

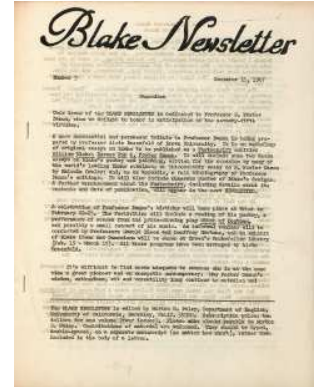
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

A R T I C L E

“A Lot He Knew”

Alvin H. Rosenfeld

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 1, Issue 3, December 15, 1967, pp. 3-5



cal; furthermore, criticism was completely taboo, as being personal conjecture, and thus not scholarly. So I devoted myself completely to my own work.

Once the book got started, it almost wrote itself, waking me up at odd hours. I got so obsessed that once I signed Blake's name to a cheque, which was returned to me. When I came to a tough spot, I simply walked round my chair, then wrote the answer. As soon as a chapter was finished, I read it to Miss Amy Lowell, whom I had met through a paper on the history of Free Verse. She had loved Blake ever since she was a little girl and gloated over the copies of his books owned by the Hooper family. When she returned from Egypt in 1898, she was tired of their formal art and ordered three of Blake's books for herself. Later she was able to get a Marriage of Heaven and Hell, which inspired her poem "The Book for Stones and Lilies" (Scribner's Magazine, Nov. 1921; collected in Ballads of Sale). Poet and lover of books, she was the only person I knew who could appreciate Blake.

Naturally I dedicated my book to her. Fortunately for me, Houghton Mifflin's reader for my manuscript was Esther Forbes; the book was accepted in 1922, and was published two years later. The reviews were hearty, long, and even enthusiastic. At last, Blake was academically respectable.

Only at Harvard was my book not greeted. There I was the lowest of the low, a mere theme corrector. Of course my book could not possibly be counted for a Ph.D. I had not entered myself as a candidate; I had not taken the right courses; nobody had approved the subject; nobody had supervised the manuscript; it had not been submitted for that or any other degree. Nevertheless I hoped that I might get a small raise in pay or even in rank. But no one of my superiors in the English Department so much as said to me: "I see you've got a book out." And nothing happened.

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I can't resist adding a postscript to Foster's last sentence, from R. P. Blackmur's essay, "A Critic's Job of Work," in which the book is taken as an example for scholarship. "The result for emphasis is that Mr. Damon made Blake exactly what he seemed least to be, perhaps the most intellectually consistent of the greater poets in English. Since the chief weapons used are the extended facts of scholarship, the picture Mr. Damon produced cannot be destroyed even though later and other scholarship modifies, re-arranges, or adds to it with different or other facts." MDP /

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"A Lot He Knew"

Alvin H. Rosenfeld
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The title of this brief article on S. Foster Damon is taken from a chapter-heading in George Weller's early novel about academic life, Not to Eat, Not for Love. The novel, published in 1933, was a sensation, and although several lively accounts of life at the universities have succeeded it, Not to Eat, Not for Love is still remembered. I call attention to it here, however, not so much to reclaim the novel for literature but because the model for one of Mr. Weller's characters--the articulate and charming

young instructor of Freshman Composition at Harvard is the same man we are honoring in this special number of the Blake Newsletter, S. Foster Damon.

As far as I know, George Weller's depiction of the young Harvard English instructor in the chapter entitled "A Lot He Knew" is the first attempt to give fictional treatment to S. Foster Damon as a Blake scholar. (Actually he is identified more closely with John Donne, but Blake shines clearly through.) It is not the last, for in Colin Wilson's latest book, The Glass Cage (1966), a Blakist is again fictionalized, this time as the scholar-detective Damon Reade, and the name immediately gives him away to us: again we know the model as S. Foster Damon.

