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To See the Worlds of a Grain of Sand: Blake and Reception

BY SIBYLLE ERLE

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1 WILLIAM Blake’s influence on modern culture is undeniable.¹ Blake—in contrast, for example, to P. B. Shelley, Wordsworth, or Byron—has a huge presence in literature, art, and music. Striking parallels and historical evidence for connections between Blake and his modern audiences have been identified and discussed, determining why he matters. From the discussions of synergies in the intellectual and emotional climates of his time and our own arise two questions, which this special issue on Blake’s reception in Europe endeavors to address: One, what of Blake (person, poetry, and art) bridges the gulf of time, appears

1. At the beginning of *Blake and Modern Literature*, Edward Larrissy declares: “Blake is the Romantic writer who has exerted the most powerful influence on the twentieth century. Indeed, the more one looks into the matter, the more surprised one may be by the extent and pervasiveness of that influence” (1).

universal, or seems directly relevant? Two, what happens to Blake if works (texts and images) are separated and taken up by audiences that ostensibly have little in common, apart from a shared residual Christian position or other—esoteric or secular—values originating in Western culture? The latter, which is about ownership, leads to a further question: If there are too many idiosyncratic interpretations of Blake, does the real Blake get lost?

2 Scholarship on Blake’s reception has come a long way since Deborah Dorfman’s *Blake in the Nineteenth Century* (1969) and Robert Bertholf and Annette Levitt’s *William Blake and the Moderns* (1982). In his review of *Blake and the Moderns*, Paul Mann teases out the dynamics inherent in reception studies, while noting the difference between being inspired by a person, who becomes a symbol, and that person’s work, which is a product of a specific linguistic and historical context:

[In the essays in the book] Blake’s personal example serves as a sort of muse for other writers inclined toward similar activity. Blake’s influence is less as an actual writer of actual poems than as a good angel of the imagination perched on the shoulders of writers who do not, for the most part, take much more from him than that. If his work explores division and reintegration in complex and pertinent forms, his successors seem to have found these forms, these actual poetic operations, either irrelevant or secondary. (170)

Though *Blake and the Moderns* was a disappointment to Mann, he nevertheless projected the directions that studies into Blake’s reception would take: research into the graphic context of his poetry and explorations of genre and printing technologies. A truly productive encounter with Blake, in Mann’s opinion, could only take place if it moved beyond the literal sense of his poetry; works that respond to or engage with Blake’s creative processes and printing methods are of interest to a reception scholar. Moreover, the early bias toward text has developed into two different, though interwoven, histories in Blake’s reception. Colin Trodd’s *Visions of Blake: William Blake in the Art World, 1830–1930* (2012) remedied this bias by investigating the afterlife of Blake’s paintings in Victorian art and art criticism, outlining “how different models of Blake relate to key perceptions of modern art” (9). Another development regarding processes of reception is that discussions of methodology have become more pronounced. What tools are required to understand what is happening to Blake?

3 Contemporary media ecology permits easy access to and wide circulation of Blake. The editors of *Blake 2.0: William Blake in Twentieth-Century Art, Music and Culture* (2012) ask provocatively:

What happens if the Blakean afterlife is detached from writer-on-writer models of influence and residually patrilineal concepts of inheritance and transmission? ... The mapping of the terrain is immediately strikingly different when done via curatorial practice in exhibitions, the iconic fashioning of centenary biography, and the nuanced aestheticism of more specialist art scholarship. (3)

The embracing of decentralized and interactive modes of communication, courtesy of Web 2.0 media technology, resulted in a significant move away from Harold Bloom's model of influence, which revolves around a reader who cannot but misread a text when trying to understand its author's intentions.² Bloom's model draws on Freud's theory of the mind. For Bloom, any person who reads to then repeat (rightly or wrongly) in their own work what they have read and experienced has been influenced. He writes, "The later poet provides what his imagination tells him would complete the otherwise 'truncated' precursor poem and poet, a 'completion' that is as much misprision as a revisionary swerve is" (66). The intergenerational connection between poets, termed "*tessera*" by Bloom, consists of patterns in language and appropriations of theme that are also shaped by context (in a Lacanian sense); all are evidence for contact or, metaphorically speaking, collaboration. In the age of digital media, Bloom's model has been struggling to accommodate the many diverse and personal responses that do not originate in intensive readings of Blake; it also doesn't consider Blake's art, or the increase in settings of his lyrical poetry to music.

- 4 Critique of Bloom's model—the sense of belatedness or feeling of coming after one's predecessors—and dismissal of direct influence are also at the heart of Mike Goode's work, which understands the reception of Blake's illuminated books as an "enduring fragmentation, mutation, and atomistic circulation" and thus sees the ubiquity of Blake's words and images in popular culture as "evidence not of how they [the illuminated books] have been misread over time but of just how open their meaningful potential seems to have been historically to realizing different kinds of cultural relations and wants" ("The Joy of Looking" 6). Turning his back on the illuminated books as verbal-textual composites, Goode argues that words inhabit their media only temporarily, and therefore shifts emphasis to the qualities of Blake's texts as objects, to focus on a text's unrealized potential. These explanations about agency in objects are upgraded into an examination and model of the absolute openness of Blake, which, according to Goode, most scholarship does not address. In *Romantic Capabilities: Blake, Scott, Austen*,

2. Roger Whitson and Jason Whittaker's *William Blake and the Digital Humanities* (2013) approaches Blake's texts as media, focusing on their structure and potential to exist as virtual artifacts.

and *the New Messages of Old Media* (2020), he discusses "the viral spread of Blake proverbs" and "the media behavior of Blake proverbs' viral circulation" (36), while attacking "complacent historicism," which, as an approach to Blake, "ends up reifying historical difference" (26). He writes that the media behavior he has identified should send "the critic back to the archive searching for evidence of how the behavior might or could have existed as potential" (26). It is Goode's belief that "media behaviors can teach us new things ... because Blake ... knew or sensed some things about media that we are still trying to understand, or at least still learning how to say" (27). A lingering impression is that Goode thinks that Blake anticipated what is happening to him, or rather to his works. This stance appears to turn viral spread into a consequence of authorial design; it is, no doubt, useful to approach letters, diaries, and manuscripts with a sharp eye for effect, which Goode says bears testimony to the potential of the original Blake text, but it is equally important to explore the material condition or situatedness of the object when considering different qualities of effect and how they are being channeled.

