

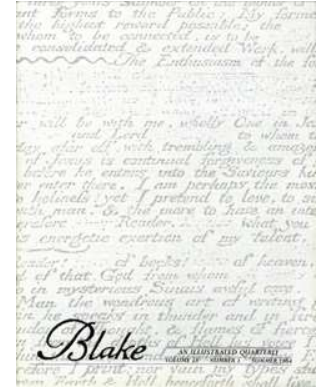
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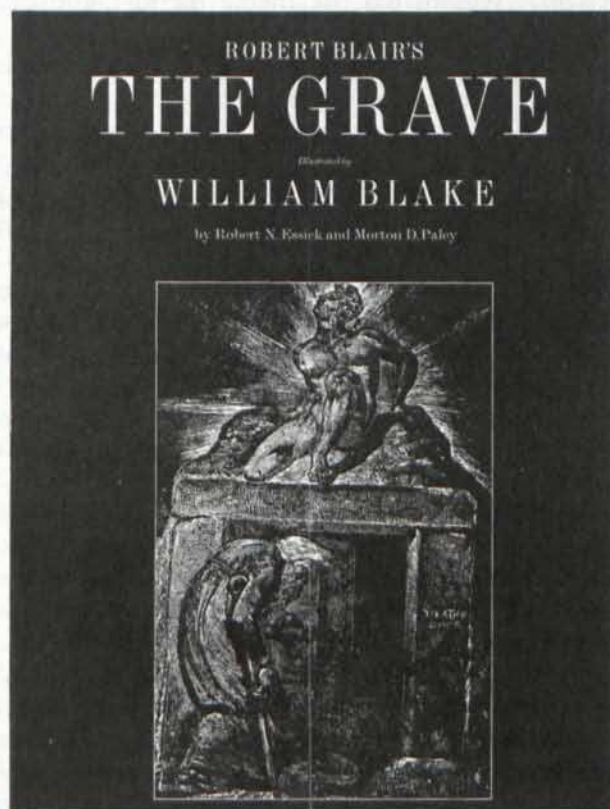
R E V I E W

Robert N. Essick and Morton D. Paley, Robert
Blair's *The Grave*, Illustrated by William Blake

Andrew Wilton

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Robert N. Essick and Morton D. Paley. *Robert Blair's The Grave, illustrated by William Blake. A study with a facsimile.* London: Scolar Press, 1982. x + 243 pp., illustrated. \$45.00.

Reviewed by Andrew Wilton

The credentials of Robert Essick and Morton Paley as editors of Blair's and Blake's *Grave* need no examination or explanation in these pages. They have produced a learned and thoroughly detailed account of the work, which is presented in this volume with an elegance suited to the original. Their extensive commentary is printed in well laid out Baskerville which provides a sympathetic complement to the facsimile, the centerpiece of the volume. This does not enjoy, it is true, quite the full measure of surrounding margin found in the 1808 original, and modern photographic methods of reproduction cannot compete for texture and body with authentic paper and type, or with impressions of the engravings taken directly from the plates; but it is a measure of the high standard achieved by the Scolar Press that the comparison obtrudes itself at all. Perhaps it is on-

ly the black cloth boards of the binding which seem a trifle coarse when one thinks of the early nineteenth-century leather and marbled boards so vividly evoked by the contents.

The facsimile is preceded by a series of essays: on the tradition of graveyard poetry to which Blair's poem belongs; on the circumstances in which Blake collaborated with Robert Hartley Cromek in the publication; and on the designs that Blake made for it. There are detailed notes on the plates, and on the numerous drawings associated with *The Grave* but not published. By way of appendices Essick and Paley add full catalogues of all these designs, referring systematically to every watercolor and sketch in Blake's oeuvre that can by any possibility be considered relevant. All these images are reproduced in adequate (though sometimes rather grey) monochrome. There is a compendium of "early references to Blake's *Grave* designs," largely drawn from advertisements and correspondence, taking the survey of contemporary documentation up to 1813, but not including reviews, which are discussed at length in the main text. A facsimile of Cromek's advertisement for the *Canterbury Pilgrims* plate that Schiavonetti engraved after Stothard is also supplied, reminding us concretely of the work that caused Blake's bitter rupture with both publisher and painter. As a final indulgence to scholarship, a summary of the variations in Blair's early texts of the poem concludes the book.

