

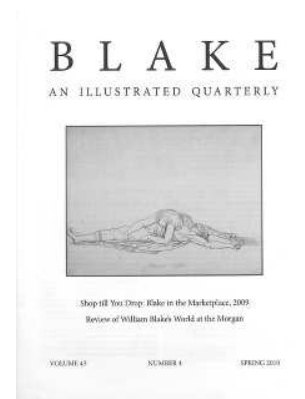
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R E V I E W

William Blake's World: "A New Heaven Is Begun," Morgan Library and Museum, 11 September 2009-3 January 2010

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Reviewed by Morton D. Paley

THE MORGAN LIBRARY's Blake collection has long been one of the world's greatest, beginning with J. Pierpont Morgan's own purchases, notably enlarged by the collection of Mrs. Landon K. Thorne in 1972-73, and continued by further acquisitions, including gifts by the Morgan's one-time director, Charles Ryskamp. The current exhibition, assembled by Ryskamp and curators Anna Lou Ashby and Cara Denison, features only part of the Morgan's holdings, judiciously chosen and mounted with a refreshing lack of clutter or busyness.

In the section entitled "Friends and Followers," some pictures bring out how different Blake's friends' artistic interests could be from his own, while others show strong affinities. Among the former are John Linnell's fine landscape drawing *View of Amwell Hill, near Ware, in Hertfordshire* (1814), and *The Dell of Comus* (1835), a vague, atmospheric drawing by John Varley's pupil Francis Oliver Finch, whose statement that Blake was "a new kind of man" is more familiar today than his watercolors. Henry Fuseli's striking portrait of Lavater's niece, Martha Hess (c. 1778-79), is also unlike anything Blake attempted at the time, but his *Psychostasy (The Weighing of Souls)* of 1800 is, in the torsion of its central figure, very like one aspect of Blake, although its celebration of the heroic Achilles is not. Perhaps closest to Blake's pictorial concerns, especially those of the 1790s, are two brilliant linear drawings by John Flaxman inspired by Robert Potter's translations of Aeschylus, which also engaged Flaxman's older contemporary George Romney. Aeschylus was in the later eighteenth century admired for his "primitive" strength, sometimes compared to the Doric order of architecture (see Rosenblum 18n50 and 161). "*Behold this proud oppressor of my country*" (words addressed by Orestes to the chorus in *The Libation Bearers*) depicts in an uncompromisingly linear style Clytemnestra's dead body flung over the corpse of Aegisthus. The qualities of torsion and linearity are hallmarks of Blake's style in the 1790s, sometimes reconciled, or, better, synthesized, sometimes not. (Blake's own copy of Potter's two-volume edition is also owned by the Morgan, although not displayed.)

It is a rare collection indeed that can display such a great chronological range of Blake's engravings, including as it does *Morning Amusement* after Watteau (1782) and George Cumberland's calling card (1827). Among its rarities are a delicately tinted *Canterbury Pilgrims* (third state) and *Satan* (also

aply known as *Head of a Damned Soul in Dante's Inferno*) after Fuseli. The latter, one of five known impressions, may have been privately printed for a few friends, as there is no indication that it was ever published for sale. In these selections we can also see Blake's development from the pleasant commercial design for Thomas Commins's *Elegy Set to Music* (1786), which could have been executed by any competent engraver (although the histrionic gestures of the figures are typical of Blake), to the engraved portrait of Wilson Lowry (executed by Blake with Linnell, 1825), that, as Robert Essick has shown, reflects the advance in techniques such as burnishing that Blake learned from Linnell (Essick 223), which was to bear greater fruit in Blake's great *Job* engravings, four of which are mounted on a temporary wall.

There is a special thrill for me, and I expect for many others, in seeing Blake's manuscripts, even when they must be shown in transparent cases. In particular, Catherine Blake's letter to Ann Flaxman, dictated to William on 14 September 1800, conjures up the image of William's taking Catherine's dictation as they both enthusiastically looked forward to moving to Felpham. Also present is the Pickering Manuscript, opened to "The Grey Monk" on pages 12-13. This holograph is dated to "about 1807" here, although on what grounds is not stated. It may be because of the date "1807?" given in G. E. Bentley, Jr.'s chronology in *The Stranger from Paradise* (460). As far as I know, the only certain date, as Bentley himself has shown ("The Date of Blake's Pickering Manuscript"), is the *terminus post quem* July 1802. There is also a letter here by William Cowper, whose correspondence, Blake wrote to William Hayley, "ought to be printed in letters of Gold."¹

A hallmark of the Morgan's copies of illuminated books is the consistently excellent quality of their impressions. One section is entitled "Continental Prophecies," the designation used in the 1995 Blake Trust edition of *America*, *Europe*, and *The Song of Los*, having apparently passed into general usage. Represented here are ten plates of copy A of *America*, remarkable for its beautiful coloring and white-line effects, four plates of *Europe* (copy G), and four of *The Song of Los* (copy C). The latter four are, in whole or in part, superb examples of Blake's color printing, a mode he employed chiefly in 1794-96. Color printing presents textured surfaces that may be grainy, speckled, mottled, reticulated, or some or all of these. These appeal to our tactile sense as no reproductions can, making us want to commit the transgressive act of touching them. Among the illuminated books to be found in other display cases are copy F of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (also color printed), the Flaxman copy of *Songs of Innocence* (D), printed in yellow ochre and delicately colored, and the intriguing copy K of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, not all of which is Blake's, as its two plates of "The Tyger" are used to illustrate.

