

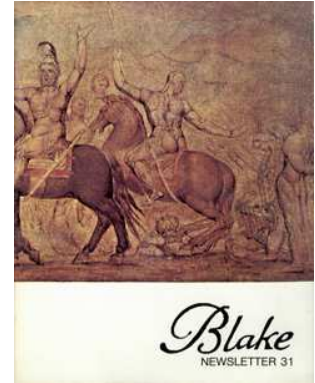
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D I S C U S S I O N

The Accuracy of the Blake Reproductions

G. E. Bentley, Jr.

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Discussion

With intellectual spears & long winged arrows of thought

The Accuracy of the Blake Reproductions

by G. E. Bentley, Jr.

The unpublished letter to Mr. Arnold Fawcus which is cited at length by Sir Geoffrey Keynes in his note on "The Blake Trust Gray Catalogue and the Blake Trust Facsimiles" in *Blake Newsletter* 27 (Winter 1973-74), pp. 64-66, reads essentially as follows:

By writing (in *Blake Newsletter*, VI [1973 (i.e., Feb 1974)], 95-96) of the Blake Trust Gray catalogue as representing "a very remarkable bargain", as being "very markedly superior in faithfulness to the original" to the reproductions in Mrs. Taylor's *Blake's Illustrations to the Poems of Gray* (1971), as giving in "The large plates . . . an excellent idea of the originals", as being with other Blake Trust reproductions "excellent substitutes for the originals" for which "Blake students have ample cause to be deeply grateful", I had intended to indicate very high admiration for the productions of The William Blake Trust and The Trianon Press. By pointing out that "A number of the reproductions [in the Gray catalogue] have been significantly cropped" and that the writing in what seems to be "an eighteenth-century hand" on the cover appears in a place where it does not appear at all in the original, and in a hand which is not Blake's on the reproduction of the 1780 Gray titlepage opposite the quasi-frontispiece portrait of Blake, I meant to give evidence for my conclusion that this Gray catalogue, and by implication other Blake Trust facsimiles, are "beautiful, but not perfect". I had not then realized that the Gray catalogue had, as you write to me, "no pretensions to accuracy", or I should not have judged it thus strictly.

I am very sorry that my words have caused distress, for I believe that the work of The Trianon Press deserves very

high praise indeed, praise which should be qualified by scholars chiefly through reminders that the facsimiles, like all other facsimiles, "must never be trusted in place of the originals for the minute details upon which the most responsible scholarship depends". In the very reliable and useful Blake Trust Gray catalogue, I found examples of Blake's handwriting apparently on some twenty-one reproductions, occasionally on plates reproduced more than once. In looking with more care at each of these, I found that two of them, on pages which seem to be faithful reproductions, are *not* by Blake. I should, perhaps, have noted that these are display-pages, serving in some sense as titlepages, and might therefore have anticipated less fidelity to the original than elsewhere, but I did not know how to anticipate which reproductions would be altered. In fact, however, on looking again at the 20th Century writing on these reproductions of 18th Century originals, I still find them likely to mislead me; even knowing that two are not by Blake, it is not easy to ascertain which two are modern.

It was, perhaps, precipitate of me to suggest there, without giving more evidence, that we should "question the reliability of the Blake Trust reproductions" in general. My business there was with the Gray catalogue. Evidence does exist elsewhere, however, that the Blake

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Trust facsimiles are admirable but "not perfect". In a review of the Blake Trust facsimile of *All Religions Are One* in *Blake Studies*, V (1972), 168-175, Professor Kay Parkhurst Easson wrote of the "unfortunate disparity between the Blake Trust facsimile and the [unique] Huntington original" with which she compared it, a comparison which revealed "a striking divergence" in the colours and "black spots [which] appear without precedent on the lettering of the facsimile plates". She concludes, justly I think: "The Blake Trust/Trianon Press facsimiles may not be perfect facsimiles, but they are the best facsimiles yet devised".

There is other evidence that they are not "perfect facsimiles". In the black-and-white reproduction of *Jerusalem* copy C (1952, 1955), the even-numbered plate-numbers have been moved from the top right side, where they appear in the original which is printed on only one side of the leaf, to the top left side in the facsimile, which is printed on both sides of the leaf. In *For Children* copy D and *For the Sexes* copy F (1968), the artificial copper-plate-mark sometimes does not quite match the printing margins, so that the engraved lettering falls outside the copper-plate-mark in a way which would, of course, be quite impossible in the originals. The eclectic two-volume facsimile of copies C, F, G, L of *There is No Natural Religion* Series *a* and *b* (1971) has leaves of some 12.5 x 18 cm. for Series *a* and 23.3 x 29.9 cm. for Series *b* (measuring width before height), though the dimensions of the original leaves of Series *a* vary from 10.6 to 11.1 cm. wide (never as much as 12.5 cm.) and 13.4 to 13.9 cm. high (never as much as 18 cm.), and though the width of Series *b* is 22.0 cm. in most plates (not 23.3 cm.) and the height varies from 29.0 to 30.9 cm. (not a uniform 29.9 cm.).¹ Clearly the leaf sizes of the facsimile of *There is No Natural Religion* are not exactly the same as the originals reproduced, though we might expect exact reproduction of the original leaves in a perfect facsimile. Perhaps other such discrepancies may be found in other facsimiles.

These are very minor defects in facsimiles which are in most respects major successes--accurate and beautiful. I and all Blake scholars I know are profoundly grateful for them and hope that Mr. Arnold Fawcus, The Trianon Press, and The William Blake Trust will continue to produce such splendid facsimiles, to approach yet nearer to perfection in an imperfect world.

The following paragraphs in response to Sir Geoffrey's note were written on 22 May 1974:

I commented on the trimming of the plates and on additions to or alterations of writing on the reproductions in the Gray catalogue. Neither Sir Geoffrey Keynes (in his temperate note in *Blake Newsletter* 27) nor Mr. Arnold Fawcus (who wrote to me on the subject) disputes the accuracy of the facts reported. The factual basis of my criticism is therefore not "totally erroneous" but is agreed to by all parties.

The questions are whether such minor alterations as were noticed in the Blake Trust Gray catalogue are likely to be misleading² (as I thought, and think, they are) and whether the Blake Trust facsimiles are, as various reviews have said over the years, "exactly like an original", "virtually [or practically] indistinguishable" from the originals, exhibiting "perfect" workmanship. I agree heartily with Sir Geoffrey that the Blake Trust facsimiles are "extraordinarily faithful to Blake's work" and that the beauty and integrity of the books produced by Mr. Fawcus and the Trianon Press which I have seen are extraordinary and admirable. The question is the "very small degree of imperfection" which may be anticipated even in an excellent facsimile. If what I wrote has been merely solemn and redundant, warning readers of the obvious limits of facsimiles in general, I can only apologize for having taken over-literally some of the reviews quoted in the Blake Trust brochures.

The facts are not in dispute. As to the conclusion, the Blake Trust facsimiles seem to me to be by a wide margin the best reproductions of Blake which have been made. I have just ordered another Trianon Press Blake Trust facsimile with eager anticipation and great confidence. I hope that other lovers of truth, of beauty, and of Blake will continue to do so as well.

1 The "Description and Bibliographical Statement" says accurately that "the leaf size used in the facsimile" is "a little larger" than the originals of Series *a* and "approximately the same" as pl. b10 of Series *b*.

2 One difficulty seems to be that some of the Blake Trust publications are "not designed as . . . perfect facsimile[s]", as Sir Geoffrey writes. Perhaps in such cases the reader could be told the modesty of the intention and the changes which have been made.