

Attribution and Reproduction:  
*Death Pursuing the Soul through the  
Avenues of Life*

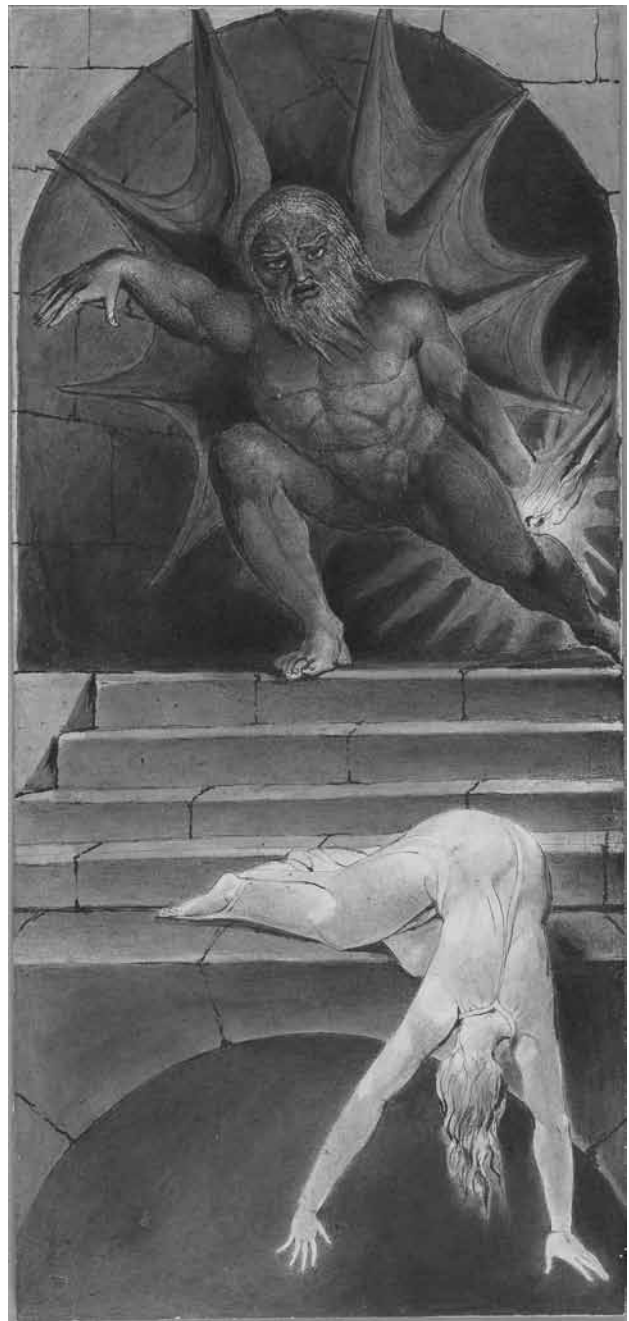
BY ROBERT N. ESSICK

A SPLENDID publication by the William Blake Trust features reproductions of Blake's nineteen watercolors illustrating Robert Blair's *The Grave*, rediscovered in 2001, and texts by Martin Butlin and Morton D. Paley.<sup>1</sup> These drawings, plus *Prone on the Lonely Grave—She Drops*, which was once part of the group, were executed by Blake in the fall of 1805 on commission from Robert Hartley Cromek, whose edition of the poem with Blake's illustrations, engraved by Louis Schiavonetti, appeared in 1808. Butlin's contributions to the volume extend to a consideration of related drawings, including *Death Pursuing the Soul through the Avenues of Life* (illus. 1). He states that this work "stands out from the finished watercolours in that it is a monochrome drawing, finished in sepia washes over pencil on card in a rather heavy manner uncharacteristic of Blake's own hand; although the invention seems to be by the artist [Blake], the work is perhaps a pencil drawing gone over by someone else to make it more saleable in the later 19th century." A long footnote includes the following comments:

When this drawing was first brought to my attention in 1965 I accepted it on the basis of a reproduction but suggested, in a letter to Sir Geoffrey Keynes of 13 December 1965, that it had perhaps been gone over in parts by someone else. By the time it was acquired by Essick in 1971 I had been able to see it and was satisfied that it was a perfectly good work by Blake and it was included without qualification in my catalogue in 1981. However, constant brooding over reproductions of this work has led me to my present doubts.

