

# AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Morris Eaves and Michael Fischer, eds.,  
Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism; Arden  
Reed, ed., Romanticism and Language

John E. Grant

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mourning or a funeral" (cf. "Ours is her wedding-garment, ours her shroud!" in "Dejection"). Certainly Newlyn amply balances such omissions with other strengths: her analysis of "The Nightingale" masterfully sets the poem in its immediately allusive context (which includes "Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew Tree," "The Ruined Cottage," "Frost at Midnight," "A Night Piece," and many other occasions), and her attention to Marvell's "On a Drop of Dew" significantly enriches our appreciation of Wordsworth's "To H. C." (146-47). There's much scholarly insight here—but also a certain unevenness of vision.

Newlyn's analysis of Coleridge's "Letter to Sara Hutchinson," the early version of "Dejection: An Ode," can serve as a paradigm of this book's strengths and weaknesses. Her reading and contextualizing of the poem's "densely allusive idiom" (61) is informed and often very shrewd. Her observation that repeatedly "Coleridge associates the word 'swimming' with usurpation: the subjugation of normal sense perceptions to the power of 'Joy'" (64), her recognition that behind "the blending of 'Tintern Abbey' and 'Frost at Midnight' in the background of Coleridge's prayer" for Sara lies a still deeper affinity with Spenser's "Epithalamion" (75-76), her suggestion that the gothic excesses of the storm passage are "pervaded . . . by self-echo" (especially to "France: An Ode") and thereby evince a self-conscious humor and "parodic control" (72), her analysis of the complex ironies informing Coleridge's double allusion ("My genial Spirits fail") to "Tintern Abbey" and *Samson Agonistes* (68-69)—these varied insights typify her critical virtues. At the same time, however, she seems to miss not only a few odd trees, but even much of the forest. While perhaps the allusion to Horace and Aesop in "be this Tempest but a Mountain Birth" (*Parturient montes* . . .) is merely incidental, the preceding apostrophe to the wind as "Thou mighty Poet" carries us allusively to a central document in the Wordsworth-Coleridge dialogue ("mighty poets in their misery dead" ["Resolution and Independence"]), and ought to be addressed. If the opening atmosphere of the evening vaguely recalls that of "The Nightingale" (66), surely the very crux of the verse-letter directly engages that earlier conversation poem, responding to the faith that "In nature there is nothing melancholy" with the harsh rejoinder that in nature there is nothing joyful, either. And why, finally, when that "mighty Poet," the wind, modulates its song from gothic frenzy to tender lyric (the "Lucy Gray" allusion) should it also be shifting from a second-rate (deliberately so, Newlyn argues) Coleridgean voice to a first-rate Wordsworthian one? Despite her sense that "Coleridge's anxiety about Wordsworth pervades everything" in this poem (78), Newlyn has remarkably little to say about this, the

poem's most insistent allusion to Wordsworth's poetry. But surely this passage extends the characteristic vicariousness of Coleridge's affirmations to new levels. "We receive but what we give"; is it now only Wordsworth's imagination, then, that Coleridge can give and receive without regret? These lapses, too, are characteristic of *Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Language of Allusion*.

Morris Eaves and Michael Fischer, eds.  
*Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*.  
Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986. 246  
pp. \$29.96 cloth/paper \$8.95.

Arden Reed, ed. *Romanticism and Language*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press,  
1984. \$38.50 cloth/paper \$12.95.

Reviewed by John E. Grant

These two collections of essays often show how the deconstructionist movement in criticism, with its program of dissipating poetry into "language," effects a rollback of revolutionary romanticism. Despite the revolutionary ambitions of individual theoreticians, the movement they have generated, like many other successful sociological or ideological movements, produces effects opposite from those intended. In overturning "the authority of the text," the deconstructive machine has given us the monopoly of the indefinite. Since some of the ideas held up in these volumes as being particularly illuminating derive from errors of earlier critics, it is evident that would-be devils are only angels of the most recent heaven. Critics of the "language" school wander into crucial misconstruals, intermingled with valuable new perceptions, because they are preoccupied with *words* rather than poems, and thus have no structure of reference for distinguishing among endlessly proliferating meanings.

Moreover, any sense of the work conveyed by the text, if ascertainable at all, is assumed to be less important than what it may signify for a modern reader who usually has some point of view very different from that of the author. Maureen Quilligan has accounted for this mind-set as follows:

In Marxist theory, as well as in all strong modern theories of interpretation, the assumption necessarily is that the text does not, at the surface level, want said what the critic finds in it to say. The critic, by his or her interpretation, brings to light what was repressed from the text's surface.<sup>1</sup>



# Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism

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# ROMANTICISM & LANGUAGE



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In an interesting elaboration of this point, Edward Pechter finds the motive for this critical strategy in the will to power.<sup>2</sup> It has often been remarked that Humpty Dumpty expressed this mentality in his credo: "the question is . . . which is to be master—that's all."

