

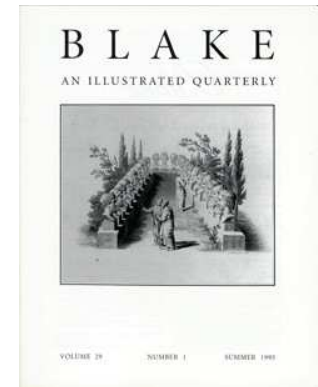
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

David G. Riede, *Oracles and Hierophants:
Constructions of Romantic Authority*

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Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 29, Issue 1, Summer 1995, pp. 29-31



occasionally takes rather a harder, more inflexible critical line than one might wish. At the same time, as Blake was fond of reminding us, hard, wiry bounding lines do have their place, if only in serving to delineate figures (or intellectual positions) so that we may encounter them and argue with them. Gerda Norvig's book seems to me an immense achievement, and one that will necessarily provide the foundation for future discussion of the designs to *The Pilgrim's Progress*. She has provided us with a vast treasury of resources, verbal and visual, together with a carefully documented reading of those designs that seeks to account in systematic fashion for the many contexts that inform them, Bunyan's originating narrative, and the century and a half of intellectual, spiritual, cultural, and aesthetic evolution that separated them. She has given us much to think about, much to talk about, and much to write about. For that, we are in her debt.

David G. Riede, *Oracles and Hierophants: Constructions of Romantic Authority*. Cornell University Press: Ithaca and London, 1991. 283 + xi pp.

Reviewed by DAVID PUNTER

David Riede in this book seeks to trace the notion of romantic authority, to explore, in other words, why and how it was that romantic poets felt that they could speak with apparent certainty on a range of issues literary, societal, and psychological. He simultaneously, as it were, traces the thanatic fate of this assumption of authority by arguing that in the cases of each of the three writers with whom he deals—Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge—this structure of authority comes to loom so large over their texts that it in effect transmutes them into the sources of a new cultural authoritarianism, which is in each case avidly seized upon by other writers and critics who wish to convert their forebears into a "church," an unquestionable touchstone of knowledge and feeling; and that this "worship" of romantic attitudes persists through literary criticism and pedagogy to the present day.

Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge, then, are the main figures here; in his final chapter Riede turns more briefly to the second generation of romantics, principally in order to differentiate their work from their predecessors' and to bring out the readiness with which they questioned *all* authority, in response first to a prevailing sense of political betrayal and second to the perceived "treachery" of some of the earlier poets themselves; the argument here touches on and usefully recontextualises wider issues of romantic irony.

This is a book of extreme meticulousness, full of detail and of close reading, but I have to confess that, although I was gripped from page to page, in the end I found it oddly

unsatisfying. There were two principal reasons for this. The first was the sheer amount of argument from other critics Riede uses to buttress his points, argument which perhaps might be necessary if one were to assume a reader unversed in criticism of the romantics, but to my mind somewhat redundant in view of the likely readership of the book.

But my other problem was more substantial, and has to do with the use Riede makes of his central term, "authority." In part this follows from a passage from Hannah Arendt which he quotes, to the effect that true authority "is incompatible with persuasion, which presupposes equality and works through a process of argumentation. Where arguments are used, authority is left in abeyance. Against the egalitarian order of persuasion stands the authoritarian order, which is always hierarchical" (20).

The problem here is that Arendt slides effortlessly between "authority" and the "authoritarian." This is an easy linguistic trope; but it is nonetheless incorrect. The notion of the authoritarian has to do with unjustifiable authority arbitrarily exercised; without some alternative notion of *authority* we have no means even to describe familial or educational process. There can be no development or pedagogy without authority, correctly exercised and subjected to appropriate questioning and testing. Such a notion of "correctness" may well be endlessly challengeable in practice, but that does not mean that it can be removed from political or psychological agenda.

Furthermore, it is not clear to me what poetry—or writing, or text—would look like in the absence of a sense of authority, whether we regard this as in some sense integral or as reader-induced. Riede suggests that the second generation of romantics were "antiauthoritarian" but that "Byron, Shelley, and Keats still struggled in various ways to establish their own poetic authority, and consequently the authority of poetry generally." Well, of course they did: I do not see how you can write anything without founding it upon *some* notion of authority, even if it is a matter of taking on the authority to satirize, to destroy, to rip down. All of these are forms of authority, even if their relations to the dominant formations of culture may be various. To Riede, it seems that this is not so:

The problem with our inherited models of Romantic authority, with the continuing Romantic assumptions of much of our criticism, is that the ideals of an authoritative culture are ultimately authoritarian, and that the practical effects of a self-validating but self-enclosed cultural minority are extremely limited. (278)

I have already said that I do not believe that an authoritative stance necessarily leads to authoritarianism; I would want to add that the issue of the effects of a cultural minority will depend on far greater political complexities than those spelled out here, complexities in the ideological positioning of that minority and in the overall sociopolitical fab-

ric of the formation under discussion. Some cultural minorities have guns; others brandish veils.

