

INTRODUCTION: THE TECHNICAL ARGUMENT

This introductory chapter is intended to announce the scope of this project and to give an indication of the range of issues it will discuss. The principal elements of my argument concern the current debate surrounding William Blake's techniques of relief etching and engraving and their context in the survival of the important, yet neglected, archives of his original copper plates in major museums and art galleries.

One of the reasons for the neglect of Blake's copper plates is that nearly all modern scholars interested in Blake's printing techniques have focused on his relief etching while ignoring his engraving. This is due to a relative devaluation of the technique of engraving which is often regarded as an obsolete means of reproduction and which was replaced by other techniques during the nineteenth century. Paradoxically, modern Blake scholarship on engraving has reproduced the very arguments about its low aesthetic valuation which Blake's *Public Address* (1810) did so much to refute. With their concentration on etching rather than engraving, notable scholars such as Robert N. Essick, Michael Phillips and Joseph Viscomi may have worked with a contrary emphasis to much of what Blake had to say in the *Public Address*, his most elaborated discussion of the role of engraving amongst the fine arts.¹

Although there have been well-defined competing interpretative theories about the literary aspects of Blake's works (e.g. David Erdman *versus* Northrop Frye, historicism *versus* proto-structuralism), nothing has generated so much controversy as academic discussion about Blake's artistic processes. The chief aspects of the arguments have gathered around the production of the illuminated books, particularly those produced between 1789 and 1795, and Blake's use of relief etching and colour printing. Nowhere are these encounters between competing views of techniques made more apparent than in the catalogue and content of the Tate Britain Blake exhibition held in the year 2000, co-curated by Michael Phillips and Robin Hamlyn, and made accessible by its associated catalogue, *William Blake* (2000). Some of the more controversial suggestions included in the exhibition concerning Blake's methods of colour

printing were further elaborated in Phillips's book, *William Blake: The Creation of the Songs from Manuscript to Illuminated Printing* (2000). Publication of Phillips's book led to a riposte offered in an article by Essick and Viscomi published in *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*, 35:3 (Winter 2002), and in their elaborate online edition of the same essay, 'An Inquiry into William Blake's Method of Color Printing' (<http://www.blakequarterly.org>).² Perhaps something of the heat of the debate is characterized by the title of former Tate curator and Blake editor Martin Butlin's essay in the same journal, "'Is This a Private War or Can Anyone Join In?': A Plea for a Broader Look at Blake's Color-Printing Techniques'. With hardly any compromise or mediated conclusion being reached, the argument about process was further complicated by Butlin's support of Phillips's theory in his essay 'Word as Image in William Blake' published in *Romanticism and Millenarianism*.³ In the issue of *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly* containing Butlin's essay, there are also G. E. Bentley and Alexander Gourlay's reviews of Phillips's book as a part of the controversy. This ongoing debate demonstrates the importance of the issue about Blake's reproductive techniques and printing processes and the profile of the academic currency amongst some of the most distinguished Blake scholars in recent times. Not least, the public aspects of the Tate exhibition brought the controversy before tens of thousands of visitors, irrespective of whether they perused the accompanying catalogue.⁴

The core issue between Phillips on the one hand, and Essick and Viscomi on the other, is whether Blake used a 'one-pull' method or 'two-pull' process to print in colour his relief etched copper plates for the illuminated books. In other words, their debate is about printing rather than about etching or engraving although, as I will argue below, the techniques Blake used in producing his copper printing plates are the fundamental underlying basis for the production of all the prints produced from them, by whatever means, and by whatever printing method. In other words, not only has there been a tendency for engraving to become subsumed under the category of etching, both of these techniques have become less closely scrutinized than Blake's printing methods. The exhibition of Blake in the Tate Britain from November 2000 to February 2001 aroused much controversy for its central section, '*The Furnace of Lambeth's Vale: Blake's Studio and his World*', the part of the exhibition understood to be organized by the exhibition co-curator, Michael Phillips. As Essick and Viscomi write, 'in 2000, ... printing techniques rose to the forefront of attention among the small band of scholars interested in how Blake made his books as the material foundation for interpretations of what they mean'.⁵ Despite the words 'small band of scholars', these include the most influential and currently best-known leading authorities in the study of Blake's art. For example, one of the disputants is Martin Butlin, the scholar whose two volume *catalogue raisonné*, *The Paintings and Drawings of*

William Blake (1981) is the necessary handbook for all studies of Blake's art. As an art historian and (now retired) senior curator, Butlin is regarded as authoritative with his eye very much on artistic techniques and so his entry into the debate is a crucial indicator of the significance of the controversy. Phillips is similarly a well established bibliographic and historicist scholar of Blake works. Just as Bentley's *Blake Records* (1969), *Blake Records Supplement* (1988), *Blake Books* (1977) and *Blake Books Supplement* (1995) are essential for every Blake student, in much the same way, the meticulous historical and material studies of Essick and Viscomi have established highly regarded reputations in the same field, with their work being based on material evidence with wide-ranging and historically empirical scholarship. Moreover, with their exceptional experience in printmaking, Essick, Viscomi and Phillips combine their specialities in literary discussion with practical experimentation, producing a kind of reconstructive archaeology of Blake's printmaking techniques.

