

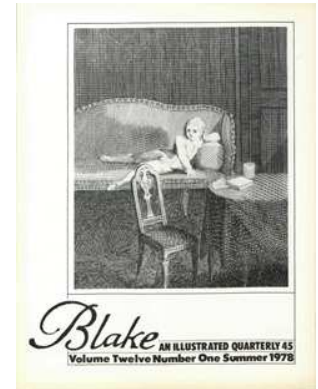
# AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

David Bindman, *Blake as an Artist*

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Wollstonecraft was thirty-eight when she died. Tomalin makes us feel the loss of this woman who was important not simply as the mother of feminism or of Mary Shelley but also as a writer, thinker, and observer. She was, after all, the friend as well as the wife of William Godwin; she had been encouraged and helped by Dr. Richard Price, the Dissenting minister whose sermon on the French Revolution provoked Burke to begin his *Reflections*; she was the protégée of Joseph Johnson, the Radical publisher, who got Blake to illustrate two of her works; she was read by Blake and Southey, and her conversation impressed Coleridge and Lamb. She achieved a great deal in a working life that was shortened at one end by poverty and lack of education as well as at the

other by early death. She was prevented from achieving more by her sex, which limited her activity to writing although her real talents were probably for some other field--politics, education, medicine--then closed to her. Yet she managed to write a book that was nearly two hundred years ahead of its time; not many men or women without her weaknesses or disadvantages have done that much.

<sup>1</sup> Hare presented his case at length in "The Base Indian: A Vindication of the Rights of Mary Wollstonecraft" (M.A. theses Univ. of Delaware 1957), and later summarized his arguments in the introduction to his facsimile edition of the novel, *The Emigrants*, which he published with both Wollstonecraft's and Imlay's names on the title page (Gainesville, Fla.: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1964).

David Bindman. *Blake as an Artist*. Oxford: Phaidon. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977.

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**Reviewed by Jean H. Hagstrum**



DAVID BINDMAN

**T**his book grew out of David Bindman's 1971 doctoral dissertation at the Courtauld Institute. Its aim is to take "an analytical view of Blake's art with particular emphasis upon its relationship to English art of his own time" (p. 9). Blake's achievement is broadly enough conceived to include all the illuminated books as well as Blake's paintings and engravings in all media, including the illustrations of the Bible, Milton, Bunyon, Gray, Young, and others. The "seemingly more conventional designs" (p. 9)--that is, those that do not accompany

Blake's own words--Bindman properly sees as an end in themselves to which the decorated poetry contributes meanings and motifs. Most literary scholars have it the other way round, making what Frye once called the canonical works the center of their attention; but Bindman does not see these as "self-contained" (p. 9). Following in the footsteps of his teachers, Blunt and Butlin, he uses, for the most part, the methods of an art historian, analyzing the visual elements of Blake's *oeuvre* and their relation to contemporary and antecedent art. He defines his



task in such a way as to require more attention to Blake's artistic friends and contemporaries than to the grand examples of Dürer, Raphael, Michelangelo, and the Mannerists. Even so, Bindman does not give a sufficiently detailed account of Blake's relations to Fuseli, Flaxman, Banks, Romney, West, Barry, Mortimer, all of whom are mentioned and some of whom are discussed with penetration. One would have to say that the iconographical and stylistic relations of Blake to English art need still to be studied, since Bindman subordinates this important scholarly task to his chronological plan of analyzing each important work of Blake as it appeared, concentrating on its meaning and value. The author has thus given us not so much a new work of intellectual synthesis or of scholarship as another introduction to Blake's chief works with incidental comments on their personal and traditional contexts.

What point of view about Blake's ultimate place in art history prevails? Boldly but disarmingly, Bindman derives his perspective from none other than Reynolds, whose characterization of the "original or characteristic style" he applies to Blake (pp. 9-10). That style the president of the Royal Academy had regarded as inferior to the grand style though it was produced by men "of lively and vigorous imagination," but he found it valuable because it reveals internal coherence and harmony even when irregular, wild, and incorrect. It can be admired as the faithful picture of a mind, and it commands attention for its consistency even though it does not rise to elevation. This use of Reynolds at the very beginning of the book is, in its way, refreshing; it seems to give Bindman his perspective, leading him into commentary that is central and commonsensical. He honors his subject and is capable of enthusiastic appreciation, but one never has the feeling that Bindman confuses Blake with Michelangelo or Rembrandt.

