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David V. Erdman, Commerce des Lumières: John Oswald and the British in Paris, 1790-1793

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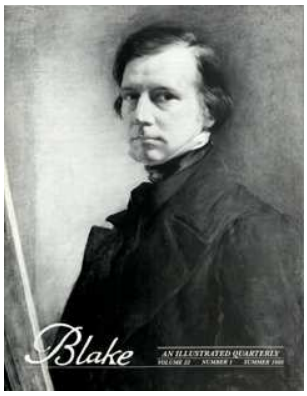


She has interesting things to say also about Blake's depiction of Raphael in *Raphael's Entry into Paradise*, noting that the cloud forms around the archangel seem to refute Milton's estimation of the scene, Blake being out of sympathy with the Father's objectives in book 5 of *Paradise Lost*. Werner also usefully corrects (in a footnote, 109) many critics' ideas of whether the moon is waxing or waning in PL designs.

It is hard to get excited about Blake's Milton designs in this book, because Werner's observations in the wider scheme of things are always cautiously correct. However, one of her best sections is her discussion of *The Spirit of Plato* (*L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, design 9), where perceptive detail bears out her statement that the design shows "the rich ambivalence" of Blake's attitude toward Milton.

I wonder if this ambivalence isn't also present in the illustrations to the *Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity*. Werner suggests as much in comparing the Nativity Ode with *Europe*, and calling Blake's poem a sardonic parody of Milton's. What Werner does not say is that Blake's illustrations to the Nativity Ode are surely among the most cluttered and least attractive of all Blake's designs, and I wonder why we avoid commenting on aesthetic effect while we are attempting to be combination literary-and-art critics. It is easy to get lost in Minute Particulars.

Minute particulars are important in Werner's book, and so I am going to be particularly minute and note here some bothersome inconsistencies. In discussing the upraised hands of the Lady in *Comus* 2H, Werner says the Lady is registering her "indecision." However, the same gesture on the Attendant Spirit in *Comus* 1H is supposed to be "an attitude of gentle piety." Now it cannot be both. Again, Werner refers to the Lady's gesture in *Comus* 1B as an attitude of "openness" when it is clearly a gesture of protest (cf. Christ making the same gesture at the Banquet Temptation in *Paradise Regained*). And Mary in PR 12 is not really "raising her arms in freedom" but expressing astonishment. And it is a worm, not a snake around Adam in *Elohim Creating Adam*. Details!

Werner has adopted a rather unusual system for referring to illustrations in the text of the book: for example, the *Comus* illustrations are numbered one through sixteen, rather than 1–8 H (for Huntington set) and 1–8 B (for Boston set). This means that if one is looking for *Comus with his Revellers* (Boston) it is called illustration 9, *The Lady's Return to her Parents* (Huntington) being illustration 8. *Paradise Regained* 12 (Fitzwilliam) is illustration 79. One must refer to the back of the book to find the illustration itself and its usual appellation. Once I got used to the system, I realized that the list of illustrations at the beginning of the book was in reality the finding list for the designs. In a book in which one is constantly having to flip back and forth to compare design and text, I think a system of putting similar subject designs on facing pages would have made the book easier to use. The notes, however, are conveniently placed at the end of each chapter, and there is a bibliography useful for both Blake and Milton studies. A good deal of careful scholarship lies behind this work. One can certainly recommend this book to anyone beginning a study of Blake's Milton designs.

David V. Erdman. *Commerce des Lumières: John Oswald and the British in Paris, 1790–1793*. Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1986. xiii + 338 pp., illus. $39.00.

Reviewed by Michael Ferber

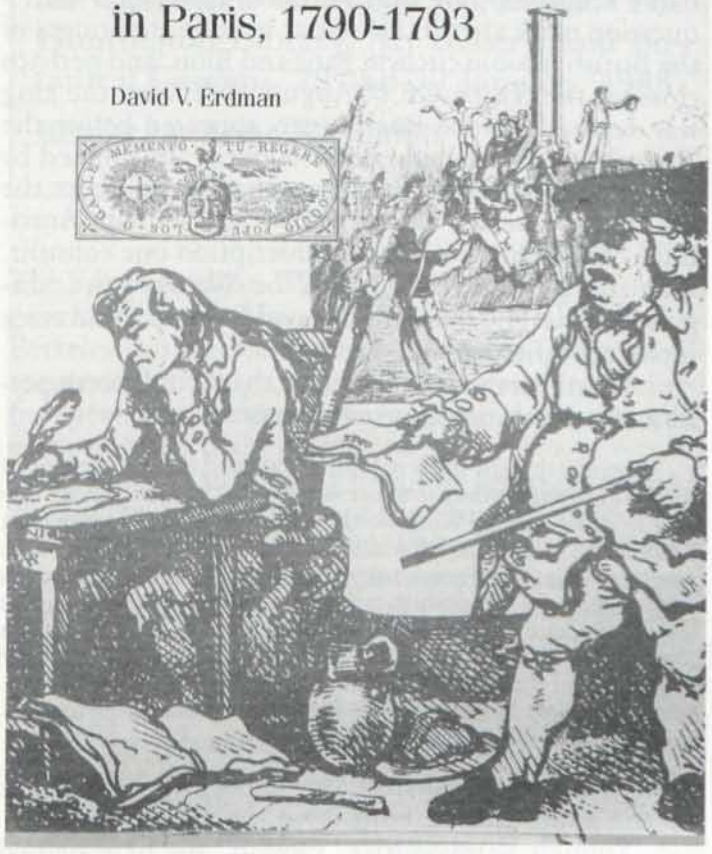
We have another reason to be grateful to David Erdman. He has given us a new Blake, he has given us a new Coleridge, and now here he comes again with a new person altogether—new unless we already know quite a lot about British Jacobin pamphleteers and "military intellectuals"—John Oswald. And what a fellow this John Oswald is!

