

WORK TOWARD KNOWING:
BEGINNING WITH

BLAKE



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JIM WATT



KINCHAFOONEE

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I have included these works to suggest the beauty of the individual voices of the Builders of Jerusalem; evidence of formal training in art are here subsumed by traces of the Four Zoas.

–J.W.

Foreword: The Building of Jerusalem

One sunny day in April I was walking with Jim Watt and Doug von Koss along a path under fragrant Bradford Pear trees toward Jordan Hall where Jim's office was located on the campus of Butler University. Doug was a guest singer from San Francisco, invited to lead the students of Jim's Blake seminar in song. We stopped at the entrance as Doug read the inscription in the limestone above the door: ENTER TO LEARN • DEPART TO FULFILL. Jim was stunned, "Doug, I've been entering through this doorway for 35 years and have never noticed that before!" He was doing just that every day of those 35 years – learning and fulfilling.

* * *

My cubicle was situated just outside Jim's office. I learned more by eavesdropping on his conversations with students than I ever had in graduate or undergraduate studies. I was inspired by the music he would play at a high volume, disregarding his colleagues in neighboring offices, ranging from the blues of Howlin' Wolf or Muddy Waters to the classical piano of Maurizio Pollini or Hélène Grimaud to fado sung by Mariza. Sometimes he and a couple students who had come by to inquire about their grades would get carried away by impromptu singing, but because this was a highbrow academic institution, they drew no audience except my secretly listening ears.

* * *

Built in 1928, The Arthur Jordan Memorial Hall, designed in the Collegiate Gothic style by Robert Frost Daggett and Thomas Hibben, sits heavily on Butler University's campus with daunting buttresses, recessed entrances framed by pointed arches surrounded by stone moldings and intricate relief sculpture. Unlike the gothic cathedrals, though, Jordan Hall did not have expansive windows. With the exception of the president's office, which was lined with high, broad windows that allowed sunlight to flood the room all hours of the day, Jordan was the dankest building on campus.

* * *

Gothic architecture, the Gothic cathedral especially, represents the universe in microcosm. One of Blake's most well-known stanzas is this one from "Auguries of Innocence":

To see a World in a Grain of Sand,
 And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
 Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
 And Eternity in an hour

Blake says, "Gothic is Living Form...Living Form is Eternal Existence." Jim also taught courses on the Gothic cathedral.

* * *

With the exception of the occasional guest poet or loudmouthed student, Jim's classroom was the only one that buzzed with vibrant energy and light. He and his students were building Jerusalem. What does that mean? Anyone casually familiar with the Bible would say that Jerusalem is a metaphor for Heaven or a place of universal love and peace. But Blake's idea of the building of Jerusalem is probably more true to what genuine artists such as Jim Watt are doing because it does not discount our life here on earth and in our bodies rather than have us yearn for

someplace beyond. Blake says that Jerusalem is Liberty, the inspiration of all mankind, and the “Divine vision in every individual.” In *The Four Zoas*, Blake’s longest poem, Urizen conspires with Luvah to enslave Liberty. Urizen represents rationality and Luvah represents emotion. And this is what happens to most of us when these two conflicting characteristics are the only attributes by which we experience reality. This is what our parents, teachers, priests, politicians, etc. have taught us. It is what Blake calls “Single Vision.”

* * *

In *The Four Zoas*, the primal man, Albion, represents Man before the Fall, and each of us in a state of sleep or unawakened consciousness. In such a state the four fundamental aspects of man have been thrown off balance. These are represented in Blake’s cosmology by the Four Zoas: Urizen (rationality) and Luvah (emotion), as mentioned above, but also Tharmas (sensation) and Urthona (intuition or imagination). “Though they are present in each of us,” Watt explains, “they are also uniquely and individually unbalanced – and a considerable effort is required to bring them into balance.” He continues, “The Zoas...will assist us in that recovery and recreation of one another and reality which Blake calls the building of Jerusalem.”

