

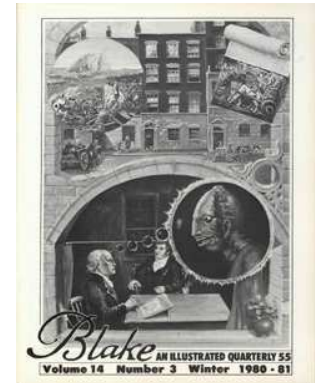
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Michael Phillips, ed., *Interpreting Blake*

David Simpson

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 14, Issue 3, Winter 1980/1981, pp.
121-127



INTERPRETING BLAKE

Essays selected and edited by
MICHAEL PHILLIPS



Michael Phillips, ed. **Interpreting Blake.**

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
1979. x + 269 pp., 20 illus. \$34.50.

Reviewed by David Simpson.

With Blake of all writers most aware of the positives and negatives of imposition in all its forms, does it help, I wonder, to distinguish the poet read in Britain from the poet read in North America? If so, then British Blake is the function of an audience not entirely sure that their poet "makes sense," and one which tends to insist that where he does make sense then it is in terms of a directly embodied concrete image, historical pressure, or social outrage. Conversely, American Blake might be cast as the apostle of visionary novelty and eternal history, a poet therefore infinitely generative of further critical riches, neither wanting nor daring to stop (for there lies standing water), and conformable thereby to a logic of the imaginative body and bodily discovery, one suggesting the secondary determinability of culture and history by the devolutions of the individual mind which is divine. Blockages may appear, and repetition invade creation, but the blockages are never quite the same twice running.

Complications of course arise. The best book on British Blake has been written in America, by David Erdman, and it may be that the above version of American Blake is to be related to the generations of the late 1960s. But I find the distinction useful if only as a way to say that there is very little of that American Blake in this British book.

Two versions of Blake, in the form of two questions addressed to him, may be specified in it. First, does he make sense? As usual, this question tends not to question itself, never recognizing "sense" as ideological rather than universal. Fortunately, there is not too much of this. Second, where does Blake stand in history, and can we establish a history which entitles us to dismiss certain kinds of ambiguity or puzzlement as beside the point, while establishing others as central to "meaning"? This second question is more firmly and usefully addressed, if not always with the self-consciousness one might hope for in the presentation of its implications. But then self-consciousness and dialectical agility tend not to belong to British Blake, being matters ordered in France.

Michael Phillips' brief introduction indeed tries to set the tone of what is to follow. He promises a series of "close analyses" helping us to "read and objectively explain" Blake's meanings. Indeterminacy is insinuated, but only under constraint: "Where interpretation is concerned, an essential principle has been observed that it should not be imposed" (p. 1). No patience here, it seems, with those who see only imposition; or those who find, as I myself do, a more troublesome and dialectical obligation in the concept of "interpretation," one which questions or at least demands closer

definition of the aspiration to "articulate objectively." The best essays in this book do address themselves to that aspiration.

The anthology opens with E. P. Thompson's "London," a poem which is notoriously central to the debate between history, vision, and visionary history. In its length and closeness of focus, Thompson's reading must be admitted to the canon of "necessary reading" for this poem. The thesis is that "London" is a "unitary analysis" (p. 20) of a historical condition, a poem whose "symbolic organization is within the clearly conceived and developing logic of market relations" (p. 22). The strongest part of this case is the context provided for Blake's use of the word "charter'd," which is I think of undeniable importance. The other word on which Thompson spends a good deal of time is, predictably, "mark." Though he generally claims to accept "seventeen types of ambiguity in Blake" (p. 15), Thompson strongly objects to any "gesture towards an ulterior 'ambivalence' in which Blake has assimilated the damned to the elect." Such a reading would "destroy the poem" and introduce "into its heart a direct contradiction of intention and of feeling." A possible reference to *Ezekiel* is dismissed as that to *Revelation* is asserted. Blake is "not setting marks on foreheads, he is observing them" (p. 12).

