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## Blake, Ludwig Meidner and Expressionism<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Ludwig Meidner (1884-1966), who belonged to the mystical wing of German Expressionism, was forced to leave Germany in 1939. It was during his exile years that Meidner's new style matured, and this ran alongside his on-going appreciation of Blake. My article examines the British context of Meidner's engagement with Blake and outlines how he understood Blake's art in a cultural setting shaped by Neo-Romanticism. In parallel, it examines how Meidner's art relates to the symbolism and existential reality of exile.

**Key words:** Blake, colour, Elijah, Expressionism, J. P. Hodin, John Piper, *Newton*, Herbert Read, Surrealism, Tate Gallery, Urizen, Visionary Heads

The German-Jewish artist Ludwig Meidner, who belonged to the mystical wing of Expressionism, deepened his interest in Blake when he was forced to leave Germany in 1939.<sup>2</sup> It was during his exile in London that Meidner's style was modified by a sympathetic engagement with the Blake 'cult', as mediated by key writers and artists in the 1940s. This article examines Meidner's representation of Blake and assesses the impact of Blake's vision on Meidner during this important period of creativity. Meidner was in his fifties when he reached London and for fourteen years lived in hopeless poverty on the outer fringes of the art world; despite these hardships he was very productive. Meidner occupied himself with representing religious figures, many of which were displayed when he and wife exhibited their works at the Ben Uri Gallery in 1949. The Ben Uri, founded in the East End of London by Jewish immigrant artists in 1915, had reopened in 1944 in order to promote Jewish artists. *Ludwig Meidner/Else Meidner* was, according to Meidner, a 'second class funeral.'<sup>3</sup> The exhibition, which included thirteen charcoal drawings from the London period, was largely ignored, although two notices linked Meidner to Blake.<sup>4</sup>

The connection between Blake and Meidner exists, in the first instance, through three images housed at his studio in Marxheim, where he worked after his return to Germany in 1953: a photograph of Blake's life-mask,<sup>5</sup> Thomas Phillips' portrait and the large colour print *God Judging Adam*, then known as *Elijah about to ascend in the Chariot of Fire*.<sup>6</sup> Meidner had come across Phillips' image of Blake in the National Portrait Gallery and had the opportunity to study Blake's works at the Tate Gallery, especially during the

first major post-war Blake exhibition of 1947. Meidner was drawn to Blake's large colour prints, which had been presented to the Tate by the artist, designer and connoisseur W. Graham Robertson in 1939. Much can be made of the old title of *God Judging Adam* since if Meidner took the figure in the chariot to be Elijah rather than God, then he may have interpreted the print's symbolism through the particular circumstances of his life. In any regard, we know that Meidner had a life-long interest in prophetic culture.<sup>7</sup> My article adds to the claim that Meidner identified with the figure of Blake by examining how he co-opted aspects of Blakean vision in *The Cabalistic Rabbi* and *Assembly of Insects*, two important, but neglected, works from the 1940s.<sup>8</sup>

As an Expressionist, Meidner was fascinated with colour; it is not surprising to learn that his engagement with Blake began with the large colour prints.<sup>9</sup> Meidner associated these works with an Expressionistic aesthetic, an impression heightened by his reading of the catalogue of the Blake exhibition held at the Tate Gallery in 1947, and supported by their description by the Rossetti brothers in Gilchrist's famous biography, which Meidner read in 1945. The large colour prints epitomized Blake's exceptional power and creativity for a range of writers and writers in the 1940s including Herbert Read, John Piper and Ruthven Todd, all of whom rejected earlier accounts where they are dismissed as disorderly or confused. The grandiose energy of these designs spoke directly to Meidner, and transported him to a position in which he could move between Expressionist and Neo-Romantic models of art. Similar arguments about Blake's creativity were advanced by Read, whose modelling of Blake as prophet of modern art, is discussed in this volume by David Hopkins. An art critic and man of letters, Read asserted his authority in the British art world through editorship of *The Burlington Magazine*.<sup>10</sup> Acutely aware of the difficulties of exile artists,<sup>11</sup> Read organized an exhibition entitled *Twentieth-Century German Art* at the New Burlington Galleries in 1938.<sup>12</sup> Later Meidner owned Read's *Contemporary British Art* (1951) and signed and dated his copy to April 18, 1953. The larger context here is that Meidner was interested in surrealist modes of conception, expression and execution. This is consistent with Read's reading of modern art as electrifying combination of fluid and eternal forms.<sup>13</sup> Both he and Meidner believed that Blake's mental energy was preserved and copied intact in his kinetic designs. This vision of Blake's creativity was shared by other Blake enthusiasts and promoters of contemporary art, and formed the bedrock of ideas in John Piper's important *British Romantic Artists* (1942), which Meidner acquired in 1943. Piper's argument is too rich to summarize here, but it is important to note that he identified Blake and his followers as expressive alternatives to academic model of art developed by the more successful artists in the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup>

