Focus on William Blake

OF EAGLES AND CROWS, LIONS AND OXEN

Blake and the Disruption of Ethics

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ABSTRACT

Why focus on the work of William Blake in a journal dedicated to religious ethics? The question is neither trivial nor rhetorical. Blake's work is certainly not in anyone's canon of significant texts for the study of Christian or, more broadly, religious ethics. Yet Blake, however subversive his views, sought to lay out a Christian vision of the good, alternated between prophetic denunciations of the world's folly and harrowing laments over the wreck of the world's promise, and wrote poetry as if poetry might mend the world. Setting imagination against the calculations of reason and the comfort of custom, Blake's poems inspire questions about the relationship of ethics to prophecy, and open the possibility that ethics itself would be markedly enriched could it find a place for what Thomas J. J. Altizer has called Christian epic poetry.

KEY WORDS: *William Blake*, *prophecy*, *lamentation*, *poetry*, *imagination*

BECAUSE IT IS OFTEN used as a gateway into William Blake's imaginative universe, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (ca. 1790–1793) is probably his most widely known work, apart from "Songs of Innocence" (1789) and perhaps "Songs of Experience" (1789–1794). A cursory reading of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, with or without the closely allied "Song of Liberty," would suggest that so far from being a suitable companion for religious ethicists, Blake is their avowed enemy. "As I was walking among the fires of hell, delighted with the enjoyments of Genius, which to Angels look like torment and insanity, I collected some of their Proverbs" (Blake 1966, 150).[1] A few of the seventy (or by my count, seventy-one) proverbs "collected" for our shock or edification are quite well known: "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom"; "Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels

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[1] All quotations of Blake's work are from *The Complete Writings of William Blake; with Variant Readings*, edited by Geoffrey Keynes. Because most of the quotations are taken from prose works (or works like *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that are partly prose and partly verse), the number given in parentheses is in all cases the page number, not the line number.

with bricks of Religion"; and "As the catterpiller chooses the fairest leaves to lay her eggs on, so the priest lays his curse on the fairest joys" (150, 151, 152). Others, less often quoted, seem even less orthodox from a moral point of view: "Drive your cart and your plow over the bones of the dead"; "Prudence is a rich, ugly old maid courted by Incapacity"; "One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression" (150, 151, 158). Taken thus at face value, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* looks like the work of a libertine and anarchist, an antinomian and iconoclast. It scorns the vulnerable, defies authority, and ridicules moderation and tolerance. Genius and imagination rise up out of shattered harmonies to spurn received moral wisdom; genius owes nothing to the empty and domestic chatter of convention: "The eagle never lost so much time as when he submitted to learn of the crow." At best, the text appears in places to fuse the divine to the human; at worst, it seems to deny divinity altogether.

It is, then, hardly surprising that the third edition of the sourcebook *The Moral Life: An Introductory Reader in Ethics and Literature* (Pojman and Vaughn 2007) includes no featured selection from the work of Blake—nowhere in its sixteen sections and one thousand pages.[2] Although the new 2007 *Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology* does include an article on Blake, its author, Christopher Burdon, emphasizes Blake's "artistic theology" (2007, 463) and deftly avoids affirming that he finds anything in Blake's corpus that would be of compelling value for ethicists.

1. Redeeming Blake

With recent works like Zygmunt Bauman's *Postmodern Ethics* before us, we are in a particularly good position to reconsider the value of Blake's work and the nature of his achievement—not just his achievement as the architect of a distinctive variant of Christian theology but specifically his achievement as a guide and teacher in the engagement of moral experience as well as in the engagement of specifically modern moral problems and challenges. Like Blake, we find ourselves in rapidly changing times in which opposed moral traditions and practices once again collide, not just at the boundaries of social systems but also at their center. Those of us in university settings find our moral consciousness stretched to encompass warring extremes. On the one hand, there is the challenge and allure of the deconstructive breaking through and unmasking of allegedly illegitimate conventional constraints on behavior, paired with the lifting up of "subjugated

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[2] A verse from Blake's notebooks is used approvingly as the epigraph of the essay "Monogamy: A Critique" (McMurtry 2007, 720).

knowledges" that are argued to demand the transformation of our received moral norms. On the other hand, we encounter increasingly strident anxiety about nothing less than a looming social crisis described sometimes as drifting relativism and sometimes as rapacious nihilism. At the same time, the traditional resources of rational decision making and virtue formation seem less and less convincing either as answers to attacks on legitimacy or as means of restoring communal bonds and moral "common sense."

According to Bauman, an ethics for our times need not and should not abandon "characteristically modern moral concerns," but such an ethics must reject "typically modern ways of going about its moral problems (that is, responding to moral challenges with coercive normative regulations in political practice, and the philosophical search for absolutes, universals and foundations in theory)" (1993, 4). Bauman sounds a thoroughly Blakean note when he writes, toward the end of his book, "Morality is not safe in the hands of reason" (1993, 247). Contrasting ethical decision making with moral responsibility, he asserts that while moral nihilism is indeed a contemporary threat, it is a threat that comes from an unexpected direction:

> Reason is about making correct decisions, while moral responsibility precedes all thinking about decisions as it does not, and cannot care about any logic which would allow the approval of an action as correct. Thus, morality can be "rationalized" only at the cost of self-denial and self-attrition. From that reason-assisted self-denial, the self emerges morally disarmed, unable (and unwilling) to face up to the multitude of moral challenges and cacophony of ethical prescriptions. At the far end of the long march of reason, moral nihilism waits: that moral nihilism which in its deepest essence means not the denial of binding ethical code, and not the blunders of relativistic theory—but the loss of the ability to be moral [1993, 247–48].

Although Bauman certainly did not have Blake in mind, his redrawing of the landscape of moral danger and moral need enables us to consider Blake as a religiously grounded thinker hammering out a moral vision on the anvil of times not unlike our own. Blake may indeed look like something of a moral nihilist if we focus on his many and various "denial[s] of binding ethical code[s]," yet his work does set forth a distinctive account of what it means to be able to be moral, to be able (and willing) "to face up to the multitude of moral challenges" that form the fabric of our lives. His bitter and deft attacks on the moral conventions of his era did undoubtedly render his work socially subversive and therefore socially dangerous (as Emily Merriman underlines in her essay in this issue), but Blake no more leaves us in a moral wasteland than Bauman does. Blake's slashing critiques of stultifying restrictions and oppressive power were meant to provoke serious

engagement with the question of agency, with the problem of moral dualism, and with the very meaning of "apocalypse" insofar as it supposes the final triumph of the righteous.

1.1 *Blake and the cultivation of moral agency*

I mentioned above that Burdon, in his article on Blake in the *Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*, stops well short of recommending Blake to the attention of ethicists. He does, however, include near the end of his essay a carefully hedged conditional observation that *if* one is persuaded by the reading offered by Stephen Behrendt's argument in *Reading William Blake*, "then Blake, the antinomian enemy of 'Religion', is paradoxically the facilitator of a profoundly ethical and religious reading" (2007, 453). Turning to Behrendt's argument, we find that he explicitly locates Blake's significance for moral theology at the level of moral agency. "A primary purpose of Blake's prophecy in general is to force us to reassess our beliefs and convictions and think for ourselves rather than accepting without question the received notions that hold us in the torpidity of complacent custom" (1992, 94). Uncritical behavioral habituation and submission erode agency, and are, in this respect at least, more damaging than criminal violation of enacted law. Whether we cede our moral authority to rigid rationalizing logic, to reductive empirical science, or to social convention, we cease, in Blake's view, to be responsible agents.

