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Review of Kathleen Lundeen's 'Knight of the Living Dead: William Blake and the Problem of Ontology'

Jason A. Snart
College of DuPage, snartj@cod.edu

R E V I E W S

Kathleen Lundeen. *Knight of the Living Dead: William Blake and the Problem of Ontology.* Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2000. 180 pp., 35 illus. $38.50 hardcover.

Reviewed by JASON SNART

Kathleen Lundeen's basic argument in *Knight of the Living Dead* is that Blake's "disregard of the conventional aesthetic parameters that are thought to separate one [artistic] medium from another," image from text for example, also plays out in his "trespassing the boundaries between here and the hereafter," that is, Blake's claim to have communicated with the dead (13). Jerome McGann, in "William Blake Illuminates the Truth," writes of what he calls "the three principal 'lines' of Blake criticism" (18). These are: (1) studies which pursue Blake's "political and social engagements" (like Erdman's *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*), (2) those which pursue Blake's "symbolistic/allegorical methods" (like Damrosch's *Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth*), and (3) those which pursue Blake's "work as an artist and engraver" (like Viscomi's *Blake and the Idea of the Book*) (18; the examples are mine, not McGann's). However, there is a fourth "line" coming into greater and greater focus—of which Lundeen's work is a part—though it is a line that I'd argue has not, until recently, run parallel to these others, so much as it has run a sort of zigzag pattern through them all, intersecting at different angles in different instances. This fourth line could be termed something like "Blake's textuality." Not that earlier studies did not attend in varying degrees to Blake's textuality, but textuality was always subsumed in broader arguments; it was always one of many means to an end. Through the mid-1980s, the 1990s, and especially in the late 90s, this fourth line of criticism began to run a course of its own. That is, studies of Blake's textuality became less concerned with explicating a political or symbolic aspect of Blake's work, and more content to (and confident enough to) begin pursuing questions of textuality for their own sake. The best parts of Lundeen's *Knight of the Living Dead* are very definitely part of this fourth line; other work that constitutes the fourth line includes that by Donald Ault, V.A. de Luca, the Santa Cruz Blake Study Group, Molly Anne Rothenberg, Nelson Hilton, Fred Dortort, and Thomas Vogler.

Lundeen's basic goal is to pursue the intersections between the insistent materiality that Blake's work negotiates and what she calls Blake's "spiritualistic practices" (13). She looks to show how *ontological* boundaries (between dualisms) are revealed in Blake's work to be *perceptual* boundaries, and that to understand Blake's claims to have communicated with spirits, we must first understand his epistemology as one "that escapes dualistic reasoning" (162). Where a great deal of early criticism looked to stabilize Blake, to systematize even those works most resistant to systematization, recent work has tended to move in the opposite direction, or at least has professed to move in the opposite direction, looking to destabilize Blake's texts, and in some cases to preserve their instability instead of correcting it, by attention to the very details which so often were swept under the carpet in earlier systematizing criticism. Lundeen's willingness to move through a variety of Blake's texts, her attention to the play of both verbal and graphic elements, and her willingness to suspend multiple, and sometimes conflicting, readings of Blake's work, place her firmly in the textualist camp. In chapter 2, for example, "Urizen, Milton, and the Problem of Forged Identity," Lundeen pursues the metaphor of "quaking" (64) in *Urizen* in relation to "the semantic instability of language" (66); she attends to Blake's illustrations as they try to "break out of the frame of the plate" (75). This textual breaking is deeply linked, argues Lundeen, to the various kinds of semantic breaking that occur throughout the poem.

Admittedly though, Lundeen's sensitivity to textual, material conditions in Blake's work does not always get pushed as far as it might. For example, in her discussion of quak-

ing as a persistent metaphor in *Urizen*, Lundeen fails to note the highly unstable plate orders of the extant copies of the book itself. Of particular importance to Lundeen's discussion should be plate 4 (numbered 4a in some systems, and as I'll refer to it here) of *Urizen* from which Lundeen, like many Blake critics, quotes ("'I have sought for . . . a solid without fluctuation'" [63]). Almost perversely, this plate, in which Urizen expresses what has become that most "Urizenic" of desires for fixity (the solid without fluctuation), is present in only 3 of the 8 extant copies (A, B, and C as listed in Worrall's *The Urizen Books* [148-49]). Consider that when plate 4a is absent, the narrative moves from "Shrill the trumpet: & myriads of Eter / -nity" (plate 3, lines 44-45) to "In living creations appear'd / In the flames of eternal fury" (plate 4, lines 1-2, copy D). With plate 4a in place (as in copies A, B, and C), "Shrill the trumpet: & myriads of Eter / -nity" is followed by "Muster around the bleak desarts" (plate 4a, line 1). Further, plate 4a ends, "All the seven deadly sins of the soul," followed by the next text plate, plate 4, "In living creations appear'd / In the flames of Eternal fury." The presence or absence of plate 4a drastically alters the possibilities for who, or what, performs certain actions.

