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The Temerity of Innocence¹. Exploring the World of Blake Scholarship 1951-2016²

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Abstract

Article is devoted to the author's creative work as a Blake scholar. The paper includes author's biography notes on the history of searching for Blake's originals and editing of his editions. During his life the author visited every Blake library and art gallery and museum and every known Blake collector, summing it up in a series of books and articles. The reader will find some interesting stories of discovering Blake's works. The article may be interesting for any specialist in study of literature and especially of Blake.

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Keywords

William Blake, Blake's bibliography, bibliographical discoveries, Blake scholarship.

1 Dedicated to my father:
sequiturque patrem non passibus æquis
Virgil, *Aeneid*, ii, 724.

2 This is a kind of sequel to (Bentley 1995), which describes encounters with Sir Geoffrey Keynes, Paul Mellon, Lessing Rosenwald, Major S.V. Christie-Miller, Dr David McC. McKell, Mary Barham Johnson, and Joan Linnell Ivimy, whom I therefore omit here.

Introduction. Childhood and youth

When I was a child, scholarship was the effervescent air I breathed.

I grew up in a world of books and scholars. My father was a Shakespeare scholar who during my childhood was working on *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage* in seven volumes (1941-1968). Men like David Nichol-Smith, David Daiches, and Herbert Davis were to me grown-up guests in our house and family friends. It was only many years later that I learned – and cared – that they were men of towering scholarship.

At the age of six I thought that the name of Mr Five-Cent-Smith was hilariously funny; at the age of nine I played chess with David Daiches in the back-seat of our car on the (to me) endless drive from Chicago to Pasadena³; and at the age of twenty-five I faced Herbert Davis as one of the two examiners of my Oxford D.Phil. thesis. When I was twelve I won a bet with Jean Robertson (later Bromley), then a young research fellow at the Huntington Library, which entitled me to all the ice-cream I could eat at one sitting at the Blue Windmill in Pasadena, which had thirty-seven flavours of ice cream. I was just squaring my elbows and getting down to serious work on my seventh order when my mother showed up and aborted the proceedings. I still think Jean owes me thirty servings of ice cream. Perhaps she had this in mind when as editor of the *Review of English Studies* she accepted an essay by me [Bentley, 1956] before I had finished my dissertation.

As I grew up, so did my understanding and respect for scholarship grow. How could anyone not love scholarship? My friends played baseball and listened to the Hit Parade, and so did I, but the grown-up world I knew was a world of scholarship.

All the scholars I knew were approachable – as guests of my parents they had to be⁴ – and I assumed that all scholars were approachable. Of course some might be grumpy and some might be busy, but if they were scholars they loved scholarship,

3 Many years later David confessed to me that he had found these chess-games very wearing to the spirit. "You see, I like to win, but if I did you cried and all the rest of the car silently reproached me. So I had to lose game after game to you. It was an heroic sacrifice to keep the car peaceful".

4 When I was 14, Ged's University of Chicago colleague Arthur Friedman invited me to spar with him using my boxing gloves in the road behind our cottage at Dutch Boys Landing in Michigan. Through some fluke I knocked him out. Twelve years later, when I became Arthur's colleague at the University of Chicago, he used to introduce me as "Jerry Bentley who knocked me out once".

and if I could prove that I too was a scholar they would respond to the scholar, whatever they thought of the man still wet behind the ears.

When I was writing my undergraduate thesis on William Blake, I went to see the Blake originals in the Rare Book Room of the New York Public Library. There I had to fill in a form requiring me to identify my institution (Princeton) and to swear that I was not an M.A. candidate. I could do this without straining my conscience, for I was not an M.A. candidate; indeed, I never earned or worked for an M.A. I guess the New York Public Library feared an inundation if they opened the flood-gates to canaille such as M.A. students.

Years later, when I worked in the New York Public Library Rare Book Room as a certified, bedoctored, scholar, they were far more cautious. When I wanted to proof-read the text of their copy of Blake's *Milton* against the facsimile I carried with me and to record its watermarks and erasures, I was not allowed to touch the book. A librarian came and turned the leaf whenever I wished to see a fresh recto. This is not the best way to record watermarks.

