Blake Goes German: A Critical Review of Exhibitions in Hamburg and Frankfurt 1975

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For the plain fact (which will no doubt come as a surprise to many readers) is that the facsimile reproduction which H. John Dent made of the other Fitzwilliam copy of the Marriage fifty years ago, though by no means perfect, is a good deal closer to its original than is this one. In Dent's facsimile, colors are sometimes darker than the original, Blake's brown is a little too orange and occasionally a background tint is out; but in other respects the rendering is extremely faithful. This is less so in the present case. The most glaring difference is that Blake used gilt on many of the plates, which both added a touch of subtle brilliance and pointed the imagery of energy. It was no doubt impossible to manage this with a reproduction based on photography (though, again, Dent managed it for his facsimile in 1927), but the omission should at least have been noted somewhere in the edition; I can find no mention of it. I have also noted a number of further differences, primarily in coloring, from the original: this is not intended in any way to be an exhaustive list, simply a note of those differences which have struck me most forcibly in comparing the plates.

Plate 2 The colors rendered as yellow and orange-brown in the trees and foliage are green and green-brown in the original.

3 The "line effect" on the flames is not as defined as, and the colors are more purple than, the original, which is more orange-brown.

4-5 In the original, colors are lighter and more delicate, giving better definition to the faces, in particular.

8 There is a strong orange effect throughout here, as against the dominant yellow-green effect of the original.

9 A light brown appears, similarly—as against the dominant yellows and blues of the original.

10 The blues are much stronger, throughout, than in the original.

12 The head title is mauve, as against the orange-red of the original.

14 & 16 (and elsewhere). The lettering gives a fuzzier and lighter effect than in the original.

18-19 The lettering in the blue-green passages is much darker than in the originals, giving a false effect of strong contrast between these and other sections of the text.

21 In the head design the purple is very much exaggerated; in the darker sections of the first five lines there is a red effect which is absent from the original.

24 The effect is much bolder than in the original.

In many cases of course the effect is surprisingly good, and it is obviously necessary to preserve a sense of proportion in making such criticisms. This copy is on any terms a beautiful book, reasonable value at the price and one which most people, including myself, will be glad to have on their shelves. For many purposes, and especially that of comparison with other reproduced versions, mentioned earlier, it will be invaluable. The point at issue is simply that the imprint of the Trianon Press, along with the superlatives used in descriptions of the reproductions, may give many readers the impression that this book is of the same quality as that of the limited editions. An extra qualifying word here or there would have been enough to guard against such a false impression. This reservation aside, Arnold Fawcus, Sir Geoffrey Keynes and the Oxford University Press are to be congratulated (—can hardly, indeed, be sufficiently praised) for bringing this book within the grasp of the ordinary reader.

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... our object is to draw the attention of Germany to a man in whom all the elements of greatness are unquestionably to be found, even though those elements are disproportionately mingled. ... but this assuredly cannot lessen the interest which all men, Germans in a higher degree even than Englishmen, must take in the contemplation of such a character.

These words, written by Henry Crabb Robinson, passed almost unnoticed when first published in the Hamburg journal *Vaterländisches Museum* in 1811. One hundred sixty-four years later Blake and the Germans were given a second chance, and again it was the city of Hamburg where the action took place. A team of young art historians at the Hamburger Kunsthalle, led by Prof. Werner Hofmann, is concerned with organizing a series of magnificent exhibitions entitled "Kunst um 1800" ("Art around 1800"). Here the works of William Blake were shown from 6 March to 27 April 1975, and then, from 15 May to 27 July 1975, they were to be seen at another important German museum, the Städelisches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main.

