encounter with a pompous angel. After showing the narrator a vision of Leviathan, “advancing toward us with all the fury of a spiritual existence,” the angel fearfully

... clim’d up from his station into the mill; I remain’d alone, & then this appearance was no more, but I found myself sitting on a pleasant bank beside a river by moon-light hearing a harper who sung to the harp, & his theme was, The man who never alters his opinion is like standing water, & breeds reptiles of the mind.

But I arose, and sought for the mill. & there I found my Angel, who surprised asked me, how I escaped?

I answerd. All that we saw was owing to your metaphysics. ... (MHH, E., pp. 40–41)

This parable of the relativity of perception demonstrates Blake’s belief that seeing is not mere sensation, but a process contingent on expectations and preconceptions as well as on sensory data. In matters of perception, as in so much for Blake, “One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression” (MHH, E., p. 43). The eye contributes to the reality it perceives, as Blake never tires of asserting, most notably in his famous letter to the Reverend Dr. Trusler, and in _A Vision of the Last Judgment_.

In the letter to Dr. Trusler (August 23, 1799), Blake answers the reverend’s charge of obscurity. His response turns into a manifesto affirming the relativity of perception and the importance of perceiver involvement in the comprehension of art: “You say that I want somebody to elucidate my Ideas. But you ought to know that What is Grand is necessarily obscure to weak men. That which can be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care. The wisest of the Ancients considerrd what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction because it rouzes the faculties to act” (E., p. 676).

A few sentences later, Blake gives us one of his fullest statements on

3. All references to Blake’s writings are taken from David V. Erdman’s _The Poetry and Prose of William Blake_ (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1970), cited in the text as _E_.

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the significance of individual differences in perception and on the im­
portance of the inner eye in determining what the outer eye beholds:

I see Every thing I paint In This World, but Every body does not see alike. To the Eyes of
a Miser a Guinea is more beautiful than the Sun, & a bag worn with the use of Money has
more beautiful proportions than a Vine filled with Grapes. The tree which moves some to
tears of joy is in the Eyes of others only a Green thing that stands in the way . . . As a
man is So he Sees. As the Eye is formed such are its Powers. (E., p. 677)

From Blake’s letter, we can see that what troubles him is not a simple
difference of opinion or perspective, but rather the arrogant, positivistic
denial of the existence or validity of his own visions. Blake contemptu­
ously rejects the assumption that perception is a passive and objective
affair, the mere registration of stimuli on an inactive observer. “As a
man is, So he Sees,” Blake tells Trusler; the perception and evaluation of
beauty (the sun above a guinea, a vine of grapes above a sack of money)
reflect the inner condition of the perceiver. Yet Blake could just as easily
have said, “As a man sees, so he is,” and, in fact, he comes close to
saying just that in Jerusalem:

    Los rolled, his Eyes into two narrow circles, then sent him
    Over Jordan; all terrified fled: they became what they beheld.
    If perceptive Organs vary: Objects of Perception seem to vary:
    If the Perceptive Organs close: their Objects seem to close also
    (30:53-56, E., p. 175)

For Blake, perception involves creation. Thus, by looking only through
the narrow chinks of his cavern, Dr. Trusler creates a frighteningly nar­
row sense of reality in which he himself is trapped; because he refuses to
look beyond the confines of “This World,” he can know no other
reality than that which “This World” offers.

The reader will have noticed that Blake’s statements on the general
nature of perception in his letter to Dr. Trusler are fused with his theory
of perception on the esthetic plane. Without transition or qualification,
Blake’s ideas of perceptual activity carry over to a consideration of
works of art and their perceivers. By placing so much emphasis on the
role of the audience, Blake makes the work of art depend on the per­
ceiver for any meaningful existence. The work comes into being only
through the consciousness of the reader or viewer whose faculties are
sufficiently roused. By the same token, that “which is too Explicit” in a
work of art precludes the kind of esthetic engagement Blake calls for. In
part, this explains how Dr. Trusler, at the same time that he condemns
Blake’s work as fantastic, refuses to rouse his own faculties to meet the
challenging difficulty (by Blake’s own admission) of that work. By so
doing, Trusler merely perpetuates the limited reality he perceives, and
ends up resembling the angel in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, de­
tecting in Blake’s work not the sublime songs of a harper, but only a
chaotic, fearsome Leviathan.
One of the more striking contrasts in Blake’s letter, that between sun and guinea, reappears in different form just over a decade later, when it plays a significant role in the conclusion to Blake’s *A Vision of the Last Judgment* (1810), a highly important document in Blake’s theories of perception:

