

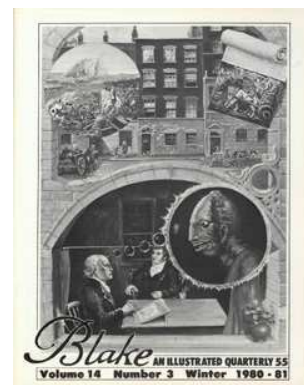
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Kay Parkhurst Easson and Roger R. Easson, eds.,
The Book of Urizen

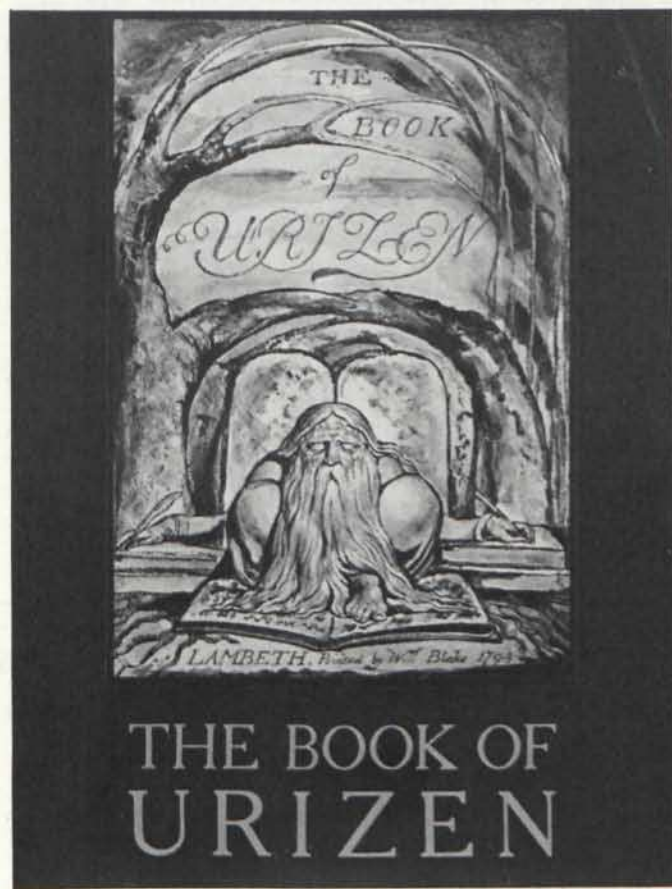
Stuart Curran

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138-143



Kay Parkhurst Easson and Roger R. Easson, eds. **The Book of Urizen**. Boulder: Shambhala in association with Random House, New York, 1978. 102 pp. \$6.95, paper.

Reviewed by Stuart Curran.



The *Book of Urizen* has in recent years become a staple of college classrooms where Blake is introduced. Its sublimity, its awesome temporal, spatial, and narrative dislocations, the totality of its cosmic vision, all make it a work representative of Blake's mature prophetic mode but accessible to the novice easily overwhelmed by *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. As art *The Book of Urizen* exists on a plane of mastery comparable to its achievement as poem, and again it is an exemplary casebook for exploring the complex relations of text and design in Blake's work. Up to this point teachers have had to rely on the indifferently reproduced black-and-white redaction of copy G, the Rosenwald copy, edited by Clark Emery for the University of Miami Press, or the reproduction of copy B in Erdman's *Illuminated Blake*, generally better in printing but uneconomical for a class not concentrating on Blake. With a strong library, of course, one can coordinate the energies, the clean fingers, and no. 2 pencils of one's students in a stampede on the rare book room, where the Trianon facsimile of copy G merits an annual dusting. None of these alternatives, however, can vie with a reasonably priced and reasonably presented color reproduction of copy G, for which there is a student, and (not to be discounted) a fair public, demand. To have an edition backed by a major trade publisher heralds wide acceptance, and one might accordingly anticipate wide applause. That is, I think, unlikely. Un-

fortunately, the defects of this edition, which will undoubtedly dismay purists, are such as to disturb even those who take long views and do not foresee residence in Jerusalem next year or for the determinable future. No aspect of the edition--the reproduction, the edited text, or the commentary--escapes them. Since this review is intended for the journal of record for Blake, I will tax the reader's patience with a specification of the problems that this edition poses for use in teaching, scholarship, and (lest it be forgotten) one's aesthetic experience of an undeniable masterpiece.

