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Let me introduce you to VALA, the new emanation of the Blake Journal that ran for ten issues around the turn of the millennium. Many of you may remember the printed booklet with affection, and some of you may have contributed articles. In the past two decades technology has moved on space and our new magazine has been designed for the digital age, yet the intent of VALA remains unchanged – to understand the provenance of Blake’s imagination.

In *Vala*, Blake’s great, unpublished manuscript there is an image where two bodies tease themselves apart or weave themselves together – you can never be sure in Blake, bodies are dismantled to be mantled in divinity. I hope that in the forthcoming issues of VALA we will see Blake teased apart and woven into many wondrous forms.

Our thanks and congratulations to the editing team and to The Blake Society.

Tim Heath,  
Chair of The Blake Society  
www.blakesociety.org
It's difficult to write about William Blake. Each time I approach the task, it grows into something unmanageable within me, his roots going so deep into my own. His influence on my personhood and on my work has been profound and attempting to write a nice intro piece feels dull and cheap when seen through the lens of the great storms his poetry has guided me through. So, please forgive the personal aspect of this account, it felt like the only way I could write a truthful expression of my respect for his work.

I was eighteen when I read *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. I was familiar with bits of his poetry, had heard it in passing reference, or read lines in other writers, but this was the first time I became aware of Blake as a force. Reading him reaffirmed my deepest beliefs and set me even more solidly on my course towards energetic experiences and reading the world, and text, energetically. I found in him a guide. His work validated my poetic and romantic spirit.

I am also from London. Born and bred, as Blake was. Although absolutely changed, his London was familiar to me. I had also seen angels in Peckham Rye, and each time I passed that tree where he had seen his, I was struck by the weight of it. He left a living cast of spirits that populated the very place I lived.

I read about his life and the things I discovered solidified what to me felt like a kindred relationship. I entertained notions that some part of his molecular structure might have evaporated and been held in the

**For our first issue, the President of The Blake Society, Kae Tempest, shows us why Blake remains vital today.**

**Blakean Intensity**
clouds over London, to rain down onto me. This was the intensity of the connection. Selfish as it sounds, I felt he was writing for me.

Blake, in his own time, was a failure. He couldn’t get exhibitions. All around him, mediocre artists were rising to celebrity. And there he was, in Soho, soldiering on. It was deeply inspiring for me to think of someone having such steadfast commitment to their craft in the face of dismissal and ridicule. How was it possible? Despite being laughed at by other artists, by society, he was prolific. He discovered new ways to facilitate his ideas. He maintained an exceptional technique. His poetry was forceful. He graved it onto copper. His imagery was living. It had a third dimension because of the way he created his plates. His creativity was so profound he had to forge new avenues to express it. And then he would come home at the end of his day, and there on the staircase, hunched into the ceiling was the shining figure of Urizen, beard blowing in a holy wind, pointing a giant finger at him. Real. Visited by real gods.

At the time, I couldn’t get published. I couldn’t get a record deal. People dismissed me as a mad-person and a drunk, just like they dismissed him. His example, and his work, gave me the fortitude and the diabolical conviction that I must continue to work at all costs. He was instrumental. He was the Spirit of Los.

There used to be a permanent Blake exhibition at Tate Britain. To get to it, you had to walk through the back rooms of the gallery, it wasn’t clearly signposted, you’d have to ask if you didn’t know. There were tiny little stairs off the back of another staircase that you had to find and climb, and then other rooms to walk through until eventually, right at the top of the gallery, there was Blake. His room was small and quiet, the walls were painted dark blue, almost indigo. I think it was to protect the paintings. Something to do with the pigments or the preservation of the engravings meant the room had to be kept very dark. It gave it all a hushed, religious feel. There was never anyone in there. I used to go there maybe once every six months and just sit in that room and soak it up. The first time I saw Elohim Creating Adam (Butlin 1981: #289, pl. 388) was in that room. It made me weep and weep because wasn’t this exactly the condition of us all?

So you see, the stakes are high. Blake belongs to a part of my life when it could have very easily gone either way. It could well have been the case that I never made it as a writer. That I never got a record deal, never had a play staged. I was living in an attic room in New Cross, trying not to cast myself as the Eagle and all my artistic peers whose work seemed to be going so well as the Crows. He belongs to the part of my life that was the engine room for the next decade’s creativity.

Blake really did see buildings engulfed with flame as he set out on his long walks to Lambeth, where there is a grain of sand that Satan cannot find. He really did see the images that populate his paintings. London was often on fire back then. Once, on one of his walks, he saw inmates breaking out of the jail house, manacled at the feet. Those howling, godlike figures in his paintings are actual Londoners. This is, for me, a holy history of what I can feel and have always felt, walking around my changing city. The London that raised me is connected to those paintings. I feel that London.

I was honoured to be asked to be President of The Blake Society. I actually have no idea what it entails or whether I am qualified to hold the position. But I was asked to write something short for the relaunch of the journal and all I could think was – how am I going to explain what he has meant to me without cheapening the magic? Without making it a said thing, a throwaway thing, an inauthentic expression of something palatable when it is not palatable; without his poetry, I would not have my own. I felt his hand on my shoulder when I was in a mess. And when I read him now I still feel that way. He was a prophet who speaks across centuries to young poets and old. His mythology lives, is living. His London is still out there now. Churning away in the muck of our own.
Blake, Children and Lockdown

The resurrection of The Blake Society’s journal has been many months in the making. Its editor, Sibylle Erle, explains how the lockdown in the Spring of 2020 catalysed our efforts.

On 23 March 2020 the UK went into lockdown to manage the spread of COVID-19. We were told that we should stay indoors, and then ‘alert’, and keep two metres apart if/when venturing outside. Stay safe! On my walks I often wondered who had caught COVID-19. A virus doesn’t discriminate and this virus’ symptoms can be subtle; there was much scrutinising of faces in the streets for ‘Marks of weakness, marks of woe’ (l. 4, E26). There was – thinking about my daily walks through the lens of Blake’s ‘London’ – no leading of old (blind) men or women by small children as shown on the plate for ‘London’. Children especially, this was the official guidance, had to keep their distance from those more vulnerable than them.

I told my boys about social distancing. About keeping safe. About looking out for others, thinking that the best attitude was to assume that we had COVID-19 and needed to protect those we met in the street. On our walks we navigated the local shops we could visit and yet, despite all of the explaining, I was continually trying to keep up with my children (I took one at a time!). I often walked with Blake’s words for ‘The Shepherd’ playing on my mind:

How sweet is the Shepherd’s sweet lot,
From the morn to the evening he strays:
He shall follow his sheep all the day
And his tongue shall be filled with praise (ll. 1-4, E7)

This praise is for my boys as they achieved their best, which was often much better than adults could do. All too often the grown-ups appeared to forget about keeping their distance.

This is the Introduction to the first issue of VALA; it takes its inspiration from Blake’s Songs of Innocence and of Experience and the children in these songs. In a number of his Songs, Blake imitates the voices of children to give their point of view. My impression is that while the younger children (those addressed by Blake in Songs) took the consequences of the pandemic in their stride, the older ones, the teenagers especially, struggled with the many bans, closures and restrictions. And yet it is those younger ones who cannot articulate what they are going through. Blake’s Songs, therefore, might help us to sympathise with the child-speakers – with how they have had to adapt. Indeed, what the children have given us, given me on my daily walks, is the ultimate symbol of hope.
The suggestion to paint stones came with the home schooling pack. Rainbows were a natural choice; it generated conversation about Newton. ‘The Tyger’ sneaked into the mix.

and of better times to come through the many rainbows adorning the street-facing windows of their homes.

For me and my job, lockdown meant delivering teaching online with two six-year-olds in the background. The training that came flooding in from work, including training on health and safety for working at home, was worrying in its committed concern and attention to detail. All is legally required, I know. Then, there was the matter of home schooling. My boys told me in all earnestness they were learning more at home. The reason being, perhaps, that some of what we did was a little on the ‘unsuitable’ side. We followed the instructions sent by the school and improvised whenever we got stuck, wondering: what do we want these boys to know, learn and experience? In a moment of desperation I found myself reciting ‘The Tyger’. Questions and answers is the connecting theme of Blake’s ‘The Tyger’ and ‘The Lamb’, customarily read as companion pieces. Children, however, do not know the answers to the questions asked by the child-speaker in ‘The Lamb’; they are way too complicated – they get us adults thinking.