There is no question that Blake's poetry is difficult. Interpretations are contested among even accomplished readers. The obscurities of his intricate mythic world, the oppositions and ambiguities that mark his verse, the conflict of voices within poems and between poems, the inversions and reversals of character and plot, and even apparently deliberate acts of artistic "sabotage"—all of these techniques operate to frustrate conceptual reduction and to throw the reader into a world that is neither simpler nor steadier than reality itself. Behrendt's contribution is to enable us to see that Blake was probably deliberately bent on forcing the reader into active discernment and interpretive construction. Thus, on Behrendt's reading, Blake's artistic style ceases to be what some have seen as an expression of half-mad visionary eccentricity and presents itself as a pedagogical and moral strategy. "Reading Blake's works," writes Behrendt, "is an exercise in continual judging and choosing, from which process emerges a sense not just of the 'meaning(s)' of Blake's texts but also, more important, of ourselves as informed readers and as empowered human entities" (1992, 26). No longer able to find shelter amid the ruins of our moral platitudes and beset by Blake's esoteric prophecies promising a future that is

alternately sublime and terrifying, "we must . . . learn to depend upon ourselves, and upon our own imaginative and experiential resources" (1992, 35). The notion that reader and author collaborate in the interpretive construction of the meaning of any text now has such wide currency as to seem unexceptionable, but Behrendt rightly argues that Blake's reader is more than just a "co-author" of textual significance in this conventional sense. Making sense of any one of Blake's complex illuminated poems[3] is "a first step toward making sense of the far more complex world that surrounds us" (1992, 149). Blake's reader is (or should be) morally transformed and liberated into action. Writing about the Books of Urizen, Ahania, and Los, Behrendt observes that these, like all of Blake's poems, "press us unremittingly to reconsider our perceptions, revise our assumptions and expectations, and reassume both authority and responsibility in reshaping the world" (1992, 149).

1.2 *Beyond binary thinking*

In addition to focusing our attention on agency and on the ways in which agency can be subverted or developed, Blake challenges our assumptions about simple moral binary choices between the pure and the impure, good and evil, justice and injustice, angel and animal, victim and oppressor, Jesus and Satan. Reflection on the interpretive history of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* suggests both how central this blurring of oppositions is to Blake's poetic universe and how difficult it can be to grasp and appreciate the alternative conception of reality that emerges as a result. Trying to make peace with this poem, interpreters who were (rightly) unwilling to read it as a wholesale rejection of moral and religious values first represented its meaning as a simple satirical inversion of moral conventions. Acknowledging that Blake does, to be sure, treat angels, heaven, and the moral law with contempt, they suggested that what he sets himself against are the deceptive simulacra of "religion" and "morality," clearing the ground for a re-presentation of what is truly godly and good. On this reading, Blake's argument functions as all good satire does: it employs shocking overstatement to mock folly and pretension and to bring to consciousness (by offending and thus making visible the tacit assumptions that usually form the blind background of thought and speech) the true normative commitments of the moral community. He attacks the notion

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[3] Like most recent interpreters of Blake's work, Behrendt gives and demands attention not only to Blake's words but to their interplay with the images Blake engraved around and among his words. As is suggested in the essays that follow, particularly in the argument of Steven Hopkins, the images often seem to be at odds with the words, adding another challenging layer of interest to any effort to unfold the meaning of Blake's complex, multidimensional texts.

that the sexual body is impure or bad in order to affirm its created purity and goodness. Instead of seeing hell as a place of suffering and punishment (and thus "bad"), he sees hell as a domain of energy and vitality (and thus "good"). Whereas apocalyptic symbolism traditionally identified animals that do harm and birds of prey with oppressors (and thus bad) and identified serviceable animals like sheep and oxen with the saints (and thus good), Blake celebrates as good the soaring power of the eagle and condemns the dumb submissiveness of animals that herd. Thus, the formal framework and the evaluative contrasts remain unchanged, but the value terms are reapplied in light of shifting notions of what actually deserves celebration as conducive to human well being. On this reading, Blake's poetry belongs to the family of Jonathan Swift and, at the same time, offers a fairly simple pre-Nietzschean dismissal of complacent, other-worldly, and ascetic moral conventions in favor of a robust world-embracing celebration of vitality, imagination, and creativity.

Yet even in the relatively early *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the movement and interplay of agonist and antagonist fails to fit neatly into this pattern of simple inversion, and more recent critical readings of the work have rejected this interpretive strategy. Instead of neatly mirrored polarities, we meet layer on layer of irony, shoals of ambidextrous symbols, and a mythic world of powerful, enigmatic figures who speak, merge, and shift in elusive ways. The seventy "Proverbs of Hell," one of the voices assures us, constitute "infernal wisdom," yet many of them—"The cistern contains; the fountain overflows" or "One thought fills immensity"—seem unexceptionable from any point of view, and it is hard to know how they could be construed as counters in a war against moral convention. It may seem initially that everything in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* falls into place if we grasp the redefinition of goodness as energy and of God as the source of abundant life, but then we are lost wondering why "the Prolific" is said to *require* "the Devouring," as if generative energy would be strangely paralyzed if not set against its binding, constraining contrary. The one voice in the multivocal poem that nearly all interpreters seem to trust is the one that asserts, "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence" (149). Good *and* evil are *necessary*. Christ *and* Satan are *necessary*. Thus, as readers we are swept up into a feeling of triumph when, at the end, the angel is consumed in the flame of the devil to emerge as Elijah, the "particular friend" of the dominant voice, the friend with whom he reads the Bible "in its infernal or diabolical sense" (158). It becomes more and more clear that Blake's subversive work lies not in rearranging the acts and attitudes usually associated with each pole of the dualism of good and evil. It is dualism itself that

is being challenged. This is not the inversion of heaven and hell; it is their *marriage*.[4]

Although Thomas J. J. Altizer's Hegelian reading of Blake is not uncontested, his reading of Blake in light of the *coincidentia oppositorum* offers a powerful means of appreciating just how radical a challenge Blake has lodged against the normal metaphysical and moral dichotomies of religious and ethical discourse (Altizer 2009). Altizer's theological work has been intertwined throughout his career with his reading of Blake, and his 1967 study, *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake*, was reissued in 2000 with a new afterword by the author. Blake is one of the major figures (along with Augustine, Dante, Milton, and Joyce) whom Altizer surveys in his 1985 *History as Apocalypse*. The article printed in this issue of the *Journal of Religious Ethics* is both a condensation and a development of Altizer's persistent appreciation of Blake's "ambivalent and dialectical figure[s]" (1985, 197), figures that not only resist all simplistic moral reductions but also induce in the reader some inkling of what it would mean to believe that there is *nothing* that the fullness of being does not finally embrace. As consciousness works the contrasts and negations that populate the world with contraries, including the moral contraries without which it seems that ethicists could scarcely function, Blake's apocalypse or revelation lies in the realization that the human calling is not the work of choosing right and rejecting wrong in a bisected cosmos; the human calling is the imaginative marrying of what destroys with what brings to birth, instituting ever new (if also ceaselessly disintegrating) patterns of hope and life.

