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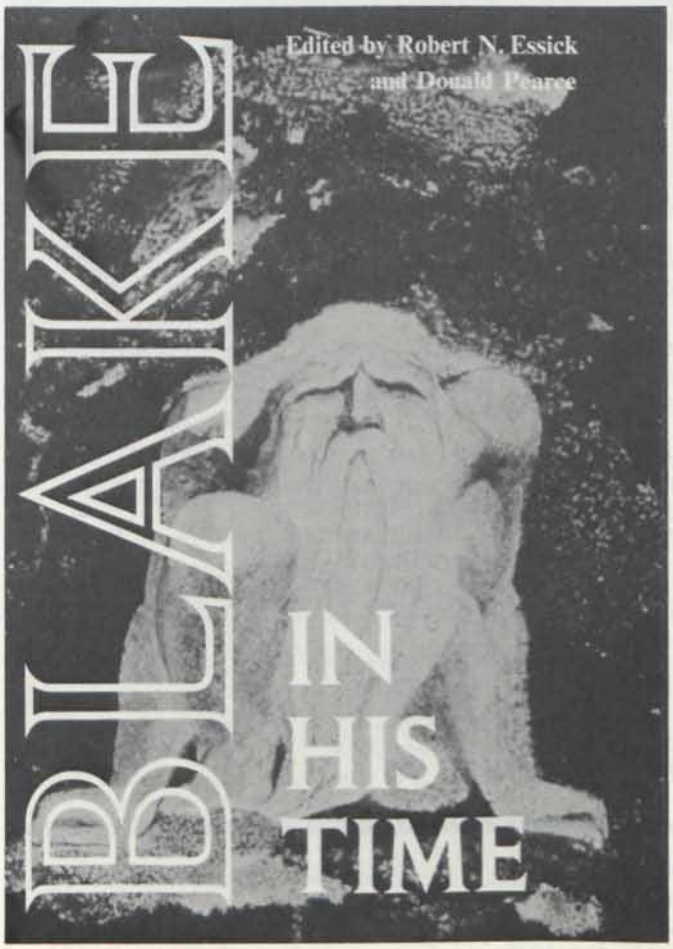
REVIEWS



HOW ORIGINAL WAS BLAKE?

Robert N. Essick and Donald Pearce, eds. **Blake in His Time.** Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978. xx + 253 pp., 144 illus.

Reviewed by W. J. T. Mitchell.

Blake has, on the whole, been well-served by scholarly anthologies. *Visionary Forms Dramatic* (ed. David Erdman and John Grant) showed us how to read his pictorial language in harness with his visionary poetry; *Blake's Sublime Allegory* (ed. Stuart Curran and Joseph Wittreich) taught us that his major prophecies have a formal and rhetorical integrity to match their intellectual brilliance. Now Donald Pearce and Robert Essick give us *Blake in His Time* to make clear what should have been obvious all along, that Blake's work did not spring from nothing, but emerged out of a deeply learned and thoughtful examination of his cultural milieu. In some ways this message does nothing to redeem Blake from his splendid isolation: seeing him in his own time does not necessarily make him more accessible to ours, and nothing will ever remedy the combination of bad luck, intransigence, and indifference which led to Blake's neglect by all but a handful of his contemporaries. But the other kind of isolation, the kind that T. S. Eliot referred to when he complained of Blake's "meanness of culture"--this misconception has been decisively eliminated. Most major artists encounter precisely the opposite sort of fortunes in cultural history. Criticism of them begins with the study of influences, and attempts to place them in a network of historical relationships. With Blake this sort of thing has come very late, having to wait, it seems, for the formation of a modern community of scholars and general readers, the fit audience that Blake so fervently desired.

