

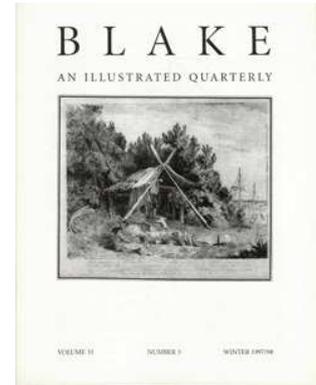
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY  
**BLAKE**

R E V I E W

Mark L. Greenberg, ed., *Speak Silence: Rhetoric  
and Culture in Blake's Poetical Sketches*

Jennifer Davis Michael

*Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*, Volume 31, Issue 3, Winter 1997/98, pp. 92-  
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Mark L. Greenberg, ed., *Speak Silence: Rhetoric and Culture in Blake's Poetical Sketches*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996. Pp. 221. \$39.95.

Reviewed by JENNIFER DAVIS MICHAEL

The publication of a collection of critical essays on *Poetical Sketches* marks a milestone in Blake studies, where such volumes usually focus on the *Songs* or, more recently, on new theoretical approaches to the prophetic books. Although Blake has long been a fixture in the romantic canon, *Poetical Sketches* remains something of a stepchild. As Mark Greenberg notes in his introduction, criticism of these early poems "has tended to pivot on questions of value" from the beginning. If we consider the history of its reception, the book seems paradoxically to disappear in two directions. On the one hand, Blake's early work was often seen as derivative or imitative of such predecessors as Thomson, Gray, and Collins. On the other hand, when the poems were considered seriously, it was only as "sketches" for the later songs and prophecies. Hence the poems were rarely evaluated in and of themselves; instead they were measured against their eighteenth-century antecedents or against Blake's mature work.

Robert Gleckner's book *Blake's Prelude* (1982) was the first major attempt in the modern era of Blake studies to assess and interpret *Poetical Sketches* on its own terms, without the "anticipative fallacy" he saw in the work of Frye, Bloom, and others (2).<sup>1</sup> Inevitably, therefore, *Blake's Prelude* looms over *Speak Silence* as Thomson's *Seasons* looms over Blake's cycle of lyrics: every one of these essays cites Gleckner at least once, and Gleckner himself responds at the end of the volume. Several of the contributors deliberately enact the "fallacy" Gleckner criticizes, recognizing perhaps that the desire for a pure text, read in a vacuum, is itself a fallacy. No matter how we try to look at *Poetical Sketches* in isolation, we cannot forget that Blake is the author, nor can we forget what we have already read of Blake. We are Experienced readers, and to return to Innocence is not only impossible but unwise.

But the book is more than an argument about how to read the juvenile productions of a canonical poet. What strikes me most about the various approaches in this volume is their common use of close readings, suggesting a renewed emphasis on formalism and lyricism in Blake. Although a review of this length can hardly do justice to the

<sup>1</sup> Gleckner acknowledges Margaret Lowery's *Windows of the Morning* (1940) as an independent assessment, but argues that Frye's *Fearful Symmetry* undermined much of Lowery's work by reading Blake's later myth back into *Poetical Sketches*.

detailed readings in these essays, it is refreshing to see such meticulous attention given to poems once dismissed as "rude" and "clumsy" (Tatham, quoted on 15). At the same time, however, there is a persistent impulse to turn away from the poems toward something else: toward questions of originality and value, toward Blake's later "system," toward a theory that replaces notions of originality and truth with pure poetic artifice. All are attempts, we might say, to fill the "silence" that "speaks" so loudly in these enigmatic poems.

In the first essay, "Sketching Verbal Form," Susan Wolfson paradoxically draws on W. J. T. Mitchell's theory of "composite art" to discuss Blake's single unillustrated letterpress publication. She finds in *Poetical Sketches* a "visual rhetoric . . . where conventions are deformed by poetic self-inscription" (31). What the advertisement disclaims as "irregularities and defects" Wolfson redefines as deliberate violations of conventional meter and line, such as "Smile on our loves; and, while thou drawest the / Blue curtains of the sky" ("To the Evening Star"). One wonders to what extent these effects can be called visual: after all, the "dissonant eye rhymes" are dissonant only to the ear, and strong enjambment operates on the ear as well as the eye. Nonetheless, Wolfson goes a long way toward redefining Blake's apparently unformed or deformed lyrics as deliberately formal. Even in a poem like "Fair Elenor," which Gleckner ranked among "the least accomplished, and perhaps the most 'un-Blakean,' poems in *Poetical Sketches*" (Gleckner 16), Wolfson locates a system in which the lack of rhyme produces not liberty but bondage through "deadening repetitions" (43). (One can only wish Wolfson had further developed her brief remarks on "Blind-man's Buff," another much-deplored and neglected poem in the volume.) Turning from rhyme to blank verse in *King Edward the Third*, Wolfson sees Blake subverting Milton's association of blank verse with "liberty," which becomes an empty word in the king's "imperialist cant" (56). Wolfson's essay takes *Poetical Sketches* seriously, as possessing its own aesthetic, and yet her serious evaluation is based very much on Blake's later work, from her opening argument in which she discusses the visual form of the text in *The Book of Urizen*. It is hard not to ask oneself, as Gleckner does in his response, What if *Poetical Sketches* was all we had of Blake? The question is not whether such coherence could be found in the poems, for Wolfson has demonstrated conclusively that it can, but whether it would be sought in the first place.

