

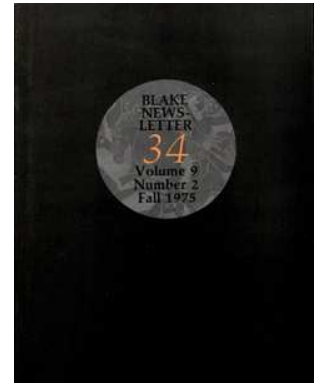
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R E V I E W

Martin K. Nurmi, William Blake

Paul M. Zall

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76--so much for brave chanticler. In a similar way the phallic worm of *J* 82 should be compared with those seen earlier, especially the loins-hugging one on *J* 63. Finally, it is not clear to me (on *J* 84, p. 363) what the amalgamation of the Druid and Christian churches would imply. From Blake's point of view, not much I think. There is not much hope in such an ecumenical movement, at least not for a radical poet-painter-prophet who is perpetually politically left and forever spiritually right. So much for *via media*.

One of the great values of *The Illuminated Blake* is that it will provoke close study and detailed comment on Blake's illuminated poems. Let us hope that comment will be imaginative and illuminating. Erdman's book will also show the new reader and remind the old that Blake was a pictorial artist and that it is a mistake to treat him *only* as a conventional poet.

It is doubtful that anyone except those who can do without *The Illuminated Blake* will be able to make the best use of the whole of it, but that is true of most books. It will quite naturally serve those best who do not really need it, since it will be used most often as a memory stimulator by those who already know the originals (as well as the Trianon facsimiles) or have easy access to a representative number of them. Its effect on the serious student or neophyte Blake scholar will probably be mixed. Of course, the good it will do will far outweigh the bad. Despite the fact that it cannot always be read without a regular printed text (except, perhaps, as Erdman recommends, with a magnifying glass), the beginning reader of Blake will get a good sense of what the thrust of a real Blakean page is.

Some of the reproductions in *The Illuminated Blake* are not easily decipherable, so that if the reader really wants to follow Erdman in detail, he will have to have better reproductions than many of those that are included in this volume, but Blake is not always easy to reproduce. I speak in the main of the interlinear and marginal areas of representative pages. If the reader depends only on the reproductions in *The Illuminated Blake*, he will often have to take Erdman's word for it, not because his interpretation may differ, but because he simply cannot make out the details that Erdman says are there.

The information on pp. 14, 15, and 21 in the Introduction, it seems to me, should be given in greater detail. Furthermore, it belongs with the information on pp. 8-9. The asterisk which appears often in the annotations is never identified, so far as I can discover. It also would have been helpful for Erdman to have explained the technical rudiments of Blake's printing process. Such an explanation belongs in a volume of this sort because it answers fundamental questions about how Blake produced the plates.

It is to be hoped that *The Illuminated Blake* will go into either a second printing or, better, a second edition so that Erdman will get a chance to rectify or, at least, modify various passages,

not to mention the typographical errors. Let us hope that his publisher is listening. Some of the photographic reproduction work should be redone. The book is too good to be so badly served as it sometimes is by lapses in production. Always formidable, often brilliant, sometimes uneven and unnecessarily obscure, *The Illuminated Blake* is an invaluable contribution to Blake studies. It is unfortunate that Erdman does not resort more vigorously and judiciously to the critical literature on Blake. He seems at times to cite only what he happens to remember, but perhaps this is a niggling point; for, while there are many minor points with which to take issue throughout the volume, there are no major blunders. *The Illuminated Blake* is an astonishingly successful book on the whole.

Martin K. Nurmi. *William Blake*.

London: Hutchinson University Library, 1975.

Pp. 175, 8 illus. \$1.95, paper.

Reviewed by Paul M. Zall

Those who have long since despaired of keeping a body count in Blake studies will be cheered by the appearance of a Blake volume in Hutchinson's series for students and general readers. The focal point is Blake's poetry, however, abstracted from his art ("it has not been possible to give much attention to his art"), and for that reason alone will probably cause consternation among Blake camps of whatever critical persuasion. But this is a book for beginners, and should be greeted accordingly, with all due allowance for puns ("a Woman of Experience") and topicality ("Blake was not a male chauvinist").

The overview in this respect is very good, with an introductory chapter enticing beginners with visions of good things to come ("as we shall see later") and a biographical summary that gives much Blake in brief compass. Successive chapters then lead through the early verse--stressing the metrics in *Poetical Sketches*, then the philosophical countersystem in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*--gradually snaking through Blake's more complicated mythic structures. While the seasoned Blakean may scoff from the trenches at the redundancy inherent in this method, it seems to fit the needs of new recruits.

