A Newly Discovered Watermark and a Visionary’s Way with His Dates

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artistic reputation was being quietly resurrected shortly before the publication of Gilchrist’s biography. But the most remarkable feature of the passage is the symmetry of its errors: Blake was dead, but did not die insane; Dadd was insane, but did not die until 1886.

Gullick and Timbs very probably lifted some of their misinformation from A Handbook to the Water Colours, Drawings, and Engravings, in the [Manchester] Art Treasures Exhibition, Being a Reprint of Critical Notices Originally Published in “The Manchester Guardian” (London, 1857). In this work, pp. 12-13, the anonymous author compares Blake and Dadd and asserts that “both were mad... [but] Blake’s fancies were lovely, rather than terrible.”

The statement—premature by a mere twenty-seven years—that Dadd was deceased may have resulted from a misreading of other published statements. The Art-Union of October 1843 took note of Dadd’s insanity, his murder of his father in August 1843, and his subsequent confinement. The journal apostrophizes the unfortunate man as follows: “The late Richard Dadd. Alas!... for, although the grave has not actually closed over him, he must be classed among the dead.” Perhaps Gullick and Timbs misconstrued this (or some other) elegy for Dadd’s psychological demise, and this prompted them to list him, along with Blake, among the principal, insane, and deceased British masters of watercolor.

References


4 P. 12; quoted from Bentley, Blake Books, p. 660.

5 Vol. 5, p. 267; quoted from Patricia Allinder, The Late Richard Dadd, exhibition catalogue (London: The Tate Gallery, 1974), p. 9. Allinder notes the reference to Dadd in Painting Popularly Explained, but does not record its authors or the reference to Blake.

A NEWLY DISCOVERED WATERMARK AND A VISIONARY’S WAY WITH HIS DATES

Martin Butlin

Recent conservation treatment at the Tate Gallery has revealed that the Gallery’s large color print of “Newton,” signed and dated by Blake in his own hand “1795 W.B. inv. [in monogram], is watermarked “JHATMAN/1804.” The watermark, in the margin of the actual design, was only found when the fine canvas on which the print had been mounted was removed. Eight of the other large color prints in the Tate Gallery, also from the collection of Thomas Butts, were similarly mounted on canvas though “Pity” was lifted from its canvas preparatory to being lent to an exhibition in 1800. It is expected that others will be similarly treated in due course, when further watermarks may be discovered; “Hecate” is already known to be watermarked “1794/JHATMAN” but was not dated by Blake.

The first documentary record of any of the twelve designs is the inclusion of eight in an account between Blake and Thomas Butts of 3 March 1806, apparently as having been delivered, four at a time, on 5 July and 7 September 1805: “Newton” was apparently delivered on the latter date. All the works delivered in 1805 are in fact dated “1795”, with the possible exception of the copy of “Christ Appearing to the Apostles” now in the Yale University Art Gallery, the only print from these eight not in the Tate Gallery. Nine prints from the Butts collection (seven of those listed in the account, including “Newton,” together with two titles not listed in any account) were sold by Butts’s grandson, Captain F. J. Butts, to W. Graham Robertson in 1905 or 1906 and were presented by him to the Tate Gallery in 1939.

A number of cases of what may be called conceptual, mythical or even wishful pre-datings by Blake are already known. There are several examples of the later state of an engraving bearing the date of the first state. It is also highly likely that the version of “The Penance of Jane Shore” that Blake claimed in the catalogue of his exhibition in 1809 had been “done above Thirty Years ago” was not the small, immature example from his series of watercolors of subjects from English history now in a British private collection—that version is easily reconcilable with a date of c. 1779—but the larger, more finished and more accomplished version in the Tate Gallery that seems to date from about 1793. But what, in the case of this print of “Newton,” is the original to which the date “1795” applies? Many people, including myself, have supposed that Blake printed more than one example of each color print at one time, by a sort of monotype process, finishing each print in pen and watercolor on demand at a later date. This would mean that the two known versions of “Newton,” like the (up to three) known versions of the other prints in the series,
would both have been printed in 1795 and that this copy of "Newton" would have been finished in 1805 for delivery to Thomas Butts; this would of course have been reconcilable with a date, for the finishing only, of 1804 or later. But in no way can the first printing have been done in 1795 on paper watermarked 1804. It is known that paper manufacturers occasionally post-dated their watermarks by a year or so; a watercolor by Joshua Cristall in the Tate Gallery, on paper watermarked 1808, is signed and dated "J. Cristall 1807", apparently when the work was executed, in a space carefully left uncolored. But for a manufacturer to post-date his paper by as much as nine years is inconceivable, and in fact the previous batch of Whatman paper was dated 1794, only a year before the date given by Blake with his signature.  

