

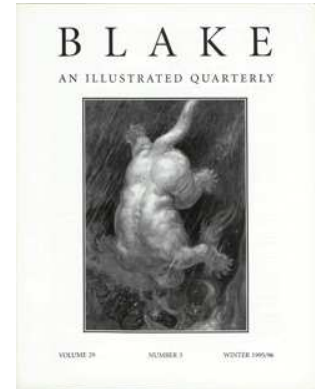
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R E V I E W

Molly Anne Rothenberg, Rethinking Blake's  
Textuality

Harriet Linkin

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not larger; one can quibble over the authenticity of the coloring. No matter; the reproductions serve well and probably bring most of us as close to the original as we ever will be. The plates are supplemented with plates from other copies of *Milton* that Blake chose to exclude from copy C, as well as several sketches and engravings of related figures and designs.

Following the plates is the text of the poem in letterpress. Essick and Viscomi have minutely examined Blake's engraved text and consequently have dissented from David V. Erdman's version in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* on numerous small matters, for instance *ann*, not *can* on 42:30. (This difference, Essick and Viscomi note, comes from an inadvertence in etching, which Blake corrected in ink on copy B.) Other differences involve capitals instead of lowercase letters and colons instead of exclamation points. Along with the text are voluminous notes, which often surpass in length the page they accompany. They are impressively inclusive of *Milton* scholarship, and they are evenhanded, favoring no critical approach over others. A small oversight is the omission of Paul Youngquist's *Madness and Blake's Myth* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989) from "Works Cited," although the study is referred to on page 163.

A bonus to the volume are reproductions of three late Blake works: the two-plate *Ghost of Abel* and the single plates, *On Homers Poetry* [and] *On Virgil* and *Laocoön*, along with associated paintings, engravings, drawings, and sketches. These are slight works when compared with *Milton*, but worthy of study nevertheless. Essick and Viscomi find in *The Ghost of Abel* Blake's themes of vengeance, atonement, and apocalypse writ small and assert it "is about the ramifications of the murder, about the various responses to the material fact of death—that is, to 'Nature' (1: 2-4) itself" (222). They are more tentative in identifying the figures on the plates; the commentary is thick with such qualifiers as "may," "perhaps," "suggests," and "appears." In *On Homers Poetry* and *On Virgil* Essick and Viscomi find Blake ambivalent toward Homer and disparaging of Virgil. *Laocoön* has to do with "the contrast between what we think we know and what we are being told" (232). Essick and Viscomi choose to arrange the inscriptions swirling around the figures on the plate in an order quite different from Erdman's, attempting to approximate a clockwise arrangement. Erdman's is a "roughly thematic sequence" (E 814). The effort is similar to mapping the globe on a flat piece of paper—that is, not entirely a success. More successful is their argument that the date of composition of *Laocoön* should be 1826, not 1820.

All in all, there is much to praise, little to question, and less to criticize in this splendid volume. Its greatest virtue is in making available to a larger audience something remarkably close to Blake's own hand. And yet there is an irony in this effort. Most of this volume is taken up with the work of the editors; perhaps one-sixth of it is unadulterated Blake.

Blake, of course, engraved and published his works in order to reach his audience directly, without the agencies of editors, publishers, and booksellers. Yet that, we find, is the only way almost all of us can ever hope to know him. Under such conditions, we must be grateful to Essick and Viscomi for providing such an excellent interface.

Molly Anne Rothenberg, *Rethinking Blake's Textuality*. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1993. \$34.50.

Reviewed by HARRIET LINKIN

Given the deconstructive approach Molly Anne Rothenberg takes in her informed discussion of Blake's textuality, her first sentence appropriately points to a gap: "In the past decade a gap has opened up in Blake studies between commentators who continue to read Blake's poetry as a *work* and those who read it as a *text*, to use Roland Barthes' distinction" (1). While this gap still looms in some critical circles, it is no longer the most telling one in Blake studies or other fields of literary analysis, where the greater gulf that divides the deconstructive approaches of the 70s and 80s from the new historical/cultural-materialist approaches of the 80s and 90s now provokes alternate readings of literary works as *texts* or *sites*. *Rethinking Blake's Textuality* makes an admirable effort to bridge this gulf by demonstrating how Blake as "poststructuralist" responds to and critiques the late eighteenth-century philosophical assumptions that subsequently shape twentieth-century schools of thought. Rothenberg distinguishes her project from comparable endeavors to locate poststructuralist tenets in Blake's texts by looking at contemporary documents Blake would have known to historicize what she defines as his position: "Like the chaos theory of present-day science, Blake's philosophical inquiry into the conditions by which texts/subjects/objects are constituted as meaningful subverts linear and totalizing rationality" (2).

