

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY  
**BLAKE**

R E V I E W

Robert F. Gleckner, *Blake's Prelude: Poetical Sketches*

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*Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*, Volume 20, Issue 4, Spring 1987, pp. 146-151



& Earth," with its linear organization (from beginning to middle to end) is folded into a scroll. End and beginning are now in the center of the text rather than at its perimeter. This is what Urizen discovers on page 121 when he says:

Then Go O dark futurity I will cast thee  
 forth from these  
 Heavens of my brain nor will I look upon  
 futurity more  
 I cast futurity away & turn my back upon  
 that void  
 Which I have made for lo futurity is in this  
 moment . . .

(19-22, E 390)

It is perhaps to underline the change of orientation demanded by the Ninth Night that the vision of regenerated humanity is written on a proof of the first page of Young's *Night Thoughts*. To complete this poem (to look for an End which could give it a final shape) is to see the vision of awakening slip beyond our grasp and to be drawn back into another dream of nine Nights.

Rather than arguing that before Blake "abandoned" *The Four Zoas* he tried "to gather the new and old threads of his Prophecy, and to strengthen the whole with new patches"<sup>7</sup> in the hope of creating a formally complete and unified poem, it is possible to argue that Blake left his creation myth in an unfinished condition because this was the only form which is appropriate for the effort of a fallen self to recount the origins, history, and regeneration of the world. Moreover, in this poem it is the tension between completion and incompleteness, affirmation and irony, which ensures that the history of Los, which is the history of the fallen world, remains open to the possibility of regeneration. The path from *Vala* to *The Four Zoas* does not lead to a "major cultural disaster"; it leads to a remarkable instance of what Rajan calls an unfinished (rather than an incomplete) poem.

<sup>1</sup>Paul Mann, "The Final State of *The Four Zoas*," *Blake* 18 (1986): 204-09.

<sup>2</sup>Robert N. Essick, "The Four Zoas: Intention and Production," *Blake* 18 (1986): 219.

<sup>3</sup>Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1947), p. 269; G. E. Bentley, Jr., ed. "Vala": or "The Four Zoas" (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 165; Mann, p. 208.

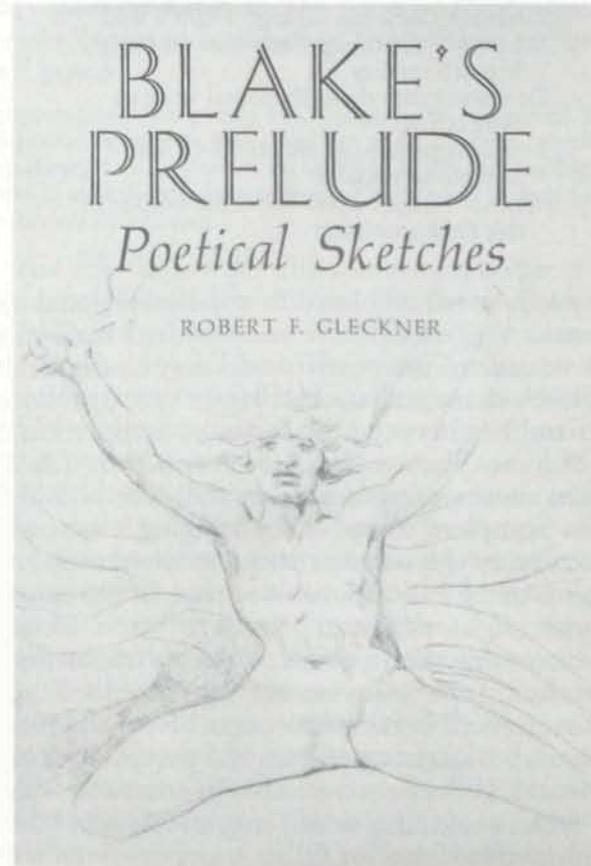
<sup>4</sup>Balachandra Rajan, *The Form of the Unfinished: English Poetics from Spenser to Pound* (Princeton, NJ: Univ. Princeton Press, 1985), p. 14.

<sup>5</sup>I describe this conflict and view of the relationship between the two seventh nights in an article entitled "Those Two Seventh Nights Once Again" (forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup>Blake did of course, complete *Milton* and *Jerusalem* after he stopped working on *The Four Zoas*; but these poems are no longer attempts to give a history of the fallen world; they are "Visionary forms dramatic."

