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R E V I E W

David V. Erdman and John E. Grant, eds., *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic*

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David V. Erdman and John E. Grant, eds.  
*BLAKE'S VISIONARY FORMS DRAMATIC*. Princeton:  
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 476. 120 plates, 8 in color. \$20.00.

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Blake's composite art is easier to experience than to analyze--that is, analyze *as* composite art. As W. J. T. Mitchell remarks in one of the essays in this collection, "the basic groundwork for understanding Blake's pictorial symbolism remains to be done. Critics still tend either to content themselves with identification of subject matter or to search for a fixed set of pictorial conventions" (p. 73). Or, one might add, they merely call attention to elements in the designs by describing the designs in terms of shapes and lines or make comparisons between one design and another. And attempts to put the designs together with the text usually take the form of talking about the text with appended notes on the designs. We simply don't have an aesthetic or criticism of composite art that amounts to very much. We should have one not only for Blake but for others, in an age in which many poets, like Robert Duncan, sing some of their poems, and either draw pictures of their own, or collaborate with artists in covering their pages with designs.

Blake criticism until very recently has been almost exclusively concerned with the text and has made great progress. It has built up a body of critical concepts about it as poetry with enough general acceptance so that each new critic no longer has to feel he has to start from scratch. Critical study of Blake's text alone is quite demanding enough for most people, but the fact remains that reading him in a printed version is not the way he wanted to be read. And the experience of reading even a sparsely illuminated work like *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* from an engraved page is simply different from reading it in print. For some curious things begin to happen. Even if one concentrates very hard on what is being said on a plate like 16 of *The Marriage*, which expounds theoretical doctrine, the picture at the top remains very much present in peripheral vision, and the little squiggles of figures following the lines of writing move the eye along in a way that imparts a rhythm to the whole thing, rhythm taking the place of punctuation. Though the analogy is too easy because it involves only one art rather than two, reading Blake's text alone is a little like singing the tunes of Schumann's songs without the accompaniment, where most of the music really is a good deal of the time, or playing Couperin without ornaments.

This book represents a cooperative attempt through a kind of super-seminar deriving from an essay contest at the 1968 English Institute to form some beginnings for the kind of criticism that we need to develop if Blake scholarship, having reached some degree of consolidation in dealing with the text, is to move toward meeting Blake more fully on his own terms. Its editors are

John E. Grant, who has been in the forefront of those insisting--and demonstrating--that the text alone is half the story, and that super-organizer of cooperative Blake scholarship, David V. Erdman. The editors have not merely put together a collection of essays from the contest with several other papers; but in numerous notes, some really essays, they comment like seminar directors on what is being said, adding information, correcting, criticizing, sometimes even disagreeing with each other.

Composite art is conceived in this volume comprehensively as including "all the arts of discourse" (p. 93), and the book contains essays on: (1) the theatre (a very illuminating piece by Martha England on "The Island in the Moon" as being possibly connected with Samuel Foote's dramatic satires at the Haymarket); (2) the theory of composite art (W. J. T. Mitchell, who argues against considering Blake's work in terms of *ut pictura poesis* because this implies a dualism which he was trying to defeat, and Jean Hagstrum, who would prefer retaining *ut pictura poesis* and the idea of the "sister arts" in a richer and more comprehensive version); (3) Blake's illustrations of the texts of others (Irene Tayler's delightful account of the illustrations of Gray's ode on the death of his cat, from a welcome study now published; Grant's fine description and thematic analysis of the early drawings for Young's *Night Thoughts*, also part of a large forthcoming study; and Ben F. Nelms's discussion of the Job engravings, which complements Frye's essay on the same subject in the Rosenfeld collection for S. Foster Damon); (4) individual works by engraved plates (Erdman's essay on *America*, to which he brings his enormous knowledge and enthusiasm to show it to be practically a total experience; Michael Tolley's useful reading of the plates of *Europe* in relation to the patterns of biblical history and Milton's Nativity Ode; Robert E. Simmons' ingenious and complex analysis of the symmetry of structure and designs in *The Book of Urizen*); (5) the structure and form of certain works (William F. Halloran's essay arguing that the *French Revolution*, when considered with its model in Revelation, emerges as deserving a higher place in the canon than it has had; Brian Wilkie's essay on Milton as a Romantic epic; Helen T. McNeil's account of *The Four Zoas* as an "epic of situations" which are cosmic confrontations; Henry Lesnick's study of the structure of *Jerusalem* which suggests that the opening and closing plates of the chapters show the structure; (6) iconographic elements (Janet Warner's study of gesture to which is appended a suggestive catalog of ten frequent forms of gesture in the designs; Eben Bass's study of the *Songs* displaying design elements such as curves, diagonals, curved vegetal designs, and so on; (7) the characters of Urizen and Orc (John Sutherland's account of Urizen as an allegory of a mental activity; George Quasha's intense examination of Orc psychologically and esthetically as "a fiery paradigm" of torsion and energy; (8) a mythical source study (Irene Chayes's study of the Cupid and Psyche myth); and finally, (9) important recurrent imagery (Kenneth R. Johnston's study of urban imagery; Edward J. Rose's account of imagery of the harvest).

