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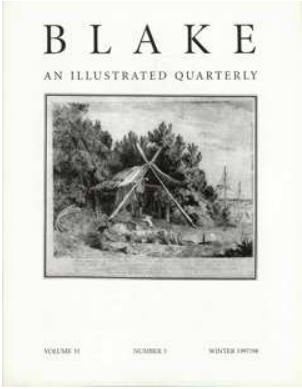

R E V I E W

Christopher Heppner, Reading Blake's Designs

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Books. These objections can serve to exemplify Lansverk's contention that "[t]he only doctrine which . . . can fruitfully be said to underlie [*MIL/TON*] . . . is the doctrine of contraries . . . here both as the opposition between . . . two ways of reading and in the very form of the performative proverb, which ultimately amount to the same thing" (182-83).

The Book of Wisdom says that "she is the breath of the power of God [cf. *M* 30[33].18, above], and a pure influence flowing from the glory of the Almighty: therefore can no defiled thing fall unto her" (7:25; Lansverk fumbles this crucial quotation through misattribution and omission of the central phrase [194])—that is, as the New Jerusalem Bible has it, "she is a breath of the power of God, pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty" (and, for Blake, "all bionic" existence). The Greek of the Septuagint has "aporroia" also as common in the neo-Platonists and translated, literally, as "outflow," "emanation." Lansverk sees the plot of *Jerusalem The Emanation of The Giant Albion* as "the story of Albion's learning to treat Jerusalem as Lady Wisdom, his consort from the very beginning, and not as the harlot she becomes when externalized from him as a sexual object" (193). This entails the reader's learning that "the Treasures of Heaven" are none other than "Mental Studies & Performances" (*J* 77). Lansverk comments that, "[t]hough the speech act theory to identify Blake's use of language would not be created for a hundred and fifty years, Blake could still point the way, whether coincidentally or not . . . that to perform is 'to do something,' 'to fulfill a command,' and most importantly 'to present a literary work of art'" (196-97).

Students and lovers of Blake can be grateful to Marvin Lansverk for this awakening call to the rich fields of the poet's sport with Wisdom and performative language.

Unknown gnomes mine. pro-verbal proverbs. but, ah! men, Wisdom's awful theopanatives love her. language bombs

Christopher Heppner, *Reading Blake's Designs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Pp. xvi + 302; 72 illus., 14 color plates. $69.95.

Reviewed by FRANK A. VAUGHAN

In the commentaries published by poets and critics through the 1960s, Blake studies began the process of discovering what Blake believed, of finding out how Blake's ideas "meant," and of applying this meaning, or myth, to his poetry, prose and, to a lesser degree, to his art. Part of the joy in Blake's quirky brilliance is that his ambiguity leaves so much room for critical invention. For the critic Blake was the America of the seventeenth century, the Africa of the nineteenth century, or the Tahiti of the early twentieth century. However, in the latter portion of the twentieth century Blakean explorers have become less comfortable with general, programmatic speculations and tend to see the need to specialize in Blake's various efforts. Increasingly he is fragmented into a poet, a linguist, a critic of scientific perception, a social critic, a radical theologian, a myth-maker, a literary critic, a satirist, an art critic, a commercial engraver, an illustrator of his own work, and an illustrator of the works of others.

Christopher Heppner's *Reading Blake's Designs* focuses on Blake as an illustrator of the works of others. Within this still-large area, *Reading Blake's Designs* calls for commentators to read Blake's designs more moderately, accurately, and individually. Too much exploration of Blake's illustrations relates the illustrations not to the immediate text but, by association and analogy, to similarities in Blake's myth, or his own designs as interpreted through his poetry.

