

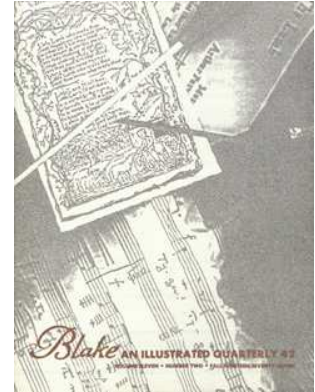
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Jean Paul Richter and Blake's Night Thoughts

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## JEAN PAUL FRIEDRICH RICHTER AND BLAKE'S NIGHT THOUGHTS

by Detlef W. Dörrbecker

Writing an essay which was later printed in the catalog of the Hamburg Blake exhibition, Werner Hofmann recently made a discovery in the field of early allusions to Blake.<sup>1</sup> Thus, he added another item to our Blake Records which hitherto obviously passed the eyes of Blake scholars unnoticed. This I thought important enough to be published in *Blake*, and thus to make it known to more than just the few German speaking Blakists who might read Hofmann's article, and then go on to look up the original sources for themselves.

Hofmann pointed out that the *Vorschule der Ästhetik* written by Jean Paul (who in English speaking countries is better known as Jean Paul Friedrich Richter), and first published in 1804, contains what is probably the first mention of Blake ever to appear in print in Germany. As early as 1801 a copy of Young's *Night Thoughts* illustrated with Blake's engravings was anonymously given to Jean Paul by Emil August, the Hereditary Prince of Gotha. On receiving this valuable present the German poet immediately referred to the book and Blake's plates in two of his letters. Following Prof. Hofmann's hint, I here quote the relevant passages in full. In the first of these letters (which is preserved in a contemporary [?] copy only) Jean Paul thanks the donor, whom he pretends not to know:

An Erbprinz Emil August von Gotha.  
[Meiningen, 20 November 1801]

Vorgestern erhielt ich ein Geschenk, das mich zu einer Bitte nöthigt, deren Erfüllung das zweite ist. Youngs Nachtgedanken, die ich mit meinen eigenen vermehrte, um vergeblich zu errathen, welcher reichen Hand in der Wolke ich die Gabe verdanke. Wenn Sie, wie ich vermuthen kan, die Youngische Verklärung durch Blake--hier der englische Titel [The Complaint, and the Consolation; or Night Thoughts, by Edward Young, London 1797]--vielleicht gesehen: so finden Sie meinen Wunsch zu danken gewis gerecht und den Weg dazu verzeihlich.--Die metall[ische] und künst[erische] Kostbarkeit<sup>2</sup>--die Liebe gegen meine litterarischen Wasserschöslinge--seine schöne Schmeichelei meines Geschmacks--und der Ort der Aufgabe auf die Post (es ist Gotha, wie ich höre) lassen mich errathen, dass Sie gewis diesen Geber näher kennen als ich. Darf ich an Sie, da Sie seine Nachsicht vielleicht nicht ganz misbilligen, die Bitte wagen, Ihrem Freunde meinen Dank zu übergeben und so der chargé d'affaires meines Herzens zu werden? Sie werden diese Kühnheit mit meine Vertrauen und mit meiner Sehnsucht entschuldigen und ich verlasse mich auf die Fürsprache Ihres gleichges[inten] Freundes.<sup>3</sup>

In an abridged English translation the same text reads like this:

. . . Young's Night Thoughts, to which I added my own when trying, in vain, to guess whose was the munificent hand in the cloud[s]to which I am indebted for this gift. If you, as I dare assume, have possibly seen Blake's illuminated version of Young--here [I give you] the English title [The Complaint, and the Consolation; or Night Thoughts, by Edward Young, London 1797] --you will surely think my desire to express my gratitude not more than just . . . --The metal-sheathed . . . artistic treasure-- . . . make[s] me guess that doubtless you know this donor better than I do. . . .<sup>4</sup>

In a second letter to a friend which was most probably written on the same day, but dated differently, we are given a more detailed description of the book and Richter's reaction:

An Christian Otto. [Meiningen] d. 21. Nov. 1801.