Not surprisingly, these statements immediately caught my attention. In 1965 Butlin apparently believed that *Death Pursuing* had been "gone over" only "in parts by someone else," but his statement in 2009 that it is "a pencil drawing" from Blake's hand suggests that he now believes that all the washes were added by "someone else." While I am tempted to do some teary-eyed "brooding" myself over Butlin's partial deattribution of what I had long considered one of the more delicious examples of neo-gothic horror in my collection, his comments raise more general issues about how drawings are

1. *William Blake's Watercolour Inventions in Illustration of The Grave by Robert Blair*, edited with essays and commentary by Martin Butlin and an essay on the poem by Morton D. Paley (Lavenham, Suffolk: William Blake Trust, 2009). The quotations below are from p. 24. Titles for the watercolors in this essay follow those used by Butlin in this Blake Trust publication.



1. *Death Pursuing the Soul through the Avenues of Life*. Watercolor, 24.6 x 11.3 cm., datable to the fall of 1805 as part of Blake's commission from R. H. Cromek to illustrate Robert Blair's *The Grave*. Essick collection. See also the color images of the work in the online version of the article at the *Blake* web site.

attributed, how the scholar/connoisseur converts subjective responses into convincing propositions, and how reproductions can play a role in those endeavors.

The basis for Butlin's change of mind would have confounded an earlier generation of art historians. For purposes of attribution, confrontation with the original work of art was not only essential but definitive. The use of reproductions of any sort was eschewed; as late as the 1960s, many art historians still refused to use color reproductions because they were thought inevitably to be misleading. Such attitudes require revision in light of recent developments in high-resolution digital imaging. I believe that digital reproductions of sufficient quality can indeed be the basis for the attribution (or deattribution) of two-dimensional works of art, even after studying the original, in just the manner that Butlin describes. But what sorts of "reproductions" was he brooding over?

I first saw *Death Pursuing* at Charles Sessler, Inc., a famous bookshop in Philadelphia, in the summer of 1971. Mabel Zahn, Sessler's employee of many years who oversaw prints and drawings, told me that she had been corresponding with Ruthven Todd about the work, and that Todd had in turn told Butlin about it. In a letter to me of 19 August 1971, Zahn stated that she had sent Todd a "photostatic copy" of *Death Pursuing*. This was apparently in the previous year, for in a letter of 1 December 1970 from Todd to Zahn, he indicates that he had seen some sort of reproduction but also remarks "if you have the drawing photographed, I'd really appreciate a copy." Todd's letter begins with the forceful statement that "I find that Martin Butlin agrees with me that Mrs. Holmes's Blake [*Death Pursuing* was then in her collection] is indeed a genuine, if perfectly horrible and disgusting, piece of his work."<sup>2</sup> Apparently these opinions were based on the "photostatic" copy, a term that could refer to any number of photographic or electrostatic reproductions.<sup>3</sup> This apparently was not a conventional photograph, given Todd's request for one "if you have the drawing photographed."

