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R E V I E W

Pierre Boutang, William Blake

Simone Pignard

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## Reviews

Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr. *The Romantics on Milton: Formal Essays and Critical Asides* [Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Lamb, Landor, Hazlitt, Hunt, DeQuincey, Byron, Shelley, and Keats]. Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1970. Pp. 594. \$15.00

Reviewed by Andy P. Antippas

Miltonists, Romanticists, and historians of criticism must be grateful for the material plentifully garnered by Mr. Wittreich. He has harvested the references and allusions to Milton from the essays, journals, diaries, notebooks, marginalia, letters, reported conversations, and poems of the major writers of the Romantic period, and he has thus provided us with a *vade mecum* into the hearts and minds of those most perspicacious readers, and, not surprisingly, with a considerable amount of excellent reading.

Wittreich does not pretend to offer complete bibliographical apparatus, but, nonetheless, the cross-referenced notes at the end of every chapter contain everything of importance concerning the influence of Milton on the Romantics. The slighter remarks of Lamb, Landor, Hazlitt, Hunt, and DeQuincey and a brief description of Coleridge's lectures are listed in two appendices. The Coleridge section will no doubt be expanded when a new edition of this volume is called for and new material is made generally available. An additional appendix will serve to list any oversights such as the Milton references in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. de Selincourt, I, 35; DeQuincey, *Collected Writings*, ed. Masson, V, 211; and *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Rollins, I, 397.

Wittreich intelligently surmounts the dangers of Bartlettizing and avoids the atomism and gnomonic isolation of remarks by constantly quoting a sufficient amount of material to preserve the coherence and the context of each observation. This generous sampling itself assists in making the case Wittreich presents in his valuable introductory essay: namely, that the Romantics "are the unacknowledged architects of Milton criticism as we know it today" (p. ix), and that somehow, the pro-Miltonists and con were a party to either ignoring the issues raised by the Romantic critics or imperfectly labeling Romantic commentary as

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1 & 2 Two sketches, recto and verso, of "Isaiah foretelling the Crucifixion," by Blake, c. 1821. 4 3/4 x 3 inches. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.

too narrowly concerned with verse techniques or too radically Satanizing.

Additionally, the collection makes it clearer that Milton, more than Shakespeare, was the fulcrum and the omphalos of the critical theorizing of the period and especially of resolving the problem of the role and function of the poet. The Romantics decidedly exercised Wellek's "perspectivism" which "tries to see the object from all possible sides and is convinced that there *is* an object." As if in rejoinder to Johnson's *Life*, the Romantics numbered the streaks on the tulip and considered Milton as polemicist, Puritan, prophet, mythopoeicist, and poet; always before them, however, was the object of their deliberations, Milton the Man. It is more than chronologically appropriate, therefore, that the Blake selections begin the anthology.

In his literal-imaginativist way, Blake does apotheosize Milton the Man, and it is a testimony to the strength of character of Case Western Reserve Press that they printed the whole of *Milton* from the Keynes edition. In its new setting, jostled by similar if more parochially-formed expressions, *Milton* gains new significance and becomes at once more singular yet more conventional. Blake's other mode of criticism, his ninety-odd illustrations of Milton's poems, is an acknowledged omission (note 72, p. 21; note 22, p. 101). The cost would no doubt have been prohibitive and we can get by, at least for the time being, with Marcia R. Pointon's numerous reproductions and interesting commentary in *Milton and English Art*. All in all, Wittreich has demonstrated that the Romantics were Milton's fittest audience and that Blake was front row center.

Pierre Boutang. *William Blake*. Paris: Editions de l'Herne, 1970.

