

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY

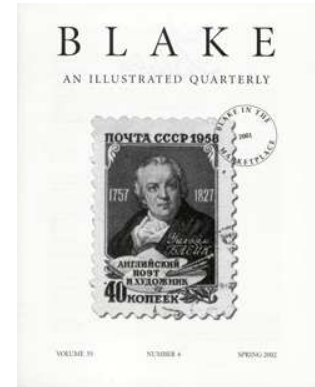
BLAKE

R E V I E W

Henry Summerfield, *A Guide to the Books of William Blake for Innocent and Experienced Readers*

R. Paul Yoder

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reproduced as pl. 23 in William Zachs, *The First John Murray and the Late Eighteenth-Century London Book Trade* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998).

P. 47, Darwin, *The Botanic Garden*, pl. 1, "Fertilization of Egypt." I suggest that the sistrum pictured in the plate "might be vaguely suggested" in Fuseli's preliminary pencil sketch "by a few lines forming a rough triangle" below and to the right of the figure's right foot. This is demonstrably wrong, for the musical instrument is clearly (if somewhat lightly) outlined by fine pencil lines immediately to the right of (but not below) the figure's right foot in the drawing. The instrument is not mentioned in Darwin's poem or his notes to it.

P. 73, Stedman, *Narrative*, pl. 5, "The skinning of the Aboma Snake." Alexander Gourlay has brought to my notice the fact that the two pine-like trees, projecting above the undergrowth on the left side of the plate and just above the head of the man standing lower left, print much more darkly in the 1806 and 1813 eds. than in the 1796 ed. This may be due only to darker inking in the later impressions, but some work may have been done on the copperplate itself to strengthen the lines defining these trees. If so, then the 1806 and 1813 impressions represent a second state of the plate.

P. 101, drawings of Flaxman's Hesiod designs from the collection of H. D. Lyon. For the attempted sale of these drawings and comments on their style and attribution, see the first entry under Flaxman, above.

R E V I E W S

Henry Summerfield. *A Guide to the Books of William Blake for Innocent and Experienced Readers*. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1998; New York: distributed in North America by Oxford University Press. Pp. 874. £14.99/\$29.95, paperback.

Reviewed by R. PAUL YODER

In the preface to *A Guide to the Books of William Blake for Innocent and Experienced Readers*, Henry Summerfield describes his "primary purpose" as "provid[ing] for the serious reader of poetry, for the student, and for the scholar who is not a Blake specialist, a bridge between an initial joy

in poems of exquisite and poignant beauty and a larger engagement, at once aesthetic and intellectual, with the lifework of a great author and artist" (11). Toward this end Summerfield provides much of the apparatus for an edition of Blake's poems, but without the poems themselves. As such, the book is perhaps best considered as a companion to the two volumes to which it is keyed, David Erdman's edition of *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* and Erdman's *The Illuminated Blake*. Especially in Part II of his book, Summerfield clearly expects his own reader also to be reading Erdman at the same time. Indeed, without some edition of Blake's poetry and illuminations at hand, much of Summerfield's book makes little sense.

Part I of Summerfield's *Guide*, "The Books of William Blake: An Introduction," is intended for those less initiated "innocent" readers, and it can be read profitably without necessarily having an edition of Blake's work at hand. This section is intended to provide the new reader of Blake with an overview of the poet's life and the development of his work. Nine of the twelve chapters summarize Blake's books, grouping them together in ways intended to suggest the chronological development in Blake's career. After the "Biographical Outline" of chapter 1, chapter 2, entitled "Rationalism Rejected," covers *Poetical Sketches*, *All Religions Are One*, *There Is No Natural Religion*, *Tiriel*, *Songs of Innocence*, and *The Book of Thel*. Chapter 3, "In Praise of Energy," covers *The French Revolution* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, followed in chapter 4, "The Lustre Fades," by discussions of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, *For Children: The Gates of Paradise*, and *Songs of Experience*. Chapter 5, "The Myth of History," covers *America*, *Europe*, and *The Song of Los*, and chapter 6, "The Myth of Creation," the books of *Urizen*, *Ahania*, and *Los*. After discussions of "Blake's Conversion," focusing on Blake's Felpham period under the patronage of William Hayley (chapter 7), and "Blake's System" (chapter 8), Summerfield's chapter 9, "An Incomplete Structure," summarizes *The Four Zoas* and *The Pickering Manuscript*. Chapter 10, "Heroic Narrative," is devoted to *Milton*, chapter 11, "The Forgiveness of Sins," to *Jerusalem, For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise*, and *The Ghost of Abel*. Chapter 12, "Masterpiece of a New Kind," discusses *Illustrations of the Book of Job*. There is no discussion of the broadsheet *On Homers Poetry* [and] *On Virgil or Laocoön*.