* * *

As a poet with a particular fondness for the Romantics – Keats, Shelley, Byron, Wordsworth, Goethe, Hölderlin, Novalis, et al. – I knew a little Blake, but always found him difficult to comprehend. I tried to learn from academics such as Northrop Frye and Harold Bloom, but they were not speaking the same language as I. Robert Bly’s *News of the Universe* provided a great introduction, but it wasn’t until I saw in person some of Blake’s prints and drawings from the *Book of Job* at the Indianapolis Museum of Art and in that same gallery attended what was supposed to be a lecture on Blake by Dr. James T. Watt, Allegra Stewart Professor of English at Butler University, that I was inspired to jump in, to begin with Blake. It wasn’t long before Watt had everyone in attendance standing and singing verses of Blake! Watt explains in this

book, "...the words are not the meaning; the text is not the poem... Actual experience...will confirm that the song is more than the notes... and your own life is much more than material cause and effect. You were not reasoned into being," he continues, "ask your parents. You were thought, dreamed, imagined, sung and danced together into being." Later he shares a passage from *Jerusalem*:

A mans worst enemies are those
Of his own house & family;
And he who makes his law a curse,
By his own law shall surely die.

In my Exchanges every Land
Shall walk, & mine in every Land,
Mutual shall build Jerusalem:
Both heart in heart & hand in hand.

Watt asks, "How could we have anything to do with such building? Even if we thought some action might be taken, what would it have to do with art?" He responds, "Blake's art...is obviously and remarkably different from what we have been taught to expect of art. Specifically, it makes powerfully spiritual, mental, emotional, and corporeal, or sensational demands on its audience."

* * *

The book you hold in your hands is more than a text on Blake. And although its subtitle is *Beginning with Blake*, it is not only for beginners. Besides being a guide to the work of William Blake, *Work toward Knowing* is a vade mecum of sorts on teaching and learning and achieving four-fold vision. It is also a memoir of a man who understands Blake and teaching and who is a master craftsman in the building of Jerusalem. Enter this book to learn. Depart to fulfill.

Norman Minnick
Indianapolis, Indiana

Prelude: A Golden String

In futurity
I prophetic see,
That the earth from sleep,
(Grave the sentence deep)

Shall arise and seek
For her maker meek:
And the desert wild
Become a garden mild.

WILLIAM BLAKE, "The Little Girl Lost"

It was an ordinary evening, a moon perhaps, a few clouds, but no threat of rain, no wind howling or even sighing. The house was not in the least unusual: a split-level, ranch style, set amongst others in the suburbs. The prior owner had died in it, but there was nothing in the least remarkable about her passing. Nor on the evening in question was I reading anything of a spiritual or occult nature; I was simply browsing through the *New York Times Book Review* when, about ten in the evening, I decided to get myself a snack. My wife was reading quietly alongside me. I asked her whether she wanted anything downstairs; she smiled, said a soft "no," and returned to her book.

When I went down the stairs, as I had hundreds of times before and have hundreds of times since, there was nothing noteworthy in the

air. It was neither perfectly silent, nor unusually noisy: a car sped past, the lights flashing briefly on the walls, the furnace clicked on or off, and the house made its normal, settling-down-to-night-time noises. I switched on the kitchen lights and opened the refrigerator. I took out the chilled white wine and cheese and then got down some crackers. Then, while I was arranging the cheese slices on a plate, I knew that someone was in the living room, watching me.

Every now and then, when I'm in the library or waiting for a plane, reading or idly waiting for the appointed time to arrive, I have that feeling – and when I look up and around I'll find someone's eyes resting on me. The person will either smile, or make his or her eyes glaze over, or be startled and look away. The tension, the energy or force of their gaze will disappear as quickly as that.

This time, though, there was no one there to catch sight of. There was no one standing in the darkened doorway to the dining room, nor in the hall. In the kitchen window, I caught only the reflected image of an ordinary man in his bathrobe, his hand frozen above a plate of crackers and cheese with a somewhat sheepish look on his face. A look, not so much of fear as of confusion.

