

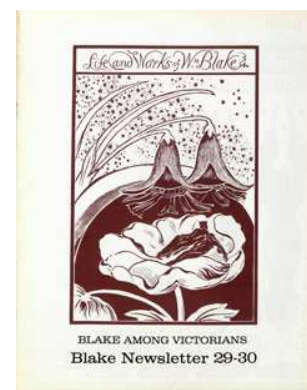
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A R T I C L E

The Public Reception of Gilchrist's Life of Blake

Suzanne R. Hoover

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The Public Reception of Gilchrist's *Life*

Alexander Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake* did not rescue its subject from oblivion, as is usually stated; rather, it served greatly to widen the knowledge of Blake and his works beyond the limited circle of his admirers.¹ If in the past we have misapprehended the precise nature of Gilchrist's service to Blake's reputation, that is in part because we have been misled by Gilchrist's own over-dramatization of the case, manifested in his subtitle, "Pictor Ignotus"--a phrase conveniently, if inaptly, borrowed from Browning. Having thus misrepresented the situation Gilchrist set his volumes before the reader with this challenge: actively dissociate yourself from the philistinism responsible for the neglect of Blake, or else give evidence to show that he was justly neglected. In short, Gilchrist made criticism of Blake an issue and a cause. Reviewers of the biography rose to the challenge; indeed, to declare oneself on "the Blake question" became almost a necessity of London cultural life. It is little wonder, therefore, that an astonishing amount of journalism was produced on the subject of the *Life of William Blake*.

Between the appearance of the biography in the autumn of 1863 and the end of the year, at least four reviews were published. [See appended list for full citations of all reviews and articles.] The earliest of these was a notice in the *Athenaeum*. The author, possibly Augustus De Morgan,² was not at all happy with Gilchrist's work. Blake had been damaged in the biography, he thought, by such errors of judgment as over-praising the artist and ignoring his faults. In fact,

the notes on Blake's conversations and habits of life which Mr. Gilchrist obtained from Mr. Robinson's 'Reminiscences' are by much the most graphic pages in the book; since it is obvious that, without

superstition, their writer admired as keenly as he observed a man of genius who, whether sane or insane, was a poet of Titanic mould. Mr. Robinson's few truths serve the memory of Blake far more essentially than Mr. Gilchrist's manifold rhapsodies.

(It is interesting to note that De Morgan and Robinson were acquainted.)

Although the three other reviews of 1863 are somewhat shorter than this one--between two and three thousand words apiece--they express forcefully their authors' gratitude to Blake's biographer for doing justice to the genius of one of England's greatest artists. In the *Spectator* R. H. Hutton perceives Blake's "essential function" in terms which imply the highest praise: "to recall by painting,--now and then by poetry,--that lost sense described by Wordsworth. . . ." In the *Saturday Review* Gilchrist's judgments are held to be "generally discriminating and well-reasoned." The writer in the *London Review*, who had known Blake's engraved *Illustrations of the Book of Job*

1 For a discussion of this point see my "William Blake in the Wilderness: A Closer Look at his Reputation, 1827-1863," in *William Blake: Essays in Honour of Sir Geoffrey Keynes*, ed. Morton D. Paley and Michael Phillips (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), pp. 310-48.

2 See Deborah Dorfman, *Blake in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 23-24.

Suzanne Hoover has written on the subject of Blake's nineteenth-century reputation for previous issues of the Newsletter and for the Festschrift for Sir Geoffrey Keynes. She has taught at C.U.N.Y. and Wellesley College.

Life of Blake

BY SUZANNE R. HOOVER



"since childhood," believed that "something very similar of rapt, transcendental imagination was exhibited, in their respective spheres of art, by Shelley, and Turner, and Beethoven." (As we shall see, the photolithographic reproductions of the *Job* engravings that were included in the second volume of Gilchrist's *Life*, even though reduced in size and inferior in quality to the originals, made a very strong impression on the reviewers. With two exceptions all those who mentioned the *Job* considered it to be Blake's finest work.) The possibility that William Bell Scott was the author of either the *London Review* or the *Saturday Review* piece is suggested by a passage from a letter of 1863 from Anne Gilchrist to W. M. Rossetti: "I was very pleased with the *Spectator's* review--have not yet seen Mr. Scott's. . . ." ³