Reviewed by Simone Pignard

The publication of Pierre Boutang's *William Blake* by the Editions de l'Herne in 1970 indicated a renewed interest in Blake on the part of French critics and readers. Since Pierre Berger's monumental thesis (*William Blake, Mysticism et Poésie*, 1907), this is the first book in the French language which promised to be a substantial critical appraisal of Blake's works. Thus, it is not surprising that the book was received with such an outburst of passion (see the translations of some articles from *Le Monde* in the Winter 1971 issue of the *Blake Newsletter*). Following Pierre Leyris (the author of one of the articles), my main purpose here is to warn the reader against the numerous aberrations in Boutang's book. This work would perhaps have been tolerable in England or in the United States; but given the state of infamy of Blake criticism in France, this book might deprive a prospective Blake reader of the enthusiasm that the reading of Blake should arouse.

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Boutang's tone and attitude are truly appalling throughout his book. He repeatedly launches vehement attacks against previous translators (including André Gide and Madeleine Cazamian, without naming the latter). He presents himself as Blake's rightful Messiah who has come to deliver French readers of Blake from the evil of the aforementioned translators. He thus proceeds to re-translate a certain number of poems (the shorter ones), providing us with tedious justifications for his choice of one word over another. This leads to a considerable reduction of the purely critical portion of the book. If I were to adopt Boutang's polemical attitude, I could say that this reduction is all the better since, in the critical section, his complete misreading of Blake becomes unbearable.

We have, first, to put up with irritating phrases such as "the secret of this poem. . . ." One of the most blatant misreadings of Blake appears in Boutang's comments on the beginning of *Milton*: "It is strange that Blake, hyperbolic in his affirmation of human unity in the divine, so ambivalent (and restive!) toward the mystery of the singular election of the Jews, has built his demented and unbearable myth of the election of Albion, his deification of the English people as the original, genuine Jews" (p. 57). This, of course, refers to the opening lines of *Milton*:

I will not cease from Mental Fight,  
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand  
Till we have built Jerusalem  
In England's green & pleasant Land.

Boutang defines Blake's position as some sort of "spiritual nationalism." Pierre Leyris has already pointed out this unforgivable error, but I wish to stress it as a devastating example of literal reading. Even a beginning Blake student knows that the above lines do not, by any means, contain a strain of vulgar jingoism. One has to be aware of Blake's particular use of tradition. The equation of Jerusalem and England stems from the sole fact that Blake happens to be English by birth. On the superficial level, it is as simple as that. Further, Blake states again and again that Jerusalem has to be built where one stands, or to use popular terminology, here and now. But if, like Boutang, one insists that

Blake's Jerusalem is a native land, let me say that it is the native land of Imagination, not any specific geographical location. Likewise, the Bible for Blake does not relate the story of a precise people back there in the past; its world is present to us as we read it.

As for "the deification of the English people," Blake's treatment of Orc and revolution should sufficiently convey Blake's distrust of anything happening on a national level. The word "deification" itself is very inappropriate, as it implies a static beatification, whereas for Blake, the struggle to release the divinity in man, i.e. Imagination, never ceases. Likewise, every word in Boutang's assertion could be easily refuted. I insist on this passage because it clearly reveals the basic weakness of Boutang's criticism.

It would be pointless to go on with the list of Boutang's misreadings; I shall only focus for a moment on his treatment of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. The translations themselves are far too abstract. Then, Boutang commits the dreadful error of identifying the first person used in these poems with Blake himself. This shows an ignorance of Blake's subtle use of perspective (or point of view) in these poems, an element which is essential to their meaning. Besides, Boutang considers them as an independent unit, whereas they should be related to the total frame of Blake's works for a full understanding of them. For example, the consideration of "To Tirzah" leads Boutang to accuse Blake of "puritanism." This overlooks the role of the senses in what Blake calls "the Intellectual Battle," to say the least.

But somehow, Boutang manages to end his book with this rather astonishing assertion: "And I began to love Blake, not only his poetry, and to constitute my own vision of him--a vision that is both personal and true; how do I know that it is true? By the fact that it has transformed me along the way: the false does not transform you." (p. 264).

He succeeds indeed in building up his own "vision" of Blake, but whether or not it is still Blake's vision is another matter.

French students of Blake have an urgent need for competent and sensitive studies of Blake. Francis Léaud has started the drive, but his book, although a good one, constitutes but an introduction to Blake's universe.