We all wonder what it would be like to intercept a burglar and I, like every other suburban male, have once or twice picked up a baseball bat or tennis racquet and set forth noisily down the stairs, turning on every light in the house and hoping to scare the source of some unusual sound back out the way it came in. At times like these I have remembered the stories of people being shot by intruders – my heart has been pumping and my senses strained to the slightest sound or movement. This time, though, I felt no fear, only puzzlement as to who was watching me – along with absolute certainty that she was there.

I was as sure the eyes were a girl's as I was aware of their presence. But on what basis? I was awake, I was thinking very clearly; clearly enough to wonder if I was hallucinating or going crazy. How could there be a girl in my living room at 10 o'clock at night? And why? (Oddly, I didn't ask myself how it was possible for her to watch me through the walls, but then nothing about this experience seemed to follow normal rules.) I put the plate down, walked past the refrigerator into the hall, turned right, and stepped into the living room. In front of me was the sofa and the large picture window. Once again, I could see

my reflected image, the kitchen light behind me clearly outlining my form, my arm reaching out and my hand resting on the light switch.

I didn't switch on the lights; I didn't have to. I could see her about five feet to my right, standing beside the long table next to the bookcase. She was about six or seven years old, in a nightdress and holding – something – wrapped in a blanket or cloth under one arm. She was looking right at me. And she was crying. In fact, she seemed quite frightened. When I moved she jumped back and almost disappeared. So, naturally, I froze. Nor did I look directly at her because, when I did so, she faded somehow. I could only see her out of the corner of my eye, with my peripheral vision. I was surprised, then, to hear my own voice, speaking ever so softly and saying, "It's all right. Don't be frightened. I won't hurt you. It's OK; It's OK."

I hadn't the foggiest notion what was going on; but I knew that it would be OK if I just didn't scare her. So I stood there for a few moments, making soothing noises and trying to get her to talk. It was evident that she expected me to throw her out and that I was not to get any closer than I already was. She had stopped crying at least. After a few moments, I thought, rather crazily, that I had better tell my wife what was going on or else she might be worried. But if I yelled upstairs I was afraid I'd scare the girl away – and probably my wife as well. So I said, Just a minute; I'll be right back.

I went up the stairs – and back into the normal world. My wife was just as I had left her: quietly reading in a pool of light, a pile of pillows behind her and the bedclothes bunched up over her knees. She looked up.

What are you doing? You look funny.

Well...there's a ghost in the living room.

What!? Her eyes widened.

No. No. I don't mean a bad ghost; just a little girl ghost.

Don't do this.

No. Really. Come and see for yourself.

This is not funny.

I'm not joking. There's this little girl, a ghost I guess, down in the living room. I think she's lost or something. Come and see.

I'm not going anywhere.

Come on. We've got to go down. She seems scared.

She's scared!

It's all right; she won't hurt us.

By this point I was sure I was having one of the best dreams I'd ever had. I didn't want to wake up though; I wanted to go back downstairs and have my little girl ghost reveal to me the secret hiding place of some vast fortune or something. So I got quite cheerful and giddy.

OK, if you won't come down – just a minute – I'll bring her up here.

And so I went back down the stairs. She was still there, maybe a little closer to the hall, maybe a little fainter – and maybe a little less frightened.

What do you want? I asked, wondering if ghosts always had to tell the truth. My wife's voice came down from the upstairs hall:

Are you all right? What's going on?

I'm fine; she's still here – but I don't think she's scared anymore.

It was clear to me that she wasn't going to talk to me – maybe she didn't understand English – so I just sort of stood there for a few minutes, making the kind of soothing noises you make for sick kids and puppies and wondering why I didn't feel like an absolute fool. And, after a time, she was gone. I felt her little spirit leave the same way I had felt it arrive: not violently or noisily or in a hurry and certainly not with any spite or malice, more like the way you feel the birds come and go in the trees. I guess I got her calmed down enough to find her way. I hope so.

