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R E V I E W

Victor N. Paananen, William Blake

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**Victor N. Paananen. William Blake.**  
**Boston: Twayne Publishers/G. K. Hall &**  
**Co., 1977. Pp. 171. \$7.95.**  
**Reviewed by Edward J. Rose**

A reviewer must pity the author of a Twayne volume--the restrictions of which apparently make the writing of an intelligent and meaningful book on Blake difficult. I must assume that Victor Paananen has done his best, having accepted willingly the limitations of the Twayne format. Unfortunately, however, the final result is a near disaster that is redeemed from absolute failure only by Paananen's understanding that he is not writing about a mythological poet but a prophet who tried to dramatize mental strife and not to create another rattletrap pantheon of bloated gods and goddesses. The Twayne *Blake*, however, cannot be taken seriously as a contribution to the study of Blake. It is, in fact, not even a good introduction and fares poorly when compared to Max Plowman's fifty-year old critique, which, by the way, is not listed in the selected bibliography; nor are Swinburne, Yeats, Symons, Wicksteed, or Percival. The usual Twayne restriction on the number of entries in selected bibliographies will not explain Paananen's astounding omissions, especially considering some of the items included. But "we" (Paananen's favorite personal pronoun, which makes him sound repeatedly like Charles Lindbergh in Paris), does not compliment the dead, since, "we" may suppose, they have no influence on the careers of the living.

While it is probable that art historians and literary scholars will never view Blake's dual creative processes in exactly the same way, it seems logical that such studies as Lister's *Infernal Methods* should be read as the first step in understanding Blake's visual imagery. It is, as I mentioned before, especially useful because it does not try to be interpretive in a literary or philosophical way. As literary scholars such as Robert Essick and others have already realized, iconography, which is just as dense and impenetrable in its way as textual analysis, may not be as useful as an initial response to Blake's imagery as the study of technique and its relationship to form. To understand the medium, its norms and the experiments that Blake made with these norms might enable us to take the first step toward the ". . . more than meets the eye." It might even be the essential bridge between the two areas of Blake scholarship.

<sup>1</sup> Robert Essick "Blake and the Traditions of Reproductive Engraving" in *The Visionary Hand: Essays for the Study of William Blake's Art and Aesthetics*, edited by Robert Essick (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, 1973); John Wright, "Blake's Relief Etching Method, *Blake Newsletter* 36 (Spring 1976), pp. 94-115.

<sup>2</sup> It is a curious fact but literary scholars appear to find iconography more attractive than the study of technique. One wonders why this is so. It may be that it generally resembles literary history. Unfortunately art historical methodology is as various as literary criticism, and while a literary scholar would never use structuralist and Marxist methodology in the same work, he often does not see that the same differences operate in art history. In other words, until now, no one has as yet mastered both disciplines well enough to use them both with ease.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Essick's article was first published in *Blake Studies*,

5 (Fall 1972), 59-103, and Lister does list it in his bibliography. He does not, however, deal with its point of view.

<sup>4</sup> Reproduced in *The Visionary Hand*, p. 512, Plate 161 (*Europe* plate 12 detail of lower right corner, copy L, Huntington Library). It depicts a figure caught in a net.

<sup>5</sup> Duncan MacMillan in his review of David Erdman's *The Illuminated Blake* and Raymond Lister's *Infernal Methods* in the *Apollo*, August, 1976, points out that there was another engraver, Joseph Strutt, who was interested in illuminated manuscripts and "Gothic" effects at the same period that Blake was also interested in these things. He states:

The world of the London engraver was small, but even if no direct link can be established between Strutt and Blake, his example is important. By showing that Blake was not isolated in his enthusiasm for illuminated manuscripts does not make his use of them any less original but by making it seem less unprecedented it makes the logic of his choice of art forms apparent.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Hess, "English Artists, Warts and Halos," *New York Magazine*, 29 Aug. 1977, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Hardie in his *Water-colour Painting in Britain*, Vol. I., p. 15, notes that "Samuel Palmer in his last period underpainted with solid white producing great brilliance by the use of transparent water-colours over this white surface when quite dry." Linda Nochlin in *Realism and Tradition in Art 1848-1900* p. 106, excerpts a passage from William Holman Hunt where he describes this process:

. . . Select a prepared ground originally for its brightness and renovate it, if necessary, with fresh white when first it comes into the studio, white to be mixed with a very little amber or copal varnish. Let this last coat become of a thoroughly stone-like hardness. Upon this surface, complete with exactness the outline of the part in hand. On the morning for the painting, with fresh white (from which all superfluous oil has been extracted by means of absorbent paper and to which again a small drop of varnish has been added) spread a further coat very evenly with a palette knife over the part for the day's work. . . ."

