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R E V I E W

Geoffrey Keynes and Peter Davidson, eds., *A Watch of Nightingales*

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Warren Stevenson. *The Myth of the Golden Age in English Romantic Poetry*, Romantic Reassessment, 109, ed. James Hogg (Salzburg Studies in English Literature). Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1981. iv + 109 pp.

Reviewed by V. A. De Luca

This slender book, really a pamphlet, is as diffuse as it is brief. Large as the subject announced in its title may seem, Warren Stevenson's treatment widens the focus. What he has produced is not an essay on the Romantic revival of a specific classical topos but rather six thumbnail synopses of the high points in the poetic careers of the six major Romantic poets, considered seriatim. Since none of these chapters runs longer than twenty pages, the commentaries on individual works tend to be emaciated, and Stevenson has room for the Golden Age only *en passant*.

As one might expect from the author of an earlier book largely about Blake (*Divine Analogy*, Salzburg 1972), Stevenson makes Blake the cornerstone of what thematic structure the book has, and it begins appropriately enough with the central statement: "The Nature of my Work is Visionary or Imaginative it is an Endeavour to Restore what the Ancients call'd the Golden Age." But Stevenson never quite explains what precisely Blake is saying here or how he is reading the Ancients. As a result no firm idea of the Golden Age ever emerges in the book, although as he skims from poet to poet and work to work Stevenson keeps an eye out for anything salvational, anything numinous, anything pastoral, anything apocalyptic, anything agreeable, anything specially labeled "Edenic" or "golden." There are nonetheless some astounding omissions: no mention, for instance, of Wordsworth's "Prospectus" and the famous lines, "Paradise and groves / Elysian, Fortunate Fields—like those of old / Sought in the Atlantic Main—why should they be / A history of departed things, / Or a mere fiction of what never was?"—the most germane lines to Stevenson's subject in all of Romantic poetry. At the same time there is room for such things as a five-page treatment of "Christabel," where the Golden Age comes in only twice—Christabel's bedchamber is a "mini-Golgonooza," and "Christabel's paradigmatic rela-

tion to the theme of the Golden Age is that of a spiritual transformer embodying the concept of vicarious atonement" (49). These instances give some notion of the prose style in the book, the sponginess of the ideas, the hollow use of Blake as touchstone.

On the whole, however, *The Myth of the Golden Age* strays only rarely into fantastical interpretations. For the most part, Stevenson's observations are inoffensive and unarguable, like those in headnote comments in undergraduate anthologies. Although there is nothing in this book that a scholar or critic will find valuable, it might usefully serve students as a light introduction to the romantic quest for bliss. It is a pity that its Salzburg venue makes it unlikely that the book will be sold in those outlets where undergraduates purchase their study guides.

Geoffrey Keynes, Kt., and Peter Davidson, eds. *A Watch of Nightingales*. London: The Stourton Press, 1981. xii + 48 pp. Four hundred copies printed.

Reviewed by G. E. Bentley, Jr.

Sir Geoffrey Keynes and Professor Peter Davidson have collected "nearly fifty poems" (p. [xii]), or rather twenty-seven poems and twelve fragments (some of them in prose), addressed or referring to the "Most musical" of birds, as Milton called the nightingale. Isaac Walton says that the man who hears at midnight

the clear aires, the sweet descants, the natural
rising and falling, the doubling and redoubling of
her voice, might well be lifted above earth, and say, Lord,
what Musick hast thou provided for the Saints in Heaven,
when thou affordest bad men such musick on earth!

The title derives from the technical term for a group of nightingales, as in an exaltation of larks and a charm of goldfinches, also derived from Dame Julia Berners's *Boke of Hawkyng, Huntynge, and Fysshynge* (1486).

The poets are, of course, concerned with the birdsong rather than the songbird, for the bird itself is negligible in appearance and usually invisible. Some try to imitate the sound of the song, as in Skelton and Coleridge's "jug jug" and Fitzgerald's translation of Omar Khayyam, "Wine!

Wine! Wine! Red Wine!," but most describe it or reproduce its rhythms, like Coleridge's

merry Nightingale
That crowds and hurries, and precipitates
With fast thick warble his delicious notes

But perhaps most interesting is the way the poets, moved to a fine frenzy by the shower of song, are governed not by the song they heard in the "melodious plot / Of beechen green, and shadows numberless" but by what they heard in the songs of other poets.

In the Renaissance, the most important influence was that of Ovid, who in his *Metamorphoses* tells of the rape of Philomela by Tereus and, at the moment of her revenge, their transformation into birds, Philomela into a nightingale and Tereus into a Hoopoe:

How prettily she tells the tale
Of Rape and Blood.

