

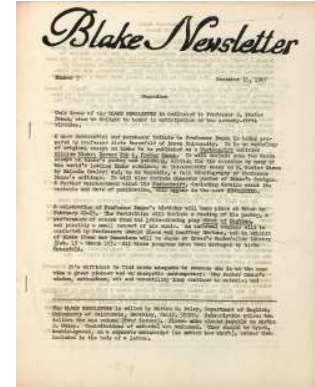
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A R T I C L E

How I Discovered Blake

S. Foster Damon

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I remember vividly when I first read the name of William Blake. It was in the summer of 1907 (give or take a year either way), and I was going to our summer home in Annisquam, Massachusetts. At the North Station in Boston I bought a pulp-paper magazine, The Golden Argosy, to read on the hour ride to Gloucester. The contents of the magazine consisted entirely of selections from well-known authors: Victor Hugo, Swinburne, and the like. And here was a poem, "The Tyger" by William Blake, with Lamb's comment that it was "glorious".

The very first line gripped my imagination immediately. "Tyger! Tyger! burning bright" is typical of Blake's peculiar gift of enthralling the imagination before arousing the curiosity. "In the forests of the night" was tremendous: suppose he had written only "In a forest at night".

I was so impressed that I did something very unusual: I memorized the whole poem before we reached Gloucester. Only occasionally did I stop to think that I hadn't understood what the poem was about--a thought I dismissed instantly as irrelevant.

Some time about now I set "The Tyger" to a kind of humpty-dumpty tune, now happily well lost.

The excellent Newton Public Library, where my real education started (I wonder now if they really had a rule that a person could not take out books more than three times a day) for once failed me: they loaned me only the unreadable volume I of the Ellis-Yeats edition; but even that had a lovely picture on the cover. Some time later, the Boston Art Museum exhibited its Blake watercolors, which were a new revelation to me.

Then, in a Boston book-sale of remainders, I was able to pick up Blake's letters and Michael Rossetti's edition of the poems, which included the exciting text of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.

In the fall of 1910 I entered Harvard. Their splendid library then owned I think just one of Blake's books, a Songs of Innocence in the Widener collection. Blake was scarcely mentioned in two courses on English romanticism. I recollect one class paper called "The Innocent Mr. Blake"--smoothly written but hopelessly ignorant.

But what was Blake writing about? The riddle seemed insoluble.

In 1914, Sampson's Oxford edition of the poems (incomplete) was published. I had my copy interleaved and spent the summer copying in what everybody had written about the various poems. I supposed that putting all the critics together would provide some answers, but they didn't. The summer's work seemed wasted.

I then decided to read everything that Blake had read, a task I supposed would be simple, as Blake never had gone to school, and was therefore uneducated. But now the gates began to come ajar. Swedenborg, Paracelsus, Behmen--these led to others, including the alchemists--and then others.

But the first big break came from William James's Varieties of Religious Experience. Why, Blake was definitely a mystic, which nobody else seemed to have noted. Evelyn Underhill's Mysticism gave a wealth more of material. And my first chapter began to lay itself out. Then Thomas Taylor's writings opened the way to The Book of Thel and (with Mary Wollstonecraft's Vindication of the Rights of Women) to Visions of the Daughters of Albion.

Properly, I should have been working for a Ph.D., and I took Anglo-Saxon and Old French; but the other requirements were exclusively philologi-

cal; furthermore, criticism was completely taboo, as being personal conjecture, and thus not scholarly. So I devoted myself completely to my own work.

Once the book got started, it almost wrote itself, waking me up at odd hours. I got so obsessed that once I signed Blake's name to a cheque, which was returned to me. When I came to a tough spot, I simply walked round my chair, then wrote the answer. As soon as a chapter was finished, I read it to Miss Amy Lowell, whom I had met through a paper on the history of Free Verse. She had loved Blake ever since she was a little girl and gloated over the copies of his books owned by the Hooper family. When she returned from Egypt in 1898, she was tired of their formal art and ordered three of Blake's books for herself. Later she was able to get a Marriage of Heaven and Hell, which inspired her poem "The Book for Stones and Lilies" (Scribner's Magazine, Nov. 1921; collected in Ballads of Sale). Poet and lover of books, she was the only person I knew who could appreciate Blake.

Naturally I dedicated my book to her. Fortunately for me, Houghton Mifflin's reader for my manuscript was Esther Forbes; the book was accepted in 1922, and was published two years later. The reviews were hearty, long, and even enthusiastic. At last, Blake was academically respectable.

Only at Harvard was my book not greeted. There I was the lowest of the low, a mere theme corrector. Of course my book could not possibly be counted for a Ph.D. I had not entered myself as a candidate; I had not taken the right courses; nobody had approved the subject; nobody had supervised the manuscript; it had not been submitted for that or any other degree. Nevertheless I hoped that I might get a small raise in pay or even in rank. But no one of my superiors in the English Department so much as said to me: "I see you've got a book out." And nothing happened.

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I can't resist adding a postscript to Foster's last sentence, from R. P. Blackmur's essay, "A Critic's Job of Work," in which the book is taken as an example for scholarship. "The result for emphasis is that Mr. Damon made Blake exactly what he seemed least to be, perhaps the most intellectually consistent of the greater poets in English. Since the chief weapons used are the extended facts of scholarship, the picture Mr. Damon produced cannot be destroyed even though later and other scholarship modifies, re-arranges, or adds to it with different or other facts." MDP /

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"A Lot He Knew"

Alvin H. Rosenfeld
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The title of this brief article on S. Foster Damon is taken from a chapter-heading in George Weller's early novel about academic life, Not to Eat, Not for Love. The novel, published in 1933, was a sensation, and although several lively accounts of life at the universities have succeeded it, Not to Eat, Not for Love is still remembered. I call attention to it here, however, not so much to reclaim the novel for literature but because the model for one of Mr. Weller's characters--the articulate and charming