To judge by this collection of essays the scholarly audience is very fit and in no danger of being few. Some of the essays manage that most difficult of balancing acts, reconstructing the historical context of a work of art while suggesting its renewed importance for our own time. Gerald Bentley's meticulous reconstruction of the artistic response to *The Book of Enoch* when it appeared in England in 1821 recovers a tiny but fascinating moment in cultural history (five major artists and poets illustrated or wrote about this apocryphal book when it appeared) at the same time that it makes visible the remarkable inventiveness of Blake's designs for *Enoch*. Where Flaxman had translated the Angels who couple with the daughters of men into his predictable classical warriors, and Westall made them winged shepherds in a sentimental pastoral, Blake siezed upon a passage much later in *The Book of Enoch* (message for illustrators: read the whole book) in which the fallen angels are seen in the shape of "great stars, whose parts of shame resembled those of horses." Blake, as Bentley shows, presents this image pictorially as a pair of Apollonian nudes with starry rays and giant phalluses emanating from their loins. This grotesquely

effective invention (which sounds a bit ridiculous, but is quite powerful in visual form) exemplifies Blake's rare gift as an illustrator, his ability to express something independent of, almost in spite of his text (in this case, an affirmation of the eroticism which is condemned by Enoch), and to do so not by violating the text, but by imitating some carefully selected particular image in a surprisingly literal way. Bentley's account of this invention highlights the central problem that unites the essays in this collection, the question of Blake's originality, uniqueness, and novelty; or, to put the matter in its more vexed form, the question of Blake as a copyist, imitator, and borrower--a parasite on the art of his precursors and contemporaries.

A practical and sensible way out of this dilemma is the formula enunciated by Morton Paley, who speaks for most of the other contributors on this issue:

> In discussing Blake's theory and practice in the light of traditions about ancient sculpture, we do not at all detract from his uniqueness as an artist; nor do we violate Blake's own view of art. "The difference between a bad Artist & a Good One," Blake wrote in his Annotations to Reynolds, "Is the Bad Artist Seems to Copy a Great Deal: The Good One Really does Copy a Great Deal" (E 634). Blake really did copy a great deal. The material he copies often originated in other works of art but was assimilated by his own mind and thoroughly recast, so that Blake could truly say, no matter how important or how numerous his "sources," that he copied Imagination. (193)

Paley's formula raises, of course, as many questions as it answers: What *is* the difference between "seeming" to copy, and "really" copying? What exactly is the "material" that is copied (motifs? style or technique? inventions and compositional arrangements of figures?)? What does "recasting" this material imply? Melting it down into a shapeless mass to be molded into Blake's own "new" forms? Or taking the old forms and casting the raw material of new circumstances, ideas, and meanings in those forms? What, finally, does it mean to "copy Imagination"? Paley's excellent essay on "Blake and Ancient Sculpture" does not answer these questions, but it provides the materials that might help us answer them, and his formula for reconciling Blake's tradition with his individual talent allows us to have our cake, eat it too, and get on with the practical work of interpreting Blake: Blake is an original copyist, an imaginative initator.

But other voices are not able to utter this paradox with the same sort of equanimity. David Bindman traces Blake's theory and practice of imitation to neoclassic traditions expressed by, among others, Blake's arch-foe, Joshua Reynolds, who claimed that "Invention, strictly speaking, is little more than a new combination of those images which have been previously gathered and deposited in the memory: mothing can come of nothing: he who has laid up no materials can produce no combinations" (quoted in Bindman, 93). But Bindman notes that "there are potential problems in such imitation" for an artist who has Blake's sort of ambivalence about tradition: "So long as Blake accepted the widespread eighteenth century assumption of the supremacy of Greek art--and there is every evidence that he did so in the 1790s--then Blake's practice of imitation did not present a dilemma . . . . But after 1800 or so he began to turn against 'the silly Greek & Latin slaves of the Sword' (E 94) and to regard Greek art and literature as Allegory rather than Inspiration; i.e., the product of Memory rather than Imagination" (95). This turnabout was not, however, accompanied by a straightforward repudiation of classical art or art theory. "Unable to relinquish his profound feelings for Greek art," Bindman argues, Blake devises from his "conflicting impulses . . . one of the more bizarre artistic theories in the history of art, in which all contradictions are reconciled and only historical probability is sacrificed" (96). This is, of course, the notorious idea that classical art is all derived from lost Hebrew prototypes, and is a weak (but the only available) imitation of the divinely inspired originals. Blake's theory thus frees him to vilify classical art while borrowing from it, to profess a Romantic theory of imagination and original inspiration while practicing the classical method of imitation and invention. Bindman's theory psychologizes Paley's paradox of the "original copyist," making it the irrational solution to an insoluble conflict, and historicizes it at the same time, presenting us with a classical Blake to 1800, and an apparently anti-classical Blake after 1800. The really fundamental Blake, however, remains for Bindman "eighteenth century in spirit . . . determined even to the end of his career by classical idealism" (98).