The Eassons' decision to present us with yet another facsimile of copy G is not to be disputed: this latest known complete copy, despite the absence of Urizen's soliloquy in the problematical plate 4, has come to be thought of as the standard copy, for, unlike earlier copies colorprinted in pastel, here Blake employs a richly layered watercoloring and even the overlay of gold and silver leaf. Copy G is, quite simply, one of the great triumphs of Blake's art. It does not, however, appear such in this edition. One's first inclination is to waive minor discrepancies in color, arguing that film technology is still unreliable when it comes to absolute fidelity with four-color plates. This is, of course, the justification for the laborious and expensive collotype-and-stencil process undertaken by the Trianon Press series of facsimiles. In the

Shambala/Random House *Book of Urizen*, with color plates printed by Lehigh Press, economy has prevailed over even a minimum standard of fidelity. To begin with, as was noted previously in these pages with the like edition of *Milton* copy B, glossy photographic paper insures a flatness of effect in place of Blake's subtle texturing. One might imagine the editors protesting but having to acquiesce in such an economy, but as fair trade they should have demanded a true color negative. There is scarcely a plate in which significant departures from the original are not manifest. In general, one may summarize them as a loss of layered texture and a pronounced tendency toward primary hues, Blake's subtle color, especially in earth tones, being deepened into heavy reds and oranges. Even a cursory glance through the colored plates here will reveal how dominated they are by red. It is not altogether facetious, given this reproduction, to suggest that Fuzon evacuated Egypt to escape the plague of measles ravaging its inhabitants.

For the purposes of this review, somewhat delayed by the death of Lessing J. Rosenwald, I have compared the Easson reproduction closely with the Trianon facsimile and with the original copy G, recently transferred from the Alverthorpe Gallery to its permanent residence in the Library of Congress. It should be noted from the start that Blake's familiar siena, the printing base for copy G, is transmuted more or less (the values change from plate to plate) to a strident red.

1. Title-page. A premonition of what is to follow is figured in the anomalous change of the plate numeral "1" in the upper right from an orange-red to bright green. The sky in the upper right is changed from muted blue to azure; indications of pale green vegetation above an otherwise barren tree in the upper left are lost in blotches of orange over olive. A similar swathe of pale green across the bottom is changed to olive.

2. Preludium. Ugly red stipple disfigures the flesh of woman and child as well as the central background: these are subtle flesh tones in the original. The woman's outlandish henna hair should be auburn. To her upper right gray-blue sky adopts a greenish tinge toward the top: here all is azure. The flame-like vegetation surrounding the text is a lovely spring green in the original: here, olive-orange, it suggests only fire.

3. Headpiece of youth racing through flames: in the original pen lines and gold flecking give a textured sense of the body's immersion in the medium.

4. Full-page design of crouched Urizen surrounded by rock. The splendid gold flecks in the rock, of obvious iconographical significance, are lost here. Gray-blue in upper left, consistent with rock, here looks like the intrusion of sky. Urizen's body is simply not rose-purple.

5. Headpiece of haloed Urizen holding open book. Again, the loss of gold in the halo and in the text of the book removes iconographical significance. The very top should be wholly dark blue, not mostly black. The opaque black blotch across

the book is in the original a translucent shadow.

