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N O T E

## All the Evidence That's Fit to Print

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3. All the Evidence That's Fit to Print

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A scholar should presumably consider all the evidence relevant to his argument and discuss the major objections to his theories before rejecting them. Ideally, he should as well make the evidence public when it has not already been printed. A difficulty arises, however, with evidence which appears to be superficially valid but which has been, or easily could be, discredited. An example is provided by Richard C. Jackson, an egregious Blake enthusiast remarkable for the carelessness of his raptures and diction about Blake. He repeatedly referred to "our all-but-adorable poet" and to the vulgarity and purblind ignorance of those who disagree with William Blake or R.C. Jackson. Apparently he was a harmless crank, who may be allowed to orate in the wings as the President of the William Blake Society of Arts and Letters.

However, in a series of articles (clippings of which were recently given to The Tate Gallery and xerox copies of which were kindly sent on to me by Mr. Martin Butlin), President Jackson makes a number of interesting if scarcely substantiated claims about Blake. Some seem trivial and therefore negligible; others seem false and therefore negligible. One fact, however, makes them worth considering briefly before dismissing them. Jackson's father, born in 1810, according to his son, knew Blake and was a kind of disciple. Some of the facts below, which appear not to have been printed elsewhere, are given on the authority of his father, and others may derive from the same source. It appears to me that all of them may chiefly be traced to President Jackson's confused mind, but it may be well to place his statements in evidence before dismissing them.

(1) Jackson owned "several of the 'household gods' of Blake's [sic]. His chairs, and their cushions worked by his wife, his classical dinner service, some of his tea-set, and, what is still far more interesting, his eight-day English clock, which still keeps good time" ("William Blake, Hampstead, and John Linnell", South London Observer, summer 1912 -- the periodical and approximate date [June-August 1912] are given in a MS title-page). No evidence is given to support this provenance. It seems highly unlikely that Blake, who lived in only two or three rooms for the last twenty-four years of his life, should have preserved such extensive furnishings. Furthermore, after his death his "Furniture [was] sold" for £1.10s in April 1828 for his widow by John Linnell (according to a MS note by Linnell in the papers of Miss Joan Linnell Ivimy), and thus passed out of the family. A "classical dinner service" is very hard to reconcile with the accounts of Blake's extremely narrow circumstances in his last years.

(2) Blake was paid £40 apiece for his (forty-three) engravings for Young's Night Thoughts (1797) -- that is, a total of £1,720 (*ibid*). No one else suggests how much Blake was paid, but this total seems far too high -- about as much as he is known to have received from all sources throughout his long life. In 1800 Blake was clearly in modest circumstances, quite irreconcilable with recent possession of a fortune such as this.

(3) At this time "a poor brother artist calling upon him at Hercules Building, he gave [t]his man £40; which sat [sic] him on his legs again, rejecting the return of the money when this friend recovered his position, saying 'what he had given had been lent by the Giver of all good things'" (ibid). Unlike the others, this story is not inherently improbable, but it is known elsewhere only in a different version. Frederick Tatham, in his contemporary life of Blake printed in 1906, says Blake was approached by "a certain free thinking Speculator", who said his children were starving and asked for a loan. "Blake lent him £40", with which his wife bought a gawdy dress -- the money was probably never returned. Perhaps Jackson was misremembering Tatham's story.

(4) "My father saw in the artist's 'Salon' [sic] in Fountain Court, in the Strand", the seven-foot-high drawing of "The Last Judgment". "My father said Frederick Tatham had it in his house in Lisson Grove in 1846 or 1847" ("William Blake at the Tate Gallery. Resident in Lambeth from 1793-1800 [sic]", South London Press, 31 Oct. 1913). These facts may be accurate; the great drawing is now lost, but Tatham (who did live at Lisson Grove) probably acquired it with most of the rest of Blake's property at the death of Catherine Blake in 1831.

(5) "Blake exhibited it [his drawing of 'The Deluge'] to my father, saying it was a sketch he made on the sea-shore on a rough day at Felpham" (ibid). This seems possible, but one wonders where Jackson and his father saw this extremely unusual drawing together before it was exhibited in 1913.