. . . --Vorgestern abends fand ich von der Post eine Folio-Kapsel, und darin eine englische Folio-Ausgabe von Young mit 20 oder 25 [sic] herlichen phantastischen Kupferstichen von Blake, englisch prächtig vergoldet und Saffian [und] Atlas und alles wieder in schwarzer [Leder] Hulse; eine achte Gold[kette] geendigt mit einer grossen Perle dient stat der Zwerg-Zettel die du in Bücher legst. Anonym kams, ist aber vom gothaischen Erbprinzen. Ich taxier' es 15 Guineen. Die Kette bin ich gesonnen abzulösen und meiner Frau an den Hals zu henken. Es ist vielleicht nicht zweimal in Deutschland, was mir sehr bei dem Verkaufen einmal helfen kan.--<sup>5</sup>

This is how the same words might have sounded had they been written in English:

. . . --The day before yesterday in the evening I found [delivered] from the post office a folio-box, and in it an English folio edition of Young with 20 or 25 [sic] magnificent [and] phantastic copper engravings by Blake, pompously gilded in English style and morocco [and] sateen [-bound] and all that again in [a] black l[ather] case; a genuine gold [chain] terminating in a huge pearl is used instead of the dwarf-[paper]slips that you put into books. Anonymously it arrived, but it comes from the Hereditary Prince of Gotha. I tax [i.e. value] it at 15 guineas. The chain I am inclined to detach and hang around my wife's neck. There is possibly no second copy [of the book] in Germany, [and] this sometime might help me a lot in selling it.--

These two letters reveal a rather materialistic attitude; mentioning the written and engraved contents of the volume in passing only--though respectfully and appreciatively--Jean Paul then goes on to describe the rich binding *in extenso*: and you can't tell a book from looking at the cover, can you? But of course Jean Paul Richter was too much of a poet himself not to be perfectly aware of this. Obviously he decided at least not to sell the book with those "phantastic" illustrations too soon, and he remembered it when writing down his aesthetic



theory in the *Vorschule*. There he still mentions Blake in passing only, but also shows that meanwhile he has opened the book and actually added his own "Night Thoughts." If we look up §73 (i.e. §79 of the second, revised, and enlarged edition published in May 1813) which deals with the representation of the human figure, we read as follows:

Ausser der äussern Bewegung giebt [2nd ed.: gibt] es noch eine höhere Malerin der Gestalt, die innere Bewegung. Unsere Phantasie malt nichts leichter nach als eine zweite. In einer Folio-Ausgabe von Youngs Nachtgedanken mit phantastischen Randzeichnungen von Blake ist z.B. auf dem Blatte, wo Träume gezeichnet werden [see *Night Thoughts* eng., p. 4; DWD], die Gestalt für mich fürchterlich, die [2nd ed.: welche] gekrümmt und schauernd in ein Gebüsch starrt; denn ihr Sehen wird mir Gesicht. Um also unserm Geiste eine schöne Gestalt zu zeigen-- --: [2nd ed.: punctuation reversed] zeigt ihm nur einen, der sie sieht; aber um wieder sein Sehen zu zeigen, müsst ihr irgend einen Körpertheil, und wär' es ein blaues Auge, ja ein weisses grosses Augenlied, [2nd ed.: comma missing] mitbringen; dann ist alles gethan.<sup>6</sup>

The same paragraph in a modern translation based on Margaret Hale's:

Besides external motion there is a still higher paintress of the figure: internal motion. We imagine nothing more easily than another's imaginings. In a folio edition of Young's *Night Thoughts* with fantastic marginal designs by Blake on the page where dreams are described [see *Night Thoughts* eng., p. 4; DWD], there is a figure terrifying to me, which stares, bent over and shuddering, into a bush; its seeing becomes vision for me. In order to show a beautiful figure to our minds, simply show someone who sees it; but to show his perception, you must accompany it with some part of the body, a blue eye or even a great white eyelid, and it will all be there.<sup>7</sup>

Werner Hofmann suggested a full-length study comparing the metaphorical, political, and philosophical concepts of Blake and Jean Paul, which seem to be quite similar in some respects.<sup>8</sup> In the sentences quoted above, the author of *Titan* demonstrates how well he understood an artistic method used by Blake in more than one case; and it is remarkable that Richter manages to get along with Blake's work without employing any pejorative terms. For him the word "phantastic" was still appropriate to describe the special quality of the engravings he wrote about. Only a few years later, when in 1811 Henry Crabb Robinson published his essay on Blake --which for other reasons of course is of more importance for us than Richter's few lines--the artist's reputation as a madman already interfered greatly with his critic's view. Jean Paul, by the way, might have known Crabb Robinson's article by the time he was revising his *Preparatory School for Aesthetics*; the publisher of the first edition, Friedrich Perthes in Hamburg, also printed the *Vaterländisches Museum* in 1811. Jean Paul originally intended to have Perthes publish the second edition of his book on aesthetics too; might not Perthes

