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Grave

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# Thomas Sivright and the Lost Designs for Blair's *Grave*

BY G.E. BENTLEY, JR.

One of the minor mysteries of Blake studies is what became of the suite of designs which Blake made for Blair's *Grave*. A recent discovery seems to give part of the answer.

On 18 October 1805 John Flaxman wrote to William Hayley: "M<sup>r</sup>. Cromek has employed Blake to make a set of 40 drawings from Blair's poem of the Grave 20 of which he proposes [to] have engraved . . . I have seen several compositions, the most Striking are, The Gambols of Ghosts according with their affections previous to the final Judgment—A widow embracing the turf which covers her husband's grave—Wicked Strong man dying—the good old man's Soul received by Angels—." Of the designs named here, only the last two were engraved, and only the finished drawing for "A Widow Embracing the Turf" is known to have survived.

The total number of designs actually finished may be in some doubt, for Blake himself wrote to Hayley on 27 November 1805: "M<sup>r</sup> Cromek the Engraver came to me desiring to have some of my Designs. He named his Price & wishd me to Produce him Illustrations of The Grave A Poem by Robert Blair. In consequence of this I produced about twenty Designs which pleasd so well that he with the same liberality with which he set me about the drawings, has now set me to Engrave them. . . ." This may imply either that Blake made forty designs (as Flaxman says), of which Cromek commissioned him to engrave twenty, or that he only made twenty designs altogether. In either case, the number of designs is larger than the twelve which Schiavonetti (not Blake) eventually etched for the volume which was published in 1808.

In the ordinary course of such arrangements, the drawings would become the property of the publisher, even though all he needed from them was the copyright. Cromek may thus have acquired forty designs (according to Flaxman), or twenty, as Blake's letter implies, or perhaps the fifteen which were advertised in November 1805,<sup>3</sup> or only the twelve which were eventually etched. At any rate, when the etchings had been made, Cromek had no more need for the Blair designs, and in May 1807 he wrote impertinently to Blake:

when I gave you the order for the drawings from the poem of 'The Grave,' I paid you for them more than I could then afford, more in proportion than you were in the habit of receiving, and what you were perfectly satisfied with, though I must do you the justice to confess much less than I think is their real value. Perhaps you have friends and admirers who can appreciate their merit and worth as much as I do. I am decidedly of opinion that the 12 for 'The Grave' should sell at least for 60 guineas. If you can meet with any gentleman who will give you this sum for them, I will deliver them into his hands on the publication of the poem. I will deduct the 20 guineas I have paid you from that sum, and the remainder 40 d<sup>o</sup> shall be at your disposal.<sup>4</sup>

By this method, Cromek would have secured the copyright for nothing—and Blake would have had only Cromek's honor and good nature (which he had good reason to suspect) for the £42, even if by his own efforts he found a patron who would pay such a substantial sum for the designs. But there is no evidence that such an arrangement was ever made.

It seems likely that the drawings stayed together, at least for a time. When Cromek died at the age of forty-two in 1812, his widow was left in some distress, and she sold the copyright of the Blair designs to Ackermann by 1813 for £120. And at this point we have lost sight of the collection of drawings. At some later date the collection was apparently broken up, for the few known finished Blair designs are now widely scattered, and new ones appear unexpectedly from time to time. Robert N. Essick acquired a previously unknown one called "Death Pursuing the Soul through the Avenues of Life" in 1971.

Recently, while pursuing a wild goose in another direction, I came across a reference in an old auction catalogue to a "Volume of Drawings by Blake, Illustrative of Blair's *Grave*, entitled 'Black Spirits and White, Blue Spirits and Grey,' " This sounds very much like the hypothetical volume of Blair drawings, though there is no record of it in Martin Butlin's great catalogue raisonné of *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake* (1981) or in the even more recent edition of Robert Blair, *The Grave* illustrated by William Blake: A study with facsimile by Robert N. Essick & Morton D. Paley (1982).

