Stephen D. Cox, "The Stranger Within Thee": Concepts of the Self in Late Eighteenth-Century Literature

David Worrall

Books," or "MILTON / a Poem in [1]2 Books"?

[42] It is curious that Bloom refers to the order of ACF as "revised," since it is chronologically the earlier order. Since Bloom mistook the first sequence for a revised one, could it be possible that later-is-better presuppositions (such as those followed in his discussion of *The Four Zoas* VIIa and b, and the canon in general) led him to detect the "More skillfully rendered" sharpening that he *expected* to find? For a comprehensive and enlightening discussion of the issues involved, see V.A. De Luca, "The Changing Order of Plates in *Jerusalem*, Chapter II," *Blake* 16.4 (Spring 1983), pp. 192–205.

[43] The quotation is from *Blake's Apocalypse*, p. 10. Bloom's survey of Romanticism in *The Visionary Company* does not cite a single edition for any of its hundreds of quotations. He does mention de Selincourt as "Wordsworth's modern editor" (p. 136), but, without explaining why, he chooses to "cite the 1850 text, but with reference, where it seems desirable, to the 1805 version." Needless to say, he does not indicate where or why the deviations are "desirable." It is in some ways an irony worthy of one of Bloom's favorite modifiers ("curious"? "supreme"? "fine"? "outrageous"?) that it is *his* Commentary that still serves the textualizing functions that we are emphasizing here.

[44] Quoted from the Vintage edition (New York: Random House, 1961), p. 737.

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Reviewed by David Worrall

Stephen Cox's study of the way in which several late eighteenth-century writers perceived and portrayed personal identity contains tantalizing but often inconclusive or slenderly-based interpretations. The single chapter on Blake has, in any case, now been largely superseded by Leopold Damrosch Jr.'s *Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980). However, *"The Stranger Within Thee"* (a resonant quotation from Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition*) is not without suggestive and constructive ways of reading Blake. Cox's discussion, in an early chapter, of the eighteenth century's urge to find a social significance for the individual self led this reviewer to look with a different perspective at some of Blake's more perplexing

passages. Unfortunately, although Cox recognizes that Blake's concept of the self was different from the mainstream one of his predecessors and contemporaries, he seems unsure and faltering in his readiness to discuss Blake's major works.

Cox begins his book with a brief commentary on the problems of solipsism (although the introductory chapter of Robert Langbaum's *The Mysteries of Identity* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977] is better and fuller) and leads quickly to what is his central view of the philosophy of the self: that it was the idea of "sympathetic" sensibility that eighteenth-century philosophers found most useful when formulating their theories of a "feeling" self. The presence of sympathy and sensibility gives individuals moral approbation and social significance and accounts, as Cox persuasively notes, for the Ossianic vogue whose "feeling" heroes corresponded flatteringly closely with what the eighteenth century wished to think about its past. Not that they had a cozy view of man's identity, however: "eighteenth-century concepts of the self as a creature of feeling are highly ambiguous; they do not suggest an image of the self that is particularly assured or impressive" (p. 56). Cox's discussions of individual authors show how they were all ridden with doubts or contradictions about the identity of themselves.

The organization of the chapter on Samuel Richardson around *Clarissa* makes this part of the book the most persuasive. Apt and steadily supplied quotation is used to explore the insecurity and roleplaying of Lovelace and the contradictory desires of a Clarissa whose wish for independence is compromised by her desire for social recognition. Cox finds Clarissa's overlong death an abdication on Richardson's part. He "neglects the complex issues of personal integrity and motivation that he has pursued throughout the rest of the novel" and converts "the tragedy of personality into the tragedy of situation." Richardson, Cox argues, found Clarissa's struggle to hold on to a personal sense of her individual self a quality his fictionalizing could do little to embody, which is why he opts for the heightening of social and filial sympathy after her rape. It is that crisis which gives her individuality a social significance it had previously lacked and enables Richardson to obscure the problems of resolving Clarissa's internal struggles about the integrity of her own identity and her relationship with society.

It is wise of Cox to give some emphasis to this partial failure of Richardson, because novelists can sometimes appear to be remote and distant from the dramatic autonomy of the characters they create. This gulf, if it exists at all, is less apparent between poet and poem, and it is from poetry that Cox finds it most possible to pose judgments on writers' perceptions of themselves.

All is not well with some of these judgments, however. It is worrying to find Gray summed up as "at best, grandly pathetic; at worst, remote and sterile" (p. 98) on the basis of a discussion that does not last twenty pages

and which relies heavily for its crucial conclusion that Gray was pessimistic about the significance of the self on a study of hardly more than four stanzas of the *Elegy*. Calling the gothic poems "galleries of the ideal states in which Gray imagined that the self could attain its greatest significance" (p. 97) is an illuminating remark. The Bard's suicide is not an act of impotence but of stylized heroic passion, the Bard himself a gesture rather than a personality.

