

BLAKE ON LANGUAGE, POWER,
AND SELF-ANNIHILATION

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AND SELF-ANNIHILATION

John H. Jones

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Dedicated to my parents, H. Boyd Jones and
Sandra B. Jones, and to my wife, Alison Brooks Jones

*And the Divine voice came from the Furnaces, as multitudes without
Number! the voices of the innumerable multitudes of Eternity.*

—William Blake, *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*

*Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual
person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in
the process of their dialogic interaction.*

—Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*

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PREFACE

The idea for this book was prompted many years ago by a footnote in W. J. T. Mitchell's *Blake's Composite Art*. In his discussion of *The Book of Thel*, Mitchell refers to Blake's term "self-annihilation"—which Blake uses only much later in his career—to explain that Thel resists the Lilly, Cloud, and Clod of Clay because she does not give herself to experience and that she lacks the faith, spontaneity, and selflessness of the other characters. In the footnote to this discussion, Mitchell acknowledges the anachronism of his use of "self-annihilation," saying that *Thel* raises "problems which Blake could solve only by writing more poems, and which the reader can solve only by reading on through the illuminated books" (87). While I don't know that I, as a reader, actually "solve" any problems, I take up Mitchell's suggestion and attempt to trace a trajectory in Blake's thinking and poetry that leads him to his concept of "self-annihilation." Although the work of many other scholars have profoundly influenced my work, it starts by following a direction already mapped out by W. J. T. Mitchell, as is the case with so many works on Blake.

Along the way, I have been the grateful beneficiary of much advice, help, and support. Michael S. Macovski has helped me immensely throughout the development of this project, and his tireless enthusiasm has truly been an inspiration. Constance W. Hassett, Mark L. Caldwell, Philip T. Sicker, and Gerry O'Sullivan offered crucial suggestions and invaluable guidance that have significantly influenced the shaping of my ideas. Thanks are also due to Stephen Leo Carr and Josephine Ann McQuail for their commentary on and assistance with earlier essays that became the foundation for this book. In the exchange of ideas at conferences, a number of colleagues offered many valuable suggestions and advice, including John B. Pierce, Peter Otto, John E. Grant, Jennifer Davis Michael, R. Paul Yoder, Steve Clark, Jason Whittaker, and David M. Baulch. I am deeply indebted to the superb staff of the Houston Cole Library, especially Harry Nuttall, Debra Deering-Barrett, and George Whitesel, who generously offered invaluable research support. I am also grateful for the support of my English department colleagues, especially Bob Felgar, Steve Whitton, Joanne Gates, Bill Hug, Randy

Davis, Carmine Di Biase, and Teresa Reed, who helped me handle tempestuous situations, turn errant winds favorable, and wade treacherous waters, and for the timely and always reliable clerical support from Cynthia Weaver and Susan Hurst. I owe great thanks to the editors at Palgrave Macmillan, Brigitte Shull and Lee Norton, who were always incredibly helpful, offering expert advice with grace and patience, and to the anonymous reader for Palgrave Macmillan, whose insightful suggestions have made this book stronger.

I am also grateful to the editors of *Modern Language Studies* and the *Colby Quarterly* for granting permission to reprint previously published material. Revised portions of the Introduction and Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 appeared originally in “‘Self-Annihilation’ and Dialogue in Blake’s Creative Process: *Urizen, Milton, Jerusalem*,” in *Modern Language Studies* 24.2 (1994): 3–10. A revised version of a section of Chapter 3 originally appeared as “Printed Performance and Reading *The Book[s] of Urizen*: Blake’s Bookmaking Process and the Transformation of Late Eighteenth-Century Print Culture” in *Colby Quarterly* 35 (1999): 73–89. I am also thankful for the generosity of the Rare Book and Special Collections Division of the Library of Congress, which owns the original versions of the illustrations in this book.

Finally, I owe the greatest debt and express the deepest gratitude to my wife, Alison Brooks Jones, who is also my best friend and most helpful critic. Without her continuous support and unwavering encouragement, this book, and so much else, would never have been possible.

As an aid to readers, I offer a brief guide to my handling of frequently cited works. All quotes from the works of William Blake are taken from *The Complete Poetry and Prose*, edited by David V. Erdman. The following are abbreviations for titles of Blake’s works cited in the text:

ARO	<i>All Religions Are One</i>
E	<i>Miscellaneous prose or commentary from the Erdman edition</i>
Eur	<i>Europe: A Prophecy</i>
FZ	<i>The Four Zoas</i>
GA	<i>The Ghost of Abel</i>
J	<i>Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion</i>
M	<i>Milton: A Poem in Two Books</i>
MHH	<i>The Marriage of Heaven and Hell</i>
NNR	<i>There is No Natural Religion</i>
SIE	<i>The Songs of Innocence and of Experience</i>
U	<i>The [First] Book of Urizen</i>
VLJ	<i>A Vision of the Last Judgment</i>

Paranthesical references for the poetry will include an abbreviation of the title, plate and line numbers, and the page number in the Erdman edition preceded by E. References for the prose will show the page number preceded by E.

Frequently cited works by Mikhail Bakhtin are abbreviated as follows:

PDP *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*
"PSG" "The Problem of Speech Genres"