1.3 *Winding the golden string*

One of the ironies of scholarship is that literary critics have for decades been paying far more attention to the theological and ethical dimensions of Blake's work than theologians and ethicists have. Critics from Harold Bloom in the 1960s to Behrendt in the 1990s have argued that Blake is a moral thinker of depth and skill, to whose views ethicists would do well to attend—not just because he challenges the normal methods and paradigms that govern our theology and our ethical teachings but also and more importantly because he sets out an

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[4] Visually, Blake's engraving of the title page makes his intention quite clear. "Marriage" is the word that is distinctively and ornately treated. Both the words "Heaven" and "Hell" are given a pictorial context below the light-filled, garden-like surroundings of the word "Marriage," making it plain that heaven and hell are not just words that happen to come at the end of the title but are to be understood as lower and imperfect realities. Trees grow equally from each realm to shelter the word "Marriage."

arresting substantive vision, a vision anchored deep in the books of the Hebrew prophets and in the Christian gospel.

Jerusalem, the last of Blake's epic poems (and his longest illuminated poem), culminates in an apocalyptic vision as dazzling in its way as the incandescent rose with which the *Divine Comedy* closes. *Jerusalem* is a mythic rebuilding of paradise, without the escape from cost and destruction that such visions of paradise usually entail. In the interlude addressed "To the Christians" between chapters 3 and 4, the poetic voice promises:

> I give you the end of a golden string,
>   Only wind it into a ball,
> It will lead you in at Heaven's gate
>   Built in Jerusalem's wall [716].

That the lines are deceptive in one sense is communicated by the neat, almost childlike quatrain, so different from the verse forms otherwise employed throughout. The words are true enough, but the journey is anything but childish or easy. And the theology is anything but orthodox. As Robert Essick has said, "To plunge into *Jerusalem* is to confront a profoundly unsettling experience" (2003, 251). The poem ends with the final breaking open of the shell within which, according to Blake, the senses and the social order repeatedly seek to secure themselves. Its final verses stretch and fracture to portray the restoration of eternal community in forgiveness, reciprocity, and selflessness. The Jesus of *Jerusalem* is not set against the world but is positioned at the world's heart. The poem offers a vision of integration so complete that nothing is alien to it. Jerusalem as the paradisal community is inviolable because it is a community from which no one is excluded.

The articles by Altizer, Hopkins, and Merriman that form this "focus" open up for the reader some of the rich reserves of Blake's moral theology and his mythic account of the forces at work in the human personality and in human history. They do this without slighting his achievement as a social and theological critic, and without papering over features of his work, such as his treatment of women, that may themselves be morally problematic. Given the sweep and complexity of Blake's poetic and artistic oeuvre, these essays can only provide a beginning—a string to wind. All three were first presented at a session of the Arts, Literature, and Religion Section of the American Academy of Religion at the AAR annual meeting in November 2007, a session that was organized, in part, to honor Altizer's Blakean contributions to theology and theological contributions to Blake studies. If Altizer has been, for forty years, almost alone among theologians in exploring (and extending) Blake's Christian epic poetry as serious

theology, ethicists have been equally indifferent.[5] The *JRE* hopes, by publishing this set of essays, to provide readers both with resources for approaching Blake's illuminated poems as discerning readers and with an enriched sense of the value of Blake's work both for reflection on the life well lived and for understanding of the conflict, desperation, destruction, and waste that seem to be such indelible features of human affairs.

2. "The Angry Poetry of the Prophets"

Interesting and important as it may be for Christian ethicists to look anew at Blake's work, the essays gathered here also draw attention to themes and issues that should be of interest to religious ethics more broadly and to comparative religious and moral studies. The theme of prophecy runs through all three, just as it recurs like a musical motif in the work of Blake himself. Hopkins's exploration of female laments (in Blake's poems and in other literary and political contexts) exposes the moral force of a form of expression that has rarely been connected in any significant way with moral or ethical inquiry. By probing the political intentions of Blake and our contemporary Geoffrey Hill, as well as the limited social impact of their poems, Merriman brings out explicitly what is left implicit in the other two articles: the possibility that poetry (or at least those forms of poetry that Hill and Merriman consider "great poetry") is an important genre of moral discourse, freighted with largely unrecognized, or at least largely unengaged, ethical significance.

2.1 *The renovation of the house*

In his new afterword in the 2000 re-publication of *The New Apocalypse*, Altizer asks, "Is it truly impossible to name our darkness? The naming of darkness, and of a contemporary darkness, has always been a primary role of the genuine prophet. Is that impossible today, or is prophecy itself impossible in our world?" (2000, 208). As his essay in this issue indicates, he is increasingly inclined to conclude that our world can no longer bear such vision and that the loss is a devastating one.

It is hard, though, to come to a judgment without knowing what, actually, we are trying to engage, and prophetic vision and prophetic

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[5] In a variety of literature searches of ATLA Serials Online that variously linked the terms *Blake* and *ethics* (and terms related to *ethics*), Timothy Jackson was the only ethicist whose work was cited as touching on the work of William Blake; see Jackson 1997, 1999.

criticism are notions that are fairly often invoked in moral discourse, but much less often analyzed. The relationships between prophecy and moral philosophy, prophets and ethicists, utopian vision and social practice, extraordinary revelation (whether the source be divinity or "genius") and practical reason are relationships on which all three of the following essays, in different ways, invite us to reflect. Whether one holds that ethicists and prophets are allies or antagonists depends to some extent on how one defines the terms: What exactly is a prophet? Who qualifies and who does not? Who gets to decide? Does the category become useless if it is used in very different ways by different theorists? One's understanding of the inter-indebtedness of ethicists and prophets also depends on one's social theory and one's understanding of social maintenance and social change. On the one hand, once again taking the Christian tradition as an example, it would seem almost unthinkable to argue that Christian theological ethicists are at odds with the Hebrew prophets; the debt of Christian moralists to the prophetic literature is manifest from the American Social Gospel into the American Civil Rights Movement and in the various twentieth-century political and liberation theologies that have funded demands for justice that can be met only through social change. On the other hand, a fairly radical disjunction of prophecy and ethics can be supposed from two different directions.

First, the two are broken apart when the need arises for a normative critique of ethics itself (a need Blake clearly felt). The appeal to prophecy captures or manifests a festering discontent with the work of ethicists and others involved in the preservation and maintenance of social arrangements and the defense and enforcement of social mores. This broad and pervasive sense that ethicists are the "insiders" whereas prophets are the marginalized "outsiders" is probably the residue of Max Weber's portrayal of the prophet as a figure of charismatic authority whose exceptional power arises not within the ties and offices of the social system but from the value constellation that the prophet articulates *in contrast to* the reigning consensus, guarded and preserved by the "priests."[6] Though more recent historical research has demonstrated that the Hebrew prophets were not nearly so much disempowered outsiders as Weber's generation thought them to be,

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[6] This interpretation of Weber's position dominates many discussions, including the treatments of prophecy explored in this article. It is, nonetheless, surprisingly difficult to find places where Weber actually says this. In *Ancient Judaism*, he certainly treats the relationship of priests and prophets as antagonistic, but he seldom treats prophecy or charisma as features of the social margins. On the contrary, he explores a variety of forms of social power that are prerequisites for the emergence of charismatic authority; see, for instance, Weber 1952, 17, 282, 380, and the definition of charisma on 465. Some of the essays collected in *From Max Weber*, particularly if read in isolation from *Ancient*

people still fairly commonly invoke the need for prophetic vision at just the point when they begin to think that ethicists have become so invested in the status quo as to be either incapable of self-questioning moral critique or unable to respond creatively and effectively to material and social change. More often than not, the figures that we identify as prophetic are figures, like Martin Luther King Jr., who chafe restlessly against established laws or customs and who act and teach in ways that seem ethically subversive from the regnant point of view.

