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William Blake and the Art of Engraving by Mei-Ying Sung
(review)

Alexander Gourlay

Studies in Romanticism, Volume 49, Number 3, Fall 2010, pp. 518-523 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/srm.2010.0022>



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Mei-Ying Sung. *William Blake and the Art of Engraving*. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009. Pp. x+220. £60/\$99.00.

In *William Blake and the Art of Engraving* Mei-Ying Sung struggles mightily to stretch some new facts about Blake's less-studied engraving procedures into a book-length exploration of his graphic techniques in general, but the result will edify only those expert enough to extract the few grains of fresh information from a boatload of chaff. There's nothing seriously wrong with Sung's fundamental proposition, which is that recent scholars have been so obsessed with establishing and theorizing about (and wrangling about) the processes used to create Blake's most innovative graphic works, the illuminated books, that they have neglected some of the evidence that is available to elucidate how he worked in conventional graphic media. As a minor wrangler in these discussions, I have to say that I believe there are very good reasons why relief etching, color printing, and the other unique processes used in the illuminated books have attracted so much more attention, but Sung is right that we should also carefully examine the plates and blocks that he used in conventional graphic processes. Even the linen clothes folded up are worth a good look, as long as we don't mistake them for the main attraction.

Sung has examined the neglected copper plates and blocks and found some important evidence there, and has also done a great deal of reading in the critical literature and poking around in archives, but very little of what she says about the significance of her discoveries rises above stating the obvious, and much falls well below that. And when she attempts, as she does repeatedly, to connect the new information to the debates about Blake's innovative graphic techniques and their implications, her arguments collapse into non sequiturs and spin, as if she is desperate to say something interesting even if it doesn't make sense.

At this point a bit of history is in order. One of the factions in the illuminated book wars, led by Robert N. Essick and later Joseph Viscomi, has held that Blake's graphic innovations in general were intended to maximize the "autographic"—"self-written"—aspects of production; that is, they were calculated to avoid the disconnections that conventional printing and publishing methodologies introduce between the creative imagination of the author/artist and published work. Illuminated books, in this account, reflect as directly as possible the imaginative visions of their creator, whereas conventional publishing of illustrated books divides poet from artist, and then interposes layer after layer of mechanical, uninspired effort—literal-minded illustration, copying and recopying of designs, laborious systematic engraving, editing texts, casting off and setting type, printing, assembling and binding books—between the imagining mind and the book

produced. The Essick/Viscomi account of illuminated publishing is distinguishable from but not incompatible with the Romantic artist's common assertion that a higher consciousness than that of the author's quotidian self contributed to his or her productions, and both Essick and Viscomi align such claims by Blake with their description of the motivations behind illuminated printing. They also emphasize that Blake did not have to produce finished designs, texts, or layouts before he worked on the printing plates, and that he maintained freedom to improvise and respond to contingencies at various stages of his process.

Sung supposes that "autographic" is the same as "automatic," as in "automatic writing" or "Surrealist automaticism," even though nothing in the Essick/Viscomi account of Blake's printing methodologies suggests that Blake was not in control of what he produced, that he never planned anything in advance, or that he never changed his mind as he worked. It is hard to tell whether she has simply misread Essick and Viscomi on her own or whether she has been misled by some similar confusion on the part of Michael Phillips, whose book *William Blake: The Creation of the Songs from Manuscript to Illuminated Printing* (2000) ignited the latest round of the illuminated books controversy. However she became confused (Sung is for the most part leery of Phillips' arguments), she has somehow concluded that Essick and Viscomi believe that Blake produced his works—all his works in all media—in some sort of creative trance, free of conscious intent, never sketching a plan, blotting a line or changing his mind.

Sung's first chapter, "The History of the Theory of Conception and Execution," provides the unsteady foundation for the whole book by arguing that the (supposed) views of Essick and Viscomi are traceable to the interest of an earlier Blake scholar, Ruthven Todd, in both Blake's innovative graphic techniques and Surrealist automaticism. Todd was one of the proponents of the "transfer theory," which held that Blake mechanically transferred his texts to the plate rather than writing them backwards directly on the plate, a theory that Essick and Viscomi took pains to disprove, so this suggestion is all the more preposterous. She concludes, "Todd's connection with Surrealism is reflected in his material and historical studies of Blake, in particular when analysing the relief etching techniques of the illuminated books, which came in turn from his friendship with Robertson and W. E. Moss. Essick, Viscomi and Phillips take their cue to expand the interpretation of Blake's ideas of relief etching without being very aware of the legacy of Todd's Surrealist ideas which are the historical origin, as I have shown, of their adaptation of the automatic writing techniques of printing so widespread amongst Todd/Surrealist contemporaries [sic]" (42).