When I turned on the light, there was my perfectly ordinary living room in my perfectly ordinary house. No ribbons fluttered down as in “Young Goodman Brown,” her little bundle wasn't sitting on a chair, and back in the kitchen no cheese or crackers were missing from my plate. There was absolutely nothing out of the ordinary. So I picked up my snack, went back to the hall, turned off the kitchen and living room lights and went back up the stairs.

She's gone, I said. After a little interrogation in which I repeated most of what I've recounted here, I took a sip of wine, opened my review and read a few more pages. When I had finished the wine and cheese, I turned off my reading lamp, said goodnight – and slept as ordinarily as ever in my life. I must have dreamed – we always dream – but on waking I had no recollection of any further communication

with my little girl lost. But everything was – and still is – as clear to me as any other thing in my memory.

I know that such reports are associated with unreliability and mental instability, with “New Agers,” charlatans and those credulous folks who purchase supermarket tabloids to keep abreast of alien abduction schemes and Elvis sightings. And they also feature in the highly developed imaginative powers of certain contemporary writers, “magical realists” and the like. But I’m not crazy and I’m not trying to sell you anything, nor do I think I’ve been “given the key” – if I have, I haven’t the dimmest notion of what it unlocks. And though I would characterize my approach to teaching (and to a lesser extent, to life) as intuitive, I always try to make my arguments as rational as possible. So what has this little narrative to do with teaching the illuminated books of William Blake? I hope that will become clearer as you read what follows. But to begin, I’d like to remind you that Blake, though highly imaginative, was himself no magical realist. Neither was he a charlatan or a credulous person – though many still dismiss him with those labels.

Blake spent his life telling everyone who would listen to him that the world we find ourselves in is infinitely more complex than the language(s) we use to describe it. Indeed, its limits and principles far exceed the rules of *any* language. He understood at least as well as Heisenberg, (and on far more immediate evidence), that reality mocks our efforts to describe it and that meaning itself evaporates under the pressure of our presumptive questioning. Still, he spent his life attempting to bring a simple and fundamental message to his fellow humans in the plainest possible language: “Mark well my words! they are of your eternal salvation.”¹

So what prevents us from hearing him? Is it the current, (i.e. nonsense) status of Religion? His aesthetic limitations? Though these have been offered in various ways by various readers and critics, I believe the cause is something much more pervasive, something shared across the entire spectrum of modern life and political, philosophical, scientific and religious thought. What gets in our way of hearing Blake is nothing less than the triumph of the scientific rationalism he so detested. I don’t mean the scientific method; I don’t mean the rise of technology; and I certainly don’t mean empiricism, for all Blake ever asks is that

you try – and try again. But scientific rationalism permits only certain kinds of trying; others are dismissed out of hand. Whatever is unique, concrete, particular and incommensurable – in a word, whatever is invaluable – is supposed by scientific rationalism to be either non-existent in “reality,” or a distraction from it. And a man who insists, as Blake did, that the earth is flat and that he can touch the sky at the end of the street will definitely be perceived by the scientific rationalist as out of touch with reality and demanding a return to the superstition of the “Dark Ages.” But what Blake objects to in the scientific rationalist’s picture is its reductionism. For him, the parameters of time/space, so dear to the followers of Newton, are neither the conditions for, nor a description of, reality; they are the consequences of perception: “For the Eye altering alters all / The Senses roll themselves in fear / And the flat Earth becomes a Ball // The Stars Sun Moon all shrink away/ [leaving] A desert vast...”² Henry Crabb Robinson remembers Blake saying, “I do not believe the world is round. I believe it is quite flat.” Robinson objected that it must be round since it had been circumnavigated (as a rationalist, today, would point to pictures from space). He then closes his account of the conversation with deliciously unconscious irony: “We were called to dinner at the moment and I lost the reply – ”³

Blake’s answer, not that Robinson could have grasped it, is clearly spelled out in *Milton*:

The sky is an immortal Tent built by the Sons of Los
 And every Space that a Man views around his dwelling-place:
 Standing on his own roof, or in his garden on a mount
 Of twenty-five cubits in height, such space is his Universe;
 And on its verge the Sun rises & sets. the Clouds bow
 To meet the flat Earth...⁴

