

Wayne C. Ripley and Justin Van Kleeck, eds. *Editing and Reading Blake. Romantic Circles Praxis* Volume. September 2010. <[http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/editing\\_blake/index.html](http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/editing_blake/index.html)>.

Reviewed by Nelson Hilton

I REMEMBER being introduced to a senior scholar at a summer Huntington Library lawn party a generation ago and his inquiring politely, “Well, what’s your angle?” Stephen Dedalus’s inner panic to “say something” flashed to Steelyard the Lawgiver’s *Island in the Moon* reassurance that “every person has a something” as I fumbled to come up with a dissertation abstract. Those more than thirty years past rise again in contemplating the analogous age differences between the two sets of contributors to this *Romantic Circles* electronic collection, which presents the efforts of four “younger Blake editors and scholars” and three “established” ones. The latter, Mary Lynn Johnson, W. H. Stevenson, and David Fuller, are doubtless familiar to subscribers of this journal for their three different “successful print editions” of “texts designed to appeal to first-time readers of Blake,” while the former, Rachel Lee, J. Alexandra McGhee, and co-editors Wayne C. Ripley and Justin Van Kleeck, “have all worked as project assistants to the *Blake Archive* and received their graduate training from its editors” (introduction, par. 4; Johnson, par. 2). With the concise print elders accounting for less than a third of the volume (in my printout, anyway, and not counting the errata sheet for Johnson and Grant’s second edition, for which there is no editorially supplied print option), and the organizers’ point taken that “Stevenson, Johnson, and Fuller all see their editions being used in connection with the *Blake Archive*” (introduction, par. 7), the juxtaposition carries the sense of staged generational baton-passing to celebrate the expanding empire of the *Blake Archive*.

There is also a curious sense that the senior three serve as a stalking-horse for the dismissal of “immersive textuality.” The introduction, by Ripley, notes that the collection (generally referred to as just “*Editing Blake*”) might in some respects be seen as a companion to Ron Broglio’s effort in the same series five years previous, *Digital Designs on Blake*. But, he notes, “instead of employing the model of the archive common to electronic editions like the *Blake Archive*, Broglio offers ‘immersive textuality’ as a model for engaging literary works from within” (par. 5). Arguing that “most of the electronic heuristics explored by *Digital Designs* have had a very brief shelf life and limited popular appeal” and that “print media and the self-declared ‘conservative’ *Blake Archive* are the primary means by which almost all of Blake’s readers engage his works” (par. 5), the introduction returns in its concluding paragraph to “Stevenson, Johnson, and Fuller, whose integration of the general reader into their editorial vision should

be the model for any future uses of immersive textuality in approaching Blake” (par. 35).

As for the “angles” and “something” of the new age, these appear to include “remediation,” “editioning,” and “delineation editing.” By far the most common is “remediation,” imported from Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s 1999 book of that title and used to denote the changes in form, content, circulation, and meaning that accompany the translation of a work from one medium to another. The introduction, for instance, finds it “noteworthy” that the *Blake Digital Text Project [BDTP]* “made digitizing Erdman’s *Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* an early priority, presumably for the purpose of improving the text through [its] remediation” (par. 7). What was posted in 1997 for the purpose of convenience was the source text for the project’s concordance—complete with the rather obviously added identification of each line and page for the primitive search program—and this is described, dramatically and anachronistically, as being “silent in how [its] remediation altered” the Erdman text, with a screen shot to illustrate. These obvious changes in the *BDTP* version, plus others introduced in the *Blake Archive* instance of that source text, lead to the portentous suggestion that “although neither copy is a new edition, these significant differences mean that the standard edition of Blake now exists in three versions. Do these variations call into question the authority of the letterpress edition itself, and inasmuch as they mirror the variations found in the original prints, do they direct readers to print and digital facsimiles? Or will a reader simply take the digitization at face value ...?” (par. 8). To recycle the words of the Santa Cruz Blake Study Group, twenty-eight years back, “would it be such apostasy to say that *none of this matters ...?*” (*Blake* 18.1 [summer 1984]: 14). Nothing escapes remediation, it appears, but while “the exceptional influence of the [*Blake*] *Archive* demands a detailed understanding of how it remediates Blake” (par. 22), we are told at the same time of a print edition that “remedies [its] remediation by referring readers to the Princeton-Blake Trust Series and the *Blake Archive*” (par. 31).

