

Sensing the Words

Text, Sofie Marhaug
Translation, Stehn Mortensen

I was in a Printing house in Hell & saw the method in which knowledge is
transmitted from generation to generation.

—William Blake

The materiality of books—their surface and texture, yes, their very sensuousness—is often subordinate to their contents: the writing, the words that comprise them. At least in comparative literature. Not so odd, perhaps. Literary texts take a myriad of shapes and forms. Take the countless versions of The Bible, dubbed the “book of books” among the faithful. And with the advent of computer technologies and the internet, the materiality of texts has changed radically. We don’t even need paper in order to read literature today, only a screen: a computer, a tablet or a smartphone.

Nevertheless, the physical formats still have a role to play in this digital age of ours. Digital tools, too, are physical objects. Our first encounter with a text is always tied to some sort of object, like a roll of paper, a book, an audiobook or an e-book.

Fetishizing the Physical Formats

In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, discusses sexual perversions.¹ His definition is both more inclusive and exclusive than what one might expect: sexual practices not serving a reproductive function are to be seen as perverse. To illustrate his point, Freud writes that a kiss that lasts too long is a form of perversion (2001, 150).

If we transpose Freud’s definition from one sphere (the sexual) onto another (that of books), one could say that the purpose of having books is to read them. Buying a book is meant to end in the act of reading, just as sex is meant to end in reproduction. Any dealings with books where its materiality takes precedence over its contents may thus be seen as

a perverse activity. The bibliophile collector fetishizes the book as an object not in order to read it; she makes the book itself the prime object of desire. Thus, the material on which the writing can be read becomes the focal point, at the expense of the production of meaning through words.

Bibliophilia was like many sexual perversions a Victorian concept, described in books like Thomas Frognall Dibdin's *Bibliomania; or Book Madness: A Bibliographical Romance* (1807). The same idea recurs in the work of Max Nordaus, *Degeneration* (1895), where decadent writers are categorized as collectors. Giving a diagnosis to book collectors may sound like somewhat of an exaggeration to modern ears. Yet, this diagnosis does tell us something about the relationship between contents and physical form: the words (contents) are favored, while the material (form) is of lesser importance. Getting caught up in the materiality of books ultimately becomes a pathological and perverse activity.

Again we encounter the opposition between contents and material, writing and book, and again arises the question of whether one may really be separated from the other. If we go even farther back in time, to religious texts, things may not be so simple.

The Tasteful Book

In The Book of Ezekiel, one of the prophetic books in The Old Testament, God reveals himself to the priest Ezekiel, who in turn is set on a mission to speak the Lord's word to the defiant Israelites. The story takes place around 600–500 years B.C., when God's chosen people lived in exile and worshipped other gods than the Jewish one. Ezekiel is ordered to proclaim the wrath of God to the Israelites, and to other peoples.

Here we encounter an angry and jealous God—traits one would otherwise identify as distinctly human or even base and low-minded. At one point, for example, God discusses the once Jewish cities of Samaria and Jerusalem as if they were two women, Ohola and Oholiba, and as if they were his wives. Ohola and Oholiba have been unfaithful, just as the Israelites in Samaria and Jerusalem have worshipped foreign gods. God is envious. They have committed adultery, and worse still: they didn't even charge money for their licentiousness. Ohola and Oholiba, it seems, truly enjoyed submitting themselves to

foreign powers: “There she lusted after her lovers, whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose emission was like that of horses. So you longed for the lewdness of your youth, when in Egypt your bosom was caressed and your young breasts fondled.” (Ezekiel 23:20–21)²

It is through his prophet Ezekiel that God presents these smutty and misogynous portrayals, before at last God’s mercy (along with meticulous descriptions of Jerusalem’s new temple) is conveyed through his preaching.

How, then, does Ezekiel gain access to the word of God? Well, in an explicitly sensory manner. In the beginning of the story, God bids Ezekiel open his mouth and eat a scroll of paper, covered with writing on both sides. “Then he said to me, ‘Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.’ So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.” (Ezekiel, 3:3)

The next chapters, like most of the book, contain very harsh words from God’s judgment of his own and other peoples, before the Israelites again are blessed with a city and a temple of their own in the latter part of the book. Despite all of this, to Ezekiel the priest, these at times unmerciful words seem to taste as sweet as honey. The majority of God’s speeches also end in different variants of the following statement: “And they will know that I am the LORD”. Ezekiel gets to know and feel the sweetness in God’s word, his people gets to know and feel the harsh judgment from God, before his grace and mercy are finally bestowed on them.