What is ‘The Tyger’? There is no peace of mind: ‘Did he who made the Lamb make thee?’ (l. 20, E25). Doubt prevails – and disapproval comes into focus, again, through questions: ‘What immortal hand or eye | Could frame thy fearful symmetry?’ (ll. 3-4, E24) or rather ‘Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?’ (l. 24, E25). The questions are directed at no one in particular; they are left unanswered with the trochaic beat of the rhythm’s urgency. Blake’s ‘Tyger’ speaks of anger and frustration, but what captures the current situation best is the unresolved relation between questions and answers in the poem. We have not come out at the other end; if we are pessimistic, there is still no horizon for the future, which means that we can still only adapt. Life, however, has always been uncertain and was ‘normal’ really all that good? In this issue of VALA Ed Collyer engages with the tradition in Blake scholarship that discusses what Blake’s ‘The Tyger’ can ‘do’ for young people in the classroom as well as for literature, by exploring the challenges of teaching poetry in a traditional school setting; John Higgs reminds us that what we can learn from Blake is that nobody can ‘lock down the imagination’ and Josephine A. McQuail’s story about William Blake and the Foundling Hospital testifies to just that.

Here, I want to confess that I greatly benefitted from the presence of my children. It was good to have them round the house. Having pored over ‘A Poison Tree’ in my Erdman edition, I went online and moved from plate to plate in the Blake Archive. Suddenly, a voice piped up behind me, asking about the snow in the image – I took a closer look – and then, before I could answer, ‘Why is this person asleep?’ I stopped to turn around and look into the enquiring eyes of a stern-looking child. A lot happened in an instant. I was taken back to my younger self, the Erasmus student who had visited Tate Britain in the 1990s.

I stood and stared at Blake’s Newton, (Butlin 1981: #306, pl. 394) then completely unfamiliar, marveling about how something so beautiful could be associated with an evil triad (Bacon, Newton & Locke). I remembered Blake’s praise of children in his letter to Dr Trusler (23 August 1799). Talking about his visions, he notes: ‘Children […] have taken a greater delight in contemplating my Pictures than I even hoped. […] There is a vast Majority on the side of Imagination or Spiritual Sensation’ (E703). Though a dedicated student of literature, Blake would always remain a graphic artist – who also wrote poetry – to me.

Questions about Blake’s target audience and whether or not all of the songs are suitable for children have long been raised. I think that it is certainly true that Songs were written so that ‘Every Child may joy to hear’ (l. 20, E7) – even if commissioning editors think otherwise, which they are, of course, entitled to do (Ferber 2001). My own context during the first lockdown brought it home to me that how we experience a poem depends on how we approach it; my beautiful little boy came to it through the pictures. I read the poem out since my boy loves red and shiny apples; we had a long conversation about why the apple in the poem was nowhere to be seen. Our conversation reminded me of what Saree Makdisi says about creative productivity in the dynamic between text and image in Blake (2015: 18): ‘The gap between what is happening in the words and what is happening in whatever you take the pictures to be inevitably opens up an
almost infinite interpretative space.’ Blake reaches many and, as John Riordan’s and Kae Tempest’s contributions to the first issue of VALA show, Blake’s words and images can connect with anybody at any point in their lives. ‘Blake’ stands for the best version of ourselves.

The circumstances of lockdown, the need to sit tight, while desperately clinging on to clock time, spawned the idea to make the first issue of VALA about Blake’s Songs and the children around us. They have all been locked up. The combined title-page, with the motto ‘Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul’ (E7), suggests that Blake conceived the Experience poems as a response. In the 1790s, the decade of the French Revolution, something terrible happened for Blake. The first lockdown was a period of transition as well as an opportunity for real and tangible change. Will we, I wonder, be able to hold on to any of the good that we may have discovered in the enforced life at home?

The spaces we dwell in can be tiny but due to the need to do something, just anything to fill the time – these spaces can open out through creativity into new possibilities:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand (Auguries of Innocence, ll. 1-3, E490)

Blake can give us hope and encourage us to see things differently. However, will this hope and point of view only stay with those who were healthy and comfortable in their bubbles? What I mean is that this hope might only exist for those who own sizeable gardens and can sit and listen to the birds ‘Merry Merry Sparrow | Under leaves so green’ (‘The Blossom’, ll. 1-2, E10). Thanks to the ‘Stay Alert’ campaign (with its deadline of 4 July 2020), we could all venture out again and stay outdoors for as long as we thought was right:

When the green woods laugh, with the voice of joy […]
When Mary and Susan and Emily,
With their sweet round mouths sing Ha, Ha, He. […]
Come live & be merry and join with me,
To sing the sweet chorus of Ha, Ha, He’ (ll. 1, 7-8, 11-12, E11).

Do these lines remind us of life back to normal?

Today, as then, lives can be shattered instantly. Josephine A. McQuail, having researched the lives of the abandoned children ‘dropped off’ on the doorstep of the Foundling Hospital in eighteenth-century London, re-imagines the family bonds in the Blake household, reminding us of the precocious William Blake who, like children today, understood full well what was going on. In the version of ‘Holy Thursday’ from Songs of Innocence children are marching in straight lines – ‘The children walking two & two in red & blue & green’ (l. 2, E13). They are paraded as living evidence of the Foundling Hospital’s mission to keep them alive. Their gratitude has to be publicly performed to get noticed. Blake’s ‘Holy Thursday’ poems connect not only with the history of charity schools in London but also Blake’s own, personal interest in education; the poems articulate the plight of children but also hint at the suffering of their mothers (Lee 2007). There was no marching of children for many months. The soft pattering of little feet between 8.45 and 9.00 each morning outside my window stopped in March and then only a small number of children were invited back by the school, which was simply too small to accommodate all within the government’s safety regulations. The continual laughter in our street resumed in September. Children are back at school now and they will have found school to be quite different.

What is the plight of our children? I had to tell mine that they couldn’t meet up with their friends; that they weren’t allowed to touch or chase their friends round the playground. Playgrounds have opened again but what we do in public spaces is still regulated by the government: Keep safe. Do not touch – keep a distance of 2 metres. This distance has opened up a gulf of longing, though we are now allowed to get a little closer. For a while, video hugs were all that they could get from their grandparents. For the time being, this is still the case for many. How important relationships with grandparents are can easily be gleaned from Jason Whittaker’s contribution to the first issue of VALA. What will happen to these precious but fragile bonds? I don’t know. I can see my parents getting older over Skype.

Stay safe. Stay alert. OK – but what should we do? Can we decide what is right for us to do or should we be told? Should we stay where we are or go local or book our next holiday abroad? What about Christmas?
It seemed that almost everybody was home schooling, which could mean that we had the freedom to address or remedy the damaging impact of conventional education as identified by Blake. In ‘The School Boy’, which is a poem that moved from *Songs of Innocence* to *Songs of Experience*, Blake allows the child-speaker to say that he doesn’t learn at school and much prefers to play ‘truant’: ‘In contrast, however, to a Rousseau-vian education through nature, which is supposed to steady children through autonomous yet civilized strength, Blake’s school boy sees chiefly in the differences between classroom and countryside what not only he but also his fellow students are deprived of’ (Welsh 2011: 208). The child-speaker of Blake’s poem wants to go out, climb trees and explore – to find out for himself. He wants to be left alone and unsupervised. The account in the poem gets interrupted or rather interspersed with the narrator’s commentary, as can be seen in stanzas 2 and 3:

But to go to school in a summer morn,  
O! it drives all joy away;  
Under a cruel eye outworn,  
The little ones spend the day,  
In sighing and dismay. (ll. 6-10, E31)

How can the bird that is born for joy,  
Sit in a cage and sing.  
How can a child, when fears annoy,  
But droop his tender wing,  
And forget his youthful spring. (ll. 16-20, E31)

The change of seasons in the poem reminds me of what life was like in the spring and summer months of 2020. The speaker is sympathetic but there is more than one way to interpret the ‘forget’ (l. 20). Apart from formal education dulling the mind, there is a sense of something irretrievably lost. Applying the speaker’s realisation to the ‘now’, it’s clear that home schooling wasn’t how it is supposed to be. Like Blake’s speaker, I have been able to enter into a dialogue with my children about what is important to them. I think I listen more than ever before, and yet, I cannot know how much lockdown and time away from school and friends has affected them. But then do we honestly know what it has done to us – ourselves?

All forthcoming issues of *VALA* will be built around a particular theme that relates to the life and work of William Blake in some way.

References
Ferber, Michael, ‘Not for the Kiddies’, *Academe*, 87.4 (July-August 2001), 50-52.
Welch, Dennis M., ‘Blake and Rousseau on Children’s Reading, Pleasure, and Imagination’, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 35.3 (September 2011), 199-226.
There is a bronze bust of William Blake attached to a pillar in Westminster Abbey, near the remains of Geoffrey Chaucer. It was sculpted by Sir Jacob Epstein and, surrounded by centuries-old engravings and tombs, it looks uncomfortably modern.

