

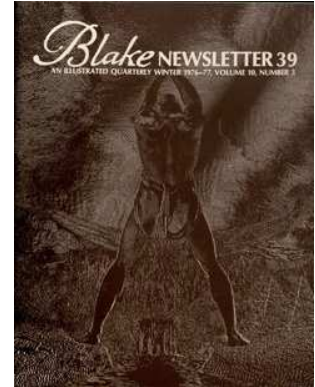
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R E V I E W

Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr., Angel of
Apocalypse: Blake's Idea of Milton

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Reviews

Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr. **Angel of Apocalypse: Blake's Idea of Milton.** Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1975. xxii + 322 pp. \$15.00.

Reviewed by Purvis E. Boyette

Wittreich has written a wonderfully old-fashioned book, although students who have gone to school with Bloom and Bush may think they are reading a book more revolutionary than it is. Blake's idea of Milton, according to Wittreich, is that the great poet was an apocalyptic visionary whose deepest insight was depicted in the spiritual illumination of the Jesus of *Paradise Regained*. This transcendental experience of redemption allowed Milton to burst through the patterns of tradition, art, and constricting personal moralities to achieve the divine vision of revolutionary and transforming prophecy--and thus become, in a figure less metaphorical than one might suppose, an angel of apocalypse. Blake's original perception of this initiatory and liberating experience revealed Milton's revolutionary attitudes toward "all" artistic and intellectual traditions, and as an inspired, lifting purity of imagination, Blake's perception of Milton "freed Blake from tyrannies of art and of history" (p. 231) and made Milton far otherwise than the Great Inhibitor. With that thesis, Wittreich's book, somewhat unexpectedly, explores Blake's achievement within the context of tradition, seeking to show not "how a recalcitrant poet withdrew from his cultural heritage but how a revolutionary artist [Blake] learned to use his heritage both creatively and subversively" (p. 69).

The most provocative chapter in the book, to my mind, is on "Milton as a Revolutionary," following two chapters of exemplary analysis and criticism of "Blake's Portrait and Portrayals of Milton" and "Blake's Milton Illustrations." Blake's idea of Milton merits our attention, Wittreich says, because the comprehension of an entire age is summarized therein and because Blake embodies "truths about Milton repressed during the eighteenth century and still lost in the orthodoxies of modern criticism" (p. 148). Most generally, the proponents of these orthodoxies appear to be Eliot and Leavis, though closer to home, Wittreich cites the Victorian villainy of one of Robert West's essays in which Milton is proclaimed "a superbly gifted confirmer of what his audience already believed and user of ways of thinking already established." Opposed to that is a sentence by Marcuse arguing that an "artist's invocation of orthodoxies" may well allow a poet to assume subversive attitudes toward them, followed by a telling point that on "virtually every occasion when he speaks of tradition and custom, [Milton] associates both with tyranny and error" (p. 149). Thus, the battle is joined, and what follows is a carefully argued and thoroughly

researched discussion of how the "forms of poetry . . . may be used against the very systems that have disfigured them" (p. 155).

Wittreich's apparent intellectual and emotional identification with Blake's perception of Milton is a remarkable feat of imaginative criticism, stimulated by the admirable care of a serious scholar. But I, for one, would have preferred to read Plato on the *Forms* of things instead of Marcuse, who learned his metaphysics from Plato too. There is something trendy, not quite gratuitous, in such citations of our contemporary philosophers, but one finds support where one can, and Wittreich knows too much--much of it displayed--to be chastized for lack of classical reading. Marcuse, however, leads Wittreich into an oddity of thought that ought to be remarked: theology keeps turning into ideology (pp. 85, 190, 213, 241), a metamorphosis slippery at best, misleading at worst, and in any case a suspicious bit of rhetoric, leading Wittreich to say that Spenser, Milton's celebrated teacher, "was locked into the orthodoxies from which Milton wished to liberate poetry" (p. 157); that the audience to whom the epic was addressed shifted from a social to a spiritual elite; and that Blake/Milton's preference for the daughters of inspiration over the daughters of memory shifted epic theory from a theory of imitation to a theory of inspiration; and finally, that "in terms of ideology, *Paradise Lost* expresses the poet's radicalism . . . in its rejection of epic structure" (p. 170). Now, all of this is effectively argued, often persuasive, but the old boys who still like their Plato (especially the *Timaeus*, *Ion*, and *Symposium*), the orphic theories of Chapman and Reynolds, the mystical theology of William Alabaster, and even Dryden have not yet been done to death. That Wittreich/Blake has made an important difference in the way one must think about Milton from now on is, however, certain.

Milton is of the devil's party because he is "both a political radical and a religious dissenter" (p. 214) and because the *Marriage* embraces the double perspective of the prophetic poem, which means that what the Devil says "may be true from the perspective of history, but . . . not true from the perspective of eternity that the poet enjoys" (p. 215). This artistic strategy engages an ironic play between speakers and shifting perspectives, whereby "the Devil is to Blake what Milton's Beelzebub is to Satan and what Satan sometimes is to Milton--a spokesman who never exhibits the same largeness of mind as the figure with whom he is identified" (p. 215). Milton, in short, knew what he was doing when he invested his Satan with those qualities of sublimity, majesty, and energy which Blake and Milton could admire in a moral character, like the Jesus of *Paradise Regained* but not the Satan of *Paradise Lost*. If Wittreich/Blake's reading of Milton is true to Milton's poems, then Blake is indeed Milton's first "fit" reader, unlike Dryden and those others who have thought the Devil was Milton's hero instead of Adam.

