

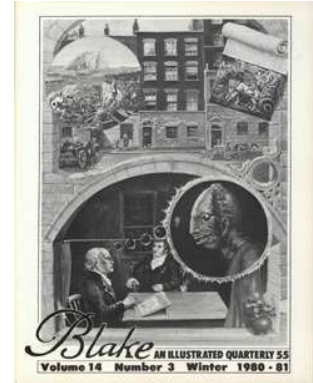
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R E V I E W

Wallace Jackson, *The Probable and the Marvelous: Blake, Wordsworth, and the Eighteenth-Century Critical Tradition*

Hoyt Trowbridge

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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

much against that poetic and the art it produced as it was against Dryden, Pope, and Swift. If anything important was shared by the two revolutions, it was a desire to restore passion to poetry, but they differed radically on the nature of passion and the means by which it could be realized poetically.

Jackson argues for a historical continuity from Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton through the eighteenth century to Blake and Wordsworth, but in a curious way most of the causal connections seem to lie in the kind of influence that Harold Bloom has called "creative misprision." Each generation made its own selection from and interpretation of its predecessors. Collins and Gray found inspiration and a model in Milton's minor works, especially *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, but were blind to the Christian and Platonic elements that were essential to Miltonic sublimity. As Irene Tayer, John Grant, and Kathleen Raine have previously observed, Blake's illustrations of Milton, Gray, Young, and Blair reveal the terms in which he preferred to read their poems, often contrary to their authors' intentions, reinterpreting and reorganizing "the latent potentialities of vision which Blake discerned within them" (p. 90; cf. 88, 89, 91). In his own poems he returned to the subject of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, but he rewrote the Miltonic theme of innocence and experience, correcting what seemed to him the limitations and misconceptions of his great predecessor (pp. 112-14). Jackson does not make this kind of point about Wordsworth, however.

Since his interest is in historical continuity, it is understandable that Jackson should concentrate on the early works of the two Romantic poets whom he discusses, without attempting any comprehensive treatment of their total *oeuvres*. In the chapter on Blake (ch. 4) his main concern is with the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, with some supporting evidence from the early, shorter prophetic works and a few references to the still earlier *Poetical Sketches*. On the side of general interpretation, Jackson's main contentions are that Blake built his revolution on that of the mid-century poets, inheriting the passions from them but mythologizing the gift and transforming it into the terms of his own vision; that the emergence of Romanticism is best accounted for by the confluence of mid-century passion with the dissenting religious tradition, heterodox Christianity; and that Blake's lifetime task was to reimagine Milton's myth of innocence and experience (pp. 108-14). On the side of discrete analysis, as Jackson calls it, his readings are interesting but somewhat unorthodox. He thinks that E. D. Hirsch is misleading in recommending that the poems of *Innocence* should be read seriatim and as an autonomous whole, and Robert Gleckner mistaken in claiming that the meaning of Blake's symbols is accretively established from occurrence to occurrence. In Jackson's less unitary view, the *Songs of Innocence* are not exclusively about innocence, although they unmethodically explore that state, and the various speakers see it in different perspectives. In "The Chimney Sweeper," for example, the speaker is a corrupt, rationalizing voice of experience which offers a hypocritical moral about "duty" at the end of the poem. The morality of "pity" in "Holy Thursday" is similarly

corrupt, "the rigorous and stony-eyed truth of an abstract morality" (pp. 97-99). It would be interesting to see some responses to these readings.

In the chapter on Wordsworth (ch. 5) Jackson's evidence is primarily drawn from the *Lyrical Ballads* and *Poems in Two Volumes*, 1798-1807, though with full awareness of the *Prelude* and *Excursion*. The argument is more diffuse than that of the Blake chapter, almost half of it being a prolegomenon (pp. 123-44) on the mid-century poets, with a few pages on Coleridge; much of this background material repeats points already made in chapters 2 and 3, and its pertinence to Wordsworth is not always clear. Although Wordsworth had apparently not read Blake until 1807, after the publication of *Poems in Two Volumes*, Jackson finds the poems in that work to be commonly concerned with innocence and experience as states of the soul. "To a Butterfly," "The Green Linnet," "To a Young Lady," "The Sparrow's Nest," "Written in March," and "To the Cuckoo" are all songs of innocence, while "The Small Celandine" and "A Complaint" describe the contrary state. Wordsworth's conception of the fall from innocence to experience is different from Blake's, according to Jackson, since the latter recognizes it as not only inevitable but productive of good through the prophetic imagination and the mental warfare it generates, while Wordsworth "seeks ways to minimize its reality, to limit and curtail its effects by strategies that begin with recovery and lead to transcendence" (p. 156). Jackson supports this interpretation by extended exegeses of the Lucy poems, "Resolution and Independence," and the "Immortality" ode. In this major phase of his career, Jackson concludes, Wordsworth "has recreated an image of human nature both probable and marvelous, the fusion of the ordinary and the sublime within the permanent image of man" (p. 168).

If I have any serious reservations about this well-written and challenging study, they arise from two distortions, as they seem to me, which he shares with the old-fashioned students of pre-romanticism. The first is to exaggerate greatly the revolutionary thrust of mid-century critics, as when he asserts that their position on the relation between the probable and the marvelous was "hardly tempered at all by moderate neoclassic principles" (p. 26). Hurd sounded radical to Beers and Phelps when he defended Gothic elements in Renaissance epic poems, but he did so in terms of imitation, nature, the rules, and poetic effects proportioned to the kinds. In spite of his belief that the chief nerves of genuine poetry are the sublime and the pathetic, so that *Eloisa to Abelard* and the *Elegy to an Unfortunate Lady* are superior to Pope's satires and moral epistles, Joseph Warton still operates within the traditional framework summed up in Dryden's definition, "just and lively images of human nature" and Johnson's "just representations of general nature." The Time-Spirit may have been carrying Warton along, as Saintsbury said, but it did not sweep him far out to sea.

The fundamental error of the Beers-Phelps school was to apply nineteenth-century categories and criteria in interpreting the thought and art of the mid-eighteenth century. In my opinion, Jackson

distorts Blake and Wordsworth by a similar but converse anachronism, interpreting them through the theme of the probable and the marvelous, an issue and a terminology that belong to a different, earlier realm of thought and discourse. The resulting account, which he describes as "no distortion of literary history"--"not a historian's invention but a discovery"--has some prima facie descriptive plausibility as applied to Wordsworth, since he avowedly attempted in the *Lyrical Ballads* to present ordinary things to the mind in an unusual aspect, throwing a certain coloring of imagination over incidents and situations from common life (Preface of 1800). He can even say, in a letter defending

Peter Bell, that the action of the imagination does not require supernatural agency but may be called forth "by incidents within the compass of poetic probability" (quoted by Jackson, p. 146). But neither he nor Blake thought habitually or systematically in terms of such an opposition; it is drawn from a radically different intellectual context and is alien to their new ways of conceiving man, God, nature, and art. If we may adopt M. H. Abram's fruitful contrast, the notion of a mean or balance between the probable and the marvelous belongs to the aesthetics of the mirror, not to the Romantic poetic of the lamp.

THE CIRCLE WITHOUT A CENTER

Gerald P. Tyson. **Joseph Johnson: A Liberal Publisher.** Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1979. xix + 276 pp., 8 plates, endpapers from Horwood's map of London (1799). \$14.95.

Reviewed by G. E. Bentley, Jr.



Engraving of Moses Haughton's portrait of Joseph Johnson (ca. 1800), when the bookseller was about sixty-five. Reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

Joseph Johnson was a major publisher, a friend of Henry Fuseli and William Godwin, patron of William Cowper and Mary Wollstonecraft and William Blake, publisher of Erasmus Darwin and William Wordsworth, of S. T. Coleridge and Joseph Priestley, of Tom Paine and Horne Tooke, of Humphrey Davy and T. R. Malthus, of Maria Edgeworth and William Beckford. The most advanced poets, political, medical, and religious writers, and scientists of the last quarter of the eighteenth century in London were his authors, his customers, and his friends. Any work seriously concerned with such authors or such books must

deal with Joseph Johnson and his publishing house. And until Dr. Gerald Tyson published *Joseph Johnson: A Liberal Publisher* in May 1979, very little was known of either.

A symptom of the neglect of Johnson is the fact that Joseph Aikin's obituary of him in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1809 "found its way unchanged into the *Dictionary of National Biography*" ninety years later (pp. 215, 217). There have been a few articles about him in the last decade and a half, by Tyson, Phyllis Mann, Jane Smyser, Paul Zall, and especially Leslie Chard, but previous to this there