The reason it has not hitherto been noticed is doubtless partly because the auction was held not in London, where one might most plausibly look, but in Edinburgh. It was offered as lot 1835 in the

*Catalogue of the Extensive and Valuable Collection of Books, Pictures, Drawings, Prints, and Painters' Etchings, Ancient Bronzes and Terracottas, Etruscan Vases, Marble Busts, Antique Carvings and Chasings in Wood and Metal, Coins, Minerals, Gems, and Precious Stones, Philosophical Instruments, Wines, Spirits, &c. &c. of the late Thomas Sivright Esq. of Meggetland and Southouse, Which Will Be Sold by Auction by Mr. C.B. Tait, In His Great Room, 11, Hanover Street, On Monday, February 1, and Sixteen following lawful days [i.e., 1-19 February 1836], at One O'Clock. (Edinburgh: Printed by Thomas Constable, M.DCCC.XXXVI [1836].)*

The price which the Blake volume fetched, £1.5.0, was not what Blake, Cromek, or the twentieth century would have valued it at, but it is sufficiently impressive to make one believe that there were a substantial number of drawings in the volume of a quality to strike someone's fancy forcibly. The previous lot, a collection of thirty Persian drawings, "very highly finished," fetched £4.4.0, the next lot, a volume of thirty-three drawings "by eminent Painters" brought £1.10.0, four drawings by Albert Durer and Lucas of Leyden (lot 1902) went for three shillings, four by Rubens (lot 1904) went for five shillings, and four by Rembrandt, "Ferd. Bol, &c." (lot 1906) went for seven shillings.

The fact that the volume found its way to Scotland should not surprise us, for though Blake is not known to have had any patrons in Scotland, Cromek had many. He secured sixteen subscribers to *The Grave* in Edinburgh (though Thomas Sivright is not among them), he made a tour of Scotland with Thomas Stothard collecting materials for an illustrated edition of Burns, and he published *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song*, ed. R.H. Cromek [and Allan Cunningham] (London: Cadell & Davies, 1810) and *Select Scottish Songs, Ancient and Modern; with Critical Observations and Biographical Notices*, By Robert Burns, 2 volumes (London: Cadell & Davies, 1810). Cromek clearly had close contacts with patrons in Scotland and particularly in Edinburgh, and he might well have sold the volume of Blair designs directly to Thomas Sivright on one of his trips to Edinburgh; alternatively, his wife might have contacted such a notable Edinburgh collector after her husband's death, knowing that he collected modern painters such as Barry and Gainsborough, as well as the ancients.

Yet more probably, the collection of Blair drawings may well have passed through the hands of his favorite sister Ann Cromek (b. 1773). Cromek willed his art collection to his otherwise-unprovided-for sister,<sup>5</sup> believing that his young widow would be supported by her prosperous father—an act to which Mrs. Cromek reacted with some bitterness when her father proved unsympathetic. Ann Cromek had fallen in love with the

tempestuous Scotsman John Black, who stayed with the Cromeks when he came from Edinburgh to London in 1810. Black married another woman disastrously in 1812 and tried to get a Scottish divorce in 1813. The account of Black in the *Dictionary of National Biography* reports discreetly, "Black, in full expectation of a divorce, had offered marriage to an old friend, who became his housekeeper and bore the name of Mrs. Black." The housekeeper is fairly clearly Ann Cromek, who in Thomas Hartley Cromek's manuscript account of his father, "Memorials of the life of R.H. Cromek, Engraver" (1865) [MS in the possession of Wilfred Warrington], p. 7, is said to have "married M<sup>r</sup> John Black, late Editor of 'The Morning Chronicle.'" ("My late mother's father was with difficulty prevailed upon to advance [to her] the money necessary to enable her to have the plate [of Stothard's *Canterbury Pilgrims*] completed by Heath; and she was obliged to pay back every farthing of it, *with interest, to her own father.*") When Ann Cromek died in the late 1820s or early 1830s, her art collections acquired from her brother may have been dispersed through Black's Edinburgh connections and thus have reached Thomas Sivright.