1. Letter to Hayley, 12 Mar. 1804 (E 743).

The superstars of this show are, as one would expect, the Morgan's two great series of watercolors: the illustrations to Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* and the Butts series of *Job*. The former are in almost pristine condition except for the last, "Milton in His Old Age," where some flaking has occurred on the left side of and just above and below Milton's head. As I looked at the written page in Blake's hand for "The Spirit of Plato," it occurred to me that we do not know what edition of Milton Blake used, and that a start might be made by comparing Blake's transcriptions of Milton's text with the likeliest candidates. Also, although there is an excellent edition of this series online at the William Blake Archive, it has never been published in a hard-copy facsimile. As the Morgan pioneered in the high-quality reproduction of Blake's art with its facsimile edition of *Job* (1935), perhaps it would consider producing an edition of these at some future time.

In looking at the *Job* watercolors, I was especially struck by the two that Blake is believed to have added for Thomas Butts around the time he made the Linnell set. In "The Vision of Christ" (no. 17), God does not incline his upper body toward Job and his wife, as in the Linnell series, but is upright; the three comforters do not hunch in the other direction, as in the Linnell, but kneel contritely toward the divine radiance. (In the first of these details, the engraving follows

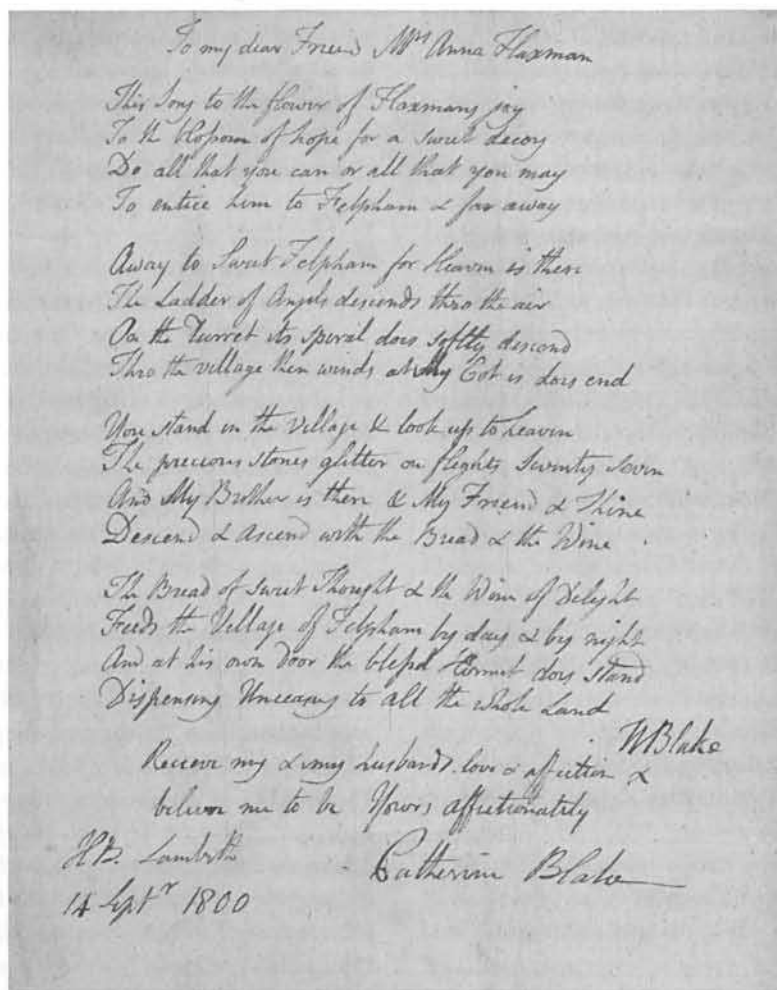
the Butts set, in the second the Linnell.) The Morgan's "Job and His Daughters" (no. 20) shows a green meadow, with Job and two daughters seated on an incongruously placed sofa, sheep ranged on either side. A third daughter kneels, reading, before her father, and the daughter to our left has been writing on a tablet. Job gestures upwards with both arms, toward scenes from his story taking place above a layer of cloud. The sky is intensely blue. In contrast, the Linnell counterpart seems to take place both indoors and outdoors at the same

time. A few sheep can be seen in the green foreground, but Job's arms extend laterally, indicating scenes set in what appears to be a curving wall. Blake followed these latter details in his engraving, as he also did in the placement of the daughters, one leaning against Job on either side, and the third seated on the ground before him. In this indoor scene the sheep are gone. The daughters' aspects, beautiful and pensive, differ from both drawings, in which they appear rather disconsolate. All twenty-one watercolors look wonderfully fresh, a tribute to the Morgan's conservatorship.