When I applied to Merton College, Oxford, in 1952, my letter and transcript of course grade⁵ puzzled the admissions folk, who normally interviewed candidates. Fortunately one of my sponsors happened to dine in College with a Fellow of Merton, and he mentioned my application. He said my grades were good and my father distinguished and my future promising. This produced no response. He mentioned that I had run and rowed at Princeton. This produced a flicker of interest, for Merton was keen on rowing. He mentioned that I was 6' 2" and weighed 180 pounds. This produced distinct interest, and next day an acceptance was sent to me⁶. Apparently academic life was different in Oxford, where all letters addressed to me ended with "Esq."

My doctoral supervisor was H.M. Margoliouth, who had published a biography called *William Blake* (1951)⁷ and some ground-breaking essays on Blake's family

5 Princeton grades were from I to VII, which puzzled even North American institutions.

6 I was only on the Princeton crew one term before the coaches discovered that I was proposing both to row and to run on the Princeton teams, both of which compete in the spring. I was required to choose one sport and chose running.

7 "This little book combines in a curious way the excellent historical scholarship shown in Margoliouth's articles on Blake with a strong tendency to popular over-simpli[fi]cation, as in the statement that Blake was 'not so very far from being an orthodox Christian'" [Bentley, 1977, 865].

and his patron A.S. Mathew. He was then working on his edition of the first draft of *William Blake's Vala* (1956), so that he was the ideal supervisor for my proposed thesis-edition of the whole poem, *Vala* or *The Four Zoas*. We agreed that there was no conflict of interest here, and so we both found it.

As I was completing my doctoral work in the spring of 1956, I asked Mr Margoliouth if he would be willing to support my applications for jobs. He said, "Yes. To whom are you applying?"

I said I was writing to Harvard and Yale and Princeton and UCLA and Chicago and"

"But I don't know anyone at those places, and I'm unlikely to see them anyway. That will mean I'll have to write them letters, and that's a great many letters, and I should not know what to say in a letter."

"Well, I could type the letters for you if you like."

"Yes, but what should I say to those dons I don't know?"

"I could draft the letter for you."

"Well, that would certainly be convenient."

So I composed the letter, I don't think he looked at it, I made six copies of it which he duly signed, and it served its purpose.

A few years later his widow asked me if I would go through his papers and let her know if there was anything of importance in them – old lectures, letters received, and the like. I said, "Of course I should be happy to" and I did – and there I found the copy of his letter I had given him. I still have it – and a jolly good letter it is.

First books on Blake

When I finished my Oxford D.Phil. edition of *Vala* or *The Four Zoas*, I thought it would be nice to have it published, and, rather to my surprise, the Clarendon Press agreed to publish it – if I could find a subvention of, as I recall, £3,000⁸. This was an enormous sum, much more than my first year's salary as a teacher. I didn't know anyone with such sums to spare – I don't think it occurred to me to approach charitable foundations.

8 I hadn't known that Clarendon ever required subventions – indeed, I have not heard of another case in which they did, but then such information is not very public.

However, I reflected that Blake's works were very dear and that collectors of Blake must be both rich and Blake-loving. I therefore wrote an eleemosynary letter to every private collector of Blake's writings and pictures whose address I could discover, a wonderfully unprofessional way of going about such a thing.

Naturally I heard nothing from most of them, but on Christmas Eve of 1958 in London I received cable from Paul Mellon saying "Letter coming from my foundation" (I hadn't known he had a foundation, much less a number of foundations.) When the letter from The Pilgrim Trust arrived, it offered to provide half the subvention if I could find the other half elsewhere.

At least this was a start.

A little later I received a letter from Mr Rosenwald saying that he would provide the other half of the subvention if I would send him a copy of my contract with the Clarendon Press. This was easy, but when I sent the contract to Mr Rosenwald he replied, in effect, "This won't do. It does not provide royalties for you".

I explained my difficulty to Dan Davin⁹, the Secretary to the Delegates of the Clarendon Press, and he tactfully rewrote the contract specifying that I would receive royalties on all copies beyond the first thousand. Only he and I knew that only a thousand copies were being printed.

