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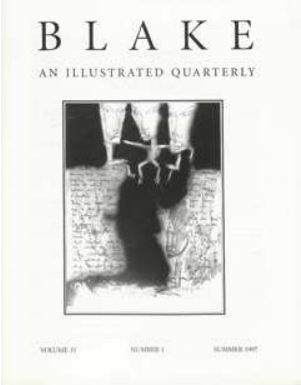

R E V I E W

Frank Vaughan, Again to the Life of Eternity: William Blake's Illustrations to the Poems of Thomas Gray

Christopher Heppner

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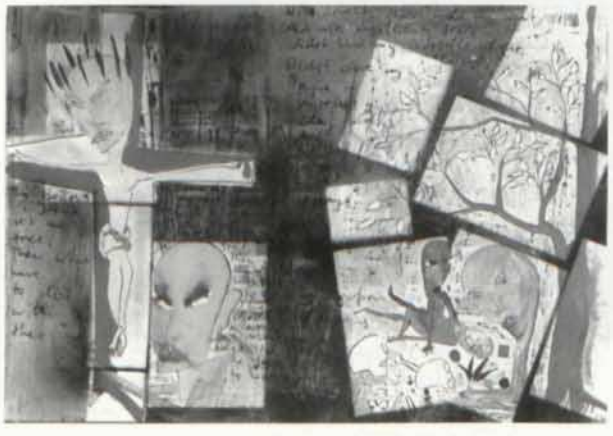
The Poison Tree

London



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R E V I E W S

Frank Vaughan, *Again to the Life of Eternity: William Blake's Illustrations to the Poems of Thomas Gray*. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1995. 139 pp. $65.

Reviewed by CHRISTOPHER HEPPNER

First the book itself. It is large and handsome, and one opens it with a pleasure that does not quite survive unmodified through the process of reading. Susquehanna University Press should find and use both a good designer and a good copy-editor. The text is laid out in single wide and long column format on a large page, with rather small print; it is not a comfortable page to read. In addition, it looks as if the text was simply run through a spell checker. Errors are of the kind that notoriously escapes such programs—Lawrence Stone, for instance, is cited as having written of the "apparent rise in the amount of martial unhappiness, leading to adultery and martial breakdown" (111); I live in hope, but fear that is not what Stone wrote. A good copy editor could have taught Vaughan the difference between "as" and "like," that "Similar to the speaker, Blake also . . ." (100) will not do, and that "at" cannot consort with both verbs in "the opening lines at which she both stares and personifies" (68). Such an editor would also have caught sentences like the following: "Thus, against this social background, Blake's handmaid concept is a belief in the 'gentle subservience ministering to harmony' . . . which [while?] the apparent feminine detachment expresses to some degree the period's gender disharmony" (111). A university press should be able to do better than this for the reader.

The viewer is better served; all 116 of the Gray illustrations are reproduced in high resolution glossy black and white, though the plates are low in contrast, so that the white background to the texts of the poems appears as a middle grey against which the texts scarcely stand out, though they remain clearly legible. The text makes many references to earlier illustrations by Bentley and others, but none is reproduced.

Vaughan has both a great deal of information, and a program to advance, which is laid out in the Introduction. This embraces a historical and political contextualization, which concludes:

> The Gray designs, if they are to be viewed as an intelligible whole and not as an elaborate but discontinuous series of responses, need to be viewed as Blake's composite works are now viewed. As [sic] the composite works, the Gray designs represent either the events and ideas of the period, or represent the essen-

> tial principles inherent in the events, and/or show Blake forming principles through his use of the forms of literature and the Bible. (15)

Vaughan thus claims that there is a program, structured like one of Blake's own poems, that makes the whole series "an intelligible whole." On a more local scale, Blake's handwritten list of the titles of individual designs before each poem is interpreted as a sign that each set of illustrations constitutes a narrative created by Blake.