Phillips, in the exhibition and in his contribution to its catalogue, *William Blake* (2000), as well as in his book, *The Creation of the Songs* (2000), advocated a 'two-pull' theory without arguing or even mentioning the earlier 'one-pull' theory substantially presented by Essick (1980, 1989) and Viscomi (1993). As the latter two writers point out, 'the two-pull theory is described [by Phillips] in a straightforward manner that implies it is a generally accepted fact.⁶ Indeed, there was significant omission of the relevance of the arguments of Essick and Viscomi in the Blake exhibition at the Tate Britain. Visitors to the exhibition and purchasers of the catalogue were not made aware of the competing interpretation of technique put forward in Essick and Viscomi's work. The 'one-pull' theory represented by Essick and Viscomi assumes that Blake printed his illuminated books by passing the inked text and coloured image through the rolling press simultaneously, in one pass. Both Essick and Viscomi carried out their experiments of relief etching in an attempt at reconstructing Blake's printing methods, and argued against their precursor Ruthven Todd's theory (1948) that Blake used transfer techniques (Essick 1980, ch. 9; Viscomi 1993, ch. 1). Viscomi's *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (1993) received great attention from Blake scholars during the 1990s, and is still regarded as a seminal work on Blake's techniques. Indeed, there can be no doubting the contribution to Blake studies made by Essick and Viscomi. Their work is founded on a practical emphasis on empirical evidence drawn from reconstructive printmaking techniques allied to a profound knowledge of the range of Blake's works. However, neither the section 'Blake's Illuminated Printing', written by Phillips in the Tate Britain exhibition catalogue, nor his British Library monograph study, *The Creation of the Songs* (2000), refers to Essick's or Viscomi's theories. Not only does Phillips display a multistage process of relief etching on the copper plate,⁷ but he also posits a multistage method of colour printing achieved by passing the etched

copper plate through the press more than once to print text and image separately using an accurate process of registration.⁸ Again, the public status afforded by the Tate Britain exhibition, accompanied by the eminence in bibliographic study implied by the British Library imprint makes the exclusion of a considerable body of alternative research endeavour all the more significant. Not least, although it may prove to be only of tangential relevance to the discussion of printmaking, the Blake Tate Britain exhibition – and its catalogue – is bound to become a standard reference point for establishing matters of both provenance and economic value. It is safe to predict that, as this is one of their major *modus operandi* in estimating the market, the Tate catalogue will in future be frequently used by dealers, auctioneers and the public and private collectors whom they serve.

Again, it is important to stress the intensity of the scholarly debate the Tate Blake exhibition engendered and how hard fought were the attempts by all parties to establish the validity of empirical evidence based upon competing studies of Blake's extant artefacts. The evidence Phillips provides in *The Creation of the Songs* (2000) includes the pinholes he claimed existed on some copies of Blake's *Songs* for the purpose of registration during printing, and the printed word '1794' which shows up beneath colour printing under ultraviolet on *Songs of Experience* Copy T (Ottawa), as well as the mis-registered *Nurses Song* in *Songs of Experience* Copy E (Huntington). Studying pinholes, like counting angels on pinheads, may appear irretrievably recondite yet it alludes to a technique for establishing accurate registration for multi-pull printing. Even in today's technologies of computerized printing, accurate registration to ensure separate colours or images do not blur by being misaligned still remains a challenge. Pinholes through which string was pulled to exactly align multi-pull printings, preventing the paper in the press from moving relative to the printing surface, was quite conceivably a technique Blake used. Indeed, such a technique may be alluded to in William M. Ivins, Jr's manuscript comments in the Houghton Library, Harvard University, discussing William Savage's printing methods in *Practical Hints on Decorative Printing* (1822), one of the more notorious of the early nineteenth-century experimenters in colour printing.⁹ However, upon examination – and as was evident at the exhibition itself – the so-called 'pin-holes' proved to be merely inkblots and Phillips subsequently published a retraction of this component of his evidence base in *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*. Similarly, it needed Alexander Gourlay's review of the exhibition in the same journal to make it clear that (with the exception of a single Blake's original copper plate from *Illustrations of the Book of Job*), the copper plates on exhibit were made not by reconstructive etching techniques but by photogravure, a photographic facsimile technique used in this case by Michael Phillips and Christopher Bacon,

a printmaker known through his work for the Thomas Bewick Birthplace Trust established in 1982.

In *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly* 35:3 (2002), Essick and Viscomi illustrated new experiments arguing against Phillips and defending their earlier theories in the essay, 'An Inquiry into William Blake's Method of Color Printing.' Their experiments were to print from electrotypes using both one-pull and two-pull methods to show their differences, also using the aid of devices such as magnification and Adobe PhotoShop computer software to reveal colours in detail on Blake's prints. The motive behind these detailed experiments was to argue against every point of Phillips's theory and to insist that Blake's printing method is 'one-pull' and no other (except in the possible case of 'Nurses Song' in the *Songs of Experience* Copy E, Huntington). These scientific methods and empirical experiments present strong evidence to support Essick and Viscomi's earlier arguments.

Taking together Phillips's 'Correction' essay, Butlin's article supporting Phillips, Essick and Viscomi's co-authored response, and mixing these with Bentley's and Gourlay's reviews, one can say that no other publication marks the peak of the controversy about Blake's printing methods more than this single issue of *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*, 36:2 (Winter 2002). Of course there were also less partisan reviews of the Tate Britain Blake exhibition and its catalogue by Morton Paley (2002) and Jason Whittaker (2002), which followed in the wake of these controversies. In other words, at least eight of the most eminent contemporary Blake scholars were engaged in an increasingly heated debate, not about the interpretation of imagery or poetry but quite simply about technical process. Indeed, after 2002 the controversy arguably intensified still further with Martin Butlin's online response 'William Blake, S. W. Hayter and Color Printing' (2003), Essick and Viscomi's replies on the same website¹⁰ as well as Phillips's most recent essay on Blake's printing of the sole surviving *America: A Prophecy* (1793) plate fragment.