Blake is shown with strong, bare shoulders, his thinning hair swept back and his eyes looking upwards like an ageing superhero. He looks up not with an expression of revelation, as in the famous oil painting by Thomas Phillips, but in a stern and determined manner. His eyes are fixed on a sculpture of the eighteenth-century political essayist Joseph Addison, which stands on the west wall of the south transept. Thanks to the position of these sculptures, Blake has been forced to stare at Addison for decades. Perhaps this explains the unhappy expression on his face.

Back when he was a boy, still apprenticed to James Basire, Blake spent long hours exploring this Abbey, sketching and climbing over the royal tombs. Now, his presence has become as unmoving as the medieval effigies he used to record. All this feels entirely wrong. Blake was a man for whom energy was ‘eternal delight’ (l. 28, E34). His face should be animated, and his eyes should dart around. He should be always in the process of actively projecting his imagination onto the world. To see his face frozen in eternity does not honour him in any way. From Blake’s perspective, the universe was a process of continual becoming, whose most vital and fundamental aspect was energy.

I’ve thought a lot about that during this pandemic. One lesson you might take from Blake about this lockdown is that we can still turn inwards. No-one can lock down

The world has changed in so many ways since Blake worked on the words and images that have made him famous. Writing during lockdown, John Higgs explores the ways in which he still speaks to us today.
the imagination. We may not be able to move around in the outside world, but then inner landscape is a place of liberty so vast we will never explore it all.

And yet, Blake always did hate the thought of being physically confined. As he tells us in *Auguries of Innocence*, ‘A Robin Red breast in a Cage | Puts all Heaven in a Rage’ (ll. 5-6, E490). This can make the lockdown appear like something he would have hated. In the ‘Proverbs of Hell’, he writes ‘The bird a nest, the spider a web, man friendship’ (l. 31, E36). We live, he tells us, in our relationships. Companionship is our natural home. For most, the hardest part of the lockdown has been the isolation, and the inability to see or touch friends, family and loved ones.

If we remember why we are doing it, though, I suspect Blake may have grudgingly approved. For those who are relatively young and healthy, we are not staying in to protect ourselves. We are doing it to save others. As he also wrote in the ‘Proverbs of Hell’, ‘The most sublime act is to set another before you’ (l. 17, E36). Here is a reason to accept confinement.

And while it lasts, we always have those inner worlds.
Billy Blake’s Cab
or
The Vehicular Form of William Blake

John Riordan discovered Blake as a teenager and his exploits in illustration and cartooning have been driven by the uncompromising poet and artist ever since.
My mum is too modest to take credit, but I’m pretty sure that she introduced me to William Blake. I remember at some point her giving me the crucial piece of info that the Old Testament bearded figures in Blake’s artwork weren’t necessarily the good guys. The first concrete appearances of Blake in my life that I can pinpoint are the Peter Ackroyd biography (1995) and the Blur song ‘Magpie’, which (appropriately enough) filched its lyrics from ‘A Poison Tree’ from Songs of Experience. ‘Magpie’ came out in 1994 (as a b-side of ‘Girls and Boys’) but I’m not sure I twigged that the words were Blake’s until later. Still, I was definitely intrigued enough by Blake to choose Ackroyd’s biography, hot off the press, for an academic school prize the following year. Pretentious teenager that I was, I also chose a collection of Rimbaud’s poetry, as A Season in Hell had been referenced in one of my favourite comics (Peter Milligan’s Shade the Changing Man, in case you’re interested). Unlike the Ackroyd, I have still barely touched the Rimbaud.

I was (and still am) a huge comics nut and one of the things that appealed to me about Blake from the beginning was that he was a poet and an artist. As in my beloved comic books, the written word and printed image were fully present. Later, I would see much more of his illuminated books and admire how the words and drawings swirl around and through each other in bewitching and bemusing combinations. But even early on it was important to me that Blake was about words and pictures, and also that he had been a working, struggling craftsman, not a laudanum-dosed fop. Years later, as I embarked on a perilous career as an illustrator and cartoonist, Blake became for me the patron saint of freelance creatives, juggling paying jobs with passion projects.

Another aspect of Blake that appealed to me as a teenager was, of course, his rebelliousness. Blake’s is a relentless, critical voice, insisting that mankind could, should, be so much better than this. He appears a man out of time, an Old Testament prophet decrying the hypocrisies of his industrialising and our post-industrial age. Growing up in a conservative (and Conservative) commuter town, already feeling ground down by convention and compromise, Blake was a thrilling discovery. In his life, Blake was not a consistently forthright rebel. His later books, in part, dramatise his internal conflict between speaking out and keeping schtum during the oppressive political era in which he lived. But in his writing he is singularly unable to toe the line, to ignore injustice or to find refuge in someone else’s orthodoxy. Inadvertently over the years (and perhaps to my cost) my inner moral voice has taken on something of the tone of Blake’s.

On leaving school I had to choose, at least for a while, between word and image and ended up studying English Lit at university. The syllabus was designed around the impossible conception that over three years we would study the whole of (white, western) English literature from Beowulf to the present day, an author a week! (This has left me with a helpfully broad but frustratingly shallow knowledge of literature.) But during the term in which we tackled the Romantics I wangled spending two whole weeks on Blake, though at this point I was solely reading him, sans artwork. In my final exam, writing on ‘The Garden of Love’ from Songs of Experience, grasping for a more contemporary evocation of the poem’s description of pastoral desecration I came up with… the Blue Peter Garden. For those of you unaware of this cultural touchstone, the Blue Peter Garden, based at the BBC’s Television Centre was vandalised in 1983. I would have been five at the time and I remember watching the edition of Blue Peter in which Janet Ellis revealed the damage and asking my mum ‘Why would somebody do this?’ 16 years later, sat in that exam hall, this seemed to me to be more and more resonant. Was this, I wondered, only slightly joking, the moment in which my generation passed from...
Here is London, Gidday London, is it working or the free or what...

I was born on this street, 28 November, '57. It was...

I've been all over this town since I was a nipper. There was no tube in those days so I went for long walks.

Age of Sw, I saw God looking in at me through the first floor window. My old man sold stockings and I hid behind a pile of them...

There's an energy to London, comes out of the stones, out of all that history...

There's not much money in it, but like I tell the wide... I labour upwards towards futurity!

These days I drive the cab and write some poetry on the side.

That's twelve quid, mate. Watch out for the 'chuggers'.

You 'ave a nice day an' all Christ, give 'em your life story, they don't even tip...

I made it down to Peckham once, saw a tree full of flaming angels!
Innocence to Experience, in which we realised that evil had entered our Eden?

In 2007 I took my illustration portfolio to see the deputy art director of *Time Out* magazine and accidentally pitched to them the idea of a weekly comic strip called *William Blake, Taxi Driver*. As the name suggests, this featured William, reincarnated by a never-explained process, as a London cabbie, whose visionary powers allow him to experience all of London history and mythology, and to take fares from its denizens. When I mentioned this idea to a friend he joked ‘You’ll never guess who I had in my cab the other day? The Four bleedin’ Zoas!’ but I was able to weave in frustratingly little of Blake’s mythology. Still, the strip ran for two years, from 2007 to 2009, (which in retrospect I find remarkable for such a weird, niche concept) and over that time *my* William Blake met everyone from Gilbert and George to Boudicca, and Milton, as is only right, got a couple of rides in the cab.

By complete coincidence I also got a couple of great Blakean moments – his 250th birthday, for which I was allowed to expand to a full-page strip, and the 2009 recreation at Tate Britain of his panned 1809 exhibition. I had accidentally come up with a very labour-intensive method of creating a weekly cartoon. Because William was the only regular character, a device by which we met that week’s guest, each episode would involve large amounts of research into his passenger, then to be boiled down into a stupid gag. It was a bit like Peter Ackroyd, condensed into a four-panel cartoon, with occasional knob jokes (and indeed a drunk Ackroyd graced William’s cab in one cartoon).

I confess that I was finally a little relieved when William bowed out on the 100th strip, a victim, inevitably, of Jack the Ripper, but I felt for my wonderful editor, Peter Watts, whose ‘Big Smoke’ section of the mag, full of London lore and hearsay, was axed by new editor Mark Frith, the genius who gave us, erm, *Heat* magazine.