The word of God, his very presence on earth, is not like other forms of speech or writing; God besieges the entire human sensory apparatus, shaking an entire people. A divine dimension is added to the merging of speech and writing, book and flesh, as we read it in The New Testament, in The Gospel of John, which opens with the following lines: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (John 1:1)

Later in The Book of Ezekiel, God seems largely to be caught up in bodily imagery. God seeks to punish the Israelites with death for having worshipped other deities than the Jewish one. Those who are to be killed, left scattered around in the city, “are the meat and

this city is the pot” (Ezekiel 11:7). His future people are to be of a different fiber: “They will return to it and remove all its vile images and detestable idols. I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh.” (Ezekiel 11:18–19)

The divine flesh culminates in The New Testament with the personage of Jesus. God is incarnated in Christ, he becomes (human) flesh, or in Latin: *carne*. In The Book of Ezekiel, however, nothing is said about the coming of a Messiah. So this is hardly the best example of an Old Testament book with evident ties to The New Testament. Still, the language of the old and the new covenant both have in common the fusion of high and low, of spirit and flesh, or as God, with the help of Ezekiel, puts it: “The lowly will be exalted and the exalted will be brought low.” (Ezekiel 21:26)

To sum up, we could say that The Book of Ezekiel and certain other parts of the Bible bring the spiritual and the sensuous together. The sensuous and vulgar is especially salient in descriptions and literary imagery. At times, these depictions are expressly tied to the uttermost exalted, to God himself, as when Ezekiel is handed his prophesy by way of his mouth, stomach, and—as we might suspect—intestines. Perhaps we can even read the entire Book of Ezekiel as a tale structured around a single man’s digestive system.

In Hell to Learn the Art of Printing

So it is no coincidence that the poet and printmaker, William Blake (1757-1827), has the first person narrator in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793) encounter the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel: “The Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel dined with me.”³ Blake was fascinated by the Christian prophecies. In his books and prints, he repeatedly makes use of biblical motifs, from The Book of Job, The Book of Revelation and other shattering tales that brings out the great contrasts in God’s creation.

Blake himself attempted to fuse what at the time were two separate spheres: imagery and writing. In the 16th century, certain workshops printed text, while others specialized in illustrations. Blake sought innovation; he wrote and drew on the very same cobber plate, then selected simple pigments with which he carefully covered the copper.⁴ He also

printed his books himself. As opposed to his contemporaries, romantic poets such as Percy Bysshe Shelley or William Wordsworth, Blake was in close contact with the physical and mechanical production of his own poetry. As such, he was in direct contact with “the Satanic Mills,” as he writes somewhere in *Jerusalem*. He wrote, drew and printed his own art, with the help of a revolutionary method he himself had devised.

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Blake’s thoughts on theology, politics and printmaking all come together in a mystical manner. The work is complex, with a lyrical preamble (“The Argument”), a prosaic main body (“The Voice of the Devil,” “A Memorable Fancy,” “Proverbs of Hell” and once again “A Memorable Fancy,”) before the concluding poem, “Song of Liberty.” The work is also in some ways an epic tale, in that the first person narrator undertakes a descent into the underworld, where he collects proverbs, which is the first section of the main part. His literature can also be associated with the revolutionary spirit of the time, found in the political and visionary aspects of the poem: a promise of what is to come. The entire text is bordered with decorations and illustrations of naked people, fantastical animals and other biblical figures.

The first person meets Ezekiel and Isaiah first after the passage leading out of Hell, in the “memorable” part. He asks them if they were not afraid of speaking the word of God, of being misunderstood or mistaken for con men. To this Isaiah replies that he neither saw nor heard God, but that “my senses discover'd the infinite in every thing.” Afterwards, both Isaiah and Ezekiel confess that persuasion was indeed central to preaching their prophecies. Just as, one could add, the ability to exercise influence is essential in all poetry and rhetoric. In Blake’s work, Ezekiel even calls the god of the Israelites “a Poetic Genius.”

After dinner, he starts asking more amusing questions, such as why Isaiah walked around naked and barefoot year after year, or why Ezekiel ate the same bread for almost 400 days and switched between sleeping on his left and right side for just as many nights. Isaiah cites Diogenes and Greek customs in antiquity; Ezekiel refers to North American tribes that performed rituals similar to his own.

The conversation between the poet and the prophets seems almost blasphemous. First they portray God as a poetic seducer, a demagogue, who appeals to the senses. Then they

explain and justify their own ascetic practices with reference to hedonistic ones in unholy foreign lands. If we also take into account the work's proverbs from Hell (as if there were wisdom to be found in the Devil) *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* almost seems a blatant attempt at Satanic heresy.

Things are, however, not as simple as they might seem. After all, Blake makes use of elements already present in the biblical texts in order to explore the entirety of the Christian universe. The Bible encompasses both a Heaven and a Hell. According to philosopher and theologian Thomas J.J. Altizer, who is also a leading thinker of Death of God Theology, Blake has discovered that Satan is but a variant of God. Altizer admits to Blake being blasphemous, but holds that he is still, at the same time, a believer. For Blake shares opinion of Friedrich Nietzsche, that God is dead. In Christianity, God dies through the crucifixion, cf. Christ's desperate statement: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46)

Blake conjures up the boundless wealth of this creation, leaving all its contradictions and paradoxes intact. Altizer contends that this is a form of Hegelian dialectics, where antagonistic tensions are allowed to run free, and further, that this basic principle takes form early in Blake's authorship, precisely in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "Already in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, immediately after having declared that a new heaven is begun, Blake set forth a dialectical ground for his vision" (Altizer, 2000, 159).

