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All Text and No Image Makes Blake a Dull Artist: Inseparable Interplay Between Poetry and Picture in Blake's Multimedia Art

W.J.T. Mitchell opens his book *Blake's Composite Art* by saying that “it has become superfluous to argue that Blake's poems need to be read with their accompanying illustrations” (3); in his mind, the fact that Blake's work consists of both text and image is obvious, and he sets out to define when and how the two media function independently of one another. However, an appraisal of prominent anthologies like *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* and Duncan Wu's *Romanticism* shows that Mitchell's sentiment is not universal, as these collections display Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* as primarily poetic texts, and include the illuminated plates for very few of the works.¹ These seldom-presented pictorial accompaniments suggests that the visual aspect is secondary;

¹ *The Longman Anthology of British Literature* features more of Blake's illuminations than the *Norton* and *Romanticism*, including art for ten of Blake's *Songs*. It does not include all of the “accompanying illustrations,” however, suggesting that the *Longman* editors still do not see the images as essential.

clearly anthology editors, who are at least partially responsible for constructing canons for educational institutions, do not agree with Mitchell's notion that we obviously must (and do) read Blake's poems and illuminations together. Mitchell rationalizes the segregated study of Blake by suggesting that his "composite art is, to some extent, *not* an indissoluble unity, but an interaction between two vigorously independent modes of expression" (3), a statement that in fact undoes itself. Blake's composite art exists not as "two vigorously independent modes of expression," but rather as "*interaction between*" these modes, and *interaction* is impossible if both modes are not present. Mitchell further says that Blake's artistic strategy was "to create unity out of contrariety" (33), a unity that arises as Blake's "independent modes" are "*multiplied by one another*" (31). These modes are not simply added together, but interact to form unified art despite their difference. Though produced from image and text, Blake's art is nonetheless indissoluble, comprised of themes and tensions arising from a multiplication of media.

Multiplication is an almost perfect analogy for Blake's multimedia style; though he starts with two distinct forms (or numbers, arbitrarily three and four for the sake of illustration), his combination multiplies them with one another to create something more than addition (twelve rather than seven). These extra elements (the difference between the product and the sum) are not inherently present in the initial text and image; rather, they arise as a result of the multiplicative function of Blake's verbal-graphic art. By following this mathematical analogy, it becomes clear that splitting Blake's works, such as the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, into their two constituent elements cannot hope to adequately explain the importance of either part. Subtracting the image and text (three and four) from Blake's composite work (twelve) leaves an unaccounted difference (five). Segregated representations of Blake's art do not notice these hypothetical themes, though they may be

greater than the direct contributions of either medium individually. Blake's form is therefore not a sum but a product (the mathematical term for the result of multiplication); his media interact with each other rather than simply existing side by side.

After briefly engaging with statements from Blake scholars W.J.T. Mitchell, Christopher Heppner, and Joseph Viscomi, as well as from Blake himself, I will detail the multiplicative interplay between Blake's media in three of the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*: "The Sick Rose," "Earth's Answer," and "The Chimney Sweeper" (all from *Songs of Experience*). I chose these texts as strong examples of meaningful multiplication between picture and poetry, though the conclusions I develop can apply to any of Blake's multimedia works. In my analysis I hope to develop progressively more complicated readings of the interactions between text and image, and eventually show how elements of Blake's works can share poetic and pictorial identity simultaneously. The thematic conclusions of these investigations are largely incidental. Rather, my purpose is to show how readily and meaningfully Blake's multimedia art opens up to analysis that views it as interplay between verse and visuals.

William Blake fundamentally identified his work as an inseparable fusion between verbal text and visual image. Indeed, his poems and pictures were inseparable from the very beginning, both etched in relief onto the same copper plates (Viscomi 68). Blake's conscious acknowledgement of his combined forms is particularly evident in the title of the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* volume. The fact that Blake calls these works *songs* rather than poems, paintings, or any other term shows that the interplay between expressive modes is at the foundation of the text. Songs are interactions of music and verse, a blending of genres and modes playing off the other to create a work more complex than if words and tones were to remain segregated. Blake makes the parallel between songs and his *Songs*

abundantly clear, stating that “Painting, as well as poetry and music, exists and exults in immortal thoughts” (qtd. in Heppner 76). This equation between the root construction of painting, poetry, and music necessarily renders his fusions of painting and poetry similar to combinations of poetry and music. Blake states that in his art, painting is “as poetry and music are, elevated into its own proper sphere of invention and visionary conception” (qtd. in Heppner 75). Clearly songs and the *Songs* are fundamentally linked since painting, poetry, and music function in a similar manner.

