

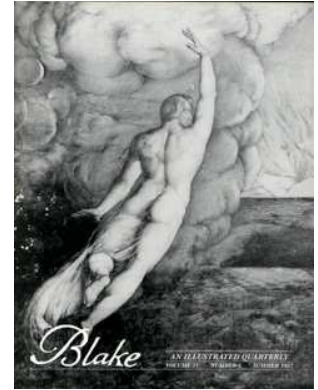
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Harold Bloom, ed., *William Blake: Modern Critical Views*; Nelson Hilton, ed., *Essential Articles for the Study of William Blake, 1970-1984*

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118; "On Another's Sorrow," 76)—or characterizes "deep" as "that most sinister of all words" (98). But in its relentless contextualization Gardner offers a salutary antidote to any who would seal Blake up in mere "textuality": "A year before Blake issued *Songs of Experience* a chapel was built 'on the green' in South Lambeth" (139). It cost £3000, "financed by the issue of sixty shares of £50 each, every shareholder being entitled to four seats," and Gardner even reproduces a 1793 watercolor of it, complete with cattle fenced off in the foreground pasture.



Section of *Survey of London* (1786) by J. Cary, showing area of Golden Square, King Street, Oxford Street and Poland Street (Oxford Street is the main road running east-west at the north of the map and Swallow Street is now Regent Street).

Harold Bloom, ed. *William Blake: Modern Critical Views*. New York: Chelsea House, 1985. 209 pp. \$24.50.

Nelson Hilton, ed. *Essential Articles for the Study of William Blake, 1970-1984*. Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1986. 333 pp. \$35.00.

Reviewed by Peter Otto

One need only measure the articles which open Bloom's *William Blake* with the work of their immediate predecessors to marvel once again at the quantum leap in Blake studies that was effected by the work of critics such as Erdman, Gleckner, Frye and, more recently, Mitchell. Articles such as "Blake: The Historical Approach," "Point of View and Context in Blake's Songs," "The Keys to the Gates," and "Blake's Composite Art" clearly deserve their place at the beginning of a collection of "modern critical views" on Blake.

Yet it would be wrong to view these articles solely in their original context. The temporal gap between production in one generation and transmission to the next, and the resulting change of context, significantly changes any article's meaning. In their original context these articles announced that they were engaged in the task of hollowing out "the cave" of Blake criticism. As a collection of "modern critical views," however, what is foregrounded is the contrary task of keeping open the space of a particular kind of Blake criticism. In the new context—that of "transmitting knowledge from generation to generation"—they now present the smooth surface of "books . . . arranged in libraries" (MHH 15, E40), which must be "opened" once again. It is perhaps emblematic of this change of stature that these articles have been reprinted without footnotes. Apparently a "modern critical view" is self-standing and requires no temporal referents. Needless to say, this omission severely qualifies the usefulness of these articles for students, who are presumably the target audience for this book.

Just how dramatic an alteration this change of context can have on meaning can be seen in Bloom's introduction (excerpted from *Poetry and Repression*) which, we are told in the editor's note, is "intended to provoke all settled readings of Blake." This is apparently to be done by pointing out how Blake "in mocking a canonical kind of poem, nevertheless is subsumed by the canonical traditions of misreading" (17). As an introduction to a book which proposes a canon of modern Blake criticism and which assures us that the opening essays "do set forth approaches to Blake that are not altogether unset-

tled or problematic" (ed. note), this argument clearly transfers a major part of its irony from the book it introduces to any "belated" attempt to constitute a different canon. Spoken in the voice of the editor of a canon, it is (in this context) itself a defense rather than an opening.

The Blake criticism represented by *Modern Critical Views* is identified as belonging to "the school of the late Foster Damon" (ed. note). What these articles have in common with Damon is, on the one hand, the belief that Blake's poetry is organized, systematic, and coherent and, on the other hand, the assumption that such virtues are apparent only when the correct method, system, or set of contexts is applied to his *oeuvre*. The book therefore has no space for Neo-Platonic and Gnostic Blake, the enthusiastic Blake represented by *Sparks of Fire*, poststructuralist Blake or "Dangerous Blake";¹ there is in fact little space even for formalist Blake. This is for me the most unfortunate omission: a student approaching Blake through this book would have little idea of the work done in the last twenty years on the form of poems such as *Europe*, *Jerusalem*, *Milton*, *The Four Zoas* or even *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.