One could wish for a strong counter-statement to Bindman's neoclassical Blake from the spokesmen for the Gothic tradition in this volume. After all, one of the unmistakable "materials" of Blake's imitation is the illuminated manuscript, a form which presupposes a rather different sense of artistic imitation based in the roles of the scribe, grammarian, translator, and illustrator, and a different sense of the text (radically unlike that of print culture) as open to indefinite embellishment, correction, and imitative "improvement" (this attitude persists in England at least up until Dryden's "creative" translations of Chaucer). The words "imitation," "copy," and "invention," are not exhaustively defined by eighteenth-century neoclassicism with its Greco-Roman pantheon, its library of printed (and thus, in an important sense, closed) classical texts, and its empirical, associationist psychology of the creative process.

The essays on Blake's relation to Gothicism in this volume tend, however, to treat this influence in a rather generalized way. Roger Easson's essay on "Blake and the Gothic" consists mainly of pronouncements about "the Gothic reality" and "the Western view of the world." When Easson descends to particulars his comments often seem odd or unconvincing. "The decisive factor" in neoclassical art is proclaimed to be "verisimilitude" defined as representation of the "material world" (147; a cursory look at Reynolds' *Discourses* or at Bindman's

essay would correct this impression). We are told that, for Blake, "the fall always has to do with the act of drawing fine distinctions, differentiating between the Good and the Evil, between heavy and light, between strong and weak, between right and wrong" (152). Easson has here mixed a half-truth with a host of patent falsehoods. It is true that Blake criticizes the construction of abstract "Negations," particularly the reduction of existence to abstract categories of good and evil. But no one has ever been more insistent than Blake on the importance of "fine distinctions" and "minute discriminations" as an intellectual and artistic duty, and this includes the distinctions between right and wrong, honesty and dishonesty, knaves and fools. This sort of obfuscation is not surprising, however, in an essay which concludes by defining Blake's Gothic as "the spirit of vision that embraces mystery rather than allegory" (153), at one fell swoop identifying Blake with a phenomenon (mystery) that he consistently despised, and opposing him to a literary form which, with qualifications, he practiced throughout his career.

Edward J. Rose's essay, "The Gothicized Imagination of Michelangelo Blake," is considerably more substantial and reliable than Easson's, suggesting in its linkage of Michelangelo with the Gothic tradition one way of mediating the conflict between the neoclassic and Romantic versions of Blake, and pointing us toward an exemplary predecessor who was himself a genius at "imitating" the antique, but in a spirit rather unlike that of eighteenth-century neoclassicism. Yet Rose's essay leads to a conclusion which seems, curiously enough, to leave Blake not "in his time" but more isolated than ever: "Blake was not really committed to the direction of the art of the next hundred years any more than he was at peace with the art of the hundred years that preceded his time" (166).