This article includes two case studies. The first case study addresses *The Cabalistic Rabbi* (1947), a charcoal drawing, which I take to be a direct response to Blake's *Newton* and *The Book of Urizen*. When in London,

Meidner's interest in mysticism intensified; he stopped reading literature altogether, studied the Bible and learnt about the Kabbalah.<sup>15</sup> My argument is that Meidner had a conception, a positive one, of the magical nature of art, an idea enriched by his imaginative engagement with Blake and Blake criticism. We know that he discovered Blake in 1932.<sup>16</sup> It is likely that he knew of W.B. Yeats' occultic reading of Blake before he came to London<sup>17</sup> since the three-volume *The Works of William Blake: Poetic, Symbolic and Critical* (1893), which Yeats co-authored with E. J. Ellis, was discussed in the ground-breaking studies of Rudolf Kassner and Helene Richter.<sup>18</sup> The second case study considers *Assembly of Insects* (c.1945-50), a watercolour which is part of a cycle of insect-drawings. This cycle tends to be discussed in terms of caricature and as an example of Meidner's critique of human relationships.<sup>19</sup> I do not want to be understood as speaking in denigration of these readings. Nonetheless, it is important to consider how *Assembly of Insects* relates to the narratives of artistic creativity linking Meidner's 'circle' to Blake-friendly networks in this period. For instance, we know that Meidner's interest in Blake was shared with J. P. Hodin, who had extensive knowledge of modern art in its European and British settings. Meidner and Hodin may have reflected on Blake's Visionary Heads, or the prominence given to *The Ghost of a Flea* in the catalogue of the Tate exhibition of 1947.<sup>20</sup>

Before I focus these case studies it is necessary to say something about Meidner's attitude to Blake as mediated via Blake criticism. Blake, I argue, became a commanding presence in Meidner's artistic development in a period in which the body - both human and animal - constituted the animating dynamic of his vision of art.

### **Meidner, Blake and Colour**

In his diary Meidner recorded that he was reading Ruthven Todd's popular edition of Alexander Gilchrist's classic *The Life of William Blake* (1942) in April 1945.<sup>21</sup> Meidner's handling of his copy is evidence that he kept up-to-date with Blake criticism. Meidner's copy of *The Life*, moreover, contains two newspaper-cuttings: an article from the *Times Literary Supplement* titled 'The Doctrines of Blake' is Geoffrey Keynes' review of J.G. Davies' *The Theology of William Blake* (1948), and the other, possibly used as a bookmark, combines a statement by Samuel Palmer with Blake's *The Death of the Good Old Man*, which is an example of Blake's visionary art.<sup>22</sup> This second, slightly older, cutting is an announcement of a radio programme with Donald Wolfit, the English actor-manager, as William Blake in *A Man without a Mask*, broadcast on the Third Programme in 1946. The programme included poems by Blake and a commentary by Jacob Bronowski, author of the influential *William Blake: A Man Without a Mask* (1943).<sup>23</sup> Bronowski, who mentioned Boehme, Swedenborg and the Kabbalah, picked *Urizen*, when writing about Blake's eclectic use of 'Jewish mystics', 'welter of symbols' and 'dialectic of Contraries and Progression'.<sup>24</sup>