That leaves unaccounted for the place of Gray's poems in these Blakean narratives. Vaughan writes that the illustrations use gentle persuasion rather than confrontation to achieve the reeducation and refocusing of the viewer's perspective (17). But Vaughan also suggests that Blake kept the printed form of Gray's poems (he could have written them out again in his own hand) as a way of asserting "an opposition between the public and mechanical vision of Gray and the private and spontaneous vision of Blake as it expands from the kernel in which it started" (19). The volume (the 1790 Murray edition given to Blake by Flaxman) gives the poems not in chronological order, but in one that "makes organic sense by imitating the natural life cycle, which Blake sought to thwart in the design set" (19). Different models of the relationship coexist within these statements: "Accommodation or transformation" and "Gentle . . . persuasion" (17), but also "opposition," "thwart[ing]," and confrontation. And sympathy too: "Blake did perceive Gray as being some sort of visionary kin because Gray saw the remnants of the Ancients . . ., but his kinship with Gray is complex and not wholehearted" (20). We shall see how this works out in looking at Vaughan's readings of specific designs.

In outlining the general plan governing the illustrations Vaughan builds on one discerned earlier by Irene Tayler, who wrote that Blake had in mind "a broad division of the poems into three groups or movements." The first group comprises Gray's early poems, the second the Pindaric odes, translations and two other later poems, the third the *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. The evidence Tayler offers for Blake's grouping is that each begins with a design showing the poet at work, the first as a youthful poet, with curly hair in an abandoned fervor, the second as a seated and more sedate figure, the third as almost grotesquely hunched over: "the surroundings . . . grow increasingly specific and detailed, and so place Gray increasingly in the mundane rather than the eternal world."[1]

Vaughan wants more than that simple outline. He sees "a substructure of order . . . that is consistent with Blake's other prophecies." He describes a first section that begins with the "failure of the imagination to arise in *Spring*," which leads to "a process of education." Then follows the second section, which

> begins with *Progress*, a series shaping itself around man's rejection of an empirical or experimental self-definition. . . . Beginning with the dual notions of 'Study' given in *Progress* 2, and then through *Progress, Bard*, the three translation series, and *Music*, the movement flows through the recognition of one's existence in a community of error, moves through the nadir of experience and then toward an actual rejection of the notion that man exists primarily as a material being.

Then the third "movement":

> Beginning with the *Clarke* series and the "Author" in *Elegy* 1, we see a confrontation of the last . . . infirmity of the fallen mind that must be overcome, belief in death as it is really belief in the primacy of the material world. The movement in *Clarke* and *Elegy* is a tentative movement forward toward the postlapsarian world, an ambiguous hope that the imagination can arise again. (30)

Vaughan writes that "Once aware of Blake's revolutionary, prophetic intent we can see how he wove connections between designs through his use of repeated figures, through color, through compositional elements, and through thematic interests" (29). He adds a warning: "when we read the Gray designs as a totality, we need to avoid looking into the logic and emotion of the text to find Blake's rationale. We should not presume the designs are more or less dependent upon the text for their order. We should not presume the primacy of the text—though the designs are 'illustrations'" (30). This sounds potentially dangerous advice—to urge the *avoidance* of evidence that would seem relevant, if not necessarily completely determinative, is a risky strategy.

Vaughan is honest and open; he declares his program, which we can test against his readings of the designs. If the program leads to illumination, good; if it avoids, obscures, or distorts what is visible, we shall be justified in questioning it. The problematic nature of Vaughan's situation as interpreter is universal and unavoidable; the interpreter needs an initial hypothesis with which to read and assess evidence, but must also be sensitive to visual evidence that disqualifies that hypothesis; we are always within the hermeneutical circle, unable to know adequately both detail and the whole, while condemned to move ceaselessly between the two in the quest for illumination. Only a few illustrations can be looked at in a review, but I shall try to give a feel of the modes of argument in play.

