

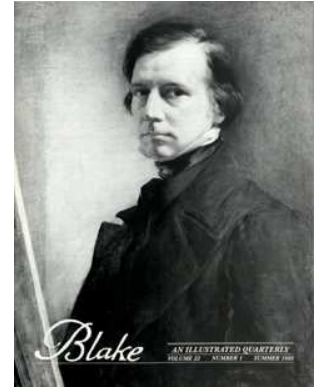
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**BLAKE**

R E V I E W

Bette Charlene Werner, *Blake's Vision of the Poetry of Milton*

Janet Warner

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<sup>7</sup>See both Samuel Hallifax, *Twelve Sermons on the Prophecies* (London, 1776) 7, 227, 261, and Henry Fuseli, "Lecture II," in *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, ed. John Knowles (3 vols.; London, 1831) II: 75.

<sup>8</sup>See both Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, 2nd ed., trans. G. Gregory (Boston, 1815) 293, and James Bicheno, *The Signs of the Times; or the Dark Prophecies of Scripture Illustrated by the Application of Present Important Events* (West Springfield, Mass., 1796) 10.

<sup>9</sup>Emanuel Swedenborg, *A Treatise Concerning the Last Judgment, and the Destruction of Babylon* (London, 1788) 16, 17; see also 19.

<sup>10</sup>Charles Daubuz, *A Perpetual Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (London, 1730) 509-10.

<sup>11</sup>See, e.g., Richard Capel, *Capel's Remains* (London, 1658) 25.

<sup>12</sup>East Apthorp, *Discourses on Prophecy*, 2 vols. (London, 1786) I: 10-11.

<sup>13</sup>Apthorp, 328.

<sup>14</sup>Jacques Derrida, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy," *The Oxford Literary Review* 6 (1984): 7, 23.

<sup>15</sup>Montague Rhodes James, *The Trinity College Apocalypse* (London, 1909) 1.

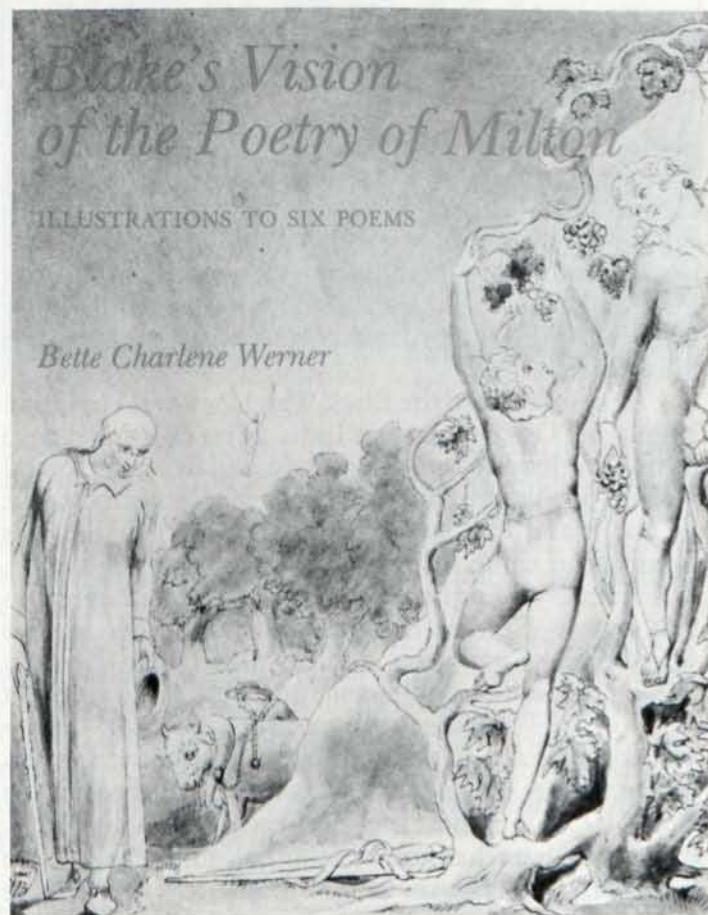
**Bette Charlene Werner.** *Blake's Vision of the Poetry of Milton.* Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1986. 320 pp., illus. \$45.

Reviewed by Janet Warner

Since 1980, Blake's designs for the poetry of Milton have been the subject of books by Stephen Behrendt, Pamela Dunbar, and now Bette Charlene Werner. The most beautifully produced book is Behrendt's, and Dunbar's contains much useful information, but because of its ease of reference, and brief, sensitive interpretations, I find Werner's book quietly impressive.

The structure which informs Werner's study is based on the generally accepted idea that Blake saw his role *vis à vis* Milton as clarifying and purifying the visionary element in the poetry: to redeem the sixfold emanation, in this case the six poems by Milton that Blake chose to illustrate. Werner discusses the six poems in the order of Blake's first treatment of them from 1801 to 1825: *A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle* (Blake's *Comus* designs); *Paradise Lost*; *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*; *L'Allegro*; *Il Penseroso*; and *Paradise Regained*. In cases where Blake produced more than one series of illustrations, such as *Comus*, *Paradise Lost*, and the Nativity Ode, Werner usually discusses the designs in tandem. She asserts that Blake's ideas about Milton were re-thought over the years and it is important to view the distinctions between each complete series. Her overview states that Blake's interpretations tend to become more affirmative in successive treatments of the same poem and also in subsequent series of illustrations. She sees Blake's method as "contending with and discarding any obscuring layer of error and then highlighting the area where he finds the work's essential validity." Werner approaches each series with this consistent point of view.

Although her general interpretations of the Milton designs are not unusual and her style is unfailingly moderate, Werner's consistent approach to each design gives such a close "reading" of visual detail that she often makes perceptive observations. For instance, she contrasts the *Paradise Lost* illustration *Satan as a Toad at the Ear of Eve* with *Milton 38*, noting similarities in the male pose and observing that "taken together, the two illustrations convey visually Blake's understanding of sexuality's dual nature, both its proximity to spirituality and its potential for precipitating a further fall into debased carnality" (74).



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