Reading Gilchrist in 1945, Meidner would have learnt about technical matters relating to colour printing as well as colouring effects. As mentioned above, this edition was edited by Ruthven Todd, and included Blake's wood engravings for Thornton's *The Pastorals of Virgil* (1821), but did not include William Michael Rossetti's important catalogue of Blake's art. There were, however, other parts of this popular publication where Blake's modernity was spotlighted. One of these was the proto-Expressionist reading of *Newton* in the supplementary chapter written by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Todd helps us illuminate some aspects of this period. This archetypal bohemian-scholar moved to London in 1943. He played an important part in the promotion of international contemporary art and knew Read.<sup>25</sup> The network of Blake scholars at this time was a tightly-knit one. Bronowski, for example, thanked Todd in his book on Blake, which argued that Blake predicted the interests of Fauvism and Matisse.<sup>26</sup> Both men were involved in the British wing of the surrealist movement. It should be stressed that Bronowski's Blake pointed to a fantasy future where the 'crowded matter' of Cubism is reconciled with 'the colour, the imaginative ease' of Fauvism.<sup>27</sup>

Reflections of this kind may have been useful to Meidner as he settled into a new style of art in the 1940s. In light of this, it is reasonable to propose that Meidner took advantage of Blake's significant presence in British cultural life in the 1940s and 1950s. For example, the Tate Gallery, which reopened with a Braque and Rouault exhibition in 1946, organized jointly with the National Gallery two wartime acquisitions exhibitions (1942, 1945). In 1947 it organized a landmark exhibition dedicated to Blake. Meidner, like many exiled artists, went to the Tate. The German artist Fred Uhlmann, who headed there to familiarize himself with English art soon after his arrival, recalled that seeing Blake confirmed what he learnt about him while in France: Blake was 'Literature' - not art.<sup>28</sup>

For the most part, this attitude was shared by leading members of the highly-influential Bloomsbury Group. Roger Fry rejected Blake's art for being inward-looking, narcissistic and subject to uncoordinated vision. Fry's Blake was the enemy of cosmopolitan formalism. A different kind of characterization was provided by Read, who used the rival idea of the unconscious to insist that Blake's art expressed spontaneous vision and auto-creativity. At the same time, however, he defended Blake on the grounds that his art was 'archetypal'.<sup>29</sup> Here, and in other contexts, Read proposed that Blake's visionary style was future-friendly. He went on to claim that Surrealism should be seen as 'essentially English'.<sup>30</sup> Read outlined his version of 'Englishness' in a widely-read essay published by *The Burlington* in 1933, where Blake and the Romantics represent authentic national spirit in art and culture.<sup>31</sup> Meidner echoed Read's admiration for Blake's masterly linear style when talking to Hodin about English and Jewish art: 'An

English artist doesn't project the inside on to the outside. Instead, he has an appreciation of the elegant, the beautiful, the pleasant. He [the artist] is always controlled and never ecstatic. The late Turner was different. Constable I also appreciate very much. The artist, who I feel closest to here, however, is William Blake'.<sup>32</sup> Meidner's motto (a Latin proverb), moreover, encapsulated what Read identified as the critical idiom of English art: 'no day without a line'.<sup>33</sup>

In *Education Through Art* (1943) Read linked Blake to German Expressionism,<sup>34</sup> thus putting him at the epicentre of modern art. This is similar to John Piper's *British Romantic Artists* (1944), where we find that Blake was 'rare simply in his capacity to live.' Piper's Blake, a magical being, 'transfigured' existing styles 'into works that were vital and necessary.'<sup>35</sup> The equivalent passage in Read is his commentary on the 'movement and aethereal light' in *Elijah about to ascend in the Chariot of Fire*: 'it is not easy to dissociate the mystic from the poet and the painter, and the genius is constant for every aspect of the man ... Indeed, so powerful is the sense of composition in many of Blake's drawings [that] they seem to transcend the scale and medium of their execution, and expand in our receptive minds to the dimensions of a Michel Angelo or a Rubens'.<sup>36</sup> Generally speaking, Meidner followed Read more than Piper in his evaluation of Blake's talents. For instance, he said to Hodin 'To think of him as a painter is unsatisfactory... he is not completely himself – he has, first of all, taken a shine to Michelangelo. That's why he appears to be amateurish. But this doesn't bother me, because his spirit was very strong'.<sup>37</sup>