Richard Barnfield in 1598 hears the legend in the song:

Fie, fie, fie, now she would cry
Teru Teru, by and by

In the myth the singer is female, and so most of the singing birds are too, from Chaucer and Sidney (1598) and Shakespeare through Thomas Carew (1651) and Milton (1673) and Marvell (1681), down to Sir John Vanbrugh (1702), William Walsh (1721), Joseph Warton (1746), John Keats implicitly (1820), and even such an acute observer as John Clare (1825). But it is, of course, the male, not the female, who sings, though the only poets to get the sex right here are Cowper (1782), Blake in *Milton* (1804-708), and Pound (1919).

Similarly, the bird was thought to learn against a thorn to stimulate her song, joyfully to mourn the prick, as it were, as in the anonymous song set to music by Robert Jones (1600):

percht with prick against her breast,
She sings fie, fie, fie, fie, as if she suffered wrong
Till seemingly pleased sweet, sweet concludes her song.

Clearly it is something added to the birdsong which has carried away the poet's imagination.

Almost as powerful is the tradition of jealous musical rivalry echoed by Goldsmith in his *History of the Earth and Animated Nature*, in Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle des Oiseaux*, and in Thomas Pennant's *British Zoology*, probably deriving from Pliny's *Natural History*:

all of them [nightingales] have not the same, but every one a special kind of musicke by her selfe: nay they strive who can do best, and one laboureth to excel another in varietie of song and long continuance: yea and evident it is, that they contend in good earnest with all their will and power: for oftentimes she that hath the worse and is not able to hold out with another, dieth for it, and sooner giveth up her vitall breath, than giveth over her song.¹

William Walsh writes in 1721 of a nightingale driven to suicide by despair at rivaling the echo of her own song or "the Waters . . . laughing in the Brook."

Clearly the liquid measure of sound is not enough for the poets, but they must make what Joseph Warton calls "Contemplation's favourite bird" into an emblem of the human condition, in an attempt to

quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan.

The *raison d'être* of this little book is the poem called "To the Nightingale" etched about 1784 by George Cumberland: "This anthology has . . . been built around" the poem (p. [viii]). Sir Geoffrey owned copies of this poem for many years and cherished them as examples of Cumberland's experiments with printing, until about 1980 Robert Essick suggested a Blake connection. The suggestion was that the transcription might be not by Cumberland but by Blake, but they soon decided that the evidence for this was inconclusive.

However, the inquiry stimulated Sir Geoffrey to speculate that while Blake probably did not transcribe the poem, he may well have composed it: "the internal evidence that it could have been composed only [*sic*] by Blake was very strong" (p. [vii]). Sir Geoffrey canvassed a number of distinguished scholars and critics on the persuasiveness of this internal evidence and published the consensus, with a facsimile of the print, in *The Book Collector* in 1981, attributing the composition of the poem emphatically to Blake. Certainly all the scholars and critics there cited either agree with Sir Geoffrey, though usually not in terms as emphatic as his own, or at least present evidence tending to his conclusion. He also printed the poem in a very slim, handsome volume in 1980 called *To the Nightingale*, though omitting there both the facsimile and most of the evidence that the poem is by Blake. Readers of *Blake / An Illustrated Quarterly* will be chiefly concerned with the evidence that the anonymous poem called "To the Nightingale" printed for George Cumberland was in fact composed by William Blake.

The external evidence is very slight. The poem was certainly sent in January 1784 in a letter from George Cumberland to his brother as an example of his new, cheap, and easy method of etching and printing. William Blake was probably experimenting with similar methods of etching and printing, which he apparently alludes to in his *Island in the Moon* (?1784) and which evolved into his own illuminated printing. Cumberland certainly knew of Blake at the time, for he mentioned him in his review of the annual Royal Academy exhibition in 1780, and they became intimate friends, exchanging correspondence from at least 1795 through 1827. The poem was printed by William Staden Blake, the writing-engraver of Exchange Alley, and, according to Sir Geoffrey, "It can be inferred from this action that Cumberland was not yet, in 1784, the close friend of William Blake, the artist, that he afterwards became" (p. [viii]). I am puzzled by

the logic of this sentence but conclude that it means that if Cumberland had known the poet well he would have asked *him* to print the poem. But we do not know that the poet *could* have printed it then—we don't know when he acquired his own printing press (probably not until autumn 1784)—and there is no evidence that he ever welcomed or did casual job-printing, as opposed to printing his own plates. But the more slightly Cumberland knew the poet, the odder it seems that he should have been etching his poem and sending it to friends without identifying the author—it rather smacks of plagiarism. Certainly when a friend sends me a poem in a letter, I assume that he wrote it unless he tells me the contrary. Sir Geoffrey's theory is that "To the Nightingale" is a poem left over from *Poetical Sketches* (1783), but there is no evidence whatever that the poem was considered for this collection by the apparent compilers John Flaxman and the Reverend Mr. A. S. Mathew, and there is no evidence that Cumberland had anything to do with the production of that volume, though he acquired copy D of it at an unknown date. Cumberland may have known Blake in 1784, he may have seen his manuscript poems then (though there is no evidence that anyone other than Flaxman and Mathew did), and he could have presented a printed copy to his brother—but there is no direct evidence that he did so, and the external probabilities are against it.

