

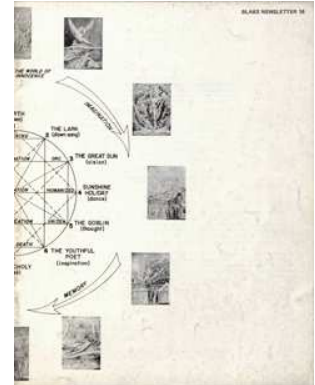
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R E V I E W

Irene Tayler, Blake's Illustrations to the Poems of Gray

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REVIEWS

Irene Tayler. *BLAKE'S ILLUSTRATIONS TO THE POEMS OF GRAY*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971. Pp. 165 + 118 plates (1 color; 117 monochrome). \$25.00.

Reviewed by Thomas H. Helmstadter, Wells College (Aurora, New York)

This handsome and important book provides a description and interpretive commentary for each of Blake's illustrations to the poems of Gray, and splendidly reproduces all 116 designs in black and white. It not only makes the Gray illustrations readily available for the first time, but also reveals how they assume meanings and implications of their own extending beyond Gray's text. The designs usually derive from Gray's poetry, but they may expand the language of the poems in order to portray original conceptions of Blake's own. By focusing on the relationship between design and text, Tayler reveals how Blake's visions of Gray's poetry show both Gray's powers and deficiencies as a poet.

The designs to Gray's "Early Poems" exhibit a variety of relationships to their texts. Design 3 of "Ode on the Spring" portrays a series of personifications and striking images that are only faintly suggested by Gray's poetry. "Wake the purple year," for example, is portrayed as a human form waking from Blake's symbolic "Roots of Nature." On the succeeding page Gray retires from the awakened year and joys of spring for the purposes of thought: "With me the Muse shall sit, and think, / (At ease reclin'd in rustic state)," and the design shows the poet leaning against a barren tree while beside him a sleeping muse is floating on a cloud and holding, but not playing, a lyre. The effect of the picture is "to suggest that Blake may not think much of Gray's inspiration, at least in the lines to which the illustration pertains, for his Muse is beclouded (a constant pun in Blake's work) and idle, apparently put to sleep by this posturing of 'rustic state.'" There are several significant parallels between the illustrations for Gray's poems and for Young's *Night Thoughts*, and I find striking confirmation for Tayler's interpretation above in *Night Thoughts* design no. 82.* In that picture Blake criticizes the unenergetic muse of Edward Young by representing the poet leaning against a barren tree while his sleeping muse floats beneath a leafless branch.

A more explicit criticism of Gray concludes the "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College" as design 9 challenges the assertion that "where ignorance is bliss, / 'Tis folly to be wise." A young man chasing a bird is oblivious to the fact that in a tree above him sits Ignorance, a grotesque laughing figure, about to pour two vials of pestilence upon him. Blake's pictorial criticism is directed against Ignorance itself: "Pestilence flung onto a sporting boy epitomizes the argument of Gray's poem: yet in Blake's design it is not 'human fate' or some similar figure that flings the pestilence,

*Among the corrections to be made before the second edition of Tayler's book are the references to *Night Thoughts* illustrations. *Night Thoughts* no. 376 cited on p. 79 should be no. 375; no. 44 cited on p. 136 should be no. 77. I count five of these inaccurate citations. *Night Thoughts* quotations throughout need to be rechecked for Young's use of capitalization, punctuation, and italics. Among editorial matters, two lines of print are misplaced on p. 11, and "The Descent of Owen" on p. 151 should be "The Descent of Odin."

but rather a vision of that very ignorance which Gray maintains is the only (though temporary) escape from the pestilence. Gray's cure is Blake's cause." Blake's writings are then cited to demonstrate why he would disagree with Gray's dubious moral. Tayler's method of first focusing on the relationship between design and text and then supporting her findings by references to Blake's own work is excellent, and rarely gives the impression that her readings are being predetermined by her knowledge of Blake. I find only one slight exception to this in the "Ode on a Distant Prospect." An old man with a beard representing Gray's Death in design 8 is interpreted as Urizen. Not all old men with beards are Urizen, and this is the same figure of Death who stalks through so many pages of the *Night Thoughts* illustrations that Blake had just completed.

The designs for "Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat" brilliantly and comically portray the discrepancy between two levels of meaning in Gray's poem, and, as Tayler shows, also portray an original theme of Blake's own.

Blake continues to expand the meaning of Gray's language and to transform it into his own conceptions in some of the "Later Poems," notably "The Progress of Poesy" and "Ode for Music." But the method changes in illustrations for "The Bard," "The Fatal Sisters," "The Descent of Odin," and "The Triumphs of Owen." These designs are more closely related to the action of the poem. Tayler suggests that such legendary and visionary works appealed more directly to Blake than other Gray poems. Hence he illustrated the work literally, and the pictures do not correct or comment upon Gray's meaning. Whatever the cause for this new procedure, Tayler's descriptions reveal the energy and power of the designs in a most sympathetic and appreciative viewing. The interpretive commentary on the illustrations to the "Early Poems" was in general more interesting than the description of them, but here the reverse is true. This is precisely as it should be. Tayler is scrupulously careful not to overinterpret the pictures or go beyond the evidence. Blake's "Bard weaving Edward's fate" in "The Bard" design 3, for example, receives a sensitive description that does not attempt to imbue the illustration with special Blakean meaning. Tayler simply comments that "Blake admired Gray's conception, and clearly sought to match it with his own."

