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**Channeling William Blake:
A Response to Roger Whitson**

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Roger Whitson's "There is No William Blake: @autoblake's Algorithmic Condition" gives a fascinating look into Whitson's process of creating a Twitterbot that could "mimic the literary style of William Blake." Whitson joins Mike Goode in questioning the "composite approach" that sees Blake's creations as a "closed, composite book of art"—an approach that owes much to the work of Joseph Viscomi and Robert Essick and to the prominence of the *William Blake Archive*. @autoblake, by contrast, treats Blake's work as an "open disintegrable text," breaking Blake's writings down into motes of a few words each, rearranging them, and releasing them into the Twittersverse.

I admire the Blakean ambition of @autoblake: approaching, absorbing, and remixing Blake's words using technologies of reproduction, revision and transmission seems analogous to William and Catherine's work with copper plates, ink, and rolling press—tools which allowed for both reproduction and creative alteration simultaneously. Blake placed himself, his wife, and that press in a creative line reaching back through history: as Robert Essick and Jenijoy La Belle note in a forthcoming essay on "The Blakes at Their Press," William adorned one of his watercolor illustrations to Dante's *Divine Comedy* with what is likely a small sketch of himself and Catherine

working at their press.¹ By positioning the sketch alongside representations of poetry and painting, Blake “elevates what was taken in Blake’s day as a mere craft into the higher realm of the arts” and places his work within a historical tradition that includes the masterpieces of Dante and others.² The impulse to read Blake as timeless—as a visionary, a prophet, or a voice crying in the wilderness—is thus grounded within Blake’s own works, with their “attitudes towards temporal escapement,” as Whitson writes. Creative manipulations of Blake’s work, including the many poetic, musical, and filmic interpretations he has inspired as well as @autoblake, stand squarely within an atemporal Blakean tradition in which Blake inherits and transforms the techniques and ideas of the past and is, in turn, inherited and transformed by those who read, view, and interpret his art.

Whitson describes the process of writing and fine-tuning the @autoblake bot:

I wanted it to create novel phrases from Blake’s poetry and prose that nevertheless reproduce something like Blakean syntax.... It took quite a while to find the proper combination of character number and Markov order to create interesting Blakean phrases. Some of the early tweets from @autoblake too often ended in the middle of a thought.... The constant linguistic repetition made it difficult at times to get the program to stop repeating certain words.

This description reveals not only the iterative nature of the programming work but also the way Whitson’s own voice and interpretative decisions became part of the act of bringing a Blakean voice

¹ See the pencil sketch in the lower left-hand quadrant of the design at <http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=but812.1.wc.101&java=no>

² Essick, Robert N., and Jenijoy La Belle. “The Blakes at Their Press.” Unpublished manuscript. Published version forthcoming in *Blake/ An Illustrated Quarterly*.

to Twitter. Not only did Whitson want the bot to sound “Blakean,” but he also wanted it to be “interesting,” to speak in somewhat complete thoughts, and to be repetitive but not too repetitive. The process Whitson describes—of tweaking the algorithm over and over again to get just the right voice—evokes all sorts of scenes: an audio producer turning knobs to tune a vocalist’s sound, a radio listener nudging the dial to hear the baseball game from a too-distant station, a safecracker listening for the tumblers to click into place, or—to use a less technological but no less appropriate analogy—a medium groping for the voices of the spirits. As he describes how he finessed @autoblake, Whitson suggests that the algorithm “processes authorial identity,” and he asks “What does it mean for a tweet to be Blakean?” But the bot, it seems to me, is as much “Whitsonian” as it is “Blakean.” Just as the music producer adds her own style to the finished piece and the medium facilitates communication with the dead, Whitson has collaborated with Blake (and with Erdman and Hilton and with the creators of the Python scripting language and the programmers at Twitter) to bring forth a voice that sounds “like” Blake.

But then, of course, there is the question, as there always is, of which Blake we mean. Whitson used as his textbase Nelson Hilton’s digital edition of David Erdman’s *Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* but excluded Blake’s letters and his annotations on books he owned. Thus the “Blake” we hear through @autoblake sounds most like the prophetic Blake we know from the illuminated books and *The Four Zoas*. But we lose the voice of the more pugnacious, pedestrian Blake—the one who complained of poverty and illness in letters to friends and scolded Bishop Watson for “defend[ing] Antichrist” in the margins of that author’s *Apology for the Bible*. Personally I’m dying to know whether @autoblake has ever used the word “Snubby”—as in “Jesus Christ was a Snubby” (from Blake’s

Notebook).³ Should Whitson wish to continue the project of building Blakebots, it might be interesting to channel a diversity of Blakes by segmenting the textbase to create Blake-as-letter-writer, Blake-as-annotator, Blake-as-manuscript-poet, Blake-as-illuminated-book-poet, and so forth. Perhaps these Blakes could be trained to tweet at one another so that we as scholars, fans, and inheritors of the Romantic project might hear a cacophony of Blakean voices from beyond the grave.

³ See www.english.uga.edu/~nhilton/Blake/blaketxt1/miscellaneous.html, marker N-p64; E695 |).