

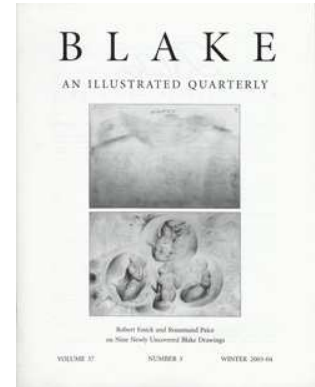
# AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

## G. E. Bentley, Jr., *The Stranger from Paradise: A Biography of William Blake*

Nelson Hilton

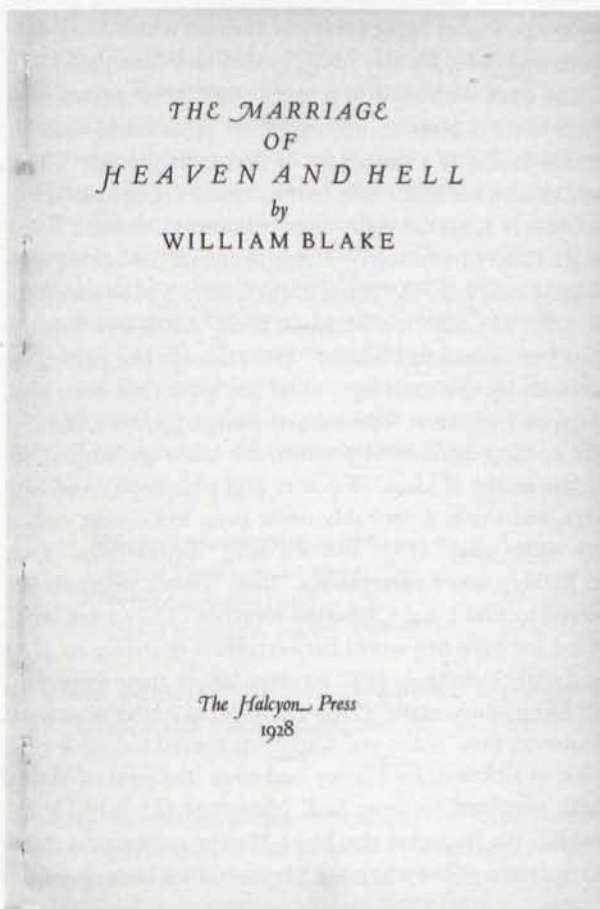
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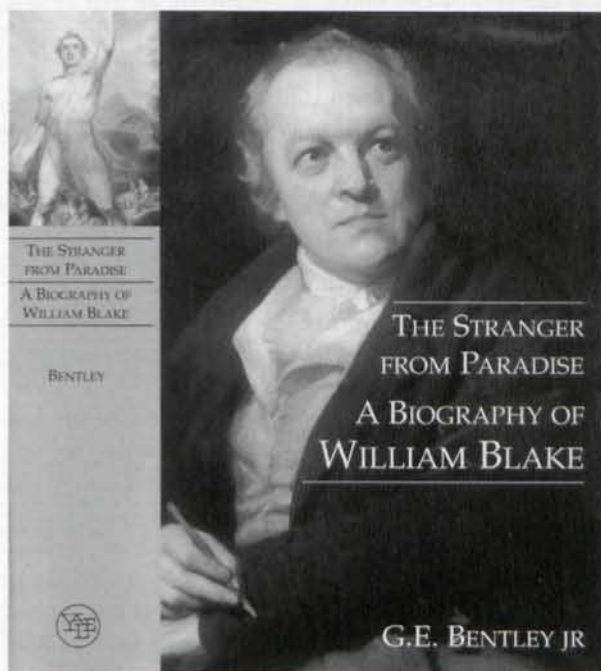
The publisher had left the typography entirely in Van Eyck's hands—considering him deservedly as an experienced private printer—but had not reckoned with Van Krimpen's touchiness. It appeared that the latter did not suffer interference with typographic design in 'his' department.... It became a question of 'give and take.'<sup>13</sup>

Whatever the differences of opinion between van Eyck and van Krimpen concerning the typography, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* was printed as a brilliant example of their superior craftsmanship and therefore must be seen as a fine tribute to Blake's genius. Regrettably, I have been unable to trace any critical English and Dutch response to this splendid publication. But that Stols scored a success with his Halcyon Press's publications in English appears from the fact that he continued to bring out such exclusive English works, including Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Hand and Soul* (1928), Milton's *The Sonnets, Both English and Italian* (1929), Keats's *The Collected Sonnets* (1930), Lord Byron's *Lyrical Poems* (1933), etc.