In 2011 I finally got to go to art school. I enrolled on a one-year MA in Illustration at Camberwell College of Art: ‘O lovely Hills | Of Camberwell, we shall behold you no more in glory & pride’, (*Jerusalem*, pl. 84, ll. 4-5, E243). Casting about for an idea for my big illustration project, I once more felt Blake bubbling up through my subconscious (or entering into my foot!) as I took a shower. The austerity years were From 2007 to 2009, William Blake met everyone from Gilbert and George to Boudicca, and Milton, as is only right, got a couple of rides in the cab.
in full swing, Albion was being smothered in his sleep by debt and recession, Occupy were camped out in the churchyard of St Paul’s. I wondered whether I could attempt a Blakean take on the Financial Crisis. As he mythologised the events and conceptual conflicts of the American and French Revolutions, could I do something similar with our economic catastrophe? Adopting a self-consciously epic tone, I scribbled pages of verse in a folder labelled BAD POETRY and then set about illustrating the gods, demons, and demiurges of financial capitalism. Eventually, the result was *Capital City*, a twenty-page fever dream of writhing London skyscrapers, exploding Gillray bankers and parasitic debt monsters:

Debt, that dreaded syllable, a dead weight between the shoulders, a pain behind the eyes.
The ghost of a fee, a louse that grows and grows,
it latches on to dreams and curdles them sour.

*Capital City* won me an award from the Association of Illustrators, got me a profile in the pages of the *New Statesman* and won me appropriately few commissions. I think Blake would have appreciated that.

Twenty-five years after my initial encounters with Blake, why do I still care? Why is he still my favourite artist and inspiration? I am still drawn to the radical nature of his project. As Blake grew older, as he and his art matured, he was forced to face the disappointing truth about the society in which he lived.

The great spiritual and political revolution he had hoped for did not happen and was clearly not about to. Although, unlike Blake, my country has not been at war for the majority of my life, I find myself living in a political, economic and cultural system that rewards short-termism and promotes selfishness and cynicism. Mainstream politics seems determined to teach us the wrong lessons about how to flourish on this planet and human life, energy and vision are squandered as we continue on our death-wish drive to trash the biosphere. The utopian hopes of my teenage years have not come to pass, and as Jarvis Cocker crudely but effectively put it ‘C***s are still running the world’.

Which is all a way of saying that one of the things that chiefly interests me in Blake right now is the idea of consolation. ‘I must Create a System, or be enslav’d by another Mans’ he famously wrote (*Jerusalem*, pl. 10, l. 20, E153). He was forced to live in a system designed by Newton, Bacon, Pitt and Napoleon but in his art, particularly in the later books, he attempts to devise his own spiritual and moral universe — a myth that explains and excuses the devastating failures of Blake’s (and our?) time, but that crucially also sites them in a larger epic sweep leading to redemption. Is it possible to wrestle hope meaningfully from our situation, to create a salvation that is more than wilful self-delusion? I am genuinely not sure of the answer but I think that I find Blake’s attempt heroic.

My current Blakean endeavour is to write and draw a graphic novel biography of Blake’s life. I want to explore how the life feeds into the work, how Blake’s domestic and commercial life fed (or frustrated) his imagination. I have given it the tentative working title of *Los: a Vision of William Blake*. To us, his fans, Blake’s life and work look heroic, but there must have been times when they seemed to him to have been failures. I’m currently in Research Hell (or Heaven?), learning more about Blake but also about life in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

‘I labour upwards into futurity’ Blake wrote in *A Small Book of Designs* (Butlin 1981: #230, pl. 379). Don’t we all, William? Don’t we all?
Considering how powerful Blake has been in my life, it would be tempting to say that he has always been there, and it would be delightful to draw upon memories of reading Blake in childhood – yet they do not really exist. I’m sure that I read – or at least heard – ‘The Tyger’, yet I had no real idea about who or what Blake was. As I moved into my teenage years, music was a pathway into Romanticism, but my Goth sensibilities were attracted much more strongly towards Byron, Shelley and Coleridge rather than Blake. He was on the periphery of my knowledge and understanding.

There was one exception – a running family joke – that gradually piqued my curiosity. My grandfather, an Irishman from Limerick who had the unlikely fortune to be born with the name John Blake, was diagnosed with leukaemia when I was a teenager.

Physically strong, he survived many years with the disease and, having worked most of his life in factories after leaving the army, he discovered a new-found pleasure in painting. Entirely self-taught, his talents were much closer to those of the naïve artist Henri Rousseau and he especially enjoyed painting tigers, copying them in oils from postcards and magazines. It is one of my greatest regrets that I never kept one of those paintings. Several times he told me that he was the reincarnation of William Blake, something which would make us both laugh, and thus I gradually became more aware of Blake’s art before his poetry.

By the time I began university, then, I was primed to appreciate the work of my family’s namesake. To be honest, however, aside from a poster of the Ancient of Days on my walls (an image that, once seen, could never be forgotten) I still knew little of Blake’s work. The change, when it came, was profound. It would be tempting to present this as a Damascene moment, a conversion when I suddenly saw the light, but it was instead a deep obscurity and anxiety that took several years to resolve itself. The cause was reading The Marriage of Heaven and Hell on a second-year Romanticism module. It must be said that moving away from home had caused a number of cracks to emerge in my youthful Catholicism, and Blake’s strange, astonishing collection of proverbs and memorable fancies would provide the hammer to smash it away completely.

It was not that Blake was anti-Catholic, more that he was perhaps the most divinely inspired writer I had ever come across who seemed to be anti-religion. The effect was so profound that I struggled to understand what it really meant. I wrote very little on Blake as an undergraduate, but I found myself reading him more and more and becoming increasingly obsessed with this voice of the devil which challenged everything I thought I knew in terms of faith, politics and even how we viewed the world. As I have later told a number of students during the intervening decades, that year was when the light went on in my brain and which has never since left me.

By the time I returned for my PhD, there was no question about who my studies would focus on, although my particular focus – Blake’s use of British mythology and history – had only emerged more slowly. Rather than religion itself, I had become increasingly fascinated with Blake’s peculiar take on national identity. About a decade ago, my father once asked me whether I had felt myself more English or Irish when growing up. My answer had been easy, but weird: neither – I saw myself as Catholic first and foremost. When that sense of identity collapsed, I had found something unsettling and astonishing in Blake’s later visions of Albion. Before the English, before the Romans – before, even, the ancient Britons.
– this had been an island of giants that, in Blake’s strange cosmogony, was both an archipelago of islands off the northwest of Europe and part of a universal company of eternals in Jerusalem:

All things begin & end in Albions ancient Druid rocky shore
But now the Starry Heavens are fled from the mighty limbs of Albion (pl. 6, ll. 25-26, E100)

For four, glorious years, I fell down the wormhole of Blake’s bizarre British mythology, where ancient druids were discovered in the Holy Land and patriarchs from the east brought their religion to Albion’s ancient rocky shore. Upon completing my degree, my professional life took me away from Blake, but I had never tired of him and, by the time I had returned to teaching at the start of the new millennium, I was more than ready to strike up conversations in eternity with him once more. Since then he has been a constant companion.

In more recent years, I have found myself increasingly drawn to those two elements of Blake – his attitudes towards religion and nationhood – that attracted me in the first place. In particular, these have fed into my work on the poem that became ‘Jerusalem’ as well as my biography of Blake, Divine Images. I’m always interested in Blake’s art and poetry, with a keen eye towards his spiritual beliefs and philosophy, searching out how he understands revelation not as something coming from out there (which he always categorised as Deism, the idolatry of the false god of this world), but rather finding its source in the inner vision of human imagination. Indeed, the title of my book draws on what has, for many years now, been my own credo, for as Blake writes at the end of ‘The Divine Image’ in Songs of Innocence:

And all must love the human form,
In heathen, turk or jew.
Where Mercy, Love & Pity dwell,
There God is dwelling too
(ll. 17-20, E13)
As G. E. Bentley Jr. has established, in the 18th century many William Blakes lived in London. The historical record of one of these ‘other’ Blakes exists in the London Metropolitan Archives. From this, Josephine A. McQuail has pieced together the apocryphal origins of William Blake, poet, printer, and painter.

What the records indicate is that in 1757, a male infant was left at the Foundling Hospital in London. From searching genealogical records and interviewing descendants of the principals (who are still in possession of letters and diaries) I have pieced together the following story.