This last appendix, coming full circle back to the source of the whole work, emphasizes the importance which the editors have attached to the literary significance of the poem, which indeed must be understood if we are to read Blake's illustrations intelligently. As Essick and Paley make clear, Blake as usual provided his own entirely personal glosses on the lines he chose to embellish, but there is a directness of reference in his designs which makes them exceptionally perspicuous as illustrations and helps to explain why they are, in the editors' words, "In some ways . . . the easiest to understand of all his major pictorial works." Schiavonetti's engravings after Blake's drawings for *The Grave* enjoyed a wider audience than almost anything else of Blake's and probably had a certain amount of influence on later artists: the interest of Bell Scott and of the Rossettis is well known, and, beyond them, one might draw attention to such apparent points of contact as the illustrations of Frederick Sandys (compare the girl in his *If* of 1866 with the head of the wife in Blake's *Death of the Strong Wicked Man*) to suggest the value of these designs for the nineteenth century. But of course the circumstances of their publication made it much more likely that they would be seen and appreciated by other artists than almost any other major work of Blake's.

The book was from the start taken seriously by the profession. Blake never received more concerted acclaim for his work than he did for *The Grave* designs. The

watercolors he finished for the project were admired by Fuseli, West, Flaxman, Opie, Lawrence, Stothard and other prominent Academicians; the volume was subscribed to by an impressive list of artists and amateurs, headed by the Queen herself, to whom Blake wrote a somewhat uncharacteristic dedicatory poem. The critical reception was by no means entirely favorable, but the book entered a sizable number of libraries and was the most accessible, physically as well as conceptually, of his published works. The plates were even issued in Latin America as early as 1826, illustrating José Joaquín de Mora's *Meditaciones Poéticas*.

Another factor in their accessibility was, no doubt, the intermediary agency of Luigi Schiavonetti. As the editors duly note, "the visual qualities of Blake's published designs are in large measure determined by Schiavonetti's reproductive techniques." The "fashionable" characteristics of "sinuousness of line and smoothness of surface texture" are contrasted with the "energetic outlines and rugged surfaces" which Blake would have achieved if he had been responsible, as was originally planned, for the plates. Essick and Paley conclude by saying that "Schiavonetti's plates are skillful and thoroughly professional renditions, but they substitute competence for genius and partially mask the intense conceptions of the artist beneath the engraver's conventional patterns. . . ." This is a reasonable summary, but it seems to me that the traditional judgment does less than justice to Schiavonetti. Blake had apparently intended to produce his plates as white-line engravings—one survives, the design for *Death's Door*, in a unique impression in an American private collection; and in fairness to Cromek, whose behavior in the affair has earned him a very hostile press, it must be said that such a technique, with its reversal of the normal tone-values to create a "negative" effect, was hardly calculated to appeal to a general audience, or even to the Academy. The publisher's doubts are understandable. They were to be closely paralleled nearly twenty years later, when Blake illustrated another poem by someone else, Ambrose Philips's *Pastoral* in imitation of Virgil for Robert Thornton's Latin primer. For that work he used a similar light-on-dark idiom, this time in woodcut, and Thornton reacted rather as Cromek had done, by partially retracting his sponsorship in the famous declaration that the blocks "display less of art than genius." There can be no doubt that the set of illustrations to *The Grave* executed as Blake seems to have intended would have been a very powerful series of masterpieces, and we can only regret that they were never realized; but it should be pointed out that the solitary impression of a black-line *Death's Door* does not prove that Blake envisaged the final series in that form: this may have been an isolated experiment. Even if not, given the inevitable lessening of impact by the adoption of conventional line-engraving, Schiavonetti's plates are, in my opinion, extraordinary in the sen-

sitivity with which they handle Blake's idiosyncratic language. Every one of the twelve illustrations (Blake had arranged to produce twenty) is vigorous, if not moving, and unmistakably Blakean in almost every detail. One might point to possible shortcomings, such as the over-illusionistic chiaroscuro in the (nevertheless ravishing) *Descent of Man into the Vale of Death*, which does not seem to reproduce Blake's handling of washes of tone; but in general the "elegant" and "fashionable" Italian has grasped and rendered the sense and spirituality of Blake's ideas with an insight for which he deserves greater credit. Nowhere, I believe, can he be accused of having "softened" or "improved" Blake: he persuades us (who know Blake's own work much better than his contemporaries did) that the elegance that is undeniably present in the designs is Blake's own, combining it, as he does repeatedly (for instance in the two figures of *The Soul Exploring the Recesses of the Grave*), with an eccentric nervousness that is entirely convincing.

