

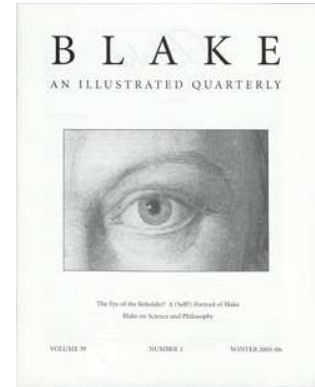
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R E V I E W

Morton D. Paley, *The Traveller in the Evening: The Last Works of William Blake*

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The Keys to the Gates

Morton D. Paley. *The Traveller in the Evening: The Last Works of William Blake*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. xiv + 332 pp. 38 b&w illus. £53.00/\$125.00, hardcover.

Reviewed by David Fuller

The *Traveller in the Evening* is concerned with Blake's work after *Jerusalem*, when the modest patronage of John Linnell freed him from the need to earn his living by reproductive engraving. This work is highly diverse in form—engraved texts and engraved designs, woodcuts and watercolors, drawings, draft verses, and marginalia. It is also diverse in theme: an equivocal attitude to sexuality, an unequivocally negative attitude to institutions and to commerce, a withdrawal from politics, attacks on classical culture, the identification of religion and art, and interpretations of Christianity with analogies in Manichaeism and Gnostic ideas. Professor Paley considers the individual works separately, but in four main sections—the illustrations of Virgil; *Ænëid* and *His Two Sons*; the illustrations of Dante; works connected with the Bible. He makes comparisons and contrasts, but with no undue attempt to impose coherence: he is ready to see contradictions, even within a single work. Paley's first book (*Energy and the Imagination*, 1970) began the unpicking of an oversystematized Blake, and he continued this in several studies of individual works. *The Traveller in the Evening* extends the argument. It also reflects his long familiarity with every area of Blake's oeuvre, and with the critical literature.

As a prelude to the illustrations of Virgil Paley discusses Blake's reworking of *For Children: The Gates of Paradise* as *For the Sexes*. This sets the method for much of the book, proceeding plate by plate, weaving in scholarly information and critical commentary from previous interpreters. We find this again with the accounts of the Dante and Job illustrations, and it is immensely helpful simply to seeing what is in the designs, and considering what one might make of that. Blake's changes to *For Children* Paley sees as producing a new work, with themes, conceptions and terminology quite distinct from those of the 1790s. It is relevant to parts of the later argument to notice that *For the Sexes* is therefore an example of the principle that interpretation depends in part on the viewer: Blake in age saw in his own earlier images—somewhat altered by additional work on the engravings—substantially different meanings. The woodcut illustrations for Robert Thornton's *Pastorals of Virgil* raise another important topic: the possibility of critical illustration. Other works of this period indicate that Blake's fundamental attitude to both Virgil and Thornton was an-

tagonistic. Nevertheless, what he depicts in these woodcuts, as Paley shows, is derived directly from Ambrose Philips's free translation of Virgil. Sometimes, as in his designs for other poets, Blake literalizes a metaphor, sometimes he emphasizes darker aspects of the poems, but always consistently with the texts. The illustrations incorporate no critique. What is so imaginative about them is not any special Blakean meanings but the way in which they invent the visionary landscape of Samuel Palmer.

Paley approaches one of the most characteristic works of Blake's old age, *Ænëid* and *His Two Sons Satan and Adam*, by considering what other eighteenth-century artists and critics saw in the famous statue on which it is based, and other engraved versions that Blake might have known or that influenced the tradition in which he was working. He stresses that Blake's title was not *Laocoön* (this appears nowhere on the plate, though of course Blake would assume anyone reading the plate would recognize its visual content), and connects the actual title with Blake's idea of the Hebrew origins of classical art. The outward form of a (supposed) Hebrew original had been preserved in the Greek (supposed) copy, but its meaning had been completely misunderstood. Blake may have assigned the figures meanings from his own myth: *Ænëid*, entwined by serpents, corresponds to Urizen; his sons are what *The Four Zoas* and *Jerusalem* describe as the limits of human opacity and contraction. Paley considers how best to represent the plate's aphorisms typographically, with some criticism of the arrangement in David Erdman's edition. He also explores the more gnomic aphorisms and their interconnections in thematic groups: on money, empire, and tax; on the nature of art; and on God, man, and the imagination. The fundamental aim of the plate, he argues, is to defend true—that is, Christian—art against commerce, militarism, and imperialism. In subverting one of the most famous sculptures of classical antiquity by the texts with which he surrounded it, Blake attacked the society in which he lived for its purely nominal allegiance to Christianity.

