



R E M E M B R A N C E

John E. Grant, 1925–2020

BY ALEXANDER S. GOURLAY

ALEXANDER S. GOURLAY (agourlay@risd.edu) teaches at the Rhode Island School of Design.

“Singular & Particular Detail is the Foundation of the Sublime”

I first encountered John E. Grant as a graduate student taking a team-taught course at the University of Iowa. I had chosen it because half of it was devoted to William Hogarth—Jack’s half, the other half, was about Blake. I planned to put up with Blake, who seemed by turns naive and utterly

This tribute is adapted from the foreword to *Prophetic Character: Essays on William Blake in Honor of John E. Grant* (West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press, 2002).

opaque, and concentrate on Hogarth. When my first efforts in the course came back to me covered front and back with Jack’s marginal commentary—acidic, oracularly terse, and plentiful—I became more determined than ever to steer clear of Blake and, especially, this impossible Grant person.

It didn’t work out that way. At some point I noticed that although Jack was copiously critical of my work, he was paying extraordinary (and probably undeserved) attention to what I had written—dissecting every argument, looking up every allusion, double-checking my notes—and that even when he was laying waste to my pretensions and sophistries he was doing so without hostility or sadism. I noticed as well that if I managed to get anything right he would find it and say so. I read some of his published work and was utterly taken by his passionate contrarianism and strange prose, glittering and graceful at times, but also rambling and digressive, with occasional baffling passages in which the enthymemes seem to be suppressing all premises as too obvious to be mentioned. Particularly winning were his wit, his occasional ferocity, but most of all the great care he took to get everything as right as he possibly could, even if the result was neither immediately impressive, admirably neat, nor notably conclusive. I took a couple more courses from Jack, eventually collaborated on some articles, and wrote a dissertation with him—even lived in a basement bedroom in his house while working as an editorial assistant on the Iowa Blake Videodisc

Project.¹ I came to appreciate his great, peculiar gifts as a scholar, his honesty and doggedness as a thinker, and his extraordinary virtues as a friend and colleague—however terrifying he sometimes seemed to be in print, he was modest and courtly in person, warm and very funny in company, and a brilliant correspondent.

A chronological checklist of Jack's scholarly writings on Blake and others follows. Even the Blake pieces are only in part about Blake, and Jack also wrote in characteristic fashion about other Romantics and artists and writers as diverse as Reynolds and Magritte, Austen and Beckett. Several of his best-known essays are jeremiads against various forms of critical sloth, cant, and carelessness, but these are more properly understood as a side effect of his critical project than as central to it, explosions of exasperated energy accumulated in the course of struggling carefully through arguments that didn't prove to be worth the effort. Jack was also noted for combining a warlike spirit with exhaustive attention to detail, on the assumption that even the most passionate campaign against Error has to be conducted with due attention to Blake's "minute particulars." In struggling to avoid the kinds of mistakes he deplored, Jack regularly found himself—and sometimes lost himself—discovering the irreducible constituent atoms of the matter before him, and then dealing with them one by one. William Kupersmith, the longtime editor of *Philological Quarterly*, once remarked as he read one of Jack's long, severely detailed reviews, "This man has an instinct for the capillaries." But sweating the small stuff was not really the essence of his criticism either. The most notable theme for me, in that it accounts for so many other features of his work, is his insistence, above all, that understanding a work of art requires the interpreter to take it and its creator seriously, no matter how difficult (or impossible) it may be to prove anything definitive about the creator's intentions, and no matter how many other interesting things might also be going on in the individual or collective unconscious, or in the broader culture, or in the mind of the critic. Jack was himself often very interested in such epiphenomena, especially when