All speculation as to the adequacy of Schiavonetti's reproductions must, of course, remain uncertain because none of Blake's finished watercolors for the work have survived. This fact is noted by Essick and Paley, and indeed by other commentators on the enterprise, very much *en passant*; yet it is a matter for no little wonder that such a group of drawings should have vanished so completely. That they were highly wrought and very beautiful we cannot doubt; the approval of the Academicians confirms it. These facts only make the disappearance the stranger. It would have been interesting to know what Essick and Paley have to say on the matter. Did the designs, for instance, partake more of the character of, say, the rejected titlepage in the British Museum, *The Resurrection of the Dead*; or of the Yale Center's *Prone on the Lowly Grave* . . . , another rejected idea? The British Museum drawing is one of Blake's most exquisitely iridescent visions of beatitude, executed in those hatchings of rich color which he used throughout his life to evoke the shimmer of paradisaical bliss. The Yale sheet is much more prosaic in its treatment, perhaps commensurately with its subject matter, but altogether a less beautiful object, and below the standard of intensity and inwardness that Schiavonetti suggests in the published compositions. The drawing of *Death Pursuing the Soul through the Avenues of Life* is another finished design, apparently rejected, for the book; it falls somewhere between these two extremes in technique, and though powerful is somewhat unresolved. It does suggest, though, that the finished drawings may have been similar in type to some of the finer of the biblical illustrations that Blake was making for Thomas Butts about this time; I am thinking particularly of such works as the Yale *Mary Magdalen at the Sepulchre* and the Victoria and Albert Museum's *The Angel Rolling away the Stone*. These drawings, like the British Museum *Resurrection*, are of a

linear beauty that would have required no modification from the hand of a Schiavonetti if he had ever been asked to engrave them.

Such hypotheses are in a sense futile; but the character of Blake's watercolors for *The Grave* is surely an issue which should lie at the heart of any investigation into the publication, and it is one which Essick and Paley, like everyone before them, have neglected. Perhaps the

solution is easy: we know very well what Blake's watercolors of this time looked like. But as I have indicated, they vary considerably in type and technique, and Schiavonetti's engravings imply inventions of truly exceptional magnificence and refinement. The contemplation of even imaginary drawings of this order is one of the pleasures afforded by any copy of Blake's *Grave*, and is stimulated especially by this rewarding new edition.

William Blake's *Jerusalem*

Structure and Meaning in Poetry and Picture



Minna Daskow

Minna Daskow. *William Blake's Jerusalem: Structure and Meaning in Poetry and Picture*. Rutherford, Madison, Teaneck, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 1982. \$37.50.

Reviewed by V. A. De Luca

Given the nature of Blake criticism, it was perhaps inevitable that a book like this on *Jerusalem* should come along. Blake's other long poems have received whole

monographs of elaborate commentary in recent years and *Jerusalem* could not avoid its turn. Minna Daskow's book is an attempt to answer an old question: What is the governing principle behind the poem's four-part structure? Her method is also familiar; it is a thematic paraphrase proceeding more or less consecutively plate by plate through the poem. The "Structure and Meaning" of her subtitle are one; *Jerusalem's* structure is a structure of meanings, meanings of an abstract didactic sort. With a kind of relentless zeal Daskow now undertakes to reveal what she believes to be *Jerusalem's* didactic structure.

She begins in a promising way, noting that "all the poem's parts fall into pieces of a kaleidoscopic whole complementing and reinforcing one another. Each chapter turns the kaleidoscope to view the theme in a new way. The pieces recompose themselves in new patterns and seem to reveal new appearances of the whole but are only actualizing those patterns potentially present all along" (p. 15). So far, so good; this is always the impression that repeated experience of the poem gives. But having correctly pointed out the contradictory results of previous critics' attempts to elicit a four-part thematic scheme out of *Jerusalem*, Daskow quixotically proceeds on precisely the same sort of attempt herself. She discovers her structure of meaning in the hypothesis that *Jerusalem* is an exposé of Albion's errors. There are three chief errors. The first chapter surveys all three; as for the rest, "in chapter 2 Blake reveals all these distortions [of perception, understanding, feeling and action] growing from the soil of Albion's religious error. In chapter 3, on the other hand, he shows them sprouting from philosophical error, and in chapter 4 from affective error" (p. 71). These categories are derived from the three addresses "To the Jews" (patriarchal religion, Druidism, imputation of sin), "To the Deists" (rationalism, natural law), and "To the Christians" (repudiation of the affections, of imagination, of liberty-named-Jerusalem).

Now there is nothing inherently implausible about this categorical organization. If one were to speak of associative thematic clusters in these chapters, of gravitational drifts influenced by the introductory address, there would be no quarrel; but then there would also be no special originality in such an insight and no very long