As noted earlier, the history of Blake criticism can be told as a story in which the expressionistic aspects of Blake's aesthetic becomes more and more important to writers, commentators, curators and painters in the 1940s. In fact, as early as the 1860s, the Rossetti brothers described Blake's art as powerfully post-mimetic:

In Blake's colouring of landscape, a subtle and exquisite reality forms quite as strong an element as does ideal grandeur ... Certainly an unaccountable perversity in colour may now and then be apparent, as where ... the tiger is painted in fantastic streaks of red, green, blue, and yellow, while a tree stem at his side tantalizingly supplies the tint which one might venture to think his due, and is perfect tiger-colour!<sup>38</sup>

A similar vision of Blake's creativity was advanced at the international exhibition of Blake's work held at Tate Britain (1947), discussed in this volume by Martin Myrone. This important show, which appeared in Paris, Antwerp and Zurich, included a distinctive catalogue. *Elohim Creating Adam* is explained thus: 'Behind the hovering figure of the Almighty is the lurid disk of a sun (representing *fire*); dark clouds (*air*) roll thickly above; and beneath the figure of Adam is the green *earth*, with dark blue *water* in front lapping

the edge'.<sup>39</sup> The catalogue, in fact, framed Blake's colouring through Archibald G. B. Russell's introduction, which dealt with Blake's artistic practice and stylistic procedures: 'His ever-present idea was to establish a Golden Age with Art for the religion and Imagination the only God ... He was concerned rather with the lines of the body from the point of view of design and as a factor in the composition. His principal delight was to make a pattern of radiant forms in action. His favourite maxim was unbroken lines, unbroken masses, unbroken colours'.<sup>40</sup> If the precise impact of this vision on Meidner is hard to assess, it is important to note that before exile from Germany, he had used colour for ecstatic effect and emotional tension.<sup>41</sup> Russell's modelling of Blake may have validated this earlier vision, as it encouraged him to see Blake's art as prophetic of the apocalyptic version of Expressionism he favoured.

In 1949 the Meidners were invited to show their works at the Ben Uri (*Ludwig Meidner/Else Meidner*, October 5 to November 2), but the event passed without much notice. Meidner, who knew about the spectacular failure of Blake's one-man exhibition of 1809, may have taken some comfort from David Waring's sympathetic review of the Ben Uri show, where he wrote about Meidner's works: 'The most striking thing about them is the immense emotional and spiritual development which the work of the later period shows in comparison with the earlier'. Pointing out that Meidner had become 'a great admirer of Blake', he continued that these 'philosophic studies suggest a changed mental outlook, and the charcoal drawings ... depicting religious and mystical subjects, have little of the virtuosity of the earlier portraits, but have a moving sincerity which seems altogether deeper and more affecting'.<sup>42</sup> The implication is clear: Blake helped Meidner realize his vision. Meidner may have alluded to this matter in a letter to Wolf Bergmann, from October 23, 1949, where he pointed out that his artistic output was now more 'mystical' than ever before.<sup>43</sup>

In London, Meidner drew many monumental figures, loosely illustrating passages from the Bible. The theme linking these figures, according to Erik Riedel, is the encounter of the human with the divine.<sup>44</sup> The same point emerges when we consider one key strand of British painting in the 1840s. A profound interest in the numinous is found in many Neo-Romantic painters including Piper, Paul Nash, Cecil Collins, David Jones and Thomas Hennell, all of whom venerated Blake.<sup>45</sup> Running alongside this spiritualisation of vision Read's humanistic evaluation of Blake's aesthetics became the nexus of his writing on Surrealism and Neo-Romanticism in the 1930s and 1940s. For Read, Blake embodied the 'romantic model of creativity'.<sup>46</sup> Read's definition of the imagination was rooted in psychology as well as suspended in dialectical tension, i.e. sustained by the ideological conflict between reason and feeling. Read remained true to this articulation of the aesthetic. In *To Hell with Culture* (1963) he used Blake's antagonism towards Sir Joshua Reynolds to explain the nature of true vision: 'what both ... are saying is that success is largely

dependent on personal qualities – labour in the one case, inspiration in the other’.<sup>47</sup> In fact, Read’s approach to art was always deeply Romantic.<sup>48</sup> In 1936, in the wake of the International Exhibition on Surrealism at the New Burlington Galleries, he became the main theoretician of English Surrealism, explaining poetic inspiration as a process or sequence of unconscious mental acts. Blake was the forerunner of this process: ‘in works like *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Jerusalem* there is a realisation of the fundamental contradictions of reality, and a movement towards a synthesis which is anything but idealistic.’<sup>49</sup>