Wittreich's book, as I have tried to indicate, is closely argued, making a lot of sense out of

the foam and rolling weed of Blake's sea of words, as well as casting light on the pictorial language and meaning of Blake's illustrations, forty-five of them reproduced in black and white on glossy paper. There is much in the book that I have not mentioned, the final chapter being richly suggestive, of Blake's *Milton* as an attempt to mythologize "the decisive turning point of Milton's life, which . . . comes with the writing of *Paradise Regained*" and to relate "that moment of redemption to the renewal of the entire human race" (p. 243), and more, that "prophecy is a sublime allegory, . . . its reference points [being] . . . not history but the inner life of man" (p. 245). In fact, the final chapter is not so much epilogue as prologue to yet another book, that one being a promised full-scale commentary on *Milton*; and one may look forward to it as work that will be characterized, like *Angel of Apocalypse*, by rigor, strong points of view, dense documentation, and significance.

G. E. Bentley, Jr. **William Blake: The Critical Heritage.** London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975. xix + 294 pp. \$25.00.

Reviewed by Suzanne R. Hoover

Though the *Mortal & Perishing* part of the present book be inelegant, expensive, and small, the *Real Book*, a documentary survey of the reaction to Blake and his works before the publication of Gilchrist's biography in 1863, will hold a large interest for readers who may wonder what it was like in the old days to encounter Blake without a trot. The details of this survey may at times baffle us, suggesting a playing-out of tidal under-rhythms of attraction and repulsion that have little to do with sophisticated appreciation, but the overall curve seems explicable enough. The brief "high" of Blake's reputation in the early 1800's turned to a long, largely ebbing phase as a consequence of the fact that the character of the man was increasingly out of harmony with the character of the times: as Samuel Palmer wrote to Gilchrist in 1855 (part of a long reminiscence about Blake for Gilchrist's book), "materialism was his abhorrence." The importance of the profound dyspathy between Blake and the culture of the first half of the nineteenth century cannot be overstressed, for there is no artist of whom it is truer to say that his character is his art--and therefore, his destiny. Some of the pain of looking closely at that destiny is mitigated for us by the enjoyments of Regency and Victorian genius; reactions to Blake during the pre-Gilchrist period come most copiously from persons who hold considerable, in some cases great, interest for us in their own right--as poets, essayists, critics, artists, mountebanks, etc.--a circumstance which compounds the interest of what we are reading and helps to put the whole question of early responses to Blake in a suitably spacious setting.

Further to help us to that end Professor Bentley begins his book with a useful twenty-six-page

Introduction that sets forth the history of Blake criticism and Blake studies. The present compilation resembles earlier ones in the Critical Heritage Series in its mixture of general essays on Blake with commentary on specific works. It differs from the other volumes in being about a writer who was also a professional artist, and in that it is necessarily composed more of private statements than of published reviews. A selection of comment on Blake and his work during his lifetime has been made from the fuller materials in *Blake Records*.¹ This includes some long pieces, such as the essays by Malkin and Crabb Robinson, and the now famous reviews in the *Examiner* (1808) and *Anti-Jacobin* (1808), as well as numerous brief, even fragmentary, references, in many cases excerpted from longer items in *Blake Records*. The biographical essays of 1827-31 by Smith, Cunningham, and Tatham are given in full, along with early post-obit articles on Blake in *Fraser's* and the *London University Magazine* (all in *Blake Records*). A spare, running commentary like that in *Blake Records* introduces and connects the items.

The new feature of this book is its chronologically ordered final section on the years 1831-63, which cites every commentary on Blake in that period, and even every comment that is now known, some for the first time: 300 items in all. This is a valuable drawing in of the nets, notwithstanding that, with netting so very fine, whitebait are brought up with tuna. The question one might raise about this chapter concerns its title, "The Forgotten Years." It is my belief, stated already in these pages and elsewhere, that "forgotten" is a misnomer in that it places an emphasis on the number of comments rather than on a consideration of their significance. Many of the (comparatively few) notices of Blake's work that were taken were important, coming as they did from Emerson, Ruskin, Palgrave, Henry James, Sr., the Pre-Raphaelites, and others of interest to us now. An edition of Blake's *Songs* was published for Wilkinson in 1839; pictures by Blake were exhibited with works of other English artists to a mass audience in 1857 and 1862, and commented on in the press. "Forgotten" really does not describe this state of affairs. Nor is it quite accurate to place the turn of the Blake tide at 1863, as Professor Bentley does in a paragraph introductory to this chapter. From the late 'forties through the early 'sixties there was a definite increase in interest in Blake, which was marked by (among numerous other indices) the acquisition of many of his works by the British Museum. The immediate burst of attention to Blake supposedly aroused from nil by Gilchrist in fact occurred in an atmosphere in which Blake was somewhat known. Of course, it is proper to emphasize the huge limitations of the mid-Victorians' knowledge of Blake, with regard both to the number of works available and the number of persons familiar with them, but that should not entitle us to write off as inconsequential the knowledge that did exist. I am conscious of the fineness of this point, and yet, if there is a purpose in retrieving and citing the small documents along with the large, it can only be to refine our picture of the way things actually happened.