This is a complex book, and to engage with the argument in more detail I shall pick out a single thread in relation to each of the poets. Riede begins his chapter on Blake as follows:

William Blake is probably the most extreme case in the English literary tradition of a poet claiming and representing the authority of absolute originality, of the inspired imaginative mind or, as he would put it, of the "Poetic Genius." (33)

In one sense an unexceptionable statement; yet if we look closely we can see this notion of authority already deconstructing itself. Did Blake, who knew a great deal about the futility of a discourse of origins, claim "absolute originality?" He may have claimed a unique connection to a realm of the imagination, but with what *contents* was that realm already stocked? Can the relationship with Milton, which Riede goes on to discuss at some length, be considered to have left Blake's imagination in a pristine condition, or the inheritance from Boehme or Michelangelo, or most important of all from the Bible? If we are to talk about authority here, we should surely be thinking of it in terms not of originality but of *access*: we may consider every writer as a mediator—just like any priest—yet even here it would not be clear to me that Blake *consistently* regarded himself as on the end of a unique hotline; or, even when he did, whether he consistently thought that the messages coming down it were of much use to the world at large.

For Riede, "the inescapable irony of Blake's career is that his work," being "disseminated at a time when 'literature' was in various ways being constituted as an authoritative cultural discourse ... became a part of the institutionalised canon of literature." This comment, claiming as it does that the fate of Blake's work is inextricably embedded in the "authoritarian" requirements of the romantic canon, depends in turn for its validity on what we think of a point of Foucault's which Riede mentions earlier, namely, that "'literature' emerged in response to the profound skepticism of the Enlightenment, to the death of God and the consequent loss of 'that primary, that absolutely initial, word upon which the infinite movement of discourse was founded and by which it was limited.'" Henceforth, Foucault continues, "language was to grow with no point of departure, no end, and no promise. It is the traversal of this futile yet fundamental space that the text of literature traces from day to day."

The "literary," then, is a substitute discourse and the romantics are the pioneers of the "scrawl over the abyss." I think the problem here is one of hypostasization: this is an interesting point *only* when one's concern is to identify the cultural construct we call "literature." If our concern is at all broader, with the interrelations between, say, literature, religion, and authority, then we have a larger field to traverse,

one where Milton might again assume a critical importance, one where oral as well as written traditions take their part in this vast series of displacements which indeed embraces in a particular way the whole articulated field of writing and the religious sense.

There is something more to be said. Even if we are to agree with Nietzsche and Foucault about the collapse of *logos*, it does not appear to me that the resultant (re)appearance of the abyss is unpopulated; certainly the abyss in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is not. When authoritarian monotheisms go into inevitable crisis, what is left in the detritus may nevertheless be a host of little gods, the emergence of polytheism and animism, a freed god behind every tree, or in some cases locked inside, a populous world of which Blake, Wordsworth, and later Yeats were certainly aware. When Mohammed came to Mecca to institute an organized Arab state, he cleared the central place of worship of its hundreds of tribal gods; only thus could the authoritarian state at that historical moment be instituted, and only in the iteration that there is *one* god could it survive the pressing world of dissolutions, the counter-"authorities" from which alone we might expect salvation from the violence and fossilization of the state apparatus.

On Wordsworth, Riede has fascinating things to say on the motif of wandering, and on suffering and sympathy, but his general argument is perhaps best summarized when he says that Wordsworth's participation in the

invention of the vast shadowy terrain of an autonomous self as at once the object and subject of literature is part of the invention of "literature" as an autonomous yet somehow authoritative discourse, of literature as an entity transcending history. (162)

Here Riede is following, as he says, Clifford Siskin's admirable identification of romanticism with "a penetrating gaze revealing, actually making, the depths within"; but I would still want to be wary of the notion that such a terrain can be "invented" rather than, shall we say, "reconfigured." The "making" of the unitary self cannot be a formation *ab initio*; rather, it comes to being in an already existent field of alternative constructions, just as does monotheism, in this case a field including many versions of the self, including ones which rely on multiplicity, plurality of selves, in the sense developed by Deleuze and Guattari's so-called "schizanalysis." This, of course, is one of the haunting fears of romanticism, where the continuing existence of "multiplicity" exerts constant pressure on the formation of the unitary self, which itself can be seen to come to fill the space left by the disappearance of the singleness of god. Riede's earlier comments on the ambiguities of madness in romanticism are very much to the point.