Conversely, ethicists tend to be suspicious of "prophets," particularly self-described prophets, who seem, to the careful moral philosopher, to be putting forward unreasonable and utopian fantasies, feeding a morally dubious hunger for impossible worlds. They ask too much. They want it too soon, or they want it by fiat. Their demands are extreme and unnuanced. Their grounds and justifications are idiosyncratically private, shielded from criticism, and either sub- or suprarational. Like Ibsen's Brand, they want "all or nothing" and are more likely to bring down, catastrophically, the fragile structures of cooperation and protection than to advance the good. From this point of view, a poet like Blake may be interesting to read and intellectually provocative, but can hardly be considered to be making a contribution that ethicists need to take seriously.

Interestingly, in-depth discussion of the prophets is missing even in places where we would expect to find it. The excellent and illuminating collection *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* offers no extended consideration of the prophetic books. In his contribution, Vincent Wimbush does acknowledge their importance, emphasizing precisely their contribution to the community's pursuit of justice. He notes that Africans in the "new world" learned from the eighteenth-century revivalist evangelicals that the Bible offered "a virtual language-world that they, too, could enter and manipulate in light of their social experiences" (1991, 86). Embracing the task of interpretation, they were "attracted primarily to the narratives of the Hebrew Bible dealing with the adventures of the Hebrews in bondage and escaping from bondage, to the oracles of the eighth-century prophets and their denunciations of social injustice and visions of social justice, and to the New Testament texts concerning the compassion, passion, and resurrection of Jesus" (1991, 86). The collection, like the remainder of Wimbush's own essay, gives ample attention to the first and third of these, but little to the second. Neither "prophets" nor "prophecy" appears in the index.

Judaism, seem more consonant with this widespread representation of Weber's argument. See "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions" (Weber 1946, especially 327–29).

Fairly standard general overviews of the scriptural grounding of Christian ethics accord little attention to the prophetic books—suggesting that, in fact, the prophetic perspective may be comparatively difficult to integrate into standard approaches to ethical reflection. For example, John Rogerson, in his analysis of "The Old Testament and Christian Ethics" in the 2001 *Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, sets before the reader a considerable variety of "differing ways in which the Old Testament has been used in ethics" (2001, 34), but they are all ways in which Christians have struggled with the Old Testament laws and their "moral content." The prophets make no appearance. In the article "Scripture" in the 2005 *Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, William Spohn insists that ethicists must take into account more than "rules and principles," for "the great historical narratives, the paradigms of Exodus and the Cross and the Resurrection, personal exemplars, prophetic vision, and the rich language of praise and lament shape the moral perception, dispositions, and character of believers" (2005, 94). However, apart from one further affirmation that "reflecting theologically on Scripture in Christian ethics" ought to involve attention to the way in which prophecy, along with laments and parables, "shapes the moral vision and emotions of individuals and communities" (2005, 95), Spohn outlines an approach that, in his own words, "(a) gives primacy to the Synoptic Gospels' portrayal of discipleship, (b) as configured by the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus, in order, (c) to shape the character of Christians and their communities" (2005, 96).

2.2 *Moral critique and social change*

In contrast, Michael Walzer's *Interpretation and Social Criticism* offers an approach that does integrate prophecy and ethics in a powerful way. Focused on how social change is effected, the book ends with a chapter on "The Prophet as Social Critic" in which he argues for "the value of the prophetic example for a general understanding of social criticism" (1987, 82). The prophet exemplifies what he takes to be the best of three approaches to moral philosophy.[7] Precisely because particularity and social connection are the distinctive marks of the moral discourse of the Hebrew prophets, they provide, in Walzer's view,

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[7] Walzer contrasts the model of the prophet ("the path of interpretation") with the law- or principle-centered model that usually supposes a revealed morality ("the path of discovery") and with the more intuitive, value-centered model in which it is usually supposed that the "values are created by conversation, argument, and political negotiation in circumstances we might best call social, over long periods of time" ("the path of invention"). The three paths are laid out in Walzer 1987, chap. 1.

a better means of moral and cultural comparison than thin accounts of minimal shared rational principles. While "each nation can have its own prophecy, just as it has its own history, its own deliverance, its own quarrel with God," it is the very existence of these particularist quarrels and the resources they marshal that can ground profitable comparison across cultural and religious boundaries (1987, 94; see also 82 n. 15).

His view that we must "resist the portrayal of the prophets as peculiar, eccentric, and lonely individuals" (1987, 83) is central to his development of his model of the "connected critic" (1987, 80). Jonah, to be sure, exemplifies a lone outsider who carries to Ninevah a divinely delivered message of doom—otherworldly, alien, and threatening. However, Walzer considers Jonah to be a late aberration, and he accordingly rejects Martin Buber's representation of Jonah as the "paradigm of the prophetic nature and task" (Buber 1960, 104; Walzer 1987, 80). Instead, he takes Amos as the proper pattern for understanding "the prophet as social critic." Walzer's discussion of the approach characteristic of prophetic social critique can be summarized around four points:

1. The arguments of the prophets are concrete, not abstract: they announce what is required of this people in this place at this time. Whereas the other models that he considers privilege universalized laws and cultivated detachment (either from the self or society), the prophet exemplifies the conviction that "what we do when we argue is to give an account of the actually existing morality. That morality is authoritative for us because it is only by virtue of its existence that we exist as the moral beings we are. . . . The critique of existence begins . . . from principles internal to existence itself" (1987, 21).

2. Accordingly, prophets emerge from and rely upon a particular tradition. Prophetic criticism is criticism from *within*. Nevertheless, prophetic judgments arising out of tradition are neither a blind recital of a common heritage nor a sheaf of moral platitudes; the prophets are interpreters who alter the very memory they revere by disclosing the meaning of shared values in new circumstances. "Prophecy aims to arouse remembrance, recognition, indignation, repentance" (1987, 75), but "the power of a prophet like Amos derives from his ability to say what oppression means, how it is experienced, in this time and place, and to explain how it is connected with other features of a shared social life" (1987, 91).

3. Their arguments are, then, social, not individual. Prophets exhibit "no interest in individual salvation or in the perfection of

their own souls" (1987, 81). Their ethic is an ethic for a community, a people elected by God and united by values and history.

4. Their arguments are extravagantly and realistically this worldly—as free of any impulse to set out an ideal "republic" as they are devoid of any suggestion that moral purity might be found by withdrawing from the corrupt social order. "Utopian speculation and world rejection are two forms of escape from particularism" (1987, 81).

It is, then, in the ethical *practice* of the prophets (rather than in their moral "message") that Walzer finds their distinctive contribution to religious ethics—and not just to the ethics of the religious traditions that, to one degree or another, happen to share the same heritage. Summarizing, Walzer writes:

> This is the standard form of social criticism, and though later critics rarely achieve the angry poetry of the prophets, we can recognize in their work the same intellectual structure: the identification of public pronouncements and respectable opinion as hypocritical, the attack upon actual behavior and institutional arrangements, the search for core values (to which hypocrisy is always a clue), the demand for an everyday life in accordance with the core. The critic begins with revulsion and ends with affirmation [1987, 87].

