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**BLAKE**

R E V I E W

Alvin Kernan, Printing Technology, Letters &  
Samuel Johnson

Nelson Hilton

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hero, many will be able to give him counsel; to him who follows the narrow way of faith no one can give counsel, him no one can understand. Faith is a miracle . . . for that in which all human life is unified is passion, and religion is a passion."<sup>2</sup>

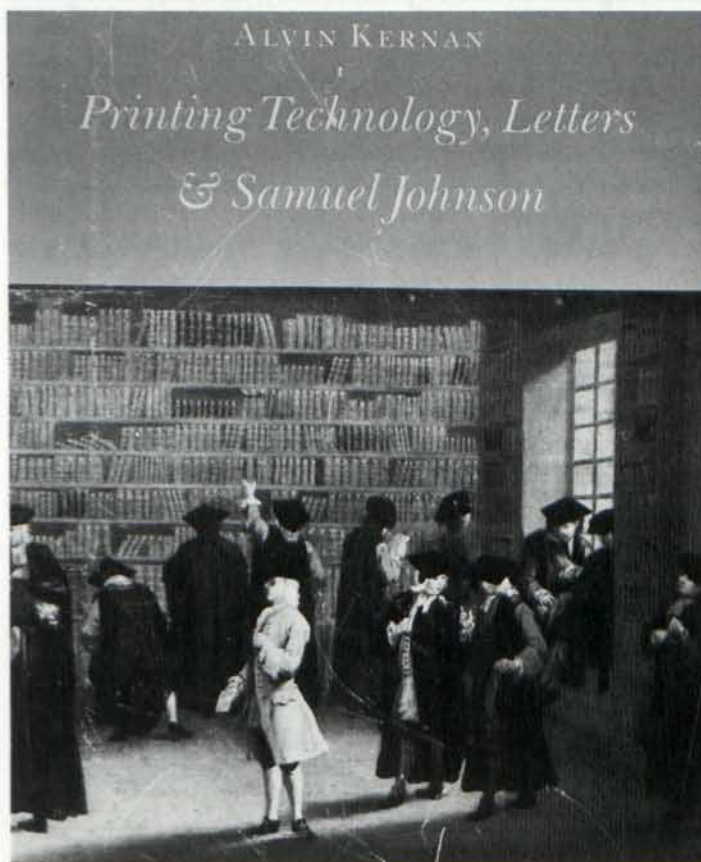
Through the effort towards mythological ritualization Blake becomes a particularly important buffer zone against chaos in the time of the gradual fading of Christian symbols in the West. It is this revitalization of Christianity that allows for a comparison between Blake and Dostoyevsky. What is at stake here is something much more fundamental than a reading of *The Brothers Karamazov* through the Blake tetrad (Fyodor—Tharmas, carnality; Dmitri—Luvah, passion; Ivan—Urizen, suffering intellect; Alyosha—Urthona, imagination). For Milosz, *The Brothers Karamazov* is a part of the same strategy with which intellect tries to replace the eighteenth-century God, Deus absconditus, the perfect Clockmaker, by the God-man, God who is not "a mathematical diagram." At one moment in his analysis Milosz even risks a sociological hypothesis: the withdrawal of Christian myths leaves space for bizarre cults ("The California of Far Eastern and satanic cults is an illustration of what happens when Christianity 'abstains'" 186). The guess may be wrong, but it again opens the same "urgent" question about the exit from the land of Ulro. If the exit is possible at all, it must be unconcealed through symbols and imagination and not through the literalist vision of science. Through what Theodore Roszak calls the "Rhapsodic Intellect" which is nothing else but the ability, to a large extent lost or to say the least threatened through the withdrawal of Christian mythology, to view the world as a reflection of a higher reality, a collection of symbols that tell us their drama which is, the sooner we realize it the better, the drama of human condition. Blake is so precious to Milosz because nowhere else in the recent history of culture do we find a more strenuous and heroic effort to bring home to man the truth of humanity as homo symbolicus.

<sup>1</sup>Alexandre Koyré, *Newtonian Studies* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1965) 23.

<sup>2</sup>Sören Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and the Sickness unto Death*, trans. W. Lowrie (Garden City: Doubleday/Anchor Books, 1954) 77.

Alvin Kernan. *Printing Technology, Letters & Samuel Johnson*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987. xvi + 357 pp., 5 illus., bibliography. \$29.50.