The introduction carefully situates Rothenberg's work in the school of Blake criticism most congenial to her approach, that practiced by Nelson Hilton, Thomas Vogler, Donald Ault, Paul Mann, and Jerome McGann.<sup>1</sup> Her contribution seeks to provide for *Jerusalem* what Ault furnishes for *The Four Zoas*, though in less "exhaustively minute" a fashion, offering close readings of local examples from *Jerusalem* to reveal the poem's strategic subversion of all absolutisms in-

<sup>1</sup> The text itself, however, most frequently refers to Leslie Tannenbaum, Joseph Wittreich, Leopold Damrosch, and Peter Otto, as if without these Bacon Newton Locke contraries there is no progression.



stituted by the Enlightenment's project of rationalization. She rightly cautions that we not view the sources introduced (such as Alexander Geddes, Thomas Gray, or F. A. Nitsch) as authorities who stabilize meaning but rather as participants in a discursive arena. She also asserts we need not read Blake's poem (or be overly familiar with Blake scholarship) to follow her argument, which strikes me as unfortunate, as then we must rely on her authority, but she means, of course, to underscore her own non-reading:

Ultimately, then, my argument seeks to make a contribution to contemporary poststructuralist thought as it engages questions of agency and political implication by means of a reading of *Jerusalem*, rather than to proffer an "interpretation" of the poem or an account of what Blake actually intended. (4)

This statement is followed by one that insists Blake is neither an advocate of liberationist politics nor a prophet of utopian Christian fellowship, and that Blake critics should recognize how Blake rejects all such positions:

critics who claim that Blake aims to redeem human society through the transformation of the consciousnesses of individual readers have not taken into account Blake's analysis of the evils produced by utopianism and have misunderstood his evaluations of "possessive selfhood." (4)

Despite the series of caveats, such statements do require authority to pass judgment (and veer into the quicksand that fills the pit of intentionality).

Rather than back away from the edge, Rothenberg ventures further out: "So I part company with most Blake scholars, including many poststructuralist critics of Blake, who insist that Blake wishes to give his readers access to a transcendental realm" (4). Whether or not this oppositional framing of her position indicates true friendship or an overdetermined gesture, she casts her challenge with a reckless defiance I respect, despite my own desire to part company at this juncture as just such a critic; time and again I resisted this book, which I view as a measure of its value. All the more courageous that she follows this assertion with a repudiation of her own previously published self in the best Blakean mode of casting out error.<sup>2</sup> Most important of all is her stipulating that she is only looking at *Jerusalem* to showcase Blake's refusal of all authorities, even those we liberally think of as "good." One question never addressed, however, is this: if she is not reading *Jerusalem* but offering methodology, does she mean us to extend her argument to all of Blake's texts? And does such extension effect a totalizing absolutism?

<sup>2</sup> Of the three longer sections that rework material from articles published in *Word and Image* (1987), and *Genre* (1990), two now arrive at different conclusions.

The argument itself opens with a quote from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (on Milton as "a true Poet and of the Devils party without knowing it" E 35) to establish that "the distinguishing characteristic of true Poets is their ignorance of the source and authority of their work" (9). So too *Jerusalem* on the matter of authority and origin, where Rothenberg points to Blake's typical narrative deflections to show his constructive problematizing of authority: Blake's preface claims the poem was dictated, a narrative voice identifies the savior dictating a song, the narrator says a theme calls him, and the text's last words identify some or all of the preceding as a song of Jerusalem, which recursively complicates the preface's discussion of tone and stylistic choice. More innovative than the insightful display of narrativity is the instructive turn to historicized religious and philosophical debates. She outlines the significance contemporary biblical criticism holds for Blake, when the basis for scriptural authenticity shifts from prophetic truth guaranteed by divine revelation to inspired interpretation marked by artful construction. Once Higher Criticism conjoins inspiration with rhetorical strategies, Blake sees "the Bible [as] a historical record of the means by which 'sacred' texts are constructed to oppress" (18). Rothenberg draws usefully and generously from prior arguments and primary sources offered by Tannenbaum, Wittreich, and McGann to document Blake's familiarity with Higher Criticism.<sup>3</sup> The strength of her analysis manifests more powerfully in her own inspired interpretations, such as the lively reading of Matthew on Jesus's authority, where the parable of the sheep and goats assists Blake's theory of authorship by undercutting the idea of totalizing authority, because the parable authorizes a kind of individual participatory interpretation that unfixes universal authority.