I find this case interestingly tendentious. Perhaps the word "heart" tells all. Do poems have hearts? No, the people who write them do. But could not that heart be divided between intention and feeling, and could not that division itself be an important part of social history? For Thompson, it seems that the heart is what gives authority to unambiguous perception, and to a social outrage uncontaminated by self-implication. The logic of the heart is an important theme in nineteenth-century literature, and I hope my point does not seem trite. What is the credibility, for example, of the unitary heart with which Dickens endows Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*? Can we not ask questions about its sufficiency? Are we not meant to? In making Blake an angry outsider, commenting on a situation with which he has nothing to do, and which he objectively transcribes, Thompson removes him from membership of that class of dialectically constructed Romantic subjectivities who experienced alienation not as something going on *around* them but also as something reduplicated or created *within* them. Thus Wordsworth is able to chronicle, with an honesty which at times almost creates incoherence, the problems of power and exchange which occur in the most solitary encounters and the most spontaneous perceptions. The mind is inescapably social even in its assertions of separateness, and a wider reading of Blake might at least suggest a poet very well aware of the intersubjective determinants and consequences of outrage. I cannot quite *complain* that Thompson wants a Blake who is pure of heart and eye (an unregenerated Milton?), devoted to one law and one polemic, without being uncomfortably aware of the literary critic's besetting interest in ambiguity. But I can wish him to be more aware of the alternative *history* of consciousness which I think he is ignoring.

Thompson's reading of the last two stanzas is, to my mind, less convincingly maintained. The idea that there is a reference to "the smoke of expanding commerce" (p. 16) in the word "blackning" needs refining. Commerce itself does not produce smoke. Industry does, and it is industry which helps to make commerce possible. This may seem a pernicky objection, but to ask what kind of *industry* Blake might have had in mind seems to me rather important for the poem. Erdman notes that London in 1803 was not so much a standard factory town as "a war arsenal and the hub of the machinery of war."¹ Could it have been so earlier, at the time "London" was being meditated? If so, then this would specify Blake's positioning of commerce as hand-in-hand with empire and war. Taken together with Erdman's reading of this poem, which suggests that the "hapless soldier" could be either the foreign mercenary or indeed the now superfluous English yeoman made redundant by him (pp. 277-78), we can see an important issue here. The wealth which enabled the king to afford mercenaries would have been related to commerce, and J. G. A. Pocock's work has shown us the importance of this debate in the eighteenth century.² Commerce erodes the rights of freeborn Englishmen by replacing militias with standing armies in the pay of the king, as it also erodes their capacity for civic virtue. Instead of being self-sufficient and self-determining, they now indirectly pay other people to fight their wars. They therefore have no control over war, which can happen without their wanting it, and in addition a force has been created which can be turned against the people itself. If this situation is indeed behind Blake's poem, then it importantly differentiates him from an economist like Adam Smith, who had seen in commerce and free trade a civilizing and peacemaking function. Soldiers too may be chartered, and hapless in their expression of the alienation imposed upon them by the division of labor; haplessness affects both those employed and those displaced and affronted.

Thompson's essay concludes with an account and eventual dismissal of a Swedenborgian context for the poem. Finding Swedenborg's writing "remote from experiential controls and affective references" (p. 26), he concludes that it has little to do with "London." What he says of Swedenborg is, however, a useful preliminary to Morton Paley's more extended account of the relation between Swedenborg and Blake's writing (*Blake* 50).

Focus is widened somewhat in Heather Glen's essay, "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." The argument is that the *Songs* both express and subvert the terms and assumptions of "contemporary ethical discussion" (p. 32), showing forth a "distrust of moral thinking itself" (p. 33). By "moral thinking" Glen means not only the assertive imposition or deduction of values, but also the more elusive logic of the feelings--charity, pity, and so forth. The case is carried on in a close reading of several among the *Songs*, paying particular attention to the status of the speaking voice, and to the metrical patterns and local ambiguities that enforce it. Impressively, this traditionally "literary" way of reading is incorporated with a historical specification of the allusions these poems demand or invite. Readings

of "The Chimney Sweeper" of *Innocence*, of the two "Holy Thursday" poems, of "London," and of "The Human Abstract" are offered. In general they contrast usefully and provocatively with Thompson's account of "London," in their argument for inclusive rather than exclusive reference (see, for example, Glen's comments on "mark"). Thus the figure of the sweep is described as a "potent image of subversive passion" (p. 42) in ways which are at once sexual, social, and political. Not that Glen presents ambivalence as itself a virtue; on the contrary, she composes it into a more sophisticated concept of the "unitary" than the one Thompson offers. In so doing, she leads us closer to the point where social and individual determination coincide in the construction of Blake's speakers.