Reviewed by Nelson Hilton



Though it mentions Blake only twice in passing, this stimulating book brings a welcome base to our evolving consideration of the most distinguishing aspect of Blake's project, his self-published "Illuminated Printing." "Even Milton and Shakespeare could not publish



their own works," Blake notes in the 1793 prospectus; "This difficulty has been obviated by the Author of the following productions now presented to the Public; who has invented a method of Printing . . . which combines the Painter and the Poet." Kernan's book helps us place this radical innovation in a social context, making the most significant difference between Blake's work and the rest of literature again its most meaningful difference.

Caxton, the Authorized Version, and the first Folio notwithstanding, it was during the eighteenth century that England became a print society, and the consequences of "the interiorization of technology" (Marshall McLuhan's phrase) were profound and pervasive, altering the nature of consciousness itself. Indeed, only the breaking down of print-based letters in our emerging postindustrial and electronic culture forces upon us the necessary distance and concern to formulate our earlier transformation.

For Kernan, Samuel Johnson exemplifies the new professional role offered the writer by print culture. Usually seen as "a Roland, the last defender of the old neoclassic values," here Johnson, especially in Boswell's mythic image of him, appears "a bearer of the new, an epic figure of the Aeneas type in uneasy transition between two cultural worlds" (22) and stands as the founding instance of "the romantic cult of authorial personality" (149). Johnson's notorious authoritativeness, besides masking his own at times despairing nihilism, "matched exactly the needs created by print technology and by a medium that provided an increasingly baffling surplus of information, much of it contradictory, all of it confusing and unsettling in its multiplicity and novelty" (150). As Kernan points out elsewhere, "Libraries of the time seldom exceeded 50,000 volumes . . . but this was a bibliographic magnitude sufficient to change the society's conception of knowledge" (242).

At the beginning of the century, anxiety over the changing conception of knowledge is expressed in the conflict of the Ancients against the Moderns, as in Swift's *Battle of the Books*. This anxiety modulates into satire on the modern invention of printing and its modern creations, the hacks and dunces, most evidently in *A Tale of a Tub* and the *Dunciad*. For (rather, In) all their typographic exuberance both works reflect a thoroughgoing condemnation of the changes being wrought by the brave new world of print, "in Pope's view the end of polite letters and ultimately of civilization" (9). But for Kernan, "The most moving and instructive records of the change in letters appear, however, in the lives of those writers like Defoe, Savage, Goldsmith, Smart, and Samuel Johnson who actually lived in the world of Grub Street and experienced without protection the full impact of print on the life of writing" (17). Here Kernan evokes a gallery of troubled souls not exactly (like Blake's

Cowper's Blake) "mad as a refuge from unbelief," but caught between "the breakdown of traditional poetic roles" and their own efforts "to make themselves something other than laborers in the book factory" (85). Smart's bookseller, we are reminded, bound the poet to a 99-year contract. Kernan concludes that "the extreme intensity and imagination these poets [poets including also Chatterton, Macpherson, and Cowper] expended to make an acceptable, a liveable, poetic role for themselves, however mad the actions may now seem, serve to suggest, startlingly, the degree to which human feelings and existential values are involved in a radical change in the social arrangements of letters" (87). Only Johnson, in this view, chose "to be openly a modern" (88) and to enjoy (evidently despite his frequent despair) the satisfactions of being "a proud and efficient professional" (97).

Johnson's mastery of (and by) print logic appears in his most typographically ambitious production, the *Dictionary*, which embodies, materially and conceptually, that logic's characteristics of "multiplicity, systematization, and fixity" (54). Marking an interesting complication in the argument, Kernan observes that the "popular success and extraordinary usefulness of the *Dictionary* guaranteed the general acceptance in the long run of its central idea that the great writers and their books determine the language" (199). The establishing of "the great writers," still more evident in Johnson's last major (and, as usual, commissioned) project, *The Lives of the Poets*, can be seen as a response in the realm of imagination to this "new, and during the eighteenth century increasingly normal, condition in which author and reader were isolated from one another [and which] was the primary form the first literary crisis took in the world of letters" (221). (This crisis, discussed in the chapter on "Reading and Readers: The Literary Crisis of the Eighteenth Century" is not the one we associate with the mechanics of reading but concerns "The Writer's Audience in a Print Culture.")