This satisfied Mr Rosenwald, and *Vala or The Four Zoas* was duly published as an elephant folio in 1963. Herbert Davis said to me, "Jerry, if you appear in your first publication in top hat and tails, what will you do for an encore?"

A few years later I wrote to Mr Davin saying that I needed a set of the *Dictionary of National Biography* published by Oxford, but that I couldn't afford the price of a new set. Could he supply me with a defective set or with a set in sheets which might cost rather less? Mr Davin replied that they never sold defective copies or copies in

9 In 1964, when my father and I were sharing a house and sabbatical leaves at Oxford, Dan Davin gave a party at the Press to celebrate many years of association between my father and the Clarendon Press, which had published *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage* [Bentley, 1941]. Dan made a speech about my father's lifetime of scholarship – and then, to my astonishment, he made a similar speech about me predicting a future of scholarship like my father's. Beth and Ged were very pleased. I was staggered.

On another occasion, Beth pointed out to Dan that *Vala or The Four Zoas* (Blake, 1963) used more paper than all seven volumes of *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage*.

sheets but that, as I needed the work, he was putting it in the post for me. Did I wish to pay for it or to have it charged against my royalties?

Naturally I said, "Charge it against royalties, please."

Searching for Blake worldwide

Blake's works are not common. There are more copies of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* than of any other of Blake's works, and there are only twenty-seven of them, each differently coloured and most of them in different page-orders. By comparison, there are ten times as many copies of the First Folio of Shakespeare and twice as many copies of the Gutenberg Bible. All Blake's works may appropriately be described as "rare".

A Blake collection does not have to have many books to make it a major collection. The Rosenwald Collection had twenty-six books written by Blake, the British Museum Print Room has seventeen, the Mellon collection had fourteen, and the Huntington Library has twelve. The ownership of just one copy of a book by Blake, or even just a page or two, raises you to high visibility on my radar screen.

I embarked on recording all known copies of Blake's writings,¹⁰ first to make a bibliography of them, which was called *Blake Books* (1977), and then to make an edition of them called *William Blake's Writings* (1978). Both were published by the Clarendon Press, without subventions – or royalties.

The enterprises required that I should make a minute examination of every known copy of William Blake's writings, page by page and comma by comma¹¹. We had to visit collections all round the world, from Washington and the Huntington Library and London and Oxford to Melbourne (Australia) and Auckland (New Zealand),

10 Not Blake's purely visual works which were being dealt with by Martin Butlin for his magisterial catalogue raisonné called *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake* (1981).

11 The dangers of trusting second-hand authorities is illustrated by the elaborately detailed records in the catalogues of *both* Northwestern University and Dartmouth College of the coloured copy of Young's *Night Thoughts* (1797) with Blake's engravings from the collections of W.E. Moss and Lessing J. Rosenwald. In fact, the Moss/Rosenwald copy is in the Library of Congress, and neither the Northwestern nor the Dartmouth copies is coloured.

with agreeable pauses in Paris, Cologne, Munich, Vienna, Geneva, and Tokyo¹². Such jauntings did not disagree with Beth and me. Indeed, we made excuses to pause en route in Bangkok and Taipei and Hong Kong and Delhi and Kabul and Teheran and Cairo, always going to libraries looking for Blake and usually giving lectures to provide a cover of respectability. As a matter of fact, the proofs for *Blake Books* were read while we were living in India for a year and were finished on a houseboat called The Floating Palace on Dal Lake in Srinagar, Kashmir.

In the course of these travels, we saw every Blake library and art gallery and museum and every known Blake collector. By 1977 we had seen Blake's originals in fifty-seven public collections and in thirty-six private libraries. Some of the Blake private collections were inherited and some were assembled at great sacrifice and some were bought with left-over small change. A few were in houses no grander than where we lived, a few were in baronial estates, and a few, such as those at Jenkintown and Upperville, were in buildings created just to house them. In every case, we were welcomed as scholars, and in many cases we left as friends.

