

Books of Fire

Books of Gold:

**William Blake's Works in Illuminated
Printing**



**Schaffer Library
March 3- April 11, 2003**

*Books of Fire Books of Gold:
William Blake's Works in Illuminated
Printing*

Books of Fire
Books of Gold:
William Blake's Works in Illuminated
Printing

A Descriptive Catalogue of an Exhibition
Held at Schaffer Library, Union College
March 3 to April 11, 2003

Schenectady, New York
Schaffer Library Special Collections
and the Department of English

Table of Contents

1. *All Religions Are One* (Trianon Press)
2. *There is No Natural Religion* (Trianon Press)
3. *Songs of Innocence* (Trianon Press)
4. *Songs of Innocence* (Manchester Etching Workshop)
5. *The Book of Thel* (Trianon Press)
6. *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (Trianon Press)
7. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Trianon Press)
8. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Granary Books)
9. *America a Prophecy* (Trianon Press)
10. *Europe a Prophecy* (Trianon Press)
11. *The Song of Los* (Trianon Press)
12. *The Book of Urizen* (Trianon Press)
13. *Milton* (Trianon Press)
14. *Illustrations to the Bible* (Trianon Press)

1. All Religions are One

London: The Trianon Press for the William Blake Trust, 1970

All Religions are One and *There is No Natural Religion* were Blake's first "illuminated" books, and were probably designed and printed by him in 1788. Every copy of each illuminated book was individually produced by the author/artist, so every copy that exists is unique. After writing out his words and drawing his illustrations on the surface of a copper plate, Blake etched the plate to host the ink. The relationship between text and illustration was controlled completely by him. The ten plates of this first experiment are very small, measuring between 4.6 x 3 and 5.9 x 4.1 cm. The only existing copy is printed simply, sometimes poorly, in green or brown, and details in some plates are accentuated with black ink. The plates also include four or five framing lines.

In *All Religions are One* Blake calls attention to the universality of religion and art, and passes on his vision of their combined significance to the world. The tract states that the religious and artistic imaginations are one and that "the true Man is the source he being the Poetic Genius." Blake's statements are often religious in nature, but also contain fuller meaning, which leads to a deeper understanding of the ties between religion and art, and of their place in society. The work promotes acceptance of difference and urges the reader to think actively. Blake offers this philosophy in hopes of bringing about change in the spiritual life of people.

--- Sara Kaplan '03

2. *There is No Natural Religion*

London: The Trianon Press for the William Blake Trust, 1971

By asserting that "There is No Natural Religion," Blake found his own spiritual voice, what he calls the "Poetic Genius." His conclusion to this work, "God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is" unifies perception, knowledge, and the spirit of man. Because comparison and judgement limit thought, and because our organs of perception also limit us, neither our rational faculties nor perception can be trusted in our pursuit of true knowledge. The "Poetic Genius," Blake claims, exists beyond these accepted, conventional ways of knowing.

Blake presents God in completely humanistic terms; each person represents his or her own God, his or her own savior, his or her own "Poetic Genius." The root of existence is truth, and truth must be the intent of one's actions if he or she wishes to become the "true Man." No person can find the "Poetic Genius" if he or she desires the truth because the "Poetic Genius" exists beyond desire. God is not a deity in control or above human existence; God is an idea created by mankind and a misunderstood idea at that. The "true Man" knows this and so sees the infinite in all things. He experiences the eternal which lies both beyond conventional understanding and within himself. Living is an intense spiritual journey filled with misconstrued concepts of what is holy and what is true knowledge.

Though simple in design and language, *There is No Natural Religion* is filled with original and creative thought that each reader should use in everyday life. Blake's words and ideas in these two works are testament and proof that he has found the "Poetic Genius."

--- Drue Spallholz '04

3. *Songs of Innocence*

London: The Trianon Press for the William Blake Trust, 1954

This title page represents well Blake's view of innocence by focusing our attention on the attractive, positive aspects of natural human feelings, thoughts, and actions before they are spoiled and corrupted by experience. The poems in *Songs of Innocence* also convey a child-like quality --- one which demonstrates the belief that all children are born innocent, naïve, and pure. As the piper/singer/writer of the volume expresses, "And I wrote my happy songs/ Every child may joy to hear."