Sir Geoffrey finds "the internal evidence . . . very strong," but this suggests the understandable pride of ownership and discovery rather than the dispassionate persuasion of scholarship. "To the Nightingale" is an agreeable little poem in four six-line stanzas, written in a somewhat stereotyped eighteenth-century style. The vocabulary is fashionably poetical, with the "lovely Chauntress of the lonely Bow'r," "wildly pour[ing] thy mellow Minstrels'y [*sic*]," a "Hind," and "Cynthias's silvry beams." This is not Blake's characteristic vocabulary and diction—but then, neither is that of a number of poems in *Poetical Sketches*, such as "An Imitation of Spencer" with its "jocund hours," "tinkling rhymes," "Pan," "Mercurius," and "Mercury." "To the Nightingale" runs:

Come lovely Chauntress of the lonely Bow'r,
(Allured by vernal airs to chequer'd shades)
And lightly sit upon the moss grown tree,
Near where the dark stream glides, and the soft flow'r,
Rears its enamel'd head to grace the glades;
Come there and wildly pour thy mellow Minstrels'y.

And I with open ears will drink thy song,
With cautious trembling steps advancing near,
Chiding the low hung boughs that bar my way,
Then gently stretch my weary limbs among
The Fern, and part the Woodbind shoots, and peer
About to find thee perch't upon the bending spray.

O then begin thy undulating note,
Check't by faint Echos from the distant grove,
And oft recall the sweetly wandring air;

Till, bursting forth, the jolly peal shall float
Upon the Breeze, and tell a tale, to move
Bald Apathy, or smooth the wrinkled brow of Care.

And may no Hind thy secret haunt disclose,
Or wanton Heifer near the thicket stray,
Rudely to break thy song, thy breast affright;
But whilst Attention hears thy gentle lay,
Soft Eve advance, clad in Her mantle gray,
And Cynthia's silvry beams illuminate the night.

Sir Geoffrey finds "jolly" characteristic of Blake, as it is used "on three occasions in *Poetical Sketches*" (p. [viii]), but it is scarcely a peculiarly Blakean word—Milton uses it in his sonnet on the nightingale. The phrase "the wrinkled brow of Care" is an eighteenth-century conceit which is repeated "in a prose composition of about the same date" ["then she bore Pale desire" (?1783)] as "Care Sitteth in the wrinkled brow," and "Bald Apathy" is alleged without evidence to be "an unusual conjunction of words pointing to Blake's authorship" (pp. [viii–ix]).

In his article, Sir Geoffrey satisfies himself that Blake composed "To the Nightingale" by canvassing vainly for an alternative author. For example, he quotes a passage from a poem undoubtedly by Cumberland which is strikingly different from "To the Nightingale" in diction and accomplishment and concludes therefore that Cumberland cannot have written it. But this presumes a uniformity of vocabulary and achievement in a poet which is very rare. It would, for instance, be difficult to demonstrate from internal evidence alone that the author of

I'll draw my sword, nor ever sheath it up,
Till England blow the trump of victory,
Or I lay stretch'd upon the field of death!

["King Edward the Third" from *Poetical Sketches* (1783)]

was the same as the author of the famous passage from *Milton* (1804–?8):

Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In Englands green & pleasant Land.

Sir Geoffrey notes that Coleridge in his "The Nightingale" follows Blake in making the nightingale's song cheerful ("merry") rather than melancholy and even suggests therefore "that he had seen one of the counterproofs [of "To the Nightingale"] made for Cumberland" (p. [ix]), but other poets too found the nightingale's song cheerful, such as an anonymous author of 1600 ("sweet content"), William Drummond in 1630 ("Well pleased with Delights"), and John Keats in 1820 ("thy happy lot").

The internal evidence is far from conclusive, and we should hesitate to alienate the poem from George Cumberland and attach it firmly to William Blake. "To the Nightingale" is a poem with an achievement above competence but scarcely reaching to greatness. And there are words and ideas in it different from those one associates with Blake. The poet peering between "the Woodbine shoots [*and fern*] . . . to find thee" sounds less like Blake than like John Clare in "The Nightingale's Nest,"