Error or Creation will be Burned Up & then & not till then Truth or Eternity will appear Its Burnt up the Moment Men cease to behold it I assert for My self that I do not behold the Outward Creation & that to me it is hindrance & not Action it is as the dirt upon my feet No part of Me What it will be Questiond When the Sun rises do you not see a round Disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea Oh no I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question a Window concerning a Sight I look thro it & not with it. (*E.*, p. 555)

In these last sentences of *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, far from being the disoriented dreamer occasionally depicted both by admirers and detractors, Blake demonstrates his awareness of what we generally call the “real world” precisely through the very comparison he uses to dismiss the ultimate importance of that world. Blake knows full well that to most of us the sun indeed looks like a fiery yellow coin in the sky, but what is more important to Blake is how his imagination and the sun fuse to produce a vision of divinity emerging through the physical. Like Pliny before him, Blake considered the mind to be the “real instrument of sight and observation,” while “the eyes act as a sort of vessel receiving and transmitting the visible portion of the consciousness.” The truest kind of perception is a semi-receptive, semi-creative state in which, as another Romantic poet was to put it, “we receive but what we give” (Coleridge, “Dejection: An Ode”).

II

Many of the statements we have examined so far are echoed in E. H. Gombrich’s masterpiece of esthetic analysis, *Art and Illusion*. Like Blake, and like members of the modern phenomenological school such as Ernst Cassirer and Aron Gurwitsch, Gombrich challenges the Lockean split between sensation and perception: “The whole distinction between sensation and perception, plausible as it was, had to be given up in the face of evidence from experiments with human beings and animals. Nobody has ever seen a visual sensation, not even the impressionists, however ingeniously they stalked their prey.” One may be

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reminded here of Blake's scornful allusion to Lockean theory in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*:

> With what sense is it that the chicken shuns the ravenous hawk?  
> With what sense does the tame pigeon measure out the expanse?  
> With what sense does the bee form cells? . . . (E., p. 46)

This anti-Lockean position is evident also in Gombrich's discussion of the connections among suggestion, expectation and perception, where he defines perception as an activity of *projection* as well as *reception*. Describing the use of inkblots to suggest everything from landscapes to ghosts, Gombrich shows us how attitudes and expectations "influence our perceptions and make us ready to see, or hear, one thing rather than another."7

Given this basic orientation toward the problem of perception and the influence of suggestion on perception, it is not surprising that Gombrich stresses the importance of an artist's careful use of suggestive detail. For Gombrich, it is part of the mark of a great innovative artist to use suggestion in such a way as to stimulate the viewer's expectation and engagement, to lead the viewer into the work itself: "The artist gives the beholder increasingly 'more to do,' he draws him into the magic circle of creation and allows him to experience something of the thrill of 'making' which had once been the privilege of the artist."8 Yet to increase the "beholder's share" in the artistic process, the artist must avoid the tame repetition of conventional, accepted formulas. In a discussion highly applicable to Blake's re-working of traditional iconography, Gombrich notes that "the greater the probability of a symbol's occurrence in any given situation, the smaller will be its information content. Where we can anticipate, we need not listen. It is in this context that projection will do for perception."9 On the other hand, Gombrich reminds us, the stimulation of viewer expectation and response requires the artist to make concessions to "the recipient's knowledge." Otherwise, successful communication would be impossible. At times, however, the artist encounters difficulties in reception by failing to make sufficient concessions—a problem which has plagued Blake both during and after his lifetime. Blake's innovations, particularly with regard to traditional symbolism, often exceed what Gombrich calls the viewer's "horizon of expectation," and hence also exceed the level of perceptual understanding not only of Blake's contemporaries but of later audiences as well.10