Of the eleven known reviews of Gilchrist that appeared in 1864, seven were long, one was brief, two were merely one-paragraph notices, and one had its say in a single sentence. The two-hundred-word notice in the *Annual Register* for 1863 called the volumes "an addition to biographical literature of some importance." The fact that Blake was "ever at least upon the borders of insanity" did not detract from the interest that the subject held for the writer. In the *British Quarterly Review* of 1 January, one unenthusiastic sentence disposes of the question: "The life of an eccentric man of genius, poet and artist, full of anecdotes concerning artists and literary people, and written in the spirit of hero-worship."

One of the most readable of all the commentaries, that in the *Westminster Review*, was notable for its interest in the philosophical issues raised by Gilchrist's work: "Not only does [Blake's] whole life thrust upon its readers a consideration of the true relations between an artist and the public; but his practice and methods can only be judged in relation to the fundamental conceptions of Art

itself." What immediate personal inspiration was to Behmen and Law, the imagination was to Blake; the result was self-worship and intellectual chaos. "Art is the interpreter of Nature, and not a new language of the imagination," asserts the writer, who may have been William Allingham.⁴ His favorite Blake works are the *Songs of Innocence* and the *Job* ("the variety and originality of the compositions are miraculous"). Blake was "unquestionably one of the greatest [colorists] that ever lived." Gilchrist is criticized by this reviewer, as by some others, for unfairness in recounting the Cromeck dispute and for intolerance of the public's indifference to Blake. Various circumstances, among them the publication of a biography of Stothard in 1851, had combined to keep interest in the Cromeck matter alive.

The *New Monthly Magazine* also accused Gilchrist of misrepresenting Cromeck and Stothard in their relations with Blake. But this was a wholly unfavorable review, one which considered it "incredible" that two volumes should have been devoted to Blake's life and works; Cunningham's account in his *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, some thirty years earlier, was surely all that was needed.

3 Herbert Harlakenden Gilchrist, ed., *Anne Gilchrist, Her Life and Writings*, 2nd ed. (London, 1887), p. 141.

4 In the *Rossetti Letters*, ed. Oswald Doughty and Robert Wahl (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), II, 494, D. G. Rossetti invites Allingham to write a review of Gilchrist for the *Westminster*. Praise at the end of the review for Rossetti's translations of the early Italian poets reinforces this attribution, which was suggested to me by Professor Walter E. Houghton, editor of the *Wellesley Index of Victorian Periodicals*.

The author of this piece, W. M. Tarrt,⁵ finds neither beauty nor sublimity in the *Job* engravings. He chooses the *Grave* designs as Blake's best work. He departs from the usual view of the reviewers, also, in his verdict that Blake was mad. Setting Blake against Stothard, he reminds the reader that "the recent appearance of both their designs [for the *Canterbury Pilgrimage*] in the International Exhibition gave us an opportunity, such as rarely occurs, of comparing the wooden formality of the disappointed artist with the graceful and flowing lines of his successful rival."

The *Eclectic Magazine* review, with its unmingled praise for the biography and its worshipful consideration of Blake, is remarkable for extensive quotation of Blake's poetry and a summarizing judgment that "some centuries will have to pass before the human race will be in a condition rightly to appreciate a man like William Blake." A notice of one paragraph in *Notes and Queries* blandly commends both Gilchrist and Blake; for example, "we have a valuable selection from his published and unpublished writings."

The *Art-Journal*, in which only two years before there had appeared an unfavorable comparison of Blake with Stothard,⁶ now printed an enthusiastic review which included a brief tribute to Linnell. Gilchrist was "eminently qualified to rescue from oblivion the name of one of the most remarkable men that lived, and moved, and had his being, among the many great men who, early in the present century, glorified the intellectual world." Blake is "not to be esteemed only as an artist; he was a poet of rare order." Another favorable review, written for the *Atlantic Monthly* by Mary Abigail Dodge, took "Arthur" Gilchrist to task for bad writing, but applauded his insight and judgments. (Gilchrist's unhappy imitation of Carlyle, especially of the *Life of Sterling*, was a frequent complaint of the reviewers.) The author, a professional journalist, strikes an extravagantly Romantic note, that takes us a good deal further than the "rapt, transcendental imagination" of the *Spectator* review, quoted earlier. The reader is tantalized with:

wild, fragmentary, gorgeous dreams . . . that throb with their prisoned vitality. The energy, the might, the intensity of Blake's lines and figures it is impossible for words to convey. It is power in the fiercest, most eager action,--fire and passion, the madness and the stupor of despair, the frenzy of desire, the lurid depths of woe, that thrill and rivet you even in the comparatively lifeless rendering of this book.

