

1959

Blake, Bacon, Dante, and Sir Geoffrey Keynes

Robert F. Gleckner
Wayne State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism>

Recommended Citation

Gleckner, Robert F. (1959) "Blake, Bacon, Dante, and Sir Geoffrey Keynes," *Criticism*: Vol. 1: Iss. 3, Article 7.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol1/iss3/7>

Book Reviews

ROBERT F. GLECKNER*

Blake, Bacon, Dante, and Sir Geoffrey Keynes

The Complete Writings of William Blake, ed. Geoffrey Keynes. London: Nonesuch; New York: Random House, 1957. Pp. xv + 936. \$12.50.

One of the outstanding features of the recent Blake Bicentenary was the publication by the Nonesuch Press of Sir Geoffrey Keynes' completely revised edition of *The Complete Writings of William Blake*. Designed by Francis Meynell, beautifully produced by William Clowes and Sons on specially made paper, the book itself is an impressive achievement; at the same time it makes available to a wide public for the first time a complete variorum text with notes. To praise the work as indispensable to readers and students of Blake, then, would be to labor the obvious. Of greater interest to us here are the differences between this edition and Sir Geoffrey's earlier three-volume edition (Nonesuch Press, 1925). These differences may be discussed under three major headings: (1) additions to the Blake canon made since 1925, including further deciphering of Blake's manuscript deletions; (2) revisions of Keynes' earlier readings and datings; (3) omissions of material, especially illustrations, included in the three-volume edition, which helped to make that monumental work, in Keynes' own words, "a tribute to Blake's genius which has not been superseded."

Such a comparison, I hasten to admit, is unfair. Even so the present edition is presented as definitive and, despite its "popular" form, will be used not only by the general reader but also by the scholar, critic, and student. It is to all of these that the following comments are directed.

The additions to the Blake canon include, among a number of minor items, Blake's marginalia in Bacon's *Essays* and in Henry Boyd's translation of Dante's *Inferno*, an advertisement of *A Descriptive Catalogue* of Blake's exhibition of his drawings and new-style frescoes, and several letters (all but one of which appeared in 1956 in Keynes' *The Letters of William Blake*). In the *Essays Moral, Economical and Political* Bacon, as we know, was not particularly concerned with art or artists. But in Blake's annotations he is judged, as Blake judged all men, as an artist and a Christian. "A Poet, a Painter, a Musician, an Architect," Blake wrote in *The Laocoön*, "the Man Or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian." And if "The Whole Business of Man Is The Arts" (*The Laocoön*),

* Robert F. Gleckner, assistant to the editor of this journal, is the author of *The Piper and the Bard*, a study of William Blake recently published by Wayne State University Press.

Bacon's business, however moral, economic, and political it was, was also surely "the arts."

In his copy of Reynolds' *Discourses*, we recall, Blake announced that he had read Burke, Locke, and Bacon "when very Young"; and his later (1808) reading of Reynolds confirmed his opinion (which seldom needed confirming) that along with Newton all of these men were deserving of his "Contempt & Abhorrence. . . . They mock Inspiration & Vision. Inspiration & Vision was then, & now is, & I hope will always Remain, my Element, my Eternal Dwelling place; how can I then hear it Contemned without returning Scorn for Scorn?" His somewhat blind scorn for Reynolds is well known, as well as his contempt for Newton and Locke, who are immortalized throughout Blake's works as the symbols of "single vision," blindness, the nadir of the imaginative hierarchy. It is not surprising then that Bacon was welcomed into this fold with great fanfare.