Up to the point in copy D at which plate 4a would otherwise appear (as it does in A, B, and C), Urizen has been trying to survive his expulsion (or withdrawal, depending on whose perspective we believe) from Eternity by organizing, building and creating. With plate 4a excised (a material "falling away" for Urizen), the Eternals arrive and chase Urizen into the "desarts and rocks" (plate 4, line 20) with their flames of fury. They drive him to "howlings & pangs & fierce madness . . . Till hoary, and age-broke, and aged. / In despair and the shadows of death" (plate 4, lines 24-27).

If we recall that the "of" in the title, *Book of Urizen*, might suggest that the book is, in fact, *by* him, as much as it is about him, then I think we must consider the possibility that Urizen is *telling* this story, not just having it told about him, and is thus potentially looking to elicit the reader's sympathy. After all, in copy D (plate 4a is absent) the Eternals chase Urizen into seclusion for little apparent reason. It is the Eternals who are jealous, vindictive, and arbitrary with their anger. With plate 4a in place, we get a chance to see Urizen proclaim his laws in books of metal, and as such we are given some reason to explain the Eternals' reaction to him. Again, the presence or absence of the plate has dramatic implications for our reading; the quaking metaphor that Lundeen pursues would thus seem to extend itself well beyond the content of the plates and into our material encounter with them. Further, Lundeen's argument that Blake and Urizen participate in a number of the same bookish activities (what she calls "Blake's occupational kinship with Urizen" [81]) could well benefit from a consideration of the role plate 4a plays in our conception of Urizen, for it is the plate on which he announces the writing of his books of metal (or, more correctly, his books of "me- / -tals" [plate 4a, lines 23-24]).

Also absent from Lundeen's analysis is any mention of the position of the "Preludium" in copy E; it does not *precede* the poem at all, but rather appears as the fifth plate. Following from Lundeen's assertion that "the entire universe of Urizen quakes destructively" (65), and her attention to the "ever-shifting narrative" (68), a detailed discussion of the ever-shifting plate order would seem to be required. Most intriguing from a textual standpoint is that in copy E the "Preludium" appears between text plates 5 and 6 (following Bentley's authenticated plate order; he has personally examined copy E), with an intervening illustration after plate 5 (Bentley). Plate 5 concludes, "And Los round the dark globe of / Urizen / Kept watch for Eternals to confine, / The obscure separation alone; / For eternity stood wide *apart*" (37-41; my italics), while plate 6 begins, "As the stars are *apart* from the earth / 9. Los wept howling round the dark / Demon:" (1-3; my italics). Indeed it is plate 2 itself, the "Preludium," which is made to stand materially "wide apart" from where it should be if it is to precede the poem. It becomes, in copy E, very literally an "obscure separation." In copy C there are two plates of the "Preludium" text; the first appears as the second plate in the book (where it properly precedes the poem). The next "Preludium" occurs immediately after the first. This second plate 2 has all but the word "Urizen" erased from the title as it appears on the first "Preludium": "Preludium to the [First] Book of Urizen." To be accurate then, the second plate "2" (that is, the third *actual* plate in the series) is not titled "Preludium" as such, though it repeats the text of the first "Preludium."

However much Lundeen's work attends to certain textual detail, her study is still rooted in some of the (potentially problematic) goals of earlier criticism. Not least of these is the tendency to ignore entanglements which arise from close reading, especially those which complicate the argument at stake. In her discussion of tautology in chapter 3, "Disappearing Boundaries in Prophetic Geography," for example, Lundeen accepts the traditional association of the child in the "Introduction" to *Songs of Innocence* with the poetic muse: the "child/muse" she calls it (126). This fails to account, however, for the fact that the Piper is piping his songs *before* encountering the child. Thus the artist is not without some form of inspiration prior to the child's appearance in the poem. The point is absolutely not that Lundeen is "wrong." In fact her analysis of the poem is particularly insightful. However, this detail is one that probably should not have escaped the author's notice, since it does complicate how we can interpret the relationship between the child and the Piper. Another example occurs in Lundeen's discussion of *Milton* in "Urizen, Milton, and the Problem of Forged Identity." She develops an analysis of

"the celebrated image of the foot" (92) in *Milton* (and in other of Blake's work), and again her explication is astute; she moves ably among a variety of Blake's works, from *Milton* itself to *Jerusalem* to a letter Blake wrote to Flaxman. She makes clear the connection between word and foot, writing/creating and walking, and thus writing as bodily action (96). Nowhere does Lundeen make what would seem the obvious connection, though, between the physical feet of the body and the metrical feet of poetry—a connection that would seem only to strengthen the link between writing and walking.

