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R E V I E W

Desmond King-Hele, Erasmus Darwin and the Romantic Poets

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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

biography, a collection of letters, and a selection of writings), King-Hele's *Shelley: His Thought and Work* is now in its third edition. The special character of King-Hele's substantial contribution to the scholarship of the period has derived from his position beyond the academy of literature teachers (he is a Fellow of the Royal Society and a professional aerospace scientist), a situation which has afforded him some degree of detachment from the relentless institutionalization of "English" and its late "crises" of theory (I write from laggardly England). Unfortunately, it is the absence of an adequately worked out theory of critical practice and procedure that limits the usefulness of *Erasmus Darwin and The Romantic Poets*.

The scope of the book is extremely ambitious in attempting to cover both the names one would expect to meet (Blake, Byron, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth) and those one has probably only passed by en route to other things (Joel Barlow, Brooke Boothby, Thomas Campbell, Leigh Hunt, Eleanor Porden, Anna Seward, Mary Tighe, and others). The reading of this extensive body of primary literature in the hunt for verbal parallels must have been a considerable undertaking. And therein lies the problem. King-Hele states his critical procedure at the beginning: "... I have concentrated more on apparent verbal echoes than on resemblances in ideas" (p. 1). In other words, his standard practice throughout the book is to compare passages from Darwin with passages from other writers and then to trace the verbal similarities. The results are highly variable and the author's commentary too often lacking in development. For example, a "close" parallel might be given as a phrase drawn from Coleridge's lecture on *The Tempest*: "sleep, which consists in a suspension of the voluntary . . . power" compared with one from Darwin's *Zoonomia*: "sleep; which consists in a suspension of all voluntary power" (p. 131). A "not-so-close" parallel would be admitted as Keats' description of Madeline "And on her hair a glory, like a saint" compared with Darwin's "A saint-like glory trembles round her head" from *The Loves of the Plants* (p. 241).

The above examples are, I think, an accurate representation of the book's procedures although King-Hele is good humored enough to allow himself an occasional diversion from "the tedious business of tracing resemblances" (p. 132). However, it is difficult to be wholeheartedly generous with a critic who says such things as "Fire is the ruling motif of 'The Tyger,' so there are bound to be parallels with Canto I of *The Economy of Vegetation* which is all about Fire" (p. 47), or, on a more breathtaking level of generalization, "With *The Loves of the Plants* Darwin also succeeded in winning warm applause from the literary world for a long poem largely devoted to detailed descriptions of Nature, and particularly flowers. This success gave Wordsworth the inner

confidence that he could do the same . . ." (p. 64).

So, what remains? Can we bypass King-Hele's book pronouncing it theoretically outmoded and primitive in its literary judgments? Not just yet, I think. At the end of *Erasmus Darwin and The Romantic Poets*, King-Hele tells us that his book has been "an exercise in probability" (p. 274), and a footnote away is an equation for working out the probability of linguistic parallels (which he very unguardedly calls "influence"): "The overall probability of influence with n parallels, each of probability p , is $\{1 - (1 - p)^n\}$ ". Thus, if $p = 0.2$ (i.e. 20 per cent) and $n = 6$, the overall probability is $1 - 0.8^6 = 0.74$." It is easy to scoff at this ready-reckoner for working out as complex a matter as intertextuality but it doesn't quite get the rest of us off the hook of coming up with a definition of what constitutes a boundary or parameter of even the simplest type of intertextuality. It might be rewarding to examine King-Hele's "exercise in probability" in the light of quite a different theory of literary probability such as the one presented in Douglas Lane Patey's *Probability and Literary Form: Philosophic Theory and Literary Practice in the Augustan Age* (Cambridge University Press, 1984). In that book Patey says that Augustan authors "quite consciously demand of their readers certain procedures of probable inference; these procedures not only reflect contemporary thinking about the probable, but are embodied and dramatized in literary form; and the procedures of interpretation required, if these works are to be understood, are precisely the habits of thought which their authors mean explicitly to teach" (p. xii). Although Patey doesn't discuss the issue, related to a theory of literary probability must be the question of imitation, plagiarism or just "good" old-fashioned "influence," all of which could, strictly, be seen as devices (legitimate or otherwise) for developing consensual appeals to the reader. For example, Coleridge (or someone else) might be imitating Darwin in order to increase the probable inferences of the reader. As Derrida points out, all "origins" are traces unacknowledged and perhaps we should consider many of the Romantic writers from the perspective of Augustan literary probability theory; in any event, the metaphysics of Romantic originality have long been amenable to deconstruction. Whatever one thinks about all this, King-Hele's own practice of counting "parallels" is too subjective to have scientific value and too theoretically backward to satisfy current critical scholarship.