The Butts prints are not only the first series for which there is any evidence; they also seem to have been the first set to have been sold to a patron. Blake offered another set of twelve prints to Dawson Turner in a letter of 9 June 1818 but these, and other examples, seem to have remained unsold at his death. One possibility could be that Blake printed one set in 1795 but that when he came to do the set for Butts he chose not to finish his existing prints but to start again from the beginning with new impressions. Frederick Tatham, who was not born until 1805, stated that Blake re-painted "his outline on the millboard when he wanted to take another print." But to re-do the color printing after a period of nine years, with the original thick, gummy colors all dried up on whatever form of plate Blake used, whether millboard (Tatham stated that Blake used "a common thick millboard") or metal, would seem to be a very perverse way of setting about things. If in fact the prints were color printed from metal plates it is possible that an outline was etched onto the plate in 1795 but that nothing else was done at that date. This is supported by the appearance of "God Judging Adam" in which Blake seems first to have printed a mono-chrome outline before overprinting it with his usual tacky color-printing medium. Or, in view of the fact that there are certain preliminary drawings, including one for the "Newton," and even a small-scale preliminary color print of "Pity," perhaps it is to these that Blake's 1795 date applies, meaning that at least he had the idea and had made the first experiments in that year. Or, he may have actually begun printing the series of twelve designs in 1795 with the whole scheme in his mind but not completed it until he was able to sell a series to Butts in 1805. It is significant that three of the titles owned by Butts but not included in the 1805 accounts, "Satan Exulting over Eve," "Pity" and "Hecate," were signed in a different way from the others, with the single word "Blake" actually incised into the pigments. The 1794 watermark of "Hecate" allows for this work to have been executed in 1795, while "Pity" does not have a watermark; it is difficult however to be certain about the copy of "Satan Exulting over Eve" now in the collection of John Craxton, though no watermark is visible from the front of the work. Further explanations are no doubt possible.

Whatever the exact solution, both as to the techniques used by Blake and the stages in which he applied each process, there are far wider implications in this new discovery. It has been generally assumed, at least recently, that Blake's use of color printing was confined largely to the years 1794, 1795 and 1796. This is based partly on the evidence of the large color prints but also on that of the illuminated books and the designs from them that were issued separately in color-printed versions. But it is now clear that Blake was still using color printing in at least one print executed as late as 1804-05. This also has implications for the theory that a revolution in Blake's style took place as a result of his experiences during his stay at Felpham from 1800 to 1803, in which he came to concentrate far more on clear outlines and balanced forms than in his earlier works. It is one thing to postulate a color print basically executed in 1795 and then more closely defined with pen outlines and clear color washes on being sold to Thomas Butts in 1805; it is quite another to see Blake re-using, as late as 1804-05, a technique the most dominant feature of which was its blotting and blurring.  

1 Martin Butlin, The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake, 1981, I, 166-67 no. 396, repr. II, pl. 394 in color. All the large color prints, together with related drawings, are catalogued in Butlin, I, 156-77, introd. and nos. 209-329, and repr. in vol. II.  
2 I am indebted to Kasia Szeleynski of the Tate Gallery's conservation department for informing me of this discovery and discussing it with me. An inscription on the back of the print, previously covered by the canvas, reads "No. 22 Page 203": this
refers to William Rossetti's listing in the 1863 edition of
G Ilchrist's Life of William Blake, which means that the paper
must have been mounted on the canvas after that date.

3 Butlin 310; exh. The Painterly Print, Metropolitan Museum, New
(17, repr.). The exhibition also included the small color-printed
try-out in the British Museum (Butlin 313; 16, repr.) and the
version in the Metropolitan Museum (Butlin 311; 18, repr. in
color); the version in the Yale Center (Butlin 312) was repr. as
fig. 50.

4 For example, "Joseph of Arimathea among the Rocks of Albion,"
"Albion Rose," "Job" and "Ezekiel"; see Robert N. Essick, William

5 See Butlin, i, 23-24 nos. 67 and 69.

6 The fullest discussion of the technique of the large color
prints is in Essick, pp. 125-35.

7 See The Tate Gallery 1972-4, 1975, p. 52, repr., where the
contrary is argued.

8 See the tables of watermarks in Butlin, i, 627, and G. E.
Bentley, Jr., Blake Books, 1977, p. 72; until the discovery of
the watermark on the Tate Gallery's "Newton" no "Whatman/1804"
watermarks were known on any of the works included in my
catalogue. For Whatman paper see also Essick, p. 105.

9 For a discussion of possible implications of the way in which
the color prints are signed, though not in fact of the group with

EXHIBITIONS: MORGAN LIBRARY

From 1 September through 4 October the Pierpont Mor-
gan Library exhibited a selection of Blake water-
colors and illuminated books, including the Morgan
(Butts) set of Job watercolors, watercolor designs
to L'Allegro and II Penseroso, "Samson Breaking His
Bonds," "Fire," America, and the Songs. The Picker-
ing Manuscript was also on exhibition, along with
engravings from books illustrated by Blake. A
catalogue is available for $7.50.

SANTA CRUZ CONFERENCE: BLAKE & CRITICISM

The National Endowment for the Humanities has approved
funding for the conference, which the sponsors hope
will bring into the open the collision between Blake
studies and the concerns, values, and strategies
of contemporary critical theory. Ever more perceived
as a key document at the origins of post-modern
consciousness, Blake's work arguably anticipates and
contests many contemporary and often anti-humanistic
critical formulations. The conference will focus on
the profound role Blake's work has to play in any
new organization and interpretation of humanistic
studies. The conference will be held 21 and 22 May
1982 at the campus of the University of California,
Santa Cruz. Detailed information concerning the
program will appear in the next issue of Blake and
will also be available from The Conference on Blake
and Criticism, Literature Board, Kresge College,
UCSC, Santa Cruz, CA 95064.