

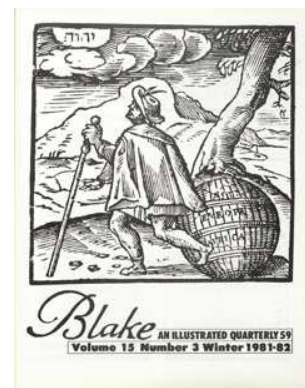
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY  
**BLAKE**

R E V I E W

John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, eds., *The Poems of William Cowper*, vol. 1: 1748-1782;  
James King and Charles Ryskamp, eds., *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*,  
vol. 1: "Adelphi" and Letters, 1750-1781

Donald H. Reiman

*Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*, Volume 15, Issue 3, Winter 1981/1982, pp.  
149-151



The Poems of  
**WILLIAM  
COWPER**

VOLUME I  
1748-1782

EDITED BY  
JOHN D. BAIRD AND  
CHARLES RYSKAMP

OXFORD  
At the Clarendon Press

John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, eds.  
**The Poems of William Cowper. Vol. I:  
1748-1782.** Oxford: Clarendon Press,  
1980. xliii + 597 pp. \$74.00.

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Reviewed by Donald H. Reiman

As Morton D. Paley has shown, not only did Blake admire William Cowper as a poet, but Blake learned Cowper's life-secrets through his intimacy with William Hayley, Cowper's friend and official biographer, and with the Reverend Joseph Johnson of Norfolk. Indeed, Paley finds Blake portraying Cowper as the pathetic "Spectre" on plate 10 of *Jerusalem* ("Cowper as Blake's Spectre," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, I [1968], 236-52). Joseph A. Wittreich, Jr., finds that Blake's conception of John Milton had been "sharpened" and "relayed" to him by Cowper and Hayley (*Blake's Sublime Allegory*, ed. Stuart Curran and Wittreich [1973], p. 27). Thus the appearance of new Oxford English Text editions of Cowper's poetry and letters (Blake called them "Certainly, the very best letters that ever were published") cannot be a matter of indifference to serious students viewing Blake within his historical context.

These two editions have not only a common publisher but a common senior partner in Charles Ryskamp, the leading Cowper scholar of our time. The "Textual Introduction" (*Poems*) and "Textual Principles" (*Letters*) set an editorial program and stated method for each edition that is sound and conservative (though there are minor differences between them); each edition evidences a law of parsimony. Baird and Ryskamp state this policy of limitation in the first paragraph of their "Textual Introduction" to the *Poems*:

This is an edition of all Cowper's original poems and translations, with two exceptions: his translation of Homer . . . and his joint translation with William Hayley of Andreini's *Adamo* . . . which, as we have it, is certainly more Hayley's than Cowper's. The translation of Homer, however, was Cowper's most ambitious and extended poetical undertaking. . . . It has been passed over on grounds of expediency. . . . To edit this material properly would be a vast labour; to publish the result would be prohibitively expensive.

(p. xxvii)

Because both Cowper's letters and poems are superlatively intelligent and entertaining--urbanelly polished, kindly, sensitive, and simply wise--the best editorial policy is to introduce Cowper to his readers and tactfully withdraw to the edge of the conversation, explaining and commenting on only those things that the modern reader would have some difficulty comprehending without assistance. Baird and Ryskamp do exactly that. Though the obtuse designers at Clarendon Press--who recently brought us all four cantos of Byron's *Childe Harold* (1812, 1816, and 1818) with the unchanging and unmeaning running heading "Poetical Works 1812"--fail to cross reference the page numbers between the texts of the poems and the "Commentary" at the end of the volume (pages 461-564), the search for the notes to individual poems repays the effort. The King/Ryskamp

notes to the letters appear at the bottom of the page, but they are not as uniformly helpful. The reader need only compare the relatively uninformative biographical sketch of Cowper's cousin Martin Madan (*Letters*, I, xxxix-xl) with the clear commentary by Baird/Ryskamp to Cowper's "Poems against Madan's *Thelyphthora*, 1780" (*Poems*, I, 501-02) to see how much more pertinently Baird/Ryskamp focus on the central issues of the relationship than do King/Ryskamp. Occasionally in *Poems*, there is a sense of two hands at work, without one knowing what the other is doing: the Introduction (p. xxiii) and Commentary on the poems (p. 502) disagree on whether Cowper read the whole of the second volume of Madan's *Thelyphthora* (for the evidence, see *Letters*, I, 466). But such factual slips are much less frequent in *Poems* than in *Letters*, where we find two notes to one letter (Cowper to Unwin, 13 February 1780) that badly misinterpret the clear statements and implications of the letter itself (*Letters*, I, 314-15, fns. 5 and 7). At *Letters*, I, 516, there is another apparent misinterpretation of Cowper's prose. The source of Cowper's reference to "a sevenfold Shield" (I, 431) was surely *Iliad*, VII, rather than Shakespeare's echo of it (fn. 2). While these oversights do not stop the reader from straightening out the issues involved, they and other factual errors cast doubt upon editorial alertness to matters where the evidence is not as easily available.

