

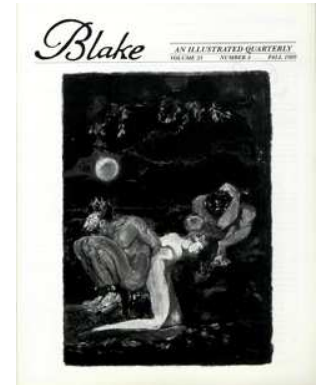
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Dan Miller, Mark Bracher, and Donald Ault, eds.,
Critical Paths: Blake and the Argument of Method

Anne K. Mellor

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the ensemble performances are equally satisfactory, and I sometimes found myself preferring some sparer arrangements that Brown recorded informally a few years ago. But even the songs that don't quite work are illuminating, especially because Brown finds so many ways to complement and complicate the metrical stresses—as I listened to this record, I couldn't help feeling that I didn't know the poems as well as I thought I did.

This should also be a useful tool in teaching. W. J. T. Mitchell reports that he sings the songs himself to his own arrangements when teaching them, and for those with his talents that is probably the best approach. But Brown's performances (and perhaps his arrangements) may help many of the rest of us who teach the *Songs* to students who are not yet comfortable with poetry on the page, especially because these versions are so unthreatening and their idiom is so familiar to students. One runs the risk, of course, of fixing their imaginations upon one interpretation of the poems, but one also gains from having them hear them as songs, and catchy songs at that.

The record is on a minor label, Red House Records, but it is distributed by Rounder Records on the East Coast and can be obtained through record stores almost anywhere. Or, write to Red House Records at P. O. Box 4044, St. Paul, MN 55104.

The song, "They All Went to Mexico," was released as a single (and made the Top Ten in the Netherlands); it appears on Nelson's *Half Nelson* LP on Columbia and on Santana's *Havana Moon*, also on Columbia.

Dan Miller, Mark Bracher, and Donald Ault, eds. *Critical Paths: Blake and the Argument of Method* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1987). \$45.00 cloth/\$17.95 paper.

Reviewed by Anne K. Mellor

It is the argument of this uneven collection of essays that modern critical theory provides us with new and necessary ways to interpret Blake's poetry and art. While no one would argue with that in principle, too many of these essays take this occasion to summarize at length by now familiar critical methods, from the Chicago School

of Aristotelian formalism and Derridean deconstruction through Lacanian psychoanalysis to Marxism and feminism, for their own sakes, rather than using them with subtlety and originality to produce understandings and interpretations of Blake's work that enhance our reading or viewing experience. There are some notable exceptions—fine essays by Hazard Adams, Nelson Hilton, Elizabeth Langland, and David Aers—to which I shall return.

The general tone of the volume is set by Dan Miller in his introduction, a rather florid, impressionistic meditation on methods and divergent paths which says little more than that the criticism of Blake reflects the critical variety present everywhere in the discipline and that all readings of Blake, as of any author, are inherently theoretical and therefore biased. Stephen Cox's "Methods and Limitations" strenuously recovers much of this same ground by insisting that critics must be aware of the ways in which their own theoretical assumptions and

C R I T I C A L
P A T H S



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Dan Miller, Mark Bracher,
and Donald Ault, editors

critical failures define the limits of their interpretive results. Unfortunately his own analysis of the criticism of plate 23 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* ends up, as does his essay, "like poor, tiresome Swedenborg, . . . writing 'all the old fals[e]hoods' but not 'one new truth'" (40). William Dennis Horn, in "Blake's Revisionism: Gnostic Interpretation and Critical Methodology," offers a persuasive (albeit hardly original) critique of the limitations of Harold Bloom's revisionary theory, and rightly insists on the affinity of Blake's thought to gnostic texts—a claim that will surprise no reader of Blake, Kathleen Raine, or Elaine Pagels. However, he fails to identify any particular gnostic texts which Blake could have read or known and proceeds at such a level of oversimplified generality that, again, he provides no "new truth."