The best theoretical account of Blake's struggle with the classical tradition comes in Hazard Adams' analysis of the annotations to Reynolds' *Discourses*. Adams shows, in the same spirit as Bindman, that there are many issues on which there is "really no contradiction" between Reynolds and Blake, "but Blake wants there to be one," partly because of Blake's resentment of Reynolds' status in the art world in contrast to his own neglect, partly because of Blake's fundamentally different understanding of the psychology and epistemology of art. Adams is strongest in showing why Blake attacks Reynolds' disparagement of "minute neatness" in imitation: "On the matter of this kind of deception [illusionistic verisimilitude] Blake must have been in agreement with Reynolds" (134), yet it is more important for Blake to defend "Minute Neatness of Execution" than to concur with Reynolds' attack on illusionsism, because Blake wants to insist on a concrete, particular, and individualized sense of the universal, as against Reynolds' "general form," an incoherent hybrid of Platonic and empirical psychology. On "the whole matter of copying and drawing from models," Adams notes that Blake "sometimes agrees and sometimes disagrees with Reynolds" (138). Blake agrees with Reynolds' idea that copying is an essential part of artistic apprenticeship, the way to learn the "language of art," but he takes issue with Reynolds' relegation of copying to a *merely* preparatory function; like "mechanical excellence" and "facility in composing" (which Reynolds also disparages), copying is for Blake the activity of the mature artist who "copies Imagination," and not a merely subordinate or preliminary function. That is why Blake can sound even more conservative and "classical" on the issue of copying than Reynolds, calling "Servile Copying . . . the Great Merit of Copying" (E 634): for Blake, ends and means, invention and execution, realization and conception are not, as they are for Reynolds, separable aspects of the creative act.

The essays in *Blake in His Time* that deal with his imitation of particular motifs or techniques of predecessors and contemporaries tend to rely upon the formula of imitative transformation or criticism without reflecting upon it, generally with useful results. Leslie Tannenbaum's "Blake and the Iconography of Cain" presents the most deeply developed critical argument in this group, showing how Blake's pictorial treatments of the Cain and Abel story criticize the sentimental and moralistic treatments that Blake could have known, and transform the story into a "sublime" confrontation with the nature of divine justice. The other essays on pictorial motifs are more in the line of preliminary efforts, mapping out areas for future research. Jenijoy La Belle's discussion of "Blake's Visions and Re-visions of Michelangelo" traces one route of Michelangelo's influence from the Sistine frescoes through the sixteenth-century engravings of Adam Ghisi, to the drawings which Blake made after these engravings when he was a student. La Belle's attempts to show significant "alterations in emphasis" between original and copy are hampered, however, by the lack of reproductions of many of the Ghisi engravings and Michelangelo originals. One wishes also that La Belle had been more persistent in raising the question of how much allusiveness to the original figure is operative in Blake's echoes of these motifs in later work: she seems content to generalize Michelangelo's figures into familiar *pathos formulae* (thus "Blake learned from the Manasses lunette how to show devitalized humanity," but is evidently unconcerned about who Manasses is). The only figure from Michelangelo that La Belle credits with "a pre-existing conceptual context" that Blake might have employed allusively is that of the Prophet Daniel. Her conclusion, that Blake "approached Michelangelo's art in much the same way" that he approached his own visions, "and that the usual distinction between copying another artist and envisioning one's own designs does not pertain" (22), seems exactly right, and an important contribution to the discussion of Blake's concepts of imitation and invention. But if it leads to an emptying out or generalizing of the "original" which is being copied then it is hard to see how the imitation can have much critical, transformative, or inventive content.

The other two essays which deal with "regions" of Blake's imitation are solid, reliable efforts. Kay Easson's discussion of "Blake and the Art of the Book" is a good introduction to Blake's use of and departures from traditional patterns in the layout of illustrated books. The most important departure

is, of course, the Blakean invention of relief printing, a technological "advance" which is employed, paradoxically, to "regress" to the integrated form of the illuminated manuscript, and to eliminate the division of labor and form (while employing the mechanical means) of the modern illustrated book. Easson is very good on the ways in which Blake imitates and parodies conventional features like tail-pieces, borders, frames, column pictures, marginal designs, frontispieces, and title-pages, but too often she is content merely to suggest that illustrative features have significance without going on to say what that significance is. Finally, Anne Mellor's account of "Physiognomy, Phrenology, and Blake's Visionary Heads" is a judicious and workmanlike effort, full of curious learning which (thank heavens!) is not taken too seriously, as it certainly was not by Blake.

One thing that must strike a reader of *Blake in His Time* is the relative scarcity of professional art historians among its contributors. It is one of the great misfortunes of Blake scholarship that he continues to be neglected by all but a few art historians, and his pictures thus have to be explained by moonlighting literary scholars. Aside from David Bindman, whose training in traditional art history partly accounts for his neoclassical version of Blake, the only certified art historian in this volume is Martin Butlin, who finds himself explaining to the Blakeans what would be perfectly obvious and trivial to an audience of art historians, the mysteries of "Cataloguing William Blake." Butlin's essay is a treasure trove of information in problems of dating, authenticity, and the nuances of "evidence of the eye," and should be studied attentively by any Blake scholar concerned with the historical context of Blake's pictorial art.