In both cases the artists are using techniques usually associated with one medium in another--Palmer tempera techniques with water color, Hunt fresco procedure with oil paint.

It would be possible to list at random fifty articles of more worth than the Twayne *Blake*, half of which might well have been included either in the bibliography or in the notes. But with Yeats, Wicksteed, and Percival missing (from the notes, too), what else can be said.

In his preface Paananen suggests that serious Blake scholarship makes it possible for "a book like this one [to be] written with fewer trepidations." Fewer trepidations than what? (Aside from regretting the incomplete comparison, I still wonder why. I should imagine it would be the other way around, that is, since it was decided to publish the book at all.) He assures the reader that "Specialized work can now be carried forward confidently" because of that serious scholarship about which he speaks. Very nice, very nice, but Twayne and Paananen should have helped. Needless to say, they did not. The reader is also informed that "Because of Blake's reputation for obscurity," Paananen will make "extensive use of quotation [he overdoes it] both to explicate the lines [there is very little true explication] and to demonstrate that Blake can speak very well for himself." Believe it or not, Paananen actually does write that "Blake can speak very well for himself." Aside from the silliness of such a remark, which even a Twayne book ought to avoid, Paananen calls attention to one of the book's greatest weaknesses. Not serious scholarship itself, the Twayne *Blake* does a poor job of introducing Blake, especially to the neophyte reader, the only kind of reader for whom a Twayne book has any value. The author must explain and illuminate, not just quote. His description of Blake's method of illuminated printing, for example, is incomplete, incorrect, and unclear. It is certainly of no use to anyone as an explanation. The reader gets the impression that Blake and Blake's ideas have literally sprung from nowhere. He is given some names, but no relations are established. The discussion of "outline" is a case in point. There is no mention of Michelangelo or Raphael. In fact, they are nowhere mentioned in the book. Neither are a host of others who contributed to Blake's intellectual milieu.

The Twayne *Blake* begins with a skimpy and wholly inadequate biographical survey. This is followed by a chapter on *There is No Natural Religion, All Religions are One*, and *The Book of Urizen*. The discussion of the three *Religion* plates could easily have been omitted, since Paananen does not really explain them. The rest of the chapter is pedestrian at best and fundamentally out of place. The third chapter on the *Poetical Sketches* is a shallow pastiche of quotations and superficial comments, but chapters four and five on *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *The French Revolution*, and *America* are even worse. *Europe* is ignored as are Blake's illustrations for his own work as well as that of others.

Paananen's commentary interlaced by inexcusable

gobs of quotation is distantly descriptive at best. The reader gets little or no insight into Blake's work or how his mind works. The book's four pages (a chapter!) on the *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* are superficial and chapter seven on *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience, Thel* and *Tiriel* fails in every respect to illuminate these poems. In trying unsuccessfully to cover as much as he can, Paananen covers little. The book is poorly organized and disjointed. The reader is never permitted to get hold of anything on which to build even the foundations of an understanding of what Blake is about. The piecemeal chronology, which Paananen violates at just those times when he should not, is carried over to the chapter on *The Four Zoas*. Instead of giving his reader a coherent introduction to *The Four Zoas* as a whole, he resorts to snippets (most of his chapters are snippets) on each of the nine nights. Like the following chapter on the "Manuscript Poems" (another pastiche of quotation), the chapter on *The Four Zoas* is a superficial narrative concerned in turn with Blake's narrative, which Paananen tells us rightly and early in the book is not the fundamental structure of a Blake "epic." Would to God he had organized his book with this understanding in the forefront of his mind. The chapters on *Milton* and *Jerusalem* are not worthy of serious discussion, and the "Conclusion" might have served as the beginning of a truly well oriented introductory chapter, which the book sorely needs.

In his preface, Paananen somewhat pompously suggests that "Blake scholars will no doubt dispute many of my [sic] readings of individual poems and passages--many of the readings are indeed new--but they will recognize that I am writing about the same William Blake that the scholarship of the last fifty years has identified for us." Not only is there nothing new to dispute (absolutely nothing), "we" wonder why *only* fifty years and where is the evidence that even that has been adequately researched by the author. The absurdity of Paananen's opinion of his book is underscored by the book itself. The errors in interpretation and over-simplifications that abound in it do not require a scholar's refutation.

Paananen's heart is, I suppose, in the right place. He likes Blake and he appreciates the integrity of Blake's work as a whole. Furthermore, he says he understands that both the individual poem and the individual plate each have an independent as well as an interdependent being, although he seems not to have organized his material with this idea in mind. Also, he stresses rightly Blake's radical politics and biblical evangelicalism, at least in general. But the book does not particularize. It does not go deep. It is not well-written, well-organized, or truly helpful as an introduction to Blake. And, finally, it is certainly not a contribution to Blake studies. It will, I believe, serve no purpose at all.