

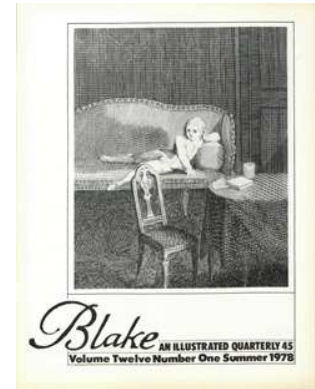
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M I N U T E
P A R T I C U L A R

The Selling of Blake's Night Thoughts Designs in
the 1870s

G. E. Bentley, Jr.

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author of the only contemporary printed reference to the publication of Blake's *Job*.

¹ The three *Job* plates referred to are presumably pl. 6, "And smote Job with sore boils"; pl. 11, "With Dreams upon my bed thou scarest me"; and pl. 15, "Behold now Behemoth which I made with thee."

² *The Star Chamber*, No. 4 (3 May 1826), 73.

³ William Flavelle Monypenny, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli Earl of Beaconsfield*, I (1910), 84n. Robert Blake, *Disraeli* (1966), p. 44, finds it "difficult to avoid the conclusion that Disraeli was the moving spirit."

⁴ James S. Bain, *A Bookseller Looks Back* (1940), p. 75.

THE SELLING OF BLAKE'S NIGHT THOUGHTS DESIGNS IN THE 1870s

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The most extensive series of illustrations Blake is known to have made was for Young's *Night Thoughts*--537 large water colors preparatory for the Richard Edwards edition of 1797. When that publication proved to be an incubator baby, requiring peace and seclusion from the world for over a century before reaching full growth in public esteem and commercial price, the drawings too were largely forgotten. They passed from Richard Edwards to his brother Thomas, who offered them at £52.10.0 in 1826 and 1828,¹ but even praise comparing them favorably with the work of Michael Angelo could not lure a collector to venture so large a sum.¹ They therefore retreated into the bosom of the Edwards family, and their whereabouts was almost completely unknown for some fifty years. In his *Life of William Blake, "Pictor Ignotus"* (1863) which revived Blake's flickering fame, Alexander Gilchrist supposed erroneously that the *Night Thoughts* drawings had gone to "one of the royal collections" (Vol. I, p. 140). A few new facts have recently turned up which throw light on the history of the drawings in the 1870s.

About a decade later, the interest in Blake which Gilchrist's book had aroused fostered the emergence of the *Night Thoughts* drawings again, and by the above passage in Gilchrist one reader wrote:

No, I saw these drawings, over 500 in number, at [*the bookdealer*] Rimell's in Oxford Street, in May 1874. They were then the property of the Edwards family, and for sale.²

Something of the background of the re-emergence of the *Night Thoughts* drawings is given in the diary of Louisa Bain, whose uncle James was one of the chief antiquarian booksellers of the time. On 18 June 1874 she wrote that she went

To the Haymarket [*where the Bain shop was located*] and looked at the two volumes of Young's *Night Thoughts* with original illustrations by William Blake, which James has lately met with [*at Rimell's*], and thinks himself extremely fortunate to have secured at the price of £425. He considers it a perfect treasure, and people who are considered judges flock to

see it, and speak highly of it. I do not like it, but then I am no judge of its merits.³

A year later, on 13 June 1875, she wrote again:

James has spoke of his *Blake* to Mr. Disraeli who advises his writing to the British Museum authorities, and allows him to use his name, which we hope will have great weight, both as Prime Minister and also as a member of the British Museum Committee. James has written accordingly and they have sent for the book, which is there now to be inspected. [P. 75]

They had another reason to think that Disraeli's opinion might bear some weight, for he had inherited from his father one of the most notable early collections of Blake's books and therefore was in a good position to judge Blake's merits. However, what Disraeli did was fairly minimal. The bookseller wrote to the British Museum:

James Bain
1 Haymarket
London (SW)

7th June 1875

Sir

I am desired by Mr. Disraeli to bring under your notice some original drawings by William Blake now in my possession.

The designs illustrate Young's *Night Thoughts* and are drawn upon the enlarged margins of the original quarto text.

They form the most extensive series of designs done by this Artist and tho' unknown to his later biographers may be regarded as the 'great work' of his life. As such it seems desirable that they should find an appropriate place in the National Collections. My price is £2,000. (Two Thousand Pounds).

Your obedient servant
(signed) James Bain.⁴

The sponsorship of Disraeli was given through his Parliamentary Secretary as follows:

10 Downing Street
Whitehall

June 9 1875

Dear Sir,

Mr. Disraeli desires me to send you the enclosed letter left here today by Mr. Reid [*Keeper of the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum*], and to tell you that on being asked by Mr. Bain in what way he could bring the drawings referred to to the notice of the authorities of the British Museum Mr. Disraeli advised him that the best course would be to write to you on the subject and gave him authority to make use of his name in the matter.

Yours faithfully,
(signed) James F. Daly.

J. Winter Jones Esq.⁵

The discrepancy between James Bain's expectations and Disraeli's performance is striking, and one does not know whether to admire more the slipperiness of the politician or the discretion of the statesman, struggling to avoid appearing as both advocate and judge in the same cause.

On receipt of this letter, the Museum authorities sought the opinion of George William Reid, the Keeper of the Print Room (1866-83), and he replied on the same day:

Department of Prints and Drawings
June 9th. 1875

Mr. Reid has the honour to report to the Trustees he has carefully examined the 2 volumes of Blake's designs offered to the Trustees for the sum of £2,000 [or about £3.15.0 each], and finds the series very interesting but somewhat dear.

