

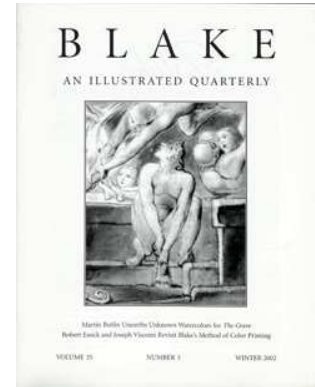
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A R T I C L E

New Risen from the Grave: Nineteen Unknown Watercolors by William Blake

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BY MARTIN BUTLIN

What is certainly the most exciting Blake discovery since I began work on the artist, and arguably the most important since Blake began to be appreciated in the second half of the nineteenth century, started in a deceptively low-key way. A finished watercolor for the engraving of "The Soul Hovering over the Body," published in Robert Cromek's edition of Robert Blair's *The Grave* in 1808, was shown to Nathan Winter, a partner in Dominic Winter, specialist book auctioneers and valuers in Swindon. He immediately recognized its importance and took a reproduction to Robin Hamlyn of the Tate Collection Division; Robin recognized its quality but suggested that I should also be consulted. I too accepted the work, with the usual reservation, "subject to seeing the original." Meanwhile the watercolor had been returned to the owner who, on being asked for its return so that Robin and I could inspect it, disclosed that it was only one watercolor from a red morocco portfolio stamped with the title "DESIGNS FOR BLAIR'S GRAVE," and containing no less than nineteen finished watercolors. Twelve of these are the finished drawings for the engravings by Schiavonetti for the 1808 *Grave*; the other seven are brand new images done in connection with the same publication.¹

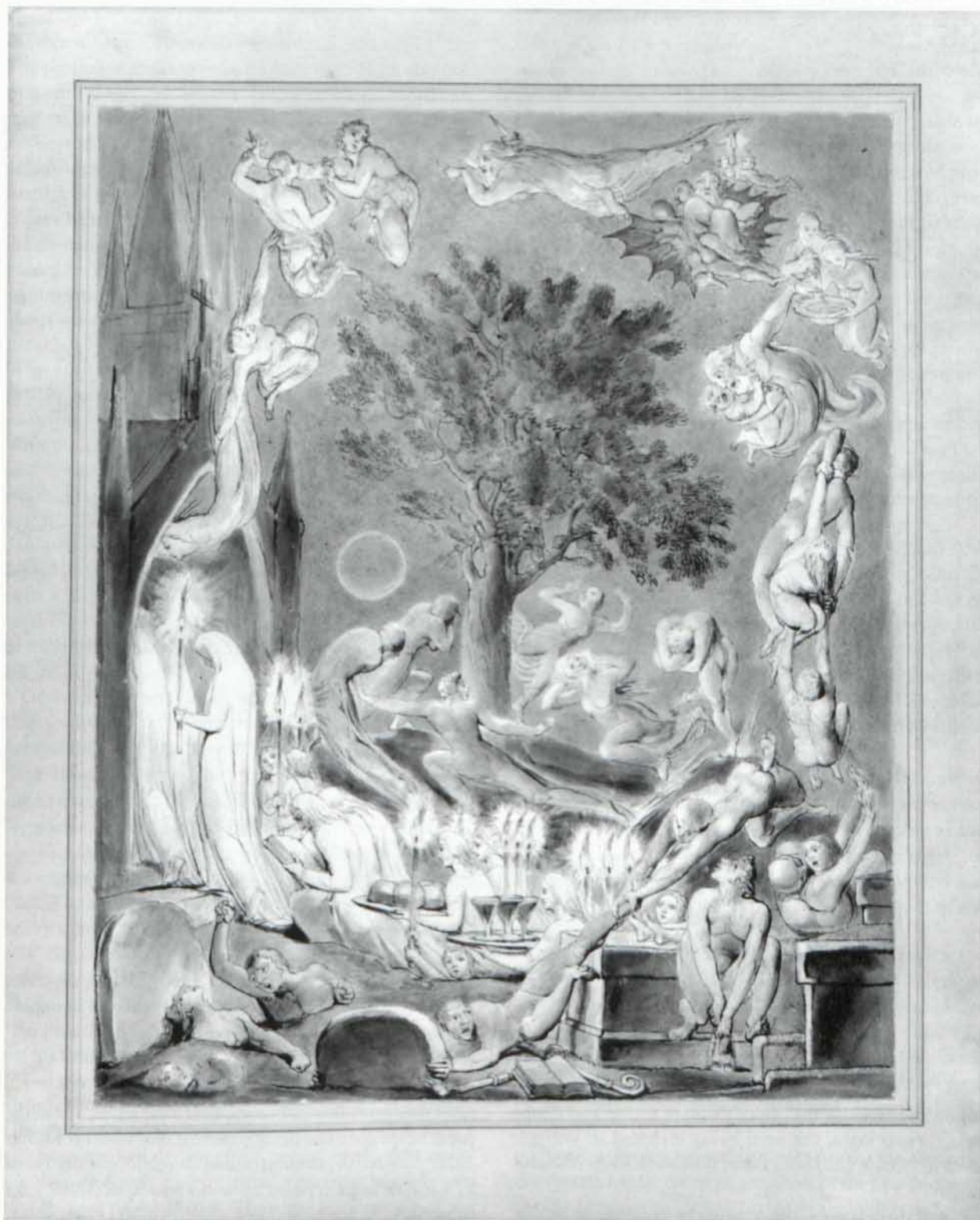
Readers of this journal will not need the full story of Blake's commission to illustrate *The Grave* with original designs that he himself was to engrave, and his subsequent betrayal by