The most significant new information in the book derives from Sung's examination of the surviving copper plates used to print Blake's intaglio

works, of which only plates for line engravings and mixed-method etching/engravings survive. In line engraving and etching/engraving the artist cuts or etches grooves or other marks in the polished surface of a copper plate; to print, the entire plate surface is inked, then wiped clean except for the ink in the grooves, which transfers as lines when the plate and paper are pressed together very tightly in a rolling press. To make changes that involve repositioning printed intaglio lines, the engraver must first restore the polished surface: shallow grooves or marks can be removed or diminished by burnishing, in which the printing surface of the copper plate is rubbed flat (or at least flatter) with a hard, smooth tool. If deep grooves are involved, the engraver may “knock up” the copper by beating on the back of the plate (the verso), thereby flattening the opposite surface (the recto) so that new grooves and marks can be cut in it.

Sung has found hammer and/or chisel marks on the backs of many of Blake’s surviving intaglio plates, including for example his largest one, which was used to print the 1810 etching/engraving after his 1808 tempera of *Sir Jeffery Chaucer and the Nine and Twenty Canterbury Pilgrims*. In the most authoritative previous study of this copper plate (by Essick), the marks here were described as the result of a preliminary process similar to “knocking up,” in which accidental nicks, dents or scratches in the polished surface of the recto were flattened by hammering on the verso before engraving began. Sung reports that although there are marks in the plate that may reflect such preliminary removal of defects, some of the hammering on the verso follows elements of the engraved design and/or corresponds to documented changes in versions of the printed image. This suggests, not very surprisingly, that at various points in the roughly 15 years during which Blake could have made substantial alterations in the plate, he used the usual method of doing so, knocking up (also known as *repoussage*). At one point (78) Sung dates all the knocking up in this plate to the interval between the third and fourth states, which would locate it in the 1820s, but she doesn’t explain why she thinks so—indeed, she also sees that some hammering probably took place before the earliest known state of the print and concludes that either this was evidence of hammering the plate flat before etching or engraving began, or evidence of a major change very early in the engraving process. Sung further notes that many other changes that are visible in the prints taken from the plate were effected without knocking up, probably by burnishing and re-engraving, but her understanding of burnishing seems confused in that she supposes that it involves wearing away copper rather than just smoothing it out (79).

Sung almost always refers to *repoussage* as a sign that Blake “made a mistake” of some kind, but she rarely tries to determine what the mistake could have been, or to distinguish a correction of an error from an instance

in which he simply changed his mind or had a better idea or wanted to add something after a section of the plate was deeply engraved or etched. She does connect one tiny revision that appears in the fourth state of the Chaucer print to a particular cluster of hammer marks, but in general she treats *repoussage* as evidence of “mistakes” rather than refinement or revision, and often reports the location of hammer marks without commenting on their possible purpose or significance. Of *Job*, Plate 1, for instance, she writes, “Hammer marks on the verso indicate that Blake had to make significant alterations to several areas of the plate, including the Gothic church at far left, the triangular harp on the tree, the circle of the moon, Job’s left shoulder and his lower drapery, a book on the knees of Job’s wife, the upper parts of all three daughters, the grass above the central sleeping sheep’s back, the drapery of the second right son and his face, and the draperies of the two sons at far left” (88). Although Sung reduces all this to evidence that Blake was not engraving “automatically,” the artist we see at work here is operating in essentially the same way that Essick and Viscomi saw him producing illuminated books: committing himself directly on the copper and then hammering and re-cutting the stubborn material until it conveyed his vision. Engraving is a different medium from relief etching, and the procedures for making changes are different, but Blake’s basic way of working seems to have been comparable, as Essick and Viscomi have argued.

It is very difficult to use the information in Sung’s book to test one’s own conjectures about revisions to the plates: there is no image provided of the hammer and chisel marks on the Chaucer plate, only an extensive, rather vague list of the general areas of the print that correspond to areas of *repoussage* on the plate verso—indeed, in the entire book there are only three obscure monochrome images of the versos of Blake’s *Job* plates, one image of the recto of a *Job* plate, an image of a platemaker’s mark, three more images of mostly non-Blake works, and diagrams of enigmatic marks on the backs of several of the *Job* plates. Even if the publisher set a limit of eight illustrations (if so, a miserly allocation for a book that is largely concerned with visual information), Sung could have provided much more useful information than she does, such as diagrams of chisel and hammer marks superimposed upon small images of the printed works, or charts in which specific major changes in the successive printed versions of an image are correlated with patterns of *repoussage* or discernable evidence of bur-nishing.