in their correspondence have told Richter about Robinson's biographical sketch? This is mere guesswork at the moment, and after all Richter did not revise the section with his reference to Blake. We will have to wait for the study proposed by Prof. Hofmann before we can go on and speculate about what Jean Paul would have thought of the Lambeth books, and whether he would have seen Los as an image close to his Titan. Then also we might be able to answer a perhaps more important question, namely why the author of the *Vorschule* thought this "relatively insignificant detail" more important than the more sublime designs in Edwards' edition of the *Night Thoughts*.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Werner Hofmann, "Die Erfüllung der Zeit," in *William Blake 1757-1827*, [Kunst um 1800], exh. cat., ed. W. Hofmann (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1975); see p. 25 and notes 47, 48 and 52 on pg. 29.

<sup>2</sup> This copy was in a very rich binding; see also the next quotation, below.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Paul [Friedrich Richter], *Sämtliche Werke*, Historisch-kritische Ausgabe, 3. Abt. (section 3): Briefe, Bd. 4 (vol. 4), ed. Eduard Berend (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1960), p. 117.

<sup>4</sup> Since I could not trace an English translation of Richter's collected letters, I had to translate this and the following quotation myself.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Paul, *Briefe*, vol. 4, pp. 118 f.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Paul [Friedrich Richter], *Vorschule der Aesthetik, nebst einigen Vorlesungen in Leipzig über die Parteien der Zeit* (Hamburg: Friedrich Perthes, 1804), pp. 476 f. The version of the text printed here is that of the first edition; in square brackets, however, I have recorded the few variants of the second edition; cf. Jean Paul [Friedrich Richter], *Vorschule der Aesthetik; nebst einigen Vorlesungen in Leipzig über die Parteien der Zeit*, Zweite, verbesserte und vermehrte Auflage [2nd ed.], 3 vols. (Stuttgart & Tübingen: in der J. G. Cotta'schen Buchhandlung, 1813), pp. 628 f. (§79). See also the critical edition of Jean Paul's works with a text based on the later edition: Jean Paul [Friedrich Richter], *Sämtliche Werke*, Historisch-kritische Ausgabe, 1. Abt. (section 1): Zu Lebzeiten des Dichters erschienene Werke, Bd. 11 (vol. 11), ed. Eduard Berend (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1935), p. 269 (facing p. 272 a detail from Blake's design for p. 4 of the *Night Thoughts* is reproduced).

<sup>7</sup> See Margaret R. Hale, tr. & ed., *Horn of Oberon: Jean Paul Richter's School for Aesthetics* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973), p. 208. Margaret Hale translates the second edition (see p. lvii), and also provides the reader with an extensive introduction. My own version of the text differs from Hale's in minute particulars only, where I thought a more literal translation necessary.

<sup>8</sup> Hofmann, "Erfüllung," p. 29, n. 52.

<sup>9</sup> Hofmann, "Erfüllung," p. 25. About a month after I had finished the MS. for this note, the summer issue of *Studies in Romanticism* arrived and necessitated the addition of a few sentences at least. In a--generally most precarious--review of the series of Hamburg catalogs on art around 1800, John Gage refers his readers to Hofmann's note on Jean Paul and Blake, which also served as the basis of the present article. Hofmann's (and my own) surprise at finding Jean Paul selecting the detail on p. 4 of Blake's *Night Thoughts* engravings in return seems to come as a surprise to that critic. For Gage obviously no problems arise: Jean Paul's attitude is known "in criticism at least as far back as late antiquity." I do not think it all that simple. What about the effects of time and contemporary context on the "critical concepts and vocabulary" Gage is writing about? Of course it is not the relative originality of Richter's aesthetic theory Hofmann and I are interested in, but rather the peculiar attitude of Richter towards Blake's mode of thinking and creating. Still I firmly believe that only a thorough study comparing Richter's and Blake's thought in the larger context of their respective historical surroundings (inclusive of contemporary aesthetic theory) might furnish us with the basic pre-requisites for answering the questions sketched by Hofmann and above. --See John Gage, review of *Kunst um 1800*, *SIR*, XV, No. 3, Summer 1976, 482-89 (especially p. 483).