Cromek. Suffice it to say that John Flaxman, in a letter of 18 October 1805, wrote that "Mr. Cromak has employed Blake to make a set of 40 drawings from Blair's poem of the Grave 20 of which he proposes [to] have engraved by the Designer ..." (Bentley (2001) 279). Blake himself, in a letter to William Hayley of 27 November 1805, wrote that about two months earlier "my Friend Cromek" had come "to me desiring to have some of my Designs. he namd his Price & wishd me to Produce him Illustrations to The Grave A Poem by Robert Blair. in consequence of this I produced about twenty Designs which pleasd so well that he with the same liberality with which he set me about the Drawings, has now set me to Engrave them."² Cromek, in the first version of his Prospectus, dated November 1805, advertised "A NEW AND ELEGANT EDITION OF BLAIR'S GRAVE, ILLUSTRATED WITH FIFTEEN PRINTS FROM DESIGNS INVENTED AND TO BE ENGAVED BY WILLIAM BLAKE ..." (Bentley (2001) 280; illus. Bentley (1988) 31). Within a few days, almost certainly alarmed by the boldness of Blake's trial engraving of "Death's Door," Cromek reissued the Prospectus, adapting the standing type to state that the book would be "ILLUSTRATED WITH TWELVE VERY SPIRITED ENGRAVINGS BY LOUIS SCHIAVONETTI, FROM DESIGNS INVENTED BY WILLIAM BLAKE" (Bentley (2001) 282-83; illus. Bentley (1988) 35). Schiavonetti almost certainly began by engraving the same subject, "Death's Door," a proof of which is dated 1 February 1806 (Bentley (2001) 284). In 1807 Blake suffered a further blow when his illustration to his own poem dedicating the edition to the Queen was rejected, though the poem itself was included in Cromek's edition when it was finally published in the summer of 1808 (Bentley (2001) 301-04). Blake received one guinea for each watercolor, making 20 guineas in all, whereas Schiavonetti received over £500 for the much more lucrative task of doing the engravings (Bentley (2001) 279, 285). Blake thereby lost most of what he had originally been promised.