But even readers not so zealous to keep ahead of the text have been indoctrinated to expect that the surface meaning is superficial or more or less duplicitous, not to be believed, and in any case not something the author understood well enough to bind the modern reader to the ancient author's delights or despairs. What seems to count is whatever can be attributed to the psychological or (more currently) the political unconsciousness of the author. It is a dimension of significance of which the author was necessarily unaware. Even the unaggressive reader will become preoccupied with something the author failed to say. Proponents of "weak" theories are hardly less affected by such assumptions than proponents of "strong" theories. Many good citizens in the teaching profession now feel that they are morally obligated to expound what the text does not say. If all or even most texts are indeterminate, and if all students de-

serve warm encouragement in their interpretations, then randomness in one's own exposition, together with a receptivity to any forceful comment (except that of the poet), is the mark of having the right attitude of openness. Believers in either "strong" theories or "weak" theories can thus hardly concede any interest to "strong" poems that exhibit determinate form as an essential part of their mode of existence. While some aspects of a strong poem may be held up for display purposes, the things that are said about such poems often grow out of some frame of reference having little to do with that in which the poem was written. On the other hand, libertarians among post-structuralists object that any specifically acknowledged "frame of reference" is arbitrary if not authoritarian. They do not consider that, as in the display of pictures, a frame may serve to feature and focus, not constrict.

Out of the fifteen essays in the two volumes, the only piece primarily concerned with Blake's work occurs in *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*: "Visible Language: Blake's Wond'rous Art of Writing," an attempt of the brilliant and resourceful W. J. T. Mitchell



to correlate Blake and Derrida. Although Mitchell suggests that "one could think of this as an essay written about and 'for' Blake and 'against' Derrida (48), the reader is often presented with an uncriticized Derridean kind of mischief that goes dead against what Blake was aiming to say or show, as will be pointed out later in this review.

The essays in Arden Reed's collection, *Romanticism and Language*, attempt deconstructive applications of the generalities of the title to well-known romantic poems. But because such generalities offer amorphous vantage points, most of these essays are peppered with random observations or reflections indicating that the authors have little conception of or interest in poems as poems. They tend to read words of poems in ways that slip in and out of focus because they have no consistent awareness of the identity the words take on as parts of particular poems. These authors defer repeatedly to de Man, one of whose ponderous pronouncements about the indeterminability of "language" is used as one of two epigraphs for the volume. The other epigraph, from the opening of Frye's energetic 1963 English Institute essay, on the vanity of romanticizing, expresses a preference for "actual literary experience," such as can seldom motivate critics, however gifted, who have joined the entourage of de Man. They operate under the presupposition that a poem is a formless construct, a notion that had considerable currency long before deconstruction was named. As Olson and later Hirsch pointed out, on the first page of *Seven Types of Ambiguity* Empson identifies his concern as being the ambiguities in "a piece of language." Empson made free to remark on anything that interested him, but such maneuverings within the ill-delineated area of "language" cannot be revealing about actual poems unless a critic possesses a rare Empsonian ingenuity and resilience that makes him or her entertaining even when wrong. Critics with more limited resources are unable to recoup the losses sure to be experienced when cavorting somewhere between "the great dictionary," tenuous etymologies, and great poems. Lest it be supposed that Empson's way with "language" has no bearing on deconstructionism, it should be noticed that J. Hillis Miller, in *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*, declares Empson to be at least one of the "great uncles" of the movement.

Though not all the essays in *Romanticism and Language* are opaque, anyone who sits down to read several of them through will experience the same response Rosemary Ashton reported in *TLS*, 5 July 1985: "I felt distinctly dizzy as I temporarily inhabited the Babel which this collection of essays seems to celebrate." Part of the cause of this vertigo may be that even those contributors who can write well often lack a sense of the varied occasions that prompted words which, in themselves, have

similar purport. The first essay, Susan Wolfson's "The Language of Interpretation in Romantic Poetry: 'A Strong Working of the Mind,'" for instance, fails to distinguish the boundaries of particular poems. Wolfson gets off the mark by eliding a passage in Blake's letter to Trusler on "what is not too Explicit" with Keats's words about "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts," (22) as though Keats had sought to advocate such troubles. Later, as part of a nine-page discussion of the gloss of the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, she quotes from Mellor's *English Romantic Irony* a comment on the fact that the gloss (when added) "'is printed in the outside margin and would thus normally be read before the text of left-hand pages, after the text of right-hand pages,' yielding 'a visual emblem' of Coleridge's ambivalence." Such factors are alleged by Wolfson to present "an explicit figure for the ultimate uncertainty of interpretation" (31). Each layer of these comments contains nothing more significant than the mystification of a convention—as if one were to argue that we are given access to the Spanish soul because the question marks are upside down. Thus students who don't understand eighteenth-century conventions of capitalization are led to discover Jesus and Mary in the "Youth" and "Virgin" in Blake's "Ah! Sun-Flower." So far as Coleridge's "ambivalence" is concerned, the text-and-gloss simply constitutes a talking point for what is abundantly obvious on other grounds, rather than being an unconscious betrayal of Coleridge's divided consciousness.

Wolfson also fails to recognize the closure of Coleridge's poem, stating that the "poem leaves open to question whether the newly haunted listener might himself become a haunted purveyor of the Rime's repetitive life . . ." (30), and designating the poem, from the point of view of Coleridge as author, an intolerably "inconclusive tale" (31). But in Coleridge's favorite play, *Hamlet*, when Horatio is exhorted by the dying prince to tell his tale through this harsh world, no one worries overmuch about whether he did as he was bid. Even if some sequel were punctuated with retellings of the tragedy of *Hamlet*, and that of the *Ancient Mariner* too, the tale would not be Shakespeare's or Coleridge's complete but open-ended stories, but the reader's, or Tom Stoppard's. Both *Hamlet* and the *Rime* have a form, which means that they are not interminable, nor did Coleridge fail to give the reader a sufficient conclusion when the Wedding Guest arises "a sadder and a wiser man."

