

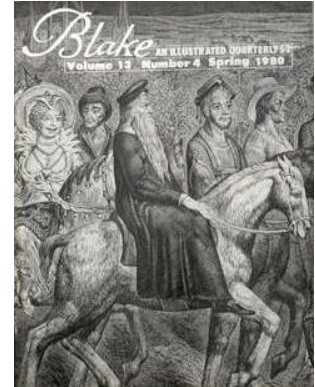
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

Donald H. Reiman, Michael C. Jaye, and Betty T. Bennett, eds., *The Evidence of the Imagination: Studies of Interactions between Life and Art in English Romantic Literature*

Robert Sternbach

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 13, Issue 4, Spring 1980, pp. 203-204



The Evidence of the Imagination:

Studies of Interactions between Life
and Art in English Romantic Literature

Edited by
Donald H. Reiman, Michael C. Jaye,
and Betty T. Bennett, *with the assistance of*
Doucet Devin Fischer
and Ricki B. Herzfeld

New York • New York University Press • 1978

Donald H. Reiman, ed. **The Evidence of the Imagination: Studies of Interactions between Life and Art in English Romantic Literature.** New York: New York University Press, 1978. **Reviewed by Robert Sternbach.**

The book's title provides, properly, an avenue toward its contents. The "evidence" of the imagination, of course, is the finished work of art, or, alternatively, a specific attitude toward experience on the part of the writer that is expressed and given shape in his letters, notebooks, or diaries. "Evidence" signifies the interaction between art and life, certifying that an imagination has existed and that it has interacted with life.

These sixteen various essays on Romantic writers, collected by Donald H. Reiman *et al.*, fall roughly into two groups: those that draw extensively on biographical materials, such as letters, literary anecdotes, or journals, to illustrate the transforming force of imagination on the raw events of an author's life, and those that use mainly that author's published texts to establish a specific theme or line of argument in his works. In both cases, as Donald Reiman makes clear in his introduction, the objective has been primarily a scholarly one: the studies seek to clarify particular themes and attitudes developed by the authors with which they are concerned, and to derive these themes and attitudes from the context of the authors' lives and times. But the studies do not seek primarily to evaluate or comment on these themes or attitudes; this, as Professor Reiman says, would be a task for the general critic.

Notwithstanding this delimitation, I find that many of the essays, including some of my favorites in the collection, have been written "from within the bosom of Romanticism." I list some phrases that

illustrate the prevailing sympathy of the scholars with the subjects of their study: Eileen Sanzo's "stretched across the city's own iron darkness"; Michael Jaye's "the empathic bond between men under the kindly auspices of nature"; and Carl Woodring's "Richard Payne Knight . . . went *far beyond* John Baillie's point . . . that an encounter with the sublime expands the mind." It should probably be said that not all the Romantic attitudes discovered in the volume would win immediate assent from all unindoctrinated readers, and I would have opted for a greater overall effort to maintain the distinction between the specialist scholar and the general critic.

The grouping takes in an extremely wide range of Romantic figures, from William Blake to Thomas Love Peacock, including three studies of female writers--one on "Plin" Clairmont as revealed in her journals, one on Mary Shelley, and one on Mary Wollstonecraft. This is a generous and helpful selection--and yet I must complain that with six essays devoted to Wordsworth there are none on Coleridge!

Five outstanding essays in the volume are those by Michael C. Jaye ("William Wordsworth's Alfoxden Notebook: 1798"), Irene Tayler ("By Peculiar Grace: Wordsworth in 1802"), Donald H. Reiman ("Poetry of Familiarity: Wordsworth, Dorothy, and Mary Hutchinson"), Aileen Ward ("That Last Infirmary of Noble Mind: Keats and the Idea of Fame"), and William Walling ("On Fishing Up the Moon": In

Search of Thomas Love Peacock"). Jaye's essay discusses Wordsworth's Alfoxden Notebook as evidence of a fundamental advance in his poetic practice in 1798 in several areas. Especially useful and suggestive are his remarks on Wordsworth's establishment of a linguistic usage capable of conveying the distinct mode of self-apprehension which is Wordsworth's subject in *The Prelude*. Also subtle and intelligent are his analyses of passages in the Notebook which reveal Wordsworth's initial explorations of transcendental experience in his poetry, and various modes of interaction between the self and nature. At times, however, his language becomes a bit too abstract and ambiguous, such as in the sentence: "Experiential clarity depends on prolonging the temporal experience, perceiving its inclusivity through diffusion and radiating pervasiveness."