Following the showing of the works of his friend Henry Fuseli in Hamburg the exhibition of a great number of Blake's most important engravings, watercolors, illuminated books and color-prints was placed...
in a proper context. This first major exhibition of Blake's visual art in Germany presented more than 200 works and was the most representative showing of the artist's oeuvre the Continent had ever seen (including the 1947 show at Zurich and Paris). It was visited by almost 30,000 people—and this is a respectable number under present day German conditions. Credits must go to the British Council (and to David Fuller, arts director, in particular), as well as to David Bindman, who successfully persuaded collectors and museums of Great Britain, the United States and even Australia to lend the unique works in their possession.

The exhibition was divided into five sections: the first dealing with Blake's early work, watercolors (from the 1780s) and the first of the illuminated books—including an incomplete copy of the two Religion series (Victoria & Albert Museum, London; not in the Census), an incomplete copy of the Songs (private collection, Great Britain; also not in the Census), and an incomplete copy of Heaven and Hell (copy K).

The second section was dedicated to the prophetic books and centered around three main points: copy K of Europe, five of the 1795 color-prints, and copy B together with several proofs from Jerusalem (including those from Canberra). Section III consisted mostly of examples taken from Blake's Bible illustrations for Butts. In a fourth division Blake's work as an illustrator of other authors' works was documented by a copy of Mary Wollstonecraft's Original Stories, and an edition of the engraved designs for Night Thoughts (newly acquired by the Hamburger Kunsthalle). These were supplemented by a selection of ten of the watercolors from the British Museum, a copy of Blake's Grave illustrations, and, among other designs illustrating Milton's poems, the complete Paradise Regained series from the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. The last part of the exhibition was devoted to Blake's artistic output in his last decade; the "Ghost of a Flea" (two pencil drawings), the Virgil woodcuts, the Illustrations of the Book of Job, and twelve of the Dante designs (seven from the Melbourne collection) were shown. One of the highlights of the exhibition was Bindman's successful bringing together of the four consecutive illustrations for Purgatorio XXVII-XXXII as originally planned by Blake. This was certainly an extraordinary experience for the careful observer, nowadays not easy to achieve by viewing any of the various collections possessing some of the 102 water-colors for the Divine Comedy.

With the supplementary showing of the Blake Trust facsimiles of the illuminated books ("William Blake. Poet, Printer, Prophet") all the necessary ingredients were offered to awaken "the interest which all men must take in the contemplation of such a character." (It might, however, be regretted that the commercial engravings of Blake were not represented.) Now we all know that the contemplation of Blake's works does not easily nor necessarily lead to the "right" understanding of his extraordinary productions; to lend the visitor a helping hand, a thoroughly prepared catalog written by David Bindman, Werner Hofmann, Johannes Kleinstueck and Siegmar Holsten accompanied the exhibition.