A lieutenant in the Black Watch or Royal Highland Regiment, Oswald serves in India (after fighting a duel during the long voyage to Bombay, and devoting several months to studying the customs of the Comorro people on the island of Joanna, off Madagascar), resigns his commission while still in India, becomes a vegetarian, and returns to England by land, no doubt largely on foot, by way of Turkey. His first wife has died, leaving two small sons; he remarries, and has a daughter. He then moves to London, and spends the next seven or eight years (c. 1784–1792) as an energetic, remarkably versatile, and increasingly militant Grub Street radical writer, parliamentary reporter, occasional poet, and editor. By late 1789 he is commuting between London and Paris. In Paris he launches another journal, joins the Jacobin Club, where he debates with Robespierre, writes a book on the use of the pike, is put in charge of a battalion of *piquiers*, and reportedly leads the guard that surrounds Louis XVI at his beheading (and leads a dance afterward). Having urged a French invasion of England, which with a rising of the lower and middle orders he

COMMERCE DES LUMIÈRES

John Oswald and the British in Paris, 1790-1793

David V. Erdman



believed would topple the British monarchy, Oswald and his unit are ordered to Brest, a likely embarcation point for an invasion, but are soon diverted to the Vendée where they are to help put down, sadly, a popular rising against the Revolution. In a minor engagement Oswald is killed.

Besides all this activity, he is capable of writing some rollicking good polemical prose. In *The Government of the People*, printed in Paris (in English) in 1792, Oswald insists that only by assembling the nation, by direct democracy, can the will of the people be known and done. Representation takes away everything from the people but its powerless voice.

> I confess I have never been able to consider this representative system, without wondering at the easy credulity with which the human mind swallows the most palpable absurdities. Were a man seriously to propose, that the nation should piss by proxy, he would doubtless be regarded as a madman; and yet, to *think by proxy*, is a proposition which we hear not only without astonishment, but even with approbation. We cannot exercise for each other the meanest functions of animal existence; and can we then perform for each other the highest functions of intellectual life? But the fact is, that although we cannot think for each other any more than we can love for each other, or eat and drink for each other, yet, by the habit of delegating to others the task of thinking for us, we insensibly unlearn to think altogether; and this answers wonderfully well the charitable purpose of those Gentlemen who are willing to save us the trouble of thinking for ourselves.

It is good to have this man back from oblivion. Having presented his life in this book about as thoroughly as it can be presented, Erdman is now preparing a collection of Oswald's complete works, and it will be worth reading.

As his subtitle suggests, however, Erdman is interested in much more than Oswald's story, which he disperses throughout the book and embeds in lengthy discussions of, say, who wrote what articles under what pseudonyms for the *Political Herald and Review*, or of who might be represented by the names on the subscription list to Oswald's *Poems* (1789), only four lines of which he quotes (though they are quite enough, actually), or of what British citizens were in Paris, and doing what, at what times. He is interested in so many things, and pursues them with such tenacity, that the book threatens to dissolve into an anthology of essays on related subjects. If the reader does not bring a strong interest in many of the subjects already, Erdman does not do much to arouse it: we are immediately plunged into the details, the documents, questions about their reliability, and so on; we are taken right into Erdman's history workshop, where we see him wrestling with the complex material. Erdman, I think, becomes the second most interesting character in the book, and most readers will watch with admiration as he chases down fugitive documents, corrects all earlier reports on Oswald, turns up unexpected treasures, and keeps up a continual commentary in the footnotes on the ideological biases of the main historians of the period. Blake (and Coleridge) scholars, knowing what a magisterial and ingenious researcher Erdman can be, will take up the book with high expectations and (in the end) not be disappointed, but it's slow going at times, and a less celebrated scholar might have provoked half his or her readers to jump ship somewhere off the coast of Madagascar.

