William Rossetti’s Aldine Edition of Blake

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Although William Michael Rossetti has been given his due as a major contributor to Victorian writings on Blake, a number of unpublished or unremarked details relating to the preparation, publication and reception of his edition of the Poetical Works of William Blake (1874) make his concern with Blake's reputation worth returning to. As early as 1864, in a letter to Horace Scudder, Rossetti lamented the public response to Gilchrist in a way which suggests how much more he considered needed to be done to secure Blake's fame. Scudder had recently reviewed Gilchrist in the North American Review, and Rossetti was acknowledging a copy of the review.

27 November 1864

My dear Sir,

I have to thank you very sincerely for your note, & the accompanying review of Blake from the North American Review. However I had already read the article; having seen it advertized & strongly suspecting—from my knowledge of what has taken place on former occasions where a little openness to new impressions was needed, & a little boldness of opinion—that the book would be better estimated in America than in England. I found my anticipation more than confirmed, & derived much pleasure from a perusal of the article. It is (if I may say so to you without impertinence) far the best I have seen; & I am sorry to say that it is not necessarily so much a compliment as I mean it to be, for the English notices, with one or two exceptions amounting to tolerable, have been silly, poor stuff which an Englishman winces & blushes at—or ought to do so, at least. My brother, who saw your article here yesterday, joins me in rating that very differently—as being positively not less than comparatively a worthy tribute to that very wonderful genius, the "mad-man" of his discerning countrymen, Blake.

It was almost another decade, however, before Rossetti was offered the chance to write comprehensively on Blake. Two entries in his Diary, the first for 8 May 1872 and the second for 6 August 1873, give a reasonably full account of the origin of his edition:

Daldy the Publisher called on me, thinking of including Blake in his Aldine series of Poets; & he asked me whether I wd. undertake the editing—including a Memoir of some 30 to 100 pages. He does not wish to insert the Prophetic Books, but only a complete set of the poems of an ordinary cast. I replied that I wd. undertake the work for £50, on the understanding
that I am not to be controlled in anything I may see fit to say; also that I might not find it convenient to commence the work for some 6 mos. or so to come. Daly took leave, saying he wd. consult with his partner Bell. He had in the first instance proposed for either Gabriel or me as editor; but, as I told him, it is practically certain that G. wd. decline.

Mr. Bell,5 of the publishing firm, called on me at Som. Ho., & agreed to the terms set forth under 8 May 1872 regarding an edition of Blake's poems in his Aldine series. He wd. like the introductory notice to be only about 32 to 48 pp.,6 & the arrangement of the poems mainly chronological. The Prophetic Books wd. not be included: I think however an exception must be made in favour at any rate of the Marriage of Heaven & Hell, if only for the sake of making the vol. of a moderately substantial thickness.7

Unfortunately a considerable gap in Rossetti's Diary between the second entry and late 1876 makes it impossible to chart the preparation of the volume as thoroughly as we can document his earlier editions of Whitman and Shelley, though a number of his letters to Swinburne and Mrs. Gilchrist offer additional information. We can assume that he worked with his usual steadiness, for on 4 March 1874 he informed Swinburne that "Yesterday I received the first proofs, both of the poems & of my Prefatory Memoir."8 A copy of the edition (presumably an advance copy) was in Swinburne's hands by late October 1874,9 and it was listed in "Publications of the Week" in the Spectator of 14 November 1874.10

In his correspondence with Mrs. Gilchrist and Swinburne between August 1873 and March 1874, Rossetti discussed mainly copyright matters and the inclusion of representative Prophetic Books. Initially he anticipated no difficulty over the ten poems from the manuscript book later known as the Pickering MS., nine of which D. G. Rossetti had printed in Volume II of Gilchrist. On 25 August 1873 he wrote to Mrs. Gilchrist that "B[ell] wd. probably succeed in effecting some arrangement with M[acmillan] & P[ickering] enabling B. to reproduce the poems," though four days later he admitted that "the matter appears to be a little complicated."11 By 27 February 1874 he had reason to complain to Swinburne about "a provoking claim of copyright," and his fear that he might have to "miss out" the poems, "thus spoiling the edition."12 In another letter to Swinburne of 4 March 1874 he reported as follows:

The copyright difficulty--of wh. I foresaw something from the first--is this. You
PREFATORY MEMOIR.

1.—PRELIMINARY.

