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R E V I E W

David V. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*,
second edition

E. J. Rose

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REVIEWS

David V. Erdman. *BLAKE: PROPHET AGAINST EMPIRE*. 2nd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969. Pp. xxix + 546. \$12.50 (in paper covers, Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1969, \$3.50).

Reviewed by E. J. Rose, University of Alberta

In the *Yale Review* in 1954, Martin Price wrote that David Erdman had a tendency to convert "Blake's irony too easily into mere expose" and went on to say that there was a kind of "'conversion downwards' that throughout the book seems in effect to invert Blake's figural method into political pamphleteering." I doubt that it would be easy to find a critic of Blake more concerned with "Blake's figural method" than I, but I did not and still do not share Price's opinion. Price's charge is really the only one that can be made on a broad scale against Erdman's study. All other disagreements are of the kind that Erdman will defeat with additional evidence or include to extend his own interpretation.

Were I asked to defend historical criticism I should cite *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* as the best example of that kind of criticism I could name; its author is not only not limited by the methods of the historical critic, he is able to use those methods to great effect. *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* is obviously more than a study of Blake's historical allegory. The "ruthless allegorizing" Price found in Erdman's book is still there, but the reader would have to be extremely dull to come away from a reading of it without having understood and appreciated Erdman's rounded vision of Blake as a poet-prophet in continuing debate with not only his own times but all times. Like Thoreau, Blake does not simply read the "Times" he reads the Eternities.

Erdman's study of Blake deals thoroughly with one great wall of the poet-painter's palace of art, but it is obvious that he has viewed that palace from other directions. Erdman's overview of Blake is what prevents his detailing of the political ideas from becoming dry-as-dust. Many myopic Neoplatonic studies and thin but overly long "introductions" that neither possess Erdman's scrupulosity nor his well-informed perspective on the whole Blake have been published since 1953: would to God that all Blake critics wrote *Prophets*.

The revised edition of *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* leaves the book basically unchanged. Erdman has made corrections, alterations, minor changes, and a few elaborations in the text. He has also built much new information into the notes. While it is the destiny of a book of this kind to go encyclopaedic, it is to be regretted that so much of value interrupts necessarily the flow of the text. Reading *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* is like reading two books at once. Many of Erdman's pages look like the heavily-annotated pages of undergraduate editions of *Paradise Lost*. The invitation is out continually, of course, to add and add, and between 1953 and 1969 Erdman harvested much from his continuing study of Blake and the contributions of others--all of which he acknowledges in proper fashion. I suspect Erdman already has more to add to the next revision.

Future scholarship is bound to assume a talmudic relation to Erdman's midrash on Blake. While some of Erdman's interpretations and decipherings do not belong to the realm of "higher criticism," many others do. Critics who are not satisfied with "lower criticism" or with interpretations empirical in character, whether they are historical, biographical, bibliographical, or textual, will always mutter "caveat emptor." But Erdman hears the wing-beats of Blake's spirit as it moves across the deeps of his

works. In every chapter we get to know the whole Blake a little better through his rigorous explanation of the historical details. *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* makes good reading in combination with E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. In the two books the 1790's come alive in a remarkable way and Blake is seen in the midst of it all laboring by the light of his fiery forge.

Anagogical critics are still going to shake their collective heads at Rintrah as Pitt and similar identifications, but it is difficult, if not impossible, to quarrel with Erdman about any detail because he allows for other levels of interpretation while pressing his own. He, in fact, invites those other levels, perhaps more so in the revised edition than in the 1953 edition. What can one say about Erdman's book but "Read it!" It stands with Frye's *Fearful Symmetry* as one of the two great books on Blake.

QUERIES

1. W. H. STEVENSON: UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN

"Death's Door"

I was in Coverdale--a long way away from Blake country, I admit--a couple of weeks ago, and I stopped to look at an old mine entrance. After I had stopped, its resemblance to Blake's "Death's Door," especially as it appears in *America* plate 12, struck me. That is, the entrance consisted of a stone doorway (though without an actual door), roofed over with a large slab. What brought the similarity to my mind was that a sizeable tree was growing above the slab, its roots twining round the entrance (which went into a sloping hillside). Is it possible that, besides the other associations of this image, Blake, having seen such mine entrances in his own area, thought of them as "entrances to death" in yet another connotation? I have not been able to check whether anyone else has thought of this, or whether Kent and Surrey yield similar doorways in fact; but someone closer to this area than I am at present may find the idea interesting.

2. RUTHVEN TODD: C'AN BIELÓ, GALILEA, MALLORCA, SPAIN

Blake's Copy of Dante

"An anonymous visitor," presumed to be William Carey, wrote an adulatory obituary of Blake in the *Literary Gazette*, 18 August 1827, in which he mentions that he saw Blake working from his copy of "Sessi Velutello's Dante." Being more optimistic than anyone of my age has any right to be, I began to wonder what had happened to this copy. Unless it had been destroyed by fire or by "enemy action," it seemed unlikely to me that a 16th-century folio should have vanished from the face of the earth between 1827 and the present day. Probably, it seemed to me, either Mrs. Blake or Frederick Tat-ham, during a lean period, turned it into cash.