The most important *omission* from the annotation of *Letters* is any substantial account of Edward Thurlow, later first Baron Thurlow. First mentioned on page 127, he is not identified until his second appearance on page 164, and that footnote merely extracts from--and omits the most important information in--the *DNB* account. For Thurlow, besides being "an energetic and tireless man who busied himself with his profession," became legendary as the most irreligious, foul-mouthed, corrupt, and reactionary politician of his time (see my Introduction to the three volumes of the poems of his nephew, Edward, Lord Thurlow, in *Romantic Context: Poetry*, Garland Publishing, 1976-79). To know Thurlow is to know something about William Cowper's "sinful" youth--and to find Cowper still admiring Thurlow long after he stopped associating with him shows how far Cowper's sympathies extended beyond his evangelical convictions. Indeed, I think that from the evidence of Cowper's letters in this volume and "Adelphi," Cowper's strange account of his early psychological-religious turmoils, one could develop a psycho-biographical explanation for his breakdowns and his ultimate conviction of damnation. Cowper's dead father had never accepted the narrow faith that, Cowper had been persuaded, was requisite for salvation (see *Letters*, I, 183-84). Cowper's temperamental incapacity to compete in worldly matters with his brother John and with such early rivals as Thurlow and Martin Madan (or even to win the bride of his choice) certainly encouraged him to choose a faith that elevated pious retirement above the activities of such worldly men. But after the deaths of two of his most direct rivals, Morely Unwin and John Cowper, both of whom Cowper self-righteously converted to his faith on their painful deathbeds, Cowper's better nature reemerged from beneath these repressed hatreds, leaving him with a much deeper sense of guilt for having taken satis-

faction in the misfortunes of those he should have comforted. Clearly he was a much wittier, kinder, more sensitive, humane person after he felt himself to be damned than when he had tried to save others from damnation. These letters, by the way, reveal John Newton to be a positive rather than a negative influence on Cowper; theories that try to hang the albatross of Cowper's despair on Newton are simply mistaken.

Cowper's early letters and poems are of greatest interest to the student of Romantic poetry. In Cowper's carefully wrought occasional verses and didactic poems and finely articulated letters we find many themes, ideas, and even idioms later employed by the Romantics. Cowper was at least a French Revolution apart from them in political persuasion, yet bound to all but Blake by a common classical education and the social prejudices of the upper middle class and to these *and* Blake by English patriotism and a common humane literary tradition. Though the tone of Cowper's fables is lighter and more playful, his poem on "The Poet, the Oyster, and the Sensitive Plant" (*Poems*, I, 435-36) bears comparison with both Blake's "The Clod & the Pebble" and with Shelley's "The Sensitive Plant." Cowper's "Ode to Peace" (I, 406) best illustrates the great differences in focus and in tone that separate Cowper's prediluvian world from that of his successors. As Morse Peckham pointed out in 1961, the Romantics and the poets of Cowper's era "used the same words, but sang them to a different tune." "Peace" in Cowper's ode means only his own peace of mind; he was so eager that Britain not lose its American colonies that, even after Cornwallis' surrender at Yorktown, he welcomed the (false) news that the British government intended to pursue the war "with the utmost vigour," including the use of 40,000 Russian troops (see *Letters*, I, 556-57 and fn. 3). Cowper--one of the kindest individuals of his era--would have appeared a positive Cossack even to Coleridge at his height as a Tory spokesman.

Though it would be pleasant when examining textual scholarship (one's own or another's) to find that there are no errors at all, Baird, King, and Ryskamp seem not to be exempt from the human condition. In *Letters*, the editors have made the dubious decision to employ the printed colon (usually but not always) to represent the two dots Cowper intended to represent the hyphen. See, for example, "to:day" and "to:morrow" (I, 310), and "Grey:headed" and "Giddy:headed" (I, 355). Where the spacing of a line was difficult, we find "Breeches: maker" (I, 349). King and Ryskamp state as principles that even when reproducing holograph letters, they *silently* "adjust" punctuation "when required for smooth reading," expand abbreviations, raise and lower capital letters, and add (and omit) apostrophes to accord "with modern practice." These decisions are debatable both on theoretical grounds (*vide* Bowers and Tanselle) and on a practical level, inasmuch as the occurrence of informal abbreviations often provides clues about the intimacy of the correspondents, and capitalization reflects emphasis.