The essays by the three editors elaborate with varying degrees of success the ways we might use highly sophisticated critical methods to approach Blake. Donald Ault's "Blake's De-Formation of Neo-Aristotelianism" demonstrates convincingly, if perhaps unintentionally, that neither a mathematical approach—his own 14-year-old attempt to provide a "calculus of perspectives" on *The Book of Urizen*—nor the Chicago School of neo-Aristotelian criticism helps us to understand the subversive complexity of Blake's thought. After a particularly sensitive visual/visceral response to the titlepage of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Mark Bracher invokes Lacanian psychoanalytic techniques both to elucidate his own responses and to show how Blake's visual and verbal texts force the reader to experience "interpellation" (in Althusser's sense) or intellectual repositioning. Arguing that Blake's language becomes "a force capable of promoting change in the reader," Bracher offers somewhat tendentious, heavily phallic/Oedipal, readings of the Proverbs to show how Blake first evokes desire, then elicits interpretation, and finally constructs a new linguistic code.

Dan Miller provides a needlessly long, if lucid, explication of deconstructive methodology (a useful primer if you haven't already read your Derrida) before moving to an analysis of the logical inconsistencies in Blake's attempts to define the distinction between nature and vision, allegory and imagination, in *The Vision of the Last Judgment* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. His final comments on the way the chariot at the end of *Jerusalem* functions as an allegory that both blocks final revelation (by sending us to other texts for elucidation) and at the same time effects an apocalyptic climax is a telling example of deconstructive reading. The utility and continuing appeal of a Derridean ap-

proach is stressed again by David Wagenknecht in his "Afterword." However, his chosen example, an interpretation of why the central soldier in Blake's "The Soldiers Casting Lots for Christ's Garments" raises his left hand in blessing, is seriously flawed, to my mind, by his failure to consider other alternatives, for example, whether it matters that it is the left rather than the right hand, whether this is unequivocally "a gesture that resembles benediction" (to my eyes it also resembles gestures of surprise, protest, throwing the dice overhand, mere hovering, etc.). A third Derridean "unreading" is provided by Thomas Vogler's "'In vain the Eloquent Tongue': An Un-Reading of *VISIONS of the Daughters of Albion*," an illuminating discussion of the ways in which the poem is about seeing and knowing, about its own interpretation, which places the semiotics of the text in the context of eighteenth-century political and sexual discourse.

Vogler reaches an insight via de Sade which also informs Brenda Webster's feminist and psychoanalytic discussion of "Blake, Sexuality and Women," that Blake's vision of a liberated female sexuality is designed to gratify only male fantasies. Hence Oothoon offers to spread "silken nets and traps of adamant" to catch for Theotormon "girls of mild silver, or of furious gold," (*VDA* 7:23–24), but no male in the poem offers to provide Oothoon with a corresponding orgy of male lovers. Webster's essay condenses the argument already available in her *Blake's Prophetic Psychology*—that Blake never resolved his Oedipal fixation with killing the father and possessing the mother and hence that the sexually liberated woman is also the sexually available mother. But she is particularly shrewd here in seeing the ways in which Blake's fantasies have gratified his male readers, who have persistently ignored or denied his misogynistic attitudes to women.

A more sophisticated feminism informs Elizabeth Langland's formal-thematic interpretation of Blake's "The Sick Rose." Not only does Langland provide an excellent overview of the possibilities and problems of contemporary feminist theory, but she tracks through a careful reading of the poem, its design, and its Notebook contexts the difference that gender makes, both to our understanding of the Rose (which could be male as well as female) and the speaker (who could be female as well as male). The essay is flawed only by the failure to include an illustration of the poem, an odd omission since less useful illustrations are provided for other essays. Her close reading of the myriad contexts of the poem gives added force to her conclusion, that "ideology" (she should probably specify gender as a crucial

dimension of ideology here) determines the "nature of critical knowledge itself."