With the Dante illustrations there are much-discussed fundamental issues about interpretation—issues that bear more generally on the interpretation of Blake's designs for other poets and for the Bible. Paley reports these, beginning from the argument of Albert S. Roe (*Blake's Illustrations to the Divine Comedy*, 1953) that Blake constantly implies critical views of his subjects, and implies these by reference to his own mythology. This he rejects, but only within limits. I should confess an interest here, because I have written about this myself ("Blake and Dante," *Art History* journal, 1988). I argued that Blake's critique—which is undoubted (it is spelled out in the clearest terms in texts on a few illustrations)—is never carried on by reference to his own mythology, but only by reference to publicly available sources, mainly the Bible and traditions of biblical interpretation, and that dissent embodied in the illustrations is at most both rare and self-explanatory. In the illustration of *Paradiso* 33, for example, the Bible is chained shut and Aristotle's works lie open (Dante's Christianity is

compromised by his classicism); Mary, as Queen of Heaven, is presented naked, gazing into a mirror, more Venus than Virgin (the place given to the Blessed Virgin in Roman Catholicism sublimates and so distorts the energies personified by Venus in Roman mythology). Blake might well have thought of this not so much as critique as what Ronald Paulson calls expression of the repressed text ("Blake's Bible," *Book and Painting*, 1982). Consider, for example, the erotic language ("disii ... ardor ... desiderio") as the Virgin, in response to the prayer of St. Bernard, leads the pilgrim towards his final vision of the divine (*Paradiso* 33.46-48). There is a touch of Venus in Dante's Virgin. Paley reports me arguing to this effect in general, and from time to time in detail, but he cannot go all the way with the idea that Blake is primarily a literal illustrator: here and there we are asked to see elements in the designs supposedly not arising from the poem which (Paley argues) should be given special Blakean meanings.

In considering this it is important to understand that an illustrator cannot always show the meanings of a text simply by transcribing textual detail into visual form. To take a simple example, Blake's illustration of *Purgatorio* 27 shows the purging flames occupied by spirits who are not harmed by them. This is not what the poem describes, but in the poem the pilgrim, thinking of human bodies burned to death, is terrified of the flames. Virgil reassures him: they are not to be feared; they do not operate as fire does on earth. How is an illustrator to convey this reassurance? In peopling the flames with figures who rejoice in their pains, Blake departs from Dante's description to show his meaning. Similarly, Blake's *Purgatory* is cloudy, whereas Dante emphasizes a contrast between *Purgatory* and the darkness of Hell. When I wrote about this in 1988, I accepted Blake's clouds as indicating doubts about Dante. I now wonder whether it is not more natural to take them as consistent with the poem: the pilgrim, his head marked with seven Ps, indicating the sins (*peccata*) still to be purged, does not yet see with the fullness that will be indicated by the radiant light of the *Paradiso* illustrations. Flaxman's *Purgatory* (which Blake knew) has clouds: they carry no implications about Dante's theology. If Blake's clouds are taken as symbolic it is, I now think, more natural to interpret them as about the limited view not of the poet but of the pilgrim at this point in the poem. Blake also wants a fundamental visual distinction between *Purgatory* and *Paradise*: the sequence passes from light occluded to light brilliant and clear. This is perhaps a case where the implications that an imaginative viewer of the illustrations really experiences—which Blake might take to be distinct from what the learned can reason out evidence for—are likely to depend on how that viewer understands Blake's fundamental attitude to illustration.

A central example of a design not, in Paley's view, illustrating Dante is that showing the entrance to Hell. This is not (as most are) a design illustrating a single canto: it is an epitome of Hell. Two giants on either side of Hell's entrance are emblematic of two kinds of sinner, those who acquiesce and those who rebel. A figure above, with crown and censer,

his costume marked with a Maltese cross and fleurs-de-lys, is a combined personification of Church and State, worshipping the Devil (with cloven hoof) who passes himself off as God. Paley rightly observes that Dante's views on Church and State were opposite to Blake's, that Dante believed in an ideal church and an ideal ruler. But is this to the point here? We are entering Hell. What we will find there is the worst of this world under punishment. Blake may have responded with special enthusiasm to Dante's arraignments and denunciations of the corruption and worldliness of the Church, but his illustration of the vestibule of Hell is entirely consistent with what *Inferno* as a whole shows.

