

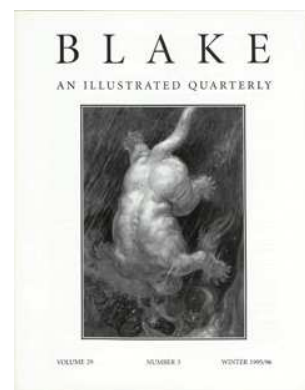
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R E V I E W

Robert N. Essick and Joseph Viscomi, eds.,
William Blake, Milton a Poem and the Final
Illuminated Works: The Ghost of Abel, on
Homer's Poetry [and] On Virgil, Laocoön

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William Blake, *Milton a Poem and the Final Illuminated Works: The Ghost of Abel[,] on Homer's Poetry [and] On Virgil[,] Laocoön.*

Edited with Introductions and Notes by Robert N. Essick and Joseph Viscomi. Princeton: William Blake Trust/Princeton University Press, 1993. Blake's Illuminated Books Volume 5. General Editor David Bindman. 286 pp. \$65.

Reviewed by DENNIS M. READ

From the 1950s to the early 70s, the William Blake Trust published more than a dozen beautiful facsimile volumes of Blake's works. This labor of love, carried out by the Trianon Press under the direction of Arnold D. Fawcus, made available for the first time the corpus of Blake's verbal-visual art as he had created it. The volumes, however, were published in very limited editions and carried price tags of hundreds and even thousands of dollars. Consequently, their purchasers were, by and large, college and university libraries. Most Blake scholars today cut their eyeteeth on these volumes in the rare books rooms of their graduate school libraries.

Now, in the 90s, we have from the William Blake Trust, in collaboration with Princeton University Press, a new series of Blake's works in photo-offset reproduction. While they are not as hand-crafted and bibliophilisticly precious as the first series, they are more affordable—certainly not cheap, but within the range of most Blakeans. *Milton* is the fifth volume. The others are *Jerusalem* (1991, reviewed in *Blake* fall 1992), *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1991, reviewed in *Blake* fall 1992), *All Religions are One, There is No Natural Religion, Book of Thel, Marriage of Heaven and Hell, and Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1993), and *Urizen, Ahania, Book of Los, America, Europe, and Song of Los* (forthcoming in two volumes, 1995). The recent release of *Songs of Innocence and Experience* in paperback induces the hope that the other volumes will follow suit; then even grad students will be able to buy them and instructors will be able to use them as texts without a guilty conscience. The entire project, with its uniform volumes, meticulously edited texts, extensive commentary, and glosses on critical studies, might be likened to the huge Library of America.

The editors of *Milton*, Robert N. Essick and Joseph Viscomi, are well credentialed for this undertaking. Essick is an accomplished commentator on Blake's meaning and method and the hands-down expert on Blake's engraving techniques, as well as a major Blake collector. Viscomi has established himself as the pre-eminent historian of Blake's artistic production, and the fruits of his landmark study,

Blake and the Idea of the Book, enrich this project. One example is in the discussion on pages 35-41 of the date of publication for *Milton* and the ordering of its plates. The upshot of this discussion is that Blake may not have printed a complete *Milton* until 1810-11, much later than previously postulated.

Only four copies of *Milton* are known to exist, and each is at least slightly different from the others in the number and arrangement of its plates. In 1967 the William Blake Trust chose to reproduce copy D, now in the Library of Congress, for its Trianon Press edition. As the alphabetical letter implies, it was thought to be the latest of the four, probably printed in 1818. Essick and Viscomi have chosen to reproduce copy C, now in the New York Public Library, and they argue that it is the final *Milton*; furthermore, because he did not sell it until 1826, that it embodies "Blake's final intentions" (41). (Kay Parkhurst Easson and Roger R. Easson reproduced copy B, now in the Huntington Library, for an edition published by Shambhala/Random House in 1978. Although the plates are less than full size, the volume is handy for quick comparisons. It still can be found in used bookstores.)

With its 40-odd to 50 plates, *Milton* is a hefty work, second in length only to *Jerusalem*. It is also a dense and confounding work. With its confusing narrative structure, constantly shifting cast of characters, and geographical and cosmological leapfrogging, it challenges the reader, sometimes beyond patience. Few, if any, in Blake's own day were up to this challenge. In our day, however, readers have become more accustomed to discontinuous narratives. No longer do commentators attempt to crack the code or come up with the definitive reading of this work. In their introduction, Essick and Viscomi provide a summary of the story in *Milton*:

Book 1. Milton leaves heaven and returns to earth to do battle with forces opposed to art and the human spirit.

Book 2. Milton's female counterpart, Ololon, returns to earth to unite with Milton in preparation for apocalypse. (9)

Those who have struggled with the meaning of the work might even argue about these descriptions of its actions. But none can deny that they are helpful. Also helpful is the discussion about biblical allegory and Blake's mythological creations (such as Ololon). The introduction gives the neophyte reader a foothold and the experienced reader a review of salient matters concerning the work.

Essick and Viscomi also provide an elucidating discussion of the genesis and history of *Milton*, as well as a careful analysis of the dating and pagination of the surviving copies. The reproduced plates of *Milton* follow. One can argue that the paper should be less glossy and more matte, like the paper Blake himself used; one can maintain that the dimensions of the pages should be the same as the original and

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.¹ 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-

¹ 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.