Hell is here the dialectical counterpart to the Heaven that is to come. A mutually dependent yet incompatible pair of opposites not only makes out the title of Blake's work, but can also be found in the Devil's insight and in the proverbs of Hell. Some of these formulations are reminiscent of the relation between flesh and spirit. Blake's Devil seeks to undo fundamental misunderstandings in readings of the Bible, and his first disagreement speaks exactly to the relation between spirit and matter: "Man has no Body distinct from his Soul; for that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age." The soul does not take precedence over the body; the one thing *is* in the other. Further, the proverbs of Hell contain a series of commandments about how one must sense, enjoy, experience, and that these aspects of the creation also are part of the divine order:

The road to excess leads to the palace of wisdom.

[...]

You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough.

[...]

Exuberance is Beauty.

More could yet be mentioned.

In Blake's own artwork, also the words (the spirit) and the material onto which they are printed (the matter) come together. The writing, decor and images are all printed onto the same material and are inexorably tied together, something which also resonates in Blake's prose. One place we can read that the first person narrator goes to «a Printing house in Hell» in order to learn how to pass down knowledge from one generation to the next. Moreover, printmaking in Hell emphasizes the dissolution of the dichotomy body/soul: "But first the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul, is to be expunged: this I shall do, by printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid." Blake's graphic invention, where literature and illustrations melt into a single whole, may thus be seen in relation to another hellish insight, namely that spirit and matter are inescapably interconnected. Just as the creation is related to the senses, to our body, neither writing nor image, neither words nor the material onto which they are printed, may be separated from one another: the exalted is inscribed into the lowly.

Text and Texture

William Blake not only wrote about the origin of creation in the traditional sense, he also wrote about his own bookmaking. Through his books, he perhaps tried to recreate his own visionary writing, a cosmos where contradictions are closely tied together, like a marriage between Heaven and Hell. Blake, in this project, rethinks sensuousness and confers just as much importance to it as he does spirituality, partially in opposition to earlier, contemporary and later Bible doctrines.

This Victorian perversion is hardly a diagnosis in Blake's literary universe, but rather a natural part of the divine world order. Instead of commandments about moderation, the proverbs of Hell encourage the experience of more than that which is necessary. The collector, who fetishizes the physical books rather than their abstract contents, is a person who follows such Satanic words of wisdom. These injunctions, as well as different depictions of collectors, may perhaps seem ridiculous, as extreme antitheses to the Ten Commandments. Nevertheless, they show a human desire for sensing the words, a longing for the tactile perception of the text, as well as the insatiable wish to horde and collect objects.

In a way, this sensuous experience is fulfilled in Ezekiel's case: he gets to sense the very word of God, sweet like honey. His otherwise ascetic life and godly sermons enter only after this watershed experience.

In light of stories like these, it becomes apparent that Blake's imaginative literary universe actually exists within a Christian horizon, and that body and soul need not strictly be organized as a hierarchy within biblical texts.

If we study Blake's artwork, with all its references to Christianity, we may find the key to understanding the initial problem found in the relationship between the text and its texture, the contents of books and the forms they take. Etymologically, we may also note that both "text" and "texture" have the same origin, the Latin *textere*, meaning "to weave." Both writing and surface are interwoven, both separately and as a greater whole. The text is also, like a woven fabric, a craft. Like other technologies, a craft changes with time: writing re-emerges in new forms and variants, in everything from the woven fabric to the printing press to the computer to the World Wide Web.

Blake does not necessarily reduce text and texture to one and the same thing in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Such simplifications once again run the risk of privileging the words over their physical representation. What Blake instead does is to stress the texture, the sensuous experience of the text. He accomplishes this both in his own prints, which combine the experiences of different senses, and in the proverbs that tell us about the entirety of creation, where wisdom is unattainable when desire and excess are left out of

the equation. These prints, together with the proverbs, make up a kind of counter-language, an alternative story to dominant Christian interpretations. Blake's journey into Hell in no way occludes the Paradise that is to come. The descent into the biblical abyss comes in addition, since Heaven mirrors Hell. They form a mutually dependent union, like words and the material onto which they are written also form a pair of opposites, an interwoven unity.

That is why our need to sense the words, this yearning for the material book, always remains. We may pretend that technology makes the surface superfluous, and label collectors as perverse, but the word always finds a form, no matter if this form tastes sweet like honey, or bitter like copper.

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Notes:

¹ I have listed the original publication years for these works in the main text, so that the reader may more easily place these works in a historical chronology. The year of publication for the editions used here is available in the bibliography.

² I have opted to use the New International Version of the Bible from 2011.

³ All references to Blake have been taken from the online Blake Archive, where also his prints are available. See the bibliography for the full citation.

⁴ In a video made by the British Library, Michael Philips shows Blake's graphic craftsmanship in an informative fashion: <http://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/videos/william-blake-printing-process> [last downloaded 7/19/2016]