Irene Tayler finely recreates Wordsworth's circumstances in 1802 in order to show how he produced several monitory figures in his poetry to guide and sustain him during that year of stress. The conjunction of the Leechgatherer, the Pedlar, and Wordsworth's brother John as "silent poets" is very good, especially since it is often overlooked that these figures are all idealized versions of the poet, and not really Wordsworth as he was in himself.

Donald Reiman's thesis in "Poetry of Familiarity" is a bold one. He asserts not only that Wordsworth's art was made out of his psycho-sexual conflicts, but that Wordsworth's poetic decline was the direct result of the resolution of those conflicts. The interaction between Wordsworth's personal life and the specific quality of his art is very complex, however, perhaps more complex than will ever be sorted out entirely satisfactorily; so that while on the one hand Reiman is surely right in proclaiming a connection between Wordsworth's relationships and his art, on the other hand he runs the risk of being reductive in this essay. Nevertheless, he identifies a fascinating sequence in discussing the different nature of Wordsworth's feelings for Dorothy and then Mary, and finally in turning to the effect on Wordsworth's marriage of the deaths of his young son and daughter.

In Aileen Ward's lucid essay, the "evidence of the imagination" resides not so much in works of art as in the transformations which Keats's attitude underwent toward art and his own role as an artist. Interesting for a theory of Romanticism is the final transformation which Miss Ward suggests, occurring toward the end of Keats's life: Keats's "Public" became in his mind an idealized notion of the "People" who would be influenced by his works in future generations.

William Walling's interesting and stimulating discussion of Peacock is a departure for this group of essays in that it attempts a more general assessment of its subject, perhaps because Peacock has

been less extensively interpreted elsewhere. Walling defines the comic element in Peacock as a paradoxical harmoniousness achieved by the fragmented, jarring subjectivities which are displayed in his novels. Peacock's work, according to Walling, can be seen as a criticism both of the excesses of Romantic subjectivity and of the idea that moral progress was embodied in the laissez-faire economic system of the nineteenth century.

Among the other essays in the volume, David Erdman's interesting study raises large questions about Wordsworth's practical response to the French Revolution, ultimately about the extent to which he would have been willing to use force to achieve any revolutionary purpose. Carl Woodring points out that the Romantic emphasis on the mind's role in perceiving the sublime underlies Wordsworth's description of the phenomenon in "Tintern Abbey." Interestingly, Woodring suggests that the Romantic sublime has something to do with the "terror of the divided self," but doesn't expand on the phrase in his study. Paul Magnuson valuably clarifies the term "spontaneity" in Wordsworth's poetic theory, linking it through the idea of voluntary excitement to the self-sufficiency or self-generating quality of the imagination. Joyce Hemlow demonstrates the modification of fact in Lamb's attempt to create a unity of feeling in his essay "The Wedding." Marcelle Thiebaut's compendium of citations enables us to gauge the response to Mary Wollstonecraft's writings in America, though most of the cited criticisms of Wollstonecraft's work are tangential or superficial. G. M. Matthews' essay on Shelley is filled with rich biographical detail which makes his interpretations of three fragments entertaining as well as persuasive. John J. Lavelle demonstrates Shelley's admiration for Pythagorean teachings which proclaimed the semi-divinity of a certain order of men who sought to embody their superior knowledge of virtue and truth in "lasting Monuments." Leslie Marchand documents the relation between Byron and Francis Hodgson. Betty Bennett shows the consistency of Mary Shelley's novels with the beliefs of P. B. Shelley, William Godwin, and Mary Wollstonecraft. Margaret Kingston Stocking provides interesting information about an unconventional lady, Pauline ("Plin") Clairmont, niece of Claire.

The only essay in the volume devoted to Blake, by Eileen Sanzo, explores the alchemical metaphor in Blake's belief that the imagination must turn the iron (industrial) age to one of gold, though I miss the specifics of Blake's vision in the essay--how is the Golden Age to come about? Nevertheless, though Miss Sanzo--or Blake--fails to name the alchemical formula by which the iron age of oppression may lead towards social justice and the millenium, her essay--like the others in this volume--testifies to the power of the imagination to encounter reality, and to give evidence of its encounters in fructifying, seminal works of art.