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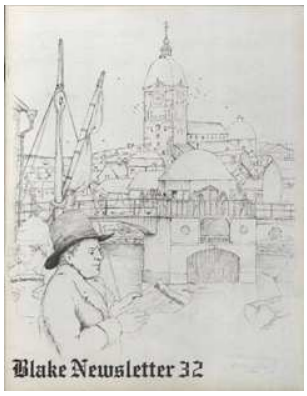

Robert N. Essick, ed., The Visionary Hand: Essays for the Study of William Blake's Art and Aesthetics

Thomas L. Minnick

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 8, Issue 4, Spring 1975, pp. 130-132

some indication of its scope and variety, let me make one more selection of a particular that improves our knowledge of Blake's mental world. In discussions of how the earth would appear if it were an infinite plane, Robert Smith (*Compleat System of Opticks*, 1738)

> argues that there is a limit (optical, not mathematical) which is imposed on perception by the physiological nature of the eye, which, he argues, would cause the eye to convert a hypothetical infinite plane into an encircling and enclosing globe. . . . Blake surely would have interpreted such an account as a symptom of complete absorption into a vision of reality in which the globular shape of the eye becomes a symbolic analogue of the restrictions placed on infinity by the nature of the combined Newtonian-Cartesian cosmology. . . . Blake turns Smith's idea inside out: instead of having the perceiver exclusively create the englobing forms, Blake has the combined Newtonian and Cartesian space, into which the individual enters, exert such physical forces as to transform the individual's perception: once he has passed a vortex, the perceiver sees the infinity 'roll backward behind His path, into a globe itself infolding; like a sun: Or like a moon, or like a universe of starry majesty.' Blake thus collapses the Newtonian idea . . . that the vertex of the cone of perception is in the object with Smith's implicit assumption that the vertex of the cone is in the eye itself and the cone extends outward. (pp. 159-60)

Obviously we can no longer do without mastering Cartesian and Newtonian cosmologies--while fiercely resisting their lure. At least we must absorb their "positives" from this learned account of *Blake's Response*. Once again a painstaking investigation of some difficult aspect of Blake's work and of his thought rescues us from the temptation to assume that whatever is not clear to our minds was woolly nonsense in Blake's.

P.S.: A friend of mine who is a mathematician has now become my particular friend after reading Ault and discovering, with perturbation and delight, the infernal perspective on his profession.

Robert N. Essick, ed. *The Visionary Hand: Essays for the Study of William Blake's Art and Aesthetics.* Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, Inc., 1973. 558 pp., 165 illus. $7.95, paper.

Reviewed by Thomas L. Minnick

The formal notice of Blake's art has undergone a slow resurrection, though the subject has not yet come fully into health. For a long while the patient was simply dead. Thanks to successive injections like the publication of Gilchrist's life of this *pictor ignotus* and the Burlington exhibit of 1876, interest turned at least moribund. And slowly but steadily, as the frequency of major exhibitions increased and the number of permanent gallery homes for Blake's art grew, and as the price of Blake works rose to the record paid last summer for *Mary Magdalen at the Sepulchre*--well, if the patient isn't yet entirely healthy, at least he can afford the best doctors. One positive recent sign is Robert Essick's new collection, *The Visionary Hand: Essays for the Study of William Blake's Art and Aesthetics*.

Until genius and inspiration work the final miracle, information and reflective understanding are the best treatments, and both of these are in abundance in the fine selection of essays which Essick has now made generally available in his useful book. This is the first anthology of work by various hands on Blake's art, and although the critical notice of this aspect of Blake's work has grown so rapidly that several excellent studies were published even while *The Visionary Hand* was in press, in many cases readers will find here the most recent statements about many of Blake's pictures and illuminated books. Essick's frequent additions to the original notes are helpful where information has come forward since the first appearance of an essay, and in several instances the authors themselves have reworked and updated their contributions. The variety of subjects and approaches is surprising: virtually every kind of Blake's work is extensively represented, and gaps generally indicate something about the state of scholarship rather than the editor's selectivity. There are twenty-two essays plus six bits reprinted from contemporary sources clearly relevant to Blake--Cumberland on etching on copper, for example, and a cut from the Rees *Cyclopaedia* article on "Etching."

In general the format is satisfactory. There are 165 illustrations, Blake a-plenty, but