The title of the volume is curious, and it is not clear whether "Black Spirits and White, Blue Spirits and Grey" are Blake's words or those of some later owner. Blake does not ordinarily speak of spirits in such colorful terms, though in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* an indignant "Angel hearing this became almost blue but mastering himself he grew yellow, & at last white pink & smiling" (pl. 22), and in *The Four Zoas* the Spectre and Urthona are described as "A shadow blue obscure & dismal" (p. 49, l. 13, p. 50, l. 23). The closest Blake comes to such terms is in a letter to William Hayley of 11 December 1805 in which he mentions his three dark years at Felpham: "I speak of Spiritual Things, Not of natural, Of Things known only to Myself & to Spirits Good & Evil, but Not Known to Men on Earth." But he was apparently ready to joke on such subjects, for when he addressed his friend Thomas Butts in a letter of 22 September 1800 as "Dear Friend of My Angels," Butts replied:

I cannot immediately determine whether or no I am dignified by the Title you have graciously conferred on me—you cannot but recollect the difficulties that have unceasingly arisen to prevent my discerning clearly whether your Angels are black white or grey and that on the whole I have rather inclined to . . . consider . . . you more immediately under the protection of the black-guard[!]; however at any rate I should thank you for an introduction to his Highness[']s Court, that when refused admittance into other Mansions I may not be received as a stranger in His[.]

With such contexts, it seems possible to me that the words "Black Spirits and White, Blue Spirits and Grey" were Blake's but rather more likely that they were someone else's, perhaps Cromek's. In Blake's surviving de-



signs for Blair's *Grave* there are nothing much like black, white, blue or grey spirits to justify the title. In any case, the quotation is from Thomas Middleton's *The Witch*, V, ii, appropriately interpolated into eighteenth-century performances of *King Lear*, IV, i.

Thomas Sivright of Meggetland was clearly a collector of formidable range and energy, but almost all my information about him derives from his posthumous catalogue. In the NOTICE to this, the auctioneer writes on 20 January 1836:

It is seldom that a Collection, so extensive and valuable in all its departments, as that contained in the following Catalogue, has been offered for sale in Scotland. It consists of Books, Pictures, Original Drawings and Etchings by Eminent Masters, Prints, Antiques in great variety, Coins, and Miscellaneous Articles of *Virtu*, comprehending the acquisitions of the late Mr. Sivright of Meggetland, during a period of nearly thirty years. The whole has been selected with the taste and judgment, by which that gentleman was so eminently distinguished as a Collector and an Amateur.

The Library contains a large assortment of Books, ancient and modern, on general literature, but it is chiefly remarkable for a collection of works on Art, in all its various branches, of unexampled extent and value . . . brilliant impressions . . . of such works as Piranesi and the Florence Gallery.

Mr. Sivright's Collection of Pictures has been long well known to the Amateurs of Scotland, and, consequently, any account of its general character is here uncalled for. It exhibits, in its details, fine and undoubted specimens of the pencils of Paul Veronese, Rembrandt, Cuyp, and Wynants, with delicious *Bits* by Ruysdael, Vander Neer, Both, and various other masters of lesser note. The Drawings and Etchings, forming a most suitable *Pendant* to the Pictures, are chiefly by the great masters of the Italian, Early German, Dutch, and Flemish Schools. In Prints, too, the collection is eminently rich, and exhibits the progress of the art from the earliest period, when the graver was rudely but powerfully handled by Mantegna and Albert Durer, to the most refined specimens of modern engraving. . . . In short, there is not a department of taste or fancy, for the gratification of which the Collection . . . does not afford the richest and most ample materials. (pp. v-vi)