It was a damp, foggy morning in December when Ann Brown left the baby at the fountain in front of Coram’s Fields where the Foundling Hospital received abandoned infants. She looked at the baby’s face one more time. Full now, he was sleeping. Born in November, he was already growing big. She made sure the card that could be used later to identify the baby was firmly pinned to his baby clothes: ‘Marcus Brutus Cromwell.’ Her lover, William Blake, would approve, she knew. His hatred of the monarchy and tyrants of all kinds had impressed even her, only 15. William was, unfortunately, at sea. Though he was only 16, he had seen a future for himself at sea and enlisted as a sailor on a merchant ship. In her grief at the
thought of being parted from him for years, maybe even forever, she had met with him secretly to say goodbye. It was in their village and they met in her father's barn. She was not even sure how it had happened, but as they hugged and cried, and it was so hot in the barn, even for February (indeed it seemed that this whole year of 1757 was unusually warm), that they took off some of their clothes and rubbed their bodies together. . . . She did not really understand these things but she knew when she was getting fat and had not had her monthly that she was with child, and she went to London to find William's uncle and hide her shame in not being married but with child. She had seen William one more time on March 12 when he came back because his ship was delayed. They could not get away by themselves that time and anyway she had not even missed her monthly. ‘Beware the Ides of March’ he had said, and explained to her about Marcus Brutus and Caesar in Shakespeare’s play. So, the name pinned to the baby was also their secret sign. It might give him a hint about her betrayal.

She had found William’s uncle James, confident that she could raise her child with help. She knew no one in London, and how she would give birth to a baby by herself she knew not. William’s uncle, she knew, was a haberdasher and that had helped her to find him. William had told her they were a close family and that James Blake had lodged William’s father for a time. The family, in their large house on Golden Square, took pity on her. William’s uncle’s wife, Kate, was also with child – a blessing. Mrs. Blake had two children already and was able to calm Ann and help her through the confusing months of being enceinte. The two adults had even written a letter to the ship captain of her William’s boat, and addressed it to the West Indies where it was expected to be in port. But her mortification again came back to her at the baby’s birth and she was too ashamed to baptise him, though his cousin William Blake was christened at St. James’s, Piccadilly on Dec. 11, and she had been permitted to watch the ceremony. (She had persuaded Kate to name her baby William, too!).

But eventually, hope ebbed.

She had heard that the Foundling Hospital was taking all the babies left there because Parliament had finally provided funds. Any baby would be cared for there, and she designed a plan. One morning she left a letter for the Blakes, telling them of the note she would leave with the baby so the child could be found later – it was a requirement of the Foundling Hospital that an identifying token or a memento be left with any infant left there. She could then return to her village with a tale of trying to earn her living in the big city of London. She kissed the baby’s cheek for the last time and left him sleeping.

William Blake got a letter when his ship stopped in the West Indies in 1758. He saw it was from his uncle, which was
another shock. He hadn’t seen him since he was a small child. He smiled at Ann’s news: he, a father! How?! He knew that they had gotten a bit tiddly in her father’s barn, but he was not sure exactly what they had done to cause this. Of course, he had learned a lot through the coarse talk of some of the sailors around him, so he had more of an idea now about swiving than he had before. He would write Ann care of his uncle. But he had signed articles for 5 years of service! He was bound next for Suriname in South America. He went to purchase some paper and sat in a coffee shop to compose his letter, hurriedly, before he must rush to board his ship.

Ann Browne care of James Blake, haberdasher, 28 Broad St., London

Dear Ann,

I will be back to support you and our child and we can be married at that time.

Yours very faithfully,

Wm Blake

Bridgeton, Barbados

Postscript: You may address the next letter to me care of ‘The Storm Treader, Suriname.’ We expect to be there for some time resupplying.

Instead, Uncle James wrote him the sad news of Ann’s flight and of the fact that she had left the baby at the Foundling. William swore that he would claim his child.

In January, 1765, William’s ship returned to London, and he arrived at his uncle’s. There, he found his cousin William, and impressed by the bright boy, now aged 8, he looked forward to meeting his own son, but he would have to wait until Monday. Before that, he tried to gather what he could of children from his little cousin. He asked him questions.

‘William, what does your father punish you for?’

‘He does not punish me any more, for he realises that most of the time I am in the right.’

‘Oh, and what have you been in the right about?’

The peculiar child answered, ‘I told father that once I had seen an angel and he punished me, but the angel was right there, above the door!’

The sailor asked, ‘And why did he punish you for that?’

‘He said I was lying, but I was not, I saw it. Since then, though, he has learned to trust my judgments, like when he wanted me to take lessons from the murderer.’

‘The murderer?’

‘Yes, I told him the man had a face that looked as if he would come to hang.’

William looked to his uncle for confirmation and his uncle nodded his head, saying, ‘We have found out that William is not much like other children. That is why we have kept him from school and will apprentice him at Pars’ Drawing School. We hope his fancy will help him to be a fine artist.’

‘An artist?’ William asked.

The child said, ‘Yes, and I will be the best artist there ever was.’

‘I hope you will, I hope you will, dear William,’ said his cousin.

‘You need not hope, cuz, you will see!’ said the young Will.

William set off for Coram the next day. He and Captain Coram would have had a lot in common, since Coram had been a sea captain! Sadly, the old man had died in 1751. Coram had been outraged to see the many children abandoned, dying or dead by the waysides of England and had established his hospital, the first of its kind in England. Why, it had saved his own child in a way, he thought! Since Uncle James was certainly burdened with his own still-growing family – besides William, John, Robert and Catherine, the baby – maybe it was for the best. He would look for Ann next, by making discrete inquiries in Milton Keynes, but he had heard neither from her, nor her father.

Entering the hospital he was overwhelmed by the large foyer with paintings on the walls. He saw one of a man in a red coat surrounded by globes, maps and an astrolabe, and bowed. ‘Captain Coram, I presume, he muttered. That must be the portrait by Hogarth, he thought. Just then a man approached and said, ‘May I help you, Sir?’

‘I am here to claim my s -- a foundling,’ he found himself stuttering.

Two hours later, he left, clutching a paper to his breast. ‘William Brooksby, foundling, deceased, 13 June 1759.’

He wanted to believe it was another child, but as he had put down ‘Marcus Brutus Cromwell’ as the identifying tag
on his petition to claim the child, the governors assured him that their careful record keeping guaranteed that, unfortunately, his son had died.

Returning to his uncle’s, he was met first by the boy, William.

‘What has happened, cuz?’ he asked.

‘My boy is dead. He died when he was just two years old,’ said the older William.

‘Then I am sorry for you,’ said the boy.

‘Perhaps I can be your son? After all, we have the same name, do we not?’

In spite of himself, William smiled through his tears. ‘Yes, yes, we do, dear William. How would you like to go with me and see the splendid paintings there at the Foundling?’

‘I should like that very much!’ said William. ‘I have heard that there was a printer named William Hogarth who gave paintings and such to the place!’

‘Yes, there was such a printer, and he was a painter, too. I saw his portrait of Captain Coram, who created the Foundling Hospital.’

‘I would like to see those things!’ said the young William Blake. ‘Do you think that I could be a printer and a painter, too?’

‘Yes, William, I think you could. And I will promise to help you any way I can.’

And he did, for William Blake began learning about art in what was informally the first Royal Academy of British Art – which Hogarth managed to establish at the Foundling Hospital. Blake was so angry that the later, official Royal Academy refused to recognise engravers because after all, as he and everyone else very well knew, Hogarth himself, who started it all, really, was an engraver, as was Blake himself.

Ann had died a few years after returning to Milton Keynes. No one there ever seemed to suspect her pregnancy. Though the older William eventually did marry and have his own children, young William always remained important to him. When Blake was a boy William would take him whenever he could to exhibitions and even to the Royal Academy. Years later when the printer and artist William Blake met the sea captain John Stedman and was asked by him to
illustrate his *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Slaves of Suriname* he remembered his uncle's voyages and felt strong emotion when designing the illustrations. Meeting his wife-to-be Catherine Boucher in 1782, he was surprised to hear his own words, spoken to his cousin in his great loss, come from her when he told her that he was heartbroken because of Polly: ‘Then I am sorry for you.’ He knew that Catherine was his soul mate, his emanation.