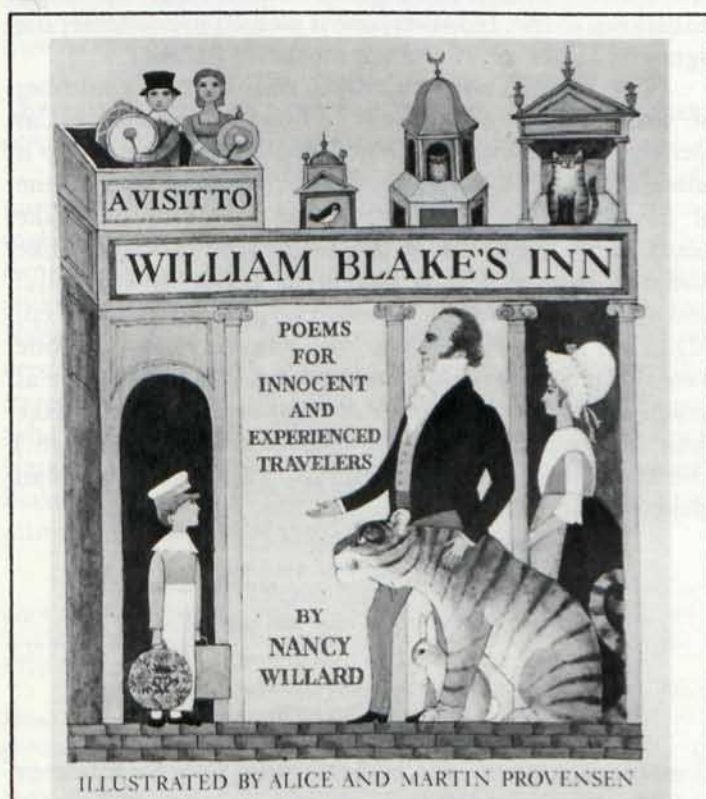
"Creeping on hands and knees through matted thorn [and fern-leaves] / To find her nest." The "Hind," the "Woodbine," "Cynthia," "Minstrels'y," and the "wanton Heifer" are very unusual in Blake's verse,² and Blake knew that the singing nightingale was masculine ("his song" appears in *Milton*), not feminine as in "To the Nightingale" ("lovely Chauntress").³ The evidence for Blake's authorship of "To the Nightingale" leads hesitantly to possibility rather than to certainty. He could have written it, but until we have more evidence it will be safest to assume no more than the possibility—numbers of others could have written it as well. And there are numerous contemporary poems which might equally well be his, some in periodicals even signed W. B. "To the Nightingale" does not deserve to be included "in the Blake canon" (p. [viii]), except perhaps as a footnote.

This *Watch of Nightingales* is, then, a charming nonce collection revealing much about the nature of the genius of English poets, but leaving the magical nature of the bird's song and the authorship of "To the Nightingale" still mysteriously obscure. As Keats wrote in his "Ode to a Nightingale," "Darkling I listen" "in embalmed darkness."

¹ Tr. Philemon Holland (1601), I, 286, quoted in Fred V. Randel, "Coleridge and the Contentiousness of Romantic Nightingales," *Studies in Romanticism*, 21 (1982), 36.

² Only "hind" appears in Blake's known writings (once, in *The French Revolution* [1791]), though "minstrel" is found thrice in the *Concordance*, as Professor Essick kindly reminds me.

³ I must confess that Blake was not always sexually faithful, for Albion is feminine in the "Prologue to King John" in *Poetical Sketches* (1783) but masculine thereafter.



Nancy Willard. *A Visit to William Blake's Inn, Poems for Innocent and Experienced Travelers*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981. 44 pp. \$10.95.

Reviewed by Elizabeth B. Bentley

Readers and scholars of William Blake are likely to be much attracted by the title and notion of *A Visit to William Blake's Inn: Poems for Innocent and Experienced Travelers*, by Nancy Willard and illustrated by Alice and Martin Provensen. Nancy Willard relates her experience as a seven-year-old convalescent measles patient introduced to William Blake through the good offices of an imaginative sitter who first quoted four lines of "The Tyger" and then sent an illustrated book containing William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.

Having published her first book while a high school senior, Nancy Willard has gone on to publish some fourteen books, a number of them children's books for which she has twice received the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award. According to the dust jacket summary of *A Visit to William Blake's Inn*, she teaches in the Vassar English Department. Her scholarly publications include a study of four twentieth-century poets, William Carlos Williams, Francis Ponge, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Pablo Neruda, entitled *testimony of the invisible man* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1970). In the introduction to this study, a Vassar colleague writes admiringly of Nancy Willard's poetry. *A Visit to William Blake's Inn*, then, is written by an experienced and successful author of children's stories, a university teacher of English, a critic and a practicing poet who connects this book with her youthful introduction to William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.

The inside of the dust jacket of *A Visit to William Blake's Inn* assures us that the illustrations reflect the multiple-award-winning artists' "deep love for William Blake and the London in which he lived." The paper and color printing of the book are of very good quality. The first illustration to the first poem (pp. 14-15) shows a redhaired man on the steps of a house labelled