*Romanticism and Language* contains another extended essay on "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," a reprinted piece by the editor, Arden Reed. Reed makes a wide sweep through Coleridge's use of the word "rime," usually in the sense of frost, and manages to relate most occurrences to the primary sense of "Rime."



But Reed's credibility is much diminished by his insistence that the Ancient Mariner sees himself among, and blesses himself along with, the water snakes (190). Reed's concluding declaration that the *Rime* counters "the current of Romantic literature" to "privilege speech," thereby somehow "Subvert[ing] the ideology of the very movement it is always taken to exemplify—which may be what makes it a genuine Romantic poem" also depends on Derridean prestigitation to say everything and nothing at the same time. Such a maneuver seems particularly unfortunate since Reed can be very acute. He has a rare ability to see through ingrained interpretive errors, such as the assertions of Warren, Beer, Chayes, and others that the crew condemned the shooting of the albatross at a time when the ship was becalmed, although Coleridge plainly states that "the good south wind still blew behind."

Six of the other essays in *Romanticism and Language*, those on Wordsworth or Coleridge by Chase, Bahti, Parker, and Christensen, on Shelley by Ferguson, and on romantic prose by Jacobus, all become entangled in their own exposition. Despite the subtle critical intelligence that Ferguson brings to bear on "Mont Blanc," she utterly mistakes the tone: "although *Mont Blanc* is a sublime poem upon a sublime subject, it projects an air of sociability" (208). And she is bound down by the implications of an inapposite and mistaken allusion: "just as Milton's Eve was once 'stupidly good,' so matter is, in Shelley's account, 'stupidly powerful,' and powerful more because of its stupidity than in spite of it" (211–12). But it is Satan in prospect of Eve, of course, who is "stupidly good" (*Paradise Lost* 9.465)—imagined so because he had previously been so resourceful. This phrase has no bearing on Mont Blanc, whose powerful and abiding identity is unchanging. From a human point of view—Shelley's—the wonder inspired by the mountain has nothing to do with its having any quasi-human capacity to be either clever or stupid. Ferguson certainly knows this, but she became ensnared in the web of language and thus fell into comments that have no validity.

The last two pieces in *Romanticism and Language* are more successful: Brisman on "Swinburne and the Language of Shelleyan Love" and Macksey on Keats's "To Autumn." Brisman adroitly expounds a passage of Swinburnean lesbian sadism, and Macksey, despite some local errors, keeps Keats's poem clearly in view. Unlike most recent commentators, Macksey does not maintain that the foreshadowing of winter and death at the end of the poem is the main point. Under the influence of de Man, Macksey does wander from the spirit of Keats in representing the poet as a self-declared "child," quoting the letter of 14–31 October 1818: "I give in to their feelings as though I were refraining from irritating a little child" (275). It is disappointing to have

to point out that Keats is representing his friends, not himself, as an irritable child.

Most of the essays in *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism* were delivered as papers in 1984–85, at the last moment in American literary studies when an acknowledgement of the New Historicism could have been avoided. One essay, J. Hillis Miller's "On Edge: The Crossways of Contemporary Criticism," which first appeared in 1979, contains a classic deconstructive exposition of "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" and is reissued in this volume because it provoked M. H. Abrams's "Construing and Deconstructing," which contains a fuller discussion of the poem and a critique of the premises of Miller's procedures. In response, Miller offers "Postscript: 1984," in which he holds out for his 1979 interpretation, with perhaps slight modifications, against many pages of reasoned critique by Abrams; then, on the basis of a deconstructive maneuver, he declares either that he has triumphed or that he is sure to, at least among judicious readers. There is no hint of the shift expressed in his 1986 MLA presidential address, entitled "The Triumph of Theory, the Resistance to Reading, and the Question of the Material Base,"<sup>3</sup> in which he attempted to persuade the audience that Derrida and de Man have always been Marxist at heart, while at the same time constructing an invisible bridge that can carry him over to the latest concern. One of the best features of the volume is its preservation of the lively question-and-answer sessions following the presentations by Miller, Abrams, and the other symposiasts, Frye, Mitchell, and Cavell. In them the essayists—challenged by an acute and well-informed audience—refined their positions and often achieved greater clarity than in the papers themselves.

Although Mitchell does not claim to have done historicist work in his essay, a paper that exhibits a style of thinking common in advanced writing of the 1980s, he takes in some historicist considerations in discussing Blake's relation to printing. And in the discussion session, he alludes to Burke, Said, and Williams, concluding with a paragraph in which he appears to say that he may soon go into serious Marxism, while, however, continuing in the playful Derridean manner.

Mitchell's main interests are apparent in his extensive discussion of Blake's scene of writing, in connection with an interpretation of the tailpiece design for the "Proverbs of Hell" (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 10). Here the Devil acts as an interpreter for a writer while another person who holds a poised writing implement looks over toward the other two figures. In his professedly Derridean manner, but with no sign of ironic reservation, Mitchell argues that what we should see in this design is a new kind of imposition in which witless scribes (the one at left being less alert than the



one at right) are accepting the Devil's dubious dictation of infernal graffiti, which are either stale in themselves, because they are unoriginal and ubiquitous down there, or are rendered ineffectual by the Devil's commentary. In a more involuted argument Mitchell further declares that the figures in Blake's picture are blasphemously derived from the Prophets, Sybils, and Nudes ("angels") in Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling—as expounded by the late Edgar Wind. This Michelangelesque standard is supposed to show Blake's viewer that an unreliable encounter with texts is going on. In the end, according to Mitchell, the infernal way of reading and transmitting texts delivers nothing that is really better than the orthodox way. Ironically, though unobserved by Mitchell, such a view turns out to be quite compatible with major pre-deconstructionist interpretations of Erdman and Keynes: that some things in the picture are indeed supposed to be wrong, and that they reflect discredit on the foregoing "Proverbs of Hell." Evidently this history "has been adopted by both parties." But Blake for one does not agree.