The details and colors in this introductory print are significant. The lettering for "S O N G S" has a florid, youthful, bouncy touch. The citrus-colored letters that stand out from the turquoise background in this copy are very decorative and cheerful to represent zest and hopefulness. The use of light, sherbet-like watercolors further enhances the feeling of innocence. Two details that foreshadow the "Introduction" to the volume are the Piper leaning against the letter "I" of "Innocence" and the writer or reader standing within the letter "N" of "S O N G S." In the fourth stanza of the "Introduction," the "child" on a "cloud" commands, "Piper sit thee down and write in a book that all may read," which could be a direct reference to Blake himself. The sepia-toned tree and the vine that wraps around its trunk also stand out. The tree with its dangling fruit above the children may represent the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil while the vine may represent youth and learning. In the foreground, an experienced mother or nurse in a lilac-colored dress reads from a book to two pure-minded, yet eager-to-learn children on the inevitable path that will take them from innocence to experience.

--- Brooke Yanow '03

4. *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*
Manchester: Manchester Etching Workshop, 1983

This edition of sixteen prints from Blake's *Songs* is as close to an original as is possible. The prints were made from a set of relief etchings taken from the nineteenth-century electrotypes of the original plates, and were printed on a rolling press with hand-made intaglio ink on dampened pure rag wove paper. The handmade paper resembles very closely in quality and texture the paper Blake used. It is even watermarked *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, as well as embellished with Blake's monogram. The prints were individually hand-colored with watercolors that were prepared using guidelines from eighteenth-century recipes. With careful observation, one can note the outlining, shaping, and contouring by pen and ink to define details.

This watercolor version of "The Lamb" is an excellent example of the precise reproductive methods followed for this limited edition of only 40 copies. The print is symmetrically aligned on paper a tiny bit wider than Blake's. The use of softly washed pastels expresses a sense of innocence, which coincides with the image of the responsive lamb in the foreground. The lamb symbolizes Jesus and accentuates the Christian values of kindness, modesty, and tranquility. The child speaking the poem is also associated with Jesus; in the Gospel, Jesus displays a sincere concern for children, and the bible's depiction of him in his childhood shows him to be inquisitive, forthright, and strong. This poem, like many of the *Songs of Innocence*, expresses what Blake saw as the more positive aspects of Christian belief. However, it does not provide a completely ample doctrine because it fails to account for the presence of suffering and evil in the world.

--- Liza Jimenez '03

5. *The Book of Thel*

London: The Trianon Press for the William Blake Trust, 1965

Dated 1789, but probably engraved between 1788 and 1791, *The Book of Thel* is an intriguing allegorical counterpart to *Songs of Innocence*. Thel, a mythological figure associated with the daughter of Venus (Desire), is a virgin inching toward the world of sex and experience, but also frightened by it. She asks several forms of life--- a lily, a cloud, and a clod of clay--- what is it like to be mortal? At the end of the book, Thel almost enters the world of the experience, but at the last minute runs back to the sanctuary of her pastoral home. Thel's final failure of nerve is, the poem suggests, worthy of pity rather than applause. Innocence may be an idyllic state, but "Without Contraries there is no Progression."

This message is clear before we even open the book. As you hold the book in hand, there is a striking contrast between the fine, smooth finish of the leather spine and the book's boards, which appear as if someone had painted an abstract image in oil paints, held the book on its side, and allowed the paint to run in the direction of the spine. This relationship between the leather bound "arm chair academic" and the flowing, mysteriously chaotic front and back covers recall one of Blake's most fundamental beliefs: that "true enlightenment and understanding comes from the marriage. . . of contraries. Innocence and Experience, Good and Evil, must converge to be complete. " Reason and Energy. . . are necessary to Human existence." Before we even begin reading the poem, we are forced to think about the dualities in our own lives and whether or not we are capable of blending the ideas of innocence and experience, good and evil, reason and energy. The reader could be said to undergo an experience similar to the paint running toward the leather, Blake forcing his mysterious, provoking energy toward us, even tapping our spine, the very back bone of our being.

Following the analogy one step further: the thin gold line that separates the boards from the spine could suggest wealth and the conventional power it represents as the only barrier strong enough to keep the chaotic paint away. While “arm chair academics” may be affected by the thoughts of the poem, they also might retreat (as Thel does) to familiar conventions that offer definition and order. Blake spent his whole creative life trying to break his readers free of the institutions that create these conventions. But, after all, it’s up to each reader to decide whether he or she chooses to embrace the easy comfort of leather or the discomfort of fluid, unpredictable energy.

