William Blake
The Critical Heritage

Edited by
G.E. Bentley Jnr.
WILLIAM BLAKE: THE CRITICAL HERITAGE
The Critical Heritage series collects together a large body of criticism on major figures in literature. Each volume presents the contemporary responses to a particular writer, enabling the student to follow the formation of critical attitudes to the writer’s work and its place within a literary tradition.

The carefully selected sources range from landmark essays in the history of criticism to fragments of contemporary opinion and little published documentary material, such as letters and diaries.

Significant pieces of criticism from later periods are also included in order to demonstrate fluctuations in reputation following the writer’s death.
General Editor’s Preface

The reception given to a writer by his contemporaries and near-contemporaries is evidence of considerable value to the student of literature. On one side we learn a great deal about the state of criticism at large and in particular about the development of critical attitudes towards a single writer; at the same time, through private comments in letters, journals or marginalia, we gain an insight upon the tastes and literary thought of individual readers of the period. Evidence of this kind helps us to understand the writer’s historical situation, the nature of his immediate reading-public, and his response to these pressures.

The separate volumes in the Critical Heritage Series present a record of this early criticism. Clearly, for many of the highly productive and lengthily reviewed nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, there exists an enormous body of material; and in these cases the volume editors have made a selection of the most important views, significant for their intrinsic critical worth or for their representative quality—perhaps even registering incomprehension!

For earlier writers, notably pre-eighteenth century, the materials are much scarcer and the historical period has been extended, sometimes far beyond the writer’s lifetime, in order to show the inception and growth of critical views which were initially slow to appear. In each volume the documents are headed by an Introduction, discussing the material assembled and relating the early stages of the author’s reception to what we have come to identify as the critical tradition. The volumes will make available much material which would otherwise be difficult of access and it is hoped that the modern reader will be thereby helped towards an informed understanding of the ways in which literature has been read and judged.

B.C.S.
To JULIA and SARAH
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Preface

Blake’s contemporaries thought of him primarily as ‘an engraver who might do tolerably well, if he was not mad’. He was not widely known, and most contemporary comments about Blake’s work survive in manuscript, not in print. Strictly speaking, there are no reviews at all of books written by Blake, though there are comments on his poems as published in accounts of him by Malkin and by others, and his Descriptive Catalogue is criticized at length in the reviews of his exhibition (1809).

As a consequence, this volume must be rather different from other volumes in the Critical Heritage series. In the first place, Blake was not simply an author like Byron or Coleridge; he was a designer and an engraver as well, and his contemporaries knew him much better in these capacities than they did as a poet. Therefore, contemporary discussions of Blake are given under four headings: I ‘Blake’s life’; II ‘Writings’; III ‘Drawings’; IV ‘Engraved designs’. These are followed by Part V, ‘General essays on Blake’, giving in substance the contemporary essays devoted entirely to Blake’s life, whether critical or not, except for the anecdotal account of J.T. Smith, which is distributed under several heads.

In the second place, the greatest number of contemporary comments on Blake is in manuscript, not in print, and consequently it is necessary to give considerably more context than is usual in the Critical Heritage series.

In the third place, most of these documents up to 1831 were printed in Blake Records (1969), in chronological order, with full documentation of manuscript sources, explanation of biographical minutiae, and so on. The great majority of the contemporary accounts of Blake here are simply repeated from Blake Records. I ignore here minor misquotations of Blake and trifling errors of fact in the comments of early critics.

2 Quotations for which no source is given may be identified by turning to the chronologically appropriate section of Blake Records. The comments on pp. 79, 113n, 115, 135n, 155n, 220–69 do not appear in Blake Records. Further, the sections in the Introduction for periods after 1863 are largely adapted from the essay on ‘Blake’s Reputation and Interpreters’ in Blake Books (forthcoming).
Parts I – IV record critical comments on Blake’s life, writings, drawings, and engraved designs made during his lifetime (1757–1827), with a few comments by surviving friends such as Samuel Palmer (1805–81) or by critics of the next generation such as Ruskin (1819–1900). Criticism of Blake’s character is included because this seems to have been as widely known as his art or his poetry and to have vitally affected interpretation of his poetry. Part VI on ‘References to William Blake 1831–62’ is organized on different principles: it is neither selective nor divided by genre but includes in chronological order all the references to Blake which I know. I have not attempted to record the torrents of Blake criticism which poured forth after 1863, when the floodgates were opened by Alexander Gilchrist’s Life of William Blake, ‘Pictor Ignotus’.

A large proportion of the book is about Blake’s art rather than about his writings, and consequently it is necessary to have extensive reproductions, to indicate what his contemporaries were criticizing. The works reproduced here are primarily those upon which his contemporary reputation was based.

G.E.BENTLEY, JR

Dutch Boys Landing
Mears, Michigan
Acknowledgments

The manuscripts of most of the documents quoted here from Blake Records (1969) are in the British Museum (chiefly Hayley, Flaxman, and Cumberland MSS.), Dr Williams’s Library (Crabb Robinson’s papers), the Linnell Papers of Mrs Joan Linnell Ivimy Burton (née Ivimy), and the collection of Mr Paul Mellon (Tatham’s ‘Life of Blake’ and Rogers’s letter, n.d. [c. 1832]). To all of these I can only repeat my hearty sense of obligation expressed in Blake Records.

In addition, I have had the privilege of quoting for the first time here from manuscripts in the Bodleian Library (Christina Rossetti poem, 12 April 1848), Houghton Library, Harvard University (Ruskin letter, n.d. [?1840]), the collection of Sir Geoffrey Keynes (C.W.Dilke letter, 27 September 1844), the Library of Congress (Gilchrist letter, 24 October 1861), the James Marshall Osborn Collection (Yale) (Hayley letter, 19 May 1801), Sheffield Public Library (Cromek letter, 17 April 1807), Turnbull Library (Wellington, New Zealand) (Allingham MSS., 17 January 1851), Yale University Library (Palmer letter, 24 July 1862), and my own collection (Schiavonetti letter, 21 July 1807).

For permission to reproduce drawings or engravings, I am indebted to the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York (Plates 1 – 2), the Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, England (Plates 3, 16), Mrs Landon K.Thorne (Plate 4), the Trustees of the British Museum (Plates 5, 8, 10, 17), the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (Plate 7), the Petworth Collection (Plate 11), the Huntington Library, San Marino, California (Plates 12 – 15), and Princeton University Library (Plate 18). To all of these I express my cordial thanks. Plates 6, 9, 19 – 20 are my own.
Introduction

BLAKE’S CRITICAL REPUTATION 1780–1863

William Blake had three professional careers which brought him to the notice of contemporary connoisseurs: first as a competent engraver, for which he was trained for seven years (1772–9) as an apprentice under Basire; second as an original and powerful designer, an ‘inventor’ of graphic ideas, for which he studied at the Royal Academy from 1779; and third as an untutored author of appealing lyrics, of bewildering Prophecies, and of outrageous criticism. His ability as an engraver was probably creditably known all his working life throughout the small professional world concerned with reproductive engravings; it was a socially and professionally humble world from which not many comments survive. His ‘extravagant’ designs were increasingly known from about 1796 to connoisseurs in London, to a few patrons of watercolour painting, and to buyers of the illustrated editions of Blair’s Grave (1808, 1813). His poetry was almost entirely ignored until after his death; none of his books of poetry was reviewed during his lifetime, and the few surviving casual judgments stress their wildness and originality.

THE ENGRAVER

Blake’s most stable reputation was probably as an engraver—competent, cheap, and faithful, especially in ‘bold etchings shadowed on a small scale, in which Blake has succeeded admirably sometimes’, as his friend the great sculptor John Flaxman wrote in 1804 (No. 17e). Almost all his professional life he could secure creditable engraving commissions when he chose, and numbers of judges may have believed, as Flaxman did, that Blake was ‘the best engraver of outlines’ (No. 17e). For example, Flaxman commented that in the engraved portrait of Cowper after Romney in Hayley’s Life…of William Cowper (1803) ‘my friend Blake has kept the spirit of the likeness most perfectly’ (No. 25d), and Samuel Greatheed agreed that it excelled in ‘correctness’ (that is, faithfulness), though not in ‘delicacy of execution’ (No. 28d).
When, however, Blake was engraving his own designs, the public reaction was more mixed; in general the public at large was indifferent or hostile to the subtlety and independence of his technique, and the praise came mostly from a small group of artists and friends. When Blake tried wood-engraving for the first and only time with his designs for Thornton’s school edition of Virgil (1821), the wood-engravers greeted his work with ‘a shout of derision…. “This will never do”’ (No. 31a), and the description which accompanied the designs apologized because ‘they display less of art than genius’ (No. 31c). Blake’s young disciples, on the other hand, were deeply influenced and moved by the Virgil designs. Edward Calvert told his son that ‘there is a spirit in them, humble enough and of force enough to move simple souls to tears’ (No. 31d), and Samuel Palmer called them ‘models of the exquisitest pitch of intense poetry’ (No. 31e).

