AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

Robert J. Bertholf and Annette S. Levitt, eds., William Blake and the Moderns

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Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 17, Issue 4, Spring 1984, pp. 169-172

[6] Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans., ann. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 77–78.

[7] *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Wade Baskin (1959; rpt. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), p. 120.

[8] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hegel's Dialectic: Five Hermeneutical Studies*, trans., int. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 105.

[9] Alan Bass, Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans., ann. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 20n.

[10] On the obvious idealism of *this* formulation, see Richard Rorty, "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism" in his *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972–1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

[11] "Of course," we read in a bizarre comparison, "there is work of Blake's which does not diverge far from eighteenth-century poetic norms—the lyrical work in particular—just as there is work of Hegel's, especially perhaps the *Science of Logic*, which employs all the traditional philosophical apparatus" (p. 69). But for Michael Rosen, "the characteristic feature of Hegel's dialectic—*determinate negation*—is . . . only displayed and developed freely in the *Science of Logic*" (pp. 21–22).

[12] "'Striving With Systems': Blake and the Politics of Difference," *Boundary 2*, 10.3 (Spring 1982), pp. 234, 231.

[13] *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, Newly Revised Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 607.

Robert J. Bertholf and Annette S. Levitt, eds. *William Blake and the Moderns*. Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1982. 352 pp. Cloth, $39.59; paper, $14.95.

Reviewed by Paul Mann

Is Harold Bloom the Covering Cherub of *William Blake and the Moderns*? His work is mentioned in only a few of these thirteen essays, and discussed in any depth in only one, but as the most visible current theorist of influence, he must be taken into account in any discussion which attempts to graph potential arcs of influence—even if that accounting turns out to be merely a prelude to dismissal. And dismissal appears to be one of Bertholf's and Levitt's purposes:

> The literature which contains reference to preceding literatures becomes an indication that the central imagination is alive and provocative, and not an indication of a metaphysical scheme of influence dominated by the anxiety of that influence and the obligation to remove that antecedent force. Harold Bloom's system in the end only explains the psychology of itself, and not the literature it raids for illustrations. Instead of declaring a necessary independence from antecedent masters, writers in this tradition seek out (often consciously) examples of this central imagination in order to penetrate further into the life of the sustaining vision. (xi)

It's fairly clear from this passage that Bertholf and Levitt have misread Bloom. Where in his writing does he claim that poets are under an obligation to remove their precursors? Ashbery wants to *remove* Stevens? To what misty realm? Bloom's theory seems rather to insist that, even in their most strident oppositions, poets manifest an indissoluble bond with their precursors. If "strong" poets do labor to revise antecedent masters, if they "swerve" from those masters in what Bloom terms a *clinamen*, they remain nonetheless anchored in them. Bloom's theory is a great deal more dialectical than Bertholf and Levitt credit it with being: it is a theory of sublation, not of excision. But it's the word "anxiety" which appears to cause them the greatest anxiety; what they desire for this central imagination is a healthier rhetoric, something purer and less troubled than the neurotic imagery of Bloomian influence.

And what they arrive at is something rather like a platonic Form:

> The poet seeks out, both consciously and unconsciously, influences, attunements, and disruptions that provoke his awareness of his engagement in a literary history of recurring forms. His occupations are not driven by a creative anxiety into intricate procedures of misreading in an effort to do away with his predecessors. The forms of expressions dominate. The generation of particular forms to present a vision specifies a line of writing that grew out of the period of the Romantic in literature. The forms develop within the vision, present and enact it; they are not imposed as external agents of structure. But while the freedom of the imagination acts as a bulwark against the passivity of conventional structures, the active principle of insistent reference to preceding literature picks out what is most vital in the line. If Blake had not taken up Milton's *Paradise Lost*, for example, as a projection of what he called "The One Central Form," that omission would have been an indication that Milton's poem had so mismanaged itself that it was not part of the common form of the imagination's life. The tradition of enacted forms by necessity refers to itself because it seeks out examples that most vigorously present the vision of the imagination engaged in an area of meaning greater than itself. If there is one central form of the imagination, then the possibilities of imaginative literature are manifestations, as approximations, of that central form. (x–xi)

If I understand this passage, literary history is construed here less as a set of intimate relations than as a wide field in which all writers can participate in "One Central Form," the Imagination itself. Writers may constellate in or around that form, but no single writer can ever embody it. A writer might be taken to exemplify it, or to mediate other writers' encounters with it, but that writer can never be entirely central to it. In other words, the true title of this work is not *Blake and the Moderns* but *Imaginative Form and the Moderns*; the book is centered in Blake primarily in the sense that it is his definition of that form which mediates its relations—in which case, it is certainly curious that so many of the essays in the collection are rather superficial and old-fashioned influence studies.