<sup>7</sup>Bentley, p. 165.

## REVIEWS



Robert F. Gleckner. *Blake's Prelude: Poetical Sketches*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982. xii + 202 pp. \$15.00.

Reviewed by Michael J. Tolley

Still the wonder grows. What Hewlett in 1876 condemned as the plagiarism of an "Imperfect Genius," has become, with successive refinements and extensions of the pioneering work in 1940 of Margaret Lowery, a swelling tribute of praise to an original (not merely "untutored") genius. Gleckner's researches, the most

extensive ever undertaken into the sources of the *Poetical Sketches*, and his critical examination, the most thorough ever given to the book as a whole, must increase our astonishment, not only that one young head could carry all Blake knew, but that he could have worked at such a sophisticated level, even in the examples Gleckner finds least successful, as rightful heir to the Bible, Milton and Spenser. Could the youthful Blake have known that he was already producing a book that is an antibook, of sketches that are not sketchy, but "finished sketches" in the manner of Michelangelo, who "did never sketch," according to Blake, for "Every line of his has Meaning" ("Florentine Ingratitude")? So, with due allowance, Gleckner concludes (p. 152): Blake in 1783 set out to emulate the masters, even if it is doubtless "too much to credit" him "with then regarding every line of his own poetical 'sketches' as imbued with meaning." Gleckner, thus, agrees with John Ehrstine against T.S. Eliot, that these poems are not "quite mature and successful attempts to do something small" but are rather the sketching out of "something very large." We may infer that critical attention has shifted from the superficial form to the grand inferred program: this penciled figure will be used in *The School of Athens*, that brief lyric in *Jerusalem*.

At this point I should make two things clear. Firstly, I am aware, Gleckner perhaps insufficiently so here, that it is dangerous to make analogies between Blake's practice as a poet and his work as a graphic artist. Gleckner loves striking phrases but he is sometimes seduced by them (and accordingly we still have to try to resist his "Higher Innocence"). The idea of the "finished sketch" is Gleckner's, not Blake's, because the idea of finishing was to Blake relative not absolute. Secondly, Gleckner is very careful not to fall into the trap of supposing that Blake's early poems should be read in the light of his later ones; the problem he raises rather is whether we should read the early poems with the same degree of attention as we do the later ones and with similar expectations regarding their functions or strategies.

I have great sympathy for Gleckner's style of scholarship and for his critical approach in this instructive book, which is far better than those of several critics to whom inexplicably he defers. That the book is not magisterial but still exploratory in tone as in effect may be related to the more widespread critical uncertainties of our times; it is hard to imagine that any one will soon write a better book on *Poetical Sketches*, and yet such a study is at once rendered obligatory by the critical problems *Blake's Prelude* engenders.

The problem that looms largest to me is one of over-reading. Blake is, as we all know, a highly allusive poet, but was he always so allusive, everywhere in his work?

Gleckner distinguishes persuasively between poems (he thinks they are to be dated earlier) in which words and phrases are snatched out of context like gems prized from a brooch and those in which there is a kind of resonant dialogue with the sources (these are perhaps the later and better poems). Gleckner writes with authority on these matters, having conducted the kind of thorough search we associate with Roger Lonsdale; he is also genuinely interested to discover the truth about Blake's relationship with his sources. Sometimes, inevitably, he has found too much; occasionally he makes mistakes or finds too little; but he always tries to present the evidence fairly and scrupulously and he has the great virtue of being willing to trust what at first sight may seem an unlikely association sufficiently to press further for supporting evidence which may force a skeptical reader to consider it equally closely. It is also good that Gleckner usually, though not everywhere, seeks to enhance rather than diminish the reputation of particular poems. The effects vary: Gleckner is in my view wrong so to undervalue "Fair Elenor" as to miss some of its allusions and be blind to its few virtues; he amply confirms the satirical qualities attributed to "King Edward the Third" by Erdman and others through finding in it ironical references to Milton; he deepens our appreciation of the celebrated seasons poems (though not of each equally); he fails to convince me that "Samson" is such "an extraordinary achievement" as his reading of the sources suggests because too many details in the reading are unpersuasive.