- 5 Goode's approach, which elevates behavior over interpretation and disconnects from the idea of control attributed to the reader, who is an interpreter (in Bloom's sense), still resonates with the concept of "horizon" coined by the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. When pondering the relations between origin, reception, and the history of effect in *Truth and Method* (1960), Gadamer uses horizon to denote "a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision" (313), suggesting that any vantage point moves as a person adjusts. This history of effect, for Gadamer, culminates in a "hermeneutic situation," which refers to a self-consciousness or awareness of "being affected by history," set within the tension between origin and reception (312). Comparing continually forming and fusing horizons with the testing of our knowledge and prejudices, Gadamer notes the role of reflection in understanding, achieved by a "transposing" into the past: "Understanding tradition undoubtedly requires a historical horizon, then. But it is not the case that we acquire this horizon by transposing ourselves into a historical situation. Rather, we must always already have a horizon in order to be able to transpose ourselves. ... Into this other situation we must bring, precisely, ourselves" (315). Consequently, if we do not transpose ourselves, we will fail to understand fully. Interpretation is based on a model of communication that guarantees fluidity and generates endless readings, but that model—in contrast to Goode's new media model—depends on readers or viewers who are aware that they have unconscious biases and have accepted that there can never be a definitive meaning. As Gadamer writes, "Every historian and philologist must reckon with the fundamental non-definiteness of the horizon in which his understanding moves" (381).

- 6 Gadamer's concept of horizon was taken up by Hans Robert Jauss for the purpose of discussing the actualizing or concretizing of meaning during acts of interpretation; Jauss puts text and reader into a dialogue (in Gadamer's sense) and on an equal footing. Interestingly, Jauss developed his model during the first rise of mass media, when literary studies came under pressure in Germany to justify the humanities' organization of knowledge in an increasingly consumer-oriented society:

When, in view of the worldwide successes of linguistic structuralism and the most recent triumph of structured anthropology, a turning away from the paradigms of historical understanding first became apparent in the old human sciences, it became similarly apparent that the best chance for success for a new theory of literature would come not by transcending history but in utilizing the insight into historicity which is peculiar to art. Not the panacea of perfected taxonomies, closed systems of signs, and formalistic descriptive models but a historical investigation that did justice to the dynamic process of production and reception, of author, work, and public (*Aesthetic Experience* xxx-xxxi)

What Jauss attests for the situation in Germany in the 1960s and 1970s (in his preface to *Aesthetic Experience*) resonates with what is happening now, more than forty years on, and in discussions about the future of the humanities at higher-education institutions. The context for Goode's theory of reception and propositions for the historical study of Blake is the rise of social and digital media. Rejecting the role of an active reader makes sense if we consider the compelling ways in which new media behaviors alter horizons of expectation, as well as ways in which Blake can be encountered. There is, however, an Anglo-American favoritism in Goode's approach; Blake is being translated into other languages, and even if his modern audiences share a similar cultural heritage, its expressions in art or everyday communication do not map seamlessly from one culture onto another. In the international context of Blake's reception, the function of the reader in the process of understanding includes an interpreter as well as a translator of Blake, who may not necessarily produce a faithful translation, but rather offer a partial view that may reveal a certain bias, which can be regarded as a positive addition.

- 7 Reception can take us to the tensions and oddities in a literary work, and translation, in particular, can open up semantic and imaginative fields and add to already existing complex observations. Unusual responses to Blake's works deserve critical attention so that we can determine how interpretations that originate in different cultural, linguistic, and artistic contexts resonate with our own. Similarly, examinations of creative approaches to Blake hold the potential for the unexpected. It is tempting to succumb to the

allure of the democratizing tendencies and democratic participation of the digital age, as the promise of open access appears to fulfill what Blake aspired to and articulated in a letter to George Cumberland on 1 September 1800:

I have now better prospects than ever[.] The little I want will be easily supplied[;] he [Mr. Hayley] has given me a twelvemonths work already, & there is a great deal more in prospect[.] I call myself now Independent. I can be Poet Painter & Musician as the Inspiration comes. (Bentley, *Blake Records* 95)

In the early days of his stay in Felpham, Blake was happy in his cottage and felt that he had the prospect of a stable income. The self-positioning in the letter is an ideal scenario of a life that he thought would bring him creative fulfillment. This life appeared to be within reach; he would do what he was able to do. Ambition cannot exist outside culture, however, and the souring relationship with his patron William Hayley eventually overrode Blake's dreams and hopes and weighed heavily on him. Regarding reception, I want to suggest that it is equally true that culture gets absorbed and that predecessors disappear when they are absorbed. Blake wanted to be a musician, but all that survives is anecdotal evidence, recorded in J. T. Smith's *Nollekens and His Times* (1828), for his occasionally singing songs to "[self-]composed tunes" that were "singularly beautiful" at social gatherings (Bentley, *Blake Records* 606). Even if Blake failed because, by his own admission, "he was entirely unacquainted with the science of music" (606), the musicality of his poetry has inspired many musicians since. Speculating about latent potential being realized now (in Goode's sense), however, can also count as an act of colonization of the past, infusing it with retrospective and nostalgic sentiments. If the focus in reception studies is instead put on new productions, quoting and referencing Blake in new ways, we can examine how he gets reworked by artists, critics, and translators who read and transplant Blake while in dialogue with their local cultures. This stance proposes an openness of a different kind and extends to how Blake should be taught and studied in universities or schools. In a footnote, Goode talks about the "gap" in how Blake is studied (by scholars) and taught (to students): "When reading and teaching Blake's words, many of us continue to work primarily off standard typographic editions [rather than "facsimile editions of the illuminated books"], for reasons that we will readily concede are 'practical'" (*Romantic Capabilities* 70). Goode's bias toward text or preference for words in teaching contexts not only jars with the evidence of Blake's eventful afterlives in art and music, it underestimates and perhaps overlooks how productive "gaps" can be for any reader or viewer of Blake.

