

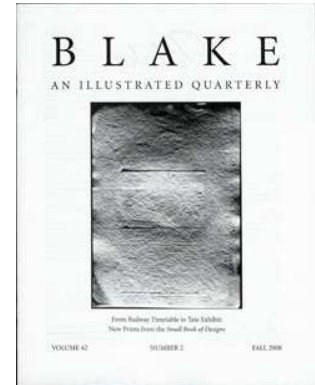
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

W. H. Stevenson, ed., *Blake: The Complete Poems*,
3rd ed.

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Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 42, Issue 2, Fall 2008, pp. 73-75



W. H. Stevenson, ed. *Blake: The Complete Poems*. 3rd ed. Longman Annotated English Poets. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2007. xxv + 929 pp. £19.99/\$59.60, paperback.

By Justin Van Kleeck

AS IF to mark 2007 as both Blake's 250th birthday and a second eighteen-year interval of Rest before Labour, Longman published the third edition of Blake's poetry by W. H. Stevenson in its Annotated English Poets series. Following his own precedent, Stevenson has not radically altered the new version from its predecessors—*The Poems of William Blake* (1971, 1st ed.) and *Blake: The Complete Poems* (1989, 2nd ed.). Thus, travelers through Blake's textual universe will find themselves on a familiar path—one that is less perilous than some others, with views that are impressive but not overwhelming, and with plenty of road signs, rest stops, and information booths along the way.

Stevenson comments in his preface on those revisions he has made to both his text(s) and the accompanying notes for the third edition. First, he now includes the prose tracts *All Religions are One* and *There is No Natural Religion*, making the edition even more "complete," sort of a "complete poems (plus a little prose)," and an even better bargain. Second, "there is considerable rearrangement of the Miscellaneous Verses after 1807"—which include some of Blake's most biting poetic effusions—"taking account of Erdman's work on the Notebook" (xiii). Last, the order of *Milton* now follows Blake's ordering of later copies, thus rescuing from an appendix the five added plates but pushing the preface to a separated existence before *Milton* proper.¹

Despite these particular changes, the more familiar features of Stevenson's previous Longman text still predominate. Because, as he points out repeatedly, his edition "is designed to be widely, and fluently, read" (xiv), these versions of Blake's writings probably offer little in the way of new discoveries; they also do not seek to redefine "the text itself [that] has been available for a generation through the labours of" previous editors, namely Erdman, Bentley, and Keynes (xiii). This is not to say that Stevenson has skirted the labors of editing entirely. Indeed, he both carries over his previous editorial actions and performs new Wonders of labour in the process of self-revision. Whatever he says about inherited textual authority, specifically regarding his original "collaboration" (xvi) with

1. Stevenson typographically distinguishes the text of the later, added plates so that readers can identify Blake's earlier arrangement.

Erdman and use of Erdman's *Poetry and Prose* (1970 ed.), Stevenson never did and does not now simply provide an Erdman clone. Longman policy partially dictates this by requiring texts that are modernized in spelling and punctuation and are arranged chronologically rather than by, say, theme or genre (see the note by the general editors, x). Yet Stevenson also chooses to reedit Erdman's text in other ways, such as in the case of *The Four Zoas*, where he orders Nights I and II differently (I: pp. 3-9a, 19-22; II: pp. 9b-18, 23-36), or *Milton*, where he now adopts the later plate order and actually comes closer in line to Erdman's text—except for Stevenson's separated preface.

The result is an edition of Blake's poetry that does much to facilitate reading and so perhaps comprehension of the author's "undoubtedly difficult verse" (xiii). In it we see quite distinctly the material manifestation of Stevenson's fundamental editorial principle, that he will produce "an edition whose primary purpose is to assist the reader rather than to establish a text ..." (xvi). We also see how deeply Stevenson believes that "the audience is far wider than the devoted company of [Blake] scholars," necessitating texts that are fit "for all kinds of readers" (xiii). Thus, in line with series policies, the editor chooses to edit the originals in ways that make them more accessible, particularly to younger (i.e., undergraduate) and general readers. Many readers of the scholarly sort may quibble, as they have before, with Stevenson for altering one jot or tittle of Blake's spelling, punctuation, and "prodigal" capitalization (xv), or for adding quotation marks to spoken passages (and so interpreting what is being spoken and by whom).² Of course, Longman policies essentially force Stevenson's hand in these cases. Further, in the light of the edition's "primary purpose" and primary intended audience, more demanding readers can and should put down their swords and spears with only minor grumbling.

