

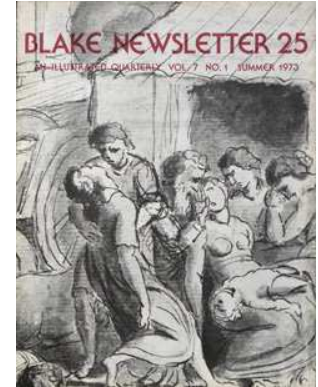
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Nancy Bogen, ed., William Blake, *The Book of Thel* (Brown University Press and the New York Public Library)

Francis Wood Metcalf

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William Blake: The Book of Thel--A Facsimile and a Critical Text. Edited and with an Introduction and Appendixes by Nancy Bogen. Providence: Brown University Press and the New York Public Library, 1971. Pp. xiv + 82, 11 plates. \$10

Reviewed by Francis Wood Metcalf

Nancy Bogen's facsimile and critical text of *The Book of Thel* is a handsome and useful work which will find a home on the shelf of many a Blakist. Not only does it offer a good likeness of the copy of *Thel* in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, it also provides a new interpretation of the poem, a new ordering of extant copies more accurate than that of Keynes and Wolf, a running gloss on the designs which includes cross-references to other copies, abundant notes, and an attempt at a standardized text and punctuation. The one bad apple in this cornucopia of bookish delights is a section on prosody whose taint has infected the interpretive section to some extent also. Since much of what follows will deal with these blemishes and therefore seem to indict the work as a whole, I would like to affirm here its overall merit, which is based largely upon the success of its major part, the facsimile.

The two most noticeable differences between original and facsimile are the latter's greater intensity of color (mostly blue) and the generally darker tone of its "blank" spaces, or "ground." The original's ground is truly blank, its light tan color that of the aged and perhaps never brilliant paper on which the designs were printed. The facsimile's ground is not blank, however, but colored to resemble the blank original. This colored ground creates a powerful contrast with the brilliant white of the surrounding page that is not present in the original and that constitutes a major perceptual difference between the two versions. The darker tone of the facsimile's ground may stem from this contrast more than from its actual pigmentation.

The greater intensity of blue in the facsimile is not bothersome and may well be more "original" than the somewhat faded blue of its model. This raises a paradox of corruptible form. Which version is more original: the present one, faded and darkened by its voyage of two centuries; or some theoretical reconstruction of its pristine state? I have no knowledge of the printer's calculations in this regard, nor of the techniques of color-reconstruction, but I hope the makers of facsimiles have considered this point before embalming bones of corruption.

Some of the blue areas of the facsimile suffer from an unfortunate grainy or mottled effect, a smudgy contrast within the color that is not as pronounced in the original. There is also a darkness, heaviness, and diffusion of line, but with very little loss of fine detail. In its total impression the facsimile transcends these minor faults, however, and appears the image of pragmatic fidelity: pleasant, useful, and cheap.

Bogen's new interpretation of *Thel* is essentially that the heroine is a sympathetic character whose point of view is Blake's own, and who is "a young girl, not a disembodied soul, who is not hypocritical or even self-deceiving but is as virtuous and transparent as the creatures with which she associates. . . . She seeks and eventually finds a meaningful role in life" (p. 21) as a "protester" (p. 30).

The basis for this interpretation is "a survey of some of the literary traditions to which the poem appears to be related" (p. 21). Six such traditions are considered, and if a similar approach in the section on prosody were not such a critical failure, I might greet this survey without suspicion. As it is, I am uneasy with Bogen's reliance upon her technique of forging links to various traditions and individual works in order to illuminate *Thel* indirectly. Specifically, I wonder whether she has been too selective, presenting as prime cuts a few supportive points from her vast, butchered *corpus* of traditions, but shunning as offal what might contradict her theory. Also I wonder whether one should so easily assume that Blake's response to the traditions he used was free of irony or reversal. However, I mean only to warn the prospective reader, not to damn Bogen's work without substance. Her new reading of *Thel* will be acclaimed by many, I am sure, and the rest will find it a challenge worth a spirited reply.