This passage provides an almost uncanny description of the work of Blake, especially if we look at his entire body of poetry from first to last. In Blake's social criticism we even hear, renewed for a different age, "the angry poetry of the prophets." The difficulty is that the community to which Blake wrote, and whose core values he sought to lift up, apparently has not found his judgment to be inspiring or persuasive. In his own time and still in ours, Blake's criticism has proved to be more disturbing and unassimilable than Walzer's account of criticism "from within" seems to explain (though Walzer does acknowledge that even Amos, having lodged his challenge, "is apparently forced to leave Beth-El, while Amaziah continues his priestly routines" [1987, 89]). Other accounts of prophecy stress ethical innovation, and these accounts give us a better understanding of the rejection of prophets. When the innovations are radical, it may be only in retrospect that we can reliably differentiate the criminal, the mad, and the vainly (or dangerously) utopian from the socially prophetic.

2.3 *Ethical innovation*

Social critique and moral innovation may be near cousins, but they are nevertheless distinguishable. If the question is "Why should ethicists pay attention to prophets' indictments and visions?" the role of

prophets as outspoken critics of social arrangements and practices provides one set of reasons while the originality of the prophet as a moral innovator provides another. Like Walzer, both Peter Berger and Dorothy Emmet place the prophet *within* the moral community, but whereas Walzer focuses on prophetic practice in the renewal of traditional values, Berger and Emmet focus on the prophetic message. What interests them is what they take to be the unprecedented nature of the moral proposals advanced by people recognized as prophets.

Berger's purpose, in "Charisma and Religious Innovation," is to show that although twentieth-century scholarship concerning the Hebrew prophets requires a revision of Weber's analysis of their social location, it actually reinforces Weber's main point: they were the source of "staggering" ethical innovation. "They stand out against their common background of Nabiism in terms of the astounding *novum* of their message" (1963, 948). What history actually shows, according to Berger, is that seismic changes in values and morals can arise at the center as well as at the margins, and that these theological and ideational changes, arising within the moral community, then "act back upon the pre-existing processes and, indeed, initiate new processes of their own" (1963, 950). Berger reaffirms Weber's treatment of charisma (along with rationalization) as one of "the two great innovating forces in history" (1963, 949), but he undertakes to disassociate charisma from the solitary, socially rootless individual. Though he does not deny that charisma may "com[e] into society in the role of strangers," Berger suggests that truly alien insights would find no traction in social reality and bear no authority—and that Weber himself recognized this. Drawing on Weber's notion of elective affinity (which Berger summarizes as "the way in which certain ideas and certain social processes 'seek each other out' in history" [1963, 950]), he urges that more attention be paid to features of the social context that "favor" or obstruct "innovating power" and to "social groups" who can properly "carry" the radically new in "historically efficacious" ways (1963, 950).

Beyond exploring how cultic location functioned in the case of the Hebrew prophets, Berger's essay does not give us much help in actually identifying, in our own context, the social locations from which genuinely novel social and moral insights might be effectively launched. Emmet's "Prophets and Their Societies" is helpful because she undertakes to do just that, by means of an unusual construal of "calling" or "vocation." She argues that an exploration of the prophet is pertinent to understanding "how institutions in fact work and get adapted to new needs" (1956, 23).

She is dissatisfied with Weber's account of charisma because it offers an uncritical portrait of domination. Weber's account "encourag[es] a

mystique of great men," but worse, it ties social innovation to "an exceptional kind of authority" that is "not regulated by regard for any specified, objectively recognized system of rules" and that "demands unquestioning obedience from followers and disciples and imposes obligations in the name of a personal allegiance to himself and his mission" (1956, 14). On her way to developing her own contribution, she reminds the reader of Emile Durkheim's arresting account of criminals in the third chapter of *The Rules of Sociological Method*. Crime, Durkheim suggests, has "a normal role in social life" (1982, 102), and a healthy society will have what might be called a desirable level of crime. Too little in the way of social violation is as much an index of "social disturbance" as too much. Emmet is interested in Durkheim's treatment of crime because she believes that he implicitly opens it to use as an account of prophets when he offers Socrates as an example: a social deviant whose "crime—his independence of thought— was useful not only for humanity but for his country" (Durkheim 1982, 102). Though this places the prophetic individual within the social system in the sense that she or he carries out a social function within it, it could certainly be argued that it still treats the prophet as an outsider. That prophets are "forerunners of the kind of morality which is about to become appropriate" (Emmet 1956, 14) does not change the fact that at the time, their beliefs and behaviors are regarded as so threatening to the social system as to be intolerable. In any case, such a view of prophecy, helpful as it may be in understanding the high cost of moral innovation, is, in her view, too limited because "it only takes into consideration those prophetic people who have been condemned as deviants," whereas, in Emmet's view, there are many people who ought properly to be credited as prophetic "who have been able to live peacefully as founders, or reformers, or educators" (1956, 14).

Like Berger, Emmet probes the issue of how ethical innovation gains traction in social settings. She advances an account that cuts two ways. First, faced with imaginative, rebellious misfits who are unable or unwilling to fit established social roles, social systems do sometimes create new niches within which these figures can successfully contribute. These niches are often teaching offices or worship functions. Whatever form they take, when the outcome is a happy one, the individual is to some extent stabilized by the discipline necessary to the occupation of the niche. Second, in creating such roles, the social system succeeds in integrating the individual's considerable gifts advantageously into the social world, even though it leaves them safely sequestered. With inspiration as their special role, and thus their distinctive form of authority, they are not only permitted but obliged to speak forcefully about what they know best, entering into dialogue and contention with established forms of social authority.

She begins the article by admitting, "I do not know that I have anything very firm to say" (1956, 13), and some will no doubt think that, despite her debt to Durkheim, she has overly domesticated the notion of prophecy by reducing it to a matter of individual creativity in well-defined social roles that facilitate institutional adaptation to "new needs" (1956, 23). Certainly her account does seem a bit tepid when set beside those of Weber or Durkheim or even Walzer. To be fair, she does not disallow their accounts, but wishes to supplement them in a way that can notice and honor more ordinary forms of originality and creativity and less dramatic forms of innovation.

2.4 *"Every honest man . . ."*

Although the purpose of this section has not been to interpret Blake, but rather to begin to explore, prompted by his "prophetic" poetry, the vexed and multivalent relations between ethics and prophecy, it may nonetheless be helpful to return here, briefly, to Blake's own work. In his relationship to the biblical tradition and to "Albion" (his mythic version of England), it seems more than reasonable to say that he understood his own work very much as Walzer understands the work of the prophet. From within the resources of the existing tradition, Blake sought to condemn error and to restore the moral community by rehabilitating the distinctive truth and values that form its very bones and sinews.

Nevertheless, it seems to be Emmet's low-key study of prophets (and their societies) that does the best job of helping us to understand the ambivalent reception of Blake's work. Setting Blake against the background of Durkheim rather than Weber makes it easy to see why he was (and is) treated as half-mad. His interpretation of European Christianity was too deviant to be seriously engaged—at least at the time during which he wrote. Emmet's discussion also suggests the interesting possibility that the roles of poets and painters are among the niches by means of which modern Western cultural bodies at once preserve and confine the socially disruptive challenge that moral innovation represents. If the arts are the social spaces where moral innovation emerges and takes hold, that is, of course, all the more reason for ethicists to engage seriously and critically the work of contemporary artists—even, or especially, the art that seems most immoral by contemporary standards.