But the novelists have not been alone in their recognition of S. Foster Damon, for the past several years have seen him acclaimed in published tributes by some highly important men--the composer Virgil Thomson, E.E. Cummings, and Malcolm Cowley among them. Virgil Thomson has written enthusiastically about his early relationship with Foster Damon, crediting Damon with introducing him to the music of Eric Satie and the poetry of Gertrude Stein, both of whom changed his life, as Thomson has recently remarked in his autobiography. E.E. Cummings has left behind similar testimony. Cummings acknowledged that he discovered El Greco and Blake only through Damon, and he told his biographer, Charles Norman, that "practically everything I know about painting and poetry came to me through Damon." Foster Damon was equally important to the young Malcolm Cowley who, in a long and warm-hearted tribute to his old friend, has recently written that it was Damon who got him to read Laforgue, the early Ezra Pound, the poetry of Stephen Crane, Melville, Blake, and Amy Lowell. As a scholar in his own right and an opener of doors to others, then, Foster Damon's achievements have been considerable and have not gone unnoticed.

And yet with it all his image has remained a modest one. Damon has worked quietly over the years, and he has neither sought nor won fame as one of our literary celebrities. Scholars have known his work on Blake all along, of course, but not enough people have been aware of the many other sides to the man--the fact that he is also a good poet and has published four volumes of poetry; a prize-winning dramatist (his Witch of Dogtown won a Russel Crouse award for drama in 1955); a composer; a musicologist; a folklorist; an historian; and a valuable and distinguished bibliophile, librarian, and book-collector.

Damon's most illustrious work has been done on Blake, but his range has been enormous and has taken in much more. Joyce and Melville, Marie de France and Amy Lowell, Thomas Holley Chivers, Punch and Judy, the History of Square Dancing, and Yankee Doodle--Damon has written definitively on all of these. There have been articles on alchemy and the occult, on genealogy and gastronomy, on Schönberg and Stravinsky, on Scandinavian and Japanese literature, on popular music, Santa Claus, and the detective story. The author of major books on William Blake is also the author of an introduction to the Annisquam Village Cook Book, a Japanese Noh drama (his Kiri no Meijiyama), and a children's Christmas book (The Day After Christmas). And there is still more to come. This summer Damon finished his writing of The Moulton Tragedy, a long epic poem that he has been at work on over the past forty years and which, after Whittier, he calls his "Yankee Faust." Present projects include finishing up a book on Shakespeare that he began some years back and now has almost completed; a critical history of English prosody, which has been his continuing occupation for years now; and the gathering together of dozens of original recipes (Damon is a gourmet cook) into a cookbook, "for poets and others."

The man I am trying to describe here is, to borrow a term from Coleridge, myriad-minded, and as such certainly one of America's most remarkable men of letters. A few of us know him this way; most know him essentially and only as the prominent Blake scholar that he is; and many who should know him do not know him at all.

Malcolm Cowley, a long-time friend of S. Foster Damon, perfectly described this situation when, in a recent letter to me, he referred to what he called Damon's "genius for concealing his genius from the public." That seems to get at both some of the most endearing features of Damon's charm and also the vexing situation of his relative obscurity. It is gratifying, therefore, that the present number of the Blake Newsletter, dedicated to S. Foster Damon, at last allows some of us who have known him well to celebrate this very admirable and distinguished man and perhaps win for him something of the larger audience that he deserves and should have had all along.

SERMON BY MR. BLAKE

for S. Foster Damon

No man can keep the rose from death;
by breathing back the borrowed sun
it makes infirmity of god-
head rooted in the hoary earth;
the power lies in what consumes,
not what is eaten up. Who lives
in fire praises energy;
he feels no spider crawl beneath
the fallen leaf, his eyes intense
with coming next refuse the sun-
light as a yellow unguent
effacing flame. He dwells inside
a city out of space, a source
immune from ever stepping back
(the burning bush before the gate
returns the timid to a life-
time of tormenting flies); beside
the fiery fountains what is wrought
can never die; enslavement to
the cycles of the sun becomes
a dream upon awakening.
We give its colors to the rose;
all beauty we adore is what
we conjure up and sprinkle
on the grasping soil. Who would lose
by lack of crossing over all
creation at its origin?
The fire, gentlemen, the fire!
There is nothing in the world
but what is hammered out of flame.

Laurence Goldstein