

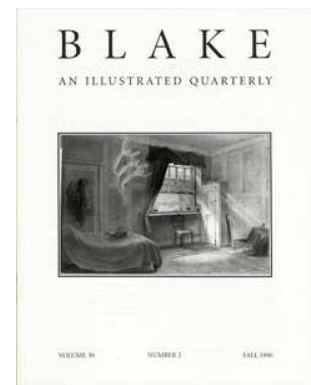
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

Peter Ackroyd, Blake

Morton D. Paley

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 30, Issue 2, Fall 1996, pp. 58-60



Peter Ackroyd, *Blake*. London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995. 399 pp. + illustrations. \$35.

Reviewed by MORTON D. PALEY

Peter Ackroyd is a writer deeply interested in the atmosphere of London at various phases of its history, as manifested by novels like *Chatterton*, *Hawksmoor*, and *The House of Dr. Dee*, books in which the feel of the past is brilliantly recreated. Given, too, the prominent role of the uncanny in his work, one can see why he would be drawn to Blake as a subject. We would expect from him a strongly plotted life of Blake, with memorable evocations of Blake's city. His *Blake* gives us these, but it also presents problems that in the end threaten the reader's—or at least *this* reader's—confidence in the biography he has written.

The sense of Blake in his time is there, certainly, in passages like this one:

If we consider the possibility of a unique urban sensibility, it will be one intimately connected with 'An Island in the Moon' and Blake's subsequent poetry—it embodies an art that is preoccupied by light and darkness in a city that is built in the shadows of money and power, an art entranced by the scenic and the spectacular in a city that is filled with the energetic display of people and institutions. Blake tends instinctively towards those great London forms, spectacle and melodrama, and is often preoccupied with the movement of crowds and assemblies; he has a sense of energy and splendour, of ritual and display, which may have little to do with the exigencies of individual moral life. But if Blake understood the energy and variety of London, he was continually aware of its symbolic existence through time: in his epic poetry, and the vast concourse of figures who flow through it, we find the pity and mystery of existence in a city he described as 'a Human awful wonder of God!' (92)

Furthermore, Ackroyd does not depend solely on an imaginative re-creation of Blake and his world. He has obviously done considerable reading about Blake, including some of the most important recent studies. At first I hoped this would result in a synthesis of what we know about Blake with an imaginative re-creation of Blake's life. But as I read on, I felt increasingly uneasy about, to put it bluntly, the basis in reality for many of Ackroyd's statements.

Sometimes this is obviously a matter of mistakes. The "Great Terror" of 1795, which marked the climacteric of the [French] Revolution" (181) should read "of 1793-94." *The Book of Ahania* and *The Book of Los* were not "printed on the back of each other" (179); perhaps what is meant is that the versos of the copper plates of one were used for etching the other, but according to Joseph Viscomi the six *Ahania* designs were etched back to back on three plates.

(*William Blake and the Art of the Book*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 287). Blake's *Newton* is not a "painting" (194); it is a color-printed drawing. The works of Boehme cannot have "been highly influential during all the religious disputations of the mid-sixteenth century" (149), as Boehme was born in 1575. When Blake said that the engravings for the "Law edition" of Boehme were so beautiful that Michelangelo could not have done better, he did not single out the frontispiece (149). "A copy [of the 1797 *Night Thoughts*] printed on vellum" (203) was not exhibited and is not otherwise known to have existed, though a single *Night Thoughts* illustration on vellum does exist and may have been used for promotional purposes. Blake cannot have been executing engravings for the Wedgwood catalogue at the time that he was writing *Milton*; *Milton* was written by 1810, and the Wedgwood engravings date from 1819. For the same reason the illustrations to *Milton's L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, some of which bear 1816 watermarks, cannot have been executed "while [he was] working on *Milton* itself" (310). Charles and Elizabeth Aders were not "a German couple" (341); Charles (Karl) was indeed German, but Elizabeth was English, the daughter of the well-known engraver Raphael Smith. Sometimes I found myself wondering whether what I was reading was a new discovery that Ackroyd hadn't bothered to document or a simple error. Could one of Blake's engravings have been printed in *The Conjuror's Magazine* (194)? Was there really an "Ellesmere edition" of Chaucer's *Caunterbury Tales* with "illustrations of the pilgrims in the margins" that R. H. Cromek could have come upon in Halifax, giving him the idea of proposing the subject to Thomas Stothard (271)? Which writings of Paracelsus were "readily available" (147) in the 1790s? They would have had to be available in English if they were going to help Blake at this time, and it would be very useful to know what they were. How do we know that Blake's accuser John Scofield "had been a fustian cutter in Manchester" (244)?

A word also needs to be said about the illustrations and their captions. The reproductions vary from good to poor, but the captions are at times uninformative or even misinforming. Some of the plates are given designations like "Plate from *The Book of Urizen*," "Plate from *Europe*," and "Plate from *Milton*," without plate numbers or copy designations. A page from *Vala* is designated as "plate from *Night the Third*," while plate 99 of *Jerusalem* is captioned "*The last page of Jerusalem*." What can explain such extraordinary indifference to detail?