2. However, Stevenson makes clear that he has "largely, if not entirely" revised his practice with capitals and so restored many as they appear in Blake's originals (xv). Of course, determining what is and is not a capital in Blake's writing can be a seriously tricky endeavor. Somewhat ironically, given the extent to which the texts have been altered to fit the Longman guidelines, Stevenson remarks in the headnote to *Jerusalem* that he leaves unaltered originally capitalized words such as Reason, Despair, Sin, Moral Law, etc., because Blake himself capitalized "words important to him" (653n2). If capitalization is a matter of definite meaning, then why alter the originals at all? When it comes to another accidental matter, I disagree with Stevenson's opinion that "[Blake's] abbreviations [i.e., contractions—"turnd" for "turned," etc.] seem intended to save manual labour more often than to indicate the omission of a sound" (xv). Blake almost never used accent marks, and so those instances when he does bother to write a word fully ("turned" rather than "turnd") deserve careful scrutiny regarding their possible effect on the rhythm of a line. The fact that these full spellings are in the minority further demarcates them as noteworthy. Stevenson's/Longman's blanket policy of expansion becomes problematic because altering so-called accidentals leaves us no way of knowing if a word was expanded or contracted in the original. In turn, without the additional editorial addition of accent marks, readers have to figure out for themselves how to read, which means additional labor, possibly making more difficult their reading process and so thwarting the editor's aim for his text.

More important to Stevenson as reading assistant are the notes: introductory headnotes, footnotes, and even indexes. This apparatus serves as the editor's primary means "to provide whatever is essential for understanding" Blake's poetry (xiv). Not surprisingly, perhaps, Stevenson has revised "the heart and lungs of the edition," as he calls them, more carefully than Blake's texts: the headnotes to individual works "have been largely rewritten," in particular the one to *Jerusalem*, and "the footnotes too have been scoured and revised, and where necessary entirely renewed." In line with the edition's "primary purpose," the notes provide historical/biographical facts and interpretive commentaries. They also frequently summarize relevant Blake scholarship for those not taking part in that terrible Intellectual Battle or following closely from the sidelines, all without privileging specific interpretations or establishing a particular system of meaning (though Stevenson does not now, as he did in previous editions, emphasize this lack of interpretive system making³). For the most part, then, the notes explain particular bits of text or, in the case of the headnotes especially, provide interpretations that function almost as vortexes readers can use to enter Blake's quirky parallel universe.

When we combine the head- and footnotes with the short index for the notes (pointing to explanations of specific important terms), some impressive color plates, a chronology, and even several maps, Stevenson's apparatus attests to the amount of energy he has expended to assist his audience along the Blakean way.⁴ Indeed, the notes may well represent the bulk of the content, made subservient to the poetry they gloss only by being cast to the bottom of a page and rendered in smaller type. Personally, I am pleased that Stevenson does not entirely overlook textual and bibliographical details in his notes, offering some commentary upon the (possible) dates of works, relevant background information on the original materials, and even instances of Blake's textual revisions, including cancelled passages and plates (see, for example, 495 and 212-13 respectively).⁵

3. For example, in the first edition, Stevenson explains that he has "tried in this edition not to interpret or expound any 'system' in [Blake's] works, but to give whatever information is necessary for the exposition of each poem or passage, so that the reader may be able to interpret more easily for himself" (1971, xi). The omission of this or a similar statement gains significance in light of Anne Kostelanetz Mellor's just criticism, made in her 1972 review of the first edition, that Stevenson quite frequently presents his personal "interpretations as though they were facts, without acknowledging that some critics disagree with him" (*Blake* 6.1 [summer 1972]: 32). Perhaps now Stevenson is being more accurate by not affirming his objectivity. Whatever the case, this editorial inconsistency in previous editions disappears in 2007 because he omits the statement.