--- *Joe Kilcullen '03*

6. *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*

London: The Trianon Press for the William Blake Trust, 1959

Visions of the Daughters of Albion stands as Blake's first attempt to address fully the condition of slavery and the sexual oppression of women. Etched in 1793 amid outcries against slavery in America and during some of the most violent years of the French Revolution, *Visions* concentrates on a love triangle formed between the heroine, Oothoon, her boyfriend, Theotormon, and her rapist, Bromion. Like *The Book of Thel*, *Visions* focuses on female sexuality. But where *Thel* is a song of innocence, *Visions* is more a song of experience. Thel is allowed to flee the threat of losing her virginity while Oothoon must deal with the loss and search for some comfort beyond it.

Oothoon's sexual freedom is destroyed when Bromion, a slave master, rapes her and dashes her hopes of a life of happy love with Theotormon. The title page may show Oothoon racing "over the waves. . . in wing'd exulting swift delight" before Bromion "rents her with his thunders" or Urizen, the god of the material world and a sensibility related to Bromion, chasing Oothoon for her sins. Either way, Oothoon, the "soft soul of America," becomes shackled to a life of psychological and social slavery that the Daughters of Albion have no power or will to release her from. Although in a different way and for a different reason, they are also oppressed, which Blake emphasizes by the refrain: "The Daughters of Albion hear her woes & echo back her sighs."

The challenging line at the bottom of the title page, "The Eye sees more than the Heart knows," seems to convey a sense of both desperation and hope. Pictured is a Rainbow of Hope with three joyful dancers at its base to contrast with the dark details and tones in the rest of the plate. Perhaps it is this hope which inspires Oothoon and the Daughters to seek relief from their exploitation in this dark universe controlled by male forces.

7. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

London: The Trianon Press for the William Blake Trust, 1960

There are only nine original copies of Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, six of which were probably printed in the early 1790s. The plates in this Trianon edition are printed and watercolored after the fashion of the originals. Only one original copy of the poem and a few individual prints were colored in opaque pigments. The paper used by the press is of high quality and monogrammed to match as closely as possible the paper Blake used. Like all Trianon facsimiles, this one duplicates exactly the dimensions of Blake's original prints and positions them as they are in the original copy that is being reproduced.

One of the main themes in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is contrary relationships, which is made very clear in the text on plate three: "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence." Blake and his Devil narrator go on to demonstrate how "Good [as] the passive that obeys Reason" and "Evil [as] the active springing from Energy" vie with one another for superiority. The reader better understands the relationship between the two when he or she accepts the motto that "Opposition is true Friendship." Plate three also includes many clever illustrations. The words, "As a new heaven is begun," are illustrated at the top of the page by a male or female figure in angelic pose but engulfed in hellish flames, and at the bottom of the page by a shockingly graphic picture of a mother at the moment of giving birth. As this one plate shows, the work has characteristics of both satire and manifesto. Because of its ironic treatment of the relationships between Good & Evil, it coerces the reader/viewer to not simply follow what they've been taught, but discover for themselves the human-centered messages offered in the Old and New Testaments.

8. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*
New York: Granary Books, 1993

Barbara Fahrner and Philip Gallo created their own version of Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* by using different techniques of book design to express their interpretation. The most noticeable difference between Blake's original and the Granary version is in the design of their pages. Blake's *Marriage* is full of colorful pictures with large and miniature figures, and with details and calligraphy flowing throughout. Fahrner and Gallo's pages are often linear with many vertical and horizontal lines. Blake's title page is full of color and detail, while the title page of the Granary edition has no illustration or color. Perhaps influenced by a late copy of Blake's *Marriage*, Fahrner and Gallo chose to include a variety of colors for the text, which itself is presented in a variety of different typefaces. The most frequently used print colors for text are black and red, but some pages include blue lettering written on a yellow background, perhaps to suggest a legal pad or a student's notebook. Some pages are also decorated with handwriting and scribbles around the print and in the margins, and others are filled with sketches and drawings of Blake. Maybe Fahrner and Gallo chose this method to show how varied and comprehensive *The Marriage* is, and how much thought and annotation it requires.

The lack of conventional, colored illustration in the Granary edition gives the reader more freedom for interpretation. It also places more emphasis on what is being said. The red text, for example, catches our eye and makes us pay close attention. The lack of illustration on some pages also forces us to focus on the thought being expressed; we are not distracted by pictures. It is impossible to decide which version of Blake's book is more effective because they are so different, but the Granary edition is a cleverly designed and carefully printed contemporary alternative in production and interpretation to Blake's very complicated work