Curiously, despite the febrile academic controversies described above, a factor which has been absent is the close examination of Blake's original copper plates. The arguments of all the scholars referred to above rely on evidence based upon an examination of prints to the neglect of the thirty-eight engraved copper plates made by Blake which are still in existence, and in particular the twenty-two copper plates for *Illustrations of the Book of Job*. My PhD thesis, 'Technical and Material Studies of William Blake's Engraved *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1826)' (2005), which this book is based on, was the first to examine the material evidence of the extant copper printing plates. To those who have studied Joseph Viscomi's *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (1993) with its groundbreaking evidence that Blake's illuminated books were printed in editions and not *ad hoc*, customer by customer, the neglect of Blake's original plates may be sur-

prising. While their existence has sometimes been noted in passing, my study is the first to analyze them in detail and to present the evidence they afford. On the face of it, this may seem an odd absence in Blake studies which, as has been shown, is a research field demonstrably amongst the most vigorously contested in Romantic studies. Similarly, contemporary critical investment in studying Blake's prints made by relief-etching, the basis of the illuminated books of poetry, has been accomplished at the cost of neglecting his engraving, the technique which required greater professional skill and dexterity than etching. Not least, as Blake's extant printing plates are physically robust and represent the artist's last personal contact with the source of his images – very much an exemplar of a Romantic ideology of the artist – the neglect of the printing plates is all the more surprising.

It is only very recently that Blake scholars have begun to notice the importance of his extant engraved copper plates. Following some time after my first paper on this subject, 'A Reconsideration of the Execution and Conception: The Evidence of Blake's *Job* Copper Plates,' presented at the 'Friendly Enemies: Blake and the Enlightenment' conference at Essex University (August 2000), there has been increasing attention paid to Blake's copper plates. Publications in the public domain include Michael Phillips's 'The Printing of Blake's *Illustrations of the Book of Job*,' *Print Quarterly*, 12:2 (2005), and G. E. Bentley's 'Blake's Heavy Metal: The History, Weight, Uses, Cost, and Makers of His Copper Plates,' *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 76: 2 (Spring 2007).¹¹

At this point it may be helpful to summarize the extent of the known archive of Blake copper plates. There are thirty-nine known and traceable printing copper plates by Blake in existence, including thirty-two exclusively made by Blake and seven cooperative plates made by Blake and others. The thirty-two copper plates solely executed by Blake include a fragment of one etched plate, the *America* cancelled plate *a* (NGA Washington DC) and thirty-one engraved plates. These are the single plates of the *Chaucers Canterbury Pilgrims* (Yale University Art Gallery), *The Beggar's Opera* after Hogarth (Houghton, Harvard), seven plates for the Illustrations to Dante's *Divine Comedy* (NGA Washington DC) and the twenty-two *Illustrations of the Book of Job* plates (BMPD) (See Figure 1). In addition, there are six plates for Gough's *Sepulchral Monuments* (Bodley, Oxford) and the single plate *Christ Trampling on Satan* (Pierpont Morgan, New York), partially engraved by Blake. Among them, only the etched plate *America a* has received scholarly attention before 2000. Perhaps because of the critical and cultural capital invested within university English Literature departments, only the single surviving fragment of one of Blake's illuminated books of poetry – a few centimetres across – has been thoroughly analysed.

This plate, known as *America a* (which is actually only a fragment from Blake's original piece of copper), has been examined, measured in detail, electrotyped, reprinted and experimented on in different ways (including some attempts at

reconstructive printing) over a fifty-year period by W. E. Moss, Ruthven Todd, William Hayter, Robert Essick, Joseph Viscomi and Michael Phillips.¹² Despite all of these experiments, this piece of copper plate has not been investigated for its own sake as also suggesting a body of possible evidence about Blake's other techniques, but simply for furthering the project of the reconstructive recovery of his method of relief etching. For example, the deep gouge on the recto, and the engraving on its verso (possibly by Thomas Butts Jr) has not been properly explained or examined. In Chapter 2, I will show that these marks are those of the corrective technique of *repoussage*, a practice found in abundance on the *Job* copper plates (see Figure 2) Equally remarkably, none of the other thirty-one engraved plates by Blake has received the equivalent attention given to the single surviving etched plate fragment, with the possible exception of where, as with Blake's plate after Hogarth located at the Houghton, modern restrikes have been taken (and have now found their way onto the print dealer market). Moreover, apart from the recently resurfaced *Christ Trampling on Satan*,¹³ there is an even more ready scholarly dismissal of the possible significance of six further copper plates, among four hundred for Richard Gough's *Sepulchral Monuments* (1786), which are only conjecturally attributed to Blake. They have been left neglected in the storerooms of the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and for many years ignored by most Blake scholars.

Although there was a short revival of interest in the technique in the late nineteenth century, engraving has lost its golden age forever and has been abandoned by most modern printmakers. By contrast, the less exacting medium of etching has won many modern artists' favour and has been regarded as a free means of innovative creation. The rise of etching, and the comparable fall of interest in engraving, has influenced Blake studies in a subtle way, one not always made explicit to Blake students.