The circulation of the works on which Blake’s reputation as an engraver chiefly depended was very limited. The *Night Thoughts* (1797) was a failure, with only four of nine Nights published; Hayley’s *Ballads* (1802) sold only a little more than one hundred copies, and the new edition (1805) was never republished; and the *Job* (1826) sold only a few score copies before Blake died in 1827. Works bearing his less ambitious engraving work, such as Hoole’s translation of Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, Lavater’s *Aphorisms*, Enfield’s *Speaker*, Bonycastle’s *Mensuration* and Hayley’s *Triumph of Temper* went through repeated editions, but Blake’s engravings elicited no comment which is known to have survived, and often in later editions Blake’s engravings were replaced by the works of other men.

Blake’s greatest finished work as an engraver was probably his series of twenty-one illustrations to the Book of Job (1826), commissioned by his friend John Linnell. It sold very slowly—about six copies a year for fifty years—but the narrow circle of admirers praised it generously. Sir Edward Denny could ‘only say that it is a great work…truly sublime…[with] exquisite beauty & marvellous grandeur’ (No. 33d). Allan Cunningham called it ‘one of the noblest of all his productions…always simple, and often sublime’ (No. 39 ¶42). Others, however, had reservations. The Quaker poet Bernard Barton remarked that ‘There is a dryness and hardness in Blake’s manner of engraving which is very apt to be repulsive to print-collectors in general…. The extreme beauty, elegance, and grace of several of his marginal accompaniments’ indicate that ‘he could have clothed his imaginative creations in a garb more attractive to ordinary
mortal’s’ (No. 33h). And F.T.Palgrave, as an undergraduate, told his mother in 1845 that ‘they show immense power and originality. Though often quite out of drawing and grotesque…every stroke seems to do its utmost in expression, and to show that one mind both planned and executed them’ (No. 33i).

The widespread belief in the twentieth century that Blake is one of the greatest engravers since the Renaissance is one which would simply have bewildered most connoisseurs of Blake’s time.

THE DESIGNER

Blake’s greatest ambitions were probably as a designer, but his peculiar power and vaulting spiritual aspirations were only truly appreciated by a few artists, mostly his own friends. His disciple Frederick Tatham (No. 42) claimed that some of his pictures are of the most sublime composition & artistlike workmanship…little inferior in depth, tone & colour to any modern Oil picture in the Country. …his pictures mostly are not very deep, but they have an unrivalled tender brilliancy….He has produced as fine works, as any ancient painter. His admirers repeatedly compared him with Michelangelo. In 1783 George Romney said that ‘his historical drawings rank with those of M1: Angelo’ (No. 9b), the artists John Flaxman, Henry Fuseli, and John Thomas Smith said that in time ‘Blake’s finest works will be as much sought after and treasured…as those of Michel Angelo are at present’ (No. 16d), and the miniaturist Ozias Humphry said in 1808 that his design of ‘The Last Judgment’ ‘is one of the most interesting performances: I ever saw; & is, in many respects superior to the Last Judgment of Michael Angelo’ (No. 16z). In 1803 William Hayley told a potential patron that Blake’s ‘great original powers’ as an artistic inventor are ‘perhaps unequal’d among the Br[itish] Artists’ (No. 16j), and Charles Lamb wrote to a friend in 1824 that ‘His pictures… have wonderful power and spirit, but hard and dry, yet with grace’ (No. 39 ¶35). Allan Cunningham remarked in his 1830 biography that Blake ‘was a most splendid tinter, but no colourist’ (No. 39 ¶51). John Ruskin asserted in 1849 that the ‘two magnificent and mighty’ artistic geniuses of the nineteenth century were William Blake and J.M.W. Turner (No. 16gg).

Such splendid praise was, however, uncommon. Crabb Robinson remarked somewhat sweepingly in 1810 that ‘professional connoisseurs know nothing of him’ (No. 36), and in 1828 J.T.Smith maintained
that ‘the uninitiated eye was incapable of selecting the beauties of Blake; his effusions were not generally felt’ (No. 16bb). There was a general reluctance to consider Blake seriously at the most respected heights of art, as a designer or painter of large ‘historical’ pictures. His friend John Flaxman warned in 1800 that Blake would be ‘miserably deceived’ if he placed ‘any dependence on painting large pictures, for which he is not qualified, either by habit or study’ (No. 16s). Lady Hesketh complained in 1802 that ‘the Countenance[s] of his women and Children are… less than pleasing’; in particular, ‘the faces of his babies are not young, and this I cannot pardon!’ (No. 24h). The British Critic in 1796 execrated the ‘detestable taste’ of Blake’s ‘depraved fancy…which substitutes deformity and extravagance for force and expression’ (No. 19a), and the Analytical Review said that his frontispiece to Burger’s Leonora (1796) was ‘ludicrous, instead of terrific’ (No. 19b). The spiritualist Garth Wilkinson described some Blake designs which he saw in 1838 as ‘most unutterable and abominable… Blake was inferior to no one who ever lived, in terrific tremendous power, …[but] his whole inner man must have been in a monstrous and deformed condition’ (No. 16ff).

The Blake designs about which most contemporary comments have survived are those engraved for Young’s Night Thoughts (1797), Blair’s Grave (1808), Job (1826), and Dante (1827). The 537 watercolours for Night Thoughts were evidently widely known among London artists before they were engraved by Blake and published in 1797, and their extravagance offended the painter Hoppner, who ‘ridiculed the absurdity of his designs…. They were like the conceits of a drunken fellow or a madman’ (No. 22b). Cunningham remarked that the nudity ‘alarmed fastidious people’ (No. 39 ¶19). Crabb Robinson in 1810 found the designs ‘of very unequal merit’; they were sometimes ‘preposterous’ but ‘frequently exquisite’ (No. 36). The novelist Bulwer Lytton said in 1830 that Young’s poem was ‘illustrated in a manner at once so grotesque, so sublime’, that they seem to balance genius and insanity (No. 22f). When the drawings were auctioned (unsuccessfully) in 1821 and 1826, however, the catalogue said that they were, ‘perhaps, unequalled for the boldness of conception and spirit of execution’ (No. 22g); ‘a more extraordinary, original, and sublime production of art has seldom, if ever, been witnessed since the days of the celebrated Mich. Agnolo’ (No. 22h). In fact, no review of the engravings was ever published, and the edition was a commercial failure.
The public success, or at least sale, of the edition of Blair’s Grave (1808, 1813) was, however, a very different matter, perhaps in part because Blake’s designs were etched by the fashionable engraver Louis Schiavonetti. Their notoriety was caused at least in part by the vigour with which they were advertised. In the Prospectus, Blake’s friend Fuseli said that Blake’s genius in the designs ‘play[s] on the very Verge of legitimate Invention’, but that the ‘Wilderness’ is ‘often redeemed by Taste, Simplicity, and Elegance’, and that the Grave designs should serve as models for artists (No. 29c). Charles Lamb called it ‘a splendid edition’ in 1824 (No. 39 ¶35), and the designs affected W.B. Scott’s father ‘in the profoundest way…nearly every one of the prints he looked upon as almost sacred’ (No. 29k). The poet David Scott (W.B. Scott’s brother) said about 1850 that they were ‘the most purely elevated in their relation and sentiment’ ‘of any series of designs which art has produced’ (No. 29l). The art critic W.P. Carey wrote in 1817 that they ‘abound in images of domestic gentleness and pathos; in varied grace, and unadorned elegance of form’ (No. 29r).