This fundamental literary crisis opens "romanticism's continuing problems with authenticity in the modern print world" (90). Correlating with the decay of civic humanism mapped in John Barrell's recent book (*The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt*, Yale 1986) and the onset of "literary loneliness in mid-eighteenth-century England" seen by John Sitter (in his book with that title, Cornell 1982), Kernan suggests that "As identity based on social existence waned, it was replaced with a belief—probably encouraged by reading books in privacy—that authentic being could be realized only in intense self-awareness and consciousness" (125). Hence romanticism and the accompanying creation of "literature" (and, eventually, literature departments) out of "letters." The following



memorable sentences on this development can stand for the vision and cogency to be found throughout Kernan's book:

The rejection of capitalist society and its rationalistic thought in favor of older idealized felt values of community and imagination ironically provided romantic literature with a firm, though not a centrally important, place in modern culture as the defender in art of certain "higher" values and more humane ways of feeling. But this strategy, insofar as it was ever planned, had its costs, for it involved literature in a fundamental social contradiction by placing its aesthetics and metaphysics in direct opposition to its actual social circumstances. This rub has been felt heavily and consistently in ways that are revealed by the persistently difficult relationship of romantic literature and print technology. (294)

And hence, at last, one is tempted to add (though Kernan does not), Jacques Derrida and his conception of "grammatology," "a general science of writing" born "during a certain period of the world's history (beginning around the eighteenth century)" (*Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976, 27).

In this context of "the social construction of letters in the age of print" (314), Blake's practice carries a deep burden. Blake literally took more care with and of writing than any other author, and this care—the concept extends to Heideggerian *sorge*—is his authentication, together with the many playful games he shares on the conventions of "print logic." Enacted on the etched, illuminated, and self-published page and in the unresting attempt to co-ordinate the infinity of minute particulars, this care seems to me what Blake has most to teach. It is somewhat more than being "a proud and efficient professional." The quality of "authenticity" is, no doubt, itself relative to a culture in turn determined by changing modes of technology/production; but what humanist author other than Blake will so profit by the diffusion of video disk and high resolution monitor?

No book is perfect. The howler on page 185 which has Johnson's mother dying "while he was working on the *Dictionary*" is a disquieting reminder of the slips awaiting one "who has not written on Johnson before" (xi), and especially in a book so concerned with printing technology one is struck by a page like 129, where over half of the thirty-four lines end in hyphens. But this is trifling. Alvin Kernan has written an engaging and provocative book for anyone concerned with print and letters in eighteenth-century England; with printing, bookselling, readers, and writers in eighteenth-century London; with making the writer's role in a print culture; with creating an aura for literary texts in print culture; with the place and purpose of letters in print society; with the social construction of romantic literature (introduction and chapters 2, 3, 5, 7, 8) and a host of collateral topics—a book, in short, for almost every reader of this journal.

**James King. *William Cowper: A Biography*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1986. xiv + 342 pp. \$35.00.**

**Reviewed by Donald H. Reiman**

James King, who with Charles Ryskamp has prepared the distinguished five-volume edition of *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979–1986), has now written the biography of Cowper that grows naturally out of his research for the *Letters*. Though it would overstate the case to call his biography definitive, King has given us a sane, balanced, and serviceable overview of Cowper's life and career as a poet that will undoubtedly be the volume to turn to in the foreseeable future.

King writes well enough, and he has organized his material in the only way that a biography of Cowper—who lived a life with few events but many moods—can be written, treating some topics chronologically and others thematically. He centers some of his fifteen chapters (and numbered subdivisions of others) on the meager outer events of Cowper's life, while devoting others to sketches of Cowper's friends and accounts of his sustained periods of composition, the reactions of contemporary readers, and a modern assessment of his achievements. The index to the volume is both usefully organized and accurate.

After chapters on Cowper's childhood and early schooling ("Berkhamsted and Westminster") and his ill-fated love for his cousin Theodora Cowper (a romance that, in the end, William Cowper broke off, in spite of clear signs of affection from Theodora and approval from her father), King takes up Cowper's decade as a London lawyer, wit, and beau, which ended with his breakdown and suicide attempts of 1763. The fifth and final section of chapter 3 tells how the position offered to Cowper through the patronage of his uncle Sir Ashley Cowper, father of Theodora and Harriot (later Lady Hesketh), turned into a competitive test with a man to whom the particular post had earlier been promised and how, under the strain of facing this test—as well as the strain, King suggests, of Cowper's knowledge that his rival was in the right—Cowper suffered his first nervous breakdown.

In attempting to explain both Cowper's periods of mental illness and his withdrawal from commitment to Theodora and, later, to Mary Unwin, King argues that Cowper was psychically wounded in early childhood by the death of Ann Cowper, his mother, at the age of