The attempt to split Blake's illustrations away from Gray's text begins immediately. The first illustration, showing in Blake's own title "The Pindaric Genius recieving his Lyre," draws this comment: "Yet for all the harmony in flight be-

[1] Irene Tayler, *Blake's Illustrations to the Poems of Gray* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971) 24.

tween poet and swan, and for all the upward determination, the lyre is received into the left hand while the bridle is held, if ignored, in the stronger right hand. Finally, *Spring* 1 is also an image of receptivity, not an image of actual playing or 'uttering' that is necessary for the prophet/poet by Blake's definition" (37). Perhaps; but the loose bridle could also be read as imaging the perfect sympathy between rider and mount, and one could point out that Blake has shown exactly what his title declares, the poet "recieving his lyre"; the second illustration shows "Gray writing his Poems," the natural sequel. Even Blake invokes the descent of Muses in the opening plate of *Milton* as a prelude to the utterance of prophetic song; he has illustrated an exactly analogous process here. Vaughan has been too impatient, too intent upon being "Blakean" to remember that Blake himself accepts the sequence that he illustrates in Gray.

The third illustration to *Spring* shows "The Purple Year awaking from the Roots of Nature. & The Hours suckling their Flowery Infants." The whole design is said to "focus on delusion"; the figure of the Purple Year is said to personify "the energy of spring" and to have "a look of exhilaration on his face"; yet he "is also fixed by two flying, bare-breasted females" and "for all his vigor he cannot leap upward from the off-balanced, thrown-back position he is in. Even if he did manage to lift himself up, he would wreak havoc on the harmonious creative circular flow. . . . If he leaped up he would become entangled both into the swirling tendrils above and the flowery-infant-suckling Hours below." He "expresses male force with a zeal that can only result in a casual or wanton destruction of maternal love and joy." This sexual tension is generalized: "Blake is aware that for the human form to stay in the dance-like beauty of the circular swirl, all the forms must be feminine, reflective of the natural joy and energy, not powerful, male, creative, primary" (38).

When I look at the design, I see a figure with a solar halo (noted by Vaughan) who personifies the central energy that motivates all the figures that fly and play; the free but energized (note the tension in the right arm) curve of his body has been harmonized with the swirl of the tendril above him, that seems almost to caress his body; male and female elements are in concord. He seems about to rise and enter the aerial games played above and around him. Vaughan has warned us not to look into the "logic and emotion of the text to find Blake's rationale," but his "fixed" is a vague substitute for the text's "wake the purple year," which Blake seems to have accepted—the two pointing figures are sounding a wake-up call, and that in turn suggests a happy union of male and female figures in reciprocal action within the design. Blake is playing around and with, not against, Gray's imagery. I am not persuaded by Vaughan's attempt to insert a warring sexual politics here; one only has to turn to *Spring* 5 and even better *Long Story* 1, which Blake has titled "A Circular Dance," to see images of male and female figures together in circular dances (I am assuming that the figure at the bottom of *Long Dance* 1 is male, though I would not bet my last dollar on that).

Vaughan often shows a readiness to find negative connotations amounting to moral failure in the figures of Blake's designs, usually in the search for evidence to support the view that Blake is critical of Gray. The Muse of *Spring* 4, for instance, is described thus: "while in *Spring* 3, the creative force was humanized as an independent and possibly destructive male force, in *Spring* 4 the force has become a feminine dream-vision suffering from acedia, a frustrated, directionless intensity" (39). Is escape possible from Vaughan's Scylla and Charybdis antinomies? Sometimes figures seem to fall foul of both simultaneously; after setting up "harmonious creative circular flow" as an image of the desirable, Vaughan responds like this when he finds it in *Spring* 5: the circular dance there is "another example of the bliss of ignorance. . . . a ritualized behavior, an instinctive unity, a oneness in nonrational activity that ignores the 'reality' below. It is less an example of the desperation of *carpe diem*, however, than the joyous denial of mortal limits that expresses eternity in the fallen world" (41-42). Does one respond to this with applause, or with deep sadness over humanity's apparent inability to both know and celebrate simultaneously?