13. "Chronological List of the English Publications of The Halcyon Press, 1927-1934," *The Private Library* 5 (1972): 76.



## R E V I E W



G. E. Bentley, Jr. *The Stranger from Paradise: A Biography of William Blake*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2001. xxviii + 532 pp., illus. Hardcover \$39.95/£25.00; paperback (2003) \$24.95/£16.95.

Reviewed by NELSON HILTON

G. E. Bentley, Jr. needs no introduction to the audience of *Blake*, most of whom depend, in their work with its subject, on his indispensable *Blake Records* (1969), *Blake Books* (1977), *Blake Records Supplement* (1988), *Blake Books Supplement* (1995), and *Blake: The Critical Heritage* (1975), not to mention his editions of *Tiriel* (1967), *The Four Zoas* (1963), and *Blake's Writings* (1978), as well as the nearly issue-long annual updates which he prepares as the journal's bibliographer. Having completed his Oxford B.Litt. dissertation on Blake in 1954, G. E. Bentley has for half a century been profoundly involved with original research in Blake and laying up treasures for the heaven of our collective endeavors.

The problem for general readers with Bentley's massive contributions has been that their rigorous factualness offers little narrative accommodation. More than any student of Blake, he has taken to heart Blake's comment, "Tell me the Acts, O historian, and leave me to reason upon them as I please; away with your reasoning and



your rubbish. All that is not action is not worth reading. Tell me the What; I do not want you to tell me the Why, and the How; I can find that out myself, as well as you can . . ." (*Descriptive Catalogue*). So it was that the general and specialist reader wishing some sense of the larger pattern of Blake's life turned first to Gilchrist (as revised and annotated by Todd), to Wilson, to Mason, or most recently to Peter Ackroyd for a narrative of Blake's life (Bentley's appendix 1 details 37 "principal biographies of Blake").

But no longer. With his new book, Bentley offers a glorious capstone to his labors, a work for which all his others can be seen as contributing preparations. For both specialist and general readers, this book becomes instantly the single most useful and reliable guide to Blake's life. Like all of Bentley's work, it offers an epitome of scholarship in quality and quantity—a 34 page index, an addenda, 2 appendices, over 600 footnotes, and over 1,100 endnotes. This marvelous achievement is also a splendid example of Bentley's concern for the book as physical artifact, with 136 plates and 40 figures, on wonderful paper and carefully proofread. There are, as one would expect from such a scholar, interesting new facts to consider—that young William Blake was watched over by a nurse, for instance—and everywhere a sensitivity to tone and context that places known facts in a new and revealing light.

As the title suggests and Bentley himself points out, the book takes its keynote from Blake's involvement with radical Dissent and develops around the central thesis that

Blake transmuted his native language of religious Enthusiasm into the language of art, and he interfused the revolutionary Christian vision that was his birthright with the English literary vision in which he immersed himself during his adolescence and the neo-classical artistic vision into which he grew in manhood. (xxv)

While it is of course Blake's "transmutation of art" that the book celebrates, the recurring points of reference, announced in the title of the introduction, are "Paradise and the Beast."

The first chapter, "God at the Window," reviews the tiny amount known about Blake's parents and for the first time in a major biography uses Aileen Ward's 1995 discovery to set straight even the author's own earlier acceptance of the longstanding curiosity of Blake's having as his favorite brother a sibling ten years younger (one who would have been five when Blake left the family for his apprenticeship). In fact, Robert—evidently misidentified as "Richard" in the church record—was four-and-a-half years younger. Here too we learn that Blake had "been known to walk 50 Miles in the day" (28), and that Bentley considers E. P. Thompson's case for Blake's brand of Dissent as specifically Muggletonian (in *Witness Against the*

*Beast* [1993]) to be "intriguing but tentative and inconclusive" (7).

Chapter 2 covers 1772 to 1779, Blake's seven years as "The Visionary Apprentice." These pages include a wonderful evocation, illustrated with several highly instructive plates, of the engraving studio environment which in one form or another was to be the setting for most of Blake's working life. Here too we are reminded of Blake's "extraordinary facility" in writing backwards (37), and of Blake's earliest surviving engraving, his "Joseph of Arimathea among the Rocks of Albion," c. 1773, adapted c. 1810, which demonstrates

the idiosyncratic Dissenting Christianity, the fascination with syncretic mythology, the focus upon England or Albion as the centre of psychic energy, and the extraordinary originality which were to mark all his greatest works in poetry and design for the rest of his life. (36)

These years manifest also his "fascination with medieval literature" as evident in

his enthusiasm for Dante and Chaucer and Spenser and for Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (he owned the 1765 edition) and even for the pseudo-Gothic of Chatterton's Rowley poems (he owned the 1778 edition) and James Macpherson's Ossian poems . . . (42)

Of the poems in Blake's *Poetical Sketches* which must date from this time, Bentley remarks that they "are about love rather than addressed to a lover," that "their sexual suggestiveness is astonishing," and that "[c]ombined with his sexual daring is a casualness or daring in prosody which would have left eighteenth-century readers breathless" (45).