It is evident that Blake is fully cognizant of the circumnavigated earth so dear to Robinson and the rationalists; it is also clear that he pities its coldness and emptiness. The “Little Girl Lost” is exactly here, in the desert of the rationalists; she is the sleeping earth who, on waking and seeking her maker, will transform the “desert wild” into a “garden mild.”⁵ It is this vast, empty sky, so different from the tent of

Los, that Blake dismisses out of hand. Samuel Palmer's reminiscence of his impatience with scientific materialists is pertinent: "Being irritated by the exclusively scientific talk at a friend's house, which talk had turned on the vastness of space, he cried out, 'It is false. I walked the other evening to the end of the earth, and touched the sky with my finger.'"⁶ The same tent of Los, the beautiful and ever changing sky waits at the end of your garden; you may touch it, if you wish, yourself. And, happily, it is not the case that you must go crazy, or see visions and dream dreams to appreciate William Blake. Nor must you be visited by ghosts. But you must be calm, pay attention, and stay sane – especially stay sane.

Blake was [and is] eminently sane. He may, indeed, have been the sanest man of the European Enlightenment. He thought every bit as carefully as Locke or Newton; though his premises and methods were strikingly different, his reasoning is just as consistent – and even more compelling. Only pay attention, he said, and you'll notice that whatever you know involves your senses as well as your reasoning capacity, touches and is touched by your feelings (or emotions) and your imagination (or intuition).⁷

Hearing and understanding Blake, then, depends on two things: first, on your listening with your whole (and balanced) being, and second, on your recognition that reality and the truth about it comes through the various attributes of your being, but is, itself, not of them. Though this is simply stated, it takes considerable effort (at first) to put it into practice. Indeed, one way of 'understanding' Blake's work may be to see it as a continual and multi-layered process of teaching us how to see and listen – and what to look and listen for.

My purpose here, however, is not to attempt an explanation of Blake's epistemology and ontology (this may not be possible). I simply hope to suggest a means of approaching his art, derived from his description of our actual relation to the world. An early and succinct statement of it may be found in some lines of a poem, "The Everlasting Gospel," he squeezed into the margins of his notebook:

This Lifes dim Windows of the Soul
Distorts the Heavens from Pole to Pole
And leads you to Believe a Lie

When you see with not thro the Eye.⁸

In this life, that is, the “Windows of the Soul” (not merely your eyes, but all your senses, as well as your reasoning capacity, feelings and intuition), distort reality when they make themselves the measure of the heavens. Blake understood the reason for this distortion (seeing “with” not “through”) to be contained in the myth of the Fall, but he was not one to get bogged down in theological argument.⁹ More importantly, his point is that though the means by which we process our experience are liable to distort it, it is not this distortion which is the problem; it is our belief that this distortion is all there is – or can be. For when you attempt to understand reality or truth with your powers rather than through them you are led, always and inevitably, back to yourself.¹⁰ The consequence for art is exhaustion; for the individual, depression; and for society, war: “Art Degraded Imagination Denied War Governed the Nations”¹¹

And you might well ask, at this point, what truth or reality can there be in this life, where we have learned to our lasting dismay that we can never escape our own subjectivity? Blake replies that reality and the truth are always and immediately accessible, ‘in Eternity.’ The seeing through to them is the end of his art. But, at the same time, vision, as he supremely shows, is not exercised in isolation: even the solo dancer is partnered by the dance. The notion of a self-sufficient truth, like any claim of self-sufficiency, cannot be trusted. “I have always found,” he writes, “that Angels have the vanity to speak of themselves as the only wise; this they do with a confident insolence sprouting from systematic reasoning.”¹²

