

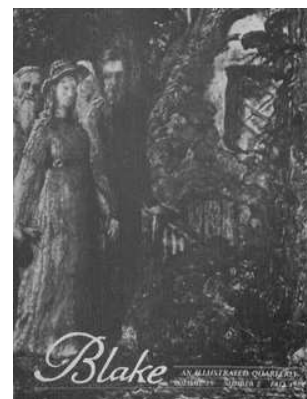
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

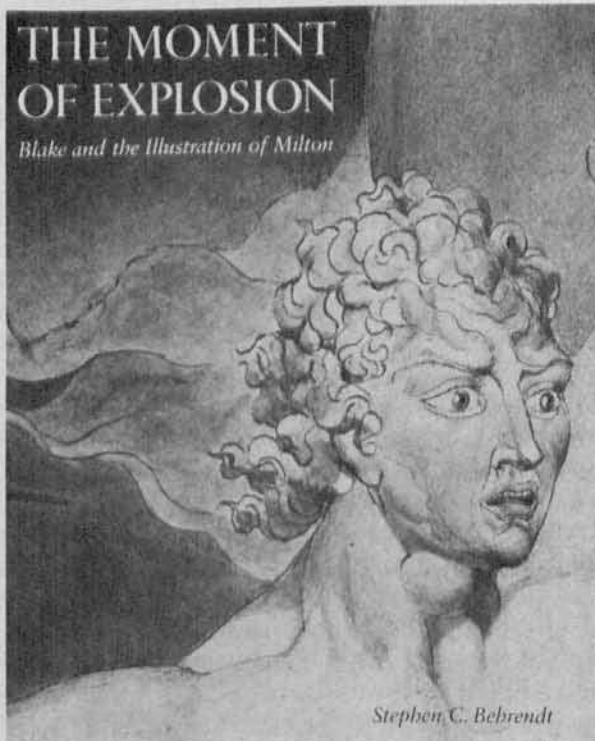
Stephen C. Behrendt, *The Moment of Explosion: Blake and the Illustration of Milton*; Edward Hodnett, *Image and Text: Studies in the Illustration of English Literature*

Karl Kroeber

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REVIEWS



Stephen C. Behrendt. *The Moment of Explosion: Blake and the Illustration of Milton.* Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983. 235 pp., 24 color plates, 54 b&w illus. \$32.50.

Edward Hodnett. *Image and Text: Studies in the Illustration of English Literature.* London: Scolar Press, 1982. 280 pp., 42 illus. \$35.00.

Reviewed by Karl Kroeber

Behrendt presents us with a conscientious study of Blake's Milton illustrations, which he regards as undertaking to "correct not only Milton but also the presumed faults of his eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century critics" (p. 1). Blake's designs accomplish this double correction by abstracting the spiritual or symbolic essence of the poetry, rediscovering and realigning Milton's mythical

and metaphorical structures in order to induce in the reader a visionary perception comparable to the artist's. This alertness to Blake's concern for his art's effect is salutary. Behrendt, naturally enough, begins with a discussion of *Milton* that leads logically into an analysis of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* illustrations. The crux of his findings is developed in the second chapter treating "The Theme of Choice," in Behrendt's view "central to all Blake's Milton illustrations" (p. 34), and the foundation for his correcting both in his poetry and in his illustrations what he took to be misreadings of Milton. The centerpiece for all such considerations must be, of course, *Paradise Lost*, and for Behrendt the epic proves the core of Blake's re-orienting of tradition, deformed in part by Milton's own obscuring of the true thrust of his poem. Blake's re-clarifying of Milton's self-obscuring pivots on insistence that the Son is the "absolute hero of *Paradise Lost*," effecting and providing "the paradigm for eternal spiritual and imaginative resurrection" (p. 185). Behrendt's thesis is difficult to disagree with, and it is no denigration of his good sense and perspicuity to suggest that his book's most exciting feature is its eighty large, clear illustrations, most of Blake's designs, of course, but including well-chosen examples from other Milton illustrators. The bibliography, however, is highly "selected" indeed, and the index of names only is virtually useless.

Hodnett's book is far more provocative and stylistically surprising. The chapter on Blake seems a shade more impressive than other chapters, but its manner is, I should judge, representative. On p. 87 we are told of Blake that "nudes were his stock in trade, and he did his best to draw them correctly." Our man gets an E for effort here, but later in the paragraph the accolade is a bit clouded: "By reducing most of his figures to nudes, by picturing types rather than individuals, and by generalizing or eliminating backgrounds, Blake sought to achieve a sense of universality, and to a degree he succeeded." One does wonder what degree of universality might be regarded as successful. Pressing on to p. 92, however, one encounters a reference to "Enitharman," to add new diversity to Blake's sexual ambiguities in *Urizen*, the passage climaxing, if that is the word: "The extraordinary title-page design pictures Urizen as a naked long-bearded man huddled cross-legged on an open book writing with a quill in both extended hands. The colours are said to have been mixed with glue and applied by a second impression of the plate." I wish I had space to explore fully Hodnett's sequiturs, but I can at least suggest a possible source for that quill in both extended hands: it is found on p. 102, where we are reassured, sort of, that "Blake probably got his effects unintentionally to a certain extent." Particularly when dealing with an eccentric like Blake, a scholar can't be too careful.