6. Full-page design of Urizen in semi-cruciform position, immersed in water. This is far from the original with all colors transmuted. Red on face and in hair replaces subtle orange: Urizen's eyes are not, as here, madly blood-shot. Where there is white, read gray throughout; where electric blue, a faint azure tint. Considerable overpainting with silver leaf (in water to right of Urizen, on his right foot, right knee, and on his beard) and gold (on nose, right big toe, and below him) is lost and with it the three-dimensional sense of immersion.

7. Three-quarters page design of three falling figures encoiled by serpents. The basic background color of the medium through which they fall should be green, not as here orange. Considerable gold flecking arching over the left figure and accentuating the serpents is absent. The wonderful effect of a scarlet overwash on gold leaf at the bottom is lost. (Incidentally, even the Trianon facsimile erred here by inverting the overlay.) Again, the figures have a blotchy red rather than the grayish flesh tone of the original.

8. Full-page design of figure balanced on hands surrounded by rock-cloud medium: as a whole much too bright and stark. Where Blake uses a gray or pink-white this has simply white. Red striations are too emphatic. The chief loss is the overwash of lines on the left leg, suggestive of a veil or cloud.

9. Three-quarters design of agonized Los (?), hands crossed over ears: far too red. Gold flecking above head, to the right of and below the body, is lost.

10. Two-thirds design of crouched skeleton. Background of text should be light blue, not violet, with azure rather than black above skeletal circle. The basic hue of the skeleton is gold to green, not, as here, orange to red. Flecked gold accentuating cranium and other parts of skeleton is lost.

11. Full-page design of shackled, weeping old man. The figure sits on golden vegetation, with golden rocks next to his right shoulder, and gold also implicated in the halo-sunburst surrounding his head. That burst is bright red here, but orange to deep red in the original. The face and body have a basic gray cast in the original: here there is much pink and red.

12. One-third headpiece of figure in rear view supporting rocks. Again as before, the rock should be suffused with gold.

13. Two-thirds tailpiece with emaciated figure and Los, surrounded and divided by flames. The text has a gray, not violet, wash. The skeletal figure, here an olive brown, has a distinctly green cast with silver flecks on his legs. Los, in contrast, has gold flecks on his legs. There is also gold to far left and in flames above Los; the flames have a lighter rose tint.

14. Full-page design of crouched nude, arms behind head, has too much red and white. There is gold

leaf throughout the corona surrounding the figure.

15. Central design of figure holding apart clouds lacks gold in clouds and on rear of head and left shoulder.

16. Three-quarters design of four heavenly figures looking down to earth. The cloud drapery out of which the two on the right emerge should be a gray-azure, not rich blue. Gold leaf surrounds the descending arm of the one figure. The medium in which his hand trails should be a gray-blue suggestive of water, not green. An anomalous red bull's-eye intruding just to the left of the plunging beard of the figure to the far right suggests defective film or unprofessional processing: Blake is not responsible for it.

17. Full-page design of globe emerging from hair of bent figure is perhaps beyond the capacity of a photograph to reproduce. Considerable gold leaf distinguishes the globe.

18. Three-quarters tailpiece of a cruciform Los in flames, with hammer in left hand and right hand on rock. Gold leaf is missing from the bottom. There is some success in capturing his immersion in flames here.

19. One-third headpiece of ascending Enitharmon and crouched Los. The text is backed by a much more pronounced gray wash. Background in the design should be gray-black with azure, not turquoise, shading. In the original, gold at Enitharmon's foot suggests fire, with gray smoke billowing to her left: this simply is lost.

20. One-third tailpiece of infant falling in fire. A blotchy woodcut quality at the bottom is without basis in the original. The dominant color of the fire is yellow, not as here orange, with streaks of gold.

21. Full-page design of Los-Enitharmon-Orc. The true cast of these bodies is gray: the whitish-red tones here are still preferable to the inexplicable chocolate to which they are darkened in the Trianon edition.

22. Two-thirds tailpiece of Urizen exploring his dens. The blue is too strong, and red splashes in the rocks behind Urizen are missing, but this plate is relatively close to the original.

