

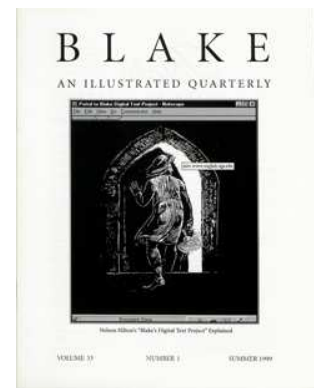
# AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

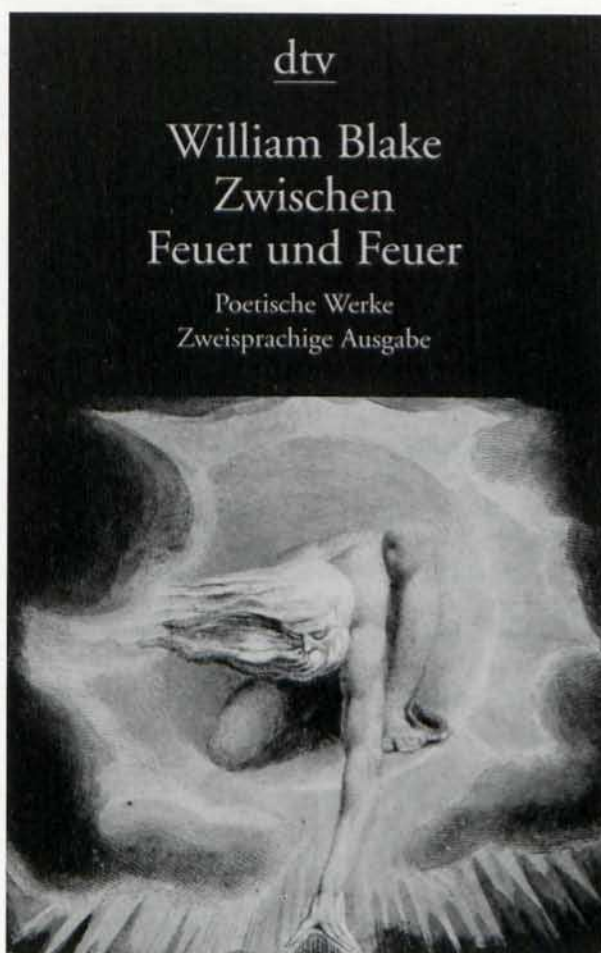
N E W S

## Urizen in New York City

Elizabeth B. Bentley

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*Verdienst*, daß der Messias fiel & einen Himmel bildete aus dem, was er dem Abgrund stahl. (trans. Eichhorn, 217; my italics)

Der Vernunft kam es tatsächlich so vor, als wäre *das Begehren* verstoßen worden, doch *der Teufel stellt es so dar*, daß der Messias fiel und daraus was er dem Abgrund stahl einen Himmel baute. (trans. Möhring, 145; my italics)

Eichhorn's *Verlangen* as a translation of "desire" may have been prompted by the sound patterns of the nearby *Vernunft*, *vertrieben*, and *Verdienst*; cognate with "longing," *Verlangen* emphasizes need and nonfulfillment. Möhring's *Begehren*, a less common word, awakens biblical and sexual resonances and connotes a fiercer, more active desire that better suits Blake's Devil. Eichhorn's "es ist des Teufels Verdienst" seems a rare mistranslation, rendering "the Devil's account" not as "the Devil's version" but in the sense of "it is on account of the Devil that . . ." Further down, Eichhorn's translation of "in Milton, the Father is Destiny" as "in Milton ist der Vater die Vorsehung [providence]" gives the phrase a more positive inflection than it has in Blake, or in Möhring's translation of "Destiny" as *Schicksal*.

