

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

Deborah Dorfman, *Blake in the Nineteenth Century*

Irene H. Chayes

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 3, Issue 4, May, 1970, pp. 91-94



than he had originally promised? On firmer ground, the detailed exposure of Cromek's dealing with Blake leaves no room for doubt that Blake was swindled; previously we have tended to side with Blake on emotional or intuitive grounds, but Blake Records exposes Cromek's double-dealing very nicely. The Blake-Linnell accounts leave a much different impression: here one can see that Linnell was accused unjustly by Palmer and others. Linnell emerges as a hard-headed man, one who would not scruple to dun a nobleman, for example; more of an entrepreneur than a Maecenas. But he did not pretend to be Blake's benefactor (and would Blake have enjoyed it if he had?), and his dealings with Blake were dignified and straightforward. Frederick Tatham, it must be said, remains about as understandable as Antonio in The Tempest.

At times in reading Blake Records one feels very close to Blake indeed, seeing him through the eyes of his contemporaries. Professor Bentley has wisely not interfered with this feeling of contemporaneity, providing only short, lucid expository links where they are needed. The result is a sort of do-it-yourself Blake biography kit, which at this stage of Blake studies, is more useful than - in the absence of new major discoveries - a new biography.

--MDP

2. Blake in the Nineteenth Century: His Reputation as a Poet from Gilchrist to Yeats, by Deborah Dorfman. Yale Studies in English, Vol. 170. Yale University Press, 1969. Pp. vx + 314. \$8.75.

Exactly how, after Blake's death, the nineteenth century tried to come to terms with what remained of his work and what could be learned about his life: this is a subject on which a major publication has been long overdue. Previously, according to Miss Dorfman, there was only a 1953 dissertation; except for her footnote references, it seems to have sunk without a trace. The present study apparently began as a dissertation also, and the author has been faithful to the genre in approach and organization as well as in the paradigmatic title. Although the immense amount of material she has to draw on might have lent itself to any one of several emphases when the dissertation became a book, intended for a new audience, Miss Dorfman keeps almost exclusively to the main line of chronology, the shortest distance between the earliest date and the latest, and compromises with the other options as she goes. One result, as the footnotes threaten to rise into the text, is that we are aware of how much is being left out, a larger and more complex world of documents, personalities, cultural attitudes, and ideas, which is hinted in the citations at the bottom of the page but which the author is not able to explore in her dutiful march through the decades. Only in the relatively less compressed and more unified chapters on Gilchrist's Life and the Ellis-Yeats edition is there more than a glimpse of the kind of book that may have been one revision away.

Although the subtitle--also from the conventions of the dissertation--makes "reputation" the key word, the account is concerned mainly with nineteenth-century editions of the poetry and the evolution of a Blake criticism. Qualitative judgments are inescapable, and here Miss Dorfman is most disappointing, not only because of her chronological approach and her exclusions. Her individual comments, though brief, are perceptive, pointed, often witty; but when she steps back for a general view, she allows her heterogeneous company of early Blakeans to fade together in a mist of retrospective compliment. There is no reason, certainly, to object to the statement that, starting from "nothing--no printed texts, no reading public, no confidence in a man presumed insane--Blake's nineteenth-century editors cleared a narrow path for readers to approach him." The pioneer commentators, as well--and this is a point not sufficiently stressed, I think--were capable of incidental critical insights which are a vindication of the power of literary meanings to communicate themselves, even at an unpropitious time. Nevertheless, side by side with legitimate curiosity and admiration and a sense of scholarly responsibility, there was something else at work in the age which Miss Dorfman's own evidence suggests, although she does not follow it up.

It was not only that, as she observes, the critics tried to recreate Blake in images of themselves: Swinburne's arch-rebel, Smetham's "religio-aesthetic monk," Arthur Symons' precursor of Nietzsche, Ellis' Kabbalist initiate, Yeats' Irish poet. What Miss Dorfman calls the "educational diversion" of rewriting Blake's poems--Cunningham, Swinburne, the Rossettis, Edwin Ellis, and W. B. Yeats all indulged--was of a piece with the cavalier editorial practice of "improving" his texts for publication; William Rossetti was, again, a particular offender. Tatham's sacrifice by fire and Ruskin's mutilations were more dramatic, but it is difficult to regard them as different except in form and degree from the other expressions of what at best was an ambivalence among Blake's professed champions. Prophetically, Blake himself had supplied the terms to describe what happened to the body of work he left behind. In the ideal contrariety of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, which was also the ideal relation between artist and public, the Prolific was inexhaustible and active, the Devourer insatiable but passive. But the precondition of their creative tension was that both should be "always upon earth"; by implication, if either disappeared, the other would lose his function and hence his identity. Blake did not foresee that when the Prolific ceased to produce, the Devourer would cease to be passive and would try to play both roles.