Several specific readings in her analysis of the poem itself seem dubious, however, and contribute to my uneasiness with her interpretation as a whole. The one point I shall deal with here concerns the first half of *Thel*'s motto: "Does the Eagle know what is in the pit? / Or wilt thou go ask the Mole." According to Bogen, "the Eagle and the Mole of the motto probably symbolize double vision and 'Single Vision.' Double vision is represented by *Thel*, who sees more than meets the eye; single vision is represented by the other creatures of *Har*, whose reality seems limited to themselves and their milieu. Therefore, the motto's first question is, Does *Thel* or one of the other creatures know what is in the pit? Since *pit* can signify both the grave and hell, the answer seems to be *Thel*, for she alone has visited the 'land unknown.' But that land is also the interior of the Clod's house, and *Thel*'s experience there results from the Clod's invitation; so the real answer is that both *Thel* and the Clod know what is in the pit, but their knowledge is of different orders" (p. 30).

This argument's premise, that the Eagle and Mole "probably symbolize double vision and 'Single Vision,'" is supported by a note to the famous letter to Butts of 22 November 1802. It would seem unwise, however, to leap forward across thirteen years of crucial intellectual development

Francis Wood Metcalf is writing a Ph.D. dissertation at New York University on rhetoric and style in the Prophetic Books and has contributed previously to the Newsletter.

in an effort to legitimize a reading retrospectively. Since apparently Blake had not evolved his concept of imaginative levels at the time he wrote *Thel*, Bogen's interpretation seems groundless. At the very least she ought to have explained why the motto's nearly contemporaneous echo in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*--"Does not the eagle scorn the earth & despise the treasures beneath? / But the mole knoweth what is there, & the worm shall tell it thee" (5:39-40)--is not of interpretive value though obviously related in concept.

Bogen supports a "no" answer for the rest of the motto by means of the following logic: "As for the second question of the motto--'Can Wisdom be put in a silver rod? / Or Love in a golden bowl?'--from the way it is phrased the answer must be no. If Blake had wanted an affirmative answer he would have asked, Can Wisdom *not* be put in a silver rod *nor* Love in a golden bowl?" (pp. 30-31). I agree with her notion of the proper answer, but marvel that she did not apply similar logic to the preceding distich. On this basis, if Blake had wanted an affirmative answer he would have asked, Does the Eagle *not* know what is in the pit? As it is, the motto states in paraphrase that no, of course the Eagle doesn't know what is in the pit because that's the Mole's turf, as it were. Bogen's claim that the answer is yes, the Eagle (*Thel*) knows what is in the pit, and the Mole (the Clod) knows too, "but their knowledge is of different orders," rings with the special pleading of an argument stretched on the iron couch of a fixed theory.

The weakness of the section on *Thel*'s prosody derives mainly from failures of judgment and accuracy. An example of the former occurs when in tracing harbingers of *Thel*'s long line in earlier Blakean works, Bogen observes that in *King Edward the Third* "several fourteen-syllable lines may be found" (p. 12); three, according to the notes. Since very many of this play's 642 lines deviate wildly from the decasyllabic norm, I question the value of her observation. To seize upon the three lonely heptameters in this exotic company and to prick them out as precursors of *Thel*'s long line, suggesting not a random but a developmental connection, is surely to display myopic judgment.

