

From

The Coleridge Bulletin

The Journal of the Friends of Coleridge
New Series 28 (NS) Winter 2006

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<http://www.friendsofcoleridge.com/Coleridge-Bulletin.htm>

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The Traveller in the Evening: The Last Works of William Blake

(Oxford University Press, 2003.)

by Morton D. Paley

IN HIS MANY learned monographs, the predominant foci of which have been Coleridge and Blake, Morton Paley has enabled his readers both to make intelligible sense of rather unruly topics (as in his recent study of millenarianism) and also to draw out potentially transformational ideas from previously neglected fields. *The Traveller in the Evening* belongs to the second category but its achievements are greater than either of his earlier forays into neglected corners of Coleridge studies. If we worried little about the portraits of Coleridge before Paley, and if his study of Coleridge's late poetry served as a welcome primer for the seemingly random variety found in the Bollingen *Poetical Works*, Morton Paley argues that the last works of William Blake are more central to his achievement. Most have been long available—not least through the remarkable online Blake archive—but they have been passed over without due attention. *The Traveller in the Evening* remedies this, suggesting that any attempt to read Blake's entire career as a product of his wrestling with an imaginative system whose summa lies in *Jerusalem* is at best deceitful. Those who have denied the import of his last years, seeing that work of 1820 as a final, but exhausting, masterpiece, will have much to contemplate here. A critic who seems at times unable to admit the counter-argument, Paley is persuasive as he makes the case for this last period. In so doing, he contributes to a long overdue reassessment of the 1820s, a time of intense literary society and marked developments in visual culture. As he at last began to be recognised as an idiosyncratic genius, Blake was significant to both, this last period of his life being especially concerned with producing visual art that negotiated the relationship between the canonical literary text and its imagined representation in illustration. Paley's book is therefore of real value to those interested in visual culture during the late Romantic period, while also transforming any understanding of Blake's engagement with the intellectual culture of the time. As a guide, Paley is scrupulously learned if occasionally guilty of allowing his rich awareness of local detail to obscure a sense of concise argument. The theoretically-minded may charge him excessively with this, but there is much here for which all readers must be grateful since these are complex, peculiar late works, revealing a spirit of continuing intellectual and artistic challenge, whose genesis Paley amply illuminates.

The illustrations to Thornton's third edition of Virgil's *Pastorals* are a particular case in point and it is this with which Paley begins. Of the 117 pages of small woodcuts and 230 engravings that enliven the edition, seventeen are by Blake and the work is known today for these alone, if at all. In part, Blake's task was tedious and unappealing, as he produced engraved heads of Virgil

himself, Augustus, Julius Caesar and Agrippa, historical figures for whom he felt antipathy. And indeed a certain double-mindedness conditions the project as a whole. Blake felt uneasy about the value of classical education, and the place of Thornton's richly illustrated book within his oeuvre is hence complicated. Still, Paley contends convincingly that the task of illustration was not undertaken under duress but was rather an opportunity that enabled him to revisit earlier engagements with the genre. He clearly knew Virgil's first *Eclogue*, as an annotation to Thornton's *Lord's Prayer* makes clear, and it is in the illustrations to Ambrose Philips' Virgilian imitations that the ambivalence of Blake's thinking about the pastoral tradition becomes apparent. Paley reminds us of the presence of pastoral motifs in Blake's earlier work and points to the way in which a disturbing collision between reality and the conventions of the mode reoccurs in the often-captivating images that were created for this commission. Paley has interesting things to say about both Blake's technique and the interpretative evidence of material lost when his blocks were cut down for final printing. His overall suggestion in summary is that the nineteenth-century interpretation of these illustrations, exemplified by Samuel Palmer who was not alone in celebrating them as among Blake's greatest achievements and who saw in them a rural charm that lent English Christian weight to pagan subject-matter, was simply blind to the darkness of Blake's vision. The images, even the beautiful frontispiece to *Eclogue I*, display a certain malaise that emerges from the play of light and shadow, a product of the careful application of Blake's unorthodox wood engraving procedure. The dramatic effect, achieved with such remarkable economy in the Colinet and Thenot series, suggests that while Blake was bound by Philips' text in real terms, he nevertheless wrested a degree of psychological complexity and emotional ambiguity from the subject matter. It is a delicately ambivalent mode of the pastoral, even if Paley thankfully stops short of suggesting that Blake's illustrations are angrily political. Indeed, the illustrations to Thornton's *Virgil* force one to ask whether Blake remained the prophet of radical opposition into this late period or was rather one concerned less with the active yoking of art and politics than has been trumpeted, a pragmatist even, prepared to take on beautifully risky commissions, and one for whom social concerns remained the matter of art even and indeed only if aesthetic excellence could be the business of their realization.

