

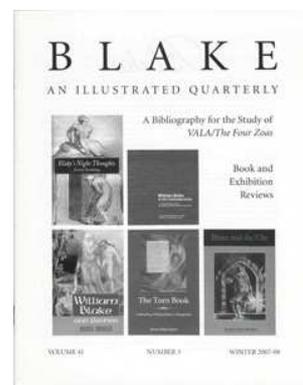
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Robert C. Brandeis, *William Blake and His Contemporaries: An Exhibition Selected from the Bentley Collection at Victoria University, Victoria University Library, Toronto*

C. S. Matheson

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"wall of words" V. A. De Luca notes on some pages of *Jerusalem* (De Luca 218) represents a deliberate defense against the contesting voice of annotation (Snart 142-43). Snart shares with Jackson, however, a fascination with Blake's use of pen to ink over his penciled notes, which Snart construes as evidence that Blake expected an audience to read them (132-33).

The strongest parts of Snart's argument are those that stick closely to the marginalia themselves. Even where he briefly introduces topics for further study, as in the closing section, "Areas for Further Research," he zeroes in on glaring gaps in our understanding of Blake's annotation. The links to Blake's own poetry and illuminated books, however, are not always as convincing. For instance, I am not persuaded that Urizen's "trac[ing] ... verses" in *The Four Zoas* is in any way connected to Blake's tracing over his marginalia in pen (144). Moreover, *The Book of Urizen*, as I have suggested above, takes up an inordinate amount of space in a relatively brief book about marginalia.

Despite these cavils, Jason Snart is to be commended for so acutely challenging the prevailing mode of reading the marginalia purely for content. Like the Santa Cruz Blake Study Group, whom Snart frequently cites and who first called attention to the distorting effect of typeset editions of Blake, Snart has shown the inadequacy of extracting marginalia from their context. He also calls attention to the alarming deterioration of many of the annotations, as pencil fades and pages crumble. We can only hope that someday some of these annotated pages might become part of the Blake Archive.

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[Robert C. Brandeis.] *William Blake and His Contemporaries: An Exhibition Selected from the Bentley Collection at Victoria University, Victoria University Library, Toronto*. 30 October-15 December 2006. Toronto: Victoria University, 2006. 36 pp., 36 b&w illus. Canadian \$15.00, paperback.

Reviewed by C. S. Matheson

As a student at Oxford I earned a bit of money working part-time in the college library. The hourly wage was small, but the labor wasn't taxing, except for locking up and shutting down the lights in a long gallery reputedly haunted by the ghost of someone disappointed at Finals (a person, incidentally, who turned up well albeit wrinkled at a gaudy in my last term).

But the shelving and the cataloguing and the reserve requests were really made tolerable by the possibility of an outing with the college librarian. Periodically the librarian would receive word that someone had donated his or her library to the college and then she—and sometimes to my delight she and I—would be dispatched to examine the books and carry away our selections. These alumni seemed to favor the environs of North Oxford, or else they had followed the Woodstock Road along a bit further and daringly settled in the Cotswolds. They inhabited similar houses—not architecturally similar of course, but eerily alike in their proportion of armchairs to reading lights, cretonnes to bookrests, and well-used dictionaries to presentation copies. In the librarian's venerable Morris Minor we would travel at an unflappable 30 mph towards these quiet houses and their expectant libraries. I was always waiting for the bright moon to drop behind the cottage roof.

These excursions were my first proper lesson in the deep autobiography that is serious book collecting. They taught me just how many layers of self are manifested in a library, and the extreme generosity of selves who can project their libraries forward into another sphere and towards another set of readers. I learned that bookshelves stand at the convergence of dense, humming lines of testimony: not just to a person's subject and expertise and interests, but to his or her travels, experiences, consolations and connections; not just to the provenance of rare volumes, but the point at which a book's passage through the world merges with the whole journey of a collector. A life lived with books can be wholly different from a career enacted through them. There are times when geomancy seems a more necessary science than bibliography.

