

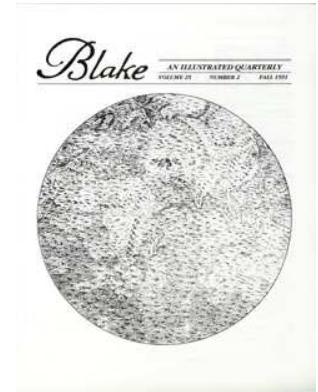
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R E V I E W

K. D. Sethna, Blake's Tyger: A Christological Interpretation

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Stevenson's lack of scholarship may not be too damaging. (I hedge this judgment, not knowing all the traps in Blake scholarship; and I do note errors in his treatment of the relationship between Hayley and William Cowper). But when Stevenson quotes Shelley's letters from a 1965 reprint of Ingpen's and Peck's Julian Edition of the 1920s (Jones's edition, perhaps, being on reserve at the library), he opens his interpretations to basic errors. Certainly the Julian Edition's corrupt texts of Shelley's letters to Thomas Jefferson Hogg (deriving from Hogg's *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, in which Hogg often reversed the pronouns from "I" to "you" so as to father instances of his own youthful foolishness on his dead friend) misled Stevenson into attributing "latent homosexuality" to Shelley rather than Hogg (see 191n9, and 192n3).

With my conditioned response in favor of scholarly accuracy—or, at least, in favor of some visible efforts in pursuit of it—I almost dismissed *Poetic Friends* as a waste of time. Eventually, however, I concluded that it has definite values, if not for the specialist, at least for students approaching romantic poetry for the first time. During an era of linguistic theorizing and sociological background studies, *Milton* or *Jerusalem*, when viewed from the perspective of flawed friendships, presents a human face that is familiar and approachable by undergraduates. While by no means a complete discussion of Blake's works, the 66 pages on Blake—filled with quotations from and paraphrases of his poems and letters—seem to me to provide a useful introduction to the larger prophetic books either for undergraduates writing term papers on these poems when they are not taught in class, or even for teachers wanting a human-interest angle from which to introduce students to Blake's somewhat abstract masterpieces.

After the students' interest is stimulated initially by encountering Blake's prophetic books as products of a personal relationship and artistic patronage gone sour, the teacher can then lead them into study of the larger symbolic and thematic issues in these poems that have been analyzed by more sophisticated scholar-critics. To remain at the level of anecdote, quotation, and paraphrase that characterizes much of *Poetic Friends* would mark teachers as having either too little intellectual enterprise themselves, or insufficient ability to stimulate intellectual curiosity in their students. But, equally, to avoid the human dimensions of the life and poetry of Blake or any of the other romantic poets—to pretend that texts write texts, that class differences produce great poetry, or that the reader's existential experience can be divorced from any art, especially from verbal constructs made with the very materials of daily communication—is to cut away the roots of literature. To expect that the blossoms can thereafter retain their attractiveness for long is a silly delusion. For this simple reason, more students of English and more English majors will be recruited by asking sophomores to read *Prophetic Friends* rather than two-thirds of the other academic studies of the romantics I've read in the past ten years. Such a quality is not to be despised in any academic book, especially by those who love and value literature and who teach because they wish to transmit that love and those values to their students. But even cynics who find the academic life congenial and wish to assure their future livelihoods may find *Poetic Friends* and books like it instrumental to their ends.

K. D. Sethna. *Blake's Tyger: A Christological Interpretation*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1989. viii + 275 pp. Rs. 60.00

Reviewed by
Michael J. Tolley

We should probably have welcomed this book in the 1960s, even if we remained unpersuaded by its thesis: that is when it should have appeared; that is when it was substantially written. Unfortunately, its publication has been so long delayed that it is impossible to review it in other than a mood of melancholy and with a feeling of pity for its author overwhelming the admiration it might earlier have commanded.

With the best will in the world, it is impossible to commend wholeheartedly a book that was written originally in 1961 and ignores totally any study of its subject published later than 1968 (the apparent exception in the slender bibliography records a reprint). That much of the recent work on "The Tyger" constitutes a massive argument against Sethna's affirmation that both beast and creator are figures of Christ is only icing on the cake. It must nevertheless be admitted that Sethna's readable and intelligent and, in some sections, unprecedentedly thorough discussions have still considerable value. I found it difficult to read the book with patience because Sethna so often seemed out of sheer perversity to be accumulating evidence against his own thesis, if only he could have been brought to see it that way. Consider, for instance, the rhetoric of this paragraph, which presents his basic reading clearly:

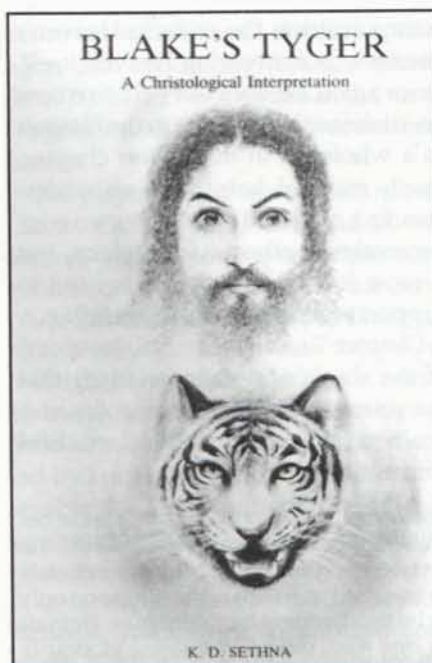
We have only to transpose the situation into an overtly Christian framework and turn the offensive into a direct Tyger-attack, to get our poem's action: Christ, the fashioner of the Lamb, fashioning the Tyger of his divine dreadfulness, keeping it afterwards chain-held for an offensive and then setting it upon Satan and his hosts within the forests of the night. (200)

Thus he assimilates the battle between Fuzon and Urizen in *The Book of Abania* to his thesis. His major coup, however, is to deploy the action of the War in Heaven as narrated in *Paradise Lost* on the side of his argument, as in this paragraph:

So *The Tyger's* drama may legitimately be pitched in Heaven and interpreted as the going forth of the Divine Fire in a destructive symbol-form expressive of Christ, the heavenly unity-in-multiplicity, to quell Satan-Urizen and his partners in revolt. Our essentially Miltonic reading of the poem gets certainly a general support in Blake's other writings. (162)

Much of the massive Miltonic source-material Sethna brings to bear upon "The Tyger" is indeed significantly relevant—but he reads black where I read white; he sees Christ in the tyger figure where I see falling Lucifer, fallen as a form of Satan.

Sethna's book is neatly arranged in seven chapters but has three prefatory texts and two appendices, much of which relates to correspondence with Kathleen Raine, who referred to Sethna's unpublished work in two footnotes to her *Blake and Tradition* (1968); Raine serves awkwardly both as Sethna's chief advocate and principal opponent. In the first chapter, a brief introductory one, D. W. Harding's 1957 essay is found wanting as doing "scant justice to the atmosphere of secret significances the poem conjures up" (3). In chapter 2, Sethna looks carefully at "The Internal Pattern of the Poem," enlisting syntactic and etymological evidence to discover "a godlike Tyger" which "attacks star-angels defecting from the true light and harmony." In order to manage this, Sethna has to emphasize the positive "brightness" of the Tyger over its evil associa-



tions (he has little to say about the bad reputation of tygers in the period and tends to lump tygers together with lions as equally noble beasts), and he particularly presses the point that the tyger's burning "In the forests of the night" must mean that the tyger is opposed to the forests and not that it finds its natural habitat there:

the forests of the night not only transcend jungles as of India after sunset: they also get charged with significances in contrast to those of the Tyger's burning and brightness. They loom up as cold and suppressive, callous and distorted, life-sapping and sinister. Hence the Tyger, instead of belonging to the forests and being a portion of the night, stands out as their opponent. (11)

This reading is unpersuasive and it is unfortunate that, in his desire to identify the "forests of the night" with transcendental dark forces and the Tyger with their supernal opponent, Sethna should come almost to lose sight of the beast with the glowing eyes which inhabits natural dark forests and is the ostensible subject of the poem. As the fifth stanza indicates, the poem is indeed about happenings in starry worlds beyond the natural one of our own experience, but it is so only in order to answer the questions

raised by the existence of the earthly predator we both admire and fear. Sethna also begs questions when he attempts to read "seize" as neutral, without the implication of theft, and "aspire" as godlike without a necessary Promethean or Luciferian reference. He finds no indignation in the shift from the "Could frame" of the first stanza to the "Dare frame" of the last.

Chapter 3, "The Internal Pattern and Christian Tradition," assembles some important source material, including Revelation 12 and Job 38:7 (though only to justify Blake's image of the stars as substitutes for angels), but appears to be using special pleading to argue for a Christ with wings in the pre-Blakean tradition, in order to justify his reading of the "aspiring" as a Christ-like activity. No one denies that the Christian deity might metaphorically be endowed with wings, whether for healing or as a vehicle of powerful motion: Jesus himself appropriates the homely image of the hen in Matthew 23:37. However, the reader sensitive to Christian tradition will not therefore be prepared to find a reference to Christ in "On what wings dare he aspire?" Sethna does not consider the strong evidence that the maker in the poem and his Tyger should be seen as stalking horses for an attack on Job's God, the Creator of Leviathan.

