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G. E. Bentley, Jr.'s *William Blake: The Critical Heritage*

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the foam and rolling weed of Blake's sea of words, as well as casting light on the pictorial language and meaning of Blake's illustrations, forty-five of them reproduced in black and white on glossy paper. There is much in the book that I have not mentioned, the final chapter being richly suggestive, of Blake's *Milton* as an attempt to mythologize "the decisive turning point of Milton's life, which . . . comes with the writing of *Paradise Regained*" and to relate "that moment of redemption to the renewal of the entire human race" (p. 243), and more, that "prophecy is a sublime allegory, . . . its reference points [being] . . . not history but the inner life of man" (p. 245). In fact, the final chapter is not so much epilogue as prologue to yet another book, that one being a promised full-scale commentary on *Milton*; and one may look forward to it as work that will be characterized, like *Angel of Apocalypse*, by rigor, strong points of view, dense documentation, and significance.

G. E. Bentley, Jr. **William Blake: The Critical Heritage.** London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975. xix + 294 pp. \$25.00.

Reviewed by Suzanne R. Hoover

Though the *Mortal & Perishing* part of the present book be inelegant, expensive, and small, the *Real Book*, a documentary survey of the reaction to Blake and his works before the publication of Gilchrist's biography in 1863, will hold a large interest for readers who may wonder what it was like in the old days to encounter Blake without a trot. The details of this survey may at times baffle us, suggesting a playing-out of tidal under-rhythms of attraction and repulsion that have little to do with sophisticated appreciation, but the overall curve seems explicable enough. The brief "high" of Blake's reputation in the early 1800's turned to a long, largely ebbing phase as a consequence of the fact that the character of the man was increasingly out of harmony with the character of the times: as Samuel Palmer wrote to Gilchrist in 1855 (part of a long reminiscence about Blake for Gilchrist's book), "materialism was his abhorrence." The importance of the profound dyspathy between Blake and the culture of the first half of the nineteenth century cannot be overstressed, for there is no artist of whom it is truer to say that his character is his art--and therefore, his destiny. Some of the pain of looking closely at that destiny is mitigated for us by the enjoyments of Regency and Victorian genius; reactions to Blake during the pre-Gilchrist period come most copiously from persons who hold considerable, in some cases great, interest for us in their own right--as poets, essayists, critics, artists, mountebanks, etc.--a circumstance which compounds the interest of what we are reading and helps to put the whole question of early responses to Blake in a suitably spacious setting.

Further to help us to that end Professor Bentley begins his book with a useful twenty-six-page

Introduction that sets forth the history of Blake criticism and Blake studies. The present compilation resembles earlier ones in the Critical Heritage Series in its mixture of general essays on Blake with commentary on specific works. It differs from the other volumes in being about a writer who was also a professional artist, and in that it is necessarily composed more of private statements than of published reviews. A selection of comment on Blake and his work during his lifetime has been made from the fuller materials in *Blake Records*.¹ This includes some long pieces, such as the essays by Malkin and Crabb Robinson, and the now famous reviews in the *Examiner* (1808) and *Anti-Jacobin* (1808), as well as numerous brief, even fragmentary, references, in many cases excerpted from longer items in *Blake Records*. The biographical essays of 1827-31 by Smith, Cunningham, and Tatham are given in full, along with early post-obit articles on Blake in *Fraser's* and the *London University Magazine* (all in *Blake Records*). A spare, running commentary like that in *Blake Records* introduces and connects the items.

The new feature of this book is its chronologically ordered final section on the years 1831-63, which cites every commentary on Blake in that period, and even every comment that is now known, some for the first time: 300 items in all. This is a valuable drawing in of the nets, notwithstanding that, with netting so very fine, whitebait are brought up with tuna. The question one might raise about this chapter concerns its title, "The Forgotten Years." It is my belief, stated already in these pages and elsewhere, that "forgotten" is a misnomer in that it places an emphasis on the number of comments rather than on a consideration of their significance. Many of the (comparatively few) notices of Blake's work that were taken were important, coming as they did from Emerson, Ruskin, Palgrave, Henry James, Sr., the Pre-Raphaelites, and others of interest to us now. An edition of Blake's *Songs* was published for Wilkinson in 1839; pictures by Blake were exhibited with works of other English artists to a mass audience in 1857 and 1862, and commented on in the press. "Forgotten" really does not describe this state of affairs. Nor is it quite accurate to place the turn of the Blake tide at 1863, as Professor Bentley does in a paragraph introductory to this chapter. From the late 'forties through the early 'sixties there was a definite increase in interest in Blake, which was marked by (among numerous other indices) the acquisition of many of his works by the British Museum. The immediate burst of attention to Blake supposedly aroused from nil by Gilchrist in fact occurred in an atmosphere in which Blake was somewhat known. Of course, it is proper to emphasize the huge limitations of the mid-Victorians' knowledge of Blake, with regard both to the number of works available and the number of persons familiar with them, but that should not entitle us to write off as inconsequential the knowledge that did exist. I am conscious of the fineness of this point, and yet, if there is a purpose in retrieving and citing the small documents along with the large, it can only be to refine our picture of the way things actually happened.

