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Portraits of

Willm. Blake

at the ages of 25 & 69 years.

Born November 28th, 1757. Died August 12, 1827.

Etch: 69.
William Blake: A Literary Life

John Beer
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Preface

Much recent work on Blake has been devoted to examination of the techniques of his visual art, especially those in which he believed himself innovative. Readers with an interest in this side of his work will find it profitable to turn to recent works such as Michael Phillips's *William Blake: The Creation of the Songs*, Joseph Viscomi’s *Blake and the Art of the Book* and Peter Ackroyd’s *Blake*, and (especially for the purposes of form and iconography) to consider the work of scholars such as Anne Mellor and W. J. T. Mitchell. They should also, if possible, visit the room at Tate Britain devoted to him, where a generous collection of his work is accompanied by explanations of his use of materials and related exhibits. My chief concern here is with Blake’s literary life – which is of course by no means irrelevant to his visual designs, since his art nearly always involved, whether explicitly or not, a verbal text of some kind. He was above all a literary artist; in other words, which helps to explain why historians of art sometimes find it difficult to fit him into categories that are based on the evolution of changing designs and techniques.

In transcribing quotations from Blake’s writing, I have tended to accept the text of the *Complete Poetry and Prose*, edited by D. V. Erdman, with commentary by H. Bloom, as produced in the revised edition (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982) (E) and, in an electronic edition, by Morris Eaves, Robert Essick and Joseph Viscomi (Charlottesville, Virginia, 2001). These follow Blake’s original punctuation. For the convenience of some English readers, however, I also refer to Keynes’s 1957 Nonesuch edition of the *Complete Writings* (K) which was taken over for the Oxford Standard Authors series (1966–), the pagination remaining the same. Keynes normally changed the punctuation where he thought an improvement in clarity would result.

Sources for many of the biographical statements will be found in the magisterial works of G. E. Bentley, Jr: *Blake Records* (Oxford, 1969), the *Supplement* to this (Oxford, 1988) and his biography of Blake, *The Stranger from Paradise* (New Haven and London, 2001). The task of the biographer of Blake in gaining reliable materials has been immeasurably lightened in recent years by his work in assembling all the known records of his life and production, followed by the additional account in his comprehensive biography.
I owe a particular recent debt also to David Worrall, who told me about the recent work by Keri Davies and M. K. Schuchard on Blake’s Moravian connections, and to Dr Davies himself, who generously sent me a copy of his thesis to read in advance of the publication in 2004 of their article. In addition, the recent work of Robert W. Rix on Blake’s interest in animal magnetism and similar matters has provided some valuable further information.

I must warmly thank the staff of the Yale Center for British Art who have been very helpful in enabling me to acquire copies of the illustrations needed. I should also express renewed gratitude to scholars such as the late Sir Geoffrey Keynes, the late Edward Thompson, the late David Erdman, Morton Paley and Michael Phillips, who have all given me considerable assistance and encouragement in my Blake studies over the years.

J. B. B.
Abbreviations

Place of publication is London unless otherwise indicated.

BQ  Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly (formerly Blake Newsletter) (Albuquerque, New Mexico)
BRS Supplement to the above (Oxford, 1988)
K   Blake, Complete Writings, with variant readings. ed. G. Keynes, 1957; reprinted with additions and corrections in the Oxford Standard Authors series (Oxford, 1966)
W Prel The 1805 text in The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850 above.
WPW Wordsworth, Poetical Works, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (5 vols., Oxford, 1940–9)

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