

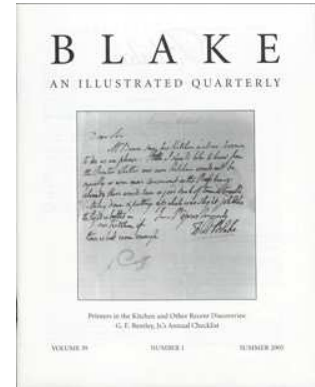
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY  
**BLAKE**

P O E M

**Cold Colloquy**

Warren Stevenson

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tion" may be partly to blame, but the mixing of carbohydrates (gums, sugars) and proteins (glue) in the temperas may have led to a phenomenon called the "Maillard reaction"<sup>12</sup> that turned many of the tempera colors brownish and rendered formerly transparent layers translucent or opaque. Other darkening may have other causes: the picture of *Satan Calling Up His Legions* at the Victoria and Albert contains only plant gums but is now so dark that it is virtually impossible to see anything in it; the egregious obscurity of this picture and some others in the 1809 Exhibition may have been part of a deliberate deadpan joke about darkness visible, dark masters, and chiaroscuro.<sup>13</sup> The Tate authors suggest Blake's habit of returning to his work again and again may also have led to darkening in the temperas, as layer upon layer of color, gums, glue, and urban dirt obscured and finally buried the underlying white of the ground and reflections from the gold and silver that he embedded in the glue.

The book ends with an illuminating chapter by Townsend, Hamlyn, and John Anderson on the history of presenting Blake's paintings and prints, including practices and economic considerations circa 1800 relevant to mounting, framing, collecting, storing, and hanging pictures like Blake's in various contexts (in exhibitions, galleries, private homes), as well as their more recent presentation in museums. One might expect this chapter to be of most interest to those who will hang future exhibitions, but the discussion casts light upon all sorts of questions, especially about Blake's audiences and patrons and what he made of them and they of him. In one case, the authors show that the framing history of several works suggests that influential inscriptions long associated with Blake are more likely from the mid-nineteenth century.

I am only beginning to digest the information presented in this book, and to reread earlier studies in its light, but it has already done more to clarify Blake's painting and color-printing practices for me than anything I have read in the last twenty years. I believe that even Blake enthusiasts who usually avoid technical questions will find many of the discussions here to be "sweet science," and recommend it to them as wholeheartedly as I do to those who are already interested in this kind of material fact. Blake's discussions of art veer unpredictably between the technical, the theoretical, and the spiritual, and we should all prepare ourselves to rethink all aspects of Blake's aesthetics in light of the technical discoveries in this book. I look forward to the many uses that students of Blake will find for the information here, particularly reports from artists who have used it as the basis for a new round of experiments with Blake's color-printing and tempera techniques.

12. This is the same complex reaction that browns food when it is cooked.

13. Similarly, *The Goats, an Experiment Picture*, in which "picturesque scenery" has been "laboured to a superabundant blackness," may have been calculated to frustrate goatish connoisseurs hoping to get a glimpse of the dark "savage girls" as hungry goats stripped them of their vine-leaf garments.

## Cold Colloquy

So we red-eyed it from Vancouver to TO  
 where it was cold as February, you know—  
 and lined up for BLAKE—in letters six-feet high—  
 that morning some twenty years gone by  
 outside and inside the AGO.  
 This 'optic heart' remembers  
 the burnished and intricately lined copperplate glow  
 of his *Canterbury Pilgrims*—what happened  
 if the burin slipped?

That evening as Frye held forth  
 on Blake's Bible Illustrations (sans slides, of course)  
 one found them gently arising  
 in one's still sleepless mind to his discourse.  
 Afterwards chatting with him and a few others  
 over coffee and cookies (it being the U of T)—  
 our wives discussing the Group of Seven—he  
 confiding that 'Urizen is necessary,' me  
 mentioning that I knew a poet whose zip-  
 code began with LOS: he  
 registering that with an *augenblick*.

Next morning outside the hotel at dawn I catch  
 a cab and am joined by a sudden highjacking stranger—  
 for the short ride to the Gallery (no danger):  
 guy sitting beside me says, 'I'm Bill Mitchell.'  
 I almost reply I'm Haile Selassie  
 but manage, 'I've read your book,'  
 whereupon we both lapse into jet-lagged silence.  
 Then he reels off,

'If Blake wrote this when he sat down to shite  
 What could he not do if he sat down to write?'  
 'Yeah,' I mutter, feeling a bit warmer as we arrive.

Warren Stevenson