The other essays which focus on Blake's pictorial achievement are the work of literary critics who have been doing their homework in art history for so long they should have honorary degrees. Jean Hagstrum contributes a richly suggestive exploration of the possible influence of Romney's drawings on Blake's early work, and Robert Essick discusses the subject he probably understands better than any other scholar in the world, Blake's "iconography of techniques." Essick shows how "controlled accidents" in Blake's printing procedures can take on significance--a significance that, one suspects, is sometimes more attributable to the beholder than the creator. Essick seems on solid ground when he discusses the multi-representational effect of patterns of color printing which "refer simultaneously to geological, biological, and psychological forms." But when we are told that Blake's "foul inking" on plate 47 of *Jerusalem* copy C "is part of his revolt against empire, against the hegemony of machine over man" (6), we feel that the boundaries of probability are being breached. Either that or Blake was expressing in an ineffective and self-defeating way what he was capable of saying much better in other ways.

I save for the last the two essays which deal with subjects closest to my own interest in Blake, his work in composite art forms which unite poetry and painting, and, by implication, time and space. Yvonne Carothers' essay on "Space and Time in *Milton*" is a worthy, but seriously flawed attempt to relate Kant's understanding of time and space to Blake's art (the flaws are: an understanding of Kant which seems to come mainly through secondary sources; a failure to make an argument as to why Blake should be connected with Kant; and some uncertainty about exactly what the subject of the essay is). Joseph Wittreich's "Painted Prophecies," on the other hand, is one of the most important essays on the nature of Blake's composite art in recent years. Wittreich takes up that side of the *ut pictura poesis* tradition too often ignored by scholars steeped in the classical tradition, the model of "sacramental" and Biblical pictorialism embodied in the text and interpretive traditions of the Book of Revelation. Wittreich surveys the complex variety of verbal/visual and textual/pictorial relationships that inform the peculiar discourse of prophecy: the prophetic experience as a psychological drama that combines visual and verbal material; the rhetorical concept of visionary prophecy as a "universal language of visual icons"; and descriptions of the book which is given to John on Patmos as a scroll adorned with pictures and hieroglyphs.

There is an unacknowledged tension in Wittreich's presentation, however, that bears on the problem of original and copy that we have been tracing throughout this volume. In one sense, of course, there is for the prophetic artist no such thing as "imitation" in the classical sense because the prophet is always at the origin, in direct, unmediated contact with divine inspiration, and thus freed from the historical chain of influence and imitation. The visual, visionary, and pictorial characterizations of prophecy are, in fact, a way of stressing this unmediated, intuitive access to the divine message. The verbal element of prophecy is, for the commentators on Revelation, a kind of supplement to the original message: "the assumption of all these commentators is that Christ's vision is presented initially as a picture; for John's (and our) sakes, that vision is preserved in a book, this time with words accompanying the pictures; and this book, in turn, is translated by John into the Apocalypse, into its verbal icons" (104). The text is added as an accommodation "for our sakes": it mediates, preserves, and interprets the original vision for those of us who do not have access to prophetic insight, or to the original illustrated scroll given by Christ to St. John. But we need to ask at this point why these secondary, supplemental steps are necessary if the original vision is inscribed in the universal language of pictorial representation, the medium which needs no learned reading or interpretation, but needs only be beheld to be understood? Isn't this universalizing and democratizing of the divine message precisely the point of illustrating or illuminating the sacred text? What else but this is the logic of producing an illustrated *biblia pauperum* that can be read by the illiterate laity? Why doesn't the prophet simply paint what he sees, or copy the pictures from Christ's scroll, thus eliminating the priestly, scribal middleman who will become custodian of the prophet's verbal translation of the divine vision? The answer can only be that those pictures are *not* transparent, unmediated, universally readable