*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is the first work of English literature written consciously and deliberately from the point of view of the Devil's Party. It is a satire, not merely a polemic, and thus contains features that complicate or qualify its words and pictures. But this illuminated book contains no invitation to the reader to adopt an adversarial point of view, angelic or other (if that is possible), toward the scenes, sayings, or stories in it. Blake undoubtedly expected that readers would initially resist the infernal point of view, but he indicates that angelic temperaments, be they as involuted as Swedenborg's, can only invent mountains, never remove them. A heaven, so long as it is new, is built on "what was stolen from the abyss": energy. The imposture that makes a heaven old is a priestly, angelic fabrication, not the Devil's doing—as the Devil is envisioned by the narrator of the *Marriage*. Plate 3 announces that "the Eternal Hell revives." Any reader who immediately thereafter seeks for signs that hell is expiring even before things get heated up must be of the Angels' party without knowing it.

The crucial considerations in plate 10 are these: Since the design comes immediately after the Proverbs, the scribe at the viewer's left must represent the narrator who collected the Proverbs, and the figure at the viewer's right must represent the illustrator. The scroll that must contain the Proverbs of Hell appears to issue (in almost all copies) from under the robe of the narrator-scribe and then to receive appropriate reinforcement from the revolutionary Devil, who has descended from his seat of authority in his eager commitment to point out a text, such as the penultimate proverb: "Truth can never be told so as to be understood and not be believ'd." Skep-

tics who find solace in Blake's doctrine of contraries, which can be enlisted to support the rational premise that any extreme formulation should be counterbalanced by some moderate alternative, would have to search hard to discover a Proverb of Heaven to counteract that piece of infernal wisdom.

The figure at the viewer's right, probably female, shows by her familiar cross-legged position, with drawing sheet spread across her lap, that she must be an artist rather than another scribe. She eagerly awaits the space on the scroll after the end of the proverbs where the tailpiece to the Proverbs of Hell should appear, at the conclusion of the second main section of the *Marriage*. Indeed, the picture we see on the page of the codex book before us is the design she will have created. This figure can hardly be construed (despite the arguments of Erdman, Keynes, and Mitchell) as a second "scribe," one who is quicker than her dull-witted counterpart on the left, for then she would have no function except as a producer of extra copy. The seventy Proverbs of Hell, as a text, are completed and concluded with "Enough! or Too much," a final flourish that calls for no revisions or afterthoughts, especially those of the sort produced by "mechanical talents" so heavily ridiculed by the narrator on plate 22. But the addition of a pictorial tailpiece is an appropriate conclusion for the words of revolutionary art, involving no pointless supererogation.

The pictorial contrary of the design on plate 10 of the *Marriage* is the title page of *The Book of Urizen*, which is also discussed by Mitchell, though not in relationship to the *Marriage*. The title page of *Urizen*, like plate 10 of *Marriage*, depicts a scribe and both writing and artistic implements—but all misused. This scene of priestly imposition and obfuscation deserves all the opprobrium it has received from commentators, not least because Urizen tries to practice all the arts himself, and bungles them. They are beyond his powers because he also aspires to statecraft and moral authority and lacks the energy of imagination. Although Blake himself did have the necessary energy to excel in both verbal and visual arts, he chose in the *Marriage*, plate 10, to represent the liberty of creation and interpretation as a collective achievement, dependent upon the energetic guidance of the only infernal being actually depicted in the major pictures of the *Marriage*.

As part of his general exposition of the concept of "visible language," with particular reference to Blake's position in the eighteenth-century debate between the conservative-oral tradition of Burke and the democratic-textual innovations of Paine, Mitchell discusses images of writing in two familiar works by Blake. First he maintains that an alleged "sinister" nuance in the "Introduction" to *Innocence* is a commonplace; then he argues, possibly whimsically, that Urizen is supposed to be an ideologue of the left rather than the right.



Mitchell declares that "Blake's encomia on writing are frequently 'stained' by irony," (55) but, while admitting the obvious celebratory view of writing in "Introduction" to *Innocence*, he judges that "no critical reader of this poem . . . has been able to avoid the ironic undertones." The moment of writing is also the moment when the inspired child vanishes:

the hollow reed and the stained water suggest that a kind of emptiness, darkness and loss of innocence accompanies the very attempt to spread the message of innocence. What makes this a song of *innocence*, then, is the speaker's unawareness of these sinister connotations. Indeed, we might say that the most literal version of this innocence is the speaker's blithe assumption that the mere act of writing is equivalent to publication and a universally appreciative readership, a bit of wish-fulfillment that every writer will recognize. The piper . . . is unaware of both the problems and the possibilities of print culture. . . . (55-56)

In fact, despite Mitchell's pronouncement about the "ironic undertones" and "sinister connotations" of staining the water that must occur to any "critical reader," very few who have written well on Blake have thought to express such misgivings. Those hinted at by Gleckner and Hirsch, and expounded by one or two others, were disposed of by Adams in 1963 and Holloway in 1968. Such suspicions were revived by Edward Said in 1975, who proposed the curious argument that the piper is so inept as to try to use the water as paper.<sup>4</sup> This unfortunate misconstrual was eventually identified and neutralized by Lawrence Lipking.<sup>5</sup> The only "critical reader" who seems to have reached conclusions about "stain'd" similar to those of Mitchell and who has gone unanswered is Heather Glen in 1983.<sup>6</sup> Her brand of politicized iron-izing may well have seemed plausible to Mitchell, though he does not mention her work.

