

Building up Jerusalem in the Classroom: William Blake and Writing Pedagogy

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Our class discussion about William Blake's short lyric "Jerusalem" was producing far more questions than answers. "What does he mean by 'arrows of desire'?" wondered Jessica after our first reading of the poem. Writing the phrase on the board, I prompted students to volunteer other terms that they found obscure and confusing. Soon I had rewritten nearly the entire poem.

I filled in some context, including the legend of Christ's sojourn in England during his "lost years" and some of the scholarly speculations about the historical referents of the phrase "dark, Satanic mills."¹ Yet my students reported that while this information helped illuminate some lines, the overall message of the poem in some senses remained dim. Broadly speaking, Sarah suggested, the poem seemed to be calling for some kind of "national pride," but its symbols seemed "off." Recalling earlier class periods in which we had discussed Blake's condemnation of the oppressive force of the state, she asked, "Wasn't he against militarism? Why would he reference arrows and swords?" Indeed, the poem concludes with the famous lines, "I will not cease from Mental Fight, / Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand: / Till we have built Jerusalem, / In Englands green & pleasant Land" (lines 13-16).

I encouraged my students to think about why Blake would employ the imagery of weapons, and I asked a few leading questions about the effect of the potential contradiction between his beliefs and his use of symbols. Steven proposed that Blake could be making fun of

militarism. Jacob half-questioned, “Or maybe he’s trying to mix up a reader who supports it?” Cynthia pushed their suggestions further by considering how Blake might be repurposing these the symbols: “He says that he’s interested in ‘Mental Fight.’ What if the sword is really a pen?” she offered. “His way of fighting could be with writing.”

William Blake’s poetry seeks to inspire readers to participate in the construction of an intellectual community that he calls “Jerusalem.”² This process remains ever incomplete and is, in a sense, incompletable, for the work of producing such a community involves “continually building & continually decaying” (*Jerusalem* 53:19, E203).³ Yet college classes (especially composition and literature courses) can provide the space to foster such community, as instructors aid their students in manifesting this ideal both within and beyond the classroom. Blake’s poetry – especially his final epics – reveals various pedagogical strategies that are useful for encouraging students to “build up Jerusalem” by improving the quality of their thinking and writing. In what follows, I examine some of these strategies, highlighting where Blake illustrates them and demonstrating how college instructors can employ them to prompt students to develop as thinkers, writers, and participants in what Blake calls “Mental Fight.” These strategies include guiding students in increasing the specificity of their thought, modeling for them effective habits that they can adopt in their writing, and encouraging them to escape their own subjective vantage points in order to engage in a dynamic exchange of ideas with others.

I draw the anecdotes and examples in this article from my experience teaching the freshman requirement Writing in Context I & II at the College of Mount Saint Vincent in New York City. A two-semester course centered around close reading literary texts as a basis for

critical writing, this class allows instructors to tailor the syllabus to their own interests and student needs. My Writing in Context I begins by inviting students to examine closely short lyric poems, such as Langston Hughes's "Harlem (or a Dream Deferred)" and William Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," as they consider how writers deploy poetic devices such as similes in specific historical contexts. Turning to Blake's use of similar techniques in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, my students next compose essays that compare and contrast literary texts as they draw conclusions about the social implications of literature. These early assignments serve as a springboard for an essay that requires students to develop a thesis statement about a short story or a longer narrative poem (such as William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" or Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market"). Students then begin to outline arguments to defend these thesis statements. In the final assignment of the semester, they must locate a scholarly article about a work we have read, summarize the article's argument, and explain in a paragraph how they would respond to this argument in a longer essay. Writing in Context II builds on these exercises as it guides students toward writing a research paper about either literary texts or a topical current event issue that is related to a work of literature. Opening with a focus on tone, the class encourages students to read and perform dramatic monologues such as Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" and Stevie Smith's "The River God." Considering how writers create tone and how readers interpret it, my students then study and perform sections of Shakespeare's *Othello*. In the second half of the semester, I help students recognize that crafting persuasive arguments is itself a performance in which they must strike the correct tone and employ the "props" of argumentation and evidence as effectively as possible for their audience.

Throughout both semesters, collaborative group revision sessions and conversational in-class exercises emphasize the importance of community to the processes of writing and reading. As students work together, they learn to locate and respond to specific words, phrases, and images in literary texts and the writing of their classmates. These engagements with specificity increasingly become central to revision and to the goal of gaining a broader understanding of the world by engaging more directly with new points of view. Each class period brings us a little closer to building up Blake's ideal of Jerusalem in the classroom.

Minute Particulars: From Generality to Specificity

Blake's poetry denounces generalization and abstraction, imploring readers to perceive "minute particulars" and act in response to these specifics. His work typically associates abstraction with his version of Satan and with the dark figures of the druids, who represent proponents of various ideas that Blake opposed, including deism, state religion, and jingoistic nationalism.⁴ Blake considers such ideas to be errors in part because each relies on sweeping generalizations.

A key moment in *Jerusalem* distills Blake's theory. When the Eternals labor alongside Los to restore the fallen world, they emphasize the importance of "minutely organized Particulars":

Let all Indefinites be thrown into Demonstrations

To be pounded to dust & melted in the Furnaces of Affliction:

He who would do good to another, must do it in Minute Particulars

General Good is the plea of the scoundrel hypocrite & flatterer:

For Art & Science cannot exist but in minutely organized Particulars

And not in generalizing Demonstrations of the Rational Power.