In dissecting these lines from Blake, however, Christopher Heppner disregards the blatant and literal link between music and text in works such as the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, stating that Blake's statement comprises an “unexpected reference to music” (75-76). In Heppner's defense, his book *Reading Blake's Designs* deals primarily with Blake's image-only art. However, he does not ignore Blake's text-and-image works, and it would not change the meaning of Blake's claims even if he did. Like the editors who highlight the words by bracketing off the image or by discarding it entirely, Heppner ignores the song-like connotation of Blake's fused form. He writes incisively regarding the themes and meanings at work in Blake's art, but misses important face-value significance of form en route to deeper symbolism. The fact that Blake's *Songs* consists of both image and text reveals that his musical reference suggests more than “an art of pure expression” (Heppner 76); though Heppner's conclusion is not invalid, his surprise at Blake's use of this essential parallel shows either a misunderstanding or a lack of consideration of the consequences of the image-text interplay in Blake's form.

Like songs, Blake's fused works can be bifurcated into two expressive media that remain individually compelling. However, even though an artistic unity remains in these segregated elements, it is necessarily incomplete, based upon a production of truncation and

editing rather than the artist directly. Mitchell's statement that "for over a century Blake's admirers had a truncated view of his art, some admiring the bust, others the torso, all finding a sufficient aesthetic unity in the fragment they beheld" (3) speaks to Blake's skill rather than his form *per se*. The fact that Blake's work is complex and detailed enough to engage readers even with segregated media does not imply that "Blake's poems do not need their illustrations" (Mitchell 3). Indeed, Mitchell clearly does not share this viewpoint, stating that "for Blake, poetry and painting were to be *multiplied* by one another to give a product larger than the sum of the parts" (31); by definition, a product needs its factors. In his later book *Picture Theory*, Mitchell expands upon the notion of multiplicative meaning, stating that in Blake's art "the necessary subject matter is, rather, the whole ensemble of *relations* between media....Difference is just as important as similarity, antagonism as crucial as collaboration, dissonance and division of labor as interesting as harmony and blending of function" (89-90). This statement is undeniably correct; however, it does not change my thesis that Blake's art is multiplicative and indissoluble. Disagreement between image and text still requires the *presence* of both media, and Mitchell certainly does not assert otherwise. After all, division is inverted multiplication (multiplication with absolute values between zero and one), and it still requires two constituent parts (numerator and denominator), one to divide and the other to be divided. This thematic division must not be confused with editing or fragmentation; it does not (and cannot) change the original authorial work. As an abstract yet clarifying example, though *Taxi Driver* may still have aesthetic unity while on mute, the remaining series of silent images is not a Scorsese film. Instead, it is a construction based upon the original and the editorial action of the person controlling the speakers. Likewise, a "fragment" of Blake's art is exactly that: a piece cropped off by an admirer.

The fact that editing changes meaning is certainly well known, but few works are altered to the extent that Blake's are. The most prominent examples are the largely image-less anthology printings of *Songs of Innocence and Experience* in canonical tomes such as *Romanticism: An Anthology* (179-206, plate 6) and *The Norton Anthology Volume 2* (81-97, C2). Though the fragments are still interesting for themselves, they are incomplete works of art. Blake's fundamental combination of forms certainly does not invalidate theories based upon either the poetic or visual element of Blake's work alone; rather, it shows such discourse as potentially lacking. Heppner's surprise at Blake's reference to "poetry and music" is evidence of a larger misunderstanding on the part of readers: Blake's art is often seen as a combination of two distinct and separable forms, when in fact he multiplies the media together to create more than a sum of parts.