1. The 1981–85 videodisc project, created by Jack, Mary Lynn Johnson, and Joan Sustik Huntley, proposed to link databases held in a computer to several thousand individually addressable video frames of Blake works on a videodisc; a pilot version focusing on the *Night Thoughts* designs worked very well but was not distributable for technical and copyright reasons. The full version of the project, eventually rejected for funding by the National Endowment for the Humanities, anticipated many of the features now incorporated in the *William Blake Archive* (<http://www.blakearchive.org>). The archive uses digital technologies barely dreamed of in 1985 (indeed, one NEH reviewer argued against funding the Iowa project on the grounds that a PC with a 20MB hard drive, which was needed to run it, would never be affordable). See Mary Lynn Johnson, "The Iowa Blake Videodisc Project: A Cautionary History," *Wordsworth Circle* 30 (1999).

they cast light upon matters that concerned him more—he was not a garden-variety intentionalist or a mere critical reactionary, as he sometimes appeared to be at his most harrumphing. He assumed that both artists and their interpreters are engaged in profoundly serious projects, and that critics must attend with modesty and care to the complexity and subtlety with which texts and/or pictures can convey meaning, especially meaning to which the creators might reasonably be expected to assent. That principle often led to exasperation with criticism that didn't reflect such care or that was disproportionately attentive to past criticism or to a novel theory rather than to the creator's work.

For Jack a good critic was a prophet, never a priest invoking a sacred tradition or a methodological mystery. He was always looking for ideas that were both original and useful for thinking about art, literature, and the world: prophecy in application. He collaborated and/or kept company with several great scholar-activists, but for the most part Jack's direct engagement in social causes was practical rather than theoretical—especially during the Vietnam War, when he spent a vast amount of energy on picket lines, vigils, and meetings. His more recent intellectual engagement tended to be isolated rather than collective or partisan, perhaps because telling one's best account of truth as uncompromisingly as possible is almost always impolitic in the short run.

Not all authors or artists were equally susceptible to Jack's characteristic approach. As a critic he generally focused on those who seemed to him to be most serious about their own work, then struggled to find an approach that did them justice. In the case of Blake this meant respectfully rethinking even the most basic interpretive assumptions of the first few generations of his critics and vigorously attacking subsequent interpreters when they compound the old errors. It also led Jack early to champion Blake criticism that treats his visual and verbal art together, recognizing both as equally sophisticated, inseparable products of the same unconventional, brilliant mind. Jack was not the first, loudest, or most prolific advocate of such criticism of Blake. But as a result of his efforts, along with those of several other scholars of the post-war generation, critics working today rarely assume, as they once did, that they can write about Blake's visual art without knowing and thinking about its literary contexts, or write about his poetry or prose without thinking about his art and *its* contexts. Jack's most characteristic critical move was to review the whole history of intellectual responses to a given artistic phenomenon or trope, both creative and critical, then show how the work at hand might represent a meta-response reflecting not only the most sophisticated of these responses but somehow transcending the level of understanding that they represent. These projects didn't always pan out. The stage of historical review was often so expansively and digres-

sively thorough that neither Jack nor the reader could ever quite get home again from the preliminary tour of the intellectual arena, and sometimes the transcendent dimension was so subtle that it was doubtful whether anyone but Jack could find it. But even when he didn't wrap everything up in a neat bundle, his passionate carefulness and commitment to discovering some kind of enduring truth about the art that he was examining set an extraordinarily high standard for others to follow, and most of his pieces, long or short, are sown with enigmatic references to promising critical paths that he never fully explored. If Jack told you something was worth looking into he was almost always right, even when he himself had gone off in search of some other grail.

Many of the works in the checklist will be useful reading long after the controversies that gave rise to them have been forgotten.² I particularly recommend the little-known "Apocalypse in Blake's 'Auguries of Innocence'" from 1964, the better-known "The Fate of Blake's Sun-Flower" from 1973, and the more recent "On First Encountering Blake's Good Samaritans" of 1999/2000, but there is great and enduring critical writing to be found throughout the list, much of it tucked into his book reviews. Anyone who undertakes to consider any topic that Jack covered would be well advised to read him carefully before setting out—at the very least, Jack's point of view will clear the critical sinuses, and even if he makes only a little progress in solving them, his perspective will elucidate some of the most important problems.