With the exception of Kleinstueck's essay on "Blake as a Poet" (pp. 31-37), a conglomerate of misreadings I had thought virtually impossible now-days, this catalog is a fine piece of introduction to Blake's thought, and with its 506 plates it makes up a most useful reference book for his art. Throughout the work David Bindman succeeds in what seems to have been his primary aim: a short but not at all oversimplified interpretation of Blake's iconography is supplied for the visitor, assume to be someone who does not know anything about Blake. Here lies the great merit of this endeavor. Nevertheless, one must criticize the catalog as well as the exhibition in two respects. First, the author finds no way to bind an objective appreciation of the "purely" visual qualities of Blake's prints, drawings and paintings with their complex iconographic meaning within Blake's mythopoetic systems; that is to say, he argues on a rather abstract level, which exists seemingly isolated from the formal difficulties presented to the unschooled viewer of Blake. For example, discussing Blake's "Newton" color-print Bindman writes that the "posture, as Blunt has pointed out, refers back to the figure of Adam on the Sistine Chapel ceiling" (p. 139, cat. no. 61), forgetting however to provide the reader with an explanation of why Blake had to use this scheme. In the same context he interprets the compasses as a "familiar symbol of materialism" (ibid.), but the power of Blake's use of this pictorial sign derives from the artist's negation of the formerly positive meaning of this symbol as well as from its appearance within a rigidly geometrical composition. Second--and this I think is indissolubly connected to the first point--Bindman's otherwise fine comments border on the incorrect when presented almost completely without reference to the political and social implications of Blake's visionary art. Though he mentions Erdman's Prophet Against Empire, he does not seem to have a very high estimate of the importance of this standard work, when he sums up a very short paragraph on Blake's revolutionary sympathies with this lapidary sentence: "Many people in Blake's circle were also political radicals, and others like him eventually sought spiritual comfort, not in the hope of an apocalyptic renovation of this world, but in the world beyond" (p. 112). I cannot agree that Blake's search for "spiritual comfort" necessarily had to exclude "the hope of the renewal of this world." With many other critics I would say that this search rather began in the hope for an apocalyptic renovation of this world. The expression of frustration and disillusionment that Bindman alludes to could only stem from Blake's daily environment, from his society and his times. Further, the religious, visionary and political thoughts are interwoven in his art in such a way, that it must be a vain pursuit to disentangle them and thus try to decompose the wholeness of Blake's productions into political and religious parts. Yet it was refreshing to hear David Bindman speak at length of "the rebel in Blake" in his opening address both at Hamburg and Frankfurt; apparently he is well aware of the importance of the discussion of these areas when viewing Blake's art. It is too bad that he excluded them from his catalog text. On the other hand, it would certainly be unfair to blame David Bindman for all this: in fact, I believe that in the short time he was given to compile the enormous amount of information necessary, he could not have achieved much more.

Yet here we come to the general dilemma that makes me stress these two points of criticism more than
the many positive things that might be said about the catalog. The problem I am interested in drawing attention to will bother us again and again when faced with presenting Blake's work to the public. The failure of the German exhibitions and the catalog--"failure" also because most of the visitors were rather irritated and could find no way into the works of art displayed and thus no way to experience their potential of broadening one's consciousness--is probably the result of two major problems. First, art historians until now (with few exceptions) have left the task of interpreting Blake's visual productions mostly to literary critics, who--fair enough, one has to admit--rather used Blake's illuminations and paintings because of their explanatory value as a kind of visual commentary or complementary code for the understanding of his poetic creations. The problem of form--not just the question of what is symbolized by the object perceived (a strong young man rising out of a sea of flames = Orc), but the question of how that object is visually organized and of the meaning of that object in the context of the entire artwork--has this problem seldom appeared to the literary critics, and the art historian dealing with Blake until now seems to have been almost compelled to choose the iconographic approach. 8 It has long been generally accepted that Blake's work as an engraver and painter is much more than a literal illustration of his writings--this finally has to be taken seriously. In the future more attention should be paid to the specially visual qualities of his art (and their inalienable necessity as such in a given context). This, I am almost sure, will throw new light on the hermeticism of the artist's visual worlds. 9

We certainly cannot leave the viewer of Blake's art--or the reader of his poetry--alone with his subjective "taste." Instead, we have to develop new concepts for exhibiting and teaching Blake that try to integrate the viewer's and the reader's first-sight experiences as well as "appeal to the Public." The hermeticism of the artist's visual worlds has to become a problem for the scholar, the student, and the visitor in the museum. Only then might we make sure that Blake's "failure" was but for a season. 9 Is it not our responsibility to bring back--or rather to help establish for the first time--that "visionary faculty" Blake demanded from his public not less than from the artist himself--the ability to really perceive that "more is meant than meets the eye"? In Hamburg and Frankfurt one could observe the necessity of developing a didactic program for the understanding of Blake's art. Here the audience had no means of deceiving itself through acquaintance with some of this strange character's poems, as might often be the case (or not) in English-speaking countries. By now we all know that William Blake was not simply a madman--does the public know as well? The fear we are deceiving ourselves, in fact, when we believe this discussion to be over just because we know. With a thousand Orcs throughout the cities of Hamburg and Frankfurt--the poster for the exhibition was based on America 10--the event prompted a massive demand for information on Blake. Thus, many a German journalist suddenly had to face the task of writing an article on an artist he possibly had never heard of before. The outcome you might already guess: most of the numerous reviews of the exhibition and the catalog in German newspapers and magazines can easily be forgotten by the serious critic, if he is not specifically interested in the reception of Blake's art and his reputation in Germany. Sadly enough, the standard of Henry Crabb Robinson's essay from 1811 is but seldom reached in 1975, though many of that author's prejudices are reproduced once more (Robinson's article is reprinted in the catalog, pp. 75-83). 10 Other Blake activities connected with the showing of his works included lectures on Blake by Prof. Helmut Viebrock (University of Frankfurt) at the Städelisches Kunstinstitut and myself at the Hamburger Kunsthalle; a Blake symposium was organized by the Department of English at the University of Frankfurt.