While Mitchell may claim that advocating for this multiplicative depiction of Blake is a "superfluous" argument among Blake scholars, the text-only versions of *Songs of Innocence and Experience* that appear in commonly used anthologies such as the *Norton* prove that Mitchell's view is not universal across the most prominent institutions studying English literature. Paradoxically, it is not the lack of image that makes the *Norton's* fundamental misrepresentation of Blake glaringly apparent. Rather, the gap in appreciation widens to a chasm in the comments on the image for "The Sick Rose," one of the two *Songs* to feature a picture in the eighth edition of the *Norton* (along with "The Tyger," 92). Aside from the fact that the page reference in the colour insert blurb on "The Sick Rose" points to *Literature and Science* by Matthew Arnold rather than anything by Blake, its opening statement that "Blake's 'illumination'... further complicates an already highly ambiguous poetic text" (*Norton* C2) is incorrect on several levels. The statement clearly privileges the "poetic text" over the "illumination"; the idea that Blake's painting, a foundational element

of “The Sick Rose,” “further complicates” the poetry obviates the opinion of the *Norton* editors that Blake's images are additions to texts rather than essential parts of cohesive works. The image does not *add to* “The Sick Rose”; rather, it *is* “The Sick Rose” insofar as the text is as well—that is to say, providing part of the essential interaction that creates the whole. Furthermore, the quotes around “illumination” imply that the illustration does anything but illuminate the themes of this “highly ambiguous” work. The verse is certainly ambiguous by itself, as is the image; however, “The Sick Rose” should not be read as a poem and a painting, but as an integrated, interacting text. Through a simple understanding that an interpretation of “The Sick Rose” must look at the interplay between word and picture, the inclusion of the “illumination” cannot further complicate the “poetic text.” Rather, it allows readers to explore how the themes in one medium play off of those in the other.

Understanding how elements of Blake's media interact is the focus of Joseph Viscomi's article, “Reading, Drawing, Seeing Illuminated Books.” While it focuses on teaching students about the intricacies of Blake's form by emulating his physical creative process (relief etching, reverse writing, etc), Viscomi expresses the underlying rationale that with Blake's art, comprehending “the relation (sometimes interdependence) between text and illustration (and their equality as *markings*), is to see the work as opposed to merely looking at it” (73). Though I argue that the relation between text and illustration in Blake's art is *always* a form of interdependence (excepting those works that are only one medium, of course), Viscomi's statement is still concise and apt. Seeing the relation between the fundamentally similar markings of text and image is necessary in reading Blake's multimedia art. It is essential to “understand [a mark's] relation to all the marks around it” (Viscomi 73), comprehending the meanings of poems and pictures (Viscomi's equal

markings) through their contextual interactions. Whereas Viscomi teaches this understanding by recreating Blake's creative process, I hope to recreate Blake's metaphorical process, multiplying analyses of image and text as Blake multiplies the media themselves.

Emulating Blake's multiplicative construction by conducting an interactive reading of image and text is no intellectual leap. Indeed, such a technique seems blatantly obvious, and *should* be obvious. With the multiplication of two forms in mind, appraisals of both the picture and poetry of “The Sick Rose” (Figure 1, [The William Blake Archive](#)) can interact to draw a succinct reading out of this “highly ambiguous poetic text.” Individually, my interpretations of the image as sexual and the poetry as cautionary are unremarkable. However, multiplying these readings together unites the various elements of “The Sick Rose,” offering a warning against promiscuity by seeing Blake's media as interactive rather than segregated.

To clarify the construction of my analysis, though I look at the image first and verse second, the order does not speak to one form's dominance over the other. Interpreting Blake's rich painting and verse simultaneously is a daunting task, and it is much simpler to arrive at the “interaction between” these modes through establishing one and then the other (though the order is irrelevant). To go back to the mathematical illustration, finding a product is basic arithmetic if one already knows the factors, as opposed to working with algebraic variables. After understanding the numbers, the arithmetic only requires knowledge of multiplication. Multiplication between Blake's media is the focus of this essay, and therefore we should understand the “numbers” before attempting the function.

The multiplication of media in “The Sick Rose” establishes the work as a caution against sexual promiscuity for females. This reading opens up simply by taking the sexual imagery depicted in the painting and the destruction and fleeting love expressed by the verse

and multiplying them together, seeing which textual elements form productive parallels to (or strong dissonance with) visual elements and vice-versa, and drawing new thematic conclusions from these interactions. A quick perusal of the image yields a possible sexual interpretation; positioned spatially opposite to the rose, the caterpillar is an undeniably phallic creature, standing erect and paralleling male sexuality. From below this creature the stem extends toward the rose, with little nymph-like people traveling along it. The flower itself erupts with one of these tiny human figures, an image of childbirth that links the nymphs to fertilization. The vaginal nature of the rose is also emphasized by its shape and its location opposite the phallic caterpillar, completing a visual narrative of sexual intercourse in the invasive terms of a worm and a rose.