23. Full-page design of heavily draped, moving figure, viewed from the rear. Heavy red striations on the drapery, overpainted in the original, have a distinct and ugly presence here.

24. Full-page design of Urizen's four children, the elements, is a very poor reproduction. Green at the top is transmuted to orange; bluish gray sky to heavy blue; the gray-green vegetation out of which Grodna arises is olive, with his hand surrounded by scarlet, not orange. The muted orange flesh tones in the original are altered to ugly pinks and reds.

25. One-third headpiece with figures immersed

in green medium and entwined with serpent coils. The original gray-green has become forest green, with the purple wash at the bottom a gray-blue.

26. Full-page design of boy and dog before immense door. The bottom half of this plate looks as if it were splattered with bright red paint: these are subtle accentuations of hue, done with orange, in the original.

27. Two-thirds tailpiece with Urizen caught in his nets is in general too olive in hue.

Plate a of copy C--plate 4 of the reading text--is reproduced following plate 27.

To summarize briefly: one may ignore the aesthetic consequences of the considerable transmutation of color values throughout the plates, but the infidelity has interpretive significance as well. Fully a quarter of the plates have lost detail essential to their meaning (plate 19 being especially obvious), while the marked alteration in hue in several (e.g. plates 2 and 16) obscures their import or subjects them to serious misinterpretation. In effect, this is not a reliable facsimile for scholarly purposes, nor can it be used with confidence in the classroom.

The twenty-eight color plates are followed by a handsomely printed edition of the text. The "Textual Note" acknowledges that "the nature of the punctuation often shapes the reader's perception of the meaning of Blake's words" (41), but that recognition has insufficiently shaped the editors' attitude toward their task. They appear not to have been guided by the accrued consensus of modern editorial procedure, which emphasizes a selfless modesty as the editor's abiding virtue. Instead, there is considerable editorial intrusion here, the main feature being a lavish (and at times ungrammatical) sprinkling of commas throughout. These have a palpable rhetorical effect, separating integrated components, slowing the momentum, and often removing a studied ambiguity of modification that is distinctly Blakean. One recognizes that Blake's idiosyncrasies, like those of Emily Dickinson, pose insoluble problems for a systematic editor. Still, the caveat should be that less is more. Here, the rule is that an editor's job is to make editorial decisions wherever possible. Many are curious; some are clearly wrong.

A few examples, compared with the original, will illustrate the effect of such fussing with the text. (I identify line numbers, which are not included in this edition, for convenience.)

And self-balanc'd, stretch'd o'er the void,
I alone, even I! The winds merciless
Bound, but condensing in torrents
They fall & fall; (4:18-21)

And self balanc'd stretch'd o'er the void
I alone, even I! the winds merciless
Bound; but condensing, in torrents
They fall & fall

But Los saw the Female & pitied.
 He embrac'd her; she wept; she refus'd.
 In perverse and cruel delight
 She fled from his arms, yet he follow'd.
 (19:10-13)

But Los saw the Female & pitied
 He embrac'd her, she wept, she refus'd
 In perverse and cruel delight
 She fled from his arms, yet he follow'd

In both these cases Blake's intentions are clear. The misunderstanding of Blake's point of emphasis for an end-stop in plate 4 forces "Bound" to do service as a passive participle, a wholly unnecessary barbarism. The second case speaks for itself; it is a model of the success often attained by Blake's peculiar ideas on punctuation. The intruded stoppage obliterates the rapid succession of interdependent actions and the double import of line 12.

If the Eassons were consistent in regularizing Blake's punctuation, one might overlook cases where they deliberately remove it. But they retain and dismiss seemingly at will. These two examples, for instance, violate Blake's apparent intentions, and one is simply puzzled to understand what would motivate or justify such unsupported emendations.