Vaughan reads the last of the series, *Spring* 6, "Summer Flies reproaching the Poet," like this: "The male creative energy has dissolved below the threshold of a potential for radicalized, destructive bursts of energy." The cause is left a mystery: "There has been a failure to rise, and a reduction in the level of energy, but what remains are four questions: What happened? How did it happen? Why did it happen? Where do we go from here?" (42). Here is Keynes on the same design, commenting on the winged flies that point at the figure of the poet: "His face has a sullen expression, and Blake takes the opportunity to reproach him for his celibate life. Two pink-winged flies hover above him pointing derisive fingers."[2] Keynes is basing this on the poem: "Poor Moralist! and what art thou? / A solitary fly! / Thy joys no glitt'ring female meets . . . ." Surely Keynes is right; Blake is responding to the autobiographical ironies of Gray's poem, and rooting his illustration firmly in the text. Vaughan's insistence on reading the illustrations as far as possible without the text has led him to a generalized comment on the politics of sex, where Keynes finds a more concrete textual reference. Vaughan could have built his case for a weakening of "male creative energy" on Keynes's particular, but there is no reference to it in his text, doubtless due to an insistence that "Blake did not seek dialogue or dialectic with the individual poems" (33).

One of Vaughan's interests, as the Introduction makes clear, is in finding broader political implications in Blake's

[2] Geoffrey Keynes, *William Blake's Water-Colours Illustrating the Poems of Thomas Gray* (Chicago: J. Philip O'Hare in association with Trianon Press, 1972) 43.

designs—sexual politics are not the only kind in play. Blake without doubt was a deeply political animal, but one should think about the implications of his comments, which range from "I am really sorry to see my Countrymen trouble themselves about Politics" (*E* 580) to "Are not Religion & Politics the Same Thing? Brotherhood is Religion" (*E* 207). Blake's politics are not something to be taken easily or for granted.

Sometimes Vaughan seems to use political events to provide an analogy to the events of a poem; thus he reads *Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat* through a parallel with what had been happening in France—"By 1798 France had looked outside of herself as a predator and attempted to assimilate another (i.e., Switzerland)" (46). This constitutes analogy rather than analysis, in the style made familiar by some New Historicist critiques—juxtaposition rather than close connection; I am not sure that the method illuminates the designs in any specific way, but it does produce an unexpected and interesting commentary.

Sometimes Vaughan claims a closer kind of connection. We can follow one strand of political interpretation through the the use made of George III. In *On a Distant Prospect of Eton College* the reference to "Henry's holy Shade" is interpreted as including a contemporary allusion: "the connection between Henry VI and George III in the public eye, especially in the highly charged 1790s, was obvious. Both were widely considered to be pious, educated, royal innocents, and, eventually, perfect gentlemen" (49). George, we are told, underwent an "apotheosis" around 1795 in which he "came to embody the image of the 'Perfect Gentleman' that could counter both the crude and amoral English Jacobins and the unrestrained Napoleon" (50).

This sympathetic and popular George III is invoked again in *Hymn to Adversity* 3, which Blake has titled in the words of the poem "And purple tyrants vainly groan / With pangs unfelt before, unpitied and alone." Vaughan argues that Blake has chosen "to avoid the speaker's generalized gloating over a monarch's fall, and to expose the viewer to a moment of individual pain" (63). But Gray's words are cited by Blake in his title, and speak of "groan" and "pangs" that are "unpitied"; Vaughan's reading raises questions he does not answer about the relationship he sees between Blake's chosen titles, which he generally reads as evidence for a strongly Blakean narrative component, and the illustrations they name or describe. Vaughan here sees Blake as "insisting the viewer see the mercy of Jehovah over the justice of Elohim" (63), but surely a "purple [with blood as well as royalty?] tyrant" is likely to win Blake's anger? He was not sparing in *America*, nor in the episode in the garden at Felpham (whatever exactly was said there); why should we expect him to be more generous here?

In his commentary on the eighth design for *The Progress of Poesy*, Vaughan writes: "asses' ears were also associated by caricaturists of the day with faulty patronage, especially George III's 'patronage of unworthy artists'" (71). George appears again in the commentary on the seventh and ninth designs for *The Bard*. In the former, we have "the pain the English monarchy too commonly and obviously itself inflicted through imprisonment, Tyburn's tree, press-ganging, conscription, and flogging" (79)—a "purple tyrant" in action? In the ninth, we see "not only Richard's sudden recognition of what he had done, but also George's recognition of what he was causing—England's loss, and its immorality" (80). In the eighth design for *The Fatal Sisters*, the king that "shall bite the ground" was identified by Erdman as George III, shown in what Vaughan describes as "ground-pounding, impotent rage" (89).

I have the uncomfortable feeling that George has become a floating signifier, a name that can be attached to any figure that can be associated with any of the variegated and even contradictory qualities that were at one time or another attributed to George. Only in the case of *The Fatal Sisters* is the association based on a claim of visual resemblance.

Another, differently structured, example. In the designs for *The Fatal Sisters*, Vaughan reads the Fates in the fifth design as transformed into representatives of the working poor slaving at their home looms; this is not impossible, though the only specific evidence adduced is that "they are all . . . bare-headed with their hair tied up in the back as an expression of modesty and restraint . . . the foremost woman has on a common, unfashionable shoe that Blake didn't color" (88). Of the next design, Vaughan writes that "the distraught look is gone. Three women, two whose eyes we see and at least one more behind, willfully participate in the cruelty of an execution as they weave." From victims they have been transformed into images of the "brief but violent dictatorship" of the revolutionary mob (89). The illustrations are thus made to track a contemporary understanding of the progress of the Revolution in France.

One can sympathize with the program Vaughan has outlined without being quite convinced; for instance, the "shoe" is probably just a bare foot, and the feet of the women seem bare also in the ninth design, in which the women are in armor again (no longer images of the working poor) and their hair is bound up again under a headdress, though not as an indication of "modesty and restraint." It is always tempting but risky to attach fixed meanings to signs whose sense is largely determined by context. Vaughan's narrative program for these designs has some attraction, but is based on slim and uncertain evidence, and in general his political readings rouse more interest than conviction in this reader.

Sometimes Vaughan's search for a program results in doubtful readings of the visual evidence. Blake has given the sixth design for *On a Distant Prospect of Eton College* the title "Yet see how all around them wait / The vultures of the Mind," referring to the passions Gray has listed:

Disdainful Anger, palid Fear,
And Shame that skulks behind;
Or pining Love shall waste their youth,
Or Jealousy, with rankling tooth,
That inly gnaws the fiercest heart;
And Envy wan, and faded Care,
Grim-visag'd comfortless Despair,
And Sorrow's piercing dart.

Vaughan makes no attempt to describe or identify the monsters except for the "Despair" that embraces one of the girls, but as in *Ode on the Spring* makes a sharp distinction between male and female figures. Males meet these vultures through education, females through "maternal charity." The boys "see the monsters and are in worried flight," while the girls "do not seem to be aware of the monsters" (51). The boys are involved "only with their own plight. Their torments stem from their own learned (i.e., Etonian), torturing metaphysics . . . or ignorance, which creates a rationale for their fearful monsters" (52).

This reading of the design worries me. The boys do not in my judgment "see" the monsters; Blake has made the monsters translucent to convey precisely that point. The children feel the monsters inwardly, are threatened by the feelings that they represent. The boy at our left moves away from a scaly, long eared creature with a serpent wrapped around an arm—possibly pallid Fear; almost certainly the piggish snout "that skulks behind" is Shame. The boy carries a bat and looks back over his shoulder with dismay; has he been guilty of some fearful and/or shameful behavior on the field? Has he just been bowled out, and feels caught between Shame and Anger? The other boy runs forward, apparently carefree, with a hat in his right hand (cf. the ninth illustration). Jealousy (?—greenish in any case) has ghostly arms around him, and Anger looks disdainfully at or through him: another mini-tragedy in the offing?

Of the girls, the one playing with a small ball—not illustrative of "maternal charity"—may be safe for the moment, but the other, holding a doll in her hands, is embraced by "comfortless Despair," and the weird serpentine and greenish head of some passion—Care? Envy?—descends apparently towards her, though possibly towards the ball-player. The girl looks at her doll with an apparently impassive face; does she see there a future illegitimate or dead child? That perhaps takes the narrative implications further than is warranted, but Vaughan's approach sidesteps the question of just what these chidren are doing, and how they relate to the specific passions depicted, in favor of a sexual differentiation which does not hold up well. Blake has invented his monsters to represent specific passions, and there is meaning in their connection with the games the children play, games which do not fully support Vaughan's focus on sexual difference.

In the next design, Vaughan suggests that the figure of the Queen of Death "symbolically is a hermaphrodite state, a parody of the eternal androgynous state"; he supports this reading by suggesting that "The source of the breasts . . . appears to be the crushing action of the serpent" (53). But the fully exposed and rounded breasts make this quite implausible: there are limits to what a serpent can do as a corset.

One last reading. Vaughan gives a political turn to the illustrations of *The Bard*, who is judged to be guilty of the error of "Samson, or that of the English Jacobin's vision of freedom turned into accepting physical war in place of mental warfare." Vaughan describes the Bard in *Bard* 1 like this: "he stares out toward the viewer blankly. He is barefoot on solid rock, Blake's common devices of 'abstract reasoning and material substance'. . . . His dull blue gown is ornamented with stars, generally in Blake an expression of the fixed Newtonian, material, and rational universe as well as a familiar symbol of the occult or magical" (76); a decidedly negative portrait. In defending this view, Vaughan argues that Blake's acknowledged "affinity for 'The Bard' in 1809 had little to do with the intensity of the Bard's self-righteous wrath and desire for oxymoronic 'retributive justice'" (75). Here is Blake's statement from the 1809 Descriptive Catalogue: "Weaving the winding sheet of Edward's race by means of sounds of spiritual music and its accompanying expressions of articulate speech is a bold, and daring, and most masterly conception" (*E* 541). That identifies the weaving of a winding sheet—which does imply a death—as a "masterly conception," without any anxiety over its retributive ethics. "[S]piritual music" and "articulate speech" are weapons in the intellectual warfare with which Blake was always in sympathy, but in addition Blake's painting (Butlin 655) shows the royal figures prostrated below the Bard, with blood-red tendrils descending from the harp to run over them and their horses; intellectual war can have physical results, of which Blake was not afraid. Vaughan sometimes gives the impression of aiming at a politically correct version of a Blake who never welcomed the overthrow of those who injured society, despite the implications of, for instance, the prints *Our End is Come* and *Lucifer and the Pope in Hell*.

The critique of the Bard becomes more ambiguous when applied to his harp: in *Bard* 1 "the yellow harp he holds is symbolically too large to be mobile," and is said to possess a transfixing "rigidity"; however, the breaking of the harp shown in *Bard* 2 indicates "the death of true inspiration" (76), and the broken harp is an image of "what has happened to the true revolutionary spirit of the 1780s" (77). Its meaning is shifted very easily from rigidity to revolutionary freedom, as George III is shifted from perfect gentleman to causer of England's harms within the space of a few designs. I agree that meaning is contextual, but there must be some specific element in a design to trigger or attract such extra-visual meaning, and I see none here.

The reading of the designs for *The Bard* has some real interest, and Vaughan's reservations over the titular figure deserve to be followed up, but his overall reading is rendered less persuasive by such inconsistencies. That typifies the book as a whole; it offers interestingly revisionist views of Blake's illustrations to Gray, making one think again about readings that one had come to take for granted. But it achieves this within the framework of an overall thesis that too often ignores or misreads details. In discussing *The Triumph of Owen*, for instance, Vaughan says that Owen "is wearing a ruby crest (III.4), as Blake picked up Gray's allusion to the real source of war, Satan (*Paradise Lost* IX.499)" (98). But is that Gray's allusion? Gray attached a note to his text stating that "The red Dragon is the device of Cadwallader, which all his descendants bore on their banners"; that note is a more likely source for what Blake has shown than Vaughan's suggestion. In addition, Milton describes Satan in the lines given not with a red crest, but as "Crested aloft, and carbuncle his eyes"; it is his eye, not his crest, which is red. Is any reference to the color red to be taken as an indication of a Satanic state of war? "Ruby tears" are shed from the Lion's "eyes of flame" in "The Little Girl Lost" (*E* 21), but most readers do not interpret this as a demonic sign in any simple sense; context, as always, plays a large part in determining the meaning of signs.