At times the magnitude of these repressions produces a palpable anxiety. Bloom writes, for example, that the "gathering movement in recent feminist critiques of Blake" (ed. note) is "intimated" by eleven pages from Susan Fox's book on *Milton*. There is no doubt that Fox's account of the first section of the second book of *Milton* deserves a place in this book, but exactly how it is meant to give an intimation of this gathering movement is not at all clear. The volume is closed by Diana Hume George's chapter on "The Feminine in Blake" from *Blake and Freud*, which according to Bloom offers us "a spirited defense of Blake against some recent feminist critiques." It seems that we have the defense against a point of view which is (apart from George's own analysis of the Female Will) not allowed to appear.

One of the strengths of this collection is that its practice with regard to "other Blakes" is not repeated in relation to the tradition that it does represent. There is at least some suggestion of the numerous and at times conflicting frameworks in which Blake "makes sense" (cf. 27 and 46, for example). Moreover, while *Modern Critical Views* gives a good idea of where Frye's systematization of Blake (particularly in relation to the imagination) has led, it also includes selections which imply at least some of the ways in which "organized" Blake has been transformed in recent years. For example, David Wagenknecht's "Transformations" from *Blake's Night*, both makes more complex and, in a certain sense, brings us to the end of the search for contexts and sources begun by critics as diverse as Bloom, Raine, and Erdman. Nevertheless, although these selections imply a very different Blake, they do not break with the tradition in

which they have been placed. Such changes remain on the far side of this book's horizon.

In stressing the "closure" effected by *Modern Critical Views* I am not making a completely negative judgment. Canonization, the always only partially successful transformation of the strongest devils into angels, seems to be inevitable. The "transmission of knowledge from generation to generation" would fail if it did not enlist the services of the angels. It is this process which creates the "ground" or the "surface" which allows the next "opening" to be found. Just how successful this school of Blake criticism has been in establishing this ground can be seen in the very different articles gathered together in *Essential Articles for the Study of William Blake*.

This second volume takes a position contrary to that of Bloom's angels. Although the foreword heralds a book which will bring together those essays which, for the study of Blake, are "genuinely essential" (vii), the preface quickly disclaims any such pretensions, for "To presume 'essentiality' would entail assuming a knowledge of universal attributes" and to make such an assumption would be to identify oneself with "the Blasphemous Selfhoods" who "must be broken asunder" (ix). The preface does claim that the collection of articles reflects "the essential trajectory of literary-critical thought for the years it covers," but at the same time it suggests that for Blake criticism these articles may represent a "revolutionary force" about which there may be some level of consternation (x). Rather than offering a systematization of Blake or emphasizing a series of contexts in which Blake "makes sense," *Essential Articles* lays stress on Blake's transformation of his sources and the nature of his own vision. There is, therefore, much greater emphasis placed on what could loosely be called textuality: on what is happening within the verbal and graphic dimensions of Blake's texts. *Essential Articles* is indeed essential reading for any student who wants to understand the pre-history of much of the most exciting work that is currently being produced in Blake studies.

Essential Articles is itself arranged in such a way as to tell the "story" of the "discovery" of Blake's textuality. The volume begins with "Blake and the Philosophy of Literary Symbolism" in which Hazard Adams distinguishes between myth and anti-myth. The former implies a power to create reality in and through language, while the latter implies a view of language which is able only to point to a pre-existing external world. Within the context of *Essential Articles*, this implies that if Blake's poetry celebrates myth rather than anti-myth, and clearly not many Blake critics would disagree, then it follows that to read Blake through a series of codes, conventions, sources, or contexts, which are external to the poem, is to "choose forms of externality from poetic tales" (5). The next two articles in the volume — "Blake

and the Gnostic Hyle: A Double Negative" by Stuart Curran and "The Iconoclastic Enterprise: Blake's Critique of 'Milton's Religion'" by Florence Sandler—implicitly underline this point by describing how Blake disagrees with and transforms two of his major sources. The implicit contention of these articles, namely that Blake's poems form a unique "grammar" that transforms the "language stereo-types" out of which they are made, is made explicit in "The Self-sufficient Text" by Michael Riffaterre. Riffaterre argues that there is no need to treat Blake's poems as if they were "a condensed and therefore cryptic allusion to a complex mythological tradition" or system of symbolism (59). Such methods of reading are in fact a disguised form of the referential fallacy. Instead, Riffaterre argues, motifs and themes from external sources are present within the text, but only as words "that point to . . . a significance determined by the rules of a grammar valid only for this text" (73).