It has also been less well understood that the group of twentieth-century scholars interested in Blake's printmaking techniques themselves had a number of connections with modern artistic circles, either by directly cooperating with artists or practising printmaking themselves. Graham Robertson, who discusses Blake's colour printing methods in his edition of Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake* (1907), was an artist himself as well as being a principal benefactor of the Tate Gallery, London, where he bequeathed most of its important Blake collection, including the best known version of the iconic print, *Newton* (1795).¹⁴ Ruthven Todd, the mid-twentieth-century Blake scholar, who is arguably Essick and Viscomi's most direct precursor, had a close association with Surrealist artists in the 1930s and 40s. Todd's experiments on Blake's printing and relief etching were made in cooperation with William Hayter (1901–1988) and Joan Miró

(1893–1983), two eminent Surrealist artists. Essick, Viscomi and Phillips all have experience in practical printmaking and experimenting on Blake's making of relief etching and printing. The latter two refer directly to their experiences as artistic printmakers in their books, *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (1993) and *The Creation of the Songs* (2000). Of course, the artistic background of these scholars has substantially assisted their study of Blake's techniques, helping validate their carefully formulated – if contrary – interpretations. However, they have also been less obviously – but nevertheless profoundly – influenced by modern artistic judgements about comparative value within their professional fields as university tutors of English literature. The focus on Blake's relief etching to the neglect of his engraved copper plates is a significant consequence of an attachment to the processes which resulted in the illuminated books becoming works crucial to the position of Blake's poetry within the English literary canon.

Most of the scholars interested in Blake's techniques are also, even if to varying degrees, collectors of his original works. Graham Robertson, W. E. Moss, Ruthven Todd, Geoffrey Keynes, Robert Essick and Michael Phillips were or are all collectors of Blake's works. Even one of the least well-known collectors from this group, Ruthven Todd, owned a receipt signed by Blake to Thomas Butts, 9 September 1806,¹⁵ *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1826) Plates 20 and 21,¹⁶ and five of Blake's separate plates: *The Fall of Rosamond* (1783),¹⁷ *John Caspar Lavater* (1787),¹⁸ *Christ Trampling on Satan* (c. 1806–8),¹⁹ *The Man Sweeping the Interpreter's Parlour* (c. 1822)²⁰ and all four states of *Wilson Lowry* (1824–5).²¹ Although implying himself to be financially precarious in a wartime letter to Graham Robertson, Todd still managed to acquire this small but important Blake collection.²² Between them, Robertson, Moss, Keynes and Essick have also owned, sold-on or bequeathed a number of crucial Blake pictures, books and artefacts. Recently, Michael Phillips – not without controversy on account of their unproven authenticity – exhibited three items from his own collection in the Blake Tate exhibition (2000), which he claimed contain Blake's authenticated drawing or writing.²³ Considering that he entitled one of his most celebrated and striking illuminated books *Milton: A Poem* (1804–20), one of these items, an 1732 Richard Bentley edition of Milton's *Paradise Lost* alleged to be copiously annotated with marginalia by Blake, stands to be an undoubtedly significant find if authenticated. However, like the Phillips-owned so-called 'Sophocles notebook,' the attribution to Blake of the *Paradise Lost* annotations has been critically challenged, notwithstanding their exhibition at both Tate Britain and, subsequently, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.²⁴ Further evidence, perhaps in the form of refinements in the technological investigation of graphic authenticity, must be awaited before these disputes are resolved one way or the other but there can be no doubting that the dual roles of collector and critic

require some measure of caution when interpreting the subsequent hermeneutic of Blake's work which results.

The slightly parochial nature of the academic contestation – even if played out in the exhibition halls of the major international galleries – is a reminder that the interpretative high ground in the judgement of commercial and artistic value involves an untidy melee of public benefactors, private collectors, university academics and museum curators together with, not least, the exclusively recondite world of dealers and auction houses, a profession not unacquainted with criminal convictions in recent years (for example, in the case of Sotheby's chairman Alfred Taubman convicted of illegal price fixing, see *The Times*, 23 April 2002). The interest and demand for Blake's relief etchings raises their prices on the marketplace, therefore encouraging a hierarchical judgement of his art. Although there is an understandable reluctance to admit the hierarchical view of artistic technique, modern Blake scholars appear to always bear in mind that engraving as a reproductive technique is significantly less valuable than etching, which is seen as a better method of revealing an artist's creativity in printmaking. In other words, by processes of either commission or omission, modern Blake scholars have been complicit in under-privileging Blake's technique as an engraver.

In fact, the decline in esteem of engraving started in Blake's lifetime. The engravers' dilemma was whether to consider themselves commercial or high artists. Many scholars have discussed the exclusion of engravers from the Royal Academy of Arts.²⁵ As D. W. Dörrebecker (1994) points out, Robert Strange's *Inquiry into the Rise and Establishment of the Royal Academy of Arts* (1775) and John Landseer's *Lectures on the art of Engraving* (1807) represent the engraver's protests against this discrimination. The notion of originality grew stronger through the nineteenth century²⁶ and, by the twentieth century, innovation and originality became the core for the judgement of artistic value. Modern Blake studies reflect this evolution of the judgement of art. Certainly, Blake's *Job* engravings were already highly admired by his contemporaries, even during the lengthy process of their execution.²⁷ The nineteenth-century art critic John Ruskin regarded them as Blake's best work,²⁸ but the original copper plates have been under-examined in modern times. By contrast, because Blake's illuminated books are today held in higher critical esteem, research into processes of relief etching and printing from relief etched plates has been pursued with the most noticeable vigour. To complete the paradox, etching is a technique which (then as now) is less skilful than engraving, arguably less a measure of Blake's command of his craft technique.

