NOTE

The Vicissitudes of Vision, The First Account of William Blake in Russian (1834)

G. E. Bentley, Jr.

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THE VICISSITUDES OF VISION
THE FIRST ACCOUNT OF WILLIAM BLAKE IN RUSSIAN
G. E. BENTLEY, JR.

William Blake is essentially an English phenomenon, strange and bewildering to his contemporaries, barely of interest beyond the English-speaking world until more than a century after his birth in 1757. Even today, no contemporary copy of Blake’s writings is known to be outside the Anglophone world of Britain, the United States, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada, and, though there are hundreds of articles and books on Blake in other languages, chiefly Japanese, they are mostly derivative and introductory. The poet called himself “English Blake,” and so he is.

Interest in and information about Blake spread beyond the English Channel only very slowly. Aside from incidental references in bibliographies and directories,² the first account of Blake in German was in 1811, the first in the United States in 1830, the first in French in 1833, and even these were essentially English. Anon., “William Blake, Künstler, Dichter, und religiöser Schwärmer” in Vaterländische Museen, 1 (January 1811), 107-31, was written by an Englishman, Henry Crabbe Robinson,³ and Anon., “Hôpital des fous à Londres” in Revue Britannique, 3e Série, 4 (July 1833), 179-87, is manifestly based on, and confused from, Anon., “Bits of Biography. No. I. Blake, the Vision Seer, and Martin the York Minster Incendiary,” Monthly Magazine, 15 (March 1833), 244-49.⁴ The early accounts of Blake in the United States are all simply extracts from or reprints of Allan Cunningham’s life of Blake (1830).⁵ And there are apparently no accounts of Blake at all, not even incidental references to him, in Italy, Spain, or Holland or in other Romance or Germanic languages until well after 1863, when Alexander Gilchrist’s Life of William Blake, Pictor Ignotia made him sensationally well known.

In these circumstances, it is astonishing to find an article on Blake in Russian as early as 1834, an article, moreover, which does not appear in any Blake bibliography and which is quite unknown to Blake scholars. What it says and how it got there are mysteries well worth pursuing.

When I was in Leningrad in 1973, I visited the great Salytkov-Shchedrin Library where Lenin had worked, to discover what they have on Blake, and found in due time that their surprisingly extensive Blake holdings included an article on the poet in Teleskop for 1834.⁶ When I first saw the Teleskop entry in the Salytkov-Shchedrin Blake list, I assumed that it must be misdated; indeed, I was
moderately confident that this must be the case until many months later, when I saw a microfilm copy of the journal itself. Even then, persuaded of the importance of the article, I of course had to secure a translation, for I have no Russian at all. I was fortunate in securing the assistance of Mrs. Christine Moisan, a graduate student in Russian at The University of Toronto, who made a careful translation of the article and gave me information about Teleskop itself.

The anonymous article is entitled "Artist-Poet-Sumassheshihi: zhizh Vil'yama Bleka [Artist-Poet-Madman: Life of William Blake]," Teleskop [Telescope: A Journal of Contemporary Enlightenment], Vol.22 (Moscow: Printed by P. Stepanov, Published by Nikolai Nadezdhin, 1834), 69-97. Teleskop was evidently an energetic though short-lived attempt to give Russian intellectuals a window on the European cultural world, and it regularly printed articles on the literature of France and England. The Russian writer of the 1834 essay had not known Blake but was depending on second-hand information. The substance of the Teleskop Blake essay is an adaptation of Cunningham's life of Blake which appeared in his The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects (1830), Vol. II, pp. 143-88, in a series published by John Murray called The Family Library. Indeed, references in the essay make it clear that it was the second edition of Cunningham (also of 1830) which was used, for the letter from Charles Lamb and "Holy Thursday" from Songs of Innocence given in Teleskop were first printed in Cunningham's second edition.

The adaptor gives no indication that he has sources of biographical information beyond Cunningham's account. The reference to "Biographers," plural, in Paragraph 11, seems to refer to Cunningham and to J. T. Smith's account of Blake in Nollekens and his Times (1828) which is explicitly quoted by Cunningham. He says that he has seen "a few" of Blake's Job prints (Para. 47), and he may be naming those he has seen in his abbreviated list of them, but such knowledge is not improbable, since we know that the Job designs were circulating in France and Germany in the early 1830s. 7 When the adaptor says that he "could present them [the readers] with a full catalogue of Blake's literary "works" (Para. 49), we may be confident that he could have done no better than make a further digest of Cunningham's information; certainly he gives no facts about Blake which are not also in Cunningham's life of Blake.

Though the adaptor has derived all his Blake information from Cunningham, he does not go through Cunningham's account systematically at all. This is just as well, as a matter of fact, for Cunningham's story is highly anecdotal and chronologically rickety. For example, Cunningham discusses "The Chimney Sweeper" and "Holy Thursday" from Songs of Innocence in his Paragraphs 13 and 53, 8 while the adaptation much more satisfactorily discusses the two poems sequentially, in Paragraphs 20-27.