Other private buyers probably found, as James Montgomery did, that the nudity depicted in several of the ‘splendid illustrations’ was ‘hardly of such a nature as to render the book proper to lie on a parlour table for general inspection’, and other designs manifested a ‘solemn absurdity’ in representing spirits with ordinary bodies (No. 29m). The published reviews were either tepid or hostile. The Monthly Review found ‘the grouping…frequently pleasing, and the composition well arranged’ (No. 29q), and Robert Hunt in the Examiner complained vigorously of Blake’s attempt to depict spirits with bodies. Not only is the result often ‘absurd’, but the figures are sometimes shown ‘in most indecent attitudes’, reaching even to ‘obscenity’; ‘In fine, there is much to admire, but more to censure in these prints’ (No. 29n). The Antijacobin Review launched a broadside against Blake’s pretensions; though the designs were ‘tolerably well drawn’ and show some ‘chasteness, simplicity’, they are often ‘absurd’, and ‘the full expression of nudity’ is ‘objectionable’; in sum, ‘Though occasionally invigorated by an imagination chastened by good taste, we regard them in general as the offspring of a morbid fancy’ (No. 29p). Despite such bitter strictures, the Grave plates were the designs by which Blake was best known for perhaps the next sixty years, with editions in 1808 (two), 1813, 1826, 1847, 1858, ?1874.

Blake’s last great series of designs, those for Dante, were left incomplete at his death, but their spiritual ambition made a powerful
effect upon those who saw them. The lawyer Crabb Robinson said that ‘they evince a power of grouping & of throw\(^g\) grace & interest over conceptions most monstrous & disgusting’; ‘They were too much above me’ (No. 34c). Blake’s disciples the artists Samuel Palmer and Frederick Tatham, on the other hand, were profoundly moved by them; Palmer called them the ‘sublimest design[s]’ imaginable (No. 34a), and Tatham said they were ‘such designs, as have never been done by any Englishman at any period or by any foreigner since the 15t? Century, & then his only competitor was Michael Angelo’ (No. 34e). All these comments on Dante, however, were in manuscript; there was no published description of them until almost forty years after Blake’s death.

THE AUTHOR

Blake was scarcely known as an author during his lifetime, and much of what is today thought of as his greatest and most characteristic work was then dismissed as incomprehensible. Of Blake’s dozen published books of poetry, the only ones which were discussed were Poetical Sketches, Songs of Innocence and of Experience, Thel, Urizen, America, Europe, and Jerusalem, and often the critics were as much concerned with the designs as with the text. None of the books was reviewed until half a century after it was written, long after Blake’s death. By a curious chance, Poetical Sketches, the one least characteristic of Blake, received a disproportionate amount of comment, probably because it was more available and conventional than the others.

All Blake’s writings are uncommon today, and none survive in more than about twenty-six copies sold or given away by Blake. Of his works in conventional typography, only about fifty copies were printed of Poetical Sketches (1783), and some of these Blake had still not disposed of when he died; The French Revolution (1791) got no further than a single proof copy; and the Descriptive Catalogue (1809) presumably was bought only by persons attending Blake’s exhibition, of whom only about half a dozen can be identified. Poetical Sketches and Descriptive Catalogue achieved, however, a wider circulation through quotation in reviews and biographies of Blake.

The circulation of works in illuminated printing was much more limited. Each had to be laboriously etched on copper, printed, coloured by hand, and bound by Blake, and few copies of any were produced. Blake evidently printed only four copies of Jerusalem (1804–?20), and
his most popular work, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794), is known in only some 27 surviving contemporary copies. Blake only once publicly advertised his works, in an illuminated prospectus (1793), no copy of which has survived, and evidently he sold chiefly to friendly artists who had heard of his illuminated writings through other artists. Blake’s works in illuminated printing must have been hard to find and expensive to buy. In the circumstances, the extent of contemporary comment is surprising.

Most critics found, as Blake’s disciple Frederick Tatham did, that ‘His poetry…was mostly unintelligible’ (No. 42). A few of the best judges praised it highly in private. Wordsworth ‘was pleased with Some of them’ (Blake’s poems) (No. 8d) and copied out four of them in 1807 (No. 8c), and the poet Walter Savage Landor maintained in 1838 that Blake was ‘the greatest of poets’, though mad (No. 8d). Unfortunately, this praise was private, while the most damaging statement appeared publicly in the *Antijacobin Review*: it said in 1808 (No. 29p) that his poetical dedication ‘To the Queen’ in Blair’s *Grave* is one of the most abortive attempts to form a wreath of poetical flowers that we have ever seen. Should he again essay to climb the Parnassian heights, his friends would do well to restrain his wanderings by the strait waistcoat. Whatever licence we may allow him as a painter, to tolerate him as a poet would be insufferable.

**Lyrics**
The poems by Blake which his contemporaries found most accessible were the lyrics in *Poetical Sketches* (1783) and *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794). The former was on the whole conventional, not to say imitative, printed in ordinary type and without decorations, and generally was of modest pretensions. The preface stressed that the poems in it were by ‘an untutored youth’ and were unrevised, but that they nevertheless showed some ‘poetical originality’ (No. 9a). B.H.Malkin, who reprinted some of them in his account of Blake (1806), praised their ‘simple and pastoral gait’ (No. 35), but Malkin’s reviewers on the whole found little to commend in them. The *British Critic* labelled them ‘idle and superfluous’ (No. 7b), the *Monthly Review* said Blake was ‘certainly very inferior’ to ‘a mere versifier’ like Isaac Watts (No. 7c), and the *Monthly Magazine* remarked that Blake’s poetry ‘does not rise above mediocrity’ (No. 7d). The closest these journalistic critics could come to praise was the statement in the *Annual Review* that they ‘are certainly not devoid of merit’ (No. 7e). In 1830
Allan Cunningham thought the poems were ‘rude sometimes and unmelodious, but full of fine thought and deep and peculiar feeling’, though the prose is ‘wild and incoherent’ (No. 39 ¶3, 7), and Frederick Tatham concluded that they were ‘more rude than refined, more clumsy than delicate’; two are ‘equal to Ben Johnson’, but ‘others although well for a lad are but moderate. His blank verse is prose cut in slices, & his prose inelegant, but replete with Imagery’ (No. 42).

The *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* were a much more novel production which, according to J.J.G.Wilkinson, their first editor (1839), contained ‘nearly all that is excellent in Blake’s Poetry; and great, rare, and manifest is the excellence that is here. The faults are equally conspicuous’ (No. 12h). In 1828 Richard Thomson remarked that they were ‘wild, irregular, and highly mystical, but of no great degree of elegance or excellence’ (No. 12a), and Edward Quillinan wrote in 1848 that some are ‘very like nonsense-verses’, though ‘others have a real charm in their wildness & oddness’ (No. 12i). Malkin praised especially ‘Holy Thursday’ (from *Songs of Innocence*) which expressed ‘with majesty and pathos, the feelings of a benevolent mind’ (No. 35), and Crabb Robinson said in 1810 that, while the designs are ‘often grotesque’, ‘the poems deserve the highest praise and the gravest censure’. In *Songs of Innocence*, ‘Some are childlike songs of great beauty’, but ‘many…are excessively childish’, while in *Songs of Experience* some are ‘of the highest beauty and sublimity’ and some ‘can scarcely be understood even by the initiated’. He singled out ‘The Tyger’ as ‘truly inspired and original’ (No. 36), and Charles Lamb, who had heard it recited, found it ‘glorious’ (No. 39 ¶35), but William Beckford called it ‘trash’. Allan Cunningham called the *Songs* ‘a work original and natural, and of high merit, both in poetry and in painting’; in particular it is coloured with ‘a rich and lustrous beauty’ (No. 39 ¶12, 17). The great critic William Hazlitt ‘was much struck with them’ in 1811 and said they were ‘beautiful…and only too deep for the vulgar’ (No. 12b), and Coleridge commented in detail on the poems and their designs in a letter of 1818, praising particularly ‘The Divine Image’, ‘The Little Black Boy’, and ‘Night’ as giving him pleasure ‘in the highest degree’ (No. 12d). Almost all this praise is from men of very considerable independence of taste.

