



R E V I E W

Saree Makdisi. *Reading William Blake*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. xii + 137 pp. £30.99/\$45.99, hardcover; £12.99/\$19.99, paperback; \$15.00, e-book.

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1 THIS is a brief introduction to Blake that novices and seasoned Blakeans alike will enjoy and learn from. Saree Makdisi has the interests of the reader, and the process

of reading, constantly in mind. He manages in a short space to elucidate a series of challenging ideas and gives a compelling sense of Blake's relevance to the modern world. Aware that most readers are likely to encounter Blake's poetry initially through the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, he has focused each chapter on a reading of one of the *Songs*, moving from particulars to the questions they pose and then to other works by Blake, gradually taking the reader from simpler to more complex issues. As a result, his explanations of difficult Blakean themes are invariably easy to follow. The book is a celebration of Blake rather than a critique. It always expresses the critic's own admiration and communicates this warmly to the reader.

2 A central concern is the difference between two approaches to reading: an authoritarian approach that would encourage a monopoly on interpretation available only to "an initiated and licensed elite," and an alternative approach that regards authority as "something to avoid" and interpretation as "open to all" (29). These alternatives have counterparts in two kinds of text: one that makes us treat it as a sacred object to be decoded only by "a priestly or scholarly hierarchy," and a "decentralized text"—epitomized by the Blakean illuminated book—that encourages us to generate meanings freely. But alternative views of human existence are also at stake here, since Makdisi argues that "the material form ... of Blake's work embodies or expresses his understanding of our very being" (70). The Blakean ideal is a joyous, expansive, collective mode of being "in which oppositions between internal and external forces ... break down as the uncontained energy of life and being exceeds the parameters of individual selves" (54). This stands in stark contrast to a repressive view of existence that crystallizes in the seventeenth-century philosophy of "discrete individuality" and is based on the assumption that we should be "self-regulating, discrete, intermeasurable individuals" who can live by "the principles of exchange in a free market" (64). In this study, then, the choice between alternative modes of reading reflects, and perhaps even becomes, a choice between modes of being.

3 The idea that the distinctive formal properties of Blake's illuminated books are aspects of his assault on authority is already well established in Blake studies, but it has rarely been pursued as fully or as clearly as it is here. Informed by recent research on Blake's printing methods, Makdisi argues that Blake's books have "high entropy" since, besides the local variations arising from the printing process itself, their constituent elements can be rearranged in many ways "without subverting the overall structure of the book" (8). He celebrates the "unstable, ever-varying relations among and between different elements" (28) of the books, including relations between plates in different books and between different copies of the same book. These features are con-

trasted with the uniform productions of conventional letterpress printing.

- 4 Two key exhibits in Makdisi's discussion of "Text" are *The Book of Urizen* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. His argument that *Urizen* "subverts the logic of the book" (45) depends in part on the variations between copies. He notes, as others have done, that only two of the eight known copies have all of the plates, every copy has the picture-only plates in a different sequence, and some copies have two sections headed "Chap: IV." These variations are seen as strategic: in writing about the Urizenic will to control the world through the book, Blake creates an "un-book" (45), which proves resistant to that will. In a comparable vein, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is described as the "ultimate un-book" (49); at least, Blake thought of it "either as a modular book" or as an "amalgamation" of elements that don't cohere into a "single, straightforward narrative" (48). Its form ensures that no scholarly elite can hold a monopoly on its interpretation, since it refuses to be subject to "that kind of reduction and containment." It is a work that "teaches us how to read in the spirit of Blake" (49).
- 5 If these un-books, like all of the illuminated books, are designed to resist authoritarian interpretation, Makdisi's own readings have to enact and exemplify interpretive openness. Having defined the two opposed conceptions of the politics of interpretation, Makdisi is acutely aware that his own involvement in the production of an academic book threatens to place him on the wrong side of this divide. Accordingly, he does what he can to lessen the impression that he is writing as an authority. He insists that his book is "neither a guide nor a companion" (2), and that rather than offering "a filter or interpretive frame" he is presenting "a set of discussions" of important concepts in Blake's works in order to "open up ... useful ways of thinking about them." He wants to help readers develop their own readings, rather than "imposing" his own on them: we can "pick and choose" from the guidelines offered (17). The attempt to disavow critical authority and embrace openness leads to one of the most attractive features of the book, its disarmingly engaging style, which is at times informally conversational, and always a model of clarity.
- 6 The enactment of interpretive openness takes time, which Makdisi makes for himself by restricting the central focus of his discussion to a relatively small number of poems, making connections with other works and feeding in references to historical context as he proceeds. In the chapter on "Image," for example, his initial discussion of the "Introduction" to *Songs of Innocence* shows how the work may encourage us "to re-read, to read backward and sideways and in circles rather than simply forward in a straight line" (14). Once this idea of non-linear reading has been firmly estab-

lished, he moves on to consider its broader relevance with brief but helpful references to a range of other works (including "London," *The Book of Urizen*, "The Little Black Boy," and *America*). In moving between different plates (some illustrated in rather murky black and white here) he develops a lucid account of reading as a fluid *experience* of shifting perspectives, readjustments, and speculative connections, a process involving both words and visual images.