Perhaps the most instructive of such discussions is that of "To Morning," where he brings massive scholarship to the close analysis of a poem which, I suppose, most of us like but none of us finds quite satisfying, the cumulative effect of which is to demonstrate just why we are unsatisfied, even if we may not, as I do not, agree with every step in the analysis. I like the reluctance with which Gleckner concedes that this relatively weak lyric does not work: "The final success of the resultant melange, it seems to me, however delicately lovely the poem as a whole, must be called into question." Gleckner's critical procedure here is to assume that every word, phrase or image employed by Blake in "To Morning" must be redolent of its source, whether Spenserian epithalamic (but curiously reversed) at the opening, or ominously Miltonic as it proceeds, or inexplicably vernerian (celebratory of hunting, in the classical manner) at the close. The effect, though impressive, makes one wonder whether one should not rather assume, in order to rescue the poem, that Blake did not mean us to associate his lovely phrases with their highly significant origins at all, so that it is well to remind ourselves that Blake's "Evening Star" and "Morning" companions have

a place in a homelier tradition, that of the children's songs or hymns by such writers as Smart, Wesley and Watts—as John Holloway points out in *Blake: The Lyric Poetry*, pp. 38f. (a book which Gleckner seems, unfortunately, to have missed).

Gleckner affirms that his book "is dedicated to proving" that Blake's labors at *Poetical Sketches* were not merely an escape from the laborious tasks of an apprentice engraver but "constituted a serious enterprise in its own right" (p. 151). I agree with him, but submit that "serious" does not always have to mean "solemn"; it is surprising to read this ponderous judgment on "Blind-Man's Buff" (p. 25):

if it confutes the idyllicism of Thomson's snug cottages, it advances an equally specious history of mankind and "sweet society." The ethic espoused is one of self-restraint, playing one's part, regimentation, and eye-for-eye justice so totally foreign to Blake even in *Poetical Sketches* that one may be justifiably puzzled why he saved this piece from the "hearth so red" with which it begins.

Rather than making overmuch of Thomson as a source (Holloway refers rather to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* II.i.42–57) and berating Blake for his severe ethics and false history, Gleckner might have wondered how it was that Blake, who I am sure hated horseplay, cheating and injustice from his youth up, could write with such genial humor about them "even in *Poetical Sketches*." The morality of the piece seems to me to hit off the thoughts of children on these serious issues admirably, just as Blake enters so well into the comedy (to an outsider) of a child's partial sense of fair play in Tilly Lally's song, "I say, you Joe." No, I like "Blind-Man's Buff" and I don't think one should have to feel apologetic about it.

"Blind-Man's Buff" is one of three "variously inept" poems, characterized by Gleckner as "early" and dealt with in a chapter called "The Muses of Memory," all lamely imitative rather than imaginatively engaged with their sources in the true Blakean style. The other two are "An Imitation of Spenser" and "Fair Elenor." The Spenserian stanzas, "all different and all wrong," need not detain us here, but "Fair Elenor," weak as it is, trips up its critic. Gleckner finds it comic that Elenor, despite Spenser's example in *The Faerie Queene* IV.viii.62, shrieks "aloud"; "how else?" he asks. Spenser and Blake meant that the shriek was loud; I understand that it is possible to shriek faintly, too. Gleckner is so busy laughing at Blake's silly Gothic ballad that he misses his real achievement in the form (which is the reason why, I suppose, some people admire the Gothic mode), which is to evoke rather skillfully the sensation of being trapped in a nightmare. Some of Blake's startling rhythmic effects, the staccato phrasing and dislocations of syntax, can work on us a little if we can suspend our scornful spirit of disbelief for a moment; line 16, especially, seems magical to me. Gleckner misses the "sublime" biblical rhythms in lines 49–51, although he castigates Blake for the inertness of his allusion to Psalm 91.5–6