With these premises articulated, Hilton then assembles an impressive series of articles which delineate aspects of the "grammar" of Blake's texts. These are of three major kinds: first, there are articles which outline an aspect of Blake's art by explicating his practices in relation to an external context (Donald Ault's article on Newton and *The Four Zoas*, "Incommensurability and Interconnection in Blake's Anti-Newtonian Text," and Morris Eaves' account of Blake's quarrel with the printing technologies of his time, "Blake and the Artistic Machine: An Essay in Decorum and Technology," fit into this class). Next, "The Female as Metaphor in William Blake's Poetry" by Susan Fox and "Desire Gratified and Ungratified: William Blake and Sexuality" by Alicia Ostriker trace the vicissitudes of a particular set of metaphors in Blake's poetry. Third, "Proper Names in the Structural Design of Blake's Myth-Making" by V. A. De Luca and "Semantic Structures and the Temporal Modes of Blake's Prophetic Verse" by Ronald Clayton Taylor concentrate exclusively on minute particulars of the "grammar" of Blake's poems. Although its focus is much broader, Robert F. Gleckner's "Most Holy Forms of Thought: Some Observations on Blake and Language" belongs to this class. *Essential Articles* closes with "'Striving with Systems': Blake and the Politics of Difference" by Steven Shavero and "What Type of Blake?" by the Santa Cruz Blake Study Group. The first is offered as an example of a close reading that does not sidestep the aporias opened up by *écriture*. The second measures the distance between textual and edited Blake. It raises, as conclusion to this volume, the very real question of the kind of Blake that should be the object of Blake criticism.

What is remarkable about this turn to Blake's texts, particularly when it is compared to the articles in *Modern Critical Views*, is the resulting recovery of a sense of

Blake's "strangeness" and of the vigor and unruliness of his texts. De Luca writes, to cite only an obvious example, of "the palpable strangeness of [Blake's] poetic surfaces" (119). Similarly, rather than smoothing over the surface of Blake's relationship to women and assimilating it to an overriding system, Ostriker discovers in Blake's poems both a "proto-feminist sensibility" and "its opposite, a homocentric gynophobia"; instead of being disedified by this contradiction, she observes that "One of the idols of our tribe is System, a Blakean term signifying a set of ideas bounded by an adhesive inflexible consistency" (233). The climax of this "unbounded" Blake is, in this volume at least, the article by the Santa Cruz Blake Study Group. By attending to the graphic particulars of Blake's text, the Santa Cruz group observes the extent to which Blake's poems resist any attempt to reduce them to univocality or uniformity. The Blake who finally emerges at the end of this volume is remarkably different from the more austere Blake who was delineated in *Modern Critical Views*.

Yet perhaps the opposition between these two Blakes is not complete. In providing us with a series of contexts, systems, and sources to "frame" Blake, the tradition represented by *Modern Critical Views* makes possible the work of *Essential Articles*. The devils could not exist without the angels, and vice-versa. Moreover, strangeness and unruliness can themselves become an orthodoxy, and then it is the angels who perform the work of the devils. If (in relation to Wicksteed, and Sloss and Wallis, et al.) Erdman, Frye, and Bloom were once devils, it is not inconceivable that Riffaterre, Ault, and even the Santa Cruz Blake Study Group could one day become angels. *Essential Articles* is after all itself an attempt to uncover a tradition, "to gather together some now maturing orphans" (x): even in Blake criticism Urien and Orc are in endless and cyclical struggle.

¹W. J. T. Mitchell, "Dangerous Blake," *Studies in Romanticism*, 21 (1982): 410-16.

Desmond King-Hele. *Erasmus Darwin and The Romantic Poets*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986. vii + 294 pp. \$29.95.

Reviewed by David Worrall

Students of Romanticism have always been well served by Desmond King-Hele. Quite apart from his earlier pioneering studies of Erasmus Darwin (which include a