Apart from the catalog, two other books recently published in Germany are really noteworthy; both are relatively inexpensive color-facsimiles of two of Blake's illuminated books. The first reproduces The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (copy H, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge) and is published in connection with the Trianon Press by the Prestel Verlag, Munich. 11 The scholarly apparatus has been kept to a minimum. The introduction by Keynes provides the reader with some basic information on the context and meaning of The Marriage and gives some useful (but far from extensive) bibliographical data. But the German edition contains only a small portion of Keynes's commentary written for the Oxford edition--in fact, not more than what appears as the "Summary" on pages 162-207. The numerous enlargements of details from Marriage that appear in the English edition are also missing from the German. This austerity and Keynes's occasionally light treatment of other scholars' arguments 12 are the only weak points that I can detect in an otherwise splendidly produced book.

The quality of reproduction is very high. All twenty-seven plates are printed in six- or seven-color offset on paper specially made to match Blake's. Each page of the small volume is characterized by the high quality that we have come to expect from Trianon Press. Whereas in the original the plates are printed on both sides of the sheet, in the facsimile they are printed on one side only, but arranged to form the same double openings; the blank versos are utilized "to bring the commentary [and translation] into close relation to the plates discussed" (p. 11). The size of the leaves is the same as in the original, and the colors seem as true as one can achieve with color-offset printing (however, I have not been able to compare the facsimile directly with the original at the Fitzwilliam Museum, and my memory might be cheating).

A German edition of the Songs of Innocence and of Experience, copy Z (the same reproduction as distributed by Oxford University Press), has been available for some years. Now a facsimile of copy T of the Songs (British Museum, London) has been published in paperback by the Insel Verlag, Frankfurt. 13
The "Afterword" by Werner Hofmann (pp. 105-15) provides the so-called common reader with an introduction to Blake's ideas as developed in the Songs, and to his "infernal methods" of printing, which is more likely to satisfy the reader's needs than Keynes's. Hofmann addresses himself to the non-specialist; he touches briefly on the socio-historical background setting, draws attention to the eschatological, millennial current in Blake's art, and to some of his central pictorial motifs employed in the Songs. He explains to his reader that Blake's strange printing process was a necessary act of refusal for an artist who did not want to create works of "comfortable familiarity" (p. 107), for an artist who had to work his way through a printing house in hell to find a method of production appropriate for his emancipatory message.13 Significantly, it is Werner Hofmann's essay on "The Fulfillment of Time" ("Die Erfüllung der Zeit") in the exhibition catalog (pp. 11-30) which approaches somewhat the questions raised in the first part of this review; and significantly, Hofmann comes closest, through consideration of the forms as well as the iconographic motifs employed by Blake, to an evaluation of the possible meaning of "visionary art" today.