The later history of reproductions of *Death Pursuing* is equally unprepossessing. I know of only a few prior to the Blake Trust volume of 2009, all in black and white except for a much reduced color illustration on page 16 in Sotheby's New York catalogue of 2 May 2006 offering the nineteen *Grave* watercolors for sale. Unfortunately, Sotheby's illustration shifts the lighter tones toward a muddy brown. To create a far better reproduction, I asked John Sullivan, head of imaging services at the Huntington Library, to produce a series of high-resolution images, including details of selected features. He used

2. Chacun à son goût. Zahn included a photocopy of Todd's letter with her letter to me of 19 Aug. 1971.

3. See Thomas Landau, *Encyclopaedia of Librarianship*, 2nd ed. (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1961) 121: "The 'Photostat' has after many years become a household word among librarians and readers, and is indiscriminately used in describing any photographic reproduction of a document. It is in fact a trade name, and a 'Photostat' copy of a document is one produced by the 'Photostat' apparatus." The term has also been used to refer to electrostatic reproductions, such as a copy by Xerox technology.

a Phase One P 45+ imaging back mounted on a Hasselblad camera. The digital file for the complete design is a 72.2 MB TIFF with dimensions of 6527 x 3853 pixels. At true size (that is, the size of the original) this yields a 645ppi image. The file of the complete image permits areas as small as 25 x 16 mm. in the original to be enlarged to a monitor image of 46.5 x 27.5 cm. without pixelation. Detail shots of the steps, the winged figure's torso and face, and the female's neck and hair allow for magnification approximately four times greater than enlargements based on the digital file of the full image. In early 2009, I sent a DVD of the file of the complete design to John Commander, executive director of the Blake Trust, for reproduction in the trust's *Grave* publication. I believe that this digital image is the basis for the reduced (16.5 x 7.7 cm.) color illustration on page 24.

A few guidelines can now be drawn. Basing attributions on reproductions is a dicey game. It is always helpful to know which have been consulted. Among the several reproductions of *Death Pursuing*, only the digital images described above are in my view sufficient for questioning an attribution previously made upon viewing the original work. I hope that Butlin was shown the digital file I sent to the Blake Trust and that his opinions are based, at least in part, upon it rather than the inferior reproductions available between 1970 and 2008.

The reproduction accompanying the printed version of this essay must also be classified as inadequate for attribution studies. Accordingly, I hope that interested readers will consult this journal's web site and view this article and its six color images available there.<sup>4</sup> Although the online reproductions do not have the resolution of the TIFFs, they should be capable of confirming (or questioning) the observations about many of the details in *Death Pursuing* presented here. The 300ppi enlargements of the twenty *Grave* watercolors available in the *William Blake Archive* <<http://www.blakearchive.org>> permit close study of those related works.

The high-resolution TIFFs greatly assist investigation of *Death Pursuing*. In several respects, they are superior to using a magnifying glass to look at the original. The field of vision is much larger, particularly compared to lens magnifications above the power of five. Zooming in and out and panning across the entire work are smoother and easier. Although I have been looking at the original drawing on and off for forty years, I did not notice several salient features until I studied the TIFFs side by side with the original.<sup>5</sup> What I found leads me to some perceptions that differ from Butlin's.

In the Blake Trust volume, Butlin calls *Death Pursuing* a "monochrome drawing" in "sepia" washes "on card"; these are among the reasons that it "stands out from the finished watercolours." Sepia means a brown tone, although I find that art historians sometimes use it in reference to the sort of gray and black washes that dominate *Death Pursuing*. There are, how-

4. The images in the online version are 300ppi JPEGs.

5. I was greatly assisted in this endeavor by the sharp eyes of Joseph Viscomi, the first to notice the red lines described below.

ever, at least two other colors in the drawing. The most easily perceived is a patch of blue on the right lower chest of the winged figure (Death), just above and to the right of his right lower thigh. Other, thinner blue washes also highlight his right knee, his right upper arm, his beard and hair (note particularly the area just right of his mouth), a triangular section of the wing just above his left shoulder, wing segments right of his left arm, two small ovoid patches above and to the right of the flames (presumably of a torch) covering Death's left hand, two dark areas below his lower left leg that lie between the shafts of light emanating from the flames, and (very thinly applied) the three step risers below Death and the step left of and below the right foot of the female figure (the Soul). Some of these blue areas have a slightly greenish appearance and may be either a diluted version of the blue on Death's chest or a different color. The two brown spots on Death's face, one on his beard below his mouth and one above his right eye, are stains unrelated to the purposeful coloring. The most interesting color touches are the (six?) fine red lines, each only about 1 mm. long, on the back of the Soul's neck. These suggest that Death had grasped his victim around her neck, leaving bloody marks behind, and has just thrown her into the abyss with his extended right hand. Both the blue and red hues have probably faded over the years.

