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R E V I E W

John W. Ehrstine, William Blake's Poetical  
Sketches

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REVIEW

William Blake's *Poetical Sketches*, by John W. Ehrstine.  
Washington State University Press (1967); pp. [x] + 108 pp.

It is a pity that the first full-length study of the *Poetical Sketches* to be published since Margaret Ruth Lowery's pioneering work of 1940 should be so little worthy the serious attention of a Blake student. Ehrstine is one of the familiar new breed of academic book-producers, whose business is not scholarship but novel thesis-weaving. Having assimilated certain ideas and critical techniques, they apply them ruthlessly to any work that has hitherto been fortunate enough to escape such attentions. The process is simple and the result--that of book-production--is infallible. If the poor little poems protest while struggling in their Procrustean bed, one covers their noise with bland assertions and continues to mutilate them. Eventually they satisfy one's preconceptions. Unfortunately, they may also impose on other people. In reviewing such books one must blame mainly the publishers and their advisors; secondly the universities for their incredibly lax assessment and training of postgraduate students; thirdly the authors, who are usually dupes of their own processes, for rushing into print without consulting the best scholars in their field.

Ehrstine shows his lack of scholarship on the first two pages of his book; thereafter he has an uphill battle in convincing the reader that he has some special insights which compensate for this, once fashionable, disability. It is perhaps unfortunate that we should come to his most convincing work at the end of the book, as he is there discussing poems which come closest to satisfying his thesis, which is briefly that "the richest understanding of a poem depends on seeing it in the context of Blake's organic thought, in the context of what his vision later led him to". The poems addressed to the seasons are probably among the latest of the *Poetical Sketches* to have been composed; so at least Ehrstine has the best chance with them of seeing the fringes of Blake's later vision. I don't go in for precognition much myself, but even those who do will find it hard to credit the foreshadowings which Ehrstine finds in some of these early poems.

One's first shock is to find Ehrstine quoting Damon uncritically about the verse of Blake's time: "Then, the other versifiers were printing but heroic couplets and sentimental quatrains." We next find him castigating T. S. Eliot for finding that the poems show "immense power of assimilation", being "very eighteenth century" and "successful attempts to do something small". On page 2, also, he shows no knowledge of Coleridge's interest in Blake, and ignores Hewlett as well as Margoliouth's article on "Blake's Mr. Mathew". He also contrives to misspell Crabb Robinson and Northrop Frye. This is not prepossessing.

Ehrstine's understanding of Blake's later vision is mainly through assimilation of Gleckner's work, with an uncritical acceptance of Northrop Frye; he looks forward mainly to the *Songs* and the *Marriage*, but ignores *The French Revolution*, which would sometimes have been more to the point. He groups the *Poetical Sketches* themselves rather arbitrarily by subject and--he thinks--chronologically. This is, of course, somewhat dangerous. It is convenient to consider the "Songs" by themselves; whether or not as "Toppling Innocence", but even Ehrstine has difficulty in keeping "Fair Elenor" within his section headed "Fragments of Politics". One must also be mildly surprised to find "An Imitation of Spenser"

and "Blind-Man's Buff" in a section entitled "The Technique of Politics", with "King Edward the Third" and the prologues. In order to find thematic unity between poems so different, Ehrstine invokes "the technical devices of irony and symbolic allegory". The symbolic allegory is imported from later poems (without any consideration whether the symbols function ambivalently even there). For instance, Ehrstine manages to read dark meanings even into the light-hearted song, "I love the jocund dance" by saying: "The oak tree and the laughing 'old villagers' are ominous symbols in Blake, and he uses them as such in 'The Ecchoing Green' of *Innocence*. There, too, the speaker is not aware of the danger in the laughter of old people. Yet it is precisely those people, laughing at rather than enjoying and sharing the innocence, who will inflict the senility of their Experience on the young." To interpret the laughter in "The Ecchoing Green" as derision is itself fantastic; to suggest on the basis of this interpretation that we are supposed to find ominous implications in the laughter of the earlier poem is to deride Blake's control of that poem. Blake's control of the mood of "I love the jocund dance" does not permit ominous speculations, which can be found only by ignoring the poem as a poem--where parts are controlled by their relation to the whole--and treating it as a cipher. Similarly, Ehrstine ignores the whole mood of "Blind-Man's Buff" when he begins to decode its "symbolism": "The poem opens with the young people sitting in a hall in which the sun of pastoral simplicity, where children belong, is replaced by a seemingly cheery fire. It is winter outdoors, and the fire in the hearth, besides representing a contraction of the sun, is also symbolic of selfish passion, characteristic of oncoming Experience. The hall itself is indicative of a confinement. The world within the poem is then closed, and that is a sure sign of the closed sensory world of Experience." What could be more perverse than this? But this is what happens when one is more interested in the system, the thesis, than in the poem. There is never any thought given to the tradition of this kind of poem, which deals in shrewd insight not symbolism--Goldsmith being the obvious mentor here.