An interpretation of the series of illustrations for "Elegy in a Country Churchyard" concludes the study. Why does the first design of the "Elegy" depict Gray as an old man bent over his writing, a lifeless and uninspired poet? Two clues to Blake's vision of the poem and its author are found in the curious shrouded corpses wrapped in a thorny vine in the foreground of designs 2 and 9, each portraying Contemplation in a graveyard. Similar forms appear many times in Blake, as in the lower margin of "The Garden of Love," where Priests are "binding with briars my joys & desires." The theme of man bound to earth by roots or chains is common throughout Blake, and Tayler notes that a body or corpse wrapped in a thorny vine is repeated in several *Night Thoughts* illustrations, such as no. 96, contrasting the life of fallen and earthbound man with the life of spirit.

Tayler observes that "in the two designs to Gray's 'Elegy' in which these bound forms appear there is a notable lack of any sign of the living spirit: to the eyes of Gray's Contemplation there is none, and Blake has drawn none in the pictures." A corresponding lifelessness is reflected in several other designs for the "Elegy" where tired and listless figures are literally bent over or attached to the ground. Blake emphasizes the lack of vitality in Gray's preoccupations with the grave.

The implications of the curious "Elegy" design 8 now become significant. Illustrating "th'unletter'd Muse" as "many a holy text around she strews," Blake depicts a muse pointing to the epitaph "DUST THOU ART" on a tombstone inscribed with "HERE LIETH Wm Blake." His age is indicated in four figures, of which the first two are 10 and the

latter probably zeros, at least the age of the millennium. Tayler reasons that to Gray's assertion "Dust Thou Art" Blake responds "with a tombstone bearing his own name: the part of me that is dust, it says by implication, I willingly consign to your graveyard, for it is as dead now as it ever will be. But the part of me that lives will outlive the millennium, for it is eternal."

Tayler offers no rules for interpreting the illustrations and proffers no theories to which all the pictures must subscribe. Her careful exploration of design and text and her persuasive allusions to Blake's work to support her findings make this a fine contribution, in fact the only one, to our understanding of the Gray designs. Tayler's method of approach and her insights into Blake's procedures as illustrator should help reveal Blake's meaning in illustrations to other writers and to his own work as well.

Geoffrey Keynes, ed. *THE NOTE-BOOK OF WILLIAM BLAKE CALLED THE ROSSETTI MANUSCRIPT* [facsimile and transcription of the manuscript]. London, 1935. Reprinted New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1970. Pp. xii + 163 + 120 plates (reproductions of MS pages). \$10.00.

Reviewed by Robert Essick, San Fernando Valley State College

This new reprint is a welcomed addition to the growing list of reprinted Blake titles, for certainly we need the *Note-Book* more than John Clarke's *William Blake on the Lord's Prayer*, Alan Clutton-Brock's *Blake*, or some of the other items turned out by the reprint houses. The price of \$10 seems fairly sensible, making the book available to those who can't afford the now very scarce 1935 Nonesuch edition of which only 750 copies were printed. But one must remember the considerable limitations of that new genre, the reprint. What we have here is a reproduction of a reproduction, twice removed from the original. One result is that the *Note-Book* is slowly shrinking. The original is 19.6 x 15.7 cm. (according to Keynes), the 1935 facsimile 19.3 x 15.5 cm., and the reprint 17.8 x 14.4 cm. The mind boggles at the final consequences. Will we ever come to reproductions of a reproduction of a reproduction?

The transcription of the text is not reliable. According to Bentley and Nurmi, *A Blake Bibliography*, Keynes was not able to see his work through the press, and a number of printing errors were introduced, all of course preserved for us by the reprint. A survey of "A Vision of the Last Judgement" shows several substantive variants between Keynes' 1935 transcription and the text in his 1966 *Complete Writings*. Erdman's text in *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* has further differences, notably in the handling of deleted passages, while the sentence sequence in Jugaku's *A Bibliographical Study of William Blake's Note-Book* varies considerably from all other texts. Erdman seems to be the closest to the manuscript, at least for "A Vision," but Keynes' 1966 edition is an adequate reading text. Both are clearly preferable to this reprinted 1935 transcription.

The reproduction of the manuscript (certainly it is no longer a facsimile) will be more valuable to most Blake students. High contrast photography has resulted in pages cleaner than those in the 1935 issue, with stains and rubbed areas burned out. The reprint seems to be better than its original in some respects, but this is only because the 1935 issue is printed on an off-white, almost yellow paper, while the reprint is on glossy white paper which gives slightly more contrast between black lines