On the whole, Möhring makes more extensive and imaginative use of the capabilities of the German language—compound words and neologisms, the subjunctive mood for indirect speech, more antiquated or formal vocabulary choices where these are more exact or contain appropriate allusions. These lend his translations more power. Eichhorn's translations, geared toward accessibility, sometimes choose sound over exactitude of sense, yet still manage most of the time to preserve Blakean nuances. Given their distinctive aims and intended audiences, both are admirable. These publications should make Blake's art available to new groups of readers, and continue the reception of Blake—apparently, now, a more-or-less integrated Blake for a more-or-less unified Germany—into a new millennium.

## NEWSLETTER

### URIZEN IN NEW YORK CITY

BY DR. ELIZABETH B. BENTLEY

At the end of January 1999, we heard that Sotheby's (New York) was going to offer at auction a copy of William Blake's *The First Book of Urizen*, one of eight known copies of his "most ambitiously designed work"<sup>1</sup> up to 1794.

It did not take long for Jerry, my husband, to identify it as copy E when he discovered that *Urizen* was from the estate of Mrs. John Hay Whitney (Betsy Cushing Whitney). Copy E has been associated in our minds with the Whitney family for some time. In the mid-1960s we had contacted all the locatable heirs of Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney (died 1942) to enquire whether any knew of the whereabouts of copy E of *Urizen*, which, along with copy N of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, had come into Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney's possession just before or after they were exhibited at the Grolier Club in 1919-20.<sup>2</sup> Nothing came of our enquiries. I understand that Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney was the mother of John Hay Whitney, the publisher of the New York Herald Tribune and subsidiaries; he was also the United States Ambassador to the Court of St. James and was notable for his interest in the world of horses. The *Urizen*, at least, seems to have passed from Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney to John Hay Whitney and then to his widow. It is quite possible that the Blake titles were scarcely noticed when they were inherited as part of the contents of one of the many Whitney residences.

<sup>1</sup> G. E. Bentley, Jr. *Blake Books* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) 181, 476.

<sup>2</sup> G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Books Supplement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) 38. *Visions* (N) still has not been found.



Members of the Whitney family may have looked at Blake's work in the 79-year interval between its last public showing in 1920 and its appearance in the 1999 sale. However, when one looks at the 567-page Whitney catalog<sup>3</sup> and sees that *Urizen* was 535th out of 1240 items in a four day sale (22-25 April), one realizes that not every family member and friend would necessarily be aware of a 24-leaf book in a slim green morocco slip case. The catalog title page introducing the third sale session pictures a dozen books, and the Blake book is not noticeable except for being the only green book amongst the 12.

We hadn't seen the catalog when Jerry went down to see the Whitney copy of *Urizen* and to consider whether this copy with 24 designs was "complete," although other copies had up to four more plates. He returned that night to Toronto full of excitement and pleasure over this copy, even though he had to make extensive corrections to the *Blake Books* descriptions of copy E.

It did not take much to convince me that it was important for anyone interested in the work of William Blake to take the opportunity to see this book now. Not only was it an opportunity for which I had been waiting over 30 years, but also I was well aware that it was quite possible that this last copy in private hands would disappear into an inaccessible private collection.

Of course, we knew several likely bidders, and Blakean email lines buzzed with gossip about potential buyers. When the catalog was issued a few weeks later, the estimated price was \$500,000 to \$700,000. I did not even translate this sum into Canadian dollars as I usually do with anything outside Canada which we covet. It was unimaginably beyond our means, but I still wished to see this Blake work and to be present at its sale.

I had been to book and picture auctions at Sotheby's and Christie's in London, but not in New York, so this was going to be a new experience. There was also going to be an interesting exhibition held at the Morgan Library which we both wished to see.

We communicated with friends of Blake and arranged to join Robert Newman Essick, a teacher, scholar, and collector; John Windle, a prominent dealer in antiquarian books with a polished and strong emphasis on Blake; Morris Eaves, a teacher, scholar, and editor of *Blake*, with his partner, Georgia; and Joseph Viscomi, a teacher and scholar whose studies have led current thinking about how Blake worked as a printer and artist.

