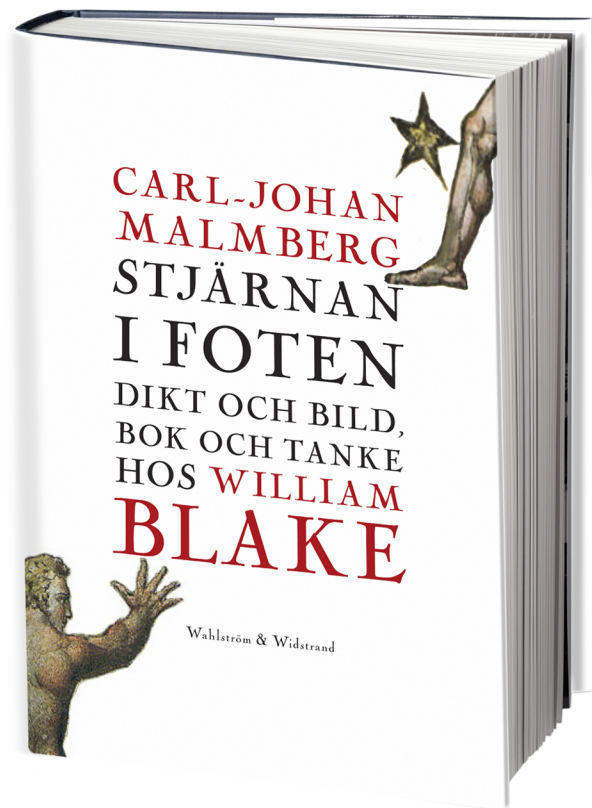


Carl-Johan Malmberg. *Stjärnan i foten. Dikt och bild, bok och tanke hos William Blake*. Stockholm: Wahlström och Widstrand, 2013. 458 pp. 255 kr, hardcover.

Reviewed by Ossian Lindberg

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- 1 CARL-JOHAN Malmberg has written a large book of about 450 pages on Blake generally, concentrating on what Jean Hagstrum called Blake's composite art, his unique illuminated printing from copperplates on which text, image, and decoration stand up in relief and can be printed like woodcuts. The writer thinks that the question whether Blake was greatest as a poet or as a pictorial artist presupposes the idea that poetry is something distinct from painting, but Blake seems to have looked upon both as one thing, which he called "art." Malmberg is up to date on recent Blake scholarship, knows Morton Paley personally, and has corresponded with Bob Essick. The book is beautifully printed, proofread with reasonable accuracy, and richly illustrated. In a final chapter there is a short summary of Blake's life, but the book is mainly criticism, not biography. Informative notes are in the margins, including the original wording of scholars quoted in translation.
- 2 This is the first book on Blake in Swedish. There are, of course, articles, mostly general, and translations, some quite bad. I do not know of a single Blake original in a Swedish collection. Blake's works have never been exhibited in Sweden, but in 2000 many Blakes from the British Museum were shown in Finland, at the Helsinki City Art Museum. Finland is a bilingual country and Helsinki a bilingual city, so David Bindman's catalogue was translated into Finnish and Swedish. Otherwise Swedes have been forced to go to Britain or to America to see originals and required to read English if they wanted substantial information about Blake.
- 3 But why has Malmberg chosen to publish his book in Swedish? In English the writer would have reached a wide international audience, while Swedes interested in Blake can be assumed to be able to read a book written in English.

Maybe Malmberg just wanted to introduce Blake to his own people in their own language.

- 4 Malmberg understands the complexities of Blake's poetry and images, and quotes Blake literature generously, recent and old. Blake scholars are mostly quoted in Swedish, Blake himself in English. The present reviewer is particularly grateful for a quote before the text from Northrop Frye's *Fearful Symmetry*, to the effect that Blake's poetical works may need interpretation, but not deciphering: "There can be no 'key' and no open-sesame formula and no patented system of translation." When I read Frye in the mid-fifties, I missed this warning. As a consequence, I lost several years trying to "make sense" of Blake by translating his poetry into reasoned stories, a Urizenic task I dutifully forced myself to perform. Before I knew Frye I had not so much worried about "understanding" Blake, I just enjoyed reading him. Afterwards I was suspicious of interpreting poetry and images for many years. It took me a long time to see that it is possible to interpret Blake without trying to rewrite his poetry into pedantic prose.
- 5 The Swedish title means *The Star in the Foot: Poetry and Image, Book and Thought in William Blake*. The first part of the title refers, of course, to plates 14, 29, and 33 of the poem *Milton*, where John Milton enters the feet of William

Blake and his brother Robert, inspiring them and so helping Blake's illuminated poem into existence.

