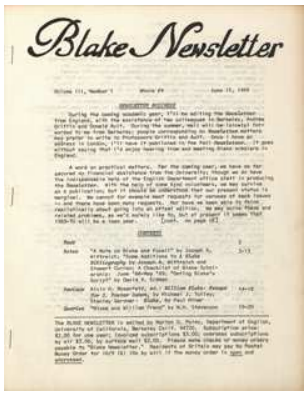
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

Alvin H. Rosenfeld, ed., William Blake: Essays for S. Foster Damon

Michael J. Tolley

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 3, Issue 1, June 15, 1969, pp. 14-17


Blake Newsletter

REVIEWS

William Blake: Essays for S. Foster Damon, edited by Alvin H. Rosenfeld. Providence: Brown University Press (1969), pp. xlvi + 500: frontispiece + xxxi plates. $15.00.

This collection of twenty-two essays on Blake, by most of the important scholars and critics in the field, makes a splendid tribute to a doughty pioneer. The volume is carefully printed and handsomely presented. Malcolm Cowley supplies an entertaining essay on Professor Damon's prolific, but self-abnegating, career. Ernest D. Costa and Elizabeth C. Westcott provide an impressive Damon bibliography.

I have not space to do each of the Blake studies justice. Over a third are first-rate, which is a good proportion; few are seriously under par. However, the disadvantages of having a non-specialist in this field as editor of such a volume are serious, and some of the contributors are to blame for submitting work which has not been privately criticized beforehand. The practice of sharing controversial papers in draft form with trustworthy scholars before publication cannot be too highly commended; in this case, as is usual, I am sure that there was adequate time for such interchange. Editors could do much here: for instance, the essays in this volume by Harold Fisch and Asloob Ahmad Ansari share much of the same ground and would both have benefited by a private interchange of ideas. Mr. Ansari's essay is on Blake's debt to the Kabbalah: Mr. Fisch, evidently unaware of this, finds it necessary to devote a long footnote to an exposition of "Blake's chief kabbalistic positions". Mr. Fisch makes the elementary error (p. 54) of supposing that when the sexes are abolished, Man and God will "return to their hermaphroditic oneness". The term "hermaphroditic" was anathema to Blake, connoting as it does a self-sufficiency that could become dangerously arrogant, in opposition to the self-sacrifice Blake stressed (a potentially redeeming element in sexual generation). Mr. Ansari (p. 217) states more cautiously that "Blake was firmly convinced that the androgynous protoplast was sexless". This volume shows, indeed, that there is no unanimity concerning this important question of Blake's attitude to sexuality. John E. Grant (p. 361), discussing *Jerusalem*, states that "Blake undoubtedly believed in untrammeled sexuality". If it should ever have been stated in quite that way, such a belief had been thrown overboard by the time Blake came to write *Jerusalem*. There is need for a careful chronological study of this question.

Both Fisch and Ansari identify God and Albion, which makes Blake's anthropotheism meaningless, and Geoffrey H. Hartman, in another essay, even identifies Albion and Jerusalem. While Harold Bloom says that when he remembers most vividly about Blake's three long poems "is always argument" (p. 22), Harold Fisch finds only "a thrilling and continuing monologue" in *Milton*. He believes that "Los, Blake, Milton, Jesus, Albion, and Ololon all blend and fuse" (p.53), but studiously ignores the quarrel between Satan and Palamabron, the struggle between Milton and Urizen, or the long arguments between Los and his sons in *Milton* 22ff.

The initiator of the Blake Trust, Sir Geoffrey Keynes, closes the volume with an anecdotal account of the Trust's work, which is shortly to

close. Unfortunately, David V. Erdman, who contributes an authoritative report on the present state of textual study (which both have done so much to advance), is made to appear more knowledgeable than Sir Geoffrey about the Blake Trust's edition of *Europe:* Sir Geoffrey doubts whether the problems of producing a facsimile can be overcome; Mr. Erdman informs us that they have already been solved (and I hear that the edition has now actually been published). This odd effect could have been smoothed out by the editor.