In addition to these omissions are a couple of points at which Lundeen, in her efforts to show how problems of ontology pervade *all* of Blake's work, stretches interpretive possibilities in one direction without considering others. For example, in her discussion of the Laocoön, Lundeen writes that "the central figures . . . appear to be struggling to burst out of [their] scripted bonds" (38). She reiterates the point on page 84: "the figures struggle to break out of the all-pervasive textuality on the page." Lundeen employs the Laocoön as one of "Blake's vigorous attempts to escape representation" (84) but at the same time (paradoxically?) to show the "claustrophobia of a universe in which 'il n'y a pas de hors-texte' [there is no outside the text]" (38). However, the figures do not seem particularly concerned at all with the words around them. Indeed, they occupy the center of the page, and it is their outline that constrains what forms the text can take. Their struggles seem to be focused on elements of the "sculpture" itself (particularly the serpent), not with the surrounding text. In fact, for a composite page of text and picture, there is little ground given by the figures to the text. In other of Blake's work, figures will often point directly to key textual moments (for example, Gwendolen points directly to mirror writing on plate 81, copy D, of *Jerusalem*). In the case of the Laocoön, what strikes me as odd is not the degree to which the figures participate with the text, or must "reckon" with it, as Lundeen writes (38), but the degree to which they *ignore it entirely*. Lundeen does not choose to explore what seems this equally viable interpretive option. Similarly, in her discussion of Blake's use of textual frames to enclose his poems, Lundeen writes that "every engraving resembles a window or, with a bit of a stretch, an open eye" (145). The general point is a good one: to link reading with seeing, and thus to complicate the ontology of seeing and of the textual frame itself. However, Blake's angular frames look nothing like eyes. And it would seem this difference is crucial; in fact, the artificiality of the frame may participate very deeply with those material elements (like the metal plate itself) which Blake struggled to reconcile as he communicated his vision in the inescapably resistant medium of his art. Unlike the human eye, which can manage that which is peripheral, a frame on the page serves to delineate supposedly important space (within the frame) from unimportant space (outside the frame), calling our attention to the artificiality, the framed-ness, of the poem.

Blake's marginalia (the subject of my own research) work against this convention of unimportant space in the text, not so much in that Blake writes important *content* in the margins, but in that he forges an alternate text (or alternate texts) in spaces left over when books are printed using a standardizing printing process (in which the economics of book production determine the final product). Marginalia, by operating in space that cannot be reached by standardized text, tend to reassert the materiality of "the book" (the artificiality of its layout, for example) which often otherwise disappears, however much it may play a crucial role in asserting and maintaining the authority of what is written. McGann notes in *Towards a Literature of Knowledge* that "the printed book is one of the most illusionistic of human works, imputing as it does an aura of permanence [and, I argue, *authority*] to the discourses we manipulate" (12).

Importantly though, despite certain omissions and "stretches," Lundeen's general argument for the way in which language operates in Blake to unseat traditional Western dualisms by metaphorizing the ground and grounding the metaphorical is not seriously at risk. In fact, it is Lundeen's analysis of Blake's use of metaphor and rhetorical devices that makes her work most valuable. In addition, her ability to connect such usages to what must have been a ubiquitous influence for Blake—the Bible—is particularly revealing. And while Lundeen shows how Blake participates in biblical traditions and forms, she does not hesitate to show ways in which he also subverts those traditions.