**Addendum:** Ann’s father lived on in Milton Keynes. When her lover William Blake stopped there in 1783, he found that a letter to him from Ann had been returned to her father after his last visit to the town, but Ann’s father had never read it. He opened the letter, which was dated January, 1758. Once again, he was shocked at what he read:

> To William Blake  
> The Storm Treader  
> Bridgeton, Barbados

My dear William,  
I have done a terrible thing. If you got your uncle’s letter you know that we have a son. But I must tell you more. After our son was born I was so sad and I did not believe I would ever see you again. Your aunt Kate had her baby just after mine was born and the 2 were so much alike. I decided that I must leave yr aunt and uncle’s home and I knew that they could not support 2 babies. I could not hear to return to Milton Keynes with a bastard; you know that even if my father accepted me the villagers would not, and I could not stand to go back knowing I would be scorned. But William, I did not want to risk our baby. Your aunt and uncle’s baby was born Nov. 28. The two babies looked so much alike that I had the idea to switch our William for the other William. I did that a few days before I left for a trial and no one noticed. So when I left, dear, I took the other baby, your aunt and uncle’s baby. Although I knew that Coram would take babies, I also knew that most of them died in their first years. Their baby, because it was christened, would go to Heaven, while ours would not, so I had to change them. William, when you come home, then, you must not go to Coram for our child, you must go to your uncle’s. I do not know if you can persuade them that I did such a terrible thing or if they will believe you, but show them this letter and tell them that their baby has the label ‘Marcus Brutus Cromwell.’ You know why. I hope that God will forgive me.

Your darling girl, Ann

Family lore has it that William told his ‘cousin’ that he was really his son in 1783, but begged him not to tell his parents. William Blake, the printer and artist, began a period of great creativity that year. It was as if the revelation of his parentage freed his imagination. He always had a special bond for the poor, knowing that his own fate came so close to penury, illegitimacy and starvation. Imagining the youth and innocence of his mother in her inadvertent pregnancy, he opened his heart to the plight of women.

Especially close to his, as he thought, younger brother, Robert, he always felt that he had a sort of twin in his dead cousin, and Robert (who, as he found out, was oddly really his cousin, not his brother) was much like himself. He had never felt close to his older brother, James, but Robert’s death in 1787 grieved him greatly. Knowing of the early deaths of his own cousin, Robert’s ‘real’ brother, and his mother Ann, but never being able to speak of them except to Robert, who he let in on the secret, and to his ‘real’ father William, caused the emotion to accumulate to a degree that was almost unbearable. His poetry and his designs were his only outlet. The strangeness of his own truth allowed Blake to recognise that what appears to be so almost never is.
In his own time, Blake was utterly rebellious and cynical and his collection *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794) captures these sentiments perfectly, combining the humorous with the outright savage. And yet, for all his revolutionary ideals, and as someone who rejected the establishment, it is ironic that Blake is now firmly embedded as part of the establishment. His poems are part of formal education. ‘London’ is included as part of the exam board AQA’s GCSE ‘Power and Conflict’ Anthology and *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* can be taught in its entirety as part of the A-Level.

Whilst I don’t necessarily believe this to be a bad thing, what it has done is give way to the ‘teacherisation’ of his texts. ‘Teacherisation’ itself is not a real word. But it is absolutely a real thing. The work done by Mason and Giovanelli has shown how teachers can ‘prefigure’ texts and, implicitly, impart their own readings on to the pupils they teach. Teacherisation is slightly different, however. It is more explicit than the prefiguring described by Mason and Giovanelli. If you imagine the first time you tried your favourite food or the first time you managed to ride a bike, nothing can replicate that feeling of the utter excitement of venturing into the unknown. Teacherisation is when teachers don’t even give pupils the opportunity to experience a text for the first time. They tell the class exactly and explicitly, line for line, what they think a text is about, at the exclusion of what the pupils think the text might be about. Teacherisation is when teachers take a text and suck every piece of fun out of literature. It’s like the abridged, school versions of *Macbeth* that take out the speech where the Porter proclaims that alcohol ‘provokes the desire’ but ‘takes away the performance’ (1. 3. 22) because, of course, any sort of innuendo is far too inappropriate for GCSE pupils.

I regularly see posts on social media groups with some teachers expressing their dismay that a pupil could possibly have read sexual undertones into Wordsworth’s ‘The Prelude’. They argue that the section included in the GCSE AQA Anthology could not be anything but a literal story about the speaker stealing a boat.

‘I’ve never heard of this. This can’t possibly be right’ one poster claimed.
‘Was it a boy who came up with it?’ asked another. ‘Probably just teenage hormones.’

I was particularly upset when I saw how a newly qualified teacher, looking for advice on how to teach Blake’s ‘London’, was told:
‘Just tell them it’s about someone walking through a street and seeing lots of sad things, then move on.’

I have a number of problems with statements such as this. Firstly, there is so much more to explore in the poem than it simply being about a person walking through a street. Secondly, the

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**Teaching ‘The Tyger’**

How Ed Collyer’s A-Level English Literature class captured William Blake’s rebelliousness in their readings of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. 

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**The Tyger**

Tyger tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what darkDen of theרו
Dwells the foulFour hoof of the О
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deep or sleep,
Dwells the fire of unextinguished
What winged desire he spans
What hand dare set it free?

And what shoulder, oh what art,
Crouchst the snare of the heart?
And what the hand stoops to beat
What dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain?
In what furnace was thy birth?
And what the blast thatframeth thee
What dread head?

When the stars threw down theirSpeak And immolate all their parentage
And the birds that of thee?
And he Hours who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?
whole concept of ‘telling’ a class the meaning behind a poem is simply preposterous and stands in contrast to all my principles as an educator.

I am privileged enough to teach on an English Literature A-Level. In doing so, I have witnessed pupils read a whole manner of things into Blake’s work, completely independent of my input. Inspired by this, some colleagues and I conducted research into the teaching of William Blake at A-Level. We looked at approaches that deliberately avoided telling pupils what his poems were ‘about’. We found that when pupils were given the opportunity and freedom to develop their own ideas, separate from teacher interference, their readings were influenced by their own sphere of experience and utterly rejected the readings found in most A-Level textbooks.

I believe if teachers are to encourage genuinely personal responses to texts, we must not interfere with, but simply guide pupils’ thinking, using our expertise and training. That’s not to say a teacher cannot address genuine misunderstandings and misconceptions should they arise. However, I believe that if Blake’s work is to be valued and explored to its fullest extent, teachers must respect independent thinking and find ways of valuing the tangents brought up by the pupils themselves.

In our research, one pupil was so struck by the images of fire and burning in ‘The Tyger’ that they felt compelled to explore how it related to contemporary geopolitical issues. They interpreted the ‘Tyger, burning bright’ (l. 1, E24) literally. They argued that by having an incredibly complex and intricate signifier of the natural world – a tiger – ablaze, Blake depicts nature’s destruction at the hands of human-made industry. They argued that industry is represented by synecdoche in ‘Furnace’ (l. 14, E25), ‘chain’ (l. 13, E25), and ‘anvil’ (l. 15, E25). They said that this reading could be contextualised within Blake’s own time, drawing on his experience of living through part of the Industrial Revolution but that it could also be situated within our own time, with groups such as Extinction Rebellion and individuals such as Greta Thunberg drawing attention to humans’ destruction of the natural world.

The rest of the class were keen to build upon this interpretation. Another pupil claimed that the discrepancy between the first stanza that asks ‘What immortal hand or eye | Could frame thy fearful symmetry?’ (ll. 3-4, E24) and the final stanza that poses the question ‘What immortal hand or eye | Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?’ (ll. 23-24, E25) represents how humans have lost the ability to control the spread of industry.

Inspired by the perceptiveness of the class’ reading of the poem – developed without any teacher prompting – we took the idea further and framed an entire lesson around it. We split the class into two groups. One group wrote down their initial responses to a picture of an 18th century industrial city. Another group did the same task, but with a more modern visual stimulus. We then invited them to share their responses with one another. There was a sense of horror that in the two hundred years since Blake was alive, nature is still being destroyed by industry. The pupils claimed that ‘we [humans] just haven’t learned any lessons’.

After discussing the poem further and re-reading it, the class were once again split into two. They were tasked with using iPads to create a vlog – a short video detailing a person’s thoughts and feelings – to depict a modernised and fictional version of William Blake, reflecting on contemporary geopolitical issues. The class were given the freedom of the school’s grounds to film their vlogs. There was only one condition – they had to reference a line from the poem. One group had an
enraged portrayal of William Blake staring over the school’s car park, disgusted at the amount of cars being used by staff and how they were ‘eating up the God created Earth’. The person portraying Blake then proceeded to mimic kicking a radiator off the wall, claiming that ‘fossil fuels “Burning bright” will be our end’. The other group went over to a mural of chimneys in the science department and pointed towards them. They altered a line from the poem to say that industry was burning ‘through the forests of the night’ rather than ‘in the forests of the night’ (l. 2, E24). They argued that they took artistic license with the words, to emphasise their belief that the tiger represents the destructiveness of industry.

