Kenneth Clark, Blake and Visionary Art; Kenneth Clark, The Romantic Rebellion; Raymond Lister, British Romantic Art

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Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 8, Issue 4, Spring 1975, pp. 143-145
Kenneth Clark. *Blake and Visionary Art*  
(W. A. Cargill Memorial Lectures in Fine Art,  

Kenneth Clark, *The Romantic Rebellion:  
Romantic versus Classic Art* (Harper & Row,  
illustrations, 278 black and white illustrations.  
$15.00.

Raymond Lister, *British Romantic Art* (G. Bell  
& Sons, London, 1973), 246 pp., 102  
illustrations (black and white).

Reviewed by Jean H. Hagstrum

Lord Kenneth Clark, an authority on landscape, the  
nude, and the Gothic revival, turns his trained and  
widely appreciated eye to late eighteenth-century and  
nineteenth-century art in a book that has been trans-  
formed from a television film. That film will  
undoubtedly be shown on American television, though  
it may not reach the wide popular appeal of the more  
comprehensive series entitled *Civilization*. Raymond  
Lister, a painter, illustrator, miniaturist, designer  
of architectural metal work, is also an author of  
books and articles on technical subjects, on Palmer,  
on Victorian narrative painting, including an un-  
technical, fresh, and informative book on the career  
and work of Blake—the comment of one craftsman on  
another. When authors of such special qualifications  
turn their attention to Blake, readers of this journal  
will wish to pay attention.

In the Glasgow lecture, which, with a few  
revisions appears as Chapter 6 in the book, Clark  
asks bluntly (no pun originally intended, but Sir  
Kenneth does acknowledge his indebtedness to Sir  
Anthony in the matter of sources), "How good an  
artist was Blake?" He partly answers his own  
question by including him among thirteen artists,  
four (including Fuseli) English, the rest Continental,  
ranging from David to Rodin, an honor of place not often accorded Blake by art historians.  
Yet Clark's answer is not one of simple praise, for  
he obviously has mixed feelings. He admires the  
Dante illustrations enormously, sees exceptional  
"classical" propriety in the Job, speaks well of  
illustrations to the prophetic books, especially  
Uriel. But he seems not attracted by the *Songs  
of Innocence*, and he finds many of the water colors  
weak. He dislikes the Gray illustrations and the  
Milton illustrations, particularly the ones for  
*Comus*, and feels that Blake responded feebly to the  
New Testament. Since he regards Blake's thought as  
a muddle, we cannot expect him to see energy flowing  
from the pen to the pencil, and he believes in fact  
that the Dante illustrations are excellent because  
Blake came in contact with a mind greater and better  
organized than his own.

Quite apart from matters of personal taste, one  
is disposed to debate several of Clark's interpreta-  
tions. There is space to mention only a few.  

Clark believes Uriel is the primal economic planner,  
a Karl Marx drowning in the waters of dialectical  
materialism. We must grant that Blake would have  
found an enemy in any tyranny of the left or the  
right; but in our culture his anti-Man would  
probably be hypocritical capitalism, a predatory  
system that cloaks itself in pious or humanitarian  
wraps. Expectedly, Clark finds the visual primary.  
The evidence does not always bear him out: Innocence  
became verbal art before it became visual; and the  
interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar, whom Clark believes  
was a recollected werewolf design long before he was  
attached to a biblical figure, ignores the fact that  
Blake knew his Bible well from his earliest years  
and that Nebuchadnezzar as described in the words  
of the King James version might well have anticipated  
Innocence. The *Songs of Innocence* can scarcely be called rococo; and Clark  
would see them more clearly and appreciate them  
more deeply if he considered them against a back-  
ground of emblem and book illustration, not only  
gainst a background of Hellenistic art, Raphael's  
Loggie designs, and medieval illumination, though  
these latter two do play a role in shaping Blake's  
imagination as an illuminator of his own songs.

Still, Clark is lively and stimulating, and we  
must be grateful to him for bringing much powerful  
Blake to a wide audience. And as a scholar he has  
thrown out some lines that we may wish to start  
windin g into a ball. The Swedish artist Sergel, who  
is given one illustration here (and also some in  
Gert Schiff's *Fuseli*); the Bolognesian Mannerist  
Pellegrino Tibaldi, who, according to Clark, was  
known to Blake through a book of engravings published  
in 1756 and who according to Thieme und Becker has  
as a sheaf of drawings in the British Museum; and the  
German, Philip Otto Runge, who Clark says was doing  
the same thing Blake was in the *Songs*—these  
artists will bear looking into.