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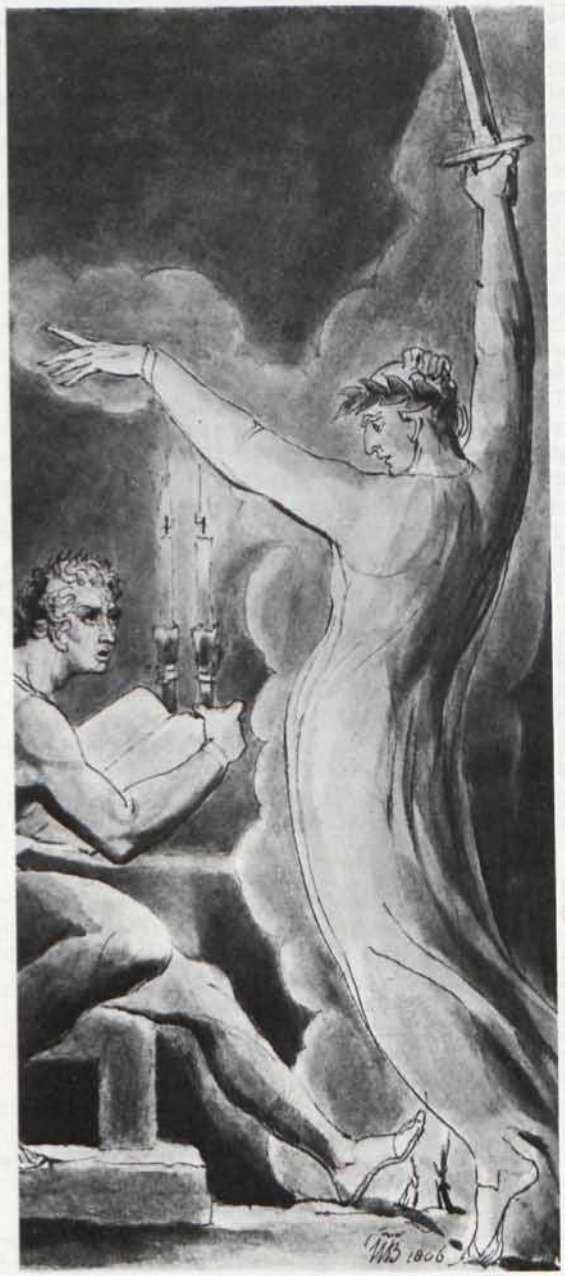
unfortunately none is in color, as the price to printer and reader would doubtless have been prohibitive. The type is readable and well chosen, except for the first section of passages from Blake's contemporaries where a smaller type could have been used for the editorial introductions, to distinguish them visually from the selections themselves.

Ruthven Todd's still unique study of "The Techniques of Blake's Illuminated Printing" is here (and hard to locate elsewhere), combining the insights of the practicing artist (Todd himself, and his co-workers Miró, Tanguy and Hayter from Atelier 17) and the scholar-collector (Todd again, and his late friend Graham Robertson). And Essick has happily included his own study of Blake and the conventions of reproductive engraving in the late eighteenth century, though occasionally he sees nets where I see minute particulars that Blake held to in defiance of the popular fuzziness of Bartolozzi and his admirers. What can be said of both Todd's and Essick's contributions applies more widely to much of the volume: there remains much to be done--and done, one hopes, by the scholars represented here--but the first difficult questions have been asked and some directions toward answers discovered. Essick incorporates this aspect of the present state of criticism by including two multi-author dialogues (on the illustrations to *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* and the Arlington Court Picture), neither of which has reached a satisfactory conclusion.

Here are several standard pieces--Binyon on Blake's engravings, Frye on poetry and design in the illuminated books, Collins Baker on Blake's pictorial sources. But here is also a considerable selection of the best recent work. I found most valuable those essays which were best informed on Blake's writing and which highlighted the interaction of Blake's two great talents--Mitchell on "Poetic and Pictorial Imagination in *The Book of Urizen*," Rose on Blake *contra* Rubens, and Burke's suggestive study, "The Eidetic and Borrowed Image: An Interpretation of Blake's Theory and Practice of Art." Also included are studies of works that are seldom seen or mentioned--Brown on the *Book of Enoch*, Nanavutty on the Huntington *Genesis*, and Merchant on the illustrations to Shakespeare, for example. For these essays especially, the illustrations in this volume are helpful.

Only Jenijoy LaBelle's "Words Graven with an Iron Pen: The Marginal Texts in Blake's *Job*" appears here for the first time. Her essay will be useful to the student looking at the *Job* series without a Bible concordance handy. Ms. LaBelle remarks accurately that "the marginal inscriptions on Blake's plates serve the same function as the marginal notes in [many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century] Bibles: both refer the reader to similar events or images to establish new perspectives from which one can view the biblical text--or in Blake's case, the central design" (pp. 539-40). But she dedicates more space to hunting sources than to revealing significances. I would have found her work more instructive had she woven the minute particulars of Blake's biblical



inscriptions into a more developed explanation of his typology at work in the series. Also, this reviewer at least would have been more comfortable had she quoted Blake, as did most other recent essayists, from David Erdman's text.

Essick is responsible for easing the reader's way by providing for all quotations from Blake the appropriate page references to both the Keynes and Erdman editions. Also, after citations to those pictures by Blake which are reproduced in the volume, Essick has added the illustration number, even sometimes when the illustration was not included with the original publication of the essay. But the editor is also responsible for a number of errors--some merely distracting, others more troublesome. For example, one of the illustrations is taken from a wrong photograph, as Professor Essick confirmed in correspondence: Illustration 4, captioned as a "fragment of *America* copper-plate.