Now imagine how these issues are amplified when the collection in question is "one of the three most important Blake collections, institutional or private, formed in the second half of the twentieth century" (Robert Essick, quoted in the "In-

roduction"). And when the collector is not only our foremost Blake biographer (*Stranger from Paradise* [2001]), but a scholar whose work forms part of the superstructure of Blake studies. Here indeed is a "Web / Of Ages & Generations, folding & unfolding," which is a rather more pleasant image when taken out of context. The books, paintings, manuscripts, drawings and artifacts brought together by G. E. Bentley, Jr., and E. B. Bentley over nearly six decades form a remarkable production in their own right. The works (more than 2500) parallel and embody Bentley's meticulous reconstruction in his numerous books and articles of Blake's associations, circles, and working practices. This is a collection that recreates the sociability and productivity—not to mention the dizzying interconnectivity—of the book and art worlds in Blake's lifetime. Recently gifted to the E. J. Pratt Library of Victoria University at the University of Toronto, the Bentley collection was showcased in the fall of 2006 through a fine exhibition curated and catalogued by chief librarian Robert C. Brandeis.

The exhibition begins with the visage of Blake himself. A copy of Deville's life mask, in which Blake's habitual sweetness of expression was soured by the weight of the plaster, is paired with Schiavonetti's engraving after the Phillips portrait, a print used as the frontispiece to *The Grave* in 1808. It is an apposite choice, not only because it answers our wish to greet Blake himself, but also for the many layers of reproduction and transmission manifested in these works. Everything follows from a desire to translate the imaginative faculty.

The first movement of the exhibition shows the range of Blake's graphic production, from sketch and manuscript to engraving on copper and wood to relief etching. It's instructive to see three electrotypes—"London," "Infant Sorrow," and "The Divine Image"—from the 16 made after Gilchrist's c. 1861 electrotype copies of Blake's plates. There are three sets of these electrotype copies now extant, and I feel rather subdued when I think of *printing from them* in Bentley's seminar. Blake's designs for and after the work of other artists (including the wonderful engraved portrait of Lavater, beaky and exacting as a Renaissance princeling) ready us for the exquisite Virgil illustrations and the magisterial *Dante* and *Job* suites that fill the South Gallery. The latter is a splendid 1826 "proof" copy on India paper. A pencil drawing in the "Visionary Heads" mode—representing Prince Arthur or perhaps an unusually svelte Henry VIII—and an autograph riddle manuscript penned on the verso of a proof of Hayley's *Designs to a Series of Ballads* direct us to the calligraphic vigor of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Copy M of *Marriage*, one of the collection's greatest treasures, consists of *A Song of Liberty* printed, as the catalogue describes, "on one sheet forming four pages with the first page left blank" (9). Together with copy L (in the collection of Robert Essick), this work provides important evidence that the *Song* was not just the tailpiece of *Marriage*, but may have been intended for distribution as a separate pamphlet.

Copy M of *Marriage* dramatizes a tendency within the Bentley collection as a whole to illuminate artists and audiences,



E. B. Bentley and G. E. Bentley, Jr., at the reception to mark the opening of the exhibition. Photographs courtesy of Alex McKay.



issues of production and reception in the period. The professional sphere that Blake (periodically) inhabited is embodied in the exhibition through the work and biographies of some of Blake's key associates: Cumberland, Flaxman, Fuseli, Linnell, Stothard, and Tresham. These six men, or alternatively, "Men who occupied the sixth chamber," appear here as artists in their own right as well as patrons, readers, or peers. Sometimes of course these roles converged, as in the case of Cumberland, whose literary manuscripts, scrapbooks, and sketches live alongside books embellished with engravings by Blake. Linnell is represented by an oil portrait sketch of Mrs. George Stephen (wife of a solicitor consulted by Linnell over the Blake estate), a kindly, intimate image that seems consistent with Linnell's handling of Blake himself. Stothard's tender watercolor *Infancy* (c. 1802) makes the sharp dealing of the Canterbury Pilgrims affair seem almost impossible. And Tresham's oil painting *Anthony and Cleopatra*, executed for Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery, calls up the aspirations and disappointments of a whole decade of British art.