The 2 volumes offered by Mr. Bain, if the purchase were entertained, could only be acquired by the aid of a special grant, which Mr. Reid has ascertained by Mr. Montagu Corry [a treasury official] to be quite out of the question at the present moment.

G. W. Reid⁶

This reply was of course decisive, and the Minutes of the British Museum Standing Committee for 12 June 1875 (pp. 13292-93) record:

Read a letter from Mr. James Bain, dated the 7th of June, offering, for £2,000, William Blake's original drawings, in two volumes, in illustration of Young's *Night Thoughts*; also a letter from one of the Secretaries of the First Lord of the Treasury, and a report from Mr. Reid, both dated the 9th of June.

Resolved, that Mr. Bain's offer be declined.

The conclusion was forwarded to James Bain, whose niece wrote in her *Journal* for 17 June: "The British Museum declines to take the *Blake*; I am so sorry" (p. 75).

Scholars of Blake and lovers of art had cause to be sorry too, for the drawings remained in private hands for another fifty years. In the Bain family, "the book was looked upon as a white elephant for twenty years or more" until it was sold for £1,500 to Marsden J. Parry (p. 187), from whom it passed to W. A. White a few years later, and the first partial publication and exhibition of the drawings were in 1927. Somewhat ironically, they returned to The British Museum Print Room by the munificent gift of W. A. White's daughter Frances White Emerson in 1929. Had they entered The British Museum Print Room in 1875, they might not still be largely unreproduced⁷ and little known.

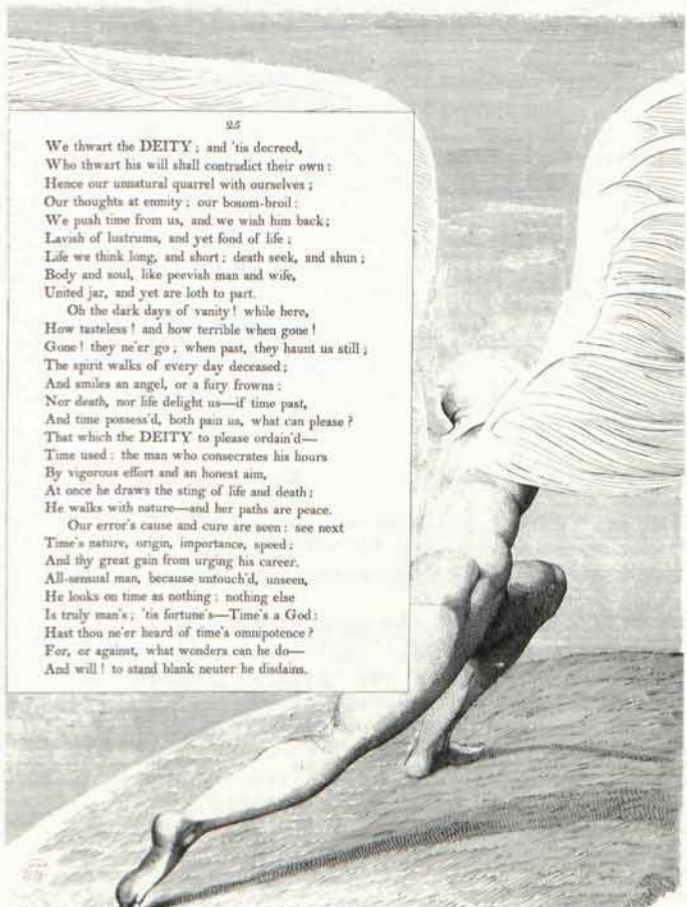
³ James S. Bain, *A Bookseller Looks Back: The Story of the Bains* (London: Macmillan, 1940), pp. 72-73.

⁴ Quoted from the British Museum Print Room's "Original Letters and Papers," June 1875, Reg. no. 2720.

⁵ *Ibid.* Reg. no. 2821, quoted by courtesy of H. M. Stationary Office.

⁶ Quoted from "Original Letters and Papers," June 1875, Reg. no. 2822. The grant would presumably have come, at least indirectly, from the First Lord of the Treasury.

⁷ The Clarendon Press is apparently about to publish a black-and-white set of reproductions of the whole, with extensive commentaries by Michael Tolley, John E. Grant, Edward J. Rose, and D. V. Erdman.



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We thwart the DEITY; and 'tis decreed,
Who thwart his will shall contradict their own:
Hence our unnatural quarrel with ourselves;
Our thoughts at enmity; our bosom-broil:
We push time from us, and we wish him back:
Lavish of lustrums, and yet fond of life;
Life we think long, and short; death seek, and shun;
Body and soul, like peevish man and wife,
United jar, and yet are loth to part.

Oh the dark days of vanity! while here,
How tasteless! and how terrible when gone!
Gone! they ne'er go; when past, they haunt us still;
The spirit walks of every day deceased;
And smiles an angel, or a fury frowns:
Nor death, nor life delight us—if time past,
And time possess'd, both pain us, what can please?
That which the DEITY to please ordain'd—
Time used: the man who consecrates his hours
By vigorous effort and an honest aim,
At once he draws the sting of life and death;
He walks with nature—and her paths are peace.

Our error's cause and cure are seen: see next
Time's nature, origin, importance, speed:
And thy great gain from urging his career.
All-sensual man, because unfouch'd, unseen,
He looks on time as nothing: nothing else
Is truly man's: 'tis fortune's—Time's a God:
Hast thou ne'er heard of time's omnipotence?
For, or against, what wonders can he do—
And will! to stand blank neuter he disdains.

¹ *Blake Records* (1969), 330-31, 368.

² Quoted from the extra-illustrated copy of Gilchrist recently acquired (1976) by the McGill University Library. The annotator may have been the Laurence Aurrin (?) whose bookplate is in the volumes.