The Infinite alone resides in Definite & Determinate Identity

Establishment of Truth depends on destruction of Falshood continually (55:58-65,
E205)

The Eternals call for indefinite ideas to be destroyed through “Demonstrations” and exposure to the “Furnaces of Affliction.”⁵ In Blake’s idiosyncratic lexicon, these terms refer to rational analysis and education through difficult experience, respectively.⁶ The Eternals suggest that these processes destroy the abstract concepts that conceal definite “Minute Particulars.” The example they give of such an abstract concept is the notion of “General Good,” which too often serves as a vague slogan employed by those who deceive others or are themselves deceived. Rational analysis (such as asking what precisely would be “Good” in any given situation) and vexed experience (such as being deceived by such ideas firsthand and thereby realizing their insufficiency) can lead individuals to abandon such general principles and work for specific positive goals within particular situations.⁷

The plots of Blake’s long poems illustrate the process of increasing the specificity of ideas, as protagonists set themselves against generalities that restrain humanity.⁸ Both *Milton* and *Jerusalem* depict “Abstract Philosophy warring in enmity against Imagination” (*Jerusalem* 5:58, E148), a conflict that produces a fallen world where “Man is by his Nature the Enemy of Man [...] Generalizing Art & Science till Art & Science is lost” (*Jerusalem* 38:54, 52, E185).

Humanity's tendency to generalize thus hampers its ethical development as well as its creative and academic endeavors. This tendency is embodied by Blake's version of Satan, whose rule over this fallen world underscores the ethical consequences of abstraction: worshipped by humans under the name of "God," Blake's Satan promotes the "Moral laws and cruel punishments" of conventional religious belief (*Milton* 9:22, E103). These "Moral laws" – which, in Blake's estimation, are anything but moral – consist of universal standards of behavior to which all people are compelled to bow. Such abstract notions of "General Good" are inherently tyrannical: Blake considered "One Law for the Lion & Ox" to be "Oppression," for universal standards overlook the particularity of individuals and situations (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 24, E44). These "laws" and various other errors limit Albion, who represents both England and, more broadly, the hope that all of humanity might join in peaceful and artistic utopian collaboration, and dwell in the intellectual community of Jerusalem. Thus restricted, Albion loses sight of the specifics of existence: "Every Universal Form, was become barren mountains of Moral / Virtue: and every Minute Particular hardend into grains of sand" (*Jerusalem* 45:19-20, E194).

As representatives of the imagination, Milton and the artist-prophet Los destroy abstract and general ideas through humanizing art that attends to "minute particulars." Over the course of his odyssey, Milton annihilates his own Satanic Selfhood, rejecting his generalizing errors and embracing the specific qualities he had disowned in life: true poetic energy and the feminine portion of his being. Emphasizing the creative import of this process, Milton gives specificity to the abstract demon Urizen, crafting a "Human form" on his cold bones (*Milton* 19:14, E112).

Los performs similar work as he labors at building Golgonooza, the city of art that will become Jerusalem in the redeemed world.⁹ Working amid “indefinite Druid rocks,” and proceeding “from Particulars to Generals,” he gives shape and increasingly definite form to both the fallen Albion and the errors that constrain him (*Milton* 3:8, 37, E97).¹⁰ Ultimately, he defeats his Satanic Spectre by embracing the “Particulars” that are lost in the formation of “Moral Law” (*Jerusalem* 91:5-30, E251). Overall, both *Milton* and *Jerusalem* reveal how abstract ideas, such as the “General Good,” can be opposed and defeated by a focus on specificity and by the willingness of inspired individuals to subject themselves and their ideas to the hard trials of thought, experience, and creative work.

College students in writing classes many times start the semester seeking after their idea of the “General Good” in their education. When they visit me during office hours, their initial questions are often framed in broad terms: “How can I improve as a writer?”, “What are you looking for in my essays?”, and “What’s a good way to end an essay?” Such questions are shaped by unclear “indefinite” ideas, and I remind them that we can only ever address their concerns in terms of minute particulars: we can study how to improve a specific paragraph, sentence, or choice of word.¹¹

The process of guiding students in revising their work often involves helping them refine their ideas with increasing specificity. Students frequently enter college with a tendency to write in abstract terms that elide more focused ideas that they are in the process of forming.

Encouraging specificity on the level of both the argument and the sentence prompts them to develop their gut reactions to texts into more sophisticated arguments. Students are often taught

in high school that the opening sentence of a paragraph should be general, but in many instances they begin a paragraph too generally. Instructors can aid these students by assisting them in identifying areas of their writing that constitute what Blake might call “indefinite Druid rocks” and by asking questions that will subject these generalities to “Demonstrations” and the “Furnaces of Affliction.”

Examples abound in writing classes. One of the first essays that students compose in my Writing in Context I sections requires them to discuss the function of figurative language in a poem. Many students choose Hughes’s “Harlem,” and most of their first drafts open with vague generalizations about the role of figurative language. For example, some begin with topic sentences such as “The figurative language in Hughes’s poem allows him to convey his message.” Or they write that this language “makes the poem’s ideas easier to imagine.” Typically, these essays immediately launch into examining the poem’s similes without bothering to explain what the message is. As such, they seem to be making an argument that could apply to any poem containing figurative language. Few students specify what they think the “message” or “ideas” are, or how the similes and metaphors of that particular poem specifically relate to those ideas.

During class and office hours, I point out these general sentences and model for students the kinds of questions they ought to ask themselves about their writing. In response to my inquiry about the exact message he thought Hughes was expressing, my student Carl spoke with me at length in my office about several interesting ideas the poem generated in him (ideas that were entirely absent from his essay). I asked him to rewrite his opening sentence during our

session. After a minute, he presented me with a sentence that stated the figurative language of the poem helped Hughes convey a “message about race.”

