Chapter Ten

Blake's Decomposite Art: On the Image of Language and the Ruins of Representation

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Fancy cannot be embodied any more than a simile can be painted; and it is as idle to attempt it as to personate *Wall* or *Moonshine*.

William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*

What is an illustration, and what must a text be if it can be represented by an illustration? No English artist ever asked these innocent-sounding questions with the acuity and persistence of William Blake, and possibly at no point with more complex results than in some of the large colour prints of 1795. One print in particular (see Plate 7 in colour insert) stands in a strikingly revisionary relationship with its Shakespearean source, which it treats not as the representation of a perception, as is the case in ordinary illustration, but as a field of rhetorical turns – a mixture of appositions, personifications, and similes – that can be detached from their original context and rearranged by the illustrator. The resulting image is as stark as it is captivating. In an alien landscape wracked by roiling storms, a woman sits astride a horse under a slash of light. The muscular child that she delicately holds by her fingertips looks up into her face, its arms outstretched in a gesture of trusting supplication. But look past the child to the anguished woman who lies supine on what could be the bottom of an ancient ocean. Another figure on another horse faces away from the viewer, as if to tell us to gaze elsewhere than here. The horses are blind; their outstretched bodies are impossibly elongated, as if willing themselves into strenuous flight. An atmosphere of perilous tumult and unstoppable motion competes with the static tableau of the two women and the naked infant. A precarious moment of handing off or handing over forms the dead centre of the image. In the absence of understanding the significance or the outcome of this conveyance, the perilous indeterminacy of the carrying across is all. We are right away reminded that the metaphor forming the literal root for "metaphor" is *metaphérō*, "to carry over" or "to transfer." Picturing a tumult of figures of speech in the language of

Macbeth rather than a dramatic scene, Blake's print in effect abducts us from the *mise en scène* of the play and returns us to the rhetorical operations or transports by which the play as a creature of language is composed. Blake does not invite us to "see" what Shakespeare's play imagines but instead to arrest our encounter with *Macbeth* and to "read" an oddly obscure knot of language in the form of an unabashedly phantasmagoric image. Are we then reading an image or seeing a figure? The design transposes the forms of judgment thought to be unique to the word and the image, respectively, so as to decompose their interaction. In the resulting confusion, about which more in a moment, we are given to see something alien about language beyond the distribution of the legible and the visible.

The displacement between Blake's picture and his subject in Shakespeare may help explain why the illustration lacks a title,[1] as if the artist were intent on marking his illustration's curious abstention from the text that it also figures forth with such pleasing luridness. But partly because of a brief note scribbled by Frederick Tatham on the back of a pencil sketch now in the British Museum, we have known since the nineteenth century that the design illustrates a familiar, though notoriously difficult, passage from *Macbeth*. By convention the print is entitled *Pity*, after the soliloquy in which Macbeth, meditating on the consequences of his proposed assassination of the king, is transported by strange figures of pathos that rapidly assume an apocalyptic intensity. This is from Samuel Johnson's edition:

> Besides, this *Duncan*
> Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
> So clear in his great office that his virtues
> Will plead, like angels, trumpet-tongu'd again
> The deep damnation of his taking off;
> And Pity, like a naked new-born babe,
> Striding the blast, or heav'n's cherubin hors'd
> Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
> Shall blow the horrid deed in ev'ry eye;
> That tears shall drown the wind.[2]

The fact that Blake's illustration is at several points a scrupulously literal reproduction of Macbeth's apposed similes for the personification named "Pity" has often been recognized.[3] (Yet I use the word "literal," meaning "verbatim" or "word-for-word," under erasure, since the figure of the "literal" as the outside or absence of the "figural" is precisely what is in question here.) Due attention has not been given to the disruptive implications of this literalness, not only for the Shakespearean text at hand but also, more generally, for the relationship between word and image. Because it "reads" the "real

Surface"[4] of a single character's rhetoric, to the disadvantage of "seeing" the play's narrative context, *Pity* serves the disfiguring function of recalling the systematic effacement and displacement of language by which conventional illustration assimilates the written word to the order of sight. Binding the text to the turns of its language, *Pity* gives emphasis to its figural life but only at the notable expense of representing the "events" in Shakespeare's story. It could be argued that Blake's illustrative interpretation interrupts the play at the point dividing language as description from language as trope; in other words, the print disarticulates the work that it reproduces by exposing a gap between *Macbeth*'s referential and figurative functions. The epistemological stakes in this instance would appear to be quite high, if we agree with Paul de Man that "to understand primarily means to determine the referential mode of a text."[5] Indeed, in referring to Shakespeare's figures of speech Blake's print illustrates that aspect of the text which always suspends its ability to be referential. The ensuing "failure" of *Pity* to "understand" *Macbeth*, that is, Blake's blunting resistance to see "through" the text, and thus to reinforce the text's referential capacity, effectively leaves the play as such unreadable. Imagine, if you will, a complete illustrated Shakespeare along the lines modelled in *Pity*. We would not know what the plays were about except perhaps as a discontinuous series of stutterings about language. *Pity* surprises the spectator by returning to view that which ordinarily undergoes a kind of repression or defacement whenever the process of *reading* writing is imagined to be one of *seeing* scenes. And like the uncanny, what returns is at once alien and familiar, Shakespeare's words and yet taken up in a manner quite unlike anything we have previously seen of the play.

In transporting spectators from work to text, Blake makes language *proud*, that is, he makes its operations stick or stand out, raised above the surrounding referential field.[6] The resulting print is beautifully ruinous for illustrative theory and practice, conventionally understood. But this philological focus on Shakespeare's words also has the paradoxical effect of estranging *Macbeth* from itself, as if it were caught telling a tale parallel to but at odds with the one that it actually tells. That other tale or, as de Man puts it, "allegory,"[7] narrates a story that it is all but impossible not to imbue with *pathos* or *pity*, which, as it turns out, is the subject matter of the words in Shakespeare to which the print responds with such assiduousness.[8] In the case of Blake's print, a human, all-too-human emotion like pity functions as a displaced name for a linguistic predicament: namely, before it does or is said to be anything else, language is the trace or echo or image of its own intentionless and indeed inhuman operations. We speak at best allegorically about language because it is always already an allegory of itself. *Pity*'s disastrousness for illustration, the lurid figures that it conjures up in the company of Shakespeare's personifications, similes, and appositions, makes legible a calamity that originarily lurks in the language of the target text, even

as it opens a door to new possibilities and to a future of the image once it is uncoupled from its representational expectations.

As poets know better than anyone ("Poetry is first philology," Werner Hamacher writes[9]), language is irreducible to its semantic function, but since that claim about language is itself meaningful, marking the onrush of semanticism back into the conversation (as if something in language refuses the absence of reference), there appears to be no way to speak of language except by obscuring it as such. We could say that language *is* this obscurity but only by acknowledging that to say this, or in fact to say anything at all, is to obscure language's obscurity. The conceptual difficulties and dynamicism of Blake's print, which is nothing if not an image of buffeting and risky transport, respond to this flexure and conundrum, this flickering of disclosure and secrecy in the presence of the incitement of language – neither "Shakespeare" nor, strictly speaking, even "Shakespeare's language," but *language*. Blake's print thus anticipates the work of thinkers like de Man and Walter Benjamin, who also struggle with "the experience of being both *exposed* to and *provoked by* language."[10] Blake's queer illustration in particular looks ahead to Sigmund Freud's account of the nature of dreams and the dream-work. In the *Traumbuch* Freud argues that the captivating images that fill and overfill our dreams, imbued with the feeling of a significance that they also hide in plain sight, are in fact picture-puzzles or rebuses. These images are not of objects of perception but of the materials of language, including words, syllables, and pieces of words, as well as syntactical jointures, puns, and other rhetorical operations. I want to return to this question, but for now what matters is that the dream image represents language. Is that not also the basis for Blake's print? Without relaxing our anxiously defensive attachment to seeing dreams as essentially pictorial, Freud suggests, we prevent ourselves from understanding them as "pictographic script" (*Bilderschrift*), and thus as a form of writing that asks to be read.[11] Blake's visionary treatment of Shakespeare is analogously dreamy, turning us back towards language while drawing its material from a play that, after all, brims with visions, nightmares, and broken sleep. By loosening the task of the illustrator from the labour of illustration, the print augurs a new experience of the image – namely, an image of language.

