

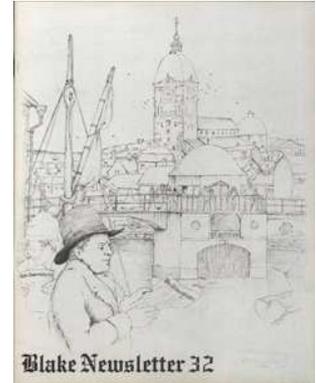
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R E V I E W

James Downey and Ben Jones, eds., *Fearful Joy:*
Papers from The Thomas Gray Bicentenary
Conference at Carleton University

Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr.

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Fearful Joy: Papers From The Thomas Gray Bicentenary Conference At Carleton University.
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Reviewed by Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr.

Carefully edited and handsomely appointed with twenty-five reproductions (fourteen of Blake's work), the Gray bicentenary volume is both varied in its approaches and expansive in its concerns, one of which is gathered into focus by the editors' Preface: "What of Gray's illustrators, commentators, and critics," they ask; "what, especially, of Blake . . . --what had he seen in Gray's poems to inspire him to illustrate them so copiously and beautifully" (pp. xi-xii)? To these questions, particularly the last, the essays by Irene Tayler ("Two Eighteenth-Century Illustrators of Gray") and Ben Jones ("Blake on Gray: Outlines of Recognition") are a response. Both critics understand that in Blake's work the written word and pictorial expression, each requiring its own lexicon, each informed by its own traditions, literary and pictorial, call for different types of consciousness; and both also perceive that interpreting Blake's pictures depends upon defining their relationship to the written word. The relationship between Blake's pictures and Gray's poems, they conclude, is marked by a spirit of contention, Blake creating designs that, not "consonant" with Gray's poems, "counter" them--designs that are "disruptively critical and passionately interpretive" (pp. 119-20, 25), involving Blake in a "polemic" with his precursor. Out of this polemic--out of the "disparity" between Gray's poems and Blake's designs for them--comes what Jones calls "individualized interpretation," "highly articulate representations of . . . a response" at once "imaginative" and militantly "independent" of Gray's poetry and of the critical tradition it elicited (pp. 127, 129, 134).

This thesis is not new: it was first advanced by Ms. Tayler in her admirable book-length study of Blake's designs for Gray's poems and is propounded again in her essay for this bicentenary volume, an essay that is both judicious in its description of individual designs and perceptive in its interpretation of them. In contrast, Jones' essay exhibits too much inattention to, and imprecision of, detail to inspire confidence. In his discussion of Adversity and the sleeping poet, Jones attends to the iconography of gesture, the raised right hand, while ignoring the dark clouds toward which it points. (Is there an analogue to be noted between this design and plate 1 of *Milton*--the raised right hand, the dark swirling clouds?) Or, when interpreting the sequence of designs for *Ode on the Spring*, Jones makes no distinction between the nude figure of the awakened year in plate 3 and the "nude" poet of plate 6, who is actually clothed in filmy, bardic vestments. The quality of response that distinguishes Tayler's clarity from Jones' murkiness is strikingly evident in the statement each critic makes about the first design for the *Ode on the Spring* series: Jones says

it is "introductory," yet different from the last four designs, which "illustrate the text of the poem" (p. 130); more pointedly, Tayler acknowledges that it is a "frontispiece to the whole set of six poems and so includes allusions to each of the six" (p. 126, n. 4).

Unquestionably, Tayler's is the finer, the more discriminating, of the two essays; but even so, her essay is flawed by inexact historical observations that, in the final pages, are crippling to her argument. According to Tayler, it was not until 1745 that publishers, either in England or on the continent, "attempted to incorporate illustration into text" (p. 123); in that year, Albrizzi printed an edition of Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* with designs engraved after Piazzetta. What is "new" in these designs, says Tayler, is "the series of vignette-shaped headpieces and tailpieces," which contain elements not just decorative (as they had been in earlier illustration) but truly interpretive; these designs mark a turning point in the history of book illustration, her argument goes, and Bentley, probably familiar with this edition, is said "to have been the only illustrator for the next forty years to realize that a revolution in book design was taking place" (p. 125). These propositions, however convenient, cannot be historically authenticated.

