

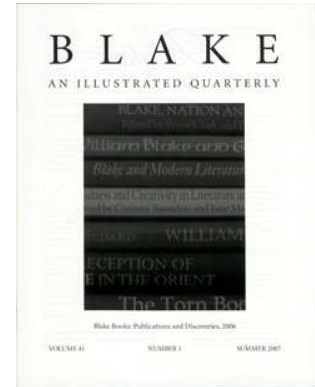
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

Blake Society Annual Lecture, 28 November 2006:
Patti Smith at St. James's Church, Piccadilly

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Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 41, Issue 1, Summer 2007, pp. 44-45,
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Blake Society Annual Lecture, 28 November
2006: Patti Smith at St. James's Church,
Piccadilly, London.

Reviewed by Magnus Ankarsjö

Maybe one day we'll be strong enough
To build it back again
Build the peaceable kingdom
Build it back again
Patti Smith, "Peaceable Kingdom"

To celebrate the 249th birthday of William Blake, the Blake Society had the honor of welcoming legendary rock artist and performer Patti Smith. With Philip Pullman, current president of the Blake Society, having presented the annual lecture in 2005—the first of its kind—this series of lectures could not have had a better start. Like the first one, this year's lecture came to be a great occasion. Patti Smith's performance was one of those rare events that will long remain in the memories of those fortunate enough to get a ticket to the sold-out show.

Smith rose to fame, quite fittingly, at the time of the explosion of the New York punk scene in the mid-seventies, and her music and poetry have withstood the test of time. When she first came to share the stage at CBGB and Max's Kansas City with the likes of Television, Talking Heads, Blondie, and the Ramones, she had already released her much acclaimed *Horses* album (1975). With hindsight one can see a different level of musical maturity than, say, the Sex Pistols, the Damned, or even the Clash; this early sign of promise comes as no surprise since Smith's artistic output shows an impressive breadth of expression. Her records range from the raw and naked *Radio Ethiopia* via the more polished *Wave* and *Easter* albums to the emphatic comeback of the last 10 years, launched with the elegiac *Gone Again* and continuing with an unprecedented series of CD releases. Smith has recorded 10 albums, including the release in early 2007 of *Twelve*, a cover album with some of her favorite songs. She has also published several volumes of poetry and other books.

It is with New York that we naturally associate Smith, and the characteristic atmosphere and attitude of the city have become something of her middle name. Apart from the celebrities of the punk movement, she has connections to beat writers like Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs, with John Cale and of course Robert Mapplethorpe, as well as music icons such as Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen. She has also collaborated in various forms with several of these; for instance, her biggest

commercial success came with "Because the Night," composed together with Springsteen.

Smith has made no secret of her admiration for Blake, and it was obvious during her performance that she has taken the anecdotes of Blake's life to heart. She made numerous references to these throughout; perhaps the most memorable was when she told the audience of the parallel between her own first meeting with her then husband-to-be, Fred "Sonic" Smith, in a Detroit doorway and the more famous (to Blakeans at least) first meeting of William and Catherine at the Boucher's house in Battersea ("Do you pity me?" etc.). The artistic influence of Blake can be seen in many of her songs and poems. One good example is "My Blakean Year" from her CD *Trampin'*. (The draft of this song was part of an exhibition, William Blake: Under the Influence, at the British Library, 11 January-21 March 2007, among other manuscripts by contemporary artists influenced by Blake.) In summer 2005 Smith was honored with the appointment as curator of the South Bank Meltdown festival in London. Having the opportunity to select artists of her own liking, she opted for several with an interest in Blake, such as Billy Bragg, and devoted one night each to performances centered on *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*.

There is little doubt that the location of the Blake Society's annual lectures greatly contributes to creating a special atmosphere, and thus to the success of the two lectures held so far. The Church of St. James, designed by Christopher Wren, is a wonderful and rare place to us Blakeans, and Patti Smith hit the right chord at once by acknowledging this fact in her first of many openhearted and spontaneous addresses to the audience during the show, telling us of the image in her mind of Blake's parents carrying little William to the font to be baptized. The memorial plaque of Blake's christening on 11 December 1757 has recently been rediscovered and placed next to the font where it belongs. Smith continued in this way, conjuring a magic spirit through which the audience could almost feel Blake's presence. The performance was also quite spontaneous and partly improvised, something which added to the benevolence and goodwill radiated by the artist. Only hours earlier Smith had picked up her friend Aaron Budnik at one of the secondhand bookshops around Charing Cross Road to support her on the acoustic guitar. Then, as she lost her way during the first song, she also confessed herself to be quite nervous and a bit intimidated by the collective Blake knowledge of the present congregation. Completely forgetting the words, she had to start again. On another song she played the wrong chords, informing the audience that, much to the delight of her longstanding and renowned fellow musicians in the Patti Smith Group, she could play only in A minor. Smith's good sense of humor throughout and generous down-to-earth attitude created a warm atmosphere in the crowded church. The audience was presented with a well-balanced mixture of songs and poems, both by Blake and from her own production. She started somewhat safely by reciting "The Lamb," perhaps what could be expected, knowing that a recording exists as part of the live version of "Boy Cried Wolf."