The sale consisted of selected furnishings from five of Betsy Cushing Whitney's residences including the Greentree estate (on Long Island), and houses in Thomasville (Georgia), Saratoga Springs (New York), St. James (London), and Beekman Place (New York City) where, we were told, Mr.

and Mrs. John Hay Whitney had never slept and where the Blake item turned up.

We were a cheerful lot as we joined forces on Thursday 22 April for viewing the items being offered in the six Whitney estate sessions, trying to respect the privacy of Bob Essick yet curious about his plans. We met other Blakeans, exchanging information about the location of various Blake materials, while keeping one eye (or both) on the case where *Urizen* was shelved. From time to time Sotheby staff members would take the book out of its slipcase and display a design or two to a client. Were these all potential bidders?

This was the last opportunity to look at any of the 1240 items in the Whitney sale, and I confess that I hunted out a few items which had caught my fancy in the catalog. I even had attending staff turn over a small piece of furniture to discover that it was not as old as I had been romancing it; that "chipped" did indeed mean just that; that the malachite table which Jerry coveted was not only a veneer, but a thin and cracked veneer at that. Luckily, I remembered three things: (a) we had a dinner engagement that night, (b) we had not the wherewithal to engage in such folly, and (c) I had not arranged for my credit to be vetted by Sotheby's—and the coming afternoon was to be absorbed by William Blake.

When the Sotheby's staff closed the exhibition at noon, they put into operation a masterful transfer of goods. They had been on duty in the showrooms from ten until noon. Now all 141 items for the 6 p.m. sale had to be moved from the exhibition rooms to the building which houses the auction rooms and offices of Sotheby's, New York, which is some distance away.

Those specialists who are in charge of the protection, cataloging, estimating, promotion and presentation of books and manuscripts did not have their auction until the next afternoon, but they were meeting with prospective buyers to show particular items, and it had been arranged to show *Urizen* to the seven of us at 1:30, and to another person or persons at 4 p.m. It is quite possible that others followed later and the next morning.

From 1:30 to 4 p.m., William Blake was indeed with us. The book was held by a Sotheby staff member (Kimball Higgs) and the pages turned for us. Some of us had slides from other copies, but even better were some color prints of what is being entered into the electronic Blake Archive being produced at the University of Virginia. I could barely breathe, what with the excitement of each page coming to view, photographic representations showing the kinds of variants which are commonplace in all Blake's color-printed works. In the spring 2000 issue of *Blake*, a proper bibliographical description will appear. I can only attempt to describe the fun it was to listen and either challenge or accept other reactions from persons whose lives are so involved with books, literature and art. It was a grand experience. I was so

<sup>3</sup> Sotheby's, *The Estate of Mrs. John Hay Whitney to be sold 22-25 April 1999* (NY: Sotheby's, 1999).



involved that I did not want to eat dinner or to try to attend a play; I only wanted to be peaceful and to think about what I had seen.

The next morning we reconvened at the Morgan Library to see the superb exhibition of some books from the English Getty collection, including a copy of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. We met other book persons, which added to the pleasures of the week, and we were treated to a tour of the Morgan, focusing on Mr. Morgan's office and the early days of the Library. I never did discover if J. Pierpont Morgan's own wine and cigars kept in a humidity-controlled storage area were available to present-day directors, as they were in the 1960s and 70s. I can recommend the garden lunch room at the Morgan, especially when the food is embellished with lively company and the excitement of the sale.

The auction began at 2 p.m. with item 410, and, knowing the ways of Sotheby's and Christie's in London, I expected them to reach the last item, *Urizen*, lot 535, by 4:30. This means that the auction runs briskly, with 125 items to be sold in 150 minutes.

It was fun watching the proceedings. We seven sat in the middle section of the third and fourth rows. It was clear that John Windle was going to bid for Bob Essick, and they sat just in front of us. Jerry circulated a tiny note on which we were to write our estimate of the price the Blake would fetch. We had five entries ranging from \$200,000 to \$2,100,000. (Two wimps didn't guess.)

