

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

William Wells, William Blake's "Heads of the Poets"; William Blake: Illustrations to The Divine Comedy of Dante, from Da Capo Press

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Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 3, Issue 3, December 15, 1969, pp. 62-64



passions for some time to come. I want to come back to the poet, *sui generis*, not as handbooks and workshops understand him, but as Shelley did, "the hierophant of an unapprehended inspiration." Miss Raine's Blake is no dogmatic geometer-humanist whose wheels, within or without, were set in motion for the critic and propagandist of a terrible time; he is a poet, obsessed with line and verb, requiring and making symbols to which his interpreter must be true. After the elucidation of the Mysteries, we yet remain in the presence of secrets honored, secrets kept.

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William Blake's "Heads of the Poets" (by William Wells). Manchester: City Art Gallery (1969) 43 pp. . . No price listed.

William Blake: Illustrations to The Divine Comedy of Dante. New York: Da Capo Press, pp. iii + 109 plates. \$100.00.

These two publications, one a large portfolio, the other a booklet, both reproduce series of pictures by Blake not otherwise available at present, although in neither case is the series reproduced for the first time. The Dante series is a "second edition" of the facsimile produced for the National Art-Collections Fund in 1922,¹ (see announcement in *BNL* II, no. 4 [whole #8], p. 61). The Manchester booklet includes photographic reproductions of a series to be found complete only in a long out-of-print Blake Society pamphlet of 1925.

The name of William Wells, Keeper of the Burrell Collection, Glasgow, does not appear on the cover of the Manchester pamphlet, and there is no title page; the author is identified only in the foreward to the booklet. This is regrettable, for Mr. Wells deserves credit for giving us a valuable little study of Blake's least-known series of pictures. This booklet, prepared in conjunction with a Blake-Hayley exhibition² at the City Art Gallery, includes reproductions of all eighteen heads, thirty subsidiary reproductions, and a handsome cover drawing of Hayley's Turret. In almost all respects, this *Heads of the Poets* is superior to the Blake Society's 1925 production. The latter had only a cursory introduction by Thomas Wright, while in this one Mr. Wells presents twenty-five pages of concise information. Five Heads given incorrect titles in 1925 are retitled now, following the corrections made by the late Kenneth Povey. Much detail appears only in the new reproductions: for example, the figure of Ugolino in "Dante" is virtually invisible in the Blake Society's reproduction but well defined in Mr. Wells's; in the earlier "Spenser" the delightful figures on the left side of the picture cannot be seen at all. In one respect, however, the earlier reproductions have an advantage -- in being printed one to a page. They have considerably more effect this way than they do in the present booklet, where they are crowded two to a page.

Since the new edition of Blake's Dante illustrations is not a fresh reproduction of the originals but rather a reproduction of the Emery Walker collotype facsimile of 1922³, it might be thought that the new production would be necessarily less accurate than its antecedent. Having had the opportunity, through the kindness of Mr. Martin Butlin, to compare the two sets page for page, I can report that in most respects this is not so. In each set detail comes through with about equal clarity; handwriting is equally legible. In fact, the darks of 2 seem at times to show more sensitive variation than those of 1 -- the rock in plate 22 ("The Minotaur"⁰, for example; and the darks of plate 16 ("Goddess of Fortune") are sharper in 2 than in 1. As far as outline and detail are concerned, one gets about as good an idea of Blake's drawings from 2 and from 1, and there are even times when 2 is preferable: in plate 5 ("The Vestibule of Hell . . .") the frieze of figures at the top is if anything clearer in 2. Nevertheless, there are two important respects in which the Da Capo edition is decidedly less satisfactory than the Emery Walker one.

The whites of 1 are very close to Blake's. In 2, however, there is frequently a strangely yellowish tone which creates an effect far different from that of Blake's originals. This makes a tremendous difference in the tone of some of the pictures -- 10, for example ("The Circle of the Lustful"). In 54 ("Donati Transformed Into a Serpent"), the picture as a whole seems decidedly darker as a result, while in 72 ("The Angelic Boat. . .") the radiance of the angelic presence is entirely lost by the absence of white. Similarly, in 80 ("The Rock Sculptured. . .") the contrast between dark sea and light rock is spoiled. Whether intentional or accidental, the failure to reproduce white as white in these pictures is a serious one.

A second point: the texture of the hand-made laid paper of the Emery Walker set is very similar to that of the drawing-paper Blake actually used. The paper of 2, however, has no visible texture, but as the texture of 1 is reproduced in the facsimile the result is an anomaly: the drawings appear to have texture but the white borders do not. 2 looks like a reproduction, while in 1 the effect of versimilitude is further increased by edges cut with slight, but discernible, irregularity.

It should be said that in one respect both facsimiles leave something to be desired. Someone who knew these pictures only through facsimile would have no idea of the role color plays in the originals. Of the nineteen Dante illustrations displayed at the Tate Gallery, not one is without some important use of color. The loss is of course greatest in finished or almost finished water colors like "Beatrice Addressing Dante" or "The Serpent Attacking Buso Donati." (1 does include a single color illustration, "The Inscription Over Hell-Gate"). The loss is not only of artistic effect but of symbolic meaning as well -- it would be unfortunate if someone were to rely on a black-and-white facsimile in interpreting a picture like "Beatrice Addressing Dante." And even in pictures in which only a little color has been used, it can make a tremendous difference, as in "The Ascent of the Mountain of Purgatory," where Virgil wears a pale blue garment, Dante a rose-colored one. Or consider "Dante and Virgil approaching the Angel who guards the Entrance of Purgatory," where deep red clouds contrast strikingly with green grass in

the foreground. At this stage of the study of Blake, should we settle for less than full-color reproductions of major works?

Morton D. Paley

¹The Dante illustrations are also reproduced from this facsimile in *Blake's Illustrations to The Divine Comedy* by Albert S. Roe (Princeton, 1953), along with the seven engravings.

2. "For Friendship's Sake" 29 April -- 18 May 1969.

3. For the sake of brevity, I will refer to the Walker and Da Capo editions as 1 and 2 respectively.

A FINDING LIST OF REPRODUCTIONS OF BLAKE'S ART

Compiled by Robert N. Essick

Addenda to Part I: The Illuminated Books

Further searches have uncovered a few reproductions of copies of plates not reproduced elsewhere and not recorded in Part I of this list.

America

3. *Connoisseur*, CLVI (July, 1964), 183 (color, M).

Book of Urizen

22. Newton, *A Magnificent Farce*, frontispiece (color, probably B).

Jerusalem

Apollo, LXVII (1958), 3-7 contains reproductions of the Br. Museum "fragments" of plates 25, 32, 41, 47.

Part II: Illustrations to Blake's Non-Illuminated Writings

This section includes the engraved Gates of Paradise and illustrated manuscripts and notebooks, but complete facsimiles listed in the Bentley and Nurmi Bibliography or the recent Blake Newsletter supplement are generally excluded. A list of reproductions of unillustrated manuscripts, letters, and pages from first editions of Blake's printed verse and prose is appended to this section.