In 1934 Fry dismissed Blake as a madman whose art was worthless since it was unable to confront reality;<sup>50</sup> it was just a product of his ‘subconscious’.<sup>51</sup> Read’s psychoanalytical reading, by comparison, allowed for the unorganized or confused to be ‘charged with ... significance’.<sup>52</sup> For Read, Blake’s prophetic books anticipated the exploration of dream worlds, championed in surrealist art.<sup>53</sup> This sense of the instinctive individualism and freedom of Blake’s designs was echoed by Piper: ‘Blake never obeyed rules by anyone else. He broke ordinary rules all his life, with profit to his art ... His hand-coloured prints that illustrate his own poems are tender and exuberant. No word-description of Blake’s art is adequate; no approach to it reasonable but the approach of acceptance’.<sup>54</sup> Piper’s Blake created art works that lived on their own terms. Similar ambitions were expressed by Meidner when, commenting on his working processes, he stressed that the meaning of his art works often escaped him.<sup>55</sup> He, like Blake, believed in the creative nature of the imagination, and wanted to establish a new language to reveal this truth. This language, as the following case studies demonstrate, was a deliberate choice and it followed Blake’s explanations of creativity as recorded in Gilchrist’s *Life*.

### **Case Study One: *The Cabalistic Rabbi: A Statement about the Purpose of Art***

In Gilchrist’s *Life* Urizen is shown in the frontispiece to the book bearing his name writing in a series of volumes<sup>56</sup> and, according to the Tate’s catalogue, which repeated information from Russell’s essay in the catalogue of the Blake exhibition at the Tate (1913), Newton is a productive but misguided creator: ‘Newton, overshadowed by darkness and working upon the ground, is intended by Blake for the type of rational philosophy and empirical science, both held by him to be enemies of the imagination’.<sup>57</sup> Russell mentioned the compasses,<sup>58</sup> which link to the creation plate in *The Book of Urizen* as well as to the design known as *The Ancient of Days*. Helpful here is Sheila Spector’s work on Blake and the Kabbalah. In *The First Book of Urizen*, Spector argues, Blake reworks the story of The Fall through the conflict between reason and vision.<sup>59</sup> He personified Kabbalistic concepts and embellished his figures’ actions with multifarious symbolism.<sup>60</sup> Her analysis, which presents Blake’s neologisms and their Hebraic roots as Kabbalistic referents, identifies Urizen as the rational soul.<sup>61</sup> Consequently, the connection Spector proposes exists



between *Urizen* and *Newton* is vision: *Urizen* deals with 'loss of vision', and *Newton* signals a condition of single vision in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*.<sup>62</sup>

With this in mind, I propose that Meidner's *The Cabalistic Rabbi* depicts a state of being as well as a moment of inspiration, since, like *Urizen* and *Newton*, the composition enacts non-verbal communication. The figure is next to a broken tree, possibly the remains of the Tree of Life, which bears but one piece of fruit. We sense that a considerable period of time has passed since this figure sat down in front of the neatly-stacked wall and dark and empty landscape, as indicated by the state of his beard, toe and finger nails. This bedraggled Rabbi is concentrating. The arched design evokes the shape of Blake's title-page in *The Book of Urizen*, and just like the figure in *Newton*, the Rabbi's big, bulging, possibly blind eye is staring at his compass-like left thumb and index finger. He is covered by a blanket-like entity and the design evokes the atmosphere of the cave or, indeed, the underwater location of Blake's *Newton*. This piece of cloth rises smoke-like from a small vessel in the figure's right hand; engulfing it, it transforms into another body which looks like a long-necked bird (Figure 1). Meidner's design recalls Blake's famous representation of *Urizen*, where he shrinks and solidifies into human form, and it evokes Zeus' transformation in the story of Leda and the Swan. While Blake visualizes what his figures are doing - in *Newton* we see a diagram and in the title-page of *The Book of Urizen* we see *Urizen* copying out of a book - Meidner has left the area of activity undefined. Is his Rabbi looking at a book? The drawing, I think, reworks Blake's imagery of isolation and mental imprisonment by associating them with the dislocated experience of the exile. Although there is no interaction with the surrounding space, the Rabbi's bundled energy suggests that change is imminent. In this sense, the drawing continues Blake's exploration of vision and creation. The Rabbi will soon return into the world. He indicates that it is necessary to withdraw and reflect, but it is equally important to communicate divine messages. Meidner's strange prophet-activist fuses mental creativity and social vision.

