

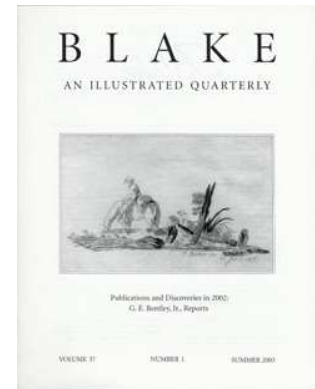
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY  
**BLAKE**

R E V I E W

K. E. Smith, *An Analysis of William Blake's Early Writings and Designs to 1790, Including Songs of Innocence*

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mercial-looking plates that depict "afflicted" children, also putatively after Blake. Reproductions of the first two can be found in Briggs; all are discussed and the latter four are reproduced in Essick<sup>4</sup> (211-26).

The new Butts print, called "Man on a Drinking Horse" by the Miniature Print Society, shows a mounted traveler wearing a wide-brimmed hat and leaning slightly forward (illus. 1). His horse is standing in shallow water, probably a river or stream, with its head lowered to drink. In the foreground are reeds, logs, stumps and other vegetation, and in the sky are some horizontal lines suggesting open sky and clouds. There is a bedroll behind the man's lightly indicated saddle, and he is holding a long narrow object in his left hand (a crop? a staff?) that is pointed down in the general direction of the horse's head.

Both my impression and Essick's are printed on laid paper with quite a bit of "plate tone," imparting a grayish tinge to the whole printed area. Although the print is signed in the plate "T Butts: sc" and dated "22 Jan<sup>y</sup>. 1806," it does not appear to be finished—a mysterious block of parallel hatching lines floats next to a tall stump at center right, and in general the clumsy execution is consistent with the date, which is only a few weeks after a year of lessons probably began sometime around Christmas Day 1805 (Essick 211). As in the case of all the Butts prints, it is not certain whether the Thomas Butts who signed the plate was the father or son; the elder Butts was said to have benefited more from the lessons than the son did (Essick 211). The signature on "Man on a Drinking Horse" closely resembles those on two other Butts works reproduced in Briggs, 94 and 96. There are no stylistic or other indications that Butts was working from a design by Blake, as he did in some of his other known works. But the composition as a whole is more sophisticated than the execution of the print, which suggests that it may have been copied from something, perhaps a vignette in a book. This is the only subject among known Butts prints that could be called a genre picture, and I doubt that it would have been Blake's choice as an early assignment for a pupil.

My impression of the plate is reproduced here; Essick's is described in his annual report of Blake-related transactions for 2002 (*Blake* 36 [2003]:127). As this article was being completed, Sarah Jones, the managing editor of *Blake*, discovered that William C. Schneider, a collector in Troy, New York, had written to the journal in 1996 about another impression of this etching that he had purchased in Schuylerville, New York; he recognized its relevance to Blake studies, and still has the print, but for some reason nothing came of his inquiry. One more impression was offered on eBay in March 2003, and was purchased by G. E. Bentley,

4. The picture of "Venus Anadyomene" reproduced in Briggs (96) may be a drawing rather than a print; see Essick 212.

Jr. Somewhere out there are 246 more impressions of this undistinguished print, as well as at least five more copper plates capable of printing restrikes of other Buttsiana.

#### Works Cited

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## R E V I E W S

K. E. Smith. *An Analysis of William Blake's Early Writings and Designs to 1790, Including Songs of Innocence*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1999. Studies in British Literature, vol. 42. xxi + 273 pp., 11 b&w illus. \$119.95/£74.95, hardcover.

Reviewed by NELSON HILTON

As its title suggests, this expensive, workmanlike study sets out to consider the oeuvre and trajectory of a William Blake who, say, fell into a "consumsion" and died in November 1790, days before his thirty-third birthday. At one time to have been called *Blake: The Road to Innocence* (back cover, 61, 87, 154), the book might more aptly be imagined as *Innocent Blake*. It brings together some of the research on these early productions to support the incontrovertible claim that

[t]he early work has its own authority, demands our attention to its enterprise. One does not have to claim artistic equality of any kind with the later work to argue that *Poetical Sketches* is one of the most adventurous and energetic poetry books of the 1780s, that *An Island in the Moon* is one of few attempts in its time to take Sterne's narrative innovations seriously or that Blake's history paintings of the early 1780s map an unusually ambitious role for the painting of English historical scenes. (4)



Its assertion that "to attempt to substantiate and fill out these claims of artistic significance . . . this study dwells in detail on specific texts and designs" (4) seems more problematic. While the book serves passably as an introductory discussion or "commentary" (186), it is neither comprehensive in scholarship nor convincing with regard to the analytical pretensions of the title.