“Better, better,” I said encouragingly, though my next questions continued to hone in on the particulars of his claim. What exactly is Hughes saying about race? After Carl had taken some time to compose a sentence that better addressed that question, I sent him home with the assignment to think through how each of the poem’s instances of figurative language contributed to this message. The sentences of his essay that followed quotations from the poem, I explained, needed to link something specific in each quote back to his larger argument. In such a revision, the paragraph still opens with a more general idea, but this idea emerges from the student’s attention to the particulars of the text. Carl told me later that his (much improved) revision was the product of many sessions of work, during which he almost gave up several times. Though he initially “hated” my critiques and the attention to detail I expected, he admitted that undergoing this difficult process had improved his writing. “I’ve never worked so hard for a B+,” he laughed. It is often through such experience – which Blake might call the “Furnaces of Affliction” – that students increasingly engage with specifics in literary interpretation and writing.

One exercise that encourages such engagement was inspired by a passage from *Jerusalem* Chapter 2 in which Los enters Albion’s bosom and explores his interior world, beholding his minute particulars. In an early preparatory assignment, I ask students to select a poem and compose a paragraph that describes what they would experience if they could “enter” into the poem’s world and explore it. What is this world like? What might they see, hear, smell, touch,

taste? The exercise forces students to connect with the text in a new way: rather than interacting with a poem on a purely intellectual level, they must develop a relationship with it, activating multiple senses as they spatialize its contents. Such an assignment additionally allows students to write creatively, and it helps them to see how imaginative work that focuses on “minute particulars” both encourages and benefits from clearer, more precise thinking.

My student Jamie described wandering through a landscape composed of the similes and metaphors found in “Harlem.” As she walked past tables displaying the discarded and ruined objects mentioned in the poem, she approached a window that looked out onto a nuclear explosion (a rendering of the final line, “*Or does it explode?*”). Her paragraph imagined how she might interact with the objects on her journey to the window. She reported the stench of rotting meat as she passed it, the stickiness of the “sugary sweet” that had crusted over, and the way that her attempt to lift a duffel bag filled with bowling balls (the “heavy load”) pulled her muscles. Finally, she noted the fear she felt upon seeing the explosion, along with the heat that she could sense on her skin even from a distance. Jamie thus developed a more personal relationship to the poem. Her later essay analyzing the poem’s figurative language reflected this deeper understanding, as she reflected on the “lasting pain” that trying to bear a “heavy load” produces, as well as the “potential cataclysm” reflected by the poem’s final image. She even speculated that Hughes’s 1951 poem was drawing upon the 1945 detonation of the first atomic bomb.¹²

Such attention to the specific content of a text is especially useful in analyzing literary quotations. One of the most popular words that students use to follow quotations is an unqualified “This.” In their essays about Blake’s “The Chimney Sweeper” (from *Songs of*

Innocence), several students argued that the poem illuminates how the children's occupation both robbed them of their childhoods and took advantage of their naiveté.¹³ In support of this argument, many quoted the moment when the speaker's friend Tom Dacre has his head shaved: "Theres little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head / That curl'd like a lambs back, was shav'd" (lines 5-6). Typically, students followed the quotation with a variation of the following sentence: "This reveals that the boys were no longer innocent." When I brought one student's paragraph into class for a group revision session, I instructed her classmates to locate any instances of vague pronoun reference (which was a persistent problem in her essay). Pronoun reference is one of the earliest grammatical topics I cover in writing classes because it is among the easiest rules to connect to specificity in ideas and wording. Students often quickly grasp this rule because it entails a simple and concrete method of revision. In this instance, I instructed them to circle all the pronouns in the paragraph and then determine how well these pronouns agree with and clarify their antecedents.

Many students identified the "This" in the sentence following the quotation as a vague pronoun, but few had ideas for what could replace it. Sam offered a suggestion that commonly appears in many student essays: "This quote." I pointed out that such a revision did not really solve the problem: what *about* this quotation shows loss of innocence? In other words, I was asking students to locate the specifics of this piece of literature that connect to the author's broader idea. Students quickly latched onto the simile in this line. It took little effort to get them to see the relation between that image and innocence, though it took longer (and many revisions of the sentence) to make the word choice precise. Working together, the class eventually

developed this new sentence: “By comparing Tom’s hair to a ‘lambs back,’ Blake emphasizes how the chimney sweepers’ occupation robs them of their innocence.” To conclude this class period, I placed this revised sentence directly underneath the original on the projector screen so that students could see how much better it had become. The revised sentence no longer vaguely asserts a connection in the hope that readers will infer it: it now confidently links a specific aspect of the quotation to the writer’s idea. Helping students to explore the specificity of their own ideas in these ways is the first step toward building up the intellectual community signified by Blake’s Jerusalem.

