

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

Edward Larrissy, William Blake

Nelson Hilton

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 20, Issue 2, Fall 1986, pp. 66-68



Rev. John Caspar Lavater (XXIX): Bindman's suggestion that this was intended as a frontispiece to Lavater's *Physiognomy* is attractive.

Industrious Cottager (XXXI): Is the child female? Untraced impressions 6. Essick's observation is undoubtedly correct.

Falsa ad Coelum (XXXIV): Schiff's rejection of "Ganesa" as a type for the elephant and his proposal of the phallic symbolism of the trunk and the pun on elephant are plausible.

An Estuary with Figures in a Boat (XXXV): Although it cannot be established that this relates to the sketching party on the Medway taken by Blake, Stothard and Mr. Ogleby, Bindman's dating of c. 1780 is preferable in terms both of composition and coloring to 1790-94.

Edmund Pitts, Esq. (XXXVI): Much more probable that "Armig" was added after Earle's knighthood in 1802, even if it counters the "left-pointing serif" theory.

Addenda:

The Pierpont Morgan Library now owns *Head of a Damned Soul in Dante's Inferno* (XXXII, 1E; given by Charles Ryskamp). The British Museum owns the unique state of *Mirth* (XVIII, 2; allocated by Her Majesty's Treasury).

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, has been allocated the following items by Her Majesty's Treasury, through the Minister of the Arts, accepted in lieu of capital taxes from the estate of the late Sir Geoffrey Keynes: *Joseph of Arimathea Among the Rocks of Albion* (I, 1A, 2E, 2F); *The Accusers of Theft Adultery Murder* (VIII, 3F); *Enoch* (XV, 1C); *Laocoön* (XIX, 1A); *The Man Sweeping the Interpreter's Parlour* (XX, 2H); *George Cumberland's Card* (XXI, 1N, 1O, 1P, 1Q); *Morning Amusement* (XXII, 1B, 1C); *The Fall of Rosamond* (XXV, 1A, 2C); *Zephyrus and Flora* (XXVI, 1A, 1B, F); *Calisto* (XXVII, 2C, 2D, F); *Venus dissuades Adonis from Hunting* (XVIII, 2A, 2B); *Rev. John Caspar Lavater* (XXIX, 2B, 3J, 3K); *The Idle Laundress* (XXX, 2C, 3E, 3F); *Industrious Cottager* (XXXI, 3D, 4G, 4H); *Head of a Damned Soul in Dante's Inferno* (XXXII, 1D); *An Estuary with Figures in a Boat* (XXXV); *The Child of Nature* (XXXVIII, 1B, 1C); *James Upton* (XL, 2C); *M^{rs} Q.* (XLII, 2E); *Wilson Lowry* (XLIII, 2B, 3D, 3E, 4J); *Bust and large wings of an angel looking to the left* (Part 3, a); *Centaur in a landscape with a Lapith on his back* (Part 3, b); *Classical figure seated on a pedestal and holding a lyre* (Part 3, c); *Head of a Saint* (Part 3, d); *Satyr with a dancing figure* (Part 3, e); *Christ Trampling on Satan* (XLIV, 1K); *Lear and Cordelia* (XLV, 3C, 4E); *Two Afflicted Children* (XLVI); *Two Views of an Afflicted Child* (XLVII); *Coin of Nebuchadnezzar and Head of Cancer* (LVII).

The following items, which are the property of the Keynes Family Trust, are on deposit at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge: *Job* V, 1A); *Chaucers Canterbury*

Pilgrims (XVI, 2B, 3O); *The Ancient of Days* (LXVII). This last item does not appear to be a print at all. Under 7× magnification there was no evidence of a printed line, nor does it appear to have been produced by a lithographic process. The underlying image may have been reproduced by a mechanical process, but the watercolor is applied by hand. The support is card, which is unusual in Blake's work, and Essick's hypothesis that this is some sort of facsimile is probably correct.

Edward Larrissy, *William Blake. Rereading Literature Series*, edited by Terry Eagleton. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985. xv + 166. \$19.95 and \$6.95

Reviewed by Nelson Hilton

A key word for this "rereading" (as well as our rereading of it) is "ambivalence"—so much so that the general editor's preface, having opened by declaring Blake "England's greatest revolutionary artist," concludes by pointing to his "revolutionary ambiguity" (ix, xi). Eagleton here recycles Larrissy's contention that Blake is "the greatest radical poet in English" (3) and that

Blake's firmness is meant to conceal what it in fact reveals: a fear that all firmness, like all definite form, is limiting because it excludes other possible views or forms. This fear is balanced against the suspicion that without firmness, without form—in fact without limitation and exclusion—no expression would be possible. The two points of view comprise an ambivalence about form and the means of expression which appears throughout Blake's work.

