

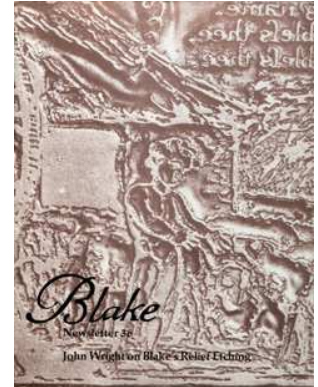
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R E V I E W

Josephine Miles, *Poetry and Change*

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Reviewed by Robert F. Gleckner

From 1964, when she published *Eras and Modes in English Poetry*, to her 1973 essay on "Blake's Frame of Language" Josephine Miles has been grappling with the problems facing all who wish intelligently to study the language of poetry and prose. Her work has ranged from the early Renaissance to British and American writing of the twentieth-century, including a number of young poets writing today. This book is a compilation of ten of her previously published essays, substantially unaltered, plus excerpts from *Eras and Modes* and *Style and Proportion: The Language of Prose and Poetry*, shaped into what is intended to be a coherent study of change in literature, with particular emphasis, as the subtitle informs us, on "Donne, Milton, Wordsworth, and the Equilibrium of the Present."

The first section of the book, comprising three chapters, sets out "Present concepts of parts and wholes in their linguistic and artistic norms" (5) and includes tabular material on the major vocabulary of selected poets and on the proportions of adjectives, nouns, verbs, and connectives in the work of sixty specific poets from Wyatt and Surrey to Lowell and Gunn, and in sixty prose writers from Ascham and Holinshed to Wain and West. Part II, with chapters on Donne, Milton, Blake, eighteenth-century prose, Victorian prose, and E. A. Robinson, is intended to relate both individual writers and contemporaneous groups of writers to the temporal developments established in Part I by means of the agreements and variations these writers maintain in language. And Part III is intended to give us "some sense for the present of where we are moving" (5)--despite the implication of a lack of "moving" in modern times indicated in the subtitle.

Professor Miles adopts certain basic assumptions about language that are difficult to quarrel with. The poet, first of all, is a sharer, in both his language and his culture, "accepting and explaining the sensory values of the aesthetic for his time" (3). Consequently he works with the "availabilities" of language, producing "patternings" which constitute the "clue in art" (4), discarding what is outworn in language, initiating or emphasizing other linguistic availabilities as new essentials to the norm. The range of these choices, she assumes, is relatively small, "there being after all not so many fundamentally different ways to order and transform the language" (4). The poet selects among a fairly easily categorizable "repertoire of transformations" (5), the result being a "design" which does not cause but rather confirms "what is in the language" (8).

The elements of this final design, however, are often subtle, difficult to talk about, though modern linguistic study (to which Professor Miles acknowledges a major debt) helps us to discriminate "not merely obvious visual surfaces but auditory echoes, semantic associations, structural similarities which may work below the surface but are also implied in the surface richness" (9). With a sense of these, "the articulatable parts of language," we can "see and hear more, . . . feel more, of the poem's entity" (11). Style, then (in which Professor Miles includes not only use of language but also "style of moral judgments" and "style of attitude toward the reader"), is a product of a "number of small recurring selections and arrangements working together," a process of "creating and reshaping expectations which design contrives" (16).

The change in poetry observable through the years operates perforce within rather severe limits, so that any writer must be read not only in context of the language and literature he shares, his acceptances and assumptions and what he does with them, but also of an array of "cultural and professional determinations" (17). The surface design of his work carries the reader in the direction of expectation, the implications of its subsurface alternatives in the direction of change and variation. Similarly, in order to know a poet's style "we need to know not only disposition or arrangement of what materials, but also choices from what materials--the prior givens, the limits and potentialities of thought and attitudes already weighing the available materials as well as the accustomed manners. The loaded materials and manners are met and confirmed or counteracted by the specific loadings of the specific artistic structure of the specific artist work" (25).

So far so good. As I say, there is little to quarrel with here--and if there is not a lot that is new, Professor Miles' presentation is clear and suitably remindful. From here on, however, there are difficulties--perhaps partly (though not solely) because the book's attempt to assimilate previously published essays into a coherently progressive argument is only partially successful at best. The crucial statistical Chapter III aside (I shall return to it later), the book as a whole tends to resolve itself less into an essay on "poetry and change" than a revision of the generally accepted nature of the "Donne Tradition" and its "influence" on modern poetry. Along with Donne there is also a good deal of Milton but, contrary to the titular expectations, very little of Wordsworth.