Bald inaccuracy joins bad judgment in Bogen's next sentence: "Blake's early attempts at measured prose might also be mentioned: *Samson*, *The Couch of Death*, *Contemplation*, and the *Prologue to King John* in *Poetical Sketches*; and the two unfinished pieces in manuscript, beginning 'Woe cried the muse' and 'then She bore Pale Desire.'" Analysis refutes the vague assertion that these works' rhythmic form relates to *Thel*'s heptameters. The *Prologue to King John*, for example, contains thirteen pentameter periods, including seven in a row, but only a few heptameters. In "Woe cried the muse," sixteen of the first twenty rhythmic units are pentameters; two are heptameters. There is considerable rhythmic variation in and among the other works in Bogen's list, but I am certain that no analysis would support the claim that they anticipate the septenary line.

Bogen next considers, by a rough count, eighteen separate non-Blakean works and genres as possible prosodic influences. I admire the breadth of her research, but wish she had been as diligent to analyze and evaluate her material as she was to acquire it. For example, she speculates that "prose works of a rhythmical or lyrical nature may also have had some influence on Blake's development of the long line" (p. 12); and "among" such works, six are listed. The evidence for a prosodic connection is this: "Hervey and Sherlock are referred to in *An Island in the Moon*; and Blake's diction in *Thel* is similar in many respects to the diction of these works" (p. 13). What have diction and prior reference to do with prosody? Does the likelihood that Blake read a work in one mode constitute evidence that he somehow transferred its form to another? Bogen's authority to suggest formal parallels was weakened by her inaccuracy with regard to Blake's own works; here, unsupported by evidence, her suggestion is critically worthless.

A singular instance of poor judgment occurs when Bogen attempts to link the long line with biblical style as discussed and translated by Robert Lowth. In quoting a passage from his *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, she claims that Lowth "contended" (p. 13) what in fact he said by extrapolation "may at least be reasonably conjectured" (3rd ed. [London, 1835], p. 214); and the quotation itself--indeed her whole treatment of Lowth--supports a connection between the Bible and Blake of an almost desperate remoteness. Amazingly, Bogen has found here the needle of irrelevance in a haystack of material that may link Blake and the Bible after all. The essential content of Lowth's few remarks on Hebrew meter is that we know next to nothing about it. His great discovery, which raced like chilly fire through the crypts of clerical Europe, was that inasmuch as Hebrew prosody could now be deciphered, it was based on a characteristic resemblance of sense-units, or parallelism. As Lowth put it, "in this peculiar conformation, or parallelism, of the sentences, I apprehend a considerable part of the Hebrew metre to consist; though it is not improbably that some regard was also paid to the numbers and feet. But of this particular we have at present so little information, that it is utterly impossible to determine, whether it was modulated by the ear alone, or according to any settled or definite rules of prosody" (Lowth, p. 214). It is therefore strange that Bogen gleans a few scattered crumbs about "numbers and feet" while ignoring the feast of parallelism spread before her. It is also strange that she overlooks the connections between Blakean style and biblical parallelism drawn by other scholars, one of whom she mentions at some length in her notes.¹ To include parallelism in a section on

1 Alicia Ostriker, *Vision and Verse in William Blake* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1965), p. 127; and Murray Roston, *Prophet and Poet: The Bible and the Growth of Romanticism* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 164-66. Roston overstates the importance of parallelism in Blake: "parallelism forms the unifying metre of [the] later books" (p. 166); but there is much truth in his view that "to read modern critics discussing the metres of Blake's prophetic books is to find oneself back in the seventeenth-century examination of biblical poetry before the discovery of parallelism" (p. 165).

Roger R. Easson and Robert N. Essick. *William Blake: Book Illustrator: A Bibliography and Catalogue of the Commercial Engravings*. Normal, Illinois: The American Blake Foundation, 1972. Volume I: Plates Designed and Engraved by Blake. Pp. xvi + 58 + 82 pls. \$8

Reviewed by Deirdre Toomey

William Blake: Book Illustrator, Volume I, is the first in a series of three publications which will reproduce and catalogue all of Blake's commercial engravings. The first volume deals with designs invented and engraved by Blake, the second will deal with designs invented but not engraved by Blake and the third with engravings by Blake after other artists. The editors, Roger R. Easson and Robert N. Essick, have been cautious in their acceptance of attributions: thus doubtful works such as the engravings in Bryant's *Mythology*, Gough's *Sepulchral Monuments*, *Vetusta Monumenta* and *The Seaman's Recorder* have not been included in the first volume. They have also been cautious in their classifications: "Laocoon," the Wedgewood engravings and the non-pastoral engravings in Thornton's *Virgil* have all been excluded from the first volume on the grounds--perhaps debatable in the case of the "Laocoon"--that they are not "original," being "essentially copies of another artist's work." These have been relegated to the third volume.