For examples of this problem in Blake's use of traditional imagery,

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one has but to think of his emblems for "The Gates of Paradise," whose iconographic elements have been pieced together painstakingly over the years; of the repeated moon-boats in Jerusalem—puzzling images until we understand their oblique connections to traditional Christian iconography of both the moon and ship. Similarly, Blake's figure of the Wife of Bath, from the Canterbury Pilgrims engraving, does not mean much to us until we realize that Blake has transformed her into an image of the Whore of Babylon through the addition of the goblet, cross, heart pendant and general style of dress iconographically associated with the Great Whore.

These instances of iconographic modification show that, in addition to Blake's individual technical or formal vocabulary (which he, like all painters, must have), Blake uses tradition to build up an individual symbolic or iconographic vocabulary that both reflects and revises its sources—revises them at times almost beyond the point of recognition. For, while Blake uses the weight of traditional images (e.g., moon-like boat, goblet and garb of the Whore of Babylon), images fraught with a significance that has been intensified by generations of artistic and literary repetition, he simultaneously seeks to empty these images of their conventional associations, to correct and re-shape accepted symbolic signs through a singular process of recombination and juxtaposition. Herein lie both a strength and a weakness in Blake. The traditional image is never a mere cipher in Blake, it always requires our active interpretive engagement; yet Blake's modifications of familiar images may be so extensive, or his sources often so arcane, that the interpretive engagement he seeks is actually blocked. In words highly reminiscent of this situation and of the general relationship between Blake and his audience, Gombrich writes that the innovative artist's "reward might easily be the public's finding his equivalent hard to read and hard to accept because it has not yet been trained to interpret these new combinations."

Gombrich's point is clear: the artist needs to tread carefully the thin line between conceding too much to his audience and conceding too little, between slavishly following tradition and blindly rejecting it. However much we may admire Blake's art, we must admit that his apparent misjudgment of the nature and abilities of his audience (especially with regard to its reading of symbolism) all too often placed him in the latter of these categories. (Of course, we should be aware that Blake's difficulty could partly be the result of an intentional use of obscurity as a screen from political reprisal.) In any event, while the problems arising

from Blake's obscurity and our own difficulty in training ourselves to penetrate that obscurity may never be entirely overcome, Gombrich's theories can help us deal more confidently with the numerous conundrums that so radically revisionary an art as Blake's presents. The tension Gombrich describes between tradition and innovation, between concessions and stimulation, can assist us in describing Blake's complex stance toward tradition. Similarly, his analysis of "the beholder's share" can clarify our own relationship to Blake's work and our need to engage actively with it.

As we look at Blake the painter through the prism of *Art and Illusion*, we realize that he consistently involves us in the process of his artistic production, draws us into what Gombrich has called the "magic circle of creation," invites us to enter his "Images of Wonder" on the "Fiery Chariot . . . of Contemplative Thought" (*A Vision of the Last Judgment*, E., p. 550). Blake the poet involves us in a similar activity, which we may address by using the literary theory of Wolfgang Iser, whose phenomenologically based philosophy of reading complements the visual theories discussed above.

III

Like Gombrich, with whom his ideas often overlap, Iser stresses the role of expectation and expectation-reversal in the reading process, particularly with respect to allusions to earlier writers and literary traditions. Henry Fielding, for instance, "calls to mind a whole repertoire of familiar literary 'genres,' so that these allusions will arouse particular expectations from which his novel then proceeds to diverge."13 Such divergence from expectation extensively marks Blake's work, both visual and verbal. Indeed, the reversal of expectation, as well as what Iser throughout his work calls the "negation of the familiar," are taken further in Blake than in any previous author, and will not appear in so radical a form again until Joyce. An extreme example of Blake's alluding to a familiar source only to reverse our usual associations with it occurs in *Jerusalem*, where, at first, we seem to be given a re-telling of the story of Mary and Joseph. But the conventional image of the purest of women and of her traditionally elderly husband, both patient, serene handservants of the Lord, quickly becomes a portrayal of a tempestuous, emotional domestic crisis:

