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**BLAKE**

R E V I E W

D. G. Gillham, William Blake

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pp. 15-17 may not be the same character as the old man at the grave many pages later. Further, crutches are a traditional--and rather obvious--emblem for old age (see for example Geoffrey Whitney's *A Choice of Emblemes* [Leyden, 1586], p. 167), and the fact that two late eighteenth-century artists used this motif is insufficient evidence to indicate that one is borrowing from the other. After looking at Blake's designs for a few years it is easy to see his sources or influences everywhere, viewing all art through Blake-colored glasses. It would be wrong to restrain the fun of discovering such parallels, but source hunting should be guided by a wider sense of the pictorial traditions that shape late eighteenth-century art.

No reviewer of this book should end on a negative note. It is a splendid production for which all should thank Erdman, Moore, and the Clarendon. Its very presence contributes to, in a way silently comments upon, several trends in Blake studies. The recent predominance of scholarship over interpretation is strengthened, for no more than a few of the critical articles and books written in the last ten years will have the permanent value of the Concordance, Bentley's *Blake Records*, the Blake Trust facsimiles, or this edition of the *Notebook*. Erdman's insistence on giving equal attention to the *Notebook* as an artist's sketchbook as well as an author's manuscript once again asserts the interdependence of word and picture in Blake's life and work. I suspect that little of any real importance will be produced on Blake in the future which does not take into account both media. The author of a survey of Blake's reactions to nature published in a recent issue of *PMLA*<sup>3</sup> commented upon two approaches to Blake, the chronological and the thematic, and chose the latter. It is a bad selection. We will come to know more about the how and why of Blake's eternal forms only when we see them evolving as productions of time. The grand continuity of Blake's vision is not stasis; rather, it is evolution within a framework of personal development and historical change. The Clarendon edition of the *Notebook* will offer many insights into that process of creation for years to come.

3 Barbara F. Lefcowitz, "Blake and the Natural World," *PMLA*, 89 (1974), 121-31.

D. G. Gillham. *William Blake*. British Authors: Introductory Critical Series. General Ed., Robin Mayhead. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1973. Pp. 216. Cloth, \$12.95; paper, \$4.95.

Reviewed by Alicia Ostriker

D. G. Gillham is a horse of instruction. He is quite a good horse. He approaches Blake cautiously, sensibly, step by step, appearing to take nothing for granted. Ruminant, judicial, he works his way through the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, concentrating on the ethical implications of each Song, and of the two sets together. His stated assumptions, that the *Songs* form "an artistic whole," that their speakers "demonstrate a range of human potentialities," and that one can read them without reference to "background," or Blake's other works, or the biography and personality of the poet, run from the obvious to the acceptable. Gillham's readings are essentially those of his earlier work, *Blake's Contrary States* (Cambridge 1966), with most of the critical infighting omitted. A tone of sweet reasonableness prevails, and the method does elicit valuable insights about the characters of Blake's speakers, as well as some good generalizations about the Contraries--for example, a fine appreciation of the erotic elements in *Innocence*. But what of Gillham's nervousness about the social implications of *Experience*? What can one make, for example, of a reading of "The Voice of the Ancient Bard" which transforms William Blake into Edmund Burke, asserting that the poem shows us the folly of revolutionaries and the necessity of building on foundations of past tradition? What of a reading of "A Little Girl Lost" which explains Ona and her father excellently, but insists that the "future age" will be no better off than this one, and that Blake was certainly not advocating free love for persons caught in the state of *Experience*?

By the time Gillham comes to the conclusion that *Innocence* is a "touchstone" and "ideal measure" but that "most of us spend the greater part of our lives meeting our obligations in the deliberate and laboured ways of *Experience*, performing duties and following programmes that purposely exclude the possibility of much spontaneous goodness or imaginative wisdom," he is about three-fourths through the book. A bit later, he adds that the glad grace of innocent virtue is "the sort of thing we can aim at in our more deliberate programmes of conduct." Flashes of it may come as a compensation, or reward, for

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good responsible behavior in this world. Perhaps this sounds more like William Wordsworth than William Blake?

None of Blake's later lyric work, from "Auguries of Innocence" to "And did those feet," from "Mock on, mock on" to "The Everlasting Gospel," receives mention in this volume. Chapter Seven, entitled "Blake's Longer Works," tells us not to worry about the poet's sources, then turns to the "unusual," "decidedly strange" and "eccentric" matters of the *Natural Religion* series, *Tiriel* ("unsatisfactory"), a backflash at *Poetical Sketches* ("some of the shorter pieces are beautiful and some show originality"), *The French Revolution* ("Moving . . . though written in a heightened, apocalyptic manner"), *America* and *Europe* ("abstract" and "mysterious"). As for *The Book of Urizen*, *The Book of Los*, *The Book of Ahania*, *Vala*, *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, these are lumped together as "the more abstruse prophetic books," and they all "fail" because Blake stopped grounding his vision "on the real circumstances of life." These real circumstances, he explains, are the ones Wordsworth had the good poetic sense to stick close to, while other Romantic poets took laboured flight into realms of unreality.

Gillham's resumé of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, at the end of this chapter, deals adequately and seriously with the moral contraries, though one would never guess, from the sobriety of his exposition, that the work (here called a "poem") is funny, or that its beautiful exuberance was, and is, an incitement to mental revolution, the artist's cry "Du müsst dein leben ändern." He does not mention anything so gross as the idea of practical politics in the *Marriage* (e.g. "The Song of Liberty"), or so outré as the idea of cleansing the doors of perception in order to see the infinite. Having quoted Frye on the risen body with the mystified shrug of a commonsense person, he reassures us that the *Marriage* does not involve "escape into a realm beyond the normal."

The final two chapters, on *TheL* and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, are full and fine, and Gillham's interpretation of *TheL* as an amusing allegory on the follies of amateur metaphysics, should provoke controversy. Whether or not the author expects those who have required his candle-in-sunshine readings of the *Songs of Innocence* to follow him here, I cannot say.

The experienced Blake scholar will not need to be told that Blake's poetry differs throughout, in some breathtaking ways, from most of what we read; and he will know how to stitch Gillham's little patch of analysis into the total fabric of his understanding. However, this book is not aimed at Blake scholars. It is (see Mayhead's "General Preface" to the series) for the general reader and the student, throughout Britain, the Commonwealth, the English-speaking world, and even the non-English speaking world. In brief, as the Preface hints, it is for people who want to pass Examinations. One does not assume that these people adore literature, or recognize their friends. It seems to me interesting that a man who, by his own admission, does not understand most of the major works of a



major English poet, should undertake to write a Critical Introduction to that poet. I am also interested by the book jacket's promise that Gillham "enables" the reader "at last to come to grips with the Prophecies." Perhaps it is a good thing that Blake's poetry emerges from this volume, after the patient attention recommended by its author, looking boring and pious--or else too inaccessible to be worth one's attention. For how would the future obedient civil servant of Uganda or New Delhi--or Birmingham--cope with a Blake who was passionate, prophetic, apocalyptic, Jacobin, visionary, deeply Christian, wildly comic, bitterly satiric, and thrilling to read? Of course, no literary scholar goes about with malice aforethought dampening the fairest joys of literature for the express purpose of maintaining an established civil and emotional order among his readers. But if the poet himself were to examine this study, carefully considering its pedagogical methods and the tenor of its understanding, he might conclude in the words of his esteemed predecessor that the hungry sheep look up and are not fed.