In writing a Memoir of William Blake, little or no difficulty can now arise as to the external facts—the dates, personages, and incidents. The truly valuable and so far exhaustive book of Mr. Alexander Gilchrist has settled all these points for us substantially; it barely requires to be here and there rectified or supplemented in some minor particular. Its tone moreover is as earnest and elevated as its research is true and thorough. I need hardly say that I am indebted to this book for the vast majority of my facts; any one who undertakes to write about Blake cannot be otherwise. Thus far, therefore, everything is plain: one has only to acknowledge a genuine debt of gratitude to Mr. Gilchrist, and to run up the account freely.

The difficulty of Blake's biographers, subsequent to 1863, the date of Mr. Gilchrist's book, is of a different kind altogether. It is the difficulty of stating sufficiently high the extraordinary claims remember that certain poems by Blake were for the first time published in Gilchrist's book—viz.: those which came from the manuscript belonging to Gabriel & me, & also certain others (Auguries of Innocence, Mental Traveller, &c) which came from a small MS. then in the hands of Mrs. Gilchrist. The poems from this small MS. are someone's copyright for 42 years from date of first publication (1863), just as the poems from Gabriel's & my manuscript are our copyright. It turns out that the small book was claimed by and returned to Tatham, who sold it to Harvey (bookseller), who sold it to Pickering; & the latter republished these poems in or about 1865, along with the Innocence & Experience. Thus Pickering is the present owner of this copyright; & he, not liking Bell, nor relishing a further republication of the poems, declines to authorize reissue. This is very annoying. Bell did tell me a fortnight or so ago that he understands Dr. Wilkinson is in possession of a certain Blake MS. containing perhaps these same poems, or most of them, & that Wilkinson would allow their republication from this other MS. Of this I have as yet heard no more, & fear it will prove fallacious. Wilkinson's manuscript did not materialize, but Rossetti was able to confide to Swinburne on 9 March 1874 that further probing by Bell had established an interpretation of the ownership of copyright favorable to his edition:

Bell told me the other day ... that the only poem to wh. Pickering's copyright really applies is Long John Brown. This is indeed a great satisfaction: for whether L. J. B. is in or out matters hardly at all. I don't however understand why Pickering's copyright is limited to that particular poem. My view of the matter was this: —copyright attached to that whole series of poems for 42 years following date of first publication, 1863: Pickering, at a later date, became the legal owner of the poems, and therefore of the unexpired residue of their copyright. Macmillan ... was never the owner of the copyright. Mrs. Gilchrist was the owner, as regards the Life generally: & it seems each proprietor of poems previously unpublished was owner of the copyright in those same poems. Hence Tatham was in 1863 owner of the copyright in the Pickering poems. I am surprised to learn that he is still the owner; but Bell's letter seems to imply as much. Tatham gave me carte blanche some while ago, in case he had any rights in the matter.

Although Rossetti obviously had doubts about Bell's understanding of the matter, he finally added the Pickering poems to his edition, excluding "Long John Brown" as D. G. Rossetti had done in 1863. In the circumstances one would expect him to have reproduced his brother's versions, but his practice was sometimes to follow the edition prepared for Pickering by R. H. Shepherd in 1866 and reissued in 1874, at other times to follow his brother, while at the same time introducing emendations of his own. For example, as Sampson pointed out in 1905, Rossetti's text of "The Grey Monk" adopts four of D. G. Rossetti's emendations, but "follows Shepherd..."
in the number and arrangement of verses, and generally as to text, adopting two out of the three important changes from the MS. Book version. On the other hand, in "The Crystal Cabinet" he adopts freely from both Shepherd and D. G. Rossetti, and introduces substantial punctuation of his own devising. But on the whole he was cautious about offering new readings. Fresh from his editing of Shelley, he had no wish to encounter again the many reviewers who had taken exception to his numerous conjectural emendations of Shelley's poems.

As for the Prophetic Books, Rossetti was not sufficiently enthusiastic to champion them against Bell's dismissal beyond arguing for the inclusion of a sampling. In his Diary for 6 August 1873 (quoted above) he mentions The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, but by 23 August he had decided on Thel, choosing it, he answered Swinburne who had urged on him the claims of Visions of the Daughters of Albion, not because it is the best of the Prophetic Books (of course it is far from being such), but because it is short, lyrical in tone & approximately in form, & easily accessible--being printed in Gilchrist's book. The Visions of the Daughters of Albion wd. have had to be hunted up: probably transcribed bodily from some copy in the British Museum. I don't remember it very exactly, but am quite prepared to think it is a finer poem than Thel: I do remember that it is one of the more startling of Blake's moral dithyrambs, & that wd. weight the scale agst. it.

"The prospective publisher is not a known emanation of the giant Albion," he reminded Swinburne later in the letter. Why he included Tiriel as well is not clear, though the unexpected reappearance of the manuscript was the most likely reason. When Swinburne, in acknowledging Rossetti's edition, regretted its "public appearance," Rossetti merely replied that he was "Sorry you are so adverse to Tiriel--wh. I for my part think fully entitled to its place in the book."