Blake's refusal to illustrate a scene from *Macbeth* nevertheless comes in the form of an illustration. As Walter Jackson Bate suggests in the course of a discussion of John Keats's strategic decision – in the *Hyperion* poems – to explore the limits of the dream-vision in a dream vision, "the closest possible wrestle with the subject is promised, and one that will involve form itself."[12] Word and picture are not combined into a composite whole but are instead marshalled to the task of decomposing the very idea that figures of speech are only verbal and that images are only pictorial. The hybrid creature that Blake invents defies easy description. Jacques Rancière's account of the montage effects of what he calls "the sentence image" is suggestive: "The visible can be arranged in meaningful

tropes; words deploy a visibility that can be blinding."[13] The immanence of Blake's critique of illustrative pictorialism, the closeness of his grappling with the problem, also anticipates Freud's observation that the dream's most affecting significance lies not *behind* its visual puzzles – *Bilderrätsel* – but precisely *in* them.[14] He counsels tarrying with the oddness of the image and honouring the ways in which the dream-thought is finally inseparable from its displacement and indeed obscuration in the dream.

The arresting qualities of Blake's print could be said to accomplish something similar. The enigma of the image, the push and pull that comes from appearing to be saturatedly meaningful without divulging that meaning, is inextricable from how the image wants us to dwell with its intensely coloured materiality, the swirling life of its darkness and light, horizontality and verticality. What we experience looking at and thinking about the print is not so much a matter of surface appearance and underlying meaning as the dynamic torsion of two surfaces woven into one another. To lose sight of the *image* of the image of language, the translation of language into a picture, would be to look away from a difficult knowledge about language that activates Blake's print and that inflects my argument in its entirety: because there is no language for language that is not already part of the domain of language, there are only stammering catechrestic impositions in the form of more or less lurid figures *for* language. Another way of saying this is that language is irreducible to its semantic functions, but since that observation about language is itself meaningful and marks the inrush of another semanticism (referentiality abhors a vacuum of zero-degree referentiality), there appears to be no way to speak of language as such except by obscuring it once again. Blake's print imagines the operations of Shakespeare's language, involving itself with its puzzling turns, but to invite us to see these operations as pictures is also to invite us to see them blindly, that is, as images *of* language and thus *not* that for which they are images. We see Shakespeare's appositions, similes, and personifications but as "sightlessly" as the "couriers" that carry "heav'n's cherubin" aloft. The difference between Blake's visual figures and Shakespeare's verbal figures repeats and stands for a difference or cleft within language and that abandons it to a perpetual allegory of itself. To experience language is therefore to experience it belatedly and in the form of its endless mediations of itself, mediations that go all the way down. Language as such, or what Benjamin calls "*reine Sprache*" or "pure language," resembles nothing, not even nothing, meaning that to refer to it – as I am certainly doing here, after Blake – is to speak of it in terms of resemblances for which there is no truly literal expression, no point of reference that isn't already a figure *for* or displacement *of*.[15] With Blake, we find ourselves in the realm of what Maurice Blanchot cannily calls "literature," that is, that which endures the passion or pathos of an exposure to and provocation by language: "pure resemblance, entirely resemblance, resemblance and nothing more."[16] Blanchot's stuttering

anaphora captures not only the propulsive energy of unfurling images of language but also the impossibility of giving a single or singular name to it.

The Illustration of Figure

To Understand literally these metaphors … seems … absurd …

Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*

Blake painted *Pity* in an age when illustrations were expected to exhibit a "slavish fidelity" to the subject matter of the text and to the iconographic conventions that had come to govern its representation in pictures.[17] This faithfulness was especially important for illustrations of Shakespeare, whose timeless themes were considered by England's intelligentsia to be the salvation of British art, an art – so John Boydell complained – that had otherwise declined into "painting Portraits of those, who, in less than half a century" would "be lost in oblivion."[18] In this context, Blake's illustrative attention to Shakespeare's similes, rather than to his noble characters or exemplary stories, appears eccentric, even perverse. We might well ask: Where is Macbeth in this illustration of *Macbeth*? Unlike Shakespeare illustrations done before or, for that matter, since Blake's composition, including most of those done by the artist himself, *Pity* treats the turns of Macbeth's anxious soliloquy as if *language* rather than a character were speaking, and thus the proper subject of the play's pictorial representation.

If Blake's curious design belongs to anything approaching a tradition, it is certainly not the familiar one that has always imagined the written text to be a conducive transparency to a visualizable referent that naturally lends itself to illustration. To be sure, *Pity* visualizes Shakespeare's words, but in a quite unconventional manner whose alertness to rhetorical language recalls the literalist strategies intermittently adopted in some medieval illuminations of the Bible. In the case of the ninth-century Latin psalter at Utrecht, for example, the illuminators take the Psalmist at his word and illustrate his plea – "Awake, why sleepest thou, O Lord?" – with a scene depicting God snoring comfortably in a tiny bed.[19] A similar fascination with what Walter Pater called "all that latent figurative texture in speech"[20] surfaces in more modern instances: in Freud and Benjamin, who in separate but complementary ways point to the profaning power of the literalist imagination at work in, respectively, the displacement of dream-work and the translation of poetry;[21] and in Proust, Ruskin, and Pater, all of whom remark upon the "special temper" that Giotto exhibits in the representation of personified characters, figures whose literal vividness and grotesquery deflects and defers the unambiguous uptake of their allegorical significance.[22] If, as Pater claims, Blake is Giotto's artistic heir, then *Pity* represents

a limit-case of that "special temper," fully exhibiting a "preoccupation" (as Pater says of Giotto) "with the aesthetic beauty of the image itself, the *figured* side of figured expression, the *form* of the metaphor."[23] What each of these examples demonstrates is the allure of an interpretive move, at once lively and unsettling, that articulates rather than effaces the difference between the materiality of the sign and what that sign is made to mean, whether by spectators or by readers.

In the print at hand, Blake's studied focus on the figured side of Macbeth's figured expression makes it possible for us to consider what the text says without reference to the speaker or to the set of circumstances of his or her utterance – factors that ordinarily play an important role in determining both the meaning and the illustration of what is said. In specifically refusing to volatilize the letter of Macbeth's figures for pity, Blake's design reminds us that conventional illustration shares with conventional reading a constitutive disposition to treat *all* language in what could be called "allegorical" terms: as displaced figures for purely literal referents and as the written representation of an essentially visual perception.[24]

The Proper Limits of Metaphor

> In fact the metaphor ought to have an apologetic air, so as to look as if it had entered a place that does not belong to it with a proper introduction, not taken it by storm, and as if it had come with permission, not forced its way in.
>
> Cicero, *De Oratore*

From the eccentric perspective of Blake's literalist illustration, then, what is a text? We can approach an answer to this question by considering the rhetorical behaviour of the similes from *Macbeth* that *Pity* illustrates. It cannot be accidental that Blake focuses on a passage that is itself a highly conspicuous example of how figural language, far from being simply illustrative in nature, can interrupt and displace the conceptual meaning that it is expected to transport. Pity is like a "naked new-born babe, / Striding the blast"; alternately it is like "heav'n's cherubin, hors'd / Upon the sightless couriers of the air." As readers have often noted, Macbeth's similes are unlikely likenesses because their proper meaning, the totalizing term that should provide the basis of the resemblance between the parts of the analogies, is far from obvious. Shakespeare's figures are meant to confirm and to reinforce the significance of pity through multiple illustration; yet the rhetorical *effect* is quite another matter, for in addition to gesturing from different directions at a common conceptual centre, the similes overlap and communicate between themselves, producing the curious confusions of sense that have always made the passage an equivocal subject of fascination in Shakespeare criticism.

In a famous essay from *The Well-Wrought Urn*, for example, Cleanth Brooks makes the most of the passage's rhetorical ambiguities. "Is the babe natural or supernatural?" he asks. Is it "an ordinary helpless babe, who, as newborn, could not, of course, even toddle, much less stride the blast? Or is it some infant Hercules, quite capable of striding the blast, but, since it is powerful and not helpless, hardly the typical pitiable object?" "Is the cherubim comparison really any more successful?" he continues: "Would not one of the great warrior archangels be more appropriate to the scene than the cherub? Does Shakespeare mean for pity or for fear of retribution to be dominant in Macbeth's mind?"[25] To ask these questions is tacitly to confirm that figural language generates ambiguities that escape critical paraphrase. That Brooks will go on to expend considerable interpretive ingenuity answering them, thereby determining the *logos* or ground of the metaphors whose difficulty had attracted his interest in the first place, seems to corroborate de Man's observation that "close reading … cannot fail to respond to structures of language which it is the more or less secret aim of literary teaching to keep hidden."[26] Moreover, by delimiting the very aspect of the text that he also argues is the sign of its unparaphrasable literarity, Brooks betrays a hermeneutical anxiety that is hardly confined to twentieth-century formalism, for Macbeth's similes have been a notorious interpretive crux among close readers of Shakespeare since the earliest annotated editions.[27] In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries criticism of these lines ranges from the censure of its "strained and unnatural imagery"[28] to the ambivalent responses witnessed by Horace Furness's *New Variorum*, whose annotators fluctuate between denouncing the passage as "pure rant" and attributing its "wild, extravagant, phantasmagoric images" to Macbeth's paranoid dementia.[29] The argument that the "unrestrained imagination" of Macbeth's language embodies his unstable psychological state continues to have credence, perhaps because it claims to discover a phenomenological and psychological meaningfulness even and especially in that language's obscurity. In any case, the counterargument that the soliloquy reflects a lapse in Shakespeare's creative intelligence has long since gone out of fashion. Only "a mind involved in the incoherent flow of its own ideas," to cite D.A. Traversi's fine phrase, can account for the "distortion and obscurity"[30] of Macbeth's soliloquy. I refer to these interpretations because they demonstrate in different ways and from different critical quarters how Shakespeare's rhetorical language consistently (and understandably) elicits from readers a desire to make it more narrowly referential and therefore to make sense of its seeming nonsense. It could be argued that Macbeth's language has so often been the subject of this sort of scrutiny because his tropes *must* be assimilated, since in fact they make salient and problematic the question of reconciling figures to their conceptual ground, the life of the letter to the idealizations of the spirit – the question, in other words, of the possibility of reading. The implied threat seems to be that unless the passage's figures are brought

within what Brooks rather earnestly calls "the proper limits of metaphor," they will only mar the integrity of the text with "excrescences, mere extravagances of detail."[31]