Blake's finished watercolors, presumably all twenty of them, remained with Cromek, passing on his death in March 1812 to his widow; she, according to Ralph Rylance, writing on 13 December 1812, "is selling her late husbands books and prints," and on 3 February 1813 he added that she was offering "Blake's original Designs for Blair's Grave with other curious Drawings of his, valued at Thirty Pounds and likely to sell for a great deal more if ever the man should die ..." (Bentley (2001) 308). Until relatively recently this was the end of it—that is, until G.E. Bentley, Jr., found in a catalogue of the auction of the property of the late Thomas Sivright of Meggetland and Southouse, held in Edinburgh at C.B. Tait's on 1-19 February 1836, that lot 1835 was a "Volume of Drawings by Blake, Illustrative of Blair's Grave, entitled 'Black Spirits and White, Blue Spirits and Grey.'" The

1. The standard work on Blake's illustrations to *The Grave* is Robert N. Essick and Morton D. Paley, *Robert Blair's The Grave Illustrated by William Blake: A Study with Facsimile* (London: Scolar P, 1982); this includes a facsimile of the 1808 edition. The most up-to-date account of the circumstances of Cromek's commission appears in G.E. Bentley, Jr., *The Stranger from Paradise: A Biography of William Blake* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2001) 278-85, 289-91, 301-08. But for certain vital details and illustrations, see also his *Blake Records Supplement* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1988) 29-40, 70-71; "Thomas Sivright and the Lost Designs for Blair's Grave," *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 19 (1985-86): 103-06; and "'They take great liberty's': Blake Reconfigured by Cromek and Modern Critics—The Arguments from Silence," *Studies in Romanticism* 30 (winter 1991): 657-84. For Blake's drawings and paintings in general, references are given to the catalogue and plate numbers in Martin Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1981). This in its turn is supplemented and corrected in Robert N. Essick's review, *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 16 (1982): 22-65, in particular pp. 38, 47-50. I am also indebted to G.E. Bentley, Jr., Andrea Fredericksen, Robin Hamlyn, and Michael Phillips for assistance over this article.

2. David V. Erdman, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1982) 766; Bentley (2001) 278-79.



1. "The Gambols of Ghosts according to their affections previous to the final Judgment." Pen, ink and watercolor, 27.4 x 21.7 cm., 1805. Courtesy of Dominic Winter Book Auctions. One of the subjects listed by John Flaxman in his letter of 18 October 1805.



2. "Friendship." Pen, ink and watercolor, 23.9 x 17.5 cm., 1805. Courtesy of Dominic Winter Book Auctions. One of the subjects listed in Robert Cromek's first Prospectus of November 1805.

volume was sold for the princely sum of £15.0³ and disappeared from sight, not even being included in William Rossetti's lists in Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake* in 1863 and 1880.

Unless there is yet another group of drawings to be discovered, these newly discovered nineteen watercolors must be the contents of that volume, even though the portfolio

3. Bentley (2001) 308n; see also Bentley (1985-86) 104 for the invaluable detail of the price. Lot 1835 was sold on 10 February, the ninth day of the sale.

must date from after the watercolors themselves, the lining paper of the portfolio being watermarked "BEILBY & KNOTTS 1821." The actual portfolio cannot therefore have been used by Cromek as he traveled around England drumming up subscribers for the 1808 publication (Bentley (1988) 42-43, 54). Nor is there any trace of the fascinating sub-title in the sale catalogue, "Black Spirits and White, Blue Spirits and Grey." One of the watercolors seems to be watermarked with a date, possibly 1801, and two of the original mounts 1800. The watercolors vary in size but all are mounted on a heavy brown paper with matching framing lines around the de-

signs, save for the title page, which measures the full size of the mounts, approximately 13¼ x 18½ in. (333 x 267 mm.). The portfolio has preserved the watercolors in good condition with the exception of a few stains on the paper and mounts, and a fold across "The Grave Personified" (illus. 4).