Of course the method risks the oversimplification of *Cliff's Notes*, but there is little of that here, except in a statement about *The Four Zoas* being "one of the very greatest works of literature" (p. 26)--alas not demonstrated in the introductory chapter in which it appears nor in the ultimate chapter where the poem is discussed in detail and the aid of both Erdman and Frye is invoked. Or in the discussion of "The Tyger," plateless, where after four pages of possibilities we are given a series of questions asserted to be logically unanswerable--with no suggestion that logic is not the only way to answer them. Or in the discussion of *The Marriage*, where the student and

general reader meet Blakean irony without being sure about the difference between the satire of "Island in the Moon" and the irony here or later--the name seems the same, but sometimes refers to techniques like parody, now to theme, later to mode of perception, a multisensory device where the plate shows one thing and the poem another, and finally to "mythic irony" (p. 100). But this is to quibble.

Given the restrictions under which the labor was performed, its real strength appears in the masterful explanation of *Urizen*, where the action is made to appear truly dramatic and the subject made clearly the mind of Man. Sometimes the explanation of other plots comes cluttered with roll calls of commentators which seem superfluous since their names appear in the notes anyway. The real weakness, however, is the lack of a clear-cut conclusion to match the introductory chapters. The student and general reader are taken to Jerusalem and left suspended there--hanging by the thumbs as it were. Having been led from *Poetical Sketches* to this loftiest of heights, it would be nice to look back at the trackless wastes behind us and ahead. The "Suggestions for Further Reading" seem sparse enough, the "Criticism" list very heavy on collections of essays at the expense of individual studies. And the index tells us something about the current state of Blake studies when it lists Franklin P. Adams (FPA) but not Hazard S.

Brian John. *Supreme Fictions: Studies in the Work of William Blake, Thomas Carlyle, W. B. Yeats, and D. H. Lawrence*. Montreal & London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1974. Pp. 318. \$13.50.
Reviewed by David Wagenknecht

Taken one observation at a time, Brian John's *Supreme Fictions* is intelligent and right-minded, but it is one of those studies of which the modesty and sanity are undone by scope. Such a range demands that one simultaneously manage general perspective as well as interpretive detail; this book, decent as it is, seemed to me neither out far nor in deep. The intention, for one thing, is rather uneasily divided between historical and critical implication: the reader must suspend himself between (on the one hand) landscapes of likemindedness so misty and general that the only distinct observations can be exceptions, and (on the other) specific interpretive patches which illustrate the author's admiration for his subjects more than these subjects' relationship to the larger view. Given the quality of the author's intelligence and the genuineness of his affections, this is a pity.

On the one hand John wants to argue for a Romantic "vitalist" tradition (stressing characteristic imagery more than his subjects' rhetorical relationship to historically conditioned audiences), but he is not very

curious about Romanticism as an historical phenomenon, and neither the provenance nor the transference of the ideas and imagery he is concerned with interests him. Consequently the reader feels himself to be dealing less with a tradition than with four quite distinct expositions of similar ideas, and his first impression that the argument will have vast scope is replaced by a feeling of arbitrariness. Not only are we not told sufficiently why author X belongs (in the tradition designated), why not author Y: we are left finally with no very developed sense of the ways in which John's chosen (and unruly) four might be related--they simply often sound alike, which is not enough point to unify the discussion. Indeed, the idea of tradition is most active in the study by negative implication, for John is often anxious because ideas which are "good" in one context (usually Blake, but often Lawrence as well) are undesirable in another (Carlyle, sometimes Yeats). The word "fascist" recurs often enough to make one uncomfortable, but it is exactly the book's undeveloped sense of history which makes the anxiety unresolvable.

The book's potential for an interpretive dimension is reflected in the title, determined by an interest in Romantic projection, but this too is swallowed up by mere exposition of ideas. There is no shortage of specific commentary in the book, but the relentlessly expository method stands far enough outside the texts that no sense of the competition between imagination and reality convincing enough to support the title emerges. The Carlyle chapter is probably the least convincing in this regard--the concluding third of it rather desperately announces a critical dimension, arguing that the sage was a literary fictionist as much as prophetic factualist (the demonstration bogs down in impressionistic appreciations of style)--but the Blake chapter may be taken as more characteristic. As a whole the chapter is a worthy general introduction to Blake's poetry (though very thin on the epics), but John decides to concentrate on *Milton* for reasons which have little to do with his general argument (it is the "shortest" as well as the "most 'finished'" epic, we are told), and the commentary manages to avoid nearly all the troubling minute particulars of the poem. Even on the level of general commentary it tells us nothing new. There is an attractive enthusiasm to the discussion, but--like the book as a whole--it implicitly begs more questions than it explicitly answers.