Noting the sexual quality of the visual imagery is far from a comprehensive reading, which must still account for the verbal component of the work. The poem begins and ends with sickness and destruction respectively (1, 8); clearly there is an overarching negative tone. Lines two through four establish the culprit of this ruin, an “invisible worm / That flies in the night” (2-3) and travels in a “howling storm” (4). Though its withering nature is invisible, this creature's presence is both temporary and commanding, a literal fly-by-night that howls for attention. Though ambiguous on its own, through interplay with the sexual implications of the illumination, this “worm” (an obviously phallic term) becomes a male suitor, boisterous in his seductions but ultimately pleasure-seeking and fleeting. Further lines detail the exploits of this worm, finding the rose's “bed / Of crimson joy” (5-6); through interaction with the image, the flower bed becomes a literal bed where joy comes in the form of sexual intercourse. The final lines, then, form a strong caution against accepting such a creature's “dark secret love” (7) that can result in sexual disease or illegitimate pregnancy. The visual childbirth and the vocabulary of sickness combine to show the

consequences of such wanton play: the once-beautiful rose is now wilted and sick, a young virgin painfully deflowered by a suitor.

By allowing basic readings of text and image to interact, we arrive at a clear interpretation of “The Sick Rose.” Of course, no translation of a text is absolute; however, the essential point is that basic constructions of the picture and the poem interact to form an apt summary of Blake's art as a whole. Blake's multiplication is most easily understood by following that very same function. Though represented in part (or rather in factor, to use mathematical terms) by the image and text individually, Blake's caution against sexual promiscuity only exists, and is only understood, through the interplay between these forms of expression.

It is easy to see why the *Norton* editors misinterpret the painting for “The Sick Rose” as over-complicating rather than grounding the verse; it is certainly not a simple image. For example, the nymph figure erupting from the fallen flower appears ecstatic, a fact that seems to complicate the negative connotations of the wilted plant. In light of the interaction with the poem, however, the nymph is a possible representation of the destructive “crimson joy” of promiscuity, offering both pleasure and ruin simultaneously, just as the figure happily emerges from a dying rose. Readers who are accustomed to encountering Blake's *Songs* in text-only forms will likely be surprised when they see a work like “The Sick Rose” as poetry integrated with pictures. Understanding the image and verse combination of “The Sick Rose” certainly does not necessitate analytical genius. Rather, it requires reading Blake's *Songs* as products of image and text, not two separate works that happen to have the same title.

Though a somewhat obvious extension of the full works existing as interplay between two media, it is essential to understand that even individual elements of Blake's art

may exist as two interacting forms. For example, Blake's handwritten words often meld into images, as seen in both "Earth's Answer" (Figure 2, [The William Blake Archive](#)) and "The Chimney Sweeper" (Figure 3, [The William Blake Archive](#)). These elements are both pictorial *and* textual rather than one or the other. Though interpreted separately for simplicity (another application of the arithmetic versus algebra analogy), the natures of individual aspects as image or text multiply together to produce greater meaning. Blake's artful, handwritten lettering is obviously unapparent in typeface reproductions of his poetry; however, one cannot assume that Blake chose handwriting as a convenient alternative to printed type. To return to *Picture Theory*, Mitchell claims that Blake "ask[s] us to see his alphabetic forms with our senses, not just read through or past them" (147); Blake's letters are individual creations, fundamentally pictorial in their construction. While it may be a stretch to state that Blake multiplies image and text in *all* of his penmanship, it is easy to show interactive meaning in *some* of it, proving that conversion to type can remove significance from the poem itself. This is especially evident in the fused letters, borders, and pictures in "Earth's Answer" (Figure 2), a song printed as text in both the *Norton* and *Romanticism*, but as image-and-text in neither.