There were two banks of Sotheby's staff mostly handling clients who bid on the phone, with a few sitting on the auctioneer's left side obviously commissioned to bid on items. The auction room was slightly over half full. I would expect the room to be fuller for the furniture sessions.

The auction room attendees seemed to consist of observers; persons bidding for themselves; dealers bidding for clients or for stock; Sotheby's agents hired to bid on direction of the client; and those bidding for telephone clients.

The auctioneer was a pleasure to watch. We were amused when one of the women offering telephone bids on behalf of a Sotheby's client pointed out that she had bid a sum which had been surpassed by another telephone bid, and now she was proffering the next bid. The auctioneer made a joke of it, but it was clear that he was not going to allow any more outside recognition of bids. He is a master of his trade and rewarding to observe.

How do you bid? If you live in a community which has a Sotheby's office, you contact that office about how to establish your credit. Otherwise, you find out from Sotheby's in New York how to proceed. Then, shortly before the session at which you wish to bid, just outside the auction room you step up to the appropriate desk and identify yourself. You are then issued a card with large numerals on it which is referred to as a paddle. (Dealers are very superstitious about these numbers.) Now, armed with a paddle in order to bid

for yourself, you enter the auction room. If you have someone else in the room ready to bid for you, you work out whether or not you communicate during the bidding and choose seating accordingly. Or you can hire a bidder from the auction house.

For successful bids, the purchaser pays the auction house a buyer's premium of 15% of the successful bid price up to \$50,000 or 10% for any price beyond \$50,000. If someone else did the bidding, the client pays the bidder a commission of 10% to 15% on the hammer-price. State sales taxes further exalt the cost.

The paddle is only to identify you—"sold to number 453." You may catch the auctioneer's attention by any means you wish, by raising your paddle or raising your eyebrow or scratching your ear. But if scratching your ear is supposed to mean "I'll raise you \$15,000," you'd better arrange your code with the auctioneer before the sale. The auctioneer looks chiefly at previous bidders, so if you wish to enter the auction at a late stage, you may need to do so ostentatiously.

We watched the sale of those items leading up to the item 535 with increasing palpitations. Some items did not reach the reserve (often the minimum catalog estimate), such as a drawing by Aubrey Beardsley which was estimated to sell for \$6,000 to \$8,000, but reached only \$4,250. Often in this sale, however, the hammer price was about four times that of the top estimate. Lot 533, copy 13 of a limited edition of 101 copies of Ezra Pound's *A Draft of the Cantos 17 to 37*, fetched a hammer price of \$45,000, which was 7.5 times the top estimate of \$6,000, while lot 531, a 1799 book containing 12 hand-colored caricature aquatints of horses,<sup>4</sup> brought \$12,000, 10 times its top estimate. Lot 518, the first edition of a novel by Surtees estimated at \$400-\$600, had no response to the auctioneer's opening gambit of \$100, while lot 531, an 1819 book on Oriental field sports with 40 hand-colored plates, estimated at \$2,500-\$3,500, opened at \$1,000, had one bid to \$1,500, but was "passed" by the auctioneer, which I took to mean that there was a reserve price on it, a set price below which the auctioneer may not go.

Which way was the Blake going to go? I could feel the excitement rising. I was so agitated that my catalog copy has no bidding notes for item 534.

The auctioneer opened the bidding on *The First Book of Urizen* by William Blake at \$250,000, which I believe was taken up by bidders just in front of me and continued rapidly but decorously until suddenly the bidding moved from the floor to the telephones and rose to \$1,000,000. There was another bid from the floor after the \$1,000,000 figure, but the real action was from three telephones, then two telephones, and finally stopped at \$2,300,000.

The TWO MILLION, THREE HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLAR hammer price would bring Sotheby's a buyer's premium of

<sup>4</sup> George Woodward and Thomas Rowlandson, *Horse Accomplishments* (London: Ackermann, 1799).