### **Case Study Two: *Assembly of Insects: A Statement about Visions and Visionary Art***

Meidner sketchbook is another important connection between him and the London art world, as this document contains a profile drawing of Blake's life-mask, dating from the spring of 1946. The sketchbook has four portraits of Dr Rosa Schapire,<sup>63</sup> an émigré, art patron and collector of German Expressionism, who had been trying to establish herself in London since her arrival in the summer of 1939. Schapire's portraits precede a drawing of Blake. We can only speculate about their conversation. Schapire had connections to the Tate; she knew John Rothenstein, the Tate Director and leading member of the organising committee of the Blake exhibition of 1947. In any case, Meidner was not the only German Expressionist to discuss Blake. Posy Croft, a sister of the art collector and supporter of Expressionist painters in exile Michael Croft, read Blake's *Songs* to Oskar Kokoschka when he was painting her in 1939.

As one of the founders of the Free German League of Culture, an organisation for émigré artists, Croft's husband Fred Uhlman knew many exiled artists and writers, such as Kokoschka, Stefan Zweig and Kurt Schwitters, and it was Uhlman who brought Croft into contact with Meidner, Kokoschka and Marie-Louise von Motesiczky, a pupil of Max Beckmann.<sup>64</sup>

Meidner hated London and never got used to the weather. He admitted, however, that living in London was conducive to having visions.<sup>65</sup> Most of his early work from the ecstatic Expressionist phase was the result of night-time visions.<sup>66</sup> Meidner, an attentive reader of Gilchrist's classic study, would have related these experiences to Blake's visionary life, as demonstrated in Blake's description of the nocturnal origin of the Visionary Heads. When talking to Hodin, Meidner elaborated on the eerie visions in his home on Finchley Road. Before Meidner's time, illegal abortions were carried out there: 'Sometimes at night, strange things happen here. I see grey masses moving along the walls', Meidner said.<sup>67</sup> Learning about Meidner's departure for Germany, Hodin asked: 'Those grey masses or figures, which you have talked about, did you really see them?' To which Meidner replied: 'As if they were in front of me. Here, of course, we have a lot vermin, cockroaches, all sorts of spiders, beetles. The place is teeming with them. Last night I was stung in my nose... Not everybody can see those ...Keen senses are a requirement...do you think that a place like this has been unaffected by the crimes committed in it?'<sup>68</sup>

Hodin declared that Meidner did not suffer from hallucinations. Intrigued as well as disconcerted he asked: 'If what you have seen are evil spirits, it would be possible to ban them?' To which the answer is: 'No, they are not evil.'<sup>69</sup> While Hodin's explanations suggest that he did not doubt the reality of Meidner's visions, Meidner's replies amalgamate motifs recorded in Gilchrist. He plays, for example, on John Varley's attitude towards Blake's account of the production of *The Ghost of a Flea*, as well as Blake's confession that all he ever saw was inside his head.<sup>70</sup> Meidner would have seen *The Ghost of a Flea* at the Tate. The Tate's exhibition catalogue (1947) included Blake's finished tempera and a preparatory sketch.

In the 1940s, Meidner created several watercolours of insects. The settings are non-specific and, as von Plottnitz notes, it is as if Meidner was painting through a magnifying glass in his attempt to depict dramatic scenes.<sup>71</sup> The early watercolours were based on observations from his time in the camps, when he sketched insects from the natural world, but what about the later works?<sup>72</sup> *Assembly of Insects* (Figure 2) evokes Blake's *The Ghost of a Flea*. It shows insect-like figures as well as a cockroach amongst the figures' legs. This watercolour, like Blake's famous tempera of the giant flea, raises questions about the size of the figures, as well as the relationship between the insect and its humanoid companions. It destabilizes the

boundaries between real and imagined space. It suggests a condition of disturbed physicality. It moves us to ask: what did Meidner see?

