

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

John Beer, William Blake

James Bogan

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 18, Issue 3, Winter 1984-85, pp. 151-152



out this volume. Professor James King has published an essay entitled "An Unlikely Alliance: Fuseli as Revisor of Cowper's Homer" in *Neophilologus*, 67 (1983), 468-79, that adds to Cowper's few comments on Henry Fuseli's involvement some quotations from Fuseli's manuscript letters about his reading and suggestions for improvements in the translation. This article, together with Cowper's remarks to and about Joseph Johnson's way of sending him manuscripts to read for possible publication, casts light on the way Johnson—and presumably other bookseller-publishers—conducted business in the 1780's and 1790's. The attentive reader of Cowper's *Letters* will learn many other things about authorship and publication in the period, but let me leave students of Blake with two in the area of technology: Cowper asked for—and seems to have received—in December 1787 "a new invention, called an everlasting pencil," which seems to have been very similar to mechanical pencils of more recent vintage (see pp. 72 and 76). And unless I am much mistaken, Cowper's remark to John Johnson on 18 December 1790, "I address you with a new pen, a great rarity with me, and for which I am indebted to my Lady Cousin" (p. 443), must mean that he wrote with a steel pen point, rather than a quill—something I would not have thought likely for a person in Cowper's rural retirement at that date. (According to the article on "Pen" in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Metallic pens, although known since the days of Pompeii, were little used until the 19th century and did not become common until near the middle of that century." The article goes on to mention that Joseph Priestley had such a pen handmade for him in 1780 and to describe "Steel pens made and sold in London by a man named Wise in 1803. . . .") Neither of these innovations in writing equipment struck me as being as novel, however, as some of Cowper's idiomatic phrases, as when he (addicted to the use of playful pet names, such as the "Frogs" for the Throckmortons and "Cuzzy-Wuzzy" for Lady Hesketh) addressed Lady Hesketh, in a term of endearment, as a "gentle Yahoo" (p. 76).

The copy that Oxford University Press sent for review this time seems to be more sturdily bound and more physically durable than the copies of volumes I and II about which I complained in the earlier reviews. Though a reviewer's single copy remains too small a sample for purposes of valid generalization, I am delighted to testify to my pleasure in finding improvement in an area that posed a serious problem in the copies of the two previous volumes that I saw. A British colleague once suggested to me that the reason that the food in English restaurants remained so abominable, in comparison with the very fine cooking in British homes of my acquaintance, was simply that the British are too polite to complain about the shoddy goods and service. Rather than allow major publishers or other institutions in our area of professional interest and competence to

degenerate into the equivalent of Fawlty Towers, it is our individual and collective responsibility to call their attention to inadequacies that are within their power to correct, assured that they will consider such advice a favor because those in positions of responsibility really strive to gain the respect and gratitude of the profession they serve. To find that a problem I pointed out in reviewing previous volumes (they almost fell apart in one's hand) has, apparently, been remedied gives me renewed hope for the return of the World's Great Age.

John Beer. *William Blake*. Windsor, Berkshire, England: Profile Books, 1982. 52 pp. £1.50.

Reviewed by James Bogan

The concept is admirable: a fifty-page booklet on Blake and his works, something more than a textbook introduction and less than a major study. John Beer's *William Blake* fits the outward description but does not provide the essential information needed by the newcomer to Blake. He does chart Blake's intellectual life well, making clear the links to Swedenborg and Thomas Taylor. His perceptive reading of "London" is enhanced by the contrast to an Isaac Watts poem for children which begins: "Whene'er I take my Walks abroad, / How many Poor I see?" Other comparisons to Watts are interesting but inappropriate for a general reader.

After a generation of warnings that Blake's poems cannot be experienced fully without the illustrations, I have often felt that the *words* are now being overlooked in favor of the pictures, but Beer totally ignores Blake as an artist-engraver. No mention is made of the designs that are fused to the poems. Perhaps the author was restricted by the format of a "Writers and Their Work" series, which shows once again that Blake does not submit to categorization without a severe distortion of his work.