On Coleridge perhaps I can also supply a single quotation which seems to me to show the tenor of Riede's approach:

Coleridge never succeeded in finding an adequate poetic authority for himself, but from around 1800 to his death he sought ways to justify a poetic authority for others—for Wordsworth, Milton, Shakespeare—on the basis of a fully integrated self that retained its free agency, yet somehow spoke, as the Ancient Mariner did, with an inspiration that transcended personal experience. (171)

This brings us back again to the “fully integrated self” as a site of endeavor and danger, yet in the course of doing so it seems to me to obliterate the notion of writing as a matter of undecidability. There is no space here to discuss the ambiguities of the concept of “success” or “achievement” in the context of Coleridge, nor even to open the question as to whether it is appropriate to use the name-of-Coleridge as the overarching sign for an “engagement” with authority and the self which was clearly writ in much larger cultural terms around the figure of the individual suffering poet/philosopher; but what can, I think, be said is that the notion of an inspiration that transcends personal experience is an expression of an inescapable paradox; the paradox which we have sometimes, through many historical windings and across many cultures, called “soul.” Our engagements with such a concept, such an experience which in itself always points beyond experience, will always be hovering, they will always catch us at thresholds, the thresholds which Coleridge approaches with such courage and despair in “Christabel” and “Kubla Khan”; whether the inability to pass over a threshold which would “alter everything” represents a lack of success is perhaps an imponderable question, for under every threshold is buried a forgotten god who will exact a price in personal and textual transformation for our projected *humbis*.

The field which Riede traverses is a crucial one; it appears to me that in the context of the romantic writers a supplementary approach might be through the notion of inner and outer worlds and the problematic flow of authority between them. An emblematic text might be “The Mental Traveller”: whence springs the observer’s authority here? From walking, we might say, on the wild side; but also and with painful simultaneity from suffering the necessity of transferring these insights across an awesome threshold of communication. The perception, the *pathos*, we might say, is clothed in words, indeed in the garments of lamentation insofar as they invariably represent loss of authenticity, of authority; and the result is always worse than we could imagine, because as the frail vessel emerges from the reeds it often seems as though there is nothing left inside the clothing, we see a “signature” with no document, presumed authority with nothing left to authorize, an already self-consumed artefact. If there is any truth in this, then it would apply in differing ways to *all* writing; when we look at the romantics in particular, perhaps the *différance* we sense is not in this basic structure of loss, which is the ground of all searchings

for authority, but in its reassimilation into the text, in the manifestation of a certain agonizing level of self-awareness; a certainty that authority is problematic, floating only temporarily on a dark sea while other, unnameable sails rise over the horizon.

Joseph Viscomi. *Blake and the Idea of the Book*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. xxvii + 453 pp. \$49.50.

Reviewed by ALEXANDER S. GOURLAY

When Robert N. Essick’s *William Blake, Printmaker* came out 14 years ago, it seemed to me the last possible word on most of Blake’s workshop techniques, and it certainly was a vast improvement on all that had been said about them before. Joseph Viscomi’s new account of the processes used in the illuminated books, the first of two planned studies about Blake and printing, carries the discussion beyond the methods themselves into their consequences in the entire illuminated canon and their theoretical implications for understanding Blake’s art. It constitutes a Grand Unified Theory of illuminated printing and publishing, revealing important new patterns in the vast sea of data about Blake’s books that Keynes, Wolf, Erdman, Bentley and others have compiled so lovingly. A few points in this ambitious book will no doubt be further refined, and it will not make Bentley’s *Blake Books* or the forthcoming supplement to it obsolete, but for the foreseeable future *Blake and the Idea of the Book* will be just as indispensable for everyone who writes about Blake’s illuminated books and his other graphic works. Even those disputing Viscomi will do so in the terms of his arguments.

Viscomi writes very clearly and carefully, though his emphatic, enthusiastic style can be trying, even when one agrees with him—sometimes it’s like being shouted at . . . or prophesied to. But most readers will appreciate his exhilarating distrust of all received opinion and everyone will profit from his extraordinary ability to synthesize complex information in new ways. His most unusual asset in this undertaking is his extensive practical experience with processes virtually identical to Blake’s, some of which he acquired in co-publishing the Manchester Etching Workshop facsimile edition of the *Songs*: impressions from reproductions of some of Blake’s relief printing plates were hand-colored, producing pages that look even more like Blake’s than the collotype and stencil facsimiles by the Trianon Press. His participation in this venture afforded essential knowledge about the presswork involved in printing relief plates and the process of finishing them. Viscomi has also thoroughly researched the history of graphic techniques and conducted careful experiments with transfer methods, resists, etching and en-