in lines 33–36 and, more interestingly, proposes a not very apt allusion to Song of Solomon 5 for lines 41–48 on the grounds, it seems, of a supposed similarity between this chapter and the plot of the poem (pp. 18f.). He goes on to assert that "The inappropriateness of the allusion is, curiously, instructive, for it is perhaps Blake's first effort to make 'use' of a source, to bend the allusion to his own context or to qualify his context through allusionary 'punctuation.'" Although I think that the ineptness attributed to the allusion by Gleckner is a consequence of his having picked the wrong biblical text, passages closer to the rhetoric of Elenor's lament for her dead lord tend to support his case that some arbitrary "bending" of an allusion to an inappropriate context has been attempted by the poet (I refuse to comment on the question of chronological priority). I think of such admired passages as Judges 5.27, for the staccato incremental repetition, and of the lament for fallen Lucifer in Isaiah 14.12: "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down . . ." (compare Blake's "But he is darken'd; like the summer's noon, / Clouded; fall'n like the stately tree, cut down" and recall the account of the death of Fuzon in *The Book of Abania* 3:41–44). However, the allusion's failure to work here is not owing to "the excessiveness of the Gothic-balladic frame and language," as Gleckner would have it, because borrowing from biblical rhetoric in order to achieve a sublime excess goes with the genre, but simply because Elenor's lord is not related to Elenor as Lucifer is to Isaiah or as Sisera is to Jael.

I don't think I'm ever going to be much interested in the critical problem of dating the poems in *Poetical Sketches*; Gleckner's speculations on the issue are sensibly based but cannot in the nature of things be wholly convincing. A more interesting issue is that of how and whether the poems should be grouped; some groupings are clear, such as the seasonal and diurnal poems and the pair of songs beginning "When early morn" and "Fresh from the dewy hill," but the interrelationships of the poems within these groups may be problematical. In a chapter labeled "Antithetical Structure," Gleckner discusses mainly the seven lyrics titled "Song" along with the "Mad Song." He does not have interesting things to say about all of these lyrics and sometimes he is hampered by his program. For instance, I think it is a mistake to find an "antithetical perspective" in the fifth stanza of "Fresh from the Dewy Hill," signaled "by its initial 'But':" as I read the poem the "But" is intensive not antithetical. I also think it is reaching too far to find a "marvelously apt" allusion to Spenser's story of Malbecco and Hellenore and then to lament that it is too weakly triggered in the third line of this "Song." As Gleckner more safely proposes, "it is certainly possible that Blake simply drew the laurel-shade locution from his ample store of other stock phrases" (pp. 46f.).

Similarly, in "Mad Song" Gleckner (p. 49) finds "a marvelous allusion if indeed it is creditable" to the Amavia episode in *The Faerie Queene* II.i.46. Unfortunately, the phrase concerned in "Mad Song," "And my griefs unfold," was most likely a misprint for the quite different idea of "my griefs infold." I suspect that Gleckner is attracted to the remote Spenserian echo partly because he doesn't quite understand the metaphorical force of "infold": as I read the text, the speaker of "Mad Song" desires Sleep to gather his griefs into a fold as the shepherd does his flock on a stormy night. This is so much stronger a reading than the printed (but not always uncorrected) text, "unfold," that it is hard to believe it was not Blake's first thought. A simpler error, the supposition that Adam and Eve turned their backs to the East when they departed from Eden, somewhat mars Gleckner's reading (p. 51) of the closing lines of the poem, where also a consideration of Hewlett's reference to *2 Henry IV* II.iii.19 for Blake's "vault / Of paved heaven" might have distracted him from depending overmuch on Milton; the phrase was of course simply a cliché by Blake's time (cf. also Gleckner's note on "King Edward the Third" 5. 19-20 on p. 182). Perhaps I should repeat here that I am not sorry that Gleckner tries on such tentative allusions for size; he is quite right to present the case for them as fully and fairly as he perceives it. If my final impression is that Gleckner relies too much on a search for allusions in his readings, and particularly for allusions to Spenser and Milton, this should not weaken my awareness that we do wrong to neglect them.

Sometimes, nevertheless, it might appear that if Gleckner could not find a way to read a poem through various perceived allusions, he would be left somewhat at a loss. Such a criticism would be unjust; with "When Early Morn," for instance, "one of the least allusive poems in all of the *Sketches*," Gleckner is able to show that Blake's establishment of "the experiential violence of real jealousy" is achieved without "significant allusion" (p. 45). On the other hand, it is hard not to feel that his tepid response to one of the best pieces, "How Sweet I Roam'd" (of which nonetheless he gives largely a just account) is an effect both of his inability to find an interesting source for it and of his failure to fit it within a larger group: he remarks indeed that "its demonstrably simple derivativeness [from Spenserian Petrarchan love poetry] and passive relationship to other songs serve . . . to validate Malkin's statement about its adolescent inception" (pp. 55f.). Is this the same poem as the one I find almost as chilling as "The Erl King"? (Teaching it as a song, I suggest to students that they try going back to the first stanza after the final one to appreciate its formal mimicry of entrapment.) To me it serves as a splendid introduction to the other love songs in *Poetical Sketches*, as well as a useful corrective to uninformed statements about the chronology of Blake's

understanding of Innocence and Experience as contrary states; it casts a long shadow through, say, "The Chimney Sweeper" of *Experience* to "The Golden Net" and "The Crystal Cabinet" and the desperate lovers in *Jerusalem*.