So far as Mitchell's own attempts to identify something "sinister" in "Introduction" to *Innocence* are concerned, the source of his difficulties appear to be with the word "stain'd." Why the senses of this word sometimes connected elsewhere by Blake with "sin" should distract the reader of this poem would be hard to explain except on the basis of loose deconstructionist "language" theories. As Adams pointed out, Blake's use of "stained" in the first line of his "To Autumn" ought to be enough to vindicate it; Keats's use of the word in the second stanza of "Ode to a Nightingale" offers further reassurance for those not determined to be bloody-minded. As most commentators remind us, "stained" refers to the making of ink and perhaps to watercolors. Had the verse permitted, Blake might have written "tinted" or "colour'd" without appreciable change in meaning.

What, then, shall the "sinister" residue alleged in "stain'd" be called? A smidgen? A trace? For the reader of Blake's poem it is insignificant: nothing worth theorizing about.

Mitchell's criticism has often been animated by a streak of antitheticalism and a Derridean alacrity in discovering some deep counter-signification that underlies or subverts the ostensible sense of a picture or poem. Not entirely unexpected then is his project in this essay to show how often Blake and Derrida are compatible. Despite my misgivings about this project, suspecting that Blake is at most as compatible with Derrida as he is with Voltaire and Rousseau, I attempted to suspend disbelief because I believe that Mitchell is a learned Blakean and has a powerful imagination. But the argument Mitchell puts up about the *Book of Urizen* (56-59), including a full-page reproduction of Morgan Copy B of the title page, is demonstrably wrong.

The old bearded often-blind scribe squatting among books on the title page of *Urizen* is conjectured by Mitchell to represent either "a self-portrait of the artist as a solitary reader" (58) or "a utopian revolutionary reformer" (59) like Rousseau or Condorcet. Since *Urizen* is shown deploying implements of artistic production, one might say that *Urizen* prompts the reader to think of Blake the artist, who unquestionably "printed" the illuminated book. If Blake were known to have affected a Whitmanian beard when he lived in Lambeth, one might think there could be more to the notion. The best evidence that Mitchell can offer for his thesis that *Urizen* is "a utopian revolutionary reformer," is to argue that Blake had a distaste for rationalism of any stripe, left or right, and that the notorious rationalists of the time were on the left. This, together with his activities as a mover and shaker is supposed to identify *Urizen* as a revolutionist! Mitchell does concede that "*Urizen* is no doubt sometimes employed as a figure of English reaction in the late 1790s" (58).

It is not easy to see how this solecism in defense of a paradoxical argument could have gone uncorrected, but a review of the facts will, of course, remind us that *Urizen* was not employed on *any* newly published projects "in the late 1790s" and his *entire* career prior to the appearance of *The First Book of Urizen* in 1794 was as "a figure of English reaction": *Urizen* was first named in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and was again named and first appeared in *America*, both dated 1793, and in those works unmistakably functions as the patron of reaction.

Such considerations would suggest that Mitchell simply made several careless mistakes though it is always conceivable that a critic in a Derridean manner assumed by Mitchell might still attempt to salvage some new adventures for *Urizen* in "the late 1790s." There is, to be sure, the manuscript of *Vala*, on which Blake may have been working, and even "Death" in the designs for Young's *Night Thoughts*, who looks like *Urizen*—though he is never called "*Urizen*" and is not consistent-



ly political on one side of the question or the other. The last expedient for discovering Urizen in "the late 1790s" (apart, that is, from cumming's "mr u") would be to appeal to *A Small Book of Designs*, a copy of which contained a color print of the title page of *Urizen* redated "1796" (Butlin Cat 261.1). Perhaps Blake's inscription, added to this print, can stand as the last word on the matter: "Which is the Way / The Right or the Left."

The interaction between J. Hillis Miller and M. H. Abrams during their rematch anent Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" is probably the most interesting feature in *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism* even though these old antagonists did not actually confront one another in Albuquerque. A 1979 essay by Miller, "On Edge: The Crossways of Contemporary Criticism" evidently led Abrams to respond with an essay entitled "Construing and Deconstructing." Of Miller's original fifteen pages, well over half are primarily addressed to perceived problems in and about Wordsworth's eight-line poem. In Abrams's response some fifteen pages are focused on the poem and what Miller made of it. In "Postscript: 1984" Miller responds unrepentantly in seven pages to Abrams's critique and Abrams added a few pages to his previous comments in his question and answer session. Anyone who had imagined that most of the issues concerning "A Slumber" must have been at least sighted by Bateson and Brooks in their venerable disagreement about the poem, which was so notably reported by Hirsch, is likely to be amazed that Miller and Abrams found so much more to say. Yet once one gets thinking about it, various other reflections arise that none of these champions chose to discuss. I doubt whether, however prompted, anyone else would ever have come up with the hypothetical dilemma proposed by Knapp and Michaels in their well-known 1982 piece entitled "Against Theory": the problem of interpreting the poem if it had somehow been written by waves on the seashore.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile Miller had gone farther out and got in deeper.

