Blake in the Times Digital Archive

Keri Davies

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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." However, since late 2003, the online Times Digital 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. 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.)

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. 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.

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. 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:


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.

This magnificent work, which has hitherto been confined, owing to its size and costliness, to the libraries of persons of opulence, has just made its appearance in a form and at a price which place it within the reach of the most moderate means.

The reviewer goes on to commend the value of biography:

We are desirous of knowing the particulars of the domestic lives, the personal habits, and daily customs of men whose names are as familiar in our mouths as household words, and of whom, although they had become dust before we drew breath, we have as distinct and individual a notion as if we had personally talked with them. Biographical history satisfies this natural craving; separates the man from the events which he controlled or was controlled by, and holds his character up to an exclusive consideration. The lesson which his life teaches is then felt in its full force; it comes home to the business and bosoms of men, because every human being perceives that the same impulses that have governed the actions of the object of his contemplation, throb in his own heart, and influence his own conduct; and he learns, by a practical example, whether their issues are of good or of evil.

He adds:

Closely associated with the desire of knowing the exclusive history of such personages, is the wish to be acquainted with their external appearance, and the fashion of the human form they wore. Nothing is more natural than to covet the power of calling them up

"In their shapes and state majestical,
That we may wonder at their excellence,"
and verify or correct the images which fancy has formed by the true copy which the art that confers immortality has preserved of them.

The quotation is from Christopher Marlowe, Doctor Faustus, act 4, scene 2, in which Faustus and Mephistophilis conjure up the shade of Alexander the Great for the German emperor.

We then get the following comment on Blake:

The late Mr. Blake, the engraver, whose genius was subject to a kind of morbid excitement, was so possessed with this notion, that he had contracted a belief that he could, almost at will, bring before his actual physical eyesight the forms of the great men of this and other countries, whose existence he could only know by means of history. Under this delusion, which, however, was of no kin to madness, and could not have happened to any but a person of exalted imagination, he had frequent interviews with his distinguished buried acquaintance, and used to relate his imaginary conversations with them in perfect conviction of their truth and reality.

This review appeared during the editorship of Thomas Barnes (1785-1841), whose view was that anonymous journalism, subordinating the personality of the journalist, "was the only kind that would be read seriously." The anonymous re-

Sarah Jones tells me that the search string "john keats" retrieves an 1848 Times reference to Monckton Milnes's biography of Keats. I would suggest that this further bears out my argument; the Blake reference is both early (within a few months of his death) and is in a casual, almost irrelevant context. Knowledge of "Blake the engraver" is part of the common currency of the well-educated Times reader.

"VISIONS OF BLAKE, THE ARTIST": An Early Reference to William Blake in the Times

BY ANGUS WHITEHEAD

John Clark Strange, the nineteenth-century collector and prospective biographer of William Blake, recorded in his manuscript journal that on 6 April 1859, following a conversation with Samuel Palmer's brother William at the British Museum, he "pursued inquiries abt Blake in various books in the Library and made extracts therefrom viz. Stothard's Life—Songs of Innocence & Experience by Blake—B's illustrations to Dante—Hayleys Life—Times Newspaper." In an annota-


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