One would not expect Emmet's ordinary prophets and Blake's apocalyptic visions to have much in common, but when Blake himself writes about prophets and prophecy, he does not reserve prophetic power or insight to alienated beings with blistered tongues and singed eyes. The prophets' only special gifts are clarity, fidelity, and truthfulness—none of which is beyond the reach of any person. In one of the "memorable

Fancies" included in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, one of the poetic voices reports matter-of-factly, "The Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel dined with me," giving him (or her) an opportunity to inquire "how they dared so roundly to assert that God spoke to them" and how they marshaled the audacity to speak out as they did since they must surely have known "that they would be misunderstood, & so be the cause of imposition" (153). Responding to the first question, Isaiah rebukes the literalist fallacy of "hearing voices" that gives rise to the question: "I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover'd the infinite in every thing" (153). In answer to the second, he corrects the questioner's misplaced focus with the words, "as I was then perswaded, & remain confirm'd, that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God, I cared not for the consequences, but wrote" (153).

Another revealing passage is to be found among Blake's handwritten annotations on his copy of Richard Watson's *Apology for the Bible*. Watson (1737–1816) was the Bishop of Llandaff, and the *Apology*, published in 1796, was his point-by-point response to the second part of Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason* (1795/2004). Blake's general judgment is that Watson "has not answer'd one of Paine's grand objections" and that the bishop's understanding of Christianity is so distorted that it has to be said that "Tom Paine is a better Christian than the Bishop." Despite his deafness to the poetry of Scripture, Paine has rightly attacked precisely the features of Christianity that ought to be repudiated rather than defended (396). The subject of prophets comes up because Watson undertakes to refute Paine's dismissal of the Hebrew prophets as "lying rascals." Blake objects that both men misunderstand prophets because both interpret the prophets as persons who possess divinely revealed knowledge of a shrouded pre-determined future to which persons can only submit. Against this Blake argues, "A Prophet is a Seer, not an Arbitrary Dictator." The deliverances of such "seers" are nothing more or less than the absolutely clear-eyed assessment of the consequences of current behavior: "If you go on So, the result is So." There is nothing extraordinary about this—except, of course, the extremely rare and truly remarkable absence of hypocrisy and self-interest. Thus, he asserts, with sublime simplicity, "Every honest man is a Prophet" (392).

3. Out of the Ruined City

Biblically, prophecy and lamentation are near kin,[8] but laments, rising out of the rubble of catastrophe, seem to offer less in the way of

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[8] Francis Landy suggests that in the Hebrew Scriptures, lament "consummates the prophecy" (1987, 329).

ethical or moral insight. Like the dirge, the genre of lament would seem to belong to the work of mourning. Traditionally, mourning has been the work of women, and, traditionally, it has been considered passive—the submission of the sufferer rather than the action of an agent. Lamentation is what follows total defeat, devastating punishment, or the moral shipwreck of unrestrained violence. From the point of view of those who have lost everything but their lives, it seems a matter of indifference whether their situation was deserved or not. We might almost say that lamentation fills the silence when the situation is beyond help, when ethical reflection is pointless because the time of action has passed and now there is only the pain—and the necessity to endure what seems unendurable. As such, lament is positioned as near to prayer or plea as it is to dirge. For neither the lacerated survivors, bereft amid the scattered stones, nor those who hear their cries does it matter whether the city was, as cities go, a good one or a bad one. Nor do we wonder whether the survivors themselves were sufficiently good persons to have the moral authority to lament in the face of devastation. Hearing, we are moved to compassion, as if we implicitly know that such destruction could never be deserved—or as if this storm of tears rising out of the totality of their loss washes away moral distinctions.

Not surprisingly, then, laments figure more prominently in considerations of the problem of evil than they do in any sort of ethical discussions.[9] In Christian biblical interpretation, various Old Testament laments are linked to ethical matters, but only by extension. That is, the laments are read as a prelude to the recognition of the religious or moral guilt that brought down destruction on the family, city, or entire people. As we saw above, Spohn, in his treatment of Scripture as a resource for theological ethics, includes "the rich language of praise and lament" among the biblical resources that "shape the moral perception, disposition, and character of believers" (2005, 94). None of this would suggest that the genre of lament should be of compelling interest to ethicists, yet some strands of recent scholarship give cause to re-examine the genre's moral weight and bearing.

Lamentation is not, by any means, simply undisciplined howling. On the contrary, it is a means of ordering overwhelming anger and grief (which can themselves become the instruments of destruction if they rage formlessly and uncontained) into expressive communal forms that re-establish the human ties that have been ripped to shreds by chaos, humiliation, and pain. Lamentation restores the survivor precisely by

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[9] For a fine recent consideration of biblical laments as "theodic" discourses, see Mandolfo 2007.

restoring the moral community. The lament of the conquered and the broken represents a reassertion of their indestructible dignity. To lament is to lay claim upon the attention and compassion of another. Lamentation, however raw, is, therefore, a passage through the valley of destruction and a means of making whole.

In *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, an exegetical study of the biblical book of Lamentations, Kathleen M. O'Connor stresses the healing power of the activity of lamenting loss. However, far from confining her treatment of the genre of lament to the impulse toward comfort and consolation, she offers a "theology of witness" (2002, 104–8) that grounds a very interesting ethical project. There are, she argues, morally appropriate and morally inappropriate responses to cries arising out of devastation and to the complaint of forsakenness. Moreover, the theology of witness that she develops leads, in turn, to her treatment of lament "as a work of justice." "To lament," she points out, "is to complain, to object, and to resist." Lamentation is public and communal. The "point" of such protest is "to name injustice, hurt, and anger" (2002, 128). For those who have suffered, lamentation is the path from victimization back to moral agency, though the only power of agency left is voice. The voices, the tears, assert against the obliterating silence the dignity, the moral worth and outrage, and the moral claims of those from whom everything else has been taken away. These laments are not, then, only prayers, much less abject confessions of fault and acquiescence. They are not reducible to appeals for comfort. Lament is moral indictment—of human failure and folly, of the will to destroy what Freud called thanatos, and even of the cosmos and its creator. There is no weakness in these tears.

In *Surviving Lamentations*, Tod Linafelt sets out to reverse what he takes to be "the devaluing of the lament" (2000, 2). Arguing against the preponderant interpretations of the book of Lamentations, he positions the lament as a form of moral resistance by setting his exegesis of the biblical book firmly in the context of the post-Holocaust "'literature of survival,' that is, literature produced in the aftermath of a major catastrophe and its accompanying atrocities by survivors of that catastrophe" (2000, 18). This requires a shift in the center of gravity of the book from the suffering man in chapter three to Mother Zion (and her children) in the first two chapters. Once Linafelt privileges Mother Zion, he no longer can hear in Lamentations "quiet acquiescence to suffering"; he hears, instead, bold protest and challenge against the author of such suffering. The model offered by Mother Zion "articulates an audacious resistance to both the fact of exile and the theological justification of exile" (2000, 98). God's silence does not invalidate or lay to rest "Zion's unanswered accusations" (2000, 134). The hope that

Linafelt believes we glimpse in the book is not the hope that we may come into a right (submissive) relationship with God through recognition of our guilt. It is rather the hope arising with and from the survival of a historical moral community that can withstand with integrity even such harrowing suffering as is recorded here.