Some thoughts in Read's *Education Through Art* (1943) are useful to understanding the nature of vision in *Assembly of Insects*. Read, who was influenced by the work of psychologist Erich Rudolf Jaensch, proposed that Blake's designs confirmed the eidetic nature of his vision: they 'take up an intermediate position between sensations and images. Like ordinary physiological after-images, they are always *seen* in the literal sense'.<sup>73</sup> This, he went on to argue, is supported in Gilchrist's account of the Visionary Heads. Then Read turned his attention to *The Ghost of a Flea*, which he defined as 'the most precise evidence of the eidetic nature of Blake's images'.<sup>74</sup> Meidner aspired to this condition of vision. Meidner's carefully constructed narrative concerning the production of *Assembly of Insects* offers a Blakean explanation; he associated the 'grey masses' with insects as well as humanoid figures with the potential to transform. The figures' development, of course, has been stopped short (aborted). Meidner, in sum, acted out what he imagined in the process of reading Gilchrist, which tells us something about the extent to which he identified with Blake. Learning from Blake meant giving power to the mental image. That, however, is what I would argue gives Meidner's late work their peculiar authority. In the end, like Blake, he wanted his audience to see him *through* his visions.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Eric Riedel, curator of the Ludwig Meidner Archive at the Jewish Museum in Frankfurt, Colin Trodd and Jason Whittaker for their help in the preparation and production of this article.

<sup>2</sup> Hartmann, 'Der schlesische Maler und Dichter Ludwig Meidner', 90.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>4</sup> Waring, 'Ludwig and Else Meidner: Ben Uri Gallery'; Anonymous, 'Ben Uri Gallery'. I am grateful to Sarah MacDougall and Rachel Dickson of the Ben Uri Gallery for making these reviews available to me.

<sup>5</sup> Breuer and Wagemann, *Ludwig Meidner*, II, 28 and 453.

<sup>6</sup> Nos 42 and 54. *William Blake*, 30, 33.

<sup>7</sup> Vinzent, 'Aesthetics of Internment Art in Britain', 84-5.

<sup>8</sup> Grochowiak, *Ludwig Meidner*, 200.

<sup>9</sup> Plottnitz, 'Humoresken', 162.

<sup>10</sup> Read was fascinated by Blake and named his autobiography *The Contrary Experience*. See Whittaker, 'Anarchic Modernism'.

<sup>11</sup> Read, *To Hell*, 32, 35.