Perhaps the most pertinent question here is not "what do these compounded similes for pity mean?" but "what does the fact that they have always been a troublesome issue mean?" Brooks's rhetoric of figuration, his characterization of uncontrolled figure as pure exorbitance, identifies him with an intellectual tradition that has always treated the trope as a turn away from truth, a turn, moreover, that harbours within itself the possibility of unruliness, even usurpation. Properly speaking, which is to say, within certain "limits," the rhetorical figure should illustrate just as pictorial illustration illustrates: as a useful supplement to thought. But the hazard of the figure's errant powers is never far away, and indeed forms the horizon of impropriety against which the notion of a proper meaning defines itself. What modern readers like Brooks see as the menace of a certain linguistic unseemliness, Blake's contemporaries could feel more sharply as the threat of outright sedition. David Simpson points out that "the general tenor of eighteenth-century opinion is that metaphor can function as an illustrative strategy, in which case it is appropriate and desirable, but can never be allowed to question or unsettle the stability (ontological and visual) of that which it illustrates. It must be at the service of its employer, but must never raise its hand against him."[32] Such service may well be the object of conventional illustration, whether in pictures or in figures; but the effect can be quite different, as the curiously unstable nature of Macbeth's similes has consistently demonstrated. Blake is remembered for strongly mistrusting systems that exacted unquestioned obedience from human beings, and he worked always to unsettle hierarchical discriminations predicated on what was thought to be proper and improper. None of his illustrations, least of all his literalist designs, could be said simply to "serve" their target texts, a fact that made Blake's relationship with his real employers notoriously difficult, not to say unprofitable. What makes these designs unusual and disruptive, however, is that by illustrating the illustrative aspect of the target text's language, they bring out the interior distances that already divide the text from itself. As Tilottama Rajan has argued, "illustration and repetition make expression a differential process, by creating crevices between the parts of an analogy or between the different discursive planes (conceptual and figurative, abstract and concrete) that supplement and repeat each other."[33] In the case of the *Macbeth* print, it is precisely the extravagance and impropriety of Shakespeare's own figures that provide the artist with an illustrative opening, an occasion to intervene at the point where Macbeth's proper meaning is most at odds with his rhetorical expression and thus where language *as* language feels most legible. Opportunistically exploiting the text's self-differences, Blake's illustration is doubly improper: by picturing Macbeth's language rather than the scene that he occupies, the artist

arrests the representation of the work as a continuously unfolding narrative; but in choosing to reproduce these particular figures, he also literalizes the interruptive effects already evident *within* Macbeth's similes, whose notorious resistance to reading blocks and complicates their efficient translation from figurative illustration to conceptual referent. In one move, Blake brings into the foreground what other readers of Shakespeare have systematically struggled to master and, for reasons that have been no less systematic, what conventional illustrators of *Macbeth* have elided altogether.[34]

Considerations of Representability

But it cannot be ignored that Blake's print is characterized by its own revealing elisions and displacements. As we have already seen, Macbeth's similes are set up as alternate, contiguous illustrations of the same thing: pity is *either* like a "naked new-born babe" *or* like "heav'n's cherubin." Yet Blake signally disregards the discrimination urged by the passage's either/or structure – indeed, he has no choice in the matter, for how could the appositions or contiguities of language as such be translated into pictures? Blake rather represents Macbeth's figures not only sharing the same pictorial "space," but making an ambiguous form of contact: the naked babe ascends purposefully above a supine woman and into the outstretched arms of a distracted cherub. To put it differently, *Pity* is constituted by the "fantastic" substitution of a visual, existential relationship *for* a rhetorical, metonymic one, whose fundamentally non-visual character makes it the other-scene of Blake's illustration, visible only because of the "prior" erasure of its invisibility.

I borrow the term "fantastic" from Freud, who uses it to describe what happens when the dream-work, which is primarily visual, and which he repeatedly compares to illustration, must contend with the rhetorical structures that underwrite the non-visual dream-thoughts: "'if,' 'because,' 'just as,' 'although,' 'either-or,' and all the other conjunctions without which we cannot understand sentences or speeches."[35] "Considerations of representability" compel the dream "to destroy" (*vernichten*) – the annihilatory violence of Freud's German is revealing – these structures, and to replace them with "absurd" visual equivalents.[36] The rhetoric of the dream-content stands in a relation of inadequacy to its representation in images because, as Freud says, "from the point of view of a dream" all that can be pictured is "a thing that is *capable of being represented*."[37] For our purposes it is especially interesting that Freud immediately identifies the absolute heterogeneity underlying the dream with the paragone, the war of signs between the sister arts:

> The incapacity of dreams to express these things [i.e., the "connections" necessary to the understanding of language] must lie in the nature of the psychical material

> out of which dreams are made. The plastic arts of painting and sculpture labour, indeed, under a similar limitation as compared with poetry, which can make use of speech; and here once again the reason for their incapacity lies in the nature of the material which these two forms of art manipulate in their effort to express something.[38]

By way of illustration, Freud suggests that "in ancient paintings small labels were hung from the mouths of the persons represented, containing in written characters the speeches which the artist despaired of representing pictorially." The art-historical accuracy of Freud's claim notwithstanding, the need for the supplemental insertion of written characters into the pictorial space raises important questions about the relationship between words and pictures. The eighteenth-century commonplace that pictures are "mute poems" suddenly takes on a more sinister pall, as if the silence of painting stood for a certain irreducible deprivation accompanying the translation of language into images – a loss whose impact Freud nicely contains by associating it with a primitive past.

"Considerations of representability" also oblige Blake to translate the rhetorical structures or "connections" of Macbeth's soliloquy into visual terms. But as Freud's remarks from *The Interpretation of Dreams* suggest, the fantastical result of this (mis)representation points to the incommensurability of language and pictures as much as to their interchangeability. *Pity* discloses a deep displacement between the visual design and the unremitting and invisible structures that belong specifically to language in Shakespeare's text; but in a print whose literalism affirms the independent life of the letter, this displacement seems only fitting, acknowledging as it does the radical difference between seeing and reading, a difference that conventional illustration works to efface in the process of treating language as description rather than language as trope. This effacement is an issue that will demand further consideration; let me stress for the moment that *Pity* is thus not only an illustration of figure but also an illustration of the figure of illustration, or more precisely, of the catachrestic borrowing of terms from an order that is alien to language to visualize that which has no properly visual configuration in language itself, namely the contiguity and apposition of Macbeth's similes. The unlikely likeness underlying Blake's illustration is thus catachrestic, or conspicuously "abusive."[39] And yet for at least one reason it is also strangely overdetermined: the relationship between *Pity* and the rhetorical devices underwriting the Shakespearean source text is structurally homologous to the personifications that the illustration literalizes in the pictures. In other words, like the translation of pity into "heav'n's cherubin" or a "new-born babe," the print's visual refashioning of Macbeth's contiguous similes *itself* amounts to a personification: by carrying over the text's inanimate, metonymic relationship to an apparently animate and, as it were, metaphoric one, *Pity* gives a form and a face to what is radically formless and faceless in language.[40]