- 7 Like the reading process, Blake's own conception of being is at issue throughout the book, and is the subject of some individual chapters. In "Desire" Makdisi observes that the terms joy and desire consistently appear in Blake's work "in connection to collective rather than merely individual experiences" (50). Where individuals do appear they "are always moving beyond their status as individuals" (51). He sees the contrast between the two versions of "Nurse's Song" from *Innocence* and *Experience* as presenting not so much one between "selfish desire and repression" as between "two different forms of being." The children in *Innocence* have a sense of collectivity that is connected with a more general life force, including birds, sheep, and even hills; in them, "oppositions between internal and external forces ... break down" (54). In contrast, the nurse of *Experience* manifests a "closed, individualistic" form of being. Reflecting upon the importance in Blake's work of images of the creation of fallen humanity, Makdisi observes that "*restriction* into the self and the *creation* of the self as a self are, for Blake, one and the same thing" (62).
- 8 Throughout the book major issues in Blake's work, from "Image" and "Text" to "Time" and "Making," are explored in ways that find relationships between his ideas and the formal characteristics of his books. In the chapter on "Time," for example, Makdisi considers the imposition of new working practices in Britain that came with the proliferation of "dark Satanic Mills," and the onset of "the struggle to impose clock time and national time" (98). This feeds into a discussion of time and repetition in industrial production: repetition "is the very key to homogeneity; it is the logic that produces a stream of identical interchangeable copies" (102). In contrast, Blake's method of book production ensures that repetition produces differences and disrupts the possibility of "mere blind replication."
- 9 Each chapter attempts to elucidate a different aspect of the same understanding of the alternatives at issue in Blake's work. This inevitably leads to some overlap between the chapters, as the discussion itself revisits ideas and circles around them. But this overlap is often fruitful, as it allows ideas to be reexamined and elaborated in stages. The final chapter, "Making," develops further the significance of Blake's method of book production, taking as a starting point Blake's famous song "The Tyger." Looking at the oft-

noticed mismatch between the words of the song and the visual appearance of the plate (including the incongruous image of the tiger), Makdisi notes that “the plate seems to deliberately undermine the cosmic or mysterious status of the tiger as contemplated object” (114). We see that what is at stake instead is “the act or process of creation and the unfathomable power of the creator.” This in turn leads us to think about various other kinds of symmetry, including that between the copperplate and the page printed from it (which is helpfully illustrated here with a photograph from a printmaking session using facsimiles of Blake’s copperplates). The song is “a text about Blake as artist” (116), which illustrates the conviction that artistic creation expresses the divine. “The Tyger” is used to introduce a wider discussion of Blake’s understanding of art as a common endeavor of all people, a process of endless making in which “art and life itself are truly indistinguishable” (126). In this way Makdisi moves effortlessly from a close encounter with particulars to a lucid explanation of Blake’s distinctive understanding of human creativity.

10 The limitations of this book are closely related to its virtues. Makdisi’s own repetitions, so important to the theme and his conception of the reading process, are not always fruitful. There is a separate chapter on “Power,” for example, but since power is nearly always at issue in the book, this chapter does not add a great deal to what has already been discussed. There are separate chapters on “Desire” and “Joy,” but there seems relatively little difference between these subjects in Makdisi’s account, as both are related directly to the Blakean understanding of being as expansive and collective. Since his focus is primarily upon sharply contrasted modes of being, the choice between these modes often seems to be relatively simple—as if corresponding to a choice between reading practices—rather than something that must emerge from a deadly struggle against errors rooted deep in a history of repression. Makdisi therefore has little to say about the transformative potential of repressed desire in Blake. The chapter on desire has no reference to Blake’s major, troubling figure of enchained desire, Orc (who is hardly discussed in the book). And just as surprising, it has almost no reference to sexuality. The plight of Oothoon in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* is discussed in the context not of desire, but of joy, where Makdisi gives relatively little attention to the “narrowly sexual dynamics” of the text, preferring to remain with the message of liberty. New readers who turn from Makdisi to *Visions* may well be surprised to find that Oothoon’s desire, in spite of her “refusal of the logic of entrapment” (78), apparently remains obsessively fixed upon the unresponsive male figure Theotormon. They might also be surprised at the emphasis in *Songs of Experience* on the troubling problems arising from sexual desire, and at the prominence given in other works to powerful, sexually alluring female figures. Apart

from Oothoon, females get scant attention (Catherine Blake plays no part in Makdisi’s account of the making of Blake’s books).

