

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY

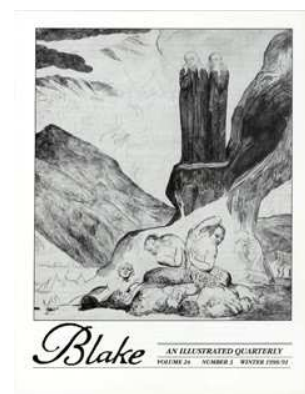
BLAKE

R E V I E W

Martin Bidney, *Blake and Goethe: Psychology, Ontology, Imagination*

Stuart Atkins

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 24, Issue 3, Winter 1990/1991, pp. 99-101



the deficiency: "Only the more extended discussions of characters and locations of Blake's mythology are referenced" (294). Someone ought to have known that a table of contents is not an index and that therefore, by the conventions of book publishing, heads listed in the contents should actually occur on the identified pages of the book. Someone ought to have asked Fuller to supply Night numbers of *The*

Four Zoas rather than merely MS page numbers. Someone ought to have remembered to tell us how we are to distinguish references to plates of Blake's illuminated works from references to the sixteen plates of Fuller's book. (Roman vs. italic, I think, but that's an inference.)

These annoyances of format distract us from what we might otherwise recognize more clearly: that Fuller's book,

up to a point, serves a legitimate purpose and that, at his best, he writes a supple and expressive prose, certainly better than in many current academic books. The main trouble with this book is not in its sloppy texture but in the author's basic misjudgment of the relation between what the book is and what he seems to have intended it to be.

Martin Bidney. *Blake and Goethe: Psychology, Ontology, Imagination*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988. xvi + 184 pp. \$24.

Reviewed by Stuart Atkins



Concisely formulated and meticulously documented, this comparative study should be of equal interest to students of romanticism and of German literature in the Age of Goethe. It is, moreover, an impressive work of scholarship that does credit both to its author and to its publisher at a time when books by university scholars treating foreign language materials and appearing under the auspices of university presses are often painful to read because of inaccurate citations, inexact quotations, frequent mistranslations, and obviously insouciant editing.

As critical analysis in the Jungian tradition of Maud Bodkin's *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry*, Bidney's monograph persuasively demonstrates—to some extent by definition, since it treats the archetypal—strikingly similar elements of thought and form in selected texts of Blake and Goethe. Because a "spiritual kinship" (xii) can be discerned in the shared interest of both writers in neo-Platonic and later hermetic materials, Bidney is persuaded that they are very similar "Romantic poet-thinkers" (xi). In Goethe's and Blake's writings it is indeed possible to find "Shared Ideas and Myths" (title of Bidney's first chapter), some of which—like the pairs "Selving" and "Unselving" or "negation" and "contrariety"—are constants, while others are to be found in Goethe only in early works or in ones using motifs typical of his early writing but without their original positive value or importance. The most obvious example of "re-use" would be the anacreontic motifs in

West-östlicher Divan, his last large poem-cycle, and of "changed value," the folkloristic-supernatural elements in *Faust*. Beginning with Goethe's conversion to classicism, as the writing of the drama progressed these supernatural elements were used with ever greater irony and ever more directly satiric, often anti-romantic, intention (e.g., in "Witch's Kitchen," usually dated 1788—with its mocking of superstition—and in many later scenes through act 4 of *Part II*, written in 1831, with its jibes at the cult of medievalism). Although Bidney's premise of a basically romantic Goethe is in no way idiosyncratic, having been promulgated for some decades even by self-proclaimed Goethe specialists, it means limiting Goethe's classical period—Bidney does not, like some who take his position, suppress the fact that there was such a period for Goethe—to "the decade of his friendship with Schiller" (xii) and ignoring the fact that Goethe expressed stronger disapproval of romanticism in the decades after Schiller's death than in the one before it and was still criticizing romanticism in his last years (e.g., in the concluding volume of his account of his Italian sojourn, published 1829, and in *Faust II*, chiefly written 1825-31).

