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R E V I E W

Huib Emmer and Ken Hollings, Bethlehem  
Hospital: William Blake in Hell, an opera

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the graphic part, indispensable contributors to any serious comprehensive reading. Thus we get embarrassing special pleading over the use of the term "cruel fire" in a draft version of the poem: though "coloured," the epithet "cruel"

is actually non-committal. Fierce strength, causing injury and pain, may be cruel but does not always on that account become evil: everything depends on the motive, the occasion, the result. . . . War also in a defensive noble cause cannot be condemned merely because of the cruelty it involves. (129)

Sethna does not realize how increasingly un-Blakean his reading becomes the more he seeks to defend it by such arguments. Clearly, the drafts are an inconvenience to Sethna, as is the illustration, which he justifies in the end only as being enigmatic, as a kind of refusal to illustrate.

The book's longest and most tedious chapter, the sixth, is headed "The Poem in the General Context of Blake's Work," in which Sethna sees his task essentially in the terms of one defending a thesis at all costs: "We have to support our identification of his beast of prey by whatever links up with our poem from outside it in the context of this work." The results are predictable. He begins, however, by quoting C. M. Bowra's discussion of the poem in *The Romantic Imagination* (1957), which he finds "excellent in several respects, but . . . quite astray at one place" and suffering from "an all-round shortcoming in that it pitches the Christ-significance of the Tyger too low." Bowra, like most of the rest of us, considered that the time "when the stars threw down their spears" was "in some enormous crisis when the universe turned round in its course and began to move from light to darkness";

Sethna restricts the crisis to Heaven's enemies, not involving Heaven itself. Once again, he does not perceive how un-Blakean this sounds. In the chapter as a whole, as in the Milton chapter, much material helpful to an understanding of "The Tyger" is drawn conveniently together in one place, but—most inconveniently—it is used to support a radical misunderstanding.

Chapter 7 offers a brief "Retrospect" of the thesis and acknowledges that the proposed reading is, insofar as it projects a terribly shining wrathful Christ, shocking:

The poet is profoundly shaken, almost bewildered, because, as Milton tells us, the revolted angels, after being mercilessly vanquished, were spared annihilation only to be everlastingly banished from Heaven by one who, though remaining gloriously divine, seems to out-Satan Satan in dreadful power—the deity who is no longer Christ the Lamb but Christ the Tyger.

For Sethna, we find, the poem is an affirmative not a subversive one, but then, he had not heard about the need to take into account "point of view and context": Blake's questioner is simply Blake for him. There is a certain complacency in this conclusion, as there is in Raine's letter of 1979, in which after listing her main points of difference with Sethna, she writes: "But that does not lessen the pleasure with which I read your thoughts on the poem you and I both love and have studied perhaps more carefully than anyone else living in the present world of generation." Even in 1979, I am happy to say, that was very far from being the case. I would be even happier if I could say that we also are entirely free these days from the arrogance of believing that our own more up-to-date studies are alone the adequate ones.

## *Opera on William Blake Destroyed by Its Own Radicalism*

*Bethlehem Hospital: William Blake in Hell*, Opera by Huib Emmer and Ken Hollings, performed by Theatre Group 'Hollandia,' under the supervision of Johan Simons and Lucas Vis. Psychiatric Centre 'Vogelenzang' Bennebroek. Performances through 25th of October.

Reviewed by Frits van der Waa, trans. by Jules van Lieshout

The task that Huib Emmer and Ken Hollings have set themselves in their opera *Bethlehem Hospital* is not a small one. The starting-point was the work and character of the English visionary poet and graphic artist William Blake. The problem raised is ethical, and deals with the human soul as an intersection of lofty and crude instincts. The events take place in the madhouse where Blake, according to a fictitious story, is supposed to have spent the last thirty years of his life.

It was predictable that the result would stick in the throat. That it has turned so unpalatable is a disappointment, nevertheless.

The nicest thing one can say about *Bethlehem Hospital* is that the piece is destroyed by its own radicalism. The granite-like idiom of composer Emmer, the juxtaposition of speech and song, the decision to put the performance into the hands of a theatre group, and even the choice to perform the opera "on location"—in the chapel

of the Psychiatric Centre Vogelenzang—all this bespeaks a dislike of half-heartedness.