Frequently we were welcomed because we could tell the owners, even in public institutions, things they did not know about their treasures. In two cases, I could tell a public museum that what they had shown me as a facsimile, worth perhaps \$50, was in fact an original worth, today, well over \$1,000,000¹³. In another case, I had to say that the book cherished as an original coloured by Blake had been printed after Blake's death by his disciple Frederick Tatham and was certainly not coloured by Blake. In another case I was contacted by a collector with a colour-printed copy of the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* to enquire into its bona fides. The owner proved to have been at my secondary school and university and to have admirably correct political views, but, alas! his copy of the *Marriage* proved to be incorrect; it was the excellent Camden Hotten facsimile [of 1868] which carries no statement that it is a reproduction.

Sometimes I could demonstrate that the order of the pages had been altered since the Blakes sewed it, and often I could show that no other copy had the pages

12 The technical term for such an enterprise is "boondoggle".

13 One was *Songs of Innocence* (Copy S) in the Cincinnati Art Museum, catalogued as a facsimile. When I went to see *Songs of Innocence* (Copy N), then in the library of St John's Seminary, Camarillo, California, I was brought a facsimile because the librarian couldn't find the original – indeed, didn't know they had two copies – and this would surely do as well.

arranged in the same order. On more than one occasion letters I wrote to the owners explaining what I thought was significant about their copies have been sold with the book as part of its record when it appeared later at auction.

In 1965 we went to the library of the University of Texas at Austin to see their small but important Blake collection: *Urizen* pl. 5, a letter from Blake, *Poetical Sketches* (Copy O), and *Songs of Innocence* (Copy O). As *Urizen* and *Songs of Innocence* were coloured by Blake and embodied the most intricate problems of recording the variants, I looked at those first, and then *Poetical Sketches* which is in conventional typography and rarely contains significant problems. The letter I left to the last, because Geoffrey Keynes had printed it in his edition of Blake, and all I had to do was to proofread the manuscript against the Keynes transcription and to record the watermark and the postmark and any unique features such as whether it was secured by a wafer or a wax seal.

I finished all the printed works and asked for the Blake letter. When this was brought to me, I looked in vain for the text in Keynes; it wasn't there. The letter had never been recorded before.

This was very exciting indeed! I transcribed the text, recorded the watermark and post-mark and wafer. Only then did I mention to the librarian that this was not the letter I had intended – as they had only one Blake letter I had given no more detail than that it was a Blake manuscript letter. At this they brought up the letter I had expected to see, and I recorded its details. And then I enquired where the previously unknown Blake letter had come from.

The letter had come from T.E. Hanley with a large collection of literary works, and the collection cost so much – rumour said over \$2,000,000 – that even Texas could not afford to pay so much money in one year. Consequently the collection was kept together in the storage stacks until the next part was paid for and could be brought up to public view. The new Blake letter had been in the section of not-yet-paid-for materials – but the book-runner who brought up the letter didn't understand this distinction. Technically Texas didn't own the first letter they had shown me, but they would next year.

Under Texas law, I believe, original unpublished manuscripts can be first published only by citizens of the Republic of Texas. However, of course Texas doesn't

own the copyright in the manuscripts. They can only require readers to sign an agreement that they will not print a previously unpublished manuscript work before they have been given permission to do so by the University of Texas. In my case, they had not asked me to sign such a statement because they hadn't known they were showing me an unpublished manuscript. We made a tacit agreement that I would publish the letter in my edition of Blake but that I would not there allude to the somewhat unusual circumstances in which I saw the letter.

Blake scholarship is not the same

In 1970 we went to Japan to work for three weeks at the National Diet Library and the Kyoto University Library, for there are more books and essays published about Blake in Japanese than in all other foreign languages combined. I wrote to all the Japanese Blake scholars whose addresses I could discover. One of these was Professor Kochi Doi of the University of Tokyo, who invited me to visit him in his office when we reached Tokyo.

I hadn't known then that the University of Tokyo is probably the most distinguished university in Japan or that Professor Doi was dean of the faculty. When we called on him, he asked politely about my undertaking and then introduced me to a man sitting quietly in the corner. "This is Professor James Hisao Kodama, who will work with you while you are in Tokyo." And after we had exchanged politenesses with Professor Kodama, Professor Doi said, "Your research assistant, Miss Keiko Aoyama, is waiting in the hall to meet you. May I ask her to come in?"

