

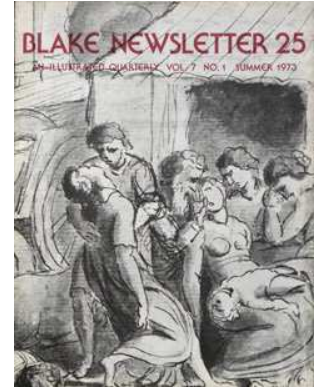
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R E V I E W

Roger R. Easson and Robert N. Essick, *William Blake: Book Illustrator, Volume I*

Deirdre Toomey

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Roger R. Easson and Robert N. Essick. *William Blake: Book Illustrator: A Bibliography and Catalogue of the Commercial Engravings*. Normal, Illinois: The American Blake Foundation, 1972. Volume I: Plates Designed and Engraved by Blake. Pp. xvi + 58 + 82 pls. \$8

Reviewed by Deirdre Toomey

William Blake: Book Illustrator, Volume I, is the first in a series of three publications which will reproduce and catalogue all of Blake's commercial engravings. The first volume deals with designs invented and engraved by Blake, the second will deal with designs invented but not engraved by Blake and the third with engravings by Blake after other artists. The editors, Roger R. Easson and Robert N. Essick, have been cautious in their acceptance of attributions: thus doubtful works such as the engravings in Bryant's *Mythology*, Gough's *Sepulchral Monuments*, *Vetusta Monumenta* and *The Seaman's Recorder* have not been included in the first volume. They have also been cautious in their classifications: "Laocoon," the Wedgwood engravings and the non-pastoral engravings in Thornton's *Virgil* have all been excluded from the first volume on the grounds--perhaps debatable in the case of the "Laocoon"--that they are not "original," being "essentially copies of another artist's work." These have been relegated to the third volume.

Clearly *William Blake: Book Illustrator* in its final form will be a very useful work of reference for Blake scholars. The unusually large amount of bibliographical data is helpful and this blending of "The descriptive bibliography and the print catalogue" is quite successful, although the seven pages of bibliographical description which accompany the one plate of Herries' *Bible* are, at first sight, somewhat daunting. It is enlightening to see the commercial engravings, not just as isolated prints,

prosody would force a minor stretch of definition, but Lowth himself set precedent for this.

Almost the final third of the section is devoted to the Sternhold-Hopkins metrical psalms, which Bogen favors as a prosodic influence on the basis of negligible evidence. In this instance, at least, she acknowledges both her bias and her lack of support for it: "to discover a positive connection between the long line of *The I* and the Sternhold-Hopkins fourteenner would be gratifying, but perhaps a closer comparison of the two is needed first" (p. 14). If this is so, and aside from the dubious critical values involved, an ethical question appears. Should one save for the rhetorically strong end-position of one's commentary, and give the fullest treatment to, what is an admittedly flimsy pet notion? If not the specialist, will the defenseless "general reader," trusting the printed word, be left sagely

but in the context of the books for which they were executed.

The editors main purpose is, however, as they have said, "the complete reproduction of Blake's commercial book illustrations" and their "prime concern is to assist the student of Blake's art." Sadly the reproductions themselves are, for the most part, of rather low quality, and this may tend to modify the usefulness of *William Blake: Book Illustrator* as a work of reference. Some of the reproductions are highly inaccurate: those of the *Night Thoughts* engravings are particularly bad. Here the values are distorted to such an extent that some pages, in particular 33, 35 and 72, look as if they have been re-engraved by John Jackson. The thick black shadows that appear everywhere in the *Night Thoughts* reproductions are most unpleasing. This tendency towards excessive blackness is also apparent in Thornton's *Virgil* and in the Cowper plate, in both cases obscuring areas of fine detail. The other reproductions are less positively bad, tending to omit detail rather than distort values. Thus in "The Hiding of Moses" whole areas of detail are missing from the left-hand side of the design. The same is true, to a lesser extent, of the fine detail in the Wollstonecraft illustrations. It is indeed most unfortunate that so useful a work should be marred by technical defects, and that such scrupulous and thorough editors as Roger Easson and Robert Essick should be so badly served by their reproductions. Yet, even with these defects *William Blake: Book Illustrator* remains a valuable work of reference and I look forward to seeing the next two volumes.

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nodding at this nonsense?

Despite the weakness of the prosody section--which is, after all, only four pages long--Bogen's book will be helpful to the student of *The I* who needs a good facsimile. We need more such works of respectable quality and moderate cost, and according to David Erdman's Foreword, Brown University Press and the New York Public Library will help to provide them. Ideally, perhaps, a facsimile's concreteness and permanence should be left uncompromised by the more subjective and fallible types of criticism. But since the Spectre of completeness haunts us all, including publishers, I suggest that these future editions be produced by the collaboration of two or more scholars, each working in his area of greatest competence. If this had been the case with Bogen's *The I*, its weakness might have been avoided, and its strength maintained.