The "source notes" for the book are squeezed, three columns to a page, into pages 372-82. Sometimes the information is sparse. If you want to know who wrote the article cited as "Blake and Cromek" in *Modern Philology*, 344" (379, col. 3, n. 50), or the year or the volume number, you're going to have to do some research. This is true for a number of other notes. "All quotations taken from Wagenknecht, *Visionary Poetics*, 39, 41, and 46" reads note

72 on col. 2, 381; but the author of *Visionary Poetics* is correctly identified in the Bibliography as Joseph A. Wittreich. Even when citations are ample, doubt may persist. Much of the biographical annotation cites G. E. Bentley, Jr.'s *Blake Records* and *Blake Records Supplement* so as to make it seem as if the information there is presented as being entirely authentic. Of course *Blake Records* is so very useful because the editor has not screened out statements that he may disagree with, although he may sometimes express his disagreement. For example, Ackroyd presents the well-known story, attributed to Thomas Butts, that

Mr. Butts calling one day found Mr. and Mrs. Blake sitting in this summer-house, freed from 'those troublesome disguises' which have prevailed since the Fall. 'Come in!' cried Blake; it's only Adam and Eve, you know! (154)

Ackroyd comments that "Thomas Butts . . . is highly unlikely to have invented or even conceived such a story," but the question is whether or not he told it at all. It is one of the numerous undocumented anecdotes printed by Alexander Gilchrist. Ackroyd reports neither Bentley's dismissal of the story nor his noting that according to Butts's grandson Thomas Butts said there was no truth in it (*Blake Records*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969, 154). Similarly doubtful is the account of Blake's falling upon a wife beater "with such counter violence of reckless and raging rebuke . . . that he recoiled and collapsed" (155). This story originates with A. C. Swinburne, who does not tell where he got it.

Unfortunately, such questionable statements pervade Ackroyd's *Blake*. The view that Blake did not advertise the prints "Albion Rose," "Our End is Come," and "Lucifer and the Pope in Hell" because of "their implicit political references" (168) is hard to sustain, as contemporary purchasers would hardly be in a position to guess what those references might be. And why would Robert Southey need to be stimulated by Blake's *Spiritual form of Nelson* (149) to write his *Life of Nelson*? There is also a tendency to present the merely speculative as true without any attempt at proof. Some major examples concern *Vala*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*. Ackroyd believes that Blake wrote out "the first thirty-six pages [of *Vala*] in an elegant copperplate hand" while still living in Lambeth (236) and continued work in Felpham, where, in the summer of 1802 "he decided to transcribe a fair copy. . . . The verses would be printed in conventional letterpress, and, as with the [Hayley] *Ballads*, an engraving would be placed at the end of each 'book' or 'chapter'" (237). It might be possible to present evidence for this view, and perhaps to account for why pages of such great size would be needed for printer's copy, but all we have here is mere assertion. (The *Ballads* analogy alone will not do—*Jerusalem* has a design at the end of each chapter, yet no one argues that it was meant for letterpress). Of *Milton* and

Jerusalem we are told: "in fact they were not necessarily 'written' at all, unless Blake jotted down first drafts on pieces of paper, but created with quill and graver on the copper plate itself" (294). In other words these works were either first written in manuscript—for what else is writing a draft on paper?—or they weren't. What evidence exists for the latter? We have Blake's assertion that the verses were dictated, but the principal Blake manuscripts we have—the Notebook and *The Four Zoas*—show ample evidence of revision, and it may be that in this instance as in so many others Blake was making figurative use of a Miltonic tradition. It's clear that Ackroyd prefers one alternative, for a paragraph later he envisions Blake as "no doubt falling upon the copper in 'the Heat of my Spirits.'"

In his conception of Blake's character Ackroyd wisely avoids the over-idealization of Blake embraced by some of his early biographers. His Blake is a figure of opposition, as capable of alienating his friends as of opposing injustice. This is a psychologically convincing view, but there are times when Ackroyd's views of Blake's quarrels seem one-sided. We've learned to think of what Hayley's side of the story would have been, but it seems a bit much to say "he was princely in his patronage" (221), especially as Hayley was more employer than patron. We have also learned that Cromek's side should be taken more seriously than it once was, but few would endorse, as Ackroyd does, Cromek's letter refusing to pay Blake to engrave the dedicatory design "To the Queen." Cromek's statement that the dedication would be to Blake's advantage and not his own is certainly untrue, as is shown by Cromek's putting the Queen at the head of his list of subscribers. Cromek alone was in a position to profit by this, Blake having no share in the sales of *The Grave*. In general, however, Ackroyd's conception of Blake's character seems to me a just one, as, for example, expressed in this analysis of the correspondence with Hayley:

There are occasions when it seems he has almost lost control over his personality or, rather, that its various aspects jostle for attention—the visionary and the tradesman, the poet and the fantasist, the prophet and the hypocrite, the passive servant and the self-righteous autodidact. All these various selves seem then to strive for mastery, and it is possible to see even here in the chaos of Blake's despair one of the sources for the drama of his Prophetic Books, where various faculties and aptitudes are engaged in a constant battle for supremacy. In moments of vision, however, all is reconciled—just as in his life the bewildering complexities of his behaviour can be transformed in an epiphany and, for a moment, all is healed. (256)

Also valuable is Ackroyd's relating Blake to a certain English tradition of eccentricity, in no reductive sense. At moments one senses that this could have been a different kind of book, focussing on Blake's character rather than

attempting to be a study of both life and works. Yet this would be to concede that the works are too difficult in their detail to form part of a general biography, which would be a dismal conclusion in any case but especially dismal for someone who never travelled further from London than Sussex and whose life was *in* his works to such a great degree. I still resist such a conclusion and can only say that despite its impressive literary qualities, psychological insight, and sense of the period, Peter Ackroyd's *Blake* is a disappointment.

Eugenie R. Freed, "A Portion of His Life": *William Blake's Miltonic Vision of Woman*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1994. \$60.

Reviewed by SHEILA A. SPECTOR

In his essay, "Persecution and the Art of Writing," Leo Strauss theorizes that during periods of political oppression, when "some political or other orthodoxy was enforced by law or custom" (32), iconoclastic writers developed a mode of exoteric composition, "writing between the lines," as a means of circumventing censorship.¹ In these Straussian texts, the surface argument would appear to be quite conventional, often even bland, to satisfy the more casual or careless readers. However, these writers would also employ specific structural and stylistic techniques by which the more persistent and intelligent readers could discern "the truth about all crucial things" (25). Although ours is not a period of overt governmental repression, still, as many on both sides of the political spectrum have argued, the numerous cultural *isms* dominating today's critical discourse have had the effect of enforcing orthodoxy through custom, if not law, to the point that writers often impose some form of self-censorship in order to avoid being labeled ideologically impure.² Such is apparently the case with "A Portion of His Life": *William Blake's Miltonic Vision of Woman*.

¹ Originally published in *Social Research* (November 1941): 488-504, "Persecution and the Art of Writing" was reprinted as the first essay of a book by the same title ([Glencoe, IL.: Free Press, 1952], 22-37).

² This is hardly an original observation. For example, Phillip E. Johnson, professor of law at the University of California, Berkeley, notes in a recent issue of *Academe*, "the principle threat to academic freedom these days comes not from ministers, or trustees, or university administrators, but from the dominant ideologies among students and faculty" ("What [If Anything] Hath God Wrought: Academic Freedom and the Religious Professor" in *Academe: Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* 81.5 (1995): 19).

Instead of presenting an explicit exposition of her revisionist interpretation of the female in Blake, Eugenie R. Freed seems to have placed "the truth about all crucial things" between the lines. While on the surface hers appears to be a conventional analysis of Miltonic influences on four major female characters in Blake's myth, in fact, formal and stylistic characteristics suggest that Freed's true purpose can be found only "between the lines," or, to be more exact, in the last seven pages of her text.

"A Portion of His Life" reads like a traditional study of the ways in which Blake absorbed and adapted Miltonic elements to create Thel, Enitharmon, Ololon and Jerusalem, major female characters in his myth. In the first chapter, "Blake's Miltonic Vision," Freed establishes the biographical, cultural and literary evidence for her belief that "Milton's poetry is not 'backdrop' alone, but *also* provides much of the raw material of Blake's" (19). As she notes, Blake did not passively incorporate the source material into his prophecies but, rather, "collapses Milton's universe into one of his own, which he has fabricated by the fusion of apparently conflicting Miltonic elements" (25). By transcending Milton's polarity of good and evil, Blake is able to focus on emotional and imaginative levels which supercede the conventional moral duality. As a result, while Thel, Enitharmon, Ololon and Jerusalem are obviously derived, respectively, from the Lady of *Comus*, Eve, Sin and Nature, their characterizations are based "even more on the *substance* of Milton's works, the transmitted words, phrases, images and ideas that had embedded themselves in the matrix of Blake's own imagination" (34). But in contrast to Milton, who subordinates women, Blake considers the "female portion" to be "an essential part of [man's] spiritual being" (31).

In the ensuing six chapters, Freed explores the Miltonic dimensions of these specific women. Chapter 2 is devoted to an analysis of the ways Thel can be viewed as laying the negative foundation for Blake's vision of woman. As a criticism of the idealized concept of chastity found in *Comus*, *The Book of Thel* provides the first example of the Female Will, a woman who erroneously withholds her sexuality. Thus, she is used ultimately to affirm a positive attitude towards sexuality as a necessary commitment to life on earth. Freed believes that "Thel, inspired by Blake's complex response to Milton's treatment of what appeared to Blake as obdurate chastity in *Comus*, deplores the loss of Paradise. And she rejects the only alternative offered to man: coming to terms with experience, which includes procreation and generation, in the fallen world" (43).

Next, Freed turns to Enitharmon as a woman who actualizes the choices rejected by Thel. Chapter 3 analyzes Enitharmon's birth, presenting her relationship with Los as a kind of "material matrix" for Los's own creativity. That is, as his female counterpart, she is essential for his artistic functioning, a necessary element to the androgynous union