

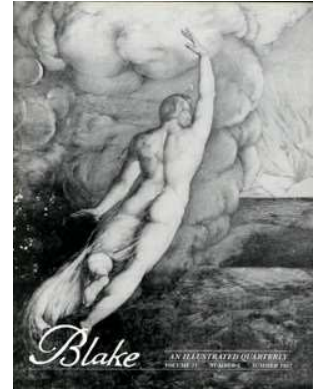
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R E V I E W

Mark Bracher, *Being Form'd: Thinking Through
Blake's Milton*

Brian Wilkie

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Mark Bracher. *Being Form'd: Thinking Through Blake's "Milton."*

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Reviewed by Brian Wilkie

Mark Bracher's *Being Form'd* is an intrepid book in some ways. To begin with, this reading of *Milton* fulfills a promise the author makes at the outset: that he will face up to the entire text of the poem (the pictures receive no attention), without finessing the difficult passages. He also focuses on what he considers the metaphysical dimension of the poem's meaning, as distinguished from the psychological dimension investigated by most interpreters, and this ontological approach denies him one escape-hatch familiar in Blake criticism: the relegation of the events to a merely mental landscape where, in effect, anything can be allowed to happen. In some important ways, then, this book takes Blake more literally than is usual. Bracher believes that when Milton goes to "eternal death" he dies in the ordinary sense of the word, and that this death means the loss of personal consciousness. (Bracher wobbles a little on this point, however; compare pp. 77, 81, 82-83.) We are also to understand that "finitude," death, and various kinds of suffering—including corporal suffering, though not all kinds of suffering based on cruelty and injustice—are part of the ineluctable structure of reality, a fact that Christianity, for example, obfuscates. In light of all this, Bracher attempts the formidable task of justifying Blake's revision of Milton's justifying of "God's" ways, most urgently Blake's claim that in some real sense Milton and humankind can attain infinitude of being.

Bracher's conception of Blake's solution to the last of these problems is that the cessation of existence does not involve the cessation of being. Rather than the maintenance or restoration of our conscious presence, infinity entails for Blake a "mediated presence." This means, for example, that every person (and every thing, even) has an absolutely unique identity, the "Satanic" being, in this context, the belief that individuals are interchangeable, mere borrowers of being from some ultimate source to whom they must, like customers of a bank, pay it back—God, for example. (This is what Bracher calls the "*quid pro quo*," or "feudalistic," metaphysics.) But this individual identity is not fulfilled in immediate presence but rather in "mediated presence" (the influence of Derrida's sense of "presence" is acknowledged but also, largely, disclaimed—p. xiv). Mediated pres-

ence involves interaction between unique identities, a process that does not diminish their being but enhances and expands it. Such unique individuals obviously include human beings, who in dying achieve fuller being through mediated, posthumous presence in other individuals with whom they, in various ways, interact—by being read, say, or revived in the mind.

In the course of making this argument, Bracher establishes a rather elaborate set of allegorical equations—Los, for example, being "entelechy" (*passim*), Ololon being "lamentation" in the sense of the dissatisfaction that makes one search for infinity (p. 7 and *passim*), Rahab and Tirzah being, respectively, "false fulfillment and superficial pleasure" (p. 101 and *passim*), and so on. (Except that the values in the equations are different, this kind of explanatory exposition seems to take us back to the world of S. Foster Damon.) The bulk of the book consists of a thorough, not to say dogged, tracking of these personifications, and of the aforementioned ideas, through exegesis of just about every line of *Milton*. After the first few chapters, there is not much more news to report.

What there is to report, however, is often arresting. The Satanic is generally deplored by Bracher, but several times he insists that the Satanic has its legitimate place in the scheme of things (e.g., pp. 22, 28-29, 38). We discover a Blake who not only opposed orthodox Christianity but also (p. 50) the New Testament (along with the Old, of course). We discover too a Blake who is strangely tolerant of, almost complacent about, suffering, largely because, if one takes the long view, everything is harmonious, or could be if human beings understood the interrelations of mediated presence or "preservation through supersession" (p. 127). The following makes me severely uncomfortable: "From another perspective, however, this violence and destructiveness of the process of actualization is seen to be pleasing and comforting. . . . By themselves these events are horrible, but in relation to each other they are seen to constitute a larger whole which is pleasant and reassuring" (pp. 140-41). This sounds Panglossian, and although Bracher recognizes Blake's exposition of the errors of natural religion in 40:9-13 (pp. 258-59), he can suggest a Blake who is pretty soft on it: "This view of destruction as the prerequisite for generation has affinities with the views of natural religion, and Blake employs images of Bacchic revelry and ceremony to evoke the connection and reveal the valid aspect of the Dionysian mysteries. . . ." (p. 159).