Of course, the adaptor has added a great deal to Cunningham's account, both in new material (usually opinions and comparisons) and in new emphases and interpretations. While Paragraphs 2-9, 11-12, 20-25, 27, 29-30, 35-36, 38, 41-43, 44 (mostly), and 46 are little more than translations of Cunningham, the Russian Paragraphs 1, 10, 15, 31, 33 (the first half), 47 (the first three sentences), 48 (the first two sentences), 49, and 52 (the last sentence), for example, are entirely new. In general, where Cunningham was usually faithful to Blake in his fashion, the adaptor is merely often faithful to Cunningham. Normally, the adaptor takes Cunningham's materials and goes beyond them, as when he says that "The Chimney Sweeper" "can give some idea of Blake's lack of sophistication, and perhaps even of his too child-like spiritualism" (Paragraph 19), when Cunningham had only said that it is "rude enough, truly, but yet not without pathos" (Paragraph 13)

Even the biographical "facts" are altered at the whim of the adaptor, particularly with dialogue. A good deal of the dialogue is simply invented by the adaptor, turning into dramatic form what Cunningham had left as mere expository narrative. For instance, the dialogue in Paragraphs 2, 3, 16 (most of it), 37 (the last quotation), and 44 (at the end) does not appear in Cunningham at all. There is, however, some poetic justice in this dramatization of Cunningham's prose, for Cunningham had been similarly high-handed with his source, J. T. Smith, in making dialogue out of mere narration.

Occasionally, the changes the adaptor makes are so remarkable that one wonders at his grasp of English (or of his own language). For example, where Blake and Cunningham wrote of "books and pictures of old, which I wrote in ages of eternity, before my mortal life" (Paragraph 22), the adaptor gives "books and pictures of old, which I will revive in eternity when I have finished my mortal life" (Paragraph 36).

(At yet more striking example is in Paragraph 16.) Either the adaptor's English was pretty poor, or his belief that Blake was deranged made him feel it to be unnecessary to give Blake's words with even approximate accuracy. The differences of past, present, and future, confused here by the adaptor, are substantial.

One effect of the adaptation is to put Blake in a much wider cultural and literary context than Cunningham provides. The adaptor compares Blake with Wordsworth and the Lake School (Paragraph 19), wishes Blake had illustrated Bunyan (Paragraph 33), and discusses him in connection with the great young French Romantics Victor Hugo (1802-85), Alexandre Guiraud (1788-1847), and Lamartine (1790-1869) (Paragraphs 26, 31). Another change is the emphasis upon Blake's madness. Cunningham usually speaks of Blake as "wild . . . overflowing with . . . oddities and dreams" (Paragraph 30), and where he does call him in some respects "utterly wild and mad" he says he was at the same time perfectly sensible" in other respects (Paragraph 32); he sees Blake as a kind of schizophrenic, a sane artistan by day and a mad visionary by night. His adaptor, however, will scarcely allow the daytime sanity and stresses insistently Blake's "derangement," often with evidence that is virtually invented (e.g., Paragraphs 14-16).

In fact, there can be no doubt that the adaptor was unscrupulously making journalistic capital out of the sensational aspects of Blake's life, and the whole performance is somewhat disreputable. Blake...
really did have visions, and the anonymous adaptor seems to have felt that this eccentricity absolved his critics of responsibility to precise truth. It is unfortunate that it was through articles such as this one that Blake's reputation, or notoriety, was spread on the Continent.

It is striking that there are no references to Russian authors in the *Teleskop* article, while the comparisons with Blake added to Cunningham's account are chiefly either French or English. As a matter of fact, the author of the *Teleskop* article is identifiable, and he is not Russian but French. The same article was originally published anonymously as "Artiste, Poete et Fou. (La Vie de Blake)" in *Revue de Paris*, 56 (November 1833), 164-82, and *Teleskop* apparently merely translated it entire, and without acknowledgement. (Indeed, the reference at the end of the *Teleskop* version to "LIVES OF BRITISH ARTISTS" is disingenuous, for the Russian translator apparently never saw Cunningham's *Lives*.) The French adaptor of Cunningham was Amedee Pichot, who reprinted his 1833 article in "Le Visionnaire Blake" in *Revue Britannique*, 5 (1862), 25-47, where he acknowledged that Cunningham's life "m'avait presque seul fourni les documents anecdotique."9

The *Teleskop* essay is, then, a translation into Russian (1834) of a rough adaptation into French (1833) of Cunningham's biography in English (1830) which was in turn largely derived from J. T. Smith's biography of Blake (1828). It is a process which makes for lively reading and a degeneration of truth.

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1 Notebook p. 5.
3 See Blake Records (1969), 432-55. Robinson's essay was translated into German by Dr. N. K. Julius. The account of Blake in *Zeitgenossen*, 3 (1830), 170-78, is a translation from Cunningham's biography of Blake—see Blake Records, 377, n. 2.
4 The *Revue Britannique* piece was also the basis for the account of Blake in Briierre de Boismont, *Dee Hallucinations* (1845 ff).
8 All information about Cunningham here derives from Blake Records (1969), 476-507, where his life is reprinted and annotated.