The term 'original print', distinguished from reproductive engraving, is attributed in the late nineteenth century to works of printmakers such as Dürer to define the prints made from the engraver's own design.²⁹ Blake's *Job* falls into this category, and deserves the same attention as his relief etching. However,

the traditional technique of engraving to which it applies is somewhat devalued and so Blake's *Job* has come to be regarded by modern scholars, perhaps dismissively, as a 'middle ground'³⁰ between reproductive engraving and original relief etching. This hierarchical judgement of artistic value, although perfectly understandable once it has been historicized, has caused an unjustified neglect of Blake's engraved copper plates.



Among the extant copper plates of Blake, the twenty-two *Job* plates in the British Museum Prints and Drawings (hereafter BMPD) should be considered the most important material for investigation. This is not only because of the substantial number of the copper plates, but also because the *Job* plates are the most complete set that was made late in Blake's life, they have the added scholarly attraction of having been the subject of well-documented records kept by the Linnell family. While other completed plates might have involved other hands in engraving or restoration, the *Job* plates are the best evidence of Blake's technique untouched by others, thanks to John Linnell's retention of them prior to their safe ownership by the British Museum from 1918. Of the others, the Dante plates are unfinished; the six Gough plates were executed during Blake's apprenticeship cooperatively in Basire's workshop and so are probably not entirely his work; *Christ Trampling on Satan* was engraved by Thomas Butts Jr with the assistance of Blake; the Hogarth plate was repaired by later commercial printers.³¹ A later impression of this last plate, in *The Works of William Hogarth, from the Original Plates Restored by James Heath* was published in 1822 by Baldwin, Cradock and Joy. Essick suggests that James Heath probably executed some work on the fourth state (1822).³² The Hogarth plate was also 'thoroughly repaired by Ratcliff, of Birmingham.'³³ In other words, the current state of the Hogarth copper plate does not contain Blake's exclusive handiwork. The large plate of *Chaucers Canterbury Pilgrims* is perhaps the second most important copper plate worth taking into account as being representative of Blake's technique and skill, except that its solitary status cannot compare with the twenty-two *Job* plates. However, despite the importance of the *Job* designs recognized by Linnell, the *Job* copper plates themselves have been paid little attention after they were deposited in the BMPD, and it is surprisingly easy to document this scholarly neglect.

In all the past studies of Blake except the two recent essays by Phillips (2005) and Bentley (2007) mentioned earlier, the *Job* copper plates have only been mentioned by a few scholars in very brief accounts. Keynes mentions the existence of Blake's copper plates in a short article in his *Blake Studies* but adds no description or other examination.³⁴ Bentley noticed the two reused copper plates, Plates 14 and 16, in the *Job* series, and deduced that they were reused plates formerly used for *A Practical Treatise of Husbandry* (1759),³⁵ a work published when Blake

was only two years old. Bo Lindberg's *William Blake's Illustrations to the Book of Job* (1973), which is a combination of material, historical studies and iconographic interpretations, and usually thought to be the most exhaustive study on the subject, mentions and provides the British Museum location data for the plates but otherwise completely ignores them. However, Lindberg's chapter on the engraving technique is not based on an examination of the *Job* copper plates themselves although he was obviously aware of their existence. After Lindberg's book, *William Blake's Illustrations of the Book of Job*, edited by David Bindman (London: William Blake Trust, 1987), is the most recent and ambitious work intended to cover all the materials available for the study on Blake's *Job* engravings. However, it includes only a small section, written by Essick, on the copper plates which contains information (which can now be updated in the light of the evidence presented here) concerning 'chisel marks' on their backs, supposing that these marks were made during planishing, the process of hammering metal plates to make them flat and hard before engraving.³⁶ Lindberg's interpretations were made without the foundation of close material study and demonstrate the extent of the neglect of these copper plates. This amounts to the absence from scrutiny of the most basic material in these studies, namely the plates themselves, and it very largely accounts for the consequent tradition of misinterpretation.

The neglect of Blake's engraved copper plates has also resulted from the extensive elaboration of an expressly literary theory, the notion of the unification of invention or conception and execution, largely pursued by Essick and Viscomi. The theory, developed from the 'one-pull' theory of printing, is sought specifically to correspond to Blake's claims for divine inspiration in his creative processes. Essick and Viscomi imply that Blake realized his theory of unifying invention and execution as a result of his practice of printmaking. The key statements for our understanding of how their argument emerged come from Blake's own statements that 'Invention depends Altogether upon Execution or Organization' (*E* 637) in his annotations to Reynolds's *Discourses*, and his antipathy to 'the pretended Philosophy which teaches that Execution is the power of One & Invention of Another' (*E* 699). The unity of invention and execution, hand and mind working as one, implies a 'spontaneous' and 'immediate' process of creation.³⁷ This takes literally Blake's own description in a letter to Thomas Butts of writing a 'Poem from immediate Dictation twelve or sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time without Premeditation & even against [his] Will' (*E* 729). Essick and Viscomi found that the best example of Blake's unity of invention and execution is his direct use of the etching needle or brush to compose text and design on the copper plate without models. Essick claims:

Blake's unique method of relief etching provided a medium for his most radical experiments in the interweaving of graphic conception and execution within a seamless process of production. Rather than transferring a design prepared in a different medium to the copper, the relief etcher can compose directly on the plate.³⁸

Viscomi says, 'illuminated printing represents undivided labor, unified invention and execution, and unconventional production,'³⁹ and claims that Blake's 'working without models' in relief etching is 'a composing process that enabled Blake to put his thoughts down on copper immediately.'⁴⁰

Essick and Viscomi endeavour to prove that Blake designed and drew directly onto the copper plate without transferring from models. Directly designing on copper plate is like drawing and painting on canvas, thus unifying invention and execution.⁴¹ For Essick and Viscomi, it is in the same way that Blake's supposed one-pull procedure of printing unifies invention and execution by colouring and printing in one go without separating this stage of the process into mechanical divisions.

However, engraving does not fit into this method or the theory which is at the core of what Essick and Viscomi argue. The reason why engraving does not fit this theory is that engraving nearly always requires models and transfer techniques and, in any case, the 'push' and 'pull' process of moving the engraver's burin is quite contrary to the fluent sketching with the etching needle, or writing with a brush dipped in acid-proof liquid. In an even greater distinction between the production processes of the illuminated books, even though they used Blake's original design, the *Job* engravings were printed by another hand, the professional copper plate printers Lahee and Dixon. The division of invention and execution, as far as the printing of the *Job* plates is concerned, could hardly be greater. In other words, the paradigm of etching employed by Essick and Viscomi, while it may hold true for the illuminated books, cannot be followed in the engraved *Illustrations of the Book of Job*, a work printed by commercial copper plate printers.

As will be discussed in Chapter 3, a major part of this study, close examination on Blake's copper plates, especially on the *Job* plates, reveals for the first time that the technique of *repoussage* was extensively used by Blake on the versos of the copper plates to mend wrongly engraved lines. This is a very significant finding. As described in handbooks of printmaking, the technique of *repoussage* is used to correct serious mistakes occurring on line engraved copper plates by scraping and burnishing the lines and hammering up the area from the back of the plate to make it into an even surface for further re-engraving. Although mentioned by a few scholars, these hammer marks have never been taken seriously, or properly understood in their functions.

The hundreds of hammered marks left embedded on the versos of the *Job* plates as traces of the *repoussage* technique are one of the most significant dis-

coveries outlined in this book. The examination of Blake's copper plates plays a central role in this study to draw attention to this important but much-ignored material evidence. With the aid of simple measuring tools, one can observe that the hammer marks on the verso of the copper plate correspond exactly to the engraved lines and figures on the recto of the plate. They also match the changes made by Blake noticed by Robert Essick on early print proofs to the final state. These prove that the hammer marks are neither random nor made by anyone other than Blake himself. They are indeed the traces of the technique of *repoussage*, the materially indelible process of repeatedly correcting and modifying original conceptions.

As with most scholars of engraved prints, Essick's method is to compare different proof states and to trace their development, systematically, from the first working proof to the final state.⁴² In this way, he has observed many important changes in Blake's *Job* and other engravings. This methodology, which is used by most scholars of prints, directs us to the prints rather than the copper plates from which the prints were produced. However, the examination of copper plate and *repoussage* has revealed another important source for our understanding of Blake's techniques as a craftsman.

In addition, this book will show that *repoussage* is not only found on the versos of the *Job* copper plates, but also on most of Blake's other extant copper plates. Chapter 3 will discuss the discovery of *repoussage* on the copper plate of *Chaucers Canterbury Pilgrims*, *The Beggar's Opera* after Hogarth, the plates for the Illustrations to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and even the early Gough plates. These discoveries tell us that Blake made mistakes in engraving throughout his career, right from the period of his apprenticeship work on the Gough plates to the end of his life when he worked on the Dante plates. These not only include commercial plates, such as the Gough plates and the Hogarth plate, but also the plates made to his own designs, such as *Chaucers Canterbury Pilgrims*, *Job* and Dante.

Keynes mentions the technique of correction on copper plates by knocking the copper up from the back in his essay 'On Editing Blake',⁴³ but only in working from an assumption that Blake might have used it on *Jerusalem*, Plate 37. Viscomi recognizes the existence of the technique of *repoussage*,⁴⁴ but does not identify its actual use on Blake's extant copper plates. A photograph of *repoussage* on a copper plate is shown by Morris Eaves⁴⁵ to illustrate its function of mending lines and figures from the verso of the plate. The particular example is of a plate engraved by Blake's acquaintance William Sharp after John Opie's design, *Edward Long*, published in 1796. Around 1813, the Sharp plate was altered by Robert Graves (1798–1873) in order to delete the figure's hat and the shadows on the sitter's head and face and to change the inscriptions below the portrait, this job possibly being a commission from Edward Long's family. However,

although Eaves discusses Sharp's plate in the context of the engraving trade in the late eighteenth century in his monograph *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy: Art and Industry in the Age of Blake* (1992), he made no examination of hammer marks or copper plates on Blake's own work. It is clear that changing the images on copper plates requires the technique of *repoussage*. In Eaves's example, the technique is not for correction but for revision. Blake's designs of *Job* engraving, however, have no intention of revising the central images because they strongly resemble his early watercolours for *Job* made for Butts and Linnell. The *repoussage* on the versos of *Job* copper plates, therefore, bespeaks correction for detailed mistakes, as well as a hesitation in the skill and fluidity of his technique.