Beatrice Addressing Dante from the Car is central. Like other commentators, I have discussed this beautiful watercolor at length. I will try not to repeat myself. All the colors in Beatrice's robes—white, green, and red (echoing the costumes of the Theological Virtues in the foreground)—are specified by Dante. There is also some blue, not specified by Dante, but blue (as Paley acknowledges) is the Virgin's color, and Beatrice is associated with the Virgin throughout the poem: she is fulfilling the Virgin's commission (*Inferno* 2); she will resume a seat in the Rose of which the Virgin is the apex (*Paradiso* 31). It is quite as important to Dante that Beatrice is associated with the Virgin as with the Theological Virtues, and Blake's coloration brings this out. As for her griffon, which Paley sees as a "stuffed animal," here we may directly compare visual impressions. I do not think the griffon a pictorial triumph, but I think it a pretty grand heraldic beast. The decisive indication for Paley is Beatrice's veil. It associates her with the delusive beauty of the world of the senses: the properly acculturated viewer will think of Vala. But Dante gave Beatrice a veil. If Blake had been illustrating a poem of his own, and had dressed a female figure in a veil, then the fit reader should be prepared for a negative significance. But when he is illustrating a poem by somebody else, in which a woman is described as wearing a veil, and Blake shows her doing so, there is—or so it seems to me—no reason for assigning to that veil the meaning Blake would have given it if he had invented it.

Interpretation depends on detail—reading the poem and looking at the illustrations (as Blake advises) with love and wonder, and looking not only at their detail but also at their broad visual impact. Both the detail and the broad impact must finally be seen, however, in relation to a sense of what kind of illustrator Blake is. One of Blake's aims as an illustrator is to help us read the text that is his subject with more full engagement and appreciation by presenting epitomes of that text in the new medium. Blake epitomizes, as one would expect from his aesthetic, not by aiming for a general impression, but by a selection of his source text's particulars. The reader of a design needs to look carefully and dispassionately at how Blake does that before reading in any supposed Blakean critiques.

Blake thought Dante a truly great poet, and he regularly made a distinction between vision and fable—the distinction in his myth between Los and his Spectre: the faculties that

imagine what is so eternally, and the aspects of the personality that subject vision to the conditions of time. All artists are subject to these. William Blake may have been a "mental prince," but he did not think of himself as other than infected by the conditions of time and space. In real life every Los has to resist his Spectre. It is only in apocalyptic myth that the Spectre can be tamed entirely. Another of Blake's aims as an illustrator was, as far as he was able, to free what is eternal in another poet's vision from what is temporal. On Blake's own account, to contradict his subject at the level of opinion would be to substitute the interpretations of one spectre for those of another. Blake the illustrator aims, insofar as he can, to release in the new medium what is visionary. When one looks in Blake's illustrations for expressions of the opinions he deduced from his own visions there is a danger, I think, of reducing him to a commentator who holds a candle in the sun.

One cannot read everything, or one would have no energy for thinking oneself. One cannot report more than a selection of what one reads without boring the reader. Still, I think Paley might have discussed Christopher Heppner's *Reading Blake's Designs* (1995). This bears on a major area of his subject, in its fine accounts of particular illustrations and of the traditions of visual expression within which Blake worked, and also in its formulation of general principles for the interpretation of Blake's illustrations of other poets and of the Bible: equal attention to the text illustrated and to the visual values of the illustration. If Paley fails in either aspect of this excellent formula, he does so in distinguished company.