It is difficult, of course, to lump together thirteen essays by thirteen different critics, and foolish to hold the contributors responsible for the claims and errors of their editors. This is, however, a remarkably coherent book.

There are certainly differences—in focus, in emphasis, in style, in interpretive skill—but, in the view of these critics, the writers influenced by Blake have much in common. And what this common denominator turns out to be is a fairly superficial reading of Blake. For according to their critics, the writers under consideration prize Blake not so much for his poetry but as a symbol of the Poet, an exemplar of the central imagination.

It might have been useful, then, for the editors to have employed critics concerned with how this imagination operates in and is transmitted through history; they might have attended more closely to discourse as a determining force, to linguistic systems, to the functions and interference of ideology, to the critique of the subject, to discontinuity as well as continuity, or, at the very least, to the ways in which "Romanticism" is variously defined by twentieth century writers and critics. But no. "Even without a survey of contemporary criticism—which would not be to the point here—the fundamental principle persists that a poet names the preceding artists who will comprise his essential literary history, the authors and the texts which extend into his own work, either consciously or unconsciously" (ix). Why isn't contemporary criticism relevant? It simply isn't. The cursory treatment of Bloom is the editors' single gesture of contemporaneity; the "fundamental principle" of interpersonal literary influence is merely posited. Context in *Blake and the Moderns* will be barely sketched: intertextuality here is *mano a mano*.

Take, for instance, the book's first essay: Hazard Adams, once again, on Blake and Yeats. If Yeats was influenced by Blake, and it would be impossible to deny that he was, he did not, according to Adams, really understand Blake. Adams notes seven areas or Blakean themes from which Yeats borrowed—notions of contraries and negations, center and circumference, the creative primacy of belief, and so on—but in all cases rather superficially, and distorted by other previously-held beliefs and ideas. Adams explicitly rejects Bloom's proposal that such distortions are the result of a *clinamen*; in Yeats's case, Adams argues, "a simpler, more mundane explanation" is in order: "an inexperienced or fanatical interpreter will interpret through what is either familiar or an *idée fixe*." "The reasons for Yeats's misinterpretation of Blake were principally his lack of critical sophistication and the occultist thoughts that dominated him at the time" (4–5).

We find such preconception and lack of critical sophistication in most of the writers addressed in *Blake and the Moderns*. What these writers tended to take from Blake was obvious, general and personal: divisions in mental activity cause divisions in and alienation from the "external" world; creative imagination can reintegrate subject and object; and Blake's personal example serves as a sort of muse for other writers inclined toward similar activity. Blake's influence is less as an actual writer of actual poems than as a good angel of the imagination perched on the shoulders of writers who do not, for the most part, take much more from him than that. If his work explores division and reintegration in complex and pertinent forms, his successors seem to have found these forms, these actual poetic operations, either irrelevant or secondary. When one of these writers wants to make use of Blake's "minute particulars" it is not in their minute particularity but as a general rule; Blake *exemplifies the general possibility* of attention to particulars.

Donald Pease's Crane "returns to Blake to recover the tradition of epic prophecy" (16); since his own epic era differs from Blake's he cannot use Blakean prophecy directly, only as an idea for a project he might himself enact. When Jay Parini's Roethke finds in Blake's "Orc cycle" the twin of his own desire to "compete with papa" (73), it seems merely in the sense that it is possible to do so; and Roethke appears to find himself under no obligation to compete with Blake as a *poetical* papa. Bertholf's Duncan is an avowedly "derivative poet" who both "takes off from Blake's poems" and "regards Blake as a poetic companion of the sacramental imagination" (92). Alicia Ostriker's Ginsberg models his own prophetic or "shamanistic" career on what he takes to be Blake's; he too tries to invert socially determined definitions of "madness," and proceeds from "giving Error a body" to "visions of reintegration" (118); but his own poetry has little of the psychological depth or verbal density which, in Blake's work, are keys to such a project. Most peculiar, but in many ways most representative of all, Robert Gleckner's Joyce seems barely to have read Blake's poetry; his chief "Blakean" influence was E. J. Ellis's highly embellished quasi-biography, *The Real Blake* (sic) of 1907. According to Gleckner, what Joyce took from Blake were less poetic insights and particular strategies than a more general *confirmation* for what must have been a predisposition to devote himself to the life of the imagination.

Surely it is natural for writers to seek such confirmation. For writers working in often severe isolation, discouraged by countless mundane influences from continuing in their work, to be able to attach themselves to so single-minded and dedicated an artist as Blake, an artist so firmly persuaded and persuasive about the virtue and necessity of imaginative labor, must seem a saving grace. As Gleckner says, for Joyce "it was the *fact* of Blake that he finally adhered to, what he knew *of* him rather than his works that finally mattered" (159). So also, evidently, for many of these poets and writers: they might have read Blake more closely than Joyce did—Duncan is certainly a student of Blake, and Joyce Cary is said by Levitt to have used "The Mental Traveller" to organize several chapters of *The Horse's Mouth*—but what they all find in Blake is not so much the practice of poetry, but spiritual affinity.

