Flaxman and Klopstock: A new letter

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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considered the relationship between Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock and John Flaxman, and commented valuably upon two unpublished letters from Klopstock to Flaxman which he printed.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

\* XVI, 5-17.
\* Ibid., 5.
\* I am grateful to The Folger Shakespeare Library for permission to quote from this letter.
\* I have not normalized this passage, but quote literal.

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shall make Sketches, write letters & perform other smaller concerns of business to which I cannot allow much day-light; 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...
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