Consider for instance the following treatment of "Song 2<sup>nd</sup> by a Young Shepherd," an early version of "Laughing Song" added (but not in Blake's hand) to one copy of *Poetical Sketches*. For Smith,

the innocent note is here in the unabashed and buoyant refrain which confirms that already for Blake Mirth is better than Fun and Happiness than either:

Come live & be merry and join with me,  
To sing the sweet chorus of Ha, Ha, He. (E 11)

In the context of the early 1780s, then, we can see proto-Innocence as a pulling away first from the elaborate literarity [*sic*] of *Poetical Sketches* and then from the satirical cynicism of *An Island in the Moon*. Although it is the second movement which will concern us in detail here, the mention of the first highlights the extent to which the momentum is away not only from satire but also from the more general knowingness of tone and outlook in which Blake's early satire is embedded. (87)

Despite stated awareness of the "mixing of sources . . . central to Blake's creative process" (22), the "very direct way in which Blake would take what he wanted" (20), not to mention the blatant literariness of "come live . . . with me . . . & be . . ." Smith has no place for the echo of the bawdy chorus from *Troilus and Cressida* 3.1: "Yet that which seems to wound to kill / Doth turn oh oh to ha ha he" and an endemic "knowingness of tone and outlook" which such an allusion would posit in the holy place [ha, ha, he] of *Songs of Innocence*. (For Smith, "the presence of a vitalistic, sexual reference ['unabashed and buoyant' or not!] suggests a world which, for good or ill, breaks free of Innocence" [170].) Such commentary has little capacity for dealing with vision. Despite its identification of "three modes of innocent poem" (102) or, in another mood, "four levels of innocent song"—

(a) a group of "London-humanitarian" songs, (b) songs of infant joy with strongly Christian-pastoral-symbolic overtones, (c) songs which use Innocence as startling light into pressing social problems of the age and (d) songs which affirm in a broad, sweeping context the validity of Innocence as a world-view. This would then leave us with a residual category of songs, namely those four which Blake eventually transferred from Innocence to Experience. (161)

—it can in no sense imagine innocent song functioning at once as a three-part glee much less in a four-fold manner. Curious also is that "residual category of songs," when "it is necessary to see *Songs of Innocence* as a composed whole, as

the first achieved version of Blake's composite art" (121) with its own "free-standing significance" (207). Smith can approve of "drawing attention . . . to the care needed by both editors and their readers in attending to precisely what Blake wrote" (157), then quote precisely even as he passes unremarked the text of the black boy he sees as "returning good for evil": "Ill shade him from the heat till he can bear." While Smith asserts that "the very notion of a road towards Innocence is surely made more credible rather than less by acknowledgment of conscious or unconscious artistic choices taken by Blake along the way" (87), the possibility of the artist's encoding of unconscious expression into the "fully-dramatized context of the words" in *Songs* goes unacknowledged, though when it suits Smith's purpose of invoking orthodox allusions to the Psalms or the Anglican prayer book he can note "the slight but marked shift of syntax which alerts us to the new dimension" (168).

A pervasive reliance on pathos undercuts logos and ethos throughout with frequent invocations of "surely," "indeed," "of course," and, in particular, repeated, tiresome assertions of what is "important" (a word never used by Blake). Saving the most important almost for last, Smith suggests in his consideration of "The Chimney Sweeper" that

whatever our various interpretations may be, the most important thing is to have the right starting-point for them in the simulation of the chimney sweeper's voice—our intuition of authorial sub-texts and search for our own framework of evaluation will follow soon enough. (175)

How, one wonders, does one voice "Ill shade him"? And how is "the simulation of the chimney sweeper's voice" not always already an "intuition"? The footnote to this heartfelt insistence relates the author's debt to some personal correspondence "for bringing me strongly back to this fundamental—yet easily-evaded—starting point of understanding 'The Chimney Sweeper' of Innocence" (245). The fundamental starting point is, evidently, the right starting point, not necessarily the same as "precisely what Blake wrote." Thus the reader's relation to the problematic last line of "The Chimney Sweeper"—"So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm"—depends on "an ability to listen to exactly what is being said by this child at this moment" (174). Just as, one supposes, Smith's reader discerns "exactly what is being said" in the sweeper's cry "weep weep weep weep" amid the multiple semantics and inferences of its writing.