Chapter 3, on the eight years between 1779 and 1787—when Blake turned thirty—finds the artist "Delighted with Good Company." A central event here is Blake's marriage in 1782 to Catherine Boucher, then "just a few months past her twentieth birthday" (68), though the particular alchemy of the marriage, as of any enduring marriage, remains a mystery: "She was, of course, illiterate, she did not speak grammatical English, she knew nothing of art or the world of ideas, of poetry and philosophy and history, and she had probably never been to London only a few miles away" (65). But she sang "delightfully," and, as Bentley notes perceptively, "their friends regularly referred to Blake and Catherine together. They were separated for only five weeks between their marriage in 1782 and Blake's death in 1827 six days before their forty-fifth wedding anniversary" (70). He adds, in a later observant footnote, that "Blake and Catherine shared a double-bed, even in sickness, for Hayley had once 'the pain of seeing both confined to their Bed' (singular) (15 July 1802)" (213). We find that the Blake-Hayley connection dates back even to 1784 when, with information bearing on the

much-debated "Advertizement" to *Poetical Sketches*, "Flaxman wrote to his new friend the popular gentleman-poetaster William Hayley describing Blake's book in terms strikingly similar to the account in the preface" (76). The further "Good Company" of Blake's partnership with James Parker, his brother Robert, and admirers in "the Mathew Circle" notwithstanding, this chapter features the five-times mentioned presence of "the Beasts of the state and the state Church" (63), as in the couple's marriage bond, which shows "the language and the power of the Beast nakedly displayed" (69), or in Blake's long acquaintance, discussed in a section on "The Blake Family Hosiery Shop and the Parish of St. James," with the "mechanics of parish charity" and what "Blake had been taught about the ways of the Beast among the children of men, even, or perhaps especially, when they claimed to be acting in charity" (90). The chapter ends a bit curiously, as it imagines the titular "stranger from paradise" having "shaken off another covering of earth" with the death of his brother Robert and now "another step closer to heaven" (99).

Eight of the "Dark Profitable Years" from 1787 to 1795 included in the twenty identified by Blake's famous letter of October 1804 occupy chapter 4. These years include Blake's invention of relief etching and creation of all his early and best-known volumes in that medium. As Bentley points out, "[o]ne advantage of relief-etched plates was that they could be printed far more simply and rapidly than incised intaglio plates." He draws on research by Joseph Viscomi to confirm our revised sense of Blake's publishing methods in noting that "[w]hen a whole book was printed in one colour, as in Blake's early practise, [William and Catherine] could easily print 500 pages in a week, enough to account for the sixteen copies of *Songs of Innocence* in one print-run" (103). Concerning "[t]he speakers of the poems in *Songs of Innocence*," Bentley makes the point students can never hear too often: "none is William Blake" (132). Quotations of Blake's poetry are taken from Bentley's complete edition which, since its interesting and novel typographic notation is not explained here, might lead a reader or two to puzzle over some of the transcriptions:

Tyger, Tyger, burning bright,  
In the forests of the night:  
What immortal hand or eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

Here, too, Bentley reflects on Blake's profound friendship with Flaxman and Henry Fuseli, two "extraordinarily different men."

Where Flaxman was gentle, classical, and restrained, Fuseli was rough, romantic, and passionate. Flaxman's sculptures and drawings were in quiet black and white, cel-

ebating feminine grace and pious grief, while Fuseli's oil paintings are vibrant with colour invoking rage and madness. Each became a dominant figure in his genre; Flaxman became Professor of Sculpture at the Royal Academy and Fuseli the Keeper of the Royal Academy. Together they represented the two poles of Blake's artistic spirit. (104)

Bentley's suggestion of "an extraordinarily confident intimacy" between Blake and Fuseli during the early 1790s, does not, however, extend to the fact of Mary Wollstonecraft's consuming infatuation with Fuseli at the time, so that despite the graphic quotation of Fuseli in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Bentley downplays that work's association with Wollstonecraft as accomplished "more by critical ingenuity than by fact" (111).