The Bentley collection is both an entity and the emanation of a distinguished scholarly collaboration. As a "working library" in its richest sense, one that documents the material and spiritual labor of the subject, the biographer, and the collectors, its relocation to the Pratt Library at Victoria University in Toronto seems very appropriate. Here it is in close proximity to an important holding of Coleridge materials and the Northrop Frye papers, not to mention Douglas Martin's portrait of Frye composedly levitating. And here the lines of the collection are extended magnetically towards a new set of readers, scholars, and students. William Blake and His Contemporaries was opened in late 2006 with a gala reception, memorable on many counts, not the least for hearing a university president quote "When the morning stars sang together" rather than the passages of Job more habitual to administrators. But what struck me most forcibly was that the qualities that converge in successful collecting—knowledge and insight, judgment and good fortune—also shape the community one collects in turn. In a life lived with books the notion of provenance, like the "little lovely Allegoric Night" in *Jerusalem*, may be "stretchd abroad, expanding east & west & north & south."

Editors' note: Information on ordering the catalogue is available at <<http://library.vicu.utoronto.ca/libpubs.htm>>.

Magnus Ankarsjö. *William Blake and Gender*. Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2006. x + 210 pp. \$32.00/£20.50, paperback.

Reviewed by G. A. Rosso

IN this well-meaning book, Magnus Ankarsjö struggles with the complex and intractable issues of sex and gender in Blake's *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*. Seeking to refute the argument that Blake was anti-feminist, Ankarsjö declares that he will "dismantle the claims that define Blake as condescending towards the female sex" (2). His goals are to demonstrate that there is much more positive "gender interactivity" in these poems than critics realize and that in them "Blake presents a gender utopia with a vision of complete equality between the sexes" (3, 2). With the burden of proof on his shoulders, Ankarsjö seeks to trace a "clear line of development" in Blake's portrayal of gender in the epics, but, in his attempt to manage the irreducible complexity of the narratives and of the sexual forces that energize them, he fixates on what he calls Blake's "single-minded idea" of achieving an apocalypse of gender equality through a unitary symbol, one that is realized only in the final plates of *Jerusalem* (3, 6). Despite the book's detour into history that briefly explores Blake's affiliations with Protestant dissent, English Jacobinism, and 1790s feminism, Ankarsjö's primary claim is that because *Jerusalem* is the culminating version of Blake's mythological system, we must read each poem from the vantage of the entire canon (6, 124, 189). He thus ends up reading from a teleological perspective that simplifies Blake's myth and the central role of gender within it.

Besides this methodological limitation, Ankarsjö does not sufficiently develop his conceptual vocabulary or provide adequate scholarship on the issues that interest him. In the first chapter, "Apocalypse, Utopia and Gender," he devotes only a couple of pages to each of his key concepts, relying on Morton Paley's *Apocalypse and Millennium* (1999) and Nicholas Williams's *Ideology and Utopia in the Poetry of William Blake* (1998) for his understanding of these terms. And in a move that he repeats several times, Ankarsjö misreads Blake's text and takes selected passages out of context to serve his argument. For example, he cites the following bleak passage from *The Four Zoas* as an "anticipation of the utopian society" (15):

For when he came to where a Vortex ceas'd to operate
Nor down nor up remain'd then if he turn'd & look'd back
From whence he came twas upward all. & if he turn'd and
view'd
The unpass'd void upward was still his mighty wandring
The midst between an Equilibrium grey of air serene
Where he might live in peace & where his life might meet
repose (72:16-21, E 349)