(6) "My respected father detailed to myself many particulars respecting the mode of life" of Blake. Blake's drawing of "The Ghost of a Flea" ("meaning thereby the personality of ... John Varley") was "seen" (i.e., drawn) "by way of shaking him off, so that he [Varley] might ask him 'no more questions'" ("William Blake: An Unlooked for Discovery", South London Observer, 22 June 1912). Jackson had a grudge against the "detestable" Varley, and this malevolence, rather than the truth, is probably the source of the story. It might, on the other hand, be true.

(7) "My father told me that the dear Blake, while residing at Hercules Buildings, Lambeth, that [sic] he should say the one [sic] joyaunce of Blake's life was when he had a garden of his own and could bask in the sunshine 'neath his own vine -- a vine which had been presented to him by the artist Romney .... This vine, I was given to understand, was grafted from the great vine at Versailles or Fontainebleau. Of course I have no certified particulars of all this; of course not; but this presentation was made to William Blake ... and supposed to come from some place in the country which Romney had, and had given up at or about the time of Blake becoming resident at Lambeth [1790, or, according to Jackson, 1793. Blake would not let it be cut] ... by any inexperienced person". Jackson traces Blake's fig tree too as "coming from Romney's garden" (ibid). Elsewhere ("William Blake's Lambeth 'Dulce Domum'", South London Observer, summer 1912), he says that Catherine Blake "made wine of the grapes in October". Gilchrist (apparently on the authority of Flaxman's sister-in-law Maria Denman) claimed that Blake would allow no one to prune the vine and that it never bore ripe fruit. Blake certainly knew Romney in the 1790's, and the story of the vine-root gift may even be true, though there are "no certified particulars ... of course not".

(8) "My father" also said that Blake "never enjoyed any of his etching-painting rooms, as he had in [sic] his panelled room (his 'atelier') at Lambeth" (the "Discovery" article above). It must be remembered that "my father" was not born until ten years after Blake left Lambeth, and that Jackson is remembering conversations with his father when the President was "a very small boy". The Lambeth painting room may well have been Blake's favourite, but this evidence does not go far to prove it. More interesting, because first-hand evidence, is the statement that the room was wainscotted and on the ground floor at the back, looking out on the spacious garden, where the vine was "still to be seen nestling round the open casement". The evidence is undoubtedly first-hand, but there may be some doubt as to whether it concerns Blake. The purpose of Jackson's articles was to show that the London County Council, Gilchrist, and every one else had identified the wrong house in Lambeth as Blake's. The letters he quotes demonstrate that Jackson had not persuaded the London County Council, and as Hercules Buildings was pulled down about 1930 it is hard to check the evidence now. We may surely conclude, however, that the house of Blake or a neighbour had a wainscotted back room and a vine-wreathed window about 1913.

What is a scholar to do with such trifling yet troubling evidence? Should he compound Jackson's folly by repeating it? Or should he quietly bury it again with a wince? Perhaps he should simply raise the problem, and, having made the evidence more public, ignore it except when it seems directly relevant to his case.

#### 4. A Bibliographical Note

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References to Blake in the first half of the nineteenth century are astonishingly few. Those listed in the Nurmi-Bentley Blake Bibliography typically portray Blake as a "madman" who excelled as an artist but faltered as a poet. A reference, hitherto unnoticed -- "The Poetry of Sacred and Legendary Art" \*--anon. rev., Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, LXV (Feb. 1849), 183 -- at once reveals the reigning attitude of the early nineteenth century toward Blake and suggests the direction that subsequent criticism was to take. The reviewer comments, "There is greatness in the simplicity of Blake's angels: 'The morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy.' Apparently this remark was inspired by Mrs. Jameson's statement: 'The most original, and, in truth, the only new and original version of the Scripture idea of angels which I met with, is that of William Blake, a poet painter, somewhat mad as we are told, if indeed his manners were not rather 'the telescope of truth,' a sort of poetical clairvoyance, bringing the unearthly nearer to him than to others. His adoring angels float rather than fly, and, with their half-liquid draperies, seem to dissolve into light and love: and his rejoicing angels -- behold them -- sending up their voices with the morning stars, that 'singing in their glory move'" (I, 80; the quotation is from Lycidas, l. 180).

The context in which the reviewer's remark appears is perhaps of special significance. Blake is mentioned among those artists who skillfully combine poetry with painting, using the former to enliven and

\*Reviewing a book of the same title by Mrs. [Anna Brownell Murphy] Jameson (1848). Immensely popular, this book went through many editions until it was edited and enlarged by Estelle M. Hurl, Sacred and Legendary Art by Anna Jameson, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1895).