Stuart Peterfreund addresses "The Problem of Originality and Blake's *Poetical Sketches*" in the context of the Hebraic literary tradition, which used metaphor to find familiar expressions for new ideas, in contrast to classical writers, who found new ways to say old things (74): "nature to advantage dress'd," as Pope said. In Blake, as in the Bible, language or speech precedes things and actions: this is why Blake so vigorously rejects the classical dictum to

imitate nature, because nature is only the product of a speech act. Peterfreund thus reads the "problem of originality" in *Poetical Sketches* as a struggle between the Hebraic impulse to prophecy (bringing things into being through language) and the ever-present "temptation to classicize" (83).

Peterfreund introduces his essay with the bold claim that Blake himself wrote the demurring advertisement to the volume. He bases this claim on Blake's later works, which always begin with an introductory comment by the author, and on the genre of the "original" books of Macpherson and Chatterton, introduced by a persona other than the author (one might note the same device in Defoe). His point, however, is that by setting the "irregularities and defects" against the "poetic originality" of the sketches, Blake is deliberately making originality the subject of his volume. Peterfreund goes on to argue that *Poetical Sketches* is in fact replete with such defects, "though not of the sort that the smug persona would recognize. The irregularities are misappropriations of authentic inspiration by force of poetic convention and habit" (83). In other words, by playing out the conflict between Hebraic prophecy and classical imitation, Blake in effect demonstrates that true irregularities are not symptoms but rather failures of original genius.

Peterfreund makes a crucial contribution in identifying and explicating the tension between Hebraic and classical tradition in *Poetical Sketches* and in Blake's work in general. His application of his theory to the four seasonal poems, though painstakingly worked out, is less convincing. He argues that "To Spring" follows "correctly" the process of original creation outlined in plate 11 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, whereby "the ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses," and that the subsequent seasonal poems also fail the test of originality in different (though sequential) ways. Like Gleckner, I am wary of using a single paragraph from a later work as the key to originality in *Poetical Sketches*. I also disagree with Peterfreund's assumption that "To Spring" is calling for an "apocalypse" that ultimately "fails." By his own argument, to prophesy is to bring about through speech. The mere fact that the speaker does not go on to describe the "decking" and "crowning" of the land by Spring does not mean it does not happen; in fact, the subsequent poems to Summer, Autumn, and Winter would imply that it does. The error, whether in Blake's speaker or in Peterfreund's reading, is in looking for apocalyptic consummation in the cyclical world of the seasons.

Peterfreund is right in identifying the atmosphere of *Poetical Sketches* after "To Winter" as a "twilight" world, a blend of prophetic light and classicizing shadows. But here too he reads ahead 21 years to *Milton* to find the restoration of originality so lacking in the early volume. Peterfreund implies that the Blake of 1783 already knows the poetic theory of the *Marriage*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem* to boot. The prob-

lem is not simply the "anticipative fallacy," but a way of reading that minimizes poetic development, or makes its course clearly defined from the start. Peterfreund's reading binds the text in all directions: binds it to biblical sources, binds it to later texts, binds the young apprentice to the aging and disillusioned artist. Like the swaddling bands of "Infant Sorrow," these ties sometimes nurture an understanding of the text and at other times restrict it too narrowly.

Thomas A. Vogler's "Troping the Seasons" challenges both Gleckner and Peterfreund on the subject of Blake's originality. For Vogler, it is not a choice between original, prophetic truth and "mere" imitation or mimesis: rather, "truth" is produced by a "rhetorical machine" as cyclical as the seasons. Blake is "trying on the seasonal paradigm" and in doing so is pulled simultaneously toward nature and metaphor. Vogler expounds this view through a stunning history of poetic representations of the sun, the "golden load" of Blake's "To Autumn." His wide-ranging discussion has applications far beyond *Poetical Sketches* and is marred only occasionally by an excessively dense theoretical prose, as in the following sentence:

If the possible subject of poetic enunciation is already inscribed in a synchronic pastoral machine that constantly provides the already-available position characteristic of any discursive formation, then that position can be seen to have a special relationship to the sun, a prototypical relationship characteristic of that between all signifiers and their "real" signifieds, which are mental constructs rather than the natural objects with which they have only a rhetorical relationship. (122)

Vogler concludes with a provocative discussion of poetry's dependence on "feigning," in the words of Shakespeare's *Touchstone*, suggesting that what Blake or any poet is offering is not "original" nor "true" but a combination of faking and desiring whereby readers "persuade themselves that they have found the object of their desire" (145). His purpose does not seem to be to discount the effectiveness of Blake's rhetoric, but to reveal it as rhetoric, as "feigning" that is the only truth. Romanticists who are also romantics will protest that imagination is truth, but in fact Vogler is agreeing with them, as he ends his essay by quoting *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that "a firm persuasion that a thing is so, make[s] it so."