Although Blake's copy of *The Advancement of Learning* (the book he says he annotated) has not as yet turned up, his comments on the *Essays* leave little doubt as to Bacon's position in Blake's cosmos—where he joins not only the above-mentioned figures, but also (as per the Bacon annotations) Caesar, Queen Elizabeth, Machiavelli, Pontius Pilate, Mammon, Epicurus, Lucretius, Herod, Caiaphas, King James, and "The devil's arse." This list is notable in itself for the scope of Blake's angry thought, but it is particularly interesting as further evidence that in all of Blake's thinking religion, politics, and art were of the same cloth. Bacon's great error was to see them as separate: "If what Bacon says Is True, what Christ says Is False. If Caesar is Right, Christ is Wrong both in Politics & Religion." This, written on the half-title page of the *Essays*, has all the arrogant assurance we have come to expect of Blake. But in the next few pages it is fascinating to watch him battle to sustain that assurance—through doubts, hopes, and fears (which led him in the same year to write in Bishop Watson's *Apology for The Bible*: "To defend the Bible in this year 1798 would cost a man his life"; "I have been commanded from Hell not to print this, as it is what our Enemies wish"). After his initial pontification in Bacon's pages, then, Blake is "astonish'd how such Contemptible Knavery & Folly as this . . . can ever have been call'd Wisdom." But, on second thought, "perhaps . . . all Men of Sense have despised the Book as Much as I do"—and boldly he signs this confession, "Per William Blake." With such support from "men of sense," eleven pages later he asserts grandly: "Every Body Knows that this is Epicurus and Lucretius." Then immediately he worries, for "Every Body" also "says that it is Christian Philosophy; how is this Possible?" Answer: "Every Body must be a Liar & deciever." Then the logical, angry, Blakean conclusion: "But Every Body does not do this, But The Hirelings of Kings & Courts who make themselves Every Body & Knowingly propagate Falshood."

All the annotations to Bacon follow logically upon these two axioms: (1) Bacon has single vision and sees things separately, whereas in reality (i. e. imagination) "Christianity is Civil Business Only. There is & can Be No Other to Man: what Else Can Be? Civil is Christianity or Religion or whatever is Humane [i. e. Human]." (2) Bacon is an "Every Body." What he "calls Lies is Truth itself" and besides he "put an End to Faith." His altar is supported by, in Bacon's own words, "the four pillars of government . . . (which are religion, justice, counsel, and treasure)." As to Bacon's opinions on art, Blake clearly believes his first error was in writing essays purporting to deal only with moral, economic, and political

problems.
giving us
Bacon ad
Blake reco
what Foll
or Art"
are in his
Annihilate
"Such v
understan
for Dante
Inferno th
his Transl
Me that M
tors, but I
concludes,
annotations
to Reynol
Titian, Cor
There was
disturbed
read Reyn
Reynolds a
art. Contr
sufferer in
(which is
then, that
to vindicate
for Keynes
least two p
did he appr
his approva
pathetic). I
to support t
in Dante is
Translator."
Blake retrea
tion is Blak
mately mor
Very Satan
wine bibber.
pendent & V
for Blake th
Blake class
in these Hi
would be nc
a novel or t
In the fol
Dante is res

problems. To rectify this Blake often reads the essays as if they were on art—giving us a preview some ten years earlier of his attack on Reynolds. Thus when Bacon advises in the essay “Of Great Place” that man imitate the best examples, Blake retorts: “Here is nothing of Thy own Original Genius, but only Imitation: what Folly!” “Bacon’s Business,” as Blake asserts later, “is clearly not Intellect or Art” for to him “Intellectual Arts [are] Unmanly. Poetry, Painting, Music are in his opinion Useless & so they are for Kings & Wars & shall in the End Annihilate them.”