revelations of divine messages, but are "concealed and dumb prophecies," hieroglyphs which require interpretation, a verbal supplement to unveil their hidden meaning. The pictorial expression no longer reveals the original inspiration but conceals it, is no longer eloquent but dumb; the verbal translation no longer appears as a superfluous covering or husk to the original prophetic picture, but becomes "revelation in the litteral expression," a textual expression of the original meaning intended by and concealed in the picture. This new genealogy of prophetic expression reverses the priority of visual to verbal expression insisted on by the commentators on Revelation, and restores the priorities of Old Testament and English Protestant prophecy: "There are three kinds of prophecy, says Luther in his 1545 Preface to the Apocalypse: Moses' kind which consists only of words, Daniel's which combines words with symbols, and John's which is purely visionary and consists only of 'Pictures'" (103). As Wittreich notes, "Hebrew law, in fact, forbade the kind of pictorial adornment that Christianity encouraged" (104). The picture is not simply supplemental and secondary, a necessary evil, but now becomes an unnecessary evil, a vain idol to be smashed by the iconoclast.

These reversals in the verbal/visual dialectic of prophetic poetics provide new perspective on the exact character of Blake's illuminated books. Blake's refusal to grant privilege or priority to text or design, his construction of his illuminated books as a kind of icono-logo-machia, the text a battleground of verbal and pictorial modes, is a strategy for dramatizing a fundamental conflict in the network of religious signs upon which he draws. The ambivalence about the icon or image in Protestant culture, its double life as a transparent window on the divine message, or an obscure hieroglyph which conceals that message and threatens to become an object of idolatry--this ambivalence is converted by Blake into a source of energy for the poetic and pictorial circuits of his illuminated texts.

The tension between verbal and visual expression which is revealed in Wittreich's account of "painted prophecies" also clarifies, I would suggest, Blake's complex attitude toward the problems of origin and copy, invention and imitation. Verbal and pictorial modes are continually discussed in prophetic poetics in terms of priority and supplementation, "original" vision (or verbal message) and a secondary translation, interpretation, or illumination which replaces, transforms, or unveils the "original meaning" concealed in the "original work." The relation of text and design shares in the same dialectic that informs Blake's understanding of copy and original. The important distinction for Blake is not between copy and original, but between a weak (or tame or "seeming") copy and a strong, "real" copy. Blake could, like Bindman's good classicist, speak of imitation and invention, but without meaning quite the same thing as Fuseli, whom Bindman quotes:

> The term invention never ought to be so far misconstrued as to be confounded with that of creation, incompatible with our notions of limited being, an idea of pure astonsishment, and admissable only when we mention Omnipotence; to invent is to find: to find something, presupposes its existence somewhere, implicitly or explicitly, scattered or in a mass. (93)

What if one is a classicist who believes that the only omnipotent deity worth mentioning is the one that "resides in the human breast," the Poetic Genius or human imagination? The notion of imitating a previous work of art cannot be seen from this point of view as supplemental, secondary, or parasitical, cannot be incompatible with creation. In fact, "Imitation is Criticism," not a slavish copying of the external form of a prior work, but an interpretation which reveals what the text has previously hidden, an illumination or explanation. The "original meaning" of a text is not lost, or locked forever in the receding moment of its historical creation, but unfolds in the history of its imitative interpretations. That is why Blake can seem to have both an ahistorical view of art as unprogressive revelations of the imagination, and yet see himself as building his own art progressively out of Milton and the Bible (both read in the "infernal sense"), and out of a classical tradition which has fallen prey to "tame imitation" by treating its sacred texts as closed books, traces of an unrecoverable origin. When Blake imitates a work of art (which will itself, he knows, be an imitation--an engraving of a Renaissance master, a text which supplements or interprets a vision, a picture which illustrates a text) he imitates the original authority that enables human beings to construct for themselves a world of signs, and thus "copies Imagination." There is thus no distinction for Blake, as there is for Reynolds, between the phase in the life of an artist, or the history of art, when we must copy and invent: we learn the language of art by copying other works of art; we execute original works of art by copying forever.