They Became What They Beheld: Modeling the Habits of Thinking and Writing

Those of Blake’s characters who promote this intellectual community often do so through modeling states of being that transform other characters. Throughout Blake’s works, the process of “beholding” frequently triggers a corresponding change in an audience. In many instances, such transmutations are negative: the refrain “They became what they beheld,” repeated across Blake’s long poems, describes the way that characters in the fallen world come to resemble Urizen in their self-imposed restriction and limitation.¹⁴ But in other contexts, such modeling functions as the fulcrum of social progress. Blake’s Milton, for instance, models the process of “Self-Annihilation” for all other characters in the poem, especially his emanation, Ololon.¹⁵

The power of such modeling plays a pivotal role in the climax of *Jerusalem*, when Albion is inspired by Christ’s example to sacrifice himself for Los. Jesus appears before Albion to

remind him that God died for humanity, and that humans can only exist through a fellowship sustained by smaller, imitative instances of self-sacrifice: “Man is Love, / As God is Love: every kindness to another is a little Death / In the Divine Image nor can Man exist but by Brotherhood” (*Jerusalem* 96:26-28, E256). Essentially, the Christian myth of the death of God should inspire humans to build a community based on kindness and love toward one another. This principle is illustrated on plate 76 (See [Figure 1](#)), a full-plate illustration of Albion looking up to Christ on the cross and spreading his arms in imitation.¹⁶ It is this emulation that leads Albion to throw himself into the Furnaces of Affliction for the sake of Los, an act that immediately converts the furnaces into the “Fountains of Living Waters,” bringing about Albion’s redemption (*Jerusalem* 96:37, E256). If the Furnaces of Affliction can serve as tools for destroying abstraction and discovering specificity, as *Jerusalem* Plate 55 suggests, Albion’s willingness to enter them signifies both his relinquishment of the (abstract) errors that had led him to reject Los and his acceptance of the specific qualities within Los that motivate true love and friendship. It is through a process of modeling and internalization that Albion is inspired to take the action that ushers in a cooperative human community.

College writing instructors would do well to model for their students the interrelated processes of thinking, writing, and revising. In all the examples I have given in this article thus far, there is some element of modeling. Students learn not merely the content of ideas but methods of working with those ideas. Through class discussions and meetings during office hours, they see firsthand the sorts of questions that they should be asking themselves, the options

for rephrasing sentences that they should consider when revising their own essays, and the ways in which specifying the phrasing of a sentence could help them develop their ideas.

But instructors can also model good thinking and writing habits through the very structure of their class periods. Just as an effective essay introduction can open with a brief anecdote that the writer ties to the main argument, so too do effective class periods often begin with a short concrete exercise or activity that the instructor can link to the main lesson of the day. For instance, when I teach the topic of tone in composition classes, I will typically begin the class with a simple game: I will write a sentence on the board and ask participants to read it out loud in the voice of characters in certain situations. I might write the question “Where are you going?” and prompt one student to ask this question as if he were talking to a friend. I then might request that another student read the sentence like a parent talking to a child. I could ask another to intone the question as if she were a police officer talking to a suspect. This exercise tends to be fun and relaxes students while also serving as a springboard to the class period’s subject.

After introducing the main topic of the lesson, instructors can illustrate it with examples, much as writers move from their main claim to supporting reasons and evidence. In my class on tone, the bulk of the lesson begins with a brainstorming session: I encourage students to think of the specific ways that writers create tone. Many students immediately suggest exclamation marks and italics, and I ask whether only writing with those formal elements possesses a tone. Students then usually point to word choice: adjectives tend to be the first category of words mentioned, but I ask students to consider how nouns and verbs create tone as well. What is the difference between the terms “nursing home” and “retirement community”? What does it suggest about a

writer who says she “endured” a lecture from her professor rather than “listened” to it? Students rapidly discern the different connotations of words, and they can then consider how writers’ choices, as well as differences between writing situations (including the target audience), might influence the kind of tone they wish to create and the means they select for doing so. Students will sometimes think of additional elements of writing that create tone, such as sentence length and structure, but it might require leading questions to assist them. Often, they are eager to discuss the implications for tone in various modes of writing and media of communication, such as in text messages.¹⁸

After guiding them in generating a list of strategies, I proceed to distribute extracts from student writing that have difficulty striking an effective tone. These extracts frequently come from introductions to research papers and from paragraphs that address the counterclaim of an argument. I ask students how the writer of a persuasive essay should want to appear in these situations and what sort of tone would be conducive to crafting this appearance. I then instruct them to circle any aspects of the writing that help or hinder creating an appropriate tone. For instance, one such extract characterized the counterargument as “ridiculous.” Another was littered with rhetorical questions that appeared in place of a cogent refutation of the counterclaim. In these exercises, students locate the specific choices that produce tone and consider whether these details are useful. Many discover for the first time that a formal essay can be less an unmediated outpouring of their gut feelings than a carefully constructed piece that establishes an authorial persona and voice most beneficial for a given writing situation.

Class periods can also end in ways that mirror the conclusion to essays. Rather than simply repeat points made in an essay, a conclusion ought to explain why these points are significant. It should answer the question “so what?” At the end of my lesson on tone, I instruct students to jot down a few sentences explaining why tone might be important in writing. When we share their answers, many are surprised to find that the class period convinced them that tone is more consequential than they had considered: setting the stage at the outset of an essay, tone influences the reader’s perception of the author’s voice throughout a piece of writing. A persuasive essay works best when it conveys that its author is knowledgeable, passionate, and fair in considering multiple points of view.

It helps to make the connections between the class period’s structure and the students’ writing explicit. Often when moving from one section of the lesson to the next, I will emphasize the point of transition: “These techniques for creating tone that we’ve just generated can help you revise your own essays for tone, as we’re about to see.” Many times, I will linger on the transition for a moment, noting that just as I announce the logical connection between activities in a class period, so too should students use transitions in their essays to clarify the relationship between their ideas.