What Miller presents is an exercise in unbounded association round about the language used in Wordsworth's poem. Like most readers, Miller mentions "Lucy" (though of course she is not named in this poem) but unlike any previous reader, he particularly associates the dead person with Wordsworth's parents—not only his mother, who died in 1778, but also his father, who died in 1783—as well as with more familiar figures such as Dorothy (106). Soon this biographical association leads Miller into such assertions as:

"The speaker of the poem rather than being the opposite of Lucy, male to her female, adult knowledge to her prepubertal innocence, is the displaced representative of both the penetrated and the penetrator, of both Lucy herself and of her unravishing ravisher, nature or death. The speaker was 'sealed,' as she was. Now he knows. . . . Lucy is both the virgin child and the missing mother, that mother

earth that gave birth to the speaker and has abandoned him. . . . The poet himself somehow caused Lucy's death by thinking about it. Thinking recapitulates in reverse mirror image the action of the earthly years in touching, penetrating, possessing, killing, encompassing, turning the other into oneself and therefore being left only with a corpse, an empty sign. . . ." (108)

Miller goes on to archetypal analogies (not described as such, of course): the parents are the sun and moon as somehow (with the aid of a phrase from Stevens) implied in the name "Lucy," that is, "light" (109). There is even anagogy: Lucy is the Logos. Presumably the only reason for excluding the Lucys of Dante and Donne is that their colorations were not markedly Freudian.

Abrams offers a summary, but doesn't attempt to reason with the author. Earlier Miller had gone into the metaphysics of the word "thing", not (of course) as an English word, but as a topic to be elucidated by references to Heidegger and Plato (104–5). Abrams did remind us that the girl in the English folksong "Charming Billy" is also repeatedly referred to as "a young thing" and indicates that this might bring us closer to the poem as written (152–53). It is true that the word "thing," especially as applied to women or children, has a rich presence in nineteenth century writing; I have recently noted cases in Blake, Austen, Keats, Dickens, Eliot, and Gilbert, any of which might seem more interesting in relation to Wordsworth than Heidegger's usage. Perhaps we could get a more useful grip on "thing" by noticing how Coleridge used it—of himself—in "Work Without Hope."

But as Abrams points out, Miller and his school take as their purview "the Western tradition generally" and thus "cut themselves free from the limitations of construing the poem as a specific lyric *parole*." (153) Thus, though you can find places where Miller seems to have paid attention to such basic structural features of the poem as the relation between before and after in the two stanzas, in the long run he doesn't care at all for them. He proposes as a paradox that a poem may not have "organic form at all"; but he means that if he discusses a poem at any length it will be to show that it doesn't. Thus he can probably in good conscience declare that those parts of his discourse which Abrams could commend as making some sense as the observations of a good reader were ironically intended, modest proposals—something, indeed, like the bone of sense T. S. Eliot's poetical burglar throws to the watchdog. I think this is a sincere rather than honest account of what prompted Miller's 1979 expatiation round Wordsworth's poem, for his notions of a wirey bounding line are so indefinite that he could not rule out any comments, even commonsensical or plausible ones.

Such a strategy of excess overwhelms any poem, particularly a little one, that has a distinct formal structure but the consolation is that one may, unlike "the



fond maniac" in *The Prelude*, regard such a work as a shell that will not be damaged by the deluge, however formidable and glittering it appears. The poem will eventually surface again, insufficiently elucidated, after the flood of "language" has receded. At that point readers will again see the point that Wordsworth's long-dead parents could have left no ascertainable mark on "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" even if William Wordsworth never got over his bereavement—conjuncturally, that is, since there is no evidence to support this theory or that it was ever mixed up in the Lucy complex.

At times Miller hints at underlying scenarios according to which the male speaker in "A Slumber" is expressing or betraying sexist attitudes toward the dead woman in the poem. Those interested in the poem as a determinant form must object that nothing in the words of the poem requires that the speaker be male; the poem could as well be articulated by a woman who had, recently, been bereft of another woman. It is necessary to maintain the specification *recently*, however, because, though some people have been known to have mourned longer than Queen Victoria, the word "now" in the poem insists that the special facts or qualities in question, whatever they may be, have finally (and recently) sunk into the consciousness of the bereft speaker.

Though I would maintain that Miller's persistent appellation of Wordsworth's poem as a "piece of language" and even as a linguistic "emergency" (e.g., 116) to justify his desperate critical measures is more likely to lose the patient-poem than to save it, there are peculiar verbal factors within Wordsworth's eight lines that may not have been encompassed either by his maneuvers or by Abrams's (see 115). It is indeed odd that Wordsworth should write of the slumber of a spirit, which is moreover, sealed. For Miller this is just an obvious case of the ultimate incomprehensibility of all poetry; for Abrams a special case quite different from most poetry. Interestingly, however, Miller paid no attention to the proposal as regards "spirit," which Abrams reports from Hugh Sykes Davies, to the effect that "'she' in the third line refers back to 'spirit' in the first" (145), thus producing a poem "about a trance-state of the speaker's own spirit." This line of inference, which was first proposed in print (I believe) by Robin Skelton a decade before Davies's better-reasoned discussion, is adjudged by Abrams as "not impossible, but extremely unlikely." It is, however, quite different in kind from Miller's expatiations in a verbal universe and probably more worthy of critical regard. In a way Davies was even more concerned with poetic integrity than Abrams or any expounder of "organic form," which Miller so deeply distrusts. One unconsidered reason that the Skelton-Davies theory that "she" is "my spirit" has considerable plausibility is that it makes most sense when "A Slumber" is read apart

