Flaxman and Klopstock: A New Letter

Marcia Allentuck

In the January 1968 issue of the Harvard Library Bulletin, Rodney G. Dennis considered the relationship between Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock and John Flaxman, and commented valuably upon two unpublished letters from Klopstock to Flaxman which he printed. He lamented that the three letters from Flaxman to Klopstock, mentioned in Christian August Clodius' Auswahl aus Klopstock’s Nachlass, have disappeared from the Klopstock Papers and were not among them when they were acquired in 1950 by the Hamburger Staats- und Universitäts Bibliothek. All that remains of these letters is Clodius’ brief summary of them: “Flaxman, as is apparent from three of his English letters among these papers, was only prevented by other pressing work from making outline drawings for the Messiah as he had done for Homer, Aeschylus, and Dante in Rome when he had more leisure.” A new letter from Flaxman to the poet William Hayley has just come to hand, which contains a passage corroborating Clodius’ glancing reference and proves indubitably that Flaxman did admire and respect Klopstock’s Messiah, and that he was not just putting the German poet off by pleading other business.

Flaxman’s letter to Hayley is dated 31 July 1801, one year after the first Klopstock letter which Mr. Dennis prints and which is in the Houghton Library; it is one year earlier than the second Klopstock letter, now in the Library of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The letter is written from London to Hayley in the country, at Felpham in Sussex; Flaxman regrets that he cannot join him for in addition to my employments in the day, my official duties in the Royal Academy engage so many of my evenings [sic] & will continue to do so for a Year & half to come, that it will not be without some difficulty, that I

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1 Xvi, 5-17.
2 Ibid., 5.
3 I am grateful to The Folger Shakespeare Library for permission to quote from this letter.
4 I have not normalized this passage, but quote literatim.
shall make Sketches, write letters & perform other smaller concerns of business to which I cannot allow much daylight; indeed these reasons have obliged me to decline the proposal of making a design for Klopstock's new & fine edition of the Messiah, which he intended for a frontispiece after going through a long days work in the labours of the Chisel or great Models added to the necessary attentions of business, it cannot be supposed that an Artist possesses that poetical energy & delicate execution without which the designs in question cannot be produced...
CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

MARCIA ALLENTUCK, Associate Professor of English at The City College, New York, is the author of The Achievements of Isaac Bashevis Singer, which was published by the Southern Illinois University Press in 1969.

MYRON P. GILMORE, who is the author of a number of books and articles, has taught at Harvard since 1937. He was appointed Professor of History in 1954 and Director of I Tatti in 1964.

HELEN E. HAWORTH is Associate Professor of English at the University of Waterloo.

DUNCAN ISLIES teaches at Birkbeck College of the University of London; his "Johnston, Richardson, and The Female Quixote" appears in the new edition of The Female Quixote (ed. M. Dale) that was published in the Oxford English Novels series during 1970.

ERNST KITZINGER is A. Kingsley Porter University Professor at Harvard and a Member of the Board of Scholars for Byzantine Studies at Dumbarton Oaks. He is the author of numerous monographs and articles.

MERWIN W. PACKARD is Librarian of the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library.

FRIEDRICH RÜHLICH has contributed articles to two previous issues of the Bulletin; an autobiographical sketch appears (pp. 11-42) in his Der Unternehmer, Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichtliche Studien (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964).

EDWARD F. J. TUCKER, who was awarded a Ph.D. in English by Harvard in 1970, is now teaching at Southern Methodist University.

WILLIAM R. TYLER has been Director of the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection since 1959.