The essays are arranged, more or less arbitrarily, in five sections, "Literary Kinships", "The Graphic Artist", "Philosophical and Religious Transmutations", "The Poet", and "Texts and Facsimiles". The essays do in fact range very widely, often reflecting marginal individual interests, so that it is impossible to discern a "mainstream" of Blake criticism. I find the six essays in the first group relatively weak, and this may reflect the fact that the serious business for us is still not to "Reason & Compare", but to illuminate Blake's particular vision. The first two essays, "Blake and the Postmodern" by Hazard Adams and "Visionary Cinema" by Harold Bloom, thus have an air of frivolity besides those of Paul Miner and John E. Grant, who grapple seriously and at length with Blake's symbolism. Paul Miner's paper, "Visions in the Darksom Air: Aspects of Blake's Biblical Symbolism", is indeed the volume's pièce de résistance. A close-packed presentation of a great number of Blake's biblical allusions, this illunimating essay serves as a massive reminder that Blake is not to be appreciated in a hurry. Blake' astonishing tabernacular imagery, already discussed in a previous brilliant essay, is here further exposed: and several passages, or whole poems, are freshly illuminated by reference to Blake's major literary source. Lip-service has often been paid to the importance for Blake of the "Great Code of Art", but few have been prepared to go further, and Paul Miner's study is thus a major landmark in Blake scholarship. Some few of his allusions have been noted by others, but the rest is new. The author points out (p. 257) that "Hundreds of biblical allusions and references are found in Blake's poetry": if we include the whole of his text, the number by my count is well over 3,000. John E. Grant's "Two Flowers in the Garden of Experience" is a model of perceptive criticism and considered, rigorous scholarship when he discusses "My Pretty ROSE TREE" and "THE LILLY". He is, unfortunately, more speculative and less persuasive when describing and interpreting the highly problematical design in *Jerusalem* 28, which shows a couple embracing on a huge lily. But where there is doubt, there must be room for speculation, and Grant's are always worth serious consideration. In this case, I fear that without the sudden emergence of a coloured copy of the early proof, or an autograph description, unanimity will not be reached. My own speculation, for what it's worth, is that the two roughly ovoid shapes that Erdman takes as the man's thigh and calf, are actually meant for anthers, just as the object behind the colour is a pistil like that of an arum lily. The trouble with Erdman's imterpretation is that what he assumes is a leg is not continuous with the man'd body. Grant takes little account of the lower limbs.

Another long and valuable essay is Morton D. Paley's exploration of Blake's *Night Thoughts* illustrations. Mr. Paley collects useful background information and isolates several recurrent motifs in the series. His readings of individual designs are usually brief but sound. As one of the three editors who engaged in producing an annotated edition of the *Night Thoughts* illustrations, I am aware of some objections to Mr. Paley's interpretations, but I welcome such intelligent suggestions as his on a series

of designs that has hitherto received scant attention, but which is of greater value and significance in Blake's canon than we have sometimes been led to think.

Albert S. Roe's "The Thunder of Egypt", which is as long as Paul Miner's paper, is very disappointing. It seems a particularly glaring example of the dangers of lonely scholarship, untested on the palates of other Blakists. A sample of Mr. Roe's method of source-study is his assertion that Blake was indebted to Darwin for the Genii, Gnomes, Nymphs and Fairies that guard the gates of Golgonooza. The Botanic Goddess has a train of Gnomes, Sylphs and two varieties of Nymph, therefore, Blake must be indebted to Darwin! What happened to Pope and his Rosicrucians? Or to folk-lore? To be fair, I should add that some of the material presented here is useful and interesting, for instance the background in Bryant to Blake's moony Arks.

Other essays I take exception to are those of Geoffrey H. Hartman, Jean H. Hagstrum, and Anne T. Kostelanetz. Mr. Hartman attempts to relate Blake's Season songs in *Poetical Sketches* to the tradition of a Progress of Poesy, turning them into a series of invocations to the poetical spirit, as seen approaching from each corner of the globe in turn. The attempt fails, absurdly, when we are asked to believe of the fourth song that Blake "seems to say to Winter, 'Thou hast thy music too,' meaning: There exists a genuine poetry of the North". In his study of "The Fly," Mr. Hagstrum sees the speaker of the poem as an innocent who is redeemed by his thoughtful sympathy with the fly he has harmed, saying that the speaker "trembles in sympathetic pain", though there is no sign of anguish in the poem. This is a decided regression from John E. Grant's well-considered study of the poem. Anne T. Kostelanetz's interpretation of the 1795 colour prints is, unfortunately, packed with errors. We hunt in vain for "white-haired, bearded" Theotormon in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (p. 119), or an "old, bearded" scaly warrior in *Europe* 14 (p. 120). We are told (p. 124) that a "serpent" winds around Adam in "Elohim Creating Adam", though it is obviously a worm, emblem of mortality rather than of evil.