The originals of the engraved plates bring no surprises. Schiavonetti's engravings follow them in detail, though matters of texture and shading are translated into his own engraving technique. Significantly, however, the subtlest of differences in the treatment of faces and expressions downgrades the visionary innocence of Blake into commonplace sentiment. Nor is there anything particularly surprising about the coloring of the watercolors, this being confined to the relatively restricted, delicate palette employed by Blake in his other watercolors of about 1805. The richest effect is in "The Last Judgment," which includes a relatively unusual warm green flanking the central group of figures at the top. The title page must have been a sensitive issue for both Blake and Cromek. The design is that of the engraving but the wording is somewhat different: "The Grave[a Poem]by Robert Blair[Illustrated with 12 Engravings]by Louis Schiavonetti[From the Original Inventions]of William Blake.[1806." Possibly at the same time there seems to have been a small amount of strengthening in ink, particularly on the face of the descending nude figure and on the inside of his left leg; such retouchings are confined to this watercolor.

Of the new images, some relate more or less to specific lines in Blair's text while others seem only to allude to the general theme; in this they differ little from the engraved illustrations. One for which no specific textual reference can be found is a night scene, illuminated by a lantern, showing a father kneeling by the grave reading from a book, presumably the Bible, accompanied by two children. This, like the engraved "The Counsellor, King, Warrior, Mother & Child," is based on a much earlier drawing in pen and wash, one of a group of such drawings treating the subject of death and charitable works dating from c. 1780-85.⁴ Perhaps the shortness of time available to Blake to produce the twenty designs to be engraved (as he wrote on 27 November 1805, "our Progress ... is but of about two Months Date") accounts for his falling back on earlier compositions.

Two more of the designs are based on sketches that have already been associated with *The Grave* project of 1805-08. One shows Christ leading the blessed souls into heaven, a composition itself deriving from a number of works showing a single figure, male or female, entering heaven's gate that go back to the 1780s.⁵ The other is a drawing of the scene described by Flaxman in his letter of 18 October 1805,

4. For the whole group see Butlin 135-37, pls. 151-55; for "The Counsellor ..." Butlin 136, pl. 153; and for the prototype of the new watercolor Butlin 137 recto, pl. 154.

5. Essick and Paley 77, 224-25, no. XI, figs. 28, 27; Butlin 624 verso, pl. 859, and 131 recto, pl. 146.

"The Gambols of Ghosts according with their affections previous to the final Judgment" (illus. 1).⁶ The watercolor is essentially the same except that Blake has differentiated more clearly between the figures of the "wicked," in the spiral ascending from the bottom left corner up the right margin to the top of the composition, and the "good" characters who emerge from their tombs in the lower right corner and process into the Gothic arch of the church on the left. The "wicked" characters are largely preoccupied with fighting each other or resisting being dragged from their tombs; in addition there is a strangely negative baptism scene in the upper right corner in which an old man clutches a resisting child while dipping his left hand into a bowl of water held by two apparently angelic figures. The "good" ghosts are noticeably passive with their lowered heads, some concentrating on the pages of a book, again possibly the Bible. The semicircle of figures around the yew tree is frantic rather than ecstatic. In light of Essick and Paley's suggestion that the engraved designs can be grouped in pairs, this composition would originally have been an ideal counterpoint to "The Last Judgment" (Essick and Paley 49-50).