Since this book confronts all of Blake's visual and visual-verbal works, the literary scholar will be curious to know how well the "readings" come off. Very well indeed, in my view. The mastery of modern scholarship is impressive, the knowledge of Blake's visual and literary contexts exemplary. The criticism of particular works is the more effective for being organized and for being related to developing topics that run all through the study. Sometimes, to be sure, Bindman, like so many of us, runs to mere description; but it is gratifying to notice that more often than not the elements treated are properly subordinated in an analysis and that a real effort has been made to arrive at interpretation. The readings are "prophetic"--that is, Bindman knows and uses Blake's myth and is therefore not content with surface meanings or traditional iconographic interpretation. In discussing, for example, the colorprint of 1795 entitled *Pity*, Bindman sees it, along with its companion *Hecate*, as an expression of the Female Will. The child is Orc, the son of Enitharmon, who lies prone on the ground. In the same series, the *Good and Evil Angels* is seen as a continuation of the story of Orc in which a jealous Los (and here there is a recollection of his role in *The Book of Urizen*) reaches out to restrain the revolutionary boy (p. 99).

Most "readings" are similarly "prophetic," and Bindman is a good guide to the essential meanings of both word and figure. But one does have reservations, and some of these are important enough to divulge. Although the description of the Vales of Har in *Tiriel* (pp. 44-46)--and that particular spot of Blakean spiritual geography I myself find to be of the highest importance--is very good, one is tempted to ask, Where is the horror? The horror, that is, of a mature woman and a white-bearded man sleeping together like infants and, awake, panting out puerilities. Bindman's description of these Vales as being "lyrical" or as being a prefiguration of Beulah obscures their qualities of regression and arrested development. Other commentary reveals the same critical fault: it is sound and central but not sufficiently emphatic and so, through excessive caution, dissipates some of Blake's power of expression and blunts his often disarming originality. The analysis of *The Book of Thel* contains one serious confusion. Can Thel be said to confront Experience when she encounters the Lily, the Cloud, the Worm, and the Clod of Clay, all of whom are surely denizens of Blake's Innocence, enjoying its uninhibited freedom and displaying its love and charity with unselfconscious ease? The world of Experience seems to me to be confined to the last plate; it is from that vision of social and psychological perversion which Thel flees at the end, not from the joyous portrayal of natural life.

Rather than pausing to note such qualifications as these all the way through the book, perhaps it would be wise to concentrate on the interpretation of one important illuminated work. In commenting on *Europe* (pp. 79 ff), that beautiful, resonant, and complex Lambeth prophecy, Bindman perceives why the incarnation of Christ is so important at this historical moment, why Urizen appears on the frontispiece, why the title-page serpent is so energetic (though something should have been said on how it is related to the similar serpent on plate 10 and to the whole matter of revolutionary versus counter-revolutionary serpents), why the inquiring man is Blake's Mental Traveller, why Enitharmon holds the veil over the sleeping youth (she is covering and not unveiling him), and why the spiderweb is the net of religion (is it not, however, woven primarily by Urizen and not by Albion's Angels?). And yet, good though it is, the commentary does not confront the truly difficult cruxes. What is the meaning of the nameless shadowy female, who brandishes her snaky hair? Why does Newton blow the trumpet? Blake evidently perceived that when revolutionary forces are unleashed a fecund nature will utter uninhibited and chaotic cries against all order, even the artistic. He also saw that the possessor of a great genius that had been perverted to mischievous cultural and intellectual ends might well fill the cup of iniquity to overflowing and so precipitate both revolution and counter-revolution.

The analyses of the purely visual works are usually excellent. Bindman sees the prophetic potential in Blake's early "neo-classical" works (observe his perceptive comment on the significance of Joseph in Egypt, pp. 34-35). Very often he adduces original materials which help interpret the works in question; and he alerts us to what is



often neglected or may surprise us, Blake's admiration of Claude (p. 203) or a possible recollection of Rembrandt (p. 126). But even in the area of the purely visual, where Bindman is more thoroughly trained than most Blake commentators, we find that his plan of covering everything forces him to be excessively brief and general at crucial moments. For example, although he is fully aware of the superiority of the Boston *Paradise Lost* illustrations to those in the Huntington, he misses an opportunity to show in precise detail the superiority of one version of Adam, Eve, and Raphael over the other (pp. 190-191 and plates 152, 153). In the Huntington version the profiles of Adam and Eve are simply drawn and as expressions are undifferentiated. In the Boston version the facial lineaments of our first parents are subtly drawn and express profound meaning: Adam seems to be confused and disturbed by what he hears and Eve responds delicately, wonderingly and submissively to his confusion. The bodies of the first pair are also more powerfully modeled, and the angel looks less like a worried human being and more like a royal, though slightly surprised, heavenly monitor. The centrality of Eve's standing position in a later version not only provides the beautiful female form at the focus of our attention, not only shows her separated from Adam, but may also point to her central role in the Fall and perhaps even ultimately in the redemption of man. Blake was certainly not the master of facial expression that the very greatest portrait artists were; but faces and particularly eyes are extremely important, as the superiority of the Boston version of *Comus* over the Huntington also expresses. Bindman is extremely good in showing the *formal* superiority of the later version of *Comus and his Revellers*, for example (p. 186 and plates 146, 147), but he says nothing of the greater richness and humanity of the Boston lady over the rather flat, simple, one-dimensional San Marino virgin. Similarly, on page 115, in an otherwise excellent analysis of a watercolor entitled *Malevolence*, Bindman seems to miss the importance of the youthful father's gaze, which is directed at *Malevolence* (plate 96), showing that the hideous psychological states portrayed can be seen as being *caused* by merit ("He hath a daily beauty in his life that makes mine ugly"). In the same painting the father's calm gaze is returned by the two fiends, each staring back in his own malign way while the wife and child fix their gazes upon the father. In fact, one of the most striking features of this powerful work are the lines of force and meaning that are generated by the eye-contacts of five people. Surprisingly, such matters are usually met with silence by Bindman, who apparently is not often impressed with the importance in Blake of eyes and glances.