Hopkins, in his article in this issue on women's laments in the poetry of Blake, draws not only upon the Hebrew Bible, which, in the King James translation, so profoundly influenced the form and cadence of Blake's verse, but also upon a growing body of cross-cultural studies of the form and function of female laments. Against the canvas of these broad studies of "violent emotions that are rooted in ethical 'judgments of value'" (Hopkins 2009, 44), Hopkins explores the laments of six of Blake's major female figures: Oothoon, Enitharmon, Enion, Vala, Erin, and Jerusalem. In displaying Blake's relationship to the broad tradition of female lament that Hopkins and other scholars are beginning to trace as it weaves through time and across cultural boundaries, the article makes an original contribution to Blake studies even as it further expands and enriches studies of lament as a form of (particularly female) moral expression. As Hopkins develops his notion of "the ethics of witness," he defines a new area for reflection in religious ethics as well. Blake's own attitude toward these female figures, who are also the weavers of the material world, is often obscure and ambiguous, but some things stand out clearly. These figures are, Hopkins affirms, "the most vigorous and sober witness[es] to the ruin" of history and community, and "they speak some of Blake's own powerful and articulate poetry of protest" (2009, 63). Their "weeping speech" (2009, 69) on the one hand compels compassion and on the other hand pronounces judgment on the violence, waste, and hatred that are the marks of temporal history. "Laments last," Hopkins writes, "as long as the world" (2009, 76).

In his treatment of Lamentations as protest, Linafelt compares Mother Zion to Rachel in the midrashic account of Rachel as the voice who could stir the mercy of God when all the patriarchs had failed. Hopkins, too, takes up this story, offering hers as the quintessential lament. Its distinctiveness, in Hopkins's view, lies in its "full particularity" (2009, 51). There is nothing general or abstract about her grief or her protest. This is what makes the voice of female lament so dangerous. No future promise, no general assurance, no necessary sacrifice or greater good can wash away the specific, concrete, irreparable, and unsubstitutable loss. That is why the women who mourn and protest can never forget, never simply pick up and move on. Hopkins's argument, though, is that their witness to the "truth of loss" (2009, 76) is, in Blake's universe at least, the condition of redemption.

4. Poetry, Good Government, and Responsible Speech

In or around 1808, Blake acquired a copy of the 1798 second edition of *Discourses on Arts* by Sir Joshua Reynolds (1975).[10] These volumes comprised a set of lectures that Reynolds had given at the Royal Academy on the subject of the importance of art. Blake considered the discourses to be "the Simulations of the Hypocrite who smiles particularly where he means to Betray" (452), and in the margins and on unprinted leaves of the first volume, he carried on a vigorously critical and characteristically intemperate handwritten argument with the author. Reynolds was right, Blake thought, in asserting the political and social weight of art; he was, however, totally wrongheaded in his judgment as to which works of art should be held up as essential to social well being. It is in the interest of governments to encourage the fine arts and to see that artists are properly rewarded. "The Arts & Sciences are the Destruction of Tyrannies or Bad Governments. Why should A Good Government endeavour to Depress what is its Chief & only Support?" (445). Blake joins Reynolds in regarding the arts as central to the establishment and preservation of public goods, as well as to the institution of a just and liberating political order. "Foolish Men, your own real Greatness depends on your Encouragement of the Arts, & your Fall will depend on their Neglect & Depression. What you fear is your true Interest" (452). Of course, not just any sort of painting or writing will safeguard good government and a great people. The problem, as Blake saw it, was that Reynolds and others had directed "royal liberality" into the wrong pockets—the pockets of those who visually "generalize" and "work up effects" (446, 450, 451). According to Blake, the public need was for art as "Vision & Revelation" (473) or "Inspiration & Vision" (477), and unfortunately those were the very qualities that Blake could not find in the art that the elites of his day (Reynolds most especially) commended and rewarded. Accordingly, Blake considered their public celebration of bad art to be at least as socially destructive as complete public indifference to the arts. Delivering himself of the judgment that "This Man [Reynolds] was Hired to

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[10] Reynolds's *Discourses on Art* (in some editions titled simply *Discourses* or *Fifteen Discourses*) were originally delivered annually or biennially between 1769 and 1790 on the occasions of the annual prize-giving ceremony at the Royal Academy, of which Reynolds was president. Each lecture was published as it became available. A collection that included only the first seven appeared in 1778. In 1797, an edition appeared that included all fifteen, and this collection is usually referred to as the first edition of *Discourses on Art*. In 1798, a three-volume edition was released. Blake's annotated copy of this second edition is in the British Museum. Blake wrote marginal comments only in volume one. His reactions to the lectures in the other two volumes can be found in his Note-Book.

Depress Art," Blake penned this quatrain in the preliminary leaves of the book:

> Degrade first the Arts if you'd Mankind Degrade.
>   Hire Idiots to Paint with cold light & hot shade:
> Give high Price for the worst, leave the best in disgrace,
>   And with Labours of Ignorance fill every place [445].

Though Blake's marginal skirmishes with Reynolds concerned the visual arts, his views with respect to poetry were no different. The possibility that Blake might have been right that there is some positive relationship between thriving and powerful arts and a just and enduring civilization should give us pause. Blake's passionate lifting up of authentic artistic creativity as politically indispensable strikes the modern ear as hyperbole (at best). It would hardly occur to any of us to look to the arts (good or bad) for ethical insight or political courage or instruction concerning public well being in our times. When the arts have been sequestered as luxury goods in a consumer culture or mass amusements in a leisure society, we cease to care whether they have been degraded or not—or even to wonder how one would differentiate "Labours of Ignorance" from life-enhancing and institutionally transformative creativity.

Over the past fifty or one hundred years, poetry written in English seems to have become particularly marginal to any conversations about public or social well being. It is no accident that the line "For poetry makes nothing happen" is one of the most quoted lines in all of W. H. Auden's considerable body of verse.[11] Some invoke the line fairly neutrally to describe the simple fact that twentieth-century English poetry neither has nor aspires to any serious function in public affairs. For others, Auden's observation seems to function more as a normative manifesto—being invoked either by someone who believes that poets and artists should not try to interfere in matters on which they are, by temperament and training, ill-fitted to comment, or by someone who thinks social or political purposes degrade art because they are incompatible with aesthetic values.[12]

A particularly lively conversation concerning the public role of poets and their poetry has been unfolding over the past five or six years in the columns and poetry reviews of the British daily *The Guardian*

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[11] The line is from "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" (Auden 1976).

[12] The very interesting theoretical issue concerning the compatibility of aesthetic values with political and ethical values is itself beginning to attract renewed attention. In Levinson 1998, the essays by Berys Gaut, Richard Miller, and Karen Hanson are particularly helpful. Glowacka and Boos 2002 includes a set of five essays on "Aesthetics and Politics." George 2005 offers nine essays on "Ethical Criticism and Literary Theory," eight on "Writers' Responsibilities," and seven on "Readers and Ethical Criticism."

(formerly *The Manchester Guardian*). The argument has been provoked in part by the very public response of the British literary community to events arising out of the Israel/Palestine conflict. Giles Foden observed in 2002 that "[d]iscounting the world wars, in which many British authors were official propagandists, not since the Spanish civil war have so many writers taken sides." Some of this political "taking sides" has been a matter of letters to the editor and public pronouncements, but it has also found its way into poetry, with varying degrees of explicitness, producing lively quarrels over the effect of this political project on the quality of contemporary poetry. The conversation in *The Guardian* has also been prompted by the work of poets who, quite apart from pressing issues in the Middle East, have recently taken up historical and social/ethical issues in their published work. Among these, Geoffrey Hill is one of the most prominent—and controversial.