“Such was Bacon: Stupid Indeed!” Blake concludes; and in his terms we can understand. But his inclusion of Dante in this company is more difficult to see, for Dante is an artist. Still we find in Blake’s copy of Boyd’s translation of the *Inferno* this angry, confused, ungrammatical annotation: “Dante was a Fool or his Translator was Not: That is, Dante was Hired or Tr. was Not. It appears to Me that Men are hired to Run down Men of Genius under the Mask of Translators, but Dante gives too much Caesar; he is not a Republican.” In fact, Blake concludes, “Dante was an Emperor’s, a Caesar’s Man.” These newly discovered annotations are thus of great interest to us when compared with the annotations to Reynolds, who along with Flaxman, Cromek, Stothard, Rubens, Rembrandt, Titian, Corregio, Gainsborough, Veronese and others was “hired to Depress art.” There was no swerving in Blake’s condemnation of these, but he is obviously disturbed at what he feels compelled to say of Dante. When he finally came to read Reynolds’ *Discourses* it is clear that he already disapproved mightily of Reynolds as a painter. Ergo, everything in the *Discourses* must be contrary to art. Contrariwise he came to Boyd’s work ready to embrace Dante as a fellow sufferer in the cause of art, only to be thrown off seriously by Boyd’s introduction (which is the only part of the book Blake annotated). It is regrettable indeed, then, that Blake did not see fit to go on and annotate the *Inferno* itself, perhaps to vindicate Dante from Blakean damnation. Obviously he read it very carefully, for Keynes reports that he made several corrections in the text. There are at least two possible reasons for Blake’s ignoring the inviting margins. (1) So highly did he approve of the *Inferno* as art that he believed it unnecessary to proclaim his approval on paper (Blake’s annotations are almost always violently anti-pathetic). Indeed Blake’s own note at the end of Boyd’s introductory essay tends to support this possibility: “Every Sentiment & Opinion as well as Every Principle in Dante is in these Preliminary Essays Controverted & proved Foolish by his Translator.” (2) Disturbed by Boyd’s references to Dante’s political activities Blake retreated in despair from a somewhat tarnished idol. Related to this suggestion is Blake’s boldly confident contradiction of Boyd’s suggestion that art is ultimately moral: “the grandest Poetry is Immoral, the Grandest characters Wicked, Very Satan—Capanius, Othello a murderer, Prometheus, Jupiter, Jehovah, Jesus a wine bibber. Cunning & Morality are not Poetry but Philosophy; the Poet is Independent & Wicked; the Philosopher is Dependent & Good.” I should guess that for Blake the *Inferno* was “immoral” in this sense, as was Homer—for clearly Blake classed these two (and Shakespeare) together: “If Homer’s merit was only in these Historical combinations & Moral sentiments [as Boyd suggested] he would be no better than Clarissa.” (This incidentally is Blake’s only reference to a novel or to Richardson that I know of.)

In the following twenty-five years, however, Blake’s initial confusion about Dante is resolved, and in the few notes Blake scribbled (about 1825-1827) on

his illustrations to the *Divina Commedia* Dante is castigated in terms with which we are by now familiar: "Every Thing in Dante's Comedia shews That for Tyrannical Purposes he has made This World the Foundation of All, & the Goddess Nature Mistress; Nature [later deleted] is his Inspirer & not . . . the Holy Ghost."

In addition to these major additions to the Blake canon there are the less obviously important additions of newly deciphered manuscript material. Ten lines of deletions are added to *An Island in the Moon*, for example, though I must confess that none are very helpful in understanding more of that cryptic early work. Item 27 in the Manuscript Notebook is now unscrambled to read:

How came pride in Man
From Mary it began . . .

thus creating an interesting foreshadow of Blake's picture of Christ and Mary some twenty-five years later in *The Everlasting Gospel*. Item 63 in the same Notebook is now printed for the first time, a reference perhaps to the Decalogue and its "Thou-shalt-nots" which Blake so condemned in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and a number of the *Songs of Experience*. Several legends that Blake inscribed in the so-called "Small Book of Designs" and "Large Book of Designs" are newly printed, and they are provokingly unlike mere titles to the prints, more like meaningful glosses on their respective texts in *The Book of Urizen*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. A nine-line deletion toward the end of the Eighth Night of *The Four Zoas* strengthens the Christian implications of the poem and "Religion's" erroneous interpretation of Christ's burial and resurrection. A few other additions, briefly, are Blake's uncharacteristic use of the word "phallic" (p. 420); a rare note on the Biblical Fall inscribed on the back of a watercolor (p. 441); a line, written on the back of a *Milton* sketch (p. 535), related significantly not only to Milton's bathing in the "Waters of Life" but also to the difficult lyrics, "The Little Girl Lost," "The Little Girl Found," and "The Chimney Sweeper" (*Songs of Innocence*), and to plate three of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*; a line in the Notebook which shows Blake's occasional interest, at least, in straining the language in a way which would have added immensely to Joyce's already strong attraction to him: "The Cunning-sures [connoisseurs] & the aim-at-yours [amateurs]";¹ an added reference to portrait-landscape painters in the Wordsworth annotations, thus linking Wordsworth's "limited" conception of the imagination to the total misconceptions of art represented for Blake by Reynolds, Gainsborough, Rembrandt, and Salvator Rosa.