*Bethlehem Hospital* has little in common with a traditional opera, but for one thing. The piece ends with a death scene. That takes up the entire third act and is deadly in all respects. Until that moment Emmer's music is still fairly captivating. To be sure, this is due more to abstract variables like a diverse lay-out and delicately balanced sound contrasts, than to a profusion of ideas or theatrical drive. His two-part counterpoint is masterful, but that alone does not make an opera. In the final act—which, as opposed to the other two, has been entirely through-composed—his rigid, modular treatment of chords, rhythms, and tones runs aground completely.

It goes without saying that the librettist Hollings shares the guilt in this. It is asking a little too much to fill an

entire act with internal memories, images, and reflections that are taken from Blake and embedded in the text. Wagner could handle that, but Emmer cannot.

The players and musicians are not to blame. Charles van Tassel and David Barron, initially playing an insane surgeon and a pyromaniac, then the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah, and finally a split Blake, heroically work their way through their interminable lyrics. Anne Haenen, cast as Blake's wife, comes a little less into her own. And, conducted by Lucas Vis, the orchestra, an ensemble for the occasion, realize the percussory building block score with iron consistency.

It is a pity that director Johan Simons, stuck with this forbidding work, has not been able to capture its uncompromising spirit and has resorted to vehement movements and effects that are sometimes inventive

but just as often ludicrous. Actors box each other's ears with bouquets, the two prophets have false beards that reach the ground, and there is even a head that explodes. The performance would not have been saved by a drastic stylization, but it would have been made a lot more enjoyable.

The designers, on the other hand, have understood: they have put up a set dominated by straight lines, made from glass, metal, and stone. In front is a transparent square column with a half-naked man, a prisoner condemned to death, inside. He is the only figure with a personality, as appears when he opens his mouth halfway through the piece. This may be a slightly painful judgment for an opera that lasts over two hours, but its essence lies in that one oppressive scene—the only one, a ten-minute soliloquy.

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## *More or Less Disturbed Mental Life*

Reviewed by Jacqueline Oskamp, trans. by Jules van Lieshout

Homemade opera is a tricky problem and this genre is usually looked upon skeptically. However, Huib Emmer has now made an opera—albeit to an English text—that stands the test of criticism magnificently. Music and text are complementary and well-balanced, and the performance is captivating all through. The libretto to *Bethlehem Hospital*, written by Ken Hollings, is based on a legend of the English poet and painter William Blake (1757-1827): he is supposed to have spent the last twenty years of his life in the London mental institution Bethlehem Hospital. The opera is produced in co-operation with the theatre

group Hollandia and performed on location in the psychiatric ward at Vogelenzang. Unexpectedly, the room was not half filled with patients—after all, a nice break—they were given their own performance *in camera*.

Apart from the fact that Blake dies at the end of the opera, the narrative lacks a clear plot or dramatic development. How could it be different if all characters enjoy a more or less disturbed mental life? This is about associations and fantasy worlds. The company consists of disparate figures like the "surgeon" Dr. Tearguts, acted and sung brilliantly by Charles van Tassel; the famous pyromaniac Martin the Fireraiser, played by David Barron; and, of course, William Blake (Jeroen Willems) accompanied by his wife Catherine (Anne Haenen). She is the only normal person in the story, although that can be properly parenthesized in view of the masochistic manner in which she allows herself to be continuously rejected.

Everybody is agreed on one thing: Bethlehem Hospital is hell. The man who is condemned to death, and who fiercely stares at the audience throughout the entire performance, is the symbol of that. At the beginning of the second act he narrates how he has killed his mother in the hope of winning his father's love. In vain. In short, this is the hell of suppression.

There is disagreement about the possibilities for liberation: the surgeon, Dr. Tearguts, believes in science and wants to cut up one of his fellow patients on the spot. There is also a clergyman who expects salvation from God and who gets all ecstatic at the idea of God sawing open all chests and finding empty hearts. Blake, on the other hand, believes in the power of the imagination and in following emotions and urges *à-la-De Sade*. That is how he is portrayed: he is not mad, but he has abandoned all convention and devotes himself to his fantasy.