A good deal of Jack's work will vanish, however, not because of the quality of the thought that went into it but because it is written in the margins of papers and books, in letters, and, most famously, on museum postcards (my graduate school office-mate noticed while reading Gail Godwin's 1974 novel *The Odd Woman* that she had merged selected characteristics of Jack, someone like Ruskin, and Mr. Casaubon to create Gabriel Weeks, the Rossetti scholar who communicates with postcards carefully chosen from a vast stock in his desk). Even if one were to preserve Jack's private correspondence, most of it wouldn't mean very much to anyone other than its recipient, and even the recipient might struggle to keep up with the densely allusive sentences packed into a Grant missive, typically a large

2. I have not included most letters to editors. Some important unpublished work is not listed here—most notably the draft commentary on the *Night Thoughts* designs that Jack and David V. Erdman, Edward J. Rose, and Michael J. Tolley worked on for decades, and have occasionally circulated in manuscript. Also omitted are at least a dozen papers read at conferences but never prepared for print; once Jack solved a problem to his own satisfaction he often moved on to another rather than spending additional time to promulgate the results.

manila envelope containing several pages of prose in Jack's loopy, unambiguous handwriting, a copy ("FYI") of a carefully sharpened letter to some editor, murky photocopies of several pictures with cryptic annotations, and one or more postcards bearing only a word or two to hint at their relevance. When these packets arrived I knew how I would be spending the rest of the day, and I never threw them away when I finished them, but when an old one turns up, carefully repacked into its envelope, I usually find that I have lost the context, and that what was once a glorious puzzle has become an impenetrable enigma.

What will endure, though it won't necessarily bear his name, is the fruit of Jack's work in private consultation and correspondence. As the checklist shows, much of his best-known published work is collaborative, including *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic* (1970, with David V. Erdman), the great *Night Thoughts* edition (1980, with Erdman, Michael J. Tolley, and Edward J. Rose), and the Norton Critical Edition of *Blake's Poetry and Designs* (1979, 2nd ed. 2007, with Mary Lynn Johnson). But Jack was a collaborator in another very important way. At one time or another (and sometimes without knowing it), many Blake scholars have run something past Jack for the kind of critical Rolfing that only he could do. His commentary on a manuscript, crawling up the margins and spilling onto the backs of the pages, often reflected as much scholarly energy as the text on which he was commenting, and no essay was ever the worse for having its capillaries worked over by Jack.

A CHRONOLOGICAL CHECKLIST OF PUBLICATIONS BY JOHN E. GRANT

1. (Co-author) "The Identity of Esther Summerson." *Modern Philology* 55 (1958): 252-58 (with James H. Broderick).
2. (Co-author) "A Critical Dialogue on Shakespeare's Sonnet 71." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 1 (1959): 214-32 (with Jack M. Davis).
3. "The Art and Argument of 'The Tyger.'" *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 2 (1960): 38-60. (See also item 4.)
4. (Editor) *Discussions of William Blake*. Boston: D. C. Heath, 1961. This anthology contains an expanded version of item 3 (64-82) as well as an introduction and a summary of criticism (vii-xi).
5. "Misreadings of [Blake's] 'The Fly.'" *Essays in Criticism* 14 (1961): 481-87. (See also item 9.)
6. "Dante's Mirrors, and Apocalypse." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 4 (1962): 289-313.

