

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

David Bindman, *Catalogue of the Blake Collection of the Fitzwilliam Museum; Blake's Exhibition and Catalogue Reconsidered*

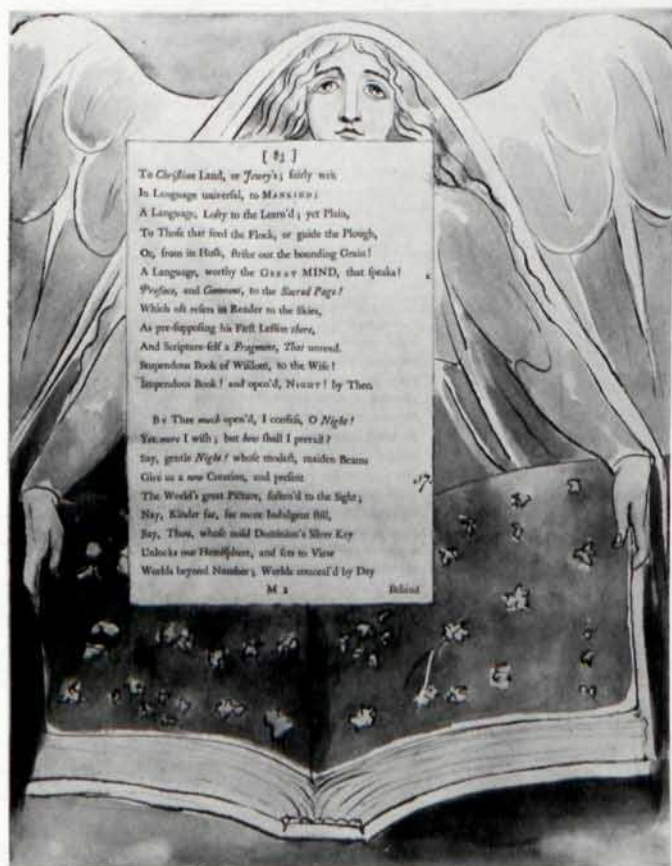
Duncan Macmillan

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the second state of the engraving. In the last analysis the irony in the inscription redounds on Solomon's head: in the end the Vanity of Cynicism is the greatest Vanity of all. Consider, for instance, the example of "our friend Diogenes the Grecian" mentioned in *MHH* 13 and epitomized in his famous encounter with Alexander the Great and Aristotle in front of his barrel; this is depicted in *Night Thoughts* no. 469 (IX, 51). Diogenes was supposed to have been a Cynic but Blake knew him to be a prophet, one who did not have to read a book to understand that Solomon's kind of wisdom must have been uttered by a sage who had grown weary of life. Nevertheless, Blake was careful to show us that, though Diogenes had abjured almost everything else, he had not given up books.

If one will lift up his eyes to the good book of the heavens, though it be opened by the sober wise figure of Night, who resembles Melancholy, he will see a goal for regeneration--as in *Night Thoughts* no. 501 (IX, 83) [fig. 14]. This is what Milton does in the end in *Il Penseroso* 12, as he looks up and sees the starry heavens humanized while a center opens beneath the pathetic, futile vanities that are unable to rise above the surface because they want to fly before they have learned how to benefit from the companionship of Melancholy.



14 *Night Thoughts* 501 (IX, 83). Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.

REVIEWS

David Bindman. *CATALOGUE OF THE BLAKE COLLECTION OF THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM CAMBRIDGE*. Cambridge: Heffer, 1970. Pp. vii + 88. 44 pls., including 1 in color. £3.

Blake's Exhibition and *Catalogue* Reconsidered: On the Occasion of The Fitzwilliam Museum Exhibition and *Catalogue*, 1971

Reviewed by Duncan Macmillan, University of Edinburgh

The publication of the *Catalogue* of the Blake collection of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, is an important event for Blake students. The range and quantity of the museum's holdings of Blake's works and of Blake material is well known, and this publication adds one more to the first class catalogues now available of the major British Blake collections.¹ The new catalogue includes as an appendix the entries from Sir Geoffrey Keynes' own catalogue, *Bibliotheca Bibliographica*, for the items in his collection that will come by his bequest to the Fitzwilliam. Though we hope this will be in the far distant future, the publication of the appendix gives us a measure of the importance of the promised bequest. It is, and will always be, a reminder of the great debt that we all owe in our knowledge and understanding of Blake to Sir Geoffrey.

David Bindman has done an excellent job of editing the Fitzwilliam catalogue. It contains sixty-four items of which the first forty-four are Blake's own works. Of the remainder, numbers 45-56 are portraits, though this includes the life mask by J. S. Deville, and at number 56 that curiously personal relic, Blake's spectacles. Numbers 1-55 are fully illustrated. The remaining items, numbers 57-64, are a small collection of commercial engraved work by Blake. The first forty-four items are arranged chronologically. They cover the whole of Blake's productive life, from the early Joseph designs to the visiting card for George Cumberland which was one of the last things that Blake produced. Although a chronological arrangement always presents difficulties, as used here it makes good sense. The illuminated books, for example, are placed by their dates of conception, not by their much more problematic dates of execution.

For greater intelligibility the chronology is subdivided into the five main periods of Blake's life: (1) the Early Works to 1789; (2) the Illuminated Books and Prints, 1789 to 1797; (3) Thomas Butts and Felpham, 1799 to 1808; (4) the Years of Obscurity, 1809 to 1818; (5) the Last Years and the patronage of John Linnell, 1818 to 1827. Each of the subdivisions is preceded by a brief explanatory outline of the significant events of the years that it includes. The two other sections of the catalogue are also similarly prefaced. The individual entries are clear and full throughout. David Bind-

man steers a skilful course through the rocks and shoals of Blake scholarship to produce an admirably lucid and accessible work of reference.

The publication of the catalogue was marked by an exhibition of the Fitzwilliam's own collections of Blake and of Blake material, together with a number of additional items from various sources. These included, as well as a portrait of Mrs. Blake, six portraits of the artist himself to add to those already in the Museum's collection. Brought together these likenesses made a striking and memorable experience. Through the various renderings of his face and person the image of the man came across very strongly to confirm his essential humanity, so strongly expressed in Gilchrist's *Life*. It was a delicate gesture on the part of the organizers of the exhibition to remind us in this way of Blake himself, and it is salutary to be so reminded at a time when the humble individual is in danger of disappearing under a mountain of scholarship, some of whose relevance, or even meaning, he might be hard put to understand.

William Rossetti wrote in preface to his list of Blake's works as it was published in Gilchrist, that his descriptive catalogue was a humble tribute to the soaring genius of the author of *A Descriptive Catalogue*. The Fitzwilliam *Catalogue* and exhibition inevitably recall Blake's own *Catalogue* and exhibition of 1809. A comparison between the two events reflects a distortion that has crept into our understanding of the artist's work. Perhaps it is not serious or fundamental, but it is nevertheless worth making a small attempt to correct.

The most important painting in the Fitzwilliam collection and the one to which the *Catalogue* gives most space, both of text and illustration, is the picture known as "An Allegory of the Spiritual Condition of Man." This seems to date from the years immediately after the exhibition of 1809; and without entering into the problem of its meaning, the picture's size, and the evident complexity of its subject, link it to the kind of paintings that Blake produced for his exhibition. Nevertheless, hung with so many smaller works of a somewhat different character the importance that this kind of picture had for Blake himself is lost. His dominant ambition was after all to be an artist in the way that his contemporaries understood the term. His early association with the circles that included Flaxman, Fuseli, and Barry was not merely casual but shaped some of his most basic ideas. That these others regarded him as a conventional visual artist like themselves is demonstrated by the suggestion recorded in a letter of Flaxman's that a subscription should be raised to send Blake to Rome, the goal of all aspiring artists in the later eighteenth century.²

It is clear that in 1809 Blake's decision to hold an exhibition was not merely a gesture of despair, but the result of fairly long meditation on his position as an artist. The seriousness and fulness of *A Descriptive Catalogue* should be evidence enough of this. From his letters while he was at Felpham we can see that at least part of Blake's difficulty with Hayley was that he wanted

Blake to take the conventional road to artistic success, but that Blake could not or would not make the compromise necessary to follow Hayley's prompting. Nevertheless *A Descriptive Catalogue* and the exhibition show that Blake agreed with Hayley's main point, and even if Hayley's advice were superfluous, both agreed that Blake could and should succeed as a painter. The argument was over their ideas of what a painter was, and the kind of painter that Blake should become. What his ambitions were as an artist is set out in *A Descriptive Catalogue*, although as so often the combative language and the hyperbole obscure the comparative straightforwardness of much that he is saying. One thing that is clear to any careful reader is that the traditional explanation of both the exhibition and *Catalogue* as prompted by his quarrel with Cromek and Stothard is simply inadequate. Blake was far too intelligent to waste his energy in such a way. The entry in the *Catalogue* for the Canterbury Pilgrims is the longest of the entries, but only one third of it has anything at all to do with either Stothard or Cromek.

Blake's status as an engraver-painter was not unique in his period. The greatest of all his predecessors, Hogarth, was after all nothing else. He was trained as an engraver, and lived by publication of his works, usually engraved by himself. James Barry too, although a painter, lived in his later years largely on the sale of his own prints from the paintings in the Society of Arts. James Ward was a slightly younger contemporary originally trained as an engraver. Thus as an engraver trying to establish himself as a painter Blake was not a forlorn outsider, but doing something that nobody would have regarded as exceptional. Nor in the pictures that he painted and the ambitions that he set himself in his *Catalogue* was he so far out of his generation as is sometimes thought. His views on outline, for example, were shared by Cumberland and Flaxman, and were not very remote from the ideas of Ingres, or, as far as we can see, that somewhat nebulous contemporary group in France, the Primitifs. What he says about oil-paint reflects the great controversy of the 1790's over the "Venetian secret," the idea that there was a particular kind of paint or varnish that the Venetians used and on which their effects depended. This and similar thinking had led to disastrous experiments in technique in which Reynolds in his later work had been particularly prominent. Blake's picture, "The Goats, an experiment Picture," "laboured to a superabundant blackness" and therefore especially "worthy the attention of the Artist and Connoisseur" is a hilarious comment on this kind of attitude to the old masters.³ Barry too had been vigorous and outspoken in resisting contemporary fashions for impure techniques. Although some of Blake's own experiments have not fared too well, when one sees what has happened to much of the painting of his contemporaries his absolute mistrust of oil-paint seems quite reasonable.⁴

One of the most important facts about Blake's exhibition, although it is often mentioned, in its true significance is also often ignored. Of the two most important paintings in the exhibition, one, "The Ancient Britons," must have been enormous.

To accommodate three life-size ancient Britons the canvas must have been at least eight feet high and proportionately wide. Seymour Kirkup writing in 1870 reckoned the picture was about 10 by 14 feet.⁵ This is not the only large picture that we know Blake painted. The lost "Last Judgment" was also evidently very big. His ambition to paint on a large scale is quite clearly set out in the *Descriptive Catalogue* and should be taken at its face value. Blake's proposal to paint Westminster Hall, even if only half-serious, is only one of a series of projects for big pictures in public places that began in the 1770's with the project for the decoration of St. Paul's in which Barry was involved and which eventually led to his paintings for the Society of Arts. The ambition to paint monumental public pictures was inherited by B. R. Haydon, who almost certainly knew Blake,⁶ and it was largely through his agitation that the redecoration of Westminster Hall and the new Houses of Parliament, in fresco, just as Blake had proposed, became a national preoccupation in the 1840's.

In scale and subject "The Ancient Britons" belonged in a long line of similar paintings that began in the 1760's with Gavin Hamilton's monumental pictures from the *Iliad*. These enormous canvases, of which the engravings circulated very widely, were profoundly influential on painters of the group to which Blake belonged. The idea of a greater heroic past preceding historical antiquity was widespread and was used in a variety of ways by painters from Gavin Hamilton onwards. The idea is apparent in their constant use of Homer and Ossian, and it is also seen in Barry's assertion of Lear's Britishness in his painting of "The Death of Cordelia," now in the Tate Gallery. It has in the background a kind of Stonehenge, just as Blake's picture had, and is clearly an ancient British subject. It provides a direct precedent for the centerpiece of Blake's exhibition.⁷

The kind of antiquarian nationalism which is implicit in Barry's interpretation of Lear, and which appears in so many ways in Blake, was not new in Barry's picture. It appeared with a Scottish slant in Alexander Runciman's decorations of Penicuik House in 1772 with scenes from Ossian and the life of St. Margaret of Scotland. Barry and Runciman were friends in Rome in about 1769 and the idea seems to have been a fairly common one among painters of their circle. The more up-to-date kind of patriotism that Blake expresses in his pictures of Pitt and of Nelson and in the suggestion that they should be the subject of a national commission to be executed "on a scale that is suitable to the grandeur of the nation . . . the parent of the heroes," also has several antecedents. In Barry's Society of Arts pictures "The Triumph of the Thames" takes a very important part. Flaxman had proposed various gigantic national monuments, one of which, the Nelson Pillar, was engraved by Blake. Benjamin West's "Death of Wolfe" had been the most popular and successful history painting of the later eighteenth century, and Barry had painted the same subject. In 1806 West had had another success with a similar subject very differently treated. This was the monumental "Apotheosis of Nelson" [fig. 1], a highly allegorical painting of the death of the

great hero of the day, which apparently attracted large crowds when West exhibited it at his house in the summer of 1806.⁸ These crowds must have included Blake, for his own painting of "The Spiritual Form of Nelson," which he exhibited in 1809, seems to reflect West's composition.⁹ In an Advertisement for his exhibition Blake actually describes his Pitt and Nelson as "Apotheoses," thus using West's title, although he changes this in the *Catalogue*.

Though the Nelson and the Pitt are usually regarded as a pair, the Nelson is a much flatter and simpler composition. Nelson supported on Leviathan is surrounded by a simple circle of figures. The whole group seems to be supported on a cloud. There are no subsidiary scenes and no views into depth as there are in the Pitt. West's composition is also, for a classical artist, surprisingly flat, and, as in Blake's picture, the central figure is surrounded by a circle of secondary figures. Blake's composition is much tauter and denser than West's, and he makes a feature of its flatness in a way of which West is incapable, but the basic similarity is sufficient to be striking. The most important point in common, however, is that in West's picture beneath the cloud on which Nelson is borne appears Leviathan in the traditional form of a whale. Blake's composition would therefore appear to be something of a critique upon West's. He still owes something to West, however, in that by eliminating the faults in West's picture Blake has himself arrived at a much more satisfactory composition than his own earlier essay in the same genre, the Pitt of 1805. It is clear that patriotic allegories of this kind were highly fashionable just at the time that Blake was painting. A few years later in 1815 a similar allegory on the subject of Wellington was commissioned from James Ward after a public competition. It was to be hung in the Chelsea Hospital. When it was completed Ward's picture measured 21 by 36 feet. In his written explanation of the allegory the artist enumerates 52 different figures. Although Ward grossly exceeded the terms of his commission, even as originally given it was quite as large and elaborate as anything to which Blake aspired in his *Catalogue*.

The elaborate symbolism and complexity of meaning of Ward's Wellington picture was not peculiar to him, or shared only with Blake. West's Nelson has already been cited, but the most abstruse and elaborate of all were Barry's paintings for the Society of Arts. These illustrate the civilizing influence of the arts on the progress of mankind, but in order to give his purpose in detail Barry published a small volume of explanatory text. In spite of their complexity his pictures were generally well received. Barry's last major picture, "Pandora, the Heathen Eve," now in Manchester, is an enormous canvas packed both with figures and with esoteric meaning. It was intended as part of a series illustrating the history of religion. Barry's obscurity and the over-burdening of his pictures was part of a widespread attempt to assert the moral and intellectual seriousness of art. Blake differed from Barry in his far greater power of creating effective symbols, but not in the nature of his ambitions. He too was sometimes led

- 1 "The Apotheosis of Nelson" by Benjamin West, exhibited in 1806. Reproduced by courtesy of the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, England.



public understanding. He was working in an intellectual and allegorical genre practised by other painters of his generation, in which obscurity was no obstacle, and a written key was a perfectly acceptable part of the picture.

The other major picture in Blake's exhibition, and the one to which he gives most attention in his *Catalogue* is "The Canterbury Pilgrims" now in Glasgow. In the absence of "The Ancient Britons" this is the most important of all Blake's paintings. It is represented in the Fitzwilliam collection by Blake's engraving. It is a different kind of painting from those discussed so far, but there is one important point about it that has bearing on this discussion of Blake's position as a painter. Both in general conception and in some of its details it is inspired by the sculptures of the Parthenon. The idea of the procession of horses seen both in line and in depth clearly derives from the splendid clattering procession of cavalry in the Panathenaic procession in the frieze. The Knight in his upper half is the figure from the

into burdening his pictures with meaning beyond what they could express in a directly visual way, and therefore, like Barry and Ward, led into the use of an accompanying explanatory text. We know that he provided such a text with the Petworth "Last Judgment," for it survives. Explanation too was the primary purpose of the *Descriptive Catalogue* to which the long account of the lost "Last Judgment" was evidently intended as an addition. David Bindman suggests that the key to the picture that is called "An Allegory of the Spiritual Condition of Man" may lie in some published text, as in the case of the picture from Hervey's *Meditations*; but in view of the evidence it seems even more likely that had he had occasion to do so, Blake would have accompanied his picture with an explanatory text of the kind that Bindman recognizes may once have existed. The same is therefore probably true of the Arlington Court picture. The obscurity of these paintings was not exceptional. Blake was not isolated in producing this kind of involved allegory, and his pictures are therefore not part of a deliberate idiosyncratic retreat from

east pediment that used to be known, and was known to Blake, as Theseus.¹⁰ The Wife of Bath is the figure of Demeter from the same pediment, and the Host seems to derive his gesture from Persephone, though the rest of his figure is from one of the horsemen in the west frieze reversed. The odd stiff front legs of his horse appeared on a riderless horse at the extreme western end of the north frieze. The standing figures at the back of Blake's procession bear a general relationship to four standing figures who appear right at the back of the equestrian procession in the north frieze. One of the figures stands round the corner to link the north and west friezes. As a group these figures play the same compositional role that the standing figures do in Blake's picture. Several other details link it to the sculptures. The main point here, however, is not art-historical source hunting, but that by this connection we can see Blake being amongst the very first to react to the major artistic event of the first years of the nineteenth century, the arrival in London of the Elgin marbles. These were not unpacked until 1807, so Blake's reaction was direct. By 1809 perhaps only Haydon, Flaxman, and Fuseli could have shown themselves as familiar with the sculptures as Blake does in his picture. The only person to beat him to a public comment on the sculptures in this way was Stothard. If Stothard took this idea from Blake, Blake's anger with him is even more understandable than if Stothard simply stole Blake's subject. Ignoring the quarrel with Stothard, however, Blake's use of the Parthenon sculptures shows him being absolutely up to date in the most important painting to survive from his exhibition of 1809. His identification of the Canterbury Pilgrims with the Parthenon in this way also illuminates what he says about Chaucer and about his painting, for it creates a link with what he knew was one of the great archetypes of European art.

In his exhibition, in his *Catalogue*, and in the pictures that he painted around 1809, Blake was therefore up to date, even topical. He had every reason to expect that his attempt to establish himself as a painter would be well received, and that at least the more discerning public would recognise that his aims as an artist were straightforward. Though Blake was highly original, he was nevertheless within the main stream of contemporary art. That people did not recognise this did not weaken the justice of his case, but it has meant that since then our judgement of his art has always been lopsided. Because he failed to be recognised as a painter, we forget that this is what he was by vocation. Our collections, through no fault of their own, do not represent him as he sought to represent himself when he appealed to the public in his exhibition and *Descriptive Catalogue*. For this reason it is appropriate to remember Blake's own undertaking in considering this new catalogue and exhibition. It is to the author of *A Descriptive Catalogue* that David Bindman and the Fitzwilliam have now, like Rossetti, paid a fitting tribute.

NOTES

¹The *Catalogue* of the Graham Robertson collec-

tion was published in 1952. Sir Geoffrey Keynes' catalogue, *Bibliotheca Bibliographica*, was published in 1964. Martin Butlin's new edition of the Tate Gallery Blake *Catalogue* has appeared this year, and the Handlist of the British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings Blake Collection is to be published in a forthcoming number of the *Blake Newsletter*.

²The project of sending Blake to Rome to complete his artistic education is mentioned in a letter of Flaxman to Hayley, 26 April 1784. It is published by G. E. Bentley, Jr., in *Blake Records* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), p. 27.

³Blake's picture, though it makes a slightly different point, recalls Hogarth's "Time smoking a picture," a print in which he lampooned contemporary taste for old masters. Hogarth also produced a burlesque of his own "Paul before Felix," "designed and scratched in the true Dutch manner." The prints were soaked in coffee to give them a good antique finish.

⁴Blake's understanding of fresco was probably no more eccentric than that of any of his contemporaries. The technique was virtually forgotten in Britain until the 1840's, when it was re-introduced for the decoration of the new Houses of Parliament. Even then some pretty disastrous things were done in the name of fresco.

⁵Letter of Kirkup to Lord Houghton, 25 March 1870, quoted in Bentley, *Blake Records*, p. 222.

⁶The evidence given below that Blake knew the sculptures of the Parthenon very soon after they were first visible in London suggests that he and Haydon must have come into contact. By his own account Haydon was in practically constant study of the marbles at that time. It would be a nice irony if Blake by strengthening Haydon's ambition had helped to inspire the redecoration of the Houses of Parliament, in fresco, with scenes from the lives of British heroes, including in an enormous painting "The Death of Nelson" by Maclise, though neither Blake nor poor Haydon lived to see it done.

⁷Ancient British subjects of one kind or another had been fairly common from the 1770's. The indefatigable Angelica Kauffman produced pictures of this kind. Flaxman's drawing of Hengist and Horsa might be thought comparable to Blake's "Ancient Britons." This kind of subject was matched by the current fashion for Druidry and the appearance of dolmens and menhirs in various contemporary parks. Alnwick Park in Northumberland, for example, has menhirs for milestones.

⁸Farington's Diary for 2 July 1806.

⁹Miss Jane Mackenzie first suggested this analogy to me, but it is also considered in Morton D. Paley's *Energy and the Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), esp. Chap. 7.

¹⁰Palmer quotes Blake's opinion of the Theseus in a letter to Gilchrist of 23 August 1855, quoted in Gilchrist, *Life*, 1880, I, 320.