Certain key words, for instance, constantly carry the weight of this ambivalence. 'Bound' . . . is one. (6)

Later we read of "those ambiguous Blakean words" (51) and the "curious ambiguity in Blake's use of . . . 'bound'" (69). The fundamental problem with this short but ambitious book is that its reliance on "ambivalence" and "ambiguity" sets up a false double bind ("Two Horn'd Reasoning Cloven Fiction") so that posited ambivalence about form and expression degenerates into the contention that "the question whether form is expressive or limiting remains a question, though a profoundly troubling one" (59, emphasis added). As a result, Larrissy's Blake's work "is marked by deep anxiety" (37); it is "anxious and ambivalent" (126), and (as in *The Book of Urizen*) the "ambiguities derive, of course, from Blake's doubts about form" (131); we can see "Blake's anxiety" in "his ambivalent feelings . . . inscribed in the am-

biguous form" (133); elsewhere Blake "reveals a true anxiety" (145). Given this schizophrenic double bind, Larrissy has to conclude (here regarding *Songs of Innocence*) that "To oscillate between two readings . . . may be the fullest response we can have" (63). Needless to say, the possibility of a vision "twofold always"—not to mention threefold or fourfold—does not appear.

One problem can be neatly framed by considering Larrissy's discussion of the motif-idea-concept-practice of "frame" and "framing" in Blake. Having identified "the [graphic] frame that surrounds many of the songs" as a way in which "Blake signals the *necessary* limitation of Innocence" [my emphasis], Larrissy opens considerations of rereading: "What is interesting about Blake's frames is that they can be seen as a metaphor for the paradoxical process described by Derrida" (25). That process, as victims of "Jack de Reader" (Scritti Politti's epithet) may remember, concerns the instantiation of a margin, a "supplementary" work (*parergon*) which is itself paradoxically necessary to the constitution of the work. The issue, finally, is where interpretation can stop—whether there is in fact anything intrinsic in the (framed) work for interpretation to fix upon; for if there is no such thing or place, then clearly rereading is the condition of our existence. As for Blake: "Working back from the graphic frames to the text, we can now see more clearly that Blake has 'framed' his innocents: he has depicted them as limited, and thus as requiring some other level of interpretation to explain them. But he has also exposed and, by implication, questioned his own framing of them. . . ." (25). This is well taken and nicely supported by a detailed consideration of "The Chimney Sweeper" in *Songs of Innocence*, all building to the observation that "irony combined with 'irony of irony' (the ironic speaker is himself limited) is characteristic of all Blake's work" (48). For "limited," as we have just seen, one may reread "framed."

This interesting use of "framing" may also serve to frame the fascinating three pages on "The Tyger," a discussion more remarkable for what it omits than what it argues, as one would be hard pressed to find any other consideration of "The Tyger" which manages wholly to suppress any reference to the first and last stanzas and the highlighted transition of "Could frame" to "Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?" For Larrissy, as already quoted, "The Tyger" reveals that "The question whether form is expressive or limiting remains a question." But the question is (isn't it?) whether this is in fact "a profoundly troubling" question (for Blake, for us) or a rhetorical one. The question is (isn't it?) whether we could (or dare?) move from either/or to both/and (expressive/limiting). The problematic relation between "reality" (the "referent") and language thus assumes a crucial or, exactly, critical importance, as, for instance, when Larrissy situates his own frame: "A Marxist criticism which

is aware of the implication of human subjects in signifying practices . . . is well placed to conduct properly sensitive analyses of the relations between the 'referential' and the 'rhetorical'. . . . The price of this advance, however, will have to be the recognition that the 'referential' only ever appears in rhetorical form" (49). Yet the discussion of the "manufacturing-process" or "harsh mechanical process" (58, 59) which sets up the Tyger as "a symbol for the position of the emerging industrial proletariat" (59) displaces precisely the insistence of "The Tyger" that the "referential" only ever appears in rhetorical form. Blake questions "his own" framing not just "by implication," but in crafting frames which inextricably implicate readers in their questioning. "The implication of human subjects in signifying practices" is not something about which one may be simply "aware," and not something it is enough simply to imply.

Larrissy expands our vocabulary for Blake's craft by invoking another Derrideanism, "graft"—though one misses a link to the now general conception of Blake's "composite art" which would have supplemented the argument. "The Chimney Sweeper" of *Songs of Innocence*, for instance, is "the product of grafts: children's hymns, liberal education theories and occult emblems" (37). Via the "graft," Larrissy can turn resolutely from the idea of a single, "unified" interpretation of some idealized organic "whole" work and find in Blake "probably the greatest reviser and cobbler-together of fragments and odd ends until T.S. Eliot" (90).