Proposer and co-editor of the collection, Justin Van Kleeck foregrounds his angle with the first word of his prolix contribution, “Editioning William Blake’s *VALA/The Four Zoas*.” While editing “represents a unique act of ‘interpretation,’” in his account, “so, too, does what I call ‘editioning,’ or the process of turning some original work into a distinct object and work” through editing it in an edition (par. 3). An edition (or “editioning”) “then, is an interpretation-in-print, not to mention a critical argument about how Blake can (and should?) be edited” (par. 47). While we hear little of the actual interpretations inhering in its editions, we are assured that although “Blake’s restless manuscript” is “safely stowed away in a British Library safe,” “ambiguity abounds in the *VALA/Four Zoas* manuscript resting peacefully in a library safe” (pars. 9, 18, 19).

According to his co-editor Ripley, Van Kleeck surveys the editionings of “Keynes, Margoliouth, Erdman, Bentley, and

Stevenson in masterful detail, providing a valuable and lasting contribution to the editorial history of the work” (introduction, par. 24). For this reader, though, what abides is the focus on the “highly fragile and highly valuable manuscript as a ‘Z-Safe Restricted’ work—which, translated from the argot, means that it *stays* in the safe almost without exception” (Van Kleeck, par. 80). Fortunately for his essay, with the help of a recommendation that “literally ‘cracked the safe’” for him, Van Kleeck had “the truly unique chance” to study the manuscript and “engage it in brief Intellectual Battle” (note 36; par. 82). The experience left him with “newfound respect” for those editors who “tried their best to represent it in some way,” the realization of “just how inadequate any edition would be” (par. 82), and regret “that many scholars, and even general readers, likely will never get to see the stunning, intimidating, and tantalizing work” (par. 83). Returning from his battle he “repaid” his recommender “with a two-day crash course on the manuscript, which I believe still has him woozy” (note 36). If this writing is a sample, he may be right. In any event, considerations of article editing aside, it is good to know that the *Blake Archive* editioning of *VALA/The Four Zoas* is proceeding, and that “along with the fresh transcriptions will be fresh (and I must say spectacular) full-color digital images at unprecedented 300 dpi resolution” (par. 65).

Wayne C. Ripley’s unillustrated “Delineation Editing of Co-Texts: William Blake’s Illustrations” identifies its subject as “a specifically Blakean notion of social-text editing” (par. 7). Ripley is concerned with Blake’s many illustrations to the works of others and through delineation editing seeks “to expand the editorial frame beyond the illustrations themselves to encompass their material and social realities” (par. 7). His strong argument is that the “source texts” for the illustrations “be considered ‘co-texts’” that “function in their own socio-historical network” (par. 11) and deserve full representation in the *Blake Archive* that at present “excludes much, if not all, of the original works that spurred the illustrations, omits the physical context in which the design exists, and leaves out paratextual features such as prefaces, epigraphs, and even blank leaves that Blake may have considered as part of the field for constructing his meaning” (par. 12).

In “‘The productions of time’: Visions of Blake in the Digital Age,” Rachel Lee and J. Alexandra McGhee relate their “experiences editing Blake’s manuscript, *An Island in the Moon*” for the *Blake Archive* (par. 7). While “forthcoming” at the time of their publication, its availability online was announced just in time for me to check whether Steelyard the Lawgiver’s assurance recalled above was that “every body” or “every person has a something.” It was “person,” but, to my surprise, here he or she has not “a something” but “as something.” And the 300 dpi enlargement certainly depicts what looks like a cursive “a” with a cursive “s” attached, with an editorial note in the transcription (object 8, line 12) asserting that “the last word of the line is ‘as,’ though Bentley (*Writings* volume 2, page 885) and Erdman (page 456) read ‘a’ without comment.” (While the

