

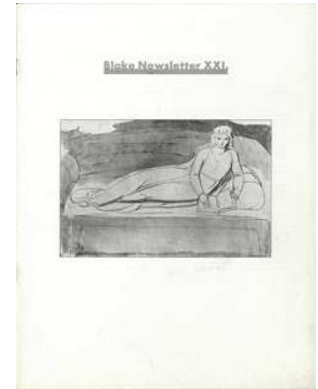
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R E V I E W

W. H. Stevenson, ed., *The Poems of William Blake*

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The Poems of William Blake. Edited by W. H. Stevenson, text by David Erdman. Annotated English Poets. London: Longman, 1971. Pp. xxiv + 877. £4.25. New York: W. W. Norton.

Reviewed by Anne Kostelanetz Mellor

W. H. Stevenson's annotated edition of David Erdman's text of Blake's poems has much to commend it, particularly to students reading Blake for the first time. For the general reader, it combines what are perhaps the most satisfying features of both the Keynes (Oxford Standard Authors) text and the Erdman (Doubleday) text. Stevenson follows Keynes in placing Blake's poems in chronological order, following (with only one exception) the most recently accepted datings of the poems. The exception is *Tiriel*, which Stevenson (following G. E. Bentley, Jr.) dates 1789 and places before *The Book of Thel*, despite the persuasive stylistic, substantive, and bibliographical evidence offered by Erdman for dating *Tiriel* 1790, midway between *Thel*, plates 1-5 (1789) and *Thel*, 6 and Motto (1791 on). Stevenson helpfully inserts "To Tirzah" (c. 1804-5 or after 1809) after the "Pickering Manuscript," and offers convincing historical and bibliographical considerations for dating the "Pickering Manuscript" itself c. 1805, rather than 1803.

Stevenson also follows Keynes in modernizing Blake's spelling and punctuation. Scholars may here prefer to consult Erdman's own text which preserves Blake's eccentric spelling and punctuation, but the average reader will be helped by Stevenson's judicious punctuation, especially in such poems as "The Everlasting Gospel" where different voices speak. In choosing the Erdman text over the Keynes text, Stevenson has correctly selected the most authoritative text we have. Unfortunately for the scholar, however, Stevenson's edition is limited solely to Blake's poetry, thus omitting the prose and letters upon which most of us depend for teaching and research purposes. Even more annoying is the omission of the *Gates of Paradise* emblems, especially since Stevenson provides such insightful comments on the emblems, captions and the relationship of the 1793 and 1818 versions.

In arranging Erdman's text, Stevenson makes three important editorial decisions, all of which he convincingly justifies. He accepts W. F. Halloran's reordering of lines 1-121 of *The French Revolution*. Secondly, he reorders Nights VIIa and VIIb of *Vala*, printing Night VIIa before VIIb and arguing that Night VIIb was intended to follow directly upon VIIa. Readers of the *Blake Newsletter* (1[March 1968], 6-8) will already be familiar with Stevenson's persuasive arguments based on internal as well as bibliographical evidence for this ordering. Finally, Stevenson relegates plates 3, 4, 5, 10, 18 and 32 of *Milton* (which appear only in the

later copies C and D) to the end of the poem as an Appendix. He argues plausibly that these plates are "largely digressive" and added for the purpose of increasing the total number of plates in the poem to 50 (p. 484).

The great achievement of this volume lies in its annotations, and here we must be extremely grateful to Stevenson for providing us with such detailed, extensive and insightful notes. I found particularly useful his commentaries on the poly-pus, the Druids, the Holy Thursday services at St. Paul's, the Ovidian echoes in "Ah! Sunflower," and the numerous Biblical allusions (supplied in great part, we are told, by Michael Tolley). Stevenson also provides brief descriptions of the designs for the illuminated poems (although he unaccountably omits the design for the titlepage of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* [p. 209]) and occasionally gives a reference to a reproduction. In future editions, he will be able to bring such references up to date by including the numerous reproductions listed in Robert Essick's *Finding List* published in the *Blake Newsletter*, 5 (Summer-Fall 1971).

I have only one large quarrel and a few small bones to pick with this annotated edition. In his Preface, Stevenson writes, "I have 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 . . ." (p. xi). Stevenson's intention is laudable, but again and again we find him offering interpretations as though they were facts, without acknowledging that some critics disagree with him. For example, it is surely an interpretation--and to my mind a dubious one--to identify the "Holy Word" in the "Introduction" of *Songs of Experience* as the production of "Blake's oppressive tyrant-father-god," a production designed "to bully mankind" (p. 209). Many readers may question Stevenson's assertions that we should not "doubt the sincerity of the *Songs of Innocence*" (p. 53); that the questions of the Voice of Sorrow on Plate 6 of *Thel* are merely "rhetorical" (p. 100); and that the angel in "I heard an angel singing" from the Notebook "is one of the deluded creatures referred to in *Marriage*" (p. 147). And why is this angel "deluded" while the "Good" referred to in the unused Motto for *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* is definitively called "a term of approval--not the satiric 'good' of *Marriage*" (p. 166)? Moreover, Stevenson's apparent assumption that Blake was a Platonist (see pp. 106, 112, 861) comes perilously close to expounding a "system" in Blake's works. I am not arguing, of course, that Stevenson should not put forth interpretations, or even that his interpretations are necessarily in error, but only that he should not have presented them as wholly objective "information."

