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R E V I E W

Kenneth Gross, *Spenserian Poetics: Idolatry,
Iconoclasm, & Magic*

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What is new here is Hagstrum's insistence that Blake placed a greater value on the female and on Beulah than I and other feminist readers have thought. Hagstrum eloquently describes the power of Blake's heroines, of Oothoon, Ololon, and Jerusalem, and rightly insists that Beulah, the land of relaxation and sexual fulfillment, is necessary to the sustenance of Eden, the land of mental vision and creation. While I welcome Hagstrum's passionate defense of sexuality, of female autonomy, and of the interfusion of the sensual and mental life, I am not persuaded that Blake finally saw the female as equal in value to the male. Beulah remains *below* Eden, not beside it, as Hagstrum's geographical metaphor of "bordering lands" would suggest. And Blake consistently depicts male activities as both logically and temporally *prior* to female activities. Nonetheless, Hagstrum rightly observes that "emanation" is a two-way street, that in *Jerusalem* males emanate from females (Shiloh) just as females emanate from males. We need a more complex analysis of Blake's concept of emanation and sexuality than Hagstrum provides here, one that comes to terms with the desire, guilt, and ambivalence Blake felt toward homosexuality, toward anal and oral intercourse, and toward aggressive female sexuality, feelings which Brenda Webster has convincingly detailed in *Blake's Prophetic Psychology* (1983).

Hagstrum's brief epilogue includes an interesting reading of Hegel's *Idee* as the philosophical parallel to the Romantic poetic ideal of "esteem enlivened by desire." *The Romantic Body* will endure as an elegant and passionate affirmation of the role of sexual pleasure in life and art, an affirmation that Keats, Wordsworth, and Blake, with increasing ranges of experience and philosophical complexity, fully endorsed.

Kenneth Gross. *Spenserian Poetics: Idolatry, Iconoclasm, & Magic*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985 [i.e., 1986]. 271 pp. \$24.95.

Reviewed by Robert F. Gleckner

In my recent *Blake and Spenser* book I strongly recommended to all Blakeans Kathleen Williams's *Spenser's World of Glass* as not only a fine study of Blake's Renaissance predecessor but, as it were, an illuminating book for the study of Blake. While my own acknowledgments extended to other fine Spenserians as well, most notably A. C. Hamilton, I must now add to my pan-

theon of "Blakean" Spenserians Kenneth Gross, whose book I wish I had been able to read before completing my own.

Gross's project is to "examine the work of a poet who both embraces and fears mythology, whose visionary quests come into conflict with a manifold skepticism of vision." His "route" to this examination is "through a study of . . . ideas about true and false gods, about their potent or empty images, and about the violence that might be worked against them" (9). While these may be recognized as at least intriguing ideas for the study of Blake, even more so is Gross's intention to show Spenser's "links to strategies of biblical writing." Such a linkage leads to Gross's characterization of Spenser's "strongly Protestant . . . stance" as at least analogous to, if not proleptic of, "the displaced, diffused, demystified, ironic, and hyperbolized Protestantism we have learned to call Romanticism." Although he acknowledges that that "likeness is far from exact," the poet he describes, he argues, is one "whom I think Blake or Keats or Ruskin could have taken seriously as a master" (10).

The book is organized into two nearly equal parts, with a "Coda" entitled "The Veil of Idolatry." Part 1 comprises two large chapters that lay the groundwork for part 2's discussion of four major episodes (or, really, episode clusters) in *The Faerie Queene*. The first chapter lays out "A Poetics of Idolatry" which has a provocative bearing on *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (at least as I read that vexatious and elusive work), and hence on much else in Blake's canon, most especially on the idea of allegory and its relationship to vision and prophecy. Chapter 2, on the surface of it, would seem to have little relevance to Blake, concentrating as it does on Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland*; but its central thesis, Spenser's "Mythmaking in Hibernia" (the chapter title), is remarkably relevant, for that under-read work "raises some rather radical questions about the nature of fable, imagination, ideology, and law," as well as religion.