Of Keynes's revised readings there are some one hundred of interest (excluding punctuation changes), most of them small, some substantial (as in "Then she bore pale desire," *An Island in the Moon*, "The Description of A Vision of the Last Judgment," and the *Public Address*). Some of the more important smaller revisions are as follows. *King Edward III*, lines 236, 292: "her" changed to "his" to describe "Reason," hence paving the way for the birth of Blake's great villain, Urizen. "The Tyger": a late pen alteration recorded, which is an

¹ See also Keynes, p. 549: "If you mean to Please Every body you will / Menny wouwer both Bunglishness & skill"; and Keynes, p. 550: "When you look at a picture, you always can see / If a Man of Sense has Painted he. / Then never flinch, but keep up a Jaw / About freedom & Jenny suck awa' [je ne sais quoi]."

interesting reversion to an earlier more conservative draft of the poem (see M. K. Nurmi, *PMLA*, LXXI, 669-685). Notebook, pp. 553-554: seven lines from "To Venetian Artists" are moved to the end of the preceding poem, which makes sense now for the first time.

Significant major revisions are those in the two early manuscript pieces mentioned above, "Then she bore" still something less than definitive (see D. V. Erdman, *BNYPL*, LXII, 191-201), *An Island* a great improvement textually over the 1925 version. This latter is also dated now considerably earlier (1784-1785) than we had heretofore guessed, a change with possible ramifications for any study of *Songs of Innocence*, since three of these songs appeared, in slightly different versions, in *An Island*. Was Blake writing other songs as well throughout the period 1784-1789? Had the idea of a song series occurred to him that early? Do the seeds of his gradually evolving aesthetic-religious-political system lie, more than we thought, in this satire and in the *Poetical Sketches*?

Along with these valuable revisions, however, are several puzzling changes—and some errors. "Leave, O leave me" (p. 61) has no "me" in manuscript. Page 100, line 12: "frighted" is changed wrongly to "frightened." Page 166, item 12, line 9: "It" is a misprint for "I"; line 6: "by" is a misprint for "my." Page 169, item 17, line 14: "Clog'd" is changed to "Clos'd" though the former is clear in the manuscript; line 20: "plowman" is misprinted for "ploughman." Page 173, item 26, lines 5-8: in the manuscript this stanza appears not second but to the left and slightly above the first stanza. Page 239: plate 4 should be indicated to begin with line 15 ("The shrill . . ."). Page 267, line 119: this line, undeleted earlier, is now deleted without comment by Keynes. Page 268, lines 147-160: these lines were almost completely deleted in the earlier edition and are now undeleted (with consequent improvement in sense, but again Keynes does not comment). Page 286, line 245: the words marked as "erased and illegible" were read by Keynes in 1925 as "Circled in infinite Orb." Page 290, line 399: there is an unaccountable omission of the words "his house" from this line. Page 363, line 248: "out[t]braving" is misprinted for "ou[t]braving." Page 420, lines 57, 58: a curious repetition of a line not even included in 1925. Page 469: Discourse VI should be indicated to begin with "Imitation." Page 725: the first two lines are part of the illustration on page 724 and do not belong in the text.