4. Stevenson might have helpfully added a bibliography of suggested readings as a way to provide the readers he aims to please/serve with much more information than the selected scholarship he cites elsewhere.

5. These textual notes also largely seem tied to instances of clearing up difficulty for readers or, at other times, to Blake's changes that somehow affect the meaning of the text, rather than for the sake of recording Blake's revisions as such. To cite a random example of the former: in l. 211 of *The Four Zoas*, Night II, Stevenson notes that "The Man" was replaced

I find much to commend and little to criticize in these various features of *Blake: The Complete Poems*, no matter the person using it. My only real concern arises out of Stevenson's central editorial goal as it shapes his edition, text and apparatus, namely that he sometimes seems to be overly careful in presenting Blake to readers. Thus, in the preface, he remarks that he identifies particular sources for Blake's allusions at times, but "not, I hope, so many that they will confuse the reader" (xiv). Shortly thereafter, addressing altered punctuation, he opines, "the reader faced with page after page of unpunctuated obscurity in *Vala* ... is probably very glad of the guidance that punctuation can give." One instance that I found most troubling occurs in the headnote to Night VIII of *The Four Zoas*. At first, Stevenson provides a surprisingly detailed (conjectural) reconstruction of the Night's composition based upon existing scholarship and a breakdown of the text into six stages/sections. He then diminishes this helpfulness, though, in the conclusion to the headnote by actually directing readers to pass over text: "The reader who finds the sequence difficult would do well to miss out at the first reading the passages indented in this table" (416). By making this suggestion, Stevenson obviously wants to keep his readers engaged in a most difficult section of, arguably, Blake's most difficult work. While his carefulness is well intended, I fear that the same reader who follows the editor's advice and misses material on the first go-round may never bother returning to it on a subsequent reading, whether out of fear, simple forgetfulness, or a sense that it is unnecessary.

More significantly, these examples indicate the editorial principles that guide nearly every facet of Stevenson's edition, both along with and independent from Longman guidelines. From the modernized texts, to the explanations of them, to the digested scholarship, to the brevity of complex textual details available in the notes, Stevenson's edition presents a version of Blake that strives to be accessible, comfortable, and enjoyable—with as little obscure, difficult, or disturbing material as possible. The edition even promotes such a view in its material particulars: a single-volume paperback that is easy to carry and, relatively speaking, easy on the wallet. Thus, Stevenson (and Longman) have a clear "ideal reader" and produce a work to meet that reader's (imagined) demands and needs. The only shortcoming I can cite arises when Stevenson's efforts to assist readers may diminish the fullness with which they can experience Blake. A reader surely will miss out on much in any editorial representation of Blake's works, so Stevenson should not be criticized too strongly for giving a limited view of the Blakean universe. But I worry an editor may sometimes limit

by "Albion" and explains that Albion is "[Blake's] later name for the archetypal Man; it implies also that the nation of Britain can stand for *The Man*" (322n). Here we see Stevenson both record a textual revision and then interpret/explain it so that readers can learn the full significance of key terms/ideas. By providing cancelled text, as with the *America* plates (212-13), Stevenson equally allows insights into how Blake struggled with his media and message and meaning.

that view further by creating the impression that an author is inherently obscure or too complex for many readers.

Admittedly, there is much that will intimidate and discom-bobulate in Blake, and so an assumption that the audience needs help may lead to some extremely valuable insights through explanation and other assistance, as frequently occurs in Stevenson's case. However, it also may lead to the exclusion of material that readers will never otherwise encounter—making Blake accessible by offering only what is easier to handle. I think seasoned Blakeans (and especially editors) do a disservice to fellow travelers, even those only on the bunny slopes of Mont Blake, by directing them to “miss out” on complexity and possible confusion, by smoothing over every rough patch on the path, or by describing the author in ways that make him seem obscure and obtuse.⁶ Possibly influenced in instances such as these, readers might never want to return to Blake and deepen their study of his creations. Call me cruel, but I believe that young readers would benefit from a lot less hand-holding and a lot more exposure to ambiguity and complexity—accompanied by plenty of encouragement to be creative explorers in their studies. Let them each become the child in the “London” illustration, confidently leading a bent old man, rather than the child in the illustration for “The Little Boy Found,” being led by some revered savior-like figure. “Unless ye become as little children”