In a brief but incisive essay, Vincent A. De Luca also takes up the matter of Blake's tropes, but does so in the context of the eighteenth-century sublime, which he says substitutes for divinity "the transient states of natural cycles," represented and embodied in constantly shifting metaphors. De Luca applies Burke's theory of the sublime to Blake's motifs of hurried transformations, but notes that the succession of images in the sublime is "a subtractive rather than an additive process," whereby "Each new trope removes light and clarity from the amassing whole until we are left

with a final dark" (157). He goes on to compare this process of troping with the depleting process of time, thus returning to the poetry of the seasons and to Blake's "Mad Song," which "crouds after night" not only in the sense of "murmuring" but also in the sense of crowding or pressing on darkness. "Crouding after Night" (the title of his essay) thus becomes for De Luca the sublime theme of the whole volume, which he ultimately casts as a rivalry between the wintry northern landscape of the Burkean sublime and the (re)generative troping of Hebraic prophecy.

Perhaps the most ambitious essay in the collection is Nelson Hilton's "The Rankest Draught," which analyzes the prose piece "then She bore Pale desire," often grouped with *Poetical Sketches* by editors. The chaotically ambiguous syntax and punctuation of the "sketch" seems an extreme example of the "irregularities" in the typeset poems, so that Hilton is tempted to see "then She bore Pale desire" as a purer version of the same kind of work that Blake's well-meaning friends mutilated with their corrections. Hilton begins his essay by transcribing Blake's prose piece into metrical lines: a questionable move, some would say, in light of current arguments that Blake's lineation should not be tampered with. But this is not an engraved poem; Hilton makes no alterations from Erdman's text; and his transcription simply reveals the metrical form already there in the language. Sometimes it is a trochaic tetrameter familiar from the *Songs* ("She doth bind them to her law"), but more often it is blank verse: "My Cup is fill'd with Envy's Rankest Draught / a miracle No less can set me Right." If nothing else, this lineation makes it easier to read a text that too many readers might dismiss as gibberish. But this transcription is only a prelude to Hilton's consideration of the piece as a poem, one that is intrinsically concerned with the creative process it both embodies and describes.

Hilton explores the "psycho-theogony" of the poem using Melanie Klein's theory about the opposition of envy and creativity as well as his own richly allusive close reading, drawing on Shakespeare, Spenser, Burton, Milton, and a host of lesser figures. The effect is not merely to uncover the sources of Blake's images, which indeed would make "then She bore Pale desire" seem as derivative as any of the lyrics in *Poetical Sketches*, but rather to depict the poet/narrator struggling with his own envy which is itself creative: "it is the Cursed thorn wounding my breast that makes me sing, / however sweet tis Envy that Inspires my Song." The poem depicts the "gods" of the passions generating themselves in a succession of metaphors that aptly represents De Luca's sense of the sublime, but rather than the poet controlling those metaphors, "trying them on" as Vogler has it, they control him. Hilton's article thus pays unusual attention to a "fragment" while also engaging many themes of the collection.

As I mentioned before, all the articles in the collection respond in one way or another to Gleckner's book.

Gleckner then responds to these responses in the closing piece, "Obtuse Angled Afterword." I shall refrain from responding to a response to a series of responses, except to say that the inclusion of Gleckner's piece helps to give the book the informal flavor of a roundtable discussion as well as raising good questions about the specific arguments presented. Giving Gleckner the last word, however, makes it seem as though all things begin and end with Gleckner where *Poetical Sketches* is concerned, whereas the volume has already demonstrated how much more is left to discuss. The questions of originality, evaluation, and formalism raised here have implications for the rest of Blake's work and beyond: implications which I hope will continue to be pursued with the energy already shown in *Speak Silence*.

#### Work Cited

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Reviewed by G. E. BENTLEY, JR.

The two greatest English printers during William Blake's lifetime were William Bulmer and Thomas Bensley, and each was responsible for a number of works of major importance in Blake's career and in the history of fine printing. These included for Bulmer three major publications by Boydell: Hogarth, *Works* (1795), Shakspeare, *Dramatic Works* (1791-1802), and *Boydell's Graphic Illustrations of the Dramatic Works of William Shakspeare* ([?1803]; 1813). For works printed by Bensley Blake did even more, and more important, work: Lavater, *Aphorisms* (1789), Lavater, *Physiognomy* (1789-98; 1810), two advertisements for Blair's *Grave* (1805) plus Blair, *Grave* (1808; 1813), and Gay, *Fables* (1793 [i.e., 1810]). In the cases of the Boydell Shakspeare and Lavater's *Physiognomy*, the interest of contemporaries and posterity was not infrequently as much in the typography and printing as in the illustrations. Such fine printing is of major importance in Blake's professional context.

William Bulmer established his reputation very rapidly and solidly:

From the moment in March 1790 that he established the Shakspeare Press in Russell Court, Cleveland Row, St James's, William Bulmer was regarded as a fine