9. *America a Prophecy*

London: The Trianon Press for the William Blake Trust, 1963

Blake's *America* includes some of the most ominous and fiery work of his career, which is clearly reflected in his illustrations. Plate five is one of the most richly colored prints in this copy of the poem with its vibrant hues and range of colors. At the top of the plate, the sky is a deep blue, but as the reader's eye moves down the page the color changes abruptly to grayish/brown clouds of smoke and then to red and yellow tongues of flame. This is a fine example of the way Blake liked to show stratification. The figures here include a man suspended in the air holding the scales of justice which are clearly upset, a man with, perhaps, a flaming sword of justice, a man standing on a cloud preparing to hurl another man into the fire below, a man trapped inside of a coiled serpent, and a man cowering with his hands over his head. The man in the serpent is particularly intriguing. A serpent swallowing its tail is usually a symbol for eternity, but here the serpent is unable to reach his tail, which is coiling toward the flames below. This may be Blake's way of suggesting that a tradition or reign is broken, such as Albion's control over America. Or perhaps he is suggesting that our dream of eternity has no chance of being fulfilled, that the American war will simply continue the cycle of destructive energy begun by the English and other old world powers. All of these images and symbols combine to form a work of art that is fraught with radical change, upheaval, and chaos, which is exactly what Blake intended.

--- Dan Donato '03

10. *Europe a Prophecy*

London: The Trianon Press for the William Blake Trust, 1969

Europe a Prophecy was first printed in 1794, following closely on the heels of *America a Prophecy*. Unlike uncolored copies of *America*, copies of *Europe* are color-printed or include blocks of color-printing mixed with watercolor. The book also includes three striking full-page illustrations, the best known being the frontispiece of the "Ancient of Days."

Like *America*, *Europe* is retrospective in its direction, and includes negative, positive, and prophetic ingredients. It is a complex mixture of events past and events obliged to come. It is replete with images of plague, sickness, ignorance, and subservience. Assembling and organizing images and symbols into one system, Blake invokes in prophetic tones his own version of the myth of civilization since the birth of Christ. The elusive, devilish "Angel of Albion" oversees a mass of humanity bound in slavery since the finite, physical world displaced the infinite. All Europe has been so bound for 1800 years. Only with devilish, revolutionary, serpent energy can these bands of binding life be loosed, clouds opened, shadows dispersed.

The prophecy builds to the moment of apocalypse. The world experiences convulsive change: bonds are broken, energies unleashed, "Angelic hosts" fall, the Angel of Albion is unable to blow "The Trump of the last doom." Enitharmon awakes and attempts to defuse the revolution, but she cannot. A song of liberation, though a violent one, is being sung. Blake begins this prophecy by invoking "elemental strings" and now a trumpet blast announces the apocalypse, a song of experience echoing a song of innocence. In France, "terrible" Orc and Los lead a "strife of blood," but their success questionable.

--- Peter Gorvitz '04

11. *The Song of Los*

London: The Trianon Press for the William Blake Trust, 1975

In 1795 Blake etched *The Song of Los*. Only six known copies are recorded and it is a relatively short work containing only eight plates, four of which are full-page designs with no text. Covering the continents of Africa and Asia, this prophecy completes Blake's continental foursome started with *America a Prophecy* and continued with *Europe a Prophecy*.

The frontispiece sets the stage for *The Song of Los* by depicting a priest bowed in submission before an unclear sun. This symbolically introduces the religious and political oppression Blake wishes to address, expose, and critique in the poem. By dividing the work into two sections--- "Africa" and "Asia"--- Blake was able to focus on the origins of religious and political tyranny, and on the relationship between them and sexual repression distinct to each continent. In "Africa" he tells the story of man's enslavement to religion and the repressive natures of many faiths. The focus in "Asia" is the political oppression that Urizen created by fearing and rejecting "the joys of love." The story of Urizen is told in *The Book of Urizen*, his appearance here being a brief continuation of that horrific drama. The important character added to Blake's cosmic cast in *The Song of Los* is Los, an immortal like Urizen, but an artist with great powers of imagination. As the singer of this song, Los dramatizes the Fall of Man that leads to the establishment of nations who hate and destroy each other because of their misperceived differences. In later illuminated books, Los has his work cut out for him as he tries to gather all his strength and energy to counter these destructive forces.

--- Anna Sluzar '03

12. *The Book of Urizen*

London: The Trianon Press for the William Blake Trust, 1958

In *The Book of Urizen* Blake describes the creation of the physical world and mankind. The number of plates in surviving copies vary between 24 and 28, most of which are brilliantly color-printed, dramatic, full-page portraits of the major figures in the myth. To achieve a stunning effect close to Blake's original, this edition required an average of 29 watercolor stencils for each page, each watercolor wash applied by hand. The result of this labor can be seen in the title page, a near perfect reproduction of Blake's original.