Although the conclusions here, and elsewhere, are often grander than the weight of evidence assembled might support, it is welcome to see any discussion of Thomas Chatterton—whose place in literary history (shelve under Cinderella Romantics?) now stands level with Blake's reputation a hundred years ago. Cox argues fascinatingly but thinly that Rowley and Canynge are the personae of Chatterton's self, heroes packaged (consciously or not) for eighteenth-century literary aesthetics. Chatterton can only write with barbarous sublimity of action and character if he first has Rowley act as the respectable "translator" of those works from a less sophisticated age, with Canynge standing as Rowley's bourgeois guarantor. This three-cornered piece of fabrication seems an exquisitely apposite interpretation of Chatterton's forgeries though further conclusions gathered from odd lines and episodes in the naive *Aella* seem less secure.

Cox's thesis on William Cowper ("The outside world provides him with a mirror of himself, but it is, after all, a mirror distorted by his own ideas" [p. 124]) is not new, as debts paid in the footnotes show.

The chapter on Blake, which forms the conclusion of the book, is not a definitive study of Blake's concept of the self. The relevant passages (familiar to all Blake scholars) from *All Religions Are One* and *The Book of Urizen* are rehearsed quite straightforwardly. Blake's special figure of the self's "Spectre," however, despite its visual and verbal appearances in *Jerusalem*, is not even mentioned, while even the early *Book of Thel*, which one had imagined to be more or less all about the self, is only referred to fleetingly. Cox can only conclude rather lamely that Blake's "philosophy of the self will probably always elude definitive interpretation" (p. 151). It is a pity he makes only oblique use of *Milton* ("Self-annihilation" is quoted but not explicated) because his stress on the eighteenth-century concept of benevolent sensibility seems to be partially what Blake was reacting against in *Milton* as a result of his experiences with William Hayley. *Milton* is also a poem in which Blake makes unusually complicated distinctions between the states of the self. For example, Blake first distinguishes Milton's "Shadow" from his "real and immortal Self" before passing on to an extraordinarily vivid description of his concept of the "vortex." That these two ideas, the self and the vortex, should be placed together so closely (both on pl. 15) is a natural function of Blake's narrative technique, which is usually more conventional than recent critical contrivance would allow. The vortex alters and controls the self's per-

ception of space and time. Once a vortex is "passd," that vortex can become anything the eye sees or the mind perceives: a starry universe "Or like a human form, a friend with whom he livd benevolent." This last is a curious line constructed with Blake's usual compressed precision.

The "friend" with whom Blake "livd benevolent" before he wrote *Milton* was William Hayley. Passing the vortex of Hayley, who turned out to be a spiritual enemy, was essential for Blake's voyage through eternity. The irony for Blake and Hayley's relationship (as is silently implicit from a cumulative reading of Cox's book) was that Hayley was doing exactly what the eighteenth century thought most conferred significance on the existence of the self, that is, acting benevolently. The problem for Blake was that he responded gratefully to that benevolence. Benevolence as a humane ideal is the product of a sophisticated society but can also be the expression of the self in search of its own significance, which is why corporeal friends can so easily become spiritual enemies. This must have been a lesson learned the hard way for Blake, who had criticized hypocritical sensibility as early as "The Human Abstract" of *Songs of Experience*. That Blake blamed himself as much as he did Hayley for such a mistaken experiment in patronage is clear from the way he buries this piece of autobiography in the midst of a passage concerning those things (eternity, infinity) dearest to his heart. Blake's metaphor for eternity in *Milton* is of an onward-stepping traveler: Blake's footsteps along his Felpham cottage path and through the world. However, eternity is also the vortex of that which comes next. The friend lived with benevolently is forgiven as that relationship recedes into the past. It is in the nature of whatever is behind Blake that it can be seen in its finite entirety, perhaps first a globe but then as a sun and, after, a universe. In the same way, benevolence viewed backwardly can be seen and forgiven as an act of the self and not a spiritual friendship. Blake explains, if not excuses, his own mistakes by reminding us in this passage that what is "apparent" to the "weak traveller confin'd beneath the moony shade" may be neither the entire picture nor the whole truth. Man may think that his "corn-fields and his valleys of five hundred acres square" are everything that there is because that is what his eye and mind perceive. The earth from whose surface he views "the rising sun & setting moon" is really a paradox of the finite. The earth is actually "one infinite plane" because, despite the appearance of those neat "square" fields, the earth at ground level (which is where *Milton* finishes and Blake ends up) is a differently-perceived globe or sphere over which the weak traveler may hurry but never find a boundary or ending.

Perception, cosmology, geometry, and autobiography are all locked up together in Blake's idea of the self and, while it has value as a general study, *"The Stranger Within Thee"* doesn't go very far towards providing a key to Blake's crystal cabinet.