Next came the first musical number and after that she had the courage convincingly to sing "The Tyger." From then on we lucky ones in the audience knew that we were in for a special treat. Among other much appreciated numbers, she read one of her best-known early poems, "Babelogue," showed that her political commitment is still there in a new song, "Qana," about the situation in the Middle East, played "Wing," the beautiful "Distant Fingers" from her second album, *Radio Ethiopia*, and, of course, "My Blakean Year." To us Blake people "My Blakean Year" is quite understandably the big hit, but the most emphatic and intense moment came when Smith came walking down the aisle and let the floor do the chorus of "People Have the Power." And power, both of voice and charisma, is definitely what this exceptional woman has.

When the last song was over there was wild applause and Patti Smith came in for one extra number, the tender "Paths That Cross," composed by her late husband, after which there was a long standing ovation. Copies of her new collection of poems, appropriately entitled *Auguries of Innocence* (published in 2006 in Britain by Virago Press, the year before in the US by HarperCollins), were sold out afterwards as Smith stayed on, generously signing them for over an hour.

It has been a great privilege to take part in these two enchanting and successful evenings with Philip Pullman and Patti Smith, and we must now hope that the annual Blake lecture becomes a permanent event. After Smith's remarkable performance, however, there is one slight dilemma facing Tim Heath, Keri Davies and the other commendable organizers: whom are they going to bring in next time (the 250th anniversary of Blake's birth at that!) to repeat this wonderful success? Bob Dylan or the Beatles?

MINUTE PARTICULARS

Blake in the *Times Digital Archive*

BY KERI DAVIES

According to G. E. Bentley, Jr., relying, one presumes, on the printed volumes of Palmer's *Index to the Times*, "no account of Blake in *The Times* [London] is known before 1901."¹ However, since late 2003, the online *Times Digital*

1. G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 717fn. Palmer's *Index* is now conveniently available as *Palmer's Index to the Times, 1790-1905, on CD-ROM*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1995) or as an online resource <<http://historynews.chadwyck.com>>.

Archive, 1785-1985 has not only incorporated every page of every issue of the *Times* newspaper from 1785 to 1985, but has made available the means to search its full text.² The *Times Digital Archive* uses character recognition software to read a sequence of digitized images of the actual pages of the newspaper (including graphics and pictures).

For the first time, users of the *Times Digital Archive* are able to search not just for home and international news, but can scan City pages, court pages, law reports, letters to the editor, book and theatre reviews, display and classified advertising, obituaries, and much material ignored by Palmer's *Index*. (There is one small caveat. As users of similar online sources such as *EEBO* and *ECCO* will be aware, the search software does generate a small percentage of misreadings and failed readings.)³

The *Times Digital Archive* makes newly possible an extensive search for references to William Blake (and his friends and acquaintances), whether these references appear in news items, advertisements, book reviews, or in any other apparently irrelevant pages of the newspaper. I leave it to others to explore all 56,317 references to "blake" in the full *Archive*, but by restricting one's search by date (for example, to the years before the publication of Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake* in 1863), and by utilizing Boolean combinations of keywords such as "blake AND engraver," it becomes possible to reduce the number of references to be checked to manageable proportions.

It was, in fact, use of the search string "blake the engraver" that led me to a *Times* article that showed early knowledge of Blake's spiritualist drawings—the Visionary Heads—and that, remarkably for the time, rejected the view that these were evidence of Blake's madness.⁴ The *Times* for 3 January 1829, I found, included a lengthy review, spread over two columns, of "LODGE'S PORTRAITS AND MEMOIRS. | FURTHER NOTICE.", of no obvious connection to Blake, but incorporating a Blake reference that a twenty-first-century researcher could only have located with the aid of the *Times Digital Archive*.⁵

Edmund Lodge (1756-1839), Clarenceux King of Arms, began issuing his *Portraits of Illustrious Personages of Great Britain* in 1814. It was completed in 1834 in 40 folio parts.⁶ The parts already completed were reissued in 12 volumes, quarto, in 1823. The *Times* reviewer, however, is concerned with the "Cabinet edition," published by William Smith in 6 volumes, octavo, in 1828. The review opens conventionally enough:

2. For further information, go to <<http://www.galegroup.com/Times/index.htm>>.

3. *EEBO: Early English Books Online* <<http://eebo.chadwyck.com>>; *ECCO: Eighteenth Century Collections Online* <<http://www.gale.com/EighteenthCentury>>.

4. G. E. Bentley, Jr., *The Stranger from Paradise: A Biography of William Blake* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001): "After 1820, most accounts of Blake refer to his Visionary Heads either as evidence of his madness or as something to be explained away" (379).

5. *Times* 3 January 1829 (issue 13793): 4, col. A.

6. Lucy Peltz, "Lodge, Edmund (1756-1839)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

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Illustration courtesy of the Blake Society; see review on p. 44