7. "Animadversions upon Professor Brown's 'Apocalypse.'" *Noble Savage* 5 (1962): 12-18.
8. "Blake on Bloomsday." *Yale Review* 52 (1963): 591-98. A review of Bloom, *Blake's Apocalypse*.
9. "Interpreting Blake's 'The Fly.'" *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 67 (1963): 593-613. Rept. in *Blake: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Northrop Frye. Twentieth Century Views. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966. Also rept. (trans.) in *Interpretationen*. Ed. Willi Erzgraber. Frankfurt: Fischer Bücherei, 1970.
10. "Apocalypse in Blake's 'Auguries of Innocence.'" *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 5 (1964): 489-508. (A shorter version was read at the 1961 meeting of the Modern Language Association.)
11. "Blake: Original and New." *Modern Language Quarterly* 25 (1964): 356-64. A review of Damon, *Blake's "Grave"*; Adams, *William Blake*; Bentley, ed., *William Blake, "Vala" or "The Four Zoas"*.
12. "The Colors of Prophecy." *Nation* 200 (1965): 91-92. A review of Keynes, *Blake: Poet. Printer. Prophet*.
13. Review of Bostetter, *The Romantic Ventriloquists. Keats-Shelley Journal* 14 (1965): 93-96.
14. Review of Hagstrum, *Blake: Poet & Painter. Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 24 (1965): 126-28.
15. Review of Bentley and Nurmi, *A Blake Bibliography. Modern Philology* 63 (1966): 351-64.
16. Reviews of Erdman, ed., *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, with a commentary by Bloom; Damon, *A Blake Dictionary*; Ostriker, *Vision and Verse in William Blake. Philological Quarterly* 45 (1966): 533, 533-35, 536-38.
17. "A Checklist of Writings by and about Northrop Frye." *Northrop Frye in Modern Criticism: English Institute Essays, 1965*. Ed. Murray Krieger. New York: Columbia University Press, 1966. 147-88.
18. (a and b) "Tense and the Sense of Blake's 'The Tyger.'" *PMLA* 81 (1966): 596-99, 600-02. A two-part response and rejoinder to F. C. Robinson, "Verb Tense in Blake's 'The Tyger,'" *PMLA* 79 (1964): 664-69, which criticized certain details of item 3 and its manifestation in item 4.
19. "The Revelation of the Grand Inquisitor." *Southern Review [Australia]* 2 (1967): 240-60. A penetrating discussion of this section of *The Brothers Karamazov*.
20. Reviews of Damon, ed., *Blake's "Job"*; Gillham, *Blake's Contrary States. Philological Quarterly* 46 (1967): 328-30.
21. (a, b, and c) "Recognizing Fathers." *Blake* 1.2 (1967): 7-9. A critique of an article by Connolly and Levine in *PMLA* 82 (1967): 257-264. "Mother of Invention, Father in Drag, or Observations on the Methodology That Brought About These Deplorable Conditions and What Then Is to Be Done." *Blake* 2.2 (1968): 29-32. A surrejoinder to a rejoinder by Connolly and Levine in *Blake* 1.3 (1967). "Mothers and Methodology." *Blake* 2.3 (1968): 50-54. A continuation of the above dispute, which is mostly about the adult accompanying the boy in *Songs* 14.
22. Review of Keynes, ed., *Blake's "Songs of Innocence and of Experience."* *Philological Quarterly* 47 (1968): 571-80.
23. "Two Flowers in the Garden of Experience." *William Blake: Essays for S. Foster Damon*. Ed. Alvin H. Rosenfeld. Providence: Brown University Press, 1969. 333-67.
24. "You Can't Write about Blake's Pictures Like That." *Blake Studies* 1 (1969): 193-202. A critique of an article by Taylor in *Blake Studies* 1 (1968).
25. (a and b) "Discussing the Arlington Court Picture: Part I, A Report on the Warner-Simmons Theory." *Blake* 3.4 (1970): 96-105. Part II, "Studying Blake's Iconography for Guidance in Interpreting the Picture." *Blake* 4.1 (1970): 12-25. (See also item 28.)
26. Review of Dorfman, *Blake in the Nineteenth Century. Philological Quarterly* 49 (1970): 328-29.
27. (a, b, and c) (Co-editor) *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970 (with David V. Erdman). It contains "From Fable to Human Vision: A Note on the First Illustration ['The Haunted Stream'] from Blake's illustrations to Milton's *L'Allegro*]" (xi-xiv) and "Envisioning the First Night Thoughts" (304-35).
28. "Redemptive Action in Blake's *Arlington Court Picture*." *Studies in Romanticism* 10 (1971): 21-26. A critique of an interpretation presented by Warner and Simmons in the same issue and a proposal for a new theory. (See also item 25.) Rept. in *The Visionary Hand: Essays for the Study of William Blake's Art and Aesthetics*. Ed. Robert N. Essick. Los Angeles: Hennessey and Ingalls, 1973.
29. "Addenda and Some Solutions to Tolley's Blake Puzzles." *Blake Studies* 3 (1971): 29-35. Comments on an article in the same issue and discussion of a previously unnoticed drawing.
30. Reviews of Erdman, *Blake: Prophet against Empire*, rev. ed.; Raine, *William Blake. Philological Quarterly* 50 (1971): 407-08, 409-10.
31. "Imagination Dead?" *James Joyce Quarterly* 8 (1971): 336-62. A contribution to a Samuel Beckett issue.
32. (a and b) "Blake's Designs for *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*: Part I, A Survey of the Designs." *Blake* 4.4 (1971): 117-34,