Merriman's treatment of Hill as an unheeded poet–prophet is well grounded not only in Hill's own self-presentation but also in the arguments carried on in the secondary literature concerning the success and value of his poems. Critical comments on Hill's poems, whether intending to praise or disparage them, frequently link his tone and material with Old Testament prophecy. Colin Burrow, leaving no doubt that he himself greatly prefers the unprophetic "mellowness" of Hill's more recent *Scenes from Comus* (2005), observes that in the years preceding the publication of *Comus*, "Hill experimented with a number of personae, from prophet to angry old man . . . a prophet crying in the wilderness." His verse in that period was "obsessively concerned with the corruption of language by politicians and journalists" (Burrow 2005). Robert Potts characterized Hill's *Canaan* (1996) in terms of its "prophetic tone." Commenting on that same volume, Nicholas Lezard described Hill as "railing against crass materialism of the age, like the more baleful kind of Old Testament prophet" (2006). Peter Forbes, a recent editor of *Poetry Review*, characterized the tone of *Speech! Speech!* (2000) as that of an "obsessive crank" (2002). Potts, who is one of Hill's more enthusiastic supporters, commends Hill's work precisely for its ethical and political contribution: "Hill's work will never be fashionable but it is a corpus of such passionate seriousness and ethical thought, its every phrase written with a consciousness of the weight of history and language, that it is hard to imagine it ever being ignored" (Potts 2002). Nevertheless, ethicists, at least in the United States, do seem to ignore it, and according to Merriman, Hill is painfully aware of that.

To explore concretely Hill's understanding of the public role of the poet, Merriman examines in detail Hill's recent, relatively short poem "ON READING *Blake: Prophet against Empire*" (2007). In this poem, Hill alludes to Blake's experience as a strangely public poet by way of

the widely known critical examination of Blake's life and work by David V. Erdman in *Blake, Prophet against Empire; a Poet's Interpretation of the History of His Own Times* (1954/1991).[13] Erdman's treatment of Blake changed the landscape of Blake studies when it first appeared in 1954 because it was the first major study to argue that understanding the poet's social, political, and historical context was essential to a proper understanding of his mythic poems. Erdman revealed the degree to which Blake's work constituted a social critique of the political situation in and to which the poet wrote. In his own poem, Hill assumes some qualitative difference between "great poets" (like Blake) and all the other writers of poems. Trying to tease out the meaning of this distinction, Merriman suggests that the two marks of "great poets" would be, first, the success of the poet in establishing a "relationship between ethics and aesthetics in the context of community or its absence," and, second, the success of the poet in orchestrating "the rich possibilities of the linguistic imagination" in order to speak in ways that "resist corruption" and "envision a redeemed world" (2009, 83–84). Though the two can be conceptually distinguished, in practice they are not really separable. Hill treats all poetry as political, and Merriman finds this to be a warranted judgment. Poets worth reading speak to and about power, and "language itself is a political medium, continuously involved in and altered by changes in social power" (2009, 85). Poetry, by its nature, struggles against the tide of slogans, propaganda, and all of the oversimplifications upon which "tyranny" rests. To understand "great poets" in this way is to understand both why they always seem to be saying things that people do not want to hear and why the objective of combining truth and comprehensibility "while still writing in an art form that readers can experience as beautiful" (2009, 84) often seems beyond reach.

In a 2005 *Guardian* article titled "The Sweetest Sound of All," George Szirtes undertakes to speak directly to the question, "If poetry makes nothing happen what use is it?" Supposing the questioner to have been thinking of "social change," Szirtes notes that Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift bent poetry to exactly that task. The

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[13] When the book was originally published by Princeton University Press in 1954, the full title was, as I have just given it, *Blake, Prophet against Empire; a Poet's Interpretation of the History of His Own Times*. That same full title was used when the revised edition was brought out by both Princeton and Anchor Books in 1969, and again when Princeton brought out the third edition in 1977, although in this third edition, the semi-colon became a colon. However, with Dover's republication of the third edition in 1991, the book began to be referenced by the Library of Congress and most but not all other libraries under a shortened, differently punctuated title (possibly as a result of the cover design of the Dover edition), and it is this title, *Blake: Prophet against Empire*, that Hill incorporates into the title of his poem.

nineteenth century offers us, among many other instances, Thomas Hood (1799–1845), who engaged labor issues in poetry, and "The Mask of Anarchy" (1819), in which Percy Bysshe Shelley deployed all his poetic powers in political commentary. Szirtes wonders, however, whether attempts at social change are actually the level at which one properly assesses poetry's capacity to "make something happen." With the same focus on language that we find in Hill's work and Merriman's article, Szirtes offers two propositions. First, "Poets are ordinary people with a special love and distrust of language." Second, "Poetry is not a pretty way of saying something straight, but the straightest way of saying something complex." From these two propositions together, he arrives at his own proposal concerning the importance of poetry in a truly complicated public world that is almost inevitably oversimplified in representation:

> It is in fact vital to love and distrust language. It is absolutely vital to tell truths that catch something of the complex polyphonic music of what happens. Someone has got to do it. It is poetry's unique task to say exactly what it means by singing it and dancing it, by carving some crystalline pattern on the thin, cold surface of language, thereby keeping language audible and usable. That is its straightness. That is its legislation [Szirtes 2005].

Quoting the entire stanza from which Auden's famous line is excerpted, he reminds us of how much more is said. In his memorial to W. B. Yeats, Auden acknowledges that all the remarkable folly and "silliness" of Yeats's politics and his philosophy have washed away, leaving us just the gift of his poems. Yeats had been "hurt . . . into poetry" by an unjust and disordered world, Ireland's "madness"; that world persists, just as "mad" as it ever was—"For poetry makes nothing happen." Yet the poetry lasts, welling up out of the useless love of music, out of isolation, out of grief, out of all the "Raw towns that we believe and die in." It flows like a life-giving river through our lives: "it survives / A way of happening, a mouth."

Szirtes is, it seems, more modest about the reach of poetry than either Blake or Hill, but even he leaves us reflecting on the responsibility of audiences (including audiences of ethicists) to cultivate the patience and the imagination to hear these powerful voices that undertake with such precision "to tell truths that catch something of the complex polyphonic music of what happens." As Merriman points out, Hill himself alludes to Walt Whitman's observation, "To have great poets, there must be great audiences, too" (Whitman 1982, 1058). The poet–prophet must find readers and hearers who are hungry for and who can receive something other than the familiar, the comforting, and the customary. If it is true, as Hill has said, that "every fine and

moving poem bears witness" (Haffenden 1981, 88), then there must be those who are prepared to see and hear that to which witness is borne.

Perhaps it is enough if the three articles on Blake that are collected in this issue leave us questioning whether it has been wise to turn our backs on poetry—and whether the fault for our collective indifference lies with the obscurity and self-indulgence of the poets or with the laziness and inattention of those who might, in another age, have formed a "great audience." Even so, the ethical authority of poetry should never be equated simply with the voicing of explicit social criticism. As Potts points out in reflecting on Hill's *Collected Poems* (1985), it is the poets themselves (or at least the ones Hill and Merriman would call the "great poets") who teach us that language itself "is a 'fallen' instrument," leaving the poet no choice but to remind us again and again, explicitly or implicitly, of "the inevitable failure of, and the necessary aspiration towards, responsible speech" (Potts 2006). Seamus Heaney has also tried, in the essay "On Poetry and Professing," to strike a defensible balance between protecting poetry's artistic integrity and affirming its ethical weight and significance: "if it is a delusion and a danger to expect poetry and music to do too much, it is a diminishment and a derogation of them to ignore what they can do" (2002, 73). It is hard, though, to imagine Blake assenting to so calibrated a formula. One can almost hear him groaning: This is what comes of eagles taking lessons from crows.[14]

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