At the same time, it should be noted that however ambivalent Rossetti's attitude towards the Prophetic Books was, he favored publication of a letterpress edition. Their exclusion from the Aldine edition, he insisted to Swinburne, "wd. not have been my voluntary choice," and he again excused that "it was obviously the only course likely to be adopted by a Publisher." In the Memoir prefixed to the edition he explicitly called for publication, arguing that "Blake will be but imperfectly known even to his enthusiasts until this is done." Four years later, in a review in the Academy of the facsimile edition of Jerusalem published by Pearson in 1877, he pleaded at length:

We cannot omit the present opportunity of saying that the publication in ordinary book-form, without designs, and without any attempt at facsimile of text, of the Jerusalem and other Prophetic Books, is highly to be desired. Difficult under any circumstances, it would be a good deal more difficult to read these works in an edition of that kind, with clear print, reasonable division of lines, and the like aids to business-like perusal. An index of the mythologic personages of Blake's strangely-named pantheon or pandemonium, with an account of their various and semi-intelligible performances throughout the successive Prophetic Books, would also be a powerful aid to such understanding of the subject as is, in the nature of things, possible. No doubt the compilation of such an index would be rather like attempting to draw a nightmare to scale: but something or other in that direction could undoubtedly be accomplished, with patience and goodwill for the work.

About the possibility of approaching total explication he remained skeptical. In an unpublished passage of his autobiography, written between 1901 and 1903, he observed:

I know most of what has been written about Blake, but have not investigated the elaborate study of his works by Messrs. Ellis & Yeats in their edition of a few years ago. I had a little speech with them on this subject, & learned that they regarded Blake's religious or quasi-religious utterances, usually counted to be chaotic, as cosmical in essence, & in detail interpretable. I presume that this view is to some valid extent justified by their commentary; yet cannot bring myself to think that Blake was in these matters a constructive thinker or an orderly expositor. My impression continues as heretofore—that, while he was a great genius in two arts, there was also a maniacal side to his intellect. Needless to
say that he was not a madman pure & simple: but he was a creative inventor whose ideas & utterances struggled beyond the limits of sanity. This view may be erroneous: it is the one to which my studies of Blake's works have led me.30

That Rossetti deleted this passage when he prepared his autobiography for publication in 1906 could, of course, be interpreted as suggesting a waning of confidence in his judgment.

To the reviewers of the Aldine edition in 1874-1875, Rossetti's kind of cautious assessment was (in a word applied to the Memoir by most of them) "sound." Edmund Gosse's two-part review in the Examiner31 offers the most pronounced indication of critical opinion of Blake in the 1870s. Gosse, a friend both of the Rossettis and of Swinburne, declared that there was a danger "that, after so long a time of disgrace and oblivion, the reaction may be too violent, and the enthusiasm over the new-found wonder be blind and altogether excessive." He confessed that "some such fear as this was in our mind when we began Mr. Rossetti's long, learned, and most interesting memoir; and, though we are of the opinion that in one or two cases his admiration for his subject has led him beyond what the canons of pure criticism permit, we are bound in justice to say that, as a whole, his memoir is as remarkable for clear judgment and good sense as it is for enthusiasm." At the same time Gosse was sharply critical of Rossetti's urging of the publication of the Prophetic Books: "He seems to us to propose one of the most hopeless and ill-advised experiments that the publishing world has ever seen." A similar criticism came from John Dennis in the Spectator.32 Dennis expressed surprise that, considering Rossetti's opinion that the Prophetic Books "are neither readable nor even entirely sane" (Dennis' words), he should consider it desirable that they be published: "We disagree with him altogether. Blake wrote a great deal of what, had it been the work of a smaller man, would be accounted trash, and the sooner it is forgotten the better for his fame. We venture indeed to think that Mr. Rossetti would have done wisely to omit a good deal contained in this small volume, since there are passages here as free almost from mind and meaning as any combina-