- 8 In “Romantic Expressive Theory and Blake’s Idea of the Audience” (1980), Morris Eaves imagines an ideal community of readers who continually move between authors and their works, thus building a relationship with the author that originates inside the work:

The ideal reader for ... Blake ... is someone with a fully developed mind and heart whose powers of intellect and passion are equal to those of the poet. The reader is not a passive receptacle or an impassive judge; the poem is not an instrument of stimulation or an object to be judged by a set of external standards. To judge a poem, the reader must enter into an intimate relationship with it. (793-94)

Eaves’s argument about ideal relationships focuses on the qualities of the text that invite readers in; a text needs to allow for personal responses. Readers, to paraphrase Eaves, should approach the act of interpretation as a relationship, which means that they will find that they might agree, or they can be left feeling provoked and are, therefore, likely to disagree. This idea relating to reading experience connects with Gadamer’s explanation of interpretation as hermeneutical conversation, the opening up of new meanings as readers transpose themselves: “In a conversation, when we have discovered the other person’s standpoint and horizon, his ideas become intelligible without our necessarily having to agree with him; so also when someone thinks historically, he comes to understand the meaning of what has been handed down without necessarily agreeing with it or seeing himself in it” (Gadamer 314). Since hermeneutical conversation is an ongoing process, readers would not completely be rejecting anything, as the exchange between author and reader via the text continues indefinitely. Ideal readers, consequently, are those who are willing to engage with what they find difficult in, as well as about, Blake. Applying this means that there cannot ever be—to state the obvious—a unified image of Blake. Furthermore, the positioning of any critical investigation or research is complicated by the critics, writers, translators, and artists who are continually adding to Blake.

- 9 In his own time, Blake had a small following that consisted mostly of his friends and patrons; curiously, he is believed to have anticipated his belated fame. I am referring to the oft-quoted “I labour upwards into futurity” (Keynes 262), taken to be representative of his determination and unwavering self-belief. This line, which is an inscription on one of the illuminated pages usually bundled into the Large or Small Books of Designs, appears to speak to Blake’s popular reception in the twenty-first century, but he may not have written it (E 890).³ Pages from these books were included in

3. The inscription is on the back of one of the impressions from the second copy of Small Book; it is not in Blake’s hand, but it might

the recent Blake show at Tate Britain (2019–20), but not discussed in a way that clarified their status as books or, indeed, consolidated the issue about the precarious authority of the inscriptions: “These were not ‘books’ in the sense even that the illuminated books were, but rather visual compendiums of plates detached from literary contexts, open to interpretation with the guidance only of our foreknowledge of Blake’s invented universe ... or, in some cases, suggestive new poetic inscriptions by the artist” (Myrone 63). This slip in the presentation of Blake is perhaps telling of what is projected onto him, as well as his posthumous fame. The notion of Blake’s reaching into his own future, at the core of Goode’s interest in the latent potential of literary texts, is part of a wider debate, one that explores his presence and relevance in the contexts of material production, counterculture, and exhibitions. It can be said that Blake, to quote from Saree Makdisi’s *Reading William Blake*, “saw the potential carried within modernity for creating a very different kind of world, more closely integrated and networked, and yet also fairer, motivated by principles of love and sharing rather than aggressive, acquisitive selfishness” (4).

- 10 When examining Blake’s creative experiments—culminating in the monoprints of 1795—in *William Blake’s Printed Paintings* (2021), Joseph Viscomi discusses the changing title of *God Judging Adam*⁴ to stress that “the inscribed and recorded titles represent a change of subject without a change of iconography” (11). Reviewing the interpretation history of this monoprint, he notes the “inevitable ‘turn’ to text” (121), while considering that Blake changed his mind during the creative process (about “a subject and scene still in flux,” 123), and concludes that “these titles did not change the meaning of the watercolor on which the monoprint is based, nor did they change the meaning of the monoprint as initially produced in 1795” (123-24). Viscomi’s evidence for Blake’s process, involving revision and reuse of images, is overwhelmingly convincing; his analyses are important because they challenge readings of text-image relationships in the 1795 monoprints, which are not unified wholes. There is, as he shows, much to suggest that Blake was not only an extraordinary innovator in printing technologies but also an evolving painter: “Modern readers appear to have a harder time severing themselves from Blake’s texts than Blake did” (207). Viscomi’s point about contemporary readers is pertinent, as it is a reminder of the interpretative traditions that—when determining Blake’s relevance—tend to install meaning by foregrounding specific perceptions of Blake, rather than drawing attention to

copy an original on the front that was lost when the impression was trimmed (see Butlin #261.10).

4. It was known as *Elijah in the Fiery Chariot* until 1965; Viscomi re-names it *Elijah/God Judging Adam*.

original design or artistic choices, just as in the Tate exhibition's presentation of the pages from the Books of Designs. Makdisi explains the consequences of such an approach: "If we read Blake through all those layers [of interpretation] we run the risk of losing much of what is most exciting and original about his work—we end up reading the layers, as it were, rather than gaining access to the work itself" (1). Blake's works are rare, but access to reproductions has become a lot easier through affordable illustrated editions of his poetic works, books on his art, and high-resolution images in the *Blake Archive*, which can be scrutinized online in conjunction with explanatory texts, interpretations, and documentation of historical, artistic, and material contexts.

- 11 Why is Blake so popular? In *William Blake vs. the World* (2021), which introduces Blake as a "misinterpreted ... symbol of English identity" on its dust jacket, John Higgs makes some bold claims. According to Higgs, Blake was open and progressive and had panoramic interests, intellectual seriousness as well as emotional depth:

One of the reasons why Blake's work proves to be so multifaceted is because of the way he accepts all sides. If you dig into his work looking for something in particular, you are very likely to find it. It doesn't matter whether your primary interest is political, spiritual, occult, sexual, social, historical or radical, when you explore Blake's mind you find that he has thought about what you are preoccupied by. (59)

This description, which is broad and verging on the sensationalist, can lead to a reductive approach to studying and teaching Blake's works. Higgs expects his readers to accept that Blake not only wrote about absolutely everything but also "had somehow transcended and escaped the perspective of a single person" (59). Moreover, Higgs claims to have found an explanation for the visions that Blake talked about:⁵ he suffered from the condition now known as hyperphantasia. While it is productive to investigate what Blake saw in his visual field, considering his visionary experiences in the context of sensory stimuli and perceptual phenomena, such as synesthesia, Higgs's book is generating a vocabulary that betrays a fascination with Blake's mental health and psychology. The claim that nothing gets rejected by Blake says something about our time and is telling of Higgs's own approach, informed by Eastern philosophy, but also harks back to my interpretation of Eaves's reading of Blake and his ideal audience: it requires that the reader give Blake the benefit of the doubt and continually strive for a