... And Mary said, If thou put me away from thee
Dost thou not murder me? Joseph spoke in anger & fury. Should I
Marry a Harlot & an Adulteress? Mary answered, Art thou more pure
Than thy Maker who forgiveth Sins & calls again Her that is Lost
Tho She hates. he calls her again in love. I love my dear Joseph

But he driveth me away from his presence, yet I hear the voice of God
In the voice of my Husband. tho he is angry for a moment, he will not
Utterly cast me away. if I were pure, never could I taste the sweets
Of the Forgiveness of Sins! if I were holy! I never could behold the tears
Of love! of him who loves me in the midst of his anger in the furnace of fire.

Ah my Mary: said Joseph: weeping over & embracing her closely in
His arms . . . . (Jerusalem, 61:4-15, E., p. 209)

In this passage, Blake forces us to reassess our traditional image of
Mary and Joseph, to take the material he has given us and to assimilate
and organize it before we go on. Indeed, we must organize this episode,
and come to grips with its reversal of expected stereotypes, before we
can go on. This passage, like many of those in the works discussed by
Iser in The Implied Reader, becomes “a test for the reader’s own capa­
bilities.”

By negating our familiar assumptions about the parents of
Jesus, Blake leads us to reassess those assumptions, not, to be sure, as a
trivial instance of shocking the bourgeoisie, but as a serious challenge to
unexamined, conventional expectations and responses. We may agree or
disagree with Blake’s myth of Mary and Joseph, but we must go
through a process of entering the work and re-evaluating our previous
assumptions before we can go on to absorb the rest of the text.

In The Act of Reading, his second book in English on reader-re­
sponse, Iser notes of Ulysses that “the lack of any connecting reference
produces a gap between the different elements, and this can only be
filled by the reader’s imagination.”

This statement, as well as Iser’s
view of expectation-reversal examined above, can be applied to the
often surprising disjunctions between text and design in Blake’s com­
site art, to the spatial gaps between textual and visual treatments of re­
lated incidents. The third plate of America, for instance, provides us
with a visual counterpart to lines 11 and 12 found on plate 1; and in
Jerusalem, the scene on plate 8 is not described until plate 63. While
plate 8 shows us a small female figure strapped to an enormous moon,
we must wait fifty-five plates to get a verbal rendition of this scene—
“the Fairies lead the Moon along the Valley of the Cherubim.” The
texts in plates 42 and 80 of Jerusalem speak of “Serpent Temples,” but
the only illustration of these is found on plate 100, which has no text at
all. What is the rationale for this syncopation of text and design? One
reason, as Frye points out, is to bind the entire work into a tightly inter­
connected unit. But this startling practice also serves to keep us from
being lulled into seeing Blake’s designs, in his view the products of
divine inspiration equivalent to his poetry (as he explains in A Descrip­
tive Catalogue, E., p. 532), as mere “pictures of” what goes on in the

text. Instead, we learn to see his designs not as visual re-statements of the text, but as a narrative form independent of though complementary to the text. Once we are awake to this aspect of Blake’s design, we can become more alert to the possibility of subtle connections between seemingly unrelated texts and illustrations, more active as participants in the experience of Blake’s art.