The 2959 lots in the sale are wonderfully miscellaneous, as the titlepage announces, and some of them are remarkably fine. Among the 1632 lots of books, most are of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such as Stuart & Revett's *Antiquities of Athens*, "very fine early impressions" (lot 399; £37.16.0), a collection of Piranesi's works in twenty-two volumes, "MOST BRILLIANT IMPRESSIONS OF THE PLATES" (lot 1632; £73.10.0), but most are priced only in shillings, such as Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) (lot 978; 3/-), and lots 1343-1358 are each described merely as "Lot of Books" and fetched 1/- to 5/6. There are a few remarkable old books, such as

- 1528 [Langland] *The Vision of Pierce Plouman*, black letter, title and fifteen leaves in manuscript (1550) (5/6)
- 1529 Shakespeare, *A Midsommer Night's Dreame* (1600), with the autograph of George Steevens (£2.10.0)
- 1530 Shakespeare, *A Pleasant Conceited Comedie, called Love's Labors Lost* (1598), "title a fac-simile reprint, and one leaf wanting" (16/-)

Among the 577 lots of drawings and engravings, the largest single group is by the Edinburgh artist Alexander Runciman (1736-1785), the friend of Fuseli, but most of the artists named are old masters, and, very remarkably for catalogues at that time, the more notable pictures are reproduced in outline-engravings. The pictures which fetched more than £25 were

- 2798 Rembrandt, "The Night Guard" (reproduced; £30)
- 2857 Paul Veronese, "Venus Disarming Cupid" (reproduced; £57.15.0)
- 2860 John Wynants, "A Magnificent Landscape" (reproduced; £47.5.0)
- 2907 Karel du Jardin, "Portrait of Himself" (reproduced; £26.5.0)
- 2917 Albert Cuyp, "A View on the Coast of Holland" (reproduced; £73.10.0)
- 2919 Canaletto, "View of the Grand Canal in Venice" (not reproduced; £26.5.0)

The miscellaneous works are wonderfully eclectic, including Japanese Candelabra, Figure of Boodha, Large Cake of China Ink, New Zealand Clothes, a Caffer Hoe, Etruscan Vases, "Varley's Patent Graphic Telescope," a violin, upwards of seven hundred casts from antique gems (lot 2372; £17.6.6), a diamond of 5<sup>1</sup>/<sub>10</sub> carats (£7), and specimens of minerals (lots 2518-2732). Among the more interesting, in Blake's context, are "Ruthven's Patent Copperplate Printing Press" (lot 2104; £2.10.0), and a number of volumes of blank paper (lots 2003-2111, 2023-2028). Apparently Thomas Sivright had some interest in printing from copperplates.

This brings me back to the wild-goose chase. George Cumberland said in a note to his son: "Tell Blake a Mr Sivewright of Edinburg has just claimed in Home Philosophical Journal of Last Month As his own invention Blakes Method—& calls it Copper Blocks I think."<sup>6</sup> This seemed to point to a John Sivewright or Sievright who is listed variously in Edinburgh directories as an Engraver and a Teacher of Music, and W.H. Lizars acknowledged in the *Edinburgh Philosophical Journal*, 2 (1820), 23 that he "was much indebted" to Sivright during his experiments to perfect a method of stereotype engraving which sounds much like Blake's. However, the "Mr Sivewright of Edinburg" in Cumberland's letter could be the Thomas Sivright of Edinburgh, whose collecting activities covered the period 1806-1836 and who seems to have had the equipment to print engravings. At any rate, it was this hypothesis which led me to the 1836 auction and its entirely unexpected cache of drawings by Blake for Blair's *Grave*. Whether or not Thomas Sivright was an experimenter with printing techniques, he was certainly a formidable collector—and one of the most remarkable of his acquisitions was the volume of Blake's drawing which has apparently not been recorded since that date.

<sup>1</sup>Blake Records (1969), pp. 166-67.

<sup>2</sup>William Blake's Writings (1978), p. 1628—this edition is the source of all the other quotations from Blake which follow.

<sup>3</sup>See "Blake and Cromek: The Wheat and the Tares," *Modern Philology*, 71 (1974), 366-79.

<sup>4</sup>Blake Records, p. 187.