from the (other) "Lucy" poems, as it often is represented in selections of just a few of Wordsworth's poems—and as it was in all the poetry collections published in Wordsworth's own lifetime. Thus it is that good students, who have heard nothing of the Skelton-Davies theory (why should they?) will sometimes spontaneously discover the spirit-she correlation that the poem itself certainly permits.

The critical performance of Stanley Cavell entitled "In Quest of the Ordinary: Texts of Recovery" is stylistically the most peculiar in either volume. It seems as though Cavell's aim as a thinker is to carry on past Kant and provide a critique of skepticism:

"My thought is that if, as I take it, skepticism is a place, perhaps the central secular intellectual place, in which the drive to deny the conditions of human existence is enacted; then so long as that *denial* of the human is essential to what we think of *as* the human, skepticism cannot, or what I call the threat of skepticism must not, be denied. You might even take it as the mission of philosophy now to preserve rather than to turn aside the scandal of skepticism—as if this preservation is our access to the memory that we are, or meant to be, human, to live with stumbling." (184)

So Cavell stumbles on and on, mixing up all the pronouns so ineptly that it is almost impossible to tell who is supposed to think what. That the author of such hedging prose should have been responsible for no less than eight books, and that these have attracted a following, is astonishing. Yet if the reader perseveres to the end of Cavell's piece he or she may be reassured that Cavell's heart is in the right place: he is on the side of the romantics, especially the American romantics, and against those skeptics. But having been subjected to such an ordeal of language without style I am brought to the verge of saying, "Damn his romantics!" and of drawing my Hume.

Eventually Cavell devotes ten pages to talk about "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (193–203) but, though here the style is not quite so bad, anyone would rather read Wolfson or Reed in spite of what I "take to be" their errors. A mark of Cavell's rhetorical disorientation is that he keeps talking about "the line" in Coleridge's poem as though it referred to a "line" that Kant either discusses or implies. Unless you happen to pick up a casual reference on page 199 or to read another of Cavell's discussions of the poem elsewhere (not specifically identified in the footnotes), you cannot be sure that he knew that "the line" in Coleridge's poem means the equator. The fact that "the line" was in place in the 1798 version of the poem, before Coleridge knew anything of Kant, ought to have been sufficient to have aborted Cavell's thesis. But Cavell is irrepressible. He does not even have recourse to deconstructive whimsicality in arguing that the mariner shot the albatross because he wanted to get to know the bird better.



What a surprise, then, to hear Cavell perform spontaneously through fourteen pages of question and answer! Suddenly he drops the hedging manner (which is suited only for obfuscation) and speaks quite simply and forthrightly about his purposes in combatting skepticism. The sincerity of his final statement is even quite moving, but there remains the pathos in the demonstrated fact that he will not write in a way that would encourage anyone to give up a debilitating skepticism. The two voices of Stanley Cavell are the opposite of the two that J. K. Stephen detected in Wordsworth's language: neither comes close to sublimity, but the personal one is engaging.

Finally, the contribution of Northrop Frye. When I first read *Fearful Symmetry* in 1949 on the advice of the late Richard Ellmann I had the immediate sense that great criticism was being written in my time. As with *Lord Weary's Castle* (of the same vintage) Frye seemed certain to prove as readable as Arnold and as interesting as Coleridge a century hence. Not everyone saw Frye that way: often those who felt themselves equal to Ransom or Blackmur or Burke were unable to cope with "The Burden of the Valley of Vision." It wasn't for almost a decade thereafter that it became obligatory to understand Frye. Then, after another decade opinion-makers began to declare that Frye was a Christian, and no better than Arnold, and therefore outmoded, though due some respect as an elder statesman. Under questioning, Miller confessed in 1984 that Frye seemed to him some kind of Jungian, for whom "archetypes tend to be thought of as preceding or exceeding any of their embodiments" (123). Or a structural anthropologist who, after gathering a hundred different examples of myth, tries to discern "some original myth of which they are all representative." He declares that this is an "anaclastic illusion" to which Frye "sometimes seems to yield."

Though Frye has often denied that he is in any way a Jungian and imagines instead that all myths are culturally transmitted, Miller's impression that Frye believes in ur-myths is hardly without foundation. In "The Survival of Eros in Poetry" Frye begins with what must be his hundredth retelling of the four main levels of the mental cosmos. Frye would maintain that he had to do so because there were certain to be students and others in the audience who were not conscious of ever having heard of such an organizing scheme. Just as a person cannot get oriented in the physical world without reference to the points of the compass, so a reader cannot find bearings in the literary universe without reference to an hierarchal scheme that starts with the gods at the top. This breeds uneasiness for advanced critical thinkers who believe that literary studies would be better off if they were immediately divested of all the illusions of Coleridge and the compromises of Arnold. The aura of Christianity that still surrounds the figure of Frye, together with his

sometime lack of responsiveness to gender distinctions, have had much to do with his rapid descent from critical eminence during the last generation.