The world of Blake scholarship is not the same in Japan as it is in North America and Britain.

It is not the same in India either. When I was teaching at the University of Poona in 1975-1976, I received an agitated letter from Professor A.A. Ansari. He said he hadn't known I was in India, and he would like to invite me to a Blake conference which was taking place in a few weeks at his own institution, Aligarh Muslim University. I said of course I would do so, we settled details of topic and date, and in due course I arrived in Aligarh. There I discovered that there were only three papers scheduled – on three different days. I discussed this oddity with one of the other

speakers, Pilo Nanavutty, and we asked Professor Ansari if it might not be possible to compress the next two papers into one day. When this was readily agreed to, we enquired why the conference had been thus scheduled. Professor Ansari replied that the rest of the conference was to be held six months later, but as I would not be in India then he had arranged for the first portion to be given in February so that I could come.

The world of Blake scholarship is not the same in India either¹⁴.

Collectors and discoveries

Two of the most distinguished collectors whose Blake treasures I saw were E.M. Forster the novelist and Sir Anthony Blunt the great art historian – and, as was not then known, a member of the Cambridge Circus, the Fourth Man. Sir Anthony was very kind to or at least tolerant of me.

Alas! I never met Mr Forster, but I cherish a letter he sent me (19 February 1964) about the glorious copy of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (Copy W) with elaborate manuscript borders which he had inherited from his aunt. The volume was accompanied by a "sheet of nonsense-verses"¹⁵ ... My aunt thought, or perhaps liked to think, they were by Blake, but I know of no evidence". I like to think that this is a characteristically Forsterian sentiment.

I learned something of what it takes to be a great librarian from Charles Ryskamp, a friend at Princeton and then Director of the Pierpont Morgan Library and The Frick Collection in New York. Charles had an extraordinary gift in dealing with the rich and cultivated. He always, and without affectation, addressed them by their first names: "Lessing" for Lessing J. Rosenwald and "Paul" for Paul Mellon, whom I always

14 I have repeatedly sent by request essays to Indian journals, but I never receive acceptances or proofs. I only learn that they have been accepted when I receive a copy of the journal – and sometimes I do not receive the journal at all. One editor explained that his budget did not permit him to send copies overseas.

15 Forster's letter said: "The sheet of nonsense-verses has been lost. I never removed them myself, but they disappeared at some date between the describing of them [*by Geoffrey Keynes*] for the Census [1953] and the presentation of the volume by myself to the College" (King's College, Cambridge) in 1959. A.N.L. Munby suggested to me, probably in joke, that "Geoffrey probably whipped it."

thought of and addressed as Mr Rosenwald and Mr Mellon. At a black tie reception in 1971 to celebrate the donation to the Morgan of the major Blake collection of Mrs Landon K. Thorne and the publication of its catalogue [Blake, 1971], Charles kissed every female guest as she came in. This is far beyond my chutzpah. The only Blake collectors I kissed were our houseguests, chiefly Mary Barham Johnson and Joan Linnell Ivimy and Heather Howell, who owned Blake's Cottage in Felpham, Sussex.

I began my work on Blake with splendid ambitions about Blake's "Artistic Integrity" [Bentley, 1952] and arcane influences upon him [Bentley, 1954], but then I discovered the irresistible allure of rock-like (as I thought – and think) facts of biography and bibliography. I did not pursue such facts to prove my theses, about artistic integrity or influences on Blake; I discovered cornucopias of facts which then defined the argument. The British Museum (now Library) Department of Manuscripts, the British Museum Print Room, the Bodleian Library, the Fitzwilliam Museum were to me Tom Tiddler's Grounds where unnoticed gold and silver was to be picked up even by a neophyte like myself. And beyond these were other realms of gold, in less conspicuous public collections such as the Buckinghamshire Public Record Office and the Bristol Central Library.¹⁶ And beyond even these are private collections.