The extent to which Goethe in some periods and works is a romantic poet-thinker comparable with Blake is economically but adequately demonstrated by Bidney with reference to a limited corpus of materials, namely, representative lyrics and a few prose passages by each writer, and major

sections of *The Four Zoas* and *Faust*. His second chapter, "Between Selving and Unselving: 'The Authentic Pulse of Life,'" compares successive pairs of lyrics (from adolescence, early adulthood, and later years) to show how "Blake and Goethe express their psychological and mythopoeic affinities" in what indeed are "strikingly similar formal patterns" (23). Slightly less satisfactory is his third chapter, "Overcoming Negations: Problematics of Reason and Desire," which examines how "the selving-unselving balance" operates for each poet in the area of psychology, although this may be because some of the texts by Goethe used for purposes of illustration are less aptly chosen than in the two preceding chapters. For example, an occasional four-hexameter epigram (mis-labeled "elegantly satiric distichs" [60]), that a genuinely appreciative Goethe wrote to thank Herder (court-preacher as well as scholar, and hence "priest and wise man" in Bidney's correct translation) for his essay "Nemesis" is interpreted to mean that "Goethe's priest is a well-intentioned but impertinent mediator" like the "Disguiser of the Female Form" in Blake's verses beginning "A fairy skipd upon my knee."

In his fourth chapter, "Overcoming Negations: Problematics of Imaginative Becoming," which has as its theme ontology, Bidney convincingly demonstrates basic similarities in the two poets' concepts of time and space with lyric examples all well chosen except for "Do You Know That Land," said to represent Goethe "in his classical decade" (it was written a full ten years earlier) and interpreted—without regard for the fact that in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* it is a narratively functional expression of Mignon's longing for Italy and the home from which she was abducted as a young child—as presenting "an Italian journey whose projected goal is a classical Eden, a comforting shelter for the nostalgic self" (87).

Chapters 5 through 7 (and a very brief conclusory 8) identify many features common to *Faust* and *The Four Zoas*, but their central concern is the two poets' "broader vision of self-transcendence" and how the "emerging form of this vision is dictated by each poet's need to try to solve, in a more comprehensive way than was possible in the lyrical utterances we have studied, the ever-growing problem posed by the power of psychological and ontological negation" (98). On *The Four Zoas* Bidney speaks with authoritative conviction; on *Faust* he is generally convincing, although at times what might be regarded as the adduction of forced parallels between these two texts seems to weaken an already well-made point. Thus Faust, Mephistopheles, Homunculus, and the Eternal Feminine are said to be the counterparts of Luvah, Urizen, Tharmas, and Urthona and, "as the four major characters in the respective poems," to "have at their command innumerable attendant (or rebellious) spirits" (99). But the Eternal Feminine—unlike Margarete and Helen of Troy—is not a character in *Faust*, and Homunculus, however important the ideas he embodies or symbolizes, merely appears as an episodic figure in it, and neither he (himself a spirit) nor the Eternal Feminine (or even Margarete or Helen) nor—normally—Faust ever deal with attendant spirits.

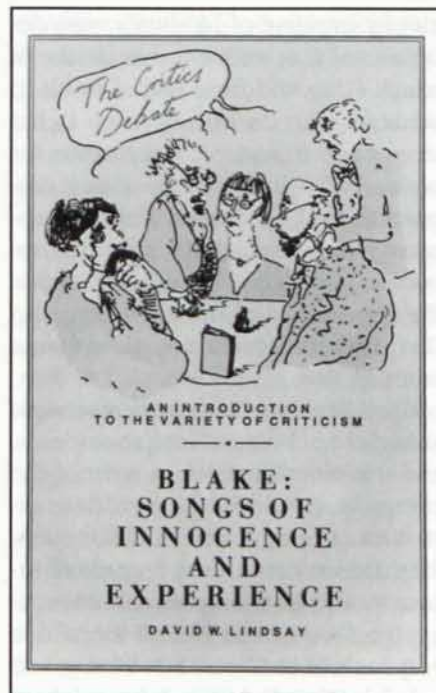
Bidney is more persuasive when, as in chapter 6, "The Spirit of Negation: Selving and Stasis," instead of forcing an exact equation, he distinguishes between the kinds of negation represented by Mephistopheles and Urizen, although even here he pre-dates the composition of *Faust*, vv. 1349-58, by over 20 years (123) to bolster (again unnecessarily) his point. Later in this same chapter his forcing of parallels between "Mephistopheles-Faust and Urizen-Orc conflicts" similarly permits him to assert that Faust dies racked by the problem of Worry and fear of the future—"in his fear of Becoming,

he mirrors the Devil"—although most readers of *Faust* agree that Faust courageously rejects Worry (at the price of blindness) and dies confident (perhaps mistakenly) that he has at last achieved something significant. (Bidney has anticipated this objection by observing that what is described in Faust's last words as a "daily battle for the right to live, fought against the daily threat of chaotic inundation hardly sounds like paradise" and actually "resembles R. D. Laing's portrait of the schizoid individual" (134), and by claiming that the dying Faust "reveals . . . his obsession with permanence and his fear of invasive flux, the twofold worry of his teacher Mephistopheles" (135). Faust has not, however, bidden the Moment tarry, which *would* be a renunciation of flux and change and growth, nor has Mephisto had any teacher-role for Faust after his Helen experience, having become at the drama's end hardly more than the mere servant of an ever more imperious Faust.)