The subjects treated, though generally on the topic of "visionary forms dramatic," range quite widely. Even so, any discussions of visionary forms to be found in music, except for Erdman's discussion of sound imagery in *America*, are almost completely lacking, a rather curious omission since Blake was said to have sung his songs and his epics are full of songs and choruses, with instrumentation specified (one group in Night V of *The Four Zoas*, for instance, includes "the soft pipe the flute the viol organ harp & cymbal / And the sweet sound of silver voices" that calm Enitharmon on her couch). Indeed, the whole of *The Four Zoas*, with its arias, choruses, and set pieces, really resembles an opera more than it does an epic. And in *Jerusalem* 74 (E 227) Blake seems to me to show a remarkable degree of sophistication in music theory in the passage beginning on line 23: "The Sons of Albion are Twelve: the Sons of Jerusalem Sixteen / I tell how Albions Sons by Harmonies of Concords and Discords / Opposed to Melody, and by Lights & Shades, opposed to Outline / And by Abstraction opposed to the Visions of Imagination / By cruel Laws divided Sixteen into Twelve Divisions." The details are too complicated for inclusion here, but I believe that Blake is taking a visionary position on the side of the melodic Pythagorean division of the octave, as opposed to the harmonic tempered division still being vigorously debated in 1806 which would divide the octave into 12 equal or nearly equal but abstract (as opposed to natural) intervals by mathematical manipulations of "harmonies of concords and discords," and that this concept was quite important to him.

This book doesn't quite give us the theory that we need to deal critically with Blake's composite art, but to ask for that is perhaps asking too much. It does give us a vigorous attempt at such a theory, with a great deal of useful matter, and, perhaps most important, it dramatizes the need for a conscious re-direction of Blake scholarship. Its fresh hammer-and-tongs approach to some of the problems as well as the enthusiasm of the enterprise should stir up further activity. Because of all these things, it should be a required book for any serious study of Blake from now on.

Geoffrey Keynes, ed. *Drawings of William Blake 92 pencil studies*. New York: Dover Publications, 1970. Pp. xiv + [185, including 92 plates]. \$3.50.

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For a long time most Blake facsimiles and reproductions were available only in expensive limited editions, far beyond the means of the average student. Such cheaper reproductions as were published were inadequate. Recently there has been a welcome tendency to issue adequate reproductions in modestly-priced editions, often in paperback: the Oxford Paperbacks edition of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, edited by Sir Geoffrey Keynes, and issued in 1970, is an example.

The two collections of reproductions of Blake's drawings available up to 1970 were those published by the Nonesuch Press in 1927 and 1956, under the editorship of Geoffrey Keynes. They were expensively produced books and, if printed now, would cost several times as much as they did originally. It is a sobering thought that the 1927 collection was published at £1-75. It is doubtful if it could be published today at less than fifteen times that amount. Now Dover Publications has issued a welcome and cheap paperback edition of Blake's drawings, also edited by Sir Geoffrey. It says much for the editor's vitality that forty years separate the first of the Nonesuch collection from this one.

The Nonesuch collections contained a total of one-hundred and thirty-eight drawings; the Dover edition contains ninety-two, so it is far from complete. In any case, Sir Geoffrey informs us that "there are perhaps more than two hundred drawings now extant." It is therefore to be hoped that the book meets with such success that another collection may be issued to bring the selection nearer completion. But the Dover book is not merely a reprint or rehash of drawings previously published, for a few are here reproduced which did not appear in the earlier selections. Among these are two early drawings, made for Basire, from monuments in Westminster Abbey (plates 1 and 2); and the powerful "Charon, from an Antique" (plate 82).

As in every medium in which he worked, Blake's range in his drawings is enormous, from the poetic, yet homely qualities of "The Virgin Mary hushing the young Baptist" (plate 34), to the almost abstract "Time's triple bow" (plate 53), which, in its tight network of curves might almost be mistaken for a schematic study by the Bauhaus artist, Oskar Schlemmer.<sup>1</sup> This selection also illustrates how Blake could produce excellent "academic" drawings, like "Laocoön: the Antique Group" (plate 58), as well as being able to indicate with a few rough lines the energy and power that would later be translated into a finished design, as in "The Soul exploring the recesses of the grave" (plate 41). On the other hand, when drawing an uncongenial or uninteresting subject, he could be incredibly weak,