Attempting to describe *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem* briefly is a challenge Blake himself never took up—with good reason. In a book such as this, the task should be to intrigue the reader and provide a few land-

marks by which to explore the *terra incognita* of the epics. Although Urizen is characterized deftly, everyone else gets short shrift. All that is said about Los is that in *Jerusalem*, "Los is now the hero." The balance of creative and destructive forces in Blake's works needs fuller exposition.

The bibliography is problematic since Blake's works are given without indication of the number of editions he printed or the variation in plate arrangement, a fact that should not be left out even for a neophyte. The list of critical works is fairly complete but indifferently annotated.

In 1799 the Reverend Dr. Trusler insulted Blake by suggesting that the artist needed someone to "elucidate" his ideas. Blake rejoined: "That which can be

made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care." As teachers of Blake we are on perilous ground unless our own instruction is calculated to "rouze the faculties [of our students] to act." In bringing a class beyond *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (and back again) it does help to set up some guideposts and do some unabashed elucidating, but I do not believe the day should be spent in endless distinctions between shadows and spectres. Blake's picture-poems work magic if they are experienced visually and aurally. For those who need explanation without oversimplification I still recommend Albert Roe's chapter on "Blake's Symbolism" in *The Illustrations to the Divine Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953). After that, as they say on the shores of Lake Udan Adan, you are on your own.

Jerome J. McGann. *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation*. Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983. x + 172 pp. \$15.00.

Reviewed by Michael Fischer

Jerome J. McGann's *The Romantic Ideology* is an important, if sometimes disappointing, book. Concentrating on recent academic discussions of Romanticism, McGann finds the present scholarly approach to Romanticism "so ignorant or forgetful of its subject, so intent upon its own productive process, that it seems capable of any sort of nonsense" (18). In place of the "loose critical thinking" (29) that presumably governs our current understanding of Romanticism, McGann proposes a "critical" or "historical" investigation indebted to Heine's *The Romantic School* and Marx's *The German Ideology* as well as to work of Raymond Williams, Louis Althusser, Pierre Machery, Terry Eagleton, and Galvano Della Volpe. Though incomplete and, in places, vague, McGann's argument is nonetheless forceful and deserves the atten-

tion of anyone interested in English Romanticism and the institutional underpinnings of academic criticism.

According to McGann, "the Romantic ideology" is that poetry can rise above the material circumstances that occasion it. Romantic poetry, as McGann sees it, is marked by various acts of "displacement," "idealization," "evasion," "erasure," "attenuation," and "occlusion," all aimed at "disguising" the historical realities that the poet wants to transcend. In a provocative reading of "The Ruined Cottage" and "Tintern Abbey," two of McGann's many examples, he argues that Wordsworth characteristically grounds his work in historical fact. "The Ruined Cottage," as Wordsworth indicated in his Fenwick note, deals with the depression of the weaving industry in southwest England in 1793, and "Tintern Abbey," as the title states, revisits on 13 July 1798 a ruined abbey first visited in the summer of 1793. In each case, the setting involves strife and contradiction, the abbey, for example, serving in the 1790s as "a favorite haunt of transients and displaced persons" (86). In "Tintern Abbey," the juxtaposition of the "pastoral farms" with the "vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods" illustrates what McGann calls "an ominous social and economic fact of the period: that in 1793 no great distance separated the houseless vagrant from the happy cottager, as 'The Ruined Cottage' made so painfully clear" (86). Wordsworth, however, evokes these troubled settings only to replace them with permanent "forms of beauty" visible to the imaginative eye that sees through transitory appearances (here, the ruined abbey) into the timeless "life of things." By the end of the poem, "the mind," in short, "has triumphed over its times," leaving us "only with the initial scene's simplest natural forms: 'these steep woods and lofty cliffs, And this green pastoral landscape' [158-9]. Everything else has been erased—the abbey, the beggars and displaced vagrants, all that