Throughout the review Blake is admired as an iconoclast of unquestioned sincerity and nobility.

A more profound, but in other respects similar, review, by Horace Elisha Scudder, also an American, appeared in the *North American Review* (then edited by Charles Eliot Norton, who was later to write on Blake). Forgiving Gilchrist "certain affectations of style, bungling English, and what we think an

occasional ill-mannered air" by virtue of his "affectionate interest" in Blake and his "confident belief in Blake's genius and sanity," Scudder apprehends in the biography "a life which was more wonderful and more lovely than all the creations to which it gave birth." Even though Scudder believes that in poetry Blake failed oftener than he succeeded (whereas in design he succeeded far oftener than he failed), he is willing to attend seriously to the meaning of Blake's work. Such problems as the work presents lie in this, that "Blake's faculty of seeing [that is, understanding] and his faculty of constructing are constantly betraying each other, leading him to veil his really profound spiritual discoveries in forms that refuse to symbolize anything for ordinary minds." (Emphasis mine.) Scudder makes two especially interesting observations in this review: that the *Job* designs "are by no means chance illustrations of the most striking points in the Book of Job; there is an epic unity, independent of the book illustrated"; and that Blake must be classed "in the small number of distinctively Christian men of genius."

Once again, in the *Fine Arts Quarterly Review*, Gilchrist's style was disparaged: "a striking example of how a book intending to give pleasure as well as convey information should not be written." Except for the *Job* engravings ("in every way the most remarkable of his works") and the *Songs* ("genuine and wonderful poems" which "now find eager purchasers at twelve guineas"), the reviewer, W. F. Rae, remains cool and unimpressed. As to Blake's mental condition, he finds him neither as sane as Gilchrist would have it, nor as mad as others suppose, simply "the victim of frequent attacks of monomania."

If, instead of indulging in silly tirades against the general public for treating Blake with indifference, and against a portion of it for denying his sanity; if, instead of adducing pitiful arguments to prove that he was in every way constituted like other men, Mr Gilchrist had maintained that Blake's mental weakness was the source of his genius and furnished the only rational explanation of his exceptional power, he would have . . . upheld what was indisputable.

E. S. Dallas, in *Macmillan's Magazine*, agreed that it was the fault of Blake himself that he was not widely appreciated. Writing in November 1864, a year after the publication--by Macmillan's--of the book, Dallas adds one new thought to the accumulating body of Blake commentary--a significant point even today: "To understand the man well he ought to be studied as a whole, and his

5 Identified by G. E. Bentley, Jr., in "Blake Apocrypha," *Blake Newsletter* 2 (Fall, 1967), p. 4.

6 In connection with the International Exhibition; see my article, "Pictures at the Exhibitions," *Blake Newsletter* 21 (Summer, 1972), p. 11.

admirers ought to make some attempt to bring his innumerable works together." In most respects, this is an ambivalent review, dealing out praise with one hand and blame with the other, and concluding that "perhaps [Gilchrist and the Rossettis] overrate Blake's merits, but their opinion, if exaggerated, is worth examining; and they have done really a good work in rescuing from oblivion one of the most extraordinary men of our nation." Dallas's rather unimaginative response to Blake descends to prosaic literal-mindedness in the comment on Blake's lines, "A robin redbreast in a cage / Puts all heaven in a rage." That, marvels the reviewer, "is a rather wild way of saying that redbreasts ought not to be caged." This is not so much an isolated instance, as an extreme form of one common reaction to Blake.