Northrop Frye succeeds, as usual, in impressing me with his brilliance, but leaves me with an uneasy reluctance to agree with his premisses. In "Blake's Reading of the Book of Job", his argument is essentially a circular one. He asserts that Blake saw the story of Job as a microcosm of the whole biblical story (p. 221), and on p. 226 we are told that because the Bible has a "comic ending", the comic ending of Job would not seem arbitrary to Blake. One misses a sense of historical probabilities: no reference is made to the typical early nineteenth-century understanding of the book of Job, and consequently Blake's reading appears to emanate from Northrop Frye's essentially modern approach, rather than to be rooted in the biblical scholarship that Blake himself knew.

I close this review with brief reference to some of the smaller treats in the volume. Piloo Nanavutty continues to be erudite and fascinating in her study of the alchemical background to a startling page in *The Four Zoas*. Martin K. Nurmi has a valuable study of Blake's negative reaction to three philosophers, Newton, Descartes and Thomas Burnet. Kathleen Raine, for once uncontroversial, gives us the privilege of sharing the thoughts of one poet on the "unfettered verse" of another, suggesting, among other things, that Blake was indebted to Chapman for his irregular seven-stressed line.

Robert F. Gleckner supplies a good essay on the important functions of adjectives in Blake's poetry. particularly the *Songs*. Hazard Adams has a neat retort to one of Wimsatt's slurs on Blake. Martin Butlin presents a scholarly survey of the development of Blake's techniques and interests as a printer evolving the great 1795 colour prints, concerning the quality of which he is, excusably, over-partisan. Daniel Hughes dares to open his essay by refuting Damon. George Mills Harper studies Blake's "theological arithmetic".

Michael J. Tolley
University of Adelaide
Australia

2. *Literature in Perspective: Blake*
by Stanley Gardner
published by Evans Bros., Ltd, 1968

This book will not serve as remedial reading for the Compleat Blakist in the sense that, with the exception of an occasional apercu, it must be categorized as a primer to Blake. Considering the audience of the *Newsletter*, another introduction to Blake has only minor significance. The major merit of the volume, to my view, is additional light that is focused on several aspects of Blakean London. One forgivable error is Gardner's statement that Blake moved to Lambeth in 1793. Actually, the move took place, probably, in the autumn of 1790 but certainly by the first quarter of 1791--significant in that this earlier date extends the crucial Lambeth canon.

Gardner notes that Carnaby market, near where Blake was born, was built on a Pest Field, and the market included a slaughterhouse, where the lowing of cattle could be heard while the animals waited to forgive the butcher's knife. Nearby also was Pawlett's Garden burial ground, and here was located the St. James's Workhouse, capable of containing 300 poor. Ultimately, the parish took over an old riding school, about 100 yards west of Blake's birthplace. This was Foubert's Academy, and the younger children of this school of industry were sent to nurse at Wimbledon. Gardner takes the speculative leap that "the mire" and "the lonely fen" in *The Little Boy Lost* and *Found* specifically relate to the watercourse of Vauxhall Creek or the area of Rush Common and Water Lane to the east of Brixton Hill, and he concludes that it "seems beyond question" that Wimbledon Common and the hills immediately south of the Thames are the "visual location of *Songs of Innocence*. . . ."

Previous scholarship has conjectured that Dacres Street and Dacres Alms Houses (to the west of the street) might possibly have dictated Blake's use of the name "Tom Dacre," and Gardner, fruitfully and independently, extends this supposition. Also there has been speculation that the fire at the Pantheon in 1792 possibly influenced Blake's imagery, for though Blake had already moved to Lambeth the fire could be seen as far away as Salisbury Plain. Gardner also adds to this fact that at the back of the Pantheon was a menagerie in the garden of Joshua Brookes, the anatomist. And the animals were panic-stricken by the Pantheon blaze. Blake, conviently, could have seen a stuffed tiger at the Leverian Museum in Leicester Square when he was living at Green Street, and Gardner's evidence causes one to wonder if a tyger