Certainly Frye is not going to ride back into office with the next movement currently assuming power in criticism. New Historicists have decided that Frye has no interest in historical criticism and will thus continue to overlook the fact that the first chapter in *Anatomy of Criticism* is entitled "Historical Criticism," and that it is, at bottom, hardly more schematic than the Marxism of the New Historicism. But Frye's kind of historicism deals with literature as an imaginative product, while that of the New Historicist deals with literature as a class product. Thus when Frye, in "The Survival of Eros in Poetry," writes as follows, he in effect admits that he has not taken out any insurance in his own popularity for the next decade: "Society is much less willing to grant literature or the other arts any degree of inner authority . . . Certain Marxist regimes, such as Stalinist Russia with its 'social realism' and the so-called Gang-of-Four group in China, deny such authority as a matter of dogma. . . ." (24)

The mark that this is no better than newspaper historicizing is not the general point, or even the clichéd, if true, identification of the adversary, but the solecism "social realism." The Stalinist standard was, of course, *socialist* realism, a very different matter of projecting the correct role models and working to show devotion to the state. It is hard not to feel that this elementary mistake occurred in the writing of this brilliant critic because of what he does, from time to time, acknowledge as comparative dissympathy with "realism" of any stripe. In the pleasantly vigorous give and take of the long question and answer period at Albuquerque Frye acquitted himself better and more genially than he has often done in the past. Anyone who has the impression that Frye is only interested in classifying, pigeonholing, and categorizing literature will be surprised to discover that he can be as good-natured and appreciative as Charles Lamb. You could not tell it from most of his essay, except for some shrewd and (I believe) new observations about De Quincey, but for all his generalizing and synthetic power, Frye is at bottom a great reader of literary works as they are, from their own point of view. The reason that most of his Blake is still with us is that Frye was not struck dumb by the wonder of "Introduction" to *Experience*, *Milton*, or even by Blake's books as illuminated.

<sup>1</sup>*Milton's Spenser: The Politics of Reading* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983) 29.

<sup>2</sup>"The New Historicism and its Discontents: Politicizing Renaissance Drama," *PMLA* 102 (1987): 299.

<sup>3</sup>*PMLA* 102 (1987): 281-91.

<sup>4</sup>*Beginnings: Intention and Method*. (New York: Basic Books, 1975) 227; the passage occurs on pages 205-6 of the Columbia UP, 1985 reprint.



<sup>5</sup>"Life, Death, and Other Theories," *Historical Studies and Literary Criticism*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (U of Wisconsin P, 1985) 190-91.

<sup>6</sup>*Vision and Disenchantment: Blake's Songs & Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads* (Cambridge UP, 1983) 66-99.

<sup>7</sup>Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, "Against Theory," *Against Theory*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1985): 15-16. My point here is that these authors deliberately conceived of a far-fetched set of circumstances in which Wordsworth's poem might conceivably appear in order to illustrate a theoretical point about how it would be transformed thereby. There is nothing wrong with entertaining thoughts about such an hypothetical situation even though it would never occur to any reader trying to construe the poem. In thus employing the term "construe" to express a basic aim of interpretation I am following Abrams, who argues persuasively for the rehabilitation of this venerable standard for criticism. The Knapp-Michaels discussion about Wordsworth's poem, on the other hand, does not pretend to be a construal and thus differs from erroneous or preposterous interpretations, which do.

Francis Curtis and Richard Dean. *Blake: A Software Package*. West Sussex Institute of Higher Education, Bishop Otter College, College Lane, Chichester, West Sussex, England, PO19 4PE, 1987.

Reviewed by David Worrall

The search for new ways of teaching is as essential as keeping up with the latest developments in literary theory; indeed, it might even be said that literary theory *necessitates* new ways of teaching. *Blake: A Software Package* is not the answer to all of our problems in presenting Blake to undergraduate students previously virtually unacquainted with his work, but it presents an interesting field for further exploration and I found the process of evaluation quite a revealing one.

My students do a fairly traditional English literature program which they take with one other subject such as sociology, history, classical studies, drama, or geography. Blake is a year-two author in a traditional "author"-based course where he is taught after Wordsworth but before "the others." Seminar groups each comprise about eight to ten students who have been reading and discussing, at least, *The Book of Thel*, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, and *America*, while lectures will have introduced them to the wider work of Blake. Blake's illuminated books are projected, as complete works, onto the seminar room wall and discussion takes place on that basis. It was within this framework of teaching that I introduced the software package at the end of the course



West Sussex Institute of Higher Education



William Blake

A COMPUTER SOFTWARE PACKAGE

of seminars. The Blake software is easy to load and runs on a BBC microcomputer with 32K of RAM. It is currently the system most widely found in the U.K. for use in schools and in further and higher education.

The title of the program, *Blake: A Software Package*, is rather misleading as it is based entirely on "London" and does not offer an introduction to the rest of the *Songs* let alone Blake's other works. My first impression on using the program was how odd it seemed to go back to the *printed* word (even in electronic form) after looking quite intensively at the combination of Blake's word and image. Perhaps one would need to look forward to a new age of electronics (and a new age of funding) for software which could incorporate high-quality visuals with some sort of enhancement to explore the detail of Blake's between-the-line illuminations. Nevertheless, loading the floppy disc is easy and you soon have another "person" in the seminar room as the T.V. monitor's ice-cold eye awaits appeasement and suggestion.