For his chapter on the poems addressed to each of the four seasons, Gleckner seems somewhat cramped for space in building on his valuable 1965 article. Some of the more interesting source material is packed into a few footnotes and his presentation is blurry in places. This must be partly an effect of the variety and quantity of possible sources that are here to be sorted; it is hard to distinguish trees from woods. To deal adequately with these matters would require me to write a long study of Blake's Seasons complementary to my essay on "Blake's Songs of Spring," so I will content myself here with only a few observations. The thrust of Gleckner's chapter title, "Cycle and Anticycle," is to propose that "To Winter" offers a kind of "anti-myth" (Adams's term) or "spectrous parody" of the Spring-Summer-Autumn progression. This is a sound reading of a sequence in which the welcome seasons are invited to "come in, sit down, put your feet up and we'll have a song; please stay awhile," and the bad one to "keep out!" In "To Winter," the iceman cometh perforce, disdaining communication with his human victims, until heaven intercedes and drives him back to Iceland. More seriously, Gleckner shows (perhaps not as forcefully as he might have done) that all the good seasons are associated with Christ, but Winter with Antichrist Satan. The outline is blurred somewhat by a need to discuss the place these lyrics have in the classical tradition initiated by Virgil, Ovid and others and regenerated by Spenser as an English topos, to descend to Blake through Milton, Thomson, Pope, Collins and others; somewhat more by occasionally careless handling and less than optimal integration of these sources both with each other and with the (oriental) Christian scheme which subsumes them. Gleckner has advanced our knowledge so far in these matters that it must seem churlish to say that we can proceed yet further and more securely at every stage, with Virgil, Spenser, Milton, Pope, Collins, Scripture, yet it must be said nevertheless and I doubt whether Gleckner will be surprised by it. (I have, too, to say that Gleckner has generously acknowledged in his book my own work as a fellow toiler in this particular vineyard; all I can do in return is a little pruning and tendriling.) I'll try to be brief here.

In Virgil's *Georgics* IV.62-63, Winter is put to rout by the golden sun and chased beneath the earth. Gleckner's association of Winter with Spenser's wild boar will not pass; he proposes it first on p. 63 (cf. 73f.) in connection with the vision of stasis at the end of the Mutability Cantos, one with which I think Blake would be less comfortable than Gleckner supposes; unfortunately, he completely mangles his quotation from Spenser's *Nature*. Gleckner has demonstrated Blake's debt

to the stanzas on Summer and Autumn in *The Faerie Queene* VII.vii.29, 30, although he makes nothing of Blake's pointed departure from stanza 28 in "To Spring" and does not notice that Spenser's Spring is recollected in the "lusty song of fruits and flowers" in "To Autumn." (Gleckner's suggestion on p. 62 that Spenser's Spring, "all dight in leaves of flowres" parallels Blake's "perfumed garments" is unconvincing in the light of the preferable reference to Song of Solomon 4.11, first noted by Miner.) Gleckner is, I think, the first to propose biblical references for "To Summer," but he makes an awful mess of his quotation from Psalm 84.5-6 as background for the first lines (p. 66). This is a difficult text for translators and commentators, but one would expect that, if he had meant us to recollect it, Blake would have brought the idea of wells or of rain in close context with it. The idea that the Summer's "ruddy limbs and flourishing hair" are also those of the beloved in the Song of Solomon 5.10-11 is attractive but tenuous; if it were meant, how did Blake miss the "gold head" image?