Art and religion are one in these late works. Religion is not morality: it is a state of being. The Bible is the great code of art, but it needs an antithetical reading that purges it of the pious, respectable and obedient. Central is a new struggle with an old topic, the nature of Jesus, and his relation to the Father and the Law. In his account of *The Everlasting Gospel* Paley presents Blake as at his most Manichaean, showing a bifurcated universe of warring oppositions, and in parts a separation of matter and spirit that suggests Gnosticism. The poem is clearly unfinished, was in part hastily written, and is in some ways confusing, even chaotic. Nevertheless, Paley argues, Blake had long considered its issues: hasty and incomplete composition implies nothing about its gestation. He accordingly tussles with ambiguities to see how far the poem's confrontational paradoxes can be resolved into arguments that make overall sense, but the more some lines are pressed, the more they yield incoherence.

In seeking to reconcile opposed aspects of the divine, *The Ghost of Abel* ("To LORD BYRON in the Wilderness") represents a quite different view. Blake's unique invocation of Byron Paley also connects with Salomon Gessner's *Der Tod Abels* (1760; translated 1761 and frequently reprinted), primarily because this is concerned, as Byron is not, with forgiveness. He argues that Blake saw Byron as a kindred spirit, a fellow friend of liberty and foe of empire, and (like Voltaire and Paine, as Blake saw them) a better Christian than the defenders of orthodoxy who accused *Cain* of blasphemy. But Byron erred in

accepting a doctrine of retribution. He needed to understand what was for Blake now the central idea of Christianity: unconditional forgiveness.

Much the most important of these late works connected with the Bible is the *Illustrations of the Book of Job*. Job is a quite different kind of text from the *Divina Commedia*. It offers more openings for the interpretive illustrator because the text itself is not wholly consistent in its address to the problems it raises about the suffering of the innocent in a universe supposedly governed by a benign deity. The standard Hebraic views on suffering of Job's friends are rejected, but no viable alternatives are endorsed by the book taken as a whole. God tells Job that, since he cannot answer questions about the structure and history of the universe, he has no right to ask the moral questions that God's wager with Satan has forced on him. Job is convinced, and is apparently satisfied in the frame narrative with new children and more donkeys. But Job knows less than the reader about the ground of his sufferings, and in any case most readers will reflect that, though more donkeys may make up for those lost, new children replace the dead at best within limits. An illustrator may be expected to indicate a view of the difficulties, as the Authorized Version translators did when they introduced a New Testament frame of reference ("I know that my Redeemer liveth") and the idea of a bodily resurrection, neither of which is present in the original.

Here, then, is a text requiring interpretation, and Paley identifies clearly the main areas in which Blake interprets. Job's wife, in the text a minor figure who briefly counsels cursing and despair, is exalted into a prominent supportive role, and this portrait of the female is extended in the added prominence of Job's daughters. Job learns a distinction, in line with New Testament theology, between observation of the letter and the spirit of the law. And, as in the Authorized Version, the Redeemer is introduced. Paley interprets the series as a whole as emphasizing the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and of the divine and the human, with a positive role for women unusual in Blake's last works. As with the Dante illustrations, he proceeds plate by plate, with a clear account of each, and reports of the views of other interpreters. Opinion is reported with a winning openness to multiple possibilities. This good scholarly practice is in line with what many readers will want, perhaps conterminous even with what Blake himself required of the historian ("Tell me the Acts ... leave me to reason upon them as I please"). But I sometimes hear the voice of Blake's Isaiah demanding a firm persuasion. However much the viewer may wish to consider dispassionately the fullest range of possible meanings, he or she cannot finally withhold assent from delimited meanings. We are otherwise in a state of "Doubt which is Self Contradiction." I think Paley might more often have chosen between the alternatives his excellent scholarship offers, and, of course, explained why he opted for one meaning rather than another.

Since Paley usually reports a wide range of opinion, it is the more notable that he should ignore Kathleen Raine, surely a

major commentator on Blake, who devoted a whole book to the Job illustrations (*The Human Face of God*, 1982). In her account, Blake presents Job as a man whose self-righteousness alienates him from a God who is entirely benign. Her book is a detailed commentary on the Job illustrations, but it is also about the interpretation of Blake's whole oeuvre and its relevance to modern Western society and thought: it is an attack, through Blake, on materialist and humanist philosophies. Kathleen Raine herself regularly ignored commentators who did not agree with her, and may sometimes remind one of the angels who think of themselves as the only wise. Perhaps Paley is wise to respond in kind. But though Blake would not, I think, find the meanings Kathleen Raine adduced from the Job engravings those he intended, he would surely be interested that such meanings could be adduced by the creative intelligence of somebody who loved his work and to whom it was intensely meaningful. It is perhaps inevitable with critics whose values and whose understanding of their own experience are deeply involved with their reading of an author that it should be difficult for them to see where their author ends and they begin. The filtering that such involvement necessitates for the reader is the price to be paid for a kind of criticism that is peculiarly worth reading. I think a critic ought to enter into dialogue with this kind of creative response, at least to say in brief where and why it seems fundamentally wrong.