5. Blake's visions and presumed madness have found fertile grounds in European cultural traditions. "Gothic" Blake is the topic of a recent collection of essays, *William Blake's Gothic Imagination*, edited by Chris Bundock and Elizabeth Effinger, which is devoted to his Gothic preoccupations and reception in contemporary creative ventures.

compromise for the relationship to work. That Blake matters to everybody is misleading, and Higgs's claims, which give license to use Blake without intensive study, are problematic because they conflate popularity with reception; there is a lot in and about Blake that resists logical explanation and remains strange, though perhaps not so strange for his contemporary audiences. Making sense of Blake now, be it through extensive reading or use of S. Foster Damon's *Blake Dictionary*, is different from reception, where misunderstanding is considered productive and worthy of critical examination. In *Divine Images* (2021), Jason Whittaker reflects on reception processes:

Blake's very obscurity allowed him to be remade in the image of those who discovered him first. ... Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a pattern of vogues and fashions for Blake become apparent: for a while he would be the new discovery and thus become all the rage, but then, with time, reproductions of Blake's art or his poetry would oversaturate the market. People grew bored of him and so he fell out of fashion, only to be rediscovered by a later generation, so that interest in Blake has often been cyclical. (22, 23)

This is not to deny the importance of Higgs's book, but rather to explain that its success has to do with Blake's twenty-first century reception and not just with his undeniable popularity. Have books like Higgs's or Whittaker's, written for a wider audience, replaced Peter Ackroyd's *Blake* (1995) or G. E. Bentley, Jr.'s *The Stranger from Paradise* (2001) and remade Blake in different images?

- 12 There are now many approaches on offer, yet attitudes toward Blake's posthumous life and popularity continue to resonate strongly with Eaves's assessment of developments in Blake studies in "On Blakes We Want and Blakes We Don't" (1995).⁶ Even with the facts at our disposal, the historical contexts that have been mined, and the friendships and social connections that have been identified, Eaves remains wary of the pitfalls of easy connection with Blake:

In Blake, especially, I would think, the codes are simply too complex and cryptic—or too ambiguous and con-

6. In his discussion of the behavior of Blake's text, Goode talks about the phenomenon of "viral media," which he coins to describe the politics of the "intermedial capabilities of proverbs and pictures as forms themselves" (*Romantic Capabilities* 11). Viral Blake, as discussed earlier, applies to Blake's proverbs and pictures, which, according to Goode, "have a recent history of becoming unmoored from their multi-medium and circulating virally" (10). While the phrasing is timely, in line with the language used to describe the current pandemic, it is highly suggestive with regard to how Blake moves from his home country and travels abroad: he attacks texts unnoticed and infiltrates cultural contexts unseen, to change them from inside. This metaphor for reception is powerful, as it captures the intricacy of the process: we connect to Blake when we share Blake.

tradictory—to be cracked by straightforward reference to big public categories such as “evangelical,” “Christian,” “rationalist,” and “abolitionist,” not to mention big late-twentieth-century categories such as “sexist,” “racist,” and so on. We can agree that Blake uses the discourse of Christianity as one of his master discourses, but he is no Christian in the regular sense; he is not convenient to history. (438)

The notion that Blake cannot be contained despite increasing access, and this applies to understanding his person via biographies and his works via the *Blake Archive*, is worth revisiting. The danger, as Eaves suggests, is that the desire for comprehension (in a Urizenic kind of way, I think) can become a compulsion that prompts us to select from Blake what fits, so that he can be understood.

Blake and Continental Europe

- 13 Reception is afterlife, and any investigation of afterlife should not be “limited to the native land,” as Elinor Shaffer emphasizes in the preface to *The Reception of William Blake in Europe* (2019), which I coedited with Morton D. Paley. Writing about the need for “systematic or large-scale” surveys and reception histories of British authors in Europe, Shaffer explains:

The history of the reception of British authors extends our knowledge of their capacity to stimulate and to call forth new responses, not only in their own disciplines but in wider fields and to diverse publics in a variety of historical circumstances. Often these responses provide quite unexpected and enriching insights into our own history, politics and culture. Individual works take on new dimensions and facets. They may also be subject to enlightening critiques. (xii)

One of the outcomes of the Blake reception project, published as volume 25 in Shaffer’s Reception of British and Irish Authors in Europe series, was the ongoing consideration of Blake’s visionary Christianity alongside the mystical or spiritual aspects of his works, which, in many cases, were linked to local traditions in the receiving cultures. We could see that these traditions gave shape—as social or cultural forces—to the understanding of Blake’s works abroad.

- 14 *Reception* consists of survey chapters that trace Blake’s impact on European cultures, charting processes of reception and identifying translations, anthologies, dictionaries, publishers, and criticism. The chapters are chronological in their approach; they capture different and often uneven strands in Blake’s reception while recognizing the importance of exhibition culture and biographies. The timeline (1: xxxviii-lxv) lists first mentions, first publications, first encounters. The goal of *Reception* was to map how Blake ar-

rived in different countries and to explain how he was transplanted into new contexts and what appealed to writers and artists with international reputations. The richness lies in the separate but also interlaced stories of discovery and rediscovery in the receiving countries. Each of Blake’s works undertook its own journey, and all works are unique, even engravings if they were colored by hand. About the newly discovered engravings in Russia,⁷ we wrote with some satisfaction: “These discoveries mean that Russia—not Germany or Austria—was the earliest destination of Blake originals on the Continent” (1: 21). I am returning to this example from our introduction as I want to reflect on the traveling metaphor. Blake has “traveled” through exhibitions, edited collections, and translations, with and without images as well as with and without graphic context. In the determination of which sources were available or made available by whom, mediation emerged as a major factor in the histories of Blake’s reception. There was also a sense of directness in this process, as our contributors read Blake in English and often translated passages that carried a response to Blake back into English for the first time. Goode, who prefers a disembodied Blake, discards the materiality of Blake’s works and its “formidable champion” Joseph Viscomi (*Romantic Capabilities* 67) and insists on the “incoherence” of Blake’s reception. He also objects to the organization of the contributions “by national group” (70). Reception processes are organized through language, however, and it is important to acknowledge that each language has its own history and literature. Any translator not only makes choices but also employs strategies that can guarantee a successful rendering of the words and syntax of a source into a new linguistic context. Explanations about these choices and strategies are often articulated in translators’ prefaces; they also inform the scope of the paratextual apparatus, which needs to introduce Blake’s life in the context of British history so that he can be understood by readers who are not familiar with the factors and parameters of his situation. The ongoing reception in Continental Europe, as mapped in our book, is a development that raises questions not just about Blake’s ability to inspire or the capacity of his texts to infect (in Goode’s sense), but also about the language used to describe reception processes, the strategies of mediators and especially translators, and the attitudes in receiving cultures, who may be ignoring Blake’s Englishness.