Bidney uses Night 7a of *The Four Zoas* and the Classical Walpurgisnight of *Faust* as the texts best showing how Blake and Goethe similarly indicate that if "Humanity is to regain the authentic pulse of life, a Spirit of Mediation must counterbalance the Spirit of Negation" (138). He correlates the "three distinct types of insight" attained by Urthona-Los with those experienced in their quests by Faust, Mephisto, and Homunculus, the last of these exemplifying "the kind of self-surrender"—here Bidney as it were corrects his Laingian interpretation of Faust as schizoid—"that Faust will begin to show only in the final scene of the play." He persuasively concludes that for Los and Faust "the key to an imaginative ontology, to life in the eternal present, is finally revealed as loving creativity, or creative love" (150). But then he weakens what seems to me a effective conclusion by moralistically interpreting the tragic fate of Faust's and Helen's son Euphron (act 3 of *Faust II*) as "an ironic reminder that in

courting Helen, Faust was moving backward in time as misguidedly as his son later tried to move forward." To observe that "Rebellious Euphorion, overcompensating both ontologically and psychologically, seeks to violate others and succeeds in killing himself" (155) is to state only a partial truth, since Euphorion's "killing himself" serves what, as the threnody on his Byronic death makes clear, we are to recognize as a noble-humane cause, Greek Independence (the historical equivalent in *Faust* of the more general good of mankind that as he dies Faust will believe he has furthered).

To the extent that Goethe was a romantic thinker, as in his Storm and Stress years, or that his ideas coincided with those of romantic contemporaries, Bidney's observations in *Blake* and Goethe persuade one of their validity, especially since they are offered with scrupulous documentation and scholarly accuracy. Exceptions to this last generalization are so few that in no way do they diminish his book's merits: (6.15 himself [for itself], 41.24 and 119.7 dumb [for stupid, Ger. dumm], 43.30 sullen [for, probably, unenlightened, Ger. trübel], 60.33 un [for the Eng. article an], 95.39 the heart [for our heart], 96.29 enjoy [not the imperative Laßt, but Läßt, can be enjoyed], 104.5 O to sink down [for O had I but sunk down], 104.21 Faust's relief [none at given point in Goethe's text], 127.18 jealous [for inconstant], 157.28 the good Lord [for a great—orfine—gentleman], and 158.27 Lusty Person [for Clown]). It might now be rewarding to compare Blake and Goethe as artists as well as thinkers, although Goethe's fondness for idealized realism and for the classics (in contrast to Blake's "it is the Classics . . . that Desolate Europe with Wars"), his limited respect for Flaxman, and his lifelong love of landscape and landscape painting suggest that here might prove to be less "spiritual kinship" between them in this area than in the areas that Bidney has so thoughtfully examined.



David W. Lindsay, ed.
Blake: Songs of Innocence and Experience. The Critics Debate Series. General editor, Michael Scott. Basingstoke: Macmillan and Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1989. 92 pp. £18.50 cloth/ £4.95 paper; \$29.95/ \$8.50.

Reviewed by
Edward Larrissy

David Lindsay's book is part of a series the aim of which is to introduce students to "a variety of critical approaches to specific texts." He pursues that aim with lucidity, impar-

Approaches to Teaching Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*

Edited by Robert F. Gleckner
and Mark L. Greenberg



Robert F. Gleckner and Mark L. Greenberg, eds.
Approaches to Teaching Blake's Songs of Innocence and of Experience. Approaches to Teaching World Literature 21. Series editor Joseph Gibaldi. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1989. \$32.00 cloth/ \$17.50 paper.

ality, and method. The book is divided into two halves: the first is a survey of critical approaches; the second, called "Appraisal," in fact "traces the evolution of *Songs of Innocence and Experience* [sic] in the context of Blake's other writings and gives closer attention to eight poems."

The survey first defines the text, discussing the different editions. It goes