Ehrstine does pretend to read the *Poetical Sketches* first of all as poems, and he makes a few sketchy remarks about versification or style, but he seems incapable of responding to the poetry--or even to the humour--and is almost always found on the side of the mockers. His last two paragraphs are incredibly self-contradictory, praising the occasional brilliance, then assuming that Blake quite likely was ashamed of his work, then finding the "miracle of communication" in each of the poems. It turns out that the miracle consists in Blake's ability to "radiate the first heat" of his later vision--a miracle indeed. We can conclude that Ehrstine would find these poems devoid of interest if the later works had never been written. He does not look very carefully, often, at the poems themselves. Discussing the rhyming quatrains of "Fresh from the dewy hill", he observes that "Blake has attempted the kind of Miltonic blank verse of which other later eighteenth-century writers were fond". On the "Mad Song", he quotes Lindsay's remarks on the metre (ignoring Saintsbury), then tries to correct him by saying: "In each of the eight-line stanzas the first three lines are dimeter, making use indiscriminately of iambs and anapests. The fifth, sixth and seventh lines are trimeter, and then another dimeter forms the cadence of the stanza." This prosodic description is similar to Ostriker's, who is never mentioned, but it ignores the fourth line, the use of spondees, inversions and monosyllabic feet, the effect of climax and variety in each stanza. He makes simple errors in reading, as when, discussing "I love the jocund dance", he says "the colors of the 'innocent bow'r' are specific", showing he has not understood Blake's metonymic reference either to two kinds of bread, white and brown or to milk and bread. Considering "Fresh from the dewy hill", he thinks that the last

stanza implies that "the restrictions placed on the youth by adult morality force him to visit the girl by night"; though it is obvious that the black-ey'd maid sleeps in the village without him--as indeed the companion song, "When early morn walks forth" shows in its first stanza. Reading "Contemplation", he finds a formula, "sorrow plus mirth will make true joy"; but Blake obviously contrasts the mirth associated with artificiality (the painted cheek) against the "humble garb true joy puts on". True joy is associated with humility and natural simplicity, not at all with the conjunction of mirth and sorrow, which are both associated with pride and city life.

Apart from nonsense, Ehrstine adds very little to our knowledge of the *Poetical Sketches*. He leans heavily on Erdman when discussing the political aspects of the poems, and follows him in discerning irony in the apparently patriotic "King Edward the Third". Erdman's study is massively based on a knowledge of Blake's likely sources and is worth any number of books like Ehrstine's, and Erdman is more sensitive to the actual ambiguity of the fragment as it stands. We would be better helped by a critique of Erdman's position than by the simple variant which Ehrstine provides. Blake's position may be eventually seen as above, rather than below, the ironies implicit in the situation. His deep sympathy with character tends to outweigh irony here as in, say, "Earth's Answer"; delusions are presented in Blake most typically with dramatic sympathy rather than irony--his study of Edward III's tyranny may ultimately have excused rather than condemned him, in line with Blake's annotations to Boyd's Dante. The concern with motives, expressed in scenes 3 and 4, tends to support such a reading; if it were simply an anti-war play, the irony would be heavier and more pervasive. This fragment is the most tantalizing experiment in the *Poetical Sketches*; to me, it suggests that, had Blake been encouraged, he could have been a great deal more than Shakespeare's imitator. Perhaps the difficulty of plotting an action deterred him; rather, the complication of a traditional plot would not have interested him.

Before I received Ehrstine's book, I hoped that at least it would provide a critique of Lowery's source study, which is the most obvious need at present. But Ehrstine is curiously unaware of Lowery's deficiencies. The gap remains to be filled; though studies of individual poems and groups of poems, such as Erdman's, and Gleckner's (of the Season lyrics), have advanced our understanding a great deal. Ehrstine is wrong, incidentally, in saying that Gleckner's article establishes that "Blake's four poems owe very little to Thomson or others of the eighteenth century" (p. 108); Collins' *Ode to Evening* is a basic source, and Joseph Warton's *Ode I. To Fancy* most likely influenced the personification of Autumn, who in line 84 "stains with wine his jolly cheeks" (Blake of course using the biblical periphrasis, "blood of the grape" for wine, and modifying a snatch from *As You Like It* to read "And tune thy jolly voice to my fresh pipe").

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