Edwin Ellis, in the edition whose character he appears to have done more than his collaborator to determine, also rewrote and recast some of the poems, as Miss Dorfman points out, and dated and rearranged those that were being published according to what he understood as their "technical vocabulary of symbols." The symbols belonged to the explicitly named occult "system" (unfortunately, the same word is used in the famous speech by Los, so that it is subject to double confusion) which was expounded by Ellis and Yeats in their first volume--no less

an arbitrary "improvement" of Blake than the textual and editorial changes; another example of the Devourer at his usurping work. But Miss Dorfman has changed the direction of her comparisons; in the last pages of her last chapter she is already backing away from the nineteenth century toward a vantage point of her own. She quotes Northrop Frye on the obvious critical faults of the Ellis-Yeats commentary, and she herself calls attention to the failure by both editors to recognize Blake's vitality and combativeness as a creator and thinker. Yet her estimate of the contribution of the Ellis-Yeats edition as a whole--that it laid the groundwork for serious later study of Blake's longer poems--ends as a selective acceptance of the Ellis-Yeats "system." Why? Because such an acceptance is what actually has occurred: "Once the existence of the four Zoas, the principle of fourfold meaning, the dialectical progression, and the theory of symbol had been absorbed, the 'System' was open to addition, qualification, documentation, and comparative studies."

A number of twentieth-century expositions of Blake, major and minor, have of course been related to the Ellis-Yeats interpretation in the ways listed by Miss Dorfman, even without direct influence by anything actually written by either man. But continuity is not necessarily progress, and the fact of the relationship may as well raise, or confirm, doubts about the twentieth-century commentators as elevate Ellis and Yeats. The number of years since the publication of the Ellis-Yeats edition in 1893 is now greater than that between 1893 and the date of Blake's death; even allowing for an unusual conservatism among many of those writing about Blake, the developments in the study of literature during the past three decades have had their effect on how his poetry too is approached. More accurate texts, new studies of his intellectual background and his literary and pictorial sources, and improved techniques of reading the poems themselves are making any overall, "systematic" interpretation unnecessary, even for the longer works; on the contrary, it may be a hindrance. Merely to try to imagine a Blake scholarship or criticism still limited to variations on Miss Dorfman's formula is to be reminded of the changes that have been taking place since mid-century, our mid-century. Practically, at least, the trend is away from diagrams and doctrine and more and more toward investigations of the language and the forms Blake actually used, in both his poetry and his designs.

Nowhere, however, does Deborah Dorfman indicate what the situation in Blake studies is today, or even what it was when she started on her own project. Except for a few documentary references and appeals to contemporary scholars in matters of opinion (but almost never opinion on Blake's poetry, and not their own interpretations), she might be writing at some indeterminate time in the middling past, demonstrably later only than 1924. When in a two-page "Afterword" she quotes from Blake's "first truly modern commentator," it is S. Foster Damon she means, and she cites him twice again before concluding. The particular quotations chosen sound "humanistic" enough, but ironically (and unavoidably, considering when he began his work), it is Damon who probably has been most responsible for keeping nineteenth-century views of Blake

at least formally alive. Most of the books listed in William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols were published before 1900, and the commentators Damon calls on are among those Miss Dorfman discusses. In one instance, the much later Blake Dictionary (s. v. "Thel") preserves as biographical fact what she shows to have been Edwin Ellis' invention: the supposed unborn child of the Blakes, supposedly lost by a miscarriage.

The small irony that involves the author herself does not affect the genuine scholarly value of her researches, which also enable us to see that the subject does not belong wholly to the past and that neither 1893 nor 1924 really marked the beginning of the "modern" in Blake studies. If Blake's story is, as Miss Dorfman sums it up, "peculiarly a history of reclamation," it would seem that the greater part of the task--reclaiming the man and his work from his Victorian heirs and exegetes--is barely under way.

Irene H. Chayes
Silver Spring, Maryland

DISCUSSION

"With Intellectual Spears and Long-winged Arrows of Thought"

1. The Devil's Syntax and the O.E.D.

Mary Lynn Johnson
Department of English
Georgia State University

How should we parse "Damn. braces: Bless relaxes"?¹ Does this proverb mean that damning braces [the one who damns] and blessing relaxes [the one who blesses]? Or are braces to be damned and relaxes to be blessed? The arguments on both sides are intriguing.

1. The act of damning is stimulating; the act of blessing is enervating. Although Damn and Bless are awkward nouns, the fact that they are capitalized, as well as the placing of a pause-period after Damn, strengthens the impression that they are nevertheless the subjects of balanced declarative clauses. The colon after braces and the period after relaxes further suggest the declarative sentence, the indicative mood, as in other paired statements among the Proverbs of Hall-- "Excess of sorrow laughs. Excess of joy weeps" or "The cistern contains: the fountain overflows," for example. Thus the pronouncing of the word "damn" or the act of damning anything deserving of an honest man's indignation is healthy, toning up the nerves and girding one for battle. The weak, "angelic" act of blessing, on the other hand, weakens