Another way that instructors can model good habits for their students is less tangible, but no less crucial. Part of educating students is modeling for them an enthusiasm for writing, thinking, and appreciating literature. Instructors themselves need to feel passion for their subject and allow this passion to be communicated to students through their demeanor, tone of voice, and even body language (that is, the minute particulars of their behavior). When I conduct

revision exercises and put sentences next to each other on the projector, I try to let my voice convey the excitement I feel at how many ways there are to write the same sentence as I ask, “Which are the best ways to phrase this idea in this particular situation?” I further explain, “This is what writing is: seeing the options you have for conveying your ideas and choosing the most suitable ones.” When I introduce a literary text to students, I try to express what is interesting about the text’s place in its historical context. For instance, I introduce Blake’s poetry – and his appeals to apocalyptic imagery – by describing the French Revolution and emphasizing how it might well have seemed to people of the late eighteenth century as if the world were literally coming to an end. I ask students to imagine how they might feel if they lived in an age that had seen the British empire lose its American colonies and then received word of the overthrow of Louis XVI across the Channel. What would it feel like to live in a world whose events are violating common conceptions of what is possible or permissible? Often when reading poetry with a class, I will pause to call attention to the beauty of a passage. For example, after a student volunteers to read a section of a poem, I will sometimes ask another student to read it again. On this second listen, I invite the class to pay close attention to the “magic of the words.” It takes less than a minute to reread a few lines, but even such a simple gesture can have a profound effect. It reminds students of the importance of reading slowly and with appreciation; it opens them to the experience of seeing at least one other person enjoying literature; and it can stimulate student interest as the period and semester proceed.

When students see their instructor passionate about writing, reading, and thinking, it suggests to them that it is legitimate to care deeply about subjects to which they might normally

only give a passing thought. The biology major or the business major in a required English course might begin to realize why literary studies is so appealing to some and so important culturally. While writing a paper for another class, the premed student might recall her instructor's enthusiasm for generating multiple ways to write a sentence and be inspired to spend more time revising her work. The marketing major might someday recall an excited discussion about the role of advertising in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market," reflecting on the power of language and considering the responsibility of advertisers in a world whose gender politics are still too much like those of Rossetti's day.¹⁹

In short, students can be encouraged to "become what they behold" over the course of the semester, internalizing models offered by not only the content but the structures of their lessons. Indeed, Blake's art reminds us that form is often just as important as content. Minute details of Blake's texts, including their images, layouts, and even their lettering, contribute to their meaning. In much the same way, every aspect of a writing and literature course – down to the smallest exercise or even casual conversation with students before class – can contribute to building up Blake's Jerusalem.

Opposition is True Friendship: Conversing Together in the Classroom

Blake's poetry illustrates how the process of modeling can encourage a dynamic exchange of ideas. In Blake's cosmos, the paradisaical world Eden or Eternity depends upon the dialectical interplay of binary forces and perspectives called "contraries." In various fallen states,

these contraries are neutralized and cancelled out, reduced to a “negation,” an abstract idea that prevents these energies from productively engaging.²⁰

One of the worst restrictions of contrary forces is what Blake calls “single vision,” a state in which the individual is limited to perceiving the world through only one perspective, rather than considering how it might look through the eyes of others.²¹ For Blake, such constriction is characteristic of the fallen state, and he thus envisions redemption as involving the cultivation of an ability to perceive both more deeply and more widely, regarding the world from multiple points of view: “Let the Human Organs be kept in their perfect Integrity / At will Contracting into Worms, or Expanding into Gods” (*Jerusalem* 55:36-37, E205).

One of the challenges students face in learning how to write is developing such an expanding vision. Good writers must imagine how another person – someone with an entirely different view of the world – might react to their writing. This remains true from the smallest aspect of writing (the grammar and word choice) to the overall argument of an essay. But pretending that they are reading their own essay through the eyes of someone who has never seen it before and who knows nothing about its argument is as difficult as it is necessary. Essentially, students must learn how to escape their own subjectivity, to pass imaginatively beyond the limits of their preconceived ideas.

All the examples I have offered so far in this article involve tools that can assist in this process. More broadly, reading literature and engaging the imagination are key ways to develop these skills. Class discussions can also aid students: they hear feedback on their writing from their peers, and they can be exposed to other perspectives on their arguments in real time.

One exercise that I introduce when students are drafting their first research papers stimulates these kinds of conversations and thus the ability of students to perceive more broadly. I prompt students to write a paragraph summarizing the counterclaim that they intend to refute in their paper. After they hand in these paragraphs, I distribute each one via email to a different student. As much as possible, I try to send these paragraphs to students who hold the position that the paragraph summarizes. Many times, various students in the class will be making different arguments about the same current events issue, so I can easily pair them up. In other cases, I might know from students' contributions to class discussions or from casual conversations with them how they feel about certain issues. In still other cases, I try to guess students' position on certain topics based on comments they have made on other subjects. After the students receive their classmates' paragraph, they are to comment thoroughly on it.²² I ask them to make suggestions for improving the summary of the counterclaim: what aspects of the summary are misleading or even inaccurate? How could the writer better phrase the counterclaim's position? Has the writer overlooked an obvious objection to his or her main argument?

Many instructors use some variant of this technique, but I often add another layer: after I have returned the paragraphs with peer comments, I set aside time in class for students to respond to their commenter in one-on-one conversation. One example of many springs to mind: my student Jared had been mostly quiet during our discussions for the entire semester until we were examining a newspaper article on gun control. He immediately raised his hand and demonstrated a wealth of knowledge about the Second Amendment and even case law

surrounding it, and his contributions greatly enhanced that class period. When his classmate Thomas wrote an essay in favor of strict gun control and poorly summarized the counterargument, I felt confident that Jared would provide substantive comments. Indeed, Jared raised points that Thomas had failed to consider, and he offered new ideas for phrasing and framing the counterclaim, making the final version of the paper more robust and compelling. But their conversation was not only a chance for Thomas to revise his work, it was the beginning of a friendship. Requiring these students to locate their points of disagreement within specific sentences of Thomas's essay helped them to discuss their opinions with details rather than in broad generalities that hinder conversation. Although these students disagreed with each other in many ways, their dialogue (grounded in particulars) precipitated a mutual respect for each other's points of view, and after this exercise, friendship emerged out of their frequent pre- and post-class political discussions.