"Earth's Answer" presents fusions of painting and lettering that challenge the value of word-only, typeface reproductions of the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. This piece opposes segregation even more so than "The Sick Rose." Combinations of handwriting and borders in "Earth's Answer" blur any clear-cut boundary between "picture" and "text," whereas in "The Sick Rose" Blake's image and text are easily identified and separated. This is not to imply that "The Sick Rose" presents pictorial and poetical elements that are *completely* distinct. As I have shown, these elements interact with one another, but are clearly either image or text. For example, the visual art in "The Sick Rose" meaningfully

conforms to the words by forming a border around them, implying that the wilted sexuality of the image literally contains the caution expressed in the text. Likewise, the image of nature appears to restrict the form and meter of the verse, implying that the poem's caution exists in natural terms. However, in these situations both the poem and painting are clearly identified; the interactions are between obviously drawn image and written text rather than fused combinations of both. In "Earth's Answer," however, the interplay between media is far more pervasive, intruding into the very words themselves.

Though there are numerous such examples throughout "Earth's Answer," I want to focus on lines 10 and 11 of the poetry, where the words "of" and "Selfish" respectively meld with the vine-like borders running between and around the stanzas. (To clarify, my choice to look at words first and picture second is again purely for the structure of the essay, and is not meant to suggest that one form is more significant than the other.) These lines, "I hear the father of the ancient men / Selfish father of men" (10-11), place both the text-image fusions next to the word "father." Clearly the image and text interactions centered around "of" and "Selfish" relate to this "father," but he is not the direct focus of the interplay. Rather, the poetic evidence seems to imply that the melded words and borders relate to the actions and motives of this "father" who produces offspring and acts according to his own interests. The first combination extends from the word "of" in line ten, emphasizing the phrase "of the ancient men" that follows "father." Structurally, "father" connects to "the ancient men" through the fused preposition "of," turning the grammar itself into a descriptive image. Since "of" grammatically designates the relationship of "father" to "the ancient men," the blended media extending from "of" necessarily adds meaning to this relation. The second melding of word and picture occurs on the word "Selfish," used to modify "father" in line eleven. In this interaction, "selfish" functions as an adjective, further describing the "father"

through the interplay of image and text.

Thus armed with a knowledge of the textual side of these interactions, factoring in the appearance of the visual side creates a consequential product that informs readings of the text as a whole. First, it focuses this analysis to note that the pictorial elements springing from “of” and “Selfish” appear very similar. Both are yellow borders running among nearby stanzas, sprouting leaves and invoking ideas of vines. The vine rooted in “of” bears not only leaves, however, but fruit in the form of grapes; the vine is literally fruitful, heavy with food and seeds. This dual wealth implies a bountiful and generative relationship between “father” and “the ancient men.” Clearly the “father” created “the ancient men” in some capacity by virtue of his name, but the actual connotations of this production are not quite clear. (This vine and the one that follows certainly invoke many other ideas. However, in keeping with my earlier statement that specific thematic conclusions are incidental to my essay, I will restrict myself to one reading that clearly illustrates the necessity of viewing Blake's art as multiplication between media.) The second image and text interaction serves to develop the relation between this father and his men, implying both his actions and his underlying desires. The vines extending left and right from the word “Selfish” encircle the remaining stanzas and end in the landscape picture at the bottom of the plate, making it apparent that the word “Selfish” has both a bonding connotation and a connection to nature. This self-serving father chains his children to the earth for his own benefit. In light of the productive notion from the interplay of media above, the bounty of the grapevine is a result of this “Selfish” bondage. The “father of the ancient men” is “Selfish” in dealing with his children and the natural world, attaining bountiful prosperity through his enforced restrictions.

As we pull away from these two small interactions and view more of “Earth's Answer,” it becomes clear that they do inform a reading of the larger work. The lines

following these fusions relate this father's "Cruel jealous selfish fear" (12) that "Chained in night / The virgins of youth and morning" (14-15), creatures who are clearly children in both experience ("virgins") and age ("of youth and morning"). The cruel father chains these children, validating the above reading of the image and text interactions. The poem further supports the notion of labour bound to the earth as it speaks of the "sower" (18) and the "plowman" (20), references to the "ancient men" working the earth through their toil. It also mentions "free Love with bondage bound" (25), a possible implication that these men love the earth freely, though their labour is bound to it by a force outside themselves.

