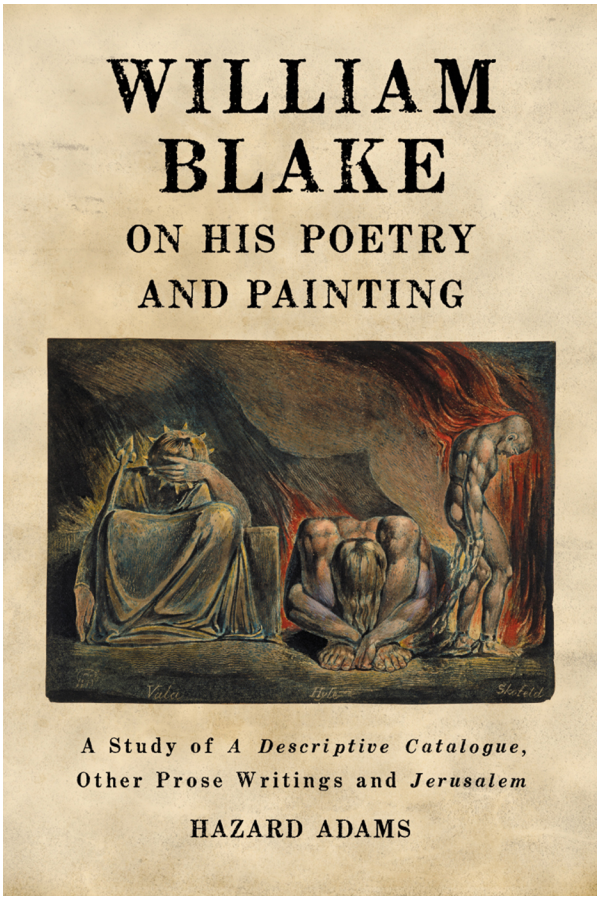

Hazard Adams. *William Blake on His Poetry and Painting: A Study of* A Descriptive Catalogue, *Other Prose Writings and* Jerusalem. Jefferson: McFarland, 2011. viii + 191 pp. $55.00, paperback.

Reviewed by R. Paul Yoder

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1 IN the past decade, we have seen examinations of the more marginal works (sometimes literally so) in William Blake's oeuvre. For example, Blake's epic *Jerusalem* has long been considered more or less his valedictory work, but in 2003's *The Traveller in the Evening: The Last Works of William Blake* (Oxford), Morton Paley charted Blake's productions after that supposed farewell, and in the process created a valuable introduction for readers interested in examining those relatively neglected materials. In 2009 Hazard Adams offered a similar overview of Blake's marginalia in *Blake's Margins: An Interpretive Study of the Annotations* (McFarland). In *William Blake on His Poetry and Painting: A Study of* A Descriptive Catalogue*, Other Prose Writings and* Jerusalem, Adams "continues the study of William Blake's prose writings begun with *Blake's Margins*" (1). *Poetry and Painting* looks at Blake's prose works with a particular focus on his remarks on art and poetry. Part I includes seven essays on, respectively, *A Descriptive Catalogue*, *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, *A Public Address*, *On Homers Poetry* and *On Virgil*, *Laocoön*, Blake's letters, and "The Early Tractates." Part II comprises three essays, the first considering Blake's attitudes on poetry, on his own poetry, and on other poets, the second on his prose and *Jerusalem*, and the third on his impact on William Butler Yeats and James Joyce. There is some repetition of information, especially among the essays in part I; Adams acknowledges this, saying that "the book is designed so that readers, particularly students beginning study of Blake and readers more casually interested in his thought, may conveniently consult a particular chapter on a particular work" (1). The book's introductory intent is obviously valuable, but the more than casually interested reader could have wished for Adams to push a bit harder at these less commonly discussed works.

2 Most of the works on which Adams focuses were written after Blake's return to London in late 1803 from his "three years slumber" at Felpham. That time in Felpham was an important transitional period in Blake's life, and that experience and the years afterward were key to the developments in his thinking that shaped *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*. Much of this material has been covered elsewhere, as in the case of *Laocoön*, for example, which has been admirably discussed recently by both Paley in *The Traveller in the Evening* and Julia Wright in *Blake, Nationalism, and the Politics of Alienation* (Ohio University Press, 2004). What Adams brings to the table is his own slant based on decades of work on Blake and on literary criticism, especially his emphasis on Blake's antithetical method and on the importance of synecdoche in Blake's thinking. Moreover, the second essay of part II ("From the Prose to *Jerusalem*") reproduces much of Adams's important but largely neglected 1993 essay from *Studies in Romanticism*, while the final essay in the book ("From *Jerusalem* and the

Prose to Yeats and Joyce") similarly revisits earlier essays on those later writers.

3 Given that Adams intends only an introduction to these prose pieces, it is not surprising that there is no overarching thesis to the book. Still, two themes run throughout the discussion:

1. Synecdoche is a basic principle for Blake. Adams references his own 1990 essay, "Synecdoche and Method," from *Antithetical Essays in Literary Criticism and Liberal Education* (Florida State University Press) on this point, and in *Poetry and Painting* he says, "Blake works almost always by synecdoche" (34) and indeed "thinks by synecdoche" (58). He explains that "the principle of synecdoche expresses for Blake the identity of particular and universal" (52), and he identifies this principle in Blake's handling of the characters of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims, especially the Franklin ("[composed] of all Franklins" [26]), Blake's use of "Britain as a microcosm of the world's history" (40) in the painting of *The Ancient Britons*, and Blake's understanding of the Last Judgment ("the individual's Last Judgment is a microcosm of the world's" [51]).