**Criticism**

The only text by Blake which was dignified by its own contemporary review, the only work by Blake published in anything like the ordinary
way, is his *Descriptive Catalogue* (1809). All contemporaries seem to have found it disjointed and aggressively assertive. Crabb Robinson, who went to the exhibition it advertised, was ‘deeply interested’ in it (No. 14b); he described the catalogue as ‘fragmentary utterances on art and religion, without plan or arrangement’, but ‘even amid these aberrations gleams of reason and intelligence shine out’ (No. 36). He took Charles Lamb to see the pictures and gave him a copy of the catalogue. Lamb ‘was delighted with the Catalogue’ (No. 14b), particularly with what he called ‘a most spirited criticism on Chaucer, but mystical and full of vision’ (No. 39 ¶35). Southey, who also saw the exhibition, merely remarked that the catalogue was ‘very curious’ (No. 14c), and Blake’s friend George Cumberland described it in 1809 as ‘part vanity part madness—part very good sense’ (No. 14e). Allan Cunningham thought it ‘a wild performance, overflowing with oddities and dreams of the author’, ‘utterly wild and mad’ (No. 39 ¶30, 32), and Robert Hunt evidently agreed with him, for he wrote a savage review in the *Examiner* in which he described Blake as ‘an unfortunate lunatic, whose personal inoffensiveness secures him from confinement’ and the *Catalogue* as ‘a farrago of nonsense, unintelligibleness, and egregious vanity, the wild effusions of a distempered brain’ (No. 14f). Clearly Blake failed in his attempt with his exhibition and *Descriptive Catalogue* to secure from the public a sympathetic hearing for his ideas on art.

The Prophecies

If Blake’s lyrics and criticism had divided the critics as to whether they represented ‘the highest beauty’ or ‘trash’, the Prophecies united them in bewilderment. Some saw beauty in the designs, but none claimed to understand the texts. Perhaps the best that could be managed was J.T. Smith’s comment of 1828 that ‘his later poetry, if it may be so called, attached to his plates, …was not always wholly uninteresting’ (No. 15c). In 1839 Garth Wilkinson was able to see ‘some glimmer of meaning’ in *Thel*, though he thought it showed strains of the madness which marked Blake’s other verse (No. 10). The anonymous critic in the *London University Magazine* (1830) found the illuminations of *Thel* ‘charming’ and ‘fairy-like’ and the ‘beautiful whole’ a ‘fanciful production of a rich imagination’ (No. 40). None of the critics of *America* and *Europe* pretended to understand the poetry at all. Allan Cunningham in 1830 spoke of the plates as merely ‘plentifully seasoned with verse’ (No. 39 ¶45), and in 1810 Crabb Robinson said they formed a ‘mysterious and
incomprehensible rhapsody’, ‘wholly inexplicable’; indeed, he could not decide whether the text was ‘intended to be in prose or verse’ (No. 36). Richard Thomson in 1828 found America ‘mystical in a very high degree’, and in Europe he praised the ‘strength and splendour of colouring’; the frontispiece of ‘The Ancient of Days’ in particular is ‘an uncommonly fine specimen of art’ (No. 13).

The only critic to mention Urizen was Allan Cunningham, who said firmly that its ‘wild verses’ surpass ‘all human comprehension’; ‘what he meant by them even his wife declared she could not tell, though she was sure they had a meaning, and a fine one’. He was probably thinking primarily of the designs when he wrote that the book leaves ‘a powerful, dark, terrible…impression…on the mind—and it is in no haste to be gone’ (No. 39 ¶18).

If the comparatively simple Urizen baffled critics, it is little wonder that the great Jerusalem proved similarly incomprehensible. Robert Southey called it ‘a perfectly mad poem’ in 1811 (No. 15a), and Allan Cunningham said it was a ‘strange’ and ‘exclusively wild’ work, in which ‘The crowning defect is obscurity…the whole seems a riddle which no ingenuity can solve’, though many of the very admirable ‘figures may be pronounced worthy of Michael Angelo’ (No. 39 ¶25). Even Frederick Tatham, who was spurred to sympathy for the work by having the magnificent and unique coloured copy to sell, could find little to praise in the verse, though the ‘designs are possessed of some of the most sublime Ideas, some of the most lofty thoughts, some of the most noble conceptions possible to the mind of man’ (No. 42).

Blake’s contemporaries thus were willing to accept him as a fine if eccentric engraver and as a designer whose works balanced uncertainly on the treacherous ground between extravagance and sublimity. His lyrical poetry was praised for its simple, pastoral qualities, but his prophetic works were fairly uniformly dismissed as incomprehensibly wild. His great invention of illuminated printing, uniting designs and text on the same etched page, provided a vehicle in which his strange verses could make their way into the world under cover of the beauty of the designs. To most of Blake’s contemporaries, his poetry evidently seemed interesting but absurd; scarcely any could have conceived of him as a great poet.

Such in general was the public estimation of Blake’s poetry and designs until 1863, when Alexander Gilchrist’s Life of William Blake, ‘Pictor Ignotus’ made Blake’s name known almost overnight throughout the English-speaking world.
INTRODUCTION

BLAKE STUDIES 1863–1974

LIFE

The facts of Blake’s life derive largely from accounts of him by his contemporaries, such as B.H. Malkin (1806), Henry Crabb Robinson (1808–27), J.T. Smith (1828), Allan Cunningham (1830), and Frederick Tatham (?1832), which were written in or shortly after his lifetime. These were supplemented from the memories of the young friends of his last years, some of whom survived him for half a century and more and preserved his memory ever green, men such as John Linnell, Samuel Palmer, Edward Calvert, and George Richmond, who told their friends and families much about Blake. A number of these accounts were reprinted with little editorial sophistication by Alfred Symons and J.A. Wittreich, Jr, and all are incorporated in Blake Records (1969),3 along with hundreds of others, making it perhaps the most convenient and reliable place to find records of Blake’s life.

While Blake was still virtually unknown, Alexander Gilchrist assiduously searched out his surviving friends beginning about 1855, and after Gilchrist’s death in 1861, his widow Anne enlisted the support of a kind of syndicate of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, including D.G. Rossetti, W.M. Rossetti, and Swinburne. When the resulting Life of William Blake, ‘Pictor Ignotus’ was published in 1863, Blake was immediately elevated from obscurity to fame and notoriety. Most of the major reviews published accounts of it, some of them at enormous length, and Blake’s stature as a major poet, artist, engraver, and thinker was securely established. Gilchrist’s biography has remained the closest thing we have to a ‘standard biography’, despite a significant amount of minor supplementary information which has come to light since 1863, and the work was reprinted, usually with significant improvements, in 1880; 1907, 1922, 1928 (ed. Graham Robertson); 1942 and 1945 (ed. Ruthven Todd); 1969. There are a number of awkward drawbacks to Gilchrist’s biography, however; for one thing, the emphases necessary to a pioneering work are no longer relevant; for another, twentieth-century readers tend to be indifferent to arguments (like Gilchrist’s) about Blake’s madness and to be deeply interested in his mythological system, which Gilchrist and the Rossettis largely ignored; for another, Gilchrist regularly omitted the sources of his information. This last defect is largely corrected in the learned annotations in Ruthven Todd’s editions of Gilchrist (1942, 1945) and in Blake Records (1969), which reprints the factual parts of Gilchrist.4
INTRODUCTION

Gilchrist’s book roused great enthusiasm about Blake, but the next serious work on Blake’s life did not appear until thirty years later. Then in 1893 E.J.Ellis and the poet W.B.Yeats published a Memoir of Blake in their edition of his Works (1893; vol. I, pp. 1–172), which Ellis expanded in his antonymically entitled Real Blake (1907), postulating that the poet was the son of a renegade Irishman named O’Neill. Though there is no biographical fact to support the theory, it enjoyed a long and active life, but today it has about the status of the ‘Bacon was Shakespeare’ controversy.

The most responsible and ambitious formal biography of Blake since Gilchrist is that by Mona Wilson (1927, revised by Miss Wilson in 1948 and by Sir Geoffrey Keynes in 1971). This is judicious, balanced, and up-to-date. For all but the most recondite purposes, the biographical facts of Blake’s life may be found in Gilchrist (1863, rev. ed. 1945), in Wilson (1927, rev. ed. 1971), and in Blake Records (1969). Indeed, the facts of Blake’s life now seem so clearly established that interest is turning toward his posthumous reputation.

ENGRAVINGS

Among his creative works, Blake’s engravings were best known to his contemporaries, as the surviving comments quoted below clearly indicate. Consequently, it is somewhat surprising that this aspect of his work is the one least examined and criticized today. A great deal of work remains to be done here.