In 1865 there were two reviews of Gilchrist, one in *Blackwood's Magazine*, written by William Henry Smith, and another in the *Quarterly Review*, by Francis Turner Palgrave. Smith, like Tarrt in the *New Monthly Magazine*, thought that Cunningham's sketch of Blake's life was "all that the subject required"; Gilchrist's fuller study, "indulgent" and "idolatrous," dissipates the "charm" of Cunningham. Offended by Blake's "inordinate conceit, the ignorance, the presumption, the wilful self-deception, and general want of truthfulness," the reviewer finds little to praise. Of the *Job* designs "the prevailing impression more nearly approaches the grotesque than the sublime"; the *Songs* contain almost all the true poetry that Blake ever wrote. A long and surprisingly sympathetic discussion of Blake's mental condition, by far the most careful and illuminating of all the comments on this subject at the time, concludes that Blake knew perfectly well that his "visions" were merely vivid imaginings, but that he liked to astonish his friends for the sake of the "effect."

As Palgrave had already written twice about Blake's art in connection with the International Exhibition of 1862,⁷ we know that both his admiration of Blake's work, and his reservations about it, antedated Gilchrist's biography. Palgrave now expressed in the *Quarterly Review* his judgment that Blake's poetry declined steadily after *Poetical Sketches*; that the *Songs*, "by their melody and a certain suppressed symbolism of meaning, remind us of Shelley" and, considered as graphic works, invite comparison with Turner's etchings for his *Liber Studiorum*. The seriousness which Palgrave brought to his task of criticism is most apparent in his judicious--even pained--discussion of the question of "spiritual enthusiasm" in art. Citing Goethe's and Flaxman's "mastery" of enthusiasm, and Socrates' guarded approval of it, Palgrave exposes the dialogue in his own soul between Apollonian and Dionysian values in art. As for Blake, although "everywhere in his art he fell short of completeness, often of moderation, we do not impair his claim to the extraordinary gift in which he probably has no superior . . . --the gift of imaginative intensity." Thus for Palgrave, Blake's example raises a characteristically Victorian question, that of self-mastery.

I have commented briefly on seventeen known reviews of Gilchrist published before the end of 1865. Taken together, they constitute a small book on Blake, in which were formulated the judgments of a new generation already attuned to Browning, Tennyson, Emerson, and Poe--a generation, we must remember, from whose members all but fragments of the Prophetic Books were still withheld, failing a friendship with Lord Houghton or a visit to the British Museum (which in any case did not as yet possess an entire set). Although Blake--and Gilchrist--were by no means unanimously appreciated, their admirers among reviewers were in the majority. We might account for this situation, so changed from that of Blake's own day, in several ways. First, the Rossettis, by their "sponsorship" of the volumes, lent their authority to Gilchrist's judgments. Second, a sufficient time had elapsed since Blake's death to throw a veil of nostalgia and romance over the era of his lifetime, and to heighten a sense of the fabulous about Blake and his contemporaries. Other reasons concern Blake's works more specifically. One is struck in these reviews by recurrent references to the *Immortality Ode*. For the reader of the 1860's Blake was the poet of the *Songs of Innocence*, and the perspective from which the *Songs* were seen was that of Wordsworth. The celestial light of the child's intuitive spirituality, supposedly fled the grown man, had--miraculously--been recalled by Blake as a mature artist, in something like its original brightness. It seemed almost that he had returned, through the agency of Gilchrist, to banish the Wordsworthian melancholy and, not only to reaffirm the vision of childhood innocence, but also to bring it closer than before. There was in Blake's favor, moreover, the easily-apprehended excellence of certain of his works--not just the *Songs*, but also the *Poetical Sketches*, *The Grave*, and the *Illustrations of the Book of Job*. If the *Songs of Innocence* were appreciated for their intimations of immortality, the *Job* was cherished for its intimations of a divine plan, as well as for its chaste sublimity.