The five years covered in chapter 5 track Blake upon "The Ocean of Business" from 1795 to 1800. Blake's watercolors and engravings for Young's *Night Thoughts* were the large project at the outset, and apropos of its evolution Bentley observes that

[i]f an engraved edition had originally been in contemplation, it is unlikely that the uniquely valuable author's copy would have been used as the text, with all the necessary hazards to it which that entailed from an engraver's inky fingers. Further, there would have been little point in making so many hundreds of designs, far more than could ever be published, or in elaborately colouring the ink outlines. But such colouring and such profusion were perfectly appropriate for an extra-illustrated work. (165)

This period also includes Blake's famous letter to Rev. John Trusler, whose falling out with the spiritual world it purported to regret; Bentley nicely fills in the picture a bit, relating how some thirty years before,

Trusler proposed to publish 150 sermons printed in imitation of handwriting, so that preachers could pretend to be the composers of the sermons they delivered. For such publications he was memorably attacked as one of the 'reverend parsonical banditti . . . with all the chicane of sacerdotal hypocrisy.' (181)

Of *Vala, or the Four Zoas*, begun during this period (though "the word 'Zoas' is used only in the title page") and presented in his facsimile edition of nearly forty years ago, Bentley remarks succinctly: "Blake worked and reworked the poem, and in each revision it seemed to become more promising and less coherent" (200).

"Sweet Felpham and Rex vs Blake" occupies chapter 6, its four years of 1800 to 1804 being the shortest chronological span of any. Hayley is a central figure here, and Bentley's evocation of his "harmless affections" speaks volumes: "describing himself as the Bard of Sussex and the Hermit of Eartham—his fifteen-year-old son addressed him as 'My very dear Bard' and 'Dearest of Proph-



ets" (204). This son, Tom, was apprenticed to Flaxman in 1794, and Bentley speculates that Blake may have taught him drawing or etching and quotes a letter of 1796 in which Tom writes his father that he "may if possible take a walk to [Blake's] house tomorrow morning" (205). Tom's death in May of 1800 after a long illness becomes one of the determinations leading to Blake's move to Felpham and Hayley in September 1800. "The first great gift of Felpham to Blake," observes Bentley, "was to open his eyes to new kinds of natural beauty" (216). A footnote reveals the thoroughness of the author's research into this topic as well:

Gilchrist . . . says: 'Often, in after years, Blake would speak with enthusiasm of the shifting lights on the sea he had watched from [his cottage] windows.' My wife and I have repeatedly admired this sea-view at dawn as the guest of Heather Howell, the generous owner of Blake's Cottage today. (211)

Things started going wrong as Blake became more conscious of Hayley's "Genteel Ignorance & Polite Disapprobation" (233) and went worse with local quartering of the First Regiment of Royal Dragoons "(cavalry so-called because they were armed with the short, large-bore musket called a dragon)" in May 1803: "the presence of swaggering soldiers in the village must have been to Blake a sign that the Beast was verily among them" (251). The incident in the cottage garden of Friday, 12 August 1803, and the background, implication, and resolution of Blake's being accused of sedition are lucidly detailed.

Chapter 7 has Blake "Drunk with Intellectual Vision" from 1804 to 1810 as he works on illustrations for *The Grave*, his *Canterbury Pilgrims* and his exhibition, with its *Descriptive Catalogue*. Describing the best-known image of Blake prepared for *The Grave* (and on the jacket cover of this biography), Bentley imagines Blake in April 1807

posing in Phillips's painting-room at 8 George Street in very uncharacteristic surroundings. He wore an unfamiliar starched shirt, a stock, an elegant coat, and a gold watch-fob, perhaps all of them painting props from Phillips's studio like the bench on which he sat. The props are unfamiliar except for the pencil in his hand, but the rapt expression in his eyes is perfectly characteristic. (290)

Bentley powerfully reminds us of a painting in Blake's exhibition which has since disappeared: "Most of the pictures were of modest dimensions, 10" x 12" or less, but one of them, 'The Ancient Britons' was bigger than all the rest put together, 14' x 10', the largest picture Blake ever made, with 'Figures full as large as Life'" (326). Readers in Wales should be alerted to know that "[w]hen the great picture was finally delivered, Owen Pughe presumably took it to his estate at Nantglyn, near Denbigh, Wales, and it has never been recorded since" (329).