If we carry our speculations a step further, we may also see that perhaps Blake was trying, through the syncopation of design and text, to subvert his reader-viewer’s dependence on memory in approaching his work. That Mnemosyne was mother of the Muses suggests the closeness of the traditional relationship between memory and art, in which memory actually stands at the core of the esthetic experience, be it from the point of view of the creator, who assembles and re-combines what he remembers, or of the audience, which perceives and understands the work of art in relation to its own set of memories. In the words of Mario Praz, “Memory . . . does not assume in art a subsidiary or ancillary function . . . but is itself Art, in which all the various arts are united without residua. Ancient mythology saw this clearly . . . when it imagined that Mnemosyne was the mother of the Muses.”17 Such a statement would be anathema to Blake, who condemned memory as corporeal, not eternal, and who saw it as the source of all imitative, weak art. For Blake, “Imagination has nothing to do with Memory,”18 a statement similar to one expressed by Milton (in the preface to Book II of The Reason of Church Government) and quoted by Blake: “A work of Genius is a Work ‘Not to be obtain’d by the Invocation of Dame Memory and her Syren Daughters, but by Devout Prayer to that Eternal Spirit, who can enrich all utterance and knowledge and sends out his Seraphim with the hallowed fire of his altar to touch and purify the Lips of whom he pleases.’ ”19 With Blake’s view in mind, we may see his separation of text and design as a possible attempt to obliterate, as much as possible, the reader’s natural reliance on memory to carry him through any given work. The result of this is that the reader, whose progress is blocked by disjointed text and design, needs to go back through the work, looking for and making connections between different, at times widely separated plates. In doing so, the reader-viewer would be confronted directly by related though separate plates, and would thus approximate Blake’s own act of creative inspired vision, which Blake saw as superior to and different from memory. Expressed in such Blakean terms as inspiration and vision, this process may appear somewhat idealized, but it is really a close relative of the kind of creative

reading activity set forth by Iser, where the "convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence." As Iser explains, the product of this activity is "what we might call the virtual dimension of the text"; neither text itself, nor the imagination of the reader, the virtual dimension of the text is "the coming together of text and imagination." 20

IV

Although neither of them mentions Blake's work in the books cited here, Gombrich and Iser have provided us with a theoretical context and vocabulary for analyzing the perceptual role of Blake's reading-viewing audience. As an exploration of this role shows, Blake's work frequently depends on a dramatic negation of traditional, time-honored associations at the same time that it evokes those very associations. By imposing his own interpretation on the symbols of the past, Blake seeks to correct what he sees as the inaccurate or incomplete conceptions (Gombrich's "traditional schemata") that underlie and perpetuate those symbols or traditions. Blake's revision and redefinition of traditional elements is nothing less than an attempt to revise and redefine our entire cultural perspective, to defamiliarize the whole way we look at our own traditions and, finally, at ourselves.

This concern with teaching us to see afresh links Blake not only with Iser and Gombrich but, as the word defamiliarization suggests, with the early twentieth-century practitioners of Russian Formalism. The Formalist concept of ostranenie, literally "making strange" (defamiliarization), this device of stripping away conventional elements so as to avoid the automatization of perception, 21 serves as an umbrella-like term that covers much of what has been said earlier about perception in the writings of Blake, Gombrich and Iser. A connection between a visionary poet like Blake and the Russian Formalists may seem odd to readers acquainted with the Formalist preoccupation with technical matters and "literary science." But in spite of such concerns, the Formalists frequently emphasized an almost Blakean elimination of cultural blinders, and defined true art as a process of constant revision, where each great new work of art is as a child that betrays the features of its parents, even while rebelling against those parents. For the Formalists, as for Gombrich, Iser and Blake, such innovativeness is closely allied with the perceptual activity of the reading or viewing audience. Railing against the perceptual complacency of his society, the famous Formalist theoretician Victor Shklovsky claims that

We have lost our awareness of the world; we are like a violinist who has ceased to feel the bow and the strings, we have ceased to be artists in everyday life, we do not love our

houses and clothes, and easily part from a life of which we are not aware. Only the creation of new forms of art can restore to man sensation of the world, can resurrect things and kill pessimism. 22

A similar spirit not only pervades the criticism of Gombrich and Iser, but underlies Blake's desire to accomplish his "great task":

To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes
Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought: into Eternity
Ever expanding in the Bosom of God. the Human Imagination
(Jerusalem, 5:17-20, E., p. 146)

Blake's stance toward tradition and toward his readers, like so many other aspects of his work, is a manifestation of this expansive passion for rekindling deadened, passive perception into living and life-giving vision.

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