The summaries in these chapters, in many cases virtual paraphrases of the poems, are better for the shorter books than for Blake's longer epics. For all of the books, he provides useful frames of reference primarily from the Bible, the classics, and Milton, along with some brief comments on historical and philosophical contexts, and the summaries proceed more or less plate by plate, sometimes verse paragraph by verse paragraph. While this approach works fairly well for the shorter books, it is rather less successful for the longer books, especially in the discussion of *The Four Zoas*. Part of the problem is that Summerfield is so inter-

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ested in presenting what appears to be an objective summary that his discussions finally have no guiding perspective. The closest Summerfield comes in the book to making an argument is in his chapter on "Blake's Conversion," in which he presents the arguments of "those who hold that Blake has fixed beliefs and those who consider that his philosophy mutates through distinct phases" (155). This is an important distinction, and Summerfield clearly is of the latter party, as his discussions of the later poems demonstrate, but even here he is reluctant to assert his own perspective.

This is not to say that there are no opinions offered. Indeed, Summerfield often makes remarks quite critical of Blake's work, but without much discussion of the basis for these remarks. For example, Summerfield acknowledges the "greatness" of "The Tyger," but then remarks (without explanation) that it "has a feeble illustration" that is "aesthetically unsuccessful" (95). In the summary of the fate of Urizen and Ahanian in Night 3 of *The Four Zoas*, he adds parenthetically, "The account of their fate, marred by poverty of vocabulary and slackness of rhythm, is stylistically the weakest passage in this Night" (197), but he offers no further explanation or example to support this judgment to the "innocent" readers to whom this section of the book is ad-

ressed. Of *Milton* he tells these same innocent readers, "Unfortunately Blake, overanxious to elaborate his system, piles on schematic correspondences in a way that becomes bizarre" (253), and "Blake's *Milton* has significant defects: uneven diction, disconcerting transitions, and formidable obscurity" (264). I am not trying to claim that *Zoas*, or *Milton*, or any of Blake's poems or illuminations, for that matter, is above criticism. My point is that Summerfield seems to have little appreciation for the difficulty of Blake's work, and he does little to encourage new readers of Blake to engage that difficulty as anything other than a defect. Many readers of Blake's work find his "formidable obscurity" less a defect than a challenge to which the reader must rise. We return to Blake again and again precisely because his schematic correspondences strike us as bizarre and rouse our faculties to act. In contrast to his negative remarks, Summerfield's highest praise goes to Blake's *Illustrations of the Book of Job*, a book in which Blake's textual input is minimal, and which Summerfield describes as "unique among the books of his maturity for its near perfection and easy approachability" (298).

His *Guide's* "secondary purpose," Summerfield says, is "to constitute a record of how Blake's works came to be understood and to show how successive interpretations, while they can be irritatingly or amusingly contradictory, often complement each other bringing out the richness of the poetry" (11). Indeed, Summerfield's long "Part II: Notes on Criticism" is a useful and handy work of bibliographic compression covering the period 1910-1984. In this sort of compression it resembles somewhat the essays in Frank Jordan's *The English Romantic Poets: A Review of Research and Criticism* (MLA 1985), which includes Mary Lynn Johnson's great chapter on Blake, but the format is completely different. Where Johnson's chapter on Blake is organized by "General Remarks," "Aids to Research," "Editions, Facsimiles, and Reproductions," "Bibliographic Resources," "Criticism" (divided into "General Studies" and "Studies of Individual Works"), and "Trends and Prospects," Summerfield makes almost no comment on the different versions or editions of Blake's work, and focuses only on criticism. His discussions follow Blake's career in roughly chronological order, with a chapter dedicated to each of Blake's books discussed in Part I. All chapters follow the same pattern: an overview of critical comments on important interpretive issues of the book in question, followed by brief discussions of potentially problematic specific lines or passages in that book, followed by an overview of critical commentary on the individual illuminations for the book. General studies of Blake's work, such as Frye's *Fearful Symmetry*, are not discussed in and of themselves, but instead are excerpted for brief remarks on particular issues or lines.