The penultimate eighth chapter takes Blake's life from 1810 to 1818, years to which Bentley applies Blake's slightly earlier lament, "I am hid." That marginal comment in the annotations to Reynolds is glossed by another, where Blake reports that "Cowper came to me and said, 'Oh! that I were insane, always . . . Oh! that in the bosom of God I was hid . . . as a refuge from unbelief.'" Bentley's followup seems as close as he ever comes to disclosing his own point of view: "To the worldly, those who believe in vision and God seem to be insane. To the truly religious, faith is a refuge in the bosom of God from unbelief" (343). These concerns are especially pertinent in a chapter which has to consider directly whether

[t]he uniform testimony as to Blake's madness from these great writers and critics, from Lamb and Hazlitt and Southey and Wordsworth and Crabb Robinson himself, should make Blake's readers two hundred years later wonder whether Blake's contemporaries were not right, whether Blake was, at least in these years 1810-18, suffering from delusions. (342)

Bentley's conclusion is forthright and judicious:

none of these great men knew Blake personally—only Southey had actually met him, and that but once—and none knew his works better than superficially. Of course a superficial verdict of madness does not preclude a profound verdict of madness. But readers two centuries later may still reflect that they have far more evidence . . . they may reserve the right to judge for themselves on more extensive evidence, though with less genius than Crabb Robinson's friends had. (342)

He then introduces most effectively a quotation from Blake's *Public Address*: "It is very true what you [*English engravers*] have said for these thirty two Years[.] I am Mad or Else you are So[;] both of us cannot be in our right Senses[.] Posterity will judge by our Works" (342). Still, it makes for sad reading to see that in June of 1814, "Cumberland again called on Blake and found him 'still poor still Dirty'" (347), or, two years later, Nancy Flaxman reporting to her husband that "for as I understand B— was very violent[,] Indeed beyond all credence . . . other people are not oblig'd to put up with B's odd humours—but let that pass." (348)

The final chapter, "The Ancients and the Interpreter," covers the "florescence of Blake's art and serenity in the last years of his life . . . largely due to John Linnell" (367). Linnell, Bentley reports, "was a man remarkably like Blake in many ways" and, like Blake, "profoundly a Dissenter" who "spoke the language of Enthusiasm: 'The mind that rejects the true Prophet . . . generally follows the Beast also for the Beast & False-Prophet are always found together'" (365). Curiously, "[i]t is chiefly from Linnell's taciturn Journal that we learn of Blake's surprisingly ex-



tensive experience with seeing plays" (385). Whether owing to Linnell's offices or a more general accommodation,

[t]here seems to have been a change in Blake by 1820. His intimate friends John Flaxman and William Hayley had written of 'Blake's irritability' (2 Jan 1804), his 'nervous Irritation' (3 Aug 1805), his 'little Touches of nervous Infirmary' (15 July 1802), 'on the verge of Insanity' (3 Aug 1805), like the mad William Cowper. Southey concluded from his visit to Blake in 1812 that 'You could not have delighted in him—his madness was too evident, too fearful. It gave his eyes an expression such as you would expect to see in one who was possessed.' However, those who met Blake after 1820 were struck by his serenity. (381)

These years include Blake's friendship with John Varley, memorably described as one who was "repeatedly arrested for debt and as repeatedly rebounded with undiminished ebullience; he used to say, 'all these troubles are necessary to me . . . . If it were not for my troubles I should burst with joy!'" (369). These were also the years that Blake became the center of the small coterie of artists who labeled themselves "the Ancients." Preeminent among them was Samuel Palmer, who was to become a principal source for the first major biography of Blake in 1863 but whose conventional piety and rooted conservatism resulted in a portrait of Blake "far less radical than is congenial" to the present (408).

With its opposition between "the Realm of the Beast and the Stranger from Paradise" (439), Bentley's book offers the most uncompromising image of Blake's life yet presented, one sure to rouse up the young men and women of the new age and to inspire the present and coming generations of Blake enthusiasts.

## N E W S L E T T E R

### Corrigenda

Two works pictured in the article "Blake's Graphic Use of Hebrew" from the fall 2003 (volume 37, no. 2) issue were identified in error as belonging to the Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection of the Library of Congress. *Laocoön* (illus. 7, also the cover illustration) is held by the Fitzwilliam Museum; *Job's Evil Dreams* (illus. 3) is in the collection of the Pierpont Morgan Library. Thanks to Robert N. Essick for calling our attention to these errors.

### Color-Printing Debate

The latest contributions to the one-pull vs. two-pull color-printing debate—Martin Butlin's "William Blake, S. W. Hayter and Color Printing," with a response from Robert N. Essick and Joseph Viscomi—are now available exclusively on the journal's web site at [www.blakequarterly.org](http://www.blakequarterly.org). Previous articles on the subject can be found on the web site and in the winter 2001-02 (volume 35, no. 3) and fall 2002 (volume 36, no. 2) issues.