Yet the shape of Larrissy's book bespeaks desire for the unity it rejects as it spends its first seven chapters getting up to and through *The Book of Urizen* and its last speeding—in twenty-two pages—all the way "From *The Book of Ahania* (1795) to *Jerusalem* (1804–c. 1820)." And while the bulk of the rereading in various ways develops Blake's "shying-away from unity, and courting of process" (88), the rereading of the bulk of Blake's work finds that here "Blake yearns for a unity" and "longs for a lost unity" (148, 154), even though it is these works that most engage "a process of endlessly deferred sense making" (153, also 145). The reason for this shift in Blake and/or in this view of his oeuvre is political. Larrissy's Blake wants "to make an effective political intervention in the revolutionary period 1790–3" (98) but that desire is not realized, and so "The slow-moving tableaux of his later works are the index of a political despair which sees all history as telling one dire story, and the only way out as mental, rather than physical, fight" (154). Yet in the book's stirring peroration we learn what it means to have, like Blake, a "thoroughly political" view of humanity: "the individual is the bearer and mediator of traditions; the world is interpreted and transformed by those traditions. To transform the world you must institute the struggle of tradition against tradition, of discourse against discourse. This struggle is

shown in Blake's works" (finis). Amen! Huzza! Selah! But *this* struggle can only be—being for hearts, minds, and cognitive processes—a "mental, rather than physical, fight," and one wonders to see evident commitment to it reread as an "index of political despair." Such an "index" seems, rather, itself an icon of the ambivalent judgment that posits its existence.

One's overall response to this study, at turns provoking, rewarding, irritating, and disappointing, and to its challenge of "rereading" Blake will probably hinge on whether or not one agrees that *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, for all its delights, warrants more attention than *Milton* and *Jerusalem* together. As for Blake's "revolutionary ambiguity," one is reminded of the ambiguously revolutionary comment "I used to be indecisive, but now I'm not so sure."

Blake: The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. Television docudrama written by Harvey Bellin and Tom Kieffer. Produced by the Swedenborg Foundation, New York, 1984. Film or $\frac{3}{4}$ " videocassette, 30 minutes. Rental free (Swedenborg Foundation, 139 East 23rd St., New York, NY 10010).

William Blake's An Island in the Moon. Adapted by Joseph Viscomi, directed by Viscomi and Evamarii Johnson, with music by Margaret LaFrance, 1983. First performed at Cornell, 8–9 April 1983; videotaped before a live audience 11–12 May 1983. $\frac{3}{4}$ " videocassette, 48 minutes. Rental \$50, sale \$130 (Blake, Dept. of English, Univ. of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27514).

Reviewed by Tim Hoyer

As video has mushroomed in the last several years it is not surprising that Blake has become the subject of several films now available on videocassette. The Swedenborg Foundation has been a good deal more generous with Blake in this film and recent publications than he was with the master in the work from which the film's title is taken. Unfortunately, the film in many ways justifies Blake's original treatment of the institutional

Swedenborg in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, lopsided though it was. What the writers and producers have given us is a distinctly "angelic" picture of Blake and his marriage to his wife and to his work, thus misrepresenting both.

The film opens with Blake sitting up in bed coloring a print of *The Ancient of Days* under the adoring eye of his wife, Kate. The Blakes are represented as living in spotless cleanliness in a small but tidy apartment even though, according to George Cumberland, Jr., who visited Blake with some frequency on his father's business during Blake's later years, their actual Fountain Court "studio" was dirty and crowded. The time is 1827, ostensibly during Blake's last days, but the film does not attempt anything resembling a narrative of this period in Blake's life and career. Instead Blake's pictures are used to illustrate his doctrine of the creative life as it is described in readings from his works. The acting (William is played by George Rose; Catherine by Anne Baxter) is limited to recitation and dumb show and the effect is not dramatic.

Overlooking for a moment the filmmakers' use of *The Ancient of Days* as a focal point for Blake's artistic consciousness in the last days of his life (though Tatham reports that Blake was coloring a copy of this print for him on his death bed, Blake was undoubtedly more concerned at the time with the Dante illustrations he was making for John Linnell), the most obvious problem with the film from the outset is its unremitting sentimentality. Blake and his wife are portrayed as luminously happy, constantly smiling at the world and one another through glistening eyes. Catherine plays a role in many ways more important than Blake's; she is a kind of dewy-eyed docent and nurse to the art and man. The filmmakers' conception of the Blakes' marriage seems extraordinarily off the mark. One does not expect to see the elder Blakes at each other's throats, but the pious couple we do see does not look like a marriage of heaven and hell, nor does it betray a shred of earthly reality. Blake's art contains a sometimes dark and ambivalent view of women and we suspect, on evidence from poems and notebook entries, that his marriage to Catherine was at times extremely difficult for both of them. Any hint of these things is completely absent here and, though it is not completely unrealistic to see the old couple mellowed and accommodated to one another at the end of their long marriage, one expects to see signs, however subtle, of the years of hard poverty and marital difficulties. Instead everything is sanitized and sentimentalized. The tone of the production is pious, almost in the religious sense. We are being given a view of a secular sainthood.

Realism is lacking in other respects too. The only "real" event in the film is Blake's death at the end. But that one event is seen through the sentimental filter of