Instances of such friendly intellectual opposition recall Blake's vision of the redeemed Albion, in which his constituent members engage in "Wars of mutual Benevolence Wars of Love" and "conversed together in Visionary forms dramatic which bright / Redounded from their Tongues in thunderous majesty, in Visions / In new Expanses, creating exemplars of Memory and of Intellect" (*Jerusalem* 97:14, 98:28-30, E256, 257-58). Here, the awaked Albion is on the verge of being reunited with the reconstructed Jerusalem, and this process of conversing together reminds us that to "Labour in Knowledge. is to Build up Jerusalem" (*Jerusalem* 77, E232). Blake's notion of the redeemed Albion and the rebuilt Jerusalem entails respectful collaboration in intellectual endeavor.²³ The writing classroom can be an opportunity to work toward that ideal

by promoting intellectual honesty, fairness, and cooperation in student interactions. In much of today's political discourse, meaningful conversation is too often hampered by vague terms that permit people to talk past each other, but it is spurred on by a willingness to deal in the specifics of issues. It is worth noting that the plate on which Blake's ecstatic vision of intellectual cooperation appears at the conclusion of *Jerusalem* (See [Figure 2](#)) is adorned not with a transcendent illustration of Albion or Jerusalem but with images of the "Living Creatures of the Earth": a snail, frog, worm, spider, and serpent. These decorations underscore how Blake's vision of intellectual utopia is inexorably linked to the minute particulars of the earthy world of experience.²⁴ The "thunderous majesty" of intellectual, creative labor cannot be achieved without a keen recognition of and respect for concrete detail.

Blake's work overall suggests not only that intellectual community is fostered by an attention to specifics but that the generalizing tendency of the mind produces terrible social consequences. Blake's long poems dramatize in part how injustice stems from a mindset that overlooks specificity and restricts its vision. Ruled by an abstracting and myopic impulse, the fallen world becomes a haven of blood sacrifice (war), tyranny, and retribution. It can be argued that many if not most problems in our world today have their root in a failure to perceive specifically and dialogue respectfully. Many of these challenges may ultimately be the product of our inability to "converse together," to use language to foster cooperation. Blake's answer to the injustices of his day was to champion imagination, forgiveness, and a focus on specificity, along with the courage to open oneself to diverse points of view.

Blake's poetry therefore reminds us that there is an ethical dimension to teaching writing and literature. Learning to think about, write about, and discuss issues in nuanced detail facilitates respecting the individuality of fellow members of our community. While Blake presents this ethic in language drawn from the Christian tradition, the fundamental idea is deeply humanist: *Jerusalem* ultimately promotes a "universal Brotherhood" sustained by mutual forgiveness and acts of kindness, where individuals honor one another and their intellectual abilities by attending to the specifics of ideas, emotions, and experiences.²⁵

My class's discussion about the short lyric "Jerusalem" eventually arrived at similar conclusions. Blake's "weapons" in this poem are the tools of writing and thinking with precision and passion. By wielding them in his art, he works against "Corporeal War," repurposing and destabilizing militaristic discourse through poetry. Picking up on Cynthia's suggestion that Blake's "sword" is really a pen, Nicole called our attention to the epigraph below the poem: "Would to God that all the Lords people were Prophets" (*Milton* 1, E96). "If Blake is talking about writing," she suggested, "then he wants his writing to make people into 'prophets' like he was. That's what I think his 'Mental Fight' is all about. He wants to build a community of visionaries." Developing this comment, I pointed the class's attention to the shift of the pronoun in the penultimate line: though the speaker uses "me" and "I" earlier in the poem, he here abruptly introduces "we." Together, the class concluded that the poem's pronouns perform the effect its speaker envisions his poetry inspiring, a shift from self-centeredness to a participation in community. This movement is fundamental to the construction of Blake's *Jerusalem*, a collaborative utopia of clear thinking and creation. Composition and literature classes that

employ techniques central to Blake's poetry can contribute to bringing this vision more fully into reality.

Notes

¹ The legend that Christ visited England with his uncle, Joseph of Arimathea, arose during the Middle Ages. See Lyons 72-104 for a discussion of the “Glastonbury Joseph.” Although manufacturing in Blake’s day was largely concentrated in the Midlands and the North of England, Keri Davies argues that the “dark, Satanic mills” may have been inspired by industry in London, including the Albion Flour Mill and the Neckinger Mill (which manufactured paper). See “William Blake and the Straw Paper Manufactory at Millbank.”

² Like many of Blake’s terms, “Jerusalem” is notoriously difficult to define. It is at once a city, a female character, and a utopian vision of the future (the “New Jerusalem” of the *Book of Revelations*). She is the “emanation” (female aspect) of Albion, who represents both England and the idea of a universal, collaborative community of all humanity. One name given to her by the “Children of Albion” is “Liberty,” a fraught political term in Blake’s day (54:5, E203). For an overview of Jerusalem in Blake’s poetry see Damon 206-208.