Rather than deal with Blake as a pragmatic, technical, or creative artist, Heppner's book "reads" the meaning of the designs through the analogy that art is "like language," a design like a sentence, composition like syntax, and a figure like a word in context. Using this analogy, Heppner reminds the reader that Blake is a history painter and that in the eighteenth century this genre had a concrete set of purposes and devices. For instance, as a history painter Blake would use both a natural and a codified language of gesture and expression which he would expect the reader to recognize and interpret. Thus, Blake uses what Heppner calls the codified *pathos formula* (7-9), and his vocabulary of figures is "disturbingly all-purpose" (11). In the 1790s Blake's language of figure, gesture, expression, and movement becomes dependent on a "codified system." For the critic this can lead to the danger of assuming that Blake's figures are "univocal" (9), single in meaning beyond a specific context. Yet, akin to words, figures have a complex relationship to their context, partially creating it and partially being created by it. Equally, and this is a point Heppner also develops (52-56), Blake's art is an art dependent on words, titles, names, verbal hints, an art increasingly dependent on allusion to verbal texts in order to give particular meaning and therefore an art fleeing from the visual to the verbal.

In the 1790s Blake became increasingly influenced by Michelangelo, but it is not the Michelangelo of the Sistine Chapel's panoramic view. Most people in the eighteenth century knew Michelangelo only through the print makers' and sellers' vision of him. Therefore Blake probably accepted him as a creator of great figures, not as a creator of contexts by which these figures were given meaning. Commentators try "too hard to interpret Blake's figures as if they were a response to the program behind Michelangelo's art" (38). Michelangelo's impact on Blake

is also important because of the qualitative difference between his art and Blake's. As a history painter Blake also had need both of narrative, and of codes of gesture and expression, to create recognizable meaning in individual characters. But where Michelangelo's figures are intensely real psychologically, powerful as allegorical moments personified and part of an impressive panorama, Blake did not merge all three levels into great art.

Heppner also goes on to characterize Blake's use of artistic sources more as "adoptive," or with little concern for their original source (33-34), than "parodic," or with a strong sense of play with their sources. This seems a bit odd in view of the work of Ault, Gleckner, Wittreich and other critics who see Blake's method of rebellion as a calculated play with sources until their implications implode. To Heppner, Blake-the-illustrator/artist is less caring, or understanding, of tradition and sources than Blake-the-poet. At one point he even says that he has "come close to suggesting" that Blake might be convicted of "fundamental incompetence as an artist, of failing to transform poetic symbols into analogous and intelligible visual symbols" (193).

This sense of Blake as an artist who has been over-read, who is careless and cannot "play" seriously with ideas, images, or perspective appears in several places. Heppner notes that many of Blake's figures are generated simultaneously as allegorical and as a portion of a narrative, yet this duality is blurred (136) where perspective is used casually by Blake. At one point he asserts that Blake creates "perspectival syntax" which is "sometimes loose enough to permit the imagistic equivalent of comma splices and dangling participles" (220). Heppner sees this casualness of perspective as a carelessness that leaves the critic stymied about the figures' intentions toward one another. Heppner takes such a lack of agreed-upon concrete, meaningful relationships in "The Good and Evil Angels," to show how commentators misread in order to construct a set of relationships which creates a text to corresponds to a familiar Blakean idea, piece of text, or even design. For another instance, the designs for *Milton*, plate 21 and 41, seen by W. T. J. Mitchell as being homoerotic, Heppner takes as either badly thought out or badly drawn (220-21). Heppner chastises commentators generally for succumbing "to a stream of association triggered by recollection of passages from his poetry" (99) and commentators on this latter design specifically for placing too much weight on the perceived homoeroticism—waxing on about the loving brotherhood of man in Blake's poetic myth. Heppner also argues that commentators should spend more time carefully scrutinizing the design to reconstruct the text on which it is based (99), and then, presuming the text to be correct, use this text to analyze the design. Commentators need to be more moderate in order to see, and re-construct if necessary, the concrete text to which Blake is reacting rather than turn all designs into a passage from Blake's poetry.

Similarly, because Heppner sees Blake's art in continual flight toward the more explicit verbal meaning, he also sees art history as justifiably having difficulty in dealing with Blake. Yet, it might be even more just to say that even if art historians have some difficulty in dealing with Blake because of his eccentric ideas, his use or avoidance of traditional methods and images and meanings, or his dependence on verbal labels, it is too early in the study of his art to accept that Blake is visually careless because he is too verbal, to downplay the power of verbal sources in great art, Blake's visual/verbal play with sources, or even to downplay Blake's artistic craftsmanship. To do so smacks of condemning the artist for the imperfect education of the commentator in viewing his art.