- 15 Two of the reviews of *Reception* observe and agree about the extraordinary scenarios of Blake’s arrival in Europe: he was “divested of them [history and contexts] as he arrived”

7. Six impressions of engravings after Meheux, Stothard, and Cosway, some hand colored, arrived in Russia in the late 1820s; they are now in the collection of the Hermitage (see Tiutvinova 540-42).

(Ferber 331) and “Blake is a foreigner wherever he goes, which means that he is equally at home everywhere” (Öwre 159). These comments return us to the question about Blake’s popularity. While it may be problematic that he is “divested” of the context of his life as well as his British and American reception, it is also acknowledged in the reviews that Blake (or rather Blake text, in Goode’s sense, to emphasize that it is a quality in and of his works that allows for this) engages new audiences quickly and easily. I think that the language used to describe processes of reception blurs the boundaries between person and work, life and afterlife. The reminder of Blake’s “foreignness” is similarly productive. The phrasing speaks of a defamiliarization that can enhance the spectrum of interpretations of Blake. It also resonates strongly with what Eaves argues in “On Blakes We Want and Blakes We Don’t” about continuing appeal:

Blake was then and continues even now to be the sign of something new about to happen, partly because of his brand of obscurity, situated right between portentous sense and arrant nonsense, and partly because of the importance that posterity has granted to his difficult illuminated books, whose multimedia character makes them even more difficult to read, to see, and to exhaust by reading or looking. A persistent problem in creating a taste for this work has been how to motivate readers to climb walls of such difficulty. (414)

Some, although not many, of Blake’s works survive in archives in Continental Europe, and most, perhaps all, have been recorded by Bentley, who has left an indelible mark on Blake studies. As in Britain, they tended to disappear into private collections; it was primarily through personal connections that knowledge of Blake was transmitted. More recently, the success of exhibitions on the Continent bears testimony to how physical objects can engage new audiences, as shown in *Reception*. When envisioning future directions and approaches to Blake, Karen Mulhallen talks about “archival urges that ... constitute ... the most promising wave of present and future Blake studies” (“The William Blake Project” 779). Mulhallen not only places the “ideal community of scholars” firmly inside the archive, but suggests that this community comprises several generations of Bentley “students.” In celebration of Bentley’s achievements, she writes: “Bentley’s life’s work has constantly demonstrated the value of studying the work of art in as much detail as one studies the artist’s writings, in order to gain a holistic and deeper understanding and appreciation of his work” (“Blake in Our Time” 5, 9). This special issue is committed to archival work and research that uncover traces of the connections between Blake and his European audiences. Each of the contributors presents a case study and reflects on popular and academic attitudes to reception processes.

Blake, Reception Studies, and World Literature

- 16 Literary works are part of literary traditions; their content is shaped by literary conventions and communicated with codes that readers must decipher in order to appreciate them. This perspective on “text” is usually refracted through intertextuality, which captures the impact of the circulation of ideas and formulae, especially language, among texts, and hence speaks about exchanges between texts. This dialogue, created through borrowings and consisting of allusions and quotations, presents readers with a layering of meaning. In *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (first published in French, 1982), Gérard Genette proposes a theory and practice that allows for a conceptualization of “text” and requires readers to remember earlier works so as to understand, for example, the style and purpose of parody. In reception studies, then, emphasis is on processes of reception and creation of new meanings in new contexts.
- 17 Jauss’s theory of audience reception, which revolves around how audiences experience and recognize genre in their encounters with literary works, was first articulated in “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory” (first published in German, 1967). In this groundbreaking article he takes on Marxist and formalist approaches to literature to address its “reception and impact” and establish the role of actual flesh-and-blood readers in “the circular aesthetic system of production and of representation” (7). This stance, which articulates the concept of influence, pertains to intellectual history and, in the present context, Marxist readings of Blake, such as the politics of the 1790s and calls for collective action. It offers the opportunity to return to creative responses to literary texts and acts of self-realization in Blake. Engaging with Genette’s ideas and using Gadamer’s concept of “horizon,” Jauss defines reading as an activity that is shaped by what readers have encountered in the past; this influence, he says, is the “horizon of expectation.” In reception studies, he argues, the intervention of readers is the most important activity in the production of literature:

In the triangle of author, work and reading public the latter is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but even history-making energy. The historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its audience. For it is only through the process of its communication that the work reaches the changing horizon of experience in a continuity in which the continual change occurs from simple reception to critical understanding, from passive to active reception, from recognized aesthetic norms to a new production which surpasses them. (8)

For Jauss, aesthetic enjoyment and historical understanding are on the same par. He explains that an intervention

is determined by “the historical context in which a literary work appears” to emphasize that it “is not a factual, independent series of events which exists apart from the reader.” He qualifies this by saying that reading is a “literary event” that can only “continue to have an effect . . . if future generations still respond to it or rediscover it” (11). Reception can happen later, as well as outside the original context; the impact of literature exists when readers are able to recognize a text’s significance for the oeuvre of an author and in relation to everything else that they have read. He writes, “The organization of literature according to events is primarily integrated in the artistic standards of contemporary and succeeding readers, critics, and authors” (11). The factors that remain constant are genre and reading competencies: awareness and knowledge of “textual strategies, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics or implicit allusions.” Readers must navigate between what they know and what they encounter, while modulating their “horizon of expectations” (12). Furthermore, Jauss’s description of the reading process can accommodate Wolfgang Iser’s concept of “the gaps left by the text itself” (285), inviting readers to engage. Iser, who focuses on textual qualities and on what allows the reader to participate in the meaning-making process, argues:

The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader. . . . Even in the simplest story there is bound to be some kind of blockage, if only for the fact that no tale can ever be told in its entirety. Indeed, it is only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain its dynamism. . . . These gaps have a different effect on the process of anticipation and retrospection, and thus on the “gestalt” of the virtual dimension, for they may be filled in different ways. For this reason, one text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities; as he reads, he will make his own decision as to how the gap is to be filled. (279, 284, 285)

These quotations from Jauss and Iser were chosen to make a simple point. Jauss challenges the notion of an objective historical truth that emanates from the facts of certain events, arguing that there is always a bias that is introduced by the person assessing and essentially interpreting the consequences of those events. Whereas Jauss dedicates much of his thinking to historical context and explanations about how authors would develop if they engaged with the feedback they received from readers, Iser concentrates on the processes, issues, and events that condition the writing situation of the author, then turns to the situation of

the reader, who is responsible for actualizing meaning in respective local contexts. In our work on *Reception*, which took seven years to complete, it stood out to us that there were several Nobel Prize winners who engaged with Blake. While this is a comment on status rather than achievement, it seems that Blake’s visibility to different national communities has increased through comparative studies. In defining world literature, David Damrosch offers three categories that are helpful for understanding Blake’s role abroad: “Literature in general, and world literature in particular, has often been seen in one or more of three ways: as an established body of *classics*, as an evolving canon of *masterpieces*, or as multiple *windows on the world*,” emphasizing that “world literature is multitemporal as much as it is multicultural” (“What Is World Literature?” 9, 10).

18 Regarding reception and the academic appeal and popular reach of the concept of world literature, Damrosch highlights the difference between authorial intention—to attract a huge number of readers both at home and abroad—and global markets, which allow diverse readerships to consume works in original languages as well as in translation. With the latter comes the assumption that works in translation need to be accessible to be appreciated, an expectation that is managed by the translator and is catered for through footnotes and appendices. For a reception scholar, the fascination of Blake in translation is that his poetry, too, can exist in versions (complementing Blake’s versions of his illuminated books) and in bilingual editions, which allow readers to move between originals and translation. Particular choices made by translators introduce nuances that reflect back onto the original; a translation may be faithful to the source text, in the sense of a word-by-word rendition, but could equally be an equivalent. It is fairly straightforward to evoke the poetic elements (form, sound, and rhythm) of Blake’s lyrical poetry in most European languages, but the prophecies tend to be done in prose. Another factor is the selection, by editors of anthologies of English literature, of particular works or passages from Blake’s poetry (which can be mediated through explanatory notes). Because of his existences in different cultures as well as in versions of the illuminated books, Blake can be seen to take on new life in his host culture. Reception, therefore, is about how Blake is presented by an artist, critic, or translator, and how he is framed by explanatory texts and information and in relation to new cultural contexts. The manner in which he is introduced and perceived is important, because rather than being acculturated, Blake appears to be transculturated. To quote Damrosch again: “If we do want to see the work of world literature as a window on different parts of the world, we must take into account the way its images have been multiply refracted in the process of transculturation” (“What is World Literature?” 13). I wish to stress that Damrosch’s position is artic-

ulated in response to the suspicion intrinsic to any cultural exchange; driven by the economic or imperialist agendas of the dominant culture, works of art are being “manipulated” or even “deformed” to suit new audiences, resulting in the loss of essence or soul. Blake’s increasing visibility and popular reach, in other words, are potentially damaging to whatever we might perceive as the real Blake. Damrosch counters this phenomenon by emphasizing that every single item is “the locus of a negotiation between two different cultures” (14). This mode of cultural negotiation takes us back to the question of how many Blakes we want, because tolerance is required for this dialogue to work, so that many Blakes, popular and academic, can coexist.

19 Blake is known well beyond the borders of his homeland, but I don’t want to make a case for his place in the canon of world literature, though thinking of him as global has certain advantages for conceptualizing Blake. Globalization here means the circulation of literature on a large scale: a text travels, or rather circulates worldwide, beyond the borders of its national culture. The word “circulation” connotes movement, in the sense of travel, but also evokes a more temporally limited absence as well as a taking roots abroad, creating a scenario where Blake is received—that is, where foreign writers, translators, academics, and artists reach out and “take” him so that they can use him and his works, appropriate him for their own creative practices. In Damrosch’s words, “Virtually all literary works are born within what we would now call a national literature. The modern nation is, of course, a relatively recent development, but even older works were produced in local or ethnic configurations that have been subsumed into the national traditions within which they are now preserved and transmitted” (“National Contexts” 513). Integrating Blake into another cultural context or artistic practice can be viewed as an act of protest, because his reputation and national identity, even if the latter gets ignored, make him a conscious choice to start with.⁸

20 “Taking” Blake comes with a careful weighing up of the national world or context that he is a part of, and to take Blake most certainly speaks to Anglophile attitudes in the receiving culture. He is chosen precisely because he is English, which means that reception is an alliance with something that is other. It is not Blake who chose to travel. Foreign critics, artists and writers, translators and musicians bor-

8. Blake’s contribution to counterculture and his “status as an agent of ‘forwardness’ in the visual and performing arts” are discussed in Colin Trodd and Jason Whittaker’s special issue of *Visual Culture in Britain*, “William Blake: The Man from the Future?”: “Blake has been imagined as a friend of the future, a revolutionary, whose art—or ideas about art—outran his own period and predicted later developments in visual culture” (285).

row and interweave themes and ideas that can be found in or traced back to Blake; they adapt them to integrate them into their own contexts and traditions. These processes of reception underline what Damrosch calls the “creative [and critical] agency” of those engaging with, rather than just passively receiving, Blake:

It is equally possible to put the emphasis on the creative agency of the local writer, who may draw on the wider literary world less for its own sake than in order to open up new possibilities within the local tradition—the sail coming in. This involves a different dynamic than the supplanting of local genres by imported ones; instead, the writer draws freely and quite selectively on foreign elements that can be reformulated and repurposed within a vital and ongoing home tradition. (“Alternative Discourse” 308)

Blake does not float free of context, even if some of his proverbs or images from the illuminated books do. The contributors to this special issue have found evidence of academic and creative engagement with Blake abroad. In other words, Blake does not exist inside the boundaries of his homeland alone, nor has he been confined inside the walls of British institutions since the early nineteenth century.