*Death Pursuing* was not executed directly on a card but on paper, 0.2 mm. thick, mounted on a dark ivory, pebble-grain paper 0.23 mm. thick.<sup>6</sup> The two layers, neither with any visible watermark, are slightly separated along their lower left edges. The back of the mount shows that it was at one time glued to yet a third backing; removal skinned the mount and exposed the back of the leaf on which the drawing was executed. Although the positioning of the twenty *Grave* watercolors on their mounts does not permit easy measurement, the 0.2 mm. paper of *Death Pursuing*, when placed upside down next to two of the twenty, appears to be of about the same thickness.<sup>7</sup> The 0.23 mm. backing paper does not match the mounts of the twenty watercolors, although one cannot completely rule out the possibility that this watercolor was once attached to the same type of mount.

Butlin states that the washes in *Death Pursuing* are "over pencil." This seems likely, although there are very few lines I have been able to identify as pencil. One such line curves slightly above the arched upper reaches of the portal above Death. The colorist changed the position of the arch, particularly on the left, and thus the pencil line was covered by only a light gray wash rather than the dark wash within the arch. Another line possibly in pencil wraps around the wing strut just above the torch. The colorist did not follow the line below

6. The measurements were taken with a Brown & Sharpe blade micrometer calibrated to 0.01 mm.

7. The watercolors available for comparison were *The Death of the Good Old Man* and *Heaven's Portals Wide Expand to Let Him In*, nos. 10 and 19 in the Blake Trust volume and both in my collection.

the strut. There may of course be a good many other pencil lines, now covered by the watercolors.

The attribution of a work of art cannot be made in complete isolation from the possible contexts of its production. In this instance, we have two contexts to consider: Blake's execution of the illustrations in 1805, and the coloring of *Death Pursuing* "in the later 19th century" proposed by Butlin. Both need careful consideration.

No one has questioned the belief (I am tempted to call it a fact) that Blake designed *Death Pursuing* in response to Cromek's commission to illustrate *The Grave*.<sup>8</sup> R. H. Cromek's son, Thomas Hartley Cromek, wrote the following on the back of the mount:

Illustration to "Urizen" – a poem by  
William Blake – who also made this  
drawing– It belonged to my father.  
Thomas . H. Cromek

The error in associating the design with Blake's *Book of Urizen* may have been based on similarities between Death and some of the more horrific figures in that illuminated book. Allan Cunningham, in his 1830 biography of Blake, describes several designs in *Urizen* and claims that one of the "exploits" of an "evil spirit" pictured in them is "to chase a female soul through a narrow gate and hurl her headlong down into a darksome pit."<sup>9</sup> Cunningham, who lived with the Cromek family from April to the fall of 1810,<sup>10</sup> was very probably describing *Death Pursuing*. The drawing may have become dissociated from other *Grave* designs and identified with *Urizen* as early as 1810, and almost certainly by 1830. *Death Pursuing* probably remained in T. H. Cromek's possession until at least 1863, for he appears to be referring to it when he notes in his journal that the copy of *Urizen* in the British Museum "does not contain the subject which I have by him and which I was told by Mr. Frost A.R.A. formed one of the illustrations."<sup>11</sup>

8. For the first consideration of the work in the context of the *Grave* project and identification of the passage illustrated, see Essick, "A Preliminary Design for Blake's *Grave*," *Blake Studies* 4.2 (spring 1972): 9-13 and cover illus. *Death Pursuing* is also reproduced and discussed in Essick and Morton D. Paley, *Robert Blair's The Grave Illustrated by William Blake* (London: Scolar Press, 1982) 75-76 and illus. 25.