Blake appears in Lister's book in many quotations,  
some long, a few apposite; and in nine illustrations,  
all but one very well known and frequently reproduced.  
The one exception to the familiarity of the Blakes  
is the reproduction on Plate 26 of Blake's miniature  
of Cowper's relation, the Rev. John Johnson (Johnny  
Johnson of Norfolk). Although also reproduced by  
Bentley in *Blake Records*, the work is not widely  
known, and Lister is right in finding in the church  
steeple a personal and prophetic touch since it is  
unlike any of the churches which the rector served.  
He might have gone farther and said that the spire  
was a Gothic sign of approval, as is the prominent  
Bible, showing that the man who is portrayed to  
resemble somewhat his poetic relative is a believing  
Bible Christian even though a member of the Established  
Church.

The presence of this Blakean miniature and our  
response to it provoked by Lister's brief comment

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perhaps provide the clue as to how to use and appreciate this book. No Blakean will be satisfied by all of the interpretations; no Romantic scholar will find his conception of the period clarified or even precisely delimited in chronology. But both the scholar and the general reader—and also the collector—will find many surprises in the nooks and crannies of this book—matters he will want to pursue further. Unusual Romneys, lovely, fresh Calverts, Palmers rich in depth and meaning even without their color, an unusual Constable drawing, a Danniell that anticipates Henri Rousseau, a lovely Girtin, Shelley as an androgynous figure, the 'corrupt' Byron, the haunting juxtaposition of Fuseli's and Rossetti's Doppelgänger, the dialect poems of Barnes, the discussion of the Eidophusikon (a device that brought Romantic scenery and sublime Miltonic landscapes to gaping spectators), and the appendixes on minor artists and engravers and etchers who could bear important relations to Blake and other major Romantics—all these and many more unexpected encounters await the alert reader. I confess to being puzzled at first by the audience for which this book was intended. Who needs to have the entire text of the Tyger quoted or who needs to be told in a footnote when Titian's name was first mentioned that he was "Titiano Vecelli, called Titian . . . Venetian painter." I still regret the many loose definitions of Romantic, and the longueurs of seeing and reading what is already so well known. But these are obliterated by the rewards that may come from following Lister's beckonings to possible discoveries of new pleasure and knowledge.

And now back to Clark for a final paragraph. He has brought us no nearer a theoretical understanding of Romanticism and Neoclassicism than has Lister, who weakens his definitions by exuberance of quotation and a loose manner of expression. Clark is the more sophisticated intellectually, but contradictions remain at the heart of his theory and he passes over significant variables. Classicism may indeed be intimately related to stress on drawing, but where does that leave Blake, who was a linear artist proud of his hard, wiry, bounding line? Classicism is related to totalitarian political order, but where does that leave David in the period of his early Roman fervor? Romantic art is sensual, yet one of the neoclassical David's central qualities is his deep sensiveness to femininity, called, confusingly, an eighteenth-century quality. The disciplined Ingres's inspiration is the female body, for whom form could never obliterate the sensuous nature of beauty. Sometimes Clark's sensitive and trained taste deserts him. Ingres's "Napoleon" is surely uninspired pastiche-making and not a dazzling cameo, whose perfection of authority proclaims the deity of the Emperor; and the same artist's "Jupiter and Thetis" is an overblown piece of visual rhetoric that is more laughable than majestic or beautiful, however delicate the hand of Thetis that chucks the solemn and ridiculous chief of the gods under his heavily bearded chin. And hasn't Clark missed the majesty of Turner's mountains in "The Goddess of Discord choosing the Apple of Contention in the Garden of Hesperides" by insisting on the controlling classicism of the dwarfed foreground? And so one could go on with disagreements about taste and theory. But, still, the work, with its dazzling plates and bright comments, is impressive. Many feel that Clarke's enviable vulgarization is not all that haute. But the present writer finds The Romantic Rebellion, like Civilisation, a kind of masterpiece of intelligent and attractive popularization, the kind that must take place if the humanities are to thrive or even survive. What a brilliant stroke to put the iron girders of the Liverpool Street Station near the Carceri of Piranesi! And how bold—and unpopular—to call the draped figure of Balzac, so silly when a nude study, Rodin's greatest work and display it for what it is, a mysterious and powerful mystery of torture and unfailing material. Clark will once more bring pleasure to thousands, whose horizons he will expand. And after the judicious have grieved and duly wrung their hands, we must all be grateful, for our own and others' sake.