Blake rejects the guarantee of transcendent authority to authenticate interpretation as well as the Dissenter belief in an immanent experience of God's intention through the individual's perceptual faculties; instead,

the individual can learn to perceive the mediations that make perceptions seem not only natural and unmediated but possible at all . . . that perception *could not*

<sup>3</sup> I find it troubling that some primary materials are cited from secondary sources, such as Wittreich citing Pareus or Newton (25), or Tannenbaum citing Howes (22-23); while the bibliography does offer a primary source for Howes, none such is proffered for Newton or Pareus. As I give voice to my pedantic spectre, I will add that the bibliography not only contains errors (Thomas Frosch is renamed "Douglas") but also cites far too many works that receive no mention in or appear to have an impact on the text. Most works cited date from 1987 or earlier (except for Peter Otto's 1991 *Constructive Vision and Visionary Deconstruction* and Katherine Hayles's 1990 *Chaos Bound: Entropy, Information and Complexity in Contemporary Literature*); one cannot help but wonder what effect Robert Essick's 1989 *William Blake and the Language of Adam* or Vincent De Luca's 1991 *Words of Eternity* might have had.



take place without the prior mediation of ideologically constituted interpretations—in effect, that all perception traces the lineaments of its constitutive ideological assumptions—provides the key to Blakean textuality. (37)

Even so fine a critic as Northrop Frye fails to understand how ideological interpretation effects perception when he designates Blake's Hallelujah-Chorus perception of the sun as more imaginative than the duller seeing of the sun as like a guinea: for Rothenberg (and Otto), both heavenly host and lowly guinea establish metaphoric comparisons that emanate from ideological systems (44). While Blake views perception as ideological interpretation, he never loses sight of his bounding line's essentializing capacity to create form. Rothenberg's excellent exposition of several techniques Blake employs to disrupt his bounding line's potential for authorizing absolutisms, via punctuation, for instance, or intertextuality, brings the first of the book's two parts to conclusion. Part One/De-Signing Authority (9-61) focuses most carefully on Blake's projection of himself as inspired author in terms of changing definitions of inspiration and scriptural authenticity, so that Blake's intertextual citations of Gray's "The Bard" reflect on scriptural authors who establish assumptive authenticity through citation.

Part Two/The Subject of Discourse (65-137) situates Blake's subversive tactics among such architects of thought as Augustine, Kant, Husserl and Hume to consider how Blake undermines the totalizing effects of hermeneutics, epistemology, phenomenology, typology, and narrativity. A comparison of Blake and Augustine suggests "Blake's practice is Augustine's without God" (65) functioning as guarantor of transcendental signification to stabilize meaning. Rothenberg's elegant discussion of *Jerusalem's* opening as demonstration contends that most Blake criticism traditionally reads the scene as a dialogue between a savior and Albion, whereas local textual disruptions show the potentiality of multiple vantage points. More specific attention to other readers of *Jerusalem* might have substantiated this broad claim in helpful ways. As Augustine, so Kant: Blake affirms the "Kantian insight that mind resembles world because mind constitutes world" (82) but whereas Kant fends off charges of solipsism through a "turn to transcendent subjectivity and universal moral laws" (82-83), Blake presents a discursive formation of mind that produces transformative subjectivity. Rothenberg's treatment of plate 97 to evidence transformative subjectivity displays her fine critical imagination at work in identifying the plate as a scene of reading the viewer reads, with variant light sources that both suggest and offset centralized perspective: "The plate thematizes and dramatizes the necessity for a continual movement of displacement in order to subvert the bid for ultimate determinacy that attends the centralized subject's repression of its own limitations" (96).

Another superior local reading shows how typology's defense against the solipsism of phenomenism employs "Augustinian tropological strategies to interpret Christ's life as the *forma perfecta* of every life" (98) but thereby depends on circular reasoning, when Rothenberg looks at plates 61-62 for the story of Joseph and Mary told to Jerusalem as a means of her understanding herself (even as Jerusalem's story serves as paradigm for Joseph and Mary). Jerusalem not only sees the tautology of typological configuration, but also the range of types available that might supply and thereby destabilize meaning: "In biblical typology the value of the event proposed as the paradigm is known in advance, while in Blake's view that value changes with each reader, with each context" (106). The individual's seeming dependence on memory for personal identity is equally fictive or narrativized, as the two "authorized" locations for plate 29/33 suggest in undermining the referent for the opening identity pronoun "He." Rothenberg begins the kind of "exhaustive" but playful reading of indeterminacies that brings out the best in Hilton, Ault and Vogler to demonstrate the sorts of tautologies or complex circular reasonings that effect narrative causalities: "The 'authority' of the voice requires that 'causes,' which are in fact a product of the activity of the authoritative voice, appear to predate the narrative" (124).

These few important close readings beautifully ground Rothenberg's astute but sometimes theory-thick discussion of philosophical and religious contemporary contexts to compensate for whatever imperfections the book contains. Perhaps I betray my own hopeless desire for meaning when I confess what I would like from Rothenberg is an extended reading of *Jerusalem* that displays her sound method at work, decoding and recoding Blake's complex textual subversions of authority. She is indeed a sensitive "Reader! [lover] of books!" whose interpretive focus would bring us further along the road of understanding, even or especially a nontotalizing one, as we come to understand how Blake's textuality exposes the search for mastery as

a narrative of "errors": this is the "story" of *Jerusalem*. At any moment in the search, the reading subject can acknowledge the structure of what it has produced, a structure that articulates disjunct, incommensurable, or competing systems as though they derive from a transcendental subject and form a coherent totality. (132)