To turn to an important matter involving Blake's artistic background, one wishes that Bindman had been a little bit fuller on the influence of Raphael. It is not that he neglects the prince of painters or that he would not acknowledge that Raphael is one of Blake's culture heroes. It is rather that his several references are not pulled together into a coherent whole, and we are therefore not allowed to see what is one of the most powerful, consistent, and uninterrupted influences

upon Blake by any antecedent painter. I shall not repeat the case I made for Raphael's influence in *William Blake Poet and Painter* (pp. 41-43 and plates XIXA, XIXB, XX, XXI). Here I would only like to disagree with Bindman's finding that in *The Book of Urizen* it is Michelangelo's God the Father in the Sistine Chapel who chiefly presides over Blake's imagination (pp. 89-95). I find, instead, that it is the God of Raphael's Bible, as engraved by some of his followers, whose body, hand-positions, and activities are precise anticipations of Blake's creator-god. I do not wish to deny that Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel may indeed be present in Blake's imagination (they almost always are), but I wish to suggest that, in terms of context, the Genesis of Blake's Bible of Hell is a direct and forceful inversion of Raphael.

I have praised the centrality and soundness of Bindman's commentary. That praise is meant to embrace his perception of what is revolutionary and revisionist in Blake's religion. More than once Bindman reveals that he is aware that his subject possessed a radical, inquiring, restless mind, not content to dwell comfortably in the house of conventional platitude, however beautiful. Nevertheless, all the way through the book the author displays a tendency to use Christian and Neoplatonic truisms to describe Blake's essential vision, often omitting the specific details, the alterations of convention, even the subversions of meaning that give it originality, force, and revolutionary energy. A few examples will show the "piety" that tends to prevail and that appears in language which is too close to Blake's own phrasing to be illuminating and which can obscure Blake's radical originality. Thus the designs and texts of *The Songs of Innocence* are said to pertain primarily to the idea of man's salvation (p. 62). The caves that entrap Oothoon are "materialistic" (p. 74). The cage that imprisons the soul is the body in the lovely early poem, "How Sweet I Roam'd" (p. 86). Albion's dance is a paradigm of "regeneration," which is here called "the true religious ecstasy" (p. 97). A lonely woman in the moonlight of one of the Young illustrations (p. 112) is "the soul seeking the aid of truth"--an "ineffable resonance" (p. 112). And Paul's posture in *St. Paul Preaching at Athens* suggests the "timeless operation of the spirit" (p. 138). But if we look more closely at these examples--and several others might have been chosen--we see that Bindman has caught Blake's meaning in a conventional net and that the complex, troubled emotion of the original has been rendered somewhat complacent by the commentary. The rigidity of Paul's form and position, the excessive symmetry of the composition, the expression on his face, and his relation to the light make the Apostle at best an ambiguous figure. One wonders if the young female asking the way of two nightwatchmen by moonlight may not be a young woman like Lyca of *Innocence and Experience*, encountering a young man and an old man in the deserts of sexuality, rather than the soul ineffably seeking the truth. Albion's dance, by Blake's own word, is the "dance of Eternal Death": can it therefore be called a "key image of Regeneration" (p. 97)? The cage is more often that of love and marriage in Blake than of the body, and the lovely words of "How Sweet I Roam'd" are more erotic than Neoplatonic. Oothoon's



cave is rather marital and sexual than materialistic. And Christ is present in *Innocence* more as a sanctioner of sexual joy and uninhibited play than of other-worldly salvation. Bindman may be a little too determined to see divine light in Blake, a light which he usually interprets as supernatural. But, as Blake said in concluding *The Auguries of Innocence*, God is light primarily to those who dwell in unvisionary night but displays a human form to those who live in realms of prophetic daylight.

It should perhaps be noted that something has rather frequently gone wrong with references to the

plates. I have noted the following mistakes: plate 39 on page 55, pl. 60 on p. 78, pl. 85 on p. 99, pl. 124 on p. 164, pl. 140 on p. 178, pl. 165 on p. 204, pl. 169 on p. 210. In each of these instances, the number refers to a work other than the one that appears on the designated plate. In some cases the proper work appears elsewhere in this volume, on another plate; occasionally it does not appear at all.

I do not wish to end negatively. Bindman's book is an example of good scholarship and trained, intelligent perceptions.