So much for actual reviews of the biography; but Gilchrist vibrated on through the rest of the decade: in five long general articles on Blake, one book, and one quasi-review (as well as some short reviews of new editions of Blake's poems). In 1866 the *Temple Bar* printed an article on Blake by Alfred T. Story, who was many years later to write a biography of John Linnell that contained material on Blake and later still a book-length study of Blake himself. In their description of Story's piece in *A Blake Bibliography* Bentley and Nurmi say that it "begins as a review of Gilchrist." In fact, Gilchrist is not mentioned until the third page of this ten-page study; he is then allotted only three sentences and not mentioned to any effect again. The piece by Story is one of several of its kind: a post-

Gilchristian non-review, an article about Blake suggested by Gilchrist's work. An article of the same kind by James Thomson, the poet, appeared in 1866 in the *National Reformer*. (Bentley and Nurmi identify this article, too, as "a review of Gilchrist." Thomson himself referred to it as "some notes on the poems of William Blake."⁸)

In April of this year H. E. Scudder wrote to W. M. Rossetti, proposing a condensation of Gilchrist's *Life* for American readers.⁹ As far as I know, Scudder never published his sketch about Blake, even though he informed Rossetti in the same letter that an announcement of his intention to do so had already been made in an American literary journal.

More articles on Blake appeared in 1867 and 1868. The Cambridge magazine, *Light Blue*, carried an article on Blake in three installments in 1867 that is notable for printing for the first time three fragments from *An Island in the Moon*. *Sharpe's London Magazine* also published an article in that year, which I have not seen. In 1868 an American Journal then in its third year, the *Radical*, printed an enthusiastically religious article on Blake signed "W. A. Cram"; also in 1868 the publisher J. C. Hotten issued two Blake books, a facsimile edition in color of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and Swinburne's brilliant, quixotic, still-readable study, *William Blake: A Critical Essay*. Swinburne had begun his book in 1862. Its connection with Gilchrist's biography is worth recounting.

In a letter to W. M. Rossetti written in 1862, in which he declined a request that he write about the Prophetic Books for Gilchrist's forthcoming book, Swinburne stated his intention of preparing an independent commentary on those works. By the end of 1863 the project was half-finished, and had taken the form of an extended review of Gilchrist to appear in installments. In 1864 Swinburne put it aside for other work and a trip to Italy but did not abandon it. He described the as-yet-expanding undertaking modestly: "My book will at least handle the whole question of Blake's life and work with perfect fearlessness." In 1866 he wrote in a letter of his "forthcoming book on the suppressed works" of Blake, whose philosophy "has never yet been published because of the abject and faithless and blasphemous timidity of our wretched English literary society; a drunken clerical club dominated by the spurious spawn of the press."¹⁰

Certainly the most important contribution of Swinburne's *William Blake* was its attempt to read the Prophetic Books as poems, something Gilchrist had failed to do. Of the need to explore the more difficult poetry Swinburne wrote:

For what are we to make of a man whose work deserves crowning one day and hooting the next? If the "Songs" be so good, are not those who praise them bound to examine . . . what merit may be latent in the "Prophecies"? . . . On this side alone the biography appears to us emphatically deficient. . . .

Why deficient? Because "a biographer must be capable of expounding the evangel . . . of his hero, however far he may be from thinking it worth acceptance."¹¹ Naturally, the biography did not fall in public esteem because Swinburne considered it conservative.

The last known review of the first edition of Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake*--a review, really, only by virtue of its format--appeared in the *London Quarterly Review* early in 1869. Its author, James Smetham, was an artist whom D. G. Rossetti had befriended, a Wesleyan who studied the Bible every morning. He thought that Blake was "mad but harmless," that the only merits of the *Prophecies* were pictorial, and wished that "to his mighty faculties of conception Blake had added that scientific apprehensiveness which . . . never fails to issue in an absolute and permanent greatness." This forty-seven-page article is mainly concerned with Blake as an artist. With the exception of such criticisms as those just mentioned, it is a gentle and highly appreciative meditation on Blake, which occasionally erupts in unconscious humor. It was included, with other new material, in the second volume of the second edition of Gilchrist in 1880.

As for that edition: further interest in Blake had developed in the seventies, assisted by a number of Blake events, principally W. M. Rossetti's 1874 Aldine edition of the poems, with its long introductory essay, and the popular exhibition of three hundred and thirty-three pieces of Blake's work at London's Burlington Fine Arts Club in 1876. Copies of the *Life* had become rare; there was a demand for a new edition. We have only to look at the haunting cover design for the volumes of 1880 to understand that the Victorians had, in the process of transforming Blake in their own image, taken him securely to their hearts.

