

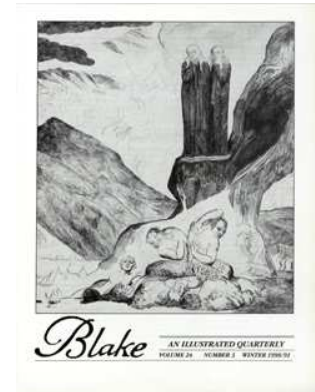
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**BLAKE**

R E V I E W

Steven Blakemore, *Burke and the Fall of  
Language: The French Revolution as Linguistic  
Event*

Lisa Plummer Crafton

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on to look at literary and artistic antecedents of the *Songs*, bringing in (according to the brief) the ways in which knowledge of these has modified critics' responses. The fact of the *Songs* being an illuminated text is then broached, and we encounter important interpretations of visual motifs, including some from such critics as Keynes, Erdman, and Mitchell. The ideas of the dramatic lyric, and of an occasionally ironic use of the represented speaker, are introduced, and then Lindsay adopts the useful ruse of using "The Chimney Sweeper" as a peg on which to hang typical reactions to Blake, because it exemplifies so many of the complexities of the *Songs*, both in its strategies and in its allusions. The discussion then moves on to the relationship between the *Songs* and Blake's "system," glancing at the opposed implications of Frye and Hirsch. It also looks at paired poems ("Counterparts"), at speakers in *Experience*, and at the symbolism of flowers.

The second part, "Appraisal," has much less to do with "the critics": hardly anything, in fact. It is Lindsay's learned and astute introduction to the *Songs*, looking at eight poems chiefly in the light of Blake's other work. The readings are tactful, and responsive to many different contexts, although the allusions to Blake's prophetic books suffer from a brevity imposed by the format of the series. In this respect they share their suffering with some previous sections of the book. There are occasions when one wonders if a student will be able easily to digest the various buffet of critical approaches so briskly served up. But this is not always a problem,

chiefly because of Lindsay's wise decision to be selective in his choice of songs. This will be a useful book to students who do not succumb to the temptation to make it a substitute for wider reading, not least because it suggests the value of many different approaches to so subtle and rich an author. It may, however, be a pity that the approaches of Hazard Adams and David Wagenknecht do not receive a mention here.

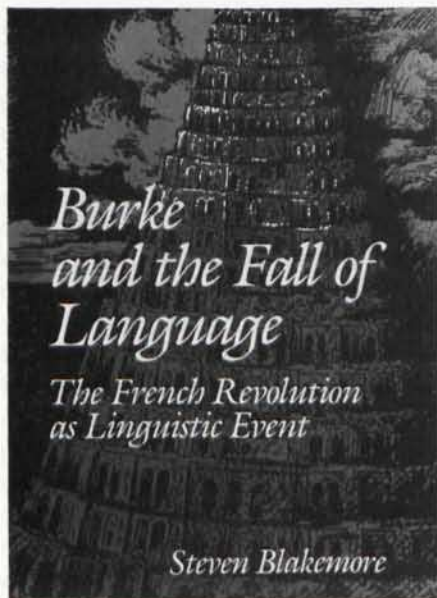
Gleckner and Greenberg's book is aimed at teachers rather than students, and this aim does control most of the essays in it. As well as providing instances of approaches to Blake, then, they are very much the records of instructors on how they go about teaching the *Songs* in the class. I found this emphasis of the book fascinating and helpful. W. J. T. Mitchell is useful on ways of talking about the "composite text," as one would expect. David Simpson, in "Teaching Ideology in *Songs*" follows almost precisely my own way of raising questions about "The Chimney Sweeper," referring to Erdman, "false consciousness," Glen, Raine, and the "corporeal" soot from Swedenborg. Joseph Viscomi recounts a most interesting method he uses of asking classes to copy designs from Blake plates. This has at least the merit of focusing attention on the facts of a given design (an important consideration in itself) as well as on the materiality of Blake's production methods. But most of the approaches treated here could yield something of value to most teachers. The editors have included an extraordinarily full reasoned bibliography to the essays.

Steven Blakemore. *Burke and the Fall of Language: The French Revolution as Linguistic Event*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1988. 115 pp. \$20.