authors state that “the *Archive* includes variant readings from Phillips, G. E. Bentley, and David Erdman within text notes” [note 12] and offer a detailed example of another transcription by Michael Phillips in note 11, his reading of “a something” goes unmentioned in the *Blake Archive* textual note. That any such omission is not an oversight of Lee and McGhee is made clear by the archive’s “Electronic Edition Information” “Statement of Responsibility,” which identifies as editors of the manuscript only Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi.)

Lee and McGhee do offer the collection’s only direct encounter with the current framework for electronic editing, eXtensible Markup Language or XML. An XML document consists of two parts, the document type definition or DTD that defines the mark-up tags to be used and their hierarchical order, and the tagged or marked-up content. The tag set is thus crucial, as it establishes the parameters of what can be marked up and processed for particular display (using a style-sheet language, XSL, and program, XSLT, which can transform the XML markup into widely varying formats). Unfortunately, while the authors direct us to “see ‘Manuscript Tag Set’” (par. 19), it is nowhere on offer, though it would appear that it “integrat[es]” at least some of the current Text Encoding Initiative guidelines (par. 28). Other of their references, to “Filling out an XML BAD File” (par. 19), for example (BAD here is evidently an acronym for Blake Archive Description), appear to invoke inaccessible private sites.

Repeated claims for the importance of transparency (e.g., pars. 32, 33, 45) notwithstanding, the source code or markup version of the transcription does not appear to be available to readers of the *Blake Archive*, so it is impossible to consider fully the claim that “XML is a better archiving and editing tool” or that “previously published works in the *Blake Archive* ... will benefit from the updated tag set” (pars. 15, 20). For example, the authors state that their “decisions about how to encode ... sections of backwards text in *Island* can be retroactively applied to the Illuminated Books that also contain mirror writing” (note 6). The transcription of the reversed text in object 18, line 10, however, is perfectly straightforward, with only a textual note to explain that “the letters ‘Bl’ (followed by an uncertain letter ‘a’) are written in backwards lettering.” Updated encoding that serves to trigger a textual note is surely an improvement over no notice at all. Also on the same object, readers will note the transcription in line 8 which reads, in its entirety, “Lamb [b in gray font] n [in blue font] n ■”. Setting aside accessibility concerns as to how sight-impaired readers will know, for instance, that gray font denotes “unclear or conjectural text,” it would be an interesting exercise for the reader to link to object 18 and find “Lamb” in short order (hint: the “L” of “Lamb” is below the initial stroke of the “n” and the word as a whole underneath that letter at about one-fifth its size) and to decide whether the transcription honors “the *Archive*’s concern with Blake’s revisions and the physicality of the page” (par. 22).

In their concluding paragraphs, Lee and McGhee note that “increasingly, visions of future electronic editions put more of the editorial process in the hands of the reader.” They cite Peter Robinson’s conception of “fluid, co-operative and distributed editions” as a “model of scholarly edition which opens itself to readerly interrogation and intervention” (par. 43). But the prospect is no sooner offered than replaced with Thomas Tanselle’s writing in 1996 to maintain “the necessity of historical expertise and the vital role specialists play in interpreting textual artifacts of the past.” After all, they finish with Tanselle, readers “do retain the power of choosing how much of the critical apparatus and scholarly research to incorporate into their reading” (par. 44). (So much for the imposition of “editioning”!)

Attempting to split the difference between Robinson and Tanselle, Lee and McGhee conclude that “regardless of whether readers actually encode and edit electronic editions, the future of scholarly digital projects still rests with its [*sic*] readers” (par. 45). But given that “the *Blake Archive*’s primary purpose is for studying Blake rather than reading him” and that its “primary audience is a scholarly one” (note 8), one senses the predicament concerning audience underlying their disclosure that “uncertainty about the long-term future of the *Blake Archive* ... motivates our goals and decisions today ...” (par. 46).