James Thorpe once observed that "ornamental borders, initials, headpieces and tailpieces are not illustrations but decorations. Like the type and the cover," he says, "they belong to the production of the book rather than to the author's text. The two processes--decoration and illustration--are quite distinct"--distinct during the 1890s but not, as Tayler implies, during the eighteenth century. David Bland might have provided Tayler with the proper historical perspective, observing that "while illustration came first it was followed . . . by its abstract counterpart, decoration," which, rather than being a mere embellishment, worked in harness with illustration to convey a poem's meaning. Such was the case in the Renaissance, and in much illustration of the eighteenth century. For verification, one may turn to the first illustrated edition of *Gerusalemme Liberata* or to the designs that were made to accompany Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calendar*--in both instances, illustration and text are wedded, probably because illustrator and poet worked in consort. Or for the kind of unity Tayler discovers between decoration and illustration, one may turn to biblical illustration of the Renaissance or to some Milton illustration of the early eighteenth century (the designs by Cheron and Thornhill accompanying the 1720 Tonson edition of Milton's poems--designs composed of headpieces, tailpieces, and letter ornaments--provide a convenient example).

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Moreover, it should not be inferred, that the "disruptively critical" design is the creation of Blake or of his age; for Kurt Weitzmann has shown that the tradition of corrective illustration is traceable to early illustrators of Homer and Virgil, and the same tradition is evident in Luther's Bible, where the commentator who would relegate the Apocalypse to an appendix is confronted by an illustrator who creates a set of full-page designs (they accompany only the Book of Revelation) by way of restoring John's Apocalypse to its authoritative position in the Bible. Such contention is also evident, both between illustrator and poet and between illustrator and illustrator, when *Paradise Lost* is illustrated for the first time. Initially, the contention manifests itself in the way that John Baptist Medina, responding both to Milton's text and to Dr. Henry Aldrich's illustrations for the first two books, tries to impose an orthodox conception of Satan on the unorthodox figure who dominates Milton's poem and Aldrich's illustrations for it; subsequently, it manifests itself in the way that one engraver, Pierre Fourdrinier, returning in 1725 to Aldrich's designs for Books I and II of *Paradise Lost*, alters those designs, bringing them into line with what had come to be regarded as the orthodox understanding of Satan which Milton was said to have violated.

This tradition of contention between author and artist stands behind the work of Blake the illustrator; and Blake's place within this tradition, though not unique, is quite remarkable. By Blake's time, illustration had become an art of compromise, less concerned with upholding the integrity of an author's statement than with supporting the received opinion of what an author should have said. As an illustrator, by the very fact that so many of his designs for other poets were not engraved, Blake

refused to support the corporate images that eighteenth-century editors and publishers were busy creating--he refused to turn his own illustrations into a form of advertising. Often Blake felt obliged to draw "corrective" designs; yet those designs, instead of disfiguring another's vision, clarified it; on occasion, as is the case with some of the Milton designs, Blake's objective was to correct not the poet's statement but the critical tradition that had misconstrued and misrepresented it. However contentious, Blake's illustrations, subversive of corporate editorial images, are vehicles for his own innovative criticism.

It is to Tayler's credit that she pushes us beyond the individual design into the traditions that helped to shape it; but Tayler does not push us far enough. It is not the individual artist's designs that illuminate Blake's own; rather, it is the whole tradition of iconography which a poem has accumulated that opens the meaning of Blake's illustrations for it. Moreover, if the concern is with Blake's tactics of illustration (as Tayler's seems to be), then it is perhaps more productive to scrutinize those traditions of illustration that stand behind the Bible and Milton than those standing behind Gray's poetry. After all, certain texts (like the epics of Homer, Virgil, and Milton or the books of Genesis and Revelation) were frequently illustrated, often by great artists. It is these texts that inspired the great revolutions in book illustration (other illustrators, not Bentley, are responsible for the innovations Tayler attributes to him). A knowledge of these traditions, especially those surrounding Milton's poetry and the Bible (which we have yet to acquire), joined to a refined critical intelligence (of which Tayler's is exemplary) will enable students of Blake to penetrate nuances of meaning still hid in the formalities of his art.