In harrowing fear rolling round,
 His nervous brain shot branches
 Round the branches of his heart
 On high into two little orbs;
 And fixed in two little caves,
 Hiding carefully from the wind,
 His Eyes beheld the deep. (13:10-16)

In harrowing fear rolling round;
 His nervous brain shot branches
 Round the branches of his heart.
 On high into two little orbs
 And fixed in two little caves
 Hiding carefully from the wind,
 His Eyes beheld the deep,

And his world teem'd vast enormities
 Fright'ning, faithless, fawning.
 Portions of life, similitudes
 Of a foot, or a hand, or a head
 Or a heart, or an eye, they swam, mischevous
 Dread terrors, delighting in blood. (22:2-7)

And his world teem'd vast enormities
 Frightning; faithless; fawning
 Portions of life; similitudes
 Of a foot, or a hand, or a head
 Or a heart, or an eye, they swam mischevous
 Dread terrors! delighting in blood

Similarly, the end-stop of 15:53-54 is wrongly placed, as the parallel repetition of 18:5 surely indicates. Sometimes, such rhetorical leads are all that Blake offers a reader or editor, and they cannot be disregarded. But sometimes, too, emendation cannot be avoided. Faced with a shambles, does it make sense to create another? I quote the original first, then the Eassons' version:

Shudd'ring, the Eternal Prophet smote
 With a stroke, from his north to south region
 The bellows & hammer are silent now
 A nerveless silence, his prophetic voice
 Seiz'd; a cold solitude & dark void
 The Eternal Prophet & Urizen clos'd

Shudd'ring, the Eternal Prophet smote
 With a stroke, from his north to south region.
 The bellows & hammer are silent now,
 A nerveless silence, his prophetic voice
 Seiz'd, a cold solitude & dark void
 The Eternal Prophet & Urizen clos'd. (15:35-41)

Adding two periods and reducing a semicolon to the force of a comma do not bring sense to the passage. But if one reads Blake's punctuation as indicative of stress and also gives due force to line-endings, one might come up with something like the dark, dramatic force that Hazard Adams realizes for his Rinehart reading text:

Shudd'ring, the Eternal Prophet smote
 With a stroke from his north to south region.
 The bellows & hammer are silent now.
 A nerveless silence his prophetic voice
 Seized, a cold solitude & dark void.
 The Eternal Prophet & Urizen closed.

Finally, I cite a passage whose punctuation makes no sense at all: it could have only one source, the raising in the photographic print of a faint dot, accepted as such by most previous editors, into a full-fledged comma in plate 25, line 12. One supposes, then, that the inadequacies of reproduction have had their unfortunate effect on the text as well.

And where-ever he wander'd in sorrows
 Upon the aged heavens,
 A cold shadow follow'd behind him,
 Like a spider's web, moist, cold, & dim,
 Drawing out from his sorrowing soul
 The dungeon-like heaven dividing,
 Where ever the footsteps of Urizen
 Walk'd over the cities in sorrow. (25:7-14)

If one transposes the comma of line 12 to follow "heaven" rather than "dividing," the passage makes perfect sense.

The passages cited here are striking representations of a list that could be extended considerably with more minor examples. One does not wish to be either uncharitable or excessively pedantic, but my own sense is that the list is too long to be dismissed with a shrug. Nor is its presence to be extenuated by arguing that, in critiquing it, the critic wants absolute fidelity in one place and emendation in another. If editors are to command authority, they must proceed from clear principles and with critical perception. These are not the hallmarks of this edition. Neither conservative nor loose in practice, the edition has a tendency to violate common sense and a distinct unwillingness to leave "well enough" alone.

The commentary exhibits the same penchant on a grand scale, and again one surmises that the purposes for which such a commentary exists have been

inadequately considered. Rather than establish a basic set of premises for reading *The Book of Urizen*, suggesting areas for exploration and leaving the reader to distinguish plain from swamp, the Eassons have attempted an exhaustive reading of the poem in thirty-five pages of print. To many it will perhaps appear as an exhausted misreading, for where the commentary might have been simply provocative of new possibilities for looking at the poem, it becomes rigidly dogmatic, riding its various theses into a lather.

