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

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¹ L. L. Laudan, "Thomas Reid and the Newtonian Turn of British Methodological Thought," *The Methodological Heritage of Newton*, eds. Butts & Davis (University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 104.

² "De Augmentis Scientiarum," *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon*, trans. Peter Shaw, vol. I (London, 1733), p. 4.

³ "Of the Conduct of the Understanding," *The Works of John Locke*, vol. I (Freeport, N.Y., 1969), p. 33.

⁴ *Thomas Reid: Philosophical Works*, vol. II (Hildesheim, 1967), p. 701.

⁵ All Blake quotations are taken from *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Garden City, 1970).

⁶ "Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind," *The Collected Works of Dugald Stewart*, ed. Sir William Hamilton, vol. III (Edinburgh, 1854), p. 258.

⁷ John Wallis, *Institutio Logica* (1715) as quoted in *Collected Works*, p. 257. Frye's statement that "the ratio of all we have already known" refers to "deductive reasoning" (*Fearful Symmetry* [Princeton University Press, 1958], p. 22) is not quite precise enough to reveal the point Blake is making about the failure of the "method of knowledge [which] is experiment" ("All Religions") to truly distinguish itself

from syllogistic reasoning.

⁸ *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, trans. Andrew Motte, vol. II (London, 1729), p. 392.

⁹ "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding," *The English Philosophers from Bacon to Mill*, ed. Edwin A. Burt (New York, 1939), pp. 605, 606.

¹⁰ Hume's name appears in several of Blake's writings, and Blake was apparently aware of Hume's proposal that there was no rational basis for our belief that the sun will rise in the morning: "He [referring to Joshua Reynolds] may as well say that if man does not lay down settled Principles. The Sun will not rise in a Morning" ("Annotations to Reynolds," E 649).

¹¹ "Enquiry," p. 610.

¹² "Remarks on Dr. Reid's Inquiry," *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestly*, vol. III (n.p., n.d.), p. 58.

¹³ *Statistical Essays*, vol. II (London, 1733), pp. xiii-xiv.

¹⁴ Thomas Reid, "Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man," *Thomas Reid*, vol. I, p. 442.

¹⁵ *Objective Knowledge* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 360, 361.

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,"¹ 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 *Vaterländisches Museum*, 1 (January 1811), 107-31, was written by an Englishman, Henry Crabb Robinson,³ and Anon., "Hôpital des fous à Londres" in *Revue Britannique*, 3^e 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 Ignotis" 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 Saltykov-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 Saltykov-Shchedrin Blake list, I assumed that it must be misdated; indeed, I was

* The translation of the Russian account itself will appear in the journal of The University of Poona [India].

moderately confident that this must be the case until many months later, when I saw a microfilm copy of the journal itself. 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-Sumassheshii: zhizn 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 Nicolai Nadezhdin, 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 ricketty. 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). (A 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 Romantic 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 artisan 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 Amedée 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.

¹ *Notebook* p. 5.

² e.g., F. A. Ebert, *Allgemeines Bibliographisches Lexikon*, Vol. I (1821), Vol. II (1830), and P. F. & A. L. Basan, *Dictionnaire des Graveurs Anciens et Modernes* (1809), I, 70--see *Blake Records* (1969), 270, 375-76, 623.

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 Brierre de Boismont, *Des Hallucinations* (1845 ff).

⁵ Anon., "Visions of Blake the Artist," *The Casket*, 5 ([Philadelphia] May 1830), 231-32 (reprinting Cunningham Paragraphs 36-39, 41), partly reprinted in *The New-England Weekly Review* [Hartford], 3 May 1830, p. 1; Anon., "Model of a Painter's Wife," *Literary Port Folio*, 1 ([Philadelphia] 13 May 1830), 150 (reprinting the London *Athenaeum* review of Cunningham, 6 February 1830, pp. 66-68); *American Monthly Magazine*, 3 (June 1831), 164-71 (a review of Cunningham consisting largely of extracts)--see *Blake Records*, 377-78, 398, 400, 410. The first edition of Cunningham (but not the second, 1830) was reprinted in the U. S. in 1831, 1837, 1842, 1844, and 1846.

⁶ See "Blake Among the Slavs: A Checklist," *Blake Newsletter* (1977).

⁷ See *Blake Records* (1969), 602, n. 3, and *William Blake: The Critical Heritage* (1975), 229-30.

⁸ All information about Cunningham here derives from *Blake Records* (1969), 476-507, where his life is reprinted and annotated.

⁹ C. H. Moore, "Amedee Pichot's Discovery of Blake," *Etudes Anglaises*, 16 (1963), 54-58, cites L. A. Bisson, *Amedee Pichot: A Romantic Prometheus* (n.d.), who described Pichot as the chief liaison officer between French and English literature.