In this achievement, it might in fact be said that Glen goes almost too far. The speaker of "London" is thus presented as "imaginatively bankrupt" (p. 57), one who is "more deeply and consciously implicated in the abstracting modes of his society than anyone else" (p. 60). Glen's general contention about the speakers of *Experience* is that they reveal "the same abstracting, distancing strategies which have produced the social consequences that they seek to condemn" (p. 66). Why, then, should the speaker of "London" be more deeply contaminated by this habit of mind than others in his society? This seems to me to go too far in locating essential responsibility with the speaker; it fails to stress (though it implies) the degree to which his options about what to see are themselves foreclosed and pressured by what is around him, the real historical situation whose terms we can adduce from Thompson and Erdman. (It depends, too, on an implicit antithesis between the innocent and experienced speakers which we need not, I think, follow.) The point may be tested against Glen's reading of the second of the "Holy Thursday" poems. She admits that this is a difficult case, and one is grateful for an account of this often ignored poem. It becomes wholly a poem about the speaker, who is presented as totally cut off from what is really around him in a gesture of hysterical moral inscription. He "reduces things to their moral qualities, and robs them of their rich reality"; he is responsible for a linguistic vapidness which gives no sense of "a rendition of a real scene, the expression of a moment when the speaker saw what was before him with more than usual vividness and clarity" (p. 54). Glen's reading is more sophisticated than I suggest here, and is to be taken seriously, but I want to pick out this contention to highlight a question: is there really a "rich reality" which the speaker simply cannot see because of strictly subjective limitations? This suggests that the speaker's view is in fact *not* socially determined, and does not at all represent what is *there*. Thompson might well complain, and I would complain with him, that this view does not allow for any credibility or conviction at all in the voice of outrage. Surely the details of the world of *Experience* are not just "a series of self-produced abstractions" (p. 56)? It is in the nature of social institutions that they are already there when a new generation opens its eyes, and it is a fact of particular societies that they produce particular forms of defining the human condition,

differently indeed for different people. Chapels, palaces, and arsenals were and are built, and constitute what it would not be ambitious to call a *reality*. I think this is a point at which Glen could afford to make the assumptions implicit in her thesis more clear, and indeed more historical. Is Blake a Godwinian idealist who believes that revolutions of the mind precede and determine social structures, and does he then rely on the same prospectus for "truth" as Godwin does, that once put abroad it will spread and conquer by its own energies, without revolutionary effort? Or is he a more devious and deflected spirit, conscious, like Wordsworth, of all that interferes with the development of the mind (perhaps initially innocent, perhaps not)? My own sense is that Blake partakes of both these figures; he often implies that the subjective imagination is a way beyond the constraints of imposed ways of seeing, but those constraints are there to be reexperienced again in the periods when the claims of habitual perception accrue. This mediated view of Blake becomes itself "historical" when we recognize all that came in the way, in the 1790s, of openly expressed revolutionary fervor, and understand the pressures toward the advocacy of private experiences as redemptive. (No one has done more than Thompson, in *The Making of the English Working Class*, to make this information available.) In the *communication* of that privacy, I think that Blake made a place for all the versions of pathological and social opposition which occur when interests clash in the forum of "meaning" and authority. Glen's is a fine essay, but it would be the poorer if it were not set against what is of worth in Thompson's more trenchant pronouncements. Taken together, they present a useful tension to help us decide between authoritatively single-hearted and hysterically alienated speakers in Blake's *Songs*.

Frank M. Parisi's "Emblems of Melancholy: *For Children: The Gates of Paradise*," shifts the focus wholly from the verbal to the visual aspect of Blake's work. Concentrating on the first issue of these designs, Parisi seeks to recover what Blake "originally intended" (p. 71) by them, which he argues to be an embodying of and response to eighteenth century conventions of melancholy:

My conclusion is that the *Gates* presents the life of fallen man as a melancholy cycle turning on frustration, defeat and despair, the more insidious for being self-renewing. At the same time the *Gates* goes far beyond contemporary analogues, for it points unequivocally to a way one may break out of the cycle into a visionary and creative state. (p. 74)

Let me say at once that I am in no sense qualified to offer a proper assessment of the success or failure of this argument. But I will say that I am not given much information on which to base a judgment. For an essay which discusses entirely visual contexts, it is perversely under-illustrated. One might perhaps pass over the absence of Blake's own designs, which have often been reproduced elsewhere, though this is at the least an inconvenience. But I frequently find that reference is made to, and arguments built on, pictures or engravings which are not reproduced. For example,

Dürer's *Melencolia I* is often cited as of great importance: but we have to head for a library to confirm that importance. Exhaustive descriptions of things which depend for conviction on being *seen* make this essay very hard to follow. Other frustrations appear in an occasional lack of evidence, or lack of consideration of alternatives. What is the force of seeing the "butterflies" of plate 7 as "the female aspect of nature" (p. 73), and of Blake's conversion of a traditional motif into anthropomorphic images? Why is the insect of the frontispiece a "worm" rather than a caterpillar (p. 76)? It is about as obvious a caterpillar as one could hope for, and clearly differentiated from the worm of plate 16. Points like this matter because they threaten to qualify the whole drift of Parisi's argument, making the designs look more like what Erdman saw as a "series illustrating the progression of contraries" (p. 204). Against this, Parisi wants to argue that plate 13 is the only one which offers a pointer beyond the constraints of earthly melancholy. The rest belong to a "closed cycle" and present a "problematic view of life" (p. 108). See the worm as a caterpillar, however, and it is hard not to think also of the butterfly, and of its immanence as an emblem of the soul. Moreover, if plate 13 really is authoritative in the way Parisi suggests, "the most articulate event in the series" (p. 110), why does it not come at the end? At least, one might ask for some discussion of the point of its *not* being final.

There are good things in this essay. The context provided for resolving (or beginning to resolve) the nature of Blake's response to Gillray (noted by Erdman, pp. 202-04) in plate 9 is well-constructed, taking us through Ariosto, Milton and Burton. Indeed, on every design Parisi has something new and insightful to say. There seems to be no doubt that Blake invokes reference to desire and melancholy at key points in the series. However, I remain unconvinced that the invocation of melancholy constitutes the unitary message of these designs. There is an obvious problem with visual images in that their significations are naturally less determinate than verbal ones often are; I am left wanting a stronger case, with more evidence illustrated, to convince me that the essay does all that it says it does. But, with this essay more than the others, I must plead a measure of incompetence.

Harald A. Kittel's "*The Book of Urizen and An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*" poses a different kind of difficulty. There is much here of real value and interest, but its leading ideas are not emphasized with sufficient force. This produces an argument of considerable density, likely to inform at first only those already very familiar with the special vocabularies Locke uses. It lacks the declaration of priorities which makes the first chapter of Frye's *Fearful Symmetry* so memorable. There is also some confusion about what *kind* of relation is being argued for between the two texts; this becomes problematic because of the closeness of the correspondences apparently being adduced. Is Blake really reading Locke closely, and incorporating point-by-point responses to his arguments, or is there in *Urizen* a general satire on the rational tradition which Locke's *Essay* happens, in exemplary

ways, to embody? Kittel reads *Urizen* as "satire directed against John Locke's theory of knowledge" (p. 111)--in other words, principally against the second book of the *Essay*--but it is only at the end of his account that he admits that "*Urizen* is neither a systematic nor an explicit critique of Locke's *Essay*. Nevertheless, elements of Locke's theory of knowledge affect theme, symbolism and structure of the poem" (p. 143). Had this declaration come earlier, it might have suggested to the author that he look elsewhere in the rationalist tradition for suggestions informing the argument and imagery of the poem. Newton, for example, is not mentioned, and yet Donald Ault has published a very important book on the Blake-Newton relation, with significant reference to *Urizen*.³ For example, Kittel glosses the "globes of attraction" (*Urizen* 3:36) as specifying reference to Locke's primary qualities--bulk, figure, texture, and motion of parts--whereas a much more obvious allusion, to my mind, is to atomism (planets as atoms involves the familiar Blakean conjunction of microcosm and macrocosm) and to its exponents in scientific method, Newton and perhaps Boyle, whose account of forms and qualities itself informed Locke's argument but was stressed by Locke in a different way. Globes of attraction are the primary particles of matter or body which are variously composed into form, whether through names alone (as suggested by Boyle) or through some form of figurative perception. As such, they do indeed lie behind Locke's account of qualities, but in a way which brings out the *mental* element in the apprehension of "things" (an element stressed also by Hobbes). Locke is here much more sophisticated than he was often seen to be by later readers who saw in him merely the apologist of materialism, and Kittel's over-brief statement of the connection misses the complexity of Locke's account, as it deals with the way in which qualities are assembled into "things" (which things Hobbes had actually called "phantasms"). He thus does not stress the radically *unstable* element in Locke's epistemology, which in fact could be taken to inform a much more thoroughly "Romantic" notion of how we perceive. Ault (p. 59) argues in this context for a discontinuity between Newton and Locke over how "reality" is knowable, and over what it is that is called "real." What matters most for Locke is how we *share* perceptions. Although information comes to us through the senses, it takes mental processes to convert it into *ideas*, and it is the nature of that conversion which was so widely argued. If it is done through *names*, which impose unitary identity on assemblies of ideas, and thus insinuate the idea of substance, then Kittel passes over a useful angle on his own case for *Urizen* as imaging Locke's complex idea of substance (p. 128). For the name "Urizen" is itself infinitely decomposable (you reason, your reason, horizon, etc.), just as the identities of Los and Urizen consistently merge and overlap throughout the book. Locke argues for personal identity in consciousness, not in substance (*Essay*, II, ch. 27, 19); Urizen finds that both body and consciousness shift and divide, or impose impossible pressures on themselves in trying not to. Urizen's faith in one law, and one name, then becomes a satire on something Locke's theory might itself satirize; a belief in the substantial identity of something which has a name.

I think that the reader who does not already know Locke will find this essay very hard to follow; and the reader who does might wish for fuller explanations of some of the subtleties of Locke's positions. His rather evasive use of arguments from divine sanction ("our Maker") and its relation to the coherence of the social contract might be seen to inform Urizen's parodic construction of a community, one which attempts to be a series of self-images. Does Blake mean to imply the inner identity of consent and authoritarian mandate? "I am your reason"? Kittel's account of the Urizenic versions of space and time also needs, to my mind, stronger emphasis. They are clearly very important to the poem, and Ault has much to say of them. They have a suggestive relation, moreover, to the questions of narration (text/time) and perspective (design/space) which are deliberately put into crisis in this poem. Perhaps different readers will find this essay helpful in different ways, and impose emphases for themselves. I think the notion of Urizen's world being composed of primary qualities (pp. 127, 136) is an interesting one (though I would then want some analysis of his relation to the Eternals, which need not be read as straightforwardly negative), and I am fascinated by the suggestion that the basis of the Urizenic mode in deferral by rational decision (pp. 118, 140) might come from Locke. This suggests nothing less than a taxonomy of desire, which was of great importance to the eighteenth century: witness, for example, its place in Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Locke's delineation of rational doubt, whereby "we are able to suspend the present satisfaction of any desire" (II, ch. 21, 52), is full of prophetic futurity in this respect. Thus do sun and moon go out.

Peter Butter's contribution, "*Milton: The Final Plates*," is of a kind which makes me wonder whether opposition can really be true friendship, and leaves me affirming a case for refusing to meet halfway. It belongs to the "Does it make sense?" aspect of British Blake, but unfortunately sense itself is not questioned or reconstituted. Butter's curiosity emanates from a genre of literary criticism which nowadays tends not to read Blake at all. Thus his comments will strike readers variously as refreshing bursts of common sense or as grotesquely out of place appeals to an inhibitive consensus. Of course, one must beware of demanding that every reader of Blake should approach with reverence and take off his shoes before walking on the purples. And, in one way, this essay partakes of some of the negative virtues of Leavis' classic misreading of Shelley,⁴ which by the very precision of its dismissals alerts us to an ulterior motive in Shelley, and an alternative way of reading. Thus Butter looks for "an immediate appeal to the senses" (p. 147), for something "touching and effective" (p. 148), and for what helps us to "visualize . . . clearly" (p. 149). His war-cry is indeed the classic one of "fully realized presence" (p. 157), and needless to say it does not come up with much to admire in this poem. When Butter says that Blake too often "leaves the reader without firm ground under his feet" (p. 157), I am reminded of a whole tradition of firmness, concretion, grasping and embodying (different from Thompson, who at least

provides the heart). It belongs to the browbeating school of criticism which asserts that "poetic quality" (p. 145) is an entity mysteriously removed from ideas, and to be elucidated from the loaded comparison of good poets and bad poets.

Substantially, the centerpiece of Butter's account is the argument that Satan is presented incoherently, and that is perhaps the issue on which readers might most profit from his essay. However, I hope it would not be adjudicated with exclusive reference to the end of *Milton*, which even the most diligent readers are unlikely to resort to with expectations of immediate transparency. Blake might have expected a reader who had seen the rest of the poem, and perhaps knew something of John Milton; he undeniably would have expected a reader who saw before him a composite art, and not just a text on a page. Remarkably, Butter manages to discuss the end of *Milton* without any reference to the designs (which by now should hardly surprise us in this anthology), and without any mention of sexuality. Who are the naked figures on the rock in the famous full-page plate, reengraved for copy D? Albion and Jerusalem/Babylon? Milton and Ololon? Blake and Catherine, waking from a dream? Prometheus, now joined by a female, and with the eagle of Zeus now also bespeaking prophecy in dismemberment? Had he at least *looked* at the plates, in some modest acknowledgment of what Blake actually "wrote," Butter might have found some clues to the problem of identity which bothers him when he finds (e.g., p. 152) more than one persona offering itself for the ownership of a pronoun.

The test of this kind of essay must be, I think, whether the impositions are generous or not. Ultimately, it is not the things of which I have written above which I find myself resenting most strongly; it is the tactic of false modesty. In the same paragraph we find the conventional critical humility--"With more understanding I shall probably withdraw some of the criticisms in this essay"--and the firm dismissal which it is used to insinuate: Blake becomes one "whose command of language is not equal to the reach of his imagination" (p. 163). As proof of this, we have a gallery of the dirty tricks which are the embarrassment of the trade. A comparison is introduced--"These lines remind one of Hopkins"--only to be turned immediately into a judgment--"Hopkins' lines convey greater intensity than Blake's longer and slacker ones"--without the relevance of Hopkins (or anybody else) ever being established. Literary history exists here as an unanalyzed spectrum of the effective and the less effective, the one functioning as a stick with which to beat the other. Butter centers himself as the arbiter of taste, the "literary critic" who is "entitled to ask the questions" (p. 161), having dismissed (as it happens) Harold Bloom as a critic "telling his own story"; something which, we are told with coy humor, is "quite common in Blake studies" (p. 155).

If opposition is to be friendship, then there is no place in it for the smiler with the knife under the cloak. This is British Blake at its worst, a product of difficulty and embarrassment which has gone hard, so that it is no longer felt

or thought out. Like those who complain of the limited number of orifices in the human body, Butter finds in the prophetic books an "obsessive return to a rather small number of ideas, repeated sometimes without enough variation or addition to make the repetition acceptable" (p. 157). This essay, to my mind (and I am a partial reader), has no ideas at all.

James Ferguson's "Prefaces to *Jerusalem*" sets out to show that the four prefaces to the four chapters of the poem provide structural guidelines for reading it. The themes he selects for emphasis are interesting in themselves, but they do not provide what we seem to be promised, which is a firm anticipation in the prefaces of the most important ideas in the poem. Moreover, themes are selected from each of the prefaces, which are thus in no sense completely expounded or interpreted. From the first, Ferguson takes up the issue of style (mildness and ruggedness), but explores it in a way which is neither historical (as an analysis of the conventions Blake reacts to might be) or intrinsic in any fully sustained way. Stylistic plurality and many-voicedness are undoubtedly very important in *Jerusalem*, but in much deeper ways than Ferguson seems to specify. Ruggedness, for example, is explained almost by apology, as "by no means the most important of the diverse poetic styles to which Blake refers in his defence" (p. 169), instead of being recognized as an integral part of meaning and idea, which is how Blake might well have meant it to be seen. The accounts of Reuben, Rahab and Ezekiel (very useful in themselves) which form the substance of the rest of the essay seem to be very loosely connected to the prefaces to chapters 2, 3, and 4, so that I begin to wonder if Ferguson has forgotten his own thesis. Scholars concerned with the interpretation of those figures should certainly not miss this essay, but Ferguson's claim to set forth a new structural patterning does not convince me. The essay is thus not quite an authoritative introduction for people coming to the poem for the first time, but it does illuminate certain special items in it.

The book concludes with John Beer's "Influence and Independence in Blake," which not only summarizes and (very modestly) answers many of the positions taken up by other authors in the volume, but does so without distracting attention from its own subject matter. The essay presents a synopsis of problems encountered and methods adopted in reading Blake for influences, and proceeds under the control of a most admirable self-consciousness. Beer states his positions and declares his assumptions. The tact is genuine, informing the arguments themselves rather than remaining a preliminary ploy. Seeing Blake as an artist whose response to influence was "dominated above all by his own obsessive concerns" (p. 202), Beer examines a series of ways in which we might find Blake to have been influenced.

Dealing first with visual sources, he produces one of the few arguments in this book which is adequately illustrated. Two kinds of influence are examined. First, that of a general context, in this case the iconographic conventions surrounding the "Ugolino" scene in late eighteenth century art. A

very convincing case is made for Blake being aware of a reading of the incident as depicting "the tyranny of the priesthood" (p. 207). Second, the possible bearing of the engraving of Cipriani's "Perseus and Andromeda" on the frontispiece to 'Visions of the Daughters of Albion' is rehearsed. Here, the influence (if it is there) is more specific and direct.

In the account of possible modes of verbal influence, Beer's comments on the word "mark" in "London" (pp. 218-21) offer a response to Thompson and Glen, and also add something else, a possible Shakespearean echo. He sees the range of choices open to the reader of the poem as rather wider than the other two authors do, but at the same time he communicates a sense of the urgency of choosing. Ambivalence is not avoidance, but a form of crisis. In general, the remarks on verbal influence open up an area of possible influence on Blake which is comparatively new (at least to me); that composed by seventeenth century literature. Allusions he finds to Donne and Herbert are especially interesting, and there is a convincing account of the neoplatonic background to Blake's use of the word "intellectual" (pp. 221-23), and of the philosophical contexts for the word "inlet" (pp. 223-27). Of particular relevance to Kittel's case is Beer's reading of Blake's "minute particulars" (pp. 227-29) in the context of specific passages in Locke's *Essay*. He sees a positive implication (for Blake) in Locke's description of "minute particles, which open out a source of light that would otherwise be invisible to the eye . . . bringing out the visionary nature of every detail while remaining faithful to their own nature" (p. 229). Locke becomes, in this way, a precursor of imaginative vision.

Having described and embodied ways of plotting specific influences in both visual and verbal contexts, Beer passes on (p. 237f.) to an assessment of "extensive influences," those which may be thought to have been behind Blake's work over an extended period of time. Three successive pages of Whichcote's *Aphorisms* are seen to appear in various forms and at various points in Blake's writings, and a similar "cluster of words and expressions" (p. 241) is discovered in Pope's "Eloisa to Abelard."

The final section of the essay makes a case for the importance of alchemical imagery and reference in *Tiriel*. The result of the whole is to suggest the highly eclectic and specifically motivated nature of Blake's philosophical, literary, and artistic borrowings or stimuli. The coherence which ensues then becomes a function of "Blake's originating artistic identity" (p. 261), which is able to react to a wide range of influence without ever merely repeating a preestablished doctrine. Influence is neither anxious nor burdensome; it provides a field of intellectual and imaginative experience for redispotion and interpretation. It is imagination, not guilt or shame, which determines Blake's reconstruction of the past. Implicitly, Beer frees Blake from some of the limits imposed upon him by other authors in the book who have more monothematic priorities.

If one were to ask "What is the audience for

these essays?" then Beer's essay comes through with the clearest answer. In its wealth of local observation and specific attentions (which I have not done justice to), it will be of use to any specialist. At the same time, because of the clarity and self-consciousness of its format and taxonomy, it comes over as a very recommendable starting point for, say, a graduate student reading Blake for the first time, and wanting to know what methods and approaches are possible. It has both scholarly and pedagogical virtues, and as such it sets a standard which few of the other essays attain. Glen and Thompson, to my mind, come closest to it, but they are best taken as a pair, with interesting questions arising from the interaction of the two accounts. The teacher who wishes to suggest to students a mode of close reading which is both literary and historical could confidently recommend Glen's essay, in particular.

For essays which took so long in coming into print--five years between the Edinburgh conference and the appearance of the book--many parts of the other essays have an unfinished quality, as if the passage from first draft to reworked statement has not been made. This may appear as an omission of the emphasis helpful to a reader in following an argument, or as the ignoring of alternative possibilities supplied by the work of other critics. More seriously, the book as a whole is lamentably under-illustrated. This applies to Parisi's essay, which depends upon illustration, but it also reflects the lack of attention paid to composite art by most of the other authors, John Beer aside. Thompson, Glen, and Butter do not discuss it at all; nor do Kittel and Ferguson, though their arguments do not as obviously suggest that they ought to do so. I do not mean to assert that this emphasis away from design is any kind of fault, for it will always be appropriate for some essays to concentrate on *aspects* of Blake's work. But it may be significant in view of the declared ambitions of the anthology (objective articulation without imposition) that the visual side of the composite design is so often

elided. Conviction is often easier to come by when one considers the text alone; the *relation* of text to design often sets up reflections which are less stable, and not verifiable in the conventional ways. In many cases, in this act of relation, there seem to be no obvious "influences." It thus becomes hard to "read" it without confronting the more indeterminate aspects of Blake's aesthetic.

Even in the realm of the verbal, intrinsically considered, it may be a peculiar justice that "mark" emerges as in many ways the fugal word of the book. The variant readings offered by Thompson, Glen, and Beer would serve as a means of articulating some of the questions generated by the chosen title word, "Interpreting." I have found that interpreting Blake is an activity calling for thought *about* interpretation. That element is built into Glen's essay, and into Beer's. But I have the sense, perhaps unjustly, that such a concern would be dismissed by some of the other authors as a piece of fashionable nonsense. If so, then I am left wishing that British Blake might set out to be a little less authoritarian, and perhaps thereby start to explore the evidence for the *historicality* of the various aesthetic indeterminacies in Blake's work. Meanwhile, some mark with the eye, some through it, and some with red pens.

¹ David V. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977), p. 396. See also p. 60. Where I refer to Erdman, it is to this book.

² I am thinking particularly of *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975), chs. 13 & 14.

³ Donald D. Ault, *Visionary Physics: Blake's Response to Newton* (Chicago & London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974). I am also surprised to see no reference to Ernest Lee Tuveson's *The Imagination as a Means of Grace: John Locke and the Aesthetics of Romanticism* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1960).

⁴ F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1936), ch. 6.