Nevertheless, I believe Stevenson's labors shine brightly, most especially because their result serves as a sort of hub, convergence point, or intermediary for the many other means by which readers may come to Blake's writings: scholarly complete editions focused on providing a sound text, other selected editions of Blake heavily enriched by outside scholarship (such as the Norton critical edition [2nd ed., 2007] with its supplementary criticism), more general anthologies that include pieces by Blake, and purely interpretive critical works. Consequently, *Blake: The Complete Poems* does an admirable job of serving its intended audience. That primary audience is not the only one that can benefit from having both a *reading* text based on a reliable authority (Erdman) and the fullest body extant of commentary from a longtime Blake scholar (much fuller than Bloom's in the Erdman edition, for example). Seasoned critics, too, likely can use Stevenson's edition for an enjoyable read and, perhaps on occasion, a bit of assistance in their own thinking. While *Blake: The Complete Poems* surely leaves more to be desired, even in its third instantiation, I feel that it manages largely to achieve the goals that the editor sets for it. It becomes even more remarkable by doing so in an attractive, affordable physical object in this age when presses are reducing their material output and electronic alternatives gain popularity—making it a book that should be saved at

6. Stevenson's rhetoric is almost always mild in addressing Blake, but a few times he comes across as a bit sharp or judgmental. For example, “a strange poem, unsatisfactory in its lack of completeness, yet compelling in its dreamlike logic, in spite of its gruesome titlepage” (headnote to *The Book of Los*, 284).

the end of the semester. Every reader should approach every edition, be it from a university library or a big-box bookstore, consciously and critically; Stevenson's is no exception. But I think that, under this editor's reliable eye, it serves as one of the more useful guides through the Blakean universe, and so we can praise Stevenson for undertaking that formidable task once again. Happy birthday, Mr. Blake.

MINUTE PARTICULAR

“M^{rs} Chetwynd & her Brother” and “M^r. Chetwynd”

BY ANGUS WHITEHEAD

IF, as Keri Davies suggests in a recent essay about Blake collector Rebekah Bliss, “every person who bought Blake's work in his lifetime is of significance to Blake scholarship,”¹ the identity of another contemporary female purchaser of the poet-artist's work, albeit on a smaller scale, merits closer investigation. William Blake twice refers to “M^{rs} Chetwynd.” On 30 January 1803 Blake wrote from Felpham to his brother James at 28 Broad Street, Carnaby Market, “I send with this 5 Copies of N4 of the Ballads for M^{rs} Flaxman & Five more two of which you will be so good as to give to M^{rs} Chetwynd if she should call or send for them.”² According to G. E. Bentley, Jr., “Mrs Chetwynd took two copies of the fourth Ballad from James Blake ... and probably had the preceding numbers as well, eight in all (£1.0.0).”³ Eighteen months later, Mrs. Chetwynd, accompanied by her brother, called on Blake at his lodgings and studio at 17 South Molton Street. On 28 September 1804 Blake wrote to William Hayley:

I had the pleasure of a call from M^{rs} Chetwynd & her Brother. a Giant in body mild & polite in soul as I have in general found great bodies to be they were much pleased with Romneys Designs. M^{rs} C. sent to me the two articles for you & for the safety of which by the Coach I had some fears till M^r [William] Meyer obligingly undertook to convey them safe⁴

I wish to thank Keri Davies and Catherine Taylor for their assistance with this note.

1. Keri Davies, “Rebekah Bliss: Collector of William Blake and Oriental Books,” *The Reception of Blake in the Orient*, ed. Steve Clark and Masashi Suzuki (London: Continuum, 2006) 38.

2. E 727.

3. G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) [hereafter BR(2)] 153.

4. E 755.