On the other hand, this volume has to be judged much more cautiously in regards to the accuracy of its reproductions than the Marriage facsimile. The glossy high quality paper used here is a far cry from Blake's. Of the two framing lines on thirty-eight plates of the original, only one is to be seen. Blake's foliation has been cut off and is replaced by a printed pagination that does not at all correspond with the plate numbers. Ironically here the plates are reproduced on both the recto and verso of each leaf, while in the original most of them are printed on one side of the sheet only, and the size of the facsimile pages is different from the original. In addition, the brilliant colors and the gold used by Blake for a number of plates in copy T are hardly to be imagined when looking at this reproduction. Yet, what can one justly expect from a color-facsimile at about $3.50?

It is this that we must aim at: the actualization of visionary art and its consequent realization for the reader of Blake's poetry as well as the visitor to an exhibition of his artistic work such as those held in Hamburg and Frankfurt last year. Otherwise we will be trapped in the self-sufficiency of the wearisome industry of source-hunting, of allusion-counting.11 The difficulties of putting this abstraction into life and action are well known; perhaps the Newsletter might provide the right forum for discussing again the problems connected with teaching and exhibiting William Blake.

2 This was the same selection from Fuseli's oeuvre that was later shown at the Tate Gallery, London, and at the Petit Palais, Paris.

3 See Blake Newsletter 31 (Winter 1974-75), pp. 51-52.
4 On the other hand it was just the more disappointing to see the twelve water-colors hung completely out of order in the rooms of the Städelisches Kunstinstitut (Frankfurt) for so-called "aesthetic" reasons. According to the "Städel-aesthetic theories" strong colors such as red, blue, and green, and black ("Dante Running from the Three Beasts," "The Schismatic and Sowers of Discords," etc.) have their rightful place at the head of exhibition rooms; whereas particular such colors are even more strengthened in their impact when viewed--almost trystically--left and right of the Städel library door, where six of the eleven water-colors found their home, the room leading to a more shadowy corner cabinet. By this method "Beatrice on the Car, Dante and Matilda" (British Museum) again was separated from "Beatrice Addressing Dante from the Car" (Tate Gallery, London)--this time not by a few miles, but by a massive pillar on which the viewer was shown "The Stygian Lake" (National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne) illustrating Inferno VII; "The Laborious Passage along the Rocks," Inferno XXXIV, was next to the "Queen of Heaven in Glory," Paradiso XLI. So the mis-understandings at the Städelisches Kunstinstitut continued. The major concern of Dr. Gallitzl, director at the Frankfurt Gallery, was the presentation of a "harmonious overall effect," and this is a good example of the bad influence of certain museum methods on the display of an artist's works. Just the more one certainly has to praise Hofmann's attempt at Hamburg to arrange the prints and paintings according to Blake's own plans and thus to bring the artist's intentions as close as possible to the public.

6 Mr. Kleinsteuck appears to be unaware of the frontiers opened up in Blake scholarship within the last thirty years. The only recent book he seems to have known when writing his critique is David G. Gillham's last (William Blake, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973). Even worse than with Gillham here we find a curious feature, aptly pointed out by Alice O'Sullivan in her review of Gillham's work: "It seems to me interesting that a man who ... does not understand most of the major works of a major English poet should undertake to write a Critical Introduction to that poet" (Spring 1975), p. 137; cf. Kleinsteuck in the exhibition catalog, p. 32 and passim. There are some minor misprints in the catalog only, and these are mostly due to the fact that neither David Bindman nor the author of this review, who translated Bindman's catalog-entries into German, was given a chance to read proof. Thus, Dream 2 is erroneously called a "frontispiece" (cat. no. 54, p. 136), "Mexico" instead of "Albuquerque, New Mexico" (p. 243) appears as the place of publication of the Blake Newsletter, etc.

8 Anne Mellor, in her recent book on Blake's Human Form Divine (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: Univ. of California Press, 1974), put forward similar questions and many hints towards the answer, but I do not quite agree with W. J. T. Mitchel's statement that "most of the studies of Blake in the last twenty years have addressed themselves to the question of form;" to my knowledge no one has ever truly attempted with such art historical criteria as utilized by Mellor. In spite of the mistakes in her work that are justly criticized by Mitchell, I still feel that the central problem discussed makes this an important study of Blake's visual art (for Mitchell's review, see Blake Newsletter 32, Vol. VIII (Spring 1975), pp. 117-19).