These are perhaps insignificant, but they do constitute enough evidence of error to lead us to look forward to the findings of a group of Blake scholars and critics who are preparing a careful corrigenda list and ultimately a critical concordance to Blake's works.

More serious problems than these exist in the realm of punctuational emendation and omissions of graphic work included in the earlier three-volume edition. In order to make his text "a reader's text" Keynes has greatly simplified the task of the reader by emending generously Blake's chaotic punctuation, especially the lack of quotation marks and the profusion of strange dots where we normally expect a comma, semi-colon, colon, or no punctuation at all. While doing this service for the reader, however, Keynes has occasionally done violence to Blake—and hence, indirectly, to that same reader's understanding of the poetry.² That

² D. V. Erdman has already remarked, for example, upon the dangerous guesses about parts of a dialogue at the end of *An Island in the Moon* (PQ, XXXVII, 144) and upon Keynes' erroneously attributing to Los parts of authorial narrative,

Keynes himself is eminently aware of this particular danger is attested to by his own change in *The Four Zoas*, page 338, lines 201-207, originally printed as narrative, now put in quotation marks. Still, in the same poem, page 363, lines 252-255, Keynes inserts quotation marks around a passage that surely is narrative like the rest of its context. In the Notebook, page 415, these emendations give rise to other difficulties, for it is not at all clear whether the quotation marks here are Blake's or Keynes', whether the lines are spoken by the first person narrator, the "spectre," or the "emanation." Finally, in Book I of *Milton* a bard delivers a long harangue to the Sons of Albion (plates 3-13) which Keynes does not indicate by quotation marks, and yet at the end of plate 13 (p. 495) the same bard's concluding words are enclosed by quotation marks.

Such a manipulation of punctuation, especially in manuscript material, constitutes an interpretation of meaning, often a meaning not surely Blake's. Similarly to emend the punctuation in the engraved works is to discount the labor and care Blake devoted to these works and adjudge his punctuation "unintentional" or "accidental." We do not emend *Finnegans Wake* or an "unfinished" Rodin or a fragment of a madrigal; shouldn't the reader of Blake be given the opportunity to read and study the works as Blake wrote and/or engraved them? Facsimiles are available to be sure, but good ones are rare and prohibitively expensive. It is here in such a work as Keynes' handsome, easily obtainable, popular form that we shall come to know Blake, his meaning, his craftsmanship, his eccentric punctuation, his puzzling prosodic experiments.

One final comment, a note of regret at the obviously unavoidable loss of the illustrations used in the earlier three-volume edition. A few line blocks are included because, as Keynes explains, they contain words as part of the design, and the emblem book, *The Gates of Paradise*, has been completely reproduced because "the designs are essential to an understanding of the text" (p. xiv). But these seem to me somewhat curious justifications for including, in general, inferior examples of Blake's graphic work. The words on the plates used lose nothing in print, and we should have benefited more from a few choice "sample" illustrations instead. And if the designs are essential to *The Gates of Paradise*, as they are, a good case could be made for their being essential to understanding several other works as well. Real confusion results from the loss of the *Milton* plates. Keynes has helpfully renumbered the lines of text, as he has in the other illuminated books, but the textual plates are also renumbered with no indication of where the illustrated plates fit into the sequence. Nor are we told what the illustrations consist of. Surely Keynes might have indicated both the position of the illustrations in the total sequence of plates and even, perhaps, added a brief note in the proper place about the subject of the omitted design (an arrangement used, oddly, only for plate 26 of *Jerusalem* and plate 36 of *Milton*).

One cannot have everything of course, and here indeed, despite these shortcomings, we must be grateful to Keynes and the Nonesuch Press for once again supplying us so attractively with so much of "the astonishing and varied qualities" of Blake's mind and art (p. xv).

giving to Los a speech by the sons of Urizen, and assigning to Los the beginning of a speech by Enitharmon (*Prophet Against Empire*, 246).