Printed by method described in the text," is actually, like Illustration 8, inked for intaglio with the surfaces wiped.

Of the numerous errors in the text, some are easy to interpret: "insistance" (p. 13), "platten" (p. 40), "resistent" (p. 43), "artifical" (p. 180), "philosopy" (p. 148), "sysmbolism" (p. 210) and many others. More serious are errors in direct quotations from Blake, as "Gallary" (p. 192: see E 568); in titles, as "*Europe*" (p. 152), "*Satan exulting over Eve*" (p. 304), and "*Titania and Puck* with *Fairies Dancing*" (pp. 241-42) where if "with" were properly italicized, one would not look for two separate works; in proper names, as "grant" (p. 482) for [John E.] Grant, "Tanguay" (p. 40) for Yves Tanguy, "Malfy" (p. 136) for Malfi, "Emergy Walker" (p. 225) for Emery Walker, the publisher of Keynes's catalogue of the separate plates, and "Haley" (p. 331) for, I suppose, Hayley, among other errors; and in dates and other numbers, as "pp. 47-47" (p. 225) and "1840-1500" (p. 94). The technical terms used of printing methods may be unfamiliar to some (I would have liked a glossary for "blankets," "bougies" and "stopping out"), and the reader who doesn't recognize "gouche" (p. 40) as "gouache" will be confused. Additionally, Essick has twice substituted "Illustration" for "Plate" in Frye's contribution (p. 156) with resultant awkwardness. The sentence in question should read: "At the bottom of Plate 8 of *Jerusalem* is a female figure harnessed to the moon: the symbol is not mentioned in the text until Plate 63."

In spite of these faults, which make the book a bad example to the graduate and advanced undergraduate students who will otherwise benefit from it most, Essick has provided a useful service to Blakeans by making easily available many essays important for their quality and for the attempt implicit in each to redress the long dearth of attention to Blake's visual art. I would have liked some other things included. Selections from the catalogues to important exhibits--Burlington (1876), Carfax (1906) and Philadelphia (1939), for example--might have plotted the rise of favor toward Blake and suggested something about the development of a taste for his pictorial imagination. And rather than duplicate some illustrations, perhaps works mentioned but not reproduced could have been included--in John Grant's words, "the very great but little known picture of 'The Fall of Man'" (p. 436), for example. I was startled to find virtually no mention of Blake's *Laocoön*, although it has been treated several times at length in the available literature. But here is abundance nonetheless, and I hope this book will enjoy a wide working audience.

At $7.95 for an unsewn paperback, the book may seem no bargain, although to xerox even just the best essays would run higher, and the photographs would reproduce less well. Libraries at least should be encouraged to get the book, in multiple copies if heavy use is likely. If all students of Blake knew these essays and a half-dozen other works on Blake's art, understanding of this aspect of his genius would increase--perhaps flourish.

The Notebook of William Blake, a Photographic and Typographic Facsimile. Edited by David V. Erdman, with the assistance of Donald K. Moore. Clarendon Press, 1973. Pp. xiii + 105 + 120 plates + 120 pages of transcription. £16.00 U.K., $45.00 U.S.A.

Reviewed by Robert N. Essick

All previous editions of Blake's *Notebook*, including Keynes' 1935 printing with a photographic facsimile, have been reading texts with the manuscript analyzed into its constituent works and fragments. As its sub-title indicates, this new edition is a photographic facsimile with a typographic transcription following the original with great fidelity. As such, it commands scrutiny by serious students of Blake. But interest in this book should go beyond the circle of Blakeans, for the labors of Erdman, Moore, and the Clarendon Press have resulted in a great work of textual scholarship and a masterpiece of the typographer's art. In this case, the study of Blake is in the very forefront of literary scholarship.

The most striking characteristic of the book is its typography, exemplified by the page reproduced here [illus. 1]. At first it can be disconcerting, particularly in those pages towards the end of the *Notebook* printed upside-down, but a comparison with the facing-page photographs soon reveals the utility of this new species, the "typographic facsimile." As far as I am aware, all earlier facsimile transcriptions of a difficult manuscript have had to rely on a complex series of signs and symbols to indicate erasures, deletions, palimpsests, and so forth. The results were often clumsy and looked nothing like the original. In this volume the typography bears a direct relationship to the appearance of the manuscript itself. When Blake wrote a note vertically in the margin, it appears in the same place and direction in the transcription. When he erased a line which is still visible under close inspection, it is printed with an overlaying screen to indicate the erasure. Even lines and carets are preserved by the typography, as the reproduction shows. Stages of revision are indicated through reduced type sizes, while italics indicate pencil writing. The system is simple, efficient, and visually pleasing--all of which belies what must have been an enormous amount of work for Donald Moore, whose "professionalism at the composing machine" is acknowledged in the Preface. This facsimile transcription includes some minor corrections of Erdman's earlier text and thus must be considered the standard edition, at least until Erdman can include the new readings in

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