Gleckner is on stronger ground when he claims (pp. 66f.) that Blake "thoroughly Miltonizes his [Summer] into Christ and Creation by equipping him with a 'fervid car' and having him ride 'o'er the deep of heaven,'" quoting *Paradise Lost* VII.214-25 and V.300-01 (mis-cited as to Book X); both should be taken together, but he misses two clinching ideas, one that the voice of the car rider was heard in both poems, the other that the noonday sun in Milton is described as, like Blake's Summer, "mounted." We may notice here that when in "To Autumn" "clust'ring Summer breaks forth into singing" it is making a classic biblical response to the redemptive initiative of God, as in Isaiah 14.7; 44.23; 49.13; 54.1 and 55.12. It is a pity that Gleckner hides in a footnote (p. 174) his proposal that the language and details of Milton's whole passage on the third day of Creation in *Paradise Lost* "are at the center" of "To Autumn," because the idea is clearly of some importance. Only one word-borrowing, "clust'ring," is adduced from the Miltonic passage, and this could have come from elsewhere, for instance from Pope's Autumn Pastoral, where there are several images and phrases suggestive of "To Autumn" besides that, noted by Gleckner, which might lie behind Blake's "golden load." (Gleckner has not in the past been very receptive to my suggestions that Blake was indebted to Pope; another one is that the phrase "and rush into the stream" in "To Summer" echoes "and rush into the sea" in Pope's *Odyssey* IV.786.)

For some reason obscure to me, Gleckner finds that what he calls the "clichéed salvation" at the end of "To Winter" has been sabotaged, because, earlier in the last stanza, the mariner cries "in vain." On the contrary, I take it that the salvation is real, that the wretched mariner only cries "till" rescue comes; Winter won't listen to him but, in due time, heaven will. Blake's realistic assessment of life in a wintry world here is of

a piece with that in "The Chimney Sweeper" of *Songs of Innocence*, which instructs us, not that harm will not be experienced by those doing their duty, but that they need not fear it. You'd have to be mad, as in "Mad Song," to turn your back on hope and Blake nowhere allows despair to overwhelm him. In noting that Blake is portraying Winter as Satan, Gleckner doesn't go on to see how much he is caricaturing him as the Gothic monster Satan is (though I do not think that he meant us to recall either Satan's metamorphosis into a monstrous serpent or Sin's yelling hounds, *pace* Gleckner, pp. 69, 73: the "yelling" surely comes from Collins, *Ode to Evening* 46, as Hewlett proposed; Chatterton also followed Collins, *pace* note 56, p. 174). I find very intriguing Gleckner's suggestion that Winter's pillars refer to those of Satan's gun-carriage in *Paradise Lost* VI.572-73; the suggestion is helped by the wording in one of the sources for Winter's "iron car," Collins's "Ode to Peace"<sup>5</sup>: "To Britain bent his iron car" (Blake has "Nor bend thy pillars with thine iron car"). Against this idea is the "more natural" one of a demon bursting from the adamantine doors of hell across such a pillared way as that constructed by Sin and Death in *Paradise Lost* X: Winter "rides heavy."

I have already encouraged the reader to profit from Gleckner's discussion of "To Morning" in his chapter "Mornings and Evenings." My own reading of "To the Evening Star" would not be quite so somber as that with which Gleckner disturbs himself (p.93) but the force one concedes to the supposed "influence" of the star and its "sacred dew" may well vary from reader to reader. Gleckner is over-suspicious of Blakean stars, but there is no reason to supply a negative reading here (and he should know that Blake is not against stars as such, only against misreadings and systematic orderings of them). A relevant text in Milton, *Paradise Lost* IX.106-07, missed by him here, might help Gleckner towards a more positive response than that in note 33, pp. 177f. Also regarding this note, I should point out that a reference to *Lycidas* 26-31 for "flocks covered with the dew of heaven" is irrelevant, since Milton refers there to the sheep's eating of dew-covered grass. This is an interesting chapter and I'll spare the author from more of my nitpicking.

In "Worldly Wars and Mental Fight," Gleckner focuses on "King Edward the Third" and the three short "political" poems in a valuable discussion. His search in the play for sources from *Paradise Lost* is too thorough to be always convincing, but this should not mean that his general thesis that Milton's poem provides several ironic counterparts to Edward's militaristic ideals may therefore be impugned.