Reviewed by  
Lisa Plummer Crafton

Starting with the basic premise that linguistic interpretations of revolutions are as viable and important as economic, sociopolitical, or ideological ones, Steven Blakemore's book contributes to revisionist critiques of the French Revolution. *Burke and the Fall of Language* explores the language of revolutionary and counterrevolutionary discourse. Although Blakemore focuses on Burkean texts and themes, he also analyzes the "special linguistic self-consciousness" (2) that shapes all visions of the revolution. While the author makes no mention of Blake (nor of literary tradition per se), this exploration of the nexus between language and ideology contributes much to a methodology for analyzing Blake's revolutionary texts. Not only has Blakemore assembled valuable historical material, for instance on the debates over constitution, authority, and patriarchy, but also his contextualizing of the poles of revolutionary and counterrevolutionary texts amidst these themes provides a revealing, albeit narrowly focused, account.

The title, which implies that language is the unified focus of study, is misleading in that only the last half of the slender book deals specifically with the language of revolution. The first three of the six chapters offer background information on what the author considers the significant bases of the arguments and how Burke and Paine exploit various *topoi* for their respec-



tive political purposes. For example, Burke argues for a constitution that exists "time out of mind" (8) in an unwritten past preserving traditional meanings whereas Paine insists that a constitution's legitimacy comes from writing, as evidenced by the American colonists' document. Legitimacy of governmental authority is also "proven" by both sides through an argument from origins. Burke's authority rests in an "ancient" origin that is "unknowable and hence fruitless to trace" (21). Blakemore points out that Paine strategically emphasizes a Biblical myth of origins that predates Burke's abstract "ancient" sources. This answer to Burke is very similar to the way in which Blake's *French Revolution* emphasizes France's "ancient" liberties (as Michael Ferber has noted, the word carries a largely Burkean resonance throughout the poem). Finally, Blakemore contrasts how the language of patriarchy is used by both sides. Burke had used this argument in defense of the American revolution, but Blakemore notes this change of heart: "Whereas Burke envisions the American Revolution as the oppressive father denying the American child his constitutional rights, he envisions the French Revolution as a revolt of the child against his natural parents" (38).

Although the historical topics of the first half are rewarding, the last half of the book is even more so as Blakemore delves into the connection between language and ideology by examining Burke's belief that revolutionary criticism of government, religion, and, above all, language means a fall from innocence; a "stripping of linguistic veils" (70) actually creates chaos. Thus the revolution as a radical linguistic event was one that upset the entire worldview. Blakemore discusses specific historical linguistic arguments over classical versus vernacular language, the establishment of a new "national" language, and the renaming of the French calendar and streets. In fact, the revolutionaries wanted a demystification of language that would change the title French King to "king of the French," so that common men would not be, as Paine said, "immured in the Bastille of a word." The final chapter, which is somewhat loosely joined to the rest of the book (perhaps due to its being printed earlier in *Eighteenth-Century Studies*) explores Burke's nostalgia for the aristocracy in terms of language and his fear that revolution would create a second Babel or worse.

Throughout the book, Blakemore keeps his eye on Burke's "majestic presence," and this not so subtle reverence for Burke may annoy some readers, but the well-written final chapter successfully argues for Burke's "modern" sensitivity to language. Blakemore's study, aside from its value as a compendium of important revolutionary arguments of Burke and Paine, employs a rewarding method of interpreting discourse as a dialectic in sociopolitical reality, a strategy especially fruitful in Blake studies, as Blake directly and indirectly reinterprets Locke, Newton, and Burke. Blakemore's study intends uppermost to remind us how much language alters our perception of reality and, indeed, that any interpretation of history or literature is "bounded by the very language that expresses it" (105).

Jerome J. McGann. *Towards a Literature of Knowledge*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989. xii + 138 pp. \$24.95.

Reviewed by  
Michael Fischer

**T***owards a Literature of Knowledge* is the final installment in a wide-ranging series of books on literature, history, and ideology. Elsewhere I have discussed the first four books in this series: *The Romantic Ideology* (1983), *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (1983), *The Beauty of Inflections* (1985), and *Social Values and Poetic Acts* (1988).<sup>1</sup> Here I want to consider why such a tentatively entitled book concludes this series—why, in other words, at the climax of his project McGann sees himself still moving towards a literature of knowledge instead of arriving at it.

By "a literature of knowledge," McGann means a literature that "deals in matters of truth and error" and "promotes moral and political values" (vii). For him this is all literature. "The secret of the imagination" is "that it makes statements, that it communicates, that its architectonics have designs upon us" (vii). In the brief theoretical introduction that opens the book, McGann suggests that the intellectual and political force of literature has remained a secret (rather than public knowledge) because formalist aesthetic theory has emphasized the purity of the arts, their rising above political protest, sales pitches, sermons, and other discourse with designs upon us. McGann sees literary works as speech acts interested in accomplishing a wide range of politically charged tasks, from achieving social change to identifying what ought to count as knowledge. Unlike other equally interested forms of commun-