10 William Blake. Die Vermählung von Himmel und Hölle--The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, ed. Sir Geoffrey Keynes (Paris and Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1975), limited edn. of 2,000 copies; an English edition has been published by Oxford University Press.

11 Many of us will nevertheless share the criticism of G. R. Sabri-Tabrizi's book on Blake, that Keynes implies (See p. 12; also the reviews of Sabri-Tabrizi's book in Blake Newsletter 32 [Spring 1975], p. 138, and J. T. Wills in Blake Studies, 6 (1974), pp. 201-02).

12 William Blake, Lieder der Ungebundener und Erfahrungen, ed. W. Hofmann (with a German trans. of Blake's poems by W. Wilhelm), Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1975. As far as I know, copy T has never been reproduced before.
Appendix

It should be understood that the following bibliography of Blake references in Germany 1973-75—especially entry nos. 1-87—is interesting not as "scholarship" in the proper sense but as documentation of Blake's reception in 20th century Germany (yet a few articles published in Austria, the Netherlands, and Switzerland are also included). Nonetheless, one might find some wheat among the chaff, even among the shorter entries (see particularly nos. 44, 78, 85), most of which were written merely as notices of the exhibition.

This checklist, it has to be said, is probably far from being complete; I am convinced that many more (and even more remote) newspapers and journals published reviews of the exhibition or the German "Blake books" listed in section two. Nevertheless, I hope that most of the longer and more important articles actually are included here, and that the second part is almost complete. Not mentioned are the many two- or three-line references which merely gave the dates of the exhibition, opening-hours etc.; also excluded are books dealing only incidentally with Blake while discussing a different or larger subject (e.g., general introductions into the history of English painting and some important Fuseli publications are not listed here). These omissions might be bettered in a future list of Continental material relevant for the study of Blake, the poetry, art, and history of his age.

Abbreviations

FAZ Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Frankfurt am Main
FAS Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Frankfurt am Main
FP Frankfurter Neue Presse, Frankfurt am Main
FN Frankfurter Rundschau, Frankfurt am Main

Articles. Published in Newspapers, Weekly and and Monthly Magazines

1. Anon., (Untitled), *Die Welt*, Hamburg, 5 May 1975
2. (Untitled), *Südkurier* (Bochum), 6 May 1975
3. (Untitled), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Frankfurt am Main, 6 June 1975
4. (Untitled), *FAZ*, 11 June 1975
5. (Untitled), *FAZ*, 25 July 1975
6. (Untitled), *FAZ*, 11 July 1975
7. (Untitled), *FAZ*, 15 May 1975
15. "Die Erfahrungen eines Geistersehers," *Frankfurter Neue Presse*, Frankfurt (hereafter "FP"), 15/16 May 1975
20. "Grosser Auftakt zur Entdeckung eines 'grossen Unbekannten','* Hamburger Abendblatt*, Hamburg, 6 May 1975
22. "Hoffmannsschimmer," *FAZ*, 16 May 1975
27. "Letzte Folge 'Kunst um 1800,'* BrunoWedelger Zeitung, Braunschweig, 10 May 1975 (signed "J. Sch.")
37. "William Blake" (Tip der Woche), *Rheinische Zeitung*, Basel (Switzerland), 27 March 1975
38. "William Blake in Deutschland," *Die Tat, (Zurich, Switzerland), 12 April 1975 (signed "EJ")
44. Bohrer, Karl Heinz, "In den Waldern der Nacht," *FAZ*, 1 January 1975
48. Eckert, Karla, "Vorliebe fürs kleine Format," *Südkurier, Konstanz, 10 March 1975