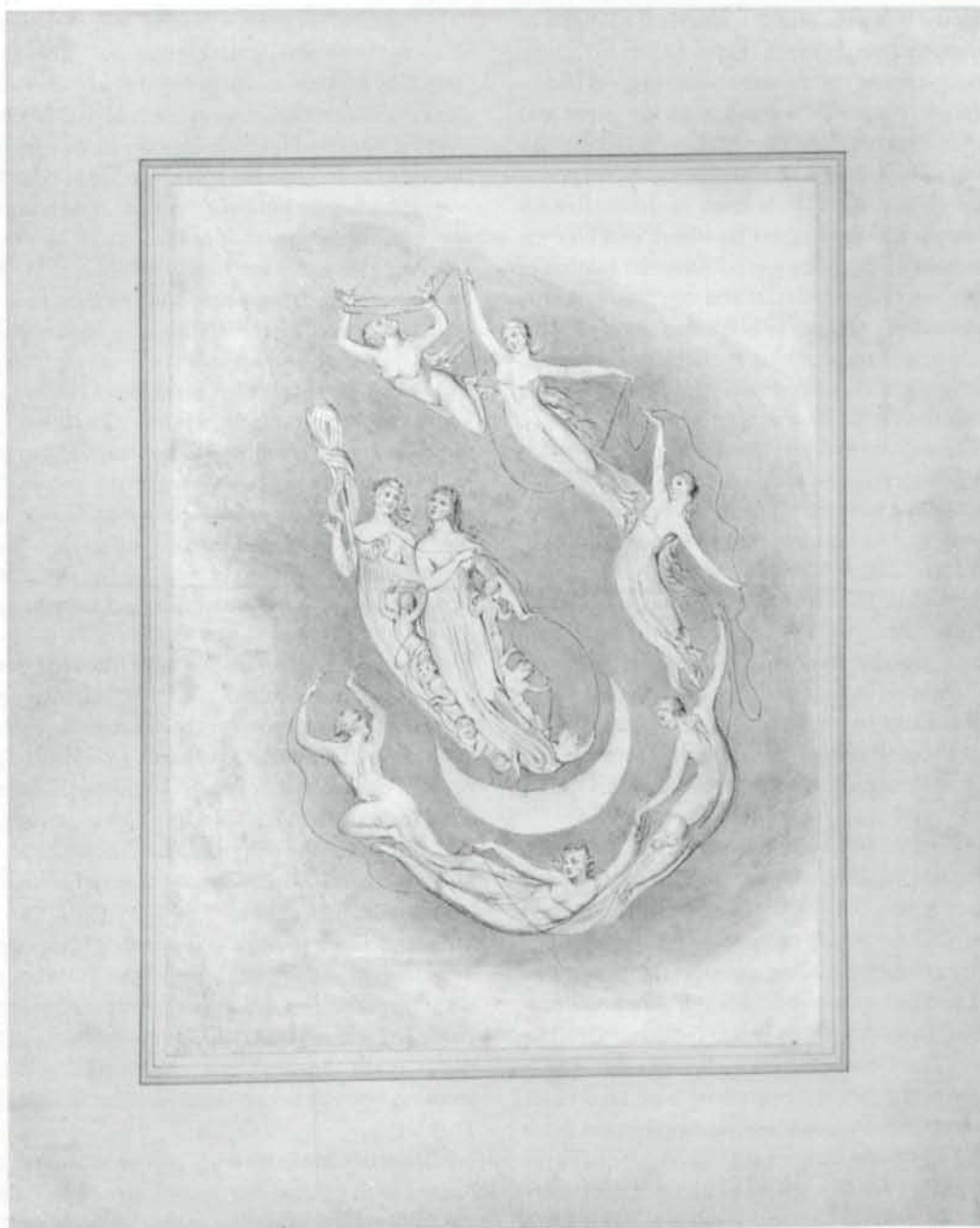
Of the unengraved compositions listed in Cromek's first Prospectus (illus. Bentley (1988) 33), "Friendship" (illus. 2) is represented by a touchingly innocent representation of two men walking along a path into a distant landscape, the horizon of which is dominated by the sun setting behind what must be the Celestial City. This is actually inscribed "Friendship" on the mount by an unknown hand. The composition is unusual in being a vignette rather than filling the whole of the paper.

A scene of two young adults standing by an open grave in a churchyard with a Gothic church on the left turns out on close inspection to depict the young girl pointing at the "high-fed worm," "surfeited upon" the "damask cheek" of the deceased "Beauty." The male figure is presumably the stripling who has been enamored of her (see page 11 of the 1808 text).

