

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY  
**BLAKE**

R E V I E W

Robert N. Essick, *The Separate Plates of William Blake: A Catalogue*

David Scrase

*Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*, Volume 20, Issue 2, Fall 1986, pp. 64-66



chapter on Horne Tooke is exemplary. Smith shows clearly how Tooke's "tracing of all parts of speech to nouns and verbs disregards the prevalent assumption that two distinct vocabularies exist for the learned and the vulgar, one which was pure and the other corrupt or barbaric" (p. 123). I at least am quite convinced by this account that those who have sought to make sense of Tooke in exclusively philosophical or linguistic terms have seen only part of the point.

The main thesis of this study, as has already been implied, is that by 1815 there had occurred a "weakening of the hegemony of the concept of vulgarity" (p. 154), so that radical writers are free to emerge into discursive self-confidence, and to project for themselves a serious and attentive audience. The conservative writers, reciprocally, have lost their grip on the "official" language. Whether this analysis contains a grain or a large measure of truth is again something that scholars will wish to ponder carefully.

Smith's final chapter offers a fascinating interpretation of the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, and of the *Biographia Literaria* as an answer to it. The complex and ambivalent radicalism of the preface is much illuminated by Smith's approach, as is the sophisticated reactionary alternative laid forth in Coleridge's later book. It is fitting that this study concludes with an account of Cobbett's *Grammar*, a text that apparently sold a hundred thousand copies by 1834 (p. 231), but which is now scarcely known to students of the period.

The importance of this book to an understanding of Romanticism as a whole will by now surely be apparent. It also provides a new and provocative perspective on Blake. Blake is not much discussed here, but his ghost is constantly visible. Smith's comparison of Tooke's campaign against the privileging of abstract thought with Blake's against "mind forg'd manacles" (p. 139) suggests much about why the poet might have thought that to particularize is the alone distinction of merit. The analogies between Blake's writings and those of William Hone (as here described) are especially fascinating. Hone's "mock innocence" (p. 165), Smith suggests, speaks for a mastery of a whole range of styles whereby all distinctions between the polite and the vulgar, and the adult and the infantile, are made redundant in the face of "a unified, organic whole" (p. 171). Hone's use of the forms of the nursery rhyme seems very close to Blake's. But we would have to question whether the case made for Hone could also work for Blake: that his synthesizing stylistic posture *effectively* denies (as it might deny in principle) the "restrictive basis of concepts of language and literature" (p. 177). If Smith is right, however, then her thesis offers another account, besides that invoking the obscurity of Blake's medium, of why his poems had no significant audience in the 1790s: such inclusive and supple stylistic resources could not have

registered as fully intelligible to a readership still intimidated by the hegemony of the polite culture. Writing after 1815, Hone was more fortunate.

We still have much to learn about the historical energies that flow through the obscurities of Blake's languages. Olivia Smith's book is one of the most valuable contributions yet made to our recovery of such forms of knowledge.

THE  
SEPARATE  
PLATES OF *William Blake*  
A Catalogue · Robert N. Essick



Robert N. Essick. *The Separate Plates of William Blake: A Catalogue*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983. 302 pp., 114 illus. \$75.00.

Reviewed by David Scrase

It is a little difficult to pinpoint the market at which this handsomely produced volume is aimed. All institutions who own prints by William Blake will need it as a standard reference work, but these are not many; for the layman, interested in Blake, but neither the happy owner of one of his separate plates nor a scholar to whose interest Blake studies is central, Bindman's

*The Complete Graphic Works of William Blake* is more likely to find a place upon his library shelf. This is a less comprehensive account of the *minutiae* of theories and analyses of the various states, known or suggested by Essick, but it is very much cheaper, and, with the illustrations integrated into the body of the text easier to handle.

Essick is a scholar of the comprehensive kind. In the tradition of G.E. Bentley, Jr. he has attempted an exhaustive study of his chosen field, which is admirable where the evidence and material is small but becomes confused and confusing when, as with *Chaucers Canterbury Pilgrims* (XVI) his list of untraced impressions runs to 142, some of which he admits "are no doubt the same as the traced prints, and there are in all probability other extant impressions not recorded here in either category" (75). After wading through the description of the 142 items one is tempted to ask what is the point of the exercise, unless to show how careful Essick has been to incorporate everything he knows into his text lest some eager reviewer points out something which has escaped him. This may sound unnecessarily tart, but this reviewer feels it sufficient to list examples in public collections only, except where a unique state is in the private domain.