11 Makdisi claims that “the limited and caverned form of being appropriate to self-regulating individual selves was not of much interest to Blake” (67). This is like saying that the corruption of the times was of little interest to the biblical prophets. But the figure of the prophet is strangely absent here. This figure assumed a central place in Blake’s illuminated books (and appeared in both *Innocence* and *Experience*). It is surely relevant to Blake’s own sense of his role as a poet, and to the complex issue of “authority.” Most tellingly, this figure, like Orc, has the potential to disrupt the contrast Makdisi makes between liberating and constraining practices, since Blake often presents the prophet as contributing to the forces of repression even while struggling against them. Los, Blake’s “Eternal Prophet,” appears in *Europe* as an airborne bard whose celebration of bliss and joy heralds an era of repressive religion. In *Urizen* he appears as an agonized blacksmith who binds other figures with chains. Some consideration of the intimate relationship between creativity and tyranny in this area of Blake’s thought would certainly have been welcome. When Makdisi, in his final chapter, considers “The Tyger” as a work about artistic creation, his interesting discussion seems in some respects oddly unrelated to what has come before. Readers new to Blake may be left wondering why the unstable, ever-varying productions of the artist are, in “The Tyger,” associated with the labor of the blacksmith, and what the speaker’s “fearful” response has to do with the “love, play, joy, and freedom” (36) that have been identified as key principles in Blake’s work.

12 Makdisi’s investment in the distinctive material form of the Blakean illuminated book as a challenge to authoritative reading leads him to suggest a simple dichotomy between a “decentralized text” and its authoritarian opposite. He sustains this dichotomy by offering, on the one hand, a close engagement with selected details of Blake’s work and, on the other, an abstract idea of the authoritarian “book,” underpinned by references to “the logic of commandment” (49). This argument is presented in persuasive, but sometimes misleading, terms. Makdisi himself claims that any text that “seeks to operate in terms of a logic of commandment and authority can contain within itself its very opposite” (37). And the reverse can be claimed: texts that challenge authoritarian reading may reproduce authoritarian gestures for their own purposes (as the dogmatic voice of the “Devil” in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* demonstrates). The Bible offered Blake a key example of the conjunction of authoritarian and libertarian writing; some engagement with the stylistic features and reading challenges posed by the Bible might therefore have helped here.

But in his discussion of *The Book of Urizen* Makdisi quickly displaces Blake's obvious concern with the Bible in order to suggest that *Urizen* is "more generally a book critical of books"; it is an un-book about "the kind of book that would seek to command us how to read" (38). Having established this simple book/un-book antithesis, Makdisi classifies *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* as another un-book. But the formal characteristics that, in Makdisi's view, make Blake's *Marriage* a subversive un-book—its mixture of many different forms and structures, different voices, contradictory points of view—are just as typical of the Bible itself, a galimaufry of disjointed histories, prophecies, psalms, laws, proverbs, parables, and epistles. Does the Bible make us treat it as a sacred object to be decoded only by a priestly hierarchy, or it is a decentralized text that encourages us to generate meanings freely? For Blake it was both a "book of iron" (E 86) and "the Great Code of Art" (E 274), depending on how it was read.

- 13 Makdisi acknowledges that any text can be read either in a dictatorial spirit or subversively. But this implies that texts do not and cannot in themselves determine how they are read; it implies that reading is never simply an unconditioned response to an offered stimulus, but is always influenced by particular social circumstances, conventions, and expectations. We can see the significance of this if we compare the different reading practices promoted by "priestly" and "scholarly" hierarchies (which Makdisi tends to conflate). Religious communities that rely on authoritarian reading practices can accommodate all kinds of writing practices, both writerly and readerly, including sublime prophetic writings of the kind that influenced Blake (like Ezekiel and Revelation), and impose upon them absolutely dogmatic interpretations. Academic communities, in contrast, may demand unambiguously clear and logical (readerly) interpretive writing that demonstrates the writer's "authority," but they regard such writing as the starting point for critical debate, disagreement, and alternative views. They can easily accommodate, and tend to promote, subversive reading practices.
- 14 The attempt to place Blake's illuminated books as a whole in clear opposition to the kind of text that can be decoded only by "a priestly or scholarly hierarchy" is an attractive introductory strategy. Makdisi succeeds admirably in making Blake look like a reassuringly open writer, but only by avoiding the more bewildering difficulties. He engages with Blake's works at points where he can most easily contrast modes of being and reading practices; he disengages at points where the works threaten to draw him into a closer engagement with their formidable mythology. In Blake it can be a short step from "what is not too Explicit" (E 702) to what is bafflingly obscure. It is the cryptic nature of Blake's mythological narratives—their very lack of open-

ness—that puts them into the realm of the specialist scholar, whatever Blake intended.