The composition that results from this exchange begs for a unified interpretation. Yet the cryptic details of the design make a conclusive explication difficult, to say the least. With her carefully placed fingers and her distracted stare, the cherub in the foreground appears to have had the experience but missed the meaning of her contact with the babe. Is her gesture one of redemption or of indifference? Who is the sepulchral figure at the bottom of the illustration? What do we make of the unaligned gazes of the cherub and the babe – or of the blankness of the courier's closed, "sightless" eye, a literal blind spot amid Blake's luridly visionary picture? As one might expect, the details of the design have prompted diverse, sometimes antithetical interpretations, many of them appealing to the larger clarity of Blake's myth because, it is assumed, the print says nothing coherent about *Macbeth*.[41] We know, for example, that Blake associated pity with death and the divisiveness of sexual reproduction, but these notions are only equivocally figured forth in the illustration.[42] It may not be an admission of critical exhaustion to suggest that the interpretive difficulties that characterize *Pity* lie at the heart of what the print is about. More than suggesting that the illustration is irreducible either to Blake's myth or to its Shakespearean pre-text, these difficulties disclose the design's deeper resistances, those inscribed even in its material status as a painting. Lacking its own title, and thus relying on readers other than Blake to identify its source in Shakespeare, *Pity* is excluded from the single most powerful supplemental means by which an artist might determine how a painting and especially an illustration is to be interpreted. Anyone who has struggled with Blake's painting knows the truth of Mark Twain's wry advice that "a good legible label is usually worth, for information, a ton of significant attitude and expression in a historical picture."[43] And yet *Pity* (or whatever more or less arbitrary label we give to the design) distinctly evokes the *possibility* of a unified interpretation, primarily because Blake is here so conspicuously responsible for fabricating an existential relationship between two figures where none had existed before in Shakespeare – except at the "literal" level of Macbeth's contiguous similes. Morton Paley's understandably impatient observation – that "it is *Blake* who makes the 'cherubin' receive the 'new-born babe,' yet no symbolic meaning emerges from this"[44] – nicely evokes the underlying problem of the design, the hermeneutical lacuna between what Blake's image *does* to Shakespeare's text and the expectation of meaningfulness that this doing raises in the viewer's mind.

The point is certainly not that the painting cannot or should not be interpreted for its "symbolic meaning." It is only that the difficulty in making such an interpretation exposes the arbitrariness of the design's crucial details with respect to the rhetorical structure that it represents *as* and *in* a picture. Paradoxically, it is in the total absence of continuity between the illustration and the source text that the other-scene of Blake's illustration, belonging to Shakespeare's language and lying utterly beyond the reach of pictures or picturing, makes its spectral

presence most problematically felt. Both effacing and figuring forth the passage from *Macbeth*, the print's very substitution of pictures for words points to that passage's blankness or invisibility (which is the radical blankness of language and which would not require the supplement of illustration if it were already visible), and reminds us that the abusive exchange of a visual, existential relationship for a sightless, rhetorical one is contingently imposed, marking an absolute heterogeneity between the pictorial configuration of the design and its linguistic ground. Blake "*makes* the cherubin receive the 'new-born babe'": does the imposed nature of this pictorial meeting explain why the cherub and the babe do not look at each other, as if residually registering, from within the painting, the *resistance* of the linguistic material to its coercion into pictures? The composition that results from the exchange of pictures for language triggers the demand for the sort of symbolic interpretation whose specific details Paley finds lacking. For the conception of a significance that precedes its representation in pictorial signs Blake substitutes a referent that is *after the fact* vis-à-vis the text in *Macbeth*, produced or posited by the arrangement of these signs and therefore more properly not the cause of the illustration's composition but a compositional *effect*. But the gap between the meaning of *Pity* and the way in which it comes to mean discloses more than the contrived character of the world it seems to represent; it also makes explicit that meaningfulness itself must await the metaphorical transport of linguistic relations – which are radically sense-less – into relations patterned after those found in the phenomenal world, relations that are alone open to symbolic interpretation as, for example, "redemptive" or "indifferent." Seeing is thus linked to the apprehension of significance; but it is a significance that remains subtended by the prior blankness that it displaces and against which the form and content of what is brought to sight can only appear as a kind of visual hallucination. In this instance, then, it could be said that considerations of representability unavoidably make illustration into a *dream* of the text, or at least of the text's specifically rhetorical features. The deep truth of the design is dissimulative and self-consuming: at once a meaningful representation and exposed to disfigurement by the meaninglessness of the rhetorical armature of which it is a representation, *Pity* functions at two levels that are unaccommodated to each other and yet inextricably interinvolved. The terms "illustration" or "illumination" hardly seem adequate to describe *Pity*, since the "solar language of cognition"[45] that they fully imply fails to account for the way in which the print uneasily raises the question of language prior to its phenomenalization, that is, before the figural eclipse that brings the text into light and sense.[46] Whatever symbolic significance we attribute to the painting can thus appear not as a simple object of cognition but as a form of delusion, blind to the aporia lying at the heart of *Pity* in which illumination is indistinguishable from an originating concealment, visual composition from rhetorical destruction, meaning from senselessness.

The Figure of Illustration

From Blake's manipulation of Shakespeare's similes in *Pity* we see that *Macbeth* presents itself to the artist not as the source of a sequential narrative awaiting its more or less faithful translation into pictures, but as a *re*source of perfectly detachable figures whose connotations are undetermined by the original text, and thus meaningful only according to how the figures are de-composed and recombined by the translation. The scandalous nature of Blake's literalist interpretive strategy here – but also at scattered points throughout his work – would be difficult to exaggerate in an age that had quite different ideas about the hermeneutics of illustration and about the relationship between words and pictures. Indeed, we would need to go as far afield as psychoanalysis to find a theoretical articulation of an analogously exorbitant hermeneutical model. As Geoffrey Hartman points out in a discussion of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, "analysis so invests and supplements an original version that it becomes less an object and more a series of linguistic relays that could lead anywhere – depending on the system and who is doing the switching."[47] Blake's "illustration" – in the present context, the term can hardly escape being placed in cautionary quotation marks – similarly rewrites and freely extends the target text, as opposed to reflecting and, as it were, parasitically commenting upon it. Like the "illuminated poetry," Blake's literalist attention to the language of the "original version" would thus seem to embody a strong critique rather than a belated apotheosis of the sister arts tradition that so dominated eighteenth-century aesthetics. As W.J.T. Mitchell has conclusively demonstrated, Blake's illuminated poetry is less a felicitous union of words and images than a "composite" of vigorously independent modes of representation.[48] Yet it is obvious that Blake's visual work is not entirely made up of the illuminated texts, as Mitchell defines them. For reasons that no doubt had as much to do with day-to-day survival as with visionary zeal, Blake continued to work primarily as an illustrator – that is, painting pictures *after* the words of other writers rather than combining the two to produce a composite art. How then to sustain a critique of the sister arts tradition when the illustrative gesture as such unavoidably presupposes that painting and writing are to some extent complementary? By illustrating texts Blake risks reproducing the very error of identifying words and images that his illuminated work complexly repudiates. How to illustrate the crucial differences between language and pictures in an illustration?

What I want to suggest is that Blake's literalist illustrative tactics signal the artist's awareness of this dilemma. In other words, literalist visualizations – *Pity*, as I have argued, is simply the limit case in Blake's work – augur the closest possible engagement with the sister arts tradition, since they displace and disrupt that tradition, with its identification of images and words, from

within. The reasons that Blake found the ancient notion of *ut pictura poesis* (as a painting, so also a poem) an unpalatable one are not difficult to imagine. The elision of the dissimilarities between the arts could only contribute to their domination by "bloated General Forms" (*Jerusalem* 38:19; E184), the abstract conceptions of unity for which Blake had a lifelong revulsion. Moreover, the notion that the arts shared an underlying ground implied the givenness of the "objective" world, which in turn legitimated the evaluation of art according to the accuracy with which that world was imitated or reflected. For Blake these epistemological conditions reduced painting and poetry alike to what he calls, with a palpable sense of weariness, "the sordid drugery of facsimile representations of merely mortal and perishing substances" (*Descriptive Catalogue*; E541). More significantly, Blake challenges the pictorialist principle underwriting the sister arts tradition, the enabling belief that words are at root pictures and that good poetry is consequently composed of language evoking the clearest pictures in the reader's mind. Literary pictorialism accounts in part for the emphasis on picturesque or scenic verse in eighteenth-century writing, and for the prevalence of what Jean H. Hagstrum calls "allegorical personification" and "pictorially conceived allegorical personages."[49] Blake seems to have been constitutively incapable of writing the first kind of poetry; his geographies are almost exclusively mental and fantastic rather than pretty and familiar. But whether his undeniable interest in personified figures reflects an incipient pictorialism is open to question.[50] Mitchell for one rejects this possibility on the grounds that Blake's figures are deliberately non-visualizable. It is true that verbal figures like "Religion hid in War" (*Jerusalem* 75:20; E231) are impossible to visualize, but the anti-pictorialist argument seems harder to endorse when we consider the number of instances in the prophetic texts in which the descriptions of the Four Zoas (and their extended families) are supplemented with quite striking visualizations. Moreover, even if "Blake rarely describes his personae in visual terms,"[51] he is nevertheless captivated by visual possibilities of personification in the work of other poets, as we see in the case of his literalist interpretations of Milton and Shakespeare.