Christopher Heppner issues several warnings which have the merit of demanding common-sense accuracy in reading details, artistic traditions, and genres before commentators translate designs generally into Blakean paragraphs. Yet there are many issues raised and not resolved in his general warnings. Why, for instance, is it a problem that an illustration's meaning is dependent "upon words implicitly contained with them" (75)? The play between the verbal and the visual is a rich field Blake often explores poetically and artistically. And in the specifics of many arguments Heppner's tends to be a bit confusing. He declares his book to be one which shows that "Blake interacts energetically with the texts he chooses to illustrate" (xv). But in an age that seeks more understanding of smaller areas, the topic of Blake as illustrator remains a topic for a much larger book. Just the meaning of "illustration" is complicated. And Blake's attitude toward any text is varied and complex. For instance, Heppner is simply too general and too glib when he opposes Morton Paley's assertion that in Blake's Young designs "certain pictures...actually satirize either passages they are supposed to illustrate or their author" (149). He asserts that these "statements become a sometimes misleading hermeneutic principle" (149). It seems truer to say that Blake uses and misuses a text subtly to create the meaning he wants, one which often differs significantly from an author's text and intention. To do this Blake ignores or contradicts the slight details in the text, shifts images and details, creates his own designs based on an idea he has "gathered" from the text, merges images in the text with traditional motifs, twists ideas in the text to fit what he wants to say to his primary audience, creates images whole-hog, and even at points creates designs that are ironically literal. This, in fact, is how he operates with the Gray designs, if to a lesser degree in the 543 Young designs.

Yet if Blake treats Gray one way, with his complex but limited admiration for him, then he is very likely to illustrate Milton, the Bible, Shakespeare, Young, Newton, etc. in other ways—depending on his reaction to the writer, the text, or his ideas at a given point in his career, or/and the purposes of the series. And there is a large difference between the primary audience of the Gray designs, or the

Young designs, and other audiences he had or created for himself. The idea of audience affecting the relationship between designs and text, then, must be as noteworthy as noticing the impact of audience on *Macbeth*. Thus, any analysis of designs Blake created for illustrations of another text must be done on a level of that individual project, series, audience, and even design as part of a series. As Blake knew, to generalize is to err.

Interacting, then, is not constant in method, purpose, or degree, and the result of Heppner's taking on the large area of illustration is a sense of disconnection as he focuses on various points of detached interest, or moves from one design, or design series, to the next. At one point he even says vaguely that he will be looking at "a few works by Blake, chosen to illustrate various facets of the process of invention" (89). Each chapter takes on a commentator's failure to do justice to Blake, or a failing by Blake. Part 1 is made up of three chapters—on the *pathos formula,* Blake's use of Michelangelo, and what Heppner calls "Humpty Dumpty Blake" —i.e., the relationship of design to text in Blake. Part 2, titled "The syntax of invention," has chapters four through nine. The chapters focus on "fables," the relationship of the 12 large prints, the Young "Night Thought" designs, Blake's use of the Bible, Blake's use of perspective, and finally, in the last chapter, a reading of *The Sea of Time and Space*. This reading in the last chapter "derives from, and is in turn designed to support, the hypotheses about Blake's art developed in previous chapters" (237). But each chapter covers such a large area that, while the general intention is clear, the issues involved in discussing individual designs are addressed only generally, speculatively, and by assertion. There is no connective subtext, unless it is very generalized.

This generalness creates many issues. For instance, there is the analysis of the design titled "A Crowned Woman Amid Clouds with Demons Starting Away" on pages 93-96. Heppner identified the woman as Jerusalem in an earlier article and defended that reading in 1986. Here, in this revised analysis, he asserts that the woman is "clearly descending" (94-95) and he sees that the word "Gog" is clearly written on the design (i.e., "Accepting Blake's identification of the male figure as Gog,..." 94). From these two assertions based on debatable evidence he sees the woman as the concept of the New Jerusalem descending and then asserts a "powerful structural analogy" (95) "between the contexts of the account of Gog in Ezekiel and that in Revelation" (94) implied in the design. He then moves on to the "standard" late-eighteenth-century commentary on Revelations and from here he moves to show how this reading is relevant to the political scene of the day. Finally, this reading is an example of how to avoid slipping into "a stream of association triggered by the recollection of passages from" Blake's poetry (99).

While his reading has much to recommend it, it is itself quite speculative and brushes aside many details in the design. For instance, there is certainly a "language" of crowns and Blake used different crowns to mean different things (e.g., in the two sets of *Comus* designs) so that this crown does not necessarily signify marriage in this design. And even if it did, marriage as a symbolic event in Blake is a complicated issue that needs explanation, especially in a context which sees this design as based on an analogy between the Gog of Ezekiel and Revelation's Jerusalem descending. Maybe even more to the point, Heppner defends his view by using what he sees as the "standard" (96) reading of Revelation in Joseph Mede and David Pareus, two "widely read" commentaries. Yet commentators on Blake's art need to be careful about where Blake got his ideas, or if ideas seemingly current in his time-period are either known or accepted by him. As recent critics have pointed out, many of Blake's ideas were received second hand, given various twists, and certainly developed instinctively and eccentrically as his own thought evolved. What Blake knew and what he made of what he knew need to be treated more gingerly, less generally, and with less presumption. Again, an assertion akin to the one that architecture becomes a "type of the sacredness of the human body," is a grand statement that makes the beginning point of a good book, rich in details and notions about architecture taken from Blake's designs, from his prose and poetry, from what we know he read, and from his period generally. But it is hardly evolved from the pictorial evidence in this design. While it may be erroneous to recreate designs in the image of Blake's poetry, it is also dangerous to overlook details, and rash to move too far from the design when reading a located or created text.

On the level of style, Heppner enlivens his writing through the use of similes and analogies, but sometimes he does so at the expense of our accuracy of understanding. For instance, there is the ever-present analogy between language and the thing we call "visual language." Sometimes there is a sense that a discussion of a complex process is being truncated or ignored because the analogy is taken too close to being factual. There are also, to name a few of these analogies, the "morse code" of pp. 12, 41; a "virtual forest" of hands of p. 15, a "hand to hold in flight" of p. 35, a figure carrying a "large freight of allusional meaning" of p. 38, a "stable charge of inherent meaning" of p. 39, and new meanings that do not "fit comfortably in old bottles" of p. 86. Visual language tends also to become intellectually uncertain and blurry, as when Heppner mixes his metaphors in looking "at a gesture that plays a prominent role in *The Sea of Time and Space*, in part as a way of clearing a little of the ground for the reading of the painting" (57).

Heppner also uses the clarity of strong assertions, as when things are "perfectly so" (96), or "exact" (30, 221), or in "total union" (221), or "precise" (32) or "diametrically opposed" (57), or "entirely" (91). The strength of these assertions, much as with the expansive use of analogies, tends to beg questions or to force the reader to accept the

commentator's point of view rather than to look closely at presented evidence. At some points the meaning seems to get away from him, as when he says that "Blake usually kept the basic features of a design when repeating it" (99). Isn't this obvious?

The purposes of Heppner's book are to show us some pitfalls in the reading of Blake's designs for other texts, and then to give us an example of how his methodology begets a more lucid reading through his analysis of *The Sea of Time and Space*. This reading covers the last 30 pages of the book and is perhaps the most cogent reading to date. As I said earlier, Heppner's method of reading the design focuses on creating/locating a text which he feels explains the design, and then highlighting certain details of the design and associating them with something in the text in order to reenforce the importance of the text. Toward defining the text he first sees the red, arm-extended man in the lower left of the design to be Isaiah. Unfortunately his evidence for this is a vague likeness from Blake's woodblock titled, "The Prophet Isaiah Foretelling the Destruction of Jerusalem"(B 773) and an equally vague likeness of gesture from the figure in the frontispiece to *All Religions are One*. He then states absolutely "Whatever its origins that block and its associated sketches identify the man in red in *The Sea of Time and Space*: he is Isaiah" (239). It is not that he is wrong, but that his evidence is not nearly as conclusive as his assertion. After this he asserts that "Accepting Isaiah" as Blake's model of "consciously and professedly Inspired Man" who represents "Real Vision," we can turn "to puzzle out the classical side of the painting." I do accept Isaiah as a Blakean example and I see the possibility of this figure being Isaiah, but the evidence and logic Heppner uses on Blake's painting is no radical departure from the methodology he condemns.

What Heppner concludes is "that the text behind Blake's painting is one that he took to be the basic statements of Pythagorean and Platonic philosophy, including both Taylor's translation and notes and Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, particularly Pythagoras's oration in Book Fifteen, which Blake would have taken to be the primary extant text of Pythagorean thought,...." Thus "Blake's painting expounds the world view of Pythagoras and Plato as Blake understood it, with Isaiah there to expose its fabulous, ever deceptive, nature" (246).

He then identifies the woman behind this Isaiah to support the text. He insists that "We must seek or construct a text" (248), and, based on pictorial evidence that is only weakly allied to the text he has located the most "suggestive single text" to be "found in Taylor's translation of 'The Hymn of Orpheus'" (248). He insists that the passages "point to much of the action of the painting" so that the two passages he quotes correspond "approximately to the right hand and lower portion of the painting, the second to the upper left" (250). From approximate likeness this figure becomes Nature. Again, it is not that he is wrong in his conclusion, or that we do not need to explore Taylor as a background to Blake's painting, but that his evidence is weak, his reading is more inspirational than logical, and while he does insist that we not turn the design into a verbal quote from Blake, his reading is a Blakean analysis of the text, not a carefully considered exploration of the interaction of a text and a design.

For instance, the woman out to sea and drawn by chariots he identifies as Aurora based on a vague likeness to Blake's "one certain portrayal of Aurora" (255). Though he has to disregard the dissimilarities, he insists that "The evidence for Aurora as the identity of the figure is strong." But this evidence consists of basic similarities between this figure and "several well-known images of Aurora," though he does not highlight concrete evidence Blake actually knew the tradition. It is not that this is *not* Aurora, but that what Blake knew and how he knew it need amplification and clarification.

From this perhaps correct speculation Heppner then concludes that the "rows of dots leaving her feet" are "drops of dew scattered as she rises" which in turn supports his whole notion of the water-cycle theme in the painting and in the text. Thus, "Aurora's veil of morning clouds descends in something like a vortex from Apollo's chariot to indicate the interdependence of the two" (256). Again, it is not that he is wrong, but that while he is asserting a new methodology of reading and seeming to censure older commentators who base themselves on association, Blake's poetic passages, Blake's myth, analogies, and inspirational leaps, I see no radical difference in Heppner's methodology when it comes to a concrete reading of a design. At most he seems to have trimmed the excesses of the 1970s and earlier.

A little later he says that, "The correspondences between the detail of Blake's painting and the sources I have quoted demonstrate that he is illustrating texts external to his own mythology, though links can be made since his myth is derived from such sources, among others" (260). Still later he asserts that "The logic binding these differently conceived figures into a unity is that of an implicit text, not the logic of visual coherence and immediate sensory intelligibility" (276). Of course he is right to acknowledge this as the case and right in the last chapter to see Blake's use of perspective as "appositive," as well as to accept Blake's use of the verbal in his art. And I think the warnings Heppner gives about how to read Blake's illustration to other texts are solid, though related more to past commentaries than to present tendencies. His warnings should be accepted as necessary and lucid guidelines, and as a challenge to read Blake by better evidentiary rules. Yet, his book shows how much the reading of a Blake design is an art more than a method, how far commentators on Blake's illustrations have come, and how far we have to go in setting down the basic rules if there is to be a method.