It is this same “systematic reasoning” which is forever busily proposing either the reconstruction of the world after its theoretical model or dismissing it altogether and urging us to move as speedily as possible from it to the perfection of heaven. And while reasoning claims to honor originality and purports to be the sole source of truth, it is itself wholly unoriginal and its grasp of truth is both tentative and incomplete. Systematic reasoning, not surprisingly, disallows truth to poetry on the grounds that it lacks rigor and precision. And when systematic reasoning is made a basis of religious belief, it solemnly proposes that nature herself was only brought into existence by the word or

law of a perfectly reasonable God as a means of manifesting (imperfectly) his creative powers. This God has several names and manifestations. Blake mostly calls him “Urizen,” sometimes Satan, and once, “Nobodaddy.” While reasoning is an enduring and necessary part of each of us, Blake asserts that when it is worshipped it turns tyrannical and manifests itself as a jealous, unforgiving Father God, the most familiar example being Jehovah in the Old Testament. Though today we are more likely to worship systematic reasoning in the sciences than the churches, the claim (that all reality is derived from reason and that to its judgment there is no appeal) remains the same. The voice of systematic reasoning is not one likely to comfort a little girl lost in the dark; it is even less likely to notice her.

Yet a lost little girl came to my house one quiet evening, and, having evidently found what she required, went on her way – leaving to me the problem of what to do with this part of my experience. For Urizen the solution is easy (or at least, automatic) enough: what cannot be incorporated in his world, that is the inexplicable, is denied. Regrettably, he says, joined with his partner, Morality, this imperfect world we live in persists in presenting us with less than satisfactory experience. Blake’s response brushes aside reason’s doubts and morality’s hesitations in the face of this life: “I know of no other Christianity and of no other Gospel,” he writes in *Jerusalem*, “than the liberty both of body & mind to exercise the Divine Arts of Imagination.” On the same page is the following quatrain:

I give you the end of a golden string,
Only wind it into a ball:
It will lead you in at Heavens gate,
Built in Jerusalems wall.¹³

So what if Blake’s right? What if there’s nothing fundamentally wrong with the world and that finding out how to live *in* it requires us to do no more than pay attention *to* it? Whether this be true of the world and your experience of it, only you can say. But it certainly is true about Blake’s art that there is nothing wrong with it, if you pay attention to it. But “paying attention” means here nothing less than seeing through the windows of your soul, not with them. Thus Blake’s

prayer for us all:

Now I a fourfold vision see
And a fourfold vision is given to me
Tis fourfold in my supreme delight
And three fold in soft Beulahs night
And twofold Always. May God us keep
From Single vision & Newtons sleep¹⁴

Amen.

This little book is my part in a joint effort to assist us in rising, in our supreme delight, to four fold vision – and to prevent our falling back to Newton’s sleep. Your part consists in surrendering some of your ordinary presumptions about significance (that it is a matter of logic and data, for instance), and attempting a kind of reading which requires rather more discipline and attention to detail than you have been accustomed to employ. Finding the golden string and winding it are not activities for either passive listeners or skeptics; what we do, we have to do together. But the results of both the finding and the winding will speak for themselves. And if you think you know, right now, what to expect, I understand: I was sure I knew, too. After all, if there really is a golden string, how hard can it be to find?

Years ago, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the Sixties, I was one of the lucky graduate students who collected around the leadership of O.B. Hardison, Jr., brilliant teacher, scholar and author of several remarkable books. We took all the courses from him we could and after class, we followed him from the lectern, down the hall to his office, and even over to his rambling house near the campus. He was always spinning out ideas – his own, those of his friends and colleagues, and, most excitingly of all, ours. He would listen to a question or remark, extract the idea that lay beneath it, put a couple of twists in it and hand it back with suggestions as to where the answer might be found.

One afternoon at his house – I think we were out by the swimming pool, for I seem to remember O.B.’s face wet and dripping – I brought up Blake’s *Milton*. I was then laying plans for a dissertation on *Paradise Lost*. My remarks that afternoon had to do with my disappointment

with Blake's poem. I had run across a reference to Blake's "inversion" or "reversal" of *Paradise Lost* and, as my studies were then focused on the structural details of the epic in general and Milton in particular, I had turned to Blake's poem for some instruction.

