

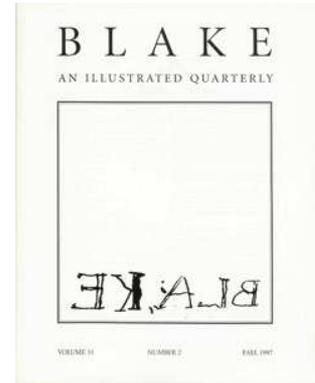
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R E V I E W

English File: Poetry Backpack: William Blake

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volume bearing the Greek text of Sophocles,³⁹ which have offset very faintly onto facing pages showing two columns of footnotes separated by a vertical rule. On many leaves one or more eighteenth-century hands wrote in old brown ink a translation (into very colloquial eighteenth century English) of *Ajax* (ff. 3-22) by Sophocles, and another hand made learned annotations in English, Latin, Greek.

At apparently random intervals (including ff. 35^r, 43^v, 45^v, 48^v, 51^r [?], 60^r, 71^r [?], 79^r, 81^r, 83^r, 91^r, 103^r, 113^r, 114^r, 116^v), generally on pages with little or no other writing,⁴⁰ "Blake," "W^m Blake," or "William Blake" is written in old brown ink, once in mirror-writing ("BLAKE" on f. 116^v), and twice in stipple ("W^m Blake" on ff. 43^v, 45^v). On f. 71^r is an ornamental B followed by a flourish, with two drawings beneath it.

There are very small, simple, amateurish sketches in pencil or black ink on ff. 71^r (illus. 9), 79^r (illus. 10), 147^r (see illus. 33), 148^v, 149^v, 150^r, 181^r, 182^v, and 183^r (see illus. 34).

There are two or more hands in the Sophocles Manuscript, and these are similar to but distinct from that of the poet.

Probably before Blunden acquired the book, 126 or more leaves were torn out, including all the printed Greek text.⁴¹

Edmund Blunden wrote an autobiographical essay entitled "Notes on Friends, Acquaintances &c" (one about "An occasion April 14, 1921," and another about a visit to Thomas Hardy at his Max Gate residence in 1923) on 12 blank rectos (ff. 24-37).

³⁹ John Byrne has read the offset running-heads of *Ajax*, *Electra*, *Trachiniai*, and *Philoctetes*.

⁴⁰ "Blake" is written at the top of f. 35^r which now bears Edmund Blunden's essay, and "Taffy Williams" is written between two "Blake"s on f. 103^r. The adjacent leaves are blank. "Sunderland" is associated with the "Blake" on ff. 43^r, 71^r, 79^r, 91^r, and 114^r.

⁴¹ There are surviving stubs before f. 1 and after ff. 1 (2), 3, 5, 7, 9, 11-12, 15-16, 18 (2?), 20, 24, 38-41, 43-46, 48-49, 50 (6?), 53-56, 58-61, 64-65, 68-69, 75-81, 83-84, 86-90, 94-100, 104-05, 109-10, 114-16, 125, 127-34, 140 (3?), 141, 143-45, 146 (2), 149 (2), 150-51, 153, 154 (2), 155 (2), 157-59, 161-64, 166-71, 173-78, 182, 184-87, 189—numbers joined by hyphens indicate a leaf removed after each leaf.

R E V I E W S

English File: Poetry Backpack: William Blake. BBC2 daytime educational program for television. Broadcast Friday, 23 May 1997.

Reviewed by A. A. GILL

Poetry Backpack is another daytime educational strand, made for older schoolchildren. Television rarely makes me very angry: this managed it. It was supposed to be a bright, punchy, accessible, undemanding yet invigorating romp around William Blake. He was, we were told a difficult poet, but worth it. We were told this by Nigel Planer, the actor who was the hippie in *The Young Ones*—an inspired choice of interlocuter for a metaphysical poet. Blake is rather a good poet for young teenagers. He also could be good television. This was frightful. Beyond parody or invective.

Where Blake is mystical and imaginative, this treatment was remedially literal and as unimaginative as bathroom scales. Imagine making the illustrations for *Songs of Innocence and Experience* come alive for young minds by explaining the technical process of etching. They did. It's like trying to explain *Newsnight* by taking the back off your television. And then there was some woman who was called a poet but who could easily have been the understudy for the naughty yellow cow lady. She helpfully pointed out that Blake's special magic was all in the words, and in particular, how the words were arranged. And some people thought the rose that wasn't feeling too well might be suffering from wormy sex, but it didn't have to be: it could be anything you liked. And then Nigel got on a Tube train and looked at the stripy seat, gave us a knowing look and made the vast metaphorical leap to a Tyger. Geddit? Give me strength. What an immortal eye.

It wasn't just that it was bad television, failing all three Es—there's tons of lousy television. What is maddening is when lazy, dumb, patronizing programs go and stamp all over another medium of culture. Poetry is the greatest prize for bothering to learn English, and Blake is one of English poetry's supreme pleasures. God, I pitied the poor English teachers who will have to resurrect some interest in him after this travesty. The box is continually accused of being moronic. It isn't. But when education programs actively de-educate, it's difficult to defend. I ardently hope an invisible worm finds the heart of everyone guilty of this terrible pile.

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