The title page introduces the reader to the dominant biblical associations in *The Book of Urizen*. The trees which frame the plate suggest the creation and the Garden of Eden, while the tomb-like stones behind and above the long-bearded old man represent the yet unetched Ten Commandments. The scholarly patriarch in the center squatting on one book while writing, it seems, in the two others to his side is reader as well as writer. Perhaps he is reading *The Book of Urizen* (his own book?) with us; or perhaps he is writing it; or perhaps he is transcribing it; or perhaps he is drafting the commandments that will be placed on the blank tablets. And is he doing what he's doing blindly or in a visionary state? It's not unusual for Blake to offer his reader and viewer many possible interpretations and then leave the sorting up to them.

--- Rebecca Bonelli '03

13. *Milton a Poem in 2 Books*

London: The Trianon Press for the William Blake Trust, 1967

Blake expresses the great respect he has for Milton many times in many of his works, including several series of watercolor drawings to illustrate Milton's finest poems: *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, *Comus*, *Paradise Lost*, and *Paradise Regained*. But Blake's admiration is fullest and most complex in *Milton a Poem in 2 Books*, which is mirrored in this brilliant reproduction by the Trianon Press, one of only four hundred and twenty-six copies produced. The extravagant leather binding and slipcase, the Arches pure rag paper with Blake's personal watermark, and the prints produced using the collotype and stencil process accented with gold and silver demonstrate the extreme effort and attention to detail expended by the Press when they recreated this most magnificent work.

The enigmatic, challenging title page with its nude portrait of Milton presents a problem of interpretation that sets the tone for the poem. When we examine the title very closely, we see that the '2 Books' Blake declares to have written was originally '12.' In this copy, Blake attempted to disguise the '1' in the circular patterns of smoke but did not obscure it completely. In other copies, the '12' is both more visible and less visible than it is here. It is not clear what Blake's original intentions were when he etched the '12.' Did he plan a much larger work with more books, or was the existing text, perhaps, going to be divided up into smaller books? Such ambiguity and mystification mildly mimics religion, which Milton found as his motivation for creating *Paradise Lost*. Milton wished to "Justify the ways of God to men," which is the quotation Blake appropriately selects to adorn his own title page. But in this book, Blake is not interested in justifying the ways of God to men; his main struggle is to justify the ways of Milton to himself, an equally difficult, often mystifying task.

--- Charles Kreuter '04

14. *William Blake's Illustrations to the Bible*

London: The Trianon Press for the William Blake Trust, 1957

Blake had an interest in illustrating the Bible from his early years when he produced drawings of figures such as Moses, Abraham, Saul and David, the King of Babylon, Joseph, Jesus, and Job. He never lost interest in the story of Job and in 1793 circulated a "Prospectus to the Public" in which he offered one of his first separate prints, "*Job, a Historical Engraving.*" Blake's largest watercolor and painting project of biblical interpretations was commissioned by his friend and patron, Thomas Butts. Of the 212 pictures Blake finished that could be classified as illustrations of the Bible, 155 have been known to have been purchased by Butts. In 1863, William Michael Rossetti compiled a "Descriptive Catalogue" of as many biblical titles as he could locate for Alexander Gilchrist's *Life of Blake*. In the years following, Blake's biblical drawings and paintings were scattered and they have scattered even more since. The last time a substantial number of them from one collection were together was at the Graham Robertson auction at Christie's Sale Room on July 22, 1949, a day also marked as an "historical occasion" by the introduction of the Trianon Press.

This Trianon edition is made up of nearly 200 illustrations interpreting various figures, moments, and scenes from the Old and New Testaments. Taking his imaginative cues from the words of other writers for a change, Blake made some of his most powerful and moving drawings and paintings. In addition to the many black and white illustrations, this book includes nine beautiful reproductions in color, among them from the life of Christ: *The Adoration of the Kings*, *The Third Temptation*, *The Last Supper*, and *The Agony in the Garden*. With their somber focus on institutional religion and on mortality, many of the works resonate with deeper, darker tones than those in early illuminated books such as *The Book of Thel* and *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.



Researched and Described by Students in English 192: Senior
Seminar on William Blake

Computer Formatting and Printing Arrangements
by Dan Donato, Liza Jimenez, and Drue Spallholz

With Special Thanks to Ellen Fladger and Julianna Spallholz
in Special Collections and Thora Girke and Jim McCord
of the English Department

Truth can never be told so as to be understood and
not be believed . . .

Enough, or too much . . .