Problems become more substantial, however, when Lundeen tries to extend her textual analysis into the area of Blake's spiritualism. Consider Northrop Frye's assertion that his book *Fearful Symmetry*, published in 1947, "offers *an explanation* of Blake's thought" (3; my italics). In *Knight of the Living Dead*, Lundeen, despite her efforts to preserve ontological instabilities, even paradoxes, that arise in Blake's work, ultimately frames her argument in terms of Blake's thought. She writes, "*In Blake's mind*, the artist and the spiritualist coexist on a continuum. Hence, spiritualism for him is not merely a suitable theme for art and literature; it is a modus operandi" (17; my italics). From the start then, Lundeen prepares her reader to be told what Blake had in mind as he worked. What is most problematic about this aspect of her study is that it appears an unnecessary rhetorical framework, given that her analytical work proves to be so energetic, resourceful, agile and revealing. That is, her analysis of Blake's "word-image art" and of the "limitations of analogical language" as they are revealed by Blake's work are, I think, of more primary concern than what might have been "in Blake's mind," if for no other reason than the issues Blake's art forces us to confront (in terms of textuality and the operation of meaning-

creation and authorization) persist, regardless of what Blake might have "meant."

Intentionality itself seemed a dubious concern for Blake. He writes that "not a line is drawn without intention & that most discriminate & particular <as Poetry admits not a Letter that is Insignificant so Painting admits not a Grain of Sand or a Blade of Grass <Insignificant> much less an insignificant Blur or Mark>" (E 560, "A Vision of the Last Judgment"). Yet we know that one aspect of Blake's color-printing process (as evidenced in a work like "Newton" particularly) incorporates the chance, random formations created as paint is transferred from millboard (or metal plate) onto paper (Hamlyn and Phillips 194). How does intention function here? I'd argue that the "intent" is to invite chance into the work of art, but not that each line, blur or mark is to signify something in its own right. If faces emerge (or are made to emerge at some point in the creative process) in certain copies of color-printed works, for example (as Lundeen notes is the case in *Urizen* plate 7, "in which the design between the figures yields faces, if one looks closely" [149]), I think it is because Blake's artistic process creates the conditions under which such events are possible, not always because Blake "intended" faces from the outset. What Blake had in mind is much less important than the field of possibility that is generated as we encounter each work of art. (I am not entirely sure which copy or numbering system Lundeen is working from here.)

Thus, however successfully Lundeen's work enters into the debates surrounding Blake's textuality—and I think, despite certain omissions, her book enters very successfully into such debates—there remains part of her work tied to earlier critical notions that studying textuality is simply not enough. One must do more. The "more" that Lundeen chooses, then, is to try and tie her study of Blake's textuality (his various responses to the problem of how we encounter verbal and visual graphic marks, the page, and the book) to what she calls Blake's "spiritualism" (162).

Specifically, Lundeen sets out to answer the question: "is there a correlation between his [Blake's] textual and his spiritualistic practices?" (13). As Lundeen notes, there is no shortage of anecdotal evidence telling of Blake's encounters with "spirits," his "experiments in mediumship," his "otherworldly communication" (13,16). Henry Crabb Robinson's *Reminiscences* provide multiple reports of Blake proclaiming to have conversed with spirits. Most (in)famous of Blake's so-called spiritual encounters might be that reported by John Thomas Smith: "his brother Robert stood before him in one of his visionary imaginations, and so decidedly directed him in the way in which he ought to proceed" (*Blake Records* 460). This "way" would become Blake's relief-etching process—a process which inverted the standard intaglio method and thus now represents, for Blake critics at least, one of his most "contrary" of material choices. Bentley assures us that "the facts [as reported by Smith] are quite uniformly reliable . . . [he had] known Blake personally for over 40 years" (455). But this does not preclude the rather tempting possibility that Blake was, at any given time, putting on a kind of show for whomever he happened to be talking to (perhaps playing the part of the "mystical poet" for those who may have been most eager for and/or susceptible to such a display). Nelson Hilton shows, in *Literal Imagination*, Blake's capacity for punning and word play (opening up what Hilton refers to as the polysemous, or multidimensional, aspect of Blake's words [10]). Might this predilection for textual play not indicate a temperament capable of many other kinds of humorous, polysemous, play? Certainly there were contextual pressures at work when, for example, Blake signed William Upcott's autograph album, "William Blake one who is very much delighted with being in good Company Born 28 Novr 1757 in London & has died several times since" (Keynes 179). In addition to the text, Blake has drawn a figure touching a scroll-like design that winds overtop and around the words, suggesting the degree to which even the "autograph" was a public performance. Also important to note is Blake's poor physical health at the time and also that Upcott owned a number of Blake's works (and thus Blake may have wanted to play the part of mystical poet as best he could).

That such possibilities are unprovable is exactly the problem I'm pointing to. Lundeen herself admits (almost a third of the way into her book) that many scholars "dismiss these extravagant claims [about Blake communicating with the dead] as little more than antics which Blake performed on impressionable acquaintances," while others, she notes, "argue for madness." For Lundeen, "neither explanation seems satisfactory" (57). Ultimately, her attempt to connect Blake's thought to his practice requires her to fix in place what that thought might be.