At any rate, very early on (49) Professor Miles establishes "the poetic tradition" as that of Sylvester, Milton, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Swinburne, de la Mare, Muir, Nicholson and the "newest American poets"--the tradition of "objective exactitude" that Pound called for, as opposed to

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"emotional statement and general *dimness*," the vocabulary tradition of "sensory nature" and *black, white, leaf, water, light, love, night*. The Donne tradition, she says, has survived much more obliquely: "His was rather a vocabulary of concept distinguished by its concern with time, cognition, and truth, positive and negative"; his terms were of "formal logic," "powerful descriptive relative clauses and active prepositions." "His are the extremes of the century's norms" (66-67), with Cleveland and Cowley being closest to him and Sidney as his predecessor--though later Professor Miles sees even Sidney as "far--from [his] basic contexts" (81). She agrees that Donne is "metaphysical" (and goes to some pains to clarify that much-vexed term) but almost seems to say that he is virtually the *only* metaphysical--and that critics like Eliot, Lewis, Brooks, Gardner, Martz, Archer, Mazzeo, Bredvold, Duncan, Bethel, Unger, Williamson, and Stein tend, in their acceptance of Donne as the center of the metaphysical tradition, to see "parts rather than wholes" (73), thus quite incorrectly reading his influence on modern poetry. Her argument here is that most, if not all, Donne critics have missed the "simplicities" of his language and structure or design in favor of their own predisposition toward his complexities of image, figure, and theme (82).

Professor Miles sees "our greatest modern metaphysical poet," and perhaps our *only* one, as Yeats--though she does include in certain ways in this category Warren, Cummings, Jeffers, the younger Rukeyser, Wilbur, and Rothenberg. "To garland the Donne tradition," she writes (148), "as the chief seventeenth-century tradition . . . is to garland a highly special and limited tradition in the twentieth-century." His "essential metaphysical vocabulary" of "conceptual evaluation" and logical disjunction, concession, expression, explanation did not survive in his seventeenth-century followers and was not revived by the moderns. Why was he hailed by so many, then, as the guiding light of modern poetry? Because "modern critics stressed less what they found new in Donne than what they found familiarly their own, the 'imagery' and feeling" (157)--not the "effortful articulation of thought, . . . spelling out of problems, analyzing of motives and situations, learned exploring of extremes of the planes of existence now and hereafter, of the cosmos below and above" (159). What they, and we generally, thought to be Donnian belongs rather to Herbert, Marvell and Vaughan, to what Professor Miles calls "the more aesthetic mode which shared affinities with symbolism" and hence with our modern predisposition to symbolic modes (160).

I find this whole argument both interesting and provocative, and were the book shaped more firmly in the direction of redefining the Donne Tradition and examining the nature of modern criticism and its evocation of that tradition in relation to poetry in general and modern poetry in particular, I think it would have been a better, and ultimately more valuable and influential, work. This is not to say, of course, that it does not have other virtues: Professor Miles' work rarely does not. But here they belong less to the book

than they are inherent in several of the originally published essays. There are also some annoying tactical flaws. Her technique of quoting words, phrases, and clauses in staccato succession from a single poem to illustrate its "procedure" or basic structure is far less clear than she seems to think, as are the too frequent full quotations of passages and poems with virtually no accompanying comment or analysis. Some statements about poetry seem perfectly meaningless, or seem to say something important that doesn't come clear or are so obvious as to make one wonder why they were made. For example, "the poet keeps using certain main terms because they signify what one wants to consider" (16); "one good way to read [the poem] is in its own terms of emphasis" (90). And finally, her tendency to cite single words as somehow belonging to, or being associated especially or even uniquely with, individual poets is, to my mind, absurd. For example, E. A. Robinson is said to "share" his verb *touch* with Sill and Swinburne, his *human* with Sterling and Stevens, his *face* and *nothing* with Poe and Stevens, and his *sick* with modern poets of the mid-twentieth-century.

This brings me to the chapter on Blake, and to Blake generally in relationship to the statistical findings of Professor Miles' Chapter III. While it is difficult to deny that "Blake's is an extremist structure" (94), the generalizations about "Blake's Frame of Language" are suspect in various ways. For example, she cites *death, dark, daughters, children, mountains, man, fire, and cloud* as central "major terms," recurring throughout Blake's work. More accurately they recur throughout *some* of his work, and the different measure of their recurrence is at least as important to understanding Blake, and Blake's place in *any* tradition, as any over-all generalization. Thus, while *death* occurs eleven times in the *Poetical Sketches*,¹ almost all those occurrences are in two poems, "Fair Elenor" and "Gwin, King of Norway." The frequency of the word here tells us more of *these* poems than of the *Poetical Sketches* as a whole, and tells us nothing of the other poems in the volume. Even including "Elenor" and "Gwin" the word *daughter* occurs only once in the *Sketches*, *children* three times, *mountain* once, and *fire* twice. *Dark* does not appear at all. Does this mean that the *Poetical Sketches* are un-Blakean? Or that "Elenor" and "Gwin" are more Blakean than the other *Sketches*? Or, quite possibly, that it is unfair to try to measure one group of poems from the total canon against the vocabulary norms established from that totality?