³ I follow the convention of giving the plate number, line number, and page number in Erdman’s *Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. I have retained Blake’s idiosyncratic spelling and punctuation.

⁴ On Blake’s use of Satan and the druids, see Damon 355-58 and 108-10, along with Whittaker’s chapters three and four. For a discussion of the sources about druids upon which Blake likely drew, including Milton’s *Areopagitica*, see Whittaker 139-145.

⁵ Harold Bloom describes lines 60-65 as a “defense of Blake’s art” and a “demonstration of unity between his ethic and aesthetic” (939).

⁶ As with many of Blake's terms, they acquire different significance throughout his poetry, depending on the context. While both terms are associated in various places with negative forces – indeed, the very passage I cite above links “Demonstration” with the generalizing tendency of the rational mind – they also play positive roles in vital moments: notably, Albion throws himself into the “Furnaces of affliction” at the climax of *Jerusalem*, sacrificing himself for Los and thereby transforming these furnaces into “Fountains of Living Waters flowing from the Humanity Divine” (96:35, 37, E256).

⁷ Saree Makdisi argues that Blake's idea of minute particulars lets him reconceive the self in a way that permits the development of a mode of “immanent sharing”: rather than understanding the self as a static entity in competition with others (and thus possessing a “sovereign sense of power over others”), Blake sees the self as a “dynamic, regenerating network of relations – a unity of minute particulars, some or all of which may at different times be shared with others” (319). If each human is understood as a collection of ever growing and developing specific attributes and experiences, it becomes easier to work toward a worldwide unity of individuals through the recognition of these minute particulars and through a refusal to see each other person as an abstract, isolated “self.”

⁸ For more detailed analyses of these poems, see, among many other sources, Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*; Harold Bloom, *Blake's Apocalypse*; Julia Wright, *Blake, Nationalism, and the Politics of Alienation*; and Susan Fox, *Poetic Form in Blake's Milton*.

² As Northrop Frye puts it, Golgonooza “when complete will be the emanation or total created achievement of Albion, Jerusalem” (248).

¹⁰ Space does not permit a full discussion of Los's actions in *Jerusalem*. To give one example, he establishes the counties of England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, correlating them with the twelve tribes of Israel (16:28-60, E160-61). In the process of giving such definite form, he oversees the minute particulars of all human experience in the fallen world, such that "not one sigh nor smile nor tear, / One hair nor particle of dust, not one can pass away" (13:66-14:1, E158). By presenting Los working outside of time, observing all of its particulars at once, Blake suggests that while time and space are linear and three-dimensional from the perspective of the fallen world, the creative mind is capable of stepping outside of typical modes of perception. In this way, art is both a product and a stimulant of new ways of thinking, generating broader conceptions of the world that seek to escape the limited and restrictive ideas of a particular time and place.

¹¹ To this end, I insist that students bring writing samples, such as drafts of essays, to our mandatory office hours meetings. This requirement ensures that students come to my office having done at least some preliminary work.

¹² This idea has been suggested by critics as well. On atomic imagery in the poetry of Langston Hughes, see Henrikson 283-84 and Williams 154-56. On Hughes's personal opposition to the atomic bomb, see Intondi 15.

¹³ On the phenomenon of child labor, see Ludmilla Jordanova, "Conceptualizing Childhood in the Eighteenth Century: the Problem of Child Labour."

¹⁴ Variations of this line appear in *Milton* (3:29, E97), *Jerusalem* (30:50, 54, E177; 32:9, 14, 15, E178), and *The Four Zoas* (53:24, E336; 55[Second Portion]:22, E338).

¹⁵ Fox argues that Milton's moment of enlightenment early in this poem – in which he recognizes himself in Satan on plate 12 – is simultaneous with the enlightenment of all other characters, including Ololon. In other words, the poem less depicts a series of events than it dramatizes Milton's realization over and over, from different perspectives, with each character functioning as an aspect of Milton (and *vice versa*). Such a reading underscores the importance of each person modeling states of being for others: since all characters partake of a common humanity, the enlightenment of one is the enlightenment of all. The readers, working within linear time, perceive these simultaneous revelations as sequential.

¹⁶ According to the editors of the *Blake Archive*, the figures are labeled “Albion” and “Jesus” in copies A and C of the poem.

¹⁷ The images used in this article have been made available by the Yale Center for British Art.

¹⁸ “I see that all the time in text messages,” one student commented about sentence length. “When you text someone and they start sending one-word replies, you know they're mad at you.” Often, bringing emails and even text messages into class can be a fruitful way to spur conversation about writing. How do the intended audience and the medium of communication influence a writer's choices when creating tone? Students are frequently savvier at recognizing and adopting tone in written communication than they might initially realize.

¹⁹ On the relation between “Goblin Market” and advertising, see Herbert Tucker, “Rossetti's Goblin Marketing: Sweet to Tongue and Sound to Eye.”

²⁰ Blake's four worlds are Eden, Beulah, Generation, and Ulro. They might be described as different ways of regarding reality (respectively, through the lenses of imagination, fancy,

sexuality, and reductive materialism). They are thus more psychological states within each individual than they are mappable locations. The roles of the contraries differ in each world. In Beulah, contraries achieve a kind of stalemate, while in Generation (the physical world that flesh and blood people inhabit) they produce war and conflict. In the final fallen state, Ulro – a mechanistic conception of the universe that is Blake’s equivalent of Hell – contraries are turned into negation, an abstract idea that cancels out any useful interaction of these forces.