Books are at a disadvantage in art exhibitions, being limited to a single opening, and copy F of *Jerusalem* looks lonely in its glass case. Many who see it will not suspect that they are looking at one of Blake's greatest accomplishments, and the last one assembled at that. The copy of *Night Thoughts* displayed has the advantage of size and color, very fine color that may well have been added by Blake (or both Blakes), as is claimed here, as a pattern for others to follow. A good example of Blake's commercial engraving after other artists is in *The Botanic Garden* by Erasmus Darwin, opened to *Tornado*, after Fuseli.

The lighting of the gallery is excellent, as is the physical arrangement of the displays. I suppose that when there is a crowd, it could be difficult to see the exhibits in the glass cases, but no

one has ever succeeded in solving this problem for relatively small works. The wall labels are on the whole discreet (as they should be), informative, and placed at a comfortable height. There are a few minor errors among them, and one that is a little more than minor: "After his apprenticeship, Blake was admitted to study as an engraver at the Royal Academy." Blake of course studied drawing at the R.A., but he did not do a stroke of the burin at an institution that looked down on engravers as manual workers.



Second page of the letter from Catherine Blake, in the hand of William Blake, to Ann Flaxman, 14 Sept. 1800. Courtesy of the Morgan Library and Museum. Accession no. MA 6048.

Although there is no catalogue, the entire exhibition is posted on the Morgan web site <<http://www.themorgan.org/collections/works/blake>>, so those who did not see this major exhibition can view it online, and those who did can refresh their memories of it, as I know I will.

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R E M E M B R A N C E

Karl Kroeber, 1926–2009

"Kroeber once portrayed William Blake, whom he admired for decades, as a kind of shamanistic figure, a poet whose allegiance was not to any standard of aesthetics but to the men and women who lived, suffered, and died around him. Blake—and this is a fact that Kroeber saw more clearly than others—was committed to showing that many of the psychological sources of man's unhappiness could be cast aside, transmuted, overcome. His poetry stemmed from a desire to show that there was nothing unavoidable, nothing inexorable, about human suffering. Kroeber bore a much more striking resemblance to Blake than he would ever have admitted. In a world replete with self-promotion and self-pity, he worked—quietly and unpretentiously—to remind us of how things could be."

From Philip Petrov, "Karl Kroeber, or Living and Dying in the Present," *Columbia Spectator* 12 Nov. 2009: 4. Extract reprinted with permission.

N E W S L E T T E R

Conference in Oxford

Blake, Gender, and Sexuality in the Twenty-First Century, organized by Helen Bruder and Tristanne Connolly, will take place 15-16 July 2010 at St. Aldate's Church, Oxford.

According to the organizers, over the many years since Irene Tayler's classic "The Woman Scaly" opened up feminist debate about Blake's art, generations of critics have wrestled and struggled with, delighted in and savored, Blake's provocative and abundant sexual visions. Throughout the 70s, 80s, 90s, and 00s, trends, tastes, and judgments shifted and swirled, from angry critique and searching psychoanalysis, through heavy theory and politicized interpretation, to wary appreciation and queer celebration. Outside academia, too, Blake's reputation as a prophet of free love and naked beauty remained a nuanced yet perennial global presence. And yet, amazingly, there has to date never been a gathering of critics, artists, writers, and fans solely devoted to appreciation of and keen debate about these significant aspects of Blake's work. Blake, Gender, and Sexuality in the Twenty-First Century aims to become that gathering, to celebrate and build upon past knowledge as it reaches toward likely concerns of the future.

For information and registration, please visit <<http://www.arts.uwaterloo.ca/~tjconnol/sexy.blake>>.

... and in Toronto

Blake in Our Time will celebrate the future of Blake studies and the legacy of G. E. Bentley, Jr., on 28 August 2010 at Victoria University in the University of Toronto.

According to the organizers, the symposium will explore new directions and approaches to the study of Blake using manuscript archives, online resources, forgeries and oddities, variations in Blake's illuminated books, and Blake's commercial engravings, as well as studies of the major collections amassed by private scholar-collectors. The day will feature a series of short illustrated papers and then illustrated panel presentations in an open forum.

Victoria University Library houses the Northrop Frye papers and the G. E. Bentley, Jr., collection of nearly 3000 works by and about Blake and his contemporaries.

For information, or to make a proposal for the panel presentations (by 1 May), please contact Karen Mulhallen (kmulhall@ryerson.ca or karenmulhallen@rogers.com).