Chapter 4, "The Miltonic Basis of the Poem," has the great merit of assembling more Miltonic background for readers of "The Tyger" than I have seen anywhere else but, as I have indicated, it is excruciating to see how often he gathers material that would most naturally work against his reading only to persist in appropriating it as grist to his own mill.

Readers familiar with recent critical discussion will find the very brief chapter 5, "The Poem in Process and in Illustration" the most obviously unsatisfactory section in Sethna's book. Both the Notebook drafts and the graphic work are treated only as material for potential bases of objection to Sethna's thesis, not as valuable and, in the case of

the graphic part, indispensable contributors to any serious comprehensive reading. Thus we get embarrassing special pleading over the use of the term "cruel fire" in a draft version of the poem: though "coloured," the epithet "cruel"

is actually non-committal. Fierce strength, causing injury and pain, may be cruel but does not always on that account become evil: everything depends on the motive, the occasion, the result. . . . War also in a defensive noble cause cannot be condemned merely because of the cruelty it involves. (129)

Sethna does not realize how increasingly un-Blakean his reading becomes the more he seeks to defend it by such arguments. Clearly, the drafts are an inconvenience to Sethna, as is the illustration, which he justifies in the end only as being enigmatic, as a kind of refusal to illustrate.

The book's longest and most tedious chapter, the sixth, is headed "The Poem in the General Context of Blake's Work," in which Sethna sees his task essentially in the terms of one defending a thesis at all costs: "We have to support our identification of his beast of prey by whatever links up with our poem from outside it in the context of this work." The results are predictable. He begins, however, by quoting C. M. Bowra's discussion of the poem in *The Romantic Imagination* (1957), which he finds "excellent in several respects, but . . . quite astray at one place" and suffering from "an all-round shortcoming in that it pitches the Christ-significance of the Tyger too low." Bowra, like most of the rest of us, considered that the time "when the stars threw down their spears" was "in some enormous crisis when the universe turned round in its course and began to move from light to darkness";

Sethna restricts the crisis to Heaven's enemies, not involving Heaven itself. Once again, he does not perceive how un-Blakean this sounds. In the chapter as a whole, as in the Milton chapter, much material helpful to an understanding of "The Tyger" is drawn conveniently together in one place, but—most inconveniently—it is used to support a radical misunderstanding.

Chapter 7 offers a brief "Retrospect" of the thesis and acknowledges that the proposed reading is, insofar as it projects a terribly shining wrathful Christ, shocking:

The poet is profoundly shaken, almost bewildered, because, as Milton tells us, the revolted angels, after being mercilessly vanquished, were spared annihilation only to be everlastingly banished from Heaven by one who, though remaining gloriously divine, seems to out-Satan Satan in dreadful power—the deity who is no longer Christ the Lamb but Christ the Tyger.

For Sethna, we find, the poem is an affirmative not a subversive one, but then, he had not heard about the need to take into account "point of view and context": Blake's questioner is simply Blake for him. There is a certain complacency in this conclusion, as there is in Raine's letter of 1979, in which after listing her main points of difference with Sethna, she writes: "But that does not lessen the pleasure with which I read your thoughts on the poem you and I both love and have studied perhaps more carefully than anyone else living in the present world of generation." Even in 1979, I am happy to say, that was very far from being the case. I would be even happier if I could say that we also are entirely free these days from the arrogance of believing that our own more up-to-date studies are alone the adequate ones.

Opera on William Blake Destroyed by Its Own Radicalism

Bethlehem Hospital: William Blake in Hell, Opera by Huib Emmer and Ken Hollings, performed by Theatre Group 'Hollandia,' under the supervision of Johan Simons and Lucas Vis. Psychiatric Centre 'Vogelenzang' Bennebroek. Performances through 25th of October.

Reviewed by Frits van der Waa, trans. by Jules van Lieshout

The task that Huib Emmer and Ken Hollings have set themselves in their opera *Bethlehem Hospital* is not a small one. The starting-point was the work and character of the English visionary poet and graphic artist William Blake. The problem raised is ethical, and deals with the human soul as an intersection of lofty and crude instincts. The events take place in the madhouse where Blake, according to a fictitious story, is supposed to have spent the last thirty years of his life.

It was predictable that the result would stick in the throat. That it has turned so unpalatable is a disappointment, nevertheless.

The nicest thing one can say about *Bethlehem Hospital* is that the piece is destroyed by its own radicalism. The granite-like idiom of composer Emmer, the juxtaposition of speech and song, the decision to put the performance into the hands of a theatre group, and even the choice to perform the opera "on location"—in the chapel