W.M.Rossetti included catalogues of Blake’s engravings in the second volume of Gilchrist’s Life (1863, 1880, 1907), and these were verified, extended, and consolidated in A.G.B.Russell’s Engravings of William Blake (1912) (ignoring works in illuminated printing). Similar extensions of knowledge were made by Keynes in his great Bibliography (1921—see below), in Keynes and Wolf’s William Blake’s Illuminated Books: a Census (1953), in Laurence Binyon’s Engraved Designs of William Blake (1926), in Keynes’s Engravings by William Blake: the Separate Plates (1956), and in R.Easson and R.Essick, William Blake: Book Illustrator, vol. I (1972); the last, the most elaborate treatment of the subject, deals chiefly with commercial book illustrations, as do William Blake Engraver (catalogue by Charles Ryskamp of an exhibition in Princeton, 1969) and the relevant portion of G.E. Bentley, Jr, and M.K.Nurmi, A Blake Bibliography (1964). Equally
1 ‘The Little Black Boy’ from Songs of Innocence (1789) (Songs, copy V) which pleased Coleridge ‘in the highest degree’ (No. 12d)
Titlepage of *Thel* (C) (1789) which the *London University Magazine* critic (1830) thought showed the ‘utmost elegance in design’ (No. 40)
America (P) (1793) Plate 15 which Richard Thomson said was a ‘very fine specimen’ (No. 13)
The Ancient of Days, frontispiece to *Europe* (G) (1794), which Richard Thomson called ‘uncommonly fine’ (No. 13)
Frontispiece to Burger’s *Leonora* (1796) which the *British Critic* condemed as ‘distorted, absurd’ (No. 19a) and the *Analytical Review* as ‘ludicrous’ (No. 19b)
6  ‘‘Tis greatly wise to talk with our past hours’, Young, Night Thoughts (1797) which Bulwer Lytton thought ‘very solemn’ (No. 22f)
7 (right) Blake’s miniature (1801) of Cowper after Romney, which horrified Lady Hesketh because of its indication of Cowper’s madness, though she believed ‘the miniature is very well executed’ (No. 25b); for Blake’s engraving of the same portrait, see Plate 9

8 (below) Frontispiece to ‘The Eagle’, the second of Hayley’s Ballads (1802); Lady Hesketh complained that the baby lacks ‘Infantine Graces …and this I cannot pardon!’ (No. 24h)
9 Portrait of Cowper engraved by Blake after Romney for Hayley's *Life of William Cowper* (1803) (second edition); Flaxman said that in it Blake 'has kept the spirit of the likeness most perfectly' (No. 25d) and Lady Hesketh wrote: 'I admire Romneys head of all things' (No 25f); for Blake’s miniature of the same subject, see Plate 7
10 Frontispiece engraved by Cromek after Blake’s marginal design of T.W. Malkin for B.H. Malkin’s *Father’s Memoirs of his Child* (1806); *The Literary Journal* ‘praise[d] his design’ (No. 7a), but the *British Critic* complained that Blake mistook ‘extravagance for genius…though the kneeling figure is elegant, and that of the child is passable’ (No. 7b)
11 ‘Vision of the Last Judgment’ (1808), Blake’s finished watercolour for the Earl of Egremont, which J.T. Smith thought ‘excellent’ (No. 16bb), and Ozias Humphry said was ‘one of the most interesting performances I ever saw’ (No. 16z)
12 Title page for Blair’s Grave (1808); the Antijacobin Review objected to the ‘nudity’ (No. 29p) and James Montgomery to the ‘solemn absurdity’ of the design (No. 29m)
13 ‘The Soul hovering over the Body, reluctantly parting with Life’ for Blair’s Grave (1808), which Robert Hunt labelled ‘absurd’ (No. 29n)

14 ‘Death’s Door’ for Blair’s Grave (1808), which the Antijacobin Review said was ‘well depicted’ (No. 29p) and which Cunningham called ‘one of the best’ of the series (No. 39, ¶27)
15 ‘Death of the Strong Wicked Man’ for Blair’s *Grave* (1808); Cunningham said it was ‘fearful and extravagant’ (No. 39, ¶24), and the *Antijacobin Review* said the depiction of the soul was an ‘outrage done to nature and probability’ (No. 29p)

16 *Jerusalem* (H) (1804–?20) Plate 76, one of the ‘stupendous’ and ‘sublime’ designs singled out by Tatham (No. 42)
17 Virgil, *Pastorals* (1821) p. 15; Samuel Palmer called the series ‘models of the exquisitest pitch of intense poetry’ (No. 31e)
18 ‘The Hiding of Moses’ in *Remember Me!* (1825), which the accompanying text said could have been accomplished only by ‘an artist possessing the imagination and abilities of Mr. Blake’ (No. 32)

19 *Job* (1826) Plate 20; Cunningham called *Job* ‘one of the noblest of all his productions’ (No. 39, ¶42), and F.T. Palgrave said: ‘every stroke seems...to show that one mind both planned and executed them’ (No. 33i)
20 Dante (1838) Plate 3; Palmer called the series of designs the ‘sublimest designs’ imaginable (No. 34a), but Crabb Robinson found the ‘conceptions most monstrous & disgusting’ (No. 34c)
important, the engravings are extensively reproduced in William Blake’s Engravings, ed. G.Keynes (1950), in the Separate Plates (above),8 and in William Blake: Book Illustrator (above—the intention is to reproduce in the three volumes all Blake’s commercial book engravings).


ART

If Blake was best known to his contemporaries as a craftsman, an engraver, the creative skill by which he was best known was his draughts-manship, his drawings. Since patronage of Blake was very limited, and he held only one exhibition of his own works, in 1809, his drawings were comparatively little known, and the ones which reached the widest public, those for Blair’s Grave (1808, 1813, 1826), were conveyed through the distorting medium of Schiavonetti’s fashionable etchings. Until a half-century after his death, it was scarcely possible to form an extensive idea of Blake’s art except in the private collections of men like Thomas Butts.9

Blake’s art was first made accessible to a wide public through a series of great exhibitions on both sides of the Atlantic. The most important of these were at the Burlington Fine Arts Club in London (1876–333 entries; 1927–91 entries); at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (1880—160 entries; 1891–234 entries); at the Carfax Galleries in London (1904–41 entries; 1906–106 entries); at the Grolier Club of New York (1905–148 entries; 1919–20–61 entries); at the National Gallery, London (1913–114 entries; moved to Manchester, 1914–176 entries; to Nottingham, 1914–138 entries; to Edinburgh, 1914–141 entries); at the Franco-Britannique exhibition in Paris (1937–94 entries) and Vienna (1937–65 entries); at the very extraordinary Philadelphia Museum exhibition (1939–283 entries); at the British Council exhibition of 1947 shown in Brussels (42 entries), Zürich (41 entries),
London (84 entries), and Paris (43 entries); at the National Gallery, Washington (1957–163 entries); and at the British Museum (1957–199 entries). Such remarkable exhibitions had an extraordinarily vivifying effect upon Blake’s reputation, and fostered the increasingly rapid migration of his works into public collections.

The greatest public collections of Blake’s art today are undoubtedly those in the Tate Gallery (London), the British Museum (London), the Huntington Library (San Marino, California), the Fitzwilliam Museum (Cambridge, England), the Rosenwald Collection (Jenkintown, Pennsylvania), the Pierpont Morgan Library (New York), and Harvard University (Houghton Library and Fogg Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts). Of these, worthy catalogues have been printed for the Huntington, Tate, Fitzwilliam, and (in part) Morgan collections, and handlists exist for the British Museum and Rosenwald Collections. On these collections and catalogues all serious work on Blake’s art depends.

The first important catalogue of Blake’s art was that compiled by W.M. Rossetti for the second volume of Gilchrist’s Life (1863, expanded 1880, rev. W.G. Robertson, 1907); no comprehensive work of a similar kind has since been published, but Martin Butlin of the Tate Gallery is now completing a comprehensive catalogue raisonné under the patient sponsorship of the Blake Trust. Other very useful catalogues of Blake’s art are G. Keynes, Tempera Paintings (1951), Sir Geoffrey Keynes, William Blake’s Illustrations to the Bible (1957), and R.N. Essick, ‘A finding list of reproductions of Blake’s art’, Blake Newsletter, vol. III (1969, 1970), pp. 24–41, 64–70, and supplement pp. 1–23, 1–21, 1–3. With the aid of such catalogues, the Blake student can find most of the important Blake designs in public collections.