8 James Thomson, *Biographical and Critical Studies*, ed. Bertram Dobell (London, 1896), p. 321.

9 W. M. Rossetti, ed., *Rossetti Papers* (London, 1903), p. 182.

10 Cecil Y. Lang, ed., *The Swinburne Letters* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1959), I, 60, 102, 208-09.

11 Algernon Charles Swinburne, *William Blake: A Critical Essay* (London, 1868), pp. 105-06.

Gilchrist's Life: A List of Reviews and Articles



All items can be found in Bentley and Nurmi's *Blake Bibliography*, except those identified as in "Keynes, *Bibliography*, 1921," or those with a single asterisk or double asterisks. A single asterisk follows items first noted by Deborah Dorfman in *Blake in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1969); double asterisks follow items first noted in my article, "Fifty Additions to Blake Bibliography," *Blake Newsletter* 19 (Winter, 1971-72). The review by W. M. Tarrt was noted by G. E. Bentley, Jr., in *Blake Newsletter* 2; see footnote 5.

Anon. "Life of William Blake, 'Pictor Ignotus,' with Selections from his Poems and other Writings." *Athenaeum*, No. 1880 (7 November 1863), pp. 599-601, and No. 1881 (14 November 1863), pp. 642-44.*

Anon. "William Blake." *Saturday Review*, 14 November 1863, pp. 650-51.**

Anon. "The Life of William Blake." *London Review*, 14 November 1863, pp. 519-20.**

[R. H. Hutton.] "William Blake." *Spectator*, No. 1847 (21 November 1863), pp. 2271-73.*

Anon. "Retrospect of Literature, Art, and Science, in 1863." *Annual Register* [for 1863], p. 352.**

Anon. "On Books." *British Quarterly Review*, 77 (1864), 245.**

Anon. "Gilchrist's Life of William Blake." *Westminster Review*, 25 (1864), 101-18. Keynes, *Bibliography*, 1921.

[W. M. Tarrt.] "The Life of William Blake." *New Monthly Magazine*, 130 (1864), 309-19. See footnote #5.

Anon. "William Blake." *Eclectic Magazine*, 119 (1864), 373-91. Keynes, *Bibliography*, 1921.

Anon. "Notes on Books, Etc." *Notes and Queries*, 5 (April 1864), 312.**

Anon. "William Blake." *Art-Journal*, 23 (1864), 25-26. Keynes, *Bibliography*, 1921.

Gail Hamilton. [Mary Abigail Dodge.] "Pictor Ignotus." *Atlantic Monthly*, 13 (1864), 433-47.

[Horace Elisha Scudder.] "The Life of William Blake, 'Pictor Ignotus,' with Selections from his Poems and other Writings." *North American Review*, 99 (1864), 465-82.*

W. F. Rae. "The Life and Works of William Blake." *Fine Arts Quarterly Review*, 3 (1864), 56-79. Keynes, *Bibliography*, 1921.

[Eneas Sweetland Dallas.] "William Blake." *Macmillan's Magazine*, 11 (1864), 26-33.*

[W. H. Smith.] "William Blake." *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 97 (1865), 291-307.*

[Francis Turner Palgrave.] "The Life of William Blake, illustrated from his Works." *Quarterly Review*, 117 (1865), 1-27. Keynes, *Bibliography*, 1921.

Alfred T. Story. "William Blake, Seer and Painter." *Temple Bar*, 17 (1866), 95-105.

"B. V." [James Thomson.] "The Poems of William Blake." *National Reformer*, 7 (1866), 22-23, 42-43, 52-54, 70-71.

P. M. "William Blake." *Light Blue*, 2 (1867), 146-51, 216-26, 286-94.

Anon. "Pictor Ignotus." *Sharpe's London Magazine*, 31 (1867 [?]), 22-28.*

W. A. Cram. "William Blake." *Radical*, 3 (1868), 378-82.

[James Smetham.] "Life of William Blake, 'Pictor Ignotus,' with Selections from his Poems and other Writings." *London Quarterly Review*, 31 (1869), 265-311.