9. Allan Cunningham, *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, reprinted in G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 638.

10. Biographical introduction in Allan Cunningham, *Poems and Songs*, ed. Peter Cunningham (London: John Murray, 1847) xxv-xxvi.

11. Quoted from the partial transcription of the manuscript journal by the book dealers John Hart and Chris Johnson in a typescript titled "Robert Hartley Cromek and Thomas Hartley Cromek with Records of Blake and Turner and Other Contemporary Artists" (2008) [43-44]. The Cromek papers are now in Princeton University Library. It is unlikely that Frost, born in 1810, was the origin of the erroneous association with *The Book of Urizen*. As Bentley (638fn) points out, "it is difficult to determine whether the mistaken association with *Urizen* originated with Cunningham or with T. H. Cromek." In his catalogue of Blake's drawings and paintings, William Michael Rossetti places a work probably identifi-



As Butlin notes, *Death Pursuing the Soul through the Avenues of Life* is listed under that title as number “11” of fifteen designs in Cromek’s first prospectus, dated “Nov. 1805,” for his edition of *The Grave*.<sup>12</sup> This, I believe, is a key document for considering the issue of attribution. All the other fourteen designs listed, with the possible exception of an untraced drawing for “A characteristic Frontispiece,” are known as colored drawings, or at the very least as a monochrome wash drawing.<sup>13</sup> If *Death Pursuing* came into Cromek’s hands as nothing more than a pencil drawing, it would have been the only design selected on the basis of a work in that medium alone. In spite of the outré (and for some tastes even “disgusting”) features of the image, Cromek may have chosen the design for inclusion in his first prospectus because it might appeal to the public taste for the gothic, but for him to have done so on the basis of a pencil drawing alone is surprising. It would also have been a little odd for Cunningham so readily to describe *Death Pursuing* as part of (rather than a preliminary for) *The Book of Urizen* if the drawing had existed only as a pencil sketch rather than a more finished design, like those in all copies of *Urizen*.

As I mentioned earlier, it is difficult to see much pencil drawing underlying the washes in *Death Pursuing*. Fortunately, Blake’s preliminary sketches for his *Grave* designs, and the under-drawing in pencil noted (but not described in any detail) by Butlin for seventeen of the twenty watercolors, offer some clues about *Death Pursuing* when it existed only as a pencil drawing. The visible under-drawing in the seventeen watercolors is not extensive, although here again we can assume that some lines are covered with watercolors or pen-and-ink work.<sup>14</sup> As in *Death Pursuing*, pencil work is most visible where the overlying pen-and-ink lines or washes stray from the under-drawing. The sides of the background doorway in *Christ Descending into the Grave* and a few lines of radiance above Christ’s head seem to be in pencil. Two of the latter were ignored by Blake when he drew over most of these lines in pen and ink. Some lines defining the ruffled hem of Christ’s garment, also not followed by the pen, are

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able as *Death Pursuing* in the possession of the London dealer Francis Harvey by 1863; see Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake*, “*Pictor Ignotus*” (London: Macmillan, 1863) 2: 241, no. 15. Perhaps Cromek lent the drawing to Harvey, or placed it on consignment with him, in the same year in which he described it as a “subject which I have.”

12. The complete prospectus is reproduced in Bentley 210-12. *Death Pursuing* was excluded when Cromek reduced the number of illustrations to the twelve published in his 1808 edition.

13. I can find only monochrome washes in *The Counsellor*, *King*, *Warrior*, *Mother and Child in the Tomb*, described by Butlin as “pen, ink and watercolour over pencil” (no. 4 in the Blake Trust volume). It is quite possible that the “characteristic Frontispiece” is the design used on the title page of Cromek’s edition (Butlin’s no. 1) or, less probably, *The Grave Personified* (no. 13) or *Our Time Is Fix’d and All Our Days Are Number’d!* (no. 18). These three are among the nineteen *Grave* watercolors discovered in 2001; none is listed in the first prospectus.