For all their fulminations against Urizen, "The Adversary," and their enjoinders to their students to look within, the Eassons seem not to have recognized that it is all perfectly fine to cast him as the barrier to spiritual travel, whatever that is, but that, more to the point and closer to home, Urizen's spirit dominates this commentary. The primeval Priest is the first to ride a thesis, the creator of formulae that obliterate necessary distinctions in search of inflexible pattern, the regularizer who converts analogy into systematic identity, metaphor into doctrine. This commentary boasts the most thorough analysis yet attempted of the import of embryology for *The Book of Urizen*. As potentially significant as such an investigation might be, it is inappropriate here on two accounts. First, the proper home for such an elaboration is a learned journal: here, though there is considerable assumption of eighteenth-century scientific knowledge, there is not a single reference to substantiate it, and thus one has no solid terms by which to judge the accuracy or sensitivity of the application. Second, there is a crucial misunderstanding of the aims and limits of metaphor, which need have neither the factual truth, the consistency, the elaborateness, nor the scientific credibility of a treatise on gestation. *The Book of Urizen* is pummeled from all sides to accord with such a model. If contemporary physiology demands, as the editors say, that halfway through the nine-month period of human gestation the sensorium be developed, then halfway through this nine-chapter progression that must be seen to happen. "The brain case is produced in the fifth chapter; the soul appears in the sixth chapter. The soul, having been introduced, is enclosed within the sensorium in the seventh chapter, and the brain begins to function" (76). This seems disarmingly simple--until one looks at the appropriate texts; for this particular brain-case goes by the name of Enitharmon, and her son Orc is, by force of logic, the soul. Having begun the trail of a logical fallacy, the commentary must take it to its end. "When Orc, the soul, is formed, Urizen, hearing the voice of the child, awakens. Apparently, Blake believed the fetus quickened, came to life, began to move, in its seventh month" (79).

A second metaphorical elaboration, of "The Book of Error" and "The Book of Transformation," is even more elaborate, and, not having even the textual basis of embryology to go on, is correspondingly more eccentric. Picking up the witty self-referential comments on engraving in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the Eassons pursue the extent to which *The Book of Urizen* is a critique of traditional bookmaking. And there is virtually no limit to it, though there is also not a single piece of evidence to support the supposition. Typesetting is seen as almost the

ultimate in Urizenic behavior, with no greater sin than that of justifying margins. A quick glance at Calvinist justification is enough to wither Milton by metaphorical transfer, and we turn to the plates for pages of corroboration. *Post hoc, ergo propter hoc*: the fetal skeleton of plate 10 is the very type of the book; the trees to be found here and there in the plates represent books, inasmuch as trees have leaves; the preponderance of tailpiece designs surely indicates that "the foot of the artist/prophet is bruising the head of the typographer/serpent" (91); and a little in-depth inspection of the falling, serpent-bound trio of plate 7 reveals that the plate is actually about books, the spine of the central figure (who is, let us recall, facing us) coming in the center of the plate and the spectral faces between the figures being here called played skins, which are the materials for book-binding, the entire plate representing "Blake's visionary joke" (99) about *royal folios*.

I don't get it. The real joke is that such an extensive travesty of the rules of evidence and of logical development should be serious and that it should be accepted without question by a reader--or a press--on the grounds of "mad Blake." Students, with an unerring instinct for the outrageous and obscure, will be quoting this stuff to their teachers for decades, especially since much of the tone of the commentary is ostentatiously pitched down to a freshman level. Urizen "is incapable of meaningful communication . . . meaningful conversation" (69), just like Charley down the hall in the dormitory; but if Charley responds best to Daffy Duck, remember that "*The Book of Urizen* has . . . a seeming comic book clarity. However, while *Urizen* is comic, Blake intentionally compounds its comic clarity with prophetic obscurity" (88).