2. Many of the ideas expressed in the prose works that Adams considers are integrally related to ideas expressed in *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*. He notes, for example, that "One thing is certain. In painting *The Ancient Britons* and writing and etching *Jerusalem*, Blake was producing what he thought was patriotic art, a mythological history of Britain … antithetical to that of reasoning historians and politicians" (40). About the picture of the Canterbury pilgrims, Adams suggests that "Blake secretly injects into his picture symbols from his long poems" (22), and he cites Orphea Jane Allen's chart aligning particular pilgrims with Blake's Zoas as well as particular classical deities. Given his comments on Chaucer's Franklin, he could easily have added that Blake's understanding of the pilgrims provides much of the groundwork for the doctrine of "states" so important to *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. In his remarks on *A Descriptive Catalogue*, Adams compares Blake's paintings of *Nelson Guiding Leviathan*, *Pitt Guiding Behemoth*, and the lost *Spiritual Form of Napoleon* to *Jerusalem*, in which "Blake calls Leviathan and Behemoth respectively 'the War by Sea enormous & the War / By Land astounding'" (19). Concerning *A Public Address*, Adams connects Blake's criticism of Dryden and Pope as well as his declamatory approach in the *Address* with the first preface in *Jerusalem*, in which Blake attacks the "'modern bondage of Rhyming'" and identifies "his own poetry with oratory" (64-65). Indeed, the connection between Adams's discussions of the prose works in part I and the three essays in part II depends on the continuity and development of Blake's ideas about art from those prose works into his major later poetry. Adams stipulates that "in order to observe [Blake's] views of his own work and what he was attempting to do, a few ventures into *Milton* and *Jerusalem* will be necessary," and then goes on to trace connections reaching from Blake's "first engraved work, where he identifies the 'true Man' with the 'Poetic Genius,'" through *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and the various prose works, and into the later poems in which "Blake identifies man with imagination and poetry with naming, implying language itself is in its nature poetic" (101).

4 Several discussions in *Poetry and Painting* are especially welcome. Adams devotes an essay to the two tractates printed together, *On Homers Poetry* and *On Virgil*, which for some reason Paley had neglected in *The Traveller in the Evening*. He compares Blake's comments on unity in *On Homers Poetry* ("Every poem must necessarily be a perfect Unity, but why Homers is peculiarly so, I cannot tell") to Aristotle's discussion of unity of plot in *Poetics* (67-70). He also notes, "When Blake speaks of Homer, he speaks of the fault of his poetry: its glorification of war and empire," adding that as the "greatest of the classical poets," Homer "stands, by synecdoche, for all 'the Poetry of the Heathen Stolen & Perverted from the Bible not by Chance but by design'" (73). Of both tracts Adams says,

> the mode of argument is enthymemic, that is, with parts left out, but implied by the fragment that remains. It also appears that the two conclusions of the tractates are interchangeable. I believe that both tractates have dramatic shapes and are deliberate efforts to go beyond the boundaries of abstract argumentation. It is as if they have plot structures. The form is one of search. (72)

5 The discussion of the prose inscriptions on three of Blake's drawings for Dante's *Commedia* is one of the strongest in the book. Adams quotes, for example, Blake's statement in the lower-right corner of Dante design 101, "Whatever Book is for Vengeance for Sin & whatever Book is Against the Forgiveness of Sins is not of the Father but of Satan the Accuser & Father of Hell [E690]," and then remarks, "The statement stands at the base of Blake's beliefs in his late years. Nothing was more fundamental to his view of Jesus's gospel" (122).

6 There are other gems scattered throughout the book. Adams offers a concise formulation of Blake's critique of allegory: "The problem with allegory is, as we have seen, its false particularity" (57). He calls Blake's discussion of *The Canterbury Tales* in *A Descriptive Catalogue* "arguably the most important criticism of Chaucer between that of John Dryden, who in his *Fables Ancient and Modern* (1700) revived Chaucer's reputation, which had fallen in the seventeenth century, and Matthew Arnold's essay in *The Study of Poetry* (1880)" (21). On the "fundamental difference" between Blake and Yeats, he says,

> Blake is radically humanistic and is totally devoted to a vision of *this* world as potentially apocalyptic through an improvement in mental power and cleansing of error. Yeats is also humanistic, and his antithetical man opts for such a vision. But at the same time Yeats concludes that a humanistic apocalypse is, if not impossible, at most only momentary and mysterious. … Like Blake's, Yeats's view is cyclical, but for Blake Yeats's vision is only of the fallen cycle. (171-72)

Concerning Blake's impact on Joyce, Adams observes,

> [Robert] Gleckner accurately observes that Joyce finally departed from Blake, thinking that Blake's work finally was blind to "the grubby realities of this world, [leading] to an 'idealism' so absolute that there was no room for the Blooms and Mollys, the Finnegans and the Earwickers" …. I think, if Gleckner is right, Joyce was wrong about this, for Blake was never that kind of idealist and his reality was not an elsewhere. (183)

7 There are some problems with the book. Compared to Adams's other work, *Poetry and Painting* can be a bit dry. Sometimes the phrasing is not quite right. For example, on the relationship between poetry and prophecy, Adams says, "Poetry is prophecy, not prediction. It is insight into things; its role is to reshape the fallen world, which is a congeries of human error, into an image so clear that error will be seen for what it is and thus annihilated" (103). The second sentence here is certainly correct, but the phrasing of the first sentence seems backward; better to say, "Prophecy is poetry, not prediction." Also, the documentation on the longer poems is a bit confusing; the references do not follow the standard format of plate and line number, but instead indicate only chapter and plate, without noting particular lines.

8 These are small points, however. The strength in this book lies in the gathering together of Adams's take on Blake's attitudes toward poetry and painting, and the relationship of those attitudes to the work of key figures before and after Blake.