One's trust is further weakened by disturbing errors of fact. There is a reference to "Panofsky's unpublished essay on 'Perspective as Symbolic Form' held in xerox at the New York Institute of Fine Arts" (120n16); the essay was published in Berlin in 1927, then translated into several European languages; an English translation by Christopher S. Wood appeared in 1991. Joseph Viscomi is credited with the engraving of "the plates for the replication of the 'Songs' from *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, the plates of which still exist from the production of Alexander Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake* (New York: Phaeton Press, 1969)" (120n17). Viscomi wrote a fine essay to accompany the Manchester Etching Workshop facsimile, but he did not "engrave" the plates used for it. In the fourth design for *The Progress of Poesy*, Blake illustrates the lines "Perching on the Scepterd hand / Of Jove, thy magic lulls the feather'd king." Three lines before this Gray mentions the "Lord of War" of "Thracia's hills" curbing "the fury of his car." Vaughan conflates Mars and Jove in writing that "Blake's Lord of War is a large and congenial-looking man with curly black hair and beard" (69). Such errors distract the reader from the case Vaughan makes.

J. M. Q. Davies in his book on the Milton illustrations distinguishes between what he calls the "footnote hypothesis," which assumes that Blake's primary concern is to illuminate Milton's poems, and leads to our finding "our imagination moving in a predominantly 'vertical' direction between text and individual designs," and a competing alternative: if we assume Blake was roused "to a bolder and more comprehensive counterstatement in his illustrations than can be accommodated by this hypothesis . . . we would expect the internal orchestration of the particulars, the 'horizontal' progressions and relationships as they unfold in narrative sequence, to be at least as crucial to interpretation as their 'vertical' relation to the text."[3] The distinction is useful, though one can imagine other relationships at play—to previous illustrations of the same text, to Blake's illustrations of other texts, and so on. In Davies's language, Vaughan pays much more attention to "horizontal" than to "vertical" relationships, sometimes to the detriment of sensitivity to what Blake is responding to in Gray, and sometimes to what is actually portrayed.

The interpreter must remain open to the varied interactions that can occur at the interface between two creative and imaginative intellects. Each of Blake's designs or set of designs presents its own problems and potential riches. Vaughan has made us look again at Blake's response to Gray, and has raised interesting possibilities for interpreting them in the light of contemporary political history. But his specific interpretations bend the evidence uncomfortably at times, and should remind us that the search for a politically involved as well as politically correct Blake must respect both his other interests and the specifics of his texts and designs.

Angela Esterhammer, *Creating States: Studies in the Performative Language of John Milton and William Blake*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994. xvii + 245 pp. $45.

Reviewed by David L. Clark

In a book described as the concluding chapter of a decade long investigation of the aesthetic ideology, Jerome McGann argues that Blake is exemplary for radically resisting the "formal" and "organic principles of poetry and imagination" entrenched by Kant and Coleridge, principles unreflectively reproduced by a certain high romantic criticism ever since.[1] Blake's poems and designs are not, or not merely, "a dance of forms," McGann insists, but "the textual 'performances' of his imaginative communications" (32); they are "deed[s] of language" (18) and "a set of actions carried out in the world" (4), whose "'great task'" it is to effect "social and psychic overthrow" (25). Significantly, the critical rhetoric with which McGann brings out this

[3] J. M. Q. Davies, *Blake's Milton Designs: The Dynamics of Meaning* (West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press, 1993) 12.

[1] Jerome McGann, *Towards a Literature of Knoweldge* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1989). Page numbers hereafter cited in the body of the review.