Incorporating intertextuality that extends beyond the scope of this close reading, the *Norton Anthology* footnote corresponding to the line "father of the ancient men" states "that this is the character that Blake later named 'Urizen'" (*Norton* 89). Though the name itself does not come from the media interplay in "Earth's Answer," the following statement that Urizen "is the tyrant who binds the mind to the natural world and also imposes a moral bondage on...human energy" (*Norton* 89) mirrors the conclusions I drew earlier from the melded words and borders. As shown above, a possible reading of the vines extending from "of" and "Selfish" establishes the "father" as a sinister character who attains nature's bounty through the bondage of his children, a clear parallel with the *Norton's* description of Urizen as a tyrant who binds human energy, in this case in the form of forced labour. These fusions *would* exist in close proximity to this footnote if the *Norton* printed "Earth's Answer" as more than typed text. Even small examples of Blake's picture and poetry interactions are as important as editorially accepted elements such as intertextuality, but whereas the latter merits a clarifying footnote in the *Norton*, the former is not present at all. Though overlooked in the most prominent printings of Blake's art, image and text interplay informs every aspect of his works.

Fusions such as the border words of “Earth's Answer” are both poetry and picture at the same time. As I show in the reading above, an effective strategy is to interpret the elements as image and text individually, then multiply the two interpretations together by seeing how the text (word choice, grammar, context) informs the image (construction and placement) and vice-versa. This interplay between the text and image components of a given element is certainly not limited to small sections of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Many works display prominent aspects that are both poetic and pictorial at once, such as the border-bound stanzas of “The Chimney Sweeper” from *Songs of Experience* (Figure 3). Dividing the poem into two distinct sections, this word-fused line separates the verse visually and ascribes pictorial information to the poem through boundaries and spatial association. Mirroring the processes used for both “The Sick Rose” and “Earth's Answer,” my reading of “The Chimney Sweeper” applies the notion that elements can be image *and* text to an overall interpretation of the interaction between media.

Employing a visual style similar to the melded words and vines of “Earth's Answer,” “The Chimney Sweeper” begins with a border that fuses with the title at the top of the plate. This winding illustration makes the poem visual through spatially orienting both text and picture. Though there are many artistic extensions of the hand-written title, the largest and most important border extends from the “r” in “Sweeper,” continuing down along the right side of the plate and intersecting with the poetic text between the second and third stanzas. While it may appear simply decorative at a glance, this detailed boundary in fact divides the poem into two distinct parts, each possessing its own meaningful interactions between media. Encircled by the illustration extending from the title, the first two stanzas are literally bound to this textual label, while the third stanza is held distinct from the top two, associating with the image below. The border corrals the stanzas visually, forming an overall

pictorial identity based on the placement of the lines and blocking off sections as though they were isolated pictures.

The border extending from “Sweeper” separates the first two stanzas from the third and the image that dominates the bottom of the piece. This division, as well as the appearance of the border itself, bears a wealth of visual information that multiplies the meaning of these stanzas. Foremost, as in the above reading of “Earth's Answer,” the fused border originates from a word that grounds it metaphorically. In this case, the border begins from “Sweeper” in the title “The Chimney Sweeper,” encircling the first eight lines, sweeping them into a contained pile and implying that they are bound to the title. This is not particularly productive, since all art is bound to its title in a sense. However, the essential meaning for these stanzas lies not in the title *per se* but in the notion of a chimney sweeper, a figure only identified by this phrase in the title. The border separates two depictions of the chimney sweeper: the first two stanzas see him in terms of his applied label, focusing on his work-stained appearance and the origin of his miserable employment, while the third and the image show him as still a child despite his sad situation, longing for nothing more than simple freedom.

Pictorially anchored to the phrase “The Chimney Sweeper,” the first two stanzas establish the subject in terms of his work, showing how he is a product of unnecessary forced labour rather than the free play of childhood. The poem opens with a narrator addressing the chimney sweeper as “A little black thing among the snow” (1). Though the child is light-skinned as his face in the image shows, the narrator refers to him as a “little black thing,” observing the dehumanizing appearance of caked-on chimney soot rather than the boy beneath. When the narrator asks, “Where are thy father & mother?” (3), the subject responds with a short tale relating the origin of his forced labour, stating that these absent

parents “clothed [him] in the clothes of death / And taught [him] to sing the notes of woe” (7-8); he answers in terms of his forced employment. Aside from the reference to “father & mother,” these first two stanzas depict the boy as a chimney sweeper rather than child, only mentioning his parents insofar as they relate to his current toil, and stating that the boy must work while “They are both gone up to the church to pray” (4). Though apparently seeing the sweeper as a child, this line is in fact a powerful construction of this boy as a forced labourer. The reference to prayer shows that the sweeper's woe stems not from a need for survival, but rather from his guardians' desire to take time away from work to (supposedly) pray. He is not an orphan who must struggle to survive, but a source of income and respite for his parents who are free to take leisure time while he labours to provide sustenance. His parents are not caregivers but cruel employers, depicted in terms of the boy's dominant status as a chimney sweeper rather than a child.