The chapter on *A View* is far too rich to lend itself to easy summary, but let me give here two or three out-of-context examples of the sort of argument (and the kinds of conclusions) Gross's fine analysis of the prose essay yields, especially those that should engage a Blakean's attention. After quoting part of the opening dialogue between Irenius and his questioner Eudoxus, Gross points out tellingly that the verbal scheme that dominates the passage is what Puttenham calls ". . . *aporia*, or the doubtful." Crediting Alpers in his *The Poetry of The Faerie Queene* with suggesting this technique as a characteristic Spenserian mode, Gross now elevates it to "one of Spenser's master tropes," entailing not merely a piling up of discrete images and verbal formulae for descriptive and narrative purposes but a "multiplication within a discourse of such a variety

of alternative perspectives as to call into question, or at least to delay, any divisive choice among those alternatives" (82). While versions of this essentially rhetorical figure underlie most if not all of Gross's analyses of the several *Faerie Queene* episodes he selects, let me cite particularly chapter 3 on Orgoglio and Arthur. The former Gross sees as interpreting for us what he calls "the poetics of Pride—delusive, idolatrous, catastrophic," while Arthur "unfolds the poetics of Magnificence—disillusioning and iconoclastic, but redeeming certain otherwise dangerous literary enchantments" (115). As a result "the allegorical battle becomes a battle about allegory," which in turn generates "darker layerings of skepticism and self-reflexivity" that emerge as premonitions and enactments of the dangers attendant upon the generation of any fixed "sense" in the poem (115).

The rest of this remarkable chapter deals even more broadly (as do chapters 4 on Britomart, Amoret, and Busyrane, 5 on the Garden of Adonis, and 6 on Mt. Acidale and the Blatant Beast) with Spenser's "willfully protean writing [which] contains a violence against the powerful machinery of allegory"—an intricate, fantastic narrative that, paradoxically because of its "eclectic opacity," forces us to forestall absolute choices as to the ultimate sense of the fable (117). Concluding the chapter is a quite dazzling analysis of Arthur's dragon helm and shield—the former an "allegorical watcher" (*Drakon*) that "constitutes a talismanic defense against the reductions . . . of allegorical reading" (135), the latter a "text as mirror-shield defensively [turning] our narcissistic will to interpret back on itself, asking us to reflect on our own hermeneutic presumptions and presuppositions." More simply, as Gross concludes, the shield "is an allegory that slays allegory" (143): it "defeats the Orgoglio in us which seeks a final meaning behind the text's bright, dark, reflective surface, or would reify its unsettled and unsettling tropes into a fixed iconic symbol or a fixed violence against the symbol" (139).

As with chapter 2, chapter 1 on "The Poetics of Idolatry" does not lend itself to comfortable encapsulation. Much of it has to do with biblical texts in the context of evolving workable definitions of the elusive terms that inform Gross's total argument, "idolatry," "iconoclasm," and "magic." All three impinge so powerfully on each other that disentangling their all too frequent fossilization into neat and "meaningful" metaphors becomes virtually impossible. For example, "the identification and elimination of an idol can register a certain critical consciousness about the limitations of any image, [but] certain acts of iconoclasm may still entail a continuing, though more ironic and dialectical process of imagemaking" (28). Thus Gross finds in a variety of biblical texts (Psalms 19 and 115, Isaiah, Genesis 2, Numbers 21, and others) that "even a divinely instituted

form of sacred figuration . . . can collapse into the condition of an idol if it is taken as final or complete, as sacred in and of itself, or if it binds revelation within delusively stable or merely anterior forms." Thus iconoclasm is extended to

attacks on ritual, legalism, syncretistic mythology, false prophecy—and finally to the crucial identification of idolatry with false forms of reading and writing. In such a situation, the work of iconoclasm must also extend itself into the realm of interpretation, often founding a radical hermeneutic of suspicion as well as making use of the literary resources of irony, parody, and revisionary narrative. (30)

Indeed, Gross might well have been speaking of Blake when he concludes in this section, "the strength of the Bible's iconoclastic rhetoric (especially in the prophets) arises from its way of mythologizing idolatry and spiritual error as forms of supernatural entrapment, seduction, and whoredom" (37).