Even the most industrious student, however, cannot visit or hold in mind the extended riches of these great collections. He must therefore depend upon reproductions for much of his work. The most important books illustrating Blake’s art are Illustrations of the Divine Comedy of Dante (1922–102 plates; 1968–109 plates); William Blake’s Designs for Gray’s Poems, ed. H.J.C. Grierson (1922–116 plates, mostly in monochrome), ed. G. Keynes (1972–116 plates in colour); Heads of the Poets, ed. T. Wright (1925–18 plates); Milton, Poems in English, ed. G. Keynes (1926–53 plates); Illustrations to Young’s Night Thoughts, ed. G. Keynes (1927–30 plates out of 537 designs); Illustrations of the Book of Job, ed. G. Keynes and L. Binyon (1935), ed. P. Hofer (1937—the ‘New Zealand’ set); Bunyan, The
INTRODUCTION


To these specialized series should be added The Drawings and Engravings, ed. L.Binyon (1922, 1967–108 plates); The Paintings, ed. D. Figgis (1925–100 plates); and Pencil Drawings, ed. G.Keynes ([first series], 1927–82 plates, second series, 1956–57 plates; 1970–92 plates, mostly from 1927 and 1956), plus of course the very full illustrations in the collection-catalogues above. Except for the hundreds of unprinted Night Thoughts drawings in the British Museum Print Room, most of Blake’s important series of designs have now been reproduced extensively.

There were, of course, appreciations of Blake’s art published in the nineteenth century, but the first work of much scholarly importance on the subject was Joseph Wicksteed’s Blake’s Vision of the Book of Job (1910, rev. ed. 1924). Its most important thesis, applied persuasively to Job but somewhat tendentiously to earlier works, is that Blake uses the right side (especially hands and feet) to represent the spiritual and the left for the material. Most other books on Blake’s art have attempted rather to survey new ground than to argue a thesis. A.S.Roe, in Blake’s Illustrations to the Divine Comedy (1953), surveys and reproduces the great Dante series competently, but rather blurs the issue by reading the designs frequently as illustrations of Blake’s own myth as well as Dante’s. Two of Blake’s most perplexing works, The Gates of Paradise and The Arlington Court Picture, are dealt with earnestly by G.W.Digby, Symbol and Image in William Blake (1957), attempting to apply modern psychology to Blake’s art. Perhaps the most satisfactory book on Blake’s visual work as a whole is Sir Anthony Blunt’s The Art of William Blake (1959), a series of lectures which yet brings the erudition of a great art-historian to bear upon Blake, placing him firmly in the European iconographic traditions. In a dissertation-turned-book, like Roe’s, Irene Taylor, in Blake’s Illustrations to the Poems of Gray (1971), reproduces and for the first time analyses extensively this great series. The last, and in many ways the most scholarly and impressive of these books about Blake’s art, is Bo Lindberg’s William Blake’s Illustrations to the Book of Job (1973), which is extraordinarily learned in many languages and traditions and which defines and analyses the problems of Job in a masterful way which is likely to make subsequent studies of it redundant; in particular, Lindberg demonstrates that virtually every detail of Blake’s Job is consciously derived from ancient traditions of Job iconography. With
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Blunt and Lindberg, in particular, Blake’s art has found scholars worthy of its vaulting achievement.\(^{13}\)

WRITINGS

Most of Blake’s works were etched, printed, coloured, bound, and sold by Blake himself, clearly in very small numbers—the most common is Songs of Innocence and of Experience (1794) in some twenty-three complete contemporary copies, while several survive only in unique copies—and even his conventionally printed works, such as Poetical Sketches (1783) and Descriptive Catalogue (1809), were limited issues of which only about a score of copies can be traced today. Consequently it was very difficult to be acquainted with Blake’s poetry during his lifetime, and his popularity depends very largely upon reprints of his works by other men. Malkin, Smith, and Cunningham printed a few poems, but the only book devoted to Blake’s poetry published before 1863 was an edition of the Songs of 1839. Then D.G. Rossetti organized a very extensive selection of Blake’s lyrics, particularly from Blake’s Notebook which he owned, in the second volume of Gilchrist’s great Life of William Blake, ‘Pictor Ignotus’ (1863) which made Blake’s poetry sensationally well known. Rossetti unashamedly shook up Blake’s verse to make it more conventional in structure, and his texts are always of dubious accuracy, but their historical importance is enormous.

The first need of Blake critics was to have texts of his works put into their hands. R.H. Shepherd and W.M. Rossetti provided separate editions of the lyrics in 1874, but the most ambitious Blake edition of the nineteenth century was the three-volume one of Ellis and Yeats in 1893, which not only presented for the first time many of Blake’s prophetic works, such as the great unfinished epic The Four Zoas, but provided hundreds of lithographs of the illuminated works. The very great historical importance of their edition, however, was much mitigated by the occasionally grotesque inaccuracy of the text and the unreliability of the lithographs. No one today can use Ellis and Yeats’s texts or reproductions with confidence.\(^{14}\)

Reliable texts

The twentieth century saw great changes in the fidelity with which Blake’s texts were presented, first with meticulously accurate editions by John Sampson of his Poetical Works (conventional lyrics chiefly) in 1905 and culminating in the great edition of Blake’s Writings in three volumes by Geoffrey Keynes published in 1925. The Keynes edition
provided texts of meticulous verbal accuracy for all Blake’s writings, together with notes on variants and generous illustrations. In various one-volume modifications, first shorn of notes and variants for a popular audience (1927 ff.) and then with the notes and variants triumphantly restored and amplified (1957 ff.), the Keynes edition has remained the most widely used edition of Blake in the twentieth century. Its chief drawback for scholars, a consistent normalization of Blake’s very irregular punctuation, is rectified in the great edition of Blake’s *Poetry and Prose* (1965 ff.) created by D.V.Erdman with the assistance of a team of scholars assembled to make the equally important *Concordance* (1967). Today, careful Blake critics cite either Keynes or Erdman, and frequently both together.

A few more editions deserve mention, chiefly for their annotations. D.J.Sloss and J.P.R.Wallis provided fresh texts of Blake’s *Prophetic Writings* (2 vols, 1926), together with a huge and somewhat misleading index to his mythological system. One of the earliest really useful annotated editions was that of F.W.Bateson’s *Selected Poems* (1957); a number of the poems in the Erdman edition (1965 ff.) are voluminously annotated by Harold Bloom, and exceedingly helpful notes are provided by W.H.Stevenson in his edition of *The Poems* (1971, text by Erdman, with punctuation added by Stevenson). Except for editions of individual works by Blake, no other texts are worth much critical confidence.

Bibliographies
Because most of Blake’s works were made by his unique process of illuminated printing, in which each copy differs, often in important ways, from every other, and because even the works in conventional typography were altered from copy to copy by Blake, bibliographical details concerning his works are particularly important to an understanding of him. No critic can deal seriously and reliably with Blake’s works without understanding something of the bibliographical details—such as that the poems in the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* were arranged in at least thirty-four orders. The first real *Bibliography of William Blake* is the very great work of Geoffrey Keynes (1921), on which all subsequent knowledge has been based. It has been modified in minute particulars here and there, chiefly by Keynes himself and most notably in the Keynes and Wolf census of *William Blake’s Illuminated Books* (1953), but the broad outline of our knowledge is that which Keynes established in 1921.
Facsimiles
Because most of Blake’s works are illuminated by his own designs, and because each copy differs from every other, it is particularly important for students of Blake to examine either originals or facsimiles of them, preferably several copies. The production of facsimiles began vigorously in the nineteenth century, chiefly the hand-coloured lithographs of William Muir and his family, and their importance has been increasingly recognized by serious Blake critics. In the twentieth century, the Blake Trust has produced a series of beautiful, reliable, and very dear facsimiles which have brought the feel of the originals to enormous numbers of enthusiasts. The facsimiles which have been published thus far are:

*Ahania* (1892 [A]17)
*All Religions are One* (1926 [A], 1970 [A]18)
*America* (1876 [copy F?], 1887 [R & A], 19 1947, 1963 [M], 18 1969 [C or D], 1970 [K])
*The Book of Los* (1886 [A]17)
*The Book of Thel* (1876 [D], 1884 [D], 19 1920 [?], 1924, 1928 [D], 1933, 1966 [O], 18 1971 [M])
*Europe* (1876 [D?], 1887 [A, D, c], 17 1931 [D], 1969 [B, G, K]18)
*First Book of Urizen* (1876 [D], 1888 [B], 18 1929 [A], 1958 [G], 18 1966 [G], 1969 [G])
*For Children: the Gates of Paradise* ([1942?], 1968 [D]18)
*Jerusalem* ([1877?] [D], [1951] [E], 18 1952 [C], 18 1955 [C]18)
*Letters...to Thomas Butts*, ed. G.Keynes (1926)
*Marrige* ([1868] [F], 1885 [A], 17, 1927 [I], 1960 [D], 18 1963 [I], 1968 [I], 1970 [I])
*Milton* (1886 [A], 17 1967 [D]18)
*On Homer’s Poetry* (1886 [C]17)
*The ‘Order’ of the Songs* (1885)17
*Pickering Manuscript* (1972)
*Poetical Sketches* ([1890], 1926, 1927)
*The Song of Los* (1876 [A or D], 19 1890 [A]17)
*Songs of Experience* (1927 [A?], 1927 [A, T], 1935)
*Songs of Innocence* (1884 [D], 17 1923 [Songs (T)], 1926 [Songs (A)], 1927 [Songs (A)], 1954 [L]18)
*Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1876 [a], 19 1883–5 [U], 17 1923, 1941, 1947 [b], 1955 [Z], 18 1967 [Z])
*There is No Natural Religion* (1886 [A, L], 17 1948 [D], 1971 [C, F-G, L]18)
*Tiriel*, ed. G.E.Bentley, Jr (1967)
*Vala or The Four Zoas*, ed. G.E.Bentley, Jr (1963)
*Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1876 [B], 1884 [A], 17 1932 [A], 1959 [C]18)
Nineteenth-century critics
The most important of Blake’s nineteenth-century critics, after Gilchrist had made his poetry public property in 1863, were A.C. Swinburne, in his *William Blake: A Critical Essay* (1868), and Ellis and Yeats, in their edition of his *Writings* (1893), in separate editions by Yeats (1893) and Ellis (1906), in separate essays, and in Ellis’s *Real Blake* (1907). Swinburne’s book was remarkable for its surging superlatives, claiming that *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* ranks ‘as about the greatest [work] produced by the eighteenth century’ and that the *Poetical Sketches* are ‘better than any [other] man could do then’. Ellis and Yeats were far more learned than Swinburne, and their work is filled with references to secret cosmological knowledge, to the Kabbala and the Illuminati and their significance in Blake’s work; Blake, they claim, was drinking at long-forgotten or concealed springs of knowledge and mythology. Most scholars today would probably agree that their impulse was promising but their learning unsystematic and often unpersuasive. There were of course scores of essays and books on Blake contemporaneous with those of Swinburne, Ellis and Yeats, but few of them contain either facts or criticism which need detain twentieth-century scholars long.

Monuments of twentieth-century criticism
The foundations and form of contemporary criticism of Blake were established chiefly by three men: S. Foster Damon, Northrop Frye, and D. V. Erdman. The first, in his *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols* (1924), brought great learning in mysticism and the occult to bear on the entire range of Blake’s writings and art (the latter largely ignored by Swinburne, Ellis and Yeats), and established analogies with Blake’s works which have proved seminal ever since. Damon’s work in *William Blake* (1924) and in his *Blake Dictionary* (1965) is deliberately encyclopaedic and has been enormously influential, though occasionally it is more assertive than demonstrative.

Northrop Frye’s *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (1947) is comprehensive, profound, and magisterial; it is the foundation of Frye’s own revolutionary critical system and of the most fruitful subsequent discussions by others of Blake’s ‘system’. Its learning is immense and unobtrusive, and its analysis of Blake’s development lucid and witty. Frye is particularly concerned with a tradition of archetypal symbolism, for instance with Blake’s Orc Cycle, and he stresses throughout Blake’s consistent attempt to create one comprehensive mythological system.
D.V. Erdman’s *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (1954, rev. ed. 1969) is a very different and more limited kind of work but in its way almost as impressive and influential. Erdman attempts ‘to trace through nearly all of his works [chiefly literary] a more or less clearly discernible thread of historical reference’, and in the process he has demonstrated, often conclusively, Blake’s frequent and deliberate responses to contemporary history and politics. Blake was neither worldly nor out of touch with his times; his profundity did not prevent him from utilizing the facts and sympathies of his day in his poetry. Within this sphere, *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* is an enormously useful work.

Scholarship and twaddle about Blake have multiplied at such a pace in the post-war years that it is scarcely possible here to do more than glance at a few of the more important and influential books. Even so, it will be necessary to treat them under several subheadings, ‘Religion’, ‘Psychology’, ‘Sources’, ‘Influence’, ‘General Criticism’, and ‘Collections of Essays’, in order to deal with all the kinds of material.

Religion
The earliest extended separate account of Blake’s religious ideas appeared in Helen White’s *Mysticism of William Blake* (1927, 1964), which concluded that ‘he is not a great mystic in any sense that means anything’, a conclusion generally assumed without discussion today. A similarly specialized work was J.G. Davies’s *Theology of William Blake* (1948, 1965), which argues, curiously, that Blake was an orthodox Anglican, but is yet useful in dismissing the claims that Blake’s family was Swedenborgian when he was a boy.

of the theological passages in Blake’s poetry. Naturally most general books on Blake also deal with his religious ideas, but today they tend to do so in the context of his myth rather than of his life.

Psychology
An obviously related subject is Blake’s psychology, for most of the major psychological ‘discoveries’ of the twentieth century have been found adumbrated in Blake’s poetry. Unfortunately, most of the psychologists are self-taught amateurs, and the professionals are rather worse. W.P. Witcutt’s *Blake: A Psychological Study* (1946, 1966) begins a promising argument that Blake can be profitably illuminated by Jung. A wonderfully perverse work on the subject is Margaret Rudd’s *Organized Innocence: The Story of Blake’s Prophetic Books* (1956), a paraphrase of ‘Blake’s own psychological drama’ in the ‘one long narrative’ formed by *Vala*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*. And finally a Jungian analyst, June K. Singer in *The Unholy Bible: A Psychological Interpretation of William Blake* (1970) analyses his sexual life as deduced from his writings in wonderful detail and with a stout disregard for plain facts. The great promises of psychology have yet to bear sweet fruit in Blake studies.

Sources
An author as difficult and heterodox as Blake seems to call to something deep in many scholars to identify the sources of his ideas, to help put him into a meaningful context and explain his work. The earliest study of this kind of much note was the essay by Henry G. Hewlett, ‘Imper-fect genius: William Blake’, *Contemporary Review*, vol. XXVIII (1876), pp. 756–84, vol. XXIX (1877), pp. 207–28, which argued that Blake was scarcely doing more than imitating ineffectively the artificial archaism of Ossian and Chatterton.

Suggested and prolific arguments on Blake’s sources were made by the French critic Denis Saurat, in *Blake and Milton* (1920), *Blake and Modern Thought* (1929), and *William Blake* (1954). In the second of these, which is the best of them, he claims that ‘there was not one absurdity in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century that Blake did not know’; he is particularly stimulating and useful on the Kabbala, Hindu mythology, and Druidism, and frequently his scholarship and accuracy are commendable. Perhaps the most satisfying book devoted to a study of Blake’s sources is Milton O. Percival’s *William Blake’s Circle of Destiny* (1938), particularly
in finding parallels and sources in the writings of the alchemists, the Kabbalists, and Biblical scholars. A similarly rewarding work is Margaret Ruth Lowery’s *Windows of the Morning: A Critical Study of William Blake’s Poetical Sketches* (1940), particularly in its then-novel conclusion ‘that, contrary to all previous comment on Blake, the influence of the [eighteenth] century is more extensive than that of the Elizabethan period’.

Learned but incomplete essays on Blake’s debt to Swedenborg and to Boehme and the alchemists were published in Jacques Roos, *Aspects littéraires du mysticisme philosophique et l’influence de Boehme et de Swedenborg au début du romantisme: William Blake, Novalis, Ballanche* (1951), pp. 25–194, and in Désirée Hirst, *Hidden Riches: Traditional Symbolism from the Renaissance to Blake* (1964), but much remains to be done in this difficult area.


An exceedingly problematic theme, the influence on Blake of Plato and the neo-Platonists via his contemporary, Thomas Taylor, has been repeatedly but unpersuasively argued, chiefly by George Harper, *The Neoplatonism of William Blake* (1961), and, rather more stridently, by Kathleen Raine, *Blake and Tradition* (2 vols, 1968). Despite occasionally convincing points, and the recent (1972) discovery of evidence that Blake did, after all, know Taylor, most scholars are likely still to return a Scottish verdict of Not Proven to the charge that Blake was extensively and directly influenced by Taylor or Plato.