- 15 Makdisi's own gestures of openness cannot really disguise his authoritative role. The book is not a running commentary on Blake, but it is certainly a guide and a companion, and of course it sets up an interpretive frame, based on historical research and a good knowledge of recent scholarship on Blake's printing process. His method inevitably "imposes" his own preferred way of reading. He regards the claim to "have a key to decode this reference or that character in Blake's work" as "the most un-Blakean thing in the world" (17), but he does not hesitate to offer "the key to enjoying Blake's work" or to explain how to read "in the spirit of Blake himself" (10). In this way he implicitly disqualifies one kind of critical activity, the kind that attempts to "decode" Blake's mythological obscurities, while attempting to set up a monopoly in another area of interpretive activity, the kind that he himself engages in. But, of course, in the realm of academic criticism, no such monopoly can stand.
- 16 Nobody has unmediated access to "the spirit of Blake himself" since all reading, as Makdisi himself shows, is conditioned by the historical conditions in which it takes place. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake describes an anticlimactic process by which inspiring visions, having been turned into books, are "arranged in libraries" (E 40). Blake's anxiety about the book apparently extends beyond the mechanical uniformity of letterpress to the processes of collation and preservation by which books can be transmitted to readers. The process by which Blake's poetic tales have been turned into objects of study has inevitably influenced how they are read. Scholars have industriously tracked down the surviving copies of Blake's works and described them in meticulous detail, in forms that allow minute comparisons to be made. The heroic bibliographical labors of G. E. Bentley, Jr., and others made it possible for Jerome J. McGann to formulate his influential version of the "indeterminate" text—a concept that depends in part upon the ability to compare multiple copies (especially of *The Book of Urizen*).¹ There is an obvious element of anachronism here, because such comparisons would not have been possible for those in Blake's day who bought individual copies of the works, and may not always have been possible for Blake himself, since he did not possess in material form the complete works of William Blake. The advent of the *William Blake Archive* in the last twenty years has, for the first time, allowed different copies of the same text to be read, electroni-

1. G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Books* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977); Jerome J. McGann, "The Idea of an Indeterminate Text: Blake's Bible of Hell and Dr. Alexander Geddes," *Studies in Romanticism* 25.3 (1986): 303-24.

cally searched, and compared in detail by anyone with internet access. Through this elaborate collation, a thoroughly comparable Blake corpus has emerged, with different versions of the same work lying together like synoptic gospels. These historical developments have made it possible for Makdisi to claim that “the fullest experience of reading Blake comes from reading multiple different copies of the ‘same’ book simultaneously” (21). This is the logical conclusion of his approach, but it is not obvious that this is reading “in the spirit of Blake.” While I love being able to compare different copies, I am not convinced that attempting to read simultaneously the nineteen copies of *Innocence* currently available in the *Blake Archive* will necessarily produce the fullest reading experience.

17 One of the things that makes Blake a powerful and truly disturbing artist rather than a propagandist for his own view of being is that his impulse toward liberty coexists with a fascination with humanity’s “limited and covered form of being”—its origins and its complex psychological and social effects. If we are to do full justice to Blake we need to engage with—and offer suggestions about—the bizarre interactions between his oddly named characters, his sometimes arcane allusions, the mysterious metamorphoses and nightmarish landscapes that constitute his unique mythology. We need to embrace a variety of critical practices, including the kind from which Makdisi prefers to distance himself. That is, we do indeed need openness.

18 But this is to take us beyond the immediate business of an introduction to Blake. Makdisi is surely right that most readers initially approach Blake through the *Songs*, and the great virtue of his introduction is that, starting with relatively simple poems, it offers enticing ways to move from these into some of Blake’s central preoccupations, and gives a vivid sense of their historical significance. It draws readers in, showing how the visual designs can be related to the text, how puzzles and disjunctions can be productive, and how the play of children, reflections on the passage of time, artistic labor, ideas of eternity, and industrial work practices can be closely related in Blake’s thought. It is a book that will succeed very well in starting readers on a journey.