It reminds us of a very early commentary on Blake's *Job* engravings only two months after their publication, and the first and only printed reference in Blake's lifetime, in a weekly journal *The Star Chamber*, 4 (Wednesday 3 May 1826), possibly by the later prime minister Benjamin Disraeli (1804–81).⁴⁶ Remarkably, Disraeli not only wrongly – but revealingly – identifies the *Job* engravings as 'etching', he also comments on their perceived lack of 'skilful execution'.

Mr. William Blake, whose illustrations in outline of Young, Gray, and other poets have been long before the public, has completed his designs for the Book of Job. Some of the etchings are full of that remarkable wildness and singularity of conception, for which Blake is so well known. The embodying of the plagues inflicted on Job by the Almighty, the personification of a Night-mare, and the figures of the creation, are wonderful, although we do not think them equal either in point of originality or skilful execution to some of the earlier productions of this extraordinary artist.⁴⁷

This verdict corroborates Blake's earlier perception in *The Public Address* (1810) that:

To what is it that Gentlemen of the first Rank both in Genius & Fortune have subscribed their Names [-] To My Inventions. the Executive part they never disputed the Lavish praise I have received from all Quarters for Invention & Drawings has Generally been accompanied by this he can conceive but he cannot Execute. (*E* 582)

Modern scholars, in defence of Blake's art, tend to dismiss this kind of criticism. However, to place Blake in the context of his time and print culture, we need to reconsider Blake's artistic skills carefully.

In many ways, *repoussage* subverts the theory of unity of invention and execution which has been most influentially debated by Essick and Viscomi. The hundreds of hammer marks on most of Blake's extant copper plates display many mistakes and reworkings by Blake. The techniques of engraving are far from being the spontaneous and immediate processes that Essick and Viscomi associate with Blake's relief etching, neither are they from 'immediate Dictation', 'without Premeditation' as Blake claims about his writing (*E* 729). In other words, descriptions appropriate to explain relief etching cannot also be taken

to encompass the very different technique of engraving, as if the spontaneity of etching was also a characteristic of engraving. Rather, the *Job* plates are a long term labour involving careful processes of composition, modification, resizing, reorganization, and trial and error. On these plates, Blake certainly did not unify his invention and execution. If Blake did succeed in the unity of invention and execution in his writing and relief etching, he did not achieve the same ideal in engraving, either for commercial plates or for his own designs.



While tracing the background of the theory of the unification of invention and execution, I found a long history of argument in Blake studies, which reveals an unexpected source from the Surrealism movement of the 1930s and 40s. The 'one-pull' theory of Essick and Viscomi follows the experiments in 1947 by Ruthven Todd, who was inspired by Graham Robertson's experiments of 1906 and W. E. Moss's experiments around the same time. Against Frederick Tatham's account about Blake's process of printing in Rossetti's 'Supplementary' chapter to Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake*, Robertson held a 'two-pull' theory, thinking that Blake printed his Large Colour Prints (c. 1795–1805) in a multistage procedure. Todd held the opposite view, the 'one-pull' theory, echoing Tatham but (like Essick and Viscomi) mainly concerned with Blake's relief etching of the illuminated books rather than the Large Colour Prints. This 'one-pull' theory, in turn, influenced Essick and Viscomi, although the latter two are against Todd's transfer theory. What has not been considered thoroughly is that Todd in his experiments on Blake's printing of relief etching cooperated with two important Surrealist artists, William Stanley Hayter and Joan Miró. Blake scholars have never paid much attention to the close relationship between Todd and Surrealist artists of the 1930s and 40s, and its influence and association with Blake studies. The history and contexts of these competing early and mid-twentieth century theories about printmaking, which will be outlined in Chapter 1, adds an extra dimension of complexity to the current debate. This Chapter traces the inheritance of early to mid-twentieth-century ideas in order to understand the background of the argument about Blake's methods, which are a central concern in current Blake studies. It is not my attempt, however, to join in the argument about Blake's printing methods, but to highlight the missing element in the Blake controversy: the neglect of Blake's engraved copper plates, and to find out the reasons for such neglect.

The overlooked examination of copper plates does not only happen to Blake, but also in other general studies of prints. Studies of prints tend to examine proofs on paper rather than the media they are printed from. In Chapter 2, to establish the historical context of printing plates and to compare with Blake's plates, I start my examination on Blake's contemporary copper plates by other

engravers in major collections, which have obviously also been ignored for a long time. These collections include the Bodleian Library Oxford, British Museum, Houghton Library (Harvard), Huntington Library (CA USA), Lewis Walpole Library (Yale), Museum of Fine Arts Boston, National Gallery of Art Washington DC, Pierpont Morgan Library (New York), Tate Britain, and the Victoria & Albert Museum.