Affinity is, finally, the true subject of *Blake and the Moderns*: affinity is the answer to anxiety. It is for this reason that the editors include among so many influence studies a number of essays about writers who knew little or nothing at all about Blake. In one of the book's more interesting essays, Leroy Searle domesticates one of the strangest *ménages à trois* on record: Blake, Eliot and Williams. Eliot hated Blake and Williams hated Eliot, and Williams cannot even be said with any certainty ever to have opened a book of Blake's poetry, but Searle is nonetheless able to unite them through each writer's concern with "the continuity of imaginative labor"—again, the attempt to counter perceived disintegration with artistic reintegration, with the unity of the imagination itself. But what does this really tell us about imaginative practice? Given affinity, would it not be possible to link any two imaginative writers?

The answer to that question appears to be affirmative. In the book's nadir essay, we encounter Blake and Marx. Certainly, as Minna Doskow argues, both men believed that the individual's labor tends to be alienated from his or her world, and that the world should be reconceived as the actual product of a labor defined in more or less humanistic terms. But whether this constitutes true affinity or only a vague coincidence of interests authorized by the most general aegis, whether Blakean humanism and Marxian humanism have anything substantial in common, whether humanism itself might then be a determining form, and, most importantly, whether this surface similarity is belied by deeper and more abiding differences in *practical* approach—none of this is seriously considered. Doskow herself notes, in discussing the subject-object problem, that for Blake "the answer lies in man's loss of imagination, while for Marx it lies in the alienation of his labor under capitalism," but she immediately glosses over this crucial difference: "Yet these answers are not as different as they may at first appear, for the causes, evidences, and consequences of each are almost identical. Both writers see a distortion of human subjectivity which extends outward to encompass the world and results in distorted practices and a distorted world which are further reflected by the subject." (232)

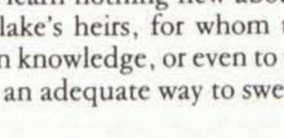
The passage not only describes a circle, it rhetorically enacts one: Doskow begins to consider effective response to a general problem but immediately reverts to the problem itself. Given her premise, she can really go no further. But the differences between these responses cannot be ignored. Each writer, in his own way, insisted on the unity of theory and practice, but where Blake's practice led through visionary art, Marx's led through political economy—matters which Blake would likely have rejected as mathematical ratios. In fact, the two men's courses run exactly opposite: Blake increasingly away from "political" solutions, Marx increasingly toward them. To ignore such deepseated difference renders the connection purely gratuitous. Indeed, Doskow is able to make this connection only by giving heavy priority to the early Marx of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, in which he was just beginning to formulate his approach, rather than the later work which fully demonstrates how different from Blake's that approach always was.

But if Doskow's essay is the most ludicrous argument for affinity in the book, it is not unrepresentative. The minute particulars of formal strategy and discursive context are continually sacrificed to the most general notions of affinity; actual work is continually glossed over for the sake of the brotherhood of individual writers. It is only in the book's final essay that such individuality, at least, is considered *as problematic*, and it leads me to believe that *Blake and the Moderns* might better have begun than ended here. William Dennis Horn is willing to wrestle with influence as a question, not as an a priori answer, and to wrestle with it in the current terms of the debate. He doesn't exactly embrace Bloom, but neither does Horn merely dismiss him. And in addressing the "problematic of the self" in Blake's work, Horn indirectly points up one of the most disturbing traps of the entire book: "In the case of Blake we find a criticism, as problematic, of all notions of self, occurring in works which have as their main action the creation and psychomachia of mental agents" (280). In the jolly fraternity of *Blake and the Moderns* there is no such problematic, no such critique, no psychomachia of mental agents. Blake was indeed concerned with imaginative reintegration, but he was also concerned with the annihilation of the selfhood, and that selfhood is reincarnated in essay after essay of this volume.