I am being a little unfair here; the passage just quoted refers to the wine-press scene that also figures in *The Four Zoas*, and admittedly this scene of gleeful violence is very hard to take, much less explain. Bracher could conceivably have made a good case here, as with the somewhat lesser heresies mentioned above, if he seemed to appreciate better the hardness of some of his

sayings, and particularly if he showed a greater awareness of the critical consensus about Blake and the context provided by Blake's other works. We would then know which of his points he intends as aggressive iconoclasm. But, except at the beginning and end of the book, Bracher has tunnel vision, providing few such glances outside *Milton*.

As might be expected, so close a reading of the poem as Bracher gives us yields some perceptive insights, on a number of particular matters: the various ways in which implicit meanings are introduced into the poem (p. 8), the Sons of Los (pp. 153-54), their creation of units of time (p. 171), and other passages too. As might also be expected in light of his general premises, some other readings are hard to swallow. Bracher himself seems to feel once or twice that he has painted himself into a corner, as when, after explaining that the Elect, Redeemed, and Reprobate classes apply to things as well as people, he admits the difficulty of imagining "the difference between . . . an Elect bar of iron and a Reprobate bar" (p. 147). Still, there is Blake's text to account for somehow: "in every Nation & every Family the Three Classes are born / And in every Species of Earth, Metal, Tree, Fish, Bird & Beast" (25:40-41). (Bracher does better with oak trees.)

There we have the dilemma; if we must believe the text, and if we also want to consider Blake's landscape and characters as more than an exposition of faculty-psychology, what do we make of such passages, or the one about the wine-press? To humanize the question further, how are people to regard the experience of having lost someone to death while feeling a strong sense that, somehow, their existence is real and enduring—which, as Bracher points out (p. 5), is how Blake thought about his brother? Bracher's attempt to read *Milton* ontologically is not, for this reviewer, the answer, but there is a need for books that, like his, nag us about the questions.

The writing is serviceable, sometimes quite good, but at times cumbersome in vocabulary ("absolutization," "substitutability," "immediatizing"—pp. 99, 102, 103), and very repetitious; characters seem to be glossed just about every time they appear, a stylistic fault perhaps necessarily entailed by Bracher's method. There is a good deal of wobbling in this book: "although such sacrifice is evil, it also seems to be redemptive at times" (p. 28); "desires can now be seen as inadequate and perverted but nonetheless valid attempts to overthrow and transcend the merely immediate, actual state of identity" (p. 212).

I also make a point in book reviews of evaluating the index: this book has none.

Sven Bruntjen. *John Boydell, A Study of Art Patronage and Printselling in Georgian London*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1985. 302 pp. \$50.

Reviewed by Louise Lippincott

The patronage of art in Georgian England has been controversial ever since Hogarth and Jean Rouquet lamented its absence in the middle of the eighteenth century. The role of printselling in the development of taste and the distribution of patronage in the same period is a relatively new topic which has received intense scrutiny only in the last ten years. Both issues are central to the life and career of John Boydell, the printseller who dominated the English and continental markets in the second half of the century.

Boydell was the subject of two doctoral dissertations completed in 1974 and both have now been published by Garland. Winifred Friedman's *Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery* was issued in 1976; Bruntjen's biography, the subject of this review, has just appeared with the promise that it complements the earlier book. Each expands and develops material briefly summarized by the other, and Friedman acknowledges Bruntjen in her introduction. Moreover, both concentrate on the second half of the alderman's career in the print trade, reflecting the biases inherent in the Boydell legend. The legend is well known: Boydell's beginning as an apprentice under W.H. Toms, his early career as a mediocre landscape engraver vending his prints in toyshop windows, his rise to wealth and fame with the publication of Woollett's *Niobe* after Wilson and his *Death of Wolfe* after West, the launch of the Shakespeare Gallery in 1787 and other ambitious publications in the 1790s. His greatest achievement was the reversal of the balance of trade in reproductive prints to favor England over France; it was matched by his political career which culminated in his election as Lord Mayor of London in 1791. By then Boydell was a famous figure in London, visited by foreign tourists, satirized in prints, and eulogized in the press. Hogarth's Industrious Apprentice incarnate, he promoted his own reputation with prints of his portrait, the gift of his *Bridge Book* to the British Museum ("The only book that ever made a Lord Mayor"), the gift of paintings to the Corporation of London, and authorship of an autobiography, never completed. When bad management, war and revolution on the continent