1 Rossetti's part in the 1863 and 1880 editions of Gilchrist, his Aldine edition, and his miscellaneous writings on Blake are discussed in the bibliographies by "33, and Bentley and Nurei, and in Deborah Dorfman, Blake in the Nineteenth Century (New Haven, 1969). Dorfman's account of the Aldine edition is the fullest (pp. 112-14, 165-67), but it needs supplementing as provided here. Our knowledge of the preparation of Rossetti's catalogue raisonné for Gilchrist is sketchy, but it should be possible to fill in the details as more of Rossetti's correspondence becomes available. Of Rossetti's miscellaneous writings on Blake, the following do not appear in the standard lists: (1) "Gilchrist's Life of Blake," Reader, 2 (November 1863), 544. (Corrects a statement in the Reader about his part in completing Gilchrist.) (2) Review of Selections from the Writings of Blake, with an Introductory Essay by Laurence Housman, Athenaeum, 3 June 1893, p. 700. (Identified from Rossetti's file at the Athenaeum in the Library of the Courtauld Institute.) (3) "The William Blake Revival," Daily Graphic, 2 November 1904, Supplement, p. 1. (Review of Russell's Letters of Blake, Ellis' Poetical Works of Blake, and G. Robertson's edition of Gilchrist.)
2 Suzanne R. Hoover, "The Public Reception of Gilchrist's Life of Blake," Blake Newsletter, 8 (1974), 26-31, points out that there were at least half a dozen favorable reviews in British periodicals up to this date.
3 Houghton Library MS., Harvard University. All quotations from manuscripts are, to the best of my knowledge, published for the first time. I am indebted to Mrs. Imogene Dennis for permission to quote from the letters and diaries of her grandfather William Michael Rossetti, and to Prof. W. E. Fredeman and the University of British Columbia for permission to publish the extracts from Rossetti's diaries (from the Angel Papers). Permission to publish manuscripts in their Collections has also been given by the following libraries: The British Library, the Bodleian, and the Houghton.
4 On "The Aldine Poets," an established series then being reissued with new names at a popular price, see Edward Bell, George Bell, Publisher (London, 1924), p. 51.
5 The Athenaeum reported on 5 July 1873, p. 17, that "The term of partnership existing between Messrs. Bell & Dalby having expired, Mr. Dalby has retired from that firm."
6 As published in the Memoir ran to 125 pp.
In early October 1874 he was still discussing the matter of text with D. G. Rossetti, who suggested: "About the Supplices of Innocence etc., it strikes me that a verbatim version of the former, at any rate, appeared in Swinburne's Blake--did it not? and might not in that case I recorded my name had it been noted in the issue of 1890." (Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ed. O. Doughty and J. R. Wahl (Oxford, 1965-1967), III, 1314.) William's review of Shepherd's 1874 edition, Pickering's patronage in attacking the editing of the poems in Gilchrist, and Rossetti's reply in the Academy (see Dorfman, pp. 112-13), all of which appeared between 5 September and 10 October 1874, undoubtedly delayed Rossetti's decision about adopting readings from Shepherd's text.

19 G. Keynes' statement (a Blake Bibliography (New York, 1921), p. 271) that in the poems from the Pickering MS. Rossetti "generally" followed D. G. Rossetti. Keynes correctly notes that Rossetti's text of the Poetical Sketches "is derived from Shepherd's edition of 1868... and is very accurate," whereas in the case of the Songs of Innocence and of Experience and of the poems from the Rossetti MS. he "followed the very inaccurate versions given by D. G. Rossetti in Gilchrist."


21 Chief among them was Robert Buchanan in the Athenaeum for 29 January 1870, pp. 154-56.

22 During the 1860's Rossetti's attitude towards the Prophetic Books, if not overly sympathetic, was at least open. On 22 May 1862 Mrs. Gilchrist requested from him "brief general descriptions of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, The Book of Ahania, The Song of Los, Asia, and America." (Rossetti Papers, ed. W. M. Rossetti (London, 1903), p. 6.) Perhaps it is to these that Rossetti refers in an unpublished passage of his Reminiscences (Bodley MS. Eng. Misc. d. 332, fol. 213) where he records that remarks by him of a critical bearing were embodied in Gilchrist's Life. That Mrs. Gilchrist's list was extended is suggested by a surviving note on Visions of the Daughters of Albion, which Mrs. Gilchrist "reduced," certain that Macmillan would reject it, though she considered it "most vigorous and admirable." (H. H. Gilchrist, Anna Gilchrist, Her Life and Writings (London, 1887), pp. 127-28, where the original note is printed. She in fact rewrote it, replacing Rossetti's direct exposition with the statement that imperishable words are opened up through the medium of this allegory... But we will not enter on them here. (Life of Blake (London, 1863), p. 108.) Even this statement was omitted in the second edition of it is worth mentioning as well Rossetti's lengthy exposition of "The Mental Traveller," printed in Gilchrist, as evidence of his willingness to tackle a difficult text, and his constant support for Swinburne's Blake, of which he wrote to the poet on 2 January [1866] after reading the manuscript: "I should consider its publication the greatest service at present possible to Blake, & hardly inferior to a full critical edition of his writings." (B. L. Ashley MS. 1446, fol. 2v.)