One of the nicest, indeed one of the most charismatic, folk we met in the Blake world was the industrialist Peter Parker. Once I asked him which of Blake's commercial book engravings he owned, and he replied, "You'll have to ask my son. He's the Blake enthusiast in the family, and he's made a list of them."

I've never seen the list, but years later, in 1999, at the sale of the Betsy Whitney Cushing estate in New York, Beth and I went to the pre-sale viewing of *The First Book of Urizen* (Copy E) which had disappeared in 1920 and which sold for \$2,300,000 [see Bentley, 1999]. There we met John Windle, the most prominent Blake bookseller, who brought up a gentleman and said, "Jerry, here's someone I'd like you to meet. Jerry, this is Alan Parker".

I said politely, "How do you do?" but didn't register beyond that – Parker is not an uncommon name.

16 There is certainly more undiscovered gold to be picked up in public collections. One of the more recent is the discovery in the Public Records Office of Blake's apprentice Thomas Owen [Bentley, 2010a].

Beth kicked my ankle and said quietly "Peter Parker's son!"

And John Windle whispered, "Ask him if he owns any Blake."

When I did, Mr Parker replied, "Well, a few years ago I acquired Blake's water-colours for *Pilgrim's Progress*."

This was sensational information, for when sold in 1996 the very important Bunyan drawings went to a British collector whom I had not been able to identify.¹⁷

After I had exclaimed a bit, John said quietly, "Ask him if he owns any other Blakes."

When I did, Mr Parker confessed that he also had the very important Large Blake-Varley Sketchbook.

This too was sensational, for the Blake-Varley Sketchbook, with many of Blake's Visionary Heads of the illustrious and notorious dead, had been sold to a still-unidentified collector in 1998¹⁸.

Greatly daring, I asked, "May I name you in print as their owner?" and Mr Parker replied "Of course".

What a blessing to have friends like John Windle – and Alan Parker.

Conclusion

Almost all the scholars and collectors whom I have innocently asked for advice or assistance have been happy, or at least willing, to do so. And no one bit me. The worst treatment I experienced was to be ignored.¹⁹ If this is the worst to fear, why not try?

Of course if one appears in print one is likely to incur reviews. If I had to choose my favourites among comments on my work as a scholar, I would give

a) "Bentley is right, but for the wrong reasons" [Viscomi, 1993];

b) "An ingenious suggestion, though wrong" [Bentley, 2010b];

c) "This is good, but you can do better, as my supervisor said about a chapter of my thesis"²⁰.

17 I had seen the Bunyan drawings when they were still in the Frick Collection.

18 I had seen the large Blake-Varley sketchbook on loan at the Tate Gallery.

19 Only one collector ignored me entirely, and only one asked for verification of my bona fides.

20 Comment by Karen Mulhallen, perhaps about a draft of [Bentley, 1984].

Today, when I must seem as venerable as Sir Geoffrey seemed to me, I receive frequent requests from young scholars for information or courage and encouragement. To these I always reply, even if they enquire by e-mail. And if the querist shows that she or he is a scholar, I reply as a scholar with what facts I have. Many of the querists are never heard from again. But some, like Angus Whitehead and Mark Crosby and Keri Davies, who only began to work on Blake within the last ten or fifteen years, bid fair to surpass their masters.

May they enjoy their life in scholarship as much as I have enjoyed mine.

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Безрассудство невинности. Из истории исследований Блейка (1951-2016)

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Аннотация

Статья посвящена работе автора как исследователя наследия Блейка. Она включает в себя мемуары автора, в том числе истории поисков оригиналов работы Блейка и опыт редактирования изданий. За свою жизнь автор посетил каждую библиотеку, художественную галерею и музей, каждого известного коллекционера, у которых хранились оригиналы Блейка, подводя итоги своей работы в серии книг и статей. В статье описаны интересные случаи обнаружения оригиналов Блейка, в том числе ранее не описанных. Статья может быть интересна для исследователей литературы, в особенности наследия Блейка.

Для цитирования в научных исследованиях

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Ключевые слова

Уильям Блейк, библиография Блейка, библиографические открытия, исследования Блейка.