Clearly *William Blake: Book Illustrator* in its final form will be a very useful work of reference for Blake scholars. The unusually large amount of bibliographical data is helpful and this blending of "The descriptive bibliography and the print catalogue" is quite successful, although the seven pages of bibliographical description which accompany the one plate of Herries' *Bible* are, at first sight, somewhat daunting. It is enlightening to see the commercial engravings, not just as isolated prints,

but in the context of the books for which they were executed.

The editors main purpose is, however, as they have said, "the complete reproduction of Blake's commercial book illustrations" and their "prime concern is to assist the student of Blake's art." Sadly the reproductions themselves are, for the most part, of rather low quality, and this may tend to modify the usefulness of *William Blake: Book Illustrator* as a work of reference. Some of the reproductions are highly inaccurate: those of the *Night Thoughts* engravings are particularly bad. Here the values are distorted to such an extent that some pages, in particular 33, 35 and 72, look as if they have been re-engraved by John Jackson. The thick black shadows that appear everywhere in the *Night Thoughts* reproductions are most unpleasing. This tendency towards excessive blackness is also apparent in Thornton's *Virgil* and in the Cowper plate, in both cases obscuring areas of fine detail. The other reproductions are less positively bad, tending to omit detail rather than distort values. Thus in "The Hiding of Moses" whole areas of detail are missing from the left-hand side of the design. The same is true, to a lesser extent, of the fine detail in the Wollstonecraft illustrations. It is indeed most unfortunate that so useful a work should be marred by technical defects, and that such scrupulous and thorough editors as Roger Easson and Robert Essick should be so badly served by their reproductions. Yet, even with these defects *William Blake: Book Illustrator* remains a valuable work of reference and I look forward to seeing the next two volumes.

Deirdre Toomey is writing her doctoral thesis at the University of London. Her most recent contribution to the Newsletter was "The States of Plate 25 of Jerusalem" in #22.

prosody would force a minor stretch of definition, but Lowth himself set precedent for this.

Almost the final third of the section is devoted to the Sternhold-Hopkins metrical psalms, which Bogen favors as a prosodic influence on the basis of negligible evidence. In this instance, at least, she acknowledges both her bias and her lack of support for it: "to discover a positive connection between the long line of *The* and the Sternhold-Hopkins fourteenner would be gratifying, but perhaps a closer comparison of the two is needed first" (p. 14). If this is so, and aside from the dubious critical values involved, an ethical question appears. Should one save for the rhetorically strong end-position of one's commentary, and give the fullest treatment to, what is an admittedly flimsy pet notion? If not the specialist, will the defenseless "general reader," trusting the printed word, be left sagely

nodding at this nonsense?

Despite the weakness of the prosody section--which is, after all, only four pages long--Bogen's book will be helpful to the student of *The* who needs a good facsimile. We need more such works of respectable quality and moderate cost, and according to David Erdman's Foreword, Brown University Press and the New York Public Library will help to provide them. Ideally, perhaps, a facsimile's concreteness and permanence should be left uncompromised by the more subjective and fallible types of criticism. But since the Spectre of completeness haunts us all, including publishers, I suggest that these future editions be produced by the collaboration of two or more scholars, each working in his area of greatest competence. If this had been the case with Bogen's *The*, its weakness might have been avoided, and its strength maintained.