There is a small misunderstanding in the final section that I am happily able to set right. On page 263 Professor Bentley notes that he has been unable to find "Palgrave's Official Catalogue" of the 1862 Exhibition, which he states was cited by me in my essay on Blake's reputation in the *Festschrift* for Sir Geoffrey Keynes.² The form of my citation makes it clear that I was referring to an article by Palgrave which constitutes a part of the one and only *Official Catalogue*: it is a three-page essay introducing the watercolor listings entitled, "The British School of Water Colour Painting." What is remarkable about this short piece by Palgrave is that nearly one page of it is taken up with a comparison of Stothard and Blake. Along with other notices of the Exhibition Blakes it was described in detail and quoted from in my earlier essay, "Pictures at the Exhibitions."³

With the *Blake Bibliography* (produced jointly with Martin K. Nurmi) in 1964, *Blake Records* in 1969, the present book on the critical heritage, and the forthcoming revised bibliography to be entitled *Blake Books*, Professor Bentley has made a most solid and impressive contribution to our knowledge of Blake's fortunes during his life and after. When distant, these separate books appear as One Book; and even if we look more closely, we may note a certain amount of overlapping, or duplication. Roughly three-quarters of the materials of *William Blake: The Critical Heritage* have already been published by Bentley in *Blake Records*; in addition, three-fifths of the Introduction to the present volume are, in its author's words, "largely adapted from the essay on 'Blake's Reputation and Interpreters' in *Blake Books* (forthcoming)"; and finally, all--or almost all--of the items in the present book will be cited in *Blake Books*. To be sure, each of these source books is different and has its own special purpose, that of the volume in hand being to provide an overview for the general student, of early reactions to Blake. But in the light of the considerable duplications mentioned above, one wonders whether this interesting volume on the critical heritage might not have been more indispensable, and at the same time more broadly and accurately reflective of its subject, had its final section on the years 1831-63 been followed by selections from the post-Gilchrist criticism, taking us, perhaps, to the end of the century? It is rather too bad that a book of Blake criticism should end just when things are about to get really lively: it was, after all, in response to the critical challenge posed by Gilchrist's *Life* that informed public discussion of Blake's thought and work suddenly picked up speed and took off.

¹ G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

² "William Blake in the Wilderness: A Closer Look at his Reputation, 1827-63," in Morton D. Paley and Michael Phillips, eds., *William Blake: Essays in Honour of Sir Geoffrey Keynes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), pp. 310-49.

³ "Pictures at the Exhibitions," *Blake Newsletter* 21, 1973, pp. 6-12.

Carolyn Keay. **William Blake Selected Engravings.** London: Academy Editions. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975. 84 pp., 4 colorplates. \$16.95 hardbound, \$9.95 paper.

Reviewed by Gerda Norvig and Myra Glazer Schotz

The blurb on the back cover of *William Blake Selected Engravings* suggests we are in for a treat. In addition to a sampling "from almost all the artist's major projects"--from most of the poems and prophecies and from the illustrations for Stedman, Hayley, Blair, Thornton's Virgil and the Book of Job--this volume, we are told, contains "a small number of engravings by contemporary craftsmen after original designs by Blake."

What a letdown when you open the book! Practically every selection from the illuminated canon has been retouched, redrawn, or re-engraved in so crude and careless a manner one needn't wonder at the anonymity of the "craftsmen." Furthermore, the renderings, as it turns out, are contemporary neither to Blake nor to us, for the bulk of them to have been photographed from a stash of awkward, nineteenth-century facsimiles now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Robert Essick, our informant on sources, claims the most shockingly altered designs are from an 1876 lithographic adaptation, the authorship of which has never been acknowledged or determined. Occasionally a composition from that collection is a successful cartoon in its own right, as is the case with some of the radical simplifications of plates from *Urizen*. But to omit proper identification of both the medium and the source, which is Keay's wont, and to pass such work off as Blake's, is at best a gross disservice to the newcomer seeking acquaintance with Blake's authentic vision. Only Schiavonetti's 1808 engravings for *The Grave* are duly captioned as "after original designs by Blake"--an admission which might well have the adverse effect of convincing a beginner everything else is unadulterated.

Unconscionable editorial flaws of this kind are matched by others of a technical and scholarly nature. An abridged group of the Job engravings, haphazardly arranged, appear in murky reproductions that convey little of the special characteristics of line for which they are justly famous. And why, in a book called "Selected Engravings," do renditions of watercolor drawings so frequently show up? Blake's Gray is here, along with a color illustration--not an engraving--for Young's *Night Thoughts*. More puzzling still is the substitution of watercolor studies for three of Blake's finest engravings in the closing section of the book where a run of Dante drawings is featured. This total neglect of Blake's last and possibly greatest achievement in the very medium with which Keay is supposedly concerned, epitomizes the problems of the entire collection.

Even with four color plates, the book is outrageously priced at \$16.95 in hardcover, \$9.95 paper.