**Each person will have so much of their life experience feeding into their reading, that to imply there is a single “right” way to interpret a text is wrong and immoral.**

More conventional readings of the poem may contend that ‘The Tyger’ draws on ideas of creation, rather than destruction, as the speaker struggles to reconcile how God could possibly have created both the innocent lamb and the fearsome tiger. Other traditional readings may also have viewed the poem as an allegory for the French Revolution. However, just because these readings are, perhaps, the more accepted versions, it doesn’t make my pupils’ readings of the poem any less valid. Makdisi seems to recognise this approach. They rejected well-established readings of Blake’s work to position him as a man with an inherent positivity whilst telling us that ‘we still have a lot to learn from Blake’. This statement couldn’t be truer. For my pupils, their life experiences and values were all feeding into their interpretation of the text. Their reading of the poem is not wrong, it is different and alternative, but not any less valuable.

Contextualising texts within the modern day is something that Ofqual – the body who ratify and approve exam board syllabuses – acknowledge as perfectly acceptable. Assessment Objective 3 of an English Literature A-Level is to ‘Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received’. They key word here being ‘received’. If a pupil decides to draw on their own life experiences as a young person growing up in the 21st century in their interpretation of texts, they should be rewarded for doing so.

My concern is that these principles aren’t being accurately communicated in the classroom and that the teacherisation of texts is still prevalent. I’m concerned that pupils are having prescribed readings imposed on to them rather than having the opportunity to explore their own ideas: pupils will end up leaving school believing that poems are puzzles, with only one correct ‘answer’ that a reader needs to ‘solve’.

A number of teachers will justify their teacher-driven approach to Blake with statements such as ‘What about the exam knowledge? What if they get it wrong?’ Well, as Rosenblatt argues, ‘no one else, no matter how much more competent, more informed, nearer the idea (whatever that might be), can read … the poem or story for us’ (1978: 141). Each person will have so much of their life experience feeding into their reading experience, that to imply there is a single ‘right’ way to interpret a text is wrong and immoral.

My pupils’ readings are rebellious. Not against exam boards, or even against Ofqual who seem to want to encourage alternative readings. But they utterly rebel against the teacherisation of texts. They go against axiomatic readings that are found in every single textbook ever made. They reject perceived wisdom and restore some of Blake’s rebellious spirit back into the study of Blake, which can become so easily eroded when tremendous texts such as *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* are included as part of an A-Level or a GCSE syllabus. We must value these readings and listen to what pupils have to say. To ignore or dismiss their readings as wrong, just because they may not conform to what textbooks say or, indeed, what the teacher believes to be true, undermines their confidence as readers. We must acknowledge that their life experiences have fed into their readings of texts and find space for tangential thinking in the classroom. Hopefully, one day, all readings will be created equal in the English Literature classroom.
Many school children have listened to and learned William Blake’s ‘The Tyger’. Desmond Bobb provides one possible explanation for the poet’s choice of unusual spelling.

My first experience of William Blake was ‘The Tyger’. Later I established that Blake was not only blessed in many areas including poetry, lithography, artistry, anatomy and theology, but was also a student of the Hebrew language.

Having learnt the poem I then went to view the thoughts of others, but little or no significance was attributed to the ‘y’ in ‘The Tyger’. However, in my research I established that this man Blake was not only blessed in many areas including poetry, lithography, artistry, anatomy and theology, but was also a student of the Hebrew language.

I am reminded of a Blake Society lecture by Iain McGilchrist in 2016 where he described how each hemisphere of the brain interprets the world in its own unique way and that our perception of the world is very much based on how we think or quote, ‘As a man is so he sees’ (Letter to Revd Dr Trusler, 23 August 1799, E702). Or at least this is what I believe he was saying! Then for some strange reason, ‘God knows’ meant sincerely, I found myself comparing the letter ‘y’ with the letters in the Hebrew alphabet.

The answer to the letter ‘y’ in the spelling of the word tiger in Blake’s most famous poem, ‘The Tyger’, could be held in the Jewish language, Hebrew.

In English the letter ‘y’ looks identical to the 16th letter of the Hebrew alphabet. However, unlike in English, in Hebrew each letter is a word in its own right and has its own meaning. ‘Ayin’ is the 16th letter of the Hebrew alphabet and the meaning of ayin is ‘eye’.

This simple translation is a revelation in itself; however, the thought behind the word ayin is that ‘God is watching over us, he is the good shepherd’. There is an obvious connection to Psalm 23 in the Bible and the reference to the good shepherd. The replacement of the letter ‘i’ with ‘ayin’ is not an accident, and may well serve to reinforce Blake’s Christian faith and reveal other mysteries in his work and the word of the Bible.
What is Man!

Published by W. Blake 17 May 1793
It is refreshing to be reminded that William Blake can still be viewed as ‘a poet of exceptional skill and versatility’ (xv) who ‘created some of the most moving and memorable verse ever written in English’ (xiii). Nicholas Shrimpton, in his new Selected Poems considers Blake’s poetry wholly as works of literature, which allows him to place the poems in literary genres or categories. This is a new and innovative way that allows readers of his Selected Poems to consider Blake outside of the Blakean mythological structure which confuses so many new (as well as not so new) readers. By placing his selection within the categories of ‘lyrics’, ‘ballads’, ‘narrative poems’, ‘descriptive and discursive poetry’, ‘comic and satirical poetry’, ‘verse epistles and dedications’, ‘brief epic’, and ‘diffuse epic’, Shrimpton allows his readers to consider Blake in a poetry-based tradition and does not include the ‘dramatic’ verse and other recognisable Blake pieces. Even the poetical works are not wholly represented; parts of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell are not included, and The Four Zoas is missing in its entirety, which I find odd, for it contains some of Blake’s most famous poetical lines in the ‘What is the Price of Experience’ section.

The book does not just include an Introduction and extensive Notes, but also has a brilliant chronological timeline in which the life and works of Blake are placed alongside key historical and cultural background events, allowing readers to refer to the society and history of the moment. This is helpful to any readers of the text and is especially useful in discerning how Blake’s patterns of thought or ideas might have developed or changed over time. Although The Four Zoas is not one of the ‘selected’ poems, Shrimpton does not dismiss its importance, stating that ‘Blake himself chose not to publish’ it. He includes not only references in the Notes when there are differences or important connections to the poem, but he also includes a concise plot summary to help the readers connect the ‘brief’ epics to the ‘diffuse’ epics, noting especially that ‘Albion’ is introduced in FZ, a character important in the later poetry. This is a considerate and noteworthy addition to Shrimpton’s Introduction, because it acknowledges that his book should not be the only text, but rather the starting, or returning point, for the readers.

Shrimpton discusses the problems that arose from Blake’s family’s place in the ‘lower middle class’ (xv), as well as their dissenting religious opinions. By presenting Blake’s mother as Moravian (a view shared with Keri Davies), Shrimpton suggests that Blake’s ‘rebarbative dismissal of the Calvinist theory of penal atonement… [has] the lingering intensity of a teenage rebellion against a previously accepted truth’ (xvii), which shows how Blake’s parents’ religious views influenced the development of his thought. Shrimpton extends this by concentrating on the importance of the Bible, most especially the Old Testament, in the Introduction, but this idea dominates the Notes, which are highly biblical and include the quotation of the biblical connection. This inclusion of the biblical quotation is very helpful to modern readers, who may not be as ‘Bible-savvy’ as their historical counterparts, and by including them Shrimpton is showing that he fully understands his audience.

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell may seem to be misplaced, because it would be reasonable to expect to find it in the ‘comic and satirical poetry’ category, and it is not. Shrimpton explains to his readers why he has only chosen to include the ‘lyrics’ from the poem. He states that it ‘is a prose text, not a poem, and its parodic function, makes it hard to interpret’ (xxviii), but this is not fully tenable because Shrimpton only discusses MHH in terms of a parody of Swedenborgian texts; an exclusion because it is ‘hard to interpret’ or understand. However, Shrimpton includes the entirety of both Milton and Jerusalem, so an exclusion of MHH based upon the difficulty of the text seems an inefficient argument. The exclusion is still justified because it is not based entirely upon the poem’s obscurity. By comparison, Shrimpton’s use of An Island in the Moon is spread throughout differing categories, and it is only in the Notes that the readers are made aware of them belonging to a larger text, rather than as separate poems, because unlike MHH these poems are not given ‘from…’ in the book.