The discussion of the *Job* plates is by far the most thorough, and as noted above, it is at least sparsely illustrated, including useful images of the front and back of the plate for *Job* 7 printed on the recto and verso of a single leaf in the book. Sung reports extensive knocking up in these plates, especially

in respect to the lettering, but her most important claim is that some lines in Plates 14 and 16 appear to have been etched—previous scholars have believed, crediting the testimony of John Linnell, the sponsor of the project, that every one of the *Job* engravings was a scrupulously anachronistic exercise in pure engraving, and that the plates were untouched by acid (except perhaps for a brief dip to roughen the surface for drawing). Sung's discovery, if it is confirmed, does not greatly alter the traditional understanding of the *Job* project, since the overwhelming majority of the work would still be pure engraving, but it is an interesting claim and would bolster Sung's thesis that printing plates can reveal things that the printed images do not. (I saw no lines in the impressions of plates 14 or 16 in the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, that were more likely etched than engraved, but there might conceivably be clearer evidence in the copper plates, which I have not seen. Essick points out to me in private correspondence that it would hardly save labor to etch a few dozen lines on two plates, since it would take much longer to prepare the plates for etching than to simply engrave the lines with a burin. And although blunt-ended lines of uniform thickness are more characteristic of etching, and swelling tapered lines of engraving, it is possible [though not equally easy] to produce lines of almost any shape with a burin.)

The "Conclusion" to this chapter focuses on the implications of the many changes that Blake made to the lettering and layout in the *Job* plates, some of which involved *repoussage*. There are many different issues about revisions in both composition (layout) and verbal content that arise here, raising profoundly different questions—but in trying to connect the *Job* plates to the controversies involving Blake's better-known visual/verbal works, the illuminated books, Sung hopelessly tangles the many different kinds of changes that occurred and exacerbates the confusion further by adducing an assortment of irrelevant canards from the other debate. Needless to say, all the evidence of "mistakes" and changes of mind that are recorded in the hammer blows of *repoussage* are trotted out to discredit the straw man of automaticism, and Blake's extensive revision of lettering in the plates is even adduced as evidence that he was not as good at writing backwards on plates as Essick and Viscomi say he was (116–17). This is a silly argument in any case, but even sillier when we recognize that one can't "write" at all with a burin, the engraver's tool, because it must be pushed through each stroke, moving always forward in line with the handle of the tool. The letters used in the *Job* plates are related in letter shape to those of his usual "roman" mirror writing, and the letters were executed backwards on the plates, but they were constructed in a completely different, much more laborious manner, with multiple strokes required to form each letter element. Whether Blake lettered his illuminated texts with a brush, quill, or

etcher's needle, all these tools allow true writing because they can be moved in any direction, and most mirror-written letters use at most one stroke per letter element.

The book is marred by repetition (there is a full explanation of *repoussage* on page 85, long after the subject has come up repeatedly), inattentive editing, and whole chapters that might better have been placed on line for consultation by those untroubled by too much information: the chapter on English copper plate makers in Blake's day (and long before and long after), seems particularly prodigal of paper, and though some of the information may be useful to someone someday, the only payoff in the context of this book is the observation that ". . . far from being an isolated visionary artist, [Blake] was very much a part of a changing economy of opportunity and capital comprising the central London book and print trade at this time" (119). The chapter on wood engraving is somewhat more edifying, especially in suggesting why Blake's relief blocks to illustrate Robert John Thornton's edition of Virgil inspired such disparate reactions from Blake's circle (who worshipped them) and from contemporary professionals in woodcut book illustration (who were appalled at Blake's obliviousness to the graphic conventions of the medium). And yet much of this chapter seems arbitrarily placed in this book, not because wood engravings are usually a relief (rather than an intaglio) medium, but because only a portion of it directly concerns Blake's printing blocks. There is a major discovery here, however: it has usually been assumed that Blake, like Bewick and most other wood-engravers of the period, worked in the strong end-grain of the wood, but Sung has found that several of his blocks use the longitudinal grain (and were apparently sawed to be used that way); that may be another reason why "the wood engravers" shouted "this will never do" when they saw Blake's efforts (146).

Alexander Gourlay
Rhode Island School of Design

John Strachan. *Advertising and Satirical Culture in the Romantic Period*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. 368. \$99.00.

Studying the poetry of the consumer marketplace and its surprisingly frequent intersection with "literary" or "high" culture is an oftentimes lonely, thankless endeavor despite the serious questions it asks: How has poetry, the most culturally prestigious of the literary arts, been used to sell not just products but an entire consumerist ideology? How has "literary" poetry positioned itself as oppositional to the consumer marketplace yet imitated,