Like the grape-laden vine of “Earth's Answer,” the border in “The Chimney Sweeper” applies pictorial identity to the text through its construction as well as constriction. The brush-like objects on the right side of the stanzas are alternately clean and dirty, forming commentaries on the social backgrounds of the respective speakers. Extending from the word “Sweeper” and shaped like a twisted broom, this illustration represents the relations between the characters and child labour. Though he expresses some concern for the “little black thing,” a clean brush borders the narrator's lines, perhaps alluding to his ignorance and inexperience of the evils of chimney sweeping. This individual is wholly outside of the sweeper's misery, unable to understand why the boy would be “Crying weep, weep, in notes of woe” (2) without an explanation about his “father & mother.” The sorrow stems from the simple fact that the boy *is* a chimney sweeper rather than a child, a misery that the narrator would comprehend if his metaphorical broom was

sullied with the soot of this harrowing experience. This work is one of the *Songs of Experience*, after all; the grime-covered broom alongside the second stanza shows the premature hardship of labour that clings to the sweeper as a direct result of the events that the corresponding lines relate.

Separated from the top eight lines by the border that extends from “Sweeper,” the final stanza represents a significant shift in textual tone. Rather than showing the boy as a labourer, these lines combine with the image to form a depiction of the child underneath the grime, desiring the simple joy of free play rather than his bondage. The chimney sweeper narrates his own misery, lamenting that his parents “think they have done [him] no injury” (10) because he is “happy & dance[s] & sing[s]” (9) while they “make up a heaven of [his] misery” (12). From the poem alone this “heaven” is somewhat ambiguous, possibly referring to the prayer time that the parents take at the chimney sweeper's expense. However, as in the earlier reading of “The Sick Rose,” the observed interaction between line and image elicit the interpretation: the freedom from drudgery that the chimney sweeper labours to provide is his most desired heaven, a comfort taken for granted by his exploitive guardians. Though he previously “smil'd among the winters snow” (6), he is no longer free to play “upon the heath” (5) but rather is bound to his work, shown as encumbered with equipment and grime. Though previously happy even among wintry nature, the black weight of his work holds him to misery. Further blackness above the child's head weighs down on him; since the heaven of Christian tradition is typically above, this blackness shows that the sweeper's “heaven” is not the pious afterlife of churchgoers like his exploitive parents. Rather, the boy wishes for nothing more than the idyllic whiteness around him, to once again smile among snow, but his forced labour prevents any such enjoyment, keeping him soot-covered, tool laden, and deprived of child-like pleasure. He may “dance & sing” while

he works, but he still describes his chore as a “misery.” His miserable existence enables his parents' relaxation, while he is denied even the modest “heaven” of free play. Instead of showing the child actively at work, the image and the final stanza depict the consequences of that work. The once happy boy seeks freedom, but remains bound under the crushing black weight of the grime, sky and poem above.

The chimney sweeper's desire to play and express himself cannot overcome the constricting, professional world around him. The fact that his parents are only concerned with part of his nature—physical person capable of labour, but not child—binds him to this miserable, stifling existence. Likewise, denying the multimedia nature of Blake's art is miserable and stifling, binding it under the crushing black weight of text-only anthologies. By this point in the essay, it has certainly become superfluous to continue arguing that “Blake's poems need to be read with their accompanying illustrations” (Mitchell *Composite Art* 3). These three interpretations of “The Sick Rose,” “Earth's Answer,” and “The Chimney Sweeper” clearly show that Blake's interacting poetic and visual art multiplies themes and tensions to create a final work greater than the sum of image and text. Though I refute Mitchell's rationalization of segregating Blake's form, his notion that Blake's art is “an interaction between two vigorously independent modes of expression” still stands as a simple yet comprehensive description of Blake's multimedia texts. We can only hope that canon editors, such as those who compile anthologies like the *Norton*, one day accept the obvious and essential fact that William Blake was no more only a poet than Shakespeare was only a director. His form is the multiplicative *interaction between* image and text, a fact still often misunderstood over two centuries hence.