In several cases I take issue with Stevenson's descriptions of the designs. Too often his descriptions seem inaccurate, inadequate or overly subjective. Since Blake's illuminated designs vary significantly from copy to copy, Stevenson may simply have described copies other than the Trianon

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Press facsimiles and Micro Methods microfilms I have checked; but he has not identified the copies he used and, in any case, one could argue that he should have used these more generally available copies. In copies D and I of *The Marriage*, plate 11 depicts both a personified sun with flaming hair and a crowned figure within a wave, tree or plant, as opposed to the single "tritonlike male figure" (p. 111) Stevenson records. Again, the design for "The Argument" in both these copies probably depicts a woman in the tree rather than the "gowned youth" Stevenson sees there (p. 103). Stevenson's description of Oothoon and Bromion, "bound and shackled back to back," in the tailpiece (or frontispiece) of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* omits mention of a very important detail, that Oothoon is not visibly chained (p. 186). Stevenson also ignores the large bird in the upper left corner of the design for "The Shepherd"--a bird which might possibly be the Holy Dove and therefore potentially significant enough to deserve mention (p. 55). Nor is it a "fact" that the "shepherd" (Piper?) in the frontispiece for *Songs of Experience* is "holding the child's arms so that he cannot fly away" (p. 209)--he might be simply balancing the child so that he doesn't fall off.

A few annotations are disappointing: Tharmas, in *The Four Zoas*, seems more complex a figure than Stevenson's identification of him as "Compassion" (p. 288) suggests; his discussion of "Havilah" solely in terms of its Biblical usage (p. 665) ignores Blake's own associations with it in his letter to Hayley, 12 March 1804; and his de-emphasis of the word "system" in "I must create a system" (J 10:20, p. 644) underestimates the importance of an organized system to Blake's late art and poetry. I would also argue against Stevenson's annotation of "dominion of Edom" in *The Marriage*, plate 3, as "dominion over Edom" (p. 105). It seems at least possible that Blake was following Biblical usage here: dominion of in the sense of dominion by. Compare II Chronicles 21:8: "In his [Jehoram's] days the Edomites revolted from under the dominion of Judah, and made themselves a King."

These are niggling details, however, and Stevenson more than compensates for such minor flaws by giving us so much useful material. In addition to the excellent annotations already mentioned, Stevenson provides illuminating comparisons with the early drafts of "Infant Sorrow" and "The Tyger" and with Isaac Watts' "Cradle Hymn"; helpful maps of Biblical Palestine, of the environs of London mentioned in Blake's poems, and of the city of London in c. 1810; and interesting bibliographical notes telling which poems were paired in seven of the eight earliest copies of *Songs of Innocence*. All of Blake's readers will want to have ready access to the wealth of background and bibliographical information gathered together in this book. Stevenson's volume is the second step toward the ideal edition of Blake: his complete poems, letters and prose writings edited by David Erdman, together with colored photographic reproductions of his illuminated pages, and annotations by W. H. Stevenson.

William Blake's Water-Colour Designs for Gray's Poems--A Commemorative Catalogue. With an introduction and commentary by Geoffrey Keynes Kt. London: Trianon Press for the William Blake Trust, 1971. Pp. xx + 72. Illustrated. \$7.50 + \$1 postage from the Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn.

Reviewed by Morton D. Paley

1971-72 were vintage years for the study of Blake's illustrations to the poems of Gray. Previous to that, very little had been seen of this major series of designs and still less written about them.¹ In 1971, however, appeared Irene Tayler's fine study²; the illustrations themselves were published in a magnificent facsimile by the Trianon Press for the William Blake Trust; and an exhibition of originals and facsimiles opened at the Tate Gallery. The following spring this exhibition, for which the publication at hand is the catalogue, was mounted at the Yale University Art Gallery in collaboration with the Paul Mellon Center for British Art and British Studies. Although modestly described by its author as "an introductory handbook," this catalogue is in itself a major contribution to the interpretation of its subject.

What inevitably strikes one first is the wealth of illustrations in the catalogue. Sixteen designs (eighteen, counting the front and back covers) are reproduced full-page in color and one in monochrome, and at the back of the book all 116 are given, four to a page, in reduced monochrome. Also reproduced full-page are Flaxman's pencil drawing of Blake and the titlepage of the 1790 edition of Gray which Blake used. There is a useful "Concordance of Blake's handwritten titles" which correlates Blake's titles, the lines from Gray illustrated (as Blake transcribed them), Blake's manuscript numbers, the page numbers of the 1790 edition, and the design numbers. (As Blake numbered his designs for each poem as a separate sequence, his manuscript numbers necessarily differ from the design numbers for the entire series.) This is a very welcome tool for anyone who wishes to study the series at length.

¹For reproductions prior to 1971, see Robert Essick, *A Finding List of Reproductions of Blake's Art*, *Blake Newsletter*, 5 (1971), 69-72. For a detailed history of the illustrations and the literature about them, see Irene Tayler, *Blake's Illustrations to the Poems of Gray*, pp. 3-25.

²Reviewed by Thomas H. Helmstadter, *Blake Newsletter*, 4 (1971), 140-42; see also my review in *Criticism*, 14 (1972), 93-96.

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