The Eassons, who are experienced journal editors, have ventured into editing Blake for the first time, and unquestionably they and their projects would have profited from experienced editorial oversight. Half of the commentary should have been suppressed, and a rigorous scrutiny--not that of Urizen, but of Los--applied to the whole. You do not advance scholarship or knowledge by indulging in high-school cant or culture, nor by placing the claims of perverse ingenuity above the formal demands of logic, nor by speculating wildly without a shred of support under the pretense of editorial authority. You do by such indulgences set a decidedly negative example for students, one that I would predict most educators would prefer not to have to counter.

It would have been good for the Eassons to have pondered the local application of the sentence with which they begin their long exposition of "The Book of Error": "According to Blake, the medium of the book is predisposed to generate error, though it is not necessary that the medium of the book cause error" (81). The fact of the matter is that this edition generates and dispenses a remarkable amount of error in each of its three divisions. It was not necessary that it do so, nor that any successors, if there are to be such in this series, should do so. There is commendable ambition in this series: the

opportunity to do lasting service to Blake studies is manifest. But there is a commensurate responsibility on the part of the editors, a responsibility to which in this volume they appear wholly unconscious. Reviewers, who in their professional existence prefer the dulcet tones of Palamabron to

the hard judgments of Rintrah, nonetheless must assume their responsibility--with the hope that both editors and reviewers, the next time around, will discover the States that please both them and the Blake community.

The Probable and the Marvelous

BLAKE, WORDSWORTH, and the
Eighteenth-Century Critical Tradition

WALLACE JACKSON

Wallace Jackson. **The Probable and the Marvelous: Blake, Wordsworth, and the Eighteenth-Century Critical Tradition.** Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978. vi + 218 pp. \$14.00.
Reviewed by Hoyt Trowbridge.

The purpose of this study, Jackson says in his introductory chapter, is "to propose yet another approach to the complicated subject of English poetry and criticism in the later years of the eighteenth century, my inquiry guided by sustained reference to the informing theme of the probable and the marvelous" (p. 3). At the beginning of his concluding chapter, he suggests that the usefulness of the work lies not "in the way of discrete analysis," of which there is a considerable amount but for the most part not unfamiliar to students of the period, but rather "within the area of general interpretation" (p. 169). The interpretation he offers is historical, laying out a kind of map of the changes occurring not only in the ways in which poems were made and responded to but in assumptions about the arts, human nature, and the relation between the ideal and the real. The changes are focused in two revolutions, the first in the middle and the second at the end of the eighteenth century.

The contours of Jackson's map can be clarified by comparing it with that presented by the students of "pre-romanticism" seventy or eighty years ago, who covered the same time-span and the same critics and poets. Beers, Phelps, Gosse, Saintsbury, and

others of that school were like Jackson in seeing the mid-century writers as "intentionally and radically disruptive of the complex equilibrium maintained by the major late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century writers" (p. 15)--as in revolt against what Saintsbury called the "neo-classic creed" and Jackson "neoclassical restraint" (p. 30) or "Augustan humanism" (p. 62). They differ from him in their late-nineteenth-century assumption, tacit but unshakable, that the Romantics had discovered the true nature of poetry and in their contention that Collins, Gray, the Warton, Hurd, and other contemporaries had at least partially glimpsed the same truth and striven to follow it; as Gosse quaintly remarked, they were "bicyclist scouts who prophesied of an advance that was nearly fifty years delayed." Jackson is much too sophisticated to make the first assumption, and he finds much more difference than resemblance between the mid-century poets and the Romantics. In his view, the revolution of Blake and Wordsworth was made necessary by "a mid-century poetic of such drastic limitations that it offered the poet no specifically contemporary act of mind and no imitative models other than the extrapolated sublimities of past poets" (p. 80; cf. 87, 144, 180-81, etc.), and the reform was directed at least as