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- <sup>12</sup> This exhibition did not include Meidner's *Self-portrait* (1912), but an etching from the collection of Dr Goldberg of Zurich. See *Twentieth Century German Art*, 34.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 157-8, 16, 163-5.
- <sup>14</sup> Piper, *British Romantic*, 7, 20, 24, 28-9, 46. Piper's book included Blake's *Lamech and his Two Wives* as well as one of the wood engravings for Hayley's *Ballads* and Thornton's *Virgil*.
- <sup>15</sup> Breuer and Wagemann, *Ludwig Meidner*, II: 474.
- <sup>16</sup> Hodin, *Ludwig Meidner*, 85.
- <sup>17</sup> Larrissy, 'Blake: Between Romanticism and Modernism', 69-70.
- <sup>18</sup> By the fin de siècle Blake was recognised as a poet and artist in Germany and Austria. While Kassner, who was drawing on Yeats, framed Blake as a mystic and discussed him in a single chapter, Richter published a full-length study. Richter was the first German critic to appreciate Blake's composite art.
- <sup>19</sup> Plottnitz, 'Humoresken', 158, 163.
- <sup>20</sup> *William Blake*, 32, 38. Arriving in 1944, Hodin, another émigré and a key figure in post-war art history, went on to write a series of celebrated books, including the first major biography of Oskar Kokoschka, which appeared in 1966, and a pioneering volume on Edvard Munch, in 1972.
- <sup>21</sup> The book was a birthday present from Else. Breuer and Wagemann, *Ludwig Meidner*, I: 180.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 352.
- <sup>23</sup> I am grateful to Keri Davies who made sense of the truncated cutting. The programme was broadcast on September 6, 1946 at 9.15pm.
- <sup>24</sup> Bronowski, *Man Without a Mask*, 11.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 22, 31-2.
- <sup>26</sup> Bronowski, *Man Without Mask*, 146, 5-6.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.
- <sup>28</sup> Uhlman, *Making of an Englishman*, 245.
- <sup>29</sup> Read, *To Hell*, 60.
- <sup>30</sup> King, *The Last Modern*, 154.
- <sup>31</sup> Read, *English Art*, 244.
- <sup>32</sup> Hodin, *Ludwig Meidner*, 85.
- <sup>33</sup> Heuberger, *Ludwig und Else Meidner*, 104.
- <sup>34</sup> Read, *Education Through Art*, 101-2.
- <sup>35</sup> Piper, *British Romantic*, 28.
- <sup>36</sup> Read, *English Art*, 269.
- <sup>37</sup> Hodin, *Ludwig Meidner*, 86.
- <sup>38</sup> Gilchrist, *Life*, 363.
- <sup>39</sup> *William Blake*, 10.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, 9, 34.
- <sup>42</sup> Waring, 'Ludwig and Else Meidner', n.p.
- <sup>43</sup> Hartmann, 'Der schlesische Maler und Dichter Ludwig Meidner', 108.
- <sup>44</sup> Riedel, "Das herrliche Pathos der Bibel", 83-4.
- <sup>45</sup> Mellor, *A Paradise Lost*, remains the key source on Neo-Romanticism.
- <sup>46</sup> Trodd, 'Celebration and Censure', 92-3.
- <sup>47</sup> Read, 'The Secret of Success', 105.
- <sup>48</sup> Thistlewood, *Herbert Read*, 47-50.
- <sup>49</sup> Read, 'Introduction', 81.
- <sup>50</sup> Fry, *Reflections*, 83-4, 86.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.
- <sup>52</sup> Read, 'Introduction', 55.
- <sup>53</sup> King, *The Last Modern*, 154.
- <sup>54</sup> Piper, *British Romantic*, 28.

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- <sup>55</sup> Plottnitz, 'Humoresken', 157-8.  
<sup>56</sup> Gilchrist, *Life*, 110.  
<sup>57</sup> *William Blake*, 27.  
<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.  
<sup>59</sup> Spector, "Wonders Divine", 90, 92.  
<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-5, 102, 106.  
<sup>61</sup> Spector, "Glorious Incomprehensible", 75-6, 121.  
<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 115, 114.  
<sup>63</sup> Presler and Riedel, *Ludwig Meidner*, 334-5.  
<sup>64</sup> Müller-Härlin, 'Rebellious and supportive', 47-50.  
<sup>65</sup> Plottnitz, 'Humoresken', 161.  
<sup>66</sup> Hodin, *Ludwig Meidner*, 114-5.  
<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.  
<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 98-9.  
<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.  
<sup>70</sup> Gilchrist, *Life*, 262-6, 317.  
<sup>71</sup> Plottnitz, 'Humoresken', 158-9.  
<sup>72</sup> A large sketchbook survives from the time in Huyton Camp. MacDougall and Dickson, *Forced Journeys*, 23.  
<sup>73</sup> Read, *Education Through Art*, 42.  
<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

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## Captions

Figure 1. Ludwig Meidner, *Insektentreffen / Assembly of Insects* (c. 1945–50), watercolour, charcaol, 67.4 × 50.5 cm, Ludwig Meidner-Archiv, Jüdisches Museum Frankfurt, shelfmark: JMF1994-0007 II/1160  
Photo: Uwe Dettmar, © Ludwig Meidner-Archiv, Jüdisches Museum der Stadt Frankfurt am Main

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Figure 2. Ludwig Meidner, *Der kabbalistische Rabbi / The Cabalistic Rabbi* (1947), charcoal, 73.8 × 56 cm,  
Ludwig Meidner-Archiv, Jüdisches Museum Frankfurt, selfmark: JMF1994-0007 II/1156  
Photo: Ursula Seitz-Gray, © Ludwig Meidner-Archiv, Jüdisches Museum der Stadt Frankfurt am Main