with a related article by Judith Rhodes, "Blake's Designs for *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*: Thematic Relationships in Diagram," 135-36. Part II, "The Meaning of Mirth and Her Companions." *Blake* 5.3 (1971-72): 190-202. Part I rept. in *The Visionary Hand: Essays for the Study of William Blake's Art and Aesthetics*. Ed. Robert N. Essick. Los Angeles: Hennessey and Ingalls, 1973.

33. Review of Paley, *Energy and Imagination*. *English Language Notes* 9 (1972): 210-16.

34. "The Visionary Perspective of Ezekiel." *Blake Studies* 4 (1972): 153-57.

35. Reviews of Bentley, ed., *The Blake Collection of Mrs. Landon K. Thorne*; Bindman, ed., *The Blake Collection of the Fitzwilliam Museum*; Bogen, ed., *The Book of Thel*; Butlin, ed., *The Blake Collection of the Tate Gallery*, rev. ed.; Todd, *William Blake: The Artist*; and four other books and articles. *Philological Quarterly* 51 (1972): 642-48.

36. "Visions in *Vala*: A Consideration of Some Pictures in the Manuscript." *Blake's Sublime Allegory: Essays on "The Four Zoas," "Milton," and "Jerusalem"*. Ed. Stuart Curran and Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973. 141-202.

37. "The Fate of Blake's Sun-Flower: A Forecast and Some Conclusions." *Blake Studies* 5 (1973): 7-58.

38. Review of Wright, *Blake's "Job": A Commentary*. *Philological Quarterly* 52 (1973): 467-68.

39. (Co-author) "Illuminated Books in the Cincinnati Art Museum." *Blake* 7.2 (1973): 40-43 (with Mary Lynn Johnson). A description and commentary.

40. "Blake's 'Illustrations of the Book of Job.'" *Times Literary Supplement* (30 November 1973): 1484. A discussion of the newly rediscovered colored proofs.

41. Reviews of Wagenknecht, *Blake's Night*; Sabri-Tabrizi, *The "Heaven" and "Hell" of William Blake*; Frosch, *The Awakening of Albion*; Mellor, *Blake's Human Form Divine*. *Wordsworth Circle* 5 (1974): 183-89 (with replies by Wagenknecht and Mellor).

42. Review of Lindberg, *William Blake's Illustrations to the Book of Job*. *Philological Quarterly* 53 (1974): 651.

43. Review of Elkins and Forstner, eds., *The Romantic Movement Bibliography: 1937-1970*. *Romantics Quarterly* 13 (1974): 352.

44. Review of Phillips and Paley, eds., *William Blake: Essays in Honour of Sir Geoffrey Keynes*. *Blake Studies* 7 (1974): 85-96.

45. (Co-author) "Blake's Vision of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*: A Report and an Anatomy." *Blake* 8.3 (1974-75): 56-85 (with

Robert E. Brown). This important article includes an excellent large-scale reproduction of the picture and many other illustrations.

46. "The Female Awakening at the End of Blake's *Milton*: A Picture Story with Questions." *Milton Reconsidered: Essays in Honor of Arthur E. Barker*. Ed. John Karl Franson. Salzburg Studies in English Literature, Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies 49. Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, 1976. 78-101.