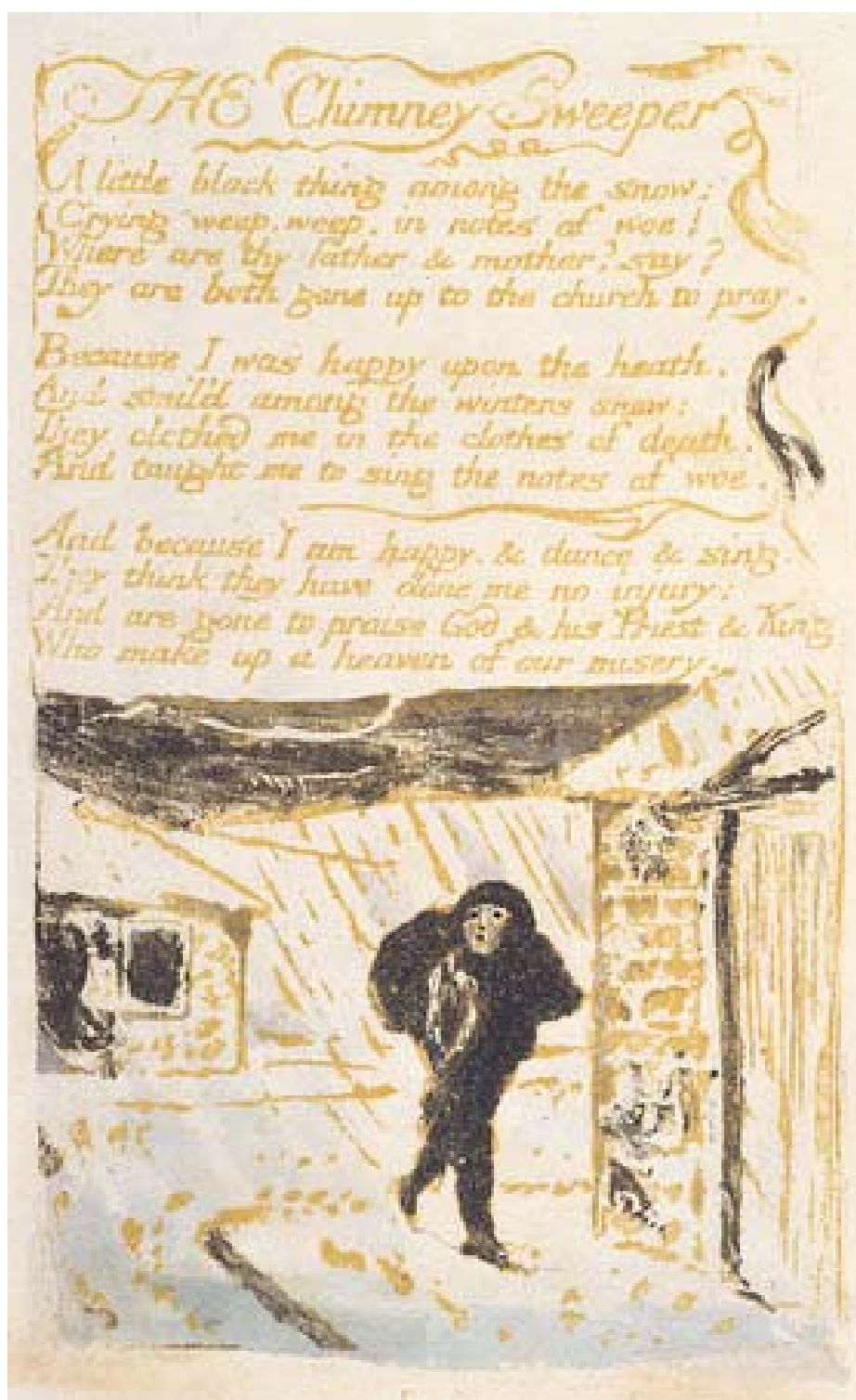
FIGURE 1



FIGURE 2



FIGURE 3



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