Perhaps most significantly The Book of Los does not appear in the Selected Poems, though it does feel like it should be in ‘brief epic’. For the Children: The Gates of Paradise is likewise not selected, but it is mentioned in the Notes to For the Sexes. Shrimpton suggests, in response to W. J. T. Mitchell, that Blake’s works can be read as a piece of text, and that they are not art and word combined, advocating that the pictures are not ‘illustrations’, but ‘decorations’ (xxxv) to the text, taking an innovative but ultimately superficial approach by suggesting that despite his ‘preoccupation with the visual arts, Blake’s greatest
achievement was as a poet' (xiii). This text-only method is very interesting when he does not choose to select any part of the poems that Erdman categorises as 'Prophetic Works, Unengraved', *(The Four Zoas, The French Revolution, and Tiriel)*. Shrimpton argues that the words can be read without the text and yet does not include the main three unengraved poems. By comparison much of Blake's *Poetical Sketches* is included, which was Blake's only poetical publication that did not include illustrations. Shrimpton appears to only be using texts that were seen by more than just the author (he includes poems from letters to Blake’s friends).

What sets Shrimpton’s *Selected Poems* apart from other editions, however, is more than its use of poetical genre or category, but the poems themselves. He takes an interesting, and pleasingly new stance: he rejects all but the earliest (published if possible) versions of each text; ‘these are the texts of actual copies of Blake’s poems as a reader could have encountered them shortly after their first appearance’. For instance, it is usually accepted that ‘The School Boy’ and ‘The Ballad of the Ancient Bard’ are poems in *Experience*, and yet both were originally in *Songs of Innocence*, and are therefore in *Innocence* in this collection. By combining historical research with literary scholarship, Shrimpton creates a version of Blake’s poems which is significantly different to all others, for although within their categories the poems are placed as much as possible in chronological order, these are not the same poems that most students of Blake read. As I stated earlier, Shrimpton excludes *For the Children: The Gates of Paradise* and this seems odd as he states that he is using the earliest version of the text, for surely *For the Children* is the earliest version of *For the Sexes*?

One of the most interesting features of this *Selected Works* is Nicholas Shrimpton’s understanding that Blake scholarship can seem overwhelming and exclusive, in its language and Blakean mythology, and so therefore he breaks away from these problems by eradicating them. What he terms ‘brief epic’ include the Lambeth prophecies, but Shrimpton carefully avoids the word ‘prophecy’, unless the title of the poem demands it. Instead he relies on the ‘epic’ to show his readers the scope of the poem as well as what it is about. These literary terms allow for an easier understanding of how Blake might be placed within poetical genres, especially for those readers who are new to Blake. For returning readers, this selection gives their reading a fresh view which allows them to see the development of Blake’s thoughts and poems, as well as giving a solid basis for comparison.

**Spoor (Pokot). Directed by Agnieszka Holland from the novel by Olga Tokarczuk and starring Agnieszka Mandat. 2017. Reviewed by Elizabeth Potter.**

Undeniably unique, Olga Tokarczuk’s *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* (2009) was a massive success. The novel, with its titular reference to one of the litany of ‘Proverbs of Hell’ from William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, promises a complicated view of the world from complicated eyes. Translated into English with a sensitive and reflexive touch by Antonia Lloyd-Jones, this difficult-to-categorize novel was shortlisted for the 2019 Man Booker International Prize. As most successful novels are, it was adapted into a feature film, called *Pokot* in Polish and *Spoor* in English. The script was a collaboration between Tokarczuk and the film director, Agnieszka Holland, in 2016.

In essence, the book and novel share the same narrative. Janina Duszejko lives in mutually respectful bliss with nature in the Klodzko Valley; a lonely terrain between Poland and the Czech Republic. A retired civil engineer, part-time English language instructor, vegetarian, and horoscope enthusiast, Duszejko is a passionate animal rights activist who finds herself often at odds with the limited people around her. One of her many irritations, her neighbour and poacher, whom she has christened ‘Big Foot’, asphyxiates on a bone in his stew. Duszejko and her friend, Matoga, find his grotesquely contorted body. Fresh deer hoof prints circle the exterior of the home, prompting her fixation that Big Foot’s death was the animal’s revenge. Several other peculiar deaths emerge, further encouraging her conviction that the animals are exacting revenge. The police officers dismiss the ‘local, batty, old woman’, as I imagine most would. But Duszejko is convinced
of her perspective. In the novel, she explains that the animal-victims are constantly present in her mind’s eye:

I can still see them. I squint, as a way of blurring their shape and making them disappear. I only do it because I cannot bear their presence. But the truth is that anyone who feels Anger, and does not take action, merely spreads the infection. So says our Blake. (65)

While the named references to Blake are far fewer in the film, the effect remains. The contradictory nature of Duszejko – a friend to animals, a foe to man – is a primary example. In a letter to Reverend Dr. Trusler in 1799, Blake substantiates his vision: there are two ways of seeing: ‘the tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the Eyes of others only a Green thing that stands in the way’ (E702). Duszejko is moved to joy by all the players in nature but she is surrounded by those who wish to remove or abuse it. A beautiful, older woman who is not a mother to children, she is brutally honest, passionate, and mad. Agnieszka Holland, the director of the film, describes her as: ‘mad with anger, obsessions, love for animals and with compassion for marginalized people. She is full of rebellion and outrage’. The character is a refreshing sight on the silver screen and made more magnificent by her Blakean construction.

Another area in the film touched by Blake’s influence is evident in the Director of Photography Jolanta Dylewska’s artistry. The autumnal warmth and fuzzy, sun-dappled textures early in the film feature depths of sky and expansive fields – indicative of a more innocent time. The bleak darkness of winter skies, spikes of ice, and oppressive snow mounds quickly reorient the ambience as the peculiar deaths occur. Holland explains the film genre as ‘mixed’, just as ‘are reality and imagination’. Dylewska’s cinematography choices exacerbate this ‘mixed’ view in that the mood and plotline fits neatly inside the aesthetics of the environment. The film is deeply rooted in the omnipresence of the natural world and the impact it has upon our lives and perception. Viewed from behind, the frame above-left appears very similar to Blake’s Albion Rose. With arms outstretched in a gesture of fulfilment and liberation, Duszejko and the figure in Blake’s design abound and celebrate the moment. They are not haunted by spectres of a peopled landscape – they are magnificently individual within their world.

The constant reworking of reality and imagination as symbiotic in Spoor is a well-versed concept in Blake. As an adaptation, Spoor expertly moves through the mixing of genres like the novel. Perhaps what it does not do as well is deliver the serpentine ponderings of the mind of Duszejko – which would be an unfair media expectation. For someone interested in William Blake and the impact he has had upon the current, globalised world, Spoor is an aesthetically arousing and morality-questioning tale full of morbid twists and delightful turns.
Contributors

Desmond Bobb is married to Jacqueline and father to Joshua. He is a born-again Christian, passionately proclaiming that Jesus Christ is the Lord God.

Ed Collyer is a secondary school English teacher and PhD student based in Lincolnshire.

Alexander Erle likes drawing, ice-cream, juice and brushing his teeth.

Maximilian Erle loves reading and climbing trees at night. Every now and then he wants to run away.

Sibylle Erle, Reader in English Literature at Bishop Grosseteste University, is still working on Blake, as well as death and monsters.

Tim Heath is Chairman of The Blake Society.

John Higgs is the author of books including Watling Street and The KLF. His essay William Blake Now was published in 2019, and his next book William Blake Vs The World will be released in 2021.

Josephine A. McQuail has many academic publications; this is her first published story. She is Professor of English at Tennessee Tech University, USA.

Elizabeth Potter is a PhD student at the University of York. Her thesis focuses on Blake’s marginalia and aesthetics.

John Riordan is an illustrator and comic artist. He created William Blake, Taxi Driver and is the co-creator of Jessica.

Jessica Riordan is almost three years old and likes to paint. She can be relied upon to demonstrate an Orc-ian spirit.

Annise Rogers is a PhD student, currently researching The Four Zoas and Biblical poetic forms.

Kae Tempest is an award-winning, author, poet and recording artist, and President of The Blake Society.

Jason Whittaker is an enthusiast who has written extensively on Blake. Born in 1969, he has died many times since.
Credits

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www.blakesociety.org
St James’s Church
197 Piccadilly
London W1J 9LL
vala@blakesociety.org

Editor - Sibylle Erle
sibylle@blakesociety.org
Managing Editor - Jason Whittaker
Art Director - John Riordan
john@blakesociety.org

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p. 3, page from manuscript of Vala, or The Four Zoas, by William Blake, from The British Library.


p. 33, Albion Rose by William Blake, from the British Museum.


p. 4, photograph of Kae Tempest, provided by Johnson and Aldcock.


p. 8, ‘Scary Tyger’ by Alexander Erle.

pp. 11, 12-16, 28 & 34, illustrations by John Riordan.


p. 21, Captain Thomas Coram (1740) by William Hogarth, Foundling Museum Collection.


pp. 32-33, images from Spoor by Robert Palka, provided by Beta Cinema.