Furthermore, the critique of agency indicated by Horn should have been, but was not, extended to the mediating influence of criticism itself. There is no chapter on Blake and the modern critic. One misses it, first of all, for the simple fact that Blake seems to have influenced some critics as much as some poets and novelists. A number of Blake's most influential critics—Frye, Hirsch, Bloom himself—have progressed from early studies of Blake to theoretical or metacritical interests. Frye would have been particularly worth considering: his work might be the closest anyone has yet come to a Blakean theory of literature and literary history; and Bloom's own theory of influence must owe something to what Frye originally termed the Orc cycle. Parini seems to believe the term was invented by Blake himself, and his essay further demonstrates the danger of ignoring critical mediation of writer relations. (Adams and Gleckner do not exactly ignore it, but neither do they fully explore it.) "'Blake gives us,' *says Price*, 'a world conceived as the manifestation of imaginative energy, hardened into opacity as energy fails, raised through intense and confident assertion to the image of One Man, containing all powers within himself and exercising them in the creation of works of art.' *Likewise Roethke*, in 'The Far Field,' envisions 'the end of things, the final man . . . '" (79; emphases added). The rhetorical, and possibly the actual, connection demonstrated by Parini in this passage is not between Roethke and Blake but between Roethke and Martin Price.[1] My point is not simply that, like Adams's Yeats, Roethke was an unsophisticated reader of Blake, nor that, like Gleckner's Joyce, he might have relied heavily on critical accounts, but that this mediation is virtually ignored by the book's contributors, and most grievously in terms of *their own* critical agency.

It is undeniable that Roethke took Blake as an ancestor, but Roethke himself claimed that a "son has many fathers" ("O, Thou Opening, O"), and when he wrote, "Walk into the wind, willie!" ("I Cry, Love! Love!"), he probably also meant Willie Wordsworth and Willie Yeats. It is undeniable that Yeats valued Blake, but simply to privilege this relation over others—Dante, Swift, Shelley, Rossetti (albeit mentioned by Adams), Lady Gregory, Synge, Pound, Rosicrucianism (simply to note the prism of occultism doesn't go far enough), Irish mythology and history, even Maud Gonne—begs too many questions of discursive context and actual compositional practice, and brute differences of time and place. It is undeniable that Marx and Blake held a handful of notions in common, but what good does it do anyone who is interested in either Marx or Blake to note them without also noting differences, or noting that these notions were much more widely held? By isolating such influences and affinities, *Blake and the Moderns* virtually unravels the intertextual fabric. By embodying influence strictly in persons and separating it from discursive practice on a larger scale—if not from an ill-defined central imaginative form then certainly from historical contexts which are both literary and non-literary, from the intercessions of critical ideologies themselves, and from the complex of ways in which all of this affects the actual production of actual works—*Blake and the Moderns* distorts both immediate influence and more general problems of literary history. The book is of very little use to the reader of Blake, who will learn nothing new about Blake from it, or to readers of Blake's heirs, for whom these links must already be common knowledge, or even to those who might still be waiting for an adequate way to swerve from Bloom.

[1] I am indebted to Professor Jenijoy La Belle for pointing out this apparently unwitting trope, and for supplying the Roethke quotations that appear in the following paragraph. The Price citation is from "The Standard of Energy," *Romanticism and Consciousness*, ed. Bloom (New York: Norton, 1970), p. 273.



H. T. Dickinson, ed. *The Political Works of Thomas Spence.* Newcastle upon Tyne: Avero Publications, Ltd., 1982. xviii + 154 pp. 19 illustrations. Paperback, £ 4.74

Reviewed by G. E. Bentley, Jr.

> The Golden Age, so form'd by Men of Yore
> Shall soon be counted fabulous no more
> —*The Important Trial of Thomas Spence*, 2nd ed. (1801), p. 93

Thomas Spence (1750–1814), founder of Spensonia, reformer of the English language, an obscure little Newcastle "malcontent" (as he called himself, p. 6), and political agitator chalking prescriptions for the millenium on midnight walls, is likely to be known chiefly to historians of late eighteenth-century radical English politics—at least he was scarcely known to me. But he was known to Bewick, Cobbett, Francis Place, Coleridge, Malthus, Southey, and thousands of others, and he may have been known to William Blake. Certainly during the last twenty-two years of his life, from 1792 to 1814 when he was in London, Spence had a surprising amount in common with Blake: poet, prophet, radical, publisher of his own writings, arrested (repeatedly) for sedition, of unshakable integrity, friendless (p. 93), considered as a "lunatic" by the reputable public (p. 93). What Southey wrote of him in 1817 might have been said of Blake then: he was "poor and despised but not despicable, for he was sincere, stoical, persevering, single-minded and self-approved."[1]

Most of Spence's many pamphlets and broadside ballads from 1775 to 1814 were published by himself for one pence to sixpence at his shop, which was for a time The Hive of Liberty in High Holborn, and in 1801 he claimed that he had already "sold many thousands of copies" (p. 88). He wrote prolifically, but he chiefly confined himself to two subjects: the reform of the English language and the reform of the English land. The former is a new system of spelling which he clung to with a characteristic tenacity or, as he might have confessed, pigheadedness, and he popularized it in works with titles such as *The Repository of Common Sense and Innocent Enjoyment.* Some of his own works were published both in conventional orthography and in his own spelling, such as *A S'UPL'IM'INT Too thi Histire ov Robinsin Kruzo, being TH'I H'IST'IRE 'OV KRUZONEA* (1782).