Eighteenth-century readers that were less troubled by the rhetorical extravagance of Macbeth's soliloquy could praise it for the same reason that Milton's account of Satan, Sin, and Death was considered powerfully evocative: that is to say, for the unpicturable "obscurity" of its grand figures. An annotator in Furness's *New Variorum* briefly considers whether Shakespeare's apocalyptic scene was inspired by an earlier painting, for example, but he does so plainly in order to reaffirm poetry's power of sublimity: "what [Shakespeare] … has here said," he concludes, "no painter could so well express in outlines."[52] For Blake the argument that language, rather than images, possessed the capacity to excite a "sublime feeling of the unimaginable" – as Coleridge could suggest[53] – was to

miss the point, since that which had no "outline" was simply without imaginative significance. Yet the question remains: what interdiction does Blake violate by painting the very picture that the *Variorum* annotator cannot imagine as Shakespeare's pictorial source? What exactly is risked by painting the figured side of allegorical figures?

That a risk of some sort is involved is evocatively implied by Hazlitt, who worried that the material representation of Shakespeare's "Poetry" on stage was absurdly reductive. "Fancy cannot be embodied any more than a simile can be painted," he writes in *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*; "and it is as idle to attempt it as to personate *Wall* or *Moonshine*."[54] In other words, the performance of Shakespeare's fanciful play, and thus its translation from a world of words into so much stage business, is comparable in its dis-enchanting effect to the crude dramaturgy of Shakespeare's mechanicals, who break the dramatic illusion of the play by calling attention to the fictiveness of their roles. But what is the force of Hazlitt's simile of painting a simile? What is the analogous disenchantment in language, or more specifically, in the representation of similes in paintings? David Marshall's account of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the context of Hazlitt's remarks is helpful: "the threat of the mechanicals' literal-mindedness," he writes, "would be its reflection of the inevitable *disfiguring* inherent in presenting moonshine … The question of the play is whether presenting and representing must mean misrepresenting; whether *figure* must be synonymous with *disfigure*; whether *figure* must mean or even might mean *literalize*, or literally, *de-figure*."[55] The equivalent threat of de-figuration posed by the representation of similes in paintings becomes clearer as we move the discussion of Blake's literalist strategy to a rhetorical context and thus away from a primarily psychological discussion having to do with the experience of the verbal sublime. Simply put, Blake is to illustrative practice what Wall and Moonshine are to dramaturgy; literalizing written figures in material images, he calls attention to the *un*likeness of the figures for their conceptual meaning, so that whatever likeness is suggested to the mind must compete with the difference that is everywhere presented to the eye. As J. Hillis Miller observes with reference to Giotto's unusual allegorical frescoes at Padua, "the more vividly and literally" the figured side of the figure is represented, "the more it brings into the open the fact that the 'ethical' meaning – Temperance, Hope, or whatever – has … not been represented at all. It has only been indirectly named in a metaphor."[56] To the extent that *Pity* visualizes written figures it would seem to defy the linguistic bias of Burke and Coleridge, and to embrace the counterargument, prevalent in the eighteenth century, that "pictorially conceived allegorical personages" were the most vivid embodiment of an underlying kinship, not incompatibility, between words and pictures.[57] But the very vividness of Blake's literalism invites us to consider not just the pictorial possibilities of personification, but the *indirectness* or aberrant turn of language by which the

metaphor makes this visibility possible and brings the radically invisible concept of which it is a metaphor into sight. In so far as personification is paradigmatic of tropes that give a form to the formless, it is the exemplary instance of such making. Blake's literalist practice de-figures and marks the text *as* text, as a site of rhetorical positings or indirect namings that reflect nothing that is properly picturable and that consequently owe everything to the substitutive capacity of the trope, the figurality of the figure.

By painting personifications, which is to say by marking the total absence of continuity between sensible image and immaterial idea, Blake brings out what contemporaneous theoretical discussions of prosopopeia tacitly recognize: that consciousness and knowledge are irreducible to metaphorical transferences. As Earl Wasserman argues, in Blake's time the figure of personification was treated not simply as one trope among many but as the enabling condition of thinking itself; eighteenth-century thinkers, he argues, "recognized that of all the rhetorical figures, prosopopeia is precisely that one that best corresponds to the true nature of human abstraction, for it presents a universal in the corporeal substance by which alone it has existence for man and can be comprehended by him."[58] Wasserman cites the prominent educational theorist David Fordyce: "what is *Sensible must*, by some Similitude or Analogy, represent what is *Intellectual*," he writes in 1786; "The Idea *must* be cloathed in a bodily Form, to make it visible and palpable to the gross Understanding."[59] Fordyce's imperatives – which I emphasize here – underline how the act of thinking is inseparable from the rhetorical substitutions with which it is carried out. (In an analogous way, Kant argues that since human beings are not perfectly rational creatures, knowing only by means of pure thought, there must be a faculty that enables them to refer concepts to what is given to the mind by sensible intuition; interestingly, although the German philosopher's work is more technically precise than that of his English counterparts, the specifically figural nature of this "referring" as a linguistic "making" or positing in the form of personification is not as explicit in *The Critique of Judgment* as it is in Fordyce's essay.) Blake's literalism similarly evokes the rhetorical basis of the mind's presentation of objects to itself, and does so by marking the sheer heterogeneity of conceptual abstraction and the means by which that abstraction is bequeathed a concrete immediacy through the necessary imposition of a figure: concepts cannot be embodied, they can only be indirectly named in metaphor.

But Blake's illustrative tactics go one step further than exposing the unlikeness of verbal figures for their abstract meanings. In *Pity* the figured side of Shakespeare's figures is brought into view to the exact extent that the figuration as such – which is to say, the positing or imposition of relation in language – is hidden: the gap between conceptual understanding and sensible intuition repeats another, deeper division, this one between the meaningfulness of Shakespeare's language and the literal, material constituents of that language.

For as I have suggested, the tropological structure underwriting the passage in *Macbeth*, in which "pity" is analogous *either* to a new-born babe *or* to "heav'n's cherubin," has not been represented at all; the positing force of this either/or structure has only been fantastically effaced and displaced by a picture.

If abstractions remain unavailable to understanding except through personification, then so too does the substitutive and appositional movement of the figure itself. To put it another way: Hazlitt's prohibition against painting similes, which *Pity* transgresses, is fundamentally a warning against de-figuring the radical unlikeness of the language's semantic and formal functions. The rhetorical structure of Macbeth's extravagant analogies is the blind, non-signifying aspect of language against which all visualized and symbolic representations must seem arbitrary and imposed, a mere "impersonation" of the text rather than its illustration. To paint a simile is *not* to paint a simile; in effect, it is to paint the impossibility of painting a simile, substituting pictures for the linguistic substitutions and structures that are themselves unpicturable. Similarly, to read a figure is to make "sense" of it, that is, to reconcile the sense-less, material articulations of language to its meaning. Since the carrying over – *metaphorein* – of Macbeth's lurid figures cannot be pictured as such, its "annihilation" in the form of the picture that we actually get in *Pity* is as inevitable as it is aberrant: both aberrant *and* inevitable because the figurality of the figure is unpicturable and thus always only being pictured. How else to imagine the non-sensible articulation of the figure in anything but sensible terms, as a "literal," visual relation *like* the one between the cherub and the babe that is represented at the centre of Blake's painting? Paul Ricoeur points out that "the word 'metaphor' itself [is] a metaphor, the metaphor of displacement and therefore a transfer in a kind of space."[60] The figure of figure as a form of transference recalls how the compositional "space" in *Pity* is itself dominated by an ambiguously meaningful movement, a translation *from* the "mother" figure at the bottom of the design *to* the "couriers" or carriers whose eyes are "sightless." The carrying-over conceived as an irreducibly linguistic "phenomenon" cannot be seen; strictly speaking, it is not a sensible relation at all, but "considerations of representability" make it impossible to imagine the *relatedness* underwriting Macbeth's speech, or, for that matter, any of language's "forms" of articulation, in terms that are not already fully caught up in metaphors relating to the senses.[61]