In addition to the problems that biographical reportage entails, as Lundeen extends her textual analysis into Blake's spiritualism, she also opens up the very precarious area of defining just what spiritualism means (to us or to Blake). Her basic argument is, again, to suggest ways in which Blake complicates our traditional sense of how meaning is generated, that is, how the status (or "ontology") of visual and verbal cues both plays into yet disrupts certain fixed, systematic codes like those of grammar or analogic language. In order to move this discussion so that it overlaps with her arguments about Blake's spiritualism, Lundeen chooses, at times, to use the word "spirit" to stand for anything nonmaterial. In one sense, direct discussions of spiritualism disappear from large portions of *Knight of the Living Dead*, in that Lundeen does not pursue Blake's interaction with the "dead." Yet in another sense, Blake's spiritualism *never* leaves the discussion, since "spiritualistic practice" is made to encompass all of Blake's work as a poet and engraver; Lundeen even argues that Blake's "implied readers *are* angels," but that to understand such an assertion, we need to

understand *Blake's* definition of angels (22). For Lundeen, every time Blake works he is practicing spiritualism, since, as *Knight of the Living Dead* tries to show, Blake is constantly looking to undermine "the whole matter/spirit dualism upon which Western culture is based" (17). In her "Introduction," Lundeen employs the term "spirits" in what strikes me as the conventional sense; that is, spirits as the souls of the dead. Thus she speaks of Blake's "sightings of spirits," his "trespassing the boundaries between here and the hereafter" (13) and his "paranormal communications" (17). However, on page 16 she explains that in the argument to come she will be following Blake's "self-defined spiritualistic practices." (On page 32, she goes, for example, to the *Descriptive Catalogue*: "'A Spirit and a Vision are not, as the modern philosophy supposes, a cloudy vapour or a nothing: they are organized and minutely articulated beyond all that the mortal or perishing nature can produce.'")

What emerges from Lundeen's initial question—"is there a correlation between [Blake's] textual and his spiritualistic practices?"—is this: not only are they correlated, but they are, in fact, merely different aspects of the *same* practice. Both challenge the ontology of the so-called material versus the non-material by way of unseating the dualism upon which one (the material, the empirical, the substantive) is thought to ground the other (the non-material, the visionary, the intangible). The extension of her textual analysis into matters of spiritualism is in part made possible by taking up a very broad, and shifting, definition of what the spiritualistic entails; indeed Lundeen takes up Blake's definition which, as her own study shows, challenges traditional notions of which activities are spiritual and which are not. Inevitably, everything becomes spiritual practice (or practical spiritualism), and anybody can be an angel (Lundeen notes that Blake refers to John Flaxman in a letter, "You O Dear Flaxman are a Sublime Archangel My Friend & Companion from Eternity" [22]).

At the close of her study, Lundeen writes, "we can never extricate ourselves from the net of Urizenic textuality." But by "peering through the seams in Blake's text—the verbal and visual borders—we may discover, as Blake evidently did, that ontological boundaries are actually perceptual boundaries, which dissolve with improved vision" (162). Lundeen does an excellent job of exploring those boundaries, and moves among many of Blake's works, both major and minor, without feeling bound to explicate any one work exhaustively, thus suggesting perhaps the artificiality of the boundaries that we normally assume separate any one of Blake's works from any other, let alone any one element *within* a work from any other. Lundeen notes Blake's "agility as an intermedia artist" (13), and she herself proves agile as a critical reader.

However much Lundeen's analysis allows us to discover about the "problem of ontology" as it operates in Blake's work, though, the question of intentionality persists throughout. Yet it is a problem that Lundeen herself does not interrogate, asserting, as above, that Blake "evidently" was aware of what his work was doing (162). The problem of intentionality, finally, is not a crippling one in this case, but it does point to an interesting, larger problem emerging in Blake criticism, especially for those, like Lundeen, entering the field with a first book. That is, how to frame an argument so that it participates in discussions as they've been formulated by previous scholars but also so that it says something new. It may very well be that there is still enough anxiety about the "fourth line" of Blake criticism that scholars feel compelled to say something about Blake himself, not just about what kinds of problems the materiality and textuality of his work force. Lundeen's study is an excellent one, and should take its place among those which further illuminate the issues at stake in the detail of Blake's work.

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