Stanley Gardner, Blake’s Innocence and Experience Retraced

Nelson Hilton

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Divine Essence;
York: Columbi a Universit y Press , 1970) , 1:402. From a review in th e
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"Negative Sources in Blake," Essays for S. Foster Damon, ed.
303.
"Blake's Marriage of Heaven and Hell: A Critical Study (Kent:
State University, 1957), p. 28. Nurmi refers to Bentley's un-
published dissertation (Oxford, 1954) as "the only study of Blake's
connections with Boehme that approaches thoroughness." I agree,
having read it many years ago; but much has been done since, as
Aubrey points out.

Marriage are "(1790–3)."
2G. E. Bentley, Jr., and Martin K. Nurmi, A Blake Bibliography
(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964), p. 199. Accord-
ing to Bentley and Nurmi, the Law edition was offered by Rivington
in 1824 for £1.16.0. That, I suppose, was expensive for Blake.
4John P. Frayne, ed., Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats (New
York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 1:402. From a review in the
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tors. Five were published by John M. Watkins, Madame Blavatsky's
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5I quote from a xerox copy of a typescript in the library of
Michael B. Yeats.
6"Blake's Marriage of Heaven and Hell: A Critical Study (Kent:
Kent State University, 1957), p. 28. Nurmi refers to Bentley's un-
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connections with Boehme that approaches thoroughness." I agree,
having read it many years ago; but much has been done since, as
Aubrey points out.
7The opposing viewpoints are most strongly supported by
Kathleen Raine in Blake and Tradition (Princeton: Princeton Uni-
iversity Press, 1968) and Helen C. White in The Mysticism of William
Blake (Madison: University of Wisconsin Studies in Language and
Literature 23, 1927).
8Damon, William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols; Percy-
val, William Blake's Circle of Destiny; Bentley, "William Blake
and the Alchemical Philosophers"; Raine, Blake and Tradition; and
Paley, Energy and the Imagination. Aubrey's review of the scholar-
ship is generally sound but not comprehensive.
9Occasional reference is made to other poems, especially The
Book of Ahania and The Song of Los in chapter 2.
10Like Raine, Paley explores many possible sources. See espe-
cially his chapter on "The Lambeth Books" in Energy and the Imagi-
nation: A Study of the Development of Blake's Thought (Oxford:
12See especially George Mills Harper, "The Divine Tetrad in
Blake's Jerusalem," Essays for S. Foster Damon, pp. 235-55; see also
Harper and Jane McClellan, "Blake's Demonic Triad," The Words-
worth Circle 8 (spring 1977), 172-82.
13Vol. 1 of the Law edition contains The Three Principles of the
Divine Essence; Vol. 2 The Threefold Life of Man and The Answers
to Forty Questions Concerning the Soul. For Aubrey's discussion of
numbers, especially 7, see pp. 20-23, and 125. Although he com-
ments briefly on the "fourfold nature" of Freher's designs, Aubrey
concludes that "the similar fourfold nature of Blake's universe needs
little elaboration" (102). Students of the later Blake should keep in
mind that "The Sexual is Threefold: the Human is Fourfold" (Mil-
ton, Bentley, p. 322).
14Blake and Tradition, 1, 1. Besides Boehme, Raine has read
widely in and quotes from such esoteric sources as the Cabala,
Agrrippa, Hermes Trismegistus, Fludd, Paracelsus, Swedenborg,
Jacob Bryant, and Thomas Taylor the Platonist. More modest in
their claims, Damon and Paley have considered most of these.

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xviii + 211 pp. illus. $27.50.
Reviewed by Nelson Hilton

Attempting to trace the Songs back to some origin or source, this book offers a Blake who first acclaims "the work of enlightened charity" undertaken by his parish in the 1780s but who subsequently, owing to the failure of that experiment in welfare, turns with "cold fury" to epitomize "the desolation" in Songs of Experience. Along the way we have a provocative revisionist account of "Holy Thursday" (SI) and become well acquainted with how things sound "to [Gardner's] ear" and look "to [Gardner's] eye." Working our way back to "the groundwork of a vision" (14), "the visionary groundwork" (47),
we can even find ourselves “As we read, sitting beneath the chimney newly swept in Golden Square” (65).

For Gardner, the “geographical and social matrix” for most of Songs of Innocence is to be located in two new forms of charity established by the parish of St. James. The first was the practice of transferring pauper children and infants out of the city to be nursed by cottagers at then rural Wimbledon:

Still more important for Gardner’s account is the school for pauper children which “the Governors of the Poor” for St. James established on King Street in 1782. Blake can be strikingly associated with the school through surviving records of payment to “Mr. Blake Haberdasher” —first the poet’s father, James, and then his elder brother, also James, who evidently took over the business on the father’s death in 1784. In the last weeks of 1784, Gardner reminds us, Blake and James Parker opened their printshop at 27 Broad St., next door to the Blake family home and haberdashery. Gardner reports that “no other London parish even remotely approached St. James’s in the vigour and consistency with which it took practical care of its pauper children” (14) and finds in this communal expression of “brief and un tarnished charity” the genesis of Songs of Innocence. In these poems Blake gives “a conclusively social rather than matrimonial emphasis” to the nurture of children, and “It seems to be an insistence we must respect” (24).