While many of King-Hele's literary judgments are open to question (such as the one that "Coleridge wrote little verse after 1800, and that little is not highly regarded," p. 119), Darwin's works do seem to have been regarded by the Romantic writers as significant repositories of attractively presented science. Drawing on the work of James Averill and Mary Jacobus, King-Hele is able to demonstrate convincingly that case histories re-

corded in *Zoonomia* received much imaginative reworking by Wordsworth. Indeed, *Erasmus Darwin and The Romantic Poets* sent me back again to read *Zoonomia*, where one is certainly struck by the frequency with which Darwin makes reference to patient case histories or to the observation of social behavior, either at first hand or by report. It could be that in dealing with Wordsworth and Coleridge in particular we need the mediation of *Zoonomia* before reaching for our Lacan *Écrits*. Darwin's period is the wonderful world of pre-Freudian psychological explanation. The following incident is classed by Darwin as a minor "disease of volition": "A little boy, who was tired with walking, begged of his papa to carry him. 'Here,' says the reverend doctor, 'ride upon my gold-headed cane;' and the pleased child, putting it between his legs, galloped away with delight, and complained no more of his fatigue" (*Zoonomia*, 1: 434-35). King-Hele is suggestive too in pointing out, with reference to "Kubla Khan," an incident Darwin had read about in the "Lausanne Transactions" concerning a "somnambulist" who "sometimes opened his eyes for a short time to examine, where he was, or where his ink pot stood, and then shut them again, dipping his pen into the pot every now and then, and writing on, but never opening his eyes afterwards, although he wrote on from line to line regularly, and corrected some errors of the pen, or in spelling . . ." (*Zoonomia*, 1: 228-29).

The issues raised by feminist literary criticism over the last ten years also seem to have left King-Hele untouched, but his account of the provincially claustrophobic tutor-pupil relationship of Erasmus Darwin and the poet Anna Seward might repay further investigation. At the moment it is difficult to see who has been "writing" the other amidst mutual charges of plagiarism. One would also want to qualify the page and a bit devoted to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Mary Shelley's preface is an elusive testament to emergent, lateral feminine writing and repays close reading: "They talked of the experiments of Dr. Darwin (I speak not of what the Doctor really did, or said that he did, but, as more to my purpose, of what was then spoken of as having been done by him) . . ." King-Hele comments that "The clumsy sentence in brackets suggests that Mary searched for an account of this experiment in Darwin's works, but failed to find anything" (p. 260). I would imagine that most readers today would be prepared to see the parenthetical sentence as deliberately disruptive, casting the primacy of Mary Shelley's "purpose" against the second-hand reportage of Byron and her husband.

I have tried to indicate the types of limitation readers might find on the usefulness of *Erasmus Darwin and The Romantic Poets*. Most of the material on Blake is derived from the work of Nelson Hilton and the present writer and, while scrupulously acknowledged, only goes tentatively beyond them. The main problems are

brought about by the ambitious nature of the project, but I don't think King-Hele has anything to worry about. We already have every reason to be grateful to him for almost singlehandedly ensuring that no one could now overlook the importance of Erasmus Darwin's contribution to the thought and writings of the period.

A Catalogue of the Lawrence Lande William Blake Collection in the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections of the McGill University Libraries. Montreal: McLennan Library, McGill University, 1983. xv + 172 pp. \$50.00 Canadian.

Reviewed by G. E. Bentley, Jr.

This is a collaborative work, with a foreword by the donor of the nucleus of the collection Lawrence Lande, a preface by the Blake scholar Christopher Heppner, whose "role . . . has been that of writing or verifying the annotation" (p. x), and an introduction by the Rare Books Librarian Elizabeth Lewis, who "organized the cataloguing, most of which was done by Mrs. Rosemary Haddad" (p. x). It is a large, handsome, oblong work¹ in double columns of admirable Baskerville type, generously leaded, with display pages in red and black, on Japan paper with deckled edges, with eight sharp reproductions, twenty-four blank pages within the text, and a "special binding" in an edition limited to five hundred copies signed by the collector, the Director of the McGill Libraries, the cataloguer, the Rare Book Librarian, the book designer, and the annotator. The greatest care devoted to the book seems to have been concentrated, successfully, upon the book's appearance² rather than its function as a work of scholarship.

A few of the lacunae here are easy to identify. There is no index, which makes it surprisingly difficult to use, nor is there a list of the reproductions, and the unnumbered reproductions themselves are so enigmatically titled—e.g., "Venus Anadyomene 5.1. B8V4 1805"—as to leave one puzzled about the artist (Thomas Butts), the medium (water color and ink), and where it is described in the book (p. 129). One may well wonder who is in charge here.