To an Englishman there are always some problems of different nuance of meaning when reading an American book. Essick's style, in accordance with the high seriousness with which he treats his subject, is measured and a little ponderous, but not obscure or difficult to read. A few things confused me. In his description of *Charity* (II), he uses the technical description "planographic transfer print," a term which usually implies the lithographic process, whereas this looks much more like a "monotype," as Essick admits in the text. A similar confusion arises in his description of the making of the large color monotypes, worked up by hand, in his introduction, p. xxv. But on the whole Essick is accurate and intelligible in his description of the processes of printmaking and his introduction is well balanced and interesting. The main text is clear and for the most part he avoids subjective judgments, a major pitfall in Blake studies. One comment with which I had to take exception is Essick's description of the reworking of the *Job* and *Ezekiel* prints: "Job's heavy burden is underscored by the thick cross hatching defining his covering. The more delicate lines of 'Ezekiel' follow the flowing contours of garments and the burnished areas suggest enlightenment rather than oppression" (23). but on the whole this book is remarkably free of such attempts at interpretation.

Under *Albion Rose* (VII), as it is impossible to see the first state in an intaglio impression, is it not possible that the Huntington Library impression is a 2nd state with the "bat-winged moth" burnished out, or that Es-

sick's state 1 should be state 2 in accordance with the evidence of *The Accusers of Theft Adultery Murder* (VIII) and that there was an earlier "hypothetical" state 1, no examples of which have yet been found? To suggest this may sound perverse—after all, just because Blake produced a preliminary pull of one print does not prove that this was his invariable practice. Whilst conceding that in some instances it is likely that there were trial "states" which have not survived—the plates after *Morland, The Idle Laundress* (XXX) and *Industrious Cottager* (XXXI), are cases in point—to presuppose them and list them as hypothetical states is hedging one's bets a bit. Better to have made an aside, suggesting that there may have been an additional state rather than boldly to list one.

In a work which is in so many ways so admirable and accurate, it is a little disconcerting to read with reference to the Butts, "Under these circumstances it is impossible to disentangle the father's work from the son's. Fortunately this quandary is of little consequence: the important issue is to determine the extent of Blake's involvement in the Butts family's graphic activities" (211). This may put the viewpoint of the Blake scholar, but the art historian is every bit as involved in ascertaining which Butts, father or son, is responsible for which print. To uncover the truth is after all our aim and responsibility. *Christ Trampling on Satan* (XLIV) seems to this reviewer to owe rather more to Blake in its handling than Essick allows, nor does it seem logical to dismiss his participation in the *Lear and Cordelia* plate (XLV), and both of the odd plates of afflicted children, *Two Afflicted Children* (XLVI) and *Two Views of an Afflicted Child* (XLVII), can only, in the light of their relationship in draughtsmanship to the series of imaginary heads, be attributed to Blake himself.

The book is extremely well produced: the print clear and the paper of high quality. There are remarkably few errors of proofreading. It should be noted that the *Industrious Cottager* (165) is no. XXXI; on p. 146, C, the owner is the Ashmolean Museum, and on p. 230 an unnecessary "d" is attached to the word "once" (paragraph 2, line 8). The color plates are a little disappointing, but Blake's color is so intense and vivid that it is almost impossible to reproduce. It would have been useful to have had the ownership of the items reproduced listed below each illustration as well as in the acknowledgments.

*Comments:* The dating of Blake's prints is not easy. On the whole Essick's conclusions seem to be justified, although Erdman's "left-pointing serif" hypothesis (see *The Accusers* [VIII]) is by no means conclusive.

*Edward & Elenor* (IV): Bindman's date of late 1770s or early 1780s makes sense.

*The Chaining of Orc* (XVII): From the reproduction the date appears to be 1813.

*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<sup>rs</sup> 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-