Ultimately, then, the exorbitant difference between picture and rhetoric in *Pity*, and the way in which the picture's visible form marks and blots out the source text's linguistic articulation, brings into view a breach or deep self-displacement that always and everywhere inhabits language as its constitutive feature. As Andrzej Warminski argues, language is "divided against itself … as the *meaning* of words against the *order* of words, in short …between language as meaning and language as syntax, articulation, non-signifying jointings or cleavings, a system of meaningless differential markings."[62] Though these "jointings

or cleavings" are "the prop upon which meaning leans, and with which it is immediately confused,"[63] they remain necessarily illegible, in the same way that the sheer analogizing force of Macbeth's figures is itself unrepresentable in Blake's picture. In figuring forth rhetorical relation as literal, existential relation, *Pity* "pictures," as it were, what always goes-without-reading in language: the senseless, illegible cleft between the cognitive and performative aspects of language, between the meaningfulness of language and the irreducibly material elements (including the positing of analogies, but also, by extension, punctuation and syntax) that "act" at the level of the letter as the condition of the possibility of readable writing. By representing this cleft, Blake's tactics are structurally homologous to those adopted by Hölderlin in his bizarre, word-for-word "translations" of Sophocles. As Walter Benjamin points out, these necessarily unintelligible translations illustrate how literalist attention to the material constituents of the target text precipitates a sudden, "abysmal" loss of sense. All meaningful translation, that is, translation predicated on the communication of meaning (whether into another language or into pictures), opens itself up to the disfiguring power of this "monstrous" prospect, or to what Benjamin also calls "pure language" (*reine Sprache*), that which is *purely language*.[64]

Turning Readers into Spectators

> Written marks, to the extent that they are writing, are in some sense invisible – to be read, not seen.
>
> Cynthia Chase, *Decomposing Figures*

By literalizing figures that are "in" the language of a text but not in the realm of events to which that text refers, *Pity* throws into relief what conventional illustration suppresses or forgets in order to promote the conception that language is a serviceable transparency rather than a site of figural production, differential markings, and linguistic jointings. The notion that visualizations of texts consistently turn a blind eye to an irreducible element of the language that they claim to bring to sight returns us to the questions with which my remarks began: what is an illustration, and what must a text be if it can be represented by an illustration? The extent to which conventional illustration amounts to a form of literal defacement is perhaps summoned up most forcefully by imagining an edition of *Macbeth* that was visualized in its entirety along the lines suggested by *Pity*. Blake's design puts to us that this "other" Shakespeare Gallery, presumably as alien and unhomely to our eyes as to those of John Boydell's contemporaries, has been systematically elided in favour of illustrations that assimilate the Shakespearean text to the order of description. Perhaps the uncanniness and originality about *Pity* is a measure of how deeply inscribed the aesthetics

of pictorialism have otherwise been in our conception of texts; indeed, the fact that readers continue to speak unreflectively of *Macbeth*'s *images* suggests a residual desire to think of Shakespeare's figures as pictures even when attention is paid specifically to the rhetorical elements of the text's language. When we also consider that a literally illustrated Shakespeare would amount to a series of disconnected visual scenes quite at odds with the coherent progression of the play's story, it becomes apparent that conventional illustration supplements the institution of the text's meaningful continuity. Illustration ordinarily refigures reading as a kind of seeing, and gives literal expression to the desire to see the text as an uninterrupted reflection of a fully formed world that is equally open to verbal and visual representation. Illustration accords a massive privilege to narrative because it so readily naturalizes the fiction that what is reported in the text is a series of successive events that have "occurred," whether in actuality or in the theatre of the mind. In other words, illustration hypostatizes the narrated by giving it the status of an existent reality whose givenness is precisely what enables any single "moment" of it to be brought into sight. But *Pity*'s sudden and arbitrary intervention at the point of the text's "real Surface" puts the text at odds with its own story, and thus disrupts the assumption that language is simply the making present of a pre-existing real. Blake's literalist attention to both the text's personifications and its non-referential rhetorical structures reminds us that the unity of the text (conceived as a continuously unfolding verbal replication of a visualizable world) is in fact a hermeneutical construction, a readerly invention that is necessary to the text's intelligibility as the narrative description *of* "something," but only possible at the cost of effacing the local effects of its non-referential, figural language.

In an age whose dominant aesthetic fostered – with an insistence that now appears somewhat overanxious – the hallucination that poems were "speaking pictures" and pictures "mute poems," it was perhaps inevitable that Blake's contemporaries sublated the difference between seeing and reading and thus the displacement effects generated by the substitution of one term for the other. As Mitchell suggests, the popularity of projects like Boydell's "Shakespeare Gallery" was "symptomatic of the belief that painting would be enhanced by an alliance with literature and that, despite some technical problems, translation from one medium to the other was possible and even inevitable."[65] In the days before he came under the spell of Lessing's *Laokoön*, even an artist as close temperamentally to Blake as Henry Fuseli could proclaim how exquisitely fitted words were to visual representation: "The excellence of pictures or of language," he writes in 1788, "consists of raising clear, complete and circumstantial images and *turning readers into spectators*."[66] Blake's tactics in *Pity* compel us to read this standard defence of the sister arts for the difference, for although Fuseli begins by asserting the equivalence of "pictures" and "language," he concludes by tacitly acknowledging that verbal images will need to be changed – "turn[ed]" is the

word with some relevance here – from something that is *read* into something that is *seen* in order to secure that equivalence. Although the sister arts are equal, one is more equal than the other.

Pity addresses the hidden mechanism of this inequality, underwriting as it does the suspiciously easy effacement of language as language even amidst claims for the happy sisterhood of words and pictures. What needs emphasis from the start is that *Pity* does not then consist of a rejection of spectatorship. "Spectator" is the very word that Blake uses in *A Vision of the Last Judgment* (E560) to characterize the ideal viewers of his pictures, but, significantly, it is a term he associates with a process of active "entry" rather than passive reception. In the case of *Pity*, Blake's argument is not with the visualization of a text but much more specifically with the act of concealment by which the metaphorical basis of that visualization is hidden or disfigured. Readers *can* become spectators – *Pity* is the ocular proof – but "only" by means of the trope or rhetorical decree that translates the text into an image, the same trope that turns an invisible abstraction like "pity" into a new-born babe. The illustration of a figure from *Macbeth* unmasks both the figure of illustration and its disfiguring effects. For the pictured text engenders readers as spectators first by defacing the text and then by masking the rhetorical basis of its own engendering. When spectators fail to "enter" actively into conventional illustration, they cease reflecting upon the transfers and elisions that institute the text as description; readers thus turn into spectators, but blind themselves to their turning. Not to see this inescapable play of blindness and sight is to misapprehend illustration as the accurate and natural reproduction of the text: the viewer takes what is only a figure – the picture *of* the text – for its literal expression.

Of course, under the auspices of the sister arts tradition the conceit of illustration is that no such rhetorical subterfuge takes place. In this sense the relationship that pictures share with language is characterized by a duplicity and parasitism that Blake consistently identified with a particular kind of imaginative failure. Illustration affects a transparency to and dependency upon the text, claiming to repeat or clarify what the words have already made apparent. By bringing back into view that aspect of the text which is masked by conventional illustration, *Pity* suggests that matters are not nearly so genteel. Pictures are in fact ambivalently supplemental, both a self-effacing addition to the complete text and an invisible emendation of it, as if language suffered from a certain lack that its transport into pictures would remedy. Visual images hypocritically exercise a will-to-power over language, turning the text into something that it is not, *except metaphorically*. "Seeming a [sister], being a tyrant," to paraphrase *Milton* (7:22; E100), illustration demonstrates towards language precisely the disguised malice for which Blake had a single, bitterly ironic name: *pity*.

The pity that subtends the pictorialist conception of language can be expressed as outright rather than concealed contempt. Leonardo da Vinci, for

example, dismisses poetry as "blind painting,"[67] as a language of images, in other words, that cannot be considered as actual pictures and so is bereft of sight. For Leonardo blindness is a figure for the radical imagelessness of writing. Poetic language as language is properly unseen, in the same way that it is mute: words are viewless and unheard until their irresistible translation into pictures and voice. Now, the figural substitution of blindness for invisibility is not unfamiliar to Blake or Shakespeare, since Macbeth employs the same device when he compares pity to "Heav'n's cherubin horsed / Upon the *sightless* couriers of the air." Blake's illustration visualizes Shakespeare's metaphor for the invisible winds as horses whose eyes are blank, sightless. The couriers give the sightless winds a form and a face, but their blindness recalls the sheer aberrance and defacement of representing that which cannot be pointed to or seen. In these blank eyes *Pity* provides a paradoxical focal point for the hermeneutical problems that it raises. Invisibility is made visible as blindness, as though the bringing into sight brought a sightlessness. Are the blind horses then not an uncanny figure for illustration, whose function is to transport the invisible letter into visibility while itself remaining out of sight? The sightless couriers are clearly seen, yet do not themselves see, as if blind paintings of the double sightlessness that turns winds into horses and language into pictures: to begin with there is the blindness *to* the figure of illustration, the unreflected and therefore unseen linguistic moment that determines readers as spectators and words as images; and then there is the blindness *of* the trope (of illustration) as such, the radical invisibility of the very figure that brings language to sight. *The blank eyes, the literal, visible defacement of the horses is a figure for the invisible, figural defacement of illustration*. To put it another way: *Pity* makes us aware that illustration – including the illustration at hand – hides to the same extent that it reveals, and thus makes invisible the disfigurement for which it is itself responsible.