Blake struggled with his classical learning, a prodigious element in his development as an artist but one that he rejected nowhere more obviously than in the earlier *Descriptive Catalogue*, which includes some of his most sensitive painting of the period. There he proclaims the priority of Hebrew art over the supposed copies that are classical forms. A lesser-known but arguably more important work is *Yah & his two Sons Satan & Adam*, which readers will know better as Blake's extraordinary late rendition of the *Laocöon*, the subject of Paley's subsequent chapter. This is a terrific piece of research that traces the developed interest in that image throughout the Romantic period, beginning with the famous responses of Winckelmann and Lessing. Blake's own

engagement with the sculpture dates back at least as far as 1815, when he produced two drawings and an engraving of the group for John Flaxman. The great representation of 1826 complete with its frantic aphorisms is, for Paley, one of the most remarkable of pieces of evidence that we have for Blake's late views on "art, the imagination, the divine and the human, and empire" (57). An interesting conjecture is that Blake may have known the responses of either Goethe or A. W. Schlegel, both of which were translated into English. The latter is known to Coleridgeans since it forms part of John Black's 1815 translation of the *Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, but the former is less familiar, appearing as "Observations on the Laocoon" in the *Monthly Magazine* of 1799. Paley offers the slightly tentative claim that Blake may have known the essay since he had himself offered a letter to the Magazine in 1800 in support of George Cumberland's proposals for a national gallery. Although the letter remained unpublished, a copy of it, transcribed for Cumberland by Blake, does exist and Paley suggests that the latter would have found himself sympathetic to Goethe's attempts to universalize the statue. In any case, he clearly did discover in his reactions to the work powerfully ambivalent feelings about classical sculpture. Subverting one of the classical world's greatest artistic icons, one that stood reputedly in the palace of Titus, Blake transforms the *Laocoön* into a statement of the inauthenticity of all imperial culture, in the process attacking the aesthetics of empire with the suggestion that it relies upon the copying of past forms. In this case, Rome's cultural mandarins are "the successors to the 'Spoilers' of the Old Testament," (99) and in fixing upon this most canonical of images, the aging Blake can be said to have lost none of his fire for radical aesthetic engagement even if the product of his iconoclasm is one of his most compelling and beautiful images.

A subsequent commission, Blake's illustrations for Dante's *Divine Comedy*, forms the matter of Paley's next chapter, the longest and most developed in the book. Once again, this project was not one to which Blake turned merely out of the need for commercial employment but was rather the product of some years of engagement with a vital source text. And Paley again reckons with the extraordinary background reception of a figure caught in the process of becoming one of the central canonical presences in England's assimilation of European culture. He points out that Blake's interest coincides with the rise of Dante's reputation and it is hard for us to avoid the reflection that in this late, and supposedly quiet period of his life, Blake dwells deeply upon three of the greatest models of Western European cultural achievement. Paley traces the emergence of Dante in the English literary and visual imagination to a single episode, that concerning Ugolino, which is the subject of a number of translations and illustrations in the eighteenth century. Blake clearly knew Fuseli's rendition and he crossed swords with the critic of *Bell's Weekly* who found dark horror rather than sympathetic pathos in the painting. Blake wrote to the *Monthly Magazine* of Fuseli's Ugolino as "a man of wonder and admiration," who amply shows the quality of sublimity that Hazlitt found so lacking, when writing in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, about a previous version by

Joshua Reynolds. Paley points out that Blake's earlier attempt at the episode in the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* achieved none of this but when, for Linnell, he returned to the *Divine Comedy* after 1824, his work was of a wholly different order. His 102 drawings and seven engravings, predominantly of *Inferno*, are often extraordinary and although Paley suggests that Blake's project was a failure in terms greater than merely those of its complete realization—the images often fail to describe what is actually going on in the text itself—his own chapter is a generous act of ekphrasis that brings the images to life, even if it says relatively little about the specifics of the commission itself.

The comprehensive final chapter of Paley's study deals, appropriately, with a series of endeavours that saw Blake return creatively to the Bible. There are five important works crowning a lifetime's close engagement with religious scripture, of which the deceptively simple *Everlasting Gospel* is a new manuscript poem that Blake left unfinished and without illustrations. Paley follows David Erdman's reconstruction of this work and provides a lengthy close reading that aims to reveal the work's Manichaean leanings through a vision of ongoing struggle between divine good and evil. A work of a very different cast, and Blake's last illuminated printing is *The Ghost of Abel* of 1822. This dramatic poem, addressed to Byron, whose own *Cain, A Mystery* had been published the previous year, shows Blake engaging keenly with contemporary literary culture and Paley speculates that his decision to return to dramatic form after an interval of almost forty years may have been prompted by a number of theatre visits in 1821. Ending on a note of redemption, *The Ghost of Abel* is a quieter work than *The Everlasting Gospel* and one that Blake made public, distributing the five printed copies among his friends. It remains, however, relatively unknown when compared to the extraordinary *Illustrations of the Book of Job*, of which Blake made 315 sets. Commentators from Gilchrist onwards have agreed that these show Blake at the height of his powers as an engraver, and Paley expends a good deal of energy explaining his method of working, and attempting to reconcile the beauty of the images with the ferocity of the Biblical narrative. Paley concludes that Blake avoided the dilemma of "how the children and servants could [...] be destroyed and then replaced so that God could in effect win a bet with Satan" (260) by representing the subject as a series of "intrapsychic events." He decides that whatever the complexities of the original narrative, this is nevertheless one project in which Blake achieves accessible success with the results passing "into the general consciousness of our culture." I am not sure whether this is still the case, however, and this particular part of the book could certainly have done with more widespread illustration. This said, however, Paley's monograph is a marvellous resource, its final sections dealing with the unfinished projects to illustrate *Genesis* (for Linnell) and the *Book of Enoch*, and the annotations to the Lord's Prayer—his last thoughts on the subject of the Bible. Much of this is serious and difficult stuff. A short appendix at the end, however, reminds the reader that Blake had a playful side and attends to the bizarre visionary heads that he enjoyed drawing over the last decade of his life.