Although to this point I have not spelled out, nor shall I spell out (deeming it superfluous for the attentive Blakean reader of this review or, better, of Gross's entire book), the implications of Gross's illuminating thesis and argument for the understanding of Blake's enterprise, surely Blake's Los has already popped into the reader's mind more than once already. Much of the final twenty pages of Gross's first chapter seems uncannily to speak of Blake's conception of Los's, not to say his own, enterprise—even as Gross intends it to underlie his view of Spenser's. More specifically this closing argument speaks to the risks of these several enterprises, especially insofar as all three participate in the allegorical mode. Of that mode Gross writes:

. . . any mode of religious rhetoric which seeks to dramatize a spiritual, conceptual, or political conflict by giving independent mythic existence to a negative term so that it may be symbolically simplified, slandered, and cast out always risks creating a verbal figure suspended between the states of demon and idol. . . . it is the creature of a discourse that seeks to attack what it sees as human illusion but . . . reserves for itself some access to a magical form of speech, a potent form of The Word which must serve the purposes of iconoclasm and revelation. Allegory thus tends to sustain even as it empties out the realm of the demonic and the idolatrous. (56)

The complex interrelationships among Blake's Los, Urizen, Christ, Albion, even Milton—not to say Blake himself—inhere in such "discourse." What Karl Kraus said of psychoanalysis, Gross notes shrewdly, may well be said of allegory, "that it is itself the disease of which it purports to be the cure" (61). It is what I called, infinitely more crudely and awkwardly in *Blake and Spenser*, Los's inveterately (indeed militantly) anti-allegorical allegory as an "appropriate," perhaps even necessary, prophetic mode.

The differences on this score between Spenser's and Blake's position and practice that I tried to chart in my book are rather neatly formulated by Gross's argument that Spenser is disillusioned enough about the duplici-

ties and slipperiness of allegory—its function as an unveiling mode but also as a mode of mystification, usurpation, and idolatry—to see how these two functional poles may infect one another; but Spenser is “equally aware that he is not quite in a position to offer any other myth or god-term that might dissolve these dilemmas” (69). Thus as allegorist and complex fabulist, he “plays the maddening game” of exposing the liabilities of allegory even as he tries to “reauthenticate it as a viable road to vision” (69). Blake, on the other hand, is shrewdly aware of the duplicities and powerful dangers of the mode but clearly does see himself in a position to offer another myth or “god-term” that does resolve the dilemmas. And, as I have argued, at the core of that “position” is his extraordinary and largely successful attempt to reauthenticate allegory—addressed, of course, to the “intellectual powers”—not merely as a viable road to vision but as vision itself.

I hope it is clear by now that I admire this book; but at the same time, while I wish it were there for me to draw on for my own, I do not think that I would have changed mine much had I read Gross first. For, if through Blake's eyes I came to see *The Faerie Queene* as he did, in substantial and even remarkable ways Gross does too. Even if Blake didn't, indeed couldn't and wouldn't if he could, think in Gross's terms, one might still imagine a scholarly Blake scribbling assorted huzzahs in the margins of his copy of *Spenserian Poetics*. At its core it is a book that underwrites Blake's sense of Spenser's redeemability (I hope not merely *my* sense of Blake's sense of Spenser's redeemability). It is meet, right, and good, then, that of his three specific references to Blake, one of which I quoted earlier, Gross closes with a quotation from the coda to the apocalypse of *The Four Zoas*: “The dark Religions are departed & sweet Science reigns”—and then comments:

Spenser, for whatever reasons, neither attempted nor could he master so extreme a rhetoric. The apocalyptic present tense belongs only to his giants and enchanter. The authoritative rule of order over change is asserted only for a space [in the *Mutabilitie Cantos*], and Book VII closes, though less desperately than Book VI, by leaving the temporal world to its shifting illusions and images, and turning to a projected sight [“that Sabaoth's sight”] that, for all the poem knows, is “visionless entire.” (252)



WILLIAM BLAKE'S EPIC: Imagination Unbound



Joanne Witke

Joanne Witke, *William Blake's Epic: Imagination Unbound*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986. ii+231 pp. \$27.50.

Reviewed by Catherine McClenahan

Joanne Witke, who has previously published articles on Blake's connection to Bishop Berkeley and on the synoptic Gospels as a structural model for *Jerusalem*,¹ combines these approaches in her book-length reading of this poem as Blake's creation of a “System” designed to oppose that of Joshua Reynolds. Since Witke sees this system as solving a philosophical problem whose “formal categories are literary,” her aim is to demonstrate the poem's “philosophical nucleus,” its operation as an epic, and Blake's aesthetic principles (prefatory note). She combines philosophical and aesthetic issues to form three arguments: first, that Reynolds' aesthetics are