47. Review of Erdman and Moore, eds., *The Notebook of William Blake*. *Modern Philology* 75 (1977): 196-201.

48. (Co-editor) *Blake's Poetry and Designs: A Norton Critical Edition*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1979; 2nd ed., 2007 (second editor, with Mary Lynn Johnson).

49. (Co-editor) *William Blake's Designs for Edward Young's "Night Thoughts": A Complete Edition*. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980 (first editor, with Edward J. Rose, Michael J. Tolley, and David V. Erdman).

50. Review of S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary, with a New Index by Morris Eaves*. *Blake* 14.3 (1980-81): 131-35.

51. "Some Drawings Related to Blake's *Night Thoughts* Designs." *Blake* 16.1 (1982): 7-11.

52. "Who Shall Bind the Infinite and Arrange It in Libraries? On Bentley's *Blake Books* and *William Blake's Writings*." *Philological Quarterly* 61 (1982): 277-304.

53. "Blake in the Future." *Studies in Romanticism* 21 (1982): 436-43. A contribution to a festschrift issue in honor of David V. Erdman.

54. (Co-author) "The Norton Critical Edition of Blake: Addenda and Corrigenda." *Blake* 16.2 (1982): 107-10 (second author, with Mary Lynn Johnson).

55. (Co-author) "The Melancholy Shepherdess in Prospect of Love and Death in Reynolds and Blake." *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities* 84 (1982): 169-89 (second author, with Alexander S. Gourlay).

56. "Shows of Mourning in the Text of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*." *Modern Philology* 80 (1983): 283-86.

57. "A Re-View of Some Problems in Understanding Blake's *Night Thoughts*." *Blake* 18.3 (1984-85): 155-81 (with responses by W. J. T. Mitchell, Morton D. Paley, and D. W. Dörrbecker).

58. (Co-author) "Visual Resources for Teaching Songs." *Approaches to Teaching Blake's "Songs of Innocence and of Experience"*. Ed. R. F. Gleckner and M. L. Greenberg. New York: Modern Language Association, 1989. 28-33 (with Mary Lynn Johnson).

59. Reviews of Eaves and Fischer, eds., *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*; Reed, ed., *Romanticism and Language*. *Blake* 22.4 (1989): 124-33.

60. "This Is Not Blake's 'The Tyger' (with Apologies to René Magritte)." *Iowa Review* 19 (1989): 112-55.

61. "The Apparition and Evanishment of Coleridgean Form in Recent Critical Discourse." *Coleridge's Theory of the Imagination Today*. Ed. Christine Gallant. New York: AMS Press, 1989. 113-27.

62. "Jesus and the Powers That Be in Blake's Designs for Young's *Night Thoughts*." *Blake and His Bibles*. Ed. David V. Erdman. West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press, 1990. 71-115.

63. (Co-author) Review of the Franklin Library edition of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. *Blake* 24.1 (1990): 260-61 (second author, with Alexander S. Gourlay).

64. "Discovering 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci.'" *Approaches to Teaching Keats's Poetry*. Ed. Walter H. Evert and Jack W. Rhodes. New York: MLA, 1991. 45-50.

65. Review of Ferber, *The Poetry of William Blake*. *Blake* 28.2 (1994): 71-77.

66. "Original Sinners." *Harvard Magazine* 97 (1994): 88.

67. "On First Encountering Blake's Good Samaritans." *Blake* 33.3 (1999-2000): 68-96.

68. "Krapp and Godot Play Iowa City." *Beckett Circle/Le Cercle de Beckett* 23 (2000): 1-2.

69. "The Powers of 'Death' in Blake's *Night Thoughts* Engravings." *1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era* 7 (2002): 257-80.

70. "Prospects of Divine Humanity: A Vision of Heaven, Earth, and Hell." *Re-envisioning Blake*. Ed. Mark Crosby, Troy Patenaude, and Angus Whitehead. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 130-43. An argument that Blake's picture known as *The Fall of Man* should be called *Prospects of Divine Humanity*.



Mary Lynn Johnson and Jack Grant