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Warren Stevenson, *Poetic Friends: A Study of
Literary Relations During the English Romantic
Period*

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Warren Stevenson. *Poetic Friends: A Study of Literary Relations During the English Romantic Period*. New York: Peter Lang, 1990. xiv + 195 pp. \$35.95.

Reviewed by
Donald H. Reiman

This book is volume 97 in a relatively new monograph series, published by the Swiss-based publisher Peter Lang and entitled American University Studies, Series IV: English Language and Literature. Those of us who have published books with new or relatively unknown publishers are aware of the frustration of trying to reach the audience of our peers. Even today the books issued by Garland Publishing (which was a new, three-person operation when I began work on *The Romantics Reviewed*), are chiefly advertised among—and ordered by—librarians, sometimes disappearing into the bookstacks of large institutions, where the teachers and students to whom they may be relevant discover them years later. The hope of authors publishing under such circumstances (and more and more academics now do so, for one reason or another) is that their work will be reviewed in the periodicals that reach their most likely readers and that it will be accorded the same scrutiny and judged by the same standards as a volume bearing the imprint of Harvard, Oxford, or Johns Hopkins University Press. That is just the way I intend to review the volume before me.

Warren Stevenson, Associate Professor of English at the University of British Columbia, has published both original poetry and at least two previous monographs on Blake and

Coleridge (1981 and 1983), both apparently published at Salzburg, and from each of which he has drawn for some material that is reused here. He is, then, no beginner, though his previous work has not, so far as I know, made much impact on romantic studies. *Poetic Friends* is intelligently organized and clearly written; Stevenson is certainly trying to communicate with *somebody*—not simply ruminating in public. His introduction begins: "This book is written out of the conviction that between the heaven of archetypal criticism and the hell of deconstruction there is room for a more modest, and possibly more human, study of the interrelation of the lives and works of a community of poets. The focus I have chosen for this study is the theme of intellectual friendship . . ." (1).

The body of the book, between the three-page Introduction and a two-page Conclusion, consists of three parts: "Blake and Hayley" (5-70); "Coleridge and Wordsworth" (71-120); and "Shelley, Byron, and Keats" (121-73); each part, in turn, consists of numbered subsections, which explore aspects of the relationships between the writers and explicate specific poems, using the interactions between poets as keys to the analysis. Part 1, for example, after an introductory biographical section on "Blake and Felpham Billy," follows with an extended treatment of "The Forming Image of Hayley in Blake's *Milton*," then with an account of Hayley's part in defending Blake from the charge of assault and sedition after his encounter with Schofield the dragoon ("Agony in the Garden"), and, finally, with an extended analysis of *Jerusalem* ("The Matter of Hyle in *Jerusalem*").

Inasmuch as Stevenson relies heavily on secondary sources—honestly footnoting his quotations from F. L. Jones's edition of *Mary Shelley's Journal*, for example, to Charles E. Robinson's *Shelley and Byron* (1976), his main source of information on the relationship between these two poets—he does not pretend to break new scholarly

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ground. His critical judgments, though involving his own reading of the poetry (and, at some points, the letters) of the principals, openly derive, for the most part, from standard books. In the Blake-Hayley section, the main authorities—besides Blake's *Letters* (ed. Keynes, 1956), and Bentley's *Blake Records*—include Morchard Bishop's *Blake's Hayley*, editions of Blake by Erdman and Keynes, lives by Gilchrist and Mona Wilson, S. Foster Damon's *Blake Dictionary*, and critical books by Northrop Frye, David V. Erdman, Hazard Adams, Susan Fox, and Morton Paley. The only out-of-the-way source that Stevenson seems to have consulted is a four-volume London edition of *The Works of Jacob Behmen* (1764-1781); other references to primary sources are quoted from one of the standard books mentioned. There are no citations of periodical literature (e.g., articles in *Blake*).