<sup>5</sup>As I am told by Cromek's biographer Professor Dennis Read. Professor Read tells me that he has searched assiduously for Cromek's will without success and believes that his will was nuncupative.

<sup>6</sup>Blake Records, p. 214; the date of the blurred postmark was there misread as 22 January 1809; it should be 1819, as Robert Essick, and the late Sir Geoffrey Keynes have pointed out. No one has identified the "Home Philosophical Journal" (or transcribed its title differently) or located the quotation.

## REVIEWS

Steven E. Alford. *Irony and the Logic of the Romantic Imagination*. American University Studies, Series III: Comparative Literature, vol. 13. New York, Berne, Frankfurt on the Main, Nancy: Peter Lang, 1984. 177 pp., paper, \$19.45.

Reviewed by David Simpson

Steven Alford's book is a comparative study of Blake and Friedrich Schlegel in which the German critic is read as providing the model of romantic irony necessary for the proper reading of Blake's *Marriage*. The aims of the book, which is an unmodified doctoral dissertation, are modest. Schlegel's early writings are expounded, and the essay *On Incomprehensibility* examined in some detail; Blake is represented in detail only by *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

After unpromising beginnings, in which the author appears to want to take seriously the accusation that Romantic poetry is "flowery" in order to reassert the counterclaim that its aims were "noble and beautiful" (pp. 1, 3, 4)—the probable irony of Keats's "flowery tale" might have been usefully recalled here—the major argument comes clear: that the Romantics moved toward an emphasis on the "rhetorical" over the "logical" as the essence of meaning (p. 6). The substantial vehicle of

this shift is a move away from "understanding" to "imagination" by means of irony (p. 7).

Unfortunately for Blake specialists, the discussion of Schlegel is considerably more adventurous than that of Blake. Schlegel is argued to be recommending and embodying a move from logic to poetry as the proper model of the philosophical enterprise, which then becomes "performative" rather than deductive (p. 42). Suggesting convincingly that Schlegel was unwilling to accept the potentially tragic Kantian distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal (p. 107)—an unwillingness shared by almost all of Kant's self-styled followers—Alford demonstrates the case in Schlegel's writings for a unification of the empirical and the absolute through the medium of romantic poetry (p. 55). In particular, romantic irony is the unity of the "cognitive and rhetorical" in which otherwise abstract philosophical problems are adjudicated in performance, in the actions and spiritual gestures of individual persons (pp. 64, 58).

As this model is carried over into a reading of the *Marriage*, it becomes somewhat platitudinous. Alford sees a parallel to Schlegelian irony in Blake's "visionary form of language" (p. 123), whereby the irritable reaching after fact and reason (fixed allegories, stable speakers, simple ironies of inversion, etc.) is to be replaced by "the eternally active creative imagination" (p. 167). Alford is surely right to lead us away from simple readings of Blake—but even a moderately experienced reader is unlikely to perpetrate such readings in the terms he describes. He is right also to encourage the search for "functional analogy," not simple definition, as the proper approach to Blake's myth (p. 148). But I cannot see that anything that is not already habitual happens to our reading of the *Marriage* if we agree that "irony functions to suspend the understanding and to make way for an act of vision" (p. 13). If anything, such a conclusion is likely to contribute to the morass of relativism that surrounds the presence of Blake in print and in the classroom. Even if we accept that such readings are part of Blake's purpose, at least two kinds of inquiry are called for: one into the composite identity of Blake's art, ignored here, and a very specific incidence of "vision"; and another (not unrelated) into the narrative identity of the *Marriage*, if any. Forms of coherence obtained by the privileging of luminous aphorisms are no longer enough, even as there is a great deal in Blake's writing to encourage such an approach.

The book's somewhat military style—the naming of parts that is all too standard as a dissertation format—and the fact that long and important passages in German are not translated, is not likely to assist the author in finding a wide audience for his book. But he does demonstrate, once again, that Friedrich Schlegel is an important figure for the understanding of Romantic theories of meaning and communication.