

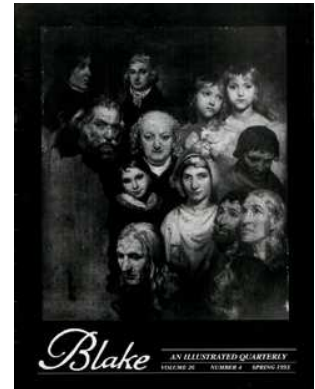
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

M I N U T E
P A R T I C U L A R

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Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 26, Issue 4, Spring 1993, p. 160



MINUTE PARTICULAR

Cromek's Lost Letter about Blake's *Grave* Designs

G. E. Bentley, Jr.

We have always known that Robert Hartley Cromek wrote to William Hayley about Blake's designs to Robert Blair's *The Grave*, for Blake refers to it in his letter to Hayley of 27 November 1805:

Dear Sir

M^r Cromek the Engraver came to me desiring to have some of my Designs. He named his Price & wishd me to Produce him Illustrations of The Grave A Poem by Robert Blair. In consequence of this I produced about twenty Designs which pleasd so well that he with the same liberality with which he set me about the drawings, has now set me to Engrave them. He means to Publish them by Subscription with the Poem as you will see in the Prospectus which he sends you in the same Pacquet with the Letter.¹

But we have not known what Cromek said in the letter or indeed whether Blake had seen Cromek's letter and the Prospectus for *The Grave* which Cromek sent to Hayley. This is a matter of some importance to Blake, for Cromek reduced the number of Blake designs he proposed to publish from 20 to 15 to 12 and changed the engraver from Blake to Louis Schiavonetti, and there is some uncertainty as to how much of this Blake knew when he wrote his letter on 27 November 1805. Certainly Blake became deeply indignant when he finally recognized the truth:

A Petty sneaking Knave I knew[.]
'Oh M Cr— How do ye do[?]'²

Blake's letter was sent with Cromek's to Hayley, but it was not traceable again until 1911, when it was sold at auction. And Cromek's letter has disappeared entirely.

But both letters appeared in the same lot in a sale of letters to Hayley in 1885.³ Cromek's letter is summarized there:

Enclosing Blake's letter; his work has too much mind and too little of the hand in it to be generally understood; mentions Lady Hamilton, &c.

The reference to Lady Hamilton is natural enough, for she was a frequent sitter for George Romney whose biography Hayley was writing, and Blake and others were enlisted to help Hayley find information about her—Blake wrote to Hayley on 27 January 1804 that "I have calld on M^r Edwards twice for Lady Hamiltons direction. . . ."

But the most interesting and tantalizing part of this brief paraphrase of Cromek's letter is the statement that Blake's "work has too much mind and too little of the hand in it to be generally understood." For one thing, this seems to imply that Cromek was already reconciled to a narrow sale for the edition of Blair's *Grave* with Blake's designs. For another, it may imply that, because of the distinction between "mind" and "hand" here, he had already commissioned Schiavonetti to engrave Blake's designs, even though, as Blake said in his letter, Cromek "has now set me to Engrave them." If Cromek had already commissioned Schiavonetti to engrave Blake's designs, he had probably already seen and been dismayed by Blake's rugged white-line etching of *Death's Door*, and the distinction he makes here between "mind" and "hand" may refer to the designs, which show "too much mind" and "too little [skill] of hand." At any rate, this is one of the earliest criticisms of Blake for incompatibility of conception and execution in his work, a criticism which became a commonplace and which Blake bitterly resented. For another, it seems probable that Blake had seen neither Cromek's letter nor "the Prospectus which he sends you in the same Pacquet with the Letter," for Blake is scarcely likely to have written of Cromek's "liberality" in commissioning him to make the engravings if he had seen Cromek's letter which referred to the want of skill, or at

least of popular effect, in Blake's engraving "hand."

There are two prospectuses of "Nov. 1805" for Cromek's edition of Blair's *Grave* with Blake's plates, one specifying that there were to be "FIFTEEN PRINTS FROM DESIGNS INVENTED AND TO BE ENGRAVED BY WILLIAM BLAKE" and the other, also of "Nov. 1805," advertising "TWELVE VERY SPIRITED ENGRAVINGS BY LOUIS SCHIAVONETTI, FROM DESIGNS INVENTED BY WILLIAM BLAKE."⁴ It would be exceedingly desirable to know which of these prospectuses was the one enclosed with the letters of Cromek and Blake to Hayley on 27 November 1805.

At the very least, this tantalizingly brief summary of Cromek's letter to Hayley of [27 November 1805] indicates an ambivalence in Cromek's attitude toward Blake and his work, a somewhat disloyal impartiality in a puffing bookseller, which seems to be at odds with Blake's impression of Cromek's "liberality." It is likely to do Cromek's reputation no good.⁵

¹ G. E. Bentley, Jr., ed., *William Blake's Writings* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978) 1628-29.

² Bentley 940.

³ Sotheby sale of "the Collection of The Rev. Canon Hodgson, Comprising Cowper the Poet; Blake; Flaxman; [i.e.] An Important Series addressed to Wm. Hayley," 2 March 1885, Lot 17. The Cromek letter is undated, but it is plainly the one enclosed with Blake's of 27 November 1805. The first part of the sale was a series of letters addressed by Byron to Francis Hodgson, but I have been unable to determine the relationship of Canon Hodgson to Francis Hodgson or even with confidence his first name.

⁴ Both are reproduced and discussed in *Blake Records Supplement* (1988) 31-36.

⁵ For evidence and analyses of Cromek's character, see particularly (1) "Blake and Cromek: The Wheat and the Tares," *Modern Philology* 71 (1974-75): 366-79; (2) Dennis Read, "The Rival *Canterbury Pilgrims* of Blake and Cromek: Herculean Figures in the Carpet," *Modern Philology* 86 (1988): 171-90; (3) Aileen Ward, "'S^r Joshua and His Gang': William Blake and the Royal Academy," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 52 (1989): 75-95, and (4) "They take great liberties: Blake Reconfigured by Cromek and Modern Critics: The Arguments from Silence," *Studies in Romanticism* (1992).