My collations with selected original sources, holograph and printed, suggest that, these technical matters aside, the level of accuracy in the *Letters*

is very high. I have found a mere handful of oversights in the texts: the most noteworthy were one verbal omission (I, 484, line 28, for "send forth" read "send them forth") and a failure to italicize the last four words on I, 70. The text of *Poems* also seems to be very accurate, and again my chief concern is the omission of a detailed record of collations (including punctuation and orthography) with authorities other than the copy-text. Otherwise, the few questions I have after spot-collating do not rise above the level of the problems in "Hymn 10" (I, 149), where Baird and Ryskamp give a semi-colon (instead of a colon) at the end of line 20 and fail to capitalize "there" in the collation to line 9. Throughout, their copy-texts are thoughtfully chosen and conservatively followed.

# NEWSLETTER

## THE NORTON BLAKE

The second printing of *Blake's Poetry and Designs: A Norton Critical Edition* appears to have a secure binding. Anyone whose duly purchased copy of the first printing fell apart may receive a new book by writing to Mr. James L. Mairs, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10036. It is necessary to return the first two pages of any damaged copy (the false title and title pages) for replacement. It would be appreciated if teachers would batch the necessary pages for all students' copies needing replacing and mail in bulk to Mr. Mairs' attention. These pages must be returned so that Norton can back up its complaints to the subcontractor who provided the "Perfect Binding," as the trade name has it. Complimentary copies, except for legitimate desk copies, cannot be replaced. The editors apologize for the inconvenience to all concerned and urge that recipients of replacement copies request the second (*corrected*) printing from Norton.

## HUNTINGTON SYMPOSIUM & EXHIBITION

In conjunction with an exhibition of "Prints by the Blake Followers" to be held November through February 1982, the Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery is holding a symposium on Saturday, 13 February. The tentative program includes papers by G. E. Bentley, Jr. ("Blake and the Blake Followers: Biographical Information"), Robert N. Essick ("John Linnell as a Printmaker"), Shelley M. Bennett ("The Blake Followers in the Context of Contemporary English Art"), and Morton D. Paley ("Samuel Palmer's Illustrations to Milton"). There will be a registration fee of \$3.00. For reservations to attend the symposium, write to the Henry E. Huntington Art Gallery, 1151 Oxford Rd., San Marino, CA 91108, or call (213) 792-6141, ext. 317.

Though the pricing policies of the Clarendon Press seem designed to return us to the early days of Oxford University, when books were chained to library shelves, we can be grateful that the contents of these two volumes will reward the scholar who seeks them out. I am less happy with the quality of binding, which (as was the case with Shelley's *Letters*, as issued by Clarendon some years ago) seems in danger of coming to pieces as I finish writing this review. The management of a historically great press--one that still attracts some of the world's best scholarship--ought to be able to employ book designers, printers, and binders capable of producing a physical artifact commensurate in quality with its intellectual content.

## SANTA CRUZ CONFERENCE: BLAKE & CRITICISM

The conference will take place from Thursday evening, 19 May, through Saturday, 21 May. With the exception of an opening address by Hazard Adams, there will be no formal paper presentations. Instead, papers will be turned in by late March so that they may be circulated among the participants well before the conference. At the conference itself, each author will offer a précis of the paper; this will be followed by the solicited response of another participant, and then general discussion. "Audience" and "participants" will be one and the same.

Those contributing papers and/or responses include Hazard Adams, Donald Ault, Vince De Luca, Morris Eaves, Gavin Edwards, Michael Fischer, Geoffrey Hartman, Nelson Hilton, Paul Mann, Jerome McGann, W. J. T. Mitchell, Alicia Ostriker, Morton Paley, David Simpson, Daniel Stempel, Thomas Vogler, and Hayden White.

Accommodations have been arranged at the Holiday Inn in Santa Cruz, which is offering a special rate of \$35 single/\$40 double for reservations made up to one month before the conference; please specify that you will be attending the conference.

Please address any questions to "Blake & Criticism," Literature Board, UCSC, Santa Cruz, CA 95064 (tel. 408-429-4591).

## HELP ME MAKE IT THROUGH THE NIGHT

According to a notice in *Girl About Town* magazine, St. James's Church in Piccadilly was to stage "the first ever continuous reading of the complete works of William Blake" on 10-11 November. The reading, called "A Day and a Night in the Life of William Blake," was part of the Piccadilly Festival. Admission was 75p, and food and drink were available.