\$232,500, which means the buyer's price is \$2,532,500. And of course the buyer had to pay his bidder, which is likely to have added significantly to his cost.

The buyer, who evidently was bidding from a telephone within the building and who wishes to remain anonymous, came down to collect his purchase and took it home with him, leaving the building about 5:30, within the hour of making his purchase. *Urizen* has left New York.

Of course, this is a RECORD PRICE FOR A BLAKE, almost twice what Copy D of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* sold for in 1989<sup>5</sup> and multiples of what any copy of *Urizen* previously sold for.

During the rather dazed aftermath of the sale, I was told by Sotheby's staff who had been dealing with the press that this is the fourth highest auction price recorded for a book. Remembering that these books included the Gutenberg Bible and a Caxton Chaucer, it is tempting to make comparisons based on size. Surely per square inch and even for number of pages, the *Urizen* has fetched the highest price in book auctions yet, over \$100,000 per page.

However, such commercial comparisons are odious. More interestingly, look at the auction records of *Urizen*, which reveal that copies of *Urizen* have been sold 10 times at auction.

#### Auction Sales of Blake's *Urizen*<sup>6</sup>

| Copy | Date          | Auction House | Price       | Present Location    |
|------|---------------|---------------|-------------|---------------------|
| G    | 20 Jan 1852   | Sotheby's     | £8.15       | Library of Congress |
| B    | 20 March 1882 | Sotheby's     | £59         | Morgan              |
| F    | 20 Nov 1883   | Sotheby's     | £124        | Harvard             |
| C    | 23 April 1890 | Sotheby's     | £66         | YCBA*               |
| G    | 30 March 1903 | Sotheby's     | £307        | Library of Congress |
| B    | 1 July 1924   | Sotheby's     | £580        | Morgan              |
| B    | 10 April 1941 | Parke-Bernet  | \$8,250     | Morgan              |
| A    | 26 Feb 1956   | Sotheby's     | £6,800      | YCBA                |
| C    | 29 March 1971 | Sotheby's     | £24,000     | YCBA                |
| E    | 23 April 1999 | Sotheby's     | \$2,532,000 | Anon.               |

\*Yale Center for British Art

Copies D and J have not been sold at auction. Copy C went early to the British Museum Print Room, and copy J was recently located by Detlef Dörrbecker in the Albertina Museum in Vienna.

Sotheby's has clearly been the auction house of choice for sales of *Urizen* for the last 147 years. Note that Parke-Bernet was taken over by Sotheby's of New York.

The re-emergence of copy E and its record-breaking purchase price have had several long term effects. First, the new

buyers have the joy of possession. The sellers have the pleasure of having raised a significant sum for their foundation. We suspect that this will raise Blake items higher in price; that this is the point at which individual pages of color designs may be priced at \$100,000 a sheet, which means that even fewer scholars can ever hope to own even so much as a page of original Blake work.

However, there is silver lining to the dark cloud of such monumental prices for Blake works. Naturally, two and a half million dollars for a 24-page book attracted notice in the media. This in turn has encouraged folk to hunt out forgotten family treasures to see if great-aunt Nellie's treasured Blake picture really is what she thought it was. Before the sale, Sotheby's had calls about the value of some works reputed to be by William Blake. I am sure that since the sale and attendant newspaper stories, there have been further enquiries directed to Sotheby's, as I know there have been enquiries to Jerry.

Perhaps this will lead to the knowledge of yet another copy of something produced by Blake. Look in your cupboards, trunks and boxes, ladies and gentlemen, I am ready to have my April adventures repeated. ORIGINAL WORK BY WILLIAM BLAKE IS SERIOUSLY SOUGHT.

<sup>5</sup> Copy D of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* has 54 prints and sold in 1989 for \$1,320,000 (*Blake Books and Blake Books Supplement*), which means that each print could be said to have cost \$24,444. In the same sort of calculation, Copy E of *Urizen* could have its 24 prints priced at over \$105,500 a print.

<sup>6</sup> *Blake Books* 81-82.