All who remember their first reading of *Milton*, can appreciate my dismay. After struggling through several pages of text (and a couple of partial, and badly printed, photo reproductions), I returned to the sane and logical structure of *Paradise Lost* (and "reality") with relief. I may have even muttered to myself what a cruel jest it was for Fate to rob Milton of his sight while letting Blake put it to such a chaotic use. Anyway, what I think I said that afternoon to O.B. was that Blake may have been right when he identified Milton as "a true Poet," and that he may have even been correct when he said he was "of the Devil's party," but to say that he was so "without knowing it," was the height of presumption on the part of someone who himself knew nothing about epic poetry.

Oh, said O.B. innocently, Blake knew nothing about epic?

Well, I replied, eager to show off, He certainly set out to "correct" *Paradise Lost*, the Preface to *Milton* states that clearly enough, but isn't it equally clear that he failed? For instance, he seems to begin in medias res, all right – but he never gets anywhere! Pretty soon the thing falls completely apart; it's not so much a reversal of Milton as it is a mess.

'In medias mess,' offered another student. But O.B. ignored him.

The real question, he said, is why he makes it so obvious. Maybe, if you took the thing apart, you'd find an answer.

This remark struck me with such force that I decided, then and there, to do a Master's Thesis on *Milton*. Ever the obedient student, I took the poem apart. I even did a pretty fair job of arguing in my thesis that it is, in fact, a reversal of *Paradise Lost*, one which (unsuccessfully) incorporates the details of Milton's and Blake's biographies and psychologies into a personal mythological system. It was duly approved and filed in the library. I filed it away, too.

I was disappointed with my argument, frustrated by a sense of never having actually touched the poem, but I assumed my disappointment was just a part of the learning process. Of course, that wasn't the real reason, nor was it the fault of my long-suffering and patient director, Robert Kirkpatrick; (long-suffering because he loved Blake and patient

because I was determined to make Blake “make sense”). I went on, with relief, to my dissertation project with Jerry Mills, which focused on a series of tropes in the epic from Homer to Milton. I proved, to Jerry’s and my committee’s satisfaction, that such poems were carefully structured by their poets to clarify for each audience member his role in the construction and preservation of society. The epic required, as I saw it, an architectural logic, a reasoned structure, otherwise it would collapse under its own weight. I was still really arguing with Blake – though at the time, I would have denied it. And the more I argued, the less satisfied I was with my argument. So I did what most people busy proving themselves right do: I turned my attention to other things. And there were plenty: I was busy teaching (or learning how not to) and starting a family. Time, as it will, passed.

I taught the courses expected of English faculty in a small, private university: freshman comp., sophomore genre courses, occasionally a Late Renaissance, or a Milton course. Never Blake. Then, one semester, I offered a seminar in the metaphor of the Eucharist in English poetry. I needed to move, somehow, from George Herbert to Gerard Hopkins and I thought Blake might make a useful contrast – and maybe even a bridge. Something quite unexpected happened, though: both the students and I found Blake’s insistence on the holiness of the body more compelling (both poetically and spiritually) than the more doctrinally correct poets’ meditations on the mystery of the Eucharist. When one of my students wanted to dip into *Milton* for his term paper, wondering if the poet’s descent from Eternity to Felpham mightn’t be a Eucharistic parallel or parody, whose laughter was it I heard echoing in the back corridors of my mind: Hardison’s? Blake’s?

At any rate, having dipped my toes again into the stream of Blake’s music, I somehow decided (or it was decided for me?) to really take the plunge. One day, I heard myself, to my amazement, proposing a seminar on Blake’s Prophetic Books.

You don’t mean those crazy ones, do you? said my department head.

Yes, I said, trying to sound as casual as possible, I’ll do the *Songs*, of course, and the *Marriage*, but I want to focus on the prophecies: *Thel*, *Los*, *America*, *Europe*, *Urizen*. Definitely *Milton*. I don’t know about *Jerusalem*. There may not be time for it.