Jean Paul Richter and Blake’s Night Thoughts

Detlef W. Dörrbecker

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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. 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 Vorrede 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 Richter's reaction:

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:


... --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] satin [bound] and all that again in [a] black [leather] 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.--

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

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...  

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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 Vorhöhe. 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 573 (i.e. 579 of the second, revised, and enlarged edition published in May 1813) which deals with the representation of the human figure, we read as follows:


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.7

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.8 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 Vorhöhe. 

Hofmann, "Erfüllung," p. 325. 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 Genette previously refers as if Jean Paul's attitude is "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 of modern writing? 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 only believe that a thorough study comparing Richter's and Blake's thought in the larger context of their respective historical surroundings (inclusive of contemporary aesthetic theories) might furnish us with such an insight. 

2 This copy was in a very rich binding; see also the next quotation, below.
4 Since I could not trace an English translation of Richter's collected letters, I had to translate this and the following quotation myself.
5 Jean Paul, Briefe, vol. 4, pp. 118 f.
7 See Margaret R. Hale, tr. & ed., Home 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. 167), 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.
8 Hofmann, "Erfüllung," p. 29, n. 52.
9 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 Genette previously refers as if Jean Paul's attitude is "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 of modern writing? 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 only believe that a thorough study comparing Richter's and Blake's thought in the larger context of their respective historical surroundings (inclusive of contemporary aesthetic theories) might furnish us with such an insight. 