**Influence**

Blake has been claimed, sometimes convincingly, as an important influence on authors as diverse as G.B.Shaw, D.H.Lawrence, Joyce Gary, Dylan Thomas, and D.G.Rossetti. Most ink has flowed, however, in tracing the effect of his thought on W.B.Yeats; the relationship was tentatively explored in Margaret Rudd, *Divided Image: A Study of William Blake and W.B.Yeats* (1953) and in Virginia Moore ‘Blake as a Major Doctrinal Influence’ on Yeats in *The Unicorn* (1954) and defined, as satisfactorily as such a problem admits of definition, in Hazard Adams, *Blake and Yeats: The Contrary Vision* (1955). But no one has yet attempted to describe with confidence the extent of Blake’s influence on all subsequent authors.
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General criticism

There are scores of books and literally thousands of articles dealing with Blake’s poetry generally, and naturally, among such a welter, comparatively little will generously reward a critic’s serious attention. The best of them, in their time, are probably those that follow. An Introduction to the Study of Blake (1927, 1952, 1967) by Max Plowman is clear and engagingly enthusiastic, though it has few claims to originality. Middleton Murry’s William Blake (1933, 1936, 1964), on the other hand, is vigorously original, as in his claim that Blake was simultaneously a profound “Christian” and a great Communist. Both works were much admired by a generation of Blake students. A more lastingly useful introduction to Blake appeared in Jacob Bronowski’s William Blake 1757–1827: A Man without a Mask (1945; expanded in William Blake and Revolution, 1969) which applies deftly and convincingly a wide range of relevant and little-used information to show how Blake’s contemporary economic and political background directed and thwarted his work. Mark Schorer’s William Blake: The Politics of Vision (1946) surveys similar terrain, particularly the radical circle round Joseph Johnson, at considerably greater length. In his Piper and the Bard: A Study of William Blake (1959), Robert F. Gleckner deals with Blake’s earlier poetry (to 1774), stressing the narrative point of view in the Songs in a way which has since become a critical commonplace. A work similarly restricted in scope is Hazard Adams’s ambitious, long, and successful William Blake: A Reading of the Shorter Poems (1963), including an annotated list, poem by poem, of criticism of Blake’s lyrics. Harold Bloom, a follower of Frye, analyses Blake’s more difficult poems in a sophisticated, allusive way which has since become a critical commonplace. A work similarly restricted in scope is Hazard Adams’s ambitious, long, and successful William Blake: A Reading of the Shorter Poems (1963), including an annotated list, poem by poem, of criticism of Blake’s lyrics. Harold Bloom, a follower of Frye, analyses Blake’s more difficult poems in a sophisticated, allusive way which has since become a critical commonplace. A work similarly restricted in scope is Hazard Adams’s ambitious, long, and successful William Blake: A Reading of the Shorter Poems (1963), including an annotated list, poem by poem, of criticism of Blake’s lyrics. Harold Bloom, a follower of Frye, analyses Blake’s more difficult poems in a sophisticated, allusive way which has since become a critical commonplace.
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which displays convincingly the reciprocal decline in importance of Orc (Energy) and rise of Los (Imagination) in Blake’s myth.\textsuperscript{26} With studies such as these, Blake scholarship has achieved a consensus from which future studies can proceed with confidence.

Collections of essays

NOTES

1 Such reputation as Blake had was almost exclusively British; a few German readers may have seen Crabb Robinson’s 1811 article in \textit{Vaterländisches Museum} (No. 36), but no known comments in North America appeared until after his death.

2 See A.T. Story, \textit{The Life of John Linnell} (2 vols, 1892), A.H. Palmer, \textit{The Life and Letters of Samuel Palmer} (1892), [S. Calvert], \textit{A Memoir of
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Edward Calvert Artist (1893), and The Richmond Papers, ed. A.M.W.Stirling (1926).


4 For other aspects of major importance in Gilchrist’s book concerning reprints of Blake’s writings and catalogues of his works, see pp. 14–16.

5 It is credulously adopted by J.G.Davies in The Theology of William Blake (1948), and forms the basis for the wonderful flights of Elizabeth O’Higgins in the Dublin Magazine (1950–2, 1956).

6 Some minor advances in Blake biography may be found in Herbert Jenkins, William Blake (1925) (a collection of his previously published essays), Thomas Wright, Life of William Blake (2 vols, 1929) (an eccentric, unreliable work embodying much new information with great ingenuity), Morchard Bishop [Oliver Stoner], Blake’s Hayley (1951) (incorporating a great deal of new information about Hayley), and H.M.Margoliouth, William Blake (1951) (especially enterprising about Blake’s early life).


8 Omitting, however, most of the separate plates designed by others but engraved by Blake.

9 The Butts Collection, including perhaps half the finished separate drawings Blake made, was sold at Sotheby’s on 26 March 1852, at Foster & Son’s on 9 June 1853 and 8 March 1854, at Sotheby’s on 24 June 1903 and 19 December 1932; much of it was acquired by W.Graham Robertson, whose collection was separately catalogued (1952) and sold at Christie’s on 22 July 1949.


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12 Blake’s Milton designs have been well served in a number of useful essays, notably in M.R.Pointon, Milton and English Art (1970), pp. 135–66. Two recent books on Blake’s art of striking negligibility are Kathleen Raine, William Blake (1970), with reproductions of unfortunate colour, and Ruthven Todd, William Blake the Artist (1971) with novel reproductions but a text mechanically derived from elsewhere.

14 The same strictures apply to the text in the E.J.Ellis edition of Blake’s Poetical Works (2 vols, 1906).

15 Notably the Keynes edition of Blake’s Letters (1968); the first collection of Blake’s Letters was made by A.G.B.Russell in 1906.

16 G.E.Bentley, Jr, and M.K.Nurmi, in A Blake Bibliography (1964), attempted to bring the Keynes bibliography up to date chiefly in its coverage of Blake’s commercial engravings and of Blake criticism and scholarship.


18 A Blake Trust publication, edited by Geoffrey Keynes.

19 Part of Works by William Blake (1876).

20 Kathleen Raine, a devoted believer in Yeats (see p. 23), would doubtless prove an exception to this statement.

21 The work of many scholars before 1940, particularly Foster Damon, was informed by the opposite conclusion.


24 Schorer’s book has consistently been highly valued in North America and largely ignored by other scholars.

25 Three short works which are particularly successful with Blake’s early poetry are Stanley Gardner, Infinity on the Anvil: A Critical Study of Blake’s Poetry (1954), his Blake (1968), and John Holloway, Blake: The Lyric Poet (1968); on the other hand, D.H.Gillham, Blake’s Contrary States (1966) is pedestrian, and E.D.Hirsch, Jr, Innocence and Experience: An Introduction to Blake (1964), is often betrayed by biographical and bibliographical facts in trying to trace autobiographical elements in the Songs.

26 Other general works which deserve mention are Bernard Blackstone, English Blake (1949, 1966), particularly for its original but probably wrong section on the Island in the Moon, and John Beer, Blake’s Humanism (1968) and his Blake’s Visionary Universe (1969), which often relate Blake usefully to his literary background.
Note on the Text

The great majority of the references to Blake here are repeated, by permission, from *Blake Records* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1969), where they are organized by date.
References

Bentley, G.E., Jr , and Nurmi, M.K. , A Blake Bibliography (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1964) (an edition revised by G.E. Bentley, Jr , as Blake Books is in the press) lists almost all published comments on Blake; an essay on Blake’s reputation and interpreters on pp. 3.

Bentley, G.E., Jr , Blake Records (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1969) reprints all the then-known comments on Blake, printed or in MS., up to 1831.

Crompton, Louis L. , Blake’s Nineteenth Century Critics, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Chicago (1954) (unpublished), surveys the field and reprints a number of early comments.

Dorfman, Deborah , Blake in the Nineteenth Century: his Reputation as a Poet from Gilchrist to Yeats (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1969) discusses Blake’s late-Victorian critics, particularly the books of Gilchrist (1863) and of Ellis and Yeats (1893).


Keynes, Geoffrey L. , A Bibliography of William Blake (Grolier Club of New York, 1921) lists many and quotes some early printed reviews and comments.