The consequences of Gardner’s reading surface most dramatically in the account of “Holy Thursday” in Innocence. While “our persistent misreading of the nature of charity schools” (30) has made us uncomfortable with the poem’s place in Innocence, it is clear to Gardner that Blake “added the illustration to insist that we take ‘Holy Thursday’... straight, without benefit of our own brand of retrospective enlightenment...” (35). One piece of evidence in this view is the poem’s reference to “wise guardians of the poor,” which Gardner can associate with an actual parish office (re-)institutioned in 1782: “Blake’s reference to this renewed and repeatedly recorded office of Guardian of the Poor seems to me too topical and too immediately recollective of an enlightened reform to be ironic or accidental” (41). Gardner corrects a common misapprehension in pointing out that the anniversary meeting of the charity-school children (“clearly an occasion Blake had shared”) took place “neither on Ascension Day or on Maundy Thursday, the two possible holy Thursdays of the church calendar” (35) but on some other late-Spring Thursday—or, once, Wednesday. This leads Gardner to suggest that the name “Holy Thursday” had been “used ironically as a gibe by some of the circle of friends Blake caricatured in An Island in the Moon” (where the first draft of the poem appears), but that Blake took over the term for his own purposes. (Perhaps the formula that “Thursday’s child has far to go” may be lurking around?)

The poem is at the center of Gardner’s conception of Innocence, and the book’s penultimate page argues again that “the lamb first entered Blake’s creative imagination when he heard the expectant murmur of the charity-school children in St. Paul’s. He went on to give the destitute child angelic status, and his neighbours the admonition, ‘cherish pity’” (157). But the complete admonition reads, “Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door” (contra Keynes, Erdman, and Bentley, Gardner reads “Then cherish pity;...”), and the fact that these messengers (“angels,” etymologically) are being walked away from our individual doors reflects eerily on the nature of that “human abstract” pity the speaker would have us “cherish.” Such various voices and possibilities are not for Gardner, and, asserting themselves, they leave “an odd sense of contradiction and unease”: “‘The Little Black Boy’ is a profoundly ambiguous poem, and the ambiguity is deepened, not resolved, by the illustrations. Its relation to the rest of Songs of Innocence is uneasy, and yet it provides Blake with the only means to hand by which a necessary dimension is added to the book” (63). While that “necessary dimension” is never clarified, the accompanying argument suggests that if “contemporary circumstances behind the poem” (62) could be identified, ambiguity might be lessened, if not resolved. The difficulty (“profound ambivalence,” 64) is that, instead, here Blake writes of “the imagined state, which both generates the poem and is expressed in the poetry itself” (62). That “the imagined state” should prove so problematic will seem to some an apt comment on the entire enterprise of “retracing” Innocence and Experience.

Gardner’s research in the Westminster archives adds some useful information about Blake’s milieu; but one can regret that such an ambitious project did not extend further into the wide range of secondary material. Particularly striking for a book which argues that “the primary motivation” of the Songs lies “in the assumptions which hung in the air [Blake] breathed” (144) is the lack of any reference to Heather Glen’s quite different version of those assumptions in Vision and Disenchantment (1983). One may have reservations as well about an argument which inserts “universally” before quoting the OED’s comment that “willow” is “taken as a symbol of grief” (100), or baldly states “The essence of Innocence” (107), or hears Blake speaking in propria persona “for the only time” —in two separate poems (“London,”
118; “On Another’s Sorrow,” 76)—or characterizes “deep” as “that most sinister of all words” (98). But in its relentless contextualization Gardner offers a salutary antidote to any who would seal Blake up in mere “textuality”: “A year before Blake issued Songs of Experience a chapel was built ‘on the green’ in South Lambeth” (139). It cost £3000, “financed by the issue of sixty shares of £50 each, every shareholder being entitled to four seats,” and Gardner even reproduces a 1793 watercolor of it, complete with cattle fenced off in the foreground pasture.


Reviewed by Peter Otto

One need only measure the articles which open Bloom’s William Blake with the work of their immediate predecessors to marvel once again at the quantum leap in Blake studies that was effected by the work of critics such as Erdman, Gleckner, Frye and, more recently, Mitchell. Articles such as “Blake: The Historical Approach,” “Point of View and Context in Blake’s Songs,” “The Keys to the Gates,” and “Blake’s Composite Art” clearly deserve their place at the beginning of a collection of “modern critical views” on Blake.

Yet it would be wrong to view these articles solely in their original context. The temporal gap between production in one generation and transmission to the next, and the resulting change of context, significantly changes any article’s meaning. In their original context these articles announced that they were engaged in the task of hollowing out “the cave” of Blake criticism. As a collection of “modern critical views,” however, what is foregrounded is the contrary task of keeping open the space of a particular kind of Blake criticism. In the new context—that of “transmitting knowledge from generation to generation”—they now present the smooth surface of “books... arranged in libraries” (MHH 13, E40), which must be “opened” once again. It is perhaps emblematic of this change of stature that these articles have been reprinted without footnotes. Apparently a “modern critical view” is self-standing and requires no temporal referents. Needless to say, this omission severely qualifies the usefulness of these articles for students, who are presumably the target audience for this book.

Just how dramatic an alteration this change of context can have on meaning can be seen in Bloom’s introduction (excerpted from Poetry and Repression) which, we are told in the editor’s note, is “intended to provoke all settled readings of Blake.” This is apparently to be done by pointing out how Blake “in mocking a canonical kind of poem, nevertheless is subsumed by the canonical traditions of misreading” (17). As an introduction to a book which proposes a canon of modern Blake criticism and which assures us that the opening essays “do set forth approaches to Blake that are not altogether unset-