Contents of This Special Issue

21 Blake’s European reception started in the nineteenth century, consolidated around 1900, and gained momentum after the end of the Cold War in 1989. Despite ongoing research, there are few explorations of his reception outside his home country and Anglo-American scholarship; in-depth case studies of his influence on European cultures are rare.

22 A main route into Blake has been and remains the study of historical context. In this special issue, familiar contexts are replaced with new contexts that merit our full attention, as they present the precise situation for Blake and his receiving cultures. The issue continues to build the histories of his international reputation and inform on the significance of Blake for other cultures. Following on from *Reception*, it offers case studies on Blake in Europe, charting lines of influence through books owned, annotated, and translated, and discussing how artistic, literary, and musical responses to Blake’s work can be traced to some of the most exciting art in Europe. Each contributor details reception processes, ranging from acknowledging shared ideas, formal descriptors of language, and poetic elements to technical or mythographic challenges involved in producing the composite nature of Blake’s works; each step for the artist or writer is filled with personal significance and each artist’s or writer’s response is articulated in dialogue with Blake. The contributions showcase intricate knowledge and under-

standing of Blake (person and/or works) and present different ways of relating Blake to his audiences.

23 The issue is in two parts. Part 1 starts with Cătălin Ghiță's account of the Romanian radio play *Biblia neagră a lui William Blake* (*William Blake's Black Bible*, 2016), written and directed by Ilinca Stihi. In his discussion of the "convoluted yet exciting spiritual recasting of Blake's complex and often baffling mythological universe," Ghiță gives a voice to the artist and identifies different musical forms and "allusion[s] and cross-reference[s]" to Blake, explaining the significance of Stihi's coming to terms with a national disaster in dialogue with Blake, whom she regards as "a rock star." Ghiță's analysis shows the potential of Blake when he is taken outside English culture; it also gives substance to the idea that Blake scholars can understand their own cultures better through Blake. A similar point is made by Eliza Borkowska, whose article focuses on Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004), the Polish-American poet, writer, and Nobel Prize winner, and his *Ziemia Ulro* (1977), translated into English as *The Land of Ulro* (1984). She quotes Miłosz, who lived in exile and taught at Berkeley, to exemplify the catalytic role that Blake can play—"I inhabited the Land of Ulro long before Blake taught me its proper name"—and explains that Miłosz "does not mean capitalist America, or capitalist France, or, for that matter, communist Poland, but modern civilization." Borkowska demonstrates that "it is from Blake that Miłosz derives the metaphors and concepts, including the titular 'Ulro,' that organize his autobiographical book." Miłosz's juxtaposition of Blake with Swedenborg and Oscar Miłosz, a French-Lithuanian poet, brings "into focus a number of qualities of the prophetic works that become especially apparent when these works are handled in the medium of a foreign language." In the context of this special issue, "Polish Blake" illustrates what happens when Blake is drawn into a reflection on totalitarianism and spirituality. Miłosz, to quote Borkowska once more, "widens the spectrum of Blake reference."

24 Further evidence for the significance of applying Blake to private as well as to public matters surfaces in the articles by Luisa Calè (Italian Blake) and Vera Serdechnaia (Russian Blake). Calè's discussion of Corrado Costa's *William Blake in Beulah* (1977), a cartoon essay or comic book, presents Blake as an enabler for "an avant-garde experiment in visual adaptation" and a direct influence: "Encountering Blake's poems as typographical texts rather than in facsimiles reproducing his illuminated printing offered Costa a visionary prompt to invent a new visual idiom around the words." Calè's analysis is a fascinating reading, conditioned by the material conditions of the comic book; her article illuminates how "Costa's comic-panel grids challenge the expectation of sequential action subdivided in discrete spatio-temporal units." Considering ideas about hidden potential,

Calè brings the subversive and rebellious facets of Blake to the fore: the result of Costa's "creative-critical intervention is to release Blake's sexual and political revolution." Costa, in other words, responds to Blake but also makes us understand Blake better: "Costa's art of spacing releases a free-love utopia from the control of Blake's syntax." In the next article, Serdechnaia examines the connection with Blake in the work of the early twentieth-century Russian poet Nikolai Gumilyov. Like Calè, she sketches a specific historical context for Blake's reception, including routes of transmission, reminding us of W. B. Yeats's role in the popularization of Blake abroad. Serdechnaia shares an archival discovery and discusses how Blake's poetry suited Gumilyov's poetics: "A leitmotif in Gumilyov's poetry is the spiritual pilgrimage, the return to the 'India of the Spirit'—his special image of Eden or a promised land in 'Zabludivshiiisia tramvai' ['The Tram That Lost Its Way']." Gumilyov's translation of "The Mental Traveller"—the first known—dates from 1918–21 and is one of several translations of English Romantic poetry done on his return from London. His decision to translate Blake was of personal significance, says Serdechnaia, as he was working on a volume of his own poetry that includes an epigraph from Blake's "The Land of Dreams." Gumilyov's engagement with Blake was cut short; he was arrested and executed by the Cheka in August 1921.

25 Part 2 starts with "'Re-mediating' William Blake in Croatia and Serbia." Tanja Bakić returns to artworks that she introduced in her chapter in *Reception* in order to explore how their originators, the contemporary artists Zdenka Pozaić, Simonida Rajčević, and Aleksandra M. Jovanić, perceived and received Blake in their creative processes. Bakić's article, with its focus on mediation and remediation—following Linda Hutcheon's ideas about cultural transmissions as adaptations and reformatting—gives insights into methodology and explains how Blake's work was transposed into new cultural contexts. In her case study, she thinks through the different processes of reception against a carefully woven review of literature; this review includes a discussion of broader issues pertaining to the "aural aspects" of Romantic poetry, with reference to Blake's "Proverbs of Hell" and Goode's article "Blakespotting." Bakić engages with Goode's take on Blake's popularity, based on freely circulating proverbs. She investigates how Blake texts can take over and establish, rather than just inspire, artistic processes, which means that in her opinion, artists—who are part of the audience that Goode is talking about—remain in control: "These 're-mediations' ... display 'the ability to wrest works of art from the past by means of new interpretations, to translate them into a new present, to make the experiences preserved in past art accessible again ...'" (quoting Jauss). The next contribution is Cristina Flores's article on the Spanish poet Leopoldo María Panero (1948–2014). She expands her work on Blake's Spanish reception by dis-