14. My comments on pencil lines are based principally on the enlargements in the *William Blake Archive*.

pencil. One or two pencil strokes right of the man’s waist and left hip in *Prone on the Lonely Grave—She Drops* show that Blake moved these motifs slightly to the left when he drew them in pen and ink. There are a few sketchy pencil lines defining cloud outlines, and some odd pencil strokes on the man’s upper left chest, in *Whilst Surfeited upon Thy Damask Cheek*. Other designs in the group of seventeen show similar odd bits of pencil work, including the bottom edge of the cloth covering the bed in *The Soul Hovering over the Body Reluctantly Parting with Life*, cloud outlines and the decorations at the top of the columns in *Heaven’s Portals Wide Expand to Let Him In*, and lines of radiance and shading on the base of the doorway and its posts and lintel in *Death’s Door*. All in all, the under-drawing that can be seen in these watercolors is sparse and sketchy.

Most of the extant preliminary pencil drawings for the *Grave* watercolors are little more than quick sketches, first thoughts on paper.<sup>15</sup> Significantly, none of these sketches, unlike *Death Pursuing*, has a provenance leading back to either R. H. or T. H. Cromek. Many are traceable to Frederick Tatham, who very probably acquired them from Catherine Blake, who inherited them from her husband. Apparently Blake supplied the elder Cromek only with the washed or colored drawings and retained the preliminaries; this would have been standard procedure for commissioned work. Only the sketch for *The Soul Hovering over the Body Reluctantly Parting with Life* includes indications of the figures’ facial features, but varies in several major respects (e.g., the position, configuration, and costuming of the man’s body) from the watercolor. Even if the pencil drawing lying beneath the washes of *Death Pursuing* had been developed as fully as the sketch for *The Soul Hovering*, the colorist (whether Blake or someone else) created most of what we now see. Death’s face is carefully detailed with very small brushstrokes; it is highly unlikely that the colorist was merely following pencil lines. The freely drawn lines defining the Soul’s dangling hair and flames covering Death’s left hand appear to have been executed with pen and ink alone. The act of coloring was also an act of composition.

Apparently another reason for Butlin’s sense that *Death Pursuing* “stands out” from the *Grave* watercolors is the “rather heavy manner” of the “washes,” a manner “uncharacteristic of Blake’s own hand.” I suspect that any such labored handling is most apparent in Death’s face and body; the rest of the composition, including the personified Soul, does not seem at all heavy to me. The *Grave* watercolors, all referred to as “finished” by Butlin, exhibit a wide range of styles, techniques, and levels of finish. Indeed, one could claim that several of the watercolors stand out from their companions on stylistic

15. These are nos. 614, 615, 619, 621, 623, 624 recto and verso, 625, 629, 632, 634, and 636 in Martin Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), pls. 851, 852, 854, 856, 857, 859-65. Some of these preliminary sketches are not known to have been developed further. Eight of the preliminary drawings for the watercolors are reproduced in the Blake Trust publication.

or technical grounds. *Death of the Strong Wicked Man* and *The Grave Personified* are quite richly colored with considerable attention to flesh tones created through the application of very small brushstrokes in blue, brown, and rose. In contrast, parts of *Prone on the Lonely Grave—She Drops* are left uncolored or shaded only with broad washes. *The Day of Judgment* exhibits a wide range of coloring techniques. An area of dark sky above the dome in the lower right quadrant, probably applied with a relatively dry brush, shows the sort of fine reticulations we can also see on Death's face, right arm, right thigh, and torso in *Death Pursuing*—and in the same or a very similar color. The detailed brushwork in *Death Pursuing* also recalls Blake's work as a portrait miniaturist begun in 1801 under William Hayley's tutelage.<sup>16</sup> Butlin has interestingly associated *A Destroying Deity*, a drawing in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, with the *Grave* designs and has even identified a passage in the poem it may illustrate (Blake Trust publication, p. 54). This deity's bat-like wings are strikingly similar to Death's and, to my eye, executed in a similar manner with washes and pen-and-ink outlining.