The fundamental problem, for this reviewer at least, is Smith's unquestioned, uncritical conception of "voice" that text serves only to transcribe. "Putting it at its simplest," we read a bit further on, "the songs need to be heard before they can be analyzed, their energies responded to before their framework is deconstructed" (177-78). (Or did you hear that?) (And how does one "respond" to "energies" anyway?) The consideration of these things is the whole duty



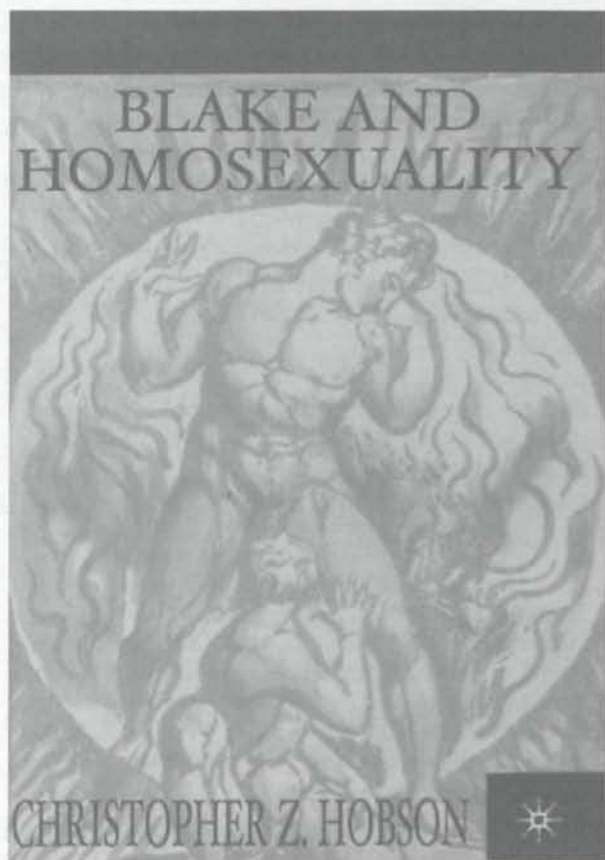
of any reader, and so the subject of the "Introduction," that opening road into Innocence ("Innocence sustains itself as a voice," writes Smith [181]). Of that plate's compressed narrative of individual/cultural progression from sound to words to writing Smith hears only "consonance between the world of the child on a cloud who sets the agenda of wholesome joy and tears and the piper who provides their artistic articulation" as he marks for us also the absence of any "felt contradiction between the downward triumphant narrative of the verse and the upward swing towards heaven of the design's vegetation" (159). The reason "Every child may joy to hear," one supposes, is that with the songs now written down, etched, and printed, they may be read aloud—perhaps even with real inspiration—by some knowledgeable (i.e. experienced) reader. But in either event There Is No Natural (or, unmediated) Access—the songs can never be "heard" before they have been analyzed—not by the reader, who must negotiate the signifiers ("Ill"? \*I'll?), nor by young listeners, with no voice about whatever reading experience they cannot choose but overhear. Several innocent references to "deconstruction" (above, and 85, 98, 151) add to the impression that, some useful if unexceptional contextualization notwithstanding, this effort does not live up to its claim to offer "An Analysis."

Christopher Z. Hobson. *Blake and Homosexuality*. New York: Palgrave, 2000. xxii + 249 pp. \$59.95/£40.00, hardcover.

Reviewed by MARGARET STORCH

Christopher Z. Hobson has written a welcome study of an important aspect of Blake that is too often ignored. People have noted the ideal beauty of Blake's male figures, his sometimes androgynous female figures, and the centrality of the theme of brotherhood in his work. Rarely has it been suggested that Blake had a specific homosexual sympathy.

Hobson presents the view not that Blake himself was necessarily homosexual or bisexual but that he came to empathize with male homosexuals and lesbians as he became increasingly aware of the prejudice and victimization they suffered. The study is well grounded in the social history of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when a specific awareness of male homosexual identity together with intolerance, greater legal repression, and mob antagonism came about. Even the republican tradition of reform which Blake espoused was inimical to sodomy. Hobson suggests that Blake's views may have developed in a way similar to those of Jeremy Bentham, his close contemporary, who over several decades moved to a position of acceptance of homosexuality as a variant of human nature.



Hobson considers that Blake's works before *The Four Zoas* reflect "the poetics of masculinity," including the tendency observed by feminists and others to treat desire and gratification in terms of heterosexual male dominance. The Preludium to *America* is a notably aggressive example. The illustrations to the poems may depict possibly homosexual figures, for instance the women in the opening plates of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, but they are absorbed in the overall heterosexual male-centered ethos. Hobson also discusses Blake's views on masturbation as shown in this period, which like his masculinist perspective are regressive. He suggests that masturbation, resulting from social repression, is an expression of "deformed desire." Thus, masturbation expresses and determines Urizen's negativity in the creation sequence in *Ahania*.

It is in *The Four Zoas*, that vast, many-faceted work that occupied Blake for more than ten years, that Hobson finds the first clear emergence of homoerotic expression and sympathy. Most prominently, homosexual acts are depicted as expressions of rebellion against the oppressive father, Urizen. Hobson suggests that in Blake's middle and later work depictions of homosexuality frequently accompany statements in the text of resistance to social oppression. Certain illustrations in the poem are studied carefully for evidence of homosexual activity or interest. One of Hobson's key examples is the illustration to page 78 of *The Four Zoas*, which, as he interprets it, shows a male figure, as-