A similarly powerful argument for Blake's ideological blind spots is made by David Aers in his Marxist essay, "Representations of Revolution: From *The French Revolution* to *The Four Zoas*," in which he analyzes the way in which Blake's failure to envision particular differences and a meaningful plurality among the classes of the oppressed enables Blake to posit a polarized, two-class society, and then to celebrate a "salvific violence" whereby the sons of Los trample down the sons of Urizen in Night IX of *The Four Zoas*, a violence that modern readers ought to find extremely troubling. Aers's essay, which invokes both Bakhtin and Carol Gilligan's concept of a female ethic of care to good effect, is flawed only by its failure to incorporate into its argument an analysis of what should be Aers' primary text, *Jerusalem*.

Nelson Hilton and Hazard Adams both pay close attention to Blake's use of particular words and rhetorical methods to generate convincing readings of specific texts. In "Literal/*Tiriell*/Material," Hilton offers another demonstration of what he has called Blake's literal imagination, the way allusion and wordplay function in Blake's texts. In this case, he turns to the Concordance to show how *Tiriell* becomes a calculated meditation on the death of old myths, the curse of inherited language and metrics, and the ways Blake attempts to lift off the burden of the rubbish heap of the past. In "Synecdoche and Method," Hazard Adams describes the peculiarly radical and progressive nature of Blake's use of synecdoche, which he illustrates with a brilliant analysis of the way both intrinsic and historical clues enable us to understand the way Blake's mind worked in composing plate 10 of *Europe*.

These essays provide a compelling illustration of how contemporary critical theory both impedes and enables our understanding and appreciation of literary texts. When theory becomes the focus of critical attention, as it does in the essays by the editors, Stephen Cox and David Wagenknecht, it can lead to little more than a self-indulgent hermeneutic exercise, resulting in reductive, predictable (or unconvincing) readings. Typically, for all that these exercises claim to take into account the necessary self-reflexivity of both language and ideology, they are usually carried out with no recognition, as is the case here, of the individual critic's personal psychological profile, gender, ethnicity, religion, or other ideological commitments and interests. But when theory enables the critic to uncover the blind spots or fault lines of both the author's and previous critics' ideological limitations and thus opens the way to more en-

compassing and genuinely critical understandings, as the essays by Langland and Aers do most effectively in this volume, it must be welcome. Perhaps, in the context of the deconstructive and self-critical methods advocated so pervasively in this volume, I should add, "to me." And end with a personal credo that grows out of my experience of gender oppression and teaching of feminist theory: I believe that the time has come for contemporary literary criticism to move beyond deconstructive theory (whose intellectual insights have by now been absorbed, even exhausted) in an effort to recuperate more politically engaged, less elitist, practices of reading and teaching.

MINUTE PARTICULARS

Blake and Burke in Astonishment!

V. A. De Luca

On those occasions when Blake discloses his most important views on art and poetry—say, in the *Descriptive Catalogue*, or in the Annotations to Reynolds's *Discourses*, or in the letter to Butts of 6 July 1803—the sublime never seems far from his mind. We do not know the extent of his acquaintance with formal eighteenth-century theories of the sublime but we can be certain that he read the most famous treatise on the subject—Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into . . . the Sublime and the Beautiful*: "Burke's Treatise on the Sublime & Beautiful," he tells us in the annotations to Reynolds, "is founded on the Opinions of Newton & Locke on this Treatise Reynolds has grounded many of his assertions."¹ Blake tells us that he read it when "very young," and what he read when "very young" usually stuck, held in a strong clasp of love or hate. The avowed hatred in this case has tended to mask a rich overlay of tastes and assumptions. A few critics have recognized the link between the two men,² but our sense of the complexity of the relation may still need some refining—such as how much even Blake's departures from Burke issue from a Burkean ground.

One handy and efficient way of approaching a complicated relation between two writers is to focus on key terms that are shared in their vocabularies. Blake and Burke share "astonishment," one of the central terms in