Particularly attractive is a depiction of eight exquisite airborne female figures (illus. 3), two, accompanied by six cherubs, rising above a crescent moon, while the others soar up and encircle them; together they hold the thread of life. This allusion to the Fates is presumably based on the line, in the midst of a long passage on the horrors of suicide on page 18, that reads "Our time is fix'd, and all our days are number'd!"

The most mysterious, and in some ways the most impressive though hardly the most attractive, of the new designs is an oblong composition dominated by a nude female figure, seated full-face with her arms extended, holding poppies and with butterfly-like patterned wings (illus. 4). Here again there is an inscription on the mount, obscure but apparently reading "The Grave Personified—Unfinish'd." The fig-

6. Essick and Paley 76-77, 224, no. X, fig. 26; Butlin 636, pl. 863.



3. "Our time is fix'd, and all our days are number'd!" Pen, ink and watercolor, 23.6 x 17.6 cm., 1805. Courtesy of Dominic Winter Book Auctions. An illustration to *The Grave*, 1808, p. 18, lines 18-19.

ure, particularly the wings, is similar to the clothed figure seen in profile on the right of the altar-like tablet in one of the alternative designs for a title page for *The Grave*, that inscribed "A Series of Designs: Illustrative of The Grave. A Poem by Robert Blair. Invented & Drawn by William Blake 1806," where she is balanced by another kneeling figure with bat-like wings holding a scroll.⁷ The butterfly wings, traditional attributes of Psyche, relate this figure not so much to

the heroine of Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* as to the Greek meaning of the word as a particular aspect of the soul, distinct from the body, as it passes through the underworld. A companion to this design, in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, similar in style and general composition but less finished and showing a male figure with bat-like wings casting thunderbolts on figures below, was, for lack of a better identification, entitled by me "A Destroying Deity: A Winged Figure Grasping Thunderbolts" and woefully misdated to circa 1820-25 (Butlin 778, pl. 1024). This last seems to have been separated from its companion early on, its provenance go-

7. Essick and Paley 72-73, 223, no. III, fig. 19; Butlin 616, pl. 853; Essick (1982) 49.



4. "The Grave Personified." Pen, ink and watercolor, 20.4 x 29.7 cm., 1805. Courtesy of Dominic Winter Book Auctions. Inscribed on the mount below, "The Grave Personified—Unfinish'd."

ing back without break to Mrs. Blake and Frederick Tatham. The newly discovered female figure is a strong candidate for the "characteristic Frontispiece" in the list of subjects in Cromek's first Prospectus, though it is just possible that this, using a very archaic use of the word "Frontispiece" for "title page," refers to the drawing for the engraved title page.

These new, rejected illustrations are remarkably varied in the way in which they illustrate *The Grave* and go considerably beyond the range of the published illustrations. Like so many new discoveries, this one raises as many questions as it answers. One further work, if one can judge by its general style, the color of its mount, and the form of the framing lines, could well have made up the total of finished watercolors to twenty; this is "The Widow Embracing Her Husband's Grave" in the Yale Center for British Art.⁸ Other

candidates, different in style and degree of finish, must now be relegated to the further drawings mentioned by Flaxman as making up the forty from which the final twenty were to be engraved.

Much remains to be done in working out the status of such works, and also in refining the relationship of the new designs to the text of *The Grave*. The forthcoming catalogue of these works when they come up for auction, probably this summer, may produce some further answers, as will, no doubt, Robert Essick's treatment of them in the appropriate year's "Blake in the Marketplace" for this journal. Nor is it likely that interpretation and refinement will end there.

8. Essick and Paley 74-75, 224, no. VII a, fig. 23, showing the framing lines; Butlin 633, pl. 721 in color. I am grateful to Gillian Forrester for checking the color of the mount and for supplying other fascinating details about the work.