²¹ Blake introduces this term in the phrase “Single vision & Newtons sleep” from a poem included in a letter to Thomas Butts on November 22, 1802 (E722, l.88). Some readers might find Blake’s condemnation of Newton (here and elsewhere) to be a sign of an antipathy for science. However, I would contend that Blake’s animus is ultimately directed at myopic approaches to life that refuse to engage with other perspectives. Newtonian mechanism, for Blake, easily lends itself to such myopia. It is one (useful) way of looking at the world, but it is far from the whole picture: it can co-exist with the creative view of the artist.

²² Here I encourage them to make use of Microsoft Word’s “comment” feature, as I do when grading their essays.

²³ It is significant that the three thinkers Blake often opposes in his writings – Bacon, Newton, and Locke – appear at the end of *Jerusalem* incorporated into his vision of Albion (98:9, E257).

²⁴ The spider in the illustration hangs from the G in the word “Golgonooza,” Blake’s city of art. As the physicality of Blake’s composite art itself continually reminds us, creative work is ever bound to the physical world, even those aspects of it that we might be tempted to conceive as

“low” (such as arachnids). This is one implication of Blake’s aphorism “Eternity is in love with the productions of time” (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 7:10, E36).

²⁵ The question of Blake’s Christianity – and what exactly it entails – is the subject of a long tradition of scholarly “Mental Fight.” While some, such as Robert Ryan, have argued that Blake’s beliefs may have been closer to orthodox Christianity than we might think, others, such as Harold Bloom, have characterized him practically as a secular humanist. At the very least, we might observe that Blake’s Christianity appears to be highly unusual and is expressed in idiosyncratic ways that raise many questions. It is worth noting that Blake identifies God as the “Divine Human Imagination” and declares in *Jerusalem*, “I know of no Christianity and of no other Gospel than the liberty both of body & mind to exercise the Divine Arts of Imagination” (E231).

Appendix A



Figure 1: The modeling of self-sacrifice for Albion (humanity), *Jerusalem*, Copy E, Plate 76¹⁷

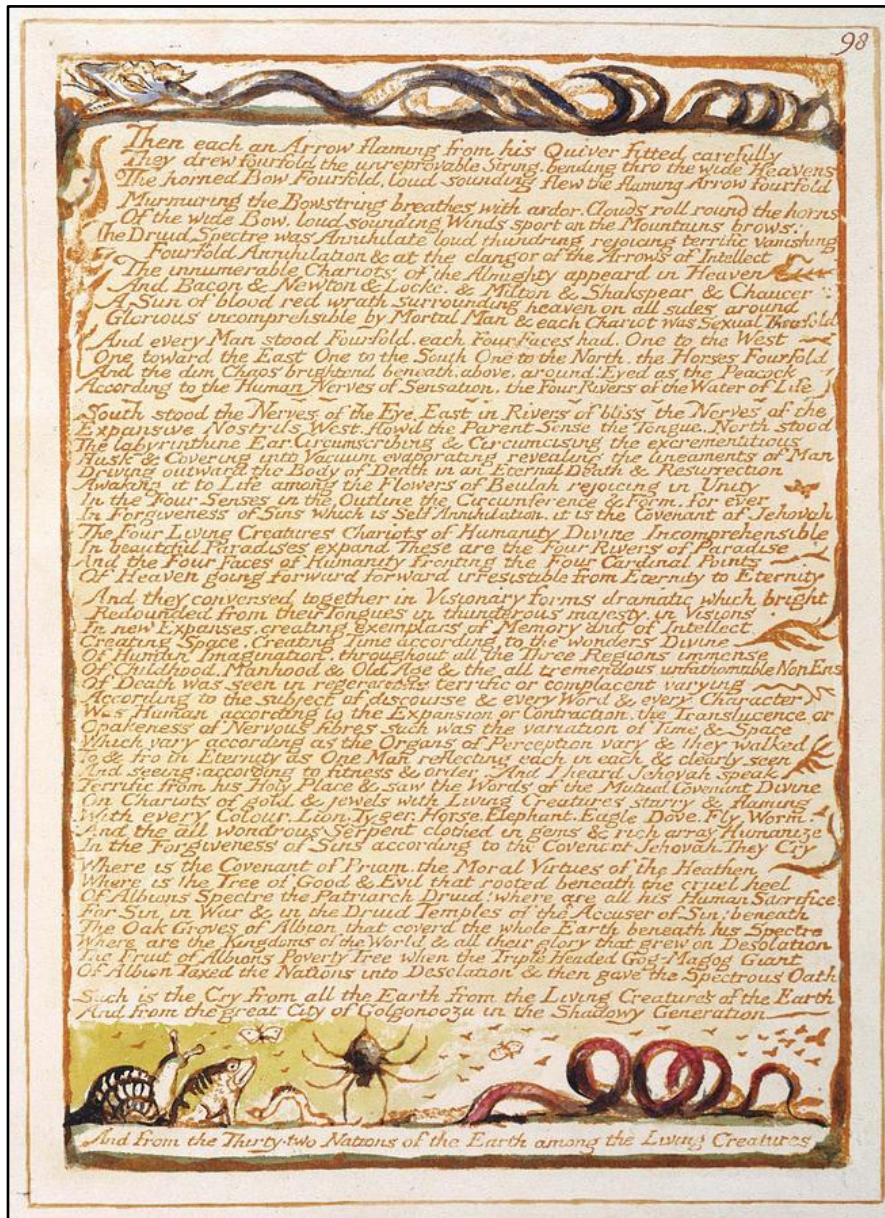


Figure 2: Jerusalem, Copy E, Plate 98, adorned with the “minute particulars” of the “Living Creatures of the Earth” (98:54, E258)

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