Let us, then, take a work which by any measure cannot be assumed to be un-Blakean. In the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* we find *death* four times (all in *Experience*), *dark* four times, *daughters* and *mountain* not at all, and *fire* but three times. Predictably *child* (and rarely, *children*) occurs 28 times. Citing Blake's doctrine of contraries, Professor Miles finds the opposites of the "major" words *death* and *night* (i.e., *life* and *day*) "not much more than half so frequent." In the *Concordance* perhaps so. But in the *Songs*, *death* occurs only four times, *life* five;

night appears 29 times, *day* 22. In the *Poetical Sketches* there are eleven *deaths* and only seven *lives*, thirteen *nights* to only six *days*, indicating presumably that the *Sketches* are more characteristic than the *Songs*. Turning her attention to Blake's verbs Professor Miles lists *see* as primary "along with *behold*; *hearing* and *knowing* are supplementary." In the *Poetical Sketches* there are only ten *sees* to thirteen *hears*, and both are outnumbered by *cry*, which she ignores. *See* appears 23 times in the *Songs*, but so does *hear* (know only seven), but both of these are outnumbered by *weep* (26). She cites as a "chief descriptive" *eternal*, supported by *divine*, but *eternal* and *divine* do not occur at all in the *Sketches* and only twice each in the *Songs*. The "countering" term to these, *human*, is absent from the *Sketches* and occurs only seven times in the *Songs*. *Dark-bright* is seen as a "clear pair . . . with *dark* consistently the stronger," but there is no *dark* in the *Sketches* along with four *brights*, four *darks* in the *Songs* completely outweighed by twelve *brights*.

Of the "chief" Blakean adjectives that Professor Miles lists (*all*, *no*, *every*, *one*, *none*, *eternal*, *dark*, *sweet*, *human*, *divine*, *bright*, *deep*, *golden*, *little*) *eternal* occurs only twice in the *Songs*, *dark* four times, *every* nine, *human* seven, *divine* two, *deep* eight, *golden* three. Only *sweet* (28), *bright* (12), and *little* (23) significantly recur--and of all of these *eternal*, *dark*, *human*, and *divine* do not appear at all in the *Sketches* and *little* only once. Instead *fair*, *sweet*, and *golden* top the adjectival list.

What does all this mean? It means, among other things, that poems like "Fair Elenor" and "Gwin, King of Norway" radically skew any word-frequency tabulations in the *Poetical Sketches* as well as, to a lesser extent, in the complete works; that the *Songs* are very different kinds of poetry from the *Sketches* on the one hand and from the minor and major prophecies on the other; and that "averaging out" the word counts through the *Sketches*, the *Songs*, and the prophecies really tells us very little about those poems or about Blake. What is interesting and provocative is what Professor Miles does not comment upon. For example, if it is not surprising to find no *merry* in *Experience* (ten in *Innocence*) and over twice as many uses of *happy* in *Innocence* as compared with *Experience*, it is at least interesting to find twice as many *brights* in the latter than in the former. *Green* and *white* are almost totally confined to *Innocence*, *sweet* occurs 20 times in *Innocence* and only eight in *Experience*, but *black* in *Innocence* outnumbers *black* in *Experience* five to three.

Among the nouns *night* and *child* outnumber all the others in the *Songs* with *joy*, *father*, and *day* close behind. *Mother*, *lamb*, *love*, and *tear* are others significantly frequent. Properly *night* appears twice as often in *Experience* as in *Innocence*, and for *joy* the proportion is reversed. *Father* interestingly appears eleven times in each set of songs, and *mother* divides almost evenly as well. There is only one *lamb* in *Experience* but more *day* and *love* in *Experience* than *Innocence*, while *tears* splits almost equally.

Finally, Professor Miles sees Blake's chief verbs as *see*, *stand*, *rise*, *know*, *come*, *go*, *love*, *let*, *say*, *hear*, *behold*. In the *Poetical Sketches* the frequency of these is as follows: *see* (10), *stand* (4), *rise* (3), *know* (0), *come* (9), *go* (6), *love* (12), *let* (5), *say* (0), *hear* (13), *behold* (5). Her list ignores *cry* (13), *fly* (8), *make* (7), *rush* (7), *sleep* (7), *sit* (10), *shake* (7), and *walk* (8). In the *Songs* Professor Miles' list of chief verbs has the following frequencies: *see* (23), *stand* (5), *rise* (13), *know* (7), *come* (14), *go* (13), *love* (5), *let* (4), *say* (11), *hear* (23), *behold* (2)--with no reference in her list to *weep*, the most frequently used verb of all in the *Songs* (26) or *sit* (15) or *bear* (13) or *sleep*, *sing*, and *make* (12 each) or *give* (11) or *have*, *laugh*, and *seek* (10 each). These discrepancies are disturbing enough in themselves, but the word lists raise other major issues, particularly in the study of Blake, that are not even alluded to--e.g., the purposeful distinctions in the vocabulary of the *Sketches* as compared to that of the *Songs* (or of the prophecies, for that matter), which have little to do with any innate preferences Blake might have had for certain words above other words. The assumption of a relatively homogeneous vocabulary can thus lead to substantial confusion not only about the "place" of one of Blake's works in the total canon, but also Blake's place in whatever "tradition" is established.