Without attributing to Stevenson an aversion to libraries, I suspect that he prefers to work at home—or, perhaps, at a rural summer retreat—with a shelf filled with paperbacks and select volumes checked out for the duration of his work on a chapter. With Blake, because of the intense activity of the past 40 years and the relative scarcity of earlier, obsolete editions and studies,

Stevenson's lack of scholarship may not be too damaging. (I hedge this judgment, not knowing all the traps in Blake scholarship; and I do note errors in his treatment of the relationship between Hayley and William Cowper). But when Stevenson quotes Shelley's letters from a 1965 reprint of Ingpen's and Peck's Julian Edition of the 1920s (Jones's edition, perhaps, being on reserve at the library), he opens his interpretations to basic errors. Certainly the Julian Edition's corrupt texts of Shelley's letters to Thomas Jefferson Hogg (deriving from Hogg's *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, in which Hogg often reversed the pronouns from "I" to "you" so as to father instances of his own youthful foolishness on his dead friend) misled Stevenson into attributing "latent homosexuality" to Shelley rather than Hogg (see 191n9, and 192n3).

With my conditioned response in favor of scholarly accuracy—or, at least, in favor of some visible efforts in pursuit of it—I almost dismissed *Poetic Friends* as a waste of time. Eventually, however, I concluded that it has definite values, if not for the specialist, at least for students approaching romantic poetry for the first time. During an era of linguistic theorizing and sociological background studies, *Milton or Jerusalem*, when viewed from the perspective of flawed friendships, presents a human face that is familiar and approachable by undergraduates. While by no means a complete discussion of Blake's works, the 66 pages on Blake—filled with quotations from and paraphrases of his poems and letters—seem to me to provide a useful introduction to the larger prophetic books either for undergraduates writing term papers on these poems when they are not taught in class, or even for teachers wanting a human-interest angle from which to introduce students to Blake's somewhat abstract masterpieces.

After the students' interest is stimulated initially by encountering Blake's prophetic books as products of a personal relationship and artistic patronage gone sour, the teacher can then lead them into study of the larger symbolic and thematic issues in these poems that have been analyzed by more sophisticated scholar-critics. To remain at the level of anecdote, quotation, and paraphrase that characterizes much of *Poetic Friends* would mark teachers as having either too little intellectual enterprise themselves, or insufficient ability to stimulate intellectual curiosity in their students. But, equally, to avoid the human dimensions of the life and poetry of Blake or any of the other romantic poets—to pretend that texts write texts, that class differences produce great poetry, or that the reader's existential experience can be divorced from any art, especially from verbal constructs made with the very materials of daily communication—is to cut away the roots of literature. To expect that the blossoms can thereafter retain their attractiveness for long is a silly delusion. For this simple reason, more students of English and more English majors will be recruited by asking sophomores to read *Prophetic Friends* rather than two-thirds of the other academic studies of the romantics I've read in the past ten years. Such a quality is not to be despised in any academic book, especially by those who love and value literature and who teach because they wish to transmit that love and those values to their students. But even cynics who find the academic life congenial and wish to assure their future livelihoods may find *Poetic Friends* and books like it instrumental to their ends.

K. D. Sethna. *Blake's Tyger: A Christological Interpretation*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1989. viii + 275 pp. Rs. 60.00

Reviewed by
Michael J. Tolley

We should probably have welcomed this book in the 1960s, even if we remained unpersuaded by its thesis: that is when it should have appeared; that is when it was substantially written. Unfortunately, its publication has been so long delayed that it is impossible to review it in other than a mood of melancholy and with a feeling of pity for its author overwhelming the admiration it might earlier have commanded.

With the best will in the world, it is impossible to commend wholeheartedly a book that was written originally in 1961 and ignores totally any study of its subject published later than 1968 (the apparent exception in the slender bibliography records a reprint). That much of the recent work on "The Tyger" constitutes a massive argument against Sethna's affirmation that both beast and creator are figures of Christ is only icing on the cake. It must nevertheless be admitted that Sethna's readable and intelligent and, in some sections, unprecedentedly thorough discussions have still considerable value. I found it difficult to read the book with patience because Sethna so often seemed out of sheer perversity to be accumulating evidence against his own thesis, if only he could have been brought to see it that way. Consider, for instance, the rhetoric of this paragraph, which presents his basic reading clearly: