

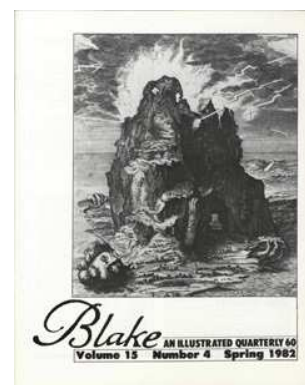
# AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Betty T. Bennett, ed., *British War Poetry in the Age of Romanticism: 1793-1815*

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## WAR AND THE USES OF MYTH

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Reviewed by David Punter

## British War Poetry in the Age of Romanticism: 1793-1815

Betty T. Bennett

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1976

It is still so easy, despite the efforts not only of historians but also of literary critics, David Erdman and other Blake scholars in their forefront, to forget the point which Betty Bennett usefully underlines in her introduction to this collection: that for most British people, the major constituent of experience in the years between 1793 and 1815 was war. In fact, such is the regularity with which the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars are treated as experiences peripheral to British culture that behind this blurring of memory there begins to loom the shadow of a more deliberate evasion, and an evasion of greater dimensions than those characteristic of a national criticism which has traditionally preferred its historical context to be presented severely diluted and preferably bent into the service of moral instruction. The reasons for this evasion are complex, and some of them bear a particular relation to the present: this is not an economic or political phase in which inter-European warfare presents itself as a privileged object of attention, nor is it one, indeed, in which military history as such can be happily seen as free from political partiality. But most of the reasons have a longer socio-psychological pedigree than that, and the materials presented in this collection of war poetry can help us towards an

understanding of them; it can also help us towards a deepened understanding of Blake's literary practice by providing a constellation of popular writing within which to situate his acts of mysterious demystification.

In referring to the experience of war, I do not mean merely to effect a simple contentual connection. War, certainly, produces its own hierarchies of signification, and it is the wars of the romantic age which provide, for instance, a shape for those connections between aggression and commerce which Blake makes so powerfully, and which, as this collection among others reveals, were a habitual feature of the popular discourse of the time. But those hierarchies are themselves dependent on deeper arrangements of social life. In economic terms, the seemingly interminable years of conflict with the French can fairly be seen as an era of interrupted potential, of hanging on the brink. The exploitation of the colonies, and the steady progress of commercial success attendant on that exploitation, did not cease to proceed, but they progressed under uneasy conditions, constantly dependent on the next phase of commercial sabre-rattling, the next round of Orders in Council; and thus the war effort becomes increasingly seen as something to be undertaken in order for something else to begin, as an increas-



ingly burdensome impediment to the birth of a new age. And, for instance, without this element within the popular imagination, this prolonged "labor" which is both the production of munitions and also the delayed attempt to give birth to a mythically stable Britain of the future, all those difficult births which punctuate the Prophetic Books would have been less bloody, and their place within the formal structures of the poems less prominent.

And equally, without the thunder of firearms, however empirically absent from the English mainland, the thunderings of Orc and Urizen would seem parts of a quite different vocabulary: the foregrounding of war as a fact of the social life of the age is the essential prerequisite for historically relevant and operable definitions of hyperbole, of clarity and opacity, and even of volume. In the discourse of the time, the clamor of the guns is important in many ways. For the Tories, it contains a double danger: that hearing it might spark a corresponding rebellious clamor at home, and/or that continental furor might obscure the sounds of unrest when they occur. Against the first, there is always the weapon of repression of communication, the setting up of resistances which will prevent the rapid electric flow of revolutionary thought; against the second, the quieter resource of spying, the ear which Pitt had always to keep uncomfortably close to the ground, however grand an international posture he sought to assume.

In this context, as Bennett hints, the search for a plainer "language of men" which constitutes one strand of English romanticism becomes perceptibly a part of a wider set of social demands riddled through and through with the political. Some of the major romantics may find their way to pockets of silence, may be able to test subtle tuning-forks on the mountains and the winds, but for the most part this collection (rightly, I believe, eschewing the handful of productions which have come to dominate the literary landscape of the period) shows us not soliloquy or refinement of sensibility but stentorian bellowing, the endless repetition of image and abstraction. The bellowing, the condensation of argument into ritual cries of "liberty," "freedom," "justice," at first appears to come from the mostly anonymous poets themselves and from the newspaper editors; but as Bennett points out in an unashamedly derivative but nonetheless very handy run-down of the politics of the press, even the powerful editors are for the most part puppets, and the voices come from over their shoulders, direct from the politicians. Under these circumstances, freedom of speech is a dangerous risk, and one with which neither Tory nor Whig felt happy. Too much was at stake; from a psychological perspective, what seems to have been in the air was the unpredictable outcome of a massive social ambivalence, itself the product of conflict of allegiance between economic and national groupings. Ambivalence and evasion here go hand in hand, for what the popular poetry reveals is a set of contradictions which cannot be handled except by displacement, by the shifting of historical, geographical, and social contexts.

Yet in some ways this is too simple: certainly the politicians manipulated, and certainly editors

were under no misapprehension about their national responsibilities. Yet it would clearly be hopelessly optimistic to argue that therefore some hypothetical variety of "free" or even radical poetry, some poetry which could see through chauvinism to chauvinism's economic and psychological functions, was suppressed, except in the rarest instances. The operations of hegemony are more all-embracing than that; and what is evidenced by the war poetry of 1793-1815, I would suggest, is an intense fear resulting in an equally intense network of collusions. It is a familiar point that those poets of the period who had some claim to be called working-class, here represented especially by Cunningham and Bloomfield, tended towards formal and ideological traditionalism; but it is more generally true that, as Bennett puts it, "poets who supported the war as well as those who opposed it use the same terms." Beneath differences of party politics we see the emergence and consolidation of a unified vocabulary, as if the tension of prolonged outward conflict were too great to permit inner discord. The relation between warfare and national unity is close indeed, and it generates an enormous power to absorb contradiction and produce it as confirmation. When Britain can be referred to, as it is in "Britain's Genius Triumphant" (1807), as "freedom-fost'ring" and "coop'd up" in two successive lines, what we need to wonder about is the power of the individual voice to survive under the pressure of fear, a fear increasingly seen as related to invasion but actually concealing a more deeply-laid fear of change and the destruction of stability. And the strategies by means of which this fear is displaced supply us with keys to the underlying myth against which the collusions are supposed to offer protection: it is a myth of imminent sexual violation, as, clearly, Blake was well aware at the time.

There is of course, and especially in the early years of the war, a terror of chaos, well exemplified in "The Farmer and Labourer" (1794): "confusion whelms all forms, all properties; / And chaos reigns among the sons of men, / Till God's avenging arm restores fair Peace again." The most important shapes for disorder are those we also find in the Gothic, both Gothic fiction and the more immediately relevant nationalistic and military Gothic represented by Macpherson's *Ossian* and, in Bennett's collection, by his many imitators. But this discourse of chaos and order is usually unspecific, lacking in vitality; it is in the imagery of a rousing song like "Stop to a Stride," from *The Gentleman's Magazine* (1803), which has Napoleon raping each European country in turn, that greater concreteness is invested. The political implications of a stance which claims that first France herself, then "poor Switzerland" and so on, have fallen victim to a violent sexual assault are manifold. Primarily, it enables a consensus to be achieved around the difficult issue of how to treat the French as, on the one hand, savage aggressors and, on the other, the victims of a pseudo-egalitarian conspiracy. This is done by separating out masculine and feminine characteristics, often along the lines suggested by Burke's potent image of the French queen. In a 1794 "Ode" from the *Scots Magazine*, the male French are conjured away completely, so that the stalwart British can perform the ideologi-



cally necessary function of protecting French virgins (presumably also virgin minds, free from the taint of Jacobinism) from damage. Frederick Atkinson's "The Emigrée" (1799) is typical of a genre in which French womanhood is conveniently reduced to penury and orphanage, British commerce being therefore her only means of survival. Helen Maria Williams, in her "Ode to Peace" of 1801, appears to entertain hopes that all might come right yet with a marriage between France and England, but for the most part so benign a solution to the quandary seems very distant.

This attempt to depotentiate the French, perhaps to remove an anxiety and an envy that they, the old enemy, have managed to effect by revolution a significant penetration of the historical fabric, becomes the key to the dominant formal device of the collection, which, despite Wordsworth, is personification. Real battles between real people are, subtly and not so subtly, transmuted into battles of the giants, in which "Freedom" and "Terror," "Liberty" and "Slaughter," "Peace" and "Rapine" are made to take on the agential role in relation to historical action. A particularly revealing example occurs in Scott's "Bonaparte" (1811), where, after a first verse in which the poet waxes rude about Napoleon's low birth in a "suburb hovel," and as we are apparently about to close in on the picture, we learn that "before that Leader strode a shadowy form, / Her limbs like mist, her torch like meteor show'd." This shadow turns out, conventionally, to be "Ambition"; what is significant, however, is her function as the "mist" which obscures real historical connection. In "Peace more Desirable than War" (1793), we find another use for personification when "Science," "Justice," "Virtue" and so forth are followed in the same mode by "George," who can thus be conveniently translated to a higher realm by a more than human process, providing a model of "super-natural" sanction.

And there are other devices which we could list, all of which help to obscure agency: transmutation into animals, gods or devils, condensation into heroic figures, and more intricate linguistic processes, mostly to do with passivization and the suppression of the subject. The process which Blake describes in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, where he provides so insightful an account of the social purposes of religion, can be extended--indeed, should be extended--into the formation of social myth, and it is clearly such a formation which is happening here, especially if we accept that a major function of myth is to naturalize contradiction. As a comment on the book, however, this is simply to say that overall it is what it set out to be, a mine of information, and no more. The introduction is a model of decorum, in which the minimal historical and social facts are stated lucidly but without recourse to speculation. The footnotes provide, as well as literary references, a sketchy narrative of the principal events of the wars; indeed, such is the author's zeal that many of them appear twice, a habit which may well have been caught from the emphatic style of the poetry itself.

But perhaps historical narrative cannot really be so simple. The confident celebrations of old

English beef and pudding begin eventually to seem thin, slightly desperate, like the skin of a system of ideas and control from which the substance is gradually leaking. Yet the pressure exerted to maintain the carapace is enormous; and here we get a glimpse of the forces of cultural solidarity which drove Blake to such lengths. The principal effort of poetry in these years, judging by this copious evidence, seems not at all to have been to achieve direct communication with the hypothesized "people," but rather to generate a connection between simplicity of structure and abstract opacity of image, whereby the representation of physical action could be turned into schematized mental conflict by a series of increasingly minimal gestures. Vaunting abstractions are permitted to "do things" to each other; individuals generally figure not as actors but as patients, sufferers, sad and distant seamen, weeping widows. And thus, of course, the hierarchy of the State is produced as the formal limitation of poetry: while outwardly professing them to be made of oak, the poets portray the "people" as cowering beneath the feet of mighty, semi-invisible contestants, "Giant Forms" par excellence.

The relation which Blake's poetry bears, then, to this body of work--and Bennett and I would agree, I think, in referring to it as a homogeneous body of work, although the nature of our evidence would be different--is a complicated one. The root of that relation lies in the fact that it is, in this poetry, Jacobin and anti-Jacobin alike, always the French who are portrayed as desirous. The English are firm and steadfast; or at least, they are perpetually about to be called upon to be firm and steadfast. Towards the untoward events across the Channel, policy permits a number of attitudes, from noisy cheering on of our troops from the sidelines to averting the eyes and calling on the moral virtues to save us from pollution. It also, on occasion, permits some rather patchy satire. What, however, is inconceivable is that the British could have outward-going desires, except the negative one of stopping the French; and this despite the facts of colonization. The prevalent ideology clearly did not allow connections between French and British imperialism, and thus two separate streams of imagery are generated: the French commit assault, the British protect and nurture their colonies like offspring or, perhaps better, distant nieces. And it is interesting that when Blake tries to put this severed world together, in *America*, *Europe* and *The Song of Los*, he too finds it very difficult. There is plenty of desire in America, and there is a set of economic truths applied to Asia, but Europe remains the most puzzling of geographies, an apparent fairyland where, nonetheless, the displaced sense of threat is a palpable absence. The land fit for Englishmen to live in, a concern dear to the hearts of many of these poets, is one-dimensional: it is a still point, at which change can be forever avoided.

In this particular context, Blake's achievement is to continue to wrestle with the exclusion of desire, and with the function of that exclusion as a political device. There were poems being written in the last decade of the eighteenth century whose professed purpose was to apply a succession of



proverbs, neatly and in order, to scenes from the wars; under such circumstances, the "Proverbs of Hell" seem all the more challenging. But, of course, myth is not genuinely susceptible to opposition, nor even can it be destroyed or modified by the construction of counter-myths; since its realm is contradiction, it is capable of remaining unaffected by intellectual weapons, modifying its contours only in a complex and variable relation with changes in the underlying reality. A poem of 1813 entitled "National Discord" is interesting in this context; the poet regrets the contemporary lack of a "Thracian Lyrist . . . gifted with skill / To humble the Tiger to crouch at his will," and bemoans the collapse of the world into discord rather than the harmony which, of course, once prevailed:

the Genius of bright intuition is fled;  
And harmony passed from the heart to the head;  
No rapt inspiration now succours the brave!  
No sounds of the lyre are effectual to save!  
The reign is establish'd of Discord; delight

Exults in narration of siege and of flight;  
Where losses confuse in the flames spreading-  
far,  
And distresses in pageants and tumults of war.

This, I believe, well illustrates ambivalence in contemporary attitudes to the war; the assumed preoccupation of poets with the martial is criticized, while at the same time the key terms "delight" and "exults" are attached precisely to this condemned narration. For "condemned narration," we could substitute "Bible of Hell," and we would thus be enriching our sense of the relations between Blakean narrative and history, while at the same time starting to think in quite a Blakean way first about the specific shapes, the particular inclusions and exclusions, which psychic energy can be made to assume by the pressure of historical circumstance and then about the ideological collusions which seek to protect people both from the threat of change and, at the same time and inextricably, from the risk of taking on their own power.

Leopold Damrosch, Jr. **Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth.** Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980. xiv + 395 pp. \$25.00 cloth, \$9.50 paper.

Reviewed by Nelson Hilton

## Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth



Leopold Damrosch, Jr.

**A**fter two books on Samuel Johnson, Leopold Damrosch, Jr. has now burst forward unheralded to present *Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth*.<sup>1</sup> It is a weighty tome which will be read by every serious student of Blake over the next few years; the observations on "sex," "fatherhood," and the "spectre" if thought before have never been so well expressed. Having stated my belief that the book should be widely read, I hope I may be for-

given for taking the remaining space to wrestle in true friendship with a gloriously Urizenic text. Let me begin with this misreading: "As human beings if not as literary critics, we surely owe [Damrosch] Blake the obligation of testing his [criticism] myth against our experience of [Blake] truth, which is no more than doing what he constantly begs us to do [unsure]. . . . But as critics we must go further and try to understand why [Damrosch's criticism]