Even more crucial in the study of Blake is the fact that contextually the *angel*, let's say, of one poem may not "mean" angel in another, and the *holy* of one poem may be positive, of another poem negative in its implications. Thus Blake's contraries, which Professor Miles tries to corroborate verbally by pairing opposites like *black-white* and *hot-cold*, may operate within the contextual confines of a single word. The mere frequency of the word's occurrence tells us little or nothing of Blake's world of values or even of his verbal proclivities--and least of all does it place him neatly in any such tabulation as Professor Miles makes.

Finally let me turn to those tabulations. In the chart indicating the proportions of the adjective-noun-verb-connective relationship in the works of 60 poets, Blake's is listed as 3-6-2-6--i.e., three adjectives to six nouns to two verbs to six connectives. I have not had time to chart the connectives, but my count of the other syntactical forms yields something much closer to 3-8-4 (more precisely 2.875-8.138-4.25 or 1.92-5.46-2.83--this sort of mathematics is very slippery) in the *Songs* and 2-6-4 in the *Poetical Sketches*, which puts the *Songs* interestingly nearer Sidney and Gascoigne on the one hand and, perhaps unsurprisingly, Whitman on the other. But is it interesting after all? Even assuming the 3-6-2-6 as accurate (and indeed it may be accurate if one does not limit the count to two works as I have), the syntactical differences between the *Songs* and the *Poetical Sketches* are more interesting and revealing to me, as are the even greater differences between both of these and the prophecies. They are all Blake to be sure, but the extraordinary range of his use of language's "availabilities" is surely

a more reliable measure of his uniqueness--as well as his relationship to tradition--than the homogeneity of his syntax or vocabulary.

Table 3, entitled "Examples of Major Vocabularies of Poets of Three Different Modes in Three Different Eras," is also misleading when seen in the light of word frequencies in the *Poetical Sketches* and the *Songs*. Of the 7700 total words included in Professor Miles' survey of Blake's poetry, 1200 were adjectives, 2400 nouns, and 1030 verbs. In the *Poetical Sketches* there are 294 adjectives, 922 nouns, and 573 verbs, clearly a substantially different proportion. In the *Songs* the same major proportional discrepancy appears, since they contain 460 adjectives, 1310 nouns, and 680 verbs. Aside from raising real questions about the validity of Professor Miles' computations, at least as regards Blake, these discrepancies show further that the adjective-noun-verb proportions of these two works separately, or taken together, will severely skew the proportions of the same syntactical units in the entire canon.

While it is true that in surveying statistically only two relatively early works of Blake, I have been deliberately unfair at least to the spirit of Professor Miles' inquiry, to find an almost equally long continuous text so at odds with her findings casts serious doubts certainly on her conclusions about Blake--and perhaps, indeed, the procedure she

follows and the conclusions she comes to overall in this book. As indicated earlier, I do find considerable interest and much to ponder in her analysis of the "Donne Tradition" (partly because there vocabulary counts are anchored solidly in structural and stylistic patternings and habits of thought), but I'm afraid that I have not been converted to her way of studying the phenomenon of change in English poetry, and the relationship of the poets' "world of values" to this change. I think I'm prepared to believe that at any one time "half the [vocabulary] usages persist, a quarter decline, and a quarter newly appear" (217), but I cannot say that Professor Miles' evidence and argument are compelling substantiation of my potential faith. If change in British and American poetry (and prose) is "steady," as she concludes, the patterns of that change are simply not as neat as they are made to seem here. Too bad. For all literary historians and literary critics, would that they were.

¹ All my counts of words in the *Poetical Sketches* exclude "King Edward the Third," the "Prologue . . . of King Edward the Fourth," the "Prologue to King John," "A War Song to Englishmen," "The Couch of Death," "Contemplation," "Samson," "Then She bore Pale desire," and "Woe cried the muse." Six of these are in prose, the others quite unrelated to the main body of poetry in the *Sketches*. A quick glance through them, however, will show that tabulation of their vocabularies would skew Professor Miles' statistics even more.