Not that there is much about Blake or Coleridge to be found here. Blake is invoked half a dozen times in the notes for interesting parallels, but Erdman offers no evidence that he knew Oswald or knew much about him. He does claim one direct influence, and it has to do, in fact, with Madagascar. In one number of the *British Mercury*, which Oswald edited for its two months' existence (1787), he printed English translations of some *Songs of Madagascar*, and these, according to Erdman, "clearly inspired William Blake's pivoting the apocalyptic turning point of *The Four Zoas* on a song 'Composed by an African Black from the little Earth of Sotha': is-

land seen as globe (*FZ* 9:pp. 134–35)" (79 n. 82), but he does not quote any of the songs.

It is the general radical literary London milieu that is important for Blake, of course, and this is thickly described and richly illustrated with the sort of telling anecdote, quotation, or cartoon Erdman has always been wonderful at finding. Many of the quotations are gathered into four "inter-chapters," an honest way of presenting material that didn't fit easily into the main chapters, accommodating though those are. Here we are reminded, for example, of one feature of the Glorious Revolution (whose centennial is commemorated a year before the fall of the Bastille) which looms large in the minds of English Jacobins after 1792: that the English constitution was established as a result of a foreign invasion. The new democratic constitution, some believe, will have to be established in the same way.

Among the thickets of interesting information I found quite a few items relevant to Blake, though some of them only add to what Erdman has written in *Prophet Against Empire* and elsewhere. Some liberals and radicals in London in the late 1780s, for example, held the hope, as a speaker in the Westminster Forum expressed it, of seeing "the thirteen Stripes wave in every English harbour, from a foederal union" with Britain (73). Later the French Jacobins made much of a possible union of France, Britain (after her revolution), and the United States. This spirit of union underlies much of *America*, of course, particularly the evocation of the Atlantean hills, where the Angels meet. Erdman tells us several times of the magic number fourteen, as the right number to have on the board of a radical journal or any committee, *le quatorze juillet* being the sacred day. Could this have anything to do with the "fourteen suns" that journey over Orc's abode? I've never felt satisfied with the usual explanations of these suns. Or how about the thirteen colonies plus Britain in a "foederal union"? Finally, Erdman's brief mention of a mutiny in Scotland in 1779 by troops who refused to be shipped to America reminds us of how the Guardians of Ireland and Scotland and Wales forsake their posts before the onrush of Orc's revolutionary flames.

Coleridge is named only three or four times in the notes, and no evidence is offered that he and Oswald knew each other.

Wordsworth, however, has an interesting part to play in this book. It was partly in order to track down the original of Wordsworth's "Oswald," the Robespierrian villain of *The Borderers*, that Erdman undertook this study, and there are quite a number of interesting though superficial similarities. Erdman certainly makes it seem likely that Wordsworth knew about Oswald and read some of his writing, and may well have known him personally, either in London or in Paris. But, since not very much is known of Wordsworth's precise whereabouts during his times in France from 1790 to 1793, his name keeps popping up in Erdman's footnotes with a question mark after it. He was at least on the fringes of the British Jacobin circle in Paris and Blois, and perhaps closer to the center. On 14 August 1792, after the king was deposed, several Englishmen appeared before the Assembly with a statement of solidarity; it is signed by James Watt, Jr., son of the inventor, and three others, the last of which reads "W. Arnviside" or "William Amvifide," depending on which transcription one consults. This strange name might well be Wordsworth's, disguised so cleverly that only a David Erdman could crack it two centuries later (163 n. 22).

Then there is the possibility that Wordsworth performed a revolutionary errand or two.

> I believe that the study of John Oswald and the investigation of the revolutionary enthusiasm that was in the air and the projects that were in debate during Wordsworth's Paris weeks (plans to take what Wordsworth called "philosophical war" to Dublin or London, or to join some unit of the French army) may help recover the perceptions and intentions of Wordsworth at that time. For example, consider his leaving Annette and unborn Caroline at the end of 1792; and his returning to Paris in October 1793 (if true)—can he have been one of the spies of the British Club sent to London to sound out the insurrectionary potential? But the further development of such inquiries is work for a different study. (289)

That's certainly tantalizing. One hopes Erdman will take up this study after he edits Oswald's collected works.

Though Wordsworth's "Oswald" my have helped inspire the present book, Erdman admits in the end that "these two Oswalds were very different persons." (Wordsworth does not name his character Oswald until 1841; in the original 1797 version he was "Danby," later he was "Rivers.") Erdman's Oswald is much more interesting, and he plays a brave and difficult part in a much more moving and exciting tragedy.