Paley's dealings with Northrop Frye indicate a related problem. Frye's account is mentioned, but only through fragments that give little idea of its fundamental drift. The synoptic mythographer in Frye, who could make pattern appear irrespective of particulars, gives an account not of the Job illustrations but rather of the reading of Job that might underlie them: Blake (Frye argues) must have seen Job as an epitome of the whole Bible from Genesis (fall) to Revelation (apocalypse and restoration). With the satisfaction of a deep mythic pattern in view, questions about innocent suffering recede in importance. Again, I think this at least partially wrong, because I take Blake to be more interested in moral questions and less in mythic patterns than Frye supposes. My doubt in relation to *The Traveller in the Evening* is whether one should extract from a view passing observations without explaining that they serve arguments quite different from one's own, and saying what one thinks of those arguments.

The illustrations of Job were not the last of Blake's dealings with the great code. Paley considers three footnotes. In his illuminated manuscript of Genesis, Blake creates his own meanings, by additions, omissions, and illustrations. Physical existence is entirely negative; the dominant issue is again forgiveness. In a series of sketches for the visionary and apocalyptic pseudepigraphical *Book of Enoch*, the main element is that adumbrated in the Enoch chapters of Genesis: the sexual relations of the sons of God and the daughters of men. Sexuality is represented negatively, as entrapping and monstrous. Most interesting of these minor works are Blake's marginalia to Robert Thornton's translation and annotation of the Lord's Prayer. Paley gives persuasive reasons for thinking that

Blake may have written these (in John Linnell's copy) for a small audience of his direct acquaintance rather than simply for his own private use. They object not only to Thornton's translation but also to the worldview represented by his whole publication, its absorption of the New Testament into the (to Blake) antithetical ethos of the classical world. Paley argues that they show a Gnostic Blake—by analogy, not necessarily by influence—who set intuitive knowledge of the divine above knowledge derived from any text. He also argues that, though Blake's comments may receive immediate prompting from a particular passage, it is often not just one section of the text that gives rise to them fundamentally. By resetting the marginalia in the context of the whole publication he illuminates their probable reference in new ways, beyond what is possible when they are simply attached (in editions of Blake's writings) to the parts of the text next to which they happened to be written. The argument draws attention to an important problem about how Blake's marginalia are presented, with an implied corollary: a call for more facsimiles of Blake's annotated books, and for consideration of all his marginalia in contexts beyond those supplied by editions of his writings.

There is much more in this book than even an extended review can describe—its tracing of sources and analogues, its range of historical, critical and scholarly reference, the diverse issues of which it points the relevance to understanding, but above all the care with which Paley reads the detail of texts and designs: even when one disagrees, one can see readily where and why. I notice that my reservations point in different directions: sometimes I should like different meanings, sometimes more meanings, and sometimes more determinate meanings. It is characteristic of Blake that he is both exhilaratingly dogmatic, and yet amenable to being read in many different ways, and to mean many different things. It is characteristic of Blake criticism that, even where he is most sympathetically understood, understanding is often partial and in some interesting way skewed. Disagreement about which meanings are determinate and which wide open is, then, perhaps all but inevitable.

Finally one must ask if Blake's last works are really illuminated by being brought together. Only, I think, within limits. Paley compares and contrasts when his material allows it, but largely he treats each work separately, and it is indicative that he does not offer any synoptic conclusions. Variousness of media and quality—from texts, engravings and watercolors that are highly finished to doggerel verse, rough drawings, and semi-spontaneous jottings—means that comparison is possible only within limits. Nevertheless, in his accounts of individual works—above all those of the Virgil woodcuts, *77 and His Two Sons*, the Job engravings, and the Thornton marginalia—Paley shows in an exemplary way what a range of knowledge and modes of thought can be brought to bear on contemplating these heterogeneous creations.