Butlin's proposal that someone had "gone over" *Death Pursuing* "to make it more saleable in the later 19th century" prompts several questions. The history of the drawing after T. H. Cromek, who died in 1873, is somewhat speculative until it entered the collection of Mrs. Artemas Holmes, Philadelphia, no earlier than the 1930s. It may have been the drawing sold at Christie's in 1880 for £1.15s.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the work had very little market value in the second half of the nineteenth century. The tinting of Death's face and parts of his body is minutely articulated with small brushstrokes; the blue and red touches are hardly visible to the naked eye. Why would anyone go to all the trouble to execute such detailed work, principally in monochrome washes, when a few splashes of rich color (perhaps yellows and fiery reds, pink flesh for the Soul, prominent blood on her neck) would have added much more to the drawing's saleability? It is possible that a colorist may have believed that the labor required for detailed development of the drawing would be adequately compensated in the marketplace, but if prompted by a profit motive such a colorist must have been badly informed about the commercial value of Blake's art and sorely disappointed.

No amount of argument or theorizing can overcome the primacy of the vision and intuitions of the connoisseur's eye. I have no vain hope of changing anyone's opinion of *Death Pursuing*, least of all Butlin's. Rather, my purpose has been

16. See the miniatures of John Johnson, William Cowper, Thomas Butts, Mrs. Butts, and Thomas Butts, Jr., nos. 347, 353, 354, 376-78 and pls. 455, 459, 460, 476-78 in Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*. For a discussion of this technique in the context of another attribution problem, see Essick, "A (Self?) Portrait of William Blake," *Blake* 39.3 (winter 2005-06): 126-39.

17. For this part of the provenance record, see Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*, no. 635. At the time he wrote his catalogue, Butlin did not know that *Death Pursuing* probably remained in T. H. Cromek's possession until at least 1863.

to exemplify some ways of using reproductions and historical contexts in cases of attribution, particularly when a leading expert has vacillated between attribution and deattribution. Although I believe that *Death Pursuing* is entirely Blake's work, I must confess to some slight misgivings. If someone else fiddled with the drawing, I suspect that it was fairly early in its history and confined to Death's face.<sup>18</sup> The most likely candidate for any such intervention is T. H. Cromek, a skilled watercolorist, although I find little similarity between the techniques used in *Death Pursuing* and Cromek's renderings of landscapes and buildings. Whatever the truth, however, Cromek, Butlin, and I would appear to share a common fate, spending part of our lives brooding over *Death Pursuing*.

18. David Bindman has expressed doubts similar to mine in conversation in Apr. 2009.

## R E V I E W

Hazard Adams. *Blake's Margins: An Interpretive Study of the Annotations*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2009. viii + 212 pp. \$39.95, paperback.

Reviewed by Alexander S. Gourlay

H AZARD ADAMS modestly introduces *Blake's Margins* by describing it as "less for scholars ... than for people who want to know more about Blake's thought ... and for students in the early stages of study of his work" (3). Beginners will find most of this eminently sensible and learned book edifying, but in fact there are very few Blake scholars anywhere who would not benefit from reading it straight through. In some ways, Blake's annotations are among the least ironic of his writings, but every Blakean marginalium is a tail that wags a very substantial dog: we can't really understand a given one without attending to the interplay with the full annotated text and with the broader contexts that contributed to Blake's response. Since even the best Blake editions inevitably misrepresent the marginalia by supplementing them with (at most) snippets of the annotated texts, many of which are unfamiliar and/or out of print, it would be a good thing if Blakists were in the habit of reviewing the relevant chapter in Adams before quoting anything written in a margin. Of course it would be even better if we all reread, say, the last third of Berkeley's *Siris* with care before repeating "God is not a Mathematical Diagram," but if that is not to happen,