cussing Panero's capacity for visions and penchant for the theme of madness, arguing that his various Blake-inspired poems reveal a darker, more Gothic Blake. According to Flores, Panero identified with the rose in "The Sick Rose" and associated it with death and dying in his own poems. About this powerful transformation of ideas, which extends to Blake's "Tyger," she writes: "Panero, who claimed to feel 'sick as a rose,' found in Blake's 'The Sick Rose' a powerful metaphor for mental illness, another of the central concerns in his poetry"; "In Panero's imagery the rose and the tiger are often associated ... as the tiger also represents his insanity." Noting Panero's lifelong drug abuse and precarious mental health, she emphasizes that "unlike Blake's *Songs of Experience*, in Panero's literary realm there is no room for the potential triumph of innocence." Panero was, as Flores explains, "a polyglot, who mastered both English and French"; he was able to read Blake in English and write in English as well as Spanish.

26 Unmediated access to Blake surfaces again in Alcinda Píñeiro de Sousa, Cláudia Franco Souza, and João Carlos Callixto's contribution on Fernando Pessoa (1888–1935) and the Portuguese band *Três Tristes Tigres*. Their article bears testimony to the breadth of Blake's reception in Portugal, previously recorded in *Reception*; it details the rise of English scholarship on Pessoa and the importance of English literature for him. Pessoa, who posthumously became a symbol of his nation's culture, was "a superbly inspired reader of Blake" in particular. His reading of Blake, though of course refracted through a different culture and linguistic background that included his English schooling in Durban, raises questions about his creative process, and the authors share archival evidence of his awareness of and preoccupation with Blake to argue that he "chose to confront Blake's influence." Similarly, the first musical adaptation of a poem by Blake ("The Tyger") to be sung in Portuguese, which "is indeed an inspired and inspiring example of a close musical reading of the poem," gets contextualized within the trends and developments of Portuguese pop-rock music. In an interview, the band's guitar player, Alexandre Soares, told Callixto: "Blake is no one's contemporary." Pondering Soares's appraisal of Blake through the words of Jorge Luis Borges while considering broader issues in academic and popular cultures, the authors emphasize in their conclusion that "Borges's statement seems to resonate in Pessoa, who wrote about 'the problem of celebrity, both occasional and permanent' almost a century ago ...: 'A Blake or a Shelley can never appeal to the generality of any age; they have the beauty of rarities rather than the beauty of perfect things.'"

27 The final contribution is on the German-Jewish expressionist painter and writer Ludwig Meidner (1884–1966), who, like Panero, experienced visions. Meidner read Ruthven

Todd's edition of Gilchrist's biography in the 1940s and knew that Blake was interested in mystical writers. His affinity with Blake exists via the spiritual aspects of his art; the article, which explores the artistic and personal relationship between Else and Ludwig Meidner, discusses how each connected with Blake. The mystical tradition, including writers like Boehme, Swedenborg, and Paracelsus, was frequently noted as a reference point in *Reception*, even though Frye had tried to put a stop to the practice of regarding Blake as a mystic: "Most of the poets generally called mystics might better be called visionaries, which is not quite the same thing" (Frye 8).⁹ Since Frye, the consensus has been that Blake was not a mystic but a visionary. My article on the Meidners agrees with Frye's assessment, because Ludwig did not perceive Blake as a mystic, and argues that Blake, for Ludwig, was a figure of identification on account of the mystical qualities of his writings and art. Ludwig, who was an Orthodox Jew, is unique in that he experienced the Blake revival in 1940s London and had encountered Blake in pre-World War II Germany. His connection is personal; he saw Blake as a neglected figure. I examine his changing relations with Blake and attitude toward visionary experiences after his return to Germany in 1953, as well as Blake's role in Joseph Paul Hodin's writings about the Meidners.

28 Meidner would have been able to study Blake's art at the Tate Gallery. His approach to Blake was guided by what he knew about him (via Blake's German reception) and what he experienced during his encounters with the originals. Viscomi's discussion in *William Blake's Printed Paintings* of production methods, changes to objects, and the ensuing impact on interpretation helps with understanding the process of reception. Viscomi reminds us that we cannot claim that Blake stays the same; new discoveries inevitably change how we perceive him and his works. In "Posthumous Blake" (2019), Viscomi examines the qualities of posthumous prints and works through bibliographical facts and the provenances of Blake's illuminated books; he concludes that Catherine was less actively engaged with posthumous printing than has previously been assumed. Considering the production and reception of the prints, he not only corrects theories about Catherine's involvement in illuminated printing as "Blake's equal partner" (par. 138), but also insists that "we must continue to excavate the archives" (par. 140). There will always be more evi-

9. In "General Note: Blake's Mysticism," appended to *Fearful Symmetry* (1947), Frye explains: "The word 'mystic' has never brought anything but confusion into the study of Blake, and, in my anxiety to prevent it from cluttering up this book, I have begun by conceding, as a sort of opening gambit, the conventional mystic's attitude to the artist as the imperfect mystic who cannot wholly detach himself from the sensible world" (431).

dence; only evidence can curb speculation and redirect research and, as in this example, evaluate Catherine's role. His exhortation that we investigate Blake's markets resonates with the importance of the research into the particularities of Blake's writings and art, as well as the debates about artistic integrity.

- 29 I enjoy spotting Blake in unexpected places, but if we consider that neither Blake nor his readers or viewers stay the same, we might be happy to admit that reception studies is an exciting, newly invigorated area of critical investigation within Blake studies and at the interface of popular and academic debate. Reading or viewing Blake at home, online, or inside a gallery space is always framed; this frame, which prepares and sets the scene for the encounter in Jauss's sense of the horizon of expectation, mediates how Blake is perceived and received. The connections are made in the minds of Blake's audiences. Influence, therefore, should not be taken for granted, but discussed as part of comprehensive histories of linguistic and artistic, as well as social and cultural, transmission. We should consider how the discussion of influence is established or integrated into personal and academic narratives in meaningful ways. This can tell us about the significance of Blake to other cultures.

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