The Task of the Illustrator

> Just as a tangent touches lightly and at but one point, with this touch rather than with the point setting the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity, a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux.
>
> Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator"

Blake's *Pity* is important for seemingly contradictory reasons. On the one hand, perhaps no illustration of the period or painting considered in the context of the sister arts debate more vividly captures the complexities that attend the experience of being provoked by language, which is to say by language's

interminable disfiguration of itself. The artist's unique decomposition after his target text is among the most important sources of the image's singularity, for it is in the generative but irresolvable confusions of Shakespeare's rhetoric that Blake most clearly apprehended the motions of language that, in all rigour, are neither legible nor visualizable. On the other hand, Blake's painting pictures a process of disfiguration that reading and illustrating always and everywhere efface in order for them to be the forms of judgment that they are or at least claim authoritatively to be. As I have suggested, thinkers as diverse as Pater, Benjamin, Freud, and de Man join Blake in making the struggle with the language's opacity to itself a subject of concern. Yet it seems important to hang on to the painting's singularity, as I have tried to do in this essay, not only because the "minute particulars" of the artist's work demand such scrutiny but also as a way to pull against the temptation, which is ultimately irrefusable, to rescue language from its formal materiality by making *Pity* – or any illustration of a text, for that matter – into a kind of visual allegory of that materiality. Like Benjamin and Freud, Blake cannot find a figure for language and so can only make figures for "it," that is, for that unnamed singularity that ceaselessly provokes language and those who contemplate it with the eye of a philologist. So we find ourselves caught amid a marvellous aporia – between the experience of being exposed to the fact that language is irreducible to semantics and the fact that saying language "is" irreducible to semantics only re-semanticizes it anew.

In attempting to illuminate Blake's extraordinary print, we may then find ourselves approaching a point that the artist would call the "Limit of Opacity." The only qualification is that, in the case of *Pity*, opacity (or blindness) shares with vision (or transparency) another and finer relationship than contrast. Though *Pity* (re)marks the text's figures in order to articulate the difference between reading the text and seeing the play, we remain spectators of a kind while Blake's illustration consists of pictures of language rather than language itself. Bound by the pictorialist conception of language that it interrogates, wholly disfigured by the disfigurement it outlines, *Pity* nevertheless has as its Shakespearean pre-text the sightless linguistic relations of Macbeth's language, "material" (to use Freud's term) whose "nature" it is to be irreducible to pictures. The fact that the print can only make this material "appear" in displaced form in a picture harbours a more general pathos: to the extent that legibility itself necessarily demands a similarly fantastic displacement of a text's stubborn structures, *all* texts are similarly "illustrated" and pictorialized, their intelligibility resting with the possibility of their literal senselessness being assimilated, by a sustained act of figuration, to the phenomenal order of light and sense. Illustration might then be said to be a figure for the more general process of comprehension and effacement called *reading*.

But where conventional reading institutes the text's intelligibility by privileging its referential meaning, *Pity*'s disruptive negotiation with *Macbeth* augurs a

form of interpretation for which there is no obvious name. "Translation" might well suffice, though translation understood not as the stable carrying over of ideas from one language to another but as the radically revisionary engagement that Benjamin imagined to be the true "task of the translator": a brush with the target text at the point of its linguistic surface, a momentary point of contact and a veering away, like a tangent's intersection with a circle, to use his own illustrative metaphor.[68] In this obliqueness, in this scattering disregard for the "accurate" transmission of meaning, he suggests, lies the possibility of articulating "*reine Sprache*" (pure language), that which is purely language. The exorbitant relationship that *Pity* shares with *Macbeth* would seem to be an exemplary case of Benjamin's notion of "*Übersetzung*," which is to say "at the furthest remove from paraphrase."[69] What is evident is that Blake's literalism, which renders Shakespeare's play strangely opaque to its own narrative, has important hermeneutical consequences, since interpretation, like illustration, depends on the text's transparency to its referents, whether historical, psychological, or aesthetic. For de Man this almost inescapable dependency has always made literary history into the history of what literature is not:[70] that is, into a systematic avoidance of the "structures of language" that de Man identifies with the literarity of "literature." But *Pity*'s reproduction of *Macbeth* affirms Roland Barthes's claim that "the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced."[71] And if ranged over, then also *rearranged*, the rhetorical features of the text's "real Surface" subject to the same de(con)structive forces that the dream-thoughts must bear under pressure of the dream-work: as Freud writes, these thoughts "are turned about, broken into fragments and jammed together – almost like pack-ice."[72] Blake's design surprises us with the dis-closural possibility that the humanist, meliorist notion of the line of vision is open to such deformation and displacement quite literally at every rhetorical turn by a kind of dream *re*vision that traces and effaces the "infinite inflexions" (*Descriptive Catalogue*; E550) of language. From the point of view of Blake's design, the relationship between poets does not amount to the gathering of a visionary company but a splintering of sense along the figurative axis of language. Disseminative, proliferative, jagged: sudden in its violent disfigurements, and hallucinatory in its abusive translations, *Pity* is what literary history looks like from the perspective of pure language.

NOTES

This essay is a revised and shortened version of "How to Do Things with Shakespeare: Illustrative Theory and Practice in Blake's *Pity*," in *The Mind in Creation: Essays on English Romantic Literature in Honour of Ross G. Woodman* (1992), ed. J. Douglas Kneale, 107–33. I am grateful to McGill-Queen's University Press for permission to

reprint portions of that essay here. This essay was prepared with the able assistance of Danielle Martak.

1 Between them, Martin Butlin and Christopher Heppner confirm that none of the copies of *Pity* is inscribed with a title. See, respectively, "Blake's 'God Judging Adam' Rediscovered," 309; and "Reading Blake's Designs," 339.

2 William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, in *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, ed. Samuel Johnson (1765), 1.8.16–25.

3 For example, W. Moelwyn Merchant notes, not entirely correctly, that "the formal relation of *Pity* to the Shakespeare text is quite different [from that of *Hecate*] and indeed unique in Blake's work" ("Blake's Shakespeare," 322). Martin Butlin argues more expansively that "'Pity' … is one of the most inspired of all 'literal' illustrations of a text in the history of art" ("The Evolution of Blake's Large Color Prints," 109). I might add here that, despite these enthusiastic claims, little sustained work has been done on *Pity*, the notable exception being Heppner's persuasive and ground-breaking "Reading Blake's Designs." Heppner argues that Blake "constructs" out of Shakespeare's similes an "implicit or virtual second-level text in the form of a dramatized episode implying a supportive narrative" and that this "episode is presented visually in a manner that implies an interpretation and valuation both of the dramatized situation and of the original text" (353).

4 I borrow this phrase from a dense passage in *Jerusalem* (83:47; E 242) in which Blake unsettles the conventional metaphysical identification of interiorities with epochal truth and exteriorities with derivation and error. For Blake, the "Surface" world of changefulness is made "real" at the moment that the notion of a "deep" world of changeless truth has been declared false or Urizenic. *Pity*'s implicit valuation of the text's linguistic surface to the disadvantage of its referential depth seems analogous. See my "The Innocence of Becoming Restored."

5 Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 201.

6 "Proud, n. 8.": "Projecting, standing out; spec. slightly raised or projecting from a surface. Now frequently in to stand proud" (*OED*).

7 de Man, *Allegories of Reading*.

8 For a discussion of the relationship between pathos and the operations of language in the wake of de Man's work, see Neil Hertz, "Lurid Figures," 82–104; and Marc Redfield, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 95–124.

9 Werner Hamacher, *Minima Philologica*, 111.

10 Ibid., 123.

11 See section 6 ("The Dream-Work") of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in *The Standard Edition*, 4.277–338. For a clarifying discussion of Freud's dream-work and the "image of language," see Herschel Farbman, *The Other Night*, 23–34.

12 Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, 610.

13 Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, 7.

14 Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in *The Standard Edition*, 4.277. As Herschel Farbman brilliantly notes, "To free oneself from the spell of the hallucinatory show

is to see that the dream was always writing, but it's in the nature of the writing it always was to hide itself in the guise of a perceptual experience. We see the writing of our dreams not through this guise but in it. To see this undisguised would be to lose sight of it" (*The Other Night*, 28).

15 Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, 81–2.

16 Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 258. (I use the slightly modified translation provided by Farbman, *The Other Night*, 62.)

17 See W.J.T. Mitchell, *Blake's Composite Art*, 14.

18 John Boydell, preface to *Collection of Prints* (1793, 1968). Boydell's remarks are cited by Ronald Paulson in *Book and Painting*, 27. Paulson's chapter on "Shakespearean Painting" discusses the impact of Shakespeare on English art during the late eighteenth century. On the same issue see Winifred H. Friedman, *Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery*, and A.D. Nuttall, *A New Mimesis,* 66–71.