The aim of this book, therefore, is a reinforcement of material and historical studies. In the Blake conference during the Tate Exhibition of 2000, 'Blake, Nation and Empire', organized by David Worrall and Steve Clark on 8 and 9 December 2000, there were concerns expressed from the floor as to whether Blake studies had become too historical and should aim to go back to Frye's interpretative methodology. In a recent study, Sheila Spector in *'Glorious Incomprehensible': The development of Blake's Kabbalistic Language* (2001) says 'having re-introduced consciousness into the study of Blake, scholars have begun to explore nonmaterial aspects of the emotive and rhetorical approaches to Blake' (p. 27). In the 'Blake at 250' Conference at York in 2007, there was also a heated debate from the floor between historical and hermeneutic approaches to Blake studies. The emphasis on nonmaterial aspects seems to reject material studies and suggest that there is an emerging view that the material studies of Blake have been over-stressed. This book will demonstrate the continued potency of material studies, whose importance as a foundation for interpretation of Blake's works has for years been established by scholars, such as Geoffrey Keynes, David Erdman, G. E. Bentley, Jr., Robert Essick, Jon Mee and David Worrall. Close examination of firsthand material is essential before any interpretation can be made. At the very least, my book may serve as a record of an eyewitness, a potentially valuable contribution in a world where material artefacts, despite their physicality, do not escape destruction.

The relative impermanence of Blakean artefacts has been highlighted in Robert Rix's PhD thesis, *Bibles of Hell: William Blake and the Discourses of Radicalism*,⁴⁸ which discusses the apparent deterioration of a pencil sketch drawn by Blake on his copy of Francis Bacon's *Essays Moral, Economical, and Political* (1798). Blake's annotated copy of Bacon in the Cambridge University Library shows a drawing on p. 55, described by Keynes and by Erdman,⁴⁹ 'The devils arse [with chain of excrement ending in] A King' (*E 624*). However, Rix recently found that the original sketch has been erased at the top, where the words 'The devils arse' and the buttocks were originally evident.⁵⁰ It is recovered by Keynes's imitation in pen of Blake's annotations on another copy of the same book.⁵¹ The erasure of the image is not mentioned by Keynes or Erdman, but only later noticed by Bentley.⁵² Although this erasure has been a mystery, and no explanation is offered, Rix's observation tells us of the importance of an eyewit-

ness account, at the firsthand, artefacts rather than dependence on secondhand records.

With the same purpose, the exposition of copper plates in this book also serves as a record, or eyewitness, of important original materials by Blake's hand which have not hitherto been collated. Should there be any deterioration of the material in the future, this record may at least preserve information for future studies.

In art history, a recent scholarly tendency has similarly emphasized material studies and conservation. The exhibition of Blake's contemporary, watercolourist Thomas Girtin (1775–1802), at the Tate Britain from 4 July to 29 September 2002, showed concern for his working methods in the studio as well as from nature. In the exhibition and its catalogue, *Thomas Girtin: The Art of Watercolour*,⁵³ the study of materials and techniques, along with the display of unfinished works in progress, reveal artists' working practice, the foundation of their ideas and achievement being equally important to the study of their lives and historical contexts. In addition, the unavoidable degradation of artworks shows the importance and urgency of conservation and how this exhibition and its material studies serve as an eyewitness at the present time. In this respect, the very physical permanence of Blake's copper plates makes it even more extraordinary that they have been neglected.

As the study of Blake reaches this scientific level, conservation of Blake's works becomes essential. The need for the conservation of Blake's work exists not only because of the quick deterioration of paper and the pigments on his temperas and colour prints, but it also gives an opportunity for the scientific analysis of the materials, which helps us to understand how they achieve their effect as works. The analysis of Blake's media, for example, the binder and pigments Blake used for colour printing, becomes important for understanding of Blake's techniques, the effect he achieved and the reasons why his choice was so different from his contemporaries. For example, Michael Phillips cites the chemical studies of Robert Essick, Anne Maheux, Joyce Townsend and Sarah L. Vallance on Blake's media to explain how he made the mottled effect on colour prints.⁵⁴ Essick and Viscomi also pay much attention to Blake's printing media.⁵⁵ These studies further indicate the significance of materials and the continuing demand for investigation. However, the paradox continues: despite the very fragility of paint and paper, Blake's prints have received extensive consideration and examination. The extant copper plates, the most materially stable artefacts to have survived from Blake's lifetime, have been neglected.

Joyce Townsend and Piers Townshend, Tate conservation scientists, have undertaken the restoration on Blake's Large Colour Prints described in *William Blake the Painter at Work* (2003). Discussions with them have benefited my study very much concerning Blake's techniques. Although a very different

medium from engraving, the working method of the Large Colour Prints also shows some inconsistency, and breaks the ideal of unification of invention and execution, similar to the *Job* engravings. The printing of these works does not seem to be done totally in one-pull, nor with any evidence of two-pull with registration, but rather a middle-way method. Accordingly, more study of Blake's materials is urgently needed. Most likely Blake did not insist using only one method but chose whatever was convenient to him.

To summarize the plan of this book, starting with the current debate about Blake's printing techniques in this introductory chapter, I will discuss a number of materialist problems in Blake studies, focusing on previous lacunae and on my examination of Blake's engraved copper plates. Chapter 1 traces the early history of twentieth-century Blake studies, and discusses their association with Surrealism and automatic writing. Chapter 2 examines copper plates engraved by Blake's contemporaries, especially with regard to the technique of *repoussage*. Chapter 3 examines Blake's extant printing copper plates, especially the twenty-two *Job* copper plates with details of their size and marks, along with a comparison with their proof states to verify the changes and mistakes Blake made. Chapter 4 looks into the copper plate makers associated with Blake, who left their marks on the plates. Chapter 5 discusses Blake's *Virgil* woodblocks, an early *Virgil* re-engraver c. 1821–43 and the contradictory views of contemporaries towards his works.