"Prophetic Forms," Gleckner's last chapter before broad conclusions are drawn in the "Epilogue," gives the critic space to discuss in some detail the prose poems. "The Couch of Death" and "Contemplation" are read

against *Paradise Lost* XI and "Il Penseroso" according to a program partly derived, regrettably, from Wagenknecht. Gleckner complains of "an Ossianic flaccidness," especially in the most allusive passages in the poems, but they are less Ossianic in effect than one would expect and the allusions are directly imitative of biblical rhetoric (Gleckner correctly recalls Ecclesiastes for "Contemplation"). His reference to Milton's Nativity Ode for the radiance and angelic visitation of the dying youth in "The Couch of Death" seems unjustified, and his comparison of the pair's Calvinistical self-condemnation to the monsters of *Comus* is unwarranted, but his account of Blake's movement towards a definition of sin is noteworthy. His description of the unclosed structure of "Contemplation" is yet more valuable, suggesting a model for the confrontations of Innocence and Experience and particularly for "Introduction" to *Songs of Experience* and "Earth's Answer." The poem-by-poem discussion is concluded by a serious engagement with "Samson" and particularly the problems of how far the poet is critical of the hero's character and how the fragment is to be set within or against the narratives in Judges 13-16 and *Samson Agonistes*. As with "King Edward the Third," "Samson" seems to me more like a sample of what the young poet could do, given the right encouragement, than the sketch of a work that might easily be finished; it certainly does not fulfill the promise of its beginning, even (I would submit) ironically. Blake had a curious liking for the foiled deliverer, whose warfare, insofar as it is mental, he rightly locates in the dialogues with Dalila. In his attempt to grapple with the puzzle of his annunciation, Samson seems to be measuring the "truth" of the angel's promise against his own knowledge that, in spite of "matchless might," wisdom and talent, he is merely human. Gleckner is a bit hard on Samson in relating (p. 146) this "matchless might" to that of Sin and Death in *Paradise Lost* X.404, but whether the hint is to be taken or not this does not mean that the angel's prophecy is necessarily false, only that it remains oracular (and, perhaps, too difficult for the young Blake). Gleckner might be encouraged to take a more positive view of the angel if, in noting that the name "wonderful" derives from Isaiah 9.6, he were to go on to find a reference to angelic mental warfare (which he will not allow Wittreich to claim) in Isaiah 9.5.

There are errors in this book, there are misprints (not all noted here), there are stylistic infelicities; nevertheless this is an invaluable study, containing many fine perceptions and discoveries, which I recommend highly to all scholars and teachers of Blake.

James King and Charles Ryskamp, eds.  
*The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper. Vol. IV: Letters, 1792-1799.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984. xxxiv + 498 pp. \$91.00

Reviewed by Donald H. Reiman

This volume, in which William Cowper's life draws to its sad close, reveals among its final texts one of the most pathetic tales in the annals of British poetry. The record of Cowper's last years offers few moments of hope or gleams of good spirits from Cowper himself; its shadows are relieved only by the loyalty of his friends, old and new, and by the poet's own courageous fight to maintain before others his civility and decency. He struggled to live as a man, while feeling (as he revealed in private outcries) "like a poor Fly entangled in a thousand webs" or "the hunted hare" (pp. 468-69). By 1795, when he wrote those and even darker words, he believed that God had cast him utterly away because he had failed to commit suicide in his youth, as he retrospectively imagined that God had ordained. In the face of such overwhelming mental anguish and the physical ravages of age, Cowper's attempts to pretend to keep up his spirits in his letters and even to comfort and commiserate with the misfortunes of his friends become a kind of domestic heroism.

Up to a point, Cowper maintained a nearly normal correspondence with most of his friends, not allowing into it the feelings of damnation that poisoned his life. But he could not do so till the very end. Of the 466 pages devoted to the letters of eight years nominally covered in this volume, the letters of 1792 occupy 269 pages, and those for 1793 take 173 pages. No letters at all survive between 14 January 1794 and 27 August 1795, and all of those thereafter repeat the theme voiced in the first words he wrote to his beloved cousin Lady Hesketh on the latter date: "Hopeless as ever . . ." (p. 450). Filling in part of the transitional gap is his brief "spiritual diary" of June-July 1795, which includes the words of despair quoted at the opening of this review. Before 1794, Cowper reserved most of his expressions of spiritual aridity and despair for his letters to the Olney schoolmaster Samuel Teedon, who—as the editors' notes on correspondents make clear—was someone whom Cowper distinctly did not *like* in their early acquaintance, but whom he later found useful as a confessor to hear reports of his strange and usually terrifying dreams. (With characteristic tact and sensitivity, Cowper prepaid at least four out of the five letters he sent to Teedon