19 For a reproduction of the illumination of Psalm 44 see E.T. DeWald, *The Illustrations of the Utrecht Psalter* (1932), Plate 40. Several art historians have noted cases of literalism in medieval illuminations, though none, so far as I know, point to the revival of this technique in Blake. See Meyer Schapiro, *Words and Pictures*, 13–15; and Otto Pächt, *Book Illumination in the Middle Ages,* 167–70.

20 Walter Pater, *Appreciations*, in *The Works of Walter Pater* (1901), 5.20.

21 Freud argues that "the whole domain of verbal wit is put at the disposal of the dream-work." Chief among the modes of representation adopted by dreams is what he calls "verbal disguise," in which the dream-work exploits the literal sense of a phrase or word in order to express a figurative meaning; the dream, for example, represents a person of high standing literally standing high. "Neuroses … no less than dreams," Freud concludes, "make unashamed use of the advantages thus offered by words for purposes of condensation and disguise." See *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in *The Standard Edition*, 4.340–1. Walter Benjamin's theorizing about the nature and limits of translation raises similar issues, to which I want to return. For now let me note that for Benjamin the unintelligibility of Hölderlin's literalist translations of Sophocles discloses an important fact about language (Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 69–82). As Paul de Man describes it, this literalism demonstrates how "the letter can disrupt the ostensible stable meaning of a sentence and introduce in it a slippage by means of which that meaning disappears, evanesces, and by means of which all control over that meaning is lost" ("Conclusions," 41).

22 Pater discusses Giotto's frescoes at Padua in *Greek Studies*, in *The Works of Walter Pater* (1900–1), 7.99. Ruskin mentions the same figures in *Fors Clavigera* (*The Works of John Ruskin*, 27.130) and in *Giotto and His Works in Padua* (*Works*, 24.118). Giotto's work is cited in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, 1.164–7. J. Hillis Miller draws attention to the similarity between all three writers on the same subject in "Walter Pater: A Partial Portrait," 104–13.

23 Pater, *Greek Studies*, in *Works*, 7.99.

24 For a detailed discussion of other instances of Blake's literalist translation of target texts, including illustrations for Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Milton's *L'Allegro*, and Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 1*, see David L. Clark, "How To Do Things with Shakespeare," 110–13.
25 Cleanth Brooks, "The Naked Babe," 29.
26 de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*, 24.
27 As Grover Smith observes, "for almost three centuries scholars have taken turns confessing bafflement at the babe striding the blast." ("The Naked New-Born Babe in *Macbeth*," 24).
28 Shakespeare, *Bell's Edition of Shakespeare's Plays* (1774), 1.18. Another editor adds: "Of this soliloquy the meaning is not very clear; I have never found readers of Shakespeare agreeing about it."
29 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, in *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare* (1873), 2.72–3.
30 D.A. Traversi, *An Approach to Shakespeare*, 162, 164.
31 Brooks, "The Naked Babe," 22, 31.
32 David Simpson, *Irony and Authority*, 141.
33 Tilottama Rajan, *The Supplement of Reading*, 282.
34 The fact that Blake's design borrows from iconographic contexts that have nothing to do with *Macbeth* further complicates matters. The attitude of the cherub in the print's upper background, for example, is "taken almost literally from an engraving after Raphael's design of *God Appearing to Isaac*" (Blunt, *The Art of William Blake*, 36, Plate 32d). Similarly, the new-born babe cites *Macbeth* but refers in its posture to leaping figures associated with what Janet A. Warner calls "creative desire and the essential energies of nature" found elsewhere in Blake's pictorial work (*Blake and the Language of Art*, 127). That paintings allude to other paintings is, of course, a given in art history; what bears emphasizing here, however, is that despite the illustration's conspicuous focus on the letter of Shakespeare's text there is, strictly speaking, nothing literal about its literal expression. *Pity*'s allusiveness demonstrates in the pictorial field what is already strongly evident in the text from *Macbeth*: the reiteration of concepts in figures, like that of words in images, is also their reproduction, their point of exposure to significant displacement and self-difference. *Reading* Shakespeare's similes but *seeing* Raphael's images when he paints his heavenly cherubim, Blake underlines how illustration is never simply the repetition of language in pictures, but a complex construction suspended between two worlds, at once the representation of a verbal pretext *and* the site of various iconographic inscriptions that exceed and precede its illustrative function.
35 Freud, *Standard Edition*, 5.339; 4.312.
36 Ibid., 4.312; 5.339.
37 Ibid., 5.340.
38 Ibid., 4.312.
39 George Puttenham calls catachresis "the Figure of abuse" in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), 180.

40 Personification is characterized this way by de Man in "Lyrical Voice" and "Autobiography as De-facement."
41 See, for example, Anne K. Mellor, *Blake's Human Form Divine*, 162–3, and Martin Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*, "Text" 157.
42 For example, Martin Butlin argues that the design refers us to "the divisive effects of Pity and Procreation" (*Paintings and Drawings*, "Text" 169), whereas Morton Paley suggests that "*Pity* introduces another gleam of grace into the nightmare world of the colour prints" (*William Blake*, 38).
43 Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, 332. Twain is cited by W.J.T. Mitchell in *Iconology*, 40–2. Christopher Heppner notes that the print might just as easily have been labelled "*Heaven's Cherubin, The Sightless Couriers of the Air*, or *The Naked Babe*" ("Reading Blake's Designs," 339).
44 Paley, *William Blake*, 38; emphasis mine.
45 I borrow this phrase from de Man, who notes, in the context of a discussion of Wordsworth's *Essays upon Epitaphs*, that "the language of metaphor, of prosopopeia and of tropes" is "the solar language of cognition that makes the unknown accessible to the mind and to the senses" ("Autobiography as De-facement," 80).
46 For a discussion of the phenomenality of language see especially Jonathan Culler, "Reading Lyric," 105–6, and Rodolphe Gasché, "In-difference to Philosophy," 262–88.
47 Geoffrey Hartman, *Easy Pieces*, 142. Hartman's term "switching" no doubt echoes Freud's notion of "switch-words" or "nodal points," the "verbal bridges" whose capacity for multiple meanings can be construed as the very condition of dream-work and psychoanalysis. See Freud, *Standard Edition*, 5.340, 341.
48 See, of course, W.J.T. Mitchell's influential *Blake's Composite Art*.
49 Jean H. Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts*, 144, 149.
50 Hagstrum, "Blake and the Sister Arts Tradition," 85.
51 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Blake's Composite Art*, 23.
52 *Macbeth*, in *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare* (1873), 2.100.
53 "The grandest efforts of poetry are where the imagination is called forth, not to produce a distinct form," Coleridge says in a lecture on Shakespeare, "but a strong working of the mind … the result being what the poet wishes to impress, namely, the substitution of a sublime feeling of the unimaginable for a mere image." Cited in Steven Knapp, *Personification and the Sublime*, 7–10.
54 *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 4.248.
55 David Marshall, "Exchanging Visions," 546.
56 J. Hillis Miller, "Walter Pater," 111.
57 Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts*, 141–50.
58 Earl R. Wasserman, "Inherent Values," 450.
59 Wasserman, "Inherent Values," 452; emphasis mine. Wasserman cites Fordyce's *Dialogues Concerning Education* (1745), 366.
60 Paul Ricoeur, "The Metaphorical Process," 143.

61 Here I recall Alan Bass's remarks, after Derrida: "The difference between the *e* and the *a* of *différence/différance* can neither be seen nor heard. It is not a sensible that is, relating to the senses –difference. But, [Derrida] … goes on to explain, neither is this an intelligible difference, for the very names by which we conceive of objective intelligibility are already in complicity with sensibility." See Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 5n3.
62 Andrzej Warminski, "Missed Crossing," 986.
63 Cathy Caruth, "Past Recognition," 944–5.
64 See de Man, "Conclusions," 81–2. For a discussion of de Man's work on the threat that *reine Sprache* poses for reading, see my "Illegibility."
65 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Blake's Composite Art*, 18.
66 Henry Fuseli, "Progress of the Arts in England," *Analytical Review* (1788), emphasis mine; cited by David Bindman, *Blake as an Artist*, 106. Bindman also argues that Fuseli's intermittent interest in depicting "not only the salient episodes [of *Paradise Lost*], but striking similes may … have helped to increase the freedom with which Blake treated poetic passages," like the one illustrated in *Pity*.
67 Leonardo da Vinci, *Treatise on Painting*, 1.18. Leonardo's phrase is cited and discussed by both Wendy Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric*, 6, and W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology*, 116.
68 Benjamin, "Task of the Translator," 80.
69 So Deborah Esch describes Benjamin's conception of translation. See Esch, "A Defense of Rhetoric/The Triumph of Reading," 75.
70 de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 164.
71 Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 147.
72 Freud, *Standard Edition*, 4.312.