Turning to the print editors, less needs to be said. In the collection’s shortest piece, “The Ends of Editing,” W. H. Stevenson writes that “the first duty of an editor is to present an accurate and useful text” (par. 5). But, as a “modernizing” editor, he argues that “from time to time” and “in pursuit of clarity and ease of understanding,” an editor “has to take minor liberties with the minutiae of Blake’s text” (par. 19). The “only justification” for such tampering is that “to do so brings us nearer to Blake” (par. 26). Most modern readers, however, will probably agree with the introduction’s characterization of Stevenson’s (and Fuller’s) changing of “The Tyger” to “The Tiger” as “wince-inducing” (introduction, par. 30). Evoking the characterization of Autolycus in *The Winter’s Tale* as “a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles,” Stevenson offers the memorable observation that “Blake’s Autolycus mind snapped up all manner of fascinating wayside material in any kind of order” (par. 34).

David Fuller, in “Modernizing Blake’s Text: Syntax, Rhythm, Rhetoric,” draws very extensively and apparently without notice from the introduction to his 2000 *William Blake: Selected Poetry and Prose* (reprinted by Pearson Longman in 2008; see pp. 18-26 in either). The final eight paragraphs turn to a different kind of re-writing (“my re-writings here” [par. 23]) that re-spaces Blake’s lines “to reveal features of the rhetorical structure of Blake’s poetry that are concealed by the conventions of its formal structure” (par. 23).

Mary Lynn Johnson’s entertaining “Contingencies, Exigencies, and Editorial Praxis: The Case of the 2008 Norton Blake” offers an “anecdotal case history” of the “fortuities and mundanities” leading up to the second edition—after twenty-nine

years—of the Norton Critical Edition she published with “co-editor John E. Grant (husband Jack)” (pars. 3, 1). In this behind-the-scenes report, we see her “proclaim by e-mail, a little pompously,” “wail” to her editor, and “wheedle sympathy” (pars. 4, 12, 13) in the “nitty-gritty trade-offs and editorial histrionics” (par. 23) that make up the long back-story of getting the book to press. In keeping with every other contributor, she does not provide data on actual number of copies printed or sold (or site hits), but she does candidly offer specifics on the permissions budget and other constraints. Anyone who uses the new Norton will find the account rewarding, just as readers of Fuller’s and Stevenson’s editions, or users of the *Blake Archive*, will gain from the inside stories of these respective versions of Blake, forgiving what they do not approve and loving all for such energetic exertion of talent.

Gerald E. Bentley, Jr., with a foreword by Mary Lynn Johnson. *William Blake’s Conversations: A Compilation, Concordance, and Rhetorical Analysis*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008. lii + 300 pp. [+ 8 pp. illustrations, 1 color]. \$119.95/£74.95, hardcover.

Reviewed by Alexander S. Gourlay

**M**OST of the primary material in *William Blake’s Conversations* will be familiar to those who have studied Gerald E. Bentley’s two editions of *Blake Records*, *Blake Records Supplement*, and his 2001 biography, *The Stranger from Paradise*, but the scholarly alchemy effected by distilling reports of Blake’s spoken words into a compact volume and adding an array of related tools has created something rich, strange, and likely to prove enduringly useful. Because many of the reports come to us from within a generation or two after Blake’s death, they are strongly colored by the late Georgian/early Victorian conception of him: these Blakeish words often seem to reflect the minds of the reporters as much as they reveal the mind of Blake, and as the intervening years and layers of reportage multiply, the share of credible Blake content diminishes. A snippet of Blake’s conversation that was worth retelling or recording is likely to have been one that conformed to, or at least resonated with, the other stories about Blake in circulation at the time. Gathered together in largely unmediated form, these reports constitute a portrait of a fellow we might call Anecdotal Blake, a somewhat different being from the persona we moderns know through his works in ink and paint, Autographic Blake. Ironically, Autographic Blake was not very well known to some of the origi-