- 6 The book is divided into several chapters. After a short introduction, "Into the Labyrinth," follow sections on "Albion Rose," "The Ancient of Days," *Newton*, the *Songs*, *Jah and His Two Sons Satan and Adam*, "A Woman Scaly & a Man all Hairy," and *Jerusalem*. At the end there is a short summary of Blake's life and times, a select bibliography, a list of illustrations, and an index of names.
  - 7 Malmberg's analysis of "Albion Rose," which he calls an agonistic icon, is excellent. It is true that Blake is agonistic, in the sense that he is prone to exceed his predecessors in a creative way. Thus "Albion Rose" is the most typical Blake you can find, and this is especially true of the uncolored line engraving. Incidentally, I think that the date 1780 is a survivor from the first state, later almost completely reworked and obliterated. And Lionardo's *Vitruvian Man* is closer to Blake than Malmberg thinks. Lionardo drew him in two positions, one spread eagled, circumscribed by a circle with its center in the navel. But the position with the arms stretched out horizontally is inscribed in a quadrate with its center at the base of the sexual organ, exactly as in "Albion Rose." Blake seems to have known Lionardo's drawing.
  - 8 In his discussion of "The Ancient of Days," Malmberg appropriately quotes Detlef Dörrbecker to the effect that the print shows not only the making of the universe in general, but more specifically the creation of measurable space. Newton holds the same golden compasses as the Ancient of Days, and both use their left hand. Malmberg has a good section on Newton as God.
  - 9 The section on the *Songs* is long (116 pages), sound, and ends with some interesting remarks on Blake's use of gold. The author knows that the *Songs of Experience* existed in Blake's mind and in his Notebook already in 1789, when he etched the *Songs of Innocence*, although *Experience* was not published until 1794. Malmberg has chosen for commentary poems that interest him, such as "The Chimney Sweeper" from *Innocence* and "London" from *Experience*. Today it is difficult to understand how nineteenth-century commentators could believe that Blake was an uneducated person who was under the misapprehension that "chartered" meant something like "mapped out," an interpretation that would make nonsense of the poem. One time in London in the mid-sixties I walked along a street and noticed the sign "Chartered Turf Accountants," and thought that I wandered through a "charter'd street." I understood that Blake must have had a similar experience, of a society in which businesses were protected by royal charters but people were left to suffer and die. Malmberg understands
- that Blake's "London" is meant to be seen as well as heard, and subjects the minute particulars of the illuminated plate to close scrutiny. He also notices the corresponding illustration in plate 84 of *Jerusalem* and mentions the church in the background. Actually there are two churches: Westminster Abbey and Saint Paul's Cathedral. The illumination shows London, blind and age bent, led by a child through the streets of, not Babylon, but London, a confirmation of Malmberg's idea that Blake's London was Babylon born again.
  - 10 There are good sections on the print *Jah and His Two Sons Satan and Adam* and on Blake, sex, and homoeroticism, called "A Woman Scaly & a Man all Hairy," and a very interesting one on "Feet." I noticed long ago that Blake drew feet carefully, and in many special, sometimes idiosyncratic ways, but I noticed the fact without realizing its importance. Other Blake readers/beholders may have had a similar experience. Malmberg has helped us understand the significance of feet in Blake, or would have, if all Blake enthusiasts could read Swedish. The book would be well worth translating into English.
  - 11 The last chapter deals with *Jerusalem*, in Malmberg's mind Blake's greatest work and the cause of his Blake experience in a hotel in New York in November 1993. He had bought the Blake Trust facsimile of copy E of *Jerusalem* and went to bed with it. The text was printed in a delicate brick red, the pages adorned with watercolor and gilding, Blake was opened to him and he realized that he held in his hand the most beautiful book in the world. The facsimile is almost as good as the original, with one exception: there is no flash of metal in the gold.
  - 12 There are a few blemishes, and some of them have nothing directly to do with Blake. Malmberg seems to be under the impression that there existed, in the Renaissance, an artist with the family name of da Vinci. That vulgarity is understandable in a thriller writer such as Dan Brown, but a well-known and cultured essayist and art historian like Malmberg should know better. Leonardo was born out of wedlock; he had no family name and no father's name. The normalized Italian form Leonardo would be acceptable, but to himself and to his first biographer, Giorgio Vasari, he was Lionardo. The woodcut of his portrait in Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* is captioned "LIONARDO DA VINCI PITT. E SCVLTOR FIOR." Because the artist was born in the Tuscan village of Vinci he was called Lionardo da Vinci to distinguish him from other Lionardos, but that does not make da Vinci his family name or surname. That there is a family with the name da Vinci today is a different matter entirely. In fifteenth-century Italy most people spent their lives, like Lionardo, without a family name. In Finland the law that

every person should have a family name is as late as the early twentieth century.

- 13 Malmberg's term "färgetsning" for the large color print of *Newton* is misleading. The technique is not precisely known, but the print has nothing to do with "etsning" (etching); it should be called "färgtryck." The color-printed illuminated books, done from etched copperplates, can of course be named etchings, but the large color prints have clearly been printed from something else, presumably millboard or cardboard.
- 14 The strange brooding figure on plate 78 of *Jerusalem* is unlikely to be an eagle-headed man. On his head is a fleshy crest, like that of a cock, and a humanized cock he is, soon to herald the rising sun at the beginning of the last chapter of the poem, which ends with a renewal of everything at the last judgment. In addition, I have doubts about the giant on plate 62. There is a tendency among Blake scholars to identify and name every figure, whether it makes sense or not. In his *Illuminated Blake* Erdman goes to extremes in this direction. Malmberg is mostly careful, but his tentative identification of the giant with its feet aflame as Jesus is far-fetched, to say the least. Why not agree that some of Blake's figures cannot be identified, since we have nothing to go on? Some questions will always remain questions.