However, if Summerfield's goal is to "show how successive interpretations, while they can be irritatingly or amusingly contradictory, often complement each other bringing

out the richness of the poetry," this section falls short. He does record a host of critical remarks and interpretations of Blake's work, but he provides very little in the way of showing how these readings complement each other in order to bring out the richness of the poetry. The introductory material in these chapters is generally sound and informative, and the notes on particular lines offer various interpretations of the passages, usually without taking sides (although he does occasionally describe a given interpretation as "persuasive"). The introductory remarks on *Jerusalem*, for example, focus on the problems of structure (including a brief paragraph on the two versions of chapter 2) and theme before focusing on more particular concerns such as the furnaces of Los, fibers of materiality, wheel imagery, number symbolism, and Albion's cities and children (including Bath, Jerusalem, and Reuben). The particular notes draw from Wicksteed, Sloss and Wallis, Frye, Ostriker, Raine, Hilton, Stevenson, and lots of others, but Summerfield offers only the briefest of comments on the basis or implications of their critical disagreements.

In his notes on specific lines and passages, Summerfield clearly assumes that his reader is actually reading Blake's poems with Summerfield's *Guide* on the side. He provides minimal context for his notes, sometimes quoting a line, phrase, or word, but more often than not giving only plate and line numbers before listing the various interpretations. This approach makes the book by itself very difficult to read, and the same goes for his discussion of the illuminations. In these remarks Summerfield assumes that his reader is also looking at Erdman's *The Illuminated Blake*. He provides no general description of the illuminations, but instead records opinions on the various aspects of the illumination in question. For example, his remarks on the design of *America* plate 10 begin, "Though the turn of Orc's head and his gesture with his hands are similar to those of Urizen in pl. 8, in most other respects the two designs are antithetical" (453); this is true enough, but neither in the rest of these remarks, nor in the remarks on Urizen in pl. 8, does Summerfield describe the turn of the head or the hand gestures or those "other respects." (For those of us without *The Illuminated Blake* in immediate reach, the design on plate 10 depicts a young, beardless man, presumably Orc, crouching among flames, his head turned to his right, arms outspread, left foot forward.) Unless the reader has memorized Blake's various illuminations, or is also looking at them (along with a text of the poem), Summerfield's remarks on them are not really much help.

Nevertheless, if one does happen to be reading Blake's poetry and following along in *The Illuminated Blake*, Summerfield's *Guide* makes some useful connections, and brings to the reader several critical perspectives to compare to his or her own. Indeed, the *Guide* could be useful as a recommended text for classes devoted to Blake. The biographical sketch, discussions of Blake's "conversion" and

system, and the more detailed critical notes on the poems would helpfully supplement the material in Erdman's edition. Part II of Summerfield's book is successful as a quick guide to critical resources for students of Blake (including their teachers and other scholars) who are deep enough into their research to want to gather various perspectives about particular lines of poetry, or particular aspects of the illuminations. I am not sure, however, that his summaries of the books in Part I would do much to encourage readers at any level to read the poems.

David Bindman and Simon Baker. *William Blake 1757-1827*. Catalogue of the exhibition at the Helsinki City Art Museum, 11 April-25 June 2000.

Reviewed by BO OSSIAN LINDBERG

One hundred and thirty seven works by William Blake from the collection of the British Museum were shown at the Helsinki City Art Museum from 11 April to 25 June 2000. From Helsinki the exhibition went to Prague.

Some copper plates and wood blocks excepted, the exhibition consisted entirely of works on paper, engravings, drawings, watercolors, and color prints. It is good that daylight is excluded from the exhibition rooms, situated in the former Tennis Palace in the heart of the city. The building also contains an ethnographical collection, fourteen cinema theatres, cafes, snack bars, shops, etc. For people under the age of 18, access to the museums is free.

In connection with the exhibition a series of lectures was given, beginning with David Bindman's lecture in English on the art of William Blake (12 April). Petri Pietiläinen talked on Blake's visions of femininity (19 April), and the artist Timo Aarniala on Blake as a psychedelic prophet with an influence on present-day popular culture (3 May), both in Finnish. Finally Bo Ossian Lindberg, presented by museum staff as "Finland's only Blake scholar," lectured in Swedish about Blake's *Job* (16 May). The lectures had to be held in the exhibition's exit/entrance room, the microphones did not function properly, and there were several other difficulties which the first lecturer, Bindman, suffered more than the others. In order to overcome this problem, another lecture room will have to be found.

On several occasions the group Oblivia appeared with *Etcetera*, a performance